

# Sarmoli-Jainti *Van Panchayat*: An Initiative in Community-Managed Forests

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## Background and Context

*Van Panchayats* (Forest Councils) have been a part of centuries old traditional system of regulated use, conservation and management of the community commons in the State of Uttarakhand and were earlier called *Lath Panchayats*. The forest commons were appropriated by the colonial state at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In 1931 they were reinstated as *Van Panchayats* in their current form after prolonged community struggle and resistance. Through a series of legal and policy changes over the years, the *Van Panchayats* are currently governed by the Uttarakhand *Panchayati Van Niyamawali* (or Rules) of 2005 and are under the jurisdiction of the Forest Department. Land records and elections remain within the jurisdiction of the Revenue Department. Of the total of 12089 *Van Panchayats* in the State of Uttarakhand, about half were in existence prior to the formation of the State in 2000, and were largely functional. Those formed post 2000 are beset with several challenges, the most prominent being the fact that the area of the new *Van Panchayats* are either too small, too contested or just not handed over to the community. Broadly speaking, the level of active participation in management and conservation appears to be directly proportional to the level of dependence of the right holder communities on natural resource-based livelihoods within the right holder communities. Age-old traditional practices of managing forest commons persist in remote *Van Panchayats*, and many have seen a revival through community initiatives.

## The Baseline

The Sarmoli-Jainti *Van Panchayat* is located on the first rise of the Greater Himalaya and lies at an altitude of 2330 m within the Gori river basin in the border district of Pithoragarh, in the State of Uttarakhand. The *Van Panchayat* with an area of 34 hectares (0.34 sq kms) comprises broad leaved forests of Oak, Rhododendron, Maple and small stands of conifers like Cypress and Cedar. There are patches of grasslands maintained on south facing slopes. There is a forest water body called Mesar Kund that has cultural significance and serves as a water source for several villages downstream. The general health of the ecosystem is presently good because of active protection, plantation and conservation work carried out by the local people.

Sarmoli and Jainti villages, located close to the Block headquarters of Munsiyari, are inhabited by a combined population of 60% *Bhotias* or Scheduled Tribes, 23% Scheduled Castes and 17% general caste people. The *Bhotias* were traditionally a transhumant community of traders, sheep

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herders and woolworkers. Woolwork remains an important occupation for the women. While some in the community have used the government reservation policy for Scheduled Tribes to get government jobs, the majority depend on subsistence agriculture, livestock rearing, manual labor and trade through small shops. With increased road connectivity and market access, there has been a proportional decrease in the dependence on forests for basic survival needs like fuelwood and fodder.



*Sarmoli Village ©Malika Virdi*

### **The Initiative**

68% of the Gori valley, of which Sarmoli-Jainti is a part, is currently under *Van Panchayats*. *Van Panchayats* have traditionally existed but in its current legal form, this *Van Panchayat* was formed in 1949. Until 1972 (before the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972), hunting and natural resource-based livelihoods were a way of life, which made forest commons or *Van Panchayats* essential to the survival of local communities. Further, this *Van Panchayat* has been the resource-base for sustaining subsistence agriculture through the transfer of nutrients, mediated by cattle (leaf litter and fodder from the forest ends up becoming farmyard manure that replenishes the

soil nutrients); for cattle rearing; for fuelwood that is a renewable source of energy for cooking and heating of homes in a mountainous climate; and for medicinal plant collection.

Proximity to the Munsiri Bazaar, has led to increased integration with the market, resulting in a shift in how this *Van Panchayat* is now viewed. From a source to meet subsistence needs, the *Van Panchayat* is now seen as an area providing larger ecosystem services- like securing the water catchment for residents of three *Gram Panchayats* (the basic governance unit at the village level in India village); slope stability; for its cultural significance; and for supporting nature based tourism which has emerged as an additional support to local livelihoods.

All permanent inhabitants that reside in the villages of the *Van Panchayat* are legally considered right holders. However, just by virtue of having a right does not necessitate active stewardship of the Forest Commons. All right holders are expected to contribute a small annual sum (of INR 100) for conservation work, though at the best of times just about 2/3rds of them make this contribution. The elected Council of 9 members, headed by the *Sarpanch* (President of the Council, elected by the village-level constitutional body of local self-government called the *Gram Sabha* (village government) are expected to ensure the regulated use and active conservation of the *Van Panchayat*. In most cases, it is the dedication and initiative of the *Sarpanch* that determines how effectively these tasks are undertaken as well as in ensuring how democratic the functioning of the *Van Panchayat* is and to what extent the entire general body remains the prime decision maker.

There is a stipulated number of women and men from the Scheduled Caste and Tribe communities in the elected council (minimum of 4) that ensures their representation. So while all *Van Panchayats* will have at least 4 women in the Council, the women by and large have a token presence and often are not included in the decision making process. With the election of a woman *Sarpanch* in 2003, the Sarmoli-Jainti *Van Panchayat* enabled the active participation of women through specific measures. Two decades ago, the Sarmoli-Jainti *Van Panchayat* passed a resolution in the general assembly recognising all women heads of households as co-right holders. This has ensured that they have a say in all decision making as their active participation is sought in not just volunteer labor work, but in all meetings where decisions are taken. As a norm, rights to the *Van Panchayat* are passed down from father to the sons of the family and daughters, even if they continue to reside in the village are not given a right. This *Van Panchayat* passed another resolution that all women who are permanent residents of the village, regardless of their marital status (unmarried, widowed, single) are recognized as right holders.

The Sarmoli-Jainti *Van Panchayat* has a 9 member elected *Panch Mandali*, (referred to as the Management Committee in the Rules of 2005) for a term of 5 years. These Council members represent the Wards within the 2 revenue villages to ensure representation from the entire geographical spread. When most active, the *Panch Mandali* meets every month or whenever decisions regarding the management of the Forest Commons are required to be taken. A General

Body meeting has to be organized at least twice a year. In the case of this *Van Panchayat*, on an average 4 meetings are organized annually. All decisions and proceedings are recorded in a Resolutions Register along with the signatures of those who have participated in the proceedings. Besides these formal meetings, the active women right holders meet informally and organize collective action based on decisions taken at the General Body meetings. This is partly due to the fact that these women are also associated with a women's collective called Maati that has been active for the past 3 decades on issues related to '*Jal, Jangal, Zameen*' (*the rights over water, forests and land*) and the struggle for rights of local communities over their resources.

With the current emphasis on forest plantation work by the state administration, the Block Office has in the past decade supported monsoon plantation works in the *Van Panchayat* under MNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act). The district Forest Department also supports similar plantation drives. The *Van Panchayat* has collaborated with a local civil society organization Himat Prakriti, in various projects that involve ecosystem restoration. Prominent amongst them are the rejuvenation of durable community assets like in the restoration of Mesar Kund, documenting the local biodiversity and the creation of Biodiversity Registers, the *Van Panchayat* Microplan, as well as working towards at strengthening and enhancing the capacity of the right holders (often times hunters of yore) to undertake research on conservation related issues and to work as trained nature guides.



*Women at a Van Panchayat meeting @Shraddha Kukkuje*



*Women doing plantation work in the forest area ©Malika Viridi*

### **The Present Day Scenario**

The region is now recognised as an important birding area in the State of Uttarakhand and draws naturalists and birders each year. Natural History and Birding Festivals have been conducted now for a decade, as well as Butterfly and Moth workshops. This area is part of the migration flyway routes for several bird species such as the Ruddy Shelduck (*Tadorna ferruginea*) that come up from the plains to breed on the alpine slopes above the *Van Panchayat* as well as those that go across the Himalaya to other parts of the continent. Of the 12 Galliformes species in the State, 11 can be spotted in a 20 km radius that includes the *Van Panchayat* and the adjoining Reserve Forest Area, prominent among them is the state bird- the Himalayan Monal (*Lophophorus impejanus*). There are 325 bird species from 63 Families within the Gori Valley where this *Van Panchayat* is located. The many corresponding habitat types represented by varied plant types host a large number of butterflies that include very many Blues (*Morpho Menelaus*) as well as those that survive beyond their breeding season like the Apollos (*Parnassius apollo*) and Tortoise Shells (*Aglais urticae*). There has been an increase in diversity and population of wildlife. Bird and animal species saw a distinct improvement, especially the Pheasant population and their habitats. These include a marked increase in sightings of the Barking Deer (*Muntiacus muntjac*) and the Himalayan Ghoral (*Naemorhedus goral*), once common in these forest. Amongst bird species, the list includes the endangered Cinereous Vulture (*Aegypius monachus*), the Steppe Eagle (*Aquila nipalensis*) and recent sighting of the Red Crossbill (*Loxia curvirostra*). Another impact has been the improvement in ecological services such as water supply and soil fertility.

A review of the last 2 decades reveals that whenever there has been a strong and engaged Forest Council headed by a committed *Sarpanch*, the health of the natural habitat has witnessed a

marked improvement. The water body, Mesar Kund has been rejuvenated, the springs and seepages that feed it and other streams have been enriched with plantation of native species. This water body now holds water year-round, ensuring that the marshes and seepages downstream stay alive and ensure water security for the 12 odd villages that depend on it for their water supply. Protection from open access for grazing, lopping, collection of fuelwood and timber has been stopped and access to resources regulated

Nature based tourism has now become a viable alternative livelihood source for the right holders. The Nature Guides of this village are now trainers for other communities across Uttarakhand. Sarmoli village has been recognized by the Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board as the first Home Stay village of the State. These Home Stays were initiated in 2004 through the Sarmoli Jainti *Van Panchayat*. Community owned and nature-based tourism being run in this village now serves as a model for not just the State but for the country.

### **Lessons Learnt and Conclusions**

One of the major lessons learnt has been to bring back a greater connection between communities and the natural landscape- the forest and the fields that sustain life in this Himalayan ecosystem. This would be made possible by working towards and regaining the status of owners of the *Van Panchayats*. Towards this end, the plan is to work towards claiming Community Forest Rights and Community Forest Resource Rights under the Scheduled Tribes And Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. There is a progressive change in livelihood patterns driven by market forces and away from natural resource-based livelihoods and farming and this will in the long run impact the conservation and management of *Van Panchyats*. One of the biggest challenges is if *Van Panchayats* will be able to survive and if the right holders will continue to have ownership and access to their respective commons.