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CONSERVATION OF SACRED LANDSCAPE THROUGH VAN PANCHAYATS: A STUDY OF SARMOLI VILLAGE IN PITHORAGARH DISTRICT, UTTARAKHAND

Abstracts

The Himalayan forests are home to a variety of species, flora and fauna, and medicinal herbs that play a crucial role in the conservation of biodiversity. But climate change, global warming and anthropogenic factors are putting tremendous pressure on forests that led to the depletion of their resources ruthlessly. To protect forests, the concept of Van Panchayat or village forest committees were introduced. The committee undertake the conservation task which eventually entitles the rights over collection of fuel wood, minor forest produce, hunting and gathering, timber harvest, etc. In case anyone does not adhere to the rules of Van Panchayat are barred from claiming these rights. Under these circumstances, the present study highlights the management of forests through Van Panchayats, community beliefs and practices, and customary practices in the conservation of sacred landscapes. The beliefs and practices regarding forest operate as an agency to regulate the forest exploitation by the community, whereas Van Panchayat regulate the external interventions, prevention of illegal tree felling, and income generation through eco-tourism activities.

Keywords: *Van Panchayat, forest, resources, community management, beliefs and practices, sacred landscape*

Introduction

Himalayan forests are famous for their majestic views, biodiversity hotspots, rare medicinal herbs, and the source of all perennial rivers. It has been a sacred abode for centuries to the people of India. Traditional Hindu philosophy reveals that people in the *Sanyas Ashram* used to visit to spend time for peace of mind and salvation. These high mountainous ranges are inhabited by many tribal and non-tribal populations who are known as *Pahadis*

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and subsisting on difficult terrains. They depended on Himalayan forests for food, fuel wood, and medicinal herbs and harnessed them while protecting the natural surroundings. The earmarked natural biodiversity hotspots are conserved in the form of sacred landscapes and are worshipped from time to time. But this symbiotic relationship was affected by the deforestation drive led by colonialists with the establishment of British rule. With the defeat of the Gurkhas in 1815, deforestation in the Kumaon region began by declaring uninhabited or unirrigated lands under state control. The 1878 Forest Act destroyed centuries of forest use by the local communities, and all the useful forests were declared as state forests. Thus, the forests were exploited for commercial purposes, which led to widespread unrest across the Kumaon region for the protection of people's rights over the forests and their produce.

The *Pahadi* (hill) people resisted the British policies and started non-cooperation with the British government in the management of forests. As a result, the British formed a committee in 1921 under the chairmanship of Mr Wyandham, then commissioner of the Kumaon region, to investigate the grievances suffered by the people due to the introduction of scientific forestry. The committee, after making visits to several hilly villages, found that restrictions on grazing, collecting wild grass and fuel wood were creating problems of survival in such harsh climates. With their recommendations, the government is forced to frame legislative rules in the form of *Van Panchayats* or forest management committees that came into force after a decade. In 1931 *Van Panchayat* regulation was constituted under the District Scheduled Act of 1874, which paved the official way to the formation of *Van Panchayats* in British administered Kumaon division (Agrawal, 1999).

In practice, there exist two types of *Van Panchayats*, i.e., carved out from reserve forests and governed by the Indian Forest Act 1927 and made from civil *soyam* lands governed by the District Scheduled Act 1931. However, *Van Panchayat* Regulation 2005 have consolidated them into *Gram Van* (village forests). This consolidation vests more authority to forest department over all types of forests in Uttarakhand (Negi et al 2012).

The act made a provision of an elected *Sarpanch* (head) and five to thirteen *Panch* members elected by the local population who shall have resided in that area for not less than 10 years. All the adult members who have voting rights become members of it. The election is informal by raising hands, not by a secret ballot. *Sarpanch* is elected for a period of five years and is eligible to contest for three terms. The managing committee should assemble once every three months, and the general body once in six months. They are empowered to regulate the overuse of forest resources (Guha, 2001). Institutionalised in 1931, *Van Panchayat* has been adapted over time to the changing socio-political landscapes, including the introduction of the new

National Forest Policy of 1980, Forest Rights Act of 2006, and so on, aimed to restore local rights over the community forest with little interference from the State or Forest Department (Nagahama et al., 2016). Pande (2022), arguing against the Garrett Hardin's tragedy of the commons, stresses that the decadal increase in the number and area of *Van Panchayats* in Uttarakhand from 1947 to 2017 is testimony to the successful management of forests through democratically elected grassroots-level committees. Scientific studies carried out in the Indian Himalayan Region (IHR) underscore the significance of *Van Panchayats* in stimulating carbon sequestration, ecosystem resilience, and climate change mitigation (Routela et al., 2025), cultural ecosystem services in forest management (Bhatt, et al. 2024), ethno-medicinal values (Samal et al., 2008), conservation of high-altitude lakes (Kaur and Balodi, 2016), and so on. The three components of sustainability, namely social acceptability, technical feasibility, and economic viability, are all present in *Van Panchayats*. The study supports Elinor Ostrom's thesis of successful management of common, i.e., forests, by the community eliminates the free rider for sustainable community living (Pande et al., 2022).

The study Sarmoli *Van Panchayat* comes under the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve (NDBS) buffer zone. It is a confluence of three ecological zones, namely temperate broadleaf forests below 2,000 meters; coniferous forests between 2,000 and 3,000 meters; and alpine scrub above 3,000 meters, which makes it a biodiversity hotspot. The sole purpose of *Van Panchayat* is to ensure a sustainable utilisation of forest resources along with the conservation of biodiversity and rejuvenation of degraded forests. The *Van Panchayats* have the right to enshrine rules and regulations to conserve the forests in their boundaries. These rules are not uniform for all villages. Though rules may be different from one village to another, there are certain commonalities that prohibit logging, control of grazing, over exploitation of wild grass, and collection of fodder, and medicinal plants. Kapkoti et al. (2014) in their study identify a total of 28 ethno-medicinal plant species belonging to 18 different families, highlighting the ecological richness of the Gahelna *Van Panchayat* of the Kumaon region.

Nagahama et al. (2019) stated that the availability of forest resources, such as *Banji Oak*, is crucial for the local community, which depends on it for fuel wood and fodder for livelihood. It influences the *Van Panchayat* members to participate in forest management to reap the benefits of the *Banji Oak*. The *Van Panchayats* management committee endorse a bottom-up approach in decision-making by the local people, not a top-down approach by the higher authorities (Nagahama et al., 2022). However, there is a growing concern about the erosion of local forest council management rights and the impact of state policy interventions on community governance of forests (Stevens and Satterfield, 2024). The sustainability of these local institutions is currently

threatened by issues including rural outmigration, insecure forest land rights, the erosion of local authority in management rights, and global environmental change (Stevens and Krishnamurthy, 2022).

Agrawal's (1999) case study on Bharaki-Urgam *Van Panchayat* also mentions that the paucity of funds and insignificant women's participation led to the failure of sustaining and spreading *Van Panchayats* in many villages. However, the study highlighted that the women's leadership made a transparent working system of the management committee and more active, responsible governance that ensures fuller participation of people. Madhu Sarin's (2001) study observed that top-down interventions of a World Bank-funded Village Forest Joint Management (VFJM) in Uttarakhand marginalised women's participation, struggles, and achievements by transferring more power and authority to the forest department and local elite people. The case studies Holta, Bareth, Makku and so on in *Tehri Garhwal* region prove that the project is insensitive to the dynamic functioning of self-governing institutions. Thus, Sarin argued for the strengthening of gender equal democratization of such community organisations.

The present study uses Murray Ross's community organisation theory, which envisages how the social institutions balance the needs of the people and their resources. In this, people create grass root level organizations which address the issues of livelihoods through cooperative and collaborative practices in the community (Ross, 1955). The professional worker in this approach may come from within the community or outside the community, who assist these institutions in functioning well through people's participation. The community organisations like *Maati Sanghatan*, *Himal Prakriti* of Bhotiya of Munsyari trying to address their livelihood problems in the changing scenario through cooperative effort. The study tests Oslon's (1965) logic of collection action, which states that if everyone in the group has a common interest, then they will act collectively to achieve it. Then it may override the free rider problem to collective interest. Ife's (2002) progressive communitarian and empowerment approach is also used for the present study, which implies the potential of collective sharing of forest resources and decision-making to address the social and environmental problems.

Based on the above theoretical framework, the present study focuses on the communitarian management of forests by Sarmoli *Van Panchayat* through the collective beliefs and practices. This collective management, in turn, facilitates the people to reap the benefits of forests and ensure the conservative dictum for the cause of collective interest. Despite some issues in collective management, Bhotiya culture and traditional wisdom facilitate the people's participation in Sarmoli *Van Panchayat*, which eventually guarantees livelihoods and conservation.

Study Area and Methodology

An empirical fieldwork was conducted in 2025 in the Sarmoli and Sankdhura village *Van Panchayats* that comes under the Munsyari *tehsil* in Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand state. The study village is located in a high mountainous range with an elevation of 2200m (7200 ft). The Shauka Bhotiya, who are the predominant population which reside in Munsyari, are basically migratory pastoralists as well as long-distance traders between India and Tibet. With the closure of borders after the 1962 Indo-China war, Bhotiyas settled permanently in Munsyari *tehsil*. All households in the village are dependent on the forest for fuel wood, fodder, leaves, and medicine.

Rational of selecting the study area is purely based on purposive sampling, as the Sarmoli *Van Panchayat* got first prize from Uttarakhand state with regard to successful management through eco-tourism. Since it is a micro-level study, the data were gathered through informal interviews. Further empirical data was also collected through observation, structured interviews, focus group discussions and open-ended conversations with the *Sarpanch*, *Panch* and the villagers to understand the management and functioning of *Van Panchayat*, beliefs, and practices in forest management.

As a part of data collection researcher stayed in the villages physically and observed how the villagers are interacting the forests on a daily basis. The participant observation allowed the researcher to see how the people's participation facilitated harnessing the benefits of *Van Panchayats* in the study area. Transact walks in the village as well as forests assist in understanding the sacred landscapes, including sacred groves, trees and water bodies, to understand the efforts of *Van Panchayats* in forest conservation.

People's beliefs and perceptions of the forests and sacred landscapes are collected through oral histories, narratives, myths, and legends. Histories centred around Mesar Khund, Panch Chuli, Hansling, and so on revealed the symbiotic relation of the people to forests. Focus group discussions with *Van Panchayat* members reveals their organised activities in the village along with local dynamics in forest management. Visual and material documentation of *Van Panchayat* activities highlights the people's participation and cooperation in day-to-day activities.

Secondary data were accessed through academic platforms such as Google Scholar, Scopus, JSTOR, and Research Gate articles, books, and census records to understand the organisation and management of *Van Panchayats* in the Himalayas in general and Uttarakhand in particular.

Organisation of *Van Panchayat*

The Sarmoli *Van Panchayat* consists of elected members, including one *Sarpanch* and eight *Panch* members, who are responsible for the overall

management of the forest for a period of five years. Out of these nine, four members belong to Bhotiya, i.e., Scheduled Tribe as per *Uttarakhand Panchayat Van Niyamavali* 2012. Though *Van Panchayat* is different from the *Gram Panchayat*, its functions and operations often overlap. Strict rules and regulations are framed by the Managing Committee regarding the logging of trees, cutting of grass and collection of forest produce. Cutting of trees is strictly prohibited throughout the year, and let it regenerate. This untouched forest is open for ten to fifteen days in the month of October-November in a year for the collection of fuel wood, wild grass, and timber for domestic use.

Further, they are collecting various types of leaves as fodder for their cattle and sheep, collecting seasonal flowers (*Burash*), fruits, nuts, and medicinal herbs being members of *Van Panchayat*. The members were allowed to collect the same with strict adherence to the prescribed rules. As a rule, all the adult villagers are members of *Van Panchayat*. It is so that they firmly believe that without addressing the basic needs of local people, forest conservation is not possible. Hence, the villagers are allowed to collect the fallen dried branches of trees and shrubs for fuel wood during severe winters. In case anyone axes down a green tree will be fined heavily. The committee had already prepared the micro-plan in collaboration with the forest department, and afforestation was undertaken in the degraded forests of Sarmoli in the name of 'Farm'

The *Van Panchayat* regulation says that it should support at least two self-help groups. In line with this, the women members of Sarmoli formed into two Self-Help Groups (hereafter SHGs), which they named *Maati Sangatan* and *Himal Prakriti*. They are working on the principle of tribal cooperation and collective action. With the decline of migratory pastoralism, now villagers are earning their livelihood from tourism, i.e., homestay, marketing of handicrafts, native forest and agricultural produce. A bank account was opened in the name of each elderly woman of each homestay, and the income generated from the homestay was directly transferred to their account. The SHG of Sarmoli decided to contribute 2% of the homestay income to the corpus fund of *Van Panchayats*. This move helped in their conservation efforts to pay the wages of forest guards and watchmen to protect the demarcated village forests. Fund generated by the auctioning of caught wood, snow-flooded fallen trees, and minor forest produce collected from time to time. Local *chowkidars* or caretakers of the forest are appointed, where they patrol around the forest every day to prevent illegal cutting of trees and fuel wood collection. Fines are imposed on those individuals who are caught cutting trees and engaging in other illegal activities inside the forest. The *Sarpanch* of Sankdhura stated that all the funds for the management of the *Van Panchayat* are collected from the villagers only and receive no funds from the forest department.

The minutes book of the Management committee reveals that the meetings are held once a month and the minutes are recorded in Hindi. Even the meeting minutes with the study team were written during the fieldwork. The Management Committee also pays a rewarding amount as remuneration to its members for carrying out various forestry works from the revolving fund. Two members of the SHGs are carrying out the work on a rotation basis to facilitate income opportunities equally distributed to all the *Van Panchayat* members. Even the governmental and Non-governmental organizations programmes, like the creation of poly-houses for vegetable cultivation, fencing material, and skill training, are being given to them.

The case of Ms Basanti demonstrates how the resilience of Bhotiya women epitomises their contribution in the creation of livelihoods and the conservation of forests, besides dealing with the prevention of domestic violence, prohibition of alcohol, and perpetuating their culture through handicrafts, etc. Ms Basanti Raut, a resident of Sankdhura, is 48 years old is a present Sarpanch to Sarmoli *Van Panchayat* now. This *Panchayat* consists of Sankdhura, Nanasem, Sarmoli and Tamadar. She belongs to the Bhotiya community and got married to Rajender Singh Raut. In 1994, Basanti, along with her friend Mallika Viridi, joined together to oppose the harassment of women in the rigid patriarchy. They organised Bhotiya women and led a movement to close the *Sharab Battis* (liquor manufacturing units). Since then, both women organised Bhotiya women towards entrepreneurs and conservation champions of village forests. As Bhotiya realised that forests are catalytic for their survival, as their destruction directly or indirectly burdens women. After becoming active members of *Van Panchayat*, they began offering voluntary *Shramdaan* for raising forests, sampling, while preventing illegal axing. *Mahila Mangal Dal*¹ is active in Sarmoli, which consists of active women organize meetings once a month. But since 2006 onwards, both women became independent entrepreneurs and are operating their own homestay tourism at the individual level as well as with Self-Help Groups. This women entrepreneurship become an agency of women empowerment in Sarmoli. Thus, they become successful in networking Bhotiya women for empowerment through homestay.

Since they are not getting any external support, members face financial constraints in the management of forests. Previously, they had plenty of *chowkidars* in their village, but now, due to a financial crunch, they do not have regular employed *chowkidar* for forest protection. To tide over the crisis, now one member from each household is assigned the duty of guarding the forest every day. Villagers also conducted afforestation by planting Oak, Pine, and other indigenous varieties of trees in a specific area locally known as the *farm*. The rights to the *Van Panchayats* were passed down to the family from father to son, not to the daughters, even if they reside in the village. In

Sarmoli, a resolution was passed that, though membership passed through the male line, all the women who are permanent residents are given access to the forests and their management. Since hunting is prohibited, tourists frequent the forest to witness a variety of birds with *Van Panchayat* members for bird watching.

Community Management of Forests

The forests near the villages are virtually managed by the concerted efforts of the village *Van Panchayat* for the collection of timber and non-timber forest produce. The collective management of forests not only provides usufructory rights of its resources but also relegates the duty of conservation.

Collection of Wild Grass

Bhotiyas collect different varieties of wild grass from the forest, which is used for domestic as well as commercial purposes. They are mainly *Tilli*, *Kassu*, *Timsu*, *Baaj*, *Koiral*, *Gaiti Kadeek*, etc. *Gaaju* grass is available in fields as well as forests. *Shaleem* is a wild grass used for thatching purposes. Apart from wild grass, they also collect different varieties of tree leaves like *Karsu*, *Timsuva*, *Baajva Gudul* that are given to the cattle as fodder. *Patela* (dried leaves) are such leaves used to spread in *goatpaan* (cattle home) and cleaned on a daily basis. The collection of wild grass is arranged through auction by the *Van Panchayat* at earmarked places during the peak season at nominal rates. Likewise, villagers are allowed to collect the resources in a limited way and thus avoid the free rider issue, which leads to the tragedy of the commons.

***Payya* (*Prunus cerasoides*) Leaves**

It is popularly known as wild *jungli cherry* and is considered a sacred tree since it grows on the cracks of hill rocks in the mountains. Since it grows from the cracks of the stones, Bhotiyas attribute that it comes out by breaking the head of the *Naag Devta*, which reside in *Paathal* (underground or hill). Bhotiya consider this tree connects the *Dharti* (earth) to *Pathal*. As such, it is deeply rooted in Bhotiya folklore and mythology, as it is also referred to as *Dev Vriksh*. Its flowers blossom during winter in pink colour, and the leaves are used in all ceremonial activities. In all the temples of the study area, worship starts with *Payya* leaves. While doing *Noreth* (*Jagaran*/awakening) in temples, a *mantap* is made with leaves and branches of *Payya* and the *Hudka* (musical instrument) to get possessed and take part in worship. In marriage, a welcome arch is decorated with *Payya* leaves. Without the use of these leaves, no sacred activity can be accomplished.

The fresh leaves are spread in *goatpaan*, which gives protection from cold to the cattle and sheep. Afterwards, these dung-mixed leaves are

collected by womenfolk to prepare organic manure. Every day, Bhotiya clean the *goatpaan* and the dung mixed leaves are dumped at an earmarked place to convert them into *Passu* (organic manure).

***Thunair* (Yew or *Taxus Buccata*) Bark:**

Bark of the *Chikkali* or *Thunair* tree is collected for its medicinal properties. Bhotiya prepares a salty tea from the powder made from dried bark of *Thunair*, which is locally known as *Lwenta*. Thus, dried bark is pounded thoroughly till it turns into powder. This powder is stored in tin boxes. Whenever they feel like drinking, a table spoon *Lwenta* was mixed with boiling water and prepared as a tea, which is consumed along with tasting jaggery. They attribute that it keeps the body warm during cold weather and has medicinal properties of curing cancer tumours. It is popular as *Jya* in the study village.

Due to the economic significance of bark and wood, only a few trees are left in the study village as the poachers destroyed them ruthlessly. The high-temperature-oriented coal of this tree is used in the forge by the Lohar community for making iron implements. In the *Van Panchayats* of Chauna, Harkot, Matena, and Kiwri, women are growing the endangered *Thunair* trees and have developed a belief system by tying protective threads and pledged to safeguard them like their brothers (Voices of Rural India, 2024).

***Burash* (*Rhododendron arboreum*)**

There are mainly two varieties of *Burash* flowers available in the study area, i.e., dark red and pink-coloured flowers. It has multiple usages ranging from economic, medicinal, ritual, and culinary significance. They start collecting the flowers after the performance of the flower festival, wherein *Phool Devi* is worshipped. The flowering season starts from March and continues up to May (spring). The plucked flowers are dried in the hot sun, and the petals are dried after careful removal of their pollen. The dried petals are used for making juice by boiling them with sugar. The extracted thick juice was stored in cleaned jars (5 litres) and consumed throughout the year. Further, it is also used for making tea, dyes, and indigenous medicine.

***Jamar* (Wild Lemon or *Citrus medica*)**

It is bigger than a normal lemon, having the size of an orange. Bhotiya collects *Jamar* in large quantities (as it falls due to snowfall), which are peeled off and boiled to convert them into a juicy form. Thus, the extracted thick liquid is preserved in bottles and kept in kitchens. It is sour in taste and used while cooking curries. Another variety known as *Malta*, which is known as sweet lemon. It is consumed in raw as well as processed form. Sweet lemon

is peeled off and boiled to extract its essence and stored for consumption during the May-June months. Another variety known as *Chook* (Big size lemon) is found at the homestead. The citrus trees located in the homestead are considered private property, whereas trees available in the forests and mountains of the concerned village limits are common property, where *Van Panchayat* members have access.

Rithu (Sapindas mukorossi)

They are organic soap nuts used for washing the body and clothes. The fallen raw nuts are collected and dried in the hot sun for storage. A small quantity is taken for washing clothes, body, and hair, etc. It is widely used for dry cleaning in the present to wash silk sarees, as detergents affect the quality of the fabric. But *Rithu* nuts keep the fabric intact and remove the dirt and stains. Elderly Bhotiya women prefer to bathe by using *Rithu* instead of modern soaps and shampoos.

Fuel Wood Collection

In Sarmoli, it is observed that every household has a huge collection of fuel wood to cope with the exigencies of nature, as Munsyari goes to minus degree temperatures during the winter season. During heavy snowfall, even electricity is not available to cope up the extreme cold. Water also freezes at such a temperature. Hence, they depend on such fuel wood as an adaptation strategy. Wood was burnt to heat the water, cook food, etc. The dried fuel wood is collected from the *Van Panchayats* auctions², some are through community-raised village forests, i.e., farms, and some are collected during the summer season. To meet their fuel wood requirements, women made afforestation near their village, which is close to the forest. For the collection of wood, they must perform the duties of conservation and obtain permission from the *Van Panchayats*.

Collection of Keera Jadi: (*Cardyiceps sinensis*)

It is a kind of rare medicinal fungus appear as a mushroom on top of a caterpillar and in brown color that grow in alpine meadows above 3500 meters above the mean sea level (Maikhuri et al 2013). It is available only at glaciers of *Johar Valley*, *Milam Valley*, and *Galeswar*. It grows naturally in very cold regions where the temperature is below -5 to 10 degrees Celsius. It is very expensive and used in the Chinese and Tibetan traditional system of medicine. The cost of one kilogram now ranges from 10 to 15 lakhs. If the family size is larger, can able to collect 1 kilogram during the season. But due to climate change and overharvesting, its availability has come down. At present, Bhotiya is able to collect 250 grams, and in one season, people's

earnings range from 10,000/- to 1 lakh rupees. Collection is dependent on pure luck, as some families may collect more than a kilogram.

During the first migration, i.e., mid-April, snow starts melting at the hill tops. At this point in time only, *Keera Jadi* is available. It is a very risky collection as every year one or two individual death cases are reported from *Milam Valley*. *Milam Valley* is situated at a height of 14,000 feet above the mean sea level (4,268 meters) and is named after the *Milam* glacier. Almost all the able members/households visit these steep valleys during the season (May-October) and collect them using their knowledge. A skilful Bhotiya can collect more *Keera Jadi* than others, as they were accustomed to mountain ecology for generations and passed it on to the younger ones orally. Now the shops and businessmen are available during the season who arrange groceries, meat, vegetable on horses, mules to the visiting Bhotiya for collection.

Natural Dyes

Bhotiya make natural dyes from the powder made from grinding the dried barks and flowers of wild medicinal trees. Bhotiya extract the barks of *Kirmoli*, *Dolu*, *Okhad* and *Seema* trees. Further, they also make powder from the dried *Burash* flowers for dyeing purpose.

***Bugyals* (Alpine Pastures)**

The study village is situated at an elevation of 2,200 meters (7,200) AMSL, and the picturesque valleys are historically renowned for the trade corridor between India and Tibet through ancient *Milam* and *Unta Duara* passes. Bhotiya had their ancestral villages popularly known with clan names such as *Milam*, *Laspa*, *Burphu*, *Martoli*, *Sumdu*, *Rilkot* in *Malla Johar* valley. The names probable originated from *Milam* glacier, and hence it is popular with *Malla Johar*. These villages are seasonally inhabited by Bhotiya, especially during the summer months.

Families living in, i.e., *Talla Johar* (lower valley) including the study village Sarmoli, visit this *Malla Johar* (upper valley), where animals were rested and taken to *Bugyals*. From there, every day, Bhotiyas take their stocks to *Bugyals* under the care of a herdsman. The Bhotiya engage in trade, cultivation and collection of medicinal herbs, indigenous crops, along with herding of stocks. With the onset of snow, they come down to *Talla Johar* (permanent settlement), where they engage in terrace cultivation and weaving the woollen items. In the present context, it was considered their permanent settlement since many Bhotiya showing less interest towards visiting *Malla Johar*. Surrounding Munsyari, alpine pastures are also available at Khalia top and its adjoining steep hills. Where Bhotiyas of the study area take their stocks for grazing on a rotation of caretakers. They used to live along

with their herds in tents and prepare food. Such pastures often have access to resources where transhumance has more exclusive rights than the *Van Panchayat*, since they are engaging such areas for grazing their sheep.

Conservation of Sacred Landscapes

They believed that the forest and hills are their sacred landscape since they are the abode of gods and goddesses, along with their ancestral spirits. Plucking of flowers, axing down the trees, and collection of forest products without the appeasement or sacrifice to those deities or spirits results in suffering to the individual and family. These kinds of beliefs and practices are functioning like checks and balances for environmental conservation. The deities of the study village are *Chalo Devi*, *Yedi Bhagawan*, *Bhumyal Devi*, *Narsing Devi*, *Ulka Devi*, and *Kaali* or *Durga Devi*. All these deities have abodes in forests and high hills. They used to appease them prior to the collection of seasonal forest produce. For example, the sacrifice of a calf (Kattera), known as *Asur Bali* (animal sacrifice), is offered to *Narsing Devta* by the villagers of Shankdura.

Further, Bhotiya also appease forest spirits that exist in hills, plains, and earmarked places like burials. *Pari*, *Chal*, and *Kala Baan*. Villagers believe that if anyone plucks the flowers in such places may affect the curse of the forest spirits, and the condition of spirit possession is expressed in the form of illness. *Pari* is the spirit reside on the hills, and if anyone, especially girls and women, sings songs, plucks flowers while going to this place will get *Pari*. In case anyone got ill due to this, *Pari* are tabooed to visit the forest on such earmarked places on hill tops. They were allowed outside only after the performance of the propitiation ceremony.

Inside the forest, many small sacred spots/landscapes are present where stones are structured in an ordered fashion in the form of small indigenous shrines. They are known as *Ban* or *Devbhumi*. Further, Bhotiya also consider *Bhugyal* (Alpine tree) as a sacred landscape, and hence no one dare to malign it. In some places, people put their ancestors' deity, called *Kul Devta*, under a tree and offer worship on auspicious occasions. In case anyone mistakenly crosses such places with a *Chappal* or commits any unwanted acts are attracted to *Chal*. It is resided on the lower valley plain homestead areas and village boundaries or outskirts. People who get *Chal* also suffer ill-health and undergo treatment along with offerings to the concerned spirit. *Kala Baan* is possessed by individuals when they visit prohibited places like burial, sacrificial spots, sacred spots, etc. In such a case, *Kala Baan* demands a sacrifice of a goat.

The trees located at temples are symbolised as sacred ones as they tie red, black, yellow, white, and saffron colours to cloths and people are not

allowed to carry on any unbecoming activities. People offer fruits, flowers, and food to these deities to please them during ceremonial occasions. Animals and chickens are also sacrificed as a promise to the deity when their wishes are fulfilled, and feasts are also organised with the distribution of cooked sacrificial meat and *puri*. Bhotiyas perceive that such belief systems help in the preservation of the forest as well as the sacred landscape and hence treat them with utmost respect and decorum.

People also believe that the forest is the source of joy and happiness, and hence believe in the idea of *Jal Jangal Jamin* where forests provide land for home, water for survival, and forest products for their livelihood. Without forests, their social and cultural identity will be lost forever. In the temple of *Maheswar Devta*, every year, villagers offer worship to the deity, where a buffalo is sacrificed at a stroke on the forehead and thrown into the forest. Villagers avoid consuming it; rather, it was left over to wild animals and birds as a part of propitiation of the *Devta*. However, in case anyone's vow is fulfilled in the village, Bhotiyas visit *Maheswar mandir* along with invited guests and offer a goat or sheep and consume it in the form of *prashad*. Women are not allowed to enter the *Maheswar* temple and its premises. The temple and its precincts are considered a sacred point, and hence the forest around it is treated as a sacred landscape and is prohibited from collecting any wood from it. In case anyone resorts to tree felling in the sacred area, they may invite the wrath of the deity. These community beliefs are systematically arranged in the form of narratives by the *Van Panchayat's* community organisations to conserve the forests. Some of the narratives are uploaded in website of the Himalayan Ark, voices of rural India, etc.

Himal Prakriti: An Institutional Mechanism to Promote Van Panchayats

It is a non-profit organisation founded in 2006 at Munsyari to ensure nature conservation and sustainable livelihoods for its members. They can also be accessed through a web portal referred to as the voices of rural India. It is a kind of cultural platform wherein the villagers place their stories/voices with respect to the significance of forests and their resources. It was created during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, where stories were collected from rural people and documented in proper order by relating them through written words, metaphors, photographs, videos, etc. At present, they have documented more than 80 such stories representing 11 states in India. One such story from Sarmoli belongs to *Timul* (fig) or *Angira* leaves narrated by Ms Bhavana Thakuni. She is also intimately called Bhanu by all the villagers. She is a very young and active member of *Maati Sangatan*. She narrated that the leaves of *Timul* are used as receptacles and cups by their forefathers and

place very sacred place in their socio-economic and religious life. Tourists are now throwing plastic plates and bottles in the Himalayas, posing challenges to the environment. In marriages and worship, the use of *Timul* leaves is considered sacred. Through a video message, she was creating awareness of using *Timul* plates and cups for environmental conservation (Voices of Rural India website, 2025).

In the name of *Himal Kalasutra*, a festival also organised since 2017, wherein all Sarmoli villagers cook traditional foods and share among themselves and with the tourists. It is part of reviving the tradition of *Shaut Shamal*, wherein food is prepared and gathered for long journeys, especially during their visit to *Johar* valley as a part of migratory pastoralism and the collection of medicinal herbs.

Management of Water in Forests

Conservation and maintenance of water sources are the collective responsibility of the villagers. The water springs in the forest are known as *Shrout*, and a cement structure was arranged, and pipes are connected to it for its effective management. The study villages have a big water tank constructed by the administration under *Sarmoli Peyjal Yojana (Jal Jeevan Mission)* near the *Shrot* (water spring), and thus, collected water is treated and supplied to each household through a pipeline for consumption. This *Shrot* directly comes from *Mesar Kund*, where all people in the village organise a *mela* and make offerings. It was being popularised by *Van Panchayat* members through their website (Himalayan Ark, 2025). Recently, the government also constructed a new reservoir under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) just beside the traditional *Mesar Khund* for the collection of water from the *Shrout* and supply water to the villages and the neighbouring villages. The natural water reservoir known as *Mesar* or *Maheswar Kund* provides water to Sarmoli, Sankhdura, and the other neighbouring villages.

According to Bhotiya folklore, two sisters of Barniagao regularly visit *Mesar Kund* for the collection of water. After seeing their beauty, Lord Mahesar was fascinated and took them into the *Kund* while the sisters were taking a bath. Worried by the non-return of girls, the family consulted with the family priest, and the priest told them they were taken by the *Devta*. The family, along with the priest and the villagers, went to the *Kund* to persuade the *Devta* to release their daughters. Instead, the *Devta* promise them gold, ornaments, wealth, and other wishes as he has fallen in love with the girls. Despite this, the family does not agree to the *Devta's* proposal and insisted for their return. Then the *Devta* has taken the whole soul of these two sisters and thrown the skeletal remains of the girls out of the pond. This act enraged the

concerned family members and villages. They broke the *Kund* in vengeance, and the water from the *Kund* started flowing in two directions. Then, the *Devta* got angry and cursed the villagers that no two brothers in a family can live together, and their family will not increase or decrease. To please the *Devta*, the villagers offer prayers and sacrifice animals to prevent water scarcity. Every year, people from the neighbouring villages come together to please the *Devta* for the well-being of their family and offer fruits, flowers, feasts, and animals to the *Devta*. It is said that priests, shepherds, and women are not allowed to enter the *Kund*. By the year 2003, the women folk of Sarmoli, Jainti and Sankdhura *Van Panchayats* came together for the restoration of dried-up parts of *Kund* and by 2006, the whole work was completed with the help of volunteers and men of the villages. Since 2006, every year a festival called *Mesar Van Kautik* is celebrated by worshipping the *Devta* along with other cultural activities.

Eco-Tourism as Alternative Livelihood

Due to climate change, snowfall has become very low in the last two years in Munsyari. Due to overheating, the Himalayan glaciers melted away, resulting in the drying of rivers early. Eventually, this scenario impacted the livelihoods related to terrace cultivation, livestock rearing, and the collection of forest produce. Villagers stated that prior to 2025, snowfall was expected to fall in November and December, but in the current year, it started in March due to climate change. With the uncertain traditional livelihoods, tourism has become a source of alternative livelihoods for *Van Panchayat* members. In turn, it has become an agency to manage the forests in the study area. Sarmoli and Sankdhura are famously known as villages of homestays in Munsyari for the seasonal tourists, bird watchers, hill trekking people, and adventurers. The part of the income (2%) generated from the homestay also contribute for the cause of forest conservation. The village women come together for personal as well as forest rights and runs homestay in the village under the banner of *Himalayan Ark*³. The *Maati Sangthan* also provides entrepreneurship and training programmes to the other village women in handicrafts, where shawls, sweaters, and carpets made from sheep and rabbit wool are produced. Besides homestay, they are also able to generate livelihoods in the form of tourist guides, taxi drivers, and petty business. Tiwari (2023) conducted a study on the empowerment of women through eco-tourism by Himalayan Ark that provides community-based homestays and initiatives for the conservation of Himalayan biodiversity as an example of successful eco-tourism in Uttarakhand. Sarmoli has been awarded for “*Best Tourism Village*” by the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India in 2023 (PTI, 2023). It gave a fillip not only to *Van Panchayat’s Maati Sangthan* but also to women from other villages.

Challenges

From the above-mentioned empirical data, *Van Panchayat* can be seen as a role model for the conservation of sacred landscape in the Himalayan region of Uttarakhand. Most of the *Van Panchayats* are self-financed ones run by the community, and they generate income from the auctioning of grass and forest products. However, this income was not sufficient for the payments of forest guards, vigilant staff, and management of *Van Panchayats* and other forest restoration work. Most of the *Van Panchayats* are unable to pay the mandatory 20% income generated from the forest to the Forest Department. Negi et al. (2012) pointed out that the *Van Panchayat* are given a secondary status to that of *Gram Sabha*, thus hindering the decision-making in forest-related conflicts. The *Van Panchayats* face a continuous threat from illegal cutting of trees and grass by the neighbouring villagers. As such, there is a need for rigorous patrolling inside the forests.

Conversion of Munsyari *Gram Panchayat* to Municipal Council instils the fear of loss of indigenous rights over land and control over the forest. The tourism also generates huge chunks of plastic waste that pollute the Himalayan environment and the water streams on which most of the villagers' livelihoods depend. *Tamri Kund* is a hot water spring located nearly 10 kilometres away from the study village. Tourists frequent this place in large numbers and pose problems by throwing plastic, junk food pouches, bottles, etc. This kind of garbage is found even at Nanda Devi temple, Maheshwar temple, and in forests also. The concept of eco-tourism has become a challenge for the villagers to make the insensitive tourists about disposal of plastic in the mountains and forests. With the perceived benefits of homestay, the real estate business is growing rapidly in the hills, and local people are proceeding to the plains for the sake of education, health, and employment. More forest and cultivable lands were converted to build homestays by the local as well as outside population. If the trend is continued, the local Bhotiya population will be replaced with plain people, which will affect the forest conservation efforts, as they do not bother about the beliefs and practices associated with forests and hills.

Though institutional efforts like *Himal Prakriti*, *Himalayan Ark*, and *Maati Sangatan* are making efforts for forest conservation but in vain. The Bhotiya youth are not interested towards traditional livelihoods. After completion of their basic education, they are attracted towards tourism related works as they perceive they could earn a good amount of money without any hard tasks like cultivation and animal husbandry. The rich folklore associated with forests, hills, and other natural resources is wading away from the younger minds as they are obsessed with smart mobile phones and digital platforms. As such, unlike their parents, they are not bothered about

the conservation of forests and sacred landscapes. All these challenges should be taken care of by the *Van Panchayats* and use eco-tourism responsibly for the creation of sustainable livelihoods to lessen the dependence on forests.

Conclusion

Thus, the *Van Panchayat* system in Uttarakhand is a living example of the sustainable community-based conservation of forests and landscapes. The indigenous rights of Bhotiya are intertwined with their organisation and participation in the socio-cultural institutions. Uttarakhand is also known as *Dev Bhumi*, which means *Land of Gods*, where every community have spiritual, cultural, and political identity associated with the forest. Many shrines are built inside the forest and are worshipped and considered as the abodes of their gods and goddesses. Thus, they venerate trees, birds, animals, and lakes as sacred spaces and conserve the forests and landscape of the Himalayas. The data enforces Ross's theoretical framework that grassroots organisations like *Maati Sangathan*, *Himal Prakriti*, *Van Panchayat*, and so on are addressing the livelihood concerns of the villagers. The cooperation and collaboration were reinforced by the spiritual, cultural, and social activities, which are evident from the organisation and performance of rituals on auspicious occasions.

Since all the households of Bhotiya depend on forests for livelihood, fodder, medicinal plants, tourism, and water, there are checks and balances through *Maati Sangathan* to prevent the free rider issue. Thus, Oslon's collective action of *Van Panchayats* discourages people who indulge in forest theft and encroachments. But the role of traditional organisations got affected with acculturation, and the present generation is not interested in moral issues of protection and preservation of forests, thereby protection of heritages of the community has become challenging day by day. Furthermore, tourism-related livelihoods are at stake during the rainy season as tourists show less interest in this place, as the routes are blocked by landslides and road blockages on hill tops. Despite this, sharing of benefits of *Van Panchayats* of the study area reflects the Ife's progressive communitarian and empowerment approach, which in turn attracts the younger generation. Hence, there is a need to enhance supportive mechanisms from the governments to achieve the real empowerment of the local people and provide for the creation of an employment guarantee to the dependent population.

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Notes

1. Under the leadership of Ms Bauni Devi, the village mahila mangal dal had waged a struggle to uproot the coal-making kiln in Bharaki-Urgam *Van Panchayats*. With this inspiration, Sarmoli also constituted a group to prevent such kind of illegal activities in the village forests.
2. During heavy snowfall, the snow slide take place from the hilltops. As a result, many trees were uprooted and was flooded to the plains. Thus, washed-out wooden trees are pruned and sliced into pieces and auctioned to the public. The collected money goes to the corpus of *Van Panchayats* of the respective village.
3. A community-based tourism organisation located at Munsyari in Uttarakhand

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