

Outlook

Cheap fix for climate change? Bring tourists to check smuggling of forest trees in J&K

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Two decades ago tourist resort Doodhpathri (Meadow of Milk) was not accessible by road. To reach the Doodhpathri green carpet meadow, locally called Padyas, locals and trekkers would have to trek several kilometres from Raiyar village, which is about 9 kilometres from the meadow.

Now there is a macadamized road passing through the forest up to the meadow and beyond. Constructions have come up in the villages. Hotels are coming up. The villagers, both men and women, have installed small make-shift open *kehwa* shops serving endless tourists hot sweet *kehwa*. Many youths of different villages living around Doodhpathri meadow have become tourist guides taking tourists to different meadows on horseback.

The rich and affluent from Srinagar, and other places are looking for land here. Some have already bought and marked their land by raising tin walls giving ugly look to otherwise beautiful villages. Land prices are soaring up around Doodhpathri and surrounding villages, where everyone seems to be a broker here. Many business families, police and civil officials from different areas have purchased the land here as everyone hopes in coming years as Doodhpathri would be a top tourist destination in Kashmir replacing Gulmarg.

A large number of tourists prefer to go sightseeing in the grass green fields after parking their vehicles on the road that divides the meadow itself. Instead of birds chirping, there is the noise of rushing vehicles. Tourists are all smiles seeing green grass fields surrounded by deodar and pine trees and a gushing stream down the hill.

On Sunday, May 15, when a large number of tourists had parked their vehicles along the road and were enjoying walking over a green grass meadow, tribal villagers around 200 meters away were talking to the forest and revenue officials. They were asking them to extend the lease of the temporary huts they have been keeping for nearly 100 years.

Gujjar Bakerwal is a community of nomadic grazers who primarily practice migratory livestock rearing. For long Gujjars have been demanding the implementation of The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, which gives them individually and community rights over forestland and its resources. On August 5, 2019, after the abrogation of Article 370, central laws were extended to Jammu and Kashmir and along with them Forest Rights Act, 2006 was also extended to Jammu and Kashmir. Earlier, the BJP was opposed to extending the law to J&K.

Now the tribal community seeks its benefit to the fullest. Under the Forest Rights Act, the forest department is supposed to give rights to the community over their hutments, locally called Kotha, in the forests and land surrounding it. Gujjars complain that the forest department is not implementing the Forest Rights Act on the ground and the government is targeting Gujjars for even making minor repairs in their hutments deep inside forests.

A local Farooq Ahmad Denda, 25, says when he tried to make minor repairs to his hutment possessed by his family for generations, the forest officials filed FIR against his aged father.

While tourism money is not trickling to every person in the area, the villagers also bank upon their pastoral practices. Most of the Gujjars, who are also the traditional shepherders assemble flocks of the peasantry and their own and take them for grazing in the mountains for most of the summer.

There are Bakerwals, who are also Gujjars but are exclusively into goat-herding. Some of the Gujjars here are both into livestock rearing and farming.

At the start of spring after the snow melts from the upper reaches, Gujjar Bakerwal tribes and Pahari and Kashmiri speaking people in the Doodhpathri forest region start moving up into forests with their flock of sheep, a fleet of horses, herds of goats, cattle, dogs, baggage and luggage to pass the summer season there. Since they spent most of the time in the jungles during summers for their livestock, they have a right to a *dhok* up in meadows and want forest officials to extend the lease and allow them to repair their *dhoks*.

On Sunday when the intense discussion was going on between the tribals and forest officials about a *dhok* at Padyas meadow, the *dhok* had been turned into a shop by a tribal as he was selling soft drinks, chips and cigarettes to the tourists.

Elderly tribals are in dilemma whether to approve tourism development in the area or not.

Ghulam Ahmad Kumar, 80, of Chekshera village, knows the Doodhpathri Valley and its villages like the back of his hand. As a child, he had been walking for a day up in the hills of Pir Panchal to get perfect soil for making earthen pots -- the work he has given up some twenty years ago as there are no takers for earthen pots in the Valley.

He says the whole area was full of forests having alpine and deodar trees but now the forest has dwindled. Kumar feels happy and sad about it. "These days life is not that difficult. It doesn't take much time to reach the forests as the road has made it easy. Tourists are coming and people are earning out of it. But springs have disappeared and the weather changes are very frequent," he adds.

Nazir Ahmad Denda, 45, is sarpanch of Mujpathri village en route to Doodhpathri meadow. He smiles a lot. "Some twenty years ago most of the people living here were small-time jungle thieves. There is a reason for it. There was no employment and there was no source of earning. So people would take timber from the jungle stealthily and sell them in the market to earn for living. Those were very bad times," he says and laughs. "We wouldn't get any benefit of it but we could feed our families out of it," he adds.

He says the big jungle smugglers looted forests like anything. "Lakhs of forest trees in this area were cut by big-time smugglers since 2000 leaving the large chunk of forests without trees," Denda says. He says gradually after the government declared the area as Tourist Development Area and constructed a road to Doodhpathri meadow some eight years ago, tourists started arriving in the area and forest smuggling has now stopped. He says the road through which tourists now reach Doodhpathri meadow was full of forest trees. The Kacha road was sanctioned in 2002 and then lakhs of trees were felled to construct the macadamized road in 2012.

Hanifa Begam, a sarpanch from the Gurrwatt area says a large number of forest trees were cut over the years. But after the road was constructed through the forest for the tourism development after cutting lakhs of trees, jungle smuggling stopped. She says after the tourism influx in the area, it generated employment and it saved forests.

Sarwar Begam, sarpanch of Raiyar village, also says tourism has provided employment to people of her village as they have opened small-time shops and are taking tourists for horse ride expeditions. She says at the same time pastoral practices of the villagers continue and they should be allowed to use *dhoks*. She also argues that tourism has stopped chopping down forest trees.

Bashir Ahmad Bjan, 47, of Yarikha Gogaldara would come by horses to reach Padyas meadow. On Sunday he had come by a vehicle. "Earlier the area would witness a substantial amount of rainfall

and snowfall. Now we see the temperature rising after every year. And we all feel it and suffer on account of it. But tourism is a great thing that has happened to this place," he says.

Over the years, says Dr Shaikh Ghulam Rasool, a well-known activist of the area, that wildlife and birdlife of the area has got disturbed and disappeared. "It is all because of the culling of forests in this area," says Shaikh, who is training villagers for the past 15 years on RTI Act. "I am told by elders here around 30 springs have disappeared. There is no regulation for tourists. I feel over-tourism will destroy this breathtakingly beautiful Doodhpathri. It is just 45 km from Srinagar. It will face devastation if tourism in the area is not regulated and afforestation is done at a large scale. We still have time to regulate tourism in this forest area," he adds. But no one seems bothered. At least villagers are not concerned at present. All they are happy about is the arrival of tourists. And they are serving them *kahwa* and earning out of it.

Source: <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/a-cheap-fix-for-climate-change-bring-tourists-to-make-people-not-chop-down-forest-trees-news-197264>