

# NATIONAL HERALD

**Forests are not just mass of trees, they are thriving communities**

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We can start counting how fast you will tune off now in 1... trees... 2... environment... 3... climate.

Thank you for managing those two lines, if indeed you did.

Years ago, when I worked in newsrooms, members of the public would often ask: why don't you people ever headline meaningful news? Things which happen in the real India, in villages, in the lives of ordinary people?

These are legitimate complaints. Why don't we do enough of that? There is a real India beyond politicians and hero worship.

Or is there?

Let's see this as a test. This column will not mention hate, sectarian divides, religious intolerance, Bollywood, cricket, sex, scandals. It will mention government, development, infrastructure, the environment, climate, forests and the future. The real India. The real world if you will. It might even mention corruption, of mind if not of wallets.

How far will these subjects enthrall?

This has been a very hot summer in India. In fact, we seem to have bypassed spring and jumped straight into a very dry summer. As we grapple with forest fires here in the hills and fires in fields and wilting crops, a small but growing group of people who care are on a mission almost impossible: To save over 2000 members of a Sal forest in Uttarakhand. Not just any forest, but forests that are part of our national heritage. The Rajaji Tiger Reserve and the Shivalik Elephant Reserve.

The destruction of the trees has started because the government at the Centre and the government in the states of Uttarakhand and UP want one more road to connect Delhi to Dehradun. It is well-known in Delhi circles that people visit Dehradun to admire its roads. Trees, mountains, forests, waterfalls? Not so much. Correct?

"What do the forests bear? Water, soil and pure air", "*Aaj Himalaya Jagega, Kroor Kulhara Bhagega*": These are slogans from the Chipko movement of the 1970s. A slogan born in the area now known as Uttarakhand. In 1973, villagers in the Garhwal region protested against the chopping of forests. In 1974, a group of women tied themselves to trees to stop contractors from felling them. From here is born an environmental awareness movement that spreads across India.

And now, as Uttarakhand proudly stands as a state, and not a northern satrap of Uttar Pradesh, it forgets its activist past and destroys its heritage. Thankfully, there is a small group of NGOs and citizens and it is growing. The NGOs and their members are under attack from the authorities, but they are still there.

They have filed and lost cases in our so-called "pro-environment" courts, but they are still there. There are young people involved, they are committed and dynamic. They are not against "development". Yes, Uttarakhand needs progress and infrastructure. But not all development has to be at the cost of precious natural resources. And forests, the mountains, the rivers, these are precious, these are endangered and they are vital for our wellbeing and our future.

You cannot destroy a forest and then plant a few saplings as road dividers and assume you have fulfilled a responsibility. Forests are communities, they sustain a massive system of plants, insects, animals. Sal trees are not individuals, they also form a community. They cannot survive on their own. By destroying forests, you also release carbon stores which can have catastrophic impacts on global warming.

The environmental destruction caused by massive road and hydro projects in the higher Himalayas has long been evident. Glaciers are retreating. Flash floods increasing. A massive earthquake is overdue according to seismologists. Rains last year caused dangerous landslides and took some of the new roads with them. Retaining walls made of stone do not provide the same protection as tree cover. What price development when there are no mountains left?

“Water, soil and pure air”? Say goodbye to those and the forest goes. The “raos”, or monsoon-fed streams, of the area all around Dehradun have long been encroached upon. When the rain does come, who knows what devastation it will bring in its wake? The air is dusty and hot.

Some six years ago, some of us fought a battle against Dehradun’s “smart city” plan. Its main purpose at the time was to destroy a tea garden and put up lots of tall buildings. We stopped that. And it’s hard to fathom what we got instead. Lots of elevated pavements as far as I can see, guaranteed to increase knee replacement surgeries and a few electric rickshaws. Yes, we need infrastructure and development but not more roads for tourists, whether for the Char Dham Yatra or for visitors from Delhi.

But who’s listening, right?

You can wake up now. I’ve finished.

Source: <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/forests-are-not-just-mass-of-trees-they-are-thriving-communities>