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New Life to the Himalayan Hills

by Tony Phillips

The continuing success of CIVA in assisting with rural redevelopment in India depends almost exclusively on two factors: the generosity of our supporters in Canada, and the collaboration with honest and dedicated members of carefully selected nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in India.

One such NGO with whom we have a close working relationship is CHIRAG, the Central Himalayan Rural Action Group, formed in 1986 with support from CIVA. CHIRAG is devoting its attention to remote rural mountain communities in the Kumaun Hill region of the Lesser Himalayas, Kumaun is situated at the junction of Nepal, Tibet and India. The region serves as a microcosm for all of the serious ecological and socioeconomic problems that currently plague the entire Himalayan region. Recently, Margo Palmer and I had the privilege of visiting this region to see first-hand the tremendous work that CHIRAG is doing in this beautiful and fragile region of the world. In this article, we would like to share some of the experiences and impressions gained during our visit to the CHIRAG headquarters in Sitla village, Kumaun, Uttar Pradesh.

As our plane droned slowly over the Siwalik Hills towards the rendezvous point at Patnagar, I was rereading, in preparation for our visit, the background document prepared by CHIRAG. I was particularly struck by the following passage and was soon to see how accurate they were.

INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT

Healthy, undisturbed forest lands have three protective layers of vegetative cover viz: trees, shrubs and grasses. These may be likened to a man's clothing i.e., coat, shirt and vest. All three layers are needed to keep the land vigorous and healthy. Much of the forest land in Kumaun is, however, very sick as it has been severely degraded, denuded and ravaged. In large tracts, all three layers of its protective cover have been destroyed, leaving the bare skin to face the elements. It is thirsty because it has lost its water retention capacity. Gradually, the last remaining skin cover or the soil is also eroded and all that is left are the bones in the form of bare rock and detritus. Consequently,

the focal point of any sustainable ecodevelopment programme in the Central Himalayas must relate to the rehabilitation of the land, to nursing it back to health so that it can provide the basic needs of the people who live on it on a sustained basis.

In a mountain ecosystem like that of Kumaun, the land, people and livestock are more closely integrated than in the plains. The vast majority of the rural households in these mountainous regions are heavily dependent for their survival on the fuel and fodder they collect from the forests in their immediate surroundings. There is a biomass-based subsistence economy. With the forests having been steadily destroyed and land heavily over-grazed, the collection work is becoming more difficult and time-consuming. Water is also becoming increasingly scarce in the region. Natural springs which constitute the main source of water for the villages located on the hill slopes are drying up due to environmental degradation.

The maximum impact of the destruction of water and biomass resources is on women because collection of fuel, fodder and water is their responsibility—in addition to all their other daily chores around the house and in the fields. In many areas in the hill districts the women have literally reached the limit of their capacity to endure. Old, young, pregnant or lactating, they continue working even when they are worn out and ill to provide the family with these bare necessities for living. In the process, their health deteriorates further, along with that of their offspring who are undernourished from the very start of their life in their mother's womb. The suffering of the people—particularly the women—described above is made much worse by the lack of health care services. The visible result in many communities is a highly degraded physical environment and an undernourished, overworked female population with no one to turn to when they are ill.

A couple with four children and another on the way, tired, indebted, malnourished, living a hand-to-mouth existence, with frequent illnesses in the family and no health-care facility is incapable of thinking and planning for the future. It is inhumane and incongruous to expect them to be interested in long-term plans and lofty ideals of providing vegetalcover to repair the ecological damage and save the Himalayas and the Gages Plain. It would be an exercise in futility unless it is linked to ways and means of alleviating their immediate needs and hardships. Given this situation, another important component of any integrated programme has to be the improvement of the health and nutritional status of the people of this hill region especially its women—with family planning as one of its essential elements. The latter is of critical importance not only for the well-being of the family and community but as a measure to curb the population growth and reduce the pressure on the land.

Whatever model or path one chooses to work at the grass-roots level

to repair the ecological damage and avert the looming disaster ahead, one basic factor cannot be ignored—both the land and its people, in particular the women, are sick, wornout and degraded. The suffering of the people is directly linked to the degradation of the land —an umbilical cord connects the two and will continue to do so as long as the livelihood of the people remains heavily dependent on the biomass resources. This is fundamental. Income generation programmes that merely put more money into the pockets of the people and weaken this link without providing suitable and adequate alternatives will not help. Nor will programmes that scar and put more land to the plough be of any help because the process will result in greater soil erosion due to unscientific land use such as poorly constructed terraces in steeply sloping marginal lands. On the contrary, they will do more damage. Nature had not intended these lands to be used for agriculture but for trees, shrubs and grasses. What is needed are soothing, healing, gentle hands and a sensitive understanding of the mountain ecosystem—a love for the mountains, if you like—to restore the health of the land and the people. Everything else is secondary.”(Integrated Hill Development in Central Himalayas, CHIRAG, 1989)

Our introduction to this region took place during the long and arduous ride by jeep from Pantnagar, a prosperous distribution centre in the plains, to Sitla, a tiny village located at the end of a mud track, 7,000 feet above sea-level. During the first part of the journey we were full of eager anticipation as we wound our way up a serviceable hardtop road into the hills. The views were spectacular, but as we looked more closely at the terrain, the signs of environmental degradation soon became apparent. Indiscriminate logging had left many hillsides bare. Our journey progressed into nightfall and our impromptu ecological survey soon gave way to concern about our final destination. After what seemed like an eternity the driver indicated that Sitla lay just ahead and with a quick switch into four-wheel drive, and a flick of the wheel we shot up a steep, seemingly impassable slope, to reach our destination. Lights appeared through the midst, but Sitla remained a mystery until early the next morning.

The small village of Sitla consists of no more than two dozen houses strung along a ridge that commands one of the best views in the world. The snowcapped peaks of Nanda Devi, India's highest mountain, and its neighbours lie about 30 miles to the north across a series of valleys; to the south are located some of the valleys where CHIRAG is focussing its activities. Sitla is important for several reasons. It is the site of the rural health centre, funded by CIVA, that served as the entry point for CHIRAG's activities in the region. Sitla is also literally the home of CHIRAG, as its main offices are located in rented buildings here, and the staff all live close by in leased houses that have been rescued from dilapidation by the Team. Sitla serves as both the hub of CHIRAG's activities and the test site for many of its innovative schemes. In

addition to the health post, there is a preschool, a women's cooperative store, the first dry chemical toilet in the region and perhaps the only biogas plant working successfully at high altitude. In the modest offices, the CHIRAG team which now has over twenty members, is carefully developing a master plan that may prove to be the blueprint for saving the Himalayas. And what a plan it is!

Over the next two days, we explored in great detail the surrounding hills and valleys and saw at first hand the problems described so eloquently in CHIRAG's reports. There was no doubt that the region is in serious trouble. The damage to the forest land and water sources was much greater than we anticipated and it was apparent that the people were in dire need of medical and educational assistance. One of our lasting memories was the pathetic sight of whole groves of mountain oak reduced to the status of skeletons with the odd green sprout close to the trunk, a condition brought about by constant lopping of branches for firewood. The loss of such tree cover starts a cascade of events by which the shrubs and ground cover are eventually destroyed, leaving the bare earth to the mercy of the elements. Seen in isolation from the reclamation program undertaken by CHIRAG, this is a most depressing sight indeed.

Fortunately, with financial help from CIVA and the Swiss Development Agency, along with the hands-on work of CHIRAG, help is on the way in the form of an integrated scheme for rural development in these hills. To this end, CHIRAG has proposed a seven part sectorial program to deal in a comprehensive manner with the redevelopment of this region. The seven sectors include: forestry, animal husbandry, agriculture/horticulture, community health, child development services, energy and village co-ops. CIVA will continue to assume major responsibility for community health, while our sister organization TRAS assists with forestry, agriculture and energy.

Throughout our brief visit with CHIRAG, we were constantly amazed by both the sophistication and dedication of the team assembled by the director Kanai Lall, in just three short years. Most of the members of CHIRAG are young professionals with expertise in a variety of subjects ranging from medicine and rural management, to the biology of edible grasses. These men and women under the benevolent supervision of Kanai Lall and his wife Lakshmi, have set themselves the seemingly impossible task of transforming a small corner of the Himalayas from its present crisis, to a region with a stable ecosystem and a sustainable economy that could prove to be the key to the salvation of the entire Himalayan chain.

After meeting these remarkable people first hand, we came away convinced that they did indeed stand a good chance of success and were even more determined than ever to

**continue with our moral and financial support.
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CHIRAG.**

[\(back to top\)](#)

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