

Reforestation of the hillsides of the Himalayas

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All photos by Alaap

Forests, Young and Old

Most environmental organisations in India grapple with the competing demands of biodiversity conservation on the one hand, and safeguarding the interests of local community on the other. The two are often at odds with each other, both in policy and in practice.

Based in the Central Himalayan ranges of Kumaun in Uttarakhand, Alaap is one such organisation that has taken on a 'mountain' of a challenge - to bring back the native forests of the Himalayas, through deep-rooted community involvement and government engagement.

Alaap works at the intersection of environmental degradation and poverty to ensure that both nature and people thrive in harmony. They advocate for the creation of mixed, natural forests of native species, as an alternative to the mono-cultured plantations seen across Uttarakhand's hillsides. To this end, Alaap employs a human-centric model by creating eco-leaders within the communities and local governments in the region. This two-pronged approach goes hand in hand to bring back the region's lost native forests - while securing livelihoods, providing food security and restoring habitats.

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How it all began

Alaap's work began in 2015 in Uttarakhand, a state with a rich history of forest activism and localised forest governance - the Chipko movement began right here in 1973, and Uttarakhand is the only state with Van Panchayats (local forest councils), in the country.

Alaap began out of the founder Sheeba Sen's conviction that social forestry was gradually failing in the Kumaun Himalayas, despite this history of forest protection and activism. Even though communities continue to be dependent on local forests for food, fuel, fodder, medicinal plants and water, people had begun to disconnect from nature. Participation in plantation programs and afforestation camps held by local NGOs was dwindling, and the onus for forest protection remained on those organisations and not on the community.

Soon after founding Alaap, Sheeba undertook a *padyatra* (a journey on foot) across 40 kilometres, covering 18 villages in Garud Valley, to get a firm grip on this growing disconnect of communities from their forests. As a young organisation, Alaap has had the advantage of trying out different approaches to test what works for the local context and community. The last few years have been spent on extensive community visits and research, liaising with state and district-level administrations as well as the development of a scientific understanding of forest growth and natural vegetation principles.

Community meetings during the Padyatra

If climate change is the problem in the Himalayas, is afforestation the solution?

The Himalayas are seeing unprecedented climate change impacts, at higher rates than other regions - including other mountain ranges. It is estimated that the Hindu Kush Himalaya region will be **at least 0.3 °C warmer** than the global average. The loss of native tree cover in the region has also been **linked to** the drying of springs, a primary source of drinking water in Uttarakhand.

In Uttarakhand, in particular, anthropogenic or 'man-made' climate change has an even more disturbing face. Among the legacies of the British in the state are the vast swathes of mono-cultured pine plantations, which were grown for their commercial value derived from resin and timber. As a non-native and invasive species, pine has largely contributed to desertification, water scarcity and the growing incidence of forest fires in the region.

The hazards of climate change - both of decreasing water during the summer months as well as the potential for landslides, flooding, forest fires and other natural disasters - are largely faced by mountain communities. Alaap believes that these communities are caught in a vicious cycle made worse by increasing climate change impacts.

Vicious cycle of climate change

But afforestation alone cannot solve the problem, can it? This was perhaps the question which led to Alaap's explorations of a forestry model somewhat removed from the prevailing approaches for forestry in the Kumaun Himalaya.

[Alaap's model and vision](#)

Much like the forests they work to restore and create, Alaap's model of interventions is symbiotic in nature. They aim to go beyond just the creation of forests, and recalibrate the relationship that local communities in the region have with forests.

For that to happen, the primary challenge Alaap is attempting to tackle is this - how can the act of forest creation itself become remunerative for Kumaun's communities, instead of the expectation of revenue generated from the extraction of forest resources? Can forest cover be increased without putting food security at risk? Just like agriculture and animal husbandry, can reforestation through the creation of dense, natural forests on small pieces of land become a reliable livelihood for the mountain farmer?

Thinking about Alaap's approach, metaphors abound. Whether it is their focus on bringing transformation through both inner and outer ecology, or bringing in an organisational culture that operates much like a forest ecosystem - Alaap employs a holistic and much-needed alternative approach to forestry.

Through native forest creation, context based education and livelihood support, Alaap's community-driven model mobilises citizens to create native forests, promotes sustainable livelihoods and empowers youth as eco-changemakers. In the long term, Alaap hopes to disrupt the cycle of poverty in rural communities that live within or in proximity to forests. It is only then that bringing back Himalayan forests, tree-by-tree, can morph into a community-led movement at scale.

Learning about Jeevamrit to nourish soon-to-be-planted saplings

[Nature. Community. Self.](#)

Central to Alaap's work is the regeneration of native forests in the region using the Miyawaki method - a scientific methodology for creating forests that are denser, more biodiverse and faster-growing than traditionally planted forests. Over the past two years, Miyawaki forest creation has been implemented at the state, district as well as village level by working with the state government and hyper-local village institutions such as Van Panchayats and community-based sangathans (institutions).

Secondly, community interventions form the foundation for Alaap's work. Whether it is the creation of alternative fodder sources for communities by making fodder forests on private land, or generating employment through forest creation activities under MNREGA, they tie in a range of interventions focussed at reducing drudgery for women and creating income generation opportunities.

Thirdly, Alaap emphasises equally the creation and empowerment of eco-leaders both in the communities where it works, as well as the local governments in the district and the state through a range of community workshops, forest officer trainings, youth internship programs as well as vocational trainings.

When science and storytelling come together, a powerful narrative can emerge. Alaap is seeing this in action, as through their workshops they are empowering local people, government officials as well as forestry enthusiasts with knowledge about trees, forests, soil and the symbiotic relationships that help natural ecosystems thrive.

Youth workshops

Achievements so far

Just over the past year, Alaap has managed to bring the District Government of Champawat on board for an innovative social forestry model that will be rolled out in 100 villages for a period of 5 years. This involves the setup of a showcase Miyawaki forest - the Champawat Mool Van - for which Alaap has already mobilised nearly 500 community members, government officials, and young people all over the country to plant 14,000 native trees on a site selected by the government. Champawat Mool Van also serves as the site for training for 100 villages in the district.

It isn't just the district governments - the Uttarakhand Forest Department is also on board to begin large-scale forest creation in 2019 in degraded reserved forests, to test out the potential of Alaap's approach in forest regeneration at a state-wide level.

Most crucially, they have managed to strike a chord with their ultimate stakeholders - the local community. 28 villages have committed to unite and revive their native forests.

Launch of the community program in Champawat

What we can learn from Alaap

Alaap's journey serves to remind us that no cause is worth giving up on. Despite the challenges faced by both civil society and the government in making forests part of the development agenda for the mountains, Alaap continues to experiment and innovate to show a different path from established norms.

Contact [the author](#)