

PASTORALISTS, POLITICS, AND THE IMPACT OF RIO 1992: A CONFLICT OVER FOREST IN THE CENTRAL INDIAN HIMALAYAS

PERNILLE GOOCH

HUMAN ECOLOGY DIVISION, LUND UNIVERSITY, SWEDEN.

Abstract:

In the late summer of 1992 I followed a group of pastoral nomadic Van Gujjars and their herds down the slopes of the Himalayas. They had broken up from their summer camps in the high ranges of the Central Himalayas, gathered their herds of buffaloes, and started the long and arduous walk back to the lowlands as they had done every year. The trail down is about 200 kilometers long and in the normal order of things it links summer pastures and winter quarters. But this particular year the trail turned out to be the beginning of a very different kind of journey; a journey that came to lead them out of their former status as one of the numerous little known communities wandering somewhere at the periphery of Indian society.

The trail of migration is hazardous as a rule, however, this year a conflict over conservation, with the establishment of a National Park in the forest of their winter camps, threatened to put a final stop to the walk of transhumance.

But in the world where the trail ended, the situation was changing. It was now not just the officials of the Forest Department with their eviction orders that were waiting to receive the Van Gujjars upon their return. While they had continued their traditional life of transhumance in the Upper Himalayas, the ground had been prepared for discussions highlighting their specific problems. This was the summer of the Rio Earth Summit where environmental issues were high on national and global agendas as well as in the media. The message that the biodiversity of our globe is rapidly disappearing spread through the media together with the notion that there is an urgent need to change policies in order to preserve nature. The year 1992 was also the year when America celebrated Columbus' discovery, five hundred years earlier of the 'New World.' But the celebration of the 'globalization' of European culture' also sharpened the critique of Western cultural hegemony and became a celebration of its antipodes: the non-western and local in the form of multiculturalism or cultural diversity. Thus the media in 1992 flashed images of a threatened biodiversity as well as of the last remnants of the world's cultural diversity, rapidly being swallowed up by a unilinear development that was molding everybody in its all-embracing image of a single world culture. These images fused biodiversity with cultural diversity and depicted indigenous people as the last vanguard of nature protection.

The results of these events was that the Van Gujjars returned back at the right moment to exemplify an ongoing discourse over the conflict between 'people and conservation' in the Indian national context, as well as discussions of indigenous people and nature in a global forum. This was the start of a Van Gujjar movement for the right to forest and livelihood; a movement that is now exactly twenty years old. What happened was that the voice of the Van Gujjar which up to then had been muted, now, with the help of the media and a local NGO, emerged as one of the parts in the environmental debate with the message "We are not destroyers of nature. We are part of forest."

This story is thus about the relationship between people and their environment, but it is also about exploitation, dominance, insurgence and political struggle and about how

nature attains a powerful symbolic value. I will show how 'nature' is used as a political weapon and how 'ecology' may be used as a liberating force as well as a tool of domination. As the Van Gujjars walked through mountains that are encircled by myth, considered environmentally fragile, contested and politicised, they were confronted with a "world of conflicting discourse". What I want to argue is that in a fully integrated global world – as after Rio 1992 – selected images of the local become intertwined in national and global discourses. Such, especially, has been the case with the ecological movement. And it gives people as the Van Gujjars – who were able to present the right image to the world (such as the transformation of a pre-modern discourse into the imaginary of modernity) – new possibilities for articulating the 'voice of nature'. These are voices that have otherwise been subdued but which were now able to represent their community as part – though still not an equal part – in the environmental discourse. The hegemonic relationship between the 'tribal' and the representatives for the majority society never ceased to exist. The moment the Van Gujjar lose their authenticity as an expression for nature, arguing instead for civil rights and rights to forest as an integrated part of Indian society, they also lose their privileged position and become like any nondescript rural community – or hillbillies - at the bottom of society. Their voice is thus but one in a heavily contested field of environmental discourse. And *Nature* speaks in many tongues.