

Himalayas | How green is my valley

The Great Himalayan National Park is now a World Heritage Site. Are people around it ready for the world? We visit the Tirthan Valley in Himachal Pradesh to find out



The 'kuccha' road leading to the village. Photographs by Pradeep Gaur/Mint

Perched almost on the peak, this is a hamlet of gabled houses and fruity smells. Black and Yellow Grosbeaks whistle through apricot trees. Wild mongooses dart through cannabis bushes. The slim men and women grow old working the slanting fields. And down the hill flows the sacred Tirthan river.

Today this timeless shell of 80 houses is cracking open, its people waking up to new possibilities.

At 2,170m, the far-flung Pekhari village in Kullu district in mountainous Himachal Pradesh is a gateway to the Great Himalayan National Park (GHNP). Last month, at a special session in Doha, Qatar, it was included in the Unesco World Heritage list. On its website, the Paris-based agency describes the park as "part of the Himalaya biodiversity hotspot and includes twenty-five forest types along with a rich assemblage of fauna species, several of which are threatened".

Dense with pine and oak trees, these 90,540 hectares of beauty enjoy great variations in altitude, enabling hillsides and meadows to support

a wide range of plants and creatures, including endangered species such as the red-headed vulture, the spotty skinned pheasant Western Tragopan and the snow leopard.

But self-contained Pekhari doesn't find wonder in the extraordinary. Lying within the park's ecozone, it wants to embrace the mundanely modern world. It was only in 2011 that the secluded village got a road. Built under the prime minister's rural roads programme, the barely motorable track altered the settled way of life. The development in Qatar promises to accelerate the change.

"For people in and around Pekhari to take advantage of the opportunity offered by Unesco, they first need to be empowered," says **Stephan Marchal**, a Belgian who recently set up an **ecotourism cooperative** with the area's villagers to organize trekking tours. "They are vulnerable as individual agriculturalist families and may not have any control on the development in the ecozone." Marchal, who has worked with development economist Jean Drèze in the Adivasi regions of Jharkhand, however adds: "Increased tourism may make the villagers aware that their land and culture are valuable. This park should be a part of their pride. Only respectful tourists will give them that feeling."

It was in a town a few miles away from this village that two distinguished men arrived to celebrate the Unesco moment. Sanjeeva Pandey, Himachal Pradesh's additional principal chief conservator of forest, had represented the state's claim for heritage status in Doha; Payson R. Stevens, an American environmental scientist and conservationist, is one of the dedicated volunteers of a core group spread across India, the US and England that helped spearhead the park's World Heritage Site application.

Holding wild flowers, a delighted Pandey, who was also the park's first director back in 1998, says: "We had been working for 14 years on this. It is like getting an Oscar in the movies." Gesturing towards the cloud-wrapped mountains behind him, he says: "It is India's seventh (natural) Unesco site (*see below*). Now no hanky-panky industries will be allowed to come up here. There will be prosperity of the fauna and flora for posterity."

As Pandey presides over a hastily performed *puja* at a riverside shrine, Stevens says, "Hopefully, the park's new tag will bring more Indian and international tourists to the region who may bring economic well-being to the locals." The duo then set out to camp for the night in the park, leaving behind a nagging concern—will this unspoiled world become another Rohtang, the high mountain pass near the tourist-ravaged town of Manali where sightseers go to savour garbage-covered snow?

"Thoughtful, analytic planning is needed to avoid a Kullu-Manali tourist future," warns Stevens. In a detailed response on email, he writes: "A scientific assessment of GHNP's carrying capacity, or the number of trekkers at any one period, needs to be determined to ensure that the pristine and delicate areas are not damaged by too many trekkers at any one time. Certain areas, like those where the Western Tragopan and

other endangered species live and breed, may become off limits. Other areas that are more resilient could alternate between prime destinations within the park, such as certain thatches/meadows and forest hut areas.” Stevens says that this kind of planning is standard in all the national parks in the US, especially those with limited carrying capacity, like the Grand Canyon. He adds that the ecozone provides a buffer zone where tourists can have a wonderful cultural experience, and it offers plenty of great treks too.

In a dramatic coincidence, on the day following the park’s admittance to the World Heritage club, Pekhari had 18 tourists camping just beyond an apple orchard—for the very first time. But it took more than the scenery to engage them. “The group was from Punjab,” says Marchal, whose cooperative hosted the visitors. “They complained that they cannot stand in the tents, that there is no television, no electricity to charge their mobile, and that the ground was dirty.”

So far, the region has received trekkers whose fascination with Pekhari goes no further than taking a few photographs while starting the trail. The villagers are left alone to deal with the toys of the modern world—and that’s not just about mobile phones, TV dish antennas or the fact that the traditional women’s garment *pattu* is being replaced by the *salwar* suit. Three cement houses have come up in the past five years. A bus service started two years ago. Last year, the village got its first and only grocery shop. This April, a girl became the first resident to own a laptop.

“I want to be a professor of sociology,” says 20-year-old Bhuma Devi, who got the laptop as a scholarship gift from her school for her performance in the class XII exams. A second-year college student, she commutes daily to a government institution in Banjar, a 2-hour bus ride from Pekhari.

Bhuma Devi’s mother died a long time ago. The women of her mother’s generation grew up in a world that had remained frozen for centuries. The villagers made their clothes from sheep wool. They wore handwoven sandals made from the dried grass of cannabis. Gunny sacks did the work of umbrellas on rainy days. If somebody fell ill, he had to be piggybacked and taken down the hill to the closest town with a *pucca* road, from where he would be driven to the government hospital in Banjar. Today, if villagers need urgent medical aid, they simply dial for the ambulance.

Pekhari hasn’t erupted in joy over the Unesco news. Some villagers fear stricter curbs on entry to the hills, valleys and brooks that they consider their domain. For centuries they were free to wander around the hills to gather *jadi-bootis* (medicinal herbs) and wood, and to let their lambs and cows graze in the meadows. This freedom was curtailed in 1999, when the government formally declared the area a national park. Dozens of villages like Pekhari, economically reliant on the land incorporated into the park, suffered some loss of livelihood.

“It’s very important to address their concerns,” says Stevens. “With approximately 16,000 inhabitants surrounding the park, sustainable tourism in the ecozone can only be built by developing quality home stays, treks and tours, cultural activities and the many craft and organic food products made by the local women. It is vital for locals to have a shared vision for the area’s future.”

Indeed, various programmes are being developed by the Himachal Pradesh government, NGOs, and the villagers themselves to create alternative sources of economic well-being, according to the [Great Himalayan National Park](#), an extensively detailed website sponsored by Friends of GHNP, a group co-founded by Pandey and Stevens.

These programmes are still a work in progress. In May, a group of 10 boys and girls from a neighbouring village ventured into the park to find rare herbs, though it is forbidden. “We spent six days in the jungle,” says a shy 17-year-old group member who did not want to be named. “We were looking for Nagchattri *jadi-booti* that grows on the ground and is sold at ₹2,000 per kg. Each of us carried a backpack stuffed with clothes, stoves, pressure cookers and our separate rations, of rice, *atta* and *dal*. We made our camps from tarpaulins, though sometimes we found night shelters in caves.”

If the riches of the forest have been barred to villagers, their own little acres grow more crops now than they did decades ago. Thanks to fertilizers, new technologies and better access to markets, agriculture has moved beyond wheat and corn. Cherries are plucked in May. Ripened apricots fall from their trees in June. Pears and plums are harvested in July. October is for peaches. This year, the snowfall that continued till April has created anxieties about the apple season in August. Meanwhile, French beans and *rajma* (red kidney beans) are ready to be harvested.

In winter, when all of Pekhari is cocooned in *tandoor*-heated homes, the daily dish is almost always *rajma*.

In the rainy months, the village’s only road becomes impassable and the daily bus service takes a hit, forcing children to walk miles to their schools and colleges in big towns. On clearer days, a ramshackle Himachal Roadways bus leaves the village daily at 7.45am. It trundles down the hills, collecting students from other villages along sharp turnings and steep curves. Travelling alone, the little ones in uniform have laminated bus passes hanging from their necks.

Inevitably, Pekhari’s increasing intimacy with the outer world is distancing it from home-grown legends, which are not on the radar of conservation efforts.

Like most villages in Kullu, Pekhari has its own god. The temple of Lomash Rishi stands by a wheat field. The idol is usually taken out on festivals. One rainy afternoon, the hillside boomed with the sound of drums as the god's procession returned after accepting hospitality at the home of a grateful farmer, whose son had recovered from a prolonged illness. Nobody in that convoy knew the legends surrounding the deity, though one grey-haired farmer claimed to have met him in a dream. "Lomash Rishi told me he had come to Pekhari from a mountain that is three days away," says Tikkan Ram. "He has long hair and his beard is white. But I'm not allowed to tell what we talked about."

The snake god too has a temple in the village. His story too is forgotten. The priest's son, Kuldip Thakur, has secular ambitions. He says, "Travellers are coming in increasing numbers since the beginning of this year and I'm thinking of opening a home stay."

That is already being tried by a few of the village's young men. Keshav Ram Thakur's newly renovated wooden cottage stands on the edge of a cliff, overlooking the Tirthan. "Until now, Manali and Shimla got the crowd, but now as more and more people will learn about our Unesco status, they will want to come here," he says. Thakur's cottage is bare. The beds have no mattress. A smaller room is filled with a fresh harvest of garlic.

Thakur's future guests will be pleased to know that this is not his family home. If it was, and if they were of a different caste, they would end up feeling like pariahs. Pekhari is peopled by the Thakur caste and those lower in the pyramid are not permitted inside the houses. "I have made some close friendships here," says Priyanka Singh, a New Delhi-based college student who is interning with a cooperative that trains the women in making jams and soaps. "Some of the girls invite me for tea but each time I visit them, they casually spread out a chair for me outside their homes, as if it is a better place to chat, though everyone is aware of the real reason."

This reporter stayed overnight at a villager's home (for `500) and was confined to the cramped guest room. When I tried to enter the drawing room, the host pleaded, "Please, not here."

Fiddling around with her laptop, Bhuma Devi offers no comment on her people's prejudices. Changing the topic, she says: "The Internet doesn't work here. I use my Acer (laptop) to watch films."

Indeed, other than on TV, the only running image the people of Pekhari can see in their enclosed universe is of the Tirthan. Once, many years ago, a villager walking down a mud track slipped and fell into its waters, never to be found.

Rushing down over the sheer slopes, the Tirthan is disciplined by the dam at Larji village, where an unannounced release of water caused the death of 24 picnicking students from Hyderabad in June. A minor tributary of the Beas river, it ends in the Arabian Sea.

Such a long expedition has rarely been made by a Pekhari native. Yet he will soon engage with the world as it comes in increasing strength to his land, a heritage to us all.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

The first six

India's other natural sites on the Unesco World Heritage list

1 Kaziranga National Park, Assam (1985)

This has the world's largest population of one-horned rhinoceros.

2 Keoladeo National Park, Rajasthan (1985)

This is a winter residence for aquatic birds from Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, China and Siberia.

3 Manas Wildlife Sanctuary, Assam (1985)

This sanctuary shelters the tiger, pygmy hog, rhinoceros and elephant.

4 Sundarbans National Park, West Bengal (1987)

This has the world's largest area of mangrove forests, and is famous for its tigers.

5 Nanda Devi and Valley of Flowers National Parks (1988)

Tucked between the Zaskar and Great Himalaya ranges in Uttarakhand, they are as sacred to botanists as to Hindus.

6 Western Ghats (2012)

This coastal hill range, which runs from Kerala to Gujarat, is exceptionally rich in biodiversity.