

CASA in Action

A ROAR in the HILLS

Stories from the glacier burst
haunting lives in the valley

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EDITORIAL

Nature serves as an exploited entity to several of humanity's ambitions. Year on year, our evolving civilisation is thriving on a base of unsustainable innovation and establishments that reap short term benefits and long term devastation. The trajectory of this growth has its roots deeply entrenched in the capitalist utilisation of Nature, whose rage does not stay concealed for long.

One of such trembling instances, where the roar of nature evidently screamed volumes against human interference in the eco-sensitive zone, is the catastrophic glacier burst of 2021 in Uttarakhand. The disaster did not only wash away vast infrastructures from bridges and roads to the NTPC and Rishiganga power projects- it ruptured the stem of life and livelihood on which the local residents heavily relied.

By its unpredictable arrival and unimaginable magnitude, the disaster scarred not only the geographical premises but also the memory of the land which would continue to haunt generations. Besides the reported casualties, the bodies of several individuals went missing. Their family either had to conduct the last rites with the missing dead body or, worse still, are searching for them with the hope that they could be alive. CASA, responding to the disaster, dispensed an immediate relief action in the valley. Relief was transported to the remote villages on the other side of the broken bridges using rope trolleys.

The newsletter is a testimony to the tears, pain, woes and injuries that hung around the valley after the disaster. The stories compiled in the edition has been collected from the beneficiaries to whom CASA distributed material aid to survive the tough times.

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Through the Gender Desk, CASA intends to highlight issues and gaps related to gender justice within our society, with a special focus on our 15 core areas of work in the first year (2021). The purpose of the Gender desk aligns with CASA's Core Programme objectives to strengthen the capacity of the organisation and staff for gender justice work and to support communities as well as strengthen women's agency for economic, social and political empowerment.

Right in the maiden month of the Gender desk's initiation, CASA empowered the rural women in two of our core areas with skill enhancement training, improved solidarity, supported Self Help Groups, association with welfare schemes, promotion of eco-friendly micro-businesses and hosting of gender sensitisation programmes. Prof. Dr. Beulah Shekhar, an emeritus professor at Karunya Institute of Technology Sciences, Coimbatore, as well as a nationally and internationally acclaimed researcher, among many other such merits, has signed up to be CASA's Gender Desk's Consultant for the year 2021.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY



This year's International Women's Day was a momentous occasion with an exclusive Gender Desk at CASA as well as dealing with the challenge of a pandemic. CASA organised plantation drives, all over our project areas, zonal offices, and sector offices, to plant over 5000 saplings and symbolically mark the celebration of an undying bond between nature and femininity.

Speeches and discussions with Global Village Project (GVP) women leaders, school students and CASA staff were also conducted alongside discussion on climate change and women's participation, keeping SDGs 5 (Gender Equality) and 13 (Climate Action) in mind. Conservation and protection of nature is



also significant in the empowerment of rural women and the community at large. Reacting to clichés of certain sports being "a man's game", or "not for girls", CASA focused a spotlight on women who are directly challenging these stereotypes by hosting Women's Football Match in Guwahati, Assam.

CASA Staff, volunteers and community members together participated in CASA's #ChoosetoChallenge campaign theme of this year's International Women's Day. The Gender Desk attended the UN International Women's Day Observance event to align our common objectives with that of the UN, UN Women and other agencies that pivot women's issues all over the world.

GENDER POLICY

CASA reworked Gender Policy in accordance with the POSH Act, which was approved by the national board and was announced to be introduced alongside the Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) in a webinar held towards late February 2021. The updated Gender Policy was introduced to all of the CASA's staff and was put into effect immediately. The Gender Desk would ensure that the new Gender Policy is a living document. It will be updated every three years or as in when the circumstances call for rework. Gender Desk would also overlook the implementation of Gender Policy within the organisation and throughout our focus communities. The policy has been drafted to make our inclusivity keep getting more inclusive.

INTERNATIONAL REPRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

National Gender Task Force Focal Point Dr. Joycia Thorat participated in the webinar, '#ChooseToChallenge - Young Champions and Leaders from Consulates of Western India', organised by the Red Dot Foundation. She presented on gender justice and gender-based violence, giving a faith perspective and addressed the even more vulnerable situation of young girls and women during the pandemic.



Vrushali Kadam from CASA's NGTF, was featured as a young Indian representative and spoke on the need for youth leadership and youth voices in the conversation surrounding gender-based violence. Her quoted statement was featured in ACT Alliance's stance on youth involvement in their press release at the end of the CSW65. She was also selected to attend the CSW Youth Forum, which brought together young activists and leaders from all over the world, during which she created a social networking group that now has over 90 participants from all over the world who are looking forward to brainstorming, engaging and exchanging ideas to build a better and equal world.

The Gender Desk actively represented CASA as a delegate of ACT Alliance in The 65th United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, held between 15th March to 26th March. Together, the Gender Desk attended over 60 events. CASA's NGTF Focal Point and ACT Alliance Asia-Pacific Gender Justice Chair, Dr. Joycia Thorat, moderated and presented at the following Parallel Events:

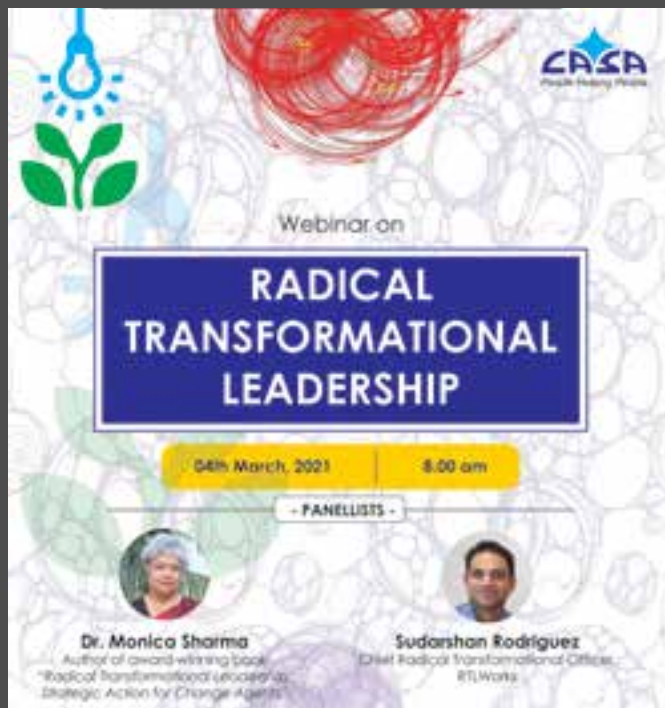
- How to Break Social Norms; ACT Alliance, Side by Side, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Lutheran World Federation, Religions for Peace, All Africa Conference of Churches, World Council of Churches, Christian Aid, Anglican Communion
- At the Intersection of Climate Change and Gender-based Violence lies Women and Girls; organised by Church World Service, ACT Alliance and CASA
- Generation Equality: Women's Rights for an Equal Future; organised by Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCAs (APAY), Gender Equity Committee (GEC)





GENERATION EQUALITY FORUM

Dr. Joycia Thorat & Vrushali Kadam from Gender Desk had the opportunity to represent CASA at the very first Generation Equality Forum (Mexico), from 29th March to 31st March, convened by UN Women alongside CASA West Zone's coordinator Gloria Kalokhe and CASA's Digital Media Manager Arushi Narchal, as delegates of ACT Alliance. The overwhelming presence of youth highlighted that Intergenerational actions are the need of the hour as past generations have handed the prejudiced world as it is to the current generation. Various Heads of State, high-level officials, activists and leaders discussed, brainstormed and called for action to ensure gender equality a century earlier than predicted. They highlighted violence against women and young girls, mobilisation against gender inequality, correction of historical wrongs, making coordinated efforts and learning from each other's best practices both at home and at a multi-lateral level.



RADICAL TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The Radical Transformational Leadership webinar with Dr. Monica Sharma took place on the 4th of March, in the presence of 50 selected staff of CASA. Dr. Monica guided us through her wide array of experiences and answered the staff's questions patiently beyond the stipulated time. Selected staff members will be undertaking training from Dr. Monica on Radical Transformational Leadership in the coming months of the year.



THE WAY NATURE AGITATES- FURY IN CHAMOLI

An aerial photograph showing a vast, chaotic field of dark, jagged rock fragments and ice debris. A person wearing a bright orange protective suit is standing in the lower-left quadrant, providing a sense of scale to the immense size of the debris. Several long, light-colored logs or branches are scattered across the debris field. The overall scene depicts the aftermath of a significant glacial event.

COVER STORY

On the 7th of February, 2021 - a chunk from the Nandadevi glacier, in Garhwal Himalayas, broke off and disrupted the tributaries linked to the River Ganga. Arriving without warning, the flash flood swept off lives, agricultural as well as residential lands, shelters, and properties from the high-mountain area.



Suresh Satapathy Manager - Programs

Calamities in the alpine regions of Uttarakhand are one of the many perpetrators of emotional hurt and threats to the sustenance of the inhabitants. On 7th February 2021, the sudden and devastating glacier burst, in the Chamoli district of Uttarakhand, inflicted immeasurable injuries and misery upon the lives in the mountains.

Suresh Satapathy, manager of programs at CASA, explains "Over two decades, CASA has known the land geographically and ethnographically through our works on supporting livelihood, governance, environment and socio-economic empowerment of the mountain communities.

The extensive commercial activities in a very eco-sensitive zone such as Chamoli, with 5 glaciers nearby, is threatening to say the least. Moreover, climate change is also a leading contributor to the disasters."

Within 24 hours of the unfortunate disaster on 7th February, CASA's Disaster Relief Task Force was deployed to survey and assess the

impact, with due support from the State and District administration.

Suresh Satapathy highlights, "The glacier was allegedly hanging in the Kailash peak, as per the local witnesses.

While the research-based study has not yet clarified the exact cause, we may unerringly assume that climate change could have influenced the glacial slide which arrived accompanied by the boulders and deluge, causing such a terrifying flash flood".

"The impact was so severe that two major power projects, namely the NTPC project and the Rishiganga project were completely damaged. Almost 500 workers at these project sites drowned in the blink of eyes. Some families witnessed the death of their beloved ones while many could not even find the bodies for performing the last rites. People lost their agricultural land. Ruined project sites also hampered livelihood".

CASA's relief distribution started on the 15th of February after passing through several challenges. As Suresh Satapathy mentions, "About 5 bridges that connected 13 villages to the mainland, across the Rishiganga river, were completely washed away. The villages were deprived of transport facilities, power or connectivity. Nearly 2500 residents are stranded. We explored several ways to reach out and finally transported relief materials using a temporary ropeway trolley. The relief included dry ration to sustain the vulnerable families for three weeks,

tarpaulin for temporary shelter, solar lamps to help through the frequent power-cuts and wash kits including sanitary pads for hygiene."

Beyond the short-term relief, there is a need to inhibit the recurrences of calamities and casualties. "Disaster Risk Reduction is a continuous process which CASA has been handling for a long while. After one round of discussion with the District and State authorities, we have been assured support in implementing a complete disaster management plan in the concerned areas.

Also, our volunteers helped the affected communities and families receive the compensation due to them, we would also navigate alternative livelihood options that can offer long term security to the locals. Furthermore, mitigation of climate change would continue to be our major intervention", enumerates Mr Satapathy.

Responding to disasters in the mountain regions is difficult, especially when the regions lose the means, roads or connectivity. CASA's knowledge and experience capacitated the team in conducting a proper damage assessment and providing requisite aid to the vulnerable masses despite the unfavorability.

All we could do is materially help the ones surviving the loss. For treating their emotional trauma and wounds, neither do we have a prescription nor an expected duration of recovery.

THE WAY NATURE AGITATES- FURY IN CHAMOLI



Arushi Narchal - Digital Media Manager, Communications



Kajol Tanaya - Volunteer Writer, Communications

Where else would you find an enriching blend of scenic and spiritual beauty, as serene as the Chamoli district of Uttarakhand, which blossoms playfully in the laps of ice-capped hills and rivers? The sun rises here with a sparkle in the Garhwal Himalayas, that embraces the region dearly to its bosom and the evening echoes the sound of a breath of breeze from the Alaknanda river, soothing your soul while caressing your forehead. Perching at an elevation of 1300 metres above sea level, Chamoli can make your eyes wander farther than your feet could enjoyably pace across the nature trails, obliging your sight to imbibe in all the aesthetic pleasures of the upright woods, wavy creeks and the peaks of the alpine hills.

People, craving for a respite from the mayhem of modern-day lives, arrive here from far-fetched locations of the country and even from abroad, for a budget-friendly tour across the gorgeous terrains, rustic villages, temples, and shops adorned with handloom. Yet that does not alone add to its popularity. Back in 1973, the Rini village of Chamoli was the impetuous centre of the Chipko Movement in India. The peaceful yet powerful protest authenticated a distinctive socio-economic and cultural bond that local residents, especially women, share with the natural forests and translated into the government declaring a ten-year ban on the advent of any commercial projects in the region. In brief, life in Chamoli and the natural environment are inseparable.

Unfortunately, since the late 1980s, the aggressive expansion of hydro-power projects, recreational resorts, haphazard roads, and other such unscientific infrastructures over the fragile environment increased the instances of climate anomalies in the state. A reflection of the imbalance created by the anthropogenic influence was evident in 2013's massive North Indian disaster. Four consecutive days of non-pacifying rainfall, added to the rapid melting snow, brought about a terrible flood and triggered landslide. The crash killed thousands of people and left several families deserted of shelter and means of sustenance.

Those ghosts of the disaster from 2013 come hauntingly alive in the year 2021 as it brings along another catastrophic deluge, this time in the face of a glacial burst in Chamoli, on the 7th of February. A chunk from the Nandadevi glacier, in Garhwal Himalayas, broke off

and disrupted the tributaries linked to the River Ganga. Arriving without warning, the flash flood swept off lives, agricultural as well as residential lands, shelters, and properties from the high-mountain area. Five significant bridges and the National Highway 58, linking the small villages across the district, were blown into pieces. Two major hydropower capitals in the Tapovan-Rini region, namely, the NTPC project and the Rishiganga project were sabotaged. Hundreds of employees in their regular morning shifts vanished into the spine-wrecking flow of the glacial flood. The survivors have been terrorised and the victims' families are still waiting for their beloveds' bodies to be recovered for the last rites.

Allegedly, climate change could be at blame for the glacier burst yet a concrete reason would only arrive post a detailed study. Geologically, the alpine hills that nestle the region are prone to avalanches, even under the natural weight of the accumulated ice on the peaks. However, due to global warming, the glaciers are melting rapidly, triggering abnormal landslides and flash floods. Other possible reasons include earthquakes, heavy rainfall, long-term dam degradation, melting glaciers and so forth. However, what lies at the intersection of all the possible reasons are infrastructural development and anthropogenic interference. Alas, how would the valley voice its pain except for raging a catastrophe for humans to understand the injuries they have made it suffer.

Within hours of the disaster, CASA engaged the assessment team in operating the rescue and assisting in evacuation without delay. The communities bearing the repercussions of the calamity were surveyed to be provided with assistance at priority. Amidst the chaos and panic, the broken roads and bridges disrupted any conventional means of accessing the remote villages that were affected. To tackle this impediment, the assessment and relief distribution team promptly explored the rope-trolley method to commute and transport the relief materials. Every individual and family whose sustenance was threatened by the loss of the earning member were approached with immediate aid. While the survey was live on the ground to identify the needy, CASA began the relief distribution, across Chamoli district, aiding the beneficiaries with a supply of dry ration, hygiene kits, solar lamps and tarpaulins.



WHEN I SEE YOU AGAIN

 Priyank Samuel – Communications Executive

“When I saw the prodigious flood approaching, I immediately called my son who was in the worksite that day. Maybe for a minute or two, I was connected to him, yelling to escape as soon as possible from the approaching flood. That was the last time I heard my son's voice” shared Jagdish Lal, the father of 24-year-old Anil Kumar who is still missing after the Glacier burst disaster which washed off the river banks of Tapovan village on 7th Feb 2021.

The Tapovan village of Chamoli district, in Uttarakhand, is the site for one of the major Hydropower projects by NTPC. Anil was working as a Foreman Instructor in a contracting company, Rithwik Projects Pvt. Ltd. Like any other day, Anil, an energetic young man, had to report to work on that Sunday as well. Little did he know that his attending to a regular working day would turn into a day filled with sorrow for his family.

The Uttarakhand glacier burst was an unprecedented catastrophe that none of the villagers had ever witnessed over decades in that area. None had anticipated that such an unfortunate incident would suddenly crush the lives and dreams of many people.

Anil was a very jovial person; he loved helping his mother with her chores about the house and even outside. He was the youngest in the family with one elder brother and 4 elder sisters and was loved by everyone. His mother Tara Devi, still has an undying

hope that he may come to see her. “I fed him with my own hand before he left for work that day. I asked him, you haven't left today? To which he replied ‘no, I haven't. I'll try to come early today, I'll go and do a little work there once it's done I'll be back but he never returned” shared his mother with a heavy heart filling up her eyes

It is especially hard to cope with the misfortune as the work site was a seeable view and just a few meters from their house veranda. The unexpected event has brought a very gloomy and miserable time for the family. Though Anil had been missing for more than 15 days, his family never gave up their hope to see him.

Anil's parents and siblings are still in disbelief that their loving son and brother had gone missing during the glacier burst for more than a month now. “His absence made the house and our lives so lonesome and still” sighs his mother. Jagdish Lal shared that Anil's brother Sandeep also used to work as a labourer in the same worksite. “Fortunately, his brother's phase of work was over a month or two ago. So he was not at the site during this calamity. Had he still been working at the site, we would've lost both our sons on that very day.”

CASA met Anil's family while distributing a dry ration kit, tarpaulin, solar lights, and hygiene kits as a temporary relief and household support during this time of need. They harbour a hope that the government and the Hydro project company may soon recognise and respond to the victim's family and provide job opportunities to the family member for financial sustenance.



“My Son, Amit, was such an obedient and caring boy. Each day after he reached home from work, the first thing he did after refreshing was to make me sit down and massage my shoulders to remove my day’s tiredness and usually took over the kitchen to prepare dinner for all of us. Ever since the incident, it has been really hard and hurtful to cope with our daily life without his presence” sighed his mother tearfully.

A VOID THE CATASTROPHE LEFT US WITH...



Priyank Samuel – Communications Executive

7th Feb 2021 morning came with an unannounced catastrophe. An extension of the Nanda Devi Glacier in Uttarakhand burst and descended its way down hauling whatever was on its way along the banks of the Alaknanda River across districts of Uttarakhand. One of the major affected sites was in Tapovan Village of Chamoli District, Uttarakhand.

A major Hydro Power project was underway in Tapovan, this came with numerous job opportunities and livelihood options for the locals. Jobs were of many categories ranging from construction manager to construction labourer.

Amit Dhobal, a 20-year-old college-going student was unfortunate enough to face the wrath of the Glacier Burst. As all schools and colleges were shut due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Amit was free from his college activities and many times helped his parents in their

work. When the lockdown was lifted and work slowly started resuming, he utilised this time to gain a little experience for livelihood and also earn a little income for the family.

He got himself a job in the Hydro power project and was working there as a supervisor for 4 months until the horrendous glacier burst happened.



Amit's brother, Atul Dhobal, age 23 is one of the living witnesses who saw the Glacier burst terror.



"I was in Tapovan to open my father's grocery shop when I overheard the rumble as though a helicopter was passing by like any other day, but this was followed by a howl of panic among the villagers. I came out to see the huge muddy flood rampaging the river banks. As any other individual of this generation, I wanted to record this event for my social media. That very moment, it struck me and I realised that my little brother left for work that morning to the worksite. I ran in search of my brother.

I reached as close to the incident spot as possible and witnessed a sight - around 8-10 men were trying to run on the highest bridge in the site to save themselves (which was about 30-32 m high from ground level). In a matter of seconds in front of my eyes, I saw a flush that swept them all away, the muddy flood was as high as 40m. That instant, my heart sank and my body shivered as I realised that I may have lost my brother because the sight of the incident was too overwhelming to comprehend if any survivors were left" sulked Atul.

Amit was survived by his parents, elder brother and

sister. He was a very caring, respectful and talented boy, a self-learnt musician and a cook. His eagerness to learn new things and the unwillingness to stay idle at home made him land as a supervisor for this job 4 months ago. The worksite is just meters away from their shop.

CASA's volunteers met Amit's family during the ration and relief kit distribution time to support the families who were hit by this disastrous event. Though nothing can bring back the lives of those lost on that day, we believe that the affected families find the strength to overcome the loss and have a normal life.

“

**I got the courage to
reopen the shop in
Tapovan after a month
since that gloomy day.
Amit's Father shared**

”

THE EXTREMES ONE MAY GO, SAVING THE LIVES OF OTHERS

Anoop Thaplial, 43 years old, worked as a supervisor in the Tapovan hydro-project area under NTPC. After his father's death, a year ago, Anoop was the sole bread earner of the family and shouldered all familial responsibility. Anoop and his wife Sapna Thaplial had an 12-year-old son Harshit and were expecting the arrival of another baby. Anoop's widowed mother also stayed with them and the family was faring well in almost every ground.

It was a normal day for Anoop's family, as he left for work like every day at seven in the morning. Little did they know that their whole world would shatter into pieces only within a span of three hours. The unanticipated glacial burst, rushing across the Tapovan project area, killed hundreds of workers and Anoop was one of the victims.

The emotional wound dug deeper since the family's sustenance was bearing the loss of two earning heads within a matter of one year. According to his old mother, "Anoop was very eager to see the new baby. He was the happiest to-be-father. But we never knew he shall leave us too early without even getting to welcome his baby into the world".

Life always was a cherishable journey for Anoop. So much was his fondness towards life and the people around him, that following his departure to his heavenly abode, Sapna, with her 6th month old foetus, feels lonelier than ever. She runs into tears inconsolably as she narrates, "After the incident, many workers from the project area arrived at our door. They revealed how Anoop saved their lives that day. It was a sacrifice. He could not become selfish about himself and rescued his workers first".

Her words tie sorrow and complaints, seeking why Anoop did not rescue himself just as he saved others. "Did he think of us and who would look after this family in his absence? how can I welcome the new life except with the sufferings that these painful losses have brought upon us." Sapna has been unable to process the death of Anoop. She expresses an undying hope that Anoop may return one day to her child and her family but whether this hope shall see the light of the day is beyond our evaluation.

The glacial burst also took away the life of Anoop's cousin who lives nearby Anoop's house. Indeed, loss and pain are too much to bear. Anoop shall always be alive in their memory as the calm and helpful man who was loyal to his duty and always prioritised other's needs. Yet whether the memories shall ever compensate even a quarter in filling the void left by him, only time has to answer.



Pic: Anoop's wife Sapna Thaplial and son Harshit

CASA met Anoop's family while distributing the dry ration support in the Tapovan village area. It was our primary concern to ensure that the family has their immediate nutritional and hygiene needs covered. Their threatened sustenance adds to the emotional pain they are suffering. For Sapna, taking care of herself and the baby growing in her womb is imperative in this critical hour. Though we can't mend for the loss absolutely, yet being able to extend aid and share their pain draws us a little closer to our purpose as an organisation.

“

**Why didn't he care for us and
save himself first? how can I
welcome this new life except
with the sufferings?**

**34 years old Sapna breaks into
a woeful cry, holding her womb.**



NOT EVERY SETTING SUN PROMISES AN APPROACHING DAWN

The Uttarakhand glacier burst was an unprecedented catastrophe. Even for the locals who could observe the trail of losses following the glacial flood, it initially was confused with a fire outbreak. As the incomprehensible accident uncovered its ferocious face, it devoured the dreams, hopes, and lives of several people who were optimistically going about their regular business for the day.

Such is the story of Narender Kumar, a 46-year-old resident of Tapovan Village, who worked as a mason at NTPC. A cheerful yet strong man, Narender used to pursue overtime engagements to boost his income. His sweat and blood were united towards a dream of giving his family a house of their own. After years of saving his hard-earned income, he could finally make

his dream come true. Life was heading towards a bright day for the family, with all its beauty and bittersweet peculiarities. No one could have imagined that the clouds of gloom would arrive so uncalled for and prey on a family's modest hopes to survive.

It was a regular day for Narender and his family too. His younger daughter Dikka recalls, "Papa left for work at 7 am. It was his usual routine. Our house is at an elevation from which the project area is clearly visible. I saw him walking away and everything seemed normal. After a while, I could see a hazy eruption closer to the project area. We thought it to be a fire accident. That's what most people believed too. I rushed to call papa and alarm him about the situation. The phone rang for a brief while. He picked it up but I couldn't hear him saying anything clearly. The call was disconnected and I stood there screaming my heart out for him to escape".

As soon as the rage of the calamity pacified, Narender's son, Neeraj and Dheeraj frantically rushed out. The frontline guards and policemen stopped them from crossing the flooded lanes. What followed next was heart-wrenching, to say the least. Neeraj narrates with a heart-sinking sob, "I could see our father on the other side. He was clad in clay, all his shirt was muddy. As I tried to look at his face clearly, it was hard to believe that an iron rod had pierced past his eye. He

was alive, I believed, I saw him move. I almost jumped into the stream when the policemen impeded me and didn't let me go to my father".

Dikka loses her sight to the distance and murmurs, "We saw him dying in front of us, he must have struggled a lot to survive. Had he not tried to rescue himself so desperately, we couldn't have found his body either. But all his struggles boiled down to nothing. After about 2 hours his body was recovered. He was dead. No one knows how much he must have tried to hold on to the last string to survive". The family has also lost a young member who happens to be Narender's nephew.

Narender's wife was in distrust of the situation. It was impossible to comprehend that a person who happened to cheerfully leave for work earlier in the day, came back in a mud-clad and tired state only to have his last rites done and depart to the other world forever. She speaks in her agony, "He could not get to live in this new house that he could secure for us after years of toil. The government and NTPC agents did give us monetary support but that can't bring back his life".

CASA met Narender's family while distributing dry ration support to the gravely affected families and survivors of the glacial disaster. Any humanitarian aid can not fill the void of a human but it can surely help those survived by the deceased in meeting their basic needs for a few more weeks. We believe that time and emotional support shall favour their existence and give them the strength to endure the loss.

“

We saw him dying in front of us, he must have struggled a lot for life. Had he not tried to rescue himself so desperately, we couldn't have found his body either.

Shares Dikka, the youngest daughter of Narender Kumar, who lost his life to the Uttarakhand Glacier calamity.

”

Pic: Narender's family in front of their old (Kaccha) House



Dharwan was heading home when he heard about an approaching disaster. "I tried to call Yashpal eight times but it was out of reach. With every passing minute, I was losing hope to find him. We went in search of him but couldn't..." Yashpal's father broke into tears while narrating the events.



THE LAST WALK TO THE RIVER BANK



Priyank Samuel - Communications Executive

What seemed like an ordinary morning turned into a catastrophic one. 7th February 2021 had brought a lot of unpleasant memories to the people of Chamoli. The unforeseen glacier burst launched devastating floods and landslides that washed away villages, lives and structures that came their way. The aggressively roaring flood left several families heartbroken, with hundreds of stories and thousands of dreams resting unfulfilled. Yashpal Rana, a 34-years-old resident of Renipalli village, was spending a harmonised life with his wife. The couple, married for a year and a half, was blessed with a baby boy three months ago. Little did the baby know that he had but the company of his loving father for a small while.

Yashpal was a man of ambitions. After completing his MBA, he pursued a job that decently met his needs. His aspiration to encourage and improve farming activities in his village motivated him to resign from regular work. Returning to his homeland, he reared about ten goats and got into agriculture-allied activities. Four months passed to Yashpal having started his own farming business when the doomed day of glacial burst arrived to disperse everything into the debris.

Yashpal's father, Dharwan Singh Rana recalls the events of the day, "Neither I nor my forefathers experienced such a disastrous incident in this region. The calamity arrived with a massive storm which was followed by a ravaging deluge, loaded with debris

from the glacier range. I was in another place that morning. According to the everyday routine, my son took a flock of goats to the river bank for grazing and I was assured that he will be back soon".

He expressed a grieving worry for his daughter-in-law and his newborn grandson. Dharwan added, "For the time we are here, we can help raise the child but we have no idea how things will turn out in the long run. His (Yashpal's) baby and his wife were emotionally and financially dependent on him".

"The scale of the flood has frightened every single one of us to such a vulnerability that even today, a slight sound of any sort gives all the villagers tremors, fearing that another natural disaster is approaching", enumerated Dharwan highlighting the psychological trauma that many villagers were suffering.

The glacial burst had damaged the only connectivity between Renipalli and Rini village that served as a crucial route to the Renipalli inhabitants for regular commute. Several families were affected and spent days without proper food supplies as relief could not reach the village in the absence of roads. "We had saved up some supplies for our general requirement but it did not last long. Had the village got an initial warning of what was awaiting us, we might have saved some more food and the life of my son. CASA's relief has helped our sustenance. We were relieved to some extent and also overwhelmed".

Even though the road connection was lost, CASA volunteers extended their hands to help the needy by setting up a rope trolley to pass ration and other essentials for the affected families. However, no amount of humanitarian aid can refill the loss of a loved one. There is a hope that CASA's help can materially sustain the bereaved family as they attempt to move on from the hurts of the devastation.

THE UNFULFILLED PROMISE

Prem Singh grew up in the Rini village of Chamoli watching his father cultivating their farm with fruit-bearing plants of apples and walnuts. For 45 years, the land sustained their family's economic and nutritional needs. However, the livelihood opportunities in the region were sparse. Therefore, when the NTPC project was initiated, many people, including Prem Singh's father, agreed to sell larger parts of their lands to the company for generating employment.

Life was taking its course. Prem Singh grew up to carry his father's farming activities forward by planting a thousand apple trees on their farm and earning a livelihood out of the harvest. A year ago, the family renovated their house. Everything was in harmony until the morning of 7th February that disrupted each thread of peace. Prem Singh recollects, "After having my breakfast in the morning, I carried manure to the plantation. As I returned, I saw my mother and my wife leaving for the riverside to collect wood, dung and other household needs. I turned to the kitchen and

started preparing for lunch. Suddenly, I sensed that the earth was shaking. Our newly made house started cracking up and windows clattered against the frame. My uncle rushed downstairs and asked me to evacuate urgently. As I took my sons out of the house, I saw a massive flood blowing the bridges off, right in front of my eyes".

"The roaring flood rushed past the low-lying region with huge chunks of stones. The pounding waves moved so fast that they must have crossed over five kilometres in a matter of two minutes. I knew my mother and my wife had been to the river bank. I was terrified to think if they were alive. A friend of mine, who is a manager at the project site, saw my wife struggling with her feet caught under rock and wires as he was running away. When he told me, I held my son and shut my eyes in despair. Soon to my relief, I saw my wife running up to the place- alive but struggling to breathe. She almost fainted as soon as she reached. Her arrival also sparked a hope in me that my mother might have been saved too. My mother was more active than anyone. Running back must not have been a tough thing", shares Prem Singh.

Prem's mother, Amrita Devi was 78 years old. Despite her age, she was very active and capable of climbing up and down the hill many times a day. In his memory, Amrita Devi resides as a hardworking woman who

"I opened my eyes to see my wife running up to the place. Her arrival sparked a hope in me that my mother might have been saved too. My mother was more active than anyone", shares Prem Singh, a 47-years old farmer, who witnessed the glacier calamity and suffered unspeakable losses inflicted by it.





never settled into inactivity. She woke up to collect household needs, weave daans or kalins, sell them across the bridge and keep engaging herself in some work. As the day of the disaster advanced with no sign of Amrita Devi anywhere, Prem knew his anticipation to see his mother for one last time had to dissolve.

"With the sun going down the horizon all the villagers were getting more terrified, wondering if another flood followed as we slept. In the darkness of the night escaping would have been difficult too. No one stepped down the elevation for two days", shares Prem. "Later when my relatives went to visit the area in the evening, I asked them to turn off the stove on which I was cooking dal. I remembered that before leaving home, my mother wished to eat dahi matthe instead of dal and I promised her to make dahi matthe the next time. Alas, I would not even get to see her for another lunch?" sighed a teary-eyed Prem.

Prem's father constantly enquired about his mother and the apple trees. He shares "I told my father that my mother has gone out to visit her native place. Since the bridge has been destroyed, she couldn't return. I made this up because it was a tough time to uncover a truth that he might fail to bear. Our home had cracked up, and it continues to scare us to date. I lost my own cousin, my maternal aunt's son, to the calamity. Even

our sustenance was at stake because our farm was left with no trees. It was through CASA's support that we somehow managed our month's needs."

Many individuals and families, akin to Prem Singh, are attempting to survive with the unrecoverable wounds left by the furious natural havoc. Our little endeavour to meet their immediate need may never restore their lost ones but the support would surely give them the means to continue moving on.





SHADOWS OF LIVING BY THE MOUNTAIN

In an interaction with CASA, Sumitra Devi Chamola, head of Tapovan Mahila Mandal, highlighted several socio-economic challenges that the residents of Tapovan village in Chamoli face every day. 40 years old, Sumitra is an elected leader of the village and has been working on resolving the local affairs for five years now. She enumerates, “Most of the works done by our organisation are associated with sanitation and reforestation. We prioritise healthy living conditions in the village by protecting and keeping the environment clean. There are also several social problems that we tackle on a regular basis”.

She highlights, “Alcoholism has been a contributory evil to various malpractices in the village including domestic violence, social misconduct and fights. Previously, women used to avoid voicing against domestic violence or seek justice. Gradually with due awareness and discussion, women started to realise that covering up any punishable offence is a crime too. The empowerment of women also made the community a safer place. The instances of petty street-quarrels diminished when women protested the indecent conduct of drunk and aggressive people”.

Sumitra adds, “This improvement also instils hope in us that soon the opportunities for girls will come to an equal level with that for boys. It is high time that the community treats women with dignity. Even today, villagers prefer a male child over a female one. Women keep producing babies until a male child is born”. Not only is gender discrimination a shortcoming that needs attention in the community, but caste discrimination is also another issue altogether.

The slim livelihood opportunities in the mountainous region also hinder economic prosperity that, in turn, translates into social frustration.

Prior to the glacial burst, only two power projects- NTPC and Rishiganga- generated any scope of employment in the village. From Sumitra's viewpoint, “The projects fail to provide sufficient employment to the villagers for the long term. Our eco-sensitive region was mostly agrarian before the projects were established. Villagers agreed to sell their farmlands to the companies with the hope that there would be better earning possibilities when the projects boom”.

As the catastrophe on 7th February eroded vast areas of farmlands and brought down the two power projects, the livelihood practices of the rural community were greatly hampered. Sumitra outlines, “Several small businesses that sold vegetables and milk to the companies could no longer operate when the project area was affected. Employees from the affected segments or departments within the company lost their jobs. Since bridges and connecting roads were sabotaged, women who sold homemade dry food material or collected wood and fodder from the other side of the river could no longer cross it. The calamity arrived with such enormous intensity that our houses cracked up”. The underground tunnels that supply power to the companies run beneath the village. As the debris and chunks of rock brought by the glacier beat against the hollow lands, it generated a minor earthquake. People almost mistook the approaching flood unless they saw the devastation right in front of their eyes.



Sumitra has been a witness to the calamity. Her husband Shantanu, 44 years old, worked in the garage of NTPC. She shares, "I was going about the day when I noticed some smoke or steam rising in the distance. Many of us assumed it to be some ship-crash of sorts. My husband had left very early for work that day. He did not have his breakfast so he headed home around 10 am for food. As soon as he stepped into the house, the flood arrived with terrifying speed. I saw the large chunks of stone and debris drifting along with the floodwater. It drowned many people near the banks".

Had her husband not reached home on time, Sumitra might have lost his company forever. Emphasising the importance of early warning, she reveals a real story from the day. "A woman named Mansari Devi from Tapovan got the information of the approaching flood. She immediately called her son up to run away from the spot. Though her son initially thought she was kidding him, her terrified tears and anxious voice alarmed him that his mother was not lying. The boy escaped the spot and evacuated about 25 men from the area. It was just minutes before the flood flushed in".

Shantanu was out of his job for months after the calamity. Since Sumitra does not earn money from the organisation, they had limited resources to sustain themselves and their two sons. CASA's support meanwhile assisted them to meet their needs. Leaders

such as Sumitra are the land's hope to improve the living condition of women in the region. The interaction with her was insightful and allowed us to bring the shadows of life in the mountains to our reader's knowledge.

“

I am grateful that luck was in favour of us. Moreover, it was a Sunday so comparatively fewer people were at work. Had the incident happened a day before or after, the entire village might have been wiped off. Any loss that has happened in the calamity is because of the lack of any siren or warning system that might alert the workers or villagers within the vulnerable proximity, mentions Sumitra.

LOOKING THROUGH THE LENS OF AN ACTIVIST

Mountains resemble a repository of wisdom of the wild. A famous quote by John Muir, a well-known naturalist of the West, expresses: "Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilised people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity, and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers but as fountains of life."

Unfortunately, the indigenous communities, for whom the mountains have been their actual home for generations now, suffer through several threats that the beauty of nature can not compensate for. The hilly areas have become a turbulent spot of frequent natural disasters which does not spare the fountains of life.

Lakshman Singh Negi, a 48 years old social worker in Tapovan, Chamoli, discussed with CASA that the depletion of the natural environment in the Himalayas, done in sheer disregard of indigenous and traditional knowledge of such a fragile ecosystem, leads to such terrorising calamities. Lakshman has been in the social sector since 1992 and has been closely observing the climatic and social dynamics of the mountains.

In his perspective, the projects initiated in the mountain areas of Chamoli fail to fully consider the traditional perspective on the tolerance levels of the region. He adds, "The area stretching from Nandadevi glacier to the entire premise of Tapovan village is a transition zone. It has a sensitive balance between wildlife, flora and human civilisation. The ancestral culture of the land suggested ways to maintain this balance. The religious practices, observations and ethnological habits are crucial knowledge that the impact reports prepared by the companies tend to ignore".

The insightful discussion with Negi provided valuable inputs to CASA team in understanding the equation between human activities in the valley. Noticing the fine balance that traditional lifestyle in the mountains could set with the nature certainly calls us to identify the significance of having a sustainable habitation in ecosensitive zones.



“

"We used to hear our grandparents speak about the fragility of the Himalayas. In ancient times, visitors were forbidden from shouting or speaking loudly near the glacial areas. Simple clothing and slow movement were only permitted while visiting the peaks. No one could litter or throw garbage in the Himalayas. The uprooting of trees and even herbs were prohibited. These traditional approaches to life in the Himalayas were sustainable" shares Lakshman.





“By the time we heard about the large-scale destruction, we had a deadly assumption hovering over our minds that Ranjit is never returning to us again. Did we really lose him forever?”

STIRRING HEARTS AND SOULS IN SPINE-CHILLING GOODBYES

Close to a month after the glacial calamity in Chamoli, CASA was continuing to distribute disaster relief support to the gravely affected families in the district. While some of them had only lost their source of livelihood to the magnanimous flood, many had lost their dear ones. One such family was from the Rini village which had lost a young member named Ranjit. As team CASA reached out to visit and enquire the family about the state of things, there was an unusual bustle engulfing the premise of the house. With a few interactions, we realised that the family was offering the last rite ritual to the demised young boy's soul.

Devki Devi, Ranjit's taiji (paternal aunt), stepped out of the house and greeted the team. An elderly lady of 62 years of age, she had been a witness to the massive glacial burst herself. Recalling the morning of 7th February, she enumerates, “Everyone had already headed for their day at work. Ranjit left for the project site at seven. I was even going about the routine of throwing the cattle waste away like every day until I heard a large flush of water and loud shrieks of human voices coming from a distance. Somehow I caught a glimpse of the incident from a thread-wide slit between the mountains. As I focused on what was happening, a connecting bridge was blown off right in front of my eyes”.

Devki saw the flood approaching and people in the low lying areas vanishing within its flapping streams and waves. She was in shock, “It appeared to be an earthquake, tearing and shaking past the region. I struggled to climb up to a safe spot, panting with fear and ambiguity. Anyhow, I came back and yelled my throat out, alarming people. The river never had such a high level of discharge and voluminous deluge. A massive stone flew off and hung by a tree standing right in front of our house. Heavy bouts of the glacial



Pic: Ranjit's aunt, Devki Devi

flood kept flowing one after the other into an undyingly ferocious series".

Devki was scared that the burst might not even be spared their village, washing away areas in such close proximity, but the discharge deviated to the left and flushed opposite to their area. She continues, "This could have been the mercy of Gods that the village is safe. On the day of the incident, we were all shaken to our core.

My daughter-in-law was expecting a baby whom she delivered four days after the tragedy, on the 11th of February. We were so terrified that we asked them to stay away from the village for many days. We did not see the newborn member of our family until weeks afterwards. Grief and shock took such a heavy toll that we could not eat for 3 days in succession. There was something stuck heavily under our throats".

Two young boys from the family, Ranjit and Balwant, were out for work that day. Unlike Ranjit, Balwant was at a higher elevation near the house at the time of the disaster. Devki recalls the spine-chilling moment when they speculated that Ranjit might have had no avenue to escape the catastrophe, "The area where Ranjit had his work was very closely bonded on all sides by

massive barricades. Only a few men who were near the gates could get alarmed in time to save their lives by leaping off the walls". Ranjit, the youngest son of the family, had an all-time cheerful attitude to help anyone in need. No one could have loved the boy more and therefore, losing him brought unsaid dread to the emotional strength of the house.

However, the search for his body continued. Ranjit's mother was hopeful that her son would return to her one day. Ranjit's mother barely stopped crying as she stated, "We were supposed to prepare for his marriage around this time but with my cursed arms I am arranging for my child's last rites".

Devki revealed that for four years Ranjit's father had been suffering from paralysis. He could not have dealt with the painful loss of his son.

The family had arranged for his last rites with his clothes and photographs to make for the missing corpse. The whole view was too heart-breaking to witness. All we could do beyond the ration and relief aid was pray for the strength of the family to stand such terribly trying times.

Pic: Ranjit's parents

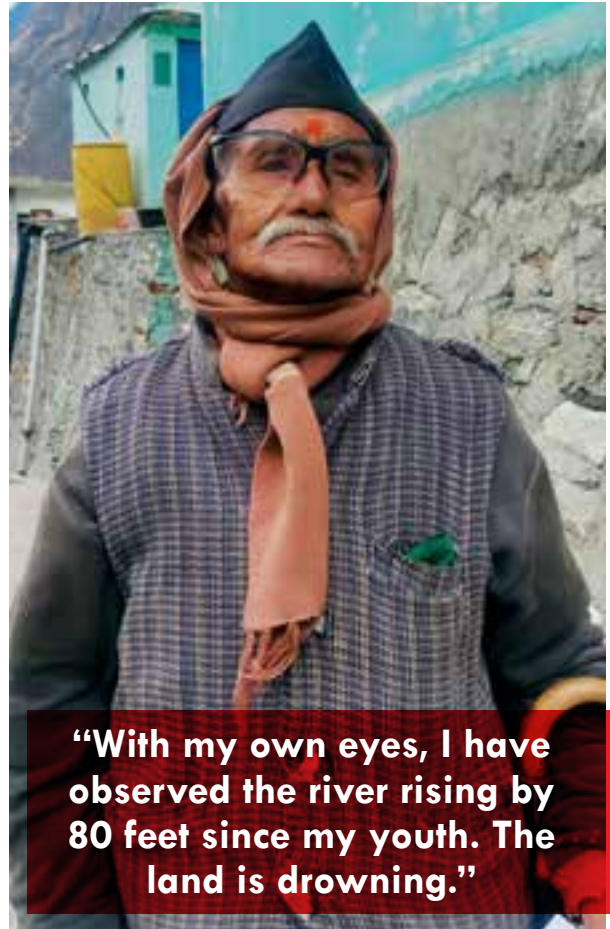


A CATASTROPHE WELL ABOVE THE FEROCITY OF ITS PREDECESSORS

In his 90 years of life, Govind Singh Kehri has treasured not only the invaluable experiences of living in the mountains but also a testimony of the changing landscape of Chamoli. He has witnessed three major calamities in his life span yet nothing as harrowing and magnanimous as the recent glacier burst on 7th February 2021. "The last time I beheld the mountains flooding in rage against the land, was over 30 years ago. In comparison to the last calamity, this glacial slide was way more severe and devastating", narrates Govind Singh.

Excavating through pages of his memory, he also claims, "Many ancient texts reveal the presence of 362 shiva temples along the river banks of Chamoli district but with the rise in river water stages, the temples have gone under the water. My own eyes have seen the river rising by 80 feet since I was a youth. Initially, there were not as many rivers surrounding the place as it is now with overflowing canals. The land is drowning".

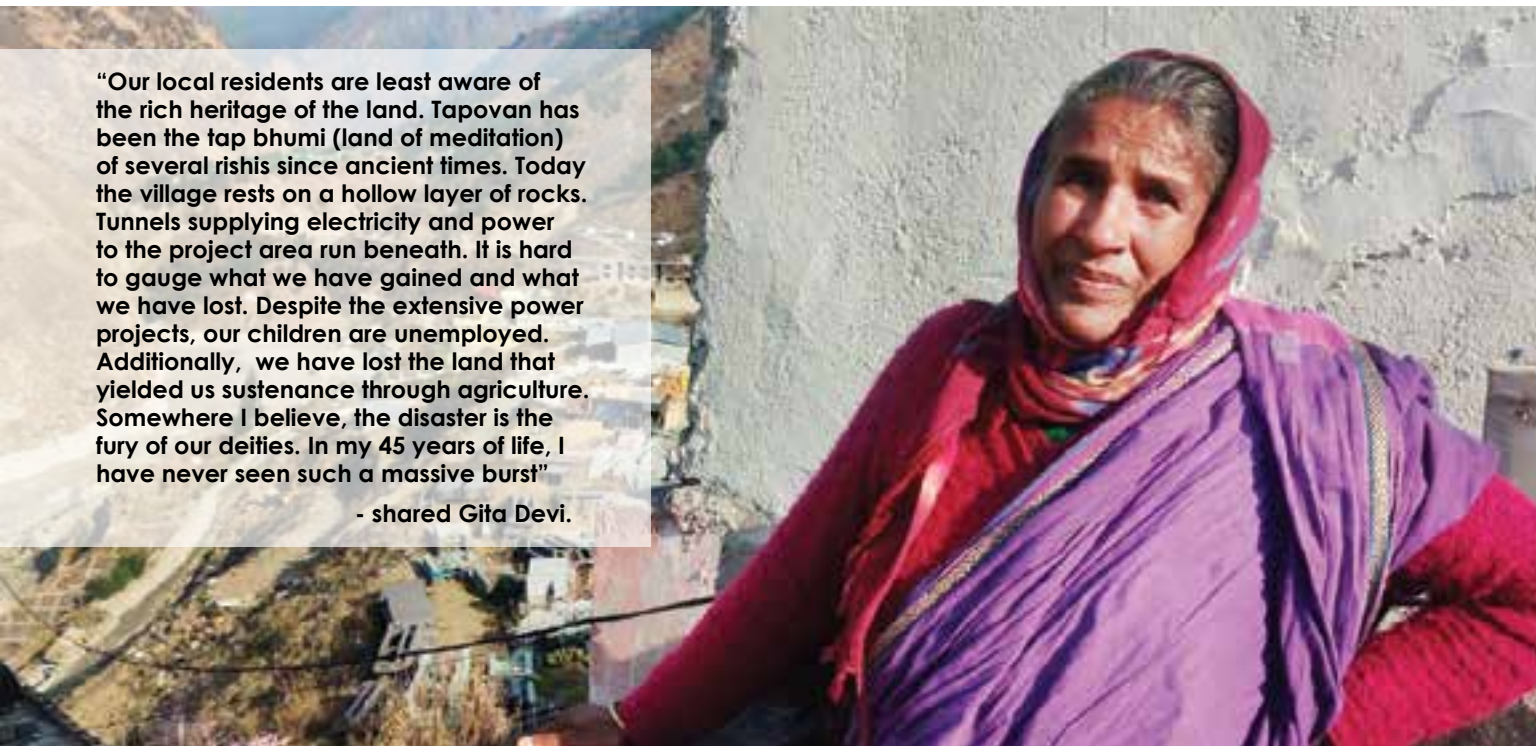
Govind Singh points at the roots of the far peaks and exclaims, "Do you see those forests? They used to be villages back when I was a kid. Because of the growing river, those lands have been abandoned". It was indeed heart-wrenching to hear his account of disasters in Chamoli. Unmistakably, the rage of the mountain is growing exponentially violent against the land with the passage of time. Besides any attempt to protect the mountain communities, there is a need to conserve the environment. We can only save lives if we first save the land from excessive developmental activities and deforestation.



"With my own eyes, I have observed the river rising by 80 feet since my youth. The land is drowning."

"Our local residents are least aware of the rich heritage of the land. Tapovan has been the tap bhumi (land of meditation) of several rishis since ancient times. Today the village rests on a hollow layer of rocks. Tunnels supplying electricity and power to the project area run beneath. It is hard to gauge what we have gained and what we have lost. Despite the extensive power projects, our children are unemployed. Additionally, we have lost the land that yielded us sustenance through agriculture. Somewhere I believe, the disaster is the fury of our deities. In my 45 years of life, I have never seen such a massive burst"

- shared Gita Devi.



STORY OF RARE LUCK IN THE LAND



"I consider myself lucky. Had I not prevented my husband from joining at work, I might never have seen him again".

Destiny has mysterious ways of failing and saving us. Minute inconveniences might at times have a silver lining to them, saving ones from more grim mishaps.

25 years old Sakshi was nowhere aware of what fate had in store for her. All of a sudden her son fell sick and fainted one day. She was worried for her ailing son and rushed him to a hospital at Srinagar. Sakshi's husband, Brijesh Raj, 33 years old, works as a communication operator at the NTPC project area, Chamoli. He had to take an emergency leave to attend to his son at the hospital.

As soon as their son recovered, Sakshi and Brijesh made their way back home. After returning from the hospital, there was nothing stopping Brijesh from going back to work, except for his wife Sakshi, who insisted he join the next day. "Since we have been in the hospital area for so long, I intuitively felt that he must freshen up, bathe, and rest the day before joining work again. But he was too stubborn to listen to me. However, my mother-in-law put his clothes in the laundry, and then he had no choice but to stay back for one more day" shares Sakshi.

Staying back on 7th February 2021 was destiny's conspiracy to save Brijesh. It was the day when the devastating glacier burst in Chamoli district flooded and damaged the NTPC project area under broad daylight. Sakshi remembers, "There were roars and shouts creating chaos. People could not comprehend what was happening.

My brother-in-law, who also works in the project, heard some men alarming them to leave. He ran from the place with three more employees. As they looked back, a massive flood swept the region off in a blink of an eye. People employed in the deeper and innermost areas of the project were never seen again".

Brijesh was posted to enter inside the tunnel with machines that day. There was no way he could have made it out or saved himself when the flood raged in. "I consider myself lucky. Had I not prevented my husband from joining at work that day, I can't imagine what all could have gone wrong, I might never have seen him again".

CASA met Sakshi while distributing relief material to the families affected by the disaster in the Chamoli district. Brijesh had not received the payment for a month which aggravated the financial state of the family. CASA supported their needs for the time until Brijesh's pay from NTPC was resumed.

AMBIGUITY TO ATROCITY- WITNESSING THE DISASTER IN CHAMOLI



“No family in the village could make up their mind for even one time meal that day. It was so tragic, we were cluelessly wandering outside trying to process what all happened”.

The destructive intensity of the deluge in Uttarakhand can be perceived in its actual perniciousness if only seen through the optics of the live witnesses. During our relief program at Chamoli, CASA came across Bisheswari, a middle-aged woman, living at a higher elevation to the damaged project area, who had directly beheld the tragedy unleashing its ferocity in Tapovan.

“I was in the kitchen, preparing Rotis when the kids playing outside suddenly rushed indoors. They were alarmingly shouting ‘bhukamp aagaya hai’ (earthquake has come). I went out to see for myself. People were in panic and were running about for life, screaming ‘bachao bachao’ (save us, save us). I was disrupted enough to see the heavy discharge of water roaring and flooding the land underneath. My house is just above the project area, so I could see it happening in front of my eyes”, recalls Bisheswari.

She further reflected that the blows of the burst kept rushing in constantly through ten in the morning to two in the afternoon until the chaos and instability between the masses ceased to a deathly silence in the mountains. “No family in the village could make up their mind for even one time meal that day. It was so tragic, we were cluelessly wandering outside trying to process what all happened”. Bisheswari’s younger sister-in-law had a 25-year-old son, Happy, posted in the tunnel on the day of the disaster. A boy of a very elated disposition, thus his name, was working

in a high-pay position as an engineer. Soon, he was going to get engaged, stepping into a new phase of his life. But the disaster broke everything into pieces. The family was still waiting for Happy’s body to be recovered by the date our team met Bisheswari.

Yet, death was not the only pain for them. The family had a piece of landholding partly utilised for agricultural activities and partly given away to the project area for generating income. The men employed in ploughing the agricultural segment for the day too fell victim to the catastrophe while Bisheswari’s family lost the land that fed them for generations.

Above and beyond the personal losses, she also outlined a horrifying incident that shocked the community at large, “When the bodies, recovered from the tunnel, went for postmortem, it was revealed that the dead were alive for about six long days, trying to survive. Had they been alarmed earlier or had the rescue mission saved them on time, those people might have been alive and back with their families. Many local young boys, newlywed and talented personas, who worked in the project to earn bread for their families, lost their lives battling food and breath, stranded in the tunnel”.

The land has already been suffering through instances of unemployment and a lack of livelihood opportunities. The NTPC project area and submerged agricultural lands were the sources of income for many lives in Chamoli. While on one hand, the disaster inflicted an irreparable blow to their sustenance, on the other, the dispersed location of the village at varying altitudes, makes it difficult for help and relief to reach the upper segments. CASA endeavoured to reach the remote corners of the land that were impacted by the glacier burst, helping families who needed support in these trying times.



A FEROCIOUS FATE OF A FATHER AND SON



Priyank Samuel - Communications Executive

"When I heard the echo that rumbled around the area, I was astounded. Thenceforth came the news of a heavy flood in the river banks. I realised that my husband's worksite is in the same area and I froze as my mind could process the whole scenario. I instantly took out my cellphone to call and enquire but the network repeatedly failed to connect. At that moment, my whole body went numb fearing that I might have lost my husband and son who went along" shared Pushpa Devi, the 45-year-old wife of late Kuldeep Singh.

Kuldeep Singh (49 years) was an employee at the Rishi Ganga Hydro Power project. He was in charge of the plumbing and electrical line maintenance at the site. He was the sole bread earner of the family. Kuldeep and Pushpa reside in Karchho village of Chamoli district, Uttarakhand with their two children- Ashish and Sarita Singh and his 75-year-old widowed mother, Shurma Devi.

Since his village was a bit far from the project site, Kuldeep mostly stayed at the worksite. He had arranged a one-room accommodation for himself to attend emergency power failures and other plumbing/ electrical emergencies at the worksite. The glacier burst was an unanticipated event that nobody was prepared for. It had in fact startled and crushed the lives of hundreds of people who were at the site that Sunday morning on 7th February 2021.

Besides Kuldeep, his son Ashish was also at the site on that petrifying Sunday morning. Ashish Singh was

a 22-year-old enthusiastic chap who loved to lend a hand and help his parents in whichever way possible. On 7th February, Ashish learned that his father had to go to the worksite for some emergency work even though it was a Sunday. He took this opportunity to back his father and meanwhile to gain experience of his father's work. Uncertain about what was to happen, both father and son left their home to the site and were never seen again.

"As soon as we heard about the calamity, we all rushed to the worksite to get any whereabouts of my son and grandson. But it was spine-chilling to see not even traces or any belonging were to be found, not even the temporary small accommodation he used to stay in at the worksite." cried Kuldeep's mother Surema Devi. Kuldeep and Ashish's family members are still unable to process what had happened as their ray of hope was crushed in just one morning. "Till now we live in a Kaccha (mud) house. It was Ashish's father's dream to build a brick house for us. He had already set the foundation out for the house but now who will build it? With my small scale farming it is an impossible task to accomplish." sighed his wife.

CASA volunteers met Kuldeep and Ashish's family during the disaster relief distribution programme, where the disaster affected families were given a dry ration kit, trampoline, solar lights and hygiene kits as a temporary relief and household support during this difficult time.



6

VILLAGES



01

DISTRICTS



TARPAULIN
GIVEN TO THE
AFFECTED
FAMILIES

CONTENTS OF DRY RATION/ HYGIENT KIT



1,050

families covered



Hygiene kit and
dry ration kit

Rice, Wheat Flour, Lentils,
Edible Oil, Turmeric
Powder, Chili Powder,
Sugar, Tea, Maggi, Salt,
Biscuit, Solar Lantern,
Sanitary Kit, Dettol Soap,
Tooth Paste, Tooth Brush,
Detergent Cake, Sanitiser





DECODING COVID-19 VACCINATION IN RURAL MAHARASHTRA: THE CASE OF POWARITOLA

 Vrushali Kadam – Research Associate, Gender Desk

As the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic seemingly came to a halt in India, CASA's exclusive Gender Desk began its on-field research to study the social, political and economic empowerment of women in our 15 Core Programme areas.

With the ongoing pandemic, we believed that no interventions could take place without addressing the elephant in the room. Thus, in order to understand women's status and burdens due to the pandemic, it was crucial to first understand the impact status and after-effects of COVID-19 and its consequent effects on women. CASA's West Zone undertook a simultaneous COVID-19 Aid & Response Impact Assessment study and uncovered strange myths and findings surrounding vaccinations.

During our research visits, we came to a halt at Marka Khanda, a village that shares its Gram Mandal and a woman Sarpanch with four villages – Kotjambhora, Asaitola, Mokasitola and Powaritola. Keeping the

COVID-19 protocol in mind, CASA had facilitated the formation of a COVID-19 Committee for the Gram Mandal in order to prevent further spread of the disease, and to ensure that the affected ones are provided with essential care.

Whilst discussing their role and functions, the members of the COVID-19 Committee (Sarpanch, community members, govt. sanctioned Aarogya Sevika, ASHA and Anganwadi workers, teachers) highlighted what the pandemic looked like from a perspective very different from what city-dwellers, perhaps, are used to – more so in the village of Powaritola.

While it was a difficult feat for CASA to ensure that the community was desensitised to common myths surrounding vaccinations, the people of Powaritola proved to be even more difficult to please. The village had closed itself to others who were vaccinated or attempted to introduce vaccination drives in their village. They paid no heed to the cries of Maya Patle,

the assigned Aarogya Sevika who made multiple attempts at introducing vaccination drives; as Maya described in a conversation, the government provided her with 50 vaccines each day, of which only 25-30 were used every few days. ASHA and Anganwadi workers present at the discussion mentioned their attempts to educate the community on the benefits of getting vaccinated, but to no avail.

The people of Powaritola believed that injecting a vaccine essentially meant injecting the COVID-19 virus in the body, or worse, weakening internal organs and killing them. Moreover, the community believed several myths, such as injecting the vaccine could cause infertility among men and women, vaccines could prove harmful to Adivasi genes, it could harmfully compromise with existing immunity – so much so that such misconceptions led several people to flee from the village.

Today, after many such interventions, awareness drives surrounding the benefits of vaccination and prevention of COVID-19 have proved to be useful, as a fraction of the Powaritola community is steadily getting vaccinated. The emergence of COVID-19 positive cases may have reduced in some of our programme areas, but the sheer challenge and power of creating awareness and advocating towards a safer, healthier rural India has given CASA a paramount perspective during a raging global pandemic. CASA continues

to engage in awareness on COVID-19 Appropriate Behaviour, vaccinations and capacity building of our communities under all COVID-19 aid & response.





EVENTS

To revive the rural economy from the slowdown during the pandemic, CASA initiated a training program to empower seven women groups, comprising 70 members, with the skill to process, harvest, and market the mushrooms. Following a two-day training workshop, women in Chattisgarh set up mushroom incubation units in their homes as a way to earn supplemental income for their families.

The program was organised in the villages of Bharijhurki, Katelpara, Parsapani of Pendra block, and Bilaspur for three months. With a minimum investment of Rs.800 to Rs.1000 including the expenses of seeds, pesticides, and other essentials, the income generated by a 45 days long- single shift cultivation, has amounted to eight thousand to ten thousand.

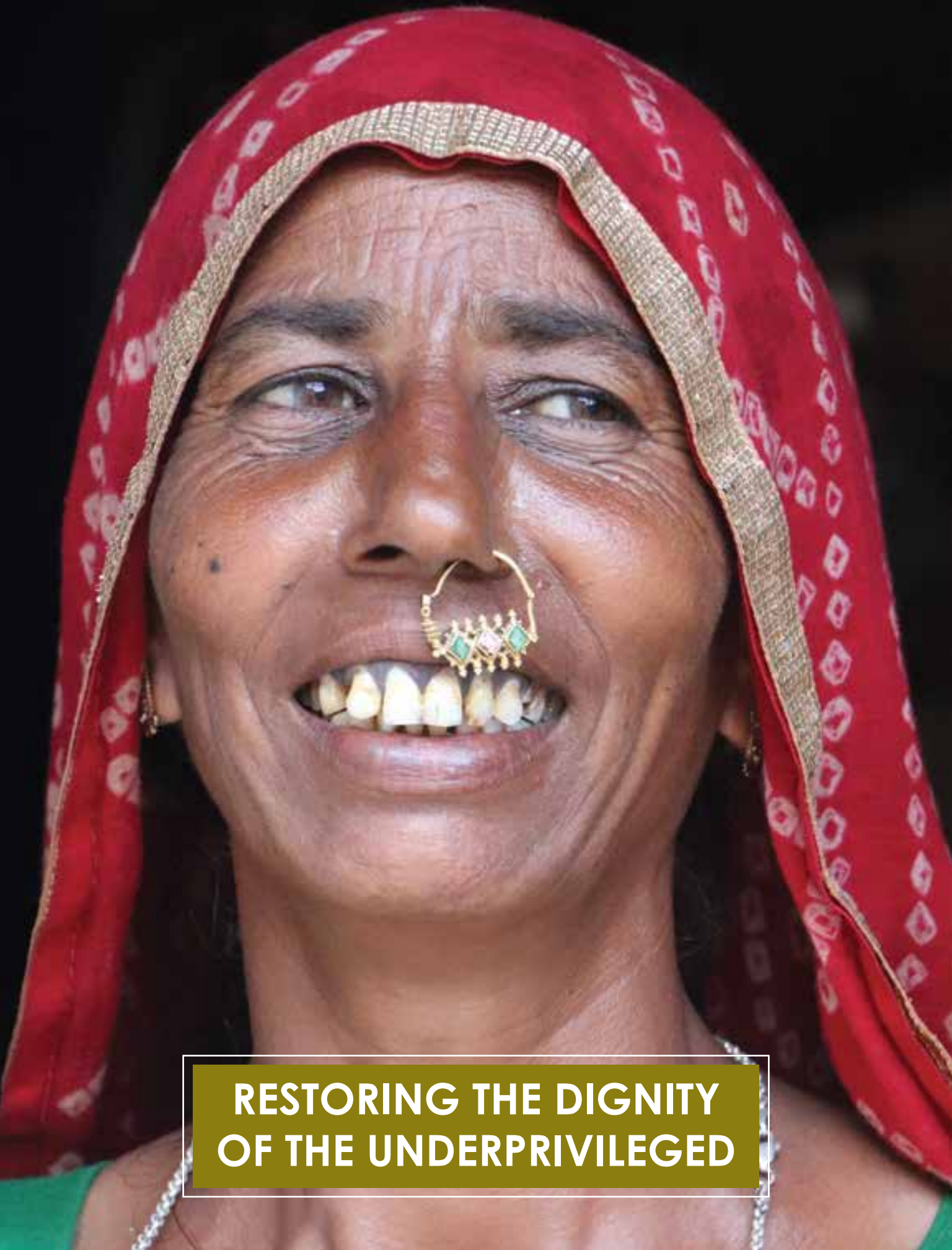
Four groups have also begun selling it in local markets for a cost of Rs.250.00 per kg. Selling it at the district level may raise the cost up to Rs.400.00 and give better income to the groups.

Oyster mushrooms are a good source of protein and minerals such as riboflavin, niacin, phosphorus, potassium, and copper. The cultivation of these oyster mushrooms can pave the way to ensure robust financial and food security for a number of marginalised families.

The art of preparing utility-based products from bamboo has been one of the most sustainable livelihood practices in many cultures across India. Besides providing the artisan with a source of income, the bamboo products also connect the buyers to a highly renewable and biodegradable alternative to plastics. For ages, bamboo has found its place in most households, in one or the other form of mats, rice cleaner, baskets, ladders, etc. However, the mass production of plastic is a challenge that most organic initiatives fail to stand against.

Establishing a primary base to help marginalised communities learn the creation of bamboo products, CASA organised 20 days of the training program in the Banda and Lalitpur of Uttar Pradesh. The participating women were mainly from low-income families and subjugated classes. Acknowledging that sustainability is the way forward, CASA encouraged the participants to take a step ahead in empowering themselves through such green initiatives of preparing and selling bamboo products.





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