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ENVIRONMENT

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Local forests being restored as pilgrims now plant trees as offering to God

Special Report By Edwin Bernbaum, Berkeley, California

High in a valley beneath the sacred snow peak of Nilkanth, the "Blue-Necked God," lies Badrinath, the major Hindu pilgrimage place in the Indian Himalayas. The apex of an ancient network of Himalayan shrines, it has been a focus of religious devotion for thousands of years. But until recently, because of its remoteness--it used to take twenty days to reach by foot from the plains--relatively few people managed to get there. Today more than 400,000 pilgrims a year come to Badrinath from all over India, arriving on roads built into the Tibetan border area after the border war with China in the early 1960s. Under the impact of so many visitors, the last remnants of a sacred forest of juniper and birch, which ancient texts say used to fill the valley, have disappeared.

On a visit to Badrinath in 1993, Prof. A. N. Purohit, Director of the G. B. Pant Institute of India's Himalayan Environment and Development, lamented the barrenness. At only 3,130 meters--well below the 4,000-meter tree line--there should

have been forest. He related, "I was feeling a little envious, wishing I had the authority of the chief priest to get people to plant trees. Then I thought, why not ask him to do it?"

Purohit did, indeed, go see the chief priest of Badrinath. He suggested the planting, saying that his institute could provide seedlings for pilgrims to plant. The priest agreed, and soon set a day for the first tree-planting ceremony. On the appointed day, scientists from the G. B. Pant Institute brought seedlings to Badrinath. The priest blessed the plants and gave an inspirational talk highlighting Hindu beliefs and myths about the spiritual importance of trees. He urged the pilgrims and others in attendance to plant the seedlings as an act of religious devotion. They responded with a rush of enthusiasm. Even the temple beggars expressed eagerness to care for the trees in exchange for food and donations. The ceremony marked the beginning of a program to re-establish Badrivan, the ancient sacred forest of Badrinath.

One of the myths the chief priest used in his talk is the story of a sage who petitioned the Goddess of the Ganges River to come down from heaven. Looking for an excuse to stay where she was, she protested that the force of her descent would shatter the earth. Lord Siva stepped in to break her fall with the locks on his head. The chief priest noted that religious texts view Siva's hair as the trees growing in the Himalayas, with their roots holding the soil in place. In the summer the Ganges falls from heaven in the form of monsoon rains, and when Himalayan forests are cut down, devastating floods and landslides do, in fact, shatter the earth. "Plant these seedlings for Lord Siva," the chief priest said, "You will restore His hair and protect the land."

A year and a half later, with help from the Alliance of Religions and Conservation, and the American Alpine Club, I came as a Senior Fellow of The Mountain Institute to document the program at Badrinath and explore its potential for replication. A tree-planting ceremony was taking place at Hanumanchatti, a shrine guarding the entrance to the sacred valley of Badrinath. Five hundred colorfully-dressed pilgrims, priests, swamis, villagers, government officials and army officers had gathered to hear speeches by various dignitaries.

The principal dignitary, Sri Naga Baba Hanuman Giri, is revered throughout India. He was holding one arm straight over his head, an ascetic practice he had followed for forty years. Long, yellowish nails curled out of his shriveled fingers. The audience listened intently to his words: "We all have a duty to plant trees: they give shade and inspire meditation."

After speeches by scientists, a priest and a swami, the holy man blessed 1,400 seedlings of various species and handed them out to the eager crowd. Hugging them to their chests, they reverently carried the trees to a nearby sacred hill, where they planted them in pits prepared by the local villagers. The village headman remarked, "These are sacred trees that we will do our best to protect."

Purohit was no longer director of the G. B. Pant Institute, but he had put Dr. P. P. Dhyani, a plant physiologist and son of a Badrinath panda or priest-guide, in charge of the program, insuring close cooperation between scientists and priests. After the ceremony, the two of us visited other plantation sites around Badrinath, and I learned that altitude, cold and snowfall

had killed off most of the trees from the first ceremonial planting in 1993. In response, the G. B. Pant Institute had established a nursery at Hanumanchatti to acclimatize seedlings and had developed special metal covers to prevent snow from breaking the soft tips of the plants. Scientists had also determined the most promising native trees for planting and preserving biodiversity--Himalayan birch, oak, maple, spruce and juniper, as well as other species. As a consequence, survival rates had improved dramatically, and some plants had reached a height of two meters.

A dispute had developed over planting trees to control erosion on slopes threatening the main temple of Badrinath. A lawyer representing the nearby village that owned the land told us that a government agency had failed to compensate the villagers for earlier use of the area. "Until they do so, we cannot permit trees to be planted there." The leader of the village woman's association said wistfully, "I am a lover of trees. If it were my decision, I would go ahead with the planting, but I cannot speak for others in my village."

Despite the dispute, which she felt would be resolved, she shared the conviction of most of the people we interviewed that the sacred forest would eventually be restored--a dramatic change from a widely-held earlier belief, based on a history of previous failures, that reforestation at Badrinath could not succeed. A remark by an orange-robed swami who ran a rest house for pilgrims pointed to a major success of the program, highlighting its promise as a model for other programs of environmental conservation: "Before the first ceremony in 1993, it never occurred to me to plant trees as a religious duty. Now I encourage everyone who comes here to

do it! I tell them to plant trees not only at Badrinath, but throughout India for the sake of peace and well-being for all." 1Ã2 1Ã4

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