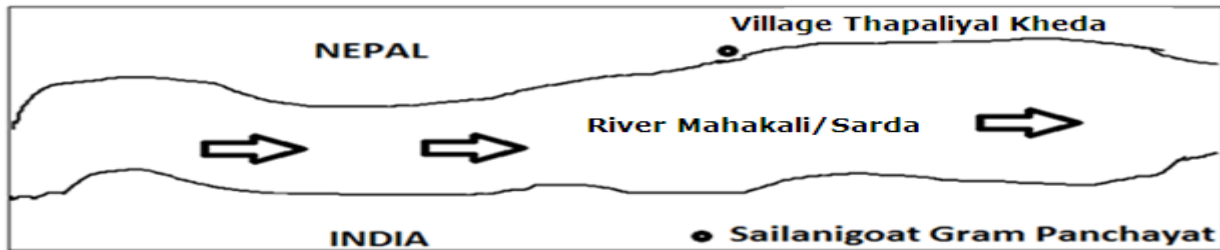


Thapaliyal Kheda – in Search of Identity

1.1. INTRODUCTION

The Mahakali River constitutes international boundary between India and Nepal, in major stretches. There exists a peculiar issue of the village Thapaliyal Kheda, Gram Panchayat Sailanigoth, which is cut off from its Panchayat, separated by River Sharda. Thapliyal kheda is some 8.5 kms away by virtue of this peculiarity (figure 1). Thus the village Thapaliyal Kheda is surrounded by Nepali territory on the three sides, whereas on the one side it faces river Sharda and its floodplains. It will also be relevant to mention that the village Sailanigoth itself is bifurcated by the construction of Tanakpur canal (1992) in two entities on either side of the canal – Sailanigoth Malla and Sailanigoth Talla. The village is 10 km away from Tanakpur town where 40 families live. Largely, families hail from Manch Tamli, Champawat. The village (along with its agricultural fields) is settled over an area of 25 acre (approximately) of forest land.

Figure 1 Location of village Thapaliyal Kheda



Overview of Sailanigoth Panchayat and Villages, the red line shows the circuitous route to Thapliyal Kheda

Village Thapliyal Kheda is part of the Sailanigoth Gram Panchayat which has another four villages as listed in the table below. The decadal growth rate of Panchayat as a whole was 28.62% for the 1991-2001 period. In 2011 census, the population of Panchayat is almost similar to the population recorded in 2001. However, there is a decrease in population in Bandora Hansi, Deupur Urf Sitapur in the year 2011. The average voter population among the total population is 68%. Village Thapliyal Kheda is accessible only

via tanakpur barrage and walking along the floodplains of River Sharda. It is surrounded by Nepals' territory. Interestingly there exist no village by the name of Thapliyalkheda in Census Statistics but the voters list enumerates it under Sailanigoth Panchayat. There are 111¹ voters in the village – 65 males and 45 females.

Villages	Area	Total Households			Total Population			% voters
		1991	2001	2011	1991	2001	2011	
	<i>Hec.</i>							
Bandora Hansi	25	25	65	74	203	367	316	72.15
Deupur Urf Sitapur	24	32	59	25	209	286	111	88.29
Bagdora Khas	23	27	29	29	164	153	194	48.45
Sailanigoth	30	56	91	118	402	452	628	64.33
Total	102	140	244	246	978	1258	1249	

Source: Census of India, 1991, 2001 & 2011

1.2. HISTORY OF SETTLEMENT

The settlement Thapliyal Kheda's existence is backed by its need to venture into the Terai forests for their grazing and livelihood needs several decades back as usually practiced in the hills. Unlike the other forest settlements, established under the *Taungia* system, this village Thapaliyal Kheda has a different history of settlement.



River Sharda acts as a divide between Sailanigoth Panchayat and Thapliyal Kheda (besides the far off forest range along the river)

[The *Taungia* system was devised by the then British Forest department during the colonial rule. In the early years of the century, erstwhile British Government introduced the policy of reservation of forests. For laying and protecting new plantations, often in place of the newly-exploited and clear-felled natural forest, labors were required. For the purpose of procuring cheap, in fact, free labor *Taungia* system was devised, more or less on the line of the *Begari* system (work without wage). Under this system, labor was

¹ Database of Election commission, Uttarakhand

brought and put in the middle of the forest in make-shift settlements and permitted to raise short-term rows of the plantation for few years. Once these trees grew to a certain height and were capable to grow naturally, then labors were shifted to new plantation sites. In 1946, the Government was hastily involved in more important work related to freedom of India and everyone forgot about these settlements. Thus they remained within the forest and continue to struggle for their rights. There are 28 such forest villages under the *Taungia* system in and around Banbasa area.]

The ancestors of the residents of village Thapaliyal Kheda used to come here in winter with their cattle for grazing and returned to their native place in summer and it continued for a few decades. Subsequently, when the hilly areas remained untouched by development, about four decades back, these nomads decided to settle here permanently, in the hope that they will be benefitted by development in plains. But this hope soon crash-landed on the ground, as expressed by Suresh, a resident of Thapaliyal Kheda – “*We neither had road and electricity in hills nor here.*” Today, in contrast to this village, their native village Manch Tamli (from where they migrated) has road, electricity, police station, and an SBI Branch.

1.3. ISSUES ARISING FROM PECULIAR PHYSICAL LOCATION

The villagers of Thapaliyal Kheda have been struggling with a plethora of problems since last forty years, as summarized below.

A. Loss of Land

Before the construction of Brahmdev Bridge in 1991-92, river Sharda was flowing towards the right bank but after the construction of bridge started flowing towards left bank and consequently significant chunk of fertile agricultural land was lost to river owing to severe erosion and submergence. Yet the forest department didn't take any preventive action for future.

B. Commuting and Crossing International Border on Daily Basis

Crossing international border on a daily basis has emerged as a major hurdle, especially if one is bringing some household items/articles. The process is typically too cumbersome (for bringing construction material) and permission needs to be taken from NHPC (as CISF is deployed for the security of NHPC power plant) for bringing in construction materials into the village. All the houses in Thapaliyalkheda have tin or similar material as roof as per the regulations of the forest department. For example, if one has to bring some sand, bricks, cement, etc. from Tanakpur then he has to give an application to the HR Manager, NHPC office. It is scrutinized and signed first by HR Manager, NHPC, followed by sign of Gram Pradhan, then sign of NHPC official, finally signed by the AC of CISF and then the pass is issued. It specifically mentioned the number and quantity of items, details of the vehicle (like number, type, license, driver's name and his license's details), etc. If by some unexpected reason, the belonging couldn't be transported on specified date, new application needs to be submitted for issuing a fresh pass. Yet, one has to spent considerable time at check-post to explain everything about the goods and purpose. There is no public transport due to its geographical location and people have to commute by foot or bicycle atleast upto the barrage beyond which there is intermediate public transport available.

C. Inertia in Development Activities

The forest department has taken serious objection to any pucca and permanent construction in/around the village, on the ground that all the 25 acre land is technically 'forest land' and laying down road or erecting electricity poles will be a violation of provisions enshrined in Forest and Environment Act, so people are doomed to live in hutments, with only tin roof. Though 20 odd houses have managed to make brick and stone houses, they too have not been permitted to have pucca roof.



D. Existing Government Facilities

- In 2001, a primary school was opened under ‘Education for All’ (*Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan*) and *Aanganwadi* is also operational. There are two teachers in the school, but the shrinking number of students is a matter of concern. Presently, there are only three Indian students (three other students are Nepali). Though there are about 16 school-going children in village but they are studying in the boarding schools in nearby Nepali town – Mahendranagar.
- In the absence of electricity, in 2007 SSB has provided solar lamps in the village on subsidy so all 40 families has light in their homes.
- During Parliamentary and Assembly elections, polling booth is established in the village so the villagers are saved from the drudgery of 10 km walk. But for Gram Panchayat elections and meetings, villagers have to go to Sailanigoth. There are 111 voters in the village.

- There is only one tube-well installed by the government and another two are private.
- Grazing is allowed by the forest department at a nominal fee of Rs. 100 per season. In fact, the receipts issued towards grazing fees are the sole basis for issuing Permanent Resident Certificate to these villagers. Only on the basis of this permanent residential status, Aadhaar card, Election Commission's voter Identity Card, etc. are issued to the residents here.
- There is no dispensary or medical facility – only the ASHA animator lives in this village.
- Ration cards have been issued but the fair-price shop is located in Sailanigoth so villagers have to venture for several kilometers to fetch their daily needs. There is no fixed time for opening of this fair-price shop and consequently villagers have to make several trips before being lucky to find the shop open.

E. Lack of Irrigation and Importing Water from Nepal

Sailanigoth is located along the river but the irrigation in the Panchayat and villages is through tubewells, the power canal takes water to the NHPC power plant. Of the 88.56 hectares land in the whole Panchayat (Excluding Thapliyalkheda), 58 hectares is sown and irrigated by tubewells. As there is no electricity in the village, irrigating agricultural fields becomes a major issue. Almost everyone belong to farming community, and beside main crops vegetables are also grown. Due to proximity of Thapliyalkheda to settlements in Nepal, irrigation needs are met from there by paying a mutually agreed rate. As a practice, there is a system in place i.e. when the pump has to be turned on and off. People of both nations across the border are living in peace and harmony and till date no issue has emerged. Villagers say that water is available in plenty here (at a depth of 18 feet) and if electricity is provided they will install their own pump for irrigating fields. Handpumps can be seen in front of every house as water is available at shallow depths.

F. Problems of Rainy Season

During rainy season, in the absence of a bridge, the village gets cut off from all sides and virtually becomes an island. Villagers merely wait for water levels to recede. In these times, school remains closed, essential daily goods are purchased from Nepalese markets at steep prices, floods in Sharda destroy crops, etc.

G. Other Aspects

- Mohan Singh Bohra, ex-Pradhan had some hope when he heard about provisioning of funds for a bridge and school but this hope watered down when the RTI filed by the local resident Madan Singh to know more about the development scheme for the village revealed that all this 25 acre land belongs to forest department and hence no permanent structures can be constructed.
- Mohan Singh and others in the past have also given requests to the administration to shift them to a alternate place if provisioning of basic amenities is restrained. But nothing has materialized and the status quo is maintained. Mohan Singh Bohra strongly believes that it is because of their villages' presence that there is still some forest left and our village provides a social watch over this boundary which suits the administration.
- There is strong cultural affinity on both sides – Nepalese visit Poornagiri mela in India and Indian visit Mahendranagar Shivaratri Mela with equal zeal, vigor and enthusiasm.

1.5. WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

Whether it makes a strategic decision to keep the village intact in its present location or not shall not be driven by keeping low service levels to the settlement like irrigation needs (tubewells or canal), electricity, education, health and access to goods/materials – the essentials a remote village require the most. Although the needs are being met in a piecemeal manner, options shall be sought from the villagers themselves so that a workable service delivery plan can be developed.

This is a unique case and nowhere in near vicinity a similar case is heard of, so apprehension that it may open up more such cases is absent and hence is a case specific aspect which probably remained neglected for want of political will. For the time being, some administrative steps need to be taken up to ease the hardship of the residents of Thapaliyal Kheda (transportation easier, simplifying process of bringing articles, providing basic amenities, etc).

The issue is compounded further as forest falls under the Central Government. Further there are dozens of 'forest-villages' and any decision involving them requires a policy-level change, towards which both the state and central governments should be in consensus. Yet another aspect is that Uttarakhand government is dilly-dallying on the implementation of Forest Rights Act (2006), which enables forest-dwellers and tribals to reside within their natural habitats and fructify rights. Henceforth, the issue of changing status of 'forest-villages' into 'revenue-villages' (a long-standing demand of affected communities) is not so simple as it appears, rather it is deeply entangled in policy-inertia, bureaucratic red-tapism and political apathy. The State and Center, both ruled by the same political party also raises hope to find some amicable solution to this vexed issue.

Improving access to and from the village will build mutual trust and initiate ease of living. Allowing bulk daily needs supply can also lessen frequent trips and may turn out to be cheaper for the people – this can be worked out with the community's need.

Improving or providing state services to ferry children to the educational institutes/schools will lessen family's financial and mental burden of sending their children to school on their own.