

An experience to cherish



The beautiful white
Dhulahdar mountain range.
© Sanjay Molur.



“Himalaya are young mountains and still growing”. This one fact fascinated me and I hadn’t envisaged the possibility to visit and volunteer in the Himalayan Restoration Project (HRP) a succession of the Himalayan Langur Project (HLP) in Chamba district, Himachal Pradesh. This conservation project is run by Zoo Outreach Organisation (Zooreach).

The mountainous journey began on 04 March 2024 as the sun rose, and I noticed the tussock grasses, gleaming under the sun on the steep slopes of the tall mountains. Grasslands being the theme for 2023–24 batch of the RHATC of which I was one of the 10 fellows, I couldn’t help but notice these grasses all the way to Chamba and the mountains at

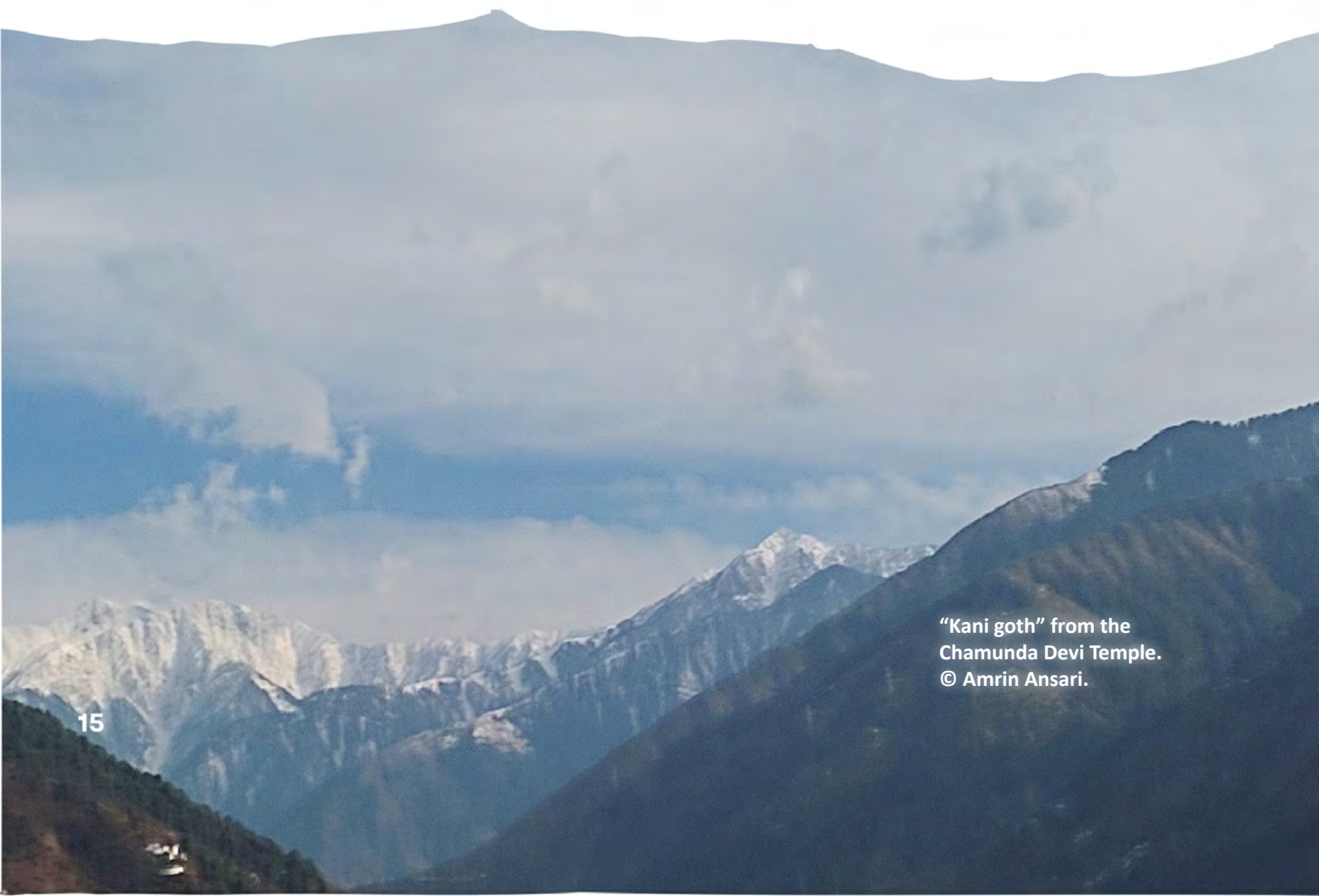
the far end, blanketed with snow. Before reaching Chamba I assumed that this place would be opposite of Ooty and would have pristine landscapes and untouched areas by humans. That was not the case, Chamba was well traversed by humans like most of the hill stations in southern India.

To get accustomed to the landscape, Amrin Ansari (my fellow-fellow at RHATC 23–24, and presently an intern with Zooreach in Chamba) and I went for a 2 km walk to the Chamunda Devi temple accompanied by Vishal Ahuja, the principal investigator in the HLP. Climbing up the hefty number of stairs to the temple, we saw the beautiful white mountain range “Kani goth”. This peak, called Diamond Peak by Vishal, was glowing under the evening sun. He added that the Gaddis, a shepherd community,

travel and camp for a few months during the summer for grazing their livestock at the grazing pastures surrounding this peak.

This peak falls in the Dhulahdar mountain range in Himachal Pradesh. Beyond it, in the horizon, was the uninterrupted Peer Panjal range and the Chamba Valley lies between these two ranges. It was a good start to comprehend this landscape that was taught briefly in geography classes back in school.

As we continued our journey, Vishal pointed out to the Chir Pine *Pinus roxburghii* trees. They are non-native trees that catch fire because of the resin, explained Vishal. A few days later Sanjay Molur, executive director of Zooreach joined us and pointed out to an agriculture patch near the Chir



“Kani goth” from the Chamunda Devi Temple.
© Amrin Ansari.

pine trees that was engulfed in fire the previous year and the devastating impact it had around.

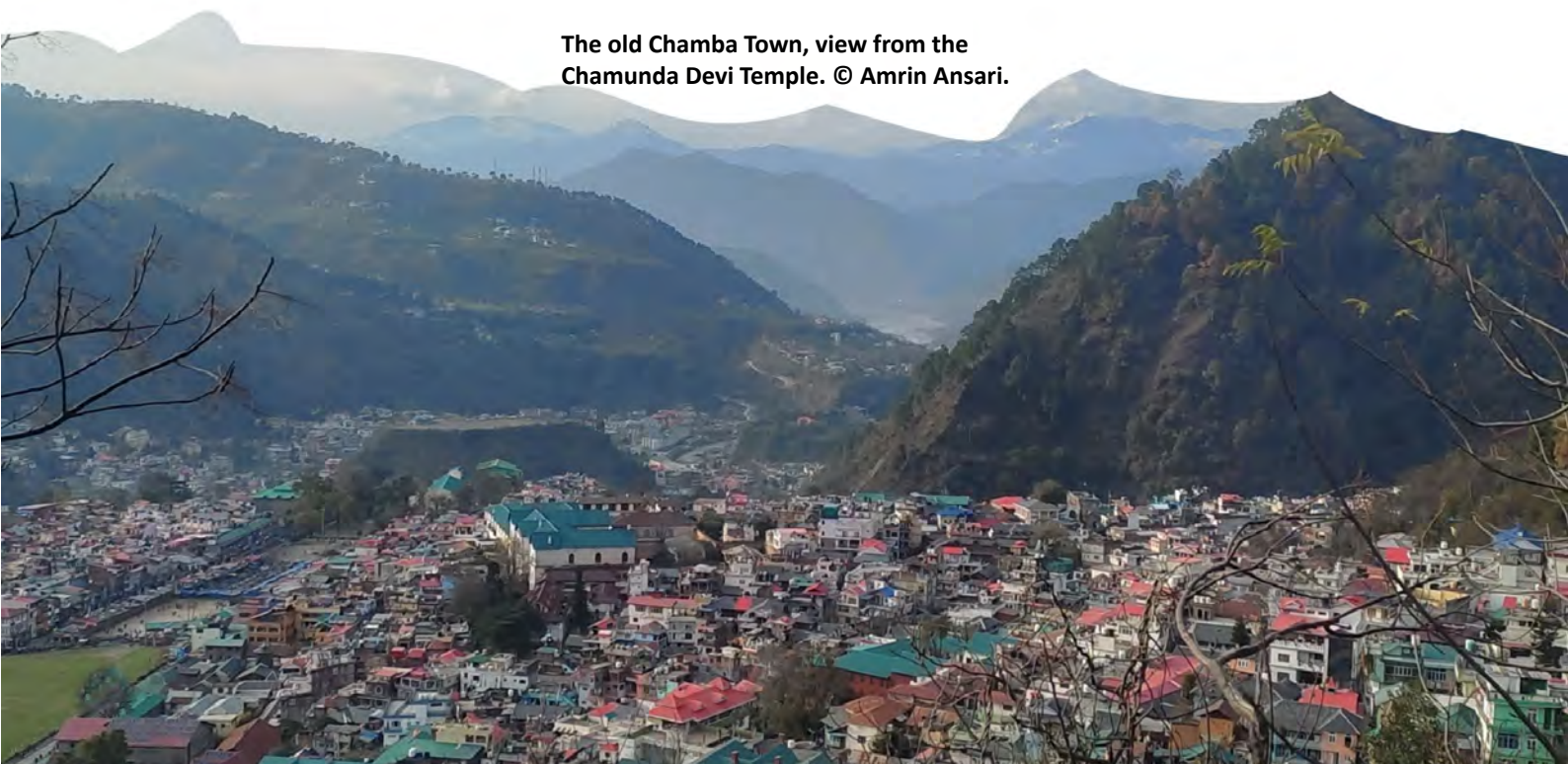
Additionally, the Chir Pine trees were considered useless by the women of the Thukrel Village where the team from Zooreach (Amrin Ansari, Trisa Bhattacharjee, Kritika, Vishal Ahuja, and Sanjay Molur) had visited women self-help groups to create awareness about the importance and need of restoration. The women mentioned that the forest area (due to Chir Pine) has been increasing and also the crop raiding by wild animals. With decreasing species of native trees to feed on, the Black Bears, Rhesus Macaques, and the Chamba Sacred Langurs have no choice but to pay unannounced visits to agricultural lands and the communities are affected. During one of the meetings with the women self-help groups we noticed a group of Rhesus Macaques feeding on the flowering

mustard crops. This leads to negative interactions and consequences for both the wild animals and the communities. It's unfortunate that species that do not belong to a particular region were consciously or unconsciously transported by humans and are now causing problems to the



Canopy of Chir pine tress. © P. Kritika.

The old Chamba Town, view from the Chamunda Devi Temple. © Amrin Ansari.



people, landscape, and the climate of the region. However, I was glad to see the efforts undertaken to develop a native plant nursery by the Zooreach team working in Chamba with the motive to propagate native trees like Horse chestnut *Aesculus indica*, Himalayan pear *Pyrus pashia*, Wild Himalayan cherry *Prunus armeniaca*, Walnut *Juglans regia* among other native species maintained in the nursery. All this is with the intention to reduce the negative interaction in the medium-term future by restoring the landscape with native saplings.

At the nursery, I was fascinated to learn from Vishal about the mountain terrain – the distinction between the southern and northern facing slopes. He pointed out that the southern slopes are characterized by their steepness and sparse vegetation, as they receive more direct sunlight, causing

snow to melt relatively quickly. On the other hand, the northern slopes are typically more humid and lush with vegetation, featuring less steep inclines.

The agricultural plots are predominantly found on the northern slopes because of the moisture content. Vishal also explained this topography while we were heading towards the Khajjiar-Kalatop Wildlife Sanctuary enjoying the scenic drive. Initially, we saw snow covered mountains and patches of snow from Chamba and before long we were playing in the snow. An experience to cherish! Around 4 pm, we saw a group of six Chamba Sacred Langurs *Semnopithecus ajax* trying to cross the road. As they climbed down the tree waiting for the right moment, a speeding vehicle would pass by and the langurs would climb back on the tree. Vigilantly, one



Working at the nursery
set up by Zoo Outreach
Organisation.
© Sanjay Molur.



Vishal Ahuja explaining about the Himalayan Restoration Project to the women self-help groups at the Thukrel Village. © P. Kritika.

by one, they moved across to the other side. It was my first time observing the langurs and playing in the snow. "I had last seen a good amount of snow over 8 feet in 2012 and never again", Vishal expressed to which Sanjay remarked "that would probably be the last time you will ever see". This one statement gives a stark reality of how the climate has changed over the years. With the expansion of human settlements in Chamba, the weather pattern has significantly changed. The Chamba town extended till the Chamunda devi temple but over the 10-12 years the other



Agriculture patches. © Paridhi Modi.

side of the temple has seen an increase in settled areas. The vehicular traffic nowadays surpasses what Chamba Town has ever seen before. The Ravi River flows across this town and witnesses the changing scenario. Dams that were constructed on this river have significantly contributed to the changes with danger of flash floods occurring during heavy rains. The expansion of roads and construction of highways are in full swing here. Why are such activities increasing when it's



The team at Chamba (left to right) – Amrin Ansari, Paridhi Modi, Vishal Ahuja, P. Kritika, Trisa Bhattacharjee & Sanjay Molur. © Sanjay Molur.

slowly destroying these fragile mountains? Conserving this landscape becomes more important and crucial considering damages that have been imposed and continues to be inflicted upon.

The Himalaya are renowned for their breathtaking landscapes and the vastness. Working and volunteering here meanwhile learning about the landscape was an amazing experience altogether. During my two-week stay, I understood the need

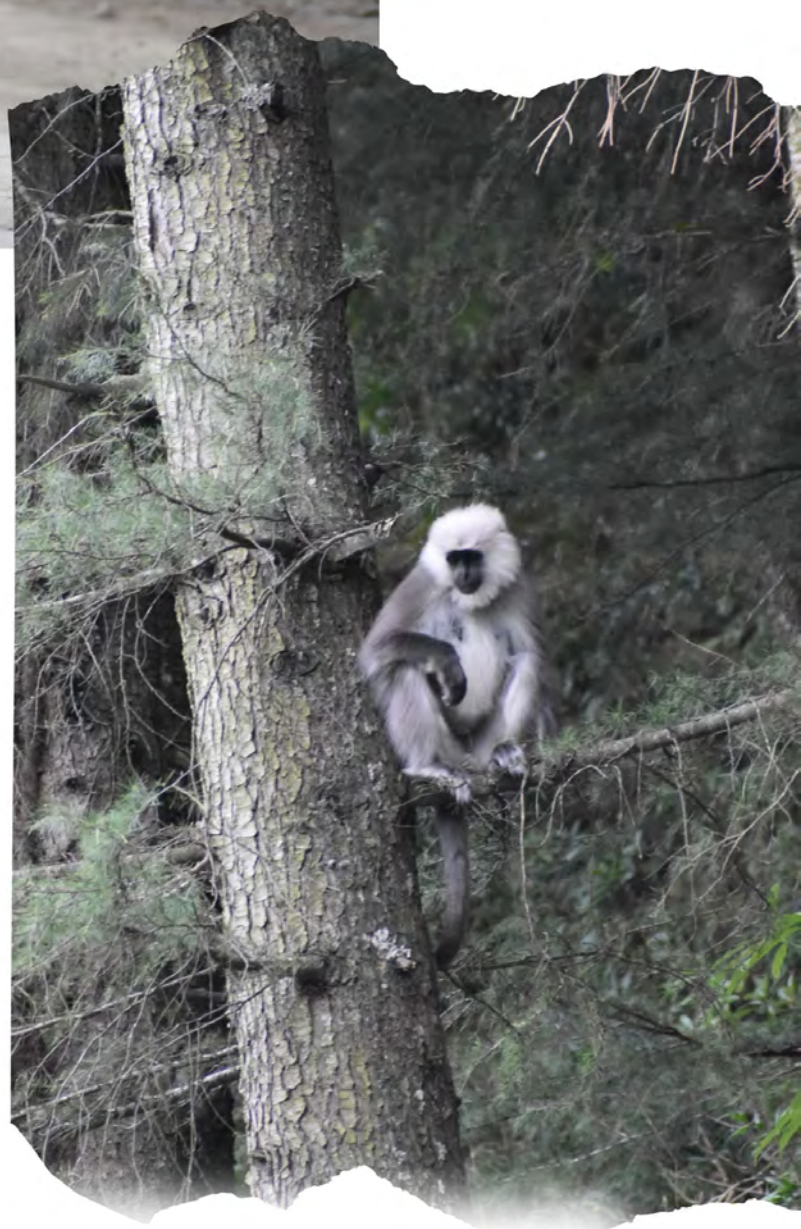


The vigilant Himalayan Grey Langurs in the Khajjiar Kalatop Sanctuary attempting to cross the road.
© Amrin Ansari.

and importance of the restoration project through various stakeholders. It took Zooreach over a decade of research on the Chamba Sacred Langurs to ascertain the need and possibility of the Himalayan Restoration Project to conserve the species and this landscape by involving the communities and the forest department. I was glad to take part in the conservation efforts by working in the nursery, interacting with women self-help groups and the forest department.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank Payal Molur who encouraged me to write an article about my experience in Chamba. Amrin Ansari, Kritika P, Vishal Ahuja, who helped me with understanding the landscape and species. Thanks to Vishal Ahuja for going through the article and giving valuable feedback. A special thanks to Sanjay Molur and Trisa Bhattacharjee for involving me in the conservation project. Thanks to the women's self-help groups for providing insights about wildlife.



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