

Memoirs of a *Pahadi* Adventure

While the left hill is full of the non-native forest fire prone Chir pines (*P. roxburghii*), fields (some used and most abandoned) and forest remnants are seen on the right hill. © Aishwarya S Kumar.

The first task assigned by Sanjay Molur was to familiarize myself with the plant names before starting my study on non-native species. Memorizing these names proved to be quite challenging, as it often happens with human memory. So, in my frustration, I began giving them my own names. For instance, I called *Geranium lucidum* “wild dhaniya” due to its leaves’ striking resemblance to coriander leaves. However, now, with six months into the internship, I have gradually learned and can recall many of the plant names. Yet, I must admit that confusion still occasionally creeps in – a very human thing, I suppose.



For my assignment, I began by acquainting myself with various plant species in our nursery, which served as my primary learning ground. It overlooks misty mountains and a region inhabited by bears, langurs, and elusive pheasants, of which we’ve caught only fleeting glimpses so far. Here, I learned the delicate art of sowing seeds. Every plant demands meticulous care until it can sustain itself – not unlike caring for a human child. Monitoring their growth and

A massive chunk of eroded land due the recent July landslides in Gajnoi, Chamba. The fields here are all abandoned, and the plantations are of the non-native Chir pines. These have very poor soil-binding capacity making the place very prone to landslides- Another reason why planting the right plant at the right place is very important! © Aishwarya S Kumar.

transferring them to larger bags reminded me of the days when I used to change my baby cousin's diapers. The joy of witnessing them sprout and develop into saplings is truly indescribable. However, as is common in fieldwork, fluctuations do occur. The untimely and incessant rains in July, followed by landslides, were a trying time for both the seedlings/saplings and myself and my fellow interns. Leaving them unattended resulted in waterlogged and overgrown plants, which complicated the weeding process. Nevertheless, time and experience have taught me to master this art. And you know what the best part of working in the nursery is? Endless hours of playing with soil after work, with no one to stop you from doing so.

"Flawless!" That was my initial impression upon seeing the Chamba Valley. Sprawling green landscapes and trees everywhere – exactly what any layperson would see. However, Sanjay urged us to observe the patterns closely. Gradually, we began to understand how grave the situation is and how cleverly concealed the dangers are. Expansive fields cut through the forests, leaving only sporadic



Phaphru (*Fagopyrum esculentum*), a local delicacy which I no longer have the heart to taste after learning that the plant's invasive. © Aishwarya S Kumar.

patches of the latter. Some secondary forests do exist, all dominated by native oak trees (*Quercus leucotricophora*), which delighted me. Then, Sanjay encouraged us to examine the forest floor more closely. A simple Google search for the definition of a forest would lead you to “a large area covered chiefly with trees and undergrowth”. But what we noticed here was predominantly oak leaf litter, with very few shrubs or herbs. The forest has been extensively utilized.

Compounding the problem are the prevalent non-native plant species (often referred to as foreign plants), some of which have been identified as invasive in our primary research. What exacerbates the situation is the local dependence on these plants. For instance, *Fagopyrum esculentum* (or ‘Phaphru’, as it’s called in Chambyali, the local dialect) holds cultural significance and is used to make a local delicacy. Noteworthy are the exotic Chir pines (*Pinus roxburghii*), which, due to the haphazardly cut roads, are highly susceptible to landslides. This issue, however, extends beyond plants. I was astonished by the vast number of non-native carps in Khajjiar Lake. Despite signs warning against feeding the fish and imposing fines for rule violations, no one seems to pay heed. Thus, outreach becomes the only solution.

The more time I spend here, the better I understand the landscape. At times, it can be disheartening and leaves me feeling hopeless. However, when I reflect on how far the project has come, and how many locals, including the Pradhan (Chief of the Panchayat), have come to understand the situation and show interest, it serves as a constant source of encouragement. Their consistent support motivates us to keep moving forward and never give up!



Unmethodically cut hill to broaden roads. The Chir pines stand dangling on the edges. The Chir pine on the extreme right could fall anytime. © Aishwarya S Kumar.



From a recent meeting with the Pradhan of the Panchayat. © Trisa Bhattacharjee.

Also, did you notice a pattern in my writing? I intentionally followed one. I understand that ignorance can be bliss, but taking a closer look at anything can reveal a wealth of truth.

Acknowledgments: Sanjay Molur, thank you for always igniting my curiosity and encouraging me to ask questions and think creatively. Your wealth of knowledge and unwavering support always leave me overwhelmed. You make learning so enjoyable! To our project lead, Vishal Ahuja, your support is deeply appreciated. I’d also like to thank my fellow interns for making this journey so eventful. And of course, to the Chambyals, I extend my gratitude and affection!

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