

WHERE TREES GROW AND TRUST TAKES TIME

In the Himalayan Restoration Project, as community outreach member, I realised that planting trees is only one part of the work. The other part often more difficult was understanding the people who live with the land every day.

One day near Gajhnoi, our workers started digging on forest land when village women suddenly arrived, took the shovel and saplings, and asked them to leave. They told us the land was used for grazing cattle and planting trees there would affect their livelihoods. When we reached the site to talk, they stood firmly on the path and made it clear that no plantation would happen that day. I remember feeling scared, but that moment also taught me that in the hills, land comes with strong opinions and louder voices.



On another occasion, one of our stakeholders kept asking me, “You will not take my land after plantation, right?” For him, every sapling looked like the first step of a land takeover. It took many long conversations to explain that the land would always remain his and that our organisation was only there to support restoration, not claim property. That fear showed me how deeply people worry about land ownership and how slowly trust grows much slower than saplings.

Challenges like this were common. When we collected pine needles for mulching, villagers stopped us because they use them for heating their homes. Sometimes people agreed to plantation only if we planted species like walnut.



During monitoring of last year's plantation, I noticed something unexpected: some tree guards were being used as window nets in houses. It was surprising, but it also showed that in the hills, everything has at least two uses.

Yet, despite all these challenges, the community was incredibly warm. Even when they didn't know us well, people offered food, tea, and help. I was especially touched by the nursery workers' attachment to the saplings. Whenever plants were moved from the nursery to plantation sites, they felt emotional and said the nursery was becoming empty, as if their children were leaving home. In the end, I learned that trees grow better when people feel secure. Restoration does not start with planting saplings it starts with listening, explaining, and sometimes smiling through difficult conversations.

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