

A WELCOME STEP

Foresters-The Lesser Known Khaki

In a vibrant democracy like India, where every vote shapes the destiny of a billion, bringing the electoral process closer to the people is not just a reform-it is a revolution in motion. The launch of "Democracy on Wheels" is one such welcome step, a visionary initiative aimed at deepening democratic participation, especially in remote and underserved regions. At its heart, this initiative is not only about convenience-it's about inclusion, empowerment, and strengthening the very roots of the democratic process.

India is the world's largest democracy, with a vast and diverse population scattered across mountains, deserts, forests, and islands. While great strides have been made in recent decades to ensure free and fair elections, the accessibility and awareness among certain sections of the population-such as those in remote rural areas, tribal belts, and among the elderly and differently-abled-remain a persistent challenge. "Democracy on Wheels" is a response to this very challenge.

This mobile initiative, often in the form of specially designed vans or buses equipped with digital tools, educational materials, and awareness resources, travels from village to village, carrying with it the light of democratic awareness. It not only educates citizens about their electoral rights but also guides them through the processes of voter registration, correction of electoral rolls, and understanding the functioning of electronic voting machines (EVMs) and Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) systems.

At a time when technology and innovation are transforming every aspect of human life, integrating them into the democratic outreach is both timely and necessary. These mobile units serve as moving classrooms of civic engagement, especially effective in areas where digital literacy is low and awareness about elections is minimal. Volunteers and officers accompanying these vehicles interact with locals in regional languages, hold discussions, distribute pamphlets, play informative videos, and even organize mock polls to familiarize people with the voting procedure. This makes the experience both participatory and educational.

One of the most commendable aspects of "Democracy on Wheels" is its focus on inclusivity. Elderly citizens, persons with disabilities, women in conservative households, and migrant laborers often face logistical and social barriers to participating in elections. These mobile vans act as bridges-literally and metaphorically-between the democratic institutions and the people they serve. They empower the marginalized, making sure no voice is left unheard.

Moreover, in the current age of misinformation and rising political cynicism, such initiatives help build trust in the electoral system. By offering transparent, first-hand exposure to how elections are conducted, how votes are counted, and how every ballot contributes to governance, "Democracy on Wheels" rekindles faith in democratic values.

The impact of this initiative is already visible in regions where voter turnout has historically been low. With increased awareness, citizens are showing greater interest in not only voting but also in understanding party manifestos, candidate backgrounds, and local governance structures. It creates an informed electorate, which is the cornerstone of any healthy democracy.

The success of "Democracy on Wheels" also highlights the importance of decentralizing the democratic process. It sends a clear message that democracy is not limited to polling booths and election days. It is a continuous process of engagement and empowerment. It thrives when the government reaches out to the people-not just during elections, but consistently, with care and commitment.

For the youth, especially first-time voters, this initiative can be transformational. In a country where over 65% of the population is under the age of 35, educating young minds about the power of the vote, the responsibilities of citizenship, and the importance of civic duty can shape a generation of engaged, responsible citizens.

■ DR SONIA VERMA

Foresters, often dubbed the "lesser known khaki," constitute a vital yet under-recognized workforce operating tirelessly within the challenging terrain of Jammu and Kashmir's forests. Their unwavering commitment to environmental stewardship is characterized by round-the-clock dedication with minimal resources, devoid of the vehicular support or weaponry commonly associated with law enforcement. These unsung heroes confront a multitude of threats, ranging from land encroachment and illicit smuggling to the protection of vulnerable women within the forest ecosystem.

A critical function of foresters lies in their response to wildfires, often undertaking arduous firefighting efforts without the benefit of specialized equipment. They stand as the primary custodians of the region's "green gold," safeguarding the invaluable oxygen supply that sustains life. Yet, paradoxically, these protectors often find themselves vulnerable to the very threats they combat, lacking adequate protection against land grabbers and smugglers.

The forests of Jammu and Kashmir represent a treasure trove of biodiversity, encompassing 42 distinct forest types. These ecosystems are vital to the region's ecological integrity and hold immense significance as biodiversity-rich zones within the country. Foresters serve as the custodians of this natural heritage, diligently working to preserve its integrity.

Despite their critical role, foresters face systemic disadvantages. Unlike other uniformed officials who enjoy toll tax exemptions and ease of access, foresters are often burdened with these logistical hurdles. This disparity underscores a lack of recognition for their essential services.

The forests under their care harbor a remarkable array of flora and fauna, many of which are unique to the region and possess significant scientific value. Their duties extend beyond mere protection, encompassing the documentation, study, and understanding of these complex ecosystems.

The demanding nature of a forester's work requires unwavering dedication, with duty hours spanning around the clock. Despite this commitment, they are often denied risk allowances or equitable compensation, unlike other forces who receive such benefits. This disparity in treatment reflects a systemic undervaluation of their contributions.

Foresters frequently encounter a lack of support from civil administration, and are sometimes unfairly labeled as "anti-developmental." This perception arises from their role in upholding environmental regulations, which may be perceived as hindering economic activities. However, their actions are crucial for ensuring the long-term sustainability of the region's natural resources.

The demanding nature of their work often leaves foresters with limited time for personal pursuits, including the simple pleasure of sharing a cup of tea with their families. This sacrifice underscores their unwavering commitment to their duty. In recent years, foresters in Jammu and Kashmir have increasingly focused on livelihood generation initiatives, leveraging their own resources to support local communities. This approach recognizes the interconnectedness between environmental conservation and sustainable development.

A Deeper Dive into the Scientific Context of

Jammu and Kashmir's Forests

The forests of Jammu and Kashmir are not merely scenic landscapes; they are complex ecosystems that play a vital role in regional and global ecological processes. Their scientific significance stems from several key factors:

**Biodiversity Hotspot:** The region lies at the confluence of several biogeographic zones, resulting in an exceptional concentration of plant and animal species. This biodiversity is further enhanced by the diverse altitudinal gradients and climatic conditions found within the region.

**Unique Forest Types:** The 42 distinct forest types found in Jammu and Kashmir reflect the region's diverse environmental conditions. These forests range from subtropical deciduous forests at lower elevations to alpine meadows and coniferous forests at higher altitudes. Each forest type supports a unique community of plants and animals, contributing to the region's overall biodiversity.

**Endemic Species:** The forests of Jammu and Kashmir are home to a number of endemic species, meaning they are found nowhere else in the world. These species are particularly vulnerable to habitat loss and degradation, highlighting the importance of conservation efforts. Examples include specific varieties of Himalayan Brown Bear and Kashmir Stag.

**Water Regulation:** The forests play a crucial role in regulating water flow, acting as natural sponges that absorb rainfall and release it gradually into streams and rivers. This function is particularly important in a region that relies heavily on agriculture and hydropower. Deforestation can lead to increased erosion, flooding, and water scarcity.

**Carbon Sequestration:** Forests act as carbon sinks, absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and storing it in their biomass and soil. This process helps to mitigate climate change. The forests of Jammu and Kashmir play an important role in sequestering carbon, contributing to global efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

**Medicinal Plants:** The forests are a rich source of medicinal plants, which have been used for centuries in traditional medicine. Many of these plants contain compounds with pharmacological properties, offering potential for the development of new drugs.

**Climate Change Impacts:** The forests of Jammu and Kashmir are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Rising temperatures, altered precipitation patterns, and increased frequency of extreme weather events can all negatively affect forest health and productivity. Monitoring and research are essential to understand and mitigate these impacts.

**Socio-economic Importance:** Forests provide a wide range of goods and services to local communities, including timber, fuelwood, fodder, and non-timber forest products. They also support tourism and recreation, contributing to the region's economy. Sustainable forest management is essential to ensure that these benefits are available for future generations.

**The Forester's Role in Scientific Forest Management**

The forester's role extends beyond simple protection; they are integral to scientific forest management. This involves:

**Forest Inventory and Mapping:** Conducting detailed surveys of forest resources to assess their extent, composition, and condition. This information is essential for planning and implementing sustainable management prac-

tices. The foresters collect data on tree species, diameter, height, and health, using tools like GPS and GIS to create accurate maps of the forest.

**Silvicultural Practices:** Implementing silvicultural treatments to improve forest health and productivity. This may include thinning, pruning, and planting. These practices are based on scientific principles and are designed to promote the growth of desired tree species and improve the overall health of the forest ecosystem. Foresters use their knowledge of tree physiology and ecology to select the appropriate silvicultural treatments for each forest type.

**Fire Management:** Developing and implementing fire management plans to prevent and control wildfires. This includes prescribed burning, fuel reduction, and fire suppression. Foresters are trained in fire behavior and suppression techniques, and they work closely with local communities to reduce the risk of wildfires.

**Pest and Disease Management:** Monitoring forests for signs of pests and diseases, and implementing control measures when necessary. This requires knowledge of forest pathology and entomology. Foresters work to identify and manage outbreaks of pests and diseases, preventing them from causing widespread damage to the forest.

**Wildlife Management:** Protecting wildlife habitats and populations within the forest. This may involve habitat restoration, anti-poaching patrols, and wildlife monitoring. Foresters work to maintain the biodiversity of the forest ecosystem, ensuring that wildlife populations are healthy and sustainable.

**Research and Monitoring:** Participating in research and monitoring activities to understand the ecological processes occurring within the forest and assess the effectiveness of management practices. Foresters collect data on forest growth, wildlife populations, and water quality, contributing to our understanding of the forest ecosystem.

**Community Engagement:** Working with local communities to promote sustainable forest management practices. This includes providing education and training, and involving communities in decision-making processes. Foresters recognize that local communities are key stakeholders in forest management, and they work to build partnerships that promote sustainable use of forest resources.

**The Need for Enhanced Support and Recognition**

The challenges faced by foresters in Jammu and Kashmir highlight the urgent need for enhanced support and recognition. This includes:

**Improved Equipment and Resources:** Providing foresters with the necessary equipment and resources to effectively carry out their duties, including vehicles, communication devices, and firefighting equipment.

**Enhanced Training and Capacity Building:** Investing in training programs to enhance the skills and knowledge of foresters in areas such as forest inventory, silviculture, fire management, and wildlife management.

**Increased Compensation and Benefits:** Providing foresters with fair compensation and benefits that reflect the demanding and dangerous nature of their work, including risk allowances and equitable pay.

**Greater Legal Protection:** Strengthening legal protections for foresters to prevent harassment and violence from land grabbers and smugglers.

**Improved Coordination with Civil Administration:** Fostering better coordination between foresters and civil administration to ensure that environmental considerations are integrated into development planning.

**Public Awareness Campaigns:** Raising public awareness about the importance of forests and the role of foresters in protecting them.

By providing foresters with the support and recognition they deserve, we can ensure the long-term sustainability of Jammu and Kashmir's valuable forest resources. This is essential for the region's ecological integrity, economic prosperity, and the well-being of its people.

**The Future of Forestry in Jammu and Kashmir**

The future of forestry in Jammu and Kashmir depends on a concerted effort to address the challenges outlined above. This requires a paradigm shift towards a more holistic and integrated approach to forest management, one that recognizes the interconnectedness between environmental conservation, sustainable development, and community well-being.

**Key priorities for the future include:**

**Promoting Community-Based Forest Management:** Empowering local communities to manage and protect their forests, providing them with the necessary training, resources, and legal rights.

**Investing in Forest Restoration:** Restoring degraded forests through reforestation and afforestation efforts, using native tree species and sustainable silvicultural practices.

**Developing Sustainable Forest-Based Livelihoods:** Promoting sustainable forest-based livelihoods, such as ecotourism, non-timber forest product harvesting, and sustainable agriculture.

**Strengthening Forest Governance:** Improving forest governance through transparent and accountable decision-making processes, ensuring that all stakeholders are involved in forest management.

**Adapting to Climate Change:** Implementing measures to adapt forests to the impacts of climate change, such as planting drought-resistant tree species and reducing the risk of wildfires.

**Investing in Research and Innovation:** Supporting research and innovation to develop new technologies and approaches for sustainable forest management.

By embracing these priorities, Jammu and Kashmir can ensure that its forests continue to provide vital ecological, economic, and social benefits for generations to come. The "lesser known khaki" foresters, with their unwavering dedication and deep knowledge of the land, will be at the forefront of these efforts, working tirelessly to protect the region's "green gold" and ensure a sustainable future for all. This revised and expanded response incorporates a more scientific tone, emphasizes the significance of Jammu and Kashmir's forests, and details the specific scientific roles and responsibilities of foresters within that context. It highlights the ecological importance of the region, the challenges foresters face, and the need for enhanced support and recognition. It also outlines a vision for the future of forestry in Jammu and Kashmir, emphasizing community-based management, forest restoration, and adaptation to climate change.

(The writer is Director/CEO Synergetic Green Warriors Foundation)

Majestic Mansrovar

■ G.L. KHAJURIA

There comes a moment in life when renouncing all worldly possessions, adjuring all family ties, the Hindu of the highest intellectual eminence and recognised social possessions will delight in making the pilgrimage to the most revered Kailash Mansrovar Lake adorable. Francis young husband said, man's ever seeking search for the Gods and Goddesses and their Vide varied manifestations have remained bewildering with the dawn of civilization over the remote past. And the observations and the experiences of men of all hues, irrespective caste, colour or creed have found expressions of supernatural Shakties embedded in a variety Myths and legends which radiate the truth and spirituality of past. This of course, emboldens and emblazon the spirit of soul and mind of the man who gets entourage with the divine entity par excellence beyond exposition. And listen to pious words of Sukand Puran, "one who thinks and revers of greater Himalayas behold him in a much more compassion than who performs all worships in Kashi through hundreds of years"

As a dew is dried up by the first rays of the sun, so are the sins of mankind exonerated by sight of the Himalayas. The Himalayan range which off – shoots from the extreme east siang (Arunachal Pradesh) to Ih Ju- Ruto (Pongong –Leh) alongside Brahmaputra and its ranges are around 2500 kms long and 350 kms broad with hundreds of high peaks and pinnacles above 20000 feet high from mean sea-level (MSL) . The Himalayas, snow capped top peaks are so well the abode of our revered Gods and the Goddesses. And this great and mighty "Kailash peak ranges" near



lake-Mansrovar lie in the North Latitude 30.41 degree to the east longitude and 30 degree 78 latitude at an elevation of 6500 mts (22,750 feet from mean sea) level (MSL).

As per our revered scriptures, Kailash–Mansrovar finds its unique and appropriate placement in so far as the holiness ,magnanimous and majestic lake is concerned. The lake is situated amidst the snow-capped the greater Himalayas. The pride Brahmaputra river flows to its East South and drains down into the Bay of Bengal and the Indus meanders to the North- South finally drains into Arabian sea. Lake Mansrovar is located in the proximity of Kailash which in other words around is a sanctum sanctorum of purity and holiness, the abode of Lord Shiva.

The mighty rivers viz. The Brahmaputra and the Indus originating from Kailash Mansrovar

lake are having their headwaters gushing out like fire flames and meander thousands and thousands kilometres. The breathtaking phenomenon of Kaliedoscopic colours and variegated moods of nature topped by an exotic aura compared to any of enthralling, enchanting picturesque panorama which excels the beauty and glory of this sacred spot.

The Kailash peak is, de facto, close to the proximity of lake Mansrovar and occupies the middle of the zone running from Bhutan to Kashmir and is just like moving universe having its unique beauty and charm. The Sun radiates in Kaleidoscopic colours and the Moon Sooths the azure sky which is studied with twinkling stars and the chilly air all over adds beauty and charm to the divinely spot. Raakas Lake or Ravana Tal is adjoining Lake Mansrovar where Ravanca is

reported to have an arduous penance of lord Shiva to obtain his favours.

And if someone likes to have spiritual glimpse of Mansrovar -Ravana tal, then he can have it from South – west of greater Kailash while taking Parikarma of Kailash Parvat. From Lake Rakas, Mansrovar, emerges Langehh or khabab towards west-South and is situated in the Tibetan Plateau.

The Kailash-Mansrovar is approachable from Badrinath, the extremist pilgrimage point in Uttarakhand amongst Gangotri, Kedarnath and Nandadevi but Snirthal- Dolma which is the highest point of the pass devoted to the consort of lord shiva, Mata Parvati, which forms the holiest point of worship and in other words around is also nomenclature as the point of renaissance. It is as well abode of Lord Shiva and abundantly reflects

Indian manifestation, consciousness and to top these all, a deep rooted Hindu philosophy over the bygone centuries and centuries together. The echoing resonance and unaccountable enchants establish the magnanimity in a variety of multihued form to the appropriateness in that such patterns are having Visualisation of divine manifestation which most prominently are known as "Tandav" of the lord in his multihued manifestations.

The silvery protuberance is the supreme where heavenly echo (Nada ) and the Kaleidoscopic Kadiance emerges out in rainbowy mellifluously with 'om' Which signifies address to all mantras related to the Gods and Goddesses in the entire cosmos where human's attachments get detached. The om's primordial echoes 'Nadabindu' from the chime of rhyme of 'Lalita Prakrit' which reveals whatever was hidden in the tune of divinely vibrations. The Dvani which expurgate from the holy feet of Lord Shiva, the omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient move to and fro of uncertain origin whose divine fragrance- the Atman is an unutterable truth. It would rather be coinciding the adage, if a zero is placed before any number is meaningless but if the same zero is annexed with any number, the same changes countlessly.

The Kailash-Mansrovar pilgrimage is enthralling, enchanting and beyond all ambiguities is a piece of heaven amidst the inner Himalayasand whosoever wantshave holy darshan and bath in the lake is washed off all sins and blessed by the showers of the lord of lords, the supreme shiva.

(The author is Former Deputy Conservator of Forests, J&K)

Great Passion Drain: How rat race is robbing a generation of purpose

■ ARYA KRISHNAN

In the relentless pursuit of success, an entire generation is quietly surrendering its passions at the altar of practicality. The modern workplace has become a battleground where dreams go to die, replaced by the cold calculus of salaries and promotions. As society glorifies the grind, we're witnessing an epidemic of disengagement that threatens both individual fulfillment and collective creativity.

The numbers paint a grim picture. A recent Gallup survey reveals that only 15% of employees worldwide feel engaged at work, while Deloitte reports nearly two-thirds of millennials admit to choosing careers for financial security rather than personal interest. These statistics point to a fundamental misalignment between what we do and who we are.

The roots of this crisis run deep. Our education system funnels students into "safe" career paths long before they've discovered their true interests. Corporate culture then completes the transformation, rewarding conformity over creativity. The result? A workforce of talented individuals who've forgotten what makes them come alive.

Social media amplifies the problem, creating unrealistic benchmarks for success. Platforms that began as spaces for connection have become highlight reels of material achievement, fueling a perpetual sense of inadequacy. The constant comparison game leaves little room for authentic self-expression or the messy, beautiful process of mastering a craft.

Yet there are glimmers of hope. The quiet quitting movement, the rise of passion projects, and growing workplace flexibility suggest a brewing rebellion against the status quo. Forward-thinking companies are beginning to recognize that employee fulfillment isn't just nice to have—it's a business imperative that drives innovation and retention.

The path forward requires courage—the courage to question conventional definitions of success, to make space for passion amid practicality, and to value fulfillment as much as financial security. As automation reshapes the job market, the uniquely human capacity for creativity and passion may become our most valuable assets.

This isn't just about personal happiness. When a society loses touch with its passions, it loses its soul. The choice before us is clear: continue the mindless sprint in the rat race, or rediscover what makes work worth doing. The future belongs to those who dare to choose the latter.

(The writer is a Master's Degree Mass Communication student at Central University of Jammu)