

"What are Men to Rocks & Mountains..."



By RAJSHEKHAR PANT

The civilisation that was capable of building the huge and lasting shrine of Kedarnath in the Himalayan heights could have easily made there, or at least on way that leads to it, some permanent structures to facilitate the pilgrimage. But nothing of that sort was ever done. A few temporary structures, vulnerable enough to disappear in rains and winter snow would be erected along the way to cater to the limited needs of the pilgrims... Over a thousand years down the line, and what remains today on the rugged terrain is the temple and the temple alone... Highlighting its limitations with regard to the biotic interference, Nature of course has been articulate enough for all of us to understand what it does want.

Of course our ancestors had insight. Coexisting with it over the generations they had developed a rapport, a sense of respect for all that surrounded them. An arrogant approach towards nature that we borrowed from the west following the surge of technology - and which is accustomed to seeing the magnificence of Nature in the form of a challenge; a challenge massive enough to put words like "We have knocked off that bastard" in the mouth of Hillary while expressing spontaneous outburst of exultation following the maiden 'conquest' of Mt Everest - must have been alien to our ancestors. Cloud bursts, erosions, flash floods and earthquakes must not have been unheard of even then, yet the massive toll of human life was not there and there was no need either to coin phrases like 'God sent curse', 'the ire of Shiva' 'deadly design by planets' or so on. The ethics of settling down in hazardous hills was then conditioned by certain traditions and wisdom perfected over the centuries of observation and experience. With these values getting knocked off by unbridled consumerism in recent years we failed to develop a set of rules that

could have contained our wayward priorities and inflated greed consequent upon an essentially wrong model of development and growth.

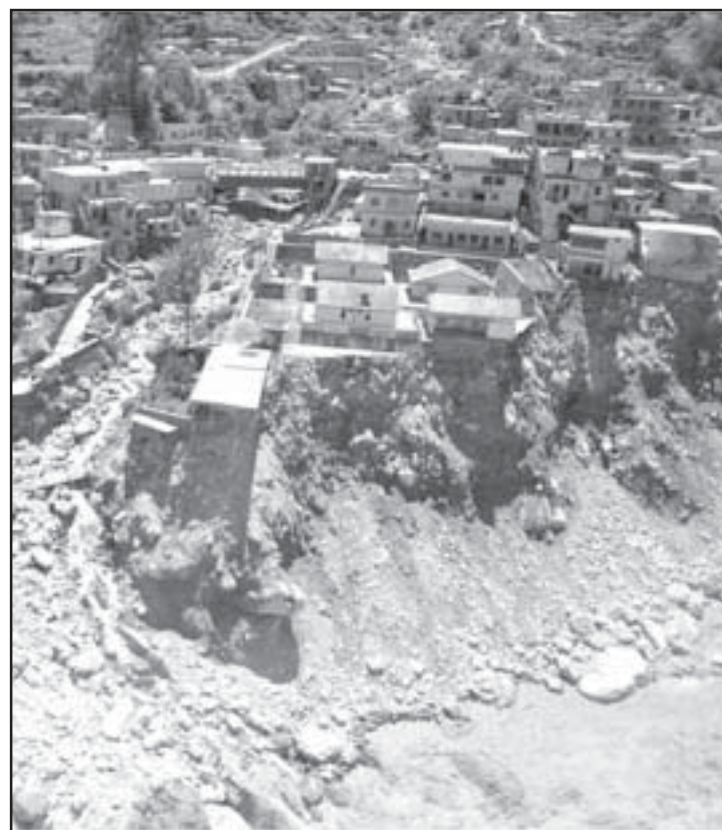
The total volume of tourist inflow in hills in the past decade has been well over the population of this region. As per the data available with the state transport department, the total number of tourist vehicles in the state has gone up from 83,000 in the year 2005-6 to 180,000 in 2012-13. Of this, the number of jeep and taxis, most preferred means of conveyance, alone has swollen from 4000 to 40,000. Add to it the number of private cars entering the hills everyday with an average of three to four tourists in each car - and then try to visualise the massive human tsunami under which the most fragile geo-physical structure of our planet i.e. the Himalayas are being crushed as a routine. In Badrinath and Kedarnath shrines, alone, the number of pilgrims (revelers?) has shot up by four times in ten years. Preceding the tragedy of Kedarnath, 17 choppers of 10 private companies were taking an average of 170 flights per day to the shrine. It is interesting to note here that even today among the anwals (herders guarding their stock during the seasonal grazing in alpine heights) even shouting, sneezing and coughing loudly in the high region is considered to be sacrilegious "lest the himal (glaciers) should crack," they would say.

The absence of rules and regulation to check and control the burgeoning construction binge to accommodate this floating population has for quite some time been instrumental in the speedy transformation of this alleged 'land of gods' to the 'arena of demons'. It is not only the question of excavating, tunneling or quarrying the hills; of encroaching on the flood plains; of mining sand, stone, clay and all that is there and can be sold; of felling the trees and so on - in fact it is the very mentality of having no moral scruple in stripping the Himalayas off of whatever they have for the public and private gains that is more disturbing and needs to be scrutinised.

The rate of economic growth in Uttarakhand being 8.6% is almost double of the same in the parent state (UP) and the personal growth of our elected representatives and government officials in the same duration understandably must have gone up several fold. Gopal Krishna of Toxic Watch Alliance sounds quite reasonable when he says that with the GDP becoming the sole

yardstick of growth, caution and restraint are bound to occupy a back seat. His organisation has recently filed a PIL in the court seeking an inclusion of ecological growth measure, too, to rate development. Keeping an eye on the geography of the Himalayas, a national mission was proposed recently by the Planning Commission with a view to containing ecological damage in the region. All vital issues, including sustainable urbanisation were a part of it. This important document must be hibernating somewhere. A report of the year 2001 of the Physical Research Laboratory, Ahmadabad and Space Application Centre speaks of Rudraprayag, Chamoli, Nandprayag, Karnprayag and Srinagar districts in terms of being extremely sensitive. It further underlines the possibility of the recurrence of the floods in Alaknanda akin to those of the year 1970. God alone does knows whether anyone ever bothered to turn the pages of this report. Besides being portentous, the CAG report raps the state for being a failure in rehabilitating over 80 calamity affected villages earlier, despite its receiving Rs 44 crores from the calamity relief fund for the purpose.

Akin to the Chardham-yatra, that adds substantially to the coffers of the state, the Amarnath-yatra is equally important for the state of J&K. Ultimate destinations for both the pilgrimages are located almost at the same altitude and the approach route is also stretched across an identical terrain. However, there is hardly any possibility of any of our politicians or bureaucrats ever going through the Nitish Sengupta report of the year 1996 released after 243 lives were lost in the flash floods and slides on the Amarnath yatra route. This report speaks of an age cap for the visitors, curbing the number of pilgrims and cutting short the duration of yatra-season to one month. Today, officially, just 8000 pilgrims may visit the shrine per day and a blanket ban is there in raising a permanent structure on the yatra-route. Ironically, for the policymakers and administrative machinery in Uttarakhand remaining unperturbed over the presence of 30,000 souls in Kedar region that has an optimum carrying capacity of 2 to 3000 was just normal; and that too when there were repeated warnings of heavy downpour, when the region was completely devoid of any dependable communication system during an emergency and the locals had no exposure to disaster management. It is least surprising and quite



understandable that for almost 48 hours following the catastrophe the officials had no precise line of action, the CM remained absent not only from the scene of the tragedy but from the state itself and initially even the numbers of the helpline being flashed on TV screens were wrong. And now the reality of the so called relief work exposed by the media at times forces one to think whether the flag bearers of the 'land of gods' are left even with rudimentary humane sentiments.

More important than restoring the ritual worship in Kedarnath; restarting the chardham-yatra; discussing the shape and size of the forthcoming pilgrimage of Rajjat and releasing the pix of high-ups holding a spade in hand in a bid to clean the temple - was the construction of those schools, roads, bridges, houses, etc., which have been swept away in the floods. It would have been worthwhile at the given juncture to lay the foundation of a tourist policy that could go beyond the professed motive of 'come one come all, we are a merry making hall'. The state tourism board speaks of exploiting the total tourist potential of the state, soliciting expertise from overseas, while the truth is that even a proper trekking policy hasn't yet been developed. Around 150 adventure tourists company, managed mostly by 'fly by night' kind of experts have been given licenses and an equal number is there in the pipeline. As per reports, in water sports alone the toll has gone over 15 in the past 3-4 months.

It actually is high time to start from scratch in terms of policies

and priorities in the state that since its birth had been caught in the double whammy of uncontrolled tourism and mega power generation. A rather saner and more rational explanation needs be thought of for the utterly misleading monikers like urja or paryatan pradesh. An impending need is there to separate the pilgrims from the revelers; to make private tour operators more responsible; to train the local inhabitants in disaster management, better at preventive level; to compensate, of course quite liberally, those living in eco-sensitive zones and bearing the brunt of saving the eco-balance for the rest of the world at the cost of the quality of their own lives and finally to understand and realise that our ancestors while seeing a connect between Divinity and the Himalayas were not talking nonsense.

But... but, that rapidly inflating segment in society- which, following the formation of Uttarakhand, has been a success in asserting itself quite noticeably; for which hills have been just hideouts where anything and everything can be done in hush-hush manner and which has no compunction in seeing an opportunity of self aggrandisement in sagging or eroding mountains, in collapsing bridges or roads, in flash-floods or earthquakes, in drying water bodies and so on -will ever be ready to alter its priorities is the big question.

The prognosis is not much heartening...

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