

## How well are we protecting the most vulnerable region, the Himalayas!

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Climate is changing. Temperatures are warming. This is known to farmers and housewives too as to experts and scientists. Only the Governments seems to be not or not bother about! Or so. How else one would explain the Chamouli Reni village flash floods of February 7, 2021 which is also the site of India's first Envi movement fifty years ago!? If disasters and tragedies only make the governments alert, the 2013 disaster was big enough with over 5000 deaths and many victims yet to be rehabilitated to date. Have we learned from that much reviewed? Between 1970 and 2004 three extreme floods happened annually on average which had multiplied after 2005. And, the extent of melting doubled during the decade. Several more things have been happening since 2013 in and around and across the hotspots of the Himalayas, signalling what was in store. As if in recognition of that the Union Government even expanded the Ministry of Environment with Climate change in 2014. And yet the state of affairs in Uttarakhand in the last decade exemplify missing links in India's crusade to sustain environment.

In 2014, it has become the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. What difference that made where it was expected to make the most?

There is no opposition party or the Government to blame for things happened since then which influenced the climate change the most, including the February 2021 disaster. Which was as big as of 2013 in terms of damage and destruction but with signals of more consequence. The saga of fifty-year long crusade to save the climate in the Himalayas by people individually and as civil society has not been scaled up and availed to play intense role. This was perhaps because of proliferation of government funded agencies. Institutes and committees. as if to remind the role of local initiatives, the February 2021 flash flood due to glacier burst happened around Reni where the 1970 Chipko moment was launched by local women to safeguard the trees as a ritual and responsibility.

That temperature goes up once the trees are cut was realised by local women of Chemouli as early as 1970. In their foresight, they came together to disallow cutting and felling of trees. In fact, it was this Chipko movement which became a torchbearer for "environmental activists" of the country. There after its founder Chandi Prasad Bhatt and Sunderlal Bahuguna become role models. In 2012, he predicted that disasters would stuck if we do not protect the Himalayan region. In 2019, CMS Vatavarana had honoured Bhatt once again to remind the nation the pioneering role of Chipko and its continued relevance now. In 2020, there were 11 land slides never taken seriously if their accumulated effect. A 2000 report of ICMOD also indicated 50 percent change since 2000 in climate change based on satellite observations of 40 years and reminded 2013 Kedarnath like disaster. In fact, this report also reminded that temperatures will melt away a third of the Himalayan glacier ices by the end of the century.

During the fortnight after the 2021 tragedy, a dozen agencies, engaged in review and research in the Himalaya region, had come up with different explanations for the occurrence. Explanation of most of these, either directly under government or funded indirectly, include glacier burst, avalanche of snow or boulders, lake collapse, flash flood, heavy snow fall, landslide triggered, etc. The explanations of equally long standing independent institutions was climate change coupled with "reckless construction", "result of doing stupid", ignoring recommendations, etc. Most of them had reported that February 7 was warmest day in six decades. Environmentalists and activists have been pointing time to time against development construction, dams, hydro, power projects and the char dham highway. In what way now 2021 we are better in focussing.?

It is too obvious that since climate change has become a pursuit of bureaucracy from 2014, the government seems has lost out its direction, focus and priorities. Worst never its pursuit and policies have been futures oriented and gross roots concerned. There is no evidence that the governments have cared to the perspective of locals, citizens and independent experts and activists. How else they could pursue what they have been since 2014? (as if ignoring what had happened in 2013 and now in February 2021 and what had happened in between). All that was not in public purview and reported as there was no disaster and destruction every time in the fury of rivers, rains, cloud bursts, avalanches and glaciers. The Dr Ravi Chopra report of 2014 on 2013 disaster recommending no hydroelectricity power plants and dams in para glacial regions was ignored despite the secretary of the ministry endorsed the recommendations as timely. Instead, the secretary of the Ministry was shifted out no sooner (presumably at the instance of the dams lobby). No wonder Dr Chopra felt that "disasters in the Himalayas region happen when we do something stupid". Ignoring natural happenings and local peculiarities. Similar was the fate of 2018 PIL by Citizens for Green.

A chronology of decisions and developments during the fifty years since 1970, to do with and in the context of Himalaya region spreading over six states, brings out utter insensitivity of the powers, particularly since 2005 and even more since 20014. The momentum built up by Chipko was never followed up with specific local plans with responsibilities was never kept up even to keep up the trees lost. Landslides in 2004 and 3005 had not deterred launch of Tapovan Hydro Power Project or the Tehri Dam. and an agreement to build more than a hundred dams higher up was formalised. When 2013 witnessed Kedarnath flood devastation involving over 5000 deaths. The idea of big dams higher up Himalayas was some kind of taming and challenging source of our life lines, the rivers instead of respecting and restoring the nature. The plans involves diverting the flow of streams and rivers through tunnels, turbines to generate electricity, to explore and exploit the mountains and trees and flora and fauna. Ambitious plans are being pursued in the name of development, ignoring implications and without concern for sustainability

Going beyond and further in that pursuit of development, in 2016 a Char Dham Highway project (initial estimate of cost of Rs.14000 crores) was launched connecting the four prime Hindu pilgrim shrines stretching over 900 km long all along the fragile ecosystem regions in the Himalaya (3500 meters above sea level) involving a loss of over 700 hectares of forest land, over 47000 trees already felled and another 10000 trees to be cut by the time it is completed. The project is projected as India's pride of tourism and a source of revenue generation. Blatant was the way the procedures even to do with environment impact assessment and appraisals were ignored, avoided or bypassed and independent review was ever allowed. The controversy and arguments against necessity of wider highway roads are ignored with the argument that future demands have to be accommodated. The laws were violated and warnings of experts and complaints of Citizens to National Green Tribunal in 2019 were ignored. The committee appointed as a formality was full of government nominees who could not oppose the project but support. Independent voices were removed or ignored. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change was side-lined to bring in the Ministry of Roads. No body dared to talk of consequence of char dam project as political leaders at highest level were interested.

Dr Ravi Chopra, Dr Santosh Kumar Rai, Dr Hagfish Gupta are three examples of many of the independent experts who had warned of environmental impact and degradation but many of their recommendations were not included in the reports. Even a 2019 report by an international group warned. Ravi Chopra recommended scrapping 23 of 24 dam projects at the outset. Most have reminded increase in temperatures, pointed abrupt changes in weather and change in the pattern of climate in the Himalayan region and negative impact of dams, hydro power projects and pointed how tunnels, bridges, road widening at high altitude and turnings spell disaster in different ways including by causing avalanche of boulders, outburst of glaciers. What would we call ignoring such warnings over so many years? Was it complacency or recklessness or insensitivity or unconcern to the futures? Or is it consumerism in the garb of tourism at its best?

What specific proactive measures were taken after 2013 disaster with increased focus and a Ministry specially created to deal with climate change? Were there any new initiatives? On the contrary, we could find more blatant initiatives with disastrous consequences to the Himalayan region. The 2021 disaster now reminds the neglect and pressure building on Himalayas on account of continued felling of trees in large scale, building of so many dams (one estimate of dams put at over 350 of all sizes), and construction of all kinds to catch up more with tourism opportunities, Widening of roads, tunnels, diversion of river flows, blocking of streams, drains and springs, etc. and, on the other, there were reports pointing out increased formation of glaciers filled with lakes, water logging, increased temperatures, etc. The number of glaciers in Uttarakhand are estimated as 1500 (against 1000 in Himachal). In Nanda Devi biosphere region (where the February disaster took place), itself has 25 glaciers. That is, what we have seen so far could only be a signal for what could be expected to come. With multiple agencies, institutes, committees and reports, are we gearing up to minimise that threat?

Can we gear up without considering and consultations with local residents, activists, Independent experts and answering the apprehensions, warnings, etc. What kind of sensitivities and support is being built up locally in different regions of Himalayas? Are we serious in the efforts to monitor, review, research and consultations? For example, is a sample of 15 glaciers good enough out of some 1500? Is the shift to quantitative methods reliable (with stories of fish moment floating to edges of rivers in large quantity and swiftly on February 7 disaster, for example)? Total Dependence on satellite updates and Google Earth images with matching local ground level studies and sensitivities is good enough? Who is responsible for proactive and reactive responses and lapses of various kind at various stages? What has been the role and responsibility of department of Climate change and the department of Science and Technology? Is it mere coordination? Do we have truly independent impact monitoring and assessment provisions, local and outside the Himalayan region?

The missing links in the climate change pursuit of India are as many as the fury of fiddling the Himalayas are witnessing in the name of development, unconcerned of future consequences. The tragedies happening in the Himalayan region reflect the kind of approach, strategy and outlook of the country towards climate change and environment policies and priorities. Long term view and concern for consequences is not clear or vague. Even more frightening is commercial, Political and parochial interests are getting more pronounced in all those situations and decisions. But advantage of checks and balances are not evident as expected when multiple agencies and institutes and committees are engaged. Even more critical is the extent of involvement of local citizens, civil society and voice of Independent experts. Do not the ongoing threats of nature need restraints and moderation, checks and balances, and lessons and foresights?

Over the fifty years (1970-2021), five critical issues remained in public domain as successive governments compromised in taking bold options. These are 1) massive cutting of trees and depleting forest coverage, 2) implications of big dams even taming river flows with diversions, 3) going for four hydro power projects and not taking to solar and wind options seriously, 4) opting for tourism orientation as revenue source, going beyond concern for pilgrims, and 5) unconcern for aping lifestyles and proliferation of urban living conditions in pursuit of populistic options. In the ultimate analysis, greedy- consumerism, political-populism and short-sighted parochialism are threats to ecology, environment and climate change, globally and nationally.

Concluded.....

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