

## Missing Links of sustainable environment

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Going by the status of nature and ecology, including forests, wildlife, climate change and the trend over the years, it is obvious that something is missing with India's environmental concerns. A separate ministry is in existence for nearly four decades but that has not made a difference in the quality of drinking water, air cleanliness, pollution control, climate change or there is much to say about forest coverage or about protecting the wildlife. Neither we are able to accomplish what we wanted nor match up with the claims of achievement. How come? Clearly, something is missing, not in taking forward, but even to blunt the decline in all these respects. It must be more than one missing link. What could be these missing links! Unless we identify these, obviously, we cannot correct or modify or intervene to catch up with upholding the environmental status of the country. The least we should do is to prevent the decline or decay. The trend for over the decade is that India's performance on the environment is declining rapidly pushing many parts and sections of India as badly affected. And yet the question arises whether we are prepared or gearing up to adequately respond to the signals.

Four specific missing links are too obvious. These are:

1) "connectivity to" and "relevance" of customs and traditions to sustain the environment which is understanding of relationship or linkage between human development and environment. 2) missing "communication between" people and the stakeholders, including "adversaries". This include new generation Indians who had little exposure and understanding of India's rich traditions and customs and their significance and linkage in upholding environment. Third and fourth are to do with a messy understanding of linkage of environment with life goals and ways of living. These are, 3) disconnected view of environment and its significance and linkage to and/or 4) constrained view of environment, more as a stumbling block to "development" which is the concern of the successive governments.

### **Disconnected view of the challenge**

Environment is not an intervening variable. It is nature-centric. It is a process. It is not for taming but for respecting and adopting that determines. Civilisations sustained to the extent of such an understanding only. That is why it is better to view environment not merely as mythology but as inherent in the culture and way of living in coexistence

with nature in all its manifestations. They are interwoven. Culture and human life patterns are evolved around these fundamentals of environment. Values are the result of realisation of these fundamentals. Governments are interested and concerned more in immediate control and command aspects. This interest of governments is in conflict with fundamentals of nature and even to the extent of threatening more often. A basic missing link in today's concern and crusade for the environment is realisation or recognition that it can only be by plugging into this platform of culture and its artefacts in terms of beliefs, rituals, traditions, customs and perceptions. All these are based on relationships between living beings as interconnected. Isolated view or disjointed approach could be a temporary outlook. These relationships are at every level of human life and development, at individual, family and community levels. Recognising these practices and availing them is a better approach than functioning in isolation and in an exploitation course.

### **Even the most vulnerable are ignored?**

The story of Uttarakhand in the last 50 years reminds that how the linkage is ignored or neglected. This cannot be unknowingly of the government as consisting of not merely the political leaders but experts, institutions and designated agencies with responsibilities. What I wrote in February 2021 in the wake of yet another disaster in Chamoli is relevant here. Climate is changing. Temperatures are warming. This is known to farmers and housewives too as to experts and scientists. Only the governments seem to be not or not bother about! Or so. How else one would explain the Chamoli Reni village flash floods of February 7, 2021, which is also the site of India's first Environment movement 50 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 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 exemplifies missing links in India's crusade to sustain the environment. In 2014, it has become the MoEFCC. What difference that has made where it was expected to make the most? In a drastic change of stance from 2014, and ignoring 2019 high level meets, the MoEFCC claimed at the Supreme Court (on August 17, 2021), that a consensus was reached between

the MoEFCC, the power ministry, the Jal Shakti ministry and the Uttarakhand government to continue work on seven hydropower projects stalled earlier by the court after series of floods. These are Tehri II, Tapovan Vishnugad, Vishnugad Pipalkoti, Singoli Bhatwari, Phata Byung, Madmaheshwar and Kaliganga. Of the seven projects, five were damaged in previous flood-related disasters. The 2013 floods damaged four. One project was damaged in floods of 2012, 2013, 2016 and 2021 and yet MoEFCC pursued with hydropower projects going against its own earlier position, stand of local environmentalists and experts. Also, that the seven projects also fall under seismic 'severe' and 'very severe' intensity zones did not bother the Ministry.

There is no opposition party or the government to blame for things that happened since then that influenced climate change the most, including the February 2021 disaster. Which was as big as 2013 in terms of damage and destruction but with signals of serious consequence. The saga of the 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 an intense role. This was perhaps because of the 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 village 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 Chamoli as early as 1970. In their foresight, they came together to disallow the cutting and felling of trees. In fact, it was this Chipko movement that became a torchbearer for the "environmental activists" of the country. Thereafter, 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 Vatavaran had honoured Bhatt once again to remind the nation of the pioneering role of Chipko and its continued relevance now. In 2020, there were 11 landslides never taken seriously of their accumulated effect.

A 2000 report of ICMOD also indicated a 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 us that temperatures will melt away a third of the Himalayan glacier by the end of the century. During the fortnight after the 2021 tragedy, a dozen agencies, engaged in review and research in the Himalayan 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 snowfall, 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 the 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 mid-2021 we are better at focussing?

It is too obvious that since climate change has become a pursuit of bureaucracy since 2014, the government seems to have lost 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 about 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. Dr. Ravi Chopra’s 2014 report on the 2013 disaster recommended no hydroelectricity power plants and dams in para glacial regions was ignored despite the Secretary of the Ministry endorsing 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 was the fate of the 2018 PIL by Citizens for Green.<sup>2</sup> A chronology of decisions and developments during the 50 years since 1970, to do with and in the context of the Himalayan region spreading over six states, brings out utter insensitivity of the powers, particularly since 2005 and even more since 2014. 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 2005 had not deterred the launch of Tapovan Hydro Power Project or the Tehri Dam. And an agreement to build more than a hundred dams higher up was formalised. That was when 2013 witnessed Kedarnath flood devastation involving over 5000 deaths. The idea of big dams higher up the Himalayas was some kind of taming and challenging source of our life lines, the rivers instead of respecting and restoring

nature. The plans involve 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 the cost of Rs. 14,000 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 metres above sea level) involving a loss of over 700 hectares of forest land, over 47,000 trees already felled and another 10,000 trees to be cut by the time it is completed.

The project is projected as India's pride in 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 the 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 NGT in 2019 were ignored. The committee appointed as a formality was full of government nominees who could not oppose the project but support it. Independent voices were removed or ignored.

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