

The Uttarakhand Disaster: A wake call to stop the rape of our fragile Himalaya

By Dr Vandana Shiva,

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The Uttarakhand disaster we have witnessed at the beginning of the 2013 monsoon season is a consequence of ignorance and greed.

Uttarakhand is the source of the sacred Ganga and its tributaries. The sources of the Ganga, which is the lifeline of India, were made sacred sites in order to protect the Ganga Himalaya, and hence India.

The yatra to the four pilgrimage centres of Gangotri, Yamunotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath- the Char Dham, was meant to both connect us culturally and spiritually to these “Bhu tirths”-sacred sites of the Earth- and to connect us ecologically to the sources of life, the sources of our rivers.

The ecologically fragile Himalaya , and our sacred rivers are being raped . The disaster which has led to five thousand deaths on current estimates and the disappearance of nearly 100000 people is a wake up call to stop the rape. We need to learn once again to have reverence for our mountains and rivers are sacred. We need to be informed by the latest of ecological sciences, not by an obsolete “development” model which is nothing more than an exploitation model which has led to the tragic disaster in Uttarakhand.

The disaster is clearly manmade, not a natural disaster, and politicians, decision makers ,businesses need to take responsibility for the disaster their actions and policies have caused.

Today, driven by greed and corruption, the government has become ignorant of the culture of the sacred, and the ecological fragility of the Himalaya. The sacred sets limits . Ecological fragility sets limits. Today these limits are being violated, as rivers are dammed and diverted for electricity, and the pilgrimage to the Char Dhams is being turned into crass consumerist mass tourism.

Mass tourism has led to construction on the fragile banks of the rivers. When rivers flood, more damage is caused.

In my childhood old people did the pilgrimage on foot. Along the main arteries we had roads for one way traffic. Today, there is an attempt to make 4 lane highways in the mountains. Highways means landslides as mountain slopes are dynamited, and the rubble is thrown down the slope. Landslides create slope instability, with more boulders and debris causing destruction of forests and fields. Less space is left for water, rivers flood more easily. And instead of reaching faster, pilgrims and local people face road blocks for days on end due to landslides. Pilgrim tourism needs to be “slow” tourism to respect the sacredness and fragility of the Himalaya, like there is Slow Food and Slow Money.

In 1916, Rai Patiram Bahadur in his book “Garhwal, ancient and modern” wrote “We may say that there is no country in the world of the dimension of Garhwal which has so many rivers as a

traveller will find in this land. The district has 60 rivers of different size, besides these; there are rivulets, rills, springs and fountains in hundreds, showing that nature has been especially bountiful to this land in the matter of its water supply.” (quoted in Semwal, p21)

500 dams are planned in our region on the Ganga system. Swami Gyanswarup Sanand,) (Formerly- Dr. G.D. Agrawal)(Ganga Sewa Abhiyanam)has been repeatedly going on fast to save the Ganga. His efforts forced the central government to declare the area from Uttarkashi to Gaumukh an ecologically fragile zone. The present Chief Minister has been blocking it in the name of “development”. I hope that the disaster of 2013 will make him realize the value of protection of the Ganga Himalaya as an ecologically fragile zones.

And it is not just the stretch between Uttarkashi and Gaumukh. We need to protect the entire catchment of the Ganga system as a cultural heritage and ecologically fragile and sensitive ecosystem.

Blasting with dynamite recklessly for the construction of dams and tunnels has triggered thousands of landslides. When the first rain comes, these landslides fill the river bed with rubble. There is no space for the water to flow. We are literally stealing the ecological space from our rivers. And when they have no space to flow, they will overflow ,cut banks and cause flooding.

Usually floods come at the end of a heavy monsoon. This year they came with the first rain. The monsoon came early, and the rainfall was much more than normal. This is climate instability. Meantime ,the ecological damage caused by maldevelopment has reduced the capacity of the mountain ecosystem to deal with heavy rain. Climate havoc adds to the vulnerability. Kedarnath ,the 8th century Shiva shrine is located at the source of the Mandakini river. The damage at Kedarnath was caused by the breaking of the glacier Kedar Dome that led to the bursting of Charbari ,a glacial lake. These are climate disasters . Yet just before the Copenhagen Climate Conference , the Government issued a report saying their was no impact on our Glaciers. The Kedarnath tragedy shows how heavy the cost of this denial is. We need to recognize that our glaciers are threatened, and melting glaciers will lead to disasters. Disaster preparedness is the duty of government.

But disaster preparedness needs honest and robust ecological science, and honest and robust participatory democracy.

40 years ago I joined the Chipko movement as a volunteer.

The women led Chipko movement started after the 1972 Alaknanda disaster , caused by logging in the Alaknanda valley.

Women connected the deforestation to landslides and flooding. As they pointed out, the primary products of the forest were not timber and revenue, but soil and water. Forests left standing to protect the fragile Himalayan slopes, provide more to the economy than when they are extracted as dead timber.

It took the 1978 Uttarkashi disaster for the Government to recognize that the women were right. When the government had to spend on flood relief was much more than the revenues they were getting through timber extraction.

In 1981, in response to the Chipko movement, logging was banned above 1000 km in the Garhwal Himalaya. Today Government policy recognises that forestry in the fragile Himalaya has to be Conservation forestry which maximizes the ecological services of the forest in protecting , not extractive forestry.

In 1983, the Supreme court stopped limestone mining in Doon Valley, recognizing that the limestone left in the mountains, contributed more to the economy than the limestoned extracted through mining.

The 2013 disaster should wake us up to the social ,ecological and economic costs of destructive policies that have devastated our fragile and beautiful mountain ecosystems. The Himalaya are the youngest mountain system in the world.They cannot bear the violence of deforestation and dam building. They need gentleness and respect.

Chipko shook our policy makers out of their slumber that allowed them to think of forests as timber mines , and woke them to the ecological functions of the forests in the catchments of our rivers. The current disaster should shake them out of the slumber that allows them to see rivers as 20,000 Mega watt of hydro power, and realize that when respected our rivers are rivers of life, and when violated,they can become rivers of death.

Appendix: Dams on the Ganga System

Among 37 hydroelectric projects on the Alaknanda power project on river Alaknanda in Srinagar being constructed by GVK, a South Indian Corporation other dams proposed on the Alaknanda – Mandakini rivers are

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1. Alaknanda (Badrinath) 300 MW
2. Bagoli (72 MW)
3. Bowla Nandprayag (132 MW)
4. Chuni Senu (24 MW)
5. Deodi (60 MW)
6. Devsari (255 MW)
7. Gauribund (18.6 MW)
8. Gohana Tal (60 MW)
9. Jalam Tameh (60 MW)
- 10.Kalnprayag (160 MW)
11. Lakshman ganga (4.4 MW)
12. Lata Tapovan (310 MW)
13. Maleri Jalam (55 MW)
14. Nand Prayag Langasn (141 MW)
15. Padli dam (27 MW)
16. Phata Bying (108 MW)
17. Rambara (24 MW)

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| 18. Rishi ganga I | (70 MW) |
| 19. Rishi ganga II | (35 MW) |
| 20. Simgoli Bhatwari | (99 MW) |
| 21. Tamak Lata | (280 MW) |
| 22. Urgam – II | (3.8 MW) |
| 23. Utyasu Dam | (860 MW) |
| 24. Vishnugad Pipalkata | (444 MW) |

(Ref Hydro electric projects on Alaknanda River Basin by South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People www.sandrp.in).

The 99 MW power project at Singoli – Bhatwari near Augustmuni, being constructed by Larson & Toubro, which will affect 60 villages is one of the 12 Hydro electric projects all coming up on the Mandakini. My colleague and local coordinator of Navdanya Chandrashekhar Bhatt has been part of the movement resisting the 13 project. In 2008, our teacher and friend, Dr. G D Aggarwal, a former Professor of I.I.T Kanpur where I attended summer schools as a Physics student, undertook a fast into death at the age of 76 to stop the string of dams built on the Bkaguella including the 600 MW Loharinag pala being built by Natural Thermal Power Corporation. The Ganga would be put into a 17 Km tunnel to generate electricity. Other dams on the Bhagirathi include the 480 MW Pala Maneri, 381 MW Bharan Ghati, (Ref <http://www.asiantribune.com>).

Projects under construction on the Bhagirathi include :-

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| 1. Loharinag Pele | (600 MW) |
| 2. Kateshwar | (400 MW) |
| 3. Kotli Bhel 1A | (195 MW) |
| 4. Kotli Bhel 1B | (320 MW) |
| 5. Kotli Bhel 11 | (530 MW) |
| 6. Maneu Bheli 11 | (304 MW) |
| 7. Pala Maneri 1 | (480 MW) |

Projects planned on Bhagirathi and Bhulangana

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| 1. Bhairon ghati | 1 | (380 MW) |
| 2. Bhairon ghati | 11 | (65 MW) |
| 3. Bhilangana 1 | | (22.5 MW) |
| 4. Bhilangana 11 | | (11 MW) |
| 5. Gangotri | | (55 MW) |
| 6. Harsil | | (210 MW) |
| 7. Jadhganga | | (50 MW) |
| 8. Karmoli | | (140 MW) |
| 9. Tehri PSS | | (1000 MW) |

Projects that are under operation are :

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| Maneri Bhali 1 | (90 MW) |
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Tehri (1000 MW)

(Ref. "The Disappearing Ganga: Is there any hope for this River" in Dams, Rivers, People SANDRP, August 2008.

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