

# India-Uttarakhand: Political Ecology of Pilgrimage and Its Hazards

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CORPORATE media's coverage of the havoc caused by the cloud burst in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh has largely concentrated on two aspects. The first has been on the plight of the tourists and pilgrims in these regions and the government's "inability to provide adequate relief." The second has been the focus on the relationship between environment and development in the making of the natural disasters. English media channels have been quick to term the disaster as a 'man-made' one that emanates from the harnessing of the rivers through large hydropower projects. The lack of preparedness of the state is attributed to the negligence of greedy and corrupt politicians, especially with respect to illegal mining and construction. Such an analysis leads to some logical questions and omissions that are conveniently left out of the mainstream political discourse and relate to the impact of the two states overall development strategy on the local economy and people. This is particularly to be contextualised in view of the fact that both these states have a history of being prone to natural disasters.

## DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY TO CATER TO PILGRIMAGES

Natural disasters are not new to the North Western and Central Himalayan region, but their intensity and scale has increased on account of the extreme weather events following the impact of climate change. In the last two decades, instead of taking precautions and implementing the agenda of adaptation measures in the Himalayan region, the governments have steadily been violating the environmental norms and liberalising the landuse policies. These landuse policies are designed to support the production of surplus hydropower for exporting power to metropolitan cities on the one hand, and supporting the burgeoning pilgrim traffic on the other. This year there were an estimated 2.5 crore tourists on the Char Dham route, a figure that is more than two times the population of the state. Infrastructural support for these pilgrims is closely linked to industrial development of the state.

The rapid industrialisation of the state has been fuelled by an industrial policy that promises cheap power, direct and easy methods of acquisition of land, and a five year tax holiday to corporate capital. The state boasts of itself as an investment destination that will provide state of the art industrial hubs in the foothills to the State Industrial Development Corporation of Uttarakhand which concentrates on the sectors of information technology, pharmaceuticals and other natural resource based industries like horticulture and floriculture.

In addition, illegal mining is rampant in the region. A 2011 district report in Haridwar indicted the

state information technology minister for having an illegal mining business on the banks of the Ganga, in the riverbed. Most of the illegal mining is for sand, bajri and boulders for construction. Hence the illegal mining economy is tied up with the growth in the pilgrim economy which has led to the burgeoning of both the legal and the illegal construction sectors. In 2011, about 141 stone crushers and 40 sand mining projects were reported in a small area of the Ganga riverbed alone, causing both deforestation and flooding.

It is significant that these activities expanded during the BJP regime and continued to enjoy political protection even though the ministry of environment and forests warned the government to take stringent action against these units. It is therefore not surprising that right wing political forces are more concerned about ensuring the pilgrims' safety rather than reviewing their disastrous developmental strategy. In order to counter this, it is essential that a demand be made to limit the number of religious pilgrims in the region. Only this can curtail the illegal commercial interests.

## **HYDROPOWER AND THE PILGRIM ECONOMY**

Apart from the pilgrim economy, another aspect of Uttarakhand's development strategy is the harnessing of its water resources for the generation of surplus power. This surplus power is exported to mega cities like Delhi and also supports the seven industrial estates without adequate care for compliance with the skeletal environmental regulations. It further provides power to the multitude of hotels, resorts, guests houses etc that support the pilgrim economy. Thus there are at least one lakh illegal power connections on the pilgrim routes alone. In 2010 the BJP urged the central power minister to allot 250 MW of power only for the benefit of the Char Dham pilgrimage.

But these pressures have forced the damming of the entire Bhagirathi, Alaknanda and Ganga rivers in the state. At present, 42 hydropower projects are in operation while 203 are under construction or in the clearance stage.

Thus, a report of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India in 2009 held that the state government was indiscriminately pursuing construction of these projects and that there was no system of assessing the cumulative impact of these projects on the environment. The CAG also commented that almost all the waste emanating from the construction of these projects had been dumped into the rivers and that this was leading to water logging as well as silting of the rivers.

Further, the continuous tunnelling of hills has itself weakened the geological structure and led to repeated landslides. According to the CAG report of 2011, the changing landuse pattern and the tunnelling of the hills have resulted in an increased spate of natural disasters between 2007 and 2011. About 653 lives were lost, of which 21 per cent were lost from landslides, 28 per cent because of flash floods and excessive rains, eight per cent from earthquakes and two per cent from cloudbursts. If the toll from the current disaster is included, the figure will rise exponentially.

Given this evidence, successive governments in the state should have reviewed their developmental strategy due to the recurring disasters. But this has not been the case. Just before remitting office, the BJP chief minister Nishank demanded that the centre compensate the state if it wanted to stop the hydroelectric projects on Bhagirathi and Alaknanda rivers on environmental grounds. In the same manner the current chief minister, V K Bahuguna, has stopped the declaration of eco-sensitive zones, saying that it will impact on the employment opportunities and the development of the region. Clearly, both these statements are designed to protect the vested interests whose dominance is embedded in the current political strategy.

## **RIGHT WING POLITICS AND INDIFFERENCE TO LOCAL PEOPLE**

Yet the fact remains that local concerns have been swept under the carpet. The land acquisition process for the hydro and other power projects is highly discriminatory against the local farmers. As Iswar Joshi of the Van Panchayat Sangharsh Samiti explained in a news report, almost four lakh hectares have been declared unclassified land, on which land rights have not been recorded. This land can be handed over to all commercial interests.

Further, the poorer inhabitants of the local areas are largely integrated into the pilgrim economy at the lower end of the scale. Thus the hotels, dharamshalas and the ponies on the Char Dham route are owned by outsiders whereas the local people are workers in this economy. While it is easy to focus on the plight of the stranded pilgrims, the plight of the local people is yet to find a public voice.

Also, the losses of several villages that have been ravaged or washed away are yet to be recorded and assessed. The armed forces alone have hinted that 40,000 sq km of the area has faced devastation, completely destroying the local infrastructure and life lines to survival in this difficult terrain.

Hence the focus on the 'stranded pilgrim' has only enabled the forces of Hindutva to consolidate their own political constituency. Thus it is not surprising that Narendra Modi has offered to rebuild the Kedarnath shrine and ferry the pilgrims back home, but has shown little concern for the plight of the ordinary people of this state. The scale of the disaster has enabled the right wing Hindutva forces to focus on the government's failure and selectively highlight the voice of devastation. The corporate media has only played into its hand by focussing more on the pilgrims and virtually ignoring the rest.

This is also evident from the fact that the focus on another ravaged area --- Kinnaur in Himachal Pradesh --- has been minimal. The only news that is being reported is of the stranded "foreign tourists" and the destroyed apple orchards of the rich farm owners.

Given this situation, it is incumbent upon all the Left and democratic forces to combine their resources, provide relief and assess the damage to the local people and their livelihoods in order to fight for their short and long term rights. This would be the first step towards building a larger struggle for substantive eco-friendly and people-friendly reconstruction of the area.

**Archana Prasad**

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\* People's Democracy (Weekly Organ of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) Vol. XXXVII No. 26. June 30, 2013:

[http://pd.cpim.org/2013/0630\\_pd/06302013\\_4.html](http://pd.cpim.org/2013/0630_pd/06302013_4.html)