

## A Disaster, Conveniently Forgotten

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*I had written this article after our visit to Uttarakhand post disaster for a study on the impacted livelihoods of the people, initiated by Tata Institute of Social Sciences. I never published this. But the recent reports on the situation of Uttarakhand and rehabilitation measures (not ) taken so far are disturbing and hence I found it relevant to publish some of my observations from the fateful months that had followed the disaster.*

Dharchula is a curious place. It lies on the India Nepal border in Pithoragarh district, and to reach there one just needs to cross a bridge on the Kali river, which emanates from further north through the glaciers along the watershed with the uppermost Humla Karnali and ultimately flows down to Uttar Pradesh to merge into Ghaghra river, a tributary to the Ganges. Any morning in Dharchula is spent hearing the songs and sounds of protests coming from across the river. These are voices of dissent on Nepal Government's inaction on disaster related relief and rehabilitation methods. Dharchula's district tehsil office is a daily witness of people from nearby and far off villages who are directly or indirectly affected by the floods on the fateful night of 16th and 17th June. While some people lost their loved ones, many lost their houses. Some villages like Sobla that were the centre points of all economic activity, got completely washed away. The flock of people visiting the tehsil office is a furious lot. They are angry, they are outraged at Government's inaction and slow response. Many of the people are still living in camps in hazardous, unhygienic and unsafe circumstances, even though it has been more than three months since the disaster. One is bound to wonder, why are the people of Uttarakhand silent ? Where are the voices of dissent ? As one investigates this question, one is bound to look at the history and the present situation of Uttarakhand .





Women at the GIC camp in Dharchula. This was a school turned into a camp post disaster where people were adjusted in huge numbers .



Food grains and other goods were stuffed in small rooms with no protection from decays and no stringent methods were taken for the restoration of goods as per the large number of families



Inside another camp on the road to the village Goti . This was the kitchen and was used for other activities too



Uttarakhand is the supposed 'Dev Bhoomi ( Land of Gods ) of India. According to the people we interviewed, majority had to say that everything that happens here is sacred and pure. In an interaction with adolescent girls aged 14-15 years of Government Intermediate College (GIC) in Dharchula it was known that they believed that the floods came because this sacred Dev Bhoomi has been 'Polluted by women'. Further clarifications revealed that they believed that women had started visiting the Dev Bhoomi during the course of their menstruation cycles, they had started delivering babies there. All these 'acts' have polluted the Dev Bhoomi in their opinion and that the Gods had to bring down their wrath on people since this was such an inescapable crime'. This is a complex amalgamation of how religion can feed into and be fuelled by politics.



Temple of a local deity. The clothes hanging signify the wishes made by the people

And the fact remains , there could not be a better way to shift the focus away from the real reasons as to why it all happened. In a place like Dharchula which has been declared as zone 5, several big dams have got the nod of the state and right now 500 dams are under construction. Harish Dhame, a member of CPI-ML in Dharchula and part of active youth groups in Uttarakhand gives the example of Tehri dam when the question of usefulness of such dams is raised . He says that Tehri dam was constructed with the notion that around 2400 MW electricity would be produced, but when it actually started it was only delivering 1000 MWs of electricity and now that electricity is actually being delivered it is generating only 300 MWs of electricity. Even after having all the resources and reports from state bodies

like Geological Survey of India, the state is not ready to follow the recommendations given by these bodies.

Harish further adds that, the Detailed Project Report ( DPR ) related to these dams was never made public. One such is The Rupsiabagar Kharsiyabara hydroelectric project which envisages construction of a concrete gravity dam over river Goriganga for hydropower generation. The dam site is located near village Paton, district Pithoragarh, Uttarakhand. The nearest town from the project site is Munsiyari . The report was placed in the DM's office which was 100 kms away from Munsiyari. The Pithoragarh district has a difficult topography , it lies 1645 metres above sea level. Areas bordering the Himalaya regions such as Dharchula and Munsiyari have steep and narrow roads where the vehicles can not run frequently and in large numbers. Hence, the local people can not travel to great distances in mountain regions so easily. One needs to walk for hours in order to just read the report and hence it never gets scrutinised by the public. People are misinformed about Jan Sunwais or Public hearings and dams are advocated for in such meetings by the local contractors. A picture is painted that the people really need the dams. Even within the report, environmental damage or impact just occupies one small paragraph where no specific and precise mechanisms are elaborated to deal with the construction and the necessity of the hydel projects in such regions. The measures mentioned like checking for soil erosion at constant intervals, for effective sewage treatment, impact on ecology and water ecology, checking for landuse pattern etc are never followed in practice, as has been observed by the inhabitants and natives of surrounding regions.

In such situations, the question remains that why there has not been any organised efforts in spite of youth groups being aware about such indiscrepancies .Harish says that when the leaders of ( then ) opposition like Sushma Swaraj say that ' Devi Mandir removed should be restored' what kind of influence will it have on the people and youth of India ? When the politicians are not talking from rationality but from superstitious religious beliefs then what is the kind of future such vulnerable places are led towards? The doors of Kedarnath temple were opened on 11th September 2013, through special arrangements and people can reach there through air way. The entire episode has been telecasted in the mainstream media with the headlines ' Aastha ki Jeet '( The victory of faith ). The focus seems to be already shifting away from long term rehabilitation and structural measures. It is more than evident how national leaders are using religion for their own propaganda. Faith camouflages Governmental inaction .



This is especially true of the areas such as Pitthoragarh district which has remained the ignored child in the entire episode. Areas such as Rudraprayag, Guptakashi, Uttarkashi are important tourist centres and hence the attraction point of all the media coverage. And hence the rehabilitation was carried out only in tourist circles and other areas were ignored completely . ( Special report, Down To Earth “ Ready for only tourists” June 2014 ) The residents of villages such as Sundum in Pitthoragarh district have said that not even the village Patwari has visited the village for an assessment of the damage since the disaster took place. In another observation, Gajendra Rautela, who is the co-convener of NGO Prakriti points out that even for the tourist places the reconstruction work has begun only a couple of months ago. The conditions of already constructed roads and bridges is such that these have to be reconstructed in case of a scheduled inspection, as mentioned in the same report. Money has been highly misappropriated to the extent that bridges that were allocated Rs. 2 lakhs for their construction have been constructed in around Rs. 20,000. The standard of such work undertaken and completed can be very well left to the imagination of the people. In our own interactions, many activists and teachers from Dharchula schools alleged that there isn't a proper resettlement and rehabilitation policy in place even after a lot of emphasis. A group of teachers in the GIC school at Dharchula said that “ People sitting on the plains formulate policies for the People on the hills. They are bound to go wrong. “ These statements are well supplemented by the fact that Gairsain, located in Chamoli district, which has been long suggested as Uttarakhand's capital because of its location between the Kumaon and Garhwal regions was rejected on accounts of its uneven topography and extreme climatic conditions. Hence while the bureaucracy is in the plains, far from the troubles of the everyday challenges the people of the hills face, the people live under the fears of natural hazards like landslides which are a daily phenomenon here. It is difficult for the people of hilly regions to come down to Dehradun for their requirements at the State level and also to stage any kind of dissent or resistance. Also, it must be noted that the the creation of Uttarakhand as a separate state in itself was driven by movements from the people of mountains who had been marginalized in all the development policies as part of the Uttar Pradesh State. The struggle was fuelled by aspirations of the people who were economically backward and unemployed. But even after becoming a separate state, the plight of the peoples of the mountain has failed to gain attention of the State.

Also, apart from this, there are many reasons as to why all these processes of rehabilitation and prevention been delayed. In spite of the crisis of land areas to settle down and cultivate,

the State government has shown no hesitation in generously distributing lands to corporates, builders, religious organisations and politicians as per its skewed development policies. Purushottam Sharma, an activist says that the state gave away about 100,000 hectares of land to different private organisations during ex Chief Minister Bahuguna's regime . Political fights between the current Chief Minister Harish Rawat and ex Chief Minister Bahuguna also led to a loss of valuable time. Elections have guided much of the process and unaccounted sums of money was given to local authorities like SubDivisional Magistrates to hasten the process, which in turn has led to large scale misappropriations. There is no accountability to the charity money that came in during the disaster .



Massive destruction of roads connecting far off villages. The relief and rehabilitation measures have still not reached to places where it was most required.





A man stands helplessly outside his small hotel in Goti village, Dharchula . He constantly asked the team to take pictures of the ruins of his only source of livelihood, the hotel hoping that some compensation and relief will reach him, some day .



A completely destroyed road/bridge that connected people of Goti village to other far off areas . Even after the disaster many people would mistake the road to be still there and accidentally move towards it. No appropriate mechanisms were installed to block the roads completely

In another report published by Down To Earth magazine immediately after the disaster, Surya Prakash, associate professor of National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM), had said that ' The area has been denuded to a great extent due to deforestation and tree cutting for road construction, and other activities such as building construction, mining and hydel projects. It has also resulted in increased surface flow and rise of river bed due to disposal of debris in the rivers," the report said. Geologically, the rocks in this area are found highly deformed, degraded and dissected by structural discontinuities and drainages.'

Such reports being in public domain, it is unfortunate how even the educated middle class and elite class of this country chooses to follow their superstitious beliefs, which makes it utterly difficult and almost impossible for the youth groups and people's groups to keep their point forward. The existence of such beliefs makes the process of structural change look like a distant dream. With such beliefs still very much a part of social order it would not be too difficult to predict another disaster in making. The land born out of popular struggles of the people is witnessing the wrath of natural calamities fuelled by political unwillingness and inaction. Question remains, how does one start breaking this hypnotic, almost blinding clutches of the superstitious structures that surround the so called Dev Bhoomi ? Where does one begin on this difficult journey replete with landslides and floods, not made by 'nature' but by the human beings?

Links to referred reports :

**Uttarakhand disaster was result of extreme rains and haphazard development: report, July 15, 2013, Down to Earth**

<http://www.downtoearth.org.in/content/uttarakhand-disaster-was-result-extreme-rains-and-haphazard-development-report>

Ready for only Tourists, Special Report, Jun 30, 2014 , Down to Earth

<http://www.downtoearth.org.in/content/ready-only-tourists>

NTPC ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT FOR RUPSIABAGAR –  
KHASHIABARA HYDRO ELECTRIC POWER PROJECT



[http://www.moef.nic.in/sites/default/files/Rupsiabagr-Khasiyabara\\_EIA.pdf](http://www.moef.nic.in/sites/default/files/Rupsiabagr-Khasiyabara_EIA.pdf)

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#### Bio of Author :

Sushmita is an MA in Social Work Graduate from TISS, Mumbai . She was a part of the study conducted by TISS assessing the impact on livelihoods of the people from disaster affected regions in Uttarakhand previous year, ie. 2013. The study was conducted in three districts in Uttarakhand namely Rudraprayag, Uttarkashi and Pitthoragarh in the Ukhimath, Bhatwari and Dharchula blocks respectively in 39 villages.

Currently, she is a freelance writer and fine artist(painter) and hopes to work for social change through creative ways .