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Why Are We So Rapidly Destroying Nature and Culture in India?

I write this column on World Environment Day, 5th June , 2013 from Bhutan where I am working with the Government on the transition to 100% Organic Bhutan. I am also working with the Bhutan Government to redefine the economic paradigm to focus on the happiness and well- being of its people and the health of its environment, instead of narrowly defined growth as GDP.

80% of Bhutan is forest. All streams and rivers are healthy and living. And this is a result of a conscious policy to protect nature and culture. From the local to the national level policies are dedicated to “promotion of sustainable socioeconomic development, preservation and promotion of culture and conservation of bio-diversity in pursuit of a happy society.”

In the beautiful valley of Bumthang in central Bhutan, the government plans to set up a Gross National Happiness Centre, and I have been invited to be on its Executive Council. To reach the site of the centre which is surrounded by protected conifer forests we had to cross the gushing river in a basket on a rope bridge.

The forests and rivers took me back to my childhood in Garhwal and Kumaon where my father served as a forest conservator, and we trekked across the Himalaya through healthy forests and across gushing rivers and streams. I could not have imagined as a child that our precious forests and rivers which have sustained us through the centuries would disappear in my lifetime because we would blindly start chasing a mirage of growth.

Forty years ago, the women of Garhwal stood up for their forests and started the Chipko movement. They said that the real gifts of the forests were soil, water and pure air, not timber, resin and revenue. After the 1978 floods, the government was forced to recognize that the costs of deforestation in terms of floods was much higher than the revenues collected from logging. In 1981, a ban was put on logging above 1000 metres in the Ganga catchment.

In 1982, the Ministry of environment asked us to do a study on the ecological impact of mining in the Doon Valley. In the 20 years of mining, I had watched our streams and rivers disappear.

Our study showed that the limestone left in the mountains contributed more to the economy than its extraction through mining, because limestone is an aquifer and holds water in its cavities and caves. Friends of the Doon mobilized citizens of Doon Valley .In 1983,the Supreme ordered the closure of the limestone mines, and all the polluting industry dependent of it. Doon Valley was declared an ecologically sensitive zone, and a Green Valley.

30 years later , in violation of all laws, the Chief Minister of Uttarakhand signed an MOU with Coca Cola to set up a plant in village Charba in Western Doon. Wherever Coca Cola goes, it brings a water famine and pollution. This was the case in Plachimada in Kerala, where women started a movement and shut down the Coca Cola

plant. This is the case in Mehdiganj near Varanasi. Each plant uses 1.5 to 2 million liters of water per day. This can create scarcity in the most water abundant region.

On 29th May 2013, citizens from across India and Doon Valley joined a solidarity rally of the Charba community to stop the Coca Cola plant. More than 1200 people traveled from the Dakpathar barrage on the Yamuna, from where Coca Cola is supposed to take water, to the village where it wants to set up its plant. On the way, the community participated in a Chipko movement by tying rakhis on trees that would have to be cut to make way for Coca Cola.

Today our forests and rivers are dying. And as a society we don't seem to care, even though every community whose land, forests and water are being grabbed are rising in revolt. It is probably the biggest ecological movement in our history.

Tagore had called the Indian civilization the Aranya Sanskriti, and distinguished us from the Western industrial societies based on brick and mortar. The economic and political powers do not think twice about chopping down forests for mines, and trees for concrete jungles.

The Government has been caught in multiple scams, including Coal-gate. For its illegal coal mines, the government has been willing to invade our protected forests and the homes of our forest communities. When the protector becomes the predator, how can India's forests survive? And when the tribal's and forest dwellers try to protect their forest homes from the predatory invasions of a corporate state, should we not pause and think about the future of our forests, our tribal's, our democracy and the principles that made us an "aranya sanskriti". Should we not look deeper at the roots of violence in our tribal areas?

How could we so completely have forgotten the foundations of our sustenance, our forests and rivers?

How could we have forgotten what it means to be a forest civilization and a civilization where rivers are our sacred mothers?

Why do mining corporations, real estate corporations, dam corporations (and they are the same corporations) get priority over India's Constitution and laws, the fundamental rights of Indian citizens, and environmental laws meant to protect nature? How have we reached a situation where the Government rewards ecological criminals, and criminalises citizens working in defense of their ecosystems and the livelihoods and sustenance they provide?

There are after all Forest Conservation laws meant to protect our forests. There is a Panchayati Raj Extension to Scheduled Areas Act, PESA, that recognizes the rights of tribal communities, and their sovereignty over their land and forests.

The justification is always "growth". However, no short-term economic policy can trump the long term economic policy of protecting the ecological foundations of all economy. Everywhere in the world, especially in Bhutan, the scam of "growth" is being recognized. All it measures is commercialization and commodification of resources, and hence is actually the rate of extraction of resources from local ecosystems and local communities. It should therefore be interpreted as measuring ecological

destruction and the creation of poverty, not as measuring wealth. The real meaning of “wealth” is well being. A process that destroys nature and dispossesses local communities, and hence destroys well being, cannot be justified as wealth creating. What it does lead to as a result of ecological and social exploitation, and the conversion of nature’s resources into cash, is the concentration of cash in the hand of a few.

And this cash can then be used for kickbacks and buying political influence, to further erode nature, people’s rights and democracy.

This is the vicious cycle we have got trapped in. And only people’s movements in the defense of nature and their rights can break out of it.

‘The Uttarakhand Disaster: A Wake Call to Stop the Rape of our Fragile Himalaya’

The Uttarakhand disaster we have witnessed at the beginning of the 2013 monsoon season is a consequence of ignorance and greed - ignorance of the ecological systems that hold up the fragile Himalaya, and greed to profit from the exploitation of the rich natural and cultural heritage of our region.

Uttarakhand is the source of the sacred Ganga and its tributaries, the lifeline of India. The sources of these rivers 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.

Our sacred mountains have sustained local communities and pilgrims for thousands of years because they have been treated with reverence and respect. Today 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 a greed and exploitation model which has led to the tragic disaster in Uttarakhand. Contrary to what the politicians are saying, the disaster is clearly manmade, not a natural disaster. Politicians, decision makers, corporations responsible for causing the disaster through their ignorance and greed, their blindness and shortsightedness, need to take responsibility for the disaster their policies and actions have caused. The “polluter pays” principle needs to be expanded to cover the scale of ecological devastation we are witnessing.

The Chief Minister has said the damage will cost Rs 3000 Crore (Rs 30 billion), and it has undone 3 years of “development”. He obviously is only looking at profits from concrete and construction. He cannot see the soil that has been washed away and the 500 years it will take to build one inch of the protective layer of top soil, the skin of the mountains. He cannot see the thousands of years it took for rivers to shape the landscape and the communities to create their settlements in river valleys. He cannot see the millions of years it took the Himalaya to form. He cannot see the sustainable

economies and cultures built by local communities over thousands of years of hard work to coexist with the fragile mountains, their home. He cannot see that the destruction of their lives and livelihoods cannot be reversed in 3 years. In many cases the damage is irreversible and immeasurable.

Today, driven by greed and corruption, the government has become blind to nature and people, it 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.

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 the declaration of this area as an eco sensitive zone 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.

Local communities, who have been made invisible in the media and government reports of the disaster will never get back the lives of their loved ones that were extinguished, or the fields and homes that were washed away. But those that have caused the damage -the construction companies like JP, GVK, LANCO, L&T etc who are building dams by recklessly blasting the ecologically sensitive Himalaya -will not loose anything. They will be bailed out through our tax money, without our consent and approval.

It is time that projects were approved by local communities who bear the brunt of the ecological destruction caused by them, not by corrupt politicians who make money all the way, including from the relief and rehabilitation packages after disasters. It is time to stop and reassess the building of dams and hydro projects in the fragile Himalaya with an internalization of all social and ecological costs.

Added to the short sightedness of “development” in an old paradigm is the denial of the deepening vulnerability of the Himalaya with Climate Change. The

Navdanya/Research Foundation for Science Technology and Ecology on Climate change in the Third Pole had warned that climate extremes, untimely rains, melting glaciers created new challenges for us in the Himalaya. But the Government spun into denial mode in the lead up to the Copenhagen climate conference.

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 Kedar Dome glacier that led to the bursting of the glacial Charbari lake. These are climate disasters. Yet just before the Copenhagen Climate Conference, the Government issued a report saying there 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.

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 mean 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 roadblocks 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.

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 :

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. Kalnaprayag	(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)
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 Chandrashekar 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:-

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

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 :

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

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