

The mountains are suffering.....

Are you listening?

Feb 7, 2021

The quiet of a Sunday morning was shattered by the news of the glacial avalanche that had wiped out a hydroelectric project and bridges that connected villages. Videos of the ferocity of the water and ice made it easy to imagine the destruction that it must have caused on its way down the gorge.

The Rishi Ganga Hydel project that was destroyed is beyond the normal tourist path and only the sturdy mountain people of Raini, Lata and Malari inhabit these mountains all year round. It is ironic that the village most under threat today is Raini, the place that gave birth to the [Chipko movement, led by Gaura Devi](#) and the women of Raini.

There are many factors that contributed to the disaster of the 7th of February — ranging from locating a power plant in a gorge prone to flooding to drilling tunnels in sensitive geological areas to the effects of climate change that are causing our Himalayan glaciers to melt and move at an alarming rate.

An affidavit filed by Ministry of Environment and Forest in the Supreme Court [admitted the role of hydropower projects](#) in the floods that devastated Uttarakhand in 2013. It said that [“the maximum damage sites in the disaster affected areas \(were\) located either upstream or immediately downstream”](#) from hydropower projects.

We are building a power project in these, the youngest mountains of the world; mountains that are still growing.

Compounding the impact of these projects is widespread deforestation, the building of massive 4-lane highways to pilgrimage sites, the influx of plastics into mountain communities with no system to remove or recycle them.

I'm not an expert in geology or building dams, but I have lived in the mountains of Uttarakhand all my life and know that these disasters will continue to be repeated if we do not start listening to what nature has been telling us for so many years.

Though it is true that stopping and reversing climate change will require international cooperation and must be done at a governmental level, I think it is up to each of us to make changes in our own lifestyles.

We must examine how our behaviours — and what we demand from our government — affects policies that can reverberate and harm our mountains. How much electricity do we consume? Do we really need to consume as much as we do? Are we even thinking about reduce, reuse and recycle? What is our carbon footprint? How much water are we using (and wasting)? Do we really need a four-lane highway to the shrine of Badrinath and other pilgrimage sites? When we visit the fragile mountains, do we tread lightly or leave a trail of waste and damage behind us?

Those living in the mountains, and more so those who live in villages, have a miniscule carbon footprint. But cities, unfortunately, have a footprint that is growing larger by the day. This in itself puts greater pressure on the need for more electricity, more dams, more tourists, wider roads; making ecologically fragile areas even more fragile.

Individual changes in demands by people not living in the Himalayas can make a difference on the demands being made of the Himalayas and its rivers.

At the Mountain Children's Foundation, we have started the conversation with children. Why children, you ask? It is simple. They have most at stake and the courage to make a difference. They will observe, understand and change their behavior and that of their parents and community and — when they become adults, change the behavior in policy, its enactment and the attitude of the generation to follow.

In our working area, children have planted and nurtured thousands of trees. They have helped educate their communities on how to prepare for disasters like the one we just saw. In the small village of Badhkote, the children's group, led by their president Aastha, decided to reduce the plastic waste littering their once pristine hills by persuading shopkeepers to replace plastic bags with those made from recycled paper. The children got together and made bags from old newspapers to supply the shops.

Despite their limited resources, they are stepping up and making a real difference. Imagine what we could achieve if we all pooled our energy and our resources into this effort.

The conversation has started. Will you join?

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