

The dark side of Uttarakhand

While the debate over an eco-sensitive zone rages, Uttarakhand has not even defined minimum environmental flows for its rivers

Rohini Nilekani

Uttarakhand is rightly termed the abode of the gods, with its magnificent mountains, pristine forests and awe-inspiring rivers. It is a place sacred in our culture, and millions of tourists and pilgrims pay homage to its beauty every year.

Yet, it's also a vulnerable ecosystem. Sudden cloudbursts, landslides, flooding are par for the course. Nature demands both space and respect and locals have shown that they understand this only too well.

For the past few years, a different narrative has been unfolding in this young Himalayan state. Uttarakhand wants to be a tourist capital and an "urjapradesh". It has planned hundreds of hydropower projects and has built a few dozen already.

As so many people have pointed out in the past few days, the reckless nature of this development has come at an unaccounted for cost. With the heartrending ongoing tragedy, it is time for the whole country to engage in the discourse around the development of the Himalayan states. None of us, no matter how far away, can remain unscathed when its natural resilience is threatened by the destruction of forests, the unscientific damming of rivers, and the indiscriminate mining of sand and stone.

It is truly a wake-up call.

In March, a group of us took a gruelling tour across 16 river valleys in Uttarakhand, to try and understand what is happening to the rivers, land and people. We returned numbed by the all-round evidence of hubris and greed. The Ganga, Yamuna, Bhagirathi and Alaknanda, none were to be left untouched. Hydropower projects were being imagined or commissioned at almost every bend, with no real assessment of the cumulative impact. Tourist facilities were being created at breakneck speed, often right on the riverbed. The holy towns were an unholy mess of honking SUVs, uncaring tourists, piled-up garbage and potholed streets. Roads were being constructed everywhere, but haphazardly, with debris just being flung carelessly down the hillsides.

Some local people we talked to were happy with the emerging economic opportunities. But many others expressed their angst about tourists leaving waste behind, and power generated in Uttarakhand going out of the state, leaving weakened mountains, diverted rivers and disrupted agriculture behind. They felt their voice was simply not

being heard. We returned convinced that it was a tragedy waiting to happen. I wish we had been wrong.

It is heartbreaking to see the extent of the damage wrought in the Rudrapur region. The cloudburst and flooding cannot be directly attributed to the development in Uttarakhand. But experts say the impact would not have been so great if the state had taken a more regulated approach.

There will be many trade-offs in the coming years, between the needs of present and future generations, and between the need to regenerate the natural resource base, and the need for economic growth. On what principles will we make these trade-offs? Certainly there are difficult choices for states like Uttarakhand to make.

Let's take its rivers. How much of a river should the state allow to be exploited for power? While the debate over an eco-sensitive zone rages, Uttarakhand has not even defined minimum environmental flows for its rivers, as neighboring states have done.

If we want to both respect the river and draw energy or water from it, we have to make smarter choices than are being made today. We know much more now, about ecosystem services and environmental impact than we did when the older dams were built. Once we understand the true ecological and opportunity cost of hydropower, it becomes crystal clear that we will have to rethink how much it can be part of the energy mix. To optimize rather than maximize the potential of our Himalayan rivers, can we not redesign tomorrow's dams? Can we agree to always preserve environment flows? Then perhaps the trade-offs become easier to make.

We have to build a consensus around the catchments in Uttarakhand and other mountain states. We might have to better incentivize forest preservation. There will also have to be more regulated urban development and scientific road building. There is no choice but to redefine development for this century. Otherwise, no one wins. Not for very long, anyway.

Susheela Bhandari, an activist who has been fighting against a dam near her home that will divert a stretch of the river Mandakini into the mountainside, puts it eloquently. "The whole country has the "adhikaar" to protect the Himalayas and Ganga." It is thought-provoking that she uses the word 'right' instead of the word 'responsibility'. It empowers us all to join the debate, and act.

The writer is founder, Arghyam, which works in the water sector