

## **A Narrative of Uttarakhand disaster shaped by Cultural Politics**

**B.V.Ramani, Ch.Alekya**

*Ast.Prof.English, Gayatri Vidya Parishad College of Engineering for Women, Visakhapatnam.*

*Ast.Prof.English, Gayatri Vidya Parishad College of Engineering for Women, Visakhapatnam.*

*Corresponding Author: B.V.Ramani*

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**Abstract** :India's "Devabhumi"-the land of gods is Uttarakhand, formerly known as Uttaranchal. This is a place of mythological importance as two of the most holy rivers the Ganges and the Yamuna originate here and also a large number of Hindu temples and pilgrimage centres are found throughout the state. Badrinath, Kedarnath and Haridwar which are of religious importance are located in Uttarakhand. Its geological prominence is so great as it is known for natural environment of Himalayas, the Bhabhar and the Terai. (**Bhabhar** region lies along the foot of the Siwaliks from the Indus to the Tista. But **Terai** belt lies to the south of Bhabhar and run parallel to it. ... Bhabhar comprises of pebble-studded rocks in the shape of porous beds. But **Terai** is composed of comparatively finer alluvium and is covered by forest) Since Uttarakhand is a place of pilgrimage not only for Hindus but also for Muslims, Sikhs and Buddhists is vibrant with pilgrims and tourists during summer season .On June 17, 2013 Uttarakhand disaster, a sudden natural catastrophe, a flash flood came down upon the overflowing banks of the Chorabari lake resulted in the great loss of life and property. This paper intends to study the various narratives formulated by Cultural Politics on Uttarakhand disaster.

**Keywords:** Climate change, Uttarakhand disaster, Cultural Politics, Mythology, Attitude, beliefs and Media.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Uttarakhand is depicted as India's Devabhoomi, with its holy rivers temples and ecological prominence is a disaster prone area too. It has witnessed a great calamity ever, caused a widespread destruction, major loss of life and profound environmental effect. The narratives related to this disaster came into existence can be thoroughly analyzed with a referential term Cultural Politics. The term Cultural politics refers to the way that culture including people's attitudes, opinions, beliefs and perspectives, as well as the media and arts shapes society and political opinion, and gives rise to social, economic and legal realities. There are many narratives that came into lime light on the Uttarakhand natural disaster which turned into a man-made disaster as human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment.

#### **People's beliefs:**

The flood disaster that has happened in Uttarakhand reinforced the people's belief in divine. There is a myth behind this massive tragedy. According to the beliefs the sudden rush of flood is all because of the wrath of Goddess Dhari Devi who is believed to be the manifestation of goddess Kali. The temple of Dhari Devi is located on the banks of the Alaknanda river between Srinagar and Rudraprayag in the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand. The structure of Dhari Devi's temple is quite typical. The Upper half of this goddess idol is monumental as Dhari Devi temple at Kalayasar in Uttarakhand and the torso of the goddess is revered as "Shree Yantra" at Kalimath temple near Guptakashi. The goddess is worshipped as protector and guardian deity of Uttarakhand. People worship it as a Shakti Sthal though it is not included in the 108 Shakti Sthals of Hindus.

The Ancient history says that the upper half of the goddess idol has been departed during a flood time in Kalikund and reached Kalayasar with the flowing Alaknanda river water. The idol got stricken against a rock and the divine voice started calling a fisherman who is passing by to take her out .The goddess laid stones in the river as steps for the fisherman to come in and the man collected the goddess face and placed it on the 20mt. high rock in the river water. Thereafter people started worshipping Dhari Devi. The goddess appears as a young girl in the morning, as woman in the noon and turns to an old lady in the evening. These drastic changes in her appearance made the people believe that she is utmost fierce and powerful divine.

The local lore says that in the year 1882 a local king tried to relocate Dhari Devi temple which resulted in the fall of a landslide that caused havoc to Kedarnath. People say that the government of India has planned to build Hydel power projects on the Himalayan Rivers to overcome electric power scarcity. GVK groups Hydro Electric project has been initiated in Uttarakhand on the Alaknanda river, for this to happen relocation of Dhari Devi temple is necessary. On June 15th 2013 the project officials shifted the shrine from its moolasthan to an

uplifted concrete platform. People strongly believe that this act made the goddess furious and resulted in the sudden cloudburst on June 16 the next day.

Many controversies went on the construction of hydel project uplifting the temple. People agitated on shifting the goddess. The Union Ministry of Environment and Forests opposed the relocation of the temple and declared that the region is sensitive to dam construction. But the government denied their opinion and facilitated the way for construction of hydel project increasing its capacity from proposed 200MW to 330MW. In order to prevent the submersion of Dhari Devi temple the project authorities shifted the goddess from her original abode. People of Hindu religion believe that man-kind has to experience decline if the divine idols are relocated from their moolasthan. Strengthening their beliefs Uttarakhand experienced a steep decline due to enormous flood which has taken away the lives of many innocent people.

### **People's perspectives**

In spite of several warnings, by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), about the extreme weather conditions and incidents caused by global warming, the government of Uttarakhand has planned to construct dams.

Surya Prakash, associate professor of NIDM, travelled over a 1,000 kilometres in flood-has suggested terrestrial meteorological and anthropogenic data with particular focus on land slides, rainfall and flood affected areas information relevant to the disaster should be stockpiled.

According to Dave Petley, professor, department of Geography at Durham university, UK, high resolutions from ISRO's geographic information System,(GIS) Platform shows that, a large amount of material eroded from the flow of the landslide. Based on that, he estimated the difference in height between the crown of the landslide and the channel below us about five hundred metres. The boulder did not stop at Kedarnath as the flow of the debris was so high. The boulders were carried away to Rambara Village and beyond. As a block was formed by the debris, an artificial lake was formed and a large amount of water gushed out forcing the rocks to flow away one after the other.

The eye-witness accounts a report that the appearance of a WALL OF WATER and there were rumours about the glacial lake burst. It is a phenomenon GLOF, Glacial Lake Outburst Flood. But later it was concluded that the disaster is due to a combination of factors such as early rainfall, movement of southwest monsoon winds and the formation of a temporary Lake.

"Monsoon has hit the entire nation early by one month. It is July 15<sup>th</sup> that all parts of India receive rains. This year that day came as early as June 15<sup>th</sup>." Said Shailesh Nayak, Secretary, and Ministry of earth sciences. "We saw what happened in 2013 and all those mistakes are what else does one expect from the mountain if there is heavy tourist rush at vulnerable areas. The Himalaya is a young mountain and you dynamite it to build roads. Landslides are bound to happen," says Anand Sharma, executive director of Dehradun Meteorological Centre. The dam that is being built near our village has a huge tunnel inside the fragile mountains. There will be a constant danger to our lives," said Sushila Devi, an activist from the Banswara area.

"Tell me one place in the Himalaya that is not eco-sensitive" says Anil Prakash Joshi, former teacher and founder of non-profit Himalayan Environmental Studies and Conservation Organisation. "Till when will we play with nature?"

### **Media**

Media plays a vital role in the wake of disasters as the coverage and shaping of the news is accepted by the people as an accurate reflection of what really happened.

Uttarakhand disaster seems to be a natural disaster but in reality, it is a manmade disaster too. This epic tragedy is caused due to unchecked and unplanned development, increase of tourism, government policies and governance failures. Since Uttarakhand is an ecologically sensitive region, construction of dams, multi storied buildings and hotels, drilling huge tunnels by blasting rocks, and mining is hazardous. Human activity as well as nature's taken the form of a historical calamity and affected the forests, wildlife and the regeneration of rivers.

The Rediff.com views it as a lesson to be learnt when the development is destruction. It is a physical, psychological, social, economic and ecological damage by which nothing can be reconstituted easily. Particularly, this disaster, in the guise of flood waters laded with silt in great quantity, boulders and debris from dam construction could not find any other outlet but the hundreds of villages and towns covering them with several feet of mud. According to media reports Kedarnath didn't even have a rain gauge. No evacuation plan was drawn up in spite of the great history of disasters the meteorological department has no reliable record of rainfall at specific vulnerable locations. In expensive radar-based cloud burst forecasting technology would have alarmed them with a three hour warning if it was installed. Due to the inter agency disputes early warning, effective evacuation plans and a responsive disaster management system could not be facilitated and so there was a massive loss of precious life.

According to *The Hindu*- the untold story of Uttarakhand focuses on the fateful day of the villagers and their children whose earning is fairly good during yatri season. The media's attention was mainly on the rescue operations of more than 200 villages which were swept away and the day to day survival of the villagers without their basic livelihood assets is a big shock and concern. The villagers annual income on the yatra routes during the yatra season is based on the dhabhas, raincoats, umbrellas, canes, walking sticks, soft drinks, water bottles, home-made snacks and other supplies. For the children, old people and the sick they have ponies to carry them. They risk their lives to earn their livelihood. This disaster is a great blow to the villager's income and also to the religious tourism until the revival of the chardham tourism. During the festive season of Kaanwar and Nanda Devi, Raaj Jaat about a million pilgrims visit Haridwar. So, the calamity has turned to be major natural and man-made disaster with a large number of inhabitants and pilgrims occupying such disaster prone area without information, knowledge or awareness. New policies must be adopted by the state government in Uttarakhand.

Dr. Vandana Shiva is a philosopher, environmental activist and eco feminist, reports that the Uttarakhand floods were a result of misguided government policy. The Chatham, the four pilgrimage centres Gangotri, Yamunotri, Kedarnath and Badarinath connect people culturally, spiritually and ecologically in the name of pilgrimage and spiritual progress the greed for profit has been reached its zenith. The rich, natural and cultural heritage has been exploited and misused and resulted in the unplanned development.

The disaster is an alarming one and also a wakeup call for the government as well as people. The government has to incorporate scientific and technological modes into ecological conservation especially for disaster sensitive regions.

### **People's attitude and opinion:**

On June 16, around 7.18 pm, Ram Singh who was on the Char Dham yatra with 17 people from his hometown Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh heard the loudest crack in 45 years of his life. He recalls lying at the Rudraprayag district hospital "I felt as if the sky had been torn asunder. Within seconds, a massive wall of water gushed towards Kedarnath Temple. Huge boulders flung into the sky like an explosion. In less than 15 minutes, thousands of people were swept away".

A 43-year-old, Sankar Gosai a local resident recounts "It had been raining nonstop since June 14. Fearing flood, we had climbed up the hill. But we never imagined that such a huge amount of water could swoop down all so suddenly".

"I have never seen anything like this. It was as if someone was throwing water from under the ground," says Vivek Rawat, 27, who worked at a hotel in Gaurikund, about 15 km from Kedarnath.

On June 18, Sushil Singh, resident of Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh, ran down from Gaurikund to Gaurigaon to save his life. There is no trace of the 14 people he came with, he says.

Pithoragarh faced the disaster twice—on June 16 and on June 22, says Naresh Ram, resident of Kholi village. It all started at Chorabari glacier, say people who have managed to return. The glacier lies on the slope of the 6,940- metre Kedarnath peak of the Himalaya. The glacier is 7 km in length, its basin area is 38 sq km and the ice cover is 5.9 sq km. It has two snouts—one is the source of the Mandakini (at 3,865 metres) and the other becomes the Chorabari Lake (at 3,835 metres). People recall that on June 16 the lake exploded when clouds burst over it. The lake is 6 km from the temple upstream the Alaknanda. Ensuing rains cut off the hilly districts of Uttar kashi, Rudraprayag, Chamoli and Pith oragarh from the mainland and battered the land till it crumbled.

### **Political Opinion:**

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 traveler will find in this land. The district has 60 rivers of different sizes, 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."

In the wake of natural disasters like devastating floods the major responsibility has to be taken up by the state government and National Disaster Management system. A sudden cloud burst with heavy rains lasted for four days in Kedarnath region in the month of June 2013, as the season is meant for accumulation of snow everywhere and results in the formation of glaciers. The Uttarakhand Government estimated that the disaster made more than 5,000 people dead, more than 10,000 pilgrims were caught under collapsed buildings, bridges and roads; many were found missing. According to the political opinion there are many underlying reasons which intensified this natural disaster. The outpouring rains, melting of snow, stagnation of debris, breaching of lake, construction of dams, landslides, global warming and weak early warning systems.

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) based upon the remote sensing satellite images before and after the event confirmed that the water and the debris breached the boundaries of Chorabari Lake and further increased the river flow and entered the town.

After the disaster the then Chief Minister Vijay Bahuguna defended his government saying that the disaster was “colossal for a tiny state like Uttarakhand with Rs.25, 000 crore budgeted and limited manpower”. He said that managing such a gigantic task in a difficult terrain was not easy and contradicted that the government cannot be blamed for such unexpected cloudburst. He announced of formulating Disaster Management Advisory Committee with environmentalists, lawyers among others under the Central Act to help the state in future planning.

The then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said that it was an extensive devastation caused due to cloudburst and floods. He announced Rs.1000 crore for disaster relief. He also appealed all citizens to donate generously for the Prime Minister National Relief Fund.

The opposition leader of BJP Smt.Sushma Swaraj said “thousands of people have died and there is no rescue operation”. BJP Spokes person Smt.Meenakshi lekhi said “the abuse and misuse of the system is basically causing damage to the governance structure of the country”. She said that there was no early warning system and alleged that the guidelines of the National Disaster Management Authority have been violated. The Spokes person demanded for, “the urgent steps be taken to describe this as a national calamity and adequate attention on war footing be given for rehabilitation and rescue operations”.

A team led by BJP Vice-President Smt. Uma Bharati visited flood-affected areas of Uttarakhand said that the State government was completely ineffective in dealing with the crisis. Approving a private company to build a hydro electric project on the Alaknanda river responsible for the relocation of Dharidevi temple and firm did not remove loads of debris which forced the river which was in spate due to heavy rains, to change course.

Prof. Santosh Kumar, Executive Director, NIDM opines that disasters are not of a homogeneous category. Each disaster is different from the other. The Uttarakhand Disaster 2013 is different from the previous. Hence it has to be understood in the light of its divergent characteristics and features.

The Controller and Auditor General (CAG) report said that National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) is ineffective in its functioning. It had no information and control over the works happening at state level. The audit identified that mitigation and vulnerability projects of NDMA over the Uttarakhand region. The scrutiny revealed, a National Database for Emergency Management (NDEM) was yet to be started. The National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF) had not been timely disbursed. It also addressed the deficiencies in the functioning of telemetry stations, temporary gauge sites and forecasting stations during the flood time. The audit stated that agencies such as Indian Meteorology Department, Indian Space Research Organisation and others who have to establish early warning systems failed in sending timely reports.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

Though the estimated cause of Uttarakhand 2013 disaster is an exceptionally heavy rainfall across the region giving way to flash floods and landslides but analyzing the disaster on the terms of Culture Politics many narratives have been projected in a lime light. With this the Social, economic and legal realities define the causes of the disaster as natural, anthropogenic , Poor Socio-Economic conditions, population growth, tourism pressure, unplanned development, faulty agricultural practices, road constructions, dams and reservoir construction, forest degradation and deforestation . So Culture Politics considering the peoples beliefs, perspectives, opinions, attitudes along with media and political narrations shaped the history, reality and tragedy of 2013 disaster in Deva Bhoomi is a nightmare in the history of mankind.

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