Deforestation in India: Government Must Join Hands with Local People to Save Thousands of Threatened Trees Near Gangotri in the Himalayas

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Probably the most ecologically sensitive area in India, also known for its great cultural and spiritual heritage, is the Uttarkashi-Gangotri area near the origin of the Ganga River in the Himalayas. This is also close to the Gaumukh glacier. It is of the highest importance to protect trees and other precious vegetation and herbs of this area. Today as thousands of trees are threatened by excessive highway widening in this eco-sensitive zone and local people are raising the demand for saving these trees, the government authorities too must respond by doing all they can to save these trees.

Solutions are available, if only the highway authorities agree to work in cooperation with local people who have much more detailed knowledge of local conditions and so can suggest alternatives which can protect trees.

The Raksha Sutra (Threads of Protection) movement, which traces its legacy to the Chipko (hug the trees) movement, and others have in fact suggested an alternative possibility in the form of a new road which will cause minimal loss of trees while at the same time improving the connectivity of several remote villages. This new road can take some of the traffic burden and hence the need for excessive widening of the highway, which is threatening thousands of trees, can be avoided.

On the other hand if the government goes ahead with the excessive widening of the highway leading to the felling of a very large number of trees, then the environmental harm will be on a huge scale. The promises of planting these threatened trees elsewhere is least likely to be realized as natural forests cannot be re-created in this way. While generally it is being said that about 6,000 and odd trees (mostly deodar trees) have been marked for felling, the past experience has shown clearly that when a big tree is felled several nearby smaller trees, plants, herbs etc. are also uprooted and ruined.

All possibilities to avoid this ecocide should be explored in close cooperation with local villagers particularly women, panchayats (local elected village councils) and social and environmental organizations.

In a region which has witnessed highly destructive floods and landslides leading to the loss of many precious human lives in recent years as well as other large-scale harm, people are understandably worried regarding the impact of the felling of so many trees and the destruction of so much vegetation. In fact people here, as in several parts of the Himalayan region, are very apprehensive regarding the overall impact of several big construction projects including dams, tunnels and excessively wide highways, particularly when the due precautions are not exercised in the construction work. The construction rubble and waste thrown in rivers increases their capacity to cause destruction in a big way but after the floods have passed, all this is forgotten and precautions are ignored again. Common people, small shopkeepers and villagers are also troubled and worried regarding the impact of such indiscriminately taken up work on their farms, springs, irrigation channels, other water sources and small shops or vending spaces.

In addition there is also the impact of tree felling and related environmental harm on glaciers, as well as in downstream areas, as the excess as well as scarcity of water in different seasons in the densely populated plains below is also influenced by what happens in the ecologically crucial catchment areas of the Ganga river and its various tributaries.

The government authorities can still act wisely even at this late stage to work out alternative arrangements in cooperation with the local people in such a way that massive environmental harm can be avoided and the base of sustainable livelihoods is protected instead of being harmed.

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