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## Uttarakhand Tragedy: Need for Preparedness, Accountability

12 Jul, 2013

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There is this apocryphal story of how three men reacted on seeing a pedestrian ahead of them falling into a ditch. While the one immediate victim too fell into the ditch, the second person avoided the pothole saving himself whereas the third man got hold of a cover, covered the safe path for himself and others to cross the ditch. The moral of the story was that the first man was a total fool, who did not learn seeing the man fall in the ditch in front of him; the second took advantage only for himself by avoiding the ditch but the third man was all, who not only saved himself but made a safe way for others too.

The story, particularly the person who followed the first victim into the ditch, reminds one of the response of various agencies to the tragedy. There have been disasters in the country since time immemorial and all these years we have only been reactive and somewhat such crises year after year.

This time again nature's fury has left behind unaccounted deaths and untraceable persons, unimaginable environmental and economic loss. It has changed the environmental scenario of 'Dev Bhumi' or the Land of Gods as the state is popularly known. All this happened in spite of intensive, occurrences in the past and met department's repeated warnings. The local administration was simply caught unawares.

A study of the cloudbursts in geographic area of the present State of Uttarakhand for the period 1908 to 2013 ie 105 years, would reveal that eight cloudbursts have occurred, out of which the first three occurred within the first 90 years, (leaving a nil occurrence period from 1908 to 1998 years) the other five have occurred in the past nine years alone from July 2004 to June 2013, leaving behind a trail of loss of human property and large scale of environmental erosion, each time.

What intrigues the common man's mind is as to why there is an increase in the frequency of cloudbursts and why there is rise in the number of deaths in spite of the fact that modern high-tech gadgets for early warning, search and rescue etc., are available, to the State administration?

As for the increased frequency, Global Warming is a major contributory factor. It is time the administrative machinery is made aware of this global changes in weather. Implementation of corrective actions thus become imperative with strict penalties on defaulters. It is equally important that the administrative machinery not only stops indiscriminate exploitation of the land, through unplanned development, undue felling of trees, but also takes concrete steps to prevent them. Uttarakhand is a live example where large guest houses, dharamshalas and dhabas have mushroomed in a short period of ten to fifteen years, exploiting the soft hilly land for construction. One cannot forget the ever increasing number of permanently located and visiting vehicular traffic.

The core issue is that of development vis-à-vis overall growing population. After all, the increasing population needs food, clothing, shelter, employment, medical facilities etc. But then the moot question is development at what cost; planned or unplanned; rural or only urban?

In today's scenario, development is largely connected to politics. Bureaucrats including town planners have very little say, except for their drawings for the approval of the local politician. It is a known fact that, a politician who can generate more housing units or business centres in his domain is a successful politician, leave alone the quality of construction or any consideration of civic amenities. One is generally not concerned when he develops his rural areas, as rural areas are not known to be money spinners.

In Uttarakhand too, haphazard development has taken place in the recent past against the repeated advice of environmentalists, geologists and experts.

Coming to met warnings, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) had sent repeated messages to the authorities in Uttarakhand regarding heavy rains. Some of the warnings and responses, as reported subsequently by The Times of India, were as under:

"The warnings had been sent to a slew of top officials, including the state's chief secretary, the district magistrates (of the districts where the yatra takes place), the Disaster Management and Mitigation Centre, ITBP, OSD to the Char Dham yatra and other top authorities. Tragically, none of them heeded the gravity of these warnings or acted upon them.

.....

The first of the warnings of 'heavy rains' was issued on June 14 in the agro-advisory bulletin.."

"Jun 15, 2013: **Heavy rain during next 72 hours. Yatris are requested to get back to shelter places.** Heavy rains during next **heavy rains on June 17** - Met alert issued to DM of Rudraprayag, ITBP

Warning – Char Dham yatris are **advised to postpone yatra by 4 days** - Special advisory issued for pilgrims

June 16, 2013: **Yatris to get back to safer places.** Heavy rains likely during next 36 hours'. - Met alert to Rudraprayag DM, state chief

"These (alerts) happen every year, forecasting heavy rains. **They say this every year**, but do not point out the intensity - **Subhash K** Chief Secretary

" 'Very heavy rains' this is issued during one of the **rarest of the rare instances** -**Anand Kumar Sharma** Director of State Met Dept

Such criminal neglect can only be dealt with if accountability is made mandatory in such situations. Passing of the buck should not be a of whatever position the guilty person is holding.

Another major area of concern is the disaster management set-up in the country. In India, the concept itself took shape in 2005, Tsunami, with the Parliament enacting the Disaster Management Act, 2005, followed by the formation of the NDMA, the NIDM, NDRF Disaster Management. It is not surprising to note that parallel to the autonomous body like NDMA, of which the Prime Minister is the C Management Authority also functions under the Ministry of Home Affairs. Each of these bodies have their independent functions and are respective department heads; yet all of them prefer to work within their own closed, water-tight confines and share nil or very little infor Interestingly, the controlling head of all disaster management functions at the Centre, State, District or Taluk is the Revenue department

It has largely been observed that in their functioning, the revenue department, at all levels, works at a leisurely pace and the same management as well.

The Uttarakhand tragedy should be viewed as an advance warning to the administrative set-up of the country and demands a p corrective action, at all levels of governance, not only in the affected state but across India, be it the Centre, State, District or Taluka, do

### What needs to be done

Ministry of Emergency & Disaster Management (MEDM): A separate Ministry of Emergency & Disaster Management needs to be s emergency services under one umbrella – Fire, Police, Medical, Met., etc. This Ministry should have its own governing body of duly qual trade at the Centre, State, District, Taluk level. It would comprise of personnel from the central cadre, answerable only to the Central C district levels, part of the lower staff man-power shall be shared by the state Govt on prorated basis, drawing the basic salary from the s deputation allowance from the Central fund;

Accountability: Strict rules on answerability and accountability should be enforced, equally on one and all, irrespective of the official posit (The writer is Consultant on Disaster Management to several local Governments)

Published Date: 12<sup>th</sup> July 2013, Image source: <http://static.ibnlive.in.com>

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