

Who is Guilty of *Chardham Disaster*: Deluge of faith or Market *Mantra*?

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Hardly four months have passed in disremembering the tragic death of about 40 people in a stampede at Allahabad when the devotees of Kumbh were on their way home in the month of February 2013; the great tragedy of *chardham* has taken place last week. The horrible experiences narrated by the survivors to the media points out the sudden and unexpected suffering of the pilgrims who were brought there by tour operators. Though it is a sensitive issue with the media reach, a dispassionate academic discussion on the commercialisation of faiths is essential to envision the future to avoid such incidents. Leaving the evolution of chota chardham from the original chardham as part of the transformation process of conversion of Shiva samprdaya in to militant Vaishnavism, the role of Adi Shankaracharya needs to be reconciled here. Even today, the rawals (traditional Hindu holy men) of Kedarinath are drawn from Karnataka and Nambodris of Kerala for Badarinath (built on a Buddhist temple). Interestingly, not many pilgrims from these two states from the South are found in the present episode and only Telugu folk are in large crowd. It is reported that about 10000 people have already registered in Hyderabad for Amarnath yatra. Is it voluntary?

There are several paradoxes in the *Chardham* episode. The Himalayas are known after lord Shiva and all the river systems including Ganga are devoted to him. It is out of place here to know how phallus worship of Indus valley civilization transformed in to Rudra, Muruga, Shiva or Eswar . But, a perceptible observer can find out the defilement of traditional norms of calling Hardwar the gateway of Lord Shiva as Haridwar seems to be a bit niggling about the conspiracy of silence. In fact, the whole Natha tradition of North India is related to Shaivism and *Tantra* where majority of the followers were drawn from the so called lower castes (See D.P Chattopadhyay) in the past. South Indians claim Siddha sampradaya. Some of the tantric traditions incorporated as part of Badrinath and Kedarinath rituals. We do not know who the multitude of Nagsadhus descended on the Kumbha are?

The popular belief systems of the people of the South were influenced by saints, Nayanars (Shivaite) and Alvars (Vaisnavite). Some of them seem to have migrated from Kashi during the 7-8 the century after Sri Sankaracharya cleared the way for their arrival. This is a turning point in our history and the Dakshinapath lost its identity and was linked with the pan Indian ethos. They have influenced our local languages and brought uniformity

with their use of Sanskrit. This has facilitated to converse with local people (who had different belief systems) and converted them to Hindu sects before the Abrahamic beliefs descended. Thus, the South Indians particularly the Telugu speaking people are found to be fond of the pilgrimages to the North due to the proselytization. It appears, every Hindu in the South believes that once in lifetime one should visit Ganga and the dhams so as to attain Jeevanmukti or physical deliverance (Bondito kailasam). There are instances where old people are thrown in to the Ganga or corpses are burnt on the banks to attain salvation. But, we never realised that our pious Godavari, Krishna, Kaveri and other river systems of the South do equally deserve attention of the North. We hardly find any one from the North revering them, indicating the disregard or bias in our credence of faith.

While anxiously watching the TV for clues about some of our kith and kin in the devastation, I had an occasion to witness an advertisement in a Hindi channel about trips to *chardahm*. It is a very interesting show where a baba was sitting on an altar sermonising on the mundane and spiritual benefits one gets in a pilgrimage to Badarinath, Kedarinth etc. The hostess in her beautiful attire gives a commentary as to how to get a reservation, the facilities and other arrangements provided by an agency along with the phone numbers. Of course, our media created a wonderful space of scrolling beneath and above the main content as Breaking News to attract the attention of the viewer. The traditional temples are also using now the ICT facilities like e-darshan, e-prasad and other e- related services to reach out the customer rather than the devotee. As far as Telugu devotees are concerned, they have more advanced information through regular and special devotional channels all the time. In fact, there are special Babas , Gurus, Brothers and Priests who have emerged and sustained through the media coverage. After all Telugus are in the forefront to declare that they have come of IT age. Thus, faith and devotion related services are packaged and sold in the market better than many other items of goods.

The impact of TV, ICT and other complimentary developments in the so called service sector after liberalisation has enhanced the contribution of this sector to GDP manifold. As noted in my earlier articles, the number of places of worship in India has increased four times over a period of two decades that stood at around 30 lakh involving billions of rupees worth of properties and business. Almost all faiths in general and Hindu in particular (due to size) have accumulated huge properties in all the important holy places and cities (people know of only Anantpadmanabha of Trivandrum). We know some of the developments in Visakhapatnam city. Most of the properties are binami and a source of concealing black money. Though, we have sincere and honest philanthropists and devotees, some of the criminal minds are behind several dubious operations. A friend has commented that it is how all the faiths have grown over a period of time? We don't know .However; the

growth of a faith in terms of quantity is found widespread while the depth of spiritual commitment is shrinking.

It is in the context of the chardham disaster, certain distressing events are reported. How do we understand the wades of missing cash in the hands of some babas and the raping and killing of hapless mother and daughter (lost pilgrims) who were searching for help? Does it any way help a traditional country? In fact, the spiritual commitment of humanists and non-believers for the enhancement of human happiness and good will is reported to be everlasting and permanent irrespective of political and economic swings.

The influence of the growing market culture on the religious practices seems to have distressed our contemporary life and living. The present tragedy in *chardham* viewed under the above context pose several issues for reflection by concerted citizens and leaders including sane religionists.

Uttarakhand where the chardhams are located is a very small state of about one crore people planned about a decade ago. It might boast of several natural resources, but all of them are subjected to the vagaries of weather and climatic changes. The state has 13 districts and 15761 inhabited villages with 70 Vidhan Sabha and 6 parliamentary constituencies. Though the state is part of Himalayas, it does not come under either fifth schedule or sixth schedule since there are only 2.6 per cent adivasis and 16 per cent scheduled castes. Yet, the Hindu population of the state is about 72 per cent. The literacy rate is above 80 per cent with several premier educational institutions located here. The per capita SDP of Rs 48114 is above the national average. Interestingly, 47 per cent of the population live below poverty indicating the precarious position of the population relying on Tourism. Keeping the typical social and economic conditions of the state, the planners must have designed some projects for economic sustenance.

The present disaster about which everyone is concerned needs to be analysed scientifically. There are several definitions of disaster, explaining an accident or natural catastrophe that causes damage and loss of life due to the fact that the calamity far exceeds the resources. We have recently identified more than 50 issues relating to disasters (Manmade and Natural) in connection with a World Congress on Disaster Management to be organised early next year. We had an opportunity to know about the work of two premier research institutes on Himalayas, one at Dehradun under Geological Survey of India and the other at North Bengal University. It is necessary to know that the Himalayas in which the chardhams are situated are the youngest and the highest mountain range in the world with an age of 70 million years on earth (which is 4.54 billion years old).

The earth scientists have reported that the Himalayas were formed when Indo-Australia plate collided in to the underbelly of Eurasia plate. Thus, it is geologically unstable and seismologically active. It has 15000 glaciers providing perennial source of water to Indus, Ganga, Brahmaputra, Yangtze and several others. The sedimentary and metamorphic rocks of the region seem to be responsible for fragile slopes and landslides and also exposed to occasional cloud bursts. Uttarakhand is abode of not only Hindu shrines, but there are ancient Buddhist and indigenous sects, Sikh and Muslim places of worship. It has a limited carrying capacity with fragile environmental implications. The region is considered as 'Devabhumi' and some of the people are called as paharias or hill people referring them as innocent. They love the land, the forest and therefore when deforestation initiated in the name of development, a counter movement as Chipko was started to stall this. However, a large number of hydro-electrical projects in the region including the highest and controversial Tehri dam, Srinagar dam etc were completed making the region prone to geophysical disasters.

It is reported in the media that an RTI question has revealed of plans to construct 557 hydropower projects on the pious rivers. Interestingly, most of the contractors are South Indian operators like GVK, Lanco, GMR and others and the NTPC project in 2010 was scrapped due to people's resistance. The state government seem to have developed Tourist destinations with the support of some operators as the demand for trips to these dhams beyond Rishikesh increased several fold. It is reported that there are about 10000 beds available for use by the tourists in different categories of hotels, dharmasalas etc. The number of tourists who visited Uttarakhand during 2010 amounted to 3.11 crores, three times the size of the population which was hardly in thousands few decades ago. One can imagine the amount of pressure put on the fragile natural resources of the region by around 20 lakh visitors particularly in the Alakananda, Bhagirath, Mandakini river banks where the dhams are positioned. Given the hydrogeological formation of the region and the river systems, the state had an average of 1606 mm rainfall. It is reported that the rainfall in the region on the fateful day was 380 mm. One scientist has alleged that the forest cover of the 53483 sq KMs of the state was 84.9 per cent in 1970 is reduced to around 50 per cent by now. Thus, the tragedy was anticipated by scholars and activists who were studying the region. The International Panel on Climatic Change has already warned of extreme weather conditions and of course the CAG warning to the state government for not following the guidelines are now in the public domain.

Thus, the June 17th disaster is a consequence of a vicious circle of leisure time activity promoted by market strategies, capitalist industrial expansion for cheap power, unworldly religious jingoism together with surplus cash invested in mindless construction in an ecologically sensitive area. This is substantiated by the statement of priest of Kedarinath

sri Vagesh Lingachar after the incident that Tourist operators and the business interests have made the area a virtual market place that masked the temple that could be seen from a distance a few years ago. This is an emerging situation where faith is conditioned by market, and if it becomes a practice that is the end of the significance of Religion in human society.