

Ten Years of Uttarakhand

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Good governance is one of the main achievements of the newly formed state of Uttarakhand. Pilgrims appreciated the helpful attitude of the police during the Kumbh. It is relatively easy to meet the ministers and officials of the state. New industries are being rapidly established in the plains of the state such as Tata's factory to make the Nano. Condition of roads is much better in comparison to UP. A traveler immediately feels relief upon entering the hill state. The state government is reaching drinking water to villages located in far-off locations by tankers. Rains in the two years before this were meager. Mountain springs which are the main source of drinking water had dried up. The Employment Guarantee Programme is running smoothly. Works are actually being done by village folk unlike other states where contractors are getting the job done by tractors and giving a small commission to the supposed beneficiaries. Such misappropriation of schemes is not seen here. Electricity is being supplied to even remote villages 20 to 22 hours a day which is commendable. Dehra Dun has emerged as one of the leading centers of education. It has moved ahead of cities like Allahabad and Ajmer which were leading two decades ago. These achievements have been possible because Uttarakhand is a small state and contact between ministers and the people is direct and continuous.

Yet the hill areas of the state are in deep distress. There are few employment opportunities. Youth are forced to migrate to the plains where they get low-wage jobs given via contractors. They have no job security and no facilities such as Provident Fund or medical benefits. The people of the hill areas alone had waged the battle for a separate state. They wanted that a development model consistent with the character and culture of the hills should be adopted. The state previously had dense mixed forests. The local people used to get fodder and fuel wood from these. The forests also maintained biodiversity, absorbed carbon from the atmosphere and provided happiness to the tourists from their pristine aesthetic beauty. The British Government cut these mixed forests and planted pine forests which provided turpentine that was required by the government. The present state government is also fonder of these pine forests because they provide revenue. Mixed forests are beneficial for the people while pine forests are beneficial for the government officials. The state has made no policy to replace pine forests with mixed forests. Consequently, forests are no longer friends of the people. There is a disjoint between them.

Agriculture is also in doldrums. Indeed, farmers across the country are in trouble. Economic policies of the government are in favour of the urban people. For example, there is no effort by the government to control on price of cars, TVs and cloth made by urban factories while there is great urgency to control the price of wheat and sugar that are produced by the farmers. The government has put in place a policy with the explicit objective of keeping farm prices low and thereby sacrificing the farmers. But farmers of the plains yet manage to eke out a living because they have access to certain advanced technologies which enable them to increase production and partly compensate for the loss due to declining prices. Submersible pumps make it possible for them to draw out water from a thousand feet or more. They have increased yields by adopting Bt cotton seeds and banana seedlings made by tissue culture, though Bt cotton proves disastrous elsewhere. Most of these advanced technologies are developed for the plains and are not suitable for the hill areas. For example, deep bore wells may run dry in the hills. And there is little research in crops that are suitable for the hills such as apples, pomegranate, gladioli and orchids. The state government is taking no interest in encouraging research in these areas.

The state has huge opportunities in the service sectors. Uttarakhand can be developed as a global tourist destination like Switzerland. Software parks, call centers, universities, cinema studios and hospitals can be established in the beautiful hills and by the side of dancing rivers. Local youth would get high-paid jobs in these activities and nature also will be happy. Focusing on the service sector is important because it is the sunrise area. Share of the services in national income rises along with economic progress. The share of this sector in the income of the United States, for example, is about 80 percent with 19 percent coming from manufacturing and a meager one percent from agriculture. The share of services sector in India's national income is rising rapidly while manufacturing is stable and agriculture is declining. In coming years manufacturing is also likely to become less. Therefore, the state must focus on services sectors. But the state government has no policy to welcome these service providers.

The main reason for disinterest in mixed forests, agricultural research and services sectors is that the state government has got hold of the kamadhenu of hydropower. This is being made the foundation of economic progress. Thinking is that the free-flowing rivers will be dammed and cheap electricity will be produced. This electricity will be provided to industries being established in the plains. Local people will get jobs in the hydropower projects. Problem is that these jobs are available only for 4-5 years during the period of construction. Thereafter the local people become totally helpless. The jobs evaporate into thin air. Agriculture is destroyed because fertile land is submerged in hydropower reservoirs. Blasting done for making in the mountains leads to piercing of the aquifers and mountain springs which are source of irrigation dry up. The beauty of the free-flowing river is also destroyed. The whole area becomes desolate. This hits at tourism and pilgrimage as well. This correspondent was told by a visitor from Himachal that one temple previously used to attract about one lac pilgrims every year. Number of pilgrims declined to mere 25,000 after a hydropower project diverted the free-flowing river nearby into a tunnel. Visitors to Badrinath will see a stretch of about 15 km of River Alaknanda that has gone dry because the entire water has been diverted from Lambgarh to Vishnugad into a tunnel for generating hydropower. The pilgrims are deeply hurt.

The benefits of industrialization that is taking place in the plains are also not likely to stay. Most industries are being established to avail of tax exemption that has been provided to industries in the backward states. This tax exemption is available only for 10 years. Many of the industries are likely to close shop and go back once the period of tax exemption comes to end. At that time the state will be left with empty factory sheds, broken rivers and destroyed agriculture. The state government should, therefore, immediately eschew hydropower and make a policy to develop the services sector which will both be environment-friendly and provide long term and well-paying jobs to the hill people who laid their lives for creation of the state. □□