

Learning from Uttarakhand

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As 6,000 people are declared missing following flash floods in Uttarakhand in June, Olina Banerji asks whether the state government will learn from past mistakes.

The Uttarakhand “tsunami” – flash floods that ravaged the state in June – swallowed entire towns and roads, leaving much destruction in its wake. As the first phase of rescue and relief operations winds down, up to 6,000 people are still missing, though their next of kin continue to urge the government not to declare them dead, as was initially planned by July 16.



As rescue teams continue to sift through the debris to save what life may remain, the state government faces a massive reconstruction effort. Religious tourism that drives the state’s economy has come to a complete halt and the thousands of small to medium enterprises that support it have been destroyed, costing Uttarakhand almost 530 crore rupees—land and property losses are estimated at 75 to 80 crore rupees, while the loss of 19,000 business units makes up the rest.

“This isn’t just the devastation of Kedarnath, it’s the destruction of the entire hill economy,” says Ushinor Majumdar, a writer for the news magazine *Tehelka*, who trekked up the hills to report on the disaster. The lifeline of this economy begins in the plains of Delhi, with taxis that ferry pilgrims to high-altitude places of worship such as the Kedarnath Temple. The route is dotted with small eateries and resting spots that depend exclusively on the tourist season for their income. According to Majumdar, many of these enterprises are run on small working capital loans and are likely to perish given that they are situated on roads that lead to nowhere—according to a Reuters report, almost 1,650 roads have been damaged beyond recognition.

The central government, though initially slow in its response, has “fast-tracked” road construction to restore connectivity to the region under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojna, explains Varad Pande, Officer on Special Duty at the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD). Additionally, the central government has increased the number of working days under the MGNREGA scheme from 100 to 150 to help revive the income of rural households impacted by the flood.

But there are many who believe such measures cannot come at the cost of current, on-the-ground efforts. “Immediate relief work, like providing food rations to locals, cannot be stopped just yet,” says Anshu Gupta, founder

of [GOONJ](#), an organisation that has been working on the ground to supply essentials to flood-affected villagers. In response to calls to refocus the rehabilitation programme on long-term planning, Gupta says, “right now, relief is rehabilitation. This season is key for locals to store food grains and save money for the winter. When such widespread devastation has taken away their means of livelihood and opportunity to store, how can we stop basic provisions?”

While the relief and rehabilitation debate rages, many are acknowledging that the Uttarakhand disaster was [long in the making](#), and that the government’s [knee-jerk moratorium](#) on building houses and commercial hubs on river banks comes far too late. Owing to the rush to develop the region for tourists, the repeated use of dynamite along the hill slopes to build and expand roads, [massive construction projects](#), and rampant deforestation are believed to have amplified the disaster.

The environmental lobby has also long contested the 600 or so [hydroelectric projects](#) built in the Alaknanda and Bhagirathi river basins. Several notifications by the Ministry of Environment and Forests – for example, one in December 2012 that declared a 41-kilometre stretch of land on either side of the Bhagirathi River [too sensitive for development](#) – have been overridden by the state government in favour of more construction. The ministry’s directive would have led to a blanket ban on commissioning hydroelectric projects and roads, quarrying, and the felling of trees. It isn’t hard to imagine then why Uttarakhand’s Chief Minister Vijay Bahuguna was reluctant to take this notice, or any others, into consideration.

The government is now taking these environmental warnings more seriously. A cabinet committee has been set up to look into relief measures in Uttarakhand, and the launch of an [Uttarakhand Relief and Rehabilitation Authority \(URRA\)](#) – which will coordinate rehabilitation efforts and supervise allocation of funds on the ground – has been announced. MoRD’s Neelakshi Mann, a member of the proposed authority, says, “the current norms and regulations around construction in the region will be re-evaluated. The authority will ensure both the quality of the materials used for reconstruction, as well as whether these processes are environment friendly.” Mann adds that any recommendations on further construction of hydroelectric projects will be made to the state authorities that sanction them. What the scope of these recommendations will be remains to be seen, however, since the URRA will be led by Chief Minister Bahuguna, who has strongly advocated against curtailing “development” in the state.

Dr Latha Anantha of the River Research Centre, who works with river-based communities, suggests [a different approach](#) to solving the conundrum around big dam projects and other infrastructure development: “There must be a clear assessment of how many dams and roads the river basin can accommodate without reacting. Communities who live in this region must become part of the planning process. No one understands the flow of the river better than them.” Such an inclusive process, Anantha adds, will lead to a sense of ownership amongst the communities of their own ecosystems. She advocates for a holistic, long-term study in all disaster-prone river basins in India, using Uttarakhand as a test case. A needs assessment completed either by the URRA or a civil society organisation could include the views of local *panchayats* to understand how a predictive – rather than curative – disaster management model can be built.

But big dams mean big politics, and such bottom-up solutions are likely to get lost in the fray. As this battle is fought on a national scale, the need to develop alternate means of livelihood for those affected by the flooding becomes increasingly dire. With parts of [Assam now submerged by the floods](#), it’s time for state- and central-level governments to learn their lessons fast.

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