

Regulating tourism and pilgrimage in the Himalaya*

The Mountain Division of G.B. Pant Institute of Himalayan Environment and Development (GBPIHED), Almora at the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), New Delhi utilized the opportunity provided by International Mountain Day celebrated on 11 December across the globe to discuss issues that impinge on sustainable tourism and pilgrimage in the Himalaya by organizing a consultation meet with diverse stakeholders. Mass tourism in the Himalayan region has proved counterproductive, particularly considering the recent disaster in Kedarnath. The focus of deliberations was on the guidelines related to regulated tourism and pilgrimage put together by MoEF and GBPIHED in a working document 'Governance for sustaining Himalayan ecosystem (G-SHE)'. Providing support for mainstreaming of G-SHE guidelines and 'best practices' is one of the key activities proposed under the National Mission for Sustaining Himalayan Ecosystem (NMSHE), under the National Action Plan on Climate Change. Government of India has entrusted the Department of Science and Technology (DST) to coordinate implementation of NMSHE. The consultation aimed at building a case while looking at the key issues of tourism and pilgrimage in the Himalaya in order to come out with recommendations and list of actions in different domains, namely policy and planning, legal and institutional arrangements, research assessments, technology, livelihoods, market, awareness and through all these, developing a shared road map for implementation of the identified actions. Experts in the area and senior-level officers from MoEF, DST, Planning Commission of India, Uttarakhand Forest Department (UKFD), National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD),

Nepal, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, New Delhi, World Wide Fund (WWF)-India and GBPIHED attended the meeting.

Describing the context of the consultation meet, B. M. S. Rathore (MoEF) said that until recently the interaction between nature and people in mountains was harmonious, but now, there is an increasing influence of market and technology on such interaction. Rampant construction at religious/sacred sites, encroachment of river beds, improper waste management and profit motives are some of the prominent issues that impinge on sustainable use of natural resources. P. P. Dhyani (GBPIHED) stressed upon the need for effective coordination among different stakeholders. K. Jude Sekar (MoEF) chaired the inaugural session and urged that tourism is intricately linked with livelihoods of local communities in the mountains; therefore there is a need to deliberate how we can ensure livelihood while regulating tourism and pilgrimage in the Himalayan region. Hem Pande (MoEF) appreciated the adequate presence of diverse stakeholders in the consultation meet, and emphasized the need for livelihood security of local communities while exploring the scenic beauty of the Himalaya in a regulated fashion. Akhilesh Gupta (Climate Change Programme, DST) and Nisha Mediratta (DST) stressed on the need for better coordination between DST and MoEF for implementation of the G-SHE guidelines related to regulated tourism and pilgrimage under NMSHE.

G. B. Mukherji (Planning Commission Task Force) said that the Mountain Division at MoEF and DST could jointly play a crucial role in making interventions that help in isolating tourism from pilgrimage and both from ecotourism. These institutions could also suggest criteria for delineating carrying capacity from tipping capacity which is essential in the wake of recent disaster in Kedarnath. He further added that tourism and pilgrimage must lead to improvement of local income and rest of the money generated should be used for environment protection. Emphasizing on the need to put in place early warning system to

avoid Uttarakhand-type calamity in the region, he said that problems are socio-political and business-as-usual approach for road construction and garbage disposal are major issues which are detrimental to the local environment. Mukherji also mentioned that we need a policy that provides input on behaviour of tourists and code of conduct for ecotourists like PATA (Pacific Asia Travel Association). S. C. Bagri (Himgiri University, Dehradun), while sharing his vast experience of more than three decades related to tourism sector in the Himalaya, emphasized on the need of skill development in the sector for environment protection and augmenting local livelihood. Rajiv Bhartari (CCF, Ecotourism, Uttarakhand) said that three regulations, viz. activities, behaviour and infrastructure need to be put in place for sustainable management of tourism in the Himalaya. Citing the example of regulated tourism in and around Gangotri, where one has been able to achieve the desired success to a large extent, he mentioned that only 150 pilgrims are allowed to visit Gaumukh and they also have to deposit entry fees for Gangotri National Park. He mentioned that there is a need to define ecotourism in clear terms. S. K. Khanduri (MoEF), Manoj Chandran (Forest and Environment in Uttarakhand), Biswajit Banerjee (Planning Commission), S. P. Vasudeva (NDMA) and Rajan Kotru (ICIMOD, Nepal) also expressed their views on the subject.

In general, the participants were of the view that the carrying capacity in many areas within the Himalayan states has been breached and still the sector remains largely unregulated. Various responses and few action areas under the aforesaid domains for sustainable management of tourism and pilgrimage in the Himalaya such as developing guidelines for tourism; eco-friendly construction; ban on plastics; code of conduct for tourists; using web-based platforms for informed decision-making; exploring possibilities of diverting tourism and pilgrimage to other potential destinations, mapping prospective new areas and publicizing new sites; identification of new

*A report on the consultation meeting on 'Regulating Tourism and Pilgrimage in the Himalaya', organized by the Ministry of Environment and Forests, New Delhi and G.B. Pant Institute of Himalayan Environment and Development, Almora at Paryavaran Bhawan, New Delhi, on 11 December 2013.

tourist circuits, zonation policy and undertaking scientific zonation mapping; defining eco-tourism and assessment of policies from eco-tourism perspective; location planning for tourist infrastructure development and homestay tourism; disaster management; use of multimedia; putting in place institutional mechanism for creating awareness among pilgrims/tourists, tourist guides, hoteliers and transport operators to bring about a change in their behaviour, carrying capacity/tipping capacity assessment with respect to infrastructure development; traditional knowledge/management practices; studies on watershed management

in glaciated areas; livelihood avenues, ecosystem health monitoring and co-operation among MoEF, DST, NDMA, State governments and other stakeholders, were collectively suggested by the participants.

In his concluding remarks, S. S. Garbyal (MoEF) said that unregulated tourism and associated infrastructure, encroachment of river zones and beds and unplanned development activities have been responsible for the recent disaster in Uttarakhand. He emphasized on the need of enabling regulations for sustainable tourism and livelihood to avoid repeat of such disasters in future. As a

follow-up of the consultations, a concrete and time-bound road map for making G-SHE guidelines actionable is being prepared jointly by DST and Mountain Division in MoEF.

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