

Regulate High Altitude Pilgrimage

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In the evening hours – on the trek route to Hemkund Sahib - a glimpse of the crowd of tired but satisfied people slowly stepping down to reach the road head is commonplace. Some of these are in groups, but then some prefer travelling solo and maintaining distance.

Others like to gossip and share experiences - they do not miss the slightest opportunity of mingling with strangers and exchanging contacts. Most however are unconcerned of the crowd - they just stand by to rest for a while and enjoy the pristine sight of the valley.

But then, for many reaching Govindghat in time is the priority as getting late could foil their onward plans. This lot can be identified from its pace - just moving down, unconcerned of possible knee and ligament injury that is commonplace in this terrain, particularly while trekking downslope – the higher gradient the chances of being crippled.

The tragedy of 4 June 2023

For that matter, 4 June 2023 was no different.

There was nothing abnormal and the pilgrimage to Hemkund Sahib was going on as usual and the ones returning were busy planning their journey back home. But then, there was avalanche activity on the pedestrian route in the evening hours and some persons were trapped in the destabilized mass of ice and snow.

Dividends of the government's decision to preposition trained and well-equipped responders at vulnerable places across the state, particularly so along pedestrian stretches of the pilgrim routes to tackle emergencies, were visible.



SDRF was quick to respond and despite dwindling visibility 05 persons were rescued and referred for medical care. Despite best efforts, one of the victims identified as Mrs Kamaljeet

Kaur aged 25 years from Amritsar could not be rescued. Her body could only be retrieved on 5 June 2023.

Now, imagine the trauma and agony of the family members. They had come over to enjoy and relish pristine nature, and of course, get blessings of the Gods. They have now to inform the ones awaiting their return and carry the dead body back home.

And this is not the only case of this kind. There was avalanche activity again around the same place two days later - in the afternoon of 6 June 2023 and the movement of pilgrims was stopped.

Previously in May 2023, there was major avalanche activity on the pedestrian route to Kedarnath.

Moreover, the number of people who succumb while on Char Dham Yatra - is mostly due to previous health-related ailments that are aggravated by fatigue and lack of acclimatisation.

High altitude pilgrimage

Uttarakhand houses Char Dham – Badrinath (3300 m), Kedarnath (3583 m), Gangotri (3200 m), and Yamunotri(3293 m) - the revered shrines of Hindus, as also Hemkund Sahib (4632 m) that is revered by Sikhs.

All these are located in the Higher Himalayas and for reaching Kedarnath, Hemkund Sahib and Yamunotri one has to trek for a considerable distance. The pedestrian treks to Kedarnath and Hemkund Sahib are particularly long and arduous. These are at the same time traversed by glacial ice mass. The timing of the opening of these shrines is decided by customary rules and rituals and by this time the ice mass along some stretches of the trek routes is generally intact.

Thus the state is under pressure to make these trekking routes fit for the movement of pedestrians as also mules, and has no option but to create a trench along the ice mass.

Aggravated risk

Avalanche is a gravity-driven downslope movement of ice and snow mass, but the ice mass we are referring to along the pedestrian routes is generally static and stable. It is a valley-ward extension of the glacial mass in the valley's upper reaches that swells during the winter season. This can be understood as being a thick layer of compact ice deposited along the valley slope.

To ensure convenient passage for the pilgrims a deep trench is carved out across this ice mass. This changes the entire stability algorithm and enhances risk.

The trench across the ice mass splits it vertically into two independent portions, detached to interact with each other. The mass on the downslope side of the trek had been hitherto supporting and ensuring the stability of the mass on the uphill side. After its being detached the mass on the upslope side is left with no option but to recalibrate its dynamics and move downslope.

The detached and unsupported mass on the uphill side of the pedestrian trek, devoid of its toe support, is rendered highly vulnerable and the very process of ensuring convenient passage for the pilgrims exposes them to the risk of being run over by moving ice or avalanche.

Risk perception and communication

With altitudes as high as 7817 m (Nanda Devi) Uttarakhand is visited by a large number of high-altitude adventure enthusiasts, who seem ready to go to any extent to experience the excitement of high-risk endeavours. Yes, high risk for common people but most enthusiasts work and train meticulously to minimize, if not eliminate the risk.

Moreover, they have a good understanding of the risks high altitude is to offer together with experience in overcoming these. They at the same time have access to warnings, communication devices, personal protective gear and emergency backup.

Though not that high an altitude, pilgrims to Hemkund Sahib and Kedarnath are faced with much higher risk as compared to high-altitude mountaineers.

They lack high-altitude experience and are unaware of the adversities they could encounter. They, therefore, come unprepared. This is evident from the clothing, footwear and personal protective gear they carry.

They at the same time do not appreciate the need for acclimatisation while gaining altitude. In a rush to save time, they thus gain many kilometres of altitude in a few hours. Improved surface and air connectivity have only encouraged this trend.

Moreover, no effort is made by anyone to communicate the risk they could face while traversing the trench cut across the ice mass en route to Hemkund Sahib or Kedarnath. So their decision to travel to these decisions is not risk-informed.

Risk reduction

Whatever the state does, the pilgrims cannot be expected to come as prepared and trained as high-altitude adventure enthusiasts. Moreover, the risk of the trench cut across ice mass along pilgrim routes can never be eliminated.

So, there always would remain the possibility of people getting affected by avalanches - more the numbers higher the risk. Statistics make it clear that the numbers are increasing at a fast pace and so the risk is mounting with each passing year.

Ropeway is sure to strike your mind and right you are. Ropeway can bypass these risk-prone stretches but then planning and implementation of the same is to take time and till then the pilgrims cannot be allowed to be exposed to the risk of moving ice mass.

The opening of the shrines would always be decided by customary rules and rituals, but the movement of the pilgrims can always be regulated. So, why not allow pilgrims only after the ice along the trek routes has melted naturally? This would only amount to delaying the pilgrimage by a few weeks.

The religious-minded might find this suggestion ridiculous but it would certainly ensure that the pilgrims coming over from far and wide are not exposed to avoidable risk, misery and misfortune.

Hope the religious-minded also want the same.