

1.00 SAVE GANGOTRI

1.01 Gangotri : The source of Ganges is situated at an altitude of 3,200 meters at the confluence of Bhagirathi and Kedarganga in Uttarkashi district. On all four sides there are high rocky mountain. The 'Gangotri' temple dedicated to Goddesses Ganga is situated on the right bank of Bhagirathi. This small temple was built in 19th Century by Amar Singh Thapa, the chief of Gurkha Commanders. Gangotri is one of the most famous pilgrimage centers in India which attracts people from various parts of India. Devotees take water from Gangotri and offer it at Rameshwaram, a Pilgrim center in South India. In the same way the sand from the coast of Rameshwaram is brought to Gangotri and it is immersed in the rivers. This symbolic act signifies the concept of one nation inspite of India's diversity. The Gangotri attracts numerous pilgrims from all over the country. It is because of this mass appeal to our countrymen, that Jawaharlal Nehru called Ganga as "River of India".

1.02 The situation before Road link.

About 30 years back, the pilgrims walked from Uttarakashi and Tehri. They stayed in Dharmshalas and caves, there was no bridle path beyond Haridwar. Usually pilgrims followed the sheep track. Pilgrims with great dedication and respect for Gangotri ventured on this trip. At Gangotri, they either stayed in Dharmashala or in nearby caves. Pilgrims trekked this tough terrain barefoot. They had utmost respect for the river and they strictly adhered to rules framed by practice. They never polluted the river water. Even throwing of old stale flowers, clothes was prohibited. People were prohibited from using soap. The pilgrims held the Gangotri in high esteem and they would not even cross the bridge with their sandals. This dedication and respect was the main source which protected the river from being polluted by human interference.

1.03 The Present Situation

Since 1984, the construction of bridge across Jhanavi has linked Gangotri to outside world by road. Now the buses ply from Rishikesh to Gangotri. This road link has reduced the difficulties of trekking and now the number of pilgrims visiting Gangotri has increased from 10,000 to five lakh per year. A number of cement buildings have been built to cater the needs of pilgrims. The place attracted more tourists and the simple pilgrims of countryside of India had to suffer the hardships. The dedicated pilgrim could not get any place in

Dharmashala, neither he is in a position to pay high cash for lodging. Most of the natural caves have been taken over by Sadhus, depriving common people the natural home.

1.04 Destruction of Environment:

1.4-1 Forests :- In comparison with earlier reports the forests around Gangotri has been destroyed at a faster rate in last five years. The trees have been felled to construct new buildings in Gangotri. Similarly the need for fuelwood has increased due to increase in the number of pilgrims. The fuelwood need cannot met only by fetching deadwood. So, green trees are felled to meet fuelwood demand. The most destructive factor is the use of wood during winter. During winter 1950's only four Sadhus stayed in Gangotri during winter months. Now this number has increased to 40. All these people who stay during cold winter months consume enormous quantity of fuelwood. They exert more pressure on scarce forest resources, depleting it at a faster rate. The depletion of forests at such high altitude is bound to create adverse affects in future.

1.4-2 Pollution

Pollution of the sacred river is one of the dangerous after affects of the increase in pilgrim, tourist population. Gangotri, a tiny place has no facilities to accomadate the influx of people. There are hardly any facilities of toilet and bathroom. So the people deficiate all around the place and the situation has become unbearable. One of the shocking thing is about the construction of open latrines. Many people, including Sadhus have built such open latrines on the banks of river Bhagirathi. The human waste is directly dumped into the river water. The garbage and waste from Ashrams and other buildings is also dumped straight into the river. All these activities has not polluted the wholy Ganges at its source, but it has turned Gangotri to a filthy place not safe for human habitation.

1.4-3 Cultural Pollution :

Gangotri, the Pilgrimage center has now become a center of antisocial elements. The Sadhu's are more interested in acquiring wealth than devoting time towards spiritual attainment. Most of the Ashrams in Gangotri are encroaching upon the vacant land. They are constructing buildings. Ashrams have become a center for antisocial elements, who exploit the innocent pilgrims.

2.00 Gurumukh

2.01 Gurumukh is the origin of river Bhagirathi. The water emerges out of Gangotri Glacier. Gurumukh is at a distance of 18 Kms from Gangotri. Many pilgrims who visit Gangotri trek to Gurumukh. It is a difficult trek at high altitude. In recent years the bridle path is constructed by state P.W.D.

2.02 Gangotri to Chirbhasa.

The walk from Gangotri to Chirbhasa passes through mixed forests. The scenic beauty of high mountain range and flowing river is beyond explanation. After walking 11 kilometers one reaches Chirbhasa. Chirbhasa means a grove of Pine trees. It is located in a broad valley at an height of 3,940 meters. There are two tea shops and a rest house. The rest house is only building in Chirbhasa. Usually people halt here for a while before they go to Bhuj Bhasa.

2.03 Chirbhasa to Bhajbhasa.

The area between Chirbhasa and Bhujbhasa is known as PusphaBhas, an area of flowers. This area is very famous for herbs. The landslide has been caused due to destruction of tree cover areas Bhujbhasa. Earlier accounts of pilgrims narrate the thick tree cover in this area. But now it has become barren, full of debris of landslide. Many pilgrims take herbs from this area. In fact this trend has resulted in depletion of many valuable species.

2.04 Bhujbhasa

This term has come from Bhoj (Birch) trees. Bhojbhasa is an open field of about two kilometers situated on the right bank of Bhagirathi. This area was thickly covered with Bhoj forest. At present the forests have disappeared. We counted only 250 Bhoj trees in Bhojbhasa!! The main reason for destruction of forest and the fauna is the establishment of a huge Ashram by Baba Lal Bihari. This Sadhu called Lal Baba gives shelter and food to pilgrims. He has constructed permanent structures to stock fuelwood and food. In fact the increase in number of pilgrims has led to increase in demand for fuelwood. The Ashram has destroyed the birch forests on right bank of the river. In winter the forest from left bank is felled to meet the demands of fuelwood. This Ashram is cultivating potato on 10 acre plot. The Potato farm has 10 feet high hedge made from precious junifer bush. This junifer is the only

vegetation which holds soil at higher altitude. The LalBaba has uprooted Junifir on large quantities from the steep slopes of mountain to make the hedge. He could have used the stones which were available in plenty. The removal of Junifir has destabilised the sensitive mountain ecosystem. These bush is the food for wild animals. This sadhu has brought 20 cows to this altitude. Grazing cattle at this height of 14000 feet will cause great damage to alpanine ecosystem. The government decision to grant 0.8 hectares of land in Bhojbhas to LalBaba will lead to further destruction of this sensitive zone. The huge building constructed by Garhwal Vikas Mandal Nigam does not fit into the total environment.

#### 2.05 Gurumukh

The distance from Bhojbhasa to Gurumukh is 3 kilometers. As one proceeds ahead of Bhojbhas, the glacier comes into view. The tree line ends at Bhojbhas. One comes across herds of deer and wild goats. At the foot of Gangotri glacier the Bhagirathi emerges from underneath the snout. The water emerges with great force underneath the snow. The rugged mountains and the high snowdad peaks of Shivling, Gangotri provides most beautiful background to Gurumukh. Fortunately no sadhu has constructed any permanent structure near Gurumukh.

#### 3.00 Tapovan

3.01 A tough climb on Gangotri glacier and a walk of 4 kilometers across the mountain leads to a beautiful valley. This valley has a field full of flowers and gently flowing streams. This area is known as Tapovan. This beautiful place is on the verge of total destruction due to human intervention. This is the camping ground for expeditions and mountainers. During a year about 40 expeditions pitch their tents in Tapovan. This is the basecamp to climb Meeru, Shivling and other peaks. In recent years the foreign expeditions have increased in numbers. These expeditions bring huge quantities of luggage. They leave the waste in open and the empty liquor bottles, cheeseling and plastic is found in this valley. The constant pressure of human being has converted Tapovan to a dust bin. A Sadhu called Simla Baba has built huts and he is trying to build permanent structures. It is high time that action must be taken to prevent the destruction of our country's heritage.

4.00 An action plan to save Gangotri, Gurumukh and Tapovan

In the changed circumstances it is essential to preserve the ecology of this place, which represents a cultural heritage to people of our country. This pilgrimage center symbolises the concept of unity in diversity of our national. It is the focal point for national integration. Keeping all this factors, in mind we have to evolve an action plan to save Gangotri.

4.01 Gangotri

Gangotri is declared as notified area. But the construction of buildings on the banks of river is going with high speed. It is essential to halt this process on construction at Gangotri to preserve the arcethetic beauty of the place. Some practical suggestions are :

- a) Permission should not be given to construct buildings near river bank. A minimum 9,200 meters distance should be maintained.
- b) All the latrines on river banks should be distroyed .
- c) The buildings as well as in public places latrines and toilets should be built. Septic latrines is the only way to save pollution at the source of Ganges. In orde r to keep the place clean, it advisable to construct Sulabh Shau-chalaya.
- d) The Ashrams should be prohibited from acquiring land in Gangotri.
- e) The Sadhus have taken private control of excellent sock caves, and have constructed buildings. This process should come to halt.
- f) Accomadation for common pilgrims for boarding and lodging should be provided by government. At present the facilities available are suitable to the needs of rich pilgrims and expeditions.
- g) There should be restriction on number of people staying at Gangotri in winter. This will reduce the destruction of forests.
- h) Alternative energy sources to cook the food has to be provided by government. If it is not provided, the demand of fuelwood for 5 lakh pilgrims will destroy the remaining forests near Gangotri.

4.02 Gurumukh

- a) No permanent buildings should be allowed to come up beyond Gangotri.
- b) The herbs and forest on 18 Km stretch from Gangotri to Gurumukh should be given protection.
- c) The Ashram at Shojbhasa should not be allotted land. No. one should be allotted land at this sensitive altitude.
- d) The activities of Lal Babas ashram like grazing, Potato cultivation, uprooting junifer grass should be banned. Alternate energy to fuelwood has to be provided to cook for pilgrims.

4.03 Tapovan

- a) The expedition teams on Tapovan have destroyed the delicate ecosystem. The pressure has depleted all the resource. It is necessary to provide rest for some years to come. All expeditions should be banned in this area.
- b) The permanent construction by a Sadhu Simla Baba should be stopped henceforth.

4.4 Gangotri, Gurumukh and Tapovan is a very saved place for our countrymen. This place has unique beauty with rare flora and fauna. The best method to protect this area would be to declare it as a bio-sphere reserve. Gangotri Bio-sphere reserve would save the country's richest cultural heritage for coming generation.

(This Report is prepared after a weeklong stay in Gangotri and visit to Gurumukh and Tapovan)

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