

# The Road To Nowhere

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The maxim is that 'everything has a price' - potentially. But I guess it depends on one's view. Solitary caves in Kedarnath where ascetics practiced meditation, are now promoted as glamorous eco-retreats for the rich and famous. Free flowing rivers that were considered holy, now find their paths obstructed by major dams. Pilgrim towns that were meant to offer solace to the weak and weary, now offer touristic chaos. From this view, it may feel as if the Himalayas are slowly being wasted away in a destructive frenzy of modern society, through the eponymous Char Dham Highway. Eroding the true value of a place and converting the Char Dham into the Char *Daam*.

And therein enters our Ministry of Road, Transport and Highways (MoRTH), working at break neck speed to bulldoze through slope and ravine. All to build a Mega highway that would connect the already connected holy places of Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri and Yamunotri. A newly formed High Powered Committee (HPC) was tasked with the mandate of 'protecting and conserving the Himalayas'. The order was for the HPC to submit their report after surveying the valleys, and for any work to occur based on the findings of said report. The logical assumption would be for the Ministry to wait for the report, but they illegally raced forward with their destructive work. And of course the HPC report that came out was contrary to what the Ministry had hoped. Letters from the HPC Chairman to halt the work were blatantly ignored, and forests were razed overnight. Dense oak and deodar forests were wiped out, tonnes of muck were dumped into clean rivers and streams, and fragile slopes were made unstable. In front of our very own eyes, the Himalayas were being torn down to build a highway. A highway whose road width was invalidated by directions of its own Ministry; whose work was in direct violation of the Supreme court; whose every act was a breach of public trust; and whose criminal destruction of national resources

was a stupendous waste of public funds during a crippling pandemic.

This double-lane paved-shoulder highway (DL-PS) is at the crux of the problem. The main justification, as stated in the guidelines of the Indian Road Congress, lies in the ability of traffic to speed up and overtake without slowing down. This is to foreshadow an estimated increase in vehicular traffic. The Ministry reckons that the traffic will rise up to 9000 vehicles a day between the Dhams, when the HPC report clearly states that the average daily figures are significantly lower. So the highway is being built under exaggerated claims, with no proof to back it up. Another matter is that the close ended valleys of the four Dhams are highly steep, narrow and fragile. They have a limited carrying capacity, which should have been the foundation of any project being undertaken. The HPC found that Badrinath at 1000 vehicles a day was already at a maximum capacity. Similar situations greet us at each Dham. So there is no justification for the figure of 9000 a day.

No reference is given to the spectacular wild life and its needs. The Himalayan woolly squirrel, thought to be extinct since 1924, has made a heartening reappearance in the Gangotri National

Park in the last few months. These large eyed, gliding mammals require cliff-edged coniferous forests to thrive. Projects such as the DL-PS could push them right back over the delicate precipice of extinction. The large horned bharal, the swift antelope, the invisible snow leopard and the rust coloured weasel are also an intrinsic part of this magical landscape. The balance further lies with the ill-conceived proposal of opening the Dhams to tourists for the six winter months. By tradition, the valleys are left to recover in tranquility and solitude; when the deities are brought down from the main shrines to smaller village temples; when nature emerges from crevices to reclaim its cycle of life. This entire sub-ecosystem could be irreversibly damaged.

The final report of the HPC alludes to all these facts, that would shock even the most vocal proponents of

development. Out of the 174 slopes that were cut, 132 have become landslide prone. Old and dormant landslides were re-triggered; roads that were disaster resilient became disaster prone overnight. The destruction of forests and habitats, the increased intensity of disasters, the debris filled waterways, were all duly noted. Yet the HPC just stood by helplessly, as the implementing agencies continued to undercut and undermine their efforts. The agencies ensured, through their unabated speed, that the entire labour of the HPC would be reduced to an academic exercise meant to be read and ignored.

An important aspect of this whole farce is the justification given for the width of this highway, that this is a standard government design. But MoRTH itself had declared such a width unsuitable for hilly terrain in a 2018 circular. This was conveniently concealed from the HPC, as the project went ahead with its irreversible devastation of the Himalayas.

And this is just the start of a truly vile story. On one side you have the HPC with the negative realities about the project, and on the other side you have the implementing agencies with the might of the government. The HPC members, also consisting largely of government employees and officials, defended the DL-PS in opposition to overwhelming proof of the damage inflicted. Only four members, including the Chairman, supported the view of an intermediate lane with a narrower width which would require minimal slope cutting. The issue was voted upon, and a majority of members voted for the project to go ahead. At this point the 2018 circular was still concealed from the HPC. It was by chance that a member of the minority vote found the circular posted on the MoRTH website. In light of this new information, the Chairman immediately asked for the majority to reconsider. Only one member changed his vote. But this did not stop the majority group from deviously creating its own report and submitting it to the Ministry of Environment and Forests, as the final HPC report. The Chairman was in for a rude shock, when he went to submit the actual report and was politely told that the report had already been submitted.

Not seeing a way out of this conundrum, the Chairman of the HPC put the matter in front of the Supreme Court. He believed the majority was contradicting previous court orders, the mandate of

the HPC, and ignoring MoRTH's own 2018 circular. Thankfully, the Supreme Court understood the fragility of the eco-system and ruled in their favour. It stated that the 2018 circular by MoRTH would have to apply and cannot be argued to be prospective in nature.

Although this was a great victory for the environment, the ministry chose to stoop to another low. It declared in leading newspapers that the intermediate lane width applied only to the stretches where work had not yet started.

And so the battle to save our mountains continues. The HPC has sought to mitigate the damage where work has commenced, by planting indigenous trees and creating a much required footpath. In stretches where work has not started, many slopes will now be preserved.

We started this fight two years ago when seven petitioners filed a PIL in the National Green Tribunal. One of them, Uma Joshi, passed away when her jeep was crushed by a landslide on the Char Dham route in October 2019. Seven other people with her in the car did not make it. A telling fact of this project has been the number of landslides recorded in the Char Dham route this monsoon. The only exception being the Uttarkashi - Gangotri stretch, where no work has started.

The question being framed is a fight between the environment and development. But there is a deeper issue we are glazing over. Even as we build roads that lead to the fabled Dhams, we forget that the Himalayas, the formidable peaks of Shiva, are the true pilgrimage themselves.

The tragedy here is not just about the destruction of the divine-souled Himalayas, nor about the trampling of the glacial origins of our majestic rivers like the Ganga, the Alakananda, the Mandakini. The real tragedy of the Char Dham Project lies in the violation of every dharma – spiritual, social, environmental and personal. These are not wounds that one might easily recover from, if at all.

This route that is taking us from a Char Dham to a Char *Daam*, is not a pilgrimage worth the making. Let us not forget the prayers of our Rishis' that arose in the moonlit forests of the Himalayas - "Lead me from the Untrue to the True; From Darkness to Light; From Death to Immortality".