

Religious Tourism Planning and Promotion in the Higher Reaches of Uttarakhand Himalayas: A Case Study of Kedarnath Post 2013 Disaster

Kamlesh Chandra Joshi and S. C. Bagri

Centre for Mountain Tourism and Hospitality Studies, HNB Garhwal University,

Srinagar (Uttarakhand) – 249161

Abstract

Pilgrimage tourism is one of the most cultural and socio-economic activities in mountain regions and has been practicing since time immemorial. It is the major source of income as about 26 percent of Uttarakhand's GDP is earned from tourism. In Garhwal Himalaya, most of the pilgrimage places are located in the higher reaches of Himalaya and Kedarnath, one of the abodes of Lord Shiva, is located at the height of 3583 meters above sea level near the source of Mandakini River. The 'Himalayan Tsunami' caused by torrential rain, clouds bursts and flash floods on 16 and 17 June, 2013 caused severe damage to the tourist amenities and facilities which badly affected the livelihood of the local people. The intensity of torrential rain in Mandakini valley washed away Kedarnath, Rambara and Gaurikund to a large extent. This flood not only devastated the local infrastructure and connectivity like highways, hotels, communication network and local inhabitants but also put halt on tourist arrival for almost 2 years. The present paper evaluates post 2013 planning and promotion of pilgrimage tourism in Kedarnath and the research methodology adopted to know the planning and promotion is based on the secondary data taken from various sources.

Keywords: Pilgrimage tourism, Garhwal Himalaya, Kedarnath, planning & promotion, Himalayan tsunami

Introduction

From time immemorial pilgrimage has been practiced as the oldest form of tourism in mountain regions. Noga Collins Kreiner (2010) defined pilgrimage as, "A journey resulting from religious causes, externally to a holy site, and internally for spiritual purposes and

internal understanding.” According to her Mecca witnesses more than two million Muslim pilgrims annually for Hajj. Every year millions of pilgrims go to Lourdes in France and Hindu pilgrims take holy dip in river Ganges in India. The impacts of pilgrimage tourism in Himalayan region are receiving more public response than ever before. Tourism affects the physical environment as well as social environment, people and communities. The degeneration of local culture leads to the cultural erosion which also changes the food habits, clothing and lifestyle of local residents. The Himalaya in India, Mt. Kii in Japan and Mt. Kailash in Tibet are some of the finest examples of religious tourism. Himalaya has been believed as a sacred abode of Gods and Goddess. Ostrowski (2000) defined pilgrimage as “a trip to a place considered sacred owing to a special influence of God therein”. Pilgrimage tourism is a sincere act of devotees, which provides belief, faith, deep feelings and respect to the divine (Singh, 2013). Many scholars think that tourism and pilgrimage share many characteristics but Dude (2001) is of the view that there is a close relation between pilgrimage and society and social structure is conserved and preserved in pilgrimage.

Perched on the banks of the River Mandakini in Uttarakhand, Kedarnath is among the four Hindu pilgrimage sites on the *Char Dham Yatra* which is located most remotely. It is located at the height of approx 3,583 meter above sea level in the Rudraprayag District of Uttarakhand. Himalayas are the youngest mountain range in the world and still in the mountain building process. The entire Himalayan zone is very fragile and prone to natural disaster such as landslides, floods and earthquakes. The topography and geographical location of Uttarakhand renders it ecologically fragile state (Bhandari, 2014).

Objectives of the Study

1. To understand the importance of pilgrimage tourism in context of Himalayan state of Uttarakhand.
2. To understand the reasons of 2013 disaster and its impact on pilgrimage tourism.
3. To examine the future roadmap and planning & promotional strategies for the development of Kedarnath.

Methodology

The research has been performed as a qualitative library majorly based on secondary data derived from various literary sources which majorly include National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM) and Government of Uttarakhand reports, several books, research papers and articles. A number of official websites of various known organizations, such as United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), Ministry of Tourism (MoT); Government of India, Ministry of Environment, Planning Commission of India, and Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board have also been consulted besides visiting portals of various news papers and news agencies for this study. Local people were also interviewed to know their view points.

Literature Review

Several worlds' famous pilgrimage places of Garhwal Himalaya provide immaculacy to Hindu devotees which enhance the socio-cultural and economic standard of native people. With the passage of time *Shaivism* and *Vaishnavism* has been emerged as two divine cults of culture. *Shaiv* are the worshipers of the Lord Shiva. Kedar is another name of the Lord Shiva. The entire Garhwal region is an abode of local deities, Gods and Goddesses and believed to be a sacred place. It is believed that Lord Shiva and Goddess Sati reside in Mt. Kailash in Himalaya (Sati, 2015, p. 166).

During the pilgrimage season male members of local families living along the pilgrimage route and the vicinity of Kedarnath shrine go to the shrine for seasonal jobs. The local inhabitants normally work in the eateries, hotel/lodges as well with other vendors supplying goods and services along the entire trek route from Gaurikund-Rambara-Kedarnath and selling fast moving consumer goods and services to pilgrims. The Palanquin (locally known as '*dandi*' and '*kandi*') carriers, ponies, mules and horse operators carry the children and old age pilgrims, who are unable to trek 18 km, in their back. The disaster has not only destroyed the local infrastructure and tourism but also affected the sources of livelihood of local people (Maikhuri et al., 2017).

The pilgrimage tourism has played a vital role in the state and has both positive and negative impacts on native people as well as on the environment. Pilgrimage tourism and tourist arrival not only provides employment opportunities to the local people but also determines their socio-economic status. The areas where pilgrimage tourism has been performed in the state have attained much socio-economic development (Sati, 2015, p. 165).

Causes of 2013 Disaster

The disaster of 2013 raised significant questions for discussion and debate. Was the disaster an impact of climate change or a natural phenomenon? Was the huge destruction only because of heavy rainfall or was it intensified by man-made activities? Has the respective governments responded and managed the disaster well and minimized its impacts? Since the formation of the state, all the successive governments neglected the state's hilly and mountain character which is associated with environmental fragility. They have promoted unprecedented construction of roads, dams, lengthy tunnels in fragile slopes, deforestation, accommodation units by riversides (Chopra, 2014, p 18).

Through a notification the union government has declared 100 km stretch of the Bhagirathi River as an eco-sensitive zone but the Uttarakhand legislature has passed a resolution twice against this notification. This eco-sensitive zone has been widely spread from Gaumukh to the town of Uttarkashi. The notification of union government only allows eco-friendly development activities in the eco-sensitive zone. It has also a provision of keeping check on the projects like dams construction. Leaders of various political parties voted against the eco-sensitive zone and forest conservation laws (Bannerjee, 2013).

Deforestation, Hydroelectric projects, Illegal mining and building construction, unplanned construction of roads and poor government policies are some of the major reasons that intensified the disaster. Unplanned expansion of tourism in Kedarnath intensified the impact of disaster. The shrines were located in an extremely fragile region of Mandakini, Alaknanda and Bhagirathi River valleys. The unprecedented downpour fell at the peak of tourist season. More than 1,00,000 pilgrims, tourists and local people present in the area were affected by the

natural hazard. Flash floods in the major rivers on the routes to the shrines washed away tourism infrastructure available in the form of townships, resorts, hotels, lodges, houses, restaurants, markets and roadside eateries (Chopra, 2014, p. 21).

The Disaster of 2013 and its impact

In June 2013, the state faced one of the worst disasters with countless deaths and huge destruction. The rage of the river and collapse of the Chorabari Lake was most destructive in the Mandakini valley which led to a huge destruction at the Kedarnath shrine and nearby areas of Rambara, Agastyamuni, Tilwara and Guptakashi. More than one lakh people were stuck in various parts of the state because of damaged roads, landslides and absence of communication facilities.



(Source: The Hindu, 20 June 2013)

The NIDM report stated that the impact of disaster was unfathomable not only for pilgrims but also for the local residents. The disaster termed as “Himalayan Tsunami” by media

caused widespread damage of the infrastructure, property, environment and loss of lives with resultant impact on the livelihoods and local economies. Large number of tourists and local inhabitants were stuck in the upper reaches of difficult mountain terrain of Himalayas (NIDM, 2015).

The NIDM report further says that a huge number of traders, taxi and bus operators, and hotel and restaurant owners lost their livelihoods. This loss has also posed a threat of forced out migration in the region. Poor socio-economic conditions, either due to loss of environmental sustainability or degradation of natural resources, and inadequate avenues of alternative livelihood and prospects of local economic development, along with marginalization, non-access to goods and services, illiteracy and ignorance, govern people's preparedness and capacity to withstand a disaster.

Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) has identified around 2,395 landslides in the watersheds of Mandakini, Alaknanda and Bhagirathi Rivers (nrsc/ISRO, 2013). Out of total landslides almost 200 were between Kedarnath and Gaurikund. Road network and communication links were badly affected. The official data recorded over 900 human deaths and 5748 persons missing (PTI, 2013). The unofficial estimate was above 10,000 fatalities. Infrastructural facilities like Roads, bridges, power supply, water supply system, telecommunication towers, hotels and houses in Uttarakhand were severely damaged. Most of the damage took place in Rudraprayag, Chamoli, Uttarkashi and Pithoragarh districts. The official value of lost infrastructure was valued ten billion rupees. The government data shows that 145 bridges were swept away and roads were damaged at 2300 locations. Landslides blocked the major national highways heading towards Char Dham and Hemkund Sahib (Chopra, 2014, p. 15).

The floods destroyed the entire tourism infrastructure and abruptly halted the main tourist season. Several residential houses and hotel buildings submerged in the flood waters in Rudraprayag, Chamoli and Uttarakashi districts. Garhwal Mandal Vikas Nigam (GMVN), the state-owned corporation, faced a huge loss as its tourist rest houses at Chandrapuri, Syalsaur, Birahi and Kaudiyala were severely got affected due to the flood. In 2013-14 the estimated

revenue loss of the state from tourism was more than 120 billion rupees which was expected to rise to 200 billion rupees in 2014–15 (Chopra, 2014, p. 16).

TABLE 4: PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT OF THE UTTARAKHAND DISASTER 2013

S No	Nature Of Damage	Numbers
1	Affected persons	5 lakhs (approx)
2	Affected villages	4,200
3	Severely affected villages	over 300
4	Persons injured	4,463
5	Number of dead persons	over 900*
6	Number of missing persons	5,748
7	Number of pukka houses damaged	2,679
8	Number of kuccha houses damaged	681
9	Number of animals lost	8,716
10	Number of roads destroyed	2,302
11	Number of bridges washed away	145
12	Number of drinking water schemes damaged	1,418
13	Number of villages without power	3,758

(Source: Chopra, 2014)

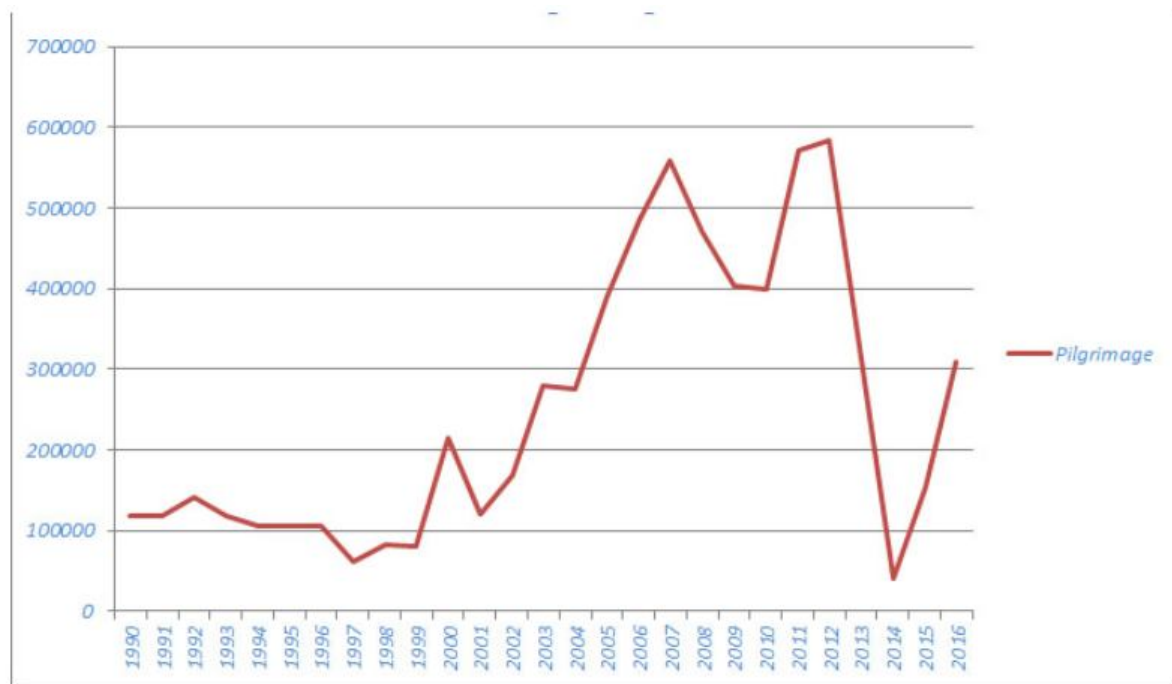
Rescue operation ended on 2nd of July, 2013 after 17 days of enormous work with the evacuation of over 1,10,000 people (Kumar, 2013). After the repeated spells of heavy rainfall, the continuing floods and landslides destroyed the different parts of the state during the rainy season.

Tourists Arrival in Kedarnath

In the year 2018, over 7.30 lakh devotees visited Kedarnath, the highest footfall to the shrine in almost four decades as per the government officials. The highest number of pilgrims to visit the shrine before this year was 2012, when 5.83 lakh people came to Kedarnath. Kedarnath has seen a continuous increase in pilgrims over the decades except for a few years following the 2013 flash floods when arrivals dipped drastically. In 2014, only 40,832 pilgrims visited the shrine (Singh, 2018). Number of tourist's arrival in Kedarnath in last one decade has been depicted in the following chart:

Year	Number of Pilgrims	Percentage Change
2008	4,70,084	-
2009	4,03,636	-14.13
2010	4,00,014	-00.89
2011	5,71,583	42.89
2012	5,83,176	02.02
2013	3,12,201	-46.46
2014	40,832	-86.92
2015	1,54,430	278.20
2016	3,09,746	100.57
2017	4,71,235	52.13
2018	7,30,054	54.92

(Source: bdadarikedar.org)



(Source: www.sacredyattra.com)

Future Roadmap and Planning & Promotional Strategy

Tourism in Kedar valley needed a sustainable development approach with keeping three dimensions in mind i.e. optimal and sustainable use of environmental resources, long term economic operations and socio-cultural authenticity of host communities. The interpretation of sustainability can be taken into four different ways that include ecological sustainability, economic sustainability, environmental sustainability and finally sustainable tourism as a part of sustainable tourism planning (Ahmed, 2013). The local community participation in tourism development leads to the equitable sharing of benefits along with strong incentives to conserve natural resources which further leads to the greater opportunities for poverty alleviation (Bhandari, 2014).



Aerial view of Kedarnath after recovering from the disaster.

(Source: NDTV)

Soon after the disaster, the reconstruction of Kedarnath valley began with the help of Government of India to rehabilitate the people who lost their earning and family members. Main reason behind this quick rebuilding was that this region of the state is mainly dependent on tourism pilgrimage tourism for its survival and livelihood. The Char Dham Yatra not only provides financial support to the locals living en-route to Kedarnath but also gives huge

revenue to the state. So it was obligatory for the government to take necessary steps to restart this yatra as earliest possible as it is considered the backbone of state's economy.

A prestigious Himalayan institute known as Nehru Institute of Mountaineering (NIM) was finally given the responsibility of rebuilding work. The 22 kilometres long hilly stretch from Sonprayag to Kedarnath has been divided into two parts i.e. Sonprayag to Rambara and Rambara to Kedarnath shrine. NIM was assigned to build the second part as it was difficult to access. Rebuilding of the first stretch from Sonprayag to Rambara was the responsibility of government agencies. The landslides and floods had destroyed the old pedestrian route above Rambara. It was impossible to rebuild it. So the old route was altered and construction of a new trek started on the opposite side of the mountain. The flood of 2013 had left many broken, weak and destroyed public and private structures like hotels, shops and homes in front of the main shrine. All these structures had to be demolished to clear the area for executing a new plan. To save the 1,200-year-old Kedarnath shrine from any serious damage the team carried out their work using hammers and iron rods instead of blasting. Due to all these serious efforts a new and fresh looking route (more than 20 kilometres long) from Sonprayag to temple town came in existence. New resting camps have been constructed and few old ones were vanished. A few km from Gaurikund a new infrastructure called Junglechatti was developed which earlier did not exist. Rambara was totally washed away in flash flood. To give an alternative pilgrim camp, Lencholi was developed just a few km before the shrine of Kedarnath - with new huts, shops and public facilities (Joshi, 2016).

The government came with a two-phase strategy to restore and rebuilt the Kedarnath temple area. In the first phase, the government decided to construct a protection walls behind the Kedarnath temple, re-channelizing Saraswati and Mandakini rivers and taking flood control measures. It was decided that the restoration work of the temple will only be done by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). In the second phase, it was decided that the government would develop a new township at Lyncholi and also a ropeway from Lyncholi to Kedarnath. All those buildings marked unsafe at Kedarnath complex will be demolished. The work on the stabilization of slopes will be more focused. To cover the 3-4 km stretch between

the ropeway and the shrine, the government is also mulling an idea to introduce electric cars at Kedarnath for pilgrims (Prashant, 2014).



(Source: Sacredyatras.com)

Kedarnath Town 2019

A master plan was drafted by Uttarakhand government for the planned development of Kedarnath to ensure that the natural calamities do not affect the temple and its surrounding areas in the future. Expected cost of this master plan was nearly Rs 250 crore and it has to be shared by the central and state government. The cabinet of the state government has also prohibited any public and private construction behind the temple (The Indian Express, 22 July 2015).

To improve the accessibility to *Char Dham* (shrines), a two lane expressway known as all weather roads has currently been under construction in the state. The project, named as *Char Dham Mahamarg Vikas Pariyojana* (Char Dham Highway Development Project), divided into 7 Packages and comprising 9 destinations has been proposed to develop a national highway of 889 km long to connect whole of Uttarakhand state. The total cost of this project is rupees 11,700 crores which includes the construction of 15 big flyovers, 2 tunnels, 3596 culverts, 101 small bridges and 12 bypass roads. It is presented as a facilitator to pilgrimage

and recreational tourism which will boost the economy of the state. Another big reason for constructing and giving nod to this project is the connectivity of highway to the India-China border (SANDRP, 2018).

The work is on full swing to complete the various reconstructions and development works in Kedarnath. Various departments and agencies are working on the flood protection walls along Saraswati and Mandakini rivers. Pilgrims arriving in Kedarnath are appreciating the effects of regularised helicopter service, the widened path to the shrine, decongested surroundings and improved boarding and lodging facilities. The 380 metre long and seven metre high flood safety wall along the Mandakini River is nearly complete. A path, solar lighting, benches and railings are to be constructed along this wall. The condition of the bridle path to Kedarnath too has been improved and being regularly monitored. If the works continue at the current pace, the experience of undertaking a pilgrimage to Kedarnath could be improved further and made more convenient and secure by next year (The Pioneer, 2018).

Conclusion & Recommendations

Although soon the after disaster government adopted a model of rapid reconstruction of the Kedar valley but that is neither equitable nor sustainable. Despite of knowing the disaster-proneness of the state, preparedness for the disaster has not been seriously considered in development policies and programs. Poor governance has triggered the impact of disaster. Instead of rapid deforestation state needs more afforestation for healthy ecosystem. Farming should be the priority of economic development to ensure the livelihood of mountain dwellers.

It is believed that post-disaster relief work, rehabilitation measures and reconstruction activities are expensive which divert the limited resources meant for development purposes. The National Policy on Disaster Management, 2009 made a change from the earlier “relief-centric response to a proactive prevention, mitigation and preparedness-driven approach for conserving developmental gains and to minimize loss of life, livelihood and property” (NDMA, 2009). Tourism and hydropower development are two major sources of revenue for

the state, but they also affect a large population. Hence sustainability and safety are the key concerns while developing hydropower projects and tourism related infrastructure.

Religious and pilgrimage tourism has been vigorously promoted by the state to generate large revenues. Each year, assembling of a million pilgrims in the limited space of five major shrines may lead to a potential disaster risk. After the disaster of June 2013, there was a huge concern on limiting and keep checking on the number of pilgrims visiting to the shrines. Limiting the number of pilgrims may give a sustainable and safer livelihood to the local residents who depend on the Char Dham yatra. Tourists should be motivated and dispersed throughout the state to visit round the year by promoting and giving choices of more tourism destinations. Community based tourism should be promoted for alternate livelihoods. Their youth can work as a guide explaining and introducing the scenic locations, local food, culture and history. The home stay concept can replace building resorts and hotels. Community-based tourism can lead sustainable and equitable tourism. To attract visitors towards fair and festivals or local customs and food, a cultural tourism model can be designed. Another aspect of tourism i.e. Ecotourism should also be promoted to make visitors more responsible towards local environment and communities (Chopra, 2014, p. 29).

Roads are basic necessity not only for improving accessibility but also for economic growth. But in the fragile region of Himalaya road construction is critical and dangerous. It causes deforestation, landslides and increases slope instability. There is a serious need of constructing safer and green roads in the fragile Himalayan region (GBPIHED, 2010). In the steep short stretches ropeways are useful alternatives to roads. The UN General Assembly has recommended five major pillars of sustainable tourism development: (1) sustainable economic growth; (2) social inclusiveness, employment and poverty reduction; (3) resource efficiency, environmental protection and climate change; (4) cultural values, diversity and heritage; and (5) mutual understanding, peace and security (Bricker, 2018). The topography and geographical location of Uttarakhand renders it ecologically fragile state. Therefore state leadership needs to keep this fact in mind while introducing the development plans.

Afforestation for ecological sustainability is recommended as a vision of green development of mountain state. It must be ensured that the ecological livelihood should ensure

remuneration for mountain dwellers. Farming and mountain agriculture need a technical advancement and revival in a sustainable manner. While developing hydropower projects or tourism related activities safety and security must be given prime concern. Lessons should be taken from the 2013 tragedy especially in the context of man-made problems and the repeated concerns of climate change. Ecologically, equitable and sustainable development is the basic requirement for disaster mitigation. Governments must realize that the local people and civil society organizations must be an active partner to fight with future climatic problems as they alone cannot take adequate measures (Chopra, 2014, p. 37).

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