

from the editor-in-chief

Nature's Unique Cybernetics The Valley of Flowers

I have some enduring relationship with Himalayas' *Bhyundar* micro-biosphere in the upper reaches of the river *Alaknanda* (Uttaranchal). Here, nature has carefully nursed a wondrous rock-garden where 'full many a flower is born to blush unseen'. As the rains come they burst forth in myriad shades and colours and mysteriously disappear from the scene as winter descends on the landscape.

Frank Smythe's serendipitous climb of Kamet (1931) revealed the existence of this floral bonanza that he named 'the Valley of Flowers' (3660 m). To Hindus, it has been a forbidden land of elves and fairies (*Nandankaran*). With Holdsworth, a British botanist, Smythe undertook taxonomic search for synecological findings. He identified over 2000 plants that belonged to garden genera; many of them were rare medicinal herbs (Smythe 1947). He grew inquisitive to know their amazing cycle of growth; the splendour of high mountain flora, their mosaic of colour and marvellous rhythm of nature. He wondered whether some one knows why purple *orchis* loves the near presence of thistle or for example, what interacting effect of nourishment do *Fertillaries* exercise upon *Potentillas* – that one dies enlivening the other; or do silver birch trees have any food chain impact on these wild flowers; why, after all, some plants love to grow in water-runnels whereas others choose the rock shades or peat-moulds. The queering ecosystems of the Valley was baffling; much as the web of life appeared to be very complex where links are bewildering as each specie is suited to its particular environmental niche and each through its life-process affects the physical and chemical properties of its immediate environment. The Valley's spectrum changes fast; the visitor who has witnessed the sight in July will find a different scene in August; September may be an autumnal glory (Singh and Kaur 1980). Such rare peripheries in nature are, indeed, too good for tourism and should be protected against human intrusion. Once their natural cybernetics is disturbed or meddled with, the Valley of Flowers one day may cease to awaken after its snowy slumber, and the heavenly blue scented *Primulas*, red *Potentillas*, golden *Eritrichiums*, creamy *Anemones*, blue *Mecanopsis* and pink *Geraniums* will perhaps be too shy to blush again to the spoilt environment.

Imbued by Smythe's inspiring account of the *Bhyundar* environment (1932;1947), I visited the famous Valley in 1977 when I was directing Himalayan Institute of the Garhwal University. It was an iconic experience. From the highly perched *Govindghat* bus-stop, the 16 km trek to the Valley was supernal and solitary, punctuated by grand waterfalls, green groves ringing with sonorous sounds and misty mountain wind that produced vital feelings of delight. Close by, the *Bhyundar* roared in white waters. It was indeed a soul nourishing

experience. As I came closer to the destination, I witnessed a 'mighty world of eyes and ears'. Flowers and flowers everywhere that would not allow any human access, without crushing the tender beauty. It was an utter wilderness; road-less and resort-less. My own foot fall disturbed the well preserved silence of the virgin beauty. At a distance were *Bhotias* grazing their herds in an environment of perfect harmony.

Alas! things do not remain the same as 'each man kills the thing he loves'. Soon the Valley was put on sale and tourism ingressed into the fair work of nature with little control and management. Drifters and junkies found a haven in the sequestered Valley, while India's neo-rich invaded the sensitive environment with their boisterous lifestyle. Lemming syndrome ensued and there were many more gazers than the Valley could afford. Ill fared the land. Home to strange insects, butterflies and herbal plants, the collectors found unobstructed access for their trophies. Poaching was not uncommon and pilferage became a practice. The climax to this tragedy came in 1982 when euphoric foresters with high officers of border forces constructed helipads in the Valley to welcome Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India. Haphazard stone pathways were laid that undermined the Bhuyndar ecology. As a committed conservationist, Mrs. Gandhi announced two high altitude national parks in Garhwal (Uttaranchal); The Valley of Flowers and the Nanda Devi. The latter was closed for tourism though the Valley continued to host tourism to its detriment, affecting the naturalness of the ecosystem. I visited the Valley in 1982 again to ascertain landscape changes particularly the enchanting floral scene. To my shock there were few yellow *Potentillas* and fewer *Brahma-kamals* (*Saussurea obvallata*) to bloom; the latter is a large flower that locks heavenly incense in its golden petals; is held sacred by the Hindus. It shunned, surprisingly heights and moved to the cold waters of Hemkund lake (4392 m). Not many Himalayan poppies loved to peep through the mossy stones, as they did before.



For Garhwal Himalaya, 1982 was a momentous year: Visit of the Prime Minister, creation of two national parks, tourism banned in Nanda Devi Park; green felling declared illegal, people went to polls, Uttaranchal demanded. Picture: Mrs. Indira Gandhi releasing T.V. Singh's book: Tourism Wildlife Parks Conservation (1982)

Ghangaria, the last settlement on the route had developed into a 'Ghetto' with unseemly sites of shanties and indigenous cabanas, shedding off its bucolic serenity. Tourism had, indeed, spoiled the unspoilt, while nature's naked loveliness had put on ugly modernity.

Wilderness is the most fragile resource we have. That is one thing that man cannot replace, if he tears it apart. As fragile as wilderness itself is the wilderness experience. How to preserve that experience even as the number of those who seek increases (Olson 1975), should be the great challenge before resource managers of such natural heritage.

The cyber-world offers talismanic travel experiences by creating 'virtual reality' environments but these could hardly be the substitutes for the 'physical reality' experience – the one is full-blooded pulsating existence while the other is soulless verisimilitude, devoid of live senses of taste, touch and smell – 'at best a surrogate for travel' (Prideaux 2002).

The Aladdin factor (immersive TV, nanotube technology, CTV, Web etc.) makes it an alluring form of tourism to armchair travellers, seniors, physically disabled and other passive travellers but they too know that they are in a make-believe world, lacking interactivity, spontaneity and element of surprise that any peak consumer shall long for. The essence of tourism is movement; a

traveller must work hard for real life experience — 'have been there, did that' for his ego enhancement, happiness and for his physical and spiritual well-being. A Hindu scripture aptly prescribes:

*There is no happiness for him who does not travel;
Living in The society of men,
The best man often becomes a sinner;
For Indra is the friend of the traveller,
Therefore wander.*

Aitareya Brahmana VII.15

I share my happiness with TRR readers that the UNESCO has listed the Valley of Flowers as a World Heritage Site, this July 2005. The Valley now belongs to the world to perpetuate this extra-ordinary earth feature, to care for and to enjoy. Such nature monument are unique masterpieces of God's creation, to be protected, conserved and even cautiously preserved for posterity.

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