

Uttarakhand Tragedy – the Questions one prefers to Ignore
Dr Hippu Salk Kristle Nathan

One month has passed since the Uttarakhand tragedy. Every time a disaster strikes at a religious place or an eventful religious congregation, the sacrilegious question that pops up is – ‘where does it leave God?’ This question is valid for any disaster where innocent people are killed. But the question becomes timelier in tragedies like the one we witnessed at Kedarnath in Uttarakhand. People go to religious places to pray for their well-being, for their families and near and dear ones. Strange enough, but, in the process, they lose the very lives they are praying for.

In common perception God is the savior. He is credited with everything good. He can do no harm. So, whenever something wrong happens, like a natural calamity, it is attributed to human sins. God only has an indirect role in terms of punishing the humans for the sins committed. This stereotypical thought is not new. The Great Lisbon earthquake of 1755 is an example of natural calamity which had an impact on the cultural consciousness of Europe. This was one of the deadliest earthquakes in history, which had devastated the city and killed about one lakh people. Catholics attributed this tragedy to God's wrath caused by the sinfulness of the people of Portugal and the presence of some Protestants and Jesuits. Contrarily, Protestants blamed the Portuguese for being Catholic, thus being punished by God. It was the audacity of Voltaire that called this ill fate of the victims as accident; nothing more, nothing else.

Voltaire, the French Philosopher, was convinced that there existed no deity that would guide the virtuous and punish the sinful. The Lisbon tragedy triggered him to question the very existence of God. How could a just and compassionate God seek to punish sins through such terrible means? Voltaire argued that the all-powerful God could have prevented the innocent suffering with the sinners, reduced the scale of destruction, and made his purpose for greater good clearer for mankind. Voltaire was not the only one to voice this. Historically, similar such voices are clubbed under atheistic views. These views remained in minority and often dominated by the superstitious views resulting out of the duplicity of the knave and simplicity of the fool.

Superstitions thrive because people's minds are generally made up ones. Psychologists say most of the time people believe what they want to believe. The 1995 episode of 'Ganesh Idol drinking milk from pious people' is a case in point. Scientists were prompt to offer an explanation and demonstrate the physical principles of surface tension and capillary action behind this so called incredible phenomenon. But there were not many takers. People wanted to believe this as a miracle for the day even if the fact remained that not only by a Ganesh Idol but any material which exhibits this property would absorb milk or any liquid offered by both pious and impious men and women, on any day, at any time.

So, despite knowledge, circumstance, evidence, and scientific reasoning, people believe in what they want to believe. They give credit to God if something good happens; they don't equally blame Him if something goes wrong. Rather, in a disaster situation, if they are relatively better off, again the credit goes to God through some deity. I remember, as a post graduate student, after the 1999 Odisha super cyclone, people credited Lord Jagannath for saving Puri, which escaped the worst. People forgot to ask the pertinent question, why in spite of the abode of most famous deity of the State, the Lord Jagannath, significant part of Odisha suffered from the super cyclone—the deadliest Indian storm since 1971? Where does it leave Lord Balabhadra and Maa Sarala, the respective deities of Kendrapara and Jagatsinghpur—the two districts of Odisha which got worst affected in the cyclone? If people who survived, were saved because of the grace of God; what about those who died? Is God relevant only in survival, only in happiness?

People don't ask uncomfortable questions. Media too plays foul. In case of the current Uttarakhand tragedy, some reporters showed in round the clock channels how because of God, miraculously, the temple was saved. They don't ask as how the same God could not save scores of innocent devotees! People have a resistance to face any contrary ideas to their status quo. Authorities cash on this psyche. Instead of eradicating blind beliefs, they reinforce them by conducting Pujas and Yagnas after each such mishaps, be it a stampede with few casualties or a mega disaster like this Uttarakhand tragedy. Instead of addressing the issue of the destruction of green cover on our moun-

tains, political parties are competing with each other in making announcements to shoulder the responsibilities to rebuild the Kedarnath Shrine. India's leadership wants to perpetuate blind beliefs, partly because they are the product of the same system, and partly because it is an easy route to votes.

If God is all-powerful and simultaneously compassionate, then justice must have prevailed. But injustices happen all the time, all around us. Martin Luther King Jr, the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, once said 'Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere'. If God is not to be blamed for these injustices and it is the human beings who have to work towards resolving them, where is the need for God? Rather concept of God itself creates confusion and complicates things and leads to more injustice. India's atheist activist Gora in his essay 'God and Government' wrote "When people's attention is divided between god and government, they are more habituated to raise their hands in prayer to god for food and peace than to hold the ways of their government responsible for unemployment and insecurity. Professional politicians slyly divert the attention of the people from politics to religion in order to avoid the popular gaze on their omissions, on their personal gains. This is a deliberate mischief. People are thus deceived."

So what stops us to invoke a debate on the superstitions, religious intoxications, and relevance of deities and God? Should we not question the rationale of lakhs of people visiting these places on daily basis? Why the norm of compulsory travel to Char Dham in case of Hindu, and Haj in case of Muslim is allowed to prevail? Can't this huge energy of people be alternatively channelized in their own neighbourhoods in helping the underprivileged and contributing towards a more equitable society – which every religion aims at? These are some of the fundamental questions which need attention and deep introspection.

The author is with National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore.

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