Usually, the month of June is abuzz with activity in the hill state of Uttarakhand as it receives tourists and pilgrims from different parts of the country to some of the holy shrines especially Badrinath and Kedarnath. This constant influx of people gives a boost to tourism in the state which over the years has become the mainstay of the local people.

This year, the bliss of the land was devastated by the monsoons that struck on June 17 triggering a Himalayan Tsunami, and leaving thousands of people stranded. Many perished to the fury of the floods and lots more are still missing! More than 450 villages have been completely washed off.

On June 21, Oxfam India announced an emergency relief response in the flood affected areas of Uttarakhand. Working through two of its existing partners – Jan Vikas Sansthan (JVS) and Himalayan Paryavaran Sanrakshan Samiti (HPSS), Oxfam India launched its relief operation.

Oxfam India relief teams continue to operate from Chirbitiya in Guptkashi located in Rudraprayag district. Oxfam food rations like rice, dal, flour, oil, spices and candles and match boxes have been airdropped through helicopter to people in inaccessible villages in Guptkashi. Mules and horses are being used to cover the interior villages. ORS sachets have also been distributed in the worst affected villages in Uttarakhand. So far Oxfam India has reached out to 1200 households. The plan is to cover 2000 flood-affected households in the next one month.

Uttarakhand is one of Oxfam India’s seven focus states and Oxfam India is committed to go beyond the relief operations and provide long term program support to the state.

Oxfam India’s goal is not only to re-build homes, provide food assistance and save lives but also to ensure safe drinking water, shelter, safety for women and restoration of livelihood to the affected.

There are families that have lost their chief wage earning male member leaving the women and children totally vulnerable.

As efforts are on to re-build Uttarakhand, the debate that arises is that could this crisis have been averted? Scientists, local people and environmentalists have been shouting at the top of their voices for a Himalayan policy for development. But these voices have been trampled in the cacophony of an unscientific construction boom.

In the Alaknanda and Bhagirathibasins of Uttarakhand, 70 hydroelectric projects are under construction with a severe impact on more than 9000ha of forest land. A report of the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) in 2012 recommended that 24 such projects should be scrapped. The government ignored the report as well as the pleas of grass root movements, affected people, technical experts or even recommendations made by forest advisory committees. It gave environment clearances to these projects, flouting environment and social safeguards.

To aid construction of dams, developers built wider roads with frequent blasting, leaving cracks inside the young mountains. The tourism industry also helped write the script for disaster by facilitating mushrooming of hotels, sometimes putting multi-storey buildings in pristine areas, on the river beds and on top of unstable slopes.

The saga of development based on the unscientific construction industry, be it in the name of energy, roads or tourism, leads to doom, as shown by the Uttarakhand floods.

It’s time to pause and plan for ‘real development’ in the hills. Science and technology, the traditional wisdom of the communities to build a sustainable, and prosperous state.

Story Credit: Inputs from Vanita Suneja, Economic Justice Lead Specialist, Oxfam India
In September 2000, world leaders came together at the United Nations (UN) Headquarters in New York to adopt eight international development goals to eradicate poverty and strengthen development. These Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) outlined a series of time-bound targets - with a deadline of 2015.

With 2015 fast approaching, the world is rethinking the next set of development goals. The post-2015 framework offers an opportunity to take corrective action. The UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon is preparing the vision for post-2015 for consideration by the General Assembly in September 2013. To make the process highly consultative, he appointed a 27 member high-level panel comprising representatives of civil society, private sector, and government leaders from all regions in July last year, to advise on the global development agenda beyond 2015. The report submitted by this panel set out a universal agenda for eradicating extreme poverty by 2030, and delivering on the promise of sustainable development.

The UN initiated a global survey – MYWorld – to capture common people’s voices, priorities and views. The survey questionnaire had 16 issues mentioned on it and it asked individuals to pick their top six priorities that would bring the maximum difference to their lives. The 16 points were built from the priorities expressed by poor people in existing research and polling exercises coupled with issues of sustainability, security, governance and transparency.

Oxfam India partnered with the UN to carry out this survey amongst community members in 13 states across India. Oxfam India collected 11,565 responses, directly from community members. The respondents had a mix of women (52 per cent) and men (48 per cent) and were in the 18-34 years age bracket. A sizable 57.6 per cent (primarily males) had either completed or gone through some primary level education.

Good education ranked top most receiving 82.4 per cent votes. Better job opportunities came next with a 72.6 per cent and better healthcare followed third with 65.6 per cent votes amongst both women and men respondents.

An interesting observation is that while men and women responded similarly in their pick for the top 3 priorities, ‘equality between men and women’ and ‘protection against crime and violence’ were ranked much higher by women than by men. This mirrors the state of mind of women in India who continue to be discriminated and abused.

Lower down in the priority matrix were better transport and roads with 29.2 per cent votes, reliable energy at home with 20.5 per cent votes and internet access with 11.6 per cent votes.

As the world prepares to frame the next set of MDGs, it will be important to bear people’s voices in mind. If the world is to indeed change post-2015, some of these issues need to be addressed with renewed dedication and commitment.

Story Credit: Deepak Xavier, Essential Services Theme Lead, Oxfam India.
Rapes have gone from page 1 to page 7 in newspapers

Rahul Bose

Time Magazine may have described him as the ‘Superstar of Art Cinema in India’, but Rahul Bose is not just a thinking woman’s man. In the backdrop of the recently concluded World Bank and Oxfam India conference on gender based violence in Kathmandu, the social activist and ambassador for Oxfam India, Rahul Bose gets talking to TOI about why much more needs to be done post December 16 and why people who lambast films for promoting harassment are myopic. Excerpts.

Post December 16 has thrown open a lot of dialogues on the issue on violence against women in India like never before in India. However, from a critical perspective is enough happening?

Rapes were happening every 22 minutes in India prior to December 16 and they continue unabated. However, once in a while certain factors come together in society like anger against political society and establishments, consciousness among youngsters, etc and there occurs an event that sparks it. Like in 26/11 when more than 2.5 lakhs of Mumbaikars came out on the streets shouting slogans and not just because of the blasts. However, the sad reality is that even an incident like the Nirbhaya rape doesn’t stop total ignorance about rapes in small towns. They are still ignored. Already rapes have gone from page 1 to page 7. We’ve seen misogyny from political parties and political in the weeks after that.

A speaker in conference commented that Bollywood films promote harassment...

No easy answer to this. Yes, the whole idea of an unwilling woman made into a willing woman within span of a song is reprehensible and misogynistic. However, watching cinema prompts a man to go rape and kill is as dangerous, incorrect and myopic as saying that watching films forces people to smoke. Chinese farmers are the heaviest smokers but which Hollywood film have they seen? It’s very easy to make cinema the punching bag. The real hard work of changing attitudes has to happen at school. If attitudes start changing from the ground, your films will reflect the change. Of course there’s still no reason to show ‘chher chhhad’ and item songs but saying that’s the reason behind violence against women would be at the very minimum a gross exaggeration.

But there are studies by industrial bodies like the ASSOCHAM that show violent video games, promote violent behavior among kids and have negative effects on their psyche.

So what? Has increased exposure to pornography resulted in more men disrobing women? It’s ridiculous. All of these factors go into human psyche along with a million other things but there’s also civilizing influence of society which is why you don’t watch an action film, go out, buy a gun and start shooting people. However should we have violent video games and give guns to our kids to play with? Absolutely not. Self regulation is important.

Some activists called for changes in the school curriculum to address the issue of gender sensitivity?

You can’t have a class on gender sensitization without teachers who understand the issue themselves. Gender sensitization need not be in a formal syllabus. It can be inculcated immediately without rocking the political establishment or lobbying in the powers of corridor. If it was imposed then it would be anyone and everyone just coming in, speaking anything and leaving. I’d rather have children not be told than be told something wrong.

The whole misogynistic attitude towards women starts pretty early with the latest Census 2011 showing female child sex ratio being skewed in some areas to dangerous levels. How serious are we today in dealing with child sexual abuse?

In a few years time when the next generation would have grown up, it would be a very ‘Matrubhoomi’ kind of situation. Already reverse dowry has started in some parts like Punjab and Haryana. The act (PCSOA) may have been passed last year but socially miles to go before we can address the problem. Going by government survey of 2007, of 12,500 children 54% had reported molestation or worse. This generates a staggering figure of 250 million or worse. It’s a deeply disturbing and uncomfortable issue that society tends to neglect as it recognises that it’s the edge of evil. Even counselors don’t do child sexual abuse (CSA) counseling anymore. They are more into the fashionable kind of counseling.

Does your social outlook towards things in general influence the way you choose films?

It’s a bit of both. I do films because they are great films like the over-the-top Biswaroopam where the Al Qaeda villain dies because of radioactivity. But sometimes the two come together in a happy way like a Mr and Mrs Iyer. The Japanese wife doesn’t have a message per se, it has a humanist message. Filmmakers like Fellini, Truffaut, De Sica etc all had humanist messages. You aren’t aware but women are treated well in a subliminal way in their films.

But ‘I Am’ was one of the most difficult roles to play. It was only as an actor that I could go to that place of fear and degradation. In real life it would have devastated me.

(Reproduced from the Times of India)
DONOR SPEAKS

DHAWAL SHETHWALA
Ahmedabad

I had been donating funds to many NGOs but I feel Oxfam is one of the social development organizations which is really focusing on all aspects of humankind and is helping needy people and uplifting them for their better future. I really appreciate Oxfam and wish them great success for a long term.

RAJESH DAMODHARAN
Jaipur

“A helping hand is better than praying lips” – very true.

I was personally touched by this quote and got associated with Oxfam India, whose mission is to create a just, fair and equitable society. The best way to reach the needy is to make sure that we have the right contacts in place to help us reach there. Oxfam India has been definitely a good bridge to cover the gap between me and the needy society. I will continue to support the society through Oxfam India.

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