

Volume

1

HEMKUNT SAHIB

During the Uttrakhand Disaster

Sikhs under Adverse Conditions

From the great tragedy of Utrakhand , there emerged a small ray of hope , a great positive story of about 4000 odd Sikh Pilgrims trapped at 11,000 ft at Gobind Dham or Ghagharia for more than a week. Trapped at 11,000 ft, with all walking tracks washed away, jungle all around and very limited hope of rescue could have easily turned the situation into another of many tragic stories which came out of the great disaster and flooding which unfolded. However the organized approach which was taken, Controls established and most importantly ensuring absolutely NO PANIC turned the tables and made this into a huge success. Most of the tragic casualties in Utrakhand were due to the panic and stampede and in this particular episode all of this was avoided by sheer determination and will. There was NO looting of any Gurudwara money , on the contrary the main “Golak” was kept in open and people every day used to put money in it !

Key to all this was the Gurudwara Sahib at Gobind Dham which helped to organize and galvanize most of the activities. Gurudawara Sahib along with the Sikh Pilgrims centralized and imposed controls, rationing, ensuring FREE FOOD through out, providing shelter to another for the ENTIRE time. While Indian Army specially the brave Garhwal Scouts had their hands full trying to evacuate huge number of pilgrims at the base camp of Gobind Ghat, help at Gobind Dham could only be reached and that too very limited after about 4-5 days. The Indian Army eventually managed to rescue EVERYONE all the 4000 odd people and there were no casualties and huge tribute goes to the brave soldiers of Indian Army. However large part of the efforts of Indian Army was to supplement the already organized procedures and process put in place by Pilgrims themselves as they had dug in to wade this huge calamity out. There was also a small permanent detachment of Indian Army Sikh regiment soldiers who helped to establish control and provided much needed support as well.

It brought out the bravery , unwavering faith and self-reliance of the Sikh community as this whole episode was unfolding.. A community long used to hardships and yet possessing unshaken belief in the timeless Lord . A community possessing great ability to overcome hardships and disaster by their sheer ability and self-reliance. A community that has never requested help , but has always been at the forefront of giving help, a community that has stood up

to foreign invasions time and time again going back from Alexander to ruthless Abdali Shah. A community having the highest number of Victoria Crosses ever earned by the Indian Army during WWII . The Indian Army in modern times is composed of 15 % of Sikhs despite being just 2% of the entire India population. A community that very firmly believes in self-reliance and a refusal to let dependency dominate their destiny.

The author was rather “fortunate” to be there when the great tragedy unfolded, if nothing else to witness how the events transpired and when it did, how Sikhs reacted to it. The author along with his family had decided to take a trip to Hemkunt Sahib, hoping to beat the rains resolved to attempt to take the pilgrimage around the week of June 19th . However as destiny played out, rains followed along with the trip.



Leg1 -

We took a flight from Mumbai to Chandigarh and were met by family at the airport and that same day we started off towards Rishikesh for a night halt. We reached comfortably and stayed with friends. However, the downpour continued, which worried us since we had prepared for everything except for rains! The next day we reached Joshimat and the following day morning we reached Gobind Ghat and started our climb. By mid-afternoon we reached the 10 km mark when the rainfall turned torrential. We assumed this was normal pre-monsoon conditions and it would eventually settle down. Unfortunately, we were in for a surprise because the rain never stopped. For the next 3 days it was completely a torrential rain. By evening we reached Gobind Dham (at 11,000 ft) and settled in for the night.

Leg 2 (Day1 of rains , Sikhs view of situation) -

Not to be deterred by the rains we, along with the Sikh Sangat got up in the morning, packed our bags with the necessary clothes and all needed to have a dip in the holy lake, donned “Barsati” (local polythene rain coats) in the and moved on. To our horror, when we reached the point of crossing at the Alankanda from

Gobind Dham , we found the bridge had been washed away and the river was in full fury. The visual power of the water was just amazing and the sound was deafening. Our hearts sank as we realized we might not get to do “Darshan” of such a beloved place for which we had come so far. With nothing else to do we went back to our resting place.

Here we saw first hand the reaction of how “Sikhs” view adversity. There was absolutely NO Panic. Not a soul had any fear. There were about 4,000 people in Gobind Dham from **the very young to very old**. No one was thinking of going anywhere, but the constant question was how soon and **who can repair this bridge** so we can cross and go up.

Great Dilemma:



In contrast was the reaction of the local population, mule owners had started to move or run towards Gobind Ghat 13 km down. They were rightly concerned about the safety of their animals and knew what was in store. By 10 a.m., it became clear that on this day movement upwards was not possible. This put us all in a great dilemma, should we also go down ? is there something the locals know which we donot ? Should we risk our families lives to stay for another day just to get Darshan ?

Some people started to go down towards Gobind Ghat as well , but very soon when they reached the main bridge which connects Gobind Ghat (base) to Gobind Dham, they realized that it had been washed away as well. A bridge which had withstood every calamity SINCE it was built in 1940's was washed away ! This meant that Sikh Pilgrims at Gobind Dham was now TRAPPED at 11,000 ft. This was a terrible turn of events indeed because

- a) People have clothes and most importantly MONEY for only 2 to 3 days. Now no one knew how long will they would be stranded.
 - b) Among the stranded were the most vulnerable – very young and old.
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- c) In such a remote location everything including medicines is in short supply. At 11,000 feet the air is thin. Prospects for a quick rescue were not encouraging as well.
- d) With such a torrential downpour **clothes had already become wet** and there was no chance of them drying out anytime soon.
- e) Beyond 10,000 ft ALTITUDE Sickness starts to play a great role

Day 1-4 : Sikh Sangat Reaction and Organization

However Sikh Sangat just bravely looked upon this as a mere hiccup and lot of people were happy that now since they cannot go down they will manage to do Darshan!! What a magnificent reaction towards such a situation! Everyone's focus was when – when will we get to do Darshan and single-mindedly on that. This was coupled with the way Sikh Sangat organized themselves. There **was a central kitchen (Langar Sahib)** in Gurudwara Sahib that continued to function and serve FREE FOOD to everyone 24 hours a day. However Sikhs used to eat generally once a day at the Gurudwara Sahib and once a day they would eat from the local eating joints there, so as not to tax the Gurudwara Sahib. Only 2 things were available – Parathas and Maggi and every one got that . We did not hear even a SINGLE complain from anyone blaming anyone or their own misfortune! No one lamented that they had come so far for pilgrimage and to **find themselves refugees**. No one, not a soul complained like that.



By the end of the day, the extent of the calamity became known to everyone. Villages, towns, walking tracks everything washed away, nothing remained. People had used what ever 1-2 STD centers were still working to inform their relatives down below and decided to pitch camp and wait it out until the danger passed. No one panicked. Once, a bit of water came to Gurdwara Sahib and locals said “flooding is upon us “, but Sangat bravely

looked upon it as a normal collection of water, some made a few pathways for water to flow down. Sikh Sangat organized themselves in the following manner:

1. **Free food continued** to be served at the Gurudwara Sahib. ALL food dropped by the Army was also delivered ONLY to Gurdwara Sahib as a central location. This ensured that NO local establishment could overcharge. The locals soon realized that these were the last Jatha of people and so it was in their interest to soon finish off their stock of stuff and move down quickly. By the 2nd or 3rd day, the price of Barsati's had fallen!!. The price of Bisleri water continued to remain the same , contrast this with some stories we heard from other regions of Uttrakhand where things were not well organized and a single Bisleri went for 300 rs and Parathas went for 400 rs etc.
 2. We used to have generator and we used to run it 1 hour at night to listen to News. While TV channels were trying their best but it seemed they created more of a sensation and generally gave NO useful information on When,How will rescue come . Further it showed disastrous images of flooding and looting and all. **Seeing that the only positive thing which came to all was that relative to what was going on down below, we seemed to be doing relatively well. This gave us some comfort!!**
 3. People started harvesting rain water. The water system had all but broken down. For drinking, rain water was good and people used their Barsati to collect and channel it into buckets
 4. Old and very young people were asked not to move much and especially not to go into the rains. Able bodied people went about getting food and water and other things
 5. For bathroom and all normal water which was flowing down was used.
 6. Communication was very open. Whatever Gurdwara Sahib knew would be announced to Sangat in general.
 7. People helped each other as much as they could with money as everyone realized they were in this, and would and have to get out of this. Together.
 8. Rains had already wet most of the clothes of people. Every one used to ensure that they have at least 1 dry set of clothes. In their resting place they would change to that. If they had to go outside they would put on the wet set of clothes and simply start to walk. At 11,000 ft with temperatures near zero people would feel cold or catch frost bite etc, so to
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avoid that we would climb about 100 odd meters to warm our bodies and also the water in our clothes. That would then act as an insulator

9. Some people decided to walk out towards Gobind Ghat. That proved fatal as few of them **got trapped in the Jungle and lost their bearing**. It is very easy to lose your bearing in the jungle. In fact if ever lost in the jungle, probably the best way is to follow the river and reach some settlement
10. Only IDEA cell phone signals were working and NO OTHER cell phone was working. This meant that most of the STD phone booths were on pre paid Idea cards and very soon they ran out as well. However we had managed to convey to our families of how and where we were

Sun comes out and it clears

For next 3 days it rained mercilessly and on the 4th day when it cleared and the sun came out people came out of their resting places to survey. By then the tragedy at **Gobind Ghat** wherein the entire car parking had washed away was known.



Imagine losing your entire car, your sole mode of going back to your native place and along with it your belongings and other things and yet no one was complaining of that. Everyone was thinking beyond what to do next. How to file insurance claims and that was it. NO ONE was lamenting, no one was crying over losses. After many days of continuous rains, it had become clear to everyone that Darshan was not going to be possible and we would have to go back empty handed !

Building the Bridge by the Sikh Sangat Itself:

As the day progressed, it became clear that every land route was washed away and the only viable rescue was from helicopters, which would be very slow. With a capacity of 6 passengers per trip and 20 minutes per round trip, evacuation time would be 10 days!!

People came to the point where river had washed the upward bridge and saw the Nishan Sahib of Hemkunt Sahib flying from 15,000 feet on the top of the mountain! It felt SO, SO CLOSE and yet we were so, so far away from our destined place. Faced with this situation and the possibility that this weather clearing is only for next 2-3 days, **Sikh Sangat decided to build a bridge** to go upwards towards Hemkunt Sahib!!



Among the volunteers were no engineers but ordinary people from villages. Everyone set themselves to the task and soon Sangat organized itself into self-directed team. Some started to build to strengthen the base, some worked to clear paths etc. The bridge was built in the following manner.

1. The remnants of the bridge that had broken into 2 parts were taken and broken horizontally. This was carried to a down-river to a narrow point and thrown across.
2. Water pipes and were fixed into the river bed and tied the bridge base.
3. Then they created the handle of water pipes as well to move on
4. The bridge was strengthened by adding a few boulders to slow the flow of the river and some other places path of water was diverted BY HAND by placing boulders to let it flow away from the bridge.

Imagine doing all this by working as a community together as “Kar Seva” and also with NO TOOLS and no help from locals. Sangat used what ever they could find to build it and by end of the day the bridge was built !

Going towards Hemkunt Sahib and Darshan:

By evening the bridge was ready to go up. It was tested by women crossing over and back and people were very excited. However, the local Gurdwara Management Committee, very strongly advised AGAINST going upwards, probably rightly so as well. The Army also advised against it, but the iron will of Sikh Sangat was not to be deterred. The main risks were :

1. A glacier at 14,000 ft close to Hemkunt Sahib was opening up which meant the route could be closed or worse, could trap travelers at that height.
2. There were NO food or tea stalls along the way and the trek was a very steep 6 km.
3. **No mules guy were available to carry the young and old forcing them to make the journey on foot.**
4. In order to reach our destination by 10:30 am to participate in the Ardaas or the prayer, everyone must make a 5:00 a.m. start.

Regardless, we all decided to go no matter what. We found a “Pithoo” guy to help carry our daughter to Hemkunt Sahib. By night the rainfall resumed!!! It reminded me of a verse from Guru Granth Sahib

ਕਾਲ ਕਲਮ ਹੁਕਮੁ ਹਾਥਿ ਕਹਹੁ ਕਉਨੁ ਮੇਟਿ ਸਕੈ ਈਸੁ ਬੰਮੁ ਗੁਰੂ ਧਰਤ ਹੀਐ ਚਾਹਿ ਜੀਉ ॥
 kaal kalam hukam haath kahhu ka-un mayt sakai ees bamm-yu ga-yaan
 Dhayaan Dharat hee-ai chaahi jee-o.
 Death's pen and command are in Your hands. Tell me, who can erase it? Shiva and Brahma yearn to enshrine Your spiritual wisdom in their hearts.

Our spirits sank again, but WOMEN in our community said, now having come so close we WILL GO, no matter what. Not many people slept that night. By 5:00 a.m., people slowly trickled out to begin the upward trek. Seeing this galvanized others, and more and more and more people joined. By 6:30 nearly all had started their ascent.



All of us were carrying lot of weight, we carried biscuits, nuts, most importantly WATER which is very heavy, a change of clothes and medicines. Some people carried ROPES to help us traverse the glacier if necessary. Everyone encouraged one another and we all started moving up. At the glacier people helped each other to cross and by 10:00

a.m., lo and behold we had reached our beloved destination of Hemkunt Sahib.



Never before had we felt so accomplished as we did on that moment. It was defining moment, testimony to the brave and un-tiring spirits of Sikhs. It was a miracle in itself. We all paid our homage and did our prayers. Below in the valley we could see helicopters rescuing people but NO ONE wanted to leave. People took their own time, spent time in reflection, thanking the Almighty for helping us reach this place and do Darshan.

By afternoon we all reached down below to Gobind Dham where the helicopters were ferrying people across. People registered themselves. The evacuation was

1. There was NO stampede. People had a clear sense of who and how will the rescue take place. Stampede on seeing helicopters could have easily caused many casualties
2. Old and very young as first priority
3. Followed by people with families to keep them together
4. Followed by single young folks
5. There was only 1 casualty from the 4000 odd people and that too from Heart attack. Most of the people managed to get rescued eventually.

In the next few days after that most of us had got evacuated and reached Joshimat. We thanked the All Mighty for having made our pilgrim successful. For having kept us in His hands so wonderfully during this time and bringing us down safely.

Evacuation and further Donations given by Sikh Sangat

On reaching Joshimat, Sikh Sangat were asking the local Gurudwara people “How to donate money to the Gurudwara Sahib”!!! Imagine having lost most of your belongings and yet asking this question? People were saying on reaching Punjab they will send money as the regions needs it. That to me sounded like

pinnacle of generosity, losing everything and yet focused on giving and not taking. We spent a few days there and finally made our way to Chandigarh. This trip was a testimony and a test of spirits of brave people from that region. It brought out the best in that community and probably even showed that community how strong and capable and how common-sense oriented they are.

Lessons learnt for future calamities:

1. Respect the Mountains, they are beautiful but at the same time can be very dangerous as well . Plan for rain, cold, food and water. Have a emergency kit always.
 2. Always impose a central Authority, which should be the central point of that place, normally this can be the Temple Authorities or any local Administrative officer if around.
 3. Information should be free flowing and clear. When , How and if at all for rescue should be clear to all
 4. Plan for worst case scenario of how many days can be stuck, ration Food and most important Water from day 1
 5. Never try to wade out into Jungle , it is very easy to loose bearings. If lost generally try and follow a stream. Nights if clear can provide for stars with navigation. Learn to navigate using Sun or stars
 6. Evacuation process and procedure should be clearly spelled out and adhered too.
 7. Block out any sources of Panic. Situations always happen, how we deal with them is the key to survival.
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