

Why experts say new pit 50m from Kedarnath is dangerous

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Almost seven years after flash floods ravaged the Kedarnath valley in Uttarakhand, killing around 5,000 people, scientists have warned that conditions are developing for a similar tragedy to again unfold in the region. They have attributed this to the rampant redevelopment work happening in Kedarnath, especially pertaining to a 'samadhi sthal' (memorial site) for 8th century seer Adi Shankaracharya who is believed to have passed away at Kedarnath.

The manner in which works are being undertaken for the project is "a grave cause for concern", scientists have said. At a seminar held a few days ago at the Dehradun-based Wildlife Institute of India (WII) that was also attended by principal scientific advisor (PSA) to the PM, K Vijay Raghavan, scientists explained how the fragile ecology of Kedarnath was being disturbed.

Delivering a presentation, MPS Bisht, director of Uttarakhand Space Application Centre (USAC), an autonomous organisation under the state department of science and technology that works in association with Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), said, "Just 50 metres behind the Kedarnath temple, a pit has been dug that is 100 metres wide and 50 feet deep for building the 'samadhi sthal'. This pit may turn out to be extremely dangerous in future." The pit, if left uncovered, will fill up with snow every winter. In 2019, there was 48 feet of snow.

Bisht said, "We already have huge glaciers in that topography and on top of that we are digging such a huge pit. This is bound to disturb the fragile ecology of the region. We have been seeing increasing seismic activity and earthquakes. Why are we creating a situation for another disaster like the 2013 tragedy to take place again?"



A samadhi being built for 8th-century seer Adi Shankaracharya, who is believed to have passed away in Kedarnath, has caused concern among scientists that it will disturb the fragile ecology of the region (above); A satellite view of the Kedarnath region (right)



which means that any structure here is prone to avalanches and landslides."

Other scientists concurred. "Kedar means 'swamp land', and digging a 50 feet deep pit here will only invite trouble considering that there are glaciers nearby like Chorabari (whose bursting had triggered the 2013 disaster)," said a scientist from the Dehradun-based Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology. He added, "The road being built to Kedarnath is being made on the most vulnerable area of Kedarnath valley and may any day collapse under the pressure of so many glacier shoots which are directly opening on the road."

POINT OF CONTENTION

The 'samadhi' has a budget of

Raghavan, speaking to TOI, acknowledged that revelations provided by the scientists were "an eye-opener" and may be "tipping points." He said, "There are two types of environmental concerns — those which are slow and others which are tipping points. Tipping points happen because there is some major environmental change which has now reached its threshold. In both cases, it is important to analyse data and take action in a calm way."

State government officials passed the buck. "The construction work has been outsourced to an agency and it is their job to take all clearances including environmental ones," said Madan Kaushik, urban development minister and official spokesperson of the government.

Manoj Semwal, manager, Woodstone Construction, which is in-

Bisht cited another example of “unabated unscientific work in the valley.” He said, “There was earlier a road to the Kedarnath temple from the right bend of the Mandakini river. In the 2013 floods the road sustained heavy damages. Thereafter, a new 9 km-long road has been constructed but this is being made on the left bend of the river. This is completely unscientific. There was a reason why the original road was constructed on the right bend by our ancestors. This was because the left bend has ‘loose glacial sediments’

around Rs 20 crore, out of which Rs 10 crore has been spent till December 2019. Funds for the project are part of a Rs 60 crore corpus given by an industrial conglomerate under its CSR initiative. The project entails having a 3D statue of Adi Shankaracharya inside a round-shaped pit. Pilgrims will enter the pit, circumambulate the statue and exit from another gate towards Bhairon temple. A meditation space near the statue is also being built inside the pit

involved in redevelopment works in the Kedar valley, said, “Getting clearances is the government’s job, not ours.” He added that “as part of the team led by personnel of Nehru Institute of Mountaineering, we made the approach road to Kedarnath soon after the 2013 tragedy when no one was even able to reach here. At that time, all clearances were taken for the work. Now, we are just involved in the construction work of samadhi sthal. The government might have taken the clearances for this,” he added.