



THE DEATH OF A VALLEY

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My heart aches and tears swell up into my eyes – with profound grief I regret to inform about the sad and untimely demise of my beloved Doon Valley. A valley echoing, and reverberating with the gurgling sounds of the sulphurous springs, and swirling rivulets, blessed with the vagabond East Canal, meandering through the heart of the city, singing lullabies to innumerable wailing newborns like me. A haven for numberless species of birds, nestling in canopies of trees lining all major routes leading towards the city, fortified by the evergreen Shivaliks. A valley, tempting passersby with mango, litchi, jackfruit, jamun, guava, papaya groves, orchards and tea-gardens. An enchantress luring people by its mysticism and ‘Sahastradharas’. A peaceful, serene abode in the lap of the Himalayas for those engaged in the quest for the Eternal. A historical city where every monument had a story to narrate as exemplified in the Clock Tower, the heart of the city with its clocks ticking, and chiming, symbolical of a city throbbing, and pulsating with life, and activity. A place where the retired, elderly people lived in sprawling bungalows camouflaged by fruits trees, and where crime was minimal, is no more.

The Soul of the Valley has left for its heavenly abode and a pall of gloom has shrouded us. We are in mourning, left with a badly bruised, scarred, battered, mutilated, and disfigured listless body of our beautiful Valley. Man’s avariciousness in the garb of progression and development has taken a heavy toll on the already fading health of our frail city. An ecocide, the mindless slaughtering of innumerable trees which had been its crowning glory proved catastrophic. Depraved politicians, land mafias, and timber smugglers eventually smothered her to death making merry over their conquest. The void that has been created has made our lives miserable. Presently, we are existing in a “Wasteland” and the barrenness is glaring, and torturous. My ears are longing to hear the voice of the chirpy ‘Chidya’ which greeted me in flocks when I woke up in the morning. The wait is endless. The mesmerizing beauty of swaying eucalyptus trees lining the Eucalyptus road and, in the backdrop, black rainy, monsoon clouds is still etched up in my memory. Today, the Eucalyptus road sans the eucalyptus trees is a picture of desolation. The canopies of trees have vanished, and what confronts us is the gory sight of mutilated headless stumps of trees, reminiscences of past glory. An eerie silence prevails where there was a deafening noise of chattering birds. The silence of the birds, still nestling in a few trees luckily spared the axe is more heartrending, and heightens the immensity of our loss. What can be more opprobrious than the fact that even the forest encircling the Forest Research Institute has conspicuous bald patches! And the bamboo jungle is a mere replica of its past majesty. The plight of the forest cover of the Shivaliks is even more lamentable. It has been ravaged by timber smugglers, and vested interests of timber merchants. The destruction has been accelerated by indiscreet felling of trees by the Van Gujjars who have cleared large tracts of land for their habitation.

Within the city itself, trees which have survived the genocide have actually been given a new lease of life by the timely intervention of some alert citizens as exemplified in the agitation of the sports persons who prevented the slaughtering of trees around Parade Ground [for some time at least!]. Agitation is still continuing to save the forest area around the Jolly Grant Airport with its exquisite flora and fauna, and it being a natural habitat of many endangered species of animals. It is just a matter of time before the vultures would gorge upon it making a feast of their spoils!

Even the East Canal was forced to lose its identity. It now lies underground, chained and fettered in cement pipes, its voice choked, and a metallic road neatly constructed over it to erase any sign of its existence. All in the name of expansion of roads for smooth flow of vehicular traffic! Population boom due to large scale migration from hills, and mind-boggling increase in vehicular traffic after the Valley became the Capital City of the State of Uttarakhand has added to the woes of its citizens who have been victimized by the slimy politicians, and their false dreams of greener pastures. In fact, all this has resulted in a steep rise in air and noise pollution. Respiratory diseases like bronchitis, asthma, allergies are on the rise and even children are suffering from them. The smog that encompasses the valley during twilight has reached alarming proportions and has a suffocating effect. There is no respite from the sweltering heat and soaring temperatures and even incessant rainfall this year has failed to provide relief from intense humidity. It is unimaginable that only a few year back fans were a rarity!

I remember that earlier a downpour would leave the city clean, and sparkling, and we as young schoolgirls returning from school would yearn for the rain to get completely drenched, and jump, and splash in the small puddles which would soon vanish as fast as they were created. Water logging was unheard of then but now it is the hydra-headed monster we fear. Unplanned, indiscreet construction and drains choked by polythenes present a grim scenario, and have added to the miseries. We are now afraid of rains, and associated problems, and have forgotten to enjoy the beauty of the same. Even the rivulets swollen with rain water had their own charms in the past but now as they are lined by slums and encroached upon, disfigured by illegal mining they are cursed for causing



extensive damage to life, and property. Many water-borne diseases take a heavy toll of life every year as all natural water resources are contaminated.

Earlier, the Valley was renowned worldwide for Basmati rice with its mesmerizing aroma, and litchi fruit but now only a few rice fields remain in Majra and Sewlakalan and the aroma is conspicuously missing. Similar fate marks the litchi orchards and the tea estates of Sirmour which have been replaced by high-rise buildings and flats, turning the place into a concrete jungle. What is more alarming is the nexus between the politicians, and the land mafia who are minting money by grabbing agricultural land, and selling it for commercial purposes.

The Valley which provided solace to tired eyes with its beautiful scenic views, and greenery, now rots with heaps of garbage. Its famous picnic spots like 'Sahastradhara', and 'Lachhiwala' have been littered by plastic waste and non-biodegradable refuse. As the environment is decaying a similar degradation is being witnessed in moral values, and consequently hooliganism at these public places is a common sight. The ever-rising graph of crimes is a matter of deep concern giving anxious moments to the Police Department. The evil propensities of man have overwhelmed his human nature and made him bestial. Scars of modernization are visible everywhere. Decay, dissolution, destruction, disintegration, degradation are rampant, and there seems to be no respite for the parched and beleaguered human soul befuddled and dazzled by the glamour of materialism.

Figuratively, the Clock Tower seems to be a rendition of the Tower of Silence. It stands as a mute spectator to the disarray encompassing it. Its stopped clocks are symbolic of the stopping of the valley's heartbeat. Mere anarchy is unleashed upon this once paradisaical Valley. Man's greed has ravaged this blissful vale, and then we fear earthquakes and epidemics! We have forgotten that "when the pent-up forces of nature are released, there is little that humans can do about it, except try to survive"¹. As Ruskin Bond, our very own Wordsworth, warns, they all come "to remind us that we are not, after all, the masters of the Universe. We might trample upon our natural heritage, and do our best to destroy it, but the forces of nature are greater than man's. Nature will always have the last word."

Works Cited

1. Bond, Ruskin. Book of Nature. New Delhi: Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 2004. 248.
2. Bond Book of Nature 248.