

## Empowering Democracy

Voting is a fundamental aspect of democracy, serving as the cornerstone of civic engagement and political participation. It grants individuals the power to voice their opinions, shape the direction of their communities, and hold elected officials accountable. This essay delves into the importance of voting, emphasizing its role in fostering a robust democracy and empowering citizens to enact meaningful change. Voting ensures that all individuals, regardless of their background or social status, have an equal opportunity to influence decision-making processes. It upholds the principle of political equality, affirming each citizen's right to have their voice heard in the governance of their nation. Through the act of voting, citizens can advocate for policies and candidates that align with their values and aspirations. It serves as a peaceful and democratic means of effecting societal transformation and addressing pressing issues within communities.

Participating in elections fosters a sense of civic duty and responsibility among citizens, encouraging them to actively engage with the democratic process. It cultivates a culture of informed citizenship, prompting individuals to educate themselves on political issues and candidates' platforms.

Voting holds elected officials accountable for their actions and decisions, as they are beholden to the electorate who can vote them out of office. It ensures that elected representatives accurately reflect the diverse perspectives and interests of the population they serve.

## Frazzling forest cover

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The forest is a peculiar organism of unlimited kindness and benevolence that makes no demands for its sustenance but extends protection to all beings offering shade even to the axe man who fells it..... Lord Buddha.

After independence, the Indian foreign policy was framed in 1952 wherein it was categorically enunciated that India would have 33% of the geographical area under the forests. But ironically, as per survey of India's latest report (2015), we continue to have 21% of forests despite population explosion, increased biotic pressure accruing from grazing, encroachments and diversification of forest land for multi-disciplinary purposes. As such, there have been a marginal increase of 1% forest cover.

The overall situation is that the total green covers now stands for 697888 sq km (21.23%) of the geographical area and upto 5871 sq km (0.92%) from 92,027 sq km as had earlier been existing in the year 2011. As such, there has been a marginal increase of just 31sq km in very dense forest, whereas moderately dense forest went down to 1991 sq km and the open forest accounted for 7831 sq km.

As per Anmol Kumar, the Director General of Forest Survey of India, the carbon stocks of the country have increased by 4.07% whereas the regeneration capacity is around 48% of the total recorded forest area. It has further been reported that West Bengal and Odisha are in the top slot having forest cover followed by Kerala, Uttarakhand, Bihar and Tamil Nadu. The North-Eastern region accounts for one fourth of the green cover showing thereby a periodic decrease which of course is a matter of utmost concern.

The survey report reveals further that 257 Sq.km of eastern states of the country have mostly been effected arguably owing to shifting cultivation practices. Nagaland with 274 Sqkm is in the forefront followed by Tripura (111 Sqkm), Manipura (100 Sqkm), Arunachal Pradesh (89 Sqkm) and Misoram (63 Sq Km) and amongst other states, Andhra Pradesh has lost the forest cover to the extent of 273 Sqkm, Madhya Pradesh (178 Sq Kms), Karnataka (62 SqKms) and Chhatisgarh (53 Sq Kms) of the geographical areas. The Jammu and Kashmir state having a forest cover of 20,230 Hectare (recorded) out of 22, 539 Hectare (Actual). This shows the recorded percentages of the area having per capita forest cover around (0.1796 Hac) ending year 2011 which is dismally jeering.

In view of the seriousness and sensibility accruing from the overall declining forest cover, the scenario is unambiguously dismaying.

And in the same vein, the situation worldwide is also alarming. The scientists, environmentalists and the policy planners around the world are awfully worried about as per the presently prevailing scenario. In a situation like this and if it continues to be the same, there is impending apprehensions of further environmental degradation, tantamounts to cataclysm. A clear cut death Knell signal for all the nations if the world.

At this crucial juncture, it is utmost warran for rapid planning and action able strategies to be put in place well before the holo-caustic scenario overshadows this planet and its diversified bio diversity. Over the years, lot of summits and the conferences have deliberated upon right from stock holm on human development in 1972 followed by earth summit in Rio de Janerio (Brazil) and then earth summit in Johannesburg but in the ultimate analysis, all have proved to be unyielding. In the ongoing process of such summits, conventions, year 1995 unfolded another convention held in Berlin (COPI), wherein it became apparent that Rio was not enough and even in its after math the results were quite unyielding. This was sequenced by a protocol on climate change convention adopted in 1997, known as Kyoto-protocol. The targeted moto was emphatically aimed at to bring down global CHG emission by 5.2% during the period 2008-2012 and its commitment expired ending 2015. And now recently, a land mark framework agreement on climatic change was enunciated in Paris (2015) to keep and ensure global temperature slow down and this remarkable agreement followed as a sequel to united nations intergovernmental panel on climatic changes (IPCC) in association with world organisation (WHO) and UN Environment Programme (UNEP) scientific, technical and socio-economic information concerning to climate areas changes, its potential effects and opinions for adaptation and migration.

This framework was laid down on the occasion of world earth day (22nd April, 2016) where apart from US and China around 120 countries across the globe participated. And this agreement was more relevant and of vital importance as a follow up for enforcement of draft treaty adapted by around 195 countries present at United Nations climatic change conference. It is, therefore, expected that this world conference shall provide the required push in reducing global emissions, to extent of 55% by the most populating 55 countries. Consequently, therefore, the signing of this agreement on climatic change, particularly when the most powerful countries viz US and China are in the lead is beyond doubt going to have a far reaching impact. This will rather change the glooming picture of the environment at large and shall provide impetus to the most magnanimous wordings of Margret Mead which go as such, " never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizen can change the world, indeed it is the only that ever has."

It is therefore, prudent to throw light on some of the very vital issues of the day and ensure their world wide implementation on larger scale. \* Averting deforestation. Our existing forest cover is frazzling rapidly with the revolving wheel of time and its further declination shall have to be averted by all the nations across the globe. \* Invigorating extensive/intensive afforestations. This shall have to be ensured on gigantic scales as the losses we have already done are not so easily retrievable. And in doing so, we shall have to start from hills/ mountainous tops as these have doubtlessly become more sensitive and fragile and are subject to denudation and huge land mass movements in the shape of landslides, floods fury on an unprecedented scale. So unless our tops are safe, the low lying areas shall always be in peril. While celebrating earth day in 2015, it was pledged to plant 7.8 billion saplings world wide to account for every single person living on earth in a lead upto 50th anniversary of earth day in 2020. Where on the same earth such pledge has so far been initiated ? This invites special attention of the world leaders.

(The author is Former Dy. Conservator of Forest, J&K).

# Gridlocks: Time to Engage Traffic Engineers

## NGOs engaged in road safety initiatives need to time their priorities of raising awareness, educating communities, and supporting victims of road accidents

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In the past few weeks, I am frequently coming across some specific videos/posts on the digital street (Facebook) showing a group of youth under the banner of a non-governmental organization (NGO) parading specific Srinagar City roads to "manage traffic". Astonishingly, the frequency of uploading the activity videos and photo features by the NGO displays intercepting vehicles of their choice under the cover of traffic police to check vehicle documents and other essentials required to drive on roads.

A peep into the activity report on the specific busy city roads posted on the digital street doesn't reveal any dramatic impact on the ground situation as the traffic jams refuse to die and continue to present a terrific situation for commuters. It seems an activity in a hurry to record it for formality sake.

For instance, it was absurd to watch a video posted by the NGO in which a member of the NGO wearing dark sunglasses inside a school bus was displaying a first aid box containing expired medical items to school children who were being ferried to their respective homes. One fails to understand how this sort of awareness campaign is going to leave impact and help to manage traffic in a better way.

It only reflected the mistimed priorities as the city and towns needed a sustainable solution to overcome the frequent grid locks and at the same time tailor innovative strategies to arrest the increasing trend of road accidents and scale it down.

Launching a crackdown on school buses in the middle of busy roads only adds to the inconvenience of the general public. It would be in the fitness of things to launch a comprehensive awareness campaign for school management to make them understand about the importance of keeping their buses fit in all respects before plying them on the roads. Displaying first-aid box containing expired items to school children is a wasteful activity.

Actually, in the given scenario, the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is inevitable as these organizations can play a yeoman's role in road safety initiatives by raising awareness, educating communities, and supporting victims of road accidents. And such organizations in collaboration with government agencies and other stakeholders across the country are actively engaged in road safety initiatives.

As all of us are aware that in the present times, road safety is one of the crucial concerns, where the number of road accidents and fatalities across the country

remains alarmingly high. Inadequate infrastructure, lack of awareness, reckless driving, and non-compliance with traffic rules are some of the contributing factors to the deadly mess on roads.

Even as the government has been investing in the development of better roads, including construction of flyovers and underpasses, the congestion on roads leading to ugly traffic jams continues to remain a concern as the situation throws road safety to the wind. Even enforcement of road safety laws and regulations and penalties, the mess on roads remains a horrible sight to watch.

Technically speaking, the role of NGOs includes their active participation in policy discussions to develop more effective strategies, sharing of valuable inputs based on their expertise, implementing targeted interventions and also to monitor the pace of progress of road safety initiatives. One of the biggest contributions of NGOs in road safety measures is organizing community engagement programmes to encourage the participation of local residents to foster a sense of responsibility among them to adopt safe behaviors on the roads.

Framing of effective policies and strategies to streamline road safety measures with tailor-made specific interventions has its base in the collection and analysis of road safety data. This helps to identify trends, risk factors, and weak areas where targeted interventions are required.

Here the role of NGOs is crucial to conduct thorough research which can guide the government towards a data-driven approach to road safety through formulation of appropriate policy interventions and stem the rot causing mess on roads.

However, it is of paramount importance for all stakeholders, especially the government agencies and NGOs to align their interventions in line with emerging technologies, with due focus on changing behavioral patterns.

Meanwhile, the role of NGOs in the union territory of Jammu & Kashmir Jammu & Kashmir in road safety measures merits a discussion owing to the unending mess on the roads where traffic jams are terrific and life-consuming accidents are happening frequently.

But before that let us have a general look at the road safety scenario in the region.

Current era is called the modern period for the kind of pace technological integration has triggered even in our routine activities.

The modern era has bridged distances and of course localised the global geographies. But one major area that has

remained a scar on its face is the growing menace of gridlock that has been eating up our growth trajectory. Today, travelling even small distances here is an uphill task for the commuters.

Everyone is contributing to the menace. While on road, whether driving our own vehicle or using a passenger vehicle, we are always in a hurry to reach our destination at whatever cost. During the course, we play havoc with traffic rules and other safety measures, which on many occasions prove fatal.

While fixing responsibility for these gridlocks, people impulsively blame traffic police. But major contributors to this traffic mess are none other than the people themselves. An office-goer who has been late for duty is quick enough to escape by blaming the traffic mess. Taking the excuse is true, but the likelihood is that he too was in fact causing the traffic jam. After all, his car also forms part of a line and is holding up the car behind. So by definition, he does not just get stuck in a traffic jam, he produces it by defying rules and norms.

Our traffic jams have their own structures. They are not vertical alone but lateral as well and you wonder how to thread your way through. People are glad to resort to on-street parking contraventions even on busy roads and block smooth traffic movement.

There is also no concept of bus stops, though many bus stops exist at various points. Passenger vehicles never stop at bus stops. It is not the driver alone to be blamed for this. But the fact is that people never wait for a passenger bus at a bus stop. The understanding between the driver and the passenger has gone trendy that they know the bus can stop anywhere anytime for him at the cost of smooth traffic movement.

Overall, the scenario reveals that traffic management is a remote idea at our place, most of the time people commit blunders or pull impolite driving maneuvers, leading to anger from other frustrated drivers. Result of this situation is road rage.

This state of mind of the drivers carries a lot of risk even to the health and safety for everyone on the road. Every one of us is aware that traffic congestion is something which has serious effects on us as drivers at personal, business and societal levels. And not to speak of psychological and physical health implications these jams have on us.

Actually, traffic jams are a big problem that virtually every place is grappling with and has precisely become inevitable. But at the same time we cannot afford to lock our future and succumb to these

gridlocks. We have to seriously pull ourselves out of this mess and we need to challenge conventional thinking around traffic congestion.

We can talk of wiping out the congestion on roads, but in actual terms we cannot. What we can do is to reduce the congestion and for this, we need a dynamic traffic navigation system which can help people to get through traffic faster. This doesn't necessarily involve building roads or introducing schemes, but simply making our road-flow more efficient.

In reducing chances of a gridlock and regulating flow of traffic, it's the attitude of drivers which can trigger change. Otherwise, it's the attitude of drivers which is at the moment the primary cause of chaos on roads. To trigger a change in the attitude of motorists here, a proper strategy is inevitable.

Our passenger transport is visibly the major player in gridlocks. If we have a close look at the behavior of these drivers we find their combination of feelings, acts, thinking and perceptions loaded with anomalies. So, the drivers responsible for traffic mess on roads need a 'handle with care' strategy. It's not punishment but soft handling through proper counselling which can infuse a sense of order in them as drivers.

Here, apart from NGOs, emerges the role of qualified traffic engineers having experience with planning and designing roadways and a strong understanding of laws and regulations governing vehicular movement on the roads.

Notably, traffic engineers are technically qualified to design roads that are operated in a way that ensures congestion and accidents are minimized. They are trained as a responsible resource to ensure that all types of roads are safe for drivers, commuters and pedestrians.

Precisely, the time demands professionalism in managing traffic on roads without any mess and for this, it makes sense to rope in traffic engineers for the job.

In the words of an acquaintance, teaching civil engineering in a reputed engineering college, traffic engineering is a branch of civil engineering where engineers are technically trained to develop traffic engineering plans; ensure proper traffic specifications; estimate traffic levels, and traffic control; and create traffic signal reports. The best part is that traffic engineers use computer simulations to test various traffic scenarios before implementing changes on streets and highways.

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# Bhakta emerging as Commercial Floriculture Village

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Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir is bestowed with natural beauty and located between 82.17 and 37.06 North latitude and 73.2 and 80.36 East longitude in the Himalayan region. It has 1069 mm average annual rainfall in sub-tropical Jammu region and 660mm in temperate valley respectively. The average temperatures of these two regions are 24.5 and 13.3 centigrade respectively. J&K is endowed with ample natural resources including soil, water, climatic condition, diversity, topography, rich natural flora etc. which are conducive for the cultivation of a wide range of flowers. J&K is considered as the paradise on the earth because of its natural glamour.

It is a mountainous Union Territory in which Jammu region is predominantly sub-tropical while Kashmir region is temperate. This beautiful territory is characterized by benevolent people, scenic natural beauty, natural waterfalls, folded mountains, alpine pastures, lush green forests, rich wild life, snow clad fields, carpet green turfs, gushing fountains, lofty skying grounds, charming gardens, cool pollution free fresh air, fresh cool water, shimmering lakes, apple orchards etc. J&K has huge potential in floriculture industry due to varied agro-climate and ecological conditions. Different types of commercially important flowers can be produced in the region and J&K can lead in quality flowers production in India because of congenial atmosphere for floriculture.

Reasi district of Jammu and Kashmir is an abode of Mata Vaishno Devi and is blessed with an immense natural beauty and vast biodiversity. Being the hub of religious spots, Reasi district has an immense scope in floriculture.

Bhakta village is about 5 km away from world famous religious place Katra in Reasi district of Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. There are around 210 families in the village. The major occupation of the people is agriculture and there is a natural source of irrigation in the village where the marigold cultivation can be possible.

There is one Govt. Middle school, One Private Middle School and one Panchayat Ghar in the village. There are many progressive floriculturists in the village who are producing the marigold flowers at a commercial level. Initially the villagers were growing maize, wheat and few local varieties of vegetables as their forefathers were doing.

They were using the traditional agricultural technologies in their fields and monkeys and wild boars were the great threats in their fields. All the agricultural produce was consumed by their families with very little surplus to sell. Their farming system was deteriorating and they were unable to mitigate the basic needs of their families. Some rural youths of the village were on the threshold to leave the agriculture profession. Some of them were migrating towards urban areas for employment.

Initially the rural youths of Bhakta village were doing the unscientific agriculture on a small scale. They were endeavouring to increase their farm income. They were using the local resources and were growing

the maize, wheat, pulses, cereals, fruits, vegetables, marigold etc. with the traditional methods resulting in the poor yield of the crops.

They were lacking the scientific knowledge in agriculture. Then the rural youths of the village came in contact with the KVK, Reasi. KVK, Reasi became a ray of hope for these rural youths. KVK scientists started regularly visiting their farms and developed a good rapport with the rural youths of this village.

The rural youths of the village were guided and motivated for the scientific marigold cultivation under ARYA project. They were encouraged for commercial marigold cultivation. KVK, Reasi organised the trainings/awareness programmes/kisan ghosties/exposure visits/farmers-scientist interaction etc. on commercial floriculture for the rural youths of Bhakta village and adjoining villages of Reasi dist of J&K.

The KVK work was synergised by the Department of Floriculture and line deptts. KVK, Reasi scientists also laid Front Line Demonstrations (FLDs) on marigold crop in the village. The technical guidelines on marigold cultivation were provided to the farmers under ARYA project.

The farmers were fascinated by observing the results of FLDs on marigold crop and they showed keen interest in the adoption of new technologies for marigold crop. Scientific cultivation of marigold changed their life. KVK, Reasi introduced new varieties of marigold in the area and gave scientific recommendations on commercial marigold farming. Marigold cultivation helped to overcome the problem of monkey menace in the village as the crop is not damaged by the monkeys. They were also guided on the recycling of waste flowers under ARYA project.

ARYA project proved a boon for him and changed his fate. Initially rural youths of Bhakta village rural youths were growing only maize, wheat, pulses and few vegetables by using the traditional technologies and they were lacking the technical skills and knowledge on agriculture. There was heavy infestation of monkey menace, diseases and insects-pests and farmers were earning very less as their crops productivity was low but with the commercial marigold cultivation they raised their annual income.

By growing the marigold crop, the rural youths are generating more income and employment as compared to their traditional farming by which their socio-economic status improved. By observing the successful results of marigold crop in Bhakta village, the other rural youths from different villages of the district villages such as Chamba Chandua, Dadura, Gern, Kaulsar, Bhabber, Kanjali, Sool etc. are also showing keen interest in marigold cultivation.

With the introduction of scientific technologies for marigold cultivation the rural youths are able to generate extra income and employment. With the generation of extra income, the farmers developed confidence to mitigate their basic problems. A self-reliance and entrepreneurial spirit has been developed among the rural youths. Their new attitude towards scientific marigold cultivation has been developed.

They have developed a good rapport with the KVK scientists, extension officers from line departments and also participate in the agricultural extension activities conducted by the Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK), Reasi and other line departments. Number of farmers including Shaukat Ali, a progressive floriculturist in the village was highly impressed with the technical guidelines given by the KVK scientists and presently he is guiding the other floriculturist of the area on commercial marigold cultivation.

He grows marigold in about 50 Kanals of the area. He has established one vermicompost unit at his home. He also used vermicompost in his marigold crop. There are many other rural youths in the area who have become entrepreneurs in floriculture like Sh. Shaukat Ali.

They used to sale their marigold flowers in local areas, at world famous place Katra, Udhampur and even in Jammu. They also make floral garlands and also do decorations work in the marriage ceremonies and other events in the area which help them to fetch more returns. Now the village rural youths have developed confidence in themselves and they are having lot of credibility on KVK scientists and line department officials as from to time they provide technical advice on commercial marigold cultivation.

The village rural youths have become an example of success and motivating factor for other rural youths in adjoining villages. KVK scientists also motivated other rural youths of the area for the commercial floriculture as it can change their socio-economic status. Many other rural youths of the area are also coming forward for the commercial cultivation of floriculture. Rural youths of Bhakta village have been appreciated by Hon'ble DDG, ICAR, Dr. Udham Singh Gautam, Ex-Director Extension of SKUAST-J, Dr. S.K. Gupta during the various extension activities conducted by KVK, Reasi. Shail Singh, a progressive floriculturist of Kanjali village was felicitated by the Hon'ble Union Minister of India, Jatinder Singh in a farmer fair organised by the Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK), Reasi of Sher-e-Kashmir University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology, Jammu (SKUAST-J). He was also appreciated by the Ex-Director General of the ICAR, Dr. S. Ayappan and Hon'ble Ex-Vice Chancellor of SKUAST-Jammu Dr. P.K. Sharma and Dr. P.J. Sharma for his efforts on commercial floriculture during their visits at KVK, Reasi. He was also awarded with the Progressive Farmer Award by the SKUAST-J during the Kisan Mela organised by SKUAST-J in March, 2021. Smt. Maya Devi, a woman farmer from the same village was also appreciated by the Hon'ble Ex-Director General of the ICAR, Dr. S. Ayappan for her efforts for commercial floriculture during his visit at KVK, Reasi. KVK, Reasi is making strenuous efforts for the farmers' welfare through commercial floriculture in the hilly district Reasi of Jammu and Kashmir. ARYA project has proved a boon to the rural youths of the area.

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