



Green worshipping

There is a record number of pilgrims going to the holy shrines in summertime. While it is useful to have better facilities when one travels, the onslaught of tourists and visitors is seriously endangering the fragile ecology of the mountains. The plastic bag disposal problem has created a nightmare for the hills where recycling facilities are non-existent. Even handing out the *prasadam* at places of worship creates a problem as plastic bags are used to dole out take-away *prasad*. Now, more sustainable alternatives are being found. The Badrinath shrine in Garhwal receives more than 13 lakh pilgrims every year. If *prasad* was given to them in bamboo baskets instead of polythene bags, it would mean saving of at least a million polybags, and consequently the environment .

Come summers and lakhs of pilgrims and tourists make their way up the winding hills to the four shrines in the Himalayas: Gangotri, Yamunotri, Badrinath and Kedarnath. With

access to these shrines being made easier, everybody from two-year old toddlers to octogenarians are now finding it much easier to have a holiday as well as embark on a pilgrimage during what is known as

the 'yatra season'. Last year, the Badrinath shrine alone saw 13.5 lakh pilgrims visit the temple. Everybody cashes in on the religious fervour—whether it's the transporters or hoteliers, and the



environment is relegated to the back-burner. The delicate ecology of the hills is not equipped to handle the influx of lakhs of people. The *prasadam* alone causes enough ecological damage as millions of polybags are used to carry it away.

Says JP Maithani, a resident of Pipalkoti near Badrinath and an activist, "the *prasad* sellers give pilgrim a *thaali*-full of *prasad* for Rs 51 or Rs 101. When the pilgrims come back from the temple, the seller retains the *thaali* and ties the *prasad* up in a polybag for the people to take back".

Now, grassroots organisations like the Alaknanda Ghaati Shilpi Federation (AAGAAS) are trying to rein in the plastic menace and give local artisans employment at the same time by replacing polybags with bamboo baskets. When the Uttarakhand region has vast resources of bamboo (hill bamboo locally known as 'ringaal') and a rich tradition of bamboo art, there is no need for the destructive polybag culture to interfere with the environment. In fact, the local artisans are hard-pressed to supply adequate number of these eco-friendly baskets. JP Maithani, the botanist who has been at the heart of this initiative says, "last year we managed to supply 22,000 baskets whereas the demand is much bigger. Each basket costs between Rs 35 to Rs 50, depending on the design and size".

The ringaal baskets are made by local craftspeople, some of whom have been weaving for generations. Others have come to be interested in the art as an employment generating opportunity. Most of the 275 arisans that AAGAAS trained belong to the most disadvantaged Schedule

What is so special about 'ringaal'?

The Ringaal's scientific name is *Arundinaria Falconeri*. While it is found in jungles across the Himalayas, it has an especially strong presence in the Chamoli, Uttarkashi and Bageshwar regions of Uttarakhand. There are seven different varieties of this bamboo plant and the most popular among them for making products to sell is the 'dev ringaal' variety, known for its elasticity and shiny appearance. Other sub-varieties of the bamboos are used to make roofs or baskets for fodder collection. In the last few years, the bamboo plant has seen 'flowering'. Flowering of the bamboo leads to the dying of the plant but nature has its own way of sustenance as not all species of the bamboo flower during the same year. The fact that they flower at different times leads to their survival.



Caste community and of these, 42 were women. Now, these below-poverty line families have been able to earn an extra Rs. 800 to Rs. 2,400 hundred rupees a month, thanks to the ringaal basket sales. The master craftsmen earn anything upto Rs 500 everyday for their skills.

The ringaal is not just restricted to *prasad*-basket weaving. It is also

used to make lampshades, mats, flower baskets, *chapatti* baskets etc. Local people use it to make baskets to carry fodder and wood from the jungle. Now the state government of Uttarakhand has also joined in, in the efforts to promote bamboo products, which not only generate employment but also contribute towards sustainable tourism.



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