

Kaas - In all its might or at the limit of its plight?

Kaas - A beautiful plateau, situated just a few hours away from Pune, is not only blessed by the natural blossoms, but also picturesque views of the surrounding Sahyadris and the Kaas lake.

Just about a few years ago, this place was completely unknown to the common people. It used to be a nature lover's heaven nestled in the Sahyadris, a place with an uninterrupted tranquility...embraced by the monsoon clouds crossing these ranges and stepping into Maharashtra, a splendid little habitat to some of the endangered and rarely spotted species of birds like Malabar Crested Lark and the Crested Bunting. The plateau used to be a pristine ecosystem in itself, which bred these birds along with some interesting species of insects and bees.

Only when the plateau was welcoming these species with open arms, followed some 'highly learned' botanists, who shouted 'Eureka Eureka....!' on the news channels' cameras and newspapers' tourism promotion pages..!! What then? In came a new species of 'the educated', 'the highly placed', 'the rich' humans with their huge cars and buses, flocking the poor place as if these people had nowhere to go on weekends before this 'Eureka' stint by the local media.

Little did they realise, that this flocking would adversely affect the blossoms, and the species trying to breed in there. All they, rather we, were concerned about was a long weekend drive in our great cars, our family and friends having a blast, clicking gigabytes of photos of ourselves on the plateau, having a hell lot of tasty food sitting right there, and then a boasting episode about how we clicked all these pictures with all these flowers in our hair, hands and all over us..!!

Even though all of this came at a huge cost to the blooming nature...

Long Drive? At the cost of hour long traffic jams and parking queues, burning gallons of fuel and honking decibels of horns, right on the plateau..

Family and friends having a blast? At the cost of sending the ecological balance of the area on toss? Oh here comes the photographer, and of the model standing right in the middle of purple flowers..!! Splendid ain't it? At the cost of stamping a hundred blades of grass and small flowers on those, nectar from which would have served the bees with their daily supply of food..

Yum..the homemade chaat dishes..right here on the Kaas plateau? At the cost of trampling a whole flock of flowers, in turn may be a few insects, by laying a mat on those, and then what do we do of the papers and plastics in which we had it? Well that's a silly question ain't it? We are Indians, we have a right to throw it right here..! Who's going to stop us? We've paid 10 bucks to get in..! Boasting of photos with flowers all over you, or you all over the flowers? At the cost of trampling those delicate flowers again, or chasing a bird in a quest of capturing it in a frame?

Trampling the grass, which bears the flowers, not only kills it for that particular season, but it also results in your weight hardening the soil beneath, thus making it difficult for the pollen and delicate roots to penetrate the surface, thus reducing the possibility of a flower blooming on that spot

in the next season too... After all this, we are still highly educated, highly placed, 'adventure loving' 'humans'...!! Unbelievably ironically funny...! I still can't imagine the scenario when 80,000 people turned up on the plateau on a single day, the 29th of September, 2013. And I am still surprised, that at least 30% of the flowers stood there, untrampled up till the 2nd of October, while I visited the plateau. I took it as a shame on the humans..!

We individually, have erred while not caring for the nature here. Keeping that aside, let's consider a few other factors.

What went wrong on the part of the Govt. of Maharashtra:

Realising the racy footage attracted by the plateau, the Govt. of Maharashtra decided to straightway declare it an official attraction, and thus the site was also declared as a ' UNESCO World Heritage Site'. Which indeed meant, the authorities should strive to preserve the site, and in turn try to beautify it, if not ruin it. The authorities, found a good way of safeguarding the area, they fenced off the area on both the sides of the road. And the best thing on their part was, they opened just one side of it to the visitors, the other side still remains untouched and pristine, which is pretty good a thing to be done.

But does just fencing serve the purpose? It sure doesn't. So, ideally, to limit the number of visitors they started ticket system, by charging a nominal amount of Rs. 10 per person, they have also made available an online booking facility. All said and done, the ticket system was never really used by them to limit the number of visitors, it was just used as an additional source of revenue, thereby funding the salaries of the employees hired for (again 'ideally') looking after the upkeep and discipline in the area. Alas! All they do is look at how people park their vehicles on both sides of a single lane road, thereby causing hours of long traffic jams, and in turn a huge amount of air and noise pollution, which in turn is more harmful than not to the delicate ecosystem breeding on both the sides of the road.

Personally, I think, the authorities should have:

- 1) Used the well designed and implemented strategy of reservations, to limit the number of visitors to three digit figures. Looking at the width of the road, and the management capabilities of the people employed, this is the maximum sustainable number of daily visitors on the plateau. In case of excess bookings, the online system can easily assign waiting queues on a 'first come first serve' basis.
- 2) Regulate the amount of visitors through on the spot bookings, in Satara from the southern entry onto the narrow road, and Kaas village at the northern base of the same narrow ghat, so that the parking and long jam issues could be tackled, where the roads are wide enough.
- 3) Possibly banned four wheelers and larger vehicles, after Satara, and provided CNG operated paid shuttle mini buses to the plateau, through the narrow roads, thereby further reducing the traffic hassles.

4) Provide simple, and essential infrastructure like, dustbins, sitting shelters and toilets in the proximity, so that all the unwanted things like littering, eating amidst the flowers, and dirtying the area could be easily avoided. All these facilities, can be easily managed, and kept clean if the number of visitors would be restricted to a few hundreds.

5) After regulating the traffic, they could have used the excess staff to regulate the crowd on the plateau, thereby prohibiting people from trampling or sitting on the flowers, or even plucking them, thus reducing the damage to the natural treasure.

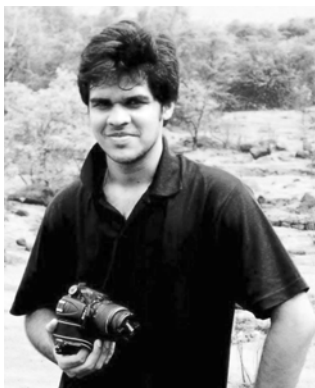
6) If they find the salaries to the employees, a burden on the treasury, they could have opened up volunteering opportunities to the nature lovers and trekkers, who would be more than happy to contribute to the upkeep of the environment, free of charge..! I would be one of the first to volunteer...!

7) Educate and spread awareness among the people, about the importance and how delicate are the diversified flora and fauna on the plateau, it should also educate the villagers nearby, about how important this ecological balance is to their daily life in the neighborhood.

Another Kaas:

Fortunately, or unfortunately the reporters have now found another Kaas like plateau, which in itself is a complete 'forest', close to Radhanagari in the vicinity of Kolhapur, Maharashtra. And the forest authorities, now want to open it up to the tourists just like Kaas. We all must hope, that at least this area gets a good infrastructure in place, before it is flocked by thousands, and ruined into bits and pieces like Kaas is today. I would suggest a sky walk through the forest, thereby just allowing the people to watch it, rather than touching and experiencing it. I personally feel, we are not worth of it just yet. We have proved that at Kaas. It would be great, if we could collectively think of measures and precautions for Kaas as well as the 'New Kaas', before we ruin it forever.

Readers' suggestions are honestly requested.



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