

Advocating Safer, Environment Friendly Trekking Trails

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Sikkim is proud to display its cultural and bio-diversity, however few know of the various types of trekking-trails and foot-paths that are to be found all around; indeed this is also a diversity of sorts, but not one to be proud of.

In towns like Gangtok one is already familiar with the crumbling, dark, by-lanes that finally lead up to the plush plaza which is the present day M.G Marg, gining one a jolting experience of coexisting opposites! Well the astonishment only increases as one moves around the state in order to trek through the countryside.

The trekking-trails of the region vary from well built, well maintained and appropriately sized natural trekking-trails which follow the gradual incline of the topography, to the mud-slides where there is nothing to hold on to and one has to move on all four limbs; then there are areas where one is likely to find number of fallen tress obstructing the path and then the most demanding of treks the cemented foot-path! Why do we have these cement covered village trails which are not only expensive to

build but are also hazardous to both man and animal that tread on them?

Thanks to the widespread and generous use of cement Sikkim's natural footpaths are increasingly turning risky and slippery. Cemented footpaths are not just slippery during monsoons but throughout the year; these footpaths which are usually covered with residues of the mud around are thereby rendered unsafe to walk on. Locals, always a knowing lot, aware of such dangers most often walk by the side of these cemented paths, on the natural earth surface thus creating another pathway just beside the cemented one. It is visitors like us who learn the hard way. And these man made cemented paths are prove a worse deterrent to walk when they are constructed with too much incline and when the stepping surface of stairs are built in an inclined manner rather than horizontal.

Using cement for the up-gradation of village trails is an environmental sin. Cement has a very high CO2 account; its fuel Intensive production method and transportation make it one of the most polluting and least sustainable building materials today. Cemented trails are not just dangerous, expensive and environmentally hazardous but such trails also result in being the eye-sores to an otherwise prestine locale. A good example of how such cemented footpaths can spoil the beauty of nature can be

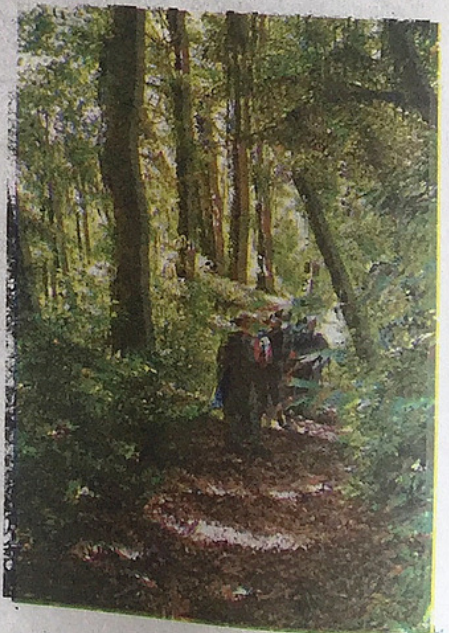
found in the charming Chopta and Tangu valleys. Here, solid cemented footpaths wienid their way like thick exotic white snakes glidding along creeks and gushing riverlets; indeed they are an eye-sore to an other wise idyllic and unspoilt landscape. No wonder one of the frequent remarks made by visitors coming to these places is: *why in the world would they be using expensive cement here when there are plenty of rocks around?* In contrast to this, the same European visitors point to a lovely village trail at a distance saying: *look at that trail, beautifully made! Don't they blend naturally with the landscape and are they not safer to walk on as well?*

The material used for constructions, foot-path or otherwise, should be determined by real natural resources that can be used on a sustainable basis rather than by earning-capacity of any given project. Sustainability and quality guided constructions are definitely a better investment rather than the popular profit driven practices of building. If the Government is indeed serious about its Eco-friendly role and is interested in keeping up its pro-environment image to the world, then some effective controls will have to be enforced. In doing so the state will certainly continue to take pride not just in its natural resourcers, but also in the fact the people here live closer to nature than elsewhere.



Top right: Trekking Trail on the way to Dzongri using local logs for stabilisation

Below: An unnecessary, visually dominating cement-foot-path on flat terrain in the beautiful valley of Lachen.



Right: A beautiful, and safe, trekking-trail at Varsey Rhododendron Sanctuary in West Sikkim