

Research Article

Title:

**Mountain as Object of Knowledge:
Understanding the Cultural Altitudes in Himalaya**

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**IUC Associate, November 2023
Indian Institute of Advanced Study
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Introduction:

Mountain is not a mere geographic feature, it acquaints us with a landscape, culture, climate and construct having a range of altitude that has evolved over time. Mountains make up around 23-25 percent of the Earth's land area. Understanding mountains and their inhabitants is thus important not only for people living in mountains, also to those who are concerned with them for various reasons. Over the centuries mountains have been the places of attraction and interest to those who live in places other than mountains. They came up with many ideas, impression and theories about mountains ranging from the theological to geological. Yet, mountains, its inhabitants and their existence have not been perceived by world, the way diversity and contrasts mountain contain.

Mountain and mountain ranges in different parts of world look quite similar in appearance but geological, ecological and cultural processes shaped their landscape very greatly, make them different in terms of image, role and importance in contemporary world. Himalaya is one such entity. To truly understand it we must view it not only from the vastly available literary accounts but also from the views and perspective of local living since time immemorial. This gives rise to few questions to work upon in the present work. Idea of and about Himalaya have changed with the times and shaped according to the need and necessity of viewer. Given the diversity, contrasts and claims in Himalaya, generalizing them is fraught with many challenges and difficulties. Here is an attempt to scale the altitudes of relevance of Himalaya and to find out to what degree have scholarly conceptions influenced and shaped the prevailing construct.

Mountains have played a major role in human history, forming geopolitical boundaries between countries and natural barriers to migration and transportation. They also have formed refuge areas for distinctive mountain cultures and economies such as those that have flourished in the Himalayan nations of Tibet and Nepal. Potential waterpower and mineral deposits are commonly found in mountains but are frequently expensive to develop. The mountain region is also prone to natural disasters, and climate change and poor land management are leading to increasing landslides, forest fires and flash floods. As the risks to this sacred landscape increase so too does the future of the people and wildlife that live there. In the Indian Himalayas, high-altitude wetlands are revered by local communities as sacred, and as such, they are often the sites of religious festivals. This strong nature-culture bond plays a key role in conserving habitats. Several Conservation Areas managed

by communities have sprung up in north east India. Such many examples are yet to be marked on the literary accounts and maps.

Objective of the Study

The aim is to reveal the true identity of this largely unknown region with support of organize knowledge from various available sources and observations from mountain inhabitants. So that natural objects continued to remain the implicit and universal referent for the production of knowledge. People, clans, and ethnic groups dwelling in the Himalayan mountains. Includes Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet, and the Indian states of Sikkim, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir and Arunachal Pradesh. Many of these communities live in isolation, and as a result, their custom, lifestyle and livelihoods have been shaped by their environment hardly been revealed in common understanding of the people outside Himalaya. Local communities and indigenous people are among the Earth's most important stewards of biodiversity and natural places.

The Himalayan Story

The mighty Himalayas rise beyond the Indo-Gangetic plain of Northern India, extending through the Indian states of Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand to Northeast India, Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan. This entire range of the Himalayan Mountains serves as home to more than 50 million people, with another 450 million settled at the base of it. And this entire population flourishes on the resources that flow from the Himalayas. There is great cultural diversity within the population of the Himalayan regions where religion is concerned. Three religions are dominant in the mountains: Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. Four distinct ethnic strains, i.e., Indic people, Tibetan people, Afghan-Aranian and Burman are visible and present today. In general, the inhabitants of the northern slopes and the higher altitudes on the southern side of the Himalayas are Mongoloids and have remained ethnically pure because of relatively lower contact with outsiders and had waves of invasions and conquests and migrations through history, and are today inhabited by diverse and mixed ethnic groups, with Mongoloid, Negroid and Aryan strains. The Central Himalayan region is inhabited by people commonly known as 'Paharis' comprise a variety of subgroups which share basic cultural patterns but show local differences in such features as dialect, ceremonial forms, deities worshipped, house styles, dress and ornamentation, range of castes, and rules of marriage. In Western

Himalaya Changpas are mostly nomads engaged in trans-human activities while Laddakhis, Dardi and Balti are engaged in primitive agricultural activities mostly concentrated in river valleys. Kashmiris, Gujjars and Bakkerwals inhabit the Pirpanjal and Kashmir valley mountains areas who speak Kashmiri, and Pahari/Gojri, respectively.

Nomadic pastoralism has been portrayed as one of the great advances in the evolution of mankind. People who specialize in livestock production requiring periodic movements of their herds are known as nomadic pastoralists, or, simply nomads. As such, these portraits of nomads offer a rare glimpse into a way of life that is rapidly vanishing. Menfolk in remote Himalayan region flourished by nature. Just as some travel for herding, many others travel out of their valleys and across the ranges for selling their wares at lowland markets, buying at the same time, goods that they cannot access in the closed high altitude valleys. Sheep, Goat and Yak wool is main source of trading. In terms of its diversity of peoples and languages, the greater Himalayan region is the most complex. There are hundreds of different languages spoken in the Himalayas. Himalayan people are highly clannish. Himalayan women usually enjoy a much greater level of freedom and participate equally with the men in agricultural practices and in cultural activities. Mountain regions had developed a rich base of indigenous traditional knowledge that is being rapidly eroded under the forces of modernization.

The Himalayan region may be considered to be a cultural complex, a composite of several cultural cosmoeses rolled into one, each little valley or plateau with its distinctive cultural forms. Their altitude changes create different agroclimatic conditions and diverse ecosystems; their seclusion and remoteness has made them the last bastions of globally significant indigenous knowledge and cultural heterogeneity. The geographical and adaptation continuities have however helped create and preserve some features that form a uniquely 'Himalayan way of life' common across the range. It gives a clear understanding of the main debates and questions concerning a number of points on ethnicity and its construction in the region about knowledge system.



Cultural Altitudes in the Himalaya

Every mountain slope is, from the anthropo-geographical standpoint, a complex phenomenon. It displays a whole range of cultural features/combinations- a variety of occupations from commercial cropping and agroprocessing to nomadic pastoralists, every degree of density from congestion to vacancy, every range of cultural development from industrialisation to nomadism. The isolation bred by the high mountain ranges have helped nurture a multiplicity of tribes with unique cultures that include languages, social structures, and spiritual traditions. Each tribe also has its own arts & crafts (weaving, metal craft, architecture, music & dance) and certain invaluable traditional knowledge systems (ethnobotany, medicine). Cultural region indicates those areas that display relative consistency, homogeneity, and distinctiveness in inhabitants' lifestyle, in that there are a greater number of shared cultural elements within the region, than between the region and others. The cultural complex of the Himalayas may be differentiated into multiple cultural regions. Cultural variation in the Himalayas is both vertical and lateral. While vertical variation predominantly flows from ecological factors, lateral variation in cultures is mediated by ethnicity and migration. The settlement patterns, occupations and ways of life of populations in the Himalayas are a reflection of human interaction with and adaptation to climate, relief and ecology. The key differentiator is that of livelihoods practiced and associated way of life. The cultural patterns in mountain regions, with special reference to the Andes and the Himalayas, and drawn out what he calls the 'cultural ecology of mountains' to interpret these patterns. This comprises two major interpretive schemas- 'approaches to organismic interaction in mountain environments' and 'production in mountain environments'. The nature of interactions in mountain environments comprises: the

interrelation of human and biological features; utilization of vertical life zones for human exploitation; occupation and strategies for control amongst cultures, and the association of occupation of vertical and horizontal space amongst peoples and animals in relation to time, space and communal control. Production in mountain environments is a composite of: response of populations and occupations to climate and altitude; the population's strategies for optimizing on the resources of the zone it occupies, spatial and temporal factors determining production strategies, and internal and external pressures influencing agricultural intensification. A majority of the people residing in the valleys and plateaus of the southern slopes of the Himalayan range are sedentary. Agriculture is the dominant occupation for most Himalayan communities, except for the people of very high altitudes and northern steppes (above) who follow nomadic pastoralism. Different patterns of cultivation are however followed, depending on the nature of the terrain and soil in a particular Himalayan region. The foothills and the lower hills, by virtue of their rich, fertile soils, brought down by the Himalayan rivers, are relatively densely populated, and the predominant religion is Hinduism. The Greater and Trans Himalayas are by far more severe in terrain and climate. Populations in this region are therefore very sparse living in small communities widely dispersed across a vast, harsh terrain. Depending on the precise location and agro-climatic conditions, they are either sedentary, subsistence farmers or nomadic tent-dwelling pastoralists.



The altitude-based occupational and associated cultural patterns in the Himalayas are as below:

Very high altitudes: The arid lands on the northern flanks and the high altitude plateaux of similar character in the southern side cannot support cultivation. A very small part of the rain-bearing winds can steal through the ranges that lie on their path to precipitate in these areas; even this is often unable to settle on the ground because of the winds that blow wild and unchecked on these flat tablelands. The little snow that does settle and provide moisture to the soil helps a soft downy grass grow in the summers. Hence the people of these regions adopted animal husbandry for their livelihoods, and follow a seasonal form of nomadism, moving with their families and herds (sheep, goats, yaks, camels) from one pastureland to the next during the summer, halting at one site just as long as its regeneration would not be affected by use, stocking up all the while for the barren, cold, but sedentary winters. These are large communities (by mountain standards) but dispersed over a vast terrain, with little

contact amongst them. In the context of scarce rangeland resources, contact has often led to clashes over sharing of these scarce resources. The culture of the nomadic pastoralists that inhabit the very high altitudes therefore revolves around their herds, the produce from them (wool, milk) and the rangelands.



Mid Altitudes: These are sedentary zones with village settlements in valleys and slopes, where the soils are infinitely more productive and support a wide range of crops. The subtropical and temperate zones are good for vegetables and orchards and are not terribly distant from the markets, and hence cash-cropping and horticulture is practiced. Communities at higher altitudes even in these zones however, practice subsistence cultivation, supplemented by animal husbandry and trading. These mid-latitudes are more densely populated and along with the sedentary nature of life, this has helped the development of more elaborate social structures and cultural forms.

Low altitudes and foothills: At the Himalayan foothills, communities plant the fertile alluvial lands with grain crops and use flooding with river waters for irrigation. In the eastern Himalayas, the much-maligned 'slash and burn' cultivation is followed, and in most other areas, Himalayan farmers painstakingly cut terraces into the uncompromising steep hillsides to plant them with one or two crops per year.

Trading: Menfolk of remote, high Himalayan regions are peripatetic by nature. Just as some travel for herding, many others travel out of their valleys and across the ranges for selling

their wares at lowland markets, buying at the same time, goods that they cannot access in the closed high altitude valleys.



Lateral Variation

There is great cultural diversity within the population of the Himalayan regions. Where religion is concerned, three religions are dominant in the mountains: Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. In terms of livelihood practices, as mentioned above, some undertake terraced agriculture, some are pastoralists while others are traders. Even local administrative systems vary from statutory panchayati systems to traditional institutions. The cultural variations visible when moving laterally across the Himalayas, stem from the waves of migration across the Himalayan ranges and into the fertile valleys. Over the centuries, generations of people of different ethnic origins from its south, east, west and north, have migrated into the region and made it their home. Puranas, the ancient Hindu epic, mentions the Kinnars, Kilinds, and Kiratas as the original inhabitants of the Himalayas. History also mentions the names of Khasas and the Darads. Grappling with the problem of “rural out-migration” and shifting of villagers to town for better facilities and generating livelihood, the UT administration of Ladakh has found organic farming as an “economically viable option” to stop this disturbing trend in the region. The present study was carried out on the traditional knowledge of communities living in the Himalayan region of India. Because of the wide altitudinal range, the Himalaya is classified into three strips i.e. outer Himalaya (Siwalik range), middle Himalaya and higher Himalaya (Great Himalaya) (Wadia, 1964). Horizontally, the Himalaya is divided into western, central and eastern Himalaya. The wide altitudinal range of the Himalaya supports some unique ecosystems.

Conclusion

In the present time of unbridled globalization, inclusive development in a multicultural society can only be possible through the understanding of the uniqueness and deep base of every culture. This understanding then needs to be translated into support to strengthen the community on the same grounds as it belongs and to allow its development to take place through informed choice buttressed by a belief and pride in its own heritage and understanding and respect for many more. Various ecological, environmental, geographical and socio-cultural factors have catalyzed to evolve unique systems of the different communities. The mountainous features, which include harsh climatic conditions and tough terrain, had made to keep the communities inhabiting the Himalayas in isolation for long period. The hardship with the profession and living in the harsh geo-climatic conditions discourage new generations to continue pastoral practices, which subsequently decline the rich traditional knowledge interwoven with the system. Apart from settled life in some parts they generally move between higher places in the summer season and lower valleys in the winter, hence they follow the fixed migratory routes between the summer pastures and winter habitats. It is concluded that traditional knowledge of Himalayan communities being highly deep, if promoted diligently, it will improve the knowledge of the society and sustainability of prevailing knowledge systems. The transhumance and localised agriculture are among the most prevalent practices in the communities of the Himalayas. Despite many similarities exist in the way of living of various groups, there are differences in the composition of their livestock and use of natural resources, which finally shape their knowledge on making various survivals. Traditionally, a variety of lifestyles and livelihoods practices are made by the natives.

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