

REGIONAL RESOURCES AND CULTURAL CONTEXT IN THE HIMALAYA

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The Himalaya is the mountainous expanse in the heart of the Asian mainland between the Chinese and the Indian sub-continent. It instantly invokes in the minds the features associated with an area of historical, cultural, religious, social, economic and political frontiers. Here is an area where political frontiers of eight sovereign states enjoin each other. Among them the only Lamaist kingdom (Bhutan), the only Hindu kingdom (Nepal) two Marxist and presently ideologically opposed political systems of U.S.S.R. and the Chinese Peoples Republic, a Socialist Republic of the Theravada Buddhists (Burma), an Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Revolutionary Government of Afghanistan add to the complexity along with the plural and participative Indian Union. In such a situation, the Himalaya becomes rather difficult to be conceptually conceived. There is another aspect of academic perspective. Most of the scholars endeavour to uncover the Himalayan panorama as per their academic expertise. Accordingly, a comprehensive understanding of the region remains desirable. The present paper attempts (i) to examine the various approaches to the study and (ii) to work out the cultural context in the Himalayan-region.

A region, such as the Himalaya, has location; it has an area, and, accordingly, it has limits. Now such an extensive area demands dissection into comprehensive and more meaningful sub-regions. For that two strategies have been evolved: one, the single-factor regionalisation, based on distinctive concern of the researcher with ethnicity, language, religion, physiography, social, political and economic systems, degree of mobility, urbanisation, cultural-historical evolution etc; the other, multi-factor functional areas in terms of several inter-relations and inter-acting phenomena. However, in actual operations, these two strategies do not remain exclusive and, in fact, the net result of regionalisation comes to be realized in terms of the themes chosen by academicians. So far the Himalayan region is concerned, we feel that there are four important approaches.

Approaches to the Study of the Himalaya

(a) *Geographical and ecological*: In fact, this is the earliest approach in the sense that the geographers identified the region on the basis of physiography, mineral resources, soil composition, vegetation, drainage, etc. distinct from the immediate formations in the south of the Himalaya. Again, keeping in mind the above factors, it was sub-divided into the greater, the lesser (central) and the foothills (*bhabar*, *tarai*, *morung*, *duars*—from west to east respectively). Then, there have been further regional sub-divisions

into north-western (Pakistan), western, central, eastern and the north-eastern hills. Here one point may be noted. In fact, these above sub-regions are the river basin systems. While the 'Indus' encompasses the north-western and the western Himalayas, the Brahmaputra river system is spread over north-eastern and the eastern regions. In between is the Central Himalaya, which is exclusively in the Gangetic river basin system.

(b) *Economic regionalisation*: Geographical reality may be conceived as a system of classifying the areal attributes in terms of macro, meso and micro regions. There have been two distinct strategies in the way of investigating the natural features and the socio-production phenomena. While the former is delineated on the basis of the maximum homogeneity with respect to the criterion selected, the latter assumes a heterogeneous character. The traditional approach has been to maintain the homogeneous and mono-centric regions such as a metropolitan city with its hinterland as opposed to the heterogeneous economic-geographic nodal regions. Accordingly, the entire Himalaya was divided into the hinterlands of the three metropolitan cities of Karachi, Bombay and Calcutta. A new approach to economic regionalization has been evolved on the basis of planned economic development strategies from the Soviet Union. They argue that the physio-geographic regions rarely coincide with those of socio-economic criteria; the geographical division of labour is artificial; and this 'artificial' distinction has introduced distortion in the regional economy and culture in course of human history. On the basis of the objective conditions of economic development, the Soviet economic geographer Galina Sdasyuk proposes a five-fold division of the economic regions in India. Among them, the economic region of incomplete formation (North-East Frontier), and the area of the Himalayas (the north-west frontier) have been enumerated (Sen Gupta, P. and G. Sdasyuk: 1968).

(c) *Cultural area/trait and cultural complex*: Anthropologists like Clark Wissler, A. L. Kroeber, M. J. Herskovits, etc. addressed themselves to the areal spread of the cultural characteristics for the primitive world. In doing so what they did was to break the structure of culture into various conceptual items such as traits, complexes, areas and patterns. Traits are conceived as the smallest identified unit which can further be combined with other traits to form a complex. Further complexes are co-ordinated in such a way that they constitute distinctive patterns. Then distribution of similarly patterned ways of life in a given region constitutes a cultural area. Such areas, accordingly mapped out, roughly correspond to ecological areas reflecting a basic relationship between material culture and habitat. Primitive North America, South America and Africa were subsequently divided into a number of cultural areas. However, no serious efforts were made to map out the basically peasant and urban-industrial Asian and European cultures. So far India and then the Himalaya are concerned, the Anthropological Survey of India undertook a number of large-scale surveys on cultural traits, border areas, material culture, border economy etc. In the absence of their publications, we are not in a position to uncover the complexity of the Himalayan culture.

(d) *Legal, political and administrative*: There was a time, when certain inaccessible undulating topographical features of the earth constituted 'a no man's land' against the river valley centred empires or plateau-dwelling pastoralists. Now with the advent of political system as universal phenomenon, no piece of earth's surface is left out unclaimed. Accordingly political boundaries have come to be legally recognized, and the areal units have turned out to be administrative parts of the states. Developmental policies, administrative priorities and political decisions of states affect the areal units (region) in various ways. Coming to our immediate concern of the Himalaya, we have already noted that the Himalaya is spread into eight sovereign states of U.S.S.R., the Peoples Republic of China, the Socialist Republic of Burma, the Royal Government of Bhutan, the Royal Government of Nepal, the Indian Union, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Revolutionary Government of Afghanistan. The Indian Himalaya has further been divided into a number of states (provinces): Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. Again, these provinces have further been divided into districts, tahsils and blocks for administrative and developmental considerations.

Physico-resource Context

Most of the geographers agree that land mass south of the Himalaya constitutes a distinct region known as South Asian region, Indian sub-continent or India. This Indian land mass has been divided by the geographers such as Dudley Stamp and O. H. K. Spate into 3 regions and a number of sub-regions from physiographical, structural and climatic considerations. S. P. Chatterjee, V. Nath and P. Sen Gupta have divided it into five regions, a number of sub-regions and various micro-regions on the consideration of geomorphology, climate, drainage, availability of agricultural and mineral resources. Ashok Mitra of the Indian Census Organization, 1961, finds seven regions, 24 sub-regions and 64 micro-regions associated with economy and social organizations in India. However, all the geographers agree that one of the three, five or seven regions is that of the Himalayan region. The "ramparts and fosses of the giant ranges which in large measure wall off the sub-continent from rest of Asia," extends from Gwadar (south-western Arabian coast in Pakistan) in the west to the Mizo Hills in the east, measuring nearly 5,000 kilometres. "Of this is western wing in Beluchistan and Trans-Sindhu (Indus) upto the syntaxial bends at Nanga Parbat (in Kashmir) is 1,500 kilometres. The eastern wing from Namcha Barwa (in Arunachal Pradesh) to the Mizo Hills is 1,000 kilometres and the Central Himalayan arc is 2,500 kilometres" (Bose, S. C. 1972: 11). Though width of the Himalaya varies from area to area, the great arc between Nanga Parbat to Namcha Barwa (or between Indus and Brahmaputra bends) known as the great Himalaya, has an average width of about 200 kilometres.

Normally, the Himalayan region is sub-divided into three: Western Hills and Ranges (now in Pakistan), Central Mountain Arc and Eastern

Hills. While the first one has fallen into Pakistan after 1947, thus, out of our present concern, the eastern Hills have their own panorama and we propose to examine them separately. The Central Mountain Arc or the great Himalaya has further been sub-divided into two: Western (Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh Himalaya) and Central (Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh). There is an amount of disagreement among the geographers for central and eastern Himalaya. While Bose (Bose, S. C. : 1972 : 33-37) includes only Nepal in Central Himalaya, Janaki proposes a separate sector inclusive of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan (Janaki, V. A. : 1977 : 157). On the basis of resource development, P. Sen Gupta divides the region into two: the Western Himalaya (from Kashmir to Uttar Pradesh Hills) and the Eastern Himalaya (Sikkim, Darjeeling, Bhutan and Arunachal) (Sen Gupta, P., 1968 : 58-59). Further she finds that the Himalaya contributes to 13.86% (171,215 square miles out of 1,232,561 square miles) of Indian geographical area and only 3.17% of her population (13,493,398 out of 439,234,771 in 1961). From agricultural points of view, she suggests that "delimitation of agricultural region to be preceded by physical regionalization of the territory, because the crop structure of any aerial unit depends largely upon its topography, soils and climate, even though socio-economic factors play their own roles. The regions with homogeneous climatic conditions form agriculture zones in macro-form, while agricultural regions in meso-form are the physical divisions of this zone and those in micro-form are the crop combination regions" (Sen Gupta, P. 1968 : 102). Accordingly she enumerates four macro agricultural regions such as (i) the Himalayan zone, (ii) the dry zone, (iii) the sub-humid zone and (iv) the wet zone. Further she divides the region into meso agriculture regions into "Wheat-maize-rice" growing regions of Kashmir Himalaya and Himachal—Kumaon hills, and "rice-maize-market gardening and horticultural products" from Kashmir valley, Darjeeling-Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh (Sen Gupta, P. ; 1968 : 102-103).

Misra *et al* are concerned with regional development planning in India. They have suggested various levels of territorial planning: (i) the nation (ii) inter-state macro-regions (iii) the state (iv) inter-district meso-regions (v) district/metropolitan regions (vi) block/taluk/city regions and (vii) the village. Again with a view to achieving economic growth, social justice and environmental quality, they propose a system of economic social, environmental, administrative and planning regions (Misra, R. P. *et al* ; 1974 : 34-35). Two appendices A and B at the end of third chapter: Regional Patterns and Imbalances provide 13 macro and 33 micro planning regions for India. Efforts have been made to map out the component district, problems requiring area-wise approach and inter-related solutions, power base, prominent industrial and urban areas, resources available, and unifying elements for 13 macro-regions, while districts included, characteristic of area grouped, resources available for integrated development and economic specializations have been enumerated for 33 meso-regions. The Himalayan India has been put into four macro-regions of Jammu and Kashmir, trans-Himalayan, Gangetic plains and hills, lower Ganges plains and north-eastern

region and six meso regions for planning and resource development (Misra, R. P. *et al*; 1974: 85-105).

Socio-cultural Context

Following the lead provided by Clark Wissler, A. D. Kroeber and M. J. Herskovits, N. K. Bose wrote an article "culture zones of India" (Bose, N. K.; 1956) and suggested a scheme of socio-cultural traits distribution vis-a-vis natural regions of India. Bose hurriedly reviewed the efforts made by geographers, ecologists, linguists and anthropologists to provide a morphological, meteorological, linguistic and racial regions of India. Again taking clue from Franz Boas, who pointed out that the geographical boundaries of racial, linguistic or cultural affiliation do not closely correspond with one another (Boas, F.: 1922), Bose as the director of the Anthropological Survey of India initiated a large scale project on culture-area and culture trait survey to be covered in all the districts of India. For the basic theme, a study in Indian unity and diversity, he chose the peasant life, for which settlement pattern, house types, food, fats or oil used, costumes of men and women, foot-wear, bullock carts, ploughs, husking implements and oil press as eleven traits were selected and data on them were collected from 311 out of 322 districts of then India (Bose, N. K., 1961: vi). Though in most of the districts only one village was surveyed, with a view to representing important variations due to ecological or ethnic differentiation, more than one villages were surveyed in some cases. Thus, they were able to collect data from 430 villages. The Anthropological Survey of India, conducted two more ambitious research projects on above pattern. In 1970's, they took up social trait survey and in 1973, they undertook the 'Border Area Projects' with a view to studying the frontier culture. Villages on the northern international frontier were chosen, their household articles, costumes, goods exchanged across the border etc. were enumerated. Unfortunately for us, the reports of the two projects are yet to be written and published.

The Anthropological Survey of India is reported to have another project on the study of the Arunachal Pradesh as a cultural area. "Two large scale projects to study two selected villages, one isolated and the other somewhat acculturated of each tribe have been contemplated. The projects cover a study of the villages under several heads: namely (i) social background, (ii) economic background, (iii) animal husbandry, (iv) forest product, (v) land tenure, (vi) trade and means of communication and (vii) distribution and consumption of economic groups, (viii) economic household, (ix) economics of social organization, (x) the economics of justice, (xi) economics of religious rituals, (xii) wealth, poverty and debt" (Vidyarathi, L. P.: 1978: 121-122). The field work was to be completed between 1968 to 1972 but we are not in the know of the outcome of the said research projects.

On the basis of their area study projects, the Anthropological Survey of India has come out with three volumes: one, on peasant life in India, second, festivals in India, and third, ornaments in India. These reports

indicate Franz Boas' hypothesis that cultural trait distribution not necessarily follows the divisions of the natural regions in the country. Another impression one gets is that the above projects present an inventory of cultural traits, but there has been no serious efforts to identify the emergent cultural patterns. That is one of the reasons that these studies project a diffused impression and they appear to be intellectually unsophisticated. Specially, the region with which we are concerned presently, e.g. the Himalayan regions, remains un-understood culturally inspite of the above projects. There appears to be only one hope. In case, the Anthropological Survey of India comes out with reports of all their above studies concerning the Himalayan region and we add them up with existing ethnographic and sociological studies from the region, picture of the cultural processes in the Himalayan region may emerge.

Cultural Context

Apart from the individual cultural traits and trait complexes enumerated or available to the casual observers, certain obvious cultural patterns occur in the Himalayan region. "The Himalaya is the abode of a great variety of people. They include unsophisticated people of the secluded valley bottoms and exposed lake beds, the seminomadic pastoral tribes and even (said) head-hunters among a few tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland. The topography of the Himalaya precludes quick movements and intermingling. It is because of this reason that quaint customs have developed in various pockets. Usually the environment has made the people of the Himalaya cheerful, happy, simple, honest, courageous and resourceful. However, the culture changes from one type to another across mountain barriers. A number of dominating cultural flows may be recognized. The two main types of currents are the Tibetan culture of Lamaism, with a Buddhistic-religion from the north and the Hindu culture from the plains of India. A third flow of culture is the Muslim-Persian influence from the west, which is dominating in Kashmir, and has more or less spread upto Kinnaur in the Satlaj valley. The Sindhu-Ganga watershed beyond is also a cultural divide" (Bose, S. C. : 1972 : 72).

Agehanand Bharati with his long first hand experience of the social context of the Uttar Pradesh Himalaya and studies in the Himalayan ethnographic materials identifies two dominant cultural configurations: Hindu and Lamaist (Bharati, A. : 1976 : 106-110). He proposes to arrange the multiple ethnic groups from the Himalaya along a continuum from high caste Hindus to discrete cultural isolates. "Thus, stress on ritualistic purity, vegetarian diet the non-remarriage of widows, merges with high-ranking in the Hindu hierarchies. Now it is tempting to select contrary patterns of social and individual action as generating obverse hierarchical ranking on the analogy of tribal societies, in the Indian plains, when in the process of 'Hinduization' and 'Sanskritization'... the process of "upcasting is ubiquitous among the groups, which rebel against low hierarchical ranking in the area.... Tibet Bhot-province admitted or domiciled, conveys the image of meat-eating, or worse, bovine (*yak*)-eating, polyandry,

easy divorce, remarriage of widows and suspect ritual to *Pahari* high castes and to the Hindu Nepal; worse of all, it conveys lax sexual morals.... The closer to the Tibetan style, more directly people seem to enjoy living; the closer to the Hindu style, the more highly ascetic, puritanical, and restrictive values are seen to have been interjected" (Bharati, A: 1976).

While dwelling upon the political culture and political dynamics in Sikkim, the present author identified three political processes operative in Sikkim. Firstly, "the basic foundation of community life in Sikkim is tribalism. Individuals are identified for the significant roles on the basis of their tribal and ethnic affiliations" (Sinha, A.C. : 1975 : 152). Secondly, "the Buddhist (or Lamaist) social structure was based on a three-tier system consisting of the clergy, the aristocracy and the commoners. Family life was organized around the institution of polyandry and their approach to social relationships within their community was egalitarian. Thirdly, the, Nepalese Hindus had their caste structure based on social distance and ritual hierarchy. Basically, monogamous, the Nepalese were organized in accordance with the concept of (purity), pollution and untouchability. Eating of beef was taboo for the clean caste Nepalese. This innate sentiment of the Nepalese ritual superiority over the "Polyandrous and beef eating Lamaist" provided a sense of ritual solidarity among the Nepalese against the Buddhists (lamaists)". It was mentioned earlier that the tribal represented "the little tradition" of their localized and diverse ethnic affiliations. The Lamaists consider themselves as a part of the great Tibetan Buddhism, under the patronage of the Dalai Lama. The Hindus draw inspirations from their sacred centres in India and Nepal.

In case we sum it up, there are four significant cultural processes operative in the Himalayan region. Firstly, all along the Himalaya Lamaist Buddhism, developed in Tibet, prevalent from Arunachal Pradesh to Ladakh on the southern fringe of the Tibetan plateau. Secondly, Hindu ethos and social intercourse is evident from Kashmir valley to Bhutan duars on the southern slope of the Himalaya. Thirdly, a basically animistic tribalism prevails predominantly in Arunachal Pradesh, which progressively decreases westward and is found mainly upto Limbuan (i.e. eastern Nepal). Many of the tribes are in the process of conversion either to Lamaism or Hinduism, not to talk about individual conversion to Christianity. Fourthly, another flow of culture from the west in the form of Muslim-Persian character is dominant in Kashmir valley. The Sindhu-Ganges water-shed remains in a way its eastern limits.

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