

An Interrogation into the Relationship of North Western Himalayan Tribes and the Natural Resources

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Abstract

The present research is empirical in nature based mainly on the primary sources of research data in the form of books, journals and research reports. It aims to analyze the relationship depicting mainly the impacts of the North Western Himalayan [NWH] tribal people on the natural resources therein. Nearly 40 million people inhabit the Himalayas. Generally, Hindus of Indian heritage are dominant in the Sub-Himalayas and the Middle Himalayan valleys from eastern Kashmir to Nepal. To the north Tibetan Buddhists inhabit the Great Himalayas from Ladakh to northeast India. In central Nepal, in an area between about 1830 and 2440 m (between about 6000 and 8000 ft), the Indian and Tibetan cultures have intermingled, producing a combination of Indian and Tibetan traits. The eastern Himalayas in India and nearby areas of eastern Bhutan are inhabited by animistic people whose culture is similar to those living in northern Myanmar and Yunnan province in China. People of western Kashmir are Muslims and have a culture similar to the inhabitants of Afghanistan and Iran. As revealed by rigorous research, on one hand the NWH natural resources are witnessing extreme challenges at the hands of the dwelling tribals like depletion of medicinal botanical wealth, depletion of forest belt for land use, ecological imbalance and the like. But looking through a sociological perspective the utility of natural resources as an immediate available life supporting system in the form of food, shelter, cure and economy is viewed by many scholars as system of sustenance for Himalayan people. The present paper will thus try to investigate this relationship in order to draw out some useful conclusions regarding the nature of the relationship of NWH tribal folk and the natural ecosystems whether being balanced, destructive or even symbiotic.

KEYWORDS: Balance, Challenges, Eco-systems, Family, Himalayas, Livelihood, Natural Resources, Tribals.

INTRODUCTION

THE HIMALAYAN ETHNIC GROUPS

The Hindu epics and Puranas refer to the original inhabitants of the Himalayas- the Kulinds, Kiratas and Kilinds, Kiratas and Kinnars and later texts mention the Khasas and the Darads. Today three ethnic types constitute the Himalayan population: Negroids, Mongoloids and Aryans.

From very early times there have been migrations into the Himalayas and within it. Spiritual quest motivated a few to migrate there, and a small minority responded to the call of these mountains to test their own endurance and will power. Pursuit of profit

propelled others. Reasons of state dictated the posting of garrisons even in remote, desolate areas. All these factors combined over a period of time to change significantly the complexion of the local populace. There have been waves of migration from Nepal to Sikkim and Kumaon, for instance, and from Tibet. At present it is extremely difficult to separate the different racial strains (Crook).

Bhutiyas of Bhutan

The Bhutanese are Bhutiyas of Mongolian origin who refers to themselves as Drukpa-inhabitants of Druk Yul or the 'Land of the Thunder Dragon'. Apart from a few obscure areas of Nepal and Ladakh, and Spiti in India, the Bhutanese are the only large group to follow traditional Buddhism and, despite the building of roads and controlled introduction of tourism, have maintained many aspects of the culture.

People of Sikkim

The Sikkimese consist of three different groups - the Lepchas, the Bhutiyas and the Nepalis. The Lepchas are the original inhabitants but are now in a minority. Not much is known of their history before their conversion to Buddhism and the enthronement of Phuntsok Namgyal as the first historic ruler of Sikkim.

Nepali People

The people of Nepal are a complex mix of racial patterns. The dominant Hindu castes of Brahmin, Thakur and Chetri, along with several others speak Nepali. The Gurungs, Magars, Tamaings, Rais and Limbus form the Gurkha regiments of the British and Indian armies. These are part of the mongoloid, tribally organized groups of hill farmers who dominate the middle hills. The Sherpas of the Solo Khumbu region in the northeast of the country are among the many Bhutiya groups who speak dialects of Tibetan.

People of Uttaranchal

In Kumaon and Garhwal, in the central Himalayas, Khasas and Doms were the original inhabitants. The Khasas, historians surmise, were a west Central Asian nomadic tribe who entered through the northwest and spread from Kashmir to Assam.

People of Himachal Pradesh

In Himachal Pradesh, the descendants of these Khasas are known as "Kanets" and now claim Rajput status. The majority of the population in the present-day central Himalayas has Khasa ancestry. Immigrant Brahmins and Kshatriyas from the plains brought caste division with them and introduced new forms of social organization rooted in Hindu orthodoxy.

The Ladakhis

The Ladakhis are of ethnic stock different from that of the people of Kumaon and Garhwal. According to folklore, Ladakh was once totally populated by Darads. The latest archaeological finds give credence to this popular belief. The Mons belonging to the Mongoloid stock, and who are now far more numerous there, seem to have migrated at a much later date.

Monpa ethnic group of Arunachal

The west kameng district is inhabited by five different tribes such as the Akas, Khowas, Mijis, Sherdukpens, and Monpa. The entire population of the west kameng district can be divided into two cultural groups on the basis of their socio-religious affinities, of which the Monpas and Sherdukpens follow the lamaistic tradition of Mahayana Buddhism. The second groups of the people are Akas, Mijis, and Buguns, who worship the Sun and the Moon as God, locally called as "Donyi-Polo" and "Abo-Tani", respectively (Nima et al, 2001).

The Lisu (Yobin) tribe

The Lisu are a minority tribal group in India based in four remote villages and a few settlements in Changlang district (see Maitra 1993 for the only ethnographic study of Indian Lisus). There are larger populations in China (515,000), Myanmar (126,000) and Thailand (16,000) (Datta).

DISCUSSION

HIMALAYAN CULTURES AND DIVERSITY: AN INTERFACE

The western Himalaya covers approximately 11 per cent of the Himalayan landmass and about 90 per cent people in these areas live in villages. People in their traditional settings are well aware of the values of conserving social, cultural and biological resources. Since generations, they have developed and accumulated knowledge and effective device and methods for conservation, protection and preservation of such value systems. The tribal society of western Himalaya is highly traditional and has characteristic manifestation of man's cultural interactions with nature. These traditional societies have, in turn, evolved multitude of strategies to make effective and harmonious use of resources. During this process, these ethnical societies have resorted to cultural adjustments for a harmonious articulation between community techniques and technologies. Indeed, culture has played a vital role in the management of at least the biological resources tuned to the region. If natural reserves do not fulfill the basic needs of the individuals then society starts changing resulting into a new phase of tribal culture. The society decides its own goals and methods ensuring sustained improvement in the quality of life without affecting the traditional values. Therefore, culture plays vital role in development and conservation of traditional society and biological resources (Singh, 2004).

ECOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL LINKAGE: A NECESSITY

Understanding the linkage between the ecological and social processes is indeed the basis for sustainable forestry management in the developing tropics. In such an integrated approach to management, the socio-economic and socio cultural issues and the traditional knowledge of the local communities need to be reconciled (Ramakrishnan *et al.* 1996b, 1998).

Linking ecological and social processes is crucial to appreciating the relationship between biodiversity and ecosystem functioning, and to utilizing this relationship for human welfare through the sustainable management of resources. The linkages could operate at the process level or at the ecosystem/landscape level (*ibid.*). Traditional mountain societies are an integral part of the functioning of forest ecosystems, now largely a variety of secondary types that are under increasing human pressure. We need a better understanding of the linkages between biophysical and social processes. In order to have this understanding, we need to consider new and emerging ecological paradigms that effectively link ecological processes with social processes. We need a new breed of scientists who have the ability to move back and forth between the ecological and the social dimensions of the problem (Ramakrishnan, 2001).

POPULATION AND DEPLETION OF MEDICINAL WEALTH

Developmental pressure on forests and their unscrupulous exploitation have caused “severe depletion” of Himalayan medicinal wealth. A report submitted to the Environment Ministry said encouraging commercial cultivation is vital for the success of medicinal plants sector to meet the ever growing demand for “temperate medicinal plants”.

This medicinal wealth, which occupies an important place in Vedic treatise, has been depleting continuously for the last two decades in their natural habitat, said the report by the Himalayan Forest Research Institute (HFRI), adding that the depletion of medicinal plants resource base is affecting the health and livelihood options of the people.

North-western Himalayan region with its wide range of altitudes, topography and climatic conditions, is a rich repository of medicinal wealth. According to the report, “more than 800 valuable medicinal species found in this part of India is extensively used by the locals since time immemorial for curing various diseases of humankind.”

“However, various developmental and anthropogenic pressures on the forests, unscrupulous exploitation of medicinal plants in the wake of their increasing national and global trade, inadequacy of management inputs and lack of enabling legislation have caused severe depletion of the medicinal plants resource base,” it said (THE HINDU July 2, 2011).

IS THE THREAT TO BIODIVERSITY ANTHROPOLOGICAL?

The biodiversity of Himalaya is severely threatened by natural and anthropological disturbances. One of the foundations for the conservation of biological diversity in forest landscapes is understanding and managing the disturbances regimes of landscapes under past-natural and natural conditions. Conservational biologists warn that 25% of all species could become extinct during the next 20-30 years. A total of 52 plant species was reported from the study area. Hill Base showed the more species diversity of all three layers as compared to Hill Slope and Hill Top, whereas, Hill Slope shown by the minimum diversity of trees than all sites and increases the diversity of Herbs and Shrubs. Presence of higher diversity of *Parthenium hysterophorus* and *Cynodon dactylon* showed the open type forest canopy in Hill Slope which showed highly disturbed forest due to colonization of villages near forest. A strong correlation was observed between tree felling and population density, fuel wood consumption as well as ease of access in the area. The forest sites surrounded by larger villages and having easy road access represented lower tree values (Arunachalam et al, 2004).

AN ETHNO-BOTANICAL VIEW

Indigenous knowledge systems are culturally valued and scientifically important. Strengthening the wise use and conservation of indigenous knowledge of useful plants may benefit and improve the living standard of poor people.

The richness of medicinal plants was decreasing with increasing altitude, but the percentage of plants used as medicine steadily increased with increasing altitude. This was due to preferences given to herbal remedies in high altitude areas and a situation of having no alternative choices, poverty and belief on effectiveness of folklore herbal remedies. Enhancing the sustainable use and conservation of indigenous knowledge of useful and medicinal plants may benefit and improve the living standard of poor people (Ripu et al, 2008).

CULTURAL RITUALS AND BIODIVERSITY: THE CASE OF HIMALAYAN SACRED GROVES

India has a rich tradition of nature conservation as well as a vigorous official program of nature reserves developed over the last 40 years. Sacred groves are forest patches conserved by the local people intertwined with their socio-cultural and religious practices. These groves harbor rich biodiversity and play a significant role in the conservation of biodiversity. Indigenous cultural and rituals practices of the local people in sacred groves serve as a tool for conserving biodiversity. Sacred groves are distributed over a wide ecosystem and help in conservation of rare and endemic species. Various indigenous communities all over the world lived in harmony with nature and thus conserved biodiversity. In the course of time, science and technology developed and industries were established and expanded to meet the increasing demands of the people and to take care of various developmental activities.

Over increasing population and growth of infrastructural facilities has resulted in the decline of sacred groves. Furthermore, habitat alternation, overexploitation, pollution and

introduction of exotic species also threatened the global biological resources. Modernization and commercialization of agriculture in order to increase productivity are the cause of disappearing traditional knowledge among the people. There is strong need to initiate people's participation, training for promoting the indigenous traditional knowledge and conserve the biodiversity through this traditional knowledge. Well-preserved sacred groves are thus storehouses of valuable medicinal and other plants having high economic value, and serve as a refuge to threatened species (Anthwal et al, 2006).

CONSERVATION AND THE FORGOTTEN LOCAL

Aparajita Datta (Threatened forests and Forgotten People) writes that "Conservation has been moving from state-controlled exclusionary approaches to those that involve local communities in valuing and protecting biodiversity (Western et al. 1994, Terborgh et al. 2002). As these initiatives gain currency, we need to assess their logic and effectiveness. Critics argue that they are fundamentally flawed because the economic aspirations of local communities cannot be regulated through imposed 'ideals' of sustainable use (Oates 1995) and that biodiversity conservation is scarcely an important goal in these initiatives (Sanderson & Redford 2003). Further, a poor understanding of the resource use interests of local people hampers integrative conservation (Noss 1997; Hackel 1999). However, the bottom line is that long-term conservation success will be hampered by exclusivist policies that alienate local communities who usually bear short-term costs.

Conservation practice in India has largely been driven by the preservationist approach. However, it has for some time been called into question (Saberwal & Rangarajan 2003); criticized for its 'elitist' attitudes (Guha, 2003) and accused of antagonizing local communities (Kothari et al. 1996, Gadgil & Guha 2000, Saberwal et al. 2000).

Compared to other Asian countries, India has strong wildlife protection laws (Bennett & Rao 2002), and conservation efforts have been relatively more successful despite high human populations. The overall impression is of a people with a history of protection of wild animals and tolerance even to animals that destroy human lives, property and crops (Gadgil & Guha 2000, Saberwal et al. 2000). Like most generalizations, however, this glosses over the diverse linguistic, cultural, and social identities prevalent in India. This is especially true of Northeast India, which has predominantly tribal populations that are further differentiated by their language, culture and history. Northeast India is geographically and culturally closer to Southeast Asia, where hunting of wildlife by tribal communities for consumption and trade is extensive and more open."

MOUNTAIN TOURISM AND THE LOCAL POPULACE

The effects of tourism on different spheres of a mountain community and mountain environment are varied. The contribution of tourism to local economies is still relatively low, although it is considered to be one of the main contributors to national economies. Both forward and backward of linkages from tourism are weak. Mountain tourism also lacks a clear marketing strategy. Local communities have no other option but to rely on

weak infrastructures and institutions. Organizing and monitoring tourism in such cases can be difficult. Mountain tourism is often sensitive to exogenous factors such as security and natural calamities. Another important aspect of tourism is to have a cadre of trained people at the local level who are knowledgeable about the local mountain environment and can provide quality services to visitors while promoting the local, cultural identity and who can assist in preserving the environment (Mahesh et al, 2000).

PASTORAL COMMUNITIES AND NWH

The Himalayas are characterized by highly complex sociological system, with rich cultural diversity linked with equally rich biological diversity. Sheep and goat pastoralism is a constant feature of traditional mountain societies. *Gaddis, Gujjars, Bakarwals, Kinnauras, Kaulis* and *Kanets* of the north Indian Himalayas, *Bhotias* of Garhwal Himalayas, *Bhotias* and *Sherpas* of Khumbu valley of Nepal, *Kirats* of eastern Nepal, *Monpa* yak breeders of Arunachal Pradesh, *Bhutias* of Lachen and Lachung, Sikkim and *Changpas* of Changthang, Ladakh are some of the known pastoral communities of Himalayas. The pastoral communities of Himalayas make use of resources like high mountain pastures in three different ways by characteristic mobility patterns, socio-economic organization and property rights.

Natural resource use is influenced by the history and cultural system of a human population as well as by the availability of resources. Human populations settled in mountainous environments have developed diverse strategies of natural resource use associated with water and land limitations, although its practice depends on the technological and socio-cultural characteristics of the population (Veena, 2011).

CONCLUSIONS & SUGGESTIONS

Conservation of biological diversity through protected area networking in this less-explored North-Western Himalayan zone is a distant dream due to several constrains, viz. inadequate data on biodiversity potential, village-to-village and community-to-community variations in dialects and culture, site inaccessibility, natural disasters, ineffective legal enforcement mechanisms, and lack of adequate infrastructural facilities and of well-trained, well-equipped and motivated personnel. The age-old practice of shifting agriculture has been one of the factors affecting the virgin forest cover in the region. Moreover, people are forest dependent and any external intervention or monitoring of biodiversity or natural resources without peoples' participation will not be successful, even if it is well intended. In order to effectively manage biodiversity, the communities should be consulted through a functional participatory mode of community mobilization (Khera et al, 2001).

High percentage of biodiversity favors ecological stability, whereas accelerating species loss could lead to disintegrate the ecosystem. Biodiversity is the totality of genes, species and ecosystem in a region. Human dominance on biosphere markedly reduces the diversity of species with many habitats worldwide, which leads to species extinction.

The biodiversity of present forest area is overtime, often heavily influenced by the cycles of human activity such as fire, agriculture, technology and trade. Over and excessive exploitation may results in alteration of natural ecosystem balance. Hence, if the natural ecosystem and their function are to be kept in equilibrium then there is a need to have correct assessment of natural resource availability. The over destruction of vegetation has been continuing at an alarming pace due to a variety of causes. Disturbance influences species diversity in much landscape and a better understanding of interaction between spatial pattern and disturbances is needed. The Himalaya embodies a diverse and characteristics vegetation describe over a wide range of topographical regions. The lesser Himalayan region with *ca* 900-1800m altitude, is colonized by subtropical broad leaved forests, mainly dominated by Chirpine (*Pinus roxburghii*) and Oak (*Quercus*) species. The forest diversity, environmental and anthropological disturbances in Himalayan region has been studied by some phyto-sociologists. Himalayan forest are considered as globe's most depleted forest. This has been attributed to the high population increase, associated with land use changes, socio-economic transformations and unsustainable exploitation of natural forest resources (Dhangwal et al, 2012).

Studies revealed that declining ethno-botanical biodiversity as a result of varying usage patterns by tribal communities of different regions of India could be partially sustained. Studies also demonstrated the tribes were committed to means of harvesting methods that ensured a natural conservation process, thus pointing out the fact that tribes could be considered as living tools for sustainable perennation of their medicating species (Chatterjee, 2004).

In order for humans to live in harmony with nature we ourselves must limit our numbers. While our most dangerous natural predators have changed over time from very large animals to microscopic organisms, our technological growth has tipped the scales, and we are presently very much out of balance with nature. Protected natural areas are necessary in order to help us regain that balance. By managing protected natural areas and their surrounding land uses and cultures as systems rather than separate entities, park managers, regional and country planners, and governments will be able to truly protect natural areas. If the protection of these areas can become a part of, rather than apart from, local human culture, preservation of nature could become a reality (Busch, 1989).

It was also found that the NWH regions are under risk due to more anthropological pressure on it in the form of fuel wood consumption, forest fire for obtaining better grazing opportunities, timber wood, use of forest land of agriculture purposes etc. and not much natural pressure on it. Thus the Govt. of J&K as well as the Forest Department should take unitary steps for the regeneration and conservation of forest diversity for future generation.

Preservation/conservation owes importance because of fragility of the Himalayan environment and considerable damages, whatever be the causal factors, to the Himalayan landscape in the past. Values for conservation/preservation of resources are deeply embedded in the religion and culture of traditional societies (Rao, 1997).

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