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The Himalaya and Our Future

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The Himalaya and Our Future

Himalaya, the 'abode of snow' and the 'largest physical mass on earth', is home to a geological, geographical, biological diversity and a multitude of human concerns and constructs—from hunting–gathering communities to agrarian societies to the economies of modern trade and industry. This mountain system has evolved a distinctive ecology that has become the basis for the existence of the natural as well as cultural systems of South Asia. It surprisingly connects the tropical rain forests of Myanmar, Arunachal and Bhutan with the sparse and cold semi-deserts of the Ladakh–Karakoram region, and the Indus, Ganga and Brahmaputra plains with the Tibetan plateau. The contrasting Himalayan collage makes it different from other mountain systems.

The Himalaya stands like a sub-continental arc. In so many ways, it is dynamic and active. The existence of the people of South Asia is deeply connected with it. Its geology teaches us about continental drift, the disappearing of the Tethys Sea, or about its own rising height, still on-going, or yet, about its own peculiar nature which hides within itself dynamism and seismicity—the mother of all earthquakes. With its peaks, passes, glaciers, moraines, rivers, confluences, gorges, pastures and meadows, its geography is akin to the myriad faces of nature. Its lofty peaks make a formidable barrier for the monsoons, resulting in heavy rainfall on the southern side. These mountains, indeed, produce and control the climate of South Asia.

Its vegetation and forests are like green lungs that absorb the rising atmospheric carbon. Its wilderness has given natural expression and embodiment to a plethora of

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Today this mountain and its communities are in crisis. It is being rapidly encroached upon in so many ways. Its resources are being exploited at an unsustainable rate, much beyond what can be regenerated. The so-called 'development' has evolved a new form of colonialism.

floral and faunal species, from medicinal–aromatic plants to bushes and trees, and from birds, fish and butterflies to *Yarsha Gumba* (*Cordyceps sinensis* or *Keeda Jadi* which has a number of uses in traditional medicine).

Its natural beauty and tranquillity has inspired and mesmerized millions, including some of the greatest human beings that ever lived. The abundance of a variety of raw material that it provides is the basis for mineral, metallurgical, oil, timber, woollen and drug industries. The wilderness has been a confluence for natural and spiritual energies, and within a broader cultural context, it is still the main attraction for pilgrims and tourists. The mighty snowy peaks, the grim passes, the forbidding glacial vistas and blue sky fascinate and beckon adventurers and explorers.

Today this mountain and its communities are in crisis. It is being rapidly encroached upon in so many ways. Its resources are being exploited at an unsustainable rate, much beyond what can be regenerated. The so-called 'development' has evolved a new form of colonialism. Sometimes change is visible, but then one feels that this 'development' is also without, or with very little positive change. The on-going projects failed in minimizing the burden on women and children, pressure on bio and cultural diversity, and monitoring the out-migration of mountain communities. They have also failed in preserving the natural resources and evolving good governance. The questions related with the impact of globalization, privatization, consumerism, corporatization and climate change are not seriously investigated.

Though the Himalaya sustains human creativity and gives us a chance to understand the dialectics of nature, the communities often fail to realize the intentions of the encroachers. For this reason, the anger of Himalayan communities must be appreciated. We need to realize that it is time to understand aspects of Himalayan society and ecology with much more depth, clear designs and exceptional dedication.

This paper is an attempt to understand the ecological centrality of the Himalaya in the Asian context, its cultural uniqueness and present ailments, and finally, how it is associated with our common future.

Fifty Million-Year-Old 'Young' Mountain

Even if we do not pursue the seemingly fantastic geological tale of the Indian subcontinent's drift from Africa towards Asia around 50 million years ago, let us come to the single biggest outcome of that upheaval, the Himalaya, as it stands today between Afghanistan and Myanmar encompassing Nepal and Bhutan, Pakistan (Northern Areas) and India (Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal, Uttarakhand, Darjeeling Hills, Sikkim, and the north-eastern states). Large regions of Tibet are very much part of this Himalayan complex.¹

Kalidas's '*devatama*' and 'measuring rod of the earth' and Allama Iqbal's '*Faseele-Kishware-Hindustan*' and 'sentinel' is indeed the backbone of a living body, rising from the plains to the north, transforming itself into a variety of hills and mountains. These are like the ribs of the Himalaya. Numerous micro-societies and cultures live in the thousands of its valleys.

Today the Himalaya is considered a natural-cultural heritage of all humanity, but it has in fact vibrated, rhythmically and perpetually, in the conscious as well as the subconscious minds of different Asian societies. This vibrant rhythm is born out of the snowy peaks and lofty mountain ranges which are ever a part of this huge expanse.

This rhythm belongs to the glaciers, innumerable rocks and faults/thrusts that have developed across them (among these, Main Central Thrust [MCT], Main Boundary Thrust [MBT] and Trans Himadri Fault [THF] are already well known), as well as to the inherent geo-energy manifest as earthquakes, landslides and thermal springs. It belongs to the lakes, streams, flora and fauna; to the human beings representing hundreds of communities and cultures. A number of religions and faiths have been nurtured here and it has also been an ideal place for myths and dreams. Before getting bound up in the faiths and beliefs of humans, their political and economic systems, its rhythm is the expression of a highly dynamic geology, and a geography that still rises as it flows down.

Asian societies share an ancient and deep bond with the Himalaya. Few realize that the Himalaya is not simply a seasonal retreat for the rich, nor solely a sanctuary for the pilgrim, an arena full of glory for the mountaineer, or the

birthplace of mighty rivers, but it is also a region where several cultures and societies thrive in its natural diversity, and where the common people are concerned about the preservation of their environment and traditions, as well as the betterment of their lives.

It is still rising (at the rate of 2 cm per year) and the Indian plate is relentlessly pushing the Tibetan (or Eurasian) plate. This process frequently gives rise to earthquakes and landslides. A number of thrusts and faults criss-cross the Himalaya, the reason behind its restlessness. It is steeped in a resentment fuelled by the geo-tectonic activity underneath. The bursting of the glacial lakes, the fast melting of the glaciers, deforestation, forest fires, floods, large-scale erosion, the transport and deposition of thousands of tons of sediment/soil downstream, and the flooding and submerging of large parts of the plains: all this has become more or less an annual spectacle. This is partly a natural process; the rest is man-made.

By itself, this is an expression of the natural processes at work in the Himalaya. Our political economy, which has given rise to an indifferent, unrelenting modern civilization, has helped accelerate and multiply the contributing factors. Nonetheless, its natural beauty and splendour glow unabated. The Himalaya, like nature itself, is well-versed in the art of self-healing and regeneration. Its forests and plants try their best to check the erosion and retain its rich soil cover.

The lustre of its vegetation is dependent on the form and gradient of the terrain, the composition and spread of the soil, rock and snow cover. These, in turn, temper the form and spirit of the lakes and rivers. As the rivers flow out from the glaciers in the high/Tethys Himalaya, it is difficult to believe that these are self-regulating and self-sufficient natural systems. The terrain here does not allow them to become aggressive.

Through the 'central crystalline zone', the rocky and boulder-hewn terrain counterpoints the river, making it angry and aggressive. This duel or a difficult '*jugalbandi*' between rock and water can be seen and heard throughout the Himalaya. This is the most challenging age for the river. On occasion, mountains hurling down rocks and boulders obstruct the river's flow, almost trying to make a lake out of it. But the river invariably refuses to be tamed. Further down, the rivers gradually settle and meet their tributaries at various confluences. Throughout they nurture habitable spaces

where humans can settle, collect edible food, till the soil and raise livestock. In the plains we see a tired river in which humans flush their industrial and urban waste and draw out canals from it.

The three river systems originating in the Himalaya and Tibet are Indus, Ganga and Brahmaputra, and they make up 4.28, 25 and 33.71 per cent, respectively, by volume of India's river water, and drain 9.8, 26 and 7.8 per cent, respectively, of India's total area. In this way their combined basin is 43.8 per cent of India's total surface area, and supply 63 per cent of India's fresh water. These rivers flow in two to four countries and are the lifelines of the northern areas of the Indian subcontinent.

The first system—Indus—takes the waters of Tibet, Ladakh and the Karakorum to the Arabian Sea. Indus isn't just the chief of the five rivers (the others are Sutlej, Ravi, Chenab and Jhelum), it also drains the Nubra, Shyok, Kabul, Chitral and Gilgit rivers. These are the rivers by which must once have stood the first few caravans of those migrant communities who later became founders of Indian society. The havoc and destruction these rivers caused in Ladakh and Pakistan in 2010 is an indication of their changing temper.

The second Himalayan river system is led by Ganga. It is not only the most sacred and largest river of India (2,526 km), but also among the ten most polluted rivers of the world. Between the Indus, Brahmaputra, Narmada and Mahanadi rivers is spread the large basin of Ganga. Yamuna, Chambal, Betwa, Banas, Ramganga, Kosi (Uttarakhand–Himachal–Rajasthan–Haryana–Delhi–UP–MP); Kali; Karnali-Ghaghra and Kosi (Uttarakhand–UP–Nepal–Bihar); Damodar (Jharkhand); and Mahananda (West Bengal) are its major tributaries.

The overall basin of Ganga is spread in five eco-regions, four countries and 11 Indian states. Its head-waters touch the southern slopes of Mt. Gurla Mandhata, north and south slopes of Mt. Sagarmatha or Chomolangma or Everest; western ridges of Kanchenjunga, Shimla Hills, Vindhyanchal and Chhota Nagpur. The Ganga system covers a large area (8,61,404 sq km) and 79.3 per cent of this basin falls in India. Nepal is completely in its catchment area. The total population living in this basin rose to around 530 million in 2011.

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Ganga forms the largest river system in India and the associated mythological narratives exalt her to motherhood. Yet there is a mother in every river and human beings are adept at exploiting her. We have already violated Mother Ganga. It's a miracle that it still flows! Our conscience has become so limited that we are searching for 'sacredness' in the river from Gomukh to Uttarkashi only!

The third Himalayan river system is Sangpo/Brahmaputra—Teesta (Rangit). Sangpo originates in the eastern slopes of Mariam La, very close to Mansarovar and Kailas, flows through Tibet at altitudes between 11,000 and 10,000 ft above sea level, enters India in Arunachal, and attains a more disciplined flow in Assam. Rangit originates from Western Sikkim and disappears into the Teesta, as does the Teesta itself into the Brahmaputra.

Flanking these rivers and all their tributaries stand the towering peaks, majestic and proud, highly individualistic and self-centred, that transform man into poet, painter, philosopher or mystic.² They converse with each other or with humans alike. They lie ever closer to the sky than us. If one poet has called this the 'depth of the Himalaya', the other invites us to behold 'as the sky reaches down to kiss its peaks'. This distinguishes the Himalaya from other mountain systems of the world.³

In the higher reaches, between the peaks, lie those ancient passes⁴ which have for centuries been the sole passages connecting India and Tibet, and which have witnessed not only the songs and caravans of nomadic and trading communities, or the transhumance of pastoral societies, but also the progress of countless pilgrims as they made their way to Tholing, Tirthapuri, Kailas-Mansarovar, Shigatse, Lhasa and other places in Tibet.

Cultural Diversity

The 'sacredness' of the Himalaya has been vividly described in the myths and literature of Asian communities. Its natural beauty, geographical complexity and a rich mythic tradition have given birth to various pilgrim destinations. Many communities have settled here; while some of them have maintained an interactive existence, many have also chosen a more isolated identity. The Himalaya is unparalleled in terms of its human and cultural diversity.

Different stages of social development can be seen here, with tribal,⁵ caste and class-based societies living alongside each other. While animal husbandry is actively

practiced in the mountains and agriculture in the valleys, the barter system of trade spreads across the Himalaya. This has led to the creation of a unique social, cultural and economic system, containing elements brought in by different constitutive communities.

Being the melting pot of several ethnic groups, a juncture of different political systems, a region where most of the linguistic families of the world exist, and the continuously increasing geo-political importance of the Himalaya has ensured that we ought to understand it deeply and comprehensively by engaging with all its aspects. Since it is spread across so many regions and nations, we need to evolve an approach through which we can see the Himalaya as the centre and also the periphery. This will be the beginning of an effort to understand this diverse mountain range more deeply.

The process of migration and habitation of human groups is an interesting one. It is yet to be analyzed in great detail as to how the Negroid, the Caucasian, the Mongoloid and other ancient communities struggled, compromised and assimilated after arriving in the Himalaya. During this process, each community tried to learn from and understand the other. They constructed their preliminary culture, developed economic activities, and experimented with indigenous arts and sciences. Thus, practices such as *jhum* (shifting farming), animal husbandry, water-milling, irrigational systems, mining and metallurgy, transportation and bridge-making, vernacular architecture, sculpture and mask-making and so on, were developed under the special ecological and geo-political pressures of the region.

Today, when we look at the blue-eyed Drokapas of Ladakh; the Shilpkars, Shaukas (Bhotiyas), Banrajis, Tharus and Bokshas of Uttarakhand; the Banrajis and Sherpas of Nepal; the Lepchas and Bhotias of Sikkim; the Brokapas of Bhutan, Arunachal and Tibet; the Khasas of many regions of the Himalaya; and the tribes of north-eastern India, their presence speaks of a variety of human contacts and rich social engagements which became possible here. Here they tried to absorb the different religious beliefs and myths they encountered, and this also gave them a distinct identity in the form of folk traditions.

The Hindu, Bon, Buddhist, Jain, Christian, Muslim and Sikh traditions have certainly associated themselves with the Himalaya due to its unique natural attraction. Many old and mutually disparate societies and cultures have existed in the Himalaya. It

seems as though this natural persona of the Himalaya gave birth to an endless series of *Pauranic stories*.

Our Himalaya is in the north while for the nomads of Tibet it is in the south. Quite clearly, the Himalaya belongs equally to the people on either side. Such a wholesome understanding of the Himalaya can be found in many stories of various Gods which circulate in its different language cultures. This includes the oral literature of the Himalaya.

The Shaiva, Shakta and Vaishnava traditions can be clearly seen here. Lord Shiva is the most influential God. From Amarnath to the Panch Kedars, and further on to Kailas-Mansarovar and the Kathmandu valley, he finds a place of prominence, and makes appearances in various forms such as head (*sir*), bunch of hair (*jatā*), arm (*bāhu*), back portion of the body (*paścabhāga*) and navel (*nābhi*).

From Kamakhya (Assam) to Punyagiri (Uttarakhand) and Vaishno Devi (Jammu and Kashmir) in the southern strip of the Himalaya, there is a strong tradition of Shakti or Mother Goddess, which seems to hark back to the most ancient time. There are also a few Vaishnavite centres like Badrinath and Muktinath. Vaishnavism also reached far-flung Manipur.

Mt. Chomolangma and Nanda Devi are still standing between myths and social reality. Chomolangma's identity is that of a local Mother Goddess. Nanda Devi of Uttarakhand is a part of this genre of Mother Goddesses; yet, she is also different in many ways. Her identity has grown out of her existence as a mountain, as a mythic character, and as part of a larger social reality. She is probably the only Goddess who refuses to be confined to the role of a mother; she is also a daughter, a sister and a daughter-in-law. She is the daughter of the Himalaya and also its mother. She is the Kul Devi (Goddess of the clan) of Katyuri kings and also the daughter of Chand and Parmar rulers. Her name is attached to many mountains. Not only is she the Goddess of faith and joy, but also of sadness.

Buddhist monasteries in the inner Himalaya, which spread from Afghanistan to Myanmar, are markers of a rich, living tradition. This Buddhist strip is connected to Tibet in both cultural and geographical ways. It is also present on both sides of the highest summits. The Bamiyan Buddha, the remains at Takshshila (Pakistan),

various monasteries and forts of Ladakh, the Tabo (Spiti) and the Lalung (Kinnaur) monasteries of Himachal, and other Buddhist monuments are evidence of a historical past of more than a thousand years.

At the same time, they are also the key to understanding the demolished architecture of today's Tholing and Chhaprang, along with the rest of Western Tibet. The same could be said about all the shrines and monasteries of Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh (the 5th Dalai Lama was born in Tawang), and their relations with the monasteries in adjoining Tibet. It is also true that the Tibetans, who came with the present Dalai Lama and settled in different Himalayan towns, have maintained a strong Buddhist presence in the region.

Folk deities, among them some are moving and Mahasu and Lataul are the most important, have an attractive tradition here, which is independent of pan-Asian Gods and Goddesses. In fact, this diversity of folk deities is inherently linked to the human and natural diversity of the Himalaya. The places which were constituted as pilgrim centres through practice of culture and belief systems were and continue to be the most beautiful even without memorials, temples, monasteries or *gurudwaras*. This fact also illustrates the aesthetic sense of ancestors and their belief in the purity of wilderness.

It seems that the human ego has led to the destruction of this serene wilderness. Nevertheless, the Himalaya is still home to many communities and cultures, some of which, strikingly, do not believe in any dominant religion. Instead, their belief systems respect the sun and the moon, the trees and water bodies, and nature in general. Such a faith, in fact, seems to be the true and original representative of current religious practices, which are often seen as being on the verge of madness. Thus the nature of beliefs prior to institutionalized religions can still be traced among some of the inhabitants of the Himalaya.

Despite the differences in religion and culture, their dependence on each other and the advent of a shared cultural legacy is also an important part of this history. For instance, the singers of Vaishno Devi and the managers of the Amarnath Yatra are themselves followers of Islam. It is the Buddhists who make the pilgrimage arrangements for

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Hindus and others in Tibet. The number of non-Sikh and non-Buddhist pilgrims to the various Sikh and Buddhist sites in the Himalaya is indeed more than those belonging to the respective religions. Many of the workers and helpers at Hemkunt Sahib and Reetha Sahib were/are non-Sikhs.

The doors of Badrinath shrine are opened jointly by the Lambudiri Brahmin of Kerala origin and the tribal head of Mana village. While there is cooperation between Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims in Jammu and Kashmir, in the north-east it is the Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and Muslims who live together. It should also be kept in mind that the Chakmas are also Buddhists.

The situation is altogether different and extraordinary in the Kailas-Mansarovar region. Ancient Bonpas (followers of Bon religion), Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs and also the modern western and Chinese tourists travel together to this mountain and lake and take part in the circumambulation (*parikrama*). This region is indeed a unique multi-cultural destination. Here we are neither witness to Ayodhya nor Jerusalem. This region cannot be treated as the prerogative of any one community, religion or belief. In fact, it is a unique example of the original unity of humankind.

The Himalaya has a number of tribes and ethnic groups who have their own autonomous worlds comprising a little bit of everything. This has kept their diversity, specificity and also their inter-relations intact. The most surprising and important fact is that the primary concern of Gujjars, Sherpas, Banarajis, Brokpas, Drokpas, Lepchas, and the many tribes of north-eastern India–Myanmar border, is still with nature and not with any institutionalized religion. Close to the Vaishnavite traditions of Manipur stand the rich tribal traditions of the Nagas, who have maintained their originality despite being attached to Christianity, and the Kukis. Within Nagas there are at least 16 groups that still exist and the practice of 'head hunting' was common a few decades back. A little further, at the tri-juncture of Arunachal, Tibet and Myanmar, Buddhist culture is still alive.

The memory of Parashuram spreads from Renuka lake (Himachal) and Renuka temples (Uttarakhand) to the Parashuram Kund (Arunachal–Myanmar border), at the

origin of river Lohit. Rishi Vyas is constantly invoked in the valleys of the rivers Kali (Kumaon), Vishnu Ganga (Garhwal) and Beas (Kulu). Rishi Kanva finds a presence near Kotdwar—hence the story of Shakuntala, Dushyant and Bharat. All the *rishis* had established themselves in the Himalaya. There are also stories of Gautam Buddha visiting the foothills of the Himalaya and Jesus Christ visiting Kashmir. Stories of Saiyads and songs of Sufis are on our lips. The tales of the Ramayana are limited here but those of the Mahabharata are extensive and in multiple forms, and they spread from Kashmir to Tripura.

The transformation of Pandavas and Kauravas into folk Gods has been possible in the Himalaya only. Their so-called journey to heaven also originated here. The temples of Karna and Duryodhana are located in Tons valley and Gods travel from one place to another with human beings.

The first Jain Tirthankar Rishabhdev (Adinath) breathed his last at Astapaad near Mt. Kailas, while Adi Shankaracharya extensively toured Uttarakhand and Kashmir. It is also believed that he breathed his last in Kedarnath, where his memorial was constructed. Before the coming of British rule, the pilgrims in Uttarakhand used to commit religious suicide at Brahmjhaap near Kedarnath. Nanak travelled in the Himalaya and the tradition of Gorakhnath is still alive in many places. Huen-tsang (Xuanzang), Fa Hien (Faxian), Padma Sambhav, Kumarjeev and many Indian and Chinese Buddhist preachers as well as explorers travelled back and forth the Himalaya many times.⁶

Festivities, fairs, songs, dances, musical instruments, implements and social systems are part of this. Different forms of traditional knowledge and relationships, manners and traditions exist here. While some communities accept polyandry, some others follow polygamy. Widow re-marriage is prevalent in some communities but impossible in others. There are many areas and communities influenced by Buddhist compassion who hesitate to kill even a bird. There are customs of burial at some places, cremation at others, and feeding corpses to birds and animals at yet other places.

Despite an East-West geographical continuity in the entire Himalaya, North-South social, economic and ecological relations are also prevalent. Relations between the societies of the north Indian plains and Tibet evolved centuries ago through the communities of the Himalaya, and continued till half a century back in spite of

different state systems. It was intense in some places and not so intense at others. After the occupation of Tibet by China, this relationship has ended in most areas.

Many layers of humanity can be read and recognized here, many have been lost and many are still hidden. The languages and dialects, arts (of cloth, clay, stone, metal, wood, fibre and colour) and other socio-cultural expressions have developed amidst these lifestyles. There are still many uneducated and illiterate societies here, even though circumstances have made them multilingual. Exchange between Indo-European, Burmo-Tibetan, Austric and Dravidian language families has been taking place since millennia. The studies undertaken by linguists like George Grierson and D.D. Sharma help us in understanding this diversity, although the nature of development and modernity today is contributing to their disappearance.

In order to understand Himalayan culture and its relations with the rest of Asia, the tradition of pilgrimage is important. The rich tradition of pilgrimage sites and routes cover different parts of the Himalaya and Tibet.

The oral traditions entered the realm of writing in the last two hundred years. Poet Lokratn Gumani (1791–1846) wrote in Hindi, Sanskrit, Kumaoni and Nepali, while painter Molaram (1743–1833) contributed to Hindi through his poems and history-writing. Nepali poet Bhanubhakt (1814–1868) was influenced by Ramayana, while Sufi poetry had a wonderful influence on the Kashmiri language through works extending from Nuruddin Wali (1376–1438) to Ahmed Zargar (1908–1984).

Yet, oral traditions have remained dynamic. I should give a few examples from Uttarakhand. Jhusia Damai (1910–2005) had, until recently, kept the mixed tradition of myths and folk-tales alive in a composite language form of Nepali, Kumaoni and some Ranglu-Tibetan, in which prose suddenly transforms into song, and song into dance. Similarly, Mohan Singh Rithagari (1905–1984) and Gopidas (1902–1975) kept alive Malushahi or Ramol Gatha, while Keshav Aruragi (1928–1993) contributed to Dhol Sagar and 'Saiyad Vani'. There could be many folk singers in the Himalaya today of whom we are not aware and yet continue to represent its oral traditions.

Abode of Resources

The Himalaya is also home to natural resources which humans have been using since time immemorial. To this is tied its ecological aspect. The colonial regime had declared

these 'life resources' to be 'goods', and the multinational corporations' approach of the open market economy has turned them into 'commodities'. In this way the resources have become silent victims to a relentless, institutionalized plunder.

The resources of the Himalaya have always been divided into land, forests, water, humans—animals, and I have added one more: wilderness. Land (soil, minerals, metals and hydrocarbons) is the mother of all resources; it bears the pastures, the forests and agricultural fields. The rivers flow on it, and all the glaciers and lakes lie sprawling among its folds. Humans have brought it to the extent of individual ownership. This is actually agricultural land. Hence they buy and sell it.

The Himalaya has been bestowing fertile soil and water upon northern India. Man's short-sightedness has hastened the depletion of the soil. This fact can be seen from Dayara region to Moor islands. And it is the soil that saves us from being reduced to soil. In fact, most of the social-ecological movements of the Himalaya are centred around the conservation of soil.⁷ Chipko is well known, but anti-dam, anti-mining and movements for autonomy are other expressions.

Water is another important resource. Experts see the Himalaya as the 'water towers of modern civilization'. This water quenches our thirst. Some of it is used for water milling and irrigation. The energy flowing in it can be captured and commoditized. The consumer's mindset or the capitalist's acumen can merely envision dams like Tehri, or the business of water, packaged in plastic. They will neither dwell on the future of fish nor be concerned about the fate of ordinary humans. Meanwhile, the construction of a series of dams is underway throughout the Himalaya—needless to say, without an 'honest' cost-benefit analysis and proper assessment of the geo-tectonics, the overall scenario of the catchments, and the consequences of such experiments.⁸ The small-scale but sustainable and successful efforts of our ancestors for the conservation and wise use of water and snow, practised for thousands of years, are invariably rejected as 'traditional knowledge systems', when they are as meaningful and useful even today. Some are even

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considering the 'linking of the rivers', without respecting the right of the river to flow.

The forests are just as much an integral and distinctive feature of the Himalaya as the snow/ice and water. The 'water towers' are also linked with the forests. Hunting and collecting, livestock and agriculture, crafts and cottage industries, traditional medicines and trade are all supported by the forests. Forests are critical to the formation and retention of soil. Forests fill the lives of people with song, music, journeys, and a range of arts and implements. They are home to animals and birds. They make possible the extent of biological diversity.

Himalayan biological diversity has many dimensions. The rarest of flora and fauna can be found here. Less than 5 per cent of the total geographical area can support life in Ladakh, and more than 80 per cent of all land in Arunachal is covered with forests. Elephants, tigers and rhinos walk in the foothills; snow leopards, musk deer, pandas, *monals* and snow cocks are visible in the higher reaches. A variety of species—like mithun, yak, takin—live in between. Some migratory birds fly from north Himalaya to its south annually. Some species are already extinct, and many others are threatened or critically endangered and have been duly included in the red data list of IUCN.

There are some remarkable areas with extraordinarily rich biodiversity in Arunachal Pradesh, Bhutan, Sikkim, Nepal and Uttarakhand. To put it simply, the Himalaya occupies 0.3 per cent of the planet area, while making up 10 per cent of its biodiversity. The forests of the Himalaya and its vegetation have been a ready source of food/fodder, fuel, timber, roots and herbs, manure, cloth, colours, fibre and so on. Agricultural diversity is closely linked to biodiversity.

Humans living in the Himalaya are a resource and at the same time consumers of all other resources. They are also national assets as most of the armed and paramilitary forces are comprised of mountain people. They produce the best mountaineers. On the other hand, the wild animals are linked to forests, range-lands and biodiversity, as the domestic animals are to agriculture, transport and food systems. They can then be termed 'cash fauna'. If the population of the Himalayan region is estimated at over 50 million, the projection for domestic animals may also go to around 40 million. But the resources of the Himalaya influence the lives of more than 530 million South Asians directly or indirectly (we don't have statistics for the domestic animals of South Asia).

The most special, 'niche', resource of the Himalaya is its 'wilderness', its beauty and tranquillity. This isn't just the peaks, glaciers, springs, confluences, rivers, lakes, valleys of flowers and forests, but a combined and juxtaposed whole, much greater than the sum of its parts. At times, rain embellishes the area, at other times snow, fog or hail storms add to the beauty. The moon and the sun adorn the wilderness in their own way. Many a time the stars would descend upon its lakes, and often the rising or setting sun or moon would set its beauty ablaze. How the clouds alight on the meadows to graze, or how the moon with swift manoeuvre becomes the sovereign of the sky as soon as the sun goes down, all these are sights that can only be experienced. The spectacle of the falling snow is also like a silent, meditative dance of animated grandeur.

In this vast panorama, the flight of a bird, the sighting of a *monal* (pheasant) or a snow cock or a musk deer, the timid tone of a *kakar* (barking deer) or the growl of a *guldar* (leopard), the slithering of a reptile or a fish leaping out from a lake, break the monotony of the splendour. Amidst all this, communities, their dwellings and architecture, songs and caravans, or the smoke rising from their houses in the settlements, all add a very unusual human beauty to the canvas. This endless palette endows their vision with art and poetry, fills in the blank spaces of the modern mind and deconstructs monoculture.

What Ails the Himalaya?

Today this mountain is being rapidly encroached upon. Its resources are being exploited and destroyed in an unsustainable way. Even the best regeneration ability of the Himalaya is less than the rate of exploitation. The hydroelectric projects are being built without proper environmental assessment and cost-benefit analysis. The search for alternatives in wind and solar energy is extremely slow. The history of earthquakes and floods in the Himalayan regions is being forgotten. Very little sympathy was shown towards the environmental refugees. Stone and slate mining is banned in most of the states but the dangerous 'yellow chip' (Uranium) is mined in Meghalaya without any idea of the impact and age of radiation. The pressure on biodiversity is so great that some of the flora and fauna species are on the verge of extinction. The wildlife is not safe even in protected areas and national parks.

The out-migration of mountain communities is another problem related to economic resources, but it impacts social and cultural aspects too. How can we see the concept

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of 'money order economy' today? While its meaning has changed for Uttarakhand, to some extent it is still a useful term for understanding out-migration from Nepal. How can we understand the migrations of Tibetans, Chakmas and Pundits from their respective lands? How can we analyze the migration of labour from Bihar, Jharkhand and eastern UP to the remotest and difficult Himalaya? From most of the Himalayan regions, able-bodied young people are migrating in search of jobs/education, and this is increasing the burden on women and children. Take the case of Uttarakhand. Over 10 million people (2011 census) live here, but around 4 million people of Uttarakhand origin live outside the region. This is a very problematic demographic scene. As per the census data of 2011, Almora and Pauri districts have negative population growth for the first time since 1871 when the first census operation was conducted.

This is not to suggest that out-migration can or should be stopped completely, but at least some of the young people should be able to find jobs or entrepreneurial opportunities in their own state. The behaviour of some among the local population in many Indian towns towards students of the north-east is not only objectionable and condemnable, but it also compels us to understand the tragedy. Himalayan urbanization and the cause of handicapped persons are not being properly addressed. Just thinking of a handicapped person in a remote Himalayan village evokes concern. Empowerment of Dalits, tribal minorities, artisan groups or women needs clarity and commitment from both society and the political system. Indigenous arts, crafts, folk medicine, theatre and magic are equally important and need to be looked at seriously as these traditional specialisations also support livelihood. They can also be related with dignified and decentralized tourism.

The impact of the presence of the army and paramilitary forces in the border areas and the use and abuse of the armed forces act is a major but neglected aspect of post-1947 polity. No one is questioning national security, but human rights violations cannot be tolerated in a democratic system. Were the people of India and the Indian state able to see what Irom Sharmila has been writing on the wall for the last 12

years? Was it just a Manipuri matter? The question that can be asked is, can creating more small states or autonomous councils help solve the problems of the Himalayan communities? The emerging sub-regionalism in most of the Himalayan states is another point in question.

Finally, the impact of globalization, privatization, consumerism, corporatization and climate change are serious concerns with deep implications for the future of the Himalaya. But these are not strictly Himalayan but national and international questions. Their impact in the Himalayan region may be much worse than elsewhere. All these issues need to be thoroughly and critically investigated and understood.

The issue of 'eco system services', strengthening highland-lowland linkages, role of Himalayan forests in carbon sequestration, biodiversity conservation with community participation (*Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers-Recognition of Forest Rights 2006-Act* is not introduced in some of the Himalayan states), and finally, the use of intermediate technology for reducing the burden of mountain communities—specially of women and children—are to be re-looked and a mechanism is to be developed which can help in conservation and at the same time empower the communities.

The highest and most sacred mountain region on the planet has been hijacked by the incomplete model of development created by our political economy, which is under tremendous pressure from national and foreign corporations and corrupt politicians. The biggest challenge for the mountain communities is to maintain their dignity and their self-respect, as well as their right to live in their territories.

It must be understood that if the Himalaya continues in its place, well-protected and cared for, it will also sustain our own lives (humans and all flora-fauna) and cultures. If many Himalayan communities today are expressing their anger through different forms of resistance, it must be acknowledged that this is the time of reckoning, a chance to right the wrongs, and make a serious attempt to find answers to the questions of its health and harmony.

Struggles Make the Future

In these beautiful and certainly difficult regions, the Himalaya shows signs of prosperity and also of poverty. The present scenario of the Himalaya is sad, and this

is felt not only by over 50 million people, but it is also part of a larger national and regional tragedy. Even amidst this, however, they are fighting for their forests, soil, minerals, folk culture and, in a way, for their very identity. They have been gauging the conspiracies of supporters of big dams and corporate and captive tourism, the contractors of mines and their destructive methodologies, and the looters of raisin, timber and herbs. This realization is not limited to some pockets only. The communities know that only their struggles will make the future certain.

Many active sections of society are of the opinion that the Himalaya cannot be sustained and saved separately. Its environment is linked to its economy and this ultimately brings in the question of political will in a national and international context. The local societies have been protecting themselves for centuries, but self-defence has become difficult today.

By the 19th century, the East India Company had gradually entered some parts of the Himalaya. In response, resistance from the communities also started to get stronger. Most of the social movements in the Himalaya were led by peasants and tribes. The significance of resistance can be understood by studying the revolts of Jayantiya, Kuki and Manipur; the Phularghi movement of Assam; the anti-*begar* (forced labour) and forest movements of Uttarakhand; Dhandhaks and Prajamandal movements of Tehri State; Prajamandal movement of Himachal States; Chanaini movement of Jammu; and the movement led by the National Conference in Kashmir.

Struggles against feudal and colonial rule have been carried out in all parts of the Himalaya. The movement of the Nepali Congress can also be placed in this context. This era witnessed the emergence of many leaders and revolutionary heroes.⁹ The soldiers who refused to fire upon unarmed Pathans in Peshawar, who enrolled themselves in the Azad Hind Fauz (INA), and the RIN mutineers are also part of this list of fighters.

This tradition of protests did not stop even after 1947. The resistance in both parts of Kashmir and north-eastern India has repeatedly turned violent. Movements in Uttarakhand also did not stop after independence, and it was the mass movements which finally brought democracy to Nepal. Movements are on-going in Tibet and Bhutan as well. Sometimes there is calm, and sometimes the situation turns explosive. Nevertheless, it is hoped that new movements will lead to a deepening of democratic foundations.

Bhutan has entered the era of constitutional monarchy. The idea of GNH, or Gross National Happiness, has emerged from this small Himalayan country. Presently Himachal and Sikkim are supposed to be the states where processes of development are being slowly and peacefully implemented, even though these states are also experiencing ecological movements.

Our political and social systems have not been able to earn the complete trust of mountain communities. The centralized republics have not yet understood their decentralized lifestyles and failed in developing the art of governance. These communities cannot be administered by one-dimensional central systems and they know the art of not being governed. The community-governed systems have actually not yet been able to make up their minds to fully recognize the centralized governments. The northern areas of Pakistan, Indian Kashmir, Nepal, Nagaland, Manipur and Assam have continuously remained disturbed areas. In the last few years, underground movements have been emerging in Tripura and Meghalaya as well.

It must be remembered that if we force externally derived solutions upon these communities, it will lead to more instability and unrest. It is crucial to recognize this fact immediately. If the resources of the Himalaya are over-exploited, the crisis will be much more serious. There is no dearth of people who on the one hand willingly declare that the Himalaya is the highest symbol of human civilization, and on the other, do not hesitate at all in destroying its natural wealth and cultural prosperity. In fact, it is these people who are running the system.

What we need at the moment is a steady middle path with long-term goals for the overall betterment of our larger society and fulfilment of our needs, and not hasty moves of development which only benefit a few. Globalization, privatization of commons and climate change are bound to have a direct impact on the Himalaya. However, we are also certain that despite these processes, it will maintain its presence amidst us and will continue to support our existence in various ways.

Despite national and international resolutions on the Himalaya, the UN's 'Mountain Agenda' (1992), the recommendations of the Indian Planning Commissions's task

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force and many social-environmental movements, the truth is that the Himalaya is being attacked from all sides and its resources are being looted so rapidly that they cannot be simultaneously regenerated and restored.

However, it is to be realized that we have only one Himalaya and we do not want to lose it. We need actual and creative actions as well as emotional appeals; honest polity; clear-cut laws; and one hundred per cent green governance. We have to develop an environment where people's freedom can go hand in hand with equity and justice, and at the same time, people can do justice to other forms of life.

One should hope that the children of the Himalaya and the rest of humankind will realize this in time! Further, it should also be remembered that this understanding is neither available in the international market, nor can it be developed by the World Bank or any multinational company. This realization and awareness already exists among the communities of the Himalaya and we can learn and imbibe it from there alone.

End Notes

1. Experts say that the Hindu Kush and Karakoram are also part of the Himalaya, and according to some it lies between the rivers Indus and Brahmaputra or between Mt. Nanga Parvat and Mt. Namche Barwa. Its length is considered to vary between 2,070–3,000 km, its breadth between 250–400 km, with an overall area of 600,000 sq km, and a population of over 5 crore (see S.G. Burrard and H.H. Hayden, 1907-08, *A Sketch of Geology and Geography of the Himalaya Mountains and Tibet, Dehradun*; D.N. Wadia, 1953, *Geology of India*, London; Arnold Heim and A. Gansser, August 1939, *Central Himalaya: Geological Observations of the Swiss Expedition 1936*, Zurich; A. Gansser, 1964, *Geology of the Himalaya*, New York; David Zurick and Julsun Pacheco, 2006, *Illustrated Atlas of the Himalaya*, Kentucky).
2. The 14 highest mountains (or eight thousanders) of the world are located in the Himalaya and also the deep gorges of Kali Gandaki, Satluj or Brahmaputra rivers (David Zurick and Julsun Pacheco, 2006, *Illustrated Atlas of the Himalaya*, Kentucky, pp. 3–4).
3. Some of the peaks are: Nanga Parvat, K-2, Rakaposhi, Nunkun, Kinnar Kailas, Swargarohini, Bandarpunchh, Kedarnath, Chaukhambha, Bhagirath, Shivling, Nanda Devi, Nanda Kot, Pancha Chuli, Api, Nampha, Saipol, Dhaulagiri, Ganesh Himal, Cho Oyu, Lhotse, Chomolangma (Sagarmatha or Everest), Chomolonjo, Makalu, Kanchen Junga, Chumalhari, Namche Barwa.
4. Pamir, Karakoram, Khardung La, Jauji La, Baralacha, Kunjum La, Sipki La, Mana Pass, Niti Pass, Kingri Bigri La, Untadhura, Lipu Lekh, Tinker La, Nathu La, Jalap La, Dongkya La, Letavasa Pass, Tunga La, etc.
5. Kalash, Balti, Bakarwal, Janskari, Gaddi, Gujjar, Jaunsari, Shauka, Tharu, Boksa, Banraji, Bhotiya, Byansi, Magar, Gurang, Tamang, Newar, Sherpa, Rai, Limbu, Lepcha, Drokpa, Monpa, Abor, Mismi, Apatani, Naga, Mizo, Bodo, Khasi, Garo and Jayantiya are the well known among them.
6. Personalities like Kalidas, Shankardev, Gorakhnath, Tulsidas, Vivekanand, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Aurobindo Ghosh, Sarala Behn, Uday Shankar, Nikolai Roerich, Govinda Anagarika Lama and explorers/ mountaineers

such as the Antonio De Andrade, Soma De Korosi, Jack Mont, William Moorcroft, Sven Hedin, Verrier Elwin, George Mallory, Younghusband, Edmond Hillary, Chris Bonington, Herzog and others have visited the Himalaya and stayed there. Pundit Nain Singh, Kishan Singh, Tenzing, Ang Dorji, Latu Dorji, Chandraprabha Aitwal, Bachhendri Pal and Lavraj Dharmasaktu are its own children.

7. In the entire Hindukush–Himalaya range, pastures make up 39 per cent of the area, forests 21 per cent, protected areas 11 per cent, and agricultural land 5 per cent. The income of 47 to 83 per cent of people in this region is US\$ 2 per day, and US\$ 1 per day for 17 to 36 per cent (Eklabya Sharma, 2004, ICIMOD News Letter 45, Kathmandu). Per capita land for farming in Indian Himalaya is 0.29 hectares (Ya, Tang and Pradeep M. Tulachan, eds, 2003, *Mountain Agriculture in the HKH Region, Kathmandu*, p. 7).
8. Presently, the Himalaya (India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bhutan) has 100 functioning hydro projects, 46 that are under construction and 406 planned (see Shripad Dharmadhikari, 2008, *Mountains of Concrete: Dam Building in the Himalayas*, p. 7).
9. Tikendrajit and Hizam Eravat of Manipur; Shivcharan Rai of Meghalaya; Naga Rani Gaidinlue; Vishweshwar Prasad Koirala of Nepal; Govind Ballabh Pant, P.C. Joshi, Chandra Singh Garhwali, Shridev Suman and Nagendra Saklani of Uttarakhand; Veer Ratna Singh, Fakir Chand Bhapa, Yashpal, Satyadev Bushhari and Yashwant Singh Parmar of Himachal; and Sheikh Abdullah of Kashmir are some of the people.

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