

Cultural Zones and Their Frontiers in the Himalayas

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. Chattarjee, 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 microregions 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 "rampart 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 the western wing in Baluchistan and Trans-Sindhu

(Indus) upto the syntaxial bend 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.

Physico-resource Context

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 from 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 : 1957). 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. 1961 : 58-59). Further she finds that the Himalaya contributes to 13.86% per cent (171, 215) square miles out of 1,232,561 square miles) of Indian geographical area and only 3.17 percent 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 is to be proceeded 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 agricultural 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) 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-Kumaun 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 levels of territorial planning : (i) the nation (ii) inter-state macroregions, (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 districts, problems requiring area-wise approach and inter-related solutions, power base, prominent industrial and urban areas resources available, and unifying elements for 13 macro-region's while districts included, characteristics 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-Indo-Gangetic plains and Hills, lower Ganges 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.L. 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 cue 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 cultural 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, plough, husking implements and oil press as eleven traits were selected and data on them were collected from 311 out of 322 districts of the 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 the above pattern. In 1970's, they took up social trait survey and in 1973, they undertook the 'Border Area Project' 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 organisation (x) economics of religious rituals, (xi) wealth, poverty and debt" (Vidyarthi, L.P. 1978: 121-22). 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 present 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 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 region, remains un-understood culturally in spite 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, a picture of the cultural processes in the Himalayan region may emerge.

Cultural Zones in the Himalaya

A part from the individual cultural trait complexes enumerated or available to the casual observers, certain obvious cultural patterns occur in the Himalayan region. "The Himalayan is the abode of a

great variety of people. They include unsophisticated people of the secluded valley bottoms and exposed lake beds, the semi-nomadic pastoral tribes and even (said) head-hunters among a few tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland. The topographic 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 Buddhist religion from the north and the Hindu culture from the plains 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 up to Kinnaur in the Satlaj valley. The Sindhu-Ganga watershed beyond is also cultural divide" (Bose, S. C. 1977: 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 Hindu to discrete cultural isolates. "Thus, stress on ritualistic purity, vegetarian diet, the non-re-marriage of widows, merges with high-ranking in 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 meet-eating (or worse, bovine yak-eating), polyandry, easy divorce, re-marriage

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 value 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 tribals represented "the little tradition" of their localized and diverse ethnic affiliations. The lamaists consider themselves as the parts 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 up to Limbuan (i. e. eastern Nepal). Many of the tribes are in the process of conversion either to lamaism or Hinduism, not to take about individual conversion to christianity. Fourthly, another flow of culture from the Muslim-Persian character is dominant in Kashmir valley. The Sindhu-Ganges water-shed remains in a way its eastern limit.

The Cultural Periphery

The Himalaya was said to be the meeting point of the three empires of Czarist Russia, Manchu China and British India in the nineteen century. In the changed geopolitical structure of Asia in 1950's the Himalaya has turned out to be the meeting point of the eight states of Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the Chinese Peoples' Republic, Socialist Republic of Burma, Royal Government of Bhutan, Royal Government of Nepal, Indian Union, Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Revolutionary Government of Afghanistan. In case one decides to divide the Asian heartland in to viable regions, can there be something like the Himalayan community of nations? Bharati has raised this issue: "we regard South Asia with Pakistan, India and Ceylon as a cultural area, South East Asia as another and China again a third; would the Himalayan region be a culture area if the same criteria of inclusion and delimitation were adopted?" (Bharati, A. 1976: 100). The above proposal apparently does not seem to be convincing because Bharati has based his regional division of the Himalaya strictly on the political boundaries prevalent only on southern Himalaya for understanding the cultural processes. Kafiristan (Afghanistan), Azerpajian (U.S.S.R.), Turkistan and Tibet (China) are inseparable parts of the Himalayn cultural community. In the absence of the northern and north-western

slopedlands of the great mountain the above suggestion appears to be restrictive. However, from entirely academic considerations, the Himalayan ethnography suggests a four fold division of her peoples and cultures: (i) the Muslim-Persian Pamir-Kashmir Himalaya in the west; (ii) the Hindu-Indian southern slope of the Himalaya; (iii) the Lamaist traditionalism of Tibet from Leh to Towang on the greater Himalaya and its northern slope, and (iv) predominantly tribal world of the eastern Himalaya.

Before examining the implications of cultural divisions within the Himalayan region, it is imperative to examine the concept of centre and peripher. "Society has a centre. There is a central zone in the structure of society. This central zone impinges in various ways on those who live within the ecological domain in which society exists.... The central zone is not, a spatially located phenomenon. It almost always has a more or less definite location within the bounded territory in which the society lives. Its centrality has, however, nothing to do with geometry and little with geography. The central or central zone is a phenomenon of the realm of values and beliefs. It is the centre of the order of the symbols, of values and beliefs, which govern the society. It is the centre because it is the ultimate and irreducible; and it is felt to be such by many who cannot give explicit articulation to its irreducibility. (It) is also a phenomenon of the realm of action. It is a structure of activities, of roles and persons, within the network of institution. It is in the roles that the values and beliefs which are central and are embodied and profounded" (Shills, Edwards, 1961: 117).

The larger societies or large territorial social units consist of various sub-systems such as the economy, the status system, the polity, the kinship system, the ecclesiastical system, the university system etc. These sub-systems are organized "through a common authority, overlapping personnel, personal relationships, contracts, perceived indenti-

ties of interest, a sense of affinity within a transcendent whole, and a territorial location passing symbolic values". These sub-system or organizations characterize the pattern of authority, symbolized by the individual actions. "Those who are closely and positively connected with authority are thought, in consequence of this connection, to possess a vital relationship to the centre, the locus of the sacred, the order which confers legitimacy. Land-territoriality - has similar properties and those who exercise authority through control of land have always been felt to enjoy a special status in relation to the core of the central value system. Those who live within given territorial boundaries come to share in these properties and thus become the objects of political sentiments. Residence within certain territorial boundaries, and rule by common authority are the properties which define citizenship and establish its obligations and claims" (Shills, Edwards, 1961: 112). Normally the central institutional system has a substantial amount of consensus. However, as one moves from the centre of society, the centre in which authority is possessed, to the hinterland or periphery, over which authority is exercised, one realized that attachment to the central values system becomes attenuated.

In case one proposes to examine the attributes of race, language, basic economic activities, pattern of social organization, material culture and religious and civilizational centres of the Himalayan region, three of the four divisions can be successfully mapped out. The Muslim-Persian-Pamir-Kashmir Himalaya in many ways is an extension of the cultural core found still westward in Iran or Kabul valley. Racially, linguistically, in their horticultural and market gardening dry economy, tribal band organizations, and their material cultures they belong to the westward cores and centres. From religious and civilizational considerations they are affiliated to the Islamic middle east. Similarly, for the Hindu-Indian southern Himalayan slope, by and large, racially, linguistically, socially, economically, religiously, and culturally the core is in the south-

ern Gangetic plains and even across the Vindhyan ranges. Again from racial, linguistic, economic, social cultural and religious points of view, the lamaist traditionalism from Leh to Tawang on the northern Himalayan slope is an extension of the core of the Tibetan system from Lhasa region. However, the predominantly tribal world of the eastern Himalaya provides its own uniqueness. Racially, linguistically, in its pattern of social organization and basic economic activities and even in material culture, it is dissimilar to its immediate northern and southern neighbours and resembles greatly to the peoples of the south east Asia. However, from religious-civilizational points of view, it does not appear to belong to an organized and an ancient socio-cultural core as in the case of the first three divisions. They belong to a localized culture and a "parochialized" religious system of its own. On the basis of the above attributes, a tentative effort to map out the Himalayan region can be entertained. Such an exercise will amply prove that the four divisions of the region are in fact four peripheries of the various cores or centres which in the process constitute the Himalayan region.

The Himalayan region has some characteristics which separate it from the adjoining areas. Firstly, it has its own topographical unity as a stupendous mountainous land mass in the heart of Asian mainland. This about 2500 kilometre long and 200 kilometre wide zone is the highest undulating topography with dozens of the highest peaks of the world and has nowhere extensive flat land. The snow-fed long rivers are not navigable; and the various species of the flora and fauna are unique to the region. Secondly, the Himalaya abounds in renewable and non-renewable resources, which remain unknown, and unexploited. Its hydel potentiality and mineral deposits have not been developed. It is not very convenient to introduce an effective transport network for industrial exploitation of the resources. Accordingly, the region remains predominantly backward, dependent up on a very primitive subsistence technology. Thirdly, the Himalaya is divided into eight countries of the

world. Though traditionally known as "one of the best natural boundaries" between the nations of the world, in recent decades the Himalayan frontiers have turned out to be zones of violent international conflicts. Since the Himalaya lies in the zone of the conflict on the frontiers, no investments for development purposes other than the defence activities have been made by the respective governments. The region remains peripheral to the main urban-industrial activities of the large 'societies'. And lastly, the Himalayan is the abode of a number of small ethnic groups, which are invariably divided across the international boundaries. In the event of frontier conflicts, these ethnic groups are the worst sufferers economically, socially, politically and physically and they play little role in formulating the policies of the respective government affecting them.

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