

Indigenous Philosophies of the Himalayan Communities

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Abstract

The people of the Himalayan region and their socio-cultural milieu have served as the most critical source of modern civilisations in this part of the world. They have in fact been the harbinger of sustainable development and ecological conservation too. However, as the Himalayas double as international borders and strategic boundaries, the region and the people were exposed to large scale military and geo-political actions. The philosophies of the indigenous people are very ingeniously located in their settlement pattern, food habits, love for nature, social actions and their own cultural cauldron. One of the most fascinating aspects of the philosophy of mountain people has been the place of volunteerism in their social life. The villages remained a lively unit as people remained highly integrated and emotionally bonded. However, all these qualities of community living are now undergoing erosion. The villagers too would like to have an urban pattern of life where individualism is the most dashing feature. This has several implications for traditionally well-knit societies in the mountain regions.

Keywords: Himalayan region, Indigenous philosophy, Culture

This is a very crucial theme primarily on three core grounds.¹ Firstly, the Himalayan regions, its people and their socio-cultural milieu have served as the most critical source of modern civilisations in this part of the world. Secondly, the indigenous people living in the Himalayan regions have in fact been the harbinger of sustainable development and ecological conservation thereby providing a major safety valve to the entire development balancing in the rest of the country. And thirdly, the Himalayas have served as international borders and strategic boundaries thereby making them and their communities vulnerable to large scale military and geo-political actions.

There are scores of fascinating literature on the history and development of mountain areas. This very much narrates the philosophy of indigenous people on

¹ The Presidential address delivered in the inaugural session of the National Seminar on 'Indigenous Philosophies of the Himalayan Communities' organised by Salesian College, Sonada in Darjeeling district, held at Don Bosco, Malbaisey, West Sikkim.

many aspects. They are an intellectual feast. If Hooker, Griffiths and Dalton brought empiricism to the unparalleled botanical endowments of the hill and mountain areas, Edgar and Landon tracked down the trading routes. If Newall, Freshfield, Hardwicke and Csoma de Koros wrote about the enchanting mountains and the socio-cultural dynamics of hill societies, many of them in their travelogues, Hunter, O Malley and Risley put together the most interesting accounts of these regions and provinces in their Gazetteers. If Eden and Campbell negotiated far reaching deals with the neighbouring countries, Aitchison deeply engaged himself in a very specialised job of compiling Treaties, Engagements and Sanads.

The philosophies of the indigenous people are very ingeniously located in their settlement pattern, food habits, love for nature, social actions and their own cultural cauldron. For instance, the food habits across the hill towns have remained deeply influenced by their strong village roots. The popular Tongba also known as the light alcohol came to be commercialised for various reasons. One major reason was the literature written by travellers like Waddell who wrote in the context of Sikkim.

“After our three hours' walk we were not sorry to find on entering the house, that Achoom, who had preceded us with the commissariat, had ready waiting for us a hot lunch, to which we did full justice. For drink we had a large bamboo jugful of the refreshing beer, that the Lepchas brew from a millet seed called Murwa. The fermented grain is put into a jug formed by cutting off a joint of the giant bamboo and this jug is then filled up with hot water. The liquor is imbibed by sipping it up through a thin reed like straw. It tastes like weak whiskey-toddy or rum-punch with a pleasant acidity, and it is milder than the mildest English beer.

It is the wine of the country and is a food as much as a drink. The men, women, and children delight to sip it at all times from morning till night. And they sing its praises in an apostrophe to the sipping reed, the best kind of which comes from the grassy hills of Sarrie (Tsari). Even the priests or Lamas are so addicted to this beverage that they sip it in their temples, and none can travel far without an attendant carrying a store of it. Indeed one of the commonest sights is to see a monk going his round sipping a jug of this beer as a solace to his pessimistic dogma that 'all life is misery,' for he then is able to contemplate the world with full approval.”²

One of the most fascinating aspects of the philosophy of mountain people has been the place of volunteerism in their social life. Traditionally a strong concept and bond of volunteerism used to characterise the mountain societies across the Himalayas in Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, Kashmir and Darjeeling. Many of the community level activities including hospitalization of sick people, support during the disasters and calamities, building of community facilities including agricultural activities used to be done by freely and spontaneously extended labour service for

2 Laurence Austine Waddell, *Among the Himalayas*, Cosimo Classics Publishing (Reprint) 2004, pp. 74-76.

prolonged working hours. All these were done without any major government support. In fact these practices prevailed mainly because the government support and interventions had not reached the village folks. This was a core element in the entire development philosophy of mountain regions. This also meant that the people were extraordinarily careful about not harming any things provided by nature.

There was this strong sense of community living and a distinct commitment to serve the community. The villages remained a lively unit as people remained highly integrated and emotionally bonded. However most of the mountain villages have now started looking for government aid and intervention for even petty repairing of village roads or public facilities also. All these qualities of community living are now undergoing erosion. A change that clearly manifests that the villagers too would like to have an urban pattern of life where individualism is the most dashing feature and where government is the most predominant actor. This has several implications for traditionally well-knit societies in the mountain regions.

On the other hand, mountain border districts are peculiar geographical locations and have different demographic patterns. They have diverse yet different development needs. Therefore, they require an exclusive planning and development interventions. These regions have very limited choices in terms of development interventions as compared to the wide range of choices and techniques available to other regions.

Entire mountain regions are very prone to a variety of natural calamities. For instance, the National Highway, the only transportation thoroughfare and lifeline of Sikkim and Darjeeling remain badly disrupted more than half of the year. The economy gets paralysed and the inflationary tendencies set in. And most importantly the cascading effects at times become very costly and socially very burdensome. There are huge human and material damages triggered by earthquake, cloud bursts, landslides and flash floods. More crucially the institutions that manage disasters have been literally absent particularly in Darjeeling district. Had it not been a strong social-voluntary response in all situations of disasters, these disasters and the damages would have even triggered socio-political instability and conflicts.

Therefore, an exclusive fund for Disaster Management specifically for the border districts/states should be created which could cater to disaster relief and disaster prevention. Knowing that no University in the border states have so far started any upfront programmes on disaster management and also understanding the need for creating a critical pool of capacity and institutions for such specific contingencies, Sikkim University, started a full programme on disaster management under the School of Sustainable Development and Livelihood Security even though just a 20 month old Central University. This will be an interdisciplinary and applied programme. Such programmes at the school, college and university levels should be supported across the border districts and states.

The mountain regions and their people have been the most significant geographical and demographic entities in providing comprehensive security to the Indian nation state. They provide i) military security, ii) environmental security and iii) human security.

Firstly, for instance, both Darjeeling and Sikkim have been one of the very geo-strategically significant border posts of India and have a huge concentration of security and military forces. They together provide the best of services in protecting national security interests. They also have the richest biodiversity resources thereby making them the global biodiversity hotspots. However, besides other issues related to carrying capacity, the physical burden of these forces as a pressure on land and other natural resources are quite gigantic. All these incur a huge development and environmental cost to this district/State which many other states in India do not have to incur. This also means that a significant portion of their development resources are devoted to maintaining this supreme national interest.

Secondly, the onus of protecting and conserving the significant portion of the fragile Eastern Himalayas including the mountain range and its environment has been with the people of Darjeeling and Sikkim. The protection of bio-diversity and the forward and backward linkages emanating from it to the entire Himalayan community and the plains land have never been quantified. However, many quarters are not able to appreciate the work the people of this region are doing for the sustainability of the region. This makes their development options and manoeuvrings very limited.

The very topography, landlockedness and agro-climatic variations have forbidden Darjeeling and Sikkim to go for an array of interventions making economic development process very limited. At times, it has been a Hobson's choice for them to opt for a major development intervention as the long run cost particularly in terms of environmental security may be much higher than the short run benefit. Unlike other States, Darjeeling and Sikkim have very constricted development choices.

This limited choice and the related constraints on development interventions as compared to the wide range of choice and techniques available with other States, need to be considered as the opportunity cost Darjeeling and Sikkim have been/will have to forego. The benefits which would have otherwise accrued to them need to be objectively assessed and accordingly make provisions for compensating the opportunities foregone.

Thirdly, both Darjeeling and Sikkim have given their best to provide maximum degree of human security to each person. An idle and unemployed mind with a degree of frustration becomes easy prey of anti-social and anti-national activities. This is more so as they are one of the border states surrounded by rather adverse situation in the neighbouring countries and some of the neighbouring states.

All these would mean a lot of investment on social and physical infrastructure, creation of a range of opportunities and constant generation of newer development options in all parts of Darjeeling and Sikkim. This naturally implies a huge investment on human development parameters. In other words, both Darjeeling and Sikkim have remained relatively peaceful as indicated by a negligible rate of crimes. They should therefore, be encouraged in sustaining these efforts to provide comprehensive security to the nation. In a recent paper commissioned to us by the 13th Finance Commission of India, we have suggested that one way to recognise these services of comprehensive security to the nation building process is to partially supplement their resources for the upkeep of the hills and the Himalayan region. Therefore, a separate fund may be earmarked as a Comprehensive Security Fund for both Darjeeling and Sikkim.

Equally noteworthy aspect has been the question of energy security in the Hill and Mountain regions where over 80 percent of the population is still dependent on traditional sources of energy viz., firewood, animal dung, crop residues etc. This consumption pattern definitely cannot sustain for long. On the other hand, there has been no consistent thinking on the need to exploit a huge unharnessed potential of the hydel resources in this region in a commercial manner. The most revealing aspect of the entire national power scenario is the fact that despite proven hydro power potentials, the Hill and Mountain regions of India continue to be a laggard in this front. Despite their very high potentials they contribute less than 10 percent of the total national hydro power installed capacities of 25407 MW.

An important feature of the mountain regions and livelihood pattern of their people is indicated by the steady promotion of cross border trade and other exchanges. It was Indo-Tibetan trade which inspired the British to annex Kumaon and Garhwal. The first trade fair by the British India government was held in 1802 in Kashipur in the Garhwal region. In Ladakh since the rule of Namgyal Rajas starting 1532 till it lost its independence in 1834 at the hands of Wazir Zotawra Singh of Jammu and became a part of present Jammu and Kashmir in 1846, one finds a range of development signals mainly based on trade with Tibet and some of the Central Asian countries. The Young husband Mission of 1903 was again primarily meant to reinforce the cause of Sikkim-Tibet trade via Nathu La. It was not only cross border trade. Khasis traded briskly with the people of Sylhet.

Livelihood through Sustainable Agriculture is critical in both Darjeeling and Sikkim from three major perspectives of natural heritage, livelihood management and societal sustenance. The entire Eastern Himalaya is declared as one of the 25 bio-diversity hotspots in the world. Nowhere in the world has one found such a magnificently diverse and rich biodiversity in such a relatively small stretch of land. The opportunities are in areas like huge demand for organic farm based commodities, commercialisation of horticulture and floriculture, value addition at the very farm gate level and diversification of commodity baskets.

The issues of global warming and climate change have started affecting our farmers even when there is not much of awareness about this at the very local level. What would happen if the rainfall pattern changes and if the entire hydrological flows in our rivers like Teesta and Rangit and rivulets undergo changes because of the glacial erosions in Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas? There are visible phenomenon of phenology that is happening across the hills where traditional seasonality of the crops are disturbed and the altitude based cropping pattern are fast and unnaturally changing. This could change the entire recorded pattern of agricultural practices in the hills and could even dislocate the farmers. These farmers have no control over the events at the global level but get struck by the adverse impact so profusely. This is where the institutions like Indian Council of Agriculture Research (ICAR) and Universities have to play a very critical role.

Much has been written about the ethno-botany, medicinal plants and also folk medicines of mountain regions. These issues are also widely mentioned whenever people talk about the development potentials of this region. However, except the very traditional way of using some of these resources many a times in a very crude and unscientific manner, we have not been able to really delve into the scientific properties and commercial values of these resources. This has affected the region in two ways. Firstly, people do not know exactly how to conserve these resources and what need to be conserved. Secondly, many of these resources and the intellectual properties related to them have surreptitiously been smuggled and commercialized by companies of both gigantic proportions and also by small petty agencies. The demand for these resources is shooting up both at the national and global market, in either ways making the local people the losers.

These developments have serious adverse impact on bio-diversity pool, its management and conservation effort. The best way however, to do so is to enhance the level of their usage and intensify the degree of their utility by making these natural resources like herbs and other medicinal plants as friendly and as popular as possible. This can be done by bringing the traditional knowledge and native wisdom of the faith healers like *Dhami*, *Jhankri*, *Phendengba*, *Bonbo* of Nepali and *Pow* and *Nejum* of Bhutia and *Bongthing* in Lepcha communities to an institutionalised forum like research centre of a college/university and under a well designed scientific framework. Today they all remain scattered because they are not confident and safe about bringing their traditional knowledge and intellectual resources to the public domain for fear of pilferage and tamper by the people and agencies for commercial use.

One of the striking reasons for this has been the low level of awareness among the locals, lack of primary scientific institutions to handle them and more seriously literal absence of local skilled manpower to harness and conserve them. This is where Universities, research institutions and academics and professionals can play a crucial role in making major skill and knowledge development intervention. These institutions

should endeavour to produce skilled, motivated, committed and technically sound human resources to harness and conserve these natural resources. This has to be largely done within the mountain regions as there are questions of sense of belonging, creation of local capacities, sustainability of initiatives etc. Once these scholars come to the local market then the region will realise more fully its latent potential.

Sikkim University as one of the youngest national Universities in the country therefore, is designing an entire School of Indigenous and Folk Studies³ as part of a dream to build a robust institution in this part of India and Eastern Himalayan region so that it conserves the mountain people, promotes national development and serves international community. Sikkim University is very keen to receive suggestions, inputs and other ideas about the need to both develop and conserve the philosophy of communities in the mountain areas.

³ This School intends to have five centres in the course of next five years: i) Centre for Food Science, Technology and Nutrition Management (MSc); ii) Centre for Handicrafts, Art, Design and Fashion Technology (MA); iii) Centre for Archaeology and Heritage Studies (MA); iv) Centre for Ethno Botany and Social Medicine Studies (MSc); v) Centre for Folk Music/Theatres/Literature (MA).