

Historiography of Nature's Despoliation: A Study of Exploitation of Himalayan Resources

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ABSTRACT

The Himalayas, which has been customarily regarded as a land of natural sanctity and divine beauty, has not been free from exploitation for centuries. As a part of imperialistic motif of different intruders, the land has experienced years of plunder and destruction of natural resources. The present paper intends to study the ecological history of the Himalayas to examine how the historical events of invasion coupled with exploitation of resources at different levels and in different forms has lead to changing in the natural morphology of the land and brought into a changed pattern in the geo- bio-physical and natural system of the land. In the wake of modern industrial development, due to a steep rise in the demand for natural resources, the exploitation has increased manifold; that has posed threat to local human and non-human living system in the mountain.

Keywords: Natural resource, Himalayas, exploitation

When Lowell Dittmer in his essay "Power politics in the Himalayas and Beyond: Introduction" mentions that the extended mountain tract of the Himalayas was "politically frozen" till the World War I (Dittmer, 2005), he intends to point out the absence of national and international politics in this highland prior to that epoch. As he says, in the second and third decade of 20th century "the long politically dormant state is suddenly rife with great power competition" (Dittmer, 2005). So to him the international border issues or geopolitics among the States, of which the Himalayas straddles the frontier, as the beginning of politics in this land. In this connection Dittmer has perhaps missed the internal power politics, politics concerning resource use, their preservation or exploitation, people's right etc.. And the origin of which can be traced back to the Aryan invasion to the mountain. Since that period there is the continuation of "settler colonization", 'internal colonization' and the indigenous people were subject to their power (Ram

Bahadur, 1916). The relation between the rulers and the ruled concerning the natural resources of the land significantly contributes to the ecological history of the land.

In the Rig Vedic period, during their stay in the valley of the Satluj, the Aryans being divided into five principal groups conquered the whole Himalayas, extending between the Jamuna and Satluj up to the Gangotri range of the mountain (Rambahadur, 1916). Among them, Tritsus dominated far into the Himalayas on the south of Satudri or Satluj. Purus occupied the entire Northern Punjab, on the north bank of Prusni or the Ravi river; the western bank of the Indus was demarcated as the territory of Anus. In the south and south-east of the dominion of Tritsus, extending far towards the bank of Jamuna lays the land of Travasus and Yadus. It is told that the Tritsus were most often in constant warfare with the chieftains of the aborigines of the region, for

which the chieftains had built forts in the steeper and wilder zones of the mountain, to protect the land from the invasion of the Tritsus. To extend the territory, they fought against the indigenous people and started getting control over their land and resources. Similarly, the Purus dominated the central Himalayas with power and courage. This is evidently the beginning of subjugation of the Himalayan tribes; and the domination continued through the epic age of the *Mahabharat* when the mountain folks were appointed as the soldiers because of their physical strength and courage, or the slaves. This indicates dissociation of mountain people from the mountain places and practices, as they were bestowed with new designation and duty in the royal courts.

In about 260BC the *Himavanta* (the other name of the Himalayan region) came into the fold of Mauryan Empire, more particularly the empire of Asoka. In the year 120BC the region witnessed the arrival of a Scythian tribe. Its famous king Kanishka included the Himalayas in the Scythian empire that extended from Kabul to Agra and from Yarkand to Kohkand on the North of the Himalayas. Again in 4th century AD, with the rise of Gupta dynasty, the region was under the influence of Samudra Gupta. In 6th century AD, Garhwal enjoyed the "shade" of Vikramaditya's (who was known as Yashodharman of Malva) regal empire. In the 8th and 9th century AD, the tract from Nepal to Kangra was dominated by Rajputs. They reached "a high degree of prosperity, power and culture" by ruling the lower valley near the planes, which are highly fertile due to the presence of rivers and as they carry "alluvial silt" and deposit in the bank in the lower hills (Tucker, 1982; Blaikie & Toshna, 2004). So, agriculture was perhaps the prime source of revenue that engaged almost the entire lower hill for that purpose. Also the central Himalayan region was ruled over by the Chand dynasty for about 6 centuries. Having been led by Kanakpal, it settled in the "lofty and steep mountain range in Chandpur, covered with thick forests and abounding in fine scenery" (Tucker, 1982). The spots Kanakpal chose for his forts were on a "peak close to the bend of the stream flowing from 500 ft below it" (Tucker, 1982). And for building of walls, large slabs of stones were cut from the mountain and used. It is evident that the invasion of different rulers into this

region, not only disrupted the local cultural fabrics at different points of time, but also disturbed the harmony between the local people and environment. Their use and exploitation of the mountain resources to embellish and enrich their territory, show least concern about the mountain ecology and local peoples dependency on it. So the mountain became a destination for recreation, capital for state administration or a land of resources waiting for extraction.

Even in the mission of conquest (getting victory over other kingdoms) to carter their expansionist attitude, the natural environment was seldom cared for. Yet certain natural locations or pieces of land were preserved as the part of royal property as the richness of resources was indicative of affluence of the country. With the rise of great political power of the Mughals in 16th and 17th centuries in the Gangatic plane, as Tucker observes, they were "content to spend their energies organising the economy of the plains and constructing a few elegant retreats, such as the Shalimar gardens in the hills of Kashmir" (Tucker, 1982). And the need of natural resources and timbers of the kings both in the hills and in the plain was fulfilled by the resources supplied from the Gangatic-basin and the mountain (Dewan, 1990). So the history of resource extraction from the Himalayas started with the approach of the non-Himalayan people, who were initially attracted by the beauty and topography of the place. And initial admiration of the place changed into exploitation of resources.

Tucker observes that with the crumbling of Mughal power after the death of Aurangzeb "North-India experienced a century of political decentralization and shifting military campaigns". In spite of the unwillingness of the kings in the hill to take part in the political affairs, the outer hill states experienced the penetration of "several military forage" (Tucker, 1982). It caused massive agricultural damage and destruction of natural wealth. The arrival of Gurkhas in Garhwal, in the late 18th century added a fresh chapter in the history of Himalayan exploitation. Although, they were defeated by the Garhwalies in 1791, they conquered the hills of Kumaon and Garhwal in 1803. With getting access to the land, they started plundering as much resources as they could (Traill, 1828). As Tucker writes "heavy tax tributes

forced many villagers to desert their old terraced fields which began washing into the river beds below. Some of the finest timber of the lower hill region was cut and sold to extract further wealth from the region" (Tucker, 1982). It is told that the kings and invaders what they extracted from and amount of damage created to the Himalayas in 1200 years is less than the damage caused by the Gurkhas in a short span of 12 years. And people of the region got respite from the Gurkha rule as it came under British rule in April 1815 and the Gurkhas were forced to leave the land. But that was not the beginning of the freedom of local people to access the resources; rather the land witnessed new laws concerning resource use in Western model formulated by the new ruler (western intellectuals).

Spreading their rule northwest ward across the Gangatic basin into the high hills, towards Satluj and Indus, the Britishers after 1930s started annexing the plain with the part of the lower hills with an intension of trade and commerce of Himalayan Natural resources. Later they sensed the fertility of the soil and promoted peasantry for the production of cash crops and intended to extract huge amount of revenue from the areas. To reinforce the cultivation, they started channelizing the flow of Indus and Ganges into the regions which were dry but fertile; To increase production there was growing need for expanding agricultural land; and to trade such products along with the jungle resources (especially timber), Britishers established connectivity between the central plain and lower hills through network of railways. Such policies evidently brought about massive decimation of the forest land in the Gangetic and Indus belt as well as in the hills. As Tucker observes: "The Gangetic forests were rapidly becoming the Gangetic plains as agriculture and forest clearing expanded in the region. [...] In order to stimulate agriculture, colonial policymakers in nearly every district gave title to large amounts of fallow or untilled land to any farmer willing to plough it" (Tucker, 1982). It further led to destruction of more forest as the farmers with intension to acquire more land freely available, started clearing the jungle land. The legitimisation of cutting trees by the farmers provided suitable condition to the timber mafias or businessmen during that time. And they started cutting

the best quality trees for charcoal, timber and furniture; again the local people used to set the forest fire to burn the dry grasses that enable the ground to produce "lush new growth following the monsoon rains". Such act of local people- which got endorsement and support from the Colonial rule- hindered the growth of new trees in the land. As a result a large stretch of land appeared clear and used for commercialized agriculture. And due to the absence of any regulation to quantify the spread of commercial agriculture, in a period of about three decades thousands of acres of forest land in the river valley and in the hills were converted into agricultural land, which was later comprehended as threat to mountain ecology as well as to local habitation.

With the rise of timber market and with the increase of value of timber, British entrepreneurs along with the local wood merchants started penetrating in to higher mountain valleys, by 1940s. The logs of hard wood like Sal were brought to the plain by the downstream of Ganges. For the construction of buildings and rail ways prime sal and deodar tracts were cleared in Kumaun and Garhwal region by 1850 as Deodar was regarded as "the ideal timber" for this purpose (Bandopadhyaya, 1992). Also by that time most jungle lands in the high hills were converted into tea estates, from which monetary profit continued to flow in the form of revenue. In the second half of 1950s, "experiments in mineral exploitation" in the high hills reached the climax and later due to lack of profit, the operation was brought to a halt. But there was a steep surge in demand and supply of natural resources in the national and European market' for which the Himalayan valleys were further mined (exploited). As Bandopadhyay says, for commercial and mining operation, "[t]he construction of forest roads and bridges brought large areas of forests in the catchments of the Bhagirathi and Yamuna river under commercial exploitation, and increased accessibility led to increased production and export downstream" (Bandopadhyaya, 1992). The construction of roads into the higher valleys opened avenue for the exploiters to extract the untapped resources from the remote regions. And the ending of such act was felt to be remotely possible. So unrestricted fuel wood harvesting¹, expansion of commercial farming, rapid infrastructural development to explore

the mountain resources accelerated the degradation of the mountain. As a result, sensing the market value of the resources and approach of possible danger caused by the rapid depletion of resources the Government, in the late 19th century declared some areas as reserved forests or protected areas; and seriously restricted the people's access to them. In a way to protect the forest land from further exploitation, the Government undermined the livelihood of a group of people, who were solely dependent on the jungle for their sustenance. But it was impossible to restrict the traders and exploiters while permitting the local people to access them (Tucker, 1982; Dewan, 1990). It was told that the mafias were among the local people and were getting local support. Yet some people say that the entry of the traders and developers was not restricted, rather local right was taken away. And the best quality forests were managed and protected with an intention to be traded later.

According to Tucker, with the appointment of Dietrich Brandis as India first inspector general of forests, "massive supplies of sleepers" was provided to the railways from the areas reserved and protected. And the profit generated from the supply was reasoned by the officials to be used for forest management and replanting the denuded tracts and valleys. But such act did not turn out to be satisfactory. Consequently the sal forests of central Himalayas stretching towards the north-western border considerably depleted. And to carter the need of the timber, British officials started cutting the stretches of Deodar forests from high hills of the princely states of Pauri and Tehri Garhwal, Chamba etc. As Tucker observes, "Throughout the nineteenth century the new forest Department concentrated on cutting in the deodar forests, providing more than 100000 sleepers annually." (Tucker, 1982) It constantly exerted heavy pressure on the forest. And the British forest officials found chir and Kail pines, Himalayan spruce, silver fir etc. as the alternative to deodar and sal.² As a part of forest management, they applied the less expensive method of planting such trees, in substituting deodar and sal to carter their need (Dittmer, 2005). Such commercial motif-with limited empirical knowledge of bio-physical nature of Himalayas and least concern for it- not only appeared to be detrimental to the mountain ecology, but also

posed threat to local livelihood. Although re-growth of such forests satisfies the commercial purposes, kills the conventional and mixed forest, which are essential for the Himalayan diversity and local sustenance as well.

The enforcement of 1878 forest law, which brought forth rule for conversion of 'Reserved Forests', protected forest or revenue forests, put rigorous restriction on local people to access the forest land for grazing, fodder collection, fire and fuel wood gathering etc.. In other words, new pattern of law, formulated by colonial methods for forest management was not in consonance with "subsistence pattern" of traditional village life in the hills. The colonial action and methods for sustainable forest management could not appear to be convincing for the local people (Baviskar, 2005). It was told that there were constant claim by the local people that when local people were being harassed and debarred by the forest officials, many protected forests were rapidly denuded by the help of those officials. It triggered the tension between the colonial laws and local practices (Karnik, 2005). In 1920s, when the country's atmosphere was swelled with national movements the tension reached the climax in the hills. The resentment of local people for forest regulation and implementation of new rules, combined with their ire against the new labour regulation resulted in the burning of thousands of acres of forest land across the Siwalik hills from Kumaon in to Punjab in 1921. That fire caused massive damage to fresh-grown forest in the region; and such act of destruction continued in 1930s and 40s when Gandhi was urging people to demonstrate non-violent resistance against arbitrary colonial laws. And constant antipathy between the idea of economy development through the fulfilment of subsistence needs and protection of resources through enforcing rules could not allow any mutual agreement.

Finally the Government came to the realization that it was ecologically inappropriate and politically damaging to segregate the local people from the forest (as a symbol of natural resources). So, the responsibility of managing the forest was handed over to the villagers. But the councils or *Panchayats* which were formulated to administer them were under the influence or control of the forest department. In this way, the government as

well as the villagers took part in the forest development programme, by which people's subsistence needs could be fulfilled to certain extent. And that was perhaps the beginning of 'social forestry movement' in India. *Van Panchayats* were the subsequent development, for which the government "formally set up procedures for election of panchayat officers by villagers and designated professional foresters to advise them" (Tucker, 1982). Again the idea of joint forest management came in to force in the post- independence era. And under the rule of Nehru, private forests were planned to be taken by the government. So, there arose 1948 private forest act and the 1952 national forest resolution, but due to delay in implementation of such policies, many private forests, including major "hunting reserves" were cleared and sold by the owners, in five years.

Again, national independence brought a new era when the first prime minister of the independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, focused on 'economic development' of the country. He tried to make the fullest use of resources by linking private business with the resources on which the government was having legal control. The first five year plan emphasised on 'expansion of heavy or large industries' and development of urban spaces . These industries were planned to be established in the plains, so it was plead that they did not exert direct impact on the Himalayan forests; yet the electric power needed for industry and urbanization were planned to be derived from the mighty Himalayan rivers. So the construction of high dams in the high hills inevitably caused massive ecological degradation (Dewan, 1990; Blaikie & Toshna, 2004). In addition to that, there arose a great demand of Himalayan woods to run paper and wood industries. As a result both forest department and private industrialists emphasised on "timber production" to meet "the fastest- expanding" national market. So the old forests were cleared even from the reserved areas and reforestation of the reserves started in full sway and the process brought massive income to the government by the cost of the forest ecology. So the department could not set any limitation to the forest exploitation and acres of old forests were cleared.

The opening of new roads into many remote mountain areas has intensified resource exploitation in the

high hills. And the geo-eco-sensitive regions of the mountain have become the destinations for national and international tourism industries. Apart from this with the association of corruption with economy and political power (as a common spectacle in independent India), many individuals and organizations by the help of such power get way to exploit the resources for generating economy (Mawdsley, 2004). It is also reported that there has been constant internal tension between the departments that cause mountain degradation. As Tucker observes:

For the Forest Department in the hills, danger lay in their perennially uneasy relations with the more powerful Revenue and Agriculture departments. In the U.P. hills the Forest Department watched the civil forests lose the last of their ragged trees, knowing that the revenue authorities had neither the training nor the interest to protect these lands and would rather see them gradually turned to subsistence farming. In the Punjab hills, now a separate state called Himachal Pradesh, the Forest Department met similar frustrations. Even today forest officers complain about the right of *nautor*, by which the revenue authorities give village landowners the right to till government fallow and ultimately to take ownership of the newly plowed fields. (1982)

The invaders gained political benefit from such conflicts and got the public property vested in their name and got legitimate power to exploit resources. Such practice does not have an end. It may be noted that the continuation of colonial practices like commercial farming, timber production etc., along with these newly added events have brought severe perturbation to the Himalayan ecology, more particularly after India and China border war of 1962. Such perturbation has inspired the attention of the local people and interests of intellectuals to reflect and revolt. Again the regulation that segregates the local people from their surrounding and depriving their subsistence need is derogatively, termed as anti-ecological and inappropriately anti-human politics.

END NOTES

1. The fuel wood harvesting was not merely to carter the local need, but was supplied to the plane for trade, which generated huge benefit to the traders. So, to accelerate the trading large,

valuable and rare trees were indiscriminately felled along with the selected trees meant for fuel wood.

2. Dietrich Brandis in his "Memorandum on the supply of Railway sleepers of the Himalayan pines Impregnated in India" has given a retrospective account of politics of forestry in the Himalayas. Here he mentions how the Himalayan forests were politically manipulated and reshaped according to the need of time.

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