Visualising the Himalaya with other coordinates

Looking at it only through the prism of geopolitics and security concerns ignores its other crucial frameworks

SWATAHSIDDHA SARKAR

A conceptual audit of questions related to geopolitics and security concerns while talking or thinking about the Himalaya is perhaps long overdue. There is no gainsaying the truth that we have been examining the Himalaya mainly through the coordinates of geopolitics and security while relegating others as either irrelevant or incompatible. In a certain sense, our intellectual concerns over the Himalaya have been largely shaped by the assumption of fear, suspicion, rivalry, invasion, encroachment and pugnacity. If during colonial times it was Russophobia, then now it is Sinophobia or Pakistan phobia that in fact determines our concerns over the Himalaya. Within the domain of geopolitics and security, conceived by that which lies outside the Himalaya, a process that decolonial scholars such as Pauline Hountondji refers to as extroversion. Ironically it is the Delhi-Beijing-Islamabad triad, and not the mountain *per se*, that defines our concerns about the Himalaya. Are we not really leading Himalayan studies towards the dead end of violent intellectual pursuits?

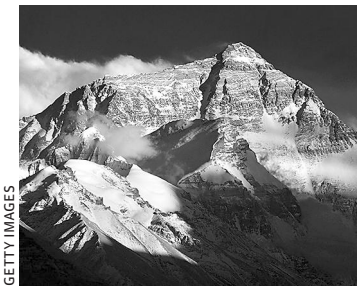
A national Himalaya

If extroversion in the field of knowledge production has resulted in academic dependency, in the case of Himalayan studies it has given birth to the political compulsion of territorialising the Himalaya on a par with the imperatives of nationalism. Thus the attempt to create a national Himalaya by each of the five nations (Nepal, Bhutan, India, Pakistan, and Tibet/China)that fall within this transnational landmass called the Himalaya. The National Mission on Himalayan Studies, for example, under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India, is a classic case in point that provides funds for research and technological innovations, but creating policies only for the Indian Himalayan Region (IHR). The Mission document avowedly claims: "The Government of India has come-up with this Mission in recognition of the fact that the Himalayan Ecosystem is important for ecological security of India (https://bit.ly/3x8dOMB)". Thus, comes the Indian Himalaya. It reminds us of that ancient parable where a few blind men were trying to fathom how huge an elephant was by touching only the different parts of its body.

By considering cartographic fixations as the natural limit of scholarship, we have overburdened Himalayan studies with the concerns of States in place of people, culture, market or ecology. India's understanding of the Himalaya is informed by a certain kind of realism, as the Himalaya continues to remain as a space largely defined in terms of sovereign territoriality, in contrast to alternative imaginations such as community, ecology or market. It may be perceived that such an alternative conceptualisation of Himalaya is not only possible but also necessary. But can we really work out such an alternative imagination especially when we find territorialisation and securitisation to be the two dominant modes through which the Himalaya is imagined both in the official context, and, by extension, in popular discourses.

A historical logjam

The Himalaya's territorialisation bears a colonial legacy which also sets up its post-colonial destiny as played out within the dynamics of nation states. The arbitration of relationships between and among the five nation states falling within the Himalayan landmass has failed to transcend the approach derived from the given categories of territoriality, sovereignty and difference. As such, the fact that the lines of peoplehood and the national border, especially within the context of the Himalaya, never



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coincided, is bound to give birth to tensions while working out projects predicated upon national sovereignty. Given this historical logjam, what we can only expect is the escalation of territorial disputes as the immediate fallout when infrastructure development projects in the border areas are adopted by constituting nation states to secure their respective territories falling within the Himalayan landmass.

Borders and their differences

It needs to be recognised that political borders and cultural borders are not the same thing. Political borders are to be considered as space-making strategies of modern nation-states that do not necessarily coincide with cultural borders. In other words, while a statist imagination has a telling effect on the way a border is understood in political terms, culture in that sense defies the (political) idea of border or at best considers it as permeable, penetrable, connective, heterogeneous and one that can be accounted for mainly through dreams, passions, flows and livelihoods. The singular statist conception of a political border would then appear to become a 'polysemic' or even 'rhizomatic' when viewed in cultural terms, and, by extension, in terms of trade and ecology or the environment.

It needs to be realised that human security cannot be effectively appreciated through the paradigm of sovereign territoriality, although state systems operating within the Himalaya have failed to devise any other framework to grapple with the issue of security. More often than not, the state has dominated the agenda of defining the domain of non-traditional security (such as human rights, cases of ecological devastation, climate change, human trafficking, migration, forced exodus of people, transnational crime, resource scarcity, and even pandemics) besides setting the tone of an approach to handling traditional security threats (such as military, political and diplomatic conflicts that were considered as threats against the essential values of the state, territorial integrity, and political sovereignty). Interestingly enough, it has often appeared as a fact that the measures to deal with traditional security threats from outside have in fact triggered non-traditional insecurities on several fronts on the inside.

Understanding the Himalaya

Keeping these arguments in order, it is proposed that there could be several alternate ways of reading the geopolitical and the security concerns of the Himalaya and if the statist meaning (territoriality, sovereignty and difference) is privileged over and above those of the anthropological, historical, cultural, and ecological ones, it would continue to reflect a set of mental processes predicated on a certain conception of spatial imagination that could be anything but 'unHimalayan' or, for that matter, antithetical to the very idea of the Himalaya itself. How long should one go on referring to the Himalaya as the one of the largest biodiversity hotspots? Or as the largest water tower of Asia? Or as a zone that is culturally and linguistically diverse, sharing a common historical pool of resources, communities, cultures, civilisations and memories, and susceptible to climate change and ecological vulnerabilities? When would these terms of references be predicated in our scholarly, and, by extension, pedestrian, attempts to understand the Himalaya and produce impactful policy research on the Himalaya?

The argument is simple. The Himalaya being a naturally evolved phenomenon should be understood through frameworks that have grown from within the Himalaya. The Himalaya needs to be visualised with an open eye and taken in as a whole instead of in parts unlike the ancient parable of the efforts of the blind men in trying to understand the elephant in parts. The Himalaya is a space whose history defines its geography rather than the other way round. Since histories are always made rather than given, we need to be careful about what kind of Himalayan history we are trying to inject or project in the way we imagine the Himalaya. Viewing the Himalaya as a space of political power and, by extension, through the coordinates of nation states epitomising differential national histories is a violent choice, which actually enriched ultra-sensitivity towards territorial claims and border management.

A road map of other routes

In contrast to this, if we are ready to consider the Himalaya as a space that is deeply embedded in human subjectivities, we can possibly come out of the grip of a national absolute space, which is actually necessary if we are to address the concerns of trade, commerce, community, ecology and environment – issues which are no less important when we are to think of securing livelihoods, cultures and the environment in the Himalaya. In fact, the road map of all these alternative routes – trade, community, environment – are located beyond the absolutist statist position. The need is that these alternative imaginations of security should be given the required space in the way policy making, state-building strategies and diplomatic relations are worked out in relation to the Himalaya. The time has come when we need to take position between the Himalaya as a national space and as a space of dwelling instead of avoiding our encounter with this ambivalence.

Swatahsiddha Sarkar is Professor and Director, Centre for Himalayan Studies, University of North Bengal, Darjeeling, West Bengal