Ideas of Nature and the Construction of Himalaya

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the conceptualization of 'nature' and its implications for understanding the Himalaya, challenging traditional dichotomies between nature and society. Drawing upon the 'social nature' perspective, it interrogates how nature is socially constructed, emphasizing the role of power, discourse, and historical context in shaping environmental narratives. The study explores colonial interventions in the Himalaya, such as scientific forestry and the establishment of hill stations, illustrating how these practices redefined natural landscapes and disrupted indigenous relationships with the environment. Through the lens of political ecology and Actor-Network Theory, the paper advocates for a non-dualistic approach that recognizes the entangled agency of both human and non-human actors. By situating the Himalaya within these theoretical frameworks, the research offers a nuanced understanding of its socio-environmental dynamics, contributing to broader debates on nature, culture, and power.
Sources

Introduction

„Nature" or „natural" has always been imagined as having their own independent existence, which is outside the human domain.[1] This statement may sound valid especially in today"s times with the proliferation of literature on global warming that has now said to have damaged the planets „natural" climate. One can even go further and hold human actions accountable for such „metamorphic" change.[2] But how far back in history do we need to traverse to arrive at the point of „pristine nature" not induced of any anthropogenic alterations? And if humans are responsible for climate change, how can „nature" ever have an independent existence? These are two primary questions that enable us to break down the dichotomous relation between nature and society as being distinct categories functioning autonomously. Before we try and grasp the Himalaya as a geological block, we first need to conceptualize and debunk traditional understanding of „nature".

Castree (2001:5) gives an account of three contemporary approaches to understanding nature in Geography: the technocratic approach of sustainable development, ecocentric approach of nature first, and the newer, less popular approach of social nature. The technocratic and the ecocentric approach both view nature and society as two distinct realms. "Where ecocentric urges us to save, live in harmony with, or even get back to nature, technocratic geographers proposes to manage, control or dominate nature as if were a domain different to, and separate from society". The social nature approach investigates how nature is socially defined by society and to consider nature as unsocial undermines the "perpetuation of power and

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[1] The words nature and natural has been used throughout the paper alternatively to convey an analogous understanding of its literal commonsensical dictionary meaning as opposed to humans and human creations.
[2] For the concept of „Metamorphosis", see Beck (2016).

inequality in the wider world". This approach shifts the focus from how nature is being exploited to who actually defines nature. The problem of understanding nature is because it "is both a concept and all those physical things to which the concept refers". Social nature argues that different individuals and groups use different discourses to make sense of nature. The physical characteristics of nature are defined by social practices which are not static. "These discourses do not reveal or hide the truths of nature but, rather, create their own truths". Therefore we must deconstruct our knowledges and „denaturalize" ourselves.

The ontological and epistemological determination of what is „natural" is primarily defined by the natural sciences. According to natural scientists, unlike humans the natural world functions with laws that can be discovered and are universal. Nature can be predicted if these laws were determined. Such a view fails to capture the material realities of conceptual ideas, such as famines and droughts only affecting the people at the margins. It fails to acknowledge the fact that most countries in Asia and Africa suffer more casualties and deaths by natural disasters than their counterparts in Europe and America. Social construction of nature not only refers to construction of our "concepts" about nature but also in "physical and material sense" (Demeritt, 2001).There lies an underlying problem of categorizing changes in „nature" only based on outcomes provided to us through meticulous research done by nature scientist. It is important to place social context, distribution of power and knowledge production to understand the consequences that led to the great transformations (Cederlof & Rangarajan, 2018). Hence, the first step to „denaturalize" is to critically evaluate the concepts revealed by natural science and place them under a diverse socio-political context and how power is distributed unevenly across a global political economy.

Debunking pristine nature directs towards the realm of political ecology where nature is socially constructed and historically situated. According to Latour (2004) society is key factor in identifying changes and problems in nature. Nature exists for society"s sake, without society there it lacks an authoritative body to define „natural" problems. The next step of „denaturalization" intermingling of culture and nature to determine normalized standard of interaction amongst them. Human-nature interaction varies locally, regionally and globally. The customary practices are often in conflict with latest technological advancements.

What is then required is to cross over disciplinary boundaries amongst the humanities, social science and sciences. "In the sciences, for example, it is often the nonhumans (animals, forests, ocean chemistry) whose actions are of interest and humans are merely those who disturb, while in the humanities typically humans are at the centre with nonhumans only ever playing supporting roles" (Morrison, 2018). This barrier needs to collapse if we are ever going to understand the complexity in their relationship. Climate change has blurred the lines between so called human history and natural history. It requires the intermixing of global „deep histories" of humans as species with histories of capital, empires, states and other forms of human manifestations to understand these planetary changes.

Locating the Himalaya

The Himalaya has both subjective and material realities. The inception of the Himalaya began with the collision of Indian tectonic plate with the Eurasian. They are considered the youngest mountain which haven"t stopped rising and stretches from Indus in the west to Brahmaputra

in the east. The extensive magnitude and diversity of people inhabiting impedes any form of generalization. But, if we imagine the „Himalaya‟ as being distinct from other geographical landscapes present in planet earth, a certain abstraction of generalization is inherent. A parallel and a comparative analogy with other landscapes can be drawn to understand the social processes in the Himalaya, but this too reconciles on the fact that certain elements in the Himalaya can be generalized. Take for example the concept of „Zomia‟ (Schendel, 2002) extended by James C. Scott can serve as an excellent tool to understand highland spaces as non-state spaces, where geography becomes a marker to distinguish social and cultural „art‟ to escape state‟s domination (Scott, 2009). Himalaya closely falls under this geographical territory of a „Zomia‟ as conceived by Van Schendel (Schendel, 2002) extending as non-state highland spaces through the lens of Scott (Scott, 2009) which opens up boundaries to conceive of a singular methodologically conception of the „Himalaya‟ as a whole.

This paper draws upon conceiving the Himalaya as a „natural‟ geological block produced by various discourses which consolidates the notion of „nature‟ being external to humans and existing independently. As, discussed earlier, this paper will try to debunk the nature-culture dichotomy in the Himalaya as forms of cultural practices placed under a socio-political context with a critical outlook towards science. The possibility to produce a grand history from time immemorial is futile and therefore must be limited to a certain historical period. I have only considered literature dealing with the colonial imagination of the Himalaya. These sources of imagination don‟t limit to the colonial state but also to individuals who are part of this Himalaya.

Constructing Himalaya

The impacts of colonialism to domesticate and control „nature‟ can be traced in the entire Himalaya. Though politically the Himalayan states/kingdoms acted as „buffer states‟ or „frontiers‟ not directly within the rule of the colonizers, it was an essential for other ancillary exploitations. Even the onset of imagining the Himalaya as natural frontiers is a work of ecological determinism, various researches have shown that access to Himalaya were different but not confined to only few. A well-developed network of trade and commerce existed from ancient periods.

Colonial powers worked towards profit maximization with market principles. The Himalaya were both home and a resource for exploitation for the colonizers. From constructing hill stations to depleting resources, its mechanisms can be conceptualized as discourses wielded by science and technology backed by hegemony of colonial supremacy to produce and (re)construct the Himalaya. This imagination is not located in a vacuum where the Himalaya is devoid of any preexisting history. Rather, what is interesting is to situate the opposing discourses by the colonials and inhabitants of Himalaya as a form of political ecology constructing what is the „natural‟.

Guha (1989) has lucidly documented the historical roots of India‟s most popular ecological movement- Chipko. The Chipko Movement that took place in Uttarakhand during the late 70‟s and early 80‟s was a reaction towards a shift in material reality brought about by colonialism. There has been a series of agrarian protest right from colonial period to independent India. These protests were basically against state policies towards scientific and

commercial forestry. The intervention by the state (colonial and monarch) disrupted the customary forms of relationship that the peasants and villagers shared with the forest. This disruptor in the relationship led to various ecological and social crises in the two regions or Uttarakhand, the independent kingdom of Tehri Garhwal and the Kumaun Divison of British Empire.

Guha falls under the school of the thought which believes that the villagers have better understanding of their ecosystem than exterior scientific knowledge (monarch and colonial state). These scientific techniques of forestry are aimed primarily towards maximization of profit. Products that have a commercial value are brought into this system of scientific forestry. As Guha mentions, " the forests were brought under working plans that regulated the yearly extraction and prescribed appropriate silvicultural practices to enable adequate reproduction of species like chir and deodar" (Guha, 1989). The customary relationship between the forest and its villagers were a threat to commercial forestry. More and more forest lands were safe guarded by the state to meet the demands of the capitalist market. The common pool of resource maintenance done earlier by the villagers was demolished. Guha reflects the fact that ecological movements are new reflections to old peasant struggles. Ecological issues are so closely related to basic survival issues of the villagers that it cannot be separated from peasant movements and agrarian changes.

Here, we can see a dialectical relationship between the ecocentric approach of the villagers against the scientific forestry propagated by science through the state. Almost, any form of ecological struggle in the Himalaya by its inhabitants is a longing towards traditional or pristine nature. The dichotomy between nature and culture is reinforced by these ecological struggles. The traditional forms of agriculture or forestry practiced are a unique set of social and cultural process that has a historical inception similar to scientific forestry. This doesn"t assert claim to which practice should prevail but practices are cultural products of interaction.

Pradhan (2017) has highlighted how hill station were created and acquired by the colonial rulers as representations of western landscapes which could be only possible at the Himalaya because of its geography. „The British inscribed the Indian hill sites with their perceptions of mountains, aesthetics and landscape. Practical utility and aesthetics combined to reproduce a European landscape...unified in a single space of the hills" (Pradhan, 2017). She mentions the role of capitalism to commodify nature to cater the urban population that migrated to these hill station or natural „Hygeia". This was done entirely by anthropogenic agency of creating the ideal European landscape. „Perception of the landscape naturalizes the culture of a particular society as the only possible history, effacing all other previous histories" (Pradhan, 2017).Constructing landscapes based on ideal notions of „natural" is a feature of colonial administration along with utilizing nature for commercial purpose while removing all previous histories. This can be generalized to any „dominant group" to create myths and mystiques to erase particular life systems.

We can see by the above two references that „nature" has been both constructed as in the case of hill stations and utilized as in the case of commercial forestry. The colonial discourses alter the way „nature" was conceived and practiced in the Himalaya. In both these cases there also lies a longing for „pristine nature" by the local indigenous inhabitants. The colonial power and the local indigenous people have constructed a Himalaya that doesn"t take into account longer

historical process that existed, but develops their own discourses to mediate the interaction between the human and the nonhuman world as „natural". The counter discourses produced against the forces of colonial hegemony is also a form of representation of power in society that has constructing the Himalaya. That leaves us into the realm of political ecology and a highly relativist approach of who is responsible in constructing. This question has been dealt extensively by propagators of social nature (Castree & Braun, 2001), how power backed by science in a neo-liberal setup dominates the discourses produced on nature and its utilization. This implies that there lies a well-defined barrier between the human and the non-human world and human as sole agents to construct the nonhuman elements. Such an analysis doesn"t extend the scope of human-nonhuman relationship and concludes power to humans.

The Himalayan Way

The Himalaya can be compared to other geographical features but not replaced. It has its own uniqueness, no matter how socially defined; it can also determine the social. Just take for instance the terrain. It barely takes three hours to travel from a tropical type of climate in the foothills to an alpine climate of the Alps. This was an important element that made the colonizers to have their headquarters shifted to these mountains. Logistically it might take days to traverse between climatic zones, but the Himalayan ascend is steep and rewarding to escape the valley weather within a few hours. The Himalaya also makes possible for certain plants and animals to flourish which is not found in any other geographical location. Tea plantations brought by the colonizers to the Himalaya replaced the quantity and quality of tea produced by China in the global market. The mountain slopes of the Himalaya with the typical type of soil made such commercialization of tea and development of multiple plantations viable. If tea plants were not fit to be grown on these mountain slopes, the colonizers would not have invested so heavily to deforest the landscape and construct factories. Agricultural practices are determined by altitudinal zonation to exploit niches in mountain economy. If agriculture has anything to do with social and cultural practices, then altitude which rises rapidly in the Himalaya must be considered. Recognizing humans to transform „nature" is not completely a unidirectional process but „nature" too shapes humans actions.

Such an analogy shifts from „nature" being socially constructed and dominated by anthropoids to nature having some agency to alter the course of human actions. We have been able to denaturalize ourselves from the hangover of „pristine nature" through a social nature approach as both having agency to shape and reshape each other but failed to imagine human-nature relationship in a non-dichotomous manner. They are still two separate realms existing independently but shaping each-other. Assigning agency to both humans and nonhumans doesn"t dissolve the nature-culture divide, but reinforces it. Moreover, the binarist thinking forces the analyst to make a choice: to prioritize one domain over another (Castree & Macmillan, 2001)

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) associated with the works of Michel Callon, Bruno Latour and John Law has tried to break down the human-nonhuman dualism. They try to conceive the world as hybrids, chimeric, complex and entangled. „This ontology of not-quite-natural, not-quite-social entities reject the pure transcendences of binarist thinking and urge us to see

them as outcomes that illicitly compartmentalizes a messy, impure, heterogeneous world" (Castree & Macmillan, 2001). The breaking down of this binary ecourages to think in terms of overlapping relations of associations rather than seperations. Eventually leading us to networks as a fovoured metaphor for conceptualizing socionatural imbrications. These networks are numerous and heterogenous invloving the unique alignment of humans,machines, animals, inscription devices, and other materials in relations which vary in satbility, time-space extension and time-space form (Castree & Macmillan, 2001).

Conclusion

The social constructionist approach to coceptualize „nature" have shown the problematics of imaging it as an nonsocial element. Secondly, it highlights the role of power in creating discourses which can be utilized for certain bodies to have stakes over the „natural". On the other hand ecocentric approah intends to go „back to nature". ANT not devoid of any criticism tries to break down this dichotomy and provides alternative frameworks for analysis. It will indeed be a daunting task to apply the above methodology to conceptualize the Himalaya which this research work intends to undertake. With the multitude of hybrid geographies that are created adding to the problem of climate change, an ANT approach to the Himalaya can add to the existing body of knowledge generation.

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