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Introduction

I

The essays in this anthology are the result of a series of seminars entitled *Tibet's Relations with the Himalaya*, from which is derived the title of the volume. Three seminars were held over a two year period with the aim of exploring exchanges between the peoples of the Tibetan plateau, the Himalayan belt and the South Asian peninsula. A key assumption of the meetings—held in Leh, Gangtok and Itanagar—was that the Himalaya represented an assimilative space for the seepage of ideas, material exchanges and institution building northwards from Indic civilisation and southwards from Tibetan civilisation; furthermore, these ideas and customs also mingled with the autochthonous equivalents that existed in the folds of the Himalayan. The topics addressed by the seminar participants ranged from international relations to trade, religion to politics and climate change to ecology.

Some of the thematic questions of the seminars were: how did the enclaves of the many small “encysted” cultures respond economically through trade, socially through shared experiences and politically through institutions? Intellectually, how did these cultures respond to the two large oceans of civilisation represented by Buddhism in Tibet and Hinduism in India? Then, as they were confronted by modernisation, how did they respond to the ideas of modernity? Were the responses mere reactions to occidental colonial expansion or was there more to it? And what of the responses following the withdrawal of the western colonialism in the mid-20th century when revised encroachments asserted themselves on the peoples who live in spaces—such as mountains, valley and high altitude deserts—that

are difficult to define sociologically and to control politically? Were there localised visions of modernity? And what does the future hold for the cornucopia of cultural expressions that is the Himalaya?

The format for the series of meetings resulting in the essays presented in this volume was to have the authors present their papers, followed by panel discussions between all the participants. With each meeting, the participants revised their papers to consider contributions that were made by colleagues until the chapters took final shape. We did not, of course, envision that the meetings would yield defining or even comprehensive answers to these questions. That task calls for a much larger enterprise. Our exercise is best described as an exploration towards formulating some of the critical questions. A prime objective was to make sure that the questions are asked so that they do not fade away. This is important for two reasons.

First, there is a need to document and acknowledge Tibetan civilisation's contribution to Himalayan culture. This is important because this contribution is in danger of being lost to our memory due to Tibet's presently diminished status as an independent political entity or a fully autonomous cultural source. Diminished political status and restrained cultural impetus weaken a nation's ability to make such contributions or a culture's ability to fully flower. More importantly, it endangers the inspiration source and the well-spring of this knowledge.

It is often forgotten that the geographic position of the many cultural enclaves of the Himalaya— sandwiched between the two civilisational oceans and political giants of present-day India and China—is also home to the indigenous knowledge, culture and life-ways of its autochthonous peoples. The second objective of our exercise was to ensure that what is left of the indigenous knowledge and its perspective in the various fields of study addressed in this volume—economic, social, political and intellectual—are incorporated into the world's knowledge bank so that lived experiences of and from the Himalaya, from the cultural outposts of Gilgit-Baltistan in the West to that of Arunachal Pradesh in the East, are preserved and expanded on.

To be sure a volume as slim as the present cannot pretend to answer such questions comprehensively or formulate all the questions that need to be asked. For example, the indigenous Himalayan contributions to the methods and wisdom in the fields of agriculture, art and literature, among other knowledge fields are not touched upon at all in this volume. In that context, the symposia organised by the Foundation for Non-Violent Alternatives (FNVA) was intended more as an exploration and an inventory of what some of the questions might be. It is hoped that the questions will serve as a beginning venture for scholars who participate in knowledge banking and practitioners who participate in policy making. The questions raised in this volume need to be horizontally expanded on and vertically deepened so that our understanding of the precious mosaic of the Himalayan cornucopia is not lost amidst aggressive state-building exercises by the many independent nation-states — specifically Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan—that form the borderlands of the Himalayan expanse and juggernaut of homogeneity facilitated by the introduction of *rapid* (and all too often uncritical) modernisation through the devices of technology, instant communications and ease of transport.

The first two chapters set the stage for the theoretical questions that emerged from our deliberations. In the last decade and a half, Willem van Schendel and James Scott have generated a creative dialogue between anthropologists, historians and geographers. The basic premise, first mooted by Schendel, of this thesis is that the societies that inhabit the Tibetan plateau and the Himalaya were protected from expanding and powerful states because of their location and the difficulty of the terrain in which they lived. Scott expanded this theory to other regions and contended that the societies also sought refuge in the hills so as to avoid being ruled by aggressive “state-making” processes, more often than not violent and oppressive.

Chetan Singh, in the opening essay, nuances this thesis with the observation that the Schendel-Scott arguments do not explain “the emergence of well-structured states in the region” in the late modern period. This is a valid question, because it was between the late 18th

and the mid 19th centuries that the Himalaya (one could also say Western and Eastern Turkestan, or Central Asia) witnessed many states— Bhutan, Nepal, Jammu & Kashmir, Sikkim and several other smaller ones—crystallising as modern entities and negotiating their futures with the larger states that either wedged them in or directly dominated them. The complexity of the process of state-building, Singh argues, allows the smaller entities to become ‘transitory’ and ‘threshold’ units as they adapt themselves to new realities socially, culturally and politically. He illustrates his argument with a discussion of how Kinnaur and the Kinnauras have adapted themselves to both modernisation and the idea of modernity.

In Chapter 2, Sanjay Chaturvedi addresses the question of Tibet’s position in the comity of nations. He argues that modern Tibet, along with the Central Asian states and Afghanistan (one could add other similar states as well) has been a victim of “colonial cartographies” and “neo-liberal geopolitics” in the recent past. This tends, he points out, to gloss over the fact that it has been subjected to ‘excessive geopolitics’. This phenomenon, combined with a forced exoticism of its location and civilisation, has caused us to forget that geopolitics cannot ignore “human-cultural geographies” which need to transcend state centric negotiation along borders. With this in mind, Chaturvedi urges “China and India to acknowledge collectively that the histories of mobility throughout the Himalaya are much longer than the histories of borders” setting the stage for a perspective on Tibet’s relations with the Himalaya in the light of the *peoples* of both rather than merely as ‘trade route’, geo-political ‘buffer zone’ or territorial possession.

The discussions during the seminar series, which give this volume its content, were Tibet-centric in that it seeks to record and expand on Tibetan contributions to the life of the Himalaya’s ethnicities, languages, political histories and even, in its role as the ‘Third Pole’, a custodian of the environment of its sprawling neighborhood of South Asia and South East Asia. Chapters 3 and 4 are devoted to establishing this perspective. Thubten Samphel’s contribution returns the focus of our discussions to the “Geopolitical Importance of Tibet” for the diverse citizens of the Himalaya and South Asia in

history and for the future. His discussion focuses on the criticality of fairness towards the Tibetan plateau in the use of its minerals (over 130 varieties of them) and as the 'Water Tower of Asia', arguing that neglect by the international community on fairness of use in these activities will be to the detriment of the world as a whole. In Chapter 4, Tashi Phuntsok gives us an overview of the Himalayan peoples' current relations with Tibet, including an historical overview of perspectives and an update on the status of the Tibetans in exile.

The next cluster of three chapters is devoted to Tibet's relations with the Himalayan kingdom-states of Tehri, Sikkim and Ladakh over the centuries.

Claude Arpi, in Chapter 5, examines the case of a dispute between the Tehri State and Tibet, which has spilled over not just between British India and pre-1950 Tibetan interests but to the current Sino-Indian border position. It represents an interesting study in how some lingering legacies of border problems are addressed. Sunanda K. Datta-Ray's essay, "Sikkim Can Be Put in India But Tibet Can't Be Taken Out of Sikkim" (Chapter 6) is a classic rendition of the debt that is owed to Tibet culturally, historically and politically by an erstwhile Himalayan kingdom. He narrates how a non-Buddhist-non-Tibetan Nepali majority "find it more than ever necessary to cling to the Tibetan legacy for its own survival as a distinct entity in India". This case of calling for the opposite of majoritarian cultural domination and highlighting a now-minority civilisational identity for a state is surely a subject that deserves a few doctoral theses in the context of identity politics that is so pronounced in political discourse today.

Sikkim lost its independent status in 1975, when it was annexed to India. The Kingdom of Ladakh was annexed to the emergent Dogra state of Raja Gulab Singh in 1842. With the birth of the Dogra State of J&K in 1846, its territory became the largest portion of the by-now "Territories of Maharaja Gulab Singh". But the ethnic, linguistic and cultural definition of Ladakh as 'Tibetan' had begun in the 9th century. This phenomenon is summarised by Sonam Joldan in his review (Chapter 7) of the historical, cultural and trade relations between the Ladakh and Tibet over two thousand years.

It is interesting to note how relations between these two 'trans-Himalayan' (depending on which side of the Himalaya one is looking at!) were sustained even though they were separated by three months of travel on yak and horse-back travel. Joldan concludes Chapter 7 by asserting the importance, for Ladakhis, of "the restoration of normal border trading and cultural relations" with Tibet. He also underlines the criticality of consulting borderland dwellers about their future, rather than having policy directed exclusively from the capitals of the large and powerful status quo states.

The original intent of the seminar series was to also include the sovereign states of Bhutan, Nepal and Pakistan—all of whom have a Tibeto-Himalayan connection along their northern borders—with *in situ* symposia and interpretations from the citizens of these sovereign nation-states. However, the scarcity of time and funds prevented the organisers from continuing the series. But we are happy to be able to include Sangeeta Thapliyal's contribution. Chapter 8 explores the implications of an independent country with a non-Tibetan and non-Buddhist majority, interacting with a significant ethnic and religious minority. Thapliyal's take is to examine, among other things, "Buddhism as a link between India, Nepal and China." She points out that these were forged when the political elites of China, Nepal and India were open to exploring cultural linkages between them, suggesting a return to emphasis on them. "States cannot ignore ...cultural realities." The implication of this appears to be that cultural dialogue is just as important, if not more so, than political negotiations which often tend to be exclusively territorial in nature.

Chapter 9 directly addresses the complexity of the contentious claim and counterclaim between India and China from the point of view of Tibet's relations with Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh. The essay by Man Norbu and Nani Bath illustrates this complication. The essay cites the evidence showing that Tawang was clearly a Tibetan territory from medieval times. Tibet lost its political independence in 1950. It is now India's official position to regard Tibet as a part of China. If such be the case, then what are we to make of China's claim to it? Between the Indian and the Chinese positions, the chapter

tells us, is the aspiration of the people of Tawang; namely, that it is not a part of China. As in the case of most intractable international disputes, Tawang also represents a conundrum in the context of the larger question of Tibet. A conundrum that will undoubtedly have to find a solution that accommodates not only the status quo states but also, most importantly, the people directly influenced by state-based territorial acquisitiveness.

Bijay Thapa's essay (Chapter 10) focuses on how Tibetans in Darjeeling and Sikkim are addressing the question of identity. His argument is not dissimilar to the one proffered by Datta-Ray earlier in this volume: "Tibetans and Tibetanness prevail, represent and define the historicity and landscape of Sikkim-Darjeeling Hills." In this context, it dwells on how the ethnic and linguistic Tibetans in these regions tend to ensure that they rigorously preserve their distinctiveness whether it is in the realm of their vocation, social relations, politics or religion.

In Chapter 11, Tshering Doma Kaleon focuses on trade links between Sikkim and Tibet which helped to shape the earlier majority Sikkimese Tibetan identity. She argues passionately for the restoration of border trade, not as part of some nostalgic romanticism but as a meaningful material linkage that can help to continue to bolster the identity of the Tibetan, and now- minority, ethnics of Sikkim.

Chapter 12 by Tenzin Norbu augments the argument for the importance of Tibet from the point of view of the environment. His is passionate argument for an understanding of the 'Third Pole' not just as a source of water for a considerably portion of humanity but also as a source of knowledge about how to preserve this ecology of the region. His aim is "to understand and bring forward the ground realities of what is actually happening, how our fore fathers have protected the ecology, and how we must act together to protect the environmental degradation and loss of ancestral cultures in the process of development".

A lacuna in the series of dialogues that we held around the topic of Tibet and the Himalaya was the absence of Chinese perspectives because of the shortage of time for networking and the scarcity

of financial resources. However, we are thankful to Ananta S.B. de Gurung (Chapter 13) for not letting the volume be blank on this important perspective. His chapter examines the reasons Tibet is materially important to China: water, minerals and the territorial expanse to allow for the migration of the majority population. He concludes: "Chinese presence in Tibet has transmogrified into a need-based issue because of the cushioning it can guarantee against non-conventional security concerns, for example, [the] destabilising effect that may arise from energy and food security in the country".

II

Over much of the known history of its mountainous belt, the diverse peoples and cultures of the Himalaya have been alternately ignored, appeased or pacified by the empires and states that have bordered them. In the last couple of centuries, with the rise of modern state-building and greater efficiency in territorial acquisitiveness, many territories and their inhabitants have been incorporated into the established nation-states. In late modernity and after the British withdrawal from Southern Asia, while the incorporation of the Himalaya into the larger states (some very new) has been formalised, the process of equitable integration of these regions and peoples has yet to be completed. In part this is because the process of state-building in the mainstream lands of the countries that border the Himalaya is still a work in progress.

Two major premises inform the seminar series. First, that it is precisely in the present that the half-dozen modern nation-states bordering the Himalayan belt must recognise the importance of not only being sensitive to the needs of the peoples of the region but engaging with them to document, preserve, improvise and improve on the knowledge, methods and material of the Himalaya. Given the relative fluidity of interaction along the Himalayan regions' borders with the six odd states that surround around it, the multiplicity and diversity of the 'Indic' and sub-cultural influences from their southern neighbours will continue as a dialogue. However, the second premise is that from the north, given the current political status of Tibet and the trend of a hard nationalism in China threaten

the homogenisation of and Han hegemony over Tibet. This in turn threatens that the well-spring of Tibetan cultural influences for the Tibeto-Himalaya will dry up. So the seminars and the contents of this volume are intended to launch a dialogue that will forestall this possibility.

As has already been said, this is a rather large project. Nor is this the first attempt at such a discourse. However, the laudable FNVA seminar series and its outcome can still lay claim to some “firsts”. Tibet’s contribution through its vernacular interpretation of Buddhism is well known, whereas its contribution to other aspects of life less so. Therefore we have made a conscious effort to concentrate on the Tibetan contribution to the Himalaya historically, culturally, commercially and socially. Also, we have ‘unpacked’ the Himalaya by attempting to represent as much of its internal diversity and modest but invaluable autonomies in our discourse. Once again, it has not been possible to do full justice to this ambition. It would have enriched this volume, for example, to have a chapter on how the people of Baltistan, which is today in Pakistan, are reintroducing the Tibetan script in order to preserve the language as also an important Tibetan Buddhist site not far from Skardu its capital. Similarly, a chapter on Mustang (ethnically, linguistically and culturally Tibetan, but territorially in Nepal) or another on the plight of Bhutanese citizens of Nepali descent would not have been out of place. But then we have to draw a line somewhere. By far the most important first in the seminars and the contributions to this volume is that the participants have been overwhelmingly ‘Himalayans’. Out of the 14 authors of this volume, 11 are those who are from the Himalaya and many of them young scholars. And what is more, the majority of them still live there.

Some authors in this volume have pointed out, either directly or indirectly, that the Himalayan region suffers from a discourse that originates and ends in the capitals of the status quo states. That is, between New Delhi, Beijing, Islamabad, Dhaka, Kathmandu and Thimpu. This book is a fervent advocacy for this to change so that the everyday citizenry of the Himalaya—the Himalayans who live on the borders – are consulted without prejudice to the centuries

of influences that have seeped into the fabric of their lives from the south and, more particularly, the north. They deserve to be allowed the civilisational dialogue that forms the warp and weft of their lives no matter from which direction. And most of all, they deserve to be allowed to have a say about the future of their lives that is substantive, transparent and organic.