

## OVER THE HILLS AND FAR, FAR AWAY

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Indian Constitution - Features & Significant Provisions related to The Preamble, Union & its Territories and The Citizenship

The Kalka-Shimla highway in Himachal Pradesh. | Photo Credit: [AKHILESH KUMAR](#)

In the last week of July this year, 11 Himalayan States of India met in Dehradun demanding a “green bonus”, or a payment for environmental services they provide to the nation. Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman, 15th Finance Commission Chair N.K. Singh and Niti Aayog Deputy Chairman Rajiv Kumar were present. The assembled Chief Ministers argued that the Himalayan States, stretching from Jammu and Kashmir (which was still a State then) to Tripura (which most people would not really include in the Himalayan region) paid a developmental price for maintaining forests, rivers, and other environmental goods which helped the rest of the country.

This meet was organised with much fanfare, and was meant to showcase the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)’s commitment to its general election manifesto which had promised a financial package to address the special developmental needs of the Himalayan States. The States asked for help to develop hydropower resources, subsidies for their environmental protection measures which deny them normal ‘development models’, and recognition of their efforts to meet human development parameters.

There was perhaps nothing exceptional about much of this, and within a week, the meagre media attention this received was overshadowed by the abrogation of J&K’s special status under Article 370 and the massive clampdown on civilian life in the Kashmir valley. However banal the demands of the Himalayan States seem in comparison to what has been happening in Kashmir since August 5, both are actually part of the same problem that India has historically had: its inability to come to terms with the specificity of the Himalayan region, whether political, social, or ecological-economic.

The problem of integrating the northern mountains to the national mainstream is not specific to India. If one takes a look at the entire mountain zone stretching from Balochistan, through Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, J&K, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Nepal, Sikkim and Gorkhaland, to Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and the Chittagong Hill Tracts, it is easy to see that each of these regions has had problems when it comes to integration of the hilly regions with the nation states that are primarily anchored in the plains. (Himachal Pradesh is the only exception, which perhaps proves the rule.)

One could also further argue that this ‘integration problem’ is not just a South Asian phenomenon — China is struggling to integrate its mountain people and their homelands with its national mainstream, as are Myanmar, Thailand, and other countries.

Scholars have for long been acutely aware of this problem. Seventy and more years ago, Owen Lattimore wrote extensively about the exceptionalism of the “Inner Asian Frontiers of China” and, a decade back, James C. Scott argued persuasively about ‘Zomia’ as the mountain zone of South-East Asia (and South Asia) which deliberately kept itself independent of the plains. Scholars in India too, from Verrier Elwin to D.N. Majumdar and Y.S. Parmar, Gerald Berreman and Ramachandra Guha, have written, even if in less ambitious terms, about how structurally different are the Himalayan regions from the Indian mainstream in terms of their social and economic structure. Yet, this research has not really percolated to political understanding, whether at the level of policy formulation or popular conceptions.

To appreciate this point, we need to move back by a couple of centuries when the geography of the colonial state was being made. There is a long, complex and surprisingly unpredictable history to the establishment of Pax Britannica's border lines along India's northern mountains. For most regions in the Himalayas, this was the first time that a 'nation state', anchored in the society and political-economy of the plains, was able to reach so deep into the Himalayas and control them in a way which was historically unprecedented. In brief, the Himalayas successfully provided a barrier to Russian colonial expansion but were unsuccessful in providing a trade route into China.

By the end of the 19th century, keeping the mountains politically quiet and socially peaceful was both a desirable aim and a hopeful description. The idyll of the 'hill station' and the war-like strategies towards the northern tribesmen were both creations of this policy.

The postcolonial nation states of Asia, be it India, Pakistan, China or Myanmar, have not been able to break out of this difficult relation with their mountain regions. These independent nation states have all imagined themselves to be the inheritors, in the high Himalayas, of the geopolitical stakes of their colonial predecessors.

Even their national imageries have been framed — despite all their other variations — on the social, political and economic specificities of the communities based in the riverine plains. It is the village or town of the Ganga plains, or along the Narmada or Krishna and Cauvery rivers, which has defined what it means to be 'Indian'. The norms of what an 'Indian village' is, how its society is structured, how its economy is backward or in what ways does its political life work make no reference to the specificities of the mountain regions. These are at best imagined by the national mainstream as idyllic 'hill stations' peopled by 'noble savages', or, at worst, as wild regions inhabited by irrational blood-thirsty tribesmen.

This is not only a social-psychological feature but has direct practical consequences as policies and programmes are devised with the 'national norm' in mind, which almost always have unintended consequences on the hilly regions. The mountains are in a permanent state of exception.

Seen in this light, there is a direct, and short, link between the demands of the Himalayan States seeking a special "green bonus" — which the BJP supports — and the autonomy incorporated in the late, lamented Article 370 — which the BJP opposes. In India, specifically, the massive expansion of the national economy over the past three decades now allows for commodification of mountain resources (forests, water, labour, tourism, horticulture and even agriculture) in ways that are unprecedented. It has led to changes in the class structure and the emergence of a new middle class with national aspirations that finds the geographical specificity of the Himalayas at once a hindrance and the main commodity in its exchanges with the nation state. Thus, the variation from secessionist movements in J&K and Nagaland to active integrationist movements in Himachal Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur expresses the same conundrum — how do these regions and people reach a fair pact with the Indian nation state and become part of the national imagination?

History tells us that almost all Asian nation states have found such a coming together very difficult, if not impossible. With its ideological militarism, ethnic sectarianism and a rapidly shrinking economic base, the present dispensation in New Delhi may well be able to throw a few crumbs but seems unlikely to be able to find a way to meet the special demands of the Himalayan people. A "green bonus" will remain a charade.

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