Visualising the Himalaya with other coordinates

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(Mains GS 3 : Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation, environmental impact assessment.)

Context:

- Himalaya is 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.
- However, people examine the Himalaya mainly through the coordinates of geopolitics and security while relegating others as either irrelevant or incompatible.

The Himalayan concern:

- 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.
- Ironically it is the Delhi-Beijing-Islamabad triad, and not the mountain *per se*, that defines our concerns about the Himalaya.

A national Himalaya:

- The Himalayan studies suffers from political compulsion of territorialising the Himalaya on a par with the imperatives of nationalism.

- Thus the attempt of the counties (Nepal, Bhutan, India, Pakistan, and Tibet/China) is to create a national Himalaya that falls within this transnational landmass called the Himalaya.
- Example- The National Mission on Himalayan Studies, 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."

Territorialisation and securitisation:

- 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.
- Stakeholders need to really work out 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 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.
- The singular statist conception of a political border would 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.

The paradigm of sovereign territory:

- 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.
- 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).
- However they mostly set 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.

The UnHimalayan imagination;

- It is proposed that there could be several alternate ways of reading the geopolitical and the security concerns of the Himalaya.
- 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'.

Understanding the Himalaya:

- 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:

- Stakeholders need to consider the Himalaya as a space that is deeply embedded in human subjectivities.
- Nations need to address the concerns of trade, commerce, community, ecology and environment and securing livelihoods, cultures and the environment in the Himalaya.
- The road map of all these alternative routes — trade, community, environment — are located beyond the absolutist statist position.

Conclusion:

- The 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.