



SACRED MOUNTAIN LANDSCAPE AND HERITAGE ROUTES: NATURE, CULTURE AND BORDERLESS BELIEFS

Anuranjan Roy

UNESCO Category 2 Centre on World Natural Heritage Management and Training for Asia and the Pacific Region, Wildlife Institute of India (WII), Dehradun - 248001, India; +91 135 2646 299, +91 7044294470, anuranjan@wii.gov.in, anuranjan.roy@gmail.com

■ Abstract

The traditional pilgrimage route through India towards the holy mountain of Kailash in the Tibet Autonomous Region of China represents a timeless example of nature-culture linkage where the exquisite terrain is an integral part of the local cultural practices. With multiple generations of pilgrims passing through, adding continuous layers of interpretation and memories, it is a living heritage which continues building its reputation and legend. The paper will look at the nature-culture connections that make the Indian section of the pilgrimage trail unique while acknowledging its continuity with the larger transnational landscape of pilgrimage to Mt. Kailash spread across India, Nepal and China. It will also correlate learnings from the Capacity Building Workshop on Nature-Culture Linkages 2019 organized by the University of Tsukuba and the site visit to Mt. Fuji to their parallels in the Indian pilgrimage route and landscape.

KEY WORDS: Kailash, Pilgrimage, Mixed Site, World Heritage, Nature-Culture

■ 1. Introduction

1.1 The Journey

“Good novels - great ones - never actually seem to tell us anything; rather, they make us live it and share it by virtue of their persuasive powers.” - Mario Vargas Llosa, Excerpts from Letters to a Young Novelist.

Much like great novels, a journey of pilgrimage derives its power from experiencing it.

The storied terrain that will be discussed in this paper is an ancient one and its connection to the human experience seamless. When a place of significant natural beauty is intricately linked with millennia of human memories, the journey itself becomes a story, a legend and a culture in itself – a rare nature-culture synergy. The journey to Mt.

Kailash is a significant rite of passage for multiple cultures in South Asia much like the pilgrim paths towards the summit of Mt. Fuji, visited by the participants during the Capacity Building Workshop on Nature-Culture Linkages 2019 (CBWNCL 2019), are cultural cornerstones for Japan.

Though the focus of this paper will be the traditional pilgrimage route through India towards the peak of Mt. Kailash (Kangrinboqe 6,638 m) and the holy lake of Mansarovar which are located within the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of China, it is important to understand the cultural continuity and connections, which are much older than present-day political boundaries (ICIMOD 2011).

1.2 An Overview of the Landscape

The Kailash Sacred Landscape (KSL) is an area of about 31,000 km², comprising of north eastern

corners of Uttarakhand state in India, the adjacent districts in Nepal's far western region, and the south western portion of China's TAR. KSL has a diverse range of ecological conditions, rich biodiversity, distinct cultures and Indigenous sources of livelihood. About 7,120 km² of KSL included in the Indian portion has been chosen for the Sacred Mountain Landscape and Heritage Routes nomination to the UNESCO World Heritage List (ICIMOD 2011). With nearly 70 % (4,965 km²) of the land classified as forest cover, and with 4 major watersheds and 2 prominent protected areas in or adjacent to it, the combination of its natural wealth and historical importance to pilgrims makes it an embodiment of the culture-nature symbiosis.

The Sacred Mountain Landscape and Heritage Routes was placed on India's Tentative List¹ of World Heritage as a Mixed Cultural and Natural Heritage Site in April 2019 (UNESCO 2019) with reference to the criteria (iii) exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition, (vi) tangibly associated with living traditions, and (x) in-situ conservation of biological diversity. The identified region fulfills the criteria through long-held local traditions and distinctive landscapes.

The site [Fig. 1] includes the Byans, Darma and Chaudans valleys in the state of Uttarakhand. The nomination includes the Askot Wildlife Sanctuary and the eastern edges of the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve making it contiguous with its eponymous National Park, a World Heritage Site in its own right. The watersheds of Panar-Sarya, Saryu-Ramganga, Gori, and Dhauli-Kali help sustain the diversity in the Indian portion and in its entirety, the KSL gives rise to two mighty rivers – the Brahmaputra to the east and the Indus to the west (UNESCO 2017). The extensive river systems of the Sutlej and the Karnali are also born here. The rainfall on the region's southern flanks eventually finds its way to the Ganges (Weise 2018).

■ 2. Significance

2.1 Cultural Significance

Like Mt. Fuji is traditionally considered to be the residence of Asama-no-Okami, the god of Volcanoes and the goddess Konohana-Sakuya-Hime, Mt. Kailash is regarded by Hindus as the abode of the deity Shiva, a central figure in the Hindu pantheon and is also associated with Mahameru, the sacred cosmological mountain linked to the creation of the world. The



Figure 1: The Mahakali Route, used for the annual Kailash Mansarovar pilgrimage, follows the western banks of the Kali River (Source: Author 2019)

¹ The site was temporarily withdrawn from the Tentative List of India to World Heritage on 8 July, 2019 to carry out technical modifications for re-submission at a later date.

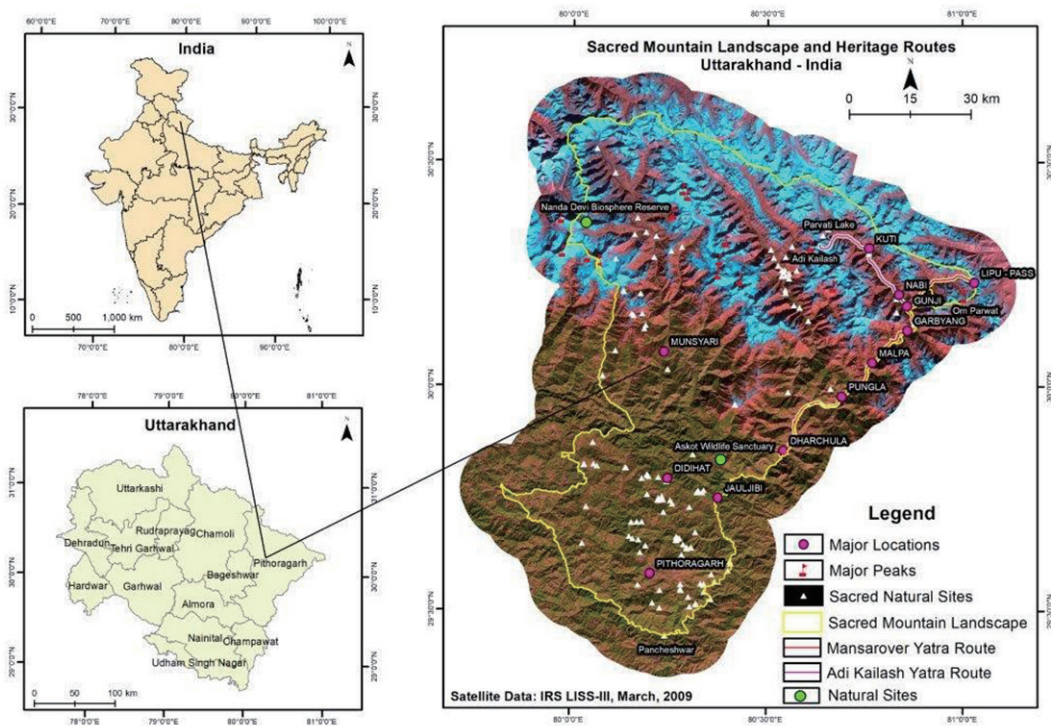


Figure 2: Map of the Sacred Mountain Landscape and Pilgrimage Routes (Source: WII 2019)

mountain features prominently in ancient scriptures like the Skand Puran and classical Sanskrit works like Kalidasa’s Kumarsambhava and Meghaduta. Despite the Buddhist-Bon myth of the battle between Milrepa and Naro Bon-chung, their respective religious figures over Mt. Kailash, today the two communities continue to access the pilgrimage route with mutual respect: the Buddhists circumambulating Kailash in the clockwise direction and Bons, anti-clockwise (Weise 2018). Regional folk stories like ‘You Don’t Die Till You’re Dead’ feature the characters of three friends representing Hinduism, Buddhism and Bon, expanding upon the common importance of Kailash to all of them (Kapur 2017).

While several historic routes for pilgrimage and business radiate through the Indian part of the Kailash landscape, the Mahakali route in the Kumaon region, going along the western banks of the Kali river through Nepal, opens for the annual Kailash Mansarovar pilgrimage [Fig. 2]. Similar to the Oshi Houses for Fujiko pilgrims visited by participants of the CBWNCL 2019, the area has a tradition of a number of smaller religious and residential structures to accommodate pilgrims passing through.

Given the richness of natural wealth, the local culture in this part of Uttarakhand is heavily influenced and shaped by it. A number of lakes like Anchheri Tal, Chhipla Kund, the previously mentioned Parvati Tal have cultural significance and confluences of rivers at Pancheshwar, Jauleshwar

(Jauljibi), Taleshwar (Jhulaghat), Tapovan (Dharchula), Rameshwar (Ghat), and Thal are considered sacred with specific rituals and worship practiced there. Similar to the popularity of the Yoshida Route taken by pilgrims to go up Mt. Fuji as seen in person by the participants of CBWNCL 2019 during their field visit, the main foot pilgrimage route to Mt. Kailash follows the valley of the sacred Kali Ganga river whose source is indicated as a pond at which there is a temple of importance for the Hindu devotees of the goddess Kali. Historically, more pilgrimage routes east of the Kali gorge route like the one that goes through the Unta Dhura Pass near Nanda Devi via Milam had existed but have now fallen into disuse (Bernbaum 2012).

Places like the village of Kuti, the last village on the route to Adi Kailash, have mythological and significant nature-culture linkages drawn from its paddy fields without rice grains due to an incomplete worship ritual by a queen as per legend; a mountain-top temple dedicated to Kunti, mother of the five heroes at the centre of Indian epic, *The Mahabharata*, and the village being the settlement of choice for Ved Vyasa who is identified as the composer of *The Mahabharata* and compiler of the *Vedas* for its serene natural settings. This charm of the Kuti landscape and its inhabitants extended well beyond the age of myths all the way up to 150 years ago, when Charles A. Sherring was compelled to note that “In these lovely valleys, there is still the romance and poetry of life: each has its god, each bush its spirit” (Pande and Bhawariya 2015).

Beyond the worship of nature, the ecological cycle finds expression in the many festivals of the region such as Harela, Chippla Jaat, Khatarau, Kandali and through important local fairs like Nanda Devi, Jauljibi, Punyagiri, Thal, and Gangolihat (UNESCO 2019). The Kandali festival of the Rang community of Chaudans, a once in 12 years celebration last held in 2011, is particularly interesting as its celebration involves the token uprooting of a plant that flowers in about the same time gap in remembrance of the defeat of an invading force which used the flowering plants as a cover.

2.2 Natural Significance

The Sacred Mountain Landscape and Heritage Routes site is naturally blessed with five major ecoregions from alpine meadows to broadleaf forests, with 191 bird, 90 fish, 38 mammal and 26 herpetofauna species (3 out of which are Critically Endangered (CR) and 7 Endangered (EN) as per the IUCN Red List) and about 1,200 plant species (24 endemic), including a rich array of medicinal and other herbs (UNESCO 2019). On the field visit to Mt. Fuji, its importance as a funnel and the only source for fresh water in the local area was emphasised upon. The transnational landscape being the source for many major rivers like the Indus, the Brahmaputra, the Sutlej and the Karnali, besides the rainfall on its southern flanks finding its way to the Ganges (ICIMOD 2011), provides critical ecosystem services to large stretches of alluvial plains downstream and to densely populated human settlements.

Near the Lipu Lekh pass, at Navidhang, pilgrims can see Om Parvat, where snow in the folds of the mountain forms a shape similar to the Hindu spiritual word 'Om' (Bernbaum 2012). Geological features like Adi Kailash (a peak with a structure similar to Mt. Kailash), Parvati Tal (as an equivalent of Mansarovar Lake) within the Indian region have long had an importance of their own both as a natural presence and a cultural marker.

Flora like Tangsen/hemlock *Tsuga dumosa*, *Cimicifuga foetida*, and *Morina polyphylla* are species rarely found in the Western Himalayas making the area an important ecological transition zone from the Western to the Eastern Himalayas. Its alpine meadows are rich in wild medicinal plants and there are local healers who retain their knowledge of the traditional treatments. Traditional sacred groves and community forests such as Bugyals, Tapovan and Haath Kali are also critical to maintain the natural balance. Birch forests are

suitable habitat for musk deer, Himalayan Monals and other migratory birds such as tits and finches and several communities use birch poles as prayer flag poles and some its bark in rituals. In selected communities, the burning of birch is a sin and due to local communities becoming conscious of birch conservation, the past 30-40 years have seen partial recovery of the birch forests in Byans Valley (Rawat 2018).

■ 3. Management

The control and use of the landscape is governed by a variety of state and national laws. These include the state level Van Panchayat Act (Village Council) 1931. Forest Development Agency (FDA), a federation of Van Panchayats responsible for preparation of projects and receives funds from various agencies and transfers the same to the Van Panchayats for forestry activities. It is chaired by the Conservator of Forests and has the territorial DFO (Divisional Forest Officer) as the Secretary. At the national level, the Wildlife Protection Act [1972] and Forest Conservation Act [1980] are applicable in the landscape too. Beside this, the Indian government's National Mission on Sustaining the Himalayan Ecosystem in sync with its National Environment Policy [2006] encourage community-based management of vulnerable ecosystems (G. B. Pant Institute 2010). The annual pilgrimage through the landscape towards Mt. Kailash in TAR is also regulated by the Government. The annual number of pilgrims is restricted to 18 groups of 60 pilgrims each staggered through the months of June through September when the access road is open. The selection for the same is done through an online application, followed by a draw of lots and further evaluation/interviews (Kailash Mansoravar Yatra 2019).

The local Rang or Rang-Shauka community live in one of the five zones of the Sacred Mountain Landscape and Heritage Routes site, that of the highland areas of Byans, Darma, Chaundas, and Johar valleys. Besides this, the Seera, Askot, Seera, Gangoli and Sor regions, all exhibit unique linguistic, social, religious and economic features and are also shaped by their interactions with pilgrims over hundreds of years. A spectrum of societies can be seen in the vertical movement from the valleys to the higher reaches, from agrarian, pastoral-agrarian, pastoral trader, nomad pastoral to a form of hunter-gathering. The hill farmers carry forward a legacy of selection of suitable crops for the predominantly rainfed agriculture, an outcome of thousands of years of manipulations tried through succeeding

generations (G.B. Pant Institute 2010, 2012). The Tribal Heritage Museum in Munsiyari has effectively conserved and institutionalized ancient and living traditions of Indigenous communities in its displays and collections. The newly initiated Rang Museum at Dharchula is dedicated to preserving the details of a traditional lifestyle rapidly disappearing. In the picture below [Fig. 3], the traditional artifacts seen have been donated voluntarily to the museum from villages across the three valleys as they have fallen out of daily use.



Figure 3: Donated traditional artifacts with the Rang Museum, Dharchula (Source: Author 2019)

The region-specific Kumaoni style of architecture uses local materials like stone, slate and mud in construction techniques passed down as legacy as is the art form of Aipan, where the artists create motifs of natural elements and gods/goddesses on cloth, paper and walls. These arts and crafts are yet to be documented in detail and management plans could consider the same, looking at the sustainability and viability of generating income streams from them. Long-held local traditions in Uttarakhand of preserving sacred groves (*Dev Vans*), i.e. community forests like those in Hokra Devi, Lateshwar Mahadev, Satgarh and Hat Kali, overseen by Van Panchayats (Village/Forest Councils) are critical to maintaining balance with nature. These *Dev Vans* perform important ecological functions like water recharging, nutrient cycling, prevention of soil erosion, conservation of biodiversity, and in mountain areas even prevent landslides. Local communities associate the sacred sites and landscapes with local deities linked with their culture while pilgrims from other parts of the country link the same with the pan-India deities like Shiva. Both groups of worshippers must be considered stakeholders (Bernbaum 2012). By including sites of local importance in the conservation plan, local involvement and interest in the conservation of the site may be greatly enhanced.

The socioeconomic life of the local people in the Sacred Mountain Landscape and Heritage Routes has been defined by a nomadic lifestyle, transhumance, and migration. Rock salt, borax, wool from Tibet and the higher mountain passes would be traded for food grains, jaggery, clothes, and other commodities from lower India facilitating an exchange of cultures at the major fairs and marketplaces where the transactions occurred. An illustration of the connections in the KSL, Limi Valley in Nepal was for centuries a central connection and a marketplace for traders from Tibet and India (The Hindu 2019). With the end of the caravan trade and transhumance due to modern political developments and the availability of mass-produced iodized salt, its economy saw a drastic decline. Alternative means of livelihood drawing on tourism, pilgrimage and local business currently offer the only income to the residents of the site. A good management plan must factor in ways to provide channels for up-skilling and employment drawing on and augmenting the protection of the area's heritage.

■ 4. Current State of Conservation and Challenges for Continuity

In the Indian state of Uttarakhand as well, remote villages continue to be abandoned and thereby leading to a loss of traditional ecological knowledge. Inaccessible areas, difficult terrain, harsh climate, seasonal work, and lack of employment/occupational opportunities leading to an increase in alcohol consumption among youth. Migration for higher education and private/government jobs in other cities of the district has increased significantly. The significance and utility of temples, sacred groves, and traditional local fairs is also on a gradual decline (WII 2014). The region is inhabited mostly by communities, who depend heavily on the forests and forest products to earn their livelihoods and the degradation of natural ecosystems; inadequate infrastructure for drinking water, health, education; increasing incidents of human-wildlife conflict with monkeys, wild pigs, leopards and black bears are a source of concern as per the annual report on the conservation of KSL (WII 2014). Due to geological instability and extreme climatic conditions, landslides like the one seen in Fig. 4 disrupt road connectivity to the terrain. The areas are also seeing changes brought on by infrastructure and tourism and the generation of sustainable, gender-responsive, and socially equitable livelihood options are the need of the hour.



Figure 4: Landslides disrupt connectivity within the landscape (Source: Author 2019)

However, local communities have had a long history of living in harmony with nature which can easily be harnessed for conservation in the region. Through the Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation and Development Initiative (KSLCDI) Implementation Programme in India under the aegis of International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), with Wildlife Institute of India (WII) as one of the partner organizations, considerable progress has been done in restoring the nature-culture connect and help local communities preserve their invaluable heritage (ICIMOD 2011). After extensive surveys on community perception and inputs from stakeholder's consultation meetings were incorporated into a Feasibility Assessment Report (G. B. Pant Institute 2010), the Programme has since engaged in multiple participatory, community-based, local multi-stakeholder in the Indian KSL for capacity building, youth outreach, Participatory Natural Resource Management (NRM), Community Based Ecosystem Management Plans (ESM) and Long-Term Ecological and Social Monitoring (LTESM) (WII 2016).

■ 5. Recommendations

For the preservation of traditional knowledge and sustainable living, the growing population needs to be supported through reliable livelihood opportunities. Owing to its remoteness, the region does not yet attract tourists to its fullest potential and the feasibility report (G. B. Pant Institute 2010) have suggested a very good scope as an adventure tourism hub with Mountaineering, Trekking, Rock Climbing, River Rafting, Skiing, Para-gliding, Angling all on offer. With trained local guides and flow of income to the villages, this offers a way to less forest dependent lifestyles with the caveat that the social and economic changes that this will bring need to be studied in parallel. As the COVID19 crisis currently engulfing the world indicates, mass market

tourism may see a significant drop in business post the pandemic but small-scale adventure in difficult to access sites may yet return. For the adventurous tourist as well as the religious, sensitization and guidelines are necessary to prevent the side-effects of over-commercialization that a spurt in tourism often causes. Culture and site-specific content always work better and can be created with this purpose in hand (WII 2010, ICIMOD 2014). The popular art inspiring impact of Mt. Fuji on Japanese society can be compared to the influence of Mt. Kailash and successful ideas from Japan could be reworked and adapt to this landscape.

For instance, during the CBWNCL 2019, participants had an opportunity to visit the Shizuoka and the Yamanashi Prefectures World Heritage Visitor Centres for Mt. Fuji where the former was a modern design with an orientation towards the international tourist while the latter was a traditionally designed one catering to the spiritually inclined local visitor. A similar approach could be considered for the Sacred Mountain Landscape and Heritage Routes site to develop interpretation content that would appeal to every kind of visitor. Much like how the religion of Shugendo allows for a syncretic mix of esoteric Buddhism, Taoism and Shinto influences, the nature of the pilgrimage route to Mt. Kailash through scenic surroundings and the story of the peak itself is such that a Hindu can see it as the path to the abode of Shiva, a Buddhist regards it as Demchog's palace, for a Jain it is where their first Tirthankara attained enlightenment and for a practicing Bon, it is the Swastika Mountain of their tradition without conflict (Bernbaum 2012) making this all-encompassing nature of the geography appeal to the secular traveller just as much.

The Indian section of the KSL represents but a unique part of a whole, a whole which encompasses millions of acres holding deep cultural, natural and aesthetic value. The KSL can be said to be, for the most part, pristine and because of the significance it has held in human history for such a long time, human presence on the landscape is as natural as any other life form's would be. As large truly natural areas disappear around the earth, the few that remain become that much more important as examples of what will always continue to inspire humankind. Extending a definition of popular culture given by communication theory guru Stuart Hall, to a journey through the KSL, the journey itself is the "carrier, reflection and producer of culture".

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