

Cultural Ecology of ‘Har Ki Doon’ A Geographical Analysis of Landscape and Cultural Morphology of Remote Mountain Settlements

D.K. SHAHI

Associate Professor

D.A.V. P.G. College, Dehradun (Uttarakhand) India

ABSTRACT

The high Himalayas is a region of diversity. It is an area of not only physical diversity but also cultural diversity. In fact, the valleys located in the high Himalayan region are relatively remote and isolated. The human societies living in these remote valleys over the centuries have maintained or developed their own cultural characteristics and differences. Different valleys are inhabited by people of different races, religions, languages. One of these is the valley of ‘Har Ki Doon’ of Uttarkashi. This secluded and marginal area is known for its natural and cultural uniqueness. Here there is uniqueness as well as diversity. The cultural uniqueness and diversity give the region a distinct identity. The present study introduces the cultural specificity and diversity of ‘Har Ki Doon’. This study presents deep research of the reasons for those cultural specialties and variations.

Key Words : Himalaya, Har Ki Doon, Cultural uniqueness, Cultural diversity, Cultural ecology

INTRODUCTION

Generally, mountains represent a context of the extremely difficult (harsh environment), unproductive and uninhabited environment, but in these inaccessible mountainous areas, there has always been a mountain society and culture which is active, energetic and vibrant. Each society is unique and different in itself.

Certainly, the existence of mountain society in these difficult (inaccessible and remote) areas is the result of interaction and adaptation with the local geomorphology (topography), climate and local ecology (soil, vegetation and aggregates of all these). Human life and livelihood, settlement and occupation (economy) in the Himalayan region reflect this. The landscape and geocultural morphology of the high mountain region clearly demonstrate this adjustment and adaptation.

Indeed, the Himalayas are a region of diversity. It is an area of not only physical diversity but also cultural diversity. The different valleys are inhabited by people of

different races, religions, languages (Berreman, 1963). One of these is the valley of ‘Har Ki Doon’ of Uttarkashi. This secluded and remote area is known for its natural and cultural uniqueness. Here there is uniqueness as well as diversity. The cultural uniqueness and diversity here give the region a distinct identity. The present study introduces the cultural specificity and diversity of ‘Har Ki Doon’, as well as this study presents deep research of the reasons for those cultural specialties and variations.

The present research also recognizes the belief that mountain societies provide a remarkable example of cultural adaptation to the local or regional geophysical conditions. These adaptations and adjustments of mountain communities are reflected in mountain habitats and all activities (Frake, 1962, Guillet, 1983, Zurick, 1989, Steward, 2016, Sutton and Anderson, 2020). This research presents the context and perspective of cultural ecology. In this context, the theme of this research is the landscape and culture of the high mountainous region.

Research Concept and Methodology:

The main assumption of this research is that cultural specificity is a product of geographical isolation or fragmentation. It is formed due to the geographical landscape (accessibility and inaccessibility of topography). This separation or dispersion is a universally accepted and transparent explanation of the cultural uniqueness of any mountainous region. The separation or dispersion is determined by the topography. It gives the mountainous regions geographical and cultural diversity and uniqueness.

The present research presents a deep study of the culture and social life of a mountain society living in a remote area. Although this is analysis-based descriptive research, this research and the content of this research are based on empirical evidence.

Introduction to study area:

Description of the area:

'Har Ki Doon' is located in Mori Tehsil (Subdivision) of Uttarkashi District of Uttaranchal State. It is an inter-mountain valley. This mountainous land provides a limited and diffused area for human habitation. This scattering or dispersion provides geographical and cultural diversity. The population of this region is scattered in about 47 villages.

'Har Ki Doon': A Distinctive Geographical 'Unit':

- The physical configuration of 'Har Ki Doon' resembles that of any higher Himalayan valley but is a distinct 'territorial unit'.
- The entire valley of 'Har Ki Doon' has a distinct geographical landscape. It has a diversity of climates. It also has a diversity of soil and vegetation. But it has an 'integrated' drainage system.
- The entire geography of 'Har Ki Doon' has a distinct geographical 'identity'. Geographers consider the valley of 'Har Ki Doon' as a definite 'geographical area'.

'Har Ki Doon': An area of Distinctive Socio-Cultural 'Identity':

- 'Har Ki Doon' has its own cultural peculiarity. The influences of Himachali, Jaunsari and Garhwali culture are found here, but the region is distinct from these major regional cultures. This peculiarity appears in the local dialect.

People of 'Har Ki Doon' have their own language (dialect).

- 'Har Ki Doon' has specific customs and traditions and above all it has specific values and beliefs. It produces a distinct and unique set of cultural characteristics. The local architecture also gives it a unique identity.

Social and Cultural Characteristics of 'Har Ki Doon':

The livelihood and way of life of the people of this region (interaction with mountain environment and 'process of production in hill environment') represent the adaptation of humans to the associated environment. There are few scattered human settlements in 'Har Ki Doon'. Vertical land use and vertical life and livelihood (Guillet, 1983) represent the uniqueness of this society. Although it is similar to the 'cultural ecology of the mountains', it is distinctive.

The societies living in this high Himalayan region for centuries have created this cultural uniqueness of their own. Sharing of scarce mountain resources is the way of life and culture of the region. Although it is an ecological adaptation, the product of this adaptation is social cooperation and mutuality, which is the specialty of this society. This social cooperation and reciprocity present solutions to the difficult challenges of life to the mountain community residing in the 'Har Ki Doon' valley.

Another feature of the hill society residing in the 'Har Ki Doon' valley is that each valley and each distinct community has developed its own distinct social and cultural life. Although a variety of geographical factors have helped shape the distinct cultures of each valley, they are broadly similar to each other. This cultural uniqueness, while distinguishing them from other mountainous regions, also binds them together.

The interdependent relationship of nature and human life is reflected in every sphere of mountain socio-cultural life. The purity (worship) of nature provides the basis for their everlasting religious belief. The mountain peaks like Swargarohini and the purity (worship) of the mountain meadows (Bugyal) also reveal the mutual relationship of human society with the mountain and nature. It establishes a deeply religious and spiritual firmness in their lives as well.

The myths and legends associated with this region give a distinctive identity to the social and cultural life of 'Har Ki Doon'. The people of this region consider

themselves to be associated with the history of Mahabharata. The location of the Swargarohini mountain and the origin of the Tamasa (Tons) river also corroborate the myths and legends associated with the region. This is the basis of their folk culture. The people of this region narrate and enact the stories of that epic to date. The mythological references associated with different places make this region even more distinctive. Local belief is that there is a cave of Manu Maharaj in Kalap, where he is considered to be in austere penance even today. Although this folk belief has no historical basis, these folk beliefs and traditions give a unique identity to the society and culture of 'Har Ki Doon'.

The most important element that gives a unique identity to social and cultural life is its religious belief. Although the Sanatan and Vedic cultures have a clear influence on the hill people, the temples of local deities are the center of the religious faith of this region. There are different groups of villages based on local customs and traditions. They have their own diversity.

The 'Har Ki Doon' area is recognized as the place of specific deities. The geographical location of the

It has functional relations (interactions) with other settlements of the region.

Jakhol is the most prominent religious place of this region. Someshwar devata is worshiped in the villages of Ador, Panchgai and Badasu Patti of this mountainous region. Prima facie the idol of Someshwar Devta seems to be the idol of Lord Shiva only because of the Trinetra inscribed on its head. One belief in naming the god Someshwar is that he is related to Soma *i.e.* Moon. According to another belief, Someshwar means the God Soma (according to local belief this is Mahadev). More about this source requires additional research. The recognition really seems irrefutable. Although there is no exact information about the construction period of this temple, but the architecture of the temple and the history of Jakhol indicate its antiquity. There is a temple of Karna Maharaj in Devra village of Singtur Patti. Every year a grand fair of the deity is organized in the village at the time of sowing of crops. Devotees from Devra village as well as dozens of nearby villages participate in the fair. There is also a temple here, where it is forbidden to see the deity. The priest of the temple also worships with his back to the deity. This temple is of Pokhu Devta. Pokhu Devta is recognized as the representative of Karna. The people of the region have an unwavering reverence for the deity Pokhu. People worship him as the god of justice. He is worshiped in every village of this region. Temples are the places of cultural events and social, cultural and religious celebrations. These temples serve as social space. These spaces cannot be separated from the social and cultural life of mountain communities. These are the means of interaction and communication.

Almost every village has some kind of Temple or Sthan. These temples dominate the centre of the settlements. These are the centres of the social relationship of rural communities. These are the centres of the exchange of social and cultural values. These social spaces, although often overlooked, have a strong effect on the settlement morphology. These spaces may be analysed to understand the social relationships of the village community.

On special occasions, a fair of Someshwar Devta is organized here. Villagers from all over the region participate in these fairs and offer special prayers to their deity Someshwar. Wishing people happiness and prosperity from the local deity show the local religious belief. In this area, there is also a tradition of animal

Cultural Zone of 'Har Ki Doon'	
Cultural Zone	Village
Panchgai Patti	Livari, Rala, Kasla, Rekcha, Fitadi, Dhara, Jakhol, Sawadi, Satudi, Sukundi, PaonTalla, PaonMalla, Sirga, (Someshwar devata is worshiped in the whole area)
Badasu Patti	Osla, Pavani, Gangad, Datmeer, Taluka (Someshwar devata is worshiped in the whole area)
Ador Patti	Saud, Sankri, Sidari, Kotgaon (Someshwar devata is worshiped in the whole area)
Singtur Patti	Dangan Gaon, Gaichawan Gaon, Devra, Kalap and Guradi villages (Karna Maharaj is worshiped in this area), Pasa, Pansar village, Pokhari
Fateh Parvat	Sewa, Bari, Gwal Gaon, Doni, Satta, Khansani, Pujeli and Hatwari (Mahasu Maharaj is worshiped in this area), Khanna (Vitasan Maharaj), Masri and Bheetari (Bering Nag)

Panchgai, Badasu, Ador Patti and Fateh Parvat areas come under 'Har Ki Doon'

cultural zone reflects cultural assimilation and cultural diffusion. It also displays the cultural diversity of the region. The spatial relationship of settlements can also be seen as a cultural heartland and hinterland. Jakhol may be regarded as the cultural heartland of Har ki Dun.

sacrifice (the tradition of offering goat khadu/menda to the deity) in the worship of the deity. Melas or other such cultural festivals act as a spatial organization. Such social and cultural activities help in spatial interaction and organization of settlements. In fact, fairs or other such cultural festivals are traditional methods of organization of remote settlements. In high mountain areas where topography and distance between settlements hinder mutual organization, fairs and festivals help in the cultural organization of settlements. (The functional and spatial organization is a process whereby all these dispersed settlements are integrated)

Yatra (Jatra) is a form of religious festival prevalent in the 'Har Ki Doon' region. In the Jatra, the Doli of the Gods and Goddesses comes out to travel or travels in different areas. The Jatra of Devkyar Bugyal is a part of the local tradition and culture. Travel and festivals act as a means, tool or medium for the spatial organization between distant settlements. Another aspect of the local culture is Jagra. In fact, it is a festival of awakening of local deities. Spirituality and socialism (collectivism) is also inherent in Jagra and. This socialism or collectivity is the basis of mountain life.

The culture and cultural interactions are embodied in the spatial organization of settlements. The socio-cultural life here is associated with the rejuvenation of nature. The arrival of festivals along with the cycle of nature infuses gaiety in folk life. People of 'Har Ki Doon' celebrate festivals like Holi, Diwali, etc. Each festival displays social unity and harmony. Another cultural feature of the 'Har Ki Doon' region is that in all cultural programs and on the occasion of religious events, dance is performed on the tune of traditional instruments, dhol, damau and ransingha. On such group events, local people dressed in traditional costumes perform dances like Tandri, Ranso etc. on traditional folk songs. Such occasions provide an opportunity to showcase the rich culture of the region.

One positive consequence of the physical isolation of the 'Har Ki Doon' region is that the people of this region have kept their age-old knowledge almost intact.

Its architecture, medicine, agriculture and forestry reflect the traditional knowledge of these people. Their traditional arts and crafts also give them a unique identity. The traditional clothing and food of these people also give a unique identity to the region. The traditional music and dance of the people of this region reflect a distinct Himalayan culture.

Conclusion :

Cultural diversity and geographic isolation make up any distinct cultural region. The people of 'Har Ki Doon' have preserved their cultural traditions, values, beliefs and myths, as a result of which its identity has assumed the form of uniqueness. Their traditional arts and crafts, traditional music and dance display a distinctive Himalayan culture.

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