

Book Review

LIFE IN THE HIMALAYA AN ECOSYSTEM AT RISK

Maharaj K. Pandit, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England (2017), ISBN 9780674971745, Page 364, Rs. 679/-.

The Himalaya predates the arrival of humans on Earth, but its memoir forms an integral part of the shared inheritance of large parts of Asia. The final phase of the Himalaya's elevational rise occurred toward the end of Pleistocene after humans had arrived on the scene. It was a matter of delight to know about the book on the Life in the Himalaya from the senior Colleague Prof. Maharaj K. Pandit in the University of Delhi who is the Dean of the Faculty of Science and we could not resist the temptation to read the same. The first chapter on 'The Himalayan Memoir' starts with a Buddhist Prayer, "Om mani padme hum" which speaks volumes about the culture of the author as well as the culture and traditions of the Himalayas also known as "Dev Bhoomi" which means the land of the God. After reading the chapter, we were reminded of my retreats to "Dev Bhoomi" as well the spiritual & blissful experiences.

The collision of the Indian and Eurasian plates around fifty million years ago profoundly altered earth's geography and regional climates. The rise of the Himalaya led to intensification of the monsoon, the birth of massive glaciers and turbulent rivers, and an efflorescence of ecosystems along the most extreme elevational gradient on Earth. When the Ice Age ended, humans became part of this mix, and today nearly one quarter of the world's population inhabits its river basins, from Afghanistan to Myanmar. *Life in the Himalaya* examines the region's geophysical and biological systems and explores the past and future of human sustainability in the mountain's shadow. The book begins with an extensive prologue unfolding the deeply embedded memories of the author about the Himalayas.

Prof. Maharaj K. Pandit has divided the journey of Himalayas into four phases where the fourth phase is futuristic in nature which is the need of the hour if the humanity wishes to live on this planet and leave the planet for the future generations in livable conditions. During the first phase, the mountain and its ecosystems formed which have been described in the first four chapters of the book. Chapter 1 describes the mountain as the pantheon of Asian memory on account of its literary tradition as well as its vast cultural range. Himalaya is also referred as an epitome of sacredness wherein pilgrims from different faiths have come to seek salvation. Chapter 2 explains the array of geological events that culminated into the formation of Himalayas and also ushers the readers into various unique facets of the gigantic mountain that prompt curiosity and awe. Chapter 3 and four highlight the interconnectedness between the geological events of the region and the evolutionary divergence of the Himalayan flora. The impact of the change in climatic conditions on the inhabitant biological communities of the Himalayan region has also been addressed.

In the second phase called as the cultural phase, humans altered the landscape, beginning with nomadic pastoralism, continuing to commercial deforestation, and culminating in pockets of resistance to forest exploitation which have been presented in chapter 5 and 6. The author explores the dark and sad

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conflict between conservation and development in chapter 6 by describing the ‘Chipko Saga’ (an environmental movement).

The third phase named by the author as mechanical phase described in chapter 7, 8, and 9, witnessed human population explosion, accompanied by road and dam building and other large-scale infrastructure that degraded ecosystems and caused species extinctions. Chapter 7 traces the reason behind the rage for road building and heavy militarization in the region and its impact in the form of air pollution and glacial ablation. In chapter 8, the author ponders upon the rampant dam building work in the region and its repercussions, including disappearance of unique wildlife and species. The cumulative consequences of natural and man-made changes, which have resulted in some of the worst disasters in the Himalaya region, have been examined in chapter 9. Also, it projects a nexus between ecological and economic security.

The fourth phase presented as future networking phase which holds the promise of sustainable living within the mountain’s carrying capacity has been articulated very nicely in chapter 10 and 11. Bilateral and multilateral cooperation on river regulation, water resource use, and bio-diversity conservation along with the associated data sharing needs to be integral to the Himalayan development process. Partnerships and networking among the national, regional, local institutions, and NGOs, is crucial for a sustainable Himalaya.

Today, the Himalaya is threatened by recurrent natural disasters and is at risk of catastrophic loss of life. If humans are to have a sustainable future there, they will need to better understand the region’s geological vulnerability, ecological fragility, and socio-cultural sensitivity. *Life in the Himalaya* outlines the mountain’s past in order to map a way forward. The book has been written in a lucid manner that provokes human intellect to mend their ways of living life to make this world a better place to live in a sustainable manner. The book draws global attention to a region that is of fundamental significance to the well being of a large part of humanity. The author conscientiously uses a blend of scholarly, scientific and common writing. The author has used befitting quotes at the beginning of the every chapter which corresponds to the literal interpretation of the chapter.

Only a person like Prof. Maharaj K. Pandit, who grew up in the west Himalayas and conducted his Ph.D. research in the east Himalayas, could have written this treatise which is a valuable contribution to not only understand the threatened Himalayan region but also the pathway for achieving sustainable development. Prof. Maharaj K. Pandit has put in his heart and soul in writing this book and we strongly recommend *Life in the Himalaya* as a must read book and also recommend the readers of this book to have a retreat in the physical form in the Himalayas to experience the life in Himalayas- “Dev Bhoomi”.

– Professor Ajay Kumar Singh and Ms. Mani Goswami