

**Vijay K. Bodh**

## **LOCATING DEVELOPMENT SONGS AND CONSERVATION RHETORIC IN THE HIMALAYAS**

### **Introduction**

Since early 1980s, The Department of Forest and Wildlife, Kullu thought of conservation of exotic flora and fauna. The idea was to protect the habitat for *Juju Rana* (Western Tragopan – the state bird of Himachal Pradesh), *Monal* (*Lophophorus impejanus*), Himalayan Serow (*Capricornis Thar*) and Himalayan musk deer (*Moschus leucogaster*). 66 birds, 16 mammals, 32 insects, 5 arachnids and amphibian varieties were identified and listed on the official website (Great Himalayan National Park). In 1999, The Great Himalayan National Park was awarded the status of a National Park. The customary rights of 314 families, the immediate beneficiaries of forest produce were bought in exchange of their customary rights over forest products on the basis of archaic Anderson settlement (Chattre and Saberwal 2002).

Abiding by the Forest Conservation Act- 1980 and Environmental Impact Assessment Notification- 1994 the EC (Environmental Clearance) document suggest PHEP-II (Parbati Hydro Electricity Project- II) has been issued 87.795 hectares of forest land for non-forest use on August 11, 1999. The 87 odd hectares have been awarded from the same land acquired by displacing the villagers in the purview of conservation. NHPC (National Hydel Power Corporation) a semi-government enterprise began the work on PHEP-II. Making through the obligatory clearances; environment, *Gram Panchayat*, forest and revenue NHPC assumed the construction work in *the Sainj* valley with immediate effect.

A documented communication between NHPC and NRO (Northern Regional Office) of MoEF in 2001 mentions that, 87.795 hectare of land has been issued to NHPC on 4 September 2001. Furthermore, on April 8, 2003 NHPC demanded an additional 126.1249 hectare of forest land from NRO. NHPC prepared the R & R plans despite earlier claims that said no displacement or submergence of inhabited land would take place. In lieu to the earlier communication Ministry of Environment and Forests granted 145.6207 hectares of forest land, including the earlier 87.795 hectares on March

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17, 2004. The early assessment claimed cutting down 3677 trees, the Environment and Clearances were awarded in 1999/2001 on that claim. But 8124 trees were axed later. In a sequence of dramatic events “Ecologically significant” area of Jiwa Nal was excluded from GHNP on the context of being “ecologically insignificant” despite the fact that 10.6 hectares of the area surrounding Sheelagarh, Pancha Nal and Manihar Nal adjoining Kundhar-Majhan villages was highly suitable habitat for the Western Tragopan (Kalpvriksh 2007).

In 2014, GHNP was incorporated into the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites. Somehow, the catchment area of Parvati, Sainj and Tirthan basin could not be adjoined into GHNP. They retain the status of Wildlife Sanctuaries. As a consequence, companies could freely acquire land and carry out construction of roads, tunnels, and power houses along the Parvati, Sainj and Tirthan river basins, and they did. By 2016; 384 families were displaced and an additional 314 families lost their customary rights over the forest. The bi-lateral rhetoric of ‘ecology conservation’ and ‘national development’ has run parallel, serving as a time-tested and convenient tool for the big-lords. Such rhetoric that is no less than the Foucaultian idea of ‘disciplinary power’ meant to control the actions of society. It is disturbing to note that a section of society controls a selected section of the society, its mobility and alters its geographical setting at its disposal. The current study is a part of my doctoral thesis, ‘Dialectics of dams and development’ in Kinnaur and Lahaul & Spiti. The present work is an outcome of an extensive fieldwork that has been carried out in villages in Sainj, Parvati and Tirthan basin to gain a deeper insight to the paradigm shift and its contestations along the remote Himalayan spheres.

### **Legal encroachment and the Great Himalayan National Park**

Great Himalayan National Park was established as a pilot project to evaluate the scope of ecological conservation in line with residing forest communities. The forest communities derive a sufficient amount of income from the forest produce. The forest has been a constant source of resources for the dwellers. The villagers would collect dry fuel-wood, medicinal herbs, *gucchi* (*Morchella esculenta*)<sup>1</sup>, *Lingad* (*Depligium esculentam*)<sup>2</sup> and fodder for animals. The morel mushroom, wild vegetables and medicinal herbs easily fetch decent returns at local markets in *Banjar*, *Aut* and *Kullu*. Climatic conditions allowed distinct varieties of pulses and rice on these slopes. *Local Rajmah* (beans), *Local maah* (pulse), *laal Chawal* (red rice) also fetched considerable returns. The flocks from every household were collected and escorted by *phuaal* (shepherds) to green pasture at hill tops during 3 months of summers. Such flocks having grazed on medicinal herbs and mineral rich glacier melts fetched essential nutrient supply to the villagers. They not only provided wool to yarn the traditional handicraft but were also sold in local markets at high prices. After the ban on entry to forests, the flocks shrunk-in;

affecting food habits, handicrafts, and local economy. 'Conservation of ecology' outstripped the local villagers off their resources.

PHEP-II acquired 10.6 Sq km of the earmarked forest land for non-forest use (construction of roads and weirs) on the context of being 'ecologically insignificant'. The de-notified site from *Kundher* to *Gatipath* has been known to possess finest bamboo forest and an ideal habitat for *Jujju – Rana* (Chattre and Saberwal 2002). However, locals hint; a greater chunk of forest land is transferred in favor of the hydel projects in *Sainj* valley. The proposed 90 sq km forest land was to be included in GHNP. The site was earmarked as significant 'biodiversity hotspot' imposed limitations on the villagers in *Sainj* valley. Erratic diversion of land proposed for 'conservation' to the construction of hydel projects in the Sainj Valley reveals diplomatic sub-standards; quenching the trickle-down hypocrisy hurled over the uninformed villagers. On the other hand, despite all the clamor for renewable energy, villages like *Shakti*, *Maror* and *Chagot* within the Sainj Wildlife sanctuary have not been electrified yet.

The write up reveals multiple aspects of misused rhetoric. The administrative philosophy views forest dwelling communities as a potential hindrance to conservation activities, hence they must vacate. Secondly, the forests are much safer when handed to the construction companies. The state can transform a forestland demarcated 'ecologically significant' as 'ecologically insignificant' at its disposal; based on economic investment and potential for revenue returns. Energy is crucial for the nation to grow. *Shakti*, *Maror* and *Chagot* nestled on top of the same mountain range, beneath whose basin megawatts of electricity is being harnessed every day, are denied the absurdly essential portion of development? Political demography essentially determines the flow of resources and services, limiting 'national growth' limited up to populous industrial centers and cities. A meager population stands ineligible under the political lens of development. The paradoxical inclination of defining 'development' and 'conservation' as per popular political conveyance reflect the sorry state of our times. It is hereby important to divulge into the depths of socio-economic stress that has emerged out as an instant and long-term consequence of the Parbati Hydro Electricity Project in the vicinity of UNESCO World Heritage site of Great Himalayan National Park Kullu, Himachal Pradesh.

Hydro electric power projects led to improved road conditions, more villages have been connected. Apparently the villagers approve off improved conditions, yet apprehensions on the impact of projects run aplenty. Sainj valley, once house to 500 villagers witnessed a pouring in of 1400 immigrant project workers during peak construction period. The displaced locals mobbed from safe slopes to the unsafe river bank in the locality. God forbid! If at Kedarnath like mis-happening repeats in the valley; the loss to life would be tremendous. The last decade of hydel projects have lead to drastic sociological

impacts. Trespassing, poaching, murder and robbery have amplified significantly in the valley. The rapid influx of immigrants witnessed a rise in infrastructure development imposing inadequate stress on the resources further damage incurred onto the ecological integrity due to floods; blotting the chapters of planned interventions devastating the natural resources.

### **Modern folklores and post-development narratives**

Identical discords tend to disjuncture the proposals for setting development projects. The expanse of construction requisite allows sufficient commonalities. One, the projects are undertaken by larger bodies such as a government, private or via public-private partnership (PPP) model. Two, everlasting stress on land grab; agricultural, forest, residential or wastelands. Thirdly, such mega projects have been earmarked as progressive work. Lastly, they amplify the scope of unambiguous ecological consequences ascertaining unavoidable fatalities at times.

The facets of 'development' have witnessed a mixed set of emotions. On the promising note it sure is a step-up in infrastructure for education, employment, health care and roads, winning the local confidence. On the other hand ecology, sustainable growth and socio-cultural aspects suffer a major blow. Development in its presumed form, technological or social, has greatly altered the terrains; be it good or bad is the perspective where one stands. Development studies and the field of anthropology have thus co-existed since long. The chronology of studies from evolutionary theories of Tylor (1865), Morgan (1877) to post modernism (Derrida 1997; Foucault 1970; Lyotard 1984; Baudrillard 1995) itself has invited profound schools of social thoughts. The growing world of economy embraced 'Development' and 'change' as a socio-economic marker of positive change. Development studies have flourished as an autonomous discipline. However, the prolific literature in anthropology has critiqued 'globalization and development' (Mehta 2009). Government reports, however continue endorsing the downbeat 'ecological and sociological impacts of development' (EIA 2009).

### **The lawful treachery of human rights**

The flash floods related disaster in the hill states of North India Uttarakhand (2013), Himachal Pradesh (2013), Jammu & Kashmir (2014) have all been largely recognised as moreover consequence of prevailing faults in the development models. Although unannounced or lacking documented records it is equally rational to state that 'illegal encroachments and illegal mining along rivers and streams' in the hill state of Himachal Pradesh emerge as a cost cutting measure providing cheaper, easy and timely access to resources and services. During unprecedented rains, such encroachment colonies are the first to be washed down. Mining of river beds often diverts the course of a river during wet seasons, inviting calamity. An entire town of

Dharampur, Mandi marooned under river water, as the river changed its course (NEWS). Compromising on the ecological pacts and agreements, project companies deter from the points agreed upon. Illegal dumping of muck bears much loss to forest vegetation. Use of low quality construction material and administrative negligence led to a broken dam at the Aleo hydroelectric project in Manali; the penstock of *Sorang* hydroelectric project exploded in Kinanur washed down 3 lives injuring a dozen and causing tremendous loss to property. The overnight flash flood in Sainj River took away the lives of 4 labourers.

The report by Kalpvriksh (2007) cites technical discrepancies in the project documentation, its policies and violation of major clause on forest land use, non compliance in muck dumping at assigned sites and polluted streams and drinking water sources. Lack of a strict monitoring and administrative checks ensured the project companies manipulate rules as per their compliance. Unscientific methods used during blasting for tunnelling have added to the woes of local villagers. The villagers in Kinnaur charge JayPee Company for digging 2 km of tunnel in the wrong direction. On later realization, the company tried to cover up the blunder by filling the dugout portion with sacks filled with sand and empty metal drums. At present, the area above the unwanted fracture has been receding continuously since last 2 years.

In Kashang, the blasting for tunnel construction has caused severe cracks in the neighbouring houses. Despite of several complaints the company officials deny any direct co-relation between blasting and tremors in the villages. Unscrupulous ethics in dam construction have largely been made liable for the loss of lives and cost overruns.

Assessing the impact of Uttarakhand floods the expert body submitted a report to the Ministry of Environment and Forests Government of India, 2014. Resonating with the local experience of exploitation and abuse the report recommended the state body with hints that advocate 'that several more projects could be dropped' (MoEF Report 2014). An Apparent admission that there is something fundamentally wrong, the way we conceptualize development. National Institute of Disaster Management Report puts on to claim "climatic conditions combined with the haphazard human intervention" a down factor in such development projects.

Positioning the etic and emic approaches (Dundes 1962) to conceptualize the post dam narratives; case studies have been voiced up from the experiences of the rural Diaspora in the hill region of *Sainj*, in district *Kullu*, Himachal Pradesh. Modern folklores on ecological imbalance, socio-economic injustice, mutual distrust, widespread loss and destruction, and numerous other stories await communication. Reflexive approach is very important in development studies. It includes being aware of self biasness and the subjectivity and is also termed as self- critique (Geertz 1990; Marcus 1998; Foucault 1972; Bourdieu & L. Wacquant 1992). In no case it is the

shortage of time, resource or the so called intellect. It is simply the concern that often explodes going through those scientific writings, which have more brackets, years and names than the number of full stops in any given paragraph.

### **Seventeen years in transition**

A respondent said:

“Road ban gaye hain, pehle peeth mein dhulai karke le jana padta tha, ab har jagah gaadi pahunch jaati hai. ek tarah se life aasaan ho gyi hai  
aasmaan nahi baras raha hai, kheti mein fark pada hai. Bahut dhool ho gayi hai. Logo ke paas paisa bahut a gaya hai, buri aadate lag lgyi hai unko..35 saalo mein bahut change aya hai..”

The roads did not exist earlier; people had to climb the slopes carrying the load manually on their back. Life has become too easy.

The amount of rain fall has decreased comparatively, and this has affected the agriculturalists. There is a lot of dust (dry soil particles) in the air. People have more money now and they have taken into a dire lifestyle. A lot has changed in the past 35 years.

Over the last 10 years, *Sainj* valley has witnessed pertinent changes. The rural lifestyle underwent transformation in livelihood patterns such as the personal practices related to health and hygiene. A road is the lifeline of any village, especially in the greater Himalayas, where transporting a sack of grain shall otherwise require a full day's labour. Since the inception of hydroelectricity projects the road connectivity has improved in the valley. New link roads connected the previously inaccessible remote villages, ensured easy and quick good transport.

### **Dealing with un-kept promises**

*Chashma*, a natural water spring and glacial melt water in local stream is a major source of drinking and irrigation water in the villages in *Sainj* valley. The construction activities during the last decade led to drying up of major water sources. Blasting and tunnelling rendered the major reason for drying up natural water resources in the hills. Replenishing sources pose a consistent threat to the sustainability in the tough Himalayan foothills. Rapid melting of major glacial deposits in the higher reaches adds to the consistent pressure of depleting resources. Deflecting from the popular academic debate on melting glaciers, a series of observations from the respondent tend to justify the changing climatic conditions in the upper reaches of the North-Western Himalayas. A tourist went missing near *Khoksar* in 1961 while an Austrian trekker went missing near *Kangla* glacier in *Miyar* in 1981. In 2004 the both the bodies surfaced up. Also a huge chunk from the *Gurdhaar* pass in *Pangi*,

is non-existent at present speaks of changing climatic conditions and glacial melt. On a similar note the untimely melting of *Rani nallah* glacier near *Rohtang* pass despite record snowfall in 2013, speaks of the changing climatic conditions.

The decreasing accumulation of snow speaks of the overall warming of the climate. As a consequence the water carrying capacity of the rivers and *nallahs* shall be affected. Further to affect agriculture and food distribution patterns in the future. The project company promises quality education and employment in the affected villages. Hence *Kendriya Vidhyalaya Sainj* was set up. The school is however located in the project colony, suited for the wards of project officials. The villagers did send their wards to the schools, but soon most of them dropped out. The school is very far to walk to. Plus, the parents could not follow the homework pattern, affecting the overall performance of the ward. This and many other factors lead to a greater drop out from the school. Very few have managed to cope up while others have shifted back to the government schools. In their words:

*“Ek to school bahut door hai  
 Upar se school mein homework dete hai  
 Bechare anpad maa- baap na to homework kra sakte hain  
 Na unke paas itna time hota hai  
 Isliye bachha class mein peeche choot jata hai  
 Us se toh sarakri school hi thik hai”*

The promises of employment fell short of the claims. The villagers were under-qualified for the high ranking jobs. People worked in less paying jobs such as drivers and assistants some diploma holders were absorbed into technical jobs. A majority of the youth was left unemployed. Those who secured a job developed a false sense of economic self dependency and being employed. But as soon as the project work completed, the youths were left without any jobs. Losing the age to go back to school and study, most of them started running taxis.

Deforestation, improper muck dumping, blasting and cutting of slopes have magnified the perceived ecological threats in the region. An estimate suggests a loss of 25% incurred onto the ecology. Pollution in the form of smoke, dust and solid waste has contributed along with frequent instances of landslides and illegal felling of forest trees. The compensation received by the villagers in return of agricultural land failed to provide the projected emancipator support. Lacking apt investment understanding and skills, the compensation amount slipped out; misused and mishandled in many instances. Some villagers bought luxury cars, some constructed new houses others indulged in a lavish lifestyle. Out of the farmers who sold their lands, few could manage creating productive assets. Most of them consumed the compensation amount or invested in depreciating assets.

in there words:

*Logo ke standard badh gaye,  
lambi gaadi, makaan khare kr diye,  
taxi mein sharab mangana, Daily chicken- sharab  
taxi wale ko hazaar hazaar rupaye tip de dena.  
Standard girenge ek din..*

it means

People have the high living standards  
Expensive cars, constructed big houses  
Order costly whisky from a far wine shop (about 24 km from the village)  
Meat and wine on daily basis  
1000 rupees tip to taxi driver for one carriage of wine and chicken.  
Standards shall fall in the coming future.

### Paragraphs on dams

There is a dearth of appropriate figures to correlate the incidence of crime and immigrant labourers in the region. Thus, the paper abstains from concluding remarks. A respondent claims 60 % of the workers go unregistered and unidentified in the police station. Living an anonymous life they dare commit serious offences. The labourers have been identified to involve in theft, robbery, murders and rapes in the valley.

*Teen baar SBI sainj mein chori karne ki koshish ki . par wo kaamyab nahi hue. Ye labour log hi karte hai ye, inka na koi ata na pata*

Thrice robbers tried breaking into State Bank of India branch, Sainj, but they could not succeed. It is these labourers. They don't have any registered records in the company any identity proof. They don't have to fear anyone.

### Justifying dams in the times of receding glaciers

If the present conditions prevail, by 2025 most of the major glaciers shall deplete and melt away (Raina 2009). Under such circumstances hydroelectric dams shall seem redundant in coming 20-30 years. Revoking justifications for blatantly wasting public revenues as sustainable avenues for energy production exist in the parallel universe. Rationalizing and justifying dam constructions in the present times is difficult. Especially when it is already old fashioned in the western countries where scientists have endeavoured to generate nuclear energy, solar and wind potentials. Why much of the focus is still given on waiving tenders that require much of buying and sub-lettings of contracts? Why not simply buy expensive machine and install them? The nation is obsessed with *thekedaari* (contractor) and the huge profits involved in it?

### Najaayaz Kabza-encroachment and disaster

According to census of India (2011) *Bhiali* a small hamlet on the bank of river *Sainj* with 55 households comprise a total population of 290. During



the peak of construction work the same village accommodated more than 2,000 immigrants. The Malthusian pessimists approach (Malthus 1798), suggest these lives shall expose themselves to natural disasters, living in makeshift construction colonies along the river bank.

Allain Duhangan project in Aleo, Manali felled hundreds of forest trees without prior permission for their construction work. In the meantime the judgement came out; the company ensured they had generated enough revenue in those two years to make the penalty of 5.95 crores appear negligible.

As the major construction work reach completion the company leaves behind vast stretches of abandoned metal scraps, disturbed sources of water, and polluted water channels. Social and economic insecurity emerged as a major concern. A web of transmission lines appear network of loose gravel and rock hang over the untidy carved out link roads awaiting major casualty.

### **Conclusion**

Pre-eminent loss of agricultural practices shifts in lifestyle and changing economy point at looming stress over the oncoming generations in the *Sainj* Valley. The contemporary academia pregnant with rationale, recommendations, and ideologies seem unmoved by the extent of loss being incurred onto the hill communities of the Lesser Himalayas.

Learning from the mistakes, it is suggested to make sure to tackle such situations beforehand in the upcoming hydel projects in Lahaul & Spiti. A targeted awareness camp on crucial weapons of democracy; Forest Rights Act 1996, *Panchayats* (Extension of Scheduled Areas) Act 1996 in addition with mitigation measures to tackle the compensation amount in case land acquisition takes place. The State shall look up to independent Impact Assessment Reports and seek counsel from premier research institutions such as Himachal Pradesh University Simla, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Simla, Forest Research Institute Dehradun and other pioneer research institutes in Forestry and Social Sciences.

Stumbled income sources, shortage of potential customers to sell tea and ration supply, traditional house pattern overtook by the concrete houses speak of the immense change that has occurred. With least investment and basic educational qualifications, the employment alternative available is, to move out and serve in a low income job in the nearby town. The youth stands vulnerable to indulge in the illegal drug consumption and pedalling. The glimpse of the tough future glares through the window of time. A bewildered future that is unsure of its dilemma, between rural and urban outfit. The future demands hard work, perseverance and re-construction of some identity; at least from the lower and middle class.

Positive legislations such as Forest Rights Act 2006 and PESA (Panchayats' Extension of Scheduled Areas) 2006 and National rehabilitation

and resettlement Policy 2014 ensure justice and fair exchange, however, most of the rural areas in previous instances the rights have been ignored and unchallenged. However, with awareness and exchange of information, the locals have managed to break the information barriers. The success story of residents of Tirthan valley, Kullu and Kashang, Kinnaur have rendered boost to the local protests and environmental advocacy in the Himalayas.

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