

HIGH HIMALAYA FORUM



April 2012

Discussion Report

Vanishing cultural identities: A Himalayan reality? How visible is Himalayan culture at present? What is deterring the transfer of skill sets to the new generation? What are the initiatives underway and what remains to be done?

High Himalaya Forum

DISCUSSION REPORT

Introduction

The Himalayan region is unique and the generations of relative seclusion of the valleys amidst these high mountain ranges have helped nurture a multiplicity of cultures with distinctive arts, architecture, traditional knowledge, and ways of life. However, these traditions are fast eroding.

With development initiatives aimed at mainstreaming the communities and the changing environment engulfing the region, how often do we pause to ponder what impact are the associated stresses having on Himalayan heritage?

The withering of the cultural identities of the Himalayan communities has not gone unnoticed and there are significant efforts being made by various indigenous and other stakeholders to enhance the valorization and diffusion of Himalayan cultures.

Participants of the discussion:

1. Lodoe Munsel Negi, Reckong Peo, Kinnaur, India
2. Abhijeet Jaiswal, Joshimath, India
3. Prakash Chandra, Joshimath, India
4. Tashi Chhering Negi, Kinnaur, India
5. Dorjay Namgyal, Ladakh, India
6. Abhinaba Chakravarti, India
7. Preeti Maheshwari, New Delhi, India
8. Darwan Naithwal, Niti Mana, Uttarakhand, India
9. Roshni Satish, Gujarat, India
10. Sunil Pillai, India

11. Ankita Hazarika, Guwahati, India

12. Kuragayala Srinivasulu, Hyderabad, India

Summary of responses

The rich and diverse traditional culture and practices of the Himalayan region have been preserved for a long time due to the relative isolation and tough geographic conditions of the region. However with better communication channels the region is opening up to outside influences. Though it is a positive improvement from the aspect of development, it has also made the region vulnerable to outside cultural influences. The locals are increasingly mimicking the outside culture, a well understood phenomenon in the natural sciences, where 'exotic species' sometimes overpower native species that have no defense mechanisms in place to withstand the assault.

Changing values and lifestyles have also made several arts and crafts forms redundant as they are fast losing their functionality, so much so that many traditional customs, music, dance forms, dress, recipes and forms of architecture are on the brink of extinction. Another major factor leading to the loss of cultural identity among the mountain communities is the bulk outmigration from the region which is accelerated because of policy and development neglect and low investment in the region leading to socio-economic problems among the Himalayan communities.

As a step towards preserving the rich cultural heritage, is important to identify the existing cultural practices, document their current stage and track the pattern of change in the culture forms and revive the threatened traditional cultural forms with the support of the community members. Creating awareness about the various cultural forms, especially among the youth, will help in better understanding and knowledge and induce responsible behavior, thus aiding towards its preservation.

In spite of having rich and vibrant culture, the lack of appropriate platforms is a major hindrance in generating awareness and increasing popularity of the Himalayan cultural forms at both national and international levels. As a step toward its preservation and for attracting the younger generation, increasing its visibility, enhancing culture-based livelihood and marketing opportunities, creating linkages and promoting responsible tourism, adventure sports and enterprises are essential. Inclusive policies and alternative development models are the need of the hour.

Responses in full

1. Lodo Munsel Negi - Reckong Peo, Kinnaur, India

Here everyone is talking about protecting Himalayan culture, but how? It's a question. In my opinion, if we talk about our culture then we should talk about its roots. How can we preserve our culture if we don't know about the root of our culture? That's why I think we have to bring awareness about culture in young people. If we know the roots better, then we can understand our culture in a better way and can do something to preserve it.

2. Abhijeet Jaiswal - Joshimath, India

The Himalayan region is abode of god. The history of this place is also related with local culture, local language and customs. This central Himalayan region has its own rich culture (e.g. Bhotia Culture). But migration is one of the main factors these days which is influencing the loss of cultural identities.

3. Prakash Chandra - Joshimath, India

The Himalayan region has its vibrant cultural society. The religious, social and cultural urges of the people of Himalayas find their expression in various fairs and festivals as well as in their lifestyle, which in turn are closely linked to the social and economic activities of the region.

4. Tashi Chbering Negi - Kinnaur, India

The Himalaya is a holy heritage on this earth. The culture, history, language, environment, social beliefs and customs of Himalaya are so unique. Every lover of Himalaya knows that these things should be protected and preserved. But what are we doing? I think if we want to preserve The Himalaya and its culture, we have to do something new. The High Himalaya Forum is a stage from where we can do something for the heritage of the Himalayas.

5. Dorjay Namgyal - Ladakh, India

Culture of peace is getting lost. Socio economic problem is at its peak. An alternate development model is the need of the hour.

6. Abhinaba Chakravarti – India

The richness and diversity of the complex socio-cultural elements in the Himalayan context have been preserved due to the relative isolation and tough geographic conditions of the region. The opening up of the region to outside cultural influences mimics a well understood phenomenon in the natural sciences, where 'exotic species' sometimes overpower native species that have no defense mechanisms in place to withstand the assault.

7. Preeti Maheshwari - New Delhi, India

I visited rural remote areas in Himalayas and was amazed by their culture and living pattern. In recent times, bulk migration from these habitations is posing threat to the culture. It is very likely

that in due course much of the learning will be lost. I appeal to everyone to take time and explore these areas and help in keeping the culture alive.

8. Darwan Naithwal - Niti Mana, Uttrakhand India

The culture and folk art has its own unique identity. But the traditional customs, folk songs and music, traditional dress and traditional architecture of this region are on verge of extinction today. Even traditional enterprises are hardly visible and people are migrating out of the Himalayan region. Therefore it is extremely important today to protect the local heritage, which would only be possible through responsible tourism and enhancing livelihood and marketing opportunities, and essential trainings.

This culturally rich area can attract the youth only if we can enhance the visibility of the vibrant culture and address the ongoing issues. This rich cultural heritage therefore needs adequate attention towards promoting tourism, enterprise, folk music, adventure sports and marketing.

Himalayas have one of the oldest and colorful rich culture, but has not yet got an appropriate platform. So the culture of high Himalaya is out of reach for many people. Presently I hope this discussion on high Himalayan culture helps it become popular internationally. Folk culture is our oldest heritage. We must preserve it for next generations!!!

9. Roshni Satish - Gujarat, India

Himalayas have a history of rich culture, with diversity in language, attires and food patterns across the central, eastern and western parts are at the state of depletion. In order to preserve the culture for the future generations a different integrative process needs to be thought of wherein to begin with one could identify the existent cultural practices and with support from the communities the extinct cultural forms could be revived using the key members of the society.

10. Sunil Pillai – India

A good starting point would be to document the current state and if possible track the evolution, i.e., the pattern of change in select culture elements.

11. Ankita Hazarika - Guwahati, India

Several arts and crafts have lost their functionality as a consequence of changing values, lifestyles, and hence lie threatened today. This has resulted in a permanent state of anxiety for the Himalayan communities. Mountain regions are perceived as peripheral and suffer from policy and development neglect. Investments continue to be low and there are stark gaps in development.

12. Kuragayala Srinivasulu - Hyderabad, India

The Himalayan region may be considered to be a cultural complex, a composite of several cultural cosmoeses rolled into one, each little valley or plateau with its distinctive cultural forms. Every mountain slope is, from the anthropo-geographical standpoint, a complex phenomenon. The settlement patterns, occupations and ways of life of populations in the Himalayas are a reflection of human interaction with and adaptation to climate, relief and ecology.

We would like to thank all the participants who took part in the discussion and shared their valuable opinions on the critical issue. For sharing further information on the topic, feel free to write to info@himalayaforum.org
