

BOOK REVIEWS

Life in the Himalaya: An Ecosystem at Risk. Maharaj K. Pandit. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA. 2017. 384 pages. Price: Rs 799. ISBN: 978-0-674-97174-5.

The Himalaya represents one of the youngest mountain ranges that harbours some of the most fragile ecosystems on earth. Poet Iqbal has described the Himalaya as a natural laboratory where nature designs interesting experiments and interplay of elements takes place every moment at different paces and levels. Scientists aim to carry out investigations on the Himalaya that are enthralling and help unravel the mysteries of nature. The mountain has also lured sages, saints, travellers and scientists from time immemorial, each looking at it as a source of enlightenment or *nirvana*. There are numerous books written on the Himalaya; nearly 70 books are catalogued in various library websites, each dealing with a specific aspect of this huge ecosystem. Though each book dwells on some contemporary theme covering biodiversity, geology, tectonics, floods, anthropologic and sociological issues, the connect between the various facets is missing. The book under review fills that void. The author, Maharaj K. Pandit, is well versed with interdisciplinary thinking and has provided a perspective of the Himalaya in each chapter that makes it special and unique.

The book is an academic treatise of literary and scientific nature based on author's years of academic research, love and passion for the Himalaya. This volume has arrived on the shelves at a time when the mighty Himalaya is at the receiving end of anthropogenic, climatic and political onslaught. The book is based on the author's association with the Himalaya from his birth, his play days, entry into youth and his journey of choosing the Himalaya as his destination for academic pursuit. Going through the pages of this book, one cannot miss the feeling of umbilical relationship all through. The author has eloquently described the Himalaya at many places like a poet, a lyrical narrator and treated the Himalaya as a laboratory from a scientist's viewpoint.

The foreword is written by two eminent academicians – Kamal Bawa and Peter Raven. I personally liked the impeccable manner in which the author has introduced the Himalaya to the world out there. The prologue narrates the author's

personal memoir of his relationship and academic trajectory, his interactions and association with the subject. The strength of the book lies in the fact that it brings a vast range of perspectives that the author gains and shares with us through the journey itself, but more importantly, through the people he meets.

Pandit has elucidated the subject in an interesting way wherein the topics are not taken up randomly, but are weaved by threads into a remarkable story based on information from all available sources of literature and experience. The author has walked the reader through various phases of sojourn starting from natural phase to cultural phase to mechanical and networking phase. The natural phase is discussed in four chapters – each chapter begins with a salutation, which builds the momentum to bring in an important contemporary issue followed by a good deal of discussion. The author skillfully correlates geological, biological and climatological facets of the Himalaya and illustrates the outcome of the dynamic relationship between climate and biota (pp. 84 and 85). The information is most valuable for any scholar who wishes to undertake research in the field, and also to a vast number of aspiring students taking competitive examinations. The development and evolution of Himalayan biota, the threats and strengths, speciation and the endemism have been well elaborated under the topic 'Life in flux'.

The second part of the book highlights the cultural phase of the Himalaya and raises a number of issues of sociological, economic and livelihood importance. The author clearly signals that aspirations of the native communities in the vast Himalayan ecosystems cannot be relegated to the back seat. He has previously warned through his writings and research work, that the Himalayan biodiversity is under threat and if we want to safeguard these fragile ecosystems, there is a need to rethink on various fronts. The third part of the book that expounds the mechanical phase of the Himalaya appears most interesting to me because in various chapters, Pandit has analysed developmental projects, their impact, the strategies, and economic issues. The chapters elucidate that the author has a grasp on developmental and economic policies of various governments. Focusing on the role of agencies that undertake environmental impact assessment of development projects in the Himalaya, Pandit has brought

into sharp focus their role as watch dogs for preserving the pristine environment, and that these works need more rigour. At one instance he highlights Jawaharlal Nehru's disappointment with the dams, who had earlier referred to them as the 'temples of modern India'. Several works of the author on the subject are internationally acclaimed and his insights on the development of water resources in the Himalaya could serve as an eye-opener for the policy makers.

In the last chapter, Pandit illustrates the failure of sustainable development as an idea propagated by the wealthier nations through a United Nations framework. He suggests a paradigm shift in terms of adopting a sustainable living approach as opposed to sustainable development. He also suggests that a carrying capacity-based developmental planning process is a more realistic model to ensure environmental protection and human development. He implores that unless there is consensus on the implementation of environmental laws and regulations and networking between institutions, governments, states and the various stakeholders, there is little hope for the Himalaya. The discussions in every chapter make one appreciate the problems from the core. The author has provided an exhaustive list of references at the end.

The book will be highly useful for the students of ecology, environmental science, geology, anthropology and sociology at both the undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) levels. More importantly, travel buffs, interdisciplinary researchers, and those who want to explore this beautiful, vast and magnificent mountain range will find the book fascinating. Anyone working on any aspect of the Himalaya will find something of his/her interest in various narrations of this book. It is written in a simple and lucid manner. The book should find a place in the shelves of all UG and PG libraries, in the rucksacks of travellers and in the hands of every researcher who takes a plunge to carry out research on any attribute of this important landform.

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