

Evolution and growth of Himalayan towns – Some geographical observations

Harjit Singh, New Delhi

I feel greatly honoured to have been invited to deliver this important lecture in memory of Professor A. B. Mukerjee who was my teacher when I was doing M.A. (Geography) at Panjab University, Chandigarh during 1969-71. Fortunately, I continued my interaction with Professor Mukerjee even after I joined Jawaharlal Nehru University in 1971 as M.Phil/PhD student, and subsequently as a faculty member. My association with him both at academic as well as personal level remained active till his last days. He taught me geomorphology and survey methods during my MA days. What was more remarkable was his fondness for fieldwork. I may mention that in 1970s fieldwork in geography was rather rare. Moreover, university financial backing for geography fieldwork of students at Panjab University was not available. It was due to the personal enthusiasm of Professor Mukerjee for fieldwork that we students self-financed day-long fieldwork trips under his guidance. Four such trips I clearly remember which were to Ghaggar Terraces in Chandimandir, Malla limestone quarries near Suraj Pur, Shivalik survey around Kalka and Limestone (Karst) Cavern near Solan. In fact, my initiation in fieldwork started under Professor Mukerjee which further blossomed under the superb guidance of Professor Moonis Raza who was my mentor at JNU. An excellent teacher and a superb researcher Professor Mukerjee had interest in a variety of fields of geography as is reflected in his diverse academic publications. He had a very deep understanding of geomorphology, settlement geography, environmental issues and social geography, which following American tradition he used to call cultural geography. It is difficult to cover vast areas of his geographical interest but I am focusing on a few issues related to settlements and environmental issues in Indian Himalayan context seen in a historical perspective.

Before taking up the process of evolution of towns in the Himalayas, it is important to briefly mention as to how towns grow and become different from rural settlements. No urban centre/town can survive in the absence of food surplus being produced in rural areas. In fact, urban population is in proportion to surplus food being grown in the villages.

Generally, it has been noted that people started settling down in permanent settlements after the innovation of agriculture. Such settlements were normally small in size and self-sufficient in nature. Human beings, unlike most other animals, learnt to use technology which kept on getting improved with every passing generation. Such settlements were

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not only producing food which was the basic necessity for survival but some families started specializing in the production of other items of use such as wooden/metal tools/implements, pottery and weaving cloth etc. Some of these tools and implements helped in increasing food production and enhancing food surplus. So, artisans like blacksmiths, carpenters, potters and weavers etc. emerged and started specializing in their own crafts. Soon, with the increase in production of these items which were more than what could be consumed within the village, new settlements occupying nodal location emerged which could cater to the needs of many food producing villages. Such new settlements became early towns which had strong bi-directional relationship with surrounding villages whereby these were providing items of use to farmers in exchange for food, production of which was not the basic function of towns. This two-way rural-urban interaction is a healthy feature of evolution of towns. Subsequently, some of these towns became headquarters of princely states, and started providing religious services through temple or mosque which were constructed. These towns, thus, became centres for producing non-farming products and began performing administrative, educational and religious functions. Bidirectional relations in classic case of a town with its rural hinterland have been shown in figure 1.

Evolution of such towns in mountains was greatly influenced by terrain and other physical factors. Looking at the Himalayas, it needs to be appreciated that no aspect of human communities living in the mountains can be understood without comprehending the role of physical parameters of this massive mountain system. Environment has been playing very significant role in

human adaptation and interaction with nature in Himalayas. Be it the economy, social organisation, population characteristics and settlements including urban centres; all these traditionally reflect the influence of physical environment. This influence did get modified with time due to many historical factors. Thus, it is important to understand physical environment of Himalayas and the historical events those took place here in order to understand the nuances of the evolution and growth of towns therein.

Himalayas form a complex mountain system. It is not one mountain but a series of nearly parallel mountain ranges. It covers nearly 5,94,427 km² area in India accounting roughly for 18 percent of its total land. Along with India these mountain ranges extend into a few other countries like Pakistan, China, Nepal and Bhutan. Himalayas roughly form India's international boundary in the north and extend over its different parts which include Union Territories of Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh, states of Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. Apart from these, Himalayas also cover a large part of Darjeeling district of West Bengal while some of its associated ranges extend into other North-Eastern States like Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura. In general, the altitude of mountains rises as one move from south to north till the Great Himalayan Range. Highest Range or the Axial range is called the Great Himalayan Range beyond which lies High-Altitude Tibetan Plateau except in Western Himalayas where some trans-Himalayan ranges also exist. Sequence of some of its landforms and ranges from south to north is Shivalik-Duns-Lower Ranges-Main Ranges-Great Himalayan Range-Trans-Himalayan Ranges. Apart from these, there are some vast flat

valleys etc. The figure 2 shows here the area covered by the Himalayas and the sequence of mountain ranges.

Altitude and site influence climate and soil conditions, which in turn affected human response to environment. Most of the population got concentrated in lower areas which provided favourable living conditions. Main traditional economic activities included animal rearing and subsistence farming. So, most of the population got concentrated in lower southern areas of the mountains and that too in the valleys. Most of the settlements in valleys were small in size in the form of hamlets. In many cases, the valleys evolved their own culture which historically got reflected in the form of local dialect or as habitat of valley-specific tribal group. External influences were limited but Himalayas were never a cul-de-sac or blind alley as many important routes passed through these mountains. These historical routes served many purposes but trade and pilgrimage were more significant among these. These trade routes also followed valleys wherever possible and significantly influenced settlements including towns. British colonial period had major impact on the Himalayas and also on its towns. Post-independence era also saw many changes in these mountains and towns therein. Thus, in order to understand the evolution and growth of Himalayan towns, one needs to see these in three phases; 1) Towns in Early Period or Pre-Colonial Era 2) Towns in British Period or Colonial Era 3) Towns in Recent or Post Independence Era.

Early period or pre-colonial era towns

As stated earlier, most human activities were confined to river/stream valleys which provided land for cultivation and slopes for

animal grazing. Thus, each valley emerged as a micro world in itself with its own dialect. Settlements were small, more in the form of hamlets. However, some settlements with more suitable environment and better land availability became bigger. These, subsequently, also became places where local ruler settled down. These also acquired some religious significance with the construction of temple etc. These became early towns as these provided administrative, revenue and religious services. Rulers of these principalities started patronaging arts and crafts which attracted artisans and craftsmen to the towns. Examples of such towns are Chamba, Kullu and many other traditional towns of Himalayas. Early period saw very limited inter-valley interaction with less external influences on local communities. Most settlements were rural in nature and small in size, situated close to rivers or streams. Many important medieval routes passed through the Himalayas. Main functions of these early routes included trade and pilgrimage. Some of the towns as stated above got established along these routes. Himalayan area itself was not producing much of surplus for trade but there were many surrounding territories which had commodities for trade. Thus, many trade routes linking north Indian plains with Tibet, China, Central Asia, Kashmir and west Asia passed through Himalayas. Apart from trade, people from various parts of India have been going for pilgrimage to sacred places situated in Himalayas. Important sacred places attracting pilgrims are Mount Kailash, Manasarovar Lake in Tibet, Amarnath Cave and Vaishno Devi in Jammu and Kashmir, Baijnath, Jwalamukhi and Naina Devi in Himachal Pradesh and Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri, Yamunotri, Rishikesh and Haridwar in Uttarakhand along with many other. Some

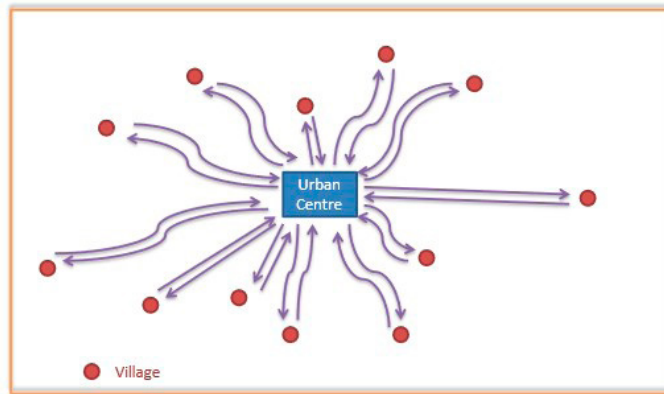


Fig. 1: (Model-1) - A typical urban centre

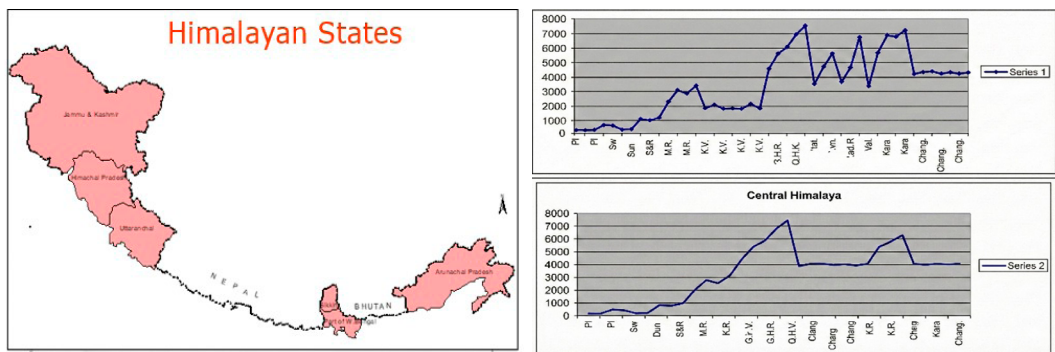


Fig. 2: Himalayan states

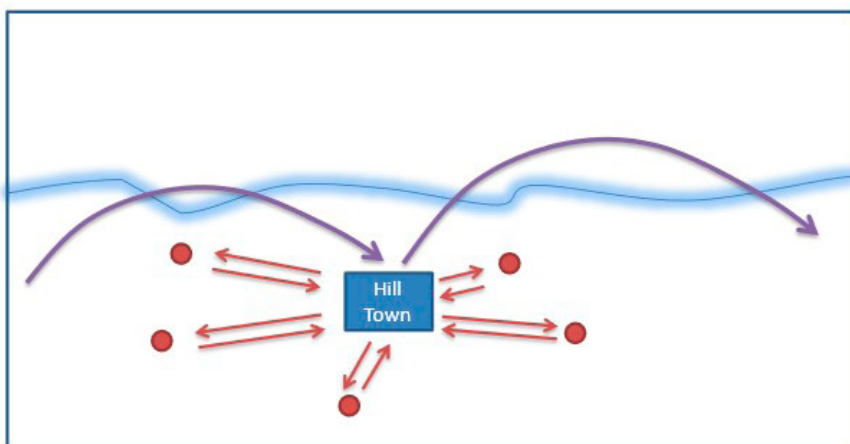


Fig. 3: (Model-2) - Linkage of a hill town on trade routes

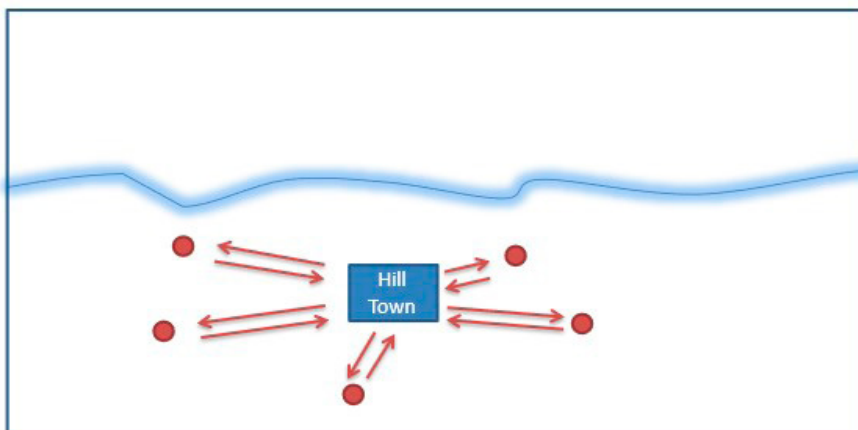


Fig. 4: (Model-3) - Linkages of early town in wide valley

towns along these trade and pilgrimage routes became service centres to serve the traders and pilgrims.

Figure 3 illustrates the case of towns situated along trade/pilgrimage route. It shows that the hill town has interactive relationship with surrounding villages whereby it takes primary goods from villages and in return provides items of use not available to rural folks. Such a town has an additional advantage as it became halting place for traders and pilgrims and starting providing food to them and fodder to their horses/ponies in return for items which traders brought with them. Examples of such towns can be seen in the case of Kullu, Rampur Bushar and Dharchula etc. Some of these towns traditionally organized fairs where trade of variety of goods used to take place. Lavi-ka-Mela of Rampur Bushar and Kullu's Dusshera fair were quite famous. However, most of these towns were not very big and also kept on performing rural activities. Thus, these towns did not strictly meet the conditions of modern towns as defined in census definition of urban centre.

Apart from these, there were some other towns which evolved and became culturally,

economically and administratively quite important. Two types of such special towns have been discussed below:

Towns situated in wide flat areas

Some examples of such towns from Indian part of Himalayas are Srinagar in Kashmir Valley and Kangra/Palampur in Kangra valley. Kashmir valley is made up vast lacustrine plains surrounded by mountain ranges. The valley was earlier occupied by a massive lake which got drained out. Now, Jhelum River meanders through this valley. Its vast fertile flat area and natural beauty are main attractions. Subsequently, the valley saw many changes during Mughal era when some very beautiful gardens were built in and around Srinagar. Due to high fertility of land, lot of food surplus was available which resulted in the emergence of Srinagar as a major urban node with strong identity. Srinagar also became an administrative headquarter of the Princely state and a well-developed centre of handicrafts and subsequently of tourism. Here, the ruler could patronise number to artists and artisans due to easy availability of food. Srinagar for long has been known for

the crafts of shawl-weaving, carpet making, wood-carving, papier-mâché and pottery etc. Kashmir valley evolved its own culture and identity due to its relative isolation provided by surrounding high mountains. In fact, Mirza Haidar Dughlat (1499-1551)— a Mongol General in the book entitled *Tarikh-i-Rashidi*, described Kashmir Valley as a Natural Fort. Thus, location of Srinagar town in a vast flat area provided major advantage in its development. Apart from Kashmir Valley, similar locational advantage is seen in the case of Kangra/Palampur situated in the vast relatively flat terrain of Kangra valley. Again, it is not surprising to see the evolution of Kangra/Palampur towns with strong culture due to availability of food surplus grown in the surrounding areas. Kangra miniature paintings are world famous.

The figure 4 shows evolution of a town in a large flat valley of Himalayas. Here, it can be seen that the town has strong bi-direction linkages with surrounding villages. Town gets food from villages, and in return provides industrial item to villages along with extending administrative, religious and educational services. It also emerges as a cultural node with strong identity.

Town with vicinal-locational advantage

Another case of some Himalayan towns is where these enjoy vicinal-location advantage due to their situation. Good example of such a town is Leh. Leh town situated in very high-altitude rugged land of Ladakh had no attraction for outsiders in early days due to its harsh rugged terrain, cold-arid climate and difficult accessibility. But its advantage was its location in vicinity of other surrounding territories which had to interact with each other for trade and for other purposes as those areas had surplus. P. Semple aptly said

the “location of a country is the supreme geographical fact in history”. Leh town became converging point for trade routes coming from different part of Asia due to its nodal location.

Figures 5 and 6 show that many trade routes coming from Tibet, Central Asia, Kashmir, west Asia and North Indian plains converged in Leh town. Though Leh was not producing much of surplus to exchange goods with the traders coming from different directions but its nodal location was such which gave it an en-route significance. Here traders could meet and trade their items with each other and go back. Thus, a trader coming from Central Asia did not have to go to North Indian Plains or Kashmir or Tibet to sell his items to traders of these places and vice versa as all these traders could meet in Leh town and sell/buy goods from each other.

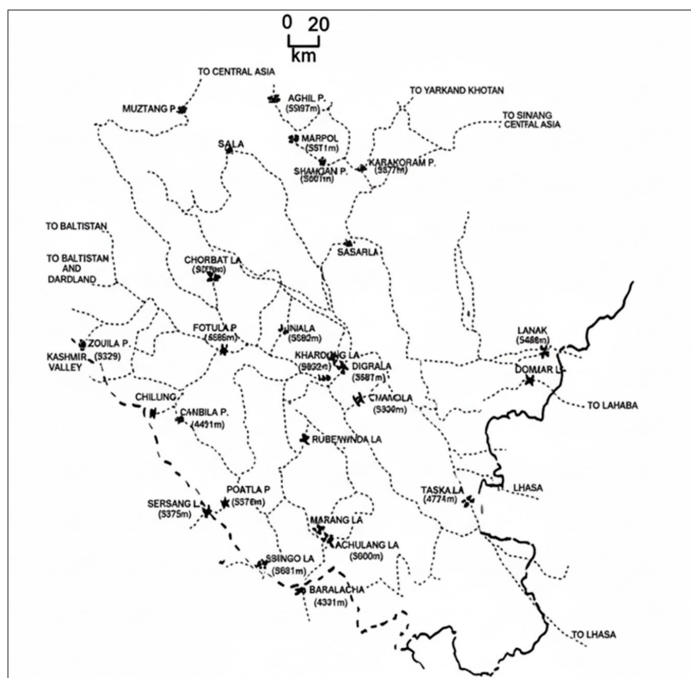
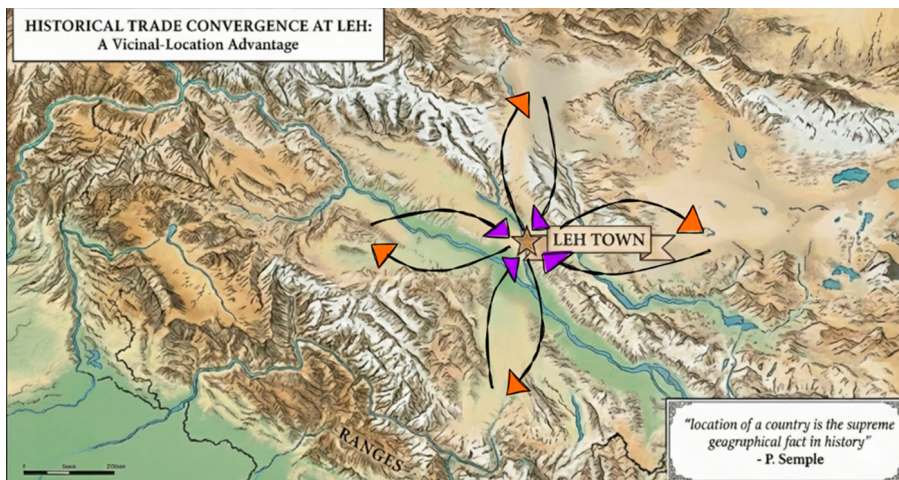
Apart from the above types of towns, there also developed some Gateway Towns in very early days at entry points into Himalayas. These began as small settlements at points from where routes entered into the mountains. Here traders halted and rearranged their goods in tune with the requirements of hazardous journey in mountains. These places also had a temple where traders prayed for safe travel in rugged terrain. The traders also prayed on their way back to thank God/deity for their safe return. Subsequently, these settlements acquired the status of full-fledged towns. Pathankot, Kalka, Haldwani, Siliguri, Kalimpong and Guwahati are some good examples of such Gateway Towns among others.

British period or colonial era towns

Colonial rulers brought major changes in Himalayas including in the growth and

evolution of towns. It needs to be mentioned that these changes were not in response to local development requirements but were mainly due to external considerations. Modifications brought during the colonial era significantly influenced the local socio-economic and demographic structure. Here, we shall mainly focus on the emergence and development of towns. One of the major factors of interest in Himalayas of the colonial rulers was its pleasant cool weather especially during summer months. Cool climate of hill areas was similar to temperate conditions prevalent in the home country of the rulers. Living in north Indian plains during summers was difficult for them due to oppressive heat. This led to establishment of a large number of towns by the colonial rulers in hill areas especially in outer and middle Himalayas. These new towns were set up as administrative and education centres, as cantonments or as health resorts. For example, Shimla was declared summer capital of India of India in 1864 while India's winter capital was Calcutta at that time. Offices used to be shifted from Calcutta to Shimla during summer months. Interestingly, there was no proper transport facility in the beginning and even railway line was only up to Ambala which was subsequently extended to Kalka. Mode of transportation between Kalka and Shimla was horse drawn Tonga in early days. Delhi became winter capital of India in 1911. Shifting of capitals/administrative headquarters to hills was also seen in the case of some states during British era. Nainital became summer capital of Uttar Pradesh that was then called United Provinces. Many offices of Bengal government used to move to Darjeeling during summer. This practice, in some cases, was followed even up to district level as was seen in the case of

Ambala where Ambala city was its winter district headquarter and offices used to move to Kasauli during summers. Many residential schools were also set up in the hills on British pattern of education. These schools were meant for children of junior British officer and non-commissioned officers posted in India who were not entitled to send their children to Great Britain for education. Many of these schools are still counted among the elite schools of India where children of Indian rich classes study. These are among the most expensive schools of India. Such schools can be seen in places like Shimla, Sanawar, Dagshai, Dalhousie, Mussoorie, Nainital and Darjeeling etc. in the Himalayas. Establishment of cantonments in hills was another important factor that contributed to the growth and development of towns in Himalayas. British officers realized at the time of revolt of 1857 that free mixing up of soldiers with civilian population was problematic for army discipline and for their loyalty towards the British rulers. This realization came when soldiers at some places refused to open fire on agitating people protesting against the colonial rule. This resulted in the need to have secluded cantonments where troops could stay away from civilian population but within a short distance from where they could be called on a short notice to suppress any agitation. North Indian Plains were among major areas of political activity and of uprising against the colonial rulers. Himalayas and some other hill areas provided ideal location for setting up secluded cantonments. These provided relative isolation to troops and were at a small distance from densely populated plains. Consequently, a large number of cantonments were established in lower and



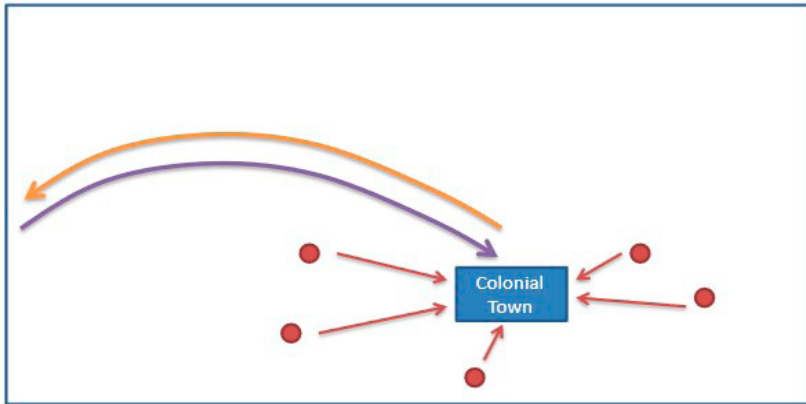


Fig. 7: (Model-5) - Linkages of colonial towns in Himalayas

middle Himalayas. Cantonments at Shimla, Dalhousie, Kasauli, Dagshai, Nainital, Almora and Chakrata are some examples of these in Himalayas. Many hill towns established by British rulers also came up as health resorts with sanatoria for the patients of tuberculosis which was quite a prevalent disease those days. It was believed that air in pine forest was good for the recovery of lungs. Subsequently, some of the British established towns became major attraction for tourists. All this led to “rapid urbanization” in the hill areas. It may also be mentioned that these emerged as developed pockets having very weak functional linkages with the surrounding backward rural hinterland. Such towns were established purely due to external considerations with no contribution to local economy. Figure given below shows functional linkages of these towns.

Figure 7 shows that the colonial towns were getting some resources from surrounding villages without giving anything back. Thus, it shows weak backward linkages. However, forward linkages of these towns were with the plains from where the Britishers used to come during summer months.

These colonial towns had major adverse impact on the environment of areas around them. Deforestation took place on large scale as large tracts of land earlier covered by forest had to be cleared for the establishment of these new towns. Large number of trees were also cut to meet the construction requirements as most buildings were built using timber. Moreover, every house/office had a fire place to keep the building comfortably warm which created huge demand for constant supply of fire-wood. Apart from this, the site considerations for the establishment of these new towns were very different from the traditional towns of Himalayas. Earlier towns were mostly situated in valleys close to rivers. But the sites for new towns were chosen with the idea of panoramic view due to aesthetic considerations. Therefore, most the new towns of colonial era are sited on hill/ridge top or on higher slopes presenting an uninterrupted view of vast surrounding areas. This point can be illustrated looking at the sites of towns like Shimla, Kasauli, Dalhousie and Darjeeling etc. However, all this resulted in concentration of population in areas which were earlier either uninhabited or had low density of population.

These towns established during the colonial era also had profound impact on cultural landscape and ecology of Himalayas. These had very distinct internal morphology with some features hitherto unknown in the hills of India. Most of these towns had one main road with a church, ball-rooms and theatres in one corner followed by some open area for leisure walk and then a high-end exclusive shopping area. This road also had most of the important government offices with nearby bungalows of high officials. This road was generally referred to as Mall Road. However, coming out of this posh area, one finds congested narrow lanes with haphazard construction meant for the living of Indian servants, petty officials and for grocery shops etc. The Mall Road was kept spotlessly clean with strict rules of its use. This kind of morphology of towns could be seen in the case of hill stations like Shimla, Dalhousie, Mussoorie and Darjeeling etc. Mall Road is around the famous Naini Lake in Nainital. It may be mentioned that almost entire construction in these towns was new as either the sites selected were uninhabited and were covered with forest or there were some small villages nearby.

New activities introduced on large scale in the Himalayas during the British era due to establishment of administrative and education centres and with the establishment of many cantonments not only influenced the hill areas but also impacted gateway towns situated at the entry points into the mountains. This point can be well illustrated with the example of Kalka town (figure 8) which shows three stages in the morphology of Kalka town. First map shows Kalka as existed before the British period. Second one highlights changes those came about during British

period. The third map shows developments after India's independence till 1990s. It can be seen in these three maps given in Figure 8 that Kalka started as two villages which were more of hamlets. These villages were called Kalka and Karari which were merged to form Kalka town with Shimla becoming summer capital of India. Subsequently, Kalka-Shimla railway line was built in 1903 and railway colony was constructed for railway workers in Kalka. Some churches and bungalows for officers were also built at this time. All this led to significant extension of Kalka town. Similar changes can also be seen in some other Gateway Towns.

Areas affected by the above changes during British era were mainly restricted to lower and middle parts of Himalayas and mainly to those territories that came under the direct rule of the British. Thus, one finds most British era towns in Himachal Pradesh and Kumaon area of Uttarakhand. Darjeeling town was a special case as the land was acquired by the British East India Company from Chogyal of Sikkim in 1835 for tea plantations and many prestigious schools were also built. However, well-established Himalayan princely states whose rulers had accepted the suzerainty of the colonial rulers did not experience much of these changes. For example, one does not find British established towns in the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir and in the erstwhile Garhwal state. Tribal population inhabiting Eastern Himalayas also largely remained outside the above-mentioned effects of colonial era except for the introduction of tea plantations in lower areas and Christian missionary activities in some parts. Higher parts of Himalayas largely remained unaffected by these changes during the British period.

Post-independence era towns

Hill towns experienced different stages of growth after India gained independence in 1947. India's independence coincided with the country's partition, so some of these towns grew very rapidly due to settling of displaced population from newly emerged Pakistan. These grew further with coming up of tourism and to strengthen administration, and also due to strategic factors. Though, a few new towns came up because of these factors but more pronounced changes were seen in towns which had got established during the colonial period. With the rise of middle class in India in post-independence era, it became a status symbol to visit hills to escape oppressive heat of plains during summers. This made tourism to be an important industry in many Himalayan areas. Kashmir Valley and the towns established by British rulers in Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Darjeeling in West Bengal became major tourist destinations. Consequently, huge tourism related infrastructure was built which exerted massive pressure on local environment. To-day, many of these colonial towns are suffering from major ecological problems because of their site on higher grounds and due to increase in population to unsustainable level. Since most British era towns occupied higher slopes on hill or ridge tops, and now with the construction of many hotels and other tourism related facilities, even on unstable slopes, are resulting in frequent occurrences of landslides in and around these towns. Moreover, water shortage and garbage disposal have become big problems.

There have been many changes, and development of new towns also took place in border areas in recent decades. These areas came into focus for the development with

the realisation of their strategic significance after Indo-China border dispute of 1962. As a result, a large contingent of Indian defence forces was moved to border areas and administration in border districts was strengthened. Recently, some border areas were also opened to tourism due to some geo-political considerations which has contributed in a big way to the development and growth of some towns in higher areas. Towns in Ladakh present good illustration of this.

Ladakh was opened to tourism in 1974. Most important single factor of change in the socio-economic set-up of Ladakh seems to be tourism. It needs to be mentioned that Ladakh was a restricted area till 1974 due to defence considerations. Foreigners were prohibited from visiting Ladakh, and even non Ladakhi Indians had to get a permit to visit the region. Outsiders were also very reluctant to go to these border areas at that time due to lack of basic facilities. Many government officials sent to these places treated it to be their punishment posting. Most modern facilities and amenities were not available in these high-altitude areas. Then suddenly parts of Ladakh were opened to Indian as well as foreign tourists in 1974. It was largely due to geo-political reasons that this territory was opened to tourists as Pakistan had started allowing foreign tourists in the occupied areas of Gilgit and Baltistan. The rich cultural heritage, exotic land and Tibetan form of Lamaistic Buddhism started attracting tourists in a big way to Ladakh.

Figure 9 shows a rising trend in the number of tourists since 1974. Their number reached 327366 tourists in 2018 but declined to 279937 tourists in 2019. Fluctuations in the number of tourist arrivals in some years were due to political disturbances in the area.

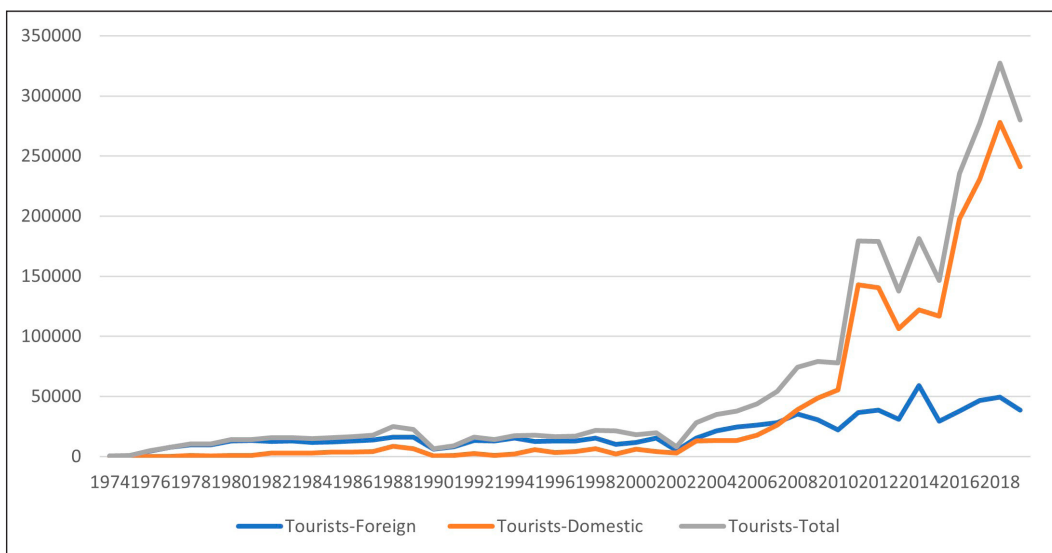


Fig. 9: Leh- tourist arrival

It may also be noted from the figure that the number of foreign visitors was much higher than the domestic tourists in Ladakh till 2007. Subsequently the picture changed as some of these areas also became more popular among domestic tourists. One of the reasons for Ladakh becoming an attraction for Indian tourists was the release of popular Hindi movie '3 Idiots' which made picturesque Ladakh very popular among Indian masses. Moreover, the government of India started giving many incentives under Leave Travel Concession (LTC) rules to encourage government employees and their families to travel to Jammu & Kashmir, Ladakh and North-Eastern States. This led to a sudden influx of many domestic tourists to far-off areas like Ladakh. Consequently, a lot of tourism-related infrastructure came up in the form of hotels, guest houses, restaurants. There was no hotel or guest house in Ladakh till 1973. Now there are around 223 hotels, 157 guest houses and 291 homestays in and around Leh

town. Kargil also has 34 hotels and 82 guest houses. Leh town was the only urban centre in Ladakh till 1973 and it too had many rural features. Now along with Leh town, Kargil has acquired the status of a town. Apart from these, there are three other census towns in Ladakh. These sudden 'developments' have created massive ecological problems in this otherwise serene environment. Many such developments, and the emergence of some towns are also noticed in some other border districts of Himalayas. Apart from these, presently, there is great emphasis on building roads and other infrastructure in Himalayas for defence considerations and also to promote religious tourism in some remote and difficult to reach places. Thus, many new facilities and amenities are being built in some religious towns especially in Uttarakhand. All these new developments need to be seen with caution as these may help some Himalayan towns to grow but can also create some serious environmental problems if these changes are

not handled very carefully. Some cases of land submergence and increased frequency of land slides are already visible in many areas.

To sum up, it can be said that early Himalayan towns emerged in tune with the local requirements with healthy backward and forward linkages. Towns established during the colonial era were more exploitative in nature and had no bidirectional relationships with the surrounding rural hinterland. These towns saw more serious ecological problems in post-independence period with the emergence of tourism. Recent changes which came suddenly, and in many cases, haphazardly in border towns and in pilgrimage centres are posing many environmental challenges.

Competing interest

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

Harjit Singh

Former Professor

Centre for the Study of Regional Development

Jawaharlal Nehru University

New Delhi - 110067

E-mail: harjit1406@gmail.com