

Human Interaction with Nature: *Ritus* and Forests of the Himalayas

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Abstract

The pivotal concern of my research is to explore the ranges of human interaction with forests and rivers in six different Ritus² (seasons) in the context of Nepal in general and Morang and Chitwan Districts in particular. People are constantly engaged in various kinds of contact with nature according to the changing seasons. On one level, it is the interaction that occurs between any life form and nature. And on the other hand, especially in the case of humans, it extends towards the variety of causes, i.e. political, religious, and economic/ educational, that shape the interactions between humans and nature. My research aims to explore the nuances of those dialogues between humans and forests that are shaped by natural forces and the religious, socio-economic, aesthetic and common reasons during different Ritus.

Keywords: Ritus; forests; human interaction; religious; aesthetic; socio-economic

Shaping the Interaction

The dependency of human beings, one of the most recent live forms in the evolutionary ladder, in nature is obvious and inseparable. Even a slight change in the natural entities can have a wide effect on them which can be both positive and negative. The interaction with nature is dynamic and cannot be understood or defined in linearity. This interaction is a complex and non-linear phenomenon. This idea of the web-like effect is essential in the concept of interaction, as opposed to a one-way causal effect. Out of all the natural elements that support life, forests are one of the major sources of survival for all living beings. For animals, this element is basically for the fulfillment of their basic needs, food, and shelter but when it comes to human beings, they are not only for the basic needs but rather for various interactions including political, economic, religious, and educational. The scenario of forests in different seasons has a great significance on the livelihood of humans, especially for those who live nearby this natural entity. The level of interaction varies depending on the political, economic, religious, and educational issues.

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2 *Ritus* refers to the six Nepali seasons unlike four English Seasons. The six seasons according to Nepali calendar are: *Greeshma, Barsha, Sharad, Hemanta, Sharad* and *Shishira*

Furthermore, forests are the most productive and self-sustaining ecosystem that supports human society ecologically, economically, culturally, and spiritually. Forests perform a vital role in ecosystem such as provisioning (supply of food, fodder, timber, etc.), regulating (regulation of climate, water, and pollination), and supporting (soil formation, nutrient cycling, and primary production). It also has cultural dimensions; for instance, recreational, spiritual, and religious. Established under UNO on 27th February 1948, Food and Agricultural Organizations (FAO), whose one of sectors is forestry as well has defined forest as, “a land spanning more than 0.5 hectare (ha) with trees higher than 5 m and a canopy cover of more than 10%, or trees able to reach these thresholds in situ.” (2). It is a source of livelihoods for people, in particular for local communities who suffer most when forest resources are lost and whose daily lives depend on the materials obtained from forests. Forest also has other terminological representations like jungle, woodland, coppice, copse, grove, woods etc.

The healthy connection of humans to forests have weakened due to industrialization and unmanaged urbanization which have subsidized to an isolation from nature. The consequences of these changes for the development of society and its environment are devastating. To keep the relation life-long and sustainable awareness could be created to strengthen the population and especially in forest management; a management which should relate to cultural, emotional and aesthetical aspects, in addition to economic, ecological and social functions, and lead towards a sustainable relationship between forests and society. Forests are the most important biomes of the nature continuously helping for the balance in the ecosystem in all way and always connected to human beings. Being based on these all areas my area of research is sub-divided into the following:

- ❖ Religious Interaction of Human and Forest
- ❖ Aesthetic Interaction of Human and Forest
- ❖ Socio-economic Interaction of Human and Forest
- ❖ Common Interaction of Human and Forest in different *Ritus*

Religious Interaction of Human and Forest

The engagement of human beings with forests has a long history. According to Martin Palmer³, about 20% of the world’s forests have a direct relationship with faith. The religious epics have the instances in them. In most of the Hindu scriptures and epics the forests are mentioned time and again. Either that be Ramayana or Mahabharata or

3 Martin Palmer is Secretary General Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) which assists eleven world faiths in developing environmental and conservation projects worldwide and works with a variety of international organisations such as WWF, the UN and the World Bank.

Shiva Puran or Shreemad Bhagwad Geeta or Padma Purana, each has the stories that clearly show the dependence of human beings on forests. As mentioned in the Canto I, Aranya Kanda of Valmiki Ramayana Rama, Seeta, and Lakshmana enter the great forest called Dandaka Forest and adore the eminent sages, who are in penance and hermitages in that forest. This canto is named as *Aranya Kanda* not just to show that *Rama* roved over forests but to show how the interconnection has formed between human and forest.

Ancient Hindu scriptures like Vedas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Upanisads, Puranas have a lot of examples of forests that show direct interaction with the humans. Not only Hindu epics and scriptures, forests are also equally mentioned in the Buddhist epics like Tripitak, Jatakas etc. It is believed that Gautam Buddha was born under a tree, in a forest in Kapilvastu, Lumbini. Basanta Bidari, in his article “Forests and Trees Associated with Gautam Buddha” in the journal of ancient Nepal writes:

According to the Sarvata Vinaya and other authorities it was an Asoka tree under which Buddha was born. Vinayavasta mentions that when Maya Devi went to Lumbini garden, she gave birth by holding the branch of the tree Tathagata. (15)

Like in Buddhism, the *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* an article titled “Rituals, Ceremonies and Customs related to sacred trees with a special reference to the Middle East” by Amots Dafni, mentions how the trees in a forest are taken in the Middle East and Muslim world. The sacred trees are taken as social centre, judgmental locations, sacrificing locations, for rain making ceremony, rag tying and overall sites for purification of the demised soul. The graveyard sites are also the forests. In Islam the Hadith of Prophet Mohammad says to plant a tree is an act of zakat - charity because under its branches birds, animals and human beings can live and thrive.

Forests for Christians also are of great significance. Vincent Rossi⁴, in his article titled “Seeing the Forest for the Trees: The Meaning and Message of Forests and Trees in the Christian Tradition” published in *RELIGION and the FORESTS* magazine in June 1999 mentions that,

The importance is only a sample that represents how forests and trees are referenced in the Bible:

- ❖ one of the species created by God and of intrinsic value: (Gen.1:11-12, 2:9).
- ❖ a source of food; a natural resource, or a source of wealth: (Gen.1:29, 2 Kgs.19:23; Ezek.39:10)

4 Vincent Rossi is the executive director of the Religious Education and Environment Project (REEP), London, England.

- ❖ a natural part of the local or planetary ecosystem: (1Sam.22:5; 1 Kgs.7:2; Isa.57:5; Mt.21:19-21; Mk.11:13; Rev. 7:3. 9:4)
- ❖ a sign of and/or response to God's blessing or punishment: (Isa.41:19-20, Rev. 7:1)
- ❖ a simile or metaphor modeled on the tree's natural properties: (Ps.1:3; Isa.56:3; Mt.7:17-19, 12:33; Mk.13:28; Lk.13:6-7, 17:6; Rev. 6:13).
- ❖ a sign of the natural world in harmony with itself: (Gen.2:9; Ps.104:16-17; Song 2:10-13)
- ❖ paradigm of the cosmic world tree; primordial living symbol of human knowledge and life: (Gen.2:9, 17; 3: 1-24; Rev.2:7, 22:2)
- ❖ symbol of the Cross of Christ: (Acts 5:30, 10:39, 13:29; Gal.3:13; 1 Pt.2:24)

It shows the spiritual bonding of human beings with trees and forests in Christianity. It seems there is a deeper and larger significance of trees and forests in the Bible. From the textual evidence, it can be understood that the tree is the most important non-human living organism that has been used in scriptures in Christianity.

Aesthetic Interaction of Human and Forest

The forests are bustling with activity - the constant droning of the bees, the chirping of the birds, the call of the cuckoo and the constant rustling of the leaves. Most of the human activity to carry out in or with forests, targets the *Basanta Ritu* due to its favourable condition. The collection of the firewood from the forest is generally more than in other seasons. After the long winter calm, the forest of Chitwan National Park in *Basanta Ritu* hums along with the tones of hundreds of birds. The tales of forest spring increases with the fragrance of jungle shrubs and trees. The outstanding colour of the flowers outshine the forest greens and seldom be disregarded though they may or may not carry fragrance.

The *Basanta Ritu* is one of the best times of the year when the tourism in Chitwan and Morang increases and the people are highly engaged in the income generating activity from the early morning. In Chitwan, there are many individuals who have domesticated elephants. Dhaniram Chaudhary, owner of an elephant named Pawan Kali, expresses his happiness briefing his earning of last year during *Basanta*. He said, "Last year the flow of tourist was better. I could not even get time to have my meals properly. I collected nearly 20,000 in 15 days using Pawan Kali." He hopes for the same every month which is impossible due to *Ritu* conditions.⁵

As mentioned in the official site of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organizations), there are numerous varieties of animals in the Chitwan National

5 Based on an interview with Dhaniram Chaudhary, Chitwan District, February 25, 2017

Park. The endangered animals in the Park include one-horned rhinoceros, Bengal tiger, gaur, wild elephant, hispid hare etc. Poaching of endangered one horned rhinoceros for illegal trade of its horn is one pressing threat faced by the park authority, despite the tremendous efforts towards Park Protection. Illegal trade in tiger parts and timber theft are also threats with the potential to impact on the integrity of the property. The traditional dependency of local people on forest resources is well controlled and has not been seen to impact negatively on the property. Human-wildlife conflict remains an important issue and threat that has been addressed through compensation schemes and other activities as part of the implementation of the buffer zone program. The property includes two famous religious areas: Bikram Baba at Kasara and Balmiki Ashram in Tribeni, pilgrimage places for Hindus from nearby areas and India. This is also the land of the indigenous Tharu community who have inhabited the area for centuries and are well known for their unique cultural practices. It emphasizes the legal, economic, and religious interactions of human beings with respect to the forest of Chitwan National Park.

The forests are sometimes taken for refreshment and entertainment. There is an example to show how the forests are used in the entertainment sector at the same time creating awareness using environmental entity like forest. Most of the picnics from schools, colleges, or any other offices in Morang and Chitwan are taken to the forests or by the side of rivers. The common destinations in Morang are Maharanijhoda, Rajarani, Betana etc. and in Chitwan the picnic destinations are usually concentrated in or around the national park during *Hemanta* and *Shishira Ritu*.

Not only picnic, most of the holidays are spent well in the hotels and resorts at Chitwan National Park where maximum of them are named after forest like Megghauli Forest Resort, Chitwan Forest Resort, Megghauli Serai and Taj Safaris, Hotel Island Jungle Resort, Sauraha Hotel and Resort, Kasara Jungle Resort etc. This shows the policy that has been adopted to attract tourists to themselves adding forest in their names.

Socio-economic Interaction of Humans and Forests

Apart from the religious and aesthetic contact of forest with human, it is also economically attached. In-fact, forest can be the boon for the upliftment of national economy too from economic point of view. The importance of forest is beyond imagination. It lends us innumerable benefits. The entire environment is made fresh and beautiful. It maintains the natural beauty of a place which in turn helps the tourists to be attracted towards it in spite of various difficulties and threats. It is the habitat of wild animals which help in the maintenance of the ecosystem. So, the zoos, national parks and reserves not only protect wild lives but also appeal the travelers and environmentalists. Hence, it promotes tourism and the nation can make a huge foreign currency.

Likewise, forest also helps to increase the intensity of the rainfall and reduce the gravity of air pollution. Further, forest provides us with costly medicinal herbs, firewood, grass and building materials. More importantly, the roots of the trees go down to the great depth and capture the soil tightly, which prevents the occurrence of deadly landslides and massive soil erosion. There are few forest dependent tribal groups always connected to the forest for their livelihood.

Raute⁶ tribe lives a nomadic presence in the foothills of the Himalayas, migrating consistently through the forests of far-western Nepal. They are found mostly in the forest areas of Dang and Jajarkot. The Rautes struggle to protect their traditional way of life in balance with nature and their right to roam in the forests they depend on. Whatever the *Ritus* be, the Raute community always rely on forests for their livelihood. Food and shelter is all obtained from the forest. The nomadic life in a forest is not an easy life to survive. Infections in the forest during all the seasons either that be *Basanta* or *Greeshma* or *Sharad* or *Shishira* or *Barsha* or *Hemanta* infections are extensive, poisonous creatures in the forest usually in *Greeshma* causes major infections which sometimes even lead to death. In an article published in *A Journal of Himalayan Studies* Kathmandu titled “The Raute: Notes on a Nomadic Hunting and Gathering be of Nepal” by Johan Reinhard⁷ it is mentioned that, “In connection with the hard work they perform with their hand for making wood handicraft, puts a lot of strain on their hand-joint.” Furthermore he adds, “The kids suffer from parasite worms, causing inflated stomachs, as the forests have such parasitic worms causing fatal illness. Only a few of the kids survive their first year in the jungle.” The people do not have knowledge on medicinal plants that are present in the forest where they live in. The direct dependency on forest in every season is a compulsion for them.

Common Interaction of Humans and Forests in different *Ritus*

In *Greeshma Ritu* of Nepali calendar, the forest fires are recorded more. Coordinator of UNISDR-Regional South Asia Wildland Fire Network Sundar Sharma in the interview in The Himalayan Times national daily said, “As temperature rises, incidents of wildfires will also increase,” adding that “normally most number of incidents of wildfire are reported on the fourth week of April every year.”

6 Raute are a [nomadic Tibeto-Burman](#) ethnic group officially recognized by the [Government of Nepal](#). They are known for subsistence hunting of langur and macaque monkeys. They gather wild forest [tubers](#), fruits, and greens on a regular basis.

7 Johan Reinhard is an Explorer-in-Residence at the National Geographic Society. He is also a Senior Research Fellow at The Mountain Institute, West Virginia, a Visiting Professor at Catholic University, Salta, Argentina, and an Honorary Professor of Catholic University, Arequipa, Peru.

In the Canto I:22 of *Ritusamhara* by Kalidasa, the forest of *Greeshma Ritu* is explained as, “the forest-regions dried up due to the tremendous heat of the sun which lead to fierce forest fire. Along with it the water on all sides diminish slowly and hence the temperature around forests increase.” Verse 27 in the same Canto, also represents the condition of animals during such fire stating, “During this time the animals like elephants, oxen and lions flock together like friends, giving up the hostility, emerge out of the grass where they were tormented by fire.” The animals despite their opposite nature come together when environment challenges them. The drying up of the water resources within the forest area during *Greeshma* create problem in the drinking water for the wild animals. Not only the animals but to the people who reach the forests in the morning for the collection of fodder for their cattle and for the firewood they collect for everyday requirement also suffer from the temperature of the forest.

After the tremendous hot *Greeshma*, *Barsha Ritu* also brings a tough time in the forest. Though the trees get water for growth, the massive deforestation has led to landslide and soil-erosion. More the deforestation, more is the chance of landslide as the roots of the trees work as anchor to the soil. Cutting down trees results in the loosening of the soil and hence soil erosion and landslide become common. In Canto II of *Ritusamhara* by Kalidasa, we can find that the birds and the bees do not lag behind either during *Barsha*. They are equally enthralled with rains.

The celebration of life begins for us with the onset of monsoons. Human beings do not go towards the forest during this *Ritu*. The threat of poisonous snakes and insects keep them away. Though the wood smugglers find it as the best time to smuggle the woods from the forests. Most of the forests of Morang and Chitwan become the victim of smuggling during *Barsha Ritu*. They try to collect as much wood for timbers as they can because the administration, forest department become quite passive during this season.

Sharad Ritu, comes after *Barsha*, which Kalidasa compares to a bride; decked in white as the moon and the swan, adorned with jewels and flowers; moving with gentle grace like the rivers. Sreenivasarao S. in his blog article entitled, “*Sharad Ritu-Season of tender beauty and celebrations*” published in creative.sulekha.com, he shows the condition of forests in the following way:

Sharad Ritu nears its end, the leaves on the trees turn from green to yellow to red and to dusty brown. The trees let go the aged leaves, that once clothed, fed and sheltered them; with grace and gratitude. They gently place the departed friends, with reverence, on the floor.

In this *Ritu*, the forest colour slowly start changing from green to yellow that marks the resting phase of the trees. The old and worn out leaves fall down and give space to the new foliage. The forest floor is full of the fallen dusty brown leaves.

After *Sharad* comes the *Hemanta Ritu* which is marked by a significant drop in temperature, the returning of the migrant birds and departure of migrant butterflies. The forests is full of the chirping of the birds that return home. Humidity drops and dryness lingers. *Hemanta*, is therefore generally said to be a pleasant season followed by *Shishira*, a season of transition. Kalidasa in *Ritusamhara* expresses his view about forests in *Hemanta Ritu* explaining it in Canto IV, Verse 11 as:

And it is indeed worthwhile to break the spell of sleep in the wee hours of *Hemanta*, to tread into silence of the forests only broken by the rhythmic rustle of dried leaves crumbling beneath the feet and intermittently by the song of the birds. In *Hemanta* the forests call you near with their subtle whisperings.

The above paragraph depicts the silence of the forest in *Hemanta*. Though the leaves are dried, the songs of birds are very appealing.

Conclusion

As a whole the forests are important for human beings in every *Ritu* as they provide the basic requirements for all the people directly or indirectly. Irrespective of the seasons, forests have everything important for season. The amount of fresh air, the fodder for the cattle, the firewood or any other timber products are available at forest. For nomadic people forests are very important as they become the chief source of their physiological needs. And thus forests become very useful entity for the living beings including humans.

As exhibited in the previous chapters through the study of different news articles, youtube videos and documentaries, books, articles, texts, interviews and field visits to Chitwan and Morang, the human interaction with nature, was found to be very dynamic and interconnected. Human beings are too much dependent on forests in the Himalayas. Throughout the study it was found that the interaction of humans with forests in different *Ritus* has a multidimensional connection which cannot be avoided. The research explored the nuances of those dialogues between humans and forests that are shaped by natural forces and the socio-cultural-politico-economic reasons during different *Ritus*. The research investigated the range of effects on people physically, emotionally and psychologically using environmental science and humanities as the area of consolidation. Thus the research comes to the impression that in the Himalayas, forests have multifaceted dimensions of interactions with people in the six *Ritus*.

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