As one moves along Runang-Kanda, a high-altitude pasture above the tree-line in Kinnaur district of Indian Western Himalaya, one is almost certain to be startled by the sheer scale of the remains of cattle carcasses strewn amid abandoned and dilapidated stone houses in this area. What is even more astonishing is the addition of newer skeletal remains of domestic animals every year. A closer look suggests that the carcasses are mostly of younger animals. Naturally, one would wonder why there are so many deaths at one place and what happened to the stone houses and agricultural terraces present there? Is it some kind of peculiar site or is it just what ruins look like?

The harsh environmental conditions of the Himalayas have led to the gradual dissipation of human settlements and rendering higher areas suitable for human activities, while cooling led to glaciers advancing down to lower levels impacting the growing seasons and rendering higher human settlements largely untenable. Thus, the climatic fluctuations in the area’s geological history shepherded human migration across different passes and valleys, from higher to relatively lower altitudes. As people responded to the rhythms of the climatic events, newer villages were created, and older ones were abandoned.

Mental maps as intangible ruins

When people moved they transmitted ideas, imaginations, technologies, rituals and habits from one place to another. Across this journey of time and space, people preserved and remembered these changes through rituals and legends associated with certain areas and places; while at many other such sites, signs of human inhabitation simply get lost in the passage of time. Ruins are not mere residuals of man-made structures; they also include narratives and histories, which continue to exist as legends and folktales in an area. These oral histories often stitch together trails, rituals, lifestyle and space-relations of societies, which underwent cartographic readjustments. With the passage of time, many trails, rituals, stories of linkages and flow become few. With every passing generation certain details of the legend get lost, while some tales about a place and the people who lived there survive despite the trail being abandoned long ago. Narratives about societies and linkages can be considered intangible aspects of ruins. Nearly every highland village talks of certain routes that earlier generations traversed, but have since been abandoned owing to the changing socio-economic and environmental conditions leading to the gradual dissipation of local knowledge, history and belief systems. While material traces of the existence of a place might disappear over time, spatial information is not a requisite for the mental map of a place; it is sufficient to just "know of" the place and not where it is. A mental map is an intangible aspect of a culture; the passage of time often produces intangible ruins of physical and non-physical institutions that cannot be seen or touched.

With the emergence of newer nation states in the 19th century, the contiguous geographical landscape of the Himalayas was fragmented by different political borders. The partition of India in 1947 and the India-China war in 1962 limited the movement of people, animals and materials across the Himalayas. Concerns around border security brought roads to remote parts of the Himalayas, which in turn led to the rapid socio-economic transformation of these areas. Nonetheless, people still remember and reminisce of forests, lakes, pastures, rocks of trails and certain rituals their ancestors followed. As an old man in his late 80s from Kinnaur (Himachal Pradesh) stated, "as a young boy, I never knew of borders. Then suddenly all sorts of people started showing up on our land and created strange boundaries in the name of district, states and nation, forcing us to live a fragmented life amid ruins of our heritage".

Not all generations could adapt to the newer socio-political realities; those who witnessed sudden transformations to their lives and livelihoods remain haunted by it, while for the rest, it has become a mere part of some shared past that might someday be used as a rallying point for political mileage.
Corridor of death

Rongglu-Kanda and Runang-Kanda are contiguous alpine grasslands overlooking the majestic Kinnaur-Kailash range across the Satluj valley in Himachal Pradesh, India. These pastures are located along the mountain ridge that formed a part of the old Hindustan-Tibet road, a pony trail suturing numerous high-altitude villages and pasturelands, which used to enjoy bustling seasonal foot-fall of shepherds, pilgrims, traders, etc. However, with the coming of roads the cross-border shepherds, pilgrims, traders, etc. However, with the coming of roads the cross-border trade eventually came to a near halt and the mountainous trails were no longer frequented as the pastoral lifestyle was traded off for more sedentary livelihoods. Occasionally villagers would make a journey up to these pastures along with their domestic animals and leave them there on their own for a few months to graze and roam the pastures and nearby forests. Towards the end of autumn, adult animals would begin their journey down to the valley and the village on their own. Households were aligned to the rhythm of nature; they would carve out agricultural terraces, tend to their herds and raise a single crop of buckwheat, potato, peas, etc. during their high-altitude summer sojourn, for a few weeks to a few months every year. However, as their dependence on animal husbandry decreased so did the relevance of these animals. The younger animals were too young to learn the necessary strategies to cope with harsh Himalayan winters, every year large numbers perished to hypothermia and wild hunters like wolves and leopards. As a result of decades of disease and lack of maintenance, agricultural terraces and houses are slowly being reclaimed by nature and what lies amid the ruins are the bones and hides of those abandoned animals. The change in the economic landscape of the area brought a considerable shift in how people moved and interact, such landscapes often present a confusing picture of a valley of ruins and death and are often not well preserved. Although these ruins are often not well preserved, they nonetheless offer significant insights into how people lived, consumed and interacted centuries ago. For instance, a common practice among higherland families was to accord clan/group identities based on place of origin and the specific territorial claims and movements, and become socially institutionalized. 1000 kilometres further east of Kinnaur lies the high-altitude region of the Dibang valley in the region. These stones, as “megalithic structures of antiquity”, can still be found as ruins of the cist-burials. Locally they were believed to be Muslim graves or graves of Kashmiri people. Although cist-burials sites of the central Asian people are a series of cairns at a nearby ridge. Cairns 3000 kilometres further east of Kinnaur lies the high-altitude region of the Dibang valley in the region. These stones, as “megalithic structures of antiquity”, can still be found as ruins of the cist-burials. Locally they were believed to be Muslim graves or graves of Kashmiri people. Although cist-burials sites of the central Asian people

Along the pastures above villages like Kalpa, Pangi, and Rongglu on way to Rongglu-Kanda, are a series of cairns on nearby ridges. Cairns are human-bodied piles of stones assembled as a part of burial rituals, popular across the Himalayas. These cairns are often located at about 3500 meters or above, as a memorial tomb for departed family members. Every year, during the Dukhraini festival of mourning at least one family member visits the cairn to pay their respects to their departed family members. The original rituals of Dukhraini can at best be understood as intangible ruins of the tangible remains-cairns, which have become a way of acknowledging and honouring the ancestors and their history in these highlands. These cairns were erected at vantage points on the ridges, often used as geographical markers by those who would frequent these heights and usually indicated proximity to a settlement. However, as societies have become more sedentary and changed in how they move and interact, such landscapes often present a confusing picture of a valley of ruins and death and are often not well preserved. Although these ruins are often not well preserved, they nonetheless offer significant insights into how people lived, consumed and interacted centuries ago. For instance, a common practice among higherland families was to accord clan/group identities based on place of origin and the specific territorial claims and movements, and become socially institutionalized. 1000 kilometres further east of Kinnaur lies the high-altitude region of the Dibang valley in the region. These stones, as “megalithic structures of antiquity”, can still be found as ruins of the cist-burials. Locally they were believed to be Muslim graves or graves of Kashmiri people. Although cist-burials sites of the central Asian people are a series of cairns at a nearby ridge. Cairns 3000 kilometres further east of Kinnaur lies the high-altitude region of the Dibang valley in the region. These stones, as “megalithic structures of antiquity”, can still be found as ruins of the cist-burials. Locally they were believed to be Muslim graves or graves of Kashmiri people. Although cist-burials sites of the central Asian people

Not just what we are left with

The geo-politics between India and China have obviously taken their toll on cross-border cultural linkages of the Mishmis. However, a prominent face from the community, Jibi Phulu, summed up the situation of his community as follows: “I am a proud Indian and feel proud of my culture. The day I die I am a Chinesse”. Mr. Phulu is well aware of the dangers of being misunderstood by some Indian officials, but the cross-border linkages have been forced to come to terms with the contemporary political realities. Like many other higherlanders, they negotiate this uncertain geo-political terrain with their social mental maps of cultural similarities on both sides of the border. These mental maps are something but nothing but intangible ruins of a community. In the Western Himalayas, excavation during road-broadening works unearthed mining sites of cist-burials. Locally they were believed to be Muslim graves or graves of Kashmiri people. Although cist-burials sites of the central Asian people are a series of cairns at a nearby ridge. Cairns 3000 kilometres further east of Kinnaur lies the high-altitude region of the Dibang valley in the region. These stones, as “megalithic structures of antiquity”, can still be found as ruins of the cist-burials. Locally they were believed to be Muslim graves or graves of Kashmiri people. Although cist-burials sites of the central Asian people

The Focus

2012

Reading space, society and history in Asia through its ruins

Below: Ancient Meditation caves near Tabo, Himachal Pradesh. Top right: Ruins at Kabi, Sikkim.


Notes


