

Ulrike Müller-Böker, *Die Tharu in Chitawan: Kenntnis, Bewertung und Nutzung der natürlichen Umwelt im südlichen Nepal*, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag, 1995, 213 p., bibl., ill., tables, maps.

#### Review by Ben Campbell

Ulrike Müller-Böker has written a serious and passionate account of the very deep problems inflicted upon villagers through the creation of the Royal Chitawan National Park. It will doubtless make uncomfortable reading for conservationists, scientists, government officials, and tourists, whose prime interest is the protection of threatened species like the rhinoceros. The message of the book is that local participation through recognition of villagers' subsistence needs is a *sine qua non* of long term nature protection. Müller-Böker does not question the ultimate need for a national park, but presents research evidence collected over eight months of fieldwork of the devastating effect the park has had, particularly on the traditional forest-dwellers, the Tharu. Müller-Böker defines her approach to investigating the issues of knowledge, valuation and use of the environment as one of "ethno-ecology", informed by analysis of the physical environment and socio-political development. She explores the Tharu's "cognitive environment" through their classifications of plants, animals and eco-type variation, and attempts to locate this knowledge within conflicts of valuation that bring out distinctive patterns of environmental orientation. It is not only a matter of differently contextualised ecological consciousness between traditional, pre-industrial societies and Western-scientific ones in the struggle over the national park, because Müller-Böker successfully shows how different are the agro-ecological orientations of the Tharu as compared to the immigrant farmers who came in large numbers from the hills since the 1950s after malaria eradication.

Chapter 6, "The use of the natural environment by the Tharu" is a tour de force which deserves to be read by everyone concerned with agrarian change in Southern Nepal. Till 1951 the Tharu practised shifting agriculture. They kept large herds of cattle used for ploughing and transport. The establishment of the national park in 1973 decimated the village herds through the absolute exclusion to pasture (and wood and plant collection). In the three villages studied the numbers per herd fell from about thirty to about six. There is now a permanent lack of dung for agriculture which is unable to compensate for the economic loss of forest

resources. With the lack of ploughing teams, tractor use removes income from the substantial proportion of day-labourers. The Tharu seem loathe to adapt to Pahâriyâ techniques of stall-keeping livestock, saying grass-cutting is too much work, forbidden, and they don't know how to do it anyway. Müller-Böker shows how the Tharu are absolute beginners compared to the Pahâriyâ's experience of agricultural intensification. The latter are also more attuned to dry crop production while the Tharu focus almost exclusively on rice. Rather than agricultural diversification the Tharu are still based in a mentality of fishing, gathering, and extensive herding. Alongside this many Tharu lost their land title to the incomers through naiveté about land values.

The final chapter 8 "the traditional life-style and economy of the Tharu in conflict with nature protection" amounts to a reasoned plea for the voices of Chitawan's villagers to be heard by the authorities, supported by pragmatic suggestions for improving the park-people interface. The Tharu have been squeezed by contradictory state policies of opening the district to economic migrants, and excluding them from their traditional environmental resources. The conservation institutions followed policies of strict nature protection, until local outcry led to a limited period of permitted winter grass-cutting. Still, the population is compelled to fulfil their needs illegally, risking detection by the military guards, and this determines an overwhelmingly negative opinion of the park. As one villager put it "If we only go into the forest to shit we are fined".

Müller-Böker takes a deliberate investigative strategy in adopting the framework of ethno-ecology, and explicitly sets her work in a counter-direction to the general trend of agro-ecological studies which have minimised the differences between "ethnic" groups (e.g. Schroeder 1985), so I will explore the merits of this approach briefly. There are strong and weak senses of the "ethno" prefix, and for the most part Müller-Böker is undogmatic, using the concept as a methodology to see what empirical insights it can generate with an applied rather than theoretical objective (p.19). Local discourses of ethno-specificity need to be questioned as to whether they are a rhetoric of group-identity boundary maintenance, or genuinely refer to coherent and distinctive lived-worlds. My reading of Müller-Böker's work leads me to conclude that neither of these alternatives are wholly true for the situation she describes. One of the factors which leads me to doubt the comprehensive applicability of concepts such as Tharu environmental knowledge, valuation and use is the huge discrepancy in land holding among the Tharu (p.78), greater even than between the

incomers, favouring especially Mahato (jimindars). Is this not such a difference as to make commonalities of language with the bulk of Tharu propertyless day-labourers secondary to land holding in determining environmental orientations? Müller-Böker claims Tharu religious cosmology holds their identity together (p.82), but the elite's engagement of Brahmans surely indicates some discrepancy in this respect. An unanswered question of 'ethno'-relevance concerns the discussion of the composite category Awaliya, that includes the Tharu and among whom some intermarriage occurs. This category disappears from view after chapter 4 and Tharu become the sole indigenous group we hear of. We are left in the dark as to whether Bhote, Darâi, Danuwâr, etc. share the same ethno-ecological formation. As for the autochtones' locally-attuned knowledge, an encounter with a non-Awaliya Chepang woman is described who says "in comparison to us you (Tharu) know nothing"! With other incomers, their ethnic diversity of Parbatya as opposed to Tibeto-Burman becomes lost under the label Pahâriyâ. Are they all identified as "blood-suckers" (p.90)?

Beyond these reservations, the identification of ecotope classification as Tharu-specific but not soil terminology, shows where ethno-specificity works and where it doesn't. In chapter 5 the data literally brings down to earth arguments about ethno-classification. There is indeed more supporting evidence for distinctive cultural orientation : as in the spatial mobility characteristic of Pahâriyâ being unthinkable to Tharu; and Tharu not knowing how to cut fodder. However, the policy consequences of taking an ethno-specific stance in terms of negotiating access for traditional user-groups, are all too briefly raised in asking how to "filter out" these groups from the heterogeneous population (p. 192)?

Caution is required in that the greater the argument made for 'ethno-specific' factors, the more local is the focus it prescribes, and the harder it may be to make comparisons. Lessons from the Chitawan-Tharu need to be able to refer beyond, to other people-park struggles. There is unfortunately no reference to Stevens' (1993) work on Sagarmatha published two years before this one, though Langtang and Sagarmatha are mentioned en-passant as examples of better co-existence with more benefits from tourism.

This book more than deserves to be translated into English. It needs to reach a Nepali readership. Müller-Böker's account of factors of agrarian change in Chitawan is full of material that will be of interest to analysts of population-agriculture dynamics. The situation she describes stimulates reflection about the effects of culture (indigenous technical knowledge and

classificatory paradigms) in conditions of economic change when population growth and resource inaccessibility are responded to very differently, depending on culturally distinctive dispositions to agro-ecological intensification. It is a courageous and thought-provoking book that brings to light facts many would like swept under the carpet. It has also introduced me to a word that should be borrowed from the German; Naturschutzpolitik. The simplistic protection of nature against all human encroachment is an extreme position born of a particular time and culture. It is also environmentally counterproductive if you consider the anthropogenically necessary maintenance of grass-stands in Chitawan for the rhinos' nutrition. I would add, consider also the animals' perspective and their own disinterest in false dichotomies of nature and society: humans produce some of the best food available, and right on the edge of the forest too! A last point, the résumés at the end of each chapter are excellent but there is unfortunately no index.

#### References

Schroeder, R. F.

1985, "Himalayan Subsistence Systems. Indigenous agriculture in rural Nepal", *Mountain research and development*, 5 (1), pp. 31-44.

Stevens, S. F.

1993, *Claiming the high ground: Sherpas, subsistence and environmental change in the highest Himalaya*, University of California Press.