
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 Pahāriyā 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 Pahāriyā’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 naivety 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 commonalties 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 Brahmins 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 Bhoti, Darai, 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 Parbata 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

References

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