

Culture and the Environment in the Himalaya

edited by Arjun Guneratne

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For decades, the Himalayas have been a hotspot for vivid environmental debates. Over a long period, the Himalayan Environmental Degradation Theory—with its small and large-scale scenarios, vicious circles and predicted catastrophes in the context of the Himalaya-Ganges problem—has dominated academic and development work. Subsequently, reservations against such catastrophic scenarios have been voiced and uncertainties disclosed in a number of published contributions. The idea was originally promoted so that inhabitants of Himalayan regions would no longer be viewed as causing environmental degradation, but rather as experts of their own environment; well grounded in the complex environmental knowledge that might represent the basis for new notions of sustainable use of environments that are ecologically fragile. These ideas—enhanced by concepts of participation—influenced the participatory forest and conservation management schemes that have emerged in the Himalayas. Based on social scientific methodologies, a number of critical studies about new resource management policies have now been produced. However, little theoretical work has been undertaken to relate the vast literature on identity, ritual and symbolism to environmental questions in the Himalayan region. Environmental issues are currently particularly prominent in discussions on global climate change, and the processes of human adaptation, coping and mitigation to the changes that are predicted or already occurring in climate conditions and incremental natural hazards are of interest.

The volume, edited by Arjun Guneratne, aims to contribute to a ‘new thinking’ in environmental anthropology and geography, interrogating contemporary theory and helping to close the theory gap that exists on relations between humans and their environments. The volume focuses on the humans who live and work in the Himalayan region and sheds light on how they understand and conceptualize their environment, and how these concepts vary across social lines and experiences. Furthermore,

the collection sets out to show the implications that such models of the environment can have for policy-making and development work. The implicit critique is that bureaucrats and development workers pay little or no attention to cultural concerns in their analysis of the relationship between humans and their environment. The contributors to this reader are anthropologists and geographers who examine and contextualise various concepts of the environment within Nepal, India and Sikkim.

Some contributors explicitly address the relationship between scientific discourses of the environment and local knowledge. John J. Metz re-visits and analyses the roots and discourse surrounding the persisting crisis narrative of the Himalayan Environmental Degradation Theory. While this is an interesting reflection on the crisis, it is a shame that he did not include a climatic change perspective in his analysis. Andrew Russell reviews the differing perceptions of what a forest is, by contrasting Himalayan Degradation Theories and postmodern ideas that romanticize the relationship to the environment alongside local oral history and practices. He vividly shows that forest perceptions among the Yakkha of East Nepal are formed and informed by a range of shifting biological, socio-political, economic and spiritual influences. Andrea Nightingale examines how people relate to forests by analysing the history of community forestry in Nepal with reference to Mugu through using a relational (actor-network inspired) perspective with the aim of explaining processes that produce the forest—materially, symbolically and politically. By analysing different stories of the forest and its management, she demonstrates that the forest is not simply a collection of trees, or as the scientific perspective suggests, a well-established and defined concept. Rather, Nightingale demonstrates that a forest is a confluence of trees, resources, management principles and harvesting practices. The meanings of a forest relate to the relations that people have with each other and how these differ along caste and gender lines. However, Nightingale notes that ‘boundaries, qualities and meaning shift with each method used to explore it and from different perspectives, requiring one to question the existence of a forest’ (p. 98). Using the example of Ayurveda—understood as the distillation of generations of practical knowledge of the environment—Mary Cameron locates local knowledge in the context of progress belief, equated with scientific rationality and power relations, with the result that the traditional practitioners of Ayurveda become marginalized.

Jana Fortier examines contrasting worldviews of forest-dwellers and foragers like the Raute, as well as the views of farmers and state bureaucrats. Although she uses a rather classical approach, Fortier offers impressive insights into the life and world of a little-known ethnic group. Similarly, Tanka B. Subba paints a broad portrait of Limbu life and the role the environment has played in shaping Limbu identity. In contrast to Fortier, Subba emphasizes that an understanding of the environment as a category does exist, although this varies across gender lines. In addition, Subba argues that this understanding is subject to transformation from the effects of the external socio-economic environment.

Anne M. Rademacher and Emma Mawdsley examine how activists use ecological ideas to foster critiques of society and polity. Both Rademacher and Mawdsley examine rivers that have symbolic meaning: Rademacher focuses on one prominent activist to show how the pollution and degradation of the Bagmati river became a metaphor for cultural and political degradation and was used to legitimize the forced eviction of squatters living along this river. By invoking identity, a specific interpretation of history (the idea of a Bagmati civilization) along with the reproduction of specific rituals was created. Mawdsley demonstrates how movements can actively mobilise religious values and beliefs in pursuit of various environmental goals. Using the example of the intervention of the Vishva Hindu Parishad in the politics of the Tehri Dam, she sheds light on the abuse of religion and ecology through the mobilisation of green issues in ways that are intended to promote chauvinist Hindu nationalist agendas and provoke anti-Muslim action.

Safia Aggarwal illustrates how in rural Kumaun, religious beliefs and notions of the sacred influence human relations with the natural environment. She focuses on the sacred forests that are idealized in India's environmental history. Aggarwal examines temple forests, which 'belong' to a deity, and communally owned panchayat forests that have been placed under the protection of a deity for a limited time. Her chapter indicates that an association with religion may be helpful for conservation, but also that it has limits. For example, the efficacy of the strategy of placing forests under the protection of a deity depends on the availability of alternative resources in the neighbourhood to which people can turn, with the result that the problem of degradation is shifted to other forests.

In the final chapter of this volume, Ben Campbell provides a sound

overview of different research perspectives and promising new research questions that go 'beyond cultural models of the environment.' He warns that it would be a mistake to return to ethnically circumscribed worldviews for understanding environmental relations, and he critiques the over-determined idea of culture, and the assumption that evenly distributed cultural knowledge exists, a statement supported not just by his own but also by Subba's case study. He proposes 'to investigate through ethnography the various claims made by social theorists, biodiversity scientists and conservation institutions regarding human-environmental relations and to evaluate critically the adequacy of our tools for understanding processes of environmental change, and the effects of representations concerning these processes on attempts to intervene in them' (p. 187). He also points out that distinctive subject positions acting in environmental matters need to be better understood. The approach that he adopts towards an environmental ethnography of the Tamang recognises the environment (as a 'synthetic manoeuvre for perceiving diverse processes and relationships') as a historical product of human consciousness.

The book under review offers exciting ideas on how research can connect with the practices, knowledge and perceptions that people have in relation to aspects of their environment, and also how people make use of ecological ideas to further their political interests. The volume provides food for thought, producing a 'new thinking' in environmental anthropology and geography, and also shows how this 'new thinking' can be translated into empirical work. However, the recurrent critique that, in their human-environment analysis, bureaucrats and development workers pay little or no attention to the beliefs of the people who live and work in a specific environment, calls not only for a deeper analysis of the interface where expert systems meet the local arena, but also for a conversion of these insights into a dialogue with policy-makers and development workers.