

The Tarai: History, Society, Environment

edited by Arjun Guneratne.

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Anyone who has travelled through the region over land recognises the abruptness with which the soaring peaks of the Himalaya drop onto the plains of the Indian subcontinent. The Tarai is the space just beyond: a sliver between topographic and political boundaries, running along the southern edge of Nepal, dotted with foothills. A diverse range of people, nature, and history, unique and yet vital to Nepal's future, inhabit the wedge. The land has hosted important trade routes, conflicting Gorkhali, Indian, and British East India Company claims, and deadly malaria. As is common in similar geographical areas throughout the greater Himalaya, the citizenship, ability and identity of the people of the Tarai has historically been questioned. Today, half of Nepal's population, and a fair amount of its economic and political will, reside there. Yet studies to date have been unsystematic and especially sparse in the east and among non-Tharu groups, leaving the Tarai in the shadow of the hills above.

When most researchers and laypeople think of Nepal, they think of Kathmandu and the hills, and of their people. *The Tarai: History, society, environment* attempts to expand this conception, and to secure a place for the Tarai in scholarship on Nepal. The volume is the third in *The Himalaya Series in Nepal Studies*, with most chapters taken from Volume 29(1) of the journal *Himalaya*. Its seven chapters serve to open windows on avenues for future scholarship on the region, hinting at a rich array of social science research in history, politics, economics, ethnicity, gender studies, development, forestry, and community-based natural resource management. The individual articles, and the book as a whole, display interesting existing research and, more importantly, raise a host of research questions for the future.

The book opens with an introduction by editor Arjun Guneratne, introducing both the importance of the region to modern Nepal, and its lack of scholarship, especially in the eastern part and among non-Tharu

peoples. Guneratne asserts, 'the Tarai deserves better.' The subsequent chapters vary widely in subject and methodology, yet share this common thread: to call attention to an area traditionally overlooked.

The first two chapters deal with the history of the area's territory and identity definition. First, Bernardo Michael explores the emergence of the Tarai as a distinct region out of territorial debates in the Anglo-Gorkha War of 1814-1816. Michael describes a complex landscape in which various tribute, taxation and tenurial relationships fluctuated over time. Boundaries were demarcated at the war's end. While these shifted somewhat in later years, Michael argues that this colonial act of formally and physically marking a state contributed enormously to national and regional development, while stressing that the area has always had ties to both hills and plains. Guneratne's paper builds on this by exploring the shifting roles of Tharu people in the trans-boundary region, comparing the experiences of the group in colonial India and modern Nepal. His conclusion that the Tharu are Nepali, but seek to be so on their own terms, not those imposed by ethnic majorities, or by the state, holds great relevance for similar groups in Nepal and the Himalaya as a whole.

Two subsequent papers explore the emancipation and subtle continuation of the *kamaiya* bonded labour system among the Tharu. The first, by Tatsuro Fujikura, is an experiential piece describing the atmosphere and events around the time of the declaration of *kamaiya* emancipation in 2000. Fujikura pays particular attention to the roles and narratives taken up by different areas, especially the youth and Backward Society Education (BASE), a local NGO. The next chapter, by Birendra Giri, delves deeper into the world of bonded labour among children, which continues semi-formally, with wide variation in treatment and conditions. The paper relies on the narratives of the children themselves to assess the subtle and heterogeneous landscape of bonded labour, strengthening the author's observations with the *kamaiya* and *haliya* children's own words.

Environment, governance, and livelihoods are deeply interconnected in the Himalaya, as demonstrated by the papers on the evolution of forest management and on the social roles of local tiger volunteers. Jagannath Adhikari and Hari Dhungana trace the history of forest policy in the region from privatisation during unification and Rana rule, through nationalisation in 1950-1990, to evolving methods of community forestry in recent decades. The authors argue that forests and their management

affect not only community livelihoods but also state formation and power. In another paper, Teri Allendorf, Bhim Gurung and J.L. David Smith explore the role of *bagh heralu*, local villagers recruited as 'tiger watchers' for conservation efforts. The research consists of interviews to chart reasons for becoming a ranger, current benefits, and changes between these, as well as to determine what kind of individuals make the best local conservation officers. The paper is exciting in that it represents the second iteration of research from long-term, on-the-ground conservation work – after first setting up the tiger management model, the authors decided to look further into what had made successful employees.

The volume's last piece is an autobiographical account originally delivered as the keynote address at the 2005 conference 'Nepal Tarai: Context and Possibilities,' from which several of these papers were drawn. Ramawatar Yadav recounts some of his difficulties as a Madhesi, and reflects on the deep prejudices toward the region and its people from dominant Nepali society.

While the articles vary widely in subject and methodology, several themes resonate throughout and suggest directions for future research. The trans-boundary identity, addressed most directly in Guneratne's paper, is an important one to study, and seems fruitful for future research that makes a more explicit, comparative study. This concept ties closely to the idea of the Tarai and its people not being 'true' Nepalis, an idea expressed most personally and viscerally in the final paper. This is an experience shared by various minority groups in the nation and the region, but one that may change along with socio-political developments in the country. The rapid superficial abolition of the bonded labour system, combined with the persistence of its vestiges, such as child labour, serves as one example of manners of social change that could be further explored. Finally, the intertwining of environmental management with governance, whether at the scale of state formation or local prestige and social structure, has been studied throughout the region and is reinforced strongly in the two relevant papers here. Overall, this collection provides an intriguing entryway to an area often overlooked, and offers incentive for further study of both the Tarai and of similar boundary regions throughout the Himalaya.