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HIMALAYAN PERCEPTIONS: ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE AND THE WELL BEING OF MOUNTAIN PEOPLES

JACK D. IVES

REVIEWED BY JOHN J. METZ

Jack Ives' new book, *Himalayan Perceptions*, is a continuation of a twenty-year investigation of what he calls the Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation (THED), the perception that a "Himalayan" scale environmental crisis was developing in the South Asia. During the 1970s virtually all scholars and development practitioners had come to believe that rapid population growth of mountain subsistence farmers was eliminating the forest cover of the mountains and exposing the steep slopes to monsoon downpours. The resulting runoff was thereby unleashing accelerated erosion and flooding in the uplands which threatened the hundreds of millions of people living on the Gangetic and Brahmaputra plains, as the flood of water and sediment poured into India and Bangladesh. Bilateral and multilateral aid donors responded by spending hundreds of millions to initiate scores of projects which sought to reestablish forests and halt erosion.

In 1978 Ives and Bruno Messerli joined the effort to explicate the links between land use practices in the Himalaya and sediment deposition and flooding in the lowlands. By the mid 1980s, however, Messerli's students joined other researchers in producing results that contradicted the consensus view. First of all, the crisis narrative appeared to have no solid research to support it. For example, in 1981 Deanna Donovan, a graduate student with a two-year fellowship from the Institute of Current World Affairs, surveyed the 49 published estimates of fuelwood consumption in the Himalayas and found the largest to be 67 times greater than the smallest, a result she attributed to superficial or non-existent research methods (Donovan, 1981). Thompson and Warburton (1985) used Donovan's conclusion to argue both that scholars knew nothing for sure about how human activities were affecting the Himalayan

environment and that state and donor actors were using the crisis narrative for institutional and personal aggrandizement. Second, THED applied conclusions from low relief, mid-latitude environments to the subtropical Himalayas. Carson (1985) and Ramsey (1985) argued that mass wasting processes, not surface erosion, deliver at least 90% of the sediment that streams carry and that mass wasting is driven by the ongoing uplift of the mountains. As streams cut into the rising landscape, the slopes become convex and unstable. Vegetation may anchor the slope for a time, but as the weathering profile penetrates below rooting depth, large rain events will release the weathered regolith. Hence, forests will produce less frequent, larger magnitude events than other vegetation types, but the overall denudation rates are controlled by uplifting and weathering. Third, Mahat et al., (1986a, 1986b) showed that forest conversion had been occurring for centuries and had been promoted by state elites as they sought to expand the tax base and had extracted half of the farmers' yields as tax/rent. Moreover, British colonial policy had supported these repressive elites and so had indirectly contributed to forest conversion. Subsistence provisioning, it seemed, was not the sole cause of deforestation.

As these and other challenges accumulated, Ives and associates organized a conference in April 1986 at the Mohunk Mountain Resort in upstate New York to review the various strands of research and to seek a consensus. Although some participants continued to argue for the crisis scenario, most found it deceptively over-simple, and some felt the crisis narrative was simply wrong. In 1989 Ives and Messerli published *The Himalayan Dilemma*, which reviewed the issues and argued that the human contribution to flooding and sedimentation of the lowlands was several orders of magnitude less than that of clima-

Himalayan Perceptions: Environmental Change and the Well Being of Mountain Peoples

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tological and geological processes.

The Himalayan Dilemma took a cautious approach, emphasizing that the great environmental and cultural diversity of the Himalaya precluded simple conclusions. The present book, *Himalayan Perceptions*, updates the earlier work, but its scope is much wider. Ives not only intends to use the last 15 years of research to show that the super-crisis scenario is wrong, but he also wants to explore the “real problems” that threaten the stability of the region: poverty, oppression of mountain peoples, unequal access to resources, bureaucratic mismanagement and corruption, misplaced development priorities, inter-state wars, and the armed insurrections these oppressions of mountain farmers have induced (xv-xvii). Ives also explores why state institutions continue to promote the crisis narrative despite the lack of supporting evidence.

Although Ives warns the reader that his book cannot comprehensively cover the many issues of this complex region, he does a remarkable job of summarizing the solid recent research not only in the Himalaya proper, but in the arc of high mountains stretching from the Pamir, through the Hindu Kush, Karakoram, and Himalaya, to the Hengduan Mountains of southeastern Tibet and the highlands of northern Thailand. The focus rests on the Himalaya, and especially Nepal, where the most intensive work has been done. Ives organizes the book into 11 chapters. The first two review the history of and challenges to the crisis narrative and give an overview of the wider High Asia region.

The third chapter reviews the condition of forests in the various mountain ranges, but devotes most attention to Nepal. The infamous 1979 World Bank prediction that all forests would disappear by 2000 is disproved by the *expansion* of forests and tree cover in the Sherpa areas around Mt. Everest and in lower elevation areas (800-2000 m), where community forest user groups have rehabilitated degraded forests and planted hundreds of thousands of trees on private lands. Yet, Ives cautions that alpine pastures (Byers, 2004) and the forests lying between the upper range of cultivation, about 2600 m, and timberline, are being degraded throughout the country. He cites Stevens [2004] who notes that timber for the explosion of Sherpa tourist facilities comes from outside the national park. What is clear is that when forest products become scarce, mountain farmers can recognize and act to mitigate the problems that beset them, contrary to the Malthusian logic of the crisis narrative.

Chapter 4, the Geomorphology of Agricultural Landscapes, reviews considerable recent research and generally confirms earlier conclusions: agricultural landscapes lose little soil to erosion, though denudation rates of the entire region are high, as they have been for millennia. Extreme rain events (1m/3days) and earthquakes seem to unleash huge volumes of material, but remain unmeasured: bedload (the sands and gravels that bounce along a stream bottom) is not measured in any Himalayan river even during normal flows. Again, within this steep landscape humans act to reduce, not worsen, the impacts of their activities.

Chapter 5, Flooding in Bangladesh, supports the earlier claim that flooding there is due to rainfall in Bengal and nearby areas. Sixty percent of Bangladesh lies below 6 m ASL, and two-thirds is floodplain, so floods are inevitable. A review of the historical record of floods by Hofer and Messerli (2002) found that the Ganges and Brahmaputra have never had extreme floods in the same year; that Bangladesh flooding correlates *negatively* with Ganges floods, and positively with Brahmaputra floods; that only in 1971 and 1978 have extreme floods affected all of the Ganges at the same time, and in no year on record has the Ganges flooding intensified downstream. The causes of increases in flooding over the last 70 years are difficult to ascertain because floodplain conditions have changed, as new dams and levees have been built and many more people settled along rivers. The only river that has had a statistically significant increase in flow is the Koshiyara, which drains the hilly parts of northeast Bangladesh and empties into the Meghna.

Chapter 6 reviews Mountain Hazards, emphasizing earthquakes and the controversies over dams. Chapter 7 explores the negative and positive impacts of tourism. It finds that local control over tourism minimizes negative impacts, but local control is rare. Decisions taken by central government bureaucrats and profits flowing to outsiders is the rule. Moreover, even in Nepal's success stories, the benefits accrue to small ethnic groups who run the lodges and trekking agencies, like the Sherpa and Thakalis.

In chapter 8, Conflict, Tension, and the Oppression of Mountain Peoples, Ives expands his inquiry beyond earlier work. Mountain peoples are harmed not only by wars and guerrilla insurgencies, but also by forced migrations, expropriation of land for national parks and reserved forests, pervasive discrimination, development projects that fail to benefit locals, and even by environmental crisis narratives which blame local farmers for non-existent threats. The chapter discusses insurrections in the Chittagong Hills, Nagaland, and Nepal. It reviews the Nepal-origin refugees forced out of Bhutan in the early 1990s, the impacts of the military confrontation between India and Pakistan on the Siachen Glacier, and the disregard of local interests by hydroelectric projects and centralized tourist development.

Chapter 9, Prospects for Future Development, does not attempt a comprehensive discussion of the region's assets and liabilities but highlights smaller pathways to attaining sustainable development for mountain farmers. Although Himalayan peoples do not face environmental collapse, Ives argues, they do face serious environmental problems. Food insecurity is increasing in Nepal as a whole, as 67 of its 75 districts have become food importers over the last 20 years. Moreover, most households, whether in remote villages, in road accessible towns, or in urban slums, cannot feed themselves. Ives sees increased integration into markets and local control as the best path to reversing the intensifying food and political insecurity. In places with access to urban markets, farmers are shifting to commercial crops and improving their

lives. In addition, although local elites maintain considerable control, as Nepal has devolved control over natural resources to local groups, more than 12,000 forest user groups have emerged, with many benefits. The chapter discusses large scale hydro projects as examples of how not to proceed.

In Chapter 10, *What Are the Facts*, Ives outlines how the crisis narrative gained dominance and how it was refuted academically, and provides an annotated bibliography of the most important literature that has and continues to support the narrative. Poverty and environmental degradation exist, he maintains, but they have complex political and socio-economic roots which are obscured by the crisis narrative.

Chapter 11, *Redefining the Dilemma: Is There a Way Out?*, begins by noting how the penetration of roads, telephones, TV, and returning outmigrants who have worked abroad has exposed mountain people to unprecedented change. Forecasting how people of the region will respond to that change is foolhardy. The foreign aid intended to remedy an unfolding environmental crisis misunderstood the problems and failed to improve local peoples' lives. Mega projects, like the Tehri Dam of Uttaranchal and the Arun III dam in Nepal, which was cancelled after a long struggle by local and international NGOs, benefit central governments and donors, but cost mountain peoples their lands, houses, and too often their lives. Ives sees small-scale, locally focused projects, like those run by the Agha Khan Rural Support Programme, as likely to improve local lives. Alleviating poverty must be the goal, but one that can only be approached by careful, locally based observation and assessment of which of the emerging changes will provide opportunities that benefit local people. Ending the inter-state and civil wars that engulf the region is a necessary first step.

This book continues Ives' central role in investigating the impacts of humans on South Asian environments, but remains largely within the intellectual boundaries of earlier work. Ives has extended his analysis to explicitly indict government bureaucrats and aid donors for failing to use their resources effectively to alleviate the poverty of mountain people. But, despite its title's emphasis on perceptions, the book does not thoroughly examine the discursive contexts of the crisis narrative. Although Ives focuses on the roles of arrogant western experts and host country bureaucrats, there is little systematic examination of the multiple intellectual, political economic, and psychological factors which intertwined to create and reproduce the crisis narrative. For example, Ives does not explore the role of Malthusian discourse in the environmentalism of the 1970s or the history of the crisis narrative before 1960: how colonial foresters in India employed the subsistence-use-causes-environmental-degradation discourse to justify wresting control of forests from local people and how this discourse was adapted to the African colonies. Indeed, Himalayan scholars are only beginning to match (e.g., Blaikie and Muldavin, 2004) the multi-faceted analysis of environmental crisis narratives made by African specialists (e.g., Leach and Mearns, 1996). Nevertheless, Himalayan

Perceptions provides a key insider's perspective on the evolution of thinking about human-environmental interactions in the Himalaya and effectively presents a wealth of recent research clarifying those interactions. The information and insights the book provides will stimulate the thinking of the general reader as well as that of the specialist.

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