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HIGH FRONTIERS: DOLPO AND THE CHANGING WORLD OF HIMALAYAN PASTORALISTS

KENNETH BAUER

REVIEWED BY CHRISTOPHER THOMS

High Frontiers is a well-written, clear and engaging case study of cultural change in the high Himal that makes at least two significant contributions. First, it illuminates a poorly understood region in Nepal. Second, it builds our understanding of how global and local forces interact to produce cultural change and associated ecological change. Given my background in natural resources, in this review I focus on the questions of resource management addressed in *High Frontiers*.

In writing *High Frontiers*, Bauer draws on his years of experience living and working with the residents of Dolpo (called Dolpo-pa)—a culturally Tibetan region of four sparsely populated valleys in western Nepal—to describe how a local culture whose identity was historically rooted in and shaped by place became displaced and reshaped, largely by external forces. The story that Bauer tells, and tells well, is one of increasing articulation with modern forces and exogenous actors. This is not to say that Dolpo was at some point isolated from the outside world. Indeed, the Dolpo-pa have been involved in long-distance trade and multicultural interactions for hundreds of years by serving as middlemen in the trade between lowland and highland goods across the Himalaya. Even so, their way of life was relatively stable well into the 1950s.

From that point on, Dolpo's people and landscape tell a rather familiar story of outside agents intervening in an eco-cultural system without knowing, understanding, or appreciating local social and ecological conditions. At the same time, impersonal modernizing forces of state-building (in the case of Nepal), colonization (in the case of Chinese restructuring of Tibet), and increasing penetration of regional markets (in the case of salt from India) disrupted long-standing trade relations and resource management practices. Predictably, as various other

studies have also shown, this constellation of actors and actions undermined and disrupted local Dolpo institutions.

The book begins with a detailed account of Bauer's extensive experience living in Dolpo and how he conducted his research. The reader is then treated to a clear and thorough description of Dolpo's agro-pastoral system and trade practices in chapter 1. I found this the most engaging chapter in the book, and the most useful section for resource management practitioners and researchers. Chapter 2 presents a more detailed account of pastoral management and livestock production at the community and household levels in Dolpo while situating the entire study in the literature on pastoralism. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 describe, in turn, the history of Dolpo, changes along the border with Tibet brought on by China, and salient aspects of Nepal's state-making activities and political changes.

Whereas chapters 3, 4 and 5 set the context for change chapter 6 describes how Dolpo residents reacted to the external forces impinging on their traditional patterns of trade and pasture management. Chapters 7 and 8 describe instances of outside intervention or involvement (conservation interventions in chapter 7 and making of the movie *Himalaya* in chapter 8) that also shaped cultural change within Dolpo. Of particular interest regarding natural resources, chapter 7 is an overview of the conservation interventions by the Nepali government, bilateral donor agencies, and international environmental NGOs, none of which understood or appreciated local resource management capacity and knowledge when they started their work. Finally, chapter 9 concludes the book with a broad statement about Dolpo today and how Dolpo-pa culture stands transformed as a result of its encounters with all the forces of change described in earlier chapters.

*High Frontiers:
Dolpo and the
Changing World
of Himalayan
Pastoralists*

Kenneth Bauer

New York: Columbia
University Press,
2004



What is striking about this case, and others like it, is the promise of local resource management capacity juxtaposed with the seeming inevitability of globalizing forces. Grounded in knowledge of the complexities of local ecosystems, indigenous resource management systems are often much more successful at resource conservation than imported “scientific” systems. In India, for example, German foresters invited by the British to manage colonial forests imported management methodologies based on observation and practice in European temperate forests. Because of great differences between the temperate forest ecology of Europe and the tropical ecology they found, application of these methods became “little short of disastrous” (Gadgil and Guha 1993).

When cultures change, their environments change as well. Changes to environments can, in turn, create change in human cultures as the cultures adapt to new problems of resource appropriation. Culture both shapes and is shaped by its ecological context (please notice that I did not say “determined”!). Unfortunately, globalizing forces tend to homogenize cultures and thus change human-environment relationships, usually for the worse. This is evidently taking place with Dolpo traders who are increasingly living a “modern” lifestyle in Kathmandu during the harsh winters. Scientific hubris, giving primacy to a “scientific” approach to natural resource management for example, can also homogenize local resource management systems, and Bauer describes significant changes to such systems in Dolpo.

Overall this is a solid book that makes important contributions. There are a few relatively minor problems, however. The most significant problem is structural. At one point Bauer states that he hopes to “reduce the margin of error” of

future interventions by showing what is and is not viable in Dolpo (17). Assuming that this goal is oriented toward natural resource professionals, I would like to see for each chapter a clear introduction and summary of the main lessons/ideas. When practitioners read books like this, they are not reading for nuance but for applicable lessons.

Another structural issue is one of section headings. They are sometimes weirdly unrelated to section content. For example, why does a section on the presence of the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) in a national park spend only two paragraphs discussing the RNA and the remaining 17 paragraphs decrying attempts to use Western concepts of range management in Dolpo (154)? This strikes me as an editorial shortcoming. It doesn’t detract from the quality of the study, but it does make the book somewhat difficult to navigate.

Finally, the chapter on conservation and development interventions is not explicit about how the changes described affected people and natural resource practices in Dolpo. Indeed, I would rather see the thread of Dolpo residents’ adaptations to change woven throughout the text rather than explicated only in a single chapter. This points toward a potentially more serious shortcoming. In my reading, Dolpo-pa primarily *react* to changes brought on by outside forces. Surely the Dolpo-pa are more than just passive victims of external change forces. Unfortunately, local Dolpo-pa agency seems lost in the telling of this otherwise insightful story.

WORK CITED

Gadgil, Madhav, and Ramachandra Guha. *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*. 1st ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.



Dancers, Dolpo

Photo: Daniel Miller