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Book review of 'Natural Premises: Ecology and Peasant Life in the Western Himalaya, 1800-1950' by Chetan Singh

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through Five). The final chapter discusses the Bonpo version of the 'Wheel of Existence' - the circle of transmigration of sentient beings - which shows, as Per Kværne rightly observes, how Bon "assimilates elements which are present in Tibetan culture as a whole, while retaining a considerable degree of freedom in utilising these elements according to its own religious concepts" (p. 143).

Per Kværne's work is an elegant, scholarly study of the Bon religion from an iconographic perspective. It is extremely accessible to non-specialized readers, and for this reason alone, it represents a very important contribution to our understanding of the Bon religion, an undeniable and profound component of the Tibetan cultural heritage.

Donatella Rossi

Natural Premises: Ecology and Peasant Life in the Western Himalaya, 1800-1950

Chetan Singh. Delhi: University of Oxford Press, 1998.

Natural Premises is a careful historical analysis of the interaction between environment and society in the western Himalaya now encompassed by the state of Himachal Pradesh, from roughly 1800 to the time of India's independence. This first environmental history of the region is based on the assumption that natural premises, i.e. the opportunities and constraints imposed by environmental parameters such as topography, climate, and natural resource endowments, significantly influence patterns of resource use and social, economic, and political organization. Through close attention to subregional differences in environmental management and natural resource use, trade, and social and political relations, Singh dispels the myth of a timeless homogenous mountain region and replaces it with the notion of distinct but interacting and changing subregions which together constitute the social, economic, and political region of the western Himalaya. Singh substantiates his theory of regionality based on subregional differences through meticulous examination of the internal dynamics of production systems within subregions and the varieties of trade and other exchange relations they engendered between subregions, southward to the plains of North India, and northward to Central Asia.

The book begins with an introductory chapter which lays out the broad aims and approaches of the study and includes a methodological note on the use of colonial documents, primarily settlement and administrative reports, and gazetteers, which constitute the bulk of Singh's sources. The next chapter addresses the emergence of regional polities. Singh traces the emergence of the relatively small hill states of this region to the ability to control territory and establish mechanisms of revenue collection, and to a lesser extent, trade relations with neighboring hill states. The remaining six chapters each focus on a different aspect of the natural environment and associated land use practices. These include settlement and agriculture, wastelands, pastoralism, forests and forest use, the growth of the market economy, and the last chapter entitled, "the social response." In each chapter Singh is careful to draw out the differences between subregions and to identify the varieties of relations and interrelations which bind them together. So, for example, in his chapter on agriculture he relates the relative importance of agriculture and pastoralism to elevation, such that agriculture is the dominant production system in the lower hills, a mixture of agriculture and pastoralism is common in the mid-hills, and pastoralism is dominant in the higher elevation trans-Himalaya regions. The regional differentiation of production strategies provides the basis for intra- (e.g. grain and meat) and inter- (e.g. wool and wool products, salt) regional trade networks which reduce total reliance on local resource endowments and enabled the development of regional towns as seats of political authority. Singh persuasively argues that the varieties of exchange relations between transhumant pastoralists and sedentary agriculturalists were also a form of non-monetized trade which linked together different subregions.

Throughout the book Singh pays close attention to the distribution of rights in property—to cultivated land, forests, grazing pastures, or "wastelands"—between villages and government, and to so e extent, between subgroups of villagers. Thus he examines and explains differences in property regimes between regions, e.g. why local forest rights differ in Kullu and Kangra, and changing property regimes over time, e.g. changes in pre-colonial and colonial taxation policies towards transhumant Gaddi shepherds. The focus on property rights allows Singh, whose discipline is history, to critically analyze British interpretations of pre-colonial notions of property in cultivated land as an attempt to bolster British property and revenue assessing claims. He also carefully distinguishes between *de jure* concepts of property and *de facto* control of resources and resource products. Furthermore, within the context of rights to wastelands and forests, he shows how the British used the concept of the village community to create a social group (landholders) in

whom rights to waste and forests would inhere, thus abdicating governmental responsibility for the management of those resources initially considered a liability rather than an asset.

The last chapter, entitled "The Social Response," addresses broad questions of caste dynamics and resource control. The author provides an overview of landowning patterns in different sub-regions and caste and suggests that the physical environment limited the degree of inequality between dominant and subordinate groups by preventing gross accumulations of wealth and conspicuous consumption on the part of "nonproductive segments of society." While fine grained social analysis, for example of the complexities of western Himalayan timber extraction and trade or the tensions between the colonial revenue and forest departments over control of forests and the taxation of Gaddi transhumants, were no doubt beyond the scope of this environmental history, the book would be stronger if the social dynamics described in this chapter had been more thoroughly integrated into the whole study. This would have allowed, within the limits the historical record imposes, for more complete analysis of the equity effects of forest conservancy and the allocation of rights to wastelands to landholders, or the effects of marketization on patterns of wealth inequality. It would have enabled great clarification of terms such as "agriculturists," "farm servants," "village menials," "subordinate landlords," and "ordinary villagers," which are used in the text but whose meaning with regards to resource access and control are not well defined for the reader. No doubt, reconstructing complex historical intra-regional social relations is extremely difficult, and to some extent is not central to the author's aim of arguing that regionality is based on different inter-regional natural premises. However, integrating the "social response" into the rest of the book would help to emphasize the fact of intra-regional, as well as inter-regional difference.

Natural Premises is an important and valuable contribution to the scholarship on the western Himalaya, Himalayan studies, and mountain regions in general. Singh provides ample evidence to support his contention that exchange relations based on subregional differences integrate the western Himalaya into a single region and also link it to northern India and central Asia. This work constitutes valuable frame of reference within which to contextualize more detailed local level field research in the Himalaya. It provides an historical benchmark against which to gauge recent social, economic, and environmental transformations in the western Himalaya. And it challenges the notion that the "regionality" of mountain regions is based on homogeneity rather than difference.

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**Labrang: A Tibetan Buddhist Monastery at the Crossroads of Four Civilizations
(Photos from the Griebenow Archives, 1921-1949)**

Paul Kocot Nietupski. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1999.

A pleasure to read, this book is a visually rich and historically enlightening study of a Tibetan polity outside central Tibet. Nietupski's contribution to the growing body of photograph-based essays on the eastern Tibetan borderlands brings new depth to such works. In this tradition, **China's Inner Asian Frontier: Photographs of the Wulsin Expedition to Northwest China in 1923** (M. E. Alonso, ed., Cambridge, Mass.: The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, distributed by Harvard University Press, 1979) with historical text by Joseph Fletcher, was an early attempt to summarize the complex ethnic and historic background of this region. More recently, the late Michael Aris briefly introduced **Lamas, Princes, and Brigands: Joseph Rock's Photographs of the Tibetan Borderlands of China** (New York: China Institute in America, 1992). Yet unlike the compilers of these earlier publications, Nietupski was fortunate to be working with a set of photographs taken in a single region over a long period of time. For this reason, he is able to use these rare photographs to offer a glimpse into the history of a significant Tibetan polity in the early twentieth century.

For those who know something about the Tibetan borderlands, the complex history revealed here will not be shocking. However, for those who hold extreme views of the relations between China and Tibet, the detailed account of Labrang's modern history should upset closely held beliefs. Nietupski acknowledges the limitations of the book when he notes that trying "to present a massive amount of data in a short format recalls the tip of an iceberg maxim" (p. 7), yet he accomplishes much in this slim volume. Given the dearth of published information on Tibetan regions outside central Tibet, this book demonstrates the potential for local Tibetan history to sink "Titanic" conceptions—neither the propaganda of Tibetans being