Reigning the River: Urban Ecologies and Political Transformation in Kathmandu by Anne M. Rademacher; Reviewed by Kelly D. Alley

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agreement system” (36 pp.); Khawaja A. Rehman, “Ergativity in Kundal Shahi, Kashmiri and Hindko” (15 pp.), and Bettina Zeisler, “Kenhat, the dialects of Upper Ladakh and Zanskar” (67 pp.). Bartee’s paper is “the first report in which an animacy split and conjunct/disjunct patternings co-occur in the verbal morphology of a language” (p. 133). After describing the conjunct/disjunct systems in Standard Tibetan and Dongwang Tibetan, Bartee presents a detailed discussion of existentials in Dongwang, where existential verbs show an animacy split which extends to situations where these existential verbs are used as auxiliaries, and is also found in other areas of the grammar. While Standard Tibetan has two existential verbs, in Dongwang there are four: *ndo* (conjunct, animate), *zd* (conjunct, inanimate), *ndzd* (disjunct, animate), and *zdzd* (disjunct, inanimate). Bartee argues that this animacy split is an innovation, most likely due to language contact, and that it is likely to be an areal phenomenon.

Huysmans describes the verbal templates of Sampang, a Kiranti language of the “complex pronominalizing” type, in which transitive verbs agree with both the agent and the patient. The various verbal agreement affixes derive from ancient independent pronouns. After presenting the conjugations of Sampang simplicia, involving eleven pronominal characteristics, Huysmans discusses two alternate analyses of the morpheme *-e*: that it is (i) a non-preterite tense marker, or (ii) a marker of singular number of second or third person actants. The Sampang morphological template consists of one prefixal slot and ten suffixal slots, each of which is discussed in detail in the third section of the paper. The article concludes with a comparison of the Sampang system with those of other Kiranti languages, finding that it is especially similar to the systems of Kulung, Limbu and Lohorung.

Rehman’s paper provides a first look at the endangered Indo-Aryan language Kundal Shahi, spoken by 3,371 people in the Neelam Valley in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. In particular, the paper compares its split-ergativity with that of the Kashmiri and Hindko of the same region. This early research finds that Kundal Shahi split-ergativity is highly similar to that of most of the Indo-Aryan languages of the subcontinent. Regarding Kashmiri, Rehman notes that it does not display a DATIVE-ERGATIVE alternation correlating with volitionality contrasts, as does Hindko.

Zeisler’s article begins with suggesting a revised classification of Ladakhi dialects into historically younger but lexico-phonetically conservative Shamskat dialects and historically older but lexico-phonetically partly conservative and partly innovative Kenhat dialects. The features distinguishing the Kenhat from the Shamskat dialects are described, first situating them in their geographical settings, then turning to phonetic and morphological features, an interesting discussion of tonogenesis, and discussions of the historical fate of several morphological and case-marking features. These two dialect groups, Zeisler concludes, reflect separate historical developments as well as different linguistic sub- and adstrates.

As with any conference proceedings volume, this book discusses a potpourri of topics. The bulk of the book consists of several specialized articles on T-B languages. The introduction, Part I, has a wider scope; and Rehman’s article will be of special interest to people interested in the Indo-Aryan, especially Dardic, languages.

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### Reigning the River: Urban Ecologies and Political Transformation in Kathmandu

**By Anne M. Rademacher**


**Reviewed by Kelly D. Alley**

What resonates after reading Anne Rademacher’s new book, Reigning the River, about the troubled Bagmati and Bishnumati rivers of Kathmandu is its opening story. In this, members of a local rally are walking along the banks of an urban rivulet, reflecting on the modern history of this city and its lack of good governance and river ecology. To investigate the problem of river decline from a number of perspectives, the author sets out to explore what she calls urban ecologies as they are played out in the capital of Kathmandu. The book walks through a turbulent twenty years of Kathmandu’s history and outlines the political crises, human settlements and resettlements, and global reaches of river restoration discourses. She orients and frames this journey by identifying three narratives of urban ecology.

Rademacher traces out the political and environmental transformations that together impact and create the degraded reaches of the Bagmati and Bishnumati rivers. The book highlights the networks of professional activists and bureaucrats that are involved in talking about river
restoration and sketches the practices that create a lively
but ultimately ineffective engagement with these rivers. Rademacher portrays a fascinating but depressing view
of a country frustrated by the hubris of international
development and an unstable and visionless leadership; in
this the population progressively loses its cultural lifeline to
important water resources. She explains how urban ecology
must be defined against the stresses of a population that has
been destabilized by violence and the vagaries of power. She
convincingly shows that top-down development projects,
employing an army of foreign consultants and well-wishers,
ends up doing very little to keep a sacred river alive. The
book is eloquently argued with substantial references to
theoretical sources and connections. But in some places, the
ethnography presents its data only loosely and leaves the
reader frustrated by a lack of additional information.

In the book, Rademacher elaborates three frames for
knowing river decline as a problem and for thinking about
solutions (p.59). These are: 1) the official frame based on
studies, policy and development plans; 2) the frame focused
on human rights and foregrounding the needs of landless
urban settlers and 3) the frame that emphasizes the loss of
culture and ecology. In short these are: the state-development
narrative; the housing-focused narrative; and the culturally
focused narrative (p.59), and each produce collaborations
and oppositions. The author approaches this case of river
decline to study how urban nature and social life are mutually
produced, reinforced and changed by state and development
experts, cultural heritage activists, and housing advocates for
poor migrants.

Rademacher explains that the official frame uses river
basin reports, water quality studies, geomorphological
analysis, and wastewater impact assessments to define the
river’s biophysical degradation. These documents note
the cultural loss that follows biophysical degradation, and
recognize that religious uses of river water are now only a
shadow of their former appeal (p.74). She shows convincingly
that such reports, produced for those with the presumed
authority to solve the river’s problems, belie a political
stability and vision that is never achieved.

In the second narrative, housing advocates put
inadequate shelter at the core of the river problem and
consider environmental stresses an unfortunate consequence.
Growing squatter settlements represent a lack of housing
rights, an economic periphery surviving on the last bit of
untitled land along the unstable riverbank. Rademacher
notes that the simultaneous growth of urban sukumbasi
(landless poor) settlements and urban river degradation
facilitated the urban (elite? middle class?) belief of a causal
link between the two (p.79). This obviously obscures an
array of drivers of river decline. Housing advocates called
for upgrading sukumbasi settlements and improving public
health, education and sanitation, foregrounding housing
rights in the discussion of river restoration.

The third frame, the cultural restorationist narrative,
presents a few established public voices that eschew
the development paradigm and valorize a lost Bagmati
civilization (p.84). For one resident, this loss is a cultural
and political problem of forgetting the river’s divine origins.
However, in this portrayal of several residents’ views and
positions, there is no substantive description of the former
Bagmati complex in myth or geography, and the reader
misses a fuller understanding of the religious occupations
once connected to temples and ghats or their changes over
the last twenty years. Unfortunately what survives of this
group today is not heard in this account, nor are the views of
other kinds of “nature-loving” populations such as trekkers
and tour agents.

After outlining these frames, Rademacher proceeds to
outline Nepal’s turbulent political history from the massacre
of the royal family and subsequent political jockeying to the
emergency impasse. In the midst of the emergency the miracle
of river cleanliness appears. A wastewater channel creates
the illusion of ecological improvement and beautification but
represents only the feeble reach of state control. The so-called
miracle at Pashupatinath was an engineering trick giving the
appearance of cleaning but only diverting wastewater to a
downstream re-entry point.

In following, the author details ‘emergency ecology’ as
a time of monarchical and state crises. After the massacre
of the royal family and during the ongoing war against
the Maoist insurgency, the city landscape underwent
further transformation. City spaces were demolished and
in some places rebuilt as symbols of state control. This
was accomplished in conjunction with crisis events or in
preparation for conferences of global or regional importance.
In the name of preparing for the SAARC conference, several
squatter (sukumbasi) settlements were demolished along the
riverbank. Rademacher notes the program of making the city
“clean for guests” as an important pretense of power and it
would be interesting to note the history and frequency of this
government strategy. Major crises and international events
function as justifications for rapid urban change (“renewal”).
As she puts it, the state is “freed to act” by the emergency.
This is a reminder of Naomi Klein’s Shock Doctrine and
Gregory Button’s Disaster Culture, two books that lay out
rapid structural changes at moments of destabilization and
disorder. In this case, the ongoing emergency provided an
opportunity for demolitions along the riverbank. After a long
period of ineffectual notices, the sukumbasi settlements were
removed “all of a sudden,” startling even the anthropologist.
Shortly after the demolitions, the state and urban elite could
claim cleanup success (p.123).

The author refers to these rapid changes as ecologies
of invasion and offers official and popular representations
of Kathmandu’s sukumbasi as they lived amidst political
instability. The migrants’ proximity to the river naturalized
them as a cause and aspect of river degradation. Although
the river squatters are introduced as victims of marginalization
in this disturbing puzzle of neglect, the reader does not
learn much about them or get to know their stories and predicaments in this book. Moreover, the particular examples of invasion are not linked or compared in any way to the many cases of riverbank demolition across Asia and especially in India and Bangladesh.

The final chapter returns to the cultural narrative and provides a disappointing discussion of several topics of interest among the resident non-governmental organizations. Although the chapter makes clear that the global reach of the riverscape is twisted and tangled in politics and the hubris of development communities, in several places the discussion appears weak in supporting evidence and the ethnographic journey seems rather pointless. The discussion of visions of pillars appears trivial even though it was an important part of the cultural narrative. On p. 167 for example, the discussion of the river rafting awareness event ended without understanding what citizens think about using the river as a dumpsite. The statements of residents and primary data on their discussions and stewardship activities are thinly applied in the writing and in some places bogged down by repetitions of summary and theoretical statements.

I finish the book without a clear sense of what urban ecology means apart from the position points of several key actors. While the author points attention to the way river degradation is framed, debated and made meaningful, to the range of processes through which degradation is engaged as an ecological problem in time and space, the book ends up overusing the notion of urban ecology. After reading about so many ecologies I just want to get away from the term altogether. This is unfortunate, for these rivers are directly in the interests of human communities, and the broader phenomenon of water stress will impact the provisioning of water for fundamental needs. In this way the book could end on that vital note, since it leaves the reader with unanswered questions that are indeed important. Can an urban river be anything more than a wastewater drain? Should those water supplies be rendered completely unusable for clean water needs? Since restoration is only anticipated at this ending, and not guided in any emancipatory way by another vision, we can only assume that such a possibility is not yet seen. And in the absence of such we carry along with the despair and anxiety of that first riverbank tour.

REFERENCES

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UNDERSTANDING MOUNTAIN POVERTY IN THE HINDU KUSH-HIMALAYAS: REGIONAL REPORT FOR AFGHANISTAN, BANGLADESH, BHUTAN, CHINA, INDIA, MYANMAR, NEPAL, AND PAKISTAN

KIRAN HUNZAI, JEAN-YVES GERLITZ, AND BRIGITTE HOERMANN


REVIEWED BY JOHN METZ

This is an ambitious and beautifully presented report which seeks to define and explain poverty in the mountainous parts of the countries of the broadly defined Hindu Kush Himalaya region. The study’s challenge is, first, to obtain realistic data; second, to organize it in ways that are reasonably similar across the different countries, and; third, to analyze it in meaningful ways. Obtaining good data is a persistent problem, but the authors have assembled and analyzed information from parallel national surveys in all these countries, except China and Myanmar, and have presented it in a clear and attractive way. I suspect this will be the standard reference on Himalayan poverty for the foreseeable future.

The first chapter, the Introduction, quickly reviews how mountain poverty is considered to be unique and then briefly explains the methodology of the study. The subsequent eight chapters each summarize the results for one of the countries. Chapter 10 provides a regional overview. Chapter 11 presents the main conclusions.

The analysis is an advance on previous studies because it assembles comparable data from the mountainous parts of the countries of the region and incorporates into the analysis community infrastructure and accessibility information. The main problem I encountered is in understanding the methods as they are presented in the document, especially the sources of the raw data. Since outcomes depend on methodology, I will spend some time reviewing it.