

March 2020

Review of *Life in Himalaya: An Ecosystem at Risk* by Maharaj K. Pandit

Pasang Yangjee Sherpa

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Recommended Citation

Sherpa, Pasang Yangjee. 2020. Review of *Life in Himalaya: An Ecosystem at Risk* by Maharaj K. Pandit. *HIMALAYA* 39(2).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol39/iss2/26>



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the Andes and the Alps, the Himalaya (Skt., *him* [snow] and *alaya* [home]) cannot be pluralized.

In embracing this geographical area of nearly 3.4 million square kilometers as his field of exploration, Pandit acknowledges that the book heavily relies on his own experience from the Indian Himalaya. He recognizes that whereas some of the topics he covers in the book are strictly within his domain—i.e., environmental sciences—others are not. The topics outside his primary field of expertise, he writes, have been recorded as honestly as possible. The eleven chapters aim for “an integrated assessment of the geobiological and sociohistorical changes that have unfolded in the Himalaya over centuries” (p. 4).

The central theme of the book is that “initially the mountain shaped life, but later the life shaped the mountain” (p. 4). Following a linear timeline through history that spans epochs, this book explores four stages: the natural phase, the cultural phase, the mechanical phase, and the networking phase. The peopling and the peopled (Indian) Himalaya dominate the discussions in three latter phases covered here.

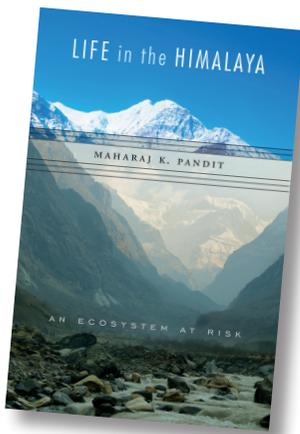
The book begins with the formation of the Himalaya and its subsequent geobiological consolidation followed by a discussion of the early days of human settlement and resource use, the organized deforestation during and after the British Raj, population growth, urbanization, militarization, road-building, and large scale infrastructure and developmental projects such as dams. These wide-ranging topics offer a regional scale view of the Himalaya from Pandit’s perspective, developed over decades of his experiential observation. The book concludes with a discussion of a sustainable future that necessitates information sharing and institutional

cooperation (p. 4).

This book will be useful for anyone interested in learning about the Indian subcontinent’s environmental history. It certainly does not cover all topics related to the Himalayan environment, but it covers a lot—some more than others. For readers interested in the Chipko movement, for example, this book provides several pages of Pandit’s personal account of how events unfolded, including his assessment that “Chipko in a sense was not only a pioneering effort at conserving the Himalayan forests but also a symbol of the culmination of the cultural phase of the Himalaya” (p. 9). Readers interested in dams and road-building efforts (or lack thereof) in Nepal or Bhutan will not find much.

The interweaving of different sciences with the sociohistorical, anchored in the Himalayan people’s concern for sustainable futures, marks a refreshing, long-awaited turn in the field of Himalayan environmental studies. In Chapter Five, for example, readers will find an assessment of evidences from genetic, archaeological, linguistic, and historical studies to discuss the earliest routes of human migration in the Himalayan-Tibetan landscape. The role of yaks in sustaining lives in the highest elevations is also highlighted.

It does not go unnoticed that the author begins every chapter with a quote from different figures, including Augusto Gansser, the Buddha, Emily Dickinson, Iqbal, Kalidasa, Mahatma Gandhi and Peter Matthiessen. Invoking these different personalities and citing literature from different disciplines, the author positions this book at the intersection of multiple sources of knowledge. This, the reader will find out, is not by accident. His personal connection to the mountain and his career in environmental sciences and in



Life in Himalaya: An Ecosystem at Risk.

Maharaj K. Pandit. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017. 384 pages. ISBN 9780674971745.

Reviewed by Pasang Yangjee Sherpa

In *Life in the Himalaya: An Ecosystem at Risk*, Maharaj K. Pandit uses Himalaya in singular form as opposed to the widely used pluralized version throughout the book to refer to “the entire mountain range from the northern region of Myanmar in the east to the borders of Afghanistan in the west (p. 3). He points out in the first pages of the book that unlike

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Sherpa on *Life in Himalaya: An Ecosystem at Risk*.

polymaking spaces have contributed to the making of this book.

The Himalaya is deeply embedded in Pandit's visual memory. He remembers the dominant presence of a mountain outside the window of his childhood home in Mahind, a village to the north of Bijbehara town in Anantnag district of India's Kashmir Valley (p. 15). His connection to the mountain also comes from the relationships with the men and women living under its omnipresent silhouette. He describes that they "experienced the benevolence of the mountain as an eternal provider" (p. 16).

The book concludes with the networking phase. In his last chapter, Pandit emphasizes the need for synergies among individuals, institutions, and the ideal of a safe operating space for the Himalaya. He envisions that space as one where the capacity of the population of nearly 1.5 billion who live in the river basins of the Himalayan rivers and depend on natural resources and the resource generating capacity of the mountains are not undermined or uncompromised (p. 13).

In the final section of the book, Pandit recalls what he had suggested earlier, "If the people of the Himalaya were more aware of the geological vulnerability and ecological fragility of their mountain home, they would surely force more compliance of laws and regulations to protect it. India and other affected countries should include in their school curricula

basic knowledge of the geology and ecology of the Himalayas. If students are taught about their environment, they will feel more connected to the land and be more aware of its pulse" (Pandit 2013, p. 283).

Statements like this force the reader to wonder about its implications: 1) Who defines what constitutes geological vulnerability and ecological fragility; 2) Whose mountain home are we talking about; 3) Who enforces the laws and regulations, and who are they enforced upon; 4) How does basic knowledge of the geology and ecology of the Himalaya in school curricula inculcate more connection to the land and its pulse, and how might that substitute for what Pandit experienced looking at the tall mountain outside his home?

While there are many Himalayan people who may not speak the language of geological vulnerability and ecological fragility, there are many who use the language of mountain hardship and unreliable harvests in the age of unpredictable weather patterns. While there are many children being raised in concrete settings away from their natural environment, there are still many who await life's modern comforts in the Himalayan ruggedness. It is places like this where the book is unconvincing. The lack of engagement with environmental knowledge generated from within the social sciences and the humanities is

glaring. The socioeconomic inequities and hierarchies of knowledges remain overlooked or under-addressed, for example, in imagining the ideal safe space.

As a redeeming feature, almost as if offering an answer to the questions raised above, the book presents the notion of sustainable living. Illustrating the impact of human activities on numerous ecosystem services, such as carbon sequestration, water supply, climate regulation, and biodiversity, through the comparison of pre-Anthropocene and Anthropocene Himalaya, Pandit argues that "[s]ustainable living instead of sustainable development should be advanced as the sustainability paradigm for the Himalaya. After all, we are stewards to a remarkable biome that has taken shape through millions of years of geological and biological change" (p. 13).

Looking forward, this book shows that networking, collaboration, partnership, and cooperation are what keeps hope alive for sustainable living in the face of daunting realization that life in the Himalaya is at risk.

Pasang Yangjee Sherpa, Ph.D. is an anthropologist from Nepal. Her research areas include climate change, indigeneity, and development in the Himalayas. She is a visiting assistant professor at Pacific Lutheran University, and an affiliate faculty at the University of Washington's South Asia Center.