

Review: Nature in the Global South: Environmental Projects in South and Southwest Asia

By Paul Greenough and Ann Lowenhaupt Tsing (Eds.)

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Paul Greenough and Ann Lowenhaupt Tsing (Eds.). *Nature in the Global South: Environmental Projects in South and Southwest Asia*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003. 428 pp. ISBN 0-8223-3150-0 (cloth); 0-8223-3149-7 (paper). US\$89.95 cloth; US\$24.95 paper. Acid-free paper.

In this eclectic and surprisingly cohesive anthology, the editors and authors invite the reader to explore the complexities within Asia's perspectives on the very concepts of *nature*, *environment*, and *man*. The papers published here were first delivered at a 1995 conference on *Environmental Discourses and Human Welfare in South and Southeast Asia*, and they have now been made available in this beautifully produced volume from Duke University Press. The essays might have traveled more easily under a simpler title, such as *Nature in South and Southeast Asia*, because only scant reference is made to the global studies paradigm that apparently inspired the more cumbersome title. Further, the contributors are not concerned so much with assessing specific projects as with introducing and exploring a broad range of Asians' ideas and discourses about the natural world.

That said, the essays here are, without exception, well presented and fully documented. Historians and environmentalists with regional interests will find this book a useful guide to both the sources and contours of contemporary environmental debates and developments in South Asia, particularly in India and Indonesia. For example, the foundations of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's compelling policy interest in wilderness preservation is explained in terms of her childhood attachments to animals and birds, including her experiences as a youthful political prisoner of the British during the 1942 "Quit India" campaign. The *cultivation system* of agrarian development introduced by Dutch administrators in 19th century Java is examined as a system that first penalized peasant relocation and later, in the early 20th century, produced officially sponsored internal peasant migrations to the outer islands of the Dutch Indies archipelago, with attendant cultural and environmental consequences.

Vivid writing and creative styling, including case studies, an imaginary visit to a future museum, and a dialogue between an "Author" and a "Critic," set a fast pace, and fascinating discussions abound. Three essays merit special mention. Historical, religious, and linguistic cues to the cultural locus of

forests in the South and Southeast Asian mind is treated in a learned piece by Michael R. Dove. A delightful if debatable contribution from editor Paul Greenough delineates a "co-contextual" comparison between South Asian programs of the 1970s to eradicate smallpox and to save the wild tiger population. Susan Darlington details the role of Thailand's contemporary Buddhist monks in developing rituals that bind villagers to their forested surroundings in a community of mutually respectful spirits. She notes that the monks have incorporated religious, economic, and cultural factors in a specifically Thai "alternative vision of environmentalism," a phrase which captures the essence of this volume.

This work also has the merit, increasingly unusual for such anthologies, of including a cumulative index. It also includes full footnoting after each individual essay, the placement of which is a great aid to readers. Extensive citations appear not to have been sacrificed in the interest of saving space.

An overemphasis on metropolitan South Asia and maritime Southeast Asia is one of the volume's few weaknesses. Only one article deals with Thailand in any depth, and mainland Malaysia is treated only cursorily. Pakistan, Nepal, Burma, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia make virtually no appearance. There is also little here on urban environmental challenges, and none of the Southeast Asian city-states (Singapore, Hong Kong, Macao) is mentioned in the index.

Nonetheless this is a pathbreaking work because of its original and detailed explorations of environmental discourses in South and Southeast Asia. Scholars and advanced students both of the region and of modern environmentalism would do well to consult it. Because of the dearth of English language materials concerned at such a complex level with local Asian debates on environmental issues, libraries with major collections in South Asian and Southeast Asian studies, particularly India and Indonesia, should acquire this volume. It is also recommended for interested general readers, since the editors have ensured that they can engage with this volume's intriguing environmental topics without confronting heavy, overly academic language.

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