

## **Review: The Kuhls of Kangra: Community Managed Irrigation in the Western Himalaya**

By J.M. Baker

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J.M. Baker. *The Kuhls of Kangra: Community Managed Irrigation in the Western Himalaya*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005. 272 pp  
ISBN: 0-295-98491-0. US\$40.00. (cloth over boards).

Mark Baker joins an illustrious group of scholars who study the management of successful common property resource institutions across the globe. Indigenously crafted and long enduring irrigation systems hold a strong fascination for such academicians who have by and large founded their work on collective action and rational choice theories. In a captivating account of the *kuhl* irrigation systems in the Kangra Valley in Himachal Pradesh state, India, Baker chooses to depart from this trend. He seeks explanations for the resilience of these institutions to physical shock and socio-economic change in the larger historical, economic and more significantly, socio-cultural context within which these institutions function.

Paying careful attention to the region's unique physical terrain as a flood plain river valley, "unusually large for a mountainous region" (p 200) and dependent on Himalayan snow-melt during the crucial pre-monsoon sowing season, Baker proceeds to integrate these observations with the evolution of local culture and its norms of trust and reciprocity. Cultural geographers will particularly appreciate his elucidation of "Kangriiness" and how the agrarian economy's heavy reliance on irrigation waters contributed to the resilience of the institution of *kuhls* through a network of informal and interdependent kuhl committees and the typically *Kangri* willingness to assist neighboring settlements in times of crisis. His interpretation of the historical document *Riwaj - I - Abpashi* amply demonstrates how such resilience was molded over time and is outstanding in its meticulous documentation of the cultural and magico-religious rituals, typical to the region and exemplifying the close relationship between water and livelihood.

Development theorists and students of political science will also find his commentary on state-making efforts since pre-colonial times to be revealing. Baker unravels the historical compulsions that drove successive governments in Kangra towards the promotion, indeed consolidation, of the *kuhl* network. In an era that celebrates conscious decentralization of governance, he explains how successive regional governments actively supported the functioning and maintenance of these irrigation canals

through generous provision of money and manpower – as a means to consolidating their own legitimacy, more especially in stressful times of natural calamity.

The recent integration of the valley's population with the market economy and the imminent threat it poses to the resilience of the network does not escape Baker's attention. He notes with considerable concern the rapid decline in the willingness of local households to provide for voluntary labor for *kuhl* maintenance. Again while he documents how local communities resist this process of change by moving towards formal and legally recognized *kuhl* committees, complete with state-funding for mercenary labor as well as meticulous record keeping, Baker also draws attention to the decline in the legitimacy of the much revered *Kohli* or the traditional water-master. Kangri agriculture, isolated in the physical confines of the Himalayan foothills, still remains a largely subsistence economy, however and it is in the continuity of this subsistence that hope for resilience in the future seems to lie.

Though strongly recommend to scholars of common property resource, this book will prove a useful compendium to both specialists and lay readers interested in the documentation of institutional change under the growing pressures of modernity, in particular with a precious natural commodity like water.

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