

Review: Ecological Nationalisms: Nature, Livelihoods and Identities in South Asia

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One must commence by pointing to the ambitious, and largely effective, task undertaken by the editors and authors of this volume. It sets out to examine the relationship between the environment, its control and management, economic and cultural values and concepts of national identity. Essentially, it is a series of eleven separate case studies each based in a specific region or community. Thus the attempt to look at issues in national identity becomes replaced by a complex series of community identities. Further, even community identities are subject to a range of change processes, many of them initiated by colonialism and post-colonial ideas. The preface and introductory chapter both endeavour to provide an overview, but not surprisingly, the complexity of situations examined in the case studies makes the integrated overview a very difficult problem in itself.

The cultural diversity of South Asia, that is, the Indian sub-continent ensures that there is great diversity among the case studies. From my personal perspective the way in which it emphasizes this diversity is particularly important. All too often modern western countries and many non-governmental organisations propose or recommend relatively stereotyped strategies. This book makes it clear why many such strategies are not effectively implemented. It points to the need for culturally aware and sensitive proposals that simply assist nations or communities to develop creative strategies based firmly in their own culture.

All authors are clearly sensitive to the fact that nature conservation and management is almost inevitably contested and conflictual. Again this should alert us to the need for continuing negotiation and adjustment in management regimes. However, few regions of the world would have the extent and openness of

diversity and potential conflict which characterizes the Indian subcontinent. Nevertheless similar issues exist and it is necessary to be sensitive to them even in the most apparently simple and unified situations.

Each of the case studies is detailed and extremely thorough in its examination. A majority have many footnotes and the collated bibliography comprises almost fifty pages. In effect, it opens the door to a remarkably wide body of research and enquiry. Most of the studies are not only very detailed but soundly based in an historical and conceptual background. The result is not easy reading but certainly provides an excellent base for understanding the interactive patterns at work in each of the areas studied. This is not a text book for beginning students; it would be valuable indeed to post-graduate students focusing on related problems and to senior practitioners.

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