

Electronic Green Journal

EGJ
Issue 26
Spring 2008
ISSN 1076-7975

Review: Environmentality: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects

By Arun Agrawal

Reviewed by Jeff Shantz
Kwantlen University College, Vancouver, B.C.

Arun Agrawal. *Environmentality: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005. 325 pp. ISBN: 0-8223-3492-5. US \$22.95 paper. Acid-free paper.

In the early 1920s the villagers of Kumaon in northern India set hundreds of forest fires to protest the colonial British state's environmental regulations. By the 1990s these village communities had become careful and persistent conservators of the forests. This transformation in thinking and practice provides the starting point for Arun Agarwal's compelling and theoretically challenging analysis of environmental agency. Agrawal's study identifies a key aspect in the development of environmental identities and behaviors in the shift from centralized to decentralized decision-making with the communities in Kumaon and between the communities and the government.

The author demonstrates the rich analytical possibilities that might be developed through an engagement of thinking on political ecology with scholarship on common property and feminist environmentalism. The approach that emerges from such an engagement, what Agarwal calls "environmentality," can help to contribute to a fuller understanding of transformations in environmental thought and practices of conservation. Bringing together a concern with power/knowledge, institutional arrangements and human subjectivities, the approach to environmentality calls upon Foucault's post-structuralist work to explain the development of environmental subjects and practices that govern their activities. As Agarwal demonstrates, changes in the relationships between states, community decision makers and non-elite residents contribute to the emergence of new technologies of government, in terms of environmental regulation, the implementation of which is in turn variously contested.

What is perhaps most striking about Agrawal's work is the extensive character of his research. The author spent time in almost forty villages in Kumaon, interviewing hundreds of residents and personally examining the condition of village forests. His fieldwork was supplemented with archival research into local records to obtain a clear sense of changes in the relations between states and localities over time.

The most significant conclusion is the importance of decentralization and the dispersal of decision-making power and its impacts on relations between states and local communities, community leaders and non-elite residents. Of particular note is the

change that occurs in people's thinking, about themselves, their community and the environment, when they gain the knowledge and power to address a problem themselves. Agrawal notes that attempts to govern forests through centralized instruments or forms of regulation consistently provoke high levels of opposition from those who are dependent on forests.

Decentralized regulatory control emerged in the 1920s in Kumaon as part of the colonial state's attempt to quell the violent opposition of local residents. The decentralization of environmental regulation involved changes in three relationships that form the focus for individual chapters in Agrawal's book. The first involved ways in which states interact with localities or what Agrawal calls "governmentalized localities" or centers of environmental decision making. The second relationship involves the emergence of "regulatory communities" that, through alliances and divisions within local communities, shape social environmental interactions within local communities. Finally Agrawal identifies the constitution of "environmental subjects" or people's development of new ways of thinking and acting in relation to the environment.

Through his innovative and rigorous analysis of the ways in which widespread participation in self-regulation, especially within perceptions of scarcity and need, becomes crucial in the development of environmental subjectivity, Agrawal has provided a work that will be welcomed by activists and theorists alike. At the same time this is, given its reliance on post-structuralist philosophy, a challenging and rather inaccessible text that will likely impact a smaller audience than it otherwise might.

Jeff Shantz <sabcat@yorku.ca>, Instructor, Kwantlen University College, Vancouver, B.C.