

Book Review

Living Between Juniper and Palm: Nature, Culture, and Power in the Himalayas. New Delhi (2013) (Cloth) Oxford University Press. By Bell Campbell ISBN-13:978-0-19-807852-4. Glossary, Bibliography, Index, pp. 392. Price: Rs.995/-

This book is a thick ethnography about a people, a national park and about the theoretical and political aspects of both of these. Located in the Rasuwa district of Nepal, it interrogates the relationship of the Tamang speaking people of the village Tenggu, situated on the banks of Trisuli river and adjacent to the Langtang National Park. The much debated problem of human vs. nature takes on entirely different overtones as the concepts of nature, culture, society and even those of human and non-human are deconstructed and displaced to show that in many non-western perceptions, such divisions are meaningless and the boundaries either do not exist as between nature and culture and human and non-human or are fluid and contested as those between people and objects situated on different planes of hierarchy. The author has taken care to examine every possible theoretical stand that exists, before settling for a 'dwelling' phenomenological perspective, like of Ingold and Viveiros de Castros and one that is inclusive of a political ecological perspective and focus on the global encounter between the top down 'developmental' activities and the bottom up counteractions of various actors on the ground, including people like the ones discussed here. The author has gone into a detailed and nuanced analysis of the interactive world of the people, one that is not based on a pre-given cognitive and culturally conditioned map, but one that is constituted dynamically through lived experiences and therefore transforms in relation to the changing conditions of these interactions. Culture is then not a given and closed entity but a fluid and continually recharged concept.

A point emphasized is that people do not have an either/or attitude towards the world as is characteristic of the modernist way of thinking but take on their surroundings (the word environment itself is debatable) in a pragmatic manner as they deal with problems of subsistence and survival. The relationship with predators

for example is not one of hate or love but of a negotiation for survival; a negotiation that resembles one human's relationship with another. Thus people who live in close proximity to the so-called wild neither have a protectionist attitude, nor an exploitative one; but simply one of co-existence and negotiated tactics, where winners and losers may often change identity. The differences between one kind of 'entity' human, non-human or super-human; and another kind, is analogous to the differences between kin and affines, one 'jat' and another, one clan and the other and all beings are enmeshed in a totality of sociality. Thus as the author puts it, 'humanity is but one of the many other intentional subjectivities in the environment' (p. 241).

Apart from engaging in and throwing light on a plethora of theoretical concepts and debates, this book scores a point in providing a thickly detailed ethnography of a people, that reminds one of the classical genre of anthropological works. How do the Tamang speaking people (the identity, Tamang, has also been rightly problematized) conduct their daily lives, how do they, as a pastoral people negotiate the 'verticality' of their existence, how do they treat their animals, what relationship do they have with the power holders of the state, embodied in the personnel managing the park, and many such aspects have been dealt with competently and with a great deal of ethnographic insight.

The political economy of national parks, their imagery, their role in the national identity and the global issues of conservation and environmentalism have also been dealt with at a more generalized and macro level of analysis. This work thus deftly negotiates the local and global weaving both within a relevant frame of analytical discourse.

On the flip side, the book is a little too long and some of the material could have very well been used to write another book. The language is meant for the academic colleagues of the author rather than for the lay/student readers, especially from South Asia. A little more lucidity and simplicity of presentation would have made this book readable for a wider audience. One would have loved to recommend this book as an essential reading for the undergraduate students, but its

heaviness makes it a little inappropriate for those whose first language may not be English.

On the whole, this is a book in the classical ethnographic style of anthropology, a valuable addition to Himalayan studies and the study of people in the marginal areas of the world. It is

also a must read for those who are interested in environmental debates and issues and an eye opener for the policy makers and power holders , responsible for making decisions regarding the fate of people and forests in the name of conservation and development.

Subhadra Mitra Channa
Professor of Anthropology
University of Delhi
Delhi, India