

Disappearing People? Indigenous Groups and Ethnic Minorities in South and Central Asia

Edited by Barbara Brower and
Barbara Rose Johnston. Oxford,
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This collection surveys the context of remote and relatively cut-off regions of Asia that are being drawn into the global mainstream. In the “nooks and crannies of a diverse and daunting environment”—the mountains and jungles of Asia—are people who have been “out of reach or beneath the notice” of more powerful elites and cultural groups, yet reflect their histories of interaction in patterns of religion and language. Historically, religion and mercantile culture have panned across their homelands and nomadic pathways; now, the imperialism of global capitalism and militarism are encroaching even further.

Brower and Johnston present a strong introduction that emphasizes how “embedded cultural meanings” (p 14)—many that are vital to livelihood strategies of people living in difficult ecologies—of half the world’s languages will not survive another generation. “Cultural nations” are fragmented by borders denying people access to “customary lands, resources and kinfolk.” The prospect of climate change can be contemplated to have “some of its most powerful, potentially catastrophic effects here in South and Central Asia” (p 15): the region’s glaciers are the sources of rivers that bring water to a third of the world’s population, and dam building and river diversions are emerging all over their courses. External interventions of the past have left troublesome legacies, such as hosting displaced communities, and conflicts in coming years are likely to threaten security, self-determination, and life itself. All

the big global powers are competing for the energy and mineral resources of the region, building pipelines, roads, and train tracks for their extraction. Communities’ customary rights are thus pitted against distant interests, but the book is not without hope, for various struggles in the sample of societies included show the “strength and vibrancy of culture” (p 17).

Paul Robbins writes of the Raikas of Rajasthan, who have much reduced pasture due both to mesquite trees introduced by foresters and to the enclosure of conservation areas for wildlife protection. The late Aparna Rao has a chapter on peripatetics. It includes an excellent table that is useful for seeing the array of different mixtures of livelihood practices among nearly 40 different cultural groups with nomadism in their mix. The peripatetics’ role of intermeshing regional cultures of the subcontinent is well emphasized. Europeans’ association of nomadism with vagrant criminality—an unfortunate colonial import—is noted as a barrier.

Judith Whitehead writes about the history of the Bhil people’s forested hills coming under pressure from the British Raj, which deprived them of resource rights. More recently, they have been affected by the construction of the Narmada dams, for which the displaced people have received paltry compensation and those deprived by the roads, canals, and wildlife sanctuaries connected to the dams have received nothing.

Arjun Guneratne explores the cultural relationship of the Tharu of Nepal with their jungle, and the jungle gods with which they conduct rituals of reciprocal care and respect. The story of incomers from the hills to this once malarial territory involves the Tharu coming under systematic relationships of inequality and expropriation of lands and use rights. This account tends to over-homogenize the immigrant hill ethnicities, as among the latter are similarly oppressed minorities whose own struggles for cultural recogni-

tion have contributed to the climate in which new Tharu associations are presenting themselves with confidence to the wider world.

Anna Schmid provides a fascinating account of the Dom blacksmiths and musicians of Hunza, who have reinvented themselves for modern conditions of patronage, such as tourist groups, and for community development projects previously not accessible to them. However, the connections and comparisons to other Dom groups along the Himalayan chain are not brought into view.

Rao and Casimir’s chapter on the peoples and cultures of Kashmir is simply brilliant. Written with a unique combination of passion, scholarship, and judgment, this discussion of the complexity of Kashmir’s history is elegantly presented, including the idea of *kashmiriyat*—providing a kind of “cultural security” to both Muslims and Hindus. In contrast to the tendency of recent years to reduce all questions of identity and conflict to differences between ethnic groups, Rao and Casimir show how the idea of a Kashmiri citizenship rose out of a combination of waves of immigrants through the 20th century, combined with repeated suppressions of democratic movements. Ironically, it is again through the notion of cultural security that the authors suggest that an easy pan-Islamic identity is presented to young men, while women suffer inordinately from ongoing violence.

A chapter on Afghanistan’s Hazaras notes the resistance against the Russian occupation as a turning point for Hazaras to become more assertive in moving to challenge oppression from the dominant Afghan society. This is followed in geographical contiguity by an excellent chapter by Herman Kreutzmann, spanning the border territories of the Pamirian Knot. The respective fates of Wakhi and Kirghiz are traced depending on their belongings. The attention to farming and herding responses to development policies in

all four states presents insightful contrasts and demonstrates surprising “far-reaching effects of international politics on peripheral valleys” (p 185).

Stephen Cunha provides a chapter on eastern Tajikistan with more demographic data and argument than others provide, detailing the incidence of famine after the Soviet era, why internationally illicit cash crops constitute an economic bright spot, and how development funds have led to a deterioration of inter-ethnic relations. Julian Birch describes the most westerly group in the collection, the Lezghi, crossing Azerbaijan and Russian Daghestan, focusing on education policies and coercive military service.

The situation of Tibet is dealt with by Christiaan Klieger, whose chapter attends to historical swings between dependence and autonomy in Tibet’s relations with China. Important observations are made about the effects on the exile community of making a homeland out of the territory of Tibet, as a means of national self-definition and as a cause through which to monitor China’s extraction of resources. On the edge of the

Tibetan plateau are the Minhe Manghuer villages, with a creole intermixing of Tibetan, Mongolian, and Chinese. Extreme poverty here is noted by people digging grass roots as a source of fuel and experiencing increasing water shortage.

Most chapters indicate where relevant films may be accessed and also mention websites for finding more information. Bibliographies, albeit of notably uneven sizes, are provided; especially small is the bibliography for the introduction, which should have included more suggestions for following up on detailed studies and high-priority topics. There could have been more discussion about the implications of the collection, and the question mark after “Disappearing Peoples?” in the title could have been expounded on: Is it that actual minority groups are falling off the map of the future, or is it rather that the old ideology of all humanity marching in one direction of modernization is effectively outdated? Do certain examples from these studies indicate an engagement with international rights and global touristic (including “mountain-academic”) consumption of out-of-the-way places?

Although the acknowledgments refer to problematic issues in the publication of the book, a follow-up volume that would pick up the strands and develop the core themes in a systematic and comparative way would be an extremely valuable and powerful contribution to the knowledge about, and plight of, such people. What are the signs of environmental governance being appropriately charged to those who know the endangered landscapes best? What are the more encouraging cases of cultural and linguistic diversity holding out among mountain and forest communities? The collection should inspire work to examine commonalities and differences of livelihood strategies for long-term wellbeing in Asia’s developmentally awkward places.

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