

Towards Sustainable Livelihoods and Ecosystems in Mountain Regions

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Towards Sustainable Livelihoods and Ecosystems in Mountain Regions

By Vishvamber Prasad Sati. Springer, 2014. 425 + 201 pp. £ 50.00, US\$ 129.00. ISBN 978-3-319-03532-1.

The abandonment of rural land and shifts in altitude driven by climate change haunt this study. The author has written extensively for many years on livelihood challenges in the Kumaon and Garwhal regions of the Indian Himalaya. While a reader might hope for a reflective, critical study at this stage of a career, this volume is a collection of prior studies, based on fieldwork in 2 specific areas, that introduces locally specific data but does not stretch to new conclusions. Rather, one feels that the slow accumulation of challenges in the montane landscape—not just gender inequality, political exclusion, difficult and vulnerable terrain, but also terrible new shifts that none of us anticipated 2 decades ago—has left the author somewhat at a loss for hope and curiosity. The resulting study contains some gems but is, in the end, rather repetitive and offers few new insights. Much of the material it contains can be found in other publications by the same author, and the overall quality of the volume is not helped by poor editing.

The text of the volume amounts to 150 pages, followed by nearly 40 color photographs supporting the chapters and 17 tables spread across 28 pages. The chapters alternate between substantive local studies (especially Chapters 2, 4, and 7) and less focused chapters that offer brief introductions to key problems in montane socioecological studies. While the author's long experience in the region allows for astute observations of change over time—such as the depopulation of hill villages, overdevelopment along tourist routes, and the collapse of apple farming due to shifts in altitude driven by climate change—that same experience is not brought to bear on social divisions in the region or theoretical developments in the field. Problems of gender, caste, and ethnic exclusion are mentioned but not substantively explored, and the voices of the author's informants never surface in his writing. Theoretical perspectives from the past 30 years that critically challenge sustainable development, the human/natural boundary, and classical development economics are wholly absent.

A number of the chapters repeat material published by the author; for example, the discussion in Chapter 2 on forest resources in the Alaknanda region (p 27 ff) repeats, nearly verbatim, material already published as a report to the Indian Council of Social Science Research (Sati 2009);

several of the appendices, including the extensive table on non-timber forest products, are available in that report; and the discussion of tea production in Chapter 4 (p 65 ff) repeats, nearly verbatim, text from the author's paper on the same subject (Sati 2008). Elsewhere, as in the brief eighth chapter offering a loose comparative framework for mountain ecosystems, it might well have been simpler to refer to more thorough existing discussions.

In short, then, this volume collects material from many of the author's prior works into a single volume. In doing so, it shows clearly the empirical value of long-term research in a single region; but there is scant material not published elsewhere, and the deep observation is not matched by theoretical maturity.

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