

Himalayan Histories: Economy, Polity, Religious Traditions. By Chetan Singh

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Source: Mountain Research and Development, 39(4)

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1659/mrd.mm248.1>

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Himalayan Histories: Economy, Polity, Religious Traditions. By Chetan Singh

Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2019. xi + 303 pp. Hardcover: US\$ 95.00, ISBN 978-1-4384-7521-9. Paperback: US\$ 27.95, ISBN 978-1-4384-7522-6.

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“The essays in this book explore aspects of history, religion, and culture in a part of the western Himalaya that today constitutes the Indian province of Himachal Pradesh” (p 8), writes the author. Singh is a doyen of the history of north India, more specifically of Punjab and the area of Himachal Pradesh (formerly the Punjab Hill States) explored in this book. His volume will thus be useful for scholars interested in the latter region, who may find it useful to dip into particular chapters adjacent to their own interests, although it is perhaps of less obvious interest to the general readership of this journal, for reasons the remainder of this review makes clear.

The introduction (chapter 1) neither engages with the sorts of historical, scientific, conceptual, or methodological issues that would interest readers of this journal, nor does it discuss studying the Himalayan past in light of the recent “environmental” or “planetary” turn in the discipline of history in our current age, the Anthropocene. The author poses, instead, a series of questions loosely allied to such matters, namely, whether Himalayan states lacked “adequate means to maintain detailed records,” whether “mountain economy and society [were] inherently incompatible with methodical record-keeping” (p 9), whether the cohabitation of “collective memory” and history in upland societies renders the disentangling of the present from the past too difficult, whether oral culture is sufficient for historical writing (p 10), and so forth.

There is, buried in the second chapter—“Defining Spaces, Constructing Identities: Regional History and the Himalaya”—some critical engagement with mountain

studies (including the concept of Zomia) and its application to the Himalaya (pp 23–33). However, it is perhaps a little too fleeting and opaque for the inexpert reader, and is not sufficiently brought back to bear on the project at hand (that is, upon a historical study of the western Himalaya). The next 3 chapters continue along these lines by examining identities and social and political organization in different ways—but with considerable overlap between each, to the extent that some restructuring and rewriting could have rendered the material more easily graspable and thus more effective. The next set of chapters are highly eclectic, ranging over an analysis of myths and the subject of peasant rebellion (*dum*), before several that consider seminomadic pastoralism or agropastoralism and the associated issues of transhumance and trade. The final 3 chapters examine polyandry, inheritance, and landownership; modernity; and urban growth of towns from precolonial to colonial times. There is no conclusion.

This reader thought the prose was too discursive and insufficiently precise to convey meanings and arguments clearly and in detail. This problem of balancing clarity with depth was compounded by the relative lightness of the footnotes and discussion of the scholarly literature and primary sources. There are also presentational issues: each essay is structured differently (eg some have conclusions, others postscripts, still others neither), betraying the extent to which this volume gathers together a loose collection of essays on a diversity of topics, rather than being coherently planned. Indeed, an early chapter laying out the area (with a map) and terrain, the various social groups (including their religious traditions and languages), and so forth would have considerably aided the reader in navigating the region and the subject matter, while also giving greater integrity to the book. Teasing out of the aforementioned thematic clusters a series of interventions on society, politics, and the economy—each brought together into a single chapter with a clear historical or other context, knitted together with a structured exploration of the issues at hand in relation to the regional and wider literatures—would have made this book less haphazard and rendered it more useful. The title of the book—*Himalayan Histories*—thus accurately conveys its contents, for each of its constitutive chapters offers a sketch of some aspect or other of the history of modern-day Himachal Pradesh, even as there is no overarching narrative arc, major historiographical intervention or historical findings, or methodological innovation within these essays.