

Northern Pakistan: High Mountain Farming and Changing Socionatures. By Michael Spies

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Northern Pakistan: High Mountain Farming and Changing Socionatures. By Michael Spies

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In this scholarly book, Michael Spies uses an “assemblages” approach to analyze agricultural transformation in Nagar Valley, northern Pakistan. Popularized by French philosopher Bruno Latour (2012), this approach to the study of socioecological transformation is a new research methodology and analytical position. Taking highways that move people, technology, and commodities; glaciers that trigger disasters, adaptations, and failure; institutions that manage irrigation water, politics, and social relations; and humans who seek livelihood and power, as actors, Spies introduces a new theoretical lens with which to view agricultural and cultural transformation in this region of Pakistan.

The book is divided into 3 parts of equal length. In the first part, Spies lays out the theoretical framework of the book and presents an extensive literature review. Although this part reads like a doctoral dissertation, it is surprisingly an interesting read. Spies surveys theories from various social sciences disciplines that explain the society–nature relationship and their cotransformations. This part will particularly benefit those who are looking for a pithy and absorbing review of the history of intellectual thought in the field of environmental anthropology and human geography.

In the second part of the book, Spies presents the political and social history of the region, describing how, in the 19th century, Nagar, an independent mountain state, came under the British and Kashmir administration, a status that continued when it came under Pakistani administration in 1948. The historical connection of Nagar, like its neighbor Hunza, with the dispute over Kashmir between India and Pakistan has kept it from being fully incorporated into the Pakistani state. Therefore, its people have not enjoyed the same political rights as the rest of the citizens of Pakistan. This ambiguous and liminal position, coupled with its geographical remoteness, exacerbated Nagar’s condition of poor socioeconomic development, compared to the rest of the country, for the next quarter of a century. The situation began to change after the 1970s, when the Pakistani state started extending political rights to the people of the region in a piecemeal fashion, first by abolishing the feudal state of

Nagar. National political parties started to gain a foothold in regional power politics during this period. A major change that followed was the construction of the Karakoram Highway, which accelerated the process of Nagar’s integration, and that of the rest of the region, into the Pakistani society and state.

In the third part of the book, Spies applies his main thesis of an assemblages approach to agricultural transformation in Nagar. In his detailed and precise account, Spies has done justice to this approach, demonstrating the integrated nature of society and environment with empirical evidence. The strength of this section lies in its meticulous presentation of ethnographic and ecological data, which allow the reader to view ecological and social transformations as a single process. Spies backs up his claims with careful attention to the data and acknowledges the limitations of his analysis with frank admissions.

The opening of the Karakoram Highway brought in various actors, such as rural development programs (eg the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme [AKRSP] and the Food and Agricultural Organization [FAO]), that brought new technology and knowledge to the valley. New crops, such as potatoes, forever changed the mountain agricultural system of Nagar, impacting pastoralism, as well as people’s income levels and social preferences. The construction of the highway resulted in parallel changes in other sectors of the society in a cascading fashion. For example, one effect of the substitution of wheat and barley by potato was that winter fodder was no longer available to the local farmers from their own fields. This resulted in a decline in the number of livestock, which meant a lack of farmyard manure to apply to potato fields. This in turn triggered demand for chemical fertilizers, which affected the long-term productivity of agricultural fields. This triggered boom-and-bust economic cycles because of linkages to down-country markets, made possible by the road that brought potatoes to the region in the first place. Spies presents a complex, but not overbearing, account, with clarity and rigor.

Improved accessibility to the region has also resulted in the diversification of livelihood opportunities, which in turn has led to a sharp decrease in certain traditional subsistence activities. For example, an increased emphasis on education has resulted in a shortage of agricultural labor; the activity most affected by this shortage is pastoralism, because it places particularly high demands on farmers. Spies, however, is sensitive to variable effects of roads and accessibility and their resultant changes. Villages that are relatively close to the Karakoram Highway have seen an increase in off-farm activities, integration into down-country markets, and changes in consumption and investment patterns. More remote regions have witnessed the reinforcement of some traditional farming practices and the abandonment of others.

Spies dispassionately records local views on climate change and compares them to data on topics such as temperature, precipitation, and ice cover. He presents a wonderful account of water management across the Nagar

valley and how each village within the valley has adjusted to factors such as climate-induced changes in water availability, demographic pressures, and political conflicts. He observes that pastoralism and overall livestock numbers in Nagar are in decline, thus negating the mainstream conservation narrative that farmers' encroachment on upland pastures is generally increasing in the region (Snow Leopard Network 2014; Hussain 2019).

Spies has carefully charted the trajectory of each major actor in the agricultural transformation in Nagar. He rejects the theory of endogenous technological change as a driver of socioagricultural transformation and presents a more expansive view of the process. He shows how the agency of human actors is intertwined with those of nonhuman

actants, such as glaciers and landslides, the "actions" of which are equally, if not more, important in shaping the course of agricultural transformation in Nagar. Overall, this is a wonderful book, despite the challenging task that Spies has undertaken in using an assemblages approach to look at social and agricultural transformations.

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