

BOOK REVIEW

Müller-Böker, Ulrike. 1999. *The Chitwan Tharus in Southern Nepal: An Ethnoecological Approach*. Translated by Philip Pierce. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.

Ulrike Müller-Böker's *The Chitawan Tharus in Southern Nepal* is the most thorough and comprehensive work on the cultural ecology of a Tarai people available in English (translated from the German original). It is an important contribution to the cultural ecology of Nepal and will be of particular interest to anyone interested in issues of resource use and indigenous knowledge and to those working in development and conservation, whose name in Nepal is legion. Müller-Böker's aim is to challenge a widely held view in Himalayan research that environmental degradation is due to the ignorance of farmers while avoiding the trap of idealizing the extent of indigenous knowledge of the environment. She does so admirably by documenting in exhaustive detail the knowledge of the natural environment – of soils, plants, forest products and so on – held by the Tharus of Chitwan, one of a number of sub-groups sharing that ethnonym that live in the Tarai of Nepal. In the process she gives us a finely detailed account of the history and development of the Chitwan valley, and a concise look at the beliefs and cultural practices of its Tharu population.

Müller-Böker uses the concept of ethno-ecology rather than cultural ecology to frame her discussion, defining the concept as one that “endeavours to get a hold of a society's store of knowledge about the natural environment, to penetrate into the “cognized environments” or “environments as understood by those who act within them” (p.7). This is not, I should note, an inquiry into Tharu cultural understandings of the concept of environment but an inquiry into how Tharus understand that which is already known to the observer or analyst. This point is explicitly made in the question at the heart of her study: “Are there any correspondences between folk taxonomies and the taxonomies of science,

and what is their nature?" (p. 7). She adds, "A scientific evaluative ingress into cognized environments thus always involves an analysis of the environment as carried out in the western tradition of natural sciences" (p. 8). Despite the superficial resemblances of terminology (e.g. "cognized environments"), her project is very different from the path mapped out for an environmental anthropology by writers like Kay Milton (1996), who have argued that insofar as "environment" refers to "that which surrounds" people, thus including "their fellow human beings, gods, spirits, animals, plants, and whatever else enters their perception" (Milton 1996), an environmental anthropology must focus on the delineation of particular culturally grounded understandings of the concept. For example, what does environment mean for the Tharu? Any answer to that question would have to deal with Tharu beliefs in ghosts, witchcraft and deities, which were as integral to Tharu ideas about the forest and their relationship to it as were the wild animals that dwelt there. Müller-Böker's project is clearly very different; in essence she is interested in what knowledge Tharus have about their environment as it is understood in Western terms; what is their knowledge of plants and soils for example and how do they make use of them?

The first four chapters of the book are devoted to laying the groundwork for the detailed enumeration of Tharu ecological knowledge that will follow in three subsequent chapters. Following an introductory chapter that discusses the concepts and methods utilized in the study, we are given two chapters that deal with ecological conditions in Chitwan and the development of the region. The endemic malaria prevalent in the valley restricted settlement by outsiders until the malaria eradication project of the 1950s, leaving the valley almost entirely to the Tharu and some smaller groups. Development in the modern period began in 1956, and the near-eradication of malaria and the development of communications encouraged immigration into the valley on a scale that soon reduced Tharus to a small minority. Jungles were cleared until most of the remaining forest survived within the national park; the largely forested environment in which Tharu ethnological knowledge was shaped over the centuries has been largely replaced by intensively cultivated farmland. It is significant in this regard that Müller-Böker's fieldwork was mostly in Padampur, an enclave within the national park now in the process of being dismantled and its inhabitants scattered to other areas of the district. A great deal of the cultural knowledge documented in this book is probably being lost to a generation of Tharus whose access to forests and forest products is increasingly limited and whose

dependence on them is being further altered by their dependence on manufactured goods and employment outside agriculture.

The core of the book and its most original contribution comes in chapters 5, 6 and 7, in which she discusses how Tharus perceive their natural environment, how they use its products, and their “ecologically adapted technology.” The approach taken is to assess Tharu knowledge in terms of its utility: how Tharus perceive the uses of different types of soils, what sorts of forest plants are edible, which ones may be used as fermenting agents and so forth. Particularly valuable are the long lists she gives of plants known to the Tharu, giving both their local and scientific names and the uses to which they are put. These chapters are also noteworthy for the extensive vocabulary she has amassed of Tharu terms for various aspects of their material culture. The discussion of Tharu technology is framed in terms of the uses that their traditional way of living made of the natural environment, but as I noted above, the forces of social and economic change are making themselves felt in Tharu communities (albeit rather more slowly than in those of their immigrant neighbors) and the importance of the natural environment in shaping Tharu life is perhaps less significant today than it was when Müller-Böker did her fieldwork and certainly much less so than it was at the start of the malaria eradication project. Indeed, her work helps to preserve a local knowledge whose long term viability may well be threatened by the rising tide of social and economic change.

The final chapter deals with the challenge posed to environmental protection by the Tharu traditional economy, in particular given the fact that a third of the valley, including areas of former Tharu settlement, have been included within the Royal Chitwan National Park. On the one hand, Tharus, especially those who live on the park’s perimeter and continue to depend on wild products, resent its existence and the constraints it imposes on their ability to harvest them; on the other, if not for the park, many of those same wild products would not exist in economically useful quantities. The general point made here is that while nature conservation in the Chitwan valley cannot succeed unless local needs are taken into account, the resource base on which those local needs depend owe their continued existence to the park. Local knowledge should be made a partner in the development and conservation effort, not seen as a barrier to its success as unfortunately, it all too often is.

In sum, this is a valuable contribution to the ethnography of Nepal, based on rigorously empirical and detailed fieldwork. It is generously illustrated

330 CNAS Journal, Vol. 30, No. 2 (July 2003)

with photographs and schematic drawings, and several full color maps of Chitwan that both supplement and enhance the text.

References cited

Milton, Kay. 1996. *Environmentalism and Cultural Theory*. London and New York: Routledge.

- Arjun Guneratne