

## BOOK REVIEW

**Chetan Singh, *Himalayan Histories: Economy, Polity, Religious Traditions*, (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2018), Rs. 895, pp. xi+303, Hbk, (ISBN 9788178245300).**

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In social theory space is represented as an inert domain where progress of the society is inscribed through time and thus history. Chetan Singh in the book (a collection of fourteen essays) under review gently guides the readers with this philosophical question with a subsequent critique of this ontological and epistemological position. Space in this theoretical proposition does not exist independent to our knowledge and perception of it. Space is socially produced. Any spatial unit be it region or territory is not just a “theatrical stage” of historical transformations but is produced out of the dwellers relations with space. Singh focus on Western Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh not only to understand how environment structured human activity but how aspects of history, religion and culture were incorporated in the social and ecological whole. The social space is constitutive of the “rational organisation of material life” or the profane and the superstitious beliefs of cultural life or the sacred.

Chapter I “Introduction” and Chapter II “Defining Spaces, Constructing Identities” constructs a theoretical correction to process of history writing on the Himalayas. Singh argues that paucity of written sources on the Himalayas inevitably calls for a multi-disciplinary historiography spilling over boundaries of academic disciplines of geography, sociology and anthropology. This would enable a historiography that takes into account both the material and “locally variant cultural forms” (p. 29). Arguing on the lines of James C. Scott<sup>1</sup> the author argues that the absence of written tradition gave the dwellers of this space flexibility to manoeuvre upon these cultural forms that makes it more interesting to look into these forms.

Chapter III “Defining Community” traces the epistemological connection between production of space and creation of community. Like space, community for him is not inert but created with complex relations with the dwelling space through a process of social thought. He argues in great detail about how different clans effectively created often contested local histories to give meaning and to have control over territory. The temple of the village god in fact constituted the most important institution via which a collective identity of the community was created. “Mythical sagas”, “supernatural actions of local gods” (p. 39) were enacted as signifiers for power; occupation and “theistic sovereignty”. In these mythological sagas the power relations and contestations among the mortals were passed off as contestation between gods. The landscape thus is constitutive of these cultural and material relations between humans, gods and nature.

<sup>1</sup> Scott James C, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

In Chapter IV “Geography, Religion, and Hegemony”, Singh contends that through cultural and material relations (elaborated in chapter II) rulers achieved ‘hegemony’ in the cultural domain of the subjects. This was possible through a “complex relationship between diverse local cults and Brahmanic religion evident in their territories...” (p. 56); since the time of geographical and political expansion of monarchical states like Kulu, Mandi and Suket among others. These arguments are further expanded in Chapter V “Nature, Religion and Politics”, to interpret the relationship between nature, religion and politics in the former princely states of Keonthal and Kumharsain. This relationship found an expression through the continuous “exchange between folk deities, peasant clans, and formal state structures” (90). Meaning making was inscribed through the symbol of the local god, both by the peasantry about the world outside and by the external forces to influence the former. The argument of Chapter VI “Myth, Legend and Folklore in Himalayan Society” is based on this intertwined nature of myth and history. The author tries to understand the material effects of myths that in turn constitute politics of the region. And as claimed by the author, that goes beyond the academic dichotomy enacted between written inscriptions on one hand and oral narratives, myths on the other.

As argued in chapter VII “The Dum: Community Consciousness, Peasant Resistance, or Political Struggle”, myths, oral narratives centred on the local devtas and the village level material co-operation were the cornerstone of organising rural life in the mountains. These collective consciousness and co-operation also induced by geographical factors provided the possibility of collective resistance or customary rebellion among the peasantry. Understanding collective resistance provided an occasion for Singh to raise certain methodological issues in academic history writing by de-marginalising the role of “living culture” or popular memory. This is necessary to not only to question the power relations enacted by official archival sources in history writing but also to enrich it by bringing in popular memory into the domain of history writing.

In Chapter VIII “Between Two Worlds” and IX “Strategy of Independence”, the author articulates on the histories of cultural and economic liminality in Kinnaur, Chamba and Kangra. In the case studies mentioned the conventional dichotomy between pastoralists and settled agriculturist often blurs as the state extracted resources from the communities/category of ‘agro-pastoralists’. This liminality was also evident in cultural domains of worship. However, here liminality often gave away to hierarchy among gods. The author then elaborates on the Gaddis as “best known transhuman pastoralists of the western Himalayas” (p.154). These agro-pastoralists were integral part of the pre-colonial state making as the state appropriated land revenue as well as other resources from them irrespective of their pastoralist or agriculturist modes of production. However, it should be remembered that (as argued in Chapter X “Migration and Trade in Mountain Societies”) this liminality was the result of paucity and insufficiency of resources. Combination of these factors including trade was in fact essential for the survival of many of the hill communities.

Chapter XI deals with the transformations in the social and economic organisations of these communities brought about by colonial encounter. In its forceful integration of the space and social relations into the same time frame as that of the coloniser, it not only altered the old

relations but also created new ones. A case that would interest the readers is to understand the restrictions on the pastoralist grazing rights with the imposition of forest regulations, as grazing was 'thought to have' pernicious effects on timber forests.

Chapter XII "Pastoralism and the Making of Colonial Modernity" and chapter XIII "Diverse forms of Polyandry...", underlines that the trade exchanges in the trans-Himalayan highlands and the intermediate positionality of many of the Himalayan societies encouraged them to be flexible and have willingness to deal with new ideas and institutions. These exchanges in the form of ideas permeated into the Kinnaura social organisation.

Singh continuing with the transformations brought about by colonialism argues in chapter XIV about the disjuncture between the "integral process of indigenous developments and those brought about by colonialism" (p. 263). The case in point here is the process of urbanisation in the Himalayas centred on the idea of "Hill Stations". The focus definitely is on Simla the way it got transformed from an uninhibited, forested ridge to "a city from where Britain's Indian empire was ruled" (p.266). However, this came at the cost of nature. Timber extraction reached an unprecedented level in this colonial project of urbanisation. Ironically, by the same centre of power that restricted access to the forests products for the indigenous in the name of conservancy.

The work is expected to contribute immensely to the current debates on interdisciplinarity on the Himalayas as an area studies or on the possibility of an area studies on the Himalayas, the plural spatial configurations of the Himalayas in the academic discourse and its impact upon the society in creating numerous ever changing social relations. It would have been enlightening if the arguments could have extended little deeper into the changing social relations into his spatial domain of analysis, especially on the changing contours of gender and caste. However, it would be an interesting reading for academicians working on the Himalayas, general readers, and for those who are struggling 'hard' to denaturalise the 'exoticism' associated with the 'mountains'.

