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THE KUHLs OF KANGRA: COMMUNITY-MANAGED IRRIGATION IN THE WESTERN HIMALAYA

J. MARK BAKER

REVIEWED BY MILAN SHRESTHA

In *The Kuhl of Kangra*, Mark Baker provides a comprehensive and historically informed explanation for the resilience of kuhl—the century-old network of collectively built and managed gravity-flow irrigation systems—in the Kangra valley of India. Baker elucidates how the kuhl regimes have managed to maintain their physical and institutional integrity despite recurring natural hazards, such as earthquakes, droughts, and floods, and recent changes in economic and socio-cultural conditions. He uses an inductive approach derived from common property regimes theory and the concepts of “regionality” and “socio-cultural embeddedness.” In doing so, he proposes a counterpoint to the prevailing understanding of common property regimes, which he believes “cannot predict why and how a stressed regime will either persist unchanged, transform to endure, or collapse” (11). Filled with historical facts and ethnographically rich narratives, Baker’s book ably illuminates the adaptive capacity of the kuhl regimes to cope with and recover from natural hazards and anthropogenic threats.

In six focused chapters, Baker covers a number of topics, ranging from rational choice theory to the impact of statemaking on kuhl, but the main strength of the book is his intricate insights on the regional specificity, contextual history, and social-cultural practices which have enabled the durability of the kuhl in Kangra. These kuhl are the lifeblood of farming in the valley, as local farmers have no other choice but to rely on them every year during the crucial pre-monsoon irrigation season and the winter wheat season. Baker believes that Kangri farmers’ heavy reliance on irrigation waters has motivated them to ensure the resilience of the kuhl regimes. Their adaptive capacity has developed not only because these regimes are governed by a set of

well-crafted rules and structures reflecting shared economic needs, but also because kuhl are the place where core cultural beliefs and practices are embedded and social relations are often expressed, contested, and reproduced. All these factors contribute to keeping most of the kuhl systems active and vibrant every year.

Kuhl regimes make use of networks of informal committees in which a recognition of interdependence helps promote trust and reciprocity. Baker argues that interdependent networks of kuhl committees help “reduce the vulnerability of individual kuhl regimes to environmental shocks by providing redundant sources of key inputs” (208). When a kuhl is temporarily damaged or water scarcity threatens, networks can provide a buffer in the form of “alternative, short-term, but crucial pulses of resources” such as labor, water, and expertise. Without these networks, kuhl might have died out a long time ago.

This book adds a new dimension to the studies in community-managed natural resource management by demonstrating clear evidence that interdisciplinary studies (in this case, political science, anthropology, economics, history, and cultural geography) can help explain otherwise obscure or puzzling aspects of common-property regimes. The issue of scale is often tricky, if not problematic, in such an interdisciplinary approach. Baker handles both spatial and temporal issues effectively by highlighting the relative geographic isolation and regionality of the kuhl regimes.

The most important contribution of the book is the way it places the persistence and change of the kuhl regimes within the context of longer histories of human-environmental interactions in the valley. Although Kangra is a unique mountain valley because

The Kuhl of Kangra: Community-Managed Irrigation in the Western Himalaya

J. Mark Baker

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of its large alluvial plains, extensive irrigation networks, and relatively egalitarian land-ownership patterns, like other Himalayan communities it is also undergoing tremendous socio-economic changes due to the growing influence of the wider market economy. Kuhl regimes are experiencing declining interest in farming, decreasing participation, increased conflict, and the declining legitimacy of customary rules and authority structures. Baker carefully documents the challenges, both endogenous and exogenous, faced by kuhl communities. He convincingly describes how the changing institutional (e.g., the replacement of the Kohli or water-master by state-sponsored irrigation users committees) and socio-economic landscapes (e.g., non-farm employment, labor shortages) have influenced some communities more than others. In general, however, the kuhl regimes of the valley have so successfully maintained physical and

institutional integrity that they have managed to negotiate with successive governments in Kangra to stay self-organized and independent, and to get support from the state for the rehabilitation of damaged kuhls.

Among the half dozen studies of farmer-managed irrigation systems of the Himalaya, this book stands out for its skillful integration of theory, historically grounded framework, and empirical evidence. Students and scholars concerned with the common pool resources and common property regimes in the Himalaya and beyond will find this book valuable.

Milan Shrestha is a PhD candidate in anthropology at the University of Georgia completing a dissertation on smallholders and land-use/cover change in the Nepal Himalaya.