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# Review of 'Dirty, Sacred Rivers: Confronting South Asia's Water Crisis' by Cheryl Colopy

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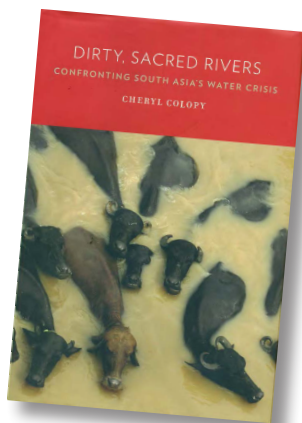
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one example: the “state memory work” invoked in preparation for the 2001 anniversary celebrations (p. 26) is directly relevant to the discussion of Debord’s “spectacle” and the Tibetan neologism *nampa ringlug*, “appearance-ism,” in a later chapter (p. 253), but each discussion revolves independently of the other without explicit connection. The problem of too much substance is a good one to have in an otherwise discerning book, but it is a problem that will likely keep less ambitious readers from working their way through the entire volume.

Fortunately, Yeh’s writing is so dense with consequence that even a single chapter or interlude contributes to our understanding of Tibet and development. The combination of ethnographic method and spatial analysis provides an excellent model for students of human geography, anthropology, sociology, and development studies. Anyone wishing to understand the micro-politics of state power in China would do well to read this volume cover-to-cover.

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### ***Dirty, Sacred Rivers: Confronting South Asia’s Water Crisis.***

**Cheryl Colopy.** New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 400 pages. ISBN 9780199845019.

#### **Reviewed by Sagar Rijal**

The Himalayans are the source of three mighty river systems—the Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra—that flow through South Asia and provide the lifeblood of freshwater for more than a billion people in the subcontinent. In the last few decades various anthropogenic causes—both localized and related to global climate change—have led to a large-scale crisis of pollution, degradation, and mismanagement of these vital arteries. In *Dirty, Sacred Rivers: Confronting South Asia’s Water Crisis*, Cheryl Colopy investigates the complex strands characterizing the water crisis along the Ganges river and its tributaries. It is a fascinating book, that rare amalgam of an engaging travelogue with cogent environmental policy analysis describing the depths of the water crisis and exploring their myriad causes. The product is a long, satisfying narrative.

The book documents the various manifestations of the water crisis along the 1500 miles trajectory of the Ganges basin. While the predominant Hindu populations of the river basin have traditionally considered the waters of the Ganges as holy and pure, the seeming paradox of its utter befoulment spurs Colopy’s curiosity.

Over a period of seven years in the 2000s, she traverses various locations along the Ganges river basin: from the river’s glacial source at Gangotri in Uttarkhand, India, then its tributaries in Nepal, onto the plains of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in India, and finally to the delta of Bangladesh and the magnificent Sundarbans by the Bay of Bengal. Along the way, we encounter locals whose traditional religious and social practices have historically been enmeshed with the Ganges, but who in modern times have succumbed to the temporal demands of more utilitarian and haphazard usage of the the river and its holy water. The larger themes of the variety of human interaction—spiritual, manipulative, exploitative, and destructive—with the watershed come to light. But also present in each stop of the journey are the ensemble cast of heroes, local environmental advocates, social campaigners and non-governmental activists, who are doggedly toiling in the face of intractable crisis and state neglect. One admires people like Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak in New Delhi who has dedicated his whole life to liberate the caste-based sanitation workers from their prescribed job of menially disposing human excrement. Another shining example is Mr. Bel Prasad Shrestha, a former mayor of Dhulikhel in the outskirts of Kathmandu, who was able to use his leadership and resourcefulness to build a local water supply system that remains in use. Many such exemplary yet regular individuals give the reader a dose of hope against

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**Sagar Rijal on *Dirty, Sacred Rivers: Confronting South Asia's Water Crisis***

the pessimistic reality of the present day Ganga.

Each instance of the numerous environmental challenges shows complex and multi-faceted localized, interstate and global causes and implications. The holy water of the Yamuna by Delhi is pitch black with pollution because more than half of raw human sewage is directly dumped into the river daily, like every other city in the region. Another issue common to the region's cities is the chronic water shortage due to rapid population growth and unmanaged urbanization. Colopy traces deeply into the economic and political roots of Kathmandu's battle with water shortage only to find that there are no easy answers even from the technocrats and hydro-experts.

Because the rivers flow across borders, interstate concerns and conflicts along with global water regimes, inform the bilateral relations between Nepal and India in the case of the recurring floods caused by the Koshi River, and between India and Bangladesh in the case of the Farraka barrage, built about eleven miles away from where the Ganges enters Bangladeshi territory, denying the lower riparian country its fair share of freshwater. Above all such concerns hangs the specter of global warming which could cause the glaciers in the Himalayas—"the water towers of Asia"—to melt and retreat, producing cycles of destructive floods and draughts, long-term intolerable water scarcity in the entire region, and environmental destruction of the whole watershed.

Colopy brings to life these seemingly disparate but yet interconnected manifestations of the South Asian water crisis using her keen and detailed observations, which are augmented with insights from local informers, activists and experts, although there is a marked dearth of the official voices from politicians or policymakers. Any academic or researcher working on aspects of environmental issues in South Asia may benefit from her accounts of on-the-ground reality. However, some readers may find that, just like the meandering river that it explores, the book hops from one place to another and takes many surprising and leisurely turns, chasing a number of interesting, even only tangentially related phenomena and personalities. Thus, there is a chapter in the form of a travel diary of the author's trek to view the depleting glaciers in the Rolwaling region of Nepal; another on an endangered-dolphin sighting trip in Bihar; and yet another on Kathmandu's traditional water spouts. However, as a work of narrative journalism aimed at an ostensibly Western audience, Colopy's work, often meditative and lyrical, humanizes the region, its people and their daily struggles in the face of rapidly changing natural environment along the Ganges basin.

*Sagar Rijal defended his dissertation entitled "In Search of Autonomy: Nepal as a Wedge State Between India and China" at the Graduate Program in International Studies at Old Dominion University in December 2014.*

***Maoists at the Hearth: Everyday Life in Nepal's Civil War.***

**Judith Pettigrew.** Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. 188 pages. ISBN 9780812244922.

**Reviewed by Matthew W. Maycock**

The decade long Maoist insurgency (1996-2006) in Nepal has had a range of significant and still unfolding consequences for Nepali society, particularly in the rural areas in which the Maoists exerted relatively more influence than urban areas. Throughout the 188 pages of *Maoists at the Hearth*, Judith Pettigrew convincingly outlines a personal and compelling account of everyday rural life during the Maoist insurgency. Essentially, Pettigrew argues that the civil war did not suspend social processes and lives in villages, but that the 'everyday' was reshaped in response to an evolving and shifting set of challenging and dangerous situations. In contrast to much of the existing scholarship on the Maoist insurgency that has focused on why the insurgency took place, Pettigrew focuses on the lived experiences of the insurgency in a Gurung village, Kwei Nasa, with which she has a longstanding connection. The ethnographic methods and person-centred descriptions Pettigrew employs provide insights that are perhaps uniquely possible through ethnographic approaches to data collection and analysis.