
In much of the Third World, discourses and practices of development have become an intricate part of the practical pursuits of individuals, communities and the state. Indeed, the very description of Nepal as ‘one of the poorest countries in the world’ is tied up with the larger politics of development. It is the apparent lack of development that makes Nepal a favourite target for international aid agencies and expert interventions. Necessarily, the collective urge towards development-induced modernisation gets translated into the everyday life of Nepal’s numerous ethnic communities. Yet, the desired ends of development cannot be assumed a priori. Very often, development ideals come in conflict with a particular community’s cultural values. Put differently, the study of development is related to the manner in which various social networks, development discourses and cultural practices articulate with one another at a particular time and place.

Against this backdrop, the present volume presents an ethnographic study of the experience of development in the context of villagers in the Langtang valley inside Nepal’s present day border with Tibet. It elaborates the tensions and ambiguities that this particular community has been facing in the process of imagining and pursuing the good life. It looks at the transmission of new ideas and demands and their problematic assimilation in the community’s cultural universe. It argues that development has to be seen as mediated through a community’s values and aspirations, that is, its vision of the good life. Without privileging indigenous cultural values or positing a non-negotiable boundary between local community and external system of knowledge (such as international development), it contends that cultural conceptions of good life shape the ways in which development goals are formulated and the pursuit of development is experienced.

Development, seen as externally imposed rules and surveillance, reconfigures the villagers’ relationship with their homeland, Nepalese state and ultimately, the world. For example, the fashionable agenda of environmental conservation has led to the establishment of a National Park in the area. This was in tune with the demarcation of Langtang by the Nep-
alese authorities as a tourist space to fuel development. This means that Langtang must sustain a set of attractive qualities to conform to its touristic image. As a consequence, the establishment of the National Park has not only taken away the community’s traditional control over the land but has also subjected them to a new and powerful disciplinary regime objectified in the forms of the army, the police and the National Park regulations. In this state-led development enterprise, villagers have to be brought under the control of the disciplinary apparatus of the state and development agencies to stem deforestation and the depletion of forest resources. While severely restricting the development options available to the Langtangpa, such an enterprise turns these villagers into potential encroachers on state-owned resources and also future threat to the state’s agendas of development.

For the author, these contestations are symptomatic of the conceptual distinction between the two prevailing spatial constructions of the Langtang valley – the sacred and the developmentalist/touristic. Whereas the villagers’ perspective is animated by the former, the Nepalese state represents the latter. Arguably, the distinction is too neat and tidy even for heuristic purposes as if a pre-existing indigenous system of social and political organisation were the root cause for the Langtangpa’s ambivalence towards the development projects. There is no denying that development projects involve a loss of autonomy for the community. But then, that would amount to imparting victimhood to the villagers and treating them as the passive recipients of the state ideologies and the equally powerful international discourses of development. Like any structural transformation of society, development in Nepal entails wider contestations between the competing political forces over what sort of place/country Nepal should be. Nepal’s engagement with development is equally a saga of how communities resist or reject the externally imposed social discourses and how they impregnate developmental vision with local intentions and purposes to make their experience of social change culturally meaningful.

Also, it would be foolhardy to suppose that development is necessarily an unsettling experience for the entire community. It may have emancipatory potential as well. The decline of the local priestly lineage and the social and political significance of temples and monasteries may not have the same tinge of nostalgia and regret as the author makes us believe.