

Book Review

Review of *The Routledge International Handbook of Himalayan Environments, Development and Wellbeing*, edited by Ben Campbell, Mary Cameron and Tanka Subba

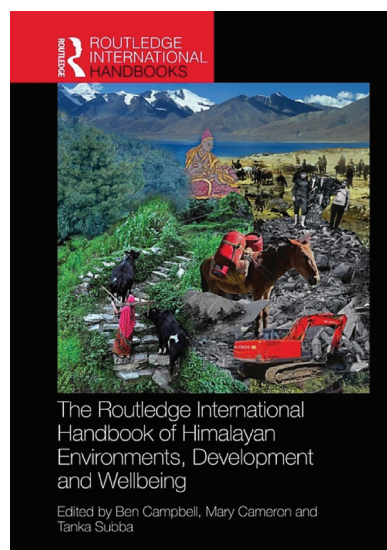
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Gurmeet Kaur

Department cum Centre for Women's Studies & Development, Panjab University, Chandigarh

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6588-3869>

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For a long time, the Himalayas have drawn a lot of political and ecological interest. Scholars have attempted to replace crisis narratives with more nuanced explanations of how mountain people navigate and are impacted by rapid environmental and socio-economic change since Ives and Messerli's (1989) influential critique of the *Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation*. Such scholarly work is now more important than ever due to the growing influence of neoliberal markets and the acceleration of climatic variability (Harvey 2005). *The Routledge International Handbook of Himalayan Environments, Development and Wellbeing*, edited by Ben Campbell, Mary Cameron, and Tanka Subba, is a significant contribution to this endeavor, bringing together interdisciplinary paradigms that document grounded experiences, political-economic changes, and environmental uncertainties across the Himalayas.

The term "environment" is expanded much beyond its anthropocentric application in the first part. The chapters address how nature is viewed, mobilized, and experienced in the Himalayas, not as a passive background but as an active participant in decisions about livelihood, mobility, and moral life, by drawing on historical narratives of forest frontiers, evolving governance, and ethnographically rich analyses of farming practices. The section's post-humanist sensibility aligns with the critical political ecology tradition (Peet and Watts 2004; Robbins 2012) and the growing "more-than-human" frameworks in environmental studies (Tsing 2015). By demonstrating how environmental knowledge is ingrained in memory, cosmology, and daily practice, chapters on glacier folklore in Pakistan (pp. 145–155) and indigenous climate knowledge in Nepal (pp. 213–223) challenge inherited categories rather than just adding fresh empirical data to well-known discussions. In this regard, the section effectively transcends what Agrawal (1995) noted as the ineffective dichotomy between "indigenous" and "scientific" knowledge, showing how these forms are entwined.

Nevertheless, several chapters remain more specific than analytical, repeating themes of climate vulnerability and biodiversity loss that have been extensively mapped in the corpus of current literature without significantly advancing the theoretical framework (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987; Robbins 2012). Although the discussion of conservation and its unforeseen effects, such as changes to conventional medical knowledge, is worthwhile, it could have more directly addressed the larger body of research on exclusionary conservation and its social implications. The section's overall argument might have been strengthened by a more thorough comparative analysis that asked how the governance histories of the Pakistani and Nepali chapters relate to one another. However, the section makes a real addition to Himalayan research by rejecting the nature/culture dichotomy and focusing on disputed environmental histories.

The second section looks at development as a daily struggle as much as a political endeavor. Li's (2007) idea of "the will to improve" is especially relevant in this respect; multiple chapters show how development in the Himalayan highlands is a technology of governance that creates and reorganizes social relations, claims, and exclusions rather than just delivering policies. The section is most effective when it grounds these processes in particular fieldwork realities, such as labor migration in Nepal (pp. 274–282), black cardamom farming in Northeast India (pp. 302–311), conservation politics, and farmers' protests, where development manifests as a dynamic struggle for infrastructure, land, labor, and recognition. Feminist critiques of development in Pakistan and India are particularly relevant, highlighting how development programs reorganise gendered labor, care, and risk exposure in ways that mainstream development studies have frequently overlooked.

The section's discussion of Nepal's state anthropology is insightful, showing how bureaucratic authority and development are mutually constitutive. This dynamic is consistent with Scott's (1998) analysis of

how states make complex social realities “legible” at the expense of local resilience and diversity. The section does not adequately integrate its diverse case studies into a cohesive account of the relationship between the Himalayan political economy and broader economic trends in South Asia or the world. It will be up to readers to synthesize how these examples relate to one another beyond national boundaries. A cross-border comparison methodology, such as the one that scholars like Besky (2013) have successfully applied in the Darjeeling highlands, would have significantly improved the section.

The third section is organized around the concept of wellbeing, which includes alternative development metrics, expressive culture, food systems, and medical diversity. Its strongest chapters place wellbeing within caste, marginalization, and community dynamics rather than restricting it to personal health results. Particularly noteworthy is how Dalits and occupational communities are treated, which links wellbeing to issues of structural justice and acknowledgement that policy-driven frameworks typically ignore. Important problems concerning whose knowledge counts and under what circumstances are raised by the institutionalization of *Ayurveda* and *Sowa Rigpa* in modern state projects; these questions are hinted at but not fully addressed in the chapters.

Although the analysis of Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness is a true strength and provides a consistent counterpoint to GDP-centred development models, the chapter (pp. 587–595) could have done a better job of exploring the conflicts between GNH as a state project and as a reality for Bhutanese communities. Among the most innovative contributions in the book are the last chapters on museums and song, which effectively recast legacy and expressive culture as continuous world-making acts rather than lingering traditions.

Overall, this handbook significantly advances an interdisciplinary discipline increasingly influenced by political ecology, environmental humanities, and critical

development studies, with Nepal serving as its main empirical anchor. Its most significant theoretical contribution is proving that environments, development, and well-being are not distinct analytical categories but are mutually constituted realities throughout 54 chapters and several fields. Rather than simply aligning with these fields, the handbook shows how Himalayan research can actively extend debates on liberation ecology (Peet and Watts 2004), development governmentality (Li 2007), and more-than-human environmental relations (Tsing 2015). This handbook goes beyond the extractive and infrastructure imaginaries that still dominate policy discourse by arguing that Himalayan ecosystems are experienced, contested, and morally freighted rather than just “natural resources.”

Additionally, the handbook engages in a meaningful dialogue with the larger intellectual background of Himalayan studies. By placing ecological, developmental, and well-being-related processes within the same analytical framework and treating mountain communities as moral and political agents rather than objects of intervention, it advances the field that was previously dominated by crisis narratives and technocratic development prescriptions (Ives and Messerli 1989) and later by political ecology critiques of resource governance (Robbins 2012). This shift is significant because it reframes Himalayan environments not as passive sites of degradation or intervention, but as contested socio-ecological spaces shaped by agency, power, and historically situated forms of knowledge.

Although the handbook’s focus on Nepal is a strength in terms of empirical depth, it also highlights the need for more systematic comparative research throughout the larger Himalayan arc, especially in Pakistan, Bhutan, and Northeast and Northwest India, where different patterns of environmental governance and wellbeing are produced by geopolitical constraints, state forms, and development pathways. By creating cross-regional and cross-border analytical

frameworks that the current handbook alludes to but does not completely realize, future research could constructively expand upon this volume.

This is an invaluable resource for academics and students of environmental humanities, Himalayan and Asian studies, development studies, and transdisciplinary area studies. It shouldn't and doesn't provide straightforward prescriptions. Instead, it provides intellectual seriousness regarding the ethical and political implications of growth in an area where social justice and ecological integrity are increasingly at risk.

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Dr. Gurmeet Kaur is a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Department cum Centre for Women's Studies & Development, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India. She earned her PhD from Panjab University in 2024 and works at the intersection of Women's Studies and Buddhist Studies. Her interdisciplinary research focuses on gender dynamics in Tibetan and Himalayan communities, decolonial and feminist theory, secularism and religion, masculinities and extremism, and the socio-religious dimensions of climate change and environmental issues in the Himalaya.