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Review: Reigning the River: Urban Ecologies and Political Transformation in Kathmandu

By Anne Rademacher

Reviewed by Matthew Fiala

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Rademacher, Anne. *Reigning the River: Urban Ecologies and Political Transformation in Kathmandu*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. 245pp. ISBN 978-0-8223-5080-4. US \$22.95, paper-binding, acid-free paper.

Reigning the River addresses the many issues that are constant impediments to real river remediation throughout the world. This book is an analytical reflection of events as experienced by the author during a volatile period in Nepal from 1997 to 2008. As Anne Rademacher recounts her experiences in Nepal, she also explores various groups' attempts to restore the urban reaches of the Bagmati and Bishnumati Rivers.

Extensive field research was conducted by the author concerning river interventions on the Bagmati and Bishnumati rivers. Rademacher's research method is unbiased as she follows the three main groups that try to assert control over restoration of Kathmandu's riverscape: (1) state and development experts, (2) cultural heritage activists concerned with restoring river-centered religious practice, and (3) housing advocates for the tens of thousands of poor migrants who settled along the riverbanks in the years preceding the period of study. Rademacher analyzes the religious, social and economic traditions and constraints of the past to address the issue of who should assume the symbolic and active power to make positive change in Nepal thus mirroring the state of the riverscape.

Rademacher's first-hand account describes the urban reaches of the Bagmati and Bishnumati rivers which are visibly declining with low water flow and quality, and nearly a complete loss of the cultural and religious values historically attributed to them. In the past, these two rivers were considered sacred to the people of Nepal; however, today's modern society has vastly changed the riverscape. Nearly all of Kathmandu's untreated sewage is discharged directly into the rivers, while unregulated sand mining in river beds and banks has changed the river's morphology in order to supply mortar and cement to the booming construction industry in the growing city.

Rademacher considers ecology in terms of social practice, and approaches these urban rivers as a study to show how urban nature and urban social life are mutually produced, reinforced and ultimately changed. She depicts her explorations of how urban nature was experienced through claims of cultural meaning, history and territorial belonging by citizens and professionals alike. As Modernist development and conservation megaprojects are occurring around the world, professionals must engage the simultaneous crises of environmental quality in metropolitan cities and how urbanization of these areas is occurring. An issue that proponents of political change in Nepal frequently pointed out was that environmental diagnosis failed to identify state governance as a problem for failed remediation. Before a political transformation

occurred in Nepal and State corruption ended, billions of dollars were spent on river remediation with very few, if any, tangible improvements in water quality, water quantity, ascetic value or any other measure which would suggest an increase in the quality of life.

This book would make an excellent addition to any upper level undergraduate and graduate course in environmental studies, anthropology, urban studies, urban planning and Asian studies. *Reigning the River* will enhance understanding of the forces and counter-forces of river remediation for State officials, activists and students alike. Rademacher attempts, and succeeds, in better understanding the interconnectedness between political and environmental transformation that ultimately occurs as the river begins to show signs of becoming 'clean'. The challenging questions and reflections she encountered in Nepal should be understood and applied to regions across the globe if we wish to achieve good water equality for all life.

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