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**BOOK REVIEW**

Lebensraum Nepal. Eine Entwicklungsgeographie. Wolf Donner, *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Asienkunde*, 226. Hamburg: Institut für Asienkunde 1994, 728 p., 142 Fig., 62 Tab..

For over a generation, German-speaking scholars working on Nepal have been referring to Wolf Donner's book, *Nepal - Raum, Mensch und Wirtschaft*, which appeared in 1972. This year, the author published a new version of his earlier study under the title "Lebensraum Nepal. Eine Entwicklungsgeographie" (Life-Space Nepal. A Development Geography). It is still the most exhaustive development geography of Nepal published in the German language. The new version has of course the advantage of being written by an author who has known Nepal thoroughly since the early 60s, and who consequently has the ability to overview and grasp the country's complex development process over the last three decades. Like his first work, Donner bases this study on a great variety of sources, Nepalese and foreign, and on publications easily accessible to a wider audience, as well as on numerous documents opened in the first place to concerned administrators and

development experts. It is not surprising then that the 600 pages of dense text are followed by over 800 footnotes (70 pages) which are sometimes even more intriguing than the main text.

After an extensive introduction that places Nepal in the context of global development trends and global discourse on development (the author discusses at some length the problems and the implications of the very term), with a historical and political overview, the book turns to such classical geographical topics as 'Physical Geography', 'Climate', 'Hydrogeography', 'Geology and Natural Degradation', 'Fauna and Flora'. An important section deals with 'Social Geography', containing data on population, settlement patterns, migration, education and health. These are followed by sections pertaining basically to the economy: agrarian geography, comprising agricultural patterns, irrigation and forestry; industrial geography, dealing with commodity production, energy and mining; then tourism, transport and communication; and trade. The book closes with a short but very dense and explicit chapter on Nepalese development policies, prospects and options.

Since the book is based not only on scientific publications but also on a large body of internal documents issued by various Nepalese ministries concerned with 'development', acute problems are often described against the background of official policies and hopes, as laid down, for instance, in the Five Year Plans. Donner convincingly combines reflections upon the demographic, ecological and economic 'givens' with analyses and discussions of institutional constraints, and the prevailing value orientations and interests involved in development planning and implementation on the part of different actors: the national administration and foreign experts as well as Nepalese farmers and entrepreneurs.

Donner's concluding remarks on the Nepalese future in view of global shifts in development policy orientations bring his stand to a short formula. His opinions are however made very explicit throughout the book. Even though his is basically a scholarly book, Wolf Donner speaks in the first place as a development expert who bases his insights upon life-long practice in international aid cooperation. As a development expert and a practitioner, the author gives a realistic picture of the Nepalese future (that, in view of economic and ecological constraints, is by and large more pessimistic than optimistic). The four decades of 'development help', partly imposed on Nepal by foreign donors eager to dispose of their funds are subjected to critical scrutiny. There are no easy solutions to the question of who are the 'culprits'. Much space is devoted to inadequate institutions, organisational failures in the national administration, and just as many critical words are addressed to foreign aid in all its complexity. Donner locates the major carriers of future development efforts in the 'people' themselves in the first place, strongly advocating ongoing measures of political-administrative decentralization. He gives numerous examples of the farmers' rationality (in spite of various development experts' claims to the contrary), be it in introducing new crops and techniques, or by showing reluctance to adopt certain innovations. A strong emphasis is put on the growing reservoir of national expertise; subsequently, Donner suggests that the young, well-trained Nepalese experts

should be allowed to gain more say in the country's vital issues, in lieu of foreign experts as well as over-aged power-holders in key national institutions.

The author is careful to give a differentiated picture of Nepal's problems, neither pressing for bombastic technocratic solutions, nor indulging in a 'small is beautiful' romanticism. For instance, concerning the tremendous transportation problems in the Himalayas, Donner refrains from condemning roads or air-transport as such, but discusses their advantages and reflects upon alternative means for the transportation of goods, such as rope-ways from and to areas with cash-crop production (e.g. fruit orchards in the north). His discussion of road transport is embedded in an analysis of the impact of roads upon economic growth in the various Nepalese regions. Interestingly, Donner remarks that very little research has been done so far on the impact of roads in the Terai area. Hence, his own analysis pertains to the hills, relying heavily on earlier findings by Blaikie / Cameron / Seddon, and Hagen and Thut. Similarly, the economic potentials of tourism and hydropower are discussed from various points of view; the options of economic growth are considered against the background of ecological constraints, of geo-political considerations as well as the unequal patterns of distribution of benefits.

The strength of the book is that it is an analysis, but also a well written digest of the major pertinent issues in the development geography of Nepal. It summarizes facts, provides arguments and counter-arguments, and can also be used as a statistical source. (Wolf Donner warns the reader about the accuracy of the data provided, given that the various Nepalese offices issue data that are very far apart from each other. However, as he puts it: statistical material ought to be interpreted in an intelligent manner by the reader him/herself.) One can argue with the author, of course, on a variety of topics, but it is obvious that one of the many strengths of the book is precisely that: it stimulates discussion.

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