

The Kuhls of Kangra: Community-managed irrigation in the Western Himalaya.

by J. Mark Baker

Seattle/London: University of Washington Press, 2005 (simultaneously published by Permanent Black, Delhi). xiii + 271 pages, tables, figures, plates, maps, notes, references, glossary, index, ISBN 978-0-295-98764-4

Reviewed by Charu Singh

J. Mark Baker's interdisciplinary study of community-managed irrigation institutions focuses on the *kuhls*, the intricate irrigational flows of snowmelt and downpour that traverse the Kangra valley in the Western Himalaya. Built both by the pre-colonial Katoch rulers and by local agricultural communities, kuhls have a long history of local management, maintenance and endurance even under ecological uncertainty, economic change, colonialism and technological pressures. Baker sets out to explain their tenacious longevity in the face of ecological distress and a radically altered context for communities' dependence on agriculture and kuhl-irrigation in Kangra, created by the proliferation of non-farm employment opportunities. In doing so, he challenges the dominant narrative of common property resource theory that would in fact predict the collapse of the kuhls under such pressures. Baker develops an eclectic framework based on theories of 'rational choice, social networks, state-formation, and regionality' (pp. 20-50). In order to address the lacunae in rational choice scholarship, he investigates closely the dialectics between state institutions; the densely tiered and inter-connected kuhl networks within a watershed; the historically informed socio-economic and cultural articulations of community and identity; and the ecological particularities of Kangra. His method ably combines participant observation, surveys, and interviews with the use of archival sources.

Through rich ethnography (and photographs), Baker lets the reader explore kuhls as an 'institutional whole,'¹ deeply embedded in the agrarian, social and religious processes of Kangra. Baker presents a vivid picture of

1 David Mosse, *The Rule of Water: Statecraft, ecology and collective action in South India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003: 1.

how kuhl regimes survive by adapting in the face of growing pressure from the market economy and the state: by shifting *khana* (labour required for kuhl maintenance) days to Sundays in order to allow even those who are otherwise committed to non-farm employment through the rest of the week to participate (p. 71); through the introduction of record-keeping in khana attendance since the 1960s (p. 73); the substitution of labour contributions with monetary contributions (p. 74); and the formalization of kuhl management through committees.

The complexity of kuhl management as a common property resource, Baker shows, is reflected in the figure of the *kohli*, simultaneously 'integrator of local knowledge and governance authority' (p. 68); at once hereditary office holder, religious functionary and also social negotiator. The pressures felt by kuhl regimes are also paralleled in the changes in the institution of the *kohli*, who in some cases has come to be elected and appointed, and in others, faces the challenge posed by bureaucratisation in the form of the kuhl committee. Further, by performing the annual religious rituals associated with kuhl management (p. 82), the *kohli* is also critical to the social reproduction of the community of irrigators in the region.

In an effort to move away from economistic, ahistorical and apolitical understandings of common property, Baker draws on theories of state-making and governmentality to make a strong case for 'bringing the state into the study of common property resource management' (p. 41). Following the historical trajectory of state-formation, Baker emphasises the ways in which geography, landholding patterns and lack of intermediaries have shaped state engagement with kuhls in pre-colonial, colonial and post-Independence Kangra. While the pre-colonial Katoch rulers' construction of some of the longest kuhls in Kangra inscribed and legitimated power through kuhls, the colonial codification of irrigation customs, the creation of new judicial arenas for the negotiation of rights to kuhl water, and the implementation of revenue assessment and collection systems set in motion irreversible changes in kuhl regimes. Baker's critical discussion of the *Riwaj-i-Abpashi* (Book of Irrigation Customs) reveals how state-formation deeply implicated kuhls as sites for legitimation and the formation of community. As Baker notes, the process of codification created a fixed written model for resolving future disputes: the text continues to be used for resolving contemporary kuhl

disputes in Kangra (p. 128-130). However, as the example of farmers using the *Riwaj* to their own ends to sue the Irrigation and Public Health Department of Himachal Pradesh in the late 1980s shows, state-making is a continuous (though usually unequal) process of negotiation between state institutions and communities of users (p. 131). In the post-1947 period, the most significant aspect of state involvement has been the formation of kuhl committees in 14 kuhls and the takeover of the maintenance of long kuhls by the Irrigation and Public Health Department. Interestingly, the records of these committees provide scholars such as Baker with an extremely rich entry-point into the contemporary management of kuhls (p. 142-144).

The strongest point of Baker's analysis is his focus on the 'regionality' of the kuhls. He conceptualises 'regions and places as being constituted by social relations "stretched out" over space' (p. 12) and attempts to locate the kuhls both 'within a hydraulically defined landscape unit' (p. 13) and in the historical, political, social and ecological space of Kangra. This notion of Kangra as a region is encoded and produced in several ways: in naming practices and contestations between upstream and downstream communities (p. 148); in the strong local bias against buying food grains and the high value attached to self-sufficiency (p. 60); in stories told about kohlis (Appendix 2). Baker points to the ways in which the 'Kangriness' of kuhl regimes (p. 14) is produced through indigenous ideas that in turn provide the semantics of collective action, such as notions of fairness and reciprocity; the importance of reputation; the ethics of access established by diversion structures between upstream and downstream users (p. 79); and the principle of acting in accordance with the principle of *bhai bundi se*, 'through brotherhood'. Thus, kuhls serve as markers and sites of history, memory, place and social relations.

In *The Kuhls of Kangra*, Baker provides a strong critique of common property resource theory, which is his professed aim. At points, however, readers may find that Baker's ethnographic and archival materials strain against the confined framework of common property, which also mars the style and narrative of an otherwise fluid story of meaning, history, and identity. As the title suggests, the objects of this particular environmental narrative are the 'kuhls' and not 'communities,' a particular problem (of agency) faced by scholars telling stories about nature. Though the communities enter Baker's narrative, it is only to the extent that they are

made visible by kuhls. In some places, Baker also appears to accept stories narrated to him by his informants at face value (p. 110, p. 146). Lastly, if the truth of environmental narratives is ‘political rather than historical,’² how do kuhls enter state-level politics in contemporary Himachal Pradesh?

Baker’s valuable focus on ‘region’ explains the book’s apt appearance under the ‘Culture, Place, and Nature’ series of the University of Washington press. *The Kuhls of Kangra* is a valuable addition to the growing body of environmental scholarship on water resources in South Asia. It will be of interest to scholars of irrigation and agriculture in the Himalayas; environmental anthropologists and historians of South Asia; and readers attracted to interdisciplinary approaches to the intersecting questions of nature, power and identity.

2 Mosse, *The Rule of Water*, p. 12.