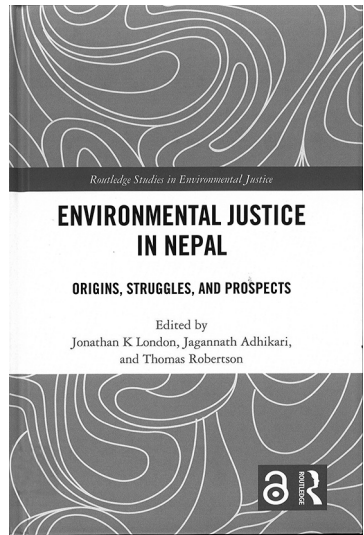


Book Reviews

Jonathan K London, Jagannath Adhikari and Thomas Robertson,
eds. 2025. *Environmental Justice in Nepal: Origins, Struggles, and Prospects*. New York: Routledge.

Environmental problems are closely related to the questions of social, economic, and political exclusion and marginalization. The editors of the volume foreground this relation as one of the study's main themes. Drawing on environmental justice as a framework, the volume explores how environmental and social inequalities are intertwined and mutually constitutive. One of the editors of the volume, London, interprets environmental justice as "overburdening of vulnerable populations by environmental contaminants, exclusion from environmental resources, and marginalization in environmental policy and decision-making" (p. 15). Additionally, the editors draw on the works of David Schlosberg and Amartya Sen to classify the components of environmental justice into distributional justice, participatory justice, recognition justice, restorative justice, and capabilities-based justice. Various authors also engage with one or more of these components of environmental justice.

The volume contains 24 short but detailed case studies from across Nepal that tackle issues ranging from climate change, pollution, and deforestation to conservation, urban development, transportation, and health. The editors recognize Jagannath Adhikari's work in the early 2000s as pivotal to environmental justice studies in Nepal, and the volume's authors build on Adhikari's approach, which examined environmental problems through the lens of social inequalities. Adhikari's essay in the current volume recaps a history of environmentally concerned social movements in Nepal from the



Rana period to the years of multiparty democracy. Adhikari focuses mostly on the struggle for natural resources and livelihoods by marginalized people across Nepal to argue, perhaps anachronistically, that the environmental justice movement can be traced back to earlier social movements, even though these movements were symbolic, resistance was localized, and even “passive” (p. 30).

Jonathan K London and Sudikshya Bhandari propose a new paradigm for environmental justice studies in Nepal, grounded in a literature review of past publications on the topic. The new paradigm builds on earlier roots in the environmentalism of the poor, integrating the urban-rural nexus and disparities, local and global concerns, and struggles for livelihood and against environmental hazards. Therefore, for the authors, such a critical and integrative framework makes Nepal not only distinct in the field of environmental justice studies but also a key site of scholarly innovation and intervention. Although this is a coauthored chapter, at one point, on page 16, one reads, “I conducted a systematic literature review of EJ studies in Nepal (encompassing 43 peer-reviewed articles, books, and reports) as well as interviews with ten prominent Nepalese EJ scholars.” This might be an editorial oversight. Jony Mainaly examines the concept of environmental justice in Nepal by analyzing four Supreme Court decisions on hydropower development, marble mining, brick kiln operations, and encroachment around the Fewa Lake. She highlights how the Nepali judiciary takes a very narrow definition of environmental justice as environmental protection at the cost of other principles of justice, such as distributive, procedural, and recognition, and calls this failure on the part of the judiciary to take a broader environmental justice approach a missed opportunity.

Part Two of the book contains five chapters that focus on land, forests, and agriculture. Srijana Baral, Kalpana Karki, and Kanchan Lama examine gender disparities in land access, analyzing women’s exclusion from financial resources, limited participation in family decision-making, and the highly male-dominated land-related spaces such as government offices. Highlighting the importance of distributive justice, they identify joint land ownership as a means to address injustices in gendered land ownership. Suresh Dhakal scrutinizes the interlinkages between landlessness, socio-economic inequalities, and the unequal impacts of climate change to argue that historically constructed socio-economic discrimination and vulnerability underlie the environmental injustice of unfree agricultural labor, such as

Harawa-Charawa. For Dhakal, linking caste, land, labor, and environmental aspects is important while formulating policies to ensure environmental justice for unfree laborers. Similarly, another chapter in Part Two by Madan Pariyar and Arjun Kumar B.K. brings together the issues of Dalit land rights and climate justice, highlighting caste discrimination as an important dimension of environmental and climate injustice.

Two chapters in Part Three of the volume examine conflict over conservation in Nepal's Tarai. Dhirendra Nalbo's essay examines human-wildlife conflict in the wetlands of Koshi Tappu by focusing on communities living near the protected area. His case study features the environmental injustices people experience, including landlessness, death, trauma, and livelihood losses. Lived experience, therefore, is central to Nalbo's conceptualization of environmental justice and injustice, and he posits resistance as "a part of survival, finding meaning, and (re)claiming place or territory" (p. 112). The chapter by Naya Sharma Paudel, Sudeep Jana Thing, and Rahul Karki also pays close attention to environmental injustices in the name of conservation against the poor and marginalized indigenous people living in and around the protected areas of the lowland Tarai. Their case study is a careful examination of fishing communities around Chitwan and Bardiya National Parks and how the evolution of protected areas has affected the culture and livelihoods of groups such as Bote, Majhi, Musahar, and Sonaha. To address the environmental injustices faced by riverine communities, they argue for moving beyond distributive conservation models towards a more participatory and inclusive process.

The uneven effects and recovery from the 2015 earthquake are the focus of Mukta S. Tamang's chapter, which investigates the social impact of natural disasters. Tamang's chapter is one of the two essays in Part Four titled Infrastructure and Indigenous Peoples. Tamang's chapter shows how structural inequalities that had already marginalized many Indigenous communities in Nepal's mid-hills not only distributed effects and recovery unequally but also weakened the resilience capacity of communities. The unequal effects and uneven recovery, therefore, highlight what Tamang calls disaster injustice, which has not yet been fully addressed. Empirically grounded, Tamag's case study faults historical social inequities for the failure of post-disaster interventions.

Part Five, titled Urban Development and Environmental Injustice, comprises six chapters covering topics such as health and hygiene, urban

environmental justice, cycling, air pollution, transport, and housing. Prashanna Pradhan and Bhawana Sharma shed light on the state of the informal solid waste workers and identify the work as an instance of occupation-based environmental injustice. Solid waste workers, already stigmatized because of their occupation, also face severe threats to their health. The authors argue that improved health protection and sanitation facilities are fundamental to ensuring dignified working conditions for the solid waste workers. Arnico K. Panday and Arti Govinda Shrestha's article provides an environmental justice analysis of air pollution in Nepal, focusing on household settings and the transnational components of environmental justice arising from polluted air blowing in from the plains of northern India. Sites of environmental injustices caused by air pollution include both the domestic settings where women are most vulnerable, and cities and mountains where the urban poor and wage workers are susceptible to disproportionate effects. On top of that, the authors point out that Nepal is a major importer of pollution, as during spring in Lumbini, two-thirds of the air pollution comes from outside Nepal. The authors conclude that physical scientists, too, need to be trained in socio-economic issues to properly grasp and address environmental injustice.

Transport injustice is one of the most salient forms of urban environmental injustice. Bhushan Tuladhar's essay analyzes existing literature and data to demonstrate how transport injustice undermines environmental justice in the Kathmandu Valley. This chapter presents four case studies from Kathmandu—"a donor-led road project with little participation from the government and community; a transport project that tried to promote sustainable alternatives; a community initiative to demonstrate a disabled-friendly street; and a local initiative to promote cycling" (p. 192)—to show what kinds of interventions in the transportation sector work and do not work. Tuladhar supports more sustainable modes of transportation, such as walking, cycling, and electric public transport, and opposes the vehicle-centric planning model adopted by the Nepali government and international agencies.

Parts Six and Seven of the volume, which focus on climate justice and health equity, respectively, each have five chapters. Sonia Awale examines the impacts of the climate crisis on irrigation water availability in the village of Phulbari, Kavre. According to Awale, the drying of perennial springs, especially after the 2015 earthquake, has destroyed livelihood options of

farmers dependent on rain-fed agriculture and small dairy entrepreneurs. Here, too, existing structural inequalities force the poor, women, and minorities to bear the brunt of climate-induced environmental injustice. Therefore, Nepal's planners need to consider existing inequalities while addressing the impacts of climate change. The penultimate chapter of the volume, by Marissa Taylor, investigates the social inequities of tuberculosis, a disease that kills 17,000 Nepalis every year. She stresses the role of poverty and poor environmental conditions, which force many Nepalis to live in overpopulated and hazardous settings, in the persistence of tuberculosis. The situation is then worsened by growing drug resistance.

The volume comprises contributions from academics, journalists, and activists, and covers a wide range of themes pertaining to environmental justice across Nepal. Many of the contributors are Nepalis and based in Nepal, which is refreshing for a volume published from outside Nepal. Of course, the editors deserve maximum credit for making the volume as diverse as it is. But one wonders what made such diversity of professionals possible. One reason is that environmental justice is of significant interest not only to academics but also to others working within institutional spaces such as media and NGOs. In Nepal, journalists and environmental activists have published prolifically on issues pertaining to environmental justice. The importance of institutions is also evident when one remembers that pioneering environmental justice scholarship—including an environmental justice bibliography and a separate glossary, both produced by Jagannath Adhikari and Sharad Ghimire (2002a, 2002b)—was done at Martin Chautari.¹

The collection is well balanced in its geographical coverage, and all chapters work at the intersection of environmental and social inequities. The volume emphasizes an interdisciplinary approach, as environmental justice issues such as health, pollution, climate change, and infrastructure development transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries. What's also refreshing about the volume is that it avoids victimization narratives and deterministic analyses. Inequalities are seen as historically conditioned and therefore subject to change. Nature's agency is also acknowledged, even though the focus is more on human impacts on the environment. Finally, voices from the margins of Nepali society show that environmental injustices are not merely accepted as given but are constantly challenged through

¹ I thank Pratyoush Onta for this observation.

demands for justice, equity, and dignity. With its focus on environmental justice, this volume is a notable contribution to the fields of environmental studies, social sciences, development studies, and law. While social scientists can learn a great deal about the environmental dimension of structural inequalities in Nepal, physical scientists will also, hopefully, be inspired to examine the social inequities behind environmental issues such as climate change, pollution, and health.

References

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