

# Melting Pot

## BOOKS

● There are plenty of books on the Himalaya and almost none that cover the broad sweep of their biological and cultural diversity. But this was my second impression.

The first was a 'wow' that escaped aloud and made my colleagues look up—my reaction to the sheer visual treat this book offers. No collection of photographs can do full justice to the diverse beauty of the Himalaya but this one comes close.

Bawa and Kadur explore the biocultural diversity of the eastern Himalaya—this encompasses the states of Northeast India that fall in the Himalayan belt, eastern Nepal, and Bhutan (leaving out the western and central Himalaya, which makes the title of the book a bit surprising, but that's a minor quibble). Several hundred pictures, most by the authors and some from other contributors, are accompanied by simple text that profiles various aspects of these regions.

A chapter on land explores the fascinating geological history of the Himalaya, noting how recent they are (70 million years) in relation to the earth's timespan (4.5 billion years!), and how they are still rising. Major eco-regions are described, and snapshots of the land, people, history and biodiversity are provided of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Sikkim in India, and of eastern Nepal and Bhutan. The next chapter on people describes how they originally came in from three directions

(north, south and southeast), contributing to an enormous cultural diversity of over 200 ethnic groups and a bewildering range of occupations. Brief profiles are given of some of the peoples: Apatani, Bodo, Lepcha, Nyishi and Naga.

These chapters are followed by one on plants and another on animals, and what is a welcome change from many other publications is that it's not only big animals that get the limelight. Ferns (their ancestry going back to hundreds of millions of years), cobra plants, orchids, rhododendrons, primulas, fungi, and several other plant groups are described and illustrated. They are followed by invertebrates (it's wonderful to see these tiny creatures get some attention!), amphibians, fish, reptiles, birds and mammals. There is a special section on the high Himalaya with its unique biodiversity. Several species rarely seen, or highly threatened, are profiled in the excellent photographs. The authors' special concern for conservation comes out clearly when they stress on how much of the region's plant and animal life is endemic (not found anywhere else) and how there may still be lots of species waiting to be discovered.

It is this concern that also underlies a crucial chapter on the challenges the region



**Himalaya: Mountains of Life**  
By Kamal Bawa & Sandesh Kadur  
(A TREE, ₹3,500)



faces—land-use changes, hunting, climate change, tourism, mining, tea plantations, rising population and poor, top-down governance. The authors repeatedly point to one of the biggest looming threats—hydro-electricity development—with about 200 projects being constructed or planned. A section on rivers, the lifeline of the region, laments their fate if all these projects come up. There is also some welcome straight talk when the authors point out that most tourism, including so-called ecotourism, is destructive rather than meeting its potential of benefiting people and nature.

The book ends with a plea to evolve a consensus on how development can be sustainable in the special situation of the region, grounded on greater research, understand-



ing and monitoring of human impacts, and on mechanisms of decision-making involving local people. Trans-boundary conservation between the countries sharing the Himalaya is also stressed. Unfortunately, other than the four-five pages (out of about 300) devoted to such general recommendations, the book is extremely thin on solutions. It could have mentioned the existing initiatives towards participatory conservation (for example, the dozens of community wildlife and forest reserves), community-based ecotourism (well-known in Sikkim, for instance), sustainable enterprises (in Assam, for example), and the heroic resistance of communities against hydro-electricity projects. These would have provided readers a sense of hope. I also felt the text to be somewhat prosaic—perhaps some local folktales and cultural vignettes could have lent it the poetic beauty that the Himalaya evokes in any traveller. An index would have helped greatly.

Finally, I do hope that the publishers will find a way to make it more accessible to potential readers, the vast majority of whom cannot afford the price tag. It will be a pity if the visual marvel of the Himalaya, and the range of its bio-cultural diversity, so well brought out by the book, gets restricted to only those who have coffee tables.

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