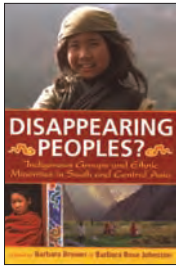


Central Asia



Barbara A. Brower and Barbara Rose Johnston, eds.,
*Disappearing Peoples? Indigenous Groups and Ethnic
Minorities in South and Central Asia*

Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc., 2007. 275 pages, b/w
photos, maps, glossary, index. Paper, £17.99. ISBN 978-1-59874-121-6.

THIS BOOK is a cohesive, well-structured introduction to the changes to the livelihoods, identities, and cultures of twelve minority groups in South and Central Asia. Written for a general audience, few readers will have heard of the Raika, the Bhils, the Tharu, the Lezghi, and others about whose plight the book pertains. Brower and Johnston's edited book makes great strides towards exposing each of these minority group's current social conditions, threats to survival, and struggles to thrive to a wide readership.

The introduction to the book frames its succeeding chapters with an interpretation of “the sweeping force of globalization” as a homogenizing process, driven by forces in the “developed” world, that threatens cultural diversity. Five hundred years ago, the era of “colonial expansion” began with tens of thousands of “cultural groups with distinct languages, values, and ways of life” many of whom have since “disappeared.” The “large-scale forces of change” of globalization today, Brower and Johnston explain, have begun to reach even those who have heretofore lived in geographic isolation and cultural segregation.

The book is framed using the trope of irreversible change that is “disappearance.” “Disappearing” denotes a clear, distinct, and definable entity that is in the process of being lost. The structure of each chapter reinforces this teleological model of change by first setting up a “people,” “setting,” “subsistence strategy,” and/or “social structure” that in the second half of the chapter are described as undergoing “threats to survival.”

But, as the question mark in the title indicates, it is not yet clear whether these minority groups—their livelihoods, identities, and cultures—are in fact “disappear-

ing.” Brower and Johnston postulate that there may well come a day when the lifestyles of the groups discussed in the book become “merely archaic footnotes in human history” (24). The book is written as a plea to ensure that this does not happen. The futures of these twelve minorities have not yet been determined, and Brower and Johnston emphasize their plight in an attempt to garner popular valuation of these little-known peoples whose struggle and resistance against these threats is not well known.

As the authors of each individual chapter examine the impact of new geopolitical borders, increased militarization, economic development, and climate change, they reinforce Brower and Johnston’s framework, highlighting the potentially homogenizing implications of globalization that appear to be causing “people” to “disappear.” But what makes the book interesting to an academic, for whom such a declarative stance on globalization might appear too simplistic, are the instances in which the trope of “disappearance” is subtly nuanced. Farr, for instance, suggests that it is precisely the changes to traditional ways of life that might help the historically persecuted Hazaras of Afghanistan “survive.” And Rao reinforces this conundrum of change when she proposes that even more change, for instance the implementation of primary education, might be necessary in order to enable the peripatetic people of South Asia to sustain their nomadic lifestyle.

The different chapters also have varying ways of defining what exactly it is about these “peoples” that is disappearing. In Rao and Casimir’s chapter on Kashmir, people are quite literally “disappearing” as a result of death, abduction, and torture. In Rao’s case of peripatetics, what is disappearing is the very mobility that defines a nomadic mode of existence. Contrarily, the Lezghi of both Azerbaijan and Russia cannot be defined by what they do. Birch identifies that the very threat of the Lezghi’s disappearance lies in the unwillingness of both Azerbaijan and Russia to define them as a “people.” For this reason, they struggle to objectify their “culture” in an attempt to emphasize the distinct nature of their ethnic group.

In their discussion of the effects of globalization, the authors of *Disappearing Peoples?* mobilize a variety of both emic and etic notions of culture. For example, Guneratne notes that “culture” is often defined, from an emic perspective, as an objectified entity that threatens to be “lost.” Much like in the aforementioned case of the Lezghi, those advocating the maintenance of Tharu “culture” are objectifying what it means to be Tharu by using practices and customs to stand in as markers of social identity. Local importance is therefore placed on labelling languages and people in order to get them “counted” and given official status in national-level censuses. Klieger also shows how the exodus of Tibetans from Tibet has resulted in the objectification of a place, from what was once defined as “where Tibetans live” to a “homeland, a place filled with symbolic and religious geography” (235).

It is also tempting to objectify culture from an etic perspective and Schmid pushes the reader, in the “to think about” section, to question whether traditions must be static and whether adaptation is synonymous with a “threat” to culture. Guneratne fleshes out this proposition by giving an alternative, anthropological understanding of culture defined as “the systems of ideas, values, and beliefs that people have which help them interpret their world and generate behaviour”

(105). “Culture,” he explains, should not be seen as fixed but as dynamic; as the world changes, culture changes as well. Change portrayed in this way need not be synonymous with “loss.” Using this vision of culture, Guneratne opines that the Tharu will continue to be a “culturally distinct” people, even as he notes that the changes of the second half of the twentieth century, unlike those of the first half, constitute “a radical disjuncture” with the past.

The authors of the book frame “change” in subtly different ways, even as they all work with the trope of “disappearance.” Yongzhong and Stuart embrace the notion of “disappearing cultures,” suggesting that since the Minhe Mangghuer lack a written history and culture, they might soon yield to a history of homogenization. Others in the book focus on the plural possibilities of how presents might become futures. Kreutzmann highlights that the Wakhi, split amongst four nation-states, are undergoing “different pathways to cultural transformation” (185); change is multiple and contingent. And in one of the most nuanced chapters of the book, Robbins proposes that instead of bemoaning models of change synonymous with irreconcilable loss (“disappearance” or “endangerment”), the focus should be instead on empowering those long silenced to be better heard.

In many ways, the aim of *Disappearing Peoples?* is to empower indigenous groups and ethnic minorities in south and central Asia by increasing knowledge of their plight amongst those in the “developed” world who might not have previously been aware of their existence. Focusing on the catastrophic effects of globalization that threaten to make these peoples “disappear” is a successful way of reaching this broad audience.

There appears to be an inarticulable attraction to the notion of people disappearing (which may be worthy of study on its own accord), and Brower and Johnston successfully tap into this popular interest. The book’s easy-to-follow structure, encyclopaedically factual writing style and the “to think about” section that concludes each chapter makes it a convenient teaching text. What makes reading the book worthwhile, however, is summarized in the title’s question mark. The most interesting parts of the book are those that question what it means to “disappear.”

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