Thailand: The racism behind the modern conservation paradigm

The upland forests of north Thailand have become an arena for intensely contested perspectives on forest protection as state forestry officials and some nature conservation groups attempt, in the name of forest conservation, to remove local communities, particularly hilltribe people living in and using these forest areas, with the argument that upland forests act as watersheds for lowland rivers and must therefore be kept free of human interaction.

“Redefining Nature: Karen Ecological Knowledge and the Challenge to the Modern Conservation Paradigm” explores the conservationist ideology and the themes surrounding it: the racial and anti-rural character of nature conservation imposed by the state, the power and politics involved in defining what counts as knowledge of nature conservation, and the struggle of the Karen ethnic people to protect their homes and fields as they engage and resist the politically powerful: the state foresters, policy-makers and nature conservationists.

Author Pinkaew Laungaramsri, an anthropologist at Chiang Mai University, begins the book with the tragic story of the suicide in March 1997 of a Karen elder, Pati Punu Dokjimu (to whom the book is dedicated), from Huai Hoi village in Chiang Mai province, after his home and swidden rice fields were taken over by the state in the name of nature conservation, threats of arrest and resettlement became a daily nightmare, and finally saw his hopes of dialogue with the phu yai --the powerful state authorities-- destroyed. As Pinkaew movingly describes it, in a world in which freedom of choice is not granted to powerless hill people, Pati Punu had chosen the only path he had in his struggle for autonomy; the path that took away his life, but allowed him to remain Karen in soul and spirit.

“Redefining Nature” unravells the complex processes of power relations by which the modern concept of nature conservation --voiced by foresters and nature conservationists representing the desire for the modernisation of the country-- has historically come into being in Thailand, and searches for radical questions rather than tacit answers, and hidden falsehoods rather than unquestioned truth.

The author describes a major stumbling block preventing foresters from considering the idea of co-management of forests with local people: “An obstacle which, I came to realise later on, was a racial prejudice against ethnic-minority hill people. This prejudice [among foresters] is so strong, definite, and decisive that it obviated the necessity of further truth finding about forest problems. In fact, what is repeatedly portrayed by the international conservationist idea of human/nature division is a human/human boundary which tends to reinforce or conceal class, ethnic, anti-agricultural, anti-commons or other discrimination in the allocation and permitted uses of land."

But this hegemonic representation of poor ethnic minorities, however, is never constructed without contestation. Pinkaew weaves an absorbing narrative about the Karen people of Mae Ning Nai village and takes us to their swidden rice fields, forests and their homes, and relates their stories of the struggles to protect their livelihoods.

The book compels us to look afresh and questions the power, ideology and prejudices behind the

politics of nature conservation, if for nothing else because, by the end of the book, we realise that the survival of hundreds of communities dwelling in forest areas not just in Thailand but elsewhere in the Mekong Region is being threatened by it.

Article extracted from “Power and prejudice in forest conservation”, a book review by Noel Rajesh, Foundation for Ecological Recovery, Bangkok Post, 8 June 2002, http://scoop.bangkokpost.co.th/bkkpost/2002/jun2002/bp20020608/en/outlook/08jun2002_out35.html