

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Geography Faculty Publications

Geography Program (SNR)

---

Fall 1996

## Review of *Losing Asia: Modernization and the Culture of Development*, by Brett Wallach.

Robert Stoddard

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, rstoddard1@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/geographyfacpub>



Part of the [Geography Commons](#)

---

Stoddard, Robert, "Review of *Losing Asia: Modernization and the Culture of Development*, by Brett Wallach." (1996). *Geography Faculty Publications*. 8.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/geographyfacpub/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Geography Program (SNR) at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Geography Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

***Losing Asia: Modernization and the Culture of Development.*** By Brett Wallach. Drawings by Susan Trammel. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. Preface and acknowledgments, drawings, sources, index. xiii + 237 pp. \$26.95 cloth.

When I first visited Kathmandu in the mid-1950s, the shops sold mostly local and Indian products, many of the shoppers wore Newari dress, and motor vehicles were uncommon. In the evening, one could leisurely stroll the quiet streets and gaze at temple tops silhouetted against a starlit sky. A couple of decades later, after the drug culture and other foreign interests had invaded and infected the capital city, a nighttime stroller encountered some of the same dangers on the street that occur in American cities at night. Upon my return to Kathmandu last winter, I observed retail stores, citizens' dress, and traffic congestion that are common to most cosmopolitan cities of the world. Who has gained and who has lost by this transformation of the economy and consumer preferences in Kathmandu?

Recently, in Tongsa, Bhutan, I experienced a milieu similar to that of Nepal four decades ago, where the landscape expressed the culture of centuries. I realize, of course, that citizens were wearing the national dress and even new buildings followed traditional architectural forms because of government decree. The lack of many foreign goods, including motor vehicles, was partly the result of a national policy to retain traditional Bhutanese culture. As a visitor, I appreciated the opportunity to see, hear, and smell the lifestyle of another society; but I wondered if the citizens of Tongsa would prefer more choices. Certainly the people of Nepalese ancestry who have fled Bhutan after the adoption of restrictive Bhutanese policies are not happy with the official attempt to retain traditional ways. How much and in what ways should change be guided and controlled?

Brett Wallach explores these questions in *Losing Asia*. The text is filled with accounts of the author's travels, mostly in India. As a

travelogue, the text is fascinating reading, especially for anyone who has been in many parts of India and met, or read about, leaders and development personnel of the past. Wallach provides valuable glimpses of an India for those in the United States, where bookstores carry "five books on China for each one on India" (xii).

Wallach brings together a wealth of historical information about irrigation and village development projects, some of which go back several centuries. He draws upon obscure reports from colonial libraries and numerous secondary sources dealing with development plans and reviews—all of which are well documented in a rather unique "Sources" section—and skillfully weaves these into a narrative describing places and peoples he encounters while wandering about India.

Importantly, he examines the issue of "the aesthetic cost of modernizing the Asian countryside" (ix). Wallach asserts that the book is "about our blindness to the destruction of what I consider the most beautiful places on earth" (ix, x). He envisions an Asia "wealthy enough to preserve its traditional landscape" and in effect, seeks "the gentrification of Asia" (xi). Summaries of historic undertakings and descriptions of contemporary observations are provided as Wallach guides the reader to Ramappa along the Godavary, to Rani Kheri near Delhi, to Shorapur (where Philip Meadows Taylor once brought about change), to the Cauvery delta, to Roorkee, and to Etawah and Gurgaon, places made famous for rural development projects.

In spite of the tremendous amount of information and lucid descriptions, I had difficulty detecting the author's theses about the gentrification of Asia. True, as I read the text, it provoked numerous questions about the effects of development schemes designed by outsiders, the ethics of purposefully introducing change into other societies, the durability of systems based on altruistic institutions and workers, the costs and benefits of modernity, the relative merits of local isolation versus global interconnectivity, and even the greed inherent in being human. Nevertheless, Wallach's lack of debate or conclusions on such issues failed to benefit me much.

I tried to convey this frustration in my introductory paragraphs above: while descriptive, the reader gains little insight into my views about the pros and cons of change. Likewise, in his discussion of the Etawah Pilot Project, I eagerly anticipated Wallach's evaluation of this famous development undertaking, but I found little and was unable to detect whether he believes that the project—either in its

objectives or actual outcome—contributed to or restrained “the destruction of the most beautiful places of Asia.”

Robert H. Stoddard  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln