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Book review of 'Autonomy: Life Cycle, Gender and Status among Himalayan Pastoralists' by Aparna Rao

Sylvia Vatak

University of Illinois at Chicago

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The Tharu Barka Naach: A Rural Folk Art Version of the Mahabharata.

Kurt Meyer and Pamela Deuel, eds. Los Angeles: Deuel Purposes, 1998. 120 pp.

This book will have two audiences, scholars interested in the Tharu culture of Nepal, and scholars interested in regional variations of the classical Sanskrit epic.

For the first group, the book provides a version of the Mahabharata that was reconstructed from manuscripts collected by an illiterate farmer over several decades and passed on to his son in 1970. The farmer, Rup Lal was also responsible for organizing performances of the Barka Naach ("big dance") on numerous occasions from 1922-1963. One might presume that the tradition of performance had been neglected for some time when Rup Lal undertook his work of reconstruction and preservation, but unfortunately, the present book does not provide any information about whether the text in its current form, or its ritual performance, preserves something quite old, or simply purports to revive the timeless tradition. The editors of this volume, Kurt Meyer and Pamela Deuel, discovered Rup Lal's son in 1994 and worked with him to raise the funds necessary for a complete performance in 1998. That performance, and this book, which translates the ten song cycle that tells the Tharu version of the great epic, are thus part of an effort to preserve a culture which is not, in fact, surviving. Although it deserves more study, this text provides a window on aspects of Tharu culture that are specific to the Dangaura Tharu who inhabit the Dang/Deukhuri district.

For the second group, the epic story is full of distinctive regional variations. In this brief retelling of the epic story, the most striking feature is the central role of Bhima, who is praised throughout as the greatest of heroes. The celebration of Bhima makes the text a truly martial epic rather than an epic modified by brahmanic religious concerns, and consequently, neither Arjuna nor Yudhistira is given prominence. There are charming twists on the story, for example in the tale of the village of Ekachakra, when Bhima goes to meet the demon who annually demands of the village folk a human sacrifice. (In this telling, the story is blended with the story of the five brothers going to a pond for water where they are accosted by a crane who will grant water only in exchange for answering his riddles, Mahabharata 3.296). In the Tharu version, Bhima allows himself to be swallowed whole before exploding out of the demon. He returns home and is unrecognized by his mother before she performs a ritual of sprinkling her breast milk on his mouth. Other Tharu variations include the assumption that Kunti is the mother of all five Pandavas (rather than mother of only three), and that the secret knowledge which allows the escape from the House of Lac comes from Sahadeva (and not from Vidura).

Dinesh Chamling Rai has provided a fluent translation of the collected manuscripts. Scholars may be put off by small inconsistencies in transliteration (Vidur; Bidur; Shadev; Sahadeva) or the lack of notes which might explain confusing passages (why, for example, is the demon of Ekachakra referred to as Kunti's brother, the Pandavas' uncle? p.26). The value of the book, however, lies not in the scholarly advances it makes, but in the fact that it provides a serviceable translation of a preserved text of a revived tradition.

James Laine
Macalester College

Autonomy: Life Cycle, Gender and Status among Himalayan Pastoralists.

By Aparna Rao. New York: Berghahn Books. 1998. Pp. xvii + 350. Figures, Tables, Appendices, Index.

As its title suggests, this book addresses issues of long-standing concern to the discipline of anthropology, namely the relationship between the individual and his/her culture. Through an exceptionally rich and detailed ethnographic account of the Bakkarwal, a Muslim pastoralist community of Kashmir, Aparna Rao sets out to explore the question of to what extent the exercise of individual autonomy or agency is available either in ideology or practice, to Bakkarwal women and men as they progress through successive life stages. From the outset, Rao positions herself theoretically among that growing number of anthropologists of South Asia who in recent years have begun to take issue with the widely accepted Dumontian dichotomy between the

allegedly “individualistic” Western and “collectivistic” or “holistic” South Asian (usually read as Hindu) world view. These critics of the received wisdom insist that the notion of the individual is in fact very much present in South Asian conceptions of the person, though that individual differs from its Western counterpart in its characteristic “embeddedness” within the social groups of the family, kindred, community, and the like.

Students of Hindu society and culture have been the most vocal contributors to the debates surrounding the concept of the individual in South Asia. Rao, on the other hand, is dealing with what she calls a “culturally composite” community: “Muslims living in a mixed Muslim-Hindu environment,” influenced by “numerous ideological currents” (including those associated with the respective religious doctrines) that provide “models for the practice of both individualism and group solidarity” (pp. 20-21). Her work is the product of an empirical investigation of local Bakkarwal concepts of “autonomy”, as these are manifested in day-to-day talk and social interaction. She is concerned not only with ideological statements but with the actual practice of decisionmaking—for oneself and others—at various stages of the life cycle and in varying social status positions (measured in terms of gender, age, and class). Her broader aim is to go beyond a description of the particular Bakkarwal case and provide, by example, an approach that can be employed by anthropologists concerned with similar theoretical issues in other areas of South Asia and even elsewhere in the world.

In successive chapters Rao takes the Bakkarwal from conception and birth through the periods of early childhood socialization and gradual awakening of adolescent sexuality, of choosing a mate and arranging and celebrating marriage, becoming a responsible householder and parent, developing an adult identity as a member of the larger community (which for some involves the potential for exercising considerable autonomy and influence over others), and finally growing old, gradually retreating from active social involvements and preparing for death. Rao justifies taking a life-stage perspective on the “self” (her gloss for an indigenous Bakkarwal term—*shakas*—“a potentially autonomous being” and “relatively independent subject of action”) by pointing out its dynamic nature. The Bakkarwal do not view the self as something static but rather “a state of being that alters . . . over the life span.” Throughout her description of the characteristic features of each life phase, Rao attends to differences of class and gender, for this is a society in which there are significant economic disparities (a consequence of differential herd sizes and differential access to grazing rights) and in which assigned gender attributes and roles are markedly differentiated, implying differential opportunities for legitimately exercising “autonomous” choices of action and directing the behavior of others.

This book makes a contribution to scholarship on South Asia on more than one level. In terms of broadening our ethnographic knowledge of this part of the world its contribution is clear. Rao has already published a number of excellent articles on this pastoral people, some together with her long-time collaborator, M. J. Casimir, but her only book-length work on the Bakkarwal appeared in German and is therefore not easily accessible to most English speaking scholars. With its focus on the life cycle, on questions of gender, of marriage and kinship organization, and on issues of individuality, self-hood and autonomy, Rao’s book suggests fruitful comparisons with the work of Nancy and Richard Tapper, Carroll and Stephen Pastner and Charles Lindholm. All of these scholars write of Muslim peoples living in Pakistan and Afghanistan, who have a great deal more in common with the Bakkarwal than do the Indian Hindus whose social arrangements and cultural outlook set the original terms for the individualism /collectivism debate.

A particular strength of Rao’s work is its extensive use and explication of indigenous concepts, an understanding of which is crucial to comprehending Bakkarwal mode of thinking about the self and its potentialities. Not content with merely “glossing” such concepts in English or referring the reader to a dictionary definition, Rao takes pains to elaborate upon the various shades of meaning that they convey in the varying contexts of their actual use by Bakkarwal men and women in everyday conversations among themselves and with the anthropologist. Rao’s narrative is also liberally seasoned with actual quotations from those whom she interviewed and with summaries of specific interactions and events that she observed or was told about. By this means she is able to illustrate the semantics of particular commonly-used Bakkarwal words or phrases. Many of these words—such as *nafas*, *osh*, *ru*, *mijaj*, *shakas*,—etc.—are of Arabic or Persian derivation and in related forms are familiar to scholars who have worked in other Muslim settings in South Asia and elsewhere. But, as Rao is able to show, the Bakkarwal give them particular meanings and significance. These meanings are in turn linked to other features of a uniquely Bakkarwal mode of perceiving the world and humankind and of imagining the proper relationship between the two.

Another strength of Rao's work is to be found in her concern to supplement her more "cultural" data and analysis with quantitative data, demographic and otherwise. So, for example, she provides 35 tables on such subjects as frequency of common names, perinatal mortality, wedding costs, ages at marriage, residential patterns, frequency of endogamous unions, and the hierarchical ranking of patriline. There are also a multiplicity of kinship diagrams and figures designed to graphically illustrate points made in the texts: to give just two examples, "Fluctuations over the life course in the amounts of [the basic human properties of] *nafas*, *osh*, and *rull* and "The sequential development of domestic groups according to gender and age." The quantitative figures and tables, in particular, lend an indispensable element of concreteness that both aids in evaluating the more general interpretations found in the text and opens up the possibility for Rao or others to make useful comparisons with data from other field studies in the future.

Rao's project in this book is an ambitious one: it attempts to combine ethnographical ly-based description and interpretation of one particular "case", cross-cultural comparison, and a theoretical argument about the relationship between the individual and culture in non-Western settings. This is a challenging agenda and one that leads to certain problems in terms of readability and theoretical coherence. In her concern to take account of and quote as many relevant ideas and ethnographic examples as possible from the very large body of anthropological literature that is available on issues of selfhood and individuality in cultures around the globe, Rao sometimes causes the reader to lose track of where her argument is headed. The book is, however, a real contribution to our knowledge of an area of South Asia that is both understudied and very much in the news at the present day. Theoretically also it is thought-provoking; Rao's contribution to the debate around which she has framed her study will certainly be taken into account by other scholars, as the dialogue continues in the future.

Sylvia Vatuk
Professor of Anthropology
University of Illinois at Chicago

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Profiting from sunshine - passive solar building in the mountains: collection of papers on national workshops in China, India, Nepal and Pakistan.

Bansal, N. K. and Rijal, K. 2000. ISBN 92-9115-099-1. 284p. Price: US\$ 20.00 (Developed Countries); US\$ 15.00 (Developing Countries); US\$ 10.00 (ICIMOD Member Countries)

In the Hindu Kush-Himalayan (HKH) Region it is difficult to keep houses warm during winter. Usually biomass fuels are burned for cooking and space heating. Using biomass fuels has resulted in large-scale deforestation and ill effects on the health of mountain people, especially women and children, from the smoke produced. Solar radiation is available in most parts, and it is sensible to take solar energy consciously into consideration in designing buildings