

1999

Book review of 'Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom: The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Nepal' by David N. Gellner, Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, and John Whelpton, editors

Todd Lewis
Holy Cross College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

Lewis, Todd (1999) "Book review of 'Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom: The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Nepal' by David N. Gellner, Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, and John Whelpton, editors," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 19: No. 1, Article 14.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol19/iss1/14>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

mercifully free of any Gee-isn't this-neat? baggage. As a result, what we get here is a first-hand look at the complexly simple and simply complex rhythms of daily life in Dolpo.

The churning of tea.

The patching of boots.

The spinning of prayer wheels.

The constant weaving of both cloth and community.

The expert might recognize all this as a riotous cocktail of ancient Indian folklore and Bon traditions. But the lay reader may enjoy it for something else. Here offered is a 214-page cultural treasure, a peek into the heart of a 1,000 year-old tradition on the brink of being lost.

And if all that isn't enough, at least you got a great lesson in packing.

Jonathan Nicholas

Jonathan Nicholas, a newspaper columnist in Oregon, worked in Nepal from 1972 to 1978. He, too, once fit all of his travel needs inside a chuba, but they included, he confesses, a Swiss Army knife the size of a hot dog.

Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom: The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Nepal.

Edited by David N. Gellner, Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, and John Whelpton. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997. 623 pages. Hardcover, £ 45. Indian Edition (available in Kathmandu), 1998, £ 30.

Back in the mid-1970s, when a student began to learn about the history of Nepal's political development, it was essential to consult the cogent and comprehensive writings of Leo Rose. Once the Nepalese people succeeded in overthrowing the panchayat system in 1990, however, Rose's volumes were relegated (in many respects) to a bygone era. Only with the publication of **Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom** is there a resource of similar importance that treats the myriad changes in politics and culture underway in post-1990 Nepal. It is essential reading for anthropologists, political scientists, and others interested in understanding how the introduction of parliamentary democracy and a host of new political freedoms has transformed the Nepalese polity. The editors deserve praise for assembling such a compelling and high-quality anthology, one that had its origins in a Conference held at Oxford University in 1992. **Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom** is a landmark in the field, an indispensable work aptly dedicated to Richard Burghart. With the publication of a South Asian edition, it is hoped that the volume will receive the readership it deserves, both within the region and beyond.

The issues and dilemmas featured in many of the chapters provide much insight about Nepal in 1999, including the dysfunctional political system, the continuing relevance of the monarchy, and the rise of the Maoist movement. Case studies draw the reader into the "politics of culture" among most of Nepal's largest ethnic groups, and we learn how national laws have created strikingly different effects across the mountains where, as David Gellner notes, "Just what it means to live in a Hindu polity varies a great deal depending on who you are (pg. 3)." Among the many valuable trends reported on, we see how caste and ethnic sentiments remain a potent force, how a "victimization mentality" has arisen even among groups that have prospered and found parliamentary representation, and how globalization has drawn scholars and their work into ethnic politics.

The editors and contributors deserve high praise as every chapter in this volume is well-presented, accessible to the non-specialist (in style and with the inclusion of a glossary), and illustrated with fine photographs and maps. The specialist will appreciate the thorough index and an extensive bibliography. While it is not possible in this review to discuss adequately each of the 16 chapters only a summary of the most salient points that strike this reviewer can be mentioned here.

David Gellner's introduction effectively lays the historical foundations and introduces comparative themes. The contested cultural domains of language and religion are especially emphasized. Of special interest is the full translation of the text produced by one of the pivotal groups active in ethnic politics, the Nepal Janajati Mahasangh ("Nepal Federation of Nationalities"), a document that in 1993 defined who are, in its view, the "indigenous people" of Nepal (pgs. 20-21).

The book then moves according to geography, starting with three chapters in *Part One* under the heading "Dominant and Diaspora Identities." John Whelpton's chapter, "Political Identity in Nepal: State, Nation, and Community," provides a useful history of the notion of "*asal Hindustan*," as well as an overview of the controversies that have pivoted on religious identity and linguistic diversity in the modern state. An unnamed "Nepali scholar" quoted by Whelpton affixes the social location of the contentious debates surveyed in this volume, serving to remind readers that the scholars' chief focus is on a limited sector of modern Nepalese society: "It is only we, the middle class, who are concerned about Nepal... The poor are just interested in getting enough to eat and the very rich people around the palace are only worried about getting more money and storing it in India." (page 39) Whelpton contends that it is not through more Hinduization but only through rising national prosperity and a broadening of the "official culture" that national integration can take place.

In the next chapter, "The King and the Cow," Axel Michaels traces how the state since 1805 has utilized the sacrality of the cow in the legal codes to promote its hyper-Hindu credentials abroad and coerce internal integration, particularly vis-à-vis the non-Pahari ethnic groups, especially highland peoples. The punishment for cow slaughter remains in force in Nepal (as it does remain an exploitable issue for Hindu nationalists in India), where as of 1990 the punishment was 12 years imprisonment. To enforce such laws today, cautions Michaels, would only endanger national integration.

Michael Hutt next provides a critical updating of the history of migrants across South Asia originating from Nepal in his chapter entitled "Being Nepali without Nepal." Using the most recent demographic sources available, he estimates that a maximal 2.25 million Nepali native speakers live outside the state. In providing an overview of the status of migrants in Bhutan, Sikkim, and elsewhere in India, Hutt shows how Nepalis are part of South Asia's two major unsolved political problems: one regarding the question of ethnic group loyalty to the state and the other reckoning just who can be citizens among a region's "indigenes".

In "Caste, Communalism, and Communism: Newars and the Nepalese State," David Gellner begins *Part II: Central Nepal* by explaining the reasons for the lack of a Newar ethnic party despite decades of leaders expressing "Newar cultural nationalism," and why Newars of the Kathmandu Valley have shown an affinity for supporting Communist parties. Gellner provides interesting commentary on the 1990 uprising in the major Valley towns, on the party allegiances in the first elections under the new constitution, and on the role of the newly-formed Newar cultural organizations. One key part of the answer having to do with Newars supporting high caste Communist politicians is the Party's support of religious beliefs, temple restoration, and cultural expressions. Much to the dismay of Newar Buddhists and others who favored (but failed to win) a secular state in the new constitution, in this matter, "The Buddhists discovered that many of the Communist leaders were, as they put it, Brahmins first and Communists second." (p. 178)

Alan Macfarlane recounts his own immersion into modern ethnic politics through two incidents in his chapter, "Identity and Change among the Gurungs (Tamu-mai) of central Nepal." One was a fax he received in England from Pokhara that was transmitted by a Gurung conference in 1992 that had made a collective, public declaration decision on "the facts" of group history, clan identity, and the primary priesthood. The second event was Macfarlane's involvement in the re-publication of an English translation of Bernard Pignède's *Les Gurungs: Une Population Himalayenne du Nepal*. In this chapter, he explains the dilemmas and complications stemming from his role in re-publishing this early ethnography, one that incorporates a multi-leveled addition of annotations and comments by him, Pignède's former assistants, and later Gurung scholars.

Ben Campbell's chapter, "The Heavy Loads of Tamang Identity," explains reasons for the limited development of Tamang political activism based upon history, ethnicity, and geography. It has been, he argues, the continuation of state discrimination on cultural grounds that has doomed Tamang alliance making with the elite groups in the capital. Burdened by regional rivalries, Tamangs across the mid-hills have also found little means or interest in forging pan-regional alliances among themselves.

Two chapters in *Part Three* deal with the Tarai, where the majority of Nepal's population dwells and where the increasing majority of the nation's agricultural and industrial production is concentrated. Claire Burkert's chapter, "Defining Maithil Identity: Who's in Charge," traces the history of Mithala's cultural influence on the Kathmandu Valley, then shows how this region and its main city Janakpur has resisted the imposition of Pahari dominance over its own rich local culture. Public spaces and temple patronage provide interesting case studies. The chapter concludes with another case study, as Burkert draws upon her work with an NGO that she founded to promote Maithili women's art: once it was successful, she outlines how male politicians, who originally dismissed the subject matter as "women's work," tried to

seize the NGO's leadership once its potential for drawing development funds from outside had been demonstrated. Such cynical maneuvering by cultural middlemen has mushroomed since 1990, when foreign aid to the country was considerably deregulated and privatized.

The news on the Tharus is more heartening, as Christian McDonough reports in "Losing Ground, Gaining Ground: Land and Change in a Tharu Community in Dang, West Nepal." The last decade in the Dang Valley has seen a great upturn in Tharu landholding, tenancy, and administrative appointments, where in previous decades Pahari migrants had been gaining land and wealth at the expense of the Tharus. McDonough as of 1993 observes that Tharu political support has remained within the UML party and that there is scant evidence of a Tharu ethnic political movement arising. This is so despite the fact that since 1949 there has been the work of the *Tharu Kalyankarini Sabha* ("Tharu Welfare Organization") and the more recent (1990) foundation by young Tharus of an NGO called BASE ("Backwards Society Education"), an organization that has focused on education and consciousness-raising (and now is the largest NGO in Nepal).

Part Four: East Nepal has all three chapters focused on "Kiranti" peoples. Although it is admittedly a reincarnation of a paper written back in 1972, N.J. Allen's chapter, "Hinduization: the Experience of the Thulung Rai," seeks to reconstruct the pre-modern and emic experience of Hinduization in the eastern hills. Allen sees Rai-s adopting Hindu traditions as part of a slow process of ending shifting cultivation and cutting down the jungles, accepting caste specialists (smiths, tailors, etc.) for their possession of superior technological skills, and out of attraction to the rituals and literate abilities of brahmins. Most fascinating is Allen's account of Rai *sâdhu-s*, who themselves now contribute to the "Sanskritization" of Rai culture. These ascetics were trained to form a formal householder Order with a training center in Kalimpong, open to individuals who, after completing their initiation, return to live in their villages, perform rituals, and seek a state of "self purity." Rai-s now feel that their own *sâdhus* are superior to brahmins of their region as examples of Hindu spirituality. One wonders how they have fared over the last 25 years.

In "Identity Management and Cultural Change: The Yakha of East Nepal," Andrew Russell finds a related cultural process underway "beneath" the surface fact of this small group adopting Hindu rituals such as those during the nation-wide Dasain festival. Through the rearrangement of the Pahari rituals and substitutions in the elements involved, "The Hindu order is being manipulated and subverted even in these avowedly 'Hindu' domains (p. 339)." Russell's ethnography recounting the impact of outside communist organizers (who were as ignorant of local culture as any Western trekker) and of the disorientation they produced, especially among the young, is fascinating. The sudden infusion of new doctrines and cultural values in village society indicates that some of the changes underway in the hills since 1990 are yet to be fully measured in national politics.

A third case study from the east is found in "Changing Concepts of Ethnic Identity among the Mewahang Rai" by Martin Gaenzle. Here we learn about Yayokkha, a new organization that promotes the idea that the Rai are *âdivâsî* ("indigenous people") and that they are united in their opposition to the Hindu immigrants whom they argue have long oppressed them. The group has also organized a new annual Rai festival - held in Kathmandu - called the Sakkhewa, an admixture of various local Rai ritual traditions. Gaenzle's discussion of the issue of group inclusivity and of the acute problem such organizations have in setting the group boundary, in this case of "the *kiranti*," is relevant in many such organizations: the wider the net, the more likely it is that only Nepali can be used as the group's means of communication. For leaders trying to organize the peoples of the eastern hills, it has proven difficult to overcome the divisions set by geography and long-established socio-linguistic differences.

Moving to the highlanders, it is left to Charles Ramble alone to write under *Part Five: The Northern Fringe*. In "Tibetan Pride of Place: Or, Why Nepal's Bhotiyas are not an Ethnic Group," Ramble sketches a masterful overview of the history of the polities that dot the highland frontier region of Tibet, moving from Ladakh to Sikkim and Bhutan. He also highlights the distinctive socio-cultural dynamics of strong local identities that in each region were pulled by links to the culture of Central Tibet. Ramble then takes this broad view to examine the "Tibetainoid" groups of Nepal, with their limited Buddhist monastic institutions and their burden of being ascribed low status in state laws and in the eyes of Nepal's Hindu elite. As in other studies found in this volume, it is interaction with Western culture that is affecting highland societies as individuals seek to achieve new recognition and garner funds needed for their region's development. To make this so, leaders in these local groups have adopted the western norms of what "Tibet" and "Tibetans" are; accordingly, many have sought to re-form their culture in conformity to the putative norms of central Tibetan culture. Most typical is the introduction of institutions of celibate monasticism. The motivation, as Ramble points out, is that "The image of a cultivated modern Tibetan is

a great advance on that of the rural Bhotiya." (p. 409) To become a "modern Tibetan" has brought the reward of attracting the trekking economy and aid from global supporters of Tibetan Buddhism. Still, the fact of possessing similar languages and culture has generated little political traction, as regional loyalties remain stronger since each highland polity has its own ethnic mix and political dilemmas to contend with. Only an association of Lamas (the "Lama Tshokpa") has been formed that links these polities, but its role is confined to petitioning the central government for restoration and development funds as well as to participate in expressions of national Buddhist ceremonialism.

The last section of the book is *Part Six: Conclusions*. Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka in "Vestiges and Visions: Cultural Change in the Process of Nation-Building in Nepal," very usefully summarizes the models of political rule in light of ethnic relations: pre-1950 under the "empire model," the *panchayat* era followed the "modern nationalism model," and the post-1990 epoch is "the patchwork of minorities." The latter has seen minorities breaking away from former modes of accommodation, as groups have formed to institute internal reforms and take public action. Pfaff-Czarnecka sees the "ethnicization of the state" as produced in reaction to its initial formation under the Shah-Rana state: the long-standing "closed society" of high caste Paharis who controlled local development programs and garnered government employment for their own ethnic group. She foresees a long period where different versions of "cultural correctness" will be contested among many of the ethnic communities of Nepal.

Distinguished academics provide Nepali voices to this last section, making no attempt to disguise their own ethnic standpoint. Here, Prayag Raj Sharma and Harka Gurung comment on the chapters and add their own contributions to the work. Sharma in "Nation-Building, Multi-Ethnicity, and the Hindu State" professes surprise at the ethnic conflicts that have arisen since 1990, suggesting that afterwards, "No one bargained for the bitterness that it [the Revolution] would arouse in ethnic feelings amongst various groups who had lived together amicably in the past." (p. 473) His essay provides a thoughtful rebuttal to the view that "Hindu rule amounts to internal colonization (p. 487)" and objects to the popular blame placed on brahmins for Nepal's backwardness - called by critics "*bâhunabâd* - as Sharma observes that brahmins were no better or worse than other groups. Sharma with impeccable politeness also skewers the "Newar nationalists" as cynical opportunists, and he very effectively warns that ethnic polarization, the "us versus them" mentality, can cause a national tragedy. Yet in reading his defensive essay, one wonders why he cannot comprehend what seems obvious to the non-Pahari ethnic critics and many outside observers: since it is the high caste elite that has dominated Nepal's politics, administration, and economics, and since the country has remained retarded in almost every development indicator due to the dysfunction and corruption of this elite, why should this group now escape bearing primary responsibility for its disgraceful performance?

Harka Gurung's chapter, "State and Society in Nepal," summarizes the points made in each chapter, then contributes another history of state formation in ethnic perspective, adding an important section on the chronology of early incidents of resistance to the Shah-Rana state. He also presents recent census data on religion, ethnicity, and language. Gurung's prescription very effectively follows from the wealth of case studies and insights garnered from this important book: "What Nepal now needs to devise is a polycentric nationalism that fosters feelings of belongingness and promotes national integration." (p. 530)

Todd Lewis
Holy Cross College

BOOKS RECEIVED

The Dozing Shaman: The Limbus of Eastern Nepal
Philippe Sagant. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Living Martyrs: Individuals and Revolution in Nepal
James F. Fisher. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Sociology of the Legislative Elite in a Developing Society: An Empirical Study Based on the Members of the First Parliament of the Himalayan Kingdom of Nepal After the 1990 People's Revolution
Dr. Suresh C. Chalise. Kathmandu: Nepal Foundation for Advanced Studies, 1995.