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Book review of 'On the Edge of the Auspicious: Gender and Caste in Nepal' by Mary M. Cameron

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Cameron, Mary M. *On the Edge of the Auspicious: Gender and Caste in Nepal*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998.

An enduring question in the social sciences has to do with the relation of culture to its material context. Is culture autonomous of the material conditions of life, which may be relegated to a secondary or residual significance or do human beings shape culture as they strive to make and remake the world they live in, drawing on and in the context of materials and circumstances that they inherit from the past? Mary Cameron's study of the relationship of caste to gender in western Nepal is an important contribution to the discussion surrounding these questions, and exemplifies the English philosopher Roy Bhaskar's contention that the task of the social sciences is to elucidate "the structural conditions for various forms of conscious action."¹ She asks how caste affects the life experience of Nepalese Hindu women; her answer focuses on the experiences of women of low (untouchable) caste. Their significance is that they are at the bottom of hierarchies of gender and caste and understanding the forces that shape their lives tells us something valuable about both.

Cameron's book is characterized not only by the acuity of her theoretical insight but also by the richly detailed nature of her observations. Her aim is to show "that at the popular level gender and caste are differentiating discourses used by the people of Bhalara to make female different from male and low caste different from high caste" (p. 57). Her study of the lives of low caste women in a village in Western Nepal challenges those who argue – mostly on the strength of research done among dominant castes – that caste in South Asia is to be understood and explained in terms of ideas of purity and pollution, including transactions among castes that are couched in this idiom. The issue of hegemony – which in the context of the study of caste refers to the assumption that the ideology of the elite is more or less the common sense of the society as a whole – is insufficiently examined in South Asian anthropology in the West. Cameron's book, with its sympathetic and insightful account of low caste life in Nepal's western hills, comes as a salutary corrective to this shortcoming. "Caste hierarchy", she observes, "is not about how rules and norms operate but about how people's agency reproduces, challenges, and changes the system" (p. 3).

This book is firmly situated in a tradition that sees caste as being not about ritual impurity but about the control of people and resources. "Too often" she writes, "anthropological approaches to caste in South Asia have emphasized . . . religious and ideological dimensions over material and economic ones, leading us away from the lived realities of everyday work in the fields and in the smithies" (p. 89). She emphasizes instead the "work of social reproduction" which includes "its social relations and the ideas embodied in those relations, with the understanding that these ideas themselves are part of what is reproduced in productive work" (p. 91).

What conditions shape this process of social reproduction? The ideas that are reproduced are not timeless (as some studies of caste that seek its meaning in ancient texts seem to suggest) but are produced by the constantly changing and evolving material conditions of life. Three factors shape these conditions. The first is the caste dynamics at the local level. Social norms for women for example have been relaxed in recent years, leading to an increasing feminization of labor, as women take on tasks once forbidden to them (such as woodcutting or hauling large bundles of firewood). The second is the way state policies and practices affect resource allocations and their accessibility. The establishment of a national park in the region, for instance, has constrained the ability of local people to gather resources from the area it covers. Finally, Nepal's integration into the world market and the ideological and cultural influences that flow from that integration has profoundly shaped life at the local level. For the low status artisan castes, especially the Sarki leatherworkers and the Damai tailors, this post-1950s exposure to the world economy has meant a declining demand for craft goods, placing more pressure on low caste families. Beginning in the 1970s, as it became harder to make a living in the hills, low caste men, who are typically landless, began to migrate to India to work, leaving women to take up the burden of agricultural labor. Land reform passed the low castes by, and all these various forces combine to make the subsistence of untouchable households shakier than it had formerly been.

Cameron challenges the widely held assumption that the greater gender egalitarianism of low caste households is due to a shared impure caste status; she shows instead that it is the result of the local and global forces mentioned above. Craft production has been replaced with wage labor in agriculture as low caste people strive to survive in these changed and changing conditions. While there are some negative consequences of this shift to wage labor (which takes place in the context of increasing poverty), including the breakdown of the relative security provided

¹ Roy Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality: A critical introduction to contemporary philosophy*. London: Verso, 1989.

by the traditional *riti-bhagya* (patron-client) relationship, on the plus side the balance of power in gender relations among low castes has improved for women as they come to wield greater economic power than before.

The Indian economist Bina Agarwal has argued that the key to understanding gender inequity in South Asia is the control of land.² She attributes the inferior status of women to the significant social, cultural and institutional constraints on their ability to own and dispose of land. Cameron shows that the difference in gender status of high caste and low caste women within their own caste groups in the patrilineal society of western Nepal is related not to actual ownership of land but to the ability of these women to contribute to its temporary or permanent acquisition. High caste women cannot own land and low castes are largely landless; but low caste women play an important and necessary role in helping their households acquire usufructary rights in land. The money that low caste men earn in India and the cash acquired by low caste women through wage labor (high caste women are prevented by their caste values from engaging in wage labor) is loaned to high castes in exchange for land, which may be cultivated by the low castes until the loan is returned.

The greater gender equity in low caste households, which comes from the more significant economic role played by their women and the absence of patriarchal authority deriving from patrilineal control of land (for there is none) is reflected in the greater prevalence of brideprice marriage among low caste households, a practice that runs counter to the *kanyadan* marriage so highly valorized in Hindu society. Brideprice explicitly recognizes the economic value of a daughter to her family. In both *kanyadan* and brideprice marriage, Cameron argues, "the daughter/bride is objectified, but it is the rights in her services that are at stake. In the gift form her services are "free," but in the commodity form they come at a price to the groom's family" (p. 202). The point is that systems of value are shaped by the material situation of the people who bear them. In this case, to cite one reason why high castes can privilege *kanyadan* and low castes not, high castes depend on the labor of their daughters in agriculture and can call on them at need because typically they live close by. Low caste families however have fewer potential marriage partners living in close proximity; not only do their daughters marry into villages located a greater distance away, but being (traditionally) involved in craft production and not in farming, their labor is entirely for their *ghar*, not their *maiti*. As one low caste woman tells Cameron, "Why shouldn't we take money for our daughters' weddings? We are poor but even so we raised our daughters to adulthood. Yet eventually we must send them away to work for another family" (p. 199).

Cameron has much to say that is interesting and insightful on a great range of topics, and there is no space here to discuss all of them. Some are poorly covered in Himalayan ethnography, and I draw the reader's attention in particular to her chapter on the concept of honor and how female honorable behavior serves to differentiate high caste from low caste households. We learn also that matrilineal cross-cousin marriage is alive and well among low castes in the western Himalaya; here again practice goes against the dominant (hegemonic?) cultural value because of the necessity of clan exogamy and the paucity of suitable low caste clans with whom to marry.

On a more critical note, it seems to me that Cameron's discussion of the transformation of women's status at marriage is informed mostly by the perspective of male informants. She writes, for example, "Although the bone and blood inherited from the father change for daughters after marriage, it remains unalterable for sons" (p. 184). The only people she invokes in this discussion (pp. 183-185) are men, and it is not clear from her account whether women share those views. Sax's work on gender and caste in Garhwal³ shows that women do in fact challenge the dominant male ideology that informs the social understanding of the transition from natal *maiti* to married *ghar*.

Cameron also asserts that low caste women wield *economic power*; the concept embodied in that phrase seems to me however to rest uncomfortably on the situation of "arresting poverty and dismaying conditions" (p. 63) she describes for them. I do not mean to split hairs, but the attribution of economic power to low caste women in the context both of their limited range of economic alternatives as well as their grinding poverty seems to overextend the concept of power. For instance, Cameron argues that male migration is only possible when women are willing to manage the farm and meet the traditional *riti* obligations as well; she presents this as an example of female power. One wonders though, given the fact of their poverty, whether women have much choice in the matter. If a woman refused this obligation, would that necessarily prevent a man from migrating in search of work? Or might he divorce her and marry again? It is surely as much in the woman's interests as the man's to keep all avenues of income open. What Cameron shows beyond question however is that the economic contributions of women to the

² Bina Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

³ William Sax, *Mountain Goddess: Gender and Politics in a Himalayan Pilgrimage*. Oxford University Press.

social reproduction of low caste households is far greater than that of high caste women and their status correspondingly, is far more coeval with that of their men, allowing them a much greater freedom of action.

These however are relatively minor caveats and do not detract from the significant achievement of this book. This is one of the best ethnographies of Nepal and of South Asia I have read in recent years. It is readily accessible to an advanced undergraduate audience and lends itself to a wide array of courses, most obviously in South Asian studies generally, in gender studies and even in the anthropology of work. While it is a significant and important contribution to the anthropology of South Asia, more parochially it fills a lacuna in the ethnography of Nepal, which has focused on the hills, and in the hills, on the matwali groups, Sherpas and other Tibetanid people, and high castes. Little has been written on the untouchable castes of Nepal and before Cameron, nothing of significance on untouchable women. And it is as fine an example as can be found of an anthropology that is aware of the importance of an understanding of culture that is firmly grounded in the social, economic and political relations that produce it.

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