

## BOOK REVIEW

*Heartbeat of Nepal: The Pancai Baja*. 1990. Carol Tingey. 239 pages. Kathmandu: Royal Nepal Academy. Price Rs. 150.00/U.S.\$ 10.00.

*Pancai Baja*, an ensemble of wind instruments, drums and cymbals played by the Damais represents a paradox inherent in the caste ridden Nepalese society. This ensemble is played by the Damais for the higher caste people, but they themselves remain at a lower stratum in the hierarchy of the caste system. The higher caste people need the band for the sacred ceremonies but the Damais are not considered 'auspicious' enough to enter the house of the Brahmins, Chetris and other castes. The Damais who play the band for the *rites de passage*, weddings, plantation ceremonies and for various other religious and social occasions, remain on the fringe of the main social stream - an irony of the paradox.

The paradox represented by the *pancai baja* shows the ambivalent attitude of the Nepalese society towards music, singing and dancing. For instance, the Gaines occupy the same social position as the Damais in so far as they too are placed at the lower rung in the hierarchical ladder, and the higher caste people do not drink water touched by them. The Gaines themselves represent the paradox. Though they sing the ballads, the annals of the dynasties and the tragic and hilarious occasions that occur in the life of the community, they too remain on the fringe. The Gaines are exclusively a singing class and their solo instrument is the fiddle called *sarangi*. However, unlike a Damai player, a Gaine singer can project his individuality through his voice quality, histrionics and virtuosity. *Sarangi*, the individual musical instrument of the troubadour, may be said to represent the singer's personality.

Unlike the *sarangi*, *pancai baja* represents a social agreement. It is not only an ensemble of the various musical instruments, but is also a

structural model of the tacit agreement between the recipients and the performers that can be noticed in the various impacts of the individual instruments. The *sahanai*, for instance, is valued for its melodious quality and for capturing the haunting beauty of the occasion by varying its tunes in various contexts. The Damai player has a repertoire from which he selects the right melody for the right context. For example the melody produced at the time of the bride being sent away by her parents captures the sad and a rather mixed mood of her folks and of the bride herself. This versatile wind instrument is also played as a solo instrument in contexts which would otherwise require the *pancai baja* ensemble.

Each of the *pancai baja* in fact, has its individuality, a semiotic value that is not lost even when the ensemble is played in unison. A particular instrument is foregrounded by a certain form of conventional agreement. The long wind instrument *narasinga*, for instance, is played for fanfare, and also to herald the coming of a particular occasion marking a change in the structure of the ceremony. The *pancai baja* thus, represents vertically a semiotic structure with its own pattern, and tradition-symbolic value of the instrument, its melodies and rhythms, and horizontally, a dynamic structure allowing changes in the choice, adaptation and rejection of the ensemble along the socio-cultural axis.

Carol Tingey's study covers both dimensions of the *pancai baja*. She traces the history, conventions and the modality of the *pancai baja* structuralism, and studies the conventions, the socio-cultural value and use of the band, the position of the Damais in the society and the indispensability of the ensemble on various social occasions. In the seven sections, she discusses history, the structure of the ensemble itself, the form of the repertoire and the relationship of the ensemble with various cycles and rituals of the Nepalese life. She provides figures, map of the study, the Gorkha district which is an important crossroad from the point of view of the *pancai baja's* spread and adoption by various groups of people and also examples in musical notations.

This book is an important study of the comparatively neglected but a very important musical subject. Associated with this study is the comprehensive study of the Damais as people, as an ethnic group that forms the main part of the ethno-musical structures of the hill people. Despite a number of variations in the structural pattern of the Damais and their musical role in the various parts of the country, the Gorkha based study of the author does provide a cross-view of the Damai social structure and their musical role

in the society. Certain generalizations, however, are based on her study of the adoption of the *pancai baja*, also pronounced as *pance baja* in the eastern hills, by people of different ethnic groups in the western part of the country. The adoption of the *pancai baja* by the Limbus in *dhan nac*, for example, is one such generalization. The *dhan nac* unlike *ghanto nac* is not accompanied by any musical instrument. It is a purely verbal repartee followed by a choral dance.

This book is a descriptive rather than a specific study of the pattern of the ethno-musical structure. The objective of the study, she says, is "to explore the concept of the 'auspiciousness' of the *pancai baja* and to examine the ways in which its function is being adapted in response to a changing society." (p. 3). This book explores the various modalities of the *pancai baja* performance rather than a certain ethno-musical concept.

Free from the specialist jargons and scholarly complexity this book gives broad based information about the very important musical band. The *pancai baja* ensemble is an open theatre where people perform their community dramas; it is a repertoire which people use for dramatizing their own sentiments; *pancai baja* gives an occasion that people use to realize the hollowness and hypocrisy involved in the caste considerations in human relationships and become one for a certain period of time and this ensemble rightly deserves to be called 'the heartbeat of Nepal.' Carol Tingey who came a little over four years ago as a graduate student of London University looking for the scanty materials on *damai baja*, as she called it then, has produced an authentic description of the subject herself. This is a useful book and a valuable contribution to the study of the important but generally neglected ethno-musical subject of this country.

– Abhi Subedi

## BOOK REVIEW

*Fatalism and Development, 1991.* Dor Bahadur Bista. 187 pages. Calcutta: Orient Longman Limited. Price: I.C. Rs. 150.00

Professor Dor Bahadur Bista is a popular name in the anthropology of Nepal. His first book, *People of Nepal* (1967) has been welcomed by a large number of native and foreign scholars. Bista has multifarious experiences in different fields of life. After many years of administrative and academic career, he suddenly seems to have realised that Nepal is underdeveloped: the root cause of underdevelopment, according to him, is Nepal's social structure which is largely based on hierarchial caste principles and fatalistic values. The high caste Hindus, primarily the Bahuns, who carry out the priestly services are seen as the sole perpetrators of this continuing underdevelopment. These fantastic ideas are put together and the result is a book entitled *Fatalism and Development*.

I am not only an anthropologist by training but also a Bahun by birth. Like Bista, I have also travelled Nepal (though not with Prof. Furer Haimendorf) extensively over the last 17 years and worked closely with him as a colleague at Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS). However, Bista does not want to show his affiliation with CNAS where he was awarded the first Professor of Anthropology of Tribhuvan University.

It requires much space to summarize the scattered arguments of the author. So this review touches only on a few salient points. Before doing this, let me briefly outline the contents of the book.

There are altogether seven chapters in the book excluding the "Introduction" and "Conclusion". The introduction is an important chapter and here he has made an effort to define his objectives, methods and to illustrate some key concepts like fatalism, *chakari*, *afnomanche* and

dependency. The objective of the book is "to isolate key factors in Nepali society that are retarding and diminishing its effort to develop" (p. 1). The "culture of fatalism," which is an absolute belief in fate, and "where one has no personal control over one's life circumstances which are determined through a divine or powerful external agency" (p. 4) is the sole determining factor of Nepal's underdevelopment. Bista claims, "This book is based on observations made over thirty years on Nepal's attempt to develop and respond to change" (p. 6). Finally, Bista targets, "the book is centred on the cultural systems of the major groups of the high caste Hindus" (p. 7).

Chapter One provides an overview of the geography and history of Nepal. Put together, they are seen as having kept Nepal economically backward and isolated. In Chapter Two, Bista attempts to provide a history of caste system in the Kathmandu valley, the Gandaki region, the *Khasan*, the Himalayan region and the Tarai. However, the distinctive features of caste as a sociopolitical system which successfully operated over the last 1500 years or so in Nepal have not been carefully delineated. Chapter Three presents the family structure, the pattern of socialization, and the status of women as prevalent among the various ethnic/caste groups. The presentation is an overgeneralized gloss. There is little reference to specific ethnic and cultural groups of Nepal.

The core chapter of the book is "Values and Personality Factors" where he discusses the work ethics, *jagir* and the *chakari* system as prevalent in the Nepali society. If *chakari* does not work, concept of *afnomanche* is built into the argument. The chapters on "Politics and Government" and "Education" provide historical overviews of the governmental structure and the educational system of Nepal. He argues that the structure of Nepali government is strongly influenced by fatalistic attitudes and that this impedes the process of democratisation. The educational system does not increase knowledge and skills of the learners. Sanskrit education is condemned outright (p. 135) as it is argued to be not only nonproductive but also generating fatalistic values among people at large. In general, Bista likens cultural behaviour to economic commodities where everything is calculated in terms of gain and profit. In Chapter Seven, "Foreign Aid and Development," he argues that foreign aid has become nonfunctional because of the prevailing fatalistic values in every developmental activity. To Bista "... seminar is essentially a manipulation and play on words..." (p. 138) or an erudite scholarly version of fatalism. He condemns Western trained scholars as replica of the fatalistic tradition of the Nepali society. The "Conclusion" does not provide a summation of his views but goes on to assemble disjuncted ideas collected from different sources.

I would like to begin by asking, "What is development?" A large section of social science theories are devoted to defining "development", or "theories" are set forth with explanation of the mechanisms of development. Nowhere has Bista attempted to define the term; perhaps he knows its complexity and elasticity. Borrowing an approach developed by Max Weber in his study of Protestant ethics and capitalism, the lack of economic development in Nepal is traced to the sphere of value orientations of a group of people. But Bista should know that it is not only economic development which counts in the development of a society. There are a lot of negative consequences of rapid industrialization or economic growth, e.g., such as uneven distribution of wealth, alienation of people or social institutions, depersonalization of individuals, destruction of family and communal life, degradation of environment etc., which make life more difficult for a large segment of population.

The other important issue is the structure of the Nepali society itself. The Nepali society is the intermingling of various ethnic/caste groups with their different languages and cultures. Within this underlying diversity are the common ideas, symbols, motifs and practices which indicate the coherent Nepalese cultural tradition. This has become possible due to a long historical process of largely peaceful intermingling of these various groups. Bista, however, speaks of an "alien culture" (p. 2) which he believes has become pervasive in Nepali culture today. While Bista never identifies this "alien culture" concretely, the readers, if they are as sly as the author, can certainly recognize the "alien culture" as none other than high caste Hindu culture. If so, Bista is highly inconsistent in his thought and characterization. He himself notes that the Bahuns were already in the Kathmandu valley during the Licchavi period (p. 35), which takes us back to the 6th century A.D. Likewise, he does not consider Newars a homogeneous cultural group of the Kathmandu Valley but rather discrete groups who entered the Valley and became Newars (p. 39). The history and culture of greater Nepal begins only after the unification by King Prithivinarayan Shah in 1768. This gives rise to the following questions: Can culture remain "alien" for more than 1500 years? Can a culture remain "alien" and yet exert pervasive influence and provide the overall direction for a "host culture"? Finally, how validly can "economic development", which is a far more recent historical category, be juxtaposed to this 1500 years old "alien" culture?

Bista seeks to relate underdevelopment to fatalism. He does not develop this key concept very well. I believe that in every religion and culture, fatalism persists; it varies only in degree. Fatalism is an essential

attribute of Christianity (catholicism in particular), Islam and indeed, all major religions. Many societies derive their duties from the command and will of God as prescribed in the book. Within Nepal, I believe that almost all ethnic/caste groups have internalized fatalistic values though the degree of fatalism may be slightly higher among the orthodox Brahmins than the other ethnic groups. Whether it is Shamanism, Buddhism or Hinduism, there is faith in the next world which helps to bind the village community together and also provides directions as to the needs of a person -- physical, moral, social and economical, in a rightful manner. In Nepal, gods and goddesses reside everywhere, on roads, trees, houses, and villages and not only in the heart of the city but also in the most remote areas. Almost every Nepali, whatever his religion is, knows his particular religious text and respects it at least to the degree of not treading on it or doing anything disrespectful to the shrines. Are these not the aspects of fatalism?

Bista is not very precise in the identification of those perpetuating fatalistic values. Sometimes, it is used in the sense of "alien culture" holders, at other times it appears to signify the cultural systems of the major groups of the high caste Hindus (p. 7) which may include Brahmin, Thakuri, Chetri, high caste Hindu Newars, the Tarai Maithil and Jha Brahmins and Rajputs. At times the perpetrators are identified as Bahuns (p. 29). Alternatively, the villains may be only those Bahuns who perform the priestly chores (p. 150). At places, Bahuns of Gandaki (p. 26) and Mechi zones (p. 52) are excluded from having fatalistic attitudes.

The text is full of contradictions. Just to cite a few examples of his idea about caste, Bista writes: "A majority of the Bahun priests are the descendants of caste Brahmans who came mainly from the plains (the Gangetic plains) and some smaller groups from the Deccan during the medieval period" (p. 38). He goes on to write "The river water in Benaras continues to be treated as holier than the clean and fresh water of all Himalaya rivers of Nepal" (p. 39). But on p. 55 he writes, "The caste system of Nepal has always been unique and not copied something from abroad".

On p. 54 there is a subheading "Decreasing significance of caste" wherein he describes how a Limbu has opted to become a *Sudra* in the Hindu caste hierarchial model. Also, he describes how the Rai boys are initiated to become Chhetris. These, to me, are examples of the ascendance of the caste system and not its decreasing significance.

In almost every page of his book, Bista talks about "work" but nowhere does he clarify its meaning. He writes, "To become educated is to be

effectively removed from the work force" (p.6), "High caste educated people never want to work" (p. 81), "Priests cannot work because work is a low caste occupation" (p. 72). "Work", in totality, encompasses almost all activities of human being. Like "making bricks", "weaving carpets", and "ploughing the fields", teaching and researching involve labour and should thus be generally categorised as work. *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*, (1929, 5th edition), noted that man does not work solely to satisfy primary needs -- there are other objects of work besides the securing of food, clothing and shelter. Additionally I can provide a hundred and one examples of Brahmins at manual work, including those who perform the priestly services at the same time. The Bhatta Brahmin at the temple of Gokarneswar Mahadev of Kathmandu (Gokarna) not only performs regular worship of the deity in the morning and evening but also works as an accountant in the Institute of Engineering campus, Pulchowk. This is not an isolated example, such cases are found throughout the Kingdom. In my recent field trip in Sankhuwasabha, East Nepal, I found a Dahal Upadhyaya Brahmin family where the father does the priestly services and the son runs a hotel and sells country liquors openly. Ploughing the field and sewing clothes are the normal activities of Brahmins of the Ilam district. Throughout the Eastern and the Western hill regions of Nepal, many high caste Hindu groups including the Brahmins earn their living by portering.

Sweeping statements are found throughout the book. Below I provide some specific examples.

#### Example 1

"Families in Nepal tend to be nuclear" (p. 61). Though Bista has done an extensive fieldwork in many parts of Nepal, nowhere has he cited an ethnographic evidence to support his view. Traditionally, Nepali families are largely of the extended type (father, mother, unmarried daughters, son/s and their families) and sometimes joint, except in the few urban areas where families tend to be nuclear. This, however, even does not apply to the many Newar families which generally are extended.

#### Example 2

"To have a son in the family is necessary among the caste Hindus" (p. 60). However, this is valid not only for caste Hindus but also for non-caste Hindu groups of Nepal. Plenty of demographic literature is available to substantiate this claim.



### **Example 3**

“Very few children are taught to compete or to try and achieve better than their fathers. Fathers symbolise the ultimate in achievement” (p. 69).

This statement is not at all valid in the context of the Nepali society in general and the Bahun-Chhetri in particular. Parents in Nepal want to see their offsprings better off than themselves. Let me cite an example of my own generation in Eastern Nepal. Most of our parents were farmers with little education. They were content with what they produced from their fields. Their world view was limited within the settings of the family, village and the district. Very few were employed outside the home. Now, the people of my generation are not only better educated than their parents, but also their living standards are higher, many of them are employed in white collar jobs and have national and international networks and connections.

### **Example 4**

“The latter (Nepali baby) is only gradually weaned from the mother, who always enjoys a respected position and the love of her children. This is not the case with the high caste male child. He too is suckled by his mother and develops for her the same close attachment as found with any small child. But the mother as a woman is only a second class human being who, in spite of her high caste, is believed to have certain qualities that are also polluting. At an early age the male child is taken away from his mother and is encouraged to redirect his attachment to his father .....” (p. 73.).

The above view clearly suggests that Bista has a poor understanding of the socialization of children among the high caste Hindu groups of Nepal. Actually, the weaning of a child depends on the closeness of the birth spacing. If the birth spacing is short, the weaning period is also short. In rural Nepal, where the majority of the people live, birth spacing is normally relatively shorter in the poorer and less educated families. The question of lack of affection to the mother and treating her as a second class human being by the sons of the high caste Hindus is not at all logical. Can Bista provide any ethnographic example where he has noticed such a case? The readers would have been much benefitted, had Bista provided examples and more specific details of such cases.

### **Example 5**

“In most areas of Nepal, low caste people are fast improving economically when compared to people belonging to the higher castes” (p. 80).

The author has chosen to treat the topic like economy in terms of a generalized structure. Valid economic generalizations are always based on data and not on gossips.

#### Example 6

"Charity is not valued under Hinduism." (p. 81). Every Nepali Hindu knows that one of the fundamental tenets of Hinduism is charity. Hindu religious texts provide ample examples where a Hindu has not only offered his wealth but also his body in the name of charity. Saint Dadhichi offered his bones to make a weapon, and king Harischandra gave away his kingdom, wife as well as his son in the name of charity; these are some examples.

#### Example 7

"Since the population of such high caste people is not large..."(p. 62). "the Bahun-Chhetri then are in a minority" (p. 154).

The above statement implies that Bista does not think seriously enough about terms like "large" and "minority". When an author asserts the population size of a group to be large (or not large), he must cite figures. Likewise, the term "minority" here applies only in relation to other ethnic groups of Nepal. Is Bahun-Chhetri a minority group compared separately to the Rai, the Limbu, the Magar, the Tamang, or the Newar of Nepal? If one carefully analyses the statistics of Nepal (Bista does not believe at all in Nepal's statistics!), the percentage of the high caste people (includes the Brahmin, Thakuri, Chhetri, high caste Newar, and the high caste Hindu Tarai groups) ranges between 40-50% of the total population of Nepal.

Though Bista attempts to provide a materialistic approach to explain the cultural behaviour of the Nepali people, he fails to explain the distinction between class and caste. Rosser's essay (1966) on caste mobility among the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley clearly notes that wherever there are disparities in wealth and political power, there arise systems of stratification, with the symbols of whatever culture context is present (whether Buddhist or Hindu) being used to legitimize and reinforce the resulting hierarchy.

Similarly, the "Chakari" system and "Afnomanche" as depicted by Bista in the book are not unusual social categories in many other parts of the world.

In sum, the book is the product of a false framework of interpretation and only serves to increase the frustration and misunderstanding of the

majority. The book fails to build a basis for scientific generalization. Nowhere is Bista's model able to show cause and effect relationships, i.e. where fatalism prevails development is absent or vice versa. An extensive bibliography of 23 pages is presented without proper references and contexts to the text. The writing style is lucid. I suggest that every educated Nepali read the book.

**- Dilli R. Dahal**