

BOOK REVIEW

The Thakali: A Himalayan Ethnography. 1998. Michael Vinding. London: Serinda Publications, 470 pages with two appendices, glossary, bibliography and index. Price (\$?)

As the author himself notes, the Thakali are the most studied group in Nepal. They have been dealt with by both foreign and native scholars and even a number of Thakali have written accounts about themselves. The quest for the Thakali started as early as 1873. Since then, they have been the object of scholarly work by Japanese, French, English, Danish, German, Swiss and American researchers. Many M.A.s and at least four Ph.D. degrees (including that of the author himself) have been based on Thakali materials. More than 100 articles and four books have already been published on this group. That so many foreigners are moved to do research on Thakali subjects is itself an interesting question. My own view is that there is an overemphasis on this group by foreign researchers. The unavoidable effect is that other ethnic and caste groups within Nepal have been unfortunately ignored and this has implications for our understanding of the totality of the human and cultural diversity of our country.

Based on extensive research over a 25 year period (1972 through 1998), this long-awaited book by Michael Vinding, a Danish Ph.D. in anthropology is a fascinating cultural account of the Thakali. The primary fieldsite was Syang village but the author collected data for 121 Thakali households of the Thak Khola valley as a whole based on his own 1977 census. The present book, according to the author, "presents a comprehensive ethnography on the Thakali with particular reference to the Thak- Khola Valley of Mustang district" (p. 4). Without a doubt, this volume is a landmark of such research on the Thakali by foreign anthropologist.

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Unlike many of the contemporary studies coming from the west, where theory trumps more empirical concerns, Vinding draws heavily on the old descriptive ethnographic tradition to provide a detailed description of Thakali history, culture, and social organization. The topics are distributed among 15 chapters. A positive aspect of this kind of rich descriptive account is that plenty of materials will be on hand for current and future research regardless of the changing tides of theory. On the other hand, rich cultural materials by itself can be lacking in the kind of meaningful analyses that further our understanding of the human condition. In this review, my intention is to briefly discuss the book's strengths and weaknesses as a whole.

So that we end on a positive note, let me first get some of these weaknesses out of the way. I should add that some of these weaknesses are more generally found in books about Nepal by foreign scholars, all the more reason to point out examples here.

- i) Population. In Table 2, the author has given "Number of households in Thak Khola based on ethnicity", from the 1977 census which he administered himself (p. 16). It is an open question why, although Vinding visited the field several times since this initial count, he did not update such vital population data. He himself doubts the validity of the 1991 national census data for Mustang district. And since population growth or decline in any setting is one of the most important contributions to stability and change in society and community, it is regrettable that the dynamics of Thakali population are made invisible to us by this rather out-dated material.
- ii) Economy. Time and again Vinding asserts that agriculture is the main means of livelihood for the majority of Thakali people, yet he hardly gives his own figures for agricultural production in the area. Instead, he relies heavily on government statistics for agricultural production (pp. 134, 142) when there is reason to believe, in most of the cases, that these figures are grossly inaccurate. His economic categorization of Thakali households is also an over-generalized gloss based on informant's perceptual accounts of rich, middle, and poor (p. 126) instead of on his own survey which would give a more purely economic way of classifying households in this way. Furthermore, although Thakali have many sources of income beyond

agriculture, there is little information on how this income is shared or distributed among households. The unfortunate thing here is that the widespread Nepali myth of Thakali wealth or poverty gets little light cast upon it from the present study.

- iii) Identity. Chapter XV of the book looks overloaded to this reviewer. It is unable to explain to my satisfaction just who the Thakali are in the context of the changing Hindu and Buddhist cultures of Nepal. We are given information on the three endogamous groups within the Thakali: The Tamang Thakali (whose homeland is Thaksatsae), the Mawatan (the indigenous people of Marpha village), and the Yhulkasom Thakali (who originate from Thini, Syang and Cimang villages in Pacgaun). The text suggests that the Tamang Thakali are more Hinduized and politicized and the Yhulkasom Thakali the least. But the ignored issues are whether and how these three endogamous groups consider themselves as one within the changing ethnic situation of Nepal after 1990, how their identity may have been influenced by an external state construction, and how they themselves define a "real" Thakali identity in the quest to maintain a distinctiveness in Nepal's ethnic cauldron.
- iv) Research ethics. A note on the question of "human subjects' issues, (that is, protecting the privacy of research informants) is warranted. Unlike researchers within their own western settings, anthropologists working in Nepal have long been free to do whatever they like in the collection and publishing of their research products. A feature of this book (shared by many others based on Nepal work, I hasten to add) is the potential for doing harm to the very people being studied. Little is known about the implications of having private matters made public in Nepal. Because of the heightened concern for these matters in western countries, I can't help but notice that Vinding gives intimate details of people's lives and includes real names of peoples and places along with maps and photographs. To be sure, such specificity makes original and important contributions, but this intense exposure of material needs to be considered in light to the possible damage to individuals and to Thakali identity more generally.

- v) Finally, the occasional sweeping statement such as, "Nepal is a country of minorities and most members of the minority groups are fluent in the Nepali language" (p. 382) weaken this rich ethnography. Such terms as majority or minority are always dependent on the context of reference. When context is clear, this can help to make numerical and social power comparisons of one group and another within a locality, village, district, or the nation as a whole. The example here is the Thakali themselves who could be the majority group for Mustang District as a whole, and therefore have differential power, but be a minority for a wider region. The suggestion that minorities uniformly speak the Nepali language with fluency is also misleading if we are to take seriously the 1991 census finding that 50% of the people do not speak Nepali as their mother tongue. Understanding the Nepali language and speaking it fluently are quite separate issues.

Nevertheless, the weaknesses are few when we look at the book as a whole. There are many more strengths and I address a few here.

- i) The book provides an excellent account of the salt trade and the Thakali Subbas in historical perspective. One interesting element of this account has to do with the name of the Thakali Subbas, who had typical Nepali Hindu names from early on. This suggests that the Nepalization process among the Thakali started as early as 1868 (p. 79, 81), and this surely has implications for our understanding of the Nepali state and the current ethnic politics of the country. In addition, various chapters suggest that the Thakali follow that Hindu model of touchability and untouchability (pp. 25, 205, 374) and that marriage between Thakali women and Bhote men (who are considered lower in status than Thakali) are rare (p. 226). Such data as these, within the changing ethnic scenario since 1990, may not please some radical Thakali, but they clearly suggest that many Thakali adopted the larger models implied by Hinduization and Nepalization spontaneously. Sometimes, at least, society changes because people change themselves.
- ii) The Thakali seem to be the most mobile people in Nepal. Only 20% stay in their traditional homeland while the rest stay in the many business towns of

Nepal, including Kathmandu. This suggests that Thakali are not only the most enterprising and economically successful group outside their homeland, but also teaches potential lessons to planners concerned with how to alleviate poverty in Nepal. Of course, how much Nepali planners are interested in understanding the culture of groups such as the Thakali is another big research question.

- iii) Finally, Vinding raises interesting points that potentially refute many ideas of other anthropologists who have done research on the Thakali or other Tibeto-Burman groups. He has doubts, for example, about the strict truth of the frequently narrated success story of the Thakali by other anthropologists (p. 370). Many Thakali are not successful in their life. Some of them languish in jails at various places. The author's point that Thakali migration took place for better living rather than in response to lack of subsistence (p. 370) is a big reply to many classical demographers who think that "push factors" such as the lack of subsistence are the major causes of migration in the hill region of Nepal. Dhikur (a voluntary rotating saving and credit association among the Thakali) is not working well for many Thakali families (p. 30). Indeed, it has started functioning in a kind of reverse, making the rich richer within traditional village society. Again, the "impression management" so distinctive of the Thakali appears to operate at the individual level and not at the collective level (p. 381). Is this a suggestion that individual behaviors have less bearing on social change for the whole of a group, such as the Thakali, than it did in the past? Are collective identities no longer viable in this new context?

The inclusion of an extensive bibliography and an excellent glossary of Thakali words in different languages (Nepali, English, Tibetan, Thakali and Gurung) has enhanced the quality of this fine ethnography. Vinding provides the strong feel of a first hand and intimate familiarity with this group. Their reconstructions of Hindu and Buddhist (Tibetan) models are illustrated with wonderful photos and maps (but seen my note above on this!) that enables readers to understand the Thakali community more closely than before. This book should be required reading as a model of sound ethnographic field work for our M.A.

students in anthropology at Tribhuvan University. The book is equally useful to planners, administrators, and lay persons who are interested in learning more about the socio-economic conditions of the Nepal Himalaya.

- Dilli R. Dahal