

BOOK REVIEW

De la Disparition des chefs: Une Anthropologie Politique Népalaise. 2000. P. Ramirez. CNRS (Collection Monde Indien), Paris. Pages 370, glossary, bibliography, index, 22 maps, 16 diagrams, 2 tables, 16 plates. ISBN 2-271-05716-7.

Nepali intellectuals from the dominant Parbatiya, Bahun-Chetri, or 'Indo-Nepalese' group often complain that foreign anthropologists are only interested in the minority 'tribals' nowadays known by the epithet *janajati*. This is not in fact true: ethnographic monographs on the Parbatiyas written by Westerners include several that are among the very best written on Nepal, including little-known and unrecognized classics (little-known and unrecognized outside Himalayanist circles, that is) such as Lynn Bennett's *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters* (1983, Columbia University Press) and Linda Stone's *Illness and Feeding the Dead in Hindu Nepal: An Ethnographic Analysis* (1988, E. Mellon Press). What is true is that if one subscribes to an ethnographic law of proportional representation, whereby Parbatiyas should have 40% of the ethnography written about them because they constitute 40% of the population, then it is probably true that the Parbatiyas suffer from under-representation. On the other hand, they are far *less* under-represented than many other groups, especially those in the Tarai or low-status ones such as Parbatiya Untouchables.

Among those who have written on Parbatiyas only a few have been interested in history and geo-politics: Fürer-Haimendorf, Borgström, and Pfaff-Czarnecka spring to mind. *De la disparition des chefs* is extremely ambitious in this regard, and it covers a lot of ground. A small example of Ramirez's interest in historical geography: he is able (by analysing the lists of candidates in the 1991 election for the whole of the middle hills excluding the Kathmandu Valley) to advance the novel and highly interesting observation that the number of Brahman *thars* increases as you go from west to east

whereas the number of Chetri *thars* decreases -- an interesting phenomenon that he attempts to explain in terms of the different significance of *thar* names for Bahuns and Chetris (p. 157).

Based on fieldwork in the Bahun-dominated Argha Rajasthal, the old capital of the kingdom of Argha in Argha-Khanchi district, west Nepal, Ramirez's book covers in considerable detail the history of the region, the role of the Dasain festival, kinship (including lineage structure, naming, ancestor worship, patterns of deference, the household), agriculture, debt, cooperative work, patron and client relations, and local politics.

There is much impressive detail, but there are also three drawbacks to the way in which Ramirez has chosen to present it, drawbacks which may perhaps be attributable to the work's origin as a PhD thesis. First, so much ground is covered that inevitably some topics are covered superficially. For example, the question of jajmani relations is dealt with by reference to Wisner and the first edition of Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* (p. 230, n. 15): no reference is made to important subsequent work by and insights due to Raheja, Fuller, Quigley, and many others. On the nature of Brahman priesthood, likewise, though some material is given, it is not analysed in any depth. (Although the main research subjects of the book are Brahmans, we learn very little about their 'thought world', i.e. how they view Hinduism, what it means to them to be a Bahun, etc.)

The second problem is that Ramirez shows a surprising reluctance to engage with other scholars, though he is not above criticizing his predecessors in vague and general terms. Most importantly, he goes into great detail on the various and contrasting forms of deference between different categories of relative on the basis of Lynn Bennett's data. He produces new ways of diagramming that data (pp. 189-90). These patterns of deference represent, as she showed and he reiterates, an ethnographic conundrum of considerable significance, since at least two conflicting models are at work at once: daughters both receive deference from their parents *and* give it to them. This leads to enormous complexity when all the different categories of relative are considered. Bennett provided a theory which attempts to explain this complexity and how Parbatiyas can negotiate it: they are operating (a) a patrifocal model of deference to seniors, especially male seniors, and (b) a filiafocal model in which men worship their daughters/sisters. Whether Bennett's interpretation is adequate or not is a key question that anyone interested in hierarchy, kinship, and politics among Parbatiyas surely cannot

avoid. Yet Ramirez, despite using Bennett's data, declines to consider it (p. 184). Another small example of the same attitude comes during Ramirez's valuable discussion of patron-client links and the ways in which individuals seek to negotiate the state bureaucracy. There is no mention at all of Dor Bahadur Bista's book, *Fatalism and Development: Nepal's Struggle for Modernization* (Longman 1991), the best-known, if controversial, recent discussion of these topics.

The third and most important criticism of *De la disparition des chefs* is methodological. After the historical section of the book there are numerous ethnographic generalizations supported neither by examples nor statistics. For example, on p. 232, he states:

The choice an employer makes to entrust a particular task to, and fortiori to set up permanent links with, one worker rather than another is only partly explained by short-term economic considerations... The ties between workers and employers are not limited to the sphere of work alone. As will be seen below, the employer of choice is very often also the preferential creditor.

Nowhere is any case study of a specific employer and employee, creditor and debtor, given. Nor are any statistics given, as elsewhere in the book. The generalizations are plausible enough, but the reader has to take them or leave them. For large sections, the Bhusal Bahuns who were the research subjects, simply disappear. One can speculate that the text refers to them, but it operates on such a high level of generality that one cannot be sure. Detailed case studies dealing with the same community or individuals would have served to tie together the very diverse sections on lineages, economy, caste, and politics together.

Despite these criticisms, *De la disparition des chefs* is an impressive achievement, not just because of its attempt to include so many aspects of life in the middle hills that are not usually found within the covers of the same book, but because of the way in which it builds up to the final chapter on political processes. Suddenly in the last 70 pages the book bursts into life, when Ramirez starts to provide detailed political case studies. It is as if the previous 260 pages of meticulous definitions have been a prolegomenon. The final chapter is as rich in case studies of political conflict as the two previous

chapters are devoid of them.

Ramirez is able to show how lineage-conflict between the two dominant Bhusal groups translated into political opposition at both the local and at the national level. The Purkote Bhusals, being less powerful, early on came to be associated with the opposition (and during the Panchayat period, underground) Congress Party. This had the paradoxical result of leading to the rich and dominant Arghali Bhusals being identified as communist. The detail and subtlety of Ramirez's political analysis deserves to be widely read. One minor point, however, is that occasionally his synoptic maps, on which he has evidently expended much effort, are hard to read, and he makes things harder for his reader by failing to provide straightforward tables of election results in the cases that he is discussing and comparing. One would also like to know whether there are currents of conflict *within* the two Bhusal lineages (he cites the case of another local leader whose own brother belonged to a different party).

It would be very welcome if the entirety of *De la disparition des chefs*, or at least the final 100 pages, were to be translated into English and/or Nepali and published in Kathmandu. In fact two sections, Chapter 2, on the history of the region, and most of chapter 6, on patrons and clients, have already appeared in English in P. Ramirez (ed.) *Resunga: The Mountain of the Horned Sage* (1999, Kathmandu: Himal Books). If Chapter 7 were also made available in a Nepalese journal it would serve as a model for the study of local political processes, clearly demonstrating the advantages of ethnographic background and contextualization. It would also be an extremely significant contribution to the understanding of politics in Nepal today if Ramirez could extend his narrative on Argha-Khanchi up to the present day, explaining and demonstrating the impact of the so-called People's War on the locality about which he has built up such a deep knowledge. Another important contribution from Ramirez, an article on Nepalese Maoist attitudes towards religion, also remains available only in French ('Pour une anthropologie religieuse du Maoïsme Népalais', *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 1997, 99: 47-68.)

The publication of Ramirez's book in a form accessible to Nepali scholars would also go some way to showing that the complaints of metropolitan intellectuals in Kathmandu about Western ethnographers' neglect of the Parbatiyas are unjustified. It is true that the vast majority of anthropological work on the Parbatiyas is not effectively available in Kathmandu, unlike

many well-known monographs on the *janajati* now printed locally and in English (e.g. Pignède's classic account of the Gurungs). This unavailability occurs either because the work in question is out of print and was never published in South Asia, or because it is published by a very small and obscure press, or because it is published in French, German, or Japanese, or simply because it is available only as a Ph.D. Thesis. Whether this contrast in the availability of ethnographies between Parbatiyas and *janajatis* is anything more than a coincidence--whether it reveals something important about the politics of ethnographic knowledge in post-1990 Nepal--is a question that deserves archival and ethnographic research itself.

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