BOOK REVIEW


The present book under review has two main objectives: First, to locate Magar in the larger tribal identity in the Hindu kingdom, and second, analyze the Maoist rebellion capitalizing the ethnic clamour in confrontation with the Hindu kingship (p.3). The Magars, one of the largest Adibasi/Janajati groups of central Nepal, are the main focus of the study.

Beginning with John Hitchcock (1966), Jiro Kawakita (1974), and Laura Ahearn (2000), research on Magars is not new in the ethnographic map of Nepal. But unlike other researchers, Marie has a special goal to publish her previously published but scattered articles into one volume. Drawing a larger theoretical notion of alterocentrism, one’s ability to view oneself from someone else perspectives, the author analyzes the rise of Gorkha Kingdom in the Magar territory where dominant Hindu values nourished along with the ethnic Magar culture. This acculturation process of two traditions further solidifies the ambition of Shah Kings who eventually conquered another 50 small kingdoms to unify Nepal as one country. The Gorkhali-Shah Kings eventually transferred their kingship to Kathmandu from Gorkha, keeping many of the religious and cultural traits intact back to the Magar territory. But over the period of time the dominant Hindu values neglected ethnic/tribal culture (Marie uses the word tribe or tribal throughout the text. I have strong disagreement for this particular term, see Dahal 1979) which ultimately instigated the ethnic/tribal revivalism in Nepal. Marie explores the strategies adopted by the Magars in the course of their relations with their high caste neighbours, from sanskritization and ritual integration to contestation, desanskritization and revolution (p. 4). This further nourished the Maoist revolution, which used the Hindu kingship and caste organization as adversary of ethnicity and to endorse their values and to win faiths among people. The Maoist insurgency and the tribal revivalism were constructed in opposition to the caste organization and Hindu monarchy. Based on these grand notions, she analyzes “otherness” which serves as the framework for underlying features of Nepalese society and its revolution. In brief, the present volume is a careful scholarly work, a narration of informed traditions which attempts to theorize “others” or “otherness” from the perspectives of people in question.

The Magars of Nepal are numerically one of the largest groups (1,622,421 population or 7.1 per cent, 2001) scattered throughout the
kingdom. Their large concentration lies mostly in the western and central hill districts of Nepal: Tanahu, Myagdi, Baglung, Palpa, Nawalparasi, Piuthan and Rolpa. Marie’s collection of articles in this volume largely focuses on Magars of Gulmi district (Darling village) and some reference is made to Gorkha, Piuthan and Rolpa districts as well. Though the author does not specifically mention time periods of her field work in Nepal, it looks that her doctoral thesis on Magars appeared in 1991. This suggests that she has spent almost two decades while understanding Magars and their culture in relation to other Hindu groups in Nepal.

Drawing from Michel Foucault’s model of “discourse”, the author has chosen a narrative and fictional framework for this study. She uses all available means to explain her text: fiction (novel and poetry), inscriptions, chronicles, myths, rituals, and contemporary accounts as well as academic or polemical publications.

Besides introduction, there are eight chapters in the book with a “Postscript” of 3 pages. All eight chapters are the collection of author’s published articles in different books and journals: Chapter 1 (Les Mondes), Chapter 2 (Diogene), Chapter 3 (originally published in a French Journal in 1999 and later published in English language Studies in Nepali History and Society, 2000), Chapter 4 (Purusartha), Chapter 5 (Gellner’s Resistance of the State: Nepalese Experience, 2003), Chapter 6 (Quigley’s The Character of Kingship, 2005), Chapter 7 (originally published in French Journal, later in Anthropology Today, 2004) and Chapter 8 (Social Analysis, Vol. 50, 2006).

The Introduction neatly summarizes the theoretical notions on stereotypes, alterocentrism and altertrization and describes how these notions are useful models in explaining the Hindu kingship, ethnic revivalism and Maoist revolution in Nepal. However, her very first sentence begins with a big question mark, “For a long time, Nepal was presented as a model of harmony and tolerance” (p.4). She has implicitly suggested this as a wrong approach to understanding Nepali society and history. It is because the Nepali people could not make resistance in the name of violence against the government and there was “dark peace” throughout the history of Nepal. Explication of the term “dark peace” however is found nowhere in the text. Against this background, can one take “tolerance” and “peace” as negative attributes in the interests of stability of the society and the nation as a whole? Can violence and killings be justified in the name of peace and development of the nation?

Chapter 1: Spirits, Shamans and Englishmen, Perceptions of Others in Vir Charitra: A Nineteen Century Novel: This chapter discusses the contents of novel Vir Charitra (Adventures of a Hero) written in 1899 by a high caste Ayurvedic doctor (Girishvallav Joshi-1867-1923). The book reflects the specific context of late nineteenth century Nepal during the reign of Rana.
Prime Ministers. According to the author, *Vir Charitra* was apparently written to entertain women of the Rana harem where stories of ten princes with “conquest of the regions” are presented. *Vir Charitra* seems to explore the infinite possibilities of journeys in worlds grafted onto the phenomenal world during the course of routine travel, where arrival and departure respectively open and close the account (p. 35). The discourse on the Others and Otherness is expressed in relation to the spirits and their numerous separate worlds.

The story centered on two Brahmin brothers- Vishnudatta and Agnidatta and their female counterpart Nidhini, actually the female spirits. Female spirits are projected as more lustful than males who kidnap males for fulfillment of their sexual desire. This shamanistic journey depicts a travel into alterity, into various worlds exiting apart, yet coexisting and interacting with the human beings, Hindu space. Human beings are associated with malevolent spirits and the wilderness (= alterization), as appears clearly in the novel *Vir Charitra*. In a nutshell, the author concludes “*Vir Charitra* can be read as an allegory of conquest of Nepal in tribal territories and their subsequent Hinduization, since all the shamanic creatures are finally destroyed or brought under the control by young Brahmins. But why a Brahmin writer had to fantasize the story in favour of Shah/Rana rulers of that period is not clear at all.

Chapter 2: Hindu Power in a Tribal Territory: The Cult of Bhume among the Magars begins with a note that why Bhume ritual has become so much important to reflect Magar culture and identity. Along with military conquest of the Magarant, the Magar country which took place around the fifteenth century by Thakuri petty kings, the Magars gradually started losing their culture while integrating themselves in the larger Hindu pantheons, rituals and festivals. Once Magars lost their territory, they started maintaining the Magar cultural identity in the form of Bhume ritual. The homology between earth and woman and ploughing and sexual relationship is discussed in relation to Magar culture. In the name of Bhume, grain is offered to a young virgin girl in each household. The cult of Bhume is associated with the first settlers. All the Hindu households of the neighboring villages contribute half kilogram of maize to the Magar priest as a ritual compensation guaranteed by Bhume for the lost land. For the Magars, the concept of village community is thus partly structured around the cult of Bhume. This way they apparently maintain monopoly of power on earth (land).

In Dashain festival, the Magar Mukhiya or headman is doubly legitimized by a direct relationship with his ancestral land through the worship of Bhume and a representative of the Hindu king during the Dashain festival. This kind of legitimization of the local leadership during the Dashain festival is common among the Tamangs as well (Holmberg 1989).
Chapter 3: The Enigmatic Pig: On Magar Participation in the State Rituals of Nepal traces the interesting narration of Thakuri kings in the Magar land from two angles; i) Whether Thakuris are Magars or have Rajput origins, and ii) The Thakuri tutelary goddess Alam Devi and the sacrifice of pig in this Thakuri temple by the Magar priest. In both cases, the pig has played an important role.

Many myths and discourses are brought in by the author to argue whether Thakuris are Magars by descent or have the Rajput origin. Many Rajputs could have adopted the tradition of raising pigs to protect themselves from the Muslim invasion. In the second case, a pig is sacrificed in the temple of Alam Devi in Lasargha, the tutelary deity of Shah kings from where the “Fulpati” (flowers and leaves) are brought to Kathmandu to celebrate Dashain festival every year. The sacrifice of a pig performed by a Magar priest at the Thakuri lineage’s god’s shrine shows that Thakuris had placed Magar rituals at the heart of their religious practice (p. 120). The author concludes “The evidence from Lasshargha shows the ongoing practice of pig sacrifices and the participation of Magar priests in key positions in royal religious practices indicates that a pragmatic strategy – that of incorporating subject populations into state’s religion, because of their number and their role was crucial in their role of allies within the Hindu state”.

This chapter further suggests that there were so many inter marriages between Thakuri kings and Magar princes or daughters, the relation between the Magars and Shahs remained cordial for a long time in the history of Nepal. But Magars changed themselves along with the politics of Nepal. After 1990, many Magar organizations were born having different names. These organizations placed greater stress on cultural, linguistic and religious aspects of Magar identity and some claim autonomy for their territory Magarant (p. 131). They also challenged the Hindu notions of purity/impurity and voices were raised against the ruling government in favour of language, culture and religion of people.

Chapter 4: De-Sanskritization of the Magars Ethno History of a Group with no History. Marie notes that the hierarchy in Nepalese social structure today is overwhelmingly criticized by the Janajatis as it is considered imposed values on them by force and has been never adopted internally. The Nepalese Code of 1927, however clearly reflected that claims of social superiority within the group were not known in the past. In other words, this value of superiority/inequality is not imposed; it was adopted willingly by all groups, irrespective whether they belong to the caste groups, Adiabsis/Janajatis or Dalits of Nepal.

Nepal experienced the momentum of ethnic revivalism that paralleled with the first experiment with democracy in the 1950s. The movement was accelerated following the popular uprising of 1990 with the setting up of the
multi-party system. No doubt, ethnic activism has helped to locate Magar in the larger national culture and to show one's own ethnic identity in the form of language, religion and culture. Among Magars, many news magazines are published to make Magars aware of themselves and their contributions to the state. But it should not be forgotten here that Magars had remained the closed allies of the Shah Kings and this is the group who have highly internalized the Hindu values and adopted the Nepali language lavishly. So Marie is very careful to indicate that what these Magar activists/intellectuals would do to those Magars who are unwilling to follow desankritization (p.154). The most complicated issues in the process of ethnic activism among the Magars today are several. Magars are Hindus, Buddhists and animists in terms of religious faiths, the same Magars have different kinds of political ideologies and affiliation with different political parties, and there are rich and poor Magars with different level of education, aspiration and tastes.

In addition, many narratives also tell more about the sankritization of Magars than desankritization. Why Teej, a dominant ritual of Hindu women has become a model of culture adopted by a large number of Magar women is, however, little explained (Laura Ahearn 2000).

Chapter 5: The Messianic and rebel King Lakhan Thapa, Utopia and Ideology among the Magars notes that Lakhan Thapa had become synonymous with "ridiculous person" in the Nepali language till history and actions were rediscovered in the 1990s by Magar intellectuals. Eventually he is rehabilitated as the official martyr of Nepal. He is a hero, a king and a messianic for the Magars today.

But who is Lakha Thapa? Lakhan Thapa (born in 1891 B.S), was a person (king) who joined the Magar battalion of Pritivinayan Shah and became a captain in the army; quit the army in 1869 and established himself in the village of Bungkot in Gorkha; crowned as a local king and organized a rebellion against the Rana government of Jung Bahadur in 1871. He was captured and hanged eventually by the Rana rulers in front of his house.

The story of rebel king Lakhn Thapa was beautifully narrated by the author drawing from various sources showing differences of opinions between the Magar scholars vs. the others. The ethnocentric biasness prevails among scholars and one appreciates one' own culture irrespective of their negative elements. But the overall story of rebel Lakhan Thapa clearly suggests one thing: After his death, he became a prophet and Messiah in the Magar culture. But after reading many of the narrations presented by Marie still many things are yet unclear in the text about rebel Lakhan Thapa: i) Whether the rebel Lakhan Thapa had any kind of lineage connection with Saint Lakhan Thapa? ii) Whether Saint Lakhan Thapa himself was an ordinary man or deity or a seducer of the wife of Ram Shah, a beloved queen of Ram Shah, who is treated as an incarnation of goddess
Manakamana, iii) If one accepts the version of Magar scholars and activists that he had supernatural powers, why he had to challenge the rule of Jung Bahadur? The story further suggests that the rebel Lakhan Thapa wanted to build his own empire in the Magar territory or Nepal as a whole. These specious kinds of narrations clearly indicate that the history of Nepal is blurred even if one tries to understand a not so old history of Nepal, hardly 150 years old.

Chapter 6: The Transgressive Nature of Hindu Kingship in Nepal shows the history of the royal dynasty of the Shah which is marked by three stages: its obscure origin in India, its establishment in the hills of central Nepal during the fifteenth century, and the rapid conquest undertaken by them in the east and the west in the second half of the 18th century. There is a comparison between the Shah and the Malla kings. The Shahs kings are depicted as warlike and dynamic in comparison to Mallas as territorialized king (p.195).

In the Hindu caste organization, the uniqueness of the king and his need to be a permanent state of purity requires in many rituals, particularly the death rituals.

The transgressive nature of the Hindu Shah King can be noted in three ways: i) the degradation of a royal heir by the king. It is presented as disinterested act, ii) the second transgression goes against the normal rules of kinship at the time of funerals. It temporarily pollutes the younger brother of the king and allows latter to be detached from his family for the duration of impure mourning period. The third transgression is aimed at the dead king from the kingdom using a Brahmin priest for the purpose. In brief, the emergence of a new political power operated through transgression is far from being a revolution in itself as transgression is central to the monarchic institution.

Chapter 7: The Regicide and Maoist Revolutionary Warfare in Nepal, Modern Incarnations of Warrior Kingdom focuses on how both the Maoists and their opponents view each other as dehumanized as sanguinary and transgressive creatures. The Maoists have probably contributed to the construction of this new social order by challenging and reversing the ancient Hindu institutions of war and sovereignty. The author analyzes the relationship between the development of the Maoist movement and the royal massacre (1 June 2001) and notes that the emergence of the Maoist movement as the reflection of the gradual weakening of the monarchical power in Nepal.

The leaders of the “people’s war” have abrogated the fundamental Hindu laws – the murder of the Brahmin, woman, child or a cow (p. 224). The sad story here is that Brahmins became both the warriors and the rulers. Now the Maoists as Brahmins fight back against the monarchy, a permanent
Hindu institution of stability, the Brahmins had themselves contributed to establish in Nepal. To maintain supremacy in the Hindu war kingdom, the Maoists have maintained a dual organization, a political wing of the Communist Party of Nepal (M) and a military wing, the Peoples Liberation Army, both under the leadership of Chairman Prachanda, a Brahmin. Prachanda has increasingly represented himself as the king’s alter ego, and, furthermore as a legitimate ruler in opposition to the king (p.236).

Chapter 8: Kill One, he becomes one hundred Martyrdom as Generative Sacrifice in Nepal’s People’s War shifts focus to another journey, this time in the company of soldiers offering themselves in sacrifice on the bloody path of the Maoist revolutions. Once this reversal takes place, all values are inverted: the great men of the past become the exploiters, the king is a butcher, happiness is sorrow, life is death and death brings life.

In Nepal, in the past, war was equated with sacrifice but today this is not the case. The Maoist leaders were able to glorify their acts that their soldiers died in war become martyrs and one drop of martyr’s blood shed in the land germinates 100 warriors (raktabij). In addition, the glorification of the Maoist activities of killings for the cause of the liberation and freedom of people are narrated through poems, stories and in other different kinds of pamphlets. In the poems the Royal Nepal Army is depicted as “demonic enemies” and there is justification for subjugation, exultation, and attack on Dang or Beni by the Maoists against the enemy forces.

Ironically, Marie points out that death and destruction are seen as creative (p. 240). Unfortunately, this destructive culture (kheti) of killing people is perpetuating in Nepal in the name of people’s freedom, oppression and suppression. Day-by day “peace” has become an abstract object or a difficult target to achieve by the people of Nepal.

Finally in the “Postscript” Marie believes that though Hindu monarchy is finished in Nepal for ever but it will no doubt survive in various institutional forms such as the patriarchy, divine sovereignty, and holy leadership of sacrificial war.

Despite having so much of intellectual richness in the text, I have some reservations about the book. My observations are focused on the theory and some of its contents.

Many European scholars who are disgusted from the evolutionary and structural functional model of interpreting culture started alternative ways in examining the culture applying new theoretical models. Some of such theories are: phenomenology (Schulz 1967), varieties of structuralism (Levi Straus 1963 and Others), Post-Structuralist (Foucault 1972) and so on. These theories, in a nut shell, emphasize the subjective, contextual and constructed character of symbols that interpret some subjective process in a particular time and place. Here Maries uses Foucault’s theoretical notions and
applies the concepts of alterization and alterocentrism to explain the text. Overall stereotypes are described in symbolic perspectives or from the philosophical angle, whether in the forms of rejection in social practices and adoption of values into the day to day life.

Much of the analysis and conclusion is drawn from inferences derived from the local elites/advocacy leaders or myths connected with events from various sources. Any kind of mythical story (such as the narration of Vir Charittra) or the notion of stratification and ethnic revivalism (as presented by ethnic activists) is not value free; they present ethnocentric perspectives than having the notion alterocentrism. Particularly, the local elites/advocacy leaders are located in strategic organizations, possessing power and other prerequisites and thus these elites have their own compelling personal interests in perpetuating their status and thus develop their own value loaded ideas in legitimizing myths or set the political agenda or ideas to achieve their goals. That is why even the inter-caste marriage is plotted as genocide to annihilate the culture of indigenous groups by some Janajati scholars. But throughout the text, there is little resistance against the Hindu culture and Shah monarchy except for the case of Lakhan Thapa. In the case of Lakhan Thapa as well the jealously and antagonism stems not with the Hindu kingship or caste values but with Jung Bahadur Rana, the then Prime Minister of Nepal, who supported the British in the sepoy mutiny. It looks that there is a tendency to come up with theoretical justifications from specious myths and conjectural histories to legitimize the views of “Others” or “Otherness”. The mythical past are put together to explain the present with a grand superstructure of an inevitable outcome. It is to be noted here that even a very recent event always matters and constantly reshape the present. Unless the vested goals and interests of a scholar/person are properly understood, analysis becomes partial or weak. The other question is how much we can use uncritical adoption of local stereotypes to describe the reality.

The interesting argument here should be that were the Shah kings clever enough to respect the local deities such as Alam Devi or Taleju Bhawani so that the subject population become a part of the state’s religion. In contrast, the Maoists as rulers simply became unpopular very quickly in the government after they sacked the Mool Bhattas (Chief priests) of the temple of Pashupatinath or withdrawing the cash fund for a Hindu guthi, and did not release the money allocated for the festival of Indra Jatra in the Kathmandu Valley.

The other focal argument is that whether Magar could live without becoming a Hindu or Buddhist or an animist? Or can they give up caste hierarchical values in their everyday life? The historical evidences suggest it was Magars themselves who welcomed Thakuris to their territories, protected them against the Muslims invasion and placed them as kings in their
territories while offering them their princes/daughters and serving them faithfully in their temples and their armies.

The other lesson to be learnt here is that the Brahmins could take any shape such as a warrior, a Pundit, a king maker and a king “eater” (unmaker), and impure and pure person as situation permits.

I also believe that it was the strategy of the Maoist to use highly sensitive rhetoric against Hinduism, casteism and monarchical authoritarianism so that they can attract the attention and support of Adibais/Janajati groups of Nepal to achieve their set agenda and goals of state seizure and come to power. But once they installed themselves in power, they forgot the old agenda and started nourishing the dominant Hindu values. In July 2009, for example, the Maoists, who are atheists in principle, organized the Hindu Puranā for fund raising in the name of supporting a hospital in Kathmandu is case in point. They not only invited the famous Pandit Dinbandhu Pokherel to recite the Hindu sacred text, the Puranā, but also collected millions worth of properties both in cash and kind from the devotees by exploiting their religious sentiments (of both the Hindus caste groups and the Adibasi/Janajati).

As already mentioned above, I have a strong distaste with word “tribe” or “tribal” as it connotes negative identity of people in question in Nepal. Even Adibasi/Janajatī groups prefer to write English equivalent nationality than the tribe. Sometime the translation is little awkward such as half liter of rice (p.72) or four liters of maize (p. 64) and so on (Rice and maize are weighted in kilogram).

Despite these few shortcomings, the collection of articles is good enough for several reasons. The volume is very useful for those who are interested about the Magar history (written and unwritten). Magar accounts of their own identity, name of Magar magazines and various pamphlets about Magars, particularly, the source of Magar accounts through Regmi Research Series. A 14 pages long bibliography amply suggests that there is so much of reading material available on the subject. Readers of all levels, including the Maoists and army personnel, scholars/leaders, particularly, Magar intellectuals may find this volume very interesting and informative in understanding the role of Shahs and Magars in making/unmaking of Nepal.

— Dilli Ram Dahal