

but at the same time the economic reform policy has led to environmental problems of land degradation, especially on the hills and parts of the uplands, by overgrazing. R.D. Schwartz's paper on 'The Reforms Revisited: Grain procurement in Tibet' outlines how Chinese procurement policy is implemented in Tibet, describes its impact on rural livelihoods, and asks whether state procurement policy has had the effect of retarding or promoting the development of market sales of agricultural products.

In the final article of the book, 'Economic Patterns of the Tibet Autonomous Region' Rong Ma provides an account of modern economic history that focuses on subsidy and nationality relations. He examines records and statistics on the twentieth century economy and places them in the context of relations between the Tibet Autonomous Region and the lowland Han regions of China.

This book is a unique new work. On the one hand it is a useful contribution to the present interdisciplinary scientific debate on development and social and environmental change. On the other, it is essential reading for those concerned with an objective assessment of Tibet's present and future development. Despite the very profound information given by the various authors, the book is also very thoroughly prepared, including an introduction to the contributors and their scientific and institutional backgrounds, lists of plates, maps and tables, notes on transcription as well as a comprehensive glossary at the end. Unfortunately the editor passed away on February 3<sup>rd</sup> 1998 and was not able to witness the success of his work. Despite this tragic circumstance the book has been completed with the help of Mrs Jinchai Clarke.

*Contested Hierarchies: A Collaborative Ethnography of Caste among the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal* edited by David N. Gellner and Declan Quigley. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995. 364 pp., 19 plates, 12 figures, 30 tables, appendix, index.

Reviewed by Martin Gaenzle

The concept of caste has long dominated discussions of South Asian anthropology, but more recently its heuristic value has been increasingly questioned.

The present volume is a forceful statement in favour of caste as an analytical category, and can be seen as a critique of overly deconstructionist views which regard caste as a mere colonial construction. Instead, as Gellner argues in his introduction, the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley are particularly suitable for a study of caste, as here certain biases of research in India can be avoided. Above all, the institution of kingship is still very much alive in Nepal, and this, among other things, allows for a reevaluation of a Hocartian perspective on caste. Also, the Newars, though agriculturalists in the majority, have a very urban culture (on various scales) and so it is possible to counteract the heavy focus on village studies which has characterized anthropological studies in other parts of the subcontinent. Besides contributing to the discussion of these theoretical issues, the book is highly valuable in providing a detailed compendium of Newar ethnography: as most of the major anthropologists who have worked on the Newar in recent times have collaborated to produce this volume, it represents the 'state of the art', with all the tensions this is bound to imply.

The chapters of the book represent the major Newar castes or caste groups, partly described in a local context, partly in a more general manner. The first contribution by Todd Lewis deals with the Uray of Asan Tol (Kathmandu), a caste of Buddhist merchants which consists of various sub-castes (Tuladhar, Kamsakar, Rajkarnikar, etc.). Here caste, which operates as a marriage circle, is criss-crossed by various different *guthi* associations both above and below the level of caste. The common Buddhist identity is still a marker of exclusiveness today. As Lewis points out, this has its roots in the historical context: in the Malla period, Hindu and Buddhist castes competed in factional politics vis-à-vis royalty, with both sides getting their share. The following chapter deals with the "dominant" Hindu caste, the Shresthas. In fact, here the term 'caste' is the most problematic, because the Shrestha are perceived as one caste by outsiders, but internally they are divided into several more or less endogamous status groups. The Shresthas are the major patrons in the traditional system, i.e. they are at the core, representing the royal function. But, as Quigley argues, not all Shrestha lineages are equally powerful as patrons, and because of this various status groups have developed.

The longest chapter is Ishii's study of an 'intermediate settlement', i.e. a settlement which is neither a fringe settlement (almost exclusively inhabited by one caste) nor a large urban settlement, like Kathmandu or Lalitpur. In this very detailed description of Satungal, a multi-caste town of roughly 1,500 inhabitants, it becomes clear that caste organization and kinship practices

differ considerably, depending on the kind of settlement. In any case, the numerically largest caste, here as in most other places, are the Maharjans, the peasants, who are generally regarded as the 'true' Newars. These 'urban peasants' are dealt with in a chapter by Gellner and Pradhan. Looking at the Maharjans, it seems, one can observe Newar culture in its 'original' form, but this suggestion, the authors warn us, has to be treated with caution.

Two further chapters, one by Toffin and one by Gellner, focus on Newar priesthood. In his chapter on the social organization of the Rajopadhyaya Brahmans Toffin points out the unique status of the small caste of Newar Brahmans: on the one hand they are renowned throughout the country for their strict orthodoxy, but on the other their status has been in steady decline since the Shahs and Ranas favoured Parbatiya Brahmans. This puts them in an awkward position, because in order to retain a Brahmanic identity they have to distance themselves from the Newars. In the case of the Shakyas and Vajracaryas described by Gellner there is also a decline, if not in status then in the importance of their religious role. In particular, it is Theravada Buddhism and Hinduism which threaten the old system and thus the priestly vocation is less in demand. In consequence, Gellner argues, the Shakyas and Vajracaryas have reinforced their identity as Newar Buddhists and tend to become a "quasi-ethnic group".

The last two descriptive chapters deal with various occupational castes at the lower end of the caste hierarchy. Toffin describes the Citrakars, the painters and mask makers in the traditional system of ritual service, who belong to the 'clean castes', and finally Gellner gives an account of the low, i.e. 'unclean', castes in Lalitpur. Though not based on intensive and prolonged fieldwork this chapter is a valuable source on Newar 'untouchability', especially since this is still the least-known area of Newar society. It is interesting to see that even the 'unclean' castes are rather heterogeneous, some tending to replicate the high-caste model and others tending towards a subculture of their own.

In spite of all the differences in the details of social organization which are described in these chapters it also emerges that there are clear continuities. Every chapter brings out the fundamental importance of the *guthi* system, and the strong ties to locality. Both of these features have often been stressed, but the unity in diversity comes out with particular clarity in this documentation of different castes in different settings. Another strength of this ethnography is that all the authors also deal with recent changes and trends of development, such as the transformation of social groups and occupational patterns,

modernization, party politics, ethnic movements, etc.

In what respect then can one speak of 'contested hierarchies'? The title holds out the promise that caste is here not seen as part of a self-perpetuating system but rather as something which is moulded and manipulated by conscious actors. And indeed, several of the contributions have something to say about social status being a matter of contestation. In particular, Quigley stresses that the internal ranking of Shrestha sub-groups is rather fluid and that the boundaries of the group as a whole are permeable. Similarly, Lewis points out status rivalries between local Uray groups in Kathmandu, and Toffin stresses the differing status ascriptions of Rajopadhyaya Brahmans and Parbatiya Brahmans. Clearly, caste rankings are not always unambiguous and are often subject to dispute. But on the whole such contestation remains relatively marginal to most of the studies. The main emphasis is on normative aspects, and agency is not made a special focus (some case studies would have been useful here). It seems that dispute is often associated with the dissolution of institutions. After all, in the traditional system where the king was at the centre of power there were obvious limits to contestation: hierarchy was often imposed on people from above.

Whereas the contestation of hierarchy from the Newars' side is not as central an issue as one might expect (it is not taken up in the conclusion), the contestation of anthropological theories on Newar society is a recurrent theme, and it is a virtue of the book that these are not covered up. In his conclusion Quigley points out these tensions. One controversial issue is the conceptualization and representation of the caste hierarchy. Gellner proposes to distinguish mainly six 'blocs' of castes, which can be represented as vertically arranged layers. This, he argues, is the way Newar themselves depict it when speaking of 'higher' and 'lower' castes. Quigley, on the other hand, regards this as misleading and prefers the 'mandala model': the king is at the centre and all the other castes are in a circle around him. The problem with this representation is that all the service castes appear to be similar in status, and in fact, Quigley's point is that Brahman and Untouchable are not all that different. I have serious doubts about his view of the Brahmanic function. After all, the ethnography of Newar priestly castes clearly shows their eminent position. In fact, Quigley admits that there is a status difference which he describes in terms of distance from the centre. But once such a distinction is introduced we are back to the vertical model. Of course, in this model the crucial point is that the king is supreme, not the priest. But it has to be borne in mind that in a mandala the real centre is always a divinity;

it protects the king and is accessed through priests. It is interesting to note in this respect that the old royal palaces of the Malla kings always contained the temple of their *kul devata*, Taleju, who was served by the Rajopadhyaya Brahmins (p. 189).

Another controversial issue is the question of whether 'Indianization', i.e. the transformation of a 'tribal substratum' through continuous influence from the south, is crucial for an understanding of Newar society. While Toffin in particular stresses the non-Indic elements of many contemporary Newar customs, both Gellner and Quigley are sceptical that this is of much relevance. It is true that the transformation of Newar culture has been a complex and long-term historical process, and so one has to be very careful in making general statements about 'tribal' and 'non-tribal' elements. But at the same time it emerges from the contributions to this book that this transformation is not only a matter of history and that certain tensions between different cultural orientations can still be recognized. Emulation of a high-caste Hindu model, for example, is still an important strategy (though not the only strategy) in the construction of a cultural self-identity (e.g. in terms of marriage practices, use of priestly functionaries, religious orientations, etc.). And so one has to ask: What kind of choices are taken by individual actors, and what are the reasons for such decisions? I think there is still considerable scope for future research on such issues, especially if more fieldwork is done among the Maharjans outside the big cities.

All in all, the volume is a very impressive documentation of Newar culture, on a high level of ethnographic and theoretical standards, and excellently presented (the book is well illustrated and has a carefully prepared index, for example). Moreover, it opens up a space for dealing with matters of agency, contestation, and cultural change without falling into the traps of an impressionistic 'psychoethnography' (S. Parish). It is an important contribution to the anthropology of South Asian culture and society, and so one can only hope that it will also receive due recognition and debate among scholars with comparative interests.