

case etymologically akin to *sarānu*, 'to praise' (cf. also Hindi *sarāha*, *sarāhan*, 'praise', 'eulogy'). If this highly important publication has any major deficiency at all, it is the lack of an index.

On the Edge of the Auspicious: Gender and Caste in Nepal by Mary Cameron. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998. 314 pp.

Reviewed by Ben Campbell

The Untouchable communities of Nepal have received comparatively little anthropological attention, and this book puts them centre stage. Focusing on a number of 'artisan' castes living in Bajhang District in the far west of the country, Cameron mixes an accessible ethnographic style with a provocative theoretical examination of caste and gender hierarchies.

Cameron argues that, for Hindu women, gender and caste have separable strategic effects that can produce different kinds of boundaries. Rather than seeing gender as another manifestation of a hierarchizing principle emanating from distinctions between 'pure' and 'impure', she disentangles gender from caste. In order to do this, however, she claims that gender difference is constructed in a way that does correspond to perceptions of castes—but in terms of *jāt* rather than *varṇa*, i.e. as characteristic social types that need not emphasize ritual inequality. She insists most strongly that low-caste women do not share the ideological and practical motivations of high-caste women, in the ways that gender merges with caste in the dowry-circulating processes of domestic cultural prestige among Bahun, Thakuri, and Chetri. The low castes' practices of bride-price and cross-cousin marriage avoid the high castes' obsession with affinal hierarchies and the status implications of the gift of a virgin-bride.

The book then pays particular attention to the ways in which low-caste women's agency can be discerned in arenas of autonomous social practice, which include economic diversification through wage work, freedom to remarry, and even comparative 'marital satisfaction'. Cameron's analysis of intercaste relations explicitly highlights everyday rather than ritual concerns, and offers a significant contrast to approaches which have stressed the hierarchical meanings of gifts that remove auspiciousness down the social scale. She sides with Quigley, Appadurai, and others in arguing that forms of dominance rest in the control of people and resources, not in ritual purity. The title of the book is thus an argument against the privileging of auspiciousness as an explanatory basis for the logic of caste inequality, and yet the low castes' condition of marginality, characterized by both autonomy and subservience, is one that occasionally invokes the auspiciousness of events—weddings, for example—as a counter to the high castes' esteem for textual knowledge.

The ethnographic study concentrates in chapters 2 to 4 on the dilemmas of livelihood facing the various artisan communities who for the most part can no longer rely on their occupational specialisms. These consist of Lohār blacksmiths (the most economically secure), Sunār goldsmiths, Oudh masons, Pārki basket weavers, Damāi tailors, Sārki leather workers (described as the poorest, most malnourished, and uneducated), Okheda ex-palace guards, and Bādī potters and prostitutes. These groups dislike the collective appellation *dom*. The collapse of service patronage under the Bhalara kingdom by the 1960s resulted in a move into economically more diverse occupations, with women much less involved in artisanal production than the men, and more motivated to support their families by taking on agricultural work for high-caste families. The proximity of India has enabled an increase in migrant labour, and also offered low castes an alternative self-perception through processes of caste reform in India.

Cameron claims that in the analysis of Bhalara's social inequalities the concept of class is culturally inappropriate, not being a locally recognized category. This is perhaps one of the least convincing aspects of the book, as she supplies sufficient material to argue the contrary. The appropriation of land by high castes through registration, reinforcing patrilineal control and high-caste gender ideology, is central to her analysis. Untouchables are denied access to the land market through the exclusionary monopolization of high-caste inheritance practices (pp.70-3). The somewhat surprising response to differential land holding is the system of *mātya* tenancy of land, taken as collateral for 'loans' made by low to high castes, funded by the former's agricultural and migrant earnings. Whether some low castes are more involved in migrant labour than others is not discussed. It is not clear if the data generated by Cameron's Time Allocation methodology is amenable to answering this sort of question. On the whole, only sketchy attention is given to many issues of livelihood strategy, given the insistence on the importance of women's efforts to achieve economic autonomy. There is, for instance, little discussion of livestock keeping. One footnote records a high proportion of loans taken for animal purchase, while another footnote discusses one woman's reputation as a good dairy producer, but it is not even made clear whether she is from the low castes.

Perhaps the issue of class and its (mis)recognition would have been better argued if the author had addressed the important studies of rural low castes in central and west Nepal respectively by Hiroshi Ishii (1982) and Inge-Britt Krause (1988). It is surprising that these are overlooked, along with Tom Cox's work on the Bādī community in Jajarkot, in a book that castigates anthropologists for not studying rural untouchability. Their research on the historical conditions of indebtedness and bonded labour would have given this book a firmer comparative basis. Cameron hardly mentions indebtedness, but alludes obliquely to its effects on the system of patronage for artisanal services in her discussion of the way in which Lohār women's contributions to 'reciprocal' work groups controlled by high-caste women is not reciprocated by work, but in the securing of contracts for their further services (p.114). Krause's argument is that class consciousness in Mugu is inhibited by a similar embedding of command over low castes' labour in delayed and diffuse

advances and returns. Furthermore, Cameron's entire rationale for arguing against symbolic interpretations of caste in favour of forms of control over people and resources, stressing transactions of material values between castes rather than ritual gifting denoting status hierarchy (p.49), contains at the very least an implicit theory of class.

This point of difference apart, I must strongly recommend *On the Edge of the Auspicious* as a perceptive treatment of gender that is pertinently located within regional scholarship and contemporary anthropological theory. There are some memorable passages of writing on *jakram* women's dances (p.215), on the sexual imagery of ploughing, on the wit deployed against exploitation, and on the effectiveness of stylized public insult (invoking a variety of possible incestuous relationships, and an eloquent wishing of death on an offending woman's male relatives (p.163)). Cameron creates a vivid sense of her own position and experience within the community of research, and does not hold back from mentioning the sometimes physically 'repulsive conditions' of fieldwork, and the 'loathsome' treatment by high castes of the women and men whose voices speak out from the pages of her book.

References

- Ishi, Hiroshi 1982. 'Agricultural labour recruitment in a Parbate village of Nepal'. In *Anthropological and Linguistic Studies of the Gandaki Area Nepal* (Monumenta Serindica 10), edited by D.B. Bista *et al.* Tokyo: Institute for the Study of the Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa.
- Krause, Inge-Britt 1988. 'Caste and labour relations in North West Nepal' *Ethnos* 53: 5-36.

The Thakali: A Himalayan ethnography by Michael Vinding. London: Serindia Publications, 1998. 512 pp., 51 colour plates, maps, glossary, bibliography, index. ISBN 0-90602650-4. £30

Reviewed by Mark Turin

The Thakali are one of very few ethnic groups autochthonous to the Nepali Himalaya who can boast that the academic bibliography pertaining to their culture runs to almost fifteen pages of small print. Michael Vinding's eagerly awaited monograph concludes a good five decades of intense anthropological debate on this famous Tibeto-Burman population of lower Mustang simply by having more information in one place than any previous study. Thankfully, although published in an era marked by navel-gazing anthropology, *The Thakali* shows no sign of having been caught up in such reflexive discussion. Whilst