

*Anthropology and Sociology of Nepal: Cultures, societies, ecology and development* edited by Ram B. Chhetri and Om P. Gurung. Kathmandu: Sociological and Anthropological Society of Nepal (SASON), 1999. ISBN 99933-301-1-6, ISBN 99933-301-0-8. 384 pp.

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This volume represents a first in two senses. It is to be welcomed as the first book ever published by the Sociological and Anthropological Society of Nepal (SASON) since its inauguration in 1985, and it presents papers delivered at the first international conference organised by SASON, in this case jointly with the Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Tribhuvan University. The conference, employing the same title as the subsequent book, was held in Patan in March 1997. Actually, back in 1992 SASON had held its first and so far only National Congress, which was effectively a kind of international conference timed to dovetail with the international conference on the Anthropology of Nepal (itself the first of its kind to be held in Nepal) organised by Michael Allen from Sydney University with the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University.

As the editors of this volume point out, Nepali and *videšī* scholars have not always interacted and shared their knowledge sufficiently, particularly because Nepali scholars often lack the funds to attend conferences and workshops abroad. To enable as many scholars as possible, both Nepali and foreign, to share their work, it was decided to hold this conference in Nepal. The resulting book is international in terms of the nationalities of the contributors, though, as is appropriate, the majority of contributions (13 out of 24) are by Nepali scholars. It is striking, however, that European scholars are only represented by Norway (three papers), Germany (one paper) and the UK (one paper). The conference title was designed to bring in as many speakers as possible. The inevitable result is that the collection of papers is very diverse, spanning a range of topics and methodological and theoretical approaches, and this is probably why the editors wisely opt not to review or survey the papers in their introduction. In fact, some 46 papers were delivered at the conference, and it is perhaps a shame that more were not offered for publication—not only to give potential readers a better view of current research but also to enable the editors to replace some of the weaker contributions to this occasionally uneven collection.

The volume is divided into five sections. The first provides an introduction from the editors and two opening keynote addresses, while the remaining sections present 21 revised conference papers grouped under the following headings: ‘Rituals and

Ethnic/Caste Identities' (5 papers), 'Demographic Studies' (4 papers), 'Management of Natural Resources' (8 papers) and 'Medical Anthropology and Sociology' (4 papers). This is followed by a list of contributors, a short introduction to SASON itself, and an end piece from the editors which gives a brief background on Professor Dor Bahadur Bista and his mysterious disappearance and calls on the government of Nepal to make all efforts to find him.

In the Introduction the editors give an overview of the development of anthropology and sociology at Tribhuvan University, before listing a series of points that emerged from conference discussions as concerns for the future. Most of these concerns are fairly predictable, including the lack of access of Nepali researchers to academic sources, especially work produced by foreign scholars, and the lack of a more theoretically informed and systemic analysis of development issues in Nepal, partly because of the way that Nepali researchers are tied into lower level, more apparently 'practical' applied research. Research gaps are identified, on the Tarai and on the Bahun-Chetri groups, as well as on more fundamental social institutions such as marriage, family, caste, and ethnicity. The questions raised here about the role of foreign researchers are interesting. There is some scepticism about how much has been gained on the Nepali side from university-level academic links and exchange programmes, and it is also noted that "quite a few *videshi* people are found doing 'research' in different parts of Nepal today" without a proper research visa or affiliation (p. 8). This is an old problem and rightly leads the editors to ask how a better system could be set up to facilitate such research at the same time as avoiding any potential problems and harmful consequences resulting from such unofficial work.

In his keynote address, Harka Gurung also make some tantalisingly brief but interesting comments on the place of foreign researchers in the wider scene in Nepal. He notes that the discourse on Nepalese history and culture has until recently been very much that of the dominant castes and has excluded the marginal ethnic groups. In this context, Nepalese scholars, "mostly from higher castes" have criticised foreign scholars for "their divisive habit of romanticising the culture of minorities", while in a parallel way the authorities have disapproved of such studies "as giving encouragement to communal movements" (pp. 11-12). Ethnic minorities, however, tend to view the foreign researchers' accounts as more authentic. He suggests that this has led to the emergence of, "on the one hand, a nexus between the outside and marginal perspectives and, on the other hand, a divergence in perception between the natives according to whether they subscribe to dominant or marginal perspective" (p. 12).

As its title suggests, Section 2 includes a heterogeneous mix of papers. Ishii compares the life cycle rituals of Newars, Parbate Hindus and Maithils. Among his conclusions Ishii finds that Newars' relations with the supernatural world are closer than those of the other groups who deal with these relations in more abstract ways. An analysis of affinal prestations reveals no particular status differentials among the Newars, in contrast to the Parbates among whom the groom's side is superior. This is not surprising, but the Maithil case, where previous equality between affines appears now to be conforming more to the Parbate model under the influence of dowry, is more interesting. In all three groups there appears to be an increasing attenuation in the practice of these types of ritual. Gyanu Chhetri's paper presents part of the analysis of a sociological survey of 483 households of Occupational Castes in the middle hills, and is to be welcomed as a contribution to thus far little-studied groups. The paper is useful in providing firm evidence to support what most researchers would already suspect, namely that the younger generations are abandoning traditional caste occupations partly for economic reasons and because of the effects of education, but also in order to escape from their low-status position. As the paper makes abundantly clear, caste hierarchy and caste-based discrimination "does not exist in theory but is prevalent in practice" (p. 57). Hagen's excellent paper on identity and ethnic politics in Ilam district is also important as a contribution to research on ethnicity. Hagen's clear analysis of the theory or discourse level of identity construction in the Mongol National Organization is nicely balanced by attention to the more everyday level of social practice, which shows that individuals actually opt for a revised single ethnic identity as Limbu or Rai etc. rather than as 'Mongol', and look to the MNO as a political rather than a social identity.

Dilli R. Dahal's paper opens the next section on demography with a comprehensive review of anthropologists' contributions to migration studies in Nepal. Dahal criticises survey methods for neglecting the complexity of context and provides a strong argument for using qualitative cultural analysis to complement more conventional and technical quantitative approaches in demography. To keep the more qualitatively oriented reader on their toes, and as an example of the striking range of approaches included in this collection, the next paper by Shyam Thapa presents a thoroughly statistical analysis of ethnicity as a factor in determining the timing of family formation in Nepal. This again provides hard data in support of ethnographically informed insights that in certain hill ethnic groups women tend to have a relatively higher status and marry later. It also shows that the earliest age of marriage occurs particularly among a cluster of Tarai caste groups. Shara G. Neidell's paper in this section also relates to women's autonomy and status. She argues that, contrary to the findings of some recent surveys, women's decision-making power

has not declined but rather they are becoming more aware of the limitations placed on them. This has resulted from their increasing internalization of outsiders' definitions of decision-making, education and work.

Section 4 on the management of natural resources contains the largest number of papers (eight) and is the main section of the book. Most of these papers consider aspects of the Community Forestry Programme in Nepal and focus particularly on issues of community participation, local level institutions, and conflict. Indigenous natural resources management systems also receive some attention. The section opens with D. Gilmour and R.J. Fisher's excellent overview of the evolution of forestry policy. This paper then turns to the constraints on contributions from anthropologists, whose work has become increasingly relevant as the scale of community involvement has grown. Many of the comments here echo other literature on the roles of anthropologists in development; nevertheless it is useful to have this extended example of the kinds of problems that anthropologists face. These problems include scepticism on the part of other development professionals, and especially economists, about a perceived lack of sufficiently robust and identifiable anthropological 'tools'. Lack of space does not allow the authors fuller discussion, but it would be very useful to know their suggestions for meeting this challenge. Ram B. Chhetri's paper constitutes a valuable critique of the rhetoric of 'People's Participation' in conservation and development. Through four case studies he unravels the real problems of 'People's Participation' on the ground. The analysis reaches a number of specific conclusions, along with the overall point that to be effective People's Participation requires a pragmatic and holistic approach to ensure that all relevant local groups actually are involved and that all their interests are properly considered. The following two papers both deal with local-level conflict and other problems in the way Forest User Groups (FUG) operate. Elvira Graner makes a very clear argument that conflicts over the membership of FUGs are very important but are as yet not properly studied or even identified as a distinct form of social conflict. Tulsi Ram Pandey identifies a range of internal and external problems in the effective running of FUGs, but again one of his key findings is that difficulties have arisen over the mismatch between membership of FUGs and the actual groups of people who make use of the forest resources. This paper and the one by Om P. Gurung both provide evidence that local people have been and can be highly effective in managing and conserving forest and other natural resources. Taken together, most of these papers will be important reading for development professionals working in this sector. They show again that the fine-grained local level research of anthropologists and sociologists can make a vital contribution to policy and practice.

The papers on medical anthropology and sociology are somewhat uneven, but this section is dominated by the excellent analysis by Marta Levitt of the conflict between Nepali management culture and the implementation of a culturally appropriate programme designed to train Traditional Birth Attendants (TBA). Levitt shows how the culture of programme management at district and community levels is shaped by traditional cultural attitudes and practices, such as “*afno manche, jagir* culture, *adesh*, and *chakari*” (p. 315). The result has been that in some cases the wrong people have been trained as TBAs so that there remain untrained TBAs in districts where training targets have been completed. This is an authoritative and informed paper, based as it is on long-term hands-on involvement with the programme, and it represents an important contribution to the analysis of the cultural dimensions of Nepali bureaucracy and management, an area much in need of further research.

It is clearly not possible for a single volume to provide a comprehensive showcase of the full range of current anthropological and sociological research on Nepal. Nevertheless this collection does reflect the development- and problem-oriented nature of much current research, especially by Nepali scholars. It is noticeable, however, that there are only two papers on the burgeoning phenomenon of ethnicity in Nepal. Harka Gurung’s comments in his opening address are thus not explored. As is often the case with volumes of conference proceedings, the collection includes many valuable as well as some weaker papers, and there would have been scope for the editors to drop some papers, at least in their present form. Unfortunately the text is also marred in a number of places by missing references and other typographical errors. Nevertheless, as a whole the volume will be of interest and value to anthropologists and sociologists as well as other scholars with an interest in Nepal, and it should certainly take its place on the shelf alongside the gradually increasing number of other similar volumes arising from conferences on Nepal.