

*Autonomy: Life cycle, gender and status among Himalayan pastoralists* by Aparna Rao. 1998. Oxford: Berghahn Books. pp 350. ISBN 1-57181-903-7.

Reviewed by Ben Campbell

Anyone wanting an insight into the lives of the Bakkarwal transhumant pastoralists of Jammu and Kashmir will find in this book plenty of informative description, well illustrated by the inclusion of people's own narratives, and backed up with tables of demographic statistics. Its ethnographic strengths, though, are unbalanced by a title that is never fully engaged with conceptually, a structure that is not wholly justified by its subject matter, and editing that leaves much to be desired.

Rao claims to offer an empirical approach, and sets out to explore processes of authorizing legitimacy in human agency with a focus on the variables of gender, economic status, and age. The compelling quality of the book is that it provides a rich analysis of Bakkarwal categories and understandings of selfhood, the morality of the person, and the cultural recognition and denial of agency. It contains some excellent writing, especially around weddings, and moments of deep ethnographic understanding stemming from the author's familiarity with the Bakkarwal over a fieldwork span of some twelve years. She writes from a closeness that only comes when your assigned role is to take care of sick lambs and kids.

The interwoven fates of herders and herds, and the connections made between animals and people in terms of principles of character, personality, and kind come over with great force. Through the structuring of the book according to the life cycle we learn that, to begin with, goat colostrum is given to a baby to bind it to its future occupation, and to treat the animal like a mother (sheep's milk would not do, being 'cold' compared to the goat's being 'hot'). At the other end of the bio-social spectrum, 'big men', a local man says, are "like certain billy-goats [who] go forward on their own to show the way to others" (p.282). Demographic data on reproductive issues are complemented by telling commentaries, such as when two women left in a Jammu hospital were visited by the author, who was later told: "We ... cannot afford to be so soft hearted—for us first come our animals and then our children" (p. 215). Cultural concepts that are developed to discuss capacities for human agency are given their fuller salience by locating them also in their usage for domestic livestock. Different species, and people as individuals have their 'innate tempers' (*mijāj*), and goats are said to have more *ōsh* than sheep. *ōsh* is the capacity for conscious personhood, and sympathy, that for instance makes a woman stay with a husband despite being unhappy. By contrast *nafas* is an egocentric selfhood,

and it is thought desirable to have a balance between *ōsh* and *nafas*, though men are deemed to hold more legitimate *nafas* than women. Each person's unique level of *ōsh* is affected by heritable characteristics of body substance and nurturing influences. There is no hierarchical rank ordering of *zāt* (p. 128), and endogamy is perceived as the legitimate autonomy of *zāt* in avoiding excessive mixture. For Rao this indicates an understanding of personhood at odds with Marriot's model of the South Asian ideology of individuality, and suggests instead a continuum between individual and individual (p. 16).

Rao's most convincing arguments are constructed by bringing together her analysis of concepts of personhood with her understandings of the dynamics of domestic pastoral economy. She highlights "the crucial connection between availability of labour and decision making in every sphere of pastoral life" (p. 220), and yet she is particularly eloquent on the cultural denial of agency to women in the gendered division of labour and space. A table of domestic and economic activities on page 247 is highly illustrative: "decisions I classified as having been taken exclusively by women are not considered by Bakkarwal men to be decisions at all." Here comes the nub of her analysis, in the fact that actions classified as 'habit' or 'custom' are not accorded the semantic weight of a decision (*pheislā*). 'Decisions' belong to the public sphere "which precludes the construction of women's autonomy" (p. 196). Autonomy and decision making are recognized among men of well-being, and noted in terms of a capacity to take apart and refashion constraints and boundaries around them and expand spheres of influence. Agency is attributed to those who demonstrate features of well-being.

The rationale for the title of the book is hard to grasp except as an overwhelming gendered refusal. Rao refers to young women's "extreme lack of autonomy" (p. 165), drops in the comment that "women are intrinsically incapable of shouldering much responsibility" (p. 246), and asserts that a woman "*is* married, she *is* sent away, she *is* divorced, and she *is* remarried" (original emphasis). It is only by the back door that the agency of women is offered to the reader, such as in arranging for a bridewealth payment to be returned after a marital breakdown, and in statements such as her claim that nuclear households give women more autonomy than joint forms. Rao does not, though, engage with important discussions of South Asian women's perspectives, that have attempted to reclaim women's agency (e.g. work by Raheja and Gold, or Bina Agarwal).

At the end of the book, which lacks a proper conclusion, Rao suggests that choice is considered minimal in life, apart for a few high-ranking men. The individual is not responsible for significant life events. Choice is not recognized among the ideologi-

cally unauthorized. There is a low level of articulated personal aspirations. That's it! No reprise of the issues is made. The term 'autonomy' appears only briefly in the theoretical introduction, and though present in the subsequent chapters is not significantly integrated into the earlier discussion of the individual. Political and ontological aspects of autonomy are not brought into any systematic theoretical interplay—an intention that the title and subject matter of the book, and the Afterword's comment that negating agency is at the core of South Asian politics, seem to imply.

Publication shortcomings include a map of migration routes with illegible place names in the unconnected opening discussion of concepts of the individual, personhood and culture. In fact there is no introductory section to provide the reader with the historical and regional context of the study and its community. A glossary is sorely missed. And 'teknonym' is consistently misspelled.

The serious contribution of this book, however, is in subjecting certain key terms of analysis in social science and development discourse, such as 'household', 'choice', and 'decision-making' to cultural critique. A beautiful revelation of gendered perspectives is contained in Rao's comment on people's responses to questioning on their domestic demographics. Different responses were given depending on women's tendency to answer in terms of *shakas* (physical beings) and men's answers only in terms of *bandā* (persons with names, social rights and duties). *Autonomy* deserves to be read by anyone interested in Himalayan livelihoods, not least for the suggestion of an "overall syndrome of verticality" (p. 51) in which pastures, herds, health, and well-being are all better at altitude.