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BOOK REVIEW

Klaus Seeland (ed.).
1986

Recent Research on Nepal. Schriftenreihe Internationales
Asienforum. Band 3. Munchen, Koln, London: Weltforum Verlag,
1986. 352 pp. 24 plates.

Reviewed by: Theodore Riccardi, Jr.

This volume contains eleven papers delivered at the Universität Konstanz, March 27-30, 1984. The participants were scholars from Switzerland, France, and West Germany. The conference had no unifying theme beyond "recent research." Its purpose was to bring together "newcomers" and "old Nepal hands" and to have them concentrate on late developments in research. The range of topics is therefore broad, but I shall try to cover each article, however briefly, in this short review. It should be noted at the outset that the papers are, in general, excellent, and the volume should be read by all serious students of the Himalayas.

Though the disciplines covered range widely, almost all of the discussions are broadly anthropological. Some cluster around the study of religion, law, and kinship; others discuss the influence of economic change on traditional society. Two articles, those of Walter Frank and the editor, Klaus Seeland, deal with the confrontation of Western and Nepalese worldviews, though in very different ways. Neither is a research article in the narrow sense. Frank, in his article entitled "Protocol of a Brahmanic Curse in Nepal" relates personal experiences that appear to defy scientific explanation. He ends with a call for a wider idea of science and for a more tolerant approach to the "inexplicable": "In our field work," he writes, "we anthropologists constantly are in contact with societies, within whose paradigmatic framework the spiritual is still a living part. What right do we have to devaluate these aspects of those societies as 'magical' or even 'primitive' and 'superstitious,' if in the meantime our own Western mechanistic-materialistic paradigm has been exposed as the superstition of the 19th century--and namely by those very sciences, which have originally formed it, the natural sciences and particularly physics?" The "answer" to Frank's rhetorical question is that of course we have no such right, and the Western scholar if he knows what he is doing, does not claim such a right. We must indeed be careful to understand other world views. But one must also be careful to understand exactly what is being rejected--or revised--when one is changing Western scientific conceptions, particularly when the evolution of science is predicated on the development of new hypotheses to explain new data. A rejected scientific explanation is simply not a superstition. And to accept what Frank does--to have UFOs flying through the steel blue sky of Mongolia and their existence over the last three thousand years corroborated to a Western traveler by a lama is, to this reviewer, not only to stretch credibility, but to fall into a little discussed area of Orientalism (in the sense in which Edward Said has used the term) and its tendency to denigrate religious conceptions like those of Buddhism by encouraging their association with the irrational and the scientifically unexplainable. This tendency, like so many things Frank does talk about, also has its origin in the nineteenth century. Mainstream

Orientalism has always, in its curious ways, supported the "lunatic fringe," the marginal people within the West who supply part of the refutation and rejection of the East that Orientalism needs to sustain itself.

Klaus Seeland, in his article, "Sacred World View and Ecology in Nepal" writes thoughtfully and cogently of how such Western concepts as 'ecology' and 'environment' are not part of the sacred world view of the Nepalese peasant. How will the peasant react to the coming ecological disaster predicted by Western and other experts? He certainly will not react to it in the way governments and aid missions will want him to. "As long as there is no concept of ecology in the mind of a Nepalese peasant, the question of survival is not an ecological problem, because it is not associated with a certain area but with a certain world view." ". . . forestation and taking care of 'resources' does not belong--I repeat--to the dharma of the peasant. It is the raja-dharma, the responsibility of the incarnate Lord Vishnu, the King of Nepal, to take care of the 'the world.' And if trees have been planted, the villagers will take for granted that the trees have been planted, the villager will take for granted that the trees are at their disposal. Who could they be meant for?" (p. 196). And as he writes on p. 196, "to sum it up, ecological preservation cannot be a survival strategy for a Himalayan peasant, because it is 1. a transgression of dharmā, 2. not a traditional pattern of reaction to changing conditions of living, and 3. exceeds the normal working capacity of the peasant."

The remaining papers follow the normal research pattern. Véronique Bouillier, who works on asceticism in Nepal, provides a short but compelling essay on the life of ascetic children. Entitled "Preliminary Remarks on Balajogis or Ascetic Children," the article tells how a chance encounter during Shivaratri led her to investigate the lives of these children, how they are the result of the désantaragamana, of the vratabandha ceremony, or, as she says, a fall "from symbolic play into reality." No one who reads the essay will forget it easily, and one hopes that she will continue her study so that the wider import of these phenomena may become clearer.

Joanna Czarnecka's "Status of Affines Among High Caste Hindus," is a study of post-factum hypergamy among Upadhiya Brahmins of Belkot (Nuvakot). Ms. Czarnecka attempts to show that "just as woman has two different positions toward her father and brother in Belkot also her husband (and other wife takers) has two different positions towards her consanguineal relatives." The main thesis is that the "worshipful status" (Dumont 1966:105) of the husband is a hierarchical feature in the Hindu society, but only one aspect of the hierarchy among the affines, because on the other hand the Hindu hierarchy attributes to affines positions according to generation, sex, and age" (p. 27).

In his article, "Unité Résidentielle à Kirtipur: Un élément Structurant de L'Éspace Urbain dans une Ville Néwar de la Vallée de Kathmandou (Nepal)," Marc Barani attempts to define the "interrelations qui lient la maison à la rue en se fondant sur les traces matérielles ou construites, concrétisées par l'action habiter;" in short, the interrelationships between, the family and society. He describes in detail the residential unit and two kinds of public space in Kirtipur: a nani or square called Tanani and a street, Shinduwa. At the end of the article he poses two hypotheses: 1. L'unité résidentielle est un principe initial qui s'est accordé à la constitution du modèle urbain indien et plus particulièrement à son trace (p. 79) and 2. "L'unité résidentielle est postérieure à la planification urbaine et provient d'une appropriation de l'espace traduite sous forme de régle. Elle n'est donc pas constituante" (p. 80). Further work in the Kathmandu Valley would be necessary to confirm or deny these statements.

Gérard Toffin, in his "Mutual Assistance among Tamangs" discusses how traditional cooperative labor gangs (called nang among the western Tamang) are expanded into other gangs (goremo) to meet needs of changing agriculture. Toffin's point is that traditional agriculture can respond dynamically, that "farmers are innovators when necessary. They know how to adapt by their own new cropping systems' and new labor organisation to produce more grain, if they are compelled to do so."

Anne de Sales paper, "The Nachane of the Kham Magar," is a brief but interesting study of the Nachane religious dancers among the Kham-Magar who tour from village to village during the months of Kartik and Pus "to expel evils from the village." She gives the origin myth of the Nachane, the ritual, their chant, and some conclusions in which, among other things, she draws attention to similarities with the Nacahari of Banyan hill.

Perdita Pohle's "High Altitude Populations of Remote Nepal-Himalaya" is a study of environmental knowledge and adaptive mechanisms in Namang District, in the differing ecological zones of Gyasumdo, Nyeshang, and NarPhu. In a few pages, Pohle describes the geographic position and regional differentiation of the district, the influence of the environment on population, the settlement structure as a expression of human adaptation to high altitude environment, the economy and its dependence on natural conditions. Finally, the author describes the economic structure of the three zones, and asks whether trade is an indicator of limited geographic opportunity.

In an article entitled "Interpretation of Cadastral Maps and Land Registers--Examples from the Kathmandu Valley and Gorkaha" Ulrike Müller describes possession and ownership structures of the Newar settlements of Thimi, Sankhu, and Pyangaon. ". . . in spite of the proximity to each other of the Newar settlements in the Kathmandu Valley and their identical cultural background," writes the author, "considerable differences exist between their possession and ownership structures. Our three examples show that they range from small independent farms to the feudal tenancy system based on rent collection." Whatever problems this pattern presents, the author concludes that the agricultural reform laws have been put into practice in the Kathmandu Valley. In Gorkha, however, "there are no secure tenants (except for guthi land): half of the total harvest is required of the unprotected field workers" (p. 152). Finally, "both areas," she writes, "have one characteristic in common though, i.e., social hierarchies are endorsed by possession and ownership structures in both" (p. 153).

Jean Fezas has recently emerged as one of the leading students of Nepalese law. In his article here, "The Nepalese Law of Succession," he deals with partition of family property (amsabanda) and its succession (aputali). It is a rich and detailed paper, valuable for what it says about Nepalese law itself but also for what it says about the relation of Nepalese law to custom and classical legal sources. The appendices to the article give the lexicographical sources from Sanskrit and Nepali, the epigraphical sources dealing with similar concepts from India and Nepal, royal edicts (lal mohar), with translations from those of King Rajendra, and the relevant passages from the Muluki Ain, with translations.

In his article, "Tourism and Socio-Economic Change: The Case of the Rolwaling Valley in Eastern Nepal," Ruedi Baumgartner discusses the effects of tourism in Rowaling and its implications for economic development and social change in the northern Nepal Valleys as a whole. He traces the economic history of Rowaling in so far as it can be reconstructed and shows how the valley "had apparently already entered into a stage of accelerated and deep-rooted transition at the eve of the touristic era" (p. 203). Social change, he concludes, is following the same general pattern as that in Khumbu: standards of living have increased

because of tourism, orientation of economic, political and religious life has turned away from Tibet toward Kathmandu, there is an increasing disintegration of social life, resource management is losing its relevance and as a result "the ecological capacity of the valley risks being overtaxed both by traditional production and trekking" (p. 211). He concludes with a call for more balanced development, "the most valuable contribution to which will probably consist of greater respect for the role of the time factor. The adaptation process in mountain settlements should be safeguarded from the enormous pressures which result from unlimited access of tourists from the first day a new area is opened for tourists. Moreover, there is no reason why each and every corner of the Himalayas should be blessed with tourists" (p. 213).

The collection ends with a large bibliography entitled "Recent Research on Nepal 1975-1983." It was compiled by Seeland, Harold Fritz, and Rainier Olsen. "The 1975-83 period was chosen," according to the compilers, "to form a continuation of the bibliographies of Heuberger/Höfer on "Deutsche Forschung in Nepal 1950-1975" and the bibliography by L. Boulnois covering the research published in European languages from 1967 to 1973, after we found that the number of publications had increased remarkable since 1975." The bibliography contains about 2300 titles. It is very useful, but it would have benefited by careful editing. Some works have nothing to do with Nepal (even though written in Nepali) and there are many errors (happily but erroneously I find Sylvain Levi listed as my co-author on two articles). But the authors are aware of the problem: "Although a reasonable number of titles could be checked and thus many errors corrected, we fear that there are still too many in this bibliography. For us it remains to ask the reader to take it easy and we finally did after we had learned with amusement how many mistakes are possible within a single title" (p. 220). Anyone who has tried to compile large bibliographies on the Himalayas knows what a laborious editorial task it is and can have nothing but sympathy for the problems mentioned here.

The black and white photographs for the articles of Barani, deSales, Toffin, Pohle, and Baumgartner, are printed together. They are clear and helpful.

In conclusion, I would like to repeat here my judgment that this is an excellent set of papers and the editors and authors are to be commended for a volume rich in ideas.