



December 2007

Book review of 'The Origins of Himalayan Studies: Brian Houghton Hodgson in Nepal and Darjeeling, 1820-1858' edited by David M. Waterhouse

Arjun Guneratne
Macalester College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

Guneratne, Arjun. 2007. Book review of 'The Origins of Himalayan Studies: Brian Houghton Hodgson in Nepal and Darjeeling, 1820-1858' edited by David M. Waterhouse. *HIMALAYA* 27(1). Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol27/iss1/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.



Kisan points out in his analysis in chapter 3 of the representational politics and organizational leadership of the movement. Kisan criticizes Dalit organizations for excluding other lower caste groups, “a phenomenon [that] has brought a 53% Biswakarma majority in the present leadership of the Dalit Social Movement” (131).

Although Kisan tries to be objective in his overview of Dalit organizations and their approaches to liberation, he advocates a revolutionary socialist vision for the Dalits. Following a Leninist philosophy, Kisan calls for effective leadership with “broad political outlooks [and] revolutionary spirits” (117). The Nepal Dalit Mukti Morcha of the CPN (Maoist) seems to provide such a vision for Kisan, who argues that “the change needed to bring Dalit social justice is radical,” and that only radical struggle, either violent or non-violent, can change the status-quo (192).

Kisan’s analysis of the caste system in Nepal comes when the Nepali state is on the verge of failing, if it has not already failed. His look at the Dalit political and cultural movement provides important insights into the armed conflict in Nepal and the political complexity within the Dalit liberation movement. As Kisan sees things, the psychological, economic, cultural, and political toll suffered by Dalit people calls for radical methods of transformation. And Kisan rightly calls for recommendations that the government and the society must fully implement. However, strategies that operate through violent means may not bring positive changes, as violence usually begets more violence. The violence suffered by the Dalits and the powerless in society during the People’s War was grave, and thus one ought to question strategies that employ violence as a method of bringing about a caste-less, egalitarian society. The champions of peace and non-discrimination, Buddha, Jesus, Ambedaker, and Gandhi, did not espouse violence, yet they were able to change societies and bring about revolutions.

ENDNOTES

1. Another publication devoted to the Dalits is *The Dalits of Nepal: Issues and Challenges*, edited by Prabodh Devkota (Kathmandu: Feminist Dalit Organization Nepal, 2002), a short collection of essays written by Dalit activists, academicians, and civil society members.

2. As John Whelpton mentions in *A History of Modern Nepal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005: 19), an inscription about Manadeva at the Chagunarayan temple in Nepal dated 465 CE is “probably the first reference to sati (widow-burning) in any South Asian inscription” (19).

Rama Lohani-Chase defended her dissertation entitled “Women and Gender in the Maoist People’s War in Nepal: Dislocation and Militarization” from Rutgers University in January of 2008, and is currently teaching at The College of New Jersey.

THE ORIGINS OF HIMALAYAN STUDIES: BRIAN HOUGHTON HODGSON IN NEPAL AND DARJEELING, 1820–1858

EDITED BY DAVID M. WATERHOUSE

London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004. xxiv, 280 pp.

REVIEWED BY ARJUN GUNERATNE

Brian Houghton Hodgson (1801–1894), the polymath who served as British Resident in Kathmandu during the first half of the nineteenth century and became a major contributor to scholarship in three different areas—the natural history of the Himalaya, Buddhism, and the description of the Tibeto-Burman languages—is one of the great figures of Orientalist scholarship in India. He resigned the Company’s service in 1843 and settled in Darjeeling, where he lived until 1857. While his researches in Kathmandu focused on the study of Buddhism and zoology, he concentrated in Darjeeling on ethnography and languages of the various ethnic groups in the eastern Himalaya, as well as the physical geography of the region. Well-known and respected in his day, and of seminal importance in the development of the study of the Himalaya, he is not as well known today as he deserves to be, even by Himalayanists, who know of him mainly by repute. This book makes a significant contribution to rectifying this situation by bringing together in one volume a wide-ranging assessment of his life and work. That such an assessment required the collaborative perspective of scholars in half a dozen fields, ranging from history to Buddhist studies to ornithology, zoology, anthropology, and art, is in itself indicative of the breadth of Hodgson’s interests and his scholarship.

What emerges from the various perspectives brought to bear on Hodgson’s work is that he was first and foremost a collector of data, and an excellent ethnographer and naturalist. He was a master at the collection of facts but an untrained amateur in their interpretation. His forays into theory, for example, with respect to the Tibeto-Burman languages, were obsolete in his own lifetime. His enduring legacy lies in the data he amassed: the Buddhist manuscripts he sent back to Europe, the animal skins he collected, the description of bird behavior he recorded when ornithological science of his

day was still focused on nomenclature and classification, the drawings of architectural monuments he commissioned and the descriptions he compiled of languages, many of which are today extinct.

Confined for the most part to the Kathmandu Valley, Hodgson relied on a corps of Nepalese to collect his data, ranging from the Newar scholar Amritananda, who collected and interpreted the Buddhist manuscripts, to hunters who brought him specimens (9,512 birds, for example, representing 672 species of which 124 were new to science) and who provided him with detailed observations of bird behavior. Hodgson trained a number of talented Nepali artists to paint and draw birds and mammals as well as buildings and monuments with great scientific fidelity; little is known about most of them. He was “the first person to describe the geographical distribution of the mammals and birds of the Himalayas” (p. 136) and was an important figure in creating the field of Indian ornithology. Despite his contributions, however, he had little support for his endeavors from the scientific establishment in England. He published mostly in Indian journals that were not readily available in Britain, so while he was well-known and esteemed in scientific circles in India, he was marginal in the scientific community at home.

There exist only two other books that discuss Hodgson’s life and work: W. W. Hunter’s biography, originally published in 1896, and a discussion of Hodgson as an ornithologist by Mark Cocker and Carol Inskipp (1988). This volume makes the life and work of one of the most remarkable Englishmen to work in the subcontinent accessible to scholars and will be of interest to a very diverse readership—as diverse, in fact, as

Hodgson’s own interests. The contributions are all uniformly good, and some are outstanding in their ability to place him in his context and illuminate the workings of colonial forms of knowledge. There are three biographical chapters that give an overview of his life, his political work as British Resident, and insights into his personal life in Kathmandu; two contributions discussing his study of Buddhism (with an essay by Hodgson on architectural illustration of Buddhist monuments as an appendix); three on Hodgson’s contributions to zoology; one that discusses Hodgson’s relationship with Joseph Hooker; and two chapters that assess Hodgson’s contributions to linguistics and ethnology. The final chapter introduces a complete bibliography of his works. The book is profusely illustrated throughout, mostly with the black-and-white illustrations that Hodgson himself commissioned, and there are sixteen color plates showcasing the work of his Nepali artists. This no doubt contributes to the book’s price, which, unfortunately, is likely to put it beyond the reach of most individual scholars and beyond the reach even of institutional libraries in the Himalayan region, where it most deserves to be. This volume is an excellent and valuable contribution to our understanding of the praxis of colonial knowledge formation and deserves to be widely read.

Arjun Guneratne is Professor of Anthropology at Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota and Editor of Himalaya. Reprinted with permission from The Journal of Asian Studies/ Cambridge University Press.