

'TRIBES' IN THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF NEPAL SOME COMMENTS ON A DEBATE

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Introduction: 'Tribes' in India

The recent interest in the question of tribe-caste differences in Nepal stems very much from earlier debates among Indianists, and I want to begin this discussion by identifying certain focal issues raised in these exchanges. Administrators and anthropologists of India—these roles sometimes combined in the same persons—were for many years concerned with the differences between tribal and peasant/caste systems.² In the heydays of the British raj the differences were often expressed in racial or physiological terms, aided from the middle of the nineteenth century by the new technologies of photography and anthropometry (Pinney 1990). In time, distinctions came to be phrased in terms of a set of descriptive social or cultural traits associated with each. Tribal peoples were defined as ecologically more isolated, economically more primitive, socially less complex, and morally more backward than peasant/caste populations. Tribals might also be distinguished on the grounds of technology and livelihood: they were defined in terms of hunting and gathering and/or shifting cultivation, against the settled agriculture practised by caste/peasants (see Sinha 1973:100)

Sinha has raised the question of the relation between tribe and civilizational centres or more generally the state. Drawing on Redfield, he argues that movement from the isolated, homogeneous and unstratified tribal pole to the caste and peasant pole “involves a progression toward ethnic heterogeneity in social interaction, role specialisation, social stratification and emergence of elite classes and enlargement and diversification of territorial networks with civilisational centres” (Sinha 1973:103). But as Beteille has pointed out, “tribes with some of the simplest technologies have been more integrated with the wider society than others with a more advanced

technology' (1986:302). Morris (1982) for example, has shown how the Hill Pandaram of Kerala have for many generations had close links with peasant villagers on the edge of the forests in which they hunt and gather.

Criticisms of these various attempts to identify fundamentally opposed categories of tribe and caste came from different directions. For one thing, administrators and anthropologists who sought to make such clear distinctions were charged with creating a social category called 'tribe' for which there was no indigenous concept in most native language (Singh 1985:7). In ancient and medieval texts, as in colonial or contemporary rural India, all groups, 'tribes' and 'castes' alike were and are referred to as *jati* (Sinha 1980:1-2). Beteille, however, is sceptical of the suggestion that tribes were entirely the creation of the administrative or anthropological imagination, insisting that 'tribe and civilization have encountered each other for centuries' (1986:306). Certainly, the epic literature seems to suggest a category of remote, autochthonous, wild and warlike people (labelled 'tribes' by K.C.Misra), who lists 363 such groups mentioned in the Mahabharata (Misra 1987).

Criticism of a different kind has come from those who have sought to characterise the nature of tribal-peasant interaction, and found earlier models of differentiation less than useful. In the Indian context, Singh notes that from 'ancient times' peasant castes have been emigrating to tribal areas, a process accelerated during the colonial period. This led to the emergence of mixed tribal-caste/peasant villages, to the adoption of the new technologies, cropping systems, and linguistic and cultural norms brought by the migrants, and ultimately to the penetration of tribal economies by market forces (1985:12-13). Bose's well-known essay on 'The Hindu method of tribal absorption' (1941) was meant to demonstrate how 'primitive' tribal technology was inevitably compelled to give way to more 'advanced' plough technology brought by Hindu peasants.

But the realities of interaction and interdependence between tribes and peasants over the centuries rendered their assignment to separate structural or cultural realms increasingly impractical and unconvincing. As Beteille notes, "observers down the ages have ... persistently mistaken castes for tribes, and tribes for castes" (1986:311). He stresses the "permeability of the boundary between tribe and non-tribe" (Ibid.:316-17), although he argues that recent Constitutional attempts to safeguard the interests of weaker tribal communities have given tribal identity "a kind of definitiveness it lacked in the past" (Ibid.:318).

Finally, before turning to the Nepalese context, I want to note Bailey's to argue that caste and tribal society are not in every respect different from each other, but must be seen ideally as occupying opposite ends of a

single continuum. At one pole, the model caste society is characterised as 'organic', in the sense that each part is distinct but related to every other part in a hierarchical system. At the other pole, the model tribal society is 'segmentary', composed of equivalent and equal units (Bailey 1961: 11-14). To ascertain where along the continuum a particular group falls, Bailey introduces the criterion of access to land. Among caste people, he suggests, a right to land is achieved by a subordinate relationship to members of the dominant caste, whereas among tribal people access to land is acquired by equality as a kinsman. Hence, the larger the proportion of a given society which has direct access to the land, the closer is that society to the tribal end of the continuum, while the larger the proportion whose right to land is earned by a dependent relationship, the nearer is that society to the caste pole (Ibid: 14-15).

Bailey's model is attractive for its refusal to attribute essential descriptive characteristics to caste and tribe, but its application can lead to some awkward outcomes. Thus Sinha observes that most 'dominant castes' who themselves control the land and so are not therefore in dependent relationships, would have to be characterised as approaching the tribal pole (Sinha 1965: 60). Bailey's attempt to identify land as a crucial element in tribe-caste distinctions is interesting, however, and I will return to this theme below.

Tribe and Peasant in Nepal

Anthropologists of Nepal have only recently expressed interest in this debate. This may be due in large part to the fact that Kathmandu, throughout the period of British rule in India, and however much it was influenced by the government there, retained its own bureaucracy and administrative system. For it must be recalled that it was British administrators in India who were the first to denote and label a category of 'tribal' communities for census purposes, comparing them to other populations organised on 'caste' lines. These distinctions were later adopted by the independent government of India, as by the anthropological establishment in the colonial and post-colonial periods (Padel 1988).

But if Nepal did not enjoy the 'benefits' to British administration, the notion of 'tribe' nonetheless became explicit in British discourses on Nepal. Kirkpatrick, in his *Account of the Kingdom of Nepaul*, published in 1811, referred to the eastern districts of the country as being inhabited by 'tribes' such as the 'Limboos', but he did not indicate what he meant by the term (1811:184). Several years later, Francis Buchanan Hamilton did suggest that tribal populations were characterised by egalitarian relations, and by specific

linguistic and customary practices, quite distinct from caste-stratified groups of Hindus (see Sharma 1978:3).

But the most prolific use of the term 'tribe' surfaced some two decades later in the debate about the recruitment of 'Gurkhas' into the Indian army.³ Brian Hodgson, who was for a time assistant to the British Resident and later himself the Resident in Kathmandu during the third and fourth decades of the nineteenth century, was probably the first to label particular ethnic groups within Nepal as 'martial tribes'. The notion that some people will make good soldiers is not an idea original to the British in India, but in the course of the nineteenth century they 'formulated and codified the principle..... into a dogma' (Mason 1974:349). In an article entitled 'Origin and Classification of the Military Tribes of Nepal', published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society* in April 1833, Hodgson identified several 'military tribes' or 'military classes' (1833:219-20). Which he urged the East India Company to recruit into its army on the grounds that they are by far the best soldiers in India (with) unadulterated military habits' (Ibid.:221). At the time he wrote - hardly 15 years following the end of the Anglo-Nepal war of 1814-16- Hodgson suspected that the Nepalis might turn against the British again, and it seemed to him wise to employ Gurkhas in the Indian army. In the view of one historian of that period, "the more these turbulent martial people were drained away from Nepal, the brighter would become the prospect of Nepal being a weak and peaceful neighbour of British India" (Mojumdar 1973:160).

Hodgson was not the only one to write about the special military qualities which distinguished the 'tribes' of Nepal. Campbell, the Assistant Surgeon at the British Residency in Kathmandu during much of Hodgson's tenure also detected a natural propensity for the masculine activity of warfare and the "abhorrence of all the military tribes in Nepal to engaging in other pursuits than that of arms..." (see Hasrat 1970:226).

This idea of Gurkhas as a set of martial tribes developed fully towards the end of the nineteenth century. At first the Gurkha regiments were not too discriminating in their recruitment policies. However, by the end of the century regiments were permitted to recruit only men from the classes prescribed by army headquarters (Mason 1974:140). Nepal was divided up into tribal units and particular characteristics would be attributed to a whole people on the strength of often very casual personal observations.⁴ A few British officers became avid ethnographers, producing handbooks in which tribal differences were exaggerated and systematised (see, for example, Vansittart 1915; Morris 1933). This is what Cynthia Enloe presumably means by her comment that "building militaries has been, in part, an ethnographic enterprise" (1980:28).

The great majority of Nepalis were classified as members of brahmanical (by which was meant all high or twice-born) castes, or untouchables, and so reckoned unsuitable to serve in Gurkha regiments. So for British administrators and army officers concerned with Nepal, 'tribes' became synonymous with those segments of the population which were 'martial' and thereby recruitable. This portrayal of Nepalese tribes as martially inclined is still a dominant feature of contemporary British military writings on the Gurkhas (see Leonard 1965:48).²

If the concept of martiality remained the province of military authorities and writers, the notion of 'tribe' gained a wider currency among western scholars, not least among anthropologists. They have applied the term to a considerable diversity of groups- diverse in terms of size, habitat and economy: to semi-nomadic Chepangs and Kusundas, wealthy trading communities of Thakalis, high altitude farming and mountaineering Sherpas, as well as mid-montane-dwelling Gurungs, Tamangs, magars, Rais and Limbus who grow cereal crops and herd animals, and even the Newar inhabitants of the culturally and agriculturally rich Kathmandu Valley (see Dahal 1979:217). But despite its wide currency, there has been little attempt by anthropologists of Nepal to theorise the term, although Gellner has recently sought to apply models of tribe and caste derived from Indian debates to an examination of the Newar case. In response to the argument that the Newars constitute a tribal community, he argues that would imply:

little internal stratification; few full-time specialists, thus no division of labour; dependence (now or in the past) on swidden agriculture or pastoralism; a tendency in the past to lie outside the boundaries of state control; its own religious specialists so that Brahmans or other priests of the Great Traditions of South Asia are not regularly made use of. (Gellner 1986:115)

In terms of such a paradigm, he rejects the tribal label on the grounds that:

Newars have a highly developed internal hierarchy (far more complex than the Parbatiyas), and numerous specialists; they depend on sophisticated rice and pulse agriculture, have supported a monarchical state for 1600 years and have a culture pervaded by the Sanskritic notions and priestly services of two ancient Great Traditions. Hinduism and Buddhism (Ibid.:115).

In a recent paper, Gellner adds to the other criteria for distinguishing tribal from caste systems the "treatment of women", and concludes that Newar society requires its own model for analysis which is distinct from both the tribal and brahmanic (caste) ones (1991:119-21).

Some Nepalese scholars have attacked the (mainly anthropological) tendency to utilise the notion of tribe in the analysis of Himalayan society. They regard it as an unwarranted and inappropriate application of an imprecise and heavily-loaded western category to this particular south Asian context. It is construed as an attempt at 'special pleading' by foreign scholars for the preservation of tribal heritage or the protection of tribal populations from "alien (Hindu) influences" (Dahal 1979:221). This latter implication is regarded as part of a tendency to see tribal peoples as somehow 'non-Hindu', and interpreted as a failure by western researchers to appreciate that tribal religions are considered to be part of the wide Hindu cosmology (see Sharma 1978:4-5). Nepalese scholars also object to the use of these terms on the grounds that in process of highlighting structural or cultural oppositions between tribal and caste/Hindu systems, political conflicts are underlined, thereby threatening to negate official concern to promote national integration (Sharma 1978:3; Dahal 1979:221).

Western researchers should take these criticisms seriously, for they point to a widespread predilection, among anthropologists especially, for 'remote places' (Ardener 1987) and exotic peoples (Keessing 19). Ethnographic studies of Nepal have for many years avoided towns, focusing rather on 'isolated' settlements in distant parts of the hills. And within these localities they often appear to seek out pristine tribal cultures even where the tribal people they study live amongst and interact intensively with non-tribal peasants. This kind of romanticism, if well-meaning, is clearly no longer acceptable, and there are increasing expressions of dissatisfaction among western scholars themselves with the status of the tribe-caste/Hindu/peasant dichotomy (see Allen 1987:33; Gellner 1991:107) settings.

If greater sensitivity is called for in the application of dualistic models of tribe and caste/peasant, we have at the same time to remember that Nepal's own official discourse has always acknowledged ethnic diversity. The early Gorkha kings recognised the unique character and customs of the people inhabiting a particular country (*des*), and in the case of many indigenous hill communities⁶ ('tribes?') their special relationship to the land was acknowledged by a royal grant of *kipat* rights (Burghart 1984:109). By the mid-19th century what had previously been an ethnic concept of country was transformed into a notion of species (*Jat*), and with the promulgation of the 1854 Legal Code (*Muluki Ain*) the various groups inhabiting the territories of the Gorkha king were brought together in a single ritual hierarchy (Ibid.:

116-17). The Code grouped together most indigenous and semi-autonomous communities of hill-dwellers, speaking Tibeto-Burman languages, labelled them 'drinking' (*matwali*) *jat*, and placed them below the 'twice-born' or 'sacred-thread wearing' (*tagadhari*) *jat* in the official ritual hierarchy. Indeed, Sharma points to the Hindu Nepalese model of their own society

in which different participating social units are given a caste name and definite within a hierarchy, no matter how divergent such groups may look or be in their beliefs and practices (1978:3).

The Concept of Tribe and the Concept of Land

In the remainder of this paper I want to suggest, notwithstanding their gradual integration into a single ritual and social hierarchy, that it may be useful to distinguish (analytically but *not* descriptively) certain ethnic groups within the population of Nepal in terms of their traditional relationships to land, and how attitudes to this land shaped people's identities. If such groups are labelled 'tribes', this is done without prejudice and certainly with no pejorative intent (see Gellner 1991:106). By doing so we are also able to draw comparisons with groups either similarly labelled (as tribes) or differently marked (as peasants)⁷ in other parts of south Asia, and hopefully move beyond the kinds of essentialism which has dogged so much of the debate. It may also enable us better to understand to nature of the transition from 'tribe' to 'peasant' which has characterised the history of many of Nepal's ethnic groups since the rise and unification of the Gorkha state. I will examine the case of the Limbus of east Nepal, whom I first studied in 1964-5, at a time when their traditional form of *kipat* land tenure still prevailed, although in a somewhat attenuated form (Caplan 1970). I should note that when I returned to east Nepal in 1988 a major programme of land reform had been introduced, the chief outcome of which for the Limbus was the abolition of their *kipat* tenure and the conversion of their lands into private property (*raikar*).

The Limbus have been settled in what is now far eastern Nepal (*Pallo Kirat*) for many hundreds of years. Little is known of their way of life prior to the incorporation of Limbuan (Limbu country) into the Gorkha state during the last quarter of the 18th century, although there is evidence of a political system based on shifting alliances among powerful household heads (Sagant 1985). Land, which until the end of the 19th century was plentiful, was deemed to belong to the group of agnatic kinsmen who cleared the forest and brought it under cultivation. It is likely that until the 18th century the Limbus, like many 'indigenous' groups of hill dwellers, practised a form of

slash and burn, or shifting cultivation. but even with the adoption of plough agriculture, probably as a result of contact with non-Limbu migrants entering their territories, the Limbus retained this clan-based system of land holding (frequently referred to, inappropriately, as communal tenure). The individual had rights to land by virtue of membership in kin groups of ascending order-sub-lineage, lineage, clan, etc.

Since the principal resource was labour, powerful households sought to attract followers and labourers by marriage and other forms of political alliance, so that the principle of agnation was lightly marked as far as access to land was concerned. In other words, rights to cultivate within the group's territory were granted to Limbu kin and political followers who were not necessarily agnates. But such grants were made in the context of a 'clan-based economy' (Gregory 1982) characterised land tenure to which the Gorkha ruler attached the label '*kipat*' in the wake of the conquest and unification (see Burghart 1984:109).

But while the state granted the Limbus a Royal Order (*lalmohar*) to hold their lands under *kipat* tenure, during the next two centuries it lost no opportunity to reduce the area under this form of tenure by series of hostile legislative measures. These were designed principally to satisfy the growing demands for land to cultivate by the large numbers of non-Limbu immigrants who had entered Limbuan in the wake of the conquest. Limbus were urged to settle these immigrants on their lands, and since Limbu land holdings were extensive and there was a need for settlers to provide labour, the Limbus conferred land grants on the newcomers, who recognised their dependence on the Limbus by both tributary and ritual offerings.⁸ Until the last decade of the 19th century these lands continued to be regarded as belonging to the Limbu donors under *kipat* tenure. The gift of land was not seen as an act of alienation, since there could be no such concept in a clan-based economy without private property. At this time the state introduced legislation which in effect allowed non-Limbu settlers and their descendants to convert into *raikar* tenure- in effect, private property and thus available to anyone- all lands which had been or would in future be granted to non-Limbus by their Limbu hosts. In these and other ways *kipat* lands were reduced and *raikar* lands increased.

By the beginning of this century the rate of *kipat* loss had reached alarming proportions, and under intense pressure from the Limbus the state executed a partial reversal of policy, banning the permanent alienation of *kipat* lands to members of other groups.⁹ By this time, in Ilam where I did fieldwork, only about 40 per cent of irrigated lands (*khet*) remained under *kipat*. These developments must be seen in the wider context of the state's concern to abolish *kipat* throughout the country, and standardise tenurial

arrangements. McDougal reports that in Rai country *kipat* had been totally abolished by the 1940s. He suggests that the state was able to exert its will over the Rais more decisively than over the Limbus because the former lived closer to the capital and "presented less of a united front" (1979:15). Regmi argues that Kathmandu had less difficulty establishing control over the *kipat* lands of other ethnic groups not only because these groups were "less organized and turbulent" than the Limbus, but because they were situated in "less strategic" areas (1971:53).

Land and Identity

When I first encountered the Limbus in 1964-5 *kipat* was inalienable not simply or even primarily in the sense that the state had introduced legislation banning its sale outside the community. For the Limbus it was inalienable because it has come to them from their ancestors the mythical 'Ten Limbus' (Caplan 1970:192). One legend related by Chemjong (1958) tells how Limbus came to be where they are;

In the beginning a large group of Mongolians came to the source of the Arun river. They were anxious to find a place to live, so they made a bundle of clothes and threw it in the river, and determined to follow it until it came to rest, for that would be the place which god had chosen for them. After many days they found the bundle on the river bank in the hilly region south of Tibet. They named the land *hidangna* 'the land chosen by god', and made it *kipat*. This place is still Far Kirat (east Nepal).

When I first knew them *kipat* was not regarded by the Limbus simply as a productive capital asset; in other words it was not a commodity, a thing distinguished absolutely from the person who owns it, and so valued solely for the returns it can provide. It was rather a form of 'inalienable wealth', a possession which serves to 'define who one is in an historical sense' (Weiner 1985:210). It stood for their way of life, and thus symbolised the cultural vitality and continuity of the community.

In this respect Limbus shared a conception of land as held by countless indigenous or 'tribal' peoples around the world, for whom "membership in the community generates an attitude to the land which is antecedent to the working of it" (Hart 1982:46). When I first knew them, Limbus regularly asserted that their forebears had cleared forests, worshipped deities and made them witnesses to their right to have these lands for all time. The grant of a Royal Order (*lalmohar*) by the first Gorkha king was

seen as state confirmation of this legacy. *Kipat* was thus more than a system of land tenure; it was the basis of Limbu identity as a people (see Chemjong 1958, 1966; Melford 1966).

By contrast, *raikar* land—the principal form of tenure through which Nepalese peasants have held land since the latter part of the 19th century—had and still has a very different meaning for its owners. This is not to say that those who possess *raikar* do not feel strongly, even passionately, about their property. Anyone who has spent time in a rural community in Nepal will attest to the innumerable disputes over land, many of them ending in court. Stiller points out how that land in both pre- and post-Gorkha Nepal was the “sole means for attaining to prestige and influence in the state” (1973:19).

For a time following the conquest the state strictly controlled the sale and purchase of *raikar* land in many parts of the country, so that individual rights in such lands were limited to its cultivation and enjoyment of the harvest. But the government was gradually compelled to acquiesce in a variety of “extralegal” practices engaged in by peasants to secure greater autonomy in their lands, and towards the latter part of the 19th century *raikar* land had in effect become private property (see Regmi 1976:171-78).

For over a century, then, *raikar* had had the status of a commodity, which can be (and frequently is) bought and sold; it is an item of investment and, on occasion, speculation. It involves an agreement between the *individual* and the state, thus anyone can own *raikar*. In a manner quite distinct from the relationship implied by *kipat*, the person who owns *raikar* land is separated from the item owned and transacted, and does not participate in it. The one who owns such land acts upon it, but is not in turn acted upon by it. Indeed, it is awkward and misleading to speak of ‘owning’ *kipat* (as one ‘owns’ *raikar*) since ownership objectifies the thing owned. Limbus speak of being *kipatiyas*, which suggests association with, or being part of *kipat*. As Williams says in relation to the Yolngu of Australia, it is a case of ‘owning’ the land and ‘being owned’ by it (Williams 1983:106-7).¹⁰

In the 1960s, a comprehensive series of land reform measures was announced by the state, among them the decision to abolish *kipat* land and convert all such lands to *raikar*. This programme was introduced during the 1970s and by the time I returned to the field work area in 1988, not only had *kipat* land been converted to *raikar* tenure, but this had resulted in a large proportion of Limbus households selling most or all of their lands. With the abolition of *kipat* the Limbus lost, to quote Weiner again, their “claim to the past” and to do so is “to lose part of who one is in the present” (1985:210). The consequences of this change of tenure were therefore profound in terms of Limbu identity. I was told that after the abolition of *kipat* the “Limbus

has no name. We became beggars- with no place, no land. How can there be Limbus without *kipat*?"

To the Limbus, therefore, the loss of *kipat* represents not simply a material loss, for *kipat* transcended its own materiality. With its abolition the Limbus were denied a part of their past and so, inevitably, of their sense of continuity in the present. *Kipat* provided a means of belonging, to a place and a distinctive community- the one not separable from the other. In short, it defined them as a "tribe". Conversion of the land to *raikar* has served that connection, and rendered the land what it had never been before- a commodity. By legislating for the alienation of what had previously been inalienable, the state effectively inaugurated the last phase in the transformation of a tribal into a peasant community.

Conclusion

Since the unification of Nepal in the late 18th century (and possibly for some time prior to that) peoples belonging to different communities and traditions have lived alongside each other in multi-ethnic hill settlements. This was occasioned by migrations on the part of members of various castes from the plains and valleys to the south into the mid-montane homelands of 'indigenous' groups such as the Limbus of Far Kirat. This often resulted in the gifting of inalienable land to the newcomers, the adoption of more advanced agricultural technologies by the previously settled groups, and - alongside the growth of a common Nepali language and the spread of a dominant Hindu Great Tradition- the establishment of economic, social and cultural interdependencies among the various communities. Over time, adoption of similar modes of livelihood and the intense interactions among persons of different backgrounds created obvious similarities of life-style and blurred the distinctions between the longer-settled and incoming communities. Thus in terms of the ascriptive characteristics generally employed by those involved in this debate (see above), the student of Nepalese hill society would, certainly by the end of the 19th century, have found it virtually impossible to distinguish "tribe" from 'peasant'. Save, perhaps, in one respect: the way in which land was held and conceptualised. In tribal society, land was the "ultimate inalienable gift" (Gregory 1982:165). Indeed, I have suggested that such a way of relating to land defined the group as 'tribal'.

If the Limbus were at all representative of Nepal's tribal communities (and there are reasons to assume that the Tibeto-Burman speaking groups inhabiting these Himalayan regions did share similar attitudes to their lands) *kipat* was much more than a simple category of land tenure in an array of official tenurial designations (see Regmi 1963-8). It would have constituted

the group's very identity, the sense it had of itself, inasmuch as the land in which it participated and by means of which it defined itself symbolised its continuity and immortality.

The non-tribal peasants related to land in a different way. As they came to hold property in their own right (when the state transformed their *kipat* grants into *raikar* tenure, and as *raikar* itself became a form of private property) the land they owned became an alienable commodity. In contrast to tribal people, then, who acquired land as individuals only in the context of a complex hierarchy of collective right, non-tribal immigrants and their descendants enjoyed land primarily as the private property of individuals. And as the state gradually diminished and ultimately abolished the tenurial systems which shaped the very existence of tribal communities themselves, it encouraged the separation of people and land characteristic of a peasant mode of existence.¹¹

It could be argued that prior to the intervention of the state, the existence of non-Limbus in the territories of Tibet-Burman communities had not constituted a threat to the tribal system. Only with the gradual emergence of a contrasting category of people holding property under different and novel tenurial arrangements did indigenous communities like the Limbus become significant.

For a variety of geo-political reasons the Limbus of east Nepal retained their *Kipat* rights, and so their "tribal" character, until relatively recently. We have very little evidence for when or how other indigenous communities 'became' peasants. Indeed, it would be inappropriate to assume, on the one hand, that all such ethnic groups were at one time "tribal" (in the way I have employed the term) or, on the other, that where it did occur the process of peasantisation was everywhere the same. I would not suggest nor have I meant to imply an inevitable sequence of tribal-to-peasant evolutionary change. But the Limbus provide a fascinating case study of the historical transformation of a tribal into a peasant community, which might serve as a point of comparison for other indigenous populations in both Nepal and India.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was given to the Himalayan forum held at the School of Oriental and African Studies during the 1990-91 academic session. I am grateful to the convenor, Dr. Michael Hutt, and participants in the seminar for their critical discussion. I must also thank Dr. Pat Caplan for her helpful comments. My visit to east Nepal

after an absence of over 20 years was made possible by a grant from the Nuffield foundation, and I here express my appreciation.

2. Although I am mindful of the dangers of doing so, in this paper I employ the terms 'caste' and 'peasant' interchangeably. The essay is concerned with the tribe non-tribe dichotomy, rather than with the distinction between these other analytical categories.
3. The first 'Gurkhas' were recruited from among Nepalese prisoners and deserters during the Anglo Nepal war of 1814-16.
4. In Victorian Britain it was thought that such qualities were inheritable (Street 1975:7)
5. A recent book on the Gurkhas (Farwell 1984) has an appendix on 'The Gurkha Tribes' which repeats almost verbatim descriptions of ethnic groups first employed by Vansittart in his handbook of 1895/1915.
6. By 'indigenous' I merely imply early settlement in the areas these communities now inhabit. A number have myths of migration from other areas and of having replaced earlier settled populations (eg Limbus in Ilam district of east Nepal).
7. In the remainder of the paper I will employ only the term 'peasant' to convey the notion of 'Hindu', 'caste, and/or 'non-tribal'.
8. Gell notes that 'Hindus' who entered Muria Gond territories last century continued to acknowledge the Muria as the 'true owners of the land' and participated in the Muria ritual system because it was the Muria gods who ensured its fertility' (198:117)
9. The colonial Government of India frequently took steps to ban the alienation of tribal land to non-tribal people. Gell notes that Muria land was legally prevented from being sold to non-advasis (Gell 1986:124). According to Singh, this policy can be traced to the Wilkinson rules of 1833 (Singh 1985:12).
10. These notions of identity and separation stem from Marcel Mauss's discussion of the 'Gift' in pre-capitalist economies, and Marx's concepts of 'commodity' in capitalist economies, as these have recently been brought together by Gregory (1982).
11. In the Indian tribal context, too, Singh notes that 'the most striking feature (of the latter part of the 19th and the early part of the 20th century) was the breakdown of the communal mode of production and the emergence of private right in land' (1985:12).

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