

BOOK REVIEW

The Gurungs: A Himalayan Population of Nepal. 1993. Bernard Pignède. English edition by Sarah Harrison and Alan Macfarlane. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar. Pages 423. Price: NRs. 1350/-

The book on the Gurungs by Bernard Pignède is perhaps the first most comprehensive ethnographic work to come out by anyone on Nepal yet. The present book is an English edition of it translated from the French original published by Mouton in 1966. It is a welcome thing to have this book available in English, for it will give the Nepali readership inhibited by its lack of knowledge in French its first chance to unravel the contents of the whole book. Before this full-length translation came out, a little glimpse of Pignède's work was possible to have through a publication of his "Gurung Clan Organization and Hierarchy" in English, forming the fifth chapter of his book, in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (VI, pp. 102-109, 1962), with Louis Dumont's effort. There is naturally a difference to see in the two styles of rendering. Dumont's translation looks more fluent and unconstricted, whereas the present fuller translation strives for an exact and literal rendering. But it has needed a far greater labour and more organizational skill on the part of the British translators to give the book its present shape and form for which our deep gratitude must go to them.

Pignède's approach to ethnography has been, as he mentions it, to maintain a balance between the material, social and religious aspects of the Gurungs. The village ethnography on the Gurungs has been based mainly, if not entirely, on the study of single Gurung village of Mohoriya in the western extremities of the Gurung territory in Central Nepal's hills. It is truly amazing what a tremendous amount of information he has been able to compile together about the Gurungs in a short time of about nine months altogether (the field work period of which was just about five months only), considering that he was a relative novice in this field and had had no prior formal training as an anthropologist. The information on the Gurung is also culled from his observation of these people in other villages in Kaski and Lamjung districts where he travelled at the same time. Obviously, this has helped him to view Gurungs broadly and rising above a single village

Contributions to Nepalese Studies, Vol. 20, No. 1 (January 1993).
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prospective. As he has said in his introduction, he favours to look at the Gurungs not as an isolated group, but forming very much part of a larger setting in Nepal as well as Central and South Asia. It was most tragic that Bernard Pignède had to die so prematurely at an early young age of twenty-nine, even before he could check and revise his dissertation before publication. Louis Dumont has paid rich tributes to Pignède for the great promise he had shown to be an anthropological talent through just that single, unfinished work. There were not many anthropologists attracted to work in Nepal in the late 50s, when he first came to work. At that time, C. von Furer-Haimendorf was his far more formidable and experienced predecessor by several years in Nepal. But Pignède's approach to ethnography was fresher and more direct, and he had a greater instinct for minute empirical details, breaking away from the classical mould of anthropology that Haimendorf had represented. Pignède's book could be said to be germane to and have laid the basis for more exhaustive works on the Gurungs to be done later by A. Macfarlane (1976), D. Messerschmidt (1976) and S. Strickland (1982) in their respective themes.

It would, however, be wrong to look at the present English edition of Pignède's work to be a faithful and exact reproduction of its 1966 French version, because it has added several new things to it which were absent in the French edition. Apart from the preface by the English translators, which is quite natural and essential to have, this edition contains remembrance about Pignède penned by his former Gurung assistant and informant, an addition of ten appendixes numbered from A to J and gathered under the theme 'Further comments on Pignède's work and the situation among the Gurung today' and, finally, an annotation of extensive supplementary notes, freely commented upon by the translators and his former informant, as well as by other knowledgeable Gurungs, claimed so by the translators, at the end. Has all this addition been done to augment Pignède's conclusion or to cast doubt on the merit of it remains somewhat unclear. Why should a work basically constituting a translation think of making so much additions and deletions, however trivial such deletions might be, from the original which confuses and distracts from the author? The translators say in their preface:

Pignède made a number of references to particular people in the village of Mohoriya.

These were not always very flattering, and because we felt that they might cause some unhappiness we have omitted their names. The village plans (Figs. 6 and 7) have also been modified to the same end.

The supplementary notes provide additional information not only on factual socio-economic changes taking place among the Gurungs today since Pignède's work, based on the findings of the translators collated later, (themselves anthropologists of standing with their own works on the Gurung), they also include seemingly free comments from Gurung residents of the area who seek to contradict and invalidate Pignède with their subjective perceptions. To give an example, in page 49 Pignède has written: "Gurung society divides itself into two groups, of which, the first, Carjat, is superior to the second, Solahjat." If we read through the pages of Pignède's book (pp. 157-195) we know that he was not unaware of what many Gurungs were saying even in his time in disregarding the efficacy of such a division. Despite this, if he still stuck to his conclusions, it is his prerogatives as an author. He must have weighed everything as a social scientist endowed with a broader comparative perspective before coming to his own conclusions. We do not want to imply from this that authors do not commit mistakes in what they write. But it is a dishonour to contradict someone in his own book on a matter of opinion when he is not around to check any longer. Pignède's above line has been allowed to be commented upon in more than one place in the supplementary notes by his former Gurung informant. In one such comment he says: "The word jat has created much discontent among the Gurungs. The Gurung vamsavali was reconstructed by Brahmins ... In fact, there was no concept of caste among them and it was not part of their social system" (Supplementary Note 18). In fact, there is not lama clan in the Gurung community. Any person from any clan who learns the science of the Lama can be called a "Lama". Even a Brahmin can be called a "Lama" if he has learned the ritual texts and performs as a "Lama" (Supplementary Note 61). This gives the reader an impression that translators probably acted under pressure from some Gurungs to have Pignède modified. New perceptions are emerging and a lot of ethnic feelings seem to be visible in the horizon. What the translators have called the "periods of dramatic economic and political change" is probable a reference to this. However, this may be, one cannot still help feeling that if Pignède needs criticizing or contradicting, it should not have been done in his own book to celebrate him, but done separately. The new history of the Gurungs freshly narrated by the Gurung authors and cited in full in appendix J is similarly intended to correct the so-called "Brahmin-imposed" origin legends about the Gurung community on which Pignède is said to have heavily relied. However, this so-called new history too has no greater ring of plausibility than the traditional history of the Gurungs, and looks equally contrived.

It has been customary for some people these days to attribute every inconvenient thing and every inconvenient idea to the Brahmins. For them,

the Brahmins are Nepal's *bette-noires*. This is no place to enter a controversy on this subject here. Still, one thing should be mentioned in passing. The idea of the division between Car-jat and Sorha-jat Gurungs has been put down to Brahmanic influence. One cannot, however, reasonably understand why the Brahmins should have done so with respect only to the Gurungs, and not with the Magars, to give but one obvious example. How can this idea find such a widespread currency and for so long consistently, if this notion was not a priori ingrained in the Gurungs somehow? The worst period of Hindu feudalistic rule in Nepal in which the minority ethnic groups are supposed to have suffered a great deal was during the Rana rule. There are more documents than one can probably count at this time relating to the Gurungs' dispute over this division in which the Ranas have invariably ruled that such a division is unfounded and invalid.

The black-and-white photographic illustrations are slightly altered in the order of arrangement and selection from the French edition. They look poorer both in the quality of reproduction and in terms of the coverage of theme. In the French edition, illustrations were gathered under suitable theme titles which one does not find in this book. The preparation of the index is the most listlessly done part of the job, which is in total disregard of the care taken for the same in the French edition. It serves no useful purpose for a serious reader. Notwithstanding it, the great interest the book will arouse in Nepal and the utility it will have for both general and specialized readers can hardly be denied.

– Prayag Raj Sharma

BOOK REVIEW

Nepal Under the Ranas. 1993. Adrian Sever. Oxford & IBH Publishing Co., New Delhi. Pages 506. Price: Not mentioned.

The Rana chapter in Nepalese history is perhaps the most colourful and in many ways the most controversial. The regime that lasted for a hundred and four years tactfully relegated the status and power of the monarchy to that of a mere figurehead with all the external decorum and regalia intact. The role of the king was purely a nominal and honorific one, stripped of all authority and power.

It was basically the bloody event that took place on the night of September 15, 1846, in the courtyard called the Kot where a notorious massacre of noblemen, officers and courtiers suddenly catapulted Bir Narsingh Konwar—later to be known in Nepalese history as Jang Bahadur Rana—into the Prime Minister's seat. The plan had been cleverly worked out and the massacre efficiently conducted. In a single night of Jang Bahadur completely wiped out his enemies, making him the first of the long line of Rana rulers with absolute and unlimited powers in all fields.

This sudden swing in Nepal's political history allowed power to be retained within the Rana family. This was chiefly due to the somewhat unexpected innovation decided upon by Jang Bahadur himself in making the title and functions of the "Prime Minister" hereditary. But the line of succession, instead of going from father to son, was to go to the male descendants of the Rana family according to seniority of age. Only the eldest agnate of the family therefore could succeed to the prime ministership upon the incumbent's death. It was precisely this oligarchical character that solidified Rana rule, thus limiting decision-making powers to a few members of the Rana family for over a hundred years.

Due to the highly centralised power structure, the Rana rulers appeared larger than life: powers of life and death lay in their hands; the wealth they commanded was legendary; and the palaces, durbars and mahals they built for themselves were breathtaking in their grandeur and magnificence. If some proved to be capable soliders and administrators, other were startling essentrics. If some lived by a strong code of honour outmoded elsewhere,

Contributions to Nepalese Studies, Vol. 20, No. 1 (January 1993).

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then others were known for their extravagant tastes and retinues of concubines. Ruthless, cruel, capable, depraved, chivalrous or arrogant, the Rana pages of Nepalese history now arouse tremendous interest among scholars, both local and foreign.

There are several publications on different aspects of Rana rule, but the book, *Nepal under the Ranas* is probably the most exhaustive publication in English on the Ranas to date. The book is divided into three main parts: 1) The Rise of the House of Rana; 2) Nepal Under the Ranas; 3) Twilight of the Ranas. It renders a graphic account of Jang Bahadur's rise to power, establishment of Rana rule, internal squabbles for power, technical innovations brought by the Ranas into the country, major developments in foreign relations, the Ranas' relations with the British, Nepal and the two World Wars, the growth of political consciousness, and struggle that finally overthrew the Rana rule. The book is chronological in structure, and besides the detailed depiction of each specific Rana prime ministership it deals vividly with social, political, economic, military, legal, administrative and cultural issues. The result is a definitive history of modern Nepal. The final analysis and assessment of Rana rule that forms the concluding chapter of the volume is a scholarly piece of writing. It will compel scholars, historical analysts and researchers to look at Rana rule in a different light—from the social and political standards of the time.

Maybe the protracted and difficult events that led to the eventual downfall of the regime are still too fresh in Nepalese memory to even remotely consider positive aspects of Rana rule with sufficient objectivity. The volume however lends sufficient weight to the theory that Rana rule may not after all be the period of darkness and oppression it is generally associated with. The contention is that Rana rule may have been viewed from the wrong perspective due to excessive concentration on its last years when power was heavily centralised and the hardline Rana family members were fighting a losing battle against changes that events in the wider field of South Asia had made inevitable. The theory that the latter half of Rana rule was conveniently used by ideologues to promote their own vested interests by labelling the Rana regime as the "dark ages" further supports the need for an objective assessment of the Rana chapter.

Rana foreign policy set by Jang Bahadur and faithfully followed by his successors is one of the main highlights of the book. It clearly and convincingly indicates that alliance with the British was not necessarily a prop to hand onto power at the cost of Nepal's sovereignty and national interest. On the contrary, it preserved Nepal's independence, since reliance on a weak China as a counter to the threat from the south was by then of little value.

The other impact the book is its wealth of rare photographs, some of them taken some hundred years ago and never published before. The two hundred and fifty plus photographs splashed throughout the book on almost every page supplement the text and further enhance the interest and curiosity of the readers. The volume must also be credited for reproducing some century old photographs as closely to the original as possible. It is not at all suprising that the rare photographs helped motivate the author to write the text. The lure of the photographs alone is enough to make you poorer by a couple of hundred rupees.

Though comprehensive, objective, informative and academically sound, the book is not free from factual and typographical errors both in the text and in the photo captions. It is hard to believe that in an otherwise thorough and well researched volume, errors like the kind listed below could occur. Some sampling is given below:

kukri for khukri (p. 39) reprecudecd for reproduced (p. 78) constituted for constitute (p. 106) Birna Singh for Bir Narsingh (p. 41) Tandah for Taudah (p. 132) Dev for Devi (p. 137) Khota for Kotha (p. 134) Parthaghat for Patharphatta (p. 176) Rashtriya Panchayat for House of Representatives (p. 289) Maharajadiraj for Maharajadhiraj (p. 301) Padama for Padma (p. 371) Hunuman for Hanuman (p. 385) Sangor for Sagar (p. 469) Diveshwari for Divyeshwari (p. 471) Dharan for Dhana (p. 476) Rakshya Day for Rakshya Dal (p. 402) Newaris for Newars (p. 404) Batta for Bhatta (p. 471)

There are also some errors in the captions of photographs which need to be rectified to clear up misunderstandings. For example, the photograph (p. 100) is of Queen Kirti Divyeshwari, the third wife of King Prithivi Bir and the daughter of Bir Shumsher, not just a lady of high birth. The lady to King Tribhuvan's right (p. 242) is his mother Queen Laxmi Divyeshwari, not Chandra Shumsher's wife as stated. She happens to be on Tribhuvan's left. Prince Basundhara (p. 333) is on King Mahendra's left not the right as stated in the photograph. In the photograph (p. 218) King Prithvi Bir is seated on Dev Shumsher's left and not on the right as wrongly depicted.

There are also other errors in the volume which need looking into if it intends to go into second edition. For example, the names of Pratap Shumsher and Ganesh Man Singh are not mentioned in the Biographical Notes, Appendix 8. Khadga Shumsher was banished to Tansen in Palpa District, not to Doti. Neither does Doti lie in Palpa District. It is rather suprising why Chakra Shumsher, Rudra Shumsher and Mohan Shumsher's names are not mentioned in the Roll of Succession draw up by Bir Shumsher upon his appointment in November 1885, for they are mentioned in the revised Roll of 1887; Keshar Shumsher is Chandra Shumsher's 'A' class son and not 'C' class as mentioned (p. 452). Rudra Shumsher is Bir Shumsher's

'C' class son, not brother (p. 452). Vishnu Shumsher was struck off from the Roll of Succession by Juddha Shumsher, not by Bhim Shumsher (p. 324).

It is also mentioned that the fabulously wealthy meharaja Juddha Shumsher retired as a sanyasi to a town called Ridi in western Nepal. It was not to Ridi but to a nearby place called Arghali in the Palpa district overlooking Ridi and the sacred Kali Gandaki river that he chose to stay for a year before he left for Dehradun in India. While in Arghali he by no means stayed in a "modest tin roofed house." It was in what was commonly known to the locals as the Arghali Durbar, demolished a couple of years ago. Neither did the maharaja retire to a life of prayer and meditation in a strict sense. In his short stay there, he is said to have left behind several illegitimate children to add to his already "one hundred sons and daughters spread all over the length and breath of Nepal" (p. 334). A sentence (p. 362) reads as follows:

"Several of the Praja Parishad's founder members it will be recalled, had been executed by Padam Shumsher, and Ganesh Man Singh had escaped the death penalty only because he was a Brahmin." As a matter of fact, it was Juddha Shumsher who ordered the execution the fiery revolutionary Ganesh Man Singh who is certainly not a Brahmin, but a full blooded Newar! To say that he escaped the death penalty because he was a "Brahmin" is to do him gross injustice and to greatly undermine his courage and determination with which he faced the much dreaded Rana rulers during the freedom struggle. The author seems to have relied too heavily on the information provided in *Who's who of Nepalese Revolutionary Politics* (p. 366). It must also be noted that Vijaya Shumsher is the son of Mohan Shumsher and not of Baber Shumsher as shown in the genealogy of the Rana family (p. 425).

Besides these shortcomings the book is remarkable as a goldmine of information for scholars, students and researchers seeking information on various aspects of Rana rule. A set of appendices at the end provides a wealth of historical data, and especially Appendix 3 of the Shah Rana matrimonial connections is valuable, considering the present state of Nepalese historiography.

—Ananda P. Shrestha

Notes to Contributors

Manuscripts should be typed double-space on A4 paper with a 4 cm margin on all four sides. The top copy should be submitted and photo/carbon copy retained by the author. The author should underline nothing except words which are to be italicised. Notes and references should be typed double-spaced on separate pages and will be included at the end of the article. The text should refer to notes numbered consecutively throughout the article, using raised numbers; bibliographical references should be cited in the text by the author's last name, date of publication, and page number, e.g., (Bista 1965:105) or if the author's name is mentioned in the text, by the date and page reference only, (1965:105). Entries in the references should be in alphabetical and chronological order of authors. They should include the details in the following order: name of the author (s)– surname first, date, title, name of the periodical, volume number (Arabic numerals to be used throughout), pagination (for articles in periodicals and books with several authors), place of publication (and name of the publisher for a book). Examples of the style to be used are as follows:

Bista, D.B. 1965. *People of Nepal*. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar

Dhungel, Basundhara. 1980. "The Newars." In Sudha Paneru (ed.), *Traditional and Prevailing Child-Rearing Practices Among Different Communities in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan university, pp. 31–53

Shrestha, Ananda. 1979. "Error Analysis." *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, 6:2, pp. 1-9.

Shrestha, Ramesh. 1977. "Adult Literacy in Nepal: a Report." Kathmandu: Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University. Mimeographed.

Stone, Linda. 1977. "Illness, Hierarchy and Food Symbolism Hindu Nepal." Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis. Brown University.

Tables should be submitted on separate pages, numbered and with headings. Maps and text figures should be drawn in black waterproof ink about twice the intended final size, with lettering in soft pencil. Notations in the text should indicate where these are to appear. Plates should not be less than intended final size. They should be printed on glossy paper. They should be titled and numbered.