

BOOK REVIEW

Cameroon, Mary M. 1998. *On the Edge of the Auspicious Gender and Caste in Nepal*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, pp. 394. Price \$ 24.95.

Except few studies done in different contexts by anthropologists, such as Patricia Caplan, Gregory Meserick and Peter Prindle, ethnographic research on low caste groups, particularly untouchables (popularly known as Dalits these days and I frequently use this word here for convenience) is virtually nil considering their population size (12% of the total population) and relative backwardness of the group (in social, economic and political platforms) compared to other Hindu and Tibeto-Burman groups in Nepal. Mary Cameron comes forward to fill in this ethnographic lacuna and deserves special merit here because: (i) Ethnographic research on the Dalit communities as a whole has been neglected to date both by the native and foreign scholars; (ii) Research on gender and caste is the burgeoning issue in the over all development problems in Nepal; (iii) The Far-western Region of Nepal, particularly the Western hill region, has been neglected in anthropological research throughout history; (iv) To date, there has been an overemphasis on non-Hindu (or Tibeto-Burman) groups in anthropological research that contributed to a false notion to western readers that Nepal is a country composed of primarily the ethnic/tribal groups with Buddhist values; (v) More research on the Hindu caste culture and values is desirable not only considering their large population size (over 80% of the total population are Hindus) but also the changing nature of Hindu-tribal dichotomy, Dalit movements and ethnic insurgency in recent years; and (vi) The male-centred analyses of the subject cause different but parallel problems in the ethnographic sphere and theoretically, concepts of gender, hierarchy and dominance demand female than male-centered approach in ethnography.

Like many Americans, Mary came to Nepal as a peace corps volunteer in 1978. With her peace-corps experiences, she developed her career in anthropology at the Michigan State University. In 1988-89 she came back to

Nepal to do fieldwork her PhD dissertation in anthropology. A follow up study was done during the winter of 1995 to complete the present monograph. Fieldwork was conducted in Bhalara village (fictitiously named) of Bajahng district, Seti zone, Far western Nepal. Detailed data were collected from 51 households – 31 households from the low caste and 20 households from the high caste (p.35). Most of the quantitative data, however, were derived from 50 households only. To protect human subjects, the author has changed all place and personal names in the text.

Excluding Introduction, the book is divided into eight big chapters. Mary Cameroon clearly spells out the objective of the book on the very first line of introductory chapter, "This is an ethnography of gender and caste relations in Nepal, a story told from the position of the low caste women"(p.1). In the larger Nepalese Hindu cultural model she explores the twin themes of the hierarchical nature of caste and hierarchical nature of gender and then systematically links this larger Hindu model with the context of Hindu women of Bhalara village. This chapter neatly summarizes views on caste, *varna* and *jāt*, purity, auspiciousness and marginality and how these concepts are embedded in the anthropology of the Hindu caste system in Nepal. After this, she deals with the setting of study with reference to the untouchables in Bhalara, the focal area of research site.

Chapter 1 "Situating Low-Caste Women" is the intellectual discourse on the concept of gender and caste in the context of larger South Asian Hindu caste model that situates the position of the Himalayan Hindu women versus the Bhalara women of Nepal.

Chapters two and three describe land and its relationship with people. Land is systematically embedded with caste and culture of local people and how the low caste groups of Bhalara are tied in the traditional patron-client relationship, the "riti-bhagya" system because of land (p.75-83). The "riti-bhagya" system has remained as one of the important means of subsistence for low caste people of the area. Discussion follows the division of labour by gender and caste and contributions made by untouchable women to subsistence, family farm production and wage-income work (p.87). Women's work in the family-farm is highest (68%) compared to men who contribute only to 26% of the total work. The nature of work differs between the high caste vs. low caste men and women, a domain largely defined by the Hindu cosmology.

Chapter four is the discussion of low caste women's artisan and domestic work in the local setting. Works of women of six different local artisan

groups, such as Badi, Sarki, Sunar, Lohar, Parki, Oudh and Damai are discussed in their traditional occupational setting.

"Narratives of Honor and Sexuality" is the subject matter of chapter five which is largely a theoretical discourse based on gender and caste in the larger Hindu caste society in general and the Bhalara Hindus in particular. The author construed the meanings of various terms such as *Ijat*, honor, *laj* and *dharma*, which are systematically interwoven in the matter of gender and matter of caste in Hindu Nepal (p. 149). The author cites examples of stereotypes that are used by high caste Hindus for untouchables such as "untouchable women are more promiscuous than upper caste women" (p. 150) and "the primary role of the low caste is to serve them" (p. 152). The author refutes these statements by saying that sex is a matter of *ijat* within low caste and it is not the subject of public discourse among them, even by women. And low caste serves high caste because they are paid for their work. Finally, the author brings a lot of beautiful Nepali idioms to show the images of capricious female and the wanton male (p.164, 169) in the Nepali local cultural context.

Chapter six discusses the main features of kinship in Bhalara, emphasizing the meaning and practice of relatedness as this pertains to lower caste women, their marriages, and social hierarchy (p. 175). In Nepal, it is obvious that rules of marriage to marry within *varna* and *jāt* are not only a typical of Hindus but also practiced in the similar vein by other non-Hindu groups as well. Similarly, *thar* endogamy and exogamy and *gotra* exogamy are regular features of marriage, whereas *jat* hypergamy and hypogamy are not the regular features of marriage in any Hindu group, whether the group is an untouchable Hindu or the high caste. One interesting feature of the text is the description of "selling of daughters" (technically sounds like the bride price) to a man (of one's own caste) within the low caste groups (p. 195). But the question of "dhan khanu" (here selling of daughters) or politics of bride price is very different in Nepal, particularly among the Tibeto-Burman groups. The bride price per se is the established cultural tradition among the Tibeto Burman groups in Nepal. The amount of bride price (both cash and service) differs with the social status of the family involved. Again the selling of daughter is not only a typical of the untouchable in the local context but also noticed among the high caste Hindu groups of this area. My own field experience in this part of Nepal suggests that a poor Thakuri family of this area virtually sells his young daughter to a rich Thakuri man (the man could be an old person or already having a wife) in the name of marrying her. This

problem has become complex once the author deals with “kanyadan marriage”(offering virgin girl in marriage). I believe that the problem of selling of daughters in the name of marriage is more closely associated with the poverty of parents, whether it pertains to an untouchable or high caste members of the society. An example of marriage of the daughter of a rich untouchable family amply justifies this. “Selling of daughters” in the name of marriage (except for the case of trafficking) is virtually unheard of in the context of high caste Hindu groups in eastern and central Nepal. In addition, a girl is considered a source of labour (labour value of the low caste woman) or an economic asset to the family (p. 198) and the family needs to be compensated for losing her is a typical western formalist approach. This type of interpretation of a girl/woman is losing its meaning with the changing status of women in Nepal recent years.

The author’s description of “rituals of marriage” in the Damai caste is excellent. The description includes every step of marriage with sufficient ethnographic details and local cultural meanings of various rituals. In addition, the author’s interpretation of low-caste marriage rituals in the larger theoretical questions on hierarchy and marriage, social drama and social conflict, auspicious and inauspicious and commensality, fertility and sexuality are proper and accurate in the context of the Hindus of western Nepal.

Chapter seven “ Bearing the *jāt*: a Childbirth and Motherhood” deals with how the ordering of caste through marriage is about the ordering of legitimate sexuality and, specifically, how the ordering of sexuality involves men and women in culturally distinct ways around the issue of purity and prestige (p. 245). Impurity leads through menstruation and childbirth is vividly discussed in the local context and equally interesting part of her discussion is the preference of sons over daughters in Hindu Nepal.

The last chapter “Reconfiguring Gender through Caste” is an attempt to analyze gender relations through cultural and social processes (p. 272).

Some of the minor problems in the text are:

- i) Her concept of *pustā* (generation) is not accurate; it should be 25 years instead of 18 (p.63); it should be Maṅasarovar instead of Manesurowa as it is written in the text (p.23).
- ii) Gender, dharma, *ijat* and sex are presented in idealized forms (pp. 135-146) in the larger great Hindu tradition. In reality, what people say and practice in their daily life is very different in Nepali society. All of these

- terins are systematically linked with the power-based model of Nepali society and the meaning of which fluctuates with access to political power and wealth.
- iii) It is interesting to note that both the unmarried Hindu girls of high caste and low caste wear the red *pothes* (necklaces) (p. 236). This is rather unusual in the Hindu context of central and eastern Nepal. Why this custom is accepted here and not in other regions of Nepal is not discussed.
 - iv) The legal age at marriage for the girl is 16 (not 17 as mentioned in the text) and 18 for the boy (p.185).
 - v) The other most conspicuously missing is the discussion of data in Table 2. This Table has noted the population size by village and caste. Based on Table (year not mentioned), there were 349 households and 2058 populations in Bhalara village. In fact, Bhalara is the fictitious name of ten small villages, where the households of high caste and low castes consist of 60%(209 households) and 40%(140 households), respectively. But this figure is based on seven villages as readers do not know the name of other three villages and their number of households and population size. How the sample of 31 households from low caste and 20 households from high caste were considered for detailed study (as the sample of 15%) is not known. Why Mary omitted the discussion of this vital population part of ethnography is unclear; the only explanation could be that "anthropologists are afraid of discussing numbers". Particularly, the data on population dynamics are vital in understanding the context of change that is taking place within the society. Once the land starts more fragmentation over time with population growth, how far the high caste groups are able to sustain their traditional *riti-bhagya* system with low caste is not known. In addition, as market network is expanding in the western hill regions in Nepal and cheap machine made clothes and agricultural implements are available locally, the interdependence and relationship between high caste by low caste or vice versa will dramatically change in coming years. In brief, untouchables are more at risk when their traditional resources (*riti-bhagya*) in the local context dry – up along with population growth and market economy.

- vi) Again the argument of relative autonomy and freedom of untouchable women compared to high caste Hindu women of this area has done little to improve their social and economic status within the society. In other words, this western notion of autonomy and freedom is relatively weak tool in explaining the culture and economy of people in the larger Hindu model.
- vii) The other issue not properly dealt with is the ramification of untouchability, where untouchables themselves are legitimizing their inferior status. There is hierarchy within untouchables. The principle of karma is still embraced, despite the family identifying themselves as "low caste". The people usually practice "untouchability" not because untouchability is enforced but because untouchables themselves have very strong feeling about untouchability. It comes to constitute a socially accepted framework of existence, which gives the way in which individuals perceive their day to- day life.
- viii) Mary is also little pessimistic as she thinks that the caste system will not change for generations. No doubt, Mary is right while considering the present rigid caste structure in this part of Nepal. But things are changing rapidly in Nepal over the last 40 years in terms of culture of people and ecology of the area as a whole. In the eastern and central Nepal the caste value is more relaxed and the degree of purity and pollution is relatively lower than the western Nepal. In the market areas of eastern Nepal, taking tea or food in the hotel or restaurant by a member of the low caste is largely accepted. The low caste people already started selling milk and milk products in market areas. This has happened because of the increasing rate of literacy, improved transportation, media – network and the mobility of people as a whole. The present form of caste structure in western Nepal will no longer remain in the present form in future by simply considering two factors: a) Literacy rate of both males and females is changing rapidly in Nepal. Along with rising rate of literacy of both males and females the rigidity of caste values will fade gradually, and, ii) The legislation of giving equal right to the property or inheritance to both sexes is already passed. It will help to liberalize the caste values as it reduces gradually the economic dependency of women on men. Money and status are very closely related in many societies of the world. According to many NGO reports (PACT, Nepal and others), women have achieved higher status

within the family because of "saving scheme" especially designed for them. Gender stereotypes concerning men will definitely change in the future.

Despite these few cursory remarks, Mary Cameron has done a commendable job while producing an excellent monograph on the group of people where research is considered very difficult even today. A thorough and painstaking review of the literature has produced the best synthesis of the culture of Dalits showing her formidable abilities to write the monograph like this. This book is highly useful to Dalit NGOs and organizations, researchers, students and teachers who want to understand untouchability, gender, hierarchy and dominance in developing societies.

– Dilli R. Dahal