

Review Article

Whelpton, John. 2005. *A History of Nepal*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN: 0-521-80470-1 (paperback); 0-521-80026-9 (hardback). Price: £ 15.99 (paperback); £ 40.00 (hardback); NRs. 600.00 (South Asian Edition), pp. 296

John Whelpton is the editor and translator of an extraordinarily interesting book, *Jang Bahadur in Europe*, published in 1983, which depicts the first Rana prime minister's 1850 visit to Britain and France (*Belait-yatra*). As is well known, this journey provided for the first time an opportunity and occasion for face-to-face contact in a fully European atmosphere between the governing elites of two European countries and those of Nepal. It had a deep impact on the friendly policy demonstrated towards Britain in India by Nepal during the second half of the nineteenth century, especially during the Indian Mutiny, and the beginning of the twentieth century. Jang's visit to Europe also had its effect on the internal scene: among the results was the introduction of some European elements into the Nepalese legal system, as well as to the local palace architecture. In other words, this journey is an important date in the overall process of the Westernization of the Himalayan kingdom, a process that continues in train to this very day, and one with incalculable consequences. What is more, as far as I know, the *Belait-yatra* is the first travel account not written by a European about Nepal, but by a Nepalese about Europe. Such a reversal of perspective, and one of such relative antiquity, is extremely significant. Few texts of this type have reached us from Asian countries. Admittedly, the Nepalese manuscript is brief, and does not contain much detail; but it does give us a chance to understand how high-status Nepalese officials of that time regarded Western countries. The impression made by the West went so deep, indeed, that Jang Bahadur considered staying on there for at least some years, and thus abdicating his power in Nepal.

Whelpton now lives in Hong Kong, but is still involved in Nepalese studies. Despite its title, his new book, *A History of Nepal*, focuses mainly on modern and contemporary Nepal, the country built up by the Shah dynasty from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards¹. Only four pages are devoted to the history of Nepal Valley in ancient and medieval times. The history of Khasa Malla, centred in the Karnali basin (12–14th centuries), is written in 14 lines (p. 22). A little more space is devoted to the *caubisis* kingdoms of the Gandaki basin, as it was from these petty states that the history of modern Nepal originated and that the leading dynasty of Gorkha emerged in the course of time. On the whole, the history of ancient and medieval Nepal is limited to one chapter (among seven), this chapter

including also general information about the populations of the country and their languages. It is true that Nepal appears as a unified state only at the beginning of the nineteenth century. But this is also the case with several other countries, in Europe as well as in Asia. Their history is nevertheless normally traced back to much earlier periods. This peculiar and restrictive approach is not explained in the book.

Chapter 2, which covers the period 1743–1885, is devoted mainly to the unification of the country, the first decades of the nineteenth century, and the establishment of the Rana regime. Of special interest are the pages devoted to the so-called process of the Sanskritization of Nepal. Whelpton shows clearly how the Western tribes (Magars and Gurungs) have been used by the political establishment of the *caubisis* states to consolidate their power and expand their conquests. In exchange, Magars in particular 'could until the eighteenth century be promoted to Chetri status'. The boundary between Magar and Chetri was a fairly fluid one. That explains why many of the clan names, such as Thapa, are equally common among both Chetris and Magars. This seems also to have happened on a lesser scale with the Gurungs: some of them were promoted among the *bharadar* (members of the political elite). It was clearly a time when caste lines were not so hard and fast as today. As far as the Magars are concerned, it is significant that their abandonment of their own language for Nepali had probably been under way since before the Gorkhali conquest.

Unfortunately, the very concept of Sanskritization is not discussed, and it is not extended to other groups, especially among the eastern tribes. No reference is given in this respect to the important article of Rex Jones 'Sanskritisation in Eastern Nepal', *Ethnology* 15-1, 1976. The trend for the Khasas of the Western Hills to adopt the sacred thread and become Chetris with a view to increasing their status is mentioned (p. 57), but not developed. As a matter of fact, this is less a process of Sanskritization (adoption of Brahmanical values) than a process of 'Rajputization', as Indian sociology has made clear. The reader has the impression that Whelpton sees some religious elements, such as the cult of the Masta in the Western hills, as the preservation of an old state, 'an egalitarian counter opposed to the dominant Brahmanical order' (p. 57). In this manner, Sanskritization 'allows' – according to the author – 'local religions to subsist within a Hindu environment'. Such formulations, which are not totally incorrect, need further discussion.

There then follows a chapter (Ch. 3) on Nepal under the Shamsher Ranas (1885–1951), and another one (Ch. 4) entitled 'The monarchy in ascendance' (1951–1991). Up to this point, the book of John Whelpton may be described as very classical political history; it insists mainly on political events, given in chronological order. Nevertheless, from time to time the reader is offered more sociological and broader insights. For instance the Rana regime, like

the Mughal administration, is termed 'patrimonial' instead of 'feudal', because, it is said, the state was organized as an extension of the ruler's household. In Nepal, three features of the Rana political system need to be stressed: the need for personal attendance on the king, the *pajani* under which all appointments were subject to annual review, and the frequent changes in the individual's *jagir*, the land assigned to a state servant in lieu of salary (p. 49). The fall of the Rana regime is also seen in a wide perspective, in which the new Western ideas of democracy, and often also of socialism, transmitted through India, are rightly emphasized. Furthermore, 'The final collapse of the Rana regime had resulted not from a widely based popular movement, but rather from divisions within the political elite and from the policy adopted from the newly independent India' (p. 73).

In my view, the best parts of the book are Chapters 5 and 6. These two chapters could be recommended to all readers interested in the present Nepali crisis. Chapter 5 deals with the economic efforts of the successive governments from 1951 to 1990 to develop the country and raise the standard of living of the Nepalese people. During that period, the formidable increase in the population – 8.5 million in 1954 to 18.5 million in 1991 – has had deep effects on the biological and economic structure of the country. The rise of the population entails deforestation, increases in temporary and permanent emigration, with new destinations becoming more and more popular – the Middle East, Malaysia, and Japan – and changes in the flow of commerce. By the 1980s Nepal had turned from a net exporter to a net importer of food grain. The continuing fragmentation of holdings made it difficult for ordinary peasant families to feed themselves. Therefore the quest for development became a central objective of the State, especially during the Panchayat period (*bikas* developmentalism). Unfortunately, the policy of agricultural development in the hills had very meagre results. Water supplies and latrines have been installed in many villages. But in 1991 it was estimated that 7 to 9 million of the country's 19 million people were unable to obtain their minimum daily calorific requirements.

The same can be said of the regional planning policy: some programmes were implemented efficiently in the country, but economic opportunities remained concentrated mainly in the Kathmandu valley. Despite massive foreign aid, the grip of poverty over most of the country could not be broken. The fact that the kingdom was notoriously under-administered provides a partial explanation of this phenomenon (this factor also explains, in my opinion, the astonishingly rapid spread of the Maoist movement all over the country from 1996 until 2001). Whelpton speaks of the responsibility of the governments themselves – for instance the quarrels between administrations over taking control over foreign aid; but there is nowhere any elaborated

analysis of the corruption and the way part of the elite diverts the aid to its own advantage.

Chapter 6, entitled 'Lifestyles, Values, and Identities', is an essay on changes in Nepalese society between 1951 and 1991. These changes start with the expansion of the education system and the improvements in communication between the different regions of the country and between Nepal and the outside world. They also include many other things, from Westernization of dress (especially among men), to the development of ethnicity movements among the various hill tribes, to an upsurge in ethnic activism, to changes in the caste system, and especially an increase in intercaste marriages. In this connection, Whelpton rightly remarks that the division between pure and impure castes remains important. We learn for instance that it was only in September 2001, following a government declaration on temple access, that a large party of *Dalits* (untouchables) was able to enter Pashupatinath temple unchallenged (p. 155). Yet the new legal dispositions in favour of women (hereditary rights, limited abortion possibilities) are not mentioned, and the progressive feminization of whole sectors of society, especially in urban areas, is an issue not addressed. It is untrue to write that the Maharjan (the Newar farmer caste) now became more likely to choose 'Hindu' as a self-description (p. 155). The recent strengthening of caste identity, on the contrary, has emphasized Buddhism as a crucial component of this caste. The dissemination of egalitarian ideas through diverse channels is alluded to (pp. 173–5), but not systematically explored.

The whole of this penultimate chapter is very rich, owing to the author's personal contacts and intimacy with Nepalese society. Interesting details are given: for instance, the fact that Kings Tribhuvan and Mahendra could both speak some Newar learned from their wet-nurses and other palace servants, and that it is said that they have sometimes used that language between themselves to keep their conversations secret (p. 156).

The last part of the book is a useful chronicle of events from the restoration of democracy in 1990 until the civil war of today. The facts are related in an objective, impartial style that is much to be welcomed in these days of confusion and passion. The decisive role played by India in the sudden collapse of the Panchayat system in April 1990, through its imposition of among other things a semi-blockade of Nepal in March 1989, is mentioned (p. 113). The resulting shortages, particularly of kerosene, caused considerable hardship in Nepal. The failure of the restored democratic parties to tackle the country's economic problems is appropriately stressed, as well as the ambiguous role played by the king in the political arena. The rise of the Maoist movement, supported by a great part of the population until 2002, to the point of being seen as a possible alternative to the present political system, is correctly summarized. Even

though a great part of the Nepalese people do not accept the official version of the Narayan Hiti palace slaughter of 2001, Whelpton rejects all the rumours and conspiracy theories. His account does not differ from those of the palace and the investigation committee. And there are some grounds, after all, for accepting it. First, sordid events of this nature are not altogether a novelty in the court history of the Nepalese kings. Second, passions for firearms and addictions to several varieties of drugs were a feature common to many Indian princely states during the nineteenth century and earlier. Concerning the hostility between Queen Aishwarya and Devyani, the girlfriend of Crown Prince Dipendra, whom he wants to marry, Whelpton suggests that an old rivalry between the Juddha branch of the Ranas, to which both Queen Aishwarya and the queen mother belonged, and the descendants of Chandra Shamsher, Devyani's great-great-grandfather (p.214), may have played a role. Such family matters, crucial in the high political sphere, are not well known and are of much interest for social scientists (and Nepali citizens).

On the whole, Whelpton's *History of Nepal* is a valuable introduction to that country. It will be useful to all non-Nepalese specialists interested in South Asia: it gives a good and accurate account of the historical events and provides general information on a wide range of quite disparate topics. The social scientist working on Nepal, however, whether anthropologist, sociologist or historian, will be more or less disappointed, as nothing very new comes out of this book and as no deep insight into Nepalese society is given. To take one example, a good contemporary history is one that illuminates the way the past embraces and informs the present. Unfortunately, this is not done here. There is no reflection on the difficulties of establishing democracy in the Nepali context, and on the structural causes of the multifaceted Maoist movement. Nepal is also a country of great variety and heterogeneity, which it has encompassed and preserved. Diverse systems and lifestyles coexisted, some anchored in pre-modern period, others in the very modern present. This coexistence is not stressed in the reviewed text. In the same way, important phenomena such as Nepali nationalism, links between the Terai and the hills (in spite of the front-page cover illustration's coming from Birganj), the political use of Nepali chronicles in the past, and so on are not given enough attention. Surprisingly, the name of Sylvain Lévi is nowhere cited, and his book on the *History of Nepal* is not referred to in the bibliography, in spite of his remarkably modern analysis of the Hinduization of the country. Instead, secondary sources and some third-rank publications are quoted at length. Furthermore, the page-numbers given in the index (at least in my South Asian copy) are rarely correct.

Note

¹ John Whelpton is the author of *Kings, Soldiers and Priests: Nepalese Politics and the Rise of Jang Bahadur Rana, 1830-1857* (1991) and *People, Politics and Ideology: Democracy and Social Change in Nepal* (1999, with the late Martin Hoftun and William Raeper).

– Gérard Toffin

Review Article

The Structure of Kiranti Languages: Comparative Grammar and Texts Karen H. Ebert. Zurich: ASAS, Universität Zurich, 1994. Pages: 283. ISBN 3-95-2010-5-2

Karen H. Ebert's grammar on Tibeto-Burman (T-B) Chianti languages (acronym *SKI: CGT*), to my knowledge is the first typological (although the term 'comparative grammar' has not strictly been used in Crystal's (1980: 66 and 362-363) sense grammar of such type on geographically less-accessible and 'nearly extinct' (Crystal 2000: 20) Kiranti languages (see Appendix A for their regional distribution) spoken in Eastern hills of Nepal from the Likhu river in the west plus across the Nepal border to north-east India viz., Sikkim and Darjeeling. Phylogenetically¹, the generic phyla 'Kiranti' under T-B sub-family, includes not less than thirty-two (cf. Rai 1985, Hanßon 1991a, Nishi 1992 and Pokharell1994) scantily described languages. Or most of them are yet awaiting linguistic description and further documentation in any form of grammar or dictionary. To some extent, some of these languages have been investigated only recently after Allen's *A Sketch of Thulung Grammar* (1975) in the Kiranti linguistic literature.

Till the year 1994, all other grammatical descriptions and investigations were based on separate individual Kiranti languages, e.g. Toba 1984, Rai 1985, van Driem 1987 and 1993b, Michailovsky 1988, Ebert 1997a and Ebert 1997b. Besides these detailed works, there is a great deal of papers on several grammatical aspects of the Kiranti grammars published since the late 1960s and onwards. Therefore, I prefer to suggest Ebeq's grammar as the first typological account on the Kiranti languages because she has included six Kiranti languages viz., Khaling, Thulung, Camling [Tsamling], Athpare, Bantawa and Limbu (Phedappe dialect) for the purpose of describing the grammatical structures of these languages. A reader trained in linguistics will be amazed by very much similar and dissimilar grammatical features of these mutually unintelligible languages termed as 'Kiranti.'

The *SKL: CGT* has been organized in six chapters and two appendixes. In the first appendix, Appendix A (pp.140-150) verbal paradigms on person and number affixes, basic tense and negative paradigms only of Athpare and Bantawa have been outlined. The second appendix, Appendix B (pp.154-280) has included the texts from these languages and the sources of the texts are available in all languages except for Limbu. This grammar is the culmination of her fieldwork study in the eastern hills of Nepal mainly on Camling and Athpare languages and the rest of the data extracted are mainly from Allen (1975) for Thulung, Toba (1984) Khaling, Rai (1985) Bantawa and van Driem (1987) for Limbu. The narrative representation of fifteen myths and