

## THE THAKURIS OF DIYARGAUN - A REVIEW.

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[Shrestha, B. K.: Karnali Lok Samskriti: Diyārgāunkā Thakuriharu (Folk culture of the Karnali. The Thakuris of Diyargaun). Vol III, Janajivan (Folk-Life Study), 1971, 114 pages, 2 maps, 4 ill. and appendix. Price: N. Rs. 9/-]

The present volume is the third of a series of five volumes published by the Royal Nepal Academy, under the general title of Karnali Lok Samskriti. These five volumes were awarded, in 1972, the *Madan Puraskar*, the highest literary award in Nepal for outstanding work by Nepali writers. A five-member team, organized and led by Mr Satyamohan Joshi made a cultural survey of the Karnali Zone in 1970. The team which made this study was composed of specialists from five different disciplines, namely History, Geography, Anthropology, Language and Folk-literature and culture. The third of the five volumes brought out by this team, entitled *Janajivan*, (Folk-life study) with which we are concerned here, was written by Mr. Bihari Krishna Shrestha. He is an anthropologist who works in the research branch of the Panchayat Training Centre at Kathmandu. At present, he is in the *Janch-Bujh Kendra* (Investigation Bureau) of the Royal Palace.

The book is based on the results of 48 days field-work carried out in a peasant village, in the Sinjadara (a geographical and administrative sub-division) of Jumla district of Western Nepal. The villagers studied by the author are Thakuris. He has given a pseudonym—'Diyargaun'—to the village. Personally, as an anthropologist, I feel he is right and that one should not reveal people's identity if their ethics and values are to be respected. In this village, he has made a detailed study of two wards (Jachauri Bado and Acharya Bado) consisting altogether of 21 houses. His research made use of census reports, interviews, participant observation and questionnaires.

He states that the main reasons behind his study were as follows:

I. In view of the lack of adequate information concerning the geography, economics, sociology and culture of the Karnali Zone he sets out to furnish some reliable knowledge of this area.

II. Most of the anthropological research in Nepal has been done by foreigners and sometimes because of their lack of language knowledge and of their own value judgements, they have not given a very true picture of what they have studied. Therefore, to study Nepali ethnic groups and to give a true picture of Nepalese society Nepalese hands are urgently needed. So, this piece of research is aimed at filling some of the gaps in our knowledge of Western Nepal.

III. To facilitate the intergration of different ethnic groups and cultures, it is essential to make such anthropological and sociological studies, for these will contribute towards national integration and national development.

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First let me give a general picture of the content of the book.

There are twelve main chapters in the monograph. The first chapter concerns the village and the people. The author begins by describing the geographical location of the village and discusses briefly the relationships of the thakuris with other groups like the Badi, the Mugali, the Raute and the Gurkhali (Nepali officials). These relationships are described in their social settings. He describes the construction and the configuration of the houses and cowsheds. The different parts of these, their role in everyday life, the importance of the *Baro* (the central spot in the village) and of *Jestha*, the busiest month in the year, are underlined. He has shown clearly that in such a small, closeknit society there is a hereditary caste stratification made up of the major subdivisions: *Chokha* (the high - caste hindu groups) and *Kamsel* (the untouchables) (p. 10).

His next chapter is on the family. Here discussion begins with the different sorts of families and their role in the social structure of the Thakuris. While examining the basic social, economic, and religious units in Diyargaun, the author underlines the advantages of the patrilocal, extended or joint-family; in practice, however, this system seldom prevails, as the author shows when analysing the real rather than the ideal patterns of family life.

In the third chapter he deals with kin groups, most of the discussion concerning residential kin groups. The author has made a clear distinction between kin groups

formed by links of marriage and kin groups formed through ritual ceremonies. While describing the former he has defined the descent system, the clan and the lineage system and the part played by these in forming exogamous and endogamous groups in terms of marriage regulations. He has brought out clearly how a particular lineage has played a major role in the creation of a ward in the village panchayat system.

The fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh chapters are devoted to the general economic organization of the Thakuris. Here one can see two major subdivisions of the economic system: (i) Agriculture and (ii) Trade. As in practically all Nepalese villages, the subsistence base in Diyargaun is agriculture. The second activity of major importance, trade, is practised, as is agriculture, by members of all the castes. Under agriculture, the author has described the land system, the variety of crops cultivated, their rotation, the seeds sown, the agricultural implements used, fertilisers, irrigation techniques, etc. Since agriculture is the basis of livelihood, the land is of utmost importance. In the local context, land is divided into three main sorts: (i) *Jyula* (usually low-lying paddy fields), (ii) *Bhuwa* (unirrigated dry land), and *Sanda* or *Lekhali Bhuwa* (high altitude land which is dry and rocky and which is far from the village). Agricultural work is done by almost the entire family. Two types of crops are grown—a winter crop and a rainy season crop. To increase productivity, crop rotation is practised. Preparation of the seed and the seed-beds receive special attention. It is to be noted that on 12th of Chaitra of every year, the Thakuris start preparing paddy seeds (p. 36, Devkota, p. Na.). The author has also noted that agricultural implements like the iron plough-share are not used in this area because of the cost of iron and its unavailability. Three types of agricultural labourers are to be found: (i) Labour exchange and services are done on a piece-work or daily-wage basis, with cash or grain used for payment, (ii) Services provided by the low-caste people which the author calls *Lagi lagitya pratha* (*Lagi*—high caste people who make some sort of payment for work done by untouchables and *lagitya*—untouchable groups who for their services get payment from the high-caste people) and (iii) some rich people employ servants to plough their fields. This last type of service is known as *Badohali pratha*. There are other groups like the *Dhangre* and other low-caste specialists who also supply services to the high-caste people. These agricultural services are described with full contextual explanations. However, if we except the first type of service mentioned above, the other types of service fit into the Indian Jajamani System (Gould, 1964; Berreman, 1963).

While writing about animal husbandry, the author gives some statistics concerning live-stock figures. He also notes that animal manure is considered most necessary

for agriculture; cows are given special attention as suppliers of milk; and bullocks are used for ploughing.

The next main part of the economic organization is trade. Here two sorts of transactions are made—from the north, the Thakuris get salt and wool; and from the south, clothes, utensils, cosmetics, cigarettes, etc. The traders from Mugu and Humla carry out their trade not in cash but in grain. So, the barter system is still prevalent among the Thakuris. When the harvest is over, one member of the family leaves to trade. The trade centres include Humla, Joljibi and Nepalgunj. The author describes clearly the business acumen of the Jumlis (Thakuris) who are clever enough to do business outside their own region. He also points out that trade is not only a means of subsistence, but it has helped the lower classes of society to widen their mental outlook and social opportunities.

The eighth chapter deals with the kin groups formed by ritual ceremonies. Ritual friends stand outside the periphery of the consanguineal and affinal relationships. In other words, a special kinship relationship is formed outside the real kin group. In the local context ritual friends are designated by different terms such as *Mate - Isthā* (soil friend), *Dharme Isthā* (religious friend), *Hitko Isthā* (wellwisher friend), *Sangi* (a friend), *Mit* (a ritual friend), and *Baisali* (a ritual friend sharing the same name.) The *Mit* relationship is the most honoured one. These non-kin groups are not limited to men only, they not only cut across caste divisions, they even extend to animals and plants (p. 71). It is interesting to note that each family has got ritual friendship with some other family or some object (p. 72). These ritual friends not only show mutual affection towards each other but also help each other materially. This exchange of goods is carried out on a reciprocal basis, where there is no calculation of loss and gain. It makes one think of similar phenomena manifest in the Kula system of the Melanesian Islanders studied by B. Malinowski (1922).

In the chapter on village politics, Mr. Shrestha has described the political situation prevailing in the area before and after the introduction of Panchayat democracy in Nepal. He has briefly described the role of the traditional village headman (Mukhiya) and his rights and duties. A few years ago it was customary in Nepal for individuals who held power in villages, to be members of large and wealthy families. But after 1972 V. S., Panchayat Democracy came, and there appeared another central figure in the village who is somewhat different from the traditional village headman and is known as *Pradhan Pancha* (head of village council elected by adults of 21 years old or over). In this chapter, one finds a discussion of the village panchayat elections, of the factions and cliques among the groups, and of the decisions taken by the village panchayat.

The author points out that though, to a certain extent, traditional village leaders have been changed, the villagers still have not quite adopted the ideology underlying the Panchayat system; and some wealthy families still play a dominant role in the village context.

In the field of religion, the author describes the religious beliefs of the Thakuris and the supernatural world which affects them. Difficulties of any kind are attributed to supernatural deities; sometimes worship concerns problems of general welfare and sometimes problems which are the concern of the family. Mr. Shrestha shows that most worship is directed towards Little Tradition deities as manifest in the local context, rather than to the principal Great Tradition gods. In this area the deities are categorized, as *Paturne* (a deity who speaks through a Dhami's mouth) and *Napaturne* (a deity who does not speak in this manner but is incense-loving and is worshipped at fixed times by local *pujari*). Generally the person whom a particular deity will possess is known as the traditional vehicle through which that deity dances and talks. The possessed persons are known as Dhami. Unlike elsewhere in Nepalese society, the Dhami's position in Diyargaun is not hereditary; thus he is not chosen by the people but rather he is chosen by the spirit he is to be possessed by.

Thakuris claim Masto as their most powerful deity. He is not a deity who is represented by images but he is personified by a Dhami, who is possessed by his spirit. Local people believe that there are twelve Mastos with their nine sisters, *Nava Durga Bhawani*. One interesting thing to note here is that deities are used as instruments of social control. *Paturne* deities are more honoured because they speak directly through a Dhami's mouth.

In Chapter eleven, devoted to marriage, the author discusses different kinds of marriage, marriage ceremonies and other related ceremonies. In the last chapter he describes the life-cycle ceremonies. Here he has discussed every phase of human life starting from birth to death. One special feature is the sixth-day ceremony which unlike the name-giving ceremony (held nine days after the birth of a child) is held on the sixth day. If a son is born, there is gunfire to announce his birth; and this is followed by a lavish feast. The other rites are held according to the usual Hindu ceremonial patterns.

There are naturally some points on which I am in disagreement with the author. In the preface to his book, he quotes the definitions of culture given by E. B. Tylor (1871) and an American anthropologist, F.M. Keesing (1958) (p. ga). Tylor's definition of culture is somewhat outdated in 1973. His concept of culture which stresses normative ideals and historical developments, conceives the whole of mankind as one racial group and argues for the psychic unity of mankind (Tylor: 1871). But modern anthropologists would like to see culture not as one universal form but as the total entity of one particular society among many (Malinowski: 1931; White: 1959; Steward: 1955).

The culture of different nations is not simply the behavioural norms which can be idealized. Obviously different groups of people have different cultures which are dissimilar in a number of aspects. Julian Steward has shown (1955) how a particular culture can subsist even at a family, band or group level which maintains its own identity which is distinct from that of others. Mr. Shrestha has simply outlined the cultural realities or norms of a small group of people, i. e. the Thakuris. One must note that the cultural identity of the Thakuris he has studied is distinct in many respects from that of Thakuris of other parts of Nepal. Therefore, I feel that it would have been better if he could have framed his definition of culture on the basis of Thakuri society in general.

In chapter I, he has studied caste stratification. In this respect the exact place of the ethnic group Bitalu, is not clear. On the one hand the author has shown that the Bitalus are untouchables: if one touches them he/she will be polluted. On the other hand, he states that for a number of reasons (which he does not give) these Bitalus are given the same social status as the Thakuris (p. 10). These statements are confused and confusing and it is difficult to know what to make of them.

Certainly because of the harsh climate and the hard life of the Karnali Zone, the joint-or extended-family seems preferable, for a number of reasons: in the practice of agriculture and trade, in the organisation of animal husbandry, etc. It is of course customary among high-caste Hindus to maintain the joint family system and this has been studied by a few anthropologists in Nepal (Caplan: 1970, Haimendorf: 1966). But in reality, at Diyargaun, nuclear family patterns among the Thakuris are much more frequent. The author has certainly pointed out how the family relationships are segmented among the Thakuris; but his descriptions are sketchy and do not provide solid reasons for the prevalence of nuclear family patterns. Nor has he attempted to study the relationship of two families once their family ties are broken.

On p.21 he suggests that the Chetris and the Thakuris have separate identities. But one feels that their separate identity is nowhere shown: neither on the basis of physical features nor in the field of sociocultural values. It is only in the clan-name that the differences appear.

On p. 22 he has differentiated kin groups into two major categories--the residential kin group and the consanguineal kin group. But one could just as well include the consanguineal kin in the residential kin group. The extensions of residential kin group are the consanguineal kin group and the affinal kin group. Systems of relationship are always defined in terms of the consanguinity and affinity which exist among the people. So the kin group classification employed here is not logical.

On p. 25 the author mentions that the preferred form of marriage is between a man and his clan's exogamous group. Marriage between a man and his father's sister's daughter is forbidden. The Thakuris also do not allow matri-lateral cross-cousin

marriage, but some cases do occur. At the same time, the sister's son as a son-in-law is regarded as most sacred; and Thakuris feel that the sister's son and son's daughter relationship is as sacred as the grey cow (*Kaili gai*) and they offer their grand-daughter to their sister's son (p.26). One feels here that sister's son is the most eligible candidate for the grand-daughter; but if a marital relation is forged between the sister's daughter and the maternal uncle this is considered a great sin. Here in just one generation one finds the contrasting marital relationship preferred by the Thakuris. So, one is not clear about the limits of incest among the Thakuris.

The table of land distribution based on the economic status of the people (p. 29) does not show which family is rich and which is poor; neither does it show landownership according to types of family.

While describing the poverty of the Thakuris, the author says, "In the winter season, the wife is sent to her natal home if she is allowed food and dress there; and her husband, during this period roams around the village and gets food" (p. 32). Here one does not understand the exact economic condition of the wife's home. At the same time, can a similar situation prevail at the man's house also? Supposing his own married daughters or sisters come back to his house in a similar fix, how do people manage, what happens then?

After sowing seed in the fields, no mention is made of how these are protected. The first rice-eating ceremony after the harvest is over is important among the Thakuris of this area (Devkota, p. na). However it is not discussed in this book, although one whole agricultural cycle has supposedly been described.

While describing the *Lagi-lagitya* system, the author has not taken into account the priestly services of the high-caste people (Brahmin's ritual services to his clients) towards the Thakuris.

In the economic context also, he has not shown clearly the economic status of the two groups of *Chokha* and *Kamsel*. It is always possible for low-caste people to be economically better off (Bailey; 1957) for they also carry out trade like high-caste people. But the economic roles played by the low-castes and their impact upon the social structure and hierarchical patterns among the Thakuris are not given much attention.

In the religious context, one does not get a clear picture. Thakuri patterns of worship show that neither are they much influenced by Hindu tradition nor is there a religious impact from Buddhist peoples (Gaborieau, 1971, Sharma, 1971). The author notes that the deities mentioned do not manifest the Great Tradition (p.89). But if they are from the Little Tradition, what sort of tradition is it? The Little Tradition is always a process of localization borrowed from Sanskrit Hinduism, which is sacred and recorded (Redfield, 1956). Actually, are their claims clear and do their customary rites and festivals conflict with their claims? I feel that it would be preferable to describe the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of the local people as "popular Hinduism" rather than to categorize them into any tradition.

We can conclude that the present book is essentially descriptive and lacks analytical depth. History and its impact upon the Thakuris are ignored. I do not mean by this that every fragment of the society should be analysed historically; but a historical perspective would clarify things in many cases. Like the Bagmati Zone, the Karnali area is also of historical importance. The early history of the Thakuris, their relationships with other so-called Chetri groups, the sharing of cultural features with them, etc. are not discussed although these groups live side by side in cultural harmony.

Though Mr. Shrestha noticed in passing exploitation by the Gurkhalis (Nepali officials) in this area, it is a matter of great importance for our administrators to note why the people still fear the Gurkhalis. The villager's fears are not groundless and the real picture of this exploitation is vividly shown in the article written by Mr. Bhim Prasad Shrestha (2028 v. s.).

Whatever may be the shortcomings of this book, the author has certainly presented a very good account of the community. He has tried to analyse the society structurally and functionally. During the short period of time at his disposal and working under many handicaps, he has indeed done a splendid job.

While concluding, one must point out that the present study is the first ethnographic study in any language of the Thakuris of the Karnali Zone. So this book really fills in some of the gaps on the ethnographic map of Nepal.

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