

BOOK REVIEWS

Gisèle Krauskopff and Pamela Deuel Meyer, eds. 2000. *The Kings of Nepal and the Tharu of the Tarai: The Panjiar Collection of Fifty Royal Documents from 1726-1971*. Los Angeles: Deuel Purposes; Kirtipur: Center for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS), Tribhuvan University.

Tek Bahadur Shrestha, ed. 2058 v.s. *Nepālkā Rājāharu tathā Tarāikā Thārū*. Kathmandu: CNAS, Tribhuvan University.

The publication of this edited collection of fifty royal documents, covering nearly 250 years of relations between Tharu elites and political authorities in Nepal's Tarai, has been long awaited. The Tharu, who inhabit the lands straddling the present day Indo-Nepal border, have played an historically significant role in the development and management of agrarian resources of the tarai making them valuable for political elites in the region. Even so, the historical contributions of the Tharu have been inadequately acknowledged in work on Nepali history. This work attempts to redress this deficiency by bringing to the notice of the English speaking world fifty rare royal documents that have been collected due to the efforts of a Tharu intellectual, Tej Narayan Panjiar (hereafter the Panjiar Collection).

The Panjiar Collection consists of fifty functionally varied and linguistically hybrid royal letters (*lāl mohars*, *syāhāmohars*), administrative orders (*rukkās*), statements of accounts (*wāsil bāqī*), and receipts (*farkhaṭṭī*). Over time a number of these documents had been published in various Tharu journals and writings such as *Thārū Saṁskriti*. In the Panjiar Collection they find their first collective expression and this indeed is a welcome development for students of Tharu/Gorkhali history and culture. The documentary translations (both in English and Nepali) are supplemented by brief but informative chapters on the history and culture of the Tharu in the tarai by Kurt Meyer. Anthropologist Gisèle Krauskopff chapter provides an informative account of the agrarian economy of the Tarai and the activities of Tharu communities. A brief autobiographical piece by Tej Narayan Panjiar recounts his attempts to recenter Tharu history and its significant contributions to Nepal's nationalist history, through the collection and preservation of such

documents. The Nepali translations are handled under the editorship of Tek Bahadur Shrestha, a historian based at CNAS, Tribhuvan University.

The fifty documents, which are arranged chronologically, cover the tarai districts of Saptari, Udayapur, Mahottari, Bara, Parsa, Chitwan, Nawalparasi, Gorakhpur, Dang and finally Salyan. They provide valuable information on agrarian history and governance in Nepal's Tarai. The documents clearly suggest that Tharu magnates played an important role in the management of the agrarian resources of the tarai, participating in activities such as cultivation, herding, fishing, and elephant hunting. They also reveal a process of thrusting centralization by the Gorkhali state as it struggled (with varying degrees of success) with the local agency of Tharu landed elites, corrupt officials, ritual specialists (*dhāmī*), and migrant laborers. Taken together, they yield rich information on the contested agrarian histories of Nepal's eastern tarai.

The documents themselves are hybrid—a mix of languages such as Bhojpuri, Hindi, Nepali, Persian, and Sanskrit. However, with the passage of time they become both increasingly standardized in their use of language (Nepali), and in their presentation. Typically these royal documents have an invocation to the patron deity of the ruler, followed by an expressive eulogy (or *praśasti*), and finally concluding with the official business they seek to transact. One of the great strengths of this collection is that the fifty documents display a wide range of types thus making for interesting and informative reading. The remainder of this review will focus on the translation of the content of these documents.

On the whole the translations, which are by and large approximate renditionings into English and Nepali, are fairly accurate and give a good sense of the concerns of the royal documents. There are, however, some omissions and inconsistencies in the Nepali (hereafter NT) and English (hereafter ET) translations that need to be clarified. These inconsistencies would undoubtedly arise given the profusion of names, typologies, categories, and concepts in use all along the Indo-Nepal Tarai which make it almost impossible for a specialist to know of all the nuances in terminology all at once. For one, there is some confusion about the administrative divisions the tarai was divided into. Typically, Gorkha's tarai was divided into ill-defined divisions such as *parganās* [*pragannā* in Gorkhali documents], which were further subdivided into *maujās* or *ṭape/tarfs*. There is little awareness of this fact, and these minor administrative divisions go virtually unrecognized (see documents 35 and 45) in the translations. In document 45 the *ṭape* of Hati (in *parganā* Binayakpur) is incorrectly translated as the village of Tapehati. In

documents 46 and 47 the *parganā* of Haveli (sometimes known as *parganā* Haveli Gorakhpur in East India Company Records) is mistakenly translated as “situated in the surroundings (*havelī*) of Gorakhpur (ET, p. 173). One does not get the sense that the reference is to a *parganā* division. In document 3, the original document mentions the *tarf* of Khalisa Maidhapahar, however the Nepali translation merely designates it as a *prades* (NT, pp. 135-136) while the English translation treats the aforementioned *tarf* as a village (ET, pp. 119-120). Similarly, in document 4, *tarf* Pakari is treated as a village in both the Nepali and English translations (NT, p. 136; ET, p. 120). It would have been helpful to give a brief note detailing the administrative geography of the Tarai. Readers attempting to reconstruct the administrative geography of these Tarai districts need to keep these discrepancies in mind.

Reading the Nepali translations one frequently gets the impression that a Nepali nation (*rāṣṭra*) existed in the nineteenth century rather than the kingdom (*rājya*) of Gorkha. For instance, the *parganā* of Binayakpur is referred to as belonging to Nepal. The truth is that this *parganā* straddled the current Indo-Nepal boundary and its layout and internal organization had fluctuated considerably during these years following the vagaries of the power struggles between local elites. In this regard Tej Narayan Panjiar’s characterization of the Tharu as being *rāṣṭrabhakta* (NT, p. 161) is anachronistic despite the political value of such claims in contemporary Nepal. Anyway, this reading back of the Nepali nation into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is historically inaccurate and the authors would have done well to clarify this point. Again, some of Panjiar’s claims concerning the Palpali ruler Ratna Sen, while apposite to the claims of Tharu identity politics in contemporary Nepal, might not stand the test of historical scrutiny. It is doubtful if Ratna Sen was a Tharu and even less possible that he was the raja of Gorakhpur until 1843 (see pp. 52-53). Gorakhpur was a *sarkār* of the Mughal Empire that in the early nineteenth century was divided into a number of *parganās*. The Palpali rajas constantly competed with the little kingdoms (such as Bansi, Satasi, Padrauna, and Bettiah) that bordered their kingdom and their control was never complete. With the arrival of the British and the demise of the Palpali state in the first decade of the nineteenth century, the fortunes of Ratna Sen declined considerably and in East India Company records of the period he is depicted as a refugee living under the protection of the Company. It is possible that Ratna Sen, by issuing land grants, was making such claims as he tried to revive the Palpali relationship with the Nawab of Awadh, and by extension the Mughal

Emperor at Delhi. But for all practical purposes he did this at a time when he was not the ruler of Gorakhpur, and neither was for that matter, the Nawab of Awadh the legal overlord of the rajas of *sarkār* Gorakhpur (since the British had formally acquired the territory of Gorakhpur from the Nawab in 1801). In document 46 it is possible that the unidentified raja Udit Narayan Singh might actually be the raja of the Satasi estate which controlled the *parganās* Bhowapar, Haveli [Gorakhpur], and Sylhet (all in the district of Gorakhpur and lying south of the Palpali kingdom). This can be inferred from the signature of Shivnidh Rai *quanungo* (record keeper) of *parganā* Bhowapar. (*Parganā* Bhowapar is incorrectly translated as *quanungo* Prabhu Kayas in ET, p. 172.)

Comparing the English and Nepali translations reveals some inconsistencies. For instance, in document 7 there is a brief discussion of the term *majkur* (see below) in the English translation, but this is absent from the Nepali translation. The Nepali translation of document 25 mentions the story of the Sen rajas cursing their Baniya officials whose machinations had caused the downfall of the Sen dynasty. No mention is made of this in the English translation. Given the nature of this collaborative project this was to be expected, as the translations would invariably reflect the concerns of the translators, but readers interested in learning as much as they can, might do well to read both the English and the Nepali translations.

Some untranslated terms might actually be amenable to translation. For instance, the term *majkur* means “above mentioned”; *jamiā [wāsīl] bāqī* is a final statement of accounts showing collections and balances and is not to be loosely translated as “submit the remainder” (document 20, ET, p. 138) or “the deputy office of the revenue office” or “issued to the district officer” (document 48, ET, pp. 173, 176); *jihat* (document 29) means land customs, excise, or duties on manufactures.

Some reflection on why there are language shifts in these documents might also have been helpful. For instance, documents 3 (dated 1834 v.s.) and 4 (dated 1838 v.s.), both belonging to Gorkhali raja Ran Bahadur Shah’s reign and issued from Kathmandu to Hem Chaudhuri in *pragannā* Saptari, are written in Hindi and Nepali respectively. Why the shift from Hindi to Nepali within a short span of four years when corresponding with the same person? Finally, there are some minor typographical errors such as N.B. Dirks not Dircks (ET, p. 31, f. 14; p. 34, f. 31); 5 rupees-4 annas-0 paisa not 0 rupees-2 annas-2 paisa (document 21, line 17 in NT); *paṭṭīle* not *patitle* (NT, p. 154); and *sawālbamojīm* not *sanadbamojīm* (document 24, lines 10-11 in NT).

The benefits of publishing the Panjiar Collection far outweigh its unavoidable shortcomings. The beautiful color reproductions of the 50 documents are a treat and for this reason alone the book is worth buying. *The Kings of Nepal and the Tharus of the Tarai* is the product of a fine collaborative effort. It is of great value for anyone interested in the history and culture of Nepal's Tarai as it recenters Tharu narratives and agency in the construction of state and society in Nepal.

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