

## Reference

Krauskopff, G. 2003. An 'Indigenous Minority' in a Border Area: Tharu Ethnic Associations, NGOs, and the Nepalese State. In *Resistance and the State: Nepalese Experiences*. D. N. Gellner, ed., pp. 119-243. New Delhi: Social Science Press.

**Tatsuro Fujikura**

Centre for Social Research and Development, Kathmandu

Laura M. Ahearn. 2001. *Invitations to Love: Literacy, Love Letters, and Social Change in Nepal*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Why should anyone be interested in love letters written by young people in an out of the way village in the hills of Nepal? In her unique ethnography of literacy practices in "Junigau," a small Magar community in West Central Nepal, Laura Ahearn makes it clear that these seemingly-trivial romantic missives in fact offer insights into fundamental changes not only in courtship and marriage practices, but also understandings of self and agency. As the result of Nepali state and internationally sponsored development initiatives most men in the village are literate but only recently has the same been true of women. Ahearn shows how female literacy rates have leaped from only about 5 percent for women born before 1951, to 91 percent for those born after 1963 (p.192). Paralleling this shift is an equally dramatic trend away from arranged and "capture" marriages that accounted for almost 9 out of 10 unions before 1960, toward elopements that are the basis for more than half of the marriages in the village since the 1980s (p.77). Linking these two remarkable changes are new "development"-inspired values of self-sufficiency, progress, success,—and romance.

One of Ahearn's main theoretical foci is agency. Ahearn explains how literacy—In the context of the state's nationalist and development discourse, and local consumer/market forces—fosters an altered sense of agency: of causation and the role of people, groups, and "fate" in social process. People come to understand themselves (via "development") as dynamic *individuals* with the ability to transform ("improve") themselves. As a result, young people increasingly interpret events, or express hopes for the future, through notions of individual choice, direct action, planning, and so on, rather than as matters of fate or *karma*.

The conflation of these new development-inspired values with ideals of romantic love is one of the unanticipated outcomes of this transformation in ideas of personhood and agency. Ahearn shows how individual "consent" to marriage by both woman and man—often the result of lengthy negotiations via love letters—has come to be the expected norm even though until only recently arranged (and even "capture") marriages were unquestionably valid. Ahearn's analysis of hundreds of love letters allows her to demonstrate how young people increasingly premise the possibility of future "life success" on the basis of relationships between freely consenting "life friends" united in companionate marriage (following elopement). In terms of agency, young people understood romantic love in an ironic way: even while describing love as something that *happens to* people in uncontrollable, fate-driven ways, once established, this new love is experienced as an empowering force, one that gives them a sense of personal agency and the ability to actively overcome future obstacles. Once smitten by it, romantic love opens up visions of success, progress, and "development." In this light, arranged and "capture" marriages are "backward" while consensual elopement is "developed" (p.150).

Ahearn goes on to show how these new patterns of courtship are tied to new patterns of marital residence and family structure. Significantly these new neolocal nuclear families mesh neatly with the demands of a new rural wage economy and labor market. Both women and men see these new social patterns as ways of escaping family control within the rural subsistence economy in favor of self-sufficiency, initiative, productivity, wage labor, and consumerism—all of which are constituted as signs of "progress" in development discourse. Ahearn describes how new ideas of personhood, agency, and cultural value (neatly encapsulated in her use of Raymond Williams' concept of "structures of feeling") emerge to meet the demands of the capitalist market, and how "development" spawns these transformations, intentionally or otherwise.

As unusual as the topic of this study is the author's depth of research experience. Between stints as a Peace Corp volunteer and anthropology researcher Ahearn lived in Junigau for 6 years over an 18-year period. The result is an almost "longitudinal" study in which Ahearn was able to follow the lives of many people from elementary school through courtship and marriage. Long-term fieldwork has given Ahearn not only uncommon levels of language competence and cultural knowledge, but also a remarkable degree of personal rapport with the people of Junigau. As a trusted teacher and friend, Junigau residents gave Ahearn

extraordinary access to some of the most intimate areas of their lives, including love letters.

This book joins the still surprisingly few studies of Third World "development" that actually show what development *does*, as opposed to what liberal development advocates say it *should do*, or what its radical critics claim it has *failed to do*. Education has been perhaps the main pillar in the Nepali state's efforts to modernize. Yet Ahearn is able to demonstrate how literacy has had totally unpredicted consequences in transforming ideas about self and other, consequences that are by no means always "empowering," especially for women. Ahearn takes literacy and its outcomes—including exposure to development discourse and programs, reading film magazines and pulp novels, and writing love letters—and shows how these changes transform common sense and local "structures of feeling." She describes how "development" is appropriated by people in unforeseen ways, producing unforeseen outcomes that in some ways transform subjectivities and social practices, and in other ways reinforce old ones. Ahearn's analysis of the social consequences of literacy is a valuable contribution to our understandings of the modernization of rural lives in Nepal, and elsewhere.

**Mark Liechty**

University of Illinois at Chicago