

Yogesh Raj, *History as Mindscapes:
A Memory of the Peasants'
Movement in Nepal*

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This fascinating memoir of the life of Krishna Bhakta Caguthi (1928-2011), a Bhaktapur peasant leader, might at first glance be taken as the first postmodern work by a Nepali historian or anthropologist. There have been multivocal works by foreign anthropologists before: one thinks of Alan Macfarlane and Sarah Harrison's translation and edition of Bernard Pignède's classic on the Gurungs (1993 [1966]) and Katharine March's *If Each Comes Half Way* (2002). There have also been postmodernism-inspired ethnographies, e.g. Vincanne Adams' *Tigers of the Snow and other Virtual Sherpas* (1996), which aimed to destabilize the idea that there was any kind of essence of Sherpahood. There must surely by now have been postmodern works in the Nepali literary scene—but could this be the first by a Nepali historian?

The book that included the English translation of Pignède's *The Gurungs* qualified and criticized the deceased author's central text by incorporating the critical commentaries of contemporary Gurung leaders and Pignède's former assistant. But it was inspired far more by cultural nationalist agendas (a determination to establish the truth and combat error) than anything approaching postmodernism. Similarly, March's mature and thoughtful ethnography is inspired more by the wish to remain true to the concepts and sense of personhood of her subjects than by any desire to breach the illusions of modernism. In the present case, on first picking up this important and exciting new book, it was not entirely clear to me whether Yogesh Raj is more with Vincanne Adams in wanting to reject any objectivist account of culture altogether, or whether, rather, with Kathryn March, he is striving for a more faithful reflection of the true complexity of his subject matter.

History as Mindscapes is made up of a 21-page introduction, a 178-page central section entitled 'Caguthi Speaks', a 5-page bibliography, Appendix 1 (5 pages) which is a sample transcript of a Newari interview with Caguthi, Appendix 2 (109 pages) containing facsimiles of 120 mostly handwritten documents, Appendix 3 (2 pages) being a sample of the 'Nepali master copy', and Appendix 4 (8 pages) which is the glossary of

local terms. The central section, 'Caguthi Speaks', is the heart of the book and it is a very complex production. In the first place, it is an English text, a translation by Raj, of the 'Nepali master copy' that was checked by Caguthi himself (by having his grandson read it out to him). The Nepali master copy was produced by Raj from 18 hours of taped interviews in Newari.

Raj makes quite a point of being fully explicit about his methods, unlike others such as Fisher (1997) who have published similar narratives—which is certainly laudable. This makes it all the more puzzling that he omits to mention in *History as Mindscapes* that the 'Nepali master copy' has actually been published by Caguthi himself and with Raj's name on the front cover as *Bhaktapurko Kisan Andolan: Krsnabhakta Caguthiko Katha: Unkai Mukhbata [Bhaktapur's Peasant Movement: Krishna Bhakta Caguthi's Story in his Own Words]* (Raj 2008)! Interestingly, this latter book is presented without any of the paraphernalia of marginal notes, appendices, and comments of *History as Mindscapes*, but with the addition of numerous photographs and a family tree. In other words, it is a straightforward memoir without any of the polyphony introduced by Raj in *Mindscapes*. It is not clear to me why Raj chose not to include some of the photographs that are reproduced in the Nepali version; they would have enlivened *Mindscapes* considerably.

Returning to the internal evidence of the book under review: when one compares the Newari of Appendix 1 with the Nepali text of Appendix 3, it becomes clear that much had to be left out and that a considerable amount of creative work necessarily went into the production of the Nepali master copy. Of the English translation of the Nepali, Raj says, 'To be frank, this text is my approximation to his voice in my imagination. To that extent, the version is decidedly fictitious' (p. 16). Despite the Italian proverb 'translator, traitor', the English version certainly *reads* like the authentic voice of a barely literate, highly determined, politically disappointed activist, seeking to justify his life's work. (A small cavil about one point where I felt the translation veered away from this faithfulness: the English phrase 'The indigenous population of Kathmandu Valley' on p. 87 is very modern; one has to turn to p. 35 of Raj 2008 to find out that 'indigenous population' is a translation of *raithāne jyāpu*—which would in my opinion be better rendered by something like 'tenant peasant farmers'.)

The central translation of *History as Mindscapes* is arranged in 27 short chapters which are roughly chronological but also by topic, the topics covered being as diverse as tattooing, the scarcity of money in the old days, religion, the *jajmani* system, changing customs, new agricultural practices, and of course land tenure. There is much discussion of land reform, cheating by landowners, and the humiliations and deprivations that peasants used to face from their former social superiors.

All this only begins to touch on the complexity of the central section of *History as Mindscapes*. Raj has contextualized Caguthi's story by adding in the wide margins extensive quotations from other works, many of them also memoirs of the period being discussed. Some of them provide confirming details of incidents that Caguthi remembers, others relevant commentary or alternative points of view.

It is worth noting here that, although Raj incorporates copious references to political memoirs and scholarly work in Nepali, and although he demonstrates a sophisticated acquaintance with historiographical literature in English, he systematically ignores works about Newar peasantry in English (or French, or any language other than Nepali). It is hard to believe that there is nothing in Gérard Toffin or Hiroshi Ishii's numerous works on Jyapu material culture or social organization (Toffin 1977, 1994; Ishii 1980, 1993, 2007—to mention only a small part of these scholars' respective oeuvres), or Robert Levy's detailed analysis of Bhaktapur's *thars* (Levy 1990: 93ff), that could have helped in the explication of Caguthi's dense and allusive text. (Levy, for example, documents the role of the Caguthi clan as leaders of the Jyapu 'macro status level' with honoured roles in the Bisket Jatra.) Highly relevant works by foreign scholars on other parts of Nepal, even on the neighbouring Tamangs, also do not rate a mention (e.g. Holmberg et al. 1999). Despite these silences, the numerous marginal insertions in the main text of *History as Mindscapes* produces a stimulating polyvocality that is reminiscent (though neither work is cited) both of the translation of Pignède's *The Gurungs* and March's *If Each Comes Half Way* mentioned above.

At three points of the central section of *History as Mindscapes* there is a break, and not merely a comment in the margins: the entire flow of the narrative is interrupted by translation of a document relating to incidents mentioned in Caguthi's narrative. These inserted appendices (A-C, as opposed to the numbered appendices at the end of the book) relate principally to Caguthi's vehement enmity for Narayan Man Bijukche, better known as Comrade Rohit, the Chairman of the NWPP (Nepal Workers and Peasants Party). The NWPP is viewed in Nepal as aligned with North Korea and is well known for the fact that it has dominated the politics of Bhaktapur city since 1980. In 1991 it won a seat outside the Kathmandu Valley, but the incumbent defected. The NWPP has in effect become a communist party of and for Bhaktapur and has, as such, presided over considerable investment and prosperity since 1990; it has been able to invest the proceeds from the \$10 per day tourist tax for the benefit of its citizens and the general welfare of the city (Hachhethu 2004: 56ff). For at least two decades the NWPP's hold on the politics of the city (apparently now less secure than for many years thanks to the rise of the Maoists) enabled it to exercise considerable control over its elected representatives, so that Bhaktapur has a reputation of being relatively less corrupt and more efficient than other city councils.

One aspect of the NWPP's rule has of course been that it has done its best to exclude all others from positions of power, and particularly those—whether of communist background or not—who compromised with the Panchayat system (1960-90) and accepted office under it (its own members excepted). This means that they came into conflict with Caguthi. NWPP documents denouncing Caguthi as corrupt, and another (anonymous) contemporaneous document defending Caguthi and denouncing Bijukche as corrupt, are translated in these appendices.

Over all, four major themes emerge from Caguthi's narrative: (1) the sufferings and humiliations of the peasants under the old regime (i.e. pre-1951), combined with their ingenuity and hard work; (2) Caguthi's and others' struggles to create the ANKS (Akhil Nepal Kisan Sangh) or Peasants' Union and its relationships with different political parties; (3) the related struggles for Land Reform so that the tillers of the soil, i.e. the peasants of Bhaktapur whom he was fighting for, did not get cheated out of their share during the process of implementation by the landowners (who plotted to kill Caguthi: pp. 85ff); (4) the conflict with 'Nārānmāncā's gang', i.e. those following Rohit (whom he refers to, as his junior, and without respect, using the suffix *-cā*), culminating in 1969 in Caguthi being accused of misappropriating fertilizer, beaten up, and dragged half-naked around the city by a mob of Rohit's supporters (pp. 161ff.).

I am not sure why Raj asserts (p. x) that '[s]trictly speaking, [Caguthi] is not a subaltern'. In terms of his class position he most certainly came from the subordinate class, as illustrated by his detailed descriptions of the numerous humiliating services that peasant tenants, he and his family included, had to provide to their landowners (p. 34). Furthermore, within the peasant and political movements of the 1950s, though he was a leader locally, he was a subordinate at the national level. Finally, as Caguthi himself protests, he has been written out of the victors' (the NWPP's) accounts of local history in Bhaktapur—a fact which he evidently hopes the present volume and its Nepali version will do something to redress.

History as Mindscapes contains much rich and wonderful material on peasant life, given all the more authenticity through being conveyed alongside accounts of actual events. Some of Caguthi's observations on social change are acute:

Peasants as a class have evaporated. They have become divided. Those who could benefit from provisions in the laws have become caricatures of the new middle-class. And those who could not do so have turned themselves into daytime labourers. Agricultural lands have disappeared and turned into suburbs. The peasants have turned into dishwashers and cleaners. Life is difficult. Everything is now weighed against money. (p 167)

To return to the question raised at the beginning of this review, whether

in this volume Raj is attempting a postmodern history of peasant movements, the case for the prosecution would read as follows: the title (*History as Mindscapes*) might be taken to imply that there as many histories as there are minds to view it; some of the authors cited in Raj's survey of historiography in the introduction would seem to be arguing in this line; no chronology of Caguthi's life is provided or attempted; no attempt is made to fix exact dates of events (e.g. p. 192: 'One day Subhasanser called me. . . He asked me to campaign for the King . . .': one may make an informed guess that this occurred at some point after 2001 and before 2004, though it could have been earlier, but no attempt has been made even to raise the question when this happened); neither an index nor an annotated list of personages mentioned is provided to help the reader navigate their way around the text. As a consequence of all this, the text seems to demand a very highly informed readership; the casual reader is likely to find themselves lost in all the details and lack of time reference.

The case for the defence against the charge of postmodernism would read: the author/editor has gone out of his way to provide as much empirical data with sufficient richness and contextualization so that the reader 'may choose to build a completely different narrative out of the materials' (p. 21)—a sentiment and attitude one can only applaud. (Given this, and given the publishing potentialities of the web, one may legitimately ask: If transparency and completeness are the aim, why not provide all the transcripts of the interviews and the entire Nepali text, along with transcriptions of the facsimile documents? And why pass over in silence the relationship to the Nepali version of Caguthi's story, published two years earlier?)

I conclude that, rather than indicating a lack of faith in the knowability of the past, Raj's book should be read as illustrative of a confidence that alternative interpretations are possible, that they can be debated, and that better and worse interpretations can be established on the basis of historical materials. Raj refers to a 'shortage of time' (p. 21) and an "other-me" 'who will engage herself/himself in reconstructing a history of rise of peasants' consciousness in Nepal' (p. 13). In other words, this wonderful, rich, and resource-full book is but a prolegomenon to the study of the rise of peasant consciousness in Nepal, not a statement that no such coherent narrative could ever be written. Raj's landmark book has certainly raised the bar in terms of sophistication in the writing of alternative histories of Nepal's tumultuous last century and it should be read by all those interested in understanding how the country has changed since 1951.

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