

Book Reviews

Arjun Guneratne. 2002. *Many Tongues, One People: The Making of Tharu Identity in Nepal*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Many Tongues, One People begins with a riddle. In January 1991, the author Arjun Guneratne sat listening to speeches by leaders of the Tharu Kalyankarini Sabha (Tharu Welfare Society) at the opening session of their meeting in the town of Biratnagar. There was a phrase repeated by several speakers: “From the River Mechi to the Mahakali ... we are all one jat” (p.1). Guneratne asks, “[I]f indeed the Tharu were a single jat ... why did their leaders feel it necessary to remind their audience of that fact? What did it mean to be a single unitary jat?” (p.1). Guneratne tells us that the ethnonym Tharu refers “in reality” to diverse endogamous groups in the Tarai who do not share any distinctive cultural traits or a language. Yet, the author also tells us that the hundreds of Tharus from all over the Tarai who were at the meeting were convinced that they had something in common, that “they were all members of a single ‘ethnie’” (p.2). How did these diverse groups of people, who do not even share a language, come to think of themselves as “one people”? The book as a whole is organized as an answer to this question.

Part of the answer is already suggested in the opening paragraphs. The pan-Tharu ethnic consciousness has been actively constructed and promoted by Tharu elites involved in the Tharu Kalyankarini Sabha. However, Guneratne immediately adds that the cultural work of the elite is not in itself sufficient to generate a sense of ethnic identity: the creative imagining of the elite needs to “resonate with the population at large”; it “must speak to the circumstances in which people find themselves” (p.3). The author argues that ethnicity, in fact, arises from specific historical experience, and the role of the elite, such as those involved in the Tharu Kalyankarini Sabha, is to “interpret and give voice to this experience” (p.3). In short, the pan-Tharu ethnic identity is a combination of a shared historical experience and symbolic forms constructed by the elite that give expression to that experience. This is a very simple formulation. Indeed, if the whole purpose of the book were to make a theoretical point about the relationship between material processes, symbolic forms, and group identity the book may not have been of great interest to many of us. Fortunately, this is not the case. This strikingly simple formulation is not

the book's conclusion, but its starting point. It is a launching pad that enables the author to proceed into a very rich and complex descriptive analysis involving explorations of an impressively broad range of material processes and conscious human actions.

The book is mainly based on anthropological fieldwork Guneratne conducted from November 1989 to May 1991 in a village in the Chitwan District he refers to (pseudonymously) as Pipariya. Yet, in order to explore the question he set for himself – the construction of a Tharu identity “from Mechi to Mahakali” – Guneratne also traveled extensively in the Tarai. The places he visited for the purpose of this research, he tells us, include: Kanchanpur, Shiraha, Saptari, Morang, Rautahat, Udaypur, Biratnagar, Dang, and a Tharu village in Champaran District in Bihar. He also conducted archival research in the Kaiser Library in Kathmandu, India Office Library in London, and the Honnold Library of the Claremont Colleges in California (pp. xii-xiii). He interviewed a number of important Tharu leaders and intellectuals, including the key figures in the Tharu Kaliyankarini Sabha – Parshu Narayan Chaudhari, Tej Narayan Panjiar, Narendra Kumar Chaudhary, and Ramanand Prasad Singh – as well as Dilli Bahadur Chaudhari, the president of the Tharu-led non-governmental organization, Backward Society Education (BASE). The discussion in the book is hence based on a wide range of primary and secondary information and covers a broad range of topics. The readers get to read, for example, depictions of Tarai and Tharu people in British colonial accounts, a concise summary of the debates concerning the famed Tharu immunity to Malaria (pp. 22-24), and a moving discussion of a poem written in a Tharu language (pp. 171-172). This is an exceptionally informative book and will be of great value to anyone interested in things pertaining to Tharu people, the Tarai, and its surrounding areas.

Let us return, however, to the central concern of the book, which is the generation of a pan-Tharu ethnic identity. Guneratne writes that a “universal experience ... the Tharu share throughout the Tarai” in the latter half of the 20th century, is that of losing land to immigrants from the hills (p.139). Another shared experience of the Tharu, which is closely connected to the first one, is that of “being treated with contempt or disdain by high-caste immigrants” (p.139). These experiences were produced, most importantly, through the activities of the modernizing, centralizing state. The successful malaria eradication programs in the 1950s and the land reform program in the 1960s greatly contributed to the expansion of migration and the loss of land by the Tharu. According to

Guneratne, the Tharu, on their part, “blame the lack of education for the ease with which they are exploited” and this in turn has led to the emphasis on education by such organizations as Tharu Kaliyankarini Sabha (p.139).

Although Guneratne emphasizes the shared experience of asymmetric incorporation into the modern Nepali state as providing the condition for the effective construction of a pan-Tharu identity, he is also careful to describe the differences among various groups of Tharus. For example, in one of the more provocative chapters, he compares the situations in Chitwan (the location of his extended fieldwork) and Dang (where he made several visits). Chitwan and Dang are both inner Tarai valleys, formerly malarial, and have gone through fundamental social and economic transformations since the 1950s. However, according to Guneratne, “Ethnic tensions are very pronounced in Dang and much less so in Chitwan” (p.123). Guneratne accounts for this difference through another strikingly simple thesis:

In an agrarian economy where land is largely controlled by one ethnic group and where ethnicity and class are congruent (in perception as much as in fact), ethnic tensions will develop (p.94).

He follows this claim with descriptions of the history of Dang and of such practices as *corvée* labor and labor bondage (*‘kamaiya’*) drawing on the works of such scholars as Gisèle Krauskopff, Christian McDonough, Thomas Cox, and Katherine Rankin. Guneratne then goes on to discuss the emergence of a phenomenally successful grassroots organization, BASE, which he defines as “an example of ethnicized politics; ... its aim is to alter the balance of power in Dang between Parbatyas and Tharus, a profoundly political goal but couched in the rhetoric of development” (p.124). In comparison, an NGO in Chitwan called Nepal Indigenous Development Society (NIDS), which was indeed inspired by BASE, Guneratne tells us, “is oriented purely toward development work and has neither political purpose nor political effect” (p.124). Guneratne argues that this difference derives from the fact that the kinds and degrees of oppression and exploitation of Tharus by the Parbatyas that gave birth to BASE in Dang, does not exist in Chitwan. In Chitwan, the Tharu as a group were able to benefit from the national education system and new economic opportunities, which led them to participate effectively in the electoral politics. At the more fundamental level, in the villages Guneratne studied, although Tharu landholding as a whole has indeed shrunk since the 1950s, the Tharu did not become landless. This has

enabled Tharus in Chitwan, Guneratne writes, to engage “their Brahman neighbors from an independent base of their own in land, and that has made the difference” (p.124).

Guneratne’s description of the local history and politics in Chitwan is complex and nuanced, as one typically finds in ethnographic description based on careful, long-term fieldwork in a single location. We find layered descriptions in which initial observations are complicated by additional ones. For instance, Guneratne quotes cases in which immigrant Brahmans took advantage of illiterate Tharus and cheated them out of their land. But Guneratne adds, “it is by no means the whole story” (p.109). He goes on to discuss other factors, including demographic changes that turned land into a scarce resource, and a historical preference of some of the Tharus for not obtaining land titles for fear of taxation by the state. Similarly, with reference to formal electoral politics, Guneratne writes that Tharus “do not vote blindly for a candidate ... simply because he is Tharu” (p.118). Guneratne describes the local political process during the general election in 1991 from multiple and often conflicting perspectives of different actors (including competing Tharu and non-Tharu candidates, party officials, and lay voters) and shows how ethnicity is but one among many factors, including “political [party] affiliation or sympathy of the voter and candidate ... and personal kinship ties” (p.118-119), that contributes to how a Tharu person decides to vote.

In contrast, Guneratne’s characterization of the situation in Dang relies mostly on information provided by the leaders and supporters of the Tharu grassroots organization BASE, and hence lacks the juxtaposition of multiple perspectives and layered-ness of description that characterizes his account of the situation in Chitwan. This leads me to wonder whether if Guneratne had done intense anthropological fieldwork in Dang also, it might have led him to portray the situation there in a more complex fashion, involving descriptions of networks and alliances that cut across ethnic lines as well as of divisions and conflicts among the Tharus – without necessarily altering his general conclusions about the difference between Dang and Chitwan. However, I do not regard this (i.e. the inclusion of the not so complicated representation of Dang) as a shortcoming of the book. On the contrary, the reference to Dang and the work of BASE has added enormously to the value of this book. If Guneratne had decided not to discuss the situation in Dang (just because he did not conduct two more years of fieldwork for the book) and written exclusively about a village in Chitwan, the book would have lost much of its provocative force.

The use of contrasting instances (e.g. ethnically contentious Dang vs. relatively peaceful Chitwan) to create provocative effects is a distinctive feature of this book. Another such contrast is between BASE, “a genuinely grassroots organization” (p.9) and the Tharu Kaliyankarini Sabha, an elite organization. (Towards the end of the book, Guneratne writes: “My understanding of the process ... owes something to Marx” [p.190].) Within the latter, there is another contrasting pair: the early Tharu Kaliyankarini Sabha, which worked within the framework of caste and sanskritization vs. the later and contemporary Tharu Kaliyankarini Sabha, which works within the framework of ethnicity and modernization. We learn that BASE has been regarded as “threatening” by some of the Sabha leaders. But, as we read on, we also learn that BASE is as firmly committed to the idea of the pan-Tharu unity as the Sabha, and has partially funded a Tharu organization in eastern Tarai whose purpose is “to preserve and promote Tharu culture,” which has “nothing to do,” Guneratne tells us, “with the improvement of the material conditions under which Tharus live” (p.148). As proof of the power of these contrasting pairs to provoke thought, this book has already inspired a reflection on the part of a distinguished anthropologist with long research experience among the Tharu people in Dang, taking several opposing pairs presented by Guneratne as her starting point (Krauskopff 2003).

Guneratne also makes explicit note of several subjects for future research. These include the effects of the Maoist conflict on the Tharu people, about which he frankly states that he does not have enough information (p.123). Another intriguing issue is that although his book as a whole concentrates on the construction of Tharu identity through its contrast with that of immigrants from the hills, at least in the eastern Tarai, Guneratne suggests, the more significant contrast may be with the Maithili- and Bhojpuri-speaking descendents of Indian immigrants (p.164). I would add to this suggestion that the relations between Tharus and the descendents of Indian immigrants also needs to be explored in parts of central and western Tarai where the latter constitute a significant population.

I found a couple of very minor mistakes in the book. On page 74, Guneratne writes that “there are more Tharus in Nepal (...according to the 1991 census) than there are members of any of the higher ranked, nonenslavable, alcohol-drinking groups.” This statement contradicts an earlier one he makes on page 67: “... according to the 1991 census ... among the matwali groups, only the Magar, with 7.34 percent of the

population, outnumber the Tharu.” The declaration of kamaiya freedom by the government headed by Girija Prasad Koirala was made on July 17, 2000, not “July 18” as printed on page 105. The name of the group organized by the landlords in response to the freedom of kamaiya was Kisan Hakhit Samraksan Manch (Forum for the Protection of Farmers’ Rights) not “Kisan Hakhit Sanchalan Manch (Forum to Mobilize for Farmers’ Rights)” as given on page 105.

A more general feature of the book that I found troubling was the use of the present tense in the book – e.g. “The Tharu in general ... believe that it is through education that the welfare of the Tharu may be assured” (p.139). The use of the present tense, of course, has the enormous benefit of keeping the sentences simple and clear. I have already suggested that the combination of strikingly simple formulations and rich and complex substance is the great virtue of this book. However, those sentences written in the present tense may convey a sense of immediacy and determinacy, which may in turn work against the purpose of the book, which is to describe an identity that is “fluid, constantly in the process of being refashioned” (p.12) and society and culture more generally as “emergent forms ... always in the process of becoming” (p.190). A practical – and I believe for many readers a commonsensical – remedy to this problem is to keep in the back of our minds that a statement made in the present tense in this book refers to the state of things, as it was observed and construed by the author, at some point in time between 1989, when he began his field research in Nepal, and 2002, when the book was published. For example, on page 122, it is stated that “there are no paved roads” in Dang. As a person who travels through the area from time to time, I am happy to report that there have been long stretches of paved roads in Dang since 1999 (the paving work began in 1998). However, the point Guneratne is making on that page, that the development of modern infrastructure is much more advanced in Chitwan than in Dang, remains indisputable at the time of my writing (2004).

The issues just mentioned are far outweighed by the positive strengths of this book that I have described above. This is a highly informative and substantial book, filled with provocative ideas, and written in an exceptionally clear style. It is an important contribution to the study of social and political processes in and around the Tarai plains, and will no doubt inspire further research and reflection on this complex and fascinating part of the world.

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.

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