

BOOK REVIEW

Botes: The Ferrymen of Tanahun. 1989. Suraj Subba. Ashok Kumar Limbu and Kumar Bahadur Rai, Damauli, Nepal. Pages 112. Price Rs. 200/-

It would be unfair to judge a non-academic book from an academic standpoint. Books coming from the pen of enterprising writers led by sheer curiosity can also serve useful purpose and hold our interest. This book by a non-specialist in anthropology on the Botes, one of the lesser known and economically weaker tribes or ethnic groups in the Tanahun district of central west Nepal, falls in this category. It has been designed as an ethnological manual on a people adversely caught up in the development and modernization process in Nepal. The book's aim is to evoke a sympathy for Botes among the general readers hoping that it will eventually lead to some action plans for the betterment of their lot, although the author does not say this in so many words.

The Botes are presented with respect to their habitation and demography (chapters 1 and 2), social organization and sacraments (chapter 3), beliefs and religion (chapter 4), and land and economy (chapter 5 and 6). There are pictorial illustrations elucidating Bote life style and economic activity. The author's research on the Botes has brought to light three old documents referring to the Botes of Bairenighat and their occupation as ferrymen. These mention landrights conferred on them by the state in return for rendering their service. The oldest of these documents goes as far back as 1765 A.D. prior to the date of Nepal's unification in the time of the Sen king, Harakumardatta Sen, of Tanahun. The name Bote suggests not only a distinct cultural and ethnic group, but also indicates a specialised occupation of rowing boats on rivers. Botes, along with Majhis, have for centuries made their living by ferrying people and goods across rivers in their primitive wooden dug-outs. The state of Nepal had also depended on the service of these ferrymen for smoothly maintaining its communication lines along the main trails of the country, in the 18th and the 19th centuries.

The book purports to give an account of the present day life of these people and the 'socio-economic realities' facing them in one district--

Tanahun. Many hitherto unknown ethnological details regarding them are described in the book. Botes are generally ranged with other peoples living in the warm subtropical riverines of the middle hills and the foothills of the Churia range, such as the Majhi, Kumal, Darai, Danuwar, etc. The Botes are said to be divided into two already formed endogamous groups: the Pani-Botes and the Pakhe-Botes. The latter are sometimes referred to also as Majhis. Obviously, the book is more a study about the Pani-Botes than the Pakhe-Botes.

The Pani-Botes are a more impoverished group, yet they reveal a culture in their rituals which otherwise appears to be purer than that of the Pakhe-Botes. As their name suggests, even today their economy links them to the river. Not only do they still row boats, they try to supplement their meagre income from this and from the practice of their little agriculture by river-fishing and gold-panning. They construct weirs across the river which is the favorite mode of fishing. Their religion reveals a large pantheon of deities and spirits whom they keep appeased through various rites.

Their traditional landholdings rights which the state seems to have given them on payment of annual rent in recompense for conducting ferry service, has been called their *kipat*. Like the *kipat* land in other areas of Nepal, the *kipat* of the Botes previously seems to have been held collectively on behalf of all the Bote members of a village. This has, however, changed in modern times and holds no longer true. In the face of growing poverty, their land is fast slipping away from them into the hands of stronger socio-economic groups. Most lands belonging to the Botes nowadays consist of dry unirrigated *pakho* land with very little paddy land. All this leads us to conclude that the Botes are one of the most vulnerable economic groups of Nepal today. All these ethnological details are an invaluable addition to what has been reported by Marc Gaborieau and Dor Bahadur Bista so far on them.

In recent years, the already precarious existence of the Botes has been further threatened by the process of development and modernization. The construction of the Prithvi highway and the subsequent development of Damauli as the district headquarters of the Tanahun District have displaced Botes from its vicinity. They feel unhappy to live in the new settlements where they have been obliged to move (p. 17). Apparently, the district administration took no consideration of the willingness of these people to settle down in these new villages. Furthermore, their traditional occupation of rowing boats on rivers in the hills is threatened with extinction because of increasing numbers of bridge constructions over rivers (P. 72). In a few places where boats still ply, this job is contracted out to people who can successfully bid higher amounts to the district administration, breaking the Botes traditional ferrying monopoly.

In the face of these odds, where is the redemption to the Botes likely to come from? A policy of national development showing no particular regard to the protection of the weaker sections of Nepali people, such as the Botes, may not prove any beneficial for them. Mere availability of new economic opportunities is not a sufficient condition, because adaptability to the new situation does not easily come to people who have remained for centuries under many forms of socio-economic handicaps. Education among the Botes is appallingly low. There is so far not a single SLC pass student among them (pp. 94-95). For such people, an indiscriminate pressure of development will more likely be a bane rather than a boon.

– Prayag Raj Sharma

Notes to Contributors

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Bista, D.B. 1965. *People of Nepal*. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar

Dhungel, Basundhara. 1980. "The Newars." In Sudha Paneru (ed.), *Traditional and Prevailing Child-Rearing Practices Among Different Communities in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan university, pp. 31–53

Shrestha, Ananda. 1979. "Error Analysis." *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, 6:2, pp. 1-9.

Shrestha, Ramesh. 1977. "Adult Literacy in Nepal: a Report." Kathmandu: Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University. Mimeographed.

Stone, Linda. 1977. "Illness, Hierarchy and Food Symbolism Hindu Nepal." Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis. Brown University.

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