

***The Kings of Nepal & the Tharu of the Tarai (The Panjiar Collection of Fifty Royal Documents issued from 1726 to 1971)* edited by Gisèle Krauskopff and Pamela Deuel Meyer** (review and commentary by Tek Bahadur Shrestha, Gisèle Krauskopff, Kurt Meyer and Tej Panjiar). Second Volume of the three volume series *A Tharu Trilogy*. **Los Angeles: rusca press / Kirtipur: Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, 2000. ISBN 0-9666742-3-5, facsimiles, 191 pp.**

Simultaneously published in Nepali entitled as: ***Nepālakā Rājāharū Tathā Tarāikā Thārū*** edited by **Tek Bahadur Shrestha. Kirtipur: Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, 2058 BS (2000 AD), facsimiles, 210 pp.**

Reviewed by Nutandhar Sharma

This book which deals with the ethnohistory of the Tharu - one of the earliest indigenous peoples of the Nepal Tarai as declared by the Nepalese Government - is the result of team work by different Nepali and Euroamerican scholars. Tej Narayan Panjiar (Tharu chronicler), Tek Bahadur Shrestha (historian), Gisèle Krauskopff (anthropologist), Kurt Meyer (art-historian) and Pamela Deuel Meyer (journalist) have presented this book in two different languages: in English and Nepali. The content of the two parallel volumes, however, is not entirely identical as there are some slight editorial differences. For example, in the Nepali volume „the story of drinking partnership“ from Tej Narayan Panjiar’s chapter is omitted. In any case, it is laudable that the publication addresses a large audience inside and outside Nepal.

The book is divided into five main sections. Kurt W. Meyer writes in his introduction that the volume explores various aspects of the Tharu life and their history, such as the human conditions which shaped the Tharu, the harsh environment of the Tarai, the role of the monarchy, the social order and economy of the Tharu. The commentary by Gisèle Krauskopff, one of the most readable chapters of the book, is titled „From Jungle to Farms: A Look at Tharu History“ and deals with the Tharu and their history by focusing on their role as pioneer cultivators of the Tarai, their status as sacred masters of the forests, and their relation to the Hindu Kings. The author associates the Tharu with Mithila or Tirhut as their major dwelling place citing Muslim scholar Alberuni’s geographical presentation of India written in 1033 AD. In this regard, it is also tempting to associate the Tharu with „Stharu draᅅga“, the name of a Licchavi settlement in 7th century

Nepal. But this assumption is based only on the names' similarity. These chapters and the revealing new facts on the Tharu they contain make this book interesting reading.

The main subject of this book is „The Panjiar Collection“, a set of royal documents which are reproduced in 51 coloured facsimiles. This collection consists of *lālamoharas* (orders issued by the Shah kings with a red seal), *syāhamoharas* (orders issued by the Sen and Shah kings with a black seal), *rukkās* (orders from the court of the Shah kings) and a letter with the signs of the officeholders. Many of those documents are concerned with the appointments of the Tharu as tax collectors (*jimdāra*), village priests, elephant trainer and attorney general. Some of them deal with land grants of the Tarai and its cultivation. Some documents are about contracts for tax, timber logging and also timber grants. Others are concerned with settlement on barren land in the Tarai and the traditional rights and customs of the Tharu. And some are about the gift of an elephant and elephant management. In other words, the documents are important for the study of land tenure and taxation in the Nepal Tarai and the history of the Tharu. The documents presented cover the time between 1726 and 1971. Most of them were collected from Dang Deukhuri in the west to Chaudandi in the east of Nepal. Some of them were also collected from the Gorakhpur area of India. This rich material is presenting an exciting history of the Tharu from a new angle. As there is a debate among Nepali historians (started first by Svāmī Prapannācārya) on the claim that there are some fake Shah *lālamoharas* (royal documents), the idea of presenting the documents in the colour facsimiles has to be welcomed. The readers now can judge the authenticity of the documents by themselves.

At the time which is documented here, it was a problem for the kings in Nepal to cultivate the vast area of fertile land in the Tarai without getting support of the local Tharu people. The consequence was clear – the kings of Nepal had to negotiate with the Tharu chiefs. The collection indicates how such negotiations were done in the past. As Kurt W. Meyer writes: „Local Tharu leaders received ‚development grants‘ throughout the 18th and the first half of the 19th century. The grants of our documents were given to the Tharu because they were known to be excellent cultivators. To obtain these privileges to cultivate, the Tharu leaders had to stay in close contact with the court.“ Similarly, Krauskopff points out: „A headman could also decide to abandon the land, taking his village tenants with him, and letting the fields return to wilderness. They could leave because of crop failure, but also to escape any type of new levy or encroachment from the central Government.“ Thus the book presents some nice examples of power conflicts between the Tharu chiefs and the local administrators.

Over the centuries the Tharu of the Tarai developed a substantial resistance to malaria in this unique habitat where other people from the hilly areas were not able to settle permanently - until DDT against malaria

was introduced in the middle of 20th century. They had been living there like the kings of the jungle, taming big animals, such as elephants. Yet our studies in the field of Tharu ethnohistory are still in the beginnings. Therefore, this book shall be taken as a big step forward. It has now opened a broad horizon in the modern study of Tharu ethnohistory.

The reviewer, on this occasion, would like to draw attention to some of the references to the Tharu and their places as mentioned in the Nepali chronicles, which this book does not discuss. For example, the *Gopālarāja Vaṃśāvalī*, written in the 14th century, mentions the place name called „Tari“ located between the Kathmandu Valley and Simaraungadha. This represents present-day „Mahottari“ and „Saptari“ of Nepal which have been the major settlements of the Tharu. The word „*mtha-ru*“ mentioned by the Tibetan Taranatha in 1605 AD may be linked with „Mahottari“. Similarly, another 19th century Nepali chronicle, the *Bhāṣā Vaṃśāvalī*, tells us a story about the Tharu of *Thārubaṭa* (Tirabhukti or *Tilvaṭ* or Tirhut or Mithila?) and their relation to the Newar Malla king, Mahindra Simha of Kathmandu in the first half of the 18th century. In this regard, the relation in the past between the Tharu and Newars appears to deserve further study.

As a matter of fact, the authors do not come up with one final view in their interpretation of Tharu history. This creates some confusion to the reader. For example: Tej Narayan Panjiar interprets the Tharu term „*bhatakhuāi māpha*“ by „given a position within the royal family“ whereas Tek Bahadur Shrestha and Gisèle Krauskopff translate it as „an exemption of the fee on the occasion of the *annaprasanna* (rice-feeding ceremony) of the crown prince or other member of the royal family“. Similarly, the date given in the transliteration of the document no. 38 in the Nepali book as „*jetha vadi || 11 roja 5*“ which is translated into English as „1st day of the dark fortnight of *Jestha*“ should be translated as „11th day of the dark fortnight of *Jestha*“. Furthermore, the word „*āśīṣa*“ or „*āsiṣa*“ from the documents is translated as „greetings“ in English. I suggest that one should render this word simply by „blessing“. The book published in Nepali has repetitions of the same footnotes – at the end of every page and at the end of every chapter. The book presented in English lacks a standardized transliteration of the texts of the documents. Expressing this kind of minor criticism is not to deny the scientific quality of the work as a whole.

In any case, the book shall be taken as an important contribution to the field of ethnohistory in Nepal. It is of great interest for scholars and students of Nepali history in general. The editors' work will be valued for their many new findings and, in particular, their new approach to the field of Tharu history.