

Cardamom and Class. A Limbu village and its extensions in East Nepal

by Ian Carlos Fitzpatrick.

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Reviewed by Olivia Aubriot

This book is about socio-economic changes brought about by cardamom cropping, which was introduced into eastern Nepal in the 1970s. The book's singularity stems partly from an anthropological political economy-based approach, which is taken within a now rather unfashionable theoretical framework: that of class formation. Not only does it provide an interesting ethnographic and socio-economic description of a village in Taplejung district, but it also studies its links with the 'dispersed' village, the new settlements in the plains, as well as the impact of cardamom production on internal and international mobility.

Based on Fitzpatrick's doctoral thesis, the book provides numerous surveys carried out in Mamangkhe, one of the northernmost villages in Taplejung district, in Birtamod and in settlements around Happenchowk in Jhapa district. It also draws on participatory fieldwork research on cardamom cultivation, and on in-depth interviews with producers, merchants, plains settlers and labour migrants. Data were collected in 2007-2008 and therefore give very recent insights.

Each major theoretical aspect of the thesis—class structure, economic differentiation, migration—is introduced through a theoretical contextualisation and a clear positioning of the author. More generally, the text is well written and makes for good reading. It stresses the objectives of the study and the major changes and differences compared to previous anthropological studies, and summarises the main findings at the end of each chapter.

Organised into six chapters, the book first sets the theoretical context of economic and social stratification, and provides an overview of the anthropological literature on caste and class in South Asia, thus legitimising its approach. The recent introduction of large amounts of cash (through cardamom production and international labour migration to

places other than India), 'has redrawn the parameters of wealth and inequality' (p. 26). The author adopts a different stance from Caplan, who stressed the importance of *kipat* (a community-specific form of land tenure) for the social and economic dichotomy between Limbus and non-Limbus (specifically Bahun-Chetris): these two groups have both poor and wealthy members, and land has long been a commodity here.

The second chapter sets the historical context: the mythological origin of the Limbus, their relations with the Nepali state and with non-Limbus in the village since the eighteenth century when eastern Nepal was conquered, the political autonomy gained through the *kipat* system, their social organisation into clans and the influences of the 1990 'People's Movement' and the 'People's War' on their political movement. With regard to Gorkhali control, unfortunately no mention is made of Sagant's theory (in *Le paysan Limbu: sa maison et ses champs*, 1976): the Gorkhalis' armed, political conquest was all the more intrusive in various aspects of Limbus' lives; it was a real technical revolution brought to the area by non-Limbus, whom the State encouraged to migrate, with the introduction of the plough, irrigated rice fields, and a more productive agricultural system than the swidden agriculture Limbus then practised. The historical description of land use since the settlement of Bahun Chetris in the village (around the end of the eighteenth century) given in Chapter 6 matches Sagant's description and is worth noting.

The third chapter provides a socio-economic and anthropological description of the village, a 'true' Limbu village where Limbu language and culture have survived relatively untouched by external influences. From a socio-economic point of view, it also has the specificity of being the largest area of cardamom production in the district. Cardamom 'is far the most unequally distributed resource' (p. 115): 'the top 10% [of households] produce 17 times the value of the bottom 50%' (p. 117). The historical process of economic and social change should not be understood only through an ethnic or caste-based analysis, even if the Chetris, Gurungs and Sarkis appear to be the wealthiest social groups, but also from a class-based analysis (p. 117).

Chapter 4 deals with cardamom cultivation itself, its production and the local history of its growth, as well as its history of cultivation in eastern Nepal and in Sikkim, where villagers used to work as labourers in cardamom fields. One rather surprising finding is how unaware farmers

are of the importance of production techniques and practices, a successful cardamom cultivation being, for them, due only to ecological conditions. This chapter also shows how the economic impact of cardamom production has benefited large- and small-scale producers, as well as non-producers, and has introduced major social and economic change to the village, including out-migration.

Chapter 5 thus describes the various processes involved in mobility: within the district, migration in order to settle in Jhapa (curiously the terms 'Tarai' or 'plain' are rarely used), or for international labour migration (to Sikkim, but also to long-distance destinations requiring a visa). This is a key chapter for understanding the relations that still exist between the village in the mountains and the 'dispersed village' in the plains. This link, which does not necessarily exist in other parts of Nepal, is not sufficiently highlighted: migrants still own land in the mountain village (since cardamom is a very lucrative cash crop) and are in regular contact with those living there, for various reasons: firstly, help can be provided in the form of ready cash throughout the year, whereas in the mountains cash is available only after the cardamom harvest; secondly, plain dwellers can act as a relay for job hunting since their area is a hub for international migration; and, thirdly, their situation also serves as a template for legitimate change. Moreover, contrary to other villages, they have settled in the plains very recently (end of the 1990s) subsequent to cardamom production, but also subsequent to the Maoist insurrection. Whatever the type of migration, the social aspects of mobility are also well illustrated.

Chapter 6 starts with a history of changes in land use (with the reminder that most Chetris left the village before the introduction of cardamom). Then, using four accounts as examples, it explains how the relationship between debt and landownership has prevailed, and has even been exacerbated. However, the introduction of cardamom as a cash crop has led to some changes in the distribution of resources: in the past, economic differentiation occurred mainly along ethnic lines, whereas nowadays some Limbus, who were traditionally excluded from this process, have become wealthier.

This book describes the history of economic change in a very clear manner, showing how the introduction of a cash crop has rapidly brought major social and economic change, and has contributed to villagers'

integration at national and global levels. It is also worthwhile pointing out that economic surplus is not enough to prevent out-migration, or at least that the uneven distribution of cardamom benefits may explain that, like other Nepalese people, migration to faraway countries is also a strategy used by Mamangkhe villagers.