

Die Agravāls in Rajakshetra (Kumaon Himālaya): Lebensstile, Habitus, Ökonomie und ‚Puritanismus‘ in einer Händlerkaste

by Ulrich Oberdiek (Indus. Ethnologische Südasiens-Studien Band 14)
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Reviewed by Hans Jürgen David

Ulrich Oberdiek's book is the publication of his habilitation treatise and is based on his extensive fieldwork in the foothills of the Himalaya. The book focuses, as the title states, on 'the lifestyles, habitus and economy of the Agravāls – a merchant caste in the Kumaon Himalaya'. The central theme of his work is to examine the question of whether there is a puritan lifestyle among the Agravāls. This publication is enriched by the author's in-depth ethnological research, providing a rich understanding of the local merchants' culture through his work with about fifty families and interviews of almost one hundred individuals.

In the first chapter, the book deals with the term 'puritanism' very extensively. The author makes it clear from the beginning that he does not want to present a comparison between historical puritanism and related phenomena in India, but to sketch the 'cultural logic of historic puritans' as a trans-cultural phenomenon (p. 25) and to see if there is something similar to be found among the Agravāls. Oberdiek then takes issue with Weber's view on the subject. Bringing the discussion into the Indian context, the author makes use of Olivelle's (1998) 'vocabulary of purity' (pp. 57-58) and exemplifies the views of Carstairs (1963), Roy (1975) and Bharati (1972), mainly by addressing the topic of sexuality. In the following, Oberdiek explores Marriot's (1976) model of 'Indian ethnology' in terms of historical puritanism. Before Oberdiek discusses his fieldwork in the Kumaon foothills, he presents the reader with a further introduction to cultural puritanism and helpfully summarises the idea of puritanism: 'Puritanism can be seen basically as a striving towards a purity, which is culturally diverse and defined within the framework of a purity/impurity-system' (p. 146).

In the next section Oberdiek gives a very detailed exposition on the Agravāl caste. After showing that the Agravāls also address themselves as

Baniyās or Mārvārīs (pp. 149-152), and thereby touching upon the concept of ‘jāti clusters’ (Mandelbaum 1984), Oberdiek goes into the mythological origins of this merchant caste. This is mainly based on Bharatendu Hariśchandra’s text *Agravālom kī utpatti* (‘The origin of the Agravals’) (pp. 158-171). Further, he presents two additional Hindi texts, the *Urucaritam* (‘The Tale of Uru’; Vidyālaṅkāṛ 1997) and *Mahālakṣmī vrat kathā* (‘The narration of the observance [in honour] of the great Lakshmi’; Vidyālaṅkāṛ 1997 and Agravāl 1993), both of which try to connect the Agraval caste with its mythological founder, the king Agrasen; a translation of the texts is given in the appendix (pp. 455-467). The last part of this chapter is dedicated to the geographical setting of this vast research. The name Rajakshetra is clearly a pseudonym for a small township in Kumaon, which is easy to identify because Oberdiek gives enough hints about the actual place. Along with the detailed description of Rajakshetra, the author also explains the relationship between the Agravals and the other castes in the area. The Agravals do not necessarily see themselves as superior to other merchant castes, but are aware of their ‘position as outsiders in Rajakshetra’ (p. 216). They do not inter-marry with other Kumaoni Vaishyas, as Oberdiek states that they demand large dowries, which makes them in fact endogamous because local merchants cannot meet the expense these entail, or are not willing to do so, because the Agravals are often associated with dowry related poisonings. While other castes in Rajakshetra largely perceive the Agravals as greedy and avaricious in terms of character, they are also described as ‘neither *bhog* (materialistic) nor *yog* (disciplined, religious)’ (p. 218).

In the second chapter, the author begins with the actual ethnographic research, which provides a framework for the field studies presented in the fourth chapter. Here Oberdiek goes into detail about what he calls the ‘central cultural complexes, selves and identity of the Agravals in Rajakshetra’ (pp. 227-237). The first complex he touches upon is dedicated to initiation rites (*samskaras*) and festivals, where he presents a marriage ritual and the Holi festival as case studies. The latter serves as a perfect example for the dichotomy between puritan and hedonistic behavior. The author’s informants give diverse opinions on the character of the Holi festival, ranging from an Ayurvedic reason—the informant B4 sees spring as a time of liberality (‘[h]e thinks this, without being explicit, in a sexual sense’), and therefore negative in a ‘puritarian’ sense—to the belief that it

represents a typical festival of the Agravals (pp. 258-259). Before closing the chapter with the concept of purity/impurity (pp. 305-309), Oberdiek discusses the topics of economic behavior, figurative speech and social control.

Oberdiek dedicates the third chapter to his informants. Many of them own shops, where most of the interviews were conducted. Since questions on 'the subject of "puritanism" in India are among sensitive topics, especially topics on sexuality', the author 'did not ask directly for these subjects, but only kept interest when they appeared in general conversations' (p. 312). Of these persons, 56 were male, 28 female, while 10 were Brahmins whose comments were compared with Agraval views. Oberdiek describes the five key informants in detail in the following section. In the fourth chapter presents several case studies arranged by different topics (sexuality; body, food and intoxicating substances; economy; politics) and concludes with a precise summary (pp. 432-436) of how these 'thick descriptions' can be interpreted. The book concludes with the fifth chapter on the findings of this vast study. Oberdiek comes to the conclusion that the Agravals 'live according to traditional caste-norms' (p. 437). They assess their economic success not in a religious way; rather it is seen as a skill that has to be learned with *discipline* in the early years of one's life (ibid.). Oberdiek states that "'the Agravals" do not exist in the sense of following a homogeneous behaviour, sharing the same perspectives, or forming a uniform group; rather the individual persons or families are imprinted in different ways that are expressed in social, business and religious issues' (pp. 438-439).

The appendix contains the above mentioned translations of the *Urucaritam* and the *Mahālakṣmī vrat kathā*, as well as a table of all the informants and a list of kinship terms of the Agraval caste in Rajakshetra (pp. 479-480).

Oberdiek's book gives the reader a detailed ethnographic description of the Agraval caste, a topic that, including the whole caste of merchants, has long been neglected by academia. This is enriched by an in-depth discussion of puritanism in general and how this concept can be brought into the Indian context. Furthermore, the whole book is filled with different interesting case studies. This book will be of immense value to every scholar with an interest in puritanism, the merchant castes and Himalayan culture.

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