

## REVIEW ARTICLE

Janaklal Sharma. *Hāmro Samāj: Ek Adhyayan (Our Society: A Study)*. Sajha Prakashan, Kathmandu, 1982. Pp. 494, XVIII, naps. 2. In Nepali. Price not indicated.

In the last decade there has been an increasing number of general ethnographic works by native Nepalese scholars. Professor Bista (1967) first attempted to identify the various ethnic groups of Nepal. The second major effort to describe the various Nepalese ethnic groups was in *Mecidekhi Mahākālī* (1975). *Hāmro Samāj* could be considered a third major effort by a Nepalese scholar to give a unified picture of Nepalese ethnic/caste groups, though general ethnographies of several Nepalese groups had been presented earlier by Shrestha (1971), by Shrestha and Singh (1972) and by N. Sharma (1976). If Bista's is an inventory to aid research on various ethnic groups, *Mecidekhi Mahākālī* is an amplification of this effort. J. Sharma's work (henceforth Sharma) provides an in-depth conjectural history of the various ethnic/caste groups and attempts to trace the origin and development of Nepalese society as a whole.

The book under review has been awarded the *Sājhā Puraskār*, a handsome literary award given to Nepalese writers for their scholarly work. *Sājhā* Prakashan, in the introduction to the book, describes Sharma as a scholar of wide interests who has written in various fields of literature and general knowledge. The reviewer feels that the area covered by Sharma is within the domain of anthropology and thus the present work is reviewed by an anthropologist.

There are twenty-one chapters in this large book. A short review would hardly do justice to the tremendous amount of work done by Sharma and the variety of topics covered in the book. Hence this review article. However, even this review is too short and will cover only a few salient points of the book.

Though Sharma has not mentioned when he started his work,

it can be seen from his acknowledgements that it has taken him years to produce the book. He started getting help from various scholars in 1965. The general objective of the book is not clearly stated anywhere. However, a reading of the book seems to indicate that he wants to present a comprehensive picture of Nepalese society in the Nepali Language, something that has not been attempted so far.

There are twenty-one chapters in seven major sections:

i) Nepalese Society in the context of Human Evolution; ii) Nepalese Society in the context of Caste; iii) Nepalese Society in the context of Race, iv) Religion, Tantra and Science; v) Folk Cultures and their interpretations; vi) The Origin of Various Nepalese Clans; vii) Various Nepalese Ethnic Groups. Finally, there are two appendices, an index and nine pages of errata.

In Section I, the author raises an interesting question: How was Nepali society formed and who were its first natives? He discusses the question in the context of the ethnic/caste composition of present-day Nepali society. In Section II, he discusses *varṇa* and *jāti* and how they emerged. He supports his arguments from the Vedas and other classical texts. He identifies *jāti* by occupation, by birth and by marriage (p. 61). After this he presents an interesting account of the origins of various Hindu groups such as the Daśnāmī Sanesī, Jaṅgam, Vaiṣṇava, Kuñwar or Kañwar clans, and then the origin of some Nepalese Brahman groups. In Section III there is a discussion of race and caste which attempts to establish a tyopological scheme for the classification of various racial groups in Nepal and their racial characteristics. In Section IV there are discussions of supernatural phenomena, local religious traditions, ghosts and witches, and transmitted cultural traditions. There is little discussion of science despite the title of the section. The section of folk culture has two parts: folk stories and folk tales. Folk stories

are stories about the origin of the earth in the Hindu and Kirat traditions. These folk stories provide universal themes which have a similar structure throughout the world. The author maintains that folk stories enunciate certain universal truths, while folk tales are basically a form of entertainment and their currency is limited to a particular area of a country. He also posits different theoretical interpretations for folk stories and folk tales which are localized through diffusion from one culture to another. In Section VI he narrates the history of the Dhakāl clan (descendants of the Vasiṣṭha *gotra*) with special reference to the Bhaṭṭarāī sub-clan, the Biṣṭa clan (the descendants of the Bharadwaj *gotra*), the descendants of the Visvamitra *gotra* (with a note on the Khātī clan). This is followed by a general treatment of the Brahma-Kṣatriya groups. The next section begins with a discussion of the Magars and Gurungs and then turns to the Kirātī groups which include the Rāī, Vāyu, Sunuwār, Thāmī, Limbu, Yakha (Dewān) and Dhimāl. This is followed by separate sub-sections on each of the following non-Kirati groups: Newārs, Tamangs, Kāikes, Thārūs and Sherpās.

As a reviewer I feel that the book is a product of indefatigable labor and sincere effort but imprecise understanding of the subject matter. In a country where written documents are still scattered, where a researcher still finds it difficult to present a well documented socio-economic history of Nepal which goes back more than a century, and where it is still difficult to talk about Nepalese culture as a single entity, the task Sharma has set himself is really a difficult one. It is not easy to trace the evolution and cultural continuity of the elements which make up Nepalese society, let alone the society as a whole. Considering the vastness of the subject matter it needs not only a good knowledge of anthropology (particularly physical, archeological and cultural anthropology) plus sociology, but also of history, linguistics, geology and paleodemography.

The author gives an interesting correlation between the evolution of animal life and the chronological incarnations of Vishnu: Matsya (fish), Murma (tortoise), Varaha (Boar), Narasimha (half-lion, half man), Vamana (a dwarf man), Parasurama (a wild man), then Ram, Krishna and Buddha (the cultured man), and finally Kalki (a superman to be evolved). Biologists long ago showed that the lowest form of animal evolved from water. From there evolution proceeded to higher forms of life: from invertebrates to fish, then amphibia, reptilia, birds and mammals. Man is the most evolved form of animal. The evolutionary history of man shows that it took millions of years for man to evolve from certain mammals. Furthermore, the original form of man was not fully developed in forelimb, dental structure and cranial capacity. The changes in the human skull with the development of the brain along with the changes in forelimb and dental structure were gradual processes affected by climatic and geological conditions. It took another million years for the present Homo Sapiens to evolve from Australopithecus. Australopithecus, the first evolved form of man, was a sort of half-man, half-animal similar to Narasimha. He then evolved in a manner which is echoed by the subsequent incarnations of Vamana, Parsurama, Rama and Krishna. Thus there is a corrolary between the organic theory of evolution and the Hindu mythological incarnations. Furthermore, Sharma says that the age of the earth according to the Oriental system of calculation corresponds with the modern scientific system of calculation.

Despite this interesting correlation, Sharma's description of the evolution of man in Nepal is incomplete and unsatisfactory. He mentions six racial groups in Nepal: Negritos, Proto-Australoid, Mongol-Kirant, Dravidian, Western Brachycephalic, and Aryan or Nordic (p. 39). However, anthropometric surveys have yet to be carried out in Nepal. What little information exists is derived from Risley (1915) who examined some Nepalese groups

settled in India while he was doing an anthropometric survey of various Indian groups. In Nepal itself any information available on physical characteristics derives from simple observation. Furthermore, having posited these six groups in ancient Nepal Sharma does not mention who their descendants are. Who are these groups in Nepal today? If they no longer exist, what happened to them? It seems to me that the author simply forwards his statements without considering the validity of controversial statements about the evolution of man in Nepal. Much of the evidence for hominid evolution is derived from geological deposits, particularly the fossils of monkey, ape and man. Where is the scientific data for such evolution in Nepal? Furthermore, it is difficult to show linkages between the original Nordic or Mongoloid groups and the present makeup of the Nepalese population. It is almost impossible to deduce *a priori* connections from present similarities. Racial characteristics respond to environmental influences. Similarly, the issue of cultural evolution is rather complex. According to Sahlins (1960), both biological and cultural evolution move in two directions at the same time. To Steward (1955), the cultural-historical approach to the evolution of culture is rather relative unless the environmental factors are taken into consideration. Furthermore, proposed answers to the question of evolution, whether it is organic (biological) or cultural, are meaningless without scientific evidence. In the present state of our understanding of various disciplines and their development in Nepal, it is fruitless to talk about organic or cultural evolution in Nepal.

Another serious confusion results from the author's treatment of the question of matrilineal and patrilineal groups in Nepal (pp. 47-49). The fundamental difference between the two types of society hinges on the questions of lineality and residence pattern, i.e. whether ancestry is traced from the

father's or the mother's side and whether the post-marital residence is patrilocal or matrilineal. The statement that "the Aryans were patrilineal and the non-Aryans were matrilineal" (p. 49), is untenable. A racial term such as "Aryan" is biological and as such does not imply cultural traits such as matrilineal or patrilineal descent; nor does it imply racial superiority though it has been used in this way at times. In any case, who are these non-Aryan, and therefore matrilineal, groups in Nepal? As far as is known, none of the ethnic/caste groups in Nepal are matrilineal. In reality, there are very few societies in the world which are matrilineal. In India, only the Khasis of the Mijoram Hills and the Nayars or Kerala are reported to be matrilineal. My intention here is not only to dispose of misinterpretation but also to clarify concepts.

Sharma's accounts of the origins of various clans are interesting, but he tries to draw a conclusion from every isolated event. Many of these conclusions I consider to be specious. For example, his contention that the Udas are descendants of the offspring of a union between a Vajracarya male and a Tibetan female (p. 95), demands cultural, historical and physical evidence. He links today's Belbāse clan (pp. 80-81) with the original Hantakālī ("heavy eater") group by way of the Chālatānī ("skinned") group. The latter are descendants of a Hantakālī Brahman who was flayed alive by a Muslim Nawab. He also mentions clan names such as "Cor" (Thief), "Phāṭ" (Liar) and "Ṭhag" (Swindler) whose present day descendants call themselves Thāpā or Khaḍka (pp. 228-9). Such statements are offensive and provocative and hence need elaboration and more corroborating evidence. I feel that much of Sharma's treatment of the ancestry of various Nepalese groups suffers from a confusion of the two terms lineage and clan. Lineage signifies a corporate descent group composed of consanguineal kin, descended from a common ancestor who can be traced and proven. On the other hand, a clan is a non-corporate descent group which assumes

descent from a common ancestor (who can be real or fictive) but is unable to trace the actual genealogical links back to this ancestor. In many cases, clans have mythical origins and are often associated with animate or inanimate objects (known as totems) such as animals, plants, natural forces and physical objects. (See Keesing 1958, Keesing 1975 and Haviland 1978.) Considering the great genealogical depth of a clan, it is natural that it fissures into manageable units which are in fact lineages. Thus a lineage is a division of a clan and the larger a clan is the more lineages it will have. Sharma's Belbāse clan ("the people sheltered under a *bel* tree") seems to have a mythical origin and would thus be a true clan. But he then links them to the Hantakālī -- Chālatānī groups and provides historical accounts of their recent descent. In this account he is clearly treating Hantakālī, Chālatānī and Belbāse as lineages, but there is no historical evidence for the links between Hantakālī -- Chālatānī and Belbāse. Similarly, Cor, Dhāt, and Thag seem to be lineages whose records can be traced from ancient times down to 1951, when these people suddenly become Khaḍkas and Thāpās whose ancestry is unknown. He does not explain why these people chose to become Thāpās and Khaḍkas. This type of unsupported argument is found throughout his clan analysis.

Another serious concern is the migration history of many Nepalese ethnic groups. Man has always been on the move throughout history, but it is not easy to trace the geographical deployment of the human population over time, because migration is the least researched and understood topic in demography (See Bouvier et al., 1979). In Nepal the migration history of a group is rather speculative, and in some cases it is derived solely from linguistic evidence (See Gurung 1982 and Dahal et al., 1977). Hence there is little scientific evidence for migration patterns. Yet Sharma presents facile migration histories for many Nepalese

groups from the hoary past as if he had abundant evidence at his disposal. He links many of the Nepalese Brahman groups (such as the supposed descendants of the Vasiṣṭha, Bharadwaj and others) with Kanyakubja or Kanauj (a place in northern India), from which these people are said to have migrated to Nepal. When referring to the Dhakāl clan, he writes "some of these Kanyakubja Brahmans migrated to the Dhaku area (Achim District) and became Dhakāls" (p. 149). It is possible that some of these groups might have migrated from northern India to Nepal, but when?, why? and how? raise not only interesting demographic questions but also socio-economic questions. The proposition that the Muslim invasions in northern India forced Hindus to move, may, in all likelihood, be valid. But when we come to the question of where they went, it is necessary to look at such factors as the availability of food and other economic opportunities. Were these available in the hilly-mountainous regions of Nepal?

Sharma narrates the legend of the Brahma-Kṣatriya group, the story of the great Rishi Viśvamitra, who was originally a Kṣatriya but became a Brahman because of his deeds. If the validity of the legend is accepted, it could throw new light on the commonly accepted definition of caste. It implies that endogamy per se was not the original criterion for caste. A person could *become* a Brahman by his deeds. Confusion occurs when the author links the Sen Rajas and the Biṣṭa clan with the Brahma-Kṣatriya group. Why did the Sen Rajas remain Kṣatriyas, whereas the members of the Biṣṭa clan became Brahmans as well as Kṣatriyas? It is possible that the union of a Brahman male and a Kṣatriya female resulted in an intermediate hierarchical group in an expanded, integrated structure of the Brahma-Kṣatriya group. However, in a straight forward formulation of caste structure, a group can be either Kṣatriya or Brahman but not both. Furthermore, how another group known as "Sakhas"



became Biṣṭa is not clear. Much of this is speculative, and I think it would have been better if he had given a few geneologies of present-day Nepali Bistas tracing their ancestry, divergences within the clan and their migratory routes.

Sharma is right when he points out that the Khātīs of Nepal are Chetrīs as well as untouchables (p. 252), but how such a dramatic hierarchical cleavage occurred is nowhere mentioned. Does this mean that whenever we have two clans with the same or a similar name we have two groups with a common ancestor or at least a common racial origin? Or are we dealing with two totally unrelated groups who just happen to have a common name? There are a number of groups in Nepal whose clan names are identical or similar: Kālīkoṭe (cobble), Kālīkoṭe (Brahman-Chetrī); Rāṇā (Chetri), Rāṇā (Magar); Būrāthokī (Magar), Būrāthokī (Chetrī), Śāha (Thakurī), Saha (a Vaiṣya group of the Terai); Lamichāne (Gurung), Lamichāne (Brahman or Chetrī), and so on. Another area where little information is offered is in his treatment of Kumain and Purbiya Brahmans. It is understandable that they have a similar clan structure and similar *gotras*. What is not explained is why each group is so different in their cultural values. It is only in recent times, for example, that Kumain and Purbiya Brahmans have begun to intermarry. In fine, Sharma's treatment of clan history adds very little scientific information to our knowledge of clan history in Nepal, and what he presents has been taken almost entirely from Sikharnath's *Thar Gotra Pravarāvalī* (Narration of Clan and Gotra).

Religion and Tantra have been explained from a theoretical perspective without linking them to Nepalese society. Nepalese society embodies various religious traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Animism. Within Hinduism there are different sects: Shaivism, Vaisnavism, Shaktism and others. The structure of Newar tantric Buddhism differs from that of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. Belief in local divinities (animism) is present not

only among the *Matwāli* but also among high caste people and among the untouchable groups. On the other hand, among these various religious traditions, there are common ideals, beliefs and practices which Sharma hardly touches upon. Despite his linking of "Religion, Tradition and Science" in one section, he does not explain how religious beliefs and superstition have a scientific base.

The section on *Sansargajanya Abhicār* ("Transmitted Cultural Traditions") presents interesting stories, but I think Sharma's overriding value concern has missed the theme of a culture. A culture, in the simplest formulation, is a complexus of socially transmitted behaviour acquired through the process of socialization. A researcher has to understand the socially transmitted behaviour patterns of a group before he can explain why people do certain things in certain ways. A culture is not value free and what is good in culture A may be bad in culture B. Consequently peoples beliefs and their value systems cannot be simply labeled "superstitious" (pp. 118, 119, 156, 157, 208) or "interesting" (p. 229).

Sharma's analysis of folk tales and folk stories gives no explanation of why certain stories are more popular in a given culture. It is obvious that when a tale is relevant to the context of a social organization it is frequently retold. Furthermore, a culture is diffused among different groups only when its elements are suitable in the local cultural setting. Distance or the proximity of groups is another factor.

Sharma's description of various ethnic groups in Nepal also seems to be out of balance. The fundamental problem, of course, is the lack of primary data. An anthropologist goes to the field, normally for a year, to record the culture of a people. Then he begins to analyse the culture. But Sharma does not mention the amount of time he has spent studying a

particular ethnic group nor does he refer to any secondary sources in his accounts. Yet, his discussion of the various ethnic groups is carried out in a highly definitive tone, and he allows himself little room to re-question or re-formulate his own conclusions. Let me cite some examples:

"Gurungs are descendants of the Huns" (p. 256). "The Gurungs forefathers came from Kanauj" (p. 257). "The Huns are also the Heptals who eventually became the Magars of Nepal" (p. 269). "Some degraded Thakuris became Magars" (p. 270). A reader will be easily confused about the correlation among these various groups: Huns-Gurungs; Huns-Heptals; Heptals-Magars; and Thakuris-Magars. There are no documents to substantiate any of these statements.

Sharma has used the term "Kirātī" from the classical Sanskrit literature (p. 280), but the term has been so vaguely employed by Sanskritists, linguists, anthropologists, historians, political scientists and others that it is abstruse in the scientific writing (See Dahal 1975). The simple query here is, who are these "Kirātī" groups in Nepal?

In treating these people Sharma has failed to notice the difference within various ethnic groups. For example, he treats the Rai as one group and describes their cultural patterns in a homogeneous fashion. In reality, there are between ten and eighteen major groups within the Rāī (Kuluṅg, Thuluṅg, Bantawā, Aṭhpahariyā, etc.), and each group differs from the other groups in language and culture. Aṭhpahariyā is not a clan or sub-clan of the Rāī group (p. 287). Rather it is a separate cultural group, just as the Bantawās are. Similarly his statement that Newar Society is a mixture of the Kirātīs, Mongols, Licchavis and the Mallas (p. 329) demands not only historical-cultural analysis but physical and linguistic evidence.

Furthermore, there is no uniformity in his ethnic descriptions.

Different bases are used to describe different groups. Discussion of the high caste groups is based mostly on legendary and conjectural accounts; discussion of the Rāī, Limbu, Dhimāl, Newār, Tamāng and Sherpa is focussed on their life cycle ceremonies; description of the Kāikes is based on a long comparative word list (English-Kaike-Nepali pp. 378-96); and the Thārūs are described through their supernatural beliefs and faith. There is little socio-economic data in any of the accounts. Disparate emphasis is a general characteristic of the ethnic accounts.

It is interesting that Sharma hardly ever cites the literature on various ethnic groups, though there is a considerable literature available on the Gurung, Magar, Sherpā, Rāī, Limbu, Dhimāl, Newār and others. Sharma must be aware that detailed descriptions of these various groups exist. On the Dhimāls alone four books existed before *Hamro Samāj* went to press. Furthermore, is information given in the book based on primary data and if so when was this data collected? The time is important when reporting on a cross section of a society. Society changes with time. The question here is what changes have taken place in the society since the primary data was collected?

Though Sharma has given a bibliography at the end of each chapter (usually without the name of the publisher or the place and date of publication), these works are not properly cited as sources in the text. Occasionally he refers to the opinion of "some scholars" (e.g. p. 30, 317, 329) and occasionally a passage is quoted (e.g. p. 30, 317), but without giving the name of the author, the name of the book or its date and place of publication. If he had quoted these sources properly, he would have sharpened his analytic tools and gained credibility. If he had cited his sources some of his account, particularly the description of various caste names and their origins could have made a theoretical contribution to the field. Proper evidence

and citations could also have enhanced the significance of his conjectural history. The paucity of reliable historical material is understandable, and it is obvious that this impedes meaningful interpretation. Hence one must not speculate on every bit of evidence and the evidence is certainly too thin to warrant universal generalizations.

The readability of the text has been considerably enhanced by Sharma's lucid style. The book will be of use primarily to Nepali readers because it is written in Nepali and to the layman because of the many interesting stories it contains. It may be of use to students of Culture, Nepal Paricaya and Anthropology/Sociology because of the short accounts of many ethnic groups. However, ethnographic research in Nepal has already passed from its incipient stage and hence this type of book is not very useful for the professional anthropologist or sociologist. A trained anthropologist would like to see the ethnography of a people based on fieldwork and productive of meaningful socio-cultural interpretations in a theoretical context. The text could be improved considerably by systematic cooperation among those working in the disciplines of history, sociology, linguistic and geology.

Dilli R. Dahal  
Kathmandu

## REFERENCES

- Bista, Dor Bahadur  
(1967) *People of Nepal*. Kathmandu, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, HMG.
- Bouvier, Leon F. et al.  
(1977) "International Migration: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow", in *Population Bulletin*.
- Dahal, Dilli R.  
(1975) "Kirati Reviewed in the Nepali Context", in *Panchayat Darpan*", (Coronation Issue), Vol. 15.
- Dahal, Dilli R. et al.  
(1977) *Land and Migration in Farwestern Nepal*. Kirtipur, Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University.
- Gurung, Harka  
(1982) *The Himalaya: Perspectives on Change*. Kathmandu, New Era.
- Haviland, William A.  
(1978) *Cultural Anthropology*. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Keessing, F.M.  
(1958) *Cultural Anthropology*. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston. (See pp. 271-282).
- Keessing, R.M.  
(1975) *Kin Groups and Social Structure*. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Nepal, HMG  
(1975) *Mecidekhi Mahakali*. Kathmandu, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, HMG.

Risley, H.H.

(1915) *The People of India*. London, Thacker, Spink and Co.

Sahlins, M.

(1960) "Evolution: Specific and General" in Sahlins and Service (eds), *Evolution and Culture*, (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press).

Sharma, Nagendra

(1976) *Nepālī Janjivan: Khoj Granthamālā* (in Nepali) Darjeeling, Acala Bhagavat Prakasan.

Shrestha, D.B.

(1972) *Ethnic Groups of Nepal and Their Ways of Living*. Kathmandu, HMG Press.

Shrestha, S.

(1971) *Hāmī Nepālī*. (in Nepali). Lalitpur.

Steward, J.

(1955) *Theory of Culture Change* Urbana III. Carbondale, University of Illinois Press.