

REVIEW

James F. Fisher, *Trans-Himalayan Traders: Economy, Society and Culture in Northwest Nepal*, 1986. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press. xiv + 232 page, including bibliography and index; eight monochrome plates; seven appendices, five maps.

Trans-Himalayan Traders is a detailed study of the economy of Tarangpur, the author's pseudonym for a village is one of three which speak a local Tibeto-Burman dialect known as Kaike and the people designate themselves as Magar, which in this case is 'simply a convenient status summation which can be readily and incontestably claimed by anyone (except untouchables)' (p.3). Apart from their native Kaike the people of Tarangpur (the 'Tarangpurians') speak also Tibetan and Nepali, a fact which indicates not only their geographical and ideological location between the Hindu south (Khasan) and the Buddhist north (Bhot) but relates also to their extensive economic involvement in these two spheres.

The author's point of departure is that 'the ways in which Tarangpur is not economically and culturally self-sufficient are far more interesting than the ways in which it is' (p.2), and the book is essentially a detailed description of local economy, traditional and more modern trading practices and the cultural features which accrue to these. In the traditional system we see the barter of homegrown grain for salt from the Bhotias, and the subsequent exchange of this salt for rice from the south. This pattern has been increasingly supplanted by the 'commodities circuit' (occasioned

largely by the Chinese invasion of Tibet and the closure of the border in 1962), which is characterised by the use of cash and a movement away from hereditary trading associates to the more impersonal milieu of the open market.

In the earlier system the Tarangpurians are 'cultural chameleons' who make appropriate adjustments in their language, names, religion and values according to whether they are dealing with Bhotias or Hindus. But the change in the trading cycle is the 'entering wedge of cultural change', which, in short, involves a more committed gravitation towards the Hindu world and an increasing sense of participation in the Nepalese nation.

Within this framework Fisher provides an impressive body of information across a range of related matters, from the most detailed accounts of prestations, crop-yields, trade profits and landholdings to more general considerations, such as indigenous attitudes to disparate wealth and the quest for respect, whether achieved through trading acumen or ascendancy in modern politics.

The book is a rewrite of the author's doctoral thesis. The research was carried out in a thirteen-month block ending in November 1969 and the doctorate was obtained in 1972, which is not bad going. Possibly because of the relentlessness of the fieldwork, combined with the fact that Fisher did not dawdle over writing it up, the overall perspective never moves very far from the data. Admittedly, the thesis appeared as a book after the lapse of fourteen years or so. I have not read the original thesis, but although the author explains that the book is a 'revised, expanded, and generally overhauled' version of the original it appears unlikely that much substantive rethinking and reinterpretation has taken place. (But who can blame him: the task of reworking a thesis for publication probably does not become any more attractive even after it has been shelved for more than a decade.)

Whatever changes the author may have introduced, the book still has much of the doctoral thesis about it. The work rests on a framework of quantifiable information, suggesting a lingering reliance on the sanctity of data for its own sake - thirty-odd tables, for example, and seven appendices which include acreages of cultivated and uncultivated land for each of eighty-three households. Potentially useful material, no doubt, but the stark presentation of it conveys a sense of the author's lack of courage in moving too far out of its shade. This need for support also manifests at times in the

development of the theoretical dimension: the reader is not assured of the self-confidence of an author who, within the first twenty lines of his introduction, quotes or cites Malinowski, Geertz, Radcliffe-Brown, Marriot, Barth and John Donne,

Since Fisher's professed concern is to examine Tarangpur's relationships with the outside world, the reader cannot help feeling that this aspect of the book could have been developed more fully than it is. It is reassuring that he rejects a completely utilitarian interpretation of the economic sphere by giving due emphasis to cultural considerations, but the opportunities of his approach are sometimes not adequately exploited. This is particularly evident in the matter of the Tarangpurians' relationship with the caste system and the broader Nepalese context. In the concluding chapter, while speaking of Tarangpur's increased contact with the Hindu world, Fisher states that:

Tarangpurians try to bring their own society into line with what they perceive to be the Hindu or modern model (or, in a Hindu kingdom, modernist Hindu), because this is the model most relevant to increasing social status and acquiring political power. In the south one learns how to deal with Hindu society on a stronger, if not equal, footing. Along with concepts of caste ranking come ideas of democracy and equality, which are acquired partly through political contacts in very recent years, but which have been absorbed through traditional economic contacts for a longer period of time (p. 110).

These are deceptively elliptical remarks. Hinduism and modernity, the caste system and equality may be paradoxically interwoven at some level in the present Nepalese context; but historically and intrinsically they are quite different things, and should not be conflated in a diachronic perspective. Democracy is certainly a phenomenon of recent years, but it has not been promulgated through the caste system; and the influence of the caste system in the very foundation of the Tarangpurians as a social entity has been underestimated, inasmuch as it was probably not limited to the seasonal demands of impression management in Khasan.

The last point is worth elaboration. Dwindling economic advantages in Bhot have led the Tarangpurians to cast their lot more firmly with the Hindu world: the author does not say much about the precise manifestations of this reorientation, and whether, for example, their is anything like the Thakali

claim to Thakuri status. Perhaps it was early days still at the time of this fieldwork for any such specific claim to be articulated, but the quest for a highest caste status was, according to the excerpt quoted above, at least beginning.

Now might it not also be that the Tarangpurians used the caste system to similar economic advantage at a much earlier period? A suggestion of this is found in chapter three, which discusses the mythic origins of the Kaike speakers. According to this the group is an amalgamation of Thakuris, Ghartis, Magars and the descendants - known as Jhankri - of someone who appeared mysteriously from the forest. Together with its two neighbours Tarangpur forms an endogamous unit, and the people call themselves Magars: why? According to the *Muluki Ain*, the Nepalese National Code, of 1854, the Magars, Bhotes and Thakuris all fall within 'pure' categories, but beyond this their status differs in certain important respects. The Thakuris are *tagadhari* (wearers of the Sacred Cord), the Magars are *namasinya matwali* (Non-Enslavable Alcohol Drinkers). Direct commercial interaction between the first and third groups might well be hampered by caste restrictions, but the status of the Magars situates them perfectly for moving between the two worlds. Properly speaking, the history of intermarriage between these three strata in Tarangpur should result in their being degraded to Enslavable Alcohol Drinkers. Conversely, they could as well have invoked their Thakuri origins as a basis for claiming *tagadhari* rank - as the Thakalis have done, with less historical justification. As it is, they did not acquiesce in the former, nor (unless recently) did they press for the latter.

Far from undermining Fisher's thesis this situation supports it; then - before the 'commodities circuit' was operative - as now, economic concerns directed cultural inclination. It would not have been a digression to expand on the Tarangpurians' formation of their caste identity in the context of the options which Nepalese society offered them. Tarangpur and its neighbours were apparently already a endogamous group before the promulgation of the *Muluki Ain*, but caste barriers were presumably still observed, albeit perhaps less rigidly. One wonders if the Tarangpurians bothered to call themselves Magars or instead identified themselves by some name associated with their locality, before the legal status of the caste society made it socially desirable and economically essential for them to do so. In any event, it must be clear that the caste system, and an awareness of its possibilities and limitations, must have been important for the Tarangpurians long before the present era of democratisation.

Although Hofer's analysis of the 1854 Muluki Ain had not been published when the thesis was written, it appeared several years before the publication of *Himalayan Traders*, and would have been a useful addition to its bibliography. Without wishing to give undue stress to a subject which is outside Fisher's central argument, an appreciation of this document could only have resulted in a clearer understanding of the dynamics of group formation and commercial relations in Nepal. It might also have resolved certain specific areas of confusion. Fisher tells us (n.25,p.211) that 'the term Gharti is used elsewhere in Nepal to refer to the descendants of slaves, but I found no evidence of any such connotation in Tichurong', the Gharti in this case being one of the exogamous Tarangpur clans. While the term Gharti does indeed refer primarily to the descendants of freedmen it was also used in a broader sense to denote people of 'notorious' origin (Hofer 1979:130), including those born of hypogamous unions between Cord-Wearers and members of lower categories. The origin myth of the Tarangpur clans has the Gharti descending from the marriage between a Bhotia woman and a Thakuri man who killed a cow and served its meat at his wedding. Not a hypogamous marriage, admittedly, but certainly one attended by enough cumulative degradation (in terms of caste) to confer notoriety on its issue.

In broad terms it must be said that *Himalayan Traders* is well researched. The information - particularly the detail of the information - is abundant and concisely presented, and this alone is a testimony both to James Fisher's diligence in collecting data and also to the subtler personal qualities which must have enabled him to secure the confidence of Tarangpur. Such a detailed analysis of local economy as the book contains could have resulted in something blindingly boring if handled by an author who was insensitive to the level of concentration the average reader (including the present reviewer) is willing to sustain. But Fisher writes well; almost, one feels, in spite of the unforgiving constraints of his subject.

Charles Ramble