

***Hierarchy and its discontents. Culture and the politics of consciousness in caste society.* By Steven M. Parish. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1996. xxiii + 270. Pb.: £16.95. ISBN 0 8122 1551 6. Hb.: £34.95. ISBN 0 8122 3313 1.**

Parish's book is in the prevalent South Asian ethnographic genre of 'critique of Dumont'. It is noteworthy within this genre for his sensitivity to

the nuances of Dumont's argument about the hierarchical nature of Indian caste society and for the shift of his critique from the structural to the psychological level where he locates Newars' lived world of ambivalence, commitment, insight, resistance, fantasy, hope and amnesia towards the social and political dominance of caste in the city of Bhaktapur.

Parish's aim is to describe the 'mind-games' that low and high caste Newars play to find meaning and value for their selves within a hierarchical cultural world that in moments of critical reflection renders them stigmatised victims or unjust agents of caste dominance. His basic premise is that south Asian caste culture includes both legitimating ideology and de-legitimising critique and that individuals living in such a society continually engage in a moral dialogue between an ideological self and a critical self in order to construct a meaningful existence and a worthy self. In this respect he directly confronts what I call the 'Frankenstein' effect of culture: human are the creators of the cultural worlds in which they live, but everyday practice naturalises that world so that we become oppressed by its apparent necessity. For Parish, it is the 'critical self' which reveals the arbitrariness of the Newar social world of caste, and it is such an awareness that breeds discontent with caste society and motivates the moral dialogues with the ideological self that members of various castes engage in to find meaning for themselves within caste society. For Parish, then, in the dialectic of structure and agency, the latter is psychological in the sense that through their mind-games, Newars actively contest and construct their cultural worlds.

In the first two substantive chapters, Parish sets up the basic moral dialectic of Newar society between hierarchy and equality. The former is portrayed in Chapter 1 via a description of the New Year festivals of Bhaktapur in which people pull two chariots carrying Bhairav and Bhadrakali through the city and eventually into the margins where the stigmatised untouchable members of the Sweeper Jat (Pore) reside. Here Parish makes the point that the procession celebrates a social system explicitly ordered in terms of hierarchy variously constituted by power, purity, knowledge and sacredness. In the second chapter, he describes the ways in which Newars of various low castes adopt a critical approach to this stigmatising hierarchical ordering and rethink the nature of their society through discursive affirmations of the equality of all humans. Here he makes two important points. First, while Newars talk about the equality, they

'do not possess an ideology of equality analogous to those found in the modern western world' (p. 44); and, second, they are fundamentally ambivalent about caste with assertions of equality often combined with re-assertions of hierarchical differences. Chapter 3 is an extended critique of Dumont in which Parish argues that Newars can and do live in a hierarchically-ordered society without being *Homo hierarchicus*: that is, without their whole society, all their relationships and their experiences being exhausted by a single truth of purity and impurity. Instead, within a Newar culture of inequality his concern is to account for the emergence of human agency in the form of a critical self as the locus of resistance and the re-imagining of society. His general point is that Newar society – and all complex societies – is not totalising, monolithic, rational and coherent as portrayed by Dumont's *Homo hierarchicus* but is constituted by a positional, context-specific multiplicity of partially dissonant perspectives and rationalities animated by a dialectic of ideology and critique. While otherwise exemplary in his understanding of Dumont's argument, throughout the book Parish uses the terms inequality and hierarchy interchangeably and without comment.

In chapters 4 and 5 Parish shifts to the psychological level by taking us into the 'minds' of Newars as they struggle to bring meaning and value to their lives. He reveals the complexity and subtlety of their ambivalence to hierarchy, describing how people of untouchable caste disguise their identities and tell stories that reveal the arbitrariness of the hierarchy. He argues that just as there is a critical self revealing the arbitrariness of caste life, so there is dialectically a 'political unconscious' suppressing this insight that allows Newars to live the life of caste without conscious moral dilemmas. This leads to the theme of chapter 5 where Parish confronts the first premise of Marxism: '... life involves before everything else eating and drinking ... the first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs' (Marx 1966: 160). Lower caste Newars must live the caste system in order to eat. In this context he introduces another dimension of the Newar mind- game: the dialectic of holism (i.e. caste as a natural, moral, sacred and therefore inherent order) and necessity (i.e. caste as arbitrary but 'the only real alternative to disorder' [p. 143]). As in the previous chapter, he speculates on how Newars of various castes work through this dialectic based upon a collection of their equivocal explanations and defences of caste. In the final ethnographic chapter, Parish widens the scope of his argument by

surveying some of the principal ethnographies on untouchable castes in India and how they, like the untouchable Newar jats in Bhaktapur, build a life within the stigma of low caste status.

There are two concluding chapters: a conclusion and a postscript. In the former, Parish suggests that a dialectic of hierarchy and equality permeates not just Newar society. They are possibilities of relatedness that are 'transcultural categories ... always available to human minds' (p. 219) and culturally constructed – something like Casey's description of 'concrete universals' in that they are 'operative in contingent circumstances and [have] no life apart from those circumstances' (1997: 29). In the postscript, Parish explores the psychology of caste hegemony and the sense of self that emerges through the way in which Newars move between knowing and failing to know their social system, between insight and blindness, between resistance and collusion, between the critical self and the ideological self.

Overall, the book is an insightful and sensitive account of the psychological life-world of caste. Its principal strength is the way in which Parish celebrates the multiplicities and ambiguities of experience of everyday life in caste society. His account strikes a responsive chord with my research experience among Parbatiya castes in a more rural village in the Kathmandu valley. It makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of caste in Nepal as well as to expanding ethnography beyond monolithic truths.

#### References

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