

Culture



Lynn BENNETT, *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters: Social and Symbolic Roles of High-Caste Women in Nepal*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1983. 353 pages, U.S. \$30 (cloth)

Doranne Jacobson

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Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Lynn BENNETT, *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters: Social and Symbolic Roles of High-Caste Women in Nepal*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1983. 353 pages, U.S. \$30 (cloth).

By Doranne Jacobson
Springfield, Illinois, and Barnard College,
Columbia University

In Nepal, the young high-caste Hindu bride is decorated with gold ornaments and scarlet silk, yet she departs for her husband's home not with joy but with sorrow. She knows that the status she has enjoyed as a treasured daughter and beloved sister will contrast sharply with her new subservient position as a wife dwelling among critical and demanding affines. Whereas her father and brothers had often touched her feet to accord her the honor due her as a pure maiden, she will now daily bathe her husband's feet and drink the wash water to signal her acceptance of the authority of her husband and his patriline. Only on occasional visits to the home of her birth will she again be treated as a favored daughter and sister.

The ambivalent status of high-caste Brahman and Chetri Nepali women is closely examined in this study. Analyses of Hindu religious beliefs, texts and legends, kinship structures, life cycle rites, women's rituals, concepts of the female body and reproduction, and the experiences of village women are brought together to enhance comprehension of the relationships between the social and symbolic roles of women in a patrilineal Hindu society. Hindu ideology is seen as largely determining women's status in Brahman-Chetri culture (p. 128).

The author, who holds a Ph.D. from Columbia University, draws upon more than a decade of experience and involvement with women in Nepal. She has been affiliated with universities in both India and Nepal, and served as a project officer for UNICEF women's programs in Nepal. Bennett was recently appointed program officer in the fields of urban and rural poverty at the Ford Foundation in New Delhi. In her preface she speaks with great affection of the village women whose lives she has

shared. This study is eloquent testimony to her multi-faceted knowledge of the actual processes of social relations as well as the idealized cultural structures of the people among whom she has worked.

Nepal is inhabited by many ethnic groups of diverse origins. The ancestors of the high-caste Hindus discussed in this volume are presumed to have migrated to the Himalayas from northern India in centuries past, and key features of their culture attest to a North Indian heritage.

Bennett's data are largely derived from the community of "Narikot", a settlement of high-caste rice growers set within a larger dispersed village. The location of the village is unfortunately not mentioned, but oblique references suggest proximity to Kathmandu. The focus of the study is, in any case, not the village, but central themes of Nepali Hinduism and the manner in which these themes are expressed in the lives of women acting as members of families and wider kinship networks.

The early chapters of the book explore fundamental conceptual oppositions structuring the Hindu villagers' world view. The ordinary householder's participation in the phenomenal world, with its round of birth, family life, reproduction, death, and rebirth, is contrasted with the higher ascetic path to release into a vaguely conceived heaven or transcendent reality. Paradoxically, through myths and rituals, the householder's earthly passage is penetrated by contradictory ascetic values of strict control of the body and its emotions. This contradiction is congruent with a deep cultural ambivalence toward women and their procreative roles.

In the symbolism of purity and pollution, so prominent in village Hinduism, normal organic processes unavoidable to the householder are considered polluting, while ritual purity and religious merit are achieved through a range of rituals and austerities centered most especially upon control of eating and sexuality. Narikot's women are responsible for most household ritual activity, and a woman's hard-won religious merit can bring benefits to her husband and his patriline as well as to herself.

Expressions of the values of fertility and asceticism are interwoven throughout the villag-

ers' life cycle rites, which emphasize the primacy of the patriline and its solidarity. While Bennett has clearly based her lengthy accounts of these ritual practices on detailed ethnographic data, she does not always indicate with sufficient clarity which of the associated beliefs she discusses were actually expressed by her village informants directly and which are more general Hindu concepts described by other scholars.

At the heart of the volume, in her analysis of the kinship system, Bennett delineates two contrasting yet interlocking models of kinship relations. In the dominant patrifocal model, the solidarity of agnatic males is cardinal, with males superior to females and age superior to youth. Although affinally related women are needed sources of progeny and labor, they are regarded as dangerous intruders, sexually distracting and threatening to the patriline's unity and purity. (Bennett, however, correctly questions the popular notion that disruptive affinal women are the prime cause of strife within the joint family [p. 179].)

In what Bennett terms the filiafocal model, consanguineal women, especially daughters, are deeply loved and treated as pure and sacred, ritually ranking higher than males. By logical extension, wife-takers—a groom's kinsmen—hold ritual superiority over wife-givers—the bride's kin. A woman's sexuality, so threatening to the ascetic ideal, is, through early marriage and relevant ritual, kept conceptually segregated from her natal kinship ties and associated only with her membership in her husband's patriline. In the home of her birth, a woman is always perceived as a pure virgin. The status of a mother appears to synthesize the opposing categories of affinal and consanguineal female kin.

These pervasive ambivalences concerning women have been described by other researchers for many areas of South Asia. Bennett's special contribution is her clear articulation of these contrasting yet intertwined structural principles and, in the latter half of the book, her detailed analysis of the manner in which they are manifested in a variety of complex rituals and myths. Of particular interest are her discussions of calendrical rites symbolically channeling women's sexuality toward approved patrilineal ends. For example, observing Tij-Rishi Panchami in the rainy season, large groups of women adorned in their blood-red wedding saris fast and dance together. Later, they assemble on river banks to enthusiastically purify themselves with hundreds of ablutions. Another festival, Dasai, provides opportunities for men to worship and attempt to

control the destructive and nurturing Goddess Durga, symbolizing the patriline's vulnerability to and dependence upon its affinal women.

The liveliest section of the work is a chapter on how the two dimensions of status affect the lives and relationships of actual women. Vivid case study materials bring to life the bearers and subjects of these complex symbolic notions. Regrettably, this section is all too short, and in the rest of the volume there is a paucity of such intimate glimpses of female experience.

Chapter 1, which is oddly organized and suffers from some significant omissions, tantalizes the South Asianist by only briefly mentioning "the parma system" of labor exchange groups arranged by women (pp. 23, 24). The fact that the Narikot villagers—never enumerated—share but two pairs of oxen rates only a footnote (p. 33). This reviewer searched the book in vain for more information on this intriguing co-operation in agricultural endeavors. In fact, while material matters are mentioned, they are decidedly minimized throughout the study (see especially p. 136). The author's reluctance to proceed beyond the realm of ideology and symbolism leads to some apparently circular explanations and to inadequate treatment of the practical material importance of the much-exalted agnatic solidarity to both men and women.

Bennett's study is well-written and produced, with but few typographical errors. Nicely-drawn figures and clear photographs illustrate the text, and a glossary is helpful to those unfamiliar with Nepali.

Some chapters are perhaps overly detailed, and the volume may be heavy going for some readers, especially those not well acquainted with Hinduism. However, all serious scholars of South Asian social structure, gender roles, and religion will find much of interest in this insightful and informed study.

Jack GOODY, *The Development of Family and Marriage in Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983. 308 pages, U.S. \$39.50 (cloth), U.S. \$12.95 (paper).

By Joseph McHugh
University of Regina

In his latest work, Goody applies his considerable experience as a social anthropologist to a far ranging body of historical data, to the effect of