



**Compte rendu de: Indian Nepalis. Issues and Perspectives, 2009. Edited by T.B. Subba, A.C. Sinha, G.S. Nepal, D.R. Nepal, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 398p.**

Tristan Bruslé

**► To cite this version:**

Tristan Bruslé. Compte rendu de: Indian Nepalis. Issues and Perspectives, 2009. Edited by T.B. Subba, A.C. Sinha, G.S. Nepal, D.R. Nepal, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 398p.. European Bulletin of Himalayan Research, 2009, pp.178-182. halshs-01694589

**HAL Id: halshs-01694589**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01694589>**

Submitted on 29 Jan 2018

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**35-36**

Autumn 2009-Spring 2010

**EBHR**

**EUROPEAN BULLETIN  
OF HIMALAYAN RESEARCH**

*Special double issue: Nepalese migrations*

view. Mrigendra B. Karki and David Gellner's sociological approach to activism in Nepal includes important data on the way Marxist ideas penetrated Nepal's educated elite during the Panchayat era. Indeed, the influence wielded by Gorky's *Mother* needed to be stressed. In the next chapter, Joanna Pfaff evaluates our knowledge of the violation of human rights as being very selective, and she underlines the fragmentation of protest movements when faced with the construction of dams in India and Nepal. Finally, Kioko Ogura's chapter on various villages in western Nepal under Maoist rule provides detailed information on this key-period in Nepalese history. Few scholars ventured into these regions during the People's War and Ogura's data are thus extremely precious. In her conclusion, the author suggests that one of the main causes of the conflict was "antipathy towards the State".

The volume ends with Jonathan Parry's eloquent discussion on the changes observed in caste organisation, in which he explores its two possible evolutions and/or interpretations: a tendency towards a merging of castes or an emphasis on their differences.

I personally regret that the discussion on caste, which forms the most coherent ensemble in the volume, is mainly based on urban cases, and, especially, as far as Nepal is concerned, on Newar society. Still, it is a very thought-provoking volume and it is impossible to do justice to the very rich ethnography and the many discussions contained within the span of only a few lines. To conclude, I would add that the volume is of further interest in presenting us with recent research carried out by our Japanese colleagues, which is not always readily accessible. We certainly recommend it to all social scientists working on the Indian sub-continent.

**Indian Nepalis. Issues and Perspectives. 2009. Edited by Subba T.B., Sinha A.C., Nepal G.S., Nepal D.R., New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 398 p. ISBN 9788180694462**

Reviewed by Tristan Bruslé

This book, a publication of part of a research seminar held in Gangtok in April 2006, may be seen as a sequel to *The Nepalis in Northeast India* (2003), yet from a broader perspective. After having focused on the identity of Nepalis in North-East India in the latter book, Indian of Nepali origin (INO) researchers, Indians of non Nepali origin and two Westerners raise certain "issues and perspectives" about Indian Nepalis. As for the "5 to 10 million" INOs (Sinha: 18), identity issues are still at the forefront of their demands,

and as recent events in West Bengal prove, the identity and sense of belonging of INOs are a subject of debate. Therefore, identity issues remain central to the book.

The book is divided into five parts: 1) Conceptual and theoretical issues 2) Search for an Indian identity 3) Regional identities of Indian Nepalis 4) Nepali sub-cultures: youth, women, food and medicine 5) India-Nepal links: history, literature and people. There is an index at the end of the volume.

Many authors recall that Nepalis in India are the product of colonial state politics, when it was easy to travel around South Asia, even for Nepalis who did not belong to the British Raj. They show the diversity of the migrants who came “as soldiers, graziers, farmers, porters, traders, sawyers, *chowkidars*, etc.” (Passah: 238). Bidhan Golay writes a challenging article about the formation of the Gorkha identity in British India, at a “time of modernity” when “the hill-man was turned into a reified commodity” (Golay: 83). According to this author, the Gorkha identity must indeed be studied within the framework of the colonial discourse on ‘martial races’: “colonialism violently disrupted the social-conceptual world of the Gorkhas, taking away his freedom by permanently colonising his body. The gorkha subject was dislocated by stripping off his past and relocated him back again a deterritorialised subject of ‘History’” (Golay: 79). As such, the history of the Gurkhas should be re-written: “there is a need to reconstitute the Gorkhas as a historical character, rehabilitate their consciousness and agency in history” (*Ibid.*: 87). When studying the willingness of Indians of Nepali Origin to assert themselves, Chalmers describes the formation of a group consciousness, in a very documented article about the “emergent Nepali public sphere” at the beginning of the twentieth century in Banaras and Darjeeling, at a time when the former lost its influence over the Nepali community in India for the latter’s benefit. In Darjeeling, a process of language unification accompanied the idea of creating a society turned towards Western-oriented progress (*unnati*) through education. Chalmers dates the beginning of the creation of *nepaliness* to this period, when elites realised that “the promotion of Nepali education was only one front in a broader struggle for cultural recognition and community representation” (p.116). The means to achieve these goals were the circulation of printed books through the creation of libraries (the first ‘Gorkha library’ opened in Kurseong in 1918), the standardisation of the Nepali language and its official teaching in schools, which was instituted in 1926 in Bengal. In 1924, the first guide to Nepali literature for second-grade students was published. The importance of literary associations and of journals was stressed by the Nepali elite at the time as a way to elevate their community not on the base of their birth but according to “formal education skills” (Chalmers: 128). This

accompanied a shift towards a new society “from a traditional model to a more open model” (*Ibid.*). The making of an Indian Nepali culture is perfectly reflected in Upadhyaya’s article about how, from the end of the 1920s to 1980s, Nepalese novels “captured the social, economic, political, educational and cultural problems of the Nepalis in Northeast India” (Upadhyaya: 204).

Going through the articles in the volume, one realises that history is always written in relation to identity and belonging issues. Gurung (from p.259 onwards) describes how indentured labour from Eastern Nepal was used by colonial companies to exploit coal mines in Assam. Here again, the author shows how the racial discourse about particular races being adapted to strenuous work benefited the Nepalese. The commoditization of the Gurkhas as a martial race is illustrated by the fact that “their recruitment in the coal mines was [considered] a gross wastage of valuable natural resources” (Gurung p.269). In the 1920s, as the mine recruitment process in Gorakhpur competed with recruitment for the Gurkha regiments, it was finally forbidden to recruit martial races in the mines.

Despite asserting their belonging to India, Indians of Nepali origin still have not found their rightful place in the Indian political landscape. The problem of their assimilation with Nepalese citizens still hampers their vows to appear as a distinct community. Their colonial identity as “the sahibs’ faithful boys” (Sinha: 12) is pervasive among non Nepali Indians: the quest for a non derogatory identity was launched decades ago, but no solution has yet been found. It has been further aggravated by the fact that Nepalis stand divided (Sinha: introduction). As a result, INOs are “puzzled” (Sinha: 4) and their children are even qualified as IBCNs or India-Born Confused Nepali<sup>17</sup> (Sharma: 277). Hutt sees manifestations of an identity crisis in the study of literature where both the pride and the pain of being Nepali are depicted. The need to build an Indian Nepali nationalism within India is somewhat contradicted by cultural bonds with Nepal “that could neither be severed nor denied” (Hutt: 39). The question of the compulsory distance *vis-à-vis* Nepal and the Nepalese lies between the lines of all the articles.

Issues of belonging find expression in the recurrent debate about names: “the very nomenclature of the community creates confusion even among them and their neighbours” (Sinha: 3). Nepalis referring to themselves sometimes as Bhargoli, Bharpali, Nepamul Bharatiya, INOs (favoured in the 2003 book) or Gorkhas have to put up with sometimes derogatory names given by non-Nepalis, such as *Daju*, *Bahadur* or *Kancha*. For Subba, the issue of names remains crucial since it is vital for INOs to

---

<sup>17</sup> This refers to ABC (American Born Chinese) out of which ABCD (American Born Confused Desi) was coined by Non-Resident Indians.

not be considered foreigners or as “second class citizens of India” (p.385). By coining a new name, the goal is indeed to widen the gap between themselves and Nepalese migrants who “leave leaving behind a mess for Indian Nepalīs to clean up” (p.385). Subba proposes “Sakhaa” (friend) as “Indian Nepalīs need a de-territorialised and de-ethnicised identity for they are not only de-territorialised in India but also have frequently experienced ethnic anger of the locally dominant communities” (p.392). A few authors focus on the regional identities of Nepalīs, and especially on the history of their arrival in North-East India, that is Mizoram, Meghalaya and Assam. The role of the Gurkhas to attract their countrymen in a chain migration type of movement is emphasised and the different niches where Nepalīs are employed are recalled in the same way as in the 2003 book. Yet these articles merely seem to hint at research which in fact needs go into more depth. The overall portrayal of INOs, in Assam, in Mizoram or elsewhere shows them as still inhabited by uncertainty and the fear of being evicted as they were from Bhutan or from Meghalaya. This fear translates into pain (*dukha*): “this sense of ancestral *dukha* underpins much of the experience of being Nepali in India, and characterises much Indian Nepali literature” (Hutt: 32). This “sense of historical *dukha*” (Hutt: 34) could be one of the things that binds all INOs together. Except for a common history and language, what are the other factors? The book does not really provide any answers.

Sinha, in a new research proposal, compares the fate and situation of INOs and Nepalese of Indian Origin (NIO), both “invisible, yet exploited” (p.372) communities. They have numerous points in common, like being rarely studied by academics and politically under-represented in their own country, whereas they have both fought for the sake of their country, against the Ranas on the one hand and in the freedom movement on the other. Their treatment as “non-existent citizens” (p.379) or as a threat to national unity must be understood, as Sinha says, within the ongoing context of nation-building exercises in South Asia.

In order to find a solution to their identity crisis, INOs also have to go beyond their differences so that a “strong ethnic solidarity” (Sinha: 13) emerges among them. That is also the problem with a new name: it is easy to find one but difficult to have it adopted by so many different Nepali communities. Subba thinks the future of the “Sakhaas” goes through a more detailed writing of their history, a focus on language and the abrogation of the 1950 India-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship.

Despite bringing new themes about Nepali Indians to the forefront and evoking in-depth analysis of identity issues from a strong historical perspective, which is of great benefit to anyone interested in Nepal or India, the book does have its limits. First, it often oscillates between a manifesto written by INOs for the sake of their own community and a

more classical academic book, with a disparate quality between each article. Some authors tend to say “we” when speaking about INOs. As confirmed by Subba (p.26), this book may provide some guidance to the Nepali youth, intellectuals and opinion makers. However, for the non INO reader, the impression may be confusing. Secondly, it is regrettable that studies of Indian Nepalīs still concentrate on North-East India. This is understandable, as it is where the greater concentration of Nepalīs are located, but it would be of great interest to learn about the numerous Indian Nepali communities who live in big cities like Delhi or Mumbai. The Gorkha community from Derhadun is, for example, completely absent from the book and, to my knowledge, no study has ever been made of it. The need to differentiate between the different INO communities would clarify things and highlight the bonds between them. As Golay (p.75) says, there is no “comprehensive study of the contributions of social and cultural movements in Darjeeling and elsewhere towards the formation of a distinct Gorkha identity”. Thirdly, except for general statements about the INOs and their occupation, and two articles about food (Tamang: 296) and herbal medicine (Chhetri: 311), anthropological, religious or cultural studies should really be enhanced in order to understand practices and the world view of INOs. Grass-root data about INOs are lacking for the community to be fully understood. Overall, the assumption that what unites Indian Nepalīs is a common language, a common origin and history has not been totally checked at local level. The question is raised in the introduction, but there are very few hints as to its answer. The reader is given no information about the links between scattered communities, though some study of them would have been of great interest. And finally, the term diaspora, seldom used, is not really re-appraised. The question remains: are Indian Nepalīs part of a diaspora, whether south Asian or global, or are they just another Indian ethnic group?

***Nomads of Eastern Tibet. Social Organization and Economy of a Pastoral Estate in the Kingdom of Dege, by RINZIN THARGYAL. Edited by Toni HUBER. Leiden: Brill, Brill's Tibetan Studies Library 15. xii + 222 p. ISBN 978 90 04 15813 9.***

Rewieived by Pascale Dollfus

*Nomads of Eastern Tibet* is a monograph of a pastoralist community from the Kham region in Eastern Tibet during the mid-20th century. This small and mutually dependent community, known as Zilphukhog, was located in the Kingdom of Dege whose prestige and power at the time was quashed