

Kultur und Geschichte Nepals

By Axel Michaels. Stuttgart: Kröner, 2018, 495 pp., including glossary, register of persons, index of places and subjects, illustrations, ISBN 978-3-520-21201-6 (print), ISBN 978-3-520-21291-7 (e-book).

Reviewed by Michael Mühlich

This book, as the title indicates, is dedicated to the relationship between Nepal's culture and history. The chapters cover various aspects of this relationship – such as the history of the Kathmandu Valley; the history of individual regions; the state, economy and society; the history of the country's religions; art and culture; and the architectural history of the Kathmandu Valley – and thus provide a comprehensive, richly detailed overview of the history of Nepal. In a nutshell, the book is about the cultural foundations, achievements and the effects of rule and power-sharing in Nepal. Axel Michaels, former Senior Professor of Indology at the South Asia Institute of the University of Heidelberg, draws above all on his in-depth knowledge of local historical documents, inscriptions on temples and other historic buildings, on records from European archives and on his knowledge of the legal framework of the 1854 *Muluki Ain* ('state law') that was conceived during the Rana regime. From the historical picture thus drawn, which also takes in the early history of Nepal, he tries to explain the legitimisation of the division of rule and power – still felt in the present – between the (former) royal and (today increasingly) disparate political actors, such as the prime minister, high-ranking officials, district administrators and leaders of ethnic groups. This powersharing has, as the author summarises in the final chapter, been able to survive mainly because of the feudal distribution of landed property, which, 'alongside coercion and the ideology of the supposedly unifying Hindu king',¹ created a system that 'to a frightening extent worked to the detriment of the peasants, the Tibetoid population groups and the casteless' (p. 414). However, the author also notes the following: 'Notwithstanding the weak points mentioned, the strengthening of

1 All quotes from A. Michaels' book have been translated from the German by Philip Pierce. Responsibility for the correctness of the translation remains with the author.

(Hindu) religion has not hindered modernisation and the first steps towards the equal treatment of people, or state unity' (p. 411). It was precisely in the nineteenth century, during the period when the Nepalese nation state and Nepalese state law were emerging, that 'a certain secure legal framework and the first steps towards equality before the law were introduced' – steps that stood 'in opposition to arbitrary feudal rule' (ibid). But what was the sharing of power rooted in?

The introductory chapters present the sources and a general understanding of 'land' and 'people', and also the social order as historically shaped by the caste system. According to Michaels, it is above all the *Chronicle of the Kings* which is important as a source for comprehending the development of historical power structures in Nepal. Summarising its chapters, he states that it clearly has a legitimising function in that it mixes miracles performed by the rulers in its narrative of past events (p. 20). In the latter, save a few exceptions, the interaction between humans and between rulers and subjects was not viewed critically, and this way of thinking – of transfiguring the past – seems to persist in official discourse today. The general classification of Nepal's main population groups adopted by the author from the 2011 census thus reflects the persistence of an ideology under which the social cohesion of the caste system was shaped (compare also Nepal Tamang Ghedung, UNDP Report 2006).

The thinking shaped by the caste system, that is, the ideology of purity and impurity in particular, is explained by the author on the basis of András Höfer's study (1979) of the *Muluki Ain* of 1854. This law code, promulgated during the rule of the first hereditary prime minister of Nepal, Jang Bahadur Rana, defined a hierarchy of castes (p. 45 ff.). For the purpose of the author's line of argument, special emphasis is placed on the distinction between the 'enslavable' (*masinya*) and 'non-enslavable' (*namasinya*) subgroups among the ranks of the 'alcohol-drinking castes' (*matwali jat*), the latter – with reference to their ritual traditions – here being members of the Janajatis. As gathered from ethnographic studies (eg Egli 1999 on the Sunuwars, Oppitz 1968 on the Sherpas), alcohol is not only served as a drink among these groups, but also features in an important manner in rituals performed during ceremonies. As the author rightly explains, the transgression of purity/impurity rules applying to all castes could lead to severe forms of punishment (including

enslavement) for members of lower castes, while the same offence was sometimes sanctioned with simple penance ceremonies for members of higher castes.

Beginning with the chapter on the 'History of the Kathmandu Valley', Michaels develops his thesis relating to the division of power on the basis of a precise description of the shifting history of rule. The earliest indications of rulers in the Kathmandu Valley, according to the chronicle, date back to the Kiratas, while the first secure dynasty, whose stone inscriptions can be traced back to the beginning of the sixth century, is the Licchavi dynasty. The author emphasises: 'The most consequential ideology that the Licchavis, whether descendants of the Indian Licchavis or not, brought to Nepal was the hierarchical caste system' (p. 61 ff.). The chronicles further suggest that peace reigned over the Kathmandu Valley at least between 600 and 753. The last Licchavi inscription dates from 877 (p. 67). There followed a 'dark period' lasting three centuries of which little historical evidence remains. Gradually, several city kingdoms emerged: Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, Lalitpur (Patan), Banepa and others. Of these, Bhaktapur was especially powerful until the end of the fifteenth century (p. 68). However, the transitional period also gave rise to many new phenomena, which still attract great interest among visitors to Nepal: stories of saints (yogins, siddhas) said to have had supernatural powers (such as Matsyendranath and Gorakhanath), and the Avalokitesvara/Bungadyah cult associated with grand processions (p. 70). The following period of the Newar (or Malla) rulers (thirteenth–eighteenth centuries), whose kingdoms competed with each other in the Kathmandu Valley, continues to make its presence felt through its monastic foundations and many historical buildings erected in honour of gods. As Michaels notes concerning the chronicles of the Malla period: 'Kingship was often expressed in the Malla period not so much in the tools of power as in symbolic and ritual power – as when the king, for instance, weighed out his own weight in gold and donated it to a temple. The king himself was considered a god (Vishnu), but he also had to provide for the other gods because otherwise disaster threatened. In the inscriptions, kings almost always called themselves the "ruler" (literally "God") of Nepala (*nepalesvara*)' (p. 75).

The period of the Gorkha monarchy (1768/69–1846) brought about a change in the tools of power, which became, in Michaels' view, primarily

legitimated on military grounds. The conquest of the Kathmandu Valley by Prithvi Narayan Shah was followed by demonstrations of military superiority and brutality until the last Malla kingdom of the Kathmandu Valley was subjugated (p. 82). The Gorkha rulers also had to combat envy and competition within their own ranks, which resulted, among other things, from the law of agnate succession (p. 128). Another factor in the special division of power lay in the concept of 'land' as understood at the time. In the wake of their conquests, which amounted to approximately the area covered by today's State of Nepal, the Gorkhalis claimed what the petty kings had earlier claimed (p. 87). However, their expansion ran up against a completely different notion of territorial claims, especially in the Tarai lowlands in the south of the country. As Michaels writes: 'Above all, it was two different concepts of territorial power and of its borders that clashed here: the British, who set up in India a sort of land registry office similar to what they were familiar with in their motherland, wanted clearly defined borders'. For the Gorkhalis, however, 'it was more important to control and exploit the land. They understood landownership as an inheritable right to use the land, especially as this applied to petty kings in the mountains, who could either use the land in the Tarai from time to time or else claim taxes on it. Landowners might simultaneously be paying taxes to two rulers from different territories' (p. 86). In their expansion, for example, the Gorkhalis encountered idiosyncratic notions of communal land use and property rights (called *kipat*), which they did not dispute as long as they received the levies they demanded.

Then the period of hereditary prime ministers (*ranas*) dawned. In 1846, Jang Bahadur Rana seized power in a coup d'état that has gone down in history as the 'Kot Massacre' and had the Shah ruler, King Surendra, grant him the title Maharaja of Kaski and Lamjung. This raised Jang Bahadur family to a level on a par with the royal household that legitimated future marital bonds between the Ranas and the Shahs (p. 95). Under his rule, the first state code of law (*Muluki Ain*) was written. This relatively harsh law code was reinforced under Chandra Shamsher (1901-1929), as in the passing of laws abolishing suttee in 1920 and slavery in 1925. At the same time, Chandra Shamsher further strengthened the caste system so that even certain Rana subgroups were excluded from power (p. 97). Although the details disclosed in this chapter may

seem familiar to us, as previously presented for example by Karl-Heinz Krämer (1996), Michaels' use of chronicles as original sources provides a deeper understanding and vivid descriptions through contemporary testimonies.

A review of the chapter on the history of individual regions is omitted here for lack of space. However, this chapter covers highly interesting details, such as the history of the Khasa-Malla kingdom in western Nepal, the traditional legal system in Mustang, the oral traditions of the Rais or the system of post-runners created by the Gorkhas included in the author's short presentation of the Sherpas. In the chapter on 'The State, Economy and Society', Michaels provides a fine overview of the categories of land (land as fiefs, land as a reward, land grants as religious merit, land as remuneration, land for loyalty and land under communal ownership), which are dealt with in detail in early articles of the Muluki Ain. This testifies to the great historical importance of land allocation in Nepal, as detailed by Mahesh Chandra Regmi (1978). As the territorial expansion of the Gorkhalis and the Ranas reached its limits, their interest increasingly shifted to the land of local populations and ethnic groups. In the long term, as Michaels notes, the communal land use (*kipat*) system in ethnic-majority regions could not survive. This was primarily due to the introduction of Hindu caste groups as settlers as part of the state's expansion, which granted them taxable fallow land as *raikar* land (p. 173). In the event of non-payment of the required tax, the threat of individual family members being enslaved and their lands expropriated loomed large (thus threatening the basis of peasant existence). In this context, Michaels points out that most Nepalese people who migrated to areas around Darjeeling in Sikkim in the nineteenth century came from ethnic groups, whereas hardly any Brahmans or Chetris were registered among the migrants of that time (p. 195). There were just as many terms for forms of thralldom – such as socage, forced labour and bondage – as there were terms for the awarding of land. As the author notes (p. 206), debt bondage was officially abolished by law only in 2000. The implicit argument that loyalty to the state and to the Rana rulers' tax policy was forced comes up rather short, however, since the latter could only be applied to land that was already under state administration (ie *raikar* land). In the case of communal landownership (*kipat*), land had first to be converted one way or another into *raikar* land. Here the author

would have done well to consult Philippe Sagant's extremely reliable and comprehensive 1996 study on the process of Hinduisation and to mention it for critical discussion (Sagant 1996). In it, the concatenation of events leading to the indebtedness and Hinduisation of the Limbus is thematised. With the acceptance of the new ruling class's cultural norms came Hindu customs that were associated with large expenses for certain ceremonies. In particular, the Hindu tradition of marriage called for a hefty dowry from the family of the bride to be handed over to the groom's family. This has been a significant factor in household debt in Nepal. At the time of the *kipat* system, although usufructuary rights of the land held under that system were transferred to a creditor for a period of time to pay off a debt, the land itself was supposed to be returned to either the debtor or the local headman, but new settlers refused to fall in line with this. Instead, new settlers and Indo-Nepalese moneylenders might offer new loans to the debtors in order to secure a permanent lease on the land, which, according to Sagant, slowly led to a transformation of *kipat* land into *raikar* land.

Michaels' focus is more on what evidence from historical chronicles has to say about the relationships between the ruling class and the regions it dominated. As he notes in reference to Richard Burghart's article 'The Formation of the Concept of Nation-State' (1984), within the history of the kingdom of Nepal notions of the specific nature of territorial claims come into play that are not, as they are today in Western thinking, based on the territorial claims of a single ruler or state (p. 132). In the Malla period it was land donations and donations in honour of temples and for the celebration of festivals that were especially effective publicly. In the Shah and Rana eras, the symbolic concept of power morphed into what Michaels describes in his own words as a 'domain' ('Domäne', *ibid*) of the ruling class within which it claimed and shared power and land, and which found heightened expression in the notion of the ruler being the protector of the people and the land, and of his heroism and struggle to claim legitimate power.

What impression does the reader gain from Michaels' account of Nepal's culture and history? His thesis in the final chapter is that Nepal's position in the world has much to do with the particular path it has taken towards forming a state within a multi-ethnic and multireligious context, and its styling itself as the last Hindu kingdom in the world

(p. 406). The main local rulers, whether king, prime minister, senior officials or political leaders and popular leaders, have successively adopted legitimising elements of the past, including its enduring rituals, because they are aware of their symbolic power and efficacy. An interesting question here would be: how, in the history of Nepal, has the legitimacy of the rulers shifted, in Max Weber's terms, from the traditional legitimation of power to the category of charismatic rule? Is Nepal really, as Michaels refers to Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, on the way towards 'pluricultural integration', in the course of which there will be an increasing ethnicisation of politics and minorities will claim their rights and have them enshrined in the constitution (p. 419)? Although I have only been able to discuss excerpts from Michaels' rich work here, I would strongly recommend that anyone interested in Nepal read his book. However, readers should also be willing, with regard to the sources mentioned by the author, to form their own picture of Nepal's culture and of its ethnographic diversity.

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Michael Mühlich is external lecturer at the Institut für Ethnologie, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main and author of *Credit & Culture. A Substantivist Perspective on Credit Relations in Nepal* (2001).

muehlich@em.uni-frankfurt.de