
The ideology of sacrifice in Nepal: self-sacrifice and interaction of the main actors, especially Dalits and Indigenous People. Comments on Marie Lecomte-Tilouine' *Sacrifice et Violence*

L'idéologie du sacrifice au Népal : sacrifice de soi et interaction entre les principaux acteurs, Dalits et populations indigènes en particulier

Marine Carrin



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ebhr/1884>

ISSN: 2823-6114

Publisher

Centre d'études sud-asiatiques et himalayennes (UMR8077 CNRS/EHESS)

Electronic reference

Marine Carrin, "The ideology of sacrifice in Nepal: self-sacrifice and interaction of the main actors, especially Dalits and Indigenous People. Comments on Marie Lecomte-Tilouine' *Sacrifice et Violence*", *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* [Online], 61 | 2023, Online since 28 December 2023, connection on 16 January 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ebhr/1884> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ebhr.1884>

This text was automatically generated on January 16, 2024.



The text only may be used under licence CC BY 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) are "All rights reserved", unless otherwise stated.

The ideology of sacrifice in Nepal: self-sacrifice and interaction of the main actors, especially Dalits and Indigenous People. Comments on Marie Lecomte-Tilouine' *Sacrifice et Violence*

L'idéologie du sacrifice au Népal : sacrifice de soi et interaction entre les principaux acteurs, Dalits et populations indigènes en particulier

Marine Carrin

- 1 This book analyses the Dasain ritual which is performed every year in September/October for the goddess of the same name. For seven days, the goddess is worshipped and her mythological narrative is read, while the last two days are marked by the sacrifices of numerous animals: he-goats and buffaloes. For the first few days, the goddess is represented in each house by a pot filled with water and two dishes containing leaves and barley, and she is worshipped by three Brahmins and two kshatryas. However, on the 8th day, the goddess's *shakti* and divine wrath increase. She is a warrior goddess and is now called Durga.
- 2 The buffalo sacrifice is central to the rite and the myth explains how kingship and caste society are produced by the sacrifice. Kings venerate the goddess and make an offering sprinkled with their own blood. The Dasain festival renews royal power and is celebrated with sacrifices in villages as well as in the ancient capitals of small kingdoms, of which there were once many in Nepal. While 54 buffalos and 54 he-goats are sacrificed at the palace in Kathmandu, other palaces in the small kingdoms have their own traditional ways of celebrating the ritual. For example, the royal palace of Dullu becomes a temple of fire where the king is represented as an ascetic. The coming

of the goddess to the margins of the kingdom makes the royal palace a secluded place and the king an ascetic. In other words, the sacrifice not only renews royal power but it also reveals its limits when the king, a quasi-divine figure, becomes an ascetic.

- 3 The way the sacrifice is performed varies from one kingdom to another but, as Lecomte-Tilouine stresses, sacrificial violence is central to the ritual. She refers to Charles Malamoud's analysis of the Vedic ritual in which he stresses that violence is necessary to the sacrifice but that Vedic texts underline the importance of sparing the victim any suffering, since the intention of the rite is not to destroy the victim (Malamoud 1989). Instead, the victim should be appeased so that, for the sacrificer, it may open up a way to the world beyond. However, Lecomte-Tilouine says, the immolation of the victim is associated with masculinity and, in the past, the king himself was both *jajman*, the one who orders the sacrifice, and the actual sacrificer. In some places, as in Dullu, the king himself makes a cut in the buffalo's hide before he leaves the Kshatriyas to conclude the sacrifice. Generally speaking, men are allowed to perform the sacrifice for their lineage gods and Kshatriyas are in charge of the buffalo sacrifice in royal houses and temples. Neither Brahmins nor women can perform the sacrifice: only those who are authorised to kill are allowed to perform the sacrifice.
- 4 The author endeavours to show that sacrificial violence in Nepal is linked to violence in warfare. She quotes Jan Heesterman (1995: 637–654) who writes that, in the earlier Vedic period, the realm of sacrifice is defined as a field for a battle between warriors. For Lecomte-Tilouine, the relationship between sacrifice and violence, which disappeared from late-Vedism texts, can still be observed in Nepal. This last point is hard to prove but the link to violence is also found in the cult of the swords which exalts the warriors.
- 5 To what extent is the sacrifice a self-sacrifice? When the medium offers drops of his own blood, he performs a self-sacrifice which is morally acceptable from a Brahmanical perception of self-sacrifice. In Nepal, the warrior who engages in battle is described as performing a self-sacrifice. During the people's war (1996–2006), the death of the warrior on the battlefield did not entail death impurity for the members of his lineage. Lecomte-Tilouine argues that the violence deployed in the civil war evokes the sacrificial violence of the Dasain festival. In other words, the violence of warfare is seen as being in keeping with the sacrificial violence of Dasain, and this violence contributes to the sanctification of the martyrs of the revolution. In the people's war, the warrior's engagement is described as a sacrificial offering of his own person.
- 6 Lecomte-Tilouine describes the engagement among the revolutionary forces as an initiatory voyage to a parallel world. For her, the martyr of the revolution evokes the renouncer who interiorises his sacrificial fires, just as – but she does not mention this – the Rajput warrior does before going onto the battlefield. During the People's War, the death of a warrior is followed by an afterlife described in the poems and texts that the warrior addresses to their comrades. The warrior, moreover, become a cultural agent fighting the ancient feudal culture perceived as indecent to promulgate new values, such as equality and solidarity that people can celebrate in song, poems and theatre.
- 7 Following the fall of the monarchy and the proclamation of the constitution in 2006, Lecomte-Tilouine observes, the sacrifice was contested, mainly by Indigenous people and Dalits, but also by young people who tend to share an ideal of 'non-violence' in the sense of modern Hinduism where a vegetarian diet is adopted in reaction to the slaughtering of animals.

- 8 With the establishment of the ethnic census, Indigenous people have become conscious of their demographic importance (1/3 of the population). Lecomte-Tilouine tells us that contestation of sacrifice by Indigenous people is political and that it varies from one group to another, but she does not actually undertake an analysis of these differences. In general, she remarks, Indigenous people feel they have been manipulated by high castes since they have often lost their land and power. For the Magars, for example, the buffalo sacrifice explicitly stages the conquest of their ancestral lands by the Hindus. On the one hand, Indigenous people question the sacrificial rite which does not grant them the place they deserve and, on the other hand, as warriors, they worship the goddess as patron of warriors. In some places, as in Musikot, two kings exemplify the relationship Indigenous people enjoyed with royal power and with a previous chieftom. The Magar king is still in charge of the old royal deity and collaborates with the Thakuri king who is in charge of today's goddess. In Musikot, this ritual collaboration between the Magars and the Thakuris has prevented a boycott of the sacrifice.
- 9 Indigenous people rallied round to contest the sacrifice and to gain recognition from the Maoist party, while groups like the Rais or the Limbus seemed to become more influential in the Indigenous people's movement. We would have liked to have been better informed about these differences, thus enabling us to understand the way political thought is shaped among the Indigenous people of Nepal.
- 10 After the fall of the monarchy and the promulgation of the constitution in 1990, the untouchable castes united under the term Dalit to promote their interests. The Dalits, too, have boycotted the sacrifice and have opposed their obligation to eat the rotten meat of the sacrificed buffalos. But high castes have not hesitated to strike and even to kill Dalits when the latter refuse to eat the rotten meat. More importantly, Dalits have not succeeded in improving their human condition. Today, they use arguments about hygiene to refuse to eat the rotten meat, but with only limited success, and we wonder whether Dalits are still considered impure. Lecomte-Tilouine concludes that neither the boycott by the Dalits for hygiene reasons, nor the political boycott by Indigenous people affects the religious essence of the buffalo sacrifice. Does this mean that the religious essence of the sacrifice lies in the devotion to the goddess? If so, we wonder why the sacrifice remains so important.
- 11 The author maintains that during the People's War, military violence served to accentuate class consciousness while in fact evening out the difference, because the Maoist party was offering careers to everybody. Since 2001, the Maoists have confiscated royal property, introduced new norms of justice and imposition, and established parallel governments where Indigenous people, Dalits and women have found their place.
- 12 If we compare the People's War in Nepal with the Naxalite movement in Jharkhand (India), we realise that there is always a danger of reproducing old inequalities around caste, tribe and gender. From the beginning, the Naxalite cause in India attracted educated urban youth from dominant caste backgrounds, drawn by the idea of renouncing their home comforts to fight in a revolutionary movement for a better world. But over time, low-caste and tribal peoples joined the fight. Some of India's most disenfranchised people are now involved. However, while the mix of people from castes and tribal backgrounds fits the Maoist party's egalitarian message, the reality of life within a military organisation does not always correspond to revolutionary ideals, as

Alpa Shah (2018) shows. In the People's War in Nepal, kidnapping was a means of recruiting troops; I feel that Lecomte-Tilouine's analysis of the Maoist ideology might have put more emphasis on the contradictions experienced by Indigenous people and Dalits when confronted with the Maoist reforms. While the book offers us a rich ethnographic picture of royal rituals in Nepal and renews anthropological thought about sacrifice it tends to relegate political thought to the sidelines, and we are told little about the polemics that the People's War may have brought about. In other words, the central idea of self-sacrifice tends to romanticise the People's War and I feel that the glorification of violence blurs the political perspective.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Heesterman, J. 1995. 'Warrior, Peasant and Brahmin', *Modern Asian Studies* 29 (3): 637–654.
- Malamoud, C. 1989. *Cuire le monde. Rite et pensée dans l'Inde ancienne*. Paris; La Découverte.
- Shah, A. 2018. *Nightmarch: Among India's revolutionary guerrillas*. London: Hurst; Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

AUTHOR

MARINE CARRIN

Marine Carrin is emeritus senior researcher at LISST, Laboratoire Interdisciplinaire Solidarités Sociétés Territoires, Université Jean Jaurès Toulouse.