



BOOK REVIEW

AUTONOMY: Life Cycle, Gender, and Status among Himalayan Pastoralists By Aparna Rao, Berghahn Books, New York (First Published in 1998), 350pp, ISBN 1-57181-903-7

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Aparna Rao in her groundbreaking book titled “Autonomy” delves into the intricate relationship between individuals and their cultural context, focusing her ethnographic study on the Bakkarwal community of Kashmir. Through a meticulously detailed and immersive account, Rao explores the extent to which individual autonomy and agency are accessible to Bakkarwal men and women as they navigate through different stages of life. The book challenges prevalent assumptions and offers fresh perspectives on the dichotomy between Western individualism and South Asian collectivism.

Rao’s work takes a theoretical stance aligned with a growing cohort of anthropologists who question the widely accepted notion that South Asian societies are solely collectivistic. She positions herself within this critical discourse, aiming to shed light on the presence of individualism within South Asian conceptions of personhood, particularly within the culturally composite Bakkarwal community. By studying the Bakkarwal people’s ideologies and practices associated with autonomy, Rao seeks to expand our understanding of the dynamic interplay between individuals and their social groups. “Autonomy” provides a comprehensive examination of the Bakkarwal life cycle, delving into key stages such as birth, childhood socialisation, adolescent awakening, mate selection, marriage, parenthood, community integration, and old age. Throughout each phase, Rao skillfully examines the influence of factors such as class and gender, unearthing economic disparities and divergent gender roles that shape individuals’ opportunities for exercising autonomous decision-making and influencing others.

One notable strength of the book lies in its extensive utilisation and elucidation of indigenous concepts. Rao delves into the Bakkarwal lexicon,

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carefully unraveling the nuanced meanings and contextual implications of their terminology. By incorporating direct quotations from interviews and captivating narratives of observed interactions, she provides readers with an immersive experience and a profound understanding of Bakkarwal perspectives. This approach allows for a rich exploration of the semantics of culturally significant words and phrases, revealing their profound ties to the Bakkarwal worldview.

"Autonomy" sets itself apart by seamlessly integrating quantitative data with qualitative analysis. The book presents a wealth of demographic and statistical information, bolstering the validity of Rao's findings. Through numerous tables, kinship diagrams, and figures, readers gain insights into various aspects of Bakkarwal life, such as naming frequencies, perinatal mortality rates, and wedding costs, age at marriage, residential patterns, endogamous unions, and patrilineal hierarchies. These quantitative elements provide concrete evidence, further enhancing the book's analytical depth and offering avenues for future comparative research.

While the book's ambitious agenda, encompassing ethnographic description, cross-cultural comparison, and theoretical discourse, may occasionally pose challenges in terms of readability and coherence, Rao's contributions to the field are undeniably significant. "Autonomy" fills a critical gap in scholarship, offering a comprehensive understanding of the Bakkarwal community while stimulating thought-provoking discussions on the complex dynamics between individuality and culture in non-Western contexts.

One critique worth noting is the book's handling of Islamic texts. I have expressed concern about Aparna Rao's interpretation of Quranic verses and narrations from the Prophet Muhammad. Everyone can argue that her understanding of these sources is flawed and that she misinterprets their meanings. Scholars familiar with Islamic jurisprudence suggest that even a novice student would be able to identify the inaccuracies in her interpretations. It is important to recognise that the criticism centers specifically on Rao's treatment of Islamic texts and does not invalidate the broader insights and contributions of her ethnographic study. However, the perceived inaccuracies in her understanding of Islamic sources might raise questions about the book's credibility and the accuracy of her analysis within the Islamic cultural context. Readers with expertise in Islamic studies may find it necessary to approach these sections of the book with caution and consult more authoritative sources to gain a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

This thought-provoking book serves as a valuable resource for scholars and researchers interested in South Asian anthropology. Its meticulous exploration of autonomy within the Bakkarwal community, combined with Rao's emphasis on indigenous concepts and quantitative analysis, provides a foundation for ongoing dialogue and future investigations. "Autonomy" not only advances our knowledge of the Bakkarwal community but also offers broader insights into the intricate interplay between individuals, culture, and the pursuit of autonomy.