

A Journalist's Encyclopædia on the Democratic Movement in Nepal

Review >
South Asia

A defining moment in the political history of modern Nepal was the "Movement for the Restoration of Democracy", also known as the "People's Movement of 1990". Over a period of sixty days in the spring of that year, citizens of Nepal struggled to regain the democracy which they had briefly tasted some forty years earlier. In just a few months, the "partyless Panchayat system" was overthrown and a parliamentary constitution was established, with comparatively little bloodshed in the process. For scholars and students of Nepal who were not in the country during these momentous times (such as myself), it has long been difficult to get a real grip on the sequence of events as they unfolded in and around the Kathmandu valley and elsewhere in Nepal. My understanding of the movement was impressionistic and sketchy at best, based on second-hand information from individuals whose descriptions were tinged with a nostalgic sense of the inevitability of eventual success. Kiyoko Ogura's meticulously researched *Kathmandu Spring* fills an important niche in my understanding of the movement and, by providing such a wealth of detail, she has made an invaluable contribution to the growing literature on the restoration of democracy in Nepal.

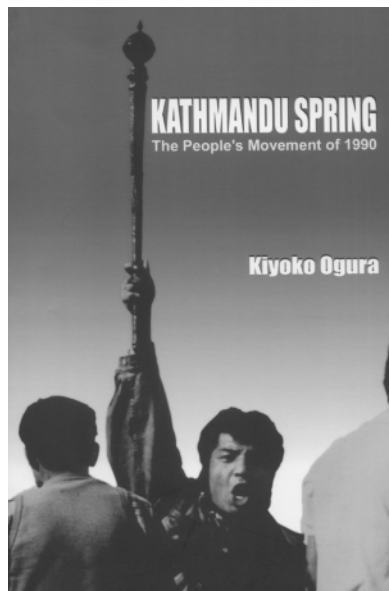
By Mark Turin

Ogura, a respected journalist and writer, first published this book in Japanese as *60 Days of a Shaking Kingdom* in 1999. Thankfully, Nepal-based Himal Books saw the value of an English edition and *Kathmandu Spring* is the result. Much to her credit, the author does not try to force history into tidy packets of pre-determined and logical fact, and nowhere is this approach more appropriate than in a country like Nepal. A sense of uncontrolled chaos pervades her account, whether in the innocent bystanders unwittingly caught in the middle of violent clashes (such as the nurse Vidya who leans out of the window to see what the noise is all about, and is hit by a stray bullet), or in the confusion about whether messages have reached their recipients across town given the difficulties presented by the imposition of a curfew. This 'real-time' tension is one of the most powerful features of *Kathmandu Spring*.

The book provides a detailed account of a modern political movement unfolding in a country with very little

modern infrastructure and a notable lack of access to communication technology. Not only was the uprising organized without mobile phones, e-mail, and television, but its leaders were under house arrest or in jail, the media was state controlled, and telephones were few and far between. Such a news vacuum is hard to imagine in the present international climate of pervasive media coverage. The account that emerges is one in which, despite these manifold difficulties, there were brave if uncoordinated underground activities, with activists in Patan not knowing what their colleagues across the river in Kathmandu were planning or doing. Ogura masterfully paints a picture of sporadic demonstrations loosely held together by a shared vision of democracy, but with diverse means and varying motivations.

The choice of subtitle reveals an important feature of the book: *An Account based on the Oral Testimony of 1050 People*. As Ogura informs us in her preface, the "contents of this book are only a small part of the massive testimonies I collected from more than one



thousand individuals". This encyclopaedic breadth is both the strength and the weakness of her work. *Kathmandu Spring* is, for want of a better pair of adjectives, both exhaustive and a little exhausting. While the text reads well and is at many points genuinely engaging, her documentary and journalistic style offers, by definition, little

dramatic tension or denouement. As a consequence, while the history lesson is welcome and important, the manner of narration and documentary style is reminiscent of a reference book, and reference books are dipped into more than they are read. The position of *Kathmandu Spring* as a source book on the democratic movement in Nepal is further brought home by the pages of dense type listing all the interviewees: terribly impressive, but also rather daunting. Ogura does include an appendix of major players, or "Dramatic personae, post-1990 Movement", for the convenience of the reader, but this does little to change the fact that we are confronted with new names, places, dates, and political parties on every page.

Finally, the "Foreword" by Kanak Mani Dixit, a noted Nepalese journalist, raises some interesting issues. In under five pages, he neatly summarizes the importance of Ogura's work and provides the reader with a brief political history of Nepal. Rather than shying away from the emergence of the Maoist movement, active in the country since

the mid-1990s, Dixit confronts it head on. The Maoists, he suggests, are moving the nation "towards a political precipice" (ix). While the People's Movement that Ogura so carefully describes was largely an urban uprising, the Maoist insurgency affecting Nepal today is primarily active at a village level. Perhaps a suitable follow-up study for Ogura would be to turn her journalistic attention to the People's Movement from the perspective of rural villagers, many of whom feel themselves to be largely untouched by the events of 1990. ◀

reference

- Ogura, Kiyoko, *Kathmandu Spring: The People's Movement of 1990*, with a Foreword by Kanak Mani Dixit. Kathmandu: Himal Books, (2001), 232 + xi pages, 17 B&W photographs, fold-out map of Kathmandu, ISBN 99933 13 09 2.

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Tibetan Pilgrimage Texts

Pilgrimage is one of the more popular and visible rituals performed in Tibetan societies. Tibetans undertake pilgrimages to temples and sacred objects, to famous lamas and saints, and also to the holy sites of the Buddha in India, in much the same way as worshippers do in other neighbouring Buddhist regions of Asia. However, what makes Tibetan pilgrimage culture unique is the special ritual attention given to the remarkably extensive network of empowered natural landscape sites, especially mountains, lakes, and caves located throughout the rugged grandeur of the high plateau and the Himalaya.

Review >
Central Asia

By Toni Huber

In *Pèlerins, Lamas et Visionnaires*, Katia Buffetrille focuses our attention on the importance of such natural holy places for an understanding of Tibetan pilgrimage traditions. Buffetrille's book is one of a series of recent works dedicated to this topic, although it is neither a critical study of Tibetan pilgrimage culture as such, nor a detailed documentation of any particular pilgrimage ritual. The work is primarily intended as a scholarly sourcebook, one that offers an interesting and well-presented collection of textual materials to readers of French or Tibetan. Its contents represent a valuable resource for studies of the status and representation of natural holy sites in Tibetan religious culture.

Buffetrille divides the various texts she has selected into chapters, which concern eight different sites located around Tibet (west, east, and central) and Nepal (east) respectively. Readers will find the original texts, lightly edited for spelling and in Tibetan script, printed on left pages. A reliable and well-annotated parallel French translation is given on the opposite pages. The book is complemented by an excellent set of indices and also several maps, one of which is an example of inscribed native cartography of the Solu Khumbu region of Nepal, and which is included as an A2-sized reproduction stored in a pocket inside the back cover. With only one exception, the texts themselves are all Buddhist in origin, and their composition dates range from at least the beginning of the seventeenth century up until recent decades.

After reading through the bulk of the texts, one is struck by how little the style and content of these examples of Tibetan pilgrimage literature have changed over the past four centuries.

For non-specialists, the most interesting chapters of this book are likely to be those dedicated to Mount Kailash (or Gangs Ti se in Tibetan), and sites in and around the Sherpa country at the foot of Mount Everest in Nepal since such places are now quite well known in the West thanks to tourism, mountaineering, and a colonial fascination with the once forbidden "roof of the world". While a number of the texts in this collection have been published before in various forms, and thus have already been available to specialists, scholars of Tibet will welcome the inclusion of some oral texts, particularly songs, which Buffetrille has managed to collect and edit. Another unique feature of the work is that Buffetrille has been able to present a more or less complete range of textual genres concerned with the cult life of the holy mountain, Amnye Machen, in eastern Tibet. These sources include different guidebooks for the mountain from both Buddhist and Bon authors, as well as prayers, songs, narratives for the fumigation rite, and traditional eulogies. One can thus begin to appreciate just how sophisticated and literate the worship of Buddhist cult mountains in Tibet is. Accompanying a few of the texts in the collection, readers will also find biographical materials on the Tibetan authors who wrote some of the pilgrimage guides translated in this work.

Reading through this wealth of Tibetan material, one soon realizes why a book concerned with sacred sites in the natural landscape is entitled *Pèlerins, Lamas et Visionnaires*. Tibetan lamas and yogis completely dominated the way in which landscape features came to be defined as empowered or holy in Tibet, and thereby the way in which they are understood by ordinary pilgrims as being important destinations for ritual journeys. The pages of all Buffetrille's Tibetan sources are peppered with the myriad clichés of the lamas' discourse about the natural landscape thoroughly understood through the lens of visionary, Tibetan-style, Vajrayana Buddhism. Under the weight of this textualized hegemony, precious little of the alternative local and more chthonic Tibetan worldview shines through. Viewed from this perspective, the popular practice of pilgrimage to mountains, lakes, and caves in Tibet is, in a sense, a recurring ritual testimony of the extent to which a Buddhist elite has managed to redefine the world in the image of its own interests. This is just one of many possible insights into which we may gain inspiration by studying the sources now available in Katia Buffetrille's *Pèlerins, Lamas et Visionnaires*. ◀

- Buffetrille, Katia, *Pèlerins, Lamas et Visionnaires. Sources Orales et Écrites sur les Pèlerinages Tibétains*. Wien: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien Universität Wien, (Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde, Heft 46), (2000): 377 pp., maps, No ISBN.

Dr Toni Huber is Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies at Victoria University, Wellington, an Alexander von Humboldt Fellow (1997-1998), and author of several books and numerous articles on Tibetan culture and society. He also has research interests in ritual, conceptions of nature, and hunting.

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