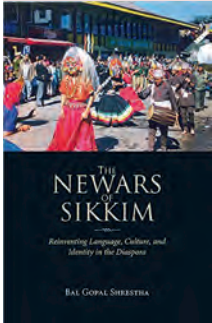


Adaptation and transformations in Sikkim

Studies of Newar diaspora inevitably give rise to comparisons between such communities as exemplified by the Newars of Sikkim – the focus of Bal Gopal Shrestha’s monograph being reviewed here – and Newar settlements in the Nepali hinterland. Newar internal migrations out of the heartland of Kathmandu valley in the first century and a half of the Shah period were characterized by a number of peculiarities.

Ajaya N. Mali



Reviewed title:
Shrestha, B.P. 2015.
The Newars of Sikkim: Reinventing Language, Culture, and Identity in the Diaspora
Kathmandu: Vajra Books
ISBN 9789937623339

IN EVERY NEW SETTLEMENT, the Newars attempted to provide for themselves a sense of cultural security through, among others, the construction of urban space modeled on or approximating to the Newar town, and the commencement of fetes and rituals similar to those in the heartland. The Newars who crossed into Sikkim and India’s north-eastern region probably felt a greater sense of alienation because they found themselves in a land that did not share a continuous history with their ancestral region.

Shrestha’s research on the Newars of Sikkim provides evidence that the diasporic community there underwent socio-cultural transformations similar to those experienced by settlers inside Nepal. The significance of this work does not lie in this fact as there is ample literature on social change in Newar migrant populations. This work’s importance rests in its analysis of the distinct nature of the socio-cultural transformation in Sikkim.

The book begins with a short history of Newar and Nepali migrations into Sikkim. The tale of the first Newar - and Nepali - migrant in Sikkim makes for an interesting myth as that of the first pre-historic Newar settlers in Kathmandu valley. Eventually, Laksmidas’s attempts to ensure his own survival in Sikkim occurs at a time when certain local chiefs oppose both British influence and the growing Nepali in-migration.

With continued Nepali complaints of discrimination by the local Lepchas and Bhotias and the annexation of Sikkim by India in 1975, the Nepali diaspora is condemned to perennial blame for Sikkim’s loss of independence.

Chapters three to seven study the absence or remains of the traditional Newar practices. The Newar caste system, notorious for its rigidity and intricacy in the heartland, has weathered away as have the numerous Newar guthis. Many of the Newars have forgotten their caste roots, language and traditional customs. The only remaining guthi has evolved into a much wider association, fulfilling the needs of not just one clan or caste but the entire community. Due to a shortage of Newar priests, the local population has had to take the services of Parbatiyas who are ignorant of Newar life cycle rituals.

In many instances, the Newars are compelled by local socio-political circumstances to co-opt other communities into their religious space. The heterodoxical structure of the Swayambhu Bhimakali temple appears to be such a cultural innovation, incorporating aspects of different religions in a Newar religious space. Even more innovative is the annual fire sacrifice in which religious prayers from all major religions are invited. Such attempts can be seen as harmonizing strategies employed by a diasporic minority to minimize the crystallization of ethnic fault lines amidst growing insecurity and distrust. The Newar situation is apparently all the more precarious given a decrease in the group’s participation in the state’s civil service with most of their lost seats going to the Bhutia and Lepcha communities. With the shifting power dynamics, an ethnic group that once thrived under the patronage of the political elite appears to be veering towards a gradual marginalization.

However, Newar influence in Sikkimese society continues in a different form. A striking parallel with the Newars in Kathmandu Valley is evident from the symbolic-ritual role played by certain Newars. Politically weak groups that remain ritually important draw capital from their traditional corpus of accrued cultural knowledge and practices. The decline of power in the political arena does not necessarily lead to a similar decline in other domains. Just as the Newars in Kathmandu valley are today relegated to positions of ritual power in the form of cultural agents complementary to the politically dominant Gorkhalis, so the Newar priest in his officiating role at the Swayambhu Bhimakali temple functions as a pivotal agent in religious rituals enacted for social harmony and cohesion in Sikkim. Such an exertion of symbolic power implies the Newari influence has not diminished despite weakening strangleholds in politics and the economy. More significantly, it suggests attempts to, if not recoup some amount of political influence, at least ensure one’s continued presence in the political field through the institutionalization of the religious-political ritual.

Just how successful have the Newars in Sikkim been in reviving their language and culture? The Newar case is interesting because even in the heartland, culture and language are fast disappearing. Many of the festivals and life cycle rituals mentioned by Shrestha have decreased in importance in many urban areas of the Kathmandu valley, and in some places, the younger generation may not even be aware of them. The Newar language has been classified by UNESCO as “definitely endangered” and has a low retention rate in comparison to other dominant Nepali languages. In this context, how do we judge the success of the cultural revival in Sikkim? Is the current state of Newar language and culture in Nepal’s capital region a good standard for comparison? Culture retention in the Newar heartland cannot be assumed and needs to be rigorously researched across the entire cross-section of an uneven social topography before any comparisons can be made with diasporic populations. The tables and descriptions of fetes and rituals detailed in the fifth chapter should be taken as ideal-typical rather than representative of actual practice. I shall suggest that a comparison with the heartland requires a much more nuanced analysis, one that examines variations in the latter just as meticulously as in the diaspora.

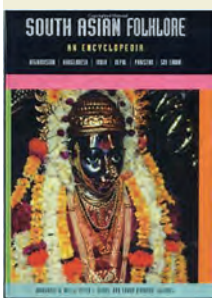
I recommend that, for future editions, the publisher provide the researcher better editorial support in order that the many grammatical, typographical and citation errors are ironed out. This is an important addition to South Asian studies and I hope it leads to more research that link Northeast India with Nepal and the central Himalayas.

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From acrobatics to worship: bringing together South Asian folklore

Research publication on South Asian folklore has a 200-year history. From the late eighteenth century, European travelers and scholars set out to document the cultural practices and beliefs of South Asian groups and people. The aims of this research were multifold: gaining knowledge in a new field of study through a comparative study of local traditions and stories, the wish to convert people by getting insight in their customs and –last but not least- social and political control.

Patrick Vanden Berghe



Reviewed title:
M.A. Mills, P.J. Claus & S. Diamond (eds.) 2015
South Asian folklore: an encyclopedia
Routledge (first published in 2003)
ISBN 9780415866927

WHILE DOING SOME RESEARCH on Indian culture, my attention was recently drawn to the work of Kamiel Bulcke S.J., a Belgian priest who played a key-role in the study of the Ramayana. Bulcke has received most fame as being the author of the most-used Hindi-English dictionary.

Whatever the goals, most researchers working on matters concerning non-Western subjects before the nineteenth century (and this is not limited to studies on Asia) upheld a European or western-oriented approach, which often included imperialist - or sometimes even racist- undertones. This was a result of the environment in which they were formed or because their sponsors were Western governments. In recent

years scholars have followed a different approach. Studies of folklore of non-Western groups have taken on a more objective point of view. This approach does not only counter the imperialistic stance but also the move that was taken by a new generation of nineteenth century indigenous scholars who collected and documented traditions in their country of origin. Some of these researchers have been linked to nationalist movements that tried to prove the social and moral value of these cultural expressions.

Studies on folklore have always been limited to either one country/region or one subtheme (oral traditions, performing arts,...). South Asian folklore: an encyclopedia has a larger scope. It aims at bringing together the work of a huge array of contemporary scholars on different subjects and is in such the first work trying to do so. Edited by three scholars, the encyclopedia contains close to 500 entries on the local traditions of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The editors point out that cultural production is

not bound by modern political boundaries and acknowledge that, because of the size of the region and the uneven state of research, the work presents only a “suggestive sample of the huge range of South Asian cultural practices and productions” (p. X). So the editors are aware of gaps and omissions.

This makes this encyclopedia vulnerable to criticism. Apart from the limitations referred to in the introduction, the reader may notice that some parts of South Asia do not (or hardly) feature in this book. Let me just point to Bhutan. And indeed, some topics do not occur, as is for example the case with the Kumari in Nepal.

Although the editors, in the introduction, elaborate largely on the premises of their publication, nowhere is explained what exactly is meant by the term folklore. We know from the history of the study of folklore that there are many definitions. The reader can only hope that the editors see folklore in its broadest description, as the traditional art, literature, knowledge, and practice disseminated largely through oral communication and behavioral example.

The alphabetically arranged articles can be divided into three categories: general concept articles, case study articles and definitional articles that introduce either a non-English term or a concept as interpreted in South Asia. The general articles relate to topics that are applicable to the entire region (or to one country, e.g., Nepal) and provide an overview of this topic (e.g., Gender and Folklore, Pottery, Popular Music). Usually two or three pages long, these articles are intended to draw the reader’s interest. The case study articles focus on one specific topic (e.g., Comic books in India, Jain folklore, Ramayana). The volume contains a list of articles and, at the end of the book, an index helping the reader pull together all the information related to a specific place or cultural expression.

For the scholar or interested reader keen on finding accessible information on cultural practice in South Asia this encyclopedia serves exactly what the editors hope for: introducing the cultural richness of this vast area to a general audience, while being an invitation to further research!

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