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.

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 multifocal: gaining knowledge in a new field of study through a comparative study of local traditions and stories, the wish to convert people by cultural practices and beliefs of South Asian groups and people. The aims of this late eighteenth century, European travelers and scholars set out to document the 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 transmogrification of Sikkim.

The book begins with a short history of Newar and Nepali migrations into Sikkim. The tale of the first Newar - and Nepal - migrant in Sikkim makes for an interesting as a myth as that of the first pre-historic Newar settlers in Kathmandu valley. Eventually, Lakhumidas’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 Bhutias and the annexation of Sikkim by India in 1975, the Newari diaspora is condemned to a perennial blame for Sikkim’s loss of independence. Chapters three to seven 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 the numerous Newar guthis. Many of the Newars have forgotten their caste roots, language and traditional customs. The only remaining guthis has evolved into a much wider assemblage, affording 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 Parbatyas 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 Bhimsakal temple seems 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 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 Bhutia and Lepcha communities. With the shifting power dynamics, an ethnic group that once thrived under the Bhutia and Lepcha communities. With the shifting power dynamics, an ethnic group that once thrived under the Bhutia and Lepcha communities.

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 feature in this book. Let me just point to Bhatan. 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 bibliographically 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 are intended to provide an important introduction to the 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 be brief introductions. The case study articles focus on one specific topic (e.g., Comic books in India, Jan folklore, Ramayana). The volume contains a list of articles and, an index of the reader pulling together all the information related to a specific area or cultural expression.

For the scholar interested in keeping an eye to 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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