

Review: *Nepal: Nostalgia and Modernity*

Deepak Shikhada, ed. -- reviewed by Jay B. Winderman

Nepal: Nostalgia and Modernity

Edited by Deepak Shikhada

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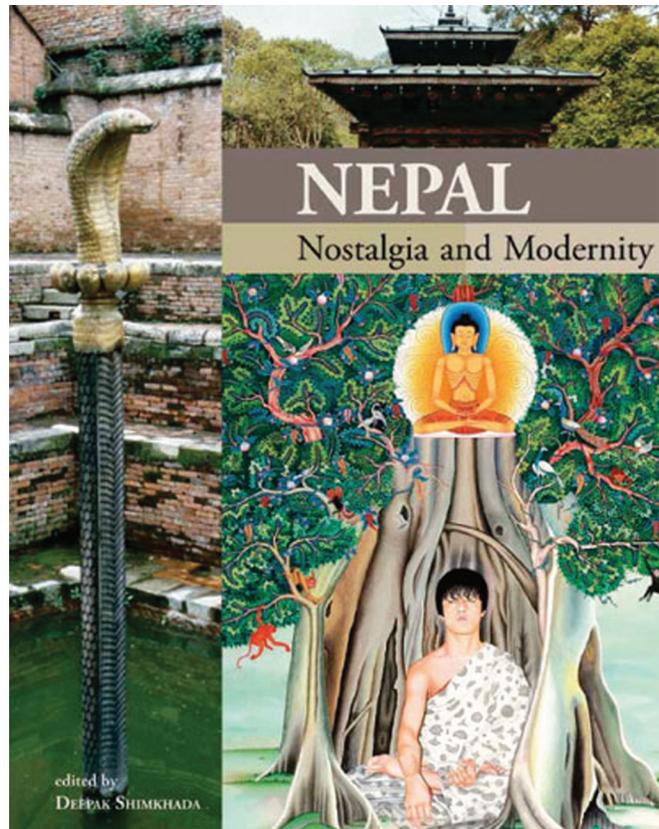
Nostalgia is a longing for the past, usually for some period or place. It conjures up warm, fuzzy images of things such as comfort food, pop music, and, in a broader sense, a way of life. We can be nostalgic for the immediate past or the more distant past. And we can pretend to live in the past by surrounding ourselves with possessions that remind us of that time in our life.

As we should know, modernity does not supersede nostalgia; it subsumes it. Deepak Shikhada, editor of *Nepal: Nostalgia and Modernity*, points out in the book that without the past we have no present, and, by extension, without the present we have no future.

It is important that the new not be allowed to eclipse the old. Rather, the old must inform the new. There is always the fear that a people's culture will be ignored and lost forever. If there is a message to be gleaned from this book, it is that the cultures of Nepal must be preserved in order to provide a continuum over the years. Nepal is not the United States. Kathmandu is not Washington D.C. Each country must retain its own identity. Each region must retain its own culture.

Nepal: Nostalgia and Modernity provides a set of snapshots of modern Nepal as influenced by its past identity. It focuses on a tiny area of the Kathmandu Valley that is rich in art and architecture. The region contains three major cities: Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur. These cities once were surrounded by farmland. Now they are surrounded by suburbs. Where once Kathmandu was secluded, it now is connected to the outside world by highways, radio, satellite television, and the Internet.

The designs of present-day Nepali art and architecture are attributable, at least in part, to the Newars, people formerly from Mongolia, who settled in the Kathmandu Valley more than 2,000 years ago. The contemporary



descendants of these original settlers may be Hindus or Buddhists. They speak the Newari language.

The volume is divided into three parts: (1) architecture, (2) visual arts, and (3) performances and religious traditions. The essays in part 1 describe Nepal's distinctive public and private buildings, public squares, and religious structures. The essays in part 2 are on the visual arts—primarily painting, although this section also includes pottery. The essays in part 3 cover street theater, Tantric Buddhist dance, celebrating Shiva at Pashupati, and the Kumari (a present-day controversial subject).

In part 1, Niels Gutschow, in his essay "Architecture: The Quest for Nepaleseness," describes contributions made by the Newars. Traditionally, buildings were constructed of baked brick and woodwork. They now are fabricated of concrete materials. But there has been an effort to bring about a Nepalese style, involving Newar-style characteristics. Then Katherine Weiler traces foreign influences, primarily European, on Nepalese architecture. Finally, Julia Hegewald brings us the beautiful

water structures in the Kathmandu Valley, asserting that there is a new appreciation of structures such as *ghats* (steps), wells, *dharas* (water conduits), *tute-dharas* (cisterns), and *dahas* (large reservoirs).

In part 2, Dina Bangdel traces the history of modernism in Nepal, from Lain Singh Bangdel, the father of modern painting, to lesser-known artists such as Laxman Shreshtha and Jyoti Dawadi. Ian Alsop examines how modern tourism has influenced the production of painting known as *paubha*. He discusses mural, manuscript, and scroll painting, and claims that there has been increasing demand from collectors and religious-minded patrons, resulting in an increase in the production of traditional art. Katherine Anne Harper writes about art works inspired by the tantric forms. She attributes new art to encroaching secularization brought about by external influences and internal social change from the mid-20th century in response to the changing world. Ani Kasten offers the story of Thimi, one of the oldest and most important pottery-making centers in Nepal. This village, located between Kathmandu and Bhaktapur, is a traditional center for pottery making in the Kathmandu Valley. The village has nearly 2000 pottery workshops run by families who are members of the Newar Kumale caste.

In part 3, Sangita Rayamajhi takes the reader through the streets of Harigoun and Kathmandu to witness the *jatras* (street festivals) and plays. Miranda Shaw brings us the Charya dance tradition that has been brought back from the brink of extinction. Tim Ward chats with a number of yogis and babas and provides the history of *Pashupati* (the temple).

Finally, Deepak Shimkhada, the editor of the volume, discusses the controversial centuries-old Kumari tradition. Kumaris are virgin girls who are worshipped as the

goddess Durga. They are selected from a small number of two-to-five-year-olds and live away from their families until they reach puberty. There are eleven Kumari goddesses in the Kathmandu Valley. Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur each has one. The Royal Kumari of Kathmandu is in particular the subject of controversy. The trouble began after Michael Allen, an Australian anthropologist, studied the subject in the 1970s and published a book in which he claims the Kumari is kept in a palace/prison while her developmental years are ignored. But is that entirely true? Politicians and human rights groups read the book and other publications on the subject and pressed for the abolition of the Kumari tradition. This is an example of nostalgia (culture) clashing with modernity.

Nepal: Nostalgia and Modernity is a fine compilation of essays on fine arts, performing arts, architecture, and religion in the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal. It is meant to be representative rather than all-inclusive, and in that regard it succeeds admirably. The approximately 140 photographs, most of them in color, are stunning. And the choice of typeface makes it easy to read. Because the book contains eleven essays by eleven different authors, it must have been a challenge to make the presentations compatible with one another. But the editor was able to pull it off. Congratulations to Dr. Shimkhada. It reminds me of the nightmare I went through many years ago as the fledgling copyeditor of an academic volume in which each chapter was written, not by a different author but by a different committee.

I would like to have seen an essay on the Newars from whom the arts and architecture were derived. And I would like to have seen a glossary of terms.

Kudos to all those who have contributed to this outstanding volume.

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