

Clint Rogers. 2004. *Secrets of Manang: The Story behind the Phenomenal Rise of Nepal's Famed Business Community*. Kathmandu: Mandala Publications.

Rogers' book is an endeavour to explain the astonishing transformation of a marginal Himalayan people, the Nyeshangte of Upper Manang valley, into a wealthy business community with their main base in Kathmandu.

In so doing, he progressively reveals various aspects of Nyeshang society; thus the book can best be labelled a thematically focussed monograph.

In line with many other writers of Tibetan speaking peoples of Nepal, Rogers assumes a historical 'push' towards trade in order to overcome inadequate subsistence possibilities in the high altitude valley of Manang. The entrepreneurial history of Manang starts in the 18th century by trade privileges granted by King Rana Bahadur Shah. But due to the geographical location of the valley, the Nyeshang inhabitants could not take part in the Tibetan trade as did the neighbouring Thakali to the west. Instead, Nyeshang traded local goods like scented glands of musk deer, medicinal plants, and woollen products to India. Progressively trade was extended to Indo-china and became independent of goods produced locally in Manang. Nyeshang traders learned to exploit price differences between South – and Southeast Asian countries, buying gemstones in Kashmir and selling them at a profit in Bangkok, from where Thai silk was brought to markets in India, and so on. Later, when the tourism boom took off in Kathmandu in the 1960s, Nyeshang traders had accumulated substantial fortunes that could be invested in hotels, restaurants, and curio shops there. Since the opening of Manang for tourists in 1977, Kathmandu-based Nyeshang businessmen have increasingly invested in their natal valley. Thus, Nyeshang business has travelled from the Manang valley to India, to Southeast Asia, to Kathmandu, and has recently returned home to Manang.

In the description of early trade, Rogers relies heavily on other writers, especially on Wim van Spengen (1987). But he succeeds in locating Nyeshang business activity in a regional-historical context which makes it highly interesting to read. Thus having narrated the story of Nyeshang business, he goes on to grapple with the main question of the book: how was this adventurous story possible?

The author starts his quest for a credible explanation by referring to two previous writers who have pondered over the same question. The first, von Fürer-Haimendorf (1975) ascribed certain cultural traits to enterprising people in the Himalayas. Entrepreneurial activity occurs, he contends, in cultures that reward risk-taking behaviour and individual choice, and lack the strict family obligations and social hierarchy so prominent in the Middle Hills. Andrew Manzardo (1977), on the other hand, looked for an ecological explanation to the trade success of some Himalayan communities. He observed that enterprising traders tended to originate in Trans-Himalayan valleys with access to pastures that were sufficiently plentiful to breed a high number of pack animals.

Like von Fürer-Haimendorf, Rogers finds the answer to Nyeshang business success in socio-cultural circumstances. At the base of the success lies a balanced attention given to private and communal interests. In contrast to caste society where social rank is ascribed by birth, a Nyeshang person achieves higher rank through individual enterprise. Private enterprise has become part of Nyeshang collective identity, according to Rogers. But this emphasis on the legitimate interests of the individual is balanced by a strong feeling of communality, which is in the last instance derived from a collective dependence on local irrigation systems. The balance between the individual and the collective has proved to be a particularly favourable quality in capital formation. In Kathmandu, Manang businessmen picked up a communal fund system, the *ki-du*, from the Tibetan exile population and later they adopted the tender *dhukuṭī* system, which is a way of raising capital quickly whenever a promising business turns up. Both systems are ways of raising capital for individual use that presuppose mutual and collective trust in order to work in a sustainable manner. Manang businessmen have been “fortunate opportunists” who were able to raise capital immediately whenever a chance of profit-making came into sight.

In sum, the Manang recipe for successful business is to establish “a middle ground between individual competition and communal cooperation,” which reminds this reviewer of the Scandinavian model of social democracy. Presently, however, competition between hotel owners in Manang valley has come to dominate over cooperation, thus putting the Manang success story in jeopardy there.

Rogers’ book is a very readable account of the history of a remarkable people. Of particular interest is the way he manages to relate micro-level qualities of a remote Himalayan people to macro-level events and processes at national and international arenas. The outcome of the analyses is a highly credible explanation of a success story from which other communities as well as politicians and development workers have much to learn.

Other parts of the book are less well documented. The description of the agro-pastoral system and the environment (chapter 1) contains assertions that might better have been formulated as questions. For example, the contentions that irrigation water is a bottleneck in farming rather than labour, and that forest regeneration has not been able to keep up with local use, are rather dubious. Also, the intriguing fact that Manang people’s attitude towards outsiders changed from being unfriendly and even hostile, to becoming amicable hosts to passing

476 Studies in Nepali History and Society 10(2), 2005

trekkers in a matter of ten years or so, is not given a credible explanation. Rogers has managed to reveal the secret of entrepreneurship in an outstanding manner, but all secrets of Manang have not yet been told.

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