

## Book Reviews

**Kevin Bubriski. 2022. *Nepal Earthquake*. Deepak Thapa, ed. Kathmandu: Himal Books.**

Kevin Bubriski first set foot in Nepal in 1975, when he spent three years working as a Peace Corps volunteer on a project installing gravity flow drinking water pipelines across the Karnali zone, carrying a camera with him wherever he went. In 1993, ninety-four of his monochrome photographs, mostly portrait studies of individuals and groups of people in various locations across Nepal, were published in a book form as *Portrait of Nepal*. Many of the photographs in that book have become iconic. It stood in stark contrast to the many color picture books of an idealized Nepal, aimed largely at the tourist market, that appeared regularly over the years. Bubriski went on to forge an illustrious career for himself as a practitioner of fine art and documentary photography, mounting exhibitions of his work worldwide. He is without doubt the *videši* photographer *par excellence* of this most photogenic country.

*Nepal Earthquake*, his fifth Nepal-focused publication, is a large-format hard-cover book of 236 pages containing 120 color photographs taken between June 13 and July 7, 2015. Most of the photographs occupy a whole page; many are double-page spreads. They are arranged by place, and interspersed with short essays by twelve different Nepali authors. In addition to this, Manjushree Thapa contributes a Foreword and Deepak Thapa an Editor's Note, and Bubriski himself writes a Preface and an eighteen-page Photographer's Journal.

Almost all of the photographs in this book are stunning in their full-color, large-format immediacy. Most are pictures of ruined and damaged physical structures; earthquake-affected people, often gazing straight into the camera; and demolition work and demolition workers. The vast majority of the physical structures are domestic houses, but we also see some of the Kathmandu Valley's world heritage buildings. Nearly a quarter of the photographs are of people working on demolition projects, pulling down and dismantling buildings that have been damaged beyond repair. Bubriski became particularly interested in this aspect of the early aftermath, and his

pictures of demolition workers at work and at rest include some of the most striking images in the book.

Despite its title, and the clear intention of the publishers that it should be regarded as a memorial volume, the book is inevitably an incomplete pictorial record of the 2015 Nepal earthquake. It records only a three-week stretch of the early aftermath, and can record only certain aspects of this. As Bubriski and his camera rove about the Valley and make a brief foray eastward, the survivors are living in damaged homes or under temporary shelters; the initial wave of volunteer first responders is beginning to ebb away as a more formally organized aid and relief effort gets underway; damaged buildings are being pulled down or made safe; the reconstruction has yet to begin. There are no pictures of injured people here, although we see people remembering the loved ones they have lost. It is understandable, given the circumstances, that more than three quarters of the photographs were taken in the Kathmandu Valley, which was less affected than hill districts to both west and east, gaining access to which was challenging, but it does still mean that the provenance of the photographs is geographically skewed. Given the focus on the Valley, I was surprised not to see any image of the fallen Dharahara, except for one on a young Bhaktapur resident's T-shirt (p. 114). For the government, the Nepali media and a large section of the Nepali population, the Dharahara was *the* icon of the earthquake from the very beginning, symbolizing not only its destructive power but also the nation's determination to "rise again" (see Hutt 2019).

The level of captioning in the book is very uneven. Sometimes we are told a fair amount about the people in a frame, in others we are told absolutely nothing. For instance, on pp. 102–103 we see a group of women standing before a wall of more than 100 enlarged passport or citizenship photographs. The women have their backs to the camera, but one holds a young child who gazes back over her shoulder into Bubriski's lens. Those who can read Nepali will understand that the photographs, which are of people of all ages, are of people who died in the earthquake, because they will recognize the word *śraddhāñjali*, but for others the photograph is unexplained. Explanations of some of the other uncaptioned photographs in the volume may be found in Bubriski's journal at the end of the book, but not all, and not this one. Deepak Thapa explains that the lack of captions for some of the photographs is due to the fact that "getting the information required would have required Kevin to intrude into people's lives at a time of hardship and even tragedy, or

otherwise disrupting livelihoods” (p. xiv). Given his obvious professionalism, I am sure that Bubriski sought his subjects’ permission before photographing them, but photography is inherently intrusive to an extent, especially when images are subsequently published for an international viewership. Bubriski has clearly thought long and hard about such issues and his journal contains some clear-eyed ruminations on the ethics of “making photographs” in a disaster zone. But still it does not seem quite right to publish photographs of people without telling us who they are.

Eleven of the twelve essays consist of narratives from or reflections on the 2015 earthquake. Prawin Adhikari’s account of traveling with other volunteers to districts to the north east of Kathmandu to deliver food to displaced families, related in the journalistic present tense, is unsentimental, evocative and true. Anil Chitrakar’s observations and assertions contain much that one can only agree with, but also a number of contentious statements. For instance, he writes that the Indian blockade “sent a chill down our neck ... but we remained determined” (p. 29). This begs a question to which I will return—who does the author mean by “we”?—and ignores the divisions that opened up between the hills and the Madhesh in the wake of the new constitution. Muna Gurung’s meditations on the meaning of “home” across the generations and their disruption by the earthquake are beautiful and moving, and Tsering D. Gurung’s warnings that the lessons from the earthquake will be ephemeral ring sadly true. Niranjana Kunwar recounts the ways in which the earthquake made “the sheltered and ignorant,” urban young Nepalis like himself, aware for the first time of Nepal’s rural realities; this was a popular theme in the early post-quake discourse in Nepal.

Smita Magar writes of the chaos and confusion of the early days of the aftermath, and pours some lukewarm water on the clichéd notion of inherent Nepali “resilience” which she says “could not possibly make up for the power tussle, corruption and mismanagement of resources at the hands of the government” (p. 97). Pramod Mishra takes an equally skeptical view of the political impacts of the earthquake, and accuses Nepal’s “political class” of using the international goodwill garnered for it by the earthquake to bring forth “the flawed constitution over the deaths of more than 50 Madhesis” (p. 119). While Avinash Shrestha’s account of growing up in Arughat Bazaar is wonderfully evocative, but seems a little tangential, Rabi Thapa’s interesting abstract piece feels like the assembling of fragments that might later form a short story, and Kesang Tseten’s reflections on the plight of Langtang and his

role as a film maker are searing in their honesty. In the last of these essays, Prateebha Tuladhar recounts the trauma of the earthquake as seen through the eyes of a journalist.

Finally, returning to the question of “we”: if this is a memorial volume (and if bound hard copy memorial volumes are still something we need in this age of Instagram and the mass consumption of online images), then who is actually being enabled and encouraged to remember? In the final lines of her Introduction, Manjushree Thapa exhorts the reader, “So, let us sit with *Nepal Earthquake*, hearts open, allowing ourselves to think and feel and ask questions. Has Nepal built back better? Can it still do so? What have we done so far? What are we going to do now?” (p. xi)

In her seminal essay on war photography, Susan Sontag (2003: 3) asserts, “No ‘we’ should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain.” So, who is the “we” at whom these pictures are aimed, the “we” that Manjushree Thapa says must assess what it has done so far and whether this has been adequate? Are “we” the people in the ruins, are “we” the people of Nepal as a whole, or are we merely the “we” that the publisher hopes will go out and spend NRs. 5,000 on buying this book? Pranaya Rana seems to be pondering the same question when he writes of the various disasters that have befallen Nepal over the years: “It all happened to other people. We went out and took pictures. We went out and wrote newspaper reports” (p. 134). Perhaps we should seek answers to this question from people like Jit Bahadur Tamang of Ramechhap, who appears on the front cover beside his shovel, gazing impassively into the camera’s lens.

## References

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