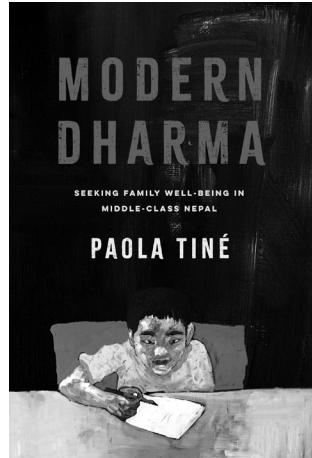


Paola Tiné. 2025. *Modern Dharma: Seeking Family Well-Being in Middle-Class Nepal*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Modern Dharma examines shifting conceptions of wellbeing and moral selfhood in contemporary Bhaktapur, particularly through an ethnography of emergent domestic tensions and their attendant reconfiguration of household and kinship dynamics. The book's strengths lay in its welcome focus on the domestic sphere and family relationships. Over the course of seven content chapters (excluding the Prologue and Conclusion), Paola Tiné argues that the economic, political, and cultural shifts of 21st-century Nepal have generated novel understandings of psychosocial wellbeing, which must then



articulate—and be negotiated—with preexisting socio-religious roles across family relationships, ritual and secular practices, and domestic spaces. Tiné begins with a series of broad conceptual questions: “How are new pressures and aspirations of life betterment negotiated with local moralities and cosmologies? How are moral selves shaped in this process? How do these negotiations contribute to social change?” (p. 2). To a large extent, these guiding questions evoke earlier ethnographic scholarship on social transformation, imposing a frame that is both perennial and fraught in the history of anthropology in South Asia—namely, one which tends to essentialize “traditional/local” and “modern/global” cultural forms and present them in binary opposition. Unfortunately, both implicitly and overtly, *Modern Dharma* appears to have inherited that general paradigm, producing a conceptual foundation that can sometimes feel insufficiently critical.

Chapter 1 (Moralities in Transition) engages with a prior generation of scholars, especially Levy (1990), to summarize earlier modes of family life in Bhaktapur, in which “individual roles are interconnected and ensure a family’s location in the religious order” (p. 7). Readers are then taken through many of the touchstone events that have transformed Nepal since the mid-20th century, producing cultural strains between generations as well as within individual subjects: “In present Nepal, new material and ideological possibilities enabled by unprecedented cultural and material stimuli overturn these frameworks, creating the premise for new contestations and new horizons of well-being at the hands of most people” (p. 13). For Tiné, these emergent tensions require constant negotiation within the domestic sphere. The titular “modern dharma” comprises a search for “balance,” a concept seemingly analogous to Liechty’s (2003) notion of middle-class “suitability.” But unlike Liechty’s processual, emic, and practice-oriented approach to class (and caste), *Modern Dharma* favors a more structuralist orientation, imposing categories that do not always neatly fit the presented data. Nevertheless, the central argument is that moral codes—i.e., what it means to be a “good” person and to live a “good” life in contemporary Bhaktapur—currently confront a moment of dramatic revision.

Chapter 2 offers a history of Bhaktapur and its Hindu norms, focusing especially on the development of ideas surrounding progress and improvement. Tracing this genealogy across three generations of political activism and development initiatives, Tiné charts “changing possibilities as well as the emergence of new imaginaries that shaped—through active

negotiation—ideas of well-being and life betterment in Bhaktapur” (p. 34). The book makes a case that life betterment has become a key idiom of self-making and self-understanding in contemporary Nepal. This is a compelling argument, even if the specific content of that sense of life betterment—i.e., the suite of actual practices, aspirations, and ideologies that constitute it and give it substance—could have been defined more sharply. After all, abstract concepts like improvement and progress can take many forms in different contexts, manifesting as a political impulse or as an individual psychological practice, encompassing everything from emotional support to a capitalist work ethic.

The remaining five chapters highlight different facets of domestic life in which emergent tensions and navigations come to the fore. Chapter 3 focuses on children’s relationships with their parents as well as with other children. Given the increasing prominence of nuclear family households, alongside new ideals of individuality and personal achievement portrayed online, such relationships have become a site of negotiation in which both parents and children seek to find “balance” between ways deemed—by informants and by the author—“traditional” and “modern.” Chapter 4 takes a similar approach to contemporary marriage practices, arguing that “mutual understanding” between spouses has increasingly become the ideal interpersonal bedrock upon which to build a relationship, as opposed to conventional social and gender roles prescribed by tradition. For Newars in Bhaktapur, “a marriage is a crucial sphere in which individual desires and social pressures come together to negotiate new and old moral discourses” (p. 98). The author presents a lot to grapple with in these chapters, and the exploration of family life and interpersonal relationships among parents and children offers a promising angle on contemporary cultural fault lines. At the same time, while the book successfully identifies the contours of many intergenerational rifts, the chapters could have spent more time on the causal engines animating those rifts—that is, what specific processes and technologies drive these transformations? Earlier ethnographers, for instance, have variously pegged analyses of sociocultural and psychological transformation to development discourses (Pigg 1992), improved literacy (Ahearn 2001), migration (Craig 2020), or mass media technologies (Kunreuther 2014), to take just a few examples. These explanations are not mutually exclusive, nor do they deny the messy over-determination of cultural reality. Rather, they provide conceptual and narrative structure. An

analogous causal mechanism remains mostly absent in *Modern Dharma*, though Tiné does present several indications of social media re-orienting perceptions of self and family. This would have been an especially engaging and critical avenue to explore at greater length, particularly in light of the subsequent Gen-Z uprisings in September 2025.

Chapters 5 and 6 marked the high points of the book for me, both in terms of ethnographic texture and analytical precision. Here, the transformations of domestic relationships are not the object in and of themselves but are rather illuminated through their tangible effects on material spaces and institutions. Chapter 5 explores the trend towards family nuclearization and other modalities of household fission. Tiné documents the way family tensions—i.e., divergent ideals of interpersonal wellbeing and kinship—yield new divisions of domestic space, from segregated kitchens and separate children’s bedrooms to smaller nuclear houses and disputes over parceling family land. These changes, moreover, directly impact longstanding community institutions like the *guthī*. Chapter 6 proceeds with an analysis of the “friendship *guthī*,” an emergent form of association that at once responds to contemporary challenges of conventional *guthī/si guthī* membership while also echoing earlier systems of rotating credit (*dhikuti*) and ritualized friendships (*mit*). As such, these chapters constitute the pinnacle of Tiné’s project, unpacking not only contemporary tensions among family members, but also how such tensions reshape earlier social spaces and sometimes necessitate different social spaces altogether. Finally, Chapter 7 examines how elders revise expectations of themselves and of younger relatives within the new dynamics of kinship and morality outlined in the preceding chapters.

While there is a great deal to appreciate in *Modern Dharma*, I would like to conclude by reiterating three critical comments. First, the heavy reliance on interviews (as opposed to participant-observation and thick description) sometimes leaves the ethnography feeling thin. This is most acute when the author takes interviews at face value, as opposed to critically and reflexively engaging with self-reported narratives *as* narratives voiced and embedded within multiple fields of power. Second, at a theoretical level, Tiné frequently draws the distinction between “old” and “new” ways far too rigidly, posing naturalized categories in ontological tension. The Conclusion chapter makes this most explicit through its citations, but throughout the book, there is a tendency to essentialize earlier modes of family life, counter-posed to “modern” ideals like individualism and personal freedom. Unfortunately,

the results can veer into an implicit Durkheimian functionalism or, at worst, recapitulate a Dumontian Orientalism. While social transformation has undoubtedly accelerated since the late 20th century in Nepal, many of the underlying cultural dynamics described by Tiné—the relational construction of selves, domestic life as a series of negotiations, the social construction of kinship categories—have deeper roots that sometimes get occluded by the book’s framing. Third, many of the book’s key concepts could have been more fully developed and delineated. The prose sometimes becomes vague and slippery, making it difficult to pin down working definitions of central ideas and, moreover, to understand how various concepts articulate with one another. “Wellbeing” is a case in point, referring to a wide array of distinct, if overlapping, aspirations: class mobility, emotional intimacy, personal freedom, economic stability, interpersonal openness, and more. Of course, the fact of a term being polyvalent is not a pitfall; quite the contrary, it can be illuminating to untangle an emic concept’s multiple, sometimes discordant meanings. However, such nebulous concepts also run the acute risk of losing analytical purchase, and while reading, I was often left hoping for more precision in the definition and deployment of key terms.

These reservations notwithstanding, a new ethnography of family life in urban Nepal will always be a welcome contribution. *Modern Dharma* interrogates the multiple, ever-shifting moral worlds navigated by urban middle-class Nepalis and, in so doing, offers a useful, if complicated, depiction of interpersonal relations in contemporary Bhaktapur.

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