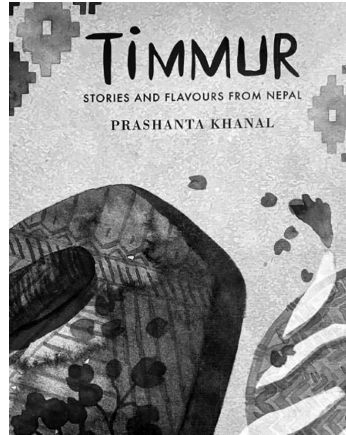


**Prashanta Khanal. 2022. *Timmur: Stories and Flavours from Nepal*. Kathmandu: FinePrint.**

Prashanta Khanal's *Timmur: Stories and Flavours from Nepal* is the first cook book reviewed in this journal's 30 years of publication. But it is also a volume that pushes the boundaries of food writing into the realms of anthropology and history that are SINHAS's home ground. Reminiscent of Dor Bahadur Bista's seminal *People of Nepal* (1967), Khanal's survey of cuisines "attempts to cover the length and breadth of Nepal" (p. 1). Other Nepali cookbooks on my shelf (e.g., ANA 1997[1996]; Pathak 2013[2007]) include some of the



same recipes as this book but make no effort to organize dishes around distinct ethnic and regional food ways. By contrast, Khanal takes pains to link regional food traditions to their "socio-ecological" and "socio-cultural" contexts—tying local cuisines to their environmental and historical circumstances—in his attempt "to introduce, celebrate, and promote the cuisines of various regions and cultures of Nepal" (p. 1).

Explaining his title, Khanal writes, "Like the depth and breadth of *timmur*'s taste and use, Nepal's food culture is deeply complex and diverse. Its richness reflects the country's ethnic and cultural diversity, its varied topography, and its cross-border influences" (p. 1). (Given the ubiquity of fenugreek seed in recipes throughout the book, and its distinctive use in Nepal as compared with other South Asian cuisines, he might as easily have named the book *Methi!*) Rather than "Nepali food" Khanal writes of plural "Nepali cuisines" or foods "from across Nepal" thereby replacing any implication of a single "national cuisine" with an offer to provide a multifaceted "glimpse into the flavours that Nepal has to offer" (p. 1). Moving beyond the now standard equation of Nepali food with variations on *dāl-bhāt-tarkārī*, Khanal takes readers into cuisines built around other grains (barley, millet, buckwheat, corn), other legumes (horse gram), other vegetables (wild lichen, mountain ebony flower, stinging nettles), and even meats (snails, frogs, offal).

*Timmur* is a beautifully produced book with tasteful (indeed, hunger-inducing) culinary photography by Nabin Baral and Gagan Thapa, and crisp design layout by Ubahang Nembang. In it, Khanal presents his cross-cultural feast in seven regionally focused chapters (on Newari cuisine; Rai and Limbu cuisines; Thakali cuisine; Tharu and Maithili cuisines; Sherpa, Tamang, and Tibetan cuisines; Magar and Gurung cuisines; and Khas/Pahadi cuisine) plus a substantial chapter entitled “Author’s Flavours” (Khanal’s personal favorites), and finally a chapter devoted entirely to *acārs* which, Khanal notes, are—in all their regional diversity—“an essential part of Nepali cuisine” (p. 260). Each recipe comes with a full list of ingredients, measurements, and cooking instructions, along with an essay describing the dish, its unique elements and cultural connotations, and a beautiful photograph of the finished dish as it might look in a kitchen somewhere in Nepal.

Khanal credits his mother Dhan Kumari Shrestha with introducing him to cooking and teaching him to “respect ingredients” (p. 2). That respect comes through in his uncompromising attempts to capture the flavor profiles of specific dishes regardless of how obscure or difficult to find certain ingredients might be. My guess is that many of the ingredients in the book (e.g., goat brains, fresh pig blood, wild lichen, “dregs of fermented rice,” etc.) would be hard to find commercially in Nepal, much less in the Chicago grocery stores I must rely on. His refusal to make concessions to the conventional suggests that the aim of Khanal’s recipes is perhaps more about preserving traditional ingredients and methods than it is about making some approximation accessible by adapting them to commercially available products and appliances. In this, as in the stories that Khanal tells of his childhood in western Nepal, the scent of food often mingles with a whiff of nostalgia for times and places untainted by commoditized food ways. One senses the same nostalgia, even romanticization, in the volume’s elaborately staged culinary photographs, many designed to evoke rustic surroundings.

Having tried a handful of recipes from the book I can attest that it is easy to use—if you can find the ingredients. The only somewhat odd (in my experience) aspect of Khanal’s recipe presentation is his mixing of English measurements (cups, tablespoons, teaspoons) with metric measurements (grams, kilos, liters) even in the same recipe. This is unlike the other Nepali cookbooks in my collection which, while originally published in Nepal, are perhaps aimed at a more Western, or at least Western-based, readership.

Returning to a comparison with *People of Nepal*, like Bista, Khanal too evades the political elephant in the room: the postcolonial question of the ontological status of “Nepal” as an organizing principle. The product of 18th-century Gorkhali imperial conquests (with some trimming by the British East India Company in 1816), Nepal as a territorial entity was founded as a conquest state. In *Timmur* Prithvi Narayan Shah’s cheerfully euphemistic characterization of his empire as a *phulbārī* or “flower garden” of happy ethnic diversity becomes a *bhoj* or feast of widely varied delicious flavors, or—as Khanal puts it—a “symphony of ... diverse food culture” (p. 2). But the question remains: How and by whom were the contents and parameters of the garden/feast/symphony determined, with what violence, and with what consequences?

The closest that Khanal comes to acknowledging the political-historical implications of the terrain he covers is when he notes how “the hegemony of certain ethnicities is reflected in the standardisation of certain staples” (p. 1). But how that hegemony in fact constitutes the very geographic context of his book goes unexamined. What unites the Khas Pahadi of the west, the Rai and Limbu of the east, the Sherpa and Tamang of the north, and the Tharu and Maithil people of the south is not some existential “Nepal” so much as a history of violence and domination that, many argue, is ongoing. In Khanal’s seven regional chapters it is not hard to detect echoes of the federal regions proposed by *Janajāti* groups prior to their erasure in the 2015 Constitution. Given the context of “hegemony,” who gets to speak for Nepalis east, west, north, and south?

Ironically, Khanal is hardly unaware of the politics of representation. Having previously claimed victim status in the culture wars over privileged elite (“white,” “western”) representation and “cultural appropriation” (Khanal 2020), one presumes that Khanal—a privileged male Newa/Bahun—thought twice about objectifying the recipes and narrating the stories behind minority ethnic food ways from across Nepal. I don’t want to imply that Khanal’s efforts to catalogue and preserve diverse elements of Nepal’s culinary heritage are unworthy, unsympathetic, or inaccurate, but simply to note the dangers of casting stones in the glass house of privilege. As Khanal himself asked accusingly elsewhere: “Who gets to set the food narrative?” (Khanal 2020). In this single-authored book, Khanal provides an answer. Representation is a politically-charged, privileged, and inherently objectifying act, the more just and humane alternatives to which

even Edward Said acknowledged to be “embarrassingly” elusive in his famous book *Orientalism* (1978: 24). Khanal, like most of us, is caught in the “postcolonial predicament” (Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993) that shows no signs of abating.

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