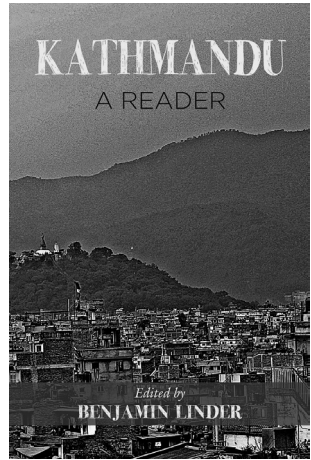


Book Reviews

Benjamin Linder, ed. 2025. *Kathmandu: A Reader*. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari.

In *Kathmandu: A Reader*, edited by Benjamin Linder, the city of Kathmandu rather than merely being a subject of inquiry serves as a mirror reflecting the broader contradictions, aspirations, and anxieties of the Nepali nation-state. Understanding Kathmandu therefore demands more than simply describing a place. It requires a critical interrogation of how the city functions as a site of reflection. The Kathmandu Valley is not only the primary urban center of the nation; it is also the site where the history, politics, and economy of the Nepali nation-state intersect and are continually being reshaped. Since the 1950s, the city has increasingly become a demographic hub, drawing populations from across the country. Kathmandu as such has long occupied and continues to occupy a central place in the imaginaries of the Nepali nation-state. *Kathmandu: A Reader* brings together a range of perspectives that illuminate the city's multifaceted character and its enduring significance within Nepal's national narrative.



Rather than offering a singular or comprehensive analysis of Kathmandu, the anthology, as its title suggests, serves as a conceptual preface to the city. It provides a curated entry point into Kathmandu's multiple temporalities, tensions, and imaginings. As Linder aptly notes in the introduction, "Kathmandu as all cities, comprises a deeply complicated amalgam of spaces, histories, conflicts, aspirations and imaginaries" (p. 19). This complexity is echoed in the wide-ranging scope of the volume, where the diversity of themes, perspectives, and disciplinary approaches reflects the layered and often contradictory nature of the city itself.

The collection is organized into three thematic sections: 1) urban forms, 2) urban cultural politics and 3) urban lives. The boundaries between these

sections are porous. What stood out to me was how the middle section, centered on memory and identity, operates not just as a thematic centerpiece but as a recurring motif that reverberates throughout the entire collection. It serves as a subtle yet powerful organizing thread, lending coherence to an otherwise diverse and wide-ranging set of essays. Taken as a whole, the collection conveys the sense that Kathmandu is in the midst of forging a new identity—one that is shaped by contemporary aspirations yet deeply tethered to the nostalgia of a selectively remembered past (see Chapters 6, 7 and 8). What emerges clearly is the absence of a shared consensus on the nature of that past or on how it ought to guide the city’s future.

This tension between aspirational identity and nostalgia takes many forms and runs as a thread through many chapters in the anthology. For instance, Niels Gutschow’s contribution traces the history of urban development and town planning in Kathmandu, highlighting how early planning imaginaries were deeply infused with aesthetics and moral anxieties. He cites the first development plans from 1965, which described the city’s nascent urban expansion as a “visual crime” defiling the imagined beauty of the city (Chapter 1). Such language reflects a nostalgic attachment to an idealized urban past, positioning modern expansion as a threat to a constructed notion of urban purity. In closing the first section, Sabin Ninglekhu (Chapter 6) compellingly explores this enduring idealized urban imaginary against the lived realities and struggles of *sukumbāsis* (squatters) in the city. His chapter challenges the dominant romanticized narrative of Kathmandu’s past by foregrounding the everyday contestations over space, visibility, and legitimacy. In doing so, he reveals how marginalized communities are excluded from both the city’s future aspirations and its nostalgic recollections.

The rest of the four articles in the first section explore the disjuncture between urban planning as an authoritative discourse and the often messy, lived realities of urbanization and urban living in Kathmandu. Each contribution, in its way, highlights the persistent tension between the aspirations for structured urban planning and the desires tied to actual urban living. The social prestige associated with building a “*Kathmandumā ghar*” (Chapter 3) that drives these dynamics often outweigh concerns about the unpredictability of the housing market and complexities of land politics.

While Biresh Shah, Andrew Nelson and Andrew Haxby draw attention to the informality of what is officially categorized as formal urbanization in Kathmandu, Prashanta Khanal and his colleagues question the very

foundation of urban development plans, particularly, the road expansion initiatives in Kathmandu. Their work implicitly raises critical questions: Who are these plans really for? Whose vision of the valley do they aim to serve? At first glance, these contributions appear to address the visible, everyday problems of urban life in the valley. But a closer reading reveals that the stakes are far greater. What is at issue is not merely the process of urban planning, but the competing claims over who gets to imagine and inhabit the future Kathmandu.

Each article identifies two key drivers behind Kathmandu Valley's sprawl: urban migration and land use change. Urban migration, which until recently primarily referred to the influx of people into Kathmandu, Nepal's sole dominant urban center, is closely tied to the transformation of land across the valley. Each author traces the causes of this shift to a range of recent trends such as foreign migration for employment or education, to earlier displacements during the Maoist insurgency, and even further back to the political upheavals of the *Jana Āndolans*. Probing deeper reveals, the foundational logic of the Nepali state itself, rooted in the territorial unification under the Shah monarchy. When urban sprawl is continually framed through the lens of migration, the logic of planning and governance often appears at odds with the presence of those classified, implicitly or explicitly as outsiders. The city, in this framing, is imagined as something that must defend itself against those who supposedly do not belong, an anxiety that complicates both urban inclusion and spatial justice.

The question of who belongs in the city becomes even more pronounced in the second section of the anthology. The identity that Kathmandu seeks takes on a sharper and more exclusionary form in Anne Rademacher's retelling of the Bagmati River conservation story. Here, the question of belonging receives a clear, though deeply problematic answer. Only those considered part of the so-called *Bagmati Civilization* are seen as the rightful inhabitants of the valley. This narrative attaches a temporal dimension to urban belonging. As Rademacher notes only those whose ancestry in the valley predates the modern migration influx, since the 1950s, are deemed legitimate inhabitants.

This selective invocation of the past to inscribe identity and belonging is a recurring political strategy in contemporary Nepal. Bryony Whitmarsh's (Chapter 8) discussion of the *Gaṇatantra Smārak* (Republic Monument), constructed within the Narayanhiti Museum grounds, powerfully echoes this

dynamic. Commissioned by the post-conflict, Maoist-led government, the monument sought to craft a unified national narrative that centered the people rather than the monarchy. Yet, as Whitmarsh argues, this well-intentioned effort ultimately fails to acknowledge the diversity and contestation in public memory. The absence of public participation in the design selection process reveals a deeper reluctance to engage with competing historical narratives. While the Maoist insurgency is often celebrated as a revolutionary triumph, it also produced countless victims, many of whose voices remain marginalized in national discourse. In both cases, the same unsettling question resurfaces: whose past is granted authority to shape the future of the city, and by extension, the future of the Nepali state?

The undertones of temporal belonging, of who holds a rightful claim to the valley, not only shape narratives of identity and memory but also resonate strongly in debates over cultural heritage. This is particularly evident in Stefanie Lotter's (Chapter 10) essay on heritage reconstruction in Kathmandu Darbar Square following the 2015 earthquake. Here, the question shifts: who is the rightful authority to interpret and reconstruct heritage? Is it the state, the local government, or the community? Lotter shows that this debate is no longer simply divided along ethnic lines; instead, it centers on the notion of cultural competence. Meaning, who is seen as truly understanding, preserving, and honoring the layered meaning embedded in these heritage sites. The contestations, then, are not just over material reconstruction but over epistemic authority: whose interpretation of heritage is considered legitimate, and by extension, who is granted the power to define the cultural identity of the city?

While much of this section grapples with questions of national identity and belonging, Jan Brunson (Chapter 11) shifts the focus to the everyday lives of "scooty girls." These young women navigate not only the physical streets of Kathmandu but also the gendered expectations embedded within its rapidly urbanizing landscape. Through their everyday acts of mobility, these scooty girls decisively challenge inherited constraints on female movement and agency, asserting new ways of being in a city that is itself in flux. Their presence on the streets marks a subtle and yet powerful reconfiguration of gendered space and urban modernity.

The forested hinterlands of the valley function as a sanctuary, spaces where those excluded from fully inhabiting the urban center can momentarily reclaim freedom. In Brunson's work, this appears through acts of intimacy,

as young, unmarried couples seek the privacy that the city's public spaces often deny. In other cases, these peripheral zones offer a measure of livability for those pushed to the margins, particularly migrants who are displaced both within the city's physical geography and from its urban imagination.

The third and final section of the anthology shifts focus to the material foundations of urban identity—to economies, labor, and patterns of consumption. The six articles in this section chart a city in transition, showing how Kathmandu's evolving identity is shaped not only by plans and imaginaries but also by the everyday workings of markets, informal economies, and physical infrastructures.

Mark Liechty's (Chapter 12) exploration of the commodification of food and sex uncovers the shifting moral anxieties surrounding practices like eating out and sleeping out, acts once tightly regulated by caste-based values, now increasingly governed by the logic of the free market. What was once a domain of cultural and moral meaning has become a space of value-neutral transaction. Yet the reach of the commodification extends far beyond leisure and desire. Other forms of exchange, embodied in youth, labor, and physical presence of Nepali migrant workers in the Gulf, represent a different facet of this commodification. In such an economy, Sandhya A.S. (Chapter 16) theorizes in this volume, the body that does not participate in exchange, the body that waits, is rendered economically and socially invisible.

In the free market economy, the bodies of both men and women become commodities, consumed in different ways, across different spaces. Those not absorbed into the grueling labor markets of the Gulf often find alternative forms of value within the city, including through gang affiliations. Rashmi Sheila (Chapter 14) traces the emergence of gangs in Kathmandu, mapping the trajectories of young men whose bodies and identities are co-opted into political projects. Here, too, the body is transactional: used, positioned, and mobilized in the pursuit of power.

If neoliberalism drives both the present and the future of the city, Benjamin Linder (Chapter 13) shows that it is not only bodies but also places that are increasingly commodified. Spaces once embedded with cultural meaning or collective memory are now treated as marketable assets, ready for branding and repackaging. Urban land and entire neighborhoods are transformed under the same logic that governs labour and consumption. Linder illustrates this through the case of Thamel—a neighborhood that occupies a unique place in Kathmandu's popular imagination. He shows how "Thamel" has become

a brand in itself—packaged, marketed and sold—transforming a lived space into a monetized asset. Once again, the tension between modern identity and nostalgic attachment resurfaces.

Taken together, the three sections of this anthology offer a layered and at times uncomfortable, but necessary understanding of Kathmandu's urban transformation. From the fraught tension between planning and lived experience, to the contested politics of identity and belonging, and finally to the commodification of bodies and spaces under neoliberal logic, these contributions reveal that the city is far more than a built environment. It is a battleground of aspirations, exclusions, negotiations, and reinventions. What this volume ultimately invites us to see is that Kathmandu is not a finished product, but an ongoing project, shaped as much by state policies as by everyday practices, by the margins as much as the center, and by the visible as much as the unseen. It is in this constant making and remaking that the city's true story unfolds.

What this anthology does not explicitly address, but what scholars of the Global South must critically consider, is the process of meaning-making itself. Each contribution offers a distinct rendering of the Kathmandu Valley, collectively revealing that meaning is neither fixed nor complete, but always in flux, shaped by the perspectives, positions and lenses through which the city is viewed. Yet what lingers for me is a deeper, more pressing question: Who is doing this meaning-making? And how do we, as scholars, writers, and citizens, come to know what Kathmandu is, and what it is becoming?

In academic research, the language of ontology is often invoked to ground such inquiries into meaning making and knowledge production. But what happens when the theoretical frameworks we rely on are not fully our own? What might it mean to theorize this layered, fragmented, and kaleidoscopic city from a position rooted in our intellectual traditions, lived experiences, and cultural imaginaries? How do we, as Nepali scholars, begin to articulate a non-Western cosmology of knowledge, one that enables us not only to study Kathmandu, but to understand and imagine it on its terms? If there were to be a second volume of this anthology, perhaps these are the questions that could anchor it: not only about what Kathmandu is, but how we come to know it, and from where we begin to think about it.

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