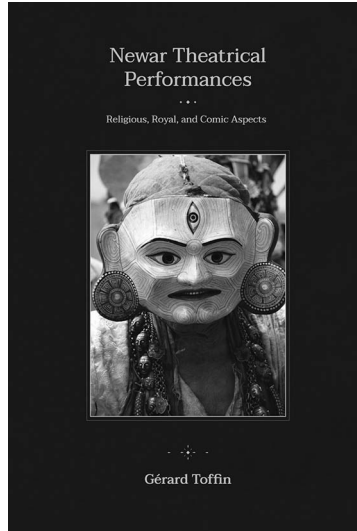


Gérard Toffin. 2025. *Newar Theatrical Performances: Religious, Royal, and Comic Aspects*. New Delhi: Dev Publishers and Distributors.

Professor Gérard Toffin's book, *Newar Theatrical Performances: Religious, Royal, and Comic Aspects* is not your regular read. It is a book for those who want to immerse themselves in the known-unknowns of the Newa traditional dance world. The book is a collection of Toffin's work over the years, tracing the evolution of Newa dances from the past to current practice.

In five parts, the book covers a spectrum of issues. The first part is "History, Profile, Concepts," where Toffin delves into the key features of Newa dance, discussing the religious and royal dimensions of traditional Newa

dance theatre, the religious dramas of the Kathmandu Valley, and the living masks of the Newa people. In the second part of the book, entitled "Wild Goddesses and Vaiṣṇava Heroes," Toffin covers the Navadurga of Thecho Village, the White Kali Goddess or the Svetkālī Ajima's Tantric temple, the 12-year dance, and the Vaiṣṇava theatrical performance in Lalitpur, more popularly known as Kartik Nach. In the third part of the book, readers are swept into "Balāmi Sacred Theatre" territory, where Toffin discusses the "theatre of emotion" and the ancient Balami Kāttī-pyākhā. The fourth part is devoted to "Festival and Theatre," where he goes into a detailed account of the theatrical dimension of the Indra Jatra festival and the practice of acrobatics and the use of stilts in Old Kathmandu city. The fifth part of the book is dedicated to "Buffoons, Pranks and Masquerades." In this part, Toffin explores the importance of tricksters in Himalayan theatre, folklore, and Newa carnivals, satires, masquerades, and clowns. He also describes rituals of laughter. These parts converge into the "Conclusion," where the author presents his analysis of Newa theatrical performance based on his own body of study.



The book is heavy—and why wouldn't it be? It bears witness to centuries of history of Newa dances, their origin, various influences over the centuries, their evolution, and their struggle for survival. Through the description of the dances, he touches upon the different political periods that have had an impact on how the dances came to be conducted. For instance, while Kathmandu's biggest festival, Indra Jatra was reshaped by King Prithvi Narayan Shah's son Pratap Singh Shah (r. 1775–1777) to give the festival a more spectacular dimension, the festival also faced major challenges when the Maoist-led government introduced the Guthi Bill in 2019. So, one of the main themes Toffin explores throughout the book is the future of the dances. What will the upkeep of these traditional cultural dances depend on? Some performances tend to be very expensive. With a lack of consistency in support from the government and local patrons, their existence could be under threat.

Take the Svetkali dance, for example. The expenses incurred for the whole 12-year dance cycle, including the Paham-cahrhay festival and the subsequent performances outside Kathmandu, were estimated at NRs. 30 lakh. In the absence of government support, local communities were compelled to pull the funds together themselves. With Newa community members displaced or moving out of their ancestral homes and some having gone thorough financial downtimes, it has become challenging to finance *jātrās*. Festivals like Indra Jatra are now even sponsored by companies that manufacture biscuits, home appliances and energy drinks.

Another major strand in the book is the religious importance of Newa theatrical performances. These performances are moving art linked to the divine. They derive from religious texts and reference many classical and religious dances from the Indian subcontinent. Yet, being situated on the streets and *dabūs* of Kathmandu, they also have a localized transcendental nature. Toffin says, “They [dances] are part of the spectacle; they display artistic concerns and contribute to the beauty of the living gods. Yet, they are themselves suffused with religious notions” (p. 171).

Beyond their religious connotations, the dances also communicate social relations in the Kathmandu Valley and demonstrate social coordination among the Valley's denizens. Each dance is managed by a certain caste representing a locality. It is this caste that is responsible for managing and orchestrating the dance's performance. During Indra Jatra, for example, dancing troupes journey for hours from Bhaktapur and Patan to Kathmandu to showcase their part in the overall Indra Jatra performance. Toffin says,

“On these occasions, the local troupes transform into the itinerant companies ... in fact, they sacralize the whole Valley” (p. 175).

The streets of Kathmandu have always served as open air performance spaces, a tradition kept alive by these festivals. And while the overtly religious processions beholding gods and goddesses take precedence over other activities, there is ample humor at play on the side. All Newa theatrical performances come with a comic interlude—a common theatric tradition all over the world—much of it steeped in scatology and a hint of sexual innuendo. The sections in the book on the “*lilā*” of the gods further describe how theatre is experienced as a game. This refers to both the theatre of the absurd and the theatre of the people, or of the oppressed people who, mirrored in the theatre’s buffoons and tricksters, have their day in the limelight. The world as theatre is a dream and a drama; one in which people live out their imagination as spectators and performers.

Caste, a major characteristic of the Newa community, also comes into play in theatre. There is marked division in terms of who performs and in what roles. Toffin illustrates how the religious dances are mostly done by the “higher caste” men and are passed down within families. For example, during the Kartik Nach in Lalitpur, the roles of the fishermen are not played by Pode men, who are the legitimate fishermen, but by men from the so-called higher castes. However, in the suburbs, like in the Balami theatre, the performance is organized by peasants. Here, the caste hierarchy flattens, and the shows entail mostly carnivals and buffoonery.

Gender hierarchy is not forgotten in these dances either. Male dancers play the role of female dancers. In some dances, the masks for male figures are silver and the diadems of female figures are copper and baser material insinuating a gender hierarchy. However, mention of women’s role in Newa theatrical dances is conspicuously absent from the book. For Toffin, women are found in the wings of the theatrical performance and do not play a direct role. In one instance, Toffin mentions that the clothes of the Jyapu men who perform the Svetkali dance were washed by their wives.

The book also goes into considerable detail about the paraphernalia surrounding Newa theatrical performances and the emotions and acting prowess of the performers. For readers interested in what happens behind the curtain, Toffin provides ample description of attire, jewelry, masks, rituals, movements, green rooms, storage spaces, etc. The headdresses worn by some dancers, for example, weigh up to 15 kilograms, evidencing the men’s

dedication to the performance. While describing the settings in detail, Toffin also injects tender moments, such as when younger actors yawn because they are tired from days of sleepless nights in a row.

The actors' emotions too become part of the performance, as explored in the "Theatre of Emotion" chapter. The dancers do not improvise. They do what is prescribed and regulated, including emulating the emotions to be expressed by the characters. Toffin describes how the "thickset bodies and wrinkled hands" (p. 228) of the performers contrasted with the graceful faces of the characters represented.

Past the matter-of-fact scholarly descriptions, the writing slips into lyricism now and then, as befits any book on the theatre! Some chapters, for instance the one set in Pharping, read like travelogue, suggestive of poetry: "Outside, the evening shadows were already engulfing the valley—and the city was slipping away into darkness" (p. 225).

Beyond the dedication to the major dances of the valley, the book also traverses the suburbs—the theatre of the people. Here is where *Kholsādyah*—the god of tears—makes people bawl, and clever men tryst with foolish wives, and kings and clowns engage with Brahmans and ascetics, sliding towards polymorphous theatre. The book's subjects thus include big *jātrās* and small events like the local *dhimay* initiation festivals for Jyapu boys. And *khyāli juju*, Madan Krishna Shrestha isn't left behind.

Toffin says he refrains from romanticizing non-Western traditional "theatrical" forms. He speaks of how the *dabū*, in non-festive times, is used for profane ends such as drying of grain or cloth in the sun or chatting. Upon witnessing animal sacrifice during festivals, he is at the "edge of nausea" and says the Newa people "do not seem to feel the same discomfort" (p. 237), even the children. This statement is a platitude, because who are the Newa people? They are individuals and their perceptions and choices are also subjective.

Among its many subjects, the book's exploration of caste in Newa theatrical performances resonated with me. As a Naradevi Tuladhar, the most fascinating chapter of the book for me was the one devoted to the Svetkali, the tutelary goddess of the Naradevi Tuladhars. Growing up, I experienced my clan's attachment to their duties and devotion towards the goddess. As a child, I wondered how it came to be that we, as Newa Buddhists, took on the role of performing as the Hindu God Mahadev? Toffin explains how the Tuladhars of Naradevi assigned the roles of the goddesses—who drink blood

during the performance—to their Jyapu tenants. He argues that this occurred because, as Buddhist by birth, Tuladhar men found that drinking the animal blood sacrifice in the performance challenged their marriage prospects to Buddhist brides. Besides, their engagement as traveling merchants also made it difficult for them to devote the kind of time the upkeep of the dance required. The Tuladhars passed on the roles of the goddesses to their Jyapu tenants, who were also residents of Nardevi and also tillers of the land under Tuladhar ownership. However, Mahadev's role, which does not require drinking animal blood, has remained in the Tuladhar clan, thus ensuring they maintained some control over the Svetkali performance.

Just as I did, every reader is likely to discover their own rabbit hole as the book spirals down into the depths, exploring not just the nuances and meaning of the theatrics but also how they connect to the everyday life of people who have lived from harvest to harvest preparing for these performances.

When a book slips into your hands, the first thing to notice about it is how it feels. The book is bulky—the kind that demands a table and a chair and your back against the chair's spine. Like most books in print, this one isn't entirely devoid of typos, mis-captions and mistranslations. Yet despite these imperfections, the book is outstanding in how much it covers and how accurately it does so. While an enthralling read, the pages aren't a reader's paradise—the glossy texture of the pages tends to trap light and reflect it back at the reader's eyes. The images in the book, mostly by the author, have an interesting take on the performances and are characteristic of the stories they tell. Yet, one imagines how a matte page would give a different dimension to the photographs.

Some sections in the book are repetitive because they are based on different studies Toffin has conducted over the years. Most of his studies underscore the cultural importance of the performances. They were a way to ensure the prosperity of the kingdom, drive away possible invaders and keep epidemics at a distance from the city walls. However, that meaning has morphed over the years into something new. During performances, the deities appear to be closer than ever to humans; the sharp ontological rift between them is blurred. The barriers between those who watch and those who perform, actors and audience, performers and spectators become permeable, as Toffin says. And right there is the poetics of ambivalence and reflexivity.

The performances are a way to hold society together and have now become part of the global Newa ethnic identity. Being spectators to the

performances carries a deep emotional weight for local inhabitants: “The dances leave a visual imprint and enhance some for the basic features of the religion and of the culture to which they belong. They tie individuals to the group and inculcate in them the community’s main values” (p. 106).

Confusion over the identity of some Kathmandu gods have always been rife, as much is lost in oral history. That confusion, is carried over into the book in some instances: is *Yalambar*, *Hāthudyah* or *Bākadyah Aju*? Is the *Nāsāhdyah Naṭarāj* or just a fluid deity without form and gender as some Newa people continue to believe it to be? Toffin presents the indigenization of the Sanskritic repertoire as an argument to explain why these dances are still alive in the forms they are and how it is a cultural assertion.

Thus, despite the radical changes that have happened in Nepal, Toffin argues, some things have remained unchanged, such as the menacing faces of supernatural beings, the overall importance of female divinities in human lives, the power of blood sacrifices to pacify deities, the centrality of esoteric cults which can be attended only after undergoing Tantric initiations, the capacity of selected men to transform into living gods and the prevalence of communal grounds to worship figures in the pantheon.

What does all this say about the Newa people? It is a question the book leaves us with.

Pratibha Tuladhar
Kathmandu