

Jagannath Adhikari and David Seddon. 2002. *Pokhara: Biography of a Town*. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point.

Pokhara: Biography of a Town is the fascinating history of the beautifully situated town in the heart of Nepal that within the last fifty years grew from a small settlement of little more than 3000 inhabitants to Nepal's second largest urban conglomeration. Both authors' special relationship to Pokhara finds expression in the way the history and social setting of this town is analysed. Jagannath Adhikari was born and raised in Pokhara while David Seddon began his renowned social research on Nepal in Pokhara and its surroundings almost thirty years ago.

For the early history of the Pokhara area, the authors refer to ethnic (Gurung, Magar) as well as national sources based on official high caste historiography. The natural setting of the Pokhara valley makes it hard to believe that this inviting region had been more or less uninhabited by the indigenous Magars and Gurungs before the 12th century (p. 18). But the development of Pokhara as a market centre began only after the unification of Nepal when Newars from Kathmandu valley settled there to escape persecution from the conquering Shah forces (p. 20).

From about the 1920s onwards expanding trade relations with India and the return of local Gurkha soldiers that had fought for the British in World War I led to the growing political importance of Pokhara as the town became a kind of refuge for dissidents. The town's close affiliation with party political activists became obvious toward the end of the Rana era (and especially during the revolution of 1950/1), and it was again confirmed thirty years later during the National Referendum of 1980.

But Pokhara also became the commercial and administrative centre for the western hill region. This process was dramatic and far-reaching in the second half of the twentieth century. Unlike most other studies, the authors view this process of urbanization of Pokhara and its hinterland by adopting an urban rather than a rural focus. This gives the study special value given that Nepal—a mainly rural society with an urban population of less than 4% in 1971—has become the country with the highest rate of urban growth in all of South Asia at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Tourism definitely plays a major role in the town's future development plans, though it currently contributes to only about 10% of Pokhara's total income (p. 189). The town is blessed with natural attractions like Phewa Tal and the magnificent mountain views of Annapurna, Machapuchare, etc. But in the face of rapid urbanization, town planners and administrators have problems balancing necessary infrastructure development with environmental protection measures.

The story of immigration is another interesting aspect of urbanizing Pokhara. Most of the permanent immigrants have come from rural Kaski as well as from the neighbouring districts. This has meant growing numbers of local indigenous ethnic groups (especially Gurungs) who nowadays constitute the largest population group in a town once dominated by Bahuns, Chhetris, and other Hindu castes as well as, to a lesser degree, Newars. Another feature is that these immigrants tend to settle in wards where already greater numbers of their groups live.

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This review has touched on only a few topics from the extremely thorough and comprehensive collection of data and statistics provided by Adhikari and Seddon. The process of urbanization and the consequent transformations in political, cultural, socio-economic, and environmental aspects of Pokhara are well described. Other issues covered by the book are folk and written literature, tourism, and the interaction of the town with its hinterlands. Thus, reading this book is a must not only for those who are interested in Pokhara, but for anyone wishing to understand processes of urbanization in Nepal in general.

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