

Photo.circle. 2009. *Hamra Hajurama: Our Grandmothers*. Kathmandu:
photo.circle.

The history of photography in Nepal is no longer than one and half centuries. Photography in Nepal began with an image of Jung Bahadur Rana and his family taken by Charles Taylor in 1863 and from that point onward it remained the privilege of the Rana-Shah family and other elites with very few others having access to photographic technology until the half of the 20th century (see Onta 1998; Whelpton 2009). In this context, *Hamra Hajurama* is a noteworthy work as it strives to document the lives of ordinary Nepali women through photos and stories. In a documentary photography style photo.circle has developed this book (with help from the embassy of Denmark) in which seven photographers (Gaurav Dhvaj Khadka, Prateek Rajbhandari, NayanTara Gurung-Kakshapati, Rocky Prajapati, Sudhir Bhandari, Susan Prajapati and Drubha Ale) and six writers (Ajit Baral, Abha Ali Phobo, Prawin Adhikari, Utsav Shakya, Ravi Thapa, and Diwas KC) record their perceptions and interpretations of twelve Nepali *hajurāmās* or grandmothers through photos and text.

Hamra Hajurama is a project mainly based on twelve elderly women (Dil Maya Praja, Suntali Chaudhary, Radhika Pradhan, Kaushila Neupane, Nusrat Banu, Parbati Gurung, Uma Pradhan, Lila Maya Rai, Khadga Kumari Thapa, Sundari Devi, Dilsara Budha Magar, and Ijyotiya Devi) from various parts of the country and from different castes and religions. The project began in May 2009 under the coordination of NayanTara Gurung-Kakshapati and lasted for six months. During 18 to 25 December 2009, photos of the twelve *hajurāmās* were displayed in an

exhibition at the Nepal Art Council. The book was launched on the first day of the exhibition by the then Ambassador of Denmark to Nepal. The book or pictorial consists of twelve chapters, each devoted to photos, interviews with, and stories about one of the twelve *hajurāmās*.

In the Foreword, photographer Satish Sharma describes the book as an example of “documentary photography”² (p. 9), a genre combining photos and text that documents the everyday lives, work, and families of these *hajurāmās*. The result is a diverse collection of stories about Nepali women and culture. Consisting of details on hometowns, marriage, work, and family life, each chapter is almost a biographical summary of each *hajurāmā*'s life. Weaving together the *hajurāmās*' words into richly textured stories, the authors almost succeed in bringing the past back to life. Indeed, the stories are the book's strongest point; the lack of old pictures of *hajurāmās* limits the scope and impact of the photography.

The photo documentary form is not without problems, as Satish Sharma acknowledges in the book's Foreword. Presented in the form of a pictorial, with over sixty photos across the 12 chapters, the book cannot avoid associations with practices “rooted in the power seeking politics of the colonial past” (p. 9). Photography was an important tool for, as Edward Said would say, the “othering” of colonized people – through the cataloguing and ranking of “lesser people” – thereby justifying colonial domination. Although this book tries to diminish these worries of photographic objectification and domination by incorporating empathy and love in its presentation, suspicion still remains. Together the stories and photographs strive to make meaningful the existence of each *hajurāmā*'s life. Most of the photographs exude their happiness and independence; we see them either at work or comforting their family, mostly grand children. In this way it differs significantly from the tourist market books that portray people, places, and culture out of context, thereby commodifying them. Instead, by bringing together the richly contextualized stories of *hajurāmās* of different ages and groups – Chepang, Tharu, Magar, Gurung, Newar, Muslim, Brahmin, Chhetri, Madhesi, and Badi – this book tries to emphasize the shared humanity of

² A new trend being carried out by professional journalists for quite a while, “documentary photography refers to the area of photography in which pictures are used as historical documents.” Pictures are first documented as historical evidence and later published. Subjects of documentary photography can be anything, including people. For more details visit: <http://www.photography.com/articles/types-of-photography/documentary-photography/>. Accessed on May 2010.

all these diverse people, not their difference. The spirit is one of inclusion, not exclusion.

Each of the book's twelve chapters is built around a theme, with its own title, and it is here that we can feel the tussle between the photographs and stories. I have already mentioned the perhaps greater value of the stories as compared with the photographs. But there is more to the photographs than simply serving as enjoyable illustrations. This is made especially clear in the last chapter, "The Non-biography of Ijotiya Devi." Because the interviewers were hardly able to extract anything from their subject, the photographs must convey the story. Here photos are worth much more than just "a thousand words." In chapter one, "Sitting on a Rock," Dil Maya is shown living happily with her grand children even though her existence is barely at the level of subsistence. The narrative theme of her struggle is balanced by photographs that celebrate her resounding happiness. In the next chapter, on Suntali Chaudhari, photos vividly express the subject's pain, her arms shown with sores covered by copper bracelets. Indeed, the photos are able to convey information that one would be hardly aware of from simply reading the stories. Because the essence of these elderly women lies in the past and is presented to the reader through their stories, the photographs of the *hajurāmās'* present lives serve as something like a subtext.

This book can be seen as a celebration of Nepali woman. As Pranab Man Singh remarks, "it captures not only this oral tradition, but also the history of oft-neglected generation" (2009: 10). In fact the book can be read as a kind of history of the past fifty years of Nepali women. Here we read of patriarchy, child marriages, and gender discrimination but also, fortunately, women's valiant struggles against these forces. The book is also a work of cultural studies in, for example, how it tells stories of the love marriages of women from various ethnic communities, while their counterparts from other caste and Hindu families recall their arranged child marriages. There is also one beautifully choreographed chapter titled "Nepali Musalman" that includes many pictures of a *hajurāmā* with her family members. Similarly in most of other chapters *hajurāmās* are pictured with their children and grand children. As a whole the book has a heartwarming and wholesome feel.

But what about its language? Because it is a written work, much of the work (the stories) is, ironically, incomprehensible to many of the featured *hajurāmās*, most of whom are illiterate. This also raises the question for whom was the book produced. At Rs. 1,000 it is hardly affordable for most Nepalis, even though the book's basic theme revolves around

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working-class elderly women. These questions force a serious observer to look critically at the authors' choices of language, storytelling modes, persistent use of black and white photography, production quality, price, etc. and ask what the ultimate meaning of *Hamra Hajurama* is.

References

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