

Bal Gopal Shrestha. 2012. *The Sacred Town of Sankhu: The Anthropology of Newar Ritual, Religion and Society in Nepal*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

The Sacred Town of Sankhu is an impressive attempt to give a coherent and comprehensive description, analysis and interpretation of the ritual, religion and society of an ancient Newar settlement on the trade route to Tibet. Shrestha worked for six years on it, punctuated by two spells of extensive fieldwork in his home town. The earlier version of the book had an enigmatic and awkward title, *The Ritual Composition of Sankhu: The Socio-religious Anthropology of a Newar Town in Nepal*. It was the author's doctoral thesis submitted to Leiden University in 2002. Published in a limited number of copies, it had 476 pages, divided into 12 chapters. The present text of 615 pages is an expanded and revised version of the thesis.

Picturesque Sākhu is a small town populated by 5,340 inhabitants, comprising 713 families, divided into 24 castes and 84 *guthis*, mostly managing to cremate the dead or to celebrate 34 festivals a year. Until recent years it was economically vibrant when faster and alternative means of transport from Kathmandu and communications with wider world overtook and bypassed it. Born in that town and brought up in a middle-class joint Newar family, Shrestha has several assets to bank on for this study.

Shrestha conducted an extensive household survey of the town covering almost all aspects of its social-economic life. It is not a sample survey. As it was done in 1997 most of his data documented in Chapter 6 are more than a decade old. Everything in Sākhu might seem to matter because its founder-cum-presiding deity Vajrayoginī is sacred. One wonders if the collection of data on their own is a relevant exercise in social anthropology, unless it is informed by principles of selection depending on variables as well as hypotheses to be tested. Although the survey data may help us to piece together a reliable social and economic status of the town the relevance of demographics to religion or culture is not evident on its own, nor so easy to show. Consequently, Chapter 6 may read like an almanac, a yearbook, or a book of general knowledge rather than a survey to verify specific hypothesis or human development index. Income-level or literacy rate may, for instance, be more relevant than counting the heads or the number of tailoring shops or tea shops. The data on landownership is significant. They show that the Shrestha caste, not the Jyāpu caste, owns more than 67 percent of cultivated land in Sākhu. They comprise 60 percent of the population. A question that may be raised is: are they higher up in ritual/caste hierarchy because they are rich or are they rich because they are more pure? At any rate, some caution may be required before one takes some of these data for granted,

As Shrestha's early schooling and youthful days were spent in this comfortable and culturally vibrant environment he developed attachment with its rhythm set in cycle of feasts, festivals, and colorful rituals observed in Sākhu. However, as he grew up he felt less fascinated by religion and cultural forms. The higher he went up the school ladder the greater was his disaffection for traditional social and cultural beliefs and practices. At one time, he thought much of these as superstition and obscurantism.

What inspired and revived him to take up a comprehensive study of social system and religious organization of his home-town was his catalectic meeting and collaboration with a Dutch scholar affiliated to the

Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS), a research institution of Tribhuvan University which Shrestha joined as a lecturer in 1993. Although Shrestha studied Political Science for a Masters degree at Tribhuvan University he began to work in earnest only after a spell of collaboration with A.W. van den Hoek, a brilliant Dutch cultural anthropologist who studied and worked under the eminent Indologist J.C. Heesterman. Shrestha collaborated with him in a number of stimulating papers and other projects, including on *The Sacrifice of Serpents*, an award-winning documentary film, listed in his web page.

The book consists of a wide variety of material on the town, from demographic to ethnographic, from historical to current political landscape. Out of the sixteen chapters, Chapter 1 provides the rationale of the study while Chapter 16 sums up its findings. Chapter 2 is devoted to an overview on the calendars in use in Nepal. A luni-solar calendar regulates all ritual activities, feasts and 34 festivals discussed in Chapter 10, including the festival of *Svanti* or *Yama-pañcaka*. Several aspects of religion and culture of the Newars are, of course, common to all the thirty-three townships and settlements in and around the Kathmandu Valley. Similarly, the role of the *sī guthi* (the funeral association) or of *guthis* in general, discussed in Chapters 8 and 9, is not too different from those of Dhulikhel studied by Declan Quigley, or those of Pyāḡāu studied by Gérard Toffin, or of Pāṃgā studied by Gopal Singh Nepali. The most informed core of the book are these chapters on the *guthis*. Whatever major structural or functional variations there are they seem to be due to local needs and adjustments. What is remarkable is the number of *guthis* gone out of scene, albeit due to increasing State interference in local affairs through nationalization of real estate belonging to religious institutions. Measures such as Land Reform Act, 1964 and the Guthi Corporation Act, 1964 led to diminishing resources and social relevance of their functions. In Sākhu, 14 *guthis* have ceased to work out of a total 84 documented in Chapters 8 and 9, However, the efficacy of these social networks and density of these institutions do not seem to depend upon the size of the settlement nor on their social/cultural relevance. Hāḍigāu, for example, has more than 200 still operative!

Sākhu is an ancient settlement. Presumably, the *Gum-vihāra* was a complex of rock-cut caves where monks meditated, prayed and lived. In India rock-cut caves were used as monastic retreat during 200 B.C. to AD 200. In Sākhu they may have been occupied by Mahāsāṅghik sect – the ancient forerunners of Mahāyāna. A number of rock-cut caves are located west of the present-day Vajrayoginī temple. As consort of

Cakrasaṃvara, Vajrayoginī cult emerged as an offshoot of Vajrayāna. It is related to a cycle of radical and heterodox texts. The location and distribution of the *yoginī* temples in India have been charted by several Indian and Western scholars, and their finding is that the *yoginī*-cult is a part of heterodoxy popularized by the *siddhas* stationed in centres such as the Vikramaśīla (see Davidson 2002: 170–182). According to Elizabeth English, “the cult of the tantric goddess Vajrayoginī flowered in India between tenth and twelfth centuries at a productive phase in Buddhist tantras” (2002: 1). Bhattacharyya (1968[1924]) says that the goddess Vajrayoginī was brought to Nepal by Bengali priests in AD 1350. In Tibetan religious tradition these caves are associated with the names of Padmasambava and Milarepa. The Vajrayoginī temple in Sākhu became one of the few shrines which continued to remain popular with the later Malla kings. The earliest inscription found in Sākhu is dated *śaka* 460/AD 538. Archaeological remains and extant historical inscriptions indicate that it was an important site in the past. But how to link the *Gum-vihāra* as the hub of a sect of Mahāsāṅghikas with the rise of tantric worship is a problem. According to Bledsoe (1998) the political annexation of the town by Kathmandu was accomplished and culturally glorified by Pratap Malla. He built a *granthkūṭa*-style temple in AD 1655. The present temple in tiered style was built by Bhaskara Malla.

At any rate, Sākhu was not a city-state, nor an independent kingdom (p. 7). As most of its rituals refer to the King, Shrestha claims that it was “a ritual kingdom,” a seat for political asylum for fugitive members of the ruling families. However, it was never a secular independent state (p. 69). It is arguable if Sākhu had any traceable royal seat, a central locality, a Taleju, or a Kot where sacred activities converge. In 1968 when parts of the town were being dug large bricks of various size were found. An elevated platform was traced in the city centre. Shrestha claims that there was a *Lāyeku*, a structural complex or its nucleus “which has recently been leveled down.” As the sacrality of the town is derived mainly from the goddess Vajrayoginī, who ordered the king Śaṅkhadeva to found a temple, a more intensive enquiry into the rise of the cult may be desirable, if not urgent. Its ritual boundaries are delimited by a *pradakṣiṇā mārga* with a defined route delineating the sacred territory, for pulling the chariot of divinity (see, Map 6 on p. 84). Out of four, a city-gate is still standing. The town was dotted with nine monasteries which seem to lie behind the name, *Gum-vihāra*. According to Locke (1988/1989), all the Vajrācāryas and Śākyas of the “four lineages of Kathmandu,” including those of Patan, Bhaktapur, Banepa and Panauti trace their *degu-dyah* in one of the

nine *vihāras* of Sākhu. In later medieval period, politically Sākhu had been a satellite of the Kingdom of Bhaktapur or of Kathmandu at least since the time of Surya Malla (AD 1520–1530) who initiated the *jātrā* of the goddess. However, it does not seem to have any residential colony or settlement of ritual elite. Among the presiding priests or ritual specialists only the Vajrācāryas are native to Sākhu whereas the Rājopādhyāya and the Karmācāryas seem to come from Patan. This compels us to believe that its status as one of a cultural outpost may be only a recent one. The *Gum-vihāra* may have been the centre of Vajrayāna from where the community of the diamond sect dispersed. Rather than “a ritual universe on its own” (p. 523). Sākhu may very well be the locus of diamond vehicle in the valley.

The current ritual specialists seem to lack credibility, authority or intellectual confidence to interpret the tradition. The well-known Buddhist text, *Maṇicūḍāvadāna* was invoked only to subject it to disingenuous and unexpected localization, just to sanctify the fresh water-falls from nearby hillocks. However, its name Sākhu is probably derived from that of the river *tSang* – a word still traceable in Bhaktapur’s *Kha-sāng-khu*. It has been sanskritized as Hanumante. *Sa-kva* in Newari just means “below Tibet.” None of the surviving versions of *Maṇisāila Avadāna* is dated, nor is its language older than 18th century. Shrestha has written a critical paper on the form and content of this text only to conclude that its language does not seem to date from before the 19th century (Shrestha 2004: 63). The complex is littered with Licchavi caityas. Among other art-treasures there is a solid bronze head of the Buddha which betrays stylistic features (e.g., pouting lips in a small mouth) of the Gupta period. However, it is mistakenly worshipped as the head of Vikramāditya, who in turn is mistaken for Mānadeva (see p. 404, plate 39). The head is believed to have “landed” in Vajrayoginī after decapitation of the ruling King, committed unwittingly by Mānadeva. His penance for parricide led to the emergence of a *vihāra*-complex at the centre of the forest. An early Pāla-style standing bronze of Avalokiteśvara is worshipped here as Blacksmith’s Queen (see p. 408, plate 41)! What more incredible example can one cite for the town’s sad loss of historical memory?

Wisely, Shrestha devotes only a chapter to the more recent Hindu cults of *Svasthāni* and the month-long fast of *Mādhavanārāyaṇa* – the former observed exclusively by women. Both cults are recent in origin, presumably the Hindu initiative to annex the riverside as the *Sāli-nadī*. However, Shrestha does not elaborate the social and cultural reasons why

the *Svasthānī vrata kathā* picked up so fast and so widely. Of interest is the embedding of a Vaiṣṇava cult in a śavīte narrative. He discusses the cult of Vajrayoginī in great persuasive detail in three chapters, Chapter 13, 14 and 15. The sanctuary, the festival and the masked dance are each treated at length, elaborating every ritual and synthesizing all available historical-textual evidence supplemented by first-hand observation. Here Shrestha's grip on details is firm just as his ability to describe what he has seen is remarkable. As he explains in his Preface, he is "privileged to be an insider-outsider," a member of the society he is studying, and he is rarely, if at all, embarrassed to lay everything bare, even if he had to investigate an episode or event as an agnostic researcher. In his unmistakable enthusiasm to promote the sacred history or geography of Sākhu Shrestha appears to be less of an outsider than an insider at large.

This brings us close to a vexed, complex, and delicate issue in this publication. Except for a couple of pages at the beginning, Shrestha doesn't give us any clue of his theoretical position on ritual, religion, society or culture. Readers of the book might as well wonder whether it wasn't planned simply to promote Sākhu as a culturally viable restoration project. The earlier title was, "ritual composition" of a Newar town. Presumably, Shrestha wanted to avoid theoretical shibboleths by resisting popular terms like "structure." His theoretical persuasion is not one of formal structuralism. Unlike Durkheim, Weber, Lévi-Strauss or patriarchs of British social anthropology, he willfully resorts to all available textual-historical evidence, ready to discuss inscriptions from the past, or popular texts such as the *Maṇisailāvadāna*. In this work we don't find any diffidence, or embarrassment, nor any reluctance to admit the relevance of written texts, particularly as gloss on social/cultural praxis. In this respect, Shrestha veers closer to Indologists (e.g., Kölver or Lienhard) than to anthropologists proper (e.g. Levy or Toffin) who believe in the relevance of concepts and constructs such as centre versus periphery, the opposition of sacred and polluted. Like Heesterman, or his disciple van den Hoek, Shrestha sees the King as the pillar of Hindu *varṇa* system, not the Brahmin. But where is the King in Sākhu? Like Heesterman, Dumont or Tambiah, Shrestha considers cultural anthropology intrinsically linked with and tied to Indology. In his quest for "a totality of texts and contexts embedded in deep past" Shrestha's theoretical ground-plan is none too visible.

Though this work is solid, "holistic," ambitious, and voluminous, surprisingly Shrestha doesn't make any tall claims for major findings

enshrined in this study. His single articulate claim is that Newar society is too fragmented, visibly divided into contesting castes or into ritually defined castes and sub-castes. Yet they are held together by associations such as the *guthi*, endowed and founded to perform defined cultural role, and accomplish cultural events and actions. In secular world, they are divided in loyalties to competing networks, such as non-governmental organizations, or political parties with divergent ideologies and socio-economic programs. But once in a while they all come together to participate in, to celebrate the feasts, observe fasts and rejoice in *jātrās* where most of the members of a locality tend to have some or other important role in accomplishing the theatrical and spectacular procession of the *Devī*. The astonishing fact is that the Newars don't seem to care for sectarian identity of a deity. Whether Mādhavanārāyaṇa is a Hindu god, whether Vajrayoginī or Ugratārā is a Hindu or Buddhist goddess doesn't seem to worry his/her devotees in Sākhu as long as the chariot arrives at one's locality on time. *Yāhnyāḥ* (the arrival of the chariot at its destination on time) is the greatest accomplishment both for the *Devī* as well the community! All kith and kin join in a family feast in celebration of the goddess's triumphal march to their locality. No wonder if Shrestha concludes so comfortably, "It becomes apparent that the goddess is importance (*sic*) for the cultural identity of the town" (p. 524).

In the Danish Royal Library, Copenhagen, there is a manuscript brought from Sākhu in 1953 by the late Warner Jacobsen (No 135), a student of Tucci. It is a temple diary of Vajrayoginī maintained by several generations of priests, with dated notes from circa AD 1524 of people and events in the temple. Whenever anything unexpected, untoward, inauspicious or unusual happened to the image of the goddess (specially perspiration in the face, fall of any side of the goddess's dress, or *ṭikā* or *dṛṣṭi* or ornaments) it was instantly and directly reported to the King in Kathmandu by a messenger or *biseta*, the keeper of ornaments in the temple. Usually the officiating Vajrācārya recommends to the palace to perform a *homa*, or a modest sacrifice of a goat or a buffalo to placate the goddess or propitiate the resulting untoward turn of events. Once a stray dog walked inside the sanctuary while the chief priest was deeply engrossed in attending to worship of the goddess. In spring AD 1525 the Magar invaders led by Mukunda Sen set fire on a number of shrines in the Kathmandu Valley. To face this scourge Vajrayoginī was among the leading deities who were invoked and propitiated. The diary records that the Magar contingent "departed thereafter without doing more pillage."

The value of Shrestha's book is enriched by 65 plates, 15 maps, 20 tables, 7 charts, a glossary and several photos. The black-and-white photos are, however, poorly printed as they are scanned at high ratio of reduction. Some of the plates are barely visible! It is no small surprise to see that the text bristles with faulty Romanization of Sanskrit or Newar/Nepali/Hindi terms or names. The manuscript could have been more carefully attended to by a professional copy-editor. Faulty structures, unidiomatic words, phrases and expressions are left as they were in the manuscript. The book would have borne comparison with Robert Levy's *Mesocosm* had Shrestha been more clear on the theoretical framework he was to use to cope with field work. His statement that "the main hypothesis of this study is that distinct entities in this urban-oriented society are not defined by socio-economic features but by their ritual practices" is at best ambiguous. The lifeline of Sāṅkhu's economy was trade with Tibet. After the opening of the Kodāri route the caravans have bypassed Sāṅkhu. Lately, the town wears a deserted look. Abandoned by forces of change the ambitious ones have found limited options. They can, of course, continue to live in isolation as in the past, or move beyond the limits of the sacred boundaries necessary to compete in the wider world.

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