

Bal Gopal Shrestha. 2015. *The Newars of Sikkim: Reinventing Language, Culture, and Identity in the Diaspora*. Kathmandu: Vajra Books.

This ethnographical work is by far the most comprehensive account of the Newars in the diaspora. Based on the fieldwork among the Newars in Sikkim, it argues that power politics compels the subjects to expand the networks of relation and power to adjust in the alien culture. Then they seek to connect to their home tradition and language. Shrestha has published widely on the Nepali religious rituals, Hinduism, Buddhism, ethnic nationalism, and the Maoist movement. His previous book *The Sacred Town of Sankhu: The Anthropology of Newar Ritual, Religion and Sankhu in Nepal* (2012) was an ethnographic account of the Newars in their homeland.

In this book, Shrestha studies the restructuring of the ethnic identity in the diaspora. He considers ritual practice – for the Newars, the *guthis* (especially the traditional funeral association, *si: guthi:*) – as a marker of such identity. Based on the finding that this practice has been abandoned by the Newars in Sikkim, he raises the following questions: How do ritual traditions function in a new historical and social context? How are rituals invented under altered circumstances? What is identity constructed through transnational linkages over long distances?

On the theoretical level, Shrestha attempts to satisfy nine major features of Diaspora proposed in Robin Cohen's *Global Diaspora: An Introduction* (1997: 180) by taking the legendary Laxmi Das Kasaju, who left Nepal (feature a) to save his life after the rise of Jangabhadur Rana in 1846. Throughout the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Nepalis had been migrating to India in search of jobs. These migrants began adopting (feature b) Nepali language (formerly *Parbatīyā*) as *lingua franca* (Samanta 2000: 23). Despite their dissimilar ethnic locations, they shared a collective memory and myth

(feature c) concerning Nepal. They idealize the supposed home (feature d) in the Diaspora, as vividly represented in their numerous literary publications. Many could not undertake ‘a return movement’ (feature e). So they sustained the ethnic group consciousness over a long time (feature f). At times, the Nepalis in Sikkim faced ‘a troubled relationship with the host society’ (feature g), because they outnumbered local Bhutias and the Lepchas. This forced the Nepalis first, to revolt against the rule of the Chogyal of Sikkim, and second, to strengthen ‘a sense of solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries’ (i.e., in Nepal and elsewhere) [feature h]. They are still not accepted as natives. This situation has provided the Nepali migrants with ‘the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life intolerant host countries’ (feature i).

In Chapter 1, the author discusses the objectives and relevance of the book. In Chapter 2, he situates the Newars in Sikkim within general structure of the Newar society. He deals with their history and present socio-economic position, attending to (a) the dates and reasons for their move to Sikkim, (b) the local reception, (c) their influence and their contribution to Sikkim’s present and the past. In Chapter 3, he examines the loss of the caste hierarchies among the Newars (N) in Sikkim, who began utilizing the common surname, i.e., Pradhan. Despite the invention, they were required to fit in local social hierarchies. They managed to acquire as high status as the Brahmins (B) and the Chhetris (C) by long political association, predating the more recent NBC grouping under the ex-Chief Minister, Nara Bahadur Bhandari.

In Chapter 4, Shrestha presents the role of the Sikkim Newar national organization (Sikkim Newar Guthi) in reviving the Newar identity in Sikkim. The Guthi formation led many to regret their inability to speak Nepalbhasha and began learning the language through the Guthi’s initiatives with Kathmandu-based Newar organizations. The Guthi founded the Institute of Nepalbhasha and Culture at Namthang Kothi (South Sikkim), which was inaugurated by the current Chief Minister Pawan Kumar Chamling on 12 September 2000, reflecting the State Government’s commitment to promote ethnic languages and cultures. The government has recognized Nepalbhasha as a state language, allowed its use in the Legislative Assembly meetings, and has staffed the Assembly with a translator and editor for publishing its proceedings in Nepalbhasha using the Newar scripts since 1994.

Chapter 5 compares the festival calendar vis-à-vis that of the Nepalis to assess how the Sikkim Newars sought to maintain the culture and tradition in their original form, and where changes and influences occurred. The population now intends to revive many feasts and festivals long disappeared. The chapter also observes both the maintenance and reinvention aspects of the Newar *guthis* and the purposes behind such moves. Chapter 6 presents a comparison between the life cycle rituals in Nepal and Sikkim with comments on the variance. Chapter 7 elaborates on the several alterations in the death rituals as introduced by the Newars in Sikkim and attributed them to the absence of the religious specialists among them. Chapter 8 discusses the history and structural details of the temple of Swayambhu Bhimakali. Presenting details on both the daily and occasional rituals performed here, the chapter highlights the processes of reconstructing Newar religion and ritual in Sikkim. Chapter 9 recapitulates major points dealt in the previous chapters, and concludes by explaining current trend and future course of Newar society in the diaspora in relation to that in Nepal. It examines the impacts of trans-border communication between the Newars in the two countries and discusses the question of Newar identity in difference to other ethnic nationalities in Sikkim.

The author's sincerity and humbleness in dedicating the book to the people of Sikkim, the genuine owner of the text, is certainly commendable. While prefatory comments by David Gellner, a well-known scholar on the Newars, are endorsing, a few emendations would have enhanced the credibility of the work. The geologists' opinion about the beginning of the habitation in the Kathmandu Valley, the claims about the proto-Newar language by a linguist (Genetti 1990: 5–10), and the advanced state of arts and artifacts created by the Newars do not match. Simply stating that, as Shrestha does, "The Newar is as an original inhabitant of Valley of Kathmandu" (p. 1) hinges on the speculative.

More thorough rechecking of the spellings and meanings would have improved Shrestha's empirical footing. For instance, the negative connotation "a festive meal *kuchibhvay* with 500 gr (mana) of beaten rice..." (p. 86) is plainly wrong. *Kuchibhvay* is a compound word consisting of three independent words: *Ku*:-*Chi*-*Bhoe*. *Ku*: (like school /sku:/) alone is derived from three different oblique contextual meanings. If *ku* be 'load or measurement of 18 inches,' the implied meaning of the compound becomes 'a feast of a load of 18 inches' with *chi* as 'one' and *bhoe* as 'feast.' It would

not make sense. Nepalbhasha has the contrasting vowel length. So *Ku* is ‘load’ and *Kuu* is ‘spade.’ The word in question should be spelled as *kuu* (*ku*)-*chhi*-*bhoe*. With this, the compound means ‘the feast with the whole family or a full clan’ with *ku*: ‘clan’– *chhi* ‘one’– *bhoe* ‘feast.’ The Newars celebrate this feast on the eighth day of *Mohani Nakha*: (*Daśāī*) to enjoy the feast in a single row (*jho*:). The absence in this key reunion festival often results into expulsion or abandonment of a family member. Intensive urbanization and development of nuclear family has led to a relaxation in the rule. But many still consider *Mohani Nakha*: as an occasion to restate family unity through *kuuchhibhoe*.

Throughout the book, the author refers to Nepali as Khas Nepali. Since the Khasa community takes the term as derogatory, it should be avoided. The end note system adopted in the book is painful for a reader. Misspellings sprinkle the text. For instance, Kansakar, Hilker (p. 151) should be Kansakar, Hitkar.

I would like to nod on the author’s word to conclude this review, that “the monograph is a modest but relevant contribution to global migration history” (p. xviii). The study about the Nepalis outside Nepal, in general, is still in its infancy. We know very little about the process of acculturation, or the differential effects of state policies on ethnic consciousness. This applies even more to the Newars in Sikkim than to those in Nepal or Darjeeling. Interesting studies on the Newars notwithstanding, no significant research has been conducted on the Newar Diaspora (Gellner 1986; Lewis and Shakya 1988; Tuladhar 2004; Kansakar 2005). Detailed micro-ethnographies, such as this monograph aims to provide for, are required to fill the gap.

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