

Book Reviews

Rabi Thapa. 2016. *Thamel: Dark Star of Kathmandu*. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger.

In *Thamel: Dark Star of Kathmandu*, Rabi Thapa showcases his literary talent to offer a rollicking, autobiographical portrait of a neighborhood that is as notorious as it is misunderstood, as detested as it is beloved. As Mark Liechty (1996) has noted, Thamel is an area freighted with different cultural imaginaries. Beyond a material space, the neighborhood is equally, to use Thapa's phrases, "a mental artefact" and "a place that won't sit still" (p. 7). To my knowledge, *Thamel* represents the first book-length treatment of the neighborhood and its complexity. This alone—to say nothing of its lyrical prose, human-interest anecdotes, and historiography—renders it a welcome and enjoyable contribution.

In its structure and style, *Thamel* has parallels with Thomas Bell's recent book *Kathmandu* (2014). Thapa presents Thamel through a meandering, impressionistic series of personal and historical sections. At a brief 174 pages, the book offers readers a pretty complete sense of the confluence of politics, tourism, entrepreneurship, criminality, and pop culture that has transformed Thamel over the past five decades. The author delivers all of this with rapid-fire narration, a renegade tone, and a nonlinear history that is both subjective and embodied, one that is always rooted in Thapa's present-day perspective. Over the course of fifteen short, unnumbered chapters (excluding "References" and "Acknowledgements"), *Thamel* perceptively untangles the layers of myth, rumor, and history undergirding the neighborhood.

"Metamorphoses" covers the original Newar settlement Thabahi and its Bikramashila Mahabihar/Bhagawan Bahal. Readers are introduced to various characters of the temple's mytho-history, from Manjushree to Atisha Shrigyana, Dharmashri Mitra to Singhasarthabahu, as well as the role of the space for Buddhist scholarship and trans-Himalayan trade over the centuries. As in the rest of the book, the history is always told from the author's subjective, grounded perspective. The discussion begins and ends with Thapa himself wandering—in the present tense—through the temple complex. The chronicle unfolds always as a memory, with Thapa himself

leaning against a stupa, talking to the Pradhan *guthi* trustees, and embodying the history he recounts.

After a few detours, “Be Here Now” discusses Kathmandu’s hippie tourism of the 1960s and 1970s. The experiences of the renowned poet/playwright Abhi Subedi feature prominently as Thapa describes the interface between Westerners and Nepalis during that time: “Young Nepalis were rushing towards modernization, young Westerners were running away from it” (p. 58). Drawing on journalistic interviews, his own family’s history, and personal anecdotes, Thapa captures the heady mixture of political, spiritual, and cultural seeking that produced Freak Street and the broader ethos of the period. When King Birendra pushed for adventure tourism and the de-legalization of drugs in the 1970s, hippie tourism began to decline (cf. Liechty 2013). “The Outsiders” picks up this story with the gradual rise of Thamel, especially the Kathmandu Guest House and other early pioneers like Utse Restaurant. Again, Thapa narrates this history by recounting his (present-day) meetings with the likes of Karna Sakya, Rajan Sakya, Abhi Subedi, and American Peace Corps volunteers. By the end of this chapter (over halfway through the book), Thapa has brought readers more or less to the present manifestation of Thamel, that bustling and chaotic enclave that came into its own in the 1990s.

After the “Prologue,” Thapa begins his book with a line reminiscent of classic film *noir*: “It’s late, but Thamel doesn’t know it” (p. 8). This sets a gritty tone and signals some of the dark topics on which the author intends to focus: the shadowy, illicit sides of Thamel. In “Songs of Innocence,” Thapa describes his encounters with street children and the NGO personnel working to help them. He confronts his own judgments about “*khāte*,” even as he does not shy away from describing the serious blights of violence, sexual abuse, and addiction that regularly befall these street children (cf. Onta-Bhatta 1996). Readers are told of drug-addled kids threatening pharmacists with used needles, starkly juxtaposed with Thapa’s own privileged boyhood in boarding school and (later) living abroad.

Most interesting to this reviewer was Thapa’s well-researched and well-rendered discussion of Kathmandu’s gangsters, particularly the Manangis. As someone who has faced obstacles researching this underworld myself, I was impressed by the portraits Thapa manages to create. Of particular relevance is the rise of Rajiv Gurung (a.k.a. “Deepak Manangey”) from a Paknajol-based “young hood on the make” (p. 85) to the Don of Thamel,

the very face of the neighborhood's criminal underbelly. Emerging from a community that benefited from special trading privileges bestowed by Shah kings, a sub-set of these Manangis became wealthy through shady dealings in Thamel. Later, they ventured into "far more lucrative, but less scrutinized, deals in real estate and contracting" (p. 89). Thapa tells gripping narratives of street fights between the Manangis, rival gangs, and U.S. Marines. He charts the ascendances—and sometimes perilous demises—of rival gangsters like Kumar "Ghaite" Shrestha, Ganesh "Kavreli" Lama, and Dinesh "Chari" Adhikari (cf. Sheila 2016). In boldly presenting these stories, *Thamel* also delves into the disreputable shadows of prostitution, dance bars, smuggling, and protection rackets that continue to color the neighborhood's reputation. This discussion spills into "Songs of Experience," which also covers the Maoists. Their contingent in the Young Communist League posed novel challenges (but also a purging of disreputability) in Thamel through its "blend of moral reckoning and brutal extortion" (p. 120).

The remainder of the book proves much more personal for the author. In "Sin City," Thapa describes the role of Thamel among Nepalis of his generation. He explicitly agrees with Mark Liechty's (2003) earlier arguments about the prominence of consumerist class logics displacing—which is *not* to say eradicating—ritual caste logics in the urban milieu of Kathmandu's recent decades. Thapa recalls his experiments with beef eating and rock music; he describes his forays into stoner culture, alcohol-fueled parties, and raves in Australia; and he describes his growing up and out of that youthful phase. The chapter concludes with Thapa's "Thamel renaissance," when his literary circle solidified over buff *sekuvā* at Newa de Café. In "Pale Fire," this discussion of literature moves on to Thamel's bookstores. Thapa recounts his own house fire alongside the well-known fire that consumed Pilgrim's Book House in Thamel in 2013. Finally, in the "Epilogue," the author turns brief attention to the earthquake of April 2015. Here, Thapa suggests that, in one form or another, Thamel will endure: "... Thamel has it all, and if you don't want it anymore, someone else will. Take it or leave it" (p. 164). In many ways, the book is largely a story of how the meaning and significance of Thamel have shifted in Thapa's own mind as he came of age.

Woven throughout *Thamel* are six mini-chapters that take a strangely different form. These are first-person narratives from different individuals, and their distinction is signified only by quotation marks around the chapter titles. The first tells the story of a black metal singer who studied

ethnomusicology at Kathmandu University. The second comes from an elderly retired police officer, who now runs a shop in Jhonche. The third is told from the perspective of a pioneer in the trekking business. The fourth introduces the heartbreaking story of a bar dancer, prostitute, and aspiring writer. The fifth is narrated by a recovering drug addict, and the sixth by a hairdresser committed to staying in Thamel. These are interesting, but even after one has come to expect them, they remain a bit perplexing. Are these verbatim transcripts from the author's interviews? Are they paraphrased or fictionalized life histories? Unfortunately, these six interjecting chapters remain unexplained, even as their content sometimes proves moving and illuminating.

As with Bell's *Kathmandu* (2014), Thapa's *Thamel* contains several overlapping narratives and genres. The author blurs the line between personal memoir, journalism, creative non-fiction, and historiography. It blends all of these seamlessly and admirably. After several readings, I have come to view the book as an extended essay on the relationship between Thapa himself and all that Thamel represents in contemporary Nepal. It is a memoir of Thapa's coming of age in relation to the space, but it is equally a biography of Thamel as seen, lived, and (re)discovered by Thapa. The author has a knack for beautiful turns-of-phrase and inter-linguistic puns. Regardless of one's interest (or lack thereof) in Thamel, the prose alone makes this book worth reading. That being said, one does wonder about Thapa's intended audience. Thapa writes in highly literate English prose, yet not in an academic vein. At the same time, he leaves certain historical figures unexplained and some Nepali words untranslated, which might be confusing to foreign non-specialists. It seems mostly geared toward highly educated Nepalis and/or foreigners with some pre-existing knowledge of Kathmandu's history. As such, I think it will appeal to many readers of this journal.

Of course, no book is perfect. As a reader with scholarly interests in Thamel, I was sometimes left hoping for more straightforward history (even as I relished in the author's literary flights and autobiographical digressions). Also, despite a solid list of references, in-text citations are somewhat sparse. It is not always clear where the ideas/arguments of previous writers end and where those of Thapa himself begin. However, *Thamel* makes no claims to being an academic book, and criticizing Thapa for the book he didn't write is admittedly unfair. There are also occasional historical errors to be identified by nitpicking specialists. For example, while Thapa claims that Thabahi was

the only *tol* to exist outside the historical city wall surrounding Kathmandu, Gérard Toffin (2007) identifies three. Furthermore, Thapa claims that the Kathmandu Guest House (KGH) was founded in 1967. While the exact start date is extraordinarily difficult to pin down, 1967 is almost certainly too early to be accurate. (The current managers of KGH place the start date in 1968, Karna Sakya himself places it around 1970, and other scholars place it later in the early- to mid-1970s.) However, errors like this are trifling matters, especially considering the amount of accurate history that Thapa manages to convey in such a concise book.

For most, Thamel remains tethered to its touristic reputation, and this persistent imaginary is woefully inadequate for understanding the neighborhood's continued significance for young Nepalis (Linder forthcoming). Thapa's book is a major step in redressing this oversight. Thapa is clear to situate Thamel within Nepal rather than writing it off as foreign. His personal memories demonstrate this without romanticizing the seedier corners of the neighborhood. He has lived the transformations he describes, and the ongoing cultural ambivalence around Thamel is reflected in the author's personal accounts. There is still plenty of work to be done in the realm of *theorizing* these cultural transformations and the role of Thamel in them. The work of describing Thamel will likely never be complete. Nevertheless, compared to academic writing, Thapa's tone is much better suited to capturing the edgy, elusive spirit of the neighborhood. This is a wonderful read, and it does a remarkable job of balancing solid research with engaging, enjoyable prose. It helps break ground in its attempts to grapple with Thamel's contested, multivalent nature. Refreshingly, Thapa takes Thamel seriously, in all its contradictions, on its own terms, for better and for worse.

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