



## Review

### *The Newars of Sikkim: Reinventing Language, Culture, and Identity in the Diaspora*

by Bal Gopal Shrestha (Kathmandu: Vajra Books 2015, ISBN-10: 9937623332; ISBN-13: 978-9937623339, 169 pages)

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Sikkim is a tiny Indian state nestled in the lap of the Himalayas. The population mainly comprises the three ethnic communities of Bhutia, Lepcha, and Nepalese. The Nepalese themselves are composed of different ethnic groups, of which the Newars, at 5%, constitute a small, albeit significant, part. Bal Gopal Shrestha's *The Newars of Sikkim* is the first attempt at providing readers with insights into the lives of this small community residing in the erstwhile Himalayan kingdom of Sikkim. The ethnography focuses on the ongoing process of reinventing and reinterpreting the language, culture, rituals, and traditions by the Newar diaspora in Sikkim. Through this process, as Shrestha shows, the Newars have been able to construct an ethnic identity that is distinct from their counterparts in Nepal. The content of the book is organised into nine chapters and is supplemented with thirty-three colour illustrations and ten black and white ones, including a facsimile of an historical letter addressed to the then King of Sikkim.

The Newars are the original inhabitants of the Kathmandu valley, the term 'Newar' being derived from the name of the country 'Nepal' itself (p. 1). Considered as a "skilled and successful trading community" (p. 2) the Newars started migrating to Sikkim in the mid 19th century, where they steadily carved a niche for themselves. Shrestha reconstructs that the Newar migration may be traced back to Laksmidas Pradhan (Kasaju), a trader from Bhaktapur, who is believed to be one of the first Newars to have arrived in Sikkim. Shrestha provides the reader with a vivid reconstruction of Laksmidas' journey, beginning with his traumatic eviction from Nepal to his rise as a successful businessman in Darjeeling, and ending with him becoming a prominent administrator in Sikkim. Once settled, Laksmidas "began to invite hundreds of

Nepalese to look after the lands he controlled in Sikkim” (p. 22). Gradually, the new settlers introduced novel methods of agriculture which transformed the landscape and local economy.

Using Robin Cohen's criteria, the author attempts to establish the diasporic nature of the Newar (and Nepalese) communities in Sikkim (Cohen 1997:180 cited in - Shrestha 2015:4). Although his arguments are convincing, his assertion that the “Nepalese reside in a foreign country and are still not accepted as natives of Sikkim” (p. 6) is disputable. The Nepalese are regarded as one of the three main ethnic communities of Sikkim, and as residents of the state they are considered Sikkimese in their own right (Choeden 1995: 75). Moreover, the Chief Minister of Sikkim, Dr. Pawan Kumar Chamling, belongs to the Nepalese community himself. Thus, the author’s statement might not be applicable.

The rest of the book is concerned with the culture of Sikkimese Newars in the diasporic context, and how it varies from the Newar culture in Nepal. One of the significant distinctions according to Shrestha is "the disappearance of caste hierarchies among the Newars in Sikkim" (p. 36), the effects of which are visible in the functioning of *Guthis* – Newar socio-religious associations. The most important among them is the *Si Guthi*, the funeral association that performs funeral rituals and processions in the event of a death in the family of any of the *guthi* members. In the hierarchical Nepalese Newar society, membership in the *si guthi* "determines local affiliation and social position" (p. 37) based on one's caste, which is reflected in one's last name. In Sikkim however, all Newars adopted the common family name *Pradhan* at the behest of Laksmidas Kasaju, and which played a crucial role in eliminating caste hierarchies. Participation in the death rituals of a *guthi* member isn't caste-bound; in fact, the bereaved family is provided with necessary support by friends and neighbours "without any restriction of caste and ethnic background" (p. 39). This practice finds resonance among the Bhutia and Lepcha communities as well. Thus, the absence of traditional caste-based *si guthis* isn't as astonishing as the author claims it to be, but might be the result of cultural adaptation by the Newar migrants to their new social environment.

The Newars of Nepal celebrate a number of festivals out of which just a few are observed in Sikkim on a comparatively muted scale, and with their ritual aspects transformed. Shrestha provides numerous plausible reasons for this, including poor economic conditions, paucity of Newar priests, cultural influence of other Sikkimese communities, and a general lack of motivation to observe the festivities “at a place far from their homeland” (p. 84). He proceeds to describe in lucid detail the rituals of some of the major Newar festivals celebrated in both the lands, and draws out a comparison between them. Most of the festivities in Sikkim are confined to the family; however with the initiative of the *Sikkim Newa Guthi* (central Newar association of Sikkim), many festivals such as *Mha Puja*, *Indrajatra*, *Kvati Punhi*, and *Sithinakha* are now celebrated at a community level. This could be understood as the result of the Newar ethnic movement that started in the early 1970s “in order to revive their rituals and traditions in support of their identity” (p. 41).

The author lauds the Government of Sikkim for introducing regulations promoting ethnic languages and cultures. *Nepal Bhasa* (the Newar language) is one of the state languages and is taught in certain schools. *Indrajatra* was recognised as a state festival in 2012 (p. 86), and is celebrated with much pomp and grandeur every year. The Newars were assimilated into the

category of Other Backward Communities (OBC) in 2003 entitling them, along with the rest of the groups in this category, to a 14% reservation in government jobs and higher studies (p. 49). At the same time, Shrestha laments the lack of recognition of the linguistic and cultural rights of the Newars and other ethnic groups in Nepal, thus creating an apparently paradoxical scenario in which the Newar diaspora find better recognition in their new lands compared to those Newars who stayed behind.

The penultimate chapter deals with the temple of *Svayambhu Bhimakali* and its Newar Buddhist priest and founder, Suryavir Tuladhar. Although religious syncretism is present in Nepal, according to Shrestha such kind of amalgamation of “Hindu and Buddhist religious practices, including *Tantric, Vajrayani and Mahayani* Tibetan Buddhism in a single temple can be considered unique” (p. 120). One may sense the author’s scepticism towards the priest’s comportment as he describes the rituals as “complicated and obscure” (p. 135) fuelled by his “artistic imagination” (p. 135), enabling the temple to attract a throng of devotees. However, the priest, who also moves seamlessly between the roles of a spiritual teacher and healer, is given due credit for reinventing the religious rituals of the Sikkimese Newars, thereby helping to foster a distinct Newar identity, and at the same time demonstrating the religious tolerance of the Nepalese community in Sikkim.

The underlying theme of this monograph is the preservation and performance of identity among the Newars of Sikkim which the author addresses at various junctures inside the book. Their affinity towards Nepal is natural and apparent; however, the author makes certain generalizations on the basis of a few examples which are not applicable to Newars alone. Statements such as the presence of a family portrait of the late Shah King Birendra “inside every Nepalese home in Sikkim” (p. 145) is to a large extent untrue, and somewhat vitiates the accuracy of Shrestha’s writing. Nevertheless, this initial endeavour to study the Newars of Sikkim by Shrestha is admirable. 🙏

## REFERENCES

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