

## Book Review

A Brief Survey of Nepali Historiography, 1980. Krishna Kant Adhikari.  
72 pages. Published by the author himself. Kathmandu. Rs. 50.00.

History of Nepal is probably one of the oldest disciplines to be written about in this country. This has not, however, made it an easy or a less controversial subject to pursue. Controversy in history arises not only because of proffered historical 'facts' and 'proofs', which usually are incomplete and imprecise in nature, but also because history has always been something more than mere facts, probably so in all times and lands. The 'truth' of history is the 'perceived truth' of the historian, and his facts are what he arranges according to his own concepts and categories within which he tries to understand them. History serves as a handy tool to project the ego not only of an individual historian but also the collective ego of the state by playing up national pride and chauvinism. The motives of the state, which are in every epoch changing, succeed in getting themselves instilled into the consciousness of its individual citizens, especially historians, through a complex diffusion process the state is constantly creating and recreating. Because of all this, history in most countries (especially in the developing ones) is in a state such as it finds itself today. Historiography becomes an interesting enquiry only when it is understood in the background of these circumstances in which it was written. Apart from other things, historiography is a field which should not overlook to bring out these things, because by understanding the circumstances alone that historical methods, errors and distortions become comprehensible.

Krishna Kant Adhikari's work on Nepali historiography seeks, for the first time, to highlight the importance of this subject for history-writing of Nepal, which, in his opinion, has miserably failed to come up to its own. In a much too brief survey (the total length of the book is 72 pages) of historical books and writings of the past one hundred and seventy years or so, divided up in four chapters, and in beaming his search, at some length, on the 'shortcomings' of past writings on Jung Bahadur Rana, the first Rana Prime Minister of Nepal, he has not been able to cover as many sides of the weaknesses of the history books on Nepal as there might possibly be. In the style that he has chosen to do it, this would never be easy to carry it out satisfactorily either. Although he seems to lay much emphasis in the methods of conducting historical research, his praise or dismissal of the historical works by others seems to rest again on his own evaluation of some of these historical events. The lack of space one understands, has compelled him to be brief, but his annotation of historical works can hardly be said to do justice to some of these books. In my opinion, a discussion of the historical circumstances surrounding the composition of these books would have been a far more exciting exploration. There is an occasional attempt to do this but it is not a sustained endeavour: in most cases

his critical appraisal becomes only a refutation of specific points. I will provide one instance here. Adhikari has strongly refuted the historical truth of the Bhrikuti episode. In a fuller appreciation of it, this problem would seem to me to be as follows. Bhrikuti grew out of a living legend of Tibet for more than a millennium. Apart from historical 'truth' as such, this episode is even more illustrative of the long history of the Tibet-Nepal cultural relations and of the perception of these relations by the Tibetans vis-a-vis this episode. The fact that the Bhrikuti episode failed to make any impression in Nepali historical traditions themselves (Nepali chronicles make no mention of Bhrikuti), until Levi pitchforked her in them, speaks equally about the relative lack of significance Nepal attached to the cultural relationship with Tibet at that time. The Bhrikuti episode has received more than its due prominence in the history books including school textbooks by Nepalis in the recent decades which is again illustrative of the change which has come over the perception in regard to this 'historical truth', this time from the Nepali end. I may add a counterpart legend to Bhrikuti's to complete my argument. This relates to the legend of the visit by Asoka, the Mauryan King, to Nepal. Indian traditions themselves are quite silent about this visit. But Newar traditions and the chronicles are more unanimous about preserving the memory of this visit. Despite it, our recent history books are not as enthusiastic to highlight this legend in the same way as Bhrikuti's. These are the changing circumstances which make or lead to the unworking of a 'historical truth'. Notwithstanding all this, Adhikari should be praised for initiating a useful and pioneering discussion in the area of historiography of Nepal.

- Prayag Raj Sharma

Classical Newari Literature A Sketch, 1982. Kamal P. Malla.  
90+XII pages. Educational Enterprises Ltd. Kathmandu. Rs. 80.00  
Hardbound, Rs. 50.00 softbound.

A book of this type has long been needed by scholars and amateurs interested in the Newars and their culture. In some 90-odd pages, Kamal Malla has given the reader an accurate and concise introduction to the wealth of material in classical Newari which lies in manuscript form in collections both public and private in Nepal and beyond. Prior to the publication of this book, anyone with an interest in classical Newari literature was essentially on his own, forced to gather information in bits and pieces from the introductory remarks to translations by western scholars such as Hans Jørgensen and Siegfried Lienhard, or from numerous articles written by Newar scholars in Newari language journals, or from extensive perusal of the manuscripts themselves.

The book opens with a short account of some of the prevailing attitudes towards Newari literature, ranging from official and unofficial hostility to the extravagant claims sometimes made by partisans of the language. In most cases these attitudes can hardly be seen as considered opinions, since partisans of both sides are often not fully conversant with the corpus of literature they deride or praise. This slim volume is a first step on the road towards a firmer understanding of what exactly is meant by the term 'classical Newari literature.'

In the first part, subtitled 'The Literate Culture', Malla presents an overview of the history of literature (predominantly Sanskrit) in the Nepal valley. A particularly interesting section presents a series of famous Nepalese Buddhist scholars of the early medieval period, drawn from a variety of sources, mostly Tibetan. Although the author may in fact have overstepped the limits of rigorous scholarship in labelling all these men as 'Newars' (a term that has never been very well defined and, as the author himself points out, was first used in the 17th century) there is no doubt that the Nepal valley did produce scholars of the first rank who produced original Sanskrit works. The Tibetan evidence for this is indisputable.

The author approaches Newari literature as 'vānmaya' (skt., 'consisting of words') rather than as 'belles lettres', the definition of literature that we have become accustomed to; thus all Newari texts, regardless of subject matter, are included in this overview. This is a wise decision, for a critical evaluation of classical Newari 'belles lettres', as the author points out, would be at this point decidedly premature. Classical Newari texts are here divided into several categories: technical prose, historical prose, narrative prose, poetry, drama and ritual texts, and each is discussed in turn. As examples,

lists of manuscript titles are given, each manuscript dated wherever applicable. These lists reveal some interesting facts about the development of the use of Newari in writing. We learn, for instance, that the earliest texts written in Newari were those which deal with technical matters: law, lexicography, medicine and astronomy/astrology. The first attempts at translating narrative prose seem to have been non-sectarian; in the early 16th century A.D., before any religious prose had been rendered into Newari, we find a copy of the Tantrākhyana, preceded (perhaps; the date is unclear) by a Newari translation of one part of the Hitopadeśa in the previous century. Oddly enough, considering the early Buddhist leanings of the Newars as a whole, it would seem that the translation or redaction of religious kathā into Newari was an innovation of the Hindu section of the population, perhaps motivated by techniques of proselytization through the vernacular picked up from the south. The first known Buddhist attempt at Newari narrative prose is a copy of the Vicitrakarnikāvadāna dated N.S. 771 (A.D. 1651) which postdates the first known Hindu example - a Swasthānī of N.S. 713 (A.D. 1583) - by some sixty years and is considerably earlier than almost all other Buddhist manuscripts in Newari. Although this dearth of early Newari Buddhist texts might be due to persecution and destruction, a more probable explanation is that the Buddhists adopted the idea of translation from their Hindu neighbours. Seeing the effectiveness of recitation of pious stories in the vernacular rather than in Sanskrit, the Buddhists somewhat belatedly began their own translation programme.

One of the most striking characteristics of later medieval Newar culture is its material and visual richness, a richness not matched in the domain of the intellect. A comparison of Tibetan and Newar cultures, for instance, illustrates this point most graphically. Whereas the Tibetans have always acknowledged the Newar mastery of the arts, the intellectual and spiritual monuments of Tibetan culture find no parallel in later Newar Buddhist culture. This phenomenon is not linked to language, and I am not referring here to the Newar tradition only in their own language but in Sanskrit as well. Although it is no doubt true, as Malla convincingly demonstrates, that several Sanskrit texts which are included in the mainstream of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna literature were in fact written by natives of the Nepal valley, it is striking that later Nepalese Buddhists never adopted any of the formidable tools of scholasticism used by the Tibetans, such as printing and catalogues. The technology of printing must have been familiar to them from the Tibetans, but for whatever reason - faithfulness to the Indian literate model or the objections of a 'union of scribes' - they never once adopted the technique. Nor did they ever develop a 'general edition' of Sanskrit scripture equivalent to the Kangyur and Tangyur in Tibet. Certainly one reason for both these lapses is the gradual decline of monasticism among the Newars, for both efforts - codification and printing - demand the kind of organization and scholastic cooperation difficult to achieve outside of a monastic or university setting.

The Newars are an exuberant people deeply in touch with the valley they inhabit. Rivers, trees, hills and streams are sacred to them, and

their appreciation of the divine often takes an almost entirely tactile and sensual form. They are geniuses at amassing wealth and spending it in honour of the gods. The result of these traits in their character has been the subject of wonderment for visitors to the Nepal valley over centuries. But when we look for a tradition of Newari literature to match the sublime achievements of Newar artists and builders, we are disappointed. As Malla puts it, "It was as if the attainments in the visual and the plastic, the perfections in the visible were more important and more gratifying to them than the lacuna in their verbal world."

But if the concentration of the Newars has been directed more to the world of matter and form than to the wonders of the word, this does not mean that there "are no books in the Newari language worth teaching at the postgraduate level", the official opinion quoted by Malla as the reason for the long delay in introducing an M.A. programme in Newari at the national university. Although not as comprehensive or ancient as the neighbouring traditions to the north and south, the literature of the Newari is of deep and abiding interest both for its own sake and in any attempt to come to grips with the culture and history of the Nepal valley. This slim volume is a concise and valuable introduction to that literature.

The book contains an extensive bibliography, which is a valuable aid to any student embarking on an exploration of the previous work on Newari literature. There is unfortunately one major flaw in the listing of manuscripts: in no case is the source or place of deposit given. Although not an impediment to the general reader, this will undoubtedly be a source of acute frustration to the serious student who wishes to consult one of the manuscripts mentioned. It is interesting to know, for example, that the earliest known edition in Newari of the popular Swasthāni compendium of Saiva-Sakta tales is dated N.S. 713, but there might be one or two readers who would like to know where the manuscript is. After some trouble they will probably find out, but the trouble could have been avoided by listing a catalogue number or Manuscript Preservation Project running number/reel number along with each citation. Hopefully a future edition will supply this information, thus making this very informative guide considerably more useful.

It is encouraging to note that Educational Enterprises, a recent contender in the publishing scene in Kathmandu, will be offering more of this brilliant scholar's work in the future.