

## Book Review

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*The Sherpas Transformed: Social Change in a Buddhist Society of Nepal.* 1984. Christoph Von Füller-Haimendorf XIII+188 pages, Bibliography and Index. Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi Price NC Rs. 150.

The anthropological research among Sherpas begun almost three decades ago by Füller-Haimendorf was undertaken in 1953 in the Khumbu area of northeast Nepal. This research work led to the birth of a book entitled *The Sherpas of Nepal: Buddhist Highlanders* published in 1964, where the author has described socio-cultural and economic life of this trading society in detail. Subsequently, the author visited the area briefly in 1971, and he outlined some of the changes in his book *Himalayan Traders* in 1975. He revisited the area in 1983, and he has presented the account of changes occurring in the area during the years 1971 to 1983 in his book *The Sherpas Transformed: Social Change in a Buddhist Society of Nepal* published in 1984 (henceforth *The Sherpas Transformed*).

*The Sherpas Transformed*, divided into nine chapters, gives a good account of changes brought about by tourism and mountaineering expedition in a Sherpa region covering Khumbu, Rolwaling and Tashi Gompa of the northeastern Nepal. Enumerating households of the area covering the period between the years 1953 to 1983, the author has vividly shown the extent of revolutionary changes occurred in the traditional, homogeneous, Buddhist society of Nepal. Presented here are the accounts of changes explained by the author in different aspects of the Sherpa's life in the Khumbu region of northeastern Nepal.

In the first chapter, the three types of settlements: main village, Gunsu (winter settlement) and Yersa (Summer settlement) are described together with the scattered pattern of housing built mainly of local resources of rocks, earth and timbers. A Gumpa (a buddhist temple) and a Mani (a giant prayer wheel decorated with frescoes with a sacred character) are the common features of a Sherpa village. Villagers' general interests on religious matters are usually reflected in the construction of a Kani (a free colorful standing gate). Its maintenance is the responsibility of the villagers, but less efforts and resources are spent on religious enterprises these days. The layout, floor plan and its uses of a typical Sherpa house is also nicely described. Among the changes which occurred in the Sherpa village, the author enumerates that Khumbu is characterized with the conspicuously erected *Dharmasālas* or lodges mainly intended for tourists which were rare in the Sherpa village in 1953. Nowadays, the houses are in ruins in the Gunsu settlement. Previously, in the Sherpa society, the poor people owned single-storeyed house and the wealthier people double-storeyed ones. These days, majority of the houses are double-storeyed and owned even by the landless, who work for tourists to earn cash and are in a position to abandon old single-storeyed houses and build a new ones.

The economy of the Sherpas has undergone revolutionary changes since 1951. However, their agricultural operation recurs at a standstill because of the absence of able-bodied people in the village. Potato, exported to Tibet in the 1950s, has been exported to mid-hill and the Terai in the south. Magars have replaced the Khampas to empty latrine to apply in the field in 1983. Previously, economic activity assumed the characteristics of a social entertainment (singing, gossiping and joking while performing agricultural operations). Nowadays, these activities are absent as the young people are busy with tourists.

The Sherpas previously linked with trades with Tibet used to import salt and wool to Nepal and export rice, wheat, millet and maize shoulder-carried from the mid-hill to Tibet. However, this commercial link has broken completely in 1959, when China occupied Tibet. After some years, these frontiers were reopened. But the irony was that the Sherpas had to dispose their goods at the Chinese trade depot in Dingri with no bargain. This was a great shock ever experienced by the Sherpa community. However, this loss from trade was made up by the emergence of tourism and Himalayan mountaineering expedition.

In the past, potato was the mainstay of their diet. Rice was usually eaten by the Sherpas on the feasts and festivals. These days, rice has been an ordinary item of diet and large quantities of rice are purchased at weekly market. Similarly, the author notes that woollen raw materials from Tibet have been replaced by cotton fabric from Kathmandu and the brick tea from Tibet by tea from India. All the changes that have been discussed above are brought about in the Khumbu regions mainly by the development of tourism.

In Chapter Two, the author maintains that a Sherpa society in Solukhumbu was homogeneous unstratified and egalitarian in nature. It became heterogeneous only after the settlement of the Khampas from Tibet. The equality of status has disappeared in the society and Sherpas have become aware of status differences.

Discussing the sex, marriage patterns, and family life in Chapter Three, the author states that "sexual relationships are morally neutral provided those involved are neither bound by vows of celibacy nor by ties of marriage" (p.35). The parents usually connive at their daughter's amorous adventures especially at feasts, dances, and fields. This society is very liberal about sexual activities. The extent of liberality can be guessed by the statement, "No disgrace is allowed to giving birth to an illegitimate child, nor does it materially affect a girl's chances of a satisfactory marriage" (p.36). The author has also eloquently described various stages of marriage such as *sodne* (proposal to ask for marriage), *zendi* (full wedding rites) and *Rit* (in lieu of *zendi*). Polyandrous marriage, which was considered to be the most desirable in the 1950s has been reducing in 1983, and polygyny has become very common among those who are involved in tourism. They usually have one wife in Kathmandu and the other in Khumbu. The husband and wife relationships in a Sherpa family is based on the principles of equals. They show

tolerance and love to each other. The marriage can be dissolved easily. The author points out that "sexual relations are emotionally not highly charged, and that Sherpas are not prone to jealousy."

In the description of village organization in Chapter Four, it is said that the institution of *Naua* and *Shingo Naua* appointed by the villagers to control village land and to preserve village forests respectively and many other organizations have not been existing at all. Many of the old traditions have been broken especially after the introduction of Panchayat System. The land revenue collected by *Pembu* has been performed by the Land Revenue Office. The *de facto* autonomy enjoyed by Khumbu is no more there. Even then the old traditions have been replaced by the Panchayat "the manner of reaching decisions and dealing with disputes has changed little and the panchayat members act like the previous *Pembu* and *Naua*" (p. 57). The village Panchayat has taken over the functions of the traditional system of village government.

The villager's spirit to protect the community wealth has declined tremendously. The Sherpas do not think that the forest belong to them specially after the establishment of the Sagarmatha National Park near Khumbu. The mountaineering team cut firewood along the trail and local traders graze pony for 2-3 month resulting in a deforestation at the Khumbu region. The problem of deforestation has been exacerbated by Tibetan refugees in the years after 1959. Besides deforestation is psychological in nature, where Sherpas cut down a large number of timbers to build houses. In this way, forests have disappeared in the Khumbu region. Also, goat husbandry, an easy way to add to their income, is no more common due to shortage of grazing land. Even the cattle are not permitted to graze inside the Park area. The pheasants, who legally protected birds, destroy early potato shoot at the *Gunsa* settlement. They endanger the crops in fields adjoining the forests. It is very sad to observe that the indigeneous systems of controlling and preserving the Khumbu forest have been destroyed completely by the establishment of the Park in the area. Similarly, a school was a novel feature in the area then. The literate Sherpas could read and write only Tibetan script. Now they are required to do so in Nepali, too. Besides HMG, the Himalayan Trust is helping to run the high school. The Trust provides free books to students above Grade IV.

The author has given a detailed account of change and impact brought about by tourism in the Khumbu region. More than half of the families of the village are involved in tourism as porter, guide, *sirdar* and hotel-keeper. The position of *sirdar* has been a source of influence and economic power in the area. The *sirdar*, besides his wage, takes a commission on the wages of non-Sherpa porters too. They have become conscious, too. They have formed an association, called Sagarmatha Sherpa Sewa Kendra for the welfare of the Sherpas at distress. The tourist-industry has brought change in the Sherpa's standard of living in terms of materials, introduction of window pane, iron sheet as roofing material. Their diet has changed from potato and buckwheat to rice,

sugar, fresh meat. Some have even luxurious house and their clothing habit has changed to down padded jacket, sheep-skin coat, etc. The number of hotel has increased from none in 1953 to 15 in 1983. And the town of Namche Bazar has changed tremendously (Nowadays, all the tourist activities are controlled from the Kathmandu base). In addition to some visible changes, tourism has brought about some negative impact on life-style of the Sherpas, too. The men joined the tourists with high income leaving their women in Khumbu and burdened them with rearing of children, farm work, etc. The women appear to be the losers, being deprived of security and their social position companionship of their husbands. Tourism has brought, to some extent, the break-up of many families. Also, many Sherpa women have been the victim of their husbands' sexual adventure with their female clients and the psychological effect caused by this is immeasurable. The Sherpas are very commercialized, and do not have time to be involved in extending hospitality and developing relationship. The absence of able-bodied Sherpas on mountaineering has affected family life more deeply. The young men return only during the monsoon to celebrate Dumje festivals. The young girls are deprived of young men in village. The impact of fatal accident on families is irreparable. The number of fatal accidents since 1953 is about 116 men, who are believed to have perished in mountains. The total impact of tourism on Sherpa is yet to be investigated. All these statistics on fatal accident raises some problem about the justification of endangering the lives of so many Sherpas in enterprises" involved seriously in giving "pleasure and satisfaction to a few foreign mountaineers." The author mentions:

Anyone who has experienced the shock and distress engulfing a Sherpa village when the news of a major accident reaches the families of the victims must wish that European, American and Japanese mountaineers could find ways of proving their courage and endurance without unnecessarily putting at risk so many Sherpas in the prime of their life (p.75).

The Sherpas are very reluctant to accept the post of a teacher because they earn more from tourism and mountaineering expedition. The author explains that the sherpa population in the Khumbu region will decline in future as the births are outnumbered by deaths, Sherpas are migrating out of Khumbu there occurs continued mortality on climbing expedition and economic importance declines in the Sherpa villages of this region.

In Chapter Six 'Buddist Institutions and Practices', the author discuss the evolution of *Gompa* in Khumbu. He says that *Thawa*, Abbot, monk and nuns are from rich families. But the number of monks has dropped as they had returned to secular life in order to earn high wages paid by mountaineering expeditions. There is a decline in religious dedication and scholarships as well as there are opportunities for young people away from Khumbu. The *Osho* (to protect village) rituals have been replaced by the Panchayat system. *Nyungne* (cleansing the worshippers of sin and the corresponding gain of merit), *Dumje* (merry making

festivals to drive out hostile spirit) are still performed. And the hospitality is thrown to earn religious merit, together with the purpose of gaining prestige in the village. Other festivals are also held, *Dumje* in public temple and the *Mani-Rimdu* in monastery.

Fürer-Haimendorf has described 'Mortality and Social Values' in the Seventh Chapter of the book. He has eloquently described both the meritorious conduct and sinful act. The Sherpas believe that good work outweigh minor sins. The Sherpas do not, anymore, show religious fervor because they have earned money by work for tourists and mountaineering expedition. Inscription of religious scripture on rock was very common, but not any more. The Sherpa's values are gradually disappearing. They compete for *sirdarship* which has created conflict in village. They moved to trade from agriculture, and from trade to tourist industry. Tourism has forced many customs to disappear in Khumbu village such as:

The generosity and hospitality so characteristic of the settled farmer is unlikely to survive in the peripatetic existence of a tourist guide or mountaineering porter...two generations ago Sherpa social life was comparable to that of medieval Europe while today a village such as Namche Bazar resembles in many respects minor tourists resorts in the Australian or Swiss Alps" (p.114).

The author has pointed out how the Rolwaling Sherpas have occasioned change in their social and economic life. The unknown things in 1953 such as leather Jacket, sleeping bag, and transistor are very common these days. The poor families rival with the rich in the possession of yak and land. The poor families also sponsor *Gompa* festivals and religious rites. The political power has shifted from older generation to younger men with tourist and mountaineering experience. They earn money from tourism. As a result the older people, these days, devote their life on religious activities. Even the school drop-outs are seen to have joined tourism.

In the last chapter of the book, the author describes "The Buddhist Community of Tashi Gompa" with the description of how Tashi Gompa was built by lamas and nuns. Its economic base is the endowment from the devotees, donation in the form of land and so on. He advocates that the Buddhist monastery life is basically egalitarian, where all nuns and Gompa officials have an equal chance of attaining positions of responsibility at the monastery. He has enumerated 27 houses with the description of nuns, who entered Tashi Gompa on their own as young unmarried girls. The reason to join nunnery, as described by the author is that

One of the basic motivations for such a decision is undoubtedly the conviction deeply ingrained in Buddhist ideology that the attainment of religious merit is a part of future good fortune through favorable reincarnations as well as peace and contentment in this life.

According to the author, the Sherpas at the Khumbu region have undergone a great change in their socio-cultural milieu since 1953. However, the author has not analyzed whether these changes are from only tourist industry or from other development strategies as well such as education, communication, agriculture development, remote area development, health etc. The author has not mentioned anything on the change in nutritional status of people in general after they have started eating rice. Nor does he say anything about the quality of life experienced by these people in 1983. Nevertheless, the book contains information brilliantly placed together by a field anthropologist *par excellence* like Fűrer Haimendorf. Thus the book *The Sherpas Transformed* covering a period of 30 years, is a well-documented, field research which is worth-reading by students of change in Nepali culture and society.

- Bishnu Bhandari