

BOOK REVIEW

My Kind of Kathmandu: An Artist's Impression of the Emerald Valley. Dysmond Doig. Indus & Imprint of Harper Collins, India, 1994. Pages 208. Price: NRs 2072.

Way back in 1978 when I met Desmond, I distinctly remember him being excited about a new book he was working on. *My Kind of Kathmandu* has at long last hit the Kathmandu book stalls. Desmond said "...it will be different; not the usual touristy kind written about Kathmandu." When I prodded the artist, writer and genuine Nepal lover, to tell me more, he, as if to skirt the topic, started talking about Calcutta: "I simply loved that city, I still do, probably its past still lures me there now and then, but it has certainly lost a great deal of character. The haphazard urban development has killed the very soul of the city. Now I'm mortified at the thought that the very same may happen to Kathmandu, this city of art and culture. If planners and policy makers don't watch out, Kathmandu may turn into a mini-Calcutta." He couldn't have been more right.

He said this was one of the reasons that prompted him to bring out the book to capture in water colours and sketches the city as he first saw it. The smell and the sounds; the vivid and vibrant colours; the tinkling of temple bells; festivals in quaint brick-paved alleys; vast expanses of virgin green fields stretching to meet the surrounding green and purple hills; temples even within the Ring Road shrouded in mystery and legend, waiting to be discovered. When Godavari, Budanilkantha, Chaubhar and Pharping were distant, one day treks through idyllic green fields and surroundings; when dramatic monsoon skies were vividly reflected in paddy fields; when Wong's Peace Restaurant was probably the only Chinese restaurant in town; when the sparkling Bagmati and Bishnumati rivers were revered symbols of a throbbing ancient culture; when the Emerald Valley was in the real sense the enchanting home of the gods.

Desmond, in *My Kind of Kathmandu*, has successfully captured these along with the mud, brick and wood Kathmandu he loved and once knew: his kind of Kathmandu that once was in the fifties and early sixties a drowsy easy going city that retained the timeless magic of the centuries. While browsing through the vibrant sketches and water colours lavishly displayed in *My Kind*

of Kathmandu, this timelessness suddenly comes alive, as if by sheer magic within the walls of the drawing room, and lures the reader into the world of the artist away from the concrete and glass Kathmandu of today where even ancient temples are vulgarly lit by blinding modern-day neon lights.

The water-colour world of the artist, depicted as only Desmond could, takes us on an exotic luxury tour of Kathmandu, Patan, Bhaktapur, Thimi, Kirtipur, etc. and renders colourfully the history and legend of Swayambhu, Boudha, Harisiddhi, Pharping, Dakshinkali, Choubhar, Godavari, Panauti, Budanilkantha, Surya Binayak, Changu Narayan, Bajra Barahi right up to Chandeshwari and in the process even describes in detail the little known Guru Nanak Math, a forgotten shrine of the Sikhs on the way to Balaju. The water colours that have so brilliantly captured these destinations throb with life not found in prize photographs.

It is precisely because of this that one will grimace in absolute agony to see these exquisite paintings so unartistically splashed all over the volume, like clumsy centrespreads, that gruesomely murder the very spirit and continuity that the artist breathed in those colourful renderings. Had Desmond lived to see some of the atrocities, especially those of Nasal Chowk (p8), the Shweta Bhairab (p.30), Asan (p.90), Bhim Sens's Tower (p.98), Jagat Narayan Temple (p.126), Old Patan Bridge (p.128), A Courtyard of Cane Weavers (p.130), Kumari Ghar (p.152), Bhairab Temple (p.154), Kirtipur (p.162), Choubhar (p.164), Dhyani Buddha (p.170) and the Temple of Masks (p.188), the artist in him would have surely rebelled and vehemently disapproved of the "murder" committed in his name. Had he been alive the layout of the volume might have been quite different and would certainly have befitted the very nature of the artistic undertaking.

The lively text, which is again art dissolved into prose, made even more interesting by personal accounts and experiences punctuated by wit, irony and a sense of humour unique to Desmond alone, is bound to hold readers spellbound. The marvellous story teller here in true form, and in spite of the ungainly size and weight of the volume, makes it hard to put down even for a brief respite. His tale of the coronations of King Mahendra and King Birendra, of forgotten temples and immortal courtyards, ancient palaces and grand festivals, colourful rendering of history and legend, magic and superstition, medicine men and soothsayers is brilliant. It also tells us of Sylvan shrines, Freak Street, two vanished cities, the Hill of the Camphor Tree of a Gateway to a Vanished Palace, Taleju's Barking Bell and a Death Drum and an old oil Press. A visit to the Kaiser Library makes interesting reading, and the hilarious personal accounts at the Royal Hotel and encounters with Prime Minister Tanka Prasad and with well known expatriates like Boris Lissanevitch, Father Moran, Col. Jimmy Roberts,

Major Dudley Spain, Gordon Temple, Han Suyin and Barbara Adams lend the book a unique flavour.

Why the 80 kg of completed manuscript and sketches of *My Kind of Kathmandu* that were sent to the publishers of London were stalled and “shelved in dusty obscurity” is a bit mysterious when Desmond was alive then. But if the years lost resulted in the volume being unceremoniously hurried through the press, as can be seen from the poor editing, glaring proof errors and clumsy layout, then it has been a very poor compensation indeed. A compensation at which Desmond would have glared absolutely petrified and surely taken Duby and the team to task in spite of the labour pains the team as a whole underwent in bringing his personal Shangri-la alive.

In spite of the shortcomings the volume still stands out easily as the best and most fascinating portrait and biography of Kathmandu to date. Nothing less of course could be expected from Desmond Doig who wrote as exquisitely as he painted and who probably knew the nooks and corners of the Valley better than any local.

Going back to that encounter with Desmond in 1978, I distinctly recall the artist saying that one of his paintings – of a Jyāpu under a tree beside a crumbling temple with flower behind his ear pulling peacefully at his hookah in some remote Kathmandu village and staring contentedly at his green fields – would adorn the cover of the volume he was so excited about. That was one painting I frantically searched for in the pages of the coffee table publication. I wonder what happened to it. Was it misplaced? Lost? Set aside? Or is it still languishing in some corner under “Kalyan’s bed”? It would have surely been a magnificent prologue to Desmond’s kind of Kathmandu, his personal Shangri-la; to his love affair with what once was the Emerald Valley.

– Ananda P. Shrestha

BOOK REVIEW

Water Resource Development: Nepalese Perspective. Coordinators Bhekh B. Thapa and Bharat B. Pradhan (IIDS, Kathmandu), Konark Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1995. Pages. 275. Price Rs. 350.

From the chronic shortage of water in the capital city; the annual cycle of death and destruction wrecked by the monsoon floods elsewhere in the country to the perennially politicised waters of Koshi, Gandaki, Mahakali (read Tanakpur) and no Arun rivers, water is literally a matter of life and death for Nepal. The scale of the contradiction, just like the gap between the much vaunted 42,000 MW hydro power potential of the country and the actual production of a tardy 232 MW is quite staggering.

On the one hand, textbooks from the primary level onwards feed the Nepalese on the staple diet of utopian rhetoric that Nepal's salvation, when it does come, will be through its immense and inexhaustible water resource potential, purportedly the second highest among all countries.

For an average man on the *goreto*, such nationalistic chest thumping can not be sustained in the light of his personal experiences; drinking water shortages; parched, dusty fields; and dark, *tukki*-light dwellings.

But the strange linkage between poverty and profit, privation and potentiality has meant that water resource utilization has remained one of the hottest and often acrimonious debate both at the political and intellectual level after Nepal's entry into the modern era in 1950.

In this backdrop the book under review *Water Resource Development: Nepalese Prospective* will be a timely contribution to the ongoing debate in the country and to some extent the South Asian region where the discourse often tends to degenerate into highly partisan and nationalistic jingoism. The book, segmentally structured into 10 papers by seven writers, links the significance of water resource utilization to development, agriculture, irrigation, energy and inland water transportation. The technical side of hydrology and hydropower generation is also provided to some extent. A brief chapter each is also devoted to the environmental aspects of water resource development and the interesting case studies on the highly controversial Koshi and Gandaki projects done with India.

Although not based on original research, the various chapters in the book have summarised some of the existing but disparate information and data in the field in a ready-to-use convenient manner. But some confusion regarding statistics has been left which could have been eliminated through better editing. For example, pages 95 and 122 have given the hydropower generation in the country as 232 MW and 227 MW respectively for 1990. But these minor slips do not in any way diminish the importance of the work. Setting a rather modest goal, the preface states: "The present volume will have served its purposes well if it can stimulate further detailed inquiry" on the issue.

But in an effort to maintain an objective posture, the work has deliberately sidestepped the contentious historical, political and bilateral issues related to water resource development in Nepal. Going to some extent in this direction, the Tanakpur hydro project has been totally omitted from the map at the beginning of the book. As a result the fine collection of relevant information lacks a central thrust and thread weaving through all the chapters.

How can water resource development – something as costly and pervasive in its impact as to require national and international intervention – be located anywhere but in the historical and economic matrix of our country and the region? Development should not be taken only in a technological vacuum. Such basic questions how much of the country benefits from these technological marvels; whether the cost of production per unit of electricity and irrigation water economically is viable; and whether the massive structures as high dams are ecologically permissible can not be swept under the carpet.

This is particularly true of Nepal's past performance in this sector. Due to rampant corruption, mismanagement and inefficiency in power generation, Nepalese consumers are forced to pay one of the highest electricity fares in the world. In this respect the book states that the cost of small plants "has been nearly 3,000-4,000 US \$ per KW" (p. 111). But the book conveniently fails to mention why the cost of mega projects such as Arun III is projected to cost over 5,500 US \$ per KW. To be economically feasible, electricity should be available at under 6 cents per unit, according to experts. The Nepalese pay over 7 cents per unit now and all the projects in the pipeline are estimated to cost more than the feasible limit.

Secondly, by opting for objective respectability rather than critical analysis, the authors have missed the internal and external political and historical dynamics so crucial to the issue at hand. For example, who makes the water agenda at home and what are the interests at play? Can some sections still ensure sectarian interests by pushing through environmentally

questionable and economically inadvisable projects? It is being increasingly felt that the politician – bureaucrat – technocrat – business complex can serve its interest just as well through commissions, contracts and consultancies no matter what the economic, social and environmental worth of the project to the country. Here the objectives of the global capital and local comprador are in perfect unison. For example, the book would have proven immensely relevant for the future if it had provided an incisive analysis of Arun III and the interplay of various forces that contributed to the present stalemate instead of apologia for the Least cost Electricity Generating Plan (LCEGP). There is a hint that the learned authors might have decided to respect political correctness, a tendency quite prevalent among Nepalese intellectuals and academicians.

Thus in accounting for the low level of development despite the four decades of development planning, chapter one notes: “A poor resource base, difficult topography, low domestic savings, inadequate domestic resource mobilization leading to excessive dependence on foreign aid resources, an under-developed human resource base and a poorly developed infrastructure and institutional framework pose strong challenge to Nepal’s development effort.” No doubt, all these factors are valid, but this is only one part of the equation. The development or underdevelopment of any country must be viewed within the global capital and labour and market, especially in the current phase of globalization, multinationals and the resulting dependency. As eminent Nepal scholar John Cameron wrote in a recent seminar paper: “In Nepal’s case, the dependency was exacerbated by being the periphery of a periphery.” We close our eyes to such forces at our own peril.

It is surprising that the book – part of a national effort at a non-governmental level study to promote cooperation in Ganges-Brahmaputra-Barak (GBB) river basin among Nepal, India and Bangladesh – has chosen to give scant coverage to the precedents and prospects for meaningful cooperation on a bilateral and sub-regional level.

The regional atmosphere for collaboration in water resource is less than encouraging with deep suspicions, grievances and selfishness on every side. The Helsinki rules on international rivers have not obviously seen much light in this part of the world. For example, when it comes to sharing water from the Farakka barrage, India asserts the right of the upper riparian to divert much of the water to its side, leaving Bangladesh high and dry to complain of injustice. But when it comes to sharing water and power from river projects with Nepal, India takes the lion’s share and botches any attempts at multilateral approach to problem resolution. The skewed benefit sharing arrangement is attested by the figures on page 208: the Koshi project irrigates 969, 121 ha. of Indian land compared to an insignificant 11,300 ha.

of Nepali soil. Apparently, none of the joint projects did Nepal receive more than 5 per cent of the total irrigation water or electricity. India's preference for unilateralism in these matters has made joint exploitation and equitable benefit sharing of this unlimited resource a distant prospect.

The other development paradigm flaw of the book is that it assumes whatever hydro power is generated must be exported for 'development' to take place. It gives scant attention to the need or the fact that even with the heavy load-shedding regime in force. Nepal's present electricity generation of 249 MW (including 22 MW of thermal generation) barely suffices to serve just 10 per cent of the total population. Common sense tells us that just to electrify the whole country of 20 million people at the present very low consumption level would require another 2250 MW of power. Would this in any way be a lesser development objective?

The economic, social and environmental returns from the total electrification of the country would be immense. Momentous possibilities for the real, down-to-earth development would unfold. It will unleash its own economy. If development and progress is viewed as sustainable, inward looking and people serving, then the authors will not have to worry about finding external markets for Arun III (201 MW), Kali Gandaki II (660 MW), Burhi Gandaki (600 MW), Upper Karnali (240 MW), West Seti (360 MW) or any other hydropower projects we might care to develop in the future. Market worries will seem genuine when mega projects such as the 10,000 MW Karnali come into operation.

As to doubts to whether rural folks can afford the 'luxury', they certainly can. If the ones who have been lucky enough to be connected to power thus far have been coughing up the present exorbitant rates, others too can, especially so as they will be only substituting the expensive firewood and kerosene for the environmentally-friendly hydropower.

If there is any silver lining to historical late coming for third world countries, it is to avoid falling into the trap of banana or other 'export' economy without first developing a strong internal production and demand. Let's hope Nepal will do it with her water resources.

Saubhagya Shah