

BOOK REVIEW

Mary Shephard Slusser. *Nepal Mandala: A Cultural Study of the Kathmandu Valley*. 2 Volumes: Volume I text, 491 pages; Volume II, Plates: Maps 9, figs. 20, plates 600. Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1983. Price: Nepali Rupees 2,375.00.

The long awaited book on Nepal by Mary Slusser is finally out. It has been produced in two impressive and attractively designed volumes in a large, encyclopaedic format. It is a little curious that in the very first sentence of the preface she addresses her voluminous work, somewhat unwieldy in size, to non-Nepali readers. Her publication has met with no little enthusiasm among the small circle of Nepali readers and caused a considerable stir of envy and admiration among them.

A great deal of time, effort and money has undoubtedly gone into the production of this book. This can be measured by the sheer time it took to prepare it from the field-work stage (1965-71), through the writing time (1972-78), to its final printing and release in 1983. She herself seems to take pride and a good deal of satisfaction in this fact as she implies in a reference to Levi in the preface (p. xii), who, in her words was neither in Nepal long enough nor permitted to move about freely to substantiate his work through adequate field research. While this is quite true, Levi's three volumes of *Le Nepal* (1905-1908) are still adjudged a pioneering and monumental piece of work on Nepal despite the discovery of so much new material since he wrote, making it urgent to revise some of his bold historical assertions made earlier. Being an orientalist of such eminence as he was in his own right, the insights he

brought to bear on the study of Nepal's history and culture after just about three months' field-work are amazing indeed. Even seventy-five years after its publication, the book has not yet lost its central relevance and the charm of an original imagination. More extensive field-work has gone into Slusser's work. It is broader and more encompassing in the scope of the subject treated, but it does not show sparks of similar vision, originality, and insight. The book, by and large, is a compilation of facts made known from already published studies in the field, supplemented with her own field observations.

There are three parts to the book, not considering the short account in the beginning describing the land and people as a background (pp. 3-18). While part one deals with political history from the earliest times to the present (pp. 18-82), the other two parts are devoted primarily to architectural (pp. 83-212) and sculptural studies (pp. 213-380), each further subdivided into several subsections of the chapters. There are, in addition, five appendices out of which two are concerned with political history (I & III), one with architecture (V) and one each with Language and Writing (II) and an Inventory of the Licchavi Inscriptions (IV). Within this general scheme of arrangement, Slusser has collected a plethora of information ranging from legends, hearsay, chronicle accounts, field observation, and speculative reasoning to conclusions from well-established historical facts. She unfolds her account in a succession of ideas and observations in which the fundamental concern seems to be to discuss her material by placing it *in situ* and in its proper chronological setting. This a style characteristic of the art historian. But she does not confine herself to this style, nor does she pursue it to the full throughout the book, as her material is far too diverse in nature. This has sadly deprived the book of its essential focus, and the addition of a subtitle has helped little to

mitigate or overcome this lack of focus.

Calling the book 'a cultural study of the Kathmandu Valley' may in fact be a little misleading. It is quite true that culture lends itself to diverse and widely varying definitions, and art and architectural study cannot be said to fall wholly outside its scope. Nevertheless, one believes that the social and ritual aspects are essential elements, and one should focus on some discussion of these aspects. This, however, is not even given an elementary treatment in the book. Even the festivals providing the most colourful background to the life of the Kathmandu Valley are not cast in their true social settings. Although limited in purpose and scope, John Locke's study of the Cult of Avalokitesvara-Matsyendranath in the Valley of Nepal (1980) or Michael Allen's *the Cult of Kumari* (1975) give a much better exposition and a far more penetrating and scholarly account of the Kathmandu's Valley's culture. At best, Slusser's book is, therefore, a description of the cultural symbols, the outer shells as represented in the art of the place. It does not delve deep to explain what material and what psychic congruence led to the production of the Valley's distinctive culture as we find it through the ages. As such, Slusser's book reads like an endless account of the vast archaeological debris of the Valley, a mixed pot pourri of art and architecture, which she claims in several places in her book, is the result of her doing intrepid 'surface archaeology'. However, in order not to let her book be just another repetition in the field of art history, architecture and iconography in which there have already been a number of good and authoritative publications (to give just a few examples refer to the works of Pal [1974], Bernier [1970], Korn [1976], Deo [1968], Pruscha [1975] and Wiesner [1978], she probably felt the need to extend the theme of her book to incorporate accounts of other areas of general and sundry interest. The book, therefore, does not present a

systematic exposition of architecture or iconography. Still it is the endless forms and inexhaustable number of deities which provide the main subject matter of her study, and the chapters of the book are arranged essentially in accordance with a scheme adopted for iconographic groupings.

It is true that among all the recent foreign authors writing on Nepal Slusser has been the most generous in acknowledging her indebtedness to the work done by native scholars in Nepali and other local languages. This is evident from her bibliographical listing of their works, including even the smallest works, and in some cases unrelated works. In this she shows an especial prediliction for the writings of the earstwhile members of a pioneering Nepali historians' group which calls itself the *Itihasa Samsodhana Mandala*. One reason for this may be that two of her principal research assistants were members of this group. For local readers in Nepal who are familiar with the importance of the work done by this group and who are also familiar with some of their favourite viewpoints and pet theories, it is not too difficult to discern Slusser's total dependence on them for her interpretative wisdom. Not too infrequently one gets the impression that Slusser is not making a very selective and judicious use of their work in her interpretation, but depending on them entirely, although giving them little more credit than mentioning them in footnotes. For example, on page 126 she proposes what she calls 'a sound working hypothesis' on the question of the location of the ancient capitals of the Valley. One can certainly question whether this is a 'sound working hypothesis' since the placing of Kailaskutabhavana in Kathmandu is the theory of one Nepali scholar, and this theory has not been accepted by any other Nepali scholar. In the same vein one can see how expansive she is on the question of tracing the development of the town of Kathmandu. This was the preoccupation of one of her research assistants and his work is now published

(Gautam Vajra's, *Hanuman Dhoka Rajadarbara*, Kathmandu: Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, V.S. 2033). On the other hand, she fails to give even a modest treatment of the development of Bhaktapur and Lalitpur. Her own information in certain areas in which her assistants probably remained unconcerned does not appear to be up to date. For example, she does not seem to be familiar with the research on the pre-Malla mediaeval coins of Nepal (see her observations in this regard on p. 41 and f.n. 1 on the same page) published by N. Rhodes and C. Valdetarro in an article entitled 'Coins in Mediaeval Nepal', in *Numismatic Chronicle*, Seventh Series, Vol. xvi, pp. 158-66. Her footnote on p. 213 relating to the Brahmans makes awkward reading as she mentions nothing about the Rajopadhyaya Brahmans among the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley.

These reservations notwithstanding, it will be difficult to ignore the book and not to recognise its merits as a major work written on one of the most fascinating areas of Nepal, i.e. its art and archaeology. The book makes refreshing reading in places where previous works have been wanting especially when she describes stray architectural pieces, stone pillars, votive *stupas*, a few temples and some new and unreported sculpture. The chance of running into new archaeological finds in the Valley seems to be inexhaustable; and Slusser has added a few finds to the repertoire that one had thought Pal had already exhausted. Her pictorial documentation of the rich artistic heritage of the Valley all gathered in the second volume presents an invaluable imagery of the finds, something which could have only been done with the resources she was able to command. One irritation in the book for serious-minded scholars is the profusion of orthographical errors in rendering local names and terms with the help of diacritical marks. It is not possible to eliminate these without a firm grounding in the local language, or languages.

260/*Kailash*

The price of the book may furnish some explanation for the curiosity we expressed at the beginning of this review--why was the book addressed to non-Nepali readers? It is so expensive that it is beyond the capacity of a Nepali reader to buy and possess it. Its buyers will have, therefore, to come from the circle of wealthy foreigners and members of the diplomatic corps who are wont to decorate their shelves and drawing rooms with high brow art publications as a proof of their delectable taste for art, aesthetics, and sophisticated living.

Prayag Raj Sharma