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Review of *The Newars of Sikkim: Reinventing Language, Culture and Identity in the Diaspora* by Bal Gopal Shrestha

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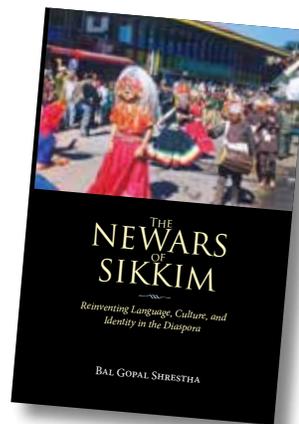


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The book *Newars of Sikkim: Reinventing Language, Culture and Identity in the Diaspora* presents a description of the changes in the culture and rituals of the Newar ethnic group in Sikkim. Using interviews, observation, and secondary data, Bal Gopal Shrestha charts the history of the Newars in Sikkim, the establishment of the Sikkim Newar Guthi, and the new cross-border connections that have been forged between the Newars of Kathmandu and Sikkim to revive and retain Newari religion and culture in Sikkim. However, while interesting in its ethnographic content, there are several areas that require attention.

The book begins with the migration in 1850 of Laksmidas Pradhan, an influential Newar who, along with his extended family, were able to establish themselves in Sikkim as revenue collectors, copper miners, businessmen, and overseers of a large number of migrants from Nepal (pp. 18-28). The historical details of their journey and their influence on Nepali migration to Sikkim provide an interesting glimpse into the socio-economic relationships between different ethnic groups in nineteenth century Sikkim. Against this background of the socio-economic life of the early settlers, the book examines the contemporary status of Newars in Sikkim. Shrestha uses data from surveys conducted in 1981, 1989 and 1994 (pp. 30-1, 142) to establish the present socio-economic status of the Newars. Considering that numerous other surveys have been conducted over the last three



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

Bal Gopal Shrestha. Kathmandu: Vajra Books, 2015. 161 pages. ISBN 9789937623339.

Reviewed by Mona Chettri

...the ethnographic and secondary details presented in *The Newars of Sikkim* will be a useful and interesting starting point for those interested in Newari culture and tradition in Sikkim.

Mona Chettri on *The Newars of Sikkim: Reinventing Language, Culture and Identity in the Diaspora*

decades, this data is not an accurate representation of the current socio-economic status of Newars. The use of statistical data is, presumably, to highlight the lower economic status of the Newars in Sikkim but Shrestha contradicts this with statements such as “many believe the Newars are affluent” (p. 54), “the Newars are believed to be one of the most educated communities in Sikkim,” and “in the past, many Newars occupied important Governmental posts, but this situation has changed in the recent past” (ibid.). Shrestha posits this change in the status of the Newars on “the privileged status given to Bhutias and Lepchas who have begun replacing them” (ibid.). Instead of assessing the overall economic and institutional structures that affects people’s status, Shrestha shifts responsibility on other communities for the current position of the Newars. While no secondary data or statistics are presented to validate this claim, Shrestha also overlooks the fact that the Bhutia and Lepcha communities have always had this “privileged status” and that the Newars nevertheless did well in securing employment and high administrative positions.

While interesting in its detailed description and comparison of Newar rituals performed in Sikkim and Kathmandu, the influence of other religious traditions on Newari practices, and their assimilation with other Hindu and Buddhist practices, the book includes many generalizations and cavalier

comments. For instance, Shrestha’s “most surprising find was a family portrait of the late Shah King Birendra and his family inside every Nepalese home in Sikkim” (p. 145; emphasis reviewer’s own), a claim which is categorically untrue. Further, the author makes a series of seemingly inflammatory claims such as “even the people of Nepalese origin migrating to Sikkim from other Indian states do not feel well-treated,” “... those of Nepalese stock from West Bengal (Darjeeling, Kalimpong) and from across the Nepalese border are not respected” (ibid.), and the suggestion that statements made by Kazi Lhendup Dorji in 1995 urging the Indian government to return Sikkim to its independent status is an illustration of “how the Indian rule in Sikkim is despised” (ibid.). These are a few examples of generalizations that are neither substantiated with evidence nor elaborated further. Inter- and intra-ethnic relationships as well as Sikkim’s relationship with India is far more complex than illustrated in the book and deserves deeper introspection and analysis.

The book categorizes the Newars of Sikkim as a diasporic community and uses examples of Newar migrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to justify this categorization. While this is an appropriate categorization for an earlier generation who considered Nepal to be their homeland and place of origin, it is not true for those who were born in India, are

Indian citizens, and call Sikkim home. Thus, while a useful category for an earlier wave of Newari migrants who probably did fulfil the criteria used by the author to define a diasporic community, the continued use of this category throughout the book for all the Newars of Sikkim is highly problematic. As the book illustrates, the Newars maintain cultural and familial contact with Newars of Kathmandu but the author conflates cultural contact with notions of belonging and home. Apart from being problematic conceptually, categorizing the Newars of Sikkim as a diasporic community negates any claims on Indian citizenship and exacerbates pre-existing problems of identity, rights, and inclusion that are being experienced by Indian-Nepalis in India. While they might not be able to claim an indigenous status in Sikkim, the author claims that they “reside in a foreign country and are still not accepted as natives of Sikkim” (p. 6) without providing any further elaboration on parameters of Sikkimese citizenship or how they are not accepted as Sikkimese. Newars who hold documents identifying them as Sikkim subjects are Sikkimese in an administrative and technical sense, and this is true for all other Nepali ethnic groups living in Sikkim.

Given the on-going ethnic revivalism in the eastern Himalaya, *The Newars of Sikkim* presents interesting insight into the work and motivation of individuals in establishing the Sikkim Newar Guthi and their renewed

cross-border connections with Kathmandu in an attempt to maintain ethnic exclusivity. However, political contextualization of these religious and cultural changes, one of the crucial drivers of ethnic politics in Sikkim, is presented in snippets and is not exhaustive.

On many levels, the book achieves what it sets out to be its central premise: to document and describe the changes, revival, and preservation of the ritual and cultural traditions of the Newars of Sikkim. From that perspective, the ethnographic and secondary details presented in *The Newars of Sikkim* will be a useful and interesting starting point for those interested in Newari culture and tradition in Sikkim. However, the lack of critical analysis, broader contextualization, and engagement with other literature on the region, rigour, and over-generalization limits the audience and impact of this book.

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