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**Book review of ' Mesocosm: Hinduism and the Organization of a  
Traditional Newar City in Nepal' by Robert I. Levy (with Kedar Raj  
Rajopadhyaya)**

Todd T. Lewis  
*College of the Holy Cross*

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thoroughness, and attention to all levels of language. The book is indeed a practical and thorough grammar that will enrich every student of Nepali at any level.

Anyone who has knowledge of Nepali will benefit from using *A Descriptive Grammar of Nepali*. I will conclude with one recommendation for the author, or some other adventuresome and dedicated person: take the information in this text and make a short and easy reference grammar to complement this text. Nepali will then be in the same class as world languages, which have several books available to all levels of learners.

**David L. Red**

*National Foreign Affairs Training Center, Foreign Service Institute, Department of State*

**Robert I. Levy (with Kedar Raj Rajopadhyaya), *Mesocosm: Hinduism and the Organization of a Traditional Newar City in Nepal*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. 830 pp. \$84 (cloth).**

Rich in architecture, cultural performance, and social diversity, the city of Bhaktapur, in Nepal's Kathmandu Valley, endures as one of the great surviving traditional cities of Asia. Robert Levy's *Mesocosm* is an ambitious and exhaustive study of its urban community and culture, a culture shaped in a thoroughgoing manner by Indic traditions, predominantly Hinduism. Crossing disciplinary boundaries, this extraordinary book speaks to a host of important issues in South Asian sociology, urban anthropology, and Indology.

A formerly walled city with a population of more than 40,000, Bhaktapur is home for over one hundred named castes, nearly all from the Tibeto-Burman ethnic group called "Newar." Like other Newar settlements, Bhaktapur has an especially vital cultural life: there are 120 major temples (wooden "pagodas," many ornate and of exquisite design) and thousands of minor shrines; over seventy-five festivals, some running to multi-day events, are celebrated each year; and the individual life-cycle is marked by twelve highly orchestrated rites of passage. The book's great length is in part necessitated by the author's extensive ethnographic documentation of these complex subjects.

*Mesocosm* constructs a magisterial overview, addressing multiple audiences. It is certainly a landmark in Newar studies and the first book-length ethnography of Bhaktapur. *Mesocosm* provides a wealth of thoughtfully assimilated data, along with wise, perceptive interpretations of Newar urban life. One especially attractive organizational feature is the use of appendices for setting forth data not of critical importance to the central analytical focus, which frees the non-specialist reader from the burden of excessive "thick description."

The author organizes his ethnographic presentation around the mesocosm, a term first used in Paul Mus' *Barabudur*. For Professor Levy, the Mesocosm is "an essential middle world . . . situated between the individual microcosm and the wider universe . . . a resource not only for ordering the city but also for the personal uses of the kinds of people whom Bhaktapur produces" (p. 32). Through this analytical-contextual perspective, Levy identifies Bhaktapur as an example of Fustel de Coulanges' "archaic city"; he thus sees the city as constructed of successive, interlocking cells (household, lineage, neighborhood, city), each sustained by its own culture and cultural performances. After the city's conquest by non-Newars in 1769, Bhaktapur's traditions were selectively shaped to become a "unicultural," Brahman-dominated "climax Hinduism" through which the city "turned in on itself." Since then, Bhaktapur's Mesocosm has functioned to maintain a distinctive, shared experience for those within by "turning accident and history into structure, for trying to escape the contingencies and consequences of history, for trying to capture change, to make change seem illusory within an enduring order" (p. 616). Regularly stepping out from the complex descriptions of Newar urban culture, Levy's narrative uses the metaphor of dance theater to assemble and assess the overarching model of the Hindu Mesocosm being developed.

City geography sets up myriad ordered spatial divisions (*mandala* quadrants associated with goddesses; cremation procession routes; the city circumambulation route; "uptown" vs. "downtown," among others) that reinforce deeper cultural constructs, becoming multiple backdrops for ritual and festival stagings. In the author's view, the walled city unit itself, neighborhood spaces, procession routes, and household boundaries--all, in an ecological-environmental sense, "think for" the urban Newar. Once launched, the mesocosm has a life of its own that enters, as meta-actor, into the dialectics of social life and cultural history. In defining human cultural ecology maximally, inclusive of a collective psyche and shared dramatic consciousness, Levy seems to have been influenced by Gregory Bateson's later work.

*Mesocosm* shows how Bhaktapur's social organization is not exactly parallel with other South Asian venues and the analysis emphasizes a bifurcated, ritually defined order: two sets of actors to perform opposite, yet complimentary, roles in the recurring Mesocosmic drama cycle. There are the maintainers of purity/pollution -- Brahmins, priestly functionaries, and untouchables -- who represent dharma and perform tasks necessary to sustain "Vedic" rituals (*sam̐skāra*) and supplicate the great "civic, moral gods" (Visnu, Shiva). This first complex upholds the caste-delimited social order. The entire population of the city connects with this system in the life-cycle rituals and festivals dedicated to the gods, who uphold the householders' core values, identities and relationships.

The second religious complex focuses upon powerful, dangerous, predominantly female deities. They are outside the "civic" order both conceptually and spatially, but through tantric ritualism they can also be relied upon to insure urban prosperity. Utilizing their irresistible "amoral powers," specialists carefully orchestrate their presence within the mesocosm and present "impure" propitiatory offerings (blood through animal sacrifice, alcohol) to win their allegiance. Dramas aimed at this goal are choreographed in what Levy terms "The Devi Cycle"; these performances, which dominate Bhaktapur's public festival life, are the responsibility of the King and the middle castes (merchants, artisans, farmers). The Newar goddess traditions are remarkable case studies in the domestication of the Devi-Maha-tmya and of Hinduism in an urban setting. Extensive descriptions of Bhaktapur's great city-wide festivals will test the reader's endurance, but the reward is rich, as they demonstrate how these two complexes are linked, compete, and coexist. The author's analysis clearly shows how the urban mesocosm's public festival system -- in actual performance as well as in deeper communication -- is almost exclusively oriented toward the male experience.

Perhaps the most original contribution of this work is to the history and anthropology of tantric Hinduism. Contrary to textual extrapolations that see tantra as a tradition of escape from social order by renouncers and marginal social groups, in Bhaktapur the tantric deities have been domesticated and employed by the society "when that moral order is being threatened either by some internal force or by some external danger" (p. 574). Especially striking is *Mesocosm's* documenting tantra as the provenance of Brahmins, allowing this caste to lead in both Mesocosmic arenas; in Bhaktapur, in fact, high-caste status is defined by access to esoteric initiations and the tantric worship of the lineage-protector deities. This dimension makes the Newar Brahman a much more complicated figure than the idealized, archaic Brahman deduced from the Dharmashastra.

One particularly interesting interpretation offered in *Mesocosm* is that those with tantric training can more deeply comprehend the society itself: "In Bhaktapur the 'reality' that is being seen through includes in large part the symbolically constructed Mesocosm itself . . ." (p. 313). In other words, tantric Brahmins and ideology have choreographed Bhaktapur's cultural history. It is significant to note that *Mesocosm* was a collaboration between an anthropologist and a learned Brahmin with ties to the city's royal temple.

In a work of such scope and ambition, of course, issues needing clarification and amplification inevitably arise. While it is true that Bhaktapur is the most Hindu of the large Newar cities, it nonetheless has a sizable Buddhist population. In Bhaktapur, the role of Buddhists and Buddhist festival observances within the non-Brahmanic sectors of the Mesocosm seems underrepresented. Newar civilization in other towns has a more balanced Hindu-Buddhist coexistence, with a parallel Buddhist culture underwritten predominantly by merchants, orchestrated by elite *acharya* communities in urban

monastic centers, and linked to large *stupa* complexes outside the town's boundaries. Newar royalty elsewhere had to balance their alliances between these orders. Given the presence of twenty-three Buddhist monastic temples in Bhaktapur, I suspect that Buddhism is not quite as peripheral to the urban system as *Mesocosm* suggests.

A second topic this reviewer ponders is the manner in which history has overtaken the ethnographic portrait. The author's construction of Bhaktapur's Hindu mesocosm argues that it does not create a class of "socially destabilizing philosophers" (p. 32). Soon after his fieldwork ended in 1976, however, there was a virtual town strike against a German project doing restoration and development work. More shattering were subsequent political movements: throughout the 1980's Bhaktapur was a stronghold of Marxist parties quite militantly opposed to the country's Panchayat system; in 1990, mass demonstrations marked by bloodshed led to the overthrow of that system. Professor Levy is quite aware of signs portending the ending of the archaic urban system: but how to explain Marxist success vis-a-vis the *Mesocosm* model?

Even classical Hindu civilizations saw the regular appearance of materialists, skeptics, and agnostics: has *Mesocosm* underplayed the chaos of the bazaar and overestimated the totalizing force of the religious culture?

A final comment must note that this volume is only the first of two. The sequel will be a welcome and necessary encore to a remarkable scholarly endeavor: to demonstrate the validity of the over-arching analytical enterprise in *Mesocosm* requires corroborating anthropological data from individual studies selected across the urban community. How does the construction of urban Mesocosm in the present volume, so brilliantly argued "from above," i.e. through Brahmans, literary myths and law codes from Sanskrit texts, really work "on the ground" and in existential terms? Professor Levy has anticipated such reservations with selected quotes from case-study data and promises to demonstrate the foundations of Bhaktapur's Mesocosm with further in-depth discussions of the household, the status of women, life-cycle rites, and psychoanalytically informed individual biographies.

Traveling with Robert Levy and Kedar Raj Rajopadhyaya into the mid-montane Himalayas requires a long and arduous approach march, but the trek as well as the extraordinary destination hold the promise of unique and rewarding vistas.

**Todd T. Lewis**

*College of the Holy Cross*

**C. M. Agrawal, *Golu Devata, The God of Justice of Kumaun Himalayas.* Almora, U.P., India: Shree Almora Book Depot, 1992. 147 pp. incl. appendices, index, photos.**

In the village of Chitai, outside Almora, U.P., Golu Devata is regularly worshipped as a god of divine justice. There, the temple of Golu Devata is one of the greatest religious shrines in Kumaun, and worship of Golu extends throughout the region. Based on his original research, C. M. Agrawal's new book provides a fascinating account of this worship at Chitai. At the core of Golu worship is the ideology and practice of *manauti*, or the individual pledge to make an offering to the god when a request to him has been fulfilled. People come to the temple of Golu Devata with a wide variety of requests (for a son, to pass an exam or receive a promotion, etc.) but the temple to Golu is in particular seen as a "court" where pleas for justice are made. Thus most requests are for justice, for divine intervention in disputes or revenge against those who have wronged a petitioner. Worshippers write out their requests and pledges on pieces of paper, sometimes money-stamped, which are then hung from wire inside the temple. When requests are satisfied, votive bells are a common offering.

Along with a thorough discussion of Golu worship, its varied meanings in the past and at present, C. M. Agrawal provides new and illuminating data from his own survey of worship and worshippers. This comes in two parts. First is a study of the written appeals placed inside the temple. Second,