



1999

Book review of 'In the Circle of the Dance' by Katharine Bjork Guneratne

James Fisher
Carleton College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

Fisher, James. 1999. Book review of 'In the Circle of the Dance' by Katharine Bjork Guneratne. *HIMALAYA* 19(2).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol19/iss2/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.



BOOK REVIEWS

In the Circle Of The Dance: Notes of an Outsider in Nepal.

Katharine Bjork Guneratne. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999. 225 pp. 14 b&w illus., 1 map.

In addition to the historic and standard anthropological monograph that has always been the hallmark of the profession, there has also been the occasional "informal account of fieldwork", a genre that has become increasingly common in these recent, reflexive years. Even less common than that is the informal account written from the perspective of the anthropologist's non-anthropologist spouse. That is exactly what Katharine Guneratne has created in her delightful and insightful *Inside the Circle of the Dance*. In what she lightly refers to as an "anthropologist-drags-wife-to-field-and-wife-writes-book" project, Guneratne gives us a thoughtful and sensitive portrait of the Tharus she got to know in a village in Chitwan in the Tarai. A compelling feature of the book is that she then also shows how her encounters with her Tharu friends inevitably shed light on her own self and her own society. It is the way she shows how this self-knowledge grew in sometimes comical fits and starts out of casual ethnographic knowledge that many readers will find especially appealing.

Part of the book concerns establishment of her own problematic identity as a foreigner - not just a marginalized foreigner, but a foreigner married to another non-European foreigner (Sri Lankan) who is therefore a different kind of foreigner. Her book is thus written out of the "struggle of being exotic while struggling to feel merely foreign" (in real life Guneratne is an historian of Latin America).

Guneratne goes through many of the reactions and predicaments foreigners typically have to being in Nepal - e.g., how to deal with beggars, particularly begging children. She concludes with some thoughts on how the existence of beggars in Nepal puts the even more exotic phenomenon of homelessness in America in a new perspective. Begging in Nepal at least involves one in a social relationship, compared to the abstract reduction of poverty in the U.S. to impersonal material terms.

She relates similar strong but ambivalent reactions to "eve-teasing" in Nepal. Having experienced her fair share of this in Kathmandu (but never in her Tarai village), she returned to Hyde Park in south Chicago and its own forms of sexual intimidation. She relates how she was walking near the University of Chicago when two "Black kids with baggy pants and untied tennis shoes" approached her. She was not afraid of anything they might do, but only of what they might say. When one of them did say something taunting, without thinking she spun around and abused them in Nepali, which caused them to flee in terror.

Guneratne's book is not just a reflexive tale. It also tells us much of ethnographic interest about Tharu life, such as marriage, food, farming, education, politics, and the impact of tourism. She also describes how other highland groups in Nepal (Tamang immigrants, Kathmandu sophisticates) appear from the vantage point of those who have always lived in the lowlands.

The title of the book is taken from the author's ability to finally be included in the dances of the women - not just observing them, but being part of them. Charmingly written, *In the Circle of the Dance* will attract anyone interested in the everyday life of people who, like us, are just folks.

James Fisher
Carleton College