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Review of Caste and Kinship in a Modern Hindu Society: The Newar City of Lalitpur, Nepal by Mark Pickett

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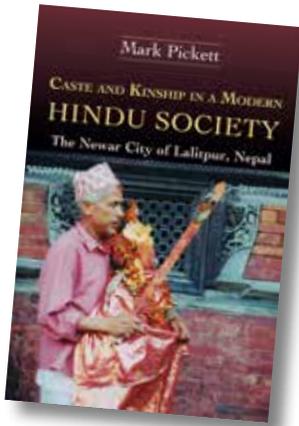


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Andrew Nelson on *Caste and Kinship in a Modern Hindu Society: The Newar City of Lalitpur, Nepal*



Caste and Kinship in a Modern Hindu Society: The Newar City of Lalitpur, Nepal.

Mark Pickett. Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2014. 363 pages. ISBN 9789745241367.

Reviewed by Andrew Nelson

No Nepali ethnic group has received more anthropological attention than the Newar. Perhaps due to their accessible location in the Kathmandu Valley or for the intellectual appeal of their social complexity, the Newar have inspired several dozen (just counting English publications) ethnographies over the past half-century. While ethnographies of other Nepali groups have largely shifted with Nepali political transformations to emphasize the political and constructed nature of ethnicity, the majority of Newar ethnographies—most of which were published prior to or soon after the 1991 reforms—have remained committed to the holism

and modernism of anthropology's pre-*Writing Culture* generations. Mark Pickett's *Caste and Kinship in a Modern Hindu Society* offers no exception. In fact, Pickett wastes no time admitting his distaste for postmodernist anthropology through his disagreement with fellow ethnographer of the Newars, Steven Parish, who has posited that culture is incoherent and fragmented. Noting an allegiance to the work of Robert Levy and David Gellner, Pickett responds that a "unified account of the culture of Lalitpur is a worthwhile and noble goal" (p. 7). Not surprisingly, Pickett forgoes the more urgent topics of transnational migration, land conflicts, and ethnic politics in Nepal for a return to the anthropology's classical concerns with caste and kinship.

Although Pickett's book neglects more contemporary questions in Nepal studies and anthropology, if understood within the confines of Newar ethnography, it can be read as a reminder of the value in more traditional approaches to social analysis. Pickett offers an intricate analysis of a section of Newar society largely missing from the ethnographic record, the Pengu Dah (Tamvah coppersmiths, Sikahmi carpenters, Marikahmi sweetmakers, Lwahakahmi stonemasons) castes of Lalitpur. His fine attention to detail and encyclopedic understanding of Newar cultural practices reveal the rich benefits of long-term research, which I gather stems from his experience of spending decades

as a resident and researcher in Lalitpur. While the level of detail is, at times, a challenge to work through, his precise description and analysis contribute numerous insights. For instance, Pickett offers strong evidence for the teachable point that caste is always contested, showing how Pengu Dah castes and Maharjan farmers debate which is ritually higher. Or, how the rise of youth clubs and caste organizations have transformed the *guthi* system, based on territory and caste, into individual caste groups or pan-Newar identities that function more like ethnic groups. I was particularly captivated by his historical analysis of Holi as a Malla-era "accretion" that has never caught on among the Newar (p. 204), and his argument that Lalitpur's four *stupas* are positioned to counteract the inauspicious crossroads trade routes.

Beyond Pickett's particular insights, the book's main contribution is in how it engages with a classic debate in South Asian anthropology between Hocart's king-centric model of caste based on exchange and Dumont's hierarchical model based on purity. Pickett strongly sides with Hocart via the work of Declan Quigley to argue that it is the royal-centered spatial order of the city rather than hierarchy that regulates Newar caste practices. Moreover, contra the "tribal substratum" argument of Gérard Toffin or the "trichotomy" of Gellner's Tribal-Newar-north Indian position, for Pickett Newar social structure is "basically one with that

of north India with the element of centralization at its heart” (p. 10).

Pickett bases his thesis on what he calls the fundamental conflict of Newar society between kingship and kinship, which is played out spatially and temporally in ritual processions and festivals. He emphasizes this point in the final four chapters, which move beyond the exacting descriptions of caste, economy, and kinship earlier in the book, to show, *à la* Levy, how the Lalitpur ritual cycle demonstrates a civic drama of epic proportions. Basically, he juxtaposes the festivals that function to expel the disorder, malevolent spirits, and threatening entities of the vulnerable monsoon season, with the festivals that serve to restore urban society to its pre-monsoon order. The ritual cycle culminates in the Matsyendranath (or Karanumaya) chariot festival. Similar to what the Baisakh Jatra means for Bhaktapur and Indra Jatra means for Kathmandu, Matsyendranath defines Lalitpur, providing what Pickett calls the “genesis of the city” (p. 250). The festival reaffirms the centrality of the Malla king, represented in the sacred sword of the Yala Jaju, symbolically positioned above the *puja*-giving Shah King (or since 2008, the Prime Minister), and marks the renewal of the city by mediating the year’s conflicts through the central symbol of the kingship.

For those looking for insight into the pressing political matters of contemporary Newar society or the contemporary debates

of anthropology, this book will disappoint. Nonetheless, Pickett’s penchant for ethnographic detail will surely benefit future scholars of the Newar regardless of their theoretical bent or topical focus. More than anything else, the book represents a tribute to the complexity of Newar social life, which will undoubtedly continue to intrigue anthropologists for generations to come.

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