

Book Review

The Limits of Surface Archaeology

Mary Shepherd Slusser, Nepal Mandala: A Cultural Study of the Kathmandu Valley, Volume I: Text xix + 491 + Appendixes + Bibliography and Index, Volume II: Plates 3-Colour Maps 9; Figures; Black and White Plates 600. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Price: Rs: 2379/-

Books on the arts, architecture, and culture of the Nepal Valley are not now so rare as they were in the past. Most of them, however, cater to the needs of the lay reader or the visitor. Mary Slusser's book is an exception. It has two clear merits--it is not a guide book nor is it a conventional art history. Secondly, it is love's labour--unlikely to be lost, or even replaced in the foreseeable future. Although she is not a trained 'Indologist' (she did her doctoral work on South American archaeology), her background as art-historian, archaeologist, and anthropologist has been an invaluable asset, and nothing could have been more desirable in a student of the culture of the Nepal Valley.

The book grew out of Slusser's long sojourn and her holy curiosity leading to fruitful and catalytic contacts with native culture and scholarship. Although Slusser was in Nepal between 1965-1971 only, the book is a product of years of indefatigable industry, meticulous study and research. As such, it deserves to be discussed in some detail. The subject-matter too is complex and intimidating--a culture system that evolved in the course of two millennia of symbiosis that took place within the geographical confines of the Nepal Valley.

When Slusser first came to Nepal in 1965 she wanted to read about its culture. Her American colleagues knew the most famous Buddhist monument of the Valley merely as "the Monkey Temple" whereas her Nepali friends could only let her know that it was "old". Because she couldn't find any satisfactory answer to her curiosity in the monuments that crowd the Valley, she came to write the book she did. After doing two years' unremitting field work Slusser had enough materials "to write a serious guide to the Kathmandu Valley cities and their compelling monuments." However, by the time her "serious guide book" was complete, she made a "startling discovery--at once exciting and sobering." The King Solomon's Mines that Slusser bumped into were the Nepali-language publications--the work of native scholars, mainly the output of Itihāsa Saṃśodhana Maṇḍala. They provided her with the clues of a firm chronology--a clue to the jigsaw puzzle of the culture.

From the Nepali sources I could now see that from A.D. 300 to 1769 there was an unbroken political continuum that harmonized with what was clearly an unbroken cultural continuum. (p. xiii)

Slusser's study seems to have, thus, two main hypotheses:

- a. the cultural continuum harmonized with the political continuum;
- b. the cultural continuum was, in fact, unbroken from A.D. 300 to 1769.

Keeping these hypotheses in view, "my primary aim", says Slusser, "has been to render in broad outlines as cogent and comprehensive a history of Nepalese culture as is now possible within the limitations of one book." (p. xiv) Dividing her time between field work, Nepali language study and research-- "in comprehending the sources" (p. xii), Slusser devoted well over a decade in writing the book. In her industry, she was fortunate to win the support, constant assistance, and geniality of "the impeccable historians of the Samsodhana Mandala." Slusser's book is, thus, an exceptional monument to the cross-fertilizing impact of the two traditions of scholarship--the Eastern and the Western. Without her "accidental" contact with native research and scholarship, Slusser would have ended up with yet another glossy though, of course, "serious guide to the Kathmandu Valley."

Much of the groundwork--"the pieces unevaluated and uninterpreted"-- for the book come from the published sources--both Nepali and Western. Slusser's achievement lies in providing the elegant structure that one needs "to make the cultural materials understandable." Both her assimilation of "the pieces" as well as her mastery of structure is in clear evidence in the early chapters of the book. In 61 odd pages (Chapters 2, 3, and 4) Slusser has given us one of the clearest outlines of Nepalese history available in any language. With exceptional clarity and conciseness she builds up her main themes in these chapters--the evolution and continuity of the culture system, its dovetailing with the continuity of Nepalese Monarchy, artificially divided into the House of Licchavis, the House of Thakuris, and the House of the Mallas. The political and cultural milieu, on the one hand, and the foreign contacts of Nepal during each of these periods, on the other, evidently show increasing Hinduisation of both polity and culture by successive dynasties.

As the mortal dramatis personae--as the patrons and creators of a complex culture--the Licchavis, the Thakuris, and the Mallas--in short, the Newar political and cultural elites were a pious, credulous and a somewhat addicted breed. The external stimulus for the growth of the culture has come almost continuously from India, and intermittently from contacts with the North. As noted by most observers on Newar culture, Slusser too finds that

Newar settlements have an urban character that persists even in the smallest villages.

Her explanation for this urbanity of Newar culture is that "the Newar towns and villages are generally oriented towards the river and the

streams that course through the more level Valley floor" (p. 83). This is at best an adequate description, but not a convincing explanation. One possible explanation may be early discovery of the art of brick- and tile-making--a crucial technology without which urban growth is inconceivable. The Newars appear to have known it for full two millennia. Among the "surface fragmentary remains" of Newar culture nothing is, perhaps, more important than the massive bricks that form the bedrock of its culture and urbanity. Another possible explanation for the growth of compact settlements and consequent socio-cultural syndromes is the Newar obligation to stay within the ritual and social space defined in terms of patrilineal and patrilineal boundaries with bahāls and bahis, nanis and āgams, degu-dyo and pālā-dyos as their radius. This cultural phenomenon is maintained largely through such instruments of social control and government as the guthis, rites, rituals, and, of course, a crowded calendar of communal festivals in familial as well as public sanctuaries. Despite Slusser's concentration on cities, courts, capitals, communities, and settlements, the amount of space and attention devoted to these instruments of cultural identity, maintenance and solidarity is scanty and dispersed. One wonders if Newar addiction to ritualism falls within Slusser's formula of "the cultural history."

Part II of Nepal Mandala, consisting of four chapters 4-9 on Settlements and Structures, comprise the core of Slusser's book. This is also the most exciting and controversial part of the book, laced with "delicately engineered reconstructions--both debatable and subjective." Nowhere are the limits of "surface archaeology" in greater evidence than in these chapters. Her credentials as an archaeologist notwithstanding, Slusser has done no digging in any site, at least not in the broad daylight. It is, of course, not her fault that archaeology is a taboo word in the Nepal Valley. To dig is to invite divine as well as human wrath--almost as good as digging one's own grave. Slusser's concentration on architecture is puzzling, not because she herself has done no digging, but because

- a. no building has survived in the Valley which is datable earlier than the 12th-13th century A.D.;
- b. for the most part present superstructures represent continuous restorations, following too frequent fires, earthquakes, and other tolls of time;
- c. even the locations of the Licchavi capitals and well-documented palaces such as Mānagrha, Kailāsakūtabhawana, and Bhadrādhivāsa are matters of wild conjecture.

This leaves not much room for a serious and well-documented architectural history. Yet Slusser's certitude is intoxicating and infectious:

We know, therefore, that in architecture, as in so many other aspects of Valley culture, there was an unbroken continuum. (p. 127)

Her data and arguments are tenuous and fragmentary, laced with her favourite expression "almost certainly", an odd turn of phrase for a trained archaeologist to use so lavishly all over the text. At several places, she is neither here nor there. To cite a classic example,

But even so, some escape dating altogether, such as the 'Svayambhū Caitya (Plate 274), which seems almost certainly to be very early, but which, as Pal discusses, may in fact be late. (p. 174)

On the basis of the extant physical remains, the surviving monuments and documentary references Slusser attempts to reconstruct "a certain understanding of early Nepali architecture." Comparing their elements and structures, their idiom and style with the known successors of the Malla period as well as with contemporary architecture of ancient India, she arrives at interesting, but not unforeseen conclusions:

I believe Nepali architecture (is) firmly rooted in India, particularly the Gupta, and even Kuṣāṇa tradition..... an assessment now tempered by the study of Ulrich Wiesner (1978) ... in which the Indian source, Kuṣāṇa and Gupta, of the Newar style temple is convincingly demonstrated. (p. 186 and footnote 109)

The alleged formality of Newar town planning is investigated in the section on life histories of five communities (pp. 86-106). Conscious planning, according to Slusser, "is quite possible" because of the Newar familiarity with Vāstuvidyā. At the same time, she appears to think that, like fortifications and walling around the city, the conscious attempt to bring the socio-religious structures of the towns in conformance with the Vāstuśāstras may have been "a recent veneer"--"accelerated under the orthodoxy of Sthiti Malla and his successors" (p. 94). Recent researches of Kölver and Gustchov on Bhaktapur, Patan, and Kathmandu seem to show that these cities were ritually and socially defined spaces divided into the sacred and the profane areas with well-defined routes for gods and men, for the living and the dead, including the commemoration of the dead. Slusser's feeling, however, is that

the splendour of the Newar town design seems to emanate more from an innate sense of aesthetics, a natural rhythmic articulation achieved over a long time span than a conscious organization of space according to dictate (p. 94).

Slusser's quest for the Licchavi period capital, particularly Aṃśuvarman's palace Kailāsakūṭabhawana, is an exciting piece of detective writing, except that she makes the same "egregious error of place-identification" scholars so often tend to make. Her identification of the palace site with Kelāchem Chowk in Jaisi Deval is a classic example of an excellent methodology on a false trail. Kelāy Chowk is a small domestic courtyard surrounded by ordinary houses. Next to the courtyard is a minor shrine dedicated to Sithi-dyo (Kārttikeya)--usually a guardian deity on palace ramparts. Little bands of Thasi and Balambū villagers come to pay their annual pilgrimage to this shrine containing

Malla period polychrome painted wood image--believed to have been stolen from Balambu Village. The most powerful scent was thrown on this false trail by two mid-14th century colophons, containing a reference to "Udasimhadeva the nobleman descended from the dynasty of Kailāsakuta in the district of Yaṅgala" (southern half of Kathmandu). Notwithstanding the anthropological concept of field work Slusser was "committed to teach her assistants"--the impeccable historians, on their own right--the fatal and biological leap was taken when the colophons were interpreted as if Kailāsakūtabhawana was in Yaṅgala. The colophons certainly do not say so. Recently, on the basis of a careful analysis of the place-names and directions mentioned in the undated Nārayan Caur, Naxāl inscription of Jayadeva II, Michael Witzel has convincingly shown that the most likely site of Kailāsakūtabhawana is around Taṅgāla--the find-spot of large brick walls built of bricks inscribed with the legend Śrī Mahāsāmāntāmsuvarmaṇaḥ. If Aṃśuvarman's palace-site is in Taṅgāla, to look for it in Yaṅgāla with such seriousness is yet another distressing evidence of the limits of surface archaeology.

The third part of the book is an analysis of Newar pantheon, their source and transformation. It consists of four chapters--Chapters 9, 10, 11, and 12. Although Slusser confesses

the understanding of Nepalese religion depends on a multiplicity of approaches and methods, flexible and varied to suit the material (p. 222)

the main data in this part of the book come from the monuments--sculptures, primarily, and bronzes and paintings, marginally. The cultural process at work in the Nepal Valley is more clearly outlined in these chapters than in the second part of the book. Here Slusser didn't have to plod through "delicate reconstructions": the sculptures speak eloquently of her continuum hypothesis.

Newar pantheon is dominated by two formal systems--Hinduism and Buddhism, syncretically fused by Hindu Śakti cults and Buddhist tantrism. Underlying both the formal systems is the third stratum of indigenous elements and belief consisting of the nature gods, particularly such deities invested in trees and stones, birds and serpents, various animals, mountains and fire, and especially water. Their shrines are hypaetheral and the cult objects are often aniconic. Central to the Newar mode of worship is the emphasis placed upon the supremacy of the female principle which, according to Slusser, "is but a reassertion of much older cults of the Mother Goddesses that prevailed in Nepal from at least neolithic times" (p. 215).

The cultural process at work is primarily one of annexation and inclusion: the formal systems taking over the informal ones, the primordial cults taken over by the imported pantheon and iconography, often one grafted onto the other. But more often it is also the other way round--the Indian gods are transformed unrecognizably in the process of localization. The changing fortunes of Kārttikeya--so popular

in Licchavi Nepal--inexplicably overtaken by the relatively late coming inelegant populist Gaṇeśa, the transformation of Nāṭeswara as a guardian deity, the cult of Bhīmasena as a god of trade, and of course, Indra as a pilloried though adorable thief--are only a few cases in point.

Undoubtely, Slusser is right in suggesting that

Brahmanism in the Kathmandu Valley does not seem to be sufficiently different from that of India to merit particular attention. But the local aspects of Nepalese Buddhism, together with its evolution and dissolution over the years, demand just that. (p. 222)

This promise, however, remains unfulfilled in Slusser's treatment of Newar Buddhism (Chapter 10). The underlying reasons for the dissolution of Buddhism, including the secularization of the too numerous vihāras of the Valley, are neither convincingly analysed nor documented. The apparent chronological order--the Licchavi, the Transitional, the Malla, and the Contemporary Scene--in which the chapter is organized is somewhat deceptively neat. Slusser makes sweeping statements without producing any evidence to support them. "Buddhism appears to have reached its zenith during the Transitional Period" (p. 281), "All (that) has transpired to efface Buddhism in Malla Nepal" (p. 290), "decline and virtual dissolution of Buddhism in the Kathmandu Valley" began to set in by the end of the twelfth century (p. 286). If Buddhism can be interpreted as a system of ethics concerned with personal salvation, the means sought for such an end have been different in succeeding phases in the evolution of the doctrine. There is no dearth of evidence (Tibetan sources, for instance) to show that literary-intellectual as well as artistic-creative activities inspired by Buddhist faith continued till the rise of the three city-states in the Nepal Valley. Slusser appears to use sculpture or monuments as a standard of measurement of the vigour of the doctrine. There may not necessarily be such a correlation because the creative energies of a society may find different medium in different phases of its history. The Buddhist bronzes and paintings of the Malla period may indicate a change of taste, but not necessarily the complete dissolution of quality. Nor were all the late Buddhist cult objects "made for the Newar traders by Tibetans with stock inscriptions in Newari", "purely Tibetan replete with Central Asiatic and Chinese influences" (p. 289). To give just one telling example, the 19th-century bilampau (narrative scroll) of Viśwantara Jātaka at the Berlin Museum of Indian Art shows that the standard of Buddhist art was maintained by Newar painters till so late in the day. The astonishing overgeneralizations are somewhat out of place in a book so well-documented and meticulously researched.

The last two chapters of the book make unforgettable reading. They deal with what Slusser calls "ancient indigenous root divinities of the Valley." What characterizes their cults is their informalism, their ambivalence, and above all their prime importance in the worship of the Newars. Central among these cults are the cults of the Mother Goddesses

(the ajimā worship). More often than not, the imported "formal" goddesses have been grafted onto root/folk/indigenous goddesses. For example,

Maiti Devi is almost certainly a riverine māi or ajimā, fundamentally a chthonic divinity who long predated both Mahāmāyūri (Vajrayāna) and Kaumāri (Hindu-Śakti). (p. 336)

Here, then, is a prototypical case--a riverine goddess of indigenous origins was transformed into Mahāmāyūri--a Buddhist Vajrayāna goddess. She was later on annexed into the Hindu Śakti pantheon of Aṣṭamātrikā cults as a Kaumāri. A number of analyses in these chapters show that the substratum of Newar worship is the root-folk-indigenous layer transformed by the ritualism and formalism, by the Hindu-Buddhist polytheism and iconography.

Slusser the anthropologist clearly overtakes Slusser the archaeologist in these--as in some of the early, chapters. The disturbing question here is: how old are these "indigenous cults"? Did they really prevail "widely in prehistoric times since the neolithic age" (p. 307)? Slusser seems to believe that they did. The foundations are of uncertain antiquity. Some of the sites of the Mother Goddesses--river-banks, ghats, etc.--may prove to be ancient. Most cult objects are aniconic and primitive. When they are iconic they are represented mostly in the toranas, conforming to late iconographic details which are tantric, vajrayāna or śakti. But not all Mother Goddesses are in such locations; some are in the city centre, others are in the cardinal limits of the city. In Kathmandu, such sites have legendary tales purporting to explain the location of a particular Mother Goddess--Luti, Lumarhi, Lucubholu. But such "origin stories" are prevalent also about tantric Paculi Bhairava and Mahānkala Bhairava, and most unexpectedly of Sighah Caitya! A number of these stories smack of late after-thoughts--one or two at least as late as Pratāpa Malla, a period when gods and god-like magicians seem to prefer to walk in the Valley.

The main conclusion of Slusser's study of Newar pantheon is clear: with the exception of grāma-devatas, root-folk-indigenous and assorted riverine gods and goddesses, Newar religion is by and large a provincial outpost of Indian polytheism. Slusser's analyses of Newar art, architecture and religion come to similar conclusions. Not that they are new or startling. They are not particularly revealing. For if we peel off the cultural strata of any Western country, no matter in which continent it is, we are likely to arrive at some uniform conclusions: their roots are Judaic-Christian and Greco-Roman with regional and provincial variations. But does such reductionism really help to interpret or explain such distinct cultures of the West as the Byzantine or the Renaissance?

Finally, to come back to Slusser's continuum hypothesis. At the present state of our knowledge, there are perhaps far too many gaps in Nepalese political and cultural history to be able to talk with any

confidence and certitude. Between Jayadeva II (A.D. 733) and Jayasthiti Malla (A.D. 1382-1395) the political history of Nepal is merely a tantalizing string of names collated with labour from the colophons of many manuscripts and a few dozen fragmentary inscriptions which contain remarkably little history. The darkness which surrounds the sudden emergence of the Licchavis in A.D. 464 and their equally abrupt fizzling out are too uncomfortable brackets of ancient Nepalese history. The mystery which surrounds the obscure social origins of Jayasthiti Malla is at present impenetrable. Numerous monuments, Buddhist vihāras, offices and palaces prominently mentioned in Licchavi epigraphy cannot be identified with any certainty. Several Licchavi settlements are today desolate rice fields; some key sites like Deopātan and Hādīgāon stand mute and benumbed by the ravages of time and men. Why and when they were obliterated and abandoned as political and cultural centres we do not know. In fact, nothing less than a gaping discontinuity is writ large on the history of Nepal--a discontinuity which can at best be glossed over by such handy terms as "the Transitional Period."

The book contains useful appendices on eras and calendars, on scripts and languages in use in the Nepal Valley, including a very valuable chronology of kings and their known regnal years, and an inventory of Licchavi inscriptions. The bibliography is extensive, particularly in listing the publications of the Saṃśodhana Maṇḍala. Here, for the first time, is a book in which a Western scholar gratefully acknowledges the contributions made by Nepalese scholars. In the past, books on Nepalese history and culture written by authorities on Nepal--Western as well as Nepalese--used to be summaries of the writings of British-Indian civil/medical/military cadre. It is gratifying to see that this is no longer possible. The acknowledgements to Nepalese sources are ample, and in a few cases, fulsome. To give just one example, Slusser singles out Śrī Pāca Prithvinārāyaṇa Shāhāko Upadeśa (Pātan: Jagadamba Press, 1968) edited by Naya Rāj Pant and others as "an outstanding contribution on the history of Nepal after A.D. 1769" (p. 78, footnote 168). It is an edition of a late manuscript of 10 pages in length. The edition is in five parts, running to a total of 1350 pages, -- the magnum opus of the group, according to its principal editor (Preface, p. 4). The first part, oddly enough, begins with an anaemic versified interpretation of Prithvinārāyaṇ Shāh by Naya Rāj Pant, displaying the latter's competence in Sanskrit prosody. Then comes the prose version, not of the text, but of the poem. The actual text of upadeśa the book purports to edit is in an appendix between pp. 413-431! The edition includes a 109-page errata and addenda. A greater part of the 1350 pages is padded with extracts from the 1878 Bhāṣā Vamśāvalī. Compare this antediluvian "textual/critical edition" with Fr Ludwig Stiller's Prithvi Narayan Shāh in the Light of His Divya Upadesh (Ranchi: 1968). A slim volume of 78 pages, it contains not only an eminently readable English translation of the Upadeśa text, but also one of the best available interpretations of it, clearly and concisely bringing out the life and times of the soldier-statesman. Slusser's adulations of Saṃśodhana Maṇḍala is understandable, but why she chose such an inept specimen of their scholarship to do so is incomprehensible.

A sound knowledge of Sanskrit and Newari, particularly epigraphic Sanskrit and Classical Newari, tempered with some grounding in Nepalese paleography and calendars, is a basic prerequisite for working on the cultural materials of the Nepal Valley. Despite Slusser's association with "impeccable historians" the book is not flawless. Factual errors are not rare. To exemplify from a single page (p. 9), the name newāra is used for the first time, not in A.D. 1654, but in A.D. 1652. On the same page Slusser writes:

The first local occurrence (of the name Nepāla) is early seventh century, when King Aṃśuvarṃā began an edict with an expression swasti nepālevyaḥ.

Nearly a century ago, King Vasantadeva had used the phrase in A.D. 512, and the form is not nepālevyaḥ, but naipālevyaḥ. Slusser dates the invasion of Mukunda Sena to mid-thirteenth century (p. 57, p. 69). The confirmed dates are A.D. 1525/26. Suvarṇapraṇalināgara is not Yaṅgala (p. 90), but Yambu, the northern half of Kathmandu, particularly Thahiti. On page 286, Slusser includes Mānandhar and Chitrakār among the Urāy castes, which is not the case. Translation and transliteration errors are too many to list. Some sampling is given below:

Vṛsadeva for Vṛṣadeva (p. 22 and ff.); Bhaktivada for Bhaktivāda (p. 75); deśa gumne for deśa ghumne (p. 93); karṣāṇa for karṣāṇa (p. 37); khā is door or gate, not boundary (p. 99); Kanehala, not Karnel (p. 192); Plate 503, not plate 508 (p. 197); Pāhācare, not Pācare (p. 232); Lākhe, not lakhe (p. 238); Lumbini is not inside Nepal's frontier with Bihar, but with Uttar Pradesh (p. 271); the A.D. equivalent of one of the dates in the Thahiti Stupa inscription is not A.D. 1482, but A.D. 1582; bahidyo boyegu is not "looking at the Gods in Vihāra" but "displaying the Gods of the Vihāra" (p. 303); gūlā, not gulā (p. 302); gathu, not gāthā (p. 347); sāparu, not saparu (p. 303); nā lākegu, not na lākegu (p. 340); paṭa, not pāṭa (p. 346); jāti ajimā, not jātaka ajimā (p. 363).

These are, of course, minor details, mentioned here mainly because the book comes from a distinguished writer sponsored by an equally distinguished publisher. No matter how one responds to it, Mary Slusser's Nepal Mandala will be considered as an outstanding contribution to the cultural history of the Nepal Valley. For many years to come it will continue to be our standard reference work on the culture of the Valley. The only foreseeable substitute for Slusser is the spade—an accursed implement in the Nepal Valley since Balbla first violated its sacred earth for wet rice cultivation.