

BOOK REVIEW

Gods Are Leaving the Country: Art Theft From Nepal. 1997. Jurgen Schick. White Orchid Press, Thailand. Pages 209. Plates, Map, Index, Bibliography and Appendices. Price ?

The problem of art-theft in Nepal is becoming an alarming one in scale and magnitude. Going by the reports, incidences of such thefts seem only to increase, rather than abate, in the more recent times. Art-theft in Nepal began to be glaringly noticed from the 60s of the last century. The more serious side of art-theft, however, lies in the attitude of indifference adopted by the government officials and government agencies whose job it is to protect and preserve the artistic heritage of the country. One finds an air of total apathy and unconcern and no enterprise to do even the necessary minimum on their part to safeguard the country's artistic heritage. Nor have the mushrooming NGOs in the recent years been able to chalk out any effective schemes to protect Nepal's most precious artistic heritage and prevent their depredations. It requires a lot of personal commitment, dedication and coordination on the part of individuals, offices and organizations at various legislative, administrative and civic levels for tackling this problem in earnest. A sincere effort has never been made from any side in this respect. Several things could be done in which the first would perhaps be the promulgation of a more forceful and comprehensive anti-theft and anti-trafficking laws to cover all kinds of art objects, that would supplement and reinforce the existing Ancient Monuments Protection Act of 1956, and subsequent amendments to it. The second would be to implement these laws on the ground with a greater stringency, in coordination and cooperation with the various organs of the government and other civic bodies responsible for the preservation and safeguard of this art. Preparation of comprehensive inventories and documentation of all the sculptural wealth of the Valley and of Nepal as a whole, with their photographs, would be another effective method for the

preservation of the art objects. Because it would furnish a legal basis to make a claim for their return later and would deter illegal attempts at the removal of the sculptures. Unfortunately, the ingenuity of the Nepalese officials in this regard, to say the least, has been wanting. There is no true desire from the cultural and archaeological departments of the government to do anything substantive to address the problem. If there is any true concern in this regard from any quarters, this is found only among the people of the locality directly affected by it. Thus sculptures and art objects that could be seen lying in the open everywhere, adorning a *hiti*, standing by an open square, or a temple-side, or in a Buddhist *baha* (Jurgen Schick has, therefore, likened the Kathmandu Valley to an open museum) in the Kathmandu Valley until not so long ago, now find themselves suddenly exposed to a new and unknown danger from theft. To meet this threat, local people have been fastening their votary objects in iron chains, or putting them behind gratings and heavy iron bars in a vain bid to save them from disappearing. Local people can think of no other better means than this for protecting their symbols of faith and culture. These measures, however, have proven too weak and flimsy for a determined thief from achieving his objective, although it may give the local people a degree of satisfaction to have done their mite for the safety of these images. Unfortunately, this has led the sculptures to lose their aesthetics and their ambience in their original settings and surroundings in which they had been conceived. It is quite true that there is no country in the world where art objects are hundred percent secure from theft. But people and governments in many countries are alert and armed with adequate legal and policing provisions in their protection. This is where Nepal's case seems most vulnerable. The present book by Jurgen Schick focuses on this and other issues relating to art-theft in and around the Kathmandu Valley from many angles. His book carries photographs of "before-and-after-theft" art objects (mainly of stone-images) in all the known instances. They include those that got missing from their original locations from the start of the early 80s. Altogether, the author has compiled over 180 cases of stolen images, some of which comprise *toranas* and other related art forms depicting diverse Hindu and Buddhist gods and goddesses in metal and wood. A few sculptures included in his inventory were lucky that they escaped theft-attempts. There is probably no true art lover in Nepal or abroad, whose heart will not bleed at the sight of mindless acts of vandalism committed on some of the loveliest art specimens of the Hindu and Buddhist gods and goddesses belonging to the

Licchavi and Malla period – the best period of Nepal’s art – sometimes with their heads chopped off, and/or their limbs smashed at random in frustration, when the bid to steal them apparently failed.

Jurgen Schick’s writing style is felicitous. His tone evokes a feeling of true and genuine admiration not only for the art of Nepal, but also for its people who created and worship them as their divine. To these people the loss of this art in spiritual and cultural terms is immense, which can be hardly compensated by any other thing. Although he actually mentions no names, he is quite frank about what kind of people both within and outside Nepal could be behind such rackets of art-thefts. He appeals art-buyers in the “West” not to buy stolen works of art and encourage the thieves in their nefarious activity. Otherwise, the unscrupulous dealers in the art-market one day could strip a country bare of all its national treasures. The author had photographed most of these sculptures *in situ* before they were stolen. He has added to these pictures of empty cells and sockets of these images from where they were lifted. Complete with these illustrations, the book delivers a far greater impact and a higher sense of urgency in the reader’s mind. All these photographs furnish an “unimpeachable evidence” of the sculptures as belonging to Nepal. To the people who created them, the value of this art cannot be measured in monetary terms. For them, they have a deeper socio-cultural meaning. And it is to them that they turn for prayers as their divines at the time of their distress and rejoicing. They are an inseparable part of themselves and their living, epitomizing their entire culture and sacred traditions. In the background of this, the book’s title, therefore, sounds even more poignant.

Jurgen Schick’s coming to Nepal in the late 1970s is a fortunate thing to have happened for its art. His book does not merely extol and appreciate Nepalese art, which any number of art critics and art historians before him have already done in glowing terms. His book’s utility consists even more in being an inventory of the stone art of the Kathmandu Valley. He would find an image he had photographed earlier gone from its place when he would return to see it after some weeks again. The massive problem of art-theft thus became manifest to him in the course of his work. The book first came out in the German language way back in 1989. The present book is an English edition of the same work with the addition of a few more photographs of images stolen since that date until 1997. Lain S. Bangdel also published his celebrated book on “Stolen Images of Nepal” in Kathmandu in 1989. Thus

Jurgen Schick and Bangdel shared a common concern for Nepal's art-theft. Probably, they also shared their material and exchanged their notes in common, resulting in the production of their identical works around the same time. Bangdel's work is a delight in terms of the high quality of photographic illustrations of the stolen and mutilated sculptures in halftone and polychrome plates. He collated them by tapping a number of individual persons and sources. However, his text is far restrained and muted in terms of discussing the problems of art-theft. Contrariwise, the strength of Jurgen Schick's book lies in the candid and forthright manner in which he has delved into this problem from more than one angle. His writing has a power of jolting the reader. He lets us know about the 1970 UNESCO Convention which is helpful and can be invoked profitably for claiming a stolen work of art back into the country again. The book is also a manual of great practical value thus.

His text, arranged in some 12 short chapters, fall into two broad parts. The first part deals with the problem of art-theft, and the second, with a documentation of all the stolen arts or arts on whom theft attempts were made, but were foiled somehow. The tone of urgency can be gathered by looking at some of his chapter headings. Chapters 1 to 5 are entitled: "The Fate of Old Art in Modern Times—Three Examples from Nepal; Nepal and its Art; Modern Times Come to Nepal; the Great Plundering; and the Threatened World of Nepal's Gods", respectively. He considers the problem of art-theft partly to lie in the sudden and abrupt manner of Nepal's modernisation, and her people's exposure to the materialistic lifestyle of the "West", starting from the decades of the 50s. He writes:

"It is also true that many Nepalese today, having become completely intoxicated by the massive influx of Western life styles, which they are hypnotized by, are already so alienated from their own culture that the theft of the statues of their gods is of little concern to them, if they notice it at all...

Nepal is currently in one of the most critical phases of its history. Still deeply rooted in the past, and at the same time profoundly affected by the encroaching modern age, it has been wobbling around in a culture shock ever since its first encounter with the West. It is all too typical for such a period of sudden change in all aspects of life that many Nepalese today no longer know, and

have not yet relearned, how to value the worth of their own culture and tradition.” (p.66)

For, he again adds:

“If things don’t change, one can foresee a time, within a few years, when Nepal, “the land of the gods”, will be emptied to the point where nothing remains.” (p, 67)

But such an attitude may only be a temporary, passing phenomenon -- a cultural amnesia at present by some people of Nepal. People are bound to rediscover their pride in their lost heritage sooner or later. Seemingly, this loss of faith, even in this darkest hour of peril to our cultural heritage, does not necessarily represent the view of all the members of the Nepalese society. People do grieve the loss of their invaluable treasure with despair. Jurgen Schick is right in underlining the fact that this should give no one the right to presume that such arts are better preserved in the collection of rich westerners. He cites the sayings of some of the typical wealthy and presumptuous Western art collectors who seek to justify their acts in these words:

“You’re on the wrong track. We’re not robbing; we’re only protecting. We must take away their art, because they themselves don’t take care of it, and we can look after it much better.”
(p. 66)

This kind of patronising remarks on the part of some of them are totally repugnant and must be treated with the contempt they deserve.

The most alarming part of the problem of art-smuggling and art-theft in Nepal is due to the protection enjoyed by art racketiers from their high placed patrons among politicians and rulers, granting them immunity in their nefarious activity. With their help, rules get easily bent. Or, officials can be bribed and asked to look away. All organisations, whether in government or private, responsible for art protection, are poorly managed, inefficient and ill-motivated to initiate action from their side in this regard. Jurgen Schick writes about the kind of people who could be engineering such thefts. The price of art has jumped many folds in the international art market, so that thieves have become far more daring in their acts of theft. The iron gratings put up by the local people to save the sculptures are no match to keep the thieves away for

long. We can well see that from what happened to the 11th century Sun image of Saugal tole in Patan (pls. 23 and 24). Despite the iron gratings, they succeeded in wrenching the entire panel of the Sun god away. Jurgen Schick writes:

“No one knows [who are the thieves?]. It may be assumed that the actual thefts are carried out by bands of Nepalese or Indians. But who is behind them? Who organizes the operations and pockets the profit? No one knows for sure. “Rumours are rife, however, that high-placed persons are involved from the Nepalese side, too. It could hardly be otherwise. For how could such a huge quantity of stolen art, including statues that weigh tons, pass undetected through all airport and border checks?

“This does not mean, however, that the West is only the purchaser and not also the procurer. As an example may be cited the case of the Polish diplomat who, having been expelled from Indonesia for such activities, came to Nepal and immediately founded a Polish-Nepalese Friendship Society, whose main activity in following years consisted in conveying art stolen in the Kathmandu Valley safely to Warsaw.

The truth that dawns in the mind after reading Jurgen Schick's book, therefore, is one of continuing anxiety and apprehensions for the safety of the Nepalese art. In fact, little positive action has resulted notwithstanding the UNESCO Convention of 1970 making possible the return of the stolen art, if backed by proper claims. In one or two cases, when stolen art from Nepal has been successfully returned to it, it was mostly owing to the interest and initiative of friendly individuals and governments abroad who returned them voluntarily. Newspapers report the reluctance on the part of the concerned authorities in the Nepalese government even to file simple official request petitions with countries from where a stolen art is to be recovered. The sordid story of the stolen art does not end here. Art objects that do manage to be retrieved find no proper place where they should be housed, so that they can be seen languishing away for years in police stations. With the one exception of the new Patan Art Museum, Nepal cannot boast of a single good museum for art. The Nepalese museums' track record of safety from robbery for its

artefacts is not too high. The National Museum at Chhauni gives cause for little confidence in this regard. The case of other government museums is no better either. Museums in Bhaktapur, Patan and Kathmandu have been busted by thieves in the past with the stolen objects without ever being recovered. In the prevailing grim situation, where thieves are enjoying their powerful patronage, the concern for the preservation and safeguard of the artistic heritage and art treasures of Nepal does not diminish a bit in the immediate future.

Prayag Raj Sharma

This review is dedicated to the fond memory of the late Mr. Hallvard K. Kuløy, a long time friend, who died in Oslo, Norway on 3rd of May, 2001. The present reviewer had been given a copy of the book for review by him a year before he died.