

BOOK REVIEW

Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur
Dr. Rishikeshab Raj Regmi
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It is heartening to see a book like *Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur* which strives to deal with the archaeological anthropology of the royal cities of the Nepal valley. Written by a well-known social scientist Dr. Rishikeshab Raj Regmi, the book aims to highlight the glorious cultural heritage of the three royal cities of the valley. Keeping in mind the cross-cultural variations in the valley, the writer illustrates some of the central socio-cultural aspects from an anthropological and archaeological perspective. The book has been written with an objective to make people at home and abroad aware that "how far the people of Nepal have travelled, and how far they need to go in the changing context of civilization journey."

In the process of touching the core of the valley culture, the writer observes that it was in the three royal cities viz Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur, the early Nepalese civilization flourished and later spread far and wide. Although, the first civilization of the valley flourished in the pre-historical times, the historical details of the valley are available since Lichhavi period. Even these details are not well-documented, and are available only in the lores, legends, chronicles and genealogies. By going into these details, the writer brings home the conclusion that the foundation of culture and civilization which turned golden in the Malla period was laid in the Lichhavi period.

The writer holds the view that the real architectural, cultural and commercial growth of the valley began in the Malla period. Industry grew more significantly and it contributed to the growth of trade. Besides "the city became important through visible cultural elements like magnificent stupas, lofty and beautifully designed pagodas, inspiring Buddhist images." However, as the writer thinks, the other aspects of the cultural growth of the valley began after 1769, when Prithvi

Narayan Shah took up the task of nation building. In the process there came a great deal of change in the valley culture. Unveiling the cause of change, the writer says that "these changes emanated from the assimilation of different cultures - the 'parbatia' culture with Newar culture - which was in the process of assimilation." The writer gives much credit to the local Kathmandu Newars who long established themselves as professionals in the area of trade, commerce, craft and industries exclusively. Appreciating the craftsmanship of the Newar people, the writer says that they are a community that has maintained through out the centuries a consistent regard for the patronage of art and culture.

Elaborating the historical details of the different names of the valley, the writer says that the Kathmandu city was founded by King Gunakamadeo in the year 724 AD, but the name 'Kantipur' was first heard in the middle of the tenth century. However, from the 4th century, the name 'Kasthamandap' seemed to signify the whole city. "By the 17th century, a modified version 'Kathmandu' was perpetuated by the new Gorkhali rulers." About the structural details of Kathmandu, Dr. Regmi says that it was not developed according to a formal plan; the city "represents a haphazard growth of hamlets, villages and towns over several centuries." Indeed the process is still on.

Reflecting on the religious aspects, the writer stresses that the thriving city of Kathmandu has its another face too. For, Kathmandu is the domain of the Hindu pantheon. The writer says, "Once a pre-dominantly Buddhist town, Kathmandu's religious past is still evident on some hundred structures called monasteries, although for centuries this has been true only in names. These monasteries, scattered among the houses, serve now as secular dwellings; they still serve as Buddhist shrines. The writer believes that although often found in shabby conditions, the building and their contents are still among the great artistic treasures of the Kathmandu valley. Delineating the religious structures, the writer points out that "interspersed with the viharas, crowding the neighbourhood squares, and especially clusters in the Durbar square are the temples and shrines that house the Hindu gods now numerically and culturally more important than their Buddhist counterparts. In the quiet courtyards and busy streets, at the public fountains, the cross-roads and the squares, the sacred images and objects are familiar adjuncts of daily life. Some are masterpieces left from Lichhavis, some by the Mallas and a few by the Shahs." The book is full of such graphic descriptions.

Similarly the writer describes the origin and growth of Patan, the second most important settlement in the valley. Dwelling on the pre-historical origin of the city, the writer says that Patan is a city originally founded by the legendary king Yalambara of the Mahabharata period. It is because of this reason, Patan is known

as 'Yala' in the local Newari language. Talking about the historical origin of Patan, the writer says that "even before the beginning of the Christian era as a Buddhist community centre, Patan was associated with the tenth century, 'Yala' had spread further further westward and acquired Sanskrit name 'Lalita' and further Lalitpur." Lalitpur is the alternative name for Patan. The writer strives to find out the correlation between Lalitpur and Patan. He says that "the name Patan is the Nepali simplification of Lalitpattana, and its use dates from the seventeenth century."

Patan, as per the writer, is essentially a Buddhist town. However, Patan has a considerable number of Hindu temples, shrines and images. The writer holds the view that even in rapidly Hinduizing Nepal, Patan remains essentially a Buddhist town. Describing the Buddhist characteristics of Patan, Dr. Regmi says that "in Patan's confined area, there are more than one hundred and fifty buildings known as Viharas are regions of related Buddhist monuments - stupas, chaityas and images." All are objects of worship by the Newar and largely by the Buddhist community. Highlighting the characteristics of religious syncretism, the writer goes on to say that "the festivals of Hindu community such as Krishna or Bhimsena celebrated in Patan attract all ethnic community but Buddhist festivals are held regularly round the whole year."

Comparing the past and present of Kathmandu and Patan, the writer says that unlike old Kathmandu, which is fast dissolving into the greater Kathmandu urban complex, Patan's old form is still intact. Describing the inroads of Patan, the writer says, "a softly coloured huddle of rose bricks, ochre tiles, and weathered wood, it remains a distinct town, in part still surrounded by rice paddies. After the encroachment by Parbatia, Patan's strong Buddhist character inhibited Hinduism." Despite the old characteristics of Patan, yet available, the writer observes that the modernizing current which has affected Kathmandu, is also affecting Patan though in a smaller scale. Nevertheless, Patan still holds the aroma of those golden years which had uplifted it to the optimum height of artistic glory.

Unlike Patan, Bhaktapur is a town where there is a dominance of Hinduism. Providing a detailed description of the Bhaktapur town, the writer says that "in irregular intervals, the road widens to form squares, the most important of which are Dattatreya square in the east and Taumidhi square in the west. The early kings of Bhaktapur had their administrative centre, and their palace in the Dattatreya square. Crossing the river, the road runs into the next valley and then on towards Tibet." However, the writer is sorry to see the present state of Bhaktapur which is striving for its survival. Its cultural heritage is turning into archaeological remains. Once the heartbeat of an important administrative and business centre, Bhaktapur is fading into a primitive village. However, Dr. Regmi is happy to see some

development projects trying to protect the soul of a dying culture and civilization.

Focussing on the cultural aspects of the Nepal valley, the writer has encapsulated most of the important festivals as observed by the local inhabitants. In his chapter "Religion : Festivals and the City Community," the writer unravels the fact that by maintaining the age-old contact with the rich glorious tradition, the valley festivals narrate the story of a nation and its people. Festivals in the Nepalese society are not simply the religious manifestation, they are over the centuries, have turned into a periodic means of recreation. Describing some of the typical social institutions of Nepal, Dr. Regmi strives to deal with the age-old family, kinship and social structure in the Nepalese society. In an authoritative tone, the writer discusses the role of *Thakali*, *Guthis*, *Fuku* and all other typical social institutions which have been in practice since long.

However, the writer is not at all happy to see the present state of the valley. He says that the valley cities, the homeland of Newar community became a common home for a variety of people of 'Parbatia' origin who settled in Kathmandu for job, Business and education. Besides, the Newars and parbatias, "Ethnic community of Muslims" have played a decisive role in the emergence of a new socio-cultural setup in Kathmandu." Reiterating the impact of migration, the writer believes that "the traditional cultural patterns and value systems are being eroded by the rapid changes in the name of progress." By studying the various social and cultural aspects, the writer brings home the conclusion that the texture of old Kathmandu is changing, due to over-population, pollution and ecological degradation. Nevertheless, the writer is still optimistic, and feels that all is not lost. To him the valley cities still offer much beauty and peace.

Despite the deceiving length, *Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur* arouses curiosity at those places where Dr. Regmi seems more original especially in the areas where he discusses ethnic composition and anthropological details of the valley. In this one-hundred page book, Dr. Regmi has become able to achieve what others have not been able to achieve in a thousand page voluminous book. The writer's attempt to study the different aspects of the valley cities from the age of Gunakamadeo up to the present time, has made the book an important social and anthropological document to collect and preserve. Written with a deep insight and note of authority, the book can be ranked among the few original books on Nepalese culture.

-Hemant Kumar Jha, Ph. D.