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Book review of 'Kirtipur: An Urban Community in Nepal' by Mehrdad and Natalie H. Shokoohy (eds)

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Book Reviews

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Kirtipur: An Urban Community in Nepal - its people, town planning, architecture, and arts.
Edited by Mehrdad and Natalie H. Shokoohy. London: Araxus Books. Pp. 258. Case Bound.

This book is the fruit of the collaborative efforts of architects (Mehrdad Shokoohy, Chris Miers, Marc Barani, and Ramendra Raj Sharma), an architectural historian (Natalie Honoria Shokoohy), a professor of architecture (Sudarshan Raj Tiwari), an engineer (Robin Lall Chitrakar), a geographer (Uttam Sagar Shrestha), an archaeologist (Sukra Sagar Shrestha), and Nepalese Government Ministry officials (Shanker M. Pradhan, Padam Chhetri, and Gauri Nath Rimal), many of whom have also functioned as conservationists and city planners in other contexts. The research team includes both residents of Kirtipur and researchers from abroad. Primarily based on a survey conducted in 1986 (2), this collected volume is intended to be a background study upon which a "Master Plan" for the conservation of Kirtipur, currently in production, will be based. The project directors are to be lauded for the multiplicity of disciplines from which these experts were drawn and the inclusion of residents of Kirtipur among them. The potential for international and multidisciplinary efforts of this kind, though clearly indicated in this work, is only partially realized, however.

The volume is lavishly illustrated with black and white photographs, a major asset that is somewhat diminished in some chapters by low contrast printing. The nineteen chapters of the book are eclectic in conceptualization and diverse in style. Chapter topics include "Private and public involvement in conservation

policy development," "History," "The Newars, the people of Kirtipur," "Social life and festivals," "Urban=46abric," "The Newari house," "Traditional houses of Kirtipur, their types and the building materials," "Water supply and sanitation," and "Art and antiquities," and receive treatments that range in length from two to fifty large, double-column pages of text. Some chapters include references with full citations and bibliographies, others do not. It is understandable that the first of two volumes cannot include the conservation recommendations promised in the second, but this volume is difficult to review as a whole because much of it consists of data that has not been worked into an overview or thesis. Many chapters do not include conclusions, leaving the reader to draw them for herself. The structure of the volume under review therefore compels me to consider each chapter briefly.

Mehrdad Shokoohy's introduction usefully situates the present work in the context of Nepal's planning efforts and earlier studies of Kirtipur that were designed to develop long-term planning and conservation strategies. Gauri Nath Rimal's chapter on "Private and public involvement in conservation policy development" follows this introduction, and appropriately begins with a description of the *guthi* system that for so long created and preserved most of the structures throughout the Kathmandu Valley that are in need of preservation today. It is unfortunate that Mr.

Rimal did not further explore the causes of the decline of the *guthi* system in Kirtipur, which he chalks up chiefly to "the influence of European ideas of progress" (9), for it is essentially this complex network of relationships between people, shrines, and voluntary organizations that must somehow be replaced. If land reform and the reworking of obligations between cultivator and owner are indeed consequences of "the influence of European ideas," Rimal's point is well taken, but surely the gaps left by the decline of the *guthi* system need to be more fully understood as social and historical phenomena in order to recommend sustainable conservation initiatives.

Though Mehrdad Shokoohy is to be congratulated as an editor for coordinating the efforts of diverse local and foreign experts, his own chapter, "The Newars, the people of Kirtipur," might have itself benefited from more such collaboration. To attempt to cover this topic in a mere four pages of text would be a daunting task for the most knowledgeable of Newarologists, but there is a great deal of literature to which the writer apparently did not have access, and from which he would have benefited, including the encyclopedic work of Mary Slusser, the numerous important works of Gellner, Quigley, Ishii, and Locke, and the voluminous monograph by Levy, to name just a few readily available general works. Though I am sure that an oversight is responsible for Chattopadhyay's problematic 1923 article being noted as a "recent study," (27)¹, and though some of the vital work of Toffin, Hofer, Gutschow and Kolver of much more recent vintage is cited, several glaring errors mar this general introductory chapter.

The important issue of caste is muddled, to say the least: castes are confused with varnas (24-25); the use of the term "caste" rather than *jat* is never explained or justified; and the statement is made that "the caste system has now been legally abolished in Nepal" (24) (only discrimination is explicitly illegal), to point to just a few problematic points. Certainly many Newars would be surprised to learn that Newari "does not appear in printed form except rarely in scholarly reports," (21) especially the thousands of readers of the several Newari newspapers. One's confidence is also shaken by seeing Wright's chronicle consistently referred to as "the *Parbatiya*," (as it is in the chapters written by both Mehrdad and Natalie Shokoohy), *Parbatiya* being the language in which manuscript translated for Wright was originally written and not the name of the manuscript itself.

¹ All Nepali and Newari words are spelled in the manner used in the book under review. For the sake of simplicity, and as no ambiguity is entailed in their omission, diacritic marks are not included in this review, though they are present in the book itself.

Shokoohy is on firmer ground in his overview of the history of Kirtipur, though problematic terms such as "the Brahmanical period" and "the Buddhist period" are used without explication or justification (13). Kirtipur is presented as a city of distinction and importance in its own right, yet mired in the inter-city politics of the valley. Reproductions of mid-nineteenth drawings by Oldfield effectively remind us here that the problems of restoration and conservation are by no means new to the Kathmandu Valley, so often ravaged by earthquakes.

Sukar Sagar Shrestha's chapter on "Social Life and Festivals" is quite useful yet disappointingly brief, offering a sketch of the public cycle of ritual events to which other chapters refer as playing important roles in defining the urban space of Kirtipur. In a few pages, Shrestha includes references to events that surely merit, yet do not receive elaboration. A dispute over rights to use a cremation site, the use of banks to secure assets and generate income for *guthis*, and the demise of the *Dvare jatra* ("headman" or "mayor festival") in 1984 are all mentioned in passing. Each of these developments concerns a transformation in the administration and use of Kirtipur as a site of religious practice and public festivity, and as such would seem to be of potentially great interest to anyone planning to help preserve more than monuments.

In the next chapter, entitled "Urban Fabric," Mehrdad Shokoohy establishes three important respects in which Kirtipur is exceptional among the ancient cities of the Kathmandu valley; the extraordinary degree to which it was effectively fortified, its "citadel" configuration, and the bifurcation of the city into what appear to be Buddhist and Hindu sectors. Here he also conveys a good sense of what a *tol*-oriented town is like. This is also one of many situations in this volume in which glosses for Newari place names would have been useful, as *tol* names often convey a great deal about how residents conceptualize the spaces to which these names refer.

The next three chapters by Ramenda Raj Sharma, Chris Miers, and Marc Barani concern Newar dwellings. Each mentions historical shifts in the use of domestic space, ways in which people transform their homes through division and expansion to accommodate new familial configurations, and the various impacts the use of new building materials has had on residential architecture. Barani's contribution stresses the symbolic attributes of domestic architecture, and points to the ways in which caste defines not only the demography of neighborhoods, but their physical layout as well, cautioning planners to remember that space both within and between homes is defined according to religious parameters. Sharma's chapter sets out a chronological typology of "traditional" Kirtipur dwellings, and most interestingly points to a gradual transformation of the ground floor from a shelter for animals and latrine pit to a space fit for human habitation. Miers's work provides

another account of how space within the dwelling is used, but also provides a fairly detailed account of construction materials and techniques used "traditionally" and now. He also briefly addresses the critical problem of reconciling the cultural preservationists' goals of retaining "traditional" architectural style and "authentic" building techniques and materials, with home owners' desires to live in a home that is more comfortable than the one in which she was raised, if not one that is prestigious by virtue of being conspicuously modern. A more detailed consideration of this critical problem would have been welcome, as would ethnographic documentation of the decision-making processes that have led Kirtipur's residents to alter old buildings and design new ones to take the forms that Miers briefly describes.

Sukra Sagar Shrestha's contributions to this volume are the most extensive, comprising nearly half of its pages. His chapters entitled "Historic Public Buildings," "Art and Antiquities," and his appendices on the inscriptions of Kirtipur also constitute some of the volume's most significant contributions. Collectively, these chapters constitute a kind of material culture inventory of Kirtipur, including its most significant individual architectural and artistic treasures. The extensive chapter on public buildings provides brief but rigorous architectural and iconographic descriptions of the principal religious shrines and resthouses of Kirtipur, but excludes treatments of the *bahas* and *bahis* ("monasteries"), which are treated in a separate chapter by another author. Shrestha also provides a brief history of each building, including an accounting of the restorations that have shaped their current forms. His chapter on "Art and Antiquities" describes many works that are no longer to be found in Kirtipur, having been moved to the National Museum in Bhaktapur, and his appendices provide much of the historical data, in the form of inscriptions, upon which his historical accounts are based.

Sudarshan Raj Tiwari's chapter on the "Tiered Temples of Kirtipur" deals primarily with two of the most conspicuous temples of Kirtipur, those devoted to Uma Mahesvara and Bagh Bhairav. Much of this brief chapter demonstrates how proportions laid out in mandala format can be used to identify transformations that temples have probably undergone through processes of restoration. In one speculative aside about the Bagh Bhairav temple, the author notes that it attracts a "congregational pattern of worship" (130), an observation that begs for elaboration and opens up an issue that should be of importance for this project but which receives little attention in this volume: how are these religious sites actually used? Many forms of ritual devotion involve processes of accretion and wear that are conceivably at odds with some goals of preservation; transformation is intrinsic to many forms of worship. Any conservation plan would surely benefit from a careful consideration of how and when and why these sites are used, in what ways.

Natalie Honoria Shokoohy's chapter on "Buddhist Monasteries" paints a picture of serious decline; many of the *bahas* being maintained, it would appear, by only one family. This is not entirely clear owing to the peculiar way in which the term *sangha* is used in some instances to refer to a single person rather than a community of initiates, as in "The sangha and his family constitute a *guthi*, or kinship organization." (131). *Guthis* are not necessarily "kinship organizations," as this sentence would imply, and I have never heard a Newar refer to him or herself as a *sangha*, even if he or she were the only surviving member. Most of this chapter is a kind of architectural inventory, documenting the current state of preservation of Kirtipur's *bahas* and *bahis* and the histories of their transformations that took place as a consequence of previous restorations and alterations prompted by domestic housing needs. Some of her descriptions include useful accounts of how the resources used to maintain these structures have declined over the past four decades.

The next three chapters deal with land use. Padam B. Chhetri's extremely brief chapter on the "Kathmandu Valley Land Use Plan and Kirtipur" touches upon what must be two of the most important problems facing conservation efforts: local interpretations of national regulations and initiatives, and the problems of enforcing such regulations, particularly building codes and land use restrictions. Shanker M. Pradhan's brief chapter, entitled "Land Use and Population Survey," provides useful maps of *tols* and *panchayat* political divisions that pertain to issues discussed elsewhere in the volume, and deals primarily with the consequences of increased engagement in wage labor and commuting on the part of Kirtipur's residents. One difficulty in interpreting the data presented is that land use data are from 1988, whereas household income source data are from six years earlier. Uttam Sagar Shrestha's chapter on "Land Use Changes in Kirtipur" is the most detailed of the three, and directly addresses many of the effects of the mandatory 1957 sale of much of Kirtipur's agricultural land to His Majesty's Government for the purpose of building the campus of Tribhuvan University and the Horticultural Research station. The agricultural bases for the financial resources of many *guthis* charged with maintaining the structures described in this volume were lost in this transaction, in which Kirtipur as a whole lost a third of its cultivated land. This would appear to be another respect in which Kirtipur is unique among the ancient conurbations in the valley, and might have well received attention in a separate chapter that would have delineated the impact of this land alienation and suggested ways in which issues of restoration and cultural preservation might be different for Kirtipur as a consequence of this dramatic change forty years ago.

Robin Lal Chitrakar's chapter, entitled "Water Supply and Sanitation," engages this extremely important topic primarily by revisiting 1982 and 1985

studies on the results of the well-known project to install low cost latrines that was initiated in 1976. Chitrakar carefully considers cultural factors in his analysis of impediments to providing sanitation and clean water, and points to complex ways in which the alienation of land in 1957 had various implications for traditional management of waste. Though Chitrakar does his own analysis of water needs for the future, some of his projections are based on 1983 data, which surely could have been updated. It would also have been very useful to include a recent study of the long-term impact of the low-cost latrine project to which many have looked as a model.

Mehrdad Shokoohy's chapter on tourism provides interesting (if somewhat dated) data on tourism in Kirtipur (from 1987), and attempts to assess the advantages and disadvantages of developing what seems to be a little-utilized potential resource for revenue. Here relevant lessons could be learned from Patan, which has only recently begun to develop tourist facilities in its historic center. Bhaktapur also provides valuable lessons with respect to the costs and benefits of making provision for tourists in conservation schemes, but larger lessons can be learned from this project as well. Apart from the contributions of experts who are residents of Kirtipur, voices of those who live

there are strangely absent from this volume. Though all of the authors profess and display sensitivity to Kirtipur as a place in which humans live and which humans continuously transform, we hear little about the aspirations of Kirtipurians for their own town, or their sense of what it means to live in Kirtipur, or the ways in which they might feel the changes documented in this volume have affected what Kirtipur is for them. A great deal of effort has been made in this volume to infer patterns of past activity and cultural significance from neglected buildings and worn images, and to document the architectural transformations that have been wrought by natural, socio-economic, and political forces. I would hope that as much effort would be expended to learn what those now living in Kirtipur themselves think about the place in which they live and what might be done to both improve and protect it. I also hope that it will not be construed as disciplinary chauvinism to suggest that this project (and others like it) would benefit from the input of an anthropologist or two, many of whom have been trained just outside Kirtipur's crumbling walls.

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Neue Forschungen im Himalaya. Edited by Ulrich Schweinfurth. Erdkundliches Wissen Vol. 112. Franz Steiner-Verlag: Stuttgart. 1993. Pp. 293.

Nepal und die Himalaya-Region. Edited by Martin Gaenzle und Dietrich Schmidt-Vogt. Beiträge zur Südasien-Forschung Vol. 166. Franz Steiner-Verlag: Stuttgart. 1995. Pp. 163.

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These two volumes bring together recent research in the Himalaya by German scholars. The papers were originally presented during seminars organized by the South Asia Institute of the University of Heidelberg in 1989/90 and 1993.

Neue Forschungen im Himalaya assembles a wide range of geographical and ethnological information, and should be read and used by everyone who is interested in Himalayan geography and ethnology. Most of the papers fall into one of two categories: biogeographic phenomena, and socioeconomic (especially cultural) change and development. U. Schweinfurth's 'Vegetation and Himalayan Research' contains very general information based on his 1957 vegetation map. It serves as an introduction, following Schweinfurth's statement that the "study of the vegetation is basic to understand a country and in particular a mountain region as

complicated as the Himalayan system" (p. 27). G. Miede's 'Plant Geography and Climatic Research' is based on fieldwork in 1986 in the Langtang/ Helambu Area of Central Nepal. His interpretation of plant life forms (especially epiphytes) and their distribution results in the following climatic classification: 1) lower cloud forest (2,000-2,500 m); 2) middle cloud forest (2,500-3,000 m); 3) upper cloud forest from 3,000 m to the upper timberline (~3,900 m). Both its methodological approach and results (including 14 informative maps) mean that the paper is a scientific advance in the plant geography of the region. J. Martens' 'Soil dwelling Arthropods in the Central Himalayas' seems rather specific, but is very informative. He regards the Himalayan fauna as an immigration fauna. Migration and isolation were the main factors for speciation in numerous neo-endemics confined to small areas and extreme mountain ecotopes. Arthropods are found in the Himalayas up to nearly 6,000 m. Low temperature, drought, wind, and lack of food supplies are the limiting factors for their existence at extreme altitude.