

Taking toothaches to a god

One dares count the coins nailed to the old tree stump, or just the nails of all sizes from small to enormous, and gives up at the ten thousandth, it would seem that Kathmandu is one vast toothache. For, every tack, nail, screw or coin knocked into the shrine means a prayer offered for relief of toothache. Which is amazing when one considers the flashing smiles that greet one everywhere. No well-capped film stars could flash whiter. But there is this old lady with her student grandchild, both hammering away with bricks. I notice the lady is offering something the size of a chisel, and the child just an ordinary nail. No coins attached, but a light is lit when the exertion is done. When done, which will the small shrine bless? One hopes both; the agonising molar and the painful milk tooth. After all, unlike going to the dentist, it is the sufferer who does all the work and the toothache god who effortlessly decides yes or no.

Legend has the god Washya Deo, yet another manifestation of Bhairab, attending a dance recital near the temple of Nardevi in the guise of a tree. How many unsuspecting people, I wonder, crouched in his shade or

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burdened his branches as they too fell under the spell of the dance? The god stayed transfixed so long that he took root and when eventually he tried to leave he found he couldn't budge. At least his disguise couldn't, so he slipped out of it as he would a shirt, and there the tree remained. A discerning tantric soon discovered its identity and persuaded the obliging god to practise. Over the centuries, the tree has crumbled. Now, just a fragment remains, sheltered by an overhanging tiled roof, and crowned by a crude coronet of oil lamps. Until a year ago, maybe less, a depression in the centre of the stump contained a small golden image. Perhaps some greatly relieved supplicant removed it in a fit of ecstasy or a constant sufferer took it home to compel a cure. Now there are millions of nails, many washed with coins; tiny nails, small nails, big nails, large screws and wedges of steel. Perhaps the nails compare with the size of the

toothache. Perhaps there was a time when a convenient hammer was provided at this wayside shrine. If so, it disappeared like the golden image. Now one is obliged to bring one's own or find a brick or stone.

When the dentists began moving in is anyone's guess. It was an obvious place to set up shop. They could either entice the suffering on their way to the shrine or collect them when their supplications failed. The shops are distinctly aimed at those who cannot afford the luxury of the latest clinics or the long wait at government hospitals. Sign boards shout 'DAAT' in bold letters and display painted pink gums and whiter-than-snow teeth in promising grins. There are sets of false teeth exhibited in windows, along with all manner of dental equipment that cannot fail to attract the suffering, particularly villagers from the mountains. One sees them, carrying baskets of fruits or vegetables slung from their foreheads, or handsome woollen rugs over their arms and shoulders, deciding which den of salvation to patronise. Often they are aided by charts, photographs of pretty women with pearly teeth, and pictures of gods.

The shops are open to the streets, the dental chairs often innocent of screens so that an extraction can offer the same morbid fascination to passers-by as a public execution. I am assured that friends of the patient are often called upon to help the dentist

when teeth are tough and resistance tougher, but this is something I haven't seen. I have heard suppressed screams welling out of a shop front but cannot vouch whether they were the patient's or the dentist's. They might even have been the protestations of an old pedal-generated drill. Once, when queues at better-known dental clinics were long and late and I suffered a nagging toothache, I seriously considered going to one of these shops near Washya Deo. The white-haired dentist looked expert and kindly, but I funked the publicity and the ferocious array of false teeth piled like petrified bites on glass shelves. Sadly, I disregarded the toothache god, not out of disbelief but embarrassed by the vision of me hammering away on a six-inch nail while traffic came to a standstill.

The area called Bangemudha (*bangra* meaning crooked and *mudha* a log of wood), offers other interests beside the toothache tree. Across a small square is an ancient statue of the Buddha, standing without explanation in the main doorway of a house. Its simplicity of line and texture place it in the Licchavi period (AD 300-800). Not far away is the handsome temple of Naradevi, dedicated to the white Kali who was invited by the Malla king to protect his city. All about are old houses heavily ornamented with carved windows and doors of great beauty. In a large courtyard is the sixteenth-century stupa of Kathisimbhu, similar in looks to the



hill top shrine of Swayambhumat. This is no coincidence, because the stupa offers similar merit to those who for reasons of ill health or age cannot worship at the great stupa on the hill. Legend has Kathisimbhu built in India near Benares. When it was completed there were none found competent to consecrate it, until a Nepali priest happened along. After performing the complex rites, he set out for Kathmandu. To the amazement of all present and those gathered along the way, the large and magnificent stupa followed him.

On the same street is an ancient window that in a valley of exquisitely carved wooden windows is unique. So unique, in fact that it has been given the Newari name of Deshemoru Jhaya which means, 'the like of which is not to be found anywhere'. That should be enchantment enough, but just a glance away from the pristine window is a small temple to Kankeshwor, distinguished by a large,

six-pointed metal star above its mysterious front door. A visiting Jewish general was emphatic, that somehow the Nepalis had appropriated the Star of David. He is not alone in thinking so, just as the swastika is considered an import from Hitler's Germany by many surprised tourists. These tantric symbols of great antiquity are common to Nepali design, but the arguments persist. An eminent Indian once pointed to a bosomy Nepali Tara and declared it to be an Indian god despite my protests. Every person to his own interpretation.

The ornate front door to the temple is always dosed. Entry is made by an unostentatious door nearby, for legend has it that should the front door be opened, it would require human sacrifice. True or no, I doubt that anyone is going to put hearsay to test. ♦

(Excerpted with permission from *In the Kingdom of the Gods*, Harper Collins, 1994.)



BOOK REVIEW

by MARK TURIN

Was *The Hobbit* born in Lamjung?



There are trekkers for whom the journey up the Kali Gandaki valley is less about nature and mountains and more about rock music. Whilst Muktinath beckons to the Hindu faithful, Jomsom is the rather unlikely pilgrimage site for scores of Jimi Hendrix fans every year who believe local claims that the rock legend once stayed in one of the lodges for a few days. Leaving the Annapurnas and returning to the plains of Pokhara, one finds other travellers looking for long-lost signs of the one-time presence of JRR Tolkien, the Oxford medievalist and creator of *Lord of the Rings*. Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, many still want to believe that Tolkien visited Nepal in the 1930s and that this seminal visit to the closed kingdom formed the backdrop of his magical tale *The Hobbit*. As it is, history tells us that Tolkien got no further east than the French Alps.

Instead of looking for dragons and elves, those seeking mystical travellers' tales would do better to read *The Throne of Stone* by Lt Col John Philip Cross and perhaps even pay a visit to his modest house located at Pokhara's town limits. The ex-Gurkha is known far and wide for his extraordinary fluency in Nepali and his 55 years of experience in Asia. For although Tolkien never came to Nepal, Cross most certainly has, and his compelling tale of how modern Nepal may have been born is distinctly, if unintentionally, Tolkienian.

The Throne of Stone is divided into three sections, respectively entitled *Father*, *Son* and *Grandson*, which chart the fortunes, misfortunes, alliances and disputes of clans

and families across parts of what is now Nepal and northern India. The story is a magical mix of history interwoven with plausible reconstruction, thus fleshing out the dry bones of the past with deftly-crafted and entirely believable actors. Whilst the focus shifts from kings to commoners and from Muslims to Hindus, a central thread of the book concerns the role of the ethnic Dura of Lamjung (whom Cross refers to as *Tura*), "a hill race" whose entanglement in the house of Gorkha, the author suggests "played a full part in establishing the current dynasty [of Nepal], all of five hundred years ago". The plot is engaging, confirming that Cross is a masterful story-teller. Through instructive alliteration and carefully-chosen words, the author holds the reader's attention from the very first page:

"This story is about those far-off days...It answers the long forgotten whys and wherefores of the warp and weft of the past. All the actors on that shadowy and bygone stage were riddled with ritual, saturated with superstition and none immune to omen." (page 1)

Although there is barely a dull moment in over 300 pages, some more squeamish readers may be a little startled by the vivid descriptions of (perhaps unnecessarily) gruesome deaths:

"A myriad flies pulsed and crawled in, around and over the tacky, viscous fluid that was still oozing from a most horrendous of gaping wounds." (page 187)

A hallmark of JP Cross' books is that no single character, tribe or village emerges as fully victorious or exonerated from blame. While the narrator's dislike of the higher Hindu castes is apparent, particularly the Bahuns who are portrayed as "clever men and clever manipulators, [who] dominated the slower hill men..." (page 12), it is genuinely refreshing to read a book in

which ethnically Tibetan people are for once not portrayed as happy-clappy Buddhists devoid of guile. In noticeable contrast to the reams of Tibeto-philic musings that appear in the bookshops these days, the narrator in *The Throne of Stone* finds the local Bhotiyas to be hypocritical, calculating and at points downright nasty.

Evaluating oral history is a complicated and political process. Just because a wise old man says so, does it mean that an event necessarily took place? As all fieldworkers know, there is no ideology more powerful than the "once upon a time..." story, and readers of *The Throne of Stone* must be careful to distinguish for themselves between plausible history and informed hearsay. Cross has devoted years of his life to collecting and evaluating oral accounts of the unwritten parts of the history of Nepal from the village perspective (what he calls "grey-beard level"), and the present book (his ninth) provides an important outlet for the previously little-known voice of the Dura. As a "reconstructed village version" of what might have happened, then, *The Throne of Stone* is as engaging as it is plausible. But as charming as it is, however, the stories may be no more than stories, and Cross' reconstruction is, after all, only 'his story'. ♦

The Throne of Stone: A Reconstructed Village Version of the Pre-Dawn of the Gorkha Dynasty, 1479-1559. John Philip Cross. 2000. Mandala Book Point, Kathmandu: Nepal. 340 pages, Glossary (9 pages) and 2 line maps. ISBN 99933-10-07-7. Price: Rs 550.

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