A Journalist’s Encyclopaedia on the Democratic Movement in Nepal

By Mark Turin

O gura, a respected journalist and writer, first published this book in Japanese as 60 Days of a Shining Kingdom in 1999. Thankfully, Nepal-based Himal Books saw the value of an English edition and Kathmandu Spring is the result. Much to her credit, the author does not try to force history into tidy packets of pre-determined and logical fact, and nowhere is this approach more appropriate than in a country like Nepal. A sense of uncontrolled chaos pervades her account, whether in the innocent bystanders unwittingly caught in the middle of violent clashes (such as the nurse Vidya who leans out of the window to see what the noise is all about, and is hit by a stray bullet), or in the confusion about whether messages have reached their recipients across town given the difficulties presented by the imposition of a curfew. This ‘real-time’ tension is one of the most powerful features of Kathmandu Spring.

The book provides a detailed account of a modern political movement unfolding in a country with very little modern infrastructure and a notable lack of access to communication technology. Not only was the uprising organized without mobile phones, email, and television, but its leaders were under house arrest or in jail, the media was state controlled, and telephones were few and far between. Such a vacuum in communication helped in planning or doing. Ogura masterfully paints a picture of sporadic demonstrations loosely held together by a shared vision of democracy, but with diverse means and varying motivations.

The choice of subtitle reveals an important feature of the book: An Account Based on the Oral Testimony of 60 People. As Ogura informs us in her preface, the ‘contents of this book are only a small part of the massive testimonies I collected from more than one thousand individuals’. This encyclopaedic breadth is both the strength and the weakness of her work. Kathmandu Spring is, for want of a better pair of adjectives, both exhaustive and a little exhausting. While the text reads well and is at many points genuinely engaging, her documentary and journalistic style offers, by definition, little dramatic tension or denouement. As a consequence, while the history lesson is welcome and important, the manner of narration and documentary style is reminiscent of a reference book, and reference books are dipped into more than they are read. The position of Kathmandu Spring as a source book on the democratic movement in Nepal is further brought home by the pages of dense type listing all the interviewees: terribly impressive, but also rather daunting. Ogura does include an appendix of major players, or ‘Dramatic personae, post-1990 Movement’, for the convenience of the reader, but this does little to change the fact that we are confronted with new names, places, dates, and political parties on every page.

Finally, the ‘Foreword’ by Kanak Mani Dixit, a noted Nepalese journalist, raises some interesting issues. In under five pages, he neatly summarizes the importance of Ogura’s work and provides the reader with a brief political history of Nepal. Rather than shying away from the emergence of the Maoist movement, active in the country since the mid-1990s. Dixit confronts it head on. The Maoists, he suggests, are moving the nation ‘towards a political precipice’ (ix). While the People’s Movement that Ogura so carefully describes was largely an urban uprising, the Maoist insurgency affecting Nepal today is primarily active at a village level. Perhaps a suitable follow up study for Ogura would be to turn her journalistic attention to the People’s Movement from the perspective of rural villagers, many of whom feel themselves to be largely untouched by the events of 1990.

By Toni Huber

Pilgrimage is one of the more popular and visible rituals performed in Tibetan societies. Tibetans undertake pilgrimages to temples and sacred objects, and to all the holy sites of the Buddha in India, in much the same way as worshippers do in other neighbouring Buddhist regions of Asia. However, what makes Tibetan pilgrimage culture unique is the special ritual attention given to the remarkably extensive network of empowered natural landscape sites, especially mountains, lakes, and caves, located throughout the rugged grandeur of the high plateau and the Himalayas. Buffetrille divides the various texts she has selected into chapters, which concern different sites located around Tibet (west, east, and central) and Nepal (east) respectively. Readers well-versed in the original texts, lightly edited for spelling and in Tibetan script, printed on left pages. A reliable and well-annotated parallel French translation is given on the opposite pages. The book is complemented by an excellent set of indices and also several maps, one of which is an example of inscribed native cartography of the Saka Khumbu region of Nepal, and which is included as an A2-sized reproduction stored in a pocket inside the back cover. With only one exception, the texts themselves are all Buddhist in origin, and their composition dates range from at least the beginning of the seventeenth century up until recent decades.

Reading through this wealth of Tibetan material, one soon realizes why a book concerned with sacred sites in the natural landscape is entitled Pèlerins, Lamas et Visionnaires. Tibetan lamas and yogis completely dominated the way in which landscape features came to be defined as empowered or holy in Tibet, and thereby the way in which they are understood by ordinary pilgrims as being important destinations for ritual journeys. The pages of all Buffetrille’s Tibetan sources are peppered with the myriad clichés of the lamas’ discourse about the natural landscape thoroughly understood through the lens of visionary, Tibetan-style, Vajrayana Buddhism. Under the weight of this textualized hegemony, precious little of the alternative local and more chthonic Tibetan worldview shines through. Viewed from this perspective, the popular practice of pilgrimage to mountains, lakes, and caves in Tibet is, in a sense, a recurring ritual testimony of the extent to which a Buddhist elite has managed to redefine the world in the image of its own interests. This is just one of many possible insights into which we may gain inspiration by studying the sources now available in Katia Buffetrille’s Pèlerins, Lamas et Visionnaires.

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