BOOK REVIEWS


REVIEW BY DAVID N. GELLNER

This book is the published version of a photographic exhibition entitled ‘Images of a City: The Old Townscape of Kathmandu and Lalitpur, 1919-1992’, held in Kathmandu in 1992. There are brief introductory essays to each section, on religious places in the Valley (Franz-Karl Ehrhard), on the Dharamara (‘Bhimsen’s Folly’) and its surroundings (Prayag Raj Sharma), on the Tundhikel and its perimeter (Mahesh Chandra Regmi), on the ‘heart’ of Kathmandu (i.e. Hanuman Dhoka, Indra Chowk, New Road, Asan) (Annick Hollé), on the Bagmati (Huta Ram Baidya), on Patan (Madhan Lal Karmacharya), on Bhaktapur Durbar Square (Niel Gutschow), and on Rana palaces (Eric Theophile).

There is, in addition, a fluent introductory essay by Kanak Mani Dixit which summarizes the historical social changes and their accelerating ecological impact in the Valley.

It is the photographs themselves which form the heart of the book. There are many photographs which show the devastation of the earthquake of 1934 and there are many others which document what was there before. Particularly striking are a series of before and after pictures on facing pages. For example, on pp. 32-3 we see the view to the north from Bhimsen’s tower in the late 1920s. Apart from a few neo-classical palaces in the distance the dense townscapes of Kathmandu is a harmonious blend of tiled roofs and brick walls with only the occasional white-plastered front. In the foreground is the large courtyard of Te Bahal with its temple of Sankata (roofed in corrugated iron) and other religious structures. The same view in the 1990s is radically altered. To one side looms the RNAC building; in every direction are concrete houses of different sizes pushing skywards at different rates and in different styles. The courtyard of Te Bahal is still there. The temple of Sankata has even been improved with beaten copper roofing. But of the houses in the court-yard only two remain in the same proportions and style as before. On pp. 36-7 one sees the same contrast, but looking south. The difference between the 1920s and the 1990s is simply stated: where there were fields, with one or two homesteads, almost as far as the eye could see, now there is unplanned suburban sprawl. For the social historian there is much to treasure. A parade on the Tundhikel from 1883 has captured a straggle of onlookers as well as a washerman’s clothes spread out in the foreground. There is a pair of photo-