

Review of Kathmandu by Thomas Bell

by Thomas Bell. Delhi: Penguin Random House, India, 2014, 496 pp., ISBN 978-8-18-400578-3, Indian Rs. 599

Reviewed by David Seddon

Its Saturday night after the book launch of Thomas Bell's *Kathmandu* at the City Museum. I am at a Newari restaurant in Patan with three Nepalese friends, talking about, among other things, the risk of a major earthquake in Kathmandu¹ and the contradictory tendencies in Newa culture – the erosion of the language as Nepali takes over and the growing recognition of the distinctive Newari cuisine as a major cultural phenomenon². I am also urging them to read this extraordinary book about their city (the author refers to Patan and Kathmandu – originally separate and distinct city states – as now ‘a single conurbation with two ancient cores, like an egg with two yokes’). I hope they do, for it will surely surprise and delight them.

Thomas Bell came to Kathmandu in May 2002, rather by chance and strangely via Kew (Bernstein 1970); he became a journalist, married Subina Shrestha (they now have two children and numerous Newari relatives) and (apart from a brief period in Bangkok) settled in Nepal where he has now lived for over a decade. His vision and experience of Kathmandu are the result of his willingness to explore the nooks and crannies of the city and to embark on numerous encounters with its diverse inhabitants, some of whom, like old Dhana Lakshmi Shrestha (his ‘informant on the traditions of the city’), see and comprehend it very differently. He has also been prepared at various times over the last ten years to leave the city to make sense of events taking place elsewhere in the country, notably the Maoist insurgency, which in the early 2000s was already spreading

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- 1 Thomas Bell shares this concern: “often, in fact obsessively, when I’m walking in a narrow gully I look up and wonder where I’ll be when the earthquake comes and the walls open up like curtains of bricks. I look at the people who are walking around me and I think, ‘Which of us is going to make it?’” (p. 399).
 - 2 One of the few significant characteristics of the city that remains unexamined in Kathmandu is the food culture, and particularly complex interwoven calendar of Newari feasts and festivals.

through the countryside and coming into conflict with the armed police and the Royal Nepalese Army.

Like the city itself, and indeed arguably Nepal as a whole, the book's texture and format is deceptively fluid and anarchic, its deep structure enduring yet surprisingly resilient. Episodic and shifting constantly in perspective and tone, as well as in time and place, *Kathmandu* is divided into three parts and 24 sections³, each of which comprises up to a dozen often only barely related topics, which like a kaleidoscope obliges/allows readers to see/make their own way through the text.

The first part of the book (The Beginnings) explores the city as mandala or microcosm, in part through the attempts of successive (mainly Western) scholars to 'unpeel' the history and pre-history of the ancient Malla kingdoms, and in part through visits by the author himself to parts of the city where the past still permeates the present, as in the case of the structure and layout of the buildings, the narrow lanes and *chowks*, the temples and the monasteries - the ancient trade routes, he remarks, are still visible in the street plans of Kathmandu and Patan. 'The mandala', he says, 'is more than a map of the city. It is a social and political ideology, a description of the order of the universe, which is repeated in a well-ordered city here on earth' (p. 54). Interestingly, the British anthropologist Declan Quigley, when interviewed by Pratyoush Onta (Onta 2004: 55), recalled a 'long chat' with Robert Levy, author of *Mesocosm* (1990) - a study of Bhaktapur - who said: 'it was as if the Newars had planned their social organisation after reading *The Ancient City* (1864) by the great French historian Fustel de Coulanges.

But this 'archaeological' enterprise - which continues throughout the book - is permeated by other more immediate concerns, including the Maoist insurgency: several sections include visits to talk with the Maoists - in Baglung (section 2), Surkhet (section 6) and Dolpa (section 9) - something few journalists, let alone foreigners were prepared to do while the conflict was at its height (between 2002 and 2005). For Bell's Kathmandu is part of the wider Nepalese political economy and while his central pre-occupation is with the city itself he does not confine himself to the city. Nor is he only concerned with buildings and structures; he is, after all, a journalist and his main source of information is conversations.

3 Is it just a coincidence that Bell was 24 when he arrived in Nepal?

He talks with all and sundry, and listens to what they say – he has conversations with Maoists in the field, with politicians, with members of the army and the police, and even with expatriates; but most of all with the ordinary and extraordinary citizens of Kathmandu, who speak often with great authority and insight.

The second section (The Revolutions), like the first, has ten chapters. It deals with the many invasions, wars and revolutions that have transformed the ancient city structures over two and a half centuries, from the conquest of the Kathmandu Valley towards the end of the 18th century by Prithivi Narayan Shah who sought to ‘unify’ Nepal as a Hindu monarchy, to the People’s War, launched two centuries later towards the end of the 20th century by ‘Prachandra’ and his fellow Maoists who sought to ‘re-structure’ Nepal as a federal socialist republic. This section, like the first, has a general chronological momentum, and ends with the overthrow of the king in 2006; but again there are countervailing forces in the structure of the text, which link the past with the present and with previous efforts to understand the city, and the country.

The book ends with a coda of four chapters; after an interval in Bangkok, the author returns to the city in the ‘post-insurgency’ period, which saw the rise of ‘ethnic/caste identity politics’, the Madhes movement, the elections for a Constituent Assembly, and the departure of the king. He gets married. In this part of the book, he has a, largely justified, rant at the corruption and ineffectiveness of the foreign ‘aid industry’ and develops his walnut theory – that ‘the international community and the state are bound together as tightly as two halves of the same walnut’ while ‘the fruit is stuck inside’.

This is followed by the ‘revelation’ that the British, like the Americans, supported the king and his authoritarian regime to the hilt throughout ‘the conflict’, only abandoning their efforts to help crush the Maoist insurgency and popular democracy in Nepal after it became clear that the people of Nepal, and equally importantly the Indian establishment, wanted something different and were not prepared to accept a ‘conservative and limited democracy with a constitutional monarch’. British complicity in war crimes is more than implied.

This final section is not encouraging: the rise and unresolved issue of ethnic/caste identity politics and the apparently associated but contentious issue of federalism; the failure to move beyond the political-

legal 'stasis' (Bell talks of 'sub-optimal equilibrium') of the last six years since the election of the first Constituent Assembly and to agree on a new constitution; the rule of an oligarchy, which now seems to include the Maoist leadership; and the refusal of this oligarchy to accept some responsibility for the atrocities committed during the insurgency and thereafter.

'There must be some things that have got better', suggests the author to old Dhana Lakshmi; 'people know how to eat', she replies, 'but now women have started showing their ass, and that I don't like at all'. 'What will Kathmandu be like in the future?' he asks; 'its impossible to figure out', she says.

I have re-read the book now myself several times and continue to discover or re-discover fresh insights as I do so. I warmly recommend it to all those who live in Nepal, as well as those who visit, and who find the city as familiar and as strange, as deeply and endlessly appealing, as does the author, and as do I.

References

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