

A Festschrift Lacking Unity

by Mark Turin

Nepal: Myths & Realities: In Commemoration of the 75th Birthday of Dr. Wolf Donner. Edited by Ram Pratap Thapa and Joachim Baaden. Delhi: Book Faith India & German-Nepal Friendship Association (DNG). 2000. 617 + xiv pages. ISBN 81-7307-089-8. Price: NRs. 880.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of compilations in the world of books. First there are those publications held together by a common thread, theoretical or empirical. At best, the value of such a collection is greater than the sum of its individual parts. Then there are those publications which are little more than haphazard and seemingly random bundles of articles thrown together, sometimes successfully and sometimes less so. *Nepal: Myths & Realities* is very much a book in the second category.

Co-published by Book Faith India and the German-Nepal Friendship Association (DNG), this collection of 42 articles (43 if you count the one by Eka Donner) is united by nothing more than its purpose as a Festschrift for Dr. Wolf Donner. Donner, whose involvement with Nepal dates back to 1966, is an acclaimed scholar and prolific writer on the economics, development and geography of the Himalayas. His impressive publication list, appended to the end of the book, runs to a full 20 pages, and his position in the annals of Nepalese scholarship is assured.

In their introduction, the book's editors set out a framework which they urge the reader to use as a backdrop for understanding Nepal. They suggest that the myths and realities of the country can be discussed "both on an endocrine level and on an exocrine level" (p. viii), rather a strange choice of words to refer to a relatively simple concept. Rather than invoking enzymes, it might have been easier to use the terms 'internal' and 'external' for the myths generated or perpetuated from within the culture itself versus those applied from outside. Moreover, despite the establishment of this over-arching dialectic, none of the articles in the collection make any explicit or implicit reference to it. A further surprise is that the editors choose to call Donner "the pope of literature on Nepal" (Preface, p. vii), a choice of terminology which will surely have as many negative associations as it will have positive ones to any non-Catholic reader.

The diversity in the content of the contributions is impressive, as is the prominence and status of many of the contributors. The articles range from critical social science (Assmann, Pfaff-Czarnecka, Gurung, Kraemer), through development policy (Hagen, Luger, East & Inmann) to journalistic and vernacular accounts of oral history and fieldwork (Gruber, Frank, Rai & Hutt, Brand). Although understandably dominated by scholars and writers from the German-speaking world, it is refreshing to see that the editors chose to include a number of contributions written by Nepalis. Less impressive, however, is the lack of editing and proof reading. We are informed that the book was "put together in a very limited amount of time" (p. vii), and at points this is quite noticeable. The biographical note of the very first contributor, Roland Nyffeler, occurs twice in four pages, word for word the same both times; and the author's note for Graham E. Clarke (pp. 201-202) makes no mention of the fact that he passed away two years ago. The great Himalayan anthropologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf has been demoted to Purer-Haimendorf (p. 479 & 486), Dr. Charles Ramble has become Rable (p. 485), and we are informed that in the upper Kali Gandaki, "many

Thakali men are local porters to the trekkers” (p. 93). Over the past nine years of coming and going to Thak Khola, I have never once yet seen a Thakali man working as a porter for a tourist, and I am quite sure that the Thakali community would find this insulting.

More important than a few typos, however, is the range in the quality of the submissions. Some of the articles stand out for being well-written, excellently-argued and critically engaged, most notably those by Toni Hagen, Kanak Mani Dixit, Thierry Dodin, Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, Silke Wolf and Karl-Heinz Kraemer. Others, on the other hand, are treasure-troves of fascinating fact, such as ‘Urgent Call for a Turtle Conservation in Nepal’ and Perdita Pohle’s ‘Rock engravings of Mustang’. In between these superb contributions, however, there are a few surprises. The first is a long article written by one of the editors, Joachim Baaden, which turns ethnographic fieldwork into a pseudo-scientific soup of phases, models, charts and tables. Whilst he rightly introduces a little clarity and rigour into the otherwise often methodologically vacant arena of data collection, the abstract model of social interaction he presents seems to allow little space for good old-fashioned friendship.

The other problematic contribution is by Bajracharya and Thapa on the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation (KMTNC). The article describes the activities of the various projects under the Trust’s jurisdiction so glowingly that the 28-page contribution ends up seeming more like a free advert for the organisation than an intellectually challenging study. There are two reasons for concern. First, the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), which is one of the Trust’s major undertakings, is widely thought to be mismanaged, corrupt and bureaucratic. Nowhere in the eight pages dealing with ACAP are there any hard statistics about what the project has actually achieved since it was established, nor where the money collected from the NRs. 1,000 entry permits actually ends up. Second, and perhaps more importantly, such an uncritical approach is out of place in a book of this nature, most particularly because we are informed that Dr. Wolf Donner himself, whom this book commemorates, is “critical, to-the-point and outspoken” and that he has “never - never ever! - belonged to the vast majority of yeah-sayers, easy-going approvers and assent-nodders” (p. 5).

Nepal: Myths & Realities is a book which can (and should) be dipped into more or less at random. No article in the collection makes any reference to any other article, and so each contribution stands totally alone. Some articles are excellent and well-worth reading, others less so. The lack of unity in the contributions, however, together with the fact that the bundle as a whole fails to seriously address the initial endocrine/exocrine and myth/reality distinction, has resulted in a rather mixed book.

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