

# NEWAR SOCIETY

## City, Village and Periphery



Gérard Toffin

Gérard Toffin is Director of Research at National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), Paris, and teaches Nepali civilisation at the National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilisation, Paris. He is an anthropologist with over 35 years of research on Nepal. Among his publications are *Société et religion chez les Néwar du Népal* (Paris, 1984), *Le Palais et le Temple: la fonction royale dans l'ancienne vallée du Népal* (Paris, 1997), *Ethnologie. La quête de l'Autre* (Paris 2005), and the two edited volumes, *Man and his house in the Himalayas* (Delhi, 1991) and *Nepal, Past and Present* (Delhi, 1993). Prof Toffin delivered the Radhakrishnan Memorial Lecture in Oxford, 2000, and the Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture in Kathmandu, 2005.



Gérard Toffin does not trudge a mono-track, one-village, one-caste study in presenting an ethnography of the Newar. This is a much fuller book, providing a broader and a more comprehensive account derived from shifting perspectives of themes, settlement locations, and such variables as their caste groups. A life-time of dedicated work is revealed in this scholarly presentation.

— Professor Prayag Raj Sharma

The Newar of the Kathmandu Valley form a highly complex society that cannot be reduced to an oversimplified and schematic presentation. Their caste system, comprising of more than 30 main hierarchical groupings, is one of the most sophisticated in South Asia. Besides the traditional high and low castes, it also includes a variety of castes of intermediate status and a number of Vajrayana Buddhist groups.

This book is the outcome of a long commitment between Gérard Toffin and this brilliant civilisation, extending from the early 1970s up to the present day. It is based on several first-hand case studies undertaken among a number of caste groups, living not only in the cities but also in rural areas. The themes that emerge include: kinship ties and the complex association of the *guthi* type; the duality between centre and periphery; the salience of territorial affiliation and social boundaries; the enactment of social ties in religious performances; and the construction of ethnic identity.

Some peripheral groups, such as the Balami and the Pahari, are analysed here for the first time. The pace of changes over the last four decades or so is also dealt with, with particular emphasis on gender issues and the emergence of new caste associations.

*Newar Society* provides a comprehensive understanding of one of the major ethnic groups of Nepal, and should be mandatory reading for anyone interested in learning about this fascinating society that shaped the cultural landscape of the Kathmandu Valley.



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