NEWAR SOCIETY
City, Village and Periphery

Gérard Toffin


Gérard Toffin does not trade a monothetic, 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 pathi 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 Balmi 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.