

## Book Review

*Man Bahadur Shahu*

Liechty, Mark (2010) *Out Here in Kathmandu: Modernity on the Global Periphery*. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari (pp 402) price NRs 1100.00. ISBN 978-9937-8194-7-3.

*Out here in Kathmandu* is a collection of essays written over the period of two decades (1985-2005), which appeared in various journals and book chapters. Mark Liechty discusses global-local connections including media effects, middle class formation, tourism, youth consumer culture in restaurants, prostitution and pornography. He argues that middle-class youths in the urban setting in developing countries contribute to the producing and reproducing of global culture and engaging as the part of the world system. The civilization of Kathmandu valley is not only associated with the erotic idols of Pasupati temple, Buddhist shrines, stucco palaces of the Ranas and ancient civilization of the Newar, but also a process of class formation. Liechty has presented his ethnographic details beyond the "primitive" and "exotic" societies and suggested that culture should be understood through the global connection that Arjun Appadurai explained in his book *Modernity at Large*.

Through the given middle class youth Liechty presents his arguments as a class of cultural phenomena or separate cultural entities. He writes, "...Middle-class people draw on deep-rooted local moral values, logics of prestige, and form of cultural capital,

as well as new "modern" symbolic resources from the burgeoning realms of consumer goods and media images, to construct a distinctive body of cultural practices that enable them to distance themselves from their social others, both from above and below" (p. 4). He refutes Marxist interpretation of the middle-class in terms of consumption, production and division of labor, rather depicting the life experiences and forming separate cultural practices which try to be suitable-modern through the imitation and living between "high/low classes" and "traditional/modern". Political transformation of 1951, brought the open door policies which welcomed foreign investment, made interstate relations and turned Kathmandu into a commercial and political center, becoming a new social space where middle-class people find hope and inspiration through abundant international aid, tourism, remittance and educational institutions. The international flows in Kathmandu created not only new markets, cash flow, new classes and suburbanization, but also created a place for several illegal activities. He defines middle class based on clothing, behavior, linguistic and material practice; however, they do not have a uniform set of values. They are more orthodox, their lives in-between cultural spaces, maintaining moral values, following the values of modernity and the nature of their suitability in terms of consuming, in his understanding middle class people are immoral in their daily consumption and adaptation such as food, sex and fashion. The *ijjat* is another issue which separates them from other class-based on economies. They consume materials from the trade centers to maintain the social dignity, prestige, respectability, honor and status in the presence of others. They have been adopting modernity and practicing their own cultural values which are based on material consumption produced in Europe. The middle class produces and reproduces under westernization, homogenization and modernization or global-peripheral relation.

As Liechty has articulated in chapter two, commercial mass media needs to take mass production and "inter-effectiveness" and discuss the *media assemblage* and *consumer sphere*. The consumer sphere is both real and imagined, and is the product of this vast assemblage of mediated meaning (p. 26). The "consumer

subjectivity" depends on "mass media" which promotes the "commercial promotion" at the local level within the capitalistic structure. According to Liechty, it needs to be looked at as a socio-cultural practice which produces "consumers", "masses" and "audiences". The media creates the spaces for global products through the advertisements of a beauty parlor, disco, restaurants, computer and language training centers, photo studios and stationeries and bookshops. Media creates new hopes among the middle class youths such as to be "film star" and "beauty pageant" through *teen* magazines which are commercially motivated. Media built the mutual linkage between consumers and producers, global-local and local-global relations. The consumer sphere was created through the media effects and there is a profound linkage between media, fashion and identity and all of them mutually interlink. In the consumer sphere multiple agencies are engaged where local consumers are adopting different cultural practices and resisting the outdated values in the way while they are engaged to be suitably modern.

Third chapter provides the historical framework of trade connectivity with European capitalism. There was "selective exclusion" until the 1951. Nepalese rulers have kept the state in a geographical distance since the period of the late Malla to Rana regimes, strictly excluding Europeans and their influence on sovereignty, but not from the trade sector. Liechty discusses the incorporation of Europeans goods in the local cultural practices through the support of missionaries, traders and colonial administrators who helped to modernize the country. Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century Nepal has been sustained as a part of the global economy. He cites a historical letter from Ranjit Malla to Pope Benedict, which reads "send here for the things that you have not there. You must not have any anxiety about affairs here". In the 18th and 19th centuries European artisans, case doctors and craftsmen were the best choice. In the 19th century the British considered Nepala place of raw materials, markets and trade routes to markets in Tibet, which meant that Nepali was not "isolated", "secluded", "unknown", a "land of mystery" or "remote" (p. 64) as written by the westerners and was proved to be a false assumption.

In the 17th century Spanish Christian missionaries came into Kathmandu valley for providing medical services and were granted land for settlement by the Newar Malla King. Through the 19th and 20th centuries roughly two-thirds of the valley's Europeans came to businesses directly associated with British residency (p. 77) and large numbers of physicians, educators and military technicians were hired; however, Nepal was protected from the foreign invasion, particularly British or *firangi*, due to the sacred nature of the state. Since the medieval era, certain elite groups of the people have been using European goods for purposes of luxury, therefore European mercantile business simultaneously captured means to supply goods in the Kathmandu valley, whereas the local products like pottery, paper, cotton textile and woolen blankets served only for local consumption rather than as exports. The nationalist feeling of Prithivi Narayan Shah promoted the indigenous industries and blocked European traded markets, which had been weakened after the Regime of Bhimsen Thapa. In the Rana period new consumerism classes were created such as the Rana elite and military classes. They used the luxury goods, constructed monumental architecture, built white stucco palaces and provided European civilian and military clothing to Nepali nobility.

In 'Social Practice of Cinema and Video-viewing in Kathmandu,' Mark Liechty explains how the cinema and video-viewing culture changed human behaviors and differentiated one from another within a couple of decades. By using historical references from the late Rana regime through the golden age of the 1960s and 1970s to the decade of the 1990s, he explains the influence of cinema, video and mass media in the socio-cultural practices of different classes of the Kathmandu valley. The history of cinema began with strict censorship by the Rana rulers who understood it as foreign representative. Since the historical inception of movies Kathmandu became the center of Hindi and English where video parlors and cinema halls were established and its publicity largely seen in magazines and radio. In the beginning different groups went to cinema halls; however, in 1980s middle-class chose the VCR instead of cinema hall which transferred them into a group of

"free", individuated consumers, rather than being isolated consumers...(p. 161) and segregated them from other groups of the people. The classes were distinct in accordance with space to choose, quality tickets, and their behavior. Liechty also observes the consumer choice in selecting cinema is influenced by social structure such as age, class and gender. They have different motives, intensions and desires for watching the movies; however, there is strict censorship of the social ethos and value system.

In the fifth chapter, Liechty has used three English words—body, face and love, which have become objects of fetish through mass media in middle-class in Kathmandu. Media plays the role of creating fantasy among the urban middle-class youths in accordance with the gendered position in society. It formed a new consumerism culture and tied urban youth to the international market centers through films, magazines, cards, flowers, posters and music. The Liechty central statement is how the culture of Kathmandu negotiated with global culture males strengthening their bodies through watching wrestling, learning a martial art, interest in "kung-fu" and other action, a visit to the training center for learning techniques, training and self-discipline, and female care of their faces through using cosmetics, makeup, maintaining their skin, hair, body and using soap. Both males and females have been influenced by the video boom and international films like English and Hindi. Liechty found gender constructed behavior in consumerism culture in the process of their struggling to be modernized. The word-love also invited new forms of social interaction within the middle-class people. They began to celebrate father's/mother's day and Valentine's Day where they began to consume cake, new fashion, card, flower and toys. The middle-class people are influence by the love story of films and roles of hero and heroine. The discourses of "body" and "face", "fashion" and "love" now play crucial roles for the constructing and communicating identity in a new culture consumerism (p. 216).

In Carnal economies, Liechty's discussion on the commoditization of food and sex in Kathmandu, in this section, he deals with how

the values and ethos of food and sex transfer from private to public issues through "restaurant", "dance bar", and "disco" in Kathmandu. Males are the main consumers to fulfill their basic desire, where women's bodies are commoditized in the restaurants to grow a new culture of food and sex— women perform their dance to entertain the middle class youths, which invited new cultural practices within the middle class people, including food and sex, commonality and endogamy, considered as a tool for sexual reproduction. The new cultural practice has a connection with the global economic system in terms of moneys, goods and works. The processes at work in the commodification of food and sex are intimately tied to contemporary projects of negotiating gender identities, caste membership...(p. 224) that changes the notion of purity and pollution. Prostitutions in Kathmandu has rapidly grown since 1970 along with the flow of tourists, the public places like hotels, restaurants, tourists and commercial zones are a popular area for prostitution for both middle class people and western tourists. Liechty argued, prostitution in Kathmandu was not yet the business of low-caste women as prior to 1950s. It is however an issue of migration, employment, poverty and drug dealing. The fantasy of prostitution has been created through film, fashion, magazines, novels, uniforms, video parlor, blue films, pornographic media and sexual stigma. The restaurant culture brings the fundamental changes within the middle-class consumerism, mainly their food and sex habits in the public sphere. It introduces new choices of foods—replacing traditional culinary practices and social values. The history of restaurants shows, foreigners who work in different aid agencies, volunteer organizations and diplomatic missions were the main consumers of new varieties of food such as apple pie, buff, burger, pizza and alcohol, which gradually became a part of the middle-class culture, urban youths fulfilling their appetite, loosening the social values systems including caste-based rank, the notion of purity and avoidance and changes. This culture fundamentally changed the gender roles in the public and private sphere; he writes, as preparers/producers of ritually compliant food, women not only "cook for love", but status (p. 258). In the public sphere, upper-class groups are able to maintain the moral obligation, prestige and

honor whereas food and sexual avoidance shifted out of the caste among the middle class consumers.

In Kathmandu as Translocality, Liechty discusses on the imagination of middle-class tourists and locals through the films, books, guidebooks, newspapers, travelogues and magazines from the distance that produces the memories of other places within the tourists. The term "glocalized" space "translocalities", "fantasy" and "deterritorialization" were borrowed from Arjun Appadurai—these terms were employed to explain the exchange of global and local cultural verities. He also shows the relationship between mass media and mass tourism in terms of cultural exchange and the consumption of goods; this culture entered along with hippie culture in Kathmandu. The new social relation between tourists and non-tourists formed a new business, adopted new culture and consumed new goods and foods. The translocal relation isn't limited to the high class elite, but also with tour guides, taxi drivers, baggage boys, drug abusers and spiritual *gurus*; such relations could be observed everywhere and with everybody such as at Pasupati temple to Thamel bar and royal elite to street vendor. Liechty interestingly presents views of urban youth from the "translocal" or "peripheralized" location of Thamel. They engage in illegal work like selling drugs, express frustrations and dream of moving to America. Middle class youths create transnational fantasies of Thamel, which has the reputation of "toughness", "drug culture", "gang fights", and "sex with foreign women", "bravery", "eagerness and violence". The interaction, imagination and fantasies of the middle class have been created through the mass media.

In Paying for Modernity: Women and the Discourse of Freedom in Kathmandu, Liechty interprets the suitably-modern gender practice based discussion on "freedom" and "democracy" after the restoration of democracy in 1990. Liechty collected opinions of middle-class women who refuse to sustain patriarchal values and like to construct new values of middle-class identities. The democratic values have changed womens' position from private to

public, creating a new public sphere and identities through maintaining social prestige, freedom from social discrimination and modernized fashions. This chapter shows the association between class, culture and gender in western capitalism (p. 311). The public sphere notion borrowed from Jurgen Habermas's account of the bourgeois in the 18th century and Joan Lande's critique of patriarchy in the 18th and 19th centuries to define womens' roles and positions in the sense of democracy, and their choices and options in terms of associational networks and negotiating processes in achieving suitable modernity in the public sphere. The changing notion of gender loosens the patriarchal domination of middle-class women and made space to enter freely into the public realm while maintaining their social capital *ijjat* concerned with moral economy, societal value, family prestige and consumerism culture. The middle-class women became conscious through democratic practices including the national and transnational development processes. Democracy not only creates new space and female/male relations but also invites new threats such as teasing, bullying and harassment in the public domain and inability to maintain their social prestige/dignity. He writes, The modern Nepali "public women" is "free" to go school, "free" to go to work, "free" to consume modern goods and enter the public sphere, but unlike the "public man" she constantly bear the burden of *ijjat* and sexual harassment (p. 341).

In the final chapter, Dissonant desires: women as consumers and pornographic Media in Nepal, he discusses pornography as a culture within middle-class consumerism. Liechty examines the relationship between consumer desires and erotic desires; the flood of pornographic video formed a new class. The circulation of commercial pornography within local consumer circles created new sexualities and new gender identities and new social relationships in society. The global-to-local circulation of pornography is possible through VCR technology, newspaper stories, reports and video parlors in accordance with middle class consumer including women and girls. The fetishization of sex created the possibility to see the "blue film" in the bedroom of young couples. Liechty interestedly articulates, despite the social

restriction and social taboo, middle class youths consume pornographic videos to meet their curiosity and desires to achieve equal footing. The pornographic film in Kathmandu became a part of life and means of entertaining in a middle class family that changed their social practices despite hesitation and embarrassment. The pornographic film created a new space such as the bedroom of young couples. The influence of social values was observed for instance, women felt awkward and uneasy watching "blue film" with their husband.

In a nutshell, Liechty's ideas have theoretical and ethnographical underpinnings about middle class, media, class, caste, food, fashion, sex and globalization processes. He establishes his logic with simple and straightforward ideas encompassing abundant ethnographic illustrations. Liechty blurs the boundaries of the traditional ritual of ethnography, observed in exotic, poor and isolated communities, and suggests observing a historical connection between global-local spheres as a process of cultural production and reproduction. Liechty has opened many questions of consumerism patterns beyond the middle classes to whom he named lower and upper classes, for instance, what about the consumerism pattern of urban elite who consume branded items in the supermarket, visit casinos for entertainment and disco in Kathmandu. Isn't it their suitably modern behavior? The readers of this book will get the vision of Nepal social composition as not only ethnic, religious and regional diversities but also a commercial culture that people have been silently adopting. Liechty has clearly mentioned the footnotes and historical evidence including inscriptions, paintings and portraits beside his excellent art of conducting ethnography in urban settings.