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Holy, Ancient, Chaotic Kathmandu

Roberta Simone

Grand Valley State University

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At Christmas break I went to Kathmandu to visit my daughter Skye, who is there for a year studying the Nepali culture and language. I was going to be transported exactly halfway around the globe. To get there you can fly east — from New York to London to Frankfurt to Athens to Karachi — or, as I was going to do, west — from Seattle to Tokyo to Bangkok and finally to Kathmandu: either way it takes about 24 hours.

Royal Thai Airlines treats its passengers like royalty: its formally dressed attendants bow as they bring you hot wet towels and lavender slippers in preparation for a comfortable and splendid four course dinner. Tokyo airport is all speedy efficiency, and Bangkok airport is all gracious efficiency. In all, the trip didn't prepare me for the chaos that is Kathmandu, and neither did the fairy land expectations aroused in me from actually flying alongside — not above — the snow-covered Himalayas and from thinking I saw, while the plane was taxiing along the tarmac, an elephant kneeling down to receive recently disembarked dignitaries.

In the Tribhuvan Airport customs area porters in varieties of nonuniforms unloaded our bags from trucks, tossed them onto counters, and hovered nearby while the customs officers held our strange items up for their partners to examine and laugh at. In the reception room, Skye was waiting with yellow flower garlands for us — Skye in a kurta (billowy pajama dress) and shawl, with plastic thongs on her feet, a red mark on her forehead, speaking Nepalese to the porters with authority, yet still so obviously a Westerner. She bargained with them for their fee and then for five minutes with three taxi drivers, each of whom wanted to take us into the city without the meter running, and won a good price from one of them — about 60 cents.

So we were off jerking and speeding down the left side of the road, pushing the bumpers of other speeding taxis, passing busses that looked like police vans, with people hanging onto the sides or sitting on the roof, bicycles, motorcycles, tempos (three wheeled taxis built out of a motorcycle); swerving into our own lane only just in time to avoid a collision with a truck; stopping at some red lights but not at others; coming up short if a gurka on traffic duty motioned a stop at a zebra crossing but not if he didn't — in which case we parted a throng of moving pedestrians. Then onto narrow city streets, where the constantly beeping horn scattered foraging cows and buffalos (I learned to distinguish between them later, though I still don't know why you can...
eat the latter but not the former). People edged over without a backward look: men carrying milk cans and lumber, women carrying huge loads of kindling or carpets, supported on their bent backs with straps suspended from their heads; children carrying smaller children in cloth packs tied around their shoulders; Hindu holy men (sadhus) in dirty white wrap gowns, beards, and staffs; Buddhist monks in red or yellow, with shaved heads; a girl leading four or five goats; women in saris and high heels; teenage boys with their arms around each other; a man wheeling a bicycle loaded with oranges, another pulling a cart full of cauliflower, another pedalling a tourist in a bicycle rickshaw.

After checking into our hotel, we became pedestrians ourselves, jumping out of the way of beeping taxis that did not slow down; but now we were also prey to bicycles, motorcycles and tempos — the larger and the faster have the right of way over the smaller and slower. Being a novice, as well as both curious and squeamish, I had to look left and right, behind me, as well as down and up, if I was to avoid being spit on from an overhanging window; being bumped or bumping into; stepping on excrement of all kinds, mud puddles or a dead rat; but also so as not to miss all there was to see. People squat on the few feet of cracked concrete, loose brick, red clay between their houses on the floor, have a vegetable, next to his head on the spot. small bumpy their hands on times heads

If the sun is on the street of a softball. they sit together on a hand lea or nursing out pants — sacks, chasing bales of straw up to the back...
kids are everywhere

their houses and the street; those that have a little enclosure that is part of the first floor, have a tiny shop, from which they sell cigarettes — by pack or loose — peanuts, vegetables, bolts of cloth, eggs, beer, comic books, or plastic shoes. A man crouching next to his hand-pumped sewing machine will make you a pair of draw-string pants on the spot. Those without shops squat on grass mats in little courtyards, weighing small bumpy oranges or six-inch bananas on scales, or, between customers, warming their hands over burning bits of wood, shawls wrapped over their shoulders and sometimes heads — both men and women, often with babies in their laps.

If the sun is shining, women wash their hair or their children or the family clothes on the street, before their dwellings, with brown soap molded into the size and shape of a softball. The water is drawn from a courtyard well or a neighborhood tap. Or they sit together searching each other's hair for lice or spinning tufts of wool into yarn or knitting bright wool into sweaters, socks or caps for the tourists, or nursing or oiling a baby. Meanwhile kids are everywhere — little ones often without pants — running after and prodding wheels with sticks, kicking home-made hacky-sacks, chasing chickens, trying to ride a big dog or picking up a puppy, jumping into bales of straw, running together and laughing, lining up in delight to have their pictures taken. A ten-year-old with a younger sibling on board is not in the least deterred from all this activity.

And there are always animals: chickens scratching around or fleeing from the children, pigs rooting in the river bank, cows eating the vegetable garbage, goats butting each other, dogs copulating, puppies snuffling at their prominently teated mothers — everywhere there seemed to be fecundity. Animals are not collared or fettered or shut up; the owners must know them by face; perhaps the dogs are communal. All the time I was in Nepal I couldn't eat meat, because the animals seemed to be residents, citizens, so intimate were they with human beings (though the Nepalis aren't sentimental about animals and only one Hindu sect is completely vegetarian). Perhaps another reason why I did not find meat appetizing was that I often saw buffalo shins, hooves, and guts, yellow-dyed goat heads with horns and eyes intact, and skinny chicken necks and feet spread out for sale on the ground. No doubt the better cuts go to restaurants.

The tourists are a younger, harder lot than you find elsewhere, probably more Germans and Australians than Americans, and mostly wearing Nepali bright striped sweaters and hiking boots and jeans, in Nepal mainly to go trekking in the Himalayas, up to the base camps of Everest or Annapurna. Many are students taking time out
from school to see the world, but I also met a fifty year old widow who quit her job as a librarian in California, sold her house, and decided to spend a few years in Asia on her own. There is a great deal of camaraderie among the foreign visitors; often they come alone but end up going around with new friends. It is also interesting to hear a Japanese and a German conversing together in English, the current "lingua franca." (Will French one day be considered the "lingua anglica"?)

In the Thamel section, where tourist guesthouses and restaurants abound, there is one shop after another with merchandise prominently displayed, selling carpets, jewelry, masks, puppets, thongkas (Tibetan scroll paintings), sweaters, books, cloth, leather goods, trekking equipment. A passing look brings the owner to your side, offering you a good price, while at your elbow is a strolling peddler wanting to sell you a curved knife, a necklace of lapus lazuli, or a hand-made fiddle; and someone else is wanting to polish your sneakers. I had thought that the Black Market was a literal place that you had to inquire about surreptitiously and be led to secretly, but it isn't: "Wish to exchange American dollars, Madam?" is the question asked of you every few paces. Inside almost any shop there is someone eager to give you three more rupees (about twelve cents) for the dollar than the bank will — or indeed can. Hotel bills can be paid only in "hard" currencies — not rupees, Italian lire or Greek drachmas for some reason — so as to ensure the king's getting a good cut from tourist dollars or pounds or marks or yen.

The guesthouses are pretty stark. The Kathmandu Guest House, where I stayed for fifteen dollars a night, had a lovely enclosed courtyard, but its stone floors and walls radiated cold from the 40 degree temperature at night and 60 degrees during the day. I wasn't sure that the sheets had been changed since the last guest; the one threadbare towel was damp and stained; and the shower, warm for only about three minutes, ran down over the toilet to a drain in the middle of the floor. In the restaurant next door, I had to take a deep breath and try to ignore the smell of urine coming from somewhere, the black crack in the teacup, the unwashed hands and clothes of the waiter, to hope I could avoid having to use the toilet — no more than a hole in the floor — and to find something to eat that was peeled and cooked and not animal: usually wheat porridge, boiled eggs and tea for breakfast; rice, curried lentils, cauliflower and broccoli for dinner.

Freak Street, where the hippies used to hang out, has very good Nepali versions of pizza and even spinach linguini. And brownies are still very popular, though the contemporary versions skip the hashish. Water is absolutely unsafe to drink, the water lines having been made up of the versions in the versions in the versions in the versions... And you cannot even hold your nose to brush your teeth.

There are no public bathrooms to see the hippies' former blue uniforms, perhaps a thousand should be some toil in auto-rickshaws to hold scarred sections in Nepali to now litter the place I thought, yet I could see for cholera and dysentery for new ones.
Nepalese are always within a few feet of a holy place

Kathmandu is a world I could never have imagined, but which sometimes now seems more real, more human, than does the neat row of houses and the quiet street of Grand Haven that I can look out onto from where I sit writing. In contrast, middle-class small town America seems so packaged: the houses on my street are all shut up and separate from each other; only an occasional — and cleanly dressed — walker or jogger goes by; it is quiet and the air is fresh. I am not so romantic as to wish to trade our sanitation and privacy for the crowds and dirt and abandoned excrement, the smell of sewage, but I think about the Nepali streets, the interaction of all kinds of lives, the living in the present because of the need to survive day by day, the acceptance of disease, poverty and death.

There, over all, through all, is a mysterious and awesome sense of the presence of God. The Nepalese are always within a few yards of a holy place — big ones taking up a whole hilltop (Buddhist) or riverside (Hindu) or courtyard (either); hundreds of small ones tucked into corners, tacked onto buildings, standing free in the least bit of open space, but never shut off from daily life or relegated to a special day of the week: cows walk into and around them; dogs sleep, men sell tomatoes, women winnow grain, children pitch coins alongside others; and people stop and pray at them, take a bit of yellow or red dye from within to smear on their forehead and hair. How can you not have the sense that God is right there too, that God includes dirt and

lines having been built too close to the sewage lines. Wine is not available, but of the versions of beer, Star brand, which does not taste like formaldehyde, is quite good. And you can buy bottles of mineral water, which you then take back to your hotel to brush your teeth with.

There are luxury hotels in Kathmandu, of course, for the tour groups that come to see the high spots and don’t stay long. In their restaurants waiters wear gold braided blue uniforms and white gloves. A double room costs about a hundred dollars a night, perhaps a third of the average Nepali’s annual salary. It doesn’t seem right that there should be so much luxury in the middle of poverty. It isn’t moral either that the rich ride in automobiles whose fumes spew black from exhaust pipes, causing pedestrians to hold scarves over their mouths. Nor that the two prominent American corporations in Nepal are Pepsi Cola and Corn Curls. Nor that thousands of plastic bags now litter their streets and parks. So much for our Western influence and progress, I thought, yet remembered that we also are responsible for free public vaccinations for cholera and meningitis — maybe there’s been a trade-off of traditional diseases for new ones.

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garbage and disease and death and cows and chickens: God includes all life and all lives, the cycles over and over again of procreation and death. No wonder there are so many manifestations of God in sculpture and painting: from Ganesh, the elephant-headed God, to dancing God with six arms, to Goddess Kali with knives and skulls, to golden meditating Buddha.

The most ancient shrine in the valley is Swayambhunath, the Buddhist Temple complex to which daily many pilgrims come, climbing up the three-hundred step staircase, passing huge golden painted Buddhas, stone carved animals, live monkeys, beggars, children running around their mothers and fathers, who chip the sacred letter om into stones to sell, or weave colorful cotton belts. At the top are numerous shrines and statues, Buddhas in niches fenced round with prayer wheels to spin. On the spires of the stupas (shrines) are painted the huge staring eyes of God. Also at the top families live behind their shops, selling pepsi-cola and hand-held prayer wheels, puppets and masks, jewelry and paintings.

Pashupatinath, Nepal's most sacred shrine, is Hindu and consists of many temples built alongside the Bagmati River. Groups of cows roam freely here, are fed by the attendants, as are numerous monkeys that climb all about, often fighting with wandering dogs.

There are so many shrines, we went for hours wearily up and down the floor, lists of beggars that accompanied us. People Katherine went to present to the temples. The very successful, from having nothing to very successfully, they soiled dressed and dressed.

Although the beggars, who are tolerant and respect all, including person or not, say "nemaste", meaning "I bow to you, I am divine", as a mark of respect. Further, the act of worship within the temple itself, represent a part of the squalid area.

Beggars are in groups. The groups stress generosity, to give...
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dering dogs. Families camp in some of the temples, washing their clothes or themselves downstream, or drinking the sacred water upstream, while waiting for a sick relative to die and be cremated in a pyre on a ghat, a stone platform which extends into the river — an elaborate funeral service in which the oldest son officiates and which devout Hindus as well as tourists watch from the overhanging bridge or wall across the river. It is startling for an American to watch the personal effects and bedding thrown into the river, pursued and captured by a beggar, to see the corpse’s feet sticking out from the pyre, to smell the burning flesh; but I think it would be more startling to attend a Tibetan Buddhist funeral, at which, I understand, the body is dismembered and thrown to vultures on the mountainside. In both religions, the spirit is manifestly stressed as more important than the body. At Pashupatinath the family pays the temple a cow for the funeral service, or, if too poor, sends a young male relative dressed as a cow to the annual week-long festival in remembrance of the dead.

There are some Muslims about too and St. Xavier’s Roman Catholic church, where we went for Christmas morning mass, leaving our shoes at the entrance, sitting on the floor, listening to the choir sing Christmas glorias and other anthems in Nepalese, accompanied by a harmonium and drum. Girls carried bowls of flowers and candles to present to the brown Baby Jesus doll at the altar. St. Xavier’s school is apparently very successful in teaching the English language and American culture, if I can judge from having heard Skye’s Nepali friend Bobby sing “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” flawlessly.

Although (maybe because) it is illegal to convert anyone, Nepal has great religious tolerance and inclusivity. Buddhists and Hindus merge, and you can’t always tell one person or one temple from another. All Nepalis greet each other and visitors too with “nemaste”, meaning, “The part in me that is divine recognizes the part in you that is divine”, as they place their fingers and palms together on their chests, bowing in respect. Further unifying all the people but in contrast to all the human-built houses of worship with statues and paintings, the majestic Himalayas, visible in the distance, represent a purer, less accessible idea of God, of the sublime and eternal as well as the squalid and the temporal.

Beggars are found everywhere but especially at the temples, because all the religious groups stress charity to the unfortunate as a holy obligation. I was advised to be cautious, to give only one rupee. That seemed very cheap, but it was appropriate, both because it is a significant amount to a Nepali — enough for a cup of tea or a plate of rice — and because there would be many requests. It is also appropriate to give

...
food (a hard-boiled egg, a dipper of uncooked rice, an orange) or some clothing; some consider these gifts more intimate and less demeaning. I was told to give only to adults—not to children, who might then be deterred from knowing they must work for a living. The children were hard to resist at first: they had learned how to make a Westerner feel guilty—they gave you wildflowers, they promised to buy pen and paper for school, they did not wipe their noses. But after being followed enough by little bands of persistent pests, who were obviously not starving, who wanted to sell you a stray puppy, and who ultimately were scolded by a parent coming upon them, I learned to be more discriminating.

Genuine beggars included the old, the blind, the otherwise handicapped. I remember a handsome young legless man perched on a kind of skateboard, a blind grandfather led by a boy, an old bent toothless woman, whom, upon closer examination, I gasped to discover was probably not much older than I am. A genuine beggar sat or stood quietly, did not follow you or thrust hands at you, bowed and uttered a "namaste", a dignity that recognizes each other's separate but ultimately equal state: in a future life the roles might be reversed. Most poignantly I remember a woman of perhaps sixty, who sat cheerfully every day at the gate of the Kathmandu Guest house, smiling and saying hello to everyone. I could never pass her by, and before I left Kathmandu I had given her rupees perhaps twelve times (a grand total of 48 cents) as well as a sweater and an umbrella. She told Skye to tell me that I was so kind and that she would pray for me—an act of charity so infinitely greater than mine.

Skye took us to visit the family she lived with for six weeks, farmers just outside the city. It consisted of a grandmother, seven children under ten years of age, a widowed aunt, a mother and father. Four of the girls wore identical dresses cut from the same bolt of red, blue and yellow cloth. The little ones were barefoot, the older ones went to school with shoes. The women hurried to get their shawls, the father, who was wearing a Camel cigarette tee shirt and topi (national hat) had to have their pictures taken in proper attire. They gave us lunch on the porch roof in the sunshine—fresh popcorn, roasted peanuts in the shell, and toasted soy beans—served on aluminum dishes—and a glass of hot water with honey and spices, upon all of which myriad flies swarmed. I remembered to eat only with my right hand and used the left as a non-stop fly-fan. Everything, the father announced proudly, was grown on their farm.

Skye's friend Gregory took us to dinner to his host family. These were rich city people, but only odd details would indicate so: an electric coffee grinder, for grinding chilies and other spices; a VCR and rented Indian films. Otherwise they had little visible furniture—what we could fit on a table could fit on a suitcase, and jellies of rakshi, a herb, powerful. Outside Nepal is ruled by Lilliput: it is not a country, but a drooping currency denominated in rupees, over the River Ganges playing native groups wearing brightly colored saris stranded because the River or country's one helipad is closed to the crowds.

After two weeks I felt nearly two centimeters taller, and Nepal forever changed.

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A genuine beggar... did not follow you

...thing; some adults required by adults to make a living; made a living by little children who sold newspapers and paper; sometimes they were beggars, and by little children who sold newspapers and paper to sell you something. I remember them, I remember them, little children who sold newspapers and paper to sell you something. I remember them, I remember them, little children who sold newspapers and paper to sell you something. I remember them, I remember them, little children who sold newspapers and paper to sell you something. I remember them, I remember them,...

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