

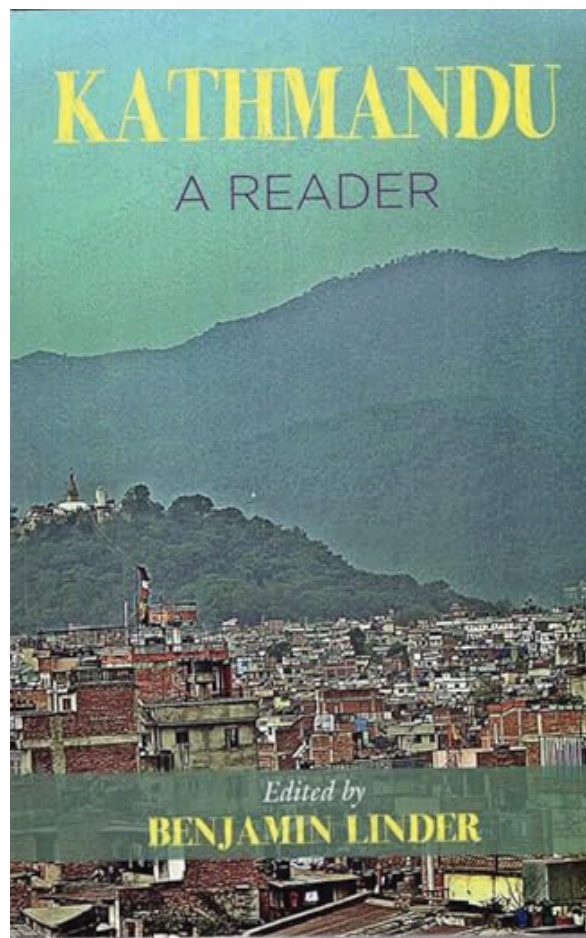
Book Review

Review of *Kathmandu: A Reader* by Benjamin Linder (ed.)

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The original motivation behind the anthology—conceived by Pratyoush Onta and edited by Benjamin Linder, who also contributed a chapter—was to create a space where the existing literature on Kathmandu could be gathered and made accessible in order to spark transdisciplinary engagement with the city. As Linder notes in his introduction, aside from a bibliography published by Martin Chautari in 2019, the literature on Kathmandu remains widely scattered across various books, articles, and other publications (p. 19). And yet, the volume is not merely a collection of previously published articles. The careful curation of articles—both in terms of thematic coherence and scholarly relevance—combined with the overall structure and editorial framing, transforms the collection into a decisive resource for understanding Kathmandu’s contemporary urban and social transformations. Rather than simply assembling previously published materials, the volume offers a synthetic and interdisciplinary lens that redefines how the city can be studied. This strength is further enhanced by the diverse backgrounds of the contributors, which include anthropologists, architects, urban planners, environmental and energy specialists—as well as both scholars and practitioners. This variety enriches the volume’s perspective, allowing for a multi-dimensional analysis that bridges academic inquiry and real-world engagement. The anthology is destined to become a foundational reference for scholars, students, and practitioners interested not only in Kathmandu, but also in broader questions of metropolitan change, spatial dislocation, and cultural heterogeneity in South Asian urban contexts.

The central idea of the anthology is this: although Kathmandu has a long, 2,000-year history, the city that has emerged in recent decades is not merely a continuation or development of the old urban center. Rather, it represents a break—a new reality—that must be understood on its own terms. The authors suggest that we should not analyze Kathmandu simply as an evolving historical city, but as the

emergence of a qualitatively different urban reality whose distinctive character demands fresh analytical tools (p. 5).

The volume is organized into three main sections, framed by an introduction and an afterword, and together they offer a multifaceted portrait of modern Kathmandu as both a material and symbolic space. The first and most substantial section focuses on the city’s physical and urban form, tracing Kathmandu’s transformation through urban planning, new housing developments, the expansion of roads and highways, and the persistence of informal settlements. These chapters collectively reveal the tension between planned modernization and the improvisational realities of urban growth. The second section turns to urban cultural politics, showing how history and heritage are continually reinterpreted through monuments, maps, and reconstruction projects. Here, the contributors demonstrate how the city’s built environment becomes a stage for political imagination and cultural negotiation. The third section explores Kathmandu as a generator of social and cultural worlds, examining the intersections of class, caste, gender, and migration that shape everyday life. Across these sections, the volume coherently portrays the city as a complex site where spatial, cultural, and social processes converge. In the Afterword, Sabin Ninglekhu aptly characterizes Kathmandu as “a deeply fractured, uneven geography of power” (p. 468), a description that captures the overarching insight of this collection: the city’s transformations are as much about inequality and imagination as they are about space itself.

The authors deliver an image of Kathmandu, not as a fixed, geographically defined city, but a dynamic and dislocated urban entity—both in how it has developed and how it functions within Nepal and globally. It functions more like a node in a network than a self-contained metropolis. The etymology of the word *metropolis*, which in Greek means mother city, comes to mind. Originally referred to the relationship between a founding city and its colonies, metropolis implies a departure from home

and a relationship defined by distance. The editor, Benjamin Linder, implicitly draws on this notion to suggest that Kathmandu, too, cannot be tied to a clearly defined territory (p. 6). Its identity is shaped by a plural dislocation—urban, historical, political. Throughout the volume, the city is portrayed as fluid and unsettled. In particular, Sandhya A.S. describes Kathmandu as a spatial hub that draws in hopeful migrants from villages throughout Nepal and sends them outward into the wider world (p. 446). The city becomes a site of convergence and dispersion, more a dynamic point in a larger migratory network than a stable metropolitan center. Alongside the experience of extreme dislocation—of being far removed from a stable or original sense of home—there also emerges a condition of cultural and social dishomogeneity. The city is not characterized by a unified or homogeneous identity, but rather by a multiplicity of cultural backgrounds and social dynamics that coexist, often uneasily, within the same space. Several articles, written by both established scholars such as Mark Liechty and emerging voices like Rashmi Sheila, explore the heterogeneity of lived urban space. The result is a city shaped as much by displacement as by internal diversity.

As the editor notes, a more wide-ranging volume would have covered topics as important as those already included. Among the omissions, Linder cites the politics of religion yet neglected the wider religious life of Kathmandu—its sacred sites, the rituals that enliven them, the daily rhythms of worship, the pilgrimages that shape the city's geography, the plurality of religious traditions, and the ways this diversity is negotiated through architecture, infrastructure, and everyday spatial practices. This limited attention to religion as a physical, cultural, and social force can be regarded as a shortcoming of the collection. This limitation should not overshadow the overall value of the volume, which is intended to serve as a critical resource for graduate students and scholars interested in Nepal, urban studies, and, more broadly, urban processes in Asian contexts.

In fact, the volume succeeds in making a significant contribution to several fields. For scholars of Nepal, it provides the most comprehensive and interdisciplinary portrait of Kathmandu's recent transformations to date. For urban studies, it demonstrates how modernization, spatial inequality, and cultural politics intersect in a non-Western metropolis. For Asian urbanism, it offers a comparative framework that connects Kathmandu to broader regional debates about development and identity. Its combination of ethnographic depth, architectural history, and cultural critique ensures its relevance across disciplines concerned with the material and symbolic dimensions of urban change.

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