



**Ian Harper, *Development and Public Health in the Himalaya: Reflections on Healing in Contemporary Nepal***

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THE AUTHOR of *Development and Public Health* is a physician who was involved in tuberculosis eradication programmes in rural Nepali communities in the early 1990s. He then studied anthropology in order to understand the cultural basis of traditional medicine and the relationships between healers in the different systems in Nepal. He is thus well situated to bring together anthropological and scientific perspectives on the medical world of Nepal. The two disciplines have brought him to an original analytical position of scepticism in his approach to the various medical systems, and an understanding of the processes of medical encounters as bringing about the rise of new hybrid systems rather than remaining imposed or transplanted medical worlds—a finding consistent with those of other related studies. Furthermore, through analysis of how patients mediate between the various categories, he argues that, as a result of the encounter between systems, the different categories of healer are broken down along with the opposition of “modern” and “traditional” healer.

After an initial focus on this encounter, which is essentially concerned with representing the multiple perceptions involved in how the choice of systems is made, the author analyzes particular programmes imposed by the Nepali state and other state actors to demonstrate that the bridging of the gap between systems involves an increasing tendency towards the commodification of health. We are given an ethnographic description of the processes deriving from the developmental state, centred around the Nepali ideology of the creation of modern citizens.

The regional setting is the area surrounding Tansen, 300 kilometers west of Kathmandu, the site of a district health office and a United Mission to Nepal hospital. Outside the ordered world of this establishment are supporting structures—teahouses, hotels, pharmacies, and so on, but also an alternate medical world where local practitioners sell medicines, including those to counteract the side-effects of biomedicine! This is a world where “other orders and rationalities exist and circulate” (71).

Tansen is a heavily medicalised landscape that includes *lāmā*, the local term for the various traditional healers (primarily understood here as ritualists rather than prescribers of herbal remedies). Then there are both government and private healthcare institutions, with each seen as having a particular speciality. In addition there are also Ayurvedics, wandering healers, and, more recently, a naturopath and acupuncturist, as well as a magnet therapist [!]. There has also been a massive growth in pharmacies, private practitioners, and medically associated NGOs.

The author devotes appropriate attention to the way in which the biomedical system of the Nepali state is supported by the “anti-superstition” discourse of Nepali

modernism, one which leaves little or no place for traditional healers. Reflecting the perspective of the WHO and NGOs, a principal of this discourse is that Nepal is living in the past; the country is understood as “medieval” and needing to modernize to cure both social and medical ills. Here the author points out how, in contrast to the common assumption of the placebo effect as fundamental to the efficacy of traditional medicine, the discourse of biomedicine backed by the forces of the state and international modernity itself creates a placebo effect in the prescription of its pharmaceuticals.

The work then moves from local practitioners into ethnographic studies of particular health programmes. First the author examines the National Vitamin A Program begun in 1993, which saw vitamin A capsules become ubiquitous as a cure for problems fundamentally associated with poverty. But with the research funded by the supplier of vitamin A allowing the removal of political factors from the scientific, money that might have been spent on poverty reduction was instead channelled into the provision of vitamin A. Thus he demonstrates how a “form of knowledge is developed that suppresses and marginalizes broader socio-political determinants of health in the name of a biological body that requires this form of capsular intervention ... [and] does little to address political issues of poverty and consequent malnutrition” (120).

The state interventions in the treatment of tuberculosis provide a classic example of the creation of a medical order involving both state and NGO medical surveillance programmes due to the necessity of monitoring patients, a programme fundamentally at odds with the mobile lives of many Nepali subjects.

The issue of mental health programmes is then discussed from the time of the late 1980s development of a psychiatric clinic attached to the UNM hospital. Numerous constraints characteristic of developing world conditions mean a pharmaceutical classification is a pragmatic response, with the classification of “nervous disease” for depression removing the issue from the realm of the spirits and lessening the stigma of a psychiatric diagnosis, reducing the condition to an “illness” curable by anti-depressants.

In the conclusions the author emphasizes the need to study “the unintended effects of the institutions, their policies and practice as well as the need for greater critical awareness of the conceptual framing devices, and the biases of programmatic representations” (144). Clearly the “highly vertical technocratic public health intervention” of the programs discussed here proceed from very different ideologies.

This is an excellent study “from the ground up,” with the author’s twin disciplinary training resulting in a balanced appraisal of his subject, neither too theoretical nor too scientific, and one alive to the ambiguities of both medical and anthropological approaches. There is room here for consideration of the perspectives of patients, systems, and the health staff who mediate these differing perspectives. A wider historical context is generally lacking and the role of *lāmās* as prescribers of medicines is understated here. But this is a concise work of considerable value that should be read by anyone interested in these areas, and is an approachable and interesting work that should stimulate student discussions.

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