

Mobile Lifeworlds: An Ethnography of Tourism and Pilgrimage in the Himalayas. By Christopher A. Howard

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Mobile Lifeworlds: An Ethnography of Tourism and Pilgrimage in the Himalayas. By Christopher A. Howard

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Christopher Howard's book provides a valuable study of how pilgrimages and tourism in the Himalayas, especially in Nepal and north India, have historically been shaped by both past and modern tourists. The book is very timely, as the author did his fieldwork in 2010–2015, and in 2011 the Ministry of Tourism in Nepal declared plans to launch a campaign to establish the key choice of holiday destinations after the earthquake disaster earlier that year. The central focus of the book is on ethnographically situating how pilgrimages and tourism in the Himalayan region have undergone transformation due to not only modernization and digitization but also the impact of globalization on the tourism sector. The author refers at various points to different types of tourism—such as voluntarism, mountain tourism, and tourism purely for religious purposes.

The book is very clear in its attempt to assess the exhaustive literature around pilgrimages, and more specifically institutionalized pilgrimages, comparing them with various political and economic structures of organization such as those of Durkheim, Weber, and Marx. It is fascinating to see how the author blends these 3 approaches to bring together the essential problem of authenticity in pilgrimages, as sites of pilgrimage in the Himalayas are continuously under pressure from various activists and types of tourists to modernize. However, though he

has given an excellent account of pilgrimages, religion, and spiritual types of tourism, he could have provided further clarification on his ethnographic analysis of the field site, apparently in Kathmandu, and the major differences between this and other sites in the Himalaya.

The author describes his choice of field site as being a popular and a well-established crossroads for travelers and mountain trekkers interested in remote areas. His primary method was ethnographic, but he also used a phenomenological approach, interacting with trekkers, walkers, climbers, and other types of mobile travelers. He justifies the phenomenological approach as follows: “let us consider the experience of walking towards a mountain that lies far on the horizon, passing thorny forested valleys, the mountain gradually comes into focus, and you begin climbing upwards, yet once you reach the summit, arriving at this was previously the endpoint of the horizon, a new horizon and an endless succession of horizons appears before you” (p 57). While it is vital to establish that a specific methodology was not envisaged and that serendipity was relied upon, it is also important to be more specific about the ethnographic region itself and the questions it raised for the author—other than that it was popular among tourists. So, why and how it did it become popular? Were local voices involved in the discovery of the region for touristic purposes? Moreover, the author provides no statistics from India, Nepal, or any international travel agency to back up this observation, or narratives from informants to support it.

While the author refers to various types of analysis that emerge from the study—such as meta, meso, and micro—to situate the mobile lifeworld of travelers, it is not clear how and where these were applied and what the results were. He appears compelled to justify the use of the phenomenological approach almost throughout the book, but the

narratives about mobile life experiences of mobile lifeworld travelers are not well explained. While he has mostly used ethnographic methods, he does not consistently follow the specific mobile world of 1 traveler's perspective. He makes it clear that the choice of the phenomenological approach is to be attentive to wondering, a primitive contact with the world while it is being experienced, rather than what Merleau-Ponty (2013) refers to as conceptualizing and describing it.

The strength of the book is its engagement with major studies on the anthropology of pilgrimages and tourism in every chapter, particularly the first and concluding chapters. The author has also done an excellent job of exploring the impacts of modernization and digitization on Himalayan pilgrimages—this is the novelty of the book, but it does not fully engage in terms of how these trends have transformed an experience that was previously considered remote. Also, while the author appears to have used an ethnographic approach to study the travel and tourism industry in the region—and this seems to have been an important source for his data—he does not explain this. Although he makes it clear that Himalayan pilgrimages are about pursuing “value ideals” (p 156), he does not clearly specify, or give any specific example of, a historical equivalent of a Himalayan pilgrimage or previous study that could have been a background for us to reexamine pilgrimage travel in the Himalayas in modern times. In addition, it would have been useful to focus not only on the travelers themselves but also on the tourism and pilgrimage industry in Nepal. There is a description of this in terms of cafés and internet connectivity, but more on (nondigital) infrastructure and how this is transforming the travel experience and connecting the various mountain regions around India and Nepal—and impacting local culture, society, and economy—

could have provided a more localized image of how local people in these places view tourism today compared with their predecessors in the tourism industry.

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Merleau-Ponty M. 2013. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge.

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