

Thomas Bertschi's book *Dreamseeds* will grow in the minds of those seeking meaning in the creative convulsions of yesteryearWORDS  
& ECHOES

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Young people often ask me questions about how I saw the exoticism of Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Patan in the late 60s and early 70s. At first, I am a little intrigued by these questions, because almost everyone of my age can tell them about it better than I, an outsider, can. But I have discovered that they want to know about the exotic perceptions of the young visitors from the West, some of whom I befriended. As a young university student then, I was drawn by the exoticism of the crowds that landed in Kathmandu. Their bodies were a theatre and they acted the drama of their times in their costumes, expressions, and actions. That exoticism is neither our cultural memory nor theirs. It was a development of the times. The appellation 'hippie' does not quite interest me, but they were called so by many in the West and in this part of the world. I have written about this before, so anything I say would be a repetition. But I want to mention some powerful palimpsests here.

## Still standing

A palimpsest speaks through layers. In 2003, essayist Shekhar Kharel wanted me to traverse my memory lanes in Kathmandu to shoot a low-budget documentary. I wanted to mention only one palimpsest, so I took him, along with his crew, to a house in Jhochhe where some artists and poets used to live on the ground floor. When we reached there, the landlord was demolishing the building. In a hurry, Shekhar's team filmed the frescos, the mandala paintings made by the 'hippies'. I proceeded with my narration and memories, answering Shekhar's questions as the landlord had agreed for a brief interval in the demolition process. The frescos upstairs that I had not seen said, 'you



Hippies walking on the streets of Kathmandu in 1970.

have to do the following to become a good hippie'. That was a meta-hippie story, a conscious and crafty interpretation of the youths' spontaneous movement. As an academic, I knew what that involved. I was uncannily bedevilled by the thought that the building was standing all these years until that day, the moment when I landed there with a young interpreter. That palimpsest opened a floodgate of memories.

The hippies did not return nor did they write something important to send back. Ira Cohen, who died in the US a few years ago, published some poems. An American academic, Mark Liechty, has been trying to put together stories about the hippies. He sent me some poems from my friend Kristof Glinka, in which he wrote these lines to a friend

who, like him, was lost in the hippie storm. Glinka wrote, "And when the thunder and lightning passed, we'll retrace our footsteps over the sand." My impression is that very few retraced their footsteps. They did not bring back their memories in books.

## Dreamseeds

One erstwhile hippie named Thomas Bertschi has returned recently, not for the first time though, with a book in English and German, titled *Dreamseeds*, which was released in Kathmandu. He earlier came to work with the young generation and help poor children's education with his meagre resources. Interestingly, I got to know him through my son Salil a few years ago. I have seen them work together on what they called

a rainbow welfare project. The song for Bertschi's first book about the rainbow project was written by my younger son Girish and performed with Roshan and their musical group, Mukut. Their CD comes attached with *Dreamseeds* too.

The story does not end there. Salil went to Bertschi's house in Sandacker, Switzerland and wrote the book with this mellow erstwhile adventurous hippie. Salil wrote of Bertschi's life on the basis of the latter's narration and the story of his own association with this senior hippie man he met in Kathmandu. This book is written in metaphors, in torrents of images, a rainbow without page numbers or minor date notations. It spans a time that I too lived through.

## A forgone era

To hippies, Kathmandu was a timeless zone. It was immaterial how old you were. Expressions like 'in dancing, the body is rediscovered', 'search for a new awakening in other cultures is also an inward journey', and Martin Luther King Jr's dream speech marked the quest for freedom. Yoko Ono's words, "whisper your dream to a cloud, ask the cloud to remember it", used in this book, evoke the memory of an amorphous journey into the world. Musicians and poets like Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and The Beatles recur. Bertschi journeys in Africa, Asia, and to Kathmandu, where the hippies ended their journeys in cold lanes, sunny hills, and in the dens I led Shekhar to see the time-tracks recur as music gone berserk. Bertschi and Salil used the Balinese 'Umbul Umbul' dragon tail and merged it with the rainbow, worked for children, and created makeshift musical groups with musician Shyam Nepali.

This book, with over a hundred photographs, is a mine of visual history of the hippie times. But the reader should link references, as this book does not give any. This book will not pass the test of an academic reviewer, but it spills with the energy of a time and movement that moved me. I have met erstwhile hippies, some of whom I knew in Kathmandu, in Britain, and some other places. They live exhausted and retired lives, some broken, while others cast on the seashore like shells. The strength of Thomas Bertschi is that he survived by holding the rainbow while his friends became invisible.

But it would not be fair to say so, because the hippies have left a message to the war-torn world haunted by Cold War spectres, to the times that stage postmodern non-human capitalist drama. Bertschi's *Dreamseeds* will grow if they are sown in the minds of those who seek to find meaning in the creative convulsions of yesteryear. My own story has now received a tacit interpretation: even as I remained unaware, my own kids were holding the rainbow that we tried to catch and failed, for other positive reasons. Maybe I too will find new idioms to speak in.