



Book Review: The Sacrament of the Goddess

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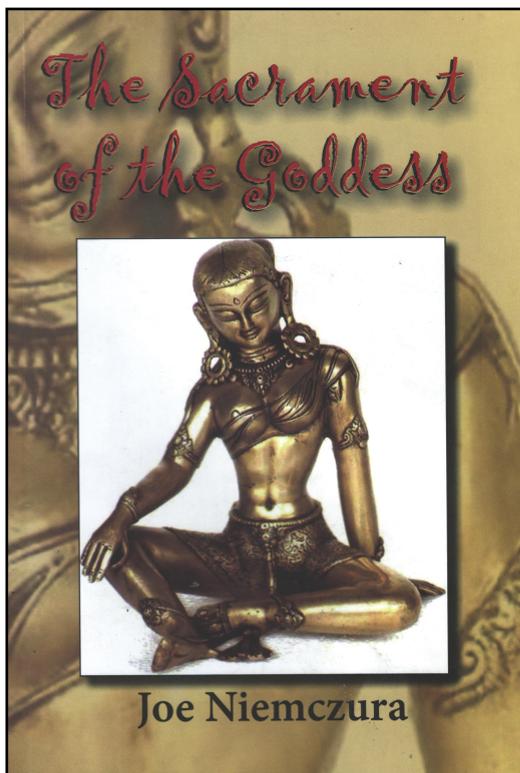
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Joe Niemczura, the author of 'The Sacrament of the Goddess', is a registered nurse in both Nepal and the United States (US) and, thus, is eminently suited to writing a work of fiction that is centered around healthcare in a resource limited setting. The novel is set during the decade-long civil war between the then Royal Nepalese Government and the Maoists and vividly describes the attack by the Maoists on the town of Beni. The main protagonist, Dr Matt, works at a

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mission hospital in Beni, a small town in western Nepal, about eighty kilometers from Pokhara. His adventures at this relatively remote location in a developing country expose important issues of relevance to medical education and health care today.

Matt, earlier, when he was a premed student, was injured while trekking in the Dhaulagiri region of Nepal and was rescued by the police. The rescue party was ambushed by Maoists and it added to Matt's morbidity, besides causing the unnecessary loss of several lives. Over the following weeks, while he was being treated at a hospital in Beni, he developed a romantic relationship with a Nepalese girl, Sushila (nicknamed Kali because of her dark skin).

During her first interaction with Matt, Kali expressed a wish to hone her English language skills. She wanted to study and work in England to escape the crushing poverty of Nepal. This desire to emigrate is common and many Nepalese students migrate to developed countries, especially to the United Kingdom and the US. Most medical schools in Nepal are private and students have to pay a large sum of money for their education. Doctors expect a good standard of living and a stimulating work environment after years of hard study. These expectations are often not met in developing countries and it motivates doctors, too, to migrate.

Unfortunately, Matt's relationship with Kali ended as he had to return to the US. A decade later, now a trained surgeon, and curious to find out what has happened to Kali, he volunteers for an year at the hospital in Beni.

The hospital medical team consists of a surgeon, an anesthesiologist, and a pediatrician. Due to the ongoing civil war and the worsening security situation, the

hospital faces challenges in attracting and retaining volunteer doctors and Matt is a valuable addition to the hospital staff. In 2004 there were frequent blockades and then the attack on Beni. Beni was the first major town to be attacked by the Maoists outside of their heartland in mid-western Nepal. War is a challenging situation with deleterious effects on health and the book serves as a good introduction to this important topic.

The book highlights the role of missionary doctors in providing health care to underserved rural populations. Many south Asian countries require newly graduated medical students to serve in rural areas; however, this may not be a very effective solution to the doctor shortage for a variety of reasons. Medical students are usually trained in well-equipped tertiary care hospitals under the guidance of specialist physicians. Students whom I had taught and who have worked in rural Nepal after their internship mention that they were not adequately prepared to work in resource limited settings. In primary health centers the doctor is often the leader of a group of older, local health professionals; most doctors, however, lack the required level of leadership skills.

The issue of violence against doctors and other medical personnel has been graphically described in the novel. When the wife of a Maoist leader dies during childbirth, he gathers a mob of supporters to attack the hospital. Such violence, often politically motivated, has recently received a lot of attention on the global stage.

The novel also addresses social issues and the human cost of HIV/AIDS in Nepal. Sex trafficking is an important factor leading to HIV among young women. The hospital in Beni builds a hospice called Shanti Navajeewan for women dying from

AIDS. Death is a frequent visitor in the novel. A woman was admitted to the hospital with over sixty percent burns to her body. She was burnt by her in laws and husband for failing to bring enough dowry. She walked for over two hours along mountain trails to reach the hospital. Unfortunately she could not be saved.

Through adroit story-telling, the author addresses the relationship between men and women in both the personal and the professional sphere. The subservient role of women in South Asia has often been justified on the basis of tradition and culture. The author examines the close link between religion, spirituality and healing in some detail. In Nepal, religion is an integral part of life. 'Puja' or prayer is a means of connecting with the Gods and with one's inner self. Beni (which means confluence in Nepali) is where the Kali Gandaki and the Myagdi rivers meet. There is a third spiritual river which joins the two physical rivers at this point. The concept of a spiritual river invisible to normal human eyes is

common in Hinduism and Buddhism.

The book examines medicine and medical care in a resource-limited setting during a civil war in an engaging and personal style. Readers are introduced to a mission hospital with various challenges in terms of resources and man power. Life and medicine during a period of conflict is detailed with sympathy and humor. Different issues of importance to the healthcare fraternity are touched upon: the human cost of HIV/AIDS, social and economic determinants of health and illness, relationship between members of the healthcare team in a relatively isolated setting, the status of doctors in society, the joys and tribulations of practicing medicine, and violence against doctors.

This very readable book will be of interest to all health practitioners, medical educators, and medical students. The bonus is that the author is available on Skype or through video conferencing for assistance with university classes on global health.