

Studies in Nepali History and Society

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INTERPRETING DEMOCRACY: ETHNIC POLITICS AND DEMOCRACY IN THE EASTERN HIMALAYA

Mona Chettri

Introduction

The surge of cultural revivalism, demands for ethnic homelands and affirmative action policies based on ethnic affiliation evince the establishment of ethnic identity based politics in the eastern Himalayan borderland where most political contestations are now made on the basis of ethnic claims (see Caplan 1970; Subba 1992, 1999; Sinha 2006, 2009; Hangen 2007, 2010; Vandenhelsken 2011). Ethnicity and ethnic identity may have emerged recently as conceptual categories, but they have always formed an intrinsic component of the lived experiences, history, politics and culture of the region and what contemporary politics particularly highlights is the malleability with which ethnic identity can adapt itself to changing political environments.

Ethnic identity is understood as a synthesis of ascribed traits combined with social inputs like ancestral myths, beliefs, religion and language, which makes ethnicity partly ascribed and partly volitional (Joireman 2003). It is socially constructed, subjective and loaded with connotations of ethnocentrism which can be detrimental for modern state building. If subjective criteria determine ethnic group formation and politics, democracy provides a wider base of socio-political collectivity that goes beyond kinship, religion, language etc. This in turn enables popular consensus building amongst a wider spectrum of people than a kinship group. Despite this basic distinction, democracy (understood as adult franchise, formation of political parties and freedom of political thought and action) and ethnic politics co-exist without any apparent contradiction in a region where democracy has been introduced fairly recently as a replacement for monarchical, feudal or colonial systems.

The political systems of the eastern Himalaya have undergone a rapid transition and while democracy has been accepted as a legitimate and effective political system, liberal democracy is not always suited to recently democratizing states owing to the difference in their social and economic structure. This renders democracy a complex, heterogeneous movement

Notwithstanding my earlier hope to see the authors engage more critically with these materials, these books present a portrait of the Kathmandu Valley in a refreshingly dispassionate way. In the introduction to *The Kathmandu Valley*, Gutschow reflexively discusses the production of images of Nepal, long the recipient of exoticizing Western gazes. He describes the fact that, while photographic documentation of Nepal is nothing new, many/most of these have been fundamentally orientalist in their search for "picturesque" scenes that favor a "romantic, emotional attitude and a belief in the power of planning" (p. ix). In *Mapping the Kathmandu Valley*, Gutschow and Kreutzmann describe the tension between "paradisiacal beauty" and "commercialization" at the heart of many urban planning schemes. From Austrian UN advisor Carl Pruscha's dismissal of peripheral development as a "visual crime" (p. 24) to the post-WWII perspective that transformed Newar cities into "an object of nostalgic feelings" (p. 29), developers and planners have struggled to make judgments that neither romanticize the past (while bemoaning new constructions) nor celebrate development (while dismissing tradition).

Gutschow seems to deliberately sidestep this issue in favor of a more documentary, rather than analytical, approach to the images:

The curiosity I feel about this ongoing development has nothing denunciatory about it. The documentation of the construction sites does reveal a certain crudity, not to say brutality. It is not meant to represent the romantic gaze. Its aim is to achieve a largely unemotional presentation of one aspect of reality. I come from a social and cultural background that not only favours but actively worships order and denounces ambivalence. It is therefore the all-pervading spirit of incompleteness, the omnipresence of structures in the making that fascinates me. (p. v)

This, it seems to me, is the most crucial and understated contribution of these two volumes. While scholars might well wish for more history, more analysis, and more curation of the photographs, the authors consciously avoid this in order to let the images tell their own story. Numerous oversized books have been published containing beautiful artistic photographs of traditional Newar architecture and the Kathmandu Valley's countless temples. However, one gets the sense that the urban spaces Gutschow documents are truer to the Kathmandu Valley in the sense that he portrays an urban landscape that is far from ancient, and in which people actually live. Of course, many might aesthetically prefer the ancient religious and traditional domestic architecture

of the valley, but this is precisely beside the point. These volumes do not bemoan urban sprawl and non-traditional design, nor do they foolishly celebrate these as modernity and development finally arriving in Nepal. Conversely, they do not denounce tradition as many planners have done, nor do they long for a pristine past of some long-gone Golden Age. The perspective offered in these two books presents the valley not as it was, nor as it could be, nor as Westerners have long imagined it. Rather, it presents the Kathmandu Valley as it is.

As separate volumes, these books contain wonderful photographs that scholars and others will simply enjoy viewing. While the volumes do contain some new information, the real strength of the short texts is in their concise and clear presentations, making them some of the most useful introductions to Nepali urban space that this reviewer has come across. One hopes that more in-depth studies will follow in this vein, perhaps with a more conceptual and theoretical approach.

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Prashant Jha. 2014. *Battles of the New Republic: A Contemporary History of Nepal*. New Delhi: Aleph Book Company

Prashant Jha's reporting and commentary on the political upheaval following the Maoist conflict has been one of the most insightful in Nepali journalism. *Battles of the New Republic* is, as the author himself states, "an attempt to not merely look at wars and movements, but what happens after them" (p. xxv). The core of the book, therefore, focuses not on the conflict, but on its political aftermath. The poet John Godfrey Saxe once said "laws, like sausages, cease to inspire respect in proportion as we know how they are made." Jha's book does exactly that. It provides a window through which one can understand how backroom deals and conspiracies have shaped Nepal's political reality since the end of the war.

Battles of the New Republic is divided into four 'books,' or chapters, each one covering a different angle of the political transition. This is not an academic book, but rather a journalistic account. It also includes some

biographical insights which reflect Jha's personal investment in the political transformation of the country over the years.

Book One, 'Politics of Gradual Revolution,' is, in essence, a brisk summary of the actual conflict, its origins, development and conclusion. It includes profile sketches of the two main leaders of the then Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), Prachanda, the charismatic leader, and Baburam Bhattarai, the ideologue. Alongside them, two party cadres are also profiled, Mal Bahadur Budhamagar, representing the rural poor, and Krishna K.C., a student activist. The overall narrative is one sympathetic to the Maoist cause, which would not be a surprise to anyone who has followed Jha's writing over the years. While the profile sketches provide an overview of the type of actors involved in the Maoist party and the reasons that made them join the insurgency, overall, the chapter does not provide much new information to the student of Nepali politics. If the reader is interested in an in-depth account of the conflict itself, picking up Aditya Adhikari's *The Bullet and the Ballot Box* (Adhikari 2014) would be her best option.

It is in chapter two, 'Politics of Partial Sovereignty,' when the book really starts to show its true worth. The author uses the events in May 2009, when Prachanda resigned as Prime Minister after his failure to remove General Rukmangad Katawal as head of the Nepal Army, to introduce the theme of India as a powerful actor in Nepali domestic politics. The considerable influence India has over Nepali political actors and its role as powerbroker is a well known, and often resented, factor in Nepali public life. However, Jha's account is fascinating and extremely insightful. It unearths both the extent of that influence, as when Delhi propped up Madhav Kumar Nepal to become Prime Minister after Prachanda's resignation, but also how the Nepali political parties maneuver to ensure India's interference would be in their favor. The author shows off his unmatched list of Indian sources as these are paraded through the chapter, from ambassadors, to Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) officials, intellectuals and military personnel.

Most relevant in the chapter, however, is Jha's personal analysis of India's strategy, "engage, coerce, divide, frustrate, exhaust, corrupt, lure, repeat the cycle, and give nothing" (p. 144), and reasoning for involvement. He dismisses the orthodox Left's dependency theory-inspired thesis that it is all a ploy to keep Nepal dependent to serve India's economic interests. Instead he argues for an Indian realist approach to international relations, one in which security concerns play a greater role. The chapter also provides an

interesting analysis of the upheavals of the relationship between the Maoists and India. The latter's mistrust is often positively correlated with the struggle between the former's two ideological camps. On the one hand, the moderate and Delhi-friendly Bhattarai faction and on the other, the radical one led by Mohan Vaidya 'Kiran,' with Prachanda, as party chairman, pivoting between both according to political interests.

Chapter three, 'Politics of Inclusive Nationalism,' is the most personal, as the author immerses himself into the world of Madhesi politics as a Madhesi journalist. The chapter begins with an account of his own personal experience with discrimination as a Madhesi in Kathmandu. This is followed by an account of the death of Ramesh Mahato in Lahan in 2007, which sparked the first Madhesi *āndolan* and the political outcome of which was the inclusion of the federal clause in the Interim Constitution of 2007. The value of the chapter, however, comes from Jha's attempt to deconstruct the political dynamics of Madhesi politics. This is a much neglected topic in Nepali academia and journalism, despite both its significant parliamentary and social importance in the future stability of the Nepali state.

His deconstruction begins, first, with an analysis of King Mahendra's assimilationist nation-building strategy in the 1960s, in which the internal colonization of the Tarai was a key pillar. Controlling the Tarai was important because, as the author points out, the Nepali Congress had its stronghold there and the ruling elite mistrusted Madhesis because their loyalties were seen to lie with India. Jha continues by explaining the awakening of the Madhesi political consciousness during the Panchayat period and finally, providing glimpses of the current socio-economic situation in the region, including the impact that migrant labor is having in challenging traditional social structures in the Tarai.

When dealing with the Madhesi context during the transition, the chapter provides valuable insights in two areas. First, on how institutional and social discrimination led to the politicization of young Madhesis. This is illustrated through the story of Tula Narayan Sah, a young journalist, whose identity and political consciousness were awakened when confronting discrimination in his student days in Kathmandu. His choices, in the words of the author, "were not the result of abstract theoretical principles, but sprang from what life had thrown at him" (p. 217). The second area is that of how Madhesi parties dealt politically with the significant leverage they had in the first Constituent Assembly (CA). Both their political maneuvering during the

election of President Ram Baran Yadav and the continuous splits within the different parties are good illustrations of this. Jha should also be praised for providing room in the chapter for other voices critical of the Madhesi movement within the Tarai, in particular those of Muslims and Tharus, as well as highlighting the issue of caste discrimination within the movement itself.

In the fourth and final chapter, 'Politics of Shanti-Sambidhan' [Politics of Peace-Constitution], the author focuses on two sets of events, which perfectly illustrate the crumbling of the hopes of many Nepalis for a 'Naya Nepal,' particularly those that supported the Maoists. The first event, related to the peace process, is the revolt of former Maoist combatants living in UN cantonments in April 2012 which led to Maoist Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai, at the behest of Prachanda, sending in the Nepal Army to restore order. This move was seen by many in the Maoist camp as a betrayal of their former Commander-in-Chief. The second event is that of the final days of negotiations in the first CA as the final deadline for the promulgation of the constitution in May 2012 approached. It is the chronicle of this second event in which Jha puts on display his immense talent for story-telling. 'Death of a Dream,' the title of this sub-section, is both a frustrating and fast-paced report of the tensions, last minute negotiations and backroom dealings in the last days of the first CA.

The book is not without fault, however. As we have noted earlier, the first chapter is certainly the weakest, perhaps in part because the author knew that Adhikari, a close friend and colleague, was writing his own book on the topic. A second and, in my view, a much more important one is that one of Jha's strengths, his invaluable connections to leaders in India, Kathmandu and the Tarai, is also the source of the book's main weakness, its skewness. There is very little in the book about the political struggle of other minorities beyond Madhesis. Neither *Janajātis* nor women are given a voice. This is a point that has already been raised by members of the feminist group Chaukath (Pudasaini and Sharma Pokharel 2014). Equally, while there is a passing mention to the role of China as a political actor in chapter two, this is only in relation to the wider context of India's strategy. Because of this, as the political commentator C.K. Lal pointed out at the launch of the book in Kathmandu, it can't objectively be called 'A Contemporary History of Nepal.'

The book could have also benefited from a clearer chronological structure, although it is fair to point out that the timeline provided at the beginning of the book is helpful. While I agree that theme-based chaptering works

best, the ability of the reader to relate different events that are happening parallel in time but analyzed in different chapters weakens her ability to put together a general picture of the overall period. Finally, I find the lack of a bibliography unhelpful.

Having said that, overall, this is an excellent book. It benefits from Jha's two strengths. First, few other journalists in Nepal would have been able to amass such a large and diverse set of views and opinions from people on the know on what was really going on in Nepal during those years. And second, he is not just a reporter, but a political analyst, and the book is strengthened by his insights which enrich and make sense of a political process that for most is, more often than not, completely unintelligible. For a country in which political elites have a strong distaste for transparency and public deliberation, this book is invaluable to understand why the first CA failed and why Nepal is where it is today.

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- Gérard Toffin and Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, eds. 2014. *Facing Globalization in the Himalayas: Belonging and the Politics of the Self*. New Delhi: Sage.

Transnational migration, an important dimension of globalization, questions the correspondence between territory and community (place and people) in the concept of culture. Regarding culture, anthropologists and sociologists have shifted theories of identity from a focus on primordialism to instrumentalism to constructivism. Belonging is increasingly being utilized in the discourse of globalization. Yet few have attempted to empirically investigate the relationship between globalization and belonging. *Facing Globalization in the Himalayas: Belonging and the Politics of the Self* is a welcome addition to the scholarship on this relationship in the context of