

BOOK REVIEW

State of Nepal. Edited by Kanak Mani Dixit and Shastri Ramachandaran. 2002. Himal Books: Kathmandu. ISBN 99933-13-22-X. Price: NRs. 490.

Recipe: take sixteen of the most articulate and incisive Nepali minds, give each of them around twenty pages to tell their story, stir very little, and publish immediately. *Result*: an exquisite book. It rather leaves one wondering why nobody had tried it before.

State of Nepal (and explicitly not *The State of Nepal*), is an important collection of essays now into its third reprint, some previously published, others lightly reworked, but primarily new submissions which 'try and explain contemporary Nepal to the world, particularly its evolution over the last dozen years of democracy' (Preface). The task is noble, necessary and timely, and the outcome is a resounding success. As the editors put it, 'there have been few works in English that look at the polity holistically, using original writings by Nepali specialists'.

While it is impossible to do justice to the wealth of detail unearthed in the 300 pages of this compilation in a short review such as this, each article warrants at least a brief discussion. We kick off with Rajendra Pradhan's discussion of 'ethnicity, caste and a plural society'. One of Pradhan's main points is that Hindu caste provides the organising framework for the Nepali polity, and he offers good historical and anthropological data to support his argument. Pradhan has a knack for tidy and succinct description: 'Although the Muluki Ain recognised and accepted some degree of cultural diversity, it translated cultural differences into hierarchical 'caste' categories'. The contribution is an excellent overview to the politics of language, culture and identity in modern Nepal.

Subhindra Sharma offers an intellectually rigorous history of Hinduism in Nepal. Pointing out that the core Hindu institution in the nation is actually the Crown, he posits that modern Nepali Hinduism is inherently syncretic, and in many ways closer to folk religions such as shamanism and animism than it is

to north Indian Hinduism. Sharma believes that the inclusion of the word 'Hindu' in the Nepali Constitution does not necessarily make 'Nepal a theocratic state', and while acknowledging the 'insularity of the Hindu intelligentsia', he proposes that Nepal is 'in *de facto* terms a secular state'. The continuing strength of Nepali Hinduism, he argues, has been its openness to infiltration by 'little traditions' which are then incorporated 'into the Hindu pantheon' and thus bring 'non-Hindus into its fold'. Sharma states his case forcefully, and readers will diverge on the meaning (and appropriateness) of his conclusion:

'...much of what goes under the rubric of 'religion' in Hinduism represents culture and civilisation, and it has been precisely for this reason that many...have been unable to reject Hindu religion in its entirety.'

Sanjay Upadhyia contributes a lucid overview of Nepali democracy after 1990. According to Upadhyia, the absence of a clear objective among the leaders of the People's Movement beyond the immediate overthrow of the Panchayat regime sowed the seeds for subsequent turmoil. King Birendra's surprising popularity after 1990 was in large part thanks to the 'distance he maintained from the political process'. In other words, the Crown avoided discrediting itself by keeping its hands out of the political pie. Moreover, the Maoists' outsider status guaranteed them the early support they needed to get their movement off the ground:

'Because it was the only untested vision for the future, the Maoists' programme struck an immediate chord with the people who felt they had little to lose.'

The next contribution in the volume, by Kanak Mani Dixit, deals with Nepali kingship. Dixit suggests that while Nepal is 'robust enough a structure' to carry on without a one, the nation is nevertheless fortunate to have a King. His voice is loud and clear: 'A kingship is a bonus available only to countries that have been allowed a 'continuous' history. Doing away with it would be an act of monumental folly'. Should His Majesty therefore engage in the political process, or would that be the wrong move for the reasons articulated above by Upadhyia? Dixit offers an oblique answer: 'a constitutional king need not be a

passive king' because in trying times, the nation 'requires a proactive institution'.

Deepak Thapa's essay on the Maoist insurgency is a meaty addendum to his first, and now seminal, article on the subject published in *Himal South Asian* in May 2001. Thapa's contribution is heavy on fact and cautious in its analysis, as befits a topic of such explosive power. The author focuses on the Maoist decision to tap into *janajati* discontent by 'taking advantage of the perceived correlation between ethnicity and poverty', and Thapa goes on to show how this 'gesture' amounts to little more than an expedient and 'tactically motivated insertion' by the leaders of the movement. He remains hopeful that the Maoist guerrillas may come above-ground to 'parlay their cadre strength and countrywide organisation to significant political strength'.

The commentator C.K. Lal devotes his chapter to a topic close to his heart: the relationship of the Tarai to the body politic of Nepal. Noting that this flat strip of land gets 'scant attention', Lal is quick to redress the imbalance and paint in some missing detail. He suggests, in his characteristically pithy manner, that Nepali identity was 'built around the Parbatiya ethos of the Gorkhali conquerors', which in part helped to form the perception that the 'people of the hills were rulers while those of tarai origin belonged to the subject race'.

Nepal has 'no policy regarding Nepali-speakers living outside the country', according to Professor Tanka Bahadur Subba, and he conscripts good evidence to support his case. For most Indian Nepalis, he argues, Nepal is 'politically as distant as Bhutan or Bangladesh', and these citizens make every effort to distance themselves from their 'country of origin', instead searching for an identity within India. Despite this, Nepali-speakers in India 'are increasingly held answerable for what Nepal is perceived to be doing, and what 'happens' to Indians in Nepal'. While Nepali identity within Nepal is 'state-generated' and 'involuntary', Subba concludes, identity among Indian Nepalis is 'self-generated and voluntary'. The author's discerning analysis makes his contribution one of the strongest in the volume, and required reading for anyone travelling to Darjeeling or Sikkim.

Saubhagya Shah's highly intellectual essay offers a critique of the burgeoning NGO sector in democratic Nepal. While somewhat over-reliant on American academic terminology, Shah's contribution is nevertheless insightful. Noting that both government and non-governmental sectors are increasingly competing for the same resources, he points out that NGOs have begun to resemble HMG in both form and content. Ironically, while NGOs

are busy adopting the 'hierarchy, bureaucracy and power structure of the government', government civil servants are coming to expect the 'higher pay and perks of the NGO sector'. Shah is strong on delightful asides, including an analysis of the contemporary practice of naming children Bikas (pages 146-147) or his observation that the 'political forces are always engrossed with changing the regime, but never with altering the substance of governance'.

In her contribution on Nepali women, Siera Tamang takes issue with the effective denial of the 'heterogeneity of women's lived experience' by development discourses. Tamang pulls no punches in noting that the 'fiction of 'the Nepali *mahila*' was...an effect rather than a discovery of the institutions', and she rightly challenges the ability of 'upper-class Hindu women', the usual 'native informants' for foreign projects, to accurately represent the reality of women's lives in Nepal. Present policies essentialise Nepali women, making them 'mere target populations' rather than 'participants in their own advance'. Tamang concludes on a positive note, however, arguing for the need to build 'solidarities without erasing difference'.

In the following contribution, Sujeev Shakya, a chartered accountant by training, offers a useful overview of the Nepali economy. Economic trends and policies are notoriously difficult for non-experts to understand, and it is to Shakya's credit that he succeeds in presenting a clear narrative of the cluttered policies of successive governments. We learn, for example, that while the private sector had high hopes for the opening up of the economy post-1990, it soon became clear that increased liberalisation would lead to globalisation and that local businesses would 'have to compete with international companies both in quality and price'. Fearful of the consequences, they chose the quick fix of 'protectionism by influencing politicians'. Defunct institutions are given short shrift by Shakya: the National Planning Commission (NPC) is no longer required since plan-making has become little more than 'a way for the government...to show work and movement when in fact nothing is being achieved'.

Shanta Dixit provides some sobering statistics in her article on Nepali education to illustrate how 'each and every malaise that the country is saddled with today harks back to the poor quality of schooling'. The present education system, which 'emphasises literacy at the expense of education', and in which the students are guinea pigs for the various developmental fads which come and go, was solely designed to test rote-learning and memory

recall. Dixit argues that the system needs a dramatic shake up and a realignment to reflect 'child-centred education' and 'community participation', thus tapping into a desire among parents to give their children the best available schooling. These reforms must encourage communities to pay a portion of the running costs of their school, thereby giving them a sense of involvement in, and responsibility for, the outcome.

Dipak Gyawali contributes a lively article which assesses the history of technology in Nepal from a geo-historical perspective. Arguing that Nepal's encounter with technology has been enacted largely through the 'new *dharma* of our times — development', Gyawali describes the time lag in the nation's 'embryonic encounter' with modern tools, machines and processes. 'It was technology and those in control of it who took advantage of Nepali society', he suggests, pointing out how successive Nepali rulers have been delighted with foreign trinkets without seeking to understand the 'driving forces behind them'. One consequence has been the rise of the 'underground informal economy', which at present steers most of the innovation in the nation. The state, Gyawali concludes, needs to both reconnect with and support local entrepreneurial initiatives.

Bhim Subba's contribution on 'Water, Nepal and India' is replete with hard facts about the energy and water needs of the two nations he describes, and is unrelenting in its critique of the present policy. A 'fundamental flaw', according to Subba, is that 'Nepal has been trying to sell electricity while it is water that India needs'. Given India's water needs, both for her consumers and for her industry, Nepal will play an increasingly important role in the water policy of her southern neighbour. Subba argues for a reversal of priorities: India should be asking Nepal to store water rather than generate hydropower, and Nepal must become strong enough to put a 'monetary value on such stored water'.

We have come a long way, argues Pratyoush Onta, from the days when print media in Nepal amounted to *Gorkhapatra* and *The Rising Nepal*. The growth in all forms of media since 1990s, he suggests, has been qualitative as well as quantitative, and the most dramatic changes have been in print and radio. Onta's contribution is made up of two parts: a comprehensive overview of media outlets in Nepal over the past twelve years, and a careful critique of their efficacy. While the 'growth in all forms of media has contributed to opening up Nepali society to new ideas and newer ways of looking at 'old' issues', investigative reporting is still sorely lacking. The state's continuing monopoly over Radio Nepal has meant that it 'continues to

be an appendage to the party in power', and the dark alliance between politics, big business and the media essentially precludes critical or probing reports which challenge the status quo.

Manjushree Thapa offers an discerning introduction to Nepali literature, and with undue modesty avoids including herself in a list of important Nepali writers and poets presently producing. She writes of the 'hostile' conditions in which local literature is being produced: far less than half the total population is functionally literate in the national language, a language which is characterised by irregular spellings and 'non-standardised grammar'. More problematic still, Thapa suggests, is that Nepali poets and writers are isolated from the rest of the world. While Kathmandu may have taken the place of Darjeeling as the 'staging ground for Nepali literary activity', Nepal's best-selling literary books are still those which are 'required to be read as part of school and college syllabi'. Thapa concludes her contribution with well-chosen excerpts from Rajav, Manju Kanchuli, Sita Pandey and Bimal Nibha.

The final contribution in the volume, by co-editor Shastri Ramachandaran, is a little slow moving. Ramachandaran relays the presentation and representation of Nepal and her citizens in India, but the result is more of a 22-page history of Indo-Nepalese political agreements and disagreements. His narrative is, however, punctuated with precise observations. 'India overwhelms the Nepali landscape as well as mindscape', Ramachandaran writes, 'there is not one major political event in Nepal in which India has not been involved, or implicated'. Asking why Nepal is so inherently anti-Indian, the author concludes that Nepali nationalism must necessarily be 'anti-Indian, if only to underscore that cultural affinities cannot be allowed to subsume Nepal's separate identity'.

I conclude with a few general quibbles with this otherwise excellent collection. While reading and rereading the contributions, I couldn't help but wonder about the intended audience. The high-brow English and frequent references to western academic literature mean that *State of Nepal* is inherently more geared towards informing expatriates about the nation than it is its own citizens. As 'donor education', the collection is second to none. Perhaps it will be made required reading for development *wallahs* before they descend upon Nepal and start dispensing their advice. As important as educating those from outside, however, is to have Nepali government bureaucrats read this book. Will the collection be translated into Nepali and offered to school and college students along with a Nepali translation of Bista's seminal *Fatalism and Development*? Perhaps a Nepali edition could

be made a little cheaper, with a nice cloth cover and some fitting illustrations by Subhas Rai. For the non-Nepali readers, a map and a glossary would also have been helpful, since a number of key terms are left untranslated.

In short, *State of Nepal* aims high and also delivers. Some compilations suffer from superficiality, since they sacrifice depth for breadth. The present volume succeeds not because of any unity of voice, since many of the contributors probably disagree with one another, but rather because each article is well-written, carefully edited and clear in its objectives. Let's hope that they're planning a sequel to be released in five years: *Return of the State of Nepal*.

- Mark Turin