

## REVIEW ARTICLE

# WHITHER SCHOLARSHIP ON NEPAL IN THE NINETIES?

*Nepal in the Nineties: Versions of the past, visions of the future.* 1994.  
Michael Hutt (ed.). Delhi: Oxford University Press. xi + 172 Pages.

**Pratyoush Onta**  
**Mary Des Chene**

This book contains eight essays that directly or indirectly, with one exception, deal with the politics (broadly defined) of Nepal during the late Panchayat era, the Jana Andolan of 1990, and the first two years of multiparty democracy. Richard Burghart's opening essay is on the political culture fostered by the panchayat regime. Burghart claims that its project of nation-building revolved around the Nepali language and Hindu kingship. For the legitimation of the latter, the nation itself also had to be Hindu. The official predominance of the Nepali language and the Hindu nation were ensured through census operations. He argues that Hindu kingship enabled "Nepal to claim a source of authority that was uniquely Nepalese" and provided legitimation of "a vision of panchayat democracy as civil society" in which "public order was defined in terms of unity and represented by the kingship." Private interests and institutions including non-state media representing various self-interests could emerge in public only with state authorization and official class-organizations constituted civil society as a collective of non-antagonistic entities. Burghart argues that the gap between the constitutive and regulative rules of panchayat democracy and how it "really" worked increasingly widened after the 1979-80 political movement against the system. Due to the critiques in private newspapers such as *Saptahik Bimarsha*, public life in Nepal in the 1980s and the panchayat system itself were increasingly seen to be a "counterfeit reality" and "structures of panchayat democracy began to acquire a fictional character." As Burghart mentions, behind panchayat's democracy remained a system of control enforced by the palace.

Although not backed by adequate references this article is a succinct macro-statement on the political culture of the panchayat regime but more micro-

studies will be needed to understand its many aspects. These studies should pay attention to the productive capacities of the panchayat era institutions that tried to craft citizens suited to panchayati versions of a Nepali nation through nationalized education, media (propaganda) and other means. Some of these institutions might have died in 1990 but it would be wrong to assume that the effects of their operations that supported the official versions of reality also ended the same year. Nor should future studies underestimate the degree of state violence used to silence the critics of the panchayat system; the "fictional character" of panchayat structures did not mean a lack of real effects. Burghart might have provided us some of these details but his death in January 1994 now challenges other scholars of Nepal to do the same. Here Nepali essayists such as Khagendra Sangraula (2047 v.s., 2049 v.s.b and 2052 v.s.) have already provided some useful bearings for further studies of the culture of fear, censorship and state violence and the nature of "counterfeit reality" during the late panchayat era .

The three essays by the late Martin Hoftun ("The Dynamics and Chronology of the 1990 Revolution"), Michael Hutt ("Drafting the 1990 Constitution") and John Whelpton ("The General Elections of May 1991") provide, as a set, an overview of the Movement that brought an end to the Panchayat regime in the spring of 1990 and the subsequent political happenings of the following year. Hoftun's "blow-by-blow account of the actual events" is based on media reports and interviews he conducted during and immediately after the Andolan and makes for a plausible descriptive account of what happened. However, one wishes for a more detailed study of what he has identified as stage two of the revolution: the 'climax' characterized by the unexpected (by the Movement's leaders) mass uprising. While he argues "that the revolution of 1990 had the form of a mass uprising, at least in the Kathmandu valley," an undifferentiated notion of the "masses" will not be useful for a comprehensive understanding of the Andolan in the long run. Also the avatars of the Movement outside of the Kathmandu valley cannot be neglected. After Hoftun's untimely death it is now up to other scholars to provide us with more insights into the composition of the so-called masses, the immediate reasons and longer political histories that compelled their participation in the Movement. A limited effort in this direction can be found in Katherine Devine's (1993) MA Thesis entitled *Political Mobilization and the People's Movement: A Case Study of Bhaktapur*.

Hutt's essay (a reprint) on the "struggles, debates and controversies" which surrounded the making of the 1990 constitution of Nepal relies too heavily on the published reports carried by the *Nepal Press Digest* and should be read in conjunction with Krishna Hacchethu's (1994) article "Transition to

Democracy in Nepal: Negotiations Behind Constitution Making, 1990." The latter is based on both media reports and on interviews with key persons involved in the process and brings the role of the three "parties" – the Nepali Congress, the United Left Front and the Palace/Panchas – in the making of the constitution into sharper relief. As has become clear with the Tanakpur controversy and with the Prime Minister's right to recommend mid-term polls, the ambiguities that are inherent in the constitution are a result of the several rounds of negotiations that in the final analysis failed to resolve the competing demands of the three groups. Whelpton's report on the 1991 elections provides much detail on the histories of the parties that eventually won seats, with particular attention to the Communist parties. More than any other article in this volume Whelpton's attends to intra and inter-party ideological differences and attempts to provide a historical explanation for the positions taken during the electoral campaign. That developments since its completion (January 1993) are not rendered implausible by this account points to its success in characterizing some of the key tensions in party politics in the early nineties. One might want to read it along with essays in *State, Leadership and Politics in Nepal* edited by Dhruva Kumar (1995) and Pravadevi Kaini's (1994) article for more on the issues related to ethnic politics & the elections and the participation of women candidates in the same elections, the latter being a subject not discussed by Whelpton. Multiple articles in the special 1991 issue of *Jhilko* (No. 16), focussing on different aspects of the elections (some of which are drawn upon by Whelpton), and Khatri et al. (1992) also provide further insights.

Alan Macfarlane's essay, previously published as a review of Dor B Bista's *Fatalism and Development*, is reprinted here. Much of the paper describes the by now familiar terrain of Bista's culturalist explanations of "Bahunism" as the source of societal ills in Nepal. Macfarlane appears to be largely in sympathy with this view, including only a few minor criticisms. Since this argument has been critiqued at length by various commentators elsewhere there is no reason to traverse the same terrain here. We simply note that it is particularly surprising, in a volume primarily focused on politics, that Macfarlane does not consider the bureaucratic institutions of the panchayat era when, for example, a purported lack of enthusiasm for working for the "public good" is under discussion. David Seddon's "Democracy and Development in Nepal" contains, in the main, no surprises for readers familiar with his previous publications including his 1987 book and other works written with P. Blaikie and J. Cameron. In an essay in which he copiously refers to these works, certain World Bank Documents and HMG's 1991 "approach paper" prepared by the National Planning Commission (NPC), Seddon concludes that in the aftermath of the death of the Panchayat

regime, a new political framework has emerged within which a positive relationship between democracy and development could grow. He also states that "a surprising degree of agreement on the broad strategy for development" can be found for the first time (across the political spectrum). From the vantage point of 1995 Seddon's optimism seems exaggerated and taking the within-Nepal debates on Arun-III as an example, he is wrong in seeing any degree of agreement "on the broad strategy for development" in Nepal. Seddon seems to have placed too much faith on the programmatic claims of the 1991 NPC paper which we would suggest should be read as an artifact of statecraft fiction. Notwithstanding the Eighth Five Year Plan and grand rhetoric about people-oriented development, it should not be difficult for anyone to observe that there has been *no* unitary strategy for national development in Nepal even after the Jana Andolan.

Nigel Collett, then Commanding Officer of the 6th Q.E.O. Gurkha Rifles, writes about the British "Gurkha Connection" in the 1990s. As part of the cost-cutting reorganization of the entire British armed forces, the strength of the Brigade of Gurkhas will be reduced from about 7400 men as of early 1991 to 2900 by 1997 (the original target of 2500 was recently revised with the announcement that an additional 400 Gurkhas will be retained) when Britain's sovereignty over Hong Kong ceases. Collett's explanations as to why the Gurkha soldiers are attractive to the British Army should not come as a surprise to anyone familiar with the history of similar representations that were first proposed by Brian Hodgson in the early 1830s and given more concrete form in the recruitment handbooks compiled by Eden Vansittart near the turn of the century (see Des Chene 1991). The "simple and rugged" soldier template, often nostalgically evoked these days, has had a long life along with Orientalist understandings of the "Sanskrit/Hindu culture" of Nepal against which, Collett claims, those with British service experience have spread "Western culture." The vacuousness of the latter representation is testimony to Collett's limited familiarity with the complex social processes currently taking place in Nepal. Perhaps the most depressing aspect of this essay is its deployment of old martial stereotypes that equated illiteracy with simplicity, rugged environment with rugged character and so on. While various details on the reduction in British Gurkhas are provided, the essay is remarkable for the silence it maintains regarding the politics played out in the UK in connection with Gurkha retrenchment, even that which is on the public record in the 1989 Defence Committee Report, "The Future of the Brigade of Gurkhas". Editor Hutt describes Collett's essay as one done "from an authoritative position." Unless one continues to subscribe to the imperial view that authoritative disposition on all matters related to the Gurkhas (along with the impact of retrenchment on Nepali society) resides with

British Gurkha officers who have historically been the self-appointed spokesmen on this issue, one can not see in what sense this essay is "authoritative" (see Des Chene 1995).

In his second essay in the volume, Michael Hutt discusses "the literary background" of the Movement. He quite correctly states that writings, particularly poetry, in the Nepali language have occupied an important place in the growth of a national culture in Nepal and notes how foreign scholars of Nepal have not paid any attention to this body of work. His essay provides a set of snap-shots of the various literary movements since the beginning of the panchayat regime, discusses the "compromises" made by Nepali writers in the late panchayat era, and samples the poetry from the time of the Andolan and its immediate aftermath. While Hutt's effort to introduce samplings of Nepali literature criticising the panchayat system to a non-Nepali reading audience is commendable, there are some worrisome aspects in his presentation. To economize on space, we have commented on only three aspects of Hutt's paper.

a) Hutt's claim that there is "a lack of published documentation" (p. 85) on the Aswikrit Jamat (AJ) and Boot Polish movements: While no historian of Nepali literature, to our knowledge, has produced a substantial analysis of these two movements, the lack of published documentation is not as complete as Hutt would have us believe. First of all, "primary" texts produced during the time of the movements exist. Hutt refers to the Bhojpur journal *Sanjivini* as the initial publication of AJ. Later another journal *Mantra*, published from Kathmandu, pushed forward the agenda of AJ. One of its issues was later republished as a book. Useful extracts from such "primary" texts are provided in Govinda Raj Bhattarai's (2049 v.s.:157-63) book which was published just around the time when Hutt presented a version of this article in Kathmandu in 1992. In terms of other secondary texts, Kavitaran, one of the leading proponents of AJ, has published a collection of his essays under the title *Mera Aswikrit Manyataharu* (2046 v.s.). Therein he discusses the movement historically and provides extracts from the individual manifestoes published by various members of the AJ (see especially pp. 36-48). Moreover Bhattarai (2049 v.s.:161) quotes from a discussion on this subject included in Dayaram Shrestha's ('Sambhava') *Nepali Sahitya Kehi Prishtha* published as early as 2032 v.s.. Hutt cites this edition of Shrestha's book in his *Himalayan Voices* (1991). While we have not seen this edition of Shrestha's book, the discussion included in its fourth edition (2048 v.s.:344-46) provides a succinct statement of the influences that generated the AJ, its agenda and the severe criticisms it received from critics such as Taranath Sharma and Shree Prasad. Documents

of the Boot Polish movement similarly do exist and references to them can be found in Bhattarai (2049 v.s.: 168-72). Extracts from one such source are provided by Kabitaran in his story "Boot Polishka Collage Katha" included in his *Mukti Prasangka Aswikrit Kathaharu* (2047 v.s.:54-71), a book which Hutt cites. We should also note that members of the AJ were later involved in the Boot Polish movement. In a fuller analysis of the place of literature and the role of writers in the Andolan it would be essential to take account of the often overlooked diversity of regional and class perspectives to be found among the "Kathmandu intelligensia." The reference to the Bhojpur journal must also alert all to the fact that while Kathmandu is no doubt the centre of Nepali literary and intellectual activity, members of Kathmandu's intelligensia have complex biographical trajectories that cover many a rural location in Nepal and beyond (e.g. Sangraula 2049 v.s.b, Subedi 2049 v.s.:1-8).

b) Hutt's translations: We noticed both incorrect translations and omissions without proper indication in the various translations included in Hutt's article. An example of the former is to be found in his translation of Sakar's poem "Boot Polish" (p. 86) where the original line "deshko brihat swarthako samunee" has been translated as "In the face of our country's/Pervasive selfishness." Our own reading of the original suggests that it should be translated as "In the greater self-interest of the country." Hence the relevant part of Sakar's poem should read as follows (in our translation):

People will remember  
That in the greater self-interest of the country,  
This new generation  
Which asks small small questions about  
Hunger, poverty, unemployment, and inequity  
Has started to write true poetry from today.

With respect to omissions in Hutt's translations, we noticed at least three. The first and the least serious can be found in his translated extract (p. 92) of the editorial by Rudra Kharel (2047 v.s.) in *Andolan Kabita*. The extract is a composite of the first and part of the last passage of the editorial. Hutt should have appropriately indicated this break after the sentence ending with "...definite direction." His second and more serious mistake, again without indication, is the omission of a line from his translation of Bimal Nibha's poem, "Patan" (p. 93) contained in the above collection. The first line which reads "Excitement, anger and revolt" should have been followed by "And protests against injustice."

Hutt's third and most serious omission is contained in his translation of a brief passage from an essay by Khagendra Sangraula. Sangraula characterizes the moment immediately after the Andolan in the following manner: "When praise of the brave Nepali people rose toward the sky, all talk about Chandani Shah along with the gang of commandos fled down a hole. It is amazing! Who was where yesterday, and where are they today" (2047 v.s.:23). In his translation (p. 94), Hutt leaves out Sangraula's reference to the "gang of commandos" again without indication. While commenting on Ananda P. Shrestha's translation of *Muna Madan* Hutt has written "The omissions rob readers of much of the richness of the Nepali original" (1994:255). In his own case, by leaving out the indicated passages, Hutt does great injustice to writers Nibha and Sangraula and his readers. The "commando culture" (alternatively called "mandale culture") of the panchayat system's 1980s avatar is central to an understanding of the violence through which "counterfeit reality" was sustained. It is central to an understanding of how the culture of fear and censorship dominated public life in the 1980s. It is for this reason that the wrath of the critics of the regime focussed so much on this theme (e.g., Sangraula 2047 v.s., 2052 v.s.) and hence its omission can not be easily ignored.

c) Hutt's characterization of the aftermath of the Andolan: Discussing the aftermath of the Andolan, Hutt writes, "Many writers were understandably anxious to prove their democratic credentials, and to pour scorn on the contemporaries they accused of having collaborated with the Panchayat regime." He then goes on to say that the panchayat's censorship regime has possibly been exaggerated after its downfall and states that "the existence of censorship... produced many great and memorable works of allegory" (p. 94-5). As long as Nepali poets used well-known symbolic codes, Hutt argues, they could express their criticism of the system. The end of the need to be allegorical has left many at a loss says Hutt with support from a quote from poet Mohan Koirala. While he is correct in his assessment of the ironically productive role of censorship in the literature written during the panchayat regime, he misses the point regarding the recriminations related to the issue of collaboration with the old regime. The point was not about censorship, but rather about whether or not writers who had succumbed to the seductions of the panchayat regime, money or power-wise – the "rajat kabis" (Sangraula 2047 v.s., Nibha 2045 v.s.) – had any moral right to call themselves democratic or function as critics in the post-Andolan Nepali society. Hutt should have noticed as much in the exchange between Shailendra Sakar (with whose poem he begins his article) and Sangraula as reported in the latter's book which he cites. What was involved in the charge

against rajat kabis was not so much "post-revolutionary rhetoric" but a call to guard against the process through which the cultural commandos of the old regime were re-inventing themselves as self-appointed moral guardians of democracy in the post-Andolan era (see Sangraula 2048 v.s.). Because he does not attend to the multiple fissures that marked the Nepali literary landscape during the panchayat era, Hutt's reading of the "aftermath" is necessarily shallow (see Chaitanya 2051 v.s., Chapagain and Subedi 2051 v.s., Kharel 2051 v.s., Pandeya 2049 v.s. and Sharma 2051 v.s. for some examples of sustained discussions of this subject). Hence while the death of the old regime might have produced temporary paralysis in writers such as Mohan Koirala, heated discussions regarding the role of the writer held *within* the ranks of left-leaning anti-panchayat critics escape Hutt's view (e.g. Dhakal 2051 v.s., Poudel 2052 v.s., Sangraula 2049 v.s.a; see also Subedi and Kharel 2050 v.s.). Hutt has been doing research on modern Nepali literature for over 15 years now and has recently been described by fellow British academic David Gellner "as the foremost foreign expert" on this subject. It is not too much to expect him to provide his readers with more than superficial summaries.

In the preface to the volume editor Hutt approvingly quotes Seddon's claim that the role of outsiders, including academics, "must be to provide sharper and more critical analysis of the complex and changing situation" (p. ix) in Nepal. Judged against that standard, articles in this book will disappoint any informed reader. However, if the purpose was to introduce a primarily non-Nepali audience to aspects of Nepal not captured in touristic literature or the international media, it might be thought of as an adequate presentation. But even if the latter was the goal we have to wonder why in this book, not entirely the product of a single seminar or forum, Nepali academics were not invited to contribute their analyses of "the complex and changing situation" in Nepal. We hope this is not a symptom of a new technology to manage the "Orient" even when it can speak for itself. The ghetto-mentality that exists within different camps of scholars of Nepal, including those of Nepali academics, is counter-productive to the process that might generate "sharper and more critical" understandings of the present-day complexity of Nepali society. We invite members from all camps to reflect on this situation and demonstrate, through mutual intellectual conversation across disciplines and across the bodies of erstwhile separate scholarly works done in Nepali and non-Nepali languages, that academic ghettos and egos can be superseded in the process of generating more comprehensive understandings of today's Nepal. To do otherwise is to contribute toward making academic research on Nepal increasingly more irrelevant in the larger scheme of things.

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