

Yogesh Raj, ed. 2013. *Ruptures & Repairs in South Asia: Historical Perspectives*. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari.

The papers in this collection started life as presentations at two conferences on the topic held in Kathmandu in 2012 and 2013, jointly organized by Martin Chautari, Kyoto University's Department of South Asian and Indian Ocean Studies and Tribhuvan University's Central Department of History.

In his introductory chapter, the editor, who is currently Martin Chautari's research director, explains that "ruptures" include "all natural and man-made momentous events" with their "aftermath" counted as "repairs" (p. 1). We are dealing therefore with out-of-the-ordinary occurrences, including, but by no means limited to, wars and natural disasters, and Raj argues that "[j]ust as volcanic eruptions bring the underground geological elements arrangements out...ruptures suddenly reveal everyday dilemmas and struggles which otherwise remain hidden behind the normal state of affairs" (p. 7). He also suggests that this approach has the additional advantages of bringing together the study of natural events and social processes and also of combining micro- and macro-scale focuses. Whilst there is indeed a lot to be said for the focus on the out-of-the-ordinary which Raj advocates, we do also have to be on guard against the danger of letting dramatic events distract our attention from the less glamorous accumulation of incremental changes.

Raj touches on a range of other historiographical issues, making a number of interesting but debatable points. He finds it "puzzling that reiterating the nation as an imagined community (after Benedict Anderson 1991)...is still

fashionable” (p. 12, fn. 11) but surely, given the persistence of primordialist views of the nation in current political controversy, Anderson’s point is still worth making. He also cites approvingly Anthony Grafton’s view that “causal argumentation has become the mainstay of historiography only since the Enlightenment in Europe” (p. 14). The search for causes has in fact been a central concern from much earlier, as shown by the opening words of the ancient Greek work to which we owe the current meaning of ‘history’: “Herodotus of Halicarnassus publishes these results of his inquiries (*historia*)...so that the great and wonderful deeds done both by Greeks and barbarians may not go uncelebrated, including both other matters and *the reason why* they fought against each other.” (Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.1, translation and italics mine)

However, whatever one thinks of some of the theoretical claims, as with Raj’s best-known previous work, *History as Mindscapes* (Raj 2010), the empirical contents are well worth reading, often presenting fresh and interesting perspectives.

In his chapter Sharad Ghimire explores the response of the Nepali state to the devastating floods of 1954 and argues that disputes over the management of relief operations heightened tensions within Prime Minister Matrika Prasad Koirala’s coalition government, eventually leading to its collapse, and that the episode was also an important factor behind Mahendra’s decision to take personal control of the administration in March 1955. He is certainly right that the floods need to be given greater prominence in accounts of the period – before reading the article I myself did not even have it down in my personal database let alone mention it in my *History of Nepal* (Whelpton 2005) – but it is highly likely that the coalition would have split and Mahendra asserted his authority in any case. Perhaps a better candidate for a natural disaster playing a decisive role in South Asian history would be the 1970 cyclone in Bangladesh, which hardened Bengali opinion in favor of independence, and played an important role in Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s rhetoric (see Thorp 1987) but even here many factors were already creating a momentum for secession.

In his introduction, Ghimire also overstates the novelty of what happened in 1954, citing Ajaya Dixit and his colleagues for the claim that it led to Nepal’s first state-sponsored rehabilitation program after a natural disaster. In fact, as Ghimire himself acknowledges later on (p. 42), Juddha Shamsher Rana’s administration had been active in relief efforts after the 1934 earthquake

in the Kathmandu Valley. Although by no stretch of the imagination an ideal ruler, Juddha did rise to the occasion with loans to private individuals for reconstruction which he eventually wrote off. It has also always struck me as interesting that the Nepali state was able without foreign assistance to rebuild temple structures which collapsed in the 1934 but required UNESCO assistance to undertake restoration work in the 1970s.

Mark Liechty, best-known for his study of consumerism and the middle-class, studies the development of Nepal itself as a 'product' to be packaged and sold to international tourists. He sees a watershed moment in the 1972 accession of King Birendra, who, unlike his father Mahendra, had been educated internationally and was thus aware of Nepal's image abroad and of the economic possibilities that image offered. The vigorous promotion of tourism went hand-in-hand with the adoption of environmentalist rhetoric as a strategy to attract foreign funds when the dynamics of the Cold War, which Mahendra had adroitly exploited, no longer dictated a struggle among the major powers for influence in the Himalayas through their aid programs. Liechty also focuses on the 'hippy' phenomenon, and its replacement by young tourists eager not to drop out but to enjoy a brief 'safe adventure' before returning to their career at home. Some of the connections Liechty makes may be a little too neat and schematic while some of the changes he details were arguably under way before Birendra came to the throne but the paper is a praiseworthy effort to draw different threads together. The detail he provides on the period is also particularly interesting to those, like myself, who first came to Nepal in the 1970s. He highlights, for example, the origins of the Kathmandu Guest House, where I stayed for a few days in 1973 without fully realizing its significance as a pioneering venture targeting tourists who did not want to rough it, hippy-style, in the center of the old city but could not afford to stay in five-star luxury. He does not, however, mention the compulsory removal of many 'hippies' from Kathmandu in the run-up to Birendra's coronation in 1975. This event was regarded by some as the formal end of the hippy era, though that, too, may have been over-schematic.

Bhaskar Gautam's 'Locating violence in Nepali politics' combines a survey of various theoretical approaches to the question of violence in general with a comparative study of the attitudes of BP Koirala and Ramraja Prasad Singh. Koirala was involved in a successful violent movement in 1950–51 and an abortive one in the early 1970s, and Singh launched a short-lived bombing campaign in the 1980s and narrowly missed being elected as Nepal's first

president in 2008. Gautam argues that previous accounts of violence in Nepali history have not taken a sufficiently analytical approach and he characterizes my own recent survey (Whelpton 2013) as “uncritical,” claiming that I “argue that there has been hardly any change in the way violence is used” (p. 77, fn. 1). I would, of course, reject the ‘uncritical’ label, unless ‘critical’ really means ‘Left-wing’ or ‘Marxist’¹ but I was indeed particularly concerned to stress similarities and parallels and especially to underline the resemblances between the revolutionary rhetoric used by the Nepali Congress in *sāt sāl* (2007 v.s.) and by the Maoists more recently. Whilst I am certainly not as well-read in the theoretical literature as is Gautam, so have to be cautious in my claims, I believe that much of the theorizing, with its multiplication of technical terms and abstruse distinctions, serves to confuse rather than advance debate, and am unhappy even with such a well-established concept as ‘structural violence,’ preferring to refer to talk instead in layperson’s terms about ‘implicit threats of violence,’ ‘injustice’ or ‘oppression.’ It is indeed true that revolutionary projects in recent times have seen violence as a means of transformation to an imagined ideal social order but violence in the past has also often been given an ideological justification, for example in the promotion of Hindu moral and social values. And, of course, the most fundamental dynamic behind the use of violence by both Prithvi Narayan Shah and Pushpa Kamal Dahal ‘Prachanda’ lies in the age-old struggle between human beings for power and for prestige.

Gautam’s essay is valuable mainly for its analysis of Singh’s attitudes, especially for those like myself who were previously unaware of the publication of Singh’s own collected writings (Singh 2066 v.s.). He shows the clear contrast between BP’s ‘pragmatic’ attitude to violence as a tool that sometimes had to be used, and Singh’s quasi-religious reference to the ‘ambrosial’ quality of bloodshed in the fight for freedom. This reminds the reader of the motif of blood-sacrifice Marie Lecomte-Tilouine (2009) finds both in orthodox Hindu thinking and in Maoist literature. For those familiar with European and particularly Irish history, there is also a slightly disturbing resemblance to the language used by Pádraic Pearse in two famous articles, one published during World War I, a year before his own death in the 1916

¹ The Russo-American Marxian economist Paul Baran is said to have adopted the term ‘critical’ precisely because of the hostility the word ‘Marxist’ would have aroused in an American audience.

Easter Rising, and the other two years earlier. Pearse referred to the earth's need to be "warmed with the red wine of the battlefields" (1924[1915]: 216) and to bloodshed as a "cleansing and sanctifying thing" (1924[1913]: 99).²

Gautam concludes his essay with the claim that the frequent episodes of violence in Nepal since the 1940s represent a "historical necessity" that "has only deepened and expanded since then" (p. 99). Nobody would deny that conditions in Nepal make political violence an ever-present possibility but to use the term 'necessity' seems to me both analytically unjustified and politically dangerous, because the belief that violence is inevitable easily becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. When looking at specific episodes I would prefer more stress on their contingent nature. The outbreak of the 'People's War' in 1996, for example, was no more inevitable than the 2003 invasion of Iraq: one can sympathize in both cases with some of the reasons why Pushpa Kamal Dahal and George W. Bush and their colleagues took the decisions they did, but the fact remains that they had a choice and made a bad one.

Harsha Man Maharjan focuses on the role of Padam Thakurathi in the development of professional journalism in Nepal and sees this, rather than the rise of the large media companies after 1990, as the major watershed. I would agree on the significance of developments in the 1980s but there is a case for seeing the 1979 protest campaign and referendum as a more important landmark: the lessening of political control during the run-up to the vote was never fully reversed.

In her contribution, Lai Ming Lam looks at relations between the indigenous Rana-Tharu and the Pahadis who have settled in increasing numbers since malaria eradication in the 1950s. She finds many parallels with the better-known case of Pahadis and Limbus in eastern Nepal since in both regions the Pahadis' better access to the state and its legal system has enabled them to displace the indigenous population as the major land owners. An important difference, however, is that a time when the Tharus were dominant and the Pahadis interacting with them as seasonal agricultural laborers is still within living memory.

The collection ends with two papers on other parts of South Asia. Kei Nagaoka looks at the importance of traditional Tibetan medicine for the people of Tawang on the Tibetan border in Arunachal Pradesh, whose ties

² Pearse's rhetoric, though more extreme than most, reflected a widespread trend in Europe at the time.

with Tibet proper were ruptured by the drawing of the McMahon line at the end of the last century and then by the introduction of a road network and cash crops. Finally, Smritikumar Sarkar tells a familiar story of unemployment created in Bengal by the introduction of new technology but also adds detail of how those displaced were to some extent able to find and exploit new opportunities.

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