Book Reviews


Revolving around the debate on relations between peace and development, *The Maoist Insurgency in Nepal* edited by Mahendra Lawoti and Anup Pahari offers fifteen chapters covering four important aspects of the Nepali Maoist movement – organizational, military, ethnic and developmental. Published within three years of the conclusion of the Maoist insurgency, it is a very timely investigation into the Maoist conundrum in Nepal. The flipside of the coin is that it probably is still too early to fully explain and theorize the causes and consequences of this decade-long insurgency. Nevertheless, laden with primary and secondary information on Nepal and on revolutions elsewhere, this book will serve Nepal researchers as an essential reference.

This book is an account of the contemporary Maoist politics. The stage is set in Chapter 1 of Part I where Mahendra Lawoti introduces the Nepali Maoists as extremist communists who made their presence felt in Nepali politics through the armed rebellion launched on 4 February 1996. The half century long history of the Nepali communist movement before the Maoists launched their armed struggle is recounted in six brief paragraphs and Lawoti says relatively little about how inexorably intertwined the Nepali communist movement has been with its democratic politics. Several subsequent chapters in Part II add to the notion of contemporariness and claim that Nepal analysts were “surprised” by the rise of the communists. For example, Kristine Eck’s chapter on Maoist indoctrination (Chapter 2) argues that while grievances over inequalities are long-standing, it is the newness of their recruitment strategy in the face of the economic and political vacuum left by the state in remote areas that allowed the Maoists to capitalize on these grievances. It is followed by Monica Mottin’s discussion of the role of popular performing art in Maoist mobilization (Chapter 3). Amanda Snellinger’s ethnography of the student union movements (Chapter 4) focuses on the glaring inconsistencies in the messages being sent out to its grassroots associations before and after signing the peace agreement. Madhav Joshi’s work (Chapter 5) serves to justify Eck’s assertion that grievances
about economic inequalities provided the Maoists a new path to revolution, but that, having chosen to follow this path, the Maoists are now obliged dutifully to implement an ambitious economic reform program which may or may not be within their capacity to deliver.

Part II is commended for its coverage of a wide range of topics associated with the Maoist movement as well as for its multi-disciplinary approach that spans statistical modelling and ethnographic accounts. But some questions remain on the content. Eck, for example, alludes to a few primary interviews conducted in April 2008 while formulating her rather far-reaching conclusion that the Maoists were successful because they were the first group to appeal to villagers’ class discontents. While several secondary narratives from the early 2000s are extracted liberally, Eck’s arguments are not always informed by original scholarly reasoning. For example, Pettigrew and Schneiderman’s (2004) account which Eck cites liberally, actually suggests that becoming Maoist was to assume an alternative national identity in the rural villages that were peripheral to national discourse of development. Similarly, Sharma and Prasain’s (2004) argument is that engendering and ethnicization have been as necessary elements of the Maoist activism as class-based struggle. These are somewhat overlooked when the author concludes that the Maoist indoctrination of rural villagers was possible because of poverty and inequality, and the absence of effective governance.

Monica Mottin concludes her Chapter 3 with a prescient sentence, “how Maoist culture and art will open, communicate, blend or perhaps confront and transform mainstream ‘Nepali’ culture is a fascinating scenario that awaits us” (p. 67). The underground ‘progressive’ (to mean subversive) cultural movement is not a new phenomenon in Nepal but one that has engaged at least two generations of Nepalis. Mottin talks about (perhaps less relevant) examples of religious subversion, e.g., Yogamaya’s ascetic hajurbāñi and ritualistic tij songs as evidence that subversion has always informed Nepali cultural performances, but does not refer to the nationally significant movements among literary and performing artists since the time of Rana regime. Nepali poets such as Siddhicharan Shrestha, Dharanidhar Koirala, Gopal Prasad Rimal have all left behind a rich legacy of subaltern literature that confronted the Rana regime. When a new autocracy Panchayat replaced the Rana regime, subversion among artists morphed into movements such as Rālpā, which functioned as the cultural wing of the Nepali communist movement in the 1970s. Mottin does make a passing comment to one of the Rālpā songs gàũ gàũ bāṭa utha (rise from every village) in a footnote (but without the
correct date and creative attribution). Otherwise the chapter ignores half a century long history of subversive art movement in Nepal which, as she foretold about the Maoist art movement, has indeed gone through the journey of initially confronting, then blending into, and ultimately transforming mainstream Nepali culture.

Are subversive artists pragmatic activists or idealistic individuals?  
Rālphā artists said of themselves that they made a life-long commitment to ‘rise above the genre of ordinary love songs’ and to refrain from participating in the ‘bourgeois channels’ aired by state radio and television stations. Such longstanding commitments are not what characterize the progressive singers in Mottin’s ethnography; she describes them as pragmatic activists rather than devoted artists, “When the police were nearby, cultural workers sang folk or love songs, but once the police left, the repertoire switched to what they called ‘progressive’ songs” (p. 56). It is true that there is bound to be more than one view and practice in a broad movement, and Mottin’s ethnography may have documented one of the several subgenres of revolutionary art movement, but this needs to be clearly signposted. Her account will benefit from a differentiation of the subgenres of revolutionary art in terms of quality of the content, organization of the performances, and ideologies of the artists.

In Chapter 4, when discussing urban and post-conflict Maoist activism, Amanda Snellinger successfully portrays how the Maoist student movement is caught between its revolutionary past and reconciliatory present. This ethnographic account offers original materials from her recent fieldwork and will be of interest to scholars of grassroots politics. The next step for research on grassroots movement may be to situate the Maoist student politics within the broader student union movement – a large part of which still lies under the non-Maoist banners including Nepali Congress and moderate communist groups. For example, there have been recurrent clashes between the cadres of the Maoist and non-Maoist factions after the former joined mainstream politics. What do these clashes say about the future trajectories of grassroots activism in Nepal? How does this inform her narrative on the Maoist leaders’ attempt to moderate their cadres after having proselytized them on extremist values? Events are unfolding fast in this area. The rich

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1 Based on a speech by M. Manjul on 19 May 2007 at a Paleti series event, Kathmandu.
and analytical ethnographic account presented in this chapter provides an excellent platform on which to theorize some of these new developments.

Marie Lecomte-Tilouine’s standalone chapter which makes Part III of this book is a seminal ethnography of a Maoist “model village” in mid-western Nepal. It is a powerful account of the long term strategies adopted by the people in remote villages under Maoist control, and it investigates the causes and manifestations of the inherent contradictions in the way issues of social reform, cultural neutralization and economic rationalization are negotiated. Faced with a new Maoist governing apparatus, the villagers in Deurali offered no arguments to protect their traditions (“superstitions” as villagers called them) while they were far more defensive of decisions concerning the use of their natural and economic resources (the Maoists did not “know the village,” villagers argued). In elaborating on these necessary tradeoffs, this chapter informs readers about the everyday changes being introduced, contested and negotiated between the Maoists and the villagers in rural areas involving symbolic freedom (cultural performances, lifecycle rituals, etc.) and material (polygamy, schooling, alcohol consumption, caste based discrimination, use of individual, communal and collective resources, etc.). This chapter differentiates itself squarely from the proliferating formalist studies on Maoist movement in its appetite to take on the issue of complexity.

The two chapters within Part IV continue the analysis of the inherent contradictions in the way the Maoist movement has lately evolved, e.g., ethnic federalization versus class struggle and indigenous movement of the hill people versus the interests of the Madhesis. Mahendra Lawoti’s Chapter 7 suffers from some degree of binarism – Peru, India and Nepal are supposed to be either similar or different for being either democratic or undemocratic, having high or low GNP per capitas, having ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ state attitudes towards the indigenous people, and eventually about having ‘high’ or ‘low’ indigenous participation in the insurgency. This chapter ends with a policy recommendation which emphasizes that “governments should not alienate and exclude specific ethnic groups, particularly indigenous groups, and that they should formulate policies that address their particular problems and grievances” (p. 151). This chapter is followed by Pramod Kantha’s Chapter 8 which attributes the Maoist-Madhesi confrontation to the former’s persistent opposition to the latter’s negotiation with the state on regional autonomy.

The succeeding sections V and VI grapple with the contentious issues of the army, external engagement and the parallels between the
Indian and Nepali Maoist movements. It is fair to argue – as Ashok K. Mehta and Lawoti do in Chapter 9 – that despite not being defeated militarily, the symbolic loss of the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) came from its misplaced political support for the royal coup. This assertion somewhat contradicts Anup Pahari’s India-Nepal comparison in Chapter 10 where he argues that the state could and should have decided whether the Maoists could have been militarily defeated or should instead be absorbed into the existing socio-political system. Had the outcome of the RNA mobilization been successful, would the Nepali Maoists have had the same fate as the Indian Naxalites in the hands of Indira Gandhi in 1975? In the absence of counter-evidence, such a statement is hypothetical. Pahari goes on to predict that although the neo-Naxalites have advanced “quite a bit” beyond the preceding generation, they will still be militarily crushed by the all powerful Indian state. Even if that turns out to be true in India, the chapter does not clarify what is the relevance of such an argument for Nepal which is currently faced with a very different set of dilemmas about Nepali nationalism, geopolitics and development. The overt militaristic assertions of this chapter contradict the developmental and reconciliatory solutions discussed in several other chapters.

The following Parts VII and VIII cover discussions on the process of state-Maoist reconciliation. Chapter 12 by Bishwa Nath Upreti on the “multi-track” approach of foreign nations towards the Nepali peace process is interesting, but perhaps restates the obvious. Data presented in Chapter 13 by Avidit Acharya on the economic costs of the insurgency could have usefully underpinned some of the earlier chapters. Mahendra Lawoti argues in the succeeding Chapter 14 that the Maoists won the constituent assembly elections through cajoling and coercion but he does not acknowledge a dozen or so international and local election monitors who have stated otherwise.

“How did the conflict affect the society, polity and economy” (p. 304)? This is a relevant if somewhat ambitious question which launches the concluding chapter written by the two editors. The “report card” laid out in less than ten pages is perhaps rather short and sketchy: It reports the abuse of human rights, the checks on democratic freedom and the economic stagnation which are the inevitable consequences of civil war. The following claim that formal dynastic politics has weakened with the end of the monarchy is true about the royal dynasty but contestable at other levels. Further, it may be too early to say that the Maoists have achieved ethnic and social inclusion, as the debate on ethnic
federalization has not really taken off. It is also too early to announce a verdict on either success or failure of Maoist mainstreaming into peaceful politics. When read against the Introduction by Lawoti, which clearly lays out the development-peace nexus as the explanatory framework for the Maoist conundrum in Nepal, it comes as a surprise that the ‘Conclusion’ chapter cautions the reader somewhat apocalyptically against the military consequences of a potential communist establishment. Somewhat disjointedly it states that 30 million peasants were killed in Mao’s revolution and 14 million in Stalin’s, giving the reader the impression that the Nepali Maoist movement is on par with its Chinese and Russian counterparts while its current position as reflected in the Maoists’ choice to be mainstreamed into competitive politics would rather suggest their entertaining lesser ideological ambitions.

References

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This book is not only about the rise of ethnic politics; it is about indigenous redefinition of democracy and state of Nepal as well as the recreation of the social order with ethnic equality. The reader gets nuanced details and insights into the indigenous struggles, political practices, and cultural innovations as a group of indigenous individuals engage in forming a political community under the flag of the Mongol National Organization (MNO). Susan Hangen brings in this book a sophisticated ethnography from a rural village of eastern Nepal which she refers to as being in the “margin of the state.” She does so by locating her analysis within the broader context of democratic discourse and practice in Nepal in which the on-going movement of Indigenous Nationalities is a part.
Indigenous peoples in Nepal have come to the center stage as one of the key actors in the political affairs of the country especially since 1990. This has stimulated much scholarly enquiry and public discourse. As a result, many social scientists, particularly anthropologists, have studied indigenous movements from perspectives of identity politics in relation to the state. This study stands out as it is focused on the evolution and the struggle of the MNO – an ethnic political party in rural districts – and takes the agency of those involved in the process into due consideration. It describes the ways in which the MNO is converged and diverged from the capital-city based movements. The MNO’s activities blend features of political and social movements and have transformed peoples’ identity, and everyday practices and aspirations about the future state and society. Perhaps because of these features, the author, going beyond the conventional idea of ethnic politics as being incompatible to democracy, rightly argues that the movement has potential for strengthening democracy.

Much of the material for the present study was collected during the period between 1993 and 1997 in a village in Ilam district and complemented by interviews and visits in other locations in eastern Nepal. The author developed interest in ethnic politics in Nepal much earlier from her prior visit and “observations of inequalities between high-caste Hindus and other caste and ethnic groups” (p. 6). The book begins with an overview of the democratization process and the emergence of ethnic politics in Nepal followed by an analysis of the Indigenous Nationalities’ movement and its goals. Chapters three and four provide rich ethnographic details on the MNO as a political party, its functioning in a village, its structure, operations, leaders as well as possibilities and limitations. This is followed by a discussion of MNO’s cultural practice of forging a common identity among its supporters through innovation of cultural artifacts such as calendars, reinterpretation of festivals, songs and ways of unbecoming Hindu. The author provides a valuable theoretical orientation from political and anthropological literature on democracy and ethnic politics to organize the field data. Readers would have been equally benefited had the author also delved into the literature on indigenous resistance and politics which seems relevant to the topic.

Given that race was not part of the official discourse in Nepal, the category ‘Mongol’ appears to be MNO’s resurrection “from the margins of discourse about difference in Nepal” (p. 54). However when one reads Article 27(1) of the Constitution of Nepal 1990 which states that “…the words ‘His Majesty’ mean His Majesty the King for the time being
reigning, being a descendant of the Great King *Prithvi Narayan Shah* and an adherent of Aryan Culture and the Hindu Religion,” an assertion of Mongol identity may be seen as a way of rejection of the super-ordinates’ signs and symbols, one that offers an alternative way of being by the indigenous groups. It is noteworthy, as the author points out, that despite the reference to race, the MNO appears to largely deploy cultural materials and political ideology for constructing a common Mongol identity from a pan-ethnic mosaic. While there are several divergences on some fundamental issues, other commonalities between the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN)-led movement and the MNO exist. For example, both agree on identifying themselves as “indigenous” in congruence with the international discourse.

The MNO, despite being a radical political party, participated in peaceful political processes including elections. Nevertheless, it never could fair well in gaining votes in elections compared to other bigger parties. While its agenda of secularism, republic, *loktantra* and other ideas have been incorporated by the state, the party remains perpetually in the margin. This may be another kind of disjuncture of democracy that the book discusses. With electoral failures and such disjuncture, the author’s allusion that the possibility of violence may not be ruled out fully should be taken seriously as peaceful indigenous politics tend to fail as they have to compete in a format not of their own making.

Hangen’s *The Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal* is an excellent work that appeared in a timely fashion as Nepal is going through a process of political transition. This study represents an important contribution and will be of interest to students and scholars of sociology, anthropology, and politics, as well as, anyone interested in contemporary Nepal and South Asia in general.

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*The Powerplant* is a biography of the Norwegian missionary and hydro-electric engineer and entrepreneur Odd Hoftun (b. 1927), who spent 50 years developing hydro power in Nepal. The biographer Peter Svalheim gives a thorough account of both Odd Hoftun’s and his wife Tullis’
careers, in 400 pages, two appendices and more than 302 detailed endnotes. The biography follows their lives chronologically, from childhood and Odd’s studies in Norway, through their remarkable experiences and contributions in several regions of Nepal.

The title *Powerplant* is a doubly apt description, both of the man Odd Hoftun and of the object of the couple’s lifetime missionary project. Svalheim tells in detail of how their lives intertwined with the history of hydro power and related competence building and business development in Nepal during 50 years.

Hydro plants now provide more than 90 percent of Nepal’s electricity production. Their history goes back to the Pharping Power House built in 1911, but it was only in the 1950s that developments picked up. That decade witnessed several initiatives, ranging from an international agreement between Nepal and India to utilize the Koshi River, to the small first contributions of Odd Hoftun.


The biographer takes care to show how the results were not only Hoftun’s work but also due to his ability to grasp and exploit opportunities and contacts. The achievements were partly due to the trust Nepal’s and Norway’s authorities gave him, the former perhaps partly further fuelled by the promise that the completed plants would be turned over to the government after 15 years. Other prominent factors were his valuable contacts with the Norwegian Institute of Technology, especially through Dagfinn Lysne and rector Inge Johansen. They contributed competence and competence training, directly to projects and with Kathmandu and Tribhuvan Universities, illustrating the constructive opportunities for global cooperation among academic institutions.

Hoftun was also well connected with the Norwegian hydro electric engineering community at a lucky time. Several Norwegian hydro electric plants were replacing their fully functional first generation generators, and happy to basically donate them, well suited to the silt-filled waters and the competence level of Nepali communities.

Non-Nepali readers will cherish the book’s sketch of Nepal’s magnificent and complex history, and the challenges wrought by rapid
modernization. The biographer includes political perspectives, such as the political games leading to government demand for energy entrepreneurs, and the tensions that led to the recent civil war. And he adeptly ties these political aspects to the highly personal.

The Hoftun’s Christian beliefs motivated their peculiar missionary mandate: to spread the gospel not by traditional attempts to convert individuals, but by promoting industry and economic development. The biographer also tells of the early death of their son Martin. Funds collected in his memory supported the renamed and now renowned Martin Chautari independent think tank, which inter alia scrutinizes the ongoing constitution writing process. Thus even the Hoftun’s private loss continues to enhance Nepal society and politics.

The biographer warns that he is enthralled with his subject – who is also his closest neighbor. And the financial sponsor of the book – HimalPartner (previously called the Himal-Asian Mission) – is a member of the United Mission to Nepal (UMN), the subject’s employer. One might suspect that a biography based on such close personal and institutional ties would be infused with hagiographic adulation. But the book seems balanced and fair. For instance, it offers thorough accounts of several tensions and conflicts surrounding the Hoftuns’ efforts. We read about conflicts within and among missionary organizations about their uneasy interaction with governments and market actors. Svalheim lays out UMN’s dilemmas, confrontations and negotiations with government corruption and donors. Indeed, the biography makes clear why many questioned both whether the United Mission to Nepal is really united, and in what sense it is a mission. Svalheim also describes how Hoftun’s honorable commitment to seek common ground in multicultural circumstances sometimes gave way – and sometimes had to give way – to authoritative and sometimes authoritarian decisions. Nor does he hide the conflicts including strikes wrought by Hoftun’s leadership style toward subordinates, colleagues and superiors. Indeed, when challenged to not write so positively about Hoftun, Svalheim counters that “I write about a workaholic who consistently puts his religious mission above everything else, even above his family. Is this really presenting him in a too nice light?” (p. 11).

The book illuminates at least three other important issues that Nepal continues to face today, and which those eager to assist are well advised to heed. Sometimes the reader might wish that endnotes addressing these were included in the main text.
Firstly, with regard to the history of hydro-electricity in Nepal. Valuable historical comparisons are offered in the endnotes; these deserve to be included in the text and expanded. A reader is left to wonder: Who other than Hoftun and UMN were engaged in building Nepal’s hydroelectric sector from the 1950s onward? What was unique in Hoftun’s efforts, and what lessons did others learn, e.g. regarding competence building?

Secondly, many development aid organizations, perhaps especially those with a religious or ideological mandate, face challenging dilemmas and criticism. For instance, how can these organizations interact with governments and businesses while maintaining integrity? Nepal long prohibited their attempts to convert its citizens to the Christian religion. How should missionary organizations operate in countries that prohibit such proselytization? Should they be there at all? The answer surely depends in part on the achievements that specifically Christian development assistance has brought to Nepal. Thus the author mentions UMN’s Sigrun Møgedal’s role in promoting community health programs, with an unusual concern for the local users’ self perceived needs. How unique was this focus, and were her initiatives copied? For instance, did such experiments further the public health measures that seem to have slashed Nepal’s rate of maternal deaths by 37 percent since 1990, to the lowest in South Asia as reported in The Lancet (8 May 2010, pp. 1609–1623; reference to Nepal on p. 1619)?

Other questions arise concerning the relationship to capital and other market forces. Many religious traditions including Christianity have reflected about such questions. How can they best maintain integrity and effectiveness as investors, or in the marketplace, indeed, as Hoftun desired, as company owners? How advisable is a ‘no bribe’ policy that threatens to block or prolongs project approval? And should non-governmental organizations enter into shared ownership deals with governments, and if so, with what structure? These issues continue to merit careful reflection, not only for religiously based development efforts. Some especially difficult issues concern the best modes of interaction with purely profit-oriented multinationals. Lessons may be particularly fruitful for the movement recently labeled ‘Social Entrepreneurship’ which explicitly seeks profit making strategies to promote social objectives such as development, empowerment, human rights or gender equality.

Thirdly, the success story of Hoftun’s contributions to build Nepal’s hydro-electric sector also prompts urgent questions about development
strategies. Among the thought provoking contributions of the biography is Hoftun’s recipe for successful development work: Start small! Projects should explicitly aim at competence building and other empowerment so the population eventually can do what is required with what they have of resources. The best funding situation for a project, says Hoftun, is to be slightly under-funded: rather spark creativity, than to bask in lavish funding requiring massive reporting obligations to international banks. Indeed, both excessive money and experts are dangerous, since they may ruin even the best programs. Among the implications are that a focus on labor-saving devices is often misguided: labor intensive processes may be neither more costly nor effective, if the aim is competence building. These are indeed profound challenges to a global development ‘industry’ accused of often being ineffective not to say dysfunctional.

While aspects of Hoftun’s development strategy are no doubt controversial, his results make a very strong case that at least some of these small scale forms of development cooperation are effective. They require a long time horizon, and include competence building and even development of a market sector, insofar as the aim is to contribute to a self-sustained society. This approach has many similarities to E.F. Schumacher’s ‘Small is beautiful,’ including the use of ‘appropriate technologies.’

So which development strategies work best, and by whose standards? The Norwegian Government Aid organization, NORAD, gave the Andhikhola project very high scores on effectiveness, relevance, quality, local influence and impact on the poorest. The biography may also make the reader suspect that donors and host countries systematically underestimate the massive transaction costs of large scale projects.

Funders such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank and global entrepreneurs mainly out to maximize profit, bring benefits but also new challenges. For instance, in Nepal as elsewhere, several hydro-electric projects have pitted local communities, often indigenous peoples, against the electricity needs of the greater society. Nepal’s ratification of ILO Convention 169 that seeks to protect indigenous peoples shifts bargaining power to their advantage, but it remains to be seen whether the overall effects are fair – especially in a country like Nepal with very many indigenous groups, and with large untapped potential for hydro-electricity for domestic and international consumption. Under which conditions are smaller or larger plants better?

What do we now know about effective and sustainable development policies? When and where is small not only beautiful but more effective
and sustainable, and when are larger projects indeed more effective, due to economies of scale or permanent scarcity of competence? It is in the nature of a biography that the author need neither pronounce on these grander issues, nor resolve them. But the questions merit sustained attention.

The biography of Odd – and Tullis – Hoftun is well informed and highly informative; a worthy portrait of a powerplant couple whose service to Nepal has generated tremendous power and empowerment. It is heartening to note that an English translation of this Norwegian text has been commissioned and is expected to be published by 2012 in Nepal.

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The history of photography in Nepal is no longer than one and half centuries. Photography in Nepal began with an image of Jung Bahadur Rana and his family taken by Charles Taylor in 1863 and from that point onward it remained the privilege of the Rana-Shah family and other elites with very few others having access to photographic technology until the half of the 20th century (see Onta 1998; Whelpton 2009). In this context, *Hamra Hajurama* is a noteworthy work as it strives to document the lives of ordinary Nepali women through photos and stories. In a documentary photography style photo.circle has developed this book (with help from the embassy of Denmark) in which seven photographers (Gaurav Dhwaj Khadka, Prateek Rajbhandari, NayanTara Gurung-Kakshapati, Rocky Prajapati, Sudhir Bhandari, Susan Prajapati and Drubha Ale) and six writers (Ajit Baral, Abha Ali Phobo, Prawin Adhikari, Utsav Shakya, Ravi Thapa, and Diwas KC) record their perceptions and interpretations of twelve Nepali *hajurāmās* or grandmothers through photos and text.

*Hamra Hajurama* is a project mainly based on twelve elderly women (Dil Maya Praja, Suntali Chaudhary, Radhika Pradhan, Kaushila Neupane, Nusrat Banu, Parbati Gurung, Uma Pradhan, Lila Maya Rai, Khadga Kumari Thapa, Sundari Devi, Dilsara Budha Magar, and Ijyotiya Devi) from various parts of the country and from different castes and religions. The project began in May 2009 under the coordination of NayanTara Gurung-Kakshapati and lasted for six months. During 18 to 25 December 2009, photos of the twelve *hajurāmās* were displayed in an
exhibition at the Nepal Art Council. The book was launched on the first day of the exhibition by the then Ambassador of Denmark to Nepal. The book or pictorial consists of twelve chapters, each devoted to photos, interviews with, and stories about one of the twelve hajurāmās.

In the Foreword, photographer Satish Sharma describes the book as an example of “documentary photography”\(^2\) (p. 9), a genre combining photos and text that documents the everyday lives, work, and families of these hajurāmās. The result is a diverse collection of stories about Nepali women and culture. Consisting of details on hometowns, marriage, work, and family life, each chapter is almost a biographical summary of each hajurāmā’s life. Weaving together the hajurāmās’ words into richly textured stories, the authors almost succeed in bringing the past back to life. Indeed, the stories are the book’s strongest point; the lack of old pictures of hajurāmās limits the scope and impact of the photography.

The photo documentary form is not without problems, as Satish Sharma acknowledges in the book’s Foreword. Presented in the form of a pictorial, with over sixty photos across the 12 chapters, the book cannot avoid associations with practices “rooted in the power seeking politics of the colonial past” (p. 9). Photography was an important tool for, as Edward Said would say, the “othering” of colonized people – through the cataloguing and ranking of “lesser people” – thereby justifying colonial domination. Although this book tries to diminish these worries of photographic objectification and domination by incorporating empathy and love in its presentation, suspicion still remains. Together the stories and photographs strive to make meaningful the existence of each hajurāmā’s life. Most of the photographs exude their happiness and independence; we see them either at work or comforting their family, mostly grand children. In this way it differs significantly from the tourist market books that portray people, places, and culture out of context, thereby commodifying them. Instead, by bringing together the richly contextualized stories of hajurāmās of different ages and groups – Chepang, Tharu, Magar, Gurung, Newar, Muslim, Brahmin, Chhetri, Madhesi, and Badi – this book tries to emphasize the shared humanity of

\(^2\) A new trend being carried out by professional journalists for quite a while, “documentary photography refers to the area of photography in which pictures are used as historical documents.” Pictures are first documented as historical evidence and later published. Subjects of documentary photography can be anything, including people. For more details visit: http://www.photography.com/articles/types-of-photography/documentary-photography/. Accessed on May 2010.
all these diverse people, not their difference. The spirit is one of inclusion, not exclusion.

Each of the book’s twelve chapters is built around a theme, with its own title, and it is here that we can feel the tussle between the photographs and stories. I have already mentioned the perhaps greater value of the stories as compared with the photographs. But there is more to the photographs than simply serving as enjoyable illustrations. This is made especially clear in the last chapter, “The Non-biography of Ijotiya Devi.” Because the interviewers were hardly able to extract anything from their subject, the photographs must convey the story. Here photos are worth much more than just “a thousand words.” In chapter one, “Sitting on a Rock,” Dil Maya is shown living happily with her grand children even though her existence is barely at the level of subsistence. The narrative theme of her struggle is balanced by photographs that celebrate her resounding happiness. In the next chapter, on Suntali Chaudhari, photos vividly express the subject’s pain, her arms shown with sores covered by copper bracelets. Indeed, the photos are able to convey information that one would be hardly aware of from simply reading the stories. Because the essence of these elderly women lies in the past and is presented to the reader through their stories, the photographs of the hajurāmās’ present lives serve as something like a subtext.

This book can be seen as a celebration of Nepali woman. As Pranab Man Singh remarks, “it captures not only this oral tradition, but also the history of oft-neglected generation” (2009: 10). In fact the book can be read as a kind of history of the past fifty years of Nepali women. Here we read of patriarchy, child marriages, and gender discrimination but also, fortunately, women’s valiant struggles against these forces. The book is also a work of cultural studies in, for example, how it tells stories of the love marriages of women from various ethnic communities, while their counterparts from other caste and Hindu families recall their arranged child marriages. There is also one beautifully choreographed chapter titled “Nepali Musalman” that includes many pictures of a hajurāmā with her family members. Similarly in most of other chapters hajurāmās are pictured with their children and grand children. As a whole the book has a heartwarming and wholesome feel.

But what about its language? Because it is a written work, much of the work (the stories) is, ironically, incomprehensible to many of the featured hajurāmās, most of whom are illiterate. This also raises the question for whom was the book produced. At Rs. 1,000 it is hardly affordable for most Nepalis, even though the book’s basic theme revolves around
working-class elderly women. These questions force a serious observer to look critically at the authors’ choices of language, storytelling modes, persistent use of black and white photography, production quality, price, etc. and ask what the ultimate meaning of *Hamra Hajurama* is.

**References**


Rashmi Dangol

Martin Chautari