

Michael Hutt and Pratyoush Onta, eds. 2017. *Political Change and Public Culture in Post-1990 Nepal*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.

The varied and multi-faceted interrelationship between political change and public culture in Nepal is the central focus of this book. The introductory chapter by Hutt and Onta surveys the scholarship on political transitions in Nepal since 1990. It however does not include many works published after 2014. The authors argue that the Western scholarly work have missed the historically important role rumor has played in a society. They build on Arjun

Appadurai and Carole Breckenridge's formulation of "public culture" to develop an analytical framework in the volume. An uncritical borrowing of the concept, without a nuanced consideration of the uneven and diverse nature of public life in Nepal, however, risks simplifying the complex history of public sphere in Nepal.

In the first section titled, "Rumor," three scholars expand our understandings of rumor. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, in "The Royal palace Massacre, Rumours and the Print media in Nepal," shows the role Nepali journalists played in shaping the rumor laden narratives surrounding the Palace massacre in 2001. The author argues that the journalists took liberty with various "urban legends" at a time of "national crisis" and provided platform for a polemical debate that in turn promoted national unity. Hutt, writing on the same topic, in "The Royal Palace Massacre, Conspiracy Theories and Nepali Street Literature," argues how rumor narratives floated by the Nepali media in the wake of the Palace massacre were capitalized by different Nepali authors to publish "fictional" works about the event. In particular, Hutt highlights the piece "Nayā Kotparvalāi Mānyatā Dinu Hūdaina" by Baburam Bhattarai as playing a pivotal role in shaping the various conspiracy theories on the massacre. Hutt also evaluates Khagendra Sangraula's piece, "Bhatij Dipendra! Malāi Māf Gara" that while questioning the existing mainstream narrative about Dipendra by portraying him as "peaceable, cheerful, civilized" person failed to support the claims forwarded in Bhattarai's piece. Notwithstanding its interesting discussion Hutt's piece significantly overlaps with that of Lecomte-Tiloune's and reads somewhat redundant. Both works also do not examine how the rumors about the massacre displaced many other important social and political discussions from the public sphere. Most importantly, these articles fail to examine how those rumors were received by the wider Nepali population.

Mallika Shakya in "Country of Rumours: Making Sense of a Bollywood Controversy" studies how the alleged derogatory remark by Hrithik Roshan (later proven to be false) became a foil to target Madhesi. Shakya through her ethnography on the streets in Kathmandu and Chitwan sheds light on the anti-Madhesi feelings that pervade the various parts of the Nepali society. The author also highlights how the political parties in Madhes later capitalized on the widespread anti-Madhesi feelings to challenge the existing national imagination. The author could have provided more contexts in explaining

as to why the riots surrounding the Hrithik case suddenly fizzled out within two days both in Kathmandu and Chitwan.

The next section, “Ethnicity and Identity,” has three articles. Martin Gaenzle (“‘Numafung’: Images of Limbu Culture in Ethnic Cinema”) shows how the Limbu movie, *Numafung* while criticizing the negative aspects related to the customary practice of bride price, romanticized the rest of the Limbu cultural tradition. The author compares the movie to Kapil Kandangwa’s original work, *Kārbārki Gharbār* and highlights how in both the works the woman protagonist speaks only once even though the narratives revolve around her life. Gaenzle however leaves the question of whether the movie had any financial impact on the Limbu community portrayed in the movie unexplored.

Onta and Humagain (“*Jana jāti* Magazines and the Contents of the Subaltern Counter public Sphere during the 1990s”) analyze the counter public sphere created by the indigenous magazines, like *Kairan* and *Jana jāti Mañc* in the struggles for *Jana jāti* rights. The article explores how the 1990 Constitution of Nepal both benefited and marginalized indigenous peoples. The chapter presents a monolithic image of the diverse indigenous communities. Which indigenous group benefited from the subaltern counter public sphere and which did not is not critically explored.

Harsha Man Maharjan, in his piece, “Vote for Prashant Tamang: Representations of an Indian Idol in the Nepali Print Media and the Retreat of Multiculturalism” stresses that the history, language and Nepali cap, and anti-India fervor appropriated by the Nepali media manipulated the Indian Idol show. While referring to the works of Chandrakishor, C.K. Lal, and Ram Rijhan Yadav, the author claims the Indian Idol fever, including Prashant Tamang did not benefit the indigenous and Madhesi communities of Nepal but only favored the national unity through monoculture debate. The author fails to get in touch with the officials at least of Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN).

Under the section titled, “Activist Cultures” two articles by Ingemar Grandin and Monica Mottin illustrate activism and its public meaning-making promoted by Kirtipur Circles and Aarohan Gurukul Theatre Group respectively. Grandin, in “Mobilizing Meanings: Local Cultural Activism and Nepal’s Public Culture” shows how the network of artistically motivated activists led by the Indreni Samskritik Samaj deployed non-profit driven models of artistic expressions, primarily songs and performances in stage

show. The author argues that those activities promote democratic transition in Nepal. Grandin's narrative could have been more enriching if it had explored how these stage programs were perceived by the growing Newar and other youths at the time.

Monica Mottin in her piece, "Protests, Space and Creativity: Theatre as a Site for the Affective Construction of Democracy in Nepal" shows Aarohan Gurukul Theatre's direct political involvement in the period following the 2005 Emergency. The author examines "*Loktāntrik Nāṭak*," one of the stage events organized by the group to underscore the critical roles artists played in the midst of widespread state censorship. Mottin however leaves out the sensations of audiences, the impacts of those sensations and the change instigated post-drama era. The author focuses only on "the process of performance production/content and the artists' identities, perceptions and motivations" (p. 172).

The following section, "Gender and Resistance," adds gendered aspects of political change and public culture to the debate. Kailash Rai ("Heroic Tales: Memories by Maoist Women") reads the various memoirs and interviews by the Maoist women to argue that instead of a homogeneous experience, a mixed sense of liberation and anxiety pervade these works. Rai especially points out that issues surrounding rape, motherhood and persistent illness suffered by the women remain subdued in those narratives. Seira Tamang ("Motherhood Containers: Cantonments and the Media Framing of Female Ex-combatants in Nepal's Transition") explores the representation of the female ex-combatants in the mainstream media. Tamang argues that the women were frequently portrayed in the newspapers as being unable to handle the guns, holding their babies and reluctant to enter the integration process. Lacking a nuanced understanding of the deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, such images, Tamang argues further promoted "the sexualization and feminization of the female combatants" (p. 231). Women were mostly viewed either as respectable wives or sacrificing mothers without probing their individual agency. The piece could have further nuanced the gender politics of the period by examining how the high-caste male reporters also promoted particular kind of masculinity by creating a stereotype of "weaker men" in relation to the femininity of the Maoist women.

Laura Kunreuther ("Publics of Heritage and Domestic Archives among Urban Nepalis of the Valley") questions the public discourse of history and heritage and its inter-linkage with the "inactive" public. Using the narratives

of Newar residents in Patan, the author sheds interesting insights into cultural loss and locals' desire to connect to forgotten history. The paradoxical role of education in the production of materialistic culture is also made apparent via their losses.

The book has a room for improvement. It could have also explored the activities constituting “the retreat of the ancestral elites” (p. 4) and shown how they influenced the process of new political changes and public culture. Similarly, this book does not include a discussion of the April 2015 earthquake. Recent political developments in Nepal cannot be wholly analyzed without the role the earthquake had on the constitution writing process and the subsequent blockade by the Madhesi political parties. The book also fails to comprehend how both the state and the public institutions have evolved since the early 1990s. In terms of geographical coverage, the book is Kathmandu-centric and leaves out many Himalayan communities.

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