

Dipak Gyawali, Michael Thompson and Marco Verweij, eds. 2017. *Aid, Technology and Development: The Lessons from Nepal*. London: Routledge and Earthscan.

“*Nepal kina banena?*” animates the Nepali public sphere on a quotidian basis. From community gatherings at the early morning tea-stalls and the editorial pages of the mainstream media to the boardrooms of the national and international institutions, diverse cast of actors and policy makers regularly offer varied response to this generic question. That diversity of answer is largely shaped by how different stakeholders understand development and its implications.

*Aid, Technology and Development: The Lessons from Nepal* seeks to provide new answers to this long vexing question in order “to effect a paradigm shift within the ongoing aid business: a business that lost its *elan vital* with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and is running on nothing more than inertia” (p. 6). The book is divided into three sections. Section One has introduction, a theoretical discussion on the relationship between political nature of development, aid and technology, including a case study of the travails of Small Farmers Development Program. The next section includes eight case studies. In the final section, two essays explore the lessons of development, aid, and technology in Nepal and beyond.

The editors, in the introductory chapter, present a vernacularized theoretical framework of *dharma*, understood as “the correct way of life,” to argue that failures and successes of development can be seen as dharma gone wrong and dharma restored. Marco Verweij, in Chapter Two, expands on this concept by outlining how development should be understood as a political activity, driven by actors operating with different rationalities. He identifies hierarchical, individualist, egalitarian, and fatalist as four rationalities in the development-aid field. Examining how actors with different rationalities relate to each other in development activities, and the consequences from those interactions are of main concern to Verweij.

Sudhindra Sharma identifies Nepal’s foreign-aid driven development as historically emergent political set of activities, both in the narrow sense of the formal governance structures, as well how a variety of actors, competing and collaborating with each other promote specific ideas, projects, methods, and materials of development. With these theoretical and historical contexts as

anchoring points, the eight case studies in section two trace the genealogies of development and aid projects in the last seven decades.

Bihari Krishna Shrestha's essay examines the way international donors, Nepali government agencies, and local institutions truncated the effectiveness of Small Farmers Development Programs. At the same time, those programs in an unintended way led to the emergence of vibrant farmers-managed cooperatives that transformed lives of the farming households through reverse migration and greater involvement of women in public life. Madhukar Upadhyaya narrates one such story of a transformation from Bhattedanda, particularly after the construction of a ropeway, which allowed the farmers to sell fresh milk in urban centers of the Kathmandu Valley. Over time, the local farmers mastered the operation and management of the ropeway technology.

Ashok R. Panday chronicles the struggles around the campaign to address the air pollution of Kathmandu valley in the 1990s that brought together disparate set of actors, leading to the rolling out of *safā* electrical three wheelers on the streets of Kathmandu. But the entrenched corruption within the state structures undermined a possibility of Nepal becoming a "world leader in low-tech and inherent green electric vehicle technology" (p. 103). Another case of dharma gone wrong!

The proliferation of micro and small hydropower projects in Nepal is the focus of Ajoy Karki's piece. Karki, a hydropower engineer by profession, details the involvement of various actors in financing, technological and institutional innovations, to argue that with the rich experience of micro and small hydropower development Nepal has the necessary expertise that could be exported around the world (p. 116).

Ratna Sansar Shrestha, on the other hand, provides an accountant's incisive analysis on the performances of Nepal's big hydropower projects. He tells the familiar tales of infrastructure projects: "defective designs," inflated costs, exaggerated benefits, and widespread legalized and illegal corruption, the collusion between international aid bureaucracy, state agencies, and local private experts. This collusion often leads to "increasing the project costs and delaying completion, thereby enabling them ... to earn more at the expense of the project owner and the overall economy (including, of course, the ultimate users of the electricity)" (p. 141).

Saroj Rai narrates the historical journey of biogas in Nepal. He traces its origins to the experiment by a Jesuit priest in the 1950s. This was followed by the government's involvement during the 1970s, and eventually its

proliferation as different international agencies, government agencies, private sectors, and non-governmental actors got involved in it. Presently, Nepal has over 700,000 individual household biogas plants, and has been a leader in this technological field so much so that Nepali biogas design is used in over twenty-four countries. Anil Pokhrel analyzes competing visions embedded in different water and sanitation projects in contemporary Nepal. Whereas a mega-project like Melamchi Water Supply Project embodies a controlling and arrogant vision over nature, artisanal water spouts symbolize organically rooted practices of provisioning waters.

Nepal's community forestry management has emerged as one of the big success stories in the world, both in terms of the restoration of the physical environment and in institutional innovations. Almost one third of Nepal's forest (1.6 million hectares) is currently managed by community forest user groups, representing over a third of Nepal's households. Hemanta R. Ojha takes us through a successful evolutionary history of the community forestry. In highlighting the various actors who contributed to that success, Ojha makes a case that given the potential to generate ecological livelihoods for a large number of households in Nepal, local level management of the forestry may provide the base for Nepal to leapfrog "straight from the Neolithic to the post-industrial" future (p. 199). However, much of that would also depend on "how the cross-scalar politics unfolds as the country moves through federal democratic reform after the 2015 constitution and the post-Paris Climate agreement" (p. 199).

Prakash C. Lohani's piece contained in the last section of the volume calls for a different approach to development by emphasizing trade over aid. He concludes by stating that "aid investment cannot have any lasting impact if the role of the state in the direction, implementation and monitoring of foreign-aided projects remains weak" (p. 211).

In the closing chapter of the book, the editors argue that "the main challenge for aid agencies and their partners to develop ways in which to allow stakeholders in poor countries to generate clumsy (or polyrational) solutions—and then to support these solutions" (p. 221).

What comes out very strongly in this volume is the centrality of the Nepali state in its inordinate complexity. In all the cases explored in the book, state agencies remain one of the key actors either keeping the dharma on balance (biogas) or on a wrong path (big hydro). Unfortunately, the first two introductory chapters to the volume elide this pivotal role of the state.

Instead of beginning with an abstract “cultural theory,” the book would have been stronger if it had built upon the insights of the late economic historian Mahesh Chandra Regmi. Regmi, after years of persistent work on political-economic history, made an astute observation regarding the centrality of the actions of those who controlled the Nepali state in the lives of Nepali citizens (see Regmi 1995). As the volume illustrates that power of the state to intervene in the lives of its citizens has grown exponentially in the past several decades.

Aid managers, politicians, students of development studies, and social sciences from both the Global South and the North may find this volume useful.

### **Reference**

Regmi, Mahesh Chandra. 1995. *Kings and Political Leaders of the Gorkhali Empire, 1768–1814*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman.

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