

Lawoti, Mahendra and Susan Hagen, eds. 2013. *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nepal: Identities and Mobilization after 1990*. London: Routledge.

Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nepal aims to explain ethnic movements and mobilization in contemporary Nepal. The edited volume consists of ten articles divided into three sections. Most empirical articles have already appeared elsewhere; hence substantively speaking, the book does not have much new to offer. Mahendra Lawoti and Susan Hagen, editors of the volume, also make efforts to compare, generalize, and theorize ethnic movements and mobilization. In the first section, Krishna Bhattachan, Mallika Shakya, and Susan Hagen and Mahendra Lawoti argue that the high-caste Hill elites have historically monopolized political, cultural, and economic resources and that the elites have used public resources to dominate and marginalize different groups such as the Dalits, Muslims, Madhesis, and *Janajātis*. The authors also emphasize the fact that the hegemony of the high-caste hill groups has never been accepted by different communities. Ethnic activism thus took different forms in the past depending upon the ‘political opportunities’ available in different historical periods.

The second section includes empirical chapters on the Dalits, Madhesis, Muslims, and hill ethnic groups. Steven Folmar highlights the difficulty for Dalit activists of advancing the long-stigmatized label of Dalits as a positive identity. This difficulty is considerable in Nepal’s contemporary social movement economy that puts high and special premium on identity categories over other dimensions of social and political life including class inequality. Susan Hagen documents ambivalent attitude shown by the

ordinary *Janajātis* toward the Boycott *Daśāi* movement led by Mongol National Organization activists in the mid-1990s in eastern Nepal. Here we see interplay between the activists' zeal for cultural purity and the ordinary citizens' attachment to the festival that had been part of their social life for centuries. She does not seem to be so sure about the actual impact of the movement on the ordinary *Janajātis* however (footnote 20, p. 141). I wish Hangen re-considered the straightjacket of the Hinduization thesis and delved deep, beyond the lived memories argument that she advances in her chapter, into the social embeddedness of the festival, particular cultural forms that the *Daśāi* festival has historically taken among the *Janajātis* as well as social psychology of religion to understand why the Boycott *Daśāi* movement could not sustain over time even if ethnic activism grew even stronger in the subsequent years since she conducted her research.

Bandita Sijapati examines the Madhesi movement, led by the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum, in 2007. Like other authors in the volume she focuses on the historical marginalization of the Madhesis and the long struggle by the Madhesis for equitable distribution of public resources as well as cultural recognition. She notes that specific physical and geographical characteristics facilitated the movement but the fragmentations of the Madhesis along caste and class lines are likely to complicate the situation in the future. Two articles address the issues of the Muslims in Nepal. Whereas Megan Adamson Sijapati examines the National Muslim Forum's efforts to construct a viable pan Muslim-Nepali identity in 2005 and 2006 in the aftermath of anti-Muslim riot in Kathmandu, Mollica Dastider emphasizes the continuity of Madhesi and Muslim identities in the southern plains arguing that a shared history, language, lifestyles, and territoriality prevails over the ideology of religious differences. Dastider's claim however belies the 'facts' the same book presents. Nearly two thirds of the "violent" ethnic conflicts Lawoti lists in the book are related to "Hindu-Muslim riots" in the southern plains (p. 239).

In the concluding section, which is somehow disjointed from the rest of the chapters, Lawoti compares and theorizes different movements. First, he tries to 'measure' the level of mobilization by employing five criteria—movement capability, existence of extreme factions, votes received by ethnic parties, representations of governance and concessions obtained by the group in question. Similarly, he runs a long list of factors affecting the level of mobilization. These factors include broadly defined movement characteristics and community characteristics, which in turn include several factors such as

political opportunities, history and mode of mobilization, linguistic/cultural differences with the dominant groups, socio-economic status of the ethnic constituency and so on. He finds that the Madhesis are most mobilized followed by the Limbus, the *Jana-jātis* (excluding the Limbus), and the Dalits.

There are several ambiguities in Lawoti's comparative project however. The comparative project is premised on the assumption that ethnic mobilization and movements played out in a context marked by *constant* state policies and socio-economic conditions. This assumption is questionable on several grounds. Economic dynamics and changes in the livelihood patterns get only cursory treatments in the explanatory model. Over the past two centuries, wage and market relations have considerably disrupted old social relations. Even the 1854 legal code, one of the most-cited straw man of contemporary scholarship in Nepal, was more 'liberal' than what was in practice before the code (Adhikari 1976). In contemporary Nepal, the caste system manifests differently in different locations such as urban and rural areas. Western liberal and illiberal ideas have long been major inspirations for change for both dominant high-caste and marginalized groups. Obviously, it needs considerable amount of forgetting to characterize state policies, society, and economy as unchanging and constant.

Another related problem is the partial reading of the historical change in Nepal through the key concept of political opportunities. In the first place, the concept of political opportunities has not been unanimously accepted in the social movement literature. In a curious move, Lawoti considers the political opportunities as 'movement characteristics' which also include organizational mobilization, cohesiveness of movements, and state attitude (see chapter 9). Conceptually, it is not clear whether the movements *respond* to the political opportunities or the opportunities themselves are part of *movement characteristics*. Lawoti rightly cites the opening up of politics in 1950, 1980, 1990, 2002 and 2006 as crucial political opportunities. And then he goes on to argue that "...the various groups utilized the political spaces [opportunities] that became available in 1950s...1980s...1990s... in 2006" (p. 202) and "political opportunities that became available earlier facilitated activities" (p. 203).

Lawoti's use of the concept as well as the statements quoted above are lacking in multiple ways. They render Nepal's watershed political movements vacuous. Do the political opportunities behave like living entities that 'become available' themselves at certain times? Who were the

political actors in those important political events? A related concept of elite division is equally content-less. To the extent that the high-caste hill elites were involved in the major political events, one gets curious about why the high-caste elites engaged in the political conflicts among themselves. After all, why do the high-caste leaders challenge the monarchical regimes and the monarch, who has been a supreme hill high-caste Hindu leader? In other words, what role did the ideologies play in the events and processes? What did the factors other than ethnicity play in Nepal's political change?

To be fair, the editors and individual authors liberally use, amidst big generalizations, qualifiers such as 'however,' 'despite,' 'although,' 'if,' and 'but' throughout the book, at times giving the readers hard times regarding what is general and what are the exceptions. A book that examines the country's major political transformations could have analyzed actors, ideologies, and the process in all its complexity. It is one thing to argue that Nepal's political change has an ethnic dimension and that the ethnic and Dalit movements have contributed to the democratization of polity and society but it is quite another to present historical changes as conflicts between high-caste Hill elites and marginalized groups.

Reference

Adhikari, Krishna Kant. 1976. Criminal Cases and their Punishments before and during the Period of Jang Bahadur. *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* 3(1): 105–116.

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