

Punam Yadav. 2016. *Social Transformation in Post-Conflict Nepal: A Gender Perspective*. London: Routledge.

The decade-long Maoist insurgency or the People's War spawned a large literature, mostly of a political nature. There has, however, been a dearth of theoretically grounded analysis of the impacts and implications of the Maoist insurgency on contemporary socio-economic change and transformation. Much of the literature is limited to political interpretation of events and marshalling of empirical facts of death, destruction and loss. Most analysis

remains oriented along party lines. In a real sense the narrative of the Maoist insurgency has been hijacked mostly by political party pandits.

The last decades have also been decades of crisis in the social sciences in Nepal. The crisis was accentuated by the all-encompassing scope and unprecedented pace of the People's War. Too many questions were thrown up while there were too few efforts to address them. Many questions related to the People's War were often buried in the quicksand of contemporary political developments.

Was the Maoist insurgency or People's War a counter-productive exercise with high costs and no benefits, as some would have us believe? Did it at all bring to the fore contradictions in Nepali society and economy, contradictions that needed to be exposed and addressed? How did it impact Nepali society, the development discourse and the agenda of socio-economic change and transformation? How did it impact women and influence gender relations in rural Nepal? Did it at all contribute to social transformation and if so in what ways? Are there lessons, both theoretical and otherwise, to be learnt and built upon?

Punam Yadav's attempt in this book is to seek answers to many of these questions. In so doing she breaks new ground and makes a singular contribution to the academic inquiry of social transformation, post-conflict situation and gender studies in Nepal. The book is a product of her doctoral work in social anthropology at the University of Sydney. The fact that a Nepali academic, and a woman with Madhesi roots, has taken up the challenge is a testimony to the new kind of scholarship emerging in Nepal.

In the book, the author juxtaposes the general notions of social change and development with the concept of social transformation. This is particularly pertinent in the context of Nepal where political leaders, policy makers, development practitioners and academics alike talk about socio-economic change and social transformation (*sāmājīk rūpāntaran*) at the same breath as if these were inter-changeable and indistinguishable concepts.

The book is very well grounded in theory. The notion of social transformation is anchored to the theoretical constructs of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (particularly his theory of social life) and that of the philosopher Michel Foucault (subject position and theory of power), and feminist social theorist Judith Butler (perceptions on the performative nature of gender).

Social change and development presupposes an exclusively top-down mega project full of slogans and abstractions and an institutionalized, deliberative, almost a homogenous process whose directions and intended outcomes can be linearly conceptualized and measured.

Social transformation instead is a bottom-up, series of multiple but small initiatives that result in a not-always intended, non-linear small shifts in perceptions, behavior and world view that induce changes in the nature of agency. It is summed up in “lived experience” of the changes in the nature and form of power relations. *Social transformation can occur even when social and economic structures are barely transformed* and material conditions remain more or less intact as is the case in much of rural Nepal. Social transformation is triggered by an *objective crisis* which impacts the normal functioning of society and questions the paradigm that maintains the social status quo. The author contends that the People’s War and its aftermath created such an objective crisis.

The empirical strength of the book lies in case studies, interviews and group discussions (in short, the lived experience in their own personalized, localized contexts) of four categories of women: 31 women constituent assembly (CA) members (including a detailed case study of Devi, a role model woman CA member from a “lower caste” of the Tarai); six women combatants of the People’s War who not only experienced the transformation in their own lives but contributed to changing the discourse on womanhood in Nepal; 15 war widows involved in the resistance to white sari, a movement that in its own way changed the discourse on widowhood, and ten women tempo drivers who challenged the social norms in a male dominated profession.

In each case the author does not only describe and analyse the multiple little shifts in social status quo contributing to social transformation but weaves them within a consistent and coherent theoretical framework. The transformations may seem mundane but are fundamental to changes in subjective positions and therefore power in their own particular contexts. Wearing a blouse, having a proper name, being able to negotiate wages, having a space in a tea stall may seem commonplace but are markers of the change in status in the Tatma community. Similarly, through the act of handling the gun, Maoist women combatants challenge ascribed gender roles, inculcate a sense of contributing to a larger common goal, and strengthen women’s agency. The red sari movement by the young widows likewise

signifies a symbolic rejection of the masculine construction of femininity. Women tempo drivers strengthen collective agency by carving a niche in a male dominated blue collar profession, by organizing themselves and standing up to the power of the policeman.

In each case there is a transformation of gender roles indicative of wider bottom-up socio-cultural shifts. There is also a link between the national level macro-processes – mandate for an inclusive CA, wider ramifications of the inclusion agenda including enlisting women in security forces, the facilitating role of donors and NGOs, etc. – and priorities of the state that translate into programs affecting the communities at the local level (old-age pensions and pensions for widows, for example).

Yadav provides a pan-Nepali look at the process of social transformation across regions, across ethnic and caste groups and draws the commonality of lived experiences. The author boldly questions the victim-centric approach to People's War and analyzes its positive social impacts particularly on women's agency.

The book has messages for the politician, the development practitioner, the field worker, and the donors alike. States will always have mega projects of socio-economic development but the dilemma for the policy makers is how to link this top-down approach with the bottom-up? How to positively mediate and reinforce the process of social transformation with economic growth? How to translate "development" into the lived experience of women so that there is a shift in the *habitus*, and the *doxa* is challenged in a sustainable manner? And for the donors – how to partner in facilitating this process?

Many aspects of the Maoist People's War, as with all such episodes in history, are open to debate. What is without doubt is that the People's War created and widened the social and political space for all those concerned with, and involved in Nepal's social and economic transformation. Unfortunately, with their mainstreaming, the Maoists themselves became indifferent to this whole enterprise, and other key political players – Nepali Congress, the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist, UML for short) and the Madhes-based political parties – refrained from even claiming that space. That I think has been the real tragedy in the aftermath of the People's War.

Yadav's book opens up a whole new, and essential discourse on Nepal's socio-economic transformation and the impact of conflict from a gender

perspective. Caveats in the book relate to the lack of full life stories of key representatives so the reader could have a more comprehensive view of their lived experiences. The author herself is an example, and a role model, of what can be achieved through social transformation. Unfortunately we gain only a passing glimpse of her lived experience. The author advocates a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory is the construction of theory through the analysis of data. The author's attempt in the book is in interpreting the data to fit her *a priori* theoretical framework. We gain very little insights into how the data informed the theory and its extensions.

Two other concerns may just briefly be pointed: the first relates to the larger process of globalization and change being felt also in the far flung corners of rural Nepal. The author rarely alludes to these impacts and their role in social transformation. The second is the process of social transformation itself. If social transformation is spurred by an objective crisis, or a conflict, what is needed to sustain it? Does the pace of transformation and its diffusion lose steam over time in the lack of continuous impulses for change? These are questions that the author might want to revisit in her coming works.

The caveats notwithstanding, Punam Yadav's work is path-breaking in the way it approaches the discourse on social transformation and development in Nepal through a gender perspective. She provides a breath of fresh air in addressing the question of the agency of women in the context of the Maoist insurgency.

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