

Book Reviews

Bhuwan Lal Joshi and Leo E. Rose. 2004 [1966]. *Democratic Innovations in Nepal: A Case Study of Political Acculturation*. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point.

Lately, a number of good old books have been reprinted (by MC Regmi, András Höfer, Eugene B Mihaly, Lionel Caplan, etc.). Most recent in the row is *Democratic Innovations in Nepal: A Case Study of Political Acculturation* by Bhuwan Lal Joshi and Leo E Rose. LR Baral's *Oppositional Politics in Nepal* is another such book that will, it is learnt, hit the bookstands soon. These are welcome developments and will be of much help especially to new students of social science who otherwise would have limited chances to read these books which have been out of print for several years. Let us hope that such endeavours will continue and many other deserving social scientists' work will get republished.

Democratic Innovations, which deals with the political developments of the post 1951 era, has come out at a time when there is a heightened interest amongst political observers in the history or, to be precise, the events of the same epoch that the 1966 book covers. In fact, recent political developments in Nepal bear a stark resemblance to those of the post 1951 years, as one can glean from the book under review.

Democratic Innovations is divided into five sections (excluding introduction and conclusion) and is comprised of altogether 23 chapters. The first section provides a brief introduction to Nepal: its geography, people, economy, etc. Those who already know a little about Nepal can skip this section. The next section provides a historical background in three chapters explaining the Shah and Rana Political systems; summarising the oppositional politics during the Rana regime and providing a glimpse of the 1950-51 'revolution,' which is one of the most important events in Nepal's political history. Never previously had a group of citizens, backed by a somewhat distinct ideology, waged war concertedly against a regime/ruler. Not only was the act in itself unprecedented, but the outcome of the war was equally dramatic. The war was truncated (even without the proper knowledge and meaningful participation of the warriors!) when the Ranas and Shahs came to an agreement brokered by the Indian government in Delhi. Because of this, Nepal clearly lost an opportunity for real transformation and stepped into

a new political set up: The Shah (Tribhuvan) got the throne back; the Rana (Mohan Shamsher) retained the premiership (though losing his *śrī tin* status); India retained its 1950 treaty (and later would also have a say in the government, get concessions in hydro projects like Koshi, Gandak, etc.); the warriors got a share in the government; and the people got the assurance that in the future Nepal would be governed by elected bodies and they would be allowed to write their own constitution through the representatives they elect, i.e., through constituent assembly. The assurances were, however, never fulfilled. The debate over a constituent assembly still continues today.

In subsequent sections, Joshi and Rose provide an excellent account of the political events of the post 1951 era (till 1964) and the corresponding roles, programs, and policies of the different actors: political parties, personalities, governments, and palace or the kings. These events, at least to me, are a testimony of the palace's design to usurp people's rights or, to put it mildly, they document the gradual transferral of the people's power into the hands of monarch. Drawing largely from the book but limiting myself mostly to political developments, I shall, in the subsequent paragraphs, elucidate how such a transformation took place in just a decade.

The coalition government of the Rana-Nepali Congress (NC), formed out of the (in)famous Indian brokerage, was a forced patch-up between asymmetrical 'objects' and, as expected, soon collapsed. But this did not lead to a positive outcome. Instead it provided an opportunity for the new owners of the palace (the Shahs) to start playing their dirty tricks and to accumulate power. Tribhuvan instigated a rupture in the NC when he forced the party to pick Matrika Prasad (MP) for the post of prime minister threatening that if the NC did not accept his 'suggestion' he "would impose direct rule with the help of Keshar Shamsher [Rana]." Though the NC had earlier selected Bishweshwor Prasad (BP) as its candidate, it had, according to Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, "no option but to acquiesce" (p. 91). MP then, with the consent of Tribhuvan, picked two Ranas and four 'independents' for the cabinet, along with seven other NC members.

With MP as prime minister, the new government was moving towards political revivalism. "Although the Ranas were in minority, they seemed to dominate the attitudes and the policies of the new government" (p. 96). Not only that, MP was appointing Rana supporters and loyalists to higher posts like cabinet secretary and home secretary, and dismissing the officials appointed in BP's tenure (while home minister in the Rana-NC

cabinet) and replacing them with members of Shah family and their relatives. In his first budget he “doubled the size of the King’s privy purse” (p. 96). All this led to a growing feud between the NC party and the MP government. Subsequently, the government collapsed.

The Shahs were, it seems, looking forward to this and fully exploited the opportunity to accumulate power. “[T]he democratic experiment suffered a serious setback on August 14, 1952,” the authors write, “when Tribhuvan ... decided to act as his own Prime Minister, assisted by a committee consisting of six Royal Councillors” (p. 103). The councillors were, needless to say, Ranas and *bhārdārs*. This was not sufficient. On September 9 of the same year he promulgated a new act called the Special Circumstances Power Act and took all executive power, nullifying the concept of King in Council. This marked the “introduction of King’s absolute authority in political affairs” (p. 104).

Since the job (of accumulating power) was done, the advisory council was soon dumped and another ‘party government’ was formed, once again under MP’s premiership. This time MP had formed his own party, the National Democratic Party—the biggest according to his own claim. Neither the palace nor the government was willing to hold elections but instead spouted rhetoric about the necessity and importance of holding elections soon. The High (present day Supreme) Court, headed by Hari Prasad Pradhan, was the only meaningful obstacle, courageously giving verdicts even against government decisions. Not surprisingly, the next target was the High Court. The first measure to curtail the power of the court began when Tribhuvan started direct rule in 1952. Later through a proclamation issued on January 10, 1954 Tribhuvan declared that:

a) supreme rights in the legislative field should be vested in the king as long as constitution had not been framed by constituent assembly, b) as long as the Constituent Assembly had not framed a constitution, all those judicial powers which had not been given to the Supreme Court should be vested in the King, and c) all powers exercised by the ministers and their subordinates according to the rules and laws enforced by the king or by the royal authority should always be regarded as proper and valid and as such should not be questioned in any court (p. 153).

Along with this proclamation came the statement that “the supreme executive, judicial, and legislative powers of the Shah sovereign, which had been ‘delegated’ to the Rana Prime Minister in 1856, had been ‘revoked’ in 1951, and that supreme authority in all these spheres was once again vested in the monarch.” “This was,” Joshi and Rose write, “the

first unequivocal affirmation of the King's inherent power as the supreme executive, legislative and judicial authority in Nepal since the end of Rana rule" (p. 153). The proclamation was followed by legislation that even further curbed power of the court. The court was even deprived of the power to issue directives on habeas corpus writs.

In retrospect, the Tribhuvan era was an era of gradual consolidation of power by the Shah ruler. Surprisingly however the authors do not blame Tribhuvan for such a shift in power. Instead, in Tribhuvan they see a person who "was content to function as a constitutional monarch." They go even further and claim that "it was only right and proper ... that King Tribhuvan should be acclaimed as 'the father of nation' and 'the chief architect of Nepali democracy'" (p. 175). One could only wonder how a person in whose regime and through whose 'proclamations' most of the democratic rights of the people were siphoned off could be eulogised in such terms.

The fourth section of *Democratic Innovations* begins with Mahendra's accession to the throne in 1955 when Tribhuvan died. Mahendra—who "was close to certain sections of the Rana family," had aired his hostility and aversion toward democratic political experiments as early as 1951, and would criticise party politics whenever the opportunity arose—entered the political stage with a bang. He announced that he would supervise several departments himself even though the ministers were in their places. But what was this highly ambitious crown prince doing in the interim? There is no answer. In fact, to study the activities or the designs made inside the opaque Narayanhiti palace is a very challenging task to every researcher of the field and remains unexplored so far.

Subsequently, Mahendra started to rule directly with the help of five "royal advisors," a group that was "not only reactionary," but also "lacked any apparent talent or special skills to commend itself to the public" (p. 182). Another of Mahendra's 'Innovations' was to reinstate *daudāhās* or tour commissions reminiscent of the Rana regime. He showed "characteristic zeal and thoroughness" in administrative reorganisation. In the first attempt 16 district magistrates were dismissed only to be replaced by Shahs and Ranas. As expected, his deeds were criticised by all sections of the society. After a couple of months he organised a *Nautānkī* (circus) conference of 129 political, social, and cultural organisations, which four prominent parties boycotted.

Mahendra then started various rounds of talks with political parties that lasted for months. He circulated a seven point questionnaire "which

sought the parties' views on the composition of the cabinet and the policies and the programs to be adopted" (p. 185). At another time he asked the major parties to set up a common minimum programme, which they did. But he adopted a 'novel' method of selecting the party members for the cabinet. He sent a three-member list—which did not include anyone who previously had been a minister—to the parties and asked them to select two members from the list. In the fourth round of negotiations, the King suggested that he would select six party representatives over which he would preside. The parties—seeing the King's self-serving intent—rejected the offer.

After nearly a year Mahendra formed a government under the premiership of Tanka Prasad Acharya, who was not even president of his own tiny party the Praja Parishad. "From the viewpoint of public support this was probably the weakest [government] formed so far" and it was dominated by three royalist independents—the formal chief royal advisor, the king's cousin, and a favourite. This government, the authors claim, "was scarcely more than a facade behind which the King continued the direct rule" (p. 188). Mahendra then started extended tours of various parts of country being felicitated and even disbursing money—not from his private purse but from the government treasury. Afterwards, Acharya and his party "began to agitate for a Parliament with limited powers operating under a constitution granted by the King" (p. 190). And exactly that happened some three years later! Another job done through the Acharya government was to further limit the power of the Supreme Court through the Supreme Court Act 1956 in which "the powers of the new judiciary were more limited, perhaps most significantly and ominously..." (p. 226). An attempt to introduce a Penal Code which contained a provision that "anyone causing, inspiring, or aspiring to any efforts at creating contempt toward the King and his government by means of speech, expression or signal" would be liable to a sentence of "life imprisonment or fourteen years' imprisonment or a heavy fine" (pp. 226-27) was foiled only to be reintroduced later in 1962.

After around one and half years in office, the Acharya Government was dumped with the charge that the government "had admitted its inability to hold the elections and run the government" (p. 194). This was a charge that Acharya refuted by making public the so-called 'letter of admittance' he had sent to king. After rounds of talks with parties, Mahendra made KI Singh prime minister and asked "all political parties to rise above 'mutual differences of opinion, jealousy, and malice' and dedicate themselves to 'the supreme duty of service to the Motherland'"

(pp. 94-95). The selection of Singh as PM, the authors write, “can not be understood on any rational basis other than his and King Mahendra’s common dislike for the Nepali Congress” (p. 195). But Singh was found to be of not much use and was sacked within a few months after he fulfilled his job of indefinitely postponing elections.

Mahendra took over the government once again claiming that “he had been compelled, in spite of his reluctance, to conduct the administration of the affairs of the country for a few days” (p. 207)! A significant event to notice in this period of direct rule was the ‘proclamation’ that officially changed the names of the ‘Government of Nepal’ and its foreign embassies to “His Majesty’s Government” and the “Royal Nepalese Embassies” (p. 228), i.e., his private property. The “notable feature of King Mahendra’s second period of direct rule was the further concentration of power in his personal secretariat” (p. 254). Apart from that he was busy holding meetings with parties whom he lectured and castigated. He tried every effort to cancel the *satyāgraha* (civil disobedience) organised by three parties. Finally he announced February 18, 1959 as the election date, not for a constituent assembly but for a parliament. It was done with full calculation for it came at a time “when the alignment of democratic political forces was in its weakest phase whereas the Rana-Royal Palace coalition was by far the most potent force in the country” (p. 217). Prior to this, the parties had gone through a litmus test of popularity via local elections held in some municipalities in which none of the parties were able to garner a majority.

Even as election preparations were in full swing, the situation was so blurry that no one knew on what basis the election was being contested or what sort of parliament would result. Finally the Constitution was promulgated just a week before the elections were held so that nobody could raise a voice against it. The constitution “at best ... amounted to the adoption of token democratic exterior for the future governments; at worst, it amounted to a calculated measure to create the illusion of political democracy under an essentially authoritarian system” (p. 292). It had not only retained the 1954 proclamation (quoted above) but also there was no reference to any democratic system. Elections were held, but the outcome was a surprise to many—NC won a two-thirds majority and BP became the first elected prime minister of Nepal.

In the fifth section, the authors detail Nepal’s first ever experiment with parliamentary democracy, party politics, and policies and programs of the government. The authors also describe the monarch’s roles in a separate chapter. Though in the beginning Mahendra pretended to help

parliamentary democracy and the NC government, his deeds suggested otherwise. He was to select half of the upper house members but chose only persons who strongly opposed the NC; from the NC three dissidents were nominated. After some six months he started to openly criticise the government, and also to instigate and incite those who were opposing the government. In his public statements he bristled with derogatory comments about parties and party leaders.

Finally, in a bloodless coup, Mahendra took power again. He jailed the political leaders, banned the parties, and later imposed the party-less Panchayat system and promulgated the most conservative constitution. To quote the authors,

It is interesting to note, incidentally, that Mahendra's Panchayat system marks a revival in some respects of the principles underlying the Panchayat system projected in the 1948 constitution bestowed on the country by Rana prime minister Padma Shamsher. The similarities between the constitutions are too striking to be coincidental (p. 398).

Even the language used echoed Padma Shamsher:

It is government's desire that all good, able and energetic elected representatives of the people should come to the centre, and cooperate with the government, but it would be very unfortunate if the introduction of political elections should lead to quarrels of disorder in the country... It is not the intention of the government that the country should be thrown into the vortex of the party system, and the government will never lend its encouragement to the habit of bringing about the election of any candidate by the strength of party machinery rather than by his own ability and eligibility (p. 398).

The sixth section of the book is on what the authors call Panchayat Raj but obviously it covers only the first four years of Panchayati politics (1961-64). With the Panchayat era a new but dark episode began in Nepali history. Mahendra could perhaps be best described as the re-incarnation of Janga Bahadur. While Janga initiated Kunwar-Rana rule; Mahendra established Shah-Rana rule.

However, it is to Mahendra—and also to BP—that the authors have dedicated the book: “Two Nepali leaders who, although placed at opposite ends of the political spectrum by a not too uncommon irony of Nepali history, are in a real sense the two most important co-authors of Nepali political acculturation surveyed in the book” (p. v). Agreed, both are co-authors. But one must again ask whether all sorts of “acculturation” are equally venerable? Does Mahendra—an apparent

despot who deprived the citizenry of civil liberties and destroyed democracy (as the book itself shows) deserve to have a book dedicated to him? At least it is not as though the authors have not criticised Mahendra's roles. But were the authors swayed by Mahendra's sugar coated nationalist and development propaganda? Would the authors still revere him the same way? It would have been wonderful if some sort of a postscript could have been added to the new edition.

Democratic Innovations is, as authors have rightly claimed, a detailed political history of a crucial transitional and formative period (1950-64) in Nepal. The book provides a blow-by-blow account—though at times repetitive—of political development during the post Rana era as well as offering interesting analysis of events. Explained in detail are the intra- and inter-party and government infightings. The book also analyses policies (administrative, economic, and foreign) of every single government formed during the study period. Though it refrains from any sort of theorising, this 566-page-long book could perhaps be called a 'classic' of Nepali political history. The book will serve as a valuable reference for both intelligentsia and political activists. For the social scientists *Democratic Innovations* has always been a standard reference, and will continue to be so.

Ramesh Parajuli
University of Bielefeld