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Nepal’s turbulent political changeover has been at the centre of many anthropological studies in recent years. The study of different aspects of the Maoist movement has been an inescapable element in writings on contemporary Nepali society. The key political event in the country’s historical narrative is unquestionably the 10-year long Maoist insurgency. It is often described as a stand-off between state forces and the Maoists, and has been explored through topics such as violence, political ideology and state formation, but less so through a lens that would grasp the broader social transformation of Nepal. In introducing an original ethnographic study into the field of anthropological literature on Maoism and the People’s War, *The Partial Revolution* explores the political and economic post-conflict trajectories in an area that has seen little representation in the anthropology of Nepal. By drawing on the complex interrelation between post-revolutionary political forces, such as social movements, different political and labour organisations, and state institutions, the book grounds politico-economic and social changes in the politics of daily life, and presents them in a wider narrative of the ongoing ‘great transformation’ of South Asia.

One of the main qualities of the book is that, instead of focusing solely on the Maoist movement, the emphasis is on producing a detailed ethnography of the transformation of both economic and political landscapes in the urban municipality located in the country’s far western lowlands. We are thrown into the world of everyday politics of a group of former bonded labourers who have experienced considerable changes since the start of the Maoist revolution. By following freed bonded labourers and looking into the creation of labour unions, freed Kamaiya political organisations and transformations in regional labour
relations, the book presents a strong argument that not only builds on the understanding of the consequences of the armed struggle, but also addresses the changing character of capitalism in Nepal. The main narrative is built in two parts. The first part provides anthropological knowledge on how political movements and labour relations have been reshaped by the Maoist uprising; the second part presents a detailed analysis of the transformation from the abolished system of bonded labour to new forms of labour relations, including ‘neo-bondage’. The broader argument of Hoffman’s ethnography challenges some of the existing anthropological studies on peasant politics and revolutionary situations: namely, it questions Eric Wolf’s and James Scott’s analysis of peasant revolutions that take the political role of the middle peasant as the main formative element of rural unrest. The argument presented ‘is less positive about such a theory of revolution that casts property-less peasants and wage-labourers as impotent, helpless agents’ but rather sees revolutions as events that ‘can challenge the balance of power and allow former serfs to act militantly and assertively’ (pp. 10). These after-effects of the different formal and informal manifestations of revolutionary ideology have opened up the discussion on the unintended social and political transformations, which Hoffman calls ‘the invisible hand of Mao Tse-tung’.

The book itself is a multi-layered ethnography based on several field sites that produce a complex, yet well-structured argument to reveal a localised political reality of post-conflict Nepal. Apart from careful historical contextualising and providing an ethnographic account of the freed Kamaiya labourers community (Chapters 1-3), the book explains several political manifestations of local political movements, and their connection with Maoists and trade unions. Hoffman describes ethnographically the politics of the ‘new’ working class that has taken political action into its own hands. Consistent with the literature describing similar social processes in India, this political uprising is further contextualised within the history of the Maoist movement in the region. Through this lens, the book describes the formation of the freed Kamaiya community in Ramnagar, which started as the capture of a space of ‘highly symbolic urban locality’ (Chapter 2). The ethnographic evidence presented in the book suggests that, by understanding the transformation from the freed labourers’ social movement to the
community politics of the resulting freed Kamaiya community, we can avoid making ‘totalizing’ conclusions of how the revolution has reshaped the community.

The book carefully avoids adopting some of the present narratives of the revolution, and instead focuses on grounding the protest movements that emerged in the area within everyday politics in this reconfigured political environment (Chapter 3). It further elaborates on the connections between FKS (Freed Kamaiya Society) and the Maoists by describing the relationship between political movements and labour unions, which in Nepal proved to be both symbiotic and hostile. Hoffman’s ethnographic examples provide valuable insight into the history of labour unionisation in Nepal, a topic that has been under-represented in anthropological scholarship. In Tikapur, the book argues, the unionisation process is closely linked to the history of Maoist activity in the area. This symbiosis between non-Maoist and Maoist-affiliated labour unions was the result of a mutually beneficial relationship: Maoist support left more room for the union to develop, and the union’s grassroots work extended the reach of the Maoists in previously neglected labour issues. While paying attention to this aspect of political activity, this study also acknowledges the movement’s embeddedness in the freed Kamaiya community. The conclusions that are drawn thus build on a hypothesis that Tikapur’s labour movement, in view of the prevailing ‘communal, case and regional identities’, should be understood as a community union (Chapter 4).

In light of local politics, labour movements and trade unions, the book further examines the politics of labour and the incapacity to change the exploitative nature of relationships between workers and owners. This contribution to the anthropology of labour emphasises the importance of studying ‘everyday social relations in production rather than of production’ (p. 150). In the concluding chapters (Chapters 5 and 6), the book studies some of the changes in everyday urban working class practices in brick factories. It analyses the ‘assertiveness and class consciousness’ in the work place and its link to the Maoist movement to conclude that, although relations do exist, there is no class identity to be found that would extend beyond the individual brick factory. Brick kiln workers, who use a tougher discourse popularised by the Maoists, were conscious of their unfortunate position but at the same time appreciated
the post-revolutionary ‘new mode of life’ that in many ways was liberating and emancipating. *The Partial Revolution* illustrates that one of the unexpected consequences of the revolution was the creation of a new working class: a young, assertive and politically conscious workforce that takes matters and *adhikars* (rights) into its own hands. Evoking the concept of ‘neo-bondage’, the book concludes with the description of a new type of unfree labour relation that the owners secure by advancing or delaying payments (Chapter 6).

By shifting the focus from the impact of the revolution to the transformations caused by contemporary capitalist formations, *The Partial Revolution* brilliantly demonstrates one of the main contradictions of Nepali society. In their fight against the ‘old order’, Maoists predominantly focused on what they categorised as ‘feudal’ exploitation, while overlooking the inequalities that were the consequence of capitalist restructuring in the region. *The Partial Revolution* therefore makes a considerable contribution to the field which is currently examining the intersection between social movements, politico-economic developments and labour relations in Nepal.

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