Political Economy of Social Change and Development in Nepal, by Jeevan R Sharma

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**REFERENCES**


1 Jeevan Sharma has offered up a bold and tidy review of the social and political impact of seventy years of development in Nepal. The book has several special merits to mention. It has a strong conceptual clarity of purpose. It adopts an integrative approach to relate political and policy domains to conditions on the ground, with dynamic shifts in patterns of inequality, and with the responses to political economic change by different categories of Nepalis. Furthermore, the author brings his expertise in migration studies to illuminate the characteristics and theorisation of this phenomenon, which has come to dominate contemporary understandings of Nepal's social change and the role of the state.

2 The book’s discussion of Polanyi’s *Great Transformation* provides a set of criteria for examining Nepal’s uneasy passage from an agrarian, patrimonial state dominated by patron-client structures of wealth generation on an imperial periphery, to a more market-powered society disembedded from old ties of occupation and status, arrived at through a series of convulsions including civil war, earthquake disaster and the promulgation of a secular republican constitution. The crux of the analysis lies in how the penetration of market values in Nepal’s social worlds and the release of many categories of Nepalis from conditions of unfree labour have not been countered by state welfare and social protection measures, which Polanyi’s ‘double movement’ entailed, despite the occupation of the state by various left-leaning and Maoist-led or -partnered
governments in recent years. Polanyi’s work is appropriately updated with Nancy Fraser’s discussion of the domestic work of care in dealing with market and austerity effects, and with her attention to emancipation as a third kind of movement, which has value for Sharma in understanding how different groups of marginalised Nepalis have experienced certain freedoms without particularly finding their economic condition any more secure. This is an outcome congruent with neoliberal paradigms of social change.

Four substantive chapters cover the emergence of new political citizenships in Nepal, the way rural livelihoods have altered from relatively un-commodified agrarian relations, the increasing role of migration and education in society and economy and the historical shifts of development paradigms with ongoing legacies of patronage politics. The conclusion raises the paradox that the countermovement to political-economic change has ‘largely been discursive’ (p205) and that kinship networks have carried the burden of coping with precarities of global labour markets.

For this reviewer, there is a strange absence in the approach and characterisation of the problem of political economy of development in Nepal. Briefly, this is neglect of the role that the environment has played as a disaster-prone urgent dimension in Nepal’s development history, and the more recent expression of this as climate change. The celebrated debates on environmental crisis in the 1970s and 1980s are referred to at the start of the concluding chapter, but how issues of deforestation and soil erosion and their links with population pressure came to dominate and legitimise development, and subsequently how the model of community forestry came to be lauded as Nepal’s great contribution to development of environmental governance are hardly featured. Community forest user groups do get a mention as a subcomponent of grassroots initiatives. The more complex politics of environmental protection as contributing to the alienation of rural Nepalis from their rights to territories and pushing them out of viable subsistence economies into regional labour markets, with nearly a quarter of Nepal’s land mass taken over by protected areas, does not get a mention in the book. Conservation is not discussed at all, thereby missing how the denial of livelihood rights of forest access acted to save rhinos and red pandas, but also acted as a de facto move of dispossession against mostly Janajati homelands extending state power. Nor is the significance of the shift to the sustainable development paradigm following the 1992 Rio Earth Summit mentioned, which triggered a reassessment of development purposes and social justice priorities, and helped put in place new approaches of conservation-with-development policies. These included the locally controlled forest user groups that even Maoists came to recognise as grassroots and pro-poor (just a brief discussion of Sharma’s co-authored work with Andrea Nightingale on this occurs on p166–167). Several chapters of Smadja’s (2003) tremendous collection for which the English translation is Reading Himalayan Landscapes Over Time could have helped give a more nuanced account of how conservation, tourism and the sandwiching of the state between local and international NGOs projects in these areas transformed people’s environmental livelihoods in highly differentiated ways, while depoliticising these domains as spaces for emerging citizenship rights in general.

A broader take on how environmental change disrupts twentieth century versions of how to frame what matters in the political economy of development could include the way studies of migration also cry out to be integrated in contextualised understandings of the combined effects of climate change and globalisation. Migration and climate
change work in conjunction for the long-term and irreversible disruption of relationships between people, territories and states. After the failure of the modernising years of integrated rural development projects to bring substantive change in the prospects of village economies, due to elite capture of development budgets intended for the poor, the post-Cold War ‘peace dividend’ led to reduced aid investments in livelihoods and abandonment of the agrarian world by many of the poor and landless. On this leg of the migration story from rural to urban environments, Sharma is extremely insightful. His chapter on mobility ends with a fascinating discussion of what happens to Bahuns, Magars and Dalits from Palpa district on encountering city ways of living and in causing surprising shifts in consumption, group association and self-presentation across these different caste and ethnic categories. Dalits notably experience discrimination and disadvantage when they seek accommodation and work in the city.

6 The book would have benefited from more attentive editing. There are several citations that have the wrong date. Pages 93 to 97 have one single paragraph without a break.

7 Overall, Sharma’s book amounts to a greatly valuable provocation, which will attract deserved attention to its argument, its concepts and how this story of unmet promise can be elaborated and disputed. It is to be welcomed for being highly informative about substantive changes that have occurred at the national level, and for bringing genuine and compelling voices into the analysis that make the reader notice the importance of bringing accounts of political economic change into conversation with the perspectives of the masses of people who directly live within and act to make those changes.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


AUTHORS

BEN CAMPBELL

Ben Campbell is an environmental anthropologist at Durham University with research interests in sustainability, in the politics of indigenous agro-ecology and forests in the Himalayas, and especially among Tamang speaking people in Nepal. Since climate change has had increasing
impact on Himalayan livelihoods, he has turned to consider energy transitions in communities affected by migration.