

Lecture

DEVENDRA RAJ PANDAY IN FIVE ATTRIBUTES

Chaitanya Mishra

We are here today to celebrate the life and work of an individual who is among the best of us.¹ This is an individual who has almost seamlessly blended mind, speech and action through his long life. More simply perhaps, he has long been walking the talk, which, as we all know, is perhaps the most difficult of all walks. This is also an individual who both reflects and shapes a distinctive period of Nepal's history—the history we are currently passing through. We, of course, can also take pride in the fact that he became the person he is because he arose from among us. So, after all and despite what we see and experience much around us today, maybe there is also something we can become proud of ourselves. Indeed, there may be something that we can celebrate about ourselves.

The individual we are speaking of today is surely exceptional in several ways. But, as hinted, he also raises the hope that our society will be able to raise a few more of his ilk. That is precisely the kind of confidence his life inspires and teaches us—that a new life can take shape in the womb of an older one. This, indeed, is the principal message of his 2021 book *Ek Jyān Duī Junī* (which may perhaps be translated as One Person, Two Lives). I am, of course, speaking here of Dr Devendra Raj Panday (henceforth Pandayji). Pandayji's life also teaches us that we can change ourselves for the better. While it may not harm any of us from enjoying one or more additional *junīs* within a single biological life ourselves, I very much wish our political

¹ This is a slightly revised text of a presentation made to a gathering organized to felicitate Dr Devendra Raj Panday in Kathmandu on January 14, 2024. The program was organized by Rural Self-reliance Development Centre which has been working for nearly four decades to reduce poverty by promoting sustainable self-reliance among the poor in several districts of Nepal.

leaders acquired an additional *junī* or several additional *junīs*. I believe that will benefit both them as well as us.

For living his second *junī*—as well as the first that, after all, led to the second one—let us stand up for a moment and welcome Pandayji in our midst. Let us also think seriously about what we can ourselves learn from his life.

Before I go any further, I *must* bring in Ms Padma Panday, who has lived a long life alongside and together with Pandayji. (When I say together and alongside I am myself, most of all, picturing the two of them taking a walk together on the streets of Kathmandu.) I also know of Ms Panday's own professional accomplishments in a small but intimate way. She, along with her sisters and a couple of co-teachers, managed a great primary school for four long decades. Our own daughter learned much during her three pre-Kindergarten years in Padma Teacher's school. (Mira, my wife, is here with me in this gathering.) Padma Teacher was also our daughter's best teacher. I feel pleased to inform Padma Teacher that our daughter, thanks in part to her school, is now living a satisfactory personal and professional life.

Invaluable as Padmaji's professional success was, I also know that there could have been no Pandayji without Padmaji. Let us stand up for a moment again and honor Padmaji both for what she gave us professionally and for her lifelong support to Pandayji. Pandayji and Ms Padma Panday are two separate individuals but may I also say the two are one single social and spiritual *ḡyān*. As they say, *jīvan rathkā duī paṅgrā*.

B

I do not expect to take much time for my presentation today. I know that this presentation is an initial introduction to Pandayji. I am fully aware that this gathering has a larger significance. In particular, I am certain, most of you are here because you wish to exchange warm smiles and *namastes* with a person who you know quite well. Many of you might wish to inquire about the wellbeing of Pandayji and Ms Panday. Some of you may like to take selfies with the couple as well.

Let me make a very brief note on the nature of the relationship between Pandayji and myself. My relations with Pandayji are almost wholly of a professional kind. But that does not tell the whole story either. Pandayji and I, for several years, lived in the same neighborhood. I personally know most members of Pandayji's family. His youngest brother, Kalyan Raj Panday, and

I grew up as friends. His immediately older brother, Narendra Raj Panday, of whom Dr Panday has written endearingly, was my mentor for more than a year at Radio Nepal. To add one additional braid to the story, I was also a neighbor, for several years, to Ms Padma Panday and her parents and sisters. This is surely a happy coincidence for me today. On the other hand, lest you have other thoughts, let me assure you once again that Pandayji's and my relations have almost always been of a professional nature.

C

Today, I would like to introduce Pandayji in terms of a set of five attributes. These attributes endear him to us but, perhaps more significantly, have also played a significant role in the nature of the currently unfolding history in Nepal—an unfolding that we have ourselves become part of. I must emphasize that while I do draw, in my presentation today, from what he has written, mostly from his inspiring latest book *Ek Jyān Duī Junī* (2021), I rely far more on his life and what he has accomplished. As they say, life is far more authentic than word. Words come cheaper and faker than deeds. Indeed, if we could sometimes fake aspects of our life, it would certainly not be very useful to give undue importance to word. In addition, one could surely list more than five attributes to describe Pandayji. But I do not think that will be necessary. I would, on the other hand, surely like to caution you that this is *my* list of attributes. I hope you will excuse me if the list does not sound right.

The first and very possibly the *singular* attribute that Pandayji imbibes, carries with himself and does not fail to infect people like me is that of his citizenship. One could say he carries his citizenship both in his heart and on his sleeves. He is a citizen *par excellence*. Let me describe Pandayji's idea of citizenship as composed of three interlinked dimensions: political freedom, inclusivity or social cohesion, and economic equity. This particular notion, I might note, resembles the idea of citizenship developed by Thomas Humphrey Marshall (1950). If I may go one step further, the three ideas also resemble the rallying cry of the 1789 French Revolution, i.e., Liberty, Fraternity and Equality.

The expression, “citizen” is commonly deployed as a legal term. Thus, Pandayji is a legal citizen of Nepal like most of us are. But often we tend to miss that citizenship (*nāgarikatā*) has a definite and powerful civil, political,

economic and cultural import in addition to an agency import (*nāgarikatwa*). Citizenship is also a somewhat stretchy identity, structure and practice. Thus, Nepalis were, *to a certain extent*, not merely legal but also political citizens of Nepal even during old-monarchical, inherited prime ministerial and later-monarchical or panchayat periods. But citizenship was then designed to be subsidiary not only to monarchy and inherited prime minister-ship but also to a party-less political system that was itself designed to make a supreme—and divine—leader out of a human monarch. Citizenship was also subsidiary to the social, legal, political, etc. state that carried the monarchy on its back. It was also subsidiary to a Hinduism that was construed as a faith that sanctified monarchy. As such, political citizenship was disallowed to come into full display and into practice. You could not see citizenship that was enshrined in the heart and you could not wear it visibly on your sleeves. This was really what the changes in 1980 and 1990 and, in a fuller sense 2006 were about—about the limits of de-politicized, legalized and individualized citizenship. The Panchayat-era citizenship, in particular, denied collective and public-political rights of citizenship—including to associate with citizens in matters local or as interest groups, political parties and so on. If Pandayji’s writings are replete with the expression “citizen” and “free citizen,” that is precisely because he both fully recognizes and acts out the political and collective significance of the revolutionary idea of citizenship.

As noted, Pandayji in his writings frequently emphasizes the notion of a “free citizen” and has consistently sought to live as a free citizen. More consequentially, throughout his second *juni* he has *led* the project of free citizenship in Nepal. For him the idea of democracy has not been one of merely of ensuring free citizenship for himself. He has utilized all of his second *juni* to call upon all of us to do all we can in order to attain and exercise free citizenship. It is in this endeavor that we have seen him through the years on the forefront of political action in meetings, on the streets and within the walls of a jail. He has lived the life of a fearless and militant citizen. He just could not be robbed out of a struggle for citizenship. Nor could he let us demean ourselves into remaining non-citizens. The risks on this account that he and Ms Panday have borne, what with bombs placed at their home compound and frequent calls from security agencies, were enormous. Few of us dared to subject ourselves to that risk. I know: I was myself on the sidewalk when Pandayji was leading mass protest movements

from the front and center. Thank you so much Pandayji and Ms Panday for bearing that immense risk on behalf of all of us.

Pandayji could see for himself that there was a sense of a great liberation in becoming a lay and free citizen—an upright citizen who abided by the law, which was itself a collective expression of the democratic will, but could not be forced to bend to the wishes of others who did not possess a democratic backing. I think Pandayji must have felt an exhilarating liberation roaming along the city streets on a flowing *kurtā-suruwāl* on a bicycle—as a citizen amidst many other citizens. I suppose he was also cultivating a fraternity, which is one of the key facets of citizenship in a democracy. I would imagine he feels a similar freedom and fraternity when he goes public that he sometimes does one or two *tucca* before he goes to bed. It is not often that one is open and free to let it out that one drinks a peg or two occasionally during the evenings.

Two, Pandayji, I think, had an incipient realization early on, possibly during the mid-1990s, that attaining fuller democratic citizenship was a *collective* civil, political and economic initiative. As such, he pushed it quite hard, leading to and following the 2006 political transition. The point was that an individual could not become a politically empowered citizen unless *all* those living within that political dispensation could. For all to become self-respecting and mutually valued citizens, the old invidious distribution of power and privilege—in terms, among others, of sex and gender, caste and ethnicity as well as regionalist distinctions and inequity had to be weakened and gradually led toward abolition. At the very least, the sharpest edges of such distinction and inequality had to be progressively and relatively rapidly rounded out.

Three, Pandayji has consistently, if comparatively mutedly, identified social democracy as a key feature of both full citizenship and democracy. Equity, for him, is an inalienable aspect of both development and democracy and, of course, an inalienable component of citizenship. In more concrete terms, both far-left and far-right politics have failed us with respect to both development and democracy. Thus, he tells us that he was appalled that the post-1990 governments failed to address the needs and aspirations of those who were for long facing the brunt of social injustice (2021: 194). He was appalled by the policy of divestment of several key state enterprises in favor of private interest as well as the abolition of fertilizer subsidy to farmers. Pandayji opts out of the neoliberal agenda in favor of social democracy (2021:

193). This neoliberal train of thought and practice, however, and to the pain of Dr Panday, continued even after the 2006 transition (2021: 196–201). Pandayji is pained, in particular, that the social democratic Nepali Congress Party, stamped as it had been by BP Koirala’s imprint, seems to him to have almost vanished from the national scene (2021: 176–77).

D

The second attribute of Pandayji’s life I can highlight, as I have already hinted, is related to democracy and development.

I lump together these two seemingly different dimensions of society and change because Pandayji himself repeatedly does so (see, in particular, Panday 1999: 226–228). Most analysts, of course, prefer to keep the two apart. But Pandayji has often stated that he sees almost no difference between democracy and development. For him, development bereft of democracy is neither. For him, one is likely to lead to the other—although not unconditionally, as has been the case in some of the Western countries during the last four decades. If at all, and in the interest of a greater clarity, he allows that one may make use of the idea of democratic development (2021: 184). Development is not a matter of economic growth alone; development encompasses the civil, political, economic and cultural domains as well as *all* citizens. I have listened to him emphasizing Adam Smith’s valuation of public welfare, which is very unlike how neoliberals read and use Smith. Similarly, he brings in William Arthur Lewis (2013[1955]) who discusses the correspondence between economic growth and social development (2021: 185). Further, during a discussion several years ago, he and I were in full agreement that Amartya Sen’s (1999) thesis of development as freedom was an immensely important contribution to both theory and practice of both democracy and development. In fact, this idea also comes through in the report the two of us and several other colleagues prepared twenty-six years ago on human development in Nepal (NESAC 1998). Following Sen (1979, 1985) and others, the report was based on the idea that expanding and enhancing the human capability of each citizen—defined primarily—and by no means exclusively—in terms of access to and quality of primary health and basic education, and a level of income that enables one to afford a minimal standard of living, was foundational to development as also to

freedom. Pandayji has also further elaborated his thinking on development as freedom in his book *Nepal's Failed Development* (1999: 95–102, 352–357).

Pandayji has noted that his mirror-imaging of development and democracy is rooted in the nature of his graduate education. More generally, this was also how development was interpreted globally prior to the advent of neoliberalism in the 1980s. The bifurcation of the notions of development and democracy, I am certain Pandayji will agree, has led to massive international and national level inequality as also to a rapid rise of right-wing politics, which is inherently undemocratic. This, among others, and as many have shown, has led to a sharp diminution of family and community relations. This, in turn, has led to individual isolation, political alienation of citizens and a host of other consequences that do not augur well for democracy.

E

The third attribute of Pandayji I must highlight is that of integrity.

Pandayji has himself contributed quite a lot in defining the notion of integrity, including in his thick book, *The Idea of Integrity and the Universe of Corruption and Anticorruption* (2018; see, in particular, Chapter 8, Foundations of Integrity and Relativist Equivocations, pp. 291–326 and Chapter 11, Partnerships for Integrity, pp. 405–440) as also in his leadership roles in Transparency International as well as its Nepal wing. I must note, however, that it is not easy to translate the notion of integrity. Some translate integrity as *niṣṭhā*, which may possibly be translated as authentic engagement, which is appropriate but inadequate. I think integrity also connotes sincerity, honesty, ethical conduct, incorruptibility, sacrifice, walking-the-talk, a seamless wholeness of being, etc. Because of the multifaceted nature of “integrity,” I shall allude to only upon a couple of aspects of it as it relates to Dr Pandayji’s life.

Pandayji, as we know, and as he writes with considerable depth, left his high government job because he could not, among others, remain comfortable with the indiscipline and abuse of financial authority immediately prior to the 1980 referendum. Maybe I could also suggest that he left his job also because he was at the cusp of entering his more politicized second *juni*. Personal—and not merely historical—transition takes up a long time to grow inside the womb before it makes its appearance in front of oneself and in front of the world. We see something new only when a certain threshold or

liminality is crossed. But that does not imply that the new was completely absent before the crossing; it may have merely been hidden from the view. Maybe I could refer to the revelation by Pandayji that he voted, as early as 1972, and like many others, for the “first republican leader,” Mr Ram Raja Prasad Singh and suggest that his second *junī* was seeded that year.²

In any case, we know that Pandayji, consistently across his long second *junī*, lived at a remove from personal ambition. Yes, he did become a minister for one historically crucial year. On the other hand, he principally became a minister because he was riding the waves of a highly popularly legitimate civil society movement that he—and a couple of others like him—were leading and because the newly installed government sought to gain strength from the popular legitimacy of the movement. I am certain he must have accepted the appointment also because he thought he could generate much public good during a period of a crucial political transition. Of course, his disillusionment with political leaders began early on. Thus, he tells us that the two main Nepali Congress party leaders, who played a key role in appointing him as the finance minister, requested him to provide jobs and benefits to their political workers (2021: 108). It was not a request he could entertain. In the same book, he also tells us that the 1990–1991 transitional government, while appropriately focused on drafting and promulgating a constitution—which it did deliver—failed to take appropriate steps on several other important fronts even as it took several unnecessary and possibly counterproductive steps (2021: 190). But, in the meantime, we know—and I know—that he declined several lucrative and prestigious national and international assignments along the way. Many of us interpreted his decline of such offers as a personal sacrifice even as he did not look at it that way. He did not accept one or more offers because he thought he was already fully engaged in a far more consequential task and a higher calling—that of helping to build a democratic and developed Nepal. He just wished to remain sincere to his life’s mission. All the rest, as they say, was chump change.

It is perhaps unnecessary to restate it, but as far as ethical conduct across his two *junīs* goes, Pandayji has remained unquestioned. And we are not here speaking only of graft either but to the whole range of abuse of authority. At certain times and places, this cleanliness would perhaps even be “normal.” And, certainly, there have been clean politicians and high administrators

² The 1972 elections to the national legislature from among the college graduates in the country within the Panchayat System.

around in Nepal. But they could perhaps be counted in fingers. I perhaps need not emphasize that cleanliness is rarer today. Pandayji—and a handful of others—have, thus, served as beacons amidst the surrounding darkness.

Let me briefly allude to one additional dimension of integrity in Pandayji's life. I have never met him unoccupied. I wonder if others have. In particular, I so hope Ms Panday and other members of his family have. I have myself invariably found him singularly occupied with questions of society, economy, country, and, of course, development and democracy in Nepal. His area of interest—what with development and democracy lumped together, is very large. But I also know that he has a big head, and he unceasingly and tirelessly keeps attempting, in his own way, to put large puzzles together.

F

The fourth attribute of Pandayji's life could be labeled “from Bagale to Berlin to DC to Delhi ... back to Kathmandu and” Bagale, Palpa, of course, is where he first seeded his well-known self-reliance program for the poor. The larger point is that Pandayji is consumed with linking together peoples, places and systems.³ I underline the expressions “the larger point” and “linking together” inasmuch as Pandayji's, started out his professional life as “foreign aid hand” within the government of Nepal. Essentially the profession called him to build bridges between Nepal and specific development projects and peoples there on the one hand and the international assistance regime and donors on the other. Of course, it may be an even larger historical point that Pandayji's generation was the first among several that grew up immediately following World War II, decolonization, an ostensibly “American century” and the Point Four Program—that trumpeted an American technical assistance initiative for all “developing countries” to go with it—mouthed by none other than US President Harry Truman. The initiative largely died out under the neoliberal onslaught of the 1980s. The imperative of linking the nooks, crannies and centers of the world remains alive nonetheless because of world scale and expansive capitalism that tie up systems, peoples and places as also because there is a thin semblance of world organizations that at least pretend to smoothen the roughest edges of capitalism.

³ See Panday 1983a: vi–xi, 1983b: 284–304, and 1999: 363–384 for his ideas on managing development, donors and international assistance.

From what I gather, Pandayji is most at home in Bagale. There, he finds intimacy. He also finds there a concrete list of things-to-do as well as people to pursue the tasks with. Bagale—and places like it—is not only a somewhat secluded space but also a microcosm inhabited by more or less excluded peoples—by caste, gender, ethnicity, class, and so on. In significant ways, Pandayji is a social worker in the best sense of the term. But the metropolises of the world loom humongous on the horizon. Bagale, in addition to being continually reshaped by such metropolises, also goes through ceaseless denting-painting by Kathmandu. In this hierarchical ordering of peoples, places and systems, struggle is a daily grind. Often and in a systemic manner, Bagale loses people and labor and skills and resources to other places and systems. But because the less fortunate live in places like Bagale, Pandayji and his colleagues cannot drive or fly away from there.

Pandayji, with Bagale and several other encompassing issues in mind, goes to Singha Darbar, the Swiss and the German development agencies, the World Bank/International Monetary Fund combine, and to a host of non-governmental organizations which have sprouted across the world, in order to discuss policies and finances that could not only help development and democracy in Bagale and Nepal but also in the global metropolises. The global metropolises are at the peak of material wealth but not of the wellbeing they could potentially enjoy. In several important respects, the metropolises are deforming themselves in the midst of material plenty. Thus, even as Pandayji is centered in Bagale and Nepal, he knows that these “local” places and peoples do not inhabit a separate and localized world. These places and peoples are tied up within a frame of hierarchical linkage with the more encompassing world. It is, as such, important not only to change Bagale and Nepal but also the rest of the metropolises and states. This is a difficult task. But Pandayji would not have it otherwise.

G

Now to the fifth and final attribute, from my side today, of Pandayji’s life. This has to do with optimism.

Many of us here in Kathmandu are optimistic about our personal lives. Some of us have even “made certain” that our offspring will have, if need be, a thickish cushion to support them along. But I am speaking here of an optimism regarding not personal but public life. Pandayji’s four-decade-long

second *juni* has been one of relentless public action. The early years of the second *juni* might be considered his period of internship. But he spent the next two and half decades thick at the altar of politics, which was always vicious and often violent and militarized. As his 2021 book makes clear, there was no dearth of family members, colleagues and peoples who were uncomfortable with his intense 1990 political foray. The lack of comfort was loud and resounding the second time around, i.e., during 2006 and thereafter. It has been recorded fairly extensively in his 2021 book. He risked all that in the interest of a much greater good.

But as he reflects back, has the personal—and the public risks he took on our behalf—been worth it? This is a question that constantly haunts Pandayji. He comes back to it again and again in his 2021 book. There has been so many “setbacks,” as he faithfully and repeatedly recounts it. The language is different but he minces no words to say that our leaders have failed us repeatedly.

But he does not answer the question frontally. Was it really worth it? But, of course, he does not need to. The older political systems relied on the birthright of a monarch and, thus, totally lacked democratic legitimacy. In addition, the systems did not resolve the problems they faced. None of the systems, had they somehow continued, could have resolved the problems that plague us now. It is a different matter that the current system or the current crop of leaders, which/who has not been up to the task either. This, of course, demands a serious re-engagement in thought and in action.

Pandayji, even as he ruminates over and is saddened by the events and processes taking hold today, remains a wary optimist. Why? Wariness, of course, is easily explainable. But an optimist nonetheless? For one, he does not rue the transitions in which he was frontally implicated. For another, the transition foreclosed the possibility of a larger-scale violence or a headlong entry into the quagmire of Maoism. Both of these were certainly among a set of possibilities that could have come off. For still another, it is a fundamental gain that a democratic system has taken hold. There are surely serious questions that need to be asked and answered both about the present and the future. But given the archaic nature of the old political system, its oppressiveness and its lack of promise, there could be no going back.

Thus, even as Pandayji is wary, he cannot let go of his optimism. He casts his hope mainly with future leaders—who are younger and come from the social margins. Hope is something he cannot let go. As he notes somewhere,

in the manner of *Lage Raho Munnābhāī*, we cannot but keep pushing the doors to democracy and development, with ever greater agency and vigor.⁴ I think we are all on his side there.

At the same time, we also hope that the confluence of history and the nature of world and society realign in a way that spurs agency. It maybe that optimism is a normal state of affairs for most when the going gets good. As a corollary, it maybe that optimism has to be willed and summoned when the going is not as good. It may be then that this is a time—for most people in Nepal—when the rare flicker of hope and optimism has to be tended with great care and perseverance.

References

- Lewis, Arthur. 2013[1955]. *The Theory of Economic Growth*. London: Routledge.
- Marshall, Thomas Humphrey. 1950. *Citizenship and Social Class and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- NESAC (Nepal South Asia Centre). 1998. *Nepal Human Development Report 1998*. Kathmandu: NESAC.
- Panday, Devendra Raj. 1983a. Introduction to the Seminar. In *Foreign Aid and Development in Nepal: Proceedings of a Seminar (October 4–5, 1983)*, pp. v–xi. Kathmandu: Integrated Development Systems.
- Panday, Devendra Raj. 1983b. Foreign Aid in Nepal’s Development: An Overview. In *Foreign Aid and Development in Nepal: Proceedings of a Seminar (October 4–5, 1983)*, pp. 270–312. Kathmandu: Integrated Development Systems.
- Panday, Devendra Raj. 1999. *Failed Development: Reflections on the Mission and Maladies*. Kathmandu: NESAC.
- Panday, Devendra Raj. 2018. *The Idea of Integrity and the Universe of Corruption and Anti-Corruption*. Kathmandu: RedInk Books.
- Panday, Devendra Raj. 2021. *Ek Jyān Duī Junī*. Kathmandu: FinePrint.
- Sen, Amartya. 1979. Equality of What? The Tanner Lecture on Human Values delivered at Stanford University on May 22. Available at <https://>

⁴ The expression “*Lage Raho Munnābhāī*” comes from an eponymous 2006 Hindi cinema *Munna Bhai M.B.B.S.* that emphasizes the virtue of patience and empathy. The main actor in the cinema, Sanjay Dutt, plays the role of a loving physician similar to that played by Robin Williams in the 1998 Hollywood movie *Patch Adams*.

tannerlectures.utah.edu/_resources/documents/a-to-z/s/sen80.pdf; accessed April 14, 2024.

Sen, Amartya. 1985. *Commodities and Capabilities*. Amsterdam: North-Holland.

Sen, Amartya. 2001. *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Biographical Note

Chaitanya Mishra has been teaching Sociology at Tribhuvan University for the last four decades. His writings span issues of structure and agency, micro and macrosociology, capitalism and globalization, and the eventful passage of Nepal across the last seven decades. He is the author of several books and many articles published in various journals and edited volumes. Email: mishrachaitanya@gmail.com