

# Book Reviews

John Whelpton. 2005. *A History of Nepal*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cambridge University Press has cornered the market in concise national histories. Called “countries histories,” these books include titles such as Dirk Vandewalle’s *A History of Modern Libya*, Brian Hamnett’s *A Concise History of Mexico*, and John Whelpton’s *A History of Nepal*. Such books pose a special challenge for the writer. They are designed for the general reader as well as an undergraduate college student. They must, therefore, be able to introduce a nation-state to someone who has only a passing familiarity with a place and its story, as well as provide sufficient analytically organized detail for the specialist. But most scholars, as Whelpton, are able to surmount the challenge and produce elegantly written introductions to the growing number of nation-states (now 192) and national projects that are unfulfilled.

In our own time, there is another problem with such national histories. The classical task of the modern historian, whose profession begins in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was to tell the story of a nation-state’s unfolding out of its feudal pre-history. Leopold von Ranke’s 1824 book *History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations from 1494 to 1514* is the *locus classicus* for this tradition. In an age when nations were coming of age, whether in the transition from feudalism to capitalism or else from colonialism to independence, the historian had a more straightforward project. As the nation-state faced a challenge in the era of globalization, the narrative form of the concise modern history of a nation-state has come under challenge. How does one write the story of the nation-state coming into its own when the state form itself has been compromised, and when national minorities have asserted their right to what had been considered a settled cultural question? What is the subject of a nation-state’s history, if neither the state nor the nation seem to be stable entities?

Whelpton’s *Nepal* takes as its subject the formation of the Nepali state from 1743 onward, with a special emphasis on the crucial years of state formation between 1951 and 1991. These forty years are the heart of the book (three out of seven chapters). We are given a historical sociology of the governing class, the Ranas and the monarchy, with as much detail on the individuals as any general reader can bear. The transition from one to

the other is told carefully, with the important caveat that the monarchy took power as part of a wider struggle by the political parties for democracy. In some ways, by Whelpton's telling (although he does not draw this conclusion), the forty years that form the heart of his book are an interregnum (so to speak) between the emergence of the democracy movement in the late 1940s and its reassertion in the late 1980s onward. It is because of Whelpton's interest in the Nepali state rather than in the democracy movement that the book spends more time on those forty years, when the state was modernized, than on the popular struggles that pushed the monarchy forward (as opposed to the Ranas, whose involution is best depicted over the A-Class, C-Class battle) and that finally restricted the monarchy's power to the Royal Palace. A history of the Nepali people, on the other hand, might have spent more time telling us how the masses came into the domain of politics, hitherto restricted to the Palace, the Ranas, and their elves amongst the various communities of the hills and plains. We know that the people played a central role in 1950-51 and again in 1990, and then again in the last few years, but we don't have a sense, because of the structure of the book, of *how* the people were able to assert themselves and reconfigure the domain of Nepali politics. If the subject is the state, then this form of analysis is secondary if not entirely avoided.

Since Whelpton does not take the politics of the people seriously, he tendentiously assumes what they must think or else discards their ability to put forward their views. As he parses the quarrel of the hill communities with the Ranas, Whelpton writes (p. 82), "Many from the Tibeto-Burman hill communities may well have regarded their quarrel with the Ranas as a squabble between their overlords which did not directly concern them." And again, in the next chapter, "The Nepalese electorate was composed largely of illiterate peasants," he writes (p. 94), "for whom the actual content of manifestoes was even less important than for voters in industrialized countries." He makes this gesture in the context of writing about the Congress' sweep in eastern Nepal, despite the party's promise to undo some of the special rights given to people in the region. After a brief summary of the reasons why the people might have turned to the Congress rather than to the more sympathetic Gorkha Parishad, he writes (p. 95), "Most importantly, perhaps, Congress attracted many who simply regarded the party as the strongest political force and so wished to align themselves with it." In other words, the illiterate peasants knew, after all, what they were doing, or else they had a sense of how best to utilize their votes. The confusion here is indicative of

a lack of exploration of how people understand the domain of the political. An ethnography of “politics,” and the politics of the people, would be a very useful addition to the literature. To put the people at the center of history requires that we understand how people recognize politics and how they intersects with it, either consciously or unconsciously.

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One of the shortfalls of the comprehensive histories is the by now customary division between economic and social history, and political history. The historian is expected to produce an account of the politics of a given time separate from the socio-economic developments in the same period. Frequently, historians of general textbooks or histories of the Cambridge kind tend to offer a chapter for each, with an additional chapter thrown in for the cultural history of the period. This is just what Whelpton has done for the period 1951 to 1991. We have a chapter on the politics (“the monarchy in ascendance”), which takes us from the first multi-party experiment between 1951 and 1960 to the revival of the multi-party system in 1990. It is followed by a chapter on the social and economic changes (“the quest for ‘development’”), which gives us a tour of such important issues as the making of the planned state economy as well as the limitations of the model. Finally, we have a chapter on the cultural aspects (“lifestyles, values, identities”), which provides an elegant summary of the rise of ethnicity, or the divides of town and country, of the development of the media and of education. Over a hundred pages through these three chapters provides the reader with a very strong sense of the developments in the four decades of monarchical rule, when the Nepali state came into its own.

The method limits itself. The material is spread across the three chapters. It is neither summarized, nor put into a theory. Because of this, we cannot understand why or how the *Jana Āndolan* of the late 1980s emerged. For instance, in the chapter on the economy (p. 137), we hear that despite many failed indicators, the one major success was education, particularly from 1971 to 1989-90. Whereas under 2000 students were in primary school in 1950 (an indictment of the Rana era, if a spectacular one were needed), by the end of the 1980s the number rose to half a million. The literacy rate in 1952-54 hovered around the embarrassing 5%, but by 1991 it was 40% (56% for males). To put this in context, in India, the rate in 1951 was 18% and by 1991 was 52% (64% for males

and 39% for females). In the chapter on culture (p. 167), we learn that “The greatest problem of the Nepalese education system was not, however, politicization but rather the fact that it was breeding aspirations which Nepalese society could not match.” Earlier in the chapter on economics (p. 126), we learnt that the regime recognized that the state-led development had created an aspiration gap. It moved, therefore, to divert some students away from higher education toward vocational studies. The students were quick to dub this plan *śikṣā niyojana*, education planning, like *pariwār niyojana*, family planning: the limitation of education and the move to create a working-class rather than a thinking populace. In the chapter on politics (p. 107), we learn that on 6 April 1979, some students, mainly organized by the Congress and the Communists, protested the execution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, but used the moment to push a variety of student demands. They wanted to ensure that all those who passed the School Leaving Certificate exam would enter university, that vocational education would be sidelined, that the pro-Panchayat union would be dissolved and that an independent union of students be allowed to function. What we have here, if we put them together, is an indication of how the social forces among the youth were moving in the direction of the *Jana Āndolan*. The material is all there in the book. By sequestering one part in one section and not offering a theory, the trees seem to be without a forest.

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In the 1930s, Singha Shamsheer argued that the Rana state should promote “a gradual rise in the prosperity of the people with the help of government grants and subsidies,” but made it clear that any such improvements should not be “subversive of our autocratic authority” (p. 79). The guided development of the decades to follow show that as socio-economic well-being and cultural aspirations grew, however haltingly, the political structure could not remain untouched. Or, put differently, the Ranas and the monarchy rule not only over the political sphere, but also the socio-economic and cultural domains. The cultural aspirations of the population demanded not only social and economic improvements, but also political power. This has the air of inevitability to it. And it is often in the contradictions of improvement that political openings are created, and indeed that spaces are formed for the ossification of political identities.

Whelpton begins the book with a rather static account of the various ethnicities in Nepal, and ends with a description of the Maoists and others who demand that the upper house of parliament be made into a House of Nationalities. The question of ethnicity for contemporary Nepal, in other words, is at center stage (the Madheshi struggle is one indicator of this). But why ethnicity? In the chapter on politics (p. 104), Whelpton tells us that the monarchy's Panchayati regime was not "simply a triumph for reactionary social classes. The monarchy was careful not to antagonize major vested interests, and power structures at village level largely retained their traditional shape, but some of the largest landowners saw their influence reduced and the position of tenants in the Kathmandu Valley was markedly improved." In the cultural chapter (p.183), we learn, "The pace of ethnic and caste mobilization increased markedly during the 1980s, partly because of the loosening of restraints on political activity but also because the government had itself been trying to enlist both ethnic minorities and lower-caste groups in support of the Panchayat system." What we learn from these two sentences is that the government provided a grammar for political activity that legitimized certain structures over others. As the monarchy attempted to seal its legitimacy through the ethnic and caste systems, it was in these spheres that people entered politics (the domain where their aspirations could be voiced). Neither the Congress nor the Communists, nor yet later the Maoists, could afford to ignore the caste and ethnicity questions, as they have not.

The 1990 victory decided only a small part of the political question, but the very ground that produced it (the socio-economic) was substantially unaddressed. Indeed, as Whelpton points out (p. 189), the Congress government went ahead with IMF type reforms against the very state institutions that created its own base. In 1991, Whelpton shows us (p. 127), between 7 and 9 million (out of 19 million) Nepalis could not cover their minimum daily caloric requirement. The austerity established by the Congress, and the lack of attention to this cataclysm by the main political parties opened the door not only to the Maoist insurgency, but also to the lack of faith in the system itself (apathy, individualism and nihilistic upward mobility are its cultural outcomes). The shenanigans of the Royal Palace are important, but not significant. Gyanendra, in line with Shamsher's warning, tried to put history in reverse; his attempt was doomed to failure. Whelpton's book ends on a theme of disappointment, when shortly after its publication events proved to be far more hopeful. It is to be seen if the parties (including the Maoists) are able to harness the dynamic against neo-liberalism, the current policy structure of global

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capitalism. It is a tall order, but necessary. Or else, as Whelpton's history shows us, they too are doomed to be overrun by the politics of the people.

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