

## Book Reviews

Gaura Prasai. 2068 v.s. *Merā Jivankā Pānā*. Lalitpur: Sajha Prakashan.  
Shanta Chaudhary. 2070 v.s. *Kamalaridekhi Sabhāsadsamma*. Kathmandu:  
Sangri~La Books.

### A Collective Review

Though this piece has been written by the two authors listed at the end, the review itself must be attributed to everyone who participated in Chaukath's Feminist Reading Group sessions on 20 June 2014 and 18 July 2014 where we discussed Gaura Prasai's *Merā Jivankā Pānā* (The Pages of My Life) and Shanta Chaudhary's *Kamalaridekhi Sabhāsadsamma* (From a *Kamalarī* to a Parliamentarian) respectively. Chaukath is a feminist collective in Nepal which looks at society, politics, and media through feminist lenses. Active since March 2013, one of Chaukath's regular activities is a monthly reading group session held at Martin Chautari in Thapathali, Kathmandu. There is no particular method to choose a book – all in the Nepali language barring one – for each session; the first few were picked by the Chaukath facilitator while subsequently suggestions came from other members of the group. Participants have been overwhelmingly women, usually social science students, academics, artists, and individuals working in non-governmental organisations. At the end of each two-hour session the group relocates to a nearby tea shop and, among other things, we talk about what book to read next.

Before presenting the collective views on the two books, we must address the question of why we have chosen to review them together. Prasai and Chaudhary are both members of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist), CPN (UML). Both have also served as members of the Constituent Assembly (CA) – Chaudhary in the first CA and Prasai in the second one. Both were nominated through the proportional representation system. Both these women, however, come from dramatically different social backgrounds in terms of ethnicity/caste, class, and geographical location. Their pathways into and immediate motivations for entering mainstream politics, and the CPN (UML) party specifically, were also very different.

Their motivations for writing their memoirs were also different, and the time-period, format, and issues discussed in the two books are worth exploring. Though the two memoirs were published within two years of each other, the

time period and thus the political and social moments they cover are chronologically and substantively quite different.

### **Two Women, Poles Apart**

Parsai's story is intertwined with the tumultuous times of what is known as the Jhapa Uprising – a guerrilla movement by what is now the CPN (UML) which was strongest in the eastern region especially in the district of Jhapa. From the details of family life given in her book, we know that Parsai's upper-caste family was not wealthy, but we can assume that it was a middle class village family – able to survive comfortably and prosper through farming their land. Parsai paints her father as a progressive man, who sent her to school and encouraged her to be physically strong; in page two of the book itself she says her father taught her how to wield a stick, jump, and climb. In 1972, when Parsai was 13-years old, her teacher was a man with strong communist sympathies. He – we are not sure if with the blessings of her father – sent Parsai and her friends out to do low-level party work. Perhaps the extent of her political commitment would have ended there. But things changed when Parsai heard rumours that her family was set to marry her off as the second wife of a much older man. Unwilling to marry, she defiantly ran away from home and went underground with the Jhapali guerrillas.

*Merā Jivankā Pānā* begins at this point, with the 13-year-old Parsai going underground. The rest of the book recounts her experiences 'underground' – the different places she travelled to and lived in while doing party work, descriptions of people she met along the way, her arrest and long incarceration, her release and subsequent illness, and her marriage and family life with a fellow cadre. The trajectory of Parsai's life – at least the years covered in this memoir – has been fundamentally shaped by politics, especially the ebb and flow of the Jhapa Uprising. Her memoir begins thus: "The country's situation was complex at that time. The dark Panchayat regime was in place. The educated and aware had their hands and mouths tied" (p. 1). But Parsai does not delve into the nuances of the Uprising or her role in the party in telling her story. What was her political trajectory? What positions did she hold in the party? What does she think of contemporary Nepali politics when compared to the values and vision of the Jhapa Uprising and the early years of the CPN (UML)? How did she rise and get to where she is now?

Parsai's motivation in writing this memoir is not to chronologically trace the achievements and trials of her life, it appears. Her book has no introduction, laying out her motivations for writing about her life. When she came to speak to the reading group (on 20 June 2014) she said the goal of her book was simply catharsis. It is clear that Parsai viewed that period of her life as one punctuated by stretches – some momentary, some extended – of suffering. She had written down her thoughts and experiences in that period, and the memoir is based on those notes without too much editing or organization. The memoir lays out Parsai's life story, with each chapter focusing on key locations and events. Parsai does not seem to particularly want to inspire other women and/or revolutionaries. She is also not interested in making a point about her political party or sharing her vision for the future. She seems only to want to note down the events and feelings of a particular period of her life, to allow others a window into her experiences so that there is a public accounting of her suffering and strength.

Chaudhary, meanwhile, has a mix of motivations for writing her memoir. In her preface, she notes that the idea of writing her life's story first came to her when she read Jhamak Kumari Ghimire's memoir, *Jivan Kāḍā Ki Phūl* (2067 v.s.). Ghimire, who has cerebral palsy, wrote the memoir with her foot. Chaudhary says Ghimire's sense that she herself could act despite such a debilitating disability touched her: though physically able, she too was born into great disadvantage. It is for this reason that she rejected offers to have her biography written, and chose to write herself – a skill she learnt only late in life. Alongside, Chaudhary also wanted to share the reality of bonded labor (the *kamalarī* practice) and landlessness, which is an experience of many Nepalis. The memoir, therefore, was born of both “desire and compulsion”.

Chaudhary's life too had no shortage of suffering – she was born into a Tharu family who had served as *kamaiyās* and *kamalarīs*, a bonded labor system widely practiced in the western plains districts, for generations. Attending school was unimaginable for Chaudhary, who started working at the home of landlords when she was nine years old. Chaudhary's descriptions of the brutalities of the *kamalarī* system are stark. But the book was not the first time she had shared these stories, which had already appeared in numerous media outlets since she became a member of the first CA in 2008.

In the book, she highlights her powerful resistance to both the landlords as well as to her own community and family who sought to prevent her activism.

She also, to our mind consciously, weaves her trajectory and contribution as an activist/politician into the book. She highlights her commitment to and organizing with the Land Rights Forum. She notes that she was responsible for lobbying to electrify her village. She justifies her support of the CPN (UML) as opposed to the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist): The CPN (UML) started social security programs during its reign in the mid-1990s, and she opposed the violence unleashed by the Maoists. And she stresses her work as the chairperson of the Committee on Natural Resources of the Parliament (2008-2012) – here she particularly emphasizes her lobbying for the rights to forests and other natural resources of landless people. She is also keen to emphasize her continuing commitment to freeing and empowering *kamalaris*.

Chaudhary's book is more overtly political than Parsai's. And we can perhaps trace two reasons for this. First, the political and social moment in which Chaudhary came into adulthood was very different from the one in which Parsai matured. After the first People's Movement in 1990, though deep and brutal inequalities remained, there was an opening up of space for organizing along different axes – ethnicity, language, religion, land. Chaudhary's entry into the CPN (UML) was through the issue of land reform and rights; this was an issue she understood well through experience. And the practice of village, and then district, level organizing provided space for her to gradually become well-versed in on-the-ground political organizing, rhetoric, and strategy. Parsai, meanwhile, only learnt of a broad and abstract class theory – the practical manifestations of which she had little real experience/understanding of. She was a small cog in a big, and little-understood, machine. Further, Chaudhary also benefited from the post-2006 (when the second People's Movement took place) spirit of inclusion, proportion representation, and reservations for the marginalized.

Second, one must also consider their futures within the party to understand the different spirits of their respective memoirs. That Parsai was elected through the proportional representation to CA II means that she continues to have some hold within the party. But she is by no means a high-profile politician – either within the party or in the public. At this relatively late stage in her career, it is unlikely that this will change. Chaudhary, meanwhile, is a rising force in the party. The chairpersonship of a Parliamentary committee was no trivial position. Subsequent to the release of her book, she was able to secure a ticket for a much-coveted first-past-the-post race in the elections to the second CA held in November 2013. She went on to lose that

election in her home district. Nonetheless, in a situation where most women cadres were shunted to the proportional representation list, it is a testament to both her skill and her ambition that she was able to secure that ticket. The memoir is, therefore, also a means of doing subtle political maneuvering – positioning herself just so in the eyes of both the voting public and the party leaders.

### **Two Women, Similar Concerns**

Despite the significant differences between the two women's personal and political backgrounds, the group discussion on the books revolved around similar issues. Specifically, three broad discussion themes emerged from both books. First, participants noted a stark dichotomy between the women's extraordinary strength in their public struggle as compared to their seeming helplessness within the home. Second, that the CPN (UML) did not provide adequate support to both women was noted. This is especially highlighted in Prasai's case; the then-underground party demanded great sacrifices of her, as they did of all cadres, but essentially abandoned her during her pregnancy and in providing childcare. The participants agreed that all political parties do not put resources into building the skills of their cadres, regardless of gender. But they especially lack any systems that allow women to continue their political careers once they marry and have children.

Third, the threat of sexual violence is a constant in both memoirs. This is a central theme for Prasai, who was abducted and sold to a brothel during her time as an underground revolutionary. This is, however, only the most traumatic of multiple cases of unwanted sexual attention and attempted rape by fellow comrades, the security forces, and a boss at the workplace. Throughout the book, Parsai's narrative is anchored to her experiences in the world due to two central identities – that of a woman and that of a leftist guerrilla. She herself highlights that she was made a target for sexual violence because of her these two identities, especially the former.

Chaudhary, meanwhile, puts less emphasis on sexual violence to herself. But such violence was by no means an anomaly in her community, she notes. *Kamalarī* women, as bonded laborers, were constantly at risk of being raped by their masters and the latter's sons. Such rapes were the norm in a situation where the power dynamics between landlord and bonded laborers were so uneven. And considering that entire Tharu families depended

on the whim of the landlords for survival, there was no question of any legal or financial recourse.

Within the framework of these three themes, the next section will delve deeper into the individual books. Considering the group's stated feminist agenda, the entry point into both books is Prasai's and Chaudhary's place in society as women. It is, however, evident that their very different caste/ethnic as well as class identities shape their experiences as women. The two authors themselves stress other identities – revolutionary, *kamalarī*, champions of social change, leftist politicians. Parsai, however, appears to have a complicated relationship with her identity as a woman and as a communist. While her memoir is filled with her experiences as a woman, in her theoretical rhetoric she adheres to a Marxist/leftist school of thought. Overall, both see themselves as working more with the issues prioritized by these identities rather than within the women-focused agenda that is also prominent in the Nepali public sphere.

This necessarily leads to a discussion, in the final section, about two weaknesses of the mainstream women's movement in Nepal. First, the movement is unable to account for the radically different experiences of womanhood encountered by Nepali women. Second, the movement has not put serious effort into establishing the home and family as a site of politics.

### **Politics of Family? Politics vs Family?**

During the discussion of *Merā Jivankā Pānā*, the general feeling in the room was one of dissatisfaction. Considering Prasai's trajectory from a young revolutionary in the heydays of the Jhapa Uprising to her current place in the CA, the group expected the memoir to be more politically nuanced. Undoubtedly, there was both empathy and respect for her struggles, political and personal. But there was distinct disappointment with Prasai's superficial engagement with the socio-economic issues underpinning the revolution. While the memoir records her constant movement back-and-forth between Nepal and India for her revolutionary work, there are no details on what this underground work consisted of. For instance, on page 88 there is a group photograph of women members of the revolution in Shillong, India. Prasai devotes that whole chapter to talking about her time in Shillong where she was organizing women. Yet, there is no mention of the actual day-to-day work or organizing, nor of the goals of the women's group.

How do we understand this lack? It could be that Prasai simply chose not to delve into these issues in her memoirs. When she attended the discussion session, Prasai said publishing the memoir was a cathartic act for her. If this was the goal, it is perhaps understandable that the nuances of political ideology took a backseat to her own experiences and feelings. Another explanation is that the majority of young cadres like Prasai lacked a proper political education. Prasai was but a teenager when she went underground, and she could only learn what the party taught her. As the memoir is based on her old notes, seemingly without adequate editing prior to publication, her youthful political naivety comes through.

While there was clear disappointment with her political understanding in the memoir, the group was surprised by her portrayal of herself within her marriage and home. Halfway through the book, Prasai marries another party cadre. In her own words, she sees the marriage as a means to protect herself against further sexual harassment. After this point, her characterization of herself changes. Formerly, she paints herself as a very active character; whether during her brief captivity in a brothel or her long incarceration in a Kathmandu jail for her political affiliations, her courage and rebellion do not falter. But after marriage and motherhood, she is frustrated and seemingly defeated.

There are two small, but telling examples of her consistent dissatisfaction with the dynamics of married domesticity. During her first pregnancy, a difficult one where she is constantly unwell, her husband is often away from home on party work. Due to implied issues with her in-laws, she lives alone while he is away. He suddenly appears at home one day. She asks him to stay with her, clearly seeking support during her difficult pregnancy. But he says he cannot do anything for her while party duty calls. He leaves soon after, but returns later that evening with a friend due to a road blockage en route. On their arrival, the pregnant and ill Prasai gets up to make them both a meal. In a book that has till that point been about rebellion and revolution, marked by acts of great courage, this unquestioning acceptance of a woman's role in the kitchen – despite serious illness – by all three revolutionaries in the scene stands out. Why did her husband and his comrade not think to cook a meal for the ill and pregnant Parsai? Why did Parsai find it impossible to ask them to cook themselves? Why does Parsai not reflect on the (in)appropriateness of this dynamic?

Left largely alone by her husband despite desiring otherwise, Prasai is equally abandoned by the party which appears to have done little to take the struggle into the homes and relationships of its cadres. There is no system in place to allow Prasai to remain politically engaged while raising her child. She is in a situation where she has to choose one or the other. In fact, Bam Dev Gautam – senior CPN (UML) leader and Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister in the current government – explicitly tells Prasai to choose between the party and her child. Prasai does challenge Gautam and the party by going underground with her child. But on reading her own story, she seems to have found herself unable to mount a strong resistance to the dynamics – one she is evidently dissatisfied with – she faced within the home as a wife, daughter-in-law, and mother.

The most recurring theme in Prasai's book is, however, that of sexual violence and sexual harassment. Indeed, the issue of sexuality seems to have shaped the trajectory of Parsai's life. In the first instance, she goes underground to escape an arranged marriage with a much older man. Later, she agrees to marry her husband as a means of protection against further sexual harassment. In between, and indeed even after her marriage, she constantly grapples with questions of how she should look or behave to prevent unwanted attention from men.

And yet, Prasai comes across as resistant to a radical change in gender relations. This is most starkly evident when, during her time in prison in Kathmandu, Prasai meets Nepali Congress leader Shailaja Acharya who was also a political prisoner. The latter engages Parsai in conversation about advocating for the right of Nepali women to be single mothers. Prasai responds, "You're trying to turn Nepali women into prostitutes. Instead of this, we should be fighting for women's freedom, independence, equality and ideals" (p. 65).

When Prasai came to the reading group towards the end of the session, we asked whether she continued to hold these views about a woman's right to have children outside of marriage. She responded that a woman should have the right, provided that she was able and willing to cope with the stigma that would inevitably follow. But she clarified by saying that while Nepali society was ready for a transformation of class relations, it was not yet time – nor was it as pressing – to bring radical changes to gender relations.

There is even less about gender relations on a systemic level in Chaudhary's book. Instead, her main concern is with the rights of the landless. This agenda



is consistent with her entry into political activism with the Land Rights Forum and her subsequent role as chairperson of the Parliamentary Committee on Natural Resources. Chaudhary is explicit in explaining that she chose to focus on land rights rather than women's right because the former issue lacked advocates while there were many others already working on the latter. This is an eminently convincing argument. But it does raise the question of why Chaudhary does not feel landlessness is a concern for the women's rights movement. This is especially so in a context where the mainstream women's movement has long fought for equal rights to ancestral property.

In Chaudhary too, we see a contrast between her relentless ferocity in taking on the feudal landlords against all odds to her seeming acceptance of abuse at home. As with Prasai, the threat of sexual violence also pervaded Chaudhary's life. She married to protect against rape by the landlords, she says. But she entered a marriage in which she faced physical and emotional abuse. Almost up to the point she became a CA member, her husband disapproved of her activism, forbade her from campaigning, abused her verbally, and even beat her, once breaking her arm on the suspicion of her seeing another man. Chaudhary herself says: "On the one hand was the workload I faced from the landowners, on the other hand was the abuse I faced at home. I suffered doubly" (p. 81). Why she tolerated it was a question the group spent some time with. Perhaps because she had nowhere else to go, was the suggestion. With all the energy she put into battling the oppressive *kamalari* system, perhaps an occasional beating seemed a far smaller problem.

This is not to say that Chaudhary did not resist within her home. When she first began her activism, the landlords were of course angry. Afraid of how this anger might affect them, Chaudhary's family and community consistently wished her to give up her work. But she refused. Sneaking around to attend meetings and protests was a regular part of her life. She also explicitly defied her husband when he forbade her to travel for a meeting of the National Land Rights Forum. And after she became the vice-chair of the National Land Rights Forum in Phagun 2064 v.s., there is a shift in the way she talks about her husband; "I sent him to work in Kathmandu" (p. 97) she notes.

In the group, there was a general sense of admiration towards Chaudhary. Her courage in the face of overwhelming odds, her tenacity in learning new things (to read and write, work a computer, and drive a car as soon as she had the opportunity), and her skill as an organizer were all applauded. But it is

not these traits that came to be recognized by her peers when she first entered the Constituent Assembly. One of her first experiences as a lawmaker was to have a female colleague point to her and comment: “Even such people are getting elected into the Constituent Assembly” (p. 109). Chaudhary went to the CA in 2008 wearing the only pair of clothes she had, and these clearly marked her as rural, poor, and not high-caste. She was mocked for this. Other CA members who were elected through the proportional system had similar experiences. They were called ‘thumb print’ members, dismissed because they were unable to read and write.

Chaudhary’s experiences in the CA led to a discussion about the need to challenge how capability is defined in politics. Chaudhary’s own capability has since been recognized by the party (as has been mentioned earlier, she was made chairperson of the Committee on Natural Resources and secured a much-coveted first-past-the-post ticket for the 2013 elections to CA II). But the initial dismissal based entirely on her dress and education points to the fact that ‘capability’ is often defined by the privileges of class, caste/ethnicity, and gender. This, in turn, becomes an entry point into opposing reservations and quotas which allow historically marginalized groups to enter national level politics. Indeed, it is a significant barrier to women’s entry into politics and their rise to decision-making positions.

### **Public, Private: Blurring the Lines**

What does these two women’s placing of a systemic overhaul of gender relations as a low priority tell us? First, the priorities of the two women are likely motivated by different factors. For Prasai, as for others seeped in classical Marxism, the gender imbalance will largely sort itself out once class relationships are reengineered. The party never strove to make the home a site of politics, either gradual or radical. For Chaudhary, her priorities are shaped by two decades of indignities suffered under a brutal system of near slavery. Ownership of land, access to crucial natural resources, and the right to dignified labor are more pressing than any woman-focused work.

Considering their individual trajectories, Prasai’s and Chaudhary’s priorities are understandable. But what does their perception of a woman’s agenda as distinct from the issues that occupy them say about the feminist movement in Nepal? This brought the group back to two long-standing and related critiques of the women’s movement in Nepal. First, the movement is exclusive, peopled largely by upper-caste and upper-class urban women.

Second, the day-to-day realities of women belonging to the lower classes and/or castes as well as marginalized communities are ignored by the movement led by the privileged. This is a reality, indeed has been a reality at least since the beginning of democratic Nepal in 1951. And this aspect of the mainstream movement has rightly been criticized for decades as well.

Meanwhile, rather surprisingly, the question of how women within the political parties – obviously capable, politically astute women such as Parsai and Chaudhary – can (re)shape the feminist movement is not asked very often. For considering their networks which are both broad and deep across Nepal's numerous faultlines, any mass-based movement to dramatically shift gender relations in Nepal must have the participation of the political parties, especially the women leaders and wings. And reading these two memoirs, it is evident that political women are well-placed to link the problems evident in both the politics of the nation and the politics of the home.

Political, and indeed other professional women in demanding jobs, often speak about the disadvantage they face in having to cook, clean, care of children while also working late hours in a competitive, male-orientated work place. But we see scant efforts by these women to collectively challenge the existing paradigms and politics of the home and family. There are no movements to organize women in calling for more equal division of housework, for example. Even for political, professional, and indeed activist women, the home remains an individual (and we all do mount notable personal negotiations) rather than a collective battle. That Nepal's women's movement has not attempted to collectively tackle the politics of the home perhaps explains the disjuncture between Parsai's and Chaudhary's politics and their lived experiences. The women's movement has done a great deal of politics around issues such as property, citizenship, and legal reform – all areas accepted as public and therefore political. Parsai and Chaudhary appear to support this politics; they are simply saying that they themselves are rooted in a different kind of politics. But because the women's movement has done little to make so-called private structures public, that the home is as much a site of collective politics as the street has not become an accepted norm in Nepali society.

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