

Krishna Hachhethu. 2015. *Trajectory of Democracy in Nepal*. New Delhi: Adroit Publishers.

The decade of the 1990s was an important period for Nepali politics as many important transformations took place in the decade including the re-practice of multi-party parliamentary democracy and the re-assertion of a civil society which was to play a crucial role in converting Nepal into a republic. One of the important features of the 1990s was the predominant role played by the parties in running the polity. This had significant meaning as there was to be a fundamental shift in the power structure from an absolute monarch heading a party-less Panchayat system to a multi-party parliamentary dispensation.

There have been works by different scholars on the period who have dealt with different aspects of democratization, economic development, and the role of civil society among others. One more work – *Trajectory of Democracy in Nepal* – by political scientist Krishna Hachhethu has now been added to this corpus. The articles in this book have been previously published in various publications and the author has put them together here, possibly for the benefit of readers who have not seen them before. For instance the chapters on the mass movement of 1990, the negotiations regarding the making of the 1990 Constitution and on the problem of governance were earlier published in the publications of the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS) of Tribhuvan University where the author worked as a researcher for a long time. Similarly, the chapters concerning elections, the parliament and the prime minister, the Maoist insurgency, the monarchy and its legitimacy crisis and those on local government and civil society have been earlier published by the Nepal Center for Contemporary Studies (NCCS), an academic NGO in Kathmandu with which Hachhethu is currently affiliated. The one on political parties was earlier published in the book *Resistance and the State: Nepalese Experiences* edited by David Gellner (2003).

A look at the articles suggests that the author has not given equal treatment to all of the subjects mentioned above. For instance while Hachhethu weaves through the negotiations of the 1990 Constitution making process, he fails to come strongly on the patronage culture perpetuated by the parties. A conceptual flaw of the author is reflective in his usage of the term democrats – in reference to Nepali Congress (NC) – and communists to refer to the parties on the left of the political spectrum. The author offers no justification for the use in the academic sense, even though the terms are in vogue at the popular level. Hachhethu must have surely known that it was the NC-led government of Sher Bahadur Deuba that had recommended the dissolution of the then House of Representatives in 2002.

In offering an analysis of the making of the 1990 Constitution, the author points out the actors involved along with describing various events that occurred during the mass movement. But, he fails to provide a link between that movement and the subsequent developments that led to the transformation of Nepal as a republic. Publishing a book on the 1990s in the post-republic period and that too while a new constitution was being negotiated would demand an explanation of those linkages from the author.

The negotiation process related to the drafting of the 1990 Constitution is fascinating. There were many ups and downs as major stakeholders concerned pushed through their respective position. The author does a good work of bringing to light the complex process and the positions of the key actors – NC, United Left Front (ULF) and the monarch. The 1990 Constitution changed the power structure of Nepali polity as it initiated the process of legitimizing political parties, who were until then banned. It also reduced the role of the monarch from being an absolute ruler to a constitutional one. Therefore the then monarch Birendra Shah initially pushed for an accommodative model whereby he wanted the parties to join the Panchayat government, a position untenable to the political parties. NC was pitching for a constitutional monarchy and multi-party democracy, which ultimately became the framework for the 1990 Constitution. The ULF on its part had pushed for the abolition of all Panchayat institution in addition. Hachhethu further points out how the members of NC and royal representatives in the Constitution Drafting Commission had their way in granting privileges to the monarch, something opposed by the ULF. The author, however, doesn't deal with the role played by the chairman of the Commission, Bishwonath Upadhyay. Upadhyay had a crucial role in the

making of the 1990 Constitution. In particular he had warned King Birendra not to push the interests of the monarchy too hard as that could jeopardize the longevity of the institution itself.

Hachhethu talks about three ds: deideolization, delinking and disintegration of political parties. These concepts portray a formative transformation undergone by the parties. The parties began as oppositional movements to the Panchayat regime. But after acquiring power they became closer to the state mechanisms and confined themselves within the power corridors at the center. Thereby, the parties delinked and slowly distanced themselves from their respective constituencies. An important hallmark of the party system in the decades of the 1990s and afterwards was the tendency of 'catch all' individuals irrespective of their ideological positioning. The tendency of parties to induct members of the former regime contributed to deideolization. The deideolization happened not just at the party level but was also reflective in the various policies undertaken by the successive governments who pursued a neoliberal policy of deregulation and excessive privatization under pressure from multilateral agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Distribution of patronage and perks from the leaders forms another important theme of the 1990s. The culture of patronage by successive governments has to be understood in relation to the tendency of creating narrow coteries which ensures regime survival both at the level of the government and in the central structures of the political parties. But Hachhethu doesn't do justice to the theme as he misses out on the idea of a professional salaried class in politics that emerged out of this culture.

The relationship of the parties with their elected representatives including the members of the cabinet is another area dealt with in the book. The author shows how the 1990 system did not help to create institutions of parties both within and without the Parliament as those in the executive felt threatened from their rivals within their own parties. Therefore party committees prevailed at times over the parliamentary structures of the parties. Also the chapter on the party system doesn't identify the vicious triangular relationship established between the party, NGOs and trade unions especially in the case of the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML) which has used the mechanism for its cadre management.

The election system is also a crucial area of inquiry in this book. In particular the fact that Nepal had adopted a first-past-the-post system (which

has also been dubbed as ‘winner take all’) has been at the heart of the political and social conflicts as this system failed to secure the representation of marginalized groups in the Parliament. Hachhethu points out the inner working of the parties in selecting the candidates and managing the dissidents. The CPN-UML, according to Hachhethu, sent disgruntled leaders to the cabinet as a mechanism of assuaging the aggrieved within its party.

The book talks of the crucial development of the 1990s, namely, the monarchy and its crisis. Hachhethu traces the crisis of monarchy to the royal move of 2002 when then King Gyanendra dismissed the elected Prime Minister Deuba. But his premise of identifying the crisis of monarchy is faulty as one can trace the roots to the fag-end of the Panchayat in the late 1980s which saw serious differences between the elected and nominated *Pañcas*, aiding the eventual downfall of that System. This heralded the coming in of multi-party democracy, which in itself weakened the link between the monarchy and its supportive institutions – Hindu religion, Nepali language and prescribed attires – which contributed to the abolition of the monarchy itself.

The chapter on the Maoist insurgency is also weak as it offers mere superficial description and does a flimsy analysis of the impact the movement has had. In particular there is very little on the ethnicity, nationality and linguistic fronts as mobilized by the Maoist party. The author has not made substantive effort even to delve into the works referred to by himself such as *Understanding the Maoist Movement of Nepal* edited by Deepak Thapa (2003). This work has made serious attempts to deal with the aspects of ethnicity and language, among others, of the Maoist movement. The chapter on civil society too has very little to offer in terms of insights.

On the whole, the book is a half hearted attempt to understand the period between 1990 and 2005. In particular there should have been a separate chapter on developments after Nepal became a republic in the form of lessons to be learnt from the preceding period or this could have been discussed in an extended introduction to the book which it lacks. Also a separate chapter on civil-military relation and the Nepal Army is desirable as that institution’s role in shaping democracy has been important. Many of the themes treated in this book should be dealt with in greater detail since critical readings of the 1990s are important for the future of Nepal as a republic.

## References

Gellner, David, ed. 2003. *Resistance and the State: Nepalese Experiences*. Delhi: Social Science Press.

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