

Binod Pokharel, Janak Rai and Mukta Singh Lama Tamang, eds. 2016. *Nepali Anthropology: New Direction and Contributions (Seminar Proceedings)*. Kirtipur: Central Department of Anthropology, Tribhuvan University.

The book is a collection of papers presented at a national seminar under the same title, “Nepali Anthropology: New Direction and Contributions.” The seminar was organized by the Central Department of Sociology/ Anthropology at Tribhuvan University in February 2015, in the eve of the formation of an independent department of anthropology after its 34 years of joint journey with sociology. “Nepali anthropology” here means “a body of work by anthropologists in and from Nepal” (p. 1), thus, all the authors of the volume are either teaching at or attained their degrees at the department, which has been practically a sole center for anthropological research and education in Nepal. The volume is an endeavor by its key players “to prove once again” that Nepali anthropology is relevant, locally as well as internationally, in terms of its academic contributions as well as social engagements.

The first part of the book consists of four papers charting out the discipline’s past and future: “Anthropological Tradition in Nepal: History and Practices” (by Dilli R. Dahal), “Teaching Anthropology in Nepal: A Critique and a Proposal” (by Laya Prasad Uprety and Binod Pokharel), “Environmental Issues and Teaching Ecological Anthropology at Tribhuvan University” (by Man Bahadur Khattri) and “Nepal School of Anthropology: Emerging Issues and Future Directions” (Mukta S. Tamang, Suresh Dhakal and Janak Rai). The rest of the book consists of thirteen papers (bundled into five parts) which showcase various research interests in the discipline today: “Conversion to Christianity through Labor Migration and Globalization” (by Indra Bahadur Rakhali), “Conversion, Crisis of Sociability and Reframing *Jati* Identity among the Santhal Community of Eastern Tarai” (by Lagan

Rai), “Delineating Territory: Local Narratives and Practices” (by Jiban Mani Poudel), “*Pellam*: A Cultural Way of Making Yamphu Themselves Self-sovereign People” (by Hom Prasad Rai Yamphu), “Everyday Life of Betel Nut Carriers: State and Border in the Eastern Nepal” (by Anup Rai), “Medical Anthropological Researches and Public Health Policy Development in Nepal” (by Prakash Upadhyay), “Traditional Healing Practices among the Hyolmo: A Case Analysis from Helambu, Sindhupalchok” (by Ram Hari Dhakal), “Dimensions and Dynamics of Categorization of People in Nepal” (by Pradeep Acharya), “Ethnic Movement and Ethnic Identity Construction Process in Nepal” (by Shyamu Thapa Magar), “Cultural Loss and Uncertain Cultural Identity: An Ethnographic Study of Bhutanese Refugee Camp” (by Rudra Aryal), “Practice of Democracy and Justice in Simple Society: Can We Learn Lesson from the Kisan Community of East Nepal?” (by Shambhu Prasad Kattel), “Experiencing Urbanism: A Case of Putalibazaar Municipality and Waling Municipality, Syangja” (by Amrit Kumar Bhandari), and “Peasantry Transformation through Development: An Anthropological Study of the Newar Peasants of Khokana” (by Vishnu Prasad Acharya).

Let us observe the present state of “Nepali anthropology” through those thirteen papers pursuing particular research interests. These rather limited “samples” are, of course, far from enough to make any fair generalizations on the discipline. However, they merit special consideration, given the fact that the discipline’s protagonists themselves selected the papers presumably for the very purpose of representing its present state. Space constraint does not allow discussing each paper, one by one; let me argue some important points by touching on some noticeable examples.

One thing you encounter among these papers is the tendency to reify the population category under study, often times fixed on the level of *jāti* or *jāti*-like population (Yamphu, Hyolmo, Bhutanese refugees, Kisan, etc.). Sweeping descriptions/generalizations are often times made on the population at the cost of underplaying its internal diversity and shared characteristics beyond that population. Admittedly, it is not always the case, though—the paper on Santhal, for example, is a case in point, where the very fluidness and complexities of *jāti* boundary is delicately presented.

Related to this is a more general problem in the ways to substantiate arguments with data. Take the discussion of “democracy” in Kisan community, as an example. In the paper, such statements are made as “the

political organization of the Kisan...ensures the rights, choice and freedom of each community member and in addition special attention is given to the poor, marginalized, women, senior and physically challenged members of the community” (p. 410) or “no discrimination, bias and prejudices are heard in the implementation of laws by the Kisan authority” (p. 411). Unfortunately, data presented to substantiate these arguments are, virtually, none; instead, you actually learn of the facts that seem to *refute* those arguments. To mention only one of them, while it is affirmed that women are allowed to participate in public meetings or access judicial processes without any gender bias in one place, in other places we are told that participation of women in public occasions is nominal—the fact ascribed to “traditional socio-cultural values” by the author (p. 415). The only fact presented to support his argument for democracy was that the author encountered not a single appellant who appealed against the judicial decision made in the traditional court. While he regarded that as a proof for everybody’s satisfaction for the political order there, I would rather not take it that way; the fact may well show something quite the opposite, that is, the *undemocratic* nature of Kisan community where raising voice against authority is too difficult to push through. After all, democracy is a thing that would *embrace* its participants’ challenges, if it truly deserves to be called a “democracy.”

Similarly, some papers appear to casually squeeze their generalizations out of data without considering other possibilities seriously. Let us see the argument related to the Bhutanese refugees. The paper discusses their socio-cultural conditions in the camps in contrast to their past in Bhutan. Change in livelihood away from agriculture, transition to “love marriage,” increasing predominance of nuclear family, waning respect for elders, discontinuation of traditional healing practice, etc. are observed, which the author summarizes as their “cultural loss” due to the unusual living situation in the refugee camp in Nepal. Prolonged living in a camp is certainly an unusual, and probably not favorable situation for anybody to go through, and such living might well lead to experiences of sufferings, anxieties, or feeling of “loss.” However, when refugees from diverse backgrounds congregated in a camp for so many years, it may well have led to the formation of *new* Bhutanese refugees’ culture—the possibility the author has neglected. Alternatively, those noted changes have been observed in many parts of the world (in non-refugee situations) since at least the twentieth century, and have been generally deemed to be elements

of “cultural transformation” driven by “modernization.” The author could have chosen to argue in this line, which he did not.

Some papers simply appear founded not on data, but on the authors’ preconceived convictions so much so that the paper can look like a piece by an (ethnic or whatever) activist, rather than by an academic. One case in point is the paper on Yamphu people. Seemingly anxious to prove they are “sovereign people to their land,” the author explores their oral tradition that lays out how their ancestors arrived and occupied their present land as first settlers. After all, what that oral tradition proves is not the fact that Yamphu *are* the “sovereign” people but the fact that some Yamphu people (the specialists of the oral tradition) *think* they are “sovereign” based on that tradition. The line in-between might be thin but crucial, for the paper to count as an academic one.

Beyond these weaknesses, however, some really important points have also been raised. To name only a few, these include the so-far neglected effects of out-migration on the conversion to Christianity, profound impact of party politics on ethnic activism, or unexpected ways how “peasantry” life changes as well as continues—they keep cultivating the very land they sold, for example—in the outskirts of contemporary Kathmandu.

Let us now get to the first part of the volume, that is, a review of research and teaching practices in Nepali anthropology. Together, these papers turn out to present a rare in-depth reflection that only those intimately involved in its practice can offer. While some points might well be glimpsed by us outsiders as well, we would dare not judge on that kind of matters—simply because we are outsiders. The papers point out practices that lead to a systematic undermining of the standards of academic performance in the discipline, such as academic post allocation along political party affiliation, lack of commitment for teaching in general and the existence of “feudalism” or academic “sharecropping” in particular (namely, senior faculty make junior faculty check students’ exam papers), illicit “copy and paste” being rampant even in dissertation writing, and the non-existence of reading and writing culture. On the discipline’s “practical, problem-oriented nature,” its “passionate love affair with development” cemented when it was introduced “as a discipline with a greater relevance and usefulness for Nepal’s development” by Dor Bahadur Bista and others is singled out as a determinant. While being practice-oriented is nothing to be condemned in itself, when it goes so far as that anthropologists regard academic work

as something “to be done when one is free from consultancy projects” (p. 117), its effects on the discipline are naturally devastating. The effects are comprehensively laid out: students (or even teachers) generally are prone to have problems in such academic procedures as “problematization,” building “theoretical/conceptual framework,” “analysis,” “interpretation,” and “writing conclusions” (p. 79).

After all, the reviewer’s criticism against individual research papers above turned out to have already been mapped out in the first part, if in flatly generalized terms. The authors put their (predecessors’) practices on the table to excavate realities that are not always pleasant to face: they pointed to their achievements along with their failures and weaknesses, and in doing so, they indicate ways in which weaknesses might be rectified. As long as you find this attitude to reflect, criticize and work on one’s own, Nepali anthropology will make its way forward. This volume is a milestone for its journey to come.

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