

Taralal Shrestha. 2017. *Bandipurdekhi Bandipursamma*. Kathmandu: Discourse Publications.

This 343-page book is written in Nepali and consists of twelve chapters. It portrays the dynamic life of electrical engineer Balaram Pradhan. He was also a businessman, industrialist, contractor, hydropower expert, and activist. The book memorializes a person who, otherwise, most would not know even though Pradhan devoted his life to developing Nepal's hydropower sector. The book highlights Pradhan's role in developing hydropower tunneling in Nepal, as well as numerous power plants. From harnessing electricity through Nepal's first tunnel route, he also led many organizations. Through his career Pradhan provided leadership to the Butwal Power Company (BPC) and Interkraft Norway as well as acting as energy advisor to the Norwegian embassy in Nepal, and serving in the steering committee of the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA).

Taralal Shrestha's biography tells Balaram Pradhan's life story within the context of Nepali social history. The book also integrates the professional with the personal—his mother's early death and his early life with his aunt and extended family, his migration from Bandipur to Chitwan and Butwal, his education, his marriage and family life. The latter part of the book documents hydropower development in Nepal through different projects to which Pradhan contributed. It highlights Pradhan's life-long working relationship and close friendship with Norwegian electrical engineer Odd Hoftun who trusted Pradhan fully. This book presents rich information on the history of different hydropower projects thereby educating a reader with no background in the hydropower sector.

The first chapter—"Bandipur during Those Times"—that details Bandipur from socio-historical and cultural perspectives, is written in a lively, colorful, and interesting manner. During the Rana era, Bandipur was a commercial center and a travel route for people from Tahanu, Lamjung, Manang, Mustang, Kaski, Gorkha, and Dhading. All manner of highland goods—from mastiff dogs to animal skins and bear gall bladders—were available in its markets. Originally inhabited by Magar and Gurung communities, Newar and Chhetri merchants slowly displaced indigenous populations. Shrestha also includes descriptions of Bandipur's colorful festivals and cultural history.

Bandipur was also a place of political activities. Bandipur citizens were determined to open a library because public education was not provided by Rana rulers. Bandipur's first library—called Bhanu Pustakalaya—was built in the year of Balram Pradhan's birth (2000 v.s.). However, in order to please Padma Shamsher Rana, its name was later changed to Padma Library. Opening the library was still a challenge since rumors spread that the library harbored many leftist books. Later, the anti-Rana nationalist movement in other parts of the country also led to organized opposition in Bandipur. In Māgh 2007 authorities shot six protesters while another two went missing.

Pradhan studied in a traditional school where classes were taught outdoors. Schools did not receive support from the Rana rulers. Only one teacher taught there. He was paid thirty rupees a month through money contributed by the community.

Chapter Two illustrates how Pradhan's family resettled in Chitwan and how he completed high school there. The section "Love and Studies" reads like a novel and highlights the love story of Balram Pradhan and Tara Piya Pradhan—how they met while she was Balram's student and how they eventually married in spite of initial opposition from her family. Love letters from Balram to Tara lend a romantic character to the book. Later Balaram passed college with distinction from Banaras Hindu University.

The chapter "Electricity in Batauli" is loaded with many details. It chronicles how the Pradhans moved to Butwal to get started with his work. They stayed in a simple hut. Adjustment was difficult for Tara initially since she was brought up in an affluent family. Balaram was busy working all the time. The chapter also provides an account of what Butwal was like historically.

The book presents interesting facts about the United Mission to Nepal (UMN), the Christian aid and development organization. In 1958 Odd Hoftun came to Nepal through UMN to construct a hospital in Tansen. Nepal was a Hindu kingdom and King Mahendra's government worked to contain Christianity by prohibiting missionary activity and conversion and imprisoning pastors. Hoftun believed that providing aid through professional training and helping Nepalis through industrial development could fulfill the objectives of Christian missionaries. In 1963 there was an agreement between UMN and the Nepal government to open a technical institute that would help industrial development. That is how Butwal Technical Institute (BTI) was established and, around it, many other institutions developed subsequently.

The invaluable contribution of visionary Odd Hoftun is well acknowledged in the book. He established early electrical infrastructure in Butwal through the Tinau Hydropower Project. Pradhan had just finished his studies in Banaras and returned to Nepal. Even though there were other foreign engineers already working in BPC, Hoftun appointed Pradhan, the Nepali engineer, as assistant director. The chapter highlights how the Tinau Hydropower Project started in 2025 v.s. Both Hoftun and Pradhan believed that hydropower plants should be built in a cost-effective manner in order to make electricity affordable for use in rural areas.

After handing over the Tinau Project to the government upon its completion, Pradhan left BPC voluntarily to start his own business and ventured into different entrepreneurial undertakings for sometime. Some years later, Hoftun was looking for a project manager for the Jhimruk Hydropower Plant. When Hoftun requested Pradhan to consider the position, Pradhan accepted what turned out to be a challenging assignment. The book describes how Jhimruk became controversial as it affected the locals and the environment. Because the Jhimruk plant diverted water from the Jhimruk River to the Madi River, power production caused problems for those living below the intake, who in turn caused problems for the power plant. Eventually electricity production had to be stopped sometimes during the dry season in order to provide water for irrigation downstream.

With tensions already high, Jhimruk became a favorite target for attacks during the “people’s war” after 1996. There were tensions between locals and management because of power cuts. Baram Pradhan opposed such cuts because it was against the understanding between locals/consumers and the project. It was not a part of the contract when the project was set up. The plant was also bombed by the Maoists during the insurgency leading to extensive damage. However, the Jhimruk Hydropower Project, started during the Panchayat era, withstood the Maoist insurgency, and subsequent political turmoil and transition.

Chapter Eight describes in detail the privatization of BPC despite Hoftun’s and Pradhan’s opposition (as they viewed electricity to be a public good). Nevertheless, it made sense to privatize BPC given NEA’s dismal performance once it had taken over the company. Pradhan wanted BPC to end up in good hands. He wanted investors he knew to buy the company since BPC meant a lot to him. The chapter reports the controversy surrounding

the tenders that were floated, how tenders were called and canceled, and competition between different interested parties.

Chapter Nine highlights the disappointment and frustration Pradhan faced as he witnessed inefficiencies and corruption in the hydropower sector. As a member of the NEA steering committee, he shouldered major responsibilities. He was disappointed seeing so much load shedding (power cuts) and corruption, for which NEA was notorious. Even though his younger son Dhiraaj was also an electrical engineer, Pradhan was not interested in investing in the hydropower sector as he viewed it more as a “service sector.” Dhiraaj quotes his altruistic father who emphasized frequently:

One should make good use of “water resources.” A Nepali expert is very important for the country. If hydropower plants are not constructed properly, the country will face big losses. We should not be the investors. Investing in rivers and making profits only will not make you happy and peaceful. We will feel much more happy and satisfied if we can help others. (p. 208)

The chapter “Later Imaginings” narrates how Pradhan dreamt of the Melamchi Drinking Water Project. The Nepal government had set forth a plan to divert water from the Melamchi River to address Kathmandu’s water demands. Many donors also showed interest in the plan. The Norwegian Agency for Development (NORAD) offered funding for the project contingent upon BPC’s involvement but the proposal was not approved despite BPC’s extensive tunneling experience and Pradhan’s intensive lobbying efforts. This saddened him. The chapter further discusses Pradhan’s associations with Hydro Lab, Geotechnical Lab, and Wasserkraft Volk.

Toward the end of the book, Shrestha shows how Balaram Pradhan’s heart did not leave Bandipur even though he had sold his property there. The book depicts how Bandipur developed into a tourist destination, how the orchid track was discovered, and Pradhan’s insistence on paving the bazaar and making it a car-free zone. Pradhan returned to Bandipur after a seven-year gap only when the bazaar became a car-free zone. Though largely apolitical in terms of party alliances, Balaram Pradhan had political aspirations later in life. Bandipur-born residents living in Kathmandu registered an organization named the Bandipur Youth Association for Social Service in 2043 v.s. Pradhan decided to run for the position of president of the Bandipur Social

Development Committee, despite many advising against it. He lost the election but was happy to have contested.

Chapter 12, “The Final Sleep,” dramatically describes Balaram Pradhan’s death on Māgh 15, 2072. He passed away alone on a cold winter day due to heart failure. The depiction of the maid finding him lifeless and the shock faced by his wife and son’s family who were in the US at the time evokes sympathy in the reader. Tara’s account of sadness and remorse at not being with her husband in his final hour is very poignant and touching. Pradhan had come full circle, hence the title *Bandipurdekhi Bandipursamma* (From Bandipur to Bandipur). His heart stayed in Bandipur till the end although his wish to return to Bandipur did not materialize.

Taralal Shrestha’s biography creatively blends biographical data with evocatively portrayed context. One feels one is reading a novel sometimes, and a research-based book at other times. The author has interviewed many people, has travelled to most of the places he has written about, and has used secondary references, all important facets of research. Therefore most of the information, including some historical facts, are derived from interviews. Hence, a research scholar might perceive a lack of sufficient references to primary documentation as a shortcoming.

From a gender perspective, women feature in Pradhan’s personal life only within the domestic realm following the “male breadwinner” sociological family model. Tara Piya Pradhan’s contribution as homemaker, wife, and mother of three allowed Balaram Pradhan to work uninterruptedly and pursue a successful career. The book also shows how the hydropower sector is a male domain as there are no references to women in Pradhan’s (and Hoftun’s) professional world.

This book, although long, has universal appeal. Its simple, descriptive, and engaging writing style makes it easy to read and is recommended for any interested reader. Finally, in purchasing the book, one can support a good cause. The proceeds from the sales fund scholarships in the Bhanu Madhyamik Vidyalaya in Bandipur, the school where Balaram Pradhan hoped to teach voluntarily after his retirement.

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