

Mallika Shakya. 2018. *Death of an Industry: The Cultural Politics of Garment Manufacturing during the Maoist Revolution in Nepal*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Death of an Industry: The Cultural Politics of Garment Manufacturing during the Maoist Revolution in Nepal charts the nebulous genealogy of the rise and fall of garment manufacturing industry in Nepal during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Shakya situates this book in a medley of theoretical discourses: critique of neoliberal economics, postcolonial politics of development, cultural politics of embeddedness, and “writing” ethnography of institutional histories. Deeply informed by a decade’s worth of multi-sited fieldwork, Shakya weaves in the stories of three key factories—Arya Nepal, Adam & Eve Boutique (A&E), and Swakan-Chhemu—along with various local and global entities like the Garment Association of Nepal (GAN), General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions (GEFONT), and International Monetary Fund (IMF), to present a tapestry of Nepali “industrial ecosystem” nested within complex designs of a global industrial landscape. The spatial “industrial ecosystem” capaciously entails both the broader workings of Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA) and Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and the everyday lexicon of a garment factory shop floor

and unions. This enables a sound understanding of the intricate and frayed encounters of the Nepali nation-state with the global market. The book successfully unravels the myths around the death—and its many synonyms: crisis, collapse, decline, and failure—of an industry that was located at the cusp of an emergent labor consciousness and subjectivity intersecting with class, caste, ethnicity, gender and the geo-political state.

The book is divided into seven chapters; the introduction and conclusion serve as conceptual bookends to help theorize industry, development, and nationhood. The introduction grapples with untangling the perceived dichotomy between economy and society which harkens back to the disciplinary chasm between economics and anthropology. Shakya proposes “industrial ecosystem” model as an alternative—firmly rooted in Polanyian discourse on embeddedness—that accounts for the complex web of interrelations and linkages between various actors and troubles the binaries. However, even in the chaos and crises, her conceptualization of the ecosystem is still imagined as cohesive, strategic, and linked. Is there a possibility that the system has components that are elusive and ephemeral? In later chapters, the author does hint at it through her engagement with the cosmologies that the interlocutors are embedded in, but it does not receive central focus in this work.

In the second chapter, the author formalizes three major waves of industrialization in Nepal from the 1930s to late 1990s to show the historical underpinnings of the economic ebbs and flows of Nepali society. She also discusses the early Marwari traders who entered Nepal in the 1850s who briefly feature in her later discussions on the geo-political pressures of border relations and labor migration. Deceptively short, this chapter helps understand how the category of “garment” is embroiled in the cultural politics of deciding the scales and degrees of how “competitive,” “productive,” and “lucrative” a nation-state is. Shakya argues that the hegemonic “global-macro perspective” delegitimizes the intimate everyday experiences of people backstage who actually keep the factories running. The resounding silence in the regional and global scholarship around Nepal’s tumultuous experience of the depoliticizing developmental discourse and practice is broken by the author’s centering of the shop floor and union ethnographies of Nepal. However, this section could have used a more in-depth engagement with feminist and gender scholarship so as to unpack the very stable notion of “labor” imagined in garment industries. Shakya briefly discusses how the

garment industry labor, the laboring bodies, and the regulating institutions and policies are very much gendered but then promptly moves away from it. Shakya's work is able to evoke the anxieties of an industry that is constantly making claims and counter-claims to be legitimate. However, this affect can be further examined to unpack the heteronormative and patriarchal anxieties of various nation-states when it comes to economic progress, efficiency, and growth.

The third chapter works towards spatializing the readymade garment clusters in Kathmandu to understand the local and global "channels of connections" that include trade ports and policies, laboring and lobbying bodies, and moral standards curbing exports and exploits. However, Shakya does not fully operationalize this spatial rendering of cultural politics which begs for further explication throughout the book. The author illustrates how Kathmandu transformed from "a fertile agricultural precinct" to "an industrial hub" in the span of a decade or two. The garment industry in Nepal emerged alongside MFA—a quota system born out of the American labor movement in 1974 and expected to expire in 2004—which regulated the exact number of garment pieces to be exported to the US from "third world" nations including Nepal. The imminent expiration of MFA cast a looming shadow over the industry, making its future both foreseeable yet inaccessible to those invested in this project at various capacities. Shakya situates the establishment of GAN in 1987 amid this ambiguity that further complicated its priorities and possibilities.

GAN effectively became a contested and contesting terrain of power among both elite and marginal individuals and groups from various ethnic backgrounds. She suggests that GAN was fractured across lines of ethnic and community identity politics. Shakya focuses on an important bifurcation in the industry between mass versus craft manufacturing groups: Arya-Nepal being former and A&E and Swakan-Chhemu being latter. The ethnographies show that these groups were cognizant of this divide because their demands (or lack thereof) from GAN and the state was guided by this awareness. Factories like Arya-Nepal taking on large-scale, pre-designed orders could not exercise originality or ownership when it came to production while A&E and Swakan-Chhemu flourished as they were able to strategically use "local designs" to promote their products as authentic. The fifth chapter presents a cosmology of sacred and secular measures, in particular conducting rituals to ward off *daśā* and restructuring office management teams to make sense of

the crises. Throughout the book, the temporality of the industry holds deep credence. However, the author does not analyze this explicitly.

The sixth chapter presents garment workers in Nepal as *bhuktabhogīs* (sufferers) of neoliberalism. She points to two major ways in which the concerns of workers and unions of the industry were delegitimized by framing the industry itself as “not real” and “not Nepali.” These allegations made it convenient to ignore the crisis, prematurely mourn the death of the industry, and generate an exodus of migrant laborers post-MFA. She points out how the muddy terrain of unionization of the industry provided political opportunities for both Maoists and the democrats to push their own agendas; one calling for “a complete overhaul of the labour Union mechanism” and the other calling “for an end to labour anarchy” (p. 116). In both cases, none of them addressed the anxieties of an industry that was placed at the brink of non-relevance from the very onset of the project.

Although the book places the Maoist revolution as a critical node in the cultural politics of garment industry, Shakya presents it as a mere interlude and does not fully capture how the politics of working-class uprising taken up by the Maoists intersect or diverge from the everyday experiences and struggles of the garment factory workers. Shakya’s discussion of the potential subalterneity presented by the case of *tol sudhār samiti* in Gwarko in Lalitpur who have a relatively peaceful labor relations could have been given more significant attention to enhance the author’s concept of the complexities of an industrial ecosystem. The final chapter reiterates that the Nepali garment industry was “neither purely economic nor purely cultural but rather an amalgamation of these and more” (p. 127). She revisits Chhote, the proprietor of A&E in the aftermath of MFA and presents to us an enduring narrative of the afterlife of the supposed “death.” Chhote is shown navigating the shifting economic and cultural terrain of business and trade in Kathmandu. Both Shakya and Chhote find themselves in the rhetoric of “new Nepal” which is still deeply entrenched in the old one of development and efficiency. Shakya ends the book with a question about whether a cultural and political synthesis is possible out of this “new” condition and imagination of development.

Shakya’s foray into the tenuously chartered terrain of economic anthropology in Nepal is impressive in both depth and breadth. Despite the book’s modest length, it covers a gamut of historical and ethnographic materials from the field. Overall, *Death of an Industry* provides a compelling narrative and an intimate understanding of the everyday negotiations and

navigations by the agents within the industrial ecosystem of Nepal. This book makes a very important contribution to a scholarship that is yet to be explored and is an inspiration to emerging scholars looking to conduct critical ethnographies in Nepal.

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