

Binda Pandey. 2019. *Women in Nepali Politics: Looking through Feminist Perspective*. New Delhi: Adarsha Books.

Nepal has made incredible progress in increasing political participation of women since the first election of the Constituent Assembly in April 2008. That election brought 33.2 percent women to the forefront of Nepali politics. Despite these visible changes in Nepali politics, there has been less introspection on women's position within political parties. In this context, *Women in Nepali Politics* by Binda Pandey fills the gap. The review will explore Pandey's approach to executing this challenging mission.

This book is an adaptation of the author's PhD research at the School of Education, Kathmandu University. The book is 288 pages long and is divided into nine chapters. The book pioneers in looking at gender policies and their implementation by one of the leading political parties in Nepal. The research is informed by three interrelated questions: 1) How are gender issues reflected within policies; 2) To what extent have these policies been implemented; and 3) What are the causes and effects behind non-implementation? Though the

research is based on the policy and practice of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist, CPN-UML), the findings offer general insights on Nepali women's political engagement. Pandey's research objective is informed by her personal standpoint and claim that CPN-UML is one of the most progressive political parties, which has prioritised issues of gender equality within its party mechanism.

In the introduction Pandey discusses what motivated her to pursue her research on Nepali women in politics. The chapter also provides a brief overview of the institutional efforts that CPN-UML has made to institutionalize gender equality within the party. In the second chapter, "Connecting with the History," the author reviews the history of the global feminist movement and presents the structure of her research in the form of a mind map. In the following two chapters, the author discusses the history of Nepali women's political engagement in struggles for democracy within Nepal. The fifth chapter explores the history of CPN-UML, women's role within the party and the process of developing the Institutional Gender Agenda in 2005. Pandey claims the latter to be a pioneering effort among political parties in Nepal. The findings of her research are presented in chapters seven and eight. The remaining two chapters consolidate the findings, discuss implications and offer recommendations. The remainder of this review discusses some unique insights offered by the book followed by a critique.

Reflecting on her own experience, Pandey discusses how her engagement in student politics beginning from the 1980s, was inspired by the slogan of "no discrimination between men and women" (p. 3). The author finds herself disillusioned and confused and admits to being "very much confused and puzzled seeing the gap between the spirit of the slogan and the practice" (p. 3). This puzzlement is evident when she reminisces how the euphoria of the success of the people's movement in 2006 turned into disappointment for women leaders, when mutually agreed issues on gender equality by the Seven-Party Alliance were ignored in the declaration made in the parliament on May 18, 2006. Pandey discusses how she requested then parliamentarian and current President Bidya Devi Bhandari to table the motion on these issues as a form of public concern. Establishing her motivations, she discusses the importance of exploring women's position within political parties, which she argues as an important institution that plays a vital role in changing social norms, attitude and practices.

The book without doubt is an important contribution to knowledge in number of ways. First, it is among the few books written by a Nepali woman politician exploring women's position within Nepali politics. Second, the book offers important insights about the women's movement in Nepal in relation to what Pandey calls its "four founding pillars" (p. 95), namely 1) "torture and fear of losing family members," 2) "middle class educated women's activism," 3) "representing people in state mechanisms," and 4) "community-based and civil society movement organizations." Her identification of these pillars recognizes both the historical and intersectional nature of the women's movement in Nepal. However, Pandey fails to recognize how these pillars and phases are themselves exclusionary and do not include the voices and concerns of women at the margin such as Dalit women, women with disability, and indigenous women.

A significant portion of the book is spent exploring the history of women's engagement within the CPN-UML as reflected in her research objective. Pandey explores the history of the All Nepal Women's Association (ANWA) and discusses how it became a separate and coherent space for women politicians in Nepal. She concludes that, despite women political leaders' active participation in the movement and contribution to building the party, women were sidelined when it came to positions of decision making and political influence.

She also examines the decisions taken by the CPN-UML to address gender inequality. Reviewing the policy presented, which ranges from the policies of affirmative action within the party to equality within home, indeed the CPN-UML appears to be a very progressive political party on paper. However, Pandey argues that the CPN-UML has lacked collective commitment in practice to implement its policies.

One example of how this lack manifests can be understood through her findings on the discourse of "qualified women politicians." Nearly all positions of power within political parties are held by men. When questioned about the invisibility of women politicians, readymade answers given by men in power are consistent: lack of "qualified and experienced" women politicians. Pandey presents an interesting finding which shows contradictory perceptions among male and female politicians. Women politicians strongly believed that there were enough qualified and experienced women leaders, whereas male politicians felt that the reason women did not get leadership roles was because there were not enough women politicians with required

experiences and qualifications. Pandey also presents an insight from women politicians who felt that the reason behind women's lack of access to positions of power was due to the lack of willpower and commitment on the part of the senior male leaders. Despite putting forward these important discussions, Pandey does not however consider how these discourses surrounding "qualification" and "experience" are masculine constructs, defined and demarcated by male politicians, and how often these definitions do not apply to men. It is strongly evident from Pandey's discussion that male politicians continue to be in position of benevolent "giver," while women politicians are in the role of grateful "receivers."

Often women politicians are doubted about their ability to continue their political engagements combining their family and social responsibilities. These roles are used to blame women for not being active in politics. Pandey has interesting findings to debunk this perception. Comparing the male and female absenteeism in the party meetings, she presents a figure which shows that more than half (54%) of men are absent comparing to 46 percent women. Despite these strengths of the book, there are some glaring flaws and shortcomings.

The first noticeable thing that a reader feels is that the book is not organized in a coherent manner. In places, the author repeats herself and sometimes readers discover important information buried in the text. For instance, instead of clearly identifying her theoretical framework in the introduction, the reader abruptly discovers it in the second chapter where the author is presenting an overview of the global feminist movement. Similarly, the methodology is not clearly elaborated. Unfortunately, the book contains many typos and grammatical errors.

Generally, academic books developed from a PhD thesis have a chapter allocated for research methodology. Despite these established norms, some researchers such as Saubhagya Shah (2018) present theory and method in a more dialogical manner: sharing both literature review and research methodology iteratively in relation to the subject matter being discussed. Pandey has not chosen either approach. A separate chapter would have ensured that information about her research methodology was on offer to her readers. The second chapter discusses vaguely about the importance of feminist inquiry and how feminist standpoint epistemology is relevant to her study. However, she does not relate these theoretical insights to her research or elaborate how it has shaped her research process and findings.

Her first mention of research methodology, qualitative methods with feminist inquiry, is offered in relation to the visual presentation of “mind mapping of the study.” Readers are left to figure out for themselves not only the number of interviews and group discussions that the author conducted but also the process and the journey of the researcher while doing this. These are serious concerns as the very tenets of feminist inquiry/methodology lie on the researcher’s ability to reflect on the research process and the asymmetrical power relations between the researcher and those researched (Cook and Fonow 1986). Pandey’s claim of using “personal reflexivity in interpreting the findings” in the preface of the book falls flat when the reader does not find those reflections critically weaved throughout her analysis. Pandey does discuss her identity of being a feminist and politician very briefly in “motivating factors” in the first chapter, and the blurb of the book introduces her as a “Nepali activist, involved in left student politics.” People who have followed her activism and scholarly work recognize her as one of the most vocal and articulate women leaders, who has taken the initiative to table important bills and policies concerning Nepali women in the parliament.

In addition to this, Pandey ignores the rich South Asian literature on women’s engagement in politics in her review. She fails to contextualize how women leaders navigate their position banking on moral capital, embodying the images of the mother and the widow in political arena dominated by the dynastic succession of men (Spary 2007). It is surprising that Pandey does not recognize the crucial feminist perspective on politics as a manifestation of patriarchy (Cockburn 1991). Without recognition of Nepali political institutions as inherently gendered, wherein masculine ideals are reflected within institutional structures, practices and norms, a deeper understanding of women politician’s struggle cannot be articulated (Tamang 2018).

Despite these gaps, it cannot be denied the book brings an insider’s perspective to the challenges of institutionalizing gender equality within political organizations in Nepal. The study identifies gaps in the current policies and makes recommendations for incorporating care work, diversity among women and political education into Nepal’s education system. Pandey concludes the book with a postscript giving a sense of hope. She acknowledges Nepali women have come forward on a long journey to become active political leaders. She urges now the need is to be more strategic and tactical, and to work as role models and agents of change.

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