

Jeevan R. Sharma. 2021. *Political Economy of Social Change and Development in Nepal*. New Delhi: Bloomsbury.

This book on the political economy of “social transformation” in Nepal highlights the major social, economic and political changes that have shaped Nepal over the past decades. Sharma claims that “there is an apparent paradox in the nature of social transformation in Nepal” (p. 24). On the one hand, there has been a significant political transformation through various social

and political movements that has led to claims for rights and citizenship across the population. Whereas, on the other hand, Nepal's entry into the global market through labor migration and extractive development processes have created new forms of precarity among certain sections of the population leading to new forms of inequalities. Therefore, Sharma's main thesis posits that there has not been a "countermovement from below" that has allowed for the transformation of people's freedom through social protection. Throughout the book, he draws from his own field engagements across different parts of Nepal, over a fifteen-year period.

In the Introduction, Sharma provides the context to Nepal's political economy since the 1950s, with a special focus on the recurring themes of "change, transformation, and development." He uses "local discourses," to highlight how ideas regarding equality, human rights and citizenship continuously play out in the lives of the people and how new forms of precarity are developed through these processes of engagement. Sharma draws on the stories and life-trajectories of the young people he had come across through his field engagement to challenge some of the dominant discourses that have come to shape the public imaginary. Here, Sharma takes inspiration from Karl Polanyi's (1944) concept of *The Great Transformation* to frame the different elements of social and political change in Nepal. In it, Polanyi proposed a *double movement*—an emergence of a market-led society, which causes commodification and socio-economic dislocation. As a response to this, a counter movement emerges within society. This results in legal and social protection mechanisms to protect people's livelihoods from market fluctuations. However, Sharma throws caution on the simple adoption of Polanyi's framework in the context of Nepal; instead, he extends Polanyi's framework to incorporate the changes made by Nancy Fraser. Fraser proposes for a *triple movement*—"a three-sided constellation of conflict among proponents of marketisation, adherents of social protection and partisans of emancipation" (2013: 129).

To understand these dynamics of change, the book focuses on four key themes, which are divided as chapters. Chapter Two looks at the historical trajectory of the Nepali state and its transformation from a feudal and hierarchical structure to that of a more inclusive and rights-based social and political system. Sharma draws from his fieldwork in western Nepal to show how local people's perception on gender, caste and ethnicity have changed. These issues, though prevalent over a long period of time, had been

“accelerated” into the mainstream discourse through the Maoist insurgency; and to some extent, the work of development actors and NGOs. However, as he warns, these social transformations have been more symbolic and have mostly been successful on creating an “awareness” on these issues. Moreover, these social and political movements have largely failed to establish a social protection model, and hence people continue to find themselves in vulnerable conditions. However, in this chapter, what would be equally useful to understand is how and why these movements were only able to create an “awareness” on social issues and were not able to establish a social protection model. This key point is not sufficiently dealt with.

In Chapter Three, “Peasantry, Mobility and the Changing Face of Rural Nepal,” Sharma briefly details the economic and social history of peasantry in Nepal. According to him, migration and the labor generated from it have impacted the local labor relations, resulting in the disruption of the social and economic power structures that were historically based on caste based feudal relations. Likewise, migration in search for livelihoods has connected the rural economy, initially across the border to India, and now to the global economies of the Gulf, South East Asia and beyond. This has resulted in the commodification of labor and Nepalis’ access to the global labor market. As Sharma warns, transformations in labor relations in the rural settings as well as opportunities to connect with the global economy has not translated into economic freedom for many Nepali laborers. On the contrary, Nepali migrants find themselves in more precarious conditions that expose them to insecurity, discrimination and poor working conditions. This chapter could have benefited from a comprehensive analysis of local economy rather than simply analyzed as remittance-based.

Drawing largely from the fieldwork Sharma conducted over a period of time in Palpa and as an extension of his previous work (2018) on “youth, migration and masculinities,” Chapter Four focuses on “Mobility and Educational and Occupational Futures” of young men from rural Nepal. The chapter highlights the aspirations for education and employment among Palpali young men across various caste and ethnic groups living in Kathmandu. According to Sharma, the “social meanings” attached to aspirations as well as the “patterns of mobility” differed across the groups. As Sharma shows, at this juncture, with the prevalence of discourses on state restructuring and identity, the young men become more conscious of their caste and ethnic subjectivities, which allow them to further maneuver the

difficult terrains of city life. However, this chapter does stand out as a sore thumb in relation to the other chapters, prompting the reader to view the book as a collection of chapters. It misses out on the major theme of transformation, which the other chapters have covered quite well. It fits more as a sub-theme of transformation—in this case, how social change has affected the lives of young men in the city. Perhaps, this chapter, especially with its rich ethnography, could be a great read as a separate monograph in understanding how ideas of federalism in Nepal can be deconstructed from below.

In Chapter Five, Sharma is interested in examining how “ideas and materiality of development” have influenced Nepali society, politics and economy. Here, he highlights some of the challenges that Nepal has not been able to overcome, even after the tectonic and political tremors of this period. Since the peace process began, there has been very little effort made towards creating jobs and there seems to be no signs of an economic growth. This has resulted in greater economic precarity for the population. In spite of the mainstreaming of the “inclusion” agendas, there have been little effort by the government, development agencies or civil society to advocate for economic justice of the minorities, argues Sharma. Since he graphs the various stages of development in Nepal through the review of literatures on development in Nepal, this chapter does feel ethnographically thin. Sharma concludes that the “process of democratization did not result in the transformation of patronage networks,” but has continued to work under clientelist modes of operation locally; and with the emergent discourse of inclusion, development has now been realized through distributional politics. However, what would have been more interesting is to understand, through Sharma’s own work, how these clientelist modes operated at the local level or what were some of the “local discourses” on it? More importantly, in the context of Nepal, how is one to understand the continued realignment of power through new forms of patronage? Perhaps, as Pilaivsky has suggested in her introduction to *Patronage as Politics in South Asia*, is it possible to look into patronage as “an imperfect gloss for a widespread moral formulation” (2014: 4) that helps us understand local people’s own normative imagination, especially in relation to social change and development?

Sharma concludes the book with a chapter on the discrepancies of Nepal’s political economy. He reflects on challenges brought about by Nepal’s integration into the global economy. This integration has helped to reduce poverty, spurred the growth of the middle class and allowed for wealth

creation for a minority; however, for large section of the population, it has failed to safeguard and protect them, enabling more “precarious livelihoods.” In other words, it has created new forms of precarity for those living on the periphery of the global political economy.

Sharma also reflects on Polanyi’s idea of a *double movement* and asserts that Nepal has witnessed certain elements of the *first movement* as it moved from a pre-capitalist to a market society. This is evident in the commodification of labor, availability of cash, consumer goods, financial products and the widespread circulation of remittances. However, unlike the counter movements discussed by Polanyi, the social and political movements in Nepal, including the Maoist movement, were largely emancipatory in nature. Sharma argues that these movements were instrumental in mainstreaming the discourses on rights and citizenship; however, they have largely failed to recognize and advocate for the dangers that emerged from the deregulation of the market and economic forces. In other words, Nepal has not witnessed a “movement from below” as questions relating to life and livelihoods of the most vulnerable have still remained ignored. Hence, he concludes that regardless of the various social, economic and political movements over the past decade, Nepal is yet to witness a true “great transformation” from below.

This extensive account of the political economy of Nepal does miss out on a few nuances. First, one needs to consider the development gains Nepal has made over the past few decades. Development indicators for Nepal show rapid growth in terms of access to education, huge decline in mortality rates and significant improvements in poverty reduction. These changes are best exemplified in a recent United Nations General Assembly resolution endorsing Nepal’s graduation from a Least Developed Country (LDC) category by 2026. Second, the Nepali state has incorporated a few social welfare programs, albeit sparsely, for certain sections of its population through allowances and grants (Khanal 2013). This culminated into the introduction of the Social Security Fund (SSF) by the government in 2018. Though complexities regarding the implementation of SSF remain, this could be seen as steps in the right direction to ensure social protection for all the citizens.

There also remains a few questions unanswered through this analysis of social transformation in Nepal. Sharma hasn’t fully delved into questions relating to why there has not been a counter movement in Nepal in the Polanyi sense. The book could have benefited from this analysis as well.

Perhaps some of the reasons can be alluded to what Fraser (2013) had also hypothesized. Is the absence of a double movement in Nepal due to the failure of political leadership? In the past, failure of political leadership in Nepal has been attributed to limited government, leadership structure, internal bickering, obstructive opposition, etc. (Hachhethu 2007). Perhaps, these challenges still remain. Or is the lack of a counter movement attributed to the inability of the labor force, especially in the global market to come together and unionize? Though Nepali laborers within Nepal have had a strong union presence (Rynhart and Peiris 2019), the same cannot be said about Nepali laborers outside of Nepal. This is evident in the lack of unions or alliances among Nepali labor migrants in their worksites outside of Nepal. Or perhaps, is globalization and the destabilization of global markets counter-intuitive to the idea of social protection, which is still framed within the controls of nation-state? Therefore, the question as to why there has not been a double movement in Nepal would still be an interesting one to explore.

The reader also finds oneself wanting to understand why the emancipatory movements in Nepal took a turn of its own to become identity movements. For example, it would have been useful to understand why the Maoist movement shifted from an agenda of (class) inequality to that of rights and inclusion of marginalized groups. Or for that matter, why social movements in Nepal have largely been “discursive.” Here again, Fraser has made certain assertions for these kind of changes. According to Fraser, the claims of emancipatory movements that challenged oppressive systems have usually been ambivalent; and when these movements align with elements of social protection, it “transforms the ethical substance undergirding protection” (2013: 130). Can we make similar claims in the context of Nepali social movements? It could be useful to explore these questions.

Though Sharma posits “transformation” to be the binding framework in weaving the chapters together, this promise is not fully realized across each of the chapters. Perhaps, this is also due to the difficulty in presenting an analysis of transformation that was spread across a long period of time and one that took various forms. Unlike the *Great Transformation* as described by Polanyi, the transformations in Nepal have been rather slow and sketchy. It requires a meticulous task to bring together an analysis of the different forms of transformations, especially through a detailed engagement of local discourses. In this regard, Sharma has done a really good job in initiating a new scholarship into our analysis of transformation. Therefore, I believe

this book is a must read for those interested in understanding the dynamics of change in Nepal. There have been a few attempts in trying to unravel the complexities and pluralities of Nepal's change and development. However, much of the scholarship on transformation in Nepal is presented for a particular disciplinary reader. Though taking an anthropological method, Sharma attempts to make this book more accessible to a larger audience and bridge some of the disciplinary gaps by bringing society, economy and politics together. In the process, he comes up with a very comprehensive, but equally easy to grasp account into the political economy of social change and development of Nepal's recent history.

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