

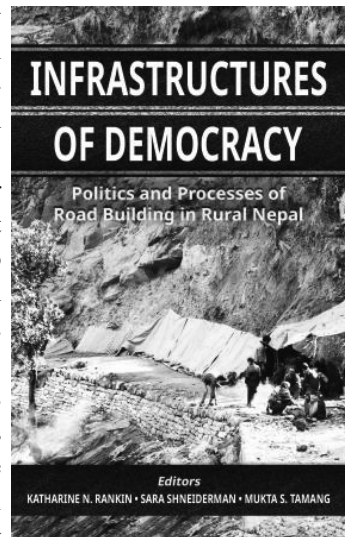
Katharine N. Rankin, Sara Shneiderman and Mukta S. Tamang, eds.
2026. Infrastructures of Democracy: Politics and Processes of Road Building in Rural Nepal. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari.

Infrastructures of Democracy: Politics and Processes of Road Building in Rural Nepal, edited by Katharine N. Rankin, Sara Shneiderman and Mukta S. Tamang, makes a timely and substantial contribution to debates on infrastructure, governance, and state formation in Nepal. Departing from conventional technocratic narratives that treat roads as neutral instruments of development, the volume advances a central argument that infrastructure is inherently political, shaped through contestation, negotiation, and asymmetrical power relations. Drawing on ethnographically grounded three

case studies, the contributors collectively demonstrate that road building in rural Nepal is embedded within complex socio-political processes rather than determined solely by technical or economic rationality. In doing so, the book aligns with a broader body of political economy scholarship that challenges depoliticized approaches to development and calls for a more grounded understanding of how infrastructure is produced and experienced in practice.

A key strength of the volume lies in its ethnographic orientation, which enables a nuanced account of how infrastructure is encountered and negotiated at the local level. Roads are not presented merely as physical artefacts but as sites of interaction between communities, political actors, and state institutions. Through detailed empirical accounts, the contributors show that infrastructure projects are shaped by everyday practices, informal negotiations, and locally embedded power structures. This approach offers an important corrective to abstract planning models that assume linear relationships between infrastructure provision and development outcomes. The evidence presented in the volume suggests that road expansion in rural Nepal does not automatically generate economic transformation; rather, its impacts are contingent upon governance arrangements, market access, and the distribution of political authority. In this respect, the book reinforces earlier arguments that infrastructure investments alone are insufficient to drive development in the absence of complementary institutional conditions (Blaikie, Cameron and Seddon 1980). At the same time, it extends these insights by demonstrating how infrastructure itself is constituted through ongoing negotiation among actors with unequal access to resources and influence.

The volume also provides a compelling analysis of the persistent disconnect between formal planning frameworks and actual implementation practices in Nepal's road sector. Instruments such as District Transport Master Plans (DTMPs), introduced to rationalize road development and ensure prioritization, are shown to have limited influence in practice.



While these frameworks provide a formal structure for decision-making, they were frequently overridden by political imperatives and localized interests. As several contributions indicate, planning often assumes a largely symbolic role, with actual decisions driven by ad hoc negotiations, electoral considerations, and patronage networks. The transition to federalism has further complicated this dynamic, as overlapping mandates among federal, provincial, and local governments have created ambiguities in authority and weakened accountability mechanisms. Rather than enhancing coordination, decentralization has in many cases intensified competition over resources and fragmented decision-making processes. This diagnosis is persuasive and well supported by empirical evidence; however, the volume offers relatively limited engagement with how such institutional challenges might be addressed. The analysis remains largely diagnostic, with less attention to the structural reforms or governance innovations required to bridge the gap between planning and implementation.

One of the most compelling aspects of the book is its exploration of the political economy of road construction. The contributors demonstrate that infrastructure development is deeply embedded within networks of patronage, where access to resources is mediated by political connections rather than technical criteria. Mechanisms such as user committees, originally intended to promote participation and cost efficiency, are frequently repurposed to bypass formal procurement procedures and facilitate rent-seeking. Road alignment decisions are often influenced by electoral incentives, with projects prioritized for their visibility and political returns rather than their economic viability or engineering soundness. These dynamics contribute to a pattern of fragmented and suboptimal infrastructure development, with significant implications for both sustainability and public expenditure efficiency. While the book effectively documents these patterns, it tends to emphasize political capture without fully considering the extent to which institutional safeguards, technocratic actors, or donor interventions may partially constrain such practices. A more balanced analysis could have explored the interplay between political incentives and institutional resilience, thereby providing a more comprehensive account of governance dynamics in the sector.

The environmental and social consequences of these governance challenges are examined with considerable depth. Weak enforcement of safeguard policies, combined with fiscal constraints and limited institutional capacity, has resulted in compromised land acquisition processes and

inadequate right-of-way provisions. The resulting pattern of incremental and often poorly planned expansion produces road networks that are functional in the short term but unsustainable over time, particularly in Nepal's fragile and hazard-prone terrain. Fragmented budget allocations further exacerbate these problems, as resources are distributed across a large number of small projects with limited impact. Such practices generate infrastructure that often fails to meet technical standards and creates long-term liabilities for the state. While the volume convincingly links these outcomes to political and institutional factors, it occasionally presents environmental degradation and poor engineering performance as predominantly political phenomena. This emphasis risks underestimating the role of technical capacity constraints, geological challenges, and resource limitations, which are also critical determinants of infrastructure quality (Dixit *et al.* 2021). A more integrated analytical framework that incorporates both political economy and technical considerations would have strengthened the overall argument.

The book also engages with debates on national integration, particularly in relation to the Tarai, and raises important questions about the distributive effects of infrastructure development. Some contributions suggest that major road projects have contributed to perceptions of exclusion among certain communities, highlighting the uneven distribution of benefits associated with infrastructure expansion. While this perspective captures important historical experiences, it warrants a more nuanced assessment. Major corridors such as the East-West Highway have played a crucial role in facilitating national integration by enhancing connectivity and linking previously isolated regions to markets and state institutions. The uneven outcomes associated with such infrastructure are therefore better understood in relation to governance structures, patterns of resource allocation, and broader socio-economic dynamics rather than as inherent features of the infrastructure itself. This tension reflects a broader analytical challenge within the volume: balancing critical perspectives on infrastructure as a site of political contestation with recognition of its integrative and enabling functions.

The principal contribution of *Infrastructures of Democracy* lies in its conceptual reframing of infrastructure as a domain of political practice. By foregrounding the interactions between local actors, state institutions, and broader political-economic processes, the volume provides a nuanced

explanation for why infrastructure projects often fail to deliver expected outcomes. It shifts the analytical focus from infrastructure as a technical input to infrastructure as an outcome of contested social processes, thereby enriching existing debates on development and governance. However, this strength is also a limitation. The strong emphasis on political dynamics occasionally leads to a form of analytical reductionism in which infrastructure outcomes are primarily attributed to political factors, leaving less room for considering the role of technical expertise, institutional learning, and incremental improvements in governance systems. Furthermore, as an edited volume, the book exhibits some unevenness in analytical depth across chapters. While some contributions offer rich empirical insights and theoretical engagement, others remain more descriptive. Greater editorial synthesis, particularly in drawing connections across case studies, would have enhanced the coherence and cumulative impact of the volume.

Overall, *Infrastructures of Democracy* represents a significant and thought-provoking contribution to the literature on Nepal's political economy and development. Its emphasis on the embeddedness of infrastructure within social and political processes provides a valuable corrective to technocratic approaches that continue to dominate policy discourse. By demonstrating that roads are as much about power, negotiation, and institutional dynamics as they are about connectivity, the volume invites a more critical and context-sensitive engagement with infrastructure-led development. At the same time, its analytical focus could have been strengthened by a more balanced consideration of technical and institutional dimensions, as well as by greater attention to pathways for reform. Despite these limitations, the book is highly relevant for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to understand the complex interplay between infrastructure, governance, and democratic practice in Nepal. It not only deepens understanding of why infrastructure projects often underperform but also underscores the broader institutional challenges that must be addressed to realize their developmental potential.

References

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Chandra Bahadur Shrestha
Green Growth Nepal