

Gellner, David N. and Krishna Hachhethu, eds. 2008. *Local Democracy in South Asia: Microprocesses of Democratization in Nepal and its Neighbours*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Perhaps, the simplest meaning of democracy is the government of the people, by the people, and for the people. This philosophical/ideal aspect aside, one may raise several questions regarding democracy's practical/real dimensions. Have people really been able to govern themselves in what are known as democracies? If they do (or do not), how

does this governance take place? Now that Nepal and other countries in South Asia have been practicing democracy in their own capacities, how has democracy reached the people?

Local Democracy in South Asia: Microprocesses of Democratization in Nepal and its Neighbours attempts to answer this set of questions. Anthropologist David Gellner and political scientist Krishna Hachhethu join together to edit this collection of sixteen chapters on local democracy, governance, and their processes across South Asia. Nine chapters focus on Nepal while the rest are about India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. In the first chapter, the editors point out how democracy is more than just elections and therefore why democracy should essentially mean “the promotion of citizens’ participation” (p.15). In many countries of South Asia local democracy is mainly a top-down imposition of decentralization measures or local governance acts. As citizens often do not participate in decision-making processes at national levels, it is important to understand why democracy is more local than national in South Asia. As there has been little or no attention paid to indigenous practices of democracy, Gellner and Hachhethu argue, this book is particularly relevant.

In the second chapter, “Obstacles to Local Leadership and Democracy in Nepal,” political scientist Dhruba Kumar shows how despite having the potential for local democracy in Nepal, this has not fully taken shape. For him, the power elites obstruct the practice of democracy. Most of the political parties of Nepal are led in almost ascriptive pattern, without having sufficient representation or the people’s mandate. There is no democratic practice in place and therefore no political leadership as such. It is the power elites who claim to lead political parties towards parties’ recognized goals, but who are instead driving these parties toward their own limited ends. Such party leadership often interferes in the decisions made at the local level for its own benefit. The political party which holds power in the central/national government selects its local party cadres in the name of election or representation, and often meddles in the functioning of civil servants at local levels. In this way, Kumar maintains, political parties and their leadership can do nothing to bring about change in local socio-political structures that might lead towards more democratic and deliberative forms.

A similar line of argument is made in the third chapter, “Local Democracy and Political Parties in Nepal.” Krishna Hachhethu uses the first half of this chapter to point out that decentralization was in practice in Panchayat era, and even before that, and nothing essential has changed

in local practice since then. Before and during the Panchayat era the state was not able to control local resources directly and interfere in affairs of the local levels. This inability of the state had resulted, as a secondary outgrowth, in a decentralized administrative set-up. Even after the demise of the Panchayat system, and the advent of multiparty democracy in 1990, local democracy or other such measures of decentralization have not been successful in Nepal. This is because of, on the one hand, the highly centralized bureaucratic structure and, on the other hand, the centralized undemocratic political leadership. The situation has deteriorated as these two overlap in their interests and as party politics overtly influences the working of civil administration at all levels—central to local. Hachhethu takes the case of Dhanusha to illustrate this fact. He also demonstrates how intra-party conflicts and the loss of a sense of collective accountability have eroded the image and influence of Nepali Congress in Dhanusha. But despite his detailed analysis, one can still ask what democracy actually means in terms of the traditional social structures and judicial practices which exist in the villages of the district as age-old institutions.

The fourth chapter by sociologist and anthropologist Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka is titled “Distributional Coalitions in Nepal.” Pfaff-Czarnecka uses Mancur Olsen’s idea of distributional coalitions to describe how administration, politics, and economics, and their respective stakeholders—bureaucrats, politicians, and entrepreneurs—form coalitions for what may be called “collective bribery.” By using Bajhang (a district in far-west Nepal) as a case study, she shows how such coalitions bypass central government in service deliveries like transportation of subsidized food stuff, land surveying, permits for forest produce, and sale of fertilizers. Such coalitions for collective bribery have paid well to the participants but have restricted people’s access to government services or any democratic outlets at the local level. Though Pfaff-Czarnecka asks why such coalitions have been very solid and impenetrable, she does not answer her own question, thus leaving it open for further studies. It is also relevant to ask whether people at the local level were aware of such coalitions and, if they were, what calculations they could make in raising voices against them.

In the next chapter, “Democracy and Ethnic Organizations in Nepal,” David Gellner and Mrigendra Bahadur Karki discuss how ethnic organizations in Nepal have been playing with the idea of democracy within them. They ask whether democracy is qualified by voting practices or elections alone. In most of the ethnic organizations, the selection of

leaders or members is largely accomplished through consensus. They discourage voting, which is seen as encouraging divisions rather than solidarity. Though there has been a constant nexus and overlapping of these two spheres—political and ethnic, voting is “associated with political parties” (p.122), and members of ethnic organizations are discouraged from joining political parties. One may notice a simple paradox in this stance however. If they claim that *intra-ethnic* unity demands that there should be no divisions or differences, how do they justify their constant lobbying for the idea of federalism (or the co-existence of differences) for *national* unity?

The anthropologist Dilliram Dahal discusses various aspects of Madhes and Madhesis in the sixth chapter, “The ‘Madhesi’ People.” Contrary to popular opinion, Dahal argues that “Madhes” and “Madhesi” are misleading and non-homogenous categories. He uses a lot of statistics to analyze demography, geography, democracy, and development to reexamine the notions of Madhes and Madhesi. For example, two Madhes districts, Chitwan and Jhapa, which host 70 to 80 percent Hill people (Pahades) have the best development indicators. On the other hand in Rautahat the non-Pahades make the highest population percent, and its development indicators dive down to the lowest levels. For Dahal, the greater the number of Madhesis in districts, the lower their development indices. Madhes suffers from its internal problems like intra-Madhesis conflicts, caste rigidity, dowry, *purdah*, and *tilak*. Therefore, Madhes politics aimed at regional democracy and freedom carries little relevance and needs to be reconsidered. Madhes should solve its own problems first, because they are the ones impeding development and democracy in the region. By this, Dahal seems to suggest that Hill and Madhes peoples are two distinct non-interacting entities in Nepal. He avoids answering whether “Madhesi underdevelopment” occurred solely because of Madhes, with no biased attitude of a Pahade-controlled state towards it. Moreover, one also wonders how his cynicism (as expressed in this chapter) would respond to the recent Madhesi uprising and the federal set-up of the Nepali nation-state in the making?

The seventh chapter, “Dispute Settlement at Local Level” by Bishnu Raj Upreti, is about dispute settlement and decision-making practices in rural Nepal. It describes traditional dispute settlements as dominated by the patriarchal and feudalistic practices where local headmen (or similar functionaries) have the ultimate say. Further they lack a standard dispute settlement mechanism. Despite this, such informal decision-making bodies and processes may still be relevant if they are reformed or

modernized with time. This is an important argument because many rural people do not have access to formal dispute settlement bodies or judiciaries. It is because of this easy accessibility and prompt service delivery that the Maoist judicial system and “People’s Courts” in rural Nepal have gained ground. The writer also takes the case of Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve area in south-eastern Nepal to examine an array of disputes regarding the use of natural resources and other socio-cultural factors. He lists “local disputes” but does not furnish information on “local solutions” or local dispute settlement processes. His presentation would have been livelier had he done so. In addition, he does not identify what “democracy” or “judiciary” mean to local people—or himself—when he claims that Maoists are “biased towards one class” (p.168) and “do not follow the principle of liberal democracy in dispute settlement processes” (p.169).

Another chapter dealing with the Maoists is “Maoist People’s Governments 2001-05” by Kiyoko Ogura. Ogura presents case studies of Dailekh, Sindhupalchok, Jumla, Pyuthan, or Rukum. Her accounts are highly descriptive and journalistic as they offer details of Maoist government, the party organization and leadership at the local/village, district, and national levels. For her, there is no people’s direct participation or elections in Maoist government or party organization, as “the structure of people’s power goes from ‘top to bottom’” (p.192). The Maoists have no standard judicial process, but she does not hint whether this is democratic. Her travelogue-like article is short of any analysis examining democratic processes, or the meaning and relevance of democracy among the locals.

Uma Nath Baral in the ninth chapter, “Local Democracy and Local Government,” examines Dhikur Pokhari Village Development Committee (VDC) to probe its organizational make-up and decision-making process in providing service to people. This article is different from the former ones as it accounts the role of non-state actors like Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and Community-Based Organizations in facilitating development and democracy to people. The NGOs, which grew especially after the restoration of democracy in 1990, have strengthened the value of democracy among the locals. During the Maoist insurgency, when the VDCs were empty and there was no one to attend to people’s concerns, these NGOs played a remarkable role in filling the gap between the state and the people. Besides, they have also been able to enhance the notion of democracy among the marginalized and oppressed

by empowering them. Baral's approach is commendable in noticing this line of development at local levels.

A similar treatment of NGOs can be found in the tenth chapter "Foreign Aid, Democracy and Development" by Keshab Man Shakya. Shakya talks at length of his experiences with NGOs/INGOs and foreign aid in Nepal. He then goes on to stress their importance in participation, empowerment, and capacity-building of local bodies in decision-making. He points out that democracy, which laid open the path for NGO growth, was again rewarded by NGOs to further advance democratic ideals among people at local levels. NGOs and foreign aid have helped a lot in materializing the Local Self-Governance Act and the state's other programs of decentralization and democratization. Though Shakya adamantly stands on the behalf of NGOs in lauding their roles, he overlooks internal democracies of these NGOs, let alone their transparent functioning systems. If democracy means being accountable to the people whom one is serving, NGOs themselves largely fail to qualify as democratic. He could have presented a more balanced picture of the roles and duties of NGOs in enforcing democratic values in our society.

The nine chapters on Nepal as discussed above are useful accounts to understand different aspects of democracy, governance, or the forms of decentralization as practiced in Nepal. But they are relatively descriptive, non-analytical, and have little by way of theoretical engagement. For instance, many miss the subtleties of democracy by putting little effort into finding out what democracy means to people at local levels. Articles by Ogura, Upreti, and Dahal miss this part and tend to treat democracy more as a structure than a process or value, and therefore contribute little towards one of the book's aims: to show "democracy as a process and democracy as a value" (p.14).

Chapters eleven to sixteen are written on local democracies in other South Asian societies. Though these chapters analyze local socio-political contexts similar to Nepal's, the analyses are more in-depth as they incorporate the processual face of democracy. The eleventh chapter, by David Lewis and Abul Hossain show how poor rural Bangladeshis are caught up in powerful structural constraints in village contexts as the local elites find new ways of dominating and maintaining their dominance across time. Therefore, despite socio-political changes, not much has changed for the rural poor as they rely on informal judiciary systems or local social organizations like *samaj*, which already suffer from traditional patron-client relationships and arbitrariness. In the next chapter, Peter Ronald DeSouza makes a cautious analysis of local self-

government as introduced by the Indian government. Village democracy, in the form of *gram sabha* (or village assembly), is only a misnomer, since it is situated in the dialectics between the formal democratic mechanisms (which are for democracy) at the local level and rigid rural power equations (which are generally against democratic ideals).

Caste is a structure and, for many, so is democracy. The next two chapters show however, that democracy is also a process where individuals or groups actively take part in creating their spaces. Surinder S. Jodhka, in the thirteenth chapter, examines how Dalits in Punjab (India) have become successful in breaking away the shells of high-caste domination as they become members of local decision-making bodies along with the Jats. Stefanie Strulik, in the next chapter, also proves this. There she examines a case of a Scheduled Caste woman leader who, despite structural hostilities and obstacles all around, rises to power, becomes a *pradhan* (through democratic process), and executes her office duties. Strulik also maintains that there is a gender element in all interactional processes of society, and if democracy means equality, it should also essentially mean gender equality. These two chapters treat democracy as a force which can create spaces of individual expression, and which can also slacken the grip of caste structures of society.

Shandana Khan Mohmand in the fifteenth chapter discusses the failure of decentralization in Pakistan which, she argues, began as a top-down imposition by military rulers to increase local loyal bases. She argues that decentralization is short of democratic essence in the rural Pakistan as it is strongly dominated by traditional power structures like the *biraderi* system, feudalism, clientelism, landlordism, or similar patron-client institutions. There is, therefore, a need for the state to move forward to *do something* to alter power relations at the local level to benefit the marginalized and oppressed. Decentralization, she points out, is not necessarily the rolling back of the state, but its active involvement in materializing democratic ideals among people. This view about the failure of top-down imposition state power is also echoed by Siri Hettige in the final chapter on Sri Lankan local democracy. Hettige takes an example of a local council to demonstrate that no democracy can function unless the local socio-cultural conditions are conducive to do so. The council can not deliver democracy because it suffers from financial and organizational limitations. It is also bypassed by higher state and non-state actors in decision-making and resource mobilization processes. In this way, the blatant penetration of centralized state bureaucracy and intervention in local affairs has produced no fruit but only an ugly disarray of state

organization and further disenchantment among the locals. Therefore, as Hettige shows, democracy is concomitant with necessary resources and rights.

In this way, the book is successful in laying out a comparative picture of local democracies across South Asia by bringing “together chapters on all the larger countries of South Asia, while yet having a principal focus on Nepal” (p.14), which it aimed to. But, as mentioned above, most of the chapters treat democracy as a structure, thus overlooking the role of agency and processes—let alone the microprocesses—involved.

Reading through these chapters, one can understand how people negotiate with traditional structures when they try to reach out for democracy. The book suggests that people have not been able to fully govern themselves in South Asian “democracies,” and therefore democracy has yet to reach people. Local democracy has yet to be celebrated in South Asia because it is stuck in the dialectic between strong undemocratic traditional power structures on the one hand, and the state-adopted principles and top-down imposed models of local governance on the other hand. The book shows this happening.

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