

Susan I. Hangen. 2010. *The Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal: Democracy in the Margins*. New York: Routledge.

This book is not only about the rise of ethnic politics; it is about indigenous redefinition of democracy and state of Nepal as well as the re-creation of the social order with ethnic equality. The reader gets nuanced details and insights into the indigenous struggles, political practices, and cultural innovations as a group of indigenous individuals engage in forming a political community under the flag of the Mongol National Organization (MNO). Susan Hangen brings in this book a sophisticated ethnography from a rural village of eastern Nepal which she refers to as being in the “margin of the state.” She does so by locating her analysis within the broader context of democratic discourse and practice in Nepal in which the on-going movement of Indigenous Nationalities is a part.

Indigenous peoples in Nepal have come to the center stage as one of the key actors in the political affairs of the country especially since 1990. This has stimulated much scholarly enquiry and public discourse. As a result, many social scientists, particularly anthropologists, have studied indigenous movements from perspectives of identity politics in relation to the state. This study stands out as it is focused on the evolution and the struggle of the MNO – an ethnic political party in rural districts – and takes the agency of those involved in the process into due consideration. It describes the ways in which the MNO is converged and diverged from the capital-city based movements. The MNO's activities blend features of political and social movements and have transformed peoples' identity, and everyday practices and aspirations about the future state and society. Perhaps because of these features, the author, going beyond the conventional idea of ethnic politics as being incompatible to democracy, rightly argues that the movement has potential for strengthening democracy.

Much of the material for the present study was collected during the period between 1993 and 1997 in a village in Ilam district and complemented by interviews and visits in other locations in eastern Nepal. The author developed interest in ethnic politics in Nepal much earlier from her prior visit and "observations of inequalities between high-caste Hindus and other caste and ethnic groups" (p. 6). The book begins with an overview of the democratization process and the emergence of ethnic politics in Nepal followed by an analysis of the Indigenous Nationalities' movement and its goals. Chapters three and four provide rich ethnographic details on the MNO as a political party, its functioning in a village, its structure, operations, leaders as well as possibilities and limitations. This is followed by a discussion of MNO's cultural practice of forging a common identity among its supporters through innovation of cultural artifacts such as calendars, reinterpretation of festivals, songs and ways of unbecoming Hindu. The author provides a valuable theoretical orientation from political and anthropological literature on democracy and ethnic politics to organize the field data. Readers would have been equally benefited had the author also delved into the literature on indigenous resistance and politics which seems relevant to the topic.

Given that race was not part of the official discourse in Nepal, the category 'Mongol' appears to be MNO's resurrection "from the margins of discourse about difference in Nepal" (p. 54). However when one reads Article 27(1) of the Constitution of Nepal 1990 which states that "...the words 'His Majesty' mean His Majesty the King for the time being

reigning, being a descendant of the Great King *Prithvi Narayan Shah* and an adherent of Aryan Culture and the Hindu Religion,” an assertion of Mongol identity may be seen as a way of rejection of the super-ordinates’ signs and symbols, one that offers an alternative way of being by the indigenous groups. It is noteworthy, as the author points out, that despite the reference to race, the MNO appears to largely deploy cultural materials and political ideology for constructing a common Mongol identity from a pan-ethnic mosaic. While there are several divergences on some fundamental issues, other commonalities between the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN)-led movement and the MNO exist. For example, both agree on identifying themselves as “indigenous” in congruence with the international discourse.

The MNO, despite being a radical political party, participated in peaceful political processes including elections. Nevertheless, it never could fair well in gaining votes in elections compared to other bigger parties. While its agenda of secularism, republic, *loktantra* and other ideas have been incorporated by the state, the party remains perpetually in the margin. This may be another kind of disjuncture of democracy that the book discusses. With electoral failures and such disjuncture, the author’s allusion that the possibility of violence may not be ruled out fully should be taken seriously as peaceful indigenous politics tend to fail as they have to compete in a format not of their own making.

Hangen’s *The Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal* is an excellent work that appeared in a timely fashion as Nepal is going through a process of political transition. This study represents an important contribution and will be of interest to students and scholars of sociology, anthropology, and politics, as well as, anyone interested in contemporary Nepal and South Asia in general.

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