

De Schepper, Pieter and Bhoj Raj Poudel. 2010. *Generation Dialogues – Youth in Politics: Nepal*. Kathmandu: Youth Initiative.

Generation Dialogues is a generally engaging overview of the role of Nepali youth in politics. It is co-authored by Pieter De Schepper and Bhoj Raj Poudel and produced by a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) based in Kathmandu called Youth Initiative. Youth Initiative's stated aim is to 'inform...empower...involve...' the youth of Nepal.

Termed a ‘research book’ for people who wish to “know about youth and politics in Nepal and also fill a gap in Nepali social science” (as stated in the introductory note), *Generation Dialogues* has ambitious aims for a short book of less than 100 pages. An introduction is followed by three unconnected chapters and a short conclusion. Chapter 1 is a broad overview of the role of youth in politics while Chapter 2 contains a basic introduction of student activism in Nepal, focusing particularly on the role of student unions in public colleges. Chapter 3, the most topical chapter, focuses on youth involvement in politics through three separate case studies: the Young Communist League (YCL), Eastern Tarai armed groups and the Tharuhat movement.

The book relies on both qualitative research methods, such as literature reviews, a wide range of interviews and discussions, alongside quantitative research methods (p. 3). The quantitative method involved surveying nearly 400 private, community and public college students in the Kathmandu Valley and Pokhara. The survey apparently sought to find out the opinions and concerns of the youth; however, the details of the survey have not been reproduced in the book. This first group’s views were supplemented by 100 more surveys taken from around Gongabu Bus Park in Kathmandu and 88 others collected in Dang district in Mid-West Nepal. The authors are initially explicit about the very limited focus of their study: namely “educated, urbanized and/or politically conscious” (p. 4) youths from Kathmandu, Pokhara and Dang.

However, the authors go on to use the term “youth” in a highly generalized way when actually talking about this very limited group of respondents. They say at one point in the first chapter when looking at political concerns, that “...we can assume with good reason that most of these ideas are in line with sentiments among the overall population” (p. 32). This is doubtful and similar attempts to draw general conclusions about the thoughts of young people across Nepal from a limited survey undermine the presentation of some interesting material.

The first chapter discusses the general state of both youth and politics in Nepal. In thirty pages, the chapter runs through basic statistics on youth numbers in Nepal, “the unloved” education system, class differences among youth, employment, youth policies and youth in relation to the Maoist conflict. Given the range of topics the chapter can only offer generalizations and summaries, such as around the unsurprising desire of youth for better education and employment opportunities. However, most of the topics are covered in a way which suggests more complex realities and, through footnotes, guides the beginner to further reading.

The small section on class differences among youth could easily have been expanded into a book by itself. The limited space given to real socio-economic differences and the emphasis on youth itself as “probably the strongest ‘occupational class’ in Nepal” (stated in the preface) sets a pattern that reoccurs throughout the book. The authors of this book recognize some of the nuances between youths but constantly focus on the need for youth to work together and cooperate, as if no real differences, competition or debates exist between youth. The chapter concludes in a distinctly moralizing tone, also highlighting the book’s slightly confusing purpose somewhere between a research paper and a roadmap for galvanizing change: “The only way for youth to climb out of the current political quagmire is to genuinely listen to other youth and cooperate.... Otherwise, this generation will slip into old patterns” (p. 35).

Chapter 2 and 3 are a lot stronger and offer concrete examples of the involvement of youth in politics. Chapter 2 is an interesting introductory overview of Nepali student unions. In a lively way, the authors go through the history of the Free Students Union (FSU) elections in Nepal during the Panchayat era. The chapter also discusses details around the 2009 FSU elections, explores how national political issues have been linked to FSU elections and covers other issues like admission trade-offs (how some students have their admission fees paid for in exchange for FSU votes).

At times, some of the historical narrative feels uncomfortably shepherded into a modern analysis of “youth” as the primary identifier and category of analysis. For example, it becomes important that Girija Prasad Koirala was “reasonably young when he led a labor movement in the jute mills of Biratnagar” (p. 39). Similarly, the role of youth in opposition to the Panchayat system also appears slightly overstated for the sake of fitting into an ongoing “youth=change” thesis.

Chapter 3, looking at case studies of youth involvement in the YCL, Eastern Tarai armed groups and the Tharuhat movement, is right to critique both negative and positive interpretations of general youth involvement in politics. This chapter builds on the authors’ reasonable aim of trying to explore the complexity beyond views of students as “mere pawns” or youth “as bringers of change” (p. 1). More detail and evidence is needed as the authors again try to cover a large ground in a short chapter.

In assessing why youth get involved in political groups, Chapter 3 also rightly highlights the desire of youth to access modernity, to find meaning

and do something about the sense that they are missing out on something important (p. 76–77). These passages are the strongest in the book. The important question of children and youth agency is touched on here but could be explored in further detail. The authors go on to repeat some well-worn arguments in their case studies, especially regarding the internal fragility of the Madhesi movement (in a tone which seems a little polemical). The author's assessments of child and youth recruitment among Eastern Tarai armed groups (p. 84) also appear unusually firm, especially when United Nations agencies and NGOs find it particularly hard to gather verified evidence.

In terms of method, the authors could have explored more Nepali language sources and material. It would also have been interesting to intersperse the text with direct quotes from youths who were interviewed by the authors. When this reader tried purchasing the book (in 2010) it was only available from Youth Initiative offices in Gairidhara. If the book is to fulfill its ambitious aim of helping “our most important audience – the youth of Nepal themselves” find “new approaches to many of the old problems suffered by politics in Nepal” (Preface), then it needs to become more widely available and also translated into Nepali.

Generation Dialogues would also have greatly benefitted from some form of mentoring by existing social scientists and social science institutions in Nepal. A thorough process of mentoring and anonymous peer-reviewing could have strengthened the book, especially in methodology and handling theory. In general, such self-published policy and research papers produced by NGOs in Nepal often ignore social science expertise in Nepal. Such collaboration should be encouraged and strongly considered in the future.

The book as a whole is right to criticize the false dichotomy between youth being used by politicians and youth as bringers of change. But the authors do not marshal their evidence in tandem with a developed understanding of the agency of young people involved in politics nor the real vulnerability of certain categories of youth. Instead of developing difference and nuance, to include gender, class, city/urban analytical lenses amongst others, the authors have perpetuated a view of “youth” as a form of cross-Nepal solidarity and as an automatic community.

In this view, “youth” also still means change, a view applied to all examples of young people becoming involved in politics in Nepal. The second *jana āndolan* apparently illustrated “the strength of the youth” as “youths from all walks of life joined hands and chose change” (as stated in introductory note). In reality it is not at all clear that young people did

this, at least not with an awareness of themselves as “youth” and as “young people.”

Generation Dialogues can be seen as a laudable attempt to fill a research gap and also an effort to legitimize “youth” as a separate category demanding targeted donor attention and greater government concern. The authors themselves note the lack of “exclusiveness” that youth as a category have, especially when compared to students (p. 73). If taken as a slightly confused introductory piece on youth and politics in Nepal, then the book largely succeeds. Viewed instead as a social science text or policy paper, then the book does not succeed.

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