

Ali Riaz and Subho Basu. 2007. *Paradise Lost?: State Failure in Nepal*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Concern over Nepal as a “failed state” was at a peak in early 2000. Donor reports, conflict analyses and journalistic reporting abounded on the danger of state failure in Nepal. Written in the same period, in *Paradise Lost? State Failure in Nepal*, Riaz and Basu utilize state failure, the patrimonial state and hegemony as the analytical tools to examine the causes and conditions of Nepal’s crises as well as to map out future trajectories.

They state their central argument as:

...the Nepali state, founded in the eighteenth century, characterized by its extractive patrimonial nature and dependent on a monarchical political order, has failed...Our contention is that the crisis in Nepal was a long time in the making, and that state formation in Nepal, especially the tendency towards the centralization of power, and a disjuncture between the state and society have contributed to the making of this crisis. Simply stated, the unrepresentative process of state formation and the tradition of governance have contributed to the alienation of the citizens from the state and engendered the crises (p. 3).

Although the book attempts to incorporate a longer historical view and the role of external actors in the making of Nepal’s political crisis, the book fails to offer anything new. Weak conceptual moorings, generalized statements and a lack of historical and empirical depth make for an overall unsatisfactory read for those seeking to better situate Nepal’s recent political turmoil.

As with other analyses which take “state failure” as the point of departure, the conditions of Nepal’s crises are identified as being local in origin with poor leadership central in blame. Internal deficiencies are

highlighted with reference to Mancur Olson's roving and sedentary/stationary banditry thesis. Using a lengthy quote beginning "[w]here governments behave like roving bandits, they are unlikely to have a development agenda that can be shared with those that they seek to govern..." they state that "Nepal is an embodiment of this phenomenon" (p. 11). The endnote reveals that the long quote is taken from a development policy paper on Kenya and neither here, nor in the pages discussing donors and development, is there any analyses of the Panchayat state's legitimizing discourse and practice of "development" and the massive role of donors in the development imperative that pervades Nepali state and society. This is a surprising absence given that "hegemony" is stated as one of three analytical tools for the book.

Other lapses exist in the book. For example, the authors state that,

As regards to state formation, one can recognize a general agreement among theorists that state formation, interchangeable with 'state-building' and 'state-making' refers to the processes that lead to the centralization of political power over a well-defined territory, and with a monopoly of the means of coercion (p. 6).

At the most basic level, the difference between, for example, the current state-building enterprise underway in Afghanistan led by the US compared to colonial and post-colonial state formation processes make such statements problematic. The sentence may be partly explained by the authors' reliance on mainstream US policy analyst Robert Rotberg's work for their failed state analyses. Elided in the book's discussion on failed states is the fact that despite the large literature, there is no agreement on the definition of state failure. Commenting on the list of failed states in Rotberg's 2004 book *When States Fail* (referenced repeatedly by Riaz and Basu), which includes Columbia, Cote d'Ivoire, Iraq, North Korea and Indonesia, Charles T. Call notes "[t]he idea that these states have more shared traits than distinguishing traits seems specious" (Call 2008: 1495).

The authors' use of more critical analyses further highlights the weaknesses of the book. For example, while Riaz and Basu state that "there is no linear, step-wise process with a clearly identifiable end in the state formation process" (p. 33), they miss that the failed/failing/weak/fragile state framework functions through a logic of comparison to "successful" (ie western) states and an ideal and ahistorical notion of what "the state" is or should be. This is a key argument of the 2004 Pinar Bilgin and Adam Morton article from which the authors selectively cite one sentence (on p. 179) in order to claim that they have explored the usually ignored "conditions that allow for state failure to occur."

Furthermore, they utilize part of Susan Woodward's introduction to the 2005 workshop on state failure at the City University of New York to stress that they are "cognizant of the potential pitfall of its [the concept of state failure] unqualified acceptance" but maintain its utility for Nepal, with appropriate reassessment/reformulation (p. 17). However, not only is a reworking of the framework absent in the book, the authors make no attempt to engage with Woodward's argument in the same introduction that the issue of state fragility and failure results from the domestic consequences of the tension between two global trends: neo-liberal reduction of state capacities and simultaneous increased international demands on governments (Woodward 2005). Such a conversation would have forced closer, detailed analyses of the historical roles of donors in the structuring of the state and state-society relations in Nepal – of key importance given the Nepali state's long and heavy reliance on foreign aid.

This lapse is in line with an overall lack of engagement with important analyses made about the forces shaping the realms of Nepal's political economy and security, which constrain and enable the state. For example, for the section on "Geo-strategic Limitation and the Economic Sovereignty of Nepal," sub-continental history begins from 1950. The contours and consequences of Nepal's insertion into the political economy of the British Raj for understanding the deeply historical and structural causes of contemporary societal conditions in Nepal appears irrelevant.

As a whole, economics and development are treated in a curiously truncated fashion. For example, in the discussion on "The Donor Agenda and the Nepali Economy" the section on foreign aid starts with "Foreign aid has played a crucial role in Nepal's economy over recent decades, but instead of enhancing productivity it has become an economic burden" (p. 97). The sentences that follow focus on the heavy reliance of the government on foreign aid, growing debt burden and per capita debt in 2001 (no comparative figures for years before, nor with other countries, is given), but do not substantively engage with the introductory formulation. The authors then state "[a]s such aid is not only causing damage to its present state of economy but also mortgaging its future to the donors, it has also created a mindset of dependence that has often led planners to plan not in terms of available resources but in terms of possible availability of aid from abroad" (p. 98). No evidence is made to back up these assertions.

The section on “endogenous factors” for the lack of “performance legitimacy” veers further into unsubstantiated generalities and bizarre sentences. I quote an example at length below:

The urban bias of development strategies also contributed to a rapid increase in population. The low literacy rate among rural women, their lack of access to an organized labor market, and their lack of influence over decision-making processes within the family all contributed to population growth. The population explosion caused enormous environmental degradation that in turn contributed to economic problems. Finally as the literacy rate increased and a quasi-monarchical democracy opened new avenues of political mobilization, politically conscious women, Dalits, agricultural workers, and bonded laborers challenged old forms of social domination. All of these reinforced extreme inequality at multifarious levels and made poverty in Nepal a “deep and complex” problem (p. 99).

There are other puzzling and unsubstantiated assertions, such as Dor Bahadur Bista’s *Fatalism and Development* as an example of “scholarly assaults on Brahminical Hinduism [which] prepared the ideological ground for new types of ethnicity-based politics” (p. 78). Further, initial hopes that the book’s orientalist title “Paradise Lost?” was but a book marketing mechanism, dissipate on page one – there is no rejection of the description of Nepal “often referred to as *Shangri La* – a place of complete bliss and delight,” but an indirect reinforcement “Why have violence and political maelstrom so deeply destabilized this picturesque kingdom.”

Nepal did, and continues to experience, deep social, political and economic crises. The book’s heavily generalized rehashing of Nepali history focused overwhelmingly on internal political dynamics, offers us little with which to better understand Nepal’s past or possible future. What *Paradise Lost?* does make clear is the underlying methodological flaws of the “state failure” framework, “which assumes that which has to be explained – the historically specific form of state-society relations” (Gruffydd Jones 2008: 186). It further illustrates how the “state failure” framing in Nepal prevents alternative analyses of that particular period of time in early 2000 as that “where the state itself has not failed but is undergoing profound change or challenge” (Woodward 2006: 16).

References

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Seira Tamang
Martin Chautari