

Lok Raj Baral. 2013. *Romāncit Jīvan*. Kathmandu: Sangri~La Books.

Lok Raj Baral is a well known figure in Nepali academia and public life who began his career in the high days of Panchayat and is still actively generating texts today. His professional accomplishments include, but are not limited to, serving as the chairman of the Department of Political Science at Tribhuvan University (TU) for over a decade, as a member of the delegation to the United Nations General Assembly, as a visiting professor at various esteemed institutions throughout the world, and as Nepal's ambassador to India in the 1990s. Baral has led a very illustrious life, and in his autobiography titled *Romāncit Jīvan*, he shares fragments of his personal and professional successes and failures.

The book is organized in chronological order. The initial chapters of the book talk about Baral's life as a young boy in Shantinagar, Jhapa, his experiences as a student in Biratnagar and later India, his parents and his marriage. Most of the book after the first few chapters, however, is about his career, and Baral delves into great detail in talking about his journey as an academic in Nepal's turbulent political climate. The picture of Baral that emerges from reading this book is that of a rebellious, talented, socially conscientious and ambitious, if slightly self-absorbed man. Baral doesn't dramatize his life in this book, he merely recounts his life experiences in a straightforward manner. This means that the book has an earnest quality to it that makes it charming, but at the same time, Baral's commitment to retrospective narration makes it incredibly tedious at times, leading one to wonder what thought process might have led Baral into believing that some of what he narrates would be of any interest to a reader. Bereft of the childlike excitement, curiosity and wonder, the minutiae appear meaningless in such a volume.

Many readers are perhaps interested in this book because of their desire to learn about the public life of a senior academic who has been prolific for many decades, and these readers will not be disappointed with all the insights into his career that Baral offers. He talks about how in his youth, Political Science was not seen by many as a credible discipline, especially for bright young man like himself who would have been expected to go into more traditional field of study. Nevertheless, the committed and individualistic man that he was, Baral chose to continue his academic endeavors in the field he was destined for, and became an expert in South Asian political study.

Baral doesn't explicitly talk about Nepali academia broadly beyond his own experiences, which is slightly disappointing considering the fact that he is one of the rare individuals who has seen the evolution of knowledge production processes in Nepal, through the Panchayat era and beyond. However, he does talk about some of the ways in which TU, the oldest university in Nepal, as an institution has changed. When Baral started out his career as an educator, his salary was a meager 600 rupees and his professional advancement opportunities were dependent more on connections to powerful people than merit. He does imply, however, that after the end of the Panchayat, things have changed for the better in important ways, and the quality of work matters much more than it used to when he first started out.

While Baral seems to be at least somewhat optimistic about TU and its growth over the years, he is very cynical about Nepal's political climate and at various points in the book, goes on long rants about how clientelism and lack of competent political leadership have doomed our country. The picture of Nepali politics that Baral paints is rather bleak, and backed by his depth of knowledge about the technicalities of political processes, his lack of confidence in anything positive happening in Nepali politics in the future is quite concerning.

The lengthy chapters Baral devotes to talking about his trips abroad can be mundane and tiresome. There are tens of pages in the book that read like journal entries. Without going into specifics of what he saw and was affected by, Baral narrates his itinerary in places like China and Europe to us. It is while reading these chapters that it can be seen that the book would have benefited greatly with some good editing. The trips abroad that Baral spends almost 50 pages talking about could easily have been condensed into one compact chapter.

While Baral does take a very dry and impersonal approach in discussing some aspects of his life, there are numerous instances in the book where he doesn't hesitate to be disarmingly vulnerable, baring his soul to the reader. His description of his relationship with his wife is nuanced and a pleasure to read. One of the many instances in the book where we see Baral's ability to move beyond cultural barriers and take independent decisions is when he talks about his cross-caste marriage as an upper caste Brahman man with a Newar woman. Baral doesn't gloss over uncomfortable facts, regarding his marriage openly admitting that he wasn't always the best husband he could be, and being an educated man in a patriarchal society gave him opportunities that his wife never had. However, he makes it clear that his long marriage to his now deceased wife was a successful one, and he is grateful for how great a companion she was despite his flaws.

Some incidents that Baral chooses to talk about in the book are intriguing and somewhat puzzling. He narrates an incident when he was travelling with his father, and somebody offered him the front seat in a car. He chose to take the seat, leaving his father alone in the back. This is apparently one of his biggest regrets in life. He also talks about an incident where he was talking to an esteemed professor in a foreign university and made a bad joke, and the professor's reaction left him flustered. Baral says that thinking about this incident still leaves him thoroughly embarrassed. It is interesting that

incidents such as these that a reader would probably think of as being fairly commonplace have had a big enough impact on Baral's psyche that he chose to devote tens of pages of his autobiography talking about them. I think in these recollections, Baral manages to capture an important essence of the human experience. Things that have a huge impact on you are often arbitrary and incomprehensible to others, and life lessons don't need to be learnt in dramatic, extraordinary situations; sometimes, the seemingly mundane can shape you in important ways. While Baral doesn't articulate this explicitly, it is somewhat a theme in his selection of occurrences that he talks about in his autobiography, and this makes some sections of the book very poignant.

*Romāncit Jīvan* is a deeply personal book, and it doesn't claim to be anything beyond a recollection of one man's own experiences. However, in talking about his life, Baral helps the reader gain an understanding of the trajectory Nepal as a nation has passed through in the recent decades. It is remarkable for a young reader to see how much the country has changed during a 70-year-old man's lifetime. Baral was born during the tyranny of Rana rule, and his descriptions of the *cākari* (servitude) that people had to perform to even the lowest tier of the Ranas in order to make a living is fascinating and deeply disturbing to read about.

Baral is a prolific writer who has produced some foundational books such as *Oppositional Politics in Nepal* (1977), *Nepal's Politics of Referendum: A Study of Groups, Personalities and Trends* (1983) and *Nepal: Problems of Governance* (1993). He has also edited or co-edited more than a dozen books, many of which emanated from research projects he has coordinated at the Nepal Centre for Contemporary Studies, an entity which he founded in 1995 and where he has been institutionally based since resigning from TU. It would have been nice to read about the thought process and effort that went into writing/editing these books in his autobiography, but Baral chooses to not get into the depths of his intellectual processes, focusing on aspects of his career (such as foreign travels) that are somewhat less compelling to the reader.

Baral does a good job of illustrating how difficult a navigation of the professional environment is and has been in Nepal's complex political landscape, and I think the book is worth reading if only to gain a surface level understanding of how the rise and fall of numerous establishments has led to enormous social change. Even though the book is long winded, not especially well written, and sometimes plain boring, it has the same kind

of engrossing quality that listening to your grandfather fondly reminisce about his life does. Students and acquaintances of Baral will definitely find a great deal to appreciate in his autobiography, and for other people, it is a sometimes exhausting but ultimately rewarding read.

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