

Girish Giri. 2016. *Birganj: Mero Śaharko Kathā*. Kathmandu: Publication Nepa~laya.

Birganj grabbed national limelight during the last (third) round of Madhesh movement immediately following the promulgation of the new Nepali constitution on 20 September 2015. Revolving around the debate on identity and state, this movement drew energy from the street protests staged by the Tharus in the Far West region over demarcation of federal boundaries but remained focused on the broader issues of citizenship and nationalism. Girish Giri's book is not exactly a surgery of the Madhesh movement but it does offer a detailed account of its eruption and demise. What this book does is it introduces "his" home city Birganj, as suggested in the title, to a broader Nepali audience through a palimpsest of autobiographic notes, anecdotes, reportage and historical memoirs. Published almost immediately after the third Madhesh movement, waged immediately after the promulgation of the constitution in 2015, this book is a timely investigation into the idea of Tarai border towns. The author, a well known journalist who has gained a reputation for his robust ground reporting and a vibrant style of writing, had drawn generously from his earlier reporting on the Madhesh movement. Nevertheless, considered by some to be too rushed in its interpretation, the book got the brunt of political polarization that seems to overshadow Nepali public sphere in the current times.

Girish begins the book with an emotional account of how he relived the loss of his father as he saw a prominent Nepali intellectual publicly cherishing his son's achievements at a cultural event in Kathmandu. The readers are then introduced to the political career of Girish's father, Gopal Giri, which was rooted in the left movement during the Panchayat period even if he was later wooed by Surya Bahadur Thapa to join Panchayat. So complex his political standing had become by the time the People's Movement took off in 1990 that he got rounded up by Thapa's rival Marich Man Singh Shrestha but the locals took his arrest to be a proof of his democratic engagement. Oblivious of these infightings within Panchayat, the locals wanted to parade Giri as their leader in their victory rally as the 1990 movement reached its victorious momentum and the king disbanded Panchayat. Giri declined. Soon after, his son and the book's author Girish moved to Kathmandu, away from the shadows of his father, to establish himself as a liberal journalist.

A decade and a half later, when King Gyanendra took over the rule during the Maoist insurgency, his old friend Surya Bahadur Thapa became the prime minister again. Thapa appointed Gopal Giri to be the mayor of Birganj. The book offers detailed accounts of contributions to the development of his home-town during this tenure. However, those were turbulent times, and he clearly did not fully negotiate the changing political equations around him. In one tragic episode, he was killed by two Maoist cadres at the tail end of the civil war – an incident that changed the life of the author and his family forever.

The book begins with Girish's journey from Kathmandu to Birganj as the third Madhesh movement gained grounds. He contrasts the brewing instability with the calmer and happier memories from his childhood in Birganj which is described at some length in the third chapter. The two accounts are mediated through a discussion on the city's standing as a commercial border town stretching from Raxaul on the India side of the border to Simara on the frontiers of Nepali hills. What is even more interesting is a personalized account of how political consciousness evolved among the Madheshis. Most Madheshis have long had unpleasant encounters with the Nepali state but their grievances took a political turn when a group of Madheshi leaders decided to lodge a letter at the royal court protesting the statements made in a state report on migration published in 1984. This letter landed an activist in jail, and the churning of the events gave birth to the first Madheshi association – Nepal Sadbhavana Parishad. After the 1990

movement, it was formally registered as Nepal Sadbhavana Party which later gave way to another political outfit Madheshi Janadhikar Forum following the first Madhesh uprising in 2007.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 offer detailed account of the third Madhesh movement in Birganj and the narrative is developed through the life stories of two young leaders who played important roles in ensuring local mobilization. Pradip Yadav and Rajesh Man Singh have both been associated with differing ideologies over time and their political careers speak for the complexity of deliberative politics in Birganj. Initially, when the protest was finding it hard to gain public support, Pradip Yadav, a former Panchayat leader and later with the “federalist” wing of Forum, came up with the idea that mass meetings should be such that they coincide with the schedules of weekly markets (*hāt*) around the region. This strategy proved effective. Although later sidelined, Rajesh Man Singh – formerly with Nepali Congress but later close to Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) who eventually joined Tarai-Madhesh Lokatantrik Party (TMLP) following the 2007 Madhesh movement – was considered a *bāhubalī* (muscular) leader who brought much needed energy in the early days of the third Madhesh movement.

The following two chapters offer a nuanced discussion of Madheshi people’s longstanding grievance on identity, and they argue that the state’s oppressive response to the peaceful protest in Tarai only brought back memories of the state’s coercive past in Tarai thus irking the crowd even further. The movement clearly gained a new energy as the state forcibly dismantled the protesters’ tent at the border gate. In response, large rallies walked in from distant villages determined to reinforce the sit-ins at the border. The discussion on the movement is enriched with nuanced accounts of how polarized Nepali social media had become – and by extension Nepali society and polity – in reporting of the Madheshi people’s face off with the state police. A contentious point on which the author had remained silent in his earlier journalistic reporting but now takes a side in this book, is the role played by India in enforcing the border blockade. While Girish disputes the ultranationalist argument that the border sit-ins had been staged by paid activists coming from the Indian side of the border, he does offer observations substantiating how India had provided some Madheshi leaders an unprecedented access to its political and bureaucratic apparati especially during the Madhesh movement.

What has been ignored by both Kathmandu and Madheshi media is the aspect of non-Madheshi people’s support for the Madhesh movement which

this book highlights well. The Birganj rally at the height of the movement, said to have brought some 10,000 people to the streets, constituted of a wide range of non-Madheshi population within the federal province number two. The book argues that local leaders within Birganj had gone to considerable lengths to ensure harmony among the various ethnic and religious communities throughout the movement, even if social media including those participating from outside Nepal seemed to portray a simple story about a charged clash between elite Pahadis and oppressed Madheshis.

The remaining of the book looks into the border location of Birganj to explore aspects of criminality including opium farming, drugs trafficking and gangsterism. Madhesh movement aside, Birganj has lately mustered few success stories on police nabbing of smugglers and criminals. Nepali media has seen the popularity of some of the police officers rise exponentially as they took concrete actions to ensure everyday law and order situation in the border towns including Birganj. This book makes an important observation that some of the security measures put in place by the state following the rise of criminality seemed to have gotten deliberately attacked and dismantled during this Madhesh movement. While the author clarifies that he was not pointing fingers at the campaign organizers, he does say that it behooves on the Madheshi leaders to ensure that criminal elements do not infiltrate into their programs and sabotage public security.

In addition to being an in-depth account of the third Madhesh movement, this book will be a valuable resource material for academics and others looking for social history of Birganj as an urban space in mid-central Tarai. It offers an engaging narrative on how Birganj emerged to be the most important cross-border commercial enclave in Nepal within a short span of a century while keeping a cosmopolitan spirit shared by its residents hailing from almost all of South Asia.

Despite its history as Nepal's commercial border capital, Birganj became the site of grievance on identity and social justice. How are we to read this book against the contemporary context? While it offers a genuine narrative on the rise of Birganj, it has to be kept in mind that Girish's is just one narrative among many. In a terrain as contested as Madhesh and in times as polarized as post-constitution (2015) Nepal, it can only be anticipated that the response to this book has been multiple too. At one level, the Kathmandu establishment seems to believe that this book would persuade Nepali readers to consider an alternative narrative on Madhesh. At another level, Madheshi

activists consider Girish's autobiographical treatment of his home-town narcissistic at best and status-quoist at worst. It has been said that the book, written so soon after the Madhesh movement waned away, can only offer an apologetic account of the movement. Yet at another level, as analyst CK Lal pointed out at a discussion on the book held at Martin Chautari in April 2016, the author is caught in a quintessential paradox of being: As a Pahadi man from a family associated with mainstream hill politics, the author is set to be damned by both sides of the divide regardless of whether he fully endorses the Madhesh movement or stubbornly dismisses it. Can an ethnic/regional outsider "do justice" to the voice of the oppressed indigenous population – is a question that needs to be considered ontologically. Leaving that aside for now, it would be fair to say that this book is a significant inquiry into the rise and demise of an important episode within the identity movement in Nepal.

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