

## Book Reviews

Kul Chandra Gautam. 2015. *Lost in Transition: Rebuilding Nepal from the Maoist Mayhem and Mega Earthquake*. Kathmandu: nepa~laya.

Kul Chandra Gautam's *Lost in Transition* is a blend of memoir and commentary on Nepal's recent political history that appears to be stuck in a transition from royal autocracy to a democratic republic and from a decade long Maoist insurgency to a semblance of sustainable peace. Gautam, who previously served as deputy executive director of UNICEF, assistant secretary-general of the United Nations, and special advisor to prime minister of Nepal on international affairs and peace process, offers a blistering and sometimes biased critique of the Maoists of Nepal and the diplomatic community for their duplicity and complicity.

The book, with a total of 16 chapters of varying lengths, has three main themes: critique of the Maoists and their sympathizers, critique of the international community, and a hopeful vision for Nepal's future. A substantial number of pages are allotted to a rebuttal of the Maoist ideology, politics, and agendas. The author is also critical of writers and activists he perceives as Maoist sympathizers or even useful idiots. Similarly, drawing on his experiences as a former international civil servant with connections to major national and international players in Nepali peace politics, Gautam censures the international community for what he sees as their suspension of universal values of human rights and democracy in favor of the Maoists and their politics in post-2006 Nepal. Notably, Gautam also shares his optimism about the future political and economic development of Nepal and his dream for a peaceful and prosperous Nepal.

For Gautam, the destruction wrought by the April 2015 earthquake and its aftershocks pales in comparison to the ravages of the decade-long Maoist insurgency. He argues that

the large-scale death and destruction, the glorification of a culture of violence, and derailing of democracy and development that the Maoists perpetrated in Nepal's body politic far outweigh whatever modest contribution their agenda may have made in ending feudalism

and promoting inclusion and social justice, which is much bandied about by their sympathisers. (p. 9)

More than half of the book consists of substantiation and reiteration of this argument alone. Although not an advocate of blissful nineties, Gautam believes that despite deep inequalities along caste, ethnic, gender and regional fault lines, Nepal was on a right path towards mature democracy and economic development until the Maoist mayhem upended everything. Furthermore, Gautam expresses strong disagreements with theorists of the “root causes” (p. 235) of the Maoist insurgency who locate its origin primarily in unequal structural conditions prevalent in Nepali society rather than in populist slogans, opportunism and the manipulation of Maoist leaders. The author firmly believes that the Maoists’ idea and practice of “*krambhangata*” (p. 134) is the worst thing to have happened to Nepal in recent years because it justified the disruption of every existing order of things in the name of the people. In contrast, Maoists depict *krambhangatā*, or at least they did until a few years ago, as forceful discontinuity of the status quo that protects and perpetuates structural injustice and inequality.

Gautam is unwilling to give the Maoists the benefit of the doubt and take them for a pro-marginalized force in Nepali society, but he reluctantly admits that they did contribute to raising the political consciousness of the historically marginalized sections of Nepali society. The other Maoist myth that Gautam delights in busting is that of Maoists as crusaders against corruption. He provides details of Maoist involvement in small and large scale corruption after the beginning of the peace process. In particular, Gautam is very vocal against the Maoist’s politics of extortion and massive fraud against their own former soldiers and disagrees with the narrative that Maoists fought against structural violence in Nepali society. Similarly, he also takes the Maoists to task for six grave crimes they committed: child rights violations, betrayal of former combatants and cadres, extortion of the state, massacre of citizens, derailment of development, and “nurturing of violence and impunity” (p. 197).

Gautam is fearless in denouncing the Maoists, the proverbial villains of his narrative, but he is also guilty of exaggerating their power in post-2006 politics. This is evident in Gautam’s observation that Maoists were not just preparing for but capable of state capture. To lend credibility to his view, Gautam argues that Nepal was really on the brink of Maoist state capture and

it was mainly because of a few enlightened men and India, of course, that “saved Nepal from Maoist takeover” (p. 270). Interestingly, Gautam does give the biggest credit to the people of Nepal for preventing this mishap by reducing the Maoists to third position in the second constituent assembly (CA) elections from their erstwhile number one party position in the first CA. He rightly observes that federalism, identity-based federalism in particular, has become the litmus test for progressivism in Nepali society today. He takes an agnostic stand vis-à-vis federalism and rightly cautions against its fetishization. Not surprisingly, Gautam is suspicious of identity-based demands and clumsily states that the human pursuit of prosperity is our one true identity because everything else is constantly changing.

Gautam is also sharp in his observations of Nepali peace politics and the role of the international community during the peace process. Predictably, he expresses his disappointment at the gullibility of the international community in the face of relentless progressive posturing and rhetoric from the Maoists, bolstered by their supporters and sympathizers in media and civil society. He is particularly critical of United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) and its adherence to the “two sides to the conflict” concept even when the Maoists had already formed the government after becoming the largest party in the first CA. Furthermore, Gautam is dismayed that UNMIN chose to ignore his views and those of people like him and relied heavily on the political analysis of “several self proclaimed ‘progressive’ columnists” (p. 230).

He argues that many Western diplomats, including UN and UNMIN officials, were so captivated by the Maoist rhetoric of social justice and inclusion that they failed to comprehend the ruthlessness and corruption of Maoist leadership and their failure to unequivocally commit to a pluralistic society. He finds the international community’s understanding of Nepali realities superficial and castigates them for their failure to denounce the recent Indian blockade of Nepal. It is worth noting that UNMIN relied on some of the finest Nepali and non-Nepali political analysts and commentators for its political reports. Therefore, it is hard for readers to believe that all of them were off the mark and that Gautam, who had spent all of his adult life outside Nepal, is the one who grasps the post-2006 Nepali reality accurately. Furthermore, Gautam is silent about the shortcomings and failings of the UN bureaucracy, of which he was a member for a long time, and limits himself to criticism of personalities such as Ian Martin and Karin Landgren both of whom served with the UNMIN. *Nepal in Transition* edited by Sebastian

von Einsiedel, David Malone and Suman Pradhan (2012) receives special attention in the book but sadly, Gautam fails to engage seriously with the authors and arguments they make. Instead he casually dismisses the book as a validation of the “root cause” (p. 251) thesis. For instance, in a rather shallow attempt at criticism, Gautam accuses one of the contributors to that book, Mahendra Lawoti, of being selective with statistics, without actually demonstrating how.

Gautam presents as self-evident truth his opinion that today’s Nepal is ailed by six sins, but saved by seven virtues. These sins include hyper-politicization, culture of violence and impunity, neglect of economic issues, passing the buck, focus on divisive forces instead of unifying ones, and cynicism, which he even calls “Nepal’s new religion” (p. 43). The seven virtues consist of women’s empowerment and people’s awareness, thriving mass media, advancements in human development, development of non-governmental and private sector, non-resident Nepalis’ positive potential, goodwill of international community, and “Nepali genius for compromise and co-existence” (p. 46). According to Gautam, these virtues will be of immense value in the process of rebuilding Nepal. Moreover, he also proposes a plan for human and economic development. The core elements of Gautam’s plan range from relief and rehabilitation for the victims of the Maoist insurgency and mega earthquake to infrastructure development and reduction of social disparities. Critical of the post-1990 liberal economy that fostered crony capitalism, corruption, and inequality, he also notes the importance of policy and administrative reforms in the promotion of development, particularly in the health and education sectors.

Towards the end of his book, Gautam indulges in wishful thinking, dreaming about a Nepali utopia which he hopes will be realized by the year 2051, a century after the dawn of post-Rana democracy in 1951 (2007 v.s.). Gautam imagines that Nepal of 2051 will be prosperous and equitable, peaceful, and the world’s leading tourist destination, and Nepalis will be proud of being “Global Nepali” (p. 414). In other words, he hopes and expects Nepal to be “*Sundara, Shanta, Bishal*” (beautiful, peaceful and great; p. 410) by the year 2051. However, the epilogue of the book, which is a reflection on motivations and effects of the Indian blockade and Nepal’s fragile relationship with its neighbors, wakes readers up from Gautam’s sweet dreams and brings them back to Nepal’s current sad plight.

The random organization of chapters in this book suggests that it is more a collection of essays than a carefully executed monograph. Easy flow, connections and a measured building of arguments from one chapter to another are clearly lacking in Gautam's book which is unnecessarily lengthy due to the fact that the writer repeats similar arguments many times, particularly regarding the Maoists. A whole chapter consisting of an unsent letter to Prachanda written in October 2005 adds nothing significant. Gautam's book is definitely weaker in terms of rigor and research than the writers whom he belittles such as Prashant Jha (2014) and Aditya Adhikari (2014) who have covered similar territory not just from a different vantage point, but also with more nuance and judiciousness. However, *Lost in Transition* provides a useful interpretation of Nepal's recent history and transitional politics, although one that is not necessarily more valid than the interpretations provided by other writers criticized in the book.

## References

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