

Chandra Bhadra. 2016. *Three Decades of Academic Advocacy for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Oxford International Publication Pvt. Ltd.

Where have Nepali women come from the time the women's rights movement was first recognized by the government in the form of the National Committee on International Women's Year in 1975? Where have we arrived in the years that spanned over continuous struggle to make our voices heard over issues and about our rights? *Three Decades of Academic Advocacy for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women in Nepal* is a book that tries to recount that history and address questions related to the events that punctuated and furthered the women's rights movement.

The book is a collection of essays and articles published in academic journals and various other publications by Bhadra over a period of three decades. Most of them are in English, some in Nepali. They appear in the book in the order of chronology, unraveling the history of the women's movement in Nepal. It is what makes this a book of importance for those

seeking to understand the evolution of the women's rights movement in Nepal. Students of gender studies often complain about the difficulty in finding the right book or adequate material on gender analysis in Nepal. This book is perhaps an answer to that.

Bhadra writes on a wide range of topics concerning women's rights over the years, besides documenting the political and academic progress on the matter. In the first article in the book "Women's Development: Some Imperatives" (originally published in 1986), she argues for the need to support opportunities for women's employment and calls it the sole measure to make a difference to the status of women.

"In urban areas, there is already a trend of women coming out of household and getting employed. Most of these women are facing the problem of dual burden of homemaking and fulltime employment" (p. 1). The argument came at a time when the number of women engaged in the official employment sector was negligible. This statement continues to be the crux of the rhetoric that runs as a theme throughout the book, even as she moves on to different arguments related to gender equality. Thirty years later, there has been a paradigm shift and the discourse has come to include topics like "gender equality and social inclusion." But the realities have remained intact.

Following the chronology of the writing timeline, Nepali and English articles appear alongside in the book. And although the topics of the Nepali and the English articles are similar, they differ in terms of expression, which also allows us an insight into the versatility of the writer. However, the articles themselves are not completely different in terms of their theme or content. I suppose this is because when they had originally appeared as stand-alone pieces in different publications, they were meant to carry a single strain of argument.

As most of the academicians who teach gender studies in Nepal continue to argue, Bhadra pushes forth the argument of evaluating household work monetarily. The other major argument the writer makes in the book is the one on resources—the relationship of women with natural and household resources. She explores the feminization of poverty—how encroachment on resources actually takes a toll on women, who are the real managers of resources in the household. "The effect of deforestation on drying aquifer forces women to go farther and farther away to fetch water," she writes (p. 16). She furthers her argument by saying: "As a great portion of women's

time is spent on home-making, technologies to reduce women's time in household chores should be developed. Food processing, cooking, water fetching, fuel-wood collection, and cleaning and maintaining the house are activities which are both time and energy consuming" (p. 15).

While she lobbies for alternative energy as a must to support women's development, she also introduces the idea of including women as "participants in development and not just beneficiaries," which takes the readers into a different level of discourse. And this has been a debate of concern for all feminist movements internationally. Popularly known as "WID-WAD-GAD," by academicians, the movements are categorized as Women in Development, Women and Development and Gender and Development, tracing the transformation the gender-benders have embraced over the years. From trying to encourage women to be part of development, the theories moved into the larger spectrum of gender, because in order to improve the status of women, it was no longer enough to just talk about women in isolation. Women had to be seen as belonging to and functioning in coordination with the other genders, in order to improve the status that has pre-existed.

The articles on the history of Women's Studies in Nepal that describe the courses' contribution to women's "emancipation" in the country, focus on the existing structural inequalities between genders, and stress the need for a change of the narrative. The narrative takes up the case of persistent inequality in the Nepali society at different levels, showing why and how the battle for equality has been such a difficult one. Bhadra draws anecdotes from songs and proverbs that preach for women to be "pretty objects." She describes how households and the workplace are both designed to keep the women confined to roles traditionally assigned to them.

Bhadra ends her articles raising questions that propel one to think about how the contours that outline Nepali society's gendered politics and social milieu can be rewritten, to change the course of the narrative. But some examples become repetitive, for example, the research on the "Bosan belles" in the paper, "Water, Environment and Management: Women as Managers – Experience in Nepal." The article tends to talk about that research repeatedly, understandably based on field work done for a UNICEF project.

In her piece "Gender and the Armed Conflict: An Alternative Feminist Perspective," Bhadra criticizes the Maoist conflict, where she writes:

Nepalese insurgency is also marked as the “battle with guns and condoms;” meaning sex among combatants accepted as basic human needs. Nonetheless, sex among combatants seems to remain the prerogative of male combatants rather than that of female combatants; revealed by the hierarchy of sexual favor with prettier girls remaining the entitlement of higher ranking male combatants. (p. 184)

A statement of that degree would survive on evidence and would have to be substantiated with examples and quotes. But it appears more as a stray comment without follow-up. At one point, she also talks about how masculinity should be gentle like that of the Buddha and one might wonder why Buddha’s “masculinity” is being eulogized when the entire idea of feminism is to de-glorify masculinity.

The article on “Women’s International Labour Migration and Impact of their Remittance on Poverty Reduction: Case of Nepal” is a piece with continued relevance. This is especially so because women’s labor migration has for decades been an issue riddled with controversies surrounding illegal out-migration. However, more comprehensive versions of the research data would do greater service to readers. If academic writing can simplify theories and make them presentable and thereby actionable, the research results go a long way. Strictly academic-looking tables that require detailed interpretation do not serve the purpose of reaching out to a general readership, which is definitely a target group for this book.

While the articles do generally cover a wide range of topics, there’s little or nothing in terms of women’s writing (literary or journalistic), an aspect that has made a marked difference in the gender politics in this country. Literature and journalistic work is a key link to trace a country’s development. Their absence in this book is regretted.

Toward the latter part of the book, Bhadra’s op-ed articles raise important issues related to menstruation and how it has become a means of treating women as “untouchables” in the Nepali society. She links this theme to survival in the aftermath of disasters. The last article on “Conceptual Clarity and Operational Streamlining of Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) Strategy in Nepal’s Development” leaves the reader with food for thought. “Gender Equality (GE) and Social Inclusion (SI) as GESI, is adopted as development intervention strategy in Nepal after the 2006’s political change; especially as a corrective measure to address the

state of underdevelopment of the socially excluded groups” (p. 332). She ends the book with an important call for “the Social Scientists [sic] with relevant expertise to come forward with conceptual clarity and operational streamlining of ‘social inclusion’ in Nepal’s development strategy especially in the context of Nepal’s imminent transforming into Federalism” (p. 345).

The book could have used a good editor to spare typos and minor language errors that interrupt the flow of sound academic writing. It also lacks a table of contents. A revised edition will perhaps pay attention to these details. And perhaps after capturing thirty years of Nepali women’s struggle, it does not suffice for the writer to “admit my lack of capability to speak in the subject of larger political economy and the ‘social inclusion’” (p. 345).

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