Introduction

Political Change and Public Culture in Post-1990 Nepal

Michael Hutt and Pratyoush Onta

Basheer Musalman
Poured us some sugar-water
And updated us on the village news.

The village is surrounded by the Rohini Khola
And is frightened by the deluge of rain.
In the eyes of the black girls
Who pick up gravel from the riverbanks and load it onto carts
Can be seen an unusual light.
You will find no difference between their skin,
Branded by the midday sun,
And Basheer's politics,
But he once saved some leader
(Who is now the Prime Minister)
By putting his neck on the line.
Basheer starts his account with this fact.

Basheer Musalman mixed the story of Surajpura
In with the sips of sugar-water.

What do they think,
Those black girls who pick up the gravel,
About the river breaching its banks,
The rising flood,
And their rising youth?
What do they think,
Those black girls,
About shifting their loads onto oxen
And feeling or not feeling light?
About Basheer's hero of history
And the streams that come mixing into the Rohini?

What do they think
About whether the white hills to the north have melted?
Who knows what they think
About the seed of fire that must be ignited in their homes?
About the jungle tigers with whom they must soon sleep?
I ask Basheer—
What do they think, these girls,
About the other girls like themselves?

'They don't think anything'
Said Basheer Musalman,
'No, they can't think at all',
And he closed his eyes.

Shyamal, 'Snow on Bhairahawa' (*Bhairahawama Hium*, 1994), tr. Michael Hutt

This book is the product of a research collaboration between the Department of the Languages and Cultures of South Asia at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, and the research institute Martin Chautari in Kathmandu, which was supported by a British Academy South Asia International Partnership. Over the course of its three-year duration (2010-13), this project, particularly the workshops it held in Kathmandu in 2011 and London in 2012, also drew in a number of other researchers from outside the two collaborating institutions.

Although primarily ethnographic and empirical in its content, this book also aims to contribute to the wider scholarly debate on publics and audiences.

Recent Political Changes

The setting of this book, Nepal, is regularly described as being 'a country in transition', and it is true that Nepal has undergone radical political change since 1990, when a 'People's Movement' led by the Nepali Congress Party and an alliance of communist parties forced the king to dismantle the Panchayat structures under which Nepal had been governed since 1962. The political changes that occurred between 1990 and 2013 include the establishment of a multi-party parliamentary system, the ten-year Maoist insurgency from 1996–2006 and the stymieing of a 2005 'royal coup' by a popular movement for democracy in the spring of 2006. They also include two rebellions in the Madhes/Tarai, Nepal's southern plains, in 2007 and 2008, two elections to the

Constituent Assembly (CA) in 2008 and 2013, as well as the abolition of the monarchy in 2008.

These major political transitions have received some attention in recent years from scholars, journalists and political commentators. For instance, Hutt (1994), Kumar (2000), Brown (1996), Lawoti (2005), Malagodi (2013) and Hachhethu (2015) have discussed the details of the transition of Nepal in 1990 from a country under an absolute monarch to one with a multiparty dispensation under a constitutional monarch. They have also discussed the making of the 1990 Constitution and its various limitations as well as the political challenges faced by Nepal's new rulers during the 1990s. The Maoist insurgency has been the subject of multiple studies by political scientists, anthropologists, historians, literary scholars, journalists and others (e.g., Thapa with Sijapati, 2003; Hutt, 2004, 2012; Baral, 2006; Tamang, 2006; Lawoti and Pahari, 2010; Sharma, 2013; Lecomte-Tilouine, 2013; Jha, 2014 and Adhikari, 2014).[1] The Madhes rebellions of 2007 and 2008, the first of which resulted in the introduction of the concept of federalism in the Interim Constitution of 2007, have been discussed in ICG (2007), Gautam (2008), Ghimire (2013) and Jha (2014). Various aspects of the political transition since the popular movement of 2006 – the peace-process involving the disbanding of the Maoist 'People's Liberation Army', the constitution writing process via the failed first CA, the debates on federalism and state restructuring and the dynamics of international involvement in Nepal during this entire period – have been discussed and analysed by many, including ICG (2009), Vollan (2011), von Einsiedel, Malone and Pradhan (2012), Baral and Hachhethu (2013), Sharma (2013), Martin Chautari (2013), Jha (2014), Adhikari (2014) and Hachhethu (2014), among others.[2]

These political changes were accompanied by equally radical socio-cultural changes. This included the doubling of the literacy rate from about 33 per cent in 1990 to about 66 per cent in 2011 (UNESCO, 2012; CBS, 2012), and enormous growth in the print, broadcast and online media[3] as well as the

1 Various anthologies of writings on the Maoist rebellion and its aftermath are also available, in Nepali and English. Gautam, Basnet and Manandhar (2007) and Gautam and Manandhar (2008) are useful examples in Nepali. A growing body of fictional writing also focuses on the Maoist conflict.

2 Other reports published by the International Crisis Group (www.crisisgroup.org) and various policy briefs published by Martin Chautari (martinchautari.org.np), available on their respective websites, have also discussed further aspects of the political transition in Nepal. Such reports have also been published by other organizations based in Nepal and elsewhere.

3 On the subject of the growth of radio and television in post-1990 Nepal, see Humagain,

publishing industry (Panthi and Humagain, 2014). Other changes included the emergence of a public discourse on human rights (Rawski and Sharma, 2012), and the vigorous assertion of linguistic, ethnic/Janajati (Gellner, Pfaff-Czarnecka and Whelpton, 1997; Onta, 2006; Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009; Hangen, 2010; Lawoti and Hangen, 2013), Dalit (Vasily, 2009; Ahuti, 2010; B. K., 2013; Kisan and Biswokarma, 2071 v.s.), Madhesi (Gautam, 2008; Jha, 2014) and other identities.[4]

The New Public Culture

The political space previously occupied by the monarch and associated elites in Nepal was filled with a new cast of characters during this period of change. Naturally, these included party political leaders and activists of many different hues, but the retreat of the ancestral elites also provided the backdrop for the emergence of a new class of citizens that was educated and political, but not necessarily politicized in party terms. These new agents became active in various public arenas. Many of these were directly related to efforts to further democratize Nepali society, but others were tied to efforts to create new or re-discovered solidarities of various kinds. These characters and some members of the traditional elites have tried to use the public arenas not only to comment upon and interpret the relatively fast moving political transitions in Nepal but also to argue for their visions of the future of Nepali democracy, polity and much more.

During the same period, the Nepali print and broadcast media and civil

Onta and Bhatta (2008) and Gautam and Parajulee (2008), respectively. The growth of the print media is described in many sources including Panthi, Onta and Maharjan (2013) and various articles published in the annual journal *Media Adhyayan*, founded in 2006. An author index to the first ten issues of this journal can be found at http://martinchautari.org.np/2012-08-27-08-45-41/journals/12-publications/journals/51-author-index-to-media-adhyayan.html. More than a dozen theme-specific bibliographies of writings related to the print, broadcast and online media in Nepal can be found at http://www.martinchautari.org.np/2012-08-27-08-45-41/bibilographies.html.

4 Human rights defenders and institutions have published a large number of reports and analyses. However, an academic analysis of the rise of the public discourse on human rights in Nepal is still awaited. There is now a large quantity of writing on Janajati and Dalit identity movements in post-Panchayat Nepal and an increasing number of publications on the Madhesi identity movement. We have only cited a few of them here. Also see various articles and commentaries published in the issues of the journal *Madhes Adhyayan*, founded in 2013, and the series of thematic discussion proceedings, *Madhes Manthan*, both published by the Nepal Madhes Foundation.

society organizations became important as intermediate institutions that constructed and distributed the meaning of political and social changes in Nepal and they increasingly challenged the traditional roles of family and caste *as institutions* in this regard. Since the late 1990s, Nepali understandings of transitions at the public level have been primarily mediated by the content of the Nepali language media, but films, songs, music videos, dramas, rumours, popular literature, poetry and most recently, social media, have also played their part. What 'the people' – including the poet Shyamal's gravel collectors – think and believe became more important as the democratic transition proceeded. The competition to influence the people with one's own opinions and interpretations of what was going on gave birth to a new breed of specialist communicators, in the form of journalists, columnists, politicians, human rights activists, activists affiliated to various social and cultural movements, film and theatre directors and public-relations experts (see Mayhew, 1997). The sometimes acrimonious public accusations and debates between these actors were confusing and complex, but these diacritics of public life, perhaps more than anything else, defined post-Panchayat public culture in Nepal.

Until comparatively recently, Western scholarly work on Nepali society often failed to engage with this new public culture in Nepal, mainly because the political economy of scholarship on Nepal conducted elsewhere rarely demanded such an engagement. The print media, television and radio, film and theatre, poetry and popular song, which exist predominantly in Nepali but also increasingly in other Nepalese languages, were largely omitted from western scholarly considerations of the immense changes Nepal was undergoing as it emerged from a period of armed conflict and its leaders struggled to construct the framework for a more representative non-monarchical state. The historically important role that rumour has played in a society where people outside the political or aristocratic elite do not expect to be told the truth has been sorely neglected. Given this lack of attention to Nepal's public discourse, it is unsurprising that foreign observers were often dumbfounded by the fast changing political scenarios in Nepal. For instance, they were shocked by the emergence of a violent Maoist insurgency in the mid 1990s, and shocked again when the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) won the largest share of votes in the 2008 Constituent Assembly elections. The Nepali electorate's subsequent rejection of the Maoists in the second Constituent Assembly election, held in November 2013, tells us that the internal discourse of the Nepali publics, some aspects of which are described in this book, can lead to substantial remouldings of public opinion and constructions of meaning.

We use the term public 'to refer to a set of arenas ... that have emerged in a

variety of historical conditions' including those outside of Europe 'that articulate the space between domestic life and the projects of the nation-state – where different social groups (classes, ethnic groups, genders) constitute their identities by their experience of mass-mediated forms in relation to the practices of everyday life' (Appadurai and Breckenridge, 1995, 4–5). Defined in this manner, the term 'public' 'ceases to have any necessary or predetermined relationship to formal politics, rational communicative action, print capitalism, or the dynamics of the emergence of a literate bourgeoisie' (Appadurai and Breckenridge, 1995, 5) and becomes quite appropriate for usage in the contexts described above. Following the formulation of the same two authors, the term 'public culture' refers to a zone of cultural contestation or debate. Defined in this manner, the idea of a public culture thus becomes a suitable analytical domain in which to locate most of the chapters in this volume. It is to these chapters that we now turn our attention.

This Book

This book has been divided into five sections. In the first part, three chapters discuss the role rumour plays not only in spreading the factual content of news but also in constructing public understandings of events. The chapters by Lecomte-Tilouine (a cultural anthropologist) and Hutt (a scholar of Nepali literature) both have as their starting point the widespread public disbelief of the official explanation of the Narayanhiti Royal Palace massacre of 1 June 2001. This was probably the most extraordinary event of recent Nepali history. Lecomte-Tilouine's essay begins with an exploration of the history of the changing interpretations of the massacre in the Nepali print media and then explores the possibility of this mysterious event being understood under opposed interpretive models. Her aim is to identify a common framework shared by all Nepalis for the understanding of such an event. She argues that the event includes all the ingredients for an endless polemical debate characterized by opacity and indeterminacy, which allows for the construction of different scenarios. Hutt uses the massacre as a basis for examining the relationship between rumours and conspiracy theories on one hand and the production and consumption of Nepali popular literature on the other. He focuses first on theoretical studies of the way in which rumours can sometimes be woven into conspiracy theories, then on the rumours that circulated in Nepal during 2001 as alternative explanations for the Narayanhiti Royal Palace massacre. He describes how believers in these rumours seized upon 'errant data' in the official

account of the massacre and built them up into conspiracy theories, and then how a number of Nepali authors capitalized on the Nepali public's fascination with this event and its continued scepticism of the official account.

The starting point for the third essay, by Mallika Shakya (an economic anthropologist), is the 'Hrithik Roshan scandal' of 2000, which began when rumours spread that an Indian Bollywood actor (Roshan) had made derogatory remarks about Nepal and Nepalis. Shakya discusses the unfolding of this scandal, including the ways in which the Nepali media propagated it and industrial workers, politicians and the general public reacted to it. Particular attention is paid to its impact on ethnopolitics at shop floor level in the context of the readymade garment industry (RMG) where Shakya bases her ethnography. RMG factory floors were among the rare public spaces shared by hill, Madhesi and Indian workers when the Hrithik Roshan scandal erupted. The significance of this rumour was its subjective consumption at three different levels. On the RMG floors, managers capitalized on the incident to bring managerial changes that had been in the pipeline for some time; the Nepali media channelled both its consumption and broadcasting as it suited broader narratives of/on Nepali nationalism and ethnopolitics; and state politicians manipulated public discontent to further their political agendas.

The second section of the book deals with questions of identity, variously located. The three chapters address different aspects of Nepali identity politics. First, Martin Gaenszle (a cultural anthropologist) discusses the movie *Numafung* (2002), which belongs to the growing genre of ethnic (or, as some would call it, Janajati) cinema, which has emerged in Nepal since the 1990s (see Ajeet, 2010). *Numafung* was the first full feature film on Limbu culture and can be seen as an expression of the new ethnic awareness and pride which developed in post-1990 Nepal. While the film's plot is not very unusual, the way the story is told and the film images are employed broke new ground in Nepali cinema. Gaenszle analyses the depiction of Limbu culture in visual scenes, music and language, and asks how the medium of film is being used to both criticise custom and at the same time create new ethnic self-images. He also considers its reception by viewers, nationally and internationally, as reflected in academic discourse, in the press and in discussions on social media, and inquires into the potentials and predicaments of ethnic cinema in the development of a more inclusive public sphere.

The following chapter by media historians Pratyoush Onta and Devraj Humagain discusses how the changes in the nature of the state in Nepal in 1990 enabled a different kind of public sphere to develop, in which critical

commentary on erstwhile off-limit topics became possible. By looking at the contents of magazines published by the Adivasi Janajatis during the 1990s, they show how a subaltern Janajati counterpublic sphere (cf. Fraser, 1990) was created through discussions of language and cultural politics, state religion and Janajati histories. Finally, Harsha Man Maharjan (a media scholar) describes the phenomenon of Prashant Tamang, the Darjeeling-born Indian national of Nepali/Gorkha identity who swept to victory in the TV talent competition 'Indian Idol' in 2007 on a wave of popular transnational support. Maharjan argues that the campaign in support of Tamang that was orchestrated inside Nepal represented a backlash against the recent movements of minority identity assertion in that country. His chapter also sheds light on the way in which the use of modern social media transcends national boundaries.

The third section of the book presents two examples of cultural production designed to raise levels of political consciousness among the general population. Grandin (a cultural anthropologist) bases his study in the Kathmandu Valley town of Kirtipur, where the predominantly Newar population has a very particular view of its own social history and its interactions with the Nepali state. He describes how Kirtipur cultural activists navigated through the sometimes turbulent years of post-Panchayat Nepal, actively relating to events such as the Jan Andolans and their aftermaths, the Gyanendra Shah-led throwback to authoritarian rule with its curfews, and the advent of the Maoists. Anthropologist Monica Mottin's chapter focuses on theatre as a site for the construction of democracy, and particularly on Gurukul as a theatre space and Aarohan Theatre Group's *loktantrik natak* as a theatrical street performance form. It describes the ways in which the interplay of space and performance was deployed in the struggle to restore democracy in the aftermath of the imposition of direct rule by King Gyanendra in early 2005. As both a participant observer and a co-performer, she analyses how Gurukul was turned into a moral space and focuses on two *loktantrik natak* performances that took place in conjunction with public meetings of the very influential Citizens' Movement for Democracy and Peace.[5]

The fourth section of the book focuses on representations of the experience of Nepali women. First, Kailash Rai (a researcher on gender politics) discusses various aspects of the many 'war memoirs' written by women who were active in the Maoist war. These challenge the idea that war, weapons, armies and assault

5 The Citizens' Movement for Democracy and Peace started collective and public criticism of the 'royal coup' of King Gyanendra at a time when the major political parties were at a loss regarding how they should organize their opposition (Basnet, 2012; Heaton Shrestha and Adhikari, 2010, 2013).

are areas appropriate only for male roles and that women are weak and always seek security. The chapter concludes that despite the physical and mental pain and suffering these women underwent, for them the most excellent life was the life of war itself. Seira Tamang (a feminist political theorist) agrees that women saw the 'post-conflict' transition in Nepal as a moment of opportunity for the transformation of social relationships and a truly historic re-shaping of gendered relationships. However, her analysis of newspaper and magazine reports of female combatants during the post-2006 transition period reveals other dynamics, including a move to discipline women back into the private and 'feminine sphere'.

Finally, Laura Kunreuther (a cultural anthropologist) turns her gaze on the relatively comfortable world of the emerging Nepali middle class, and more particularly the urgency felt by many Kathmandu families to retrieve or restore cultural, historical and personal memories that they feel are in danger of being lost. None of the people she discusses are formal political actors, but their projects of creating domestic archives resonate with the contemporary ways in which a public debate about history has played a significant role in redefining political and personal lives. Each of the stories she explores engages with the question of how public discourses of history and heritage may, unwittingly and indirectly, affect people who are not directly a part of that public.

These case studies, produced by a variety of scholars from different disciplinary locations, help us to understand how the public culture of post-1990 Nepal was constituted. In so doing, they provide us with empirically grounded histories of the Nepali nation during one of its most important political transitions and challenge future scholars of Nepal to build upon the insights provided in the chapters of this volume.

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