

REVIEW ARTICLE

DEMOCRACY AND ITS CULPRITS

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The Challenge to Democracy in Nepal: A Political History by T. Louise Brown, London: Routledge, 1996, xi+239 pp, includes bibliography and index, price: £ 40. hardback.

It is but natural for researchers on Nepal to habitually identify two recurrent phenomena - monarchy and poverty coexisting and constraining democratic development in the country. The premises that an assertive monarchy and an incipient democracy are institutionally incompatible in a feudalistic socioeconomic environment of a "soft state" like Nepal lead to a foregone conclusion about the tenacity of democracy. The University of Birmingham scholar, T. Louise Brown in her pessimistic assessment of *The Challenge to Democracy in Nepal* has also joined the bandwagon of analysts in making inescapable remarks of the common genre by implying that unless the intriguing monarchy is tamed and poverty remains at unsatisfactory level the hard won democracy of 1990 could be stifled by the "hungry [who are] yet to be fed," (p. 222) because the ensuing "poverty and prolonged economic stagnation are the greatest threats to Nepali democracy" (p.213).

Worsening economic scene has undoubtedly been a serious concern in Nepal. The growth related economic indicators are irrelevant to the increasing incidence of poverty estimated at 50 to more than 70 percent of the total population of 18.4 million that the 1991 census records. Poverty and underdevelopment were the twin issues confronting Nepali democracy in the early 1950s. In those days the state's capacity to generate revenue was limited to a mere Rs. 35 million against Rs. 50 million plus national expenditure for a population hovering around 7 million. A much larger Nepali economy in 1996 is still trying to cope with the same challenges it faced when Nepal entered the post-Rana phase of democratization in 1951. But poverty and economic destitution were hardly any reasons for the destruction of democracy in 1960. Brown's narratives of the non-democratic

panchayat system in the three subsequent chapters after an introductory on "Traditional Nepal" throw sufficient lights on how and why democracy was outmanoeuvred by an assertive monarchy. The only significant aspect of the post-Rana Nepal was the resurgent monarchy which had successfully coopted all the non-democratic forces to keep democracy at bay, but not the aspirations of the people struggling for democracy.

Had poverty and the economic plights of the people been causes of the failure of democracy in 1960, the lowly literate, lowly fed and lowly clothed people of Nepal would never have risen again for restoring democracy in 1990 when called by the urban based middle class. Again, if poverty were to be taken as the greatest threat to democracy, this premise requires to be empirically tested and validated. Because even institutionalized and industrialized democracies in North America, Europe and India are severely afflicted with poverty and the relative vulnerabilities. Take the case of the United Kingdom, the mother of parliamentary democracy. Poverty there is becoming endemic. Under the Tory rule since 1979, which changed the face of Britain from the "sick man of Europe" to a thriving economy, the people suffered severely. The number of Britons earning less than half the average income, according to the common European definition of poverty, has increased from below five million in 1979 to some 14 million at the end of 1996. Average income growth of 39 percent for each Briton notwithstanding, the Tories have added 9 million more people in the ranks of the poor.

In the case of India where 300 million middle class people are said to be extremely well off compared to more than 600 million poor, democracy is under stress but not threatend towards its extinction. According to the IMF, the current rate of income growth in India could take it 154 years to reach the level of developed countries what China could achieve in 16 years. These cases amplify a most complicated feature of governance under democracy where social inequalities are pervasive. Systemic opposition to the rule of certain political party and the search for institutional remedies to the government's failings are articulated to the extent of making the government responsible to its policies and postures. Nepal however differs on these scores. "Not only has it to institutionalize a democratic system of government, but the political parties themselves have to be institutionalized", (p. 214) says Brown.

Identifying these "double challenges" to democracy in Nepal is preposterous without attempting to understand the political context where two prominent political parties are waging an unending conflict for attending two identically different purposes. The Nepali Congress party began its life aiming at overthrowing the century old Rana regime in Nepal,

restore monarchy to its rightful place, and establish a multiparty parliamentary system under the constitutional monarchy. It succeeded in realizing these objectives twice: once in 1951 and secondly in 1990 against the authoritarian Ranarchy and the absolute monarchy.

The Communist Party of Nepal, on the other hand, was born to oppose the Nepali Congress ideology and establish communism in Nepal. The cut-throat competition between these two parties are now on the open. The Nepali Congress is still struggling to sustain a minimum functional democratic norms under the constitutional provisions. Whereas the Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist-Leninists is striving at paralysing the multiparty system aligning itself with all the non-democratic forces. Rethoric or otherwise, they are untiringly asserting that multiparty system is not their ultimate goal. Evidently, they had undermined common democratic norms during their stint as a minority government for nine months after November 1994 election. They put the country directly under the control of the *State Management Department* of the party not the cabinet.

Nowhere has this unique feature of Nepali politics figured in Brown's study. And least is said about the alleged configuration of non-democratic forces working in tandem to disrupt the political process, impair the constitutional features and increase the vulnerability of the multiparty system. She has however mentioned in passing reference the internal as well as international context in which the *Jana Andolan in 1990* was launched. The critical ingredient for encouraging the movement for democracy in Nepal was no doubt the favourable international situation when the cold war was reeling to an end with the collapse of the Berlin wall and autocrats like Ceausescue had fallen to the wrath of the people in Romania. But the inner strength of the Nepali people and their determination for democratic struggle was the catalyst for the movement to push ahead. The movement was launched with a single agenda: to achieve multiparty democracy under the constitutional monarchy.

Ms Brown who had personally watched the unfolding events of *the Jana Andolan* has rightly identified the movement as being mostly urban based. Indeed, it was not a "national movement" in the sense of a spontaneous people's uprising spreading like a bush fire throughout the nation. But for the "global fashion for democracy, it had a higher international profile" (p. 141) she says, which eloquently put the movement into perspective. Had this "small scale" people's uprising occurred elsewhere, and Kathmandu and some other major urban centres were left untouched, the movement would have met the same fate as other uprisings previously occurring sporadically in the aftermath of the Royal Coup of December 1960 in which numerous

people mostly associated with the Nepali Congress rebellions were massacred by the security forces which go unrecorded even in the violent conflict studies manuals. Perhaps this urban characteristics of the people's movement have contrived democracy to make a "clear break from the past". It could have continued the influence of Nepal's traditional elites by relegitimizing their power through the sanctions of the ballot box (p. 211). As "democracy did not destroy the old order... [and] Congress chose to ally itself with the palace and place[d] its faith in the king, the leader and symbol of the very system it had fought to overthrow" (P. 145), Ms. Brown ruefully says, "democratic Nepal differs only superficially from Panchayat Nepal." And therefore the fragments of "democracy in Nepal could prove to be remarkably short." (*Foreword*, Michael Leifer, p. vii).

This pessimism is the consequence of her astute observation of the Nepali political scene. Still she lapses in correctly observing and carefully scrutinizing the elementary facts of Nepali political history. First, the *Jana Andolan* was never intended to vanquish monarchy. Nepali Congress, as the leader of the people's movement, has never deviated from its principal political objective of demanding multiparty system under constitutional monarchy to which it ultimately succeeded in mustering support even from its arch-rival communists. Second, as Ms. Brown has herself admitted that the movement had a higher international profile because of the democratic struggle, not because of the revolution in the traditional sense. Bloodied armed revolution aiming at overthrowing the monarchy, which she implicitly mentioned as "destroying the old order", would have severely complicated the movement's bona fide not because of internal constraints but because of the international factors invigorating the Nepali political scene. The role of India as well as Western democracies, even to the extent of providing moral support to such an enterprise, would have been very intriguing and different. Suffice it to say why the communists supported the democratic movement in Nepal although previously being antagonist to it, and still not amenable to the cause.

Ms Brown is not a stranger to these facts. She has correctly noted that the situation was becoming more panicky with the rumours spreading that the *Jana Andolan* was being hijacked by the leftist and the extremist forces. The "hasty compromise" between the king and the movement forces was the result of this situation, she says. And this makes her to lament that "Nepal was an unlikely venue for revolution" (p. 140). The caveat however is that the compromise was not hastily arrived at, it was forced upon the king after the bloodshed in front of the Royal Palace and all the evasive negotiation strategies adopted by the panchayat regime ran out of steam. Another interesting phenomenon of the period was that once the king

announced the lifting of the ban on political parties, the movement spontaneously turn to celebration. Hence her concluding remarks in the *PostScript* about the political development under the Nepali Congress - Rastriya Prajatantra party coalition as a culmination of traditional forces with entrenched vested interests in an inegalitarian society appear incongruent in view of the hard evidence how another major political party, the Communist party of Nepal-United Marxist-Leninist (CPN-UML), operates in Nepal. Nepali communists' intriguing behaviour during the national referendum in 1980, and the expression of their insatiable lust for power and privileges in the post-*Jana Andolan* Nepal is a study in contrast to Brown's last sentence synthesising the NC-RPP coalition as: "Yet, paradoxically, it was also evidence of the vitality of communism in one of the world's poorest nations" (p. 225).

Perhaps Ms Brown believed in the fables told by her interviewees, nine of whom are either communists or their staunch supporters (pp. 227-28). But what had the communists done in the Nepali history needs to be put into perspective in order to understand the linkage between poverty and communism as well as the monarchy and other vested interests as being challenges to democracy in Nepal. Suffice it to say that the most revered living communist leader, Manmohan Adhikari (the president of the CPN-UML and the former prime minister) was released from the panchayat jail only after he signed a petition to the king fully supporting the panchayat system. None of the Nepali Congress leaders imprisoned after 1960 coup had done so. And the communist underground between 1960 to 1990 is a story in itself.

Nepali Congress is an unflinching supporter of the constitutional monarchy. The communists, by contrast, are widely believed to be dubious in their intention and their profession of communism is said to be as myopic as their origin. Ignoring these facts would never put the political history of Nepal into a clear and understandable perspective. What requires to investigate and dig out the facts is to know the truth but not to narrate and detail what has been said. In the post-*Jana Andolan* Nepal the crux of the problems lies elsewhere.

- Customarily portraying the continuity of monarchy in its constitutional form and the persistent abject poverty as the twin impediments to democracy would be of little analytical value while interpreting democratic development in Nepal in the future.
- The behavioural pursuits of political parties as masquerading hoards with increasing objectives of monopolizing state power even at the expenses of democratic norms could seriously undermine the process called democratization. Their drive to win the king's favour by

advocating monarchy as one of the key players and the third force in Nepali politics is the glaring evidence of their political opportunism as well as their leadership disarray.

- The context when Nepal graduated to democracy from autocracy also has considerable bearing in its political history. Sharpened by the dichotomous developments in economics and politics, Nepal was suddenly drawn into the vortex of the politics of economic globalization and liberalization which ultimately broke economics away from the reins of national polity. By contrast, the polity as well as the governmental capacity to deliver remain national. Besides the institutional infirmities of the fragile democracy the challenges it faced relate to the modernizing and interventionist forces entering the Nepali developmental scene in the shape of INGOs and NGOs. Their objectives transpired in using the weak government as a clearing house of policies designed elsewhere. This emerging nexus of internal and international forces with the politico-bureaucratic complex of the state resulted into undermining the effectiveness of domestic institutions in the socioeconomic spheres. This tribe of externally funded group in the national political scene accountable only to their sponsorers has produced neo-riches and neo-vested interest groups stymieing democratic processes from taking roots. Again, their participation in the national process as certain party loyalists have created disturbing impact in the entire political edifice.
- Finally, the real challenge to democratic Nepal lies in the failure of transforming the communist parties, especially the CPN-UML from its projected Stalinistic straitjacket but dubious political orientation, to a committed participant in the parliamentary democracy and a believer in the essence of political competition rather than a monopolist power crusader.

Till date, neither the Nepali Congress as a champion of democracy nor the CPN-UML as the saviour of the underdogs has lived up to their profession, in and out of the power. A constituent common element found in both of these parties is their greed and lust for power and privilege. The Nepali Congress, within the seven years of democracy in Nepal, has proved itself a clan of *Yadubanshis* (a self-destroying lot). Unless the party improves its staggering image, to think of democratic sustenance from the Nepali Congress would be equally elusive. If an when party system collapses in Nepal, the Nepali Congress will be the real victim of circumstance because it will have no where to turn but to obvilion in that case. Others, the

CPN-UML could turn to a more orthodox communism as an alternative. The RPP could make a home coming by reverting back to the fold of a monarchical political regime. The only way to ensure democratic stability in Nepal is thus to govern responsibly, an element so precisely lacking previously. There is no excuse for political thuggery. For Iconoclasts, democracy may be a part of the problem. But the people's consciousness has become least submissive to any excesses. The political parties should never again imagine that the people's memory is fickle and therefore they could recycle the national tragedy repeatedly in Nepal's political scene.