

## **New Nepal: The Fault Lines**

Nishchal Nath Pandey

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reviewed by Milly Joshi

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 21 November 2006 and the peaceful elections to Nepal's first ever Constituent Assembly on 10 April 2008 are milestone events in the history of Nepal. As these landmark events transpired, 'New Nepal' became a much-coveted dream for many Nepali people. Nevertheless, there was a lot of ground to cover and challenges to overcome before the promise of a New Nepal could be realised.

Nishchal Nath Pandey's *New Nepal: The Fault Lines* offers a comprehensive documentary analysis of Nepal's contemporary political milieu following the People's Movement of April 2006. The aftermath of the People's Movement, the metamorphosis of the Hindu kingdom into a federal democratic republic, and its concomitant challenges and perils are outlined. The author clarifies his position in the preface: 'This book will strive to analyse the events of the post-Jan Andolan II stage, including the background in which repeated amendments were made to the interim constitution, and highlight major fault lines that need to be addressed if durable peace is to be achieved' (page xiii). Ironically, issues that brought masses of people together and contributed to the success of the People's Movement—that is, issues of identity, language, religion, ethnicity and region—are themselves now being debated, inhibiting the drafting of a new constitution.

In chapters one to three, Pandey focuses on the immediate aftermath of the People's Movement, the most discerning effects of which were the unleashing of a storm of protest (following the first amendment of the 1990 Constitution) and the unprecedented emergence of a number of armed forces in the Tarai. The newly formed interim government found itself negotiating a fine line between holding a Constituent Assembly election and drafting a new constitution against the backdrop of the crisis in the Tarai and the growing distrust between and within the parties themselves. Pandey outlines the array of contexts (some historically significant and some highly dismaying, for instance, the Lahan incident, the Gaur massacre

and the mayhem in Kapilvastu) in which repeated amendments were made to the Interim Constitution.

As the book progresses, the author draws out a series of faults within Nepal's peace process. To begin with, he critically analyses the relevance and challenges of implementing federalism in Nepal in a context where the very structure of federalism is a moot point. Pandey castigates leaders for creating the illusion that a federal system will be a panacea for all political and social ills. According to the author, given the country's unique history of unification and the diversity of its population, a federal system based on ethnicity/caste, language or region cannot be the ultimate solution to social exclusion, but would rather be the impetus for the creation of an insurmountable chasm between its people. Pandey argues that if federalism were to be implemented in Nepal, it would need to be implemented with certain caveats. He also argues that issues of language and religion developed political traction during the post-revolutionary period, triggering debates and a series of unanticipated events that acted against the sentiments and wellbeing of the general public (such as the bomb blast in the Church of the Assumption in Patan). The author warns of serious consequences if language and religion become dominant issues in Nepal's political realm.

In chapters seven to ten the author highlights the key issues and challenges confronting the nascent federal republic, namely the integration of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) into the Nepal Army; the exigency to deconstruct old political traditions (those that foster anarchism); and the revitalisation of an economy shattered by a decade-long Maoist insurgency. The author considers the integration of the PLA into the Nepal Army as the key challenge for New Nepal's peaceful trajectory, as integrating rebels (who are deeply influenced by political ideology) into the national army would be a new initiative not just for Nepal but also for the whole of South Asia. The challenge is deepened by the fact that these armies have been in conflict for more than a decade. Among the Nepali Congress and other parties, scepticism and fear that the Maoists might control the Nepal Army following the integration of the PLA is further delaying the process of integration. Chapter seven addresses the series of political events and debates that finally culminated in the resignation of Prachanda as Prime Minister. Pandey also highlights (in chapter eight) the role played by the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) in the peace process through its monitoring of the ceasefire agreement, the surveillance of PLA cantonments

at seven sites and, most important of all, the electoral assistance provided by UNMIN to the Election Commission, and the monitoring of the historic CA election.

In the closing chapters (eleven and twelve), the author describes Nepal's relations with India and China regarding trade, transit and tourism. Nepal's relationship with India has been at best ambivalent. Following the People's Movement, India was thought by many rightists (pro-monarchists) to have been a catalyst behind the downfall of the monarchy, and was held accountable by the mainstream parties, namely the CPN (Maoist) and CPN (UML), for the sudden emergence of armed forces causing unrest in the Tarai, questioning India's interest in gaining influence in the Madhes or the whole of Nepal. Chapter eleven highlights key issues in Indo-Nepalese relations that propelled debates during the post-revolution period. Among these were the collapse of the Koshi embankment (which led to a demand for the revision or repeal of the 1950's treaty) and the issue of land encroachment along Nepal's borders. The author also recommends areas in which Nepal needs to foster ties with India in order to rejuvenate its economy and forge sound relations with its neighbour. In chapter twelve, Pandey outlines various aspects of Sino-Nepalese relations, such as the issue of Tibetan refugees as well as tourism, connectivity and border trade, with a focus on goods that have potential in the Chinese market. The author finally specifies resource areas in which Nepal should initiate joint ventures with China to uplift its economy.

Overall, *New Nepal: The Fault Lines* provides readers with a comprehensive understanding of political developments in Nepal following the April uprising in 2006, in the light of historical events. On the one hand, the book offers a synopsis of the key events that ensued from the People's Movement, while also providing a critical analysis of issues concerning state restructuring. However, the book does show deficiencies in dealing with some significant issues relating to the process of social exclusion. For instance, the author fails to unpack the historical carryover of social exclusion embedded in the process of Nepal's unification. Pandey presents the 'history of unification of Nepal' in a conventional, rather than critical, way by not questioning Prithvi Narayan Shah's legacy of consolidating 'Asli Hindustan', which continued throughout the Shah dynasty. The author writes: 'Nepal was united by King Prithvi Narayan Shah the Great (1723 A.D-1775 A.D) by bringing together 22-24 different principalities belonging to various castes and ethnic groups.

Recognising this delicate ethnic composition, King Prithvi had named his country a “garden of different flowers” (p.41).

Basing his discussion of the issue of language on Dev Raj Dahal’s work (1996), Pandey writes, ‘it was natural that in the country, which is invariably multi-lingual, the politics of language turns easily into a thorny issue and that was why Nepali language was developed as a lingua franca for the past three centuries, which served as a link language among different communities’ (p.63). Nowhere in the book does the author seek to question the historical orchestration of the ‘linguicide’ of many ethnic minorities rendered by the state’s adoption of a one-language policy. According to Oommen (1986), one language, one religion and one state policies demanding that the population of the state become homogeneous despite its ethno-cultural heterogeneity were a ‘pathological obsession’ that ‘had and can develop into extreme nationalism of the fascist variety, leading to genocide and/or culturocide; that is, the systematic liquidation of the cultural identity of minorities’ (pp.53-57).

The author also articulates a strong dissatisfaction regarding Nepal’s secularisation. He writes, ‘In Nepal’s independent history of over 200 years, we have never had the state telling its subjects what religion to belong to or dictating the religious practices of the people’ (p.68). He further argues that the secularisation of the country has in fact instigated a gradual erosion of the religious harmony that remained undisturbed for centuries prior to the official declaration of Nepal as a secular republic. However, it is not the case that Nepal has never had communal clashes between religious groups. Dastider (2007) gives a list of clashes that took place between Hindus and Muslims at different times before Nepal’s secularisation, although those clashes were quickly defused by the then rulers. None the less, Dastider adds that ‘communal clashes in Nepal remained a rare event as long as Muslim minorities kept a very subdued and low profile, and did not raise any objection to their low caste status, or the overall deprivation they suffered for professing a religion which was considered inferior to the official one’ (2007:164). By suggesting that Nepal was inherently secular despite its status as a Hindu kingdom, Pandey seems to have ignored the institutionalisation of social exclusion (gender, caste/ethnicity and religion) under a dominant Indo-Aryan culture that allowed the penetration of Hindu patriarchal ideology into the legal system of the country, as manifested in the civil code of 1854 and its amendments.

Despite the author's failure to deal with certain issues pertaining to social exclusion, the book is valuable and important for making sense of recent political developments in Nepal and their implications on the national and international stage. Highly analytical and descriptive, this book will cater to the interests of a wide range of researchers, analysts and academics interested in or even new to the political dynamics of Nepal.

### References

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