

BOOK REVIEW

Developmental Practices in Nepal. 1997. Krishna Bahadur Bhattachan and Chaitanya Mishra. 1997. Central Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur.

Though the Central Department of Sociology and Anthropology has published its annual journal, *Occasional Papers in Anthropology since 1990* (five volumes are out up to now.), it has recently added a new volume to its list with the 1997 publication of *Development Practices in Nepal*. Full credit of this volume goes to Dr. Krishna Bahadur Bhattachan who not only made the initial foray into tapping resources to organize the original workshop but also invited a group of scholars conducting research on Nepal themes to write these papers on development practices in Nepal.

This volume consists of six seminar papers presented at the workshop, tied together with a summary of floor discussion and a foreword by Peter Herring, Resident Representative of Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung (FES). In the programme preface, the editors outline three major workshop objectives:

1. To generate teaching and reading materials for development practices in Nepal toward an applied course in the three year B.A. program in Sociology and Anthropology; and also as an "optional paper" in the Sociology of Economics for the MA programme in Sociology and Anthropology;
2. To spark a debate on development practices in Nepal among academicians, policy makers, and development practitioners; and
3. To disseminate development experience to a wider audience through publication.

The thrust of this short review concerns itself with the question of the extent to which these objectives are being fulfilled by this publication.

Let me begin by considering the identity of the six paper writers of this volume. Four of the six authors are, economists with different levels of experience in their administrative careers. The other two authors are in fact, the volume's editors, who are more prominent sociologists of Nepal. This selection of authors by itself suggests that development is primarily

an economic concept and that other aspects are peripheral. Such an approach to development is not new in Nepal, of course, since up to now most development planners, with the exception of a small number of geographers, are economists. Indeed, the rationale for excluding geographers as paper writers is not entirely clear. Political science, too, is not even touched upon although it is common knowledge that without political stability development cannot take place.

It is also interesting how each paper of this volume appears to contradict the views expressed in another paper. Yet nowhere do the editors attempt to ameliorate these contradictions. That said, let me discuss the first three papers on Nepalese economy; these discuss the role of state and market in the development of Nepal.

Dr. Badri Prasad Shrestha's paper on "State-led Growth Strategy in Nepal" pleads for a state-led growth strategy in Nepal's development. He argues that, over the years, there has been a widening economic and social justice among people in Nepal. In order to mitigate these economic gaps, he advocates a stronger state role in Nepal. Thus, he writes that "... economy remains dualistic in its nature and content"(p. 45). Nevertheless, Dr. Badri has not given even cursory note to the fact that Nepal's development efforts to date have already been a primarily state-led growth strategy that has done nothing to alter Nepal's status as one of the world's poorest countries. Somehow, he seems to avoid grappling with the critical issue that state personnel assigned to administer Nepal's development may itself be marked by corruption. Could it be that these very people have no strategic interest in Nepal's development because such an outcome would jeopardize their private interests? Would development force them to forfeit the regal and luxurious lives which they enjoy in the name of development for the poor people of Nepal? The author himself is one of the foremost beneficiaries of such a model for development in our country. To be sure, the author clearly notes that the state becomes poorer and poorer even as individuals within it grow richer and richer. But the question of why this is happening is neatly skirted. My own feeling is that the author may have found that answer to these deplorable circumstances through an examination of Nepalese social structure, the reproduction of advantage for a ruling elite, and the empirical functioning of the Nepalese economy over the last 50 years.

Dr. Shankar Sharma in his paper on "Market-led Development Strategy in Nepal" argues that economic development in Nepal is made most possible through privatization, economic liberalization, and globalization. This is, of course, a sentiment typical of current western models of economic development which proceed without minimal

consideration of fundamental social structures in the Nepali society. He writes, for example, that "liberalization policies are likely to generate higher income" (p. 66). Yet, the question of how liberalization and privatization will actually provide widespread benefits in a relatively little educated and hierarchial society such as Nepal's is a crucial issue left unaddressed. In reality, economic privatization or liberalization must benefit only those few people who already have access to resources or who are already within the inner circles of the power-base that typifies the Nepali society. The asutere liberal economic model by itself predicts that privatization of goods and services leads to competition and this generates economic growth through the provision of cheaper, better quality goods and services to consumers. But is this happening in Nepal?

Take, for example, the burgeoning number of banks, both private and joint ventures, in Nepal over the past decade. What have they done? Are these banks helping more than 70% Nepal's population who live below the poverty-level? So far as I know, most of these banks are not motivated to industrialize the Nepal's economy; rather, they are making a few businessmen richer who will eventually drain Nepal's resources elsewhere, while the country itself risks economic collapse at any time. One of the major revenue sources in Nepal is through customs, and this is controlled technically by these few businessmen who have access to these joint-venture banks. In recent years, we have seen the big news that the custom office is not able to collect the expected revenue because many imported goods are passed through illegal channels where a few of the ruling and business elite play key roles. If this is the kind of privatization or open market economy we are talking about, our country will be economically doomed in coming years. While revenue growth has obvious positive impacts in GDP, this is not happening in Nepal. Growth in the manufacturing sectors is still quite far away.

The paper by Dr. Kishore Kumar Gurugharana, on "State-led Development Strategy in Nepal" is the most confusing of all. He argues that democracy is not an essential ingredient for development. So, he writes "... democracy is not essential for development, nor does it guarantee good governance and development" (p. 30). This clearly suggests that he holds anti-liberal and anti-democratic views with respect to development strategies that are in direct contradiction with the ideas of Dr. Shankar Sharma. What causes him to argue this way is not clear at all from the paper. Examples from western societies amply suggest that democratic systems work better to deliver better goods and services to the people. Democratic systems at least begin the task of providing an equal opportunity for all provided a person is competitive within the system. In

the case of Nepal, of course, how much a person (or people in general here) can compete on that kind of social, economic and political platform is a big question.

Although in Nepal, where social networks still play key roles for economic development, democracy has failed to produce desirable results for economic growth, this cannot be definitively the fault of democracy per se.

The nature of other three papers is primarily sociological though one of the authors is a diehard economist by profession.

The paper on "Non-Governmental Organization-led Development in Nepal" by Dr. Meena Acharya is interesting for its overall sociological orientation. She gives details for the types and functioning of many NGOs by categorizing them into three distinct groups:

1. National Welfare Oriented NGOs;
2. Professional NGOs; and
3. District and Village based NGOs.

Dr. Acharya argues that people-centred development in Nepal cannot take place through the state intervention nor the open-market economy. Further, she continues, although some Nepal-based NGOs are undoubtedly fulfilling their own objectives, their more significant role may be in fostering people's participation and empowerment. Thus, for Dr. Acharya, these NGOs play key roles in the socioeconomic development of Nepal and its people. Still, I feel that she has somehow missed the basic question about the functioning of these NGOs and INGOs in Nepal.

Over the past decade, particularly after the reinstallation of democracy, the number of NGOs and INGOs has like *banamārā* weeds in Nepal. Some estimates run as high as 20,000 NGOs in Nepal (although the exact number is anybody's guess since no single agency keeps a proper record). Many of these new NGOs may even be threatening the proper function of existing indigenous local level institutions (see, for example, the paper by Dr. Bhattachan). Today, in most of the villages of Nepal, very few people readily volunteer their services because cheap money has become available through these new NGOs. The outcome is that it has become difficult at the local level to imagine community-oriented work without monetary incentives. In this connection, it is worth noting that even the Ministry of Finance has no record of the extent of money flows into Nepal in the name of NGOs since bilateral agreements exist only between the NGOs and the donor organizations themselves.

Simple input-output analysis suggests an approach to the questions turning to the relative value of every dime contributed by an agency. And

anybody in Nepal could provide evidence that outputs are generally much lower than agency investments. I am suggesting that money coming in the name of helping the poor in Nepal disappears somewhere else. My own experience in Eastern Nepal gives the case, for example, of a district-level forest officer who was not motivated to do his district work efficiently because his counterpart peon (the lowest administrative staff member) in a forest-based INGO drew a higher salary and fringe benefits than he did. We are faced with the more serious question of what would happen if the donor agencies would suddenly withdraw their aid to help these NGOs in Nepal. That is, are these village-level development programs self-sustaining in the absence of direct NGO contributions?

Dr. Krishna Bahadur Bhattachan's paper on "People/Community based Development Strategy in Nepal" pleads for an "ethnic" based development model in Nepal. Dr. Bhattachan questions the existing people and community based development approach for its failure to trickle down to marginalized ethnic and caste groups. The people on the bottom have been tricked, he suggests—development programs mostly benefit high caste groups because they ignore the still relevant caste and ethnic attributes of people and their communities. Dr. Bhattachan thus strongly advocates the development of indigenous and traditional community based organizations in Nepal. This paper clearly rejects the dominance of NGO strategies for people based community development approaches.

Nevertheless, one of the weaknesses of Bhattachan's paper is that he does not go to the next stage of defining exactly who constitute the marginalized ethnic groups who are the actual victims of high caste Hindu models for economic development. Are these marginalised groups or victims the Thakali, Byanshi, Sherpa, Rai, Limbu, Tamang or such other groups as the Chepang, Raute, Satar, Thami, and others? It is an interesting question why Bhattachan appears to exclude from his list the so-called "untouchables of Nepal" in both the Tarai and Hill groups. After all, these groups are the most deprived in social, economic, and political domains. Does he ignore them because they fall under the larger category of Hindu? Bhattachan's paper raises the important question of whether the proper development strategy should be "uniform/monolithic single development strategy or a series of multiple approaches" (p. 100), but his own attempt at creating categories shows the real difficulty of fairly enumerating the disadvantaged groups.

The first paper on, "Development Practices in Nepal: An Overview" by Professor Chaitanya Mishra, provides a general summary and overarching theoretical umbrella for approaching the notion of development. It suggests causal mechanisms for both sides of the coin of

development and underdevelopment. Professor Mishra, as usual, begins from within the philosophical perspective of Marxist approaches to the topic, in critical engagement with the western view as a whole. In the first part of his paper he focuses on western models and their location within the assumptions of capitalist hegemony. However, in the second part, he advocates the "democratization of development." This may confuse readers since the language of both democratic values and capitalist economic practice are such essential components of the western model that Professor Mishra takes pains to criticize. He himself notes that the serious weaknesses of the Rana and Panchayat regimes were in the very processes of democratization which were essential, but missing, ingredients in the functioning of their governments. Professor Mishra also argues in favour of indigenous notions and practices in development strategies but he provides painfully little empirical material to substantiate these ideas. He writes that "Public has never been a forte of the modernizing elite" (p.7) and that "class and cultural interests" continue to play a dominant role (p. 7). But how to avoid such things in the development processes of Nepal is nowhere convincingly demonstrated in this provocative paper.

In my opinion, the culture of development and development agents in Nepal has changed minimally over the years. We have the same rafted groups of participants scholars, and paper writers who discuss, time and again, the same story of Nepal's development approaches. These same people, in fact, are the very ones who have already benefited most from their position within historical and enduring structures of Nepal's status hierarchy. Just as changes in the political system of Nepal have brought the possibility of new experiment and the hearing of new voices, we require new voices and thinking in our approaches to development questions. Although there is no shortage of beautiful plans for developing this poor country, we seem unable to face the simple fact that things are not working in spite of a new democratic situation demanding radical breakaway from old habits of thought and behaviour.

Some less outstanding weakness of this volume includes the terribly confusing use of abbreviations in the text. Like DAC, IRDP, ILO, R and D, and so on without once giving their full form. In addition, the relative lengths of paper are not uniform. Some papers such as Badri's, contain only eight pages whereas others, such as Bhattachan's run to 48 pages or fully 32% of the total text. Indeed, Acharya and Bhattachan alone occupy over 53% of the total space in text. It seems to me that fairness to the varying points of view argues for a more uniform quota for each author.

Finally, to refer to another one of the volume goals, a BA level student will find difficulty in comprehending the concept of development in this volume, if only because the different authors' opinions are so various. And it becomes all the more confusing since no strategy—be it state-led, market-led, or NGO-led—has really definitively helped to enhance the socio-economic status of Nepali people up to now. This clearly suggests the complexity of development as a concept and the need that it be understood in terms of multiple contexts and meanings. Undoubtedly, this volume will continue to generate debates among academicians. One awaits the further trickling down of their ideas on development issues in Nepal.

- Dilli Ram Dahal

BOOK REVIEW

Districts of Nepal: Indicators of Development. 1997. Mahesh Banskota, Pitamber Sharma, S. Zahir Sadeque and others. Kathmandu: International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development. vii+ 119, Maps. Price: NRs. 550.

Availability and accessibility of quality data on Nepal is a problem, but equally an important issue is lack of use of what is available at the various institutions engaged in development activities in the country. One early attempt is *Atlas of Economic Development in Nepal* (Shrestha and Sharma 1980). It presents series of maps related to physical and socio-economic conditions of the country along with interpretations of respective maps. It contains valuable information but for some reasons its use could not be as wide as it is expected. Later, some attempts to bring various district level indicators of development together in a simple framework resulted in the publication of *Population Monograph of Nepal*. Since it mainly focuses on population and environment, it includes indices such as CIP (Crude index of population) and CIPQuE (Crude Index of Physical quality of Environment) and assesses the status of districts in the context of sustainable development (Subedi, 1995). Central Department of Geography prepared a report for National Planning Commission identifying critical regions and districts using some indicators of development (Manandhar et al., 1994). Both of these have limited purpose and circulation. However, the quantity and quality of data related to development remains a major problem in the country. *Districts of Nepal: Indicators of Development* published by ICIMOD (1991) is the latest publication in this regard. It fills an important information gap — a good, well chosen collection that could serve as a handy reference to all those interested about Nepal in general and those trying to appraise the development situation of the districts in particular.

This volume assesses the development status of each of Nepal's 75 districts using 39 indicators which are grouped into four major categories, namely socio-economic, institutional and infrastructure development; poverty and deprivation; natural resources endowment and management; and women's empowerment. The book has two sections. The first section

specifies various indicators used to assess the development status and their data sources. It also discusses methods of data transformation. The second section is entirely devoted to thematic maps (coloured) including tables relevant to each map. With an exclusion of the reference map (Map 1), there are a total of 49 thematic maps: of which 39 are single indicator maps and 10 composite index maps. For simplicity, districts are categorised as best, intermediate and worst for each indicator and index: with top 25 belonging to the best, the bottom 25 as worst and the remaining intermediated. The composite maps are placed in the beginning (Map 2-Map 6) and at the end (Map 46-Map 50) whereas the single indicator maps are placed in the middle (Map 7-Map 45). Of the five composite index maps in the beginning, the first (Map 2) is the overall summary of development situation of the districts. This summarizes each of 75 districts' development situation based on 39 indicators which were first reduced to 23 indicators, then to four dimensions (socio-economic, women's empowerment, poverty and natural resource management) and finally to overall composite index of development.

This book is very informative. For the first time district-level information from diverse sources has been brought together and presented into sets of neat maps which are not only informative but also impressive. The primary outputs, i.e. series of maps speak of themselves. The authors have rightly chosen the path of not wasting time by attaching lengthy description of maps. The quality of paper is good and the cover page which portrays rural life-style in Nepal nicely fits the theme and gives added flavour. However, some minor inconsistencies are apparent. One of them is the confusion created by the assumptions implicit in the categorization of districts according to values of two indicators, namely percentage of cultivated area and ratio of non-cultivated area to cultivated area. Table of Map 43 showing percentage of cultivated area assumes that higher percentage of cultivated area in the district is indicative of better situation whereas Table of Map 44 showing ratio of non-cultivated area to cultivated area assumes the opposite. When both these indicators are used to produce composite index of natural resources endowment on equal footing, the index value may not represent a situation it ought to reflect. Likewise, putting "gross rural population density" in natural resources group is rather odd at least to this reader.

Some suggestions could be made for the second edition. The unit of measurement could be added to Table of Map 45 showing gross rural population density (person/hectare?). Wherever applicable, inclusion of national average figures in single indicator Tables would greatly help readers compare the district situation with the national average. The reference map

(i.e., Map 1: Administrative Boundaries) could have chosen colours other than the ones used in the subsequent maps or else patterns rather than colours could have been used to show three ecological zones. This map is not meant for quality assessment and the use of same colours as in the following maps may unknowingly provide wrong impression. Similarly, since single indicator maps are arranged according to four themes, a spare page with main theme centred, before sets of maps with a theme begin could provide a better guide to the readers. If this is the case, there will be a page before Map 7 which reads something like "Poverty and Deprivation" and so forth for three other themes. This might be done before presentation of sets of composite maps as well. Furthermore, the presentation (ordering) of values in Tables of single indicator maps (Tables 7-45) and the presentation of index in the maps may be arranged in the same order. For example, these Tables present data on descending order (from best to worst) whereas indexes of the map present in the ascending order (from worst to best).

There are some maps that raises a **question of data quality**. The percentage of population with an access to safe drinking water coverage is surprisingly high (Table of Map 18, p. 54). If this is real, many districts have made appreciable progress in this respect (e.g., Mahottari district with almost total coverage). But if this data assumes any kind of water available for safe drinking which appears to be likely, there is a problem. With this data and in the extreme, one may also argue that since each person manages to have an access to drinking water and thus drinking water coverage is hundred percent. One must agree that the categorization of 75 districts into 3 groups with equal number in each group is less debatable. The authors have wisely provided individual values in the Tables so that for those who find this categorization too simplistic may use their own grouping to fit their purpose. There is one exception in which this three-fold grouping appears rather uncomfortable because it puts a very wide range of values in one category; i.e., road density where districts whose "weighted sum of different categories of road in km as a percent of 100 sq km of total surface area" was 98.78% and those with 7.1 percent in one category as best. But the good point about this is that no other indicators demonstrate the distinct inter-district inequality in development as this one does showing 20 of the 75 districts as deprived of road access.

Overall, the book has been successful in accomplishing its objective of depicting relative levels of development among each of 75 districts of Nepal. The authors deserve commendation not only for their attempt to bring together various information scattered in the different institutions and presenting them into colourful maps but also for the methodological details of how data from various sources and of various nature are combined together

into scores which are free from unit of measurement which preserving orders as of indicator value. For those interested in the data and illustrations, i.e. final products, maps and associated tables prove valuable. For those interested in the process, there is an excellent discussion of methodology which can be used in further studies. This inclusion of methodology, which most publications ignore, is very important and has further reinforced the book's academic significance. This publication can also be considered a bold endeavour as this not only attracts commendation but also there is room for a lot of criticism. This is because among the chosen indicators while some suffer from data quality, while others suffer from definition problem. Of course, this publication is not an exhaustive collection of all the indicators of development at the district level. It has successfully brought useful data together which otherwise would have remained in a fragmented form. This book is highly recommended not only for those interested in understanding the development status of districts in Nepal, particularly, HMG, development institutions and organizations involved in decentralized development planning but also for research scholars in and about Nepal, students and others with even little interest in Nepal.

References

- Manandhar, Mangal S., Bhim P. Subedi, U.M. Malla and others, 1994. "A Study on Population and Environment". A report submitted to Population Division, National Planning Commission, Nepal.
- Shrestha, R.K. and Pitamber Sharma (eds.). 1980. *Nepal: Atlas of Economic Development*. Kathmandu: National Council for Science and Technology.
- Subedi, Bhim P. 1995. "Population and Environment in the Context of Sustainable Development in Nepal". *Population Monograph of Nepal*. Kathmandu: Central Bureau of Statistics, pp. 403-440.

– **Bhim P. Subedi**