

BOOK REVIEW

Joshi, Jibgar. 2006. *Regional Strategies for Sustainable Development in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Lajmina Joshi. 156 pages with 38 Tables and 8 Figures, Price NRs. 400.

Unlike many Nepali bureaucrats, Dr. Jibgar Joshi has already published three books and several articles on regional and urban developments in Nepal. The present book is the latest volume making a new contribution to that goal. Regional planning begun in Nepal since the Fourth Five Year Plan (1970-75). Regional planning as a model of development failed in terms of reducing poverty, regional disparity and equity among people. The author, however, reiterates that it could be used as an effective tool for sustainable development in Nepal. The central issue in regional planning in Nepal, according to him, is 'how to improve our sectoral plans through regional and sustainable development?' (p. iv). To improve sectoral plans, the basic questions raised by the author are: a) allocation of regional resources across the country; b) nature of investments in different regions; c) strategic activities in different regions, d) social transformations in the society; and d) building institutions for decentralization. This review concerns itself with how these questions are answered by this publication.

The present book consists of nine chapters. Chapter I briefly highlights the basic concepts such as regional planning, sustainable development, environmental sustainability, poverty and empowerment, coordination, decentralization and resource region. The last part of this chapter offers a "country profile" which includes the location, physical divisions, climate and rainfall, demography, economy and administrative divisions. The author notes that sustainable development has three parts: economic growth, social equity and environment, which must be linked together to make development an integrated whole (p. 6). Chapter II deals with regional disparity in terms of the development index, agriculture, road transportation, electricity, communication, drinking water, education and health. It also provides an interesting table on relative per capita GDP and HDI based on 15 regions of Nepal. This follows reviews of regional development policy in Nepal and their gaps. The author argues that the following policies should be adopted to make regional planning more effective: investment strategy, national urban system and resource development strategy, institutional development and regional research (pp. 40-44). Chapter III describes migration and urbanization in Nepal, considering demographic changes and the trend in urbanization over the years. The author links urbanization with development and the ways and means of ensuring spatial integration for better planning.

Sustainable development depends on the effective government action at the regional level. He believes that more urban growth leads to more economic growth and the reduction of poverty. Chapter IV outlines national goals and regional strategies to be adopted for development planning and conditions necessary for sustainable development. He argues that poverty alleviation strategies will need a spatial vision (p. 70).

Chapter V is an attempt to develop a spatial framework for development based on growth poles and growth centres in Nepal. He develops a "spatial framework of development" showing interrelationships between growth centres of different ranks. Thus, growth centres in the context of regional planning are beautifully drawn in maps (pp. 104-108). Chapter VI shows investment plans, policies and strategies in different ecological regions: Mountain, Hills and Tarai. Chapter VII shows the need for good governance at different levels with adequate decentralization planning. He argues that the spatial aspect should be embodied in the national urban system and growth centre strategy (p. 122). Chapter VIII provides strategies for capacity building and technology transfer. He believes that social transformation in Nepali society is possible only through economic principles (p. 129). According to him, rural areas should be transformed into urban areas, incorporating technology and resources (p. 131). The last chapter summarizes the major contents of the book.

No doubt, the author identifies many of the shortcomings and contradictions in regional planning in Nepal. The volume's strength is found in the author's articulation of regional planning and its ethos and pathos in the context of Nepal. The major strength of the book is that there are many useful tables for students, teachers and planners including the well documented description of development processes in Nepal. At the same time, the book is rich in ideas, concepts and questions, particularly his approach of "spatial" and "sustainable development" could be a model for development in the context of regional planning in Nepal in the future. No doubt, the volume is successful in answering many of the questions that it raises.

Studies on regional development and planning in Nepal tend to focus on macro-level structures while ignoring local-level processes and concerns. The present volume also follows this general trend and thus falls short while dealing with the many issues that concern regional strategies for development in Nepal.

The author suggests that development is primarily an economic concept and that other aspects such as social and political ones are peripheral. It is common knowledge that without political stability, development cannot take place. For example, the 9th and the 10th Plans have been seriously affected meeting their targets by the peoples war, launched by the Communist Party (Maoist) in February 1996. This war has massively disrupted the social,

economic, political and cultural lives of people and affected a large number of development projects. There is virtually no analysis to show how local/regional development projects that have been initiated/activated were affected by the people war. The issue here is not only the proper allocation of resources to the concerned people and regions but also how the delivery of goods and services has been affected due to these unavoidable circumstances. In addition, delivery of goods and services is also linked to the governance system. A recent observation visit (October 2006) by a study team in the Karnali Region clearly noted that the "Food Delivery Programme" to the people in the concerned region by helicopter is completely misused by contractors as they carry other goods (such as beer bottles and liquors) instead of grains.

The fact is that Nepal's development efforts to date have not changed Nepal's status as one of the poorest countries in the world. The landholding size, which is a major source of livelihood and income for more than 80% of the population of the country, is shrinking every year. The level of human development, as measured by the human development index, is skewed every year. In terms of global ranking, Nepal's position was 138 among the 177 countries ranked (UNDP 2006). Among 100 ethnic/caste groups in Nepal, the level of poverty and the human development index differs by region and among various groups such as women, Adibasi/Janajati, and Dalits. The net effect of development planning is almost zero in terms of equity and social development of people. In brief, the state-led growth strategy and development models have not substantially benefited the poor and marginalized people of Nepal. It is clear that exogenous, top-down and blueprint development models are not working in Nepal. In brief, the issue here is how the author's proposed model of spatial and sustainable environment could be made to be more effective in the context of regional planning in Nepal. At the same time, the national space has no meaning without human survival or welfare.

The author relies too much on statistics instead of understanding the sociology of Nepali people, particularly the culture of Nepali administrators and planners. Though he acknowledges development planning is barely successful in Nepal, he hardly details why planning fails. The hurdles that exist in implementing various projects are nowhere mentioned. The whole issue of poor governance and decentralization in the history of Nepal is not addressed. Despite all the metaphoric slogans of decentralization since 1975, there has been little transfer of power from the centre to the local bodies (such as the DDCs, municipalities and VDCs) even today. But the bureaucracy is loaded with paperwork in the name of development (do this or do that) rather than delivering goods and services to the people. Though thousands of NGOs and hundreds of INGOs have been working for the empowerment of people in different regions of Nepal over the last 40 years, it

is not known how much people are empowered in social, economic and political terms. In other words, there is a need for an analysis of the success and failure of different projects in the context of regional planning in Nepal. How to create viable communities (p. 123) at the local level to deliver goods and services is yet another major issue, as the structure of traditional elites has not changed. In a country where there is corruption at every level of governance, and flattery plays a major role in bureaucracy, is it possible to change the existing practices of bad governance to good governance? Theoretically, everybody knows the functions of institutions at different levels (Table 7.1), but somehow these institutions do not provide services. In fact, so-called institutions in Nepal are hardly institutionalized, as power politics and *Afno Manche* (one's own people) dominate and run these institutions. So in reality there is little transformation in society in terms of social, economic and political structure over the years. The major issue is to change the working pattern of institutions so that good governance and the decentralization process can work from the centre to the local level.

Again the author's ideas of 'growth centres' are based on population size. I feel that simply considering population size without noting down the available physical and human resources at the local level jeopardizes the very idea of growth and service centres. For example, wherever groups like the Newars, Thakalis, and Sherpas live, it should be remembered that some level of business activities will be there. Where are the plans and policies to raise the income of local people? In other words, is required a lot of field research for better design of regional planning in Nepal. The issue of urbanization vis-à-vis growth is raised. He argues that the future of small settlements is dark (p. 62). Simply integrating rural areas does not make an area urban. It is unrealistic to create new urban centres or towns to develop as growth poles without providing basic facilities required by the people. Even today, there is barely the provision of clean drinking water, and almost all of Kathmandu's streets have potholes. One can aptly describe Kathmandu as a cluster of unauthorized buildings, hazardous day-to-day pollution, and no green belt anywhere to make a good living. Is this the kind of an urban area we want in the future?

Finally, I feel that the author overemphasizes the importance of spatial factors in the context of regional planning. A more spatially-integrated society might produce greater equality and opportunity, but it is difficult to see how it would create a greater equality of results in the absence of a more redistributive social policy.

In brief, Nepali planning to date is skulduggery: there is little delivery of goods and services to the people. Nepali planning requires a tour-de-force, a completely new approach for the development of the Nepali people.

– Dilli Ram Dahal

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- Tiwari, Sudarshan Raj. 2001. *The Ancient Settlements of the Kathmandu Valley*. Kathmandu: Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University.
- Maharjan, Pancha Narayan. 2000. "The Maoist Insurgency and Crisis of Governability in Nepal." In Dhruba Kumar (ed.), *Domestic Conflict and Crisis of Governability in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University, pp. 163-196.
- Khatri, Sridhar K. 2001. "Teaching of International Relations in Nepal." *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, 28:2, pp 139-154.
- Shrestha, Bal Gopal. 2002. "The Ritual Composition of Sankhu: The Socio-Religious Anthropology of a Newar Town in Nepal." Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis. Leiden University.

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