

attempts to analyse the initial impetus of the “people’s war”, seeing its causes in the dismay generated by socio-economic and political conditions, insufficient space is devoted to the internal conflicts and fissions within the movement caused by its individual leaders’ strategies at the later stages. The authors fail to perceive the vested interests inducing the movements’ exponents to carry on their battle. One is tempted to add that the Maoist movement in Nepal has been beneficial to a significantly larger number of actors, including those outside the movement, than it has been acknowledged so far – an issue not addressed in this publication.

Despite these omissions, Thapa’s and Sijapati’s is a very useful and readable book. It provides us with crucial insights into the complexities of the current Nepalese society and its polity, and above all, it indicates the horrendous costs women, men and children in Nepal have had to bear so far.

***Forget Kathmandu: An elegy for democracy* by Manjushree Thapa. New Delhi: Penguin 2005. 260 pages. ISBN 0-67-005812-2.**

Reviewed by Elvira Graner, Heidelberg

Manjushree Thapa has taken up a courageous enterprise by publishing her “private search” (p. 6) about “what has gone wrong” in Nepal. In doing so, she voices her deep concerns about “floundering democracy” and “bad politics” (p. 6) and presents a vigorous, enlightening and at the same time highly-sensitive piece on the current political situation in the country. By adding one more voice to what she calls the “cacophony of public discourse” (p. 5) she has further established her reputation. Not only is she one of the few English-writing Nepalese novelists, but in the present work she also provides evidence for her skill at social and political analyses. Her style is innovative in this book, which she calls “a mongrel of historiography, reportage, travel writing and journal writing”.

The first chapter, on “the coup that did not happen,” is a lively and rather personal account of how she and her friends in Kathmandu experienced the “royal massacre” of June 1st, 2001. By recollecting the scene on the streets during the first days and weeks along with the rumours, lack

of reliable information and conspiracy theories, she provides a vivid picture of a memorable period. The chapter progresses by recalling details of the “investigation committee” set up by the new king in order to shed some light upon the massacre. However, even the final report of that committee raised more questions than it provided answers. Thapa’s final comment is simple but telling: “... when trying to take a position – a reasonable position, one that we can defend in our most dispassionate moments – most Nepalis will conclude that we just do not know what happened” (p. 47).

The second chapter concentrates on Nepal's history and recapitulates how the nation came into being during the latter half of the eighteenth century. Inspired by the notion that “much knowledge is incomplete in Nepal, that truth has been lost many times to speculation” (p. 51), Thapa engages in re-narrating “old and discredited histories“. Following her account of Prithvi Narayan Shah (“the great unifier unifies himself a nation”) she introduces the second chapter (“the age of the recent queens”) by pinpointing that “Nepal was ruled for the next 70 years by kings who were either underage, inept, insane or all three” (p. 58). This claim is further elaborated by details of intrigues and power games, padded with more or less obvious Shakespearean features. Although this is not a new attempt at re-interpreting history, the argumentation is nevertheless convincing.

The third chapter, “The wind, the haze”, is a fascinating and condensed history of the emergence of the political party landscape of Nepal, particularly the phases of the fight for democracy during the late 1940s (“the haze”) and its rapid end (“the monarch takes a stab at democracy”) in 1960. This is followed by an account of the more recent period of “postmodern” democracy, culminating in a description of the nineteenth working session of what still was, at least in name, a parliament (p. 143). These sessions strikingly brought home the messy state of parliamentary politics, with the chanting of slogans against the prime minister and the occasional fistfight. Some of these parliamentary sessions lasted five minutes, others even less (ibid.). Yet this chapter comprises much more than mere descriptions of failed parliamentary sessions. It is a vivid documentation of the “creeping anxieties on the perils of bad politics” (p. 136).

The following chapter, “The massacre to come”, is again a rather personal account by the author. It takes up nearly a third of the book and is possibly meant as its climax. It is a detailed (and lengthy) description of the author's trek with an American companion through the country's Maoist districts during a ceasefire. While looking out for Maoist women she tries to obtain some first hand information about, and understanding of, their involvement in the movement. The personal narration and the frequent use of a dialogical form add to the authenticity of the account. Yet this chapter is weaker than the others, reminding the reader of Thapa's first and less advanced novella, *Mustang Bhot in Fragments*. It also reveals the distance between the local population and the author, who is a member of what she

herself frequently terms “the bourgeoisie”. In spite of this shortcoming the book is a good read and highly recommendable for a diverse readership.

This piece of “uncensored discourse” (p. 4) was published in New Delhi and launched only a few days before what was to be officially termed the “royal proclamation”, when King Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah seized power on February 1st, 2005. In the wake of this royal take-over the book gradually disappeared from bookshelves in the Kathmandu Valley. While some book shops claimed that the book was banned, others said it was in high demand and thus no longer available. Both stories could be true. The state of emergency was characterised by an unprecedented type of censorship. It seemed that the state had returned to the old days of panchayat rule, simply banning all types of news and information that were not in line with the ideas and interpretations of “their nation state”. Emergency has now been lifted for some time, and thus there is no legal provision for censorship. The book is not particularly flattering to the current political system, but a “modern monarchy” needs to provide room for such a book and its author. Thapa’s concluding words in the introduction are programmatic: “... there will come a time, I hope, when no such book about Nepal will be necessary. This is an elegy for democracy, yes, but one written while awaiting resurrection” (p. 6).