

Michelle KERGOAT. *Histoire politique du Népal. Aux origines de l'insurrection maoïste*. Paris: Karthala. 2007. 315 p. ISBN : 978-2-84586-945-5.

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Books on the Maoist insurrection in Nepal and its origins have flourished over the past years, many of which have described the People's war on a rather broad scale. However, most books on the subject are written in English. Michelle Kergoat's book entitled *Histoire politique du Népal. Aux origines de l'insurrection maoïste* (*Political History of Nepal. The Origins of the Maoist insurrection*) renders the Nepal Maoist issue accessible to the non-English speakers in France and in French-speaking countries.

In a long introduction, Michelle Kergoat brushes a quick outline of Nepal's topographical, demographic and climatic situation, and sets the scene where non-specialists gain a better understanding of the historical events she later depicts. Her book is then divided into three main parts: the first deals with the period leading to the first democracy in 1951; the second part describes the contemporary history of the country from 1951 to 2006; while the third part of the essay is an analysis of the different elements that finally led to the Maoist insurrection.

The first chapter –in which Michelle Kergoat admits to the rather confused sources of information on this subject (p. 29)– retraces very concisely the historic period prior to unification by Prithvi Narayan Shah. Yet, despite the author's warning, the reader cannot help but regret that she did not take this opportunity to provide a few hints about the different interpretations given by successive historians who worked on this topic, and all the more so as she does not systematically give her sources to backup her choices.

The next two chapters relate how Greater Nepal was built by King Prithvi Narayan Shah and his successors, which is followed by an account of the Rana era. The author shows how the king of Gorkha based his conquest both on violent and diplomatic means, first by organizing his army along new lines (with the use of firearms and an innovative means of paying his soldiers), then by making promises to local chiefs who agreed to bend to his rule. Prithvi Narayan Shah and his followers gradually managed to lay the foundations of the future nation of Nepal. However, the author notes that quarrels related to successive reigns weakened the new kingdom and eventually led to its being supplanted by the Rana family.

Though this take-over did indeed last a whole century, it suddenly collapsed because of a “double impact” (p. 71): the birth of opposing forces and the support it gained from neighbouring India. Although this regime has been highly criticized by many of the current Nepalese political leaders, Michelle Kergoat argues that the Rana era was not entirely negative and that it even led to undeniable progress, especially under Jang Bahadur’s reign. Hence, the author cites Jang Bahadur’s *Muluki Ain* or the Rana general foreign policy which, as she sees it, allowed Nepal to avoid annexation by British India.

She examines more thoroughly the impact that the Shahs and the Ranas had on social and religious issues in the fourth chapter of her book. Among the different questions the author raises, an attempt is made to show how the two dynasties contributed to forging the concept of a nation in Nepal and to creating a genuine “State” of Nepal by establishing a set of rules and laws designed to unify the population. In addition, Michelle Kergoat devotes a large part of this chapter to the propagation of Hinduism and its consequences on the local population. After dissecting the mechanisms whereby Hinduism flourished in the Kingdom with the help of the Brahmins, she examines its impact on Nepalese religious matters in all relativity, for she notes that in 1951, village communities in remote areas practised an unorthodox Hinduism, mixed with rites borrowed from their former animist beliefs. Hence, she argues that Hinduism mainly influenced Nepal’s social sphere by reserving the highest ranking positions for members of the high castes. Domination by the higher Hindu castes thus created a rift between the centre and the periphery, described in the last part of this fourth chapter through a study of the main ethnic groups of Nepal. Here, one regrets that the author merely chose to provide descriptions of eastern ethnic tribes. Indeed, although the Magars are the main indigenous ethnic group (according to the Nepal 2001 census), Michelle Kergoat does not see fit to devote a detailed analysis to it. This choice is all the more surprising since the title of the book suggests that the author aimed, among other things, at giving an account of the Maoist insurrection, a rebellion which was initiated in a Magar-dominated area.

The second part of the book deals with the emergence of the Nepalese democracy and its vicissitudes, between 1951 and 2006. After briefly summarizing in her fifth and sixth chapters the major events that occurred during this period in time, the author sets out in the seventh and last long chapter of the second part to paint a more detailed picture of main actors involved in the various episodes that has shaken the Nepalese political scene over the past four decades.

To begin with, Michelle Kergoat focuses on the role of the king (not so much as a person but rather as an institution) in the country’s

contemporary history for, as the author puts it, one cannot tackle Nepal's political developments over the last forty years without doing so. The links between the King and the Hindu religion are of course one of the key factors which explain the omnipresence of the monarch in every decision taken by the government, and the fact that, for instance, Gyanendra "gave back the power to the People" (according to his words) in April 2006 underlines the King's belief that he legitimately "owned" the power and that it was only through his magnanimity that the Nepalese People finally recovered it (p. 158). Moreover, the "trauma" of the Rana period made the king reluctant about the idea of sharing his power with any other political figure. Hence, he forever tried to counter-balance any institution, party or person that would pose a threat to his authority, either by seizing total power, or by decentralizing it and thus, diluting it at a grassroots level.

The second category of actors is the political parties, and the author briefly retraces their history (the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) excepted). Among other issues, the quarrels within the different parties and their leaders' respective personal ambitions are thoroughly analysed, with Michelle Kergoat reminding the reader that this greatly contributed to weakening their position and to reinforcing the king's position.

The author then describes the CPN (M): its birth and growth, its ideology as well as its strategy. Though this section provides a good synopsis of the CPN (M)'s main trends, one regrets that the author does not systematically state her sources. For instance, she mentions the fact that the Maoists announced the creation of 21 district governments in 2001 (p. 183) or the birth and policy of the CCOMPOSA (Coordination Committee of Maoist Parties and Organisation of South Asia) (p. 188), but does not refer to any precise written sources (or even to any oral interviews she might have recorded), making any further investigation on these issues impossible.

India is another major actor on Nepal's political scene, and since the rise of the Ranas –as the events of 1990 have shown– its influence over the Himalayan Kingdom has been undeniable. Nepal is an ideal buffer state between China and India, with the latter casting a jealous eye over Kathmandu to prevent any attempts by Beijing to enhance its role in the area. Although the Kingdom tries to play the Chinese card to the full, it has often no other choice than to abide by New Delhi's rule, since its geographical situation makes its economic development highly dependable on India's goodwill.

According to Michelle Kergoat, the role the People have to play is probably what has improved most since 1950 (p. 200). The rise in democracy and the (still slow) progress made in education in rural areas are probably partly responsible for these steps forward. The part played by the People in revolutionary movements started in 1951, with the fall of

the Ranas, and has steadily increased since then, reaching new heights during the movement in 1990. The population's expectations are taking on a more specific nature and though their political commitment has gained momentum, thus proving their trust in democracy, the author points out that many Nepalese people are still incapable of differentiating between the different political parties (p. 205).

Lastly, before launching into the third part of her book, Michelle Kergoat briefly mentions the role intellectuals and students have to play.

In this final part, Michelle Kergoat focuses on the social, economic and cultural context in which the Nepalese democracy emerged, and she sets out to study its future viability.

The eighth chapter thus provides an overview of the country's economic and social situation. The author analyzes the state of demographic growth, the economic activities as well as public infrastructures from 1951 to the present day, backing up her arguments with a great many figures and tables.

The socio-cultural context is dealt with in the following chapter, in which the author reverts to the religious background of Nepal and explains how Hinduism, from a religious perspective, is gradually losing its hold over the local population (p. 243), despite the fact that its hegemony was ratified by the 1990 Constitution. However, when studying recent Nepalese political elites, she notes that the culture they promote prevails, creating frustrations among the minorities.

Given the social, economic and cultural context, the author thus wonders if the Maoist insurrection might have been foreseen. She observes in the tenth chapter that because of their elitism, successive governments have not grasped the population's basic needs, while inequalities within Nepalese society have never ceased to exist despite the emergence of a democracy in 1990. Moreover, through its increasing political commitment (especially after 1990), the population was able to broadly express its demands, their growing ethnic claims being a perfect illustration of this political development. The author ends the chapter with a description of the impact of the People's war on the country, recalling however that the sources of information concerning this issue are scarce and not always reliable (p. 276).

The eleventh and last chapter is a sketchy outline of Nepal's future, following the People's movement in April 2006 and the peace agreement signed between the Seven Parties Alliance and the CPN (M).

Overall, Michelle Kergoat's book mainly targets a non-specialist public. Indeed, in dealing with the subject, the author has preferred to use already existing literature rather than calling upon primary sources and her own personal experience. Despite some incomprehensible editorial errors, such as the misspelling of Prachanda's name (written

“Prachandra” throughout the book), her book is indeed an excellent synopsis of Nepal’s history and of the brand new Republic’s latest political development.