

Autocratic Monarchy: Politics in Panchayat Nepal

by L.S. Baral, edited by Pratyoush Onta and Lokranjan Parajuli. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari. 2012, 500 pp., (Chautari Book Series 70), ISBN 978-9937-8389-9-3, price Rs. 600

Reviewed by John Whelpton

Leelanteshwar Sharma Baral (1923-1997), who also wrote under the names Isvar Baral and L.S. Baral, was a hill Bahun by descent but was born in the eastern Tarai. A dedicated scholar of Nepali literature, politics and history, he was educated mostly in India and spent the greater part of his career there, teaching Nepalese studies at the Indian School of International Studies and, as it became in 1970, the Jawaharlal Nehru University School of International Studies. His time in Delhi was punctuated by two extended stays as a researcher in London, where he gained his Ph.D at SOAS. He was also a founder member in 1947 of the Nepali Rastriya Congress and in 1990, following Jan Andolan-I, was appointed vice-chancellor of the then Royal Nepal Academy by the Congress-led interim government.

Both because of his location and perhaps also his sometimes rather ponderous style, Baral's work has not in the past received the attention it deserves. However, his doctoral dissertation, 'The Life and Writings of Prithvi Narayan Shah', was made accessible on-line¹ in 2011 and now his principal essays on Nepali politics, covering the period from 1959 to 1979, have been collected together by Pratyoush Onta and Lokranjan Parajuli and published with a substantial introduction that disclaims any intention of providing an 'intellectual biography' but in fact presents an excellent survey of his work and the background against which it was produced.

There is no authoritative narrative of the Panchayat period, in sharp contrast to the years from 1950 to 1962, covered by Joshi and Rose's magisterial *Democratic Innovations in Nepal*. We therefore have to rely on studies of particular aspects, some of the most useful being those by L.S. Baral's former student, Lok Raj Baral, and one of the targets of the elder Baral's trenchant criticism, Rishikesh Shaha. There are also a few very brief

1 See <http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/rarebooks/downloads/> (accessed 4 March 2014)

general surveys in works dealing with a longer period (e.g. Hoftun et al. (1999)). L.S. Baral's thirteen papers in this volume do not radically challenge the view one gains from these other sources, but remain useful for their detailed description of certain episodes (e.g. the run-up to the 1975 second amendment to the 1962 constitution) and of institutions (particularly the Class Organisations analysed in chapter 7) and for documenting the changing perspective of a well-informed 'insider-outsider'.

Though a major figure in the development of Nepali literary criticism, L.S. Baral's cultural identity, unlike that of many Nepalis, was not one based on distancing himself from India. In Kathmandu in the 1950s, when he worked as a lecturer at Padma Kanya college and as a literary editor, he was known for walking the streets in a dhoti and kurta, whilst later on some Panchayat ideologues queried (wrongly) his Nepali nationality, and Parijat, one of the 'progressive' authors who criticised his 1990 appointment to head the Academy, reportedly described him as 'a strange Indian import.' In his analysis of Nepal-Indian relations, which are the focus of the last three chapters in the volume, his bi-cultural background meant that he was well able to see things from the Indian as well as the Nepali perspective. He characterises the Indian government's approach from 1963 to 1971 as one of 'appeasement' of the royal regime which only encouraged more demands (pp. 434-5) and also complains about unreasonable criticisms of Indian aid projects (pp. 437-8).

Baral's personal standpoint on Nepali politics evolved over the twenty year period on which his essays focus. He appears first as a strong Congressite, optimistic in the book's first chapter (co-authored with A. Appadorai, the head of ISIS) that King Mahendra would be able to work with the party despite the extensive powers he retained under the 1959 constitution, but then bitterly critical of the royal dismissal of B.P. Koirala's government whose achievement was 'little short of a miracle' (p. 118). However, in his paper on 'The Changing Constitutional and Political System of Nepal', originally published in 1977, he argues that, following Suvarna Shamsher's acceptance of the royal regime in 1968, Koirala, released from prison the same year, threw away a chance of a rapprochement with the king by public talk of confrontation. Baral writes also of the 'series of amateurish and facetious looking acts of terrorism carried on by fits and starts from 1973 onwards by some young persons under Koirala's influence' (p. 390). There is also some evidence of disillusionment with the

opposition as a whole, with references to ‘so-called democrats’ in the final chapter of the book, which analyses relations between India and Nepal under the Janata government and suggests that India had no real interest in the restoration of multi-party democracy in Nepal

It is uncertain exactly what would have emerged if an understanding between B.P. Koirala and Mahendra had been reached. In 1984, after the last of Baral’s essays had been published, Shambhu Prasad Gyawali, who as attorney-general had drafted much of the 1962 constitution, published details of his own role preparing successive drafts of an amended version, work which was unfinished when Mahendra died in February 1972.² There is some confusion over the exact chronology, as veteran Panchayat politician Navaraj Subedi (2012/13: 9) claims that he was himself made chairman of the drafting committee in 1968 but that the whole project was aborted when B.P. refused to remain silent for three months after leaving prison. However, both Subedi and the Gyawali family report Mahendra telling his associates it was time to pay back the ‘loan’ (*nāso*) he had taken from the people.

We still await a full narrative of the Panchayat years, but in the meantime this volume makes a useful addition to the resources available.

References

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2 Information from S,B. Gyawali’s son, Deepak Gyawali. The father’s account was published in his 2041 V.S.article in Rajdhani and republished in Gyawali 2055.

3 <http://books.google.com.hk/books?id=MX22o4PJ3Q0C&pg> (accessed 4 March 2014)