

Book Review

Underdevelopment and Regional Structure of Nepal

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[This is a commentary on the book *The Nature of Underdevelopment and Regional Structure of Nepal: A Marxist Analysis* written by Baburam Bhattarai and published by Adroit Publishers, Delhi, in the well-known magazine *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 8-14, 2003, by AM as "Calcutta Diary". We may not necessarily agree with the views of the author.-Ed.]

The Viswa Hindu Parishad cannot understand it. Nepal is the only Hindu Kingdom in the world; substantial sections of the people there are of north Indian ethnicity and bear names of Hindu gods and goddesses; the ruling family has long-time links with India and marries into the Rana clan dispersed along the higher and lower reaches of the Indo-Gangetic valley. And yet, Nepal is hardly benevolent land for Hindu chauvinism. Maoist communists, who are engaged in a relentless guerrilla war against the country's regime for the past seven years, control most of the countryside. Even in the national parliament, the second largest party happens to be the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist). So, irrespective of whether one applies the criterion of parliamentary or extra-parliamentary influence, Marxists, and not revanchists of the Togadia-Singhal brand, reflect the overwhelming *vox populi* in Nepal.

This clinches several points. Not rapid religious sentiments, but hard economic realities, mould the psyche of a nation. If the chemistry is different in Aryavarta, that is because of an unnatural hiatus between people existing under today's canopy and their consciousness lagging millennia behind. To argue that British colonialism was the albatross which prevented the Indian mind to swim away from the corrosive waters of obscurantism would be altogether banal. Hindu feudal ethos successfully resisted contamination from the spirit of enlightenment that was the major spin-off of British rule. The Mughals too had tried earlier to wear down this resistance and failed. Indian obviously is an exceptional case defying the dynamics of history. Part of the responsibility for continuation of the same stagnation in the post-independence period has to be shared by the orthodox proletariat-loving parties. They have exhibited a fetish for verbal calisthenics but failed to delve into the metabolism of either class realities or forces which could disturb such realities. The leaders of the parties belonging to the Left might well ponder over the fact that, at the dawn of independence, the Communist Party of India, though relatively small, was still the second largest party in the country: the situation is now qualitatively different both ordinally and cardinally.

Nepal did not suffer from the India malaise. A book recently published, *The Nature of Underdevelopment and Regional Structure of Nepal: A Marxist Analysis* (Adroit Publishers, Delhi), offers some clues as to why Nepal could escape India's fate. The author of the book, Baburam Bhattarai, happens to be one of the top leaders of the Maoist guerillas currently on the rampage across the length and breadth of the country. That does not diminish the book, it actually adds luster to it.

Some irony, Bhattarai's life story bears a strong parallel to that of Indian students who once traveled to Great Britain for higher studies. The worldwide depression was at its worst in the 1930s.

Europe was seething in discontent. The British empire was still a non-negligible political entity. For Indians, Britain was the metropolitan center. It was easy for the bright generation of young Indians coming from affluent households to transit to radicalism, often to membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain, to join the global struggle against fascism, from there to comradely solidarity with the Republicans in the Civil War in Spain. For the earnest young Nepalese in the second half of the 20th century, the metropolitan center was India. They would travel to Chandigarh, Delhi, Lucknow, Allahabad, Patna and Calcutta for higher studies. En route, they would pick up ideas and assorted tidbits of revolutionary praxis. Bhattarai found himself first in Chandigarh and then in New Delhi. He took a bachelor's degree, and subsequently a Ph D, in architecture in Indian universities. He lingered at Jawaharlal Nehru University honing the ideology of activism. These details however are a frivolity. Much more relevant is his success in organizing the Nepalese students in India into a radical political formation and his contribution towards giving Marxism-Leninism-Maoism a Nepalese face. Bhattarai of course has had comrades equally steeled in activism. He is nonetheless different: he leads a ferocious rebellion and at the same time writes a treatise on the facets of dialectical materialism, including its application to particular circumstances and events, such as the state of development, or, if you will, under-development, in Nepal.

Even the two-in-one role of scholar-politician bears a strong resemblance to the perambulations of the first batch of the CPI leadership. B T Ranadive actually started life as a proper academic in the Bombay School of Economics and Sociology. He and such others as EMS Namboodiripad and PC Joshi never discarded their thinking caps even in the most turbulent times; they set aside a certain time of each and every day for reading, thinking and writing - and producing books. The tradition has died out in India: a notion has struck roots that theorization is by and large a dated modality; one does not need to be literate - and learned - to understand sociopolitical realities. Nepal politics is in its early phase, the Baburam Bhattarais are therefore not yet deterred from reading, thinking and writing. Whether this trend will continue only the future can tell. Were the Marxist movement in Nepal too to lapse into relative illiteracy, that would be a tremulous prospect. If conformity claims radical groups, could the spread of Hindu fundamentalism be averted for long in that country either?

Nepal is therefore a land of both hope and apprehension, depending upon where one's allegiance lies. Feudalism has an ancient history in the country, strongly resembling the annals of northern India. In a still overwhelmingly primitive economy, feudalism, if left undisturbed, leads to smaller and still smaller-sized holdings and to increasing fragmentation of land. Poverty is endemic in such a system and as the decades roll by, the ancillary aspects of poverty-malnutrition, lack of literacy and high infant mortality-overwhelm the milieu. Surplus accumulated through ground-rent, usury and unfair terms of trade might have risen over time if land productivity had displayed a secular upward trend. That did not happen, since there was little feedback from the capital extracted from land, while progressive fragmentation militated against efficiency per labor unit. Till 1950 the situation was complicated by two exogenous factors: (a) imperial presence, even if indirect, asserting itself through treaty arrangements with the British Crown, and (b) the intrusion of Indian capital, mostly in trade and services. The export of Gurkha contingents to the British army could have turned the face of Nepal's villages and lifted it from the quagmire of underdevelopment. The reality bites were different; what was directly transferred to the Nepalese royal family by the British far exceeded the sum of subsistence wages paid to the Gurkha recruits, very little of whose income could filter back into the Nepal countryside. On the contrary, the degree of monopoly power exercised by the royal family and its appendages, such as the Ranas, increased significantly, intensifying the rate of exploitation of Nepal's masses.

Bhattarai draws attention to yet another datum. Perhaps because of his background in architecture, he has a searching eye for spatial arrangements. He points his finger at a riveting home-truth: not only is the long, thin territorial strip consisting of the Kathmandu valley and the lower Terai in the grip of the landed gentry: this class has spread its tentacles across the whole country. That is to say, apart from the standard phenomenon of inter-clan income inequalities, Nepal has to bear the cross of spatial inequalities, what many others would choose to refer to as regional inequalities. Trade, transport and commerce are also concentrated in Kathmandu and the Terais, partly because the latter region ensures a natural linkage with India. Tourism, including casino culture, suffers from a similar bias. Little of capital goods industry was developed in any part of Nepal. The consumption goods industries too are concentrated in Kathmandu and the Terais and therefore emerge as a further instrument of spatial exploitation. Bhattarai articulates yet another lament: whatever cottage crafts were once located in the outlying provinces have tended to disappear due to intrusion of Indian imports and import substitution mostly centered around Kathmandu valley: de-industrialization with a vengeance.

Poverty in Nepal, it is hardly surprising, has grown exponentially. There are as yet no safety valves to take care of anger increasingly churning among the Nepalese peasantry and lower middle classes. Conceivably, this statement is only partly correct in the historical sense. In the early phase of post-1950 era, the Nepal Congress Party and the Koiralas provided some hope. However, as the decades succeeded one another, both got gradually assimilated into the ruling class. For a while, radical presence from the middle classes, exemplified by the Pushpa Lals and the Sahana Pradhans - who too had earlier taken shelter in India and were proximate to communist formations - offered a second layer of hope. Things are moving fast and the generation of the Prachandas and the Bhattarais is apparently outflanking the senior radicals. On paper the Communist Party of Nepal (UML) has larger membership roll than the Maoists have. The ground reality in the villages tells a different story though. At least this conclusion seems legitimate in the light of the extent of hold the Maoists have been able to exercise in the remote provinces.

Some quarters would love to look at the Nepal dilemma through the prism of a China-India face-off. It is hardly so. The Maoists have not as yet succeeded in attracting much sympathy from the Chinese Communist Party. As of now, China has other preoccupations. At the same time, part of the tilt of ordinary citizens towards the Maoists must be on account of the strong relationship, whether real or imaginary, between elements of the royal household and the Nepali Congress on the one hand and Indian ruling groups on the other. Metropolitan capital to the Nepalese is, for all practical purposes, Indian capital; the paradigm of British colonial hegemony has faded into oblivion. Bhattarai's book has many theorizations, some ingenious and some not so, concerning the penetration of north Indian capital into the land-locked country and the material and moral havoc it has rendered. One does not necessarily have to agree with each of these propositions, but India's anxiety to keep Nepal out of China's sphere of influence has had several deleterious consequences. Add to this the other indubitable fact that the ingress of north Indian finance has the marks of footloose predatory capital, with insidious impact on the terms of trade between the two countries.

The intrinsic merit of *The Nature of Underdevelopment and Regional Structure of Nepal* is somehow diminished by Bhattarai's fondness for ideologically tilted terminology. One wishes there was another, shorter version of the book with the hierographics rendered into simple everyday language, so that it could have a wider reach amongst the struggling masses in Nepal. Others who should read this book are the mandarins in the Ministry of External Affairs at South Block, New Delhi - and, in addition,

the cloak and dagger retinue in the Ministry of Home Affairs who love to flog the thesis that the Nepal Maoists too are a constituent of Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence. •

[From *The Worker*, #9 (February 2004).]