



Sixteen opinions on the state of the nation



Recipe: Take 16 of the most articulate and incisive Nepali minds, give each of them around 20 pages to tell their story, stir very little and publish immediately.

Result: An exquisite book. It rather leaves one wondering why nobody tried it before.

State of Nepal (and explicitly not *The State of Nepal*), is an important collection of essays, some previously published, others lightly reworked, but primarily new submissions which “try and explain contemporary Nepal to the world, particularly its evolution over the last dozen years of democracy” (Preface).

It kicks off with **Rajendra Pradhan’s** discussion of “ethnicity, caste and a plural society”. One of Pradhan’s main points is that Hindu caste provides the organising framework for the Nepali polity, and he offers good historical and anthropological data to support his argument. Pradhan has a knack for tidy and succinct description.

Sudhindra Sharma offers an intellectually rigorous history of Hinduism in Nepal.

Pointing out that the core Hindu institution in the nation is actually the Crown, he posits that modern Nepali Hinduism is inherently syncretic, and in many ways closer to folk religions such as shamanism and animism than it is to north Indian Hinduism.

Sanjay Upadhyaya contributes a lucid overview of Nepali democracy after 1990. He writes, King Birendra’s surprising popularity after the 1990 People’s Movement was in large part thanks to the “distance he maintained from the political process”. Upadhyaya says the Maoists’ outsider status guaranteed them the early support they needed to get their movement off the ground.

Kanak Mani Dixit deals with Nepali kingship. Dixit suggests that while Nepal is “robust enough a structure” to carry on without one, the nation is nevertheless fortunate to have a king. Dixit offers “a constitutional king need not be a passive king” because in trying times the nation “requires a proactive institution”.

Deepak Thapa’s essay on the Maoist insurgency is heavy on fact and cautious in its analysis. He focuses on the Maoist decision to tap into *janajati* discontent by “taking advantage of the perceived correlation between ethnicity and poverty”, and Thapa goes on to show how this “gesture” amounts to little more than an expedient and “tactically motivated insertion” by the leaders of the movement.

CK Lal devotes his chapter to a topic close to his heart: the relationship of the tarai to the body politic of Nepal. Lal suggests, in his characteristically pithy manner, that Nepali identity was “built around the Parbatiya ethos of the Gorkhali conquerors”, which in part helped to form the perception that the “people of the hills were rulers while those of tarai origin belonged to the subject race”.

Nepal has “no policy regarding Nepali-speakers living outside the country”, according

to **Professor Tanka Bahadur Subba**. For most Indian Nepalis, he argues, Nepal is “politically as distant as Bhutan or Bangladesh”, and these citizens make every effort to search for an identity within India. Subba’s discerning analysis make this required reading for anyone travelling to Darjeeling or Sikkim.

Saubhagya Shah’s highly intellectual essay offers a critique of the burgeoning NGO sector in democratic Nepal. While somewhat over-reliant on American academic terminology, Shah’s contribution is nevertheless insightful. It notes both government and non-governmental sectors are competing for the same resources and NGOs have begun to resemble HMG in both form and content.

In her contribution on Nepali women, **Siera Tamang** takes issue with the effective denial of the “heterogeneity of women’s lived experience” by development discourses. Tamang pulls no punches as she rightly challenges the ability of “upper-class Hindu women”, the usual “native informants” for foreign projects, to accurately represent the reality of women’s lives in Nepal.

Sujeev Shakya, a chartered accountant by training, offers a useful overview of the Nepali economy. He presents a clear narrative of the cluttered policies of successive governments. We learn that increased liberalisation meant local businesses would “have to compete with international companies both in quality and price” so they chose the quick fix of “protectionism by influencing politicians”.

Shanta Dixit’s chapter on Nepali education illustrates how “each and every malaise that the country is saddled with today harks back to the poor quality of schooling”. Dixit argues that the system needs a dramatic shake up and a realignment to reflect “child-centred education” and “community participation”.

Dipak Gyawali assesses the history of technology in Nepal from a geo-historical

As *State of Nepal* goes into its third reprint less than a year after its release, Mark Turin reviews the book that has become essential reading for everyone interested and involved in Nepal.

perspective. Arguing that Nepal’s encounter with technology has been enacted largely through development, the “new *dharm*a of our times”, Gyawali describes the time lag in the nation’s “embryonic encounter” with modern tools, machines and processes.

Bhim Subba’s contribution on ‘Water, Nepal and India’ is replete with hard facts about the energy and water needs of the two nations he describes, and is unrelenting in its critique of the present policy. Subba argues that India should ask Nepal to store water rather than generate hydropower, and that Nepal must become strong enough to put a “monetary value on such stored water”.

We have come a long way, argues **Pratyoush Onta**, from the days when print media in Nepal amounted to *Gorkhapatra* and *The Rising Nepal*. The growth in all forms of media since 1990s, he suggests, has been qualitative as well as quantitative but investigative reporting is still sorely lacking.

Manjushree Thapa offers a discerning introduction to Nepali literature. She writes of the “hostile” conditions in which local literature is being produced: far less than half the total population is functionally literate in the national language. More problematic still, Thapa suggests, is that Nepali poets and writers are isolated from the rest of the world.

The final contribution in the volume, by co-editor **Shastri Ramachandaran**, is a little slow moving. He relays the presentation and representation of Nepal and her citizens in India, but the result is more of a 22-page

history of Indo-Nepal political agreements and disagreements. “India overwhelms the Nepali landscape as well as mindscape,” writes Ramachandaran.

The high-brow English and frequent references to Western academic literature mean that *State of Nepal* is inherently more geared towards informing expatriates about the nation than it is its own citizens. As “donor education”, the collection is second to none. Perhaps it will be made required reading for development *wallahs* before they descend upon Nepal and start dispensing their advice. But it is as important to have Nepali government bureaucrats read this book.

State of Nepal aims high and also delivers. Some compilations suffer from superficiality, since they sacrifice depth for breadth. The present volume succeeds not because of any unity of voice, since many of the contributors probably disagree with one another, but rather because each article is well-written, carefully edited and clear in its objectives. Let’s hope that they’re planning a sequel to be released in five years: *Return of the State of Nepal*.

State of Nepal. Kanak Mani Dixit, Shastri Ramachandaran (ed). Himal Books, 2002. Rs 490.

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