

BOOK REVIEW

Leadership in Nepal. 2001. Lok Raj Baral, Krishna Hachhethu and Hari Sharma. Delhi: Adroit Publishers, ix + 142 pp. Price IRs 300 (cloth).

This book presents the findings of a survey of the background and attitudes of a sample of national and local political leaders carried out by the Nepal Centre for Contemporary Studies with assistance from the Embassy of Finland in Nepal. The authors are well-known scholars, two of whom also have practical experience of government: Lok Raj Baral, Nepal's leading political scientist, headed a committee set up by Girija Koirala's first administration to make recommendations concerning the agreement with India on the Tanakpur project and was also appointed ambassador to India by the Deuba government in 1996; Krishna Hachhethu has published numerous articles on Nepalese politics since the 'People's Movement' of 1990 and is the author of a forthcoming study of party organisation; and Hari Sharma was Principal Secretary to Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala during his tenure in 1991-1994 and 1998-2001.

The study commences with an overview of analyses of leadership offered in political science literature including the trait, behavioural and contingency theories. Some readers will find this section rather jargon-ridden, and, as elsewhere in the book, the copy-editing could have been more thorough. However, the authors rightly focus on the key question of how far leaders simply play the system and how far they are able to bring about positive change; their preferred terms for the distinction are James Burn's 'transactional' and 'transformatory' leadership. In considering Nepal's situation since the restoration of parliamentary democracy, they consider that Joshi and Rose's analysis for the 1950s is basically still valid: despite an avowed break with the past, the politics of personality and patronage remains dominant.

Broadening the scope to South Asia as a whole, the authors point out (p.20-21) that in the region political leaders' legitimacy often rested originally on their role in struggles for independence or for democracy but

that dominant parties – especially the Indian National Congress – then sought to buttress their position by alliances with traditional forces at local level. In the Indian case this arrangement is now unravelling with the increased mobilisation of other sectors of the population. The prominence in the politics of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh of the ‘other backwards castes’ is an example in point, as is the earlier success of the anti-Brahman movement in South India. In contrast in Pakistan and Bangladesh the older ‘feudal’ structures remain dominant and this is also to a large extent the case in Nepal. ‘The social and economic basis of all élites of Nepal are similar and their political socialisation in authoritarian and feudalistic norms and values remain unchanged’ (p.28). The book went to press before last November’s renewed Maoist uprising and the insurgency, now in its sixth year, is not discussed, but it could be argued that this generalisation is applicable to the Maoist leadership as well as to those operating within the parliamentary system.

The authors do not make it clear precisely when the fieldwork was carried out but it appears to have been after the United Marxist-Leninist (UML) split in March 1998 and before the June 1999 general election. Data was obtained principally from 100 ‘local leaders’, 50 of them office holders at district and fifty at VDC or municipality level in Dadheldura (Far-Western hills) Dhanusha (Mid-Eastern Tarai) and Ilam (Eastern hills), districts dominated at the time respectively by Congress, the ML and the UML. Reflecting the relative strength of the parties in the 1997 local elections, 33 respondents were chosen from Congress, 44 from the UML, 17 from the RPP and 6 from other parties. Subsidiary data was obtained from twenty-one central level leaders and from fifty members of the general public.

Assuming that the sample is indeed a random one, the caste/ethnic background of leaders at the grassroots is quite similar to the picture at national level. Fifty-five per cent of the local leaders were Brahmans or Chetris, compared with an average of just under sixty per cent for the composition of the national legislature over the last forty years. The study also finds that fifty-five per cent of the local leaders came from ‘élite’ families. Included in this category were those families whose members had held official positions such as village headman or revenue collector during the Rana period; Brahman priests (presumably excluding those Brahmans (a majority) who do not carry out priestly functions); Mahajans (an old term for rich merchants, presumably covering families that been traders since the Rana period); and those who now hold office in the civil service or in political

parties. One can quibble with the imprecise definitions of some of these categories but the overall picture is probably accurate. The authors themselves are also, I think, right to conclude that although traditionally dominant groups retain an advantageous position, their dominance is slowly being diluted.

In the case of the 'untouchable' occupational castes, progress has been particularly slow. Like many others, the authors do not focus sufficiently on this aspect, concentrating instead on the relative positions of the Parbatiya high castes and the *janajatis*. They do, however, point out in the discussion of Dadeldhura (p.87) that the occupational castes are totally excluded from power, despite being around 25% of the district's population (the 1991 census showed that they make up around 10% of the national population).

Comparisons between the representatives of the major parties show that the ethnic and class background of Congress and UML local leaders is not too dissimilar. Brahmins dominate in both and most leaders are drawn from the middle or lower middle classes, though the proportion of middle to lower middle is higher for Congress than for the Communists. Chhetris rather than Brahmins predominate in the Rastriya Prajatantra Party, which is consistent with the higher numbers of Chhetris than Brahmins in the legislature in the Panchayat period, a situation reversed in the post-1990 period.¹

While the above findings are much as most people would have expected, there are one or two surprises. There have been complaints from party veterans that Congress was virtually taken over by the so-called 'Chaite Congressmen', ex-panchas who joined the party after the success of the People's Movement in April 1990; to a lesser extent there has also been concern over the 'Kartike Communists', who reinvented themselves as Leftists the following autumn. The survey data shows, however, that the great majority of local leaders had been with their present party from the start of their political careers. In addition, despite the importance attributed to the role of school masters as UML activists, very few teachers were found within the sample, although about a third of those questioned in all parties had entered politics in their student days

Also interesting is the seeming implication of one question included in the survey: 'What was your occupation before you took politics as a profession' (p.83). Are we to suppose that, even at village level, members of elected bodies are normally full-time politicians?. There is perhaps a link here with the general perception of politicians as selfish and corrupt, a perception acknowledged by the local leaders themselves, even though, when asked to

select from a list of qualities that might distinguish leaders from ordinary people, 'selflessness' is one of their top choices. The authors summarise the problem thus: 'The leaders and political élites, in general, have approached politics as a profession, an earning source which, in turn, becomes a resource for winning elections and for perpetuating positions of power. It has thus created a nexus between the politicians and illegitimate sources of income. Money power also brings with it the muscle power for furthering the prospects of electoral gains.' (p.67).

Although the book does not deal with the extra-systemic challenge posed by the Maoists, most readers will naturally look for clues in it to the roots of the present (January 2002) critical situation. The survey to some extent confirms the general consensus that failure to meet the high expectations engendered by the 1990 is a large part of the picture. Politicians have been expected by their constituents to deliver material benefits which have not materialised. The leaders themselves seem to see the pressure upon them mostly in terms of individuals' demands for help finding jobs or other specific figures, whilst the ordinary voters surveyed claim to be more focussed on the public interest. The difference between these two perspectives is perhaps not that great since the 'public' in question will often be a very specific group. Against this background the Messianic solution promised by the Maoists has been particularly attractive to those who feel the most marginalised, whilst the 'People's War' also offers a seeming method of advancement educated youngsters whose own personal aspirations for social mobility have been blocked.² The personalised and clientelistic nature of the political process also makes it particularly important in Nepal (as in much of the Third World) to maintain good relations with the dominant power, whoever that might be. In voting, villages may often be trying to predict rather than to select the winner and, in a civil war situation, this applies even more strongly to a decision to help either the rebels or the security forces. Another relevant dimension to village politics is the tendency for rival clans or factions to seek backing from rival forces outside the village, in which case cleavages will not necessarily follow neat class or ideological lines.³

These issues are all ones which merit further investigation but it would be unfair to expect a very specifically focussed work such as the one under review to go thoroughly into them. Despite copy-editing/proof-reading problems (particularly evident in the charts on pages 23 and 73) and the failure to provide a full enough account of survey methodology, the book

is a useful contribution to our understanding of Nepalese politics at local level and deserves the attention of all specialists in the field.

Notes

1. However, it is worth noting that the Chhetri predominance over Brahmins under the Panchayat appears to have depended on the system of royal nomination. In the 1981 Rastriya Panchayat, the representation of the two castes was exactly the same if only elected members are counted (figures by Harka Gurung given in DREFDEN, *Report on the Study and Research on the Local Elections in Nepal, 1992*, Kathmandu, 1993, p.7, TableA-12.)
2. Anne de Sales's characterisation of the active insurgents ('The Kham Magar Country, Nepal: Between Ethnic Claims and Maoism.' *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* 19, 2000, p.63) is interesting in this context: 'The `people's army' is organised in such a way that the fighters in any one district always come from outside it. They are mostly young peasants (all castes mixed up), some of whom have suffered setbacks when attempting to emigrate to the town or abroad.'
3. De Sales (ib.) gives the example of two clans in one Magar village aligned respectively with Congress and the UPF. Rival villages may similarly back rival parties (Frederick H.Gaige & John Stolz, "The 1991 Parliamentary Election in Nepal: Freedom and Stability," in Dharamdarshani (ed.), *Democratic Nepal*, Varanasi: Shalimar, 1992, p.50.)

- John Whelpton