Discourses of Awareness: Development, social movements and the practices of freedom in Nepal

by Tatsuro Fujikura, Kathmandu: Martin Chautari, 2013, 310 pp. ISBN 978-9937-594-03-5, price 600 NRS.

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This book combines historical and ethnographic analyses to explore the ways in which the project of development in Nepal has helped to produce new forms of imagination and socio-political engagement. It argues against 'post-development' discourse theorists who cast development and social movements as alternatives and consider development to be 'anti-political'. In contrast, Fujikura argues that in order to understand Nepal's political present, it is essential to turn to the history of development in Nepal.

The argument is laid out over the course of eight chapters, including a conclusion and introduction. Chapter 2 is primarily conceptual, and sees Fujikura argue for a perspective that takes seriously discussions about awareness and consciousness. Chapter 3 explores one particular model of development, 'community development' (CD), which, it is argued, has had a profound influence on subsequent socio-political processes in Nepal. Fujikura shows how CD as a technology of reformation and improvement embodied a certain political rationality, including a notion of 'how democracy works'. In chapter 4, Fujikura turns to the work and reflections of Japanese NGO workers to examine the continuities and changes in 'bottom-up' development in Nepal, from the CD of the 1950s to the more recent 'rights-based' approaches. He argues that a recurring theme in development in Nepal has been the attempt to forge a constructive relationship between the people and the state. The next three chapters focus on the 'targets' of development, or more precisely their political projects. Chapter 5, one of the most successful chapters in the book, delves into how self-identified village leaders have engaged with the discourses and techniques of development. Fujikura argues convincingly that the actions of these leaders should not be seen as the expression of a desire for upward mobility. Rather, these should be understood as a way of seizing and exercising agency in relation to national and local communities,

of being moral, responsible agents recognisable by living villagers and
ancestors, as well as the state and other agents of development. In chapter
6, he considers the relationship between the actions of participants
in the Maoist People's War and the project of national development in
Nepal. He highlights the fact that the Maoists and state schooling shared
assumptions regarding the existence of the Nepali nation as an object of
attachment and ground for political action. He further argues that it is
this attachment that propelled the Maoists towards revolutionary forms
of action. The next chapter continues the exploration of the political pro-
jects of the 'targets' of development and focuses on the Kamaiya liberation
movement. It traces the origins of the movement and the NGO BASE, a
key supporter of the movement, and the former's link to CD programmes.
The chapter also highlights the similarities between the discourse of awa-
reness, awakening, and the need to change behaviour and consciousness
in BASE and Maoist songs and discourse. In doing so, it ties together the
themes of practices of development, discourses of awareness, reformation
of subjectivities and political action. This is followed by a conclusion in
Chapter Eight.

As a whole, the book effectively updates the critical conversation
concerning development in Nepal. In urging that we explore the produc-
tive, enabling side of development, Fujikura is in agreement with recent
work in the anthropology of development elsewhere (e.g. Crewe & Axelby
2013). Similarly, his suggestion of a link between contemporary political
engagements and development forms part of a broader shift within the
anthropology of development, away from viewing development as a mask
of power and towards conceiving development as the practice of politics
(e.g. Li 2007, Bierschenk 2008). Further, in the spirit of this recent work,
the account is subtle and complex in its representation of the agents of
development. The differently positioned characters—be they the instru-
ments or targets of development interventions—are presented as reflec-
tive, discerning and even flexible in their thinking. This is a far cry from
the representations of the 'post-development' theorists, rightly criticised
for their tendency to deny reflexivity and responsibility to the agents of
development (Mosse 2013) as well as their dichotomous constructions
(e.g. Harrison & Crewe 1999).

Broad in scope and ambitious, the book is also peppered with insights
and challenges to existing understandings in the regional literature. In

Chapter 4, for instance, Fujikura suggests that development in Nepal has involved anything but the promotion of neo-liberalism, as often argued, and points instead to the inherently contradictory nature of development. He holds, with writers such as Li (2007) and Gould (2007) that development should be thought of as an ensemble (or *assemblage*) of disparate elements, ideas and interests, rather than a monolithic enterprise. In Chapter 7, he questions the commonly accepted account of the relationship between the emergence of the Maoist movement and development in Nepal, namely that a major factor was the 'failure' of development (e.g. Sharma 2006; Deraniyagala 2005). He also counters arguments that development and democracy have not engaged each other in Nepal since the 1990s, arguing instead that a vision of democracy has been central to the development endeavour since the 1950s.

The book's breadth and ambitiousness, however, do not always work to its benefit. At times the insights feel like tangents; and certain themes remain unelaborated, notably the topics of pedagogy and discipline and also that of alliances between individuals from different social backgrounds. Similarly, the accounts of the Maoist and Kamaiya liberation movements are somewhat sketchy and receive more thorough treatment elsewhere, including by the author himself (e.g. Fujikura 2011).

Also, while the move away from the pessimism of development discourse theorists is commendable, I found myself wishing for a more balanced account—that is, for a more thorough engagement with the arguments of 'post-development' theorists, and the less agreeable experiences of the encounter with development recounted by, inter alia, Nanda Shrestha and Mark Liechty (e.g. 1997). The issue of power is surprisingly downplayed in the account (leaving me wondering about the extent to which the author might be engaging in some antipolitics of his own). I was struck, in the introduction, that the two individuals quoted as people 'who did not know anything', were both women, one from each of the movements explored in the book, and yet this did not give rise to a discussion of the power dynamics within the movements. I would have wished to see a discussion, in other words, not only of how (and whom) development enables but also disables—enabling the 'practices of freedom' of which Fujikura writes, while also turning some or all of its agents into 'prisoners of freedom' (Englund 2006).

Overall, however, and a few editorial issues notwithstanding, the book

is an interesting, at times insightful and thought provoking study and will certainly be of interest to students of development and social movements in Nepal, and anyone interested in understanding Nepal's political present more generally.

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