

From Monarchy to Republic: Essays in Changing Nepal

by Gérard Toffin. Kathmandu: Vajra Books. 2013, 280 pp.,
ISBN 978-9937-623-07-0, US\$ 15

Reviewed by Chiara Latizia

This book deals with the sweeping changes that Nepal experienced between 1950 and 2012. Gérard Toffin, drawing on the research he has been conducting in Nepal since the 1970s, reflects on the transformations he witnessed and wrote about over the last four decades. He offers a collection of eight essays (supplemented with three appendices), written between 1976 and 2013, most of which have been already published in academic journals and partially updated for the present volume. Only two essays concerning western Tamangs – originally published in 1986 and 1976 – are presented in their original form as chapters 7 and 8. They show that some changes (like the growing importance of migration or the effects of new economic trends on traditional forms of agriculture) were already noticeable in the 1980s.

In his introduction, the author stresses that the volume is not a political history and does not just concern Nepal, but endeavours to reach both a more profound level and a broader scope of study through anthropological and sociological analysis. It proposes to explore the ideas and values on which political systems and new trends in contemporary Nepal are built, to draw ‘a sort of mental cartography of the country, the ideas behind the political arena’ (p. 12) so as to research the ‘underlying determining structural factors in action’ (p. 13), and to focus on the ‘ideological elements that sustain the democracy and the republic in the South Asian context today’ (p. 17). In the process, the volume compares Nepal’s recent political history with that of India and Western countries. Given space limitations, I elected to focus on the first five chapters, trusting that this will suffice to give the reader a good measure of the book.

The first essay introduces the main theme of the book by way of a broad reflection on the fabric of social change in Nepal and beyond. Toffin traces a panoramic history of political changes from king Mahendra’s rule (1955-1972) to the proclamation of a republic in 2008, and shows how the paradigms of anthropological studies have changed accordingly, adopting

a global and dynamic approach that takes history into account from the 1980s onwards. Toffin compares the events of 2008 with the French revolution and, inspired by Tocqueville's lesson that a major alteration in the political system does not automatically imply a change in society, he affirms that the new republic of Nepal has not experienced a radical transformation in its social structure or religious practices. Taking up a theme already emphasized by Anne de Sales (2011), Toffin points to the dialectics between continuity and rupture, where transformation in one sector dissimulates permanence in other fields, and affirms that, in the end, the main structural elements of the social system were reproduced (also by Maoist leaders themselves). While acknowledging the emergence of new voices, values and social forms, particularly among the young and urban educated classes, Toffin notes the prevalence of old legacies, and shares his perception that a sense of cultural loss and demoralisation in the face of changes induced by globalisation and modernisation constitute a prevailing theme in present day-Nepali society. In my view, another prevailing theme is the sense of frustration about the change that did *not* happen, a reversal of the strong hope for change that pervaded the country in 2006. The interesting discussion of this chapter could have engaged with the reflections of Anne de Sales on the methodological difficulties in identifying on-going changes and more specifically on the inherently subjective dimension of the notion of change and on change as a value (embedded in human action) at the centre of revolutionary ideology (de Sales 2011: 112).

The second essay traces the historical dimensions of the politics of Hinduism, which have defined key features and issues of secularism in Nepal. Toffin shows that historically two models of statecraft, each in their own way, have construed Hinduism, its relation with kingship and with other religions: the Mallas of the Kathmandu Valley and the Caubise kingdoms of the Central hills. The Gorkha conquest and unification of Nepal lead to the supremacy of the second model and its religious values and symbols, which the modern state later adopted. Thus, they played a major role in Nepal's identity as a Hindu state. Toffin traces the changes that occurred from 1951 onwards (including modernisation and gradual democratisation, challenges to the Hindu state in the 1990s, and the declaration of a secular state in May 2006), mentioning some of the issues that came up after the proclamation of the republic in 2008. Toffin remarks

that these events have not diminished the prevalence of Hinduism and of religion at large, which is still present in all aspects of life.

Chapter 3 deals with the rise of Janajati movements in the 1990s: it provides a history of the movement and insists on the distance between the self-representations of these minorities and their social realities, with a view to deconstruct the rewriting of history and the myths (like the myth of autochthony) on which political and ethnic claims are based. The chapter offers a critical reflection on the essentialist conceptions of groups as self contained and unchanged entities and points to the paradox of ethnic issues 'being brought in the foreground by Nepalese sociology and anthropology' (not further specified by the author, p. 92) even as western academics are stressing the hybridity and the fluidity of ethnic boundaries. The essay also considers the impact of the ideas of Janajati ideology on democracy and argues against the adoption of a federalism based on ethnic lines that would endanger the country.

Chapter 4 discusses the dialectics of equality and hierarchy in the Nepali (and South Asian) context to depict a broad portrait of caste in contemporary Nepal. It argues that equalitarianism is not just a foreign concept, but that it also has roots in Nepal and India, as expressed in the egalitarian values promoted by Hindu reformist movements and in the 'casteless ideology existing within the orb of most Nepali tribal groups' (p. 102). Toffin explains how – despite the growing calls for social inclusion, the equality of all citizens affirmed in the Constitution, the abolition of untouchability, and the pressures of modernisation and globalisation – caste persists as a fundamental social fact and continues to regulate large sectors of social life, as even affirmative action measures tend to end up reinforcing caste consciousness. Toffin observes also the persistence of discrimination against Dalits despite the Caste Based Discrimination and Untouchability (Offence and Punishment) Act, 2068 (2011), and he affirms that the language of purity and impurity is reproduced in the daily practices of Dalits groups themselves who are divided into hierarchically ranked castes and do not accept cooked rice from lower castes (p. 106, no reference is provided). The author also points at important shifts, such as current processes of substantialisation and essentialisation of caste, and a reluctance of lower castes to fulfil their traditional role.

The fifth essay presents interesting data on the proliferation of new religious movements (most of them of Indian origin, but some of them

from the West and one being autochthonous) among middle and upper class youth. The author considers these NRMs as an expression of the individualisation and internalisation of religion, and links them with the new liberal and democratic *ethos* that has been reigning in the country since the 1990s. Toffin shows that shared ideas can be observed amidst the diversity of these religious movements, which fit within the process of modernization and globalization of Nepali society (to name a few, the lack of puja and sacrifice, the practice of yoga and meditation, and these groups inclusiveness, irrespective of caste, ethnic or religious belonging). The new beliefs and practices, with their individualistic and universalist, transcendental values, coexist with traditional religion with its social and ritualistic features. Finally, among the appendices, I found particular interest in the transcript of an interview with lawyer and activist Sapana Malla (previously published in EBHR 39), which discusses various issues in connection with women's rights, equality, laws and political change, and thus echoes many themes presented in the book.

To sum up without doing justice to all the essays, this volume is, in the author's own words, a general reflection on the theme of change and 'a general account of what change actually is in the present-day Nepal' (p. 23). Obviously it cannot cover all aspects of transformation in Nepal, and as the author himself admits, key factors of change at play over the past decades are absent or barely mentioned in the essays. Notably, the political movement led by the Maoists, the Madheshi movement and politics, the changes in education (the proliferation of English boarding schools, for example), the economic and social changes due to the migration of Nepali workers to the Gulf (for example, the effect of remittances), the tremendous development of media, etc. Toffin's long familiarity with the subject clearly appears in this volume, and one may easily forgive the occasional lack of bibliographical precision, which seems to derive from the assumption that the reader already knows them (e.g., 'My Pyangaon book, as well as some of my subsequent studies...', p. 34) or to 'the work of well-known anthropologists Michael Oppitz and Anne de Sales' (p. 32). On the whole, given the panoramic nature of some of the discussions, I feel that more references to the work of other scholars throughout the volume would have been helpful for the reader interested in investigating further the subjects touched upon by the author. The bibliography of chapter 3, in particular, could have been updated in the process of republication.

Despite these minor limitations, the juxtaposition of these essays on key areas of change, and the approach of the author, who has always emphasized the importance of including historical analysis in the explanation of present-day facts, highlights some major elements of the change process and contributes to a wider understanding of the complex situation of contemporary Nepal, and its dialectic between rupture and continuity.

References

de Sales, Anne. 2011. 'Time, Identity and Historical Change in the Hills of Nepal'. *EBHR* 39: 106-126.