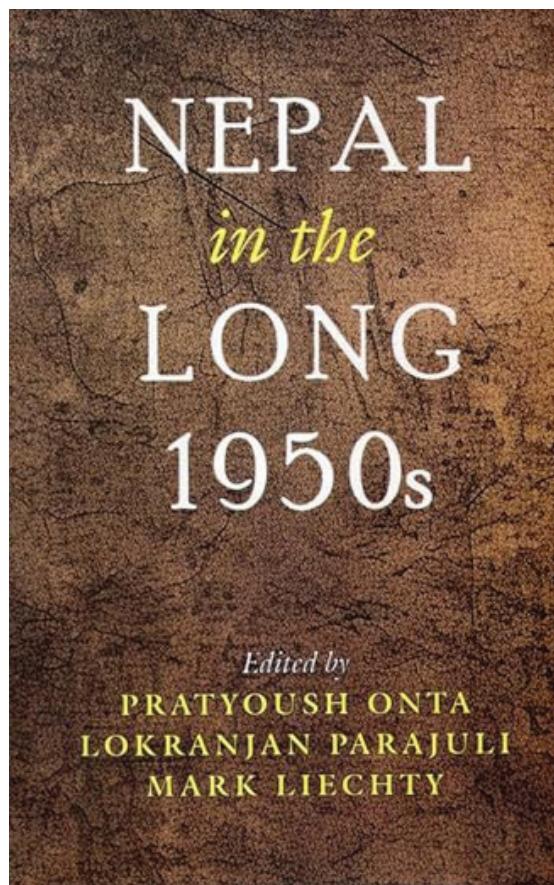


Book Review

Review of *Nepal in the Long 1950s* by Pratyoush Onta, Lokranjan Parajuli and Mark Liechty (eds.)

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Nepal in the Long 1950s is a collection of essays that offers an ambitious and original historiography of this pivotal decade in Nepal's history on two main fronts. First, as stated by the editors, the volume pulls back from a narrow focus on the political events surrounding the 1951 revolution that deposed the Rana regime, and instead turns to the social, cultural, political, and economic life of the country at the time. Secondly, it aims to recontextualize this decade within wider geopolitical upheavals of the post-World War II period, namely a wave of independence from European colonial rule, the USA establishing itself as a world power, and the Cold War.

As the editors argue, the events of the 1950s in Nepal were part of a "tectonic transition" (p. 2) neither temporally limited to the decade itself, nor spatially constrained to the borders of Nepal. With this in mind, the French historian Fernand Braudel's understanding of historical periodization as '*longue durée*' (Braudel, Fernand. 1980. *On History*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.) that cannot be bound firmly in time nor space is indeed apt for framing the volume and encourages a reading of events that considers a wide range of factors internal and external to Nepal. To this end, seven previously published papers and three new contributions are divided into two sections that alternately present Nepal as an actor on the world stage, and as a battleground for ideological dominance as a new world order was establishing itself. The articles cover public spaces of political debate (Gautam), how anti-colonial movements influenced the establishment of cultural institutions (Onta), the development of higher education (Parajuli), and land reforms (Gill). The Cold War, and the new arrival of foreign powers into Nepal also shaped the anchoring of *bikas* as development (Gyawali), aid assistance (Ghimire, Robertson, Rappleye) including healthcare (Heydon), and the 'Golden Age' of tourism (Liechty).

As promised in the preface, the volume successfully "injects new life into the study of Nepal's post-Rana era" (p. ix), in

no small part through the methods and lenses employed by contributors. More than an account of political events, what we have here is a cultural history of the time. The wealth of documentation used, including private papers, newspaper articles, speeches, and interviews, grounds the contributions in empirical material which had been previously left unnoticed. Accounts of a Kathmandu teashop as a space for political discussion (Gautam), or the details of the creation and downfall of the Nepal Sanskritik Parishad (Onta) paint a picture of a time of vibrant public life and political debate. Certain figures' personal involvement in actualizing change is brought to light, such as the queen mothers' hand in developing higher education in Nepal, and their key role in the establishment of the country's first university (Parajuli). The emphasis on key figures and biographical narrative also serves to highlight the importance of relationships and negotiation in efforts to transform Nepal into a modern nation-state.

Indeed, one of the core themes running throughout the volume is modernity, looking not just at the internal liberation from Rana rule, but also at how the quest for modernity was inspired by decolonization and influenced by competing global forces. These changes are nicely traced by Gyawali's analysis of the discursive shift from *unnati*, progress through autocratic rule, to *bikas* as development closely tied to democracy, technocratic solutions and infrastructural development. In the early days of a post-colonial world, Nepal was of strategic importance to Nehru, keen to preserve stability with a government sympathetic to India's interests. India's influence, be it in higher education or land reforms, was contested by the US's quest to establish its own presence through health, education and infrastructural development programs, and disaster relief, fearing China's potential expansion of influence into Nepal and India. These overlapping and competing interests of a range of actors are woven throughout the chapters and demonstrate what can otherwise be lost in critical context when the scope of analysis is restricted to national

borders. In doing so, they mark a clear and welcome departure from the existing historiography of Nepal in the 1950s.

It transpires that some of the reforms and concern for modernity were mostly relevant to the higher classes. For example, the “socioeconomic plurality” that the project of *bikas* enabled for the urban elite still left the majority of the population bound to traditional hierarchy (Gyawali, p. 89–90), and land reforms had far less of a material effect on the livelihood of tenants in practice than on paper (Gill, p. 98, 118). The occasional recognition of the disparities in the impact of transformations betrays a lack of attention to how these changes were perceived and experienced by the lower echelons of society or those on the periphery, such as the rural poor or *janajati* groups. This oversight can be attributed to the choice of sources used, as diverse as they may be as written archives. Photographic archives and oral histories from different parts of the country, for example, would likely have told a different story of the relevance or perception of these changes in most people’s day-to-day lives.

The editors stress that this volume has been a decade in the making. It has now been published at a time when many of the themes addressed are gaining renewed relevance in relation to contemporary world events. Of particular note is the role of foreign development assistance as we witness the retraction of long-standing Western aid worldwide, most drastically the recent shutdown of USAID, and the rise of strongman politics threatening the place of liberal democracy as the main form of governance. Such momentous reconfigurations feel like their own ‘tectonic transitions’ of the magnitude witnessed in the 1950s and challenge a world order established in these post-World War II years. This leaves the reader wanting deeper reflection on what a new historiography of the 1950s can teach us about the significance of the current moment for Nepal, and conversely how contemporary transformations can enable new insights into this pivotal long decade. This task can be taken up by future

research, inspired by the volume’s chapters to consider Nepal not as a discrete, insular entity, but as it exists in and of the world. Overall, this rich volume is essential reading for anyone keen to gain a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural and political landscape of Nepal’s modern history.

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