

Book Review

Toni Hagen (2012) **Decentralization and Development: The Role of Democratic Principles**, Himal Asia Foundation, Kathmandu, p. 373+liii, Price ... ISBN 978-99933-0-951-2.

Toni Hagen, for several years, has been a household name in the socio-economic development discourses in Nepal. Philosophy of local development and decentralization in the 50s through 90s of last century remained much discussed theme among scholars, development workers and among the national and international agencies. Local development programs were conceived under the various forms such as Integrated Rural Development, Community Development, Hill Development, Small Area Development, etc. These projects of various shape and forms and size were operational under various international funding agencies with or without collaborative national fund. Concept of rural/local development was the hallmarks of national development and which remarkably were deeply embedded with the polity of that time. It was era of Local Development entwined with national development, democracy and decentralization. With the advent of Panchayat System, after the overthrow of parliamentary system of political system by King Mahendra, Panchayat polity in the country was established which also became synonymous to 'grass root' democracy and concept of local development was wielded with the new polity. Development of Jiri, hitherto an obscure and unknown village in the nowhere of Dolkha district emerged as the hub of local development. It was Swiss funded project which ignited a number of rural development ideas notably Tuki system, forestation with peoples participation and users' committees. With opening of Jiri development project in the villages of deep mountains, sustainable rural development program became central 'mantra' for national development programs in Nepal.

Toni Hagen, with his dream to work in 'road-less mountains of Nepal, can be seen in this new treatise of development. In this book one can visualize Toni Hagen sweating in the mountains of Nepal with zeal to transform Nepal into Switzerland- a country of diversity, grass root democracy and sustainable development. This development epic, impregnated with his vast experiences in Nepal presents a kaleidoscopic glimpse of socio-economic and political life of Nepal from the early 50s till the end of his life in 2003.

The present book under review, entirely is not directly penned by Toni Hagen himself, rather a 'compilation of his reflections' (Page xxvi) on development issue, speeches and recitations and talks delivered (Ch 4 and Ch 5) which cover issues of socio-economic and political development aspects in Nepal of his time.

The book is structured as an anthology of his views on events and happenings in his five decades of development journey in Nepal. It is a sort of a memoir of Toni Hagen providing innumerable insights of political, economic, social and development facets, spanning more than fifty years of Nepal history starting from the last days of Rana rule in 1950 to nearly the end of the era of constitutional monarchy.

His views and reflections in the book are laid down in eight chapters. They give a glimpse of development issues and polity of Nepal of his time. They are presented in the form of his speech, interviews and recitation given by various personalities on his honor, no less than the king and the mayor of Kathmandu. All the presentations cited in the book reflect his views on democracy, development, decentralization, rural development, constitutional monarchy. In places one can feel under currents of international political conflict as was evident in the

building Tribhuban Highway linking Kathmandu with terai, or in developing hydro power projects. Going through the chapters, one can feel a synergic relation of peoples with development, decentralization, democracy and the recently unfolded horizon of political discourse-federalism. The book reflects his deep faith in the concept of political decentralization which he believes, must go hand in hand with decentralization of economic development of the country. Although the author has spun the whole discourses around philosophy of democratic principles of his home country, Switzerland, which have had evolved after 700 years of exercise on democracy, and which became a separate model and philosophy for democracy in the treatise of Political Science. But at the end, he discovers that model of Swiss concept of democracy is not eternal and unquestionable. During last days of his life he witnessed 'highest unemployment and 'decline of democratic culture' as a result Switzerland remained 'no longer a model for developing countries that are testing democracy, decentralization, ..' (p.17). This is an eye opening lesson for the country like Nepal which currently, is striving to establish federal and republic system of constitution after the abolition of Monarchy. The lesson for Nepal context is that, the system of a country need to be evolved on the historical, economic, and socio-milieu of the country. The strength of a nation lies in its own inner self, therefore, one should introspect for a model; there is no need chasing wild gees for looking models to replicate. Besides, Nepal is an ancient country having its own long tradition and culture impregnated by 'tremendous ethnic, cultural, religious and lingual diversity within and 'exemplary openness and tolerance towards other people 'which he considers as an excellent precondition for democratic development' (p. 79).

The philosophy evolved around the life of Toni Hagen has left no facet of development untouched while unfolding his knowledge on socio-economic and political development in Nepal. It is based on his deep love for Nepal and on genuine desire to see the people of Nepal prosper and democracy thrives for years to come.

During the long intellectual journey tony Hagen has developed a philosophical base for whole gamut of development model for Nepal. His views are based not on theoretical principles, rather on actual realities and events occurring in Nepalese life in those days. His self help model developed after his deep insight in to the Tibetan refugees pouring from Tibet with the flight of the Dalai Lama in 50s is still very true even for to-days Nepal.

His views for grass root democracy and people centered development are more valid today as Nepal is in the threshold of writing a new republican and federal constitution.

The philosophies of Tony Hagen also include some thoughts on dangers for young and inexperienced democracies. His danger-list includes 'poverty, high expectations and impatient, political self interest, greed for power, and arbitrariness, frequent changes of chief personnel sense of insecurity and frustration' among others. Other factors included in his negative list are 'un holy political alliance and frequent vote of no confidence, lack of continuity, little experience in democratic evolution from grass root, unchecked corruption, lack of democratic culture ' etc. His writings demonstrate great regards for constitutional monarchy which he, considers as 'sole bulwark against fatal and irreversible political changes'. However, his high opinion failed to sense under-tremors rocking the country in the form of Maoist uprising against the entire socio-political structure of the country. His views fail to fathom Tsunami of discontentment and anger simmering within seemingly, simple and peaceful hills and mountains of Nepal. He did not live to witness a deadly massacre of King Birendra and Queen and his entire family within the high walls of Narayanhiti Palace and subsequent abolition of entire edifice of Monarchy ushering republican system of polity in

the country. His views on constitutional Monarchy as prescribed in Chapter 4 of the book remained untested. The country, currently, is in the threshold in writing a new democratic federal republic constitution.

The treatise provide deep insights in to all aspects of national development efforts which in many respect, still remain true even after decades of his reflection. His discussion on tourism (Ch 5), detailed out various facets and has come up with recommendations and signaling the dangers for sustainable tourism industry in Nepal.

Hydroelectric Power Development is next areas which has been discussed (Ch. 6) quite in length in the book. The observation on the issues of hydroelectric power development details out the events involved in the Arun III projects revealing national and international politics in hydroelectric power development in Nepal. In course of analyzing the events involved in Arun III he comes to conclusion that this mega project, 'in the long term, deprive Nepal's power sector of self reliant, sustainable, economic, social human development'. (p. 256). He argues that real issue of Arun III is 'political' and poses question whether the 'project promote self reliant, participatory, sustainable, development and strengthen Nepal's independence in every aspect or is rather an obstacle to it? (6.2.6). The author has listed some of the important efforts in Nepal and compares with the efforts which took place in Switzerland in the areas of hydro electric power generation. His views on the issues of large barrages are presented in Chapter 7 of the book.

His views on transport infrastructure development in Nepal are discussed in Chapter 7. He compares road building system of Switzerland with the development of Transport Infrastructure in Nepal. He enlists some of the problems facing opening hills and road building in the hilly regions in Nepal. He has drawn several lessons from Integrated Hill Development project (IHDP) and Lamasangu- Jiri Road project which was undertaken during his time under the Swiss assistance. His critical views regarding high dose of investment and technology are reflected in his assessment of repairing of land slide caused in the vicinity of Charnawatikhola along Lamosangu-Jiri road under the Swiss assistance. He terms it as 'ugly 'and 'crazy' comparison with the Swiss infrastructure development. Based on the experience he develops a concept of green roads for rural areas of Nepal. As a consequence Tinau Watershed Project to Palpa Development Program and Dhading District Development Project (DDDP) was developed. The author has given a comparative scenario of road building with Swiss experience and concludes that in Nepal there exists 'an excellent model of environment compatible roads, involving people and local authorities, in the construction of 'Green Roads'.

His views on Poverty Alleviation are dealt with in Chapter 8 which still today is central theme in Nepal's Socio-economic development discourses. Root of rural poverty, among others, as discovered by the author, lies in the 'large projects' facilitating needs to spend huge amount of resources favored under the 'centralistic development approach' (p. 318), as exemplified by Arun III project which focuses population of industrial centers such as Biratnagar and Kathmandu (P. 318) ignoring needs of local people of the village.

The author has touched upon very vexing problem of food subsidies and problem of farmers in the hills. He finds that Food Aid from the 'rich countries may well be necessary, for short time. However , experiences have shown that such disaster relief often arrives too late, and if so, in large quantities no longer required for relief efforts, creating competition with local production' (P. 328). He comes to conclusion that Food for Work program is wrong way to fight poverty (p.356).

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The book has drawn various lessons through his long journey of development in ancient road less country Nepal. Although political context has changed with immanent federal, democratic and republic constitution in the anvil of Constituent Assembly of Nepal, none the less, the dynamics of socio-economic development are still valid as discovered by the author nearly a quarter century ago.

The book also contains some photo graphs providing a window for the life of hills and mountains of Nepal. The book is a valuable presentation not only for general readers but also for scholars, students and professionals engaged in the socio-economic and political development efforts in Nepal.

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