INTRODUCTION: MAPPING THE TRAJECTORY AND DYNAMICS OF NEPAL'S 'TRANSITION'

Fraser Sugden*

Over the last four years, Nepal's political 'transition' has dominated public debate on social, cultural and political issues in the new republic. However, although the term 'transition' has been applied loosely when referring to many elements of political and social change which have occurred in the wake of the *Jana Andolan II* and the end of the People's War, what exactly does this transition constitute and what path is it destined to take? The trajectory of social transformation over the last five years has been complex, but nonetheless well documented. The initial euphoria following the overthrow of the monarchy was followed by the uncertainty of what exactly *Loktantra* would constitute and within less than a year, ethnic tensions had erupted in the Tarai and eastern hills. The 2008 Constituent Assembly elections offered a strong representation of Tarai based parties and a Maoist majority. However, it was only a matter of time before the realities of constitution writing and transformation in the centre became apparent, particularly given the tension between new political actors and the entrenched pre-conflict political order. This culminated in the resignation of the Maoists from the government in 2009, and the two years of political stalemate.

Subsequent years have been characterised by a strong sense of disillusionment within the populace regarding the slow pace of change, arrested expectations and confusion over the potential direction of transition. Even new political actors have been losing their legitimacy, particularly when they appear to reproduce the same legacies and agendas of the old political order. The appointment of a new government in January 2011 represented yet another conjuncture in the political development of the new republic, although it has so far failed to make significant progress on the drafting of a new constitution, which now seems increasingly elusive. This is something that is central to the future of Nepal's polity, structure of the state, peace and stability.

The present moment, therefore, represents a suitable point at which to engage with the concept of 'transition' in Nepal. How can 'transition' be understood both temporally and geographically? What are the dynamics of the various political movements which have arisen in recent years? Are the social and political changes we are observing necessarily something new, or indeed, is the whole notion of transition itself an illusion? It is in this context that this inaugural issue of *New Angle: Nepal Journal of Social Science and Public Policy* hopes to mobilise concrete research to better understand the entire concept of 'transition' and (re)interpret the changes which have occurred over the past two decades in Nepal.

*   University of Stirling , FK9 4LA, Scotland.

It is important to acknowledge the positive role social science can play in understanding and shaping the future trajectory of social and political transformation in Nepal. This journal has thus been established as a new initiative which seeks to strengthen informed debates and analyses of politics and change in Nepal. It hopes to further this goal through a number of means. Firstly, it hopes to tap into the considerable amount of research on social, political and cultural change in Nepal, and provide a supportive outlet for both emerging as well as more established scholars to disseminate their work. Secondly, by focusing on shorter articles in an accessible format, it anticipates that ways can be found for academic knowledge to more easily inform both policy and progressive social movements. Thirdly and most significantly, *New Angle* places a particular emphasis on studies informed by concrete research on the ground rather than speculative or theoretically driven analyses. Through promoting research culture, it is hoped that more effective transfers of knowledge between academic and political actors can be facilitated. It can also better allow scholarship to move beyond popular analytical lenses and uncover hidden realities and perspectives. Furthermore, at a time when donor driven rhetoric associated with aid has distorted public-oriented intellectual practice, it is anticipated that critical empirical research can reframe discourses of change and transition and inform a progressive social and political agenda.

Initial steps were taken to broaden understandings of transition through research at a conference in Kathmandu in July 2010 focussing on the peace process entitled, "*Conflict, Transition and Possibilities for Peace in Nepal and South Asia: Challenges to Engagement, Practice and Scholarship*". Papers presented contained various critiques of dominant approaches to peace building. This was one of the first conferences seeking to directly bring together concrete research on Nepal's transitional processes. Papers engaged critically with dominant approaches to peace building, noting the limitations of human rights discourses and transitional justice processes for those affected by the last sixteen years of political upheaval, be they families of the disappeared or war widows. The rehabilitation of young former combatants was another topic which was addressed. The conference's remit was largely an examination of how various groups were dealing with the past and the legacy of conflict. One of the points to emerge was the need to make policy makers and political actors more aware of academic research going on in Nepal in the fields/sectors relevant to their work. Promoting such awareness is one of the aims of *New Angle*. However, simply duplicating the contents of the conference is not our intention here. While the conference predominantly brought together papers dealing with the past and the peace process, this issue of *New Angle* is focussed on drawing on the past (both recent and distant) to better understand the dynamics and possibilities of the present conjuncture.

The papers in this volume draw together a range of disciplinary perspectives. All are based upon concrete research, including both ethnographic fieldwork and reviews of historical sources. While not all elements of Nepal's transition were covered in this first issue of *New Angle*, the contributions do offer new insights into the direction of

change, the reconfiguration of power relations and the lived experiences of transition on the ground. To begin, Adhikari's contribution explores the multiple dimensions of land reform policies in Nepal- a politically contentious issue in the present period of state restructuring. The paper traces the evolution of land policies from the nineteenth century onwards, and identifies how the creation of a politically powerful land owning class with persisting control over the bureaucracy continues to impede reform. Ollieuz's paper also takes a historically informed approach to comprehending the current conjuncture by examining the political history of a village development committee (VDC) in Morang district. The paper traces how systems of local governance have changed from the Rana period up until the People's War and post-2006 transition, offering valuable insights into local perceptions of change. Satyal's contribution meanwhile, expands the discussion to encompass the ideological framework guiding Nepal's past and present political actors. It charts the evolution of social justice as a concept from the ancient to contemporary period. The paper sheds new light on the emergence of radical notions of social justice which have challenged the political order over the last two decades, while also highlighting the persisting tensions between discursive notions of change and the realities of political transformation on the ground.

Focussing on the contemporary moment, Baral's contribution to this volume examines the Maoist's experiment of New Democratic Education introduced during the People's War, reviewing the innovations in both pedagogy and theory. The paper explores some of the challenges and

opportunities the new system offered, and its legacy following the dissolution of the People's War. Maycock's paper offers insights into the unprecedented rise of ethnic consciousness in the aftermath of the People's War. The paper charts the rise of the Tharuhat movement in Kailali, and reviews the movement's origins, its ideological rationale and methods of mobilisation. The final two papers deal more specifically with the human legacy of the conflict and the lived experiences of recent political change. Thapa's paper examines the rise of armed groups in the far eastern Tarai, a phenomena unique to the recent transitional period. The analysis offers new insights into the lives of the young members of such movements, and the underlying reasons for enlistment. Finally, Ghimire's contribution explores the legacy of the conflict with regard to the health needs of the population in Rolpa district. The paper also reviews how approaches to healthcare provision have evolved in the recent transitional period, and how they represent continuity rather than change.

Bringing together the themes raised in the aforementioned papers, there are a number of specific areas relating to the theme of 'transition' in Nepal where this first issue of *New Angle* seeks to contribute to scholarship.

SITUATING NEPAL's TRANSITION HISTORICALLY: GAP BETWEEN THEROY AND PRACTICE

The post 2006 period has seen some political changes which could be considered as 'positive', especially in the eyes of rapidly growing urban middle class. The interim constitution has made further efforts to institutionalise equality of opportunity,

rectifying the shortcomings of the 1990 constitution with a more comprehensive approach to end discrimination on caste, ethnic or religious grounds. Nevertheless, it still has a long way to go to fully guarantee on paper, the human rights and equality of opportunity for all social groups. Ensuring an inclusive model for federalism and representation of minorities will be a significant challenge (Middleton & Shneiderman, 2008). At the same time the interim constitution retains anomalies associated with the old political order, including highly reactionary amendments which if implemented, would unashamedly discriminate against women and young people with regards to citizenship (Jha, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2011). Nevertheless, what is most significant when assessing the success of the recent transition is *not* what is enshrined in legal documents or party rhetoric, but whether these changes are actually reflected in material transformations on the ground. Are historically entrenched power relations within the powerful political establishment, the bureaucracy, and civil society really being transformed, or do they continue to be reproduced, albeit in renegotiated form? Are the calls for social change made by political parties contradictory to the self-interest of the more powerful within these entities? Most importantly, does the rhetoric of change by political actors actually translate into practice?

The studies in this issue demonstrate that 'transition' is a confusing and contested aspect of political rhetoric. It is strategically mobilised despite the fact that lives and livelihoods often remain as they are, or change as a result of other contextual drivers. A central theme is the processes through which power relations are reproduced over time in the face of political language of change and transformation. To better comprehend this phenomenon, there is a need for more studies of Nepal's transition which are *historically* informed. Such an analysis can raise new insights into the slow progress made by both the Constituent Assembly and social movements in realizing the vision for social change held by so many citizens. By tracing the trajectory of social relations in different spheres of Nepalese society, several of the papers in this volume effectively shed new insights on patterns not just of change, but of *continuity*. This has the potential to call into question whether there is indeed any meaningful 'transition' at all.

Understanding these processes requires a brief overview of the well documented history of power relations associated with the expansion of the Nepalese state, both in the centre and in the rural periphery. Some of the issues in this volume add new insights into how relations of authority and class power have been perpetuated over time. While the territories that constitute present day Nepal fell under the influence of numerous state formations over the centuries, it is evident that the Gorkha state surpassed previous formations in both its capacity to extract revenue and impose administrative control. The early state apparatus established by the Shah dynasty imposed a form of centralised feudalism[1] across its newly acquired territories, in a

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[1]   Although the 'feudal' character of the past and present Nepali state and rural economic formation is readily acknowledged by scholars and activists, there is rarely any concrete definition of the

mode of production Regmi (1977b) terms "state landlordism". A local tax collecting functionary class was created in rural areas, who appropriated a share of the surplus before the remainder was channelled to Kathmandu to fund the state's expansionist campaigns as well as luxury consumption[2] (Regmi, 1977b, 1978, 1988; Seddon, 1987; Sugden, 2009).

These patterns of inequality were deepened following the ascendancy of the Ranas. The British imperialists guaranteed the Ranas a symbolic 'sovereignty' so long as the latter provided troops at times of need and allowed the former an access to raw materials and a captive market for British-Indian manufactured goods. This alliance maximized outflows of raw materials, while imported goods served to impede the organic development of domestic industry in the Tarai or indeed anywhere else in Nepal

(Sharma, 1992; Blaikie, Cameron, & Seddon, 2001). In other words, it was *political* alliances between a feudal[3] ruling class and the colonial power which ensured that Nepal remained an underdeveloped 'buffer' state and captive market at the fringes of the empire.

In the economic sphere, these relationships intensified rural inequality and reproduced feudal relations on the ground. They impeded the emergence of alternative livelihood options for a peasantry already pauperised by tax and rent obligations, while on a political level they strengthened the power of the ruling class with primary control over land. In this volume, Adhikari discusses processes through which a politically powerful local land owning elite was created under the Ranas. This occurred not only through giving individuals loyal to the bureaucracy a revenue collecting role,

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term. I refer to feudalism loosely as a mode of production whereby ownership of productive resources (predominantly land) is controlled by a minority ruling class, and where the agricultural (or other) surplus is appropriated through extra-economic means and is invested for consumption rather than for productive purposes (see discussion on 'Rent of Land' in Marx, 1932).

[2] Through reviewing series of government directives from the late eighteenth century compiled in Regmi (1971), one gains fascinating insights into uses of revenue extracted by the Morang peasantry immediately after its annexation into the Gorkhali state. Expenditures recorded by the *subba* (district administrator) include gifts for distribution within royal networks, animals for sacrifice, wedding and medical expenses for the royal family and salaries for artisans to maintain palaces. The military uses of revenue are also evident in a set of directives to local administrators between 1804-1805 recorded in Regmi (1973). They request the supply of raw materials such as timber and wax usually through using jhara or labour tax by the hill peasantry, while another directive reports the use of tax revenue from Morang district to purchase steel for munitions from Kolkata.

[3] Following on from footnote 1, it is worth noting that although the Ranas were not themselves an 'agrarian' class, the term 'feudal' can be extended to describe the character of the centralised ruling elite and bureaucracy more broadly. Not only did they directly appropriate a share of the agrarian surplus for elite consumption, many members of the bureaucracy themselves held private estates yielding them rent or were involved in other activities also driven by feudal logic such as money lending or collecting tax from imports (Regmi, 1977). Furthermore, given the centralised character of land ownership, feudal relations permeated all levels of the bureaucracy lending support at the macro level to a feudal economy grounded in elite consumption, economic dependence and enforced stagnation.

but through the distribution of land grants which allowed them to extract rent from a peasantry already subject to a tax burden (see also Regmi, 1977b). Ollieuz's contribution based on a case study in Morang, demonstrates how local level functionaries held a significant monopoly over political power at the local level. Authority was passed on not through democratic selection but a hereditary system, as in the central government.

In alliance with an expanding merchant community serving the needs of colonialism, the Ranas represented a classic comprador class. They were enriched by both agrarian revenue and from the imposition of taxes on the import of manufactured goods from India and exports of raw materials such as timber (Blaikie et al., 2001; Blaikie, Cameron, & Seddon, 2002). The vast sums of revenue collected by the regime were used to strengthen the state apparatus and to fund lavish luxury consumption by the ruling elite.[4]

What ideological rationale legitimated this system of rule? Satyal's contribution to this volume on social justice demonstrates how the moral codes informing the governance of successive rulers up until the Gorkha expansion were drawn from the Hindu and Buddhist notion of *dharma*. While this doctrine of rights and duties promoted the collective good, it was distorted by elites through the development of caste distinctions. Satyal charts how these were institutionalised, particularly during the Rana era to legitimate the monopoly of

power amongst the upper caste hill elite from where they drew much of their support base. A simultaneous policy of isolationalism sought to insulate the Nepalese populace from external cultural and political influences and stifle dissent.

However, Satyal also demonstrates how the ideological screen based upon caste privilege and isolation which had legitimated Rana rule for several generations was under stress, particularly in the face of the freedom movement in colonial India. Externally influenced discourses of social justice (or *samajik nyaya),* democracy (*prajatantra*), and equality (*samanata*), facilitated the overthrow of the Ranas in the 1950s and the introduction of a short spell of democracy before the resurgence of autocratic rule by the King under the *Panchayat* system.

Alongside the restoration of centralised monarchical rule, what is remarkable is that the overall structure of the economy and the political culture changed little following the overthrow of the Ranas. Despite moderate industrial 'development' on the far-eastern Tarai, the overall economy of Nepal remained subordinate to Indian capital (Blaikie et al., 2001; Bhattarai, 2003). The bureaucracy continued to serve the interests of the comprador mercantile elite which had been solidified in the Rana period. The *Panchayat* rulers, as with their predecessors, were allied to the merchant capitalist class and together they continued to benefit from the structure of economic dependence, often being involved in the

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[4] Most capital which could potentially be mobilised remained in the hands of the Rana aristocracy and was primarily invested in land or in overseas accounts, and the rulers had no incentive to generate other forms of wealth (Karan & Ishil, 1996). The use of state revenue for consumptive rather than productive purposes is aptly exemplified in Regmi (1971).

import-export trade, with no incentives to break it, despite the official government rhetoric (Blaikie et al., 2002; Neupane, 2003; Thapa and Sijapati, 2004). Nepal was thus far from acquiring a 'developmentalist state', having severe consequences for initiatives which sought to promote independent industrialisation (Blaikie et al., 2001). There was also little evidence of a 'national bourgeoisie' which could challenge the rulers on a political level (Blaikie et al., 2001; Mishra, 2007).

This left intact many of the feudal power structures in the centre who had benefited from this relationship for decades (Regmi, 1977a; Blaikie et al., 2001; Bhattarai, 2003). As the *Panchayat* regime sought legitimacy, Satyal's essay shows how it toyed with discourses of 'rural development'. This was exemplified by the attempts at land reform, culminating in the 1964 Lands Act, discussed in Adhikari's paper. However, it was clear that technocratic interventions would not be effective at undermining consolidated power relations in both the centre and the rural periphery. Adhikari demonstrates how feudal landlords easily avoided reforms. At the same time the government lacked true commitment to change, with reforms designed to maintain landlord's control over their estates. In many ways this stems from the fact that landlords remained loyal support bases of the regime, and were integrated within the bureaucracy (see also Adhikari, 2006).

In terms of rural government, Ollieuz's paper based upon the case study from Morang, demonstrates how there were some progressive steps when it came to decentralised governance, with the introduction of local ward[5] level representatives for the first time, who were selected by the rural population. However, political power at the higher *Panchayat* level still remained in the hands of literate landed classes, despite the changed context. On a cultural level, Satyal demonstrates how the *Panchayat* era government introduced new sets of ideologies which sought to legitimate the status quo, even while notions of social justice were embedded within the popular consciousness. These included one-nation one-culture policies to suppress the voices of indigenous and Tarai communities. A coercive state apparatus simultaneously impeded political opposition.

Sadly, the restoration of democracy in the 1990s, once again failed to undermine the deeply engrained relation between feudal production relations on the ground and the power structures within the bureaucracy. Adhikari's essay notes how pro-land reform politicians were sidelined, while tenure policies continued to favour landlords. Rhetoric of reform continued to be mobilised to garner popular support, although commitment to redistribution remained limited. Satyal's paper demonstrates positive developments on the political front with greater civil liberties and a widespread undercurrent of social justice based upon equality of opportunity framing popular consciousness. However, such notions did not sufficiently address Nepal's complex ethno-linguistic make up. Ollieuz's contribution meanwhile, outlines how the political parties quickly evolved to both reproduce, as well as to challenge

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[5]   A ward was a sub-division of a Panchayat (now the Village Development Committee), and the smallest unit of government.

entrenched power relations. For example, the paper demonstrates how parties in many contexts represented networks of patronage headed by powerful individuals, and how rural people would join to facilitate access to resources rather than to further a particular political aim. This echoes Pfaff-Czarnecka (2004), who argues that under the *Panchayat* system, state actors were enriched through acting as 'gatekeepers' in the distribution of state resources (to which the population had a right, but no means of claiming). In more recent years this role has been taken by 'distributional coalitions' between politicians, civil society and entrepreneurs. Politicians and their local representatives benefit material while using their position as a route to re-election.[6]

The aforementioned papers from this volume have reviewed the long and complex development of power relations in Nepal in the sphere of the economy, the state, and its ideological apparatus. The remaining question however, is the implications for these social structures at the present conjuncture. The 10 year People's War, *Jana Andolan II*, and the multiple waves of protest and political mobilisation over the last five years have, to varying levels, sought to transform and unsettle these historically entrenched inequalities, often with significant popular support. However, the history which has been traced above, has demonstrated both the resilience of feudal power relations, and their capacity to adjust to new political contexts while retaining their essential character. In this context,

despite the drafting of a new constitution and the abolition of the monarchy (the 'symbolic' representation of feudalism), to what degree has there actually been a radical transformation in social relations on the ground, and a changed political culture within the bureaucracy?

It is useful to firstly examine the new discursive dialogues which have challenged the pre-existing order. In relation to this, Satyal notes how conceptualisations of social justice have evolved whereby the new notion of *loktantra* (rule of the people) is more inclusive from that of simply *prajatantra* (democracy). In particular, it encompassed a politics of *redistribution* and *recognition* as well as offering political representation. The notion of redistribution points to a desire to undermine feudal property and land relations, while the concept of recognition suggests efforts to encompass Nepal's cultural and religious plurality. The Maoist movement was arguably influential in this regard, and this was exemplified through their new approach to education documented in Baral's contribution to this volume. The Maoist's New Democratic Education not only sought to raise political awareness on issues of social inequality, but also reform the mode of learning itself. Baral shows how it attempted to move away from the idealistic world view of traditional education that glorified the feudal past. New Democratic Schools in the Maoist heartland sought instead to enhance political consciousness through a curriculum

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[6] These coalitions have the power to mediate access to services or resources such as the issuance of licences, land ownership certificates, and subsidised foodstuffs. By creating artificial scarcities or delays in provision, these services can be provided to citizens in order to secure their patronage. In the context of political parties, this can involve seeking electoral support (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2004).

grounded in dialectical materialism. Some elements were controversial, such as the teaching of military science. Baral also notes that the excessive veneration of the revolutionary leadership could be considered anti-dialectical and fatalistic, while power hierarchies within the party tended to determine content, impeding independent thought and student-teacher dialogue. Nevertheless, significant pedagogical innovations were introduced such as the introduction of polytechnic elements relevant to lives, livelihoods and students' surroundings. Baral also notes promising attempts to make education more accessible. For example, efforts were made to streamline the curriculum, shorten periods and reform the examination system to make it more student-friendly while valuing practical knowledge.

However, to what degree have progressive political ideologies following the People's War and *Jana Andolan II* been matched by changes in material practices? Satyal asserts that the actual practices of Nepal's political actors do not always match the conceptualisations of social justice they have claimed to espouse. With regards to redistributive justice for example, Adhikari finds limited evidence that land reforms have moved beyond the level of rhetoric, with a number of political actors still resisting change. In the context of severe competition for land, a situation has arisen whereby land has become a source of speculative investment for urban elites, further impeding a redistributive agenda. The root cause of these failures can not be understood in isolation from the historical context discussed above whereby over the last two centuries, land has been central to political power. Adhikari therefore emphasises that redistributive justice on the

land question can be most effectively achieved not through political parties or government legislation, but through independent grassroots mobilisation led by landless and land-poor communities. It is imperative, therefore, for civil society to support their agendas. Satyal on the other hand, emphasises the need for interventions to ensure representation of marginalised groups in the state structure if their demands for social justice are to be realised.

Even if one discounts the failure of a more ambitious redistributive agenda, it is evident that the chronic inability of the state to provide social services to its citizens has continued well into the transitional period. This cannot be separated from the historically entrenched power relations outlined thus far. This is exemplified through Ghimire's paper in this volume on the health care system in Rolpa. The state in this context has consistently failed to provide even the most basic healthcare services at a district or village level, as is evident by the lack of equipment and human resources, and corruption. This has obliged many citizens to seek expensive healthcare in India or Kathmandu, representing a perpetuation of Nepal's centralised political-economy, while signifying a further drain of resources from the rural periphery. Ghimire also points to the limited state regulation of the private medical services on which many rely. They consistently breach regulations and are driven by profit rather than the desire to provide effective patient care. The failure of the state to regulate such practitioners is connected with the involvement of political parties which offer support to their associated practitioners when they are guilty of medical malpractices. This reminds one of

the persisting importance of political parties in the reproduction of entrenched power relations.

The failure of the state to follow through with progressive reforms and pursue a more equitable trajectory of development could in some ways be connected to the collapse of the Maoist government in 2009. This was significant in the eyes of the population. Ollieuz's paper for example, demonstrates from her study in Morang that Maoist success in the 2008 elections was tied to the popular perception that unlike other parties, the Maoists *would* actually follow through with their pre-election promises. It was certainly an interesting experiment for a Marxist-Leninist party to enter coalition politics with its mainstream rivals. However, when one considers the historical pre-conflict association between mainstream political parties and entrenched feudal power relations, the difficulties faced by the coalition could perhaps have been considered more inevitable. The implication today is that many of the progressive goals of the People's War have now been sidelined. Land reform represents one example, and with regards to education, Baral's paper notes that many of the New Democratic Schools have now closed, while the realisation of elements of the NDE which made it on to the 2008 election manifesto were lost following the collapse of the government in 2009.

Aside from the politics of redistribution, what progress has there been in realising a politics of recognition? It is evident that at this time of political change, ethnic consciousness and awareness of minority rights has risen to unprecedented levels. Compared to the reproduction of class based power relations on an economic and political level, there is possibly a break with

history when it comes to the ideological representation of the Nepali nation. Maycock's paper on the *Tharuhat* movement, offers insights into the dynamics of ethnic mobilisation. While the movement clearly places the Tharu as an ethnic group in the national consciousness, to what degree has this been matched by material improvements to the lives of the populace in the western Tarai districts? Indeed the movement has its origins in forms of material subjugation associated with the Gorkhali expansion (see for example, Guneratne, 2002; Sugden, 2009). However, in an era of identity politics, is there a risk that a politics of recognition may undermine an effective politics of redistribution?

Maycock's essay notes how the Tharuhat refused to support the rights of landless settlers in Kailali by the virtue of their hill origin. This suggests that ethnic exclusivity is taking precedent over a broader commitment to social justice on a material level. The limited efforts to include sub-groups such as the *Kamaiyas* are also worrying. It also remains to be seen whether movements such as the *Tharuhat* will degenerate to serve elite interests within the Tharu community, a risk Maycock points to in his conclusion. This itself could serve to further the reproduction of older forms of authority, representing continuity rather than a break with the past in the sphere of social justice, albeit with a changed ideological apparatus.

While there may be a long way to go before the more ambitious rhetoric of 'redistribution' or even 'recognition' is matched by changes to the actual practices of the state, what about the basic tenets of democracy or *prajatantra*, the claim that governments 'represent' the people? Firstly, with regards to rural governance, some

elements have become *less* democratic in recent years. During the conflict in 2002, Ollieuz's paper shows that the government decided not to extend the term of elected ward level representatives, and in 2004 replaced these with a multi-party committee. Surprisingly, this decision was not reversed in the post-2006 period. This has reduced the accountability of the government, while increasing the grip of the political parties over the local community. It is therefore unclear whether the entrenched role of political parties as 'patronage networks' will be challenged in the long term. It is in this context that Ollieuz emphasises the need for urgent local elections to address this democratic deficit.

Secondly, while the centralised authoritarian rule associated with the monarchy has been dismantled, coercion and violence remain important elements of the exercise of political power. The primary difference is that with the restoration of multi-party democracy, the monopoly for coercion is now shared between a decentred spectrum of political actors. Human rights abuses have not dissipated entirely following the end of the People's War, and a culture of impunity remains embedded within the bureaucracy, as noted by Thapa, in this volume. On a more mundane level, the propensity for *bandhs* or shutdowns have increased considerably in the transitional period. *Bandhs* have perhaps lost their utility as a tool for popular mobilisation, given that they are used by a vast spectrum of political groups, both large and small, often to enforce highly specific agendas. The coercive practices used to enforce shutdowns often come at the expense of basic entitlements such as the right to education, as Thapa observes.

SITUATING NEPAL'S TRANSITION HISTORICALLY: METHODS AND DYNAMICS OF POLITICAL MOBILISATION

A historical perspective not only offers insights into the gaps between theory and practice in terms of the capacity of movements to realise material transformation; it also offers richer understandings of the character of political mobilisation on the ground. This probably represents one set of processes associated with the present transition which most significantly impact lives and livelihoods on a day to day basis. It is clear that the methods and internal dynamics of contemporary political movements in Nepal can not be separated from the historically unique conjuncture in which they have emerged. Unlike the anti-monarchy uprisings of the early 1960s and 1990s, the recent context is characterised by an unfortunate combination of a weak coercive state apparatus following the 10 year People's War and high levels of militarization. Easy availability of small arms and knowledge of military tactics, offer opportunities for disillusioned Maoist cadre and other political and semi-political actors to launch their own armed movements. This situation has arisen at a time when Nepal lacks a wholesome political programme and broadly acceptable political leadership within the establishment.

In Maycock's paper, it is demonstrated how the *Tharuhat* movement today is significantly different from previous ethnic based movements representing the Tharu community. Their methods have been shaped by a post-conflict context whereby there is a widespread culture of violence (or

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the threat of violence) in all forms of political mobilisation, exemplified by the preference for coercive *bandas* as a political tool. Maycock also, however, points to discontinuities when compared to the conflict period, whereby the Tharu Liberation Army has emerged not opposed to but within the state structures itself.

Similarly, the unprecedented rise of armed movements with multiple agendas (or no apparent agenda) has been a distinctive phenomenon since the 2006 peace accord. Based upon research in the eastern Tarai, Thapa's paper in this volume maps the emergence of a diverse set of armed movements as a unique manifestation of the recent transitional period. A culture of impunity with greater tolerance for violence following the end of the People's War, combined with the easy availability of small arms has hastened the emergence of such groups, not to mention the rivalries within the Maoist movement that had spawned the development of splinter groups.

HUMAN COST OF CONFLICT

A final set of issues where this volume seeks to engage with concrete research based analysis is the human cost of conflict. The ongoing political discourse and the post-conflict initiatives notoriously limit the settlement to the satisfaction of major political parties while paying inadequate attention to healing the social, economic and psychological impact of a decade and a half of war and instability, not to mention the long term impact on sectors such as healthcare, education and agriculture.

The 2010 conference papers drew attention to processes whereby the individual agency of conflict victims and young former combatants was overlooked by institutions

designing programmes to address their needs. Several papers also echoed how insufficient attention had been given to the local meanings of key terms and classifications used within the 'peace building community'.

Ghimire's contribution to this volume explores the persisting human cost of conflict in Rolpa with regards to public health. While the loss of human lives in Rolpa was high, what is significant now is the lingering effect of the conflict on the health needs of the population. The war's legacy on mental health is particularly significant. It is shown that patients and their families often avoid seeking support for such ailments, both due to lack of awareness or fear of social stigmatisation, not to mention the lack of mental health care facilities. The high levels of migration during the unrest, which for many women included coercion into sex work has also left an enduring legacy. This includes mental ailments associated with social separation and the further spread of sexually transmitted diseases.

An associated set of issues relates to the peace building 'industry' in Nepal, and its attempts to address the human cost of the conflict, and rehabilitate lives and livelihoods. While this was not dealt with in-depth in this issue of *New Angle*, the 2010 conference in Kathmandu made a number of contributions worth noting, particularly the papers by Marsden (2010), Bhandari (2010) and Robins (2010) which offered insights into issues such as the rehabilitation of child soldiers and the legacies of war for conflict victim's families. Common threads included the problems posed when peace building institutions base their programmes from external models or the agendas of national level Kathmandu based institutions,

rather then local level assessment and research. Such programme approaches have tended to heed elite perspectives over those of the more marginalised groups. Aside from the lack of attention to local context and diversity of voices, there was a lack of recognition of the agency of different individuals within these groups beyond their 'victimhood'.

Thapa's paper in this issue also points to the neglect of local voices in peace building discourses, with reference to the regions still under the sway of armed groups. This paper is important as there is a risk of generalising or sensationalising the remaining instability rather than seeking people's lived experiences. During the 'war', militarisation was a dominant concern, denoting 'order' of a particular kind. However, for regions at the fringes of state control today such as the eastern Tarai, it is 'criminalisation' which appears to pervade public (and particularly, donor) discourse, denoting social disorder. In this context, are there divergences between how transition is understood within the enclosed networks of the Kathmandu valley, and how it is conceptualized from the ground up in peripheral regions, or indeed whether there is a sense of transition in these regions at all? This is particularly the case in regions such as the Tarai where it is not only the reproduction of material power relations which is significant, but the continuity of violence, even while Nepal moves through the peace process.

Thapa demonstrates how rural populations themselves understand the current political instability in the eastern Tarai. For example, explanations for membership in armed groups tend to be dominated by simplistic arguments such as lack of education, employment opportunities or the failure of

state to provide security, not to mention 'financial' incentives. While Thapa demonstrates that these factors are still important in some contexts, there are also more complex processes at play. For example, some young people in Siraha joined armed movement in the search for a sense of belonging and purpose in the face of the powerlessness and marginalisation of the rural Tarai. It is also, however, tied to the rural political economy, whereby a weak state apparatus has encouraged membership of particular armed factions as a protective measure against becoming a victim of activities such as abduction or looting. Membership in armed groups also stems from the broader political-economic stagnation and persisting unequal power relations in access to resources. Persisting gender and caste discrimination in education for example, combined with the increase in school closures during *bandhs*, has encouraged young people to enter armed movements.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This issue only covers a small part of the spectrum of political, cultural and economic issues associated with the political 'transition' in Nepal. Nevertheless, it anticipates that it will raise awareness of some of the understudied yet critically important elements of political change in the country. The issue also furthers the broader aim of *New Angle* to promote research culture and broaden knowledge of social, economic and cultural change in Nepal from a globally and historically informed perspective. There are a few conclusions which can be drawn from the papers reviewed above, where it is hoped that this issue will contribute to scholarship and debate.

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Firstly, the papers in this volume highlight the enduring reproduction of entrenched power relations, a topic on which there is a need for further scholarship. However, it is important to emphasise that Nepal is not dominated by an archaic political and economic formation whereby power has been monopolised by the same elite class for generations. Instead the studies in this volume have demonstrated that the exercise and reproduction of power is a dynamic process, with power relations under continual flux and renegotiation. The latest period of transition is one such example of this dynamism.

Secondly, the review of this volume has made it clear that the current political landscape in Nepal is unique. There is now a combined context of militarisation, newly awakened ethnic consciousness, shifting geopolitical tussles, unprecedented out-migration and chronic public disillusionment. This means that trajectories which were followed during previous episodes of transition can not necessarily be repeated at the present conjuncture.

Thirdly and finally, however elusive a political settlement may seem in the present context, it is clear from the papers in this volume that there is a significant difference between the successful transition on a political level and the rehabilitation of lives and livelihoods affected by sixteen years of conflict and unrest; not to mention a reversal of centuries old axes of inequality grounded in class, gender, ethnicity, caste and spatial affinity. This process arguably requires far more profound solutions. There is also a difference between what the mainstream popular discourse brings and what is hidden from view– particularly visible in the way a discourse of change and transition is created while re-entrenchment of authority and reproduction of historical relations of power continue to operate. Studies from the Tarai have also shown that such instability remains a reality for significant rural populations, and that the complexities of unrest on the ground are often different from the imagined vision of the periphery when viewed from Kathmandu.

What is clear is that ongoing transition in Nepal, and potential trajectories for the future can not be identified through either theoretical abstraction from within the academy walls; or through the plethora of reports and testimonies by international 'experts' from aid-land. The underlying dynamics of social transformation can only be uncovered through the analysis of empirical data at this historically specific conjuncture involving concrete research. And all this has to be done through more innovative ways– connecting engaged scholarship on Nepal from different quarters and perspectives, and yet taking a critical perspective with public orientation. This is what *New Angle* intends to do, and it is hoped that this issue will go some way in meeting this goal.

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