

Summary of article for CMI website

'New Nepal and new Nepalis.' *Gorakhapatra* (Daily), Special Issue, May 6, 2008, p. 1,7.

By

Chaitanya Mishra

Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Kathmandu

(This is a wide-ranging survey of the polity, economy and culture of Nepal at the point of a key transition. It was published on the 108th anniversary of the newspaper together with the views of 17 other prominent analysts.)

The end of monarchy signified and was a powerful historical acknowledgment that political, economic and cultural roles, including leadership roles, could not be inherited completely or even largely and run through the family, clan, caste and other ascription-based structures and rules. It was also an acknowledgment that modern, diverse, differentiated and plural states and citizens cannot be ruled without their assent. Further, it represented a claim by the citizens that they had politically matured enough to rule themselves without the intervention of a 'divine' monarchy: The citizens could see through the halo of the king and the ideological mystification of monarchy.

For a new, democratic, prosperous and just state of Nepal to be born, the first task is to prepare and implement the principal rules of the game, i.e. a new constitution. If the mandate of the 2006 political movement and the 2008 elections is honored, one could imagine that, within a short span of approximately five years, a new Nepal could take an initial but definite shape. Enhanced civil rights and inclusiveness as well as expanded rights to basic education, primary health, a minimum basket of food and a minimum level of employment will also begin to be assured by that period.

On the other hand, if these gains have not begun to being realized by the time, the transition may well fail to be completed and the emerging state crumble. A political democracy will very likely fail in the absence of realization of economic and social-cultural growth and equity. They are, often, two inseparable sides of a single coin.

The way in which many of us are accustomed to interpreting and explaining the ongoing transition is very often narrow and myopic. It has usually been argued that the Communist party of Nepal (Maoist) (henceforth CPNM) and the Seven-party Alliance (SPA) effected the transition against the king and monarchist forces. This is, of course, not invalid in itself. But it is not adequate enough. One has to adequately explain not only the transition but the rise of the SPA and the CPNM themselves as historical products rather than seeing them as self-created and ahistorical organizations. Their rise must be rooted in specific political, economic and cultural-ideological conditions and processes.

One of the key arguments to be made here is that the explanation of the transition—and the rise of the SPA (and its constituents) and the CPNM has to be primarily located in the changes in the organization of production or mode of generation of livelihood of a large number (and proportion) of households and individuals within the last three decades. (It also has to be noted that the SPA and the CPNM have undergone many avatars and we are here referring not to a ‘generic’ SPA and CPNM but to the specific nature of the SPA and CPNM which they acquired immediately before and during the 2006 political movement.) Going much deeper and in a historical-structural vein, one could well argue that changes in the organization of production or generation of livelihood lie at the roots of all political transitions, including the one Nepal began to undergo in 2008. But then Nepal has undergone several political transitions during the preceding decades which, however, did not assume the same scope and potential impact as the 2006 one. Why was this so?

Nepal has experienced, progressively within the last three decades, rather wide-scale economic, political and cultural transition. Agriculture produces less than 40 percent of the GDP compared to two-thirds three decades ago. Low-capitalized, small-scale, low-productivity agriculture, which is sometimes under absentee or ‘dual ownership’—an agrarian relationship which, among others, reduces the intensity of cropping or which encourages year-around fallowness—has been pushing the increasingly literate and sometimes high-schooled youth of the new generation off family farm, agriculture and rural areas and into labor migration to nonagricultural sectors and urban areas, including the international labor market. The new generation in hordes is looking for and often finding wage employment in nonagricultural service, construction, transport, manufacturing and other sectors in towns of Nepal, India and, within last 1.5 decades, in West, South and East Asia. Migrants are becoming individualized and urbanized. Even those who remain in the rural hinterlands are becoming individualized and urbanized. The political, economic and cultural leadership are structured quite differently than in the past. The level of interaction between the urban and the rural—in terms of commodity, labor and even financial markets, remittance, and aspirations—is becoming expansive and dense. Essentially, the urban generally sets the values and the norms—despite the romanticization of the rural—and the rural and the existing agrarian regimes are increasingly adapting and acceding to their secondary role. Further, the nation—and the rural and the agricultural—is becoming more diverse and differentiated: The rural community, the household and the individual are no longer ‘agricultural’ and no longer ‘marginal or medium/large holders’ or tenants; they are much more differentiated; most households earn progressively smaller incomes from agriculture—they combine it with other pursuits; many move outside of the rural and the agricultural and from their settlements.

The new generation is, in this specific sense, becoming liberated from their families, households, communities, caste as well as locational affiliations and associated norms and values. In a very real sense it is the rise of these Nepalis that gave birth to the ‘new Nepal, to the SPA and the CPNM and to the 2006 political transition. It is, whatever the nature of the future, the dawn of a new era.

It is also the case that most of the new generation, for the first time in history, is attending educational institutions or has recently graduated from them. This is very unlike their parents. The books, the media and the urban are supplanting parents and village elders and the more

established norms and values. This is opening a new world as the young are learning to compare and critique the old and the new. The older within the households are, often learning from the young—in matters related to the expansive, new and more open world, as also in matters related to agriculture, health, sanitation, political events and leaders, technology, the media, and so on.

These new Nepalis hold great potential. The new state has to build a system for enhancing and utilizing their capabilities. The success of the new state fundamentally depends on it. A failure at it will bear a commensurate negative impact on the youth themselves and on the nature of the new state. The risk of youth-led episodes of apolitical and anarchic unrest and a state of anarchy, some of which may stretch over a longish period, will bear enough 'power' to potentially dismantle the new state. Such episodes will generally—at least initially—take place in urban areas, the Kathmandu Valley in particular. During the last decade three such episodes have taken place, e.g. the 'Hrithik Roshan', the 'Iraq and manpower agency,' and the 'petroleum price hike' episodes. These episodes did not last more than one week, but they packed so much power that the political and security agencies were completely paralyzed and had no clue over appropriate strategy and tactics.

This can potentially be avoided and many key mandates of the movement and the spirit of the transition honored with a major political, economic and cultural-ideological turn. This is a turn toward social democracy. This variant of democracy seeks to find a balance between bourgeois democracy and civic and wider social responsibility, capital and labor, growth and distribution, human capability formation and utilization. It should be emphasized that even bourgeois democracy is a progressive philosophy and policy stance in the context of Nepal at present. Social democracy, in this context, is not only a progressive political-economic form, but possibly only one that could sustain a legible form of democracy. It is the only strategy which enables an important role for individual and private initiative, capital and enterprise even as it generates adequate public resources for immediate public investment. It also allows continual formation and use of human capability. It offers a chance for security and peace as also for civil rights. It negates the radical left's one-point agenda of redistribution and welfare which starves reinvestment as well as individual initiative and freedom. This radical left stance also deemphasizes the role of private capital which is seriously questionable not only from the point of view of a democratically valorized individual citizen but also from the point of view of the internal and world market system as well as the development of the productive forces. If this policy stance were to be politically legitimized within the present global context, not only would international assistance and investment not flow in but even 'national capital' would surely free across the national borders.

It is in these contexts—promotion of economic diversification and growth, reduction of unemployment and agricultural underemployment, increasing urbanization, rapid reduction of 'absolute' poverty, and increasing access to high quality education and health that Nepal also has an immense amount to learn from its immediate neighbors India and China. While India is way ahead on this point, China is also slowly but gradually moving forward on the front of political freedom as well. In addition, both states are basically social democratic in nature. The post-1978 Chinese state and the post-1990 Indian state reduced 'absolute' poverty much faster than the previous states there, despite the political rhetoric in either of the countries. Nepal itself can take a divergent path only at the risk of not learning and gaining from the historic and unprecedented

lessons that the two countries are distilling, synthesizing and implementing. In addition, taking a substantially divergent path will widen and sharpen the Nepali state's contradiction with these immediate and far more powerful and promising neighbors. This will inevitably be costly. In essence, the Nepali state has to visualize, as Marx said in another historical-spatial context, capitalism to be a revolutionary system for some period of its future history. Social democracy gives a particular shape and impetus to this capitalism and politically controls capitalism's extremely rough edges and its cyclic fluctuations.

The ideological divergence among the various significant political parties may well become a stumbling block in this regard. In addition, divergence and contradictions within the major parties, e.g. the CPNM, may assume very significant impact as well.

The risks are three fold. First, the political forces begin to lose direction or are otherwise ineffective and/or very inefficient in implementing the vision. Second the new generation of youth, dissatisfied and disenchanted with the process and the results at, among others, the creation of additional and accessible gainful employment opportunities rebels in an organized manner. Three, the remnants of the old guard reorganizes and resuscitates itself and launches a rebid to capture power within a context in which the earlier set of risks begin to materialize. None of these possibilities, the first two in particular, can be dismissed out of hand. This is the biggest challenge the new state faces.