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Review of Social Transformation in Post-conflict Nepal: A Gender Perspective by Punam Yadav

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Social Transformation in Post-conflict Nepal: A Gender Perspective.

Punam Yadav. London: Routledge, 2016. 181 pages. ISBN: 9781317353904.

Reviewed by Matthew Maycock

Punam Yadav's *Social Transformation in Post-conflict Nepal: A Gender Perspective* constitutes an important contribution to both scholarship on post-conflict Nepal and wider regional research on post-conflict contexts across the Himalaya and further afield. Taking a strongly and well-developed gender perspective is welcome, given the often gender-blind nature of much existing scholarship on post-conflict Nepal. The explicitly gendered stance of Yadav's analysis is particularly novel, and this analytical stance illuminates important elements of the complex relationship between armed conflict and social transformation. This book is at the same time accessible and theoretically grounded, and is enriched by the personal accounts of the author.

The Maoist People's War (1996–2006) represents a period of significant transformation and societal change, with, for example, the role of women in Nepali society changing in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways.

The central argument the book makes is to advocate for what Yadav calls a bottom up approach to social transformation, moving away from a top down focus. Yadav develops this argument coherently and convincingly, raising a number of important questions that can only come from the nuanced, gendered analysis deployed throughout the book. Importantly, the book moves debates about conflict toward reflection about what might be some of the positive impacts of conflict, and past restrictive and narrow perspectives on the victimization of women during conflict. These are insights well developed in other post-conflict contexts, but not, until now, in the Nepali context. Resonating with a wider literature on the possibilities of conflict to empower women, specifically in relation to the Maoist People's War, there are compelling examples given that highlight the empowering effects of the war on some Nepali women.

Yadav identifies a number of factors—including the changed subject position of women, the emergence of new role models, and the power of collective agency (p. 171)—as critical in contributing to the changes taking place in post-conflict Nepal. Through the nine chapters of the book, Yadav considers both some of the intended and unexpected transformations that the Maoist People's War has had for the Nepali women she interviews. Within a framework of social transformation, Yadav analyses fifty-seven interviews with Nepali women in order to consider the Nepal-specific aspects of post-conflict transformation. The fifty-seven women sampled were representative of a wide range of ethnic and caste groups, age, and educational backgrounds. From this sample, Yadav identifies four categories of women that were not as prominent in Nepali society

prior to the Maoist People's War. These categories include: female Constituent Assembly members; female combatants; war widows; and female tempo drivers. Importantly, Yadav includes a consideration of the views of women that were not members of any of these four groups, to better understand the implications of these new categories for wider currents of social transformation in Nepal. Critically, Yadav argues that women occupying these four non-traditional roles subvert pre-People's War currents of Nepali womanhood. For example, the illustration of female combatants is considered to be a radical shift in the image of womanhood (p. 165). Through detailed analysis of the narratives of the women interviewed, Yadav constructs a compelling argument for the transformative nature of the People's War, as this was a time that Nepali women were able to occupy and maintain in the post-conflict context new roles that have more widely created opportunities for Nepali women.

While this book makes a significant contribution to a number of disciplines and should feature on a wide range of reading lists, there are some issues with the book. Gender is very much equated with women in the post-conflict context, which is somewhat problematic given the that the gendered experiences of men in such contexts is overlooked in this book, and much of the 'gendered' post-conflict scholarship. Masculinity is mentioned in passing on page 12, although only to the extent that Bourdieu's model of masculine domination (Bourdieu, P. 1998. *Masculine Domination*. Stanford: Stanford University Press) is somewhat uncritically assumed to have resonance in the Nepali context. Additionally, more than half of the sample (n=31) were Constituent Assembly

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members, which is significant from a class perspective and is not fully considered. Additionally, there is perhaps an uncritical consideration of the importance of the fact that interviews, where explicitly mentioned, with all four groups (tempo drivers, women combatants, CA members, and war widows) took place in Kathmandu. There is a well-established literature relating to the specific nature of urban transformation in Kathmandu (for example, Liechty, M. 2003. *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press) and this is touched on in a number of places, but not developed. While it is claimed that the sample represents a good cross section in terms of caste and ethnic groups in Nepal (p. 12), all the samples seem to be living and working in Kathmandu, which might have shaped the ways in which social transformation is gendered. Consequently, migration and urbanization are not overtly included in the analysis as potential factors influencing social transformation for the women interviewed. Finally, issues relating to sexuality are largely absent from the book, despite homosexuality being legalized in Nepal in 2007 in the post-conflict era.

Despite these issues the book represents an important contribution to the literature on social transformation in Nepal. Ultimately, the book will be of interest to students and researchers with an interest in post-conflict Nepal and

post-conflict contexts across the Himalaya and wider Global South, as well as in Gender, Peace and Conflict Studies and Development Studies.

Matthew Maycock, PhD., is a Learning and Development Researcher at the Scottish Prison Service. Matthew is currently undertaking a range of prison-related research, and has a longstanding interest in research on gender in Nepal, particularly in relation to the Maoist People's War and bonded labour.