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Review of 'Discourse of Awareness: Development, Social Movements and the Practices of Freedom in Nepal' by Tatsuro Fujikura

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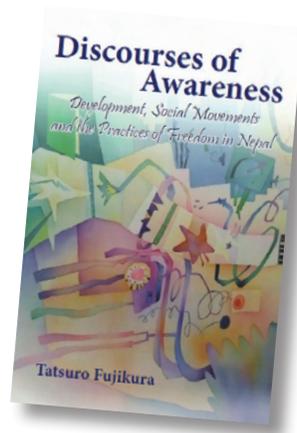
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**Discourse of Awareness:
Development, Social Movements
and the Practices of Freedom in
Nepal**

Tatsuro Fujikura. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari, 2013. 310+x pages. ISBN: 978-99-375-9403-5.

Reviewed by Jagannath Adhikari

The book *Discourse of Awareness* makes a clear case that we should not abandon development projects as they offer some cognitive and institutional resources for individual and collective action. It critically analyzes the conceptual ideas of scholars like Arturo Escobar and James Ferguson, who argue that donor agencies, particularly the World Bank, national governments and I/NGOs bring development interventions that further weaken target populations both economically and politically. According to such scholars, by severing the analysis from historical and geographical context, these agencies assume in their standard development practices that the targeted areas and people were/are always poor, backward and traditional. Agencies then prescribe standard methods like capitalist market mechanisms and define the problem as a technocratic problem requiring technical solutions, privatization, and benefit for the state/government at the cost of local people. Furthermore, these scholars assume that the net result of such practices is that they become unable to empower and emancipate the poor and marginalized but instead perpetuate

capitalism and modernity in their hegemonic form.

The author Tatsuro Fujikura uses real examples, such as community development and empowerment and the *kamaiya* (bonded labor) freedom movement, to demonstrate that even standard development practices can create various political possibilities for the empowerment of marginalized people and the protection of their rights. These possibilities come from the people's new forms of imagination and socio-political engagements that these development practices would induce. As the author shows, these imaginations and engagements have helped village leaders, women, young boys and girls and bonded-labourers to change themselves and better their community's conditions through education and new practices, volunteer work for benefitting larger society, and participation in socio-political movements of different types, such as the Maoist and *kamaiya* freedom movements. The author offers examples like that of existing village leaders taking up modern farming and adopting family planning methods to bring 'development' in the village and to serve the country and society. Such ethos were present in women and marginalized groups like *kamaiyas*, which motivated them to work in non-violent as well as violent ways of social change. These were made possible despite the fact that they are standard development practices.

The book identifies real people and places in much of the discussion, whether it is in rural study areas or urban areas, which makes it very interesting to read and understand the situation. Moreover, the study offers an engaged discussion of the literature produced on development issues by Nepal-based Nepali scholars. In many of the books written by foreign scholars on Nepal, there is usually a thin coverage of such literature. This book is an exception to this. Much of the primary information used for discussion is based on participant observation and conversations with various people. But after reading the book, one feels that there is an absence of a structured methodology for the collection of information, such as details of the study areas, why those areas were chosen and what are the cautions to be exercised in interpreting the information gathered. While the author uses the names of real people in the discussion in many places, he has not given the reason for not giving real name of the study site for his ethnographic study.

The book, however, uses an innovative approach to understand the consequences of development projects aimed at community empowerment. It analyzes the thoughts and actions of development workers, mainly the community workers and social mobilizers, and the beneficiaries of their projects, and the conception of the relationship between them, which influences their power relation. This power relation in turn affects the kind of development pursued –

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Jagannath Adhikari on *Discourse of Awareness: Development, Social Movements and Practices of Freedom in Nepal*

whether there is empowerment of the communities concerned (p. 132). The chapters in the book are also organized according to the thoughts and actions of development workers, beneficiaries and participants of the social movements. After two introductory chapters, two chapters are devoted to understanding the thought and action of development workers involved in community development and community empowerment projects. Three more chapters ('politics of governed', 'Maoist movement' and 'kamaiya freedom movements') are devoted to the thoughts and action of the people. The author argues that analysis of the thought and action of development workers clearly reveals that they were concerned with democracy, freedom and liberty of the people, with the assumption that these would come from development. On the other hand, people also had an idea and desire for development in the form of doing something useful and being useful at least for others. In this light, the book encourages us to look into the other side of development –the productive side of development, such as its work to reform subjectivities and reorganize social spaces in which the subject acts in order to bring the welfare to individual and society.

This book certainly makes an important contribution to the analysis of development practices in Nepal and how they have created some conditions for the betterment of the people concerned. These lessons could help identify social movements (such as

the *kamaiya* free movement) that work better for these communities and avoid social movements, as the book implies, that used armed movement (such as the Maoist movement). Taking the benefit of hindsight in Nepal's political development, we can say that the *kamaiya* freedom movement has achieved more for *kamaiyas* than the Maoist movement, which rather created more burdens for the very same people it wanted to benefit.

The book also helps rethink discussions in Nepal on issues concerning foreign aid, involvement of foreign agencies like INGOs, and the role of NGOs. These issues have also been deeply debated in academia and civil society within Nepal with widely differing opinions. The book clearly shows that the transnational nature of today's communities and interests of agencies located at different geographical spaces mean that networking among them could result in better outcomes, as seen in the successful launching of the *kamaiya* freedom movement.

While the book deals with some of the political possibilities created by development projects for the emancipation by the people concerned, which appear as indirect consequences, it overlooks some of the positive tangible benefits like health, education and infrastructure that could help all people and trigger economic growth. For example, the author mentions that Pokhara was in a precarious condition in the 1950s because of malaria, mass illiteracy and other dis-

eases like smallpox affecting almost the entire population, but that the human condition there is far better now because these generic problems affecting all have been more or less solved. Development projects are also needed for these tangible benefits. However, there is the question of how these projects are to be politically organized. It is also interesting to note that some of the demands from the people's movements, like the *kamaiya* movement of late 1990s, was anticipated as early as the mid-1950s in the form of land reform. But this has not yet been implemented even though the modality of this program could be different now because of the cosmopolitan nature of village life and economy on account of the growing influence of external income in the form of remittances. The question then comes as to what political/social structure is needed to implement these programs, and whether there was/is a way to create these structures. Given that *kamaiyas* were/are so much after the land, this analysis would have some pragmatic use. Readers would have certainly benefited more from such analysis in the book.

Jagannath Adhikari is a research fellow at the Australian National University. His research interests focus on development issues like political economy of development, food security, globalization, labor migration, and natural resources management. His book Under the Shadow of the Red Flag: Travel through Nepal's Conflict (Kathmandu: Martin Chautari) is coming out soon.