

Book Review

Mallika Shakya (2018) *Death of an Industry: The Cultural Politics of Garment Manufacturing during the Maoist Revolution in Nepal.*

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Mallika Shakya's book *Death of an Industry* probes a novel question: What does it mean when a garment industry that arose garnering dreams and hopes, reconfigured work and lives, suddenly disappears? Her decade-long multi-sited research in Nepal explores the tensions between workers who became militants following the demise, disillusioned capitalists and trade diplomacy networks that buried the industry under the rhetoric of market competitiveness. This is a dramatic story of failure that is not often captured in scholarship, and it poses many questions for the future of the world of work that is now so firmly embedded in the markets. It is also a political and cultural narrative capturing of the turbulent history of contemporary Nepal.

Nepal's garment industry arose in the late 1970s and benefitted from the Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA) with the USA; this large export market gave it the highest quota in South Asia. The industry became the principal employer of unskilled labour and encompassed a vast and intricate network of textile suppliers from India and China, Indian and Nepali business owners, brands in the USA, fashion designers, artisans and policy-makers. When the MFA ended in 2004, owing to the dictates of the World Trade Organization, the USA moved elsewhere, entering into trade agreements like the African Growth and Opportunity Act favouring sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean Basin Initiative. In Shakya's own words, factories fell like dominoes, one after another, day after day, until there remained six or seven factories in 2006, down from over two hundred factories in 2002, and from over a thousand in 1995 (p. 116). Nepal's garment industry was the biggest victim of American trade politics. Yet, Shakya argues, there is little analysis of this global logic beyond its death, which is often explained by bureaucrats and policy analysts globally and locally as an outcome of market competitiveness or Nepali backwardness. Shakya's incisive analysis unravels the ways in which neo-liberal development is not just unequal and hierarchical, but a deeply cultural experience.

Shakya uses an industrial ecosystem approach, which integrates the economic, political, social and cultural domains of garment-making, moving along the disciplines of development economics, anthropology, sociology, geography, history and business studies. She engages with a variety of interlocutors: workers, elite businessmen, fashion designers, revolutionaries, auditors, craftsmen and artisans, lobbyists, aid bureaucrats, politicians and poets, while simultaneously moving the analysis over Nepal, India and the USA. Here again, she follows Polanyi in showing that how the compartmentalisation of work and industry into the various facets of shop-floor ethnography, union politics and business organisation is an often-intentional misinterpretation of the embeddedness of markets in society.

There is a certain charm to the story of global interdependencies in garment manufacturing that Shakya weaves. The industry invoked cultures of friendship, caste and ethnic kinship, and other networks that acted as social capital. Often these networks went beyond and were constrained by politics. This is especially so for craft producers, which Shakya focuses on, along with mass garment producers. The textile was sourced from elsewhere since fashion changes made textile manufacturing a difficult choice. One such producer, Swakan-Chhemu, sourced organic fabric made from hemp from a Shanghai firm and in turn sold the product to a London-based company that campaigned for free Tibet, but did not mind sourcing from China. Another craft producer, A&E Boutique with a collaborator in Seattle, decided which textiles available in the Indian textile market would be suitable after a fashion forecast for the market on the West Coast, and contacted velvet, brocade and cotton weaving sub-clusters in Indian cities, which were occupied by artisans not conversant in the language of business. Often Eastern icons were used in Western garments, which then became sought-after in the East as a Western product: As a business owner says, “We buy clothes from each other. We both buy clothes that are supposedly about each other, for each other” (p. 60).

There is also an inbuilt critique of the depoliticisation of the industry and the first-world monitoring of third-world production. There is humour in the account of how information about the first-world inspectors’ arrival was provided to the factory owners by airport immigration officers, leading to a wide range of activities – cleaning the shop floor, removing excess machines to keep up with the regulations, workers changing from factory-made clothes to others, and young-looking workers exiting through the back door. And a generous meal was offered after the inspection that was always turned down. Shakya asks: Did anybody believe that a factory earning three dollars per t-shirt from the inspectors’ employer would pay its workers four dollars to do the job (p. 43)? This inspection through corporate monitoring, she argues, just gives an “auditing” spin to a crisis that was essentially a product of the politics of race, class and nation.

The end of MFA was understood in the apocalyptic language of *kaliyuga* (the Dark Age) and *pralaya* (deluge). The tsunami that rocked Asia five days before MFA ended was explained as a precursor. Nepal felt it did not deserve to have a garment industry, while global policy-makers and development experts blamed Nepal’s lack of competitiveness. Nepal tried its best to find similar patronage, like that accorded to the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa, mobilising its contacts to lobby the industry, such as a Democratic senator, an amateur trekker, and the wife of the founder of a Himalayan charity. However, the Maoist movement and “political blunders”, such as arresting Tibetan refugees and handing them over to China, thwarted any such possibility, once again showing how politics intersects with policy and social capital.

While the garment factory owners, Indian and Nepali, moved out and found success elsewhere, the materiality of the demise of the industry had the deepest impact on the workers, males from all over Nepal and from India. Many migrated to the Gulf, India and West Africa in search of livelihoods. But many, who had been apathetic to unions before, joined the Maoist union, All Nepal Free Trade. As workers became disillusioned after losing their jobs, and they were ignored by the state, elites and existing unions, they took up the Maoist banner, connecting labour concerns with a wide range of social-political demands. Thus, it was the demise of the industry, not its presence, that enabled the politicisation of garment workers in Nepal.

What are the implications for labour that emerge from this book? When the garment industry is relocating to sub-Saharan Africa as the new hub, one might wonder what awaits the lives of business owners and workers there. Democracy and neo-liberalism have shown a distinct and highly productive alliance in Nepal, and equally in South Africa and Ethiopia now. Shakya’s book shows that while the workings of the garment industry are mostly determined by global trade

politics, the ramifications are “made” locally, drawing on political and cultural tools of interpretation, meaning-making, and political upheaval.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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