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Book review of 'Power, Participation, and Policy: The "Emancipatory" Evolution of the "Elite- Controlled" Policy Process' by Katusuhiko Maskai

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**POWER, PARTICIPATION,
AND POLICY:
THE “EMANCIPATORY”
EVOLUTION OF THE
“ELITE-CONTROLLED”
POLICY PROCESS**
KATSUHIKO MASAKI

Lanham, MD: Lexington Books. 2007. 145 pp.

REVIEWED BY KENNETH D. CROES

In his 2007 book, *Power, Participation, and Policy: The “Emancipatory” Evolution of the “Elite-Controlled” Policy Process*, Katsuhiko Masaki presents the results of his doctoral dissertation research carried out in 2000-2001 on river-control projects in Nepal’s Bardiya district. Masaki examines the results of a 1992 directive by the Minister of Water Resources to decentralize government administration and to increase local people’s participation in river control projects—part of a national initiative, adopted in the wake of the 1990 Jana Andolan, that Masaki refers to as the Decentralization and Participation (D&P) agenda. To promote D&P objectives, the 1992 directive restricted the role of the of the national-level Department of Irrigation (DOI) to the disbursement of funds for river control projects, and made the District Irrigation Offices (DIO) responsible for deciding which projects to implement within their districts.

While the 1992 D&P shift in river-control policy is the backdrop for Masaki’s research, his primary topic is the nature of power in policy contexts. Pitching his study as a response to government officials and development professionals who see power as held and exercised only by elites, Masaki views power as immanent in the continuous and dynamic interactions and negotiations between elites and non-elites. Following Michel Foucault and Anthony Giddens, Masaki sees power not as something one group has and exercises over another, but rather as something that circulates between them, brings them into relation, and unfolds in unpredictable ways. When power is viewed as relational and contingent, Masaki argues, it becomes clearer that not just elites but also “the entire spectrum of stakeholders, includ-

ing policy ‘clients,’ exerts some leverage over the policy process” (74).

Although several river-control projects had been initiated along D&P lines in the Bardiya district, by the mid to late 1990s and early 2000s decision making had begun to revert to the center and local people’s participation had begun to be replaced by contractors. It is in this reversion that Masaki finds the clearest evidence that all stakeholders in a policy, even those conventionally seen as “powerless,” exert influence over the course that a policy takes. A conventional explanation for the decline of the D&P agenda in river control—a type of explanation that Masaki, following Foucault, refers to as “descending”—would stress development as a means to secure political patronage. That is, while the same political party led the national government and the Bardiya district government at the outset of the 1992 policy, it was no longer in the interest of that ruling party to restrict its role to mere funding once a competing party won control of the Bardia district government and therefore the project and its patronage in a later election. Masaki argues that although this sort of “descending” analysis passes as satisfactory in most policy studies, it relies on monolithic assumptions about the interests of national politicians and elides the influence of those on the “margins” on the course of policy. To get beyond the conventional conclusions, Masaki adopts what Foucault calls an “ascending” approach, which emphasizes a lack of stability in the views and interests of all social actors.

Masaki’s empirical observations in chapters 3-6 generally support his central argument. In chapter 3, Masaki establishes that Nepal’s national political leaders harbor a “story-line” about the development process, which is that the political center initiates development for the benefit of the disadvantaged on the periphery. Cross-cutting this monolithic “story-line,” however, are the heterogeneous views of political leaders. Masaki quotes a former Minister of Water Resources who questions whether true decentralization and true people’s participation can occur in the area of river control given that the central government would only pay for projects that used ramparts of wire-encased boulders. Masaki believes that this divergent view—precisely the kind of heterogeneous view that is overlooked in the “descending” explanations—help explain the decline of the D&P river policy.

In chapter 4, Masaki presents his interviews with Bardiya district political leaders and bureaucrats with the District Irrigation Office (DIO). Among these groups, as with the national political leaders, Masaki encounters the basic “story-line” of locals as needy recipients of outside technical assistance and financial aid. But at the district level, too, he also finds the basic story-line cross cut with

a destabilizing heterogeneity of views. Some DIO officials, for instance, expressed misgivings about the fact that “people’s participation” borrowed from a long-standing local system of corvée labor, in which Pahadis (high-caste Hindu immigrants to the district from Nepal’s hill districts) relied on the unpaid labor of the region’s indigenous inhabitants, the Tharu. District political leaders and DIO bureaucrats were newly sensitive to the inequality of corvée labor in the wake of the 1990 Jana Andolan, which opened forums for Nepal’s minority ethnic groups to address what they view as their subjugation at the hand of high-caste groups.

In chapters 5 and 6, Masaki focuses on several local river-control projects in two Bardiya villages to show that although the traditional corvée system was still in operation in 2000–2001, the system was also precarious. The “story-line” at the local level was that Pahadis were “benevolent benefactors” who bring development to the “backwater” Tharu—a “story-line” that was often proffered to justify the corvée system. But insofar as this “story-line” was predicated on a contradictory mix of exploitation and benevolence, it presented openings to the Tharu to negotiate a more favorable position for themselves. Historically, for instance, Tharus would have been expected to collect and haul the boulders for the ramparts. The Tharu protested, however, that this would be by far the hardest of the project’s tasks and asked for and received cash compensation. The Tharu also employed what Masaki, following James Scott, calls “infra-politics”—for example, sending children instead of adults to work (with the idea that the Pahadi supervisors at the work site could not demand much labor from children), and leaving en masse for lunch or other breaks. Masaki argues that microprocesses such as these mediate the implementation of policy and serve as the circuits through which power draws local and non-local actors into relation. He argues that even such seemingly local microprocesses, by reducing the efficiency of individual projects, also contributed to the decline of the D&P agenda.

The strength of *Power, Participation, and Policy* lies in its theoretical rigor, and is successful in carrying out the stated objective of offering an “ascending” analysis to counter the simplistic assumptions found in “descending” approaches. The theoretical framework, however, is also a limitation. Masaki’s theoretical framework is robust, to be sure, but it dominates the book, and left me wondering if there isn’t a vast amount of thick description unexploited in his notebooks. Reading between its taut lines, one can discern a rich if unrealized account of how the changes ushered in after the 1990 Jana Andolan continue to reverberate in Nepal’s out-of-the-way places through the complicated intersections of policy, development, caste, ethnicity, class, gender and local systems such as corvée labor.

Ken Croes earned a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology from Princeton in 2007 for his dissertation, “Nature of a Nation: Monarchy, Development, and Culture in Nepal’s Annapurna Conservation Area Project.” He is currently a project director with the University of Wisconsin Survey Center.

THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS

KIRAN DESAI

New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006. 324 pp.

REVIEWED BY B. P. GIRI

In the years since Salman Rushdie published his groundbreaking novel *Midnight’s Children* (1981), English language literature from India has ceased to be treated as colonial anachronism or postcolonial anomaly; instead, it has achieved considerable international recognition and visibility to become part of world literature. Curiously, the arrival of Indian English literature in the international arena has been made possible by an increasing number of writers who are “loose in the world,” so to speak, and, as such, they belong to a global fraternity of diasporic Indians, appropriately called “India Abroad.” Kiran Desai (the daughter of Anita Desai, a widely acclaimed Indian author) is one such writer, and the Anglophone literature has become all the richer because of her magnificent new novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*.

Appropriately enough, the best way to approach *The Inheritance of Loss* is to consider it under the rubric of postcolonial diasporic fiction. Even as the story is set, for the most part, in the lush and exotic surroundings of Kalimpong, India, in the shadow of mighty Kanchenjunga, many of its characters are displaced individuals who struggle to invent a life out of place, away from their ancestral homes and homelands. The novel, for example, features a colonial era judge, once an impoverished student in England, who returns to India to a life of colonial service. In the process, he morphs into the figure of an Anglicized babu, someone who rejects his family and native heritage, choosing instead a life based on an obsessive pursuit of false colonial ideals. Another character, Biju, is an illegal immigrant, living among other immigrants in New York, trying to eke out a difficult living in the basements of one shady restaurant after another. Then there are a handful of European expatriates, who are gloriously out of place in the same city the judge calls home. It is clear from this cast of uprooted characters that a certain sense of alienation and loss, said to be an integral part of the diasporic condition, is at the heart of the novel’s inheritance.

The novel’s diasporic location also reveals its cosmopolitan outlook and sensibility. In its very first page, the narrator asks the reader to juggle two impossible images—a rare view of the majestic Kanchenjunga looming over the horizon and an image of giant squids from the pages of *National Geographic* over which Sai, the judge’s sixteen-year-old grand daughter, lingers for a moment. The interesting thing about these