Editorial

IN THE NAME OF *BIKĀS*

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In desperate times people do the best they can. It seems that in Nepal's *bikās* world it is always desperate times. Overwhelming needs, impending crises and unachieved goals dominate the agenda. Thus academic critiques of *bikās* projects that point to methodological or theoretical weaknesses can be deflected with the counter charge of a lack of realism. Academics can appear to development practitioners to be impractical, either mired in ground-level description or lost in clouds of theoretical reflection. In either case they can seem to be uninterested in, or incapable of producing clear guidelines for social transformation. Academic analyses of *bikās* can seem useless at best, parasitical at worst, feeding off of activities meant to meet urgent needs without contributing to those efforts. Development practitioners, in turn, can appear to academics to be mercenary, carrying out rapid superficial surveys on the basis of which major social interventions will be made. Such research and the resulting social programs can appear to be vastly uninformed about the realities they seek to assess and then change. *Bikās* studies and projects can seem poorly designed at best, immoral at worst, feeding off poverty and need without effectively alleviating them. When the infamous "real world" meets the equally infamous "ivory tower" of academia the result is too often an unproductive, even uncomprehending standoff. Both academics and development practitioners can easily believe that the other inhabits a fictional world, while they themselves best know the real condition of "the people".

This special issue of *Studies in Nepali History and Society* reflects on the real world of *bikās* in its Nepali avatars. The articles can examine only a few of the things that have been done, thought and believed in the name of *bikās* over the past four decades. But by including studies by both development practitioners and academic analysts, and by urging each to address the other, we make an effort to move beyond an unproductive standoff on the view that if *bikās* is in fact about the betterment of people's lives, then *bikās* culture itself must constantly be in the business of self-improvement. Insights into the nature of complex social

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formations—of which *bikās* culture is itself one—issue neither wholly from within, nor wholly from without. We will achieve more effective understanding through collaboration, and through making the mental effort to comprehend one another's different perspectives.

Such effort is not merely an intellectual exercise. People die daily while waiting for the fruits of *bikās*, and sometimes they also suffer from the harvest when those fruits arrive. *Bikās-wālās* themselves provide a host of statistics to show the first of these desperate situations, and thus the urgent need for further *bikās* activities. They tend to be more circumspect about the second. We hear little from them about people who say, with the Tarai farmer who flagged down Nanda Shrestha while he was carrying out research, "I am a development victim, sir. Please help me" (Shrestha 1990:xii). The great gap between *bikās* discourses—from the most analytic treatises, to the pragmatic language of evaluation reports—and the experience, whether good, bad or indifferent, of being a *bikās* recipient or target, is easily lost sight of by academics and development practitioners alike. The consumers of *bikās* are, by and large, not self-selected, nor do they usually have much say in the projects and programs that come their way. And they have virtually no say over how they are described (cf. Adhikary, Pandey, Rankin, Thapa, this volume). The political-economy of the *bikās* world is such that this situation is unlikely to change in the near future. It is for this reason that what is done and said in the name of *bikās* and in the name of "the people" requires close scrutiny. It becomes a basic responsibility for those who act as the conduits through which *bikās* money flows, and those whose words define the parameters of what counts as *bikās*, to constantly examine their own beliefs and practices. And it becomes a basic responsibility for academics who work outside the *bikās* world, but whose disciplinary methods and theories are utilized within it to produce portraits of social realities, devise means of social transformation, and legitimize both activities with the stamp of scientificity, to constantly examine what is being done in the name of *bikās.*

What is this *bikās*? The answers are many, but all of a kind: development, social betterment, increase in well-being and productivity, modernization, opportunity... *Bikās*, in sum, is good, and there ought to be more of it in more places. Defined in these general, positive terms, or somewhat more specifically as the means to better health, environmental and employment conditions, educational opportunity and so on, few if any would disagree. But let us redefine *bikās*, for a moment, as an industry. A multi-national industry, and Nepal's largest industry. Let us redefine

bikās, for a moment, as a capitalist enterprise. A transnational capitalist enterprise, and Nepal's main gateway to both the riches and the ruthlessness of global capitalism. From this perspective we may better understand some of the gaps between rhetoric and reality, and the much lamented failure of *bikās* to achieve its promise in Nepal since the 1950's. Defined in this way we can begin to differentiate among the many actors involved in the *bikās* world (cf. Pandey, Tuladhar, Upadhya, this volume), and to see why, despite continuous manufacturing of new terminologies and plans of action (cf. Fujikura, this volume), there remain enduring and endemic problems in the practice of *bikās*, when judged against its positive definitions as the producer of social betterment and opportunity.

Academic critiques of *bikās* are sometimes perceived, from within the *bikās* industry, not only to be remote from the pragmatic concerns of the practitioner, but also to be essentially hostile to *bikās*. This is one of many areas where an unproductive, even uncomprehending standoff reigns. Not even the sharpest critics of *bikās* as currently practiced, stand in opposition to the lengthening of lives, access to education for more people, a healthier environment, or other overt general aims of *bikās*. Rather, if critiques are sharp, it is precisely because, as a transnational capitalist enterprise, the organizational structures of the *bikās* industry themselves function in opposition to those overt, laudatory goals of social equalization and improved quality of life for "the people". From this perspective, *bikās* in the positive, general senses defined above, is an accidental by-product of capitalist machinery built for other purposes. Like any capitalist enterprise, the *bikās* industry is in the business of turning a profit and ensuring its own survival. Like any capitalist enterprise, achievement of those goals entails the reproduction of social inequality. Because the *bikās* industry presents itself as a form of social welfare—as aid to poorer nations when initiated from abroad, and as a means to self-improvement when Nepali-organized—not as a business, the gaps between its rhetoric and its realities are yet vaster than in many other capitalist enterprises.

There are many Nepalis within the *bikās* industry who struggle against its nature. Some believe the *bikās* machine is only broken, in need of new parts, whether imported or locally manufactured. Others would agree with me that the *bikās* machine is not broken at all, but functioning well to ends very different from those that it is ostensibly meant to achieve. That I have rarely met a contented *bikās* practitioner, at any level, makes me hopeful. Collectively, it might be possible to unveil the *bikās* machine, examine its parts, dismantle it, and build something better. Such an effort

would require collaboration from inside and outside the *bikās* industry, for detailed knowledge rests with those within it, yet at the same time their ability to act is limited by that very position, and the contradictions and comprises it entails.

Any significant redesign of the *bikās* machine would seem to me to require oppositional efforts on the order of those that resisted the siren call of Panchayat ideology over many years, working collectively from inside and outside its structures to expose its nature—the "counterfeit reality" (Burghart 1994) that covered over the chasm between its rhetoric and its realities. An effort of this magnitude, one that would fundamentally delegitimize the status quo of the *bikās* industry seems necessary for the sake of every sphere of social life—economic, cultural and political. When "partyless democracy" was at last dismantled, hopes ran high that the monumental tasks of building a more equitable society and finding ways to harness the country's resources and talents to its needs could finally be commenced in earnest. Many are now bitter at the failures of an adjectiveless, presumably more genuine form of democracy. But it is, in fact, not an adjectiveless democracy that has followed upon the demise of the Panchayat, but rather a *bikāse* democracy, caught in the wheels of the *bikās* machine, and one which appears to be equally crippling of efforts for social betterment.

What follows is a set of propositions about the historical development of the gaps between the rhetoric of *bikās* culture and the realities of the *bikās* industry. Written from an academic's perspective, predictably they invite a moment's reflection and a step back, a respite from the doing of *bikās* to consider what in fact is being done—by whom, for whom, and to whom—in its name. Each stakes out a large terrain in general terms, identifying aspects of *bikās* culture, some of which are broached in the following articles, that I believe need careful inspection. Collectively they assert that no amount of tinkering with the *bikās* machine will produce the greater distributive justice and better social conditions for the majority that *bikās* claims as its aims, for the *bikās* machine is simply not designed to those ends. Rather, as a form of transnational capitalist enterprise, it will continue to compromise sovereignty at a national level while more locally enriching a small group of power brokers, and sustaining a somewhat larger group of *bikās* workers. Its ostensible beneficiaries, "the people", in whose name the *bikās* industry conducts business, will always receive only the chaff left behind as aid dollars are threshed into locally viable forms of profit and power.

3 Ekīkaraṇs

As every schoolchild knows, Prithvi Narayan Shah was the founder of the Nepali nation. He effected its territorial integration and brought present-day Nepal and beyond under one administrative rule. Let us call this the First *Ekīkaraṇ* (Unification). As every Nepali schoolchild also knows, Bhanubhakta Acharya brought about the emotional unification of the country through his translation of Valmiki's Ramayana into simple Nepali and, via it, the spread of the Nepali language and a feeling of being united by a single language and culture were realized (cf. Onta 1996a). Call this the Second *Ekīkaraṇ*. Although other heroes are also celebrated, nationalist history of Nepal does not record any further unifications; the state and the nation are completed and joined in the mythologization of these two figures.

Let me redefine, for a moment, the First and Second *Ekīkaraṇs* as instances of effective hegemony—the first political and administrative, the second cultural. In the late 18th century, Prithvi Narayan Shah, by military means, brought under his control a variety of other small political entities and subjugated them to his rule. In the early 20th century, advocates of Hinduism and the Nepali language used the figure of Bhanubhakta to promote (or invent) a single cultural tradition as the national Nepali culture. In both these processes, small groups became the brokers of power and influence and while the players changed over time, these processes can be said to have continued through and beyond the Panchayat period.

Let me now posit a Third *Ekīkaraṇ* in the latter half of the 20th century: unification with the rest of the world through the advent of modernity. The hero in this case is not an individual, but *bikās*. The Third *Ekīkaraṇ* is, in fact, a much-told story, but it is recounted as a tale of progress and not, like the state and nation building of the First and Second *Ekīkaraṇs*, as a tale of unification. In this way, the Third *Ekīkaraṇ* is presented as something yet greater—not merely the inheritor of Prithvi Narayan Shah's Nepal, but also its liberator. After incarceration for a century by the Ranas, within the borders ignominiously reduced by the Sagauli treaty of 1816, Nepal was to be restored to its former glory, not through renewed territorial expansion, but by entering the world community of nations, entering the modern age, achieving a "developed" state. Politically and administratively, the Third *Ekīkaraṇ* required new, modern forms (parliamentary structure, civil service bureaucracy, UN membership, etc.), but as a means of state unification—a means for a few

to control the country from the centre and to manage its relations with the rest of the world—its goals remained consonant with those of past rulers. Moreover, though forms of governance had been "modernized", and might thus *appear* to represent a decline in autonomy through emulation of European polities, post-Rana political formations (above all, the Panchayat) could instead be presented as instances of native genius and thus as signs of autonomy. As two of the crafters of Panchayat ideology put it, "Nepal's Panchayati system…is a limb of the international search for a democracy of a native brand" (Mohsin and Rana 1965:11). As the forces of the *bikās* machine strengthened over the years, allowing for less and less actual autonomy, the rhetoric of uniqueness, independence and the cultural specificity of Nepal's modern state grew in kind.

The relation of the Third *Ekīkaraṇ* to the cultural/emotional unification of the Second *Ekīkaraṇ* is yet more complex. *Bikās* is generally viewed as an import: material goods, scientific techniques, and modern ways of thinking that arrived from the "developed" world once the borders of (so the story goes) hermetically sealed Rana Nepal were opened. That *bikāse* imports have flowed into the country in ever greater quantity over the past four decades is undeniable. What is less examined is the effort to manage those imports and turn them into distinctly Nepali products—a Nepali form of *bikās*, a Nepali form of "modernity". *Bikās* was to be modern, but it was also to be "suited to the soil", in the infamous Panchayat-era phrase.

In this task, the modernizers, early orchestrators of the Third *Ekīkaraṇ*, drew upon the resources of the Second *Ekīkaraṇ*, particularly the story of a single Nepali cultural tradition, but also upon an emerging anthropology that concentrated on differences within the population. A set of "scientific" grids began to be marked out upon the map of Nepal. The strength of caste divisions was related to geography and ecology, strongest in the lowlands, becoming progressively weaker in higher altitudes (see, for example, Mohsin and Rana 1965:35-36). Nepali society was understood to be "multi-ethnic", but despite differences, all Nepalis were "folk conditioned, group-oriented and dharma-bound" (Mohsin and Rana 1965:47). The key cultural task of the Third *Ekīkaraṇ* became the crafting of citizens of a modern state (cf. Onta 1996b) out of the modal villager who, "has few private emotions and likewise few private ambitions. Few choices are open to him to exercise his personal discretion. In this respect he is not fully an 'individual'" (Mohsin and Rana 1965:39). Such a characterization achieved several tasks at once. First, it placed the right

and responsibility to dictate the course of modernization squarely with those who, like Mohsin and Rana, had somehow escaped the blinded condition of other Nepalis. Second, it provided a culture-based argument for a partyless political system, one that did not incorporate the unsuitable individualism of the West, but rather drew on the group-oriented identities "native" to Nepali culture. Third, by dehumanizing the average villager, represented as living out an uncomprehending life in darkness and ignorance, it produced a homogeneous target population for *bikās* and legitimized the imposition of a single national culture (*euṭā deś, euṭā bheṣ*), even while lip-service was paid to cultural diversity and the multi-ethnic composition of the nation. As the ability of those who had invited in *bikās* to actually manage its importation, distribution and effects within the country declined over the years of the Panchayat, efforts to impose a uniquely Nepali cultural tradition that could be held up as evidence of autonomy and uniqueness increased apace. In this light, we might rethink the *Gaun̐ Pharka* program, and other projects of Panchayati culture brokers.

The Third *Ekīkaraṇ* continues to thrive in post-Andolan Nepal. Its central problematic, the making of modern citizens of a modern nation-state out of villagers imagined as "undeveloped"—even if they are also said to have an earthy wisdom—remains. Its central tool, *bikās*, also remains. But while there continues to be a desire to present the *bikāse* culture and society that is being crafted as something distinctly Nepali, not merely an import, the terms of description and analysis, and the modes of planning and execution of *bikās* have become almost exclusively those of imported "*bikāse*" science. Whereas during the Panchayat years there were contending tendencies to, on the one hand, draw on the current theories and methods of Western social science to understand Nepali culture and social structures and, on the other, to draw on Hindu panditry and the nationalist historiography of the first two great *Ekīkaraṇs*, *bikās* today is almost wholly conducted in the terms of the former.

What we witness today in the *bikās* industry might be called "the tyranny of numbers" (cf. Upadhya, this volume). Statistical forms of knowledge have become the astrology of the modern state, and *bikās* pandits the modern-day court astrologers. Comprehension of the state of "the people" is manufactured, in Kathmandu, through the manipulation of numerical data extracted from the countryside. Here it first produces a sense of knowing what is out there, the sad condition of the country. Here it also produces an ostensible certainty, a "data base" with which to plan improvement. Next, this data becomes a valuable export commodity. Sent

out to metropolitan centres from whence aid money flows, it becomes the means for acquiring more such aid. The tight dictates of the *bikās* industry, which define the parameters of knowledge about social conditions, what is to be included and excluded, and the forms in which such knowledge must be presented to be granted validity, cannot be underestimated. But it is also the case that Nepalis who know better, have acquiesced to, or eagerly joined in the cause of numerical tyranny.

There is a disastrous union of fictionality and functionality in the hegemony of statistical knowledge in the *bikās* world. Certain kinds of national statisticss (GNP, GDP, MMR, IMR, LR, etc. etc.) are needed in order to keep the *bikās* machine well-oiled and its daily fodder of aid dollars coming in. And so they are dutifully produced, despite the fact that many involved in their production know those numbers to be bogus. For, despite their fictionality, such numbers have an irresistible functionality—or at least a functionality that has not yet been resisted. They allow *bikās* practitioners to believe, or at least pretend, that they have a sense of the whole nation and its conditions, a knowledge of "the people". They provide an ostensibly scientific basis for planning. Above all, they match the required form for exportable knowledge, knowledge that can be traded for further aid money. Reliable statistical information could be a great asset in *bikās* efforts that work toward improvement of social conditions. But as things stand, there are, in most domains, only fictional numbers that have functionality for the *bikās* industry itself, ensuring its self-maintenance and profitability. The tyranny of numbers represents another form in which sovereignty has been compromised by *bikās* culture which, in its styles of garnering knowledge about "the people", has wholly acquiesced to impoverished forms of Western scientificity.

The influence of the glorious stories of the first two *Ekīkaraṇs* has not, however, lapsed altogether. That glorious history continues to be taught as the history of the nation, and to provide an alternative way of knowing the country, but one that now has virtually no place in the conduct of the business of *bikās*. This creates a certain schizophrenia in the narratives of the nation, which is at once described as an "LDC" (Least Developed Nation) and a country rich in cultural tradition, a country whose national economy is fully dependent on aid, and a *bir swatantra raṣtra* (brave, independent nation), a country whose government is unable to dictate the course of externally-imposed *bikās*, but is the inheritor and continuer of the proud tradition of having never been colonized. The political-economy of the *bikās* industry, and this national cultural-economy need to be thought through together. Only then might we

appreciate (or even realize) that the *bikās* worker who writes a report on Nepal-as-LDC by day may have another life by night, as a writer of *deśbhakti* poetry, progressive literature, or essays in opposition to structural adjustment.

Bikās for Profit

'Sustainable development' is a phrase much in use these days. It refers to the need for *bikās* to be sustained after foreign aid dollars, rupees from the capital, *bikās* experts, and material assistance depart for the next project site. Judged by the continuous calls to work toward sustainable development, it has proven an elusive goal. Unremarked upon, "sustainable development" has, however, been thoroughly implemented in one sector—the *bikās* industry itself. Whether a given *bikās* project succeeds or fails appears to be fairly incidental to the sustainability of the *bikās* industry. Pre-planning and assessment, project design, and purchase of materials all precede project implementation. Whether a success or a failure, evaluation and assessment follow upon implementation. Moreover, in the budget analyses of some agencies and ministries, simply the expenditure of set-aside funds counts as the successful completion of a *bikās* project, thus lending weight to the organization in its bid for its next project. As the *bikās* process rolls on at the administrative and managerial levels, salaries are paid, contracts meted out, supplies purchased. Many profit along the way, whatever the outcome on the ground at the site of a *bikās* project. Sustainable development is well ensconced at the organizational level.

When foreign aid budgets are critiqued in donor countries, it is often on the grounds that foreign aid represents a massive give-away of financial resources needed at home. In this view, the aid-wing of the *bikās* industry is not an industry for profit at all, but rather a charity. Such a view overlooks two kinds of profit, one financial, the other political. Although with the exception of India and in some cases China, donor countries cannot expect direct profits from their aid investments in Nepal (in the form of an importable resource like energy for example), in the execution of *bikās* projects, much profit can accrue to the donor country. Despite the rhetoric of sustainable development, agreements can be written in such a way as to give preferential advantage to foreign suppliers and technical experts under tied-aid (cf. Pandey, this volume). Even if, on an overall cost-benefit analysis, *bikās* aid might not show a profit in a donor country, it provides grease for the industrial wheels, opportunities to bring business to one's own political constituency and other benefits that

make it a profitable enterprise—sustainable development begins, and often ends at home.

The idea that the aid regime is a continuation of colonialism by other means is not new. But a better model for Nepal may be the continuation of indirect colonialism which provided political influence and access to resources without the cost of administration of a colony. Thus there may be more continuities between the colonial era, when Nepal was subjected to just such indirect colonialism by the British in India, and today's aid regime, than is the case in formerly colonized countries. The conditionalities that were to be placed upon Nepal's national economic policy in return for financing of Arun III are a clear example of this kind of intervention. The public pressure placed on Nepal by major donor countries to ratify the Mahakali Treaty shows that the *quid pro quo* of aid money for a hand in the country's international political relations, its economic policies, and its internal political system is sufficiently explicit that it need not even be much disguised before the media and the public. While Nepal is neither a key market like India or China, nor a strategic resource centre like the Gulf states, its quiescence smooths the way for larger capitalist agendas. Here too, is a kind of sustainable development that has been effectively achieved—sustainable development of relations of subordination and dominance under the logic of global capitalism.

Language Masks

"Economic liberalization", "structural readjustment", "sustainable development", "income generation", "grassroots development", "alternative development", "community development", "poverty alleviation", "*jana cetanā*", "awareness raising", "people's participation", "empowerment"... These are a few of the mantras of *bikās* culture today. Thirteen years ago, Harka Gurung dubbed the constant reinvention of *bikās* language the "cavalcade of concepts" (quoted in Panday 1983:289) and argued that it had a stultifying effect on the actual realization of *bikās.* The effect is surely stultifying for the realization of the overt, positive goals of *bikās,* but it may be quite crucial to *bikās* viewed as an industry.

Along with the numbers that provide the appearance of a scientific command of the situation and a commodity for trade in international *bikās* markets, there must also be a narrative of the state of *bikās* (cf. Fujikura, Thapa, this volume). The statistical and narrative stories are often as divergent as is the story of the Least Developed Nation from that of the Brave, Independent Nation. *Bikās* mantras sound a positive, ever optimistic note while statistics tell a tale of impending crises, unachieved

goals, and the urgent need for more *bikās*. Their simultaneous deployment is crucial. Statistics make the argument for more aid, the life-blood of the *bikās* industry. The "cavalcade of concepts" is the babbling brook that explains why, though the last infusion of cash failed to fix the problem, the next one surely will (cf. Dixit 1996): infrastructure-building was the wrong approach, what is needed is sustainable development; poverty-alleviation by the year x remains our goal, but we now realize it is best achieved through privatization… so go the narratives that accompany numerical tales of woe. Paper *bikās*—the *bikās* of numbers and words—thrives, and as it thrives so too do those who are its producers. The numbers and words produced by the *bikās* machine paper over the great gap between the rhetoric of *bikās* as social betterment, and the reality of *bikās* as transnational industry.

This situation could be treated as just another instance of the inevitable gaps between ideals and actualities in the "real world", even as an amusing tale of delusion, were it not for what is papered over. All the activity of the *bikās* world is carried out in the name of the *janatā* (the people). When fictional knowledge about real people and their suffering is traded for profit in the name of those people's well-being, it is not merely unfortunate, but immoral. Enmeshed in the convoluted inner-workings of the *bikās* machine, each individual *bikās* practitioner can protest that they, themselves, can do little to change this state of affairs. Yet precisely through the collective results of that individual acquiescence, the *bikās* industry maintains itself.

The following articles represent yet further words about *bikās*, but their effort is to expose gaps between the rhetoric and realities of *bikās*, rather than to contribute to hiding them. Such exposure in words is but a first step if *bikās* is ever to become an activity of the *janatā*, rather than an industry that profits a few carried out in the name of the *janatā*.

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