



BOOK REVIEW

Democracy Struggle in Nepal

Shadow Over Shangri-la

Durga Pokhrel with Anthony Willett

Brassey's Inc. USA, Price \$24.95

Review : ○ Latika Padgaonkar

In James Hilton's popular novel *Lost Horizon*, Shangri-la was an allegorical land of eternal youth and safety from war. Located somewhere in the interior of Tibet and bathed in evanescence, it had a haunting and mysterious quality which gripped contemporary imagination and quickly turned that utopian world into a myth of our times. The word Shangri-la is today part of our everyday vocabulary; for one and all it signifies the ideal refuge.

Durga Pokhrel's *Shadow Over Shangri-la* is an antithesis of Hilton's paradise, if ever there was one.* Her Nepal is no safe haven for her children. It is a land of turmoil that dispenses injustice without a care. And far from Hilton's vision of eternal youth, it forces people who witness its crimes to rather wither and age early.

Lively political autobiographies from Nepal are rare indeed. So when one comes along it is particularly satisfying. And all the more so

* Durga Pokhrel had contributed an article to MANUSHI while in prison describing her experiences there. This was published under the title: **Behind the Bars of Nepal Central Jail** in MANUSHI 6, 1980.

when the writer is a woman of grit and a rebel with a cause. Pokhrel's autobiography is a political tract. It unfolds the rage and violence that shook the Hindu kingdom on its path towards democracy in the 1970s and paints in savage colours the regime that sought to silence her. The years she describes are those when power-hungry cliques held monarchy in their thrall, when a partyless *panchayat* system was a subterfuge for authoritarian rule; when sycophancy was rampant and usurpation and palace intrigues commonplace; and when a nascent democratic movement was peremptorily scuttled.

All this is portrayed with the vividness of an insider's eye—an insider, who has seen and suffered. For Durga Pokhrel's political journey, right from her days as a young girl, is intertwined into the wider canvas of dramatic events that unfolded in Nepal. But the importance of the book lies in her lone battle against a ruling elite and its uncouth and terrifying instruments of repression. That Pokhrel emerged sane (although not unscarred) and in one piece through her incarceration and that she went to live a life of happiness and comfort can only be attributed to incredible luck or divine

intervention. Or maybe, her *karma*.

Pokhrel's book is partitioned into two: her life in Nepal and her life abroad. Born into a patriarchal middle class Brahmin family (her father was a doctor and community leader and her grandfather a *rishi* and yogi), Durga is left unnamed for the first few years because her father hoped for a boy. But an astrologer had pronounced that she would possess the qualities of a son. Proud, precocious and defiant, this little girl learns Sanskrit *shlokas* on her father's knee, writes poems and stories, wins prizes and becomes the president of her school union. At the age of 12 she attends her first political meeting and goes on to join an underground political movement.

Everything about Durga sets her apart from her peers. Her complex relationship with her father, her solitary tours of various hill districts at 16, her refusal to marry early, her determination to pursue higher studies, to arouse students, her organisational abilities. Her occasional tactlessness invites trouble but she is endowed with enough spirit to take on the consequences in her stride. "Although I was not a rebel by nature," she writes, "I had been made a rebel as my personal life had

become an eddy against the great turbulence on national life.” In this case turbulence means the ambiguity and arbitrariness of a political system which was “a mystery, a survival game in which the players competed with each other in keeping the palace happy.”

Durga’s real test by fire begins one day in the 70s, when she is arrested, by the police from Star Publications, which she has been running for three years with her friends, allegedly in connection with a plot to kidnap the crown prince. From then on begins a terrifying, gut-wrenching tale of prison life in Nepal. Strangely, Durga herself is spared physical abuse and is even respectfully called Netaji and Durgaji by inmates and jailers alike.

Her chronicle of prison days alone would be sufficient to make this book memorable. Inside the high walls operates a system so dehumanising that language itself cracks as it grapples with jail routine: heat, bugs, mosquitoes, lack of water and appalling or non-existent toilet facilities combined with what passes for food (niggardly quantities of black rice that smells of dead animals and two green chillies) in Mahakali in western Nepal where Durga is also detained for a while; the many diseases and malnutrition; the system of *kamdar*, *naike*, *mulnaike* and the tough *chaukidarni*, inmates all, sometimes murder convicts, who oversee other prisoners, practise torture with casualness and abandon but who, as Durga realises, are as much the victimised as victimising, repeating within the jail what society has done to them without; the once a month mockery of a bath, problems of menstruation in the absence of pads, where the sari itself absorbs the flow; the indispensable pot for



Durga Pokhrel in 1980



...and in the '90s

cooking, drinking and washing; the mass sleeping injections jabbed into women with the same needle; the rigid caste system that operates within these dehumanising surrounding, as untouchables clean mounds of excrement with two buffalo ribs, the upper castes who will not touch the morning’s leftover food and lower caste women who will reveal their bad dreams to still lower castes.

Particularly poignant are descriptions of the *pagal khana* (cell for the lunatics) and its interns. Once a new lunatic arrives wearing earrings, noserings and red bangles; raped by her father-in-law, as we learn later, she is now serving life term for having aborted. No time is lost in giving her the “treatment”. She is pushed, poked, pierced, her hair is tugged, cheeks pinched, and she’s beaten to near lifelessness with sharp nettles, then spread-eagled, handcuffed to a roofbeam and her ankles chained to iron wheels she is left to lie hanging all night.

Such are the many rites of passage that Durga Pokhrel evokes of this forlorn, forgotten

community, this “regime of compliance, unconsciousness, inhumanity” where no normal human feeling or interpersonal relationships are possible. Crying invites treatment like being fed sewage from the toilet and friendships lead to beatings. “Jaade cried remembering her 6 year old daughter...all her pubic hair was scorched off by pouring hot ash over her genital area”; inmates have needles inserted into their nipples and fingernails and sticks shoved into vaginas. The result is “inverted uteruses, cystoceles and rectoceles.”

Restrained, meticulous and clear, these bestial tales of prison life woven into the canvas of the country’s political turmoil are the best part of the book.

Then one day, after a few court adjournments of her case, Durga is suddenly released. She never knows why. Is it because of her petition to the king? Her father’s petition? Her friend’s efforts or pressure from Amnesty International? As she tastes freedom, she does not forget her friends in jail; she writes a series of articles and through her

intervention with the queen succeeds in getting 16 of them released.

Thereafter, Durga's story takes on another hue and somehow leaves large, rather disturbing gaps that fit ill into the character of a principled woman. Out of the blue she is sent an air ticket to Minnesota by friends; miraculously, a passport and a US visa materialise, and within no time, without farewells to friends who had helped her, she leaves Nepal. We assume that she has little money, yet manages entry into Harvard in mid-semester with one wonders what kind of supporting academic and other documents. Sure, she babysits but how can that cover her fees (she has received part financing and her travels? She lands in the UK without visa but one is rapidly organised in the middle of the night by a telephone call to Lord Avebury.

That is when one begins to have misgivings about Durga's commitment. Her longing for Nepal remains but not forceful enough to pull her back. Her marriage to Anthony Willett and the birth of her children draw her into the family fold. Their stay in the West lengthens, after masters there are PhDs to be done, then an unhappy posting in Zanzibar. When pro-democracy student strikes and demonstrations paralyse her country, she is keen yet unable to return; once the strikes end she loses interest: "The struggle was over, there was nothing further I could contribute."

A Nepalese Congress activist, Durga abhors both the partyless *panchayat* system and the communists; her belief in a benevolent monarch and her enlightened, rational vision of an evolutionary form of multi-party system in her country is somehow clouded by certain reactionary traits

on the one hand (adherence to the caste system, for instance, which she honestly admits even though she married a foreigner : "I had warned Anthony in a letter that even though I was a believer in democratic socialism, he might still find me somewhat feudal") and domineering ones on the other.

Her lucid analysis of the breakdown of governance whose bankruptcy after 30 years of totalitarian rule she compares to Eastern Europe (she refers to the shallow quality of freedom and the absence of a cultural vision), and her hopes for the future — that Nepal would one day become the Shangri-la of the legend and adopt a holistic pattern of growth — including yoga and ayurvedic medicine—are somehow overcast by her repeated insistence on

karma and *dharma* and on a doubtful "Vedic formula".

Most troubling of all is that such counsel comes from a Durga settled in America. And then, how can one reconcile her espousal of democratic socialism with her hopes of returning caste to its "originally intended symbolic meaning?" Pronouncements such as "He's so Brahminic, the way he can discern the truth in any situation" or "what a Chhetrini she is in her fight against drug abuse" or "he's a great Vaisya, so clever at business" and "she works away with the humility and devotion of a Shudra" will not stand on their own as symbols, segregated from the weight of millennia of thought, attitude and behaviour. Durga herself is part of this structure. No. The shadow over Shangri-la will not be lifted this way. □

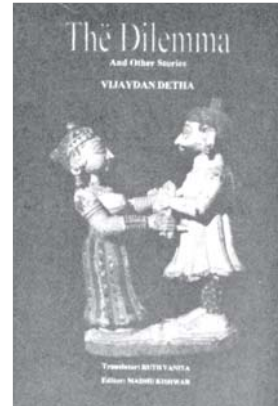
The Dilemma

and Other Stories

By Vijaydan Detha

Translator: Ruth Vanita

Editor: Madhu Kishwar



Vijaydan Detha's stories provide a scintillating glimpse of the rich repertoire of folk tales of Rajasthan—stories in which women challenge and subvert male defined institutions and norms without losing their dignity and femininity. This collection stands out for affirming the joy of living as well as for its vision of more egalitarian and mutually satisfying man-woman relationships.

169 pages ♦ Paperback ♦ Price: Rs 150 (India), US\$ 15 (Abroad)

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