

Richard Burghart. 2016. *The History of Janakpurdham: A Study of Asceticism and the Hindu Polity*. Martin Gaenzle, ed. Kathmandu: Social Science Baha and Himal Books.

The History of Janakpurdham is the PhD thesis of anthropologist Richard Burghart (1944–1994), published in only lightly edited form almost 40 years after its submission at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies in 1978. The most striking aspect of Burghart’s book is the wealth of empirical material that he brings to bear in order to make his theoretical arguments. His detailed accounts of the founding of the town of Janakpur in the early 18th century by Ramanandi ascetics, their changing relationship first with the Shah and Rana dynasties of Nepal, and finally the Panchayat regime, and the emergence of markets in land form a valuable and lasting contribution to the scholarship of Nepal, and the Tarai in particular.

Burghart’s main theoretical intervention, a contribution to the debate about the roles of kings and Brahmans in South Asian society, is set out in the introduction, which had been published earlier as a journal article (Burghart 1978). His was then an innovative argument, postulating that the mutually

incompatible claims of superiority by Brahman, ascetic, and Hindu king are in social practice rendered compatible through avoidance, but also carry the seeds for constant and dynamic contestation. Based on royal documents, and sacred texts used by ascetics and Brahmans in the eastern Tarai in the 18th and 19th century, Burghart concludes that this represented the “traditional Hindu social system” of India and Nepal, which had, however, been transformed in response to significant changes in the nature of the state.

The first part (chapters one to four) of the book introduces the reader to the Ramanandi sect, one of the largest Vaishnavite renunciatory orders in north India, including the historical evidence available on the emergence of the order in the 16th century. Chapters two to four deal with initiation and daily ritual practice of the ascetics, departure from family and subcaste, and the monastic organization of the Ramanandis as it was practiced at the time of Burghart’s research in the 1970s.

The remaining three parts of the book provide an ethnohistory of the city of Janakpur, located in southeastern Nepal, tracing the shifting relationship between the Ramanandi ascetics who founded the monasteries around which the city grew and the kings of Nepal. The recorded history of Janakpur begins with land grants by the Sen kings of Makwanpur and the Raja of Darbhanga to a Ramanandi ascetic during the early to mid-18th century. These grants were in *kuśa birtā*, a form of tenure that was both inalienable and exempt from taxation. The Shah kings of Gorkha both confirmed the Sen kings’s *kuśa birtā* grants, and continued to provide new grants until the mid-19th century. As *kuśa birtāwāls*, who paid no tribute to any superior, the abbots of the Ramanandi monasteries stood outside the secular tenurial hierarchy. However, the income from *kuśa birtā* land was often insufficient for ambitious abbots, who therefore tended to become intermediate revenue collectors on crown land in addition. As such, they fell inside the polity of the kingdom of Gorkha, but the far-reaching judicial authority and power over tenure renewals that intermediaries enjoyed meant that they still very much appeared like local kings from a local point of view.

Under Rana rule (1846–1951), however, a series of administrative reforms began to curtail the powers of the revenue intermediaries: from 1861 onwards, the *Muluki Ain* of 1854 was implemented by district-level courts; centrally appointed district officers directly represented the interests of the Rana prime ministers; and both tenants and *jimidārs* (as revenue collectors in the Tarai were now called) enjoyed security of tenure contingent on their

paying the required annual taxes. These changes had several effects. The increased tenurial security allowed ascetics to found monasteries as non-cultivating tenants on crown land, leading to a proliferation of monasteries. Abbots who were revenue intermediaries in addition to holding *kuśa birtā* stood above these ascetic tenants in the tenurial hierarchy, but also found themselves more clearly subordinated to the king. This constellation led to new kinds of relations between ascetics and king, as tenant ascetics began appealing to the Rana prime ministers directly to protest the excesses of abbots-cum-*jimidārs*, who in turn leveraged their importance as guarantors of royal revenue streams.

With stronger tenancy rights, there developed a nascent market in land titles, which, together with the process of subinfeudation (the sub-letting of rights to cultivation on crown land, here usually to sharecroppers) that also began around the turn of the 20th century, brought the *kuśa birtāwāl* and *jimidār* abbots in Mahottari great prosperity. This eventually prompted the Rana regime to integrate the tax-exempt *birtā* holdings into the revenue system. After a series of disputes, Prime Minister Chandra Shmsher Rana's administration assumed jurisdiction over the two largest *kuśa birtā* monasteries in Janakpur in 1911. Expenses had to be accounted for, and the government controlled all remaining income. The abbots, having lost the last privileges associated with kingship, had now become salaried employees of the state. Patrimonial Rana rule formally ended in 1951, and the 1964 reforms of the land tenure system finally placed all *kuśa birtā* monasteries under the authority of a semi-autonomous government body.

It has now been 38 years since Burghart wrote *The History of Janakpurdham*, so it seems fair to also examine it as a historical document, and ask where it fits within the broader development of anthropology as academic discipline. The 1970s and 1980s were a period during which the relationship between anthropology and history was being redefined. Anthropology was starting to come to terms with its orientalist baggage, and used history to explore how colonial practice had shaped its modes and objects of enquiry. In light of this, *The History of Janakpurdham* seems to have been simultaneously cutting edge, and stuck in a dead end. It was innovative in its use of sectarian texts, historical state documents, and oral history to document the impact of colonial power to the south and a changing political economy. This foreshadowed, by more than a decade, Nicholas

Dirks' (1987) famous ethnohistory of a "little kingdom" in southern India, *The Hollow Crown*.

But there are also crucial differences between Burghart's work and that of the Chicago School of ethnohistory, from which Dirks' work emerged. Burghart pays close attention to the intrusion of structural factors, but not the circulation of ideas, and the ruptures that South Asian intellectual traditions had undergone during colonization. He bases his reading of the "traditional" Hindu polity on late 18th century texts by contemporary ascetics, and ancient Hindu texts such as the *Manusmṛiti*, which the Shah dynasty explicitly referred to. However, Burghart sets up his key problem – the incompatible claims to superiority by ascetics and king – almost entirely through inference and the material he presents rarely indicates that the people he writes about shared his concerns. At times, the presentation of evidence appears forced, glossing over apparent contradictions such as the gusto with which junior ascetics appear to have left the monasteries of *kuśa birtā* abbots to establish their own monasteries in tenurial inferiority to the king.

From a later point of view, thus, *The History of Janakpur* lacks reflection on how the object of Burghart's study – the Hindu polity – had been constructed as field of inquiry. To what extent were both Burghart's assumptions about a pre-modern Hindu polity, and those of his informants, colored by late 19th and early 20th century concerns? A broad range of ideas and debates that circulated through northern India and southern Nepal at the time had things to say on Hindu kingship: these included early Hindutva efforts to re-imagine princely states as traditional models for future governance (Bhagavan 2008), but also class-based mobilization that was influential with smallholders and landless populations. At times, Burghart himself seems to have doubts about what exactly had been the polity that had been transformed, declaring towards the end of the book that "the local kingdom [of the abbots] remains somewhat elusive," but that he assumes it anyways to have "existed in a pristine state" (p. 271).

With the publication of this book, a treasure of anthropological scholarship on Nepal that had long been difficult to access has become publicly available. It will be of great relevance to scholars of Nepal's administrative history, and anyone interested in the history of the Tarai plains, and provides important context for reading Burghart's later work, which was mostly published in the form of articles. Based on detailed readings of an extensive corpus of historical documents (many of them from the collection of historian Mahesh

Chandra Regmi), the empirical standards that *The History of Janakpur* sets continue to be relevant for anthropological scholarship of Nepal today. The introduction to the book by anthropologist Martin Gaenszle provides a chapter-by-chapter synopsis, and serves as a very useful guide to the literature Burghart was engaging with at the time of writing, as well as more recent contributions to the study of Hindu ascetics.

References

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