

Jhalak Subedi. 2073 v.s. *Bhūmi, Kisān ra Rājya: Nepal mā Rājya ra Kisānbīcko Sambandha*. Kathmandu: FinePrint.

Bhūmi, Kisān ra Rājya: Nepal mā Rājya ra Kisānbīcko Sambandha by Jhalak Subedi explores the historical and contemporary relationship between the Nepali state and its peasants. The book is primarily concerned in explaining how the indigenous minorities over time lost the ownership of land to various state policies. It consists of four chapters, a post-script, and a concluding section.

Subedi, in Chapter One, briefly examines the historic relations between land and people using a diachronic perspective by linking them to the “spread of Khas Arya around fifteenth century,” particularly the adverse effect that process had on the “traditional economy of Tharu, Magar, Gurung” (p. 4). He holds the Khas Arya migration responsible for “disrupting the indigenous people’s social, cultural identity connected to the land” (p. 5). Subedi additionally argues that the various land tenure systems, particularly *birtā* system, in the past tied farmers and peasants into a feudal relationship.

The second chapter consists of a literature review. In it Subedi describes the different land tenures, viz., *raikar*, *guthi*, *kipat*, *birtā*, *jāgīr*, *rakam* and *ukhaḍā*. Readers not familiar with the various land tenure system in Nepal may find this discussion useful. The chapter contends that a historically unequal distribution of land, alongside failures of the Nepali state to push for land reform initiatives, have compounded the marginalization of the peasants belonging to the indigenous communities. Subedi specifically explains how the arbitrary distribution of land by the Shah and Rana rulers made Nepali state the biggest landlord at the expense of the minority communities.

In the third and perhaps the most important chapter, Subedi follows eight ethnic minorities (Bote, Majhi, Chepang, Danuwar, Gurung, Raji, Sonaha and Musahar) from seven districts to demonstrate how unequal access to land has left an enduring legacy of socio-economic marginalization on the ground. A rich ethnographic data presented in the chapter is quite interesting.

A sub-chapter on Gurung and *kipat*, which builds on a narrative of an 84-year-old Khagendra Jang Gurung, also known for initiating the identity politics in Nepal, is captivating. For example, Gurung, a son of a *subbā* in Lamjung, we are told, exchanged letters between King Mahendra and the Chinese leader, Mao-Tse Tung. This section illustrates how an “informal” land tenure system evolved into a “formal” land tenure system and gradually brought “sovereign” people under the state “surveillance” by introducing different levies on the land that people had cultivated for generations following customary practices.

Chapter Four, as is aptly titled, explores the “precipitation of the feudal land system.” It discusses *birtā* and *guthi* and the tensions between the tenants and holders of these titles. Thirty-six percent of the cultivable land was under the *birtā* system until its abolition in 1957. Subedi argues that the abolition however simply turned the previously non-taxable *birtā* land into a taxable *raikar* land without resolving the question of tenancy. In one instance from 2067 v.s., a popular film actor/director Nir Shah, with the help of the YCL (Young Communist League) cadres, went to confiscate ninety *ropanis* of land in Dhaibung of Rasuwa, claiming that it belonged to his mother Dol Kumari. The tenants on those lands refused to give up the land and warned the District Land Revenue Office not to transfer it to Shah.

In the case of Pashupati Mahasnan Guthi from Phatakshila of Sindhu-palchwok, Subedi shows similar contested claims made by different groups. King Rana Bahadur Shah in 1799 had granted a fertile land in Phatakshila to

the Guthi. Drawing upon oral sources, Subedi shows that competing claims over tenancy between the Guthi overseers and the tenants have continued since. Another case further illustrates how a fertile land in Melamchi Valley granted to a Lama of Taruka Ghyang (monastery) during the premiership of Bhimsen Thapa has been at the center of dispute between the tenants and the representatives of the monastery.

Land tenure, generally understood, as individual or communal rights and responsibilities may be rooted in a formal legal, and or ancient customs and traditions. Chapter Three and Four shed light on the evolution of the variegated land tenure from an informal to a formal system in Nepal. Though the case studies presented do not deal with the many complexities surrounding the indigenous land tenure system, they do constitute the core strengths of the book. Perhaps future researchers would expand on Subedi's work to offer a more nuanced relationship between land and indigeneity.

Subedi concludes the book stating that the multiple land tenure systems in Nepal have evolved alongside the modern state. With the increasing emphasis on a centralized administrative uniformity together with an attendant paper based record keeping system, the bureaucratic state gradually eclipsed the informal and communal ownership records of land and the natural resources, eventually disenfranchising many indigenous communities in the process. A closer examination of cultural, historical and legal forces would have added more heft to that argument.

In a country like Nepal where statutory laws and land administrative policies are often ineffectual in safeguarding the tenurial rights of the population, without formal land holding documents, Subedi's work nevertheless makes a strong case to take customary law and a longer history of residency into the administrative decision making framework. Given that the right to use of the land had historically relied on a combination of legal, customary and traditional practices, an all-inclusive method in identifying ownership may go in the right direction to addressing the long unresolved question of land equity in Nepal.

The book surely could have benefited from a careful editing. For instance, proper citations of many factual information would have been necessary and useful. Also, an additional section discussing the changes post-2006 in relation to land policies, rather than simply enumerating them, would have made the argument more relevant. Some of the findings are a bit too generic, and do not always do justice to the richness found in the primary

documents presented by the author. At times, Subedi resorts to sweeping statements that are more discursive and less historical. A seven-page long biographical sketch of a land rights activist, already published elsewhere, without a new contextualization adds little value to the book. Some of these shortcomings may dilute the reception of an otherwise well-crafted work. These notwithstanding, the richness of the primary sources presented in the book, in and of itself, is of great value to anyone interested on the land question in Nepal.

Suresh Dhakal
Tribhuvan University