

Yangesh. 2017. *Bhuiyā*. Kathmandu: Fineprint.

Bhuiyā is concerned with the the question of landlessness. The book, non-fiction with eleven chapters and an introductory section, is written by journalist Yangesh. Each chapter is written in profile-format where different citizens chronicle the pangs of extreme poverty, the social and economic pressures of being landless, and problems pertaining to economic and educational backwardness.

It contends that in Nepali society, power is exerted through land ownership. Power influences one's prestige, prosperity, as well as political and social representation. The introductory note "*Sa-Sānā Kathā*" deals with the issue of the rise of landless class and tries to explore how the ruling class placed these landless citizens at the bottom of social hierarchy. According to this section, the book is not about the victories and failures of the land movement. Rather, it is about landless citizens and the contribution of land movement to their life.

The details of the stories collected are ethnographic and sociological in nature, giving a vivid picture of the plight the concerned people have to endure. The author raises some critical questions regarding the situation of landlessness: these people are cultivating land, and growing crops for long periods of time. However, they do not have legal shares in the land they cultivate. A critical question regarding existing laws and statutes is raised: who is our law designed to serve?

The chapters infer that the state's neglectful attitude regarding the proper allocation of land is one of the major reasons for the plight of the landless. People at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder toil hard in deserted and not-registered lands, making what is barren fruitful. However, they are unable to claim ownership over the land that they depend on for their livelihoods. Powerful people get the ownership of the land that should rightfully belong to those who work on it. The author asks the question, "How could one have the ownership over the land where he never lived, never worked? What is the problem in giving the ownership to those who made the barren land livable and have been living and toiling hard for decades?" (p. 124). The discontent is towards the powerful who have been subjugating landless people.

The profiles show that several organizations working on the issue of landlessness encourage the landless to unite. However, when their cooperation is actually needed, they disappear. Salma Behen, one of the characters from

the chapter “*Tāto Karāī*,” says that she is not happy with these organizations, right-based activists, or the Maoist party, which used the issue of landlessness to further its political interests without taking any tangible action.

Tara from “*Srilanka Kholāmā Tara*” talks about her discontent with Maoists and other once-revolutionary parties with great poignancy. She asserts that they rose to power on the backs of poor and disadvantaged citizens of the country but after seizing power, forgot everything they were supposed to be fighting for. Tara says, “Maoist came around us when they had to fight for themselves. But where are they when they had to fight for us?” (p. 86). This not only portrays common people’s disillusionment with new political leadership but also reveals the hollowness of promises made to those who are oppressed that are forgotten as soon as the leaders come to power. Tara offers a sharp satirical critique of political parties and leaders, talking about how the Nepali Congress, CPN-UML (“*Yemāle*”) and the Maoists each promised to take up the cause of the landless but eventually became “party of those whom we never know” (p. 86).

Narrating different facts related to land in Nepal, the author says, “There is nobody from the Dalit community who got land of their own distributed by Rana rulers and any of the governments till now. It is believed that no Dalit has *birtā jaggā* of their own” (p. 123). Different social and political movements have created awareness amongst landless people about the degree of their oppression.

The chapter “*Tāto Karāī*” tells the tale of Salma Behen who is from Banghusri village, 4 kilometers away from Nepalganj bazaar. She earns her bread through *baṭaiyā* where she has to offer certain amount of the harvest to the landowner. Salma asks for the statement-letter (*bharpāī*) from her landowner when she offers the harvest to him. After asking for the *bharpāī*, her revolution starts in real sense which encourages her to become a cautious land-right-activist.

This chapter discusses how land-activists motivate Salma to get her rights. Salma also knows how other landless citizens are bearing the pangs from their community and through the state too. The author not only presents the plethora of problems but also offers thought on how it can be solved through determination and well-planned policies of the government. The negligence of political parties in solving the real problems of the people who keep on voting for them comes as a major reason. Such crassness of the political parties weakens people’s belief towards them.

Salma is angry with those land activists who pay lip service to the plight of the landless but do not come to the scene when their advocacy is needed. She is enraged with the Maoist party and right-based activists, who she feels have deceived her.

Parbati Raji is another character from the text. The following statement that she makes encapsulates the overarching theme of the book: “Government should not come to burn-down their homes, they should not come to hit *lāṭhīs* to them whenever they are protesting for their rights. It should come offering land that would be enough to build a home” (p. 33). Women like Parbati are in pursuit of land that would help them survive, that would let them know that they are human, they are mothers and citizens of the country.

The chapter that consists of narratives from the lives of Parbati Dagaura and Chuke Chaudhari is one of the strongest in the book. The life of *kamaiyā* Chuke Chaudhari demonstrates how the government’s declaration to free *kamaiyās* was hollow and furnished without any preparations.

The book points to the various hypocrisies of a government that lead to marginalized people being oppressed even further. Tara says, “Now, the jungle too does not belong to us. We don’t get woods whenever we need. Government is mute to the tusker. They earned millions of rupees selling wood. We don’t get to use it as fuel to cook food with” (p. 81).

A weakness in the text is that some of the profiles are unnecessarily lengthy and filled with details that if removed, would not detract from the strength of the accounts. At points, the author seems to be overwhelmed by the everyday life of the chosen landless people, so in some sections the narration reads like an overflowing emotional diatribe. The lengthy backgrounds could have been cut down, for example Ganga Maya Baniya’s prolonged description about pursuing education could have been shorter.

Being a work of nonfiction, *Bhuiyā*, resounds like a story with facts and figures. The use of images and symbols relate mostly with the struggles of the landless, but at times also seem ridiculous. For example, on page 90 a metaphor, “*udās bāluwā* (sad sands) *paṭiyekā dhuṅgā* (overturned stone)” is used. Do sands become sad? What could be the meaning of an ‘overturned stone’?

To sum up, these stories of resentment and compassion could be a source of reference to those having interest in ground-level problems of the landless of Nepal.