

Laya Prasad Uprety, Suresh Dhakal and Jagat Basnet, eds. 2018. *Peasant Studies in Nepal*. New York: Vajra Books.

Peasants are rapidly disappearing all over the world, so is peasant studies. This is not surprising in Nepal, where remittance now contributes more to gross domestic product (GDP) than agriculture does. Peasants' rights mutate into land/property rights in the context of rapid urbanization and rising land prices. Yet, the allure of studying peasants remains. An edited volume contributed to by "eight scholars working in the disciplines of anthropology, sociology and agricultural sciences," and claiming to stand "as a comprehensive *reader* on 'peasants' and 'peasantry' in contemporary Nepal" (back cover, italics added) is sure to raise expectations among academics and activists alike.

The book contains eight chapters, preceded by an Editorial Preface containing summaries of each chapter. These include one conceptual chapter, one review of peasant movements and one review of land reform, two NGO-ish policy reviews, and three empirical studies.

The first chapter, by Suresh Dhakal, focuses on different conceptualizations and definitions of peasants by anthropologists. He does not wish to engage in the debate of defining peasants, but follows Benno Galjart's and Raymond Firth's criteria of peasantry that include smallholders, tenant cultivators, and agricultural laborers. In the case of Nepal, Dhakal claims that the term *kisān* "signifies both landed class and the tenants and small holders" (p. 5) and suggests that it should be used with caution. He then goes on to briefly review peasant resistance and peasants' roles in communist revolutions around the world, including in Nepal. This chapter intends to serve as an introduction to the book itself (maybe due to its position in the beginning of the book), but it focuses mainly on peasant resistance and mobilization. The author admits that his chapter is just a "provocation" or a "wake-up call" to advance peasant studies in Nepal and throws questions for others to consider. However, the chapter does not contain enough material to provoke others to do so.

The second chapter, by David Seddon, is a long overview of peasant movements in Nepal, from the rise of the Kingdom of Gorkha in the 1750s to the end of the Panchayat System in 1990. It presents an informative analysis of Nepal as a tributary state, oppression of peasants by the state and elites, and peasant resistance. The chapter documents not only revolts

by the oppressed peasantry, but also by landed elites against confiscation, such as of *birtā* land, and the state's careful navigation through revolts by keeping peasants' oppression intact. The author shows that peasant revolts are not just against oppression by tributary states and landlords, but that after the 1950s such struggles are more for land/property rights as informed by political ideology than for access to land as a factor of production.

In the third chapter, author Janak Rai begins with a conversation with a Dhimal activist in Morang focusing on the Dhimals' current state of landlessness as a result of lack of accumulation of land even when it was available aplenty. He attributes this, conceptually, to Dhimals' differing understanding of and relationship with land. As an indigenous people, Dhimals viewed land, labor, and products as culturally produced, exchanged, and consumed. For peasants, by contrast, land is both commodity and property with surplus going to the elites/rulers. However, because owning land meant "entering into tenurial relationship with the state that was filled with hardship" (p. 114), Dhimals opted to work as tenants of landed Dhimal Majhis. Rai argues that as Rana rulers intensified land colonization and expansion of cultivation in the second half of the nineteenth century, Dhimals, who practiced shifting agriculture, began to lose land to non-Dhimals. Moreover, after malaria eradication in the 1950s, massive in-migration from hill regions increased pressure on land, and Dhimals were alienated from their land through mortgage, forced sales, and appropriation for public infrastructure. Also, Dhimal Majhi landlords lost landholdings due to lack of political connections. This chapter gives good insights into the relationship between indigenous people and the state in terms of land, and how the state dispossesses them from land through laws and coercion.

Jagat Basnet's chapter is about marginalization of tenants even after the land reform program started in 1964. It contains data on distribution of landholding at the time of and after the land reform, showing that the number of tenants decreased after land reform. It also discusses many provisions and practices during the land reform implementation that marginalized tenants and bolstered the position of big landholders. This chapter re-confirms what has already been established on tenant marginalization in land reform or land ownership literature. Although purportedly based on "empirical observations and discussions," the evidence is too scattered and brief to give a clear picture of tenant marginalization in the western Tarai. It lacks

new information, analysis, or perspective on tenancy, land ownership, land reform, or peasantry.

Yamuna Ghale, writing on food security governance, argues that exclusion of poor peasants restricts their ability to be empowered and hinders their broader political, economic, and social transformation. She then presents women-specific provisions/objectives in agricultural policies and programs and international instruments, followed by “analytical frameworks” for moving “from exclusion to inclusion” of people. She also presents five cases of peasant situations that are too general and brief, lacking in detail and not related to peasants *per se*. This chapter is a compilation of policy provisions, “analytical frameworks,” and statements that do not relate to one another and have no direct relation to peasantry. The conclusions she derives are not justified. Although (somehow) intelligible to the editors (as evident in the Editorial Preface), other readers will have a hard time understanding the meaning and significance of its contents.

Madhu Giri focuses on changing labor regimes of Musahars in the Tarai. This chapter highlights diverse strategies for livelihood after Musahars gained freedom from being bonded agricultural laborers, such as sharecropping, livestock sharing, contractual labor and mediation, and firewood collection, showing the evolution from forced to free labor. It gives a clear picture of the economy of Musahars through case stories, but Giri regards all Musahars—from sharecroppers, to firewood-selling non-farm workers, to “middlemen” in getting loans and in buying/selling labor—as peasants. However, it is not clear whether the author is trying to say that Musahars are always or were previously peasants but their labor is changing, or their changing labor is making them peasants (such as through sharecropping).

Kapil Dahal has attempted to portray the transformation of peasantry in a rural area of Gorkha by discussing how increasing outmigration has changed agricultural relations and peasants’ sociocultural life. He discusses these changes through two past practices: migrant people saying *bhāg-bhog sakiyeko* (“consumption is over”) and leaving the village at or before dawn to avoid being seen leaving; and *besāune* (buying cereals from neighbors) as a stigma, as an indicator of impoverishment. He notes that these are no longer stigmas, but rather migrating and buying sacks of rice from the Tarai are now signs of prestige. This chapter presents some common observations and common discourse about rural Nepal. The observations lack detail and the examples given do not look like they have been derived from “ethnography”

and “15 life histories” (p. 219). As for Lenin’s views, they are too far removed in time and space to account for changes happening in Nepal today.

The final, long chapter by Laya Uprety aims to provide a framework for linking land with human rights in South Asia. It provides a long collection of South Asian (and some national) legal provisions on issues of land rights as human rights, including access to food, right to housing, right to indigenous land mainly related to protection against illegal land grabbing, land right problems, and land right movements. This chapter is a jumble of provisions in legal instruments regarding land rights, and seems to imply land as comprising anything on the surface of earth. Although having “peasants’ land rights” and “engaged anthropology” in the title, it has no discussion of public issues and political struggles for social justice, or motivational calls for such activism; nor is it related to peasants *per se*. Moreover, the chapter contains an obviously erroneous supposition: “... the fact that the ‘right to food’ is ensured *only* with the access to land (a means of producing the food)” (p. 259, italics added).

This book has enough problems to disappoint an academic, or even a general, reader attracted by its title. Although the book boasts its contribution to the “‘production of knowledge’ on ‘peasants,’ ‘peasant economy’ and ‘peasant rights’” (p. ix) in Nepal, it contains more reiteration than production, more general description than knowledge, and more NGO-ish policy review than anthropological/sociological conceptual/empirical review. In a thematic edited volume, readers expect that the editors will identify common themes and discuss similarities and differences around those themes among the chapters in their introduction (or Editorial Preface, in this case) to the book. Without such a discussion, the chapters in this book at best seem disjointed.

Simply mentioning that “[t]his is a peer-reviewed publication” (in the copyright page) does not make a book peer reviewed in its real sense. Many chapters have incomplete/ambiguous sentences and contain many unsupported assertions, along with many errors of grammar, style and referencing. They remain in the book as evidence of the poor peer review and copyediting that went into its making. Despite its weaknesses, this book does have some chapters that provide a few insightful perspectives on Nepali rural society, economy, and politics.

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