

# book reviews

Mahesh C. Regmi

Landownership in Nepal (University of California Press, Berkeley: 1976), pp. xvii, 231, xx.

Mahesh Regmi's latest contribution to the field of Nepal studies is in many ways his best. Landownership in Nepal is the distillation of years of research and analysis of the problems of landownership and tenure in Nepal. It is a book no serious student of Nepal can afford to ignore. Landownership in Nepal does not replace Regmi's earlier work: Land Tenure and Taxation in Nepal (University of California Press, Berkeley: 1963-68, 4 volumes). Many readers will surely want to refer to that earlier work to round out their understanding of the modalities of land ownership and tenure. Land Tenure was a less mature study than the present work, but nevertheless it is still a landmark in the social and economic history of Nepal and the four volumes of Land Tenure treat of several aspects of land and tenancy on the land in much greater detail than is possible in the single volume of Regmi's Landownership in Nepal.

Landownership in Nepal, however, is not merely a re-serving of old broth. This is a new book, far more penetrating in its analysis and far more precise in its statement of themes than the earlier work. While both books deal with the land and land-related problems, Landownership in Nepal differs from Land Tenure and Taxation in Nepal precisely as the titles of the two works indicate. Land ownership and land tenure are correlative concepts, as the reader will readily discern, but they are most decidedly different.

The first impression the reader forms of Landownership in Nepal is one of appreciation for Regmi's grasp of the documents. The casual reader should be impressed. Those who have worked with the sorts of documents that form the basis of this book will be overwhelmed. Not only are these documents embarrassingly abundant, they are also difficult to read and even more difficult to interpret, covering as they do a two hundred year span, recording an almost imperceptible evolution of real ownership rights in the land.

Secondly, one is struck by the clarity of Regmi's description of the successive stages in the emergence of land ownership rights in Nepal. His main theme is easy to follow, but so also are the subsidiary themes dealing with the various degrees of participation in ownership rights that were a distinguishing facet of Nepalese economic growth.

Regmi's earlier study of the concepts of land tenure and taxation in Nepal has served him well in the present work. There is no doubt that the basic question he addresses in Landownership grew out of his earlier study of the intricacies of land tenure in Nepal. His discussion of land ownership is far broader and much

more profound than could have been possible had he not first broken the ground in his earlier study. Saying this does not detract from Landownership's stature. Even when the subject requires a re-introduction of old themes, the reader profits from the more mature handling of these themes in Landownership. This is the third characteristic of this book that I would point out to the reader, maturity. Landownership shows Regmi as a master of the ideas he was quite evidently labouring to express in Land Tenure. In a sense, he is too much the master. He makes ideas that have the most complex origins seem simple and obvious. Only when the reader begins to piece together the intricate maze of ownership rights with all their varying degrees will he realize the full import of what Regmi has done. The glossary alone is evidence of this mastery. No dictionary, encyclopaedia, or study will provide the definitions Regmi has included as an aid to the reader. Each entry is simply and clearly stated. Yet each of these is the result of careful analysis of parallel usages and constant comparison of each term with related expressions. For historians of Nepal, the glossary is worth the price of the book. However, even this is surpassed by the textual treatment Regmi has given each of these concepts in the body of his book.

Perhaps most important, Regmi has given his description of the growth of ownership rights in the land a distinct sense of motion. We are not confronted with static pictures in which detail is added to dreary detail, but a sense of growth, of change, of response to stimulus. This is an achievement one appreciates more fully when Landownership is compared with contemporary literature on Asian economic history.

Landownership in Nepal is not without its flaws. The major flaw I would cite is a by-product of the maturing of Regmi's thought. His more precise explanation of terms in Landownership is at times quite at variance with his earlier explanations of the same terms. The reader is entitled to a comment or a note explaining that this is a development of Regmi's thought. This is particularly indicated because in his earlier works Regmi's style is compact, even dense. I think the reader has a right to know whether he has himself misunderstood the earlier version or the present version is indeed the result of new material or new understanding on the part of the author.

Landownership raises many questions for the enquiring mind. Individual readers will find abundant challenges to their own thinking, whatever their reason for studying the book. But two general questions have to be asked here that apply regardless of the individual reader's interest.

First, there is the question of publication. Abundant thanks are due to the Center for South and Southeast Asia Studies at the University of California at Berkeley for bringing out such a fine volume. Berkeley recognized what our own Nepali publishers and

research organizations failed to see, that this is a fundamental book that was badly needed. Nepal's need was far greater than Berkeley's. Yet for some reason buried in the labyrinthine ways of local bureaucracy, this book was not published in Nepal. We are the losers. The manuscript was ready for the press in 1972. Berkeley published it in 1976. We lost four years. One suspects that this may not be the only case of local genius, unrecognized at home, going begging abroad. One is justified in asking why?

Secondly, this book is not the first important study that Regmi has given us. His three books: Land Tenure and Taxation in Nepal, A Study in Nepali Economic History: 1768-1846, and Landownership in Nepal (plus his various research papers) have given us a rich body of works documenting and analyzing Nepal's economic institutions and growth. Serious students of Nepal have found Regmi's work more and more useful as a support for their own work or as a base for a new line of reasoning. It is time to give credit where credit is due. Government reports, foreign advisers to Nepal, and foreign scholars have borrowed liberally from Regmi with little more than a nod of recognition or, at times, no recognition at all. Will Landownership be another mine of ideas to be borrowed without the simple courtesy of recognition, or will academics in the specialized world of Nepal studies have a change of heart and give public recognition to the man whose ideas and questions have so strongly influenced their own work? Regmi is, of course, not the only Nepali scholar who has been 'used' in this way, but it is his work that is under discussion here.

The other side of this coin must be mentioned as well. Local historians can no longer afford to ignore Regmi's contributions. Well over twenty years have passed since Regmi's works began to appear. It is now apparent that his writings challenge many cherished positions that no longer seem tenable. It is not a question of who is right and who is wrong. It is a question of growth in our understanding of our common heritage. Regmi's conclusions have a great deal to contribute and any serious scholar should want to consider and to evaluate the evidence and the arguments Regmi presents.

It is not merely Mahesh Regmi's conclusions that have significance for the local historian (professor, writer, or student). Regmi's methodology also has a significant role to play in the development and writing of Nepalese history today. Historians in Nepal have begun to sense that they have outgrown the facile chronology and evidence consisting of an isolated lal mohar. Those who take the time to study Regmi's Landownership in Nepal will find it a singularly apt introduction to the methodology of modern historiography.

Mahesh Regmi's Landownership in Nepal is a lasting book, one that will be sought long after it goes out of print. Land Tenure and Taxation in Nepal has already become a collector's item for experts on Nepal. Landownership is destined to joined it as a basic book for any serious study of Nepal.

L.F. Stiller, S.J.

NEPALI JANAJIVAN, Khoj-grantha (Folk Life of Nepal, A Research work) Achalā Bhagawati Prakāshan, Darjeeling, January 1976, 137 p. price: Rs. 8.50 (N.C.).

Many ethnographic and ethnological works on Nepal have been already published in many languages by foreign anthropologists especially since 1951, when Nepal opened her door to the outside world. There are however, only a few ethnographic works that are reported by Nepali authors either in Nepali or English. Bista (1967) pioneered in this field through his publication of People of Nepal (HMG, Department of Publicity, Kathmandu) and his work has been referred so much both in Nepal and elsewhere, that it seems to be providing base line data even today for all those are doing serious work. This was followed by another Nepali publication, which has also been often referred to in the literature, called Hami Nepali (Shrestha, S.L.: 1971: Shrestha Prakashan, Lalitpur, 104 p., price Rs. 3.00). This book, in a nutshell, describes the groups such as Newars, Khas and other Eastern Terai groups (viz. Dhimal, Satar, Rajbangshi, Meche) and studies the linguistic affinities of these groups. The other noteworthy publication in Nepali is, Diyar Gaunka Thakuriharu (Shrestha, B.K.: 1972: Thakuris of Diyar Gaon, Karnali Lok Sanskriti, Vol. III, Royal Nepal Academy, Kathmandu), which is one of the only Nepali publication that meets a 'western' standard. This was the outcome of a multidisciplinary study in the Karnali Zone (Far - Western Nepal). This work represents a good 'model' of the kind of social research work that Nepal needs most. This was preceded by a publication, called Ethnic Groups of Nepal and Their Ways of Living, (Shrestha, D.B., C.M. Singh and B.M. Pradhan; 1972, Authors, Kathmandu). The latter work is not based on original research and is rather more of interest to tourists more or less coying the People of Nepal. Mr. Bista published another book in Nepali: Sabai Jatko Phulbari (Bista, D.B., 1973, Garden of all castes, Sajha Prakashan, Kathmandu, 131 p.). It is also a translation of author's earlier work, in an abridged form but with a view to catch the sentimentality of the groups described in People of Nepal. The general ethnography of Nepal has also been briefly dealt with in Nepal in Perspective (Bista, D.B., 1973: Rana and Malla (ed.), CEDA, Kathmandu, pp. 34-46). Royal Nepal Academy published another preliminary report on multidisciplinary study, entitled, Dhimal-Folk Life Study (Divas, Subba, Rai, Dahal and Sakya: 1973: Kathmandu, 31 p.).

One Ph.D. dissertation (or thesis) by Dr. Khem Bahadur Bista (Le Culte du Kuldevta au Nepal, en particulier chez certains Ksatri de la valee de Kathmandu, Paris, 1970) has been published while another by Dr. Bed Prakash Uprety (Analysis of Change in Limbu-Brahmin: Interrelationships in Limbuwan, Nepal) awaits publication. Since the inception of INAS, under Tribhuvan University as a research institute, the department of Anthropology/Sociology has conducted few projects on this line. Two of them, The Economy of

Pandrung: A Study of Chepang of Central Nepal (Rai, N.K., 1975: INAS, Kirtipur, 323 p.) and An Ethnographic Study of Social Change among the Athpahariya Rais of Dhankuta (Dahal, D.R., 1975: INAS Kirtipur, 274 p.) have been completed and are awaiting publication.

Mild attempts have also been made to publish ethnographic works by Nepalese authors in journals, magazines and newspapers published in Nepal. To name some of them, but not all, are Contributions to Nepalese Studies (INAS: Kirtipur), Kailash (Ratna Pustak Bhandar: Kathmandu), The Himalayan Review (Nepal Geographical Society: Kathmandu), Journal of Tribhuvan University (TU: Kathmandu), Pra-chin Nepal (Archaeological Department: Kathmandu), Madhuparka (Gorkhapatra Corporation: Kathmandu), Panchayat Darpan (Training Material Production Centre: Lalitpur), Hamro Sanskriti (Department of Culture: Kathmandu). Regmi Research Series (Regmi Research: Kathmandu) often translates ethnographic work from Nepali and publishes them in English.

Last year (1975), Janchbujh Kendra (Royal Investigation Bureau) compiled, edited and published a noteworthy publication on Nepal, called, Mechidekhi Mahakali (A Gazetteer of Nepal: 1975: Kathmandu, 4380 p.) which partly deals with the ethnic groups of Nepal studied both by Nepalese and foreign anthropologists. This work has been already reviewed in Contributions to Nepalese Studies (Sharma, P.R.: 1976, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 129-134) and also in Madhuparka (Rai and Dahal: 1976: Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 58-68).

The present work (Nepāli Janajivan) under review, as the author of the book claims, is an offshoot of the works published in Mechidekhi Mahakali. He claims to have reedited the ethnographic material and published it in book form. The author feels that the credit in the book should go to the authors, who have contributed articles in Mechidekhi Mahakali. The author of the present book worked as a member of the editorial board in the publication of Mechidekhi Mahakali and the articles submitted to Royal Investigation Bureau were once again abridged in the book (see p. 3). Needless to say, most of the lines of this book are quite comparable and compatible with the lines from Mechidekhi Mahakali. The book lists such groups as Brahmins, Chhetris, Sanyashis, Ghartis, Kami, Sarki under the label of Kehi Byabashaik Jatharu (occupational castes). The author states that Brahmins (the priests), Chhetris (the army) Sanyashis (the yogis) and Ghartis (the 'slaves') (but excluding Thakuris) should be 'classified' as occupational castes. In addition, thirty-six ethnic groups living in areas within Nepal have been listed alphabetically, and each of their racial, social, cultural, religious and economic aspects have been discussed obviously in a much sketchier form than found in Mechidekhi Mahakali. The longest article is on Newars (pp. 64-78) and the shortest in on Humli 'Tamangs' (half a page).

The bhumika (preface) and mera kehi kura (also preface) repeat almost the same lines and it is felt that one of these could have spelled out what the author has intended the book to be. The research workers, with whose co-operation the book was assembled are not acknowledged (their names have not even been mentioned), although it is promised in the preface of the book (p. 5), a fault to some extent repeated from Mechidekhi Mahakali.

While reading this book, two questions obviously arise. If this work is not original and if this has been already published in much greater detail in Mechidekhi Mahakali, is there any point in reprinting this 'revised and compact' form? Secondly for how long we Nepalese are going to quote, requote, or 'launder' the same work or material, when People of Nepal was written in greater detail, ten years ago? We dare say that the works published in an 'alien' language are not comprehensible and inaccessible to common citizens. Yet we have been 'photocopying' our own earliest works adding little more than hearsay to it.

I do not want to blame only the author of the work under review because we have experienced such cases even in the past. The existence of People of Nepal published in 1967 is completely ignored by the authors of the book Ethnic Groups of Nepal and Their Ways of Living which was published in 1972. Can the authors give proof to the question that they did not see the earlier publication published five years earlier? Anybody can see from the face of the latter book that it was not based on field work. This trend would certainly discourage serious workers in the field especially when facing exploitation on the part of subsequent authors. The scholars' code of conduct (not to mention copyright rules) necessitate that due credit be given to the original authors. Many daily and weekly newspapers such as Gorkhapatra and The Rising Nepal (both published by Gorkhapatra Corporation) have also been seen from time to time publishing 'cheap' articles on ethnography. Radio Nepal broadcasts stale articles from time to time. The editors in these media cannot ignore any longer the work that has been accomplished to date. This trend does not help, but discourages the healthy nourishment of research that is now being undertaken. We do not want anymore 'quantity' but 'quality' of the work. This kind of 'reprinting' may help the new author to gain cheap popularity but it will not help him in the long run. To quote the original author correctly will not spoil the borrowing author's academic picture, rather it enlarges the impression of his knowledge.

In the line that I have taken above I would consider this work under review of almost the same pattern of Ethnic Groups of Nepal and Their Ways of Living. In fact Hami Nepali can be considered relatively of a better quality in this regard, because it reports first hand field observation and is much more guided by the author's independent work, but it also gives a smell of sentimentality and ethnocentric bias. It reports some 'facts' which can never be proven from anthropological and linguistic point of

view. This trend is also a danger to authentic research and it ought to be discouraged.

The author, I believe, is a very brilliant writer of many essays relating the social norms of Nepalese life. His interest, if I am correct, is now bending towards a serious study of history, art and architecture and people of Nepal. We can expect from him more serious publications in the future. My aim to write this review is just to call an attention of the Nepalese students of Anthropology as to evaluate the work done in the last decade and equip ourselves for the future.

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