

Book Reviews

Nanda R. Shrestha. (2018). *Landlessness and Migration in Nepal*. Routledge.

As a student of Himalayan Studies, I have always been curious about people's mobility, migration patterns, and access to land amid the political transitions in history. The dramatic shift in landscape, eco-demography, and people's relocation over time has left behind people's mobility stories, revolving around everyday livelihood and coping strategies. Against this backdrop, I found Nanda R. Shrestha's book *Landlessness and Migration in Nepal* (2018) intriguing as the book captures the similar subject of land, labor, and migration in Nepal. Shrestha expounds on the historical exodus of Nepali hill migrants from the highland to the lowland, referring to it as a "frontier migration" and claims that this mobility process led to the underutilization and loss in the country's labor force.

The book is 277 pages long, divided into seven chapters, each of which has its sub-sections. The book was first published in 1990 by Westview Press Inc., and reissued in 2001 by an Indian Publisher, Nirala, and the present volume under review was reprinted in 2018 by Routledge. Presently, when many are only paying heed to Nepal's existing international migration trend, this book is valuable for readers of all kinds, who are inquisitive about the in-migratory pattern, its causes, and its consequences. By primarily describing Nepal's agrarian land structure and juxtaposing it with the plight of those hill migrants who toil in the new land and their fate shaped by the patrimonial state policy, Shrestha contrasts the notions of "development" and "underdevelopment," employing a critically neo-Marxist approach. While he examines the paradox of "frontier migration," Chapter Six goes into more detail about the same. While dealing with the issue of frontier migration, Shrestha challenges the state development policies by bringing up the issue of landlessness and "nearlandlessness," and spontaneous settlement on the frontier which subsequently weakened both the local and national development of the country. In addition to this, the book also illuminates the donor-driven development initiatives leading to disastrous ramifications for the place, people, and environment. The texts are easy to read, with nuanced premises and arguments firmly interwoven in a Nepali setting with a wide range of related theories in each Chapter.

The First Chapter "A Profile of Nepal's Agrarian Economy," provides an overview of the country's agrarian structure shedding light on the issue of demography, mobility, land, and labor. Here, the author pitches the idea of frontier migration

and discusses how it affects Nepal's agrarian economy to emphasize the connection between demographic structure and geographical population. Also, the Chapter explains how the ruling class controls the resources and reaps the most from them, underlining how the state policies failed to solve the problems related to land, labor, absentee population, and mobility from the hills to the plains.

The Second Chapter, "A General Theory of Underdevelopment and Migration" expands upon the theoretical framework by demonstrating the link between migration, labor displacement, and underdevelopment. This connection is drawn from a variety of left-leaning literature and classical migration theories, shedding light on the continuing phenomenon of human mobility given the market economy's persistent presence and penetration. With the expanding capitalist market system and wage-dominated economic structure becoming more prevalent, Shrestha puts up three key issues: Who migrates and from what class? Why does migration occur, as opposed to why an individual migrates? What effects does migration have on both the economic development and the migrants themselves? This is a useful chapter for researchers who wish to align with and synthesize theories related to migration.

The Third Chapter "State Policies, Underdevelopment and Hill Outmigration," offers a historical analysis of the causes of migration. The Chapter addresses the trajectory of hill mobility through internal and external factors, culminating in underdevelopment. As an internal factor, Shrestha accentuates Nepal's phases of social formations and transitions at different political times and blames the institutional measures taken during the Shah and Rana regimes. Moreover, he believes, these governing classes severely exploited the working force by stifling its ability to grow into productive forces while also completely separating land and labor. For instance, during unification, the Nepali labor force was absorbed into King Prithivi Narayan Shah's army for military purposes and later they were simply used for building palaces, temples, forts, and providing for the needs of the royal family and palace, without being compensated for their labor (p. 74). Eventually, the state's land policies and mounting agricultural debt made it harder for hill households to survive, forcing many to move to the frontiers of Darjeeling, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Burma. Likewise, he places the responsibility externally on the British Indian policy of enlisting young men from the hills to serve in its imperial army. Shrestha raises an exciting revelation in this section by emphasizing the drastic change in the migration scenario affecting the population dynamics. "The hills—once an important destination for foreign immigrants—have now become a prominent source of outmigration to other parts of the country as well as outside the country, mainly India" (p. 87).

The Fourth Chapter, "Landlessness and Nearlandlessness: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis," provides a macro-scale analysis of poverty, development, landlessness, and nearlandlessness. Here, he argues that without a thorough grasp

of the agricultural class system, rising population growth, eco-demographic growth trends, and regional distribution patterns, it is impossible to understand the issue of land in the broader context of Nepal. The conventional view of landlessness as a lack of land or scarcity is challenged by the author's take on individual land ownership and the relationship between man-land production and physiographic forces. The massive migration of people from Hills to Tarai has led to an enormous population rise and land scarcity, illustrating the issue of nearlandlessness. With this, Shrestha claims that "Agricultural capitalization and industrial development have been insignificant in the process of landlessness and nearlandlessness in Nepal because they are both generally absent in its agrarian space-economy" (p. 135). With this, he concludes by saying that, "Nepal will continue to have nearly landlessness for a very long period" (p. 137).

Chapter Five, "Patrimonial State, Development Planning, and Origins of Land Colonization Policy" explains the history of frontier land colonization by charting the interconnectedness of patrimonial state, state policies, and land colonization. This Chapter exhibits land politics, as state elites gain control over land by institutionalizing and regulating the state plans and policies. State machinery is used as a weapon for land colonization, transforming landowners into landed gentry and suppressing the voices of the peasants. Shrestha makes it clear that whatever the plans and policies the patrimonial state makes is not to serve the needs of the poor, but rather the vested needs and interests of the ruling elites and landowners (p. 158).

It is clear that Shrestha opposes the notion of frontier migration and believes it to be a state-sponsored measure. The observations he made in two central Tarai districts, Nawalparasi and Chitwan, as well as the field survey he conducted during 1979 and 1988, form the basis of the Sixth Chapter "Frontier Migration and Hill Migrants' Achievement in the Tarai." The Chapter explores the economic impact of frontier migration on Hill migrants, especially in southern Tarai, examining their adaptations and achievements. Shrestha reinforces the premise of landlessness, nearlandlessness, and land colonization policy discussed in Chapter Five by reappraising the resettlement project that arose after 1950 in various parts of Nepal's lowlands. Here too, he argues that the resettlement itself was a state-sponsored political project in expanding the particular class of Hill people in the Tarai, as Tarai continued to be an integral component both politically and economically for Kathmandu's government.

In the Seventh and last Chapter, "The Politics of Land, Spontaneous Settlement, and the Prospect of Agrarian Revolution?," the author asserts that the hill settlement and resettlement that was overpowered in the Tarai was deliberately cultivated by the patrimonial Nepali state whose sole intent was to play a politics in lowland geography. Numerous people were drawn to Chitwan and other lowland regions by the state's implementation of its resettlement program. However, not all equally received the land from the government. Rather, it was

intended for a specific class and group of migrants and wealthy landlords. This created a large gap and rift between those who own and those who do not. Finally, Shrestha predicts a potential peasant-migrant revolution, referencing the 1979 Chitwan landless movement, but at the same time warns that it could be thwarted by the region's increasing population settlement.

The book's subject matter and the persuasive analytical expression that flows within the text enthrall the reader and hold their attention throughout. Despite the book's scholarly value, the author erred on certain grounds that call into doubt the book's meaning and maturity. The book has been republished several times, but each edition maintains the same content with just a little modification in the Chapter's title. The reappearance of the book with the same content perplexes young readers in the era of neo-liberalism since the author's observation appears contradictory and strange given the stark transformations that have occurred in Nepal's Tarai region today. This is visible in the author's fieldwork locations, Chitwan and Nawalparasi. Thus, a synchronic examination of Nepal's lowlands is completely absent in the book.

Similarly, in the present Nepali context, the author's antiquated conceptions of Nepal as a predominantly agricultural society, agriculture as the principal source of livelihood, and agriculture as the main reason for regional migration, all appear out of date. A large number of people are turning to non-farm activities and moving abroad in search of unskilled, semiskilled, and skilled jobs. There's an extreme shortage of agricultural laborers, lands are either sold out or are barren and the farm or agricultural activities have drastically declined today. Furthermore, the way the author generalizes the all-Tarai region of Nepal just based on his two field sites is incomplete and partially accurate. Contrary to what the author states in his book, the situation of Eastern and Western Tarai is completely different. In his future edition, perhaps, the author will provide his readers with something fresh and insightful. Nevertheless, this book is an important contribution, benefitting all kinds of researchers interested in the politics of land, labor, and migration.

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