

**Manik Bajracharya, ed. 2022. *Slavery and Unfree Labour in Nepal: Documents from the 18th to Early 20th Century*. Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing.**

A critical study of slavery is few and far between in Nepali historiography. Conventional narrative of slavery often begins and ends with the Rana Prime Minister Chandra Shamsher's banishment of the institution on November 28, 1924. Yet this Rana movement against slavery too remains critically unexamined. It might be worth briefly noting some key arguments outlined by Chandra Shamsher against the practice of slavery in Nepal.<sup>1</sup> Calling slavery an ancient system anchored in religion and culture, he highlighted slave ownership as a bad investment decision. According to him, capital used to purchase slaves otherwise invested at a 10 percent interest rate yields a guaranteed and a stable financial return without a perennial risk of monetary loss resulting from runaway slaves.<sup>2</sup> He further emphasized since wage labor is readily available at a cheaper cost it was financially unsound to pay additional expenses required for slave upkeep.<sup>3</sup> The Rana ruler thus sought to dissuade slave practice in Nepal by emphatically invoking an economical logic. Furthermore, in portraying it as a relic of religion and local

<sup>1</sup> See Rana (1924) for the English translation of Chandra Shamsher's long speech delivered on November 28, 1924.

<sup>2</sup> According to the data presented, the cost of bringing up a slave boy until he reached age sixteen was Rs. 409. When the purchase and maintenance cost of a slave mother was added this totaled to Rs. 1,123. If the same amount of money were invested in an interest bearing investment option the return would be much higher and secure.

<sup>3</sup> Chandra Shamsher stated that wage labor hired at Rs. 6 per month was way cheaper and efficient. He emphasized that slave labor was an inefficient labor because the slaves had no incentive to perform more than the minimum labor to survive, which at any rate was provided by their masters.

customs, he deliberately sidestepped on how the control of that institution had been a fundamental part of the growing legitimacy of the Rana clan through much of the 19th and early 20th century. Earlier generation of scholars similarly overlooked the centrality of slave practice to law making and state consolidation in Nepal.<sup>4</sup> More importantly, one sided focus on “productivity” and “efficiency” both by the Rana state and the subsequent body of scholarship has eclipsed the many ways in which slaves contributed to the master’s households and to the latter’s social reproduction.

*Slavery and Unfree Labour in Nepal: Documents from the 18th to Early 20th Century* offers a possibility to interrogate the role and legacy of slavery in Nepali state building process. A carefully curated collection of a range of primary documents on slavery featured in this edited volume highlights both the extensive scope of slave practice and the role Nepali state played in sustaining it. As the subtitle suggests, the majority of the included sources pertain to the period between the dawn of the Gorkhali power and the closing decades of the Rana rule. The volume is divided into three parts. In an engaging introductory section, Manik Bajracharya and Axel Michaels emphasize the importance of studying South Asian slave practices outside the dominant Atlantic Plantation framework. The duo then trace the earliest history of slave practice in Nepal dating back to the seventh century Licchavi era. Table 1 serves a succinct and useful testament to a long genealogy of slavery in Nepal. The remainder of this section explores the causes and consequences of slavery mostly from the mid-18th century onward. This latter discussion primarily underscores the crucial role played by the 1854 *Ain* in structuring and legitimizing various slave status for the violations of state sanctioned bodily and ritual purities. It is, however, somewhat unclear why Bajracharya and Michaels decided to combine the history of slavery in Nepal with other forms of coerced labor practices, such as *jhārā* and *hulāk* in a single introductory chapter. Is the conceptualization of 18th and 19th century labor practices in Nepal through a framework of free and unfree a useful approach?

Section II is *raison d’être* for this volume. This section introduces readers to a range of primary documents pertaining to various facets of slavery in both their original Nepali composition and in English translations, followed by an engaging commentary on individual source. The chronological and

<sup>4</sup> For instance, see Regmi (1971: 117).

geographic variety of these documents offer fascinating, and in some instances, rare glimpses into diverse and widely prevalent practices of slavery in Nepal. Rather than organize the documents in one chronological sweep, the editorial decision to divide them by categories of slave practice is a welcome approach as it makes navigating this section less cumbersome. This latter part is of significance given that the section occupies more than half of the overall space in the edited volume and is the longest chapter. An inclusion of index would have perhaps made navigating the volume even more convenient.

The final section following a brief commentary by Simon Cubelic, Rajan Khatiwada and Axel Michaels on the genesis and scope of the *Ain*, presents some of the crucial articles pertaining to regulations of slavery envisaged by the 1854 Rana legal codification. Like the preceding section, this one also offers both original Nepali as well as English translations of the selected works from the *Ain*. It should be noted that most of these documents featured in section II and III have been published in different venues already. Nevertheless, by bringing them together into a neatly organized volume with attentive translations and succinct commentaries the volume may address a research lacuna in the study of slavery in Nepal. As such, this volume is an invaluable resource to anyone interested in aspects of slavery during the formative period of Nepali history. It may equally serve as a resource for scholars working on comparative histories of slavery who hitherto might have been unable to access Nepali language sources. In this latter regard, the volume may even contribute to various ongoing and upcoming scholarly projects on global and comparative histories of slavery by bringing Nepali materials to a global scholarly community.

The volume should be commended for acknowledging that the history of slavery is more than a causal product of economic exploitation. It engages with the pioneering work of Indrani Chatterjee (1999) and seeks to link slavery to household and family power in Nepal. But the actual discussion of household and family power remain muted in the volume. It does not address why some slaves were considered intimate members of the household. Why were there large number of female slaves in royal households in Nepal? Why did the Rana ruler frequently emancipate some slaves while simultaneously demanding other “young and beautiful” slave girls be sent to the royal palaces from specific parts of Nepal? Nor does the volume resolve the question of whether the caste-based form of slavery was a product of a particular legal

invention or a feature of a Hindu society. If slavery was modulated by caste purity, why were the Limbus elevated in caste ranking in 1863 despite having been originally categorized as enslavable caste in 1854? This much is clear that the Rana state at different historical periods classified groups by establishing and refining vulnerabilities to and exemption from enslavement driven by various political-economic imperatives. It is likewise evident that the Rana family by imposing a new caste hierarchy and reaching into the inner space of households through the *Ain* under the pretext of maintaining moral order played an extraordinary role in creating, defining and sustaining new parameters of slavery after 1854. A more engaging and contextual centering of that familial power and its imbrication with law-making would have perhaps made this a much more engaging read and an apt engagement with Chatterjee's insights on the intimate link between long slavery and the making of family itself.

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