

Book Reviews

Maximillian Mørch. 2023. *Plains of Discontent: A Political History of Nepal's Tarai (1743–2019)*. Kathmandu: FinePrint.

There has been a scholarly eagerness to comprehend the Tarai region of Nepal following the several Madhesh movements of the recent past. This has led to a growing body of academic works on the Tarai/Madhesh's society, culture, conflicts and politics since 2008. *Plains of Discontent* is one such attempt to understand the anger and resentment long felt in the Tarai. Mørch in his monograph seeks to explain Gorkhali internal colonialism, dispossession, political repression, exploitation and the creation of nationalist collective identities in the Tarai.

The book, organized chronologically, maps the history of the Tarai from the rise of the Gorkha state in the mid-18th century to the making of new contemporary political forces (led by CK Raut and Resham Chaudhary). This book synthesizes key political events from the perspective of the Tarai's people. It weaves important social, political and historical events through an extensive review of the published academic literature. The book's target audience appears to be individuals who are unfamiliar with Nepal's Tarai/Madhesh region and mostly English language readers who may benefit from a succinct compilation of the historical events from the perspective of the Tarai.

Mørch, in the introductory section, contextualizes two incidents around which much of his narrative is organized. First, the demands made by the Madheshis and Tharus for federalism claiming autonomy from the unitary and centralized rule to protect their ethnic, cultural and social identities. Second, the events leading up to the Tikapur incident of August 2015, which depicted the prevalent resentment against the Nepali state in southern Nepal. The author perceptibly notes that while Nepal is geographically divided in three regions: 1) the flatland of the Tarai; 2) the mid-hills or Siwalik range; 3) the Himalayas, with almost over half of the country's population living in the flatland, both national and international imaginations continue to view Nepal predominantly as a mountainous landscape. According to Mørch, as a result of this ongoing historical-political-geographical marginalization of the Tarai "Nepal's political future remains in jeopardy." To understand the

present discontent and political cleavages in the Tarai, the author contends “we have to go back to the very beginning” (p. 2).

Chapter One examines two historical incidents and their linkages to the Tarai: 1) Prithvi Narayan Shah and the rise of Gorkhali power; 2) the expansion of the East India Company (EIC) in South Asia and the subsequent Anglo-Nepal war (1814–1816). In the first case, the control of the Tarai provided the emergent Gorkha empire with an important resource base to fund various military campaigns and control the fertile lands all the way across the eastern Tarai. Following the successful military victories, Prithvi Narayan’s brother was appointed the administrator of Bara, Parsa and Rautahat in 1786. As part of the new Gorkhali governing strategy, the leaders of indigenous communities were appointed in various administrative positions to facilitate revenue collections. They were also entrusted to encourage labor migration from India to bring more land under cultivation. The Gorkhali state’s land grants in the Tarai in the form of *jāgīr* further solidified “the survival and growth of the Gorkha empire” (p. 27). Through much of the early 19th century, wide swathes of malarial jungle across the Tarai had allowed Nepali rulers to keep outside power at bay. As both the EIC and Gorkha state began expanding into the Tarai, a collision was inevitable. The eventual defeat of Nepal in the Anglo-Nepal war resulting in the Sugauli Treaty, according to Mørch “was not particularly good news to some of the population in the Tarai.” He states “that the Nepali government was not to take action against the local population in the Tarai” (p. 43). But Mørch argues that many Madheshis were tortured and charged with treason shortly after the war. However, his claims are not substantiated by empirical or archival evidence. He further implies that Madheshis were under suspicion due to their perceived British affiliations and were subjected to prejudices that obstructed their recruitment into the Nepali Army.

In Chapter Two, Mørch reflects on Rana rule (1846–1951) and its impact on the Tarai in four ways. First is the diplomatic astuteness of Jang Bahadur Rana to ally with the British in quelling the 1857 Indian Sepoy Mutiny. This diplomatic move yielded territorial gain known as the *Nayā Muluk* (comprising of present day Banke, Bardiya, Kailali and Kanchanpur Districts) in Nepal. The new territory was distributed amongst the Rana family members as *birtā* and *jāgīr* (as absentee landlords) in exploitative terms. Second is the Rana encouragement of migration from India into the Tarai to clear the forest to generate more revenue, which subsequently

displaced Tharus and other indigenous groups from their ancestral lands. Third is the massive expansion of India's railways that fueled the export of timber from Nepal benefiting the Ranas at the cost of the Tarai's indigenous peoples. The resources extracted from the Tarai region were barely reinvested in the betterment of its inhabitants. Fourth, Ranas used hunting diplomacy by inviting British ruling elites to hunt down (tigers, rhinos, leopards, etc.) in the malarial jungles of the Tarai. The analysis presented by Mørch relies heavily on secondary sources rather than incorporating any new archival research throughout the book; as a result much of what he says reads very familiar.

Chapter Three documents the 1950–1990 period in four ways. First, during this period, the migration from the hills to the Tarai increased significantly under the Rapti Valley Development Project (RVDP). The erstwhile Panchyat regime presented migration as “development” even when it was altering the population composition in the Tarai by favoring hill migrants to the detriment of the local population. Second, the unsuccessful land reform disenfranchised the Madheshis, who lacked proper paper documentation to claim their land. Third, the idea of forest conservation (under the garb of environmental protection) further pushed back Tharus from their ancestral lands. Fourth, the construction of a narrow collective Nepali national identity during the Panchayat period by privileging the cultural ethos of high caste hill groups eclipsed Madheshis, Tharus, and indigenous socio-cultural diversity.

In the last three chapters of the book, Mørch presents a succinct overview of the post-1990 political developments with reference to Madheshis and Tharus. In particular he highlights their anger and resentment in five ways. First, the Maoist insurgency period (1996–2006) opened up avenues for various social and political movements to raise the voice of Madheshis and Tharus. However, the relationship with the Maoists waned over the period for lack of better political representation, social inclusion, and regional autonomy via federalism. Second, Madheshis and Tharus shared many commonalities in the form of historical discrimination by the Nepali state but also pronounced differences to achieve their goals of representation and autonomy vis-à-vis the state. Third, the discontent of Madheshis over citizenship discrimination and statelessness lingered over the generations “following collusion between wealthy landowners and local government officials” (p. 181). Fourth, whereas “the Madhesi movement was against the Nepali government, the Nepali media portrayed it as being a fight

between Madhesis and hill communities” (p. 194–195). Fifth, the amount of extrajudicial killings and human rights violations disproportionately occurred in the Tarai during the Madhesh movements (2007, 2008 and 2015) and there is still cry for justice.

The book offers a brief summary of over 250 years of political developments and their impact on the Tarai. For the reader who wants to read a fast-paced general narrative to understand the discontents of the Madhesis and Tharus, this book is an important contribution. The book, however, fails to incorporate several political and historical events such as Nepal Tarai Congress, the movement of Raghunath Thakur, Durganand Jha, Ramraja Prasad Singh, the role of Nepal Sadbhavana Party led by Gajendra Narayan Singh, Janatantrik Tarai Mukti Morcha led by Jay Krishna Goit, etc. For the book that claims to unpack the “*plains of discontent*,” these omissions are glaring.

Two other aspects weaken the quality of the book. First, it fails to engage with the extensive body of literature in Nepali and other regional languages. The author has not consulted important contributions such as edited books/journal articles published by Martin Chautari and the works produced by Nepal Madhesh Foundation. In relying exclusively on English language sources, the book comes short in offering a comprehensive analysis to unravel the roots of the Tarai’s discontent. Instead of providing an original account of the Tarai’s anger and resentment offered by new archival research or field research data, the book tends to reiterate established information. Rather than providing original research-based content, this book presents an overview of the existing English-language materials to contextualize Tarai/Madhesh spanning 250 years of modern Nepali history. Second, there are many factual and editorial flaws and a highly inconsistent bibliography. For instance, Prithvi Narayan Shah’s date of birth is mistaken (p. 11). He died in 1775 so how could he issue a decree to citizens in 1798 (p. 27)? The slogan *ek des ek prades* (p. 204) should have been *ek Madhesh, ek prades*. The quote in Chapter One attributed to Krishna Bhusan Bal (p. 2, endnote 11) does not match the given reference. The quote, “Say with pride: I am a Madhesi, not a traitor but a son of the soil” (p. 139) is misattributed to Upendra Yadav instead of Matrika Yadav. Critical data points concerning the lands (p. 61) lack proper referencing. Likewise, there are numerous quotes in the book that are either inconsistent with the bibliography or without proper references. This book is poorly edited and the academic readers who value reliability

and validity may face occasional moments of disappointment. However, the overall argument that Mørch makes in the book are still persuasive despite these editorial lapses. Overall, the book makes a good effort to encapsulate and write several centuries of political history in one volume and for that it deserves praise.

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