

David Seddon, Suresh Dhakal and Jagat Basnet. 2020. *Rural Unrest in Nepal: A History of Resistance, Revolt and Rebellion*. New Delhi: Adroit Publishers.

In 1850, Jang Bahadur Rana told Orfeur Cavenagh that “although revolutions often occurred (in Nepal), yet the country as a whole did not suffer more from

such disturbances that England would from a change of Ministry; neither the army nor the peasantry taking any part in the disputes, and submitting without a murmur to the dictates of whichever party might emerge the victors” (p. 1). This quotation suggests that capital city intrigues happen without “a murmur” in the countryside. It suggests the city is active and the countryside is passive. *Rural Unrest in Nepal* suggests the opposite—that Nepal has a 300-year history of resistance, rebellion, revolt and revolution.

This is an important and useful book of synthesis. It puts under one roof all of the known materials about rural unrest in Nepal. It is not new archival work but instead borrows from, builds upon, and adds to works by others, particularly historians Mahesh Chandra Regmi and John Whelpton. It has some minor editing flaws and an inconsistent bibliography, but otherwise is a solid contribution. It will be a point of departure for many people wanting an overview of a particular time period, or a summary view of rural unrest at a particular time and place.

The book is organized chronologically from the rise of Gorkha state in the mid-eighteenth century to just before the Maoist People’s War in the mid-1990s, with separate chapters on each recent decade. The book documents different forms of unrest: resistance to incorporation within the state, revolts against the imposition of excessive taxes by the state or against excessive rents by landowners, and rebellions against the authority and jurisdiction of the state. It looks at both hill and Tarai regions, east and west. It is good social history.

Overall, the authors want us to think more about class but not in a narrow sense. They maintain a capacious definition of class interests but think that often unrest is categorized as ethnic when it also has an important class dimension. They don’t ignore ethnic struggles but think there is a tendency “to define caste and ethnicity when, in reality other aspects of social identity, like class, have played a crucial part” (p. 6).

Relying heavily on the interpretations of Mahesh Chandra Regmi, the first short three chapters of *Rural Unrest in Nepal* address the establishment and expansion of the Gorkhali state. The authors document the resistance to the Gorkhas in the Kathmandu Valley, in the eastern and western hills, and in the far west. By the third decade of the nineteenth century, the authors argue, the Nepali population has become mostly peasants. “In so far as they were for the most part cultivators subordinate to the Gorkhali state, most of the population could be broadly characterized as peasants . . . , subject to state

jurisdiction and authority, and obliged to pay rent and taxes” (p. 37). By this time the Gorkhali state had already “evolved into a powerful apparatus,” that could control coerce and raise revenues (p. 37).

The second section of the book deals with Rana rule. Seddon, Dhakal and Basnet see the Rana regime as a type of “prebendalism,” which they define as “political systems where state officials (civil and military) feel they have a right to a share of government revenues, and use them to benefit their own extended families and social networks” (p. 37). They agree with Regmi’s assessment that Jang Bahadur Rana was similar to rulers before him in approach, only more efficient and favored by outside events. He oversaw an “authoritarian but effective regime” with “a growing and relatively dynamic agrarian economy” fueled by exports of agriculture and timber to British India.

Four things explain how Ranas were able to expand revenue—expansion of cultivation, greater bureaucratic efficiency, expanded exports particularly of timber and some tax increases. The authors note that there was little unrest during the Rana years because the Ranas were very careful about not creating too much of a tax burden. Migration also provided a safety valve of sorts. Peasants voted with their feet, leaving Nepal for India if work terms got too bad. This applied to not just the Tarai but also the hills, particularly the eastern hills.

Nonetheless, it would be wrong to say there was no resistance to Ranas. The authors provide intriguing capsule summaries of Lakhana Thapa Magar, a soldier who led a Gorkha-based revolt in the mid 1870s; unrest among Limbus in the eastern hills during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the book *Makaiko Kheti* (The Cultivation of Maize, 1920), a satirical account of Rana rule by Krishna Lal Adhikari; and an account of Yogmaya, the Brahman widow who led a movement against caste oppression and oppression from the 1920s to early 1940s. They end with a discussion of the rising resistance to Rana rule, including Yogmaya’s anti-Rana work and mass suicide protest in 1941.

The chapter on the 1950s is one of the longest in the book. Mostly it describes the unrest associated with the overthrow of the Ranas and its immediate aftermath: unrest in Bhaktapur, rebellion under Naradmuni Thulung Rai in Bhojpur, a long section on Bhim Dutta Panta, who set up a “revolutionary government” in the western Tarai ending sharecropping and redistributing land, the revolutionary activities of K.I. Singh and Mohan Bikram Singh’s communist organizing in Pyuthan.

The 1960s chapter focuses on land reform in the context of malaria eradication and the movement of people from the hills to the lowlands. Seddon, Dhakal and Basnet give a useful summary of land reform efforts, noting that only 22,000 hectares were redistributed to 10,000 small farmers. Even after the reforms, 3 percent of farmers still owned 27 percent of the arable land. They also offer a summary of Frederick Gaige's 1975 book *Regionalism and National Unity in Nepal* on the Ukhada legislation affecting Kapilvastu, Rupandehi and Nawalparasi, which created perverse incentives for landlords to declare longtime tenants aliens and prevent them from acquiring land rights.

The 1970s chapter provides info on unrest east and west but mostly focuses on the movements within the underground political parties. Seddon, Dhakal and Basnet offer a short summary of the divisions that split the communist movement. And they give a good overview of the firebrand politician Ramraja Prasad Singh from the time he was elected as a member of the Rashtriya Panchayat in 1971 to the time he led a band of guerrillas to execute a series of bomb blasts in 1985. Those blasts forced the Nepali Congress to call off its *satyāgraha* against the King Birendra-led Panchayat regime.

By this point the book begins to feel less like a united monograph and more like a kind of encyclopedia of disparate episodes of unrest and rebellion. Except to say that Nepal saw a lot of rural unrest, the book does little to connect the many case studies and examples together. If the examples were not inherently interesting, this would be a major flaw. But each case is clearly and concisely explained. Usually they are explained in their own terms, without some unwieldy one-size-fits-all ideological framework imposed in heavy handed fashion.

A short conclusion reinforces the book's ecumenical approach—emphasizing class but not reducing complicated reality to just class. They note that it would be wrong to try to distinguish elite from grassroot unrest, and wrong to split ethnic unrest from class concerns. “It is also often the case that it is usually not a matter of ‘either ... or,’ but of both” (p. 135). Instead, they say the book's many examples show evidence “of multiple causation and complex interactions of class, caste and ethnicity” (p. 135).

Tom Robertson
Kathmandu University