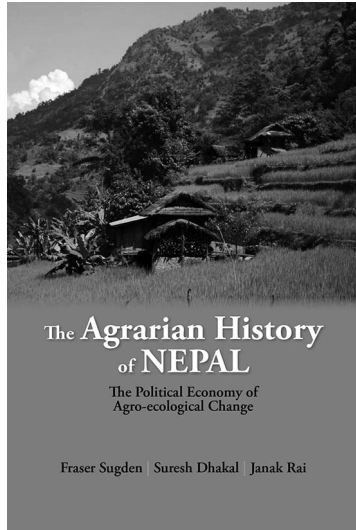


**Fraser Sugden, Suresh Dhakal and Janak Rai. 2025. *The Agrarian History of Nepal: The Political Economy of Agro-ecological Change*. Kathmandu: Vajra Publications.**

*The Agrarian History of Nepal* is a comprehensive study of agrarian change in Nepal over the last five centuries. The authors, Fraser Sugden, Suresh Dhakal and Janak Rai, draw on their own primary research and a diverse and exhaustive body of existing scholarship to present a broader and longer view than previously attempted of Nepal's agro-ecological change. In this sense, this book is an ambitious and much needed project. It analyzes how ecology, the nature of state formation, and land relations explain farming practices, crop patterns, and land ownership and distribution across Nepal. In doing so, it demonstrates how historical changes in the relationship between people and agrarian structures, as mediated by ecology and the state, have produced contemporary inequality and uneven development. A key argument of the book is that agrarian change has been "incremental rather than transformative" (p. 311) despite various reform efforts in land distribution and administration.



The authors employ a Marxian analysis of change, with each chapter structured around a designated period in which the authors posit that major transitions occurred in the dominant modes of production. At its core, mode of production analysis explains the relationship between those who labor and those who extract the fruits of that labor and how this relationship is determined by economic, political, cultural and ideological processes. The book pushes back against a teleological and evolutionary framework moving linearly from feudalism to capitalism and, instead, gives narrative attention to diverse agrarian transitions across time and space. Rather than conflating the pre-1950s mode of production across Nepal with feudalism, the authors identify three dominant modes of production that have existed in various geographical regions across the last five centuries: the feudal mode with its localized and centralized forms, the independent peasant mode and the *ādivāsī* mode of production. These categories map onto different spatio-temporal contexts based on ecological conditions and the relative strength of state formation versus the relative autonomy of indigenous practices. The book traces changes in these modes of production in the hills and Tarai-Madhes across four periods of time: the pre-Gorkhali conquest, the Gorkhali conquest and early Rana period, the early democratic period and Panchayat era, and post-1990s neoliberalization until the present.

In Chapter Two, the authors argue that in the centuries prior to the Gorkhali conquest, two modes of production were prominent in the Tarai-Madhes. Localized forms of feudal production were typical of regions under the influence of small principalities in the present-day Maithili and Bhojpuri speaking areas. In the western hills, where Khas kingdoms had ruled, feudal mode of production was also dominant. This feudal mode was characterized by sedentary farming with state control over the agrarian surplus via taxation and rents collected by local landlords. In contrast, deep within the forested tracts, indigenous groups such as the Tharu, Dhimal, Meche, and Bantar practiced the *ādivāsī* mode of production in relative autonomy from state formations. The *ādivāsī* mode was characterized by a shared cultural-ritual relationship with the land and collective labor and redistribution rather than accumulation of surplus. In the eastern hills, for example, the *ādivāsī* mode of production encompassed clan-based customary tenure such as *kīpaṭ* and shifting cultivation and transhumant agro-pastoralism. However, during the same period, the growing influence of the hill principalities, for example

the Baise-Chaubise Rajya in the west, led to the gradual dissolution of the *ādivāsi* mode of production.

Chapter Three examines agrarian change in the period during the Gorkhali conquest and early Rana rule from the 1750s to the 1900s, with close attention to changing social relations due to the expansion of the state into indigenous territories. The Gorkhali invasion and subsequent rule was based primarily on the expansion of the state's land administration into regions that had enjoyed self-governance. Throughout much of the Tarai-Madhesh, the *ādivāsi* mode of production was replaced by a feudal mode via the creation of an indigenous functionary class and the distribution of land grants. In the hills, the migration of Hindus into erstwhile indigenous territories expanded sedentary cultivation; communal and customary ownership gradually eroded. Transhumance and customary practices persisted in the rugged mountainous regions where the presence of the state was sparse. The Rana period saw the consolidation of private property and a strengthening of the localized feudal mode of production in the Tarai-Madhesh. Early attempts at relocation to the plains through the clearing of forests along with irrigation projects also extended sedentary cultivation, mainly of rice and wheat. In this period, land tax was monetized, remaining static as prices rose. As a result, the condition of peasants improved and an independent peasant mode of production emerged, particularly in the hills.

Chapter Four details the agrarian change brought about by the legal-administrative and political changes following the end of the Rana regime until the end of the Panchayat era. A series of reforms in land administration was enacted in the 1950s and 1960s to redistribute land to the peasantry and the landless by imposing a ceiling on landholdings. This, the authors argue, only formalized the tenant-landlord relationship and had limited impact on redistribution. Instead, a new landed class emerged among the wealthy. Rinck (2025) has recently challenged this pessimistic view of land reform by arguing that the reforms set off a long-term process by which middle peasants acquired land. That said, there is a broader consensus that reforms failed in their purported goals. The resettlement of hill populations to the plains did expand the independent peasantry. At the same time, the indigenous functionary class disappeared as the indigenous landlords lost relevance within the centralized feudal mode of production. In the eastern hills, with the dissolution of *kipat*, the *ādivāsi* mode was replaced by sedentary peasant production.

The post-1990s has been a period of major political changes. Multiparty democracy and neoliberal economic reforms coincided with the People's War. Chapter Five shows how, during this period, feudal and indigenous land relations were replaced by wage labor and migration. The concern over redistributive land reforms was displaced by neoliberal agricultural policies that saw peasants as petty commodity producers of food and cash crops. In the Tarai-Madhesh, feudal land relations persist in the form of concentrated land ownership. However, land concentration is declining due to fragmentation from inheritance and the peasantry's ability to purchase land from remittance income. Feudal relations are also in decline due to the refusal of peasants to provide corvée labor and the abolition of the *kamaiyā* system.

The book's main contribution is the theory of the *ādivāsī* mode of production. The authors deploy the mode of production framework in a way that takes seriously the spatial and temporal variations in Nepal's agrarian structure. The framework allows for the possibility of feudal relations existing alongside indigenous agrarian structures at various times and shows how state formation and modern land management led to the "demise of the Adivasi mode of production" (p. 312). For instance, the encounter between the Tharu of Dang and localized and centralized feudalism appears throughout the book to show how the *ādivāsī* mode of production gradually eroded with the creation of an indigenous functionary class, which eventually was replaced by hill, upper-caste landed elites. My reading of this book extends Coulthard's (2014) argument that North American capitalism emerged out of the expropriation of indigenous land to show that in Nepal even centralized feudalism emerged out of indigenous dispossession. Analytically, the *ādivāsī* mode of production shows that centralized feudalism expanded not only through the Gorkhali expansionism but also by dismantling indigenous socio-economic structures. From a political perspective, the *ādivāsī* mode of production provides the theoretical basis for the indigenous protection of land in Nepal.

The mode of production framework, however, runs into some analytical limitations since agrarian structures in practice are rarely closed systems even if they are spatially and temporally disparate. As a corollary, the authors tend to treat as marginal or anachronistic all those characteristics that do not fit the description of a mode of production. For example, how do we make sense of the presence of common land, collective labor and reciprocal social relations—features attributed to the *ādivāsī* mode of production—in

the feudal mode of production or even in the contemporary petty-capitalist agrarian mode of production? The book treats the persistence of customary tenure outside legal structures as mere “relics of the Adivasi mode of production” (p. 286) while also observing that it has disadvantaged marginal farmers since they do not legally own the land. Therefore, the book argues these relics have “parallels with feudal economic formations rather than being part of a mode of production in its own right” (p. 288). Here, it is not clear if the book is suggesting that the relics of indigenous formations create feudalistic land relations within a capitalist mode of production. The authors could have elaborated more clearly how they understand such interrelationships between modes of production.

Feminist critiques of capitalism elucidate some of the problems inherent in mode of production analysis. This is particularly important since gender is absent in the text. Feminists have criticized Marxism for overlooking the appropriation of women’s social reproductive labor, particularly domestic labor, in the analysis of capitalist primitive accumulation (Federici 2004). For example, the book briefly mentions systems of bonded domestic labor specific to women and girls such as *kamlari*, practiced in western Tarai-Madhesh, without paying much attention to the gendered aspect of the interaction between *ādivāsī* and feudal modes of production. While caste and ethnicity receive some attention in the analysis, women’s positioning within the agrarian structure is missing. The book would benefit from engaging with the post-1990s feminization of agriculture observed as men left farms for employment in cities and abroad (Spangler and Christie 2020; Upreti *et al.* 2018). The mode of production analysis used by the book risks overlooking the question of women’s power and agency by treating them through the broader category of labor.

Similarly, feminist critiques of capitalism have also questioned the portrayal of capitalism as a unified and total system guided by a singular logic of profit motive (Gibson-Graham 1996). These are not only critiques of capitalism but also critiques of theories of mode of production as singular systems dictated by an economic imperative. While the book shows the coexistence of multiple modes of production across Nepal, it also imagines each mode of production as a closed system dictated by singular logics of reciprocity and redistribution or feudal extraction. The changes in the mode of production occur largely through external factors such as the expansion of the centralized state into otherwise autonomous societies. This approach tends

to neglect internal contradictions, such as gender and class differentiation, as drivers of change within these modes of production.

Despite some of these analytical issues in the mode of production framework, *The Agrarian History of Nepal* brings together an empirically and historically rich account of agrarian change in Nepal. This book, as David Seddon points out in his endorsement, is a must-read for anyone interested in Nepal's agrarian history. It is a remarkable attempt at theorizing five centuries of social and political change. As the authors suggest, learning from this history of change is imperative to achieve social and economic justice in Nepal.

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