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Book Review: Yogesh Raj, *History as Mindscapes: A Memory of the Peasants' Movement of Nepal*

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should perhaps have been highlighted, as evidently the wider legal environment has repercussions on how harmonised draft provisions for minority laws may be formulated without causing uproar in the majority sections of society.

The conclusions are thoughtful and cautiously constructive. The need for personal law reforms is evident. How to proceed is the problem, not whether reforms are necessary (pp. 46 and 48). While the government quickly gets cold feet and like the erstwhile colonial rulers sits on the fence hiding behind 'tradition', the excellent field research conducted for this study produced much evidence of a groundswell of opinion within the community in favour of reforms. However, among a minority that suffers continuing disadvantage because of the vexed and unresolved 'vested property' issues, fears that legal reform might bring further disadvantage are also being raised (p. 47). That this is not totally unjustified is indicated by statistics to the effect that between 1961 and 2001, the share of the Hindu population in Bangladesh seems to have halved from 18.4 per cent to 9.2 per cent (p. 47). While in debates about Muslim law reform in India it is similarly argued that the communities themselves should decide what reforms they need, majoritarian pressures and state involvement are evidently not completely trusted on either side of the border by the respective minority.

So the debates go on and the official law does not change. Some activists will continue to ask for the moon, claiming that 'the way to go is to ask for everything' (p. 48), but at present it appears that Bangladesh will only ever get a mirror image in draft. The onus will be on minority families to make responsible and appropriate decisions, but even small studies like the present one confirm that in South Asia, what is considered appropriate cannot fully be prescribed by the state or fitted into uniformising legal drafts.

We know from other fieldwork that, for example, Hindu fathers in Bangladesh may gift property to their daughters who officially have no rights to family property. But when such well-meaning transactions appear in the form of dowry, this upsets other social activists with certain bees in their bonnet. Clearly, the constructive and gender-sensitive interaction of state law and non-state law in South Asia will remain contested and will keep generations of scholars and activists busy.

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Yogesh Raj, *History as Mindscapes: A Memory of the Peasants' Movement of Nepal* (Kathmandu: Martin Chautari, 2010), 336 pp.

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This book provides a highly original window onto mid-twentieth century Nepal. While voices 'from below' have often populated Nepalese anthropology, historical scholarship has tended to draw on political, administrative and literary records produced by a tiny elite.

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We learn much from scholars such as M.C. Regmi and John Whelpton about the legal and social structures within which the populace lived, but learn little of what the people ‘felt’ about these structures. Through a searching and meticulously detailed set of interviews with a single informant (along with some scattered texts produced by the same person), Yogesh Raj has illuminated a life-world that would otherwise have been lost to posterity. Raj presents edited transcripts of the interviews in the form of a continuous first-person narrative, contextualised by extensive notes placed in the right-hand margin of each page.

The informant, Krishna Bhakta Caguthi (1928–2011), was a peasant leader who achieved political prominence in the town of Bhaktapur from the early 1950s. He was a central figure in the Bhaktapur section of the *Akhil Nepal Kisan Sangh* (All Nepal Peasants’ Organisation), a communist-inspired grouping launched after the fall of the Ranas to protest unjust taxes and push for land reform (pp. 72–75). While retaining a fierce allegiance to the Jyapu (Newar peasant or farmer) caste from which he came, by the 1960s he was associated with Nepal’s ruling Panchayat regime and was thus outflanked in terms of peasant leadership by more radical figures associated with the Nepal Workers’ and Peasants’ Party (NWPP) (p. 159ff.). By the 1980s, Caguthi was viewed as a broken and discredited figure. He saw the interviews with Raj, conducted in 2005–06, as a way of doing something to restore his reputation.

While some of the book thus consists of Caguthi’s political score-settling, in particular relentless vituperation against the NWPP leader Narayan Man Bijukchhe, by far the most interesting material arises when Caguthi is in reflective mode, drawing up vivid memories of the social world of his youth, or ruminating insightfully on the disorienting changes experienced by peasants of his generation. One memorable moment (pp. 65–66) occurs when he describes the method he used to avoid the task of carrying his landlord’s children in the *kohla*, a wooden pole with baskets at either end that Jyapus would carry over their shoulders, leaving a distinctive gnarl of muscle on the upper back which can still be observed on older peasants today. When safely out of sight of his masters, Caguthi would spin the children round until they were dizzy. Then, whenever they were placed in the baskets in future, they would cry to be let out, thus relieving Caguthi of the duty of carrying them. This ‘weapon of the weak’ could find a place in the work of James C. Scott.

The book contains important information on diverse aspects of economic and social life. We learn that money was scarce during Caguthi’s childhood (pp. 51–52). Meat was bartered for rice grains and rice paddy was used to pay taxes at the land revenue office. Instead of paying people to labour in their fields, the peasants would exchange labour with each other, counting heads carefully to make sure the exact extent of the labour debt was known. We learn (p. 54) that women would tattoo themselves with images of peacocks or cloves, oil their hair profusely and tie it with red cloth and paint *kohl* (ground lead sulphide) around their eyes. It was believed that they could feed themselves on their long journeys after death by selling their adornments.

Caguthi’s narrative is given shape and emotive force by the story of his developing class-consciousness. As Raj points out (p. 12), the key moment occurs in April 1951,

when Caguthi hears a political discourse denouncing the injustice of the appropriation of hay from the peasants. Caguthi remembers: 'I was flabbergasted [...] We had been feeling a wound, but we could not say where. It was Sribahadur Dai who pointed the spot to us. I could not sleep that day. I felt overblown with excitement' (p. 71). This dawning consciousness transforms Caguthi's view of peasant life: 'I began to understand the tragedy of it all [...] my mother would wash the blood stained undergarments of [the landlord family's] female members [...] she could not imagine that there could be a different life to that' (p. 123). Although his subsequent career would have many ups and downs, Caguthi remained a proud Jyapu until the end, lamenting that while his generation 'fought for our share of the produce and the land so that they could get rid of the drudgery we were in', his children, 'when [they] hear someone calling them *Jyapu* [...] frown and feel ashamed [...] they dress up like petty bourgeois and enjoy bourgeois implements while forgetting all of the tools we have been using to till the land' (p. 199).

The book also contains much useful information on political history, such as details of the Bhaktapur-based activities of future Nepalese prime minister Tanka Prasad Acharya (p. 94ff.). However, though Raj makes efforts to be even-handed, presenting documents both supportive and critical of Caguthi's perspective, a reader unfamiliar with Bhaktapur could be forgiven for finishing the book with the impression that Caguthi's antagonist, the NWPP, is a semi-criminal gang intent only on brutalising the farmers and glorifying its leader. This is far from reality and Caguthi's bitter experiences with the NWPP, such as being dragged naked and bleeding through the streets by its supporters as punishment for alleged corruption (pp. 161–63) understandably prevent him from recognising the positive contributions the party has made to the social conditions of farmers.

The skewed impression of Bhaktapur's politics that non-specialists could take from the book might have been ameliorated had Raj outlined the city's history at greater length in his introduction. Instead he offers some general reflections on the nature of history writing, which, while interesting in themselves, do not do much to contextualise Caguthi's narrative. It is also surprising that more is not made of the Subaltern Studies project, into which this work appears to fit. The space might more profitably have been used to draw together some of the fascinating material that appears in the side-notes, in order to provide a more coherent picture of Caguthi's place within Nepal's and Bhaktapur's social and political history.

This criticism, however, seems insubstantial when placed against the great service Raj has performed for those who study Nepal. He has opened up a lost world and shows how the private injuries of class can shape large-scale political processes. He has rescued a remarkable individual from the 'enormous condescension of posterity'. Most importantly, he has suggested new paths that historians and anthropologists of Nepal will surely want to follow and has provided an indispensable reference-point for those who do.

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