

Book Reviews

Yogesh Raj. 2010. *History as Mindscapes: A Memory of the Peasant's Movement of Nepal*. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari.

This book, entitled *History as Mindscapes: A Memory of the Peasant's Movement of Nepal*, focuses on the 'reminiscence of a peasant leader' from the Newar community in Bhaktapur. It was published at a time when no other publications have been initiated on similar themes with the exception of a small number of works. The book should, therefore, be regarded as the welcome beginning of a new trend in history writing in Nepal, supported by the theoretical foundations. Thanks to this innovative approach of presenting history in the form of experiences of an individual, the author Yogesh Raj deserves appreciation for creating it and Martin Chautari for publishing it. Nepali historians who prefer to select stereotypical themes and present them in a very traditional way should, at the very least, look at the style and the method that the author has applied to conceptualize the reminiscences of the peasant leader.

The author further deserves special thanks for his love of history and skill in presenting the historical context of the peasant society and economy as well as his effort in highlighting the experiences of a peasant leader. The author's knowledge and skill in historical writing is remarkable and much appreciated by this reader. There is ample ground to hope for more valuable contributions in historical writing from the author in the future.

Individuals from the lower rungs of society have contributed significantly in Nepal's historical process but they have not been duly noticed by historians. However, a later generation of historians is now gradually turning to address this section of society's role in making history. This is what is actually required for the study of Nepali society. In this context, focusing on the lowest rung of the society can yield a fruitful people's history, which is no doubt the primary focus of 'history-from-below.' This includes the oppressed, the poor, the Subaltern and persons who are outside of hegemonic power structures as well as otherwise forgotten people.

Yogesh Raj has applied a 'revisionist approach' in highlighting peasant's history which is in direct opposition to the 'great man' theory of history. Historical revisionism is the reinterpretation of orthodox views on

evidence, motivations, and decision-making processes surrounding a historical event. Constant revision of history is part of the normal scholarly process of writing history. The author further argues that the driving factor of bottom line history is the daily life of ordinary people. It is hard to disagree with this point.

The subject matter dealt with in this book is the reminiscences of Krishna Bhakta Caguthi (1928–2011), a peasant leader from Bhaktapur. His experience as the leader of peasant community provides the reader with a detailed account of various aspects of the lives of downtrodden peasantry, including agricultural economy, agrarian relations, agrarian social structure, the rights of involving parties and so on. It is a kind of oral history presented in the written format. Although the area of discussion is limited to inside the periphery of Bhaktapur town and based on the personal experience of the leader, the book more or less represents a snapshot of the entire agricultural scenario of the country of that period. This book also advances studies of the political economy of agriculture in Nepali society.

Basically, this book is an attempt to re-construct agricultural history through a narrator's reminiscences. From the author's perspective there are various dimensions to peasants' history, particularly their role in movements and in resistance. The most important factor of the peasant movement in the Nepali context is its political orientation, which cannot be overlooked in either mode of interpretation. The writing of peasants' history in Nepal is still in a very preliminary stage, although more than six decades have already passed after the first organized peasant movement of Nepal. This was initiated by another leader, Padma Bahadur Budhathoki, from a village called Somlingtar in Bhaktapur district. He and Caguthi maintained good connections while they worked for the welfare of the peasantry.

While it is true that a critical history of peasant activities in Nepal has still not been written, the personal narrative of a peasant leader as presented in this book can provide certain clues on how to write a history of peasantry in the national context. That is to say that it provides a basis for the historical analysis of peasant society and economy. This kind of oral narrative can provide historians with an opportunity to draw significant conclusions. In uncovering the bundle of the historical context of peasantry, both the author and Caguthi deserve appreciation from historians. Since Caguthi is an ordinary person, he could be seen as a 'nobody.' However, a person who is the source of a history of peasant activities cannot remain a 'nobody' but is, instead, a hero. I believe that

every person who recognizes the importance of history would agree on this point. My view is that historians should treat information from persons like Caguthi as exceptional source material and as the source of history. But unfortunately, in a country like Nepal, institutional support is still unavailable for such activities. Thus, it is the duty of lovers of history, like you and me, who have to take care of these things.

If we talk about the structure of the book, it is divided into two chapters followed by appendices. The first chapter deals with certain conceptual descriptions as a background to what has been written in the following chapter. The second chapter is the body of the book. It is the compilation of the personal experiences of the leader during his long association with the peasantry as their trusted leader. This is, in fact, 'history from below' and the Subaltern mode of historiography. The experience shared by Caguthi is an example of 'people's history.' This book represents all the forgotten people who have played their part in the historical process. It gives an interesting account of historical details of the peasant society from the perspective of the common people. The detailed narratives of personal experiences in the book are concerned with the conditions of the peasantry, various other social aspects, rights in land, agrarian relations, the role of intermediaries in the agricultural economy, the mode of production, peasant politics, insurgency, and changes brought about in land holding practices among many other topics. The book further discusses how peasants lived in such harsh conditions. The peasants of Nepal actually lived in bare subsistence conditions. Caguthi says, "Instead our daily food consisted of a pot full of boiling water with two handful of wheat flour, a pinch of salt and turmeric" (p. 38).

The gentry also exploited the peasantry to fulfill their economic interests. The landowning community also adapted various modes of exploitation. In the agricultural sector, appropriation of exorbitant rates of rent had been a common practice. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Nepali peasants lived at the mercy of the gentry. Peasants had no courage to speak against prevailing malpractices. They endured harsh conditions until the Land Reforms Act was promulgated in 1964.

The condition of peasantry that prevailed in Bhaktapur is the main point of discussion in the book. But one should know that it was also the general condition of Nepali peasantry elsewhere. The author has nicely conceptualized the context in the book, especially through extensive use of footnotes and cross-referencing to other written works and events that took place at the same time.

The construction of history out of this sort of personal narrative is the task of historians, which demands certain scholarly efforts. The methodology of history recommends performing ‘internal criticism’ of all kinds of such personal statements and experiences that are to be used as the source of history because there always remains the possibility of deviation and distortion of facts in personal narratives. Since the book is simply the personal narrative of a peasant leader, the author did not look into passing the matter through a process of historical criticism. In spite of the author’s careful presentation, there are a few weaknesses such as providing irrelevant notes occasionally. But in general this book is worthy of reading and could also work as source book on several topics.

Finally, those who are particularly interested in the history of Nepali peasantry and agriculture must read this book. I particularly recommend Nepali historians to go through it closely and experience another mode of history writing, different from what Nepali historians traditionally do. I believe that such a study could provide historians with interesting thematic clues and necessary methodological considerations when looking at historical problems while writing history.

Finally, the book is very well written. The author demonstrates his scholarly ability while also conceptualizing the context in the start of the book. Yogesh Raj also demonstrates his skill in compiling personal memories of others into one source of history.

Shanker Thapa
Tribhuvan University