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Nanda R. Shrestha

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PEASANTS, POVERTY, AND ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY IN AGRARIAN NEPAL

Nanda R. Shrestha

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This study will analyze land encroachment as an ecopolitical battle over land access and control in agrarian Nepal. Nepal has arrived at a juncture where mounting peasant impoverishment has come face to face with growing ecological impoverishment. This interface reveals that poverty is not just a socioeconomic issue; it is also an ecological issue with wide-ranging ramifications. As in many other agrarian societies, there is an ecopolitical battle raging in Nepal over land. The battle is waged between peasants' day-to-day survival (land access) on one side and the state's dominant interests and environmental security (land/resource control) on the other. Three basic questions arise from this ecopolitical struggle: why has the conflict arisen, how far has it progressed, and how does it affect the sustainability of what we term peasant ecology -- one in which peasants are engaged in direct production relationships with nature, that is, their socioeconomic viability is intrinsically intertwined with the ecological sustainability of their environment. Peasant ecology is, in essence, subsistence ecology as it represents an umbilical cord, a basic source of peasant subsistence.

No peasant ecology exists in a sociopolitical vacuum, however, distanced from agrarian relations of production, state policies, and development activities. Occupying center stage in peasant ecology (subsistence) is land, a vital natural resource, which represents different values for different social classes and for the state. Land is not only the economic backbone and cultural roots of the agrarian system, but also the bedrock of its sociopolitical structure. Because of these functions, land access and control have far-reaching implications for both peasants' socioeconomic viability and environmental security. The issue is compounded by the fact that land access is constrained because of its natural monopoly (limited in nature) and social monopoly (skewed social class distribution). It is these natural and social monopolies that **frame and heighten land competition** among different social classes, including the state, eventually leading to ecopolitical conflicts over *land access* and *land control* -- the two antipodal forces that lie at the root of the political ecology of land encroachment. Peasants have their own notions of agrarian morality, rights, justice, equality, and subversion. When the state denies them access to land, their lifeline, such action signifies a negation of their basic survival rights and justice. In response, they resist such state action and policy, utilizing several strategies of protest. In the agrarian context, land encroachment is thus a form of peasant (social) movement, a form of everyday resistance against the state and its land control policy. In agrarian Nepal it is not only an ecopolitical struggle for peasant survival; it also represents a volatile terrain of an emerging political ecology, which pits protagonists around the axis of environment-poverty relations. However, to discuss environment-poverty relations without first analyzing the social and ecological configuration of peasant ecology and peasant modes of resource use is not productive, for such discussions have neither theoretical nor policy value.

Guided by this general conceptualization, this study will investigate four interrelated issues: (1) the evolution of human-environment relations in agrarian Nepal, focusing on the social and ecological configuration of peasant ecology, (2) the political ecology of land encroachment, i.e. the social and ecopolitical conflicts over land in the TARAI, (3) the implications of these conflicts for peasants' socioeconomic viability and environmental sustainability, and (4) the exploration of how state monopoly over common resources affects environmental exploitation/deterioration and subsequently peasant ecology and subsistence. Investigation of these issues will be conducted within a conflict-based political ecology theoretical framework, and will rely on ethnographic techniques, combining formal

interviews with land encroachers (both male and female heads whenever possible), informal interviews with key informants, and participant-observations. Historical and government publications will also be used.

The proposed research has both theoretical and policy significance. Theoretically, it expects to advance a coherent theoretical political ecology framework, one that can be used to investigate similar struggles unfolding in various local and regional contexts throughout the Third World's threatened environmental resource systems. Given its focus, the findings of this study will also have significant policy implications for the sustainability of peasant ecology as well as overall environmental security.

**Plan to Attend the
23rd Annual Conference on South Asia
Madison, Wisconsin, November 4-6 1994**

Annual Meeting of the Nepal Studies Association:

5:30-6:30 Saturday, November 5th