

2001

Book reviews of: 'Employment Creation and Income Generation in Rural Regions: Peoples, place, activities and interventions in Nepal' by Indra P. Tiwari, 'The beginnings of agrarian change (A case study in central Nepal)' by Jagannath Adhikari, 'Nepal's Agriculture Sustainability and Intervention: Looking for new directions' by Birendra Bir Basnyat

Stephen Bezruchka

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

Bezruchka, Stephen. 2001. Book reviews of: 'Employment Creation and Income Generation in Rural Regions: Peoples, place, activities and interventions in Nepal' by Indra P. Tiwari, 'The beginnings of agrarian change (A case study in central Nepal)' by Jagannath Adhikari, 'Nepal's Agriculture Sustainability and Intervention: Looking for new directions' by Birendra Bir Basnyat. *HIMALAYA* 21(1). Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol21/iss1/25>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

Book Reviews

THREE VIEWS OF AGRICULTURE IN NEPAL

Tiwari, Indra P. *Employment Creation and Income Generation in Rural Regions: Peoples, places, activities and interventions in Nepal*. Lekhnath, Nepal: Center for Rural and Urban Studies and Transfiguration, 1998.

Adhikari, Jagannath. *The beginnings of agrarian change (A case study in central Nepal)*. Kathmandu: TM Publication, 1996.

Basnyat, Birendra Bir. *Nepal's Agriculture Sustainability and Intervention: Looking for new directions*. The Hague: Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 1995

These books, reports of studies for PhD theses, complement each other and confirm many of my observations garnered over several decades about agriculture in Nepal.

Tiwari describes a cross-sectional questionnaire survey of a sample of villages in a strip east of Pokhara in the Western Development Region across the Tarai, hills and mountains. It documents the "big picture" of the rural economy in central Nepal.

Tiwari reviews economic history, characterizing the Rana rule as a friendly but seclusive colonial capitalist regime with repressive socioeconomic policies that drained resources out of rural areas to the urban center. The legacy remains. Nepal's development plans are outlined, and their problems discussed. She summarizes capitalistic theories on rural development with Asian examples.

In this study, Tiwari describes the subsistence economy as the need to: diversify agricultural production to fulfill household requirements for the entire year and save for next year; integrate cereal production and livestock rearing; use household or exchanged labor; employ contract labor payable in kind and cash for difficult work; and limit needs for consumer goods. The basic component of a market economy (specific utilization of available resources for commercial purposes) is depressed by subsistence characteristics; that is, profit maximization is not the explicit motive of people. Whatever subsistence work household members do, the productivity of labor and labor cost are not matters of concern. If there is a cash crop on top of subsistence agriculture, "the incremental adaptation lacks dynamism, nor is there a restless innovation conceiving paths to other structures, they just respond to pressures and opportunities just on the horizon." The "lack of so-called dynamism is a difference in perception between the forced but reliable, risk-free way of livelihood with limited consumption among rural people, and [the] livelihood that researchers, planners, policy makers and politicians are accustomed to and prescribe to the rural populace." She concludes that these subsistence structures work until the density of population reaches a point of supersaturation of land resources, followed by poverty, massive unemployment, and drift to cities. She suggests this can lead to peasant uprisings, as well as religious activism. Education is seen as the only reliable agent of social mobility.

Tiwari's lack of significant development project experience is reflected in many very detailed subjective hypotheses that were statistically tested on household responses forced by a structured questionnaire. The convoluted presentation and the detailed quantitation of the survey results suggests the author's lack of rural living

experience. By aggregating responses over each ecological zone (hill and mountain ridges, hill and mountain valleys, Tarai plains) the small area variations, pointed out in the next book, that influence significant economic change are lost.

New economic opportunities in the agricultural sector require improvements in production that respect farmers' decision making processes. Tiwari feels that new opportunities in the non-agricultural, non-farm sector, would have less environmental uncertainty. She does not consider that in the move to markets there would be greater economic risk, since the market mechanisms can produce their own large uncertainties (as current economic crises demonstrate). It is the poor who are at risk in this process, as is seen in the turmoil in global markets today. Those who were well-off before are more likely to get public bailouts, whereas the poor must endure. The concluding proposals read like a five year plan and many do not bear out the research results. Proposals such as these need to be tailored to individual situations, something that is missing from the research design.

Adhikari's book presents a more detailed look at the response to increasing population in two nearby villages situated in Kaski District in the Western Development Region, one predominantly Gurung and the other Bahun Chhetri. This volume is easier to read because of its more qualitative perspective, reflecting more time spent in discussions with villagers learning their responses to economic and population changes. There is an excellent discussion of caste, ethnicity, and the local agricultural economy.

An interview survey done in 1988-9 was updated in 1994, looking at ethnicity in relation to subsistence production, off-farm work, and utilization of common resources. It questioned how off-farm work effected the household and village economy, especially the poorest and occupational castes.

Village response to increasing population has been land fragmentation and agricultural intensification with the production of multiple crops. In addition, off farm work was sought in administration, tourism and general labor. Military service by the Gurung produced large foreign cash contributions, as did working in factories and as household servants. Others did farm labor for other farmers, but as a more educated populace develops that avoids physical work, there are fewer laborers. The Gurung become more time efficient, abandoning distant *khoriya* (slash and burn) land. For those with large amounts of off-farm income in transition out of subsistence, time efficiency becomes more important.

Unexpectedly, increasing population did not result in bringing more land under cultivation because of higher cash income from off-farm work and the intensification of agriculture through land-renting and multi-cropping. Short-term household opportunity is maximized as Gurung with military service in the British Army, and in India, abandoned many local sources of income.

The marked differences in access to all resources is especially difficult for the occupational castes, who do not derive direct benefits from recent changes in the village economy. The increasing need for farm labor may become hard to meet from the low castes, as they migrate searching for better opportunities, suggesting that farm size may be limited to the number of family members able to do farm work.

Adhikari suggests such local adaptations to agrarian change will prevent the disaster scenarios resulting from rapid population growth and environmental deterioration that Blaike, Eckholm and others predicted in the 1970s and early 1980s. Outside income and agricultural intensification leads to inter-ethnic interdependence, with occupational castes getting some wage labor on farms. The income and wealth gap between the richer and poorer segments of the area has increased. This is consistent with the observations of the *1998 Human Development Report: Nepal*, which has raised serious concern about the increasing inequality throughout Nepal, a consistent feature of the development process in much of the world during the last 40 years.

"Restructuring the household and village economy as a consequence of off-farm income-earning activities has been critical, *so far*, in maintaining household income and in avoiding further pressure for the expansion of land for cultivation." For the study area, "the most extreme poverty by Nepal's standards has been avoided." The peasant mode of production was continued, and capitalist farmers did not emerge in the study area.

Two short-term development strategies suggested are to strengthen rural markets to guarantee wage employment, and to provide more access for landless and marginal farmers to common resources, especially forests.

Adhikari suggests that when administrative authority becomes weak, protests of the disadvantaged people and minority groups that begin in the village, may extend nationally. (Does this mean that the Maoist activity in parts

of Nepal may spread unless the poor get more of their share?)

Birendra Basnyat, in the third study, uses a variety of qualitative methods to look at farmers' perceptions of agricultural inputs from development projects. His 25 years of various work in agriculture in Nepal shows in his understanding of rural situations and the problems of agricultural projects.

Basnyat observes that in spite of intensification of agriculture in Nepal, yields appear to have declined as poorer land was brought into cultivation. His study of why the interventions have failed focuses on critiques of development strategies and flaws in policies and implementation, as well as institutional problems.

The important chapter 4 looks at farmers' perceptions of sustainability in agriculture spanning three districts in Nepal: in a mountain village, three hill villages and a Tarai village. Farmers feel that the present state of agriculture is worsening. Rankings of perceived problems differ by locality, showing the importance of tailoring any program to the local situation. Land fragmentation is avoided in the mid-hill villages by seasonal migration or by individuals leaving the village permanently to seek other employment. In mountain regions, the practice of polyandry results in all the sons sharing one wife, so there is no need to divide land among the brothers. This practice and others show the varied responses that might not be picked up by rural development tourism visits, which don't expose the strong inter-relatedness of agriculture and culture.

Four interventions are analysed via case-studies for agroforestry, permaculture, community forestry and agricultural extension.

In agroforestry, farmers viewed trees as more than a source of fodder to animals, and they had their own priorities for food for themselves, which conflicted with the agenda of the implementing agency who did not consider the social aspects of innovation.

Permaculture is the oldest idea to Nepali farmers, but where they have converted to modern methods, "asking them to go back to grade one after completing school" seems ludicrous. Their perspective points out the shortcomings and weaknesses in the intervention processes and strategies.

While community forestry appeared as a simple shift from being forest to people centered, the results have been unexpected and slow. The program has not handed over many forests to user groups, nor has it used funding inputs efficiently in the process. This kind of project requires a broader focus on the management of natural resources.

Extension programs, Basnyat found, fail to coordinate various agencies, suffer from mis-reporting, and have essentially come to a standstill. To have an effect, institutional changes must occur first, for if changes are made in one subsystem without making changes in other subsystems, bottlenecks occur.

In chapter 12, he presents lessons learned. Basnyat argues against viewing projects as packages of plans, activities and resources, but as interventions in the lives of rural people. The shift from plants, water, animals and fodder to people and their relationships is critical. Interventions should not be just mechanistic, but require the "soft systems" perspective of monitoring and evaluation to guide further changes.

His recommendations: learn from the people, their successes and past mistakes. View the problem from a systems perspective. At the implementation level, "communication and cooperation should be strengthened at any cost." Development agencies in the field must find and document indigenous knowledge and indigenous production systems, learning from them and developing a mechanism to communicate among the relevant actors.

Although Basnyat cautions that his results may not be generalizable, what he observes rings true with my experiences working in health projects in rural Nepal. As a medical doctor working in international public health, wouldn't it make more sense to be reading about vitamin A distribution programs, or the development of cancer treatment in Nepal? But improving health, not health services has always been my aim. If improving the health of the people of Nepal is the goal, then equitable economic development is the magic medicine needed. Nothing will improve the health of a population more than equitably attaining a per capita GNP of \$1000 dollars from its stagnant current value of \$200. With most of the population involved in semi-subsistence agriculture, and with increasing economic inequality, what else could the doctor prescribe?

About fifteen years ago I observed that most peasants could no longer be sustained on their family's crop production. Households responded by engaging in off-farm labor in portering and tourism, or farm labor, or

migration to urban areas and abroad for work. Today I am often asked by rural Nepalis if I could arrange work for them in America — something unheard of twenty years ago. Many families make great sacrifices for the education of their sons. While well-to-do families pay for private education for their children, the poor are at the mercy of the public schools for their sons, and their daughters continue to work at home. Although the well-off are much wealthier than when I first came to Nepal in 1969, the situation of the poor is unchanged and there are many more poor today.

Either of the first two of these volumes could have been written by a *bedeshi* (foreigner), but the third one could not. Basnyat's insights from his many years of work experience cannot be obtained by the practice of rural development tourism, so common among expatriate experts who lack grass-roots experience.

None of these books demonstrate significant benefit from foreign aid as practiced today. As agricultural economist John Mellor argued in a recent talk presented to APROS in Kathmandu, foreign aid has been ineffective in reducing poverty because it has focussed on too many unrelated projects, based on donors' political needs. Experiences of other countries who have reduced poverty suggests emphasizing agricultural inputs throughout the entire country, with necessary infrastructure development. This would allow commercialization of agriculture and stimulate spending in rural areas to retain people there, instead of their fleeing to urban centers. There are many other reasons why foreign aid has been ineffective, which anyone working in economic development knows all too well.

Needs for long term change, as I see it, include: decentralizing the economic development process to reflect the local wisdom and sensibility the second two volumes describes; promoting transparency of actions and resource flows so people are not kept hidden and can respond appropriately; finally, transforming the education system so that publicly funded schools meet the needs of the people and are the showcase of the country.

Some development people like large surveys that produce graphs and tables; Others like to read about small area analyses or about individual ideas and beliefs; fewer want to discover what went wrong with the development interventions. Successful projects need all three perspectives. To guide change, the goal of equitable economic development must be merged with local beliefs and knowledge to create advances that are monitored for progress and modified if necessary. This trilogy: a broad-based survey, an in-depth look at one small area, and an assessment of interventions present an important views of that process. If carried out appropriately to stimulate equitable economic growth, a truly enlightened development will do the most to improve the health of the population.

Stephen Bezruchka, Seattle, Washington

Love and Honor in the Himalayas: Coming to Know Another Culture

Ernestine McHugh, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001 180 pp. 9 black and white illustrations.

Can one understand life by looking at death and death rituals? Ernestine McHugh in this book successfully convinces that yes we can. Ignited by the intellectual passion of Gregory Beteson, and nurtured by the friendship of Bhuvan Lal Joshi in UC Santa Cruz, the author sets out to Nepal to look at death rituals and explore how they reflect social life and personal experience. Well, death actually follows her closely in every step of the way. Her own mother was dead when she was 14. She herself comes to near-death experiences several times in the remote mountain villages. Her best friends die one after another. Gregory and Bhuvan Lal are dead in Santa Cruz when she is in Nepal. One fine morning, the author discovers that her first host in Kathmandu, an American women in her 40s, is found dead in her room. Lalita, the women who adopted her as a daughter in the Gurung village, also dies of cancer at the end. Author also witnesses the death of a young woman in the Gurung village. Dharma Mitra her spiritual companion and the founder of Buddha Vihar in Pokhara also dies of cancer. The author is the witness behind these dead persons and their stories and accepts the inevitable reality of loss.