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VIII. BOOK REVIEWS

*Regmi, Mahesh C.

1978 Thatched Huts and Stucco Palaces: Peasants and Landlords in 19th-Century Nepal.

New Delhi, India: Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd, 1978. Map, glossary, bibliography and source materials, index. xii, 173 pp.

Review by: Shyam Thapa
Brown University

Scholars of Nepalese society agree that Mahesh C. Regmi's contributions to the study of Nepal's economic history have been outstanding. His works focus on the heart of the economy of Nepal: land and agrarian systems. The primary sources of information for Regmi's studies are government records and other public and private archives, which he painstakingly digests and consistently analyzes in a lucid and coherent manner.

Regmi's latest contribution to Nepalese historiography is Thatched Huts and Stucco Palaces, the first of two projected volumes on the country's economy during the 19th century. The book is an outgrowth of his earlier work on land tenure and taxation in Nepal, and embodies the author's desire to comply with E. H. Carr's dictum that "the main work of the historian is not to record, but to evaluate" since "history consists essentially in seeing the past through the eyes of the present and in light of its problems" (cited in Preface page). Regmi's objective is to examine the historical and institutional constraints that hindered Nepal's economic development during the 19th century in order to explain why the country has remained "poor" to this day.

Regmi's central thesis is that Nepal suffered from a vicious circle, which was a consequence of the nature of the relationship between the peasants, on the one hand, and the state and the landlords, on the other. The standard of living of the peasants, who were the great majority of the country's population, was very low; this resulted in a lack of agricultural investment, which in turn led to low productivity and thus more poverty and a lower standard of living. Peasants were exploited by the state, the landlords and other intermediaries to such an extent that they were stuck in the "margin between subsistence and destitution" (p. 154). The peasants were neither able nor did they have any incentive to improve the productivity or the quality of land, and the landlords showed no interest in doing so either. The book presents a concise but comprehensive analysis of the institutional structures that served to maximize revenue for the government and other rent receivers.

A crucial point that emerges from the book's ten chapters is how coalitions were formed between the de facto Rana government, the landlords and other local representatives of landowning elites. Although the rise of the Ranas "did not mark the entry of new groups into the traditional nobility, it certainly heralded the emergence of a new political elite" (p. 20). The political system of these new elites, which was "as much against the traditions of the Shah dynasty as (it) was against the traditional political process" (p. 20), required a realignment of the agrarian bureaucratic system so as to insure a steady source of revenue from the peasants. The Rana regime, therefore, developed coalitions with landlords and village elites (headmen), and it was through this realigned machinery of the government that revenue was maximized. But the hegemonic role of the Ranas did not mean any change for the peasants; they were still forced to share their produce with, and pay rent and taxes to, not only the government but also a host of others, such as the rajas, the birta owners, the jagirdars, and the village elites (Chapter 5). Payments in the form of agricultural produce did not represent the total burden on the peasants since compulsory unpaid-labor obligations and extra levies were common during that period (Chapter 6).

Another important feature of the agrarian system pertains to how different categories of intermediaries -- such as the money-lender-cum-landlord, the mukhiyas, and the jimidars -- emerged and operated during the 19th century. They represented a further source of economic domination over the peasantry by exploiting its labor and appropriating a share of its product without making any contribution to improving the land or productivity (Chapters 7 and 8).

Regmi also examines changes in the agrarian system and in land tenure policies introduced by the Ranas during the second half of the century. These policies increased the total area covered by the rajya, the birta, and the jagir systems of land tenure (Chapter 3) by strengthening control of the central government over its functionaries "without affecting the basic structures of these systems" (p. 47). Similarly, the Rana's taxation policies improved the method and machinery of collection (Chapter 4). Other land policies, such as tenure security and property rights, did not change the exploitive situation either, because the peasants remained subject to the village elite's manipulation. Interestingly, tenancy and property rights were initiated largely in response to conflicts between the interests of the state and

those of the landowning elites. Whatever increment of productivity was obtained could be attributed to new lands brought under cultivation by the peasants (Chapter 9). Regmi concludes that "the official policy toward the peasant remained one of apathy and exploitation throughout the nineteenth century" (p. 153).

The author thoroughly analyzes the unenviable position of the Nepalese peasantry and the economy. Although he contends that the study "purposely seeks to avoid reference to ideal conceptual systems such as partimonialism and bureaucracy, or feudalism and capitalism, in the belief that a conceptual analysis of a society is no substitute for socio-economic research" (p. xi), the analysis would have been strengthened with a more comparative, analytical approach. How, for example, would he compare the Nepalese system to those of pre-industrial Europe described by Brenner¹? Furthermore, some of Regmi's assumptions and criteria are not explicit -- for instance, his overall view of the problem of economic development. Similarly, the reader is left wondering how the author understands and defines the central question which the book seeks to answer: "Why is Nepal poor?" The reader can only agree with the author, given the benefit of hindsight, that agricultural productivity could have been raised by more capital investment in land. Would higher productivity have improved the peasantry's condition, or would it have resulted simply in a few more "stucco palaces"? Would higher agricultural productivity have made Nepal "rich" as opposed to "poor"? Would Nepal have achieved "economic development" today had agricultural productivity have been higher during the 19th century? The book concentrates on the internal forces operating in Nepal, but ignores significant external forces. Nepal's geopolitical status, the regional political situation, Nepal's trade relations with neighboring countries, and trade between India and Tibet--all of these are important external forces to consider.

In conclusion, we can certainly concur with Regmi's caveat that the reader "will value (the book) more for the questions it stimulates than for the answers it postulates" (p. xxii). Thatched Huts and Stucco Palaces nevertheless is a provocative monograph not only for scholars of Nepal's history, society and political economy, but also for students of development in general, who may well find it an enriching case study.

¹Robert Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe," Past and Present, 70 (1976): 30-75.