

July 2015

Agrarian Future(s) of Rural Nepal: Revitalizing Peasant Agriculture?

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Recommended Citation

Sunam, Ramesh K. and Goutam, Keshab R. (2015) "Agrarian Future(s) of Rural Nepal: Revitalizing Peasant Agriculture?," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 35: No. 1, Article 12.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol35/iss1/12>



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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all of the contributors to the workshop on 'Climate Change Mitigation with Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples: Practices, Lessons Learned and Prospects' held from 26-28 March 2012 in Cairns, Australia. Their comments helped to improve the quality of this paper. The authors are also deeply grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their highly insightful comments and suggestions. Many thanks to Sienna R. Craig and Mark Turin, the journal editors, for all their support and suggestions.

Agrarian Future(s) of Rural Nepal: Revitalizing Peasant Agriculture?

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Discourses on peasant agriculture have heightened in the context of recurrent food crisis and persistent poverty in Nepal as in many parts of the global South. Although an industrialized model of agriculture has been promoted as a pathway to a food-secure future, it has been heavily criticized for being environmentally destructive and socially unbearable. In this broader context, we examine peasant farming to explore enabling factors and barriers for its revitalization in Nepal, where the vast majority of rural people depends on farming for their livelihoods. This research draws on case studies of two agrarian villages characterized mainly by the subsistence nature of farming systems, but with one of them having significant prospects for commercial agriculture. While scholars are increasingly acknowledging peasant agriculture as a viable approach to ensure food security

and a sustainable future, this article shows that peasants are unlikely to continue such practices given the local and global challenges created by outmigration of laborers, neoliberal policy of the government, and diminished attraction of farming to young people. We suggest that these challenges should be addressed through reframing agricultural discourse and policy.

Keywords: food sovereignty, land, migration, Nepal, peasant farming.

Introduction

Discourse on agriculture has heightened in recent years in the context of recurrent food crisis and agro-biodiversity loss, particularly in the rural South. Global food production needs to be increased by 70 percent to feed the additional 2.7 billion people by 2050 (Godfray et al. 2010). However, the current industrial approach, promoted by neoliberal policies, continues to be unsustainable, aggravating the agrarian crisis. While industrial agriculture¹ has resulted in large-scale food production, increased food prices, inequitable distribution of benefits, and irreversible damages on the environment are becoming more evident across the world (Koochafkan et al. 2011). Thus, modern agriculture, which is fossil fuel-based, capital-intensive, and mechanized, has been widely criticized (Van der Ploeg 2008; La Via Campesina 2010; Holt Gimenez and Shattuck 2011).

Finding alternatives to industrial agriculture that can encourage more biodiverse, sustainable, and socially just forms of agriculture has been an immediate challenge. 'Food sovereignty,' an international peasant movement that emphasizes local control over food regime and productive resources opposed to corporate control, is already underway (Borras 2008; Patel 2009). In consequence, scientists, activists, and politicians around the world have started to renew their focus on peasant agriculture as a viable option (Edelman 1999; van der Ploeg 2008; Altieri and Toledo 2011). Peasant agriculture refers here to both agrarian discourses and practices. It espouses the idea that small farmers control land and farming for their food security, in contrast to corporate control and export-oriented agriculture. Peasant farming relies less on export-market and on external farm inputs such as pesticides and fertilizers, but it may not completely refrain from using such inputs and in its engagement with the market. Thousands of smallholders, particularly those belonging to local and indigenous communities in many parts of the world, in Africa, Latin America and Asia, have been practicing subsistence-oriented peasant farming, which has long contributed to address local food demand. Many peasants utilize agroforestry systems, which offer many co-benefits such as enhancing water quality, controlling soil erosion, conserving biodiversity, and sequestering carbon (Alavalapati et al. 2004; Jose 2009). In Nepal too, farmers have been engaged in agroforestry systems that typically involve agricultural crops, trees, and livestock, with some variations across geographic belts (Garforth et al. 1999).

Nepal has a long agriculture policy which is known as the Agriculture Perspective Plan (APP) 1995-2015. Some scholars critique this policy for being market-oriented and strongly guided by a neo-liberal agenda that potentially hollows the role of the government in agriculture

(Cameron 2009; Sugden 2009). Despite such a policy, agriculture in Nepal is predominantly characterized by peasant ways of farming. There are about 4.2 million peasant households, cultivating about 85 percent of the total agricultural land (CBS 2011). An average landholding size of these households is only about 0.7 ha (ibid); however, the contribution of smallholders to their own household and local economy is significant. These households rely on agriculture and forests, featuring integrated agriculture-forestry systems. However, the practices of peasant farming in the country have been dwindling over the last few decades as is the case in many areas around the world (Bryceson 1996; Rigg 2006). It is, therefore, crucial to examine the factors and broader political economic processes that underpin ailing peasant farming.

This paper seeks to do that by exploring opportunities for and barriers to engaging local farmers in peasant agriculture. There is a large body of literature on Nepal's agriculture in terms of farming practices with particular focus on farms, households, and other local socioeconomic and physical factors (Garforth et al. 1999; Paudel and Thapa 2004; Dhakal et al. 2012). However, these studies have not considered the broader socioeconomic processes that underpin the dynamics of land and peasant farming in light of massive outmigration of rural people for work, mainly to the Gulf States or to Malaysia (Adhikari and Hobley 2013; Sunam 2014; Thieme and Ghimire 2014). Along with labor migration, a decade-long Maoist 'people's war' and recent political-economic upheavals have had profound effects on the agrarian political economy of Nepal (Adhikari and Hobley 2013). In this paper, we explore these changes in relation to peasant farming by portraying the experiences of rural people through case studies.

The Peasantries: Death or Resurgence?

"The most dramatic and far-reaching social change of the second half of this century, and the one which cuts us off for ever from the world of the past, is the death of the peasantry" (Hobsbawm 1994: 289). This Hobsbawm's historic statement, from his book, *Age of Extremes*, refers to the disappearance of peasant agriculture, mainly from Europe and North America. As peasantries still have a presence in sub-Saharan Africa, South and continental Southeast Asia and China, "the death of the peasantry" is somewhat exaggerated in Bernstein's terms (Bernstein 2001). The food crisis of the first decade of the twenty-first century has also discredited Hobsbawm's belief that "the demise of peasantry is long overdue." Instead, current global issues such as food crisis, climate change, and poverty prompted by capitalist development suggest that the revitalization of peasantries has been 'long due.'

Industrial agriculture relies on large-scale food production through extensive mechanization, monoculture, and high levels of external inputs, such as chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and insecticides. Of the 1.5 billion hectares of cropland in the world, close to 90 percent are used for annual crops with mostly monocultures of rice, wheat, maize, soybeans, and cotton. These agricultural practices are highly dependent on chemical fertilizers and pesticides, as well as copious amounts of irrigation water (Altieri and Koohafkan 2008). Excessive use of these inputs contributes to the loss of agro-biodiversity, soil organic matter, and increased greenhouse gases. Due to these negative aspects of modern agriculture, in recent years growing focus has been placed on small-scale agriculture, which has also been the advocacy agenda of the food sovereignty movement promoted by La Via Campesina, an international movement that coordinates peasant organizations of smallholders, farm workers, rural women, and indigenous peoples (Pimbert 2009). A large body of literature reveals that many smallholders and indigenous peasants across the world continue farming, which supports local livelihoods and promotes sustainable agro-ecosystems (e.g. Altieri and Koohafkan 2008; La Via Campesina 2010; Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck 2011). These farmers often downplay the role of modern industrial agriculture promoted by some developed nations and their multinational companies.

The experiential knowledge, skills, and practices of traditional farmers have given rise to an agro-ecological approach. This approach has recently gained popularity, as it focuses on livelihoods of small farmers, production of safe, healthy, and culturally preferred foods, and local distribution, trade, and marketing (Altieri and Toledo 2011). This approach is expected to contribute to ensuring sustainable food production while developing resilient agro-biodiversity. Peasant agriculture, the root of agro-ecology, supports a high degree of biodiversity in the form of poly-culture and agroforestry patterns. Such poly-cultured farms feature nutrient-enriching plants, pollinators, insect predators, nitrogen-fixing and -decomposing bacteria, and a myriad of other organisms performing various beneficial ecological functions (Beets 1990).

While conventional wisdom suggests that small farms and peasant agricultural systems are unproductive and backward, research reveals that small farms are more productive than large-scale farms when total output is considered (Altieri and Koohafkan 2008). As smallholders diversify farming systems with grains, vegetables, fruits, fodder, and animal produce, productivity in terms of harvestable products per unit area surpasses that obtained from monoculture of a single crop under the same level of management. Yield advantages can vary from 20 to 60

percent (ibid) because poly-culture minimizes losses due to insects, weeds, and diseases and makes more efficient use of resources such as land, water, and light. Further, small farmers often treat their lands with organic manures and legume-based rotations, which sequester carbon better than soils with chemical fertilizers (Koohafkan et al. 2011). Peasant farmers reduce fossil fuel consumption directly through use of local tools and indirectly through reduced use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. As small farmers often produce and sell at local markets, this helps avoid energy consumption and emissions associated with transporting food hundreds and even thousands of kilometers.

Overall, industrial agriculture creates environmental and social problems, as evident in many developed and developing countries. For sustainable and resilient agriculture, peasant agriculture offer better prospects. Since the agricultural policy of the Nepali government aims to accelerate agricultural growth in an industrial and commercial mode, critical lessons from other countries such as India may lead policy makers and other policy actors reconsider such a policy.

Study Sites and Research Methods

This article draws on case studies of two agrarian villages in Nepal, both exhibiting the features of peasant and smallholding farming systems. The purpose of choosing two villages, one each from the Hills and the Tarai, is to capture a broader understanding of the socio-economic processes that underpin farming practices in these distinct geographical spaces. The Tarai region has immense potential for commercial agriculture. Apart from fertile agricultural land, the region also has relatively good access to irrigation, roads, government agricultural service centers, and agri-input markets. The mechanization of agricultural activities is feasible in Tarai because of its extensive flat terrain. However, the commercialization of agriculture has not advanced as envisioned by the government policy. Still, pre-capitalist labor relations largely define production and distribution of benefits from farming (Sugden 2009). Average landholding is relatively small, although there are some large landholdings. Most small and medium landholding farmers are engaged in subsistence farming systems. Most large landholders are not farmers; rather, they rent out their land to poor and landless peasants who cannot afford modern agri-inputs and thus are engaged in traditional forms of agriculture. More recently, outmigration has been quite common in the Tarai, forming a large portion of the total foreign labor migration from Nepal. It has resulted in agricultural labor shortage on the one hand, and feminization and geriatrification of agriculture on the other (Gartaula 2010).

The other village in this study belongs to the mid-Hills region of Nepal, with predominantly subsistence agriculture. The hilly region offers limited potential for commercial agriculture due to rugged and fragile geography, fragmented and small landholding, low level of access to roads, and expensive agri-inputs. Peasant agriculture and subsistence-oriented production are the dominant practices; at times some farmers often target local markets. Agroforestry practices are common because of farmers' need for diverse products—foods, fruits, fodders, grasses, and so on. Integrating trees on farms is essential not only for protecting fragile landscape from landslides and erosions, but also for supplying fodder and fuel-wood. As in the Tarai, outmigration is also increasing in the Hills, resulting in a shortage of labor.

To collect data from these two villages, we employed three main methods. First, we conducted participatory ranking exercise to categorize households into food self-sufficiency categories (see HBP 2013 for ranking procedures). Second, focus group discussions were executed to collect village-level information about socioeconomic changes, agricultural practices, and the challenges of peasant farming. We carried out two focus group discussions in each village, each lasting an hour and a half to two hours. The groups were comprised of 10-12 people representing diversity in age group, gender, and caste. Third, we carried out household surveys² to gather information about basic

socio-economic characteristics and agricultural practices. Seventy-five out of 137 households in the Tarai village and 35 out of 49 in the Hill village were randomly selected for the household surveys. Apart from conducting in-depth interviews with farmers and laborers, researchers also observed socio-economic phenomena and farming systems in the study villages.

Farming and Agrarian Change in Nepali Villages

This section presents findings from case studies. Following brief demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the rural households, we provide description of existing situations and broader changes that have occurred in these villages. Analytical domains concern land, labor, and other contours of social relations which have profound ramifications on the lives and livelihoods of rural people.

Case Study 1: Productive Land, Poor Farming

Located in Sunsari district in the Tarai region, the village of Belapur³ has a total of 137 households, half of them comprised of *tharu*—an indigenous group. After *tharu*, *dalit*⁴ form the majority, followed by higher-caste *bahun* and *chhetri*. Nearly half of the total households were food self-sufficient; they were able to meet demand for food from production on their own land. As seen in Table 1, most indigenous *tharu* and *dalit* were poor and less food secure.

Ethnicity	Total households	Food self-sufficiency (in months)			
		< 4	4-8	8-12	>12
Bahun/Chhetri	25 (18)	-	2 (8)	6 (24)	17 (68)
Tharu	64 (47)	21 (33)	11 (17)	19 (30)	13 (20)
Dalit	48 (35)	7 (15)	38 (79)	2 (4)	1 (2)
Total	137	28	51	27	31

Table 1. Food self-sufficiency status of households in Belapur.

Surveys reveal that most households were small landholdings, with an average landholding of 0.68 hectares and a maximum of seven hectares. Of the total households, 38 percent were tenants who worked the land of others on a sharecropping basis. In current sharecropping practices, tenants provide half of the total harvest to landlords but bear costs of labor and other farm inputs themselves.

Subsistence and peasant agriculture largely describes what people do in the Belapur village. Most farmers used animal and human power while carrying out agricultural activities such as land preparation, transplanting, harvest-

ing, weeding, and threshing. Traditional agricultural tools such as the plough, spade, hoe, and sickle were used. By not using fossil fuel-run modern tools and chemical fertilizers, many farmers have wittingly or unwittingly prevented the loss of agro-biodiversity. About 15 percent of the total households were landless and made their livings mainly through wage laboring in the farm and non-farm sectors. Employment in non-farm sectors mainly involved casual laboring in the construction sector, including house and road construction within the village or in the local towns.

Farmers grew three crops a year in the Belapur village; paddy was predominant. The popular crop rotations were rice-rice-wheat, rice-rice-maize, rice-rice-mustard, and rice-vegetables-vegetables. They also grew legumes, which, apart from providing a cheaper source of proteins to poor people, are believed to be useful for soil nitrogen fixation. Diverse multipurpose trees were maintained on the farms for foods, fruits, fodder, firewood, and timber. Seven main tree species were reported to have been integrated on farms and 16 trees per household were found. The majority of farmers also tended different types of livestock for milk, meat, organic manure, and draught power. The common livestock seen in the village were goats, buffalos, cattle, pigs, and chickens. When there was global food crisis that inflated food prices, rising food prices hit the poor, particularly net food buyers, hard. Sharecroppers were not adversely affected because they had sacks of paddy in their houses. The landless who were just laborers suffered a great deal because their earnings were not sufficient to buy expensive foods from local towns.

The household surveys revealed that in Belapur village, 71 people—mostly young and male—from 65 households were abroad working as migrant. They were working either in the Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and UAE, or in Malaysia. Remittances sent back home ranged from NRs 70,000 to 300,000 in their migration cycle, based on migrant's destination countries and the nature of their work. Those left behind in the village were mostly women, elders, and children. During the fieldwork, the first author observed many elderly men plowing and women working land, but few young men on the farms. The impacts of out-migration were quite visible in the village in terms of high wage rate and labor shortage. Just five years ago, daily wage rate was NRs 80, which has now increased to NRs 300. Further, many participants in the focus group discussions reported that finding male workers during peak agricultural season was much more difficult now than few years ago, because males were now employed abroad in Malaysia and the Gulf countries. In addition, labor shortage in agriculture was further worsened by high labor demand in the non-farming sector, mainly for construction activities in the nearby town centers, which in a way was spurred by the flow of remittances in the local economy. To sum up, the Belapur village has witnessed recent phenomena of increased labor shortage and geriatrification and feminization of agricultural activities triggered by outmigration of villagers for foreign employment.

The migration of local people for foreign employment has led to some households giving up farming, while providing

other, poorer households with the opportunity for sharecropping. The migrant households received remittances, which they used for covering food and other household expenses and for sending their children to schools. As the left-behind family members found farming difficult, they tended to lease out their land or give up sharecropping if they were tenants. Remittances have played a role, but these households also cited reasons of labor shortage and high farming costs for giving up farming during the focus group discussion. Many migrant households and landlords intended to rent out their land for sharecropping, but very few of the poorer households took this opportunity. New sharecroppers were those who had adequate family labor to offset the cost of labor and who had kept oxen for plowing. For households without family labor or oxen, sharecropping was not *posane* (not profitable, not worth doing). One could argue that increased wages can benefit laborers. This is plausible. But farmers and laborers revealed that the demand for hired farm laborers has decreased in the village because farmers chose to revive reciprocal labor relations, called *parma*, or keep some portion of the land uncultivated rather than hiring costly labor.

Similarly, with increased flow of remittances in the village, the speculative land market has ballooned, which has led to the conversion of arable land into housing plots. Investors in land saw a high profit margin. Landowners sold land for a large sum of money, which they hardly could have accumulated merely from farm incomes, in order to build a house in towns or to purchase land there. Focus group discussions revealed that some people from the Belapur village moved to local towns for better education for their children, reducing a labor pool of the village. Remittances enabled these movers to make livings in the towns. Let us now consider a few excerpts from the in-depth interviews conducted in the village.

Researcher: Then would you like to give your land to *bishwashilo* (trustworthy) people for sharecropping?

Landowner: Yes. My two sons are in Malaysia and we don't have *jan* (labor) in our house.

Researcher: Some landless people here had told me that they were interested in sharecropping. Have not they contacted you?

Landowner: Yes. Some of them have approached me but I am afraid that they might claim some portion of my land as they have good political connections (he was indicating that they are close to Maoists).

Another excerpt, from interview with the landless:

Researcher: Land for sharecropping seems to be available here. I was thinking that you would be doing farming.

Landless: Yes. Many *malik* [landlords] came to us asking to work their land on sharecropping basis. But it is not *posane*.

Researcher: why? You can have harvest share, isn't it?

Landless: It's not so easy as you said. Half of the share goes to *malik*. I do not have family *jan* (labor) so the cost is high. *Malik* can kick out us at any time if they do not like us. We have to cover costs of seeds, labor on our own. It is really not *posane*.

These excerpts highlight that landowners wish to rent out land and there are poor households who are interested in sharecropping. The rich fear that their land might be taken away. On the part of the poor, terms and conditions of farming are unfavorable, and tenure security is poor. In the case of labor costs, had there been a large share of harvest going to tenants, sharecropping would still be profitable for the sharecroppers. There is another key reason that farmers frequently cited that they are compelled to sell their surplus grain at low prices, which often do not even cover their production costs: In the Belapur village as in other bordering parts of the Tarai, the market particularly for paddy was overtaken by cheaper Indian rice where agriculture has been heavily protected through subsidies for seeds, fertilizers, irrigation, and electricity (Pritchard et al. 2013). The provision of minimum support prices, if it was in place, could protect farmers from adverse effects of such market.

The Belapur village has enjoyed a huge flow of remittances, potentially capital for investment in agriculture. However, very few migrant households have spent their remittances in farming. Lal Bahadur is one such returnee migrant, who spent about five years in Dubai and now has come back to his own village. He has started tomato farming in his own land of half a bigha (1 bigha = 0.67 ha). He said he saves about NRs 10,000 every month by selling tomatoes. In Dubai, he used to earn about NRs 12,000 per month. In his own words:

Working in my own village is far better than doing so in *bidesh* (overseas). I have been able to look after my children. I do not have to be away from my wife. Look. Working hours are long there

[in *bidesh*]. Here I can take a rest when I feel like not working. But in *bidesh* we have to work under the supervision of foremen. Still, I am earning almost an equal amount of money here as in Dubai.

Two points, at least, are important to understand the conditions enabling Lal Bahadur to engage in tomato farming. First, he had his own capital to invest in agriculture which he accumulated from foreign labor migration. In the Belapur village, the people who wanted to do what Lal Bahadur has done lacked capital. Interviews with young people highlighted that banks do not provide loans for farming without lucrative collaterals. Taking loans from local lenders makes farming hardly profitable because the local lenders charge high interest rates, ranging from 24 to 60 percent. Second, Lal Bahadur has his own fertile land. In the village, few farmers own land, either bought or inherited, although they may have enough capital to invest in it. Hiring others' land is more an exception than a norm in the village, as indicated earlier. In the focus group discussions, participants reported that there is no government policy to facilitate land leasing. However, they see huge prospects of vegetable farming, dairy, and meat products which they can sell in their own village or local towns.

In the Belapur village, land rights movements have also taken place, partly facilitated by a local NGO. This local NGO has been advocating for the rights of the landless to secure land in collaboration with a national-level NGO and an international organization. The effects of such movements on the lives of the landless were not yet visible. At one point during the interview, a land rights activist, a salaried employee of the local NGO, said that the landless should come to their office if they had any issues to do with land rights. This made the first author heavily doubt the scope of land rights movement in securing land for the landless. A local NGO has posted many slogans related to land rights, including "land to the tillers," in their booklets and brochures. However, when the first author asked the local landless leader about his experience with the movements, he expressed his frustration, saying, "I have been struggling for land rights for 20 years. I was born landless and I think I would die landless." He felt that it would have provided realizable benefits to them had they put the pressure on the government to change the terms and conditions of sharecropping, rather than to struggle for land rights as the slogan "land to the tillers" implies. He thinks that the former is more doable and politically feasible given the current political context, but he reaffirms his persistent belief in "land to the tillers" as a long-term peasant agenda.

The Agriculture Perspective Plan aims to increase agriculture productivity through the use of fertilizers, improved seeds, irrigation, and market facilities (Cameron 2009). Little progress has been seen in this regard, as a lot of farmers continue farming in traditional ways. However, in recent years some farmers like Lal Bahadur have been practicing commercial vegetable farming, indicating that the village is gradually moving towards commercial agriculture. Some are growing monocultures of sugarcane, receiving credit and agri-inputs. The use of fossil fuel-run tools such as tractors and chemical fertilizers to farm paddy, potato, sugarcane, and wheat has increased in the village. The amount of fertilizer used by some richer farmers stands at 85kg/ha, far exceeding the national average of 30kg/ha. However, as reported by many local farmers, they have started to reduce the application of chemical fertilizers due to increased costs and perceived negative side effects on soil quality. Further, most indigenous people and the poor stay in subsistence agriculture, in which enormous inter-linkages among trees, agriculture, and livestock can be observed. As they are smallholders and landless peasants, they can hardly afford modern inputs such as chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and improved seeds. In addition, *tharu* (indigenous peoples) are the ones who rarely out-migrate, due to their weak social networks and chronic poverty, as only six out of 64 households had sent their family members abroad.

Case Study 2: Flying People, Fallow Land

Another case study was conducted in Durapur village of Tanahun district in the Western mid-Hills. The village is characterized by steep terrain, small terrace farmland, and poor access to the market and basic infrastructures. Among a total of 49 households, *dalit* and *gurung* constitute 20 and 12 percent respectively, the rest being *bahun*, *chhetri* and *thakuri* (so-called upper caste). During the participatory ranking of households, it was revealed that over two-thirds of the total households were identified as not food self-sufficient. The landholding of households ranges from less than 0.1 to 4 hectares. *Dalit* have generally

small landholdings and are thus less food secure (see Table 2). No remarkable difference in farming practices could be observed across different households along castes and food security status divisions.

Peasant farming has always been the main livelihood strategy for almost all of the households in the Durapur village. However, only the elderly and female members of households were engaged in this occupation at this time. In the focus group discussions, younger people preferred going out of the village, where they could earn more. Both permanent and temporary migration had taken place rapidly in the last two decades. At least 20 families permanently migrated to the local towns and the Tarai in this period. Either rich families who were able to afford better living in the new place, or families who were near-landless left the village permanently. Similarly, household surveys revealed that at least one member from each of 29 households was working in India or another foreign country for labor employment. This outmigration has created a shortage of labor in agriculture, and thus many farmlands have been left uncultivated. However, a strong linkage between agriculture, trees, and livestock has compelled the left-behind people to continue peasant agriculture. A participant remarked during the focus group discussion: “We can buy grains with money earned overseas [remittances], but we cannot buy agricultural by-products like hay to feed our buffaloes and cattle.”

Although the rural households owned small areas of land, every household in the village produced a variety of food items—some cereals, pulses, vegetables, spices, fruits, milk, ghee, and meat—which were important for supplying diverse nutrition in the rural context, where access to the market is poor. Because of small economies of scale for marketing outside the village, the households exchanged some types of food (such as fruits, vegetables, milk) among themselves, whereas they tended to sell surplus to the neighboring villages during *haat bazaar* (market days). Nevertheless, with increasing trends of out-migration, coupled with enhanced road access, the village is now being well integrated into the market as evidenced by dramatic

Ethnicity	Total households	Food self-sufficiency (in months)			
		< 4	4-8	8-12	>12
Bahun/Chhetri	33 (67)	4 (12)	16 (49)	9 (27)	4 (12)
Gurung	6 (12)	-	3 (50)	2 (33)	1 (17)
Dalit	10 (21)	7 (70)	3 (30)	-	-
Total	49	11 (22.5)	22 (45)	11 (22.5)	5 (10)

Table 2. Food self-sufficiency status of households in Durapur.

increase in the import of food products, including noodles, biscuits, and (non)alcoholic drinks.

Farmers in this village have long been conserving agro-biodiversity. Farmlands were rich with trees. As a general pattern, fruit species were in home orchards, and fodder trees were in farms (usually in the rain-fed land). Results from the surveys showed that a household possesses, on average, 22 trees of nine species on their farmland. Most of the products they produce are organic and of local varieties. Similarly, they owned local varieties of animals including buffaloes, cattle, goats, and chickens. The participants in the focus groups said that there was limited to no use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. However, some households that have high income and more land but fewer livestock (and thus less organic manure) tended to use chemical fertilizers. Traditional agricultural implements such as the wooden plough and spade were being used while undertaking farming activities. The farmers have been protecting and using local forests as an integral part of their farming systems.

Despite its longstanding contribution to the livelihoods of local people, serious challenges to peasant farming were identified during focus group discussions. One of the major challenges was that farming is unprofitable, and therefore the 'new generation' is discouraged from continuing it. It should be noted that, given the small land holding size and the practice of producing only major cereal crops in rotation (such as rice-rice-wheat or rice-wheat in the irrigated land, and maize-millet in the rain-fed land), peasant agriculture does not provide full-time employment for farmers. Therefore, a youth's opportunity cost of being involved in the peasant agriculture is very high, particularly in the context of a booming foreign labor market. The evidence of the new generation's detachment from agriculture could be observed in the farmland, where there were a lot of over-mature fodder trees but very few saplings. An account of a respondent also supports this situation: "Trees you [a researcher] see in our farm are that planted by our grandfather. We have not planted any trees. I guess, this is true for many in this village." Many respondents also reported the lack of marketing potential of the agricultural commodities, poor transportation facilities, poor schooling for children, and inadequate state support as other constraints to continuing their tradition. These disincentives have led people to invest remittances not in agriculture in the village, but in housing in the urban areas.

Nevertheless, the opportunity to revitalize peasant farming appears on the scene. Padam, a man in his fifties, who

spent more than a decade of his life in the Indian labor market, has now lived a better life through goat keeping in the village. All he did was to transform the subsistence practice of keeping a small number of goats. He increased the number of goats to 22. This number is important not only in terms of its creation of full-time employment and its contribution to the household's livelihood, but also in terms of its effects on other areas of farming. For instance, organic manure from goats was utilized for producing vegetables and other agricultural produce. The newly built muddy road, which has connected the village to the local towns along the highway, has created an opportunity for marketing agricultural produce. Despite the development of infrastructures such as road, electricity, and telephone service in the last few years, many young people seemed less interested in staying in the village given the availability of migration opportunities. A participant in the group discussion remarked: "One can easily find money [from the lender] to go for foreign employment but not for farming or any local business." This is probably due to the perceived uncertainty or unpredictability in the agricultural business in the face of increased costs of farming. It suggests that improvements in peasant agriculture are required. Apart from developing basic infrastructures for health and educational facilities, the development of economic opportunities in the village should be lucrative enough in relation to foreign labor migration. This requires state support, particularly for irrigation, supplying improved varieties of seeds and technical assistance, and for banking facilities.

Persistence of Peasant Farming: Choice of Farmers or Survival Strategy?

As the case studies suggest, many political, economic, historic, and cultural factors underpin the persistence of peasant agriculture in Nepal. First, the majority of farmers are smallholders (<0.7 ha) and are poor who hardly can afford expensive farm inputs. Being smallholders, they need to satisfy their diverse demands for food crops, fruits, fodder, and so on from their small farm, necessitating poly-cultured farming and agroforestry practices, as evident in the villages we studied. Second, historically people are attached to land, and being landless means being less dignified. For socio-cultural reasons, people don't want to be landless, no matter how prosperous they are and even if they are not receiving substantial income from land (Basnet 2010). Third, livelihood alternatives to farming are rarely available, and if available are not secure or sustainable. Many men from the case study villages have left the villages for foreign employment. Particularly,

poor people cannot afford the costs of migration. Even for those who can pursue this pathway, working abroad either in Malaysia or Qatar is not the best alternative given the adverse terms and conditions of work and miserable living conditions; some scholars call labor camps in Qatar “living jails” (Bruslé 2012: 20). Despite the fact that an increasing number of rural people are involved in non-farm employment or labor migration, they continue to attach themselves to land for future livelihood security.

Finally, although the government looks aggressive for the commercialization of agriculture, at least in its policy documents, the government staff for agricultural service shares only six percent of the total civil servants (MoGA 2011) and budget allocated for agriculture stands at about seven percent of the total budget, while agriculture sector contributes over 30 percent to the total GDP (CBS 2009). In addition, particularly in the Hill and Mountain regions of Nepal, there is a meager prospect for large scale, commercial farming due to small landholding, and rugged and fragile landscapes.

However, the aforementioned context may not always be able to make peasant agriculture grow. As our studies indicated, several threats to peasant agriculture are already in place and many more will emerge in the coming years. One of the important and overarching threats is the expansion of the neoliberal development approach which underscores the role of capital intensive agriculture (Altieri 2011). Some argue that the Agriculture Perspective Plan (APP) is strongly guided by neoliberal agenda (Cameron 2009; Sugden 2009). A new agricultural policy, called Agriculture Development Strategy, is under preparation which will replace the current APP from 2015. Growing public discourse in Nepal indicates that a substantive policy shift cannot be anticipated in a new agriculture policy; rather, it would again embrace neoliberal agricultural policies, being just a mere extension of the APP. The continuous emphasis of the government on commercial agriculture, with the support from international agencies including ADB and DFID, has created fissures in peasant agriculture.

Similarly, outmigration—mainly foreign labor migration—has negatively affected peasant agriculture. Our study villages were not an exception in this regard. Over 1.9 million Nepalis are abroad, most of whom are economically active and male; only 13 percent of these people are female (CBS 2011). People residing in rural areas are mostly women, children, and elders. The agricultural workload has been borne by women and the elderly, leading to the feminization and geriatrification of agriculture which have been observed across the country and South Asia in

general (Gartaula et al. 2010; Adhikari and Hobley 2013; Maharjan et al. 2013; Lahiri-Dutt 2014). As peasant agriculture is labor intensive, outmigration has created labor shortage. Many returnees do not wish to continue farming, but prefer to engage in ‘clean’ jobs (Gartaula et al. 2010). Another adverse effect on farming triggered partly by migration is that arable land has increasingly been converted into residential housing plots. This is a speculative land market operating not only in the study villages, but that has also expanded across the country, more profoundly in the Tarai (ibid). In the Hills, fallow land has increased. In consequence, arable land has declined, converting villages from production to consumption spaces. This process has been further worsened by the fact that sharecropping is not beneficial to tenants and the land rental market lacks an enabling state policy.

Another shock is that peasant agriculture has not become an attractive occupation to young people. Subsistence peasants are often regarded as dirty folks, backward, and less innovative, and thus are disrespected in society, despite the fact that they are doing agriculture in a sustainable way. The creation of such identities of the countryside and farmers is common in the discourse and practice of modernization (Pigg 1996). As a result, new generations are reluctant to attach themselves to land and farming. During the focus group discussions, the youth echoed this intention; they aspire to *bidesh jane* (go abroad) or become a teacher after their studies, but few showed interest in farming. Most poor and landless peasants are managing their farmlands in sustainable ways, but these are the people stuck in poverty, food insecurity, and marginalization. What are the incentives for them to continue such types of farming when it does not lead them to prosperity? The next section summarizes key arguments and attends to this question with policy options.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

The importance of peasant agriculture, described here as being bio-diverse and smallholding with low external inputs, has rapidly grown amidst wider concern for food sovereignty and a green economy. While the notion of ‘death of peasantry’ does not necessarily reflect reality in many countries, peasant farming has faced daunting challenges around the world. Drawing on the case studies from rural Nepal, this paper argues that while peasant agriculture has contributed to achieving food sovereignty, it will not grow with vigor in the face of local and global challenges such as rapid outmigration of the labor force, pro-industrial neoliberal government policy, and the reluctance of new generations to farm.

Apart from addressing these challenges, new discourse and policy can offer prospects for revitalizing peasant agriculture. The discourse that a technical fix is a key solution to agrarian crisis has deeply influenced Nepal's government policies. A 20-year Agriculture Perspective Plan is a case in point which envisions entrepreneurial farmers and 'priority inputs' of irrigation, fertilizer, technology, roads, and power that would automatically lead to increased agricultural growth. This Plan fails to address structural causes of agrarian crisis and recent socio-economic changes in Nepal, as our case studies suggest. Apart from shifting discourse on peasant farming, we suggest some policy options, not recommendations, to stimulate debates around prospects of peasant agriculture. First, while we recognize that the slogan "land to the tillers" still holds strong relevance, its actual translation into the lives of landless and marginal farmers takes a long course in terms of politics and policy. For the short-term, tenancy reforms may immediately benefit the poor and landless, and this option is politically more viable than radical redistributive land reform. Thus, changing terms and conditions of sharecropping is of utmost importance to enable tenants, or sharecroppers in our case, to receive more than half of the total harvest (for instance, 75:25 rather than 50:50) with a fair mechanism of cost sharing between tenants and landlords. Second, a policy that facilitates land leasing is necessary so that aspirant farmers with working capital can invest in farming; a land rental system is a workable option for those who cannot purchase land but are interested in farming.

Third, there should be economic incentives for farmers to continue peasant agriculture. Peasants are disrespected and misrecognized as 'backward,' but it should be the other way around given their significant role in the rural economy. In the forestry sector, the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) mechanism has been piloted in many developing countries, including Nepal, to provide financial incentives for local peoples for their role in conserving forests. A similar incentive mechanism can be put in place to reward farmers who have been continuing peasant agriculture while protecting agro-biodiversity and mitigating climate change. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations has advocated for such a mechanism under the rubric of "climate-smart agriculture," although it is yet to be fully recognized by developed countries (FAO 2010). Other incentives can be in the form of minimum support prices and financial and technical support to the establishment of agricultural cooperatives—particularly for marketing—in the village, although such incentives do not fit in the neoliberal policy box. Finally, the development of

market infrastructure, at least for the local trade, needs to be developed. Since many local people have moved from villages to local towns for providing better education to their children, perhaps enhancing school infrastructure and improving the quality of education in the village can retain people in the village and encourage them to continue peasant farming. Importantly, peasant farming also needs a prompt rethinking for its transformation. Overlooking new technology and farm inputs is not a panacea for a food-secure future and resilient agriculture; rather, a win-win pathway needs to be worked out through the amalgamation of strengths of both peasant and modern agriculture. This should reflect ongoing synergy between agriculture, livestock, and trees for a food-secure and sustainable future.

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The authors would like to thank all of the contributors to the workshop on 'Climate Change Mitigation with Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples: Practices, Lessons Learned and Prospects' held from 26-28 March 2012 in Cairns, Australia. Their comments helped to improve the quality of this paper. The authors are also deeply grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their highly insightful comments and suggestions. Many thanks to Sienna R. Craig and Mark Turin, the journal editors, for all their support and suggestions.

Endnotes

1. Industrial agriculture involves a large-scale operation in terms of size of land, scale of production, and geographical coverage. Corporate sector or large investors are involved in such agriculture. Similar to industrial agriculture, producing food for sale is a driving force in commercial agriculture, whereas producing for self-consumption is the main motive in peasant agriculture. In theory, peasant farmers are also expected to conserve local biodiversity using less external farm inputs, while commercial farmers or agri-industries pay little attention to environmental aspects.
2. In line with initial research design, about 50 percent of the total households were surveyed in the Tarai village. However, a higher percentage of the total households were covered in the Hill village to minimize possible errors caused by a tiny sample size.
3. The real names of villages and peoples have been disguised to ensure their anonymity.
4. 'Dalit' is a collective noun for people who are considered 'untouchables' and have long been marginalized and excluded on the basis of caste hierarchy nurtured in Hindu religion. The population of dalit in Nepal is about 3.7 million (approx. 14 percent of the total).

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