



PROGRAM IN
Agrarian Studies
YALE UNIVERSITY

Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
YALE UNIVERSITY
SEPTEMBER 14-15, 2013

Conference Paper #69

Transcending the Focus on Agrarian Sector

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critical perspectives on rural politics and development



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Conference paper for discussion at:

Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

International Conference

September 14-15, 2013

Convened by

Program in Agrarian Studies, Yale University

204 Prospect Street, # 204, New Haven, CT 06520 USA

<http://www.yale.edu/agrarianstudies/>

The Journal of Peasant Studies

www.informaworld.com/jps

Yale Sustainable Food Project

www.yale.edu/sustainablefood/

in collaboration with

Food First/Institute for Food and Development Policy

398 60th Street, Oakland, CA 94618 USA

www.foodfirst.org

Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies (ICAS)

International Institute of Social Studies (ISS)

P.O. Box 29776, 2502 LT The Hague, The Netherlands

www.iss.nl/icas

Transnational Institute (TNI)

PO Box 14656, 1001 LD Amsterdam, The Netherlands

www.tni.org

with support from

The Macmillan Center, the Edward J. and Dorothy Clarke Kempf Memorial Fund and the South Asian Studies Council at Yale University

http://www.yale.edu/macmillan/kempf_fund.htm

<http://www.yale.edu/macmillan/southasia>

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that, together with building thriving and functionally integrated farm agro-ecologies and peasant-controlled economic practices, we need to pay serious attention to things that are normally considered beyond 'agriculture sector.' Very often, the crisis of agriculture is presented in terms of the spread of technologies that take farming away from the control of peasants and entangle them in relations of dependency to input traders, their transnational manufacturers and the transnational regime of intellectual property rights. In the process, farmers are dependent on alien markets for selling their surplus. There is another, a more hopeful, side of the story, too. Throughout the world, growing number of farmers has been able to extricate itself from these entanglements by adopting agro-ecological management of farms and by building alternative mechanism for sharing resources such as seeds and knowledge. The spread of farmer-to-farmer network for sharing and innovating alternative technologies have shown impressive results in not only enhancing farmers' autonomy but also increasing productivity and resilience of farms.

This paper is based on my year-long ethnographic research in a predominantly small-holder Phulbari village of Chitwan Valley in south-central Nepal. I explored the way a couple hundred farming families have transitioned from high-chemical farming to agro-ecology based organic farming practices. In this paper I seek to show that, while agro-ecological practices and diversification of economic relations goes a long way in enhancing the autonomy of small-holder farmers, the increased privatization of education and health, lack of interest among young people in farming, increasing cost of building homes, and boom-and-bust cycle of land speculation pose significant challenges to maintaining the thriving agro-ecological practices in the coming years and decades. I will finally conclude by making a case for broadening the vision of 'food sovereignty' to include issues related to public goods such as quality and access of education and health care, intergenerational transfer of agricultural skills, and ecological home building.

Introduction

In 2010, Henry Bernstein wrote a provocative essay in *Journal of Agrarian Change* which raised salient questions "concerning the productive forces" (Bernstein, 2010). He suggested that there was "an inherited weakness of 'orthodox' materialist conceptions of the development of the productive forces in capitalist agriculture, and the intellectual deficit of an uncritical and ahistorical stance that embraces such development as forever 'progressive'" (p.300). This is no small a suggestion coming out of someone who had been doing 'agrarian political economy' for over four decades. It is also not a mere coincidence that his call is also coming at a time when

critical agrarian studies have begun to adopt the concept of 'food sovereignty' as central theoretical focus. Better late than never. After all, the ecological questions in agriculture have been around for over a century (Berry, 1986; Howard & MacDonald, 1940; King, 1911). The concept of food sovereignty explicitly embraces twin goals of social justice and ecological sustainability as inseparable (Desmarais, 2002; Wittman, 2009).

Traditional left politics hovered around the question of land redistribution. It continues to be the case in different countries even now. Besides the question of landownership, the emphasis has also been on increasing the accessibility of agricultural inputs such as irrigation, chemical fertilizers, pesticides and seeds. In this later case, traditional left politics and agricultural modernization projects shared common goals (Fitzgerald, 2003). The assumed superiority of industrial farming based on high degree of mechanization and the use of agrochemicals and hybrid seeds remained implicit and explicit in most of left theorizations of agrarian questions for over a century (Akram-Lodhi & Kay, 2010a, 2010b; Kautsky, 1988; Lenin, 1967). While redistributive land reform remains a part of left political agenda in different parts of the world, there has been perceptible shift among a growing section of left scholars and activists away from high external input agriculture towards the principles of agroecology (Altieri & Toledo, 2011). Practices of millions of farmers and agroecologists around the world have generated viable alternatives to high-external input agriculture (Holt-Giménez and Altieri 2013; Kumar et al. 2009). Giménez and Altieri (2013), however, have cautioned against focussing only on technical approach of agroecology, which can lead to the same old green revolution paradigm. Radical agroecology, therefore, need to combine farm-level agro-ecological practices with the politics of transforming the structural conditions within which broader political economy operates. The question of corporate control over input and output markets, national policies that align with expanding corporatization, and resultant disempowerment of world's smallholder farmers have become rallying issues for articulating what Holt-Giménez and Altieri (2013) call 'radical agroecology.' These are important issues. However, the emphasis on 'structural factors' of agrarian political economy has been marred by inadequate attention to issues that lie beyond the 'agricultural sector', but that are central to the viability of peasant farming across the much of the third world.

In this exploratory essay, I discuss three 'non-agricultural' sectors as a way of broadening the focus of food sovereignty movement. I argue that realizing the goal of food sovereignty calls for not only transforming the structural conditions of how food is produced, distributed, processed and consumed (Holt-Giménez and Altieri 2013), but also addressing interrelated issues of access to comfortable homes, quality health care, and meaningful education, and cultural politics, among other things. I will argue that the conceptual broadening can provide opportunities for expanding the coalitions for political fights for food sovereignty, and opens up

spaces for enacting new economic possibilities (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gibson-Graham, Healy, & Cameron, 2013).

This paper is based on my year-long ethnographic research among practitioners of agroecology in Nepal, over three decades of growing up in predominantly small-holder dominated area of Nepal's Chitwan valley, and over two decades of work on permaculture designs, grassroots and national level political activism in Nepal. The rest of the paper is divided into two major sections. The first section discusses the emerging agroecological practices and the way some of Nepal's smallholders have been reconfiguring their landscapes and economic practices, enhancing greater control over farming livelihoods. In the second section, I will discuss three intimately related challenges facing these farmers: privatization of health care and education; rising costs of homebuilding; and changing cultural attitudes towards farming.

Organic Farming in Phulbari village of Nepal's Chitwan Valley

Chitwan valley has been the center of experiments in and promotion of high external input agriculture in Nepal since 1950s. Until early 1950s, it was densely forested land interspersed with paddy-cultivating indigenous Tharu villages situated in the swampy areas (Malla and Sharma 1957). On January 23, 1951 the then Nepali government signed a cooperation agreement with the then United States Overseas Mission (USOM, which later became the United States Agency for International Development, USAID in 1961) (Skerry, Moran, & Calavan, 1991). One of the major projects undertaken by the USOM jointly with the Nepali government and a few United Nations agencies was to open up the low-lying valley of the southern plains of Nepal. Chitwan was one of them (ibid.).

The spraying of DDT controlled the malaria and opened the way for widespread cultivation of the previously densely forested land. Migrants from across Nepal flocked to the valley in search of land during the subsequent decades (Ojha 1983). The USOM and Nepali government actively promoted modern agricultural technologies with the help of a wide network of extension technicians. In the initial years, American technical advisors of the USOM were actively involved in the process. In late 1950s, Nepal's first agriculture and animal science institution was set up in Nepal's capital city Kathmandu. This institution was later upgraded and transferred to Chitwan valley in late 1960s, where it currently trains thousands of undergraduate and graduate students of agriculture and animal sciences. Agricultural research, transfer of technologies through the trained extension agents, and popularization of new agricultural practices through mass media became major activities of Nepalis state throughout the last six decades.

Chandra Adhikari's parents moved to Chitwan valley as one of the first settler families in Phulbari village in 1957, the first planned settlement in Chitwan valley. The newcomer family were provided with three hectares of land for homesteading and farming. Over time the availability of land for settlement dwindled. Chandra Adhikari was born in Chitwan one year after his parents migrated to the valley. His family is now a second generation smallholder farming household. Through subdivision of property among his brothers, his household now farms three quarters of a hectare of land.

In early 1970s he started intensive commercial vegetable cultivation in three quarters of his land. Back then, it was possible for farmers to raise enough money to buy half a hectare of land from good vegetable harvest. "We did not do that, but a few of our neighbors added to their land by selling cabbages and carrots," Chandra Adhikari told me in November 2010. In early 1990, he faced major insect and fungal attacks in his vegetable farms. There was not a single tomato without holes in them for two consecutive years. He got advice from the agriculture college professors. He used pesticides and other 'medicines' they recommended. Nothing worked. That was when he decided to stop using chemicals. His farm is now one of the most functionally integrated systems of annual crops, vegetables, animals, trees, bamboo, and fish, to name a few. Over the last two decades, about two hundred farming households in Phulbari village have stopped using external agrochemicals and have adopted a variety of agroecological practices. The practices include intensive and functional integration of trees, animals, and other elements in farming; vermicomposting; integrating fish and azola in rice fields; cover crops and green manuring; conservation of cattle urine; utilization of biogas, among other things. These farmers have become part of Phulbari Organic Producers' Cooperative. Although most of the production is consumed in the households, this cooperative is becoming a vehicle for selling surplus in both premium organic markets and locally.

What is unmistakably clear in Phulbari is that by simply adopting agroecological practices, they have been able to cut their dependency on external inputs and thereby have reconfigured their relations with input traders. They procure a few organic inputs such as oilcakes from local oil press mills. Visits to their farms show different degrees of productive and functional integration of different elements of the farm. This integration process have generated diverse products for household consumption and markets: rice, wheat, buckwheat, maize, vegetables, firewood, fish, pigeons, seeds, bamboo, fruits, spices, honey and bee waxes. They are in the initial process of establishing relationships with city-based organic traders to sell their grain surpluses, but much of other items are sold directly to consumers or through many local retail shops. These changes have complex origins and trajectories, which I discuss in my dissertation (Bhattarai 2013). Phulbari village has become a major site for learning visits for government extension officers, farmers from nearby villages and other parts of Nepal, students of agricultural colleges,

and workers of non-governmental organizations. Their farms are living testimony to agroecological transformations.

In the process of changing their farm landscapes, they are also contributing to some changes in both local agrarian economy and agricultural knowledge. For the last six decades, farmers were the recipients of agricultural knowledge from experts. Now, many of the experts visit them to learn how they have been able to transform their farms. Occasionally, they are also invited to present their experiences during formal classes, training sessions, and conferences. Their farms are becoming a part of new emerging commons. Although in the initial stage, they are also strengthening their cooperative for marketing surpluses and are using their personal and institutional networks to sell directly to final consumers. At present, Chandra Adhikari has started producing seeds of over 50 varieties of rice and distributing them to other farmers. Among the seeds are the ones many local farmers used to plant in the past, but had stopped doing that for over two decades.

Many have also begun to realize the value of their own landscapes. In the second week of July 2011, Chandra Adhikari had come to Kathmandu to attend a meeting at the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperative (This ministry has been renamed into Ministry of Agriculture Development in 2012). Incidentally, I had also come to Kathmandu for a weeklong visit--for my personal works, and also to meet Govinda Sharma of HASERA farm and Judith Chase and Jim Danisch of Everything Organic Nursery at Patalekhhet village, 45 kilometre east of Kathmandu. Both of them were early pioneers and promoters of organic farming and permaculture in Nepal. He asked me if we could meet. I was on my way back from Patalekhhet and met him at Jawalakhel junction near Kathmandu valley's old city Patan. From there, we went to meet an organic trader at Lucky Enterprises. He had to collect some money on behalf of the Phulbari cooperative for some grains they had sent him a few months ago. As we walked along the backstreets of Patan city, he told me: "Sir, every time I come to this city, I feel like returning home right away." The dust, noise and smell contrasted sharply with the serenity of Phulbari. Phulbari also smells clean and devoid of poisons you would smell in lots of commercial vegetable growing areas across Chitwan and other districts. Everyone I met in Phulbari attested to this change. Most know how pesticide smells from their own past experience. Many had smelled pesticide along part of the highway where commercial vegetable farming was carried out.

One evening, I followed him when he was going to his rice plot. He showed me the metal screen he had put across a foot-long opening on a dike to keep fish from escaping into another plot. He had observed the relationship between the changing sound of water, fish movement and mongoose. He also randomly asked me: "Wouldn't it be wonderful if the whole of Phulbari

had this (fish in the paddy field), sir?" I nodded. That evening, after dinner, the whole family was sitting outside in the porch. It was cloudy monsoon season, but there was no rain. "What will this farm look like in 30-40 years from now?" I asked. Chandra dai, Maya bhauju, their son Rajkumar, his wife Sheela, and Maya bhauju's niece, Aarati were present.

"I don't know. That's a hard question. It also depends on what this man decides to do," Chandra dai answered pointing to his son, Raj Kumar. What did Raj Kumar think? "*Dai* (elder brother in Nepali), I don't think I can leave this place for long," he said. After graduating from IAAS, he had worked with various non-governmental agencies. During 2011, he was overseeing a program at a British NGO called Practical Action on cooperative building among milk producers across several districts. He traveled across many mountain villages and came back home on weekends. He had also enrolled in a ph.d. programme in agricultural economics at the IAAS. His wife Sheela, who grew up in Narayangarh city thirteen kilometres away, said: "This is so different here. Narayangarh has become so difficult to live these days for all the noise, dust, and smoke. I often feel suffocated (*ukusmukus huncha*)." Narayangarh is Chitwan's commercial center and one of Nepal's burgeoning cities.

But I had also been noticing a complex reality emerging in Phulbari and many other places. Young people were leaving farming in hordes. According to official records, 1600 persons from Nepal, most of them young people from across villages and towns, fly away from Nepal's only international airport Tribhuvan International Airport towards different destinations in South East Asia and Gulf countries, where they work in different jobs. Remittance from these migrant workers has become the biggest source of foreign-currency in Nepal (Seddon, Adhikari, & Gurung, 2002).

Anecdotal evidences showed medical expenses were skyrocketing. Parents were asking their children less and less to contribute to household work because they had to 'study.' Home-building was becoming more and more expensive. The price of brick, steel and cement was going up and, as more and more skilled laborers migrated to booming countries in the Gulf states, the price of labor had shot up. The modes of building homes have changed thoroughly in the last three decades. Incomes from farm have almost always become inadequate to build cement-brick homes that have become the dominant architectural forms across Nepal including in Chitwan valley. Add to that the waves of land speculation that Phulbari and almost all other places across Nepal went through during the last two decades.

The crisis of agriculture has often been explained as the outcomes of changes in agricultural technologies such as adoption of GM crops , or farmers indebtedness resulting from increasing dependence on markets for inputs, or the general decline in terms of trade between farming

and industrial sector. In critical agrarian studies, this crisis is often explained as the outcomes of increasing incorporation of farming households within the 'circuits' of capital (Moore 2011; Patel 2013; Weis 2007). Transnational corporations have expanded their reach over farming economies. Their control over trade in agricultural inputs and outputs has grown massively during the last several decades(Weis, 2007).

The TNCs are exerting greater amount of control over seed production and trade. They have become powerful force in pushing intellectual property rights provisions throughout the country to ensure their control over seed monopolies (Kloppenber 2009). They are also controlling biotechnologies in farming as these technologies are spreading into more and more aspects of agricultural economies: inouts, outputs, distribution and processing (Weis, 2007).

International land grabs, especially in African countries have drawn a lot of attention. Huge amount of land have been bought by investment companies and sovereign states such as Saudi Arabia and India. Large tracts of land is being converted from subsistence food production to production of exportable commodities, food and non-food (Hall, 2013).

These are important issues, but they also point towards how much of 'agrarian studies' has delimited its boundary of analysis to 'agricultural sector.' The sectoral focus has provided truncated pictures of agrarian realities, and I believe that this have erased from view important challenges for building and expanding food sovereignty. Part of this is also related to fragmented nature of the disciplinary nature of knowledge production.

Farmers' do not only farm or sell surplus or, lately, experiment in agronomic practices. They also fall ill or meet with accidents; they also aspire to have homes their neighbors have; they also aspire to send their kids to 'English boarding schools', among others. After all, in Phulbari, a lot of farmers do not suffer from agricultural expense-related indebtedness, nor are they dependent heavily on external markets for farming inputs. As I have tried to show in the previous section, increasing number of Phulbari farmers are farming with greater degree of control. They have lessened their dependency on traders for a number of inputs. They have built new relations with traders who sell a few organic inputs they are using in the process of transition. The organization of farms and mobilization of resources within the farm have led to the construction of thriving farmlands. Farmers are also increasingly becoming important participants of agricultural knowledge assemblage.

Challenges of Agrarian Reproduction

In Phulbari, anecdotal evidences and ethnographic observations indicate the major challenges for reproduction of sustainable practices lie mostly outside the agricultural sector. They are political economic in nature, but not necessarily related to political economy of agrarian sector. I discuss some of them below.

Exodus from Farms

On July 31-August 2, Phulbari Organic Producers' Cooperative organized an introductory workshop on "participatory guarantee scheme" (PGS). PGS emerged as an alternative to single-farmer funded organic certification system. The trade in organic products have increased across the world. This has led to increasing reliance on third-party certification process to ensure the quality of organic production. Therefore, certification of organic products has become increasingly necessary for domestic and international trade on organic goods across the world. The standards of certification vary across countries, and in some places, some town and city councils themselves have their own standards, but the objective is to ensure that the claimed product adheres to standards of the place in which it is introduced.

PGS is a mechanism to address the cost of certification. Instead of relying on costly third-party certification carried out by specialized agencies, participatory guarantee scheme ensures that producers themselves monitor each other in terms of adherence of given standards. Instead of professional certifiers, producers themselves certify each other on an ongoing basis. This scheme is ideal for increasing access of small-holders to premium-priced organic markets. This workshop in Phulbari was the first of its kind in the village to orient organic farmers on PGS. Since international trade had not been, not a big part of surplus distribution from Phulbari, and because much of surplus is sold through multiple markets, most of the organic farmers I had talked to were not very enthusiastic about the certification process. Having said that, the certification of the group elevated Phulbari's cooperative's public name recognition, which gave them advantage in future when the cooperative gets much more organized and involves in value adding processing activities.

"Do you mind if I ask you a question?" I asked the participants right before the first introductory session of the first day was over.

"Sure, why not?" They said.

"How many of you would really like to practice organic farming for the rest of your life?" I asked.

"We all do," said many after a short pause.

"That is why we are here, sir," one elderly woman politely reminded me.

"Yes, that's right," I concurred. "But still, I just wanted to know."

I paused for a while and then asked: "How many of you want your children to become an organic farmer?" This time there was a longer pause, before a loud collective guffaw ensued.

"No, we don't want our kids to stay in farming," almost all said in unison. "Who would?" Many asked me back. Why was I even asking that? Wasn't that evident, that who would want to keep their kids in farming these days?

Most of Phulbari's farmers are second generation farmers in Chitwan. Their parents migrated to Chitwan valley from their mountain villages in the mid-1950s. Availability of greater amount of land than they had in the mountain villages and access to education for their children were the main objectives of these migrants. Many of them thought that the next generation would follow in their footsteps even if that was the first generation going to school. Barring a few who moved out into business sector, most stayed on. The story of third generation seems to be quite different.

During my ethnographic stint over 2010 and 2011, I talked to people in Phulbari and many other places across Nepal about declining interest among young people in farming. I also listened to nuanced conversations, observed the everyday life closely--in teashops, among men playing chess, ludo (snakes and ladders), and caromboards in village and town squares, or even during random conversations in buses or footpaths. It was common to see groups of men playing different board games, often with bets in place. It is also very common to see a lot of them sit around and watch for hours on a stretch a few play those board games. Outside a shop in Phulbari's village square, I once saw four men playing carom board while 15 others watched, cheering and cajoling them.

Decline of the proportion of population in farming has become a universal phenomena, with extremes in Northern countries (Ploeg, 2013; White, 2011). In villages such as Phulbari, farmers are taking this with a sense of resignation and bafflement. There is almost a sense of inevitability in the unfolding reality.

Semanta Subedi and his wife, for instance, moved to Phulbari in 1994. This was their second 'permanent' migration in life. First was from their mountain village in western region to a village

across the Narayani River. "I have never used any chemicals ever," he told me at his home in July 2011. He spent thirty years working in a textile factory in Mumbai. He visited home every year and took family down to the plains in 1980s for the first time. After ten years, he moved to Phulbari in 1994. His son is married and has a child. When I went to interview Semant *dai* (elder brother) and his wife, their son's family were in Kathmandu.

"But I send everything from here, all the food, to them," he told me. "We have to send food to them," his wife added. We were sitting at their back porch of brick-cement home. The porch faced cattle shed, and goat pen. "I send all the food not because they cannot buy food themselves. They earn money, maybe not a lot, but enough to live. But who gets good food these days in the city (Kathmandu)? I want to make sure the grandson gets to eat pure food (*suddha khana*). I have even asked them not to buy oil."

"You send them oil, too?" I asked.

"Yes. We grow sunflower and rapeseed."

During our conversation that included topic such as how many goats and cows he had, and what he grew in different seasons, and where he got his seed, I also asked what he sees his farm to be like after his life? "Will your son come and take care of the farm?" I tried to clarify my question.

"Where will he go? This is their ancestral land (*patrik thalo*)."

"You mean, will he come and farm?" I asked again.

He shook his head. His wife also shook her head in agreement.

Chandra dai had come along during the interview. "I don't know about your son, but your grandson will definitely come back and take this farm to a different level," he told Semanta dai. These were obviously speculative questions and the answers could only be speculative. But in those answers also lay their expectations as well as a feeling of uncertainties.

This phenomenon is not unique to Phulbari. Berry (1986) has been writing about depopulation of the American rural areas for over four decades now. Berry sees it as a result of conscious policy choices. The emphasis on efficiency, largely expressed as productivity per unit of labour, has meant that farmers are pushed to increase their acreage and reduce the number of workers in their land. But there has also been cultural transformation. Although the situation in Nepal and America are very different, the angst is not different.

The decline of interest in farming among young people, however, came as not much of a surprise to me. In my own family, my generation is completely out of agriculture. My parents are probably the last generation to continue farming in our land--if present trend continued, that is. We register ourselves as farming family in census reports because we own small plots of land and parents still farm. I grew up routinely reminded by my parents, grandparents and other elders including our teachers that I would end up holding ploughs if I did not study hard (*Padhnu gunnu chaina kaam, halo jyoti khayo maam*).

If this is a generalized phenomena, it is not the outcome of a natural social progression from one stage of development into another, higher one (as many leaders of Nepal's modernization--from left and right of the political spectrum thought and many of them still continue to think in Nepal and other parts of the world).

The question as to if the present growth in organic farming will continue into future is directly contingent upon the reproduction of farming in society itself. One of the elements of that is continuous inter-generational transfer of skills, knowledge and interest in farming (White 2011). Farming in general requires diverse skill sets, more so in ecologically-resilient and embedded practices (Ploeg, 2013; Pretty, 2007).

Deskilling occurs primarily because of non-work and this is becoming one among many other factors pushing young people out of farms (White 2011). The excessive emphasis on school grades have pushed a lot of families to keep their children from working hard in land. To be clear, children and teenagers work in farm in Phulbari, but there is much less emphasis in acquiring skills. In fact, there is almost a consensus among parents in Phulbari that their kids should not go into farming. The commonly used word to designate farming was: "dukha" (hardships). That farming involves a lot of work is almost a foregone conclusion.

As I sat at Phulbari village square many times watching young men come and play all sorts of games such as carom board, chess, snake and ladder, and tiger and goat (Bagh Chal), I heard them talking about going to 'Saudi', or 'Katar' (Qatar), or Malaysia, among others. Many also talked about others who had fallen into bad middleman trap. They also talked about going to Iraq and Afghanistan even if those countries were risky.

"Aren't you scared?" I asked one of them.

"Oh *dai* (elder brother), if I die I die. What's a big deal about that? (*Ke thulo kura bho ra?*). (*Mare marincha ta*) If I lived, I will bring a lot (of money)."

"How much?"

"I heard that they pay sixty-thousand minimum for a month with residence in Afghanistan." To note, going to Afghanistan and Iraq for work is illegal from Nepal. However, recruitment agencies routinely arrange their documents and travel.

That Nepalis have been on the move for better opportunities is not a new story. For hundreds of years, people from hills have gone to North-Eastern part of Indian sub-continent--to work as tea plantation workers, to colonize new lands, and to work in British army(Regmi, 1978) Subedi 2012). The later still continues, although long-term migration to India has nearly stopped. Temporary labour migration has been the defining feature of Nepal's villages and towns. What was new was the scale. According to census reports, there has been decline of the proportion of population dependent on agriculture, but agriculture still accounts for around 70 percent of people's direct livelihoods.

Medical expenses

Phulbari farmers almost exclusively utilize private medical services. When someone gets sick, the direct and indirect expenses are large. In fact a whole year's income can go in treating illnesses sometimes. For example, Sundar (name changed) supplemented his family income by distributing newspaper across towns and villages adjoining the main markets. He fell to pneumonia in March 2011. He borrowed money from his neighbor. I asked how much money he had spent altogether. By the time the patient came back home, after six days in hospital beds where, according to him, they only gave him 'salen paani' (saline drips), the bill to the hospital and required medicines was to the tune of Rs.70,000. That did not include all the other expenses. His father regularly took public mini-bus to see him in hospital daily. Food was ordered from cafeteria nearby the nursing home.

Saraswati madam (name changed) was met with motorcycle accident in November 2010. The main roads did not have sidewalks and therefore farm animals, humans and vehicles of different kind share the same road. Roadside accidents have become very common across urbanizing Nepal. The number of vehicles has gone up and so has the reckless driving. Among the vehicles, motorcycles have seen the biggest proportion of growth over the twenty years. The treatment involved going to a private nursing home in Bharatpur, where she had to get her x-rays and general check-up. The charges were over 15,000.

In July 2011, Chandra Adhikari's neighbor took his mother to a government hospital for hysterectomy. One evening I followed Chandra *dai* to their house as he was going to see the lady convalescing from her surgery at her home. The man worked in local school as an accountant, a government job. They owned an acre of land. The hysterectomy cost was around

50,000. In this case also, this amount only covered the doctor's fees, hospital charges and drugs. If we add travel and food expenses together with the disruptions in the regular farming schedules, the cost comes even higher.

These are three stories among many others I witnessed during my research. I visited the Hospital Road in Bharatpur regularly. I observed the nursing homes sometimes from inside and sometimes from outside. A walk through that road is enough to make one feel the boom in private medical business in town. The drugstores are almost always full of people buying drugs, some prescriptions in hand while others over the counters.

There are several medical clinics in Mangalpur bazaar, one kilometer away from Phulbari. I passed through Mangalpur every time I came to Phulbari. I also walked to the town regularly during my stay in the village. I saw crowd of people in those clinics. One morning in June, I woke up with red eyes covered with sleep. I looked at the mirror to find that I had had an eye infection. I showed this to Chandra dai and he suggested me to go to the Mangalpur clinic run by a medical doctor. Before my turn came, I waited outside his clinic as he examined many others who had come with a variety of illness. A construction worker had come there to change bandage for severe cut he had sustained during a house-building work in town. An elderly woman was examined for her fever. The examination was occurring out in the open for everybody there to hear the doctor's pronouncements or the patient's stories.

Immediately after he saw my eyes, he prescribed two eye ointments. He told me I had conjunctivitis. I paid him his fees and bought the medicine. I guessed that he saw at least 80-90 people that morning. Chandra dai later told me, that crowd is fairly consistent every morning. In the afternoon, he goes to work in a government hospital nearby. For serious illnesses that required specialized surgery, most went to Bharatpur. While medical care expenses are the sources of stress for a lot of farming populations, the growth of markets in education is no less so. I have already explored how schools have become one of the important institutions for cultural transformations.

Chitwan's planners, politicians, private sectors have started projecting Chitwan as a potential site for medical tourism to be led by medical entrepreneurs. There has been impressive growth of private medical services. A street in Bharatpur, Chitwan district headquarters, is called Hospital Road. This street is filled with private hospitals, nursing homes, pathology labs and drug stores. A cursory observation of the flow of money showed that medical businesses have become a one way transfer of resources from farming communities.

Schools

On several weekdays, I stood on road intersections in Phulbari village to see most of the village kids walk or ride a bus to their schools. There are many English-language 'boarding' schools within Phulbari village. Quite a few of Phulbari kids also went to schools outside the village. Some went to schools thirteen kilometres away in district headquarters. Those who could not afford private schools sent their kids to government-run public school. Shreepur Secondary school was one of them. Over eight hundred students studied there in 2011--not all of them from Phulbari village.

Schooling, like medical expenses, has become costly. The perceived and real quality of education of public education is low. The liberalized environment allowed for the establishment of schools as private business ventures since mid-1980s in Nepal. The private schools boomed across Nepal after 1990s--that was the era of increasing liberalization and greater integration with globalized economic processes. The education system has undergone very significant change over the last four decades. Until late 1980s, all the farmers sent their kids to government-supported public school. The schools charged monthly fees. They also made school uniform compulsory. The students had to buy their textbooks and school supplies. There was a general consensus that expenses for schooling have shot up during the last two decades.

Increasing number of people began to send their kids to private boarding school from early nineties onward. There are several other significant changes in public life. The fees differential between public school and private is almost ten times. In Phulbari's boarding schools, a fifth grader paid on average 700 rupees as monthly fees. That is in addition to higher registration fees at the beginning of the year. But these changes also have led to other subtle changes in people's perception of education itself.

I met Bedu Ram ji during the workshop on participatory guarantee scheme. He and his family farmed a three quarter of a hectare farm in Shivapur, adjoining Phulbari.

"How many kids do you have?" I asked him.

"Two, one son and one daughter," he told me. They both went to a private school nearby, one in the eighth grade and the other in the tenth. Their fees were 700 rupees a month each. Each month they spend Rs.1400 for school fees. "Then, we have to pay for their dress, textbooks, snacks in the afternoon. It is endless."

Those who sent their kids to private schools also lost their source of helping hands. The kids come back home with loads of homeworks. Most importantly, " we do not want them to do

anything other than study. They should study, don't they, sir?" Bedu Ram ji looked for my confirmation. "They are the padhnewala (the type that studies) in our family." While education in general has been thought as a route to exist from agricultural drudgery, the private school phenomena have led to internalization of that desire early on. It was common for kids to come back from school and regularly contribute to farming activities.

In fact, the summer vacation itself was designed as a way for kids to contribute to major farming activities during monsoon. Chandra dai's son, Raj Kumar, fondly recalled how he used to do *house* work (the preparation of rice field for seedling transplantation). He graduated from Shreepur School and got his agriculture degree from nearby Institute of Agriculture and Animal Sciences in Rampur. He and his friends routinely worked in the farm almost every day. Chandra dai's wife fondly recalled how her daughter helped her in all the household chores.

But private education, paid for with more money, meant a lot of families wanted to get good return out of it. That invariably meant they emphasized 'studying' over 'working'. Hence the growing distinction among family members between 'working types' and 'studying types.' It is not clear what kind of future awaits many of those who are graduating from high schools. A fair number of college graduates aspire to go for studies overseas. Man-power agencies and educational consultancies have filled up the roadside public hoarding boards across Nepal. Nepal's newspapers, radio stations and television stations get large share of advertisements from these private human-resource businesses.

The result has been both the higher levels of expense portfolio for farming families as well as the loss of helping hands in farming activities. The growing schooling, privatization of education has further contributed to this although this has not been researched well until now.

Gidwani (2008) has explored this phenomena in the case of Gujarat villages. These seem to be an outcome of unfolding transformation of agrarian life brought about by complex interlinkages between political processes, state projects and idea of modernization. Clearly, this is a masculine phenomena brought about by dislocating effects of that modernization process (Gidwani, 2008).

Home building

On 28 September 2010, I visited Phulbari with about two dozen others. On that day, Ecological Services Centre (ECOSCENTRE) had organized a day-long workshop on "Natural Architecture and Homestead Ecosystem" in Phulbari. Participants in this workshop discussed some aspects of the crisis of industrial system as well as ways that crisis could be addressed. This workshop

was a part of a 13-day long 48th Permaculture Design Course (PDC)¹ and its 18 participants had come from across different parts of Nepal. As an institutional member of Nepal Permaculture Group (NPG), ECOSCENTRE had been running these advanced PDCs for over a decade by then. Besides the registered participants, there were a few other people from Fulbari village itself in the workshop. I had volunteered to translate for Markus, the lead instructor, who was a professional house-builder from the United States. He and his wife, Rachna, were visiting Nepal and offered to lead that day's workshop.

Markus began the workshop by telling the participants that he had already built 52 houses in the US during the last two decades and that ten of those built in the last two years were made of straw-bales. "I don't build with other materials anymore, but there is no housing business in the US right now," he added. He then asked the workshop participants to briefly tell him about the houses they were living in and the amount of land they each owned in their family. He also asked them about the skills they had had related to any aspect of house building. Most said they had cement-brick houses, and that they did not contribute their skills in building their houses. Their role at best was those of ordinary laborers passing bricks to the masons, and those of modern house owners, buying building materials from the market. Almost everything had to be bought--bricks, cement, steel, wood, glass, paints, roof and many other items.

The discussions set the stage for asking three simple questions related to homes people were building lately: what was the single-most item they have spent most of their money on? What was the single-most place they have spent most of their time in? What was the single item they had invested most material resources on?

In a way the answer was already evident. These were ordinary experiences in Chitwan and many parts of Nepal. A few participants who had had experience of building homes recently recounted how much money they had spent. It was a common knowledge that people were spending a lot of money on homes. Homes consumed a lot of resources and most of them increasingly shipped from distant lands. Energy intensity of modern homes are very high (Colombier & Li, 2012; Ding, Ge, & Phillips, 2012; Kong, Lu, & Wu, 2012; Mattila, Gronroos, Judi, & Korhonen, 2012) . Most of the participants spent fair amount of time inside a built structure.

¹Permaculture is a term coined by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren of Australia back in the early 1980s. Permaculture Design Course (PDC) is advanced level hands-on design training emphasizing a number of principles that Mollison and Holmgren enunciated as principles of care of the earth, sharing of surplus and???. The first PDC in Nepal was in Nepal by Bill Mollison himself in late 1980s at the Institute of Agriculture and Animal Sciences, Rampur, Chitwan. There are various organizations which run this course in Nepal and ECOSCENTRE is one of them. Almost all of these institutions carry out this course in consultation with Nepal Permaculture Group set up in mid-1990s by graduates of earlier PDCs.

I asked several households if they could recall the expenditure for building their homes. Most had not kept detailed records and receipt but they remember broad figures. Even simple three room and kitchen structure was costing over a million Nepali rupees (over 14000 USD by recent currency exchange rate. A few had sold some piece of land during the real estate boom. Many had built homes with money saved from work as migrant workers. A few had made good money through real-estate trade in the village. But only a little over three decades ago, homes were built largely with shared labour and mostly with local materials. The use of fired-brick began to spread during late 1970s. The use of cement had spread by mid-1980s. By late 1980s, a lot of people were beginning to incorporate lots of steel and glass in their building: steel for columns and security grills on the windows and glass for windows. By late 1980s, most of the old self-built homes were already replaced.

The first all-Nepali permaculture advanced design course was conducted in the early 1990s. By 2011 September 48 advanced courses had been conducted. And it was only on the 48th that the course featured brief workshop on detailed aspect of homebuilding. Basanta Ranabhat of ECOSCENTRE told me that other than briefly designating 'home' as 'zone zero' in permaculture design system, they had not delved into the issue of homes until that day.

In agrarian studies, this has remained generally overlooked. Why? Perhaps the same sectoral focus which led to disciplinary division of labour often resulting in fragmented understanding of the world was at play. We can only speculate. Perhaps the issue of built form was to be dealt with only through engineering, or planning, or architecture. Here was the single-most expensive item in a farm household's life where members spend the most of their time, where most of the produce of the land is processed, and the structure that used the most amount of energy, largely absent from the analytical focus of agrarian studies.

Changing Perception of Land

Together with the cultural devaluation of farming and distancing from farming because of increasing privatization of education and health, speculative and non-agricultural transfer of land has become common across Nepal including in Chitwan valley. In Phulbari village, speculative real-estate transaction on land grew spectacularly in 2006.

In Chitwan first round of speculative real estate boom occurred in early 1990s. That was a time of major change in Nepali society. The absolute monarchy had given way to liberal multi-party democratic political system. That was also a time when opening up of the economy, privatization of public enterprises, encouragement of private schools and healthcare facilities boomed. Many in Chitwan recall how land traders (dalals, as they are called, often derogatorily)

used to travel from one village and town to another in their motorbikes looking for piece of land to buy. Between 1993 and 1998, the boom had spread around major town and cities. Major centres of real estate speculation were Chitwan and Kathmandu valley. By 1998, the real estate boom had petered out. This was also the time when the People's War led by the then Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) began to gather steam.

The spread of war and counter-insurgency operations brought land transactions to a standstill. This began to change in 2006 when a peaceful settlement was negotiated and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) announced to give up violent struggles. The second round of real estate boom began immediately after this. Unlike in the early 1990s, this new boom spread throughout the major towns and cities and modernizing villages across the country--both in Tarai and mountains.

This second boom hit Phulbari and surrounding villages for several years. A lot of people used the English word 'whim' to describe the nature of boom during the immediate aftermath of political change in 2006. During this period investments from banks and other financial institutions had increased significantly in the real estate sector. 'Plotting' and 'planning' (*pilaning*, in local vernacular) became common household terms in the villages and towns. The land speculators (*jagga dalals*) went around with bank credit to buy big chunk of land that they then dissected into smaller plots for sale to general public or to other speculators. People who had cash put money in land instead of putting it in the bank.

I made a preliminary visit to Phulbari village in late December 2008. I had gone there with Basanta Ranabhat of Ecological Services Centre to meet Chandra Adhikari, the pioneer organic farmer there. On the way to the village, Basanta ji told me that he and his friends had bought two hectares of land several kilometers away from Phulbari village. In Phulbari village, another colleague had bought a hectare of land. Their plan was to set up training centres on ecological agriculture.

"How much did you pay?" I asked him.

"It was Rs.50,000 per kattha," he replied. A hectare is 30 kattha and by that rate, a hectare of land would cost 1.5 million rupees. In Phulbari, land was more expensive. In December 2008, when the real estate boom had begun to pick up steam, a kattha of land would fetch Rs.70,000. But things did not remain that way for long. In a short span of time, the price of land began to shoot up.

"Din duguna, raat chauguna" (Doubled in the day, quadrupled in the night) was the common phrase that people used to describe the spiralling land prices across Nepal including in Chitwan valley. "People would come in motorcycles--people who, we had never seen before, all these unknown faces," a farmer in Phulbari told me. Basantaji's colleague Shyam Krishna (name changed) completed the buying of one hectare of his land in three different installments. First, he bought an eight kattha of land for 70,000 rupees per kattha in late 2007. A few months later the rate had gone up to 80,000 when he bought another fifteen kattha of land. The final five kattha of land was bought for 100,000 per kattha.

This growth paled in comparison to what was to follow. One of my college friends told me his own entry into this world. He had been in the business of wholesale marketing of consumer items such as alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, soap, shampoos, among many other items. In early 2008 he had bought a bigha (3/4 of a hectare) of land in Chitrasari, near Nepal's famous Chitwan National Park. The real estate boom had just started pick up steam then and he told me how his relatives rebuked him for putting in two million for that piece of land. But by November 2008, he was already offered over 6 million rupees. When I met him in December 2008, he was weighing in the option of whether to sell it or to wait till the value would peak further.

In 2010 when I met him during my field work, he had already sold that piece of land for 7 million rupees and had reinvested it in another real estate plot near Narayangarh along the bank of Narayani River. He told me he was thinking of building a hotel for tourists there. The story in Phulbari was no less dramatic. During my stay in Nepal between 2010 and 2011, I realized real estate had become an obsession among men who gathered in village squares or town tea-shops. Nobody seemed to be in control of what was going on as price of land changed overnight. But by then, the number of transactions had dried up significantly. Everybody was talking about real estate slump. People were aware of how real estate markets had crashed in America and the Nepali television channels had aired those news on a regular basis.

Private markets in land have existed in Nepal for a long time (Mishra 2007; Regmi 1973; 1984). In fact, Nepal's land tenure history is history of the creation of private ownership in land. But until early 1990s, land transaction was rarely speculative, especially in farming areas. In Phulbari village, most of the land bought and sold before 2006 boom began was by those who genuinely wanted to buy or sell the land. People bought land for what it was worth in terms of its productivity.

The early settlers got land for nominal price. By 1970s, land price had gone up significantly, but at pace with the rise in the price of grains and other agricultural produce. Moreover, the price

of land in the hills had also gone up as first migrants sold their land to returnee Gurkha soldiers from British and Indian army. Several rounds of squatting also created additional private plots across Chitwan.

Until mid-1980s, the price of land was tied to its real and perceived productivity. Therefore, rice fields were much sought after and more expensive than the upland. Even among the rice fields, those lying low were more valuable than those that needed to be irrigated with external sources. When people bought land, they bought it for farming. A lot of migrants opted for land away from the district headquarters in Bharatpur. Many in Phulbari and other places recall, with a sense of loss, that the price for land in Bharatpur was less than in Phulbari when they first moved to Chitwan. Big reversal has occurred by 2006. This coupling of land price with land productivity was possible because land was valued for its productivity.

Future

These ethnographic observations and anecdotal evidences strongly hint that critical agrarian studies need to transcend the boundary of 'agricultural sector' as the object of its scholarly and political focus. The combination of the factors I have discussed above has created a condition in which farming is becoming culturally unappealing, and materially challenging. Land has become opportunity for making quick money without cultivating the soil. Land speculation has also become a boom-and-bust process. The commodification of land in itself did not mean the transformation of use until the buying and selling of land was generally uncoupled from its productivity and usefulness. Will the coupling between land productivity and its price be back in the land market? It depends on a host of factors including the way bank policy operates. It is noteworthy that even during the hyper speculative frenzy of 2006-2009, only a handful of people sold all of their land in Phulbari, and those who sold their land, did so to buy other piece somewhere. Many sold very small portion to buy motorbikes or build new cement brick homes.

In 2008 December I visited Nepal to establish first round of contact with people involved in Nepal's public health sector. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) had been in power for a few months then. One of the major programs they had launched was the constitutionally mandated free primary level care including free availability of drugs from public health care institutions. I was initially interested in researching the way this program was evolving including the extent to which it was or was not able to address the healthcare needs of those who used public health care.

After visiting Phulbari, I changed my mind to instead focus on emerging agroecological practices. During the dissertation research I began to see anecdotal evidences regarding

medical expenses. Paradoxically, most of the people I talked to during the research both in Phulbari and outside framed the issue of organic farming around the question of health: the healthy food and healthy environment. Similar to the question of materiality of homes, the potential and real stress brought about by increased privatization of health care was almost no part of discussion among those involved in sustainable agriculture promotion.

Phulbari's Shreepur High School is surrounded by organic farms. Lately teachers take their students on quick learning visits. Most of the students come from farms, but teaching had almost always been limited to class-room text-book based delivery. Some farmers also go to school and take classes on environmental aspects of agriculture.

There is also a growing public demand for organic healthy products. The idea of organic food has spread also through television religious sermons such as that of Baba Ramdev. During a public meeting at the fourth organic agriculture fair, speakers after speakers stressed how organic food is the way to good health. That creates a possibility for building a direct linkage between producers and urban consumers. Interestingly, Chitwan is emerging as semi-urbanized settlement with thriving organic farms.

Certain initiatives need broader policy actions such as expanding and strengthening public health care system. That then calls for reframing the priorities of Nepali state which is possibly only within a context of radical politics. We saw some semblance of that political will briefly in 2009 in the form of initiatives for rebuilding public health system, but it did not last long.

When it comes to remaking farmlands, there is not short-cut and fast path. It has to be adaptive process of experimentation, learning, and expansion. On this front, a lot seems to be happening across Nepal. Farmers are visiting other farmers' fields through learning trips. Even if not as much as expected, the government agencies are incorporating organic farming in their agricultural projects. Pretty characterizes the spread of alternative agricultural practices as silent revolution (Pretty, 2002).

However, the strictly sectoral focus of agrarian activism has also kept food sovereignty movement from tapping the opportunities to expand coalitions into struggles for health care and education reform, and into burgeoning but scholarly underexplored movement of ecological home designs and building across the world. The boundary of 'agriculture sector' is artificial simply because, from the perspective of farmers, what matters is not only what happens in their fields, but what kinds of homes they live in, what kinds of education that their daughters and sons acquire, and what kind of health care they can access when in need.

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FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

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A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has — as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework — barged into global agrarian discourse over the last two decades. Since then, it has inspired and mobilized diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways by various groups and individuals. Indeed, it is a concept that is broadly defined as the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. As such it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, biofuels, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labor migration, the feeding of volatile cities, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights.

Sponsored by the [Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University](#) and the [Journal of Peasant Studies](#), and co-organized by [Food First, Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies \(ICAS\)](#) and the [International Institute of Social Studies \(ISS\)](#) in The Hague, as well as the Amsterdam-based [Transnational Institute \(TNI\)](#), the conference “Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue” will be held at Yale University on September 14–15, 2013. The event will bring together leading scholars and political activists who are advocates of and sympathetic to the idea of food sovereignty, as well as those who are skeptical to the concept of food sovereignty to foster a critical and productive dialogue on the issue. The purpose of the meeting is to examine what food sovereignty might mean, how it might be variously construed, and what policies (e.g. of land use, commodity policy, and food subsidies) it implies. Moreover, such a dialogue aims at exploring whether the subject of food sovereignty has an “intellectual future” in critical agrarian studies and, if so, on what terms.

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