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Land Ownership in Nepal: Are Lower Castes Excluded?

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Abstract

In Nepal, the land ownership still determines the economic prosperity, social status and the political power of an individual. Therefore, unequal distribution of land has caused a differentiation, hierarchy and divisions in the society leading to perennial conflicts. Still a large number of land dependent households are deprived from their primary source of livelihood, i.e. land. Statistics show that one-fourth of the total population of the country is either landless or have less than 0.1 ha of land. An overwhelming majority of low caste people belong to this landless category. But, the caste aspects of land ownership have not been looked into seriously. This paper, based on a study carried out in Morang, an eastern Terai district of Nepal, explores the socioeconomic status of the lower castes groups and relationship between the land ownership and livelihoods among them. The study was carried out in 3,054 households selected through stratified random sampling. Among which 125 were dalits, the lowest in the caste hierarchy. Semi-structured questionnaires, focused group discussion and key informants interviews were conducted to collect the primary data. The study revealed that there is a strong correlation between caste hierarchy and landownership pattern: the higher the caste, larger the land size he holds. This is further resulted into the differentiated access to education, health service and loans and eventually to the job markets. The study found that 44 % of all households fall under the landless category, where, total landlessness among the low caste is as high as 62 % whereas only 26 % of the upper castes fall under this category. No household of lower castes owns more than 2 ha of land. Legally regulated pro-poor land agenda are to be brought into practice to prevent absentee landlordism, which is 44 % in the study area, and ensuring landownership rights of the tillers, who are usually unregistered and low castes. Such an action would not only increase the productivity and food security, but also provides low caste with livelihood security and social justice leading to reduced tensions and conflicts.

Keywords: Caste, ethnicity, food security, land ownership, livelihood