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BOOK REVIEW: PIECES OF EARTH: THE POLITICS OF LAND-GRABBING IN KASHMIR

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Pieces of Earth: The Politics of Land-Grabbing in Kashmir. By Peer Ghulam Nabi Suhail: Publisher: Oxford University Press (New Delhi 2018), x + 194 pp., Rs. 695 (Hardback), ISBN: 9 780199477616

7.1: INTRODUCTION:

Since 1947, when the erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir became a disputed territory between India and Pakistan, scholars from local to international level have examined it merely as a territorial dispute between the two countries without considering the people of the land, who over the last seventy years are bearing the brunt of this long standing dispute. In view of that, *Pieces of Earth: The Politics of Land Grabbing in Kashmir* by Peer Ghulam Nabi Suhail is a highly significant work, primarily because the book is first of its kind to highlight the economic perspective of the Kashmir dispute and economic imperialism of the region. Therefore, adding a fresh and important dimension to the dispute.

Suhail, a Beijing-educated international development and policy expert, earned his PhD in International Development Studies and Master's degree in Public Policy. The book is a culmination of author's PhD research thesis (p.xiv) based on his comprehensive field work in Bhadvan and Khopri villages in Bandipora district and his personal experience of being a permanent resident of conflict zone (Indian Administered Kashmir). Suhail has gone to the

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trouble of obtaining multiple viewpoints from around and within the region which certainly enhance the value of the book.

Broadly, through the book, author has tried to examine the land-grabbing[†] as a global phenomenon and emerging issues related to it while its specific focus is to assess and analyse the land-grabbing in a conflict zone such as Kashmir. To do so, the author has aptly used Kishanganga Hydro Electricity Project (KHEP)[‡] as a case study therefore making it a unique work on the subject largely neglected by scholars and academics.

The book comprises of seven chapters and each chapter has an opening section on particular chapter's theme and subject matter. In the first chapter, the author gives us an overview and background of land-grabbing in Kashmir by state owned corporation—'National Hydroelectric Power Corporation' (NHPC) on the pretext of development, public interest and security. To contextualise the entire debate, the author in the second chapter has explored debates around land-grab on national and global level and the actors(state) involved in the facilitation of land-grabbing. He further tells us in this chapter how these attempts are being resisted by the displaced/affected people. The third chapter tries to build a link between the colonial and post-colonial period and how in both the cases State has exploited the natural resources of land and the patterns of resistance by peasants and displaced people against the arbitrary exploitation of these resources. Further, the chapter also traces the patterns of land-grabbing in India which according to the author intensified in the post-liberalised era. He concludes the chapter by providing a brief historical background of the Kashmir conflict and

[†] According to the author, land-grabbing is a 'large scale lease or purchase of land by local/national or International Corporation for agricultural production or for industry with the help of the State (p.17).' Consequently, national or International Corporation extracts and controls resources over a particular piece of land.

[‡]The KHEP worth 5750 Crore Project budget is one among the seven power projects approved for the construction by the state cabinet led by Mr Farooq Abdullah in 2000. The project is located on a tributary of River Jhelum in the northern district of Bandipora in Jammu & Kashmir. It has been constructed and is executed by the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) with an expectation of generating 1350 million units of energy annually with an installed capacity of 330 Megawatt. The project has been designed to divert water from the Kishanganga River through a 24-kilometre-long tunnel for generating electricity and then send the water back to the Kishanganga. The project after several years of construction was inaugurated by the current prime minister of India, Mr Narendra Modi on 19th May 2018.



how India sustains its control on the land the land by applying two-pronged strategy based on soft and hard power in the form of improbable democracy and coercive machinery respectively (67). The fourth chapter talks about the relationship between people and land besides providing a historical background of land reforms in Kashmir. It is in this chapter that the author introduces its readers about the tale of two villages—Badwan and Khopri and the displacement of the people through arbitrary land-grabbing by the(27) in these two villages. Last three chapters i.e., chapter 5, 6 and 7 are what would be described as core contents of the book. Through these chapters, the author has provided an in-depth assessment of land-grab and its impact on the socio-economic and political life of people in the two villages apart from the environmental costs given the region's ecological sensitiveness.

The book is overall a significant addition to the existing literature as it covers some important issues that are critical for understanding of 'politics of land-grabbing' in conflict zones.

Strength of the book lies in its demonstration that land-grab is never consensual rather a forcible act of the state against the will of the people. KHEP is an assertion by India over the land and over its resources and can't be studied in isolation. Unlike other parts of India, resistance against these land-grabs by the people from Bhadvan and Khopri villages is seen anti-national and thus dealt with brute force by the state (131-132). Suhail has convincingly shown that development card of land-grabbing is scandalous as it leads to displacement of the people at a very large scale and turns the land owners into workers and consequently subjects them to market forces (167).

7.2: SOME LAPSES IN THE BOOK:

Throughout the book, author tries to make the point that land-grabbing is an economic imperialism and for that he has entirely relied on KHEP. Highlights from other examples would have strengthened the major arguments of the book. Author hasn't sufficiently deliberated upon link between the resistance by the villagers of Bhadvan and Khopri and the resistance movement of the people of the Kashmir against the occupation as both are dealt in the same manner by the state. There are too many repetitions in the book and these repetitions at times become unnecessary burdens for the reader. Besides, the book has many spelling and grammatical mistakes,

Nevertheless, the book has added some new areas and issues for further exploration and discussion. Most importantly it has initiated conversation on a significant aspect of the



Kashmir problem. Also, the book has academic value, particularly for those working in conflict zones. The author has comprehensively discussed his research methodology which can be used as a guideline by researchers working in conflict zones. Given the theme and subject of the book, it has a large potential audience of students, research scholars and academics interested in issues related to land-grabbing, Kashmir politics and economic imperialism.