

Kamal Siddiqui. *Land Management in South Asia: A Comparative Study.* Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1997. 484 pages. Hardbound. Rs 595.00.

There is something refreshingly honest about Dr Kamal Siddiqui's writings on reform and management aspects of land in South Asia, where land is considered a source of prestige and political power. He has the analytical sharpness of an economist and the disciplined coolness of a bureaucrat.

The author's objective is to help shape land management policy appropriate to the needs of South Asia. He selects for investigation the time-period from the late 1940s to the present and studies seven entities: Punjab, Sindh, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Bengal, and Bangladesh, in three countries, viz., Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. However, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka have not been included. We do not know why these smaller but equally important states were omitted from the land management perspective.

The book is a neat exposition of similarities and dissimilarities of practices in the seven entities. While undertaking the analysis, however, the author has not done any detailed investigation of the issues such as water management and land-related environmental aspects. Water, being a scarce resource and considered as the lifeline for agriculture in South Asia, finds a logical place in such types of deliberations. There is ever-increasing importance of the environment, in terms of both land and water, as it directly or indirectly affects the quality of life, and has a strong case to be part of such a study. The other important omission is the management of forest lands.

Apart from these omissions, the other issues regarding land management have found their appropriate place and importance in the explanations. These are organisation of land management, land revenue, consolidation, regularisation of use and acquisition of land, state land management, land dispute resolution, mutation records, sale registration, and the land record system covering preparation, maintenance, and updating of records.

The author starts his argument by comparing the significance of land in the developing world with its declining importance in the developed world, and argues that it will stay on as such in the foreseeable future, particularly in South Asia, where land is taken as a source of prestige and political power. He further holds that land management will stay on as an important issue due to the rising degradation of land and increasing fragmentation of landholdings. He notes that the disappointing implementation of land reforms further emphasises the fact that without improvement in land management, neither land reforms in the true sense are possible nor can significant changes be introduced in agrarian relations. He further contends that land management will emerge as the central aspect of development administration because of environmental issues, emerging democratic attitudes and the good governance pressure.

The author has classified the land record system in practice in the seven entities into three categories: centralised, decentralised, and semi-decentralised. Bangladesh follows a highly centralised system, while it is completely decentralised in West Bengal, and in the rest of the regions it is semi-decentralised. Over time, West Bengal has developed the best arrangement of land record system through innovations, but Bangladesh is still following the pattern set during the colonial rule, while the other regions are in a state of transition. He recommends a de-centralised-type of land record management, but underscores that it requires tremendous political will for implementation.

The land sale registration has the best arrangements in the Punjab and Sindh amongst the seven regions; but still their practices are short of being excellent. The land mutation procedures are the same in all three countries, whereas the differences exist in their details. The delays, hassles, and corruption are common in all the regions, with a difference of degree in the disposal of mutation cases. Amongst the seven regions juridically, the mutation practice is best laid out in Uttar Pradesh. But no region could be regarded as the best in this regard. The author states categorically that without some kind of an innovative grassroots adjudication mechanism in place, the present framework is incapable of providing solutions for land-related disputes. Although there are well-established revenue courts for dealing with these disputes in all the regions, and to some extent Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu have introduced some innovations in the inherited procedures of the colonial era, the author is of the view that land disputes are emerging due to the poor quality of land records and the sociological and economic factors related to land which need to be addressed both at the provincial and local levels.

There is no better alternative regarding state-land management in any of the seven regions. The existing laws and procedures of land acquisition do not exist in a consolidated form to be understandable by the common people. Changes introduced in these laws over time are beyond the understanding of the lay man, who has ultimately to face the consequences. The complicated nature of these laws has put him at the mercy of the revenue lawyers and land officials.

The present state of land use and regulations in this regard in all the regions studied are such that the author predicts an ecological disaster in the not too distant future. The author has very rightly delineated that fragmentation of land should be stopped in South Asia for the sake of productivity and efficiency of the productive system as it adversely affects cultivation and the introduction of modern technologies in agriculture.

The study comprehends the declining importance of land revenue as a source of government income over time, whereas it was the most important source during the colonial period. At present the share of land revenue stands between 0.25 percent to 2.5 percent of the total revenue receipts of different regions. This declining share

of land revenue in total income is attributed to other sources of revenue (taxes), and the availability of loans and foreign aid.

He recommends a complete re-orientation/organisation of the land management system to make it more efficient and free of corruption by the provision of suitable incentives to the personnel dealing with land records and related issues.

There is no set procedure for the publication of relevant data/statistics on a regular basis regarding management issues, and the training of the land management staff is sketchy and defective; even the training manuals are not available in the vernacular languages. These gaps require a huge effort for improvement.

Dr Siddiqui concludes that the prime importance of land as a precious asset to society in the developing world in general and in South Asia in particular will not decline in the near future. In South Asia, which is noted for extreme poverty, gross inequality, slow growth, the land-man relation in its present state is an obstacle to economic development and the social transformation of society. With this background, he maintains that the transformation of society on modern lines is not possible without effective land management. He is of the view that it can be achieved through a coordinated effort between government officials (central land management body), non-government organisations (NGOs, ensuring grassroots participation of people), and the local government (control and execution at the local level in a decentralised manner). For this purpose, he recommends governance reforms to be carried out in the entire government system.

This well-documented book is an excellent resource for those engaged in land management. It should be essential reading for researchers, policy-makers, politicians, and good-governance reformers.

Zulfiqar Ahmad Gill

Faculty of Agricultural Economic, and Rural Sociology,
University of Agriculture,
Faisalabad.