

# **Nepal's Land Administration: A Historical Tapestry of Continuity and Change.**

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## **Abstract**

The evolution of land administration in Nepal reflects a complex history of governance, social transformation, and adaptation to modern practices. Since ancient times, Nepal's land administration has evolved from unofficial, community-based systems to more formal institutional frameworks with the goals of national development, equity, and sustainable land management. With a focus on how these have influenced current land tenure systems, ownership rights, and governance structures, this study offers a thorough analysis of Nepal's past land administration practices, laws, and reforms. Early on, the Atharva Veda and Arthashastra, among other ancient books, provided guidance on taxation and governance, which had an impact on land management in Nepal. During the Lichhavi Period (400–750 B.S.), these ideas served as the foundation for systems such as the Panchali system, in which local officials kept oral records of ownership and tax commitments. In order to facilitate structured governance and streamline land transactions, King Jayasthiti Malla also instituted one of the earliest official land classifications, classifying land into Abal, Doyem, Sim, and Chahar.

During the Malla dynasty (12th–18th century), communal landholding customs gave way to private land ownership. Private property rights emerged during this time, enabling people to own and exchange land and establishing the framework for modern land management. Land governance was further organized by Prithvi Narayan Shah's 18th-century unification attempts, which established district-level land record offices run by officials like Jimmuwal and Mukhiya. By formalizing tax collection and record-keeping, these agencies paved the way for open governance and reduced land-claim disputes. An organized approach to land administration that changed with every subsequent political and administrative shift was largely shaped by these early initiatives.

With organizations like the Survey Department (1957) and Department of Land Revenue (1959), Nepal's post-Rana era, which spanned the 1950s to the 1980s, witnessed revolutionary turning points. These organizations carried out important surveys, like the Sarpat Survey (1952) and the Compass Survey (1923), which were essential in producing cadastral maps for precise tax assessment and land recording. With the goal of achieving fair land distribution, the 1964 Land Reform Act introduced landholding ceilings and outlawed feudal customs such as the Birta system. But in spite of these developments, the Act did not address informal holdings, which resulted in millions of people lacking strong tenure and sustaining socioeconomic disparities. This era emphasizes how crucial inclusive change is to solving past wrongs and assisting underprivileged groups.

Digital technology has revolutionized land administration in Nepal since the 1990s, improving accessibility, accuracy, and efficiency. Digital cadastral surveys, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), Global Navigation Satellite Systems (GNSS), and remote sensing technologies have all been used by the Land Records Information Management System (LRIMS) to improve land record-keeping. Many landholders' tenure security is limited since Nepal's land registration system still uses a deed-based model without state-guaranteed title protection, despite these improvements. The Fit-for-Purpose (FFP) strategy, which the government has adopted in response, encourages community-verified mapping that formalizes informal holdings while supporting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This model provides a workable method for resolving historical land disputes and guaranteeing fair access to land resources by emphasizing inclusivity an adaptation.

Nepal's land administration system is built around organizations such as the Department of Survey and the Ministry of Land Management. However, obstacles such as dual ownership, unregistered land, and bureaucratic inefficiencies impede effective governance. The report recommends recognizing informal rights, integrating the community in policymaking, and offering greater training to authorities to promote digital initiatives. Addressing these concerns is critical for promoting socioeconomic progress, maintaining tenure security, and improving land governance.

This study explores Nepal's land governance by doing a desk review of academic articles, research papers, and secondary data. It investigates the socioeconomic implications, policy development,

and historical context of land administration, emphasizing Nepal's unique history in sustainable land management practices.

The study discovers that, despite Nepal's advances in land management, difficulties such as informal ownership, inadequate administration, and resource scarcity remain. Nepal is dedicated to overhauling its land administration in order to establish a more equitable and effective land management system. The FFP model provides a framework for formalizing informal lands while also ensuring fair access. Decentralization, digitalization, and community involvement are critical for establishing a strong land management system that is consistent with national socioeconomic goals and sustainable development agendas.

In summary, Nepal's land administration history shows an impressive transition from feudal landholding customs to a system based on openness, technology, and community involvement. But the continued existence of dual claims, informal ownership, and infrastructure constraints underscores the necessity of legislative changes that put accessibility, equity, and inclusivity first. Nepal can create a more just and efficient land governance system that promotes social justice, sustainable development, and national progress by taking lessons from the past and implementing creative, community-driven solutions. According to the paper's findings, advancing social justice, enhancing resource management, and establishing long-term stability all depend on an inclusive, open, and technologically sophisticated land administration system.

## **1 Introduction**

In Nepal, land administration is essential to environmental protection, agriculture, and rural community development, with evolving practices influencing ownership and government participation. According to the United Nations, land administration includes gathering, documenting, and disseminating data on land ownership, value, and use. This comprises land registration, cadastral surveying, mapping, fiscal, legal, and multi-purpose cadasters, as well as land information systems. Good land administration fosters long-term development by focusing on efficient resource management, equitable society, and economic growth, while also emphasizing the worth of official and informal land rights(Zeeuw, 2016).

## **1.1 Historical Evolution of Land Administration in Nepal**

- Ancient and Medieval Periods

The earliest theories of governance and taxation found in ancient texts such as the Atharva Veda and Arthashastra, which outlined basic principles of land use and tax collection, had an impact on Nepal's land administration during the ancient and medieval periods(Subedi, 2009). King Jayasthiti Malla established one of the oldest known land classification systems during the Lichhavi Period (400–750 B.S.), classifying land into groups including Abal, Doyem, Sim, and Chahar. This established a significant advancement in official land management. This classification promoted a more structured approach to land governance by simplifying legal land transactions and tax collection procedures. An early example of community-based land record-keeping that facilitated local oversight of land management was the Panchali system, which allowed village leaders to maintain verbal records of property parcels for tax purposes(Adhikary et al., 2007).

- Malla Dynasty and Private Ownership (18th–19th Centuries)

During the Malla dynasty (12th to 18th centuries), Nepal witnessed a significant move toward private ownership. Individuals were able to purchase and sell land, marking a break from communal landholding traditions and laying the foundation for present property rights (Subedi, 2009). Prithvi Narayan Shah set up the evolution in the 18th century by establishing district-level land record offices run by local officials like Jimmuwal and Mukhiya, who were in charge of tax collection and kept correct land records. In land management, this strategy aims to improve transparency and administration(Paper, 2023).

- Early Modern Reforms (20 century: 1950s–1980s)

After the fall of the Rana government, Nepal's early modern reforms from the 1950s to the 1980s made great progress in land administration. The establishment of the Survey Department in 1957, the Department of Land Revenue in 1959, and the first land office, Pahilo Mal, in 1896 AD were major milestones(Subedi, 2009). Two notable projects were the Compass Survey, which created the first cadastral map of Bhaktapur in 1980 B.S. (1923 AD), and the Sarpat Survey, which was

conducted in 1952 B.S. In order to promote equitable land distribution, the Land Reform Act of 1964 abolished the Birta system and introduced land ceilings(Sharma & Khanal, 2010).

- Recent Developments (1990s- Present)

Since the 1990s, Nepal has utilized digital technology to modernize its land administration. The Land Records Information Management System (LRIMS) has improved the accuracy and efficiency of land record-keeping through digital cadastral surveys and technologies like GNSS, GIS, and remote sensing(Joshi et al., 2019)

Nepal's land administration evolved from verbal tax recording to structured cadastral surveys and digital maps. The Land Survey and Measurement Act of 1963 enabled the development of formal maps for taxation and registration. Digital surveys began in 2006 and reached 38 districts by 2010. Nepal's land registration system employs an upgraded deed model but does not give state-guaranteed title protection. Land administration is managed by key organizations, with a legal framework established to improve record-keeping efficiency across the country. (Paper, 2023; Shrestha et al., 2023).

Birta, Guthi, and Kipat underwent significant changes in the 1960s, including the Civil Code and the Birta Abolition Act. In 2006, the Ministry of Land Management and the Department of Survey used digital procedures(Pathak, n.d.).

Land registration is essential for formalizing ownership and facilitating transactions, whereas effective land administration improves governance and economic development. This is particularly crucial in post-conflict situations, where addressing housing, land, and property rights is critical for sustainable stability(Paper, 2023; Todorovski, 2011)

Nepal's land administration transitioned from feudalism to decentralization, transparency, and digitization, dealing with corruption and enhancing governance while attempting to reduce inequality and resolve conflicts. The Land Act of 1964 intended to solve land fragmentation but neglected numerous informal holdings, affecting over 1.3 million families. Current issues such as resource shortages highlight the importance of sustainable management(Sharma & Khanal, 2010). The 2015 Constitution and new rules seek to validate these lands using the Fit-For-Purpose (FFP) method, encouraging economic empowerment and sustainable development in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goals (Baral, 2024; Joshi et al., 2019)

Nepal's Land Administration System consists of several organizations, including the Ministry of Land Management, Department of Land Management and Archives, Department of Survey, National Land Commission, Land Management Training Center, Land Revenue Office, Land Survey Office, Special Survey Office, and Digital Survey Office, all of which team up to improve land governance.

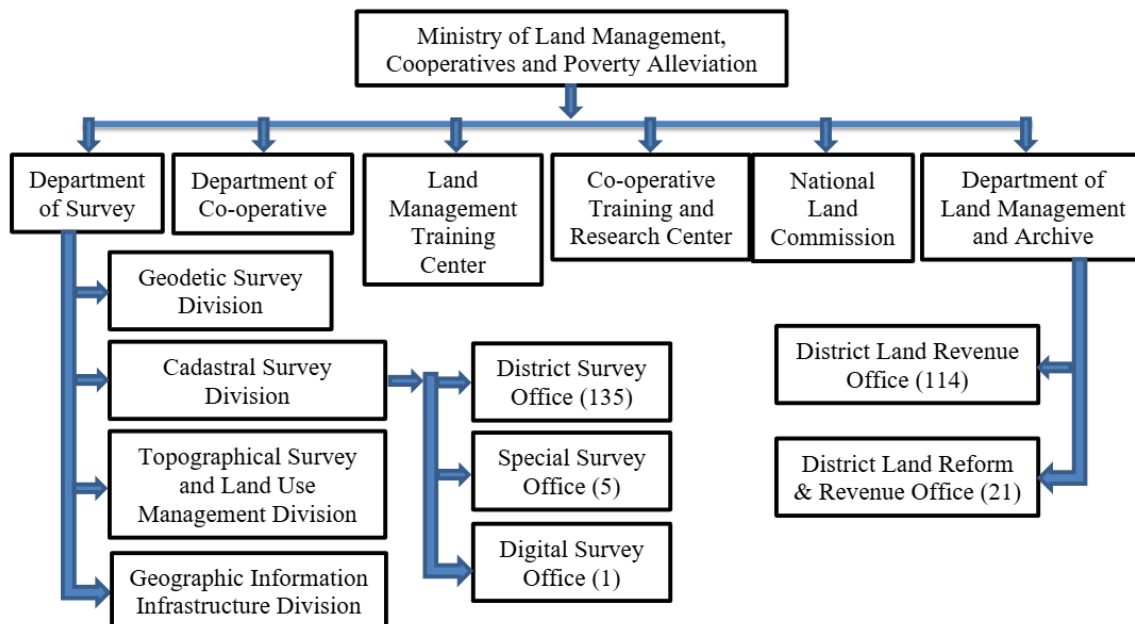


Figure 1 Structure of land administration organizations of Nepal(Shrestha et al., 2023)

## 2 Objective

The main objective of study is to understand how Nepal's land policies and practices have changed over time, with a focus on how past occurrences and rules have influenced the country's present land tenure and governance structures.

### Sub-Goals

- Explore how significant historical events and legal frameworks have influenced Nepal's current land tenure systems.
- Identify the issues facing land governance today to direct upcoming advancements in equity, access, and transparency.
- Examine sustainable land management techniques suitable for Nepal's unique cultural and geographical context.

### **3 Methodology**

Using a desk-based technique, this study examines the history and evolution of land administration in Nepal by conducting an in-depth review of academic articles, and papers. Keywords like "land administration," "land tenure," and "Nepalese land policies" were used to search academic works and papers using secondary data from websites like Google Scholar and ResearchGate.

Themes like socioeconomic effects, policy evolution, and historical context were examined in the sources. There were limitations because of the use of secondary sources. For transparency, all references are included.

### **4 Result and Discussion**

- **Historical Background and Consequences**

The transition from traditional community-based land management to modern private ownership represents a significant shift in Nepalese government. During the Lichhavi Period, the Panchali and land classification systems encouraged a systematic approach to land authority, giving local officials additional power. Understanding current property rights requires knowledge of official land transactions, which were made possible by the Malla dynasty's construction of district-level land record offices.

- **Challenges With Current Land Governance**

Despite improvements to land administration, significant obstacles continue. In an effort to promote equity, the Land Reform Act of 1964 neglected informal ownership, placing roughly 1.3 million families at risk. Current land registration procedures limit title security, which is worsened by administrative challenges and territorial disputes. Issues such as dual ownership and unregistered land continue to impede effective government, highlighting the need for major reform(Lowy, 2013).

- **Technological Developments and Opportunities**

Since the 1990s, computerized technology has changed Nepal's land record-keeping. The implementation of digital cadastral surveys and the Land Records Information Management System (LRIMS) has improved accuracy and efficiency. However, infrastructure issues must be

addressed in order to completely realize these benefits. The Fit-For-Purpose (FFP) model, which promotes community-verified mapping, offers a potential path for formalizing informal land claims while also aligning with the SDGs to address historical injustices.

- **Methods to Improve Governance**

To improve land governance, Nepal should prioritize the recognition of informal property rights and actively engage local communities in policymaking. Transparency and accountability in land administration can be improved by offering training sessions to officials and community members to support digital initiatives. A comprehensive approach that includes land rights, economic empowerment, and sustainable resource management is required to reduce the socioeconomic gap.

- **Implications for future Research and Actions**

The study's findings highlight the significance of further investigating the cultural and historical foundations of Nepal's land tenure patterns. Future policy initiatives should prioritize incorporating community perspectives into land administration and addressing the special issues associated with informal property ownership. Nepal can create an effective land management system that supports social justice and sustainable development by focusing on equity and access.

## **5 Conclusion**

Secure property rights, effective tax collection, and integrated leadership are vital for national security and advancement, as they promote improvements in land management. Land administration is a critical government activity that encourages economic growth, infrastructure development, and legal ownership in accordance with sustainable development goals. Despite these advances, continuing challenges require inclusive and transparent policies to address issues such as informal land ownership and administrative hurdles, emphasizing the value of diversity and community involvement in land management. Nepal can create a more equitable and effective land governance system that supports livelihoods and promotes long-term development by learning from past and adjusting to current conditions. Learning from past mistakes and using creative ideas will improve the land administration system, ensuring fair access to land resources for all citizens and promoting long-term growth across the country.



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