

# **Conflict in Nepali society: a look from the theories of state, modernization and government.**

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## **Abstract**

Nepal, as an emerging state, is facing serious challenges of failure over the decades. The indigenous notion of state has been in pressure over the decades in the process of modernization and other interventions of external forces. Various social and political contradictions, controversies and conflict have been blown up over the years at higher intensity and dynamics. A bloodthirsty insurgency is on the way over the years, which can be seen as a meaningful expression of the underlying contradictions in existing social relationship.

There are many, who like to see the root of the entire social, economic and political problems in the notion of caste based social structure and hegemonic state. But, in this paper, I will attempt to analyze the undercurrent in the Nepalese society from the perspective of 'sociology of government' and 'sociology of science and technology'. This paper analyzes the macro politico- economic situation in which the traditional state regime got transformed as a welfare state in mid fifties and led by the same until recently. Initiatives will be made to depict how the technocratic prescription of development ultimately led the state to face its failure within less than half century. In this orientation, the paper attempt to 'deconstruct' the statutory Para-statal organization in the bi-fringing framework of actor and agency. Retrospective and discursive evidences will be used to debate the argument made. The examples of dichotomic relationship in between policy planning and program implementation will be drawn from various sectors such as agriculture, irrigation, forestry, education and local development.

## **Modernization and Nepali state: an introduction**

Life situation of non-western world is generally defined as the traits of 'poverty', which lacks enough commodities and goods of much processed and refined form for consumption. In addition, the modernization school of thought define life situation prevalent mainly in the third world as the traits of 'tradition bound' and as 'the obstacles for modernization'. At the bases of this understanding, post world war third world were prescribed to gear up in the direction of 'modernization' in order to get rid of the state of poverty or 'to be developed' (?). In this process, emphasis was given to implant western knowledge, skills and concept in the countries of third world. Among others, two things have been more apparent as an outcome out of those initiatives of development which are; 'failure of development efforts in changing life situation of the undeveloped community' at a scale that is generally desired and in some cases the 'resistance of the third world community against the prescription of development'. Though at a first glance, the two outcomes as mentioned above appear opposite among each other, but at scrutiny, they appears to be the two faces of the same coin. We presume that these outcomes are

very important to understand 'sociology of government' and 'sociology of science and technology' in Nepali context that contribute to the theories of anthropology of development, post-modernism, political ecology, empowerment, decentralization and alike.

The 'failure' and the 'resistance' of development in the third world over the decades are found to be screened, analyzed or approached from different perspective in which, *pundits* of development sociology see the problems in the structural matters of the recipient community such as 'overruling power of customs and traditions', 'hierarchical social structure and lack of redistributive arrangement' and in the 'underlying thinking model in collective mind'. And, on the other hand, politico-economist see the problems in 'undemocratic political regime at state and even in community level', in 'prevalent inequality in the access to production resources and opportunity', and in 'the incompatibility in between changed technology and unchanged institution' whereas classicist economist see the problems in the lacks of sufficient investment, in the lack of economic infrastructure such as market and banking facility, availability of credit and so on. As a point of theoretical departure, I would rather argue that 'resistance' and 'failure' of development is there mainly because of the contradictions and problems created in the process of development due to the cause of inappropriate institutional choice, over reliance on techno-centric prescription and in disregarding local knowledge and tendency to take local community as a vacuum of knowledge.

### **Definition of key concept**

'Development failure'- the term used here is imply to denote the state of affairs, in which, the attempt of agricultural modernization was largely unsuccessful due to various structural and processual constraints. 'Development failure' is reduced here to 'the failure of agricultural modernization' in Nepal case since major focus of development was on agricultural modernization in Nepal.

The concept of 'resistance' used here to explain negative attitude, understanding and thereby negative response of the local people towards development prescription offered by development agencies.

I take institution as 'a whole of rules, norms, beliefs, processes, and organizational arrangement- both formal and informal, in which, by virtue of morale, an individual in his/her individual or in collective capacity abide to do or not to do something'.

'Technocentric prescription' is a prescription against the state of under development, which involves tools, techniques, beliefs and approaches from western science'. In case of agricultural modernization, technocentric prescription means 'the application of high yielding varieties of hybrid seeds, chemical fertilizer, pesticide and irrigation in the distinct principle of land use, which may also involve new technique of using machines or other equipment'.

I like to define 'local knowledge' as 'a collective repertoire of information about the processes of local environment, along with the historically informed set of normative ideas and tools and technique of resource use that was developed in the heuristic processes of human history and limited to a small spatial extent'.

### **Development effort of Nepal in perspective**

Similar to the other parts of the underdeveloped world, development prescription in Nepal came in the form of techno-centric prescription right from the outset that begins from the mid of last centuries. Afterwards, series of measures adopted to support the endeavor throughout the five decades until to date. In this endeavor, efforts have been made to change agricultural production system towards technically more effective and economically beneficial one (were they?). Emphasis was given to tie up Nepalese subsistence economy to the world market through heavy investment in building physical infrastructure i.e. transport and communication and developing corporate sector. Investment made in research and extension of agricultural technology, in the arrangement of supplying agricultural input including large-scale irrigation technology and in developing market facility in tremendous scale. In all through the history of modernization led development, Para-Statal organization were assigned key role in such kind of service delivery.

Despite all these initiatives as mentioned above, goal of development was seldom realized being translated into practice. In the chain of realization of failure of the approaches one after another, *pundits* of development never failed to give the alternatives. From the very beginning of early sixties, emphasis was given in technifying agricultural production system of the country through the development of infrastructure, developing human resources including the establishment of agricultural colleges and research centers. This attempt was accompanied by the initiatives of reforming traditional village social organization upon the Panchayat philosophy and the initiatives of land tenure reform. But, the political project of land reform got into failure due to the various resistances and the attempt of technification was also found to be unsuccessful in attaining its targeted goal. In consequence, decentralization was recommended as the best means in attaining desired output of development from early 80's. Later on, various donors started to support to the micro level initiatives of development such as in enhancing self help approach for community development while participatory approach was became the buzzword in the development camp after 1980. Now after all these initiatives, right-based approach has becoming a hotcake in the development community for several years.

#### *Why problems lie in the efforts of institutional change?*

Initiatives of institutional change very-often limited in replacing only part of the existing institution of Nepalese society through formal regulatory measures or establishing organizations. In this process, efforts were seldom made to explore the layers of meaning of the traditional institutional arrangement and their interconnections with different life-system through holistic dealing. In consequence, the initiatives of institutional change

appear just as an 'overtopping ornament' leaving the rest part of the system unchanged. Therefore, part of the institution recently implanted in the larger societal system become, to a large extent, either defunct or isolated from the rest part of the system and the traditional system keeps on functioning even though in little dilemmas. The pundits of development failed to realize that implanted institutional arrangements very could replace the part of institution and thereby part of knowledge of the Nepalese society and therefore the institutional change was not possible only through the initiatives of formal regulatory changes. In doing so, the large part of the knowledge system remains alive in the collective mind of the people and provide repertoire of meaning for the collective social behavior of its participant.

In more concrete way, we can conceptualize it through the example of Nepalese experiences. In Nepal, I would argue that it was the over reliance to the Para-statal agencies as the sole agents of development service delivery that leads the efforts of development to the state of 'failure' and 'resistance' where the practice of rule of law, independent and professional bureaucracy and democratic practices were in their infancy. Likewise, the next thing that must be understood in this context is that the formal realm of state law and institutions were largely limited only to the certain area or to certain community and the rest kept on continuing their faith over traditional institutions. In such a matter of fact, para-statal bureaucracy remains largely ineffective in its role of development agents because the process of state formation was not completed in its all dimensions.

#### *Technification as a monolithic development prescription - a default choice*

Adoption of advance technology was, to a large extent, emphasized in Nepal for decades as the monolithic prescription of 'development' including in case of agricultural development, in which, attempts were very often made to transplant it in blue print form. The advance technological model most often are likely to be compatible where social organization are quite organized at larger scale with high level of management skills, there is access to information and communication, and the market system are well developed. But, in Nepal case, people were used to have their livelihood practices in domestic domain and only small parts of population were informed with modern tools and technique of management. Social organizations were found to be organized only in small scale as the discreteness of geography prefers and the economic linkages were not extended beyond domestic domain. In such a situation, a successful transformation of production system in the entire country through homogenous approach of technological revolution could have been nothing than the fuzzy dream.

If we attempt to contextualize the above concept in Nepalese experience, things come into more apparent form. From the very beginning of 'development era', the organizational orientation of the agencies looked after agricultural research and extension have remains leaning towards technocentric approaches. Para-statal organizations looking after that sector were organized in a way to have a manpower supply from hardcore technical background seriously undermining manpower from other background specially from social sciences.

### *Overlook the strength of existing pattern of knowledge*

One of the main defaults of the development initiatives in Nepal was to overlook the strength and grasp of indigenous knowledge on the local adaptation system. Therefore, development efforts very often founded over the knowledge base which presumed that the recipient community are lacks of knowledge, skills and concept of better production and that could be handed over to the community through the efforts of development and can make sustained tying it up with the efforts of institutional change. But, my argument is that both the understanding were incorrect that neither the local community were the vacuum of knowledge nor the initiatives of institutional change could that easily replace the knowledge repertoire deeply seated in the collective mind of the people of the recipient community. Rather, the indigenous systems are a sort of integrated system where technical and institutional arrangements were fused in symbols, rituals and in oral-lore. In which, symbols, rituals and oral-lore were those vehicles which carries knowledge and skills from one place and time to the another place and time as a means of education. So obviously isolated attempts in bringing change in formal institutional arrangement or in implanting advance technology as a means of development would certainly have hardship in succeeding over the integrated system of indigenous arrangement.

Therefore, my assumption is that the resistance to development was the outcomes of contradictions between the knowledge systems- the traditional and implanted one in conceptualizing nature, natural process and their utility. In which, resistance very often guided by the sustainability concern of local community. It is because, local community perceived the prescription of development as the way that leads to the erosion of nature and culture and blocks the processes of sustainable supply of natural resources in the long run.

Again, if we like to see this concept in more contextualized form, we can take various examples of Nepalese experiences. For example, local communities venerate high mountain area and the Himalayas and in many cases believed those areas as the seat of god and discouraged any human activities. The underlying meaning of that repertoire seems to explain ecological fragility of that area discouraging intensive human activities in those uplands which could also renders threats to the lives and properties in the downstream through the change in the water regime at the upstream. Thus, if one underestimates the value of deep-seated knowledge of this type and prescribes more consumptive pattern of resource use in that area then 'resistance' is most likely the response of the local community.

In course of the assessment of the issues as mentioned above, I have revisited the concept, context and application of the approaches, methods and arrangement of development initiatives in Nepal particularly focusing the major turning points of development history in extensive manner i.e. approaches of technology transfer, the

approaches of integrated development vs sectoral approaches, decentralization, from government led development to NGOs led and market led approaches and so on.

### **Cumulative impact**

As mentioned above, para-statal organizations were given lead role of service delivery in the development history of the last half decades. Different sectoral Ministries were formed to look after different sector of land use such as forest, water, agriculture, and others like rural development, transportation, education, health etc differently. Serious absence of coordination practices was one of the pronounced characteristics in Nepalese administration. Many of them had their regional and district mechanism to deliver their services. These government agencies were solely responsible for research and technology development, its extension, social empowerment and so on. Concerned technical personnel were predominantly deputed in various positions in their bureaucracy hardly leaving any room for the personnel from other academic background. Even in many cases, these organizations got seriously affected from the back-biting of the professionals of each other sub-discipline. For example, dynamics between the group of civil engineers and agricultural Engineers in the Department of Irrigation, and in between the group of agriculturist and the livestock experts in Department of Agriculture are the matter of problems forever.

In three different five years plan (1975-1990) agriculture, forestry and irrigation were the sectors receiving main priority of the national planning. Even in the next three-succeeding five years plan (1991-1995) in which main priority was on “poverty alleviation”, means of which are predominantly envisaged as earlier. Therefore, these sectors received large amount of financial resources continuously for the last 30 years. Irrigation remains one of the few largest single most sectors receiving country’s scarce financial resources. But, very paradoxically, the cumulative impact at the people’s level remains surprisingly unchanged or rather negative. Except, in very few pockets of the plain of Tarai area, production modernization in agriculture mainly remains in paper with no effect in the grassroots. Even in those area where a few progress is seen is mainly due to the competitive effort of private sectors initiatives. Even in some cases, where agricultural agencies were able to introduce some high yielding varieties of seeds, livestock and chemical fertilizer, people’s experiences over those inputs proved largely discouraging. The uncertainty in availed market in supplying timely seed and fertilizer made farmers largely reluctant to have improved pattern of agriculture. The new varieties and inputs were found to be vulnerable from climatic viewpoint and environmentally unsustainable. The improved inputs require huge cash flow to purchase things, which is not attractive to the farmers who mainly adopt agriculture for subsistence purpose.

On the other hand, irrigation agency always emphasize on having large scale irrigation systems targeting mono-crops of paddy where farmers traditional organizations were largely small in nature as geography separates them. Many irrigation systems are found to be failed either from default design or due to the incompatibility in between the services they were envisaged to deliver and the pattern of production organization prevailed in the

Nepalese society. Heavy corruption in the construction game was the other main mistrust of farmers against the extension worker of irrigation agency.

In case of forestry, the entire forest of the realm were nationalized in 1956 and put under the control of state machinery. In which, farmers were prevented to have their access to their local forest for their daily needs. Hostility between people and forest personnel was pronounced and it was resulted at heavy depletion of forest within the last 4-5 decades. Corruption of forest officials was much apparent in the regime. Now the regime has changed and government has adopted policy of management transfer to local community though there are still many processual problems in this regard.

Another common problems in the entire sector were the predominant emphasis on building infrastructure and installation of highly sophisticated equipment, which would require expensive operation and maintenance. Officials were attracted to have those things due to the hidden benefit for them at personal scale. In effect, now a large number of such large scale infrastructure are out of timely repair of maintenance lack of skilled manpower in the country and expensive capital requirement.

These kind of paradoxes are everywhere in the country, be it larger or smaller in scale but in all the sectors of development. This type of development paradoxes strongly overlooked the need of local people and found to prescribe unfeasible development prescription. The blueprint technification would not be feasible in the diverse social, institutional and geographic context of Nepal. Hence, grass root people understand all the initiatives of external agencies as the futile drama and hardly trust over it. Not only that this is the major cause, which made environment to drove people to the camp of Maoist insurgency.

Apart from those paradoxes prevailed in the institutional choices, the development initiatives in Nepal are also criticized from inclusion and exclusion perspective. The bureaucrats mainly technocrats, national planner, development consultants at GOs, NGOs and donor agencies are found to be from urban background or from the rural elite background with educational degrees from western institutions. They hardly serious enough about the problems that rural people are facing nor they have empirical experiences about so. In such a rigid structure, the people from rural background with no access to the elite network of the capital of the country got only frustration in their part, which was one of the supporting elements to expand the popular base of the insurgent Maoist group in the country.

### **Future research**

As a future study, I have planned to concentrate my work on the study of agricultural extension in Nepal in the framework of technological modernization. One aspect of study will be to explore changing institutional arrangement in the sector over decades after 1950. Under this broad theme, I will explore organizational change especially in the formal Para-statal organization related to those sectors, managerial arrangement, changing property right issues, development perspectives, priorities, methods and

approaches. Attempts of agricultural technification will be assessed from the viewpoint of their wider applicability in the broader agro-ecological and institutional context of Nepal.