

UNDERSTANDING LONG-TERM SOCIAL CHANGE IN RURAL NEPAL, 1970-2010

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Abstract

The sociological understanding of long-term social change has developed primarily along two streams of contesting arguments. While functionalists (such as Parsons, 1970) would understand it in terms of modernisation, for the Marxists and the political economists a historical understanding of the changing forms of class relations would reveal its true essence (Holton, 1985; 1981). Hence the debate continues as to what should constitute the central locus in a proper understanding of social change. To Norbert Elias, to have a true understanding of social change one should focus on “increased differentiation and integration,” as well as “decreased differentiation and integration” (Elias, 1994: 182ff), which together form the two main directions in the structural changes of societies. Sociological understandings of social change differ profoundly with other social sciences in their treatments of social change in the sense that sociology postulates social change of structural kind.

This paper explores dynamics in the capitalist market relations in Nepal’s agricultural sector and the resultant structural social change in Mahesh Khola, a village west of the capital city, Kathmandu. This paper unfolds how a process of transformation of the agricultural sector replicates a real development of the rural sector, resulting in social disruptions and widening social inequalities. I juxtapose such a long-term social change I discerned in Mahesh Khola with other studies of a similar kind, one in Thak village, closer to Pokhara (Macfarlane, 2001) and the other along the corridor or Siddhartha Highway, from Lumbini to Pokhara (Blaikie et al., 2002). In doing so, my emphasis will be on investigating how the society-market interface evolved in the dynamics of an agrarian society.

Keywords

Social change; countryside; structural social change; social inequality; Nepal

Introduction

This paper attempts to look at durable social change that unfolds in the long-term in Nepal's countryside. It argues that meaningful understanding of social change should be sociologically informed, which implies that, social change needs to be looked at social structures and institutions over a sufficient length of time. At its empirical ground, this paper makes an argument that in the case of countryside Nepal, one cannot afford to miss out the change in social formation as reflected in structures of society. It also argues that embedding class analysis in the broader historical contexts of evolving market dynamics in Nepal's countryside could be new and unconventional arenas of meaningful social change studies. The underlying empirical ground for such an assertion is that such a social change would eventually manifest into widening and deepening social inequality on the ground.

This paper is divided into three parts. In the following section, I briefly delve into conceptualizing social change from a few earlier empirical studies. This will be followed by a section, in which I pull three different empirical cases from countryside Nepal, each of which either re-visits the original research sites after a gap of two or three decades to see what changes have taken place or take a longer retrospective view of social change for more than two decades. Finally, this paper concludes by making a synthetic analysis.

Observations on long-term social change in Nepal's countryside

This paper explores dynamics in the capitalist market relations in Nepal's agricultural sector and the resultant structural social change in Mahesh Khola, a village west of the capital city, Kathmandu. A cluster of several villages in the foothills of Central Nepal, "Mahesh Khola" is a fictive name that represents an area located 25 to 30 km west of Kathmandu. This is a small river valley made up of two streams, which make its topography rugged, composed mainly of river banks and their constituent hillocks (with slopes predominating over flat river banks), at an elevation of between 950 to 1,700m. Note that Mahesh Khola is the same cluster of villages where Luintel had carried out his dissertation research for Master's thesis (Luintel, 1990, also see Luintel 1994).

I have studied a case of the Mahesh Khola valley during a couple of decades, from 1985 to 2008, to examine the expansion of agricultural markets as a mechanism to transform rural livelihoods into the market-operated capitalist set up. But, before I begin, let me delve into two representative studies carried out by two foreign scholars in Nepal.

Alan Macfarlane's reflection on 30 years of change in Thak (a village in Nepal's mountain region near to Pokhara) entitled "Sliding down hill" (Macfarlane, 2001) builds on its original study *Resources and Population*

(Macfarlane, 1976). Macfarlane's account contributes enormously to expanding our understanding of long-term social change in the specific context of Nepal. Although Macfarlane's account "does not make a pleasant reading" because it reports "a move [of Thak] from bad to worse" (Luintel, 2001: 112) with details that people have become thinner and more unhealthy, the livestock population has depleted, farm productivity has plummeted, the real earnings of village workers have shrunk leading to the staggering indebtedness of the village households; and all this resulted in unforeseen "extensive and permanent out-migration" (Macfarlane, 2001: 106).

It also reports that despite some economic improvements, owing to army recruitment or overseas labour migration, the inhabitants of Thak neither sent part of their income back home, nor they came back to Thak. They would rather settle in nearby towns, in this case, Pokhara. To Ben Campbell, Thak's case shows that a place that was to inspire so much development activity in the hills remains in a state of under-investment. The peripheralisation of Thak, he argues, concerning the growth in urban conglomerations, in some ways shows the fate of Nepal's other rural communities (Campbell, 2001).

In both *Resources and Population* (Macfarlane, 1976) and "Sliding down hill" (Macfarlane, 2001), there are several flaws, some methodological and others

analytical. To both Campbell and Luintel, Macfarlane's account misses out the larger context in which social change unfolded in Thak. Macfarlane developed a picture of social change as if it were independent of a larger political-economic context, such as the expansion of the market and capitalist encroachment on the one hand, and the international division of labour on the other. Macfarlane's admits that his prediction (of "no forest in Thak by the year 2000") that he did in his doctoral research (Macfarlane, 1976) proved to be wrong. This relates I argue, to his failure to take into account the likelihood of a new population process (such as outmigration) coming into effect.

To both McHugh (2001) and Seddon (2001) who reviewed Macfarlane's account, it fails sufficiently to recognise the analytic importance of social divisions and class inequality in Thak. These are some of the social dynamics that emerged so robustly in his recent reflection (but Macfarlane still fails to recognise them). Had Macfarlane opened his mind to a slightly different analytic route, such as, for instance, including some treatment of the political economy of class, it would have better enabled him to grasp the internal dynamics of the long-term social change being unfolded in Thak between the mid-1970s and the turn of the century.

Macfarlane can also be challenged for his analytic weakness in according little value to the agency of the people in question. For instance, in his

original research, Macfarlane posited his research subjects as entrapped in external ecological conditions. Later in his reflection, he portrayed urban growth (in Pokhara) as a new externality to his research subjects. In either case, his account posited ecological conditions or urban development as overpowering to the community as if people did not have any capacity to adjust, adapt or reposition the ways they lived.

A year after Macfarlane brought his reflection to wider academic attention, a group of British scholars from East Anglia University, namely Piers Blaikie, John Cameron and David Seddon (Blaikie et al., 2002) published a little more rigorous reflection based on their re-survey of 20 years of change in the lives and ideas in some of their original research villages from west-central Nepal (that spanned from Pokhara to Lumbini). Their re-study reflects upon their original account of the highly popular, *Nepal in Crisis* (Blaikie et al., 1980), for which they had originally conducted field-research during 1974-75. Their original research into the political economy of agrarian change in Nepal drew an overall conclusion that Nepal was, in the mid-1970s, in a state of crisis, fundamentally rooted in a failure of productive organisation associated with its economic and political underdevelopment.

This pessimistic conclusion of Blaikie and his colleagues (Blaikie et al., 1980) resonates in many respects

with Macfarlane's mentioned above. The origins of Nepal's crisis, they saw, were derived partially from the particular form of imperialism experienced by Nepal which allowed it to maintain formal political autonomy vis-à-vis its giant neighbour, India - a point Macfarlane missed out completely.

Their original study showed that while Nepal's experience as "semi-colony" ensured a degree of "forced stagnation" in its production and productivity sectors, it also led to increased population pressure on marginal land, emigration, and ecological decline (Blaikie et al., 1980: 5). Following an analytical framework that combined class analysis with dependency theory, their original study found a dynamic which they anticipated would lead to capitalist development in the rural (and urban) areas of west-central Nepal. The re-survey in the same region after a gap of 20 years, however, showed it to be otherwise. Seddon writes elsewhere that:

[t]he most pessimist forecasts of the mid-1970s [in *Nepal in Crisis*] regarding the pauperization of the mass of the peasantry in the region had not been realized and that a significant 'middle peasantry' had managed to survive through a variety of livelihoods strategies, including labour migration to other areas of Nepal and abroad... There [were but]...indications of growing inequality, spatial and social, within the region, the district, and the village, and one would

anticipate a picture of growing inequality from any contemporary village study (Seddon, 2001: 117-118).

This finding exactly corroborates to Norbert Elias's assertion that an account of the long-term social change either notices "increased differentiation and integration," as well as "decreased differentiation and integration" (Elias, 1994: 182ff). Concurrent to this broad observation, Blaikie and his colleagues' re-study also found that, over more than 20 years, there was a remarkable lack of change in the class structure (the pattern of households' classes).

The nonfarm income played a greater role in supporting households and in providing an income; there was also a level of increase in agricultural commodity production. But overall, they concluded, rural capitalism had failed to develop in either the forces of production or the relations of production; and that circumstances for individual migration had proven considerably more positive than anticipated, and the resulting remittances had allowed the preservation or even strengthening of the middle class (Blaikie et al., 2002: 1262-1265).

Blaikie and his colleagues included class analysis as an integral part of their analysis without losing sight of the wider context (of dependent relationships). This was precisely the important analytical trope that Macfarlane (1976, 2001) missed out completely, as our aforementioned

discussion suggests. However, both Macfarlane (2001) and Blaikie et al.'s (2002) accounts grossly miss the pivotal role market dynamics play in shaping lives and livelihoods at the local level. Their systematic omission of the importance of the market (or the changing forms of market relations) in bringing long-term social change in contemporary rural Nepal is, thus, striking. For example, despite that both Macfarlane (2001) and Blaikie et al. (2002) frequently mention about the changing consumer behaviour, rising levels of expenditure (and the latter even talk about the increasing importance of commodity production), none of the two accounts sufficiently weaves the market (or market relations) into their framework of analysis.

This is precisely the contribution that Luintel (2010) makes in his account of long-term structural social change in Mahesh Khola (discussed below).

Eight years after the publication of Blaikie and his colleagues' reflective account, discussed above, Youba Raj Luintel, a sociologist from Tribhuvan University, carried out his doctoral research analysing the relationship between the expansion of the capitalist market in Nepal's agricultural sector and the resultant structural social change in a village, close to Kathmandu. He studied the case of the Mahesh Khola valley, west of Kathmandu, during a period of more than two decades (1985-2008) and examined the expansion of agricultural

markets as a mechanism to transform rural livelihoods. In his research entitled "Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Rural Nepal: Market Relations, Inequality and Social Change in 'Mahesh Khola'," Luintel (2010) demonstrates how a development model that defined commodification of agriculture as the real development of the rural sector created a development paradox by bringing several social disruptions and aggravating existing social inequalities. He argued that neoliberal policies promoting market-centred development failed to take into account that markets it promotes are socially embedded in unequal power relations.

The exacerbation of social inequality created by this development model has several manifestations. As the case of Mahesh Khola illustrates it includes (a) the radical restructuring of rural labour through unprecedented intra-class differentiation, notably through the emergence of a wealthier fraction within the working class, (b) the transformation of part of the traditional rural elite into a modern capitalist upper class, closely connected with this transformation; and (c) the progressive relocation (or self-displacement) of this modernised upper class to the capital city of Kathmandu (see Luintel, 2010).

In this study, Luintel (2010) shows how these long-term social changes are the outcomes of the accumulation and transfer of rural surplus to metropolis

urban centres. While part of this surplus is retained by the rural working class and transferred to Kathmandu mainly through consumption of nonessential goods and services. Part of this also goes to purchasing increasingly expensive agricultural inputs, such as pesticides and fertilisers. A large proportion of this surplus, Luintel (2010) illustrates, is expropriated by the actors who monopolise the access to agricultural markets: the modern indigenous upper class and the Indian traders who have control over the highly asymmetric core-periphery relation characterising market exchanges between Nepal and India. Moreover, the surplus diverted to the capital is often invested unproductively in real estate and urban residences, while the rural sector where the surplus is produced suffers from chronic disinvestment, social disruption and underdevelopment. Luintel's research draws four important conclusions, as follows:

The model of development that has been fostered in Mahesh Khola with greater emphasis on commodity production and profit-making, in more than two decades, has significantly improved the livelihood conditions of rural households. This is one facet of the long-term social change taking place in Nepal's countryside.

After two decades of persistent emphasis on production for sale, commercialisation of agriculture and profit-making from vegetables (1985-

2008), the people of Mahesh Khola are now motivated to start a nonfarm livelihood in Kathmandu. Their regular exposure to the urban cosmopolitan life of Kathmandu (in or around the Kalimati vegetable market) has seduced the rural populace to cosmopolitanism in such a profound manner that they would like to make a fresh start in their lives and livelihoods away from agriculture. Going back to the argument of Norbert Elias, this represents one of the profound characteristics that Nepal's countryside is going through.

The model of development (which Luintel has conceptualised here as neoliberal kind) has deepened social inequality in Mahesh Khola by exacerbating class inequalities, at the intersection of existing social asymmetries of other kinds (notably caste, ethnicity and gender). From the prism of long-term structural social change as propagated by Norbert Elias, this is one of the telling stories that contemporary social science may pursue further.

This way, the recent trajectories of capitalist development in Mahesh Khola have eventually resulted in a process of social differentiation connected with the transfer of economic surplus generated in agriculture and rural sector (from the farmers to the traders, and then from rural peripheries to the urban metropolis). In the long run, the rural peripheries are left underdeveloped due to the lack of productive investments, largely because

the rural surpluses are predominantly transferred to the urban centres, and from there to the metropolis (Luintel, 2010; see also Amin, 1972 and Frank, 1967).

Conclusion

This paper was about social change. It was specifically about durable social change unfolded in rural Nepal during the post-1970s. The type of social change depicted in this paper does not resonate the social change of evolutionary kind, nor does it follow the social change of functional kind. Sociological understandings of social change differ profoundly with other social sciences in their treatment of social change in the sense that sociology believes on social change of structural kind.

This paper argues that a meaningful understanding of social change should be sociologically informed. The sociological approach to social change is always social structural – meaning that, social change needs to be looked at social structures and institutions, which demands a long-term retrospective study. At its empirical ground, this paper argues that in the case of countryside Nepal, one cannot afford to miss out the structural alteration that long-term social change eventually manifests into. In that sense, embedding class analysis in the broader contexts of examining market dynamics would entail two arenas of social change studies, which would unpack the widening and deepening social inequality being unfolded.

My conception of social change is mainly informed by Elias's (1994) arguments that social change is not always essentially evolutionary; but mainly structural and transformative where he looks for "figurational change" (p. 184) over a long-term. Elias's

conceptualisation of social change brings me closer to class analysis as the structural social change in society in the specific circumstances of countryside Nepal.

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