Analyzing Madhesh Movement from a Social Structural Approach

Tek Nath Subedi

Assistant Professor of Sociology, Saraswati Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University

email : tngsubedi@gmail.com

Abstract

Collective human activities are the motors of social change. Change depends less on mutual understanding and more on the contradiction between different micro-to-macro-level functioning units. Thus, sociological theories bring together the network of relationship between manifold social layers while analyzing the status of continuity or flux of change in society. Insofar as Nepali society has undergone tremendous changes, attempts of inserting more recent sociological theories becomes customary. Contrary to this, the application of classical theories in analyzing the socio-political transformations has been a usual trend. The 2007-Madhesh Movement was one of the major turning points in Nepal's socio-political history, which had brought significant macro-level changes in Nepal. Several scholarly attempts are made to discuss and analyze the Movement, but emphasis is given more to the internal structure bypassing the international structure. This paper aims to analyze the Madhesh Movement with reference to an acclaimed book 'Madhesh Bidrohako Nalibeli', and examines whether the book has applied the most updated sociological theories of social movement such as Theda Skocpol's social structural approach. The book is found too slim in defining and theorizing the movement sociologically since it has given credit only to national-level phenomena than the global capitalist process. This paper confirms that the proper positioning of macro-level structural contexts and the development at home and abroad can help anyone better understand the movement.

Keywords: Madhesh, revolt, social movement, Theda Skocpol, theory.

Introduction

Movements for the last few decades have become more common in Nepal. These movements in general constitute the agendas of change in 'old-regime state', and in particular, the mainstreaming of under-privileged groups and communities such as Dalits, ethnic, women, disabled, or remote zones. Movements seem to have locally germinated, but have far-reaching global impacts. Despite the eruption of a movement in a particular geographic location, it has the capacity of networking people elsewhere and campaigning them for its sake.

Movement and revolt are two different concepts, which commonly infer collective human actions for change. While the movement is a prolonged type of mass activity and the revolt is an instant or short-durée type of protest. Both processes however need a larger connection of issues, thick coverage of data, deeper analysis of phenomena, and a broader structural level of explanation for being theorized. Nevertheless, the trend of analyzing the incidences and factors that are responsible for fueling these movements are narrowly elucidated. And, the assessment of these movements in terms of a well-established theoretical framework is far lacking in the common social-science discourses.

Madhesh Movement (movement hereafter) is one of the recent uprisings, which erupted in the southern part of Nepal in 2007 AD with an aim of denouncing the cultural, linguistic, and political superiority of the hill-laden high-caste state hegemony. Shortly after the promulgation of the Interim Constitution of Nepal 2007 (ICN) by the Seven-Party Alliance (SPA) of the mainstream political parties and the underground Communist Party of Nepal – Maoist (CPNM), some of the terai-based intellectuals, activists and politicians blamed the ICN for ignoring federalism and other crucial issues of state-restructuring, and thus, launched the movement. One year after the Movement, a book "Madhesh Bidrohako Nalibeli" (Details of Madhesh Revolt, and Nalibeli hereafter) was published with an editorship of Bhaskar Gautam, aiming to cover the causes and consequences of the rise of Movement. Therefore, it is deemed to evaluate the book in the light of the more advanced social structural theory. This paper proceeds from giving a glimpse of Madhesh with reference to Nalibeli, reviews the basic premises of social approach of Theda Skocpol, collates Nalibeli with the given approach, and draws a simple conclusion on the way Movement is poorly theorized.

Movement and Nalibeli

Wide belief is that the Movement was an outcome of a prolonged oppression of people of Madhesh (Madheshi hereafter) by the hill-dominant centralized Nepali state. However, the major fueling and contributing factors could be beyond the caste or regional realm.

Feeling Alien in the Homeland

Causes vary but the exclusion of Madheshi was the result of hegemonic rulers' strong 'Pahadiya' or Hill-centric sentiment. The 'Pahadiya' state was reluctant to consider Madheshi as equal as others and provide a share in the government and its administrative units. Issues of exclusion of Madheshi were raised in various forums and levels, but the government of Nepal (GoN) displayed meager attention for resolving the contention. Those agendas began to be raised more effectively after the formation of Nepal Sadbhawana Party (NSP), a political party formed in 1985 by Gajendra Narayan Singh aiming to promote the rights of Madhesh region, but no significant progress was gained even after. Their demands for inclusion in political and administrative apparatus have perpetually been neglected by the political parties, ruling elites, intelligentsia, and the development-pundits. Hence, "Madhesh remained to be victimized as an internal colony, which is denied its share from key organs of the state system, and left under the geo-political crossfire by the superordinate 'Nepaliya' nationality" (Gautam, 2008 p. 6). The official branding of unfair treatment by the state was not less disappointing than other inequalities that the Madheshi have long been experiencing as second-class citizen.

Speaking to the Madheshi by pronouncing words such as 'Marsya', 'Dhoti', 'Bharatiya' etc. was another form of oppression, which could be equal to or as offensive as the pronouncing of 'Negro' in the global context and as 'non-Nepali' or 'Indian' in Nepali context. This racial cum regional oppression indicates the key character of a unitary state. Madheshi identity was never considered as dignified identity. Much interesting is that the Madhesh as a region is well-received as a treasure by the state but in contradiction with the geographic region the people living in the region are taken as burden. The pains of a plainland, thus, include not only the big and vague political, administrative, and economic

disparities, but also a loss of status and identity of a dignified citizen at the same time (Gautam, 2008 p. 8). It can be added that the identity-struggle happens to be more crucial than the class-struggle. The statement 'Madheshi are the Nepali people" has partial truth. It is not that the Madheshi lack the citizenship, but a large number of Madheshi were granted the citizenship only after the revolt. It means that the Madheshi had never been the citizens in practice. The only granting of citizenship card to a national does not ensure one's share in the broader-national social, cultural, economic, political, and state system. Thus, the revolt must be understood as a wholesale response of accumulated sufferings of people living there. The unequal treatment of Madheshi by the state which Gautam identified as a major factor for revolt, other relevant factors were the distancing of Madhesh by mainstream political parties, and the weak relationship between Madheshi and major stakeholders of Nepali society such as human rights organization, media and publication houses, civil society, etc. (Gautam, 2008 p. 12-13).

Underestimation of Madheshi Power

The GoN could be sensitive to the Movement and have paid serious attention to the incidences ripe during the time, but the incumbent government highly underestimated the power of Madheshi. It was reluctant to invite the rebels to sit for a dialogue. Mainstream political parties were busy in discrediting the opposition government, and were far away from initiating political dialogues with the concerned stakeholders. In other words, no serious considerations were made from the political parties to turn off the fire in Madhesh. The role of the human rights institutions and media was also less visible than desired. For the Maoist party, the uprising was a counter-revolution of the democratic movement of Nepal-2006, and the Movement was defined as a conspiracy from the anti-national and regressive forces dominant in Madhesh with their vested interest of dividing Nepal into pieces. The patriotic political powers and the mass people of both Madhesh and 'Hill' should protest in oneness for those plotting terrible designs to boycott Madhesi movement from the overall class, caste, regional, gender-based movement creating hostility between the Madheshi and Pahadi by daily emerging mysterious outfits thereby segregating the nation on the whole. The CPN-UML and Nepali Congress became the spectacle of the Madhesh uprising as the revolt was only confined to the Madheshi and Maoist parties (Gautam, 2008 p. 3-4). To conclude, all the mainstream political parties and the media including the human rights organizations and the mass people across the country filed to pay due respect to the cost of conflict in Madhesh.

Indeed, the Nalibeli has highly discredited the mainstream media and human rights organizations for their biased look towards Madhesh. The detail of Nepalgunj terror, which was happened in the initial days of the revolt, was unreported or dismissed in pretext of potential communal violence throughout the country. Human rights organizations showed no readiness of publishing the details of violence and violation of human rights during the revolt. Media displayed no interest in covering or forecasting the news during the Movement, but the same media worked its best in disseminating the news during the democratic movement of 2006. However, fake information such as 'accomplice of the formal king Gyanendra were hatching conspiracies', or 'massive encroachment from Indian nationals has been underway', 'counter-revolution to democratic movement of 2006 unleashed', or some title news like

that were ceaselessly been circulated. No genuine news materials were put into public. Frustrated by the growing incidence, Madheshi found no alternate to revolt.

The revolt that was unleashed in Madhesh was not only for the inclusion of Madheshi in the state system or mainstream political landscape of Nepal. Instead, it was also for equal dignity and worth of living of Madheshi as Nepali. Nevertheless, the successful revolt was unable to materialize the years of dreams of millions of Madheshi as it kept busy in negotiating the share in government. It rendered no significant changes in the overall livelihood pattern of Madhesh but only a minimal change in state structure. Only those privileged Madheshi were benefited from the revolt. The poor Madheshi remained the same as they were previously were such as they did not increase their access to food, cloth and shelter. Nalibeli, however, admits the revolt as successful in establishing Madhesi identity as a Nepalese identity to a great extent. It considers the revolt successful in two distinct ways. Firstly, it has contributed differently to the privileged and poverty-stricken Madheshi. The privileged groups in Madhesh were supposed to receive the proper share in the government while the confidence-level of poor Madheshi for initiating such revolts soared up. Secondly but more importantly, the Movement became a benchmark for pushing the nation towards the federal system of governance.

Popular uprisings are normally seen as turning points in history in accelerating the human rights and satisfying people to the desired extent, but the Movement rendered no overwhelming results than the very ordinary ones, Nalibeli sums. Nonetheless, the growing scope of Madheshi in the state-restructuring process of Nepali society cannot be undermined. Increased share of Madheshi in social, political, administrative, and developmental forums in Nepal signifies that more visible and significant changes are about to occur in the recent future.

Social Structural Approach of Theda Skocpol

Social sciences have a variety of approaches for understanding social movements and macro social processes. The structural approach developed by Theda Skocpol is one, which helps to unravel the deeper social, political, economic and other foundations of the mega social processes. It analyzes movements bringing together the broader geographical setting such as the national, regional or global, and underlines the combined role of state structures, international forces, and class relations for the origins and accomplishments of revolutionary transformations. Special attention while analyzing social movements is given to the national and international contexts by the 'structural perspective' (Skocpol, 1979 p. 5).

Skocpol believes that the existing structure of a given state is the most responsible factor for any revolution to erupt. Revolutionary changes occur once the existing structure cannot satisfy the increasing demands of its people. Each country consists of multiple social structural layers, we often call them sub-structures, and these sub-structures are prone to changes as they contradict with each other. Sometimes, the one or few micro-structures contradict with the macro structure. The higher the structure embroils with contradictions, the sooner it has chances of being debilitated (Skocpol, 1995 p. 111). The more fractures and contradictions occur in a structure, the higher is the possibility

of a revolution to take place. Old structure continues until sound political and economic condition prevails. On the contrary, if crisis emerges in the old structure, it is quite impossible for a structure to manage the crisis. The highly successful revolutions in France, Russia, and China took place at a critical point in which the state structure was entangled with several crisis and turbulences.

Contradictions and crises in a sub-structure depend on the relationship of a state to the existing socioeconomic structures of a country. The mode of production of a given society conditions the regime in general and the activities of the rulers in particular. State, on the one hand, controls its territory and people, and on the other hand, establishes a particular relation to its people. Thus, a better analysis of a revolutions demands special attention in an analyst to explore the relationship of a state to its superordinate and subordinate class of people. Similarly, the old-state structure sustains until it becomes highly incompatible to the modernizing population. And, as soon as people cease to obey the old-way of living, the country involves in the course of choosing for a new way. In this way, the state keeps on determining the rise or a fall of a regime.

In the present globalized context, no one can deny the role of international contexts within which revolutions break out. For Skocpol, two different transnational contexts should be noted. On the one hand, there exists a world capitalist economic structure and the international states system within which individual nations are situated in different positions, and, on the other hand, there are changes and transmissions in "world time", which shape international contexts to permit revolutions, and the particular models and options for action that can be borrowed from abroad by revolutionary leaderships (Skocpol, 1979 p. 23). The capitalist globalization sponsors countries in the world so as to work as functional parts of a capitalist world economy.

The political and diplomatic relationship between states gave rise to the emergence of an international state system. This type of capitalist world-system and the international state-system did not let its member-country out of the world capitalist chain. Despite being a part of a global capitalist order, Skocpol foresees the competition between states in bringing changes in the rival countries. States often engage in wars with the aim of expanding colony or hegemony. The winner becomes successful in addressing the demands of its people and thus maintains its relationship with them, while the loser may fail in convincing its people and thus dissatisfaction grows among people. When the state loses a war, it also loses people's support as well. A situation comes in which a trust-deficit between state and people heightens, and the state is forced to face protest from its people. The case of revolution in France, Russia and China was the result of the heightening trust-deficit between people and their respective states.

Internal class dynamics – class inequality in particular – in a country is other structural dimension that produces a fertile soil for a movement. The more gap between economic classes widens the higher is the possibility of launching class struggle from the lower-class people. The "Great Revolutions" i.e., the French, Chinese, and the Russian Revolution, had multiple class groups each having multiple layers. The proprietary class in France, the Gentry in China and landed nobility in Russia were

the upper- class groups with numerous privileged rights. The middle class were the increasingly-bourgeoning capitalists in France, industrialists in Russia; and a few business persons and merchants in China. But, more than two-third of the total population in those countries accounted for lower class people i.e., peasants in France and China, and peasants and workers in Russia. Upper-class people were given more privileges from the state while lower-class people had disadvantaged living.

The differential distribution of power and privilege by the state looking at the economic condition of people was crucial in escalating class antagonism between rich and poor class. For example, the landed-upper class people had privilege rights as they were exempt to pay tax. The peasants on the other hand were compelled to pay the tax, firstly to the government and secondly to the seigneurial-groups. The paying of tax was thus beyond the capacity of peasant class. The case of France was also gruesome, where the peasants had to suffer from double-disadvantage; firstly, paying tax to the state, and secondly, receiving hostile behavior from the state. Yet, peasants were high in number in all those countries, the middle class, particularly the bourgeoisie class of people, came to ally with the peasant class. The middle class came to realize that their rights would be safeguarded if an alliance is made with peasant class. Unequal class relations, hence, produced a revolutionary climate in those countries.

Skocpol by and large has credited to the combined role of state structure and the class relationship as an internal, and world-historically developing international structures as an external factor for revolutionary changes. She has successfully synthesized the Marxian theory of class struggle with the political conflict theory of Charles Tilly, and developed an extended version of social structural theory of revolution. She acknowledges the Marxian theory of mode of production, but finds internal class conflict as insufficient condition for a revolutionary transformation in this global capitalist context. Nalibeli from the Social Structural Approach

Notwithstanding the acknowledged role of internal and external factors for a revolution to break out, Nalibeli emphasizes how internal structure of Nepali society was functioning against the will of people with due disrespect to the Madheshi. Since the state defined Madheshi deliberately as incompatible to Nepali society, they came to valorize their self-identity, expanded their networks, came to the street and spilled all their dissatisfaction over the ground in the form of a movement. It is undoubtedly that the Madheshi for a long time have lived without a real identity. They could not feel the motherland because they were neither the Indians nor were they considered as Nepali. As a result, their representation in administrative, bureaucratic, judicial, and other state units was poor. Even after the restoration of democracy in 1990, and after the landing of a successful democratic movement of 2006, their status left unchanged. They had remarkable contribution to each democratic movements of Nepal, but were deliberately excluded. There was growing disenchantment among Madheshi for not being acknowledged as dignified Nepali citizen. Their unfair treatment by Nepali state therefore proves to be a major factor for movement, which Nalibeli has emphasized in a convincing manner. Madhesh is located in the southern plain, the bread-basket of Nepal. It contributes to a significant portion of GDP and GNP of the country. There is no disagreement that the contribution of plainland

to the development of the Nepal is significant. Also, Madheshi are the most laborious people, who invest more time than the average Nepali worker in farm-related and other production activities. Madheshi are the most industrious people, but are discredited as 'Madhishe', literally the dirty people; 'Bhaiya', literally as junior and unknown person; 'Dhoti, literally the people wearing only one garment to cover the legs for lacking or being unfamiliar of other garments; or sometimes as more humiliating identities than these above-mentioned ones. Of all the martyrs of the Madhesh Revolt, most of the cases were from the poor families. Nalibeli illustrates less about the economic inequality of Madhesh, but emphasizes the role of poverty-stricken people in producing the waves of revolt (Gautam, 2008 p. 20). It verifies the notion that the lower-class and death during the movement – martyr in political word – has established relationship.

Nalibeli is worth-reading in terms of its critical assessment of issues, but it is highly unsuccessful for its failure to assess the factors in terms of the broader theoretical coverage those available in the literature of social and political movements. It not only has undermined the role of international communities, but underemphasized international communities concern of the movement. The-then Chinese ambassador to Nepal being the first high-profile diplomat to reach Madhesh during the revolt has made serious concern over the revolt. At the same time, many delegates from Europe, America and Asia were worried to the violent incidences during the movement. The role of India to provoke Madheshi before and during the movement was also muted. The book speaks as if India had no role during the movement. But in reality, India time and again had given huge pressure to the GoN to make Hindi an official language of Nepal.

Collective actions for movement are the incidences which could hardly exclude the class dynamics of a given society. The absence of discussion in Nalibeli about issues like mode of production, pattern of distribution, exchange system, employment, relationship between economic classes, finance, infrastructure development, urbanization, industrialization, globalization, capitalism, etc., which contribute to the diversified class-society, and make a fertile ground for a movement, fails to meet the standard of social structural approach as advocated by Skocpol.

Conclusion

The 2007-movement being a highly successful movement in Nepali socio-political history had successfully institutionalized its agenda of the federal democratic type of government system in Nepal. Systematic cum perpetual exclusion of Madhesh by the state has become the fundamental reason for the movement. Nalibeli has analyzed that revolt in terms of geo-political dimension in general and racial in particular. Apart from this, the revolt was an outcome of an accumulated frustration caused by the series of social, economic, cultural, political and regional exclusion by the mainstream state apparatus. Insofar as Nalibeli's relationship with the structural approach is concerned, it does not reflect the theoretical premises as Skocpol has argued. Internal factors of movement have been raised while; world-historical international contexts are entirely abandoned. The absence of global factors, and their distinct role in the revolutionary social transformations is deliberately sidestepped by Nalibeli since the book has categorized movement merely as a revolt. In the present globalized

context, the attempt of downsizing the role of international dynamics in examining at least the mega processes like social movements would not be logically convincing. Because of its failure to consider role of international factors as equally and effectively as the national structure in shaping the movement, Nalibeli has become more phenomenological than theoretical. It is believed that the theoretical foundation of social movements and revolts would be stronger in case Skocpol's social structural approach was applied.

References

Gautam, B. (2008). Nairashyako raajniti (Politics of despair). In B. Gautam (Ed.) *Madhesh bidrohako nalibeli* (Details of madhesh revolt) (pp. 1-36). Martin Chautari.

Skocpol, T. (1979). *States and social revolutions: A comparative analysis of France, Russia and China.* Cambridge Press.

Skocpol, T. (1995). *Explaining revolutions: A quest of a social structural approach in social revolutions in the modern world.* Cambridge UP.

Skocpol, T. & Trimberger, E. K. (1996). Revolutions and world historical development of capitalism. In T. Skocpol (Ed.), *Social revolutions in the modern world* (pp. 120-132). Cambridge UP.