



## Empowerment and Resistance: Motivating Factors of Women Participation in the 1990-People's Movement of Nepal



Chiranjivi Acharya, PhD

Dr. Acharya has been an Associate Professor of Sociology at, Central Department of Sociology, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Kathmandu Nepal, Email: acharyakiran72@gmail.com

### ARTICLE INFO

Received data: Dec 25, 2024

Reviewed: Dec. 30, 2024

Revised: Jan 7, 2025

Accepted: Jan 8, 2025

### Keywords

democracy, freedom, political movement, political sociology, social change.

### ABSTRACT

*Nepalese women have actively participated in all political movements in Nepal, both before and following the establishment of democracy. Their contribution, however, is often undervalued. This paper elucidates the specific instances of participation by women in the 1990 People's Movement of Nepal, based on data collected from a dozen female participants, and examines the factors contributing to their involvement. It asserts that women participated in these movements not just for women's issues, but for the freedom of all Nepalese people. The paper posits that women's desire for equality and justice was linked to a broader vision of human freedom, rather than specific agendas. The overarching desire for common freedom emerged as a significant reason, as women participants emphasized that true liberty could not be an agenda for any single group. They viewed the struggle for freedom as a collective human concern, placing the liberation of all before their own. Many joined the movement, recognizing the historical context where global transitions to democracy intensified the urgency for change in Nepal. Influenced by political parties and leaders, women engaged in the movement, believing that political action was essential for social change. They articulated that only through collective effort could oppressive structures be dismantled, enabling women to enhance their societal status and advocate for wider agendas, ultimately fostering greater equality and empowerment.*

© 2025 Journal of Development ReviewSMC All rights reserved

The role of women in any society is more significant than their perceived status, which is supported both qualitatively by their capacity for childbearing and quantitatively by their numerical equality with men. However, their contributions to society as mothers at home, as workers in domestic and professional settings, as active agents in the community, or as leaders in the broader

political arena are less acknowledged. The inadequate recognition of women by individuals, families, communities, society, or the broader social structure is both unjust and discouraging. Despite the underestimation of women's roles, they have been active participants in the production, reproduction, and enhancement of love, care, progress, and societal well-being.

It is also possible that the prolonged devaluation and oppression of women, given that humans are inherently political beings, could lead to a significant revolution against the patriarchal structure and value system. Society frequently resembles a battleground as it involves significant dissent among a substantial population. The dissensus results from individuals' persistent desire to attain power. In this context, society can be seen as a domain in which power dynamics are perpetually active. However, society engages in negotiation to transform dissent into consensus. Various entities such as individuals, groups, communities, state agencies, and private and public organizations all vie for power, making power a fundamental aspect of human society. We can see that people vying for power manifests in different forms such as agitations, revolts, movements, protests, and revolutions. People fight with each other aiming to achieve some key posts. Sometimes, they formally compete with each other as well. We can therefore say that humans are political beings and they focus on exercising that power personally or institutionally in the field of marriage, employment, education, or religion.

The more dominant entities within these power dynamics strive to uphold their influence, while individuals who are marginalized endeavor to disrupt existing power structures and challenge the dominant forces. Whether it is within a family, industry, political party, or socioeconomic class, members are engaged in a continuous struggle to assert their power. Furthermore,

the power struggle between men and women is observable within this framework, with the existence of patriarchy being a direct result of this ongoing competition (Tamang, 2000).

Power dynamics not only give rise to multiple unwanted situations but also produce negative instincts in human beings. Criminal behavior and violence can similarly be traced back to power dynamics. The emergence of disparate interest groups and the ensuing conflicts they experience are often rooted in more foundational economic and political discord. Political inequalities contribute to various economic and social disparities, which in turn lead to more severe forms of conflict and insurrection within society (Diani, 1992; Gusfield, 2007). The struggle between the affluent and the impoverished, proprietors and laborers, or males and females is often fueled by their competing interests to control the opposing faction. In essence, all forms of inequality can be seen as stemming from the unequal distribution of power among individuals across societies. This imbalance of power also results in an unequal distribution of wealth.

### **Reviewing Sociological Theories on Movement**

There are numerous theories in the field of social sciences aimed at deciphering the concept of power, its nature, and the reasons behind its exercise. The Marxist perspective has been widely embraced across all social sciences as a pivotal framework for analyzing power dynamics. Within Marxism, there exists a distinction between Classical and

Neo perspectives, both of which are focused on scrutinizing the prevailing disparities and exploitative practices within modern capitalist societies. Classical Marxism posits that individuals from the lower socio-economic strata are oppressed by the state apparatus under capitalism, whereas neo-Marxists contend that the modern bureaucratic regime serves to suppress the general populace. Neo-Marxists also emphasize that the state plays a significant, semi-autonomous role in perpetuating the marginalization of certain social classes (Kelkar, 1985). Proponents of Classical Marxism highlight how capitalist societies are characterized by entrenched systems of inequality, predominantly controlled by the capitalist ruling class. Power dynamics within such societies are structured in a way that confers greater authority and privileges to the wealthy elite, while disenfranchising the working class, who are left only with their labor as a commodity. The capitalist elite strategically leverage state mechanisms to further consolidate and expand their influence.

Neo-Marxist thinkers, such as Michael Foucault and Jurgen Habermas, detect modern state having a highly oppressive character within itself by which it keeps on exploiting individuals and mass or people. Typically, it is those who are part of the citizenry that fall victim to state aggression. Those in positions of public authority may not perceive this threat, as they represent the interests of the state itself. This dynamic creates a situation where the state is seen as antagonistic towards all citizens, particularly those at

the grassroots level. According to Foucault (1982), proponents of this view assert that the state places unnecessary burdens on individuals, reducing them to mere objects in the process. Furthermore, they contend that the state operates to maintain the exploitative capitalist framework, trapping individuals within its confines. The excessive demands imposed by state institutions are believed to give rise to a variety of societal ills. Additionally, it is argued that state policies are designed not chiefly for the welfare of individuals but rather to further the state's own agenda. Consequently, individuals find themselves constrained by a multitude of restrictions imposed by the state, which in turn fosters divisions among different segments of society - pitting male against female, healthy against ill, virtuous against immoral, and rational against irrational. This scenario results in individuals within each category engaging in perpetual competition to establish dominance over others.

The understanding of violence, as it emerges from conflict, requires the application of conflict theory. In the field of sociology, conflict theory is regarded as the primary framework used to analyze and interpret social phenomena. This theory encompasses various types of conflicts, with politically and economically driven conflicts being the most significant. It is crucial to explore the interactions between the wealthy and the poor, capitalists and workers, employers and employees, dominant groups and minorities, as well as senior and junior positions, and familial relationships such as those between

partners, parents and children, and one community compared to another. It is clear that individuals of different genders hold roles in societies that are not only distinct but also fundamentally unequal. Women, in particular, have limited access to material resources, leading to their social status being considerably lower, resulting in them having little legal power and few opportunities (Silver, 2007).

### **New Social Movements**

In the latter part of the twentieth century, multiple movements – also referred to as New Social Movements (NSMs) because of their inclination to specific agendas like identity – emerged (Subedi, 2021), including the women's movement, student movement, anti-apartheid movement, and disability movements, as well as numerous other specific movements (Ritzer, 1996). These movements, which emerged since the 1960s are characterized by a significant departure from traditional types of movements, such as labor movements, class struggle or communist revolutions. Their primary objective is to transform social belief systems and values while ensuring the protection of human rights, identity concerns, and emerging lifestyles. Diverse strategies targeting gender inequality and oppression have been initiated on a global scale via multiple platforms. The women's movement has emerged continuously across various regions worldwide, including Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. These women-led movements established diverse agendas; however, their primary objective was to liberate women by transitioning

them from traditional domestic roles to opportunities in income generation and professional development. These movements also led to the emergence of various gender and feminist theories.

A notable aspect of Nepali society is the marginalized status of women (Pradhan, 1994; Kauser, 1999). They are systematically denied opportunities for economic independence and the capacity to exercise personal agency. Pursuing independent activities for the purpose of earning a livelihood or seeking personal fulfillment is often perceived as in opposition to entrenched social norms, which consequently discourages women from following these avenues. This aspect of society creates numerous barriers for women, resulting in their persistent vulnerability to abuses and violence (Cameron, 1995). The insufficiency of legal and social support systems exposes women to various risks. The principal structural factor hindering women's empowerment is the prevalence of patriarchy. Tamang (2000) asserts that the Nepali state is institutionalizing patriarchy. Consequently, any initiatives aimed at promoting the women's movement in Nepal must be pursued with a comprehensive understanding of the enduring patriarchal frameworks.

### **Context and Research Questions**

Nepal has consistently been a site of political conflict and movement, in which various actors have participated, with women playing an undeniably inspiring and active role (Helel, 1993). The academic literature does not elucidate the role of women in movements

that explicitly aim for visible political constitutional change, which subsequently leads to broader social and cultural transformations that enhance their freedom and equality in personal, familial, and social spheres. The participation of women in the democratic movement has historically been an overlooked subject and an underrepresented area of research and publication in Nepal. This paper aims to examine the involvement of Nepalese women in political movements and the factors motivating their participation. The specific research question was: what motivated women to participate in the democratic movement in Nepal in 1990? However, the research also included their overall perspective on movement, their orientation towards it, their knowledge of democracy and freedom, and other relevant issues.

### **Methodology**

This paper utilizes primary data gathered in Kathmandu, focusing specifically on the women who participated in the Democratic People's Movement of Nepal in 1990. Only the participants of the specific movement were selected, as they were the sole authentic respondents for the research. In other words, to mitigate sampling error, only the participants of the movement were selected. The female participants of the movement were interviewed to identify the factors that motivated or inspired their involvement. The sample was obtained using a snowball sampling method. The snowball sampling method was selected based on the premise that genuine respondents could only be

identified and accessed with the assistance of individuals who had experienced similar situations. This implies that identifying the women participants of the 1990 movement is feasible by investigating who took part in that movement. Therefore, snowball sampling was the most effective sampling method for this research.

Prior to meeting the sampled respondent in person, I arranged an appointment via mobile phone with a woman who is currently the leader of the Nepali Congress Party. She provided several names of participants from the 1990 movement in which each had played an active role. Participants were inquired about their interest in providing information regarding the 1990 movement. All participants were inquired whether they had experienced any form of oppression or inequality within their family, community, or other public settings, which constituted the primary motivation for their involvement in the movement. Participants were asked about their specific or general objectives in joining the movement. Participants were also inquired whether their decision to join the movement was autonomous or influenced by external political or social factors. The participants were apprised of the research's objectives and their roles as respondents in this study. Respondents were afforded complete autonomy in determining whether to engage with the researcher. A total of twelve women were selected for the interview. On average, each interview was allocated 90 minutes. The rationale for selecting a small sample size is twofold: first, women who participated

in the 1990 People's Movement in Nepal, which occurred 35 years ago, are challenging to reach after several decades; second, qualitative research of this nature does not require a large number of respondents for generalization of research findings.

### **Results and Discussion**

This section evaluates the primary motivations for women's active engagement in the People's Movement of 1990. Significant reasons are delineated and analyzed in a chronological sequence.

#### **Common Freedom was the Initial Aspiration of Women**

Throughout the interviews, all participants perceived that Nepali society was entrenched in a dark age during the party-less Panchayati Era while the global clock advanced into the late twentieth century. All of them asserted that no Nepalese citizen had experienced true freedom. They expressed that liberation cannot be the prerogative of a singular sector of society, such as men. Consequently, they joined the movement as proactive agents of revolution. Some excerpts from the respondents included:

"A commendable agenda can be a collective agenda, and we cannot remain passive in promoting these beneficial objectives. I believed that our identity as men or women could only be realized when all individuals possess a minimum degree of freedom. Therefore, my initial objective was to liberate humanity, followed sequentially by the emancipation of women, lower-

caste individuals, lower-class citizens, the marginalized, the disabled, and so forth. "

The statement above underscores that the primary concern of women is humanity. The human being should be prioritized over other considerations such as gender distinctions. The foremost identity of all individuals is that of humanity, after which identities such as womanhood or manhood are secondary or tertiary.

Other women remarked:

"No one experienced freedom during the Panchayat Era. Thus, we maintained the perspective that we must transcend our specific identities. If we can secure freedom for all, that liberty can then be disseminated to other segments of the human population. Therefore, my motivation for joining the movement was not solely to liberate women but to emancipate all human beings. Moreover, I held a steadfast belief that women's participation in the movement yields expedited results. "

It can now be concluded that women predominantly favor universal freedom over individual freedom. Women prioritized human liberation above their own gender-specific freedoms, indicating that they have never positioned themselves above the broader human category.

#### **The constitution is fundamental to other laws**

All the responding women who addressed me asserted that the constitution is the most significant document for ensuring liberty and

justice. Once a constitution is established, all other subordinate laws can subsequently be created. Their primary objective was to exert pressure to establish a foundational reality for a new constitution that could guarantee the rights of all individuals. In their perspective, a democratic constitution was the paramount law for everyone. One respondent remarked:

"We did not possess an authentic constitution. The constitution we had previously was created by the royal monarch and his relatives. That constitution was itself insufficient, and there was also a possibility of it being intentionally undermined by royalists. A constitution created by the people was our preference; thus, I became involved in the movement. "

A constitution granted by another's volition can be revoked at any moment, which poses a significant risk. The Panchayati constitution, which was issued by the king, could be rescinded by him without the people's consent. Consequently, during the 1990 democratic people's movement, women took to the streets and demanded a democratic constitution. Another respondent stated:

"The Panchayati constitution conferred ultimate authority to the king and not to the populace. In this context, we had no option but to revolt. If we could create a constitution ourselves, it would be preferable to the king-made constitution and ensure the protection of all our rights. I was resolute about establishing a constitution by the people; thus, I joined the movement. Altering the constitution is feasible only if both men and

women collaborate. "

Considering the viewpoints expressed by the women participants of the 1990 movement, the formulation of a constitution is the most critical task, which is challenging without male support; however, should a legal transformation take place, society gradually adapts to the law, ultimately promoting equality. They highlighted that political movements have the capability to effect legal change, and women's involvement would guarantee the safeguarding of their legal rights. In the absence of legal structures, rights remain unexercised, but with appropriate legal frameworks, individuals will benefit from these provisions in the future. The respondents also conveyed that although they might not presently reap the benefits of the law, their daughters would acquire rights that empower them to enjoy greater freedoms than their mothers.

### **Movement was the key feature of the late twentieth century**

At times, movement becomes a choice, while at other times, it becomes inevitable. Occasionally, movement occurs more frequently than individuals perceive. Numerous participants expressed that the 1990s people's movement was essential. One woman stated:

"I was not particularly prepared for the movement. However, the circumstances became so compelling that I could not avoid joining it. Many friends were not fully ready to participate in the movement, but numerous countries worldwide were transitioning from

dictatorship to democracy during that period, and I became involved. That was a time of movement around the globe. "

There are moments when a situation arises in which individuals find it impossible to extricate themselves from the developing context. The year 1990 marked a pinnacle when many people took to the streets to advocate for democracy in Nepal. In that movement, women also participated. That was the prevailing trend of movement. Another woman commented:

"We used to envision transforming Nepal into a prosperous nation, akin to the financially affluent democratic countries of the West. Many political parties were executing their agendas, and I was also inclined toward one party. We were convinced that it was solely the movement that could transform Nepal into a democratic nation. "

Considering the assertions made by the women as described above, it can be concluded that certain issues become prominent topics in the social, cultural, religious, legal, economic, or political spheres. It was evident that the late twentieth century was an epoch of movement in which Nepalese women actively engaged.

### **Political influence on people was substantial**

It is commonly asserted that political parties are essential for extensive political transformation. In Nepal, during the Panchayati system, numerous political parties operated clandestinely due to the prohibition of their public activities. Consequently, the underground political factions functioned

with a sense of urgency. Many individuals were affected by their endeavors. Women were not exempt from the influence of political parties. One respondent remarked:

"I was entirely persuaded by the ethos of the then Joint Left Front. I was influenced by leftist political parties and was resolute in establishing a communist regime in Nepal following the introduction of democracy in my nation. I believed that altering the country was feasible by participating in the movement that would dismantle the party-less system and implement a multi-party system. "

The woman identified as a left-leaning political activist, and she held a strong affinity for leftist politics. Consequently, she became engaged in the movement. The revolutionary nature and spirit of leftist political parties at that time were the primary factors that motivated her to actively participate in the people's movement of 1990. A similar perspective was expressed by another woman, who stated:

"Politics is a potent ideology from which we cannot retreat. I was impacted by several democratic leaders such as B. P. Koirala, Kisun Jee, and Ganesh Man Singh, among others, who significantly shaped my political awareness and my desire to participate in mass movements. I did not harbor grand ambitions, but the influence exerted by these political leaders was pivotal in encouraging my involvement in the movement. "

The statements provided by various respondents above validate that individuals, including women, are political beings unable



to remain passive in the face of change and development. Political consciousness was the primary motivator for many women to engage in the democratic people's movement of 1990 in Nepal.

### **Belief on social transformation through movements**

All participants conveyed that the people's movement was the crucial instrument for dismantling all forms of oppressive and exploitative structures. Any autocracy can be terminated if individuals unite in combat. Respondents also held analogous beliefs. Allow me to quote one woman's perspective:

"The most formidable power is the people's power, which can surpass any force in the world. We have observed that Nepalese society was rife with inequality and injustices, and the movement was the appropriate strategy to render oppressors psychologically vulnerable. No one can dispute the change instigated by the movement. "

The above statement signifies that long-lasting or sustainable change is achievable if it originates from the collective efforts of the populace, such as large-scale movements. It suggests that Nepalese society was permeated with malpractices, which can be eradicated through mass movements. Other women responded:

"Women in Nepal were significantly disadvantaged. However, we could not advocate for their interests until we attained democracy. Thus, our strategy was to empower women's agendas by becoming

active participants. Once we engaged in the movement, our bargaining power increased. That is why many women, like myself, joined the movement. "

Numerous women participants capitalized on the 1990 people's movement to enhance their social status. By joining the movement, they gained visibility, and their respective political parties began to heed their voices. Once these parties listened, they started to incorporate women's issues as central agendas. This illustrates that women were highly strategic when joining the movement. They could gradually negotiate their share in higher education, income, employment, reproductive health, leadership, property rights, citizenship, marriage, and more, which empowered them (Pandey, 2014). Their extensive range of preferences for change underscores that the agenda for social transformation and the necessity for women to participate in mass movements have become fundamental to politically motivated women.

### **Conclusion**

Since this paper aims to explore what motivated Nepalese women to participate in the democratic movement in Nepal in 1990, I would like to highlight the main reasons of their involvement in the movement in order of importance. First, what inspired women to join the movement was their desire for a common freedom. Interviewees described Nepali society as being repressive during the party-less Panchayati Era. They believed that all Nepalese citizens, regardless of gender,

lacked freedom. All respondents stressed that their participation was not just for women's rights but for the freedom of all people. They felt that human freedom was their top priority, which would eventually lead to women's freedom, and the true identity comes from being human first, not through gender or social class. Second, women viewed the Constitution as essential. All women interviewed agreed that a constitution was crucial for ensuring freedom and justice. They aimed to pressure for creation a new constitution that would safeguard everyone's rights. Most felt the previous constitution was flawed since it was ordered by the king and favored him over the people. They believed a constitution made by the people would better protect rights and emphasized that men and women must work together to create it. Third, the movement was timely. Many women stated that the situation made participation necessary, especially since other countries were moving toward democracy at that time. They felt that the movement was the only way to transform Nepal into a democratic nation because late twentieth century saw women actively participating in movements for change. Fourth, political influence played

a significant role. During the Panchayati system, many political parties operated underground, which inspired women. All respondents had some political affiliation in which some were motivated by left-leaning parties, while others were influenced by democratic leaders. These political movements helped women recognize their role in creating change, fueling their desire to join the struggle. Finally, the participants believed that movements were vital for social change. They felt collective action could dismantle oppression and exploitation. They noted that without democracy, they could not advocate for women's rights but saw the movement as a pathway to empowerment and social transformation. By joining the movement, women aimed to elevate their status in society, influencing agendas around education, employment, and health. Their strategic participation showcased their desire for broader social change and political inclusion. Given that all research participants underscored a human-centric approach, the 1990 people's movement in Nepal, when examined from a gender perspective, does not align with the NSM framework.

## Reference

- Cameron, M. (1995). Transformation of Gender and Caste Divisions of Labor in Rural Nepal: Land, Hierarchy and the Case of Untouchable Women. New Mexico. University of New Mexico.
- Diani, M. (1992). The Concept of Democratic movement. *The sociological Review*. Vol.40, pp: 1-25.
- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry*, 8(4), 777-795.

- Gusfield, Joshep R. (1970) 'Introduction: Definition of the subject' in *Protest Reform and Revolt*.
- Helel, O. C. (1993). *Dedicated Lives Women Organizing for Fairer World*. Kathmandu: Oxfam, Nepal.
- Kausar, K. (1999). *Violence Against Women and Children*. Kathmandu. Nepal.
- Kelkar, G. (1985). *Women and Structural Violence in India*. New York. The Feminist Press.
- Pradhan, G. (1994). *Violence Against Women in Nepal*. Kathmandu: CWIN, Nepal.
- Ritzer, G. (1996). *Modern Sociological Theory*. New York: McGraw Hill companies, inc.
- Silver, Hilary. (2007). *The process of social exclusion: the dynamics of an evolving concept*. Rhode Island. Brown University.
- Subedi, T. N. (2021). Review of Literature on Social Movement. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Management and Social Sciences*, 2(2), 118–124.
- Tamang, Seira. (2000). Legalizing State Patriarchy in Nepal. In *Studies in Nepalese History and Society*, 5(1): 127-156.