

Economic and Social Development under Rana Regimes in Nepal: A Historical Analysis

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Abstract

This research paper explores the economic and social development in Nepal during the Rana (1846-1951) regimes. It critically analyzes the impact of political dynamics on infrastructure, industry, and social services. The Rana regime perpetuated stagnation through autocratic rule, monopolistic control, and exploitation of state resources, resulting in negligible advancement in physical infrastructure, industry, and social services. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the obstacles to development in Nepal during the Rana Regime and the legacy they left on the nation's socio-economic landscape.

Key Words: Rana Regime, Economic Development, Social Development, Nepal

Introduction

The Rana Regime (1846-1951) represents pivotal eras in Nepal's history characterized by significant political events and minimal economic and social development. The Rana rulers focused more on their own and their family's luxuries rather than on the economic and social development of the country during their regime.

The history of modern Nepal often traces back to 1769, when Prithvi Narayan Shah conquered Bhaktapur, initiating the Shah regime. This era marked by military conquests and internal power struggles saw limited socio-economic progress. Despite exposure to global advancements, the Rana rulers continued to prioritize their own luxury and power consolidation over national development.

This paper delves into the economic, infrastructural, and social conditions of these periods, identifying the major obstacles to development and assessing their long-term impact on Nepal's socio-economic landscape. By analyzing the economic conditions and policies during the Rana regime, the research seeks to understand the root causes of Nepal's historical underdevelopment. The study further investigates infrastructure development, highlighting that the investments made by the Rana rulers were not for public welfare but rather to serve their own luxuries. Despite their exposure to the Western world, the Ranas prioritized their own comfort over the needs of the citizens, leading to significant physical and logistical challenges for the nation. Additionally this research explores the social development of Nepal during these periods, with a particular focus on education and healthcare, to illustrate how governance practices affected the population's well-being.

Identifying the key obstacles that hindered development in Nepal from 1769 to 1951 will help to clarify the systemic issues that have shaped the country's historical trajectory. Finally, the study assesses the long-term impacts of Shah and Rana policies on Nepal's socio-economic development, offering insights that are crucial for comprehending the nation's contemporary challenges and potential pathways to progress.

This research paper is structured to provide a comprehensive analysis of the socio-economic and infrastructural conditions in Nepal during the Rana regimes. It begins with an introduction to the historical context, highlighting the focus on power consolidation and luxury over national development. The methodology section outlines the historical-analytical approach used, drawing on primary and secondary sources. The paper then delves into detailed discussions of development under the Rana regimes, examining the economic conditions, infrastructure development, and social progress, with a final assessment of the long-term impacts on Nepal's contemporary challenges.

Methods

This research adopts a historical-analytical approach, utilizing both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include historical documents, government records, and archival materials from the Shah and Rana periods. Secondary sources comprise scholarly articles, books, and research papers that provide insights into the socio-economic conditions and policies of the time. The study employs content analysis to systematically analyze the data and draw conclusions about the developmental patterns and obstacles during these regimes.

Development under Rana Regime

The history of modern Nepal is presumed to have commenced since 1769, the conquering year of Bhaktapur by Prithivi Narayan Shah. Conquering the states and geographical unification continued during the Shah regime after that due to which there could not be much physical, economic, and social development in the country. There was no remarkable progress of Nepal from 1769 until the establishment of Rana Regime in 1846. During the Shah Regime, apart from running the daily administration and collecting tax, no remarkable development activities were performed.

No physical infrastructure could be developed. However, trade was done during that time. There were a few small cottage industries as well. For the immediate gain in increasing national treasury by the rulers and enjoying the luxurious life, they adopted to boost the business. The rulers imposed heavy tax on business during the Shah Regime. The heavy tax and unfavorable environment always discouraged people towards establishing industries and other business (Regmi, 2074).

During the Shah Regime internal disputes within Shah Rulers were at their peak. It ultimately resulted in the autocratic Rana regime in the country. Rana rulers did not show much concern for the development of the country. For example, when Jung Bahadur Rana visited Great Britain, he observed dance, wrestling, military shows, and historical palace and weapon factories. He did not show any interest in visiting agricultural farms or industries (Dixit, 2014). Many Ranas Prime Minister had studied in the Indian Universities

and had seen the development in the globe. However, they showed no attention towards development of Nepal (Regmi, 2074). Nepal was in isolation in the whole Rana regime from the world. The national treasury was exploited by the Rana rulers and their relatives but showed no interest towards physical, economic, and social development of the country.

Rana rulers had monopoly in the business sector as well. The rulers' purpose was always to increase the state income for their own benefit. At that time, there was no difference between private and public property. There was control of the state over business of important daily consuming goods (Kadel, 2055, p. 196). The rulers had control over the basic needs of people like rice, beaten rice, salt, oil, ghee, and grain. The contract system was implemented for trading these substances. The rulers provided the contracts to their relatives and kins.

The rulers received commission from profit made by the contractors. There was no free competition in contracts. All the amount earned that way would be controlled by the Rana rulers (Regmi, 2074). The Rana rulers did not want the progress of the country. They had an understanding that if there was economic development, people would be conscious, and they would not have control over the national treasury easily. They also thought that if there is rapid economic and educational development in the country, the people would go against the Rana rule (Pande, 2078a). The Rana rulers had reasons to believe that to the extent there was improvement in the economy, the people would demand political rights and reforms in the socio-economic arena. Therefore, Rana ruler closed all windows of economic advancement and development of the country (Amatya, 2004). Thus, the Rana regime was a dark period in Nepal's history of development.

Economic Conditions during Rana Regime

The state's economy was extremely weak during the Rana regime. There was no work for economic development during the whole Rana regime. More than 90 percent of the total population of the country lived in rural villages at that time. Only less than 5 percent of the population owned land. Most of the landless peasants took land on lease on tenancy basis (Koirala, 1950). There were fewer material tools and little inanimate source of power was used in the village (Redfield, 1953). The people largely depended upon agriculture which produces only raw materials. People were constrained to live in a "hand-to-mouth" condition (Amatya, 2004). The whole economy was captured by the Rana rulers. Most of the tax collected was spent on their own luxuries in utter disregard of the country's development and public will (Tuker, 1957).

Jang Bahadur Kunwar established the monopolistic control over trade and contract in Nepal which was later followed by his successors. The rulers went on prospering. The common people of the country were living in chronic poverty (Amatya, 2004). There was not any mechanism during the whole Rana regime for data keeping of income and expenditure of the state. After expenditure, all the income of the country was used for Rana Prime Minister and his family. The status of expenditure was not published at that time. They were never accountable towards the people (Amatya, 2004). There was no annual budgeting system (Mahat, 2005). Nobody except Rana Prime Minister would get information of the income and expenditure of the country (Pande, 2078a).

A survey showed that even during the post Rana period about two thirds of the farmers were in debt. The average debt for more than 200 farmers came to 300 rupees which corresponded to about a year's income (Sharma et al., 1956). At that time, the employment opportunity in the country was very limited. A survey conducted in 1951, showed that 86.5 percent of men left their homes to seek seasonal employment elsewhere. Majority of them went to India for working (USOM, 1958).

No budget was allocated to physical infrastructure development of the country. Rather, a huge amount was spent on the Prime Minister's visiting purpose. A study of the Rana budget showed the country's annual income to be Rs. 90,270,000 out of which only about Rs. 400,000 was spent on public welfare (Upadhyaya, 1948, pp. 16-18). According to Upadhyaya, within hundred years of Rana rule in Nepal they might have collected more than Rs. 7,000,000,000 at the cost of the poor people. According to Regmi (1948), various kinds of tax were levied during the Rana regime. He writes:

Rana introduced many types of taxation. The poor peasants had to pay malgajari (land tax) more than rupees 150 per acre...the porters who were engaged in carrying loads to Kathmandu along the Thankot-Bhimphedi road in the hills had to pay 1/6 i.e., a little more than 16 percent of their daily income to the Government. It was called the bhariyansaika tax (commission for the porter age accruing to the porter's agents). A petty government official had to pay a feudal levy known as salami (Salutation). Those earning rupees 9 or more per month had to pay rupees 10 per year to the government as salami. Besides there were other taxes like bankash tax (road tax), cigarette tax (who bought imported cigarettes legally at the price quoted by the contractor) etc. As the Ranas were the only people who had an income of more than rupees 5,000 annually, they did not introduce any income tax, obviously to avoid any cut in their income. Each higher-ranking Ranas had an annual income of at least several hundred thousand rupees out of taxes (Regmi, 1948, pp.1-8).

The heavy taxation led to the countrymen to be poorer. However, Padma Shamsher who became the Prime Minister of Nepal on November 29, 1945, tried to implement he liberal economic policy in the country. He announced an increase in the annual budget for the development of the country by Indian rupees 2,250,000. This was a very important attempt of Padma Shamsher while the Rana rulers had exploited the national treasury to the extreme. Padma's willingness to develop the country's economy was in the industrial sector for which he increased the annual budget by rupees 200,000 (Amatya, 2004, p. 143). But Padma was sacked out of the post before he could implement the policy. Throughout the Rana regime there was literally no economic development. Rana rulers were self-centered in acquiring power and enjoying the life of Gaylords that they never thought of the welfare of the people. As a result, the Nepalese economy became stagnant throughout Rana regime (Amatya, 2004).

The service sector is becoming important aspect of the economic growth and nation state building process in Nepal. Trade, banking, commerce are the key components of the service sector. However, the development of the service sector was poor during the regime. The

only economic institution that existed in Nepal was Nepal Bank Limited (Mahat, 2005). Regmi (1988) argues that during the Rana regime the state completely undermined the small-scale domestic cottage industries and trade. They implemented Hindu caste-based system through civil code. They divided people based on caste. According to Bista (1991) it had direct impacts on the manufacturing, trade, prosperity, economic growth, and development of the country. There were nominal and limited commercial activities during the Shah and Rana regimes. There were no basic infrastructures of transportation, communication, and irrigation which hindered the economic growth and development of the country.

There was no lack of resources for development during the Rana Regime.

During the end of the Rana Regime in 1945, an industrial sub-committee was established. The sub-committee had kept electricity production as a top priority of the country. The Kaligandaki Project was identified as the most appropriate project. The company had presented the contract document to the industrial department to complete the project with 18 million rupees within 3 years period. There was plenty of money for that project in Nepal. Nepal had received 33 million rupees from the British Government for providing military support to Britain during the Second World War. The British Government wanted Nepal to use that money in electricity development. There was no foreign loan in Nepal at that time.

The GoN had decided to use the amount received from the British Government to in Kaligandaki Electricity Project to produce 22000 KW electricity. During that time, around 30 million rupees was collected as taxation and investing 18 million rupees in a project to produce 22000 KW of electricity was a good attempt. The resource was also managed for that.

The project was hog-tied by the contemporary Indian Ambassador Sir Chandeshwor Prasad Narayan Singh for no reason. He came to Nepal in June 1949 and was informed about small development projects being developed in Nepal and about Kaligandaki project by Rana Prime Minister Mohan Shamsher. The ambassador Singh told him that the Indian Government was preparing to produce huge electricity in Bara area and was planning to distribute the electricity to Nepal, North Bihar and Bangal in 2 paisa per unit. So, the amount that was allocated for developing Kaligandaki project should be used in some other development works and Nepal should use cheap electricity from India. Prime Minister Mohan Shamsher believed the ambassador Chandreshwor Prashad Narayan Singh and the project could not commence (Pande, 2076b, pp. 141-144).

Infrastructural Development during Rana Regime

Infrastructure development is one of the important bases for economic development of a country. The infrastructure always facilitates service delivery, financial activities, mobility of the people and ultimately to promote the economic growth and development of the country. Though, the status of infrastructure development like road, transportation, communication, electricity, irrigation, drinking waters were very weak and poor during

Shah and Rana regime. However, some very a smaller number of physical infrastructures were developed during the Rana regime. Few modern infrastructure developments were started by the Rana rulers.

One of the important development activities during Jung Bahadur's rule was the maintenance of road from Mechi in the east to Doti in the west. He had spent 2 hundred thousand rupees on this work. Similarly, Chandra Shamsher had built the majority of the traditional bridges along that road (Pande, 2076). Similarly, the hydroelectricity production started in Nepal during the Rana regime. Chandra Shamsher had built a 500 KW hydropower project in Pharping, Kathmandu in 1911. Likewise, 640KW Sundarijal Power Plant was built in 1935. Nepal had 6380 KW installed power capacity including diesel plants before the start of first five-year periodic plan in 1956. Singhadurbar was built in 1908. The major physical infrastructure during the Rana regime also includes *Swayambhu barudkhana*, leather factory in Balaju, establishment of Agriculture Department, Chandra Nahar in Saptari, Dhushing-Matatirtha ropeway, Bhimphedi-Amlekhgunj Road, Amlekhgunj-Raxaul Train, and few suspension bridges (Pande, 2076; 285). The telephone service was extended to Dhankuta in the east and Bhairahawa in the west (Pande, 2002; 408). During 1920s in the Chandra Shamsher's tenure, 14 miles long Matatirtha-Dhursing Ropeway, Bhimphedi-Amlekhgunj Highway and 19 miles long Amlekhgunj-Raxaul Train Track were built (Mahat, 2005; 35). Until 1951, there was 5 km black topped road, 83 km gravel road and 288 km unmetalled road were built (Pande, 2076; 146). An airport, 51 miles long narrow train track, 1 hundred post offices and more than 3 hundred telephone lines were there in Nepal during Rana regime. A total of 50 thousand hectares of land had irrigation facilities (Mahat, 2005; 50). Similarly, the railway in Janakpur was built in 1925 and the railway track connecting Raxaul, India to Amlekhgunj Nepal in was built 1927 with the support from British India (Panday, 1999).

Industrial Development during Rana Regime in Nepal

The status of industrial development in Nepal during the Rana regime was very weak. The limited connectivity accounted for the slow industrial development in the country. However, during the tenure of Juddha Shamsher Rana (1932-45), there had been few attempts for industrial development. The industrial council was established in 1935. The company act was promulgated in 1936. After this, few industries were established with the ownership of the state (Bajracharya & Agrawal, 1980). During the downfall of the Rana regime, the National Planning Council was established with the aim of starting planned development in the country. The council started the first five-year plan in 1948 (Pande, 2078a). However, the plan was not implemented.

Few Indian investors came to Nepal to establish industries and invest sharing with Rana rulers. They had established 21 industries in Nepal including Biratnagar Jute Mills in Terai, Biratnagar Cotton Mills and Nepal Soap Industries. The capital investment was more from Indian than the Ranas. From 1934 to 1950, there was an investment of 70 million Indian investment and 21 million Nepali investments to establish 63 companies (Bhusal, 2059; 133). While Nepal lacked skilled manpower to work in the industries, the labor force was

also imported from India. The Nepali workers thus were not benefited by the establishment of the industries. While the Rana families did not have family background of investment and industries, they spent major part of the collected tax and profit of the industries in luxury and entertainment rather than investing and reinvesting in the more business. The Indian investors took the profit to their country after investment in Nepal. As a result, these industries could not last for long. Thus, half of the industries established during the Rana regime did not exist until 1963 (Regmi, 2074).

In this way, the industrial sector could not flourish much during the Rana regime. Some processes started in 1947 for industrial development in the country. For this, Bhim Bahadur Pande went for visit to Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Austria, Italy, France, and Switzerland in Europe to study about the industrial development. After the visit, he had concluded that the development of Nepal should follow the economic development model of Switzerland (Pande, 2076). However, neither the environment was created, nor the any infrastructure development was carried out during the Rana regime. As a result, industrial development could not take a good place in the country.

Social Development during Rana Regime

While the modern education system was introduced in Rana regime in Nepal, the educational status was weak (Dahal et al., 2000). Dubar High School was established by Jang Bahadur Rana in 1854. The school was built to teach the sons of the Ranas. Jang Bahadur Rana also established the Department of Education in 1858 (Sharma, 1990). However, his successors did not show much concern towards educational development in the country. But on March 5, 1901, Dev Shamsher made the school available for the children of the public. Similarly, he had issued an ordinance to open schools all around the country (Maskey, 1996). But Dev Shamsher was sacked out of power within 4 months of his tenure on June 27, 1901, by his brother Chandra Shamsher (Sharma, 1990). After this, the works initiated by Dev Shamsher in the educational sector got halted.

Chandra Shamsher had initiated few works in education sector in Nepal. First, he sent eight Nepali students to Japan for studying Engineering in 1902 and he also established Tri-Chandra Campus in 1918. The Rana government also introduced the School Leaving Certificate examination in 1946. The girl's school was opened in 1947 (Parajuli, 2012). However, the initiations were not very effective. The aim of the initiative was not to develop human resources for the benefit of the country but to serve the regime and help it maintain its grip on power (Aryal, 1979). The Ranas always thought that educating the general people was a threat to their autocratic Rana regime (Pande, 2076). The education sector remained extremely poor, the literacy rate being less than two percent before 1951 (Sharma, 1990). There was One college, 11 secondary schools, 2 hundred primary schools in Nepal till 1951 (Mahat, 2005).

Similarly, the infrastructure for health and availability of health workers both were very poor. In 1880, the contemporary Prime Minister Bir Shamsher established the Bir Hospital. Similarly, Chandra Shamsher established the Military Hospital in 1925. Before 1951 there were 6 hundred 49 hospital beds and 50 doctors in Nepal. Half of this number was limited

to the Kathmandu Valley. The modern medicine was scarce in the important areas (Pande, 2076; 285).

There was no preventive medicine prior to 1954 (Shakya, 2018). There is not much data related to the health sector available before 1951. However, more than 30 percent of people lived in the malaria prone areas (Mahat, 2005).

Table1: Summary of the Development during Rana Regime in Nepal

Physical Development	Social Development	Economic Development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A total of 6380 KW installed electricity capacity including diesel plants. • 5 KM metaled road, 83 km gravel road, and 288 km unmetalled road. • 1 airport • 51 miles narrow-gauge railway • 100 post offices • 300 telephone lines • 50,000 hectares of irrigated land. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Established the Department of Education 1838 • 1 college • 11 Secondary • 200 primary school • 649 hospital bed • 50 health workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About 63 Company were established during 1934-1950. • Establishment of Udyog Parishad in 1935 • Promulgated the Company Act in 1936 • Establishment of Nepal Bank Limited on November 5, 1937.

Source: content analysis, 2023

Major Obstacles of Development during the Rana Regime

During the Rana Regimes, the state of physical, social, and economic development was poor. During 104 years of Rana regime, no activity was carried out that would uplift the living standard of people. The elderly literacy rate was less than two percent. The child and maternal mortality rate were high. The development work was of no priority during the Rana rule (Amatya, 2004). The major hindrances and obstacles for development at that time are identified as follows:

a) Culture of Sycophancy and Flattery

The bureaucracy remained largely in the hands of Rana-era staff, the old legacies of conservatism during the Rana regime. Chakari (Sycophancy) and Chaplasy (Flattery) remained dominated in the 1950s (Joshi & Rose, 1966). There were no professional and knowledgeable people in bureaucracy. The civil service commission was formed in 1951 to manage bureaucratic staff (Shrestha, 1975). Due to the lack of professional and knowledgeable people in bureaucracy, no plan could be prepared and implemented for the development of the country.

b) Lack of Law and institutions

Nepal was completely the poor state and there were not any modern law institutions of governance and anti-corruption during Shah and Rana regime. There was no annual budgeting system as well. The State treasury was exploited by the rulers as their personal

property. In this situation, the rulers were concerned to increase their own property rather than using the state property for development work.

The tax was collected through land revenue, customs, sale of timber and other forms. Before 1951, the data and information of income and expenditure of the state treasury were accessed only with the Rana Prime Ministers and nobody else (Mahat, 2020). Upreti (1996) said, as lack of transparency is taken as one of the major elements of underdevelopment, the lack of accountability also played role in creating hindrance to development.

c) Development for the Benefit of the Rana Family

Few physical infrastructures and social development took place during the Rana regime which was focused for the benefit of Rana families and relatives and not the general people. For example, Chandra Shamsheer built the Singha Durbar using state property in 1908 which he built for his personal use. Later, he claimed the palace as his personal asset and sold it back to the government (Bajracharya, et al., 2019). Amatya (2004; 326-327) wrote:

The Janakpur-Jayanagar railway with its extension to Bijalpura was intended not as much for the people in that region as for certain big Rana landlords who needed easier transportation facilities of timber of the forests owned by them and help to earn by the sale of the timber in India. The Chandra Nahar (canal) in Saptari was constructed at the expense of the National treasury but was exclusively meant to irrigate the Birta of Chandra Shamsheer who, obviously to acquire more wealth, increase revenue for the land in the Birta to make it the highest in the country on grounds of irrigation facilities. Several of the mills and factories set up at Birganj and Biratnagar almost wholly belonged to some rich Ranas.

Regmi (1988) also agrees with this. According to him, the infrastructure developed was more focused to gain benefit within Rana family and relatives than public in Rana regime. They spent the state treasury when and where they thought would be a benefit for them. Durbar High School for their children, Bir Hospital for their own treatment, and Pharping Powerhouse for them to get electricity was few examples.

Conclusion

The development trajectory of Nepal under the Shah and Rana regimes was significantly hampered by political instability, autocratic governance, and a lack of progressive policies. The Shah regime's focus on political consolidation and internal disputes left little room for socio-economic development. The subsequent Rana regime perpetuated this stagnation through its exploitative and self-serving policies. Heavy taxation, monopolistic control over trade, and the neglect of public welfare hindered industrialization and infrastructural growth. Social development, particularly in education and healthcare, was minimal, with initiatives primarily serving the elite rather than the general populace. While there were some efforts towards infrastructure development, such as the construction of roads, bridges, and hydropower plants, these were limited and often aimed at benefiting the ruling class. The lack of transparency, accountability, and equitable resource distribution further exacerbated the developmental challenges.

The Shah and Rana regimes' legacy is marked by a prolonged period of underdevelopment, where the potential for economic growth and social progress was largely unrealized. Understanding this historical context is crucial for comprehending the foundations of Nepal's current developmental landscape and addressing the long-standing issues that continue to affect the nation's progress.

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