

The Practice of Local Leadership and Governance in Nepal: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The paper aims to study the practice of local leadership and governance in Nepal critically. The historical perspective synthesizing the review of literature and interpretation analyzing the changes over some time is adopted as a method. The practice of local leadership and governance in Nepal has been since ancient times. The kings and states are examples of leadership and governance practice that is mentioned in Hindu and Buddhist scriptures. The great-men theory or charismatic theory of leadership has largely been associated with leadership and the governance system was mainly based on religious and community basis and ultimately utopian ideas. Self-rule was found on a community basis as governance at the local level. Similarly, the charismatic typology of leadership has long been dominant in Nepal. Despite this, leadership has largely been influenced by caste, kin, and noble family. However, with the advent of modernization, the traditional practice of governance and leadership has changed. Nonetheless, questions on leadership and governance have also been raised regarding social transformation and economic growth.

Keywords: Charismatic, Democracy, Governance, Leadership, Transformational leadership

Introduction

Leadership and governance have largely been associated with each other. Weber's (1994) concept of governance is broadly used as it is the exercise of power and legitimate authority under a cooperative framework to encourage a more - equitable process of development that fosters well-being (p.22). the leadership is more inclined to the political exercise of power both theoretically and empirically as well. The political leaders, therefore, have a central role in the exercise of power in an institution to achieve the outcome for social welfare and the development of enduring governance.

Local leadership's role in resolving disputes in social issues can be considered influential in the communities. The concept of leadership has largely been associated with the 'influence' which is the central theme of leadership. Leadership can be understood with various theories such as the great man theory, charismatic, and transformational. Earlier, traditional values and charisma were the main features of leadership. According to Northouse (2013), the

study of leadership can be traced back to Aristotle. Greece (Athens) is considered a birth of democracy (self-rule of people) from around 4-5h BC (Before Christ) that emphasized the relevance of the direct participation of ordinary people in collective self-governance (Ober, 2007).

Aristotle emphasizes the 'ideal city' where citizens' participation is ensured equally and same as all have equal access to education through good ruler; it may be related to good governance and leadership. In modern history, the local government was believed to have been first initiated by Britain. Anglo-Saxon times (roughly 700-1066), local government was administered through the King's Ealdorman who was responsible for law and order (Commission, 2011), however, it was centralized in nature.

In ancient history, powerful personalities were taken as great leaders. The Varna and Hindu caste system in South Asia has largely been rooted in societies and each caste had its leadership system under the caste. However, Ommen (2010) claims that caste Panchayat in ancient South Asia could not settle inter-caste disputes. On the other, indigenous people have practiced a community-based collective nature of leadership. However, the historical roots of the practice of local governance and leadership have long been prevalent in South Asia and Nepal and changed over time. However, after the downfall of Lichchhavi, there was no strong leadership in the medieval period. Internal bickerings and intrigues made shadows in this regard.

The paper aims to synthesize the practice of local governance and leadership critically in Nepal through literature. The historical approaches with critical analysis of time series analyses are adopted to explore the local governance and leadership's practice and its function through a review of the literature.

Nepal's Prospect

The practice of local leadership and governance in Nepal has been since ancient history, which was relatively autonomous. The ancient Videh state (around 3000 - 600 BC) practiced the republican political system in the beginning phase. There was a republican political system in Kapilvastu of Nepal; the tribe (Shakya, and Kolya tribes) had their leaders (called kings) and among the Kings, one supreme leader (also called king) was selected collectively (Nepal, 1998). Their roles were to protect their territory and maintain laws and social orders. King's role was considered influential. The Hindu based Caste-system has been in practice for centuries and has direct implications for polity and power (Khanal, 2004) and it has also been practiced in Nepal for centuries.

Gopals (cowherd) and Mahishapalas (buffalo-herd) (they were in semi-nomadic life) are the earliest rulers as per Chronology of Nepal (Nepal, 1998) with their capital at Matatirtha of Kathmandu Valley (MoFA, 2019). Eight generations of these tribals ruled in Kathmandu. The nature of governance was tribal and *Gana* system. Later, Kiratis defeated the Gopals/Mahishapalas (Malla, 2015), and they ruled for 800 years since the 7th and 8th centuries BC. Yalamber was the first King of Kirati. He was a powerful and influential leader. In the wake of external affairs, the king alone could not make a decision; ten Limbus

were consulted. Kirati had practiced the Republican political governing system and the decision was made collectively. Lichhavi came to power defeating Kirati.

The practice of decentralization in evidence-based is believed to initiated in Nepal since the Lichhavi. Regmi (1996) mentions that there were three layers of governance in the Lichhavi period- Center, Gram (Village committee), and Tol (block). Local self-governance existed at village levels. *Talukdar Adhikari* (authority chief) was appointed at each village called '*Talawami*' as well. The village committee was generally used to collect taxes on agricultural products and remit them to the government (Jha, 1970). Based on the works, there were two types of organizations- Panchali(Panchayat) and Gosthi. Panchali was related to administration and Gosthi was a functionary part of social and religious matters and it was independent (Bajracharya, 2007). Panchali and Gosthi represented a symbol of decentralization to a large extent. The state was divided into many parts (called *Bisaya*) and heads (called *Bisayapati*) were selected at each *Bisaya*. In a dual system, one ruled by the center directly and another ruled by local *Samant (feudal)*. The areas (*Bisaya*) located far from the center were ruled by Samant; when the center weakened, they ruled themselves. Mandev and Anshuvarma(the first Thakuri Dynasty king) were famous and powerful leaders (kings) in Lichhavi. The self-governance was practiced under Bisayapati (head) (Khanal, 2005).

Out of the Kathmandu valley, the Karnataka dynasties (1097-1325 AD) established a powerful kingdom in the Bara district of Madhesh province in Nepal. Among them, King Nanya Dev and Harisingh Dev were strong leaders whose influences were seen in the Kathmandu valley. In the medieval period, self-governance had been practiced. In Kathmandu, the Malla dynasty (1201-1779) ruled. Amongst, Jaya Sthiti introduced legal and social codes to mobilize social and economic systems, and still, his social values can be seen in Kathmandu. The mid-age of the Malla period is considered a golden age in trade, as a center of business (during the 14-5th centuries). It also indicates a good situation of governance and leadership and people were more emphasized.

At the time, some 'Khas' shepherds of Aryan stock, had settled in western Nepal and established an independent state in western Nepal survived till the end of the medieval period (Acharya, 1963). In the 12th century, a famous King Nāgarāja conquered and expanded his territory up to the Bheri River. In the mid-hill of Nepal, Mukunda Sen (Sen Dynasty) was a famous king (1520-1553) who expanded its territory to Bijayapur (Kirati area) to the east and Champaran of Bihar, India to the south. As of Khanal, there were numbers of Parganna (makeup of villages) and Tappe/Tapke (larger than Praganna) between Gandaki and Koshi in Nepal Tarai/Madhesh and local *Jamindar* (big landowner) ruled over these *Pragannas* and *Tappes*. The monopoly of one person (*Jamindar*) highly existed in these Tappe and Praganna. Das (2000) argues that Mukunda Sen can be taken as a leader like Prithvi Narayan Shah who expanded its territory from the eastern hill to the whole of Madhesh.

Post-Unification (1768) Up to 1950

King Prithvi Narayan Shah led the territorial unification campaign of Nepal, therefore, he is considered a great leader in Nepal despite some criticism. According to (Gurung, 1997), the House of Gorkha had three types of political systems form supremacy- One was the 46 leadership of Baise and Chaubise principalities, the second was a group of tribal hegemonies in the Gandaki and Koshi basin and the third was adversary included Newar and Sen dynasty. After unification, centralization of the political system of governance was practiced, though the local elites were also given some powers to collect and manage land systems.

After Prithvi Narayan, Jung Bahadur Kunwar (Rana Prime minister) emerged as a powerful political leader in the county. He ruled for 104 years (1846-1950) with authoritarianism and family-based. Rana's Prime minister was more powerful than the King. Sharma (1969) argues that Jung Bahadur Kunwar can be compared to Prithvi Narayan Shah as a great leader. The political system in the Rana period was mixed up - King (ceremonial), Prime Minister (below King in ranking), Army Chief, and Administrative Chief (Gautam, 2004). The country was divided into 35 districts administratively; the chief of the district (called *Badahakim*) was appointed by the Center directly. All *Mauja*, *Praganna*, and *Tappe* (villages) were under the districts, and local heads were assigned to collect tax at village levels and their connection with the Center was obvious. These village heads were also known as local elites and they were influential at the village level. Many of these elites emerged as national and regional leaders.

According to Pande (2063 BS), at Rana time, Talukdars of the hill, and Jimidar Patwari in Tarai villages administered. Before it, there was 'Amali' practice on the hill; minor disputes were settled by Amali or Thum. *Badahakim* (district chief) was powerful at the district level. However, all land-related works were done by 'Jimuwal' at the village level. On the hill, there was a 'Jhara' practice in which collective work was done at the village level. Jhara system was like a social obligation, and without payment. Locally based individuals (headmen) were at the bottom of the pyramid; in Limbu, Subba, and, Kirati, Jirel boosted its status till 1795 (Whelpton, 2005). Later, they lost control of much of the land.

Nepal has long been governed by a monarchy system with the hereditary leadership of the king (Kumar, 2004). The formation of ruling elites mostly consisted of military personnel and courtiers along with those related to Royal/Prime ministerial palaces before 1951. Nepal's political elites were also developed in this manner to a larger extent.

1950-1990 period

After the downfall of the Rana regime in 1950, Nepal adopted democracy based on parliamentary governance with the monarch. The idea of separation of powers among a legislature, an executive, and a judiciary was initiated, although the king enjoyed the highest authority in practice. Rural development was given a high priority in terms of the development establishment of Tribhuwan Gram (village) *Vikas* (development) in 1953. In 1960, King Mahendra took power and introduced the Party-less Panchayat system.

Panchayat (1960-1990) introduced five tiers of governance; Center, Regional Development Regions (5 numbers), 14 Zones, 75 districts, and around 3347 Villages Panchayat. The zonal commissioners (*Anchaladhis*) maintain the liaison between local government bodies and the national government but as of Bista (1991), the formation of an administrative structure was complex. The Panchayat system, however, adopted a different form of administration that had a four-tiered system consisting of local, district, zonal, and national levels (Shakya, 2013). The local government during Panchayat has been promulgated through various laws and acts such as the Local Administrative Act (1971), Village Panchayat Act(1963), District Panchayat Act, and Decentralization Act (1982) (Baral, 2008). Nepal introduced development in a planning and systematic way following the change of 1950. The first five-year plan in 1956 emphasized the development of rural areas. Decentralization with plans and programs was instigated to approach the development at the lower level. *Gau* (rural) Panchayat was a lower unit of the governance that had to deliver public services. However, they did not have fiscal power. The process of modernization was the mainstay of Panchayat but it could not contribute a lot to the modernization process. Bista(1990) argues that Nepal has been struggling towards modernization referring to less development. Panchayat era, a small number of expenditure and revenue authorities were transferred to local bodies but low progress due to politicize in it (Fuel, 2014).

In terms of leadership, Rana & Mohasin (1967) found that along with caste (so higher caste) and age (elder), power and land were the main reasons behind the emergence of leadership. Panchayat emphasized effective leadership for the change and transformation of rural society. The Panchayat had given due importance increasingly towards the growth of leadership considering its important role in supporting the regime. However, the government structure during and after the unification time was ineffective and inefficient (Shakya, 2013) and needed to be reformed because the local level was less given authority and power in terms of resource mobilization.

Nepal adopted multi-party democracy and decentralization was more concerned to all under a unitary government system after the first people's movement in 1989. There were three layers - Central, Regions (Five Development regions), and local levels. District, Municipality, and Village Development Committee (VDC) was represented at the local level, and VDC was the lower tier of local governance. Despite the decentralization policy, there was a lack of fiscal power in the local governance. Further, to strengthen localism, Local-self Government Act (LSGA) 1999 was initiated which was the basis for people's participation in local governance. However, it had also limited fiscal power given to local government, the 'center' was dominated in terms of budget, resources, and decision-making. In Nepal, local governance at the bottom level in the past was more centralized (Acharya, 2018). Due to various circumstances, leadership could not show their effective role after 1990 due to various reasons such as internal bickering among political parties; conflicts between parties and the palace, and so on. The bureaucrats were given more roles than leaders. The democratic rulers of Nepal post-1990 have not delivered to address people's needs properly (Baral, 2004).

However, the Maoist insurgency between 1996 and 2006 disrupted the local level's function and bureaucrats handled local levels from the district headquarters. Almost all villages were affected by Maoist insurgency and violence.

Post-2006

After the 2006 People's Second Movement, the governance system of Nepal shifted from a centralized to a federal system, formally, the Constitution implemented in 2015 declared the country a federal setup with seven provinces and 753 local levels. Under the federal political structure in Nepal, three layers of governance- Federal (center), provincial, and local governance were categorized. The Constitution promulgated in 2015 assigned the authority to the federation, the provinces, and the local levels. Schedule 8 of the present Constitution includes 22 types of powers for the local levels ranging from local taxes to local-level development plans and projects. Local levels are given three powers-executive, legislative, and judiciary powers, which is why a local level in Nepal is called local government.

After the promulgation of the Constitution in Nepal, the election of federal legislative and provincial/local was held on 26 November and 7 December 2017 respectively in Nepal. Similarly, the election at the local level in 2022 has also been held. In both local elections, political parties have been dominated. However, some influence independent leaders have emerged in the 2022 local election. People searched for innovative and action-oriented candidates to speed up the governance system.

Local Governance and Leadership in the Federal Context

As per the Constitution of Nepal (Article 306-n), the local level means the Village bodies, Municipalities, and District Assemblies. Rural municipalities and municipalities are the lower levels of the political system. The major aim of restructured local governments was to make the local body capable of delivering public services to the local communities and carrying out social and economic development activities for the welfare of society. The strengthening of grass-roots (in the sense of rural) democracy was the basic concept of the present local government. The motto of local governance was to establish '*Singh durbar*' (center of power in Nepal) at every local level.

753 local government units have been established. It reduced the number of local units in comparison to past structures (it was 3,157 VDCs and 217 municipalities). Local units in terms of areas were larger than in the past but proved power and authority. As per the new structure, the local level in Nepal is divided into 77 districts and 753 local levels (including 6 metropolises, 11 sub-metropolises, 276 municipalities, and 460 rural municipalities). Municipalities/Rural Municipalities are further subdivided into wards. The ward is represented by a Ward Chairperson and four Ward Members. Out of the four ward members, two should be women (one must be from the Dalit community). The role of District offices is to coordinate with local bodies. The legislative powers of the local level are in the village assembly and municipality assembly. These assemblies may make

necessary laws on the matters outlined in the list contained in Schedules 8 and 9 of the Constitution (as per Article 226).

As of the Local Government Operation Act 2017 (LGOA), a Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson (in RMs), Mayor, and Deputy Mayor (in Municipalities) lead the head of new local governments. The Rural Municipal executive is comprised of the Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson, the Rural Municipality's Ward Chairpersons as well as four women members elected among the Rural Municipal Assembly. Similarly, the Municipal Executive includes the Mayor and Deputy Mayor, Ward Chairpersons as well as five women members elected among the Municipal Assembly. Locally elected representatives comprise the Village or Municipality Assemblies, which have local legislative power. The local executive bodies carve up power based on the nature of the works. The Constitution also provides provisions for the local level with semi-judicial powers for settling various disputes at the local level. For instance, the Deputy Mayor or Vice Chairperson of the local unit serves as the coordinator of the judicial committee.

Local Government Operation Act 2017 emphasizes leadership development to strengthen the local level. Leadership, public service delivery, and economic development are three basic approaches at the present local level that clearly emphasize the role of leadership and governance. The effectiveness of Leadership includes inclusiveness that ensures a participatory approach at the local level, that enhances local development. Article 51-f (3) emphasizes the enhancement of local public participation in the process of development works(LGOA, 2017). Despite the favorable conditions for leadership, local governance has been debated.

Discussion

The practice of local leadership and governance in Nepal has existed since pre-history. The socio-culture and religious aspects have largely been influenced by the emergence and development of local leadership and governance. Religious values have largely been influenced by the governance system. Hindu philosophy emphasizes 'high-quality leadership' committing 'dharma'; dharma is related to morality, selflessness, and the ability to govern in society. In the conversation between Krishna and Arjuna during the Mahabharat war, Krishna preaches that leadership should understand the 'situation' and tackle it accordingly. It provides the importance of the 'situation leadership' approach as well. According to, Kissinger (2014), Kautilya also emphasizes 'situation' in which leaders should know about the situation and make decisions strategically. Kautilya lobbies for strong leadership assuming that power is the dominant reality. Likewise, the Buddhist theory of leadership supports authentic, value-based, and servant leadership (Dhiman, 2018). Buddhist theory of organizational leadership offers insights into how individuals and organizations can effectively adjust to change both at individual or group level and organizational levels. Later, the Caste system influenced the formation of local leadership and created hierarchies. The concept of leadership with elites-high caste and noble family. landlords- surfaced parallel so far.

Following the 1950 revolution in Nepal, many political leaders from various regions and societies emerged at the national and regional levels. A few of them appeared in the international arena as well. Consequently following the 1989 movement, the Maoist movement (1996-2006), the Madhesh movement (2006-2007) and ethnic movements contributed to producing many leaders. Social movements have been the major reason that contributed to producing influenced leaders at the national level and leadership at the local level has also been apperaed accordingly.

After 1990 democracy, and decentralization were truly emphasized, but decision-making and finance issues were not given to the grassroots authorities. Hachhetu (2004) studied basic research on ‘Municipality Leadership and Governance: A Case Study of Bhaktapur’. He found that leaders possessed personal integrity, economic discipline, and transparency but lacked charismatic and broader participation in development. Hachhetu (2007) further emphasizes effective and inclusive leadership for strengthening democracy; democracy would take root only if the leadership structure is inclusive. Likewise, Khanal (2004) also studied ‘Village Leadership and Governance: A Case Study of two VDCs of Kathmandu District’ and found that both VDCs (Village Development Committee) lacked effective leadership and governance. This literature suggests that the role of leadership in democratic governance is crucial.

However, there has been a negative attitude toward leadership in Nepal (Baral, 2004). All leaders accepted that they could not yield to people's expectations. Despite changes in the traditional practice of leadership, elite-centric, politically vested, and economically favorable either to the upper-class people or middle-class mediators (*bichauliyas*) have been dominated (Sapkota, 2020). The present local governance under the federal set-up has also been facing lots of challenges. Chaudhary (2019) points out that the present collaborative form of local governance is not well-functioning. Further, he emphasized the effectiveness of Leadership for local development and grass-roots democracy. The capacity in terms of technical, administrative, and fiscal capability is a major hindrance in the light of local governance(Acarhya and Scott, 2022).

Based on literature and discussion, the typology of governance in Nepal can be summarized in the following way:

Table 1. Type of Governance in Nepal

Time-Period	Types of Governance
Ancient Time(Before 700 BCE)	Clan/Village/Community
Pre-Ancient Time (700 BCE – 10th AD)	Village/ <i>Gana</i> /State
Middle Age (10th-1775 AD)	Village/State
1775 to 1951 period	State/Authoritarian/Centralized
1951-60	State/Transition for Democracy
1960-1990	State/Monarch/Centralized
1990 – 2006	Globalized age, Rule of Law
2006 onwards	Rule of Law/Inclusiveness/Federal

Conclusion:

Conclusively, religious and community-based governance have largely been practiced in the pre-and middle history of Nepal. While talking about Hindu religions and Dharma, indigenous people, and their collective social system(including governance and leadership) could not be forgotten. The clans, villages, and small principalities/territories, conflicts, and war are major facts and circumstances in the light of the emergence of governance and leadership. The practice of governance and leadership has largely been influenced by the expansion of territory/land and hegemony/influences. Along with the emergence of a big state, control from the center is increased. In the same way, the expansion of modern democracy and technology made governance community-based and inclusive to some extent. The pattern of leadership and governance has drastically changed in the formation of modern nation-states since the 19th century. Various social movements erupted and leadership emerged accordingly in this period.

In the pattern of governance under the federal set-up, local levels are given priority considering it is a lower tier of governance that can make effective public service delivery and rural development. However, local levels have largely been dependent upon the center for finance issues. The role of leadership in the capacity building of the institution seems to be imperative. The nature of local governance is collaborative in nature, and consultation and coordination with various stakeholders are becoming essential. In essence, the scope and roles of leadership have been widened and it demands dynamic and effective leadership so that they can make local levels more capable to tackle problems and promote rural development and grass-roots democracy. The role of leadership in making capable local levels is crucial like in Switzerland, where local levels generate more budget and influence the center. Qualification and experience have been more concerned in leadership and governance because modern education and technology appeal to such effective leadership to cope with the challenges and competence of the governance system.

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