

Discourse on Contemporary Nepali Politics Based on Class and Identity Politics

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Abstract

The class and identity, these two factors have become major driving forces of contemporary Nepali politics. Class politics related to left political spectrum is defined as broader than identity politics. Broadly, it is believed that the left politics can support many identity question; so, identity politics can be packaged within the class politics as well. However, the contemporary Nepali politics is not in this frame where the long history of left politics is. Now, the communist party is ruling party and parallel to it the identity politics is raising in a new speed positioning as third largest political power. It has made the discourse of identity politics as an attractive agenda of discourse in Nepal. The article is completely about this new discourse of identity politics in Nepal with comparative analysis with class-based politics, its outlook and action upon identity in burning politics of Nepal. The discussion of the article is based on the position of political parties secured in federal parliament through election, raise of the identity politics and its political agendas with some contents of class.

Keywords: : identity politics, class, historical discrimination, social justice, discourse

Introduction

The representation of federal parliament of Nepal shows that the competition of three perspectives: left, right and identity based political perspectives in current Nepali politics. Nepal Communist Party (NCP) is ruling party representing left, Nepali Congress (NC) is main opposition party which represents right and People's Socialist Party (PSP) is third largest political party representing identity politics. Theoretically, NCP is class-based, NC is rightist with focus of freedom and PSP is identity politics based. As data, class-based political party NCP has 67 percent domination however main opposition party NC has only 21 percent and third largest party PSP has 11 percent representation in federal parliament of Nepal. However, the popular vote of the parties acquired for proportional representation shows somewhat different position of parties such as NCP's 46.89, NC's 32.77 and PSP's 10.71. (Election Commission, 2074). It further clarifies that the class-based politics has first, NC has second and identity based party has third position in popularity where a remarkable issue is class-based politics has weaker position in popular vote (obtaining 46.89 percent) than elected representative position (67 percent). NC's popular vote is found greater (32.77 percent) than elected representative position (21 percent) and identity based politics has balanced popularity in both popular vote (10.71) and elected representation (11 percent).

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These three major political spectrums seen in Nepali federal parliament reflect the global trend of politics as claimed by Francis Fukuyama, (2018),

“Twentieth-century politics was organized along a left-right spectrum defined by economic issues, the left wanting more equality and the right demanding greater freedom... [i]n the second decade of the twenty-first century, that spectrum appears to be giving way in many regions to one defined by identity” (p. 5)

Similar to this claim, the leftist party NCP established in 1949 and rightist party NC’s history begins from 1946 both have the history and access from 20th century. However, identity based political party; PSP’s remarkable rise is found after the end of 20th century only. .

Thus, the political discourse of class has 71 years history focusing to class struggle and economic redistribution for equality based in guidance of communist manifesto. It focus the unification of proletarians to win the world through the communistic revolution (Marx & Engels, 1848). In this sense the communist perspective is distinct form identity, although in Nepali politics both left and identity politics have dominant place. If we look back to the movement of identity politics it had not significant presence in assemblies before 1990s but the parties based on identity got significant representation in first Constituent Assembly (CA). Then after, the issue of identity politics is in forefront of Nepali political discourse competently with left’s class struggle.

Research Methodology

Class based politics has longer history and larger dominance in current Nepali politics which has theoretically the political agenda of emancipation and equality, however; why did the identity politics transpire in Nepali politics? This was the question of study to construct this article following a qualitative way. The data of first general election result of Nepal’s federal parliament is key quantitative fact to make the foundation of writing. Federal democratic republican Nepal’s first general election report 2017 of the election commission is the source to capture the position of popular vote and data of political party seats of NCP, NC and PSP.

The study has compared the party positions of three major political powers (NCP, NC and PSP) presenting the federal parliament election result. It has verified the raising position of PSP or identity based political power both in quantity and in popularity. Therefore, the study has made analysis thematically to seek the cause of raising identity politics beyond the class-based politics as a major political development in contemporary politics. For this, the study has included the discussion of theoretical concepts and contemporary agendas related to contemporary politics.

The review of theoretical books related to the multiculturalism, federalism, diversity management, concept of democracy in contemporary world, justice and the writings related to the burning Nepali politics have produced the background of discourse for thematic analysis. Reports of international organization, election commission, election observations and literatures related to Nepali contemporary politics have provided the foundational platform to complete the article.

The data analysis is thematic, comparative and descriptive. Identity and class politics, commonly agreed agendas for both, social justice, inclusion, socialism, federalism, secularism and proportional representation are main and commonly agreed contemporary issues in Nepali politics. The position of the identity politics is the variable depending to the phenomenon of class politics and other thematic agenda movements like social justice, federalism, secularism and so on. The study has comparatively and descriptively analyzed the relationship between emergence and development of identity politics in Nepal with other above identified burning issues to draw the conclusion.

Rise of Identity Politics

Till 1990s, the agenda of identity politics was weaker. In this period, only one Madhes based political party Nepal Goodwill Party (NGP) could get few elected representatives but no other ethnic party could elect legislatures in parliament (Lawoti, 2008). Identity movement was popular in the level of social movements among the historically marginalized groups like indigenous nationalities, Madhesi, Dalit, women etc. The problem of exclusion, different types of discrimination, unequal representation in state mechanism were the agendas of movement.

But after 1990s it slowly transformed into the politics and got magnitude in Nepali politics. Mainly, it got gravity after safe landing of the Maoist insurgency (1996 – 2006), success of People's Movement, 2 in 2006, Madhes movement in 2007, Limbuwan and Tharuhat movements. Based on these movements many new parties emerged based on identity politics carrying the major agenda of social inclusion, justice, proportional representation and consociationalism.

Then, identity based political parties could elect significant representatives in the first CA election where Madhesi Janadhikar Forum Nepal (MJFN) won 52 seats, Tarai Madhes Loktantrik Party (TMLP) got 20 seats, Sadbhawan Party (SP) got 9 seats, Rastriya Janamukti Party won 2 seats, Federal Democratic Nation Forum got 2 seats, Nepa Rastriya Pary got 1 seat and Dalit Jajati Pary got 1 seat (Cooper, 2008).

The second CA election result too showed the continuity of the rise of identity based political parties Madhesi Janadhikar Forum (Loktantrik), MJFN, TMLP, SP, Federal Socialist Party and some other could get seats (Ansari, 2013). The second CA could declare Constitution of Nepal 2015 that incorporated many issues raised by identity based movements such as secularism, federalism, mixed with proportional

election system and so on. In this background, first federal parliament election was conducted. Identity based political parties could get significant representations in this election too, when, those parties were in different small groups but later the merger process of them has made now a new third largest political party in the name of PSP Nepal holding 37 seats in federal parliament of Nepal.

Why Identity Politics is flourishing beyond the Class Politics?

Eric Hobsbawn, (1996) writes the left political perspective as Universalist for all human beings; however, identity politics is the members of specific groups and basically not for all, therefore, left cannot base the identity politics. However, opposite to this writing, in Nepali context; the class-based political movement has also taken some bases of identity politics. Mainly, Communist Party of Nepal Maoist (CPN-M) had applied this principle in insurgency period, “Of course, the Maoist party has ethnic contents, i.e. secular state and ethnic autonomy, but it could be simply overridden by the communist principle of “democratic centralism” (Hachhetu, 2003, p. 11); which, further supported the ground of identity politics. This was the symptoms of left sinking into identity politics but it could not work.

Rather, from this left created background and issues of identity groomed new environment of identity politics. The issues are social exclusion, unequal representation in state mechanism and so on. They raised in theoretical background of many scholars of late 20th and early 21st centuries like John Rawls’s, (1999) theory of justice, Iris Young’s, (1990) theory of social justice, Will Kymlicka’s, (1995) multiculturalism and Arend Lijphart’s, (1980) consociationalism.

Based on the newly raised above theories for social justice and diversity management the emergence of identity based political parties started to be justified in Nepal. When, classical Marxist philosophical based political parties could not convince to the marginalized people. Its major cause was prevailing historical discrimination in Nepal. It was mainly seeded by Prithvi Narayan Shah in establishing modern a Nepal unitary Hindustan and later strengthened through legal caste classification in Muluki Ain by Janga Bahdur Rana (Law Book Management Committee, 2022 BS).

The data of exclusion and marginalization presented in academia further supported to flourish the identity politics. For example, Gobinda Neupane, (2005) presented a data of socially exclusionary fact of 80 percent dominance in leadership positions of state mechanisms of Hill Bahun, Chhetri and Newar having only 37.2 percent population where only 20 percent of sharing was large 62.8 percent social groups like indigenous nationalities, Madhesi, Dalit, Muslim and so on. It justified as claim of Kymlicka, (1995) the historical policies of exclusion in the world is shifting towards a more multicultural approach for the accommodation of diversity.

Thus, identity politics flourished to fight against exclusion and to construct new state structure for justice and inclusion in multicultural approach. This process has been connected with democratization process as well, “[i]f exclusion continues, countries may not be democratizing. In fact, exclusion could derail the democratization process” (Lawoti, 2008, p. 364).

Major Agendas Commonly Agreed by Class and Identity based Political Parties

As Hobsbawm, (1996), the leftist perspective carry wider agenda, which can make foundation of identity politics to some extent and it, can support many identity groups. Similar to this saying the major agendas raised by identity politics in Nepal such as social inclusion, federal republican, secularism, proportional representation, and social justice for equity has become common agenda of both class based and identity based political parties in Nepal.

Social Inclusion for Social Justice

Many literatures claimed that the parliamentary democracy in 1990s was failed because of “exclusive parliamentary politics” (Humagain & Seo, 2013, p.195) it was also the cause of social injustice. Ending exclusion through inclusive democracy has now commonly agreed by both left and identity politics. It has been mentioned in The Constitution of Nepal 2015, “... we also express our determination to create an egalitarian society on the basis of the principles of proportional inclusion and participation, to ensure equitable economy, prosperity and social justice” (CAS, 2015, p. 1). And, now the agendas of identity politics to address the problem of injustice have come in the forefront of the Nepali politics after 1990s (Bhattachan, 2018).

Socialism oriented Federal Republican

Communist parties were already theoretically clear in the issue of establishment of republican replacing feudal monarchy. The raise of identity politics brought one additional agenda of federalism for restructuring the unitary state to manage the diversity in Nepal. Both left and identity based parties including right major power NC agreed on it and replaced monarchy and declared Nepal as socialism oriented republican and federal (Misra, 2008, NLC, 2007). Now in many context the implementation of federalism is being difficult and challenging as well. Here the power contradiction between center and province unit is seen as unsolved problem, for example, “[t]wo chairmen of ruling party-Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli and Puspa Kamal Dahal on Friday decided to name Province no 4 as Lumbini and Rapti-Valley Deukhuri of Dang District as its capital” (Pradhan, 2020).

Secularism and Proportional Representation

Hindu state and unequal representation in state mechanism were two major identified problems raised by identity politics which later agreed by left politics as well. Because the Nepali long structural history of Hindu state was defined as main cause of creating discriminatory state mechanism. Thus, the history of exclusion based on the socio-culture has made congenial environment through the social and state institutional practices of Nepal, therefore, it "... is deeply rooted in the structural history of Nepal that encompasses multi-dimensional factors" (Gurung, 2019). Realizing this the political forces agreed to declare Nepal secular and inclusionary and proportional election system in Nepalese politics as their common agenda through constitution of Nepal 2015. One remarkable note caused by this event is to be a weaker power of the monarchy based political force of Nepal.

Conclusion

As result of different political movements contemporary Nepali politics is in the beginning phase of institutionalizing newly established federal, republican, secular and inclusive democratic political system. These all issues are the central issues of jointly agreed by both class and identity politics. Mainly the implementation process of federalism in a newly restructured mechanism is found as a challenging effort to current Nepali politics. However, class struggle focused to fight against bourgeois and feudalists of Nepal and identity politics focused to fight against discriminatory structures historically rooted as the cause of exclusion and injustice are steel as the prime agenda of in Nepal. As the solution of the problems of Nepali people and emancipation of all types of exploitation the socialism has become the main and common target for both left and identity politics where the another major political stakeholder right based NC has also not disagreed. In this way I say, in Nepal, identity politics and its agendas are burning beyond the left and class politics is in stronger position which is distinct from the claim of left and identity politics' relation by Hobsbawm, (1996), since the 1970s lefts have developed a trend of diving head first into the deep waters of identity politics which is theoretically not correct.

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