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“Degenerated” Leadership of Social Movements: Implications from the Tharu Movement in Nepal

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Abstract

Social movements and protest activities in contemporary Nepalese society have been a common phenomenon. They are becoming intermediary power to challenge the State-led political mainstream and development affairs. With a long history, Tharu movement is a part of such movement discourse in Nepal. The leadership, however, has not been dealt in detail for scholarly research. This paper analyses how the leadership of Tharu movement is becoming degenerated and elite-centric in representing the poor people's grievances. With a social constructivist epistemology, the study was conducted in 2013 in Dang district of western Nepal.

Keywords: Social movement; Leadership; Identity politics; Discourse

1. Introduction

Social movement (hereafter, SM) is a mode of social mobilization that can be organized as collective behaviour for or against any kinds of social change in the societies. Leadership constitutes an important dynamics of SM studies [4,18]. The leaders play a key role in inspiring commitments, mobilization of resources, utilization of opportunities and fighting against the constraints, framing demands and leading the outcomes. However, a number of scholars realize that leadership in SMs has still to be theorized and contextualized [1,8,16,17]. Some of them also argue that the SM attributes are more structured and rigid in the context of globalisation [5]. They persistently focus on institutional and strategic framework of the movement.

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Contesting this rigid and structural approach, some researchers further argue for post-structural framework of SM [11]. According this perspective, SMs are loosely organized and they may change their objectives, even shifting from on one type of movement to another. All these debates and issues also ring true in Nepal with a rapid emergence of different kinds of SMs and non-State actors in the country[14]. The present paper analyses contestation in leadership taking a case study of Tharu movement (hereafter, TM). The movement claims to represent one of the largest indigenous ethnic groups, the Tharus, living abundantly in the Terai region of Nepal. Theoretically speaking, there is a continuum between linearity and non-linearity in the TM leadership. This continuum in the leadership got more complicated after the People's Movement 2006, which has thrown the centuries-long monarchy and established a republic system in the country. Yet, the constitution writing and state-restructuring process has been delayed and thus the political spaces are being created for different kinds of SMs. As a major part of such movements, the TM has been now undergoing with the emerging gaps between theory vs. practice, agency vs. structure, opportunities vs. constraints, and central leadership vs. local leadership. In this context, this paper seeks the answer of following key research question:

“How has the Tharu movement been subject to its generation of leadership?”

2. Methodology

The present article is basically a research paper, taking the SM leadership as a key analytical question from the view point of TM. The study site was selected purposively; the Dang district, a district of Nepal's mid-western region. Historically, the region boasts a strong background of TM and peasant's resistances [12]. According to the National Census (2011), total population of Dang district is 5,52,583 constituting more than one third of Tharu (popularly known as '*Dangaura*') followed by other castes like Chettri, Magar and a few Madhesi [3]. A dozen of in-depth interviews, half dozen of focused group discussions and some incidental observations were conducted to dig out the micro-level issues of the leadership. For this purpose, the researcher had classified research participants as being representative of three distinct groups: a) general people (women, wage labourer and farmer, in particular); b) the State actors (the government authorities or bodies) and; c) the non-State actors (the civil society and the TM activists). Thus, the research has methodologically been situated in a logical contestation of the conventional approach of leadership, what the researcher has conceptualized as "degeneration of movement leadership". The paper is designed to be socially constructive in its epistemology.

3. Discussion and analysis

In recent years in Nepal and the beyond, the changing mode of leadership, formation of public sphere and collective identity and adoption of new strategies, etc. are being important aspects within the SM studies. As a part of this discourse, the movement leadership is the major one which performs the ideological and strategic functions within the movement. This study has perceived the leadership as strategic and ideological decision-makers (or a system of decision making) who claim to organize and to represent the Tharu people and inspire them for participation. With this, the term 'leadership' has been used as an institutional metaphor to denote the leaders in a holistic way. The major dimensions within the Tharu movement, where the leadership has been generated (and degenerated) can be discussed as follows:

3.1 Leaders, followers/actors and opponent's dimension

It is generally agreed that leadership depends on the correlation of leaders, followers and opponents. Some authors argue that it is the leadership qualities that reflect the cumulative nature of these attributes [7,13]. In the context of TM, this correlation is somehow complex and unique too. Historically, TM was virtually represented by Tharu Welfare Society (TWS). Established in 1949, the society involved in the welfare affairs rather than in the movement activities. In this context, existing constituency or membership of TWS was converted into the local leaders of the TM. The leadership appealed Tharu people to participate actively in the movement. In Dang district, there was a kind of compulsory appealing system (*jhara*) where the village heads (*aguwas*) called for participation, while the researcher also observed some kind of spontaneous and conscious participation of people. The participants, in turn, became 'followers', and with this, leadership created different line networks and searched for common ground of all the partner organizations, from a ward to Village Development Committee (VDC), from that VDC to district, and district to national context.

But, the leadership of the TWS lost their legitimacy with the rapidly changing political and social scenarios in the country. Moreover, they were divided and fragmented. There was quite contradiction and lack of consistency in their perceptions. Nationally, the anti-Madhes sentiment was becoming popular among the Tharus, though there were only a few Madhesi people in the district (more in Deukhuri region) and the sentiment was not so much antagonistic and erratic as was being advocated in Kathmandu-based leaders and media. Consequently, this crisis led to the formation of Tharuhat Joint Struggle Committee (TJSC) in 2009 which started a regressive campaign to mobilise a number of movement organisations and groups nationally and locally. The TJSC sought to change the conventional leadership mode encouraging more active and widespread involvement of members and networks. The number of movement participants gradually increased and the periods of demonstration were extended accordingly (for example, in Dang 49 days were called the '*bandas*' during 2011-2013). The coverage of the movement also widened from the Ghorahi and Tulsipur to the village levels. Lamahi bazar was one of such emerging epicentre of the movement, where many people from nearby VDCs (e.g. Lalmatiya, Satbairya, Sishaniya, etc.) used to come and participate. In focused group discussions, I came to know that hundreds of people got injured and four people became 'Tharuhat martyr'. The leaders also reformulated the agendas of the movement involving various political and economic claims, such as revenue collection at Lamahi bazar, declaration of Tharuhat State in Tulsipur, etc.

All these things reflected some implications for the relationship between leadership and participant's representation making a wider public face of the movement. The composition of the class, caste, gender, educational attainment and regional belongingness all seemed to be crucial in the representation in the movement. Most of the leaders were found to be from the upper class, urban-centric, comparatively high educational attainment and male-biased. The well-being ranking of the top leaders found to belong upper ranking, i.e. having more valued land, additional income sources and food secured. Based on the in-depth interviews and focused group discussion, the well-being ranking was established by the researcher. Well-being, here, has been perceived as multi-dimensional issue involving both material (e.g. income, landholding, food security, etc.) as well as non-material (e.g. social identity, prestige, participation, etc.) issues. The most of the leaders in study areas have their own home and businesses in renowned towns and market centres, e.g. Ghorahi,

Tulsipur and Lamahi. Though the massive participation of the women was reported, there were no women in the top three leadership positions of the district level committees either of the TWS or of TJSC. It was almost grabbed by males, who were also the members or leaders of other local institutions, such as co-operatives, user groups, and Tharu cultural groups. Women were just given the leadership of less powerful saving groups (compulsory provision), induced by local NGOs and co-operatives. There were two women-led co-operatives initiated by TWS in Chailahi VDC, which had about 2,050 women members in total. Some previous studies have also showed a significant role of these co-operatives in poverty reduction and economic empowerment of women in the region [15].

Unlike in the conventional movements, there was a less (and, decreasing) room for patron-client relationship in the leadership of TM. There were various causes behind this. It was because of the political unwillingness in young generation and additional income sources of the leadership households. They did not like to take any risk or loss from the movement in one hand and the benefit of the movement ultimately went to the families/relatives of the leaders irrespective their participation or sacrifice in the movement.

On the other hand, the most of the followers were from lower well-being ranking, inhabitant of the rural remote areas (though the demonstrations were massive in the emerging towns with road and market network). These people possessed comparatively low education rank, and having less valued landholding, they also suffered from tenancy issues, food insecurity and seasonal or dependent income sources. The followers were less accessed to the leadership positions of the movement organisations and other power-based institutions. In initial days of a long strike in 2013, there were small mobs and the followers were inactive and less violent. In the latter days, however, their activeness and participation gradually increased (even became violent in some places, particularly in Lamahi and Sisahaniya) and the mobs turned into larger demonstrations. The role of movement participants gradually modified into 'movement actors' from the 'movement followers'. However, many people from the domain of followers think that the movement leaders and organizations could not lead them to the end of the TM. This was what some of the research participants also criticized the leadership to be unable in fulfilling and binding commitments for the sake of their followers and supporters. For example, one of their counter-claims was as:

"You are asking me about the leaders? Let me ask about us: what did we get from them? What did they give us? We participated day and night in the Lamahi bazar, but the top leaders enjoyed at Kathmandu. And the result is nil." (Personal communication, September 5, 2013)

3.2 Innovative dimension: Moral and ideological

The nature of leadership is extensively qualified by the role of creativity, innovation and networks in SMs[2]. TM, by nature seems to be rooted with the pursuit with new political identities and cultural patterns, ranging from day to day problems to long-term emancipation. To move such pursuit, people are easily dreamed out by the leadership; and the dream of emancipation is more convincing. In Dang, the Tharu people were expressing different kinds of economic burdens (poverty, unemployment and low wage), political-social exclusion, and land and tenancy issues – being the crucial factors for their backwardness. These issues along with the shifting

occupation, emerging expectations and growing awareness among the Tharus were materialized by the movement leadership. The leaders accommodated them as being the ‘true granter’ of the emancipation of the poor Tharu people. As such, in a recent interview (personal communication, December 13, 2013) one of the district-level Tharu leaders said:

“We [leaders] can eradicate all the evils from the society; the exclusion against the Tharus. We are committed for the people’s emancipation through the Tharuhat...The Tharuhat will guarantee the emancipation of all the Tharus”.

The Tharu leaders were also expected to be weighting of different qualities, such as ability to inspire, activate and empower and decisiveness. Some people also expected a kind of military qualities, authoritarian command and violent mobilization from their leadership. The Tharuhat brigade was also practiced in western Nepal, including Dang, though it could not run for long term. Tharuhat brigade was a kind of non-military reserved force of youths organized to support the Tharuhat movement, particularly in the western Terai districts including Dang. The number of total members in this brigade was said to be about 20, 000 in the whole region. By contrast with these expectations of people, the Tharu leaders follow edmere electoral policies, i.e. appealing, attracting and casting out votes in electoral contests. This led to ashifting of movement discourse into a political (party) discourse; for example, formation of Tharuhat Terai Party Nepal in 2012. Some scholars also argue that this kind of transformation of the TM is not irrational [10]. However, it could lose the charm of SMs to represent and mobilise the people because it is evident (in many Asian and Latin American countries) that the SMs are the better alternatives to the political parties in bringing social changes in the societies. The shifting of a SM into a political party and its participation into election is indeed a crucial research issue in future.

There is a problem, therefore, with theoretical approaches regarding on claimed assumptions and perceived outcomes. Like other movements, TM leadership explored their movement propagandas with a greater degree of morality. They were thought to be ‘moral icon’ and ‘true emancipator’ of the Tharu people. But empirically, they were heavily criticised to be largely deviated from obedience, loyalty, solidarity, sacrifice and collective welfare.

The agendas of Tharuhat autonomy and ethnic identity were documented, and wall-painting was also common everywhere. However, there were contradictory ideas of the leaders. They expressed different views in different contexts (e.g. with the researcher in interview and FGD; and with public in their writings, speech and media interviews). Meanwhile, when the TM was at its peak in 2012, some of the Tharu leaders of Dang made a common alliance with a Madhesi alliance of movement. Later on in 2013, they went for another Madhes-based party. This created a huge contradiction in the TM leadership. After some months, they returned back in the TM and claimed to be the central leaders. The Tharuhat autonomous council which had a strong background in Dang got also split into different factions. Meanwhile, some members of the TJSC also claimed that the committee was just a puppet of major political parties, including the Maoists, Nepali Congress and Unified Marxists Leninists. In turn, the followers became depressed with their leadership, and they accused the leaders to be corrupted, selfish, authoritarian opportunist and money-centric. Some of the participants were feeling guilty and regretful for their participation in the movement. When the researcher met with some people who got injured in

the movement, they were almost regretting their sacrifice, and now they became ashamed. They thought that they had been just used in the movement and now thrown away. Even some local leaders also expressed their pessimism about the future of TM, and they were more unsatisfied with the top (central) leaders of the movement. In a personal conversation (November, 20, 2013), I felt a lamentation expressed by one of the research participants that:

“I also participated in the movement, and gave a full time in the strike, but what did I get? Nothing...the central leaders became selfish and saleable in the market (lilami). There is no value of local leaders and local people! No!!”

3.3 Dimension of public sphere and identity formation

The public sphere of SM can be perceived simply as the ‘totality of the audience’ of the movement[6]. In the context of TM in Nepal, the public sphere includes the Tharu people (actors) in particular and the other people (spectators) in general. Whether and how the leadership interacts with public sphere is one of the basic issues of SM, bridging the gap between the leaders and followers.

However, the nexus between TM and public sphere within the frontiers of development has been very complex in the Dang. In terms of the both processes, the local community as a whole constituted the public sphere of any kinds – Tharu and non- Tharu. This was gradually undergone into the process of modernization and urbanization, expansion of media and information services, improving means of transportation. In particular, the Maoist’s armed insurgency (1996-2006) and the People’s Movement 2006 have played crucial role in this transformation. Though some development indicators (e.g. literacy, fertility, private sector and market) have improved significantly in the last decade, the transformation could not easily reach to the bottom of the society. The research participants were revealing great contest in existing inequality and unemployment. The development was suffered by state-biased orientation, creating an advantageous pull for the local elites. The power structure within the Tharu community was highly unequal, lagging the majority of the women, small farmers, wage labours at behind. They were just treated as electoral equipment for the survival of electoral democracy in the region.

With this dynamics, a critical mass of people was gradually emerging along with the contemporary development affairs. Like other SMs in the country (ethnic movements, in particular), TM leadership grabbed such a mass into its sphere and appealed for a collective protest. Participants started to be organized and local networks were developed up to the ward (village) level. There were altogether 12 types of such networking organizations in the district, including TWS, TJSC, youth association, Tharu brigades, and so on. Tharu identity formation was a common thrust of the movement, and almost all research participants revealed it as the main agenda of the movement. Some of the Nepalese scholars termed it in different ways: the identity politics, the identity formation, agitation politics, oppositional politics, etc. [9,15]. However, interesting is that the identity in the context of TM was neither well-defined nor it has well been well described. Broadly speaking, the formation of (politics of) identity has been coupled with following two connotations:

3.3.1 The identity formation within the Tharu community

It was purely a caste and ethnicity-based solidarity. In this kind, Tharu we-feeling was common and the Tharu bondage was a must. There was honor and proud of Tharu culture and economy including the animalist religion, arts (wood, grass and mud), historical Tharuhat autonomy (the dynasty of King Dangisharan), agricultural occupation and indigenous knowledge system (regarding farming, elephant domestication and treatment of malaria and typhoid). Virtually, there seemed a kind of common understanding of the TM; its leadership, agendas and strategies. There existed a functional unity for the sake of Tharu identity. This kind of unity, however, largely ignored the internal contraction within the Tharu community, i.e. power structure, elitism, feudalism, exploitation, landlordism, and problems of landlessness and tenancy, etc. Sociologically, this construction of the movement was guided by ethnocentrism; feeling of difference and superiority than the other castes or ethnic groups. According to this claim, the TM was an ethnic movement, organized by and for the Tharu indigenous group.

3.3.2 The identity formation inside and outside the Tharu community

It was class-based solidarity, where certain groups having similar kinds of social status and economic characteristics tended to unit for their common welfare. Politically it happened in two ways:

At first, the dynamics of leadership and identity formation was “*from the below*”. The disadvantaged sections of the Tharu community feel deprived and marginalized themselves and their consciousness leads them to be organized for their well-being and emancipation. This kind of solidarity developed among the Tharu poor and disadvantaged people, and the solidarity gradually shifted to search the poor and disadvantaged people of other communities or caste/ethnic groups. There was no negation of Tharu indigenously (cultural); rather it was an extension of causality behind the Tharu indigenously. In particular, poor farmers, wage labors, unemployed youths and landless people formed this kind of collective identity. In the public demonstrations, many people from other communities also supported, some participated and injured too. A slow but gradual shift in the movement from ‘Tharu caste’ to the ‘Tharu class’ was being geared. For example, the formerly bonded labourers in the region-*kamaiya* and *kamalari*-were being actively involved in a land right movement which also included non-Tharus and poor, landless farmers of all the ethnic groups in the region. Still, there was possibility of separate movements of the *kamaiya* and *kamalari* for their issues of rehabilitation and resettlement in the society. This also indicates the deformation of singularity in the Tharu movement breaking its central leadership.

Further, the role of NGOs in the movement was essentially contested. The officials of some local NGOs, particularly basic education society (BASE) and Friends of Needy Children (FNC) claimed that they really advocate the issues of *kamaiyas* and *kamalaries* (e.g. rehabilitation and resettlement). When I triangulated this claim at the local level, most of the research participants said that they were being helped by such NGOs. One of ex-*kamalari* blamed that:

“It is the FNC who is helping us to liberate from our slavery. The Tharu leaders and movements do not know our problem at all, but they [NGOs] do it. The FNC has also provided us some technical training; so that now

we [some kamalaries] have opened own beauty parlor in Ghorahi". (Personal communication, December 3, 2013)

This was an irony to the movement leadership (as well as to the local leaders of the major political parties), who were being turned off about such issues addressing as movement agendas. If the leadership does not work even equal or greater than a NGO or NGO officials, what does it indicate other than frustration and incapability of the leaders. Some of the research participants also blamed NGOs to be a puppet of the donors and the leaders to be the puppet of such NGOs. Not surprisingly, the leaders were playing a dual role involving simultaneously both in the NGOs and in the movement. It also indicates the decrease of movement leadership authority. To add it, the formation of different types of non-state organisations involving Tharus and non-Tharus in the same organisational framework was creating another dimension of movement, i.e. a shift from singular identity (e.g. Tharu ethnic) to the multiple identity (e.g. women, farmer, class) for their common welfare including farming and saving purposes. In the Deukhuri region of the district, there were some common networks of people, where many dalits, wage labours, farmers and poor people organised and worked together. For example, there were 15 saving groups in the Chailahi VDC of the Dang, where the women from poor households were the members and there I did not observe any kinds legal/empirical discrimination against the Tharu women. Rather, there was a common understating and awareness among the women from all caste and ethnic groups. In this way, these type of collective identities were conditioned from bottom to up and initiated from the below of the social structure. Strategically, it was more progressive (sometimes radical), but less organized in nature.

Second, there was another kind of alliance between the upper elites of the TM organizations and groups – the dynamics “*from the top*”. Some of them grabbed the movement leadership, some remained in civil societies, and some remain totally inactive in the movement. Most of these elites were politicians, bureaucrats, rich farmers, businesspersons, and people having larger landholding size. Their unorganized alliance gradually shifted in searching of the co-ordination with the elites of the other communities or caste/ethnic groups. It was seen in the organizational form where the leadership was picked up by these elites. The leaders and members of the different power-based institutions of society (including local co-operatives, political parties and civil societies, and chambers of commerce – in Ghorahi, Tulsipur, Bhaluwang and Lamahi) tried to make such a collective identity in favour of their economic and social interests. This kind of collective identity was counter-progressive and hegemonic in nature, which virtually talked about the social change, but did not want to lose the privileges of elites as a result of the movement. It also wanted to prevent the movement going in the hand of deprived sections of society, the poor and rural Tharus. Thus, this kind of collective identity did not help to change the power structure of society in essence; rather the whole attempt was paid in the maintenance of the status-quo.

4. Conclusion

TM is one of the ancient SMs of Nepal; the leadership constitutes a major part of it. However the structure of leadership has different dimensions including the continuum of leaders and followers, innovative dynamics and formation of public sphere and collective identity.

With this, there is a kind of shift in the mode and structure of the TM. The follower and leaders linkage became weak, the innovative nature of the leadership was also poor and the morality became questionable. On the other hand, ideological conflict transformed the movement into a mere 'strategic' affair of the leadership, rather than making the leaders as true 'emancipator' of the grassroots people. The identity seemed to be a vague and fluid agenda, being gripped only in the domain of "caste and ethnicity" of the Tharus. The day to day problems of people were gradually losing their gravity to be the agenda of the movement. In consequence, previously neglected issues and constituencies — relating to identity, gender, race, landlessness, wage, bondage labour— have come into the public sphere, but still less articulated in the upper leadership. The leaders were either replicating the elite formation or they served merely to maintain the social relations in favour of the elites. Indeed, this has created a 'degeneration of the leadership' preventing the TM to be more progressive and representative.

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