

"This essay was submitted as part of TNI's call for papers for its [State of Power 2015 report](#). The essay was not shortlisted for the final report and therefore TNI does not take responsibility for its contents. However the Editorial Board appreciated the essay and it is posted here as recommended reading."

## **State of Social Movements in South Asia: Critical Reflections and Implications**

Mahendra Sapkota

### **Abstract**

In the Global South there is a huge research gap in linking the social movements and power dynamics within the societies. In this context, the paper analyses the contestations of social movements in the South Asia from a view point of contentious politics in the region. Despite having a long historical background, critics suggest that the social movements are increasingly contested with identity politics and agrarian issues. Following critical discourse analysis, the paper concludes that the social movements has been shaped by the social relations dominated by the elites of the south Asian societies who share some common features in terms of culture and ideology. The movements, thus, have become contested power games around the issues of class, caste/ethnicity, gender, region and development. Finally, the paper anticipates a call for the collective colloquium of south Asian social movements.

**Key terms:** social movement, south Asia, identity politics, social relations, contested development

### **Introduction**

Globally, research on social movements reveals relatively more insights from European and Latin American studies than that of the Global South, particularly from the south Asian countries. In this context, the paper analyses the contestations of social movements in the South Asia from a view point of contentious politics in the region. Despite having a long historical background, critics suggest that the social movements are increasingly contested with identity politics and agrarian issues. Sharing part of this critique, the paper argues that the social movement has been undergone with the formation of contested domain of polity incorporating the previously neglected issues of poverty, inequality and marginalization. Following critical discourse analysis,

the paper concludes that the social movements has been shaped by the social relations dominated by the elites of the south Asian societies who share some common features in terms of culture and ideology. The movements, thus, have become contested power games around the issues of class, caste/ethnicity, gender, region and development.

It rings true in south Asian countries where the society is rapidly changing with a complex set of State-society relationship. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is such a political complexity, which remains an economic and geopolitical power of the region. Being a homeland of number of caste and ethnic groups, the ways and process of how the social movements interact with contentious politics (and vice-versa) have been still less theorized empirically in the Asian societies. It is seen that modernization, democratization, political ideologies and emergence of mass societies threatened the personal and collective identities and the advancement in information systems have sustained people's struggles against the dominant world view of the State and elites. With the end of Cold War, social movement discourse of south Asia has been featured with identity-based movements, and it became more apparent after the emergence of non-state activism in the region. Interestingly, while the People's Movements in the respective countries were structural and political in nature, subsequent movements have been fuelled with the voices of identity and rights of socially disadvantaged ethnic groups.

In nutshell, although having a century long background of various social movements, South Asia is undergoing a burgeoning phase of social movements' transformation, which is outcome of the various factors including reluctantly changing state structure vis-à-vis social development, rights regime, marginalization, and conflict resolutions. There are various currents of social movements, today, across the region, which have become strengthened and highly vocal over last three decades. In this context, this essay explores whether and how there is contestation in the south Asian social movements. In operational term, the paper fleshes out the key analytical question as "How have the social movements been subject to power and contestation in the south Asia?"

### **Present crisis**

There are numerous complex powers working all inclusive and in the South Asian area that are both making barricades and testing the development of new conceivable outcomes for revamping our social orders and creating the south Asian economies on more supportable, impartial and simply bases. Business driven globalization has arrived at phenomenal levels, and worldwide administration includes a scope of performers and organizations a few of which are against the individuals making due at the edge. The predominant neoliberal development show that is at play at present has been extremely and even viciously rebuilding the area's financial approaches and social life of the individuals and shortening and depreciating the very pith of vote based system specifically or by implication. The becoming financial

authority of transnational partnerships (TNCs) and multinational organizations (MNCs) and the part of global monetary establishments; the unequal exchange relations under the World Trade Organization (WTO) administration, including under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) transactions, have brought about serious disintegration of the force of individuals and of States, to choose our fates, utilization of characteristic assets, agribusiness and different method for livelihoods.

The development of atomic element in global governmental issues has overpowering changed the pith of offset of-force idea. This element is an acceleration of political measurement of parity of-force and diminishment of military angle (hard power). The current monetary and oppressive political frameworks and the emergencies led by them have exhibited a risk to popular government and unleashed the devil of patriotism, communalism and fundamentalism; expanded divergence and separation; dissolved manageable job opportunities; expanded securitisation and militarisation of society for the sake of fighting "terrorism" and national security dangers; and diminished space for popularity based contradiction. Subjective confinement, torment, custodial assault and additional legal killings have gotten to be regular events. There has been expanding roughness particularly against ladies and the most helpless in the public arena and brutality has additionally oftentimes showed where there is rivalry for getting to business assets. Landlessness and unemployment (particularly of the adolescent), declining wellbeing and social administrations division, and more prominent reliance on ladies to convey the load of consideration, have gotten to be persevering gimmicks of numerous nations in the area. Reformulation of the connection in the middle of a free market system and patriarchy is prompting further commodification and generalization of ladies, undermining their pride and exertions for liberation. These techniques further fortify and reconstitute the conventional types of exploitative and severe structures in new structures, for the sake of advancement, modernisation and change.

Besides, worldwide difficulties, for example, environmental change, destitution, vitality emergency, and the transnational nature of numerous rising dangers to human security in South Asia offer the conversation starter of the ability of the country states to fight with difficulties that go past national limits. Nothing new is a certain formula for relentless social emergencies and turmoil and clashes, which debilitate human security and disturb environmental debacles on diverse scales. Enlarging the strength of South Asian social orders and building cross outskirt solidarities is fundamental given the proceeded with utilization by worldwide and territorial forces of the pretence of clash determination to further fortify their monetary and political hang on this area through support, "helpful" and military intercessions.

Since picking up autonomy, South Asian states have yet to settle down to common concurrence, not to mention to participation and a serene relationship. Despite the fact that under the appearance of SAARC the locale has made stores of assertions advancing provincial participation and shared help, genuine collaboration and backing has been needed. Contemporary advancements represent a considerably more noteworthy test to rethinking

South Asia and South Asian regionalism. The current circumstance calls for new reactions.

The joined economy of SAARC is third biggest on the planet in the terms of GDP/PPP after the United States and China and eighth biggest in the terms of ostensible GDP. SAARC countries involve 3% of the world's zone and conversely having 21% (around 1.7 billion) of the world's aggregate populace. India makes up in excess of 70% of the zone and populace among these eight countries. All non-Indian part states with the exception of Afghanistan offer outskirts with India yet just two different parts, Pakistan and Afghanistan, have a fringe with one another. Amid 2010-15, the normal GDP development rate of SAARC is running at a great 8.8% p.a. But, it regulated to 6.5% in 2014 generally due to stoppage in India which represents almost 80% of SAARC's economy. With these economic nuances, the social and cultural changes, HDI, GEM and HPI of the region are also discouraging.

South Asia perhaps is the only regional entity in the Asia, which not only historically but contemporarily also is interconnected and interdependent mostly because of the similar social environment, cultural grounds and political development across its constituent countries. Apart from shared natural resources like water, land, forests, waters and coasts, it also shares social traits in terms of ethnicity and languages and mostly influenced by international media as well as cultural medium.

India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal, which encompass beyond 90 percent of the demographic mass in the region, have similar political trends and culture. The broader political and ideological dividing lines like liberalism and secularism VS conservative approach and religious extremism are also at a similar level in the prospective countries having deep foundations in the aristocratic social behaviour. This is combined by the development issues and rights regimes of regional countries, which also experience and share the similar realities.

Until now, the social movements in the South Asia have been sharing their experiences with each other at a highly confined narrative mostly due to the non-existent boarder South Asian perspective and discouraging governance in all countries. It has never attempted to see and act at regional level on the issues in boarder terms. Today, however, almost all enabling elements have grown socially and politically to nurture a South Asian umbrella and unison of the social movements. These enabling elements include growing interdependence between the regional countries through trade, strategic and other initiatives, media and cultural interaction, and boarder civil society with South Asian sensibility. This is in fact a high time when an initiative needs to be taken at regional level structuring a Collective for South Asian social movements with special focus on: a. academic and expert understanding; b. activism analysis and, c. interconnecting discourse and initiatives.

### **The problem of linking social movement into development**

According to the World Bank (2013) a two third of the population of South Asia live with less than 2\$ a day. This enormity of poverty and inequality astonishes, specifically when considering the continued efforts undertaken by the respective states, by international donors, sections of civil society, or entrepreneurially through 'the market' in the name of development and poverty alleviation. A large part of the population in south Asia is virtually excluded from the growing spheres of economy and society. Several studies by NCCR North-South researchers<sup>1</sup> have confirmed this. At the same time, various heterogeneous "non-state actors and social movements"<sup>2</sup> have arisen that challenge and even resist state-run – mostly "neo-liberal" – development agendas in the region (e.g. peasant and farmers movements; workers movements; caste or religion-based movements; etc.).<sup>3</sup>

Lasting peace and prosperity of the Indian subcontinent has been elusive due to the various ongoing conflicts and in the region, particular of Indo-Pak, Indo-China, and China-Japan contestations. Political dialogue is often conducted on the margins of SAARC meetings which have refrained from interfering in the internal matters of its member states. For example, even there was a headline of media coverage regarding the golden hand shake between Indian PM and his Pakistani counterparts in the 14 the SAARC Summit held recently in Kathmandu, Nepal. Case in point, even there was a feature of media scope with respect to the brilliant hand shake between Indian PM and his Pakistani partners in the 14 the SAARC Summit held as of late in Kathmandu, Nepal. Amid the twelfth and thirteenth SAARC summits, compelling stress was laid upon more prominent co-operation between the SAARC parts to battle terrorism. These commitments are being repeated in every bilateral and multi-lateral dialogue though there are not scientific action plans and strategies proposed.

These actors and movements claim to rightfully represent people's desire to improve their lives, and adopt approaches ranging from non-violent protest to militancy. Interestingly, a shift appears to have occurred in the focus of such movements: whereas earlier groups sought to directly address the economic concerns of rural poor (e.g., agricultural labourers, peasants; and issues such as land reform or wages), many new movements mobilise people based on issues of identity and culture (e.g., caste, ethnicity, religion; and on issues such as recognition or autonomy).

But, do these actors and movements truly represent alternative visions of development and the aspirations of the poor, and can thus be understood as forms of progressive social forces? If so, what are the lessons for mainstream development policymakers? How do these movements portray rural poverty, and how do they propose to overcome it? How do they interact with the poor in articulating local demands, and do they legitimately represent local aspirations? How do they attempt to influence broader development policy in view of overcoming inequality, and how do the poor benefit, if at all?

These questions are at the heart of contemporary research in south Asian countries. To fulfilling such gap, we have to investigate the stated visions and the actual practices of such non-state actors and social movements, with regard to overcoming poverty and inequality in rural contexts. For this

assessment, the following questions are becoming powerful to challenge the mainstream discourse:

*(i) Non-state actors' / social movements' positioning:* What are their visions and discourses regarding development and the role they see for themselves in achieving development? e.g. how is poverty and inequality explained; who is blamed for the persistence of poverty and inequality; their arguments regarding specific issues like land, labour, non-farm income, role of middle class, etc.; their visions on the 'supply of development', esp. regarding the relation between material (income; employment, access to resources) and non-material issues (identity, self-respect, etc.).

*(ii) Interaction with "the local":* How do non-state actors / social movements interact with the poor and marginal in articulating and addressing local needs, problems and aspirations (e.g. do they emerge out of local social mobilisation, or do they enrol 'local people' into outsiders' projects; who represents whom? How do they establish legitimacy?).

*(iii) Horizontal interaction among non-state actors / social movements:* How do they interact with other non-state actors / social movements in view of further strengthening the cause of poor and marginal; in acting as progressive social forces? In case they do not interact: what are the factors that mitigate this, or support this?

*(iv) Vertical interaction – especially with the state:* How do they interact with the state, or challenge the state, e.g. trying to influence state policy related to rural development issues; how do they interact with global forces (incl. donors)?

*(v) And finally:* What do the poor get by the end of the day? And what are the lessons for mainstream development policy?

### **Power dynamics and major social movements in the regions**

South Asian offset-of-force flow do generally spin around investigation of force battle in the fields of military form up and atomic clout between custom players (Pakistan and India) and extraordinary forces (United States or China and USSR in past). Along these lines, it is fundamental that adjust-of-force in this locale may grasp as contrasted with other district.

Fundamental gimmicks of South Asian equalization of-force are not quite the same as old European one yet the substance of the idea is same. In the event of gimmicks, South Asian parity of-force is a bipolar framework having heterogeneous and multilingual social orders along intense interstate clashes. Alternately, the European equalization of-force was a multipolar framework while having a homogenous and fit society in which balancer was noticeable as Britain.

The "Western extraordinary force legislative issues" has impacted customary and key (atomic) situated equalization of-force in South Asia (Thomas, 2004). Similarly, the nexus has not been clear at all in this sub-framework in which at some point either America or China or Russia does assume this part. Be that

as it may it is huge that on account of battle for atomic force among customary players, China comes up as an issue for Pakistan and as an unbalance for India as indicated by numerous western and Indian investigators. However the same case is with U.S.

As sub-continent players, the region primarily incorporates two players i.e. India and Pakistan. Both states are distinctive in size, populace and assets. Generally, since autonomy because of vicinity of opponents, there was a need to balance security dangers against one another through military means. Pakistan began outside balancing through CENTO and SEATO with U.S. under two-sidedness approach and India inside one by receiving non-arrangement methodology. Pakistan and India settled in this idea as an issue instrument of remote strategy because of the feeling of compelling shakiness and multilateral key impacts of Great Powers in subcontinent especially amid the Cold War. For Pakistani strategy producers, two-sidedness has been intended to look for equivalent relations with all significant forces - the U.S., the USSR (now Russia), and China. India under the shadow of non-arrangement has played the U.S. card or the USSR card or China card at a perfect time as contrasted with Pakistan in light of the fact that Pakistan's arrangement has significantly been ace Western.

Although having a century long background of various social movements, South Asia is undergoing a burgeoning phase of social movements' transformation, which is outcome of the various factors including reluctantly changing state structure vis-à-vis social development, rights regime, marginalization, and conflict resolutions. There are various currents of social movements, today, across the region, which have become strengthened and highly vocal over last three decades. These include:

- a. Land and Peasants Rights Movement in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal
- b. Women Rights Movement across the region
- c. Political Rights Movements across the region
- d. Dalit and Minority Rights Movements in India, Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh
- e. Water Rights Movements across the region
- f. Fishing communities movements in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh and Maldives
- g. Indigenous People's Rights across the Region
- h. Natural Recourses Rights Movements across the region
- i. Youth Activism across the Region

## **The ways**

Individuals are ending up more politically estranged, denied central rights and additionally get to instruments vital for understanding their rights. The State which is considered as an issue for serene determination of clashes stays delicate even as States are catching more draconian forces of control went for reducing individuals' developments and real manifestations of association and safety. More choices influencing the ordinary life of the individuals are

generally directed by MNCs and worldwide money related establishments to which there is no just get to and from where there is no responsibility.

We have not seen nor would we be able to expect a genuine move from the legislature and financial elites to genuine coordination that is focused around collaboration, value, reasonable exchange, solidarity, and complementarity. Thus, the driving force will need to originate from common society and people groups' developments. Contemporary experience far and wide is demonstrating that actually it is the individuals' developments that can develop the methodology of vote based system, fight ideologically and politically with all types of backward and high and mighty administrations, perspectives and philosophies, and construct a common schema for serene conjunction.

Recovering the area and creating maintained provincial choices obliges that we amalgamate legislative issues and the economy that serves individuals and restricts the ravenousness of elites. Recovering the area means reproducing local joining focused around human rights standards – individuals focused and individuals arranged. The test, then, for common society and people groups' developments in the area is to concoct and attest an option vision of provincial incorporation or new regionalism focused around people groups' requirements and goals, contemplating the diverse levels of advancements in the district; a local combination that will challenge the neoliberal model – a People's SAARC or a People's Union of South Asia. Consequently the subject of this current debate of movement discourse in the region will include the following major areas and outcomes:

- Alternative regionalism, regional autonomy
- Food regime and security
- Social mobility and freedom
- Labour rights and movements; increasing role of remittances
- Climate change and ecological Justice
- Economic cooperation
- Livelihood changes
- Gender Rights, Women's Rights, Women and Armed Conflicts
- Human rights and social justice
- Refugees and Indigenous People's rights
- Sustainable Development
- Peace, democracy, rule of law and de-militarisation
- Tax justice, fiscal responsibility, and corporate accountability
- Community control over regular assets, asset hall, water lodge

With these prospects, a collective structure for the South Asian social movements has become a niche. To devise and map a comprehensive outlook of the social movements in the region and thereby stepping ahead for its' structural formations, a Colloquium on Social Movements in South Asia needs to be initiated deliberating around the following objectives:



- a. Analyzing, reviewing and mapping social movements in South Asia
- b. Discussing state structure and governance regime context of the social movements
- c. Developing a regional outlook of the nexus between governance, development and social movements
- d. Devising a framework of actions and initiatives for the synchronizing the social movements at regional level

The colloquium should contain primarily at least one expert-cum-activist from each country of the region and may include a few from the host country in a way that social movements could be addressed in thematic and geographical perspective along with regional outlook.

The colloquium will be consisting on three components of discourse:

- a. **Thematic:** This will include a discourse and discussion around:
  - i. land, peasants and fishing peoples' rights,
  - ii. women and gender rights,
  - iii. labor rights,
  - iv. water and natural resources rights,
  - v. political rights,
  - vi. minorities and *Dalit* rights,
  - vii. peace movements.
- b. **Countrywide:** This will include a boarder countrywide perspective of the social movements based on the analysis concerning governance structures and rights regime and futuristic review of the movement's scenario.
- c. **South Asian Approach:** This part of the deliberations will be based on the discussion around the regional outlook, aspects and possible synchronization of the social movements in South Asia.

After the colloquium deliberations, a documented version of discourse will be shared across the region with the social movements, broader civil society, and academia. Besides, a formal forum on the South Asian social movements will be formed, which will take initiatives to materialize the recommendations for the South Asian umbrella of the social movements.

### **Contestations in the development**

The social movement leads to the contestation stage where there are various kinds of contradictions and crisis operated to contest the rural development (Sapkota, 2014). In liberal democratic systems where the electoral policies are dominant, the State-led development explicitly start to manipulate different issues for public appeal, such as democracy, poverty reduction, targeted programs, political consensus, inclusive growth, etc. In Nepal, the 'new Nepal' has been emerging such a metaphor as if it will solve all the problems existing in the society. There may be also changes in legal forms of exclusion and

marginalisation, providing Constitutional guarantee for them. All these strategies will most probably to occur within the 'boundary of political system' of the State. The state and its apparatus describe their own activities as strengthening democratic processes in order to promote well-being of grassroots people. In effect, the state start to promote corporate elite interests in implementing the reformed strategies, the same is true for the Tharu movement. Empirically, the rural elites and social movement elites who are close to the State elites become the ultimate beneficiary of the development outcomes. In this there will be huge crisis in class ideology of the society – because there will be other deliberate manipulations of caste, gender, minority and regional issues. Though this, the liberal development approaches of the State could not undermine elite manipulation of society; the rural society in particular. It is proposed that contrary to their rhetoric, liberal foundations of development like their conservative counterparts also manipulate democracy to promote elite interests. All these factors, in consequence, affect the rural development and make it contested.

Meanwhile, the researcher postulates that every society in today is in regular contestation. The social and ethnic movements may have certain life cycle (in most of the cases) or they have in their continuous confrontation (for a long period of time). But, the contestations and effects they create in the rural polity are simply impossible to decline or end from the society. So, contestation is cyclic in nature; only its transformation and management is possible, but not the elimination. It is always manifested in the social relations and power structure of society, which can further fuel the people's resistances and agitations in the days to come. Nepali society is not exceptional to this. With this, the main features of contestations in rural development are:

- Contestation in the rural region and rural development is not only the function of its own rural social relations. Indeed, it is largely imposed by the national development, urban development and State-led modernisation and development.
- Power of elites increased; division of political leaders and social organisations becomes frequent, role of the state virtually assimilates with the newly emerged market force.
- The State can make some reformist changes and commit to make access the resources and development outcomes to the rural poor and disadvantaged sections of society, but it always searches for the poor who can be devotee of the existing political system.
- Alliance of elites both of State's and non-State's to ensure the upcoming benefits and opportunities and be escaped from the possible cost of well-being status.
- The elites who are emerged from the social movements become part of the State. The 'formation of elites' (through the social movements) is gradually turned into the 'replication of elites' (through the State). <sup>4</sup>In this shift, power is institutionalised and elite will become the product of such institutional landscape of the society. This contributes for the further strengthening and continuity of dominant or mainstream discourse; and thus, will repress or dismiss the alternative discourses

which are likely to merge. But, the structural problems of underdevelopment, deprivation and livelihoods of rural people become either twisted or mis-led. So, there is always a political space for contestation in rural development.

To conclude, the rule of powerless majority (democracy) is in crisis due to the rule of powerful minority (elites) in the contemporary world, not exceptional to the Global south and south Asia. It means that, all societies, including the democratic societies or the societies struggling for the democracy like the south Asian societies, are government by the elites – the inherent constituents of mainstream development. The local elites have consciously manipulated the development activities and movement affairs in an effort to manufacture public consent for their interests. By nature, social movements continue to be a major force in the world - both in the past and present societies, as well as to anticipate changes and trends that may play out in the future. The social movements continue to change, so too happen in the contestations. It goes beyond the conventional dimension of sociology of social movement inviting the debates from political sciences and development studies.

Indeed, the discourses of social movement and identity politics are highly contested - either in the form of a scholar's romantic judgment or in the claim of leaders of the movement, or in the perception of local people. Globally, we have witnessed a numbers of struggles for justice, equity, identity, emancipation, special attention, recognition, rights and legal status. Often, these demands and issues have manifested in different forms of social movements. The paper perceives social movement as a network of contested interactions for sharing or gaining of power between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflict, on the basis of shared collective identity. However, it has been also replicated that social movement implies a degree of homogeneity and stability that is not appropriate anymore in a time when sociology uses new concepts such as networks, flows and complexity.

### **Bio-note of the Author**

**Sapkota, Mahendra** is a Ph.D. fellow of a collaborative research project between Kathmandu University, Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South and University of Zurich. He has an outstanding expertise and publications in social movement and rural studies. He holds his Master's degree in Rural Development from the Tribhuvan University, Nepal. The theme of his ongoing PhD is "Contested Rural Development"- to be seen from the viewpoints of emerging ethnic movements in Nepal. His key research interest is on political economy of rural societies; mobilization and representation of people; agency-structure dynamics; and, changing institutions and livelihood strategies. Methodologically, he is more focused on critical social research design. He can be accessed via [mahendra\\_sapkota27@yahoo.com](mailto:mahendra_sapkota27@yahoo.com)

## References

Thomas, R. G. C. (2004). The South Asian Security Balance in a Western Dominant World." In T.V. Paul, James J. Wirtz and Michel Fortmann, (Eds), *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*. (pp. 305-315). California, US: Stanford University Press.

Sapkota, M. (2014). Emerging Ethnic Movements and Contested Rural Development in Nepal. In S. R. Sharma; B. R. Upreti; Manandhar, P. and Sapkota, M. (Eds). *Contested Development in Nepal: Experiences and Reflections*. (pp.77-104). Kathmandu: School of Arts, Kathmandu University and Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research (NCCR).

World Bank (2013): World Development Indicators 2013. Washington DC, USA: World Bank.

## Author's Note:

For details on this program see <http://www.north-south.ch/>

<sup>2</sup> At present, I am using this notion as a more generic term, being aware of the fact that it requires further refinement.

<sup>3</sup> In addition, there is an array of groups that have been launched and started through donor projects. Social organisations can also be the result of political patronage from regional leaders.

<sup>4</sup> In the South Asian context, the term 'elite' has been widely used to denote the people who: a) have direct access to the State and political parties; b) control and command the powerful institutions and organisations of the society; c) possess extra-power in terms of class and well-being (most of the upper class), organisation (i.e. leaders), academic-intellectual; and d) deserve better communications skills, articulation, presentation and persuasiveness.