

Shaping Political Futures

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YOUNG VOICES · SHARED BORDERS · FUTURE POWER

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About Shaping Political Futures

Shaping Political Futures (SPF) is a youth-led civic education and political engagement initiative developed by the Global Shapers Kathmandu Hub. At its heart, SPF is a response to a question that echoes across communities in Nepal: *How do we prepare young people not just to participate in democracy, but to shape it?* In a country where the majority of the population is young, yet their representation in public decision-making remains minimal, SPF exists to bridge the widening gap between youth and the political processes that govern their lives.



SHAPING POLITICAL FUTURES

The project began in 2022, not as a grand strategy, but as a series of honest conversations among young people who were disillusioned by inefficiencies in governance — some waiting years for a driver’s license, others unsure how to read the national budget or navigate government offices. These everyday frustrations revealed deeper structural gaps in civic literacy and participation. SPF emerged from these lived realities, with the intention to build a space where inquiry, access, and action could come together.

The initiative’s first step was a national *Knowledge Gap Analysis* titled “*Youth in Nepali Politics: Gaps and Experiences*”, capturing reflections from young leaders across political parties and sectors. This foundational research informed the development of “*Politics Ma Paila*”, an open-access political education course designed to equip young Nepalis with foundational political knowledge and practical civic engagement tools, enabling them to become active participants in Nepal’s democratic processes. Rooted in the vision of the youth at **Global Shapers Kathmandu Hub**, the course seeks to cultivate a generation of changemakers who are committed to promoting equity, accountability, and transformative political engagement.

SPF also nurtures informal political learning. Through “*Chiya ra Rajneeti Guff*”, an open dialogue series, youth are invited to sit together over tea and ask bold questions without fear — about power, representation, corruption, or apathy. These spaces have become microcosms of what participatory democracy can look like: warm, inclusive, critical, and collective.

In 2024, SPF was awarded the **Global Shapers Community Innovation Prize**, a recognition from the World Economic Forum that celebrated the initiative’s relevance in addressing civic disengagement and a lack of youth leadership. This acknowledgement gave further momentum to expand both reach and impact.

By 2025, SPF launched its first South Asia-wide youth journal, creating a platform for political reflection that transcends borders and welcomes youth voices from all South Asian communities. The initiative not only created a space for shared learning but also reminded us that questions on good governance, public service and accountability often stretch beyond the boundaries of nation-states.

The journey reached a new milestone with the SPF residential workshop on “*Power, Process, Structure, and Discourse*”, which brought the initiative to full circle. With 29 diverse youth (ages 18–30) from across

Nepal, the workshop was not just about understanding frameworks, it was about critically unpacking them. More importantly, we co-created a community rooted in the belief that Nepal's future must be built on the foundations of equality and inclusion. The workshop also marked the launch of the SPF digital portal, an online platform designed to house civic resources, political learning tools, and future publications. This portal aims to be a living archive of our collective civic memory — a place where young changemakers can return, contribute, and grow.

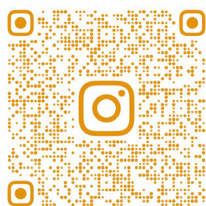
Above all, Shaping Political Futures remains grounded in one vision: that young people in Nepal, and across South Asia are the force and catalyst for change. As fellow youth of GSKH, we believe in the power of our peers to shape the present and reimagine the future. Our narratives must be placed at the center of decision-making, not just as future leaders, but as current architects of the societies we strive to transform.

With this edition of journal, we bring these important stories of ourselves and our communities- testaments of how we see ourselves, how we lead, and how we resist as youths of the Global South.

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Reclaiming Nepal's Democratic Imagination: Youth, Technology, and the Politics of Belonging

Dear Readers,

The **Shaping Political Futures: Nepal Edition** emerges at a time when Nepal's democratic experiment feels both established through regular elections, a functioning federal structure, and active civil discourse - and unsettled by recurring political instability and public disillusionment. Federalism promised new opportunities for inclusion, yet over a decade later Nepali youths continue to raise questions



such as: who truly holds space in Nepal's democracy, and who continues to be left outside its institutions? With youth constituting nearly half of the population, and women and marginalized communities still fighting for meaningful representation, the future of the nation depends on whether these voices are not only heard but given authority to shape transparent policies, accountable governance, and citizen-led public discourse.

This volume aims to bring together eight essays by young Nepali authors, researchers and practitioners who are engaging critically with the challenges and possibilities of a "good democracy". From gender justice and youth participation to digital governance, decentralization, and intersectional equity, each piece draws from lived experience and empirical insight, revealing that democracy is not merely a legal framework but a collective, everyday practice that requires vigilance, imagination, and courage.

Reclaiming Women's Voices in Nepal's Recovery explores the ways in which women, long underrepresented and undervalued in public life, are actively rebuilding communities, economies, and civic spaces. Their resilience demonstrates that empowerment is not a borrowed ideal but a deeply Nepali truth, rooted in courage, agency, and sustained social engagement.

Democracy in the Age of Algorithms, examines the profound impact of digital platforms and artificial intelligence on political narratives, voter behavior, and civic discourse. The author highlights both the promise and peril of technology: while digital spaces expand participation, they also introduce new risks of manipulation and disinformation that test the integrity of democratic systems.

Reclaiming Local Power, investigates whether decentralization has truly opened spaces for youth leadership at the municipal and village level. Through case studies of civic tech and community engagement, they demonstrate that meaningful federalism depends on the empowerment of young citizens to exercise agency where they live.

Youth Representation and Political Participation, highlights the transformative potential of younger leaders like Sumana Shrestha and Balen Shah, who have challenged entrenched norms with integrity and independence.

Decentralized Power, Centralized Voices interrogates whether youth outside Kathmandu are truly represented under the federal system. Combining surveys and interviews across provinces, they reveal gaps between constitutional promise and lived experience, emphasizing the need for participatory mechanisms that reflect true inclusion.

The *Centralized Loop and the Illusion of Decentralization*, deepens this critique by uncovering that while political power may have been formally redistributed, social and economic privilege remains concentrated. The author essay warns that federalism without resource redistribution risks maintaining inequalities under the guise of “reform”.

In *Barriers Faced by the Barrier-Breakers*, the authors trace the invisible obstacles that women politicians confront daily—from social hierarchies to institutional fatigue—despite formal guarantees of representation. Their work calls for a democracy that recognizes competence, care, and resilience as critical components of leadership.

Finally, *Intersectional Youth Governance: Where Are the Young Agrarians?* examines the persistent exclusion of Nepal’s largest workforce from policy and governance. By highlighting youth-led innovations in agriculture, environmental justice, and rural development, the author argues that a truly representative democracy must engage agrarian youth as active participants, not passive beneficiaries.

Taken together, these essays form an honest portrait of Nepal’s democracy: young yet restless, hopeful yet unequal, ambitious yet in need of reckoning. They remind us that political renewal depends not only on institutions but on citizens committed to rebuilding trust, amplifying marginalized voices, and exercising civic courage and accountability.

This publication also invites reflection on the collective effort that made it possible. It would not have been realized without the insight, labor, and collaboration of many. We are grateful to the authors for their critical perspectives and lived experiences, and to our editor - Ms. Smriti Pantha, for her careful editing and guidance. Our thanks extend to Mr. Saurav Thapa Shrestha for the publication design and Mr. Saurabh Shrestha for production and dissemination.

We also recognize the invaluable support of the Shaping Political Futures Team, hub members and authors across Kathmandu, Pokhara, and other regions, whose engagement strengthened this project. Special thanks to our team members - Ms. Devika Thapa, Ms. Anukriti Kunwar, Mr. Sanket Paudel and Ms. Irisa Shrestha for their steadfast commitment throughout the process, and to Ms. Deanna Sherpa, Curator of the Kathmandu Hub, for her mentorship, guidance, and encouragement.

This edition is, ultimately, a collective labor of reflection, care, and civic commitment. It is intended for readers to engage with, reflect upon, and ask: How can we create communities, institutions, and governance systems in Nepal that are genuinely inclusive, rooted in lived realities, and guided by justice, equity, civic courage and a drive for the nation’s prosperity?

Sincerely,

Ishika Panta and Devika Thapa

Editors-in-Chief

Nepal Edition (2025–2026)

Shaping Political Futures (Innovation Prize Winner 2024-2025)

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AI, Fake News, and Democracy in Nepal

Dikshya Adhikari

Abstract

Nepal's democratic resilience is increasingly under strain as artificial intelligence transforms the way information is produced, disseminated, and perceived. In a state already plagued by political dissatisfaction and institutional distrust, the rapid dissemination of AI-generated mis/disinformation exacerbates a pre-existing public trust crisis. Social media, long a means for civic engagement, is now blurring the line between mobilization and manipulation, particularly while digital literacy remains frighteningly low. As voters struggle with distinguishing authentic content from deepfakes and algorithm-driven distortions, electoral processes become more susceptible to manipulation. These conditions not only diminish trust in democratic institutions but also foster echo chambers in which emotional reactions dominate factual understanding. The risk is heightened when monitoring mechanisms lag behind technology advancements, and public discourse is driven more by viral outrage than educated debate. Without purposeful measures to establish digital resilience through ethical regulation, education, and inclusive policymaking, Nepal risks devolving into a performative rather than participatory democracy. The challenge today is not only technological, but also highly political: preserving truth as a public good in an age of synthetic realities.

Introduction

Nepal's increased use of social media has changed the terrain of political discourse (Bhattarai, 2023),

where enhanced connectivity has reshaped how citizens – particularly younger generations – engage with politics. The virtual walls of social media have undoubtedly exposed them to new ideas, enabled digital activism, and offered platforms to organize, express dissent, and demand accountability in ways that weren't possible before.

However, a considerable amount of political content consumed online remains unconfirmed and unverified (Center for Media Research, 2022), contributing to a broader crisis of information confidence. In the digital age, virtual seeing and hearing are no longer reliable indicators of truth (Discerning the Truth in a Digital Age, n.d.). The rapid growth of artificial intelligence has enabled the creation of hyper-realistic graphics and synthetic audio, allowing for the precise fabrication of entire events and identities (George & George, 2023).

Given Nepal's still-fragile democratic institutions (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2021), the effects of this technological revolution are especially pronounced. Although democracy was adopted with widespread public support and high expectations, there is now a clear gap between those aspirations and the system's actual performance. Widespread dissatisfaction with state institutions (Das, 2025) has created an environment where distorted information can easily gain traction. Nepal's limited digital literacy further compounds this vulnerability.

While the country has long struggled to build foundational competencies for navigating online spaces (Sigdel, 2025), the emergence of AI-generated

content presents a more complex challenge: discerning credible information in environments designed to mislead (Nasiri & Hashemzadeh, 2025). The spread of manipulated content not only misinforms but actively undermines trust in democratic processes (Gerbrandt, 2025).

Elections, as the central instrument of democratic legitimacy (Election - Representation, Voter Choice, Accountability, n.d.), are especially sensitive to these shifts. The quality of information available to voters directly influences political outcomes (Vössing, n.d.). Social media platforms, once heralded as tools for public participation, have now blurred the line between communication and manipulation.

Nepal's democratic fragility is worsening as AI reshapes how information is generated, shared, and trusted.

Nepal's Democratic Status

Nepal has witnessed conspicuous political shifts in recent decades, transitioning from a partyless Panchayat system and monarchy through a decade-long armed conflict to its current status as a federal democratic republic. While the adoption of the 2015 Constitution and the conduct of periodic elections mark significant milestones in the country's democratization journey, Nepal's democracy remains fragile and transitional.

The country has been classified as a hybrid regime, characterized by persistent governance weaknesses such as electoral irregularities, judicial interference, and authoritarian tendencies (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2016). Moreover, Nepal's democracy score has declined notably – from 5.18 in 2017 to 4.9 in 2022 – highlighting ongoing systemic challenges (Dhakal, 2024).

Although Nepal has consistently held regular elections, formal procedures alone do not constitute genuine democracy (Schmitter, 1991). For democratic consolidation, robust voter education, political accountability, and meaningful citizen empowerment are essential.

Nepal's Information Crisis

Nepal's information issue can be viewed via two interconnected perspectives. First, there is the increasing proliferation of fake news, particularly during election seasons, which can now be manufactured and disseminated more readily using AI, as exemplified by the viral video circulated during the protest at Tinkune, Kathmandu on March 28, 2025 (Setopati, 2025), which appeared to show tear gas being fired on stage while the national anthem was playing, though in reality the incident never occurred, as the video was generated using deepfake technology, and such manipulated content not only misleads the public but also fuels distrust and resentment toward authorities, ultimately eroding democratic processes and distorting public discourse.

Second, a significant portion of the populace lacks the digital literacy necessary to interact with a media landscape that is evolving quickly.

1. Electoral Disinformation and the Rise of AI

Nepal has yet to witness large-scale electoral interference caused by powerful AI, but the distribution of fraudulent and misleading content during the 2022 federal and provincial elections was prevalent.

In 2022 General Elections, despite the absence of big coordinated disinformation tactics, many voters were exposed to distorted videos, manipulated photos, and bogus political circulars (Adhikari, 2022). These were not high-tech manipulations, but they were nonetheless effective. What makes this even more concerning is how quickly this type of content can now be generated using simple AI technologies.

Visual and audio modification no longer necessitates specialist knowledge or extensive resources (Simonite, 2020). Anyone with basic access can create compelling information that distorts reality.

In a politically heated environment like an election, the ability to quickly propagate misleading information can have a significant impact on public opinion and

confidence, with a high chance of the public being both cynical and manipulable.

The technology is rapidly changing, but oversight systems are straining to keep pace. The threat lies not only in the current circumstances but also in how easily and swiftly the situation could escalate.

2. Digital Literacy and Structural Vulnerability

Beyond the immediate dangers posed by fake news, Nepal has a more serious and structural challenge, i.e., digital literacy. Nearly 56% of the population is under the age of 30 (National Statistics Office, n.d.), making them the most engaged online demographic.

Though more than two-thirds of the overall population reside in urban areas with relatively reliable internet connectivity, media literacy remains uneven (Digital Rights Nepal, 2024).

The majority of the literate population has only received a primary education, creating serious concerns about their ability to navigate an information ecosystem inundated with AI-generated content. Since 2008, internet users have increased from 300,000 to 36 million (Bhattarai, 2023).

However, increased access has not ensured informed use.

Further, Nepal has an overall literacy rate of 76.3% but a considerable digital divide (Pokharel, 2024), with approximately 31% of the population deemed digitally literate (Digital Divide Threatens Nepal's Vision for a Tech-Driven Future, 2024).

The disparity highlights a key vulnerability in the age of AI-powered information flows. The capacity to read and write does not imply the ability to critically engage with digital platforms, particularly when

those platforms are inundated with algorithmically amplified misinformation and seductive AI-generated content (Williamson, 2024).

Critically, the architecture of social media algorithms is designed to prioritize engagement over accuracy, often showing users content that, regardless of its harmfulness, abuse, or falsity, aligns with their pre-

existing beliefs and biased opinions, thereby limiting their ability to critically assess the information and situations.

This “confirmation loop” makes it easier for people to cling to orthodox or exclusionary views rather than challenge or educate themselves, reinforcing societal divisions. Social media is designed to reward attention-grabbing content, not accuracy. For many users, emotionally charged posts and misleading headlines often carry more influence than verified facts.

Recognizing this risk, the government has recently taken some important steps. In its 2082–2083 budget, it allocated Rs 740 million for improving digital literacy and promoting responsible use of artificial intelligence. These are positive developments, but they will only make a real difference if they are implemented in ways that reach underserved communities and focus on practical, long-term learning.

Building digital skills is not just about protecting individuals from misinformation. It is about strengthening democracy itself. Without the ability to engage critically with information, citizens cannot meaningfully participate in political decision-making.

And when misinformation spreads faster than understanding, democracy risks becoming a performance rather than a process.

Public Frustration with the system

Public dissatisfaction with Nepal's political system has persisted since the Second People's Movement in 2006. The transition to democracy raised lofty expectations, but these were frequently disappointed. Over time, a schism has developed between the elder political elite and the younger populace, who now constitute a sizable majority.

The distinction is not just based on age. It indicates a deeper communication deficit. Many young people do not know how to contact their elected officials, nor do they believe that doing so will result in a substantial response. In this atmosphere, social

media has emerged as the key platform for political activity. It provides greater visibility and immediacy than traditional political channels.

However, the transition to online expression has not always resulted in positive effects. When frustrations are neglected or rejected by institutions, they may explode in potentially dangerous ways.

In Nepal, this involves unethical hacking of vulnerable digital infrastructures, insulting authorities with viral memes, and publishing online content geared more at derision than reform. These activities suggest a deeper alienation.

Citizens are not only unhappy; many have stopped identifying with the System entirely.

There are two major repercussions from this disconnection. First, it creates space for the misuse of artificial intelligence tools. Several individuals, especially disgruntled individuals, start exploiting AI to create extreme or deceptive content. These acts may appear to be digital resistance, but they have serious implications, including personal reputational risk, legal exposure, and long-term harm to democratic discourse. Second, in an environment where media literacy is lacking, unsubstantiated news spreads quickly. Emotionally charged posts are frequently mistaken for facts on platforms that value attention above veracity. This allows people to easily affirm their existing beliefs. If someone sees frequent assertions that the government is corrupt or incompetent, they are more inclined to believe it without questioning the source.

Both patterns feed directly into electoral behavior. Some citizens withdraw completely, resulting in low voter turnout. Others cast votes based only on what they see online. Candidates with a strong social media presence gain visibility and influence, while others with fewer resources or a more principled approach are overlooked. The quality of political participation declines as performance and visibility take precedence over substance and policy.

The public trust in state institutions, a base for democracy to thrive, seems to be lacking critically in the context of Nepal.

In a system where frustration grows and facts are blurred, democracy begins to erode. When citizens feel unheard and unrepresented, voting no longer feels like a tool for change. It feels like a formality. And when that happens, the real danger is about disconnection and not just about misinformation.

Regulating AI

AI is more than just the replication of biological intelligence. It is the science and engineering of designing systems capable of reasoning, learning, and doing activities that would normally need human cognition. While its uses are numerous and frequently helpful, AI has also presented new hazards, notably in the political realm.

One alarming example is what experts refer to as the “Facebook to Politics” (FfP) model (Kane, 2019). Political campaigns employ social media analytics to create psychological profiles of their users. As research has demonstrated, Facebook’s data capabilities have been used to target voters with emotionally charged content and personalized advertisements, gradually influencing beliefs and behavior over time. This focused impact can undermine electoral openness and fairness, particularly when it leads to the spread of inaccurate or inflammatory information.

Generally, elections should be free, fair, and transparent. However, in the digital age, these concepts face enormous challenges. The situation is even more acute in countries like Nepal, where regulatory frameworks are still being developed and internet literacy is low.

AI has indisputable benefits, like improved service delivery and more access to information. However, Nepal cannot afford to deploy these technologies without a plan. The country urgently requires a regulatory structure that is consistent with global norms while also addressing local realities. Digital illiteracy, a lack of institutional competency, and a reactive rather than proactive approach to policies have all contributed to the nation’s vulnerability.

Policy responses should be measured and inclusive. Proposing extensive restrictions, such as overly broad social media laws that restrict political speech

or information access, would be detrimental. Such measures risk alienating the generation most involved in civic engagement via digital platforms.

The government must do more than just control content; it must also comprehend the underlying issues. The longer these tensions are ignored, the more likely they will materialize in disruptive or destructive ways.

Several AI governance policies from the globe offers valuable lessons for Nepal in this regards, for instance, the European Union's GDPR framework contains provisions like Article 22 that govern automated decision-making and profiling, placing limits on how AI systems can make decisions that affect individuals, while Singapore's Model AI Governance Framework promotes ethical AI deployment with clear guidelines for fairness and explainability, enabling trust without heavy-handed regulation. Further, Canada's Directive on Automated Decision-Making requires federal agencies to conduct Algorithmic Impact Assessments based on system risk levels, with the goal of identifying and reducing harms such as biases, discrimination, and opacity, thus promoting accountable and transparent AI governance in the public sector.

As Nepal's digital generation gains political awareness online, the system must adapt alongside them.

Regulation should not discourage participation; rather, it should foster trust, improve literacy, and strengthen democracy's base in an ever-changing technology context.

Learning from other countries

The increasing use of AI for or in electoral campaigns across South Asia has exposed significant concerns for democracy.

These are no longer hypothetical concerns, but rather the experience of neighboring countries, demonstrating how rising technology can disrupt democratic processes in real and destructive ways (Iqbal & Mushtaq, 2024). For example, during the 2024 elections in Pakistan, AI-generated videos and voice messages impersonating political leaders were widely

distributed and used to spread false announcements of boycotts, candidate withdrawals, and inflammatory remarks, causing voter confusion, undermining public trust, and distorting the electoral landscape. Further, in Bangladesh, deepfake videos were used to discredit opposition leaders and misinform the public about electoral procedures, which helped the ruling party tighten its control over public narratives and curb genuine political participation.

Similarly, in India, it has been opined by numerous researchers and journalists that political parties had actively recruited social media influencers and used AI-powered content strategies to create emotionally charged, attention-grabbing material. These efforts are often used to exploit personal data to tailor messages to specific psychological profiles whose impact is not only persuasive but also manipulative by limiting voters' capacity to make independent, well-informed decisions.

As elections have become more about snatching votes and less about earning them, AI tools become more and more dangerous in this regard. These regional cases offer two major learnings for Nepal. First, the tools of AI are already being used to manipulate electoral behavior and distort democratic discourse, and Nepal is no exception to this. Second, political actors themselves are often seen as the drivers of this manipulation by weaponizing AI to control narratives.

For Nepal, the implications are more serious. Despite the rapid growth in internet access, the country still struggles with digital disparities where urban areas benefit from relatively stable connectivity, while many geographically rural areas continue to lack basic digital infrastructure, creating a clear information gap where individuals from underserved regions are often the most vulnerable to misinformation, especially when presented in convincing deepfakes images, videos or audios.

Nepal's situation is particularly potentially dangerous since it is caught between two extremes. On the one hand, if it fails to regulate AI tools and digital platforms, the country risks becoming a hotspot for unchecked disinformation and exploitation; on

the other, without a proper framework to embrace new technologies, Nepal may fall further behind in leveraging the legitimate benefits of AI for public administration, education, or inclusive development.

This reality is already taking shape. AI-generated disinformation has the potential to reinforce pre-existing beliefs, creating echo chambers where users are only exposed to content that aligns with their biases. In such environments, critical thinking is always discouraged, making it even harder for people to form personal opinions based on facts rather than emotional or misleading content.

Both results are harmful, but they are not mutually exclusive. While unregulated space allows room for manipulation, excessive control, especially in the lack of openness and accountability, can hinder innovation and limit democratic participation.

Nepal's current trajectory of low digital literacy, insufficient institutional safeguards, and rising political dissatisfaction further exacerbates this balance. Thus, the solution here is not to reject technology, but to build a regulatory system that is transparent, rights-based, and inclusive, that must recognize the real harms AI can cause in electoral and civic spaces, while also enabling innovation that genuinely serves the public good.

In the absence of this kind of intentional approach, Nepal risks becoming both digitally irrelevant and digitally exploited.

Analysis and Conclusion

Public frustration with Nepal's institutions and governance is growing, as shown not only by frequent protests but also by the large number of people leaving the country. In the fiscal year 2023/24, over 741,000 Nepalis went abroad for work (REPUBLICA, 2025). In just the first eight months of 2024/25, more than 530,000 left, while on top of this, many are choosing to settle permanently outside Nepal. In the past two years, 137,000 Nepalis migrated for good, and in 2024 alone, 66,835 left permanently (REPUBLICA, 2025).

These figures reveal a deep loss of hope in Nepal's

future, highlighting the serious challenges facing its democracy. Without effective policies to address these issues, Nepal risks pushing vulnerable groups further away from participating in democracy, especially by widening the digital divide. Transparency and active citizen involvement are known to build greater trust in government institutions. Therefore, digital literacy programs are crucial not only to reduce the spread of misinformation but also to empower people to think critically about the information they encounter.

Fake news has become a global problem with serious consequences. The threat grows when false information is made to look convincing, especially through AI-generated content, which makes it harder for people to spot lies. A 2019 Ipsos survey, done for the Centre for International Governance Innovation, interviewed over 25,000 people in more than 25 countries. It found that 86% of online users worldwide believed they had encountered fake news, admitted to believing the news was true at least once, and nearly nine out of ten of those had believed false information at least once (Simpson, 2019).

Even though Nepal was not part of this survey, the situation here is likely more vulnerable. Compared to many of the countries surveyed, Nepal has weaker infrastructure and lower digital literacy. This makes the country's already fragile democracy even more at risk as it struggles to keep up with fast-changing technology and the dangers of misinformation.

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Barriers Faced by the Barrier-Breakers: The Struggles of Women in Politics

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Abstract

Nepal's claim that it is ahead of many other Asian countries in terms of female political participation is debatable. On one hand, the country has done a great deal in terms of policies and numerical representation of women, but it hasn't quite translated into meaningful political participation of women just yet, especially women who aren't Brahmin/Chhetri and/or economically strong. There are barriers, some well-known and some not so much, that have inhibited women's political participation throughout history and continue to do so today. While talking about the prevalent barriers, it is also necessary to acknowledge that we've had "barrier-breakers", because of whom we've had some progress reducing the severity of those barriers. Hence, Nepal's political landscape is much more inclusive of women than it used to be, but we still have a long way to go. This article explores the barriers that women have been facing for years in terms of political participation, and recommends interventions that reduce such barriers as well as reinforce momentum of the movement for inclusive political participation.

Keywords: *female politicians, female representation, meaningful participation, barriers, gender-based discrimination, patriarchy.*

Introduction

Nepal often boasts an inclusive and representative

political space, particularly for women. This notion reached its peak when Bidhya Devi Bhandari served as the country's first female President from 2015 to 2023.

Before that, the adoption of electoral quotas in the Interim Constitution of 2007 was a historic milestone in making the political space fairer for women. The 2007 Interim Constitution's Article 63 (5) guarantees that the minimum of one-third of the total number of candidates nominated shall be women. Further, Article 142 (3) (c) provides that members from neglected and oppressed groups including women and Dalits shall be included in the executive committees at various levels, for political parties to qualify contesting for elections.

The 2008 Constituent Assembly elections showed the immediate impact of the electoral quotas with 33.3 percent of women in the parliament, which was a large leap from 6 percent in 2005 (World Bank, 2008). 30 women were directly elected through first-past-the-post, 161 through proportional representation, and 6 women were nominated by the cabinet. Since it was the first time in Nepal that women from Janjati, Madhesi, Muslim and other marginalized groups were represented in the parliament, the 2008 CA election results were celebrated not just by women in Nepal, but also received a lot of appreciation from international communities (Burathoki, 2020).

At present, the 2015 Constitution of Nepal mandates

that 40% of all elected representatives at the local level must be women, and 20% must be Dalit women. Similarly, it mandates that 33% of all elected representatives at all state mechanisms must be women, and provides additional representational quotas for other socially excluded groups.

Breakthroughs like these have made the political space more accessible for women, enabling their entry into decision-making positions, and challenging the long-standing trend of female exclusion in the political space. They have also paved the way for 'barrier-breakers'— women who seize these opportunities to confront and dismantle existing obstacles, further expanding the space for other women in the political arena.

Throughout Nepal's political history, there have been women who have broken barriers to claim leadership roles, challenge patriarchal norms, and pave the way for greater female participation in politics. One such barrier-breaker is Dibya Koirala, credited for establishing the Women's Committee to mobilize women against the oppressive Rana regime. About 30 years later, the Model Women's Organization led by Revanta Kumari Acharya emerged, with the objective of raising women's political and social consciousness. As the country experimented with democracy in the 1950s and 1960s, various women's groups became involved with political parties and started to engage in nonviolent protests and lobbying to bring women into decision-making structures. The Panchayat system between 1960 to 1991 suppressed political activities, including the women's movement. Following this setback, a new organization called the Nepal Mahila Sangathan was formed to keep track of the progress of the women's movement (United Nations Development Programme, 2014). Following the footsteps of these barrier-breakers, the women members of the Constituent Assembly formed a 197-membered caucus from the then 19 political parties in 2009. The caucus lobbied hard to ensure women's one-third representation in all state mechanisms and political parties (Ghimire, 2022). At present, Nepali women are stepping up to utilize the opportunities created by the previous generation of barrier-breakers, to expand the space for women in

the political landscape. In the course of doing so, they have to face a wide range of barriers.

A key barrier faced by women in politics is rampant discrimination. According to UN Women (2018), women are given a lower status in society, which limits their ability to actively make contributions in politics. Furthermore, as social media and technology started making their way into the political landscape, women in politics have become even more vulnerable to discrimination, through cyberbullying and hate speech. As Bajimaya (2022) states, "women are threatened and prevented from speaking up, which is why they still remain underrepresented in the political process today."

The lack of intersectionality and acknowledgement of the issues faced by marginalized women also plays a huge role in hindering women's overall engagement in politics. Analyzing the 2022 local elections, out of 293 mayors in Nepal, only 7 of them are women and 5 of them are Khas Arya. This showcases how the 33% reservation quota is largely occupied by Khas-Arya women. Women from Dalit, indigenous, and Madhesh identities are set back in terms of social networking due to the socio-cultural restraints that are rooted in patriarchy and casteism. Women's representation and issues are kept in a homogenous category which neglects women from marginalized communities as the system will favor so-called "upper caste" women (Rimal, 2022). Additionally, there are also the economic restrictions with factors such as unpaid family care, gender gap in pay, occupational segregation, etc., making it difficult for women to even take part in electoral campaigning (Prasain, 2025). This further prevents marginalized women from entering the political landscape as networks that are willing to provide funds to political campaigns are favored based on the social hierarchical status.

Next, the current socio-cultural structure in Nepal significantly discourages women from participating in politics. Women are expected to fulfill their roles as wives and mother before anything else and are usually heavily policed and dictated in their choices and agency. Due to this, they are often scrutinized for pursuing and prioritizing a political career. They are consistently seen as caregivers first and leaders

second (Prasain, 2025). This creates a deep-rooted mindset that women should not be pursuing a political career. Therefore, even though the quota system creates reservation for women's participation, women are more likely to be treated like they are not made for politics, resulting in the tokenistic nature of the quota system.

Although there have been a lot of progressive changes in terms of women's participation in politics, the core of this statement is still the same two decades later. Women's political representation is not translating into meaningful participation. The barriers that prevent women from being in the position of power must be studied and analyzed. This article aims to explore the same and recommend possible interventions.

With the objective of helping the readers understand the struggles of women in the political space, this article summarizes the experiences and opinions of a few female leaders in the political space of Nepal. Their names, party affiliations, and any other information regarding their identity have been kept anonymous for their safety.

Discussion

From a young age, we have studied about grassroots-level political movements to national level political movements that shattered long-standing oppressive systems. And most times, we study about the contribution of men, often ignoring the female contribution in those movements. Most of our political history highlights men, partly because it has been a male-dominated field, and partly because women's efforts have been heavily undocumented. This is the systematic erasure of women's contributions, which can be seen through the lack of data and information about their contributions. From a young age, many of our current female politicians have contributed to grassroots-level resistance and political movements. From sneaking out of their house after dark to distribute awareness pamphlets, to navigating the male-dominated rooms and spaces where political conversations happened, they have stood strong against challenges to be active contributors in the country's fight for democracy. To work tirelessly in politics while constantly being invalidated and having

your capabilities questioned has been a common denominator in female political experience across history.

While the quota system has made a very positive impact in terms of increasing women's participation, there are issues that have to be addressed within the quota system. Even under the quota system, women's representation often resorts to tokenism rather than meaningful participation. Although the quota system has helped reach grass-root level in terms of women's participation, oftentimes the women in these positions are still overshadowed and unheard by their male colleagues.

While the country is ahead in terms of electoral equity mechanisms in the political space, the way that the larger society views female involvement in politics is largely the same. To this day, our female political leaders feel that they are considered less important than their male counterparts, because of not being taken seriously in their position, not being seen as capable leaders, and in extreme cases, facing harassment and threats of violence. For those who have been in the political arena since a young age, this societal tendency to consider women as inferior feels like an old wound that never completely heals.

The fight for women's meaningful participation in political spaces has been a long fight that can date back to the 20th century. According to Pradhan (2005), in spite of constitutional provisions for women's representation in politics, their widespread participation in the 1990 movement for democracy, and increased awareness, women have not been able to see a satisfactory improvement in their access to positions of power and decision-making.

One of the most persistent barriers that Nepalese women in politics face is the expectation to shoulder almost all of the household duties. Although Nepal has made positive strides towards gender equality, our society still expects women to manage the household, raise children, and take care of the family. Today, this burden is exacerbated by a modern "do-it-all" ideal placed on women. They must excel simultaneously at home, work, and in public life. These overlapping demands put women in a difficult position. Firstly,

the time and energy required to balance household responsibilities with political duties make women's career path significantly more challenging than that of their male counterparts. Secondly, even when women somehow manage to balance both spheres, they're often criticized for not fulfilling the "duties of a woman" adequately. Such criticism reinforces the notion that women's political career comes at the expense of family obligations, which may deter women from active political participation. Further, the responsibility of taking care of the household takes away from them the time they could use to build connections within the party. Many women in politics feel that they'd be able to do so much more if they didn't have to shoulder the responsibility of household chores all by themselves. Even to this day, the traditional caregiving role placed on women continues to obstruct their political participation.

A female political leader that we interviewed stated, "Women in politics are not only expected to be active in their political careers but to also bear the responsibilities of being a mother and a wife as well. It all follows the concept of 'Have-it-all Feminism'." 'Having it all' is a phrase that is typically used against professional mothers, a certain standard that men aren't expected to reach, but women are (Lattouf, 2023). In the context of female political leaders, the traditional roles of wife and mother follow them into their political careers, and they are also likely to be criticised for not balancing their political careers with motherhood. On the other hand, male political leaders do not have to face these criticisms nor do they have the same standard forced upon them. Male politicians are often seen just as politicians, and their political career is acknowledged as a valid profession.

Within their own party, women face a fair share of challenges. For one, many of them feel that their reasonings and opinions aren't taken seriously. Even when they are on the same footing as their male counterparts in terms of their position, women have it more difficult to have their voices heard and their presence respected. One of our interviewees shared, "In meetings and discussions, our opinions are more susceptible to dismissal or mockery. We are frequently interrupted and spoken over, making

it harder to assert ourselves in professional spaces. We don't want special treatment. We just want the same respect and space that our male counterparts receive by default."

Another interviewee shared, "People automatically look at men to fill in the leadership roles everywhere, including politics. This scares off women from reaching for leadership positions. If they do get into politics, they get into secretary or assistant roles. Our parties are hesitant to trust women with leadership positions in politics." In a patriarchal society, women are automatically seen as weak-willed. This has not only hindered women in Nepal from taking on leadership roles in politics, but also caused people to be less accepting of women in politics. Hence, despite the laws that promote female political participation, the patriarchal mindset rooted in our society is a major barrier for women in politics.

Aversion towards female leadership also translates into harassment sometimes, especially online. The harassment that women in politics face has worsened with the advancement of social media and technology. An interviewee shared that she experienced online harassment when she just started her political career. She stated, "To say it simply, women in politics are more likely to be targeted for the smallest things. If I hadn't been able to withstand the harassment I faced, perhaps I wouldn't be able to stand in the position I am currently in."

The Himalayan News Service (2024) showcases the Open Nepal Initiative's 2024 data on the instances of online violence faced by female politicians over the course of 3 months.

In August 2024: 24 incidents, 67% of which involved "insult and hate speech."

In September 2024: 35 incidents, with 74.3% classified as "insult and hate speech," including physical threats and sexualised distortions.

In October 2024: 44 incidents, with "Insult and Hate Speech" (70.5%) continuing to lead.

This data showcases the epidemic of online harassment that women in politics experience. Our society continues to suppress women and make sure

they don't "cross the line". Specifically, in the political landscape, it seeks to suppress and punish women for claiming public power and breaking traditional gender norms.

The long-held patriarchal mindset in our society has created a belief that women are not capable or credible to become natural leaders. There is a common belief that women are not confident enough or possess proper leadership skills to take charge of large ministries and political spheres (Prasain, 2025). This particular patriarchal belief has caused a lot of burden towards women political leaders. An interviewee shared, "It is difficult to advocate for yourself and campaign as a woman in the political field. When I had to campaign for myself, I would often have to take my male friends with me. When people didn't listen to me, they would at least listen to my male friends instead." She also shared how she had to have her male colleagues to vouch for her when she was campaigning because there were instances when certain networks refused to fund her campaign because they didn't take her seriously. Her experiences showcase how the system has been built in a way that women in the political landscape have to be dependent for support. This further raises the question about how much autonomy women truly have within the political system.

Despite all the work women in politics put into their political careers while navigating the associated challenges simultaneously, they find it comparatively more difficult to gain and retain the party's trust, as well as to have their work recognized and acknowledged by their party members. The lack of acknowledgement and support from their own party members sometimes makes women question their space in politics, especially in leadership roles. As for the women who try to reach for leadership positions despite the challenges, they observe that men within the party have a hard time accepting female leadership. One of our interviewees shared, "When I ran for election, men within my own party tried to sabotage my campaign. Being a woman, many men couldn't accept that the party had given me a ticket to contest the election." This reflects the resistance female political leaders face within the very political

institutions they contribute to.

Patriarchal values also pose another kind of challenge to women in politics. Women's groups and alliances to support each other are often seen as threats. Women's caucus was a crucial aspect to ensure women's representation not only in legislative but also in executive, judiciary, and political parties (Ghimire, 2022). Initially formed in 2008, the women's caucus was formed as a platform for women across different political parties. Putting aside their ideologies and political differences, it made way to address issues with gender inequality, which had made a space for women's voices to be heard in a male-dominated political landscape. However, this has been long dismantled as male-dominated structure of political parties has sidelined, suppressed, and marginalized the voices of women in the parliament (Ghimire, 2022). Without an association or proper solidarity network, women would constantly feel like they are in competition with one another rather than seeing each other as collaborators working to solve collective problems. Influence and power, when held and exuded by women, is seen as a threat in the political space, making it difficult for women to sustain influence and support fellow women in doing so.

Additionally, there is also a double standard on how the public views male political leaders versus female political leaders. Unlike male political leaders, female political leaders are often ostracized for things that have nothing to do with their roles as politicians, like their marital status, dress code, appearance, etc. The moral policing of female politicians can be very extreme. For instance, Sumana Shrestha in 2023 raised important concerns regarding the wrong template for budgets, the systematic failure in the three layers of administrations, and the failure of the government to introduce a social security programme to help people cope with the economic crisis (Ojha, 2023). However, people were only concerned with her attire, a pair of pants, black vest and a coat, which became a topic of controversy. Even our interviewee has stated, "Sometimes, I do feel a little self-conscious about my appearance because I don't want it to take away from what I am trying to do as a leader." The

constant scrutinization of women over trivial things has made their meaningful contribution to politics even more challenging.

Further, intersectionality is a lesser acknowledged issue within female political participation. The women that are able to take part in politics are usually women from upper societal castes or upper economic class. Women already have to go through challenges taking part in politics under the patriarchy. However in Nepal's case, it is also important to add that the system is as Brahminical as it is patriarchal. Women from indigenous, Dalit, and marginalized communities have another layer of challenges added to them as they are facing double discrimination. Such challenges include the restriction of social mobility. Social mobility for women from marginalized communities are far more restrictive than women from a Brahmin background. For instance, Dalit women are more likely to be shamed, harassed, and have threats of violence for daring to speak against anyone. Even those who made it into the political sphere have been called snide remarks and are often subjected to misogyny and casteism (Upadhyay, 2023).

One of our interviewees belonging to the Dalit community shared, "Even though I have made to the position I am currently in, people still make assumptions about me based on my identity as a Dalit person. They assume that I am not as educated and have made stereotypical remarks about me." An interviewee belonging to the Madhesi community shared, "I have advocated myself as a Madhesi person and I have advocated myself as a woman as well. But they've been used in a very tokenistic way. I have to articulate my experience either solely as a Madhesi person or solely as a woman. I am unable to fully address my unique experience as a Madeshi woman." Another interview belonging to the Madhesi community shared, "When I had gotten the ticket to take part in the elections, men from my own party started creating smear campaigns against me. They did this because they didn't want a woman to represent them even if it means bringing more representation to the Madesh community. These experiences of female political leaders from Dalit and

marginalized communities show that intersectionality isn't acknowledged enough in Nepal's political landscape, particularly for women. Women from marginalized communities have to fight added layers of discrimination, resulting from their identities as women as well as their marginalized backgrounds.

Moreover, there is also the financial aspect alongside social mobility. Typically, women from the so-called "upper caste" are more likely to have useful social networks as well as enough finances to be able to campaign in competitive elections. As for women from Dalit and marginalized communities, they have to go through several layers of restrictions both socially and economically. One of the main obstacles of entering politics is finances and economy. In terms of the economy, women perform about 5.8 times as much unpaid care work as men do (Adhikari, 2025). This financial burden is a setback for women in general, but for women from Dalit and/or marginalized backgrounds, it is even more difficult because of the combination of social and economic restrictions.

Clearly, political participation remains a daunting journey for women, even more for women who aren't Brahmin/Chhetri and/or economically strong. This results from deep-rooted patriarchal and casteist values and structures, as well as their lasting consequences. From being underestimated to facing excessive moral policing, women in politics confront a range of barriers that their male counterparts often do not. Despite the challenges, they continue carving out their space in politics and making their voices heard. Women who choose to enter and engage in politics are barrier-breakers. With their participation in politics, they challenge the status quo, confront long-held male dominance in politics, and inspire other women to do the same. Our female political leaders continue pushing through spaces that resist their presence, let alone active participation. It is because of their persistence that the path to active political participation becomes more accessible for women who will follow.

All of these challenges discussed here have one common denominator- they make our "barrier-breakers" question their space in politics. If women today start questioning their space in politics and

feeling like they don't belong in that space, our collective dream to make politics a fair space for women shall remain only a dream.

Conclusion

Examining the barriers and challenges that have restricted women in politics, it is very clear that the issue is deeply rooted in the patriarchal mindset which has shaped such traditional societal norms of Nepalese society. There has been progress in terms of women's participation in politics especially when making a comparison of this from decades ago to the present. However, there are still issues within the system that are preventing women from being able to fully participate in politics.

The cultural expectation of leadership being presented as masculine and caregiving being presented as feminine has created a huge restriction for women. Not only are they not taken seriously or seen credible for leadership positions, but they are also expected to be able to find the perfect balance between their political career and their duties in the household. There is this additional pressure that women have faced that makes it very difficult to be able to fully commit to their political career. Moreover, the political system also naturally resists putting women in leadership positions. This may result in women questioning themselves and their positions as leaders in politics.

Further, there is also more pressure and higher standards for women to become good leaders. Male politicians' criticism and faults are solely seen as an individual character flaw whereas female politicians' criticism and faults are seen as a general representation of women leadership. This makes women in political roles more susceptible to facing online violence, cyberbullying, and harassment. Not only has this put women in a very difficult position where they also have to find a way to tolerate online violence but it also brings fear and hesitance for women to even think about taking up leadership positions. It is very clear that, in a patriarchal society, this is an attempt to put women back to subordinate and invisible roles. It is also an attempt to punish those who try to break existing barriers and take over

more "masculine" roles such as leadership.

It is also important to look into the lack of intersectionality within women's representation in politics. While there are barriers for women in general, there are very specific barriers for women from marginalized communities. Specifically in terms of social networking, financial restrictions, and overall their voices of struggle being ignored. Women from Dalit, indigenous, and Madhesi communities especially have layers of discrimination set against them based on their gender as well as their ethnicity.

Hence, there are multiple barriers that restrict women's participation. Luckily, there are possible interventions that make space for women's meaningful political participation.

A recommendation given by a participant was to start increasing awareness. Awareness has been something preached in politics and women's representation many times before. However it is still very much needed now. In this case there need to be more studies on women's history in politics. There also needs to be programs that are specifically targeted for women to learn about political literacy. These programs should not only target women to become more politically aware but to also uplift their confidence and skills so they can feel like they have the potential of becoming a political leader. It is important to be able to dismantle the ideation that women aren't fit to become leaders as it has been deeply socialized due to the patriarchal values forced upon.

Another important solution is for there to be action taken towards people harassing and bullying online. The epidemic of online violence has especially been more rapid currently with people feeling very comfortable being anonymous online. The anonymity gave netizens the power to share their unfiltered biases online. Due to the patriarchal mindset, this has created a space in which it brackets women in politics and makes it easier to criticize and in extreme cases harass them without consequences. Further normalizing the violence against women in the political leadership positions. There needs to be more security and strict action to be taken for them.

Next, there is a need for proper programs and support for women specifically from marginalized communities. Having associations dedicated towards helping women from marginalized communities have a platform in which they will not only be able to voice their struggles that are unique to them but also help them create a proper social network. There also need to be associations that will help fund campaigns, especially for women from marginalized communities, as that also seems to be something that is preventing them from entering the political landscape. Furthermore, to support women in politics and bring more intersectionality into discussion, the revival of women's caucus is essential. This will not only strengthen the solidarity between women but will also help in highlighting their struggles as well.

Most importantly, the key is for women to continue making space for themselves in politics. If women in the past had given up on their fight against these challenges, we wouldn't even see the progress we've seen till date. To help women mark their space in politics, our leaders urge their male counterparts to take off their patriarchy-colored lens and support their female counterparts' fight in any way that they can. Because somewhere underneath all our progress lies a bitter truth- our society finds it easier to accept men's opinions rather than women's opinions.

The struggle for women's participation in politics is far from over, and there are barriers that are left to be overcome. But, our "barrier-breakers" throughout have played a huge role in making politics a more accessible space for the future generations of women. The political space needs more female leaders to dismantle the patriarchal values and bring women on an equal footing as men in political leadership.

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Decentralized Power, Centralized Voices: Are Nepal's Youth Truly Heard?

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Abstract

Since Nepal's 2015 constitution ushered in a federal order, decentralisation has become the crux of political, judicial and administrative reform. Yet, the extent to which young citizens, who are emblems of the country's progress, feel represented within this system is underexplored. This paper explores Nepali youth's perception of federalism. More specifically, it fills a critical research gap by assessing how federalism is understood and internalised by youth engaged in activism and federal discourse. It also focuses on their experience, political inclusion and access to opportunities that the federal model promises. We will employ a convergent mixed-methods research design, integrating structured surveys with approximately 117 youth participants and 21 in-depth interviews. Data will be collected from diverse geographic regions, including the central Bagmati Province (specifically Kathmandu), peripheral provinces, and more remote areas such as the Far-Western Province. Quantitative data will be analysed through descriptive and comparative statistics, while

qualitative materials will undergo thematic coding such as elite capture, resource asymmetry, limited fiscal transparency and policy implementation gaps. By triangulating these strands, the study aims to clear up how Nepali youth conceptualise federalism and identify regional disparities in their civic engagement. We conclude with policy recommendations to recalibrate participatory mechanisms and close the representation gap.

Introduction

Nepal's shift from a unitary state to a federal democratic republic as formalised by the 2015 Constitution reconfigured authority across three tiers of government. This shift promised a more responsive, locally rooted polity. Schedule 8 of the Constitution entrusts [22 exclusive powers](#)¹ to municipal and rural bodies. The [Local Government Operation Act 2017](#)² specifies their administrative and fiscal machinery by turning constitutional text into day-to-day practice. Parallel policy initiatives such as the [Asian Development Bank's Law and Policy Reform \(LPR\)](#)³ Programme and [Disaster Preparedness Network](#)

1 Government of Nepal. (2015). Constitution of Nepal (Schedule 8). <https://www.lawcommission.gov.np/en/archives/category/documents/prevailing-law/constitution>

2 Government of Nepal. (2017). Local Government Operation Act 2017. <https://mofaga.gov.np/detail/1697>

3 National Planning Commission. (n.d.). Fifteenth National Plan (2019/20–2023/24), Nepal. Law and Policy Reform Platform, Asian Development Bank. <https://lpr.adb.org/resource/fifteenth-national-plan-20192020-2324-nepal>

(DPNet)⁴ have amplified the decentralisation agenda by training local officials, mainstreaming community participation and pressing for evidence-based amendments to sub-national statutes.

Youths occupy an important place in this new architecture. According to UNDP, people aged 16-40 constitute over 40 %⁵ of Nepal's population, and yet they remain under-represented in formal decision-making processes. Globally, Sustainable Development Goal 16⁶ calls for "Responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels". This is a benchmark the Government of Nepal has endorsed but not yet fully met. As young people make up a large share of Nepal's population and are becoming increasingly visible through protests and online activism, how well they are brought into and represented by the new federal system will reveal whether federalism is actually working. The existing scholarship has focused on the technical and administrative aspects of Nepal's federal transition, but it rarely centres youth as "office-seekers or claim-makers". Most studies examine institutions rather than the lived experience of those navigating them.

This article therefore asks: (1) How do Nepali youth perceive their political inclusion under federalism? (2) What urban-rural disparities shape those perceptions? (3) Which structural barriers most impede meaningful engagement? To answer these questions, we adopt a convergent mixed-method design by combining a structured survey of approximately 117 youth activists/professionals with 21 in-depth interviews and analysing the data through descriptive statistics and thematic coding.

The article is structured to commence with an exposition of the methodology, followed by a presentation of findings and narratives, organized within the main body through thematic or case-based analysis, substantiated by empirical evidence and real life argumentations. It concludes with reflections

on the findings, their implications for policy and practice, and recommendations for enhancing youth engagement in Nepal's federal system.

Methodology

This study adopts a convergent mixed-methods design to capture both breadth and depth of how Nepali youth perceive and engage with federalism. The quantitative component consists of a structured survey administered to approximately 117 youth activists and community organisers. Respondents are purposely sampled to achieve a roughly equal split between the Kathmandu Valley (50%), peripheral provinces and more remote areas of the Karnali and Sudurpaschim Province (50%). The survey instrument employs questions to measure perceived political representation, access to the decision-making process, and institutional trust at the municipal and provincial levels. Additional demographic and socio-economic questions (age, gender, caste, education, and urban/rural residence) are also added which allow for subgroup analysis. Survey questionnaires were distributed online via secure Google Forms.

The qualitative component involves 21 semi-structured interviews with young people purposely selected to represent a balance of gender, caste, and geographic location. Interviews are conducted approximately 30 minutes each and are conducted in Nepali or English, whichever the participant preferred. All participants provided oral/written informed consent, also including permission for audio recording. All identifying information is anonymised and stored separately from responses in order to protect confidentiality. The study's limitation is that it is based on a non-probability sample of youth activists, which may skew findings towards more politically engaged individuals.

4 National Planning Commission. (2019). Disaster risk reduction national strategic plan of action (2018–2030). Disaster Preparedness Network-Nepal (DPNet). <https://www.dpnet.org.np/resource-detail/1515>

5 United Nations Development Programme. (n.d.). Youth: Empowering young people in Nepal. <https://www.undp.org/nepal/youth>

6 United Nations. (n.d.). Peace, justice and strong institutions – Goal 16. United Nations Sustainable Development. <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/peace-justice/>

Discussion

Thematic or Case-Based Analysis with Evidence and Argumentation

A key starting point in understanding how Nepali youth relate to federalism is the depth of their familiarity with it. Of the 117 survey respondents, only 28.2% described themselves as very familiar with the federal system introduced by the 2015 Constitution, while the majority of 51.3%, reported being somewhat familiar. Strikingly, just 2.6% admitted to having no familiarity at all, suggesting that while awareness exists, depth of understanding varies significantly. Unsurprisingly, urban youth, particularly those based in Bagmati Province, reported significantly higher familiarity rates. Over half of urban Bagmati respondents said they were very familiar with the system, whereas only 15% of rural youth in areas like Madhesh could say the same. These geographic variations mirror access to civic education and political discourse. In interviews, many urban participants defined federalism in terms like “division of power” and “shared governance,” whereas rural youth often gave broader, less concrete descriptions such as “development” or “empowerment.” Some rural respondents voiced concerns about the misuse of decentralised authority, particularly in provinces like Karnali and Sudurpaschim, where a lack of technical expertise and elite interference has, in their view, warped the intended purpose of federal governance. One youth from Madhesh summarized this sentiment poignantly: “Power is provided to all levels of government, but without training on how to use it correctly, it’s often misused.” Across the board, regional disparities in exposure to information and civic infrastructure deeply shaped how youth internalized the concept of federalism.

Optimism regarding federalism’s impact on national development was mixed but leaned slightly positive. While 41.0% of respondents were somewhat optimistic and 17.9% very optimistic, a combined 23.1% were either neutral or pessimistic. When asked about improvements in local governance, a majority (43.6%) noted

only slight improvements, while just 20.5% saw

significant positive changes. These numbers reveal a cautious attitude: most youth recognize incremental shifts but remain unconvinced that the system is fully delivering on its promises. This skepticism was reflected in interviews, with many participants citing elite capture and resource asymmetry as major structural failures. Thematic coding of qualitative data reinforced this, with 51.3% of youth referencing elite capture directly, 48.7% pointing to poor policy implementation, and 56.4% identifying limited access to decision-making platforms as serious hurdles. Urban youth in areas like Kathmandu and Pokhara tended to report more visible improvements and better responsiveness from local bodies, while rural youth in Madhesh and Karnali often felt entirely bypassed by federal programs. One youth from Lumbini put it bluntly: “Political arenas are filled with older crowds, resulting in a feeling of alienation for young people.” Others noted that even within provinces, urban municipalities monopolize resources and attention, leaving outlying areas perpetually underdeveloped and unheard.

When asked about political representation, youth responses painted a picture of symbolic inclusion with little real power. Only 20.5% of survey respondents felt adequately represented in local or provincial decision-making, while one-third disagreed or strongly disagreed. Participation in governance activities was similarly low: 28.2% reported never engaging, 30.8% rarely did, and only 17.9% participated regularly. This disengagement was most pronounced among rural youth, especially in provinces like Madhesh and Sudurpaschim, where only 10% felt represented, compared to 40% in Bagmati. Interview narratives illustrated how political gatekeeping shuts out youth lacking party ties or financial influence. One participant from Karnali revealed: “I wasn’t elected fairly because I had no political power.” Another, from Madhesh, described the experience of being overlooked despite being active and informed: “Youth from rural areas are overlooked despite our commitment, while those in Kathmandu get selected for programs.” Even those in urban areas who accessed platforms like youth councils often reported feeling sidelined or dismissed due to their age. There was a pervasive sentiment across interviews that

youth voices are used to signal inclusivity without truly influencing decisions, a form of tokenism that undermines democratic participation.

Access to both economic and political opportunities under federalism was another major axis of dissatisfaction. One-third of youth (33.3%) rated their access to economic opportunities such as jobs and training as poor or very poor. While 35.9% rated access as average, only 12.8% described it as good. Political access fared only slightly better, with 28.2% rating it good or excellent, but 30.8% still found it poor or very poor. The disparities were again sharply regional: youth from rural Madhesh and Karnali reported the lowest access to both types of opportunities, half said economic access was poor, and 60% rated political access as poor. By contrast, in urban Bagmati, only 20% found economic access poor and a mere 15% saw political access as limited. Interviewees frequently pointed to structural issues like budget centralization, poor outreach, and politicized program design. One youth from Gandaki Province remarked, “Youth programs should be organized in rural areas, not just Kathmandu, to give marginalized youth a chance.” Many also described a lack of awareness about available programs or the financial inability to participate, which disproportionately affected female and Dalit youth. Participants cited a critical lack of transparency and accountability in how youth development funds are allocated, with many funds ending up in the hands of politically connected individuals.

The urban-rural divide remains a persistent structural fault line in Nepal’s federal project. Youth in urban centers, particularly Kathmandu reported significantly higher levels of familiarity, representation, and opportunity. This is attributed to their proximity to institutions, greater access to information, and stronger educational infrastructure. Meanwhile, rural youth, especially in the peripheries of Sudurpaschim, Karnali, and Madhesh, faced much steeper challenges. They described barriers such as poor road access, lack of local forums, digital exclusion, and ineffective dissemination of program information. One group discussion participant emphasized that development under federalism

often remains concentrated in provincial capitals like Pokhara or Biratnagar, replicating Kathmandu’s centralism at a smaller scale. Marginalized youth, particularly from Dalit, Madheshi, indigenous, and LGBTQ+ communities, shared stories of exclusion even within inclusive frameworks. One young LGBTQ+ advocate from Lumbini acknowledged their community’s symbolic inclusion in some policies but lamented the absence of queer voices in actual budget discussions or legislative planning. Another female respondent in Koshi Province shared her frustration about merit being sidelined in favor of political quotas, saying, “Opportunities feel reserved for specific groups, leaving others, like myself, sidelined despite our capabilities.”

These narratives bring to light a stark reality: while federalism has opened some doors, it has not removed the stairs many youth must still climb. Interviews with young political representatives and community workers affirmed that decentralization has in some ways enhanced service delivery, ward-level services, old-age allowances, and identity-based representation were cited as tangible gains. Yet the aspirational vision of federalism, one of inclusion, equity, and meaningful youth engagement, remains undercut by elite capture, politicization, and uneven implementation. Even when local governments organize skill training or development projects, as one ward chairperson noted, youth participation is often low, driven by outmigration and a loss of trust. Youth themselves recognize federalism’s value and potential but remain wary. As one activist concluded during a group discussion, “Federalism is worth fighting for, but not in its current form. It needs reform, accountability, and youth at the center, not the periphery.”

Layered beneath statistical indicators and survey metrics are the lived contradictions that young people across Nepal encounter while navigating the evolving terrain of federalism. During group interviews and dialogues, several participants expressed disillusionment not only with implementation flaws but also with the very structure of provincial governance. While federalism was initially framed as a solution to the excessive centralization of power,

many youth now question whether the provincial tier has added value or simply complicated decision-making. In provinces like Gandaki, youth cited confusion over jurisdictional responsibilities, such as the case of legalizing ride-sharing services, where the provincial government's inability to act independently due to federal interference highlighted the limits of its authority. Participants voiced frustration that despite the investment of resources in provincial institutions, tangible outcomes were hard to identify. One youth remarked that had power remained with just the central and local levels, Nepal might have operated more efficiently. This view reflects a growing skepticism among engaged youth who once supported the federal shift but now feel its operational layers lack clear mandates or accountability.

This lack of clarity around provincial power is more than a bureaucratic concern, it shapes how youth understand and experience governance. Some participants working in areas like climate advocacy and local development shared that while they were eager to collaborate with provincial authorities, they often encountered delays, vague responses, or redirection to federal entities. This fragmentation breeds confusion, weakens trust, and diminishes the sense of agency among young civic actors trying to create change at the local level. Others noted that provincial governments often mirror the same hierarchical, party-dominated culture found at the central level, failing to innovate or localize engagement strategies. Instead of acting as a bridge between central policy and grassroots needs, provinces are often perceived as redundant or even obstructive. For youth committed to action, whether in climate, agriculture, education, or governance, the inefficiency of the provincial layer creates a bottleneck. "If no one can tell what the province is really doing," one respondent asked, "why should we believe it's worth having at all?"

Importantly, these sentiments do not reflect a wholesale rejection of federalism. Instead, they reveal a desire for refinement while streamlining governance, clearly delineating authority, and aligning policy responsibilities with capability. As Nepal's federal model matures, youth are calling

for simplification and functionality over form. They want to see provinces take initiative on pressing local concerns like education reform, environmental policy, youth employment, and gender inclusion should not remain sidelined or subservient to federal ministries. Without this recalibration, federalism risks becoming an expensive illusion of decentralization rather than a meaningful redistribution of power.

Throughout discussions, youth also stressed the importance of long-term planning and inter-generational accountability. Many felt that programs aimed at young people were reactionary and disconnected from the real barriers they face, such as under-resourced schools, migration pressures, and political gatekeeping. Some emphasized that youth engagement initiatives often focused on urban centers, leaving rural and remote areas reliant on irregular NGO outreach or political patronage networks. This misalignment between intention and delivery deepens the rural-urban gap and reinforces the perception that federalism, in practice, continues to privilege the already privileged. Even when youth receive training or support, participants reported that their voices rarely translate into policy decisions. The process remains top-down: consultative on paper but directive in practice. There is, they argue, a stark difference between being heard and being heeded.

These perspectives, drawn from youth working in agriculture, climate action, education, and community advocacy across various provinces, coalesce into a shared narrative: federalism, as it stands, is a promise unfulfilled. Its framework offers potential, but its execution suffers from structural confusion, elite capture, resource misallocation, and lack of political will to meaningfully include young people beyond symbolic gestures. And yet, these youth are not giving up. Their criticisms are rooted not in apathy but in expectation. They continue to demand reforms that are grounded in transparency, responsiveness, and clarity, especially regarding the provincial tier's purpose and capacity. In a country as diverse and stratified as Nepal, federalism must not just exist, it must function. And for that to happen, youth argue, the system must be made intelligible, accountable, and responsive at every level.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Nepal's youth remain cautiously optimistic about federalism. They understand its theoretical promise: bringing governance closer to people, decentralizing power, and amplifying marginalized voices. But in practice, they encounter structural dysfunction, elite capture, policy ambiguity, and a persistent urban-rural divide that distorts access to representation and opportunity. Provincial governments, meant to serve as a connective tier between local realities and federal policy, are seen by many as administratively weak, politically redundant, or even obstructive. While federalism has delivered visible gains in areas like service delivery and symbolic inclusion, it has yet to institutionalize youth agency as a core feature of governance.

To bridge this gap between promise and practice, the following policy recommendations are proposed. These are grounded in the data, directly target problem areas, and are designed to be practical, implementable, and tailored to Nepal's political and institutional realities:

1. Legally Mandate Youth Representation in All Local and Provincial Planning Bodies

Amend the Local Government Operation Act and related provincial statutes to include a mandatory youth representative (age 18–30) in municipal and provincial planning committees. This position must carry decision-making authority, not just advisory status. Quotas should prioritize inclusion from Dalit, Madheshi, Janajati, LGBTQ+, and disabled youth populations, and selection should be done through open applications, not party nominations.

2. Publish a Federal-Provincial-Local Responsibilities Matrix for Public Awareness

To resolve confusion over roles and duties, especially among youth activists, civil society, and local officials, the Ministry of Federal Affairs should develop a clear, visual “Responsibilities Matrix” that maps out

what federal, provincial, and local governments are accountable for. This should be taught in secondary schools, used in civic education programs, and distributed widely through youth networks and digital platforms.

3. Create Provincial Youth Opportunity Portals

Each province should be mandated to establish a Youth Opportunity Portal, a digital one-stop hub that lists available internships, training programs, budget allocations, grant opportunities, and local council events. These portals must be updated monthly and maintained by a dedicated Youth Engagement Unit under the Office of the Chief Minister. SMS notification services should be made available for rural youth without stable internet access.

4. Introduce Participatory Budgeting for Youth Funds

Make 30% of all local-level youth development funds subject to participatory budgeting processes, where youth groups vote or provide feedback on funding priorities. This creates a feedback loop between youth needs and budget allocation and reduces elite capture. Guidelines and toolkits for participatory budgeting should be developed in partnership with CSOs like NEFIN Youth and National Youth Council.

5. Reform and Standardize Youth Councils

Revise Nagar Yuva Parishads and related youth platforms to eliminate partisan appointment practices. Introduce competitive, merit-based entry with fixed terms, gender quotas, and independent oversight. Each council should have a published work plan, annual report, and accessible complaint mechanism. Councils must also be institutionally linked to municipal planning and budgeting bodies.

6. Localize Civic Education and Federalism Orientation Programs

Partner with schools, colleges, NGOs, and FM radio networks to run short, localized civic education programs that demystify federalism, governance

responsibilities, and youth rights. This is especially urgent in rural and marginalized communities. Develop a “Federalism 101” handbook in local languages, distributed through schools and youth clubs.

7. Invest in Youth Data Systems

There is currently no centralized, disaggregated data on youth participation in governance. The National Planning Commission, in collaboration with provincial ministries, should establish a Youth Engagement Dashboard to track participation rates, program access, and resource distribution across geography, gender, caste, and age bands. This will help target underrepresented groups and track progress over time.

8. Enable Provincial Fiscal Autonomy and Revenue Innovation

Provincial governments must be empowered to generate and retain their own revenue beyond federal block grants. This includes legal authority to introduce local levies, incentivize private investment, or partner on public-private youth initiatives. Budgetary autonomy is essential if provinces are to deliver

context-specific programs for youth engagement and development.

9. Strengthen Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms

Create a national-level Youth Accountability Ombudsperson within the National Youth Council tasked with tracking youth grievances against local or provincial governance failures. This office should produce annual reports, conduct independent audits of youth-targeted budgets, and recommend sanctions or reforms.

10. Depoliticize Youth Opportunity Distribution

Enact clear ethical codes and transparent application systems for distributing government-supported training, travel, or employment opportunities. Selection should be merit-based and decentralized, with applications reviewed by independent panels that include civil society and youth-led organizations. Anonymized data on recipients should be published annually to ensure transparency.

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Intersectional Youth Governance: Where Are the Young Agrarians?

Samarth Bista

Abstract

Agriculture, which is Nepal's economic backbone, engages over 60% of the population. Yet, the very youth who sustain this system, especially those from rural, indigenous, and marginalized communities, are often left out of the conversations and decisions that shape it. In this piece, I examine the various ways young agrarians are excluded from governance and policy-making spaces. Drawing from my own field experiences, policy review, and work with local communities, I explore how caste, gender, geography, and class intersect to limit participation. While Nepal's federal structure was meant to bring the government closer to the people, it hasn't done enough to meaningfully include young farmers in decision-making. At the same time, there's powerful work happening on the ground, youth-led cooperatives, agroecological initiatives, and digital tools that show just how much potential exists when young people take the lead. This article argues for a shift- from token gestures of inclusion to real, structural change that puts youth at the center of agri-governance, advancing food justice, youth rights, and truly inclusive democracy in Nepal.

Introduction

Agriculture has long been the foundation of Nepal's economy, engaging 19.5 million people- about 67% of the population. Among them, women slightly outnumber men, making up 51% of those engaged in

farming (National Census, 2078). Farming contributes approximately 23.95% to the national GDP (MoALD, 2024). But beyond the statistics, it is deeply tied to our culture, identity, and survival. Yet, despite its central role in daily life, agriculture is often dismissed as outdated or low-status, especially for young people.

Nepal's youth, defined by the Youth Vision 2025 and the Constitution of Nepal as individuals between the ages of 16 and 40, make up over 42.56% of the population, with females accounting for 52.95% of this youth segment, while males make up 47.05% (National Census, 2078). Many young people are actively engaged in agriculture, either by inheritance or by choice. However, despite the national rhetoric on youth empowerment, their participation in agricultural governance remains shallow. Movements like #OccupyBaluwatar and Youth Parliament Nepal have shown that young people are capable of reshaping political discourse, influencing national budgets, and mobilizing collective action through digital platforms. But these movements mostly reflect urban youth, leaving young agrarians overlooked. When youth do enter the national conversation, it's usually about digital activism or urban entrepreneurship, not the day-to-day realities of rural farming. Those of us working the land, or choosing to return to it, remain largely invisible in policy spaces. Inclusion cannot just be a matter of physical presence or token representation. True participation means confronting the deeper structures that determine who gets heard and who remains invisible. Layers of caste, gender,

geography, and economic status continue to shape the extent to which young farmers can influence the systems that affect their livelihoods (Koirala & Neupane, 2023).

Over the past few years, I've had the opportunity to engage with different aspects of Nepal's agricultural system, whether working as an agriculture intern in Rautahat, participating in the national agriculture census in Dhankuta, or collaborating with youth movements during climate dialogues, a consistent narrative emerged: young people are doing the work, yet excluded from decisions about that work. Through personal reflection and critical engagement with current policies, this piece looks at why so many young people are missing from the places where decisions are made about agriculture and how intersectional barriers deepen that exclusion. But it also highlights how many of us are already pushing back, finding our ways to lead, organize, and make change from the ground up. At its core, this article is a call to rethink governance. Decentralizing systems isn't enough if they still exclude the very people doing the work. We need structures built on trust and shared power, ones that recognize the lived wisdom of young farmers and allow them to lead. Because if we want a resilient, just, and sustainable food future in Nepal, it must be built with young agrarians, not just for them.

The Silent Majority: Youth in Agriculture

Nepal's policy landscape has long sidelined agriculture as a domain for development rather than as a vital space for democratic participation. National strategies like the Agriculture Development Strategy (ADS) and Youth Vision 2025 frequently mention youth participation. However, this inclusion is often reduced to encouraging entrepreneurship or commercialization, equating youth empowerment with business creation rather than political or systemic engagement. Programs such as the Prime Minister Agriculture Modernization Project (PMAMP) emphasize mechanization and commercialization, but they rarely involve youth collectives or smallholder farmers meaningfully in program design,

implementation, or monitoring. During my internship with PMAMP-PIU in Rautahat, I saw firsthand how the disconnection between state-led interventions and grassroots realities plays out. While trainings and subsidies were available, they were frequently filtered through layers of bureaucracy and political favoritism, which sidelined many deserving young farmers. Notably, youth without formal land ownership or political connections found themselves excluded from access to resources and decision-making platforms.

Even initiatives with genuine intent fall short due to poor outreach and tokenistic political practices. A study by Khanal et al. (2021) reflects similar realities, noting that while youth are enthusiastic about agriculture, they often perceive it as burdensome and economically unrewarding. Nearly half of the respondents reported that agriculture had minimal impact on economic transformation due to limited access to modern tools, land, credit, markets, and institutional support factors that mirror the systemic exclusions I observed on the ground. While local governments may establish "youth advisory councils," these bodies rarely hold real decision-making authority or influence over agricultural policies or budget allocations.

Moreover, agricultural governance remains a domain dominated by older men with established political or bureaucratic networks. Youth participation is often confined to symbolic roles or limited to attending workshops that have little impact on real policy. Despite the broad legal definition of youth as anyone aged 16 to 40, their formal political representation is alarmingly low, comprising only around 5% of Nepal's parliament, well below the global average of 13.5%. This underrepresentation is further compounded by legal age restrictions that require individuals to be at least 21 years old to run for local elections and 25 for provincial or federal offices. Current laws restrict candidacy for provincial and federal offices to individuals aged 25 or older, and bar anyone under 45 from serving on constitutional committees. These age-based exclusions conflict with Nepal's definition of youth (16–40) in Youth Vision 2025 and effectively marginalize the largest demographic from

legislative influence. These restrictions effectively silence a large segment of youth, especially those from rural and agrarian backgrounds who face additional structural barriers to candidacy, such as limited education, resources, or political networks. This gap between the lived agricultural realities of youth and their absence in governance means that policies are often misaligned with the needs and aspirations of those who farm the land. When youth voices are missing, agricultural programs tend to focus narrowly on technological fixes or commercial outputs without addressing the social and political dimensions of farming. The governance structures that are supposed to support youth empowerment frequently reinforce the very exclusions they claim to address.

Layers of Exclusion: Geography, Gender, and Caste

To truly understand why young agrarians are underrepresented in decision-making spaces, we must look beyond age and consider how other social identities intersect to exacerbate exclusion. Intersectionality, as conceptualized by Kimberlé Crenshaw(1991), helps reveal how overlapping systems of oppression shape people's experiences. It is an analytical framework for understanding how groups' and individuals' social and political identities result in unique combinations of discrimination and privilege. In short, it's a framework for understanding oppression (El Gharib, 2022). In Nepal's agricultural governance, exclusion is layered. A youth's likelihood of being heard is shaped not just by age, but by their caste, ethnicity, gender, and geography. In Nepal, caste and ethnicity play a central role in shaping access to land, capital, and political power. Marginalized and indigenous youth farmers often face systemic discrimination that prevents them from accessing government programs, land titles, or leadership positions in cooperatives and local bodies. During my time conducting the National Agricultural Census in Dhankuta, I interacted with young farmers who had never been invited to ward meetings or heard of subsidy programs. Those from marginalized or indigenous backgrounds expressed deep cynicism about government responsiveness.

Gender adds another layer of exclusion. Rural young women face entrenched patriarchal norms that limit their visibility and agency. They are even less visible, rarely listed as landowners, cooperative leaders, or project beneficiaries, even when they perform the bulk of agricultural labor. These forms of exclusion are not merely social; they are systemic, reinforced through planning mechanisms, eligibility criteria, and legal structures. Decentralization, under federalism, was intended to improve local accountability. However, many municipalities continue to replicate exclusionary models rooted in elite, male-dominated, and urban-centric frameworks. Youth without political connections or fluency in dominant languages often find governance spaces intimidating or inaccessible.

Geography further compounds exclusion. Across Nepal's hills and plains, young people continue to till land, manage livestock, and adapt to erratic climates. Yet their contributions often go unrecognized in policy. Despite national programs referencing "youth inclusion," the fine print frequently excludes those without formal land titles, access to capital, or proximity to political centers. Structural neglect compounds this problem. Even when youth are organized in cooperatives or informal networks, their participation is often tokenized. Most agricultural decisions are still made by older men with land, political leverage, or bureaucratic ties. The rest of us are asked to follow, but not lead. Traditional and cultural practices continue to reinforce gender and caste-based exclusion in agriculture. Women often bear disproportionate physical workloads, such as milling and grinding grains even during pregnancy, which limits their capacity to engage fully in farming decisions or leadership roles. Dalit farmers face persistent caste-based discrimination that restricts their access to critical social networks, training opportunities, and participation in governance structures. These systemic barriers further deepen the invisibility of marginalized young agrarians within agricultural policy and governance processes, perpetuating cycles of exclusion (Koirala & Neupane, 2023). In the 2022 local elections, while youth candidacy surged in urban municipalities, structural and economic barriers limited rural youth participation, especially those in agriculture.

High youth unemployment (19.2%) and migration for employment abroad further deepen rural disengagement from politics.

Migration, Return, and Youth Exclusion in Nepal's Agrarian Governance

Migration has long shaped Nepal's rural landscape, but lately, it's become more than just a response to poverty; it's a quiet reshaping of how young people see farming and the countryside. According to the World Bank reports, in 2023, Nepal received over \$8 billion in remittances, roughly 25% of its GDP. That's a staggering amount, and it tells a bigger story: young people are leaving, and the country's economy is becoming more dependent on money sent home than on farming the land.

The decision to migrate is rarely an individual choice. It is shaped by a complex matrix of aspirations, obligations, and structural exclusions. For many youths, especially in places like Dhanusha, Dhading, and Kanchanpur, the decision to migrate isn't just about chasing better pay. It's also about giving up on a system that no longer seems to support them. Farming, for them, often feels like a dead end. Rising costs, unpredictable weather, shaky markets, and limited access to land or loans leave little room for hope. So when the chance comes to go abroad to the Gulf, Malaysia, or even Kathmandu, it feels like the only real option (Paudel & Adhikari, 2010). Government efforts to keep youth in agriculture have largely missed the mark. Policies talk about modernization and entrepreneurship, but they often fail to engage with the everyday struggles that push young people away in the first place. So, migration, in many cases, becomes a quiet protest, a way of saying, "This system isn't working for me."

Back home, the impact of this shift falls heavily on those left behind, especially women. As more men leave, women and girls take on bigger roles in farming and family care. But even with more responsibility, they're still often left out of decision-making, training programs, and cooperatives. So, while we talk about the feminization of agriculture,

we rarely back it up with reforms that shift power. Remittances, for all the good they can do, like funding education or home repairs, also have a downside. They give the government an excuse to ignore rural investment. Roads remain broken. Market access stays poor. Agricultural support is minimal. Instead of strengthening the rural economy, remittances often end up funding more migration, which slowly disconnects families from the land. Over time, generations lose touch with farming, not just in practice, but in identity. Returnees, those who come back after years abroad, face another kind of struggle. They often bring back skills, savings, and a desire to do something meaningful. But they hit barriers almost immediately: bureaucracy, lack of land, social doubt. Farming isn't easy to return to, especially when systems are built more for show than for real support. Take Nepal's Foreign Employment Policy (MoLESS, 2021). It barely mentions agriculture. Modernization projects rarely include returnees who want to farm sustainably. Yet, talk to returnees, and many say they want to stay on the land they just don't see a way to make it work.

What Nepal needs now is more than another subsidy or top-down program. It needs a real shift in how we see agriculture, not as a fallback or burden, but as a space full of possibility. That means giving youth real access to land through co-ownership or lease models. It means designing reintegration programs that connect returnees to cooperatives, training, and markets. It means letting youth lead their agriculture funds at the local level. And it means reshaping the public narrative, celebrating farming not as survival, but as skill, pride, and innovation (Shiva, 2016). Of course, returning to farming is rarely simple. It's often emotional. Many young Nepalis still see it as a step back. They have to justify their choice to skeptical neighbors, distant relatives, and even themselves. And with little government support, it's easy to burn out. But for those who stay or return, farming can be a powerful act. It's a way of reclaiming space, resisting the pressure to conform to urban ideals, and rebuilding a connection to land and community. Many of these young farmers are experimenting with permaculture, seed saving, and cooperative models, building something new from the ground up. But

without recognition and long-term backing, their energy risks fading (Shiva, 2016).

There are models to learn from. Countries like the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Ghana have launched programs to welcome returnee farmers, offering land, mentorship, and training. Nepal could pilot similar efforts at the municipal level. Even labor agreements with other countries could include reintegration clauses that link migration to rural development in a meaningful way (World Bank, 2022). Migration, by itself, isn't the problem. But when it becomes the only option for youth, it signals that something's broken. Young people aren't leaving the land because they don't care that they're leaving. After all, the systems around them have failed to see them as farmers, leaders, or citizens with a future in agriculture. Fixing that means reimagining rural life not just with policies, but with respect, trust, and real opportunities.

Seeds of Change: Youth-Led Innovation and Resistance

Despite these formidable structural barriers, Nepal's young agrarians are far from passive victims. Across the country, youth are actively reclaiming agency through innovation, advocacy, and collective organizing. They are reimagining what agriculture can be and how governance should work.

One inspiring example comes from the GRAPE student exchange programme at the HASERA Permaculture Center. Here, young people from diverse backgrounds learned hands-on permaculture techniques, biofertilizer production, integrated pest management, and climate-resilient farming systems. These approaches challenge the dominant narrative that equates agricultural progress with chemical inputs and monocultures. Instead, they promote ecological sustainability, biodiversity, and community knowledge, offering viable alternatives for young farmers facing climate uncertainty and degraded soils. Digital tools are also transforming the landscape of youth engagement in agriculture. Apps like GeoKrishi provide rural youth with timely weather forecasts, crop advisories, and market price information, bridging knowledge gaps that have long disadvantaged smallholder farmers. Although

digital inequality persists, with limited internet access and low digital literacy in many remote areas, such platforms demonstrate the potential for democratizing agricultural knowledge and empowering youth as informed decision-makers.

Youth-led collectives such as World Food Forum Nepal, Mountain Youth Hub, and Clean Energy Nepal are forging trans-local alliances that combine agroecology with climate advocacy. These movements articulate alternative food system visions grounded in social justice, land rights, biodiversity protection, and cultural identity. They work across ethnic and caste lines to build inclusive spaces that amplify marginalized voices and advocate for systemic change. However, these youth innovators often remain marginalized from formal governance structures. Without institutional pathways to influence budgets, policies, or local bylaws, their impact tends to be limited to pilot projects or donor-driven initiatives. For these efforts to translate into meaningful, lasting change, grassroots leadership must be paired with formal political legitimacy and access to decision-making.

Building Bridges: What Inclusive Governance Could Look Like

Inclusion must go far beyond inviting a token youth representative to an occasional meeting. It requires reimagining governance so that participation is not only possible but meaningful, accessible, and embedded at every level. Imagine if every rural municipality established a youth-led monitoring unit to oversee agricultural programs. These units could gather community-defined indicators such as soil health, water availability, or market fairness, and provide real-time feedback to policymakers. This would shift governance from top-down decision-making to co-creation grounded in lived experience. Implementing and scaling agricultural innovations in mixed farming systems requires inclusive policies that actively engage diverse groups of farmers, especially women, the elderly, and marginalized communities. Participatory, bottom-up approaches are essential to fostering enabling environments

where farmers exercise ownership over the selection, implementation, and post-implementation of innovations. This not only enhances contextual relevance but also strengthens social legitimacy and adoption. Addressing regressive social norms is equally critical. Policies and programs must prioritize reducing women's labor burdens and creating safe, inclusive spaces for their meaningful participation. Ignoring the heterogeneity among farmers risks deepening marginalization. Alongside technical agricultural training, soft skills development, such as understanding subsidies, market systems, and leadership, can better equip marginalized farmers to navigate institutional barriers. Moreover, strengthening farmer groups and cooperatives can bridge the gap between grassroots actors and institutional stakeholders. These networks facilitate access to critical services, inputs, credit, subsidies, and agro-mechanization, and enhance the political agency of young agrarians and underrepresented groups. Such collaborative platforms are not only technically empowering but also politically transformative, contributing to more inclusive governance.

What if agricultural budgets mandated a youth quota, not only for program beneficiaries but for youth co-designers involved in planning and evaluation? Embedding youth participation structurally in budgeting would give young farmers real influence over resource allocation and priorities. Nepal's legal framework already contains the tools to move in this direction. The Local Government Operation Act (2017) enables local bodies to form thematic committees and consultative forums. Yet, these provisions often remain underutilized or are implemented only symbolically. The key missing ingredients are political will, capacity building for youth leadership, and sustained follow-through from all stakeholders. International donors and INGOs can support this shift by reallocating funding from large-scale, top-heavy projects toward community-rooted youth initiatives. Investing in leadership development, technical assistance, and horizontal learning networks would nurture the next generation of agrarian leaders and innovators. Finally, language and literacy barriers must be addressed. Governance platforms should

be multilingual and use accessible formats, visual tools, storytelling, and community radio to ensure that diverse youth can understand, engage with, and influence agricultural policies.

Towards Food Sovereignty and Youth Sovereignty

Nepal's growing engagement with food sovereignty movements presents a unique opportunity to link agrarian justice with youth rights. Food sovereignty emphasizes democratic control over food systems, biodiversity, land, and traditional knowledge. These principles align closely with the lived realities and aspirations of young farmers. However, food sovereignty risks being incomplete without centering youth, especially those from historically excluded communities. Who decides what crops to grow, how to farm, and who benefits from agricultural policies? These are political questions that require youth participation at every level.

Young agrarians are not asking for charity or token inclusion. They demand recognition as farmers, thinkers, and community leaders. From agroecological projects in Kavre to compost entrepreneurship in Dhanusha, young people are creating blueprints for sustainable and just food systems. To realize this vision, governance must evolve from being a gatekeeper to a partner. It must listen deeply, invest boldly, and trust youth to lead. Otherwise, food sovereignty will remain an ideal rather than a lived reality.

From Tokenism to Transformation: Why Youth Inclusion Matters

Youth inclusion is not a symbolic gesture or a checkbox on a policy document; it is a strategic investment in Nepal's future. As climate change intensifies, rural livelihoods face unprecedented challenges. Migration patterns are shifting, threatening community cohesion and agricultural knowledge transfer. Governance systems need the insight, creativity, and adaptability that only young farmers can provide. Yet, current governance models

rarely value the experiential knowledge that youth possess. Policies are often drafted in technical jargon inaccessible to many rural youths. Echoing these concerns, Khanal et al. (2021) argue for targeted investment in agricultural education, youth-friendly extension services, and improved access to inputs and finance strategies that can transform youth participation from passive to powerful. Participation is too often limited to passive roles: attending workshops, submitting forms, or signing petitions. Real empowerment means co-creating policies from the start, planning, budgeting, implementing, and evaluating programs together.

Co-governance must become the norm. Youth councils should hold statutory powers with real budgets and influence. Funds should be decentralized to support grassroots innovation. Youth-led groups must be mandatory stakeholders in policy processes. Additionally, agricultural education must expand beyond technical skills. Governance literacy, understanding how decisions are made, how to influence policy, and how to advocate for rights should be integral to training young farmers. Tomorrow's farmers must also become tomorrow's leaders and decision-makers.

Conclusion: Reimagining Power from the Ground Up

Nepal's future grows in its fields, tended by young people whose knowledge, leadership, and care remain too often invisible. We must shift our perspective: stop asking whether youth are ready to lead and start asking whether our systems are ready to trust and empower them. Nepal's political landscape is being reshaped by youth, but unless rural and agrarian voices are included, the transformation will remain incomplete.

From my experiences across regions and institutions, I have witnessed the transformative potential of young agrarians. They are not passive beneficiaries but co-creators of a just, sustainable, and sovereign food system.

To make this vision a reality, we must:

- » Mandate youth representation with real power in local agricultural committees and governance bodies.
- » Ensure policy design is inclusive, using multilingual and youth-friendly platforms.
- » Increase funding for youth-led initiatives that integrate ecology, economy, and equity.
- » Recognize rural knowledge as critical policy data, not anecdotal or marginal.

Young agrarians are already planting seeds of change. The question is whether governance will grow alongside them, not above them.

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Restructuring Power: Youth and the Future of Governance in a Federal Nepal

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Abstract

Restructuring Power: Youth and the Future of Governance in a Federal Nepal examines how Nepal's decentralized federal system can better serve its youth not just as participants, but as leaders. While the Constitution envisions power shared across federal, provincial, and local levels, in actual practice, young people remain excluded from meaningful decision-making. In present day Nepal, power is still concentrated among older elites; and youth are often limited to token roles or street activism.

This article argues that decentralization shouldn't just be about the transfer of control to local authorities but also mean generational restructuring of power. Through case studies, some historical contexts, and policy analysis, we explore how youth-led governance can bridge gaps between policy and lived realities. From urban innovation to rural neglect, the article reveals deep disparities and offers solutions.

By investing in civic education, authority filled youth quotas, and making recognized space for the youth in law making processes, Nepal can unlock the full potential of federalism because - for democratic transformation - letting youth lead is not optional, it is essential.

Introduction

A quick Google search gives us a very clear answer

on what governance is : the action or manner of governing a state, organization, etc. The World Bank defines governance as the processes and institutions through which decisions are made and authority in a country is exercised (World Bank, 2017). Governance starts from the very children club (Baal Club) of our locality to the governance of a state as a whole. Governance is the system by which the institutions are directed and controlled. It encompasses the rules, regulations, practices and mechanisms that determine how decisions are made, how power is exercised and how actions are implemented.

Decentralization is the process of allocating power, responsibilities and functions from a central authority to the substantial ones. Here, the central authority delegates its authority so that the hierarchical chain can function from their own level. The central theme behind decentralization is that it increases civic participation and the feeling of ownership in governance which in turn gives comprehensive results in development (Ostrom, 1990).

Power (yeah, you heard it right: Powerrrrr!). This word is very misunderstood, to say the least. The Weberian view of power : as a control over others even against their will; is widely the public perception of power (Weber, 1947). We shouldn't limit power to just Max Weber's view though. When we hear the word "power" - we build a negative connotation around it most of the time. But, power - like we understand it - does not exclusively refer to the threat or use of

force. Power in politics and governance is in fact, the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behaviour of others or the course of events (Foucault, 1977).

With a very brief intro of power, decentralization and power - let's come to discussing these, in the context of our very mother; Nepal. Nepal politically adopts a decentralized governance model and that is the major power structure here. Something we shouldn't miss from the very beginning is that the term "decentralization" isn't very new in the context of Nepal. Efforts to decentralize power have been ongoing for several decades starting from as early as the 1950s. The Panchayat-era itself introduced some concept of decentralization from 1960 to 1990. It is true that significant advancements in decentralization were seen after the establishment of local government institutions soon after the restoration of multi-party democracy in 1990. Local Self-Governance Act (1999) laid the necessary groundwork to a great degree for the future. The Constitution of 2015 envisioned full federal restructuring into 3 tiers: federal, provincial, and local. We're currently living that envision. Not just in Nepal, the need for decentralized power is felt in every country worldwide to maximize the utilization of local resources and to understand the actual need of the people. With this in mind, let's talk about power, governance and decentralization - with a special focus to youth. Since these concepts directly shape the fate of the country and ultimately direct everything we do, it is our responsibility to understand them in a greater detail.

Nepal is going through a rough political climate currently - When does it not, though? xD. Jokes apart, in this article - we'll try to dive a little into how and why we should talk about restructuring/reclaiming power. The role of youth in shaping the future of a country doesn't need any explanation. In Nepal too - this idea needs no further elongation; in fact - the phrase "Youths are the future of the nation" is a very widely used answer in the Social Studies paper for almost every "How to develop Nepal?" question. In this article too, we'll try the best of our knowledge to emphasize the role of youth in shaping political futures. How youths bring fresh perspectives in the fastest changing times in human history? How

youths can still navigate a way around technology - which is moving faster than ever. How can youths bridge the gap between the vision and execution in the context of present day Nepal? We'll put forward our arguments on how it is the youths who can make the most of these advances. And, how the political structure of the country can help mobilize the energy of the youths in the right direction. Because, none of us are in any doubt that with the right participation of youths, multi-dimensions of development unfold.

Discussion

We often cite weak governance as an answer to every problem in this country. The Good Governance Theory (UNDP) explains governance by emphasizing transparency, accountability, participation, and the rule of law (UNDP, 2015). So, the question arises - how do we strengthen our weak governance? How do we ensure transparency, accountability, participation and the rule of law? How do we build institutions that are trustworthy enough for the public? These remain experimental ideas in an early democracy like Nepal. Currently, our state mechanism looks very confused because most of the things in Nepal are experimental. Francis Fukuyama, a recognized American political scientist argues that what we're going through in Nepal isn't very unnatural - the confusion we're in isn't much of a surprise in an early democracy. But, obviously we can't use it as an excuse to accept what we're going through, we need to ACT.

Nepal has 3 layers of governance - the central government, the state and the local. On paper, this sounds like a very wonderful plan. Transfer of power, resources, and responsibilities from central to subnational levels sounds beautiful. But, just recently we saw the Central government dictating the Gandaki province to halt the Ride Sharing Niyamaawali which it had prepared. The irony is that the Ride Sharing Laws are amongst the laws that the province is responsible to build - on paper. Areas like these are places where the division of power was expected. But, we couldn't feel that in reality. In the context of Nepal, the transfer of power from the central government to the provincial and the local governments is very minimal with direct intervention of the central government in the very smallest of the areas. These are the issues

we youths should be vocal about.

Also, let's get our facts clear - decentralization isn't just a political thing. In fact, to actually receive the rewards of it, we need rigorous investment in administrative, fiscal, and market decentralization - which is very less talked about in Nepal. The institutions of Nepal are ultra politicized, the schools and the hospitals too are one of the most politicized public institutions in the country. Partisan politics is one of the most significant reasons for the chaos we're in as a society. Former President Biddhya Devi Bhandari rejoining party politics speaks volumes of the problem.

Before we talk about correcting what went wrong and ensuring the active participation of the youth - let's quickly know how our governance and power structures evolved historically. The governance trajectory from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy (1990) to Republic (2008) to federal democratic republic is a topic of great study for the students of political history of Nepal. The pre-1990 era saw a highly centralized monarchy (a traditional elite-driven power structure) where the youths were mostly excluded. Then we saw a semi-decentralized party-dominated power structure from 1990 to 2006 where the youths were involved but just limited to protestors, and had no role in policy making. The period after 2006 till the drafting of constitution from the constitution assembly saw a great transition. It was the first time Nepal was in reality a democratic republic. The civil space was expanded, a lot of our youths became leaders in activism during this period. Post-2015 is what is the practice of the constitution. There are significant changes like the representation of women, Dalits, marginalized and economically backward communities in the mainstream politics and governance but still there is a great elite-domination at the top. The major political leaders are unpopular but have found a way to stay in power somehow. The youths have found formal entries at the local levels as Mayors and Ward Chairs, and the rise of digital voice has opened up wholly new possibilities.

With so many opportunities for youths, what's the correlation of youth and power? Historically excluded from formal power structures; youths are still not offered powerful positions by the present day political

parties of power. Investment of time (a lot of it) in the power radar of the political party is taken as a very necessary condition for power gain, which discards youth from reaching powerful positions since they're made to wait, wait and wait. Youth movements all the way from the Jayatu Sanskritam Aandolan to the Janamat Sangraha to the 2006 People's Movement (Jana Andolan 2nd) to the recent climate discussions and digital activism see youths' role limited to activism and not policy making. This is what needs to change now.

Nepal's history of governance is also the story of who had a voice and who didn't. For a long time, power was controlled from the top. During the monarchy and Rana rule, a small group of elites made all the big decisions. Young people, especially from marginalized communities like Dalits, Madhesis, and Janajatis, were often completely left out. Education wasn't common, and standing up to authority was dangerous. Things began to change in the 1990s. Democracy brought hope. Students started organizing protests, writing political slogans, and taking part in movements. But even then, the real power stayed in the hands of party leaders and the same old groups. Youth were allowed to speak, but not really decide.

The Maoist conflict between 1996 and 2006 shook the system. Many young people joined the movement, not just because of the ideology, but because they had felt ignored. Some wanted justice, some wanted a better future. It was a painful time, but it created a generation that was somewhat aware of politics and power. After 2006, there was a feeling that things might change for good. The media gave young people new ways to raise their voices. Activism moved online with time. And when Nepal adopted its federal Constitution in 2015, it officially promised to give more power to local governments. And today, youth represent 41 percent of local representatives, although only 11 percent of federal-level lawmakers are under 40. This is a big win considering where we started from. At the same time, a great mental shift is seen and the youth is deciding to stop waiting for permission to lead. They are creating their own spaces to be heard.

As we previously pointed out, Nepal's new federal

system looks great on paper. We now have 753 local governments, each with authority over schools, health posts, roads, and more. But in practice, many of these governments still depend on the center for money and approval, the provincial governments are very weak and have unclear jurisdiction (a very recent example is the Gandaki Province's Ride Sharing Law). Youth who win elections often feel frustrated when they want to work, but they don't have enough authority or support.

Take the story of a young deputy mayor from the Madhes Pradhesh. She wanted to start a campaign to promote menstrual health in schools. Although many supported her idea, she faced delays, red tape, and resistance from older leaders. She said, "I am an elected leader, but I'm still expected to obey." Her voice echoes the struggle of many young leaders trying to make real changes. Despite many shortcomings, there is a better budget to the municipalities and wards than before and the number of youth candidates in the local government is only rising.

Party capture of local governments is a serious long-term problem. The local governments are too much captured by the political parties and because of that, the rise of independent individuals becomes difficult. This will create a massive frustration amongst the youths and also lead to a de-politicized society. As much as ultra-politicization is a problem to our democracy, extreme de-politicization can also become one.

Another problem with the present day political parties is that they resist young people from reaching actual power by valuing age over ability. There is an unbreakable-looking informal power structure (networks, patronage, seniority culture) in almost every institution. Age, seniority and *yogdaan* still carry a lot of weight in Nepal's present day politics. In most political parties, being older is seen as being wiser. This culture makes it hard for young leaders to be taken seriously. Sometimes they are labeled as "too emotional" or "too inexperienced," even when they bring strong ideas. Student and youth wings of political parties like the NSU or ANNFSU also haven't been able to break this vicious cycle. The

major failure of student and youth politics lies in its extreme politicization. Major political parties didn't allow these wings to act as independent forces nor did they let it evolve as an autonomous intellectual platform. Instead, they held it hostage to their partisan interests which led to favoritism, token positions, and little room for real influence inside. Because of this, many young activists now stay away from political parties and focus on issues instead. But that too has a cost to bear - without party backing, they often don't get the resources, platforms, or media attention for widespread change. Now, a mere superficial fix can no longer revive youth politics. What is needed now is deep introspection, ruthless self-criticism, structural reform, and essential behavioral change.

Despite the obstacles, something new is happening. Young people are using social media, digital campaigns, and issue-based activism to make noise. Campaigns like "Occupy Tundikhel," "Save the Bagmati," "Remove the Red Tax," and protests against gender violence are just a few examples. These didn't come from political party offices, they came from living rooms, classrooms, and mobile phones. Today's youth may not all want to be politicians but they want to be part of the change. Now, the participation through youth wings (NSU, ANNFSU etc.) and independent youth activism should go hand in hand to bring that missing synergy. Digital platforms have opened up crazy possibilities for advocacy, and campaigning but that's not enough in the long run - we should equally work to build the lacking institutional spaces.

When Balen Shah won the Kathmandu mayoral race, it shocked many. A rapper and engineer with no party background, Balen built his campaign through Instagram stories, online lives, and street-level connections. He didn't make the old promises but he talked about data, dignity, and disruption. People, especially the youth, saw hope in him. His win showed that new voices can win public trust. In the 2022 local elections, the 71 percent voter turnout proved how engaged people were especially the young voters.

In other parts of Nepal too, change is starting to show. In Kathmandu's Gokarna Municipality, leaders are really working hard to deliver results to the citizens. Young people, women, and community members

can now help plan budgets and share their ideas. One young female ward chair said, “Before, people laughed at my ideas. Now, they’re included in official plans.”

Differences are distinct now between youth led and patronage-dominated municipalities. The Arjun Chaupari Rural Municipality led by young Prakash Tiwari and the Bharatpur Metro led by Renu Dahal have shown real efforts and results in their respective areas. They’ve been able to show that youths really think differently to the problems and find a way to address them.

But in places like Damak Municipality, things remain stuck. There, decisions are still made behind closed doors. If you’re not connected to the right people or political groups, your ideas are often ignored. A young engineer once proposed a smart flood mapping system but was dismissed and asked who he was sent by, showing that - while the laws have changed the mindsets haven’t changed everywhere.

Even when it’s almost certain that youth bring in some kind of a fresh perspective in leadership, the number of youth participation is very low at the structural level and not satisfactory. This creates a big gap between the problems of the youth and how they’re being solved. As a result, the problems of the youths amplify. The youths feel unattended. This is also the reason why the youths aren’t very open to staying in Nepal and aren’t looking for opportunities here. Unattended; this will have a significant impact in the long run (so much is already visible.)

Talking about youths, a very less talked about topic is the big gap between the aspirations of the youths in the urban area and the rural areas. There exists a group who has received a fair share of opportunities to explore and raise their voice, while another section is completely unaware of the opportunities. The problem with this is that the youth narrative is driven by a small section of the population. This might look like a very small problem today, but will eventually pose a bottleneck.

Again, decentralization has to do a lot about it. Are the voices of youths from the rural corners of the country treated equally to the voices raised by those

from Kathmandu or the cities? The answer is a clear NO.

The local government can do much about it. The urban youth has an advantage in terms of access to technology and forums to raise their voice but much needs to be done to bring ideas of the rural youth.

Conclusion

Not every young person wants to be in politics, and that’s okay. But many do want their country to listen. Today’s youth don’t find any sense of attachment to the stories of how much of a struggle it was to establish democracy in this country or how the country implemented federalism. They now look for institutional reforms and accountability from the government. The dust filled roads, the queue in government offices, the heavy traffic is what is bothering them. And since the current political leadership never felt the need to win the trust of the youth, the youths are now only focused on the results. Also, the youth is quick to make judgement, doesn’t have much interest in politics, doesn’t read between the news and is mostly frustrated.

Now we’ve to start from the basics. From our classrooms, from our cafe discussions. In most classrooms, we never teach the students what it means to be a responsible citizen, how to engage with local government, or how to challenge unfair policies. Let’s change that now. Let’s discuss how our ward offices work, how laws are made, and how the budget is built.

Civic education and political literacy shouldn’t just be fancy terms to be used in discussions, they should act as the tools to help young people find their voice. Lately, we see a lot of events, programs and workshops catering this urgent need. Initiatives like Language of Liberty, Amnesty International, Project Abhaya, Global Shapers Kathmandu, and the likes of it have tried to bridge that gap. Since these initiatives reach only a handful, we need forums like these at all of our local levels at the least. Because, for most of the youth outside the valley and not involved in a political party, political literacy and politics as a whole feels distant, dirty, or dangerous. That needs

to change?

How do we change that? For that, we have to now redefine “youth participation” from the ground up. At the moment, even in areas where youths are “included,” most of it feels like a formality. A few young faces in the photos, to fill the quorum, a mention of “engaging youth participation” in the report and that is pretty much it. Most of the youth quotas today are symbolic, you might be invited to a meeting, but you don’t get to shape the outcome. So, youth quotas should really go beyond tokenism to begin with. That’s step one.

Imagine 23-year-olds discussing how a portion of the ward budget should be spent. What do they want? A library? Menstrual health training? An upskilling workshop? This is the shift we should be moving into. Local youth councils could make this real, if they were given real power. Also, the youth wings of political parties can lead this if the political leadership wills.

Change doesn’t happen by accident, it happens when we make space for it. Concepts like the National Youth Parliament could give young people the platform they’ve never had; to represent their districts and areas, raise real issues from the ground, and propose solutions from their lived experience. Today, it’s not impossible to do that; technology gives us necessary tools to build digital democracy, real-time feedback systems, public voting practices, and open accountability. But more than that, we need to see youth not just as future leaders, but as present changemakers. And this includes young women. For every boy who speaks in a room, there’s a girl who was made to learn to be quiet. That silence needs to end too. Young women must not only be invited, they must lead the conversation. We have to make space for the underprivileged, the Dalits, the Aadiwasis and those who have been left outside the mainstream. Because when power is restructured to include those who’ve long been excluded, Nepal will finally begin to look like the country it dreams to be.

Nepal’s young people today are not waiting in the shadows, they’re already raising their voices, building initiatives, and imagining a better future. Multiple initiatives are active to empower the youth. The youth

has creatively blended civic education as a networking opportunity. They make sure to play in the middle of the serious dialogues, they make sure to dance in the middle of drafting serious reports - all while they’re bringing awareness to their communities. Today’s youths work differently.

So, what they need now is not just appreciation, they need power. Institutional, legal, and financial power. Because no matter how passionate young people are, they can only go so far without real tools and support. We cannot keep calling them “leaders of tomorrow” while denying them space today.

It’s high time we make youth representation more than a headline. Nepal has only 5% youth representation at the federal level, far below the global average. We’re missing out a lot on fresh ideas, local insights, and the boldness to question the status quo. Let’s create spaces where young people get mentorship, funding, and real authority. Political parties also must stop limiting youth as foot soldiers and start treating them as policymakers now. They should push for internal youth elections, platforms for new debates, and promotions based on ideas not age. Local governments too can unlock the leadership potential of youth. Even 5% of a ward’s budget allocated to youth-led projects can mean a new waste management plan, mental health support, or a tech training center. More than the project, the result this trust and responsibility will bring is immense.

Technology offers a bridge between youth and governance. With the digital tools available today, we can make politics accessible and engaging. We can build platforms that let young people suggest ideas for their wards, vote on what matters most, or track how budgets are spent. This isn’t science fiction, this is already happening in many places of the world. You can check the stories from Estonia, Taiwan and more. Nepal’s youth have the skills to build it here too. But they need the green light. It’s time to stop sidelining the generation that has everything to lose and everything to offer. Let this be the decade when Nepal says clearly: youth are not just the energy of politics, they are its mind, its soul, and its rightful leaders. Let them lead.

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The Illusion of Decentralization: Nepal Still in Centralized Loop Amidst Federal Aspirations

Renisha Ghimire

Abstract

Nepal transitioned to a federal democratic republic in 2015, aiming to dismantle centuries of centralized governance and address profound regional disparities, uneven development, and social exclusion. This paper critically examines whether this political decentralization has translated into genuine socio-economic decentralization, arguing that it has largely created an “illusion of decentralization.” While new governance structures are in place, the Capital - Kathmandu - continues to monopolize economic resources, infrastructure, and institutional capacities, perpetuating a significant imbalance across the nation. The core finding is the identification and analysis of a “centralized loop”, a self-reinforcing mechanism comprising historical centralization, a vicious “opportunity-brain drain-investment” cycle, and policy capture by elites. These interconnected factors systematically divert human and financial capital towards the center, leading to persistent stagnation in outer regions and largely symbolic decentralization. The paper demonstrates how this loop undermines federalism’s transformative potential, exacerbates regional inequalities, compels youth migration, thereby hindering inclusive national development. Breaking this entrenched cycle requires integrated strategies focused on equitable resource distribution, capacity building for local governments,

and democratizing access to opportunity beyond the capital.

Introduction

Nepal’s socio-economic and political evolution has been profoundly shaped by a long history of centralized authority, geographic constraints, and complex socio-cultural dynamics. The promulgation of a new Constitution in 2015 marked a historic turning point, officially transitioning Nepal from a unitary governance model to a federal system. This profound shift was intended to fundamentally address deep-rooted challenges: uneven development, the systemic exclusion of marginalized groups, and persistent regional disparities. Federalism promised to dismantle centuries of top-down control from the capital, fostering genuine inclusion, equitable representation, and localized development across the nation. However, nearly a decade since this constitutional reform and the formal devolution of political authority to three tiers of government, the anticipated socio-economic transformation has largely failed to materialize.

This is evident in the gravitational pull of the capital, which continues to monopolize economic resources, infrastructure, and institutional capacities, drawing talent and investment away from the other regions throughout Nepal. This suggests that the

historical system through which the capital has been dominating over it was never truly dismantled, but merely overlaid with a federal superstructure.

Thus, this persistent imbalance raises a central question, which is also the central thesis for this paper: Has political decentralization genuinely translated into socio-economic decentralization in Nepal? This paper argues that while federal structures exist in form, a centralized reality persists in substance, creating an “illusion of decentralization.” To unpack this phenomenon, this paper introduces and analyzes the “centralized loop”: an interconnected set of historical and structural factors that systematically reinforce the dominance of capital, perpetuating regional inequality and limiting federalism’s transformative potential.

This paper will critically examine the mechanisms that sustain this centralized loop, explore its profound impacts, particularly on youth migration and regional development, and propose strategic interventions designed to break this cycle, thereby achieving meaningful decentralization and inclusive growth across Nepal.

The Legacy of Centralization: A Historical Determinant

Nepal’s socio-economic and political landscape has been profoundly shaped by centuries of top-down governance, where the capital acted as the singular forum for power, resources, and decision-making.

This section explores the deep historical entrenchment of centralization that laid the groundwork for the “centralized loop” to persist, encompassing the resilience of the capital’s dominance even in a formally decentralized system.

The origins of this extreme centralization are rooted in the unification campaign of King Prithvi Narayan Shah (mid-18th century). After the conquest of the Kathmandu Valley in 1768–69, Prithvi Narayan Shah moved the capital from Gorkha to Kathmandu, establishing it as the political and administrative center of the newly unified kingdom. He instituted a unitary system of governance, replacing the previously fragmented local rule of the Baise (22)

and Chaubise (24) kingdoms with direct control from Kathmandu. Administrative posts and offices were created and managed from the center. Land tenure and revenue systems were designed to ensure loyalty to the center, often granting land or revenue rights to those who supported the Shah’s rule. This initial phase effectively diminished the traditional authority of local elites, making them directly submissive to the King in Kathmandu.

This centralization was profoundly deepened and institutionalized under the autocratic Rana regime (1846-1951). In power, education, and economic resources were tightly managed from the capital. For instance, Kathmandu became a manufacturing hub in the mid-1800s; during this period, highly personalized and monopolistic control was practiced, and all critical state functions, administration, military, and exporting textiles, metal works, and utensils. The Swayambhu Barudkhana (gunpowder factory) and a Leather Factory in Balaju were established in Kathmandu. The first significant hydropower project in Nepal, the 500 KW Pharping Hydropower Plant, was built in Kathmandu, followed by the 640 KW Sundarijal Power Plant. Nepal Bank Limited, the country’s first modern bank, was established in Kathmandu. Durbar High School (Bhanu Secondary School), the first school in Nepal, was established in Kathmandu. Tri-Chandra College, Nepal’s first college, was established in Kathmandu.

These institutions primarily served the ruling elite and their associates, reinforcing Kathmandu’s status as the exclusive center of power, education, and economic activity during the period, ensuring that any economic benefits or foreign aid (then limited) flowed directly to the central fund, and often into the Rana family’s private wealth. The deliberate underdevelopment of transportation and communication links to the outer regions was minimal, by the end of the Rana regime in 1951, Nepal had only five kilometers of blacktopped road, 83 kilometers of gravel road, and 288 kilometers of unmetalled road in the entire country, with Kathmandu’s access still primarily by footpath. The first motorable road (Tribhuvan Rajpath) connecting Kathmandu to the Indian border was only constructed after the end of

the Rana period (1953–1956), reinforcing the capital's isolation as a privilege. This was a deliberate strategy; by keeping these regions infrastructurally backward, economically marginalized, and educationally deprived, the Ranas aimed to prevent any organized challenge to their authority, fostering a dependent and docile population.

Following the fall of the Rana regime in 1951 and the rise of democracy, the Panchayat system (1960-1990), though couched in the language of “local governance” and “decentralization,” ultimately maintained this concentration of power. Under this partyless system, political decentralization existed largely in name only. While local bodies were established, they had limited autonomous powers. Economic planning remained centrally driven, with major development projects and resources still channeled through the capital. This sustained concentration inadvertently (or intentionally) reinforced regional disparities, embedding the idea that all legitimate authority and opportunity emanated solely from the center. For instance, the Decentralization Act was enacted in 1982 and implemented in 1984 with two important milestones: opening up integrated rural service centers (Sewa Kendra) in every district to provide technical and other services at the local level, and implementation of small local projects, such as drinking water systems, through Users Committees. But the decentralized programmes could not produce expected outcomes, mainly due to the lack of funding from the center and the absence of local revenues.

Even the reintroduction of multiparty democracy in 1990 did not fundamentally alter this centralizing pull. Despite aspirations for a more balanced governance model among citizens and political actors, the capital stubbornly retained its primacy. It continued to be the undisputed center for bureaucratic authority, financial institutions, higher education, and business, creating a severe regional imbalance.

This relentless pull of the capital due to the existence of the country's best hospitals, top-tier universities, highest employment prospects, and richest cultural amenities led to a stark regional imbalance that persists today. It substantially has higher GDP per capita and HDI compared to other provinces,

reflecting its concentration of economic activities, government institutions, and services. It contrasts with the chronic underdevelopment in many districts across the Terai, hills, and mountains, which struggle with limited access to even basic services. This historical trajectory, therefore, establishes a deep-seated centralized foundation that proved remarkably resilient to formal political shifts, laying the unavoidable context for the challenges faced by Nepal's federal aspirations.

Federalism's Promise: A Constitutional Attempt to Face Historical Realities

The promulgation of the new Constitution in 2015 marked a profound attempt to fundamentally re-engineer Nepal's governance structure. It was not merely a legal layout but a direct response to deep-seated political and social grievances accumulated over centuries of centralized rule. This section argues that while the constitutional blueprint for federalism was ambitious and theoretically sound, its implementation has consistently met the inertia of historical realities, setting the stage for the “illusion of decentralization.”

The shift from a unitary to a federal democratic republic was a climax of decades of popular movements and the peace process, explicitly aiming to rectify past injustices. A clear intent to address uneven development, combat the systemic exclusion of diverse ethnic, linguistic, and regional groups, and mitigate entrenched regional disparities can be seen through this constitutional reform. For example, the Preamble and Directive Principles emphasize ending “all forms of discrimination and oppression created by the feudal, autocratic, centralized, unitary system” and committing to a “federal democratic republican system of governance” that ensures inclusiveness and autonomy for diverse groups. The overarching goal was to counter the capital's long-standing dominance by fostering genuine inclusion, equitable representation, and participatory governance.

Federalism, as enshrined in the 2015 Constitution, promised a radical transformation of governance

through the devolution of legislative, executive, and some judicial authority to local levels. This was a direct response to the historical concentration of power. The core philosophical idea, as articulated by proponents of federalism, was that decentralizing power would bring government physically and functionally closer to the people. This proximity, it was hypothesized, would enable more responsive, accountable, and transparent governance, empowering local communities with greater agency over decisions directly affecting their lives.

Article 56 meticulously outlined the establishment of three distinct tiers of government: federal, provincial, and local. Each tier was endowed with constitutionally guaranteed powers, functional responsibilities, and, importantly, revenue-sharing arrangements, marking a clear division of authority intended to decentralize governance. Schedules 5 to 9 of the Constitution list exclusive and concurrent powers of the Federal, Provincial, and Local governments, detailing jurisdiction over areas such as taxation, natural resources, education, health, and infrastructure, thus institutionalizing federalism and local autonomy.

The explicit goal of this multi-tiered structure was to dismantle the centuries-old top-down control that had been centralized in Kathmandu. By empowering local governments with their own legislative, executive, and judicial powers, federalism aimed to reduce the dependence of local units on the central government for every decision and resource. This was expected to foster tailored, community-focused development initiatives that could address the unique needs and priorities of different regions and communities. Beyond administrative efficiency, the promise was deeply tied to fostering inclusion and equitable representation. Federalism aimed to give a voice to marginalized groups, including various ethnic minorities, Madhesis, Dalits, and women, by ensuring their representation in provincial and local governance structures, thereby addressing the historical injustices of exclusion. The aspirations were high: a more responsive, accountable, and regionally balanced Nepal, where every citizen felt a sense of ownership and participation in the nation-building process. However, as the subsequent analysis will demonstrate, the implementation has fallen short of

this grand blueprint.

The Central Question: The Illusion of Decentralization or Decentralization?

This section posits that the current state of affairs represents not true decentralization, but rather an illusion of decentralization, where formal structures mask a continued centralized reality.

Three levels of government were indeed introduced with constitutionally guaranteed powers in 2015, underpinned by the core idea of bringing government closer to the people for more tailored, community-focused development initiatives. However, the Internal Migration Report of the National Population and Housing Census 2021 reveals that Kathmandu continues to attract a disproportionate share of youth seeking education, employment, and better living standards. (National Statistics Office, 2025). This socio-economic reality on the ground starkly reveals a continued, deeply entrenched centralization of opportunity, influence, and wealth. Major economic activities, sophisticated services, and crucial decision-making processes overwhelmingly reside in the Kathmandu Valley. Due to which Only Bagmati and Gandaki provinces have higher-than-average per capita income, while others lag behind, reflecting uneven economic development and high dependency on federal transfers (Bhattarai, 2024) These disparities also correlate with social indicators such as HDI and poverty rates, where Bagmati's higher income and better infrastructure contrast sharply with other provinces' challenges. This leads to the growth of capital while regions outside the capital consistently struggle to retain talent and attract investment.

Nearly a decade since the formal transfer of political authority, Nepal's federal journey has not been accompanied by the necessary substantive changes in the redistribution of economic resources, infrastructure, or institutional capacities required for genuine local empowerment.

This persistent imbalance reflects that while federal structures have been formally put in place with elected provincial and local governments now functioning, their functional effectiveness in

genuinely transforming regional disparities remains highly questionable. This creates a core tension that seems very apparent and fundamental: decentralized governance exists in form, but a powerfully centralized reality persists in substance. It suggests that the structural foundations of Kathmandu's dominance were never truly dismantled; instead, they were merely overlaid with a federal superstructure, creating a façade of distributed power.

This directly raises a critical question: Has political decentralization truly translated into socio-economic decentralization in Nepal? Evidence from development indicators and anecdotal accounts consistently indicates a negative answer. This disjunction, as argued, is precisely what constitutes the illusion of decentralization.

This reality undermines the constitutional spirit of local autonomy and equitable development. The subsequent section will delve into the specific mechanisms that perpetuate this illusion, collectively termed the “centralized loop.”

The Problem: The Centralized Loop - Mechanisms of Persistent Centralization

The concept of a ‘centralized loop’ discussed in this paper serves as a critical analytical framework to understand how a complex interplay of historical realities, economic dynamics, and political processes conspires to reinforce the capital's dominance. This section presents a detailed thematic analysis of these interlocking mechanisms, arguing that they systematically perpetuate regional inequality and severely limit the transformative potential of federalism.

Figure: Centralized Loop

1. Historical Centralization

The foundation of the centralized loop is the profound historical centralized force generated by centuries of centralized governance. As discussed above, the administrative apparatus, resource allocation mechanisms, and even the collective consciousness of Nepalis were conditioned to view the capital as the

singular center of power and resource. This historical weight ensures that the “new” federal structures often operate within the constraints of “old” centralized habits, thus impeding the operational autonomy of provincial and local governments.

2. The Opportunity-Brain Drain-Investment Vicious Cycle

A core operational component of the centralized loop is the Opportunity-Brain Drain-Investment cycle, which creates a self-reinforcing dynamic of central accumulation and depletion of outer regions.

- » **Concentrated Opportunity:** The capital, due to its historical advantages, continues to concentrate the vast majority of high-quality opportunities. This includes access to advanced tertiary education, diversified and high-paying employment sectors (e.g., IT, finance, specialized services), premier healthcare facilities, and a vibrant cultural and social scene.
- » **Accelerated Brain Drain:** The perceived and actual lack of comparable opportunities in the regions outside the capital compels ambitious youth and skilled professionals to migrate to the capital. This “brain-drain” systematically suck off the human capital, talent, innovation, and productive workforce that is crucial for local development in the provinces and municipalities. This is not merely a “choice” but often a pragmatic necessity for economic and professional advancement.
- » **Deterred Investment and Stagnation in the regions Outside the Capital:** The consistent outward migration of talent, coupled with underdeveloped local markets and inadequate infrastructure (e.g., reliable electricity, high-speed internet, efficient transport networks), acts as a significant deterrent for both domestic and foreign investment in the regions outside the capital. Bagmati Province, which includes Kathmandu, holds the largest share of Nepal's FDI stock, accounting for 59.7% of the total

FDI stock of Rs. 295.5 billion as of mid-2023. Other provinces, such as Gandaki (15.1%), Koshi (14.7%), and Madhesh (8.8%), have significantly smaller shares, while Lumbini, Karnali, and Sudurpaschim provinces each account for less than 1% of the total FDI stock. (Economic Research Department - Nepal Rastra Bank, 2024) This lack of investment further stifles local economic diversification and growth, trapping regions outside the capital in a state of stagnation. They are unable to accumulate the necessary capital, human, financial, or infrastructural resources to break free from their dependency, thereby perpetuating the centralized loop.

3. Stagnation in Regions Outside Capital

The direct and inevitable outcome of this Opportunity-Brain Drain-Investment cycle is stagnation in regions outside capital. Regions outside Kathmandu experience sustained economic, social, and infrastructural underdevelopment; local economies remain largely agrarian or dependent on remittances, with little diversification or value addition. Essential public services, such as quality healthcare, advanced education, and reliable utilities, remain limited, exacerbating the disparity in living standards. For instance, Nepal's overall HDI in 2025 is 0.622, ranking 145th out of 193 countries, placing it in the medium human development category. Among provinces, according to UNDP 2019 data, Bagmati leads with an HDI of 0.658, followed by Gandaki (0.638), Koshi (0.598), and Lumbini (0.594). In contrast, provinces such as Madhesh (0.548), Karnali (0.575), and Sudurpashchim (0.579) fall into the low human development category, highlighting significant disparities between Kathmandu-centered Bagmati and other provinces. (Dulal, 2023). This indicates the uneven distribution of development outcomes across different parts of the country.

This stagnation reinforces the very conditions that drive migration to the capital, creating a self-perpetuating cycle where the regions outside the capital consistently lag behind, unable to accumulate the necessary capital (human, financial,

or infrastructural) for self-sustaining growth. The promise of tailored, community-focused development under federalism often goes unfulfilled as these regions lack the fundamental resources and capacities to implement ambitious plans.

4. Policy Capture by Elites

A critical, though often subtle, mechanism reinforcing centralization is policy capture by elites. Despite the formal shift to federalism, powerful political, bureaucratic, and economic elites, largely based in the capital, continue to exert disproportionate influence over national policy-making and resource allocation. This capture can manifest through:

- » **Centralized Budgetary Control:** Despite constitutional provisions for fiscal transfers and shared revenue, a significant proportion of financial resources and budgetary authority remains at the federal level, particularly within line ministries. This allows central elites to exercise considerable discretion over large development projects and funds, which can then be directed towards initiatives that disproportionately benefit Kathmandu or regions where their political influence is strongest. In 2024/25, Bagmati allocated 55.23% of its budget to capital expenditure (Rs 36.93bn), higher than many provinces, indicating greater investment in infrastructure and development projects. This contrasts with provinces like Madhes, where capital expenditure is 63.55% but on a smaller total budget. (Ghimire, 2024)
- » **Bureaucratic Resistance to Devolution:** The entrenched federal bureaucracy, accustomed to centralized power and control, often subtly resists the full devolution of authority and resources. This resistance stems from a fear of diminishing their power base, loss of prestige, and the perceived convenience of centralized decision-making. This bureaucratic inaction ensures that critical information, decision-making capabilities, and skilled personnel remain largely concentrated in the capital.

- » **Lobbying and Influence:** Powerful business houses, industry associations, and non-governmental organizations, predominantly located in Kathmandu, can effectively lobby central government bodies to create policies (e.g., tax incentives, regulatory frameworks, major infrastructure investments) that further consolidate their economic advantages in the capital. This often occurs at the expense of fostering a more equitable regional distribution of wealth and opportunity, distorting the market towards the center.
- » This elite capture ensures that even well-intentioned federal policies struggle to genuinely decentralize resources, as their implementation is frequently skewed by the entrenched interests of a powerful, centralized elite operating within the capital.

5. Symbolic Decentralization and the Illusion of Function

Finally, the centralized loop is sustained by the phenomenon of symbolic decentralization, where the form of federalism exists without its substantive function. Nepal has indeed created new tiers of government and inter-governmental coordination mechanisms. However, evaluations of their operational effectiveness frequently point to significant limitations. The functional effectiveness of these structures is often undermined by the continued centralization of opportunity, influence, and wealth. While legal frameworks for power sharing are in place, the socio-economic realities mean that genuine empowerment remains elusive.

This gap between the constitutional ideal and practical reality creates an “illusion of decentralization.” Political decentralization has occurred (e.g., successful elections, local representation), but socio-economic decentralization has not followed suit. This allows the federal superstructure to exist atop an undisturbed centralized foundation. The appearance of decentralization appeases popular demands for autonomy and provides a ‘show’ of progress, while the fundamental mechanisms of centralization continue to operate unhindered, perpetuating regional

inequality and limiting the transformative potential of federalism. This sustained illusion ensures that the centralized loop remains intact, continuing to shape Nepal’s development trajectory in a highly uneven manner.

Towards a Genuine Decentralization

To realize the full potential of federalism and move beyond the illusion of decentralization, Nepal must commit to a more integrated and equity-driven model of decentralization that addresses both political and socio-economic power structures. Redrawing maps and devolving functions are insufficient unless it is accompanied by deliberate efforts to democratize opportunity and resources. This involves:

- » **Breaking the Centralized Loop:** Consciously directing investment, services, and human capital development toward historically neglected regions. This requires targeted federal and provincial policies to incentivize businesses to establish operations outside the capital, provide tax breaks for rural investments, and allocate a disproportionately larger share of development funds to lagging regions. It also means actively building robust provincial and local administrative centers that can compete with Kathmandu’s pull.
- » **Democratizing Access to Opportunity:** Implementing strategies that ensure equitable access to quality education, healthcare, and economic prospects across all regions. This includes building and upgrading regional universities and vocational training centers, establishing specialized healthcare facilities in provincial hubs, and creating dedicated funds for local entrepreneurship and small and medium-sized enterprise development outside the capital. Policies that support local value chains and agricultural diversification can also create sustainable livelihoods.
- » **Empowering Local Governments:** Strengthening local governments not just with political mandates but with genuine

fiscal resources, skilled personnel, and enhanced technical capacity to drive economic development. This entails ensuring a fair and predictable revenue-sharing mechanism, granting greater autonomy in local revenue generation, and prioritizing comprehensive capacity-building programs for local government officials. Furthermore, a decisive and expedited civil service adjustment must be implemented to deploy qualified human resources to the provincial and local tiers, coupled with incentives for retention.

The path forward must be collaborative, requiring synchronized coordination between federal, provincial, and local tiers of government. This necessitates clear communication channels, agreed-upon policy frameworks, and a shared national vision for balanced development that transcends immediate political interests. Ultimately, the promise of decentralization will only be fulfilled when every region of Nepal, regardless of geography or historical neglect, becomes a viable place to live, work, and thrive. Nepal does not need federalism in name alone; it needs federalism in function. The time has come to shift from symbolic decentralization to substantive equity; only then will decentralization cease to be an illusion and become a lived reality for all Nepalis. Achieving this will require continuous monitoring, adaptive policies, and sustained commitment from all levels of government and civil society.

Conclusion

Nepal's transition to federalism in 2015 was widely celebrated as a corrective measure to centuries of centralized governance that had marginalized regions outside the capital and communities. The constitutional shift held the promise of empowering local governments, narrowing regional disparities, and allowing citizens greater voice and control over development processes. However, this paper has demonstrated that while political decentralization has occurred in form, the socio-economic reality remains strongly centralized.

The concept of the centralized loop reveals how

systematic forces interact to perpetuate central dominance. If this centralized loop is not actively dismantled, Nepal risks entrenching the very inequalities that federalism was designed to correct. This loop may deepen if local communities continue to experience stagnation, compelling migration as the only viable strategy for advancement. This could result in demographic imbalances, with some regions becoming depopulated while others are overburdened. Such a scenario would increase stress on infrastructure, exacerbate the urban-rural divide, and weaken national cohesion. Moreover, the erosion of trust in decentralized institutions may foster skepticism toward democratic governance itself, especially among younger generations.

Thus, as long as the capital and selected urban hubs continue to attract the majority of talent, investment, and institutional focus, the regions outside this gravitational center will remain underdeveloped. In this sense, decentralization has thus far functioned more as an illusion than a transformative reality.

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Youth, Representation and Political Participation

Deeksha G.C.

Abstract

This article explores the transformative impact of youth leadership on Nepal's political landscape, highlighting how young leaders have challenged traditional power structures dominated by elder elites. It explains the increasing political participation of youth as candidates and voters, driven by a collective desire for transparency, accountability and innovative governance. Despite significant barriers posed by senior politicians reluctant to cede power, youth-led movements and independent candidates have energized public discourse and reshaped perceptions of politics from a corrupt domain to a platform for service and integrity. As Nepal approaches the 2027 elections, the article underscores the critical need for political parties to embrace generational change and provide space for young, visionary leaders to address contemporary challenges and advance social justice. Ultimately, youth engagement is framed as essential for democratic renewal and sustainable development in Nepal. The article highlights the reality of youth political engagement: on one hand, an empowered, hopeful segment working for transformation; on the other, a disillusioned majority frustrated by corruption, political stagnation, and exclusion from decision-making. In addressing the ongoing challenges, it also explores how digital activism, youth-led movements like "No, Not Again," and the growing appetite for issue-based politics are redefining Nepal's democratic norms and public

expectations.

Introduction

For any country, youth are the best assets it can have. They are not just the future of a nation but also a collective form of an energized group of people who carry vision, fresh perspectives, and innovative ideas. Young people possess competitive minds, eager to learn and contribute to the progress of their nation. Youth are the group of people who carry a sense of responsibility in their mind and integrity in their hearts.

According to Kehily, Youth is "a stage of life between childhood and adulthood" or the period when a person gains independence from dependency (Kehily, 2007). Another approach suggests defining youth as a cultural marker meaning "a distinct social status with specific roles, rituals, and relationships" (USAID, 2005). According to the Armenian State Youth Policy Concept, young people represent the 16-30 age group of the population. Definitions of youth by age groups vary across various international and local institutions, but the basic notion remains the same: they are a group of young minds driven by the motivation of identity exploration, instability, and self-focus before settling into adult roles. The representation of youth in nation-building allows for diverse viewpoints, ensuring that policies and decisions reflect the needs of all generations. Society as a whole is a system of power relations like

political, social, economic, religious, moral, cultural and others. Politics, specifically, is a major driving force of societal transformation as it deals with the distribution of power and resources which eventually leads to society's progress in an equitable manner. Therefore, the participation of youth in politics is crucial for a dynamic and progressive society.

For a healthy democracy, meaningful participation of youth in political, social and economic life is crucial. Youth participation not just ensures that governance reflects the needs and aspirations of the maximum segment of the population but also contributes in holding the stakeholders accountable. Politics shapes the future of a country. Youth brings creativity, adaptability and a critical-thinking approach that is essential for solving modern challenges. Their involvement brings fresh ideas, wide and broad perspectives and technological awareness. Engagement of youth also aids in building civil responsibility and combatting social justice. Pavels (2021) finds proactive youth civic engagement is a potential for the country's development, which ensures the development of civic society, strengthens democratic values, unites society for overcoming common challenges, influences political processes and is an invaluable investment in solving different social problems.

Role of youth in political development of Nepal

In a short period, Nepal's political development has been through major significant changes. Be it the abolishment of Rana regime, Monarchy or establishment of a federal democratic structure, the country has witnessed major transformations and youth have played a pivotal role in these historical movements. Zharkevich (2019) describes how the promise of development and the reality of political instability motivate young people to become politically active. Veteran leaders like B.P Koirala who began their political activism in their youth were among the revolutionaries to overthrow the autocratic Rana Regime. Similarly, student unions like Nepal Students Union, ANNFSU, who organized massive demonstrations, strikes, discourses, led to shift

Nepal from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy. Besides this, the active participation of youth in historical People's Movement I and II laid the foundation for social transformation and inclusive legal reforms that significantly impacted Nepal's political landscape highlighting the importance of youth in political reforms. According to Acharya (2024), Youth movements in Nepal have played a significant role in shaping political policies and governance, particularly in recent decades. These movements driven by the vibrant and politically active youth population of the country have led to substantial political changes and reforms.

In recent years, youth active participation in politics has taken significant momentum globally and locally. From the climate strikes of Greta Thunberg to the glorious victory of Balen Shah in the local level elections, youth people have taken over to the streets, social media, and political platforms demanding for change.

These movements highlight that the youth today no longer limit themselves to being passive observers but are emerging as catalysts in political transformation.

These movements showcase how youth can bring change by utilizing their energy, digital fluency, and moral clarity to mobilize large-scale public support. Their ability to globalize local concerns and influence international policies and discourse shows that youth are not just demanding the change but actively leading to it. These examples prove that youth are not only aware of socio-political issues but are also capable of leading impactful change, challenging outdated systems, and reimagining governance for the better.

Youth representation in politics is highly essential for a nation's progress. In Nepal, where political stigmatization and corruption have caused deep frustration among young people, their active participation can reform the system. By breaking the stigma around politics, promoting ethical leadership and demanding accountability, the youth can reclaim power from corrupt leaders and divert the country towards a brighter future. The energy, vision and

determination of young people must be mobilized to build an inclusive and prosperous Nepal. It is now time for the youth to take over the driving seat and lead the country to a better tomorrow. Shakya (2022) explains, a youthful population is regarded as a force of change and a source of innovation, and in Nepal, the youth has catalyzed critical movements, systems and opportunities.

Challenges

On one hand, we see an inspiring rise in youth involvement in politics. Many young individuals are stepping forward, initiating change and becoming active participants in shaping society. However, on the other hand, a significant portion of the youth population still remains disillusioned and disconnected from political processes. This disassociation often comes from a deep sense of political frustration, cultivated by years of witnessing corrupt practices, broken promises and power-hungry behavior from some politicians,

For a big section of youth, politics has become synonymous with manipulation, dishonesty and self-interest, rather than a means of public service. They are not just critical of certain politicians but they have developed a generalized hatred for the entire political system. As a result, many choose to withdraw entirely from civic engagement, believing that involvement will either make no difference or compromise their values. O'Neill (2020) explains, despite the widespread influence of political parties on the lives of young Nepalis, there is growing anti-political or counter political sentiment that reflects a deepening distrust with formal political institutions.

Also, it is important to understand that the group of youth in Nepal are not uniformly and smoothly accessed opportunities. Youth political participation is hindered by the context of each individual. Such micro factors like upbringing, access to education and opportunities, financial situation, family situation etc should also be analyzed. Not everyone grows up with the same amount of privilege and opportunity. These factors are proportional to the amount of engagement youth show eventually. While youth of urban area who has had the access to education and

social capital may find it easy to engage in socio-political activities, youth from remote areas, dalit community, indigenous communities, minorities who might lack digital access or local support network often face deeper exclusion. This not just makes their political engagement challenging for them but also aids in increasing their political detachment. So, in order to understand the standing of youth in political participation and representation, it is necessary to understand whether the youth of a nation are all in an equal standing or not with balanced access to opportunities and information.

This widespread apathy and mistrust are dangerous if increased, because not only they weaken democratic participation but also ignore the transformative potential of politics when driven by integrity and vision. To reduce this political frustration, more engagement of youth is required with practical examples that when young people determine and come forward, they make the change possible. A ray of hope has been observed through recent elections where it was observed that an increasing number of youths were coming out and running in the elections. This wave was first brought in the 2017 Local level election where a 21-year old candidate Ranju Darshana stepped into the political spotlight by announcing her candidacy for mayor of Kathmandu Metropolitan City. In a country long dominated by traditional political parties and older leadership, the emergence of Ranju Darshana marked a bold and refreshing chapter in Nepal's political landscape. At just 21 years old, her campaign symbolized not just a personal ambition, but a larger movement calling for integrity, accountability, and the active participation of young people in governance.

Ranju Darshana's candidacy was significant because it directly challenged the notion that politics is reserved for the elite, the powerful or the experienced, which motivated hundreds of youth with no dynastic background or political lineage to come forward.

Ranju's bold move served as an inspiration for many other young people across Nepal. Her campaign sparked discussions in schools, universities, and communities about youth leadership, political accountability, and alternative governance. She

challenged the stereotype of politics being “dirty” and unfit for the educated youth. Following her footsteps, other youth-led initiatives began to gain momentum.

The emergence of independent candidates like Balen Shah and Harka Sampang in later elections, who succeeded in securing top positions without traditional party support, can be traced back to the wave of confidence and political consciousness Ranju helped initiate.

This shift has become even more visible with the rise of youth leaders like Balen Shah, Toshima Karki, Sumana Shrestha, and Sagar Dhakal. Balen Shah’s victory as the independent mayor of Kathmandu shattered the monopoly of traditional parties and proved that credibility and vision can defeat political machinery. Toshima Karki, a doctor turned politician, stood firm against party politics and demonstrated that professionals with clean images can bring ethical leadership into the system. Sumana Shrestha who is known for her policy-driven approach and conceptual clarity in parliamentary debates, has emerged as a role model for young women and aspiring lawmakers. Likewise, Sagar Dhakal, who contested against powerful leaders like Sher Bahadur Deuba, showed that youth can fearlessly challenge even the most influential political figures. Their rise to public office without any propaganda or political backing from major parties has encouraged a new generation to believe in the power of civic engagement, independent thinking and the possibility of reshaping Nepal’s political landscape from the ground up.

These leaders collectively changed the perception that politics is a “dirty game.” Their rise has helped people realize that it is not politics itself that is corrupt, but the actors within it who misuse power for personal gain. This growing awareness has ignited a positive sense of political hope among the public. Many now believe that if the youth dare to dream of a better system and step forward to lead, change is not only possible but achievable.

Jyoti Lamichhane, the Deputy Mayor of Beni Nagarपालिका, Myagdi, is a shining example of youth leadership rooted in purpose and service. Entering

politics with a heartfelt vision to raise the voices of the unheard, she has dedicated herself tirelessly to improving lives at the grassroots level. Her focus on enhancing education and strengthening public service delivery has made a significant impact on her community, despite often working away from the spotlight. In a system often dominated by loud rhetoric and political stunts, she chooses to lead through action: calmly, consistently, and compassionately. Her journey stands as a hope for many young people in the region, proving that leadership doesn’t require privilege, but persistence, integrity, and a sense of duty.

Across Nepal, there are countless young leaders like Ms. Lamichhane, serving their communities with dedication, compassion and a deep sense of responsibility. Though they may not all be in the limelight, their contributions are vital threads in the fabric of national progress. Their stories remind us that youth-led politics is not a future dream, but a present reality empowering change from the ground level. When young leaders emerge with clean images and a genuine desire to serve, they inspire others to believe in the system again. Social media and digital platforms have also provided youth with tools to mobilize, educate, and influence political narratives without relying on traditional, corrupt structures.

Today, this new wave of leadership continues to inspire thousands of young Nepalis to engage in activism, policymaking, social service and governance. The 2022 federal and provincial level elections too saw an increase in youth participation with 31% of the total candidates falling in the youth category, (Election Commission (2017)). These statistics have shown that the youth have the potential to drive change and bring new ideas to the table. There is a renewed belief that politics can be a platform for honesty, innovation, and service when in the hands of visionary youth. It has restored a sense of ownership and optimism among citizens, proving that real transformation begins when people stop waiting for change and start becoming the change.

As the country actively awaits the next elections happening in 2027, there is a growing public desire to see young, dynamic and capable candidates stepping

into leadership roles. Citizens across the country are eager for fresh perspectives and innovative solutions to long-standing issues where almost everyone is hoping to see young, fresh and competitive candidates but an unwillingness of political leaders to hand over leadership and management roles to the younger ones has also been observed as a critical challenge. However, a major challenge resides in the reluctance of established political leaders to delegate power and provide space for the younger generation. Despite the rising call for generational change, as of now, Nepal is being ruled by leaders who are in their 60s and 70s. It's been decades that we're seeing repetitive incompetent faces sitting in the decision-making positions, rotating their turns in and out, risking our future and right to a better quality of life. This political pattern has not only limited innovation but also eroded public trust in traditional parties. The continuous recycling of the same faces who have become incompetent or out of touch has left a large section of the population, especially the youth, feeling alienated and frustrated. The younger generation is increasingly aware of how these repetitive leadership patterns are compromising their future and denying them the right to a better quality of life.

It's high time the political parties realize the sense of frustration developed in the citizens seeing the same old, repetitive faces and begin actively seeking out and empowering young, qualified and forward-thinking individuals within their looking for competitive, innovative young minds within their parties. If the traditional parties continue to ignore these signals and once again distribute election tickets to the same old, predictable candidates in 2027, they may face a stronger wave of youth resistance. Unlike in the past, today's youth are more informed, organized and unwilling to remain passive spectators. The demand is not just for participation but also for transformation. The political elite must either embrace this change or be prepared to be left behind by a generation that is ready to lead.

A powerful glimpse of this frustration was already visible during the 2019 elections with the rise of the "No, Not Again" movement. What began as a simple Facebook page calling on citizens not to vote for six

former prime ministers quickly turned into a viral campaign, resonating with thousands who were tired of the same power-hungry figures dominating the political scene. This grassroots initiative sent a clear message that people are no longer willing to accept recycled, underperforming leadership.

The only way to remove corrupt leaders from power is by replacing them with competent, ethical and visionary young leaders. Youth participation in elections both as voters and candidates can shift the balance of power. When young people vote in large numbers, they can hold politicians accountable and demand better governance. Moreover, when educated and passionate youth enter politics, they bring fresh energy and innovative solutions to long standing problems. Nepal's youth, who make up 42.5% of the country's population, are approaching the 2027 elections with a mix of hope, determination and critical awareness. After years of observing repeated patterns of political paralysis, corruption and lack of accountability, the younger generation is no longer content with being passive participants in democracy. Instead, they are envisioning the upcoming elections as an opportunity to reshape the political landscape that is more inclusive, innovative and responsive to the needs of ordinary citizens. The youth want leaders who are not only young in age but progressive in mindset, capable of addressing contemporary issues such as climate change, digital transformation, unemployment, and mental health.

The 2027 elections are also seen as a platform for greater political accountability. Young voters increasingly demand transparency in campaign financing, candidate backgrounds and party policies and visions. They are more informed than ever, using digital platforms to fact-check, organize and compare. Movements like "No, Not Again", "Enough is Enough" have proven that young people are ready to challenge the status quo and promote issue-based voting over party loyalty.

Moreover, Nepal's youth envision an election where independent candidates and youth-led parties are given a fair chance to compete. Inspired by leaders like Balen Shah, Toshima Karki, and Sumana Shrestha, they believe politics can be clean, efficient

and driven by real public needs rather than out of the world and impractical hope. Youth believe that young women and marginalized voices must be given more space in decision-making roles. A society is considered just when it is equitable, when every group gets proper representation and opportunity. So, to create a just and fair society, equity and social justice are highly important.

However, when young people are excluded from decision-making processes, policies often fail to address diverse concerns which leads to minority groups being backwarded. In Nepal, where political instability and corruption have hindered development, young people have grown increasingly frustrated with traditional politics. Many like me feel that their voices are ignored and their potential is wasted. This disillusionment has resulted in either complete disengagement from politics or migration in search of better opportunities abroad. However, if the youth actively participate in politics, they can challenge the status quo, demand accountability, transparency and bring transformative changes.

This stigma has discouraged many young and passionate individuals from entering the political arena. To change this, youth must redefine politics by promoting transparency, integrity and accountability.

Conclusion

The significant role in societal transformation is played by the youth of that nation. Youth who carry the mentality that if you have courage and resilience change is possible can actually bring out positive change. Youth whose blood is mixed with strength carry the skills and capacity to divert the country towards a new age of education and technology. They carry diverse methodologies to solve problems.

Despite high expectations, youth merely remain symbolic representatives without real decision making power. It won't be wrong to say, Youth political participation in Nepal suffers from tokenism, where young people are showcased but merely empowered. We get to see large groups of youth getting regularly mobilized during elections, rallies, protests by the political parties but those voices are rarely included

in core policy decisions. Although young people are invited to voice their opinions, they're viewed through the lens of their symbolic presence rather than genuine engagement in policy development.

Beyond mere attendance, representation in meaningful and genuine decision making power structures like parliamentary committees, executive branches should consist of adequate youth participation. One of the essential points in the fight against tokenism is the awareness among young people of their own values, strengths, and knowledge that they bring to the table. To successfully counteract tokenism, youth must recognize the power of their voice and the importance of their perspectives.

It is vital to create and promote platforms that empower young people to take a more active role in political decision-making. Through collaboration with organizations, institutions, and other youth, strategies can be developed that promote genuine participation, empowering young individuals to become key actors in shaping their future. Its high time, Nepal must move forward from just symbolic gestures to accountable commitments for youth participation. The Election Commission should also consider lowering the age barrier for electoral candidacy which will help in intergenerational representation and acknowledge the political maturity and readiness of today's youth, especially with growing access to education and information.

Similarly, statutory bodies like the National Youth Council should aggressively coordinate among various stakeholders to mainstream youth issues into national development and runs programs on entrepreneurship, leadership training, youth mobilization and meaningful youth participation. Besides, policies like National Youth Policy, 2072 which are promulgated with the vision of promoting youths' allegiance to the nation should be effectively implemented and timely updated to ensure inclusivity and representation of marginalized youth and enhance active youth participation in national development.

Our society is dynamic, so should we be. Our policies should be updated and upgraded in accordance

with time. In modern context, the decisions made by the old generation may not cover every aspect of the society. As a result, sometimes such policies and regulations may be damageable to the society's progress. Even though the system makes it hard for them, young people in Nepal are stepping up to lead and shape the country's future. More young voters and candidates are getting involved, showing they want a government that is honest, modern, and ready to tackle issues like climate change and technology. As Nepal moves toward the 2027 elections, political parties must give young people real opportunities to lead. If they don't, they risk ignoring almost half the population and weakening democracy.

Youth-driven change isn't just good, it's necessary for Nepal's growth and fairness. When young

leaders act with honesty and vision, they don't just run for the sake of running, they bring new life to democracy and build a better future for everyone. Youth representation in politics is highly essential for a nation's progress. In a country like Nepal, where political stigmatization and corruption have caused deep frustration among young people, their active participation can reform the system. By breaking the stigma around politics, promoting ethical leadership and demanding accountability, the youth can reclaim power from corrupt leaders and divert the country towards a brighter future. The energy, vision and determination of young people must be mobilized to build an inclusive and prosperous Nepal. Therefore, it is now time for the youth to take over the driving seat and lead the country to a better tomorrow.

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कृषिसागको पुनर्सम्बन्ध: थारू युवा, पुर्ख्यौली जमिन र आर्थिक न्यायको खोजी

भूमिका थारू

१. परिचय

खेतमा पसिना बनेर, जंगलको स्याहारमा संगीत बनेर, अनि समुदायको अनुशासनमा पहिचान बनेर थारू समुदायको जीवन माटोको काखमा लेखिएको थियो भन्दा फरक परोइन । त्यसैले थारूहरूका लागि “जमिन” केवल सम्पत्ति होइन, जीवनशैली हो, केवल उत्पादनको आधार होइन, परम्पराको आत्मा हो । मानव जीवन कुमालेको चक्र हो भने थारू समुदायको जीवन त्यही जमिनको चक्रभित्र आफ्नै ताल र लयमा घुमिरहेको पाइन्छ । पुर्ख्यौली संस्कार, भूगोलसँगको आत्मीयता र कृषि पेशामा आधारित जीवनशैली थारू समुदायको मौलिक परिचय हो । टाकुरा, तराई, र जंगलभित्र साँघुरिएका यी समुदायका जीवनका कथाहरू भूमिसँग गाँसिएका छन् । थारू समुदायको सामाजिक संरचना, सांस्कृतिक चिन्तन, रहनसहन र परम्परागत श्रम-जीवनशैली कृषिप्रधान नै रहिआएको छ । पुर्ख्यौली जमिन केवल भौतिक सम्पत्ति होइन । त्यो थारूहरूको पहिचान, संस्कार र अस्तित्वसँग गाँसिएको अमूल्य निधि हो । तर, यो सम्बन्ध समयसँगै केवल भावना होइन, प्रश्न बनेर उठ्न थालेको छ, खासगरी जमिन्दारी व्यवस्थाको चपेटा, गैरथारूहरूबाट भूमि कब्जा, र सरकारी संरचनाहरूको अपारदर्शी अभ्यासका कारण ।

छेग्रहा भैरहा हुने सानै उमेर, हली बन्ने किशोरावस्था, कुलो खन्न झराली बन्ने जवानी, अनि गाईगोठ हेने बुढ्यौली— यी सबै चरणहरू भूमिसँग यति गहिरो गाँसिएका छन् कि थारू जीवनलाई माटो बिनाको कल्पना गर्नु सम्भव छैन । यो केवल जीवनयात्रा नभई थारू समुदायको जीवनदर्शन हो । जहाँ श्रम, प्रकृति र समुदाय एकअर्कासँग अन्योन्याश्रित रूपमा जोडिएका छन् ।

तर, यही सम्बन्ध विगतका शासकीय हस्तक्षेप, कानुनी विभेद र जमिन्दारी जालझेलले धुमिल बनाएको छ । औपनिवेशिक सोच र अधिनायकवादी संरचनाहरूले यो जीवनशैलीलाई बिथोलेको छ । राणा शासनको दौरबाट शुरु भएको जमिनको राजनीतिकरण, त्यसपछिका कालखण्डहरूमा थारू जमिनमाथिको कब्जा, अनि

कमैया, कमलरी, विगलहरीको नाममा श्रमको शोषण— यी सबैले सामूहिक रूपमा थारू समुदायलाई आफ्नै भूमिबाट टाढा पुर्याएको हो ।

यद्यपि, समय फेरिदैछ । विगतको घाउ $cem\}$ झस्काउने खालको भए पनि अहिलेको पुस्ता, विशेषतः थारू युवाहरू आफ्नो पुर्ख्यौली विरासतप्रति गम्भीर बनिरहेका छन् । आजका थारू युवाहरू विगतसँग तिनको “पुनर्सम्बन्ध” गरिरहेका छन् । उनीहरू कृषि र आत्मनिर्भरताको बाटोमा फर्किरहेका छन् । आधुनिक शिक्षाको पहुँच, कृषिमा प्रविधिको प्रयोग र भूमिसँगको आत्मीयताको पुनर्जागरण हुँदै समुदायभित्र एक किसिमको ‘अगाडि फर्केर हेने’ लहर आएको छ जुन एक किसिमको सामाजिक पुनर्जागरण हो ।

यस लेखमा त्यही पुनर्सम्बन्धको कथा, संघर्ष र सम्भावना समेटिएको छ । जमिन गुमाउने पीडादायी इतिहास, अन्यायपूर्ण जमिन्दारी प्रथा र कमैयाको बाध्यतापूर्ण जीवनशैलीले थारूहरूको पुर्ख्यौली सम्पत्तिलाई चुनौती दिएको छ । तथापि, समय फेरिएको छ । अब थारू युवाहरू आफ्नो विगतसँग पुनः जोडिने प्रयासमा छन् । कृषि पुनः एकपटक आशाको बिउ बनेको छ ।

यहाँ थारू समुदायको इतिहास, भूमि अधिकारका लागि संघर्ष र आधुनिक युवाहरूको ‘गो ब्याक टु नेचर’ अभियानजस्तो प्रयासको समग्र चित्रण गर्न प्रयास गरिनेछ । विशेष रूपमा कृषिसँगको पुनर्सम्बन्धलाई दिगो भविष्य र आर्थिक न्यायको खोजीका रूपमा विश्लेषण गरिएको छ । यस लेखको मूल आशय परिवर्तनशीलता, पुनः सम्बन्ध र भविष्यप्रतिको आशालाई उजागर गर्नु हो, जहाँ थारू युवाहरू कृषि र जमिनसँग पुनः जोडिन खोजिरहेका छन्, जहाँ उनीहरूले केवल विगत सम्झिँदैनन्, त्यो विगतबाट भविष्य निर्माण गर्न पनि चाहन्छन् ।

२. जमिन र थारू जमिन्दार

तराईको कठिन वातावरणमा बाँच्न सक्ने प्रमुख जाति थारू जाति नै

हो । तराईका परिश्रमी थारूहरूले तराईको घनाजंगलहरूका बिच बिच भागमा आफ्ना बाक्ला गाउँ बस्ती बसाएर बस्थे । तराईका बाघ, चितुवा, गोही, सर्प, हात्ती साथै जंगलका हिंसक जनावरहरू थारूहरूका लागि साथीभाइ जस्ता थिए । तराईको घनघोर जङ्गल फँडानी गरी जग्गा गुल्जार गर्नेदेखि लिएर धानको खेती गर्ने जगपालक पनि उनै थारूहरू कहलिन्छन् । मध्यपाषाणकालीन युग अर्थात् अढाइ लाखदेखि पाँच लाख वर्ष पूर्वका ढुंगे हतियारहरू असंख्य मालामा दाड्ढेउखुरी, बर्दियाको दानव ताल र नवलपरासीको कोडडाँगीमा भेटिनुले प्राचीन थारू बस्ती भएको पुष्टि गर्दछ । नेपालका थारूले भारतीय मूलका मानिसहरूलाई बाजी भन्नुले सम्भवतः यसको सम्बन्ध थरुहट क्षेत्रदेखि भारतको वृज्जी गणराज्यसँग देखिन्छ (चौधरी, २०६४ : ८७) ।

तराईको हरियाली फाँट र शीतल नदी किनाराहरूमा थारू समुदाय पुस्तौंदेखि बसोबास गर्दै आएको छ । उनीहरूले h+un फाडेर जमिन उब्जाउन सिके त्यो जमिन जोते त्यसले जीवन चलाए । तर जब सत्ता बदलियो, जमिन पनि बदलियो । राज्यको नजरमा जमिन पुरस्कार दिन मिल्ने धन बन्दो, तर थारूका लागि त्यो कहिल्यै व्यापारको वस्तु थिएन । थारू र भूमिको सम्बन्ध केवल आर्थिक स्रोतको हिसाबले होइन, सांस्कृतिक र आत्म-पहिचानसँग प्रत्यक्ष गाँसिएको छ । युगौंदेखि थारू समुदाय तराईको हरियाली h+und} अडिएको थियो । वनजन्य उपज, सिजनअनुसारको खेती र जैविक चक्रसँगको सामञ्जस्यताले उनीहरूको जीवन चक्र सम्हालिरहेको थियो । उनीहरू बाहिरी शक्ति र राज्य संरचनाबाट प्रायः स्वतन्त्र थिए । उनीहरूका लागि जमिन भनेको केवल उब्जनीको आधार होइन, समुदायको गर्व, पुर्खाको सम्पत्ति र सामाजिक सम्मानको संकेत थियो । तर, यस सम्बन्धको मुटुमा चोट लाग्यो । राणाशासनको पछिल्लो कालखण्डमा ।

राणाशासनकालीन (१८४६-१९५१) अवधिमा राज्यद्वारा अपनाइएका जमिन पुरस्कार नीतिहरूले थारूहरूको पुर्ख्यौली भूमिमा गहिरो असर पुर्यायो । विशेष रूपमा राणाहरूले आफ्नो पक्षमा रहेका मानिसहरू, सैनिकहरू र उच्चपदस्थ कर्मचारीहरूलाई थारूहरूको h+un फाडिएको जमिन बिरुवा माफ र तमसुक माफ नीतिको नाममा दान दिने गरेका थिए । यसले थारूहरूलाई साँचिकै मालिक रहेको जमिनमा अचानक किरायेदार बनाइदियो ।

२.१ राणाकालीन पुरस्कार नीति: मौखिक स्वामित्वको विस्थापन

राणाशासनमा राज्यले आफूप्रति निष्ठा देखाउनेलाई बिरुवा माफ, तमसुक माफ शीर्षकमा थारूहरूको उब्जनी जमिन दिन थाले । थारूहरूले पुस्तौंदेखि प्रयोगमा ल्याएको जमिन एकाएक कागजको जोरमा अकरैको बन्दो । मौखिक स्वामित्वको कुनै प्रमाण नहुनु, निरक्षरता र संस्थागत भेदभावको कारण थारूहरू कानुनी रूपमा निष्काशित जस्तै भए ।

यसरी सुरु भयो जमिन्दारी प्रणाली जहाँ वास्तविक जोत्नेलाई कमैया, बटैया वा अधिया बनाइयो । उनीहरूले आफूले जोतेको खेतमा काम

गर्नकै लागि ऋण लिनुपर्यो, त्यो ऋण तिर्न नसक्दा पुस्तौंसम्म श्रम दिनुपर्ने बन्दो । जमिन अब उत्पादनको आधार थिएन, उनीहरूको दासत्वको संकेत बन्न पुग्यो ।

राज्य संरचनाले जमिन्दारीलाई कानुनी औचित्य दिइरह्यो, भूमि सुधारको प्रक्रिया टालटुले भयो । थारूहरूको भोगचलन केन्द्रित स्वामित्व अवधारणा कानुनी दस्तावेजविहीन हुँदा, उनीहरूको अधिकार झनै कमजोर बन्दो । उनीहरू आफ्नै जमिनबाट मानसिक, सामाजिक र कानुनी रूपमा तिरस्कृत गरिए ।

१८४६ देखि सुरु भएको राणाशासनले बल, भय र पुरस्कारको माध्यमबाट राज्य सञ्चालन गर्‍यो । यसै अवधिमा, राज्यद्वारा जमिन वितरणलाई राजस्व वृद्धि, आबादी नियन्त्रण, वा राजनीतिक इनाम जस्ता बहानामा प्रयोग गरियो । पाएको जनसेवाको बदलामा वा व्यक्तिगत सम्बन्धको आधारमा, राणाहरूले बिस्तारै तराईका उब्जाउ जमिनहरू आफ्ना समर्थक तथा नातेदारहरूलाई “बिरुवा माफ”, “तमसुक माफ”, वा “जयदाय” को नाममा हस्तान्तरण गरे ।

यी जमिनहरू प्रायः पहिले नै थारूहरूले सदियौंदेखि जोत्दै आएका जमिन थिए । जसमा कुनै लालपुर्जा थिएन, तर सामाजिक स्वीकृति र परम्परागत स्वामित्व थियो । कागजमा नभए पनि व्यवहारमा उनीहरू मालिक थिए । तर, जब ती जमिनमा अन्य बाह्य जमिन्दारहरू कानुनी तवरले मालिक बने, थारू समुदाय आफ्नै भूमिमा पराइ भयो ।

एकातिर, थारूहरूले पुस्तौंदेखि जोत्दै आएको जमिन थियो । अर्कातिर, शासकहरूले त्यो जमिनलाई कागजमा नयाँ जमिन्दारको नाममा दाखिला गरिदिए । थारूहरूको मौखिक स्वामित्व कानुनी रूपमा गायब बनाइयो ।

हाल नेपाल दक्षिण एशियाली अनुसन्धान केन्द्रको प्रकाशन नेपालका राजा तथा तराईका थारू (२०५८) पुस्तकमा ५० थान लालमोहर समेटिएको छ, जसले जमिन र थारूको सम्बन्धलाई केलाएको छ । आफ्नो वीरता देखाएको भनेर थारूहरूले शासकबाट जमिन पुरस्कार पाएको एक उदाहरण सरदार रन्जित थारू हुन् । यसरी वि.सं. १८७१ पौष १८ र १९ गते नेपाली सेनाले अंग्रेजविरुद्ध विजय हासिल गरेपश्चात वि.सं. १८७१ साल चैत्र १ मा तात्कालीन श्री ५ महाराजधिराज गीर्वाणयुद्धविक्रम शाहबाट प्राण शाह, भीमसेन थापा, उदय गिरी, समरसेर साह, रणध्वज थापा र दलभञ्जन पाण्डेमाफर्त् पर्सागढीमा भएको लडाईंमा थारू समुदायका सरदार रञ्जित चौधरीले गरेको उल्लेखनीय योगदानको लालमोहर लगाई चौधरीहरूको वीरतापूर्ण योगदानको कदर गरेको प्रमाण ईतिहासमा पाईन्छ । पर्सागढी परिसरमा भित्ता बनाई राजाहरूबाट बक्स त्यही लालमोहररूपी ३ थान प्रमाण अंकित गरिएको छ । तर, त्यसबेलाको भाषा र लिपिले केही बुझिदैन । रञ्जित चौधरीको प्रसंग रहेको लालमोहर ‘नेपालका राजाहरू तथा तराईका थारू’(२०५८) पुस्तकमा संकलित ५० थान लालमोहरमध्ये ३१, ३२ र ३३ नम्बरमा समेटिएको छ, जुन पर्सागढी परिसरस्थित भित्तामा अंकित छ ।

३१ नम्बरको लालमोहरमा वि.सं. १८७१-७२ को नेपाल-अंग्रेज

युद्धको समयमा पर्सागढीमा भएको दुई पक्षको लडाईंमा रञ्जित चौधरीले उल्लेखनीय मेहनत गरेको यसमा परेको छ । वि.सं. १८७१ को पत्रमा गीर्वाणयुद्धविक्रम शाहले मेहनत गरेको रिझवापत रञ्जित चौधरीलाई पर्सा जिल्ला सिधमास प्रगन्नामध्ये बसडिलवा र लोरिआड गरी दुई गाउँहरूमा विसं १८७२ वैशाखदेखि राजअंकबाहेक जलकर, वनकर आदि विभिन्न दस्तुर उठाई सरकार बुझाउनु पर्ने कार्य सुम्पेको विषय परेको छ । रञ्जित चौधरीले नेपाल-अंग्रेज युद्ध नसकिदै अर्थात् लडाईं सुरु भएको चार महिनाभित्रै यो विर्ता पाएका थिए (श्रेष्ठ, सं., २०५८: १७१-१७२) ।

३२ नम्बरको लालमोहरमा वि.सं. १८७१ को यो रक्कापत्रमा रञ्जित चौधरीले पहिलेदेखि उपभोग गर्दै आएको जमिन वि.सं. १८७१ मा भैरवदल कम्पनीको खानीमा पर्न गएकोमा विसं १८७२ वैशाखदेखि लालमोहरअनुसार पाउने व्यहोरा परेको छ । यसै गरी ३३ नम्बरको लालमोहरमा विसं १८७२ मा सुब्बा चन्द्रवीर थापाले रञ्जित चौधरीसंग रमौली, बसडिलवा र लोहीआड गरी तीन मौजाहरू वेषबुन्यादको रूपमा कायम गर्न रु ६०० सलामी माग्दा चौधरीले यस विरुद्ध दरवार गुहारी लालमोहरअनुसार न्याय पाएको कुरा परेको छ । (श्रेष्ठ, सं., २०५८: १७२-१७३) । यसरी राणाकालमा थारु समुदायका धेरै मान्जनले कर उठाउने आधिकारिकता पाएका थिए । आधुनिक कर प्रशासनका कारण उनीहरूको अधिकार गुम्यो ।

आधुनिक कर प्रशासनबारे अर्जुन गुनरत्नेको शोधले भन्छ- २००७ सालअगाडि तराईमा थारुहरू बिना राज्यको कुनै पनि काम चल्दैनथ्यो । तर २००७ सालपछि राज्यलाई थारुको आवश्यकता परेन । २००७ सालपछि हात्ती स्याहार गर्नेबाहेक अरु काममा थारुहरूको भूमिका रहेन । कर प्रशासनमा कर्मचारीतन्त्रको प्रयोग हुन थालेपछि शक्तिको नजिक रहेका पहाडहरूलाई फाइदा भयो तर यस व्यवस्थाले थारुहरूलाई पाखा लगायो । यसले थारुहरूको जातीय चिनारीको विकासमा ठूलो प्रभाव पार्यो (गुनरत्ने, सन् २००६, ४४) ।

वि. सं. २००० सम्म हालको जस्तो बटैया जग्गा जोत्ने चलन नरहेको अधिकांश थारुहरू स्वयं जग्गाधनी थिए । तर, अपवादको रूपमा केही थारुहरूले मात्र तिरो तिरी जग्गा जोत्ने गरेका थिए । २०१९ मा विर्ता प्रथा उन्मुलन, भूमिसम्बन्धी ऐन २०२१ ले जिमिदारी उन्मुलन गर्‍यो र नयाँ भूमिसुधार लागु भई जग्गाको हद कायम गर्‍यो । यसरी २०२० साल पछाडिको नयाँ प्रशासनिक संरचनामा थारुहरूको सामाजिक, राजनीतिक संरचना गौण भएको देखिन्छ । (दिवस र प्रधान, सं., २०६५: ४१) ।

२.२. जमिन्दारी व्यवस्थाको उदय

जमिन पुरस्कार प्रणालीसँगै सुरु भयो जमिन्दारी व्यवस्था, जसअन्तर्गत केही व्यक्तिहरूलाई ठूलो क्षेत्रफलको जमिन स्वामित्व दिनुका साथै त्यस क्षेत्र भित्रको जनताबाट कर असुली गर्न अनुमति दिइयो । थारुहरू, जो पहिले आफैँ मालिक थिए, अब ती जमिन्दारको अधीनमा मजदुर, बटैया वा कर्मैया बन्न थाले ।

थुप्रै थारु परिवारहरू परनिर्भर, ऋणी र असहाय बने । खेतीको

मिहिनेत गरेबापत मलिकलाई भाग दिनुपर्ने, ऋण तिर्न नसक्दा पुस्तौंसम्म गुलामीझैँ श्रम गर्नुपर्ने बाध्यताको सुरुवात यहीँबाट भयो । यसरी, सामूहिक रूपमा थारु समुदायले जमिनमा अधिकार गुमाउने मात्र नभई आर्थिक-सामाजिक गरिमामा पनि गिरावट भोग्यो । थारुहरूको मौलिक जीवनशैली र निर्णय स्वतन्त्रता कमजोर बन्यो ।

२.३. जमिन्दारशाहीको उदय: भूमि स्वामित्वको पिंजडामा थारुहरू

यी तथाकथित नवजमिन्दारहरूले राज्यको बलमा भूमिमा आफ्ना अधिकार जमाए, र थारुहरूलाई बटैया, कर्मैया, वा अधिया मजदुरको रूपमा आफ्नो लागि काम गर्न बाध्य बनाए । एकातिर त्यही जमिन, जसले पुस्तौंसम्म थारुहरूको पेट भरिदिएको थियो अर्कोतिर त्यो जमिन, अब अर्काको नाममा दर्ता भइसकेको — यो विरोधाभास थारु अस्तित्वमै प्रश्न खडा गरिरहेको थियो ।

यहीँबाट सुरु भयो कर्मैयापनको लासदी — जुन केवल श्रम शोषणको रूप मात्र थिएन, त्यो आत्मसम्मान र स्वतन्त्रताको विसर्जन थियो । थारु परिवारहरूले ऋणका नाममा पुस्तौँ-पुस्तासम्म निःशुल्क श्रम गर्नुपर्‍यो । न जमिन उनीहरूको रह्यो, न जीवनमाथि नियन्त्रण ।

निरक्षरता, कानुनी पहुँचको अभाव, र संस्थागत विभेदले गर्दा थारुहरू कानुनी प्रक्रियाबाट आफ्नो अधिकार माग्न पनि असमर्थ थिए । राज्य संरचनाले जमिन्दारीलाई नै वैधानिकता दिँदै गयो, र जमिन कागजी मालिकको हातमा रहिरह्यो । थुप्रै थारु परिवारहरूले आफ्नो जमिन कागजमा गुमाएको त पत्तो नै पाएनन् जबसम्म तिनीहरूलाई कर असुलीको दबावपत्र पुगेन ।

३. भूमि अधिकारका लागि संघर्ष

भूमि अधिकारको लडाईं थारु समुदायका लागि केवल सामाजिक नारा होइन, अस्तित्वको लडाईं हो । आफ्नो पुर्खाको जमिन गुमाउनु भनेको केवल उब्जनी गुमाउनु थिएन । त्यो आत्मसम्मान, सांस्कृतिक पहिचान, र स्वतन्त्र जीवनको अभिलाषा गुमाउनु थियो । यही कारणले विगत केही दशकमा थारु समुदायले देशका विभिन्न भूभागमा विविध रूप र रणनीतिमा भूमि अधिकारका लागि साहसी संघर्षहरू गरेका छन् । थारु समुदायका लागि भूमि अधिकारको मुद्दा विगतको पीडामात्र नभई, वर्तमानको प्रतिरोध र भविष्यप्रतिको सपनासमेत हो । राज्य संरचनाले उपेक्षा गर्दा र कानुनी पहुँच अपारदर्शी बन्दा थारु समुदाय निरन्तर आफ्ना अधिकारका लागि सडक, सभा, h+un र खेतमै आवाज उठाइरहेको छ ।

थारु समुदायको भूमि संघर्ष केवल ऐतिहासिक गुनासो होइन । यो वर्तमानको आवाज र भविष्यको दृष्टिकोण हो । भूमिको कानुनी स्वामित्व, गुमेको गर्व, र पुस्तौँपिच्छेका श्रमको मूल्य खोजीको यो लडाईं cem} पूरा भइसकेको छैन ।

३.१. बर्दिया-राजापुरको बेलवा किसान आन्दोलन

नेपाली कांग्रेसद्वारा सञ्चालित २००७ सालको क्रान्तिका अगुवाहरूले स्थानीय जोताहा कर्मैया किसानहरूलाई 'जग्गा जोत्नेको, बाली

कमाउनेको' नाराले जागृत गरिएको थियो । यही जागरणले बर्दिया, तात्कालीन भौरा क्षेत्रका थारू किसानहरू उद्वेलित भए । उनीहरू उब्जनीको दुई भाग आफूले लिने तथा एक भाग मात्रै जमिन्दारलाई दिने निर्णय गरे । यसबारे अध्येता दिनेश प्रसाद श्रेष्ठ (२०८१) उल्लेख गर्छन्:

२००७ सालको नेपाली कांग्रेसद्वारा सञ्चालित क्रान्तिमा राजापुर कब्जा भएको ३ महिना १८ दिनपछि २००७ साले क्रान्तिबाट जागृत भूमिहीन कर्मैया किसानहरूले आफूले जोतेको र उब्जाएको अन्नबालीको तिभाग (टिकुर) बटैया आफूहरूले पाउनु पनर् नत्र बटैया गर्न नदिने माग राखेर बेलवा गाउँ, भौरा (पहिलेको मानपुरटपरा गाविसको र अहिलेको राजापुर नगरपालिका, वडा नं ६) मा जमिन्दारको खलिहान घेरेका थिए । सोही खलिहान घेरेर बसेका किसानहरूमाथि तत्कालीन प्रशासनबाट २००८ साल वैशाख १५ गते (२८ अप्रिल १९५१) शनिवारका दिन साँझ ५ बजे गोली हान्न लगाइएको थियो ।

अध्येता दिनेश श्रेष्ठका अनुसार बर्दिया बेलवाको खलिहान गोलीकाण्डमा सहिद हुनेहरूमा बर्दिया बसन्ताका लोहारी थारू, मङ्गलपुरका चापु थारू, कोइलीपुरका लक्ष्मीप्रसाद थारू, दयापुरका पतिराम थारू, गुलराका डिबुवा थारू, बेलवाकी कोइली थरुनी (पेबुवा थारूकी श्रीमती) गरी ६ जना थिए । उक्त आन्दोलनमा सहादत प्राप्त गर्ने कोइलीदेवी थरुनी पहिलो थारू महिला थिइन् ।

खेरहनवा आन्दोलनमा जमिन्दारहरूले प्रशासनको आडमा आफ्नो हिंस्रक व्यवहार देखाएका थिए । तात्कालीन बाँके-बर्दिया गोश्वाराका वडाहाकिम शेरबहादुर शाहको आदेशमा राजापुर थानाका थानेदार खड्कबहादुर गिरी र जमिन्दार विदुर नरसिंह राणाले थारू किसान उपर गोली चलाएका थिए । थारू आयोगको स्मरिका (२०७९) मा पुरन प्रसाद चौधरीले बर्दिया बेलवा गाउँको उक्त घटनामा १३ सय जना थारू कर्मैयाहरू वारदात भएको दिन खलिहान घेरेको उल्लेख गरेका छन् (चौधरी, २०७९: १८४) ।

३.२. दाङको बेलवा बन्जारी: एकताको आवाज

२००७ सालको क्रान्तिको ज्वारभाटाले किसानहरू तरंगित थिए । उनीहरूले आफूले पुस्तौदेखि कमाई खाई आएको जग्गाजमिन जमिन्दार वर्गले विभिन्न खालका लास धम्की एवं अमानवीय व्यवहार गरेकोमा असन्तुष्ट थिए । यसै क्रममा घर खेती र जिरायत खेती खोस्र थाल्दा तथा दिनदिनै असहनीय वेठवेगारी चरम सिमामा पुग्दा र खाई आएको शर्त बदल्न थाल्दा दाङका थारू किसानहरूमा वर्ग द्वेषको भावना तिखारिदै आयो । जमिन्दारले विभिन्न डर, लास, धम्की दिदा पनि वेठवेगारी गरेनन्, किसान वर्गले आफूले कमाई खाई आएको जग्गा छाडेनन् ।

२०१६ साल माघ १७ गते दाङ वेलुवा बन्जारी (हाल: घोराही उपमहानगरपालिका-३) का खलिहानमा दाँड भएकी तोरी जमिन्दारहरू राती लुट्न आए । तर, किसानहरूको बीचबाट तोरी लुट्न सकेनन् । उल्टै किसानहरूले जमिन्दारहरूलाई नियन्त्रणमा लिई

प्रशासनमा बुझाए । तर तिनलाई कुनै कानुनी कारवाही नगरी तुरुन्तै छाडियो । बरु तोरी दाँड गरी आफै एकलौटी खाएको भनी मुख्य मुख्य किसानहरूलाई लुटपाट, डकैती मुद्दा दिइयो । किसानहरूले पनि प्रतिउत्तर लगाए । सो मुद्दामा परेर गाउँ छाडेर घेरै किसानको भागाभागको अवस्था रह्यो । बेलवाका किसान पिठु थारू, पर्वते थारू, कुलमान थारू, बञ्जारीका घरेवा थारू, विष्णु थारू, चुकिया थारू, कान्छाराम थारू, गोपीलाल थारू लगायत वारेन्टेड थिए । ती किसान संगसंगै केशवराज, मणिकलाल, ढाँठु चौधरी, नारायणप्रसाद शर्मा रामप्रसाद उपर पनि मुद्दा हालिएको थियो (दहित, २०७८: ६३) ।

तिम्लिआएका जमिन्दार वर्गले शान्ति सुरक्षाको निहुँले केही प्रहरी र ४/५ सय लठैत जम्मा गरी २०१६ साल साउन ४ गते दाङ वेलुवा बन्जारीका खेतमा काम गरिरहेका किसानहरूमाथि एकाएक हमला गरे । तर मौरीको गोलाझैं क्षणभरमै किसानहरू भेला भए । जमिन्दारहरू गाउँ छाड्न बाध्य भए । केही जमिन्दारलाई बरगदवा गाउँबाट पक्रेर ल्याई सबै किसानहरूको गोडामा सेवाढोग लाग्न पठाएर मात्र छाडे । अन्ततः जमिन्दार वर्गले हार खाई सरकारसँग हारगुहार मागे । यस क्रममा एकातिर 'आफ्ना माग पेश गर' भनी मुख्य मुख्य किसानहरूलाई २०१७ साल साउन ६ गते प्रशासनमा बोलाइयो । अर्कोतर सर्वसाधारण किसानहरू एकसुरले काममा लागेको मौका छोपी दक्षिणतिरवाट बन्जारी गाउँमा हमला गरियो । उनीहरूको संख्या करिब ५/६ सय थियो । सबै किसानहरू खनजोतमा लागेका र गाउँघरमा बुढापाका केटाकेटी र स्वानीमान्छेहरू माल थिए । यसले किसानका घर घरमा पस्दै बुढापाका र केटाकेटीलाई कुट्ने नगद, गरगहना हडप्रे मात्रै होइन, किसानका छोरी बुहारीहरूको सतित्व लुट्ने काम पनि गरे (फुलरिया, २०७२: ४०) ।

घरेलु हतियार लिई महिलालगायत सबै किसानहरू भेला भई प्रतिकारका लागि बन्जारी गाउँतर्फ दौडिए । लुटपाट गनरेहरू पनि बन्जारीबाट वेलुवातर्फ लागेका थिए । दुबै पक्षको बन्जारी र वेलुवा बीचको डारवरा जम्काभेट भई घमासान लडाई भयो । किसान गुमरा थारूले तात्कालीन एसपीको हातको औला छिनाइदिए । उनलाई गोली हानियो । यसरी २०१७ साल साउन ६ गते उनी सहिद भए ।

३.३. जाली तमसुक बनाउन माहिर गैरथारू जमिन्दार

पञ्चायत कालमा गैरथारू जमिन्दारले आफूसम्बद्ध अढेरुवा, कर्मैयाहरूलाई ऋण दिएवापत थोरै रकमको तमसुकमा शुन्य थपी मनोमानी ढंगले रकम बढाउनु सामान्य मानिन्थ्यो । तर, यसवारे विद्रोह गर्ने हिम्मत अढेरुवा, कर्मैयाहरूको हुँदैनथ्यो । विद्रोह गरे ज्यानै जान सक्थ्यो । बर्दियाका युवा मोहन थारू पनि गैरथारू जमिन्दारको नक्कली तमसुकका कारण २०३६ साल वैशाख ३ गते ज्यान गुमाएका थिए ।

बर्दिया, बारबर्दिया नगरपालिका-११, बेलभार घर भएको मोहन थारूको परिवार विगत ४ वर्षदेखि बर्दिया, बारबर्दिया नगरपालिका, फचकहवाका जमिन्दार केशव केसीको अधिया, बटैया गर्थे । ४ वर्षपछि बटैया गर्न छाडे । त्यसैले जमिन्दारको जग्गामा बनाइएको बुकुरोको काठपात लिन सहयोगीहरूलाई लिएर गए । तर जमिन्दारले ऋण देखाई, पहिला पैसा तिर अनि मात्र सामान घर लानु भनेछन् ।

सामान ओसार्न लगिएको गाडा पनि रोके । तमसुक हेर्दा ५ सयको तमसुकलाई ५ हजार बनाइएको रहेछ ।

मोहन थारू मारिएको घटनाका साक्षी रहेका हाल बर्दिया, बढैयाताल-९, सेवानगरका कृष्ण प्रसाद चौधरीका अनुसार त्यसबेला गोचाली परिवार बर्दियामा सक्रिय थियो । त्यसका अगुवाहरूसँग सल्लाह गर्दा पुनः जमिन्दार कहाँ जाने, तमसुक हेर्न माँगे, तमसुक हात पार्ने बित्तिकै च्याले र धुलो खुर्सानी जमिन्दारको आँखामा छर्किने योजना बनेछ । जोगी गाउँमा पढ्ने विद्यार्थी, किसानहरू पुनः गाडा लिएर जमिन्दारको घर गए । सुरुमा ४ जना जमिन्दारलाई बोलाउन गए । अरु नजिकको ठुम्री जंगलमा लुकेर बसे । कुनै अप्रिय घटना भए हाँक पार्न भनिएको थियो । योजनाअनुसार जमिन्दारसँग तमसुक मागे । जमिन्दारले तमसुक दिने बित्तिकै तुरुन्तै च्यातियो तर खुर्सानीको धुलो छर्किनेले विलम्ब गरे । टोलीका गाडा हाँके लहेउनाले गाडा हाँके । जमिन्दारले सय मिटर जति टाढासम्म तमसुक च्याले टोलीलाई लखेटे । तुरुन्तै के मन भयो, आफ्नो घर भित्र छिरे अनि भरवा बन्दुक लिएर आए । फायर गर्दा मोहन थारूलाई लाग्यो । उनलाई बोकेर ठुम्रीको जंगलमा ल्याइयो । पेटमा गोली लागेर धेरै रगत बग्दा उनको मृत्यु भएको थियो (सर्वहारी, २०८२: ३३-३४) । मोहन चौधरीको यस घटनाले शुन्यमा शुन्य थप्दै थारूहरूको घरघडेरी हड्पी कंगाल बनाइएको थुप्रै उदाहरण छन् ।

३.४. जमिनमा अधिकारका लागि बर्दियाको कनरा आन्दोलन

जमिनमा अधिकारका लागि थारू समुदायकाले २०४७ देखि २०५० सालमा गरेको बर्दियाको कनरा आन्दोलन ऐतिहासिक घटना हो । कर्मैयाहरूले कनरामा औपचारिक रूपले पहिलो बैठक २०४७ वैशाख ९ गते सुरु गरेका थिए (दहित, २०७८: ९२) । कनरा आन्दोलनमा प्रहरीको कुटाईबाट गम्भीर घाइते भएका ६० वर्षिय किसान रुन्चे थारूले उपचारको क्रममा ज्यान गुमाएका थिए । सो घटनामा १२ जना थारू किसानहरू गम्भीर घाइते भएका थिए (दहित, २०७८: १०२-१०३) । १२ जना थारू किसानहरू गम्भीर घाइते हुनु, त्यसमाथि रुन्चे थारूले सहादत पाएपछि आन्दोलनकारी निराश भएका थिए । धेरै त बस्ती छाडेर बसाइँ सराइ गर्न थालेका थिए । तर, अन्तमा जो जो टिक् सके, ती सबैले पछि जग्गा पाए ।

कनरामा कर्मैया र सुकुम्वासीहरूको संघर्षले सरकारबाट आयोगसम्म गठन भई ४,९३९ परिवारलाई जमिन उपलब्ध गराइएको थियो (देउजा, २०७४: १२) । २०५१ सालमा त्यति परिवारले सरदर ५ कट्टा जमिन पाएका थिए । जसअनुसार विधवालाई २ कट्टा, ३ देखि ५ जना रहेको परिवारलाई ५ कट्टा, ५ देखि ११ जनासम्मको परिवार रहेकालाई ७ कट्टा लालपूर्जा दिइएको थियो । जग्गा वितरणपछि बसाइँ सराइ गरेर जाने करिब १९ सय परिवारहरू निकै पछुताएका थिए । सरदर ५ कट्टाको दरले पनि त्यसबेला कर्मैया र सुकुम्वासीहरूलाई करिब १५ हजार विगहा hUUFF उपलब्ध गराएको देखिन्छ (दहित, २०७८: १११) ।

कनरा आन्दोलनले कतिसम्म धक्का दियो भने यही आन्दोलनका कारण

सरकारले ६५ जिल्लामा भूमिसुधार व्यवस्थाका लागि सुकुम्वासी आयोग गठन गर्यो । कनरा आन्दोलनका अगुवा रेशम बहादुर चौधरी थिए । यिनकै नामबाट बर्दियाको बाँसगढी नगरपालिकामा रेशमपुर गाउँ पनि रहेको छ ।

कनरा आन्दोलन लगायतको जोडबलले २०५२ सालदेखि सुरु भएको थियो कर्मैया मुक्ति आन्दोलन, जुन २०५७ साउनसम्म रह्यो । सरकारले २०५७ साउन २ गते कर्मैया मुक्ति घोषणा गरेको थियो । कर्मैयाहरू मुक्त भए पनि उनीहरूका किशोरी छोरीहरू मुक्त भएनन् । यसका लागि २०६० को दशकबाटै कमलरीहरूले आन्दोलन गर्नुपर्यो । अन्ततः २०७० असार १३ गते सरकारबाट कमलरी मुक्ति घोषणा गरियो । यी दुबै आन्दोलनका क्रममा सयौं कर्मैया, कमलरी घाइते भए । यद्यपि कसैले बलिदानि दिनु परेन (सर्वहारी, २०८२: ३८) ।

मालिकको घरमा कमलरी बस्दा भने केहीले ज्यान गुमाएको अवस्था छ । २०७५ असारको पहिलो सातासम्म ४ जना झण्डिएको तथा २ जना जलेको अवस्थामा गरी ६ जना कमलरीको मालिकको घरमा ज्यान गएको छ (केसी, २०७५) ।

२०७२ सालको संविधानले कर्मैयाको प्रथा खारेज गरिसकेको भए पनि, त्यो थारू समुदायको लागि सजिलै अन्त्य भएको होइन । दशकौंसम्म ऋणको भारी, श्रमको शोषण, र भूमिविहीनताको पीडामा बाँचेका थारूहरूले २०५७ सालमा सुरु गरेको कर्मैया मुक्ति आन्दोलन अहिले पनि थुप्रै अर्थमा अधुरो नै छ । थारू समुदायका हजारौं परिवारहरू cem} भूमिविहीन छन् । अधिकारप्राप्तिका नारा, लालपुर्जाका आश्वासन र पुनर्वासका वाचा cem} अधुरा छन् ।

राज्यले कर्मैयाहरूलाई मुक्त त गर्‍यो, तर पर्याप्त पुनर्वास, रोजगार, र स्थायी आवास नदिँदा उनीहरू पुनः गरिबीको चक्रभित्र फसिरहे । केहीलाई जमिनको लालपुर्जा दिइयो, धेरैले cem} पनि आशैमा दिन बिताइरहेका छन् । रायगाउँ, भिटेनिया, र कैलाली-कञ्चनपुरका कर्मैया बस्तीहरूले आज पनि बाँझ जमिन भाडामा जोत्नुपर्ने बाध्यता व्यहोदरै छन् । थारू युवाहरू आफ्नो आमाबुबाले भोगेको पिँजडालाई भत्काउने प्रयासमा छन्, तर राज्यको मौनता त्यो प्रयासमाथि अवरोध बनिरहेको छ ।

३.५. माइतीघर र स्वर्गद्वारी गुठी आन्दोलन

२०८१ सालमा राजधानी काठमाडौंको माइतीघर आन्दोलनको केन्द्र बन्यो । जब देउखुरी, बर्दिया, दाङ लगायतका क्षेत्रका थारू किसानहरू आफ्नो जमिनको न्याय माग्दै एकजुट भए । 'रगत पसिना बगायौं, बदलामा के पायौं?', 'गरिबको पसिनामा देवता रमाउँछन्?', 'मौलिक हक सुनिश्चित गर' जस्ता नाराले राजधानी गुञ्जायो । स्वर्गद्वारी गुठी पीडित मोही किसानहरू त्यही सडकमा उभिए । उनिहरूको माग थियो — गुठी भूमिमा पुस्तौंदेखि काम गरिरहेकालाई मोहीबाट स्वामित्वसम्मको यात्रा सुनिश्चित गरियोस् । आन्दोलनले भूमि आयोग, संविधान र पुनर्स्थापना नीतिप्रति गम्भीर पुनर्विचारको माग गर्‍यो । त्यसकै सन्दर्भमा, स्वर्गद्वारी पीडित आन्दोलन पनि सशक्त रूपमा उठ्यो, जहाँ मोहियानी किसानहरू वर्षौंसम्म जोतेका खेतको

स्वामित्व पाउन संघर्षरत किसानहरू माइतीघर पुगे । उनीहरूको माग थियो — हामी गुठी जमिन तिर्दै आएका छौं, अब त्यसको अधिकार चाहिन्छ । गुठीमा दर्जनौं पुस्ताहरूले काम गर्दा पनि कानुनी संरक्षण नपाउनु अन्याय हो भन्ने आवाज चर्को थियो । आन्दोलनमा अभियन्ता इन्दु थारूले आफ्नो कविता सुनाएर प्रतिरोध जनाएकी थिइन् ।

मेरो पसिनाको मोल छैन

मेरो रगतको मोल छैन

किन भने

मेरो पसिना मेरो रगत

सबै मलिककाको बेगारी हो

यी आन्दोलनहरू केवल थारू समुदायको मुद्दा होइन । त्यसको केन्द्रीयता जोलेलाई जमिन को नैतिक दर्शन हो । सबै तहमा उपेक्षित किसानहरू आफ्नो पसिनालाई जमिनमा रूपान्तरण गर्न पाउनुपर्छ भन्ने सन्देश यी आन्दोलनहरूले दिएको छ ।

थुप्रै थारू परिवारहरूको कथा यस्ता छन् जहाँ छोराको बाबुको जमिन खोज्दै सरकारी कार्यालयको चक्कर काटिरहेको छ जहाँ आमाले पुस्तौंपिच्छे उब्जेको खेत हेरेर रोइरहेकी छन् किनभने त्यो खेत अब 'सरकारी नाम' मा दर्ता भइसकेको छ ।

सत्ताको शूर्लाबाट वञ्चित, चर्को घाम र अवहेलनाबीच थारू बृद्धाहरू माइतीघरमा रोइरहेका थिए । कसैले आफ्नो पुरानो लालपुर्जा बोकेका थिए, कसैले छोराको फोटो, साझा कुरा — गुमेको भूमि र गुम्दो अस्तित्व ।

यी कथा आँसुका माल होइनन्, भविष्यका दस्तावेजहरू हुन् जसले सत्ता र समाजलाई सम्झाउँछ । नीति तबसम्म अपूर्ण छ, जबसम्म जमिनमाथि पसिनाको अधिकार स्थापित हुँदैन ।

यी कथा केवल आँसुका सागर होइनन्, यी आँधी जस्तै विस्फोटक इच्छाशक्ति हुन्, जसले परिवर्तनको खाका तयार गरिरहेका छन् ।

४. थारू युवाको कृषिसँगको पुनर्सम्बन्ध

पहिले 'बोक्नुपनेर् बोझ' ठानिएको हलो आज थारू युवाहरूका लागि आत्मसम्मानको प्रतीक बन्न थालेको छ । विगतको अस्वीकार, भूमि अधिकारको संघर्ष र आधुनिक जीवनको तानाबाना झेल्दै गर्दा पनि थारू युवाहरू कृषिसँग पुनः सम्बन्ध गाँस प्रेरित भएका छन् । उनीहरूको यो पुनरागमन केवल पारिवारिक परम्पराको पुनरुत्थान होइन । यो सामाजिक न्यायको पुनर्परिभाषा हो । विगतको जमिन गुमाइको पीडाबीच पनि थारू युवाहरू आज माटोसँग सम्बन्ध पुनः गाँस्दै छन् । उनीहरू श्रमलाई आधुनिक सोचसँग मिसाएर कृषि पुनर्जागरण गरिरहेका छन् । त्यसै त खेती गर्नेसंग जमिन हुन्न । जमिन हुनेहरू खेती गर्दैनन् । जमिन नहुने थारू युवाहरू जमिन भाडामा लिएर भए पनि खेतीमा उत्प्रेरित हुन थालेका छन् ।

युवाहरू परम्परागत खेती धान, गहुँ, मकै, तोरीबाहेक आधुनिक खेती, तरकारी खेतीमा डोरिएका छन् । यो अध्ययनकर्ताको दाङ, लमही

नगरपालिका-४, छुटकी घुम्ना गाउँमा थारू युवाहरूले प्रविधियुक्त कृषिको अभ्यास गर्दै छन् । घुम्ना गाउँ हाल थारू युवाहरूको नयाँ कृषिकथा लेख्ने प्रयोगशाला बनेको छ । टनेल खेती, ड्रिप सिँचाई, जैविक मल, बिउप्रविधिमा यी सबै विधिले गाउँलाई कृषि नवप्रवर्तनको थलो, आत्मनिर्भरता घुम्ना गाउँको पहिचान बन्न थालेको छ । छुटकी घुम्ना गाउँकै छिमेकी गाउँ भैस्कोर्मा, मजगाउँ, टिकलीगढ, सेम्रहा, बलामपुर लगायत पनि तरकारी खेतीको हब बनेको छ ।

यी युवाहरू बजारमा प्रतिस्पर्धा गर्न सक्षम छन् । उनीहरू उपभोक्ताको स्वाद, माग, र स्वास्थ्य चेतनालाई समेत ख्याल गरेर उच्च गुणस्तरीय उत्पादन गरिरहेका छन् । त्यसमाथि स्थानीय सहकारीहरूमाफर्त बजार सञ्जाल विकास गर्दै उत्पादनदेखि वितरणसम्मको स्वावलम्बी सञ्जाल बनाइरहेका छन् ।

४.१. वैदेशिक रोजगारीबाट माटोमा फिर्ता

अहिले धेरै थारू युवा कृषि विज्ञान, एग्रोटेक्नोलोजी, र उद्यमशीलता अध्ययन गर्दै छन् । कृषि विज्ञान, उद्यम विकास र सहकारी व्यवस्थापनमा पढेका थारू युवाहरू अब केवल खेतमा होइन परियोजनाको नेतृत्वमा पनि छन् । उनीहरू शिक्षालाई परम्परागत भूमिमा पुनःलगानी गर्न चाहन्छन् । कतिपय प्रवासी युवा वैदेशिक रोजगार छाडेर आफ्नै जमिनमा फर्कंदै छन् । यस्ता परिवर्तनशील दृष्टान्तहरू लुम्बिनी, बर्दिया, चितवन, कैलाली सबै क्षेत्रमा देखिन थालेका छन् ।

उदाहरणस्वरूप, दाङ, तुलसीपुरका गोपाल चौधरीले कृषि व्यवसायमाफर्त वार्षिक लाखौं आम्दानी गर्दै ५ जनालाई रोजगारीसमेत दिएका छन् । मलेसियाको निर्माण साइटमा काम गरेर फर्किएपछि अहिले उनी २० रोपनी जग्गामा बेमौसमी तरकारी, गहुँघास, र भैंसी पालन गर्दै वार्षिक लाखौं कमाइ गरिरहेका छन् । उनी स्थानीय युवाहरूलाई तालिम पनि दिन थालेका छन् ।

तुलसीपुरका अर्का युवा गोविन्द चौधरी नाम गरेका कृषकले पहिला मलेसियामा मजदुरी गथरे, अहिले भने उनले बायोग्यास, वर्मीकम्पोस्ट, र मल्टी क्रपिड प्रविधिको प्रयोग गर्दै २० रोपनी जमिनमै दिगो जीवन निर्वाह गरिरहेका छन् ।

अहिले थारू युवाहरू मोबाइल एप्स, युट्युब, कृषि पोर्टल र सरकारी प्रशिक्षणमाफर्त माटो परीक्षण, बजार मूल्य, बाली चक्र र रोग नियन्त्रणसम्बन्धी ज्ञान लिइरहेका छन् ।

यससँगै कृषिविज्ञान अध्ययन गर्ने थारू विद्यार्थीहरूको संख्या पनि बढ्दै गएको छ । उनीहरू शिक्षालाई केवल डिग्रीका लागि होइन, कृषिमा नवप्रवर्तन र उद्यमशीलताका लागि प्रयोग गर्दै छन् ।

४.२. महिलाको अग्रणी भूमिका

जमिनसंगको पुनर्सम्बन्धमा थारू महिलाहरूको भूमिका प्रशंसनीय छ । कृषिमा प्रविधिको प्रयोग, बीउ उत्पादन, मूल्य संवर्द्धन, र बचत समुहमाफर्त आर्थिक सशक्तीकरणमा उनीहरूको सक्रियता

विकासको हृदयरेखा बन्न थालेको छ । उनीहरू परम्परामा आधारित व्यवहारिक ज्ञान र आधुनिक प्रविधिको समायोजन गदरै कृषिमा नयाँ मोड ल्याइरहेका छन् ।

थारू महिलाहरू अब बिउ-बजारभन्दा अगाडि सोच थालेका छन् । उनीहरू बचत समूह, सामूहिक खेती, आर्जन तालिम, र विपन्न परिवारको सशक्तीकरणमा उत्प्रेरक बनेका छन् । दाङ, बर्दिया, र नवलपरासीमा महिला-नेतृत्वमा आधारित कृषि सहकारीहरू समृद्धि र सामाजिक रूपान्तरणका संकेत बनिरहेका छन् । उदाहरणका लागि, चितवनकी रिता चौधरीले कृषि संकायबाट सातक सकेर अहिले थारू हरित फर्म नामक महिला-केन्द्रित कृषि सहकारी चलाइरहेकी छन्, जहाँ जैविक बाली, सुकुटी प्रशोधन, र घरेलु बीउ उत्पादनमा सशक्त महिला सहभागिता देखिन्छ ।

थारू महिलाहरू परम्परादेखि नै खेतीपाती, गाई-गोठालो, घर व्यवहारमा गहिरो संलग्न थिए । अब उनीहरू सामूहिक कृषिको नेतृत्वमा अग्रसर छन् ।

थारू महिला हरित समूह जस्ता सहकारीहरूले महिलाहरूलाई उत्पादन, वित्तीय साक्षरता र नेतृत्व क्षमतामा सशक्त बनाइरहेका छन् । बेलवा र घोराहीजस्ता क्षेत्रमा महिलाहरूको सहकारीमाफर्त लाखौंको कारोबार हुँदैछ । यो आत्मनिर्भरता थारू समाजमा नभई सशक्तीकरणको संकेत मात्र नभई सामुदायिक विकासको गति हो । थारू गाउँको नेतृत्व बरघर, भलमन्सामा महिलाहरूको पाइला डोरिनु महिला सशक्तीकरणको उदाहरण हो ।

४.३. गो ब्याक टु नेचर भन्ने अवधारणा: सामाजिक प्रतिरोध र आत्मनिर्भरता

थारू युवाहरूको यो कृषितर्फको फर्काइ सिर्फ रोजगारी खोजी होइन, यो सामाजिक-सांस्कृतिक प्रतिरोधको रूप हो । जब राज्यले उनीहरूलाई भूमि दिन सक्दैन, उनीहरूले आफूभित्रको ज्ञान, जुझारुपन र प्रविधिलाई प्रयोग गरी आफ्नो जग पुनःस्थापित गर्न थालेका छन् ।

गो ब्याक टु नेचर भन्नेको अर्थ जग्गा फर्किनु होइन । नयाँ युगका औजार लिएर, पुर्ख्यौली मूल्य र जमिनप्रतिको माया बोकेर आत्मनिर्भर यात्रा सुरु गर्नु हो ।

यो अभियान कुनै आदर्शकृत विचार होइन — यो सामाजिक, मानसिक र आर्थिक पुनर्संरचनाको प्रयास हो । युवाहरू अब कृषि पेशामा दासत्व होइन, नेतृत्व देखिरहेका छन् । पिढीहरूबीचको संवाद बलियो बनिरहेको छ । बाजेले हलो समाउने कला सिकाउँदै छन् भने नातिले मोबाइलबाट मल-बीउको आपूर्ति मिलाउँदै छन् ।

५. उपसंहार

थारू समुदायको भूमि कथा माटोमा मालै होइन, मुटुमा लेखिएको इतिहास हो । त्यो इतिहासमा पसिनाको आशीर्वाद थियो, श्रमको कविता थियो तर जब अधिकार खोसियो, त्यसमा चोट, चिहान र

चेतना पनि मिसिए । तराईको उब्जनी जमिनले उत्पादन बन्द गरेन, तर जोत्नेमाथिको अधिकार भने हरायो । र त्यस बेलादेखि आजसम्म, थारू समुदायको भूमि संघर्ष केवल माग होइन । आत्मा र अस्तित्व जोगाउने प्रतिरोध बनेको छ । थारू समुदायको कृषिसँगको सम्बन्ध केवल जीविकाको आधार होइन, सांस्कृतिक पहिचान, अस्तित्व र सामाजिक न्यायको अस्त्र हो । पुस्तौँदेखि जमिनमा पसिना बगाएर जीवन बिताएको समुदायले जब त्यही जमिन गुमायो, तब त्यो क्षति केवल भूमि गुमाउनु होइन, अस्तित्व गुमाउनु बन्यो ।

राणाकालीन भूमि वितरण, जमिन्दारी व्यवस्थाको राजनीतिक कुटिलता, कानुनी पहुँचको अभाव, र सामाजिक भेदभावले थारूहरूलाई भूमिहीनता र परनिर्भरता तर्फ धकेल्यो तर त्यो कथामा पूर्णविराम लागेको छैन । थारू समुदाय उठिरहेको छ, स्वरूप बदलिएको प्रतिरोधमाफर्त ।

यस अध्ययनले देखाउँछ । अन्यायको कथा पछाडि मात्र हैन, त्यो अगाडि बढ्नेसमेत कथा हो । राजापुर, बेलवा बन्जारी, माइतीघर र स्वर्गद्वारीजस्ता संघर्ष स्थलहरू मूक छैनन् उनीहरू आवाजका पाटाहरू हुन्, जसले बताउँछ कि थारू समुदायले आशा र अधिकारबीच सन्तुलन खोजिरहेको छ । माइतीघरको चिसो सडकमा दाङ, बर्दियाबाट आइपुगेका किसानहरूको आवाज गुञ्जिन्छ । जोत्ने हातको अधिकार जमिनमै हुन्छ । यो आवाज राजनीतिक मात्र होइन, मानव अधिकारको अडान हो । स्वर्गद्वारी गुठी पीडितहरूले उठाएका प्रश्नहरू केवल अतीतप्रति आक्रोश होइनन् — ती भविष्यप्रति प्रतिबद्धता पनि हुन् ।

तर यी सबै संघर्षका बीच, आशाको प्रकाश पनि छ । थारू युवाहरूको रूपान्तरण । उनीहरूले अतीतलाई बोकेको बोझ होइन, भविष्य बनाउने प्रेरणाका रूपमा ग्रहण गरिरहेका छन् । प्रविधियुक्त खेती, कृषि उद्यमशीलता, सहकारी सञ्जाल र समुदाय-केन्द्रित सोचमाफर्त अब थारू युवाहरू जमिनप्रतिको सम्बन्धलाई पुनर्परिभाषित गदरै छन् ।

थारू युवाहरू आज जमिनतर्फ फर्किरहेका छन् न केवल उब्जनीका लागि । तर इतिहाससँग मेल गराउने अवसरका लागि । कृषि अब वैकल्पिक होइन, विरासतको निरन्तरता हो । आधुनिक प्रविधि, सहकारी, उद्यमशीलता र सामूहिक सशक्तीकरणमाफर्त उनीहरूले भविष्य निर्माण गर्न बीउ रोपिरहेका छन् । आज थारू युवाहरू हलो समाउँदा त्यो केवल माटोलाई चिदरैन । त्यो अन्यायको जरा उखेल्ने सांकेतिक अस्त्र हो । उनीहरूले खेती गर्नु केवल भोक मेटाउने काम होइन । त्यो सम्पूर्ण समुदायको सपनालाई माटोबाट अंकुराउने काम हो ।

अन्ततः जबसम्म जोत्नेलाई जमिन, पसिनालाई सम्मान, र समुदायलाई निर्णयमा स्थान दिइँदैन, तबसम्म न्याय अधुरो रहन्छ । तर थारू समुदाय अब केवल न्यायको अपेक्षा होइन, त्यसको अभ्यास गदरैछ । थारू समुदायको माटोसँगको सम्बन्ध रगतजस्तै जीवन्त छ । उनीहरूले इतिहास भोगे, संघर्ष बुझे, र अहिले न्यायका लागि रोप्दै छन् — भविष्य र त्यो भविष्य — हलो समाउने हात, बीउ रोप्ने आँखा,

र न्याय खोजे हृदयसँग गाँसिएको छ । जमिनसँग पुनरसम्बन्ध बनाउँदै गरेको थारु समुदायको नयाँ पुस्ताले जमिनमा अधिकारका लागि पटक पटक आन्दोलित हुनुपर्ने अवस्था आउनु हुन्न ।

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