

Critical Perspective on Communalism and Casteism in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to deal with the contemporary social issues of Nepal, particularly, communalism, and casteism from the critical perspectives propounded by the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, namely, Max Horkheimer in “Traditional and Critical Theory” (1937) and Herbert Marcuse in “Critical Theory” (1968). Its main objective is to challenge the ways communalism, casteism, and even the feminine issues are described as ideologies that seek to divide people from their society and their value systems. The theoretical tool used for it is the analytical approach to the critical theories of Horkheimer and Marcuse. Casteism and communalism have been the principal cause of social discrimination in Nepal. The chief finding of the study is that the so-called untouchable people of Nepal suffer from their livelihood problems and identity problems because of the majority’s indifference toward them. The significance of the research lies in the attempt to reconstruct the identity of Dalits, untouchables, and exploited women in relation to the constitutional provisions of inclusion in Nepal. It is believed that this paper stands as a reference to the scholars interested to research the topic further.

Keywords: Discrimination, Ethnicity, Hierarchy, Patriarchy, Protest.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Since Nepalese society is predominantly conservative in orientation and the Nepalese people keep on practicing superstitious norms, most people in Nepal suffer from ethnic and religious discrimination. Further differences are made by the geographical differences, economic situations, and cultural and caste variations (Luitel, 2001). Hundreds of the so-called Dalit people of Nepal are being exploited and killed every year, and hundreds of women of Nepal are exploited physically, economically, and socially because the so-called hegemonic groups strongly believe in communalism and casteism. Marcuse’s concept of critical theory enables us to judge the Nepalese society and culture critically in order to reveal and challenge the power structure generated by casteism and communalism. Horkheimer (1937) believed that when people have the materialist tendency to accumulate more, they develop an oppressive nature. Marcuse (1968) criticized capitalism thinking that they exercise social control. The German theorist and one of the members of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, Horkheimer (1937) regarded critical theory as “a social theory oriented to critiquing and challenging social taboos and biased norms” (p. 362). The key ideas of the critical theory of Horkheimer encourage us to criticize such a trend, that is, all the social norms based on taboo and biasness. The critical theory seeks to “liberate human beings from all social phenomena that propose to enslave them” (“Critical Theory”, n. d., para. 2). Another important member of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, Marcuse (1968) assumes critical theory as “an approach that studies society and culture in a dialectical way” (p. 357). But such tensions can be reduced and harmony can be created if we perceive and implement the core concepts of critical theories developed by Horkheimer and Marcuse. Their critical perspectives mainly inspire us to improve the better understanding of the current issues of the Nepalese society and to “integrate all the social issues ranging from sociology, history, political science, anthropology to psychology so that people can obtain maximum freedom” (Horkheimer, 1937, p. 364). Critical theory provides a specific interpretation of Marxist philosophy with regard to political and economic notions like commodification, reification, and critique of mass culture (Horkheimer, 1937).

Using Horkheimer’s and Herbert Marcuse’s radical concepts of critical perspectives, the researcher has tried to criticize communalism based on different religious communities such as Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, and so on, or casteism based on different hierarchies of castes such as Brahmins, Chhetris, Dalits, and so no. all living in Nepal. The aggressive attitude of communalism and casteism has bred

tensions among the Nepalese religious and ethnic communities leading to communal riots. Recently, Nawaraj Bishwakarma, along with five of his friends, was killed publicly or lynched by the so-called upper-caste villagers on May 23, 2020, in Rukum district, Nepal when his girlfriend had phoned him to come to his house because she wanted to elope with him (*Globalvoices*, 2020). The researcher is intended to object to such malpractices prevalent in the Nepalese society. Another motive of the researcher is to advocate for the global community where the ethnic and communal boundaries do not divide human beings from human beings.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study develops a theoretical framework based on news surveys, and observations of the focused group, that is, the lower or marginalized communities and castes of Nepal. The study is formulated on the basis of the research problems that downtrodden caste group people of Nepal are deprived of achieving their basic facilities like education, health, communication, and other services that are the essential factors for the development of the modern citizen because they have been treated brutally by the hegemonic group of people. The research methodology used to explore the topic is the survey of primary as well as secondary resources, that is, available literature on exploitations imposed on the Dalits and other marginalized castes and communities of Nepal. This research was based on data collected from real incidents that occurred in the Nepalese society and observations of the issues of communalism and casteism in Nepalese society over a long period. Authentic works of literature related to the minor communities, Dalits, and other untouchable castes from national and international journals, books, e-libraries, and government reports on the Dalits are studied to mark the research gap, to state problems, build hypotheses, and inform new findings. Experiences were another method of data collection in this study. After the collection of data in the required subject and their interpretation, the analytical method is used. It is not described in every detail of ethnic area and form and content of different communities or castes recognized in the country by different political and ethnic organizations, but it is a bird's eye view over this matter of the so-called minor untouchable communities.

A. Conceptual Framework

Horkheimer (1937) distinguished critical theory from 'traditional theory' which is "designed to accomplish the status quo in that it increases the productivity by functioning the world as it exists presently" (p.362). Critical theory is the reflective assessment and a critique of society and culture in order to reveal and challenge the power struggle (Marcuse, 1968). According to Husserl (1929), a "theory is an enclosed system or proposition for a science as a whole" (p. 89). Weyl (1949) deems that "Harmony and dogmatic elements are necessary for theoretical system" (p. 118). It is linked in a conservative way; it has become a hypothesis stored up with stereotypes. And this kind of biased ideology needs to be refuted and challenged. Marcuse (1968) depicts critical theory as "preoccupied with the potential for human freedom" (p. 357). Instead of judging something as "better, useful, appropriate, productive and valuable, critical theory rejects these notions because they only function within the present order" ("Critical theory", n. d., para.3). Thus, critical theory is directed toward eliminating dogmatic and irrational practices.

Casteism is a mad favor and loyalty of a group towards the caste or sub-caste of an individual of the group (Kroeber, 1930). Casteism does not regard much for the issues of other ethnic groups. In casteism, a person seeks to realize the economic, political, social, and other aspects of his or her own group. Casteism is categorized in terms the ethnic groups while class is categorized by the economic conditions of the family in the society (Lieten, 1994). Communalism is a narrow-minded view of the society that goes against the ideals of the constitutions of the country (Lieten, 1994). It is an unfair inclination toward the community of an individual or group.

By analyzing the radical concepts of critical perspectives of Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, the researcher has tried to highlight how the stereotypical and biased concepts of communalism, casteism, and patriarchy are still practiced in many areas of Nepal. The researcher also aims at protesting communalism based on different religious communities such as Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists or the political communities such as Maoists, Communists, Congress, and so on, or casteism based on different hierarchies of castes such as Brahmins, Chhetris, Dalits, and so no, all living in Nepal.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ideologies associated with casteism and communalism, gender, and women-related issues in Nepal have oppressed and exploited the marginalized groups of people in Nepal for a long time. Horkheimer (1937) advocates, "If experience and theory contradict each other, one of the two must be re-examined"

(p.364). In Nepal, the constitutional theory and experience contradict each other. Almost every day, we hear the news that some Dalit girl is raped, or the so-called untouchable people or poor women of Nepal are exploited economically, culturally, socially, and psychologically. Nepal was declared free from caste-based discrimination on June 4, 2006, but even today people from so-called lower castes are still facing bitter discrimination and are deprived of basic facilities and infrastructures. According to Article 24 of the *Constitution of Nepal* (2015), no citizen of the nation shall be subjugated to any kind of partiality, or untouchability on the bases of the person's ethnicity, origin, race, community, profession, or mental, physical conditions. The practice of discriminating against people in terms of the untouchable castes shall be subject to punishment by law. Not only this, one who victimizes the innocent by discriminating against him in terms of his or her race and religion has to pay the compensation. However, casteism and communalism still exist in Nepalese society. People talk of the upper class, lower caste, touchable and untouchable.

A prominent libertarian socialist, Bookchin (2006) defines communalism as "a system of government in which independent communes participate in a federation for the principles and practice of communal ownership" (p. 2). We can mark how the dominant castes or the culturally powerful group exploit the marginal tribes physically, economically, and socially. A 12-year-old Dalit girl from Devdaha village of Rupandehi district, Nepal was found dead by hanging herself on a tree on May 23, 2020 (*Demand Justice for Dalit Murders; Killing Dalit Youth is Savagery*, 2020). She was raped by a man from the so-called upper caste and forced to marry her rapist. The initial police investigation claimed that she had been raped and murdered. A legal complaint against the murder was reported to the police by the victims only after the pressure from the civil society. On the same day, that is on May 23, in West Rukum district, 18 young men, mostly Dalits, were targeted by a violent mob (*Demand Justice for Dalit Murders; Killing Dalit Youth is Savagery*, 2020). More than fifty people of the so-called upper caste, caste community hurled stones at the victims and chased so-called untouchable young men to the edge of the river. Over the next several days, the bodies of six men were recovered from the river. Five of the six men were Dalits. A teenage girl Nirmala Panta was raped on 27th July 2018 and murdered in a sugarcane field in Kanchanpur. This was an impact of treating women as a commodity by the patriarchal Nepalese society. Therefore, they need to be re-examined from the critical theories of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, especially, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse. Horkheimer (1937) also believes that "Theory is the sum-total of propositions linked in a system" (p. 363) and consists of "useful hypothesis stored up knowledge" (p. 363). The way the male members of the Nepalese society have conceptualized that they can manipulate any girl physically or any man economically hints at what kind of system they have fabricated in their minds.

1) *Discriminations in Terms of the Communalism in Nepal*

Communalism is "an ideology that, in order to unify the community, suppresses distinctions within the community and emphasizes the essential unity of the community against other communities" ("Communalism", n. d., para.1). In Nepal, communalism is connected to different groups of religious communities such as Hindus, Muslims, Kirats, Buddhists, Christians, and so on. Communalism increases orthodox ideologies and principles. It also uplifts the tendency to dislike other religions, communities, and ethnic groups, and hence, divides the society (Kothari, 1989). Communalism has not always been negative. It has some positive aspects as well. Communalism enhances the closeness and responsibility of an individual towards his community or group. In communalism, the members are engaged in uplifting the social and economic conditions of the community. However, in a negative connotation, it is an ideology that emphasizes the separate identity of a religious group in relation to other groups with a tendency to promote its own interests at the expense of the others. Such a notion can be termed as 'traditional theory' which is designed to accomplish specific tasks set up for it (Horkheimer, 1937). Communalism as a political philosophy has its tool to create division, differences, and tensions among the communities on the basis of religious and ethnic identity leading to communal hatred and violence.

The recurrent disputes among the so-called Madhesi and Pahadi, Limbuwan and Tharuhat supporters, and other communities in Nepal are the byproduct impacts of communalism. Weyl (1949) marks the dogmatic elements rooted in the theoretical system. In the communalist assumptions of Nepal, dogmatic elements are rooted. Communalism of Nepali people leads to the death and disasters of innocent people and their properties. When one community has a strong attachment towards their own community, they start considering other groups in a negative way. In a popular discourse in Nepal, it is understood as an unhealthy attachment to one's own religion. But critical theory opposes such unhealthy practices. Critical theory is "concerned with human happiness flourishing to arrive at a rational organization of society through transforming the material condition of existence" (Horkheimer, 1937, p.360).

In the hilly regions of Nepal, the non-Brahman communities have had conflicts with the Brahman community for centuries. In the same way, the people of the plains region of Nepal have Indian origin. They are often called the Madheshis. But the term, 'Madhesh' denotes the inner zone of plain Nepal.

Hence, the inhabitants of the plain regions are the Madheshi people. These people have a communal battle against the Hilly people. Hundreds of people lost their properties and lives in the communal riots. Marcuse (1968) reasoned that modern society tends to suppress those communal groups who are successful within themselves. It is because modern society seeks to expand the consumer culture, and force people to consume the products of the capitalist society in the name of globalization. By blocking critical understanding of the real workings of the system, communalism in modern society pulls its members into a one-dimensional existence of a community. But critical theory condemns such a dividing tendency and speaks for the equality and freedom of all (Marcuse, 1968).

Madheshi Movement is a political movement that erupted as a movement of communalism in 2007. It is launched by various political parties, especially those based in Madhesh, the plain region of Nepal, for equal rights, dignity, and identity of the Madhesis, Muslims, Tharus, and Janjati groups in Nepal. There were three Madhesh Movements in Nepal. The first Madhesh Movement began in 2007. Ramesh Mahato became the first Madheshi martyr in 2007 at Lahan when the Madheshi community was fighting against the colonialism of the non-Madheshi groups, the dominant Brahmins and Chhetris for the Hilly regions. The second Madhesh Movement came in 2008, and the third Madhesh Movement resurged in 2015. In the third movement, that is, in 2015, many Madheshi people became martyrs. The riots almost took the turn of communalism because so many communities from hilly regions attempted rivalry and violent actions toward the Madheshis.

The Madheshi people complain against the government of Nepal because they are still treated in a biased way and deprived of equal rights. Though the Interim Constitution of Nepal, 2008 had assured to address the demands of Madhesis, even the 2015 Constitution of Nepal could not address their issues. The underlying principle of the critical theory is the transformation of the content of social life while retaining its ideological and institutional forms (Marcuse, 1968). The Madheshi people believe that their social life will be changed. The Constitution of Nepal itself is taken as the critical theory. This, as it is believed, will assist in transforming the social values of the people in plain regions and help retain their ideological and institutional forms.

2) *Issues Based on Casteism in Nepal*

A major problem in Nepalese society is Casteism. Kroeber (1930) defined caste as “an endogamous and hereditary subdivision of an ethnic unit occupying a position of superior or inferior rank or social esteem in comparison with other such subdivisions” (p. 254). Max Horkheimer differentiates critical theory from traditional theory. The traditional theory is expressed through abstractions and is designed to accomplish the specific tasks set up for it. The stereotypical notions of communalism and casteism can be categorized under traditional theory as they are designed to represent the “status quo, the productivity and functioning of the world as it presently exists” (Horkheimer, 1937, p. 366). The Nepalese society is a country of various religions. Each religion has further sub-categories of different castes, and even these castes have sub-divisions in the orthodox Nepalese societies. The norms of each caste differ though they all might belong to one religion (Vishwakarma, 1997). Among these castes, certain groups are given high status and others a low status, depending upon their caste occupation. There are different communities according to Castes (such as Brahman, Chhetris, Tharus, and Sudras) and geographical territories (such as Pokhereli, Dhankute, Purbeli, Pashchimeli, etc). In such a society, there are every possibility for caste, ethnic and religious conflicts to occur. The conflicts that originate from casteism refer to the dislike of one caste by the other (Vishwakarma, 1997). Casteism is noticed when the members of one caste try to gain personal advantages by ignoring the interests of the other castes. In brief, casteism refers to one-sided loyalty in favor of a particular caste. In casteism, a particular group or caste tends to provide the advantage of their own caste only. There have been conflicts and fights between or among Brahmins, Chhetris, Tharus, the Sudras, or untouchable castes in Nepal because of our people’s dogmatism in casteism.

In casteism, the members of one caste may even adopt the most improper methods to enhance the priority and prestige of their caste. But the critical theory of the Frankfurt School forces us to erase impartial ideas based on casteism, and gender hierarchies through the reasoning process. The reason is the fundamental category of philosophical thought in which an individual can examine and judge everything by means of the power of his knowledge (Marcuse, 1968). The problem arises when women of a certain caste are subjugated by the men of their community. This is an impact of the patriarchal norms of society. Patriarchy “is a social system in which men hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, and social privilege” (“Patriarchy”, n. d., para.1). Communalism, casteism, and patriarchy are traditional ideologies that lead to violence, riots, and domestic war.

Casteism in Nepal is an obstacle to democracy. Earlier, people were classified into different castes according to the work they were allocated for. But today people are recognized as touchable or untouchable castes. Such practices create inequalities in society and hamper the development of the socio-economic system. Even today, the so-called untouchable people in Nepal are deprived of receiving basic

educational rights, job opportunities, right to citizenship and vote. The principles of Horkheimerian critical theory reject such issues. Horkheimer (1937) says, "The separation between individual and society in virtue of which the individual accepts as natural the limits prescribed for his activity is relativized in critical theory" (p. 365). Critical theory lives in the dialectic tension between accepting the economics, and values of the existing order by condemning them. Critical theorist embraces tension as a constituent element of their theory. In contrast to Kant and Hegel, Horkheimer stresses the social context of reasoning. Critical thought opposes the world of communalism, capitalism, casteism, and separatism. It encourages the integration of human beings and harmony. "A consciously critical attitude is a part of the development of society" (Horkheimer, 1937, p. 367) and critical theory is "critical of the social forces that make up its own basis" (Marcuse, 1968, p. 357).

However, Nepalese societies are tinged with communalism, capitalism, casteism, and separatism. There are caste-based discriminations and acts of violence. The Matwalis (alcohol drinkers) who are now known as the indigenous of Adibashi have conflicts with the Brahmins (Hofer, 1979). Even among the non- Brahmins, there are conflicts among the Khas, Newars, and the Indo Aryans. Such conflicts have led to communal violence resulting in the death of the people involved.

The conflict originating in casteism, communalism, and gender discrimination in the Nepalese society can be removed by encouraging co-education at the primary level and boys and girls should be given the opportunity to come together. "Critical theory involves a normative dimension, either by criticizing society in terms of some general theory values or norms or by criticizing society in terms of its own espoused values" (Horkheimer, 1937, p. 367). Inter-caste marriages should be welcomed by all the stakeholders of society. This will lead to the improvement of behavior among different sexes simultaneously, with which casteism and communalism will be actively refuted. In order to put an end to casteism, communalism, and gender discrimination and to deprive them of their very basis, the creation of some optional groups is necessary through which the communal tendencies of the individuals can be manifested and organized. As these increase, casteism, communalism, and gender discrimination decrease because the individuals will have the chance to express their instincts and motives outside the caste. To eliminate the conflicts arising out of casteism, it is necessary to create economic and cultural equality among the castes.

We can end the conflicts generated by casteism by improving our internal aspects of conduct through love, integration, and cooperation. For this, it is necessary to try and develop critical attitudes based on the deduction, regarded as experimental judgment, and induction, as evident insights. Unless the Nepali people develop the insights of integration, they can never be free from the problems of casteism, communalism, and other discriminatory practices.

IV. CONCLUSION

If we re-evaluate communalism and casteism from the critical perspectives of Max Horkheimer, we would no longer exploit people as low, and our women would no longer be exploited as inferior. The critical perspectives of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, especially, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse help us to study our contemporary issues on gender, communal, ethnic, and religious hierarchies in a dialectical way by analyzing them politically, economically, socially, and culturally. They encourage us to reduce riots, violence, and exploitation practiced in the castes and communities. The critical theories of Marcuse and Horkheimer have the potential to make us critical of the biased contemporary social conditions. We are prone to adopt social transformation positively, avoiding all the social prejudices. The recurrent discriminations and oppressions imposed on innocent Nepali women in terms of gender, downtrodden castes, and communities will cease only when we reject such mechanisms. Like Horkheimer's or Marcuse's critical theorists, we have to be able to embrace tensions as a constituent element of society. If a man is governed by reason, then our critical thought must oppose the world of elites, capitalists, and feudal which dictate all aspects of human life. Thus, this paper presents a transformative and reformatory vision of society. To release people from social dogmatism and prejudices, one ought to learn from Horkheimer and Marcuse in critiquing ideology and linking it with the practice of social revolution.

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