Emancipation of Kamaiyas: Development, Social Movement, and Youth Activism in Post-Jana Andolan Nepal

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The Kamaiya Liberation Movement that began on May 1, 2000, forced the Nepali Government, on July 17, 2000, to declare the emancipation of up to 200,000 bonded laborers in western Nepal. This historic movement, coming as it did ten years after the restoration of a multiparty democratic system in Nepal, is a critical diagnostic event for gauging Nepal’s political present. ‘Emancipation’, many commentators were quick to point out in July, is not something that can be achieved simply by a governmental decree. Indeed, the movement continues as the former Kamaiyas struggle to fashion their new modes of life. And so does the need to reflect seriously on the significance of this movement.

A newspaper cartoon a few days after the declaration depicted a man whose left leg is freed from the fetters of the ‘Kamaiya System’ but whose right leg is still chained to the larger fetter of ‘Poverty.’ Because the liberation movement came from western Nepal, some political observers wondered aloud about its relation to another famous movement in western Nepal—the ‘People’s War’ being waged by the Nepali Communist Party (Maoist). The Kamaiya issue also raises reflection on ethnicity, the overwhelming majority of the bonded laborers being Tharus, and many of the landlords being high-caste Hindus. The Kamaiya liberation movement thus engages fundamental questions of Nepal’s political present, and about the meanings of democracy, citizenship, and poverty—what it means ‘to be free’, or ‘to be freed.’ The following essay is a partial and preliminary account of some of the aspects of the ongoing movement in order to suggest the issues they raise for further historical and political inquiries.

I was fortunate to be in Nepal from late June to early August 2000 and to catch glimpses of the liberation movement immediately before and after the declaration. The way I approach this issue is also informed by my larger research project on development discourses in Nepal, entailing historical inquiries as well as fieldwork in western Nepal and in Kathmandu. Thus, before turning to discussions of the movement itself, I shall make brief, preliminary remarks sketching my approach towards development discourse and political agency.

Development, Discipline, and the Figure of Youth

The democratization of Nepal in the 1950s introduced ‘development’ as the supreme object of the polity. In a definition promoted in the 1950s, development was ‘[a] process of releasing, through effective leadership, the enormous potential that resides in people who discover that through their own efforts they can improve the usefulness of their lives’ (Rose 1962:100). Thus, the ‘people’ were simultaneously the beneficiary of and the means for development. They were objects as well as resources. A development-oriented government aimed and aimed to identify and cultivate the ‘enormous potential’ of the people, make them aware of it, and help them behave in such a way as to apply. This short paper is part of a larger research project on development discourse in Nepal, which has involved fieldwork in western Nepal and in Kathmandu from 1996 to 1999. An earlier version of this paper was presented as part of the panel on Decade of Democracy in Nepal at the South Asia Conference in Madison, WI, in October 2000. I thank Susan Hargens and Laura Kunstehofer for organizing the panel.

1I am grateful to many of my friends who were participants to this movement for allowing me to catch glimpses of the movement from a relatively close distance, from June to August 2000, in Kathmandu, Kailali, Bardiya, and Dang. I am especially thankful to Dilli Chaudhary and other members of BASE, and to my friends at Martin Chautari. Martin Chautari, a discussion forum in Thapathali, Kathmandu, has provided crucial support for the Kamaiya movement since June 2000. Needless to say, this paper does not necessarily reflect the views of BASE or Martin Chautari, nor are they in any way responsible for any mistake of fact or interpretation in this paper. I thank Pratyusha Oma and Seira Tamang for their helpful comments on a draft of this paper. Some disclaimers

improve the usefulness of their own lives'. Technically, this has involved classifying the people into further subcategories - such as small farmers, the landless, women, children etc. - each with different problems and potentials.

"Youth", I suggest, was one such category. The motto of the Sports Council of Nepal, a government branch primarily focused on youth, has been "Development, Discipline, Dynamism." The motto signified a governmental will, as well as anxiety, to contain and exploit the power of the youths for the project of nation building. The youths were to be shaped, through discipline by such devices as school and sports, into dynamic and energetic participants of development and progress - in the Panchayat vocabulary, into those who find pride and pleasure in the work of desa

In what follows, I suggest that agentive forces of some to the actors in the Kamaiya liberation movement derived at least partly from the complex constitution of the category 'youth' in recent Nepali history. More generally, I would like to suggest that over five decades of development discourse, almost any significant socio-political mobilization in Nepal in the present would involve some degree of translation / transmission of development categories.

Kamaiya Liberation Movement, 2000

Kamaiya practices in the agrarian western Tarai, since they included forms of debt-bondage and bonded labor, had been considered a major developmental and human rights issue in Nepal, at least since 1990. Debt bondage was clearly stated to be unconstitutional in the 1990 Constitution. Many international organizations, NGOs and political parties had been calling for the end of these practices, and many had proposed programs to gradually liberate all the bonded laborers. However, no major changes had been effected until this year.

On May 1st, 2000, 19 Kamaiyas in Kailali District went to the VDC office and asked the COO officially to file their cases demanding minimum wages, the cancelation of their debt, housing and land and personal security.

"The word Kamaiya originally derives from a Tharu word designating a man in position within the intra-household division of labor where he carries out physically demanding work like tilling the field and earning the householder. Because of the resonance of its original sense, and because of the diversity of contemporary Kamaiya arrangements even by the person calling himself a bonded laborer in the legal sense. Conversely, those who are not called a Kamaiya, such as a female member of a Kamaiya household (Kamaihari, Bechrai, etc.) may effectively be a bonded laborer. For accounts of Kamaiya practices, see: Rankin (1999), Dhiwal et al. (2000), Sharma and Thakralari (1998), Robertson and Mishra (1999) Ministry of Land Reforms and Management (1999) Nepal South Asia Conne (1998)."

"Article 20(3) of the 1990 Constitution states that ‘Traffic in human beings, slavery, serfdom or forced labor in any form is prohibited. Any contravention of this provision shall be punishable by law.’ Mulki Aini (Part 4, section 11; sub-section 3) prohibits slavery-like practices and prescribes 3 to 10 years of imprisonment against offenders. Nepal also ratified the Slavery Convention (1926) and the Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutional and Peasant Practices Similar to Slavery (1956) in 1963. For more details on legal provisions see: Ojha (2005 v.s.), Pandit (2000))."

The choice of the date, May 1st, by the promoters was deliberate, as the day marked the international laborer's day. 7These are Dang, Bardia, Kailali, Kanchanpur, and Salyan. 8Decision of ‘emancipation’ was made by the Ministers Council and announced as a ‘statement of public interest’ at the National Assembly by the Minister for Land Reforms and Management, Dharma Ojha. The same statement that announced the immediate ban on bonded labor practices, acknowledges that the practices had been illegal for many years and states that the proclamation is made under Constitution and Mulki Aini (2000). For details see Gorkhapatra (2005 v.s.) and The Rising Nepal (2000)."

"Here and in the rest of this paper, I foreground BASE and the 19 Kamaiyas in the story of Kamaiya movement. BASE, the human rights organization which has been involved in Kamaiya and land to till, is the first need to be met before accepting any other programs, such as education or skill training programs (further detailed below). As of December 2000, the government has yet to meet any of these demands."

This has been a brief summary of the events so far. In the following section, I would like to further highlight and discuss some aspects of this movement. This will include the movement's relation to more conventional development projects, as well as relations to such things as youth clubs. I will also be discussing the connections between intentions and outcomes, and the process of translations and articulations involved in the movement.

Kamaiya Movement and BASE

As I mentioned above, the organization called BASE played a leading role in the Kamaiya mobilization. There is an onic distinction within some development circles, between a 'project' and a 'movement' or between an NGO and a social movement. BASE moves between the two categories. BASE (or Backward Society Education) is an organization based in western Nepal, with more than 130,000 members.

Only a few days after the declaration of emancipation, Dilu Chatterji, the chairman of BASE, who is also the convenor of the Kamaiya Muki Parchalim Samiti, described BASE as something that started out as a popular movement led by young Tharus, with such objectives as empowerment of the oppressed and freedom for the Kamaiyas. But after 1990, with the donor money flowing in not only for its primary, and extremely popular, activity of non-formal education classes, but also for other conventional programs such as health and women's savings groups, BASE had become more 'project oriented.' However, recently BASE has again taken the form of a movement, succeeding in Kamaiya emancipation, and now intends to continue focusing on movements, rather than projects.

The distinction between ‘project’ and ‘movement’ contains an incisive critique of much of what goes on in the issues at least since 1991, and was a participant in this year's movement, would tell alternative story with markedly different picks and emphases. See for instance, an article titled INSEC with Kamaiya (Statdtd Labor) Liberation Campaigns (INFOR- MAL 2000). Divergent constructions of the Kamaiyas liberation by different parties (including political parties) after the declaration, raise important issues that here.

For a brief comment on the problem see Otsa (2000). For other illuminating analyses and commentaries on the movement, see, for example, Tiwari (2000) and Bhattarai (2000)."
The recent announcement of a Kamaityi rehabilitation program by the Nepal Office of International Labor Organization (ILO) illustrated this point. The $3.5 million project funded by the United States Department of Labor is expected to benefit 32,000 bonded laborers and their families. The program addresses issues such as labor rights, education, and social security. The goal is to empower these workers to improve their livelihoods and achieve a sense of dignity.

In 1985, Dilli Chaudhary and his friends started a youth club in Dumri Gaun, organizing literacy classes and other activities. They sought to create a space for young people to engage in meaningful conversations about their future and the challenges they faced. The club went on to become a significant player in the local political landscape.

Yet, development discourse is not simply a cover, an ideology or mystification, that conceals the asymmetric power relations. While it often serves the function of the former, development discourse does much more. Obviou...
And why did thousands of other Kamaiyas also act the way they did? For the 19 Kamaiyas, some reports say that what prompted their decision for that radical action was the passing of the minimum wage law by the government (cf. Parajuli 2007 v.s.). The law was to take effect on the 1st of Magh, 2057 v.s. (January 15, 2000), and it prescribed the daily wage for agricultural labor to be no less than 60 rupees a day. For the Kamaiyas who were receiving far less, this drove home their plight even more. \footnote{30} So it seems to be paid a just wage was a very important issue for some of the Kamaiyas who acted. There may have been other various and complicated issues that were on the minds of Kamaiyas. Yet, in the course of the movement, for the movement as a whole, the issue of wages became secondary or tertiary.

In early July, leading Kamaiyas\footnote{31} and people from organizations supporting the movement held a two-day meeting in Nepalgunj. Vivek Pandit, a tribal rights activist from India and recipient of the 1999 Anti-Slavery International Award, served as the facilitator of the meeting. He and others argued that freedom was the first and foremost issue for the Kamaiyas. Without being free from the domination of the landlord, there could be nothing. After freedom, other issues could be dealt with. The goal of the movement had to be clear. And the goal was freedom. Vivek divided the attendees into groups and encouraged each group to compose and sing Kamaiya songs and slogans. Vivek also tried to help participants to visualise this movement as an epic fight between the good and the evil – as in Hindi movies. There were heroes and there were villains. Heroes, of course, were the Kamaiyas; the villains were the CDOS and the landlords. NGOs and INGOs were friends of the heroes. As in the movies, heroes never die. Even if the heroes died, they would somehow return to life after the end of the movie. The story doesn’t end until they win. And they do win at the end.\footnote{32}

When the 150 bonded laborers began dharna, many human rights activists and political leaders came to Bhadra Kali and gave speeches expressing their support for the Kamaiyas.\footnote{33} The human rights activist, Gopal Shrivastava ‘Chitan’, welcomed the Kamaiyas and told them that, "The Nepali government is sending armed police forces to western Nepal, saying that the government is trying to make the Maoists obey the Constitution. Now you came all the way from western Nepal to Kathmandu, in order to make the government itself obey the Constitution (and stop allowing bonded labor practices)."

There were disagreements among the organizations supporting the movement, as to what the demands should be. Some argued that a comprehensive law detailing the processes of emancipation and rehabilitation should be passed, before anything else (cf. Ojha 2000). Some also argued that when negotiating with the government you should not have only one or two demands, you should ask for twenty or thirty. Then you might get two or three. But some kept arguing that there should be a clear demand, that of freedom, in order for the movement to have any chance of success. Some legally minded activists said we don’t need any more of those \\

\[ \text{dakha stories (i.e. narrating of numerous hardships experienced by the Kamaiyas).} \]

We just need to repeat our clear legal argument.

Many journalists came to Bhadra Kali to ask the Kamaiyas questions about why they were here, what they wanted, their stories of dakha, and what they wanted to do, if liberated. Sitting in Bhadra Kali, amidst the dust and gas fumes, many protesters became ill. But they all responded to the reporters that they had come here for justice, their rights. They recounted stories of abuse, said they wanted to be free to go wherever and whenever they wished. Girls said they wanted to go to school once they became free.

In reflecting on the aspects of the liberation movement, I find myself concerned, not so much with such things as what the pure and original intentions of the Kamaiyas were, but more with the instances and processes of translation, the creation of narratives, and the assumption of images and roles that may or may not let one act as a certain actor in a particular situation. A social movement, a concrete historical process, involves a constant encoding of meaning of the process as its integral part. The process involves the creation of certain kinds of actors (e.g., “you,” “bonded laborer”) with particular kinds of capacities, competence and desires (e.g. an ability to act as an activist, to desire to be free).

A Kamaiya girl, about 13 years old, was smiling after we were released from Mahendra Police Club, a few hours after the declaration of emancipation by the government. “How are you? Weren’t you sick yesterday?” I asked. She answered “Now I’m fine. Because we won.”

References


