

## **Applying Marxist Perspective on Particular Social Institutions and Processes in the Context of Nepal**

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*The main purpose of this study is to concentrate on the discourse of applying Marxist perspective on particular social institutions and processes in the context of Nepal. To fulfill the goal, this paper has divided into different sections. It begins with the introduction, main premises, logic, and arguments of the Marxist perspective. Moreover, the focus is also given to explain and illustrate how that perspective can be applied to explain phenomena from Nepalese society with concrete examples of social institutions and processes. So, the body part of this paper tries to link Marxist perspective particularly on social institutions like marriage and family, and social process like birth rate. Finally, the recapitulation section of the paper presents the overall argument of the whole paper.*

[**Keywords** : Marxist perspective, Nepali society, Marriage, Family, Fertility rate]

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## **1. Introduction**

Marxist perspective originally is related to the philosophy and ideas of the prominent German philosophers Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. It has often been said that the Marx fashioned his doctrine out of three major elements: German idealism, especially in its Hegelian version, French socialist tradition, and British political economy. Though not incorrect, this is hardly the whole truth. In fact, other streams of thought, primarily the German and French Enlightenment, were equally important to him. The genesis of this perspective is based on the inversion of German idealism, particularly the idealistic conception of the German philosopher G. F. Hegel. Moreover, by distinguishing itself from Feuerbach's materialism, the Marxist perspective depicts that Feuerbach's materialism is abstract, which only posits "'man' instead of real 'historical man'" (Marx & Engels, 1845-46 : 39). Unlike Hegel and Feuerbach, the Marxist perspective neither accepts any forms of idealistic conceptions nor follows the "abstract" materialism rather it treats the phenomena with their own historical specificity.

Marxist perspective believes that society comprised a moving balance of antithetical forces that generate social change and transformation in a progressive way. Basically, such progressive epochs in the economic formation of society can be designated as Asiatic, ancient, feudal and capitalist modes of production (Marx & Engels, 1845-46). According to the Marx, the motivating force in history was the manner in which men relate to one another in their continuous struggle to extract their livelihood from nature. Therefore, for Marxist perspective "the first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals" (Marx & Engels, 1845-46 : 31).

The second premise is that "the satisfaction of the first need, the action of satisfying and the instrument of satisfaction which has been acquired, leads to new needs; and this creation of new needs is the first historical act" (Marx & Engels, 1845-46 : 43). In other words, the production of material life itself was the first historical act and a fundamental condition of all history. The continuous quest for sufficiency in eating, drinking, habitation, and clothing were man's primary goals at the beginning of the race as is even found in the complex anatomy of modern society. In the effort to fulfill basic needs, people engage in antagonistic cooperation as soon as they leave the

primitive communal stage of development. Moreover, as soon as a division of labour emerges in human society, that division leads to the formation of antagonistic classes as the prime actors in the historical drama. According to the materialist conception of history, the ultimately determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms that proposition into meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase (Engels, 1890-94).

Marxist perspective believes that all social relations between men and the systems of ideas are specifically rooted in historically distinctive periods. So, ideas and categories are no more eternal than relations which they express. They are historical and transitory products (Coser, 2002). Historical specificity is the hallmark of Marx's approach. This means that all previous historical periods were marked by class struggles and these class struggles differed according to historical stages. Unlike Hegel, Marx took as his point of departure the evolution in man's material conditions. For Marx, neither the change of social systems could be explained by extra-social factors such as geography or climate nor can such change be explained by reference to the emergence of novel ideas. Moreover, ideas themselves are not prime movers but are the reflection of the material interests of men in their dealing with others.

According to Marx, "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force" (Marx & Engels, 1845-46 : 59). In other words, the class which has the control of means of material production at the same time has control over the means of mental production too.

Marx adopted the dialectical mode of logic from Hegel. However, whereas Hegel focused on dialectic of ideas, Marx tried to embed his dialectical approach in the material world. As a dialectical thinker, Marx was interested in the structures of society and the actors within society, as well as with the dialectical relationships between actors and the social structures. But the dialectical method is even more complex than this because the dialectician considers past, present, and future circumstances, and this applies to both actors and structures (Ritzer, 1992). Marx was adapted to the ongoing interplay among the major levels of social analysis. The heart of Marx's thought

lies in the relationship between people and the large-scale structures they create.

Marxist perspective does not rest on the arbitrary premises, dogmas, and imaginary abstraction rather is based on the real individuals, their activity and the material bases under which they live. The premises it follows can be verified in a purely empirical way. In direct contrast to idealism, materialism believes that morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology, and their corresponding forms of consciousness do not retain the semblance of independence (Marx & Engels, 1845-46. It views that "life is not determined by consciousness rather than vice-versa" (Marx & Engels, 1845-46 : 37). In other word, the mode of production of material life conditions the other aspects of social, political and intellectual entities of life. One of the gist points of the Marxist perspective is that "circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances" (Marx & Engels, 1845-46 : 54). Therefore, to interpret the different facets of Nepalese society from the angle of materialistic perspective focus should be given to the material bases or conditions of the society under which they prevailed.

## **2. Marriage in Changing Mode of Production**

We can take some examples of social institutions and processes to apply the Marxist perspective in Nepalese society. Let us consider marriage. There are/were different forms of marriage that existed in the long history of Nepalese society. Broadly, among them, captured marriage, polygamy, polyandry, child, widowhood, and monogamy are/were dominant forms. These different forms of marriage can be analyzed by linking with a specific mode of production or material existence. In recent decades, arranged and love marriage is in practice in Nepalese society. Moreover, in recent years the form of love marriage is increasingly dominant one. It is because this form of marriage is compatible with the capitalist mode of production.

The nature of Nepalese society/economy is primarily capitalist now (Mishra, 2007). In a capitalist society, marriage as a social institution is transformed or modified and adapted to the exigencies of the capitalist frame or mode of production. When Nepal was primarily a feudal form of production arranged marriage was dominant. In the feudal form of production, land was the main means of production. Traditional agriculture had a major form of subsistence. Individual mobility was very low. Individuals were

more dependent on parental property. Such a material condition had favored and sustained arranged marriage. In an arranged marriage, parental consent was obligatory. Moreover, marriages become possible between landlord family with landlord and peasants with peasants. No one of the landlord family could ready to marry their sons and daughters with the sons and daughters of peasants. The fear of the fragmentation of land could be the responsible factor to sustain arranged marriage in a feudal form of ownership.

Unlike the feudal form of ownership, in the capitalist form people left farms for industrial occupation. Industries or factories became the major means of production. Parental property is no more valuable for their children than in the form of feudal society. Factors like separate occupation, individual freedom, self-reliance, and self-responsibility create a situation that is compatible to love marriage. Thus, the ownership of the means of production, the nature of the society, and the material conditions are prime forces responsible to create and sustain the specific forms of marriage.

### **3. Formation of Family in Changing Material Condition**

Let us take the formation of a family in Nepal. Family defines rights and obligations that the members of the group have to one another, both economically and socially. Broadly, there are two major types of family in Nepalese society. One is a nuclear family comprised of married partners and their offspring. Another is extended or joint family which comprised at least three generations: grandparents, married offspring, and grandchildren. What constitutes a family varies depending on a variety of factors including subsistence practices, economic behaviors, and mode of production. The joint family is compatible with material conditions that prevailed in the feudal mode of production. But, the nuclear family is common to be found in the capitalist mode of production.

In the context of Nepal, if we go back at least three generations we found joint families with more than thirty members. Moreover, this was more common in Tharu community in Tarai but equally applicable to almost all caste and ethnic people in Nepal. In the past, Tharu people normally had an extended family system, with up to a hundred members in a family (Khadka, 2016). There were different material conditions responsible to the formation of extended family. First, it had only been possible to sustain such a large family that the housed hold head himself used to be a feudal or landlord. The

Landlord needed a lot of labourers which was possible within the family if the size of the family is large. Second, to fulfill the need for labourers, the priority of the landlord used to be the family of a tenant with large members which was not possible by the members of a small family. Therefore, in such a situation both landlord and tenant had to need a large family which ultimately had created the basis of joint or extended family in feudalism.

But, this situation is changed with the onset of the capitalist mode of production. The land is no more remain the main means of production as in feudalism had. Industries and factories became the major means of production. On the one hand, with the creation of different jobs in factories, people left agricultural works for industrial occupations. On the other hand, industrial occupations have created the situation of individuals' mobility far from their birthplace. Moreover, income opportunities have made the individuals self-dependent and end the family restrictions as found in an extended family in feudalism. In such a material condition things like individual freedom, independence, and individual choices have prevailed which ultimately created the basis of the nuclear family in all Nepalese caste and ethnic groups including the Tharu people.

#### **4. Changing Mode of Production and Fertility Rate**

Let me consider the example of the fertility rate in the context of Nepal. In recent five decades, the fertility rate in Nepal is gradually or in some sense intensely decreasing. The fertility rate for Nepal in 1950 was 5.959 births per woman. For 1980, 1990, and 2000 the fertility rate was 5.725, 5.185, and 4.039 births respectively. But the current fertility rate for Nepal in 2020 is 1.880 births per woman (United Nations, 2020).

**Table-1 : Nepal - Historical Fertility Rate Data**

<b>S. No.</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Fertility Rate</b>
1.	1950	5.959
2.	1980	5.725
3.	1990	5.185
4.	2000	4.039
5.	2020	1.880

**Source :** United Nations, 2020



The above table shows that the fertility rate in Nepal is decreasing since 1950 but in the recent few decades, the decreasing rate is very intensive. The question raised here is why the fertility rate in Nepal is intensively decreasing in the last decades? What are the things that interfere with these biological processes? Are today's women anatomically weak than the women in previous periods? Whereas the life expectancy for Nepal in 1950 was 34.20 years and the current life expectancy for Nepal in 2020 is 70.88 years (United Nations, 2020).

Some people argue that this is because the government announces the policy of "sano parivar sukhi parivar". Others believe that it is due to the provision of family planning. Moreover, few others believe that the main factors for decreasing fertility rate are literacy, income, etc. Of course! These are the factors responsible for decreasing the fertility rate in Nepal but they are not the major ones. Marxist perspective believes that to interpret for such a situation focus should be given to the material bases of the society under which they live. The ownership of the means of production, the nature of the society, and the material conditions are prime forces responsible for decreasing the fertility rate.

The major cause for the decreasing fertility rate in Nepal is the transformation of the feudalistic mode of production into capitalist ones. Basically, last four to five decades people began to move as foreign employees in different countries in general, and the gulf and Malaysia in particular. This trend has become more intensive in recent years. A large number of people of their reproductive age left the country for foreign employment. Almost each and every family in the countryside either husband or wife or both has gone for foreign employment. This situation creates the context that now husband and wife have no opportunity to live together in twenty-four by seven as in the agricultural or feudalist mode of production had. On the one hand, in an agricultural society, the husband and wife live together for almost all the time and which was favorable for reproduction. On the other, in agricultural society due to the manual labour high fertility rate had mattered. But in capitalist or industrial society people become busy with their job and such a busy schedule do not create the situation for husband and wife to be live together. Therefore, this busy schedule definitely brings restriction on birth rate. The same material conditions can be found in the decreasing fertility rate in recent years in Nepal.

## 5. Conclusion

Marxist perspective believes that to understand or interpret contemporary phenomena like social institutions and processes their historical and material roots should be studied. This is only possible when the focus is given on the transformation from one mode of production to another mode of production. In recent decades in Nepalese history, there are different forms of social institutions and processes that came into existence, sustained, and changed. In the feudal mode of production, institutions like marriage and family were in arranged and extended forms. But, with the transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist ones the form of marriage and family also transformed into love and the nuclear family. Similarly, even the biological-looking process of birth rate changed with the transformation of feudal to capitalist modes in Nepal. The transformation of these social institutions and process was not due to an extra-human agency or other consciousness, ideas, a supernatural entity, and so on rather was very material conditions that prevailed.

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