

The Thaha Movement and Social Transformation in Nepal: Insights from Rupchandra Bista's Philosophy of Social Justice

Sano Bhai Karki¹

¹PhD Scholar, Department of Political Science, Singhania University, Jhunjhunu, Pacheri Bari, Rajasthan, India

Corresponding Author: Sano Bhai Karki

Email:ksanobbhaig99@gmail.com | <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-7142-6687>

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ABSTRACT

The seeking of social justice in Nepal is still being defined by age-old caste stratifications, pessimistic views of the world, and cultural regulations, which inhibit civic agency. In the same landscape, the Thaha Movement based on the philosophy of thaha or critical knowing by Rupchandra Bista, presents a valuable framework that would put forward a challenge on the epistemic principles of inequality. This work is going to explore the ideas of awareness, anti-fatalism, and rational discipline by Bista as the prism through which the concept of social justice in Nepal can be seen and how the Thaha Movement is related to the larger processes of social change. A conceptual review based on PRISMA with systematic search, screening and thematic synthesis of 21 relevant articles was undertaken based on their retrieval in academic databases and registers. The results show that the critical awareness importance placed on by Bista is an emancipatory instrument that helps individuals and communities to challenge the oppressive social systems. His fatality criticism is also an interruption of cultural discourse to justify inequality and clear conceptual space of agency and group empowerment. Moreover, the rational discipline he advocates connects the individual sense of ethical responsibility to systemic justice, which can make contributions to ethical governance and democracy. Generally speaking, the review presents the contemporary usefulness of the philosophy developed by Bista and emphasizes the prospects of the application of the Thaha Movement to shape more participatory, fair, and critically based methods of effecting change in Nepal.

KEYWORDS

Critical Awareness, Epistemic Inequality, Rupchandra Bista, Thaha Movement, Social Justice

INTRODUCTION

Historical formations of social justice in Nepal have taken their course in a topography that has been hierarchically organised, exclusionary on the basis of caste and has always been framed by deeply established cultural practices that restrain civic agency. Social reproduction encompasses the mechanisms through which social differences are enacted to the benefit of some groups and the disadvantage of others, which has been widely documented in the anthropological and sociological examinations of the Nepali society (Gurung, 2022). Among such a manipulated land one of the most significant but least studied problems to the epistemic and social injustice is the Thaha Movement as the result of the Rupchandra Bista philosophical intervention. Basing the concept on thaha, which is a form of critical knowing, Bista made awareness as a dislocative force that can expose domination and empower communities to challenge unfair systems (Shrestha, 2022). His philosophy thus changes the discussion of social justice not only on the institutional frameworks to an emancipatory redefinition of the consciousness, morals, and citizenry.

The Thaha Movement was a social-philosophical movement of consciousness, a reaction to the continued existence of inequality, fatalism, and blind obedience in the Nepal society. The movement was not a formal political group but a critical intervention in the field of knowledge

and awareness, with ethical discipline, anti-fatalism, and other elements of reflective citizenship as the roots of social justice (Shrestha, 2022). The movement, which began in an era where agency was limited by the hierarchical relations of society and forms of knowledge embedded within the culture, also aimed to break not only institutional injustice, but also the epistemic conditions of normalizing the existence of inequality. Although relevant, the scholarship of the Thaha Movement has been underrepresented and the importance of the Thaha Movement as a long-term philosophical response to domination and social reproduction has not been theorized adequately in the discourse of social justice (Gurung, 2024).

The main problem that this paper is focusing on concerns the continued lack of engagement between the normative approaches to social justice in Nepal and the existence of structural inequality. The reality in a perfect society would be providing dignity, equal participation and equal opportunity to all citizens. Nevertheless, current literature proves that pessimist ideologies inhibit marginalized groups, whereas limited access to transformative knowledge still negatively affects agency and further marginalization (Verma, 2022). Despite democratic reforms, constitutional re-structuring, and development intervention in Nepal, the interventions have not sufficiently dealt with the epistemic sources of inequality. The existing literature is more prone to highlighting the political and institutional aspects of exclusion, whereas they underestimate the role of culturally perpetuated knowledge systems in perpetrating injustice or the possible role of critical awareness as a source of resistance (Gurung, 2024). As a result, reform efforts are still disjointed and do not have a line of thought philosophy of how sustainable social change can be achieved.

The impacts of this gap are both direct and indirect. The people who do not have the ability to think critically have challenges in asserting their rights, opposing discrimination and engaging in the polities in a meaningful manner. Meanwhile, epistemic inequality also leads to poor governance, justifies corruption, and weakens collective action, which decreases the effectiveness of democratic institutions and equitable development (Bishwakarma, 2022). These circumstances highlight one of the fundamental facts: even the institutional change will not be enough to break the strongly rooted hierarchies before corresponding change in consciousness and social awareness.

The response given in this paper to these shortcomings is the revisiting of the philosophy of social justice expressed by Rupchandra Bista, through the Thaha Movement. Despite the fact that Bista can be recognized as a significant personality in the history of Nepal intellectual life, there was little scholarly interest in the philosophical richness and social justice aspects of his ideas (Bhatta, 2021). The available literature mainly talks about his activism or personal impact, and the conceptual possibilities of his thought on the path to cognizing systemic inequality, power structures, and group change have not been developed (Kaini and Rai, 2023). In order to fill this gap, the following objectives will guide the study:

- i. To critically analyze the philosophy of awareness, anti-fatalism, and ethical discipline developed by Rupchandra Bista as a model to explain social justice in Nepal; and
- ii. To examine how the ideas and interventions of the Thaha Movement are meaningful concerning overall processes of social change and structural inequality.

With these purposes, the study will add to the existing scholarship by providing an interpretive framework that puts the Thaha Movement in a strategic position to be used as a crucial intellectual tool in visualizing a more just and equitable Nepali society.

METHODOLOGY

In this research, the conceptual review strategy with PRISMA was used to recognize and integrate the literature about the Thaha Movement and the philosophy of social justice by Rupchandra Bista. Database and register search This was initially a systematic search of academic databases and registers that identified 236 records (230 database and 6 registers). A total of 75 duplicate records, 5 items recorded ineligible using automated tools, and 5 records were excluded due to other reasons before screening. The rest of 151 records were sent to the screening stage during which titles and abstracts were evaluated. At this stage, 36 records were not considered because they had no thematic relevance.

After the screening, 53 reports were identified to be retrieved and 49 were obtained, and 4 others were not obtained. Then, these 49 full-text reports were evaluated by eligibility criteria such as conceptual relevance, Coherence with the philosophy of Bista, as well as their role in the debates concerning the issues of social justice and social transformation. Out of all the reports accessed during the eligibility assessment, 28 were excluded owing to the fact that they were not published during or after 2010 and therefore not within the inclusion criteria of the study which is recent conceptual scholarship.

Finally, 21 articles were able to meet all the inclusion criteria and have included as part of the final conceptual synthesis. These works are at the very centre of the analysis of the philosophical commitments of Bista, the intellectual background of the Thaha Movement and its impact on the modern social change in Nepal.

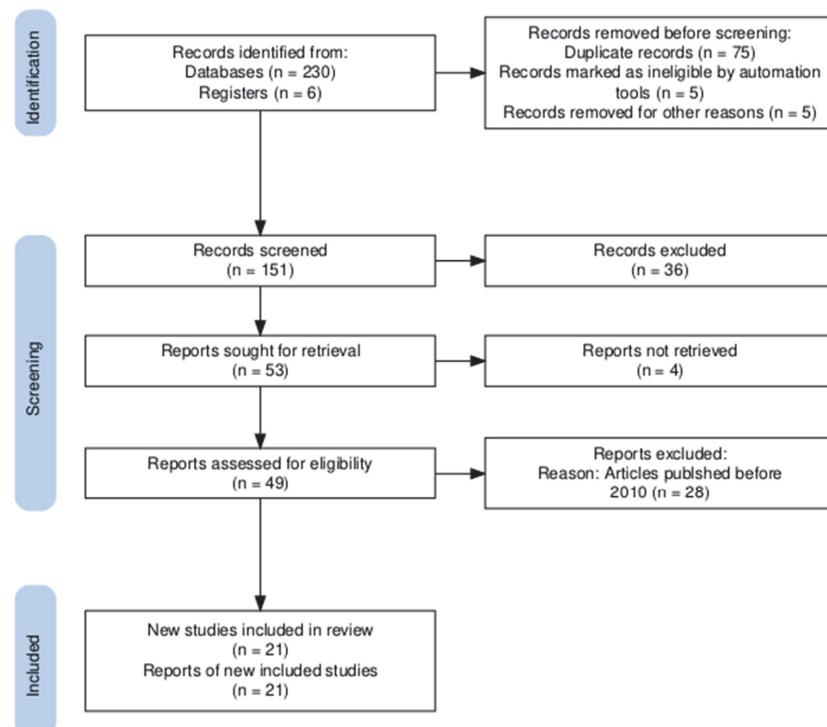


Figure 1: Study identification and screening process following PRISMA guidelines**THE THAHA MOVEMENT AND SOCIAL JUSTICE*****The Thaha Movement as a Social Justice Project***

The Thaha Movement appears in the literature as a massive popular intellectual opposition of the Nepalese firmly-profound systems of inequality. The movement, though making no formal political organization, helped such historically oppressed communities to challenge social constructs that denied them dignity, agency, and participation (Yadav, 2018). Thaha critical knowing as perceived by Bista was an emancipatory tool that made it possible to challenge cultural practices, caste as well as institutional practice that reproduced injustice. In this respect, thaha does not just mean factual knowledge but reflective understanding that would make people recognize the social sources of injustice. As an example, being able to identify caste hierarchy as not an order of nature, but as a product of historical domination is thaha as critical knowing. Previous studies confirm that awareness-driven mobilization has been a driving force behind organizing the collective domestic action and social change in Nepal since time immemorial, showing how local mobilization and participation facilitates social justice goals (Chaudhary, 2023).

This is supported by modern research. Researchers demonstrate that the critical awareness that Bista focused on enables marginalized groups to realize and challenge domination, which corresponds to more general frameworks that refer to consciousness-raising as one of the fundamentals of collective liberation (McGee, 2016; Sankofa, 2024). These observations are linked to the recent studies which point to how community-based movements redefine norms, undermine elite powers, and provide space where meaningful empowerment can be achieved among the structurally disenfranchised groups (Bhattarai & Basnet, 2023; Chowdhury & Gow, 2024). The Thaha Movement, therefore, can be referred to as one of the major interventions to the socio-political life of Nepal, referring to the potential of innovative changes of grass-roots movements based on awareness, solidarity, and decision-making through the involvement of representatives of the broader audience.

Nevertheless, despite the ability of awareness-based movements to promote the empowerment, scholars warn that the socio-political climate of Nepal is limited by the presence of unbroken patronage groups and elite influence. They are structural forces that still deny epistemic liberation full manifestation, and they are not only an indication of promise but also scarcity of struggles over social justice at the grassroots level (Chaudhary, 2023). This literature has formed the basis of the current review because it shows how the Bistana philosophy can be used to interrupt the narratives that permit caste-, gender-, and class-based disparities in the world, as well as the structural restraints that attempts to change the world operate within.

Although the Thaha Movement has normative interests with other social justice movements in Nepal like Dalit movements opposing caste hierarchy, feminist movements opposing patriarchal domination, and the Maoist insurgency opposing structural inequality, it has significant differences in terms of its mode of intervention. Instead of depending on legal reform, identity-based mobilization, armed struggle, the Thaha Movement anticipates epistemic change with the help of critical awareness, ethical self-control and reflective citizenship. To this end, the movement is not substitutive of other types of resistance but supplementary as it determines the cultural and cognitive bases through which inequality is normalized and reproduced.

Bista's Philosophical Commitments to Justice

Bistas philosophy relied on the fact that justice commences with epistemic equality. His logic was that the lack of development in Nepal was in fact a result of ignorance generated and perpetuated strategically by the elites in such a way that the communities were never able to see the injustice or even seek redress. His works placed knowledge among the rights and as a condition of just development and resonated with the more general traditions of social justice and critical pedagogy (Yoo et al., 2019).

The focus on epistemic equality adopted by Bista is consistent with the critical pedagogical formulations that aim to give voice to the poor through creating awareness and discussion of societal injustices (Karki, 2020). This point of view emphasizes the fact that educational reforms are necessary, in which approaches based on inclusion and the acknowledgment of the voices of historically marginalized people are sought in Nepal. These are the necessary reforms to break the systematic obstacles that constitute the inequality and introduce the more reasonable educational environment in Nepal (Sharma et al., 2024).

The intellectual similarities between the critical awareness promoted by Bista and the conscientization as introduced by Paulo Freire and the agency and capability as stressed by Amartya Sen are intellectual. Nevertheless, such a contribution by Bista is unique in that it bases itself on the socio-cultural setting of Nepal, where epistemic injustice is reinforced by fatalism, ritualized power as well as internalized hierarchy. Bista as opposed to Frantz Fanon recommends a slow process of ethical and cognitive restructuring as the key to sustained social justice.

The current review consolidates these works and illustrates that Bistas philosophy does not just challenge systems of domination but it enriches the recent discussion on the democratic transformation, social equity and epistemic justice. However, scholars conclude that to apply epistemic equality into practice, there is a need to make more extensive institutional changes that can challenge entrenched hierarchies and redistribute power more equally (Bhattarai, 2018). This highlights a gaping need; Bista has outlined theoretical commitments that in their practical application have not been observed through empirical research studies. Even though there is limited systematic empirical documentation, philosophical commitments as expressed by Bista are still echoed in the current civil society practices in Nepal. The focus on awareness, normative answerability, and anti-fatalism is similar to the goals of community education, advocacy based on the rights, and participatory development programs that aim to advance agency among the marginalized populations. This indicates that the ideas of Bista are still relevant nowadays, although they are not directly expressed when the term is the Thaha Movement.

THEMATIC FINDINGS

Critical Awareness as Resistance to Oppression

One of the overarching themes in the literature is the fact that Bista insists that social justice starts with awareness. His critical view of ignorance was directed to regimes of domination that maintained the ignorant groups in the dark over their rights and power machinery. According to scholars, Bista thought about awareness as a resistance, and it allowed people to recognize oppression, go against the principle of hierarchy, and express demands towards justice (McGee, 2016). This is in line with social justice theory across the world whereby the focus of collective liberation is based on the idea of raising awareness. Consciousness opening not only helps to develop critical consciousness but it is also the impetus to take social action and people can

become proponents of the fight against oppression (Sankofa., 2024). This critical awareness is critical to inculcating a sense of agency and advancing sociopolitical building, which eventually grows to empower the marginalized representatives (Seider et al., 2020). The current analysis supports such indications by demonstrating how the critique of the fatalistic ideologies by the Bosta is a direct attack on the epistemological basis of inequality. Identifying awareness and agency allows Bista to place critical consciousness as a disruptive instrument in systems of domination and promotes individual and group empowerment.

Challenging Fatalistic Ideologies that Legitimate Inequality

Traditionally, fatalism in Nepal was used to defend the uncertainty of the caste hierarchy, gender inequality, and royal control by displaying the social roles as something that were pronounced by the gods (Thornton et al., 2020). The ideological ideals of injustice were the actual attack by Bista when he rejected fatalism. In Bista's philosophy of anti-fatalism means denying the view that suffering, poverty, or the position of caste are predetermined by fate or the will of the god; rather it sees these conditions as products of social organization, which can be challenged and even changed by the collective consciousness. The literature tells of how his criticism shook convictions which had justified the practice of exploitation and how hopeless the opportunities of social transformation were to the restless populations in the end. The redefinition of the concept of destiny as a social construct and not a divine imposed one gave Bista a conceptual space of resisting, being mobile, and empowered (Khanal, 2019). The change of vision can have a great impact on interpreting the dynamics of social transformation and development in Nepal, especially that of marginalized populations (Bhandari et al., 2023). The ideas of Bista are relevant today because the marginalized community in Nepal still faces the challenge of trying to intervene in development processes due to the inherent barriers created by the system to make such participation difficult. In his work, he stresses the importance of inclusive approaches that might help to increase the voice of these communities and enable them to develop the actual empowerment (Nepali, 2025). This battle supports the message of the necessity of discussing the structural imbalances and providing some voices of the marginalized not with hearing but with the development initiative in Nepal (Aryal, 2024).

New research also sheds light on the way common people still struggle with the structural obstacles in spite of their growing critical consciousness. Nepal continues to marginalize poor people by excluding them in development activities, capturing its resources through elites, and social stigma continues to affect them. The authors also believe that social justice is also something that would need continuous actions like amplifying the voices of the marginalized and breaking down the structural inequalities (Bhandari et al., 2023; Nepali, 2025). This review then builds these arguments by pointing out how the philosophy of Bista can be used to conceptualize the six persistence and resistance to hierarchical forms of power.

Rational Discipline and the Construction of an Ethical, Just Society

The third general theme is connected to the call to disciplined rationality as a component of fair rule and the common good by Bista. Bista embraced ethical self-regulation contrary to the conventional authority-based discipline which sustained fairness, transparency and social responsibility. Rational discipline, in turn, suggests ethical self-discipline based on reason and moral responsibility i.e. being just in social life not because of subordination to the government or of the fear of punishment. According to the scholars, this paradigm offered a social justice-oriented blueprint of citizenship whereby individuals have a role in the common good, and institutions are useful to people (Upadhyay, 2021). His focus on logic and responsibility along

with acting justly is also close to the modern discussions about fair governance and participatory democracy.

The concepts provided by Bista are quite consistent with the principles of ethical governance, as they emphasize the significance of integrity and accountability towards the company to build a just society where the greater good prevails (Aryal, 2024). This is one of the versions of a wider philosophical view of governance that incorporates ethical leadership as fundamental to attaining sustainable development and social equity. This alignment indicates that the introduction of ethical principles in the governance systems becomes a critical factor in tackling systemic inequalities and social justice in the modern society in the context of promoting equity and distribution of the resources (Bista, 2023). This vision is, therefore, one of the cornerstones of achieving the just society where ethical governance is the tool of empowering the local communities and encouraging the fair distribution of resources (Bhattarai, 2018). The framework created by Bista emphasizes on the need to institutionalize ethical governance in the decision-making process as the means of attaining social justice and establishing equitable relationships among different members of communities.

In this review, the philosophical commitments of Bista can be seen to intersect arguments on democratic transformation and good governance. According to scholars, the solutions to structural inequalities could be found in inserting ethical principles into the system of governance so that the resources could be distributed more fairly (Bhattarai, 2018). However, the difficulties in institutionalization of ethical governance in the highly stratified political and social context in Nepal are also recognized in the literature. Therefore, as much as the ideas of Bista do provide a visionary guideline of a justice-oriented governance, it has to be properly implemented at structural levels, beyond personal moral behaviors.

Structural Constraints and Limits of Epistemic Transformation

Although it would be emancipatory, the implementation of the epistemic vision of Bista is subject to strong structural limitations. Systemic patronage systems, the control of political systems by the elites, the lack of access to critical education, and the cultural resistance to the issues of translating the awareness into the long-term social changes limit the transfer of awareness into the long-term social change. Furthermore, the idea of epistemic liberation tends to face criticism among individuals who are interested in the status quo of power relations. Such constraints point to the conflict between the consciousness-based change and material and institutional circumstances required to consolidate it.

Limitations of the Study

This research has a number of limitations, which should be recognized. First, being a conceptual review, it is based purely on secondary sources and does not involve primary data like interviews with the members of the Thaha Movement or direct research and examination of unpublished manuscripts by Rupchandra Bista. Second, PRISMA used in the research is tailored to philosophical synthesis and places greater importance on conceptual relevance rather than empirical generalizability. Third, the low number of included studies is the result of the limited theorization of the Thaha Movement in the academic literature and not methodological weaknesses. These shortcomings suggest that future empirical, archival, and ethnographic studies would be necessary to supplement the conceptual findings generated in this review.

CONCLUSION

This review paper demonstrates that thaha (critical knowing), anti-fatalism, and rational discipline as a combination of all these factors place the Thaha Movement as an important epistemic intervention against caste-, gender-, and class-based inequalities in Nepal. The philosophy of Bista conceptualizes awareness as an active type of resistance rather than passive enlightenment by which marginalized communities can identify and resist domination systems. The denial of fatalistic values interrupts the historically established patterns of social immobility and rational discipline connects the individual ethical responsibility and collective justice. Nevertheless, this is still hampered by structural factors like elite control, patronage, and lack of access to vital education that still inhibits the complete achievement of epistemic liberation. The implications of the findings imply a number of things. Further studies are needed to be empirically focused on Bista writings and the lived experiences of the participants of Thaha Movement so that the epistemic justice is better understood in practice. Social justice and development programs in Nepal must be incorporated at the policy level incorporating critical pedagogy, civic awareness and ethical responsibility with institutional change. As an exercise, school educators and civil society institutions can use the Bista framework to community-based initiatives that facilitate reflective learning and participative citizenship with marginalized populations. Altogether, the Thaha Movement can be considered an important intellectual asset to the further development of more equitable, participatory and ethically based methods of social change in Nepal.

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