
Household as a Unit of Changing Social Structure

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Abstract

Almost all the comparative historical analysis have been done from etic perspective that always describes the external social structure as the determinant of social change especially in changing internal structure like households. However, this study tries to describe, the external as well as internal, both factors of society contribute for the transformation of households. In this context, two major questions have been raised. First, what are the major events that shaped my own household since last twenty years? And the second, how do those events contribute to transform the household as a unit of social structure? This study is based on lived experiences and group discussions supplemented through unobtrusive measure within family gatherings that are attributed as data required for the comparative historical analysis of household in a twenty-year long run. It explores five major events within a household that contribute for its transformation. Eventually, it finds that both internal and external factors that contribute to occur as events of a household transformation at structural level. As capitalist neo-liberal structure is being developed rapidly, structure and attributes of household have been changing along with its pace; at the same time, internal factors (adaptive nature) such as idea of surplus cattle, migration from rural to urban, adaptation of urban life, transformation of occupation, division of family, international migration etc. are also playing crucial roles to shape households in substantive ways.

Keywords: contribute, event, household, social structure, transformation

Introduction

As we know that family-household is of great importance in sociology; not only does it serve as the most basic unit of a society, it remains often the location of primary socialization. Wallerstein & Smith (1992) define household as a fundamental unit of economic activity,

serving as both producers and consumers of goods and services. Therefore, household is a unit of production and consumption that pools income from different sources and shares it separately in their own sectors of saving and expenses. However, since the structure and mode of production of society change, the nature and structure of households change along with its pace. No household could remain unchanged after the transformation of social structure along with mode of production; thus, family-household where I was born also adapted the changing scenario of social structure, and transformed as the social environment developed along with socio-cultural influence. Nepali society passed a whirlwind of social changes through the Maoist Civil War, People's Movement II, the dethronement of the King, state restructuring, and a lot of modern technological change in the last twenty years. My household as a social entity; was not free from all these changes. Thus, here I attempt to portrait my own household as a unit of social structure. However, household especially depends on the production and consumption process along with its supporting or constraining events. Therefore, here I have tried to grasp some major events that influenced my household's production and consumption systems which have eventually been transforming my household from the last twenty years ago.

As Kertzer (1991) asserted, in many communities of the 18th and 19th centuries, a majority, sometimes a large majority, of people lived in households containing two or more component conjugal families (Torti, 1981 and Kertzer, 1991); twenty years ago, my household used to live in a rural community of eastern Terai in a non-nuclear family household along with my parents and grandparents. While every household used to cultivate land, and keep animals for their survivals, my household also did the same. This evidence justifies that household was not only the unit of production but also the unit of consumption in pastoral as well as in agrarian society. Furthermore, goods produced by households could not be sold easily because of the lack of connection with the market that almost all people in my community just used to fulfill their subsistence from their production. Surplus production was distributed among the neighbors who were very close to the household. Labor could be exchanged for the fulfillment of additional labor while yielding the crops. There were frequent visits of kin-members in my household that they used to support in household chores as well as in farming activities. My household never knew that milk and vegetables could be bought and sold elsewhere because it always seemed 'taken for granted' since its origination. However, in the recent years; the social scenario, structure and production systems as well as relationships of household have totally been changed

than the twenty years ago. A number of circumstances were surrounding my household in different points of last twenty years ago. However, here I portray only five major events that contributed to change and shape my household chronologically; and after all, I conclude it. As comparative historical analysts focus on structure rather than individuals, but at the same time, they do not refuse the role of individuals in the process of social change. Thus, this study focuses on the roles and influences of both aspects in transformation of each other.

Problem Statement

Almost all comparative historical analysis is found to have studied from etic perspective. Those studies merely emphasize the external events as causal factors to happen something alter within the society. However, contrary to this, discontenting with these argument this article not only attempts to study the own household from the emic perspective but also it tries to reveal the major five causes that influence as internal factors to transform my own household since the last twenty years. First, this article tries to fulfill the methodological gap and then turns to the issues of the household transformation. As Mishra (2009) argues everything is social and everywhere is social, this study considers every events connected to my household is social, and how those events influence in changing its characteristics and structure would be regarded as the social structural influence in the unit of household rather than the personal, natural/biological, and spontaneous. Therefore, some big questions have been expected to be answered from this study. What are the major events that shaped household since last twenty years? How do those events contribute to transform the household as unit of social structure?

This study is based on the facts regarding the gradual transformation of household. It tries to grasp this transformation from the emic as well as etic perspective; however, emic does not entail here to hypothetical, rather it is factual means lived experiences. Thus, this study also believes that lived experiences along with experience based knowledge could only reveal the social reality. Thus, some lived experiences and some incidental facts that have been collected within the family discussion through unobtrusive measures have been taken as data for this study. Additionally some secondary data have also been added to justify the issues. Literatures have been adjoined with the every event that it has not been separated in an extra chapter for this study. In this way, this study seeks the answers of two questions from emic as well as etic

perspective applying comparative historical method to study historical transformation of my own household along with the overall structural change of the society.

Research Methodology

This study believes that not only the external but also both external and internal factors play significant roles to shape the household as well as transformation of society simultaneously. Every person is experiencing from their self lives. Some dare it to share, but some do not. Here I have dared to share lived experiences through chronological way which would help to describe and understand the influences of internal as well as external factors in the transformation of household. Data taken for this study are from lived experience as well as incidental facts found through unobtrusive measure while discussing with the family members in the gatherings in different feast, festivals and occasions. Thus, most of the data have been taken from primary sources; however, some data have been taken from the secondary sources to justify the statement for the references. Since the study follows comparative historical analysis method, all acquired data have been analyzed putting in chronological order. What the incidents were, how they occurred, what strategies the family applied to cope the situation and how the interplay of external as well as internal factors contributed to change the situation of household, have been described systematically that helps to understand the factors leading to change the household over the long period of time.

Household as a Unit of Social Structure, and Change

Unexpected events in life could impact the life of individuals that could contribute to transform the household. Households not only change its structure and its play the significant roles for social transformation. Both aspects have their impacts on each other. Thus, first, here I would like to describe how unexpected events contribute to change household economy. First, around 19-20 years ago, a terrible drought stood as an event which compelled to change my household as well as its economy. Nineteen and half years ago, my household as a production unit of my society encountered a severe drought in Terai. My household almost totally depended on agriculture at that time; therefore, the drought devastatingly damaged its economy. As Mills (2005) argues human beings cannot cope with their personal troubles in such ways as to control the structural transformations that usually lie behind them (Mills, 2005. p. 11); my household

could not cope upwith drought that there were no surplus grains for food in my household. Neighbors sold their livestock for their survival. As being a Brahmin family, there were only a few milking cattle in our shed. Milk could not be sold at that time. My parents/grand parents decided to sell some old copper and brass utensils which were locked in a wooden box for a long period of time, and eventually they did it. We survived; however, the event taught a lesson that we should keep surplus livestock to sell in the crisis. My household began to keep the livestock which could be sold in the need. This crisis also obliged me and my elder brother to work for a wage for the first time. We joined different private schools to earn some money which could help our family household. It was around 20 km. far from ourresidence; therefore, we both left home for the job. This event taught us to learn to live in urban setting for the first time. This event seems common; however, it not only shaped my household economy in a new way but also transformed the whole household structure, production and consumption system as well. This event seems natural; however, as Mishra (2009) argues that ‘social is everywhere’, this event was also social because he further argues Sociology—do not turn out to be created and recreated quite in an automatic, natural, divine, biological or chemical manner either (Mishra, 2009, pp. 4) . Thus, that was a social event that compelled my household to transform its production as well as consumption system because after 1980s or the implementation of neo-liberal production system, financial capital flowed rapidly all over the world. Likewise, Terai regions were only the regions where most industries were located that caused climate change as well as global warming that eventually manifested as drought in eastern Terai region of our country.

Second, health crisis is another factor that could change not only the structure of household but also the residence of individuals. In the same way, sixteen years ago, my father’s death stood as a crucial event which shaped my household and its economy. I did not know what disease caught my father. However, I thought that he should be taken to the hospital for his check up. There were no big hospitals nearby my residence; and I could not take him to the big hospitals of thebig cities because income of my household could not afford them. I approached in available ones in the surroundings; but they could not diagnose my father’s disease. They used to give some medicine which could mitigate his pain shortly but could not cure it. One day, my uncle came to visit my diseased father. When he observed my father seriously, he suggested me to take him to Ghopa Camp, Dharan; where, according to him, severe patients could be treated

well. As he suggested, I took my father to the hospital in Dharan; however, it was getting late for his treatment. My father could not live more. Normally, my father's death is considered as biological or natural event; however, sociologically it can be claimed as social because social model argues that human health and treatment is socially determined (Bruce and Phelan, 1995, p. 86); thus, unavailability of big hospital for his treatment nearby the residence is socially determined aspect that lacked my father's treatment in time. That event badly hurt me, my mother, and other family members as well. We could not continue our traditional occupation after the death of my father which was major source of income of my household. My household could not stay there longer. As Sun-Ki Chai (1996) argues ethnic boundaries are both 'primordial' and 'circumstantial' (Chai, 1996. p. 281); we, then, migrated to Sunsari, Itahari instead of Dharan and Biratnagar because it was both primordial and circumstantial that there were more Brahmin-Chhetri community (also our relatives lived there) along with the job/business opportunities as the city was developing as a booming city after the establishment of republic nation. Now, we all members transformed from villagers to city dwellers. Instead of borrowing goods from the neighbors, we approached to the local grocery for the credit. Neighbors' visit needed permit that every gate was locked almost all time. Our social relations and connections dropped and we socially faded for the first time.

Third, a small achievement in life of individuals could play the roles in the transformation of household. In such way, fourteen years ago, my elder brother passed the examination of public service commission; and held a government job as an accountant. As Jordan (2004) argued that rises of income decreases the poverty in close correlation (Jordan, 2004. p. 23.); my elder brother's job stood as a pillar of my household economy to decrease the poverty level. My father's responsibilities went on the head of my elder brother then. His income supported to build a house in Itahari. On the one hand, he supported in the higher education of my younger brother, and mother's treatment and medicine. On the other hand, he facilitated every member to accomplish the goal of lives. I also started to teach in a college. My younger brother started to work in a construction company. Then, my household totally transformed from rural to urban household. Instead of working in farm, we started to work in the organizations. Our social relationships and connection totally changed. Now, my household transformed from a

unit of production and consumption to only unit of consumption because all the goods were purchased from the market, and all members began to work outside the household.

Fourth, life event could also change the structure and ways of functioning of household that could contribute the social structure as well. Eleven years ago, marriage of my elder brother changed the patterns of my household. Generally marriage seems as private affair; however, when I seek the answer of why my elder brother decided to get married only after holding job and building a new house, crossing the age of twenty five years, it becomes social because his marriage was implicitly as well as explicitly connected to his government job, new house, and his age of marriage. When he got married, he started to live with his better half which was also socially determined; however, many of my relatives thought that his wife changed him and he became selfish now. He also began to spend less money for us means other family members. My family thought that it was natural or spontaneous; however, it was not natural but factual that he could not save as much money as he could do before his marriage. His expenses have been raised because of the influence of a couple's marriage in capitalist mode of production. Thus, it was not only just the consequence of being individualized but also the slow moving influence of capitalist mode of production as every society had been facing. In this way, influence of capitalist social structure impacted first in my household in the case of individualization. Simultaneously, when he reduced the expenses in the household, we, two brothers, became alert that it could happen in our lives too. As RSS (1992) argued that the political economy strengthens actors-individuals as well as collective-actors whose power is grounded in control of economic and organizational resources (RSS, 1992, p. 5); we, two brothers, had also started to earn from our organizations rather than the farm. Unknowingly an understanding prevailed among us was that we began to bear our all personal expenses by our own. We understandably began to save money for our own future in our personal accounts. Later, my younger brother and I also got married in a few years gap. Now, all of our three brothers live in different places. Mother lives in Itahari, which is our old family-household. In this way, my single family household has been divided into four households because of the influence of internal but social factors; and all of us have been separated now. This fragmentation of household not only changed the structure of household but also contributed to transform the social structure. However, we all gather occasionally there especially in Dashain and Tihar. Each of us purchases clothes for our mother.

But, for us, we buy for ourselves. In this way, marriage changed my household as an internal but social factor(as a structure) of householdtransformation. We could not experience the same relationships among the every member what we experienced in the earlier family life.

Fifth, nineteen years ago, since family members' separation for the first time brought changes in the household along with income and living of family members, it had already proved that upheavals of life chances could contribute for the transformation of household. Thus, it can be argued that circumstances of living together and separating from family not only contribute to change the household but also contribute to change the social structure. In the same manner, four years ago, my younger brother migrated to Europe that again reshaped our household. When my brother migrated to Europe in search of job, his better half and son started to live along with mother. During his transition period in the job of Europe, we, two brothers, supported them for their livelihood. But, when he came back and took his better half along with him to Europe, my mother with her grandson (my nephew) migrated to Bhaktapur from Itahari. Now, my mother and nephew live in my elder brother's house in Bhaktapur. Couple of my younger brother sends money for the expenses of the son. Sometimes they send money for mother too. My mother sometimes visits me along with her grandsons (both brothers' sons) to add a grandson (my son) in my household. As Kertzner (1991) argues that grandparents are needed to take care of small children and household when both of the parents have to be away at work (Kertzner, 1991. p. 169);nowadays, my both brothers' sons have started to live together, eat together, sleep together, and go to school together, play together; my mother (grandmother of my nephews and son) takes care of them that has reshaped the household again. All those events and their influences contributed to transform the household structure along with its characteristics. As Mishra(Setopati, 11 July, 2023) argues changing society along with stagnated individuals could not be found all over the world;both, the society and its units could not remain in stagnation; both change simultaneously over the time. Thus, societytransforms along with its units and social units change along with the society or the social structure.

Conclusion

As Wallace ad Wolf (2006) asserted that an understanding of how societies had evolved in the past could help us understand our present; my household as a unit of my society evolved in

a linear way from twenty years ago to present. On the one hand, household faced and challenged major five internal events such as economic crisis, health crisis, job holding, marriage, and the migration since last twenty years where external factors such as neo-liberalism, urbanization, and modern education system etc. also contributed to shape the household. Both internal factors such as capacity and willingness to adopt the situation and external factors such as availability of market and demand of competent labor influenced to transform the structure and characteristics of household. First event contributed to adapt nuanced ways of agricultural production than previously existed conventional type. Second event badly affected household that everlastingly migrated from rural to urban setting. Third event highly contributed household to be transformed because physically it was already transformed from wooden-clay house to cemented house. Full support of brother's government job in downsizing my household's poverty was another reason in the transformation of household which also contributed in the career development of each family member. Fourth event also contributed to adjust the household in a newer family-household environment where the family was being scattered for the first time than the previously existed family structure where all members used to pool income and consume together in a united way. This event taught us to be individualized and self-progressive. Last event again contributed to reunite the family which is also developing as a social feature of latest capitalist mode of social structure. Since capitalism developed as a single world economy all over the world, it also influenced my household as being the smallest unit of the world system. It began to transform from non-nuclear to nuclear, and now orienting towards reunion. Although the neo-liberal capitalist structure contributed as a external factor, the adjusting desire, competent skill, collective capacity to envision the future of the family-household etc. also lubricated in the transformation of household simultaneously. Along with the transformation of household, all family-household members transformed as wage laborers; all members became freer than the previous days; however, whole relationships were being faded in the recent years. Instead of borrowing things, household members started to get credit due to the expansion of market. It was not deliberate change; however, household could not remain as same as it was twenty years ago. In this way, household transformed as a unit of social structure by the influence of internal and external factors of society. It is still perpetuating, and will remain for a long time.

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