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Public Services Delivery in Local Government: Anthropological Insights on State-Citizens Relationship

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Abstract

This paper describes the relationship between the state and the people in relation to public services delivery by the local government to its citizens in the Federal State of Nepal. The study was based on studied between the years 2019 to 2023 through the ethnographic approach like interviews, observation, and focus group discussions. The data presented in the text reveal that the local government is neither closer to its citizens, although it is geographically near to them, nor equally access to all of them. It always represents the elite class and powerful group in a society. Furthermore, local government is not both an 'object' defined by its territorial boundaries and a 'concrete structure' like organography. For the citizens, the state is defined by its activities or performances, including the delivery of services to its citizens. It is constructed through the interaction between the local government and citizens in everyday life experiences that helps us to understand what the local government (state) means for the people at large, and how they perceive it. Furthermore, the understanding of the delivery of public services by local government is possible through the combination of structure and agency together that creates a robust framework for the ethnography of the state.

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1. Introduction

It was the first week of August 2021, we were preparing a funding proposal to apply to the called-for proposal for an international organization about the human-elephant conflict in Eastern Nepal. To be a highly affected area, we thought Mechinagar Municipality of Jhapa district would be a good area for the proposed future project. One of the requirements for applying the proposal was a consent letter from the local government. Being a citizen of the Municipality, I (here the principal author) contacted mayor for the official letter. He told me to email the specimen of the letter. As per the telephone conversation, I did it, although, I could not get any responses from him for two days. Then, I called him again, but he did not receive my calls at all. The next day, I called him again because we were at the 11ᵗʰ hour. At that time, he received my call and said, "I am busy. I can do nothing for you.". The letter was essential to me to submit the funding proposal. Then, I asked for help from one of my friends who had a good relationship with him, expecting to get the letter. "Oh friend! You will want to work for the people. That is your mistake. If you talked with him about soil, gravel, and stone, he would listen to you easily." He gave me a readymade answer after hearing me.

That was a story that I encountered with the representative of the local government for a formal letter reflecting what is the local government (state) for people like me that people encounter with government representatives and bureaucracies to receive various services. Studying the state ethnographically involves both the analysis of the everyday practices of local bureaucracies and the discursive construction of the state in public culture (Gupta 1995, Sharma and Gupta 2006; Thelen, Vetters, and Benda-Beckmann 2018, Kay 2019; Bierschenk & de Sardan 2014). Furthermore, Lynteris (2013) writes that the state is a social relation. Agreeing with these conceptual ideas of the state, this paper explores the relationship between the state (local government) and citizens (people), in particular people's perceptions and feelings towards the public service delivery system of the local government. In the context of Nepal, the most immediate context for encountering the state is through the everyday interactions with bureaucrats and representatives of the local government. Indeed, the encounters with them provide the concept of 'the state' in the public culture (Gupta 1995). This issue will be examined through the ethnographic approach based on grounded theory which emphasizes empirical data rather than deducing testable hypotheses from the existing theories (Charmaz, 2006). To examine the rhetoric and reality of accessibility of citizens to the local government's services, the paper explores how the local government (rural/municipalities) is working to deliver services to its citizens, and what the local people say about the services delivered by the local government to them. This helps us to explore what a state means to its people and how it is instantiated in their daily lives. Sharma and Gupta (2006) claim that anthropological inquiry of the state, therefore, has two spheres i.e., everyday practices and the representation of the state. Thelen and his colleagues called it 'the relation of anthropology of the state' (2018). This is important to understand how people perceive the state and make an image of the local government.

In Nepal, the federal system was established in 2008 by overthrowing the autocratic monarchy through the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the Seven Political Parties and Nepal Communist Party (Maoists) held in November 2006 with the support of external agencies like the Indian Government and Internal Aid Agencies (Sharma 2013; Adhikari 2020). One of the aims of restructuring the old government structure was to deliver the government's services to the door of its citizens. Consequently, they can feel the government with them and experience it directly. With the restructuring of the state, a new phrase "*gaun-gaunma sinhadarbar*" (meaning government closer to the citizens) became a buzzword among politicians. This concept seems to be more or less related to the concept of 'street-level bureaucracy' used by Lipsky (2010). It is rooted in the concepts of 'welfare state' or 'bottom-up-government' or 'state of the art' in which citizens experience directly the government they have implicitly constructed (Lipsky, 2010; Hupe, Hill, and Buffat 2015; Hupe 2019). Within the concept, public officials are expected to have a greater

ability to recognize, interpret, and satisfy more precisely citizens' needs and demands for public goods and services (Montalvo 2009), and citizens directly and typically interact with public services (Lipsky, 2010).

In Nepal, the concept of federalism is a highly contested socio-political discourse. Some scholars argue that the system of federalism appeared as a political discourse rather than an evolutionary process (Thapaliya 2012; Adhikari, 2020). However, the political parties defend the federal system over the unitary system on grounds of improved efficiency, equity, and responsiveness of government toward citizens (Thapa and Sharma 2011). The underlying logic is that the local government has better knowledge and information on local needs and problems and is more likely to respond to local aspirations. It is assumed that local representatives have better access to information about the real problems of the local citizens, and the citizens can get government services easily, timely, and effectively. In this way, the concept of restructuring the government system from the unitary to the federal system in Nepal was rooted in ideas from the government to governance (Acharya 2018) which were rooted in the UN's five pillars of good governance, namely representation, rule of law, participation, accountability, and transparency (Pokharel and Pradhan 2020). In other words, we can say that it is a symbol of the Western style of democracy (Weiss, 2000).

State is not a new issue among the academia. Since the postmodern crisis of the 1980s, a distinct analytical method has emerged in social sciences which is referred as 'the ontological turn' in anthropology (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). Such new analytical perspective also influences to study the state and its activities. Troulittot (2003) argues that the state does not represent an entity 'object' over there. It is never simply a political, administrative, or economic one, but also cultural and symbolic (Smadja 2013). It implies both an institution, space, idea, and practice (Sharma and Gupta 2006) that is understood, experienced, and reproduced in everyday encounters between the state and citizens (Gupta 1995; Thalen, Vetters, and Benda-Beckmann, 2018; Kay 2018). Hence, it is taken as the 'cultural constitute of state' (Sharma and Gupta 2006 p.12). In this paper, the local government, we mean, is constructed through the interaction between the local government and citizens in everyday life experiences which will be explored through the services delivery practices of the local government to its citizens. It helps us to understand what the local government (state) means for the people at large, and how they perceive it.

2. Methods and Materials

Recently, ethnography has shifted from the study of an object 'out there' to the network of relations (Campbell 2013). In this study, our focus was not on the study of 'the state' that is 'out there', but on the relation between the state (government representatives and bureaucrats and the citizens). This study was carried out between 2019 and 2023 in Mechinagar Municipality of Koshi Province which was selected purposively. Ethnography gives voice to people in their own local context, typically relying on verbatim quotations and a "thick" description of events (Fetterman 2010). As an ethnographic study, information was collected through primary sources like formal and informal interaction with the local people, focused group discussion, and observation. During the study period, 10 focused group discussions with the local villagers were done to understand their perceptions of the services delivered by the Municipality to them. That helped us to understand what the state means for the people and how it is instantiated in their everyday lives. Methodologically, the main concerns of why the study was done, how it was done, what was investigated, and what the possible results were found (Khatri, 2022).

Besides that, we also visited the Municipality office and ward office and discussed with the representatives and staffs. In addition, we also carried out an intensive interview with the three key informants who were working in the field of agriculture and noticed the delivered services of the Municipality from the beginning to understand the constraints of working in their field while it was under the District Agriculture Development Office (DADO) and currently under the Municipality.

2.1. Study area

The name 'Mechinagar' is derived from the river's name 'Mechi'. The etymological toponymy of the Municipality implies the settlements located on the bank of the Mechi River. However, the name avoids other kinds of cultural, historical, social, and religious connotations while naming the Municipality. Indeed, Akin (1999) writes 'toponymy is one of the features of the process of the legitimizing a new territorial basis, hence political control of territory starts with its linguistic marking' (cited in Smadja 2013, p. 15).

Mechinagar Municipality consists of 15 wards. It was formed in 1996 through the merging of two Village Development Committees (VDCs), namely, Dhulabari and Kakarbhitta. In the process of restructuring the local government, four local units such as Bahundangi, Duwagadi, Dhaijan, and Jyamirgadi were again merged into Mechinagar Municipality in the year 2017. The conglomeration of the six local units is currently known as Mechinagar Municipality which has 192.85 square kilometers. The households and population were 32,695 and 133,073 respectively (NSO, 2023). The Municipality is the largest local government of Jhapa district in terms of area and population. Similarly, the average family size is 4.07 and the sex ratio is 92.66. The difference in sex ratio reflects that male migration is higher than females in the Municipality. The density of the population is 690 individuals per sq. km. This indicates that the Municipality is one of the most densely populated municipalities in the country.

2.2. Public services delivery: Rhetoric and reality at Mechinagar Municipality

In 2015, the federal constitution promulgated three tiers of government, namely, federal government, provincial government, and local government. In terms of accessibility, local government is much closer to the local people than provincial and federal governments. In this regard, Acharya (2018) writes,

"*They institutionalize a democratic and well-functioning government at the local level; they are committed to delivering the public services to the local communities in an efficient, effective, and responsive way;*

and they promote activities that enhance social and economic development to uplift the living standards of the ordinary people and developing organic local democratic leadership (Acharya 2018, p. 38).

The Local Government Operation Act (LGOA), 2017 has clearly stated that local governments are mandated legally to provide adequate services to the people (GoN 2017). However, services do not reach the citizens spontaneously. Budget, human resources, law, and the willingness of bureaucrats are essential to it (Pokharel and Pradhan 2020). After the restructuring of the local government, it not only changes in administrative structure, but both the working areas, the budget, and the authority of the Municipality have been increased dramatically. For instance, a ward office has legal right to make recommendations on 35, or more spheres that would not be in the past. It would be done by a municipality only in the past. Similarly, there was a limited budget with a Municipality before the restructuring of the local government. By recalling the budget now and then, a senior staff of the Municipality reclaimed,

"*Before restructuring the new government, the annual budget of the Municipality had 120 to 130 million. Now it has more than one billion 420 million. The increase in the budget has helped the Municipality to work in different spheres including infrastructure development, social services, livelihood support, cultural protection, and promotion, etc.*"

If we look at the organography of local government, we can see seven divisions, namely the administrative, planning, and monitoring section, infrastructure development and environment management section, health and social development section, law section, education, youth and sports section, economic development section, and economic administrative section. Some sections have been further divided into sub-sections. For example, there are three subsections such as Social Security and Vital Registration, Women, Children, and Social Welfare, and Health Center under the Health and Social Development Section. Likewise, there are three subsections, namely, Tourism, Agriculture and Livestock

Development, and Small and Cottage Industries and Others under the Economic Development Section. One of the objectives of establishing different organs within the Municipality is to provide services to the people easily and effectively.

3. Experiences and Perceptions of the Municipality's Services

3.1. Blaming one against another

It was on June 14, 2019. We visited Dhulabari Bazaar to see Gopal Khadka, the ward chairperson. After being elected as ward chairperson, it was our first visit. we began the conversation by wishing him a successful and effective tenure. "Have you felt any differences in working in the past and present as a representative of the people?" This was our first question to him because he was elected as vice-chairperson and chairperson of the Dhulabari Village Panchayat during the Panchayat Era and is now elected as ward-chairperson of Mechinagar Municipality Ward no 9. In our query, he said, "In the past, the people's representatives had a great social honor and power in a village. But it has changed a lot. Now, people do not respect the representatives at all." Importantly for this discussion, however, the ward chairperson's account reflects a change in people's relationship with the local representative and changing the ethic and degrading morality of politics due to the concept of nepotism and favoritism which is common in Nepal's bureaucratric and administrative culture (Bista 1991; Jamil and Dangal 2009; Subedi 2014). LGOA has given the local representative more authority to make decisions in local affairs but they lost their social power and prestige in practice. The degradation of respect for the local representative among the citizens is a symbolic metaphor for the weakening of the social relationship between the representatives and the citizens, on the one hand, and, on the other, the declining of honor (*ijat*) by the local representatives in society. Indeed, honor is a social concept that is articulated through various social structures (Cameron, 2005, p. 136).

In our discussion with the local people as well as representatives of the local body, they repetitively told us that '*singh ayo tar darbar ayena*'. It has a symbolic meaning to the local

people. The Municipality has been given the authority by-laws, although it fails to utilize it properly due to red-tapism of the bureaucratic process. This is narrated by illustrating the obstructiveness of the staff like this:

The northern part of my ward is highly affected by wild elephants. Every year, local villagers lose their crops, properties, and sometimes their lives. We formed a Wild-Elephant Victim Committee (WEVC) to protect the lives of the local people and their properties and crops from wild elephants. At the ward-level meeting, I decided to allocate one thousand hundred Nepali rupees to the committee purchasing torchlight to take the wild elephants away. However, I did not have any authority to buy the equipment due to the procurement process of the government. Then, I visited the Municipality Office to talk with mayor. I talked with him who suggested visiting the administrative officer for the further process. Then, I went to the officer's chamber and talked with him. He also suggested visiting the store section/department. I went there and gave a letter to the staff. The staff said, 'You are late. The department cannot do it at the 11th hour of the annual budget.' I backed with an empty hand. I could not implement the decision at all. (Personal communication with G. Khadka, ward chairperson of Mechinagar Municipality on June 14, 2019).

Like the government representatives, the citizens have the same experience with the procurement laws of the local government. One of the informants shared the messy procurement laws of the local government like this,

Several cattle were affected by the lumpy skin disease in our Municipality. The local government could address the local problem, although we considered that it would be a long process to get a vaccine due to the lengthy and messy procurement laws of the local government. Therefore, we did not visit the local government. If we rely on the local government, there will be no cattle at our shed by the time of vaccine arrival. All the cattle will have died. Then we decided to buy the vaccine ourselves and requested the local government to provide the technician for vaccination to our cattle.

(K. Poudel, 56 years old farmer)

These narratives reflect the gap between theory and practice; need and standard operating procedure (Weber, 2018) and how the procedure, as a theory, binds the practice or willingness of the representatives to do something for the people. Indeed, the lack of cooperation between people's representatives and bureaucrats is one of the challenges of being a state of inclusive governance (Pokharel & Pradhan 2020). Unless a change in the bureaucratic system, it will be hard to receive effective and quick services from the local government, although it is physically and geographically near to the citizens.

Theoretically speaking, *singha*, as a symbol of power, has come to the village but *darbar,* the use of power, is still not with the representative. The power is still with the bureaucrats. They control everything. Weak control of the local government over their staff is one of the main challenges of service delivery in Nepal. In our discussion with one of the senior administrative staff of the Municipality, he said,

"*There is a gap in the operation rule of the Municipality. We have the Local Government Operation Act. But it does not work itself. To operate it, we need a guideline. The guideline makes it alive. Our Municipality has not yet made any guidelines. Without a guideline, we cannot operate the act properly. The Municipality has not properly utilized the available staff and their knowledge to develop the guidelines. Moreover, there is a huge gap in trust between the staff and the elected representatives. The elected representatives have no sound knowledge of the law. They do not accept it. They do not listen to experts.*"

The statement expresses the gap in mutual understanding between the staff and the local representatives. The mistrust led weak capacity of local government at all levels in terms of providing quality service, planning, monitoring and the implementation of the rule of law, proper use of financial resources, executing development interventions, and fulfilling the responsibility of the local government (Acharya, 2016 & 2018) and finally to deliver the services to the citizens.

3.2 Dilemma on the authority on assign tasks

In our discussion with key informants, they told us that both the staff and elected representatives were still in dilemma regarding the authority. The dilemma produces obstacles in delivering the services to the local people properly. Regarding it, an informant remarks about his experiences on it like this:

"*I was working in an agricultural organization. I went to the district to renew the license of my organization. The district authority suggested visiting the local government for the renewal of the license. Then, I visited the Municipality office to get it. I met mayor and talked with him about it. He was not clear. Then, he suggested seeing a senior staff. I visited the senior staff chamber and explained my aim to visit the office. He started to turn over the pages of laws and legislative books. He got nothing in the guidelines. LGOA gave the local government the authority to renew the organization, but there is no guideline. He was in a dilemma on his rights i.e., whether the letter given by the Municipality would be legal or not. He told me that I was the first person to visit the Municipality for a renewal letter for an organization. He gave me the renewal letter of my organization. However, I am still in a dilemma on whether the letter is legal or not.*"

This statement clearly states that the government has given authority to the Municipality, but both the staff and the representatives are still in dilemma about what has been given to them or not. Without having proper knowledge of the law and legislation among the bureaucrats and representatives, the citizens cannot get service correctly and effectively. Thus, service delivery to the citizen rests on the knowledge and capacity of the service providers rather than the law. It is hard to receive service even if service-providing institutions are close to them.

3.3. Department without human resources

Agriculture is still the dominant way of living for the people of Mechinagar. Cereal

crops, vegetables, cash crops, horticulture, fishery, poultry, livestock, etc. are the main agricultural activities of the Municipality. At the Municipality, there was a separate section to look at agriculture and agriculture services. It has been providing services on agriculture-related problems. In our discussion with farmers, they were found unsatisfied with the Municipality's working modalities. An informant, M. Timseena, a farmer activist, who was working on the expansion of modern agriculture at the local level, said,

The new restructuring of the government definitely brings agricultural services close to the people. Now, the farmers do not need to visit the DADO. Theoretically, I claim that farmers have access to services, but, in reality, it does not at all. I mean, being closer to the people does not mean to increase the access to services.

Now, the Municipality has limited agricultural specialists. They cannot actually understand agriculture due to its complexity. In agriculture, there is not a single field. There are various fields such as fishing, horticulture, cereal crops, paste management, soil, and so on. Can a single staff understand it? I do not think so. One or two specialists cannot understand the agriculture at all. It requires different knowledge and skills like an aquatic specialist for fishing, a plant specialist for cereal crops, a paste specialist for paste management, a soil specialist for curing the soil, and so on.

When it was under the DADO, there were different sections on agriculture and providing services to the local farmers differently under the same roof. After the restructuring of the government, it comes under the local government. At the Municipality, the Economic Development Section looks over it where only a few technical specialists. This limited human resources cannot understand agricultural diversity and the problems. For example, an aquatic specialist does not know the problem of cereal crops and vegetables, and vice versa. In this condition, how can the local government provide services to local farmers?

Here, Timsina was claiming that access to physical space and access to services are two different things for the farmers. The local government pays attention to the first one,

but the farmers talk to the later one. It means the establishment of a new service delivery department near the local farmers cannot do justice to the local people if not address the actual problems. In our observation, the farmers in the Municipality have been planting tea, horticulture, betel nut framing, banana farming, aquatic farming, vegetable farming, cereal crop farming, fishing, and so on. In the matter of delivering services in the agricultural sector, the Municipality should have potential human resources. Lack of potential human resources, it cannot provide good services to the farmers. This reflects a lag between the local government and the people with regard to providing effective service delivery. The service delivery center arrives close to the people geographically, but it is not close to people in reality.

3.4. Class matter in local government

The Municipality has tried to reach the people through subsidies, skill development programs, and other infrastructure development programs. The construction of new channels for irrigation, maintenance, and repair of the existing irrigation canals, support of communal plot farming and scientific farming, providing subsidies to commercial farming, organic farming, and distribution of seeds of cereal crops, and vegetables were some agricultural development programs run by ward. However, our quarry is not to describe the program in detail but how such programs connect with the people. It helps us to understand what the state is for the citizens, and to whom the state represents in a reality.

On July 16, 2019, a household was performing a death ritual. In the evening, there was more than 12 villagers were gathered at the house. We began to discuss programs and the performance of the local government on the ground. In the village, some villagers had recently started commercial goat farming. To get a subsidy from the government, a farmer had to register his/her farm at the Municipality. One of the visitors was a Municipality-registered farmer. We asked him about the process and registration fee.

Researchers: *How much money did you pay to the local government for the registration?*
Informant: I paid seventeen thousand to the

local government for the registration of my farm.

Researchers: *What would be the benefit to a farmer?*

Informant: A registered farmer can be a subject of the local government's subsidy whereas a non-registered farmer shall not be.

This conversation really raises the question about the representation of the state, and who has access to the local government. The conversation reflects that accessibility to the local government is differently constructed for the rich farmers and poor farmers. The door of the local government is not open for all. It is closed for poor and marginalized farmers who cannot pay the registration fee to receive the services delivered by the local government.

In Mechinagar, many households do not have a land ownership certificate. Some of them are cultivating others' land and some of them are cultivating non-registered land (*ailani*). In the Municipality, it makes it difficult for non-registered farmers and shared croppers to access the services of the local government. Regarding it, I. Bhandari (54 years old man), who works at a cooperative, shared his experiences like this,

> "*A few months ago, a woman farmer came to my cooperative for paddy seeds. During that time, the ward office was distributing seeds to the farmers in subsidy. I suggested her to visit the office. She went there for the seeds. The ward staff asked her for Xerox copies of her citizenship and landowner certificate. She did not have a land certificate because her land was non-registered. Then, the ward office refused to provide the subsidy seeds to her. Later, she again backed my cooperative for the seeds.*"

This indicates that statutory laws restrict non-titled farmers from accessing the subsidy program of the Municipality, largely due to a lack of documentation proving eligibility for support. In Nepal, about 1.6 million farmers are unregistered (Wily, Chapagain, and Sharma, 2008). Does the local government policy on subsidies reach the needy citizens? Does the state think about the needy citizens? In reality, they hardly do it.

It was informed that the concept of *afanomache*, one's own man commonly exists to access the services, including subsidies,

in the Municipality. M. Timseena, a farmer activist, said, "A handful of farmers who had a good relationship with representatives and staff had good access to the subsidy program, but the general farmers did not get it at all." This statement is also supported by news broadcasted in national media. According to the media, the Municipality has funded 1.7 million Nepali currency to two farmer's cooperatives, namely Krishak Bahumuki Sahakari Sanstha, Mechinagar – 7 and Bahundangi Krishi Tatha Pasupalan Private Limited, Mechinagar - 7 with an aim of promotion of plotting based scientific farming (Kantipur Daily, 23 July 2019). The Municipality has provided 0.9 million to the first one, and 0.8 million to the second one due to good relations with the Municipality staff as well as mayor and deputy-mayor. This was under the investigation of the Abuse of Authority.

Our question here is not about the abuse of authority by bureaucrats or government representatives at all. Our questions are - What the local government (state) is for people? How does the local government work in everyday life to deliver the services? Who benefits or not? The answers to the questions give us a vivid picture of the state and the representation of the state. The local anecdotes tell us that access to the Municipality is not the same for all citizens. The local people did not feel that it was an equal distance for all in terms of service delivery. The data reveal that the concept of *afanomache*, one's own man (the term used by Bista 1991) is still a powerful instrument to be closer to the local government in Nepal. A narrative by a farmer is the evidence that supports how being an *afanomache* is important to access the services from the Municipality.

> "*A few days ago, I visited the Municipality where I met a staff, who was also my distant relative. I was chatting with him. Suddenly, another staff entered in his chamber and requested the seeds of green vegetables. He gave some packs of seeds to him and then he went out. He also gave me a few packs of seeds without following the government's procedure. If I was not there, I would not get the seeds at all.*" (Bhandari, 54 years farmer)

In the past, DADO would distribute seeds to the local farmers. It was not accessible

to all because of the geographical distance. The district headquarters was quite far away from the village. It came under the Municipality with the transformation of DADO's authority. The transformation of authority definitely increased the accessibility of the local farmers to the government. It depends on the behaviors of the bureaucrats. In Nepal, bureaucrats are irresponsive and unaccountable toward the people (Paudel and Gupta, 2019). Accessibility to the local government's services depends on the willingness of the staff to broadcast the information. In the service delivery system of the local government, clientelism, favoritism, and network (the terms used by Bierschenk and Sardan 2014) still seem to be dominant and powerful instruments. Bureaucrats make it alive, functional, and active. The passiveness of bureaucrats creates huge challenges to connect the local people with the local Municipality.

4. Discussions

"*The Singadarbar (resources, authority, and power) has come to the village along with the wall; those who could cross the wall are getting its benefits, but others do not at all.*" This is a statement of a 56-year-old farmer to whom we met at the ward Office, who came there to receive the services. In the farmer's statement, it is not difficult to understand that the local government is not the same for the citizens. The statement is remarking that socially, politically, culturally, and economically powerless people are not feeling the local government is with them. They felt that it was only for the influential people who always represent the elite class in society (Sharma and Gupta 2006).

Is the state a concrete entity, something 'out there'? Trouillot (2003) raised a strong question about the state. In everyday practice, the state is not an apparatus but a set of processes, i.e., interaction between state agents and the citizens (Vetters, 2018). Therefore, local government is neither an 'object' defined by its territorial boundaries nor a 'concrete structure' like organography. It is defined by its activities or performances, including the delivery of services to its citizens. The sphere of everyday practices and the representation of the state are the primary arenas in which people feel something about the state (Sharma and Gupta

2006; Kay 2018). Therefore, the state-citizen relationship and the domain of representation are important elements of the study of the state (Thalen, Vetters, and Benda-Beckmann, 2018), including local government. The state is, therefore, a social construct, brought into being through a combination of ideas or images, on the one hand, and actual practices, actors, institutions, and places, on the other, through which people interact with the state on a day-to-day basis (Kay, 2018).

Accessing government services is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon. It is rooted in technical, social, economic, cultural, and geographical factors (Acharya, 2016). Accessing to government services is shaped by linguistic, caste, and ethnic prejudices; lack of technical knowledge, capacity, and skills of duty bearer; inaccessibility of proper information; ill-intentions of the staff; and geographical remoteness (Pokharel and Pradhan, 2020). Hence, the failure to deliver services to the people by the government is a symbol of the failure of accountability. Poudel and Gupta (2019) argue that the failures in accountability are a matter of the system rather than attributable to individual actors. These findings again bring the debate between agency and structure in front. The followers of structuralism generally downplay the role of agency and vice versa. In our case, the concept of *shigadabar ghar ghar* ma is influenced both by the actions of the individuals (bureaucrats and government representatives) and the structure or system of the state. Therefore, the concept of government at the door of the citizens largely relies on the interaction between agency and structure. We cannot understand it by the structure-agency dualism concept. It demands the fusion of structure-agency approaches to better understanding the state.

5. Conclusion

The state is not simply an administrative or political unit; it is felt and perceived by the citizens through the everyday activities and performances of the state that are produced through the interaction between the state (local representatives and bureaucrats) and the citizens. It is, therefore, neither an object that is out there nor a concrete structure presented in

an organographic chart. It is expressed through how it delivers services to its citizens. The service delivery of the state to its citizens rests on different components like the bureaucratic process, trustworthiness between local representatives and bureaucrats, knowledge of laws, the interest of conflict between staffs, unclearity of the legal provision among the local government staff, understanding of the complexity of phenomena, power, nepotism, clientelism, the willingness of the bureaucrats and so on. Understanding this complexity really helps us to understand what the state is for the citizens.

The findings presented in the text show that all citizens do not feel the local government is equal for all. It is only an illusion. Access to the resources and services of the local government rests on the socio-political space of an individual or a community, as well as the cultural values of bureaucrats. It is inherently rooted in the social structure of the society. Restructuring of the local government definitely changes the manifested structure but fails to change in cognized structure of bureaucrats. It will be a nightmare to deliver the services to the citizens until the change is the cognized structure of the bureaucratic system.

The findings presented in the text reveal that the concept of delivery of public services to the people at the local government rests on both the actions of the individuals (bureaucrats and government representatives) and the structure or system of the state. Therefore, the concept of government at the door of citizens largely relies on the interaction between agency and structure. It cannot be understood by the dualism concept of structure and agency as an isolated component. It demands to bring two fields - structure and agency – together which creates a robust framework for the ethnography of the state.

Anthropology may not find the state ready-made and waiting for our ethnographic gaze in the known sites of the national government (Trouillot, 2003). We anthropologists should focus our study on government institutions and practices, of course, and we have not contributed enough to these areas. In this context, anthropologists are best suited to study the state from below through the ethnographic approach in which everyday practices and representation of the state can be the subjects of inquiry. It helps us look at the process and effects in the sites rather than those of institutionalized politics and established bureaucracies (Trouillot 2003; Mosse 2005).

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Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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