

Social Movements and Socio-Political Transformation in Nepal (1950-2015)

Jagadish Oli*

Abstract

This paper examines how social movements contribute to the modification of sociopolitical structures in Nepal, particularly from anti-Rana movement (1950) to Madheshi movement (2015). The goal of the study is to present how the democratic and social movements have contributed to transferring the political and social structure of the state from the Rana regime to federal democratic Nepal. The study is based on qualitative research, including key informant interviews, case studies, and thematic analysis of information from both primary and secondary sources: scholarly articles, books and reports. Similarly, the study analyzes how social movements of Nepal can alter the lives of their people, particularly the Madheshi, Dalit, Janajati, Women, and Kamaiya. This study applies the theoretical perspectives of social movements, such as theories of social movements, political processes, and resource mobilization.

These movements in Nepal have helped bring down the old regime and promote the adoption of democracy and a multi-party system, human rights, social inclusion, and proportional representation of marginalized and oppressed groups in the constitution's mainstream. The study concludes that social movements are both transformative and ongoing processes that foster the development of and establish democracy, human rights, and structural change in the country.

Keywords: Dalit, Madhesh, Discrimination, Movements & Political Transformation

Introduction

A social movement is an organized effort by groups of people working together to achieve shared goals and bring about social change (Tarrow, 1994). A movement is considered successful when it accomplishes its goals. The primary aim of social movements is to alter the existing social structure. Social movements are essential for social progress and societal transformation. This does not mean that social movements

* Assistant Professor, T. U., Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Padmakanya Multiple Campus, Orcid 0009-0004-5905-3876m, E-mail: olijagadish73@gmail.com

constantly welcome change; they may also resist it. As a product of the social structure, a social movement develops in response to specific social conditions (Mukhrji, 1977).

The lives of oppressed and disadvantaged populations experience significant societal change when a social movement is successful. A social movement can be defined as a long-term, loosely organized effort that promotes a social cause, often aimed at preventing or fostering change in societal norms or values. It may exist within the informal network of relationships among various individuals, groups, and organizations involved in a cultural and political struggle based on a shared sense of group identity (Diani, 1992).

Since the Third French Revolution, Lorenz Marx wrote a book titled "The Communist Manifesto" in 1848. Von Stein coined the phrase and used it to describe this style of political movement warfare (Tilly, 2004). Theoretically, a social movement is any effort to effect change through any means, including violence, criminal behavior, revolution, or retreat into a "utopian" society, according to Paul Wilkinson (1971).

In Nepal's sociopolitical landscape, many social movements have developed from the Rana regime to the present. All these movements aimed at political and social change, transforming Nepali society. In 1951, the Democratic or anti-Rana movement emerged. It aimed to establish democracy and end the Rana dictatorship, which lasted for 104 years (Gupta, 1993). Similarly, in 1990, the King overthrew the democratic movement initiated by the Nepalese people, calling for the restoration of multi-party democracy and the abolition of the Panchayat monarchy. After Nepal returned to a multi-party system, the underground Maoist Party launched a guerrilla war, demanding an end to economic inequality, the feudalistic structure of Nepali society, ethnic discrimination, and the monarchy. Alongside regime-change movements, several social movements, including the Madheshi, Indigenous, Dalit, Women's, Kamaya, and Tharu movements, emerged at different times, asserting ethnic identity rights, inclusion, recognition, and equality, which directly influenced the political system of Nepal (Pykurel & Adhikari, 2013). The movements have compelled the state to undergo social transformation and structural change in Nepal. While these movements have undoubtedly contributed to major political shifts, they have also exposed ongoing gaps in inclusion, equity, and social justice.

Statement of the Problem

From the dictatorial Rana regime to the present, Nepal has experienced numerous socio-political disruptions. Through the abolition of the dictatorial Rana regime and monarchy, the movements helped Nepal transition from a monarchy to a multi-party democracy to a federal democracy. Due to political upheavals, numerous constitutional amendments and new laws have been enacted. As a result, ethnic groups, women, Dalits, Tharus, and Madheshis in Nepal are becoming more politically and socially aware.

Although the 2015 Nepalese Constitution guarantees rights to employment, education, health, shelter, security, representation, identity, inclusion, non-discrimination, and equality for Dalit, women, Madheshi, Muslim, Tharu, and Indigenous peoples, they continue to be deprived of opportunities. The literacy rates for Dalit and Terai Dalit women are approximately 45.5% and 34%, respectively. Eighteen percent of non-Dalit populations live in extreme poverty, compared to 36% of Dalits. Terai Dalits are the most economically disadvantaged group among Dalits, with 44% classified as extremely poor, versus 32% of hill Dalits. The child marriage rate among Dalits is 23%. In Karnali Province, the highest percentage of child marriage is 20.1% (Rauniyar, 2025). Similarly, Dalit communities face significant discrimination in rural areas, experiencing caste-based discrimination and untouchability primarily during public events such as feasts and cultural ceremonies. Women continue to face systemic discrimination as second-class citizens, being deprived of education, healthcare, security, and basic rights. The identities of Tharu Muslim and indigenous peoples are not practically recognized, despite being acknowledged in the constitution. Dalit communities, especially Madheshi Dalit, live in extreme poverty. Social movements like the indigenous movement, women's movement, Dalit movement, Madheshi movement, and Kamaiya movement exemplify ongoing issues of social exclusion, exploitation, inequality, and the struggle for recognition (Lawoti & Pahari, 2010).

The voices of citizens, especially those from marginalized groups like women, Dalits, indigenous communities, and Madhesis, have been largely absent in academic and policy discourse of development. As a result, there is limited understanding of how these movements have impacted everyday lives, social relationships, and long-term societal development. The marginalized people, like Dalits, Madhesis, indigenous people, and women from marginalized groups, feel disillusioned with the political transformations in Nepal.

Despite numerous social movements in Nepal aimed at promoting equality, justice, and democratic reforms, there is a limited systematic understanding of how these movements have influenced socio-political transformation and improved the lives of marginalized communities. Specifically, it remains unclear how Dalits, Madhesis, women, and Indigenous peoples have experienced changes in social, economic, and political spheres as a result of these movements. This gap hinders the evaluation of social movements' effectiveness in fostering inclusive development and empowerment in Nepal.

Much of the existing literature focuses either on macro-political outcomes (such as regime change or policy adoption), structural political changes, or isolated case studies without combining a broader understanding of mobilization strategies, socio-political contexts, and long-term transformation. There is also a shortage of qualitative research into the lived experiences, organizing logics, and adaptive strategies of movement actors in Nepal's changing political landscape. This study aims to fill this gap by critically analyzing the processes of mobilization, the political opportunity structures that social

movements navigate, and the transformative effects—both structural and symbolic—of these mobilizations on Nepali politics and society. To better understand these underexplored dynamics, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: How have social movements in Nepal contributed to socio-political transformation? What changes have been observed in the lives of marginalized communities such as Dalits, Madheshi, women, and Indigenous peoples following these movements?

Methodology

The researcher chose the subject because of the historical significance of sociopolitical transitions in the specified regions. Using both primary and secondary data sources, the researcher employed an exploratory and qualitative approach. Interviews with key informants, such as journalists, identity activists, and Madheshi individuals, along with a case study of Madheshi Dalits in Inharwa Municipality 8, Sunsari District, were conducted to gather data. Academic publications, historical papers, policy documents, and archives served as secondary sources. Additionally, the firsthand data was triangulated and analyzed through political perspectives. All of this information was combined to support the research.

This study focused on three districts in the Kathmandu Valley located in eastern Nepal, including Jhapa, Morang, Sunsari, and Saptari districts in the eastern Terai, to examine significant societal mobility between the 1950s and 2015, which led to selecting these districts. I engaged in communication and interaction with activists, journalists, women, Dalits, Janjati political leaders, and independence warriors, facilitated by the study's chosen field. Thematic analysis was used to examine the collected information, including case studies, interviews, and documents from various sources. To identify recurring themes such as regime transition, political inclusion, marginalization, identity assertion, and civic engagement, the researcher systematically categorized interview transcripts and textual documents.

Figure 1: *Relationship between social movement and social transformation*

Structural Inequality → Collective Grievance → Social Movement → Political Pressure
→ Policy/Regime Change → Social Transformation

Source: Smelser, 1962

This shows how deep-rooted structural injustices like caste and ethnic discrimination, gender inequality, political marginalization, and unequal resource and income distribution within a community are the main causes of social movements. Historical structural inequalities have harmed the Madheshi, indigenous peoples, women, Dalit, and Kamaiya. These systemic disparities became collective grievances. Those affected began organizing for social movements, which creates political pressure. In Nepal, major political shifts, such as the fall of the monarchy or the adoption of federalism,

were driven by persistent pressure from democratic and identity-based movements. The movement succeeded in leading to regime change and structural reforms through constitutional amendments. Ultimately, the movement seeks to reshape the state's policies and society's socio-cultural structure. Society's political and social framework changes as people's demands evolve.

Literature Review

A social movement, according to Tilly (1979), is a coordinated, ongoing, self-aware struggle that indicates a shared identity among its members. Turner and Killian (1987) describe social movements as a distinct form of collective activity, contrasting with "organizational" and "institutional" behavior. A social movement serves as a way for individuals or groups to voice their concerns in an effort to improve the world. In many countries, social movements have successfully altered sociopolitical systems. Numerous initiatives have been launched to eliminate caste, economic injustice, racial and gender discrimination, and ethnic prejudice. Protecting people's rights, welfare, and overall well-being are primary goals of social movements. They are a rational mechanism for social, political, and cultural change (Karki, 2010). Causes of social movements include grievances and injustice, collective identity and awareness, political opportunities, cultural shifts and new ideas, and triggering events (Gurr, 1970; Inglehart, 1990; McAdam, 1982; Melucci, 1989; Tarrow, 2011).

An organized group of individuals working toward common goals to promote social change is called a social movement (Tarrow, 1994). When a movement reaches its goals, it is considered successful. Changing the existing social structure is the main aim of social movements. For social progress to happen, social movements are essential. Impersonal factors can also influence social transformation. While they may resist change, that does not mean they always oppose it. A social movement develops in response to social circumstances as a reaction to the social structure (Mukhrji, 1977). When effective, a social movement can lead to major societal changes for disadvantaged and oppressed populations. A social movement can be described as a prolonged, loosely organized effort advocating for a social cause, often involving the prevention or promotion of changes in societal norms or values. It often exists within an informal network of contacts among different individuals, organizations, and groups involved in cultural or political disputes based on shared identity (Diani, 1992).

During the Third French Revolution in 1848, Lorenz von Stein used the phrase "Social Movement." He introduced this term to describe this kind of activism-focused political movement in academic discourse. According to Tilly (2004), social movements emerge from a combination of three factors: there are three types of collective actions and rituals: campaigns, which involve ongoing claims against authorities, primarily state entities; repertoires, which include new collective actions and rituals such as media use, organization formation, and material circulation; and collective displays of worthiness,

unity, numbers, and commitment. Tilly examined social movements as a political tool. He argues that structured, methodical, and contemporary social movements are controversial acts. After 1768, these movements arose due to the increasing democratization of the state, the growth of civil society, and the development of a capitalist economy. He categorizes social movements based on their structured, persistent, and peaceful traits. He also discusses how social movements change depending on circumstances, time, place, and available resources, emphasizing that their foundation is political rather than apolitical. Tilly contends that all social movements result from sophisticated thinking, originate in Western Europe, and possess unique characteristics. Public interest, deservingness, unity, numbers, and dedication drive these publicly organized campaigns, which include various contentious activities such as public gatherings and protests (Tilly, 2004).

Nepal has seen several social movements throughout the years, as well as numerous social developments and revolutions that have contributed to the social transformation. Examples of Nepal's political change include the fall of the Rana, the downfall of the monarchy and the installation of a federal democratic system. Similarly, many social movements came out in Nepal following the establishment of democracy, such as the indigenous nationalities movement, the Dalit movement, the women's movement, the Kamaiya movement, the Tharu movement, and the Madheshi movement. These movements helped bring attention to these issues and forced the government to take constructive action. On the subject of "social movements in Nepal," the specifics of the movements are discussed. A closer examination of important theoretical frameworks can aid in the interpretation of how and why social movements arise and change, even if the literature offers a general overview of social movement dynamics both internationally and in Nepal.

Theoretical Discourses on Social Movement

Resource Mobilization Theory

The effectiveness of a social movement relies on more than just large-scale protests, rallies, and ideological support, as Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) mainly explains. Key factors include the ability to manage resources like time and money, support and media use, social organization networks, and group coordination on a large scale. The theory suggests that social movement groups contribute by securing funds from nonprofit organizations and gaining external support from donors, political allies, and the media. It views social activity not as an emotional response but as a strategic plan. According to McCarthy and Zald (1977), the concept depends on the ability to mobilize and effectively manage substantial amounts of resources.

Political Process Theory

In the Political Process approach, Tilly (1978) links the rise of social movements to a larger political process where marginalized groups try to gain access to the existing

polity. Tilly analyzes this process through a historical perspective. He states that social movements are logical responses to changing political conditions, and their success depends on their structure, available resources, and the broader political environment. According to him, social movements are deliberate, persistent, and self-aware challenges that often share a common identity among members. The political process approach focuses on how social movements emerge rather than their specific causes (Melucci, 1989; Diani, 1992). However, from the above perspective, a social movement is defined differently. A social movement is any effort to create change using various strategies, such as violence, criminal activity, revolution, or retreating into a "utopian" society (Wilkinson, 1971).

Most social movements have been studied through Karl Marx's conflict perspective. This view argues that the economic structure of society is the main cause of social movements. It sees the natural tension between the interests of the working class and the ruling class as the source of contradictions. Through social institutions like media, education, and religion, the ruling elites use the coercive state apparatus. When one group dominates, others are denied opportunities and benefits.

Social change ultimately results from the rise of a grassroots social movement that opposes the hegemony of the upper classes. Collective acts of protest, insurrection, and resistance have given birth to these social movements. Some Marxists have acknowledged the ethnic, social, religious, and cultural aspects of social movements, even though pro-Marxists have mainly focused on the economic foundation of social conflict (Chandavarkar, 1998). The various types of social movements in Nepal are discussed in the following section.

Results and Discussions

Social Movements in Nepal - Democratic Movement (Anti-Rana)

The Anti-Rana or Democratic movement is a historic movement in the process of democratizing Nepali society. The main causes of the Anti-Rana movement were autocratic rule and the hereditary power of the Rana family, the feudal social and economic structure of society, social injustice, Indian diplomatic pressure, the democratic movement, and the political exile of leaders. All these factors supported the anti-Rana movement and led to the overthrow of the century-long autocratic Rana regime. Primarily, this movement is viewed as a political movement. People fought not only for democracy but also for human rights, freedom from economic exploitation, caste-based inequality, and discrimination. Therefore, it is recognized as both a political and social movement in Nepal's history. Gupta (1993) analyzes Nepal's anti-Rana movement from a historical perspective. He describes the anti-Rana movement as both a political and social movement that succeeded in transforming Nepali society from a long-standing autocratic family regime into a modern monarchical democratic society, ensuring human rights and democracy in Nepal. Similarly, it contributed to reforms in

social and religious values and practices, the social transformation of caste-based inequality, and the reduction of social, religious, and gender discrimination. While the Anti-Rana movement laid the groundwork for democratic aspirations, the 1990 Mass Movement was a pivotal moment in turning those ideals into a multi-party democratic system. Democracy and a multi-party monarchy were established, and the Rana aristocracy was overthrown. A democratic constitution was also introduced. B.P. Koirala was appointed as Nepal's first prime minister following the country's first general election. Everyone fundamentally gained human rights and liberty. Nepal has since gained international recognition as a democratic state.

Mass Movement 1990

The 1990 mass movement in Nepal was a democratic uprising against the repressive monarchical government led by the Communist League and the Nepali Congress party. Another name for it is Jana Aandolan 1990, which was crucial in Nepal's transition from a monarchy to a multi-party democratic system. According to Krishna Hachhetu (1990), the causes of the mass movement included the autocratic rule of the King, where democratic rights, political freedom, and human rights were restricted, political parties were banned, and poverty and economic stagnation were exacerbated. Nepali students protested against the monarch. India's blocking of the borders supported the movement.

The movement succeeded in ending the Panchayat regime and restoring multi-party democracy and human rights, which the late King Mahendra had taken away in 1960. The movement reformed Nepal's constitution and transferred monarchical power to the Nepali people (Hachhetu, 1990). Alongside these democratic struggles, a different kind of movement rooted in Marxist-Leninist and Maoist ideologies emerged to challenge structural inequalities through revolutionary means. The main achievements of the mass movement were the abolition of the Panchayat regime and the re-establishment of multi-party democracy with a constitutional monarch, which granted many fundamental rights such as civil liberties and press freedom through the 2047 BS constitution.

Communist and Maoist Movement

The Communist movement in Nepal, active from 1960 to 1990 during the Panchayat era, aimed to eliminate all forms of injustice and inequality that motivated the poor, youth, and marginalized groups to join the party. It plays a significant role in the country's history of social change and transformation. Support for the communist cause came from public school teachers, labor unions, and government officials. In 1971, a gang of young communists in Jhapa, eastern Nepal, assassinated several 'class enemies' as the Naxalite Maoist movement in West Bengal sparked a bloody conflict with Nepali communists. Despite facing many factions, the communist movement grew considerably during the 1990s.

Among the communist parties of Nepal, the Maoist party is one of the factions that began its movement on February 13, 1996, with the slogan of 'people's war.' The causes of the Maoist movement included poverty and economic inequality, socio-cultural inequality and exploitation, modernization, social transformation and adaptability, exclusionary democracy, and a weak state (Lawoti & Pahari, 2010). The movement succeeded in ending the constitutional monarchical political system and establishing federalism with social inclusion and proportional representation. Alongside class-based struggles, ethnic and indigenous communities also mobilized to reclaim cultural autonomy, achieve historical justice, and secure political representation.

Indigenous Nationalities Movements

The high-caste Hindu elites, the Brahmin and Chhetri, discriminated against, exploited, and marginalized them throughout the Rana and Panchayat regimes for decades, which led to the emergence of the Indigenous nation's movement. Demanding that the Limbu tribe return their ancestral territory (Kipat) in the eastern highlands, the uprising erupted. Violence against Brahmins occurred in eastern Nepal in the early 1950s (Caplan, 1970). Tamang in the districts of Dhading and Nuwakot started protesting against Brahman landlords and money lenders in 1959, claiming that they were unfairly stealing Tamang land. The Tamangs beat many Brahmins and pillaged property. To reclaim their stolen land and protect their territory, hundreds of Brahmins sued the Tamangs in court (Devkota, 2036 V.S.; Tamang, 1987; Hagen, 2010).

The ethnic groups established several tribal organizations to protect their customs, language, and culture. In the indigenous movement, many ethnic groups engage in cultural politics to promote their political goals. In the 1990s, the movement's main political objectives were to remove the state's high-caste Hindu domination and create a more responsive, inclusive, and representative government along with ethnic autonomy. Decades after the federal democratic state was established, the movement's demands have evolved. New demands included proportional representation, rights to land and resources, cultural recognition, ethnic autonomy, self-determination, and linguistic equality (Hagen, 2010).

Gurung (2022) identifies the factors of the Janajati movement as caste-based hierarchy and discrimination, state-sponsored cultural domination (one-language, one-religion policy), political exclusion, economic inequality, ineffective inclusion policies, and identity-based mobilization. David Gellner, 2000, has outlined the historical exclusion and domination by Brahmin-Chhetri elites in areas such as politics, civil service, judiciary, education, and the enforcement of a monolithic national identity like one language, one culture, and one religion. The ethnic identity politics after 1990 includes different demands for rights such as cultural recognition, political representation, social inclusion, addressing structural inequalities in education, employment, government services, representation rights, and indigenous rights.

The literature explains that issues like unequal representation, identity, and disparity in distribution are the main concerns of the movement. The key achievements of the indigenous nationalities movement include federalism, inclusion, and proportional representation within the state system. Similarly, the movement helped strengthen their cultural identity, dignity, and ethnic rights, and empowered ethnic groups by securing quotas in every sector of the state. It also supported the promotion of mother-tongue education and the preservation of indigenous cultures and languages.

Dalit Movement

The Dalit Movement in Nepal seeks to abolish racial and caste-based discrimination, religious impurity, and economic exploitation. Emerging from the Rana regime, it started in 1947 in the Baglung district, emphasizing self-respect for oppressed Dalits. In 1947, Sarbajit Biswakarma, a native of western Nepal's Baglung area, established the Vishwa Sarvajan Sangh, the country's first Dalit organization. One of the organization's main goals was to promote self-respect among the oppressed Dalit community.

The major movements include the Pashupati Nath and other temple entry movements, the Sino (carcass) boycott movement, the Land Rights Movement, the Untouchability Movement, the Dalits Lives Matter Movement, and others (Maharjan & Kisan, 2070 BS). Additionally, significant Dalit movements in Nepal consist of the Vishwa Sarvajn Sangh and self-respect movement, the Pashupati Nath temple and other temple entry struggles, the cattle carcass boycott movement, the Bhadrakali hunger strike, the Badi and Koti Hom Struggles, and the tea cup cleaning boycott movement. These efforts aimed to eliminate racial segregation and caste-based discrimination. The primary achievement of these movements is legal recognition, as the 2015 constitution declared caste-based discrimination and untouchability unlawful and punishable. This has helped to dismantle long-standing caste prejudice and untouchability. It also contributed to securing reserved seats in government processes at the state, federal, provincial, and local levels.

Women Movement

Gender has also been a major aspect of Nepal's social transformation. Women-led movements have consistently fought for gender equality, representation, and protection from patriarchal norms. Throughout the history of the women's movement, Nepali women have marched for various causes including liberty, equality, property rights, recognition, cultural discrimination, and gender-based violence. Yogmaya Neupane's struggle to eradicate religious and cultural discrimination against women raised awareness of the movement and persuaded the community. She chose to take her own life and that of 67 followers in the Arun River in 1942 A.D. This event became a landmark moment in Nepal's women's movement history. The movement led by Yogmaya motivated Nepali women to stand against the brutal Rana regime.

The women's movement in Nepal continued after Yog Maya's struggle. Through an awareness campaign in 1935, Chandrakanta Mathema took the lead in advocating for girls' education and urged women to participate in political activities (Tumbahamfe, 2009). Ten years later, in 1947, Nepalese women participated in the civil rights struggle for the first time in their history. At that time, it was a daring move for women. It was quite rare and considered inappropriate by family and society for four female protesters—Sahana, Pradhan, Snehalata, and Kanaklata—to be arrested and imprisoned for two weeks. In reality, these four women took courageous actions that forced societal transformation. The first Nepali Congress was founded in January 1947, as it became clear that women had been denied their basic human rights, subjected to discrimination, and subjugated.

In recognition of this fact, Congress passed a resolution unanimously affirming that women should have the same rights as men in society and that all forms of discrimination and oppression against them must be eliminated (Basnet, 2009). During the 1948 Mangala Devi Sing, a female Congress leader, demonstrated to the Rana regime, demanding education and voting rights for women. In 1960 A.D., King Mahendra imposed the Panchayat system through a military coup. All political parties, including women's organizations, were banned by the Panchayat government. When Shailaja Acharya and some others attempted to raise a "black flag" in public to protest the King's decision, she was detained and imprisoned for three and a half years (Basnet, 1996).

The women's movement has a long and strong history of advocating for political rights, along with legal and educational improvements. Its major achievements include voting rights; Nepali women cast their first vote in 1951. They also gained a 33% reservation in the government system. The movement has successfully pushed for legal reforms such as the Gender Equality Act of 2006, equal property rights, the Domestic Violence Act of 2009, and citizenship rights awarded in the mother's name. Besides issues of gender and caste, class-based exploitation was especially harsh in Nepal's western Terai, where the Kamaiya system of bonded labor lasted for decades. The effort to end this system was another important milestone in fighting against structural slavery.

Kamaiya (Bond Labor) Emancipation Movement

The Kamaiya emancipation movement aimed to eliminate bonded labor among the Tharu people in Dang, Bardiya, Kailali, Kanchanpur, and western Nepal. The Tharu are the primary indigenous group of the Terai, especially in western Nepal, and have lived there since before malaria was eradicated. They slash and burn the forests of the Terai to clear land for farming to sustain themselves. After malaria was eradicated, Pahadi migrants moved to the Terai seeking better livelihoods. Being literate and clever, they started lending money to local Tharu farmers facing financial trouble, especially for costly cultural ceremonies. The Tharu borrowers often paid high interest or had to live at the lender's home as bonded labor until repaying the debt with interest. This practice

is known as the Kamaiya system. Although it was formally abolished by Rana Prime Minister Chandra Shamsher and the 2047 BS Nepalese constitution, the practice persisted (BASE Organization, n.d.). The emancipation movement for Kamaiyas gained momentum in May 2000 when 19 Kamaiyas from Kailali demanded better wages, debt relief, land, housing, and protection. NGOs and human rights groups, notably BASE (Backwards Society Education), led by young Tharus with substantial membership, supported the protests that erupted when local officials ignored their demands. Protests escalated by July 2000, including sit-ins in Kathmandu. The Nepalese government officially outlawed bonded labor and freed all Kamaiyas on July 17, 2000, declaring their debts null and void after arrests during protests. However, even after the ban, the government did not provide sufficient support. Many freed Kamaiyas were evicted by landlords and forced into poor camps (Fujikura, 2001). The movement successfully abolished bonded labor and liberated around 20,000 Kamaiyas from landlord control. It helped establish human rights and freedom for the Kamaiya community. In Nepal, there were some land-based movements since 2010 BS for tenancy rights and land ownership, which became major agendas for political parties that pressurized the political authorities to implement a land reform program, declaring the emancipation of Kamaya, Hali, and Haruwa-Charuwa (Dhakal, 2007; Shahu, 2013). Still, not all the freed Kamaiyas received the land promised by the government, leaving many homeless due to landlessness. The regional and ethnic marginalization is also evident in the Madheshi movement, which sought recognition, autonomy, and political equality for communities in Nepal's southern lowlands.

Madheshi Movement

The social movement's concerns are specific to the local circumstances and environment. The redefinition of Nepali nationalism challenges the idea of one language and one dress. Historically, Madeshi people have kinship, cultural, linguistic, and geographic ties to people in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, India. This connection often leads to suspicion from hill people and is viewed as Indian. These issues have taken various forms, including denying opportunities and making disparaging remarks about their "patriotism," language, attire, and skin color (ACHR, 2009).

According to Gaige (2009), the Madheshi movement in Nepal seeks to establish identity and equality for Pahadi (hill-origin people). The history of this movement dates back to 1956 A.D. when Vivekananda Jha founded the first Madhesh-based political party called 'Nepal Terai Congress'. For many years, until 2007 A.D., the goal remained unachieved due to loose organization. After fifty years, some political activists renewed the movement with new groups such as Nepal Sadvawana Party, Madheshi People's Rights Forum, Madheshi Janadhikar Forum, Loktantrik, and Terai Madhesh. Leaders from Madheshi parties also played key roles in the movement. Early on, the Madheshi People's Rights Forum, one of the younger political parties, set fire to the Interim Constitution in Kathmandu. Some activists were arrested on charges of torching the

constitution. In response, Madhesh declared a strike focused on eastern Terai. During the strike, Maoist activists killed a Madheshi People's Rights Forum (MPRF) member in Lahan, Siraha district, during an encounter between the two groups. Due to the government's inability to handle the situation, the protest escalated into violence. It began in Siraha and Saptari districts and spread to the southern plains starting January 19, 2007. The protests lasted for 21 days and resulted in 29 deaths (Gautam, 2012). This event is known as the first Madheshi movement.

The second Madheshi movement erupted in 2008, and the third Madheshi movement began on July 15, 2015, continuing until February 3, 2016. During these protests, hundreds of Madheshi activists were killed (Pradhan, 2024). Madheshi movements demanded several things, including population-based electoral seats, proportional participation of Madheshis in government, and an independent identity-based provincial boundary system called Ek Madhes Ek Pradesh. The primary demand of the Madheshi movement was the declaration of Ek Madhes Ek Pradesh (Madhesh as one province) under the federal system of governance. They called for regional autonomy and the right to self-determination. The movement expressed dissatisfaction due to the government's indifference to addressing the key demand of Ek Madhes Ek Pradesh. The Nepalese government did not meet the main demand of the Madheshi party. As a result, Madheshi people started rising in the movement, burning the 2015 Nepalese Constitution and spreading throughout the Terai belt. Activists used Indian territory, but the Indian government did not issue any statements about the situation. At the same time, India closed the Nepal-India border to support the movement. The Madheshi parties welcomed this, seeing it as support for their cause (Mathema, 2011). The Madheshi movement succeeded in restructuring the state into a federal democratic republic. It led to proportional representation and reservations in government bodies, the election of the first president from the Madheshi community, and the establishment of the Madheshi commission. Additionally, the movement achieved reforms in citizenship laws, with the government agreeing to amend the 2015 Constitution to recognize Madheshi culture and identity.

Dynamics of Mobilization

Nepal has experienced various types of regime change and political movements throughout its history. The Nepali Congress and the Nepal Communist Party Maoist led the anti-Rana or democratic struggle in 1951, the mass movement in 1990 (Jana Andolan I), and the People's movement in 2006 (Janandolan II). These three movements were crucial in transforming Nepali society from authoritarian Rana rule, the monarchical Panchayat system, and constitutional monarchy democracy to a democratic federal state. In the late 1990s, many identity-based movements, such as the indigenous nationalities movement, Dalit movements, women's movement, and Madheshi movements, emerged out of grievances related to power concentration and social marginalization. Hachhethu

(2007) argues that different political parties accelerated these movements. The labor unions, professors and teachers unions, including professional organizations, civil society organizations, students, indigenous peoples, Madheshi, Dalits, and women actively participated in the protests that led to the democratic movement until the end of the constitutional period. Gellner (2019) mentions that various Nepali movements have played an influential role in ending deep-rooted exclusion, caste-based discrimination, and marginalization by raising the voices and grievances of Janajatis, Madhesis, Dalits, and other underrepresented groups into the national political discourse.

The movement challenged the longstanding and deeply rooted dominance and exclusion by the upper caste hill Brahmin and Chhetri. It called for recognizing the cultural diversity and identity of indigenous nationalities and Madheshi people. It succeeded in pressuring the state to include proportional representation for Dalit, women, Janajati, and Madheshi women in parliament, other constitutional bodies, and the public service commission in the 2015 constitution. Although challenges remain, such as limited implementation and elite co-optation, Gellner (2019) emphasizes that these movements were essential in triggering a shift toward a more inclusive and representative government in Nepal.

The Madhesi Movement (2007–2008, 2015) shows how regionally organized protests can pressure the government to recognize identity-based demands. While the movement succeeded in prompting constitutional changes and discussions on federalism, it also revealed the limits of political negotiation, especially in securing long-term inclusion and autonomy. Although these social movements did not simply turn Nepal from an autocratic regime into a federal democracy in a straightforward way, they played a key role in challenging structural inequalities and redistributing power. Their impact is not only in regime change but also in shifting underlying power dynamics and creating space for historically excluded organizations to participate in the political process.

Political movements, Transformation, and Achievements

Nepal has experienced various phases of political change in its democratic movement, driven by active political parties such as the Nepal Praja Parisad, Nepal Communist Party, and Nepali Congress. The overthrow of the Rana administration marked Nepal's first major political shift in history, followed by the implementation of multi-party democracy and the return of the monarchy on February 18, 1951. The Nepali Congress party fought against the autocratic Rana regime to establish democracy in Nepal. The Delhi Agreement among three political forces—the Ranas, the King, and the Congress party—agreed to keep the King as the head of state (Gupta, 1993).

King Mahendra rejected multi-party democracy, accusing the BP Koirala administration of failing to maintain political stability, encouraging corruption, and providing ineffective governance, even though the people were enjoying the freedoms of the multi-party system and democratic principles. Then, the King introduced the Panchayat regime

on December 15, 1960. Once again, the state entered a Dark Age, all the fundamentals of democracy were suppressed, and people were left disappointed (Pykurel & Adhikari, 2013).

Democracy and a multi-party monarchy were established, and the Rana aristocracy was overthrown. These were the main accomplishments of the Democratic movement, also known as Anti-Rana. Access to education improved, political awareness increased, and a provisional democratic constitution was adopted. B.P. Koirala was selected as Nepal's first prime minister after the country's first general election. Nepal has gained international recognition as a democratic nation.

The Jana Andolan of 1990 was a significant political struggle that occurred in 1990. The movement aimed to restore multi-party democracy and overthrow the Panchayat government. The country's multi-party democracy with a constitutional monarchy, which guaranteed fundamental rights such as press freedom and civil liberties, was restored in 2047 BS after the Panchayat regime was dismantled. These were the main achievements of the mass movement. The political parties involved in the Maoist guerrilla insurgency from 1996 to 2006 experienced the most notable political shift in Nepal in 2006. The movement aimed to end the monarchy and establish a federal democracy in Nepal. The People's Movement of 2006, supported by a broad coalition of Maoists, democratic parties, and civil society organizations, marked a pivotal moment in Nepal's political history. This was not just symbolic; it laid the groundwork for institutional reforms, a federal democratic republic, and the new constitution adopted in 2015.

Gellner (2014) states that insufficient democratic deepening and ongoing elite dominance make this transition still fragile. Research shows disillusionment with the political elite's failure to deliver on the promises of inclusion, transparency, and accountability. While democratic federalism was achieved through mass mobilization, the continued exclusion of marginalized voices from meaningful policy influence raises questions about the democratic transformation.

The major achievements of the movement included Nepal officially declaring itself a federal democratic state in 2008. The promulgation of the 2015 Constitution recognized key milestones: the abolition of the monarchy. Nepal was established as a federal republic and secular state with a three-tier government system, along with inclusive and proportional representation, especially for women, Dalits, indigenous groups, differently-abled individuals, and Madheshi (Constitution, 2015). These collective accomplishments of the movement reshaped Nepal's political landscape, transforming it from a centralized monarchy into an inclusive, republican, and federal democratic state.

The movement has led to significant political reforms; members of the indigenous community, women, and the Madheshi group have all attained top positions in Nepal, including president and deputy president. It has declared democracy and progressive

changes to promote economic equality, prosperity, and social justice. It has abolished all forms of oppression and discrimination caused by the feudalistic, autocratic, centralized, unitary system of governance. It has also safeguarded and encouraged social and cultural solidarity, tolerance, harmony, and unity in diversity; and recognized the multi-ethnic, multilingual, multi-religious, multi-cultural, and diverse regional characteristics.

This constitution promised to establish an equal society based on fair, inclusive, and participatory principles to promote prosperity, social justice, language, religion, gender equality, and the elimination of untouchability. The Constitution 2015 committed to following democratic norms and values, such as a competitive multi-party democratic system of government for the people, civil liberties, human rights, fundamental rights, adult suffrage, regular elections, freedom of the press, an independent, impartial, and capable judiciary, the rule of law, and the development of a prosperous nation.

However, despite the constitutional provision mentioned above, poor, marginalized, Dalit women, and oppressed people still face discrimination, untouchability, and oppression. They are denied the fundamentals of democracy and basic human rights: food, shelter, education, health, and security. The state continues to practice nepotism, corruption, and gender bias. Nepal faces serious problems of poverty and unemployment due to a lack of employment opportunities. Young people are leaving the country in search of jobs. This shows that political change alone cannot transform society; economic and social improvements are also necessary.

Identity Movements and Reforms

The main social change in Indigenous nationalities movements is the shift in identity, dignity, and respect within ethnic communities. These movements have succeeded in moving ethnic groups from mere survival and resistance toward empowerment, self-determination, and leadership in areas such as political representation, legal reform, and cultural revitalization. Although the movement began before 1990, its recognition started when Nepal's multi-party democracy was restored.

The Indigenous nationalities movement led to proportional and inclusive representation in government bodies, increased awareness of social justice, identity rights, and dignity, and influenced Nepal's federal restructuring. Their collective voices, including Janajati, Madhesi, and other marginalized communities, partly fulfilled their call for identity-based federalism, resulting in the establishment of a federal democratic republic (Lawoti & Hangen, 2013). However, only highly educated ethnic groups and urban elites have truly benefited from the movement. The Madheshi Movement played a key role in the political and social transformation of Nepali society, especially in reforming politics, which led to the adoption of a federal structure, proportional representation, and reservation policies for marginalized groups, including Madheshi Dalits. The movement succeeded in shifting perceptions of Pahadi nationalism toward Madheshi. It helped to strengthen their identity and dignity. According to Tula Narayan Sah, an activist of the

Madheshi movement, one of the most meaningful achievements was awakening political awareness among Madheshis and Dalits. They started asserting their rights and demanding justice within a democratic framework.

Despite ongoing inequalities, the movement marked a key shift toward inclusion, identity-based justice, and participatory democracy in Nepal by electing the country's first president from the Madheshi community, reserving government positions, establishing the Madheshi Commission, and providing reservations for proportional seats. Although the Madheshi movement brought positive changes in political representation, social inclusion, and proportional representation for marginalized groups, Dalit people and women of Madhesh still face low literacy rates, gender-based violence, caste-based discrimination, untouchability, and social exclusion. The success of Nepal's Dalit movement is reflected in legal and constitutional recognition.

The Constitution of Nepal 2015 explicitly bans caste-based discrimination and untouchability. It guarantees equal rights, proportional representation, and protection for Dalits at all levels of government. The constitution has declared caste discrimination and untouchability as criminal acts. It provides legal avenues for victims to seek justice. Dalits have secured specific seats in the federal parliament, provincial assemblies, and local governments through quotas and proportional representation. Dalit women are assured representation at the ward level in local government bodies (Constitution, 2015). The increasing presence of Dalit leaders in major political parties is a notable achievement in political representation.

In Nepali society, the Dalit movement has effectively promoted social change. A key part of this transformation is the decline of traditional caste hierarchies; in urban areas and among younger generations, strict caste boundaries are weakening. Inter-caste marriages, friendships, and shared public spaces are gradually increasing. "Inclusive democracy" is now a central principle in Nepal's political discourse. Caste, ethnicity, gender, and all regions are considered in the development of public policy.

Legal recognition has enabled them to assert their rights, even in rural areas. Dalits are increasingly aware of their rights and more outspoken in demanding equal treatment. Cultural assertion, including the revival and celebration of Dalit histories and traditions, has been safeguarded. Dalits are free to pursue any career they choose and are no longer forced to adopt their traditional occupations as they did in the past (Constitution, 2015). The most significant achievement of the Dalit movement is the psychological sense of full dignity within the Dalit community, which has helped them overcome decades of caste-based inferiority.

Although many aspects of social life have changed, caste-based discrimination, feelings of inferiority, and untouchability in daily life still exist. Dalit people encounter limited economic opportunities, restrictions on land ownership, and very low representation in

higher-level decision-making roles. Violence and exclusion, especially against Dalit women, have not decreased. The following case discusses social exclusion and violence.

Basudev Rishidev (name changed), a Dalit daily wage laborer from Inaruwa-8 Sunsari, expressed his deep frustration: "We Dalits do not have citizenship. My grandfather died without it. Now I am getting old, and my son is growing up, but we still have no identity." His son dreams of working abroad but cannot do so because he lacks a citizenship card. "He cannot get a passport, and he cannot secure a decent job. What are we supposed to do?" Many elderly Dalit women over 70 in their village remain undocumented and are excluded from government allowances. "Nobody listens to us. People treat Dalits like garbage. No one comes to our houses except during elections." Basudev recalls joining the Madhesh movement hoping for change. "We dreamed of citizenship, maybe some land, a small house. But nothing changed." When asked about the movement's results, he responded with a bitter smile: Jun jogi aaepani, kannai chireko—"No matter who leads, our suffering stays the same".

Throughout history, Nepali women have fought for civic, social, cultural rights, gender equality, recognition, and identity in the public sphere. Their struggle was to free themselves from the Sati system, cultural discrimination based on gender, the right to vote, access to education, and basic human rights, including economic rights.

The movement has succeeded in securing some civic rights and identity for women. The major achievements and social changes of the women's movement included political participation and representation; Nepali women gained the right to vote in 1951. The first general election in February–April 1959 marked the first time a woman was elected to Parliament, Dwarika Devi Thakurani, who won her seat in the House of Representatives as the only woman among 109 elected members. Another woman, Kamal Rana, was appointed by the King to the newly formed Upper House of 36 members; she had previously served as vice chair of the National Assembly in 1952 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025).

The Constitution of Nepal 2015 mandates 33% female representation in Parliament. As of the 2017 elections, women accounted for more than 40% of local government. Many women now serve as mayors, deputy mayors, parliamentarians, and ministers. The Gender Equality Act of 2006 changed discriminatory provisions in both the criminal and civil codes. Women have equal rights to parental property and inheritance under the Equal Property Rights. The Domestic Violence (Crime and Punishment) Act, 2009, recognized domestic violence as a punishable offense (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025).

In the field of education, the female literacy rate has increased to 69.4 percent (NSO, 2023) thanks to specialized educational programs for girls like 'Balika Shiksha' and 'Beti Padhau Beti Bachau' in Madhesh Province. People have become more aware of child

marriage, dowry, and witchcraft systems. A notable achievement of the movement is that women now have the same property rights as men in ancestral property, and a mother has the authority to issue her children's citizenship cards (Regmi, 2025).

Although the women's movement has secured the civic rights and identity mentioned earlier through the 2015 constitution, many issues still need to be addressed. Rights that have been gained are not always practiced in daily life, such as property rights and citizenship from the mother's side. Kamaiya is also considered a modern form of slavery; emancipation marked a major transformation for Nepali society. The Kamaiya emancipation movement began in May 2000; 19 Kamaiyas from the Kailali district called for better pay, debt relief, land, housing, and security. The movement's main achievement was the official declaration by the Nepalese government in July 2000, abolishing the Kamaiya system. The government issued an executive order freeing all Kamaiyas from bonded labor and canceling all debts claimed by landlords.

More than twenty thousand Kamaiyas were freed following the government's declaration. The movement ended centuries-long hereditary debt bondage tied to land and labor exploitation. The government started the Kamaiya Rehabilitation Program (KRP), which focused on land distribution, housing, and education for the freed Kamaiyas. The Kamaiyas experienced major changes in identity, representation, land ownership, and livelihoods. They began to see themselves as rights holders, organized as freed Kamaiyas in society, and participated in political parties. Although the movement freed the Kamaiya, they still face issues with shelter and livelihood, as the government had previously declared.

Civic Consciousness

The various movements carried out over different periods promote civic awareness among Nepali people. The most notable movement is the anti-Rana or Democratic movement (1951), which freed the Nepali people from an autocratic regime. Similarly, the mass movement of 1990 and Mass Movement II in 2006 also aimed to abolish the monarchy in Nepal, leading to significant changes in the societal structure.

Indigenous groups, Dalit communities, Maheshi, Tharus, women, and the Muslim community are actively involved in social, political, and legal spheres, advocating for federalism with a focus on identity, social inclusion, recognition, and rights. They have gained some political, legal rights, and social recognition. In this context, Nepal's Constitution (2015) grants Dalit groups the right to challenge caste-based discrimination. It guarantees their access to political representation, educational and political quotas, and the freedom to establish organizations for active societal participation. Likewise, the Madheshi community has led efforts advocating for federalism, proportional representation, and recognition of their regional, ethnic, and socio-cultural identities and rights. As a result of these movements, Madheshi youth have started playing active roles in regional politics and leadership.

Nepali women, who have played a significant role in various social and democratic movements, have gained increased awareness and advocacy for gender equality, property rights, and legal identity. These movements have resulted in important achievements, including legislation addressing domestic violence, citizenship rights in the name of mother, and a constitutional provision guaranteeing 33% reservation for women in political bodies and civil service (Constitution of Nepal, 2015). Likewise, indigenous peoples have become more aware through the indigenous movement, which educated them about indigenous rights regarding resource utilization, cultural identity, and linguistic recognition according to the norms and rules of the United Nations.

The indigenous people, also known as 'Janajati,' have been actively advocating for identity-based federalism, recognition, inclusion in politics, and preservation of their linguistic and cultural identities due to social movements. Similarly, the Tharu community has organized against historical injustices like the Kamaiya bonded labor system and has led vigorous campaigns for provincial autonomy and official acknowledgment. They now participate more actively in politics at both the provincial and national levels. Additionally, Muslims in Nepal have cultivated a stronger sense of identity and have become more outspoken in advocating for inclusion within a secular state. Their efforts focus on securing religious and educational rights, with increased involvement in civil society and growing calls for political representation. Overall, these developments demonstrate a strong movement toward inclusion, equity, and justice within Nepal's evolving democratic landscape. The political, social, and identity movements in Nepal have also helped shape the perspectives of the people, including ethnic groups, regarding the country's political system and the necessity for change.

Conclusion

This article examines the evolving social and political movements and their role in transforming Nepali society, from the 1950s anti-Rana democratic movement to the 1990s democratic movements, the 2006 federal democratic movement, and the Madheshi movements of 2007, 2008, and 2015. These movements challenged existing socio-political structures and played a significant role in democratic and constitutional reforms, leading to the creation of a federal democratic state with an inclusive political framework. Specifically, they have resulted in the formal recognition and greater representation of historically marginalized groups such as Dalits, Madheshis, women, indigenous communities, Tharus, and Muslims, ensuring broader access to legal rights, education, and political participation through constitutional provisions.

The shift from monarchy to a federal democratic republic is one of the most important achievements resulting from decades of activism. Marginalized groups—such as Dalit, Madheshi, women, indigenous peoples, Tharus, and Muslims—have gained improved access to legal protections, education, and political representation through constitutional provisions. However, socio-cultural barriers, caste- and gender-based discrimination,

and socio-economic exclusion still exist in both obvious and hidden ways. This shows that political movements alone have not fully changed Nepal's socio-political structure; social movements have also given voice to those who were traditionally unheard, creating space for dignity, identity, and justice. Both types of movements have played a vital role in shaping Nepali society. The process of change continues in Nepal and should go on through legal and political means with grassroots involvement. While constitutional and legal measures are essential, practical social practices are just as important.

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