

Madan Bhandari and His Theory of People's Multiparty Democracy

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ABSTRACT

People's Multiparty Democracy (PMPD), postulated by Madan Kumar Bhandari in the early 1990s, is a political, economic, and social theory that combines Marxism with specific Nepali attributes. By reviewing the global landscape of socialist movements, Bhandari's political thought offers a theoretical framework for critically examining Nepal's evolving production relations based on its contemporary class dynamics. Tragically, Bhandari, who served as the Secretary-General of the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN [UML]), lost his life in a mysterious car accident in 1993. His political journey traces back to the 1960s when he began as a communist party worker during the Panchayat regime under the absolute monarchy. Subsequently, he drew inspiration from the postwar rise of communist parties around the world but went on to reshape Nepal's unique left movement, setting it distinctly apart from other communist parties in South Asia and beyond. He recognized the need for a joint movement with non-communist groups like the Nepali Congress for the restoration of multiparty democracy, which remained vital in his ideological transformation. Applying a historical explanatory approach, this article explores the factors contributing to the formulation of PMPD while also retracing the evolution of Bhandari's ideological position in the left movement with Nepali characteristics. Through an examination of the political history and Bhandari's political philosophy, this article sheds light on the theory of PMPD, which has now become the guiding principle of CPN (UML).

Introduction

An attempt at any academic reflection on Madan Bhandari's¹ "People's Multiparty Democracy (PMPD)" involves layers of caveats, including the reflector's propensity of getting emotional over the need to be objective. This observation is based on the corpus of writings available in the Nepali language about Bhandari by his colleagues and contemporaries, wherein the authors indiscriminately speculate his attributes, organizational abilities and charismatic Marxist oratory informed with the resonance of Sanskrit

philosophy and literature than on his definite contributions towards the development of Marxist thought with Nepali characteristics.

Another layer comprises the caveat of the deliberator being politically labeled since Bhandari, in addition to being a thinker, was also the Secretary General of an influential political party—the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) (CPN [UML])—that has given Nepal's four prime ministers between 1994 to 2021. Such was the charisma of the man in a society that has traditionally leaned on patriarchal

guardianship for security where qualification of leadership is often judged either by graying hair and beards or by family heredity², Bhandari as an outsider³ demonstrated an unprecedented ability to mobilize people. Bhandari was only forty-one when he passed away⁴.

Except as a Member of Parliament for two years until his death, Bhandari did not hold any public office. It is therefore natural for the outside world to know less about him. One of his rare interviews in the English language with the magazine *Newsweek* titled "In Nepal, Karl Marx Lives" (Litvin, 1991). This may be called only a small introductory foray equating Bhandari with Marx. Bhandari's more comprehensive presence, as if to serve justice to the *Newsweek* interview title, came in 1993, just before his death, in the form of a working paper on Marxism amid the audience of twenty-four communist parties from across the world in a congress held in Calcutta, India (Bhandari, 1993b). A few months before the Calcutta paper, Bhandari had his comprehensive ideological work-*People's Multiparty Democracy: A Program of Nepali Revolution*-endorsed by the Fifth National General Convention of the CPN (UML) (Bhandari, 1993a). It is mainly for his struggle for democracy and significant contribution to the formation of the left-oriented democratic ideology that Bhandari stands for as a politician who has been most referred to and respected in the mainstream polity of Nepal.

Bhandari's critics, both political and academic, limit him to the "communist" bracket informed by international experience and tropes, which he had broken while leading his party into the democratic era of Nepal (Sharma Oli, 2020). Here too, the criticism from the liberal vantage point shrouds his intellectual verity conforming to the fundamentals of democratic tenets.

This study aims to retrace the genesis of PMPD, its ideological foundations in support of Marxist philosophy, and its relevance in the domestic as well as the geopolitical context of Nepal. This paper, taking into account Bhandari's championing

for democracy and reformulation of the left political philosophy, explores how the theory of PMPD seeks to establish a new democratic social contract that prioritizes competitive practices and individual freedom, with the ultimate goal of facilitating Nepali society's transition toward socialism.

Methodology

This article relies on a substantial corpus of textual data obtained through archival research, primarily from four important secondary works on Bhandari. The first is the volume of the obituary on Bhandari published by the Madan Bhandari Foundation in July 2016 under the title *Shraddhaanjali* (Obituary), a collection of 28 brilliant materials from Nepal's political and journalistic stalwarts. The second important work on the politics and philosophy of Bhandari is *Margadarshan* (Guidance), which is more political and was again published by the Madan Bhandari Foundation's Kaski district committee in November 2020. The third, and more significant, is *Lokatantra ra aajako Marxwaad* (Democracy and Today's Marxism), by Chaitanya Mishra (Ed. Rajendra Maharjan). A renowned sociologist, Mishra deliberates on the philosophical underpinnings of PMPD as developed by Bhandari. This volume has been published by Book Hill in June 2019. The fourth is the latest work of research by Ramesh Ruchhen Rai under the title *Shwetshaardool*, published in 2021 by Shangri-la Books where the author has painstakingly utilized sociological data and empirical research to find out more about Bhandari. Besides, there are ten volumes of the collected works of Bhandari himself to explore deeper and further.

These materials are then interpreted and analyzed using methods of historical explanation and narrative inquiry. Historical explanation as a research approach involves a systematic exploration of the causal factors that have shaped past outcomes (Mahoney, 2015). In qualitative research, this entails analyzing event sequences

or causal chains, where factors from different historical contexts collectively contribute to the final result (Roberts, 1996). This approach has been applied by Fisher (2018) to view an important period of historical transformation in the context of Nepal through a prism of what he calls a “person-centered ethnography” based on historical events, by which he has explored the lives and times of a former Nepali Prime Minister Tanka Prasad Acharya and his wife Rewanta Kumari Acharya. Building further on this method, as a Marxist would aim at changing society rather than merely interpreting it, Bhandari’s redrawing of the Marxist ideological perspective has also been examined in its applicability to transform Nepali society specifically and in its usefulness for reforming communist ideology in general.

Investigating interconnected factors contributing to a particular historical event or development involves the systematic investigation of primary and secondary sources to reconstruct narratives of past events. This process of narrative reconstruction unravels the underlying reasons behind certain historical phenomena. In this light, this study utilizes Bhandari’s ten-volume collected works and other historical documents on the communist movement in Nepal as primary sources. Meanwhile, secondary resource materials, including several published works on Bhandari, are referenced and also explained in the notes of this paper.

Results and Discussion

Ideological evolution

Bhandari was born on 27 June 1952 in a village in Nepal’s northeast mountain district of Taplejung. Bhandari completed his early schooling in a local Sanskrit school in the neighborhood and then went to the Indian city of Varanasi together with his elder brother for further studies. In Nepal, it was the time when a brief window of democracy that people had opened through the struggle against the century-old Rana oligarchy had just been forcefully closed. Also, the popularly elected Prime Minister and Nepali Congress

(NC) leader Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala was ousted in a military coup by King Mahendra. As a result, many of the pro-democracy leaders exiled themselves to India to avoid arrest and execution. Exile in India also allowed them to continue their political activism⁵.

In Varanasi, Bhandari studied Sanskrit literature and then went to Dehradun for two years where he came in contact with the communist ideology–indoctrinated Nepali youths. While in Dehradun, he began contributing to local newspapers in favor of Nepal’s “left movement,” a parlance almost synonymously utilized to identify the “communist movement” in Nepal.

The left in Nepal from the start acknowledged itself with the opposition to the autocracy of monarchy and stood in favor of the reinstatement of democracy. Therefore, it stands in direct contradiction with the bracketing of the left-wing political front that the Western democracies viewed as absurd and the communists themselves as infantile disorder (John & Fari, 1977). The new left by the 1970s had already started challenging Moscow-oriented communism and capitalist liberalism. At the same time, it became stronger when it espoused the values of social democracy and liberty together with communist ideals (Levit, 1979). Even though researchers around the world have established that the traditional connection between the electorate and the left was in constant decline (Angelucci & Vittori, 2021), Nepal has been regularly voting for left parties (named communist parties) to power, giving as many as six prime ministers from the block between 1994 and 2023.

The Nepali left led by Bhandari was therefore a democratic movement more akin to the new left, exactly unlike how the left wing has been defined and construed conventionally in several parts of the world, especially the West.

Going back to history at the start of the movement, Bhandari’s association with the Nepali left in Dehradun led him to return to Varanasi in 1969,

where he received admission to Banaras Hindu University (BHU) for an undergraduate Degree. Bhandari's budding political leaning drew him to the communist party led by Pushpa Lal Shrestha⁶. Bhandari secured formal party membership after two years. It was from BHU that Bhandari went on to graduate with a Master's Degree in Oriental Philosophy and Sanskrit Literature before becoming a full-time cadre for the restoration of democracy in Nepal.

Bhandari's interaction with NC leaders, his education in BHU, and Shrestha's guidance shaped his worldview to a great extent in his formative years of political understanding. The NC, professing social-democratic ideology, used to keep itself away from the communists and people with a left political orientation. Shrestha, the founder of the Nepal Communist Party, however, had a firm belief that the NC and communists needed to join hands to have any realistic chance to restore multiparty democracy in Nepal.

In 1968, B. P. Koirala was released from prison following international as well as Indian pressure on King Mahendra. Following this, Koirala moved to India and established contact with his Nepali and international friends. Until then, Koirala cherished a strong conviction that he had India's goodwill as well. In such a situation, Shrestha took the initiative to persuade Koirala to a joint mass movement for the restoration of democracy in Nepal.

In four different meetings held between the two leaders during 1968-1971, Koirala would never object to the idea of launching joint protests, but he would also continue to procrastinate the date when the two forces would take to the streets⁷. In that era, coinciding with the height of the Cold War, Koirala was under pressure to maintain a distance from the communists. Koirala seemed to maintain a profound impression that his close friendship with Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and his active participation in the Indian Independence Movement during the

1940s would obligate India to support Nepali Congress. Koirala believed that, with India's support to them, King Mahendra could be pressurized to make a compromise with him and his party. Had the New Delhi establishment heeded Koirala's expectation, he would not have needed communists in his political moves. However, Indira Gandhi, the powerful Indian prime minister, ignored Koirala amidst a scenario where Nepal's king was increasingly reaching out to China.⁸ The politics of balance Nepal adopted in its foreign policy strategy won support for the Nepali monarchy and weakened pro-democracy voices (Rose, 1971, 2010) much before they could ever be heard.

Most surprisingly, Indira Gandhi coerced Koirala to return to Nepal at the very time that the ruling leaders of King Mahendra's Panchayat system were demanding his execution. Koirala was subsequently left with no option, but to return home announcing the political line of "National Reconciliation," which was meant to advocate a more favorable political alignment between the King and the NC (Koirala, 2004). The idea of a joint democratic movement of the NC and the communists never gained momentum during the lifetime of Koirala and Shrestha. Nor could Koirala secure the king's goodwill.

Bhandari, during the same years as a student and as one of the editors of the party's mouthpiece *Mukti Morcha*, was closely observing these political developments, which proved quite pessimistic about the achievement of democracy⁹. For Bhandari, the main attraction of the communist party led by Shrestha was the prospect of a joint mass movement with the NC. In the meantime, there were other communist parties, certainly, but they rigidly sought a Chinese-style people's new democracy in Nepal and were not at all interested in the joint democratic mass movement¹⁰.

Shrestha was running out of choices. On the one hand, his attempts as the founder of the

Nepal Communist Party were falling short of uniting multiple communist groups, prone to division over trivial issues. On the other hand, the NC had cold-shouldered Shrestha's proposal of deploying a people-based democratic alliance for the restoration of democracy in Nepal. At that point, Bhandari and some comrades rebelled against Shrestha and reached out to an extremist group in Jhapa which had come into the limelight in 1972 through its political line of "physically eliminating class enemies," drawing inspiration from the Naxalite movement in the West Bengal state of India just across the border¹¹. The Jhapa District Committee of the Communist Party, as the outfit was known, had young revolutionaries, including K. P. Sharma Oli, the former prime minister and current chair of the CPN (UML). Oli and Mohan Chandra Adhikari were the two members of the committee to dissent from the "physical elimination of individuals" agenda of the group (Mishra, 1999). The duo made up a clear minority in the committee of eleven members but kept advocating the need to have broader public support over the use of violence as a means to advance the communist agenda.

Bhandari had reached out to Jhapa activists for strategic reasons. He had spotted the youth group's potential of evolving into a full-fledged political organization. At the same time, Bhandari was clear about the need to redirect the violent methods of the Jhapa District Committee. A combination of these two elements-committed youth and appropriate ideological orientation-would for him formulate the very basis of the revolutionary agenda.

In his sharp analysis of the inadequacies of the Jhapa rebellion, Bhandari strongly argued why "violence and elimination" would not be helpful and why in the long run a communist party in Nepal would not be strengthened by blindly following the Chinese style of guerilla warfare¹². Bhandari would later more broadly expand the causal interpretation underlying these arguments by drawing inferences from divergent

paths the Russian, Chinese, Korean, Cuban, or East European communist parties took from one another, and simultaneously complementing it after analyzing concrete conditions of Nepali society (Bhandari, 1993).

Bhandari had conceptualized this need of recharting the course of the left movement early, for which he associated himself with a rebel group within the party. Named as Mukti Morcha (Liberation Front) group, which was also the title of the magazine Bhandari edited, the comrades started working for unity among like-minded factions and to expand the organization through the involvement of peasants and workers¹³. Those leaders of various communist factions formed a Coordination Center to continue talks on unification with the Jhapa District Committee. Over the next four years, following several protracted ideological debates, the Coordination Center was converted into the Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist) with Bhandari not as its apex leader but key ideologue of the party, and a member of its powerful Central Committee¹⁴. The new party did not give up the Maoist idea of using force to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat, but the catchphrase "power comes from the barrel of a gun" was deemed irrelevant in the context of Nepal. In 1979, the party majority adopted the line of boycotting the plebiscite for the improved Panchayat system or the multiparty democracy announced by King Birendra, who had taken over the Panchayat regime after the demise of his father King Mahendra. Bhandari, still a minority voice in the party, pleaded against the boycott of the referendum, considering it a wrong approach. However, over the next three years, he would bring a turnaround in the party by convincing the leadership to participate and utilize "bourgeois" elections. Around that point in time, the party had also convincingly assessed that the violent methods of the Jhapa rebellion were inappropriate (KC, 2005).

With Bhandari's guidance at the front, the party adopted a new slogan: "Let's use and develop

Marxism with creativity.” This slogan gradually helped the leadership and the rank-and-file to be receptive to the very foundational philosophy of modern democracy. Following the congruence of policy and leadership, Bhandari was elected the Secretary General of the CPN (ML) by its Fourth General Convention in August 1989. The party then adopted the line of joint mass struggle with other democratic forces. Bhandari initiated talks with the new leadership of the NC, particularly Ganeshman Singh¹⁵. By then, B. P. Koirala had already died of cancer on 22 July 1982; Shrestha had also passed away on 21 July 1978. With the mandate of the fourth convention of the party, Bhandari played a key role in uniting seven communist groups under the umbrella of Joint Left Front, with Mrs. Sahana Pradhan, the widow of Shrestha, as its convener. Finally, the NC and the Joint Left Front launched the combined Jana Andolan (People's Movement) in 1990, successfully restoring multiparty democracy in Nepal, which had been wrested by King Mahendra in 1960 after its brief flowering. The monarchy came firmly under the new Constitution of the Kingdom in 1990. At this point, we see Bhandari not only conceptualizing the new theory but also putting it in praxis to bring about change in the polity.

Nepal's communist movement, as has been the trend elsewhere in South Asia, embodies a history of division and factionalism since its founding. Bhandari, as a mass leader, wanted to transform the left's preference for close-door theoretical debates. During the first year of post-democracy, Bhandari organized hundreds of mass gatherings across the country to establish the party's leadership among the people and drive the party's Leninist cadre-based organization through mass mobilization. Bhandari simultaneously initiated the unification of communist parties, the first being with the CPN (Marxist) led by Manmohan

Adhikari in 1991. The unified party was named as we know it today: the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) (CPN [UML]).

The formation of CPN (UML) was a wise strategic political move, bringing aboard seasoned political leaders of CPN (Marxist), who carried a positive standing among the international community. With this, CPN (UML) became a combination of experienced and educated youth, prepared to look back, realize past mistakes, and always eager to improve. Manmohan Adhikari, an experienced politician, did not command a mass base, but his collaboration with Bhandari gave the newly unified party additional maturity and confidence. Adhikari remained the elected Secretary General of the communist party in the 1950s. He had credibility at home and abroad with his active participation in the movement for the Independence of India during the 1940s. He was respected for his sincere dedication to the party, modest lifestyle, and clean personal character. Bhandari, thus, transformed a militant political front into a democratic political party that not only had a perfect integration of youth and experience but also the much-needed trust in the neighborhood.

After this unification, Adhikari was elected the Chair while Bhandari remained the Secretary General of the CPN (UML). In subsequent democratic elections of parliament held in 1991, the NC won a majority with 110 seats out of 205 in the House of Representatives- The Lower Chamber. The CPN (UML) led by Adhikari and Bhandari came as the main opposition with 69 seats. In this election, Bhandari not only won two seats with landslide votes, both in the Kathmandu Valley but also defeated the popular sitting Prime Minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai in Kathmandu constituency 1, which also brought him to further limelight in contemporary Nepali politics while drawing attention of the international press¹⁶.

The second general elections held a year after Bhandari's death elected the CPN (UML) as the largest party in parliament with 88 seats. Manmohan Adhikari came to be the first popularly elected communist prime minister of Nepal. This government is credited for changing the face of governance in Nepal, by introducing several welfare programs and social security schemes, which deepened the presence of the CPN (UML) in Nepali society.

The politics of peace

Perhaps the strongest element of Bhandari's politics was his exceptional commitment to peaceful politics in praxis. As a communist, his ideology would provide him enough latitude to convert the party's large cadre base into a militant organization. There was a demand for combativeness in the party, which could be easily justified in the face of domestic autocracy as well as the Indian Naxalite rebellion right across the eastern border¹⁷. However, he chose to prioritize larger public participation over communist militancy to expand the party's organizational base. His strategy for the party's organizational structure comes more from his contrarian disposition than his status quo approach in Nepal's democratic movement. Uniquely, Bhandari is the only major political leader of Nepal who did not organize himself or participate in any violent struggle, nor was he arrested at any point in his political career, yet succeeded in leadership. He was an example of transformational leadership in this context.

Bhandari was a 'contrarian' in the sense that he was under no obligation to recoil from the espousal of violence, which is followed as a basic tenet by communist parties. It is interesting to note that Bhandari's political parallel on the liberal side, Koirala, also occasionally proclaimed as a Gandhian and an ally of Jawaharlal Nehru, raised arms twice. The first was in 1950 through the NC's Liberation Army to fight against the Rana Oligarchy. Koirala's second attempt at armed revolt in 1969-71 revived the Liberation Army but

ended in the killing and imprisonment of several of his workers by the Panchayat security forces. Koirala's request to the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi for arms was turned down, and the subsequent hijack of a Nepali aircraft carrying NPR 4 million in cash also resulted in a fiasco¹⁸. It was in this context that the arms Koirala had gathered in India were "gifted" to Bangladeshi freedom fighters with Koirala returning to Nepal proclaiming the policy of national reconciliation (Koirala, 1976).

Bhandari on the other hand transformed the militancy of the Naxal-influenced cadre to his party's organizational potency by mobilizing it peacefully. He expanded the party's presence among professional groups, most notably teachers and doctors. All Nepal National Teachers Union was established as an arm of the democratic revolution in 1983, as were the women's and professionals' associations. Student and farmer wings of the party were active for a long time. This was adopted as a strategy to expand the party's base among the masses. The success of this strategy was tested by utilizing the general elections of 1986 May, held under an autocratic royal regime.

Since political organizations were outlawed under the autocratic constitution, Bhandari's party would field individual leaders in the election and brand them as people's candidates (*janapaksheeya ummedwaar*) in the 1986 Rastriya Panchayat General Election. It was only a test but proved successful with 6 left leaders elected to the unicameral House of Representatives—Rashtriya Panchayat—even if the constituencies covered were only close to ten percent. So was the case with local governments. These leaders in the House and local bodies would voice freedom of expression, as well as the freedom of political parties and organizations, which would go against the royal constitution of the time. In the Intraparty Circular 22, issued immediately after the elections, the party positively assessed its utilization of the election held by the royal

regime (KC, 2005). This was a success on an insignificant level but it incentivized the party rank and file more toward the possibility of change through peaceful means.

For Bhandari, the use of violence was only the last resort. Of course, he did not renounce it for he was under no baggage of the past to do so, but he refrained from using it as a means to perpetuate his politics. He would frequently invoke in his speeches and writings that his party would not remain a mere spectator if democratic achievements brought about by the popular movement were undermined. But he never resorted to the armed mobilization of his cadres even during the royal autocracy when there was plenty of room and appetite. He was determined to experiment with the joint mass struggle for democracy before going for other options. That moment came in 1990, and after its success, he did not need to look back.

In the political paper endorsed by the Fifth National General Convention of the CPN (UML) Bhandari (1993) writes:

The leadership of a Marxist-Leninist political party is indispensable for the proletariat and the working class. However, that [leadership] may be attained only through persistent struggle, dedicated service, proactive initiative, and competitive politics. We have especially emphasized that the question of leadership can neither be resolved solely through theoretical or constitutional reference nor by utilizing the authority of the state. (4.13 Leadership and Dictatorship)

A few years later in the democratic era, Nepal's Maoist party started an armed insurgency in 1996 to establish the People's Republic of Nepal¹⁹. The insurgency lasted for a decade and ended with a 12-point peace accord signed between the Seven Party Alliance and the Maoist party in New Delhi. Through another negotiated peace agreement- the Comprehensive Peace Accord- in November 2006, the Maoists

joined mainstream democratic politics. Again, it was Bhandari's path that demonstrated the possibility of democratic transformation of a communist party. Maoist leader Pushpakamal Dahal "Prachanda," who also became the prime minister through democratic elections post-peace agreement, has repeatedly credited Bhandari for the latter's far-sighted and pragmatic politics (Dahal, 2020). The need for the Maoist party to raise weapons against the nascent democratic structure has, in fact, never been justified even after the liquidation of the insurgency.

Over the last sixteen years into peaceful politics, the largest Maoist faction named the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Center) has not only abandoned Maoism but also briefly unified with the CPN (UML) that Bhandari founded. The two parties stayed together under the banner of the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) and governed the country with a nearly two-thirds majority in parliament for almost three years. They separated in 2021 following a bitter power struggle within the party ultimately with the Supreme Court ordering them to stay in their previous forms as two individual parties- the CPN (UML) and the CPN (Maoist Center).

It may be said with this analysis that the leadership of Bhandari still alive may have created a bulwark against an insurgency, as well as the state's reaction, which meant that Nepal lost ground in its attempts to use democracy for economic growth, inclusion, and equity.

One can also say that it was the power of peaceful politics, which was essentially the legacy of Bhandari as far as the CPN (UML) was concerned, which ultimately played a role in ending the Maoist insurgency, and guided to a large extent the writing of the new Constitution of 2015. This constitution lays the foundation of the Republic of Nepal and guides the state to adopt a socialism-oriented system²⁰. This constitution has further incorporated several

of the twenty-seven points of critical support that Bhandari had extended vis-à-vis the Constitution of Nepal 1990.

People's Multiparty Democracy

Bhandari's most significant contribution to the Nepali communist movement is his theorizing of People's Multiparty Democracy, which can be said to stand as a conclusion of his ideological evolution and practice of the politics of peace as well as his synthesis of the usage of Marxism in the Nepali context.

PMPD is a comprehensive political, economic, and social theory that incorporates key Marxist principles within the specific context of Nepal. Its development is influenced by a critical examination of the global landscape of socialist movements following the collapse of communist party regimes in the USSR and Eastern European countries. Bhandari (1993b) argues that the demise of these regimes resulted from their failure to subject themselves to periodic evaluation and validation by the people. PMPD, therefore, proposes competition among political parties within a system, whose political superstructure is designed by the people through revolution under the leadership of the communist party (Bhandari, 1993a). Explaining the instrument of such revolution, PMPD further provides a theoretical framework to analyze Nepal's evolving production relations, taking into account the contemporary dynamics of class structures. Drawing on the foundations of Marxist philosophy, particularly dialectical and historical materialism, PMPD redefines the concept of class as a social relationship determined by the control exerted over the means of production and the labor of others. This description of class attends quite adjacent to the one proposed by neo-Marxist academics (Neilson, 2017).

The conceptual clarity regarding the notion of class within a society plays a pivotal role in guiding revolutionary actions. Mao Zedong, for instance, successfully tested in the Chinese context that a united front of progressive forces and armed proletariat in class society would lead

the revolutionary vanguard. That was during the first half of the 20th century. Bhandari's distinctive approach put into practice during the end of the same century lies in his pursuit of a working alliance with capitalist political parties aiming to bring about democratic and progressive transformations within Nepali society through peaceful means and later, under the transformed polity, proving the communist party better by competing with the capitalist forces.

This theory was first adopted by CPN (UML) as the Program of Nepali Revolution under the aegis of Bhandari in its Fifth National General Convention of 1993. The party went a step forward to espouse PMPD as the guiding principle at its seventh General Convention of 2003. The development of PMPD holds more significance as its rise in Nepal came at a time when the Soviet Union had just fallen and socialist states of Eastern Europe were losing public support. The world was staring at the huge rejection of communist ideology, and to stay relevant there was a need for new imagination and fresh thinking.

That was the time in Nepal when the communist movement needed a theoretician who could incorporate Marxism through concrete analysis of the objective conditions obtained in the country. The Nepali democratic movement also demanded a leader who could fearlessly uphold the banner of consistent democracy, and the Nepali nation sought a national figure who could boldly champion national interests and aspirations. In Bhandari, all of these requirements found a unified answer, and therein lay his unique contribution²¹.

In the ideological landscape, Bhandari envisaged PMPD as operationalizing with four core values:

1. A Marxist communist party must prove itself better than the capitalist political parties through competition amongst the people;
2. Modern democratic principles and human rights are as many properties of a communist party as they are of capitalist political parties;

3. The dialectical relations present in nature extend as far as the two-line struggle within a communist party, where the majority governs, but the minority must have an equal chance to express itself with dignity;
4. A communist party must have regular cadres, who are organized in committees and operate through the organizational guiding principles of Lenin.

Bhandari, as the main leader of Nepal's communist movement, had struggled for the fundamental democratic freedoms of the people. He recognized after the successful Jan Andolan of 1990 that the search for the emancipation of the people from feudalism as well as the country's struggle against intervening comprador capitalism and imperialism were key questions before the socialist revolution. He further declared that the basic objective of the Nepali revolution was to establish the people's democratic system by resolving these contradictions through the revolution (Pokharel, 2020).

Against this backdrop, pointing to the need to draw lessons from the setback of the world communist movement, Bhandari (1993a) said:

[T]he previous power balance of the world has shattered. It has become necessary to initiate new research, experiment, coordination, and modification in the design and method of revolution. We have to take serious note of past experiences and present circumstances of the world while ascertaining our programs and revolutionary processes. It becomes necessary for us to take appropriate lessons from them (Section 2.9).

Then, outlining the program of revolution, Bhandari (1993a) announced: “[S]ocio-economic character of our contemporary revolution is capitalist democracy; we aim to establish people's democratic system. Only by

accomplishing this primary responsibility alone can we move ahead on the path of socialism” (Section 3.2). In the program of PMPD, Bhandari integrated universal human rights, the rule of law, constitutional governance by the majority, opposition of the minority, and separation of powers, all of which form the fundamental basis of modern democracy. He did this while continuing to envisage Marxist principles of dialectical materialism, the welfare state closer to the socialist mode of production, and Leninist organizational mobility. The concept of a vanguard party was, however, deemed extraneous. Bhandari, therefore, had qualities attributable to a philosopher who was able to assess the concrete conditions of Nepali society and propose a new path to change it. In doing this, he shines as a true democrat among the leaders of the Marxist philosophical tradition.

Bhandari reiterated that a communist party needed to prove itself to be better than the capitalist political parties by competing in the elections. A popular government would then implement the program of PMPD in favor of altering the capitalist relations of production. A revolution, according to Bhandari, may accomplish big things, but the achievements are subject to renewal by the mandate of the people from time to time (Bhandari, 1993a; section 3.5)

PMPD, Bhandari urges, should be upheld by the party which applied Leninist organizational principles, which in Nepal's context would be the CPN (UML). Bhandari, therefore, transformed the CPN (UML) into a pyramid structure of committees working tightly in each of over four thousand villages and cities and their thirty thousand wards, leading up to the national leadership. The central committee and national leadership were to be elected by the general convention every five years, while the district, town, and rural conventions were held regularly. This was strictly followed by

the CPN (UML) but was ignored for a few years after its merger with the Maoists in 2017, leading to a sort of organizational disarray. Over the last two years, after separating from the Maoists, the party is gradually addressing the organizational questions, some of them still to be resolved²².

At the organizational level, Bhandari recognized the omnipresence of dialectical relations among the beings of nature, as indeed of the universe. This vision recognized conflict within the communist organization, as reflected in the two-line ideological struggle, as an indispensable part of progress. Bhandari argued for organizational safety valves where ideological struggles between the majority and minority groups of the party would not evolve into acrimony. He allowed minority ideas to be discussed, and under his leadership minority leaders were accommodated with dignity. This was something never seen earlier in Nepal's communist movement. Bhandari not only rationalized the communist movement but also diligently democratized the party from what it once used to be a marginal extremist group. Bhandari was indeed an innovator. Writing an obituary upon his passing, *The Telegraph Daily* (1993) of Calcutta wrote: "He was neither a King nor a Prime Minister. His impact and presence in Nepal will remain beyond all these formal offices²³."

Conclusion

Madan Bhandari's contribution to Nepal's communist movement has remarkable consequences. At a time when people were much concerned with the totalitarian dictatorship worldwide, the CPN (UML) leadership not only democratized the left movement but also promoted political alliance with Nepali Congress in the process of restoration of democracy in 1990. Bhandari's leadership in the party has been acknowledged for the paradigm shift in the political landscape of Nepal, giving the world's left leaders space for alternative strategies for the accomplishment of their political objective. Bhandari refused to understand Marxism as dogma but as a creative political thought which

could be upgraded in the best interest of the country and people of any society.

Bhandari was indeed a powerful orator, equally persuasive writer, and political thinker. For all his efforts to write a new Marxist narrative, he was initially severely attacked by his competitors and comrades for his "deviation" from the ideology of communism. At one point in history, Bhandari was seen as being not radical enough for the communists while he was viewed as someone not liberal enough for the so-called democrats. But he continued his journey. The Maoist party, which launched its armed struggle in Nepal in 1996, accused Bhandari of being a revisionist and traitor to the revolution. By doing so, the Maoist party aimed at owning the sole right over the communist brand. In an ironical twist of events, the same Maoist group, in 2017, came to unite with the CPN (UML), the party Bhandari nurtured and strengthened with the defining ideology of PMPD.

Within the CPN (UML), minority factions have traditionally opposed PMPD as a parliamentary program and accused Bhandari of converting the party organization into a mere election-winning machine. This, of course, is true to a large extent, but we must also consider the fact that even the fiercest of Bhandari's critics within the party have accepted the indispensability of PMPD among Nepali people. Additionally, no one questions the fact that Bhandari's brisk charismatic leadership had a role in making PMPD acceptable, and thereby propelling the party into becoming the major democratic force that it is today.

At the academic level, probably one of the most noteworthy critiques on Bhandari and PMPD comes from Stephen Mikesell (2004), who teaches anthropology at Wisconsin University and is a keen follower of Nepal's left politics. Mikesell, however, looks at Bhandari from a Maoist standpoint and imputes him for distorting Mao's clear diktat on class struggle. Yet Mikesell also accepts Bhandari's tremendous impact and presence in Nepal's democratic political landscape.

Another remarkable critique of Bhandari and PMPD may be ascribed to Chaitanya Mishra (2020), who traced the need for reforms and clarifications in the theory during the sixth and seventh general conventions of the CPN (UML). A sociologist of repute, Mishra's contention that PMPD was incomplete and several reformulations were necessary to interpret the concrete conditions of Nepali society, class relations, and relations of production was later picked up by the party. The aspects of economy and production relations are complex subjects, which continue to change as new dynamics emerge and impact the progress of society. Mishra has, therefore, strongly argued that the society Marx was unable to see or predict had to be interpreted from the Marxist point of view, and doing this needed newer avenues of knowledge. This is where Mishra appears to see the essentiality of Bhandari's thought. Critiquing a theory for an academic is also to tread the path of newer explorations. Further studies and research on Bhandari's PMPD would be interesting to look into the development of the leftist and progressive movement in Nepal, South Asia, and beyond.

Notes

1. Madan Kumar Bhandari, often addressed by his first and last name as Madan Bhandari, is regarded as the People's Leader in Nepal. Among the names he adopted for security reasons during the days of struggle for democracy, Sagar and Shwetshardool are better known..
2. Nepal has a long history of patriarchal family oligarchy. First, the monarchy existed for two and a half centuries until 2008, during which the eldest son of the king would become the next king. Before that, there was the Rana Regime, which lasted for 104 years until 1950, and the position of Prime Minister was also succeeded based on family heredity. This continued even during the competitive democratic era, with three brothers from the same family assuming the office of the Prime Minister of Nepal. One of them, B.P. Koirala, was the first-ever democratically elected Prime Minister. His elder brother, Matrika Prasad, and younger brother, Girija Prasad, also became prime ministers in an interval of forty years. During his struggle days, Bhandari wrote a satirical poem in the Nepali language titled "Daari ho umra umra" (Translated as: Oh Beards, Grow), humorously calling on his beards to grow so that he could also become a leader. The permanent line of the poem, written in Mandaakraantaa Chhanda, a Sanskrit metric discipline, translates to something like "Oh beards, Grow and make me a leader soon!"
3. Bhandari didn't belong to a political family. His humble roots, a life full of struggle, and constant self-education made him stand out. He rose into politics as an outsider and was accepted in the same way. .
4. Bhandari's death on 16th May 1993 in a car accident remains an unsolved mystery. According to the most widely available account, on that rainy evening, the car "veered off" the road at a place called Dasdhunga in Chitwan District and fell 20 feet vertically, then another 20 feet into the deep Trishuli River. The body of his party comrade, Jeev Raj Ashrit, was found in the crushed vehicle, while Bhandari's body was recovered far away after three days. The driver of the vehicle, Amar Lama, survived without injury and maintained throughout his life that the car was involved in an accident. However, Lama was shot dead by a group of unidentified men nine years later in the town of Kirtipur. The gunmen were thought to be the Maoists.
5. The Rana regime lasted for 104 years. Popular uprisings in 1950 and 1951, also

backed by India's intervention, ended the Rana regime and established multi-party democracy on 18th February 1951. As per the New Delhi agreement formalized among the three sides - the last Rana Prime Minister, the King, and the rebel NC - these uprisings would conclude, and an election to the Constituent Assembly would be held immediately to write a new, democratic constitution. However, the promised elections were deferred by the king on several pretexts. In 1957, King Mahendra, with the support of the NC, formed a commission in lieu of the Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution, which was subsequently brought into effect. Democratic parliamentary elections took place under the Constitution in 1958, electing Koirala, the revolutionary leader and ideologue, as Nepal's new prime minister. In December 1960, King Mahendra dissolved the elected Parliament, imprisoned Prime Minister B. P. Koirala, and started direct rule. Following this, most of the leaders of Nepal's democratic movement exiled themselves, mostly to Varanasi in India, among whom were Shrestha, the founder of Nepal Communist Party, and Krishna Prasad Bhattarai and Ganeshman Singh of the NC. The NC, as a political party, was founded by B. P. Koirala in 1947 to fight against the Rana regime.

6. Shrestha founded the Nepal Communist Party in 1949, but he could not maintain unity, especially after the king's coup. He had reorganized the party after the former Secretary General, Keshar Jung Rayamajhi, joined hands with the king.
7. In an interview (in Nepali) titled "Four Talks between B. P. Koirala and Pushpa Lal Shrestha", Keshar Mani Pokharel, a close aide of Shrestha during those years, gives an account of the four talk sessions between Koirala and Shrestha. *Naya Patrika Daily*, 1st June 2019. www.nayapatrikadaily.com/news-details/15736/2019-06-01.

8. In 1969, Nepal decided to send back Indian troops stationed at the 17 military check posts along the border with China. India, troubled by its relations with Nepal, wanted to avoid further irritation with B. P. Koirala, who was perceived by the king of Nepal as a rebel leader.
9. Mukti Morcha (Liberation Front) was a major publication of Shrestha's communist party, of which Bhandari was an editor. In the first three issues of this magazine, he regularly wrote in favor of organizing a mass uprising jointly by the Nepali Congress and the Nepal Communist Party. The fourth one was the rebel issue.
10. In a sharply divided communist spectrum, over a dozen communist parties have always existed in Nepal. Few of their successes have been long-lasting. Those who have reached the circles of power have transformed towards Bhandari's political line, though they would not admit it.
11. Much literature is available on the Naxalite movement that began in West Bengal under the leadership of Charu Majumdar and spread across India. It was a revolt based on class calculations and justified the physical elimination of class enemies.
12. The fourth issue of Mukti Morcha, dated March-April 1978, was named the "Rebel Issue" in which Bhandari theoretically analyzes the Jhapa rebellion and suggests that a communist party must work to organize peasants, workers, and the middle class rather than identifying individual "enemies" for elimination.
13. At that time, there were thirteen different communist factions, with three of them being influential. Over time, Nepal's communist movement has witnessed 70 different groups unite and merge. As of July 2022, there were as many as fifteen communist parties in the country.
14. The CPN (ML) was founded in February 1979 with C. P. Mainali as the Secretary

- General. Madan Bhandari was a Member of the Central Committee and a major ideological opponent of Mainali's extremist stand.
15. Known as the Iron Man of Nepali Politics, Ganesh Man Singh was the Supreme Leader of Jana Andolan in 1990. He and Madan Bhandari led their respective parties and coalitions jointly in the successful movement. Singh rejected the position of Interim Prime Minister after the success of the movement.
 16. Immediately after this electoral victory, Newsweek interviewed Bhandari, which was published under the title "In Nepal, Karl Marx Lives." He then presented a paper at the Calcutta conference of the Communist parties, in which he called for a serious review of the ways Marxism was applied in different countries.
 17. Charu Majumdar, one of the founders and Secretary General of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), initiated the "physical elimination of class enemies" in the 1960s in a place called Naxalbari in the West Bengal state of India, right across the eastern border of Nepal. He authored the Historic Eight Documents, a set of eight monographs that outline the political thinking behind the Naxal movement, also referred to as the Naxalite, Naxali, or Naxalbari uprisings or rebellion.
 18. Because India did not support the pro-democracy movement at this stage, B. P. Koirala's team planned to use the cash from the hijacked plane to fund the movement. On 10th June 1973, Nepal's Central Bank was transporting Indian currency notes from Arariya, India, to Kathmandu via Biratnagar. It was transported to Biratnagar by land and was supposed to be taken to Kathmandu by air. The 19-seater Royal Nepal Airline Twin Otter passenger aircraft took off for Kathmandu from Biratnagar. Within five minutes of take-off, three hijackers on board, all of them the cadres and allies of B.P. Koirala, hijacked the plane. They forced the pilot to land the plane in Farbesganj in Bihar (India) on a grass field and took 3 million Indian Rupees that belonged to the Nepalese government. The hijackers who boarded the plane were Basanta Bhattarai, Durga Subedi, and Nagendra Prasad Dhungel. Girija Prasad Koirala (B. P.'s youngest brother who later served as a five-time prime minister of Nepal) and Chakra Prasad Banstola were involved in transporting the money to Darjeeling and hiding it in the house of B. L. Sharma, an acquaintance of B. P. Koirala.
 19. Nepal's Maoist movement provides an interesting case study of the nature and practice of communist insurgency in South Asia. During the decade-long Maoist armed struggle (1996-2006), more than 17,000 people were killed, and about 2,000 individuals were forcefully disappeared. Through a negotiated peace settlement in 2005 and 2006, the Maoists joined competitive democracy, and approximately 1,400 of their erstwhile guerilla forces were integrated into the Nepal Army as part of the peace process. Investigation into the conflict-era violations of human rights remains the unfinished agenda of the Peace Process.
 20. Article 4 of the Constitution of Nepal 2015 states: "Nepal is an independent, indivisible, sovereign, secular, inclusive, democratic, socialism-oriented, federal democratic republican state."
 21. Binod Mishra, Secretary General of the Communist Party of India during the 1990s, outlined these three contributions of Bhandari in his address at a program of the CPN (UML) on 18th May 1993, organized to mourn Bhandari's death. In his memoir, Mishra recollects his discussions with a fellow comrade from

the Philippines on how Chris Hani of South Africa and Bhandari of Nepal, in their death, proved through the sea of people in mourning, that communism remained a relevant and popular ideology among the downtrodden of the world when championed by skillful and dedicated leadership.

22. The CPN (UML) and the CPN (Maoist Center) united between October 2017 and May 2018 and separated in February 2021. Since then, UML has worked on the organizational front, holding conventions of the committees, renewing party membership, and recruiting new members. However, the questions regarding the renewal of leadership, political agendas of the party, and an economic program to attract people are still to be resolved even after two years since the tenth general convention of the party..
23. In an obituary under the title “Bhandari: Nepal’s Revolutionary,” Telegraph Daily published from Calcutta, India, had written this on 19 May 1993.

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