

Source Force

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‘Source force’ is a Nepali English term widely used throughout Nepal. Most often heard as a simple reduplication, it is sometimes doubled, as in ‘You will need source *and* force’. It refers to the influence of connections, whether through family, wider kin or caste networks, politics, school, or business. Often the Hindi loanword, *pahunch*, literally ‘reach’, is used instead.

In this single term, a whole view of how the socio-political world works is encapsulated. Before 1990 when Nepal’s political system banned parties and, overtly or covertly, everything was run from the Royal Palace, approval for all government appointments came ‘from above’ (*mathi-bata*). The secretary to the King was in an extraordinarily powerful position to act as a gatekeeper and control, or at least persuade people that he controlled, who obtained which post. The wider culture that this engendered was labelled ‘fatalism’ by the anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista in his book, *Fatalism and Development*. According to Bista, Nepalis suffered from a subservient mindset characteristic of the patrimonial system existing under the Ranas who ruled Nepal from 1845 to 1951. This way of interacting with superiors was summed up in the cultural practice of *chākari*, in which paying court to powerful patrons was institutionalized as a daily acting out of inferior and dependent status.

In return the powerful patron would find jobs and preferment for their assiduous clients.¹ With the ‘coming of democracy’ in 1951 and the (second) legalization of political parties in 1990, no one today would boast openly and brazenly that they are the *chakariwal* of a powerful person. But they certainly would let people know that they are acquainted with or related to an influential person to demonstrate their sphere of influence. Even today it is assumed that it is through connections that jobs are obtained, contracts awarded, court cases decided, and prizes awarded.

The concept of *āfno manchhe* (one’s own person) is integral to understanding how source-force operates. Bista argued that Nepalese society has a strong tradition of distinguishing between ‘us and them’ and maintaining these boundaries.² The expected protocol of the *āfno manchhe* dynamic is that one gives loyalty and priority to those who are within one’s own circle over those who are not. The concept allows people to make sense of their own and others’ social landscape because it indicates one’s sphere of influence and obligation. The national holiday of Dasain is a ritualistic enactment of the hierarchical dependence involved in *āfno manchhe* relations. Superiors give a *tika* blessing on the forehead of all those who come and ask for it; and they also give gifts to junior relatives and servants. Inferiors who make an animal sacrifice for their family or household will also invoke their boss or patron when doing so. This ritual happens at the state level with the king, army, and governing officials making sacrifices to the goddess Durga; in every stratum of society people honour their superiors and superiors’ superiors in kind. The Dasain festival is an annual re-enactment of the country’s social and political order by using force (sacrifice) to acknowledge source (*āfno manchhe*).

¹ Dor Bahadur Bista, *Fatalism and Development: Nepal’s Struggle with Modernization* (Delhi: Orient Longman, 1991).

² Ibid., p. 97.

Towards the end of the Panchayat period a medical doctor complained to Saul Weiner about the way in which those from elite backgrounds managed to get all the jobs in the cities, leaving those without connections to spend their lives in poorly remunerated positions in remote districts. He noted there was a three-tier hierarchy of doctors in Nepal: the topmost are more powerful than the Minister of Health himself because they have deep connections with powerful families on whom they exert influence; the second level is on par with the Minister, having relative autonomy and maintain a quid-pro-quo relationship with the Health Ministry; the third, which Weiner notes comprises about 40 percent of doctors, are subservient to the Minister and ‘lack all source force’.³

With the fall of the Panchayat regime and the legalization of political parties, power has been decentralized. It is no longer connections to the Palace, but rather connections to one of the three major political parties—Nepali Congress, the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) usually known by the acronym UML, or (since 2006) the Maoists—that matter. Because of the civil war, 1996–2006, no local elections have been held since 1997 and there have been no elected local bodies since 2002. Consequently, the big parties at the local level have had a free hand to divide up the spoils between themselves, a cosy arrangement that they are disinclined to give up. The decision to appoint bureaucrats to oversee local government administration not only reinforces the need for connections but a need for connections to the centre, Kathmandu, which seriously undermines the intentions of federal decentralization that the peace process is supposed to achieve. The same ‘shares’ system has also operated in many spheres at the national level too (e.g. in deciding who becomes ambassador or who heads a particular research unit within the university). When there is disagreement, the post may lie empty for years: *source force* leads to *Zugzwang*.

³ Saul Weiner, “‘Source Force’ and the Nepal Medical Profession”, in *Social Science and Medicine*, Vol. 29, no. 5 (1989), p. 672.

Today, at the level of ordinary people, as education levels creep higher, competition for jobs becomes even more intense. High-school and college graduates feel they have few choices: they can ‘time pass’ (q.v.) while waiting for poorly paid positions at home to come up, or they can go abroad, either to India, or to the Gulf countries, or further afield. A young Chhetri man from Parsa district, adjoining Champaran, Bihar, said in 2013:

Here you need money-power [i.e. bribes] or manpower [i.e. personal networks] to get a job. Another way to put it is you need source or force. There is no way to get a job on education, merit, or handiwork. So people go abroad for work opportunities. The irony of this is that to make this happen you need to pay money to manpower agencies to get a job abroad.

Another young man, a Magar, from a relatively poor village on the edge of the Kathmandu Valley, managed, thanks to a former employee of his father’s, to get a badly paid job that barely covered his commuting and eating costs. He commented:

Nobody gives jobs to people like us for no reason. These days you have to know someone to get anything. I went to training but there were so many others who were there too. Why would they give it to me without source force?⁴

Sometimes *source force* is theorized by activists in a manner reminiscent of Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*, as one of the key elements of practical politics. The leader of a student front affiliated to one of Nepal’s many communist parties said in 2004:

Politics has four aspects. The first is power (source force): this means to extend one’s influence over others in the most far-reaching way possible. The second is conspiracy. This means that everything is fogged; there is a belief that one loses the extent of their influence if they were to be transparent in their action or engage in discussion; since they are not, this breeds distrust. The third is thought, which really means ideology. And the fourth is credit, which in Nepal comes out of our patriarchal patronage system.

Despite the spread of democratic ideals and the deep commitment to voting in regular elections shown all over South Asia, but especially in India, people still see advancement in life as depending on powerful patrons. What Obeyesekere called ‘the

⁴ S. Karki, ‘Education and Employment: Transitional Experiences in Nepal’ (unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2014), p. 262.

relentless piety of the masses'⁵ in the religious sphere has its corresponding 'relentless deference of the masses' in the political and socio-economic sphere.

⁵ Gananath Obeyesekere, *Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformation in Amerindian, Buddhist, and Greek Rebirth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 148.