

COMPREHENDING INDUSTRIALIZATION: FROM ABSTRACT TO HUMAN

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Those who have followed the past several decades of economic discourses around the world, and especially in the Global South, will note that an economy is increasingly expressed in terms of rationality or profit-motive transaction while ignoring other facets having to do with reciprocity and redistribution. Methodologically speaking, information about economies is increasingly considered and communicated in abstract units of numeric values and forms of mathematical equations, while real-life histories and social trajectories are often set aside as “anecdotes”. Abstractism is a double offender: On the one hand, neoliberal experimenters use it to further the ideology of market supremacy while considering that economy stands on the equilibrium between the two anonymous forces of demand and supply. On the other hand, the Marxist discourse fetishizes class by interpreting it strictly in terms of income or occupation for exercises of central economic planning. The casualties here are the humanizing tenets of economic transactions and activities, of understanding how human beings insert themselves into the economies they are situated in.

In conceptualizing what a “human economy” might mean, Keith Hart, Jean-Louis Laville and David Cattani (2010) have argued for the fulfilment of four criteria: (i) it should be made and remade by people and should be of practical use to us all in our daily lives; (ii) it should address a great variety of particular situations in all their institutional complexity; (iii) it must be based on a more holistic conception of everyone’s needs and interests; (iv) it has to address humanity as a whole and the world society we are in. I discuss the unfolding of various economic and political turbulences in Nepal to examine whether and how such concerns are being resonated in this Third-World country situated between the giants of China and India.

Nepal is a country never directly colonized, but sufficiently colonially influenced to make a case for what Michael Herzfeld (2002) called “crypto-colonialism”. Many scholars have argued that feudalism was replaced in Nepal by colonial capitalism when it was conceded one third of its territory to the British empire following a defeat in 1815. Later, when the British rule ended in South Asia, Nepal did oust the dictatorial Rana

regime that came to rule it through implicit British support. The tragedy for Nepal was that its stint with postcolonial democracy lasted less than a decade and it fell into the hands of the mono-ethnic Hindu Shah kings in the 1960s. What this meant for the Nepali economy was that the new Hindu king hijacked the global discourse on economic modernization and democracy to build a state that was mono-ethnic and mono-religious in nature. King Mahendra justified his coup against democracy to launch a regime called Panchayat, which pursued an anonymized idiom of developmental when in reality it worked to build an elite class from a select few caste and ethnic groups under the patronage of a Hindu state (Shakya, 2013a).

The Hindu monarchy was brought to the constitutional limits in Nepal at the end of the cold war – an era Francis Fukuyama (1995) heralded as “the end of history”, which supposedly signified a global triumph of capitalism over its communist rival. For Nepal, the 1990 regime change meant a direct march toward a market-based economy from a state-protected economy through a cascaded trajectory of bureaucratic and industrial reforms. An ethnographic case study of the readymade garment industry in Nepal showed that “democratization”, for the world of businessmen and workers, largely meant deregulation of firms, including removal of entry and exit barriers into the market, and an opening up of business associations for membership of general public (see Shakya, 2004).

Neoliberalism was somewhat reversed in Nepal when the country hit an industrial crisis at the turn of the century, at a time when a civil war being waged by Nepali Maoists in the countryside calling for an end of monarchy began to seep into the cities. Especially in turbulent industries that witnessed large-scale retrenchment of labour and capital, there emerged new social movements that called for a “humanizing” drive, in terms of addressing humanitarian concerns of wealth and poverty as well as in calling for a methodological departure from both neo-classical and neo-Marxist economics, to acknowledge the role of individual actors and social institutions in the charting of the economic trajectories. I will discuss these two aspects of humanizing in the following paragraphs.

With reference to the first, there emerged a re-politicization of labour on and beyond the industrial shop floors, which called on the government to reverse the flexibilization of labour to humanize work to a certain degree (Shakya,

2016). The new union movement that emerged on the turbulent shop floors in Nepal just after 2000 must be differentiated from the union movement of the past on one specific count: the new did not limit itself to concerns over wage and working conditions alone, but worked towards achieving a broader social justice. Class formation did not happen on the isolated shop floors, but it drew on the broader socialization patterns in the world of workers that wove through overlapping structures of caste, ethnicity, regionality, religion, and gender. The class positions of factory workers took on meanings when posited within the broader domains of social and cultural configurations. Class resistance then gained life not from the narrow concerns of class interests but from broader concerns of social justice. This way of linking shop floors with the national ideological ethos is a phenomenon Karl von Holdt (2002) called “social movement unionization”, referring in his case to South Africa, a term that also seems applicable to Nepal as well as several other countries in the Global South.

As for the second aspect of the humanizing drive, we see somewhat greater acknowledgment of the fact that economic transactions were not exclusively rooted in profit-seeking motives, but that they drew on the broader social networks, institutions, and value systems. To take an example of the readymade garment industry connecting Nepal and the United States through a global supply chain, it is clarified that markets are not constructed strictly from the anonymous forces of demand and supply, but through several complex sets of bilateral and multilateral trade agreements (Shakya, 2011a; Shakya, 2013b). As far as the efforts of the Nepali garment manufacturers are concerned, most exporters seemed to compete for their market share on counts of fashion and creativity often interpreted through culturally and locally nuanced guidelines of contemporary and cosmopolitan craft. In this sense, mainstream economics’ claim about price- and quality-based competitiveness is inadequate, and we have to draw on the notions of consumer aesthetics through individualized interpretations of fashion and design (Shakya, 2011b).

Here, by looking at how modern factory workers, craftsmen, and capitalists have inserted themselves into Nepal’s industrial landscape, I have suggested that economic actors’ methods of social organization help them to build new alliances among themselves, but that these then also shed light on how their shop-floor ac-

tivities are situated within the lives and worlds that certainly extend beyond the limits of profit. Considering these questions may help us find a more human idiom through which to make sense of the process by which economies transform, thereby diluting the abstractness of the discourse on transformative trajectories.

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