

Civic Education: National Context

(A national seminar, jointly organized by NEFAS and FES in Syangja, Tanahu and Chitwan on November 19, 20 and 21, 2015 respectively)

Ritu Raj Subedi

Informing the public about the tenets of civic education and democracy in the midst of national crisis is indeed a tough task. In the wake of merciless unofficial blockade from India and belligerent Madhes agitation, the Nepalese people have been left high and dry. They are roiled by the acute shortage of basic items such as gas, petrol and kerosene. Bad governance, chaos, inflation and impunity have further taken the starch out of them, forcing them to fend for themselves. In such a situation, the time appears to be stingy for the people to lend an ear to the speeches of visiting experts and get engaged in a two-way 'communicative action'. But, this illusionary thinking evaporated as one joined a small team of NEFAS and FES experts that dares to visit every nook and cranny of Nepal, come hell or high water. This scribe shared such a feeling while becoming the part of the visits to the villages in Syangja, Tanahu and Chitwan in the third week of November.

Despite being suffered from the shortage of fuels, the locals from these districts were enthusiastic to learn and share their views on the burning issues. They said that the debates on the civic education and associated subjects were timely and necessary to allay many confusions piled by devious politics and amoral politicians. The seminar entitled 'Civic Education in the National Context,' jointly organised by Nepal Foundation for Advanced Studies (NEFAS), Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), was also instrumental to revive patriotic feelings and conscientize the locals about their duty and responsibility towards the state. They noted that they agreed on the call for promoting national economy to reduce the country's lopsided dependency on India. All had unanimous views on the importance of civic education as the viable instrument to defend nationalism and usher the nation in the era of self-dependence and spread fundamental values of democracy.

The following are the excerpts:

Place: Siddhartha Community Campus, Phedikhola, Syangja

Date: Nov 22, 2015

Guna Nidhi Sharma, former vice-chair of Nepal Planning Commission

Nepal has faced policy paradox in the economic realm as it has been reeling from illegitimate blockade from India. Nepal's economic policies never corresponded with its reality. It ran in line with policies prescribed by the global financial institutions such as

the IMF and the World Bank. With privatization and liberalization, the country became weak and its dependency further grew. The blockade has exposed the fatal flaws of such policies and strategies. The politics was not connected with people but with these global instruments, resulting in the alienation, deprivation and frustration of people. The past government sold off the profit-making public enterprises at throwaway prices. Liberalization policy is much to blame for the current crisis because it discouraged the promotion of domestic industries. Now we are in a miserable situation after the Indian blockade as we never thought of developing self-dependent economy.

The 1950 treaty established the Nepal-India relations as 'special one' with open border and free movement of people from the two nations. But Nepal was/is not in a position to compete with Indian technology, capital and business. It dried up the local industries, business and trade. We gave India an inch and it always tried to take a yard. India and the UK continue to work in collusion to weaken Nepal as reflected in their recent joint statement that features Nepal's political process. It is a brazen violation of Nepal's sovereignty and integrity. The new education policy of 2028 BS had defined education as part of government responsibility and promoted quality education but we linked it with Panchayat system and destroyed general education. Under the instruction of World Bank, the state's role was downsized. De-regulation, de-control and de-nationalization became the new mantra, which eventually hijacked Nepal's economic and political sovereignty.

There is preposterous tendency to search for groups' identity but forget the national identity. This is a dangerous trend and needs to be discouraged.

Nepal belongs to the young people. About 57 per cent population are aged between 15 and 57 while 40 per cent of them are from 15-48 years of age. But, the nation failed to tap this demographic dividend as this population has left the country, which has harmed the agriculture sector, leaving the vast arable land uncultivated and barren.

Ananda Shrestha, NEFAS Executive Director

The NEFAS always seeks constructive inputs from the youth as the nation is in a process of transformation. We have been organising the brainstorming sessions on the burning national issues to solicit the people's views and we publish books encompassing their opinions. We will provide books to the policy makers so that they will address the public concerns while framing programmes and policies. The NEFAS has so far published 40 books in its 25-year long history.

We arrived here in search of alternative means to resolve the national crisis triggered by Madhes agitation and Indian economic embargo. The people gave chance to the old generation leaders to bring tangible changes to the life common people but they could not deliver on their promises. Now it is high time the society gave the youth a fair crack of the whip so that they would prove their mettle.

CD Bhatta, FES Programme officer

FES always promotes freedom, peace, solidarity and social justice. We need freedom but it is not enough. Those, who are strong, demand freedom but the weak calls for equality. Therefore, equality and social justice is a must to create an egalitarian society but the Nepalese society was witnessing the widening gap between the rich and poor. There is urgency to bridge the divide so as to balance between freedom and equality.

Against this background, the civic education is necessary to strengthen democracy and ensure social justice. We have seen many politicians but not the statesmen. Education is the key to life as it is linked with family, society and nation. Education should be utilized for the nation-building. We have to learn from the works and feats of our ancestors.

Globalization has emasculated the family values, society and the notion of solidarity. Nepal has over 5,000-year long history and this cherished historical heritage should be preserved, propagated and imbibed.

Professor Ram Kumar Dahal, political scientist

It has become imperative for the new generation to understand the nation's glorious history to check its continued decline. If the state is strong, we will be able to exercise our sovereignty. At the moment, there is the surge of nationalistic sentiments among the people in the wake Indian blockade and this should be given momentum. There is a tendency to understand democracy as synonymous with anarchy. Democracy, human rights, rule of law, separation of powers, periodic election, political parties and civil society are indispensable elements of modern society.

“Democracy is a responsive rule. It is a rule by the people, who have legitimate right to participate in every decision that affects them.” (From Handouts on Democracy) But, in Nepal it has been abused to meet one’s own vested interests. Our politicians have distorted the definition of democracy by Abraham Lincoln. It has been distorted from ‘by the people, of the people and for the people’ to ‘buy the people, off the people and far the people.’ Democracy is of course an ideal system but its practice is not up to the scratch. The society is increasingly becoming right-oriented and there was need for spreading civic education to make citizens duty-oriented.

Shiva Raj Dahal, NEFAS Programme coordinator

We came here to propagate the civic and ethical values in order to do away with the anomalies besetting the social and economic fields. The youth should join the politics to clean it up and consolidate democratic culture and norms. Our national sovereignty and integrity are at stake. Some groups are searching and demanding their mini ethnic and regional identities at the cost of national identity. We can put a halt on this dangerous trend by imparting civic education to the students, youths and local leaders and intellectuals.

Education policy that must reflect the need of time should be guided by the humanistic values and norms. It should match the country's geopolitics, sociological approach, ground reality and the need of the society. It should be practical, skill-oriented and democratic as education is a means to liberate from darkness. It should promote 'we' instead of 'I'. However, our education policy is highly theoretical and fails to serve the major purpose of life. It is unable to promote critical bent of minds and a sense of discipline and collectiveness. It has created two separate classes as wealthy families send their children to private schools and the poor to the government schools. This trend must end to create an equitable society.

Comments from the floor

A host of participants, including Bhoj Raj Ranabhat and Arjun Subedi put forth their views, which are as follows:

Gas shortage has triggered unprecedented crisis. This has posed a serious question: Should we continue to bow to external pressure or build our own economy? It has become obvious that Madhes agitation has not been operated by the Nepalis themselves. Some Madhesi leaders are openly making treasonous remarks. Can they not be charged with treason and sent to jail? When Nepal is reeling from humanitarian crisis, why is the United Nations silent? Does it make sense for Nepal to be a UN member in this context? It shows that bilateral ties with India are guided by 'the might is right' principle. Our leaders prefer to live a life of luxury. When China has been constantly asking Nepal to provide fuels, why are our leaders not lifting their fingers? Intellectuals have had their role in nation building.

It would have been better if the civic education has been imparted to the people at the time of election. The political leaders need civic education more than any other member of the society. Although the blockade has crippled out normal life, it has also benefitted in other way. Billion of rupees that would go for buying the luxurious items have been saved. This money should be used for development works. The country's hydropower should be developed by giving shares to every citizen. It is a mere chimera to expect development boom through the foreign aids and grants.

It has become very delay to organize this sort of programme in the villages. It is the intellectuals, not the ordinary people, who have committed most of the bad deeds. You have said that RAW agents have penetrated into many state organs from bureaucracy to constitutional bodies. Can you provide us the name of such individuals? We will expose them in the public.

From the chair, school management committee chairman Prem Prakash Gautam said that the programme had inspired the participants to fight for nationalism at a time the nation was clobbered by the blockade. "Our government looks incapable as it is not giving job to the youths. Instead, it has sent outside the country. However, we must not bow to India," said Gautam.

Place: Panchadev Higher Secondary School, Tanahu

Date: November 23, 2015

Ananda Shrestha, NEFAS Executive Director

The nation's condition is terrific. No leader seems to be politically clean. The country has been reeling from the perpetual instability for the last over six decades, impeding the building of essential institutions. Education and health sectors are not in good shape. Doctors do not prefer to stay in villages and remote places. The politicians have destroyed the state's institutions with their divide and share policy.

CD Bhatta, FES Programme Officer

Democracy functions only when there is a balance between freedom and equality but the widening gap between the rich and poor led to the widespread inequalities among the people. The nation is infested with elected autocrats, and because of them democracy is in jeopardy. The same political class continues to cling on to power for decades. We are in knowledge-based society. Those with knowledge are becoming rich. Civic education promotes civic culture necessary to strengthen democracy. Our education sector is riddled with faulty policies. It neither provides job to the new graduates nor is useful for life and world. There requires big commitment to build the nation.

Ram Kumar Dahal, political scientist

Nepal is one of the 17 oldest nations in the world. The name of Nepal is mentioned in Atharva Veda. The state becomes strong if it is materially/economically strong. We need new leaders to build Nepal anew. Right organizations should also educate the people about their duty towards the society. The notion of human rights needs to be interpreted as per the social and cultural contexts. There should be separation of powers between the executive, legislative and judiciary to prevent a concentration and monopolization of power. This ensures for the check and balances of power. The political parties are vehicle of modern society and represent the state institutions, parliaments and governments. But, the parties must be open and internally democratic.

Guna Nidhi Sharma, former vice-chair National Planning Commission

Citizen- Citizen is a member of state. It is matter of glory to be a citizen.

Economy- Economy is a power to receive and command things.

Development- Development is a total transformation of society.

Nepal abundantly possesses in human, cultural and natural resources. It houses 123 ethnicities and 92 languages. Around 40 per cent population are from 15-40 age groups. It is a matter of regret that we do not have leaders, who properly understand Nepal. This is a reason why our morale has gone down. Late king Mahendra launched 'Health for All' and 'Education for All' campaigns. His contribution is immense. What would have happened to Nepal if Prithvi Narayan Shah had not unified it? It is very terrific imagination. Our ethical position plummeted alarmingly with the marketisation process. Before 1990, knowledge was considered to be common heritage but after 1990 it became individual property. There is misplaced priority for individual and group identity over national identity. Foreign technology replaced the local one and the storm of marketisation took the starch out of state, giving rise to countless anomalies in the nation. At the same time, agriculture was neglected. Nepal's dependency on India stood by 28 per cent before the advent of multiparty democracy but it has now soared to 70 per cent.

India knows where Nepal is weak and it goes for jugular, hitting its economic underbelly time and again. The country main sources of income are VAT, customs and foreign aids. Brain powers and technical hands are leaving country. We have to promote compassionate capitalism and make resources productive. We have to enhance agricultural and industrial capacity. Institutional structures, which are problematic, need to be fine-tuned.

Shiva Raj Dahal, NEFAS Programme Coordinator

Civic education is a continuous process of learning about the society and making the members of society rational and moral. Those equipped with civic education are not dependent on others because it promotes a feeling of self-reliance and awakens them to be a good citizen. It generates a sense of rationalism in the citizens so as to make them aware of their rights, duty and responsibility towards society. It enables the people to mobilize the social capital. It musters the public support to frame and implement the policies of good governance. At the moment, we are not able to translate the rosy principles of Loktantra and wisdom of people into action. It is against the grain of democracy to create two different economic classes of citizens. It is imperative to convert the fragmented identities that have been blown out of all proportion in the name of ethnicity, language, region and gender into a unified Nepali national identity. This task is possible only through the promotion of civic education.

From the chair, school management committee chairman Dal Bahadur Pun underlined the need for spreading the ideas and thoughts discussed in the seminar to the society for the benefit of all.

From the floor

Bishnu Prasad Wagle said that those, who pelted security personnel with stones, needed civic education more than any other people. Jyoti Tmilisina noted that the seminar would have positive impacts on the students and teachers. Knowledge and insights expressed

here should be reflected in the national policies and programmes. Shesh Mani Acharya said that today he got answers to many questions that had been nagging him for years. Self-reliance is the only answer to the current blockade. A sense of dependency has been ingrained in the psyche of us and this must be removed, he added. Now we have to grow self-confidence to overcome the national crisis. Keshav Raj Ghimire said that he got insight about the economic growth from the seminar. Moti Prasad Poudel said that the prospective migrant workers should be imparted basic trainings before they flow in to the foreign land. Technical education should be promoted to make the students self-reliant. Hari Wagle said that growing fragmentation of arable land has posed a threat to agricultural production and livelihood.

Place: Dahre Chowk, Kurintar, Chitwan
Date: November 24, 2015

Ananda Shrestha, NEFAS Executive Director

The NEFAS has been conducting seminars on civic education for more than a decade. We hold social and political dialogues with the people from different walks of life to solicit their views on the crucial issues of the nation and the gist of seminars will be submitted to the politicians and policy makers so that the concerns of citizens from the villages and far-flung parts will reflect in the government's policies, programmes and strategies.

Professor Guna Nidhi Sharma

Nepal has been endowed with cultural and ethnic diversity; it is our asset but some are making it our liability, picking holes in it. The politics fails to manage this diversity as it could not evenly distribute wealth and justice to the weak and marginalized people. Until 1980s, we used to export rice, wheat and lentils but now we are importing them because the agriculture has not been in the priority for the government after 1990. Now the arable lands have gone into the hands of mafias, who are plotting and selling them. There is no connection between the people and policy makers. We have to boost participatory democracy to enhance the people's access to the decision-making level. We should also review our foreign policies as many agreements signed with India are not in our national interests.

CD Bhatta, Programme Officer, FES

Power politics has led to the current mess. Power has been largely concentrated in the hands of a handful of politicians. The major parties often promote nepotism when it comes to appointing individuals to major posts. They go for '*hamro manchhe*' (our men), not '*ramro manchhe*' (competent men). Since the Sugauli Treaty, Nepal has been weak. We have not learnt from history. The new statute has granted many rights. If we do not

have economic framework to realize these rights, the statute can be another sources of conflict. Education has power to change and civic education is necessary to build nation.

Ram Kumar Dahal, political scientist

It is a paradox that Nepal Parichay has not been taught in the varsity. When the students do not know about the nations' history, geography and culture, how can they be loyal to the nation? Political stability is the key to all-round economic development. The political parties are losing their integrity and the politicians have converted the politics as a means of earning money. The civil society should act as whistle blower to check the illegal acts of parties and the government. Civic education expands the frontier of democracy and transforms the people into citizens.

Shiva Raj Dahal, NEFAS Programme officer

Nowadays, the youth and educated people say that politics is not a matter of their concerns. They define it as a dirty game and blame it for any wrong thing that happens in the society. There is growing negative attitude among the young people towards politics. This is dangerous trend. The politics is in itself not a bad thing. It should not be merely seen a system of participating in the government on the basis of multiparty competition. It fact, it is a master policy of all policies. It is related to the evolution of organized power and social transformation. It is also about the mobilization of organization, maintaining social good will, fraternity and cooperation. To conduct a peaceful protest for preserving and realizing the fundamental rights is also politics. The strategies aimed at improving economic sector also belong to purview of politics. Therefore, every conscious, educated and competent citizen should engage in national and constructive politics. The student politics is just one facet of national politics. The youth must join politics to purge it of myriad anomalies that have clobbered the society to the hilt.

From the chair, Krishna Prasad Pokhrel said that the seminar enlightened the participants about the civil, social and economic rights. It served as the fitting social dialogue and spread knowledge on the important aspects of democracy and civic education.

From the floor

Ram Nath Tripathi and Dhruva Raj Adhikari recited poems, urging the people to stand united and promote self-dependent economy in the wake of Indian blockade. Kamal Khadka enquired about the scholarships being provided by the FES to the students.