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“The Reinvention of Aristocracy: Political Kinship and Structural Patronage in Federal Nepal”

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Abstract

Nepal's Transition to a federal republic in May 2008 promised to dismantle centuries of centralized monarchical and feudalistic power. Instead, it has witnessed the reconfiguration of elite dominance through networks of artificial political kinship. This article argues that the traditional Nepali concept of “aafno maanche” (one's own people) has been systematized into a pervasive structure of “Political Kinship”. This network operates on the logic of “Structural Patronage” (Samrachanatmak samrakshyan), where a ruling elite (Shree-15) leverages state institutions to benefit their kin (Hamro Maanche), legitimizing exclusion through a discourse of democracy and development. Drawing on long-term ethnography and over 300 interviews, this study reveals how this system generates structural violence, marginalizing those outside the network while instrumentally mimicking the moral obligations of traditional kinship. The findings necessitate a critical rethinking of policy and institutional design to address this latent hegemony, which undermines the very foundation of equitable federalism.

Keywords: Political Kinship, Shree-15, aafno maanche, structural violence, patronage

1) Introduction

Since its pre-history, Nepal's political landscape has been defined by protracted debates, conflicts, and the fortified complexities of dissatisfaction, oppressions, identity crisis, and multifaceted socio-political exploitation (Whelpton, 2005). This historical context has sparked recurring political dynamism and frequent shifts between ideologies and regimes (Jha, 2014). A persistent feature of this history has been the strategic affiliation with diverse political ideologies, whether inadvertently or deliberately, as a means to navigate and maintain peace with contemporary power dynamics (Joanna, 1999). The concept of “aafno

maanche” and its culture of dependency (Bista, 1991) provides a powerful framework for understanding the historical evidence of political kinship, a foundational element of Nepali society. This is exemplified by the pre-2008 monarchy, where Kings were revered as father figures and incarnations of God Vishnu, overtly devoted and dedicated as sacred to their authority (Hofer, 1979).

The decade-long civil conflict (1996-2006) concluded with a promise to dismantle these very feudalistic and aristocratic structures and the elite political kinship networks that perpetuated the suppression of marginalized, minorities, and indigenous communities (Lawoti, 2007). The advent of new political leadership was intended to bring equality and tolerance within the state and social structure. However, in contrast to the movement’s ideal and anticipation, a predictable pattern emerged, to which major political leaders exhibited an unchecked inclination toward power consolidation and individualism. This subsequently reformed circles of new elites, reinforced feudalistic attitudes, and deepened political kinship into a more rigid and pervasive network (Jha, 2014). Since the declaration of federalism (2008) and the promulgation of the new constitution (2015), socio-cultural institutions have become acutely ingrained with a form of legitimate structural violence. This violence is perpetuated through an alliance of political kinship networks, which have strengthened a nascent capitalistic bourgeoisie and established it as a superior mechanism of state control (Tahidi & Murshid, 2020).

This consistent power play from the manipulation of ideology and policy for state control engenders powerful fraternal organizations. These are organized structures of close-knit groups bound by the shared political kinship networks that function to exploit and control natural resources and the economy, systematically encroaching upon the rights and privileges of the citizens (Wedel, 2009). Consequently, spheres like the economy, religion, migration, geopolitics, bureaucracy, and global capitalism have become primary arenas for political discourse. This discourse facilitates state-encouraged violence against the subaltern and marginalized groups, leveraging judicial and neoliberal frameworks to serve the self-interest and maintain the superiority of political leaders and their kin (Bista, 1991; Harvey, 2005).

2) Literature Review

The political landscape of Nepal following the dissolution of the 240-year-old Shah Monarchy in 2008 has been characterized as a profound paradox: the formal institutionalization of the democratic republic occurred alongside the emergence and strengthening of deeply entrenched patronage networks operating on a logic of “Political Kinship” (Khanal, 2017). This review explores this intricate interplay between individual self-interest, power dynamics, and the reconfiguration of social affiliations. While scholars have effectively documented macro-level political transitions (Subedi, 2014), there remains insufficient analysis of micro-sociological phenomena where political affiliations supersede the traditional notion of kinship ties (Khanal, 2017; Limbu, 2022). This micro-level focus is critical to understanding how these networks lead to widespread social disorder and the instrumentalization of the state (Lawoti & Pahari, 2020).

The concept of “aafno maanche” (Bista, 1991) acts as a significant marker of this modern system, providing a scaffold for acquiring power and controlling subaltern groups (Chandra, 2004). This review argues that the pervasive self-interested pursuit of resources through political channels (International Crisis Group, 2020) has reconfigured Nepal’s social fabric. This study will fill the identified gap by analyzing how political kinship operates as a hegemonic force, creating a system of “Structural Patronage” and “Neo-Patrimonial” governance (Erdmann & Engel, 2007) that prioritizes partisan gain over public good. This article argues that contemporary Nepali politics constitutes a system of structural violence (Galtung, 1969), where state institutions and policies are designed to maintain social inequality by distributing power and resources to favor the closest political kin. This process operates as a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1972); the networks of political kin perform their power in a way that legitimizes their worldview as natural and superior, leading the subaltern to internalize their own subordination.

Furthermore, discourse is the central mechanism of this system. Political language shapes thought and behavior, incentivizing individuals to join the mosaic of political kinship for personal benefit (Bourdieu,

1991; Foucault, 1984). Conversely, this same rhetoric serves to mask and legitimize elite power capture, functioning as a direct tool of domination (Luintel, 2001). Different elite paradigms of political, economic, and cultural arenas maintain their own fraternal kinship networks, which frequently compete for control over the federal system's resources and patronage networks (Rankin, 2019). This rivalry is a major source of the political paralysis and factionalism that prevent genuine inclusion and equitable development (Kramer, 2014). Therefore, this article demonstrates that while the political transition altered the form of competition, it failed to change the underlying dynamics of elite control and state capture. Through the duality of structure (Giddens, 1984), individuals are both shaped by the agency of political fraternity and, in turn, act as an agent who shapes the political networks of elites, being both the medium and outcome of this system (Jha, 2014).

3) Theoretical Framework

This study is framed through an interdisciplinary theoretical lens that integrates local Nepali concepts with established social theory to analyze the mechanism of post-conflict power in Nepal. The Analysis is anchored by two core, interrelated local concepts of "Shree-15" and "Structural Patronage" (Samrachanatmak Samrakshyan).

The Concept of "Shree-15" (C.K. Gyawali, Personal Communication, September 2, 2025) refers to the patronage formed by a central, hierarchical system of elites often numbering around fifteen key figures who control state powerhouses and resources. This group operates as a collective "agency in practice", whose common objective is the subjugation of diverse demographics to maintain control. Their modus operandi is "Structural Patronage", a system where elites create structures to manipulate socio-cultural institutions through state-encouraged violence. This system functions by proclaiming 'Haamro Maanche' (Our People), an extension of the traditional "aafno maanche" (Bista, 1991), which creates a bounded moral community of insiders who receive protection and benefits, while excluding and exploiting outsiders.

To understand how this system operates and persists, I employ Practice Theory (Bourdieu, 1977) and the Duality of Structure (Giddens, 1984). This perspective reveals the dual role of individuals and institutions in which elites and citizens alike are shaped by the structure of political kinship, but their everyday practices (e.g., seeking patronage, offering favors) also actively reshape and reinforce that very structure. This recursive relationship is driven by self-interest and the pursuit of economic benefit, systematically disregarding the needs of subalterns (Guha, 1980) - a term we define broadly to encompass all individual or groups, regardless of state-defined identity, who are suppressed by this elite network. The mechanism of this system are further illuminated by specific theories of power and violence. It generates "Structural Violence" (Galtung, 1969) by designing institutions that unevenly distribute resources and opportunities to favor kin. It employs "Symbolic Violence" (Bourdieu, 1991) by making this unequal order appear natural and legitimate, leading the subaltern to internalize their own subordination. The system's resilience is explained by the 'Axiom of Amity' (Fortes, 1969), where the moral obligations of kinship are prevented from creating unconditional loyalty within the political family, framing corruption as altruism.

Finally, the discourse that legitimizes this system is deconstructed using Foucault's (1975, 1976) theories of Power, Knowledge, and Discourse. Political language and rhetoric are not neutral; instead, they are tools used to manufacture knowledge that justifies elite capture, masks exploitation as development, and subjugates subordinates. This study, therefore, employs a neo-structuralist approach (Leach, 1954) to dissect underlying patterns of political oneness that influence how individuals organize society and perceive their world within this network of power.

4) Methodological Paradigm

This study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, utilizing ethnomethodology (Grafinkel, 1967) to understand the everyday practices and meanings that constitute the social reality of political kinship in Nepal. To capture the intricacies of this phenomenon, the research employs a qualitative design centered on multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995), supplemented by case study analysis and archival research. The fieldwork for this study was conducted over an extended period employing a strategy of prolonged participant observation across multiple sites to ensure depth and triangulation. The research sites include Lalitpur, Makwanpur, Dhading, Chitwan, Bhaktapur of Bagmati province; Dhangadi, Darchula,

Dadeldhura of Far-Western province; Biratnagar, Jhapa, Sunsari, Morang, Sankhuwasabha, Bhojpur of Koshi province; Kaski, Tanahun, Lamjung of Gandaki province. Similarly, this study was conducted within diverse organizations of major political parties (CPN-M, Nepali Congress, CPN-UML, National Democratic Party-Lingden, National Independent Party), different government institutions, and social unions.

The primary data was gathered through unstructured and open-ended interviews to explore nuanced experiences and perceptions. Similarly, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires were applied to ensure key themes that were consistently addressed across a larger sample. In addition, photographic transcription and document analysis were enhanced to archive visual and material evidence of political networks and events. A hybrid purposive sampling strategy was used to identify information-rich cases relevant to the research problem. This was operationalized through stratified random sampling and multiple cluster sampling, which supports to ensure representation across different districts and organization types, as well as assisted in selecting specific groups and networks within the larger political and social ecosystem. This approach allows for the recruitment of over 300 individual research collaborators from diverse backgrounds, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the political kinship network.

Simultaneously, data analysis was iterative and ongoing throughout the research process. Interview transcripts, field notes, and archival materials were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify recurring patterns of behavior, discourse, and social structure related to political patronage. The analysis was guided by the theoretical frameworks of structuration (Giddens, 1984) and practice theory (Bourdieu, 1977), focusing on the interplay between agency and structure in sustaining these networks.

I acknowledge my positionality as a researcher embedded in the Nepali context. Continuous reflexivity was practiced to critically assess how my own identity and preconceptions influenced the research process. The ethics of informed consent were maintained from all the research collaborators, who were ensured anonymity and confidentiality to protect them from potential repercussions, as given the sensitive nature of the research topic.

5) Findings and Discussion

This study employed multiple ethnographic and qualitative research methodologies, including triangulation and extensive recursive fieldwork within a focused area and set of institutions. This approach yielded critical insights into the article's central objective. A key finding articulated by a research collaborator illustrates the profound intertwining of political affiliation, personal power, and social mobility:

"I used to be a simple villager, but now I am a central committee member of my party. My business, economic status, and social prestige have all grown immensely. Now I can even create upheaval in the government. I have connections everywhere, including police, administration, courts, and wherever it is needed. It is a straightforward process for me because I am renowned as the closest party member. And if our party is in the ruling government, it's a predictable outcome that all work, budget, and everything is as if it's my own. I am not afraid of anyone now, rather if you need anything or any help, I can always assist. Our organization will back me up. Whatever needs to be done, whether it's a small, big, or even an irregular proceeding, just say the word. Our party people are everywhere, and the network is widespread."

This reflection underscores the necessity to rethink contemporary Nepal's social structure and ethics.

5.1) From Individualism to Aristocracy

Anthropological individualism emphasizes the individual's rights, freedom, and independence over the group, prioritizing self-interest and self-reliance (Hofstede, 1980). This contrasts with collectivism, which values group loyalty and protection. Individuals are fundamentally motivated by a drive to acquire limited resources and social advantages (Bourdieu, 1986). Politics becomes a primary framework for this pursuit, offering a path to power that enables control over resources, influence over others, and the fulfillment of personal desires. Improving one's social status is a powerful motivator, often compelling individuals to challenge existing norms and rules (Lukes, 2005). When traditional structures are perceived as barriers to personal ambitions, individuals may defy them, seeking legitimacy for actions initially considered

“Wrongdoings” through ideological control and manipulated narratives (Bailey, 2001). Furthermore, they build power by creating systems of reciprocal obligation that foster loyalty and dependency, using symbolic and structural force to suppress dissent and enforce authority. Expanding one’s network is a key strategy for consolidating this influence (Mauss, 1990).

Within the nuanced socio-cultural institutions of Nepal, including ethnic groups and indigenous communities, individuals have become highly determined and optimistic towards political kinship, especially following the revolutionary shift to federalism and secularism. This transition, coupled with the rise of neoliberalism, has intensified competition for social, political, and economic capital. Individuals now perform ideological allegiances to achieve higher status within social class hierarchies, driven primarily by self-interest. This practice involves locating oneself within power domains through discourse and kinship ties to political elites. It is a mutually reinforcing process in which motivated individuals shape the social structure, and the reshaped structure, in turn, acts as an agency that propels their actions. This cycle enables individuals to secure excessive benefits across all levels of society, from basic subsistence to economic and religious prestige (Bourdieu, 1990).

Whether acting independently or within groups, individuals strive further influenced by culture, history, and self-admiration to achieve benefits in their various social forms. Consequently, they regroup into new structures based on shared values and interests, typically centered on power and economic activity. This unified group then moves to secure superiority and control, effectively forming a structure of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984). This leads to continuous transformation where reformed groups convert into a new semblance of elites and aristocrats. Their intention is to rule, control, and exert power to enjoy social, economic, and political dominance. They reinvent categories of quality to privilege their members and establish superiority (Bourdieu, 1996; Mosca, 1939). This new structure functions as an institution that delivers patronage and benefits exclusively to its members, systematically excluding the true subaltern and marginalized. It does so by overtaking control of judicial, economic, and state power for extreme manipulation.

A robust example of this aristocracy is the structure of ‘Shree-15’ (as articulated by Dr. Chandrakant Gyawali), which defines a state where aristocratic individuals form a collaborative group acting as a de facto state-head. This group provides every social benefit to its associated members while despising ordinary individuals who lack connections to the structure of “Shree-15”, illustrating a potent form of power hegemony.

5.2) Structure and Alliance in Action



In the given image, the indexicality of alliances of political parties is clearly shown as an instance of a new political group, which depicts the formation of new power for legitimate violence through structuration derived from a purely individualistic nature and self-interest. Splitting from the previous alliance defines the state of individual agency in practice to shape the political kinship network. *“Plot-twister events are synonymous with Nepali politics. In a surprising turn, the 15-month-long partnership between CPN(M) and Nepali Congress collapsed, and a new coalition is tied. Political leaders start ploughing plots to quench their thirst to remain in power at any cost, putting the basic political culture and the essence of the coalition at the helm, which re-evince the notion of structural violence.”*

Fig 1. (The Kathmandu Post, 2024 A.D.)

The idea of survival in politics at the behest of power is deeply ingrained in every political leader in Nepal” (Bhatta, 2024). These two paragraphs by Meena Bhatta, 2024, from The Kathmandu Post, published on March 27, 2024, justify the underlying self-interest nature to gain aristocratic advantage at the cost of subaltern and marginalized subordination, forming a longitudinal control realm for capitalizing economic

and social resources. Out of 300 research collaborators, more than 50% also shared their individual personal interests in following different political ideologies based on the advantages and benefits one can acquire by being associated with these ideologies, and on the question of whether they are ready to change their political attachment to opposing ideologies. They answer overtly about their easy shift to a different political spectrum due to the greater degree of advantages and opportunities, justifying the objective of this study on Structural violence from the alliance of political kinship networks.

5.3) “Aafno Maanche”: Fictive Kinship and the Consolidation of Power

Kinship is traditionally understood as a structured system of relationships binding individuals through complex interlocking ties (Murdock, 1949), based on genealogical connections that confer mutual rights and obligations (Rivers, 1910). These consanguineal and affinal ties are organized through classificatory terminology (Morgan, 1871) and are often structured by alliances between groups where marriage acts as a reciprocal practice to maintain bonds and validate prescriptive and prohibited taboos (Levi-Strauss, 1969). In reference to this, Nepali political geography is shaped by the notion of various relationship ties. For instance, the president of the Nepali Congress is termed as “Brother” and his wife as “Sister-in-Law”, similarly, the head of CPN-M and CPN-UML are referred to as “Father” (Ba). Likewise, there has been a frequent number of marriages held between different political groups and corporate business groups in Nepal to ensure a strong and valid power relationship as an alliances to sustain power hegemony. Correspondingly, political kinship is an enacted, hierarchical structure operating across socio-cultural dimensions. It is also powerful form of fictive kinship, which is knowingly created by both parties for mutual benefit and goal attainment (Messerschmidt, 1976).

Examining Nepali society reveals that the bond between individuals and political groups is now more sturdy and forceful than that of blood and marriage. The ubiquitous partisan structure has overshadowed traditional kinship, creating a new political family in Nepali societal reality. The political capital fabricates a powerful network of artificial kinship (Wedel, 2009). Combined 2024-2025 data estimates over 2.5 million direct members in Nepal’s five major political parties (as per party-reported figures, August, 2025). These numbers represent an artificial kinship, a conception of “aafno maanche” (One’s own people) (Bista, 1991). This network functions as a coercive structure through political fraternal unions, managing kin bonds to mobilize the alliance and apprehend social resources such as economy, markets, employment, prestige, and privileges (Wedel, 2009; Marx & Engels, 1970; Mauss, 1990). These kin groups form corporate elites that contend in class struggles and succession to higher positions. Through political roles, they reshape the structure of politics, sometimes breaching state regulations and engaging in revolt to gain reliable hegemonic control over political, economic, and social capital (Poulantzas, 1973; Mosca, 1939; Gramsci, 1971).

These fictive kinship networks persist in everyday life, deeply subjugating individuals. Their resistance is suppressed by the cohorts of political kin who function as a control mechanism, manipulating and exploiting from their perch atop class hierarchies to ensure an unequal distribution of resources and opportunities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Gaventa, 1982). Voices of the revolts are punished by the panoptical power of elites, only granting the freedom to live, but not to oppose (Foucault, 1995). The pivotal instance of this power play is demonstrated by the consistent succession of leadership and power by the same individuals, shifting fifteen times within seventeen years across major parties and government structures since the Monarchy’s end. In this federal state, inclusion remains a utopian vision, while exclusion is mandated by an orderly system that imposes political affiliation as the primary ruling structure of the state and its laws (Jha, 2014; Katz & Mair, 1995; Lawoti, 2005).

5.4) Structural Political Violence

The structuration of legitimate violence inclines individuals to seek political patronage by performing hegemonic rituals dictated by political rhetoric. Consequently, those at the ordinary level of the class struggle are often subverted and marginalized, their identities disregarded in favor of political affiliation (Bourdieu, 1994; Gramsci, 1971; Giddens, 1984). The system concerns itself only with political loyalty and the economic reciprocity that empowers kinship networks. All others are excluded and subjected to state-

encouraged violence, their voices obscured by a legal structure that demonstrates a fundamental “lack of true subaltern tolerance and accommodation”.

This reality is unmasked in the everyday function of the institution. While studying political kinship within Nepal’s bureaucratic and judicial structures, I repeatedly encountered an elderly female research collaborator outside the district court office in Kaski. Upon inquiry, she explained her plight:

“My home is up by the hill. Two years ago, for no reason, they filed a case against me. A hotel owner seized my land. Now, his lawyers are powerful and influential. They are just leading me in circles. The justice system itself is his! What can I do? I haven’t received a hearing (meso)!”

Her testimony provides a broader envisagement of structural patronage and symbolic violence. This system completely dominates and subjugates the subaltern. Regardless of one’s identity as a minority or majority, individuals are exploited by elites for economic advantage, a process facilitated by the very judicial structures meant to protect them. This case is not unique; instead, it is a single and random example from a vast universe of such suffering. It reveals a socio-cultural structure built upon a pervasive lack of true subaltern tolerance and accommodation.

5.5) Knowledge and Discourse for power



The image (Fig.2, Kantipur post, Batsyayan, 2017) depicting “Vote for Prosperity” has been a crucial political rhetoric to gain power every time by manipulating the knowledge of discourse stressed upon the historical and social contingencies, making both the background and present context of the social situation in favor of the politician to generate and sustain their kins and elites proximated to political institutions. This further initiates the phenomenon where “rich get richer, and the poor get poorer” (Matthew effect, 1968). On this basis, it is the established verisimilitude that the political leaders and associates gain control through the means of the electoral system and structure of the election, or else through the act of violence, through revolution and rebellion. This kind of

performance has always been a scaffold for politicians in Nepal to rise in superiority and regulate the state's disorder (Foucault, 1976 & 1969). To maintain this muddle and gain the advantages over resource control, these political institutions function as a powerful and coercive structure through fraternal unions as their sub-structure, perpetuating the role of agency (Marx & Engels 1970[1846]).

5.6) Artificial Political Kinship Network in Action

The operations of Nepal’s artificial political kinship network is best illustrated through the lived experiences of individuals within the system. The following case studies from fieldwork reveal how this network functions at different levels of the power structure, from the mid-level bureaucrat to the district level elite.

Case Study 1: Defying the state from the Mid-Ranks

During my fieldwork, a government staff member from the ‘Drinking Water Distribution and Management Office’ in Lalitpur, whom I will call “Som Dai”, consented to be a research collaborator. Despite his nominal position within the departmental hierarchy, he wielded significant informal power. When faced with a bureaucratic transfer, Som dai openly refuted the order. He explained,

“These higher officers must think of me as an ordinary staff member; they don’t know about my power. I have spent a lot of time involved in my political party. So, why should I accept the transfer? Being in this locus is very easy for me. I have my link to higher leaders in the government. If these higher leaders can’t do me a favor, why should I continue to dwell inside the party structure?”

His confidence was not misplaced. A few days later, the transfer order was cancelled through the intervention of a powerful political leader, directly challenging administrative law. This phenomenon, where an individual's strong relatedness within the patronage system overrides state protocol, which is a quintessential example of political kinship structure in action. It demonstrates how the network disrupts formal systems and reinforces structural violence, within the individual and political structure mutually shaping each other, as agency and medium (Bourdieu, 1998; Galtung, 1969).

Case study 2: The district-level power broker

In contrast to Som dai, a research collaborator in Tanahun exemplified a political elite who control district-wide resources. This individual is a prominent party head (Jilla Shavapati) achieved his position by meticulously strengthening kinship relationship with central party leaders. He now commands immense local power and explained his strategy,

"Now it's my turn. Every bureaucratic and district administration structure is in my control. I will support and favor only those central leaders who will correspondingly support me. Otherwise, I am even ready to challenge my central leader or shift to another party with more power and control opportunities. Jobs, agriculture, industry, administration, health, and all social capital within this district are under my control, and I have my own sort of trusted network of my cadres."

This explanation serves as a powerful hermeneutics of Nepal's political reality. It reveals a system built on reciprocal obligations, whether loyalty is conditional and power is transactional. The district head is not just shaped by the structure, he actively practices and reshapes it to consolidate to his command, illustrating a perfect loop of mutual constitution between agency and structure.

Case study 3: The ultimate outcome; immunity and impunity

The logical conclusion of this system is the erosion of justice. The network's power was further demonstrated when a renowned political leader from Koshi province was immunized from conviction for a serious criminal offense of "Human Trafficking". His affiliated political family provided a laudable support through a web of structural patronage that extended from the central government down to the local ward level (Bourdieu, 1994). This case proves that the artificial kinship network can ultimately shield its members from the law, formalizing the impunity for the connected and powerful.



Similarly, this image also signifies nuanced political cohesion for economic gain through corruption related to top leaders, though the structural patronage system forbade state laws and policies from punishing the perpetrators. This structure also functions to stabilize and enhance the artificial kinship network of "aafno maanche" (Bista, 1991). These all interplay are practiced for power through discourse and knowledge through inclusion of kins relating to the groups of elites as partisans.

(Fig.3, published in Online Khabar, Nov 2022)

5.7) The 'Aaalo-Paalo' System: Structural Patronage and Political Kinship

A prime example of structural patronage can be observed in Nepal's political landscape since the monarchy's abolishment in May 2008. Despite public rhetoric of mutual accusation, the ruling and opposition parties have persistently engaged in a state of coalition and cooperation. This strategy serves to perplex the public while allowing them to flourish their closest-knit networks of individuals, socio-cultural organizations, and capitalistic agencies, which correspondingly support the political foundations in a system of mutual exploitation.

Since 2006 (2063 B.S.) and the rise of political favoritism, the coveted "Shree-15" positions have consistently been awarded to the favorites of the party leaders within various coalition governments. These appointments, in turn, reciprocate by supporting those same leaders to maintain superior positions within political and governmental hierarchies. The chairperson of the CPN-M, Nepali Congress, CPN-UML, and

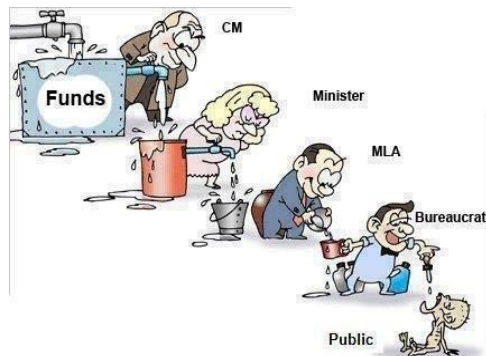
other upper-echelon leaders effectively run the government through the “Aalo-Paalo” system, i.e., a contractual agreement that ignores state norms, citizenship rights, and their own political ideologies. This mirrors Henry Maine’s concept of contract-based kinship, where individuals freely choose their affiliations based on self-interest, deviating from traditional moral ethics (Jha, 2014). This is evidenced by a constant cycle of shifting alliances: CPN-M uniting with CPN-UML to oppose Nepali Congress (May 2018), Nepali Congress later uniting with CPN-M (2016, 2022), to gain control, CPN-UML then forming a coalition government with Nepali Congress, and most recently the coalition of CPN-M and CPN-UML (March 2024). This repetitive coalescence and divergence centers power within a small group of major parties, creating a structure of patronage for their kin. They publicly enact the role of responsible leaders working for societal welfare, yet the schemas they orchestrate have rocked the country with hundreds of offensive scams and scandals. These acts are often manipulated and justified despite being public facts.

To sustain this structure of violence and subjugate the judiciary, a parallel hierarchy functions to provide legitimacy and maintain power. Scandals like the Bhutanese Refugee Scam, Lalita Niwas Land Grab, Gutam Buddha International Airport Scam, and N-Cell Scam represent only a fraction of the exploitation solidified by political elites and their aristocratic kinship networks. This system exploits government, law, and morality, subjugating the subaltern who are denominated as citizens, to a perpetual state of social, cultural, and legal suffering. Their subtle voices are brushed aside and hegemonized by this tyrannical structure (Gramsci, 1971). The legal outcome of large-scale scams depends entirely on whether the perpetrators are under the protection of “Big-3” major political powers, a reality that has drawn scathing criticisms towards Nepal’s political and business environment (East Asia Forum, Feb 2024).

This politics of kinship through relatedness, adoptive, and fictive ascription, now functions like traditional kinship based on blood and marriage. It is deeply rooted in every dimensions of Nepali reality, consciously or unconsciously engaging every individual (Schnieder, 1984; Mauss, 1990). Similarly, the number of professional in business and industry elected under the proportional representation (PR) system has increased significantly, winning tickets from major parties like Nepali Congress, CPN-M, CPN-UML, and others (Republica, Dec 2023). Billionaire Binod Chaudhary is a prominent example. This trend points to the broad and immutable complexities of an “Artificial Political Kinship Structure” highly reframed by the concept of “aafno manche” (One’s own people) (Bista, 1991). This networks now extends to encompass industrialists, business powers, socio-cultural leaders into a single, powerful entity: “Haamro Manche” (Our People).

Throughout my study, I observed and found that the major organizing bodies for “structural patronage” and “Structural Violence” are the structure of “Shree-15” and “aafno manche”, both in the order of hierarchy.

The present context of Nepal is highly determined by “Structural Patronage” and the elaborated concept as “Haamro Manche”, which is inciting the symbolic violence of corruption, exploitation, and encroachment of state resources through the structure of political kinship hierarchies. The form of hegemony and suppression is the leading cause enabling the escape and release of transgressors and lawbreakers.



(Fig.4, Deepak Raj Joshi, March 2019)

As per the article of this image, for over twenty years, these political leaders have been trying to convince us that they were building democracy, despite they are only interested in material values. The modern Nepali government has many names: pseudo-democrats, traitors, elitists, and one of the major names is “Kleptocrats,” which defines the systematized theft leading to the fact that officials and entrepreneurs who refuse to participate in corrupt schemes, in various ways, get removed and dismissed from power and business. Kleptocrats do not just steal, but they teach how to steal from the whole country (Joshi, March 2019).

The above explanation resembles the attitude of “Shree-15” compiled with the hierarchies of a powerful structure governed by the highest elite and control mechanism, recognizing the prime minister of the country as the chief of the hegemony. Similarly, the network of kinship throughout different regions of the

kingdom, as illustrated in Figure 5, helps to identify the web of political affiliation and hierarchies that are shaped and reinstated as an edifice of power and control by domination and subjugation.

Political affiliation of agencies in the five major parties of Nepal (Fig. 5)

Agency Involved	Number of Ordinary Affiliations				Number of High-ranking Affiliations				Number of Non-Affiliations			
	Ba.	Ko.	Ga.	Fw.	Ba.	Ko.	Ga.	Fw.	Ba.	Ko.	Ga.	Fw.
Individuals	115	78	95	58	35	25	31	26	15	4	3	5
Bureaucratic organizations	25	57	63	52	17	12	26	41	7	-	6	3
Socio-Cultural Organizations	60	105	59	87	15	19	13	22	11	-	4	6
Total	200	240	217	197	67	56	70	89	33	4	13	14

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Ga.- Gandaki Province

Fw.- Far-western Province

The Statistical Figure 5 illustrates the deeply embedded kinship structure within various agencies that are always in their obliged role to perform and enact as per the guidelines of the party system in a structural hierarchy. Moreover, the dynamics are consistently shaping the violence against the minorities and excluding their voices, simultaneously emphasizing priorities to their related kinship and political elites (Weber, 1978; Gupta, 2012). As fig. 5 shows non-affiliation is nearly absent in bureaucratic and socio-cultural organizations in Koshi, indicating the total permeation of political kinship in this region.

5.8) Symbolic Violence through Practice and Agency



The structure of political elites is in a continuum of practice, rendering the corruption, breaching of laws to protect their related ones, and accumulating all sorts of economic, political, and social capital within the certified political favouritist. Moreover, enhancing the reduction of (Fig.6, Kamal Dev Bhattarai, March 2023) states' economy, development policies, and foreign trust. This type of exertion is designed in a very organized and legitimate way, maintaining within the standards of law, which justify the statement of "Neetigat Bhurstachaar", a legal corruption (Bourdieu, 1986; Giddens, 1984).

These instances unravel the truth of the existing pattern of Cronysim of "aafno maanche", referring to the practice of favouritism or partiality towards acquaintances or political associates when granting jobs, contracts, privileges, or advantages, regardless of their qualifications. In this context, a structure is formed and shaped, which is "Shree-15", a legitimate structure to perform violence and unfair treatment towards the marginalized and minorities, absentia of fair justice. As a precedent to structural patronage and practice

of structural violence through the manipulation of knowledge and power, from a report published on Nepal Live Today, by Ashim Neupane, on 4th July 2022, States as follows.

“As indicators have painted a bleak picture of the economy, economists and experts have already warned that bad policy and institutionalized cronyism might push Nepal to the brink of economic crisis. But instead of taking measures to correct the course, the government seems to be perpetuating the nexus among politicians, bureaucrats, and businesses for the gain of a few elite coterie. Further illustrated a case for the point, with the alleged financial crime committed by the finance minister, Janardan Sharma” (Neupane, July 2022). He presented an exemplar of destroying the evidence of CCTV footage on May 28, which was published in The Annapurna Post, about the interference of the finance minister in involving an outsider to change tax provision in the budget draft just before the budget was presented in the parliament on May 29.

The structured violence is reflected in destroying the evidence as well, and the symbolic domination is represented by the reluctance of the prime minister to investigate the alleged high-profile involvement. These ongoing practices in politics to protect and preserve the political favouritism through an artificial kinship network, manipulating law and bureaucracy from power, reflect the organized aristocratic hegemony (Gramsci, 1971).

In precise, if we examine these paradigm of political kinship network, we can find a strong medium to make these kinship network last longer and in a powerful way, the medium can be stated as “Gifts”, a materialized form of social bond (Mauss, 1990) according to which the system of give and take is being continued and when these sort of generalized, balanced or negative form of reciprocity stands as pivotal in shaping the political kinship more prominent and valuable. As a recent case, the Bhatbhateni supermarket owner provided land for the CPN-UML party’s head office. This shows the intriguing and bold kinship network and obligations practiced in contemporary Nepali society.

6) Critiques, Contributions, and the Path Forward

This interpretation, while grounded in rigorous, multi-sited ethnographic research, acknowledges its own boundaries. The specific manifestations of Nepal’s artificial political kinship network may vary in intensity and across regions, including those within the vast study areas. A significant methodological challenge was the deeply clandestine nature of this network. Gaining access to open and sincere collaborators was frequently difficult as well, and the embedded, often hidden frequency of political kinship within the social structure was even harder to map. Initial fieldwork was met with suspicion; my presence and motives were overlooked. It was only through the prolonged immersive observation and the slow building of rapport that the hierarchies and effective attire of this entrenched system became visible. This deep engagement was ultimately unlocked by accessing political rallies in Dhangadi and apprenticeship programmes in Biratnagar, providing a window into the network’s inner workings. Simultaneously, two critical, unpredictable case studies revealed the system’s parallel structure.

The first case was about a minor marital dispute in Dhading that was weaponized by a feminist sub-union of the Nepali Congress, resulting in the husband’s imprisonment. A villager noted, *“There was no big issue, just a small husband-wife discussion that could have been easily resolved. It became a party matter, and the problem escalated because the wife was a congress member. Now their problem will never be solved”*. The second case was about the dispute that arose after the death of a major political leader, which triggered a vicious succession battle within his family, splitting along core consanguineal and affinal lines, all fighting to inherit his resources and power.

These instances expose a system where personal and political spheres are catastrophically intertwined. Acknowledging these limitations, this study nonetheless makes an inevitable and critical contribution. It concedes that the vast portions of this patronage ecosystem may remain unexposed, a reality that future research must address.

This research posits a stark conclusion contrary to the purported goals of federalism, in which, the notion of power has not been decentralized rather it has been replicated. The federal restructuring has not dismantled the old system but has reinstated and intensified the “aafno maanche” system, now operating more extensively as “Haamro Maanche”. This network has culminatively recreated the central power

structure at every provincial and local level, generating a smaller, localized version of “Shree-15” that sustains structural violence and hegemony through “Structural Patronage” (Bista, 1991; Lawoti, 2012). The result is a false dichotomy for citizens. The electoral choices are not between competing ideologies but between rival patronage networks. This reality fundamentally contradicts the very foundation of multi-party democracy.

This research does not merely diagnose a problem; at the same time advocates for concrete, systematic measures to dismantle these structures of patronage. It further suggests insulating various institutions, such as bureaucratic, judicial, and electoral institutions, making them truly independent through transparent, merit-based appointments, and a system of fixed tenures for key officials to prevent political penetration. In addition, constitutional bodies like the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA) and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) must be granted greater autonomy and resources. Concurrently, the mix of FPTP and PR must be revisited to drastically reduce the absolute power of party leadership over candidate selection, which is the primary mechanism for enforcing kinship loyalty.

The future research encourages the gendered analysis of the role of women in these entrenched systems of political kinship networks, as well as the diasporic and digital nexus exploring how patronage networks extend beyond national borders through diaspora funding and are reinvented through digital platforms and social media. It further necessitates a global comparative study placing Nepal’s “Structural Patronage” alongside similar systems in other post-conflict, federalizing states to determine if this is a global pattern of post-conflict political settlement. The study is a starting point. The road ahead requires continued excavation to fully expose the architecture of power in Nepal and to forge a genuine path towards democratic integrity.

7) Conclusion

This research unambiguously unveils the architectural structural patronage and the “Shree-15” system, dissecting the micro-sociological maneuvers and macro-sociological consequences of elite domination in federal Nepal. It discerns a brutal truth where individual identity is rendered irrelevant within the cosmos of the embedded artificial political kinship network of “Haamro Maanche”. In this shadow state, a new aristocracy imposes legitimate violence through political kinship, practicing a hegemony that exploits with impunity. This reality demands nothing less than a radical redefinition of state’s structure and a fundamental reform of every minuscule constitutional privilege and duty.

The study elucidates the reconfiguration of social affiliation as a core elite strategy. Here the calculated manipulation of identity politics often supersedes, yet simultaneously exacerbates, underlying class struggles. This deftly diverts public attention and political energy away from demands for economic redistribution and toward battles for cultural recognition (Adhikari, 2014). Since the conflict’s end, the logic of “aafno maanche” (Bista, 1991) has been formally codified into a political cartel system. Major parties now function primarily as vehicles for distributing patronage to loyalists, thereby institutionalizing the exclusion of anyone outside these networks (Khanal & Singh, 2020). Within this cartel, aristocratic elites structured in the “Shree-15” practice a politics of structural anarchism and transgression. They systematically undermine constitutional citizenship rights through inherently exclusionary practices, establishing a blatant hierarchy of access. This results in their direct control over and the systematic marginalization of the subaltern and minority groups (Lawoti, 2005), who are perpetually exiled beyond the pale of power.

The grim reality of this exclusion is captured by Hari, a collaborator from Dadeldhura, “*What to do? These big leaders haven’t done anything specifically for us. But even for your own self-interest, you have to align with one party on another. Otherwise, it’s like being dead in this society.*” This statement reflects the profound internal conflict and forced performance shaped by the overpowering agency of the political structure. It reveals a habitus for survival that is heavily dependent on self-interest, a necessary adaptation to a system that offers no viable path to existence.

As a corollary, it is crucial to recognize the continuum of overt and subtle power. The stature of the “Shree-15” empowers Structural Patronage, which authorizes legitimate structural violence. This manifests in the exploitation and capture of social and state resources, reverberating through society as an unequal

contestation sustained by symbolic struggle. The central focus of this study is the vicious cycle driven by a “Lack of true subaltern tolerance and accommodation”. This void enables the organized structuration of political kinship, which in turn begets a “Cumulative Power Gain Frequency” for a closest-knit elite. This group maintains class hierarchies and reinforces a predatory form of neoliberalism through a “Laissez-Faire” attitude toward graft and governance (Giddens, 1984; Wedel, 2009), all while playing lip service to democratic principles.

Ultimately, Nepal’s Core Challenge is not merely to change it’s government but to transform the deeply ingrained social logic that equates political belonging with the right to rule and economic plunder. The façade of democracy endures, but until the nation courageously confronts the shadow state of political kinship within, the promise of a truly federal, inclusive, and equitable Nepal will remain an elusive dream. The story of post-conflict Nepal, therefore, serves as a critical case study in how the ghosts of traditional hierarchy can haunt the machinery of modern statehood, demanding a reckoning not just with policies, but with power itself.

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