



Theories of Conflict Sources and Dynamics

The uncertainty of human life is very obvious in the present day world as Mahbub ul Haq writes, “Human security is a concept emerging not from the learned writings of scholars but from the daily concerns of people – from the dread of a woman that she may be raped in a lonely street at night, from the anguish of parents over the spread of drugs among their children, from the choked existence of prosperous communities in increasingly polluted cities, from the fear of terrorism suddenly striking any life anywhere without reason” (116).¹

Steven D. Stauss writes, “War has been around as long as man has been alive. Mankind fights for many reasons: survival, hate, anger, greed, need, miscalculations, power, insecurity – and the list is probably as lengthy as the list of human emotions. If Woodrow Wilson said that World War I would be the war to end all wars, George Bush said that the purpose of the War on Terrorism was to wipe out evil” (9).² If you ask a rebellious leader in any country why he/she is fighting a war, perhaps you will get an answer, “To fight for justice.” I tell myself “We are all living in a fool’s paradise.” Just as war is an inevitable part of life’s existence, so is injustice and so is the fight for power, and to believe that we can wipe out injustice or wipe out all evil from the earth is just a myth. We can try to minimize evil and minimize injustice by putting good theories to test but totally eliminating them is next to impossible as long as human beings exist.

As Jayne Docherty says, “We are not sure the existing ways of responding to threat and danger will be effective, but we don’t have any clear alternative responses to draw on. The rules of the game have changed, but we aren’t quite sure what the new rules are.” Sure enough the show will go on no matter what the rules are, where injustice and oppression will come in the form of colonization, neo-colonization, power struggle, or whatsoever. The rules and forms of the game will change but the type and measures of conflict will continue as long as human life exists. So the discussion on the theories of conflict causes and dynamics will also go on as long as human beings exist in the world and there will never be any clear cut solution to resolve the conflicts in the world as it is said, “Every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing.”

Ul Haq’s theory of conflict states that structures perpetrate conflict by overlooking basic needs, as he says, “It is a great tribute to international diplomacy to spend \$ 2 billion in a single year on soldiers to deliver humanitarian assistance in Somalia when such an amount invested much earlier in increased domestic food production might have averted the human tragedy not for one year but for a long time to come” (116).

Multiple factors leading to causes of conflict:

Mahbub ul Haq further goes on to say that transformation results from a paradigm shift from structure centered policies to people centered policies. This poses to be a big challenge in Nepal where government structures have failed because they have not been able to address the basic needs of the poorest of the poor people in the rural areas, because the paradigm shift from structure centered policies to people centered policies is a great challenge faced by the ruling party.

Though the problems seem to lie with the inefficiency of the government mechanism in providing effective means of communication and transportation, we cannot overlook the fact that the tough geographical terrain of the country poses a great challenge to the government to reach the poorest of the poor who live under harsh geographical conditions and the cost for providing even the basic of services to these communities and build the basic infrastructures require a lot of financial resources. Besides the remote areas of the country are sparsely populated and the tough choice the government has to make is whether to reach out to the poor or the ‘the poorest of the

¹ Reflections on Human Development Mahbub ul Haq 1995

² World Conflicts Steven D. Strauss 2002

poor.’ To reach out to the poor rather than the poorest of the poor is more cost effective and less time consuming because they live in areas that are more accessible and the benefits to the population is also greater because there is more population density. Whereas reaching the poorest of the poor is challenging, not at all cost effective and the benefits to the population is also smaller, because the poorest of the poor live in sparsely populated remote areas of the country with harsh terrain.

So the challenge that most development practitioners including the Government face is; “How can the poorest of the poor be reached by development practitioners in a cost effective manner, when the financial resources allocated by the government is so limited?” Therefore, in the case of Nepal the causes of conflict do not only lie in the inefficiency of the government mechanism to address the basic needs, but the tough geographical terrain, with limited means of communication and transportation and the limited financial resources are also multiple factors leading to causes of conflict. As Northrup mentions, “There are multiple factors leading to conflict at any level and any time” (59).³

Though I don’t have much experience in other development countries, I presume this is the situation in most developing countries, whether in the south or the north. “Paradigm shift” cannot take place as swiftly and as smoothly as it appears on the papers. It takes time, a lot of money and profound measures of commitment to serve the poorest of the poor people and to do them justice.

Inability to create a space for “meeting of minds.”

The tough geographical terrain also poses a challenge for the ruling party in Nepal to mobilize the people under one umbrella through efficient means of communication and information flow. Due to this constraint it also makes Earnest G. Bormann’s, “symbolic convergence theory that creates a symbolic climate and culture that allow people to achieve empathetic communion as well as a ‘meeting of the minds’”⁴ become difficult. Hence, conflict between the people becomes inevitable. Thus I agree very much with Mahbub ul Haq when he says, “There must be a search for models of development that enhance life, not marginalize it and encourage the grass roots participation of people in the events and processes that shape their lives” (117).

Market Economy versus Nature’s Economy:

I agree with Vandana Shiva’s suggestions about ecological approach to conservation rather than the capital approach to development. Her explanation of “The stable constellation of the three economies (nature, people and capital) and the unstable constellation of the three economies,” (15)⁵ is very thought provoking. The market economy and the capitalist approach to development have exploited the nature and people to no ends and this is creating extensive conflict in the world. How do we reverse this process and bring about more stable development by focusing our development on Nature’s economy. As she says, “The earth carries us; we do not carry the earth” (15).

Over exploitation of the earth’s resource to fulfill the greed of the capitalist society is also a sure example of a source of conflict causes in the context of Nepal. Big businessmen in Nepal work in collaboration with top level government officials, to buy huge stretches of agricultural land from the farmers at cheap price, to build big five star hotels to provide first class service to tourists. The trend still continues till today and the government mechanisms in Nepal are least aware of the long term consequences of such procedures. As a result the farmers are displaced, the agricultural lands are exploited to fulfill man’s desperate need for entrepreneurship and earn more wealth and the overall productivity from agriculture to serve the people is reduced to a great extent. So the rich get richer and the poor get poorer in the long run. A sure example of development based on market economy and taking the nature economy for granted. Vandana Shiva defined this as, “the need for development in the Third World which again involved taking away resources and rights from local communities” (1). In other words she also says, “Rights for some have been created by denying rights to others. Freedom for the privileged has been created by creating bondage for the others” (5).

As Robert J. Burrowes also writes, “Market forces have geared most of the world’s productive capacity to the demands of Western consumers rather than the needs of the local people. Driven by the desire to maximize their

³ “The Dynamic of Identity in Personal and Social Conflict” in Kriesberg, Louis, Terrell A. Northrup, and Stuart J. Thorson (eds), *Intractable Conflicts and Their Transformation*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press (1989)

⁴ “Symbolic Convergence Theory and Communication in Group Decision Making.” Earnest Bormann 1996.

⁵ *Decolonizing the North*, Vandana Shiva 1992.

profits, for example multinational corporations have taken vast tracts of land in Africa, Asia and Central America and South America in order to produce cash crops (such as coffee) for export”(143).⁶

Lack of efficient committee leaders:

In the context of Nepal another theory of conflict source is the lack of far sighted efficient leaders who are committed towards fulfilling the needs of the people whether they are material, social or symbolic.⁷ The political leaders in Nepal are more concerned about getting more power and taking care of their own needs as well as greed. Unless this scenario changes there cannot be any mechanisms for peace in Nepal.

Ideological Hegemony

Gramsci’s definition of ideological hegemony encompasses “the whole range of values, attitudes, beliefs, cultural norms, legal precepts, etc. that to one degree or another permeated civil society, that solidified the class structure and the multiple forms of domination that pass through it” Carl Boggs (160).⁸ Such hegemonic

Structures, for example the patriarchal system and the caste system are also causes of conflict in Nepal. The patriarchal system in Nepal totally ignores the needs of the women and has been very successful in brainwashing the minds of the women into believing that their primary goal is to serve their ‘master’ i.e. their husband and his family members. A majority of the women believe that their first duty is to please their husband and that is their ‘dharma’ (religion).

So, the patriarchal system is another source of conflict in Nepal. As Burrowes writes, “Wollstonecraft like many feminist authors has identified patriarchy as the principal source of women’s oppression. He argues that, “the grand end” of a woman’s efforts should be the development of her own faculties – not the cultivation of qualities designed to please men” (136). However, this is beyond the understanding of a majority of the women in Nepal. As Northrup writes, “If the low power party, however, has so little power that it is unable to act, such a situation may persist for a great length of time without conflictual behavior erupting between the parties. Low power parties also may be socialized to accept their plight and to see it as “the way things are” so that there is no desire to change the status quo” (61). This was exactly the situation for women in Nepal for a long time.

According to several feminist writers patriarchal society compels women to occupy subordinate positions to men, denies women their dignity and autonomy and their most fundamental human needs, their freedom and control including the control over their own bodies. Therefore, there is a need to find new models of development that give equal opportunities to both men as well as women to develop their human capabilities.

How does conflict escalate and de-escalate?

There are many factors that lead to the escalation and de-escalation of conflict. The ruling party’s inability to meet the human needs of the poorest of the poor communities in Nepal leads to escalation of conflict. The development projects that are implemented throughout the country with all good intentions also fail to reach the poorest of the poor because of the challenges the tough geographical terrain poses. When it is a time to make a choice and show commitment towards the poorest of the poor the government and the development organizations make the wrong choice and are only able to reach the poor because they are easily accessible and it is cost effective in the sense that a larger population can be reached. So, the poorest of the poor feel that their human needs and needs for identity are threatened and conflict further escalates and de-escalates. Terrell A. Northrup writes, “Identity plays a major role in the conduct of any conflictual relationship, particularly in intractable conflicts, since threats to identity may cause or escalate conflict” (55).

The vicious cycle of poverty continues because the government is unable to prioritize its efforts to reach the poorest of the poor segments of the society. In order to promote market economy by emphasizing on tourism and building big five star hotels, the poor farmers are further displaced leading to poverty. As Vandana Shiva writes, “growth is viewed only as growth of capital. What goes unperceived is the destruction that this growth creates in nature and the people’s economy” (6). This further leads to extreme poverty which brings dissatisfaction to the farmers in the long run, which further leads to escalation of conflict.

⁶ The Strategy of a Nonviolence Defense, A Gandhian Approach, Robert J. Burrowes 1996.

⁷ Jayne Seminare Docherty Mapping Theories of Conflict and Conflict Transformation 2002.

⁸“ The Theory of Ideological Hegemony” in The Two Revolutions: Antonio Gramsci and the Dilemmas of Western Marxism. Boston: South End Press. (Social Structures plus Ideological Hegemony), Carl Boggs 1984.

In the same manner structures like the patriarchal system has been successful in brainwashing the women that their rights to freedom and liberty lies in the will of their husbands and majority of the women succumb to this belief without questioning it. Due to this belief of the women, their right to education and career is also controlled by their husbands, which in the long run leads to the dissatisfaction among women and then to conflict escalation.

What does this imply to a practitioner of Conflict Transformation?

The major role for the practitioners of conflict transformation is therefore to be able to analyze the “real situation” and be able to point out the theories of conflict sources and dynamics. The analysis should be done with the stakeholders involved and a strategy should be developed to find out how the present situation could be improved to bring about social change.

For example if one of the sources of conflict is the inability of the government and the development organizations to reach the poorest of the poor, then the practitioner of conflict transformation should take up the challenge to advocate to the government and major development organizations to adopt effective development mechanisms where the poorest of the poor are not left out and that their human needs, material, social and symbolic are met and that their need for identity is intact..

If another source of conflict is the patriarchal system then the practitioner of conflict transformation should be able to analyze the harm being done by the patriarchal system and implement programs where people become aware of the discrimination being imposed by the patriarchal system and work together to get rid of these kinds of structures. In other words the role of the practitioner of conflict transformation should be to advocate for justice for the subordinate groups at all times, whether they are the poorest of the poor, the women, children or the ethnic minorities.

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