

Appeasing the “Big man”: A note on the bureaucratic ritualization of (digital) public service delivery in Nepal

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Abstract: Hierarchies are more important in some societies than in others. In countries which value the existence of hierarchies, the pattern of how responsibility is felt by public servants towards citizens as the service recipient is culturally relative. From the other end, there can be a deep-rootedness in the tradition to appease the person with authority. This paper discusses the case of Nepal where historically and contemporarily, the tendency exists for appreciation of hierarchy and maintaining the power dynamics between citizens and public servants. Based on the observations of some offices of public service delivery in Nepal and the processes in place, this paper argues that the bureaucratic ritualization of appeasing the “big man” in the Nepali public sector context is a systemic problem that is deeply rooted in the cultural context of Nepal that has emerged from the feudalistic regiments of the past. The paper first analyzes evidence from historical accounts and fictional literature to establish the image of the historical citizen-government relation in Nepal in the context of public service delivery, and further on, discusses the tendencies of the past with the contemporary context. Our study shows that despite the progress in digitization of several government services the established “bureaucratic rituals” continue to persist. While Nepal has been on a steady process towards digitization of public services, the rituals, however, seem to persist posing a major hurdle in the achievement of one of the primary goals of digitization – the convenience of the public service recipients. At the same time, there are the pre-existing cooperative institutions which, in contrast to dominant formal means of public service delivery, are participatory alternatives to service delivery in some sectors. These institutions are largely embedded in the social fabric of a sizable portion of the local communities. The argument put forward in this paper is that the emphasis on the latter could lead to a transformative governance that would be more citizen-centric and effective.