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THE ISSUE OF NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN NEPAL An Ethnoregional Approach

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Roti bhaneke chillo mitho, kura bhaneke khasro mitho.
(Call a spade a spade)
— A popular Nepali saying.

There is no doubt whatsoever that the problems related to the various ethnic and depressed caste groups in Nepal constitute the singlemost serious issue of the day facing the Nepalese society after the people's movement of 1990. People here have ever since been asking: Will Nepal face ethnic problems as acute as in Sri Lanka or Yugoslavia? Can the process of national integration in Nepal be really equated with the idea of a 'melting pot' as is often done? Is Nepal a 'garden of all castes and ethnic groups' in the real sense? And, should the monopoly of the dominant Hindu hill caste groups end?

Articles have, no doubt, appeared to address these queries.² But most of them have somehow ignored the policy implications of such ethnoregional problems in the context of national integration. This article intends to show that there was no rational ethnic policy in Nepal in the past nor is there any at the present. It also suggests that the ethnic-paradigm should be treated as a central element in everything related to planning, policies, and programming. Alleviation of poverty also demands a serious discussion of the various dimensions of ethnic issues. In that context, this article expects to generate a rational discussion of the implications of ethnoregional problems for the social and national integration of Nepal.

For the purpose of this discussion, **ethnicity** has been defined as a process of reciprocal, common identification (or 'peoplehood') marked by (a) symbols of shared heritage, including language, religion, and customs; (b) an awareness of similar historical experience; and (c) a sense of in-group loyalty or 'we feeling' associated with a shared social position, similar values and interests, and often, but not inevitably, identification with a specific national origin. **Social integration** is a condition of achieving a relatively cohesive and functioning interaction system in a society among different people as a precondition to national integration. Finally,

national integration is a progressive process of identifying commonalities with respect to common goods but maintaining and promoting the distinct ethnic identity of each group through social integration within the framework of the current international political boundaries. To achieve national integration, all the ethnic groups must have shared values in which the cultural aspirations of each group are also reflected. However, in order to protect diversity within a framework of these shared values, at least three measures need to be taken: (a) ending all kinds of negative discrimination and promoting positive discrimination to overcome the historical disparities that may subsist between the various groups; (b) promoting equal opportunities; and (c) making education practically accessible to all.

This article is divided into seven sections: (1) Nepal: a Country of Diversity; (2) A Brief Review of the State's Position on Ethnic Issues; (3) Decentering the Concept of National Integration; (4) Increasing Significance of Ethnic Identity; (5) Hotspots of Ethnic Conflicts; (6) Issues at Stake; and (7) Ethnic Reconciliation.

NEPAL: A COUNTRY OF DIVERSITY

Nepal is a country of diversity in terms of race/caste and ethnicity, language, religion, region/ecology, society, and culture. All these diversities revolve around the center of ethnicity that calls for a multi-paradigm approach in its developmental plans, strategies, policies, and programs.

Racial Diversity

Nepal's racial composition is derived mainly from two major groups, Mongoloid and Caucasian.³ Whereas the Mongoloid people, many of whom are indigenous peoples, are relatively isolated geographically and more close to the Tibetans, the Caucasians are close to the people of the Indo-Gangetic plain, particularly Bihar and Uttar Pradesh of India.⁴ This makes these two groups culturally distinct from each other. The other two groups are Dravidian (*Jhangad/Dhangad* and Proto-Australoid or Pre-Dravidian (*Satar/Santhal*) in origin.

During the last two centuries, the hill Chhetris, particularly Thakuris, ruled the country and other hill Chhetris and Bahuns were the most privileged caste groups in Nepal, which always remained very close to the royalties with access to and control over most of the available resources. As an exception, the Newars, one of the Mongoloid groups shared those resources with hill Bahuns and Chhetris mainly because they have been for a long time the dominant urban-oriented ethnic group in the Kathmandu Valley.

Linguistic Diversity

Ethnic identities and languages go hand in hand in Nepal where over 70 languages are spoken.

The National Language Policy Recommendation Commission (NLPRC) has noted that there are, on the one hand, multi-lingual caste and ethnic groups, and on the other, diverse castes and ethnic groups, which speak single or multiple languages.⁵ The rulers have taken advantage of such complicated linguistic situation to impose and rationalize Nepali as the only official language in Nepal. Nepali language is increasingly being perceived by various ethnic groups, whose mother tongue is not Nepali language, as imposed by the rulers. However, quite a few ethnic groups have now started to rediscover their scripts and teach their languages to their children and adults. The Nepal Sadvabana Party has gone so far as even to demand official recognition of Hindi as the official language in the Tarai region, although it is the vernacular language of not one minority even there.

Nepali language has been imposed by the hill Bahun-Chhetri rulers as the official language of Nepal and the 'democratic' constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal-1990 declares Nepali as the *Rashtra-Bhasha* ('national-language') and other native languages as *Rashtriya-Bhashaharu* 'languages of the nation'. Sanskrit has been made a compulsory course of study for the high school students. Such a policy is viewed by the ethnic groups as a strategy of dominant caste groups to deprive their children of higher education. The *Nepal Janajati Mahasangh*, which is a federation of 22 indigenous and marginalized ethnic groups, has demanded an equal status for all the languages, including Nepali and withdrawal of the government's decision on Sanskrit as well as support for education in their respective mother tongues.

Religious Diversity

People in Nepal follow different religions, namely, Animism, Bon, Lamaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, and there may be many sects even within each of these religious systems. Among them, Christianity is of recent development and Christians have been blamed by the Hindus for large-scale conversion of the Hindus and Buddhists, which the Hindus argue, the Constitution does not allow.⁶ Actually the Constitution of 1990 explicitly declares Nepal as a Hindu kingdom although people remain divided on this point and the issue of secularism has sharpened the debate recently. The Constitution, however, allows everyone to practice the traditional

religion of one's own family. The Trident, the Thunderbolt, the Crescent, and the Cross are all thus seen here in conflict with one another, even if the Trident remains a dominant force due to the constitutional and legal protection given by the state.⁷

Regional Diversity

Ethnogeographically speaking, regional variations exist due to the land's extreme ecological diversity. The country is divided into three main ecological regions, five development regions, and 12 ethnic regional clusters.

The three ecological regions are: (i) the Mountain, (ii) the Hills, and (iii) the Tarai. The nature and cultures of these three regions vary significantly. Politically, the hill peoples have been dominant in the Mountain as well as the Tarai. Therefore, there is a direct conflict between the hill and the Tarai peoples.⁸

The five development regions demarcated during the course of the Panchayat rule are: (i) Eastern Development Region, (ii) Central Development Region, (iii) Western Development Region, (iv) Mid-Western Development Region, and (v) Far-Western Development Region. Among them, the Central Region is the most affluent, the Eastern Region is relatively better off, the Western and the Mid-Western regions are somewhat behind the Central and Eastern Regions, and the Far-Western Region remains the most neglected area where the Chhetris, Magars, and Tharus are heavily concentrated with the third group suffering most.

Until 1768 there were 12 ethnic regional clusters: (i) *Awadhi*, (ii) *Bhojpuri*, (iii) *Jadon*, (iv) *Khambuan*, (v) *Khasan*, (vi) *Kochila*, (vii) *Limbu*, (viii) *Magarat*, (ix) *Maithil*, (x) *Nepal*, (xi) *Tamba Saling*, and (xii) *Tamuan*. King Prithvi Narayan Shah of Gorkha conquered the city states of Kathmandu Valley, and absorbed all the petty states in his process of 'unification.' This led to the emergence of a centralized government under a single sovereign called *Maharajadhiraj* ('the Emperor'). However, the ethnic-based political parties which have emerged recently, for example, the *Nepal Janajati Party* and the *Nepal Jani Party*, have demanded federalism based on those ancient traditional ethnic regional clusters.⁹

Society and Culture

The diversities described above have helped Nepal to develop a plural society and culture. Dahal, who identifies more than 100 distinct ethnic/caste clusters, aggregates them into five broad groups: (a) Hindus with caste origins; (b) Newars; (c) ethnic/tribal groups; (d) Muslims; and (e) others (Sikhs, Bengalis, Marwaris, and Christians).¹⁰

A more logical grouping, however, would be: (1) high caste Hindus of the Hills; (2) high caste Hindus of the Tarai; (3) low caste Hindus of the Hills and the Tarai; (4) indigenous and marginalized ethnic groups; (5) Muslims; (6) Sikhs, Bengalis, and Marwaris; and (7) Nepali citizens of European origin.¹¹ The rites-de-passage and religious practices, norms and values, kinship features, and culture patterns of these groups differ, often significantly. Such differences make Nepal a small world in itself. But while many take it as a matter of strength, the privileged groups consider it a source of weakness and future problems.

Such diversities demand pluralistic approaches for uplifting the standard of people's life here. The official ban on household production of liquor and cow slaughter hurts the sentiments of many people.¹² Similarly, the imposition of Sanskrit language at the high school level by the state and the absence of a policy on vernacular language as a medium of teaching deprives them of equal educational opportunities. What works for one group, moreover, may not work for another. An income generating program of pig raising, for instance, would not succeed amongst the devout Bahuns and Muslims, just as the agents of development programs, who can speak only in Nepali may not succeed in non-Nepali speaking communities. Bhattachan writes:

Nepal's status of underdevelopment has remained the same for several decades as one of the last 12 poorest countries in the world, a fact which itself indicates the failure of the past development paradigms to change the quality of life of the poor Nepalese peoples. One of the crucial reasons for such stagnation is the ignoring of ethno-development in all development plans, programmes, policies, and strategies. Unless the current and future development plans and programmes are geared towards ethno-centered development, stagnation will continue for a long time.¹³

As caste/ethnicity is at the center of Nepalese social structure, the ethnic paradigm should get a central focus in all plans, both in the perspective as well as five year plans.

STATE'S POSITION ON ETHNIC ISSUES

According to the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal - 1990, Nepal is a **Hindu kingdom**. The constitution recognizes Nepal as a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, democratic, independent, indivisible, and sovereign nation.¹⁴ The description of Nepal as a single nation-state is self-contradictory in nature as it at the same also recognizes the plural nature of ethnic groups and cultures. Nepal is also a multi-religious state and religion, like racial origin, language, and nationality, is one of the important attributes of ethnicity.

Though the constitution provides an individual the right to adhere to and practice one's own religion (thus recognizing the existing multiple religions in Nepal even if at the same time it also underlines the dominance of the Hindu caste groups by labeling the country a Hindu kingdom), it prohibits conversion into another religion.¹⁵

The state appears to accept the responsibility of establishing coordination among different ethnic groups with different racial origins, castes, religions, and languages by eliminating all kinds of economic and social inequalities.¹⁶ Though the constitution of Nepal thus does not overlook the fact of economic and social inequalities among the various ethnic groups, the policies and programs of His Majesty's Government of Nepal (HMG-N) do not reflect a sincere effort to deal with these inequalities with appropriate justice as stipulated under the Constitution.

Until 1990 HMG-N did not even collect census data regarding ethnic affiliation and it was only in the 1991 census that ethnic information appeared. However, the caste and ethnic groups identified in the 1991 census report have not been free from the criticism of various ethnic groups for being too biased in favor of the hill Bahun-Chhetris and Hindus. Census data have as a consequence invited attributes such as *nithyanka* ('false data').

During the Panchayat period, no development programs were implemented for raising the quality of life of the underprivileged ethnic and depressed caste groups, barring the half-heartedly implemented *Praja Bikash Karyakram* ('Chepang Development Program'). Even after 1990, the interim government and the Nepali Congress government formed after the general election of 1991 did not care to consider the ethnic reality in formulating government plans, policies, strategies, and programs. It was only in the annual program of the Nepal Communist Party (United Marxist and Leninist) government in 1995, that HMG-N allotted some nominal budget for the upliftment of the underprivileged and native ethnic groups.¹⁷ But these programs could not address the major issue of ethnic exploitation nor could they put the underprivileged ethnic groups on an equal footing with other privileged groups.

The present coalition government of the Nepali Congress Party, the National Democratic party, and the Nepal Sadvabana Party, too, has a program for the development of Chepangs and other ethnic groups, such as Raute, Musahar, Jhangar, Dom, Dusadh, Satar, and Dhimal. There is also a program for the upliftment of the native ethnic groups. The objective of these programs for the 1995/96 fiscal year is limited to the study of the socio-economic conditions of these

ethnic groups and to the establishment later of a foundation for the promotion and development of their culture.¹⁸ Recently, a task force formed by HMG/N has submitted its report about the establishment of a foundation for upliftment of the nationalities.¹⁹

Such programs, as they are, make the native ethnic groups merely a subject to be studied. The state does not seem to show any sincerity in recognizing the continuing unequal distribution of rewards and privileges; nor does it demonstrate any serious change in ethnic policy which would show a certain modicum of progress. The Prime Minister recently touched upon the idea of establishing a foundation in the near future in the course of his address in a national convention of the Gurungs. But mere setting up of a foundation or even creation of a ministry of ethnic groups would hardly help to materialize social justice in Nepal. In the place of such ceremonial harangues, the ethnic-paradigm should be internalized at all levels of public policies and by all public actors, including the political leaders, bureaucrats, and social workers.

DECENTERING 'NATIONAL INTEGRATION'

In Nepal the concept of national integration had a single meaning until 1990. Till then, the hill Hindu rulers interpreted the concept in terms of Hinduization, Sanskritization, and Nepalization. Their source of such inspiration was King Prithvi Narayan Shah's saying: *Nepal char jat chhattis varnako phulbari ho* ("Nepal is a garden of four castes and thirty-six varnas").²⁰ The 'assimilation theory' of national integration, practiced elsewhere, was advocated in Nepal by both the Western and Nepalese scholars and the development practitioners, too, had been influential in reinforcing such a monolithic notion of national integration. But now the decentering of such a monolithic notion of national integration has, somehow, begun. In the changing context, the traditional notion "should be interpreted as the king's idea of internal autonomy to bind the different ethnic groups into a single territorial nation-state, or into a multi-ethnic nation-state."²¹ Another scholar notes: "... the old model of integration is no longer acceptable to the different ethnic groups. Ethnic nationalism is taking deeper and deeper roots."²²

Poudyal is of the opinion that "... the process of national integration is to bring together the culturally disparate parts into a closer approximation of one nation. In the process of national integration, however, the ethnic groups should be given a chance to maintain their 'minimum value-consensus' in society."²³ Poudyal's conception of national integration is problematic for ethnic groups

because these groups, if his prescription is to be followed, will get a chance to maintain 'minimum value-consensus' and the rest might still be imposed by the ruling Hill Hindu Bahuns and Chhetris.

In a marked contrast, Gurung argues: "National integration is a political idea and an ideal. It implies a national state where citizens have full right without any form of segregation."²⁴ But if the concept of national integration is a political concept, then it should not be the monopoly of the ruling Hill Hindu Bahuns and Chhetris to define it according to their convenience to protect their vested interests, that is, the interest to control political, economic, cultural, and other resources of Nepal. Recently, however, alternative thinking about the concept of national integration is emerging.

Fisher, in his interpretation of *Mahakabi* Laxmi Prasad Devkota's poems, says: "If national unity depends on the acceptance of a framework in which multiple cultures or flowers are allowed to compete without one dominating the whole system or garden, then it may require the resurrection and embracing of indigenous 'sprouts'."²⁵

Leaders of all political parties are divided within their parties on ethnic issues. Some strongly favor, others strongly oppose the ethnic paradigm. Unlike the dominant political parties, however, Nepal Sadvabana Party has taken up the goal of safeguarding the ethnoregional concerns of *Madhesiyas* as a prime issue.

INCREASING SIGNIFICANCE OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

Many Nepalese wonder why there is an increasing significance of ethnic identity in an open society and why ethnicity did not matter much before 1990. The best answer to these curiosities was given by Cohen who said: "Ethnicity has no existence apart from inter-ethnic relations."²⁶

Historically, before the so-called 'unification' of Nepal or the 'Gurkha expansionism' there were many independent small states, including 22 and 24 principalities which lived in isolation. Most of the diverse cultural, linguistic, religious groups, and their social institutions and identities evolved during those times. In *Lig Lig* in Gorkha, during those old bygone days, the person who won the race was selected as the king. Later, the high caste Hindu rulers imposed 'Gorkhanization,' Hinduization, Sanskritization, and Nepalization by imposing first coercive legal and then, more recently, constitutional measures.²⁷ The rulers, following the East India Company's strategy of 'Divide and Rule,' divided the indigenous ethnic groups into several factions. For example, Gurungs were divided into four castes and sixteen sub-castes, and the *Dus* (Ten) Limbus were divided into hundreds of *Subbas*.²⁸ It, therefore, appears that the rulers themselves

were against social integration in Nepal. Until the fifties of this century, most Nepalese peoples also lived in isolation due to a lack of modern transportation and communication facilities and because of the state policies.

But during the last five decades, Nepalese people have increasingly been coming in close contact as a result of the revolution in transport and communication facilities in the country. With the re-introduction of the multi-party political system in 1990, various ethnic and caste groups are 're-discovering' and asserting their ethnic and caste identity. One reason was the gradual increase in the number of educated people among the various ethnic and underprivileged caste groups, especially after the 1950 revolution. Three other factors, namely, (a) extreme inequality in the distribution of resources, (b) homo-social reproduction of the 'power elite,' and (c) state-protected dominant-subordinate ethnic group relations over these resources, have prompted various ethnic and underprivileged caste groups not only to rediscover and reconstruct their ethnic identity but also to assert it very strongly. In response to such challenges, the hill Bahuns, Chhetris, and Thakuris have begun to undergo a certain self-transformation through ethnicization. According to Sharma:

An interesting current trend is that the Hindu caste groups are also beginning to get 'communalised', that is, gaining an ethnic identity all their own. Earlier, the Bahuns – the Brahmins of the Nepali hills – had formed part of the ruling class. Hence they had little reason to develop a communal psychology as did the under-privileged, discriminated groups The Thakuri and Chhetri castes of the hills, too, are beginning to show a tendency to look upon themselves as distinct cultural groups with separate roots and origin. The untouchable castes of the pre-1963 *Muluki Ain*, actually, have even more justification – as an exploited and still-exploited class – to forge a new identity of their own. The trend, thus, is that even the so-called culturally homogenous groups are beginning to seek to build their new political and economic security under the spell of 'ethnicisation.' The process of cultural atomisation seems to have begun.²⁹

About such trends, as pointed out by Sharma, Bhattachan has this to say:

Sharma has noted a recent process of communalization of the Hindu caste groups, especially as seen in the birth of 'Bahun ethnicity' and 'Chhetri ethnicity'. Thus it indicates that the Bahun-Chhetri's monopoly over power has already begun to erode to a point of threat that needs to be defended by them implying that sharing or losing power is unacceptable. *One wonders how Bahuns-Chhetris would have responded if they were suppressed and oppressed like low caste and non-caste ethnic groups for two centuries? How might have they reacted if the next two centuries they have to live like low caste and non-caste ethnic groups of the last two centuries?*³⁰ (emphasis added).

HOTSPOTS OF ETHNIC CONFLICTS

Viewed in a larger perspective, many social scientists, political leaders, and ethnic activists have lately begun to realize that Nepal harbors potentials for ethnic violence and communal riots, and there may be many such hotspots. Those hotspots, however, differ sharply in the perspectives entertained by the various actor groups in the national scene – dominant caste/regional groups, depressed castes, ethnic, and regional groups.

In Nepal there are several hotspots of ethnic violence at the international level:

- The Indian news media often claim that some of the towns in Nepal Tarai, particularly Rautahat, Kalaiya, and Nepalgunj, are hotspots of Hindu-Muslim conflicts and also that Pakistan uses these areas as centers of underground subversive activities against India. On the other hand, Nepalese press often reports that the RAW (Research and Analysis Wing), *Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, and *Siva Sena*, all of India, are fanning communal tension in various parts of Nepal. Nepalese people living and working in various parts of India and Indian people living and working in various parts of Nepal also provide grounds for sensitive ethnic issues in the two countries.
- Mustang area has been very much in the news recently through the national and international press. The Nepalese press recently reported on the seizure by Nepal army of a sizable amount of arms from the walled township of Mustang. The photo exhibition of the walled city in Lalitpur at the end of 1995 was actually related to the Free Tibet Movement in Nepal.
- Nepal has given shelter to about 100,000 Bhutanese refugees in Eastern Nepal. The process of repatriation has been very slow. Meanwhile, some conflicts between the Bhutanese refugees and the local community have also been reported.
- A large number of people of Nepali origin live in Sikkim, Assam, and Darjeeling of India and in Bhutan. Subhas Ghising of Darjeeling has been well known for his *Greater Nepal* slogan.³¹ Early this year, his scheduled visit to Kathmandu for a public address was thwarted when His Majesty's Government expressed its inability to provide adequate security for him.

Besides these factors, some endogenous factors have also been identified as potential threats to national integration by prominent social scientists:

- In Eastern Nepal, in what is known as *Kirant Pradesh*, Lionel Caplan has researched on Hindu-Tribal (hill Bahuns versus indigenous Limbus) conflicts, said to have occurred due to a take-over of the Limbu *Kipat* land (communal land) by the Bahuns.³² Although during the last three decades no serious violence has been reported, tension is mounting up due to the ongoing displacement of the indigenous people by the Hill Bahuns. Bir Nembang's *Limbu Mukti Morcha* and Gopal Khambu's book *Khambuan ko Awaj (The Voice of Khambu People)* are its reflections.
- It was Beenhakker who first disaggregated data about the various key positions in politics, bureaucracy, police, and military on an ethnic basis and noticed persisting severe inequality between the hill Bahuns and Chhetris and others.³³ The book by Gaige (1975) focuses on the discrimination against the *Madhesiyas* (the people of Tarai) by the *Pahadiyas* (the hill people), cited later by Blaikie, Cameron, and Seddon.³⁴ Finally, political groups like the *Sadvahana Parishad* (later party) and social groups like the *Nepal Janajati Mahasangh* picked up their ideas and brought it up at the national political stage. The ethnic conflicts thus exist at two levels: One, Bahun-Chhetris, whose total combined population, according to the census of 1991, is 29 percent of the total population of Nepal, but control about 70 to 90 percent of the total key political, bureaucratic, military, and police positions.³⁵ The remaining 71 percent of the total population have been deprived of these positions for the last two centuries. Therefore, majority of the ethnic and low caste groups are in direct conflict with hill Bahun-Chhetris. Two, the population of Tarai is a little more than those of the hills and mountains put together, but all those positions are controlled by *Pahadiyas* (hill people). *Madhesiyas* (the people of Tarai) have been deprived of their share in those positions. Therefore, the people of the Hills and Tarai people are in direct conflict with each other.

- Traditionally, the high caste Hindu Bahuns, Chhetris, and Thakuris in the hills and the Brahmans, Kshyatriyas, and Vaishyas in the Tarai have been exploiting the untouchables (low caste groups). Therefore, the *Dalits* (depressed caste groups) are in direct conflict with the high caste Hindus.
- In terms of faith, Hindus are in direct conflict with Muslims.
- Hill residents of the Far Western Region in Nepal had almost empathized with their neighbors in India during the Uttarakhand Movement last year, possibly because they bear an intense feeling of deprivation themselves versus the south and the center.³⁶ Such a situation itself might prove an explosive issue in the future.

These ethnic hotspots can be managed and mediated only by ethnic approaches in policies, plans, and programs at various levels.

ISSUES AT STAKE

There are many issues at stake that need immediate attention from the policy makers. They are:

Right to Self-Determination: There is a demand for the right to self-determination by the indigenous peoples of Nepal, influenced by either the leftist views or by the ILO and the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations. Others, argue that since nations do not exist in Nepal, the right to self-determination is not applicable here.³⁷ Still others insist that the voters use such right when they cast their ballots on the election day. Those who stand for right to self-determination, moreover, propose that the state should give this right to all ethnic groups, but quite a few also advocate cession if the state continues to suppress their legitimate demands.

Federalism or Local Autonomy: Ethnic and region-based political parties, such as Nepal Janajati Party, Nepal Sadvabana Party, Nepal Rastriya Jana Mukti Morcha, and non-political organizations, such as Nepal Janajati Mahasangh and its 22 affiliated ethnic organizations demand federalism or local autonomy, but their demands differ at three levels.³⁸ Nepal Janajati Party demands federalism based on the traditional 12 ethnic regional clusters but its opponents see it as irrelevant today due to the emergence of mixed communities in all those clusters. Nepal Sadvabana Party calls for federalism based on the dichotomy of the Hills and the Tarai. Nepal Rastriya Jana Mukti Morcha advocates federalism based on administrative

considerations, not on ethnic or ecological regional grounds. But all the ruling political parties of the past and present, except Nepal Sadvabana Party, have rejected such demands and go, instead, for 'decentralization,' which, in practice, has only meant more and more 'centralization.'

Human Rights and Rights of Indigenous People: Public feelings ran high last year when a minister of a left government announced that each ethnic group should be able to practice the human rights guaranteed by the Constitution.³⁹ The Hindu fundamentalists took it as a license for 'cow slaughter' and there was a nationwide uproar, even a call, for the first time in the history of Nepal, for a '*Nepal Bandh*' (Nation-wide Close Down) by the Hindu fundamentalists. Nepal Janajati Mahasangh and its affiliated ethnic organizations declared their intention to counteract it. The bandh, which was called off at the last moment, could have brought a violent clash, because a number of *Janajatis* made public their decision to slaughter cows if the state was to take sides with the Hindus. The Constitution does forbid the slaughter of cows, as a national animal, but it also recognizes the religious rights of its citizens. For many ethnic groups eating beef is not a taboo; it is rather an established practice. The principle is thus in sharp contrast with practice.

Demands for the rights of indigenous peoples are increasing under the patronage of the United Nations which declared the International Decade for the World's Indigenous Peoples in 1994. In Nepal, about 20 affiliated ethnic organizations of Nepal Janajati Mahasangh have claimed themselves to be the indigenous peoples of Nepal. But the government and many Bahun-Chhetri leaders either deny the existence of such peoples or claim themselves to be as indigenous as others. Recently, the HMG-N delegates to an UN conference in Geneva to discuss the draft of the rights of the indigenous peoples claimed that the UN's concept of indigenous peoples is inapplicable to Nepal.⁴⁰ Such policy vacillations could easily aggravate the situation further.

Citizenship Certificate: Citizenship is another vexing issue as there are scores of people who have not yet received their citizenship certificates without which they can not enjoy legally provided rights and privileges, including the purchase and sale of land.⁴¹ The situation has been more confusing due to the open border between Nepal and India which leads to free movement of people from both sides. The leaders of Nepal

Sadvabana Party have called for facilitation of the process of citizenship certification. But government efforts have been less than serious. The real crux of the issue is a cut-off date for citizenship certificates. Further delay on the issue could set off widespread communal violence.

Sanskrit Education and News Broadcast: His Majesty's Government of Nepal has introduced compulsory Sanskrit language curriculum at the high school level, and has also started news broadcast in Sanskrit language, along with a few other 'national languages': Newari, Tamang, Magar, Rai, Hindi, and Gurung. Nepal Janajati Mahasangh and some factions within the political parties, including the Nepali Congress Party, Nepal Communist Party (United Marxist and Leninist), United People's Front, and Nepal Sadvabana Party, have, however, strongly protested against such government decisions. The reasons forwarded are: (a) Sanskrit is a 'dead language,' that is, it is not in day to day use by the people, and it is useless to make it a compulsory course at the high school level, and to broadcast news from the state-owned Radio Nepal; (b) Compulsory Sanskrit education has been devised to reduce the scope of higher education of the non-Bahun-Chhetris because most *Janajati* and non-Brahman *Madhesiya* students are likely to fail in such courses and drop out at the school level; (c) These moves are a part of the process of Hinduization in a heterogenous Nepalese social system which puts the non-Bahun-Chhetri people in disadvantage. Whereas the opponents of Sanskrit argue that there are dozens of 'national languages' that should get priority in the news broadcast because a large number of people speak these languages, they also ask why a dead language should be able to get such a high priority. Rationalization of such state recognition is perceived to be based on emotion rather than rationality.

ETHNIC RECONSCIENTIZATION

Political change in South Asia today is at a crucial historical juncture. This is true elsewhere, too; for example, in the former USSR and Yugoslavia. The emerging ethnic conflicts and the economic reforms proposed by the multi-national organizations have raised widespread concerns because the existing order has tended to sustain the existing socio-economic inequalities, which could thus spawn far reaching negative effects on the process of social and national integration. Although ethnic conflicts and their resolution have now occupied the center of the democratic agenda in a number of South Asian countries,

the failure of the process of social integration has led to separatist movements in Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, and Bhutan.

In all multi-ethnic societies, the lack of reforms has now added another new dimension: the problem is how to reform the state in a situation where political power is shared among different ethnic communities. Legalization of ethnopolities in such a context becomes crucial for ethnodevelopment.⁴² The various facets of Nepalese policy making – political, economic, social, cultural, religious, and ideological – should reflect its diverse composition and the dominant national political parties should take a leading role to ensure sufficient socio-economic, cultural, and political participation of the ethnic groups and to eradicate negative discrimination and reinforce positive discrimination instead.

Improved transportation and communication networks in Nepal have helped the diverse, isolated ethnic groups to come close together than ever before. But in that process they have also started to perceive and feel more clearly and more closely the stark discrepancies and glaring disparities that exist in the arena of social justice among various ethnic groups. These perceptions have become magnified because while the traditional, feudal relationships have survived, despite recent political changes, the modes of perception have changed. Some ethnic groups have retained their dominance in the socio-economic and political power structure, while others continue to suffer exploitation and denial of rights. This necessitates a new set of social relations based on equality and social justice which means a new process of ethnic reconscientization must evolve.

CONCLUSION

Nepal has been a country of extreme diversity in terms of ethnicity, language, religion, ecology, and economy. It will remain so in the future. When Nepalese people living within a defined political boundary begin to see their common destiny in living together retaining all their diversities, then only their transformation into a real nation-state could be said to have begun.

The sentiments of the various ethnic groups may be interpreted as ephemeral political gimmicks but the recorded history of the past 200 years of Chhetri-Bahun domination in the political, social, and cultural life of the Nepalese people is not. So far, such sentiments have been viewed by the dominant group as nothing more except psychological upsurges against deprivation, but if these grievances take the form of political movement, the shape of present-day Nepal may not long remain the same in the future. The aim of social and national integration is not elimination of differences between the

different ethnic groups but to recognize and respect such differences and make conditions conducive for the communities to live together in a more productive way within an established national boundary. For such harmony to attain, widening disparities – political, economic, and social – need to be reduced.

For protecting diversity within a framework of shared values, the government should ensure participation of different groups of people. The state should design plans, policies, and programs to minimize and eliminate all kinds of state-promoted and -protected discrimination and ensure the socio-cultural, economic, political, and human rights of all ethnic groups on equal terms fostering the process of social integration. This alone can ultimately lead to national integration. The people who are in the high seats of power should seriously take up the ethnic approach as a critical measure for solution. For, if status quo continues, the Nepalese people will have to pay dearly at the cost of the nation's peace and prosperity. According to Wallerstein:

There are four principal ways in which ethnicity serves to aid national integration. First, ethnic groups tend to assume some of the functions of the extended family and hence they diminish the importance of kinship roles; two, ethnic groups serve as a mechanism of resocialization; three, ethnic groups help keep the class structure fluid, and so prevent the emergence of castes; fourth, ethnic groups serve as an outlet for political tensions.⁴³

In brief, if Nepal intends to prepare itself for the twenty-first century as a prosperous and peaceful society, all plans, policies, and programs should place the ethnic paradigm at the center of these activities. The time bomb of ethnic violence is already ticking and no one knows when it will detonate. But there is still time to correct the present course and prevent disaster.

NOTES

1. This article is a revised version of a paper presented at a seminar on **Ethnicity and Nation-Building** organized jointly by the Central Department of Sociology and Anthropology and The South Asia Institute of the University of Heidelberg in Kathmandu, Nepal, on December 22-23, 1995. The authors thank Prof. G. S. Nepali (Tribhuvan University) for his thoughtful comments.
2. For an analysis of the issues related to national integration and disintegration after the people's movement of 1990, see Bhattachan (1994); Fisher (1993); Jha (1993); Koirala (1995); Nepali (1995); Poudyal (1992); Shah (1992); and Sharma (1992). For a detailed analysis of such issues during the partyless Panchayat period, see Gaige (1975); Gurung (1989); Manandhar and Amatya (1989); and Sharma (1986). For discussion about ethnicity, see O'Neill (1994); and Pyakuryal (1982).
3. The Tibeto-Burman language speaking ethnic groups are generally called *Thepches*, and the Indo-Aryan language speaking groups are termed *Chuchches*.

4. A Task Force on the Foundation for Upliftment of the Nationalities identified 61 nationalities in Nepal (see HMG-N 1996).
5. See NLPRC (1993:10-11). For detail about language issues, see NJM (1993); and Toha (1992).
6. See Shah (1993) for details about Christianity in Nepal.
7. See Sharma (1994) for issues related to Islam religion in Nepal.
8. See Dahal (1992); Gaige (1975); and Jha (1993) for details on such conflict.
9. The *Nepal Janajati Party* was not recognized by the National Election Commission of His Majesty's Government on communal ground.
10. See Dahal (1994).
11. Indigenous peoples include the Newars.
12. If cow slaughter hurts the sentiments of the Hindus, then a practical alternative would be to replace cow as a sacred national animal by another animal which would not hurt the sentiments of all religious groups in Nepal.
13. See Bhattachan (1994:143).
14. See HMG-N (1990:9). For details about the ethnic issues raised during the making of the constitution, see Bhattachan (1993a).
15. See HMG-N (1990:9).
16. See HMG-N (1990:11).
17. See NPC/HMG-N (1995 a; and 1995b).
18. See NPC/HMG-N (1995c).
19. Krishna B. Bhattachan, one of the authors of this article, served as a member of this task force.
20. Different scholars translate this saying in different ways, due possibly to an error (or a mistake?) in the choice of terms, particularly *Jat* and *Varna*. According to the Hindu Varna model developed in *Manusmriti*, there are four Varnas, viz., Brahman, Kshyatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra, and there are many castes within each of these four categories. Prithvi Narayan Shah, instead, chose to specify the situation in terms of four castes and thirty-six Varnas. The Tibeto-Burman language speaking ethnic groups do not perceive them as falling under any of these Varnas and caste groups because these are applicable to Hindus only. Some Nepalese historians say informally that the *Dibya Upadesh* was, in fact, not written by the king but by some officials of the Gurkha palace.
21. See Bhattachan (1994:138).
22. See Nepali (1995).
23. See Poudyal (1992:134).
24. See Gurung (1989:133).
25. See Fisher (1993:14).
26. See Cohen (1978:389).
27. For a discussion on the concept of Gorkhanization, see Manandhar and Amatya (1989).
28. *Subba* is a title given by the rulers to the local administrative authorities. Such titles were given to many other ethnic groups, including the Thakalis and the Gurungs in the western part of Nepal.
29. See Sharma (1992:8). Also, for Khas ethnicity, see Bista (1995).
30. See Bhattachan (1994:135).
31. See Dixit (1993); and Rose (1994).
32. See Caplan (1970).
33. See Beenhakker (1973).
34. See Blaikie, Cameron, and Seddon (1980).
35. For detailed data, see Beenhakker (1973); Dahal (1993); Gaige (1975); J.B.R. (1973); and Jha (1993).
36. For details on the movement, see Aryal (1994).
37. See Bhattachan (1995); Magar (n.d.); and Thapa (1994) for detailed analysis of right to self-determination.
38. *Ibid.*, for analysis in detail of federalism and local autonomy.
39. See Bhattachan (1993b); Dahal (1993); NAC/IDWIP-N (1994); and TNCIY/WIP-N (1993).

40. Personal communication with the officials of the Nepal Janajati Mahasangh.
 41. See Gaige (1975); and Jha (1993).
 42. See Bhattachan (1995).
 43. See Wallerstein (1971: 673).

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BHEJA AS A STRATEGIC CULTURAL CONVENTION
Community Resource Management
in the Barha Magarat

Suresh Dhakal

ne important if informal cultural institution that regulates all the functions, feasts, and festivals of the Magars of west Nepal is *Bheja* that affects almost every sphere of their day-to-day life. Although there exists a significant ethnographic literature on the Magars otherwise, it has never been highlighted so far. This article intends to contribute a little in that direction.¹

Put briefly, *Bheja*, which coordinates various rituals of the Magar Community, helps to establish and maintain the community with a certain system of production and enables it to interact harmoniously with nature. Rituals, like the whole culture of which they form a part, have their economic aspects as well the ecological ones and this ritual may be considered a typical way of the Magar way of adapting to their environment.

This analysis and interpretation of *Bheja* is primarily guided by the factors delineated by Rappaport's proposition in his recognized work *Ritual Regulation of Environmental Relations among a New Guinea People*. He proposes that most of the functional studies of religious behaviors in anthropology have as an analytical goal the elucidation of events, processes, or relationships occurring within a 'social unit' of some sort. This 'social unit' is not always well defined, but in some cases it appears to be "... a congregation, a group of people who participate together in the performance of religious rituals".

As Rappaport believed and quoted, the following statement by Homans (1941: 172) represents fairly the dominant line of anthropological thought concerning the functions of religious ritual. According to him, 'ritual actions' do not produce a practical result on the external world - that is one reason for calling them ritual. But to make this statement is 'not to say that ritual has no function'. Its function is not related to the world external to the society but to the 'internal constitution of the society'. It gives the members of the society confidence; it also dispels their anxieties; it disciplines their social organization.