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Ethnic Cauldron, Demography and Minority Politics: The Case of Nepal

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In recent years, particularly after the restoration of democracy, "ethnic politics" is gradually taking a volatile turn in many countries of South Asia. It is not only deharmonizing the ethnic/caste relations and the process of nation building within the countries, but also jeopardizing economic and political relations between nations as well. The tragic conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalis in Sri Lanka, hundreds of cases of ethnic conflicts in India (such as the Hindu-Muslim riots, the case of Babri Mosque, the Hindu-Sikh conflict such as the case of the assault on the Golden temple, the Assamese-Bengali carnage in Assam and many separatist's movements led by the Nagas, Mizos, the Sikhs, and so on), the Chakma movement in Bangladesh and the cultural conflicts between the Bengalis and Pakistanis that eventually created a separate nation-state - Bangladesh - are some examples.

In Nepal, three main forms of ethnic divides deserve attention. The first is between the *Pahade* (hillmen) and the *Madhesiya* (plainsmen) based on regionalism and ethnicity. The second is the split between the high caste Hindu groups (particularly the Hill Brahmin (Bahun), the Thakuri, the Chhetri and the Newar) and the *Janajati* (ethnic/tribal groups) of Nepal. The third is the split between the Brahmin (Bahun) and the Newar groups, and the high caste Hindu groups and the

low caste Hindu groups (*dalit* or untouchable groups).¹ The problems in each cases revolve around "cultural identities" of people as expressed through language, race, religion, caste and culture and the question of a fair participation in national economy and politics.

This paper is an attempt to deal with the so called "minority groups" and their politics in Nepal and to assess whether the concept of ethnic minority/majority is a useful tool in analyzing ethnic politics in Nepal. The paper is organized into three parts. The first part briefly notes the context of ethnic issues in South Asia in general and Nepal in particular. The second part highlights the major/minor groups in terms of population size, with special reference to language, religion, economics and politics. Finally, an assessment is made of ethnic politics with reference to minority groups and the process of national integration and nation-building in Nepal, with a perspective on the future.

Ethnic Cauldron: the Nepali Culture

Nepal is home to a number of ethnic/caste groups with different languages, religions and cultural traditions. There are well over 100 distinct ethnic/caste groups, who have been living side by side over the last 1,500 years, maintaining separate yet related cultural traditions collectively known as "Nepali culture" today. This Nepali culture, in essence, is the combination of three distinct elements:

1. A culture, representing five major distinct groups of people: (a) the Hindu groups with caste origins (b) the Newars (c) the ethnic/tribal groups (d) the Muslims, and (e) others (Sikh, Bengali, Marwari and Christians).
- 1a. The Hindu caste groups comprise both the Hill and the Tarai groups. The social structure of the Hill caste Hindus is simple, reflecting only three groups in the hierarchy. Their mother tongue is the Nepali language.

High caste Hindus: Bahun
 Thakuri
 Chhetri

Middle caste Hindus: Sanyasi

Low caste Hindus (Untouchables): Kami, Sarki, Damai, Badi and Gaine.

In the Tarai caste Hindus, there are more than 30 distinct cultural groups (though many of them share a common language) and present a more complicated social structure than the Hill caste Hindus. Some major groups in the hierarchy are:

High caste Hindus: Maithil Brahmin, Bhumihar, Rajput, Kayastha and Yadav,

Middle caste Hindus: Baniya, Kurmi, Rauniyar, Hazam, Lohar, Badahi, Kewat, Malloha, Sudi, Teli, and others,

Low caste Hindus(untouchables): Khatwe, Chamar, Dhusad, Mushahar, Batar and Dom.

- 1b. Among the Hill caste groups, the case of Newars is exceptional. The group not only presents the most complicated social structure among all caste groups in Nepal, truly reflecting the model of the four categories of the Hindu Varna system, and is clearly divided into two distinct religious and racial groups; the Hindus and the Buddhists and the Caucasoid and the Mongoloid. Though King Jayasthithi Malla (1380-1394 A.D.) classified the population of the Kathmandu Valley (primarily Newars) into 64 castes with different functional and occupational categories, there are more than 40 distinct cultural groups of Newars even today, sharing a common language, the Newari.
- 1c. There are about 35 distinct ethnic/tribal groups (*Janajati*) in Nepal, each group having their own language and culture with no hierarchy within the group. Historically, they used to occupy a particular habitat or territory, and thus many of them claim that they are the true "first settlers" (*Adivasi*) of Nepal. Like the caste groups, the *Janajati* groups are also spread in the Hills as well as in the Tarai.

Hill *Janajati*: Magar, Tamang, Rai, Gurung, Limbu, Sunuwar, Sherpa, Bhote, Chepang, Raji, Raute, Lepcha, Thakali, Darai, Dura, and others.

Tarai *Janajati*: Tharu, Dhimal, Gangain, Rajbansi, Satar, Jhangad and others.
- 1d. The Musalmans are a religious group, primarily settled in the Tarai. One small group of Musalmans also live in the Hills, popularly known as the Churaute.

- 1e. Likewise, a small number of Sikhs, Bengalis, Marwaris and Christians live in different areas of Nepal, many of them being recent migrants.
2. Racially, there are two distinct groups of people: The Indo-Aryan (Caucasoid) and the Mongoloid. Certain small groups of people e.g. Satar and the Jhangad are treated in a separate racial category, the Austro-Asiatic (Satar) and the Dravidian (Jhangad).
3. In terms of cultural tradition or civilization, Nepal as a whole can be said to present a distinctive interface between the Hindu and the Buddhist civilizations.² The Nepali cultural tradition is heavily influenced by the Hindu civilization from the South and the Tibetan culture or civilization of the north. Furthermore, there are many groups (primarily tribals), who are not influenced by the Hindu or the Buddhistic cultural traditions. They are only partly influenced by both traditions. Their tradition can be popularly labelled as "Animism" or "Folk Tradition" or "Local Tradition". In brief, Nepal truly presents an ethnic cauldron; a combination of different ethnic/caste groups and their cultures.

Major/Minor Groups

In this broad cultural spectrum and multi-ethnic situation, it is indeed a difficult task to demarcate a boundary between major and minor groups in Nepal. Furthermore, there is no standard definition as to specify what criterion makes a cultural group major or minor. Weiner while discussing the Indian ethnic politics notes that "what is a majority from one perspective is a minority from another".³ For example, Muslims are India's largest religious minority but in Jammu and Kashmir, it is the Hindus who regard themselves as a minority. Likewise, Bengalis are minority in Assam and Assamese claim themselves to be a national minority.⁴ In China, there are 56 nationalities but except the Hans, who constitute 94 per cent of the China's population, all other 55 groups are called national minorities. Even the groups such as the Tibetan (3.4 million people) and Zhuang (12 million people) are considered minority nationals in China.⁵ Any assessment of relations between Nepal's majority/minority groups becomes meaningless unless it is properly analysed from

various angles such as a) minority and majority groups by number, with special reference to the national and the district-level data, b) majority/minority groups by language, and c) majority/minority groups by religion, economics and politics.

National Majority/Minority Groups by Number

The 1991 Census identified 60 different ethnic/caste groups and their population size. The census data, however, are some what misleading as the Census does not properly identify many separate cultural groups. But this is the only comprehensive official/non-official information on ethnic/caste groups available at the national level.

The ten numerically dominant national groups, whose population exceeds over 500,000, are as follows:

Table 1: Ten Major National Groups of Nepal with Population over 500,000 in Number (1991 Census).

Ethnic/Caste Group	Total Population	% of the Total Population
Chhetri	2968,082	16.0
Hill Brahmin	2388,455	12.9
Magar	1339,308	7.2
Tharu	1194,224	6.5
Tamang	1081,252	5.8
Newar	1041,090	5.6
Kami	963,655	5.2
Yadav	765,137	4.1
Musalman	653,055	3.5
Rai Kiranti	525,557	2.8
Total	12,919,815	69.7

Source: CBS, 1991.

Total Population of Nepal (1991 Census: 18,491,092)

Only 10 ethnic/caste groups comprise almost 70 per cent of the total population of Nepal. If only the Hill Bahuns and Chhetri populations are taken into account, they represent 29 per cent of the total population. It can be said that the Hill Bahun and Chhetri in combination numerically represent the dominant national group in Nepal. Except for one or two

Mountain districts, the Bahun and Chhetri groups are spread throughout the country.

There are other 18 ethnic/caste groups whose population is over 100,000 and less than 500,000 in number.

Table 2: Population Size of Ethnic/Caste Groups Ranging Between 100,000 to 500,000 in number (1991 Census)

Ethnic/Caste Groups	Total population	% of total population
1. Gurung	449,198	2.4
2. Damai	367,989	2.0
3. Thakuri	299,473	1.6
4. Limbu	297,186	1.6
5. Sarki	276,224	1.5
6. Teli	250,732	1.4
7. Kusahawa	205,797	1.1
8. Chamar	203,919	1.1
9. Sanyasi	181,726	1.0
0. Kurmi	166,718	0.9
1. Maithil Brahmin	162,886	0.9
2. Sudi (Kalwar)	162,944	0.8
3. Mushar	141,980	0.8
4. Dhanuk	136,944	0.7
5. Mallaha	110,413	0.6
6. Sherpa	110,358	0.6
7. Baniya	101,868	0.6
8. Kewat	101,482	0.6
Total	3,327,837	20.3

Of the 18 ethnic/caste groups, 12 groups (66.6%) represent the Tarai and comprise 20.3 per cent of the total population. The Gurung, Damai, Thakuri, Limbu and Sarki are numerically significant Hill groups even today.

There are 10 ethnic/caste groups, with population ranging between 50,000 and 100,000 in number, 8 of these belong to the Tarai region. The other 10 ethnic/caste groups whose number is less than 10,000 are mostly (eight) from the Hills. The ethnic/caste groups whose population size is less than 5,000 are all Hill groups e.g. Churaute, Lepcha, Jirel, Gaine, Raji and Raute.

In brief, 28 ethnic/caste groups represent more than 90 per cent of the total population, and, thus, can be numerically considered the major groups in the national scene. Numerically, the national minority groups are those whose population size is less than 10,000. These groups are 10 in number (Badi, Bote, Lepcha, Jirel, Gaine, Raji, Raute, Churaute, Bengali and Sikh) with a total population of 53,130 or 0.3 per cent of the total population. But many Bengalis and Sikhs are recent migrants from India, and many are non-citizens.

Numerically, three major groups by districts (according to the 1991 Census) present interesting features. The Bahuns and Chhetris are numerically the largest group in 30 districts (Chhetri 21 and Brahmin 9), the Newars stand numerically highest in Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Lalitpur districts. The Rais are numerically the largest group in Ilam, Dhankuta, Sankhuwasabha, Khotang, Bhojpur and Solukhumbu; Limbus in Taplejung, Panchthar and Terathum; Gurungs in Gorkha, Manang and Mustang; Tamangs in Sindhuli, Kabhreplanchok, Sindhupalchok, Nuwakot, Rasuwa, Dhading, and Makawanpur; Magars in Tanahu, Myagdi, Baglung, Palpa, Pyuthan, and Rolpa; Tharus in Sunsari, Bara, Nawalparasi, Dang, Bardiya and Kailali; Yadavs in Saptari, Siraha, Dhanusha, Mahotari and Sarlahi; and, Musalman in Parsa, Rautahat, Kapilbastu and Banke.

A breakdown of the numerically dominant ethnic/caste groups by region (population size over 500,000), would be as follows:

Table 3: Numerically Dominant Groups by Region (1991 Census)

Region	Caste Origin Hindu Groups	Ethnic/Tribal Groups	Others
Mountain & Hill	1. Chhetri 2. Bahun 3. Newar 4. Kami	1. Magar 2. Tamang 3. Rai	
Tarai	1. Yadav	1. Tharu	1. Muslim

The resultant scenario suggests that 70 per cent of the numerically dominant groups live in the Mountain and Hills.

Majority/Minority Groups by Language

Language is one of the most important social indicators for integrating a large number of diverse cultural groups of people. The people speaking the same language have certain degree of commonality which bind them together. For example, the Hill Bahuns and the untouchables (the Kami, Damai and Sarki), all speaking the same language, have certain culture forms in common though they place themselves at two extremes in the hierarchial model of the Hindu caste structure. A person who speaks the language of the other group is relatively more acceptable to the people of the other group than a person who does not.

According to the report of the Language Commission of Nepal (1993), 70 languages and dialects are spoken in Nepal. But the Nepali language has been spoken as the mother-tongue by more than 50 per cent of the total population of Nepal over the last three decades. The Nepali language is the mother tongue primarily of the Hindu caste groups such as the Bahun, Thakuri, Chhetri, Sanyasi, Kami, Damai, Sarki, Gaine and Badi. The Nepali language is followed by Maithili; 11.5 per cent of the total population have declared their mother tongue to be Maithili over the last four decades. But the Maithili language is spoken primarily in the central and the eastern Tarai regions of Nepal. There are other 10 mother tongue groups whose proportion in total population range between 1 to 7.5 per cent. The larger groups are the Bhojpuri (7.5%), the Tharu (5.4%), the Tamang (4.5%) and the Newari (3.7%) languages. There are nearly 40 other languages whose speakers are less than one per cent of the total population of Nepal. The picture of major/minor language groups would be quite different if one sees the district-wise figures for different mother tongues. The three numerically dominant language groups by district (according to the 1991 Census) is given in Table 4.

Table 4: Numerically First, Second and Third Language Groups by District (1991 Census)

Languages	First	Second	Third	Total Districts
1. Nepali	54	18	3	75
2. Maithili	6	1	0	7
3. Bhojpuri	4	1	0	5
4. Tamang	2	7	6	15
5. Tharu	2	5	6	13
6. Newari	2	1	3	6
7. Awadhi	2	0	1	3
8. Gurung	1	3	2	6
9. Sherpa	1	1	3	5
10. Rai	0	7	1	8
11. Magar	0	4	4	8
12. Limbu	0	3	3	6
13. Rajbansi	0	1	0	1
14. Hindu Urdu	0	1	2	3
15. Thakali	0	0	1	1
16. Baitadeli	1	0	0	0
Total	75	53	35	

Source: CBS, 1993

These data clearly suggest the primacy of the Nepali language throughout the kingdom. It is the first language or mother tongue for the people of 54 districts (72%). In the other 8 districts, the Nepali language has remained the second dominant language. Nevertheless, the primacy of Maithili, Tharu, Tamang, Newar, Gurung, Limbu and Magar languages as mother tongues in certain districts of Nepal is obvious.⁶ On the other hand, though the CBS recorded 1339,308 as the number of Magar population in Nepal in 1991, only 430,264 (3.21%) were listed as the Magar speakers, suggesting that a large number of Magars (particularly the Magars of the Eastern Nepal) had already forgotten their mother tongue and had switched over to the Nepali language.

Majority/Minority Groups by Religion

The numerical and percentage distribution of the population by religion over the last four decades is given in

Table 5. It shows that three major religious groups live side by side in Nepal: (i) the Hindu (ii) the Buddhist, and (iii) the Islam. The 1991 Census also identified "Kirat religion", a local animistic tradition, whose followers are mostly the Rais and Limbus of Eastern Nepal. The other "minor" religious groups are Jain, Christian and others. However, the Hindus are overwhelmingly represented. In 1952/54, 88.9% of the total population were Hindus and this came down to 86.5% in 1991, a moderate percentage decline over the last four decades. But the absolute number of Hindus has more than doubled in this period; 7,318,392 in 1952/54 to 15,996,953 in 1991, an absolute increase of 8,678,561 people in 40 years. Similarly, the percentage of the Buddhist population has moderately declined from 8.6% in 1952/54 to 7.8% in 1991. But the number of the followers of Buddhism has also doubled in this period. The only religious group whose percentage as well as population is constantly increasing over the last four decades is the Musalman. The Musalmans have tripled in this period from 208,899 in 1952/54 to 653,218 in 1991.

Many *Janajati* leaders (to some extent even the Buddhist people) in Nepal allege that the figures for the Hindus are exaggerated. Obviously, the caste system and the Hindu religion are complementary. The Hindu caste groups live both in the hills and in the Terai. If only these caste groups are taken into account, the percentage of the Hindus would be close to 70 per cent. In brief, by religion, the Hindus are in the majority in Nepal.

Economically Major/Minor Groups in Nepal

It is indeed very hard to assess the economic condition of the people of Nepal by ethnic/caste category, as some people are relatively affluent and some are very poor within a group. For example, some Tharus are big landlords and some are not only marginal landholders or completely landless but also make their living under the *Kamaiya* system, being bonded labourers of Bahun, Chhetri and Tharu landlords. The macro economic picture of Nepal clearly indicates that most of the Nepali people are poor; an income of NRs. 8,500 per person per annum (\$170) or Rs. 23.28 per person per day.⁷ According to the National Planning Commission (1992)⁸ 55% of the total

Table 5 : Distribution of Population of Nepal by Religion, 1952/54-1991.

Religion	1952/54	%	1961	%	1971	%	1981	%	1991	%
Hindu	7318392	88.87	8254403	87.69	10390009	89.39	13445787	89.50	15996953	86.51
Buddhist	707104	8.59	870991	9.25	866411	7.50	799081	5.32	1439142	7.78
Islam	208899	2.54	280597	2.98	351186	3.04	399197	2.66	653218	3.53
Kirat									318389	1.72
Jain			831	0.01	5836	0.05	9438	0.06	7561	0.04
Christian			458	-	2541	0.02	3891	0.03	31280	0.17
Other	684	0.01		-		-	365445	2.43	26416	0.14
Unstated									18138	0.10
Total	8235079	100.00	9412996	100.00	11555983	100.00	15022839	100.00	18491097	100.00

Sources :

DOS, 1958, Population Census 1952/54, Part. II, Table 5
 CBS, 1968, Population Census 1961, Vol. II, Table 7
 CBS, 1975, Population Census 1971, Vol. II, Table 13.
 CBS, 1977, The Analysis of the Population Statistics of Nepal, p. 42.
 CBS, 1984, Population Census 1981, Vol. I, Part III, Table 13.
 CBS, 1993, Population Census 1991.

population of Nepal fall below the poverty line. Gurugharana believes that 95% of these poor people live in the rural areas.⁹

In Nepal, poverty is commonly associated with landholding.¹⁰ Historically, landownership in Nepal is closely and systematically tied to the hierarchial caste framework; the higher the caste status of a family, the larger its landownership, and vice-versa. Though the Tarai is considered the granary of Nepal, the percentage of landless people is found to be highest in the Tarai. These landless people are mostly from the low caste Hindu groups such as the Chamar, Batar, Mushahar, Dushad and Dom.¹¹ The limited rural household survey conducted by ARTEP (1972) found that 23 percent of households in the Tarai possessed no land compared to one percent landless in hill villages. In the hills, the landless people are mostly untouchables such as Kami, Damai, Sarki, Bote and Gaine.¹² In other words, if landholding is taken as a variable of assessing economically dominant and economically handicaped groups, it is the untouchable Hindus, who are in the most deprived situation. They, indeed, constitute the economically minor groups.

If "income" data are taken into account (which is in fact the real measure of poverty), the picture of economic dominant groups is quite different. Some of the northern Himalayan groups such as Byansi of Darchula, the Thakalis of Thak Khola, the Manangbas of Manang, the Sherpas of Solukhumbu and the Bhotiyas of Olangchunggola hold little cultivable agricultural land but they are the most prosperous groups in Himalayan region.¹³ All these communities were historically involved in the trans-Himalayan trade of salt, grain and other goods between Nepal and Tibet, and Nepal and India. Dahal, in one of his studies indicates that Byansis are the most affluent group in the Darchula district in terms of income, literacy, and the pattern of expenditure compared to other Hindu groups such as the Bahun, Thakuri and Chhetri in the area.¹⁴

Similarly, if the income of Newars is carefully calculated (as they are mostly businessmen and settled primarily in the market areas of Nepal), this group, could be found to have the highest per capita income, and, thus, could be considered one of the richest groups of Nepal. While considering the economic condition of the high caste Hindus, Bista writes: "In most areas

of Nepal low caste people are fast improving economically compared to people belonging to the higher caste" ¹⁵ Though very few *Janjati* leaders will believe in Bista's statement, it can be said that Bahuns are neither an affluent nor a poor community in Nepal. Many Bahuns simply pretend to be economically better off than others as they are relatively frugal in day-to-day life.

Political Participation in Relation to Major/Minor Groups

Leaders of various *Janjati* groups allege that politics in Nepal is absolutely in the hands of the high caste Hindu groups, particularly the Bahuns. A cursory observation shows that Bahuns are no doubt in large numbers in all parties - the Congress, UML, United People's Front, Rastriya Prajantatra Party or the Sadbhavana.¹⁶ In the following data is given the number of the Members of Parliament of the 1991 Elections by ethnic/caste categories (see Table No. 6), and, I claim that this charge is only partially true.

The Table shows that only 25 ethnic/caste groups (almost 1/4 of the total cultural groups but representing most of the groups with population exceeding 100,000) are represented by the members of parliament (i.e. in both the lower and the upper houses) in 1991. Not a single minor group (with population less than 10,000) is represented as a member of parliament and these are not the groups engaged in ethnic politics in Nepal. No doubt, Bahuns represent 38.1 percent of the total members of parliament, though their number is only 12.9% of the total population - 194.5% higher representation than their population size. But this representation does not seem abnormal if one considers the representation of other ethnic/caste groups. The groups who have a higher representation in parliament than their population size are the Chhetris (including Thakuri and Rajput) (13.9% higher, Newar (33.8% higher), Thakali (2142% higher), Limbu (162.5% higher), Gurung (41.6% higher) and Tharu (4.6% higher). Though comprising numerically dominant groups, representation of the Magar (176.9% lower), Tamang (152% lower), Yadav (57.7% lower), Rai (47.7% lower), Musalman (52.0% lower) and untouchable (includes the hill as well as the Tarai untouchables -900% lower) groups are considerably low. The extremely unbalanced representation is

observed only in the case of two groups, the Thakali and the untouchable. The Thakalis, though numerically considered a minor group (representing 0.07% of the total population) appear active with very high participation in politics. On the other hand, the untouchables who represent almost 13 per cent of the total population have insignificant representation in parliament.

Table 6: Members in the Parliament in 1991 Election

Caste ethnic	Nepali Congress		UML		UPF		Sadbhavana		RPP (Chand)		RPP (Thapa)		NLP		UNCPP		Selected		Total
	LH	UH	LH	UH	LH	UH	LH	UH	LH	UH	LH	UH	LH	UH	LH	UH	LH	UH	
Brahmin	5	13	27	5	2	2	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	101 (38.1)
Chhetri/ Thakuri/ Rajput Newar	28	5	10	3	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	3	0	54 (20.1)
Gurung	6	4	7	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	23 (8.4)
Tamang	4	2	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9 (3.4)
Thakali	1	0	2	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6 (2.3)
Rai	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4 (1.5)
Limbu	1	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5 (1.9)
Magar	0	2	7	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	11 (4.2)
Tharu	3	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	7 (2.7)
Yadav	10	1	4	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	18 (6.8)
Rajbansi	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	7 (2.7)
Musalman	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1 (0.4)
Damai	3	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6 (2.3)
Karni	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1 (0.4)
Sarki	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1 (0.4)
Others	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1 (0.4)
Total	5	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	10 (3.8)
Total	113	31	69	16	9	2	6	1	3	0	1	0	2	0	2	0	10	0	265 (100.0)

Source: Kanchanjunga Research and Management Group, Kathmandu, 1992.

Likewise, the ethnic/caste representation in the Parliament was observed in the 1959 general election, and the 1981 and 1986 elections for Members in the national legislature. In each election, Brahmins, Chhetris, Newars, Hill ethnic groups (Limbu, Rai, Magar, Gurung, Thakali and Tamang) and Tarai ethnic groups (Tharu) and Tarai high caste groups (Rajput and Yadav) won significantly compared to other groups. Each ethnic group improved its position in the following elections, except the Brahmins whose representation declined in 1981 as well as in 1986 elections. In 1986, the Newar representation also declined marginally.¹⁷

In brief, ethnic representation has been a dominant feature in the Nepali social, economic and political life throughout its history, though the participation of various groups of people depends upon the ethnic consciousness or 'political culture' of the respective groups. In Nepal, there have been significant variations in nationalistic assertiveness among ethnic groups; and, these variations are in many instances a function of the differences in economies, religious attitudes and political culture of the ethnic/caste groups concerned.¹⁸

Why is ethnic assertiveness and radicalism on the rise in Nepal in recent years, particularly after restoration of democracy in spite of political participation by various groups of people being quite encouraging over the years? Why is Bir Nembang suddenly attempting to develop a separate self-ruled nation-state in Limbuwan, or why has a separate "Limbuwan National Council" been formed under the leadership of Harkaraj Limbu to counter Bir Nembang?¹⁹ Why are Rai leaders trying to declare a self-ruled Khambuwan state in their traditional homeland of Majh Kirant, including a part of Limbuwan.²⁰ Why is Gajendra Narayan, a leader of Sadbhavana Party, claiming that the Hindi be declared the language of the Tarai people, though he knows very well that the mother tongue of the Tarai people is not Hindi. Sometimes he further aggravates the situation by saying that the Nepal Tarai can develop a Sri Lanka like situation.

By 1993, 44 religious, linguistic and ethnic/caste associations have emerged in Nepal. The most prominent of these are the "Nepal Tamang Baudha Ghedung" (an Association of the Tamang community), "Nepal Bhasa Manka Khala" (an

association of the Newar community), "Thakali Samaj Sudhar Samittee" (Thakali social reformat committee), "Magurali" (a joint association of the Magar, Gurung, Rai, and Limbu), "Kamtapuri" (a joint association of the Koche, Meche and Tajpuria), "Tharu Kalyankari Sabha" (Tharu welfare association), "Nepal Dalit Samaj" (an association of the untouchables of Nepal), "Nepal Janjatiya Mahasangha" (confederation of ethnic groups), "Nepal Langhali Sangh" (an association of the Magar community), "Limbuwan Mukti Morcha" (Limbuwan liberation front) and many more. Besides, other are not only five Muslim associations and three Hindu religious associations (Viswa Hindu Parishad, Hindu Dharma Samrakchan Manch, Hindu Rastra Samrakshyan Samittee) have also been formed in Nepal in recently. But why all these ethnic/caste associations? I believe that the manifestation of ethnic/caste associations and ethnicity in the Nepali politics is due to an improper understanding on the part of the Nepali government regarding the totality of Nepali culture and society. There has been a regular attempt by the Nepali rulers to develop a homogeneous Nepali culture within the frame of Hindu political ideals, without seriously considering the diversity and complexity of Nepali culture. Certain facets of the history of Nepal are given below to underline the lacuna in this regard.

- i. After the unification of Nepal by the Gurkha King Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1768, the Nepali social structure was gradually instilled with the Hindu model of great tradition albeit without disturbing the local cultures. This peaceful transition was effected through the implementation of the Old Legal Code of 1854. This Code categorised all the peoples of Nepal into four distinct orders, without seriously considering the diversity and complexity of the Nepali culture. These were:
 1. *Tagadhari* (castes wearing sacred thread)
 2. *Matwali* (liquor consuming castes)
 3. *Pani na calne choi chito halnu napanne* (castes from whom water is not accepted but whose touch does not require purification by water)
 4. *Pani na calne, choi chito halnu parne* (untouchable castes).

According to Sharma²¹ this Code embodied certain distinct features: commensality, supremacy of the Hindu values and religious orthodoxy and caste as the basis of social mobility. A member, irrespective of his cultural background, breaching these features of the Code, was either severely punished, excommunicated or forced to accept demotion within the caste hierarchy.

The New Legal Code was introduced in 1964 and according to the Code nobody could claim superiority on the basis of race, caste and creed. But irrespective of what the Code says, the caste system is alive and, in some cases, has become more distinct entrenched over the years. It is because of this, ethnic/caste groups whose social position is higher in the traditional hierarchy usurped much of the power, influence, wealth and prestige available within the system.

In brief, Hinduism and caste structure went hand in hand, and most of the people believed that the dominant features of the Nepali identity rested on these two basic cultural elements. The rising Hindu consciousness in Nepal is thus a product of an historical phenomena which creates uneasiness among non-Hindus, particularly after the advent of democracy.

- ii. The second most important issue causing discontent among various *janajati* groups of Nepal is making Sanskrit education compulsory for school children all over the country. The *janajati* leaders feel that it will not only strengthen the values of the Hindu religion and the Brahmanic caste structure, but also that many children of ethnic/tribal groups will fail in the Sanskrit examinations, thus, making *Janajatis* virtually subordinate to Hindus in every field of life.
- iii. Finally, a major frustrating experience among the youth in various groups of people is the lack of employment opportunities. The unprecedented growth of education has no correlation with the necessary manpower for the nation. The irony of educational development in the country has been that it has not produced skilled or semi-skilled manpower, and Indian nationals have been providing the basic input functions for major factories and industries. This process has been further accelerated by

the democratic government in the name of liberal economic policy.

The work permit system has been withdrawn, and many national industries have been handed over to foreign nationals in the name of privatization. The result is that a substantial number of under-employed and unemployed people are seen throughout the kingdom. Except agriculture, the secondary and tertiary sectors such as services, commerce and industry provide little employment opportunities. Political connection has become necessary to get a job, or a person will get a position only if he has access to the power hierarchy in the government. A person is merited not by his educational excellence and long experience but simply on the basis of closeness of alliance with the ruling government. One of the negative consequences of these developments a policy is the role being played by the younger people in extremist politics (both in the leftist and the rightist) who may be called the "new political elites" in a largely traditional society.

Today, these "new political elites" can be seen not only in schools, colleges and university students' associations, but have also become a force in the teachers' unions, and constitute a strong pressure group in the local village development committees. As the power structure maintains hierarchy, these new elites find no place within the structure, and the result is conflict and frustration, leading to the creation of new caste, ethnic, linguistic and religious associations and organizations to vent their frustrations and oppose the existing political structure. Interestingly, the psychosis of not getting a proper place in the national economy is breeding alienation among groups of people, which many people label as the ethnic politics of Nepal. But I note here that these features are primarily the product of urban phenomena with no base at the grass roots level, where more than 90 percent of the people live.

Conclusion and Future Perspective

Nepal is a multi-ethnic state. Fortunately or unfortunately, this historical multi-ethnic structure cannot be changed. Since almost every ethnic/caste group is disadvantaged in

relationship to some other, it is not easy to define a major/minor group in the context of Nepal. In Nepal, many *janajati* leaders narrowly use the term "minority" to refer to those who are not the Hindus. But within the Hindu groups, untouchables (whether belonging to the Hill or the Tarai groups) who constitute close to 13 per cent of the total population, are socially economically and politically the most disadvantaged and backward groups in Nepal. A group like the Thakali, who constitute a national minority numerically can be considered a major group in the overall political and economic structure of Nepal. The Thakalis are unobtrusive, politically active and economically advanced ethnic group. The Kayasthas of the Nepal Tarai, though numerically only 0.3 per cent of the total population, are not only the most literate community but also hold prestigious positions in every field of administration. Likewise, the Newars, who are hardly 5.6 per cent of the total population, are one of the richest communities, hold more than 35 per cent of the total administrative jobs of the kingdom, and occupy important positions in the government as well as in non-governmental organizations.

Muslims are one of Nepal's religious minorities, but numerically they stand as one of the ten major groups of Nepal. Linguistically, except for Nepali, Maithili, Bhojpuri, Tharu, Tamang and Newar, all other language groups belong to the minority groups. There are some 40 language groups whose speakers are less than 1 per cent in the total population.

In brief, a caste, a tribal, a linguistic or a religious group can be major on one dimension but a minor on other dimensions. In general, the so-called "minority groups" of Nepal regard themselves to be socially, economically and politically disadvantaged and believe that the state is unfair to them, and that, they suffer serious discrimination in every field of life.²² Many of them also feel their "cultural identity" is getting gradually displaced from the national mainstream and the government is not serious about it.

But if one analyzes carefully the politics of ethnicity in Nepal, the ethnic/caste groups, (whether a major or minor group in terms of caste, tribe, language, religion, economy, etc.) in one way or other have been participating in politics throughout the country's history. Ethnic awareness has become an ubiquitous aspect of political life in Nepal after democracy,

mainly because ethnic identities are closely and systematically tied to the political identities of people by leaders of the concerned ethnic/caste groups. These political identities are hatched out at the top by those people who are the most privileged in the Nepali society. The Nepali society in general is a peasant society; the people's love for land is the love for their locality or love for their territorial homeland. In other words, ethnic problems in Nepal show the characteristics of a non-peasant, urban phenomena. In other words, ethnic politics has no base at the grass-roots level and pose no immediate danger to political stability and national integration.

Today, national politics is playing a more important role than socio-cultural attributes such as ethnicity when conflicts take place between people. There is a clear polarization and the people tend to align with one particular political group or the other irrespective of their cultural values. Had ethnicity played a major role, the Sadbhavana should have grabbed a large number of seats in the Nepal Tarai. Dr. Harka Gurung would not have lost his election bid in the midst of the Gurung community of Lamjung or Madan Bhandari would not be victorious in the heart of the Newar community of Kathmandu. Likewise, in the recent bi-elections, Gopal Chandra Singh Rajbansi should not have been defeated in the midst of the Rajbansi and the other local Tarai groups of Jhapa district. In brief, the manifestation of ethnicity in Nepali politics is only superficial, and it is not so much an outcome of grassroots passion as it is a creation of vested political interest groups.²³

"Cultural identity", or "ethnic identity" is not an end in itself; it is only a means to adapt to the larger society. In India, more than 900 different languages and dialects are spoken, but only 16 languages have been accepted by the constitution. Many groups switch over to another language while preserving their own identity. Furthermore, artificial conglomeration of different cultural groups does not create strength within ethnic/caste associations. The history of Nepal clearly shows that ethnic/tribal Rajas had serious feuds with neighbouring states to maintain their own status quo, territorial integrity and ethnic identity. The point here is that simply homogenizing culture without understanding the differences in local cultures does not automatically elicit political credibility at the popular level.

In brief, the concept of ethnic majority/minority is not a very viable tool for understanding the politics of ethnicity in Nepal. However, the future of existing so-called ethnic politics in Nepal would either gain momentum or would gradually lead to a fissiparous stage if the following points are not taken into consideration adequately.

- i. Multi-culturalism or the plurality of Nepali culture must be accepted as officially in every field of life. Once this basic cultural paradigm is accepted, the concept of majority/minority culture would either lose its lustre or gradually become meaningless. The religious, linguistic, racial and caste identities would no longer simply remain "ethnic identities" but submerge themselves into a new national identity of people.
- ii. Though the Hindus constitute the major religious group in Nepal, unlike many countries of South Asia where some people are killed almost every day in communal riots in the name of religion, such incidents never have taken place in Nepal.²⁴ Religion is, perhaps, the least conclusive marker of identity in Nepal. Many different ethnic/caste groups share the same religion albeit with local variations, and the Newars can be either Hindu or Buddhists. Most of the high caste Hindu groups have already internalized the deities of different groups as their own. Many ethnic groups such as the Magar, Rai, Gurung, Danuwar, Byansi, Thakali and others simultaneously follow the two religious faiths in their day-to-day life, Hindu as well as local shamanism. The Magars are priests in the temple of Gorakhkali in Gorkha, who dispenses "flowers" to the king of Nepal during the Dasain festival even today. In temples such as Guheswari and Dakshinkali, the priests are Newars. Animal sacrifice is common among high caste Hindu groups for strength, health and prosperity of family members, a belief similar to that of many non-Hindu ethnic groups. So far there is no evidence that the Hindus of Nepal have shown a fanatical attitude towards Buddhist or local shamanistic faiths. What has been wrong is that the government is not serious even today regarding wide spread discontent among those people who do not want to be labelled as Hindus. There is no harm in calling a person non-Hindu

or even declaring Nepal as a secular state. But the important issue is that there should not be pseudo-secularism as in India.

- iii. The study of the Sanskrit language has been made compulsory in school education, without considering the diverse cultural groups whose mother tongue is not even Nepali. A student, who has difficulty even understanding the Nepali language cannot be expected to perform well in the Sanskrit language. This is an example of the myopic lopsided view of the democratic government regarding the educational policy of Nepal. Many *janajati* leaders feel that since the government is Hindu, the government will do whatever pleases the Bahuns and the Chhetris who constitute the numerically dominant Hindu group. This is simply a misconception of the *janajati* leaders. One must admit though that the Bahuns and Chhetris are the most shrewd and dynamic people in Nepal who can adopt themselves according to the changing needs of the society. They will not send their children to the Sanskrit University for higher education by any means, as most of them admit that Sanskrit language is dead and has only a classical value.

Likewise, the Hindi language is merely a tool for playing politics in the Tarai today by those who regard themselves to be outside the Hill Nepali mainstream. All the Tarai people (excluding the tribal/ethnic groups and the hill people), in fact speak Maithili, Bhojpuri, *Bajika* (mixture of Bhojpuri and Maithili) and Awadhi languages and not Hindi. It is a serious mistake of the democratic government to treat Hindi as a domestic language in the Tarai.

Notes

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