

Ethnic Nationalism in Nepal

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South Asia

Ethnic nationalism is on the rise in Nepal. With only 23.2 million inhabitants and measuring only 147,181 square kilometres, Nepal is host to 62 'nationalities' (*janajati*). None of these nationalities, including the predominant Khas population – consisting of Brahmin-Ksetri castes, speaking Nepali (Khas) and practising Hinduism – can be considered a single majority group. The Khas, however, remain determined to propagate their language, culture, and religion through their control of state institutions. While ethnic mobilization in Nepal has largely, to date, avoided bloodshed, the frustration of minority nationalities, ethnicities, castes, and tribes (*janajati*) is an important factor behind the growing popularity of the Maoists' 'people's war'.

By Bal Gopal Shrestha

In the wake of political reforms instituted in 1990, non-Khas nationalities began asserting their own national identities within the boundaries of the current state. A new constitution was introduced that year, confirming Nepal as a multinational (*bahujati*) and even multilingual (*bahubhasika*) country. The constitution, however, retained the Nepali (Khas) language as the official 'national language' and Hinduism as the sole 'state religion'. Although the constitution provides liberty for ethnic non-Khas and non-Hindu religious communities to express themselves – against the domination of the 'one nation, one language, and one religion' policy of the government – minority languages and religions remain without legal protection.

The major demands of the non-Khas nationalities in Nepal are: the right to autonomy; political representation in the central government; equal rights for their languages in the courts, in education, and in local and central administration; and an end to the domination of Hindu religion and culture. The 'All Nepal Nationalities' Organisation' (Akhil Nepal Janajati Samgha), a Maoist sister organization to the Communist Party of Nepal, has presented the most radical demands, including the right of secession for all nationalities in Nepal. The influence of the Maoist Party, engaged in a violent 'people's war' for more than six years, is increasing throughout the country and threatening its stability.

As the ruling class manipulating state institutions, Brahmin-Kshetris are the target of other nationalities' criticism. The latter find it insulting to be categorized alongside low-caste Hindus. Mainstream scholars also define these groups as 'tribes'. Most groups in Nepal including the Newars, Tamangs, Magars, Gurung, Sherpa, Limbu, Rai, and Tharu, do not accept the labels 'ethnic groups' or 'minorities'. They prefer to be called 'nations' and believe they fulfil all the criteria of nationhood: language, religion, culture, territory and a history of independent statehood, which would be achieved again if rights to secession were granted. All these groups now accept the Nepali word *janajati*, translated as 'nationality' in English. In 1990, when eighteen of these groups gathered to create a forum called Nepal Janajati Mahasamgha, they translated it as the 'Nepal Federation of Nationalities'.

The search for 'national identities' in Nepal may be a recent phenomenon, but has deep roots in the past. Until 1769, present-day Nepal was composed of small independent states and principalities of different 'nationalities'. The Gorkhali king Prithivi Naryanan Shah, forefather of the present ruling dynasty in Nepal, embarked on an expansionist campaign, bringing several small states and principalities under the control of Gorkha. His successors continued the



Courtesy for both photos: Malla K. Sundar

Fierce ethnic agitations in the capital Kathmandu against the 1999 decision of the Supreme Court of Nepal, which prohibited the use of local languages in municipalities and District Development Committees. (left and below)

expansionary policy, which came to an end only after their defeat in a war with the British East India Company (1814-1816). It was only in the 1930s that the Nepalese government began to adopt the name 'Nepal' in an attempt to make it a modern nation state (Burghart 1996: 255). In general, people of different origins within the country's borders continued to live together in peace over the centuries. However, this ended when groups began to feel discriminated against by the state.

Soon after the Gorkha conquest of 1769, the Gorkhali king Prithivinarayan Shah proclaimed his country to be the 'True Land of Hindus' (Asali Hindustan). In 1854, Jangabhadur, the first Rana prime minister, introduced written laws based on Hinduism, dividing the country hierarchically and subordinating all other nationalities to the Brahmin and Ksetris (Khas) ruling class. In 1960, King Mahendra, the father of the present king, introduced the party-less political system called 'Panchayat', which proclaimed Nepal the only 'Hindu Kingdom' and 'Nepali or Khas the only official language', thus ignoring its multi-religious, multinational, multicultural, and multilingual character.

The ruling Hindu population of Nepal articulates its nationalism by imitating Indian Hindu nationalists, whose vivid forms have been discussed by several scholars (Van der Veer 1994; Jaffrelet 1996). Thirty years of Panchayat politics (1960-90) channelled support to Hindu religious organisations such as the 'World Hindu Council' (Visva Hindu Parisad) while ignoring the issues of minorities and their rights. Encouraged by Hindu fundamentalists in India, Nepalese Hindu extremists are gaining momentum. They have taken inspiration from Indian organizations like the 'Hindu god Siva's Army' (Siva Sena) to form groups like the 'Cows Welfare Association, Nepal'. It is notable that, even today, a person found guilty of killing a cow is condemned to capital punishment by

Nepalese law. Few were surprised when Hindu fundamentalists announced substantial cash rewards to anyone cutting off the head of Padma Ratna Tuladhar, then Minister of Health and a champion for human rights, when he spoke on behalf of the beef-eating communities of Nepal.

Undercurrents of insurgency

With the downfall of the former Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, many small nations have emerged, while others remain incipient. Tamil insurgents in Sri Lanka can be seen as one of the most destructive examples of national uprisings in the South Asian region. In Southeast Asia, Indonesia is experiencing equally violent uprisings. For decades, India has been witness to Assamese, Naga, Jharkhand, and Gorkhaland national movements, whose grievances remain unresolved. In many respects, present-day ethnic nationalist movements in Nepal are heavily influenced by events elsewhere, though they are unusual in their, by-and-large, non-violent record.

The Nepalese government has taken few steps to fulfil ethnic demands. The news is now broadcast in several languages, but the Supreme Court of

Nepal infuriated non-Nepali speakers with its 1999 decision prohibiting the use of local languages in municipalities and District Development Committees. At present, all ethnic groups in Nepal feel they are overshadowed by Khas linguistic and cultural chauvinism. This situation can only lead to undesirable hostilities. A number of bloody incidents have recently taken place in eastern Nepal, in which local people killed Brahmins, burnt down their houses, and chased them away from their villages. Up until now, however, ethnic uprisings in Nepal have been peaceful in nature and, except in a few cases, violence has been avoided. The most interesting aspect of the present ethnic mobilization is that the nationalities are united through the Nepal Federation of Nationalities in their fight against the ruling Khas.

The failure of parliamentary parties in Nepal to address the grievances of these nationalities has caused the latter to turn towards the Maoists for support. It has been noted that the Maoists receive active support from non-Hindu ethnic groups and oppressed low castes (*dalit*) (Bhattachan 2000:146-50). The majority of people killed by the police, on the suspicion of Maoist activity, come from ethnic nationalities and oppressed castes. Yet Nepal's ethnic nationalities are aware of the reality across their northern border, where the Tibetan minority population has been subjected to great distress under the rule of Maoist China. Bhattachan speculates that the Maoists' war has played a crucial role in preventing ethnic insurgency in Nepal.

To develop mutual understanding among the different groups in a multi-ethnic country like Nepal is a difficult task. Until recently, the king has served as the 'unifying symbol' of all nationalities in Nepal, even as the political reforms of 1990 curtailed the king's power by introducing parliamentary democracy. Over the last decade, King Birendra regained considerable popularity, largely as a result of the political



instability caused by the corrupt leadership of constitutional parties. The 'palace massacre' of 1 June 2001, in which practically the entire royal family was murdered, has exacerbated tensions and instability in the country. The only surviving brother of the slain king, Gyanendra, has now become king. Unfortunately, in contrast to the great respect shown to his slain brother and his family, people do not trust the present king. Images of deified kings of the past have been destroyed. The Maoists, forming the most powerful extra-constitutional political party, represent recent developments as the 'death of monarchy' in Nepal and urge the country to declare itself a republic. This is an unprecedented situation for the entire nation. While nationalities remain suspicious of the present developments, they are speculating about possibilities for favourable change.

The most recent trend in Nepalese ethnic mobilization is the active involvement of Maoists; their populist appeals are attracting adherents. The majority of ethnic nationalities, including a large section of Magars, Tamangs, and Newars in Kathmandu Valley, are sympathetic towards the Maoists. Despite its cultural richness, Nepal is one of the poorest and most underdeveloped countries of South Asia. Its people are facing various problems, including ethnic nationalism and a violent Maoist people's war. A small country with many nationalities, the government is unable to effectively address ethnic conflict. If ethnic uprisings are not handled with great care, Nepal may face trouble in the near future, as has been experienced by the Balkan states, by Southeast Asian countries, or by neighbouring India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. As indicated above, ethnic insurgency in Nepal has been prevented thus far because of the people's war launched by the Maoists. The involvement of ethnic nationalities in this bloody war, however, has become painfully apparent. ◀

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