

Ethnicity and National Integration in Nepal:
A Statement of the Problem

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Ethnic issues have come to be regarded as one of the most pressing problems facing the many countries of the world in modern times. They concern basically with the question of relationship between diverse groups of people characterised by a distinct race, culture and religion living within the political boundaries of a state. The notion of distinction, apart from being evident in some of the objective and tangible facts, is strongly present far more in the perception of the groups about themselves or in the opinion of others who hold them to be different. The state of relationship between various groups and categories of people varies in each country depending upon such variables as its historicity, political process and the many socio-economic configuration in it. This relationship ranges from a relatively harmonious form to one of antagonism and open hostility of a conflictual type. Thus the status enjoyed by different groups and social categories with respect to their various social, political, economic and demographic rights in different countries varies widely. So, its problems, too, assume different colour and pitches in their political overtones, accordingly.

The criteria for distinction between human aggregates can be multiple, viz., racial, cultural, linguistic, religious and regional. This is not necessarily a new awareness of the more recent times only, but one that has existed in the minds and thoughts of the people even in the ancient societies. But, in the past, such distinction is not known to have been the prime cause of any overt political violence, nor of an internecine war between two groups of people. More usually, the stress on distinction would lead to a cultural introversion, but in the more neutral and secular domains of life, such groups would not refrain from making intimate contacts.

Nowadays, ethnic issues have acquired a new sensitiveness as never before and, hence, a new urgency can be seen to solve them. Ethnic issues shape up no little from the kind of popular politics we have come to pursue and practise in our times, the politics of ballot box, elections, popular representations, political parties, etc. All these are new political values which have replaced the old form of polity of the more traditional type everywhere. Even the dictatorial regimes of various hues and pretensions, while they may seek to curtail the civil rights of the people, cannot shut their eyes completely to the needs of modernisation and launching of plans for the economic development of their country. This involves ushering in new sets of ideas and new values and a call for participation by people in the manner as they had never done

before. Demands for a greater share in the political power and economic resources by such unequal groups increase. Even if these may be dumb and backward groups in terms of their political articulateness, regimes have felt obliged to give them some form of representation in deference to changing political ideas of public governance in the modern world. Such things have enabled these people to define their group consciousness better and given them a little voice against neglect and discrimination of older forms. In an extreme form, actions over such demands have even led to a call for secession and complete political independence by such groups, the instances of which can be found in the countries of South Asia itself.

Like many countries of Asia, Nepal, too, is, culturally and ethnically-speaking, a multi-ethnic and a pluralistic society. The predominant group in Nepal today, both in numerical and political terms, is that of the Hindus, with the smaller ethnic groups of various sizes and geographical provenance forming its minorities. The co-existence of Hindus with the various cultural groups in the hills and the Tarai of Nepal for centuries did not pass without certain forms of social exchanges including the incidences of intermarriages taking place between them, of course. The blood intermixture is most evident on the facial constructs of the many caste groups of Nepal including some of its high castes, where they have pronounced Mongolian features. Notwithstanding this fact, however, a general belief ascribes the Hindus here to be racially, of a Caucasoid origin and culturally-speaking, of Aryan extraction from India. In the same way, most ethnic minority groups of Nepal are said to be of a palaeo-Mongolian stock speaking dialects of the Tibeto-Burman language family. The latter, at least some of them, are believed to have come to Nepal earlier than the Hindus, some from the north, and others from the east. The exact number of such ethnic minorities in Nepal has not been specified in official terms. In fact, the census of Nepal does not allow counting of people on the basis of their castes or ethnicity. It is part of an official policy. The reason for this may lie in the fact that the government fears that this will give rise to divisive feelings and drive a wedge in the minds of the people on the basis of their caste or ethnic grouping. The census report at present recognises merely the existence of the linguistic minorities, but even in this regard it carries many flaws in the counting process. In fact, a lukewarm attitude is known to exist in the official circles towards the minority languages. There was already a predominant role historically played by the Nepali language in Nepal, and the need to accord the smaller languages also a meaningful place in the national life in the changed context of the new times is slow to dawn. Some of the more developed minority languages, which can boast of a fair amount of literature in them, have begun raising voices for recognition. These are only likely to grow in volume and pitch in the coming years. An ostrich-like attitude adopted towards these languages may not be a helpful solution for ever.

Thus, although we do not know the exact number of the languages spoken in Nepal, nor a reliable number of their speakers, still linguists working in Nepal have calculated about forty principal minority languages, most of them of the Tibeto-Burman family. Some of the smaller languages

have already gone extinct within the last fifty years, their few remaining speakers having been absorbed into the nearest majority language speakers. Nonetheless, the more prominent linguistic groups have managed to survive, and their speakers whose number is not inconsiderable, have revived their ethnic awareness in the recent times centering around any pertinent issue. Recently, David Gellner has published a searching paper on Newar identity problem centering on many cultural issues, mainly their language (Gellner: 1986).

Some of these still extant linguistic groups today are the Gurung, the Magar, the Rai, the Limbu, the Thakali, the Sherpa, the Tharu, the Raji and the Raute (Bista: 1972). What would be the apt term to call these peoples by in Nepal? Scholars have preferred to use all sorts of terms to describe such cultural-linguistic categories in which there is no unanimity of opinion. Three most commonly used terms are 'tribe', 'nation' and 'ethnic group'. According to Mercier, these three terms can be used interchangeably (Mercier: 1965). However, in the more recent usage, 'tribe' has acquired a more restricted application being generally understood to describe the various aggregates of Black Africa (Essien-Udom: 1975). 'Tribe' and its derivative 'tribalism' is also understood by some people in a pejorative sense implying 'a parochial irrational allegiance towards one's group'. But more widely, a 'tribe' is said to indicate a smaller group based on descent with their social structure consisting of 'families, clans and other kinship groups' (Andreski: 1968). A greater obscurity shrouds the definition of 'nation' to a people, and we don't propose to discuss it here at any length, since we think that it has not even a remote application to any minority group in Nepal. We should, therefore, be considering the definition of the 'ethnic group' next. Andreski's definition of the term 'ethny' or 'ethnies' seems once again to fit in the Nepali situation. According to him, it describes 'a social aggregate exhibiting a certain uniformity of culture but not organised for collective action, where the feeling of collective solidarity is rudimentary, and where there is no will for political unification and independence (or preservation thereof)' (Andreski: 1968). The ethnic awareness of these groups is of a cultural and not of a political kind in Nepal. The Hindu majority, on the other hand, is content to see the ethnic aspirations subordinated by the more overriding concern for national integration. Nepal's unification in the 18th century and the birth of the modern nation-state of Nepal ever since then was done largely with the initiative of a Hindu king. The traditional attitude of the Hindus towards the diversity of people, by and large, has been not to view them as 'foreign' or 'alien' elements, but as part of their intrinsic social order. This historical solution to the problem of cultural diversity has led all these groups to be recognised as equivalent to 'castes' within the Hindu four-fold Varna framework, that is, within a given hierarchy (Höfer: 1979). This perhaps continues to dominate the outlook of the Hindus of Nepal even now since there is such tardiness, at least in the administrative policy, in recognising the aspirations of these peoples in the changed context. One would like to hope and believe that ethnic problem will never reach a pitch to threaten the prevailing social harmony in Nepal, even though one might say that harmony has been largely maintained through the social

order laid down by the Hindus mainly. This historical legacy, however needs to be readjusted and reappreciated in a more modern context, I believe. The reminder to the existence of such a problem came during the year of referendum in 1979-80, during an atmosphere of freer political expression. Posters voicing ethnic feelings and anger were spilled on the walls of Kathmandu exhorting all the people of 'Mongol jati' to shake off the domination of the 'Hindus', which indicates that although such things may not be expressed always, they do, nevertheless, simmer beneath the surface.

Nepal's minorities do not merely consist of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic groups, however. In fact, Hindus themselves would form into several regional and linguistic groups, which also, according to Gulliver, can be the basis to make up a separate group of people (Gulliver: 1969). This, too, can become a division of the ethnic type in the event of a problem or a political rift arising, in which case its ramifications could be similar. First, we have the Nepali-speaking Hindus of the hills, who have been in control of Nepali politics at least for the last two hundred years. Unlike the many ethnic groups mentioned above, they are not tied to any single specific region of Nepal, and barring the extreme northern parts, can be seen settled everywhere. Historically, however, their origin had been in the hills of western Nepal in the 12th-14th century. Next, there are Newar Hindus who may form about half the population of the Newars in Nepal. That itself constitutes about 5% of Nepal's total of 14 million population in the census of 1981. The Newars speak Newari, a distinct language of their own, which is quite a different language from Nepali. They are an ancient people, 'the heroes and builders' of historical Nepal, and a people who are proud of their rich cultural heritage of two thousand years. Thirdly, we have Hindus whose history in Nepal is more recent. They are Hindus of the Tarai who are further divisible into three groups according to their languages mainly, namely, the Maithili, the Bhojpuri and the Awadhi-speaking groups. People of the Tarai have been less involved in the process that created the state of Nepal, but in the more contemporary context they made no small contribution in the nation building process. Regional and linguistic identity has, however, remained strong among the Hindus of the Tarai and the process of their social and emotional integration has been very slow. In the contemporary politics, the need to accord them a due representation in the various organs of the government and civil service has been a well-acknowledged practice. The demand for a greater quota of representation in all these things and in others, and also in the allocation of resources in an increasing amount to the Tarai may rise in future. This revolves around the question of according Hindi a recognition as the language of the Tarai. The Nepalese government recognises speakers only of the three Tarai languages, i.e., Maithili, Bhojpuri and Awadhi and bars use of Hindi for any official purpose. In pursuit of this policy, it withdrew radio broadcast of news in Hindi from Radio Nepal in 1965. People in the Tarai, because of their closer cultural and linguistic links with people in India, are suspect in the views of the people of the hills to be leaning more towards India in their loyalty (Gaije: 1975). This mistrust has a disquieting potential for future, the evidence of which can be had from the kind of

reaction the Gurung Report on International Migration evoked just some time ago. This can develop into a conflictual situation which may be sparked off by the issue over language, land or citizenship rights.

The old economic relations of production and control of resources, by and large, have even now remained unchanged in Nepal. They still continue to be rooted in some of the feudalistic values. Still, measures at modernisation and development of Nepal's economy have not passed without some consequent social changes. New economic classes have come to be formed as a result of this. There is a sizable increase in the number of middle class people taking up specialised professions. One can also see some new trading classes emerging. It is true all this change is happening lying in a few urban centres only. But still, this change has not been able to make much dent on the question of resolving the ethnic identity of the people. If anything, the ethnic consciousness of people has gotten stronger in the present times. Its instance is provided by the Newars. As the inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley they have benefitted maximum from the development that Kathmandu as the capital of Nepal is able to enjoy. But this has not diminished their strong ethnic consciousness in all these years. In fact, the Newars today are more conscious of it and have become more strident in their demands for according their language a greater recognition. The increasing tempo in which they have begun to celebrate their *bhintuna* (Newar New Year's Day celebration) clearly illustrates this.

In a society such as Nepal's, its various social segments called by their respective caste names (*jat* or *jati* in Nepali) are generally understood to form part of a single social and cultural order. Whatever the wisdom or otherwise of this arrangement in the past, the old hierarchy of caste based on status has been terminated, at least in a legal sense, in Nepal following the promulgation of the new *Muluki Ain* of 1963. In the anthropological works written mainly by the westerners on Nepal, Brahmans have been depicted and identified as a class of exploiters in relation to the ethnic groups (Caplan: 1970). They, too, are thus, perhaps unwittingly, being given an ethnic identity of their own. If this style is to prevail, their might emerge several caste groups trying to mark out their social boundaries very much along the ethnic lines and considering themselves to be quite apart from the rest. The Thakuri-Chhetri might be another people inclined to judge themselves quite apart from the other Parbatiya groups. The low and untouchable castes of the pre-1963 *Muluki Ain* years may be said to have even more a legitimate ground as an exploited and still being exploited class of people to forge a new identity of their own. The electoral politics has placed a new sense of power among these people in the rural settlements where the high-caste runners in election are obliged to woo and win them by using persuasion and other more tangible means to get their votes (Caplan, P.: 1971). These are all, no doubt, circumstances fraught with divisive tendencies capable of inducing new tensions.

In the preceding lines, we tried to outline some of the broad patterns of group relationship emerging in Nepal in the recent times. One might say that in the present state there is no immediate danger of a

serious breakdown in the older form of relationship, and of Nepal facing an ethnic problem of a big magnitude. But the future might be different, who knows. A new basis of national integration will have to be found to give the country a new strength of unity. This lies certainly in including new values of democracy and by encouraging increased popular participation of the people in the country's political process. As long as the old order prevailed, the Hindu system of social values was allowed to go unquestioned. Caste inequality and difference of status which it accorded to people was held as a preordained fact and hence, legitimate, by everyone. It got supported on two key Hindu concepts. One was the theory of *karma* according to which the present life of a person got explained in terms of his deeds in his past life. He carried the fruits of his deeds to his next life after death, and his present position in terms of his caste standing according to this belief, is therefore an earned one. Any disadvantage suffered in this life can only be mitigated by living it in accordance with the rules of *dharma*, which laid emphasis on the right and virtuous conduct of a person carried out or fulfilled from his social station into which he had been born. Since all castes, high or low, shared in the truth of this ideology, this was given a wide acceptance in the society. Before the new ideas of equality, social justice and democracy infiltrated in Nepal from outside, the traditional Hindu model of caste had provided it, as in the opinion of some, a 'harmonic model' (Béteille: 1975). It was a natural Hindu outlook and a legally acknowledged arrangement in the Old Legal Code of Nepal by which it incorporated even the most culturally contrastive ethnic societies into one social order by giving each of them a definite place in their caste rankings. However much some of us might wish to see this 'harmonic model' to prevail as before, this may not be possible. Because, this model has just outlived its utility now. Our true search should be to continue to find this harmony in group relationship, but the values on which they are to be based must, however, be compatible with the times.

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