

## HOW SHOULD ONE STUDY ETHNICITY AND NATIONALISM?

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### **Bhattachan's review of Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom**

In a recent issue of *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* (Vol. 25:1, pp. 111-130) Dr. Krishna Bhattachan has favoured a book that I co-edited, *Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom: The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Nepal* (Amsterdam: Harwood, 1997), with a long and detailed review. He has raised many important issues about the book and, more generally, about how academics should study and write about ethnicity and nationalism. To these points and criticisms, in a spirit of engaged scholarly debate, I would like to offer a personal response (I speak for myself only; my co-editors are more than capable of defending their own views). It is a tribute to the seriousness and comprehensiveness of his review, I would argue, that it has stimulated such a lengthy reply.

Dr. Bhattachan has questioned whether such a book should not have covered all Nepal's castes and ethnic groups and he writes: "Why were three articles on the Rais included but none on the many other ethnic groups...? Why was there not a single article about the Bahuns and Chetris...? Why was [sic] there no articles about the Dalits and Muslims?... Why did the Maithils get priority over the Bhojpuris and Abadhis...?" (1998: 113). The simple answer to these questions is that the book was never intended to be an encyclopaedia, with equal coverage of every group, but rather to provide a representative sample of in-depth, ethnographic studies. Since the authors took different angles, and since Nepal's different groups really are different, it would have been counterproductive to impose a fixed format and list of questions for contributors to address. It was not meant to be that kind of book. It was intended to be illustrative without being exhaustive. Had the encyclopaedic approach been adopted there would have been no space for

authors to develop the ethnographic insights that are, I believe, the unique strength of the book. It is true that there are three chapters on the Rai (if one includes the Yakka among the Rai, which itself is debatable); but these three chapters complement each other, and taken together provide a very valuable understanding of eastern Nepal. Certainly it would have been helpful to have had ethnographic articles exploring changing forms of identity among Bahuns, Chetris, Magars, and Dalits, and I regret that these groups were not covered. But the book was already long and we were very lucky that Harwood Academic Publishers was willing to take it at all at this length.

### **Size and Cost of Books Published in the West**

The book is, as Dr Bhattachan points out, very expensive. It is important here not to exaggerate the power of Western academics. Certainly, they work in conditions and at salaries that compare very favourably with those of academics and intellectuals in developing countries. But they do not work under easy conditions of their own choosing, and only a minority of 'superstars', mostly based in the USA, have the power to publish where and in whatever format they please. Unfortunately the length of the book (the editors' attempt to be as representative as possible) undermined the case for a paperback and therefore a cheap and easily available book. I take heart at Dr Bhattachan's suggestion that it would be useful if the book were translated into Nepali and other languages of Nepal.

### **The Question of Instrumentalism**

Dr Bhattachan makes a very good point that whatever theory of motivation is used should be applied consistently: if it is applied to activists it ought to be also applied to those who resist them. It is certainly correct to ask, not just 'Who will benefit if ethnic demands are met?' but: 'Who will benefit if ethnic demands are not met?' It is one of the main points of ethnic activists the world over that, when the playing field is not level to start with, the liberal rule of treating like cases alike and appointing to positions on merit in fact favours the dominant group (cf. Bhattachan 1998: 116).

### **How Should One Study Ethnicity and Nationalism?**

**Rule One:** Nationalism is not natural.

The first rule for the scholarly study of these phenomena is to recognize that ethnicity and nationalism are not 'natural', 'inherent', or 'eternal'. To

assume that national feeling or identification in any of these things is the position usually taken up by nationalists. This should make it hard for scholars to be apologists for particular nationalisms; but there have been, and still are, many academics who do take on this role.

Nationalism is in fact adopted by some people in certain contexts, and not by other people in other contexts. At some historical periods the phenomena of nationalism are simply absent; even when they do occur, they are not equally shared by all classes, by both genders, by all ethnic groups, and so on. Thus nationalism, far from being a natural, inevitable phenomenon, needs to be explained. In Nepal, as in most countries of the world, there is and has been a conscious process of nation-building. Eugen Weber's book, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, is a classic account of how culturally and linguistically diverse people were trained, through schooling, military service, and the disciplines of the market into speaking French and adopting urban ways. The nation, he concludes, has to be seen "not as a given reality but as a work-in-progress, a model of something at once to be built and to be treated for political reasons as already in existence" (ibid.: 493). Before the time about which Weber writes (1870-1914) there were numerous parts of France where the French language was simply not understood. French citizens had to be forced, often unwillingly, to see themselves as French. (For a study of the Breton minority in France, which, in spite of its title, shows that the majority of ordinary Bretons do indeed see themselves as French, see Maryon McDonald's *We are not French!*)

Thus there are many times and places where people have no particular national or ethnic feelings: their ties to other people are much more local; and their religious or political allegiances may go far beyond the nation or ethnic group (Anderson 1983). Still today many ordinary people feel no particular attachment to their culture; they are happy to change it and adapt it, and feel no great loss at so doing – to the anger or despair of cultural nationalists. It is a matter of common observation that many Nepalis whose mother tongue is not Nepali none the less speak Nepali to their children. This is a very common phenomenon which has happened in many parts of the globe. A glance at the Vienna telephone directory reveals the etymological evidence of linguistic change at the heart of the Hapsburg Empire: numerous were the subjects of the Hapsburg who switched from various Slav languages (or Yiddish if they were Jewish) to German as the official language, the language of science, education, and progress, as it was then seen to be.

**Rule Two:** Nationalism and ethnicity need to be studied from the bottom up.

The second rule for the study of nationalism and ethnicity is that they need to be studied ethnographically, i.e. from the bottom up. What does this mean in practice? It means following the widely accepted norms of ethnographic fieldwork: living with the people being studied and conversing with them in their own language(s). As far as practicable it means sharing their own way of life (there may be limits, especially with very poor populations, as graphically described by Moffatt 1979). In other words, it means not restricting oneself to administering, or having someone else administer, a list of closed and quantifiable questions (such methods have their place for certain purposes, but are incapable of revealing the subtle, contextual, and changing nature of people's deepest identifications). Nor does it mean restricting oneself to occasional, open-ended interviews (though this latter method can sometimes attain the range and depth of ethnographic insight of participant observation, if the research is already 'at home' in the culture). For most ordinary people, in situations such as contemporary Nepal, nationalism and ethnicity play only an occasional role in their conscious lives, much of the time being a kind of backdrop of which they are hardly aware. In such a situation, the social-scientific researcher will get a better understanding of the role of nationalism and ethnicity in ordinary people's lives by trying to obtain a rounded, holistic picture of their whole way of life, and of their interactions with others, by hanging around long enough to observe those interactions for themselves, and not just relying on other people's accounts of them.

Dr Bhattachan points out that the book lacks contributions by political scientists. This is true. Political scientists have not been slow to contribute to analyses of Nepal post-1990 (see Kumar 1995, 2000). Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom was intended to be ethnographically based, that is to say, based on detailed case studies, regardless of the disciplinary allegiance of the writer. Claire Burkert's paper (Burkert 1997) was written by someone without formal social-science training; but it provides a subtle, ethnographic analysis of Maithil identity, incorporating a very valuable focus on gender, based on long acquaintance with the region. Political scientists have sometimes provided theoretically significant contributions to ethnographic approaches (one thinks particularly of Scott's works on the study of resistance: Scott 1985, 1990). There was certainly no intent to exclude political scientists, per se; rather, the concern was to get below and

beyond simple description of immediate political processes, to study 'from the bottom up'.

**Rule Three:** One should not assume that ethnic activists and ordinary people share the same agenda.

This rule follows from Rule Two. Ordinary people may well have many of the same feelings as the activists about their own group and about neighbouring groups (on the other hand, they may get on very well with neighbouring groups). Ordinary people may be willing to support the activists under certain circumstances (on the other hand, they may regard the activists as living on another planet). But they do not devote their life to advancing the ethnic cause; they may consider it extreme, or a waste of time, or unnecessary, etc. It is a common mistake by scholars of all disciplines, including anthropology, to take the activists' views for those of the people on whose behalf they claim to speak. It is, of course, easy to speak to activists and to find out their views: the fact that they are activists means that they have articulated their views, written them down, and are keen to disseminate them. Activists often seek out social science researchers because they need an audience and are delighted to find an attentive one, an audience which may lend them respectability by publicizing their views abroad. Listening only to ethnic activists is to commit the same methodological error as those students of religion who talk only to ritual specialists. Adopting a 'bottom-up' perspective means not taking the discourse of ethnic activists at face value.

**Rule Four:** Researchers should be aware of the fluidity of boundaries.

The nationalist picture in the modern world presupposes that everyone has one and only one nation, and one and only one ethnic attachment ('Thou shalt have one and only one ethnic identity!'). Where people have dual attachments that lead to conflicting or opposing loyalties, this is treated as an anomaly that has to be ironed out, and is dismissed as an exception. But in fact, in the premodern, pre-nationalist world, people very often do have multiple and overlapping attachments. They may belong to one group for some purposes and other groups for different purposes. They may belong to a group that has one kind of identity in relation to some groups, and a different sort of identity in relation to other groups. The boundaries of states in the premodern world were notoriously fluid and undefined. Social attachments, which today are supposed to determine a unique and unequivocal ethnic

attachment, were determined by different criteria. The majority of the Rajopadhyaya Brahmans of the Kathmandu valley do not today see themselves as Newars, do not call themselves Newars, do not speak Newar to their children, and do not support Newar ethnic activism. Yet they are seen as Newars by many others, an identification (one or two well-known intellectuals apart) which they themselves reject. This is by no means an isolated case. Andrew Russell's paper about the Yakha describes another small group that is able to claim various different identities on different occasions; and Charles Ramble's paper about Bhotiyas shows how they construct localized ethnic identities that reject a pan-Bhotiya formulation (Russell 1997, Ramble 1997).

The nationalist and ethno-nationalist picture tends to downplay the importance of mixture, both in the past and today, a conceptual error that is usually labelled 'essentialism'. In fact, as is well known, the various different castes and ethnic groups of today intermarried very greatly. The Chetri caste was able to spread so fast throughout the country and became its largest group by means of intermarriage, as described by Fürer-Haimendorf (1966); even the offspring of Bahun men and tribal women (i.e. children with no Chetri genes at all) became Chetris. Because such marriages go against both the ideology of caste and the modern ideology of ethnicity, they are not celebrated and are forgotten as quickly as the social network allows. But it is perhaps time that reflective and liberal nationalists, keen to find a new basis for a multicultural Nepal, began to celebrate and even encourage such mixture. As Whelpton writes, "It is surely time for the House of Gorkha to reclaim its Magar heritage" (Whelpton 1997: 73). (See further the conclusion, point 4, below.)

**Rule Five:** Nationalism and ethnicity should be studied in historical context.

In order to understand how feelings of nationalism and ethnicity have developed, it is essential to study how they have changed over time, and not to assume, as nationalists tend to do, that these were the same in the past as they are today (see Rule One). In this context, research on the actual formation of early Nepali nationalism is particularly valuable (Burghart 1984, Onta 1996, 1997, 1999), because it prevents it from being taken for granted. It is quite wrong to project back from the present to Prithvi Narayan's time, or to the Rana period, the kind of national feelings that are conventional today. Hence the inclusion in Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom of

several, contrasting historical studies (Whelpton 1997, Michaels 1997, Hutt 1997, Pfaff-Czarnecka 1997). The work of ethnic nationalists to rediscover histories that have been ignored in the official versions encouraged by the state might fall into this category, providing they do not merely mirror and reproduce the projective errors of the official histories they are arguing against.

Sentiments of attachment are framed and conditioned by the politics and pressures of their own time. One consequence of this is that, though national and ethnic feelings are not inevitable, and may not be found, in some periods of history, it is in fact the case that in today's environment, when the whole global order presupposes nation-states, they do indeed have a kind of inevitability. But, as I have argued, the extent to which they are part of ordinary people's life-world today is a variable and empirical question that can only be established by careful and open-minded ethnographic fieldwork, and cannot be predicted or assumed in advance of such study. My own contribution to Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom attempted to understand, by providing both historical and sociological background, how it was that the Newars, with a strong sense of their own cultural identity, none the less were very slow – slower than other ethnic groups of Nepal – to give any form of political expression to this (Gellner 1997).

### Some Conclusions

(1) Most ordinary people are essentially concerned about their family's economic survival. If this means speaking to their children in Nepali rather than in their own mother tongue, if it means cutting down on expensive rituals, switching to a non-traditional method of performing them, or abandoning them altogether, most people do this without great psychic cost. Most people are not particularly nationalist or especially communal most of the time. This may be fortunate or unfortunate, depending on your point of view, but it is, I believe, a fact.

(2) The alliance between some of the more extreme ethnic nationalists and the Maoists that appears to have emerged recently in Nepal is, to me, surprising. Certainly it has been encouraged by the Maoists themselves, but it is surely naive to treat the Maoists as if they were just another political party whose election manifesto is to be examined to see how much succour it offers to one's favourite causes. There have been enough Marxist-Leninist regimes in

the twentieth-century for the autocratic, centralist, and oppressive implications of Marxism as a ruling ideology to be obvious to any properly educated person. Given the proximity of Nepal to Tibet, and the long-term presence of Tibetan refugees in Nepal, there is no excuse for Nepali intellectuals being unaware of the consequences of a Maoist regime for ethnic activism. There may be so-called autonomous regions in the PRC but there is no real autonomy.

(3) Indiscriminate attacks on all members of one ethnic group or caste have no place in scholarly discourse and still less should individuals be attacked for a background which they did not choose. Krishna Bhattachan may not agree with Prayag Raj Sharma's arguments about the position of Bahuns in contemporary Nepal or the role of Hinduization and Sanskritization in producing a nascent national identity (Sharma 1997), but to label his arguments as "de-contextualized, ahistoric, narcissist, illogical, sometimes senseless and baseless" (Bhattachan 1998: 126) is to fail to live up to the canons of acceptable scholarly or engaged intellectual debate. The seriousness of the issue for contemporary Nepal surely requires its foremost sociologists both to acknowledge ethnic inequalities and to advocate national unity, on whatever basis.

(4) In the light of the fluidity of boundaries in actual social practice (as opposed to the traditional and modern folk models that are used to describe it), any government that was serious about both acknowledging ethnic attachments, while wanting simultaneously to 'unify the nation', might think about the categories that are on offer for Nepali citizens to tick in the next census. If there were options to tick more than one box, or none, whether under the heading of religion or that of ethnic group or caste, there might be a surprising number of people who chose either to tick more than one, or to tick none. (I have argued this point in a recent paper: Gellner 2001.) Presumably today's sophisticated, computer-aided, statistical techniques would be well able to deal with the results. Such a step would enable the census to reflect more accurately social developments within the country and might prevent the figures from becoming even more of a political hot potato.

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