

Vote For Prashant Tamang: Representations of an Indian Idol in the Nepali print media and the retreat of multiculturalism*

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Introduction

According to dominant accounts of the relationship between media and nationalism, the media can play a role in both inventing and perpetuating national culture. In his most quoted work, Benedict Anderson has discussed the role of the media, and especially the print media, in constructing national identities (Anderson 1983). Silvio Waisbord claims that scholarship has identified, in relation to this construction of national identity, three roles of media: ‘making national cultures routinely, offering opportunities for collective experiences, and institutionalizing national culture’ (Waisbord 2004: 386). Michael Billig’s surveying of a single day of the British media reaches a similar conclusion, arguing that these media represented the homeland by using words such as ‘our’ and ‘here’ alongside symbols such as the flag in their representations of Britain (Billig 1995).

This article discusses a struggle between proponents of monocultural and multicultural national identities in the Nepali media and contributes to a debate on the increasing trend towards a retreat from multiculturalism. The idea of multiculturalism or the tolerance of difference began in the late 1960s in western democracies, and was manifested in the recognition of the rights of ethnic, racial, religious and sexual minorities. This trend encountered heavy criticism from academics and politicians from the mid 1990s onwards. Kymlicka has argued that it is only in the case of immigrants’ rights that there has been a backlash and that there is no backlash regarding the rights of ethnic peoples and other minorities (Kymlicka 2010). But here I wish to argue that the Nepali media’s use of

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old symbols of national identity in relation to Prashant Tamang, a reality-show contestant on the TV show 'Indian Idol', represented an attempt to retreat from multiculturalism and to reprioritise a common national culture.

After a brief discussion of reality shows, including 'Indian Idol' and Prashant Tamang, I will engage with the debate on nationalism and national identity in Nepal in its historical context. This paper draws upon news reports, articles, editorials, and letters to editors published in the Nepali print media from July to October 2007. By 'Nepali print media', I refer to newspapers and magazines in both Nepali and English that are available at the Martin Chautari library. Although Prashant Tamang was declared the winner of 'Indian Idol 3' in September 2007, discussions regarding him continued into October.

The Idol series, 'Indian Idol' and Prashant Tamang

In October 2004, the Hindi General Entertainment Channel (GEC)'s share of the Indian television market was falling, but fresh format programmes like 'Indian Idol' helped it to increase its viewership from 19 to 25 percent (Krishna 2004). By July 2007, 200,000 people were calling each day, on 570 telephone lines and in four cities, to register themselves for the programme (Aiyar and Chopra 2000).

'Indian Idol' was an instant hit, with the first season being aired between October 2004 and March 2005. Over 20,000 people participated in auditions in four different cities (Bhandari 2005). This season, which was judged by Anu Malik, Sonu Nigam, and Farah Khan, was won by Abhijeet Sawant. 'Indian Idol 2' was aired from 21 November 2005 to 22 April 2006. Both the judges and anchors reprised their roles from the first season and Sandeep Acharya won the competition, becoming the second 'Indian Idol'.

The press release for 'Indian Idol 3' contained the title; 'Chahiye Woh Ek Awaaz Jispar Ho Desh Ko Naaz' Indian Idol 3-Coming Soon' (IndiaPRwire 2007), conveying the message that there was a search for 'a voice of which the nation could be proud'. This press release represented the call for registration for the auditions of 'Indian Idol 3', which were going to be held in twelve Indian cities: Jodhpur, Bhubaneshwar, Hyderabad, Amritsar, Srinagar, Nagpur, Baroda, Bhopal, Kanpur, Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai (IndiaPRwire 2007). Interestingly, it did not mention that auditions were also to be held in London and Dubai, which suggests that these must have

been decided at a later date. Aspirants between the ages of 16 to 30 had to call or send an SMS to register for an audition.

Three days later, a new press release was issued. The singers Alisha Chinoy, Udit Narayan Jha and Anu Malik were announced as judges and the male host was also changed. When 'Indian Idol 3' started, there were four judges including the three singers and a lyricist Javed Akhtar. Both the marketing and hype worked, resulting in 25,000 people showing up to the auditions. 'Indian Idol 3' was aired from 4 May 2007 to 23 September 2007. It is believed that its opening episodes on 4 and 5 May attracted 27 million viewers (Indiantelevision.com team 2007).

As the final of the competition drew near, to be fought out between Amit Paul and Prashant Tamang, there was an upsurge of nationalism on a regional, national and transnational level. People in Meghalaya, from where Amit Paul hailed, initiated a campaign to support him by sending votes and other activities. This became known as the 'Amit Paul phenomenon'. His participation gave different groups from Meghalaya and Northeast India an opportunity to come together and promote a common cause (Punathambekar 2010, Mazumdar 2007). A similar campaign in support of Prashant Tamang began in Darjeeling, Nepal, and other places where Nepalese lived (Cooper 2008).

The two finalists received 70 million SMS votes during the final nine days (14- 23 September 2007), which was unprecedented in the history of 'Indian Idol'. Votes came in from nine countries: India, Nepal, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Kingdom.¹

'Hamro Prashant': Nepali identities and the retreat from multiculturalism

Though 'Indian Idol 3' was aired from 4 May 2007, coverage of Prashant Tamang in the Nepali media began about a month after the first telecast. This was not unusual, because 'Indian Idol' was a programme focused on the making of a star and people do not generally relate to participants during auditions. The liking and belonging process begins after the audience comes to know the participants closely, and it is

1 Available at http://www.sify.com/indianidol/images/jun2007/voting_terms.html. Accessed on 2 August 2011.

then that the fandom begins. This is especially true in respect of reality shows, because their stars are nearer to ordinary people than film stars (Homes 2004).

Before Prashant Tamang's blog (<http://www.prashantindianidol.blogspot.com>²) began on 13 June 2007, the Nepali media had already carried news items about him. The Nepali newspaper *Kantipur* published a report on 9 June and discussed the campaign that was being implemented around Darjeeling. It also quoted the actress Niruta Singh, who hails from Darjeeling, and who had gone there and witnessed the campaign. This report paved the way for other news reports and articles.

In the following section, I conduct a discursive analysis of the Nepali print media coverage. My analysis will also extend to the discourse of Nepali nationalism and national identities, Nepali language and national dress, anti-Indian Nepali nationalism and the crisis of Nepali nationalism.

Gorkhali/Nepali and other nationalisms

Although Prashant Tamang is an Indian citizen, the Nepali media presented him as a Nepali. This shows that, for the Nepali media, a nation is an imagined community that encompasses people beyond its borders. Common ancestry, memory and history are all important aspects for the Nepali media.

From the very first news items about Prashant in the Nepali media, he was presented as a symbol of Gorkhali pride. The article written by Benupraj Bhattarai published in *Kantipur* on 8 June 2007 had the headline, 'Wish to become idol' (Bhattarai 2064 v.s.). The focus of the article was the need to make Prashant the pride of all Gorkhalis by helping him win 'Indian Idol 3'. Alongside the information that people in Darjeeling were doing their best to make him the winner, the article also declared that Prashant had provided an opportunity to unite the people of Darjeeling in Nepaliness. It also included the request of Chief Minister of Sikkim, Pawan Chamling, to the people of Sikkim to make a Nepali singer the next idol. The next news item was published in *Samaya*, a weekly Nepali magazine, in its 15 June 2007 issue, under the headline 'Height of Prashant' (anon. 2064 v.s.). Here, it introduced Prashant as a Gorkhali youth and informed the reader that he would 'definitely establish the Nepali ethnic identity'.

2 The blog site moved to <http://prasanttamang.blogspot.com> later.

This article added that by his singing Tamang had increased his fame and the pride of people of Nepali origin and informed the reader that Prashant had reached the top twelve contestants remaining in the competition. These two examples show that, from the beginning, identities such as 'Gorkhali' and 'Nepali' were prominently used by the Nepali media in their reporting of Prashant.

So, what is 'Gorkhali', and what does it have to do with being 'Nepali'? To answer this, we have to observe the construction of these identities. The term 'Gorkhali' came from the kingdom of Gorkha, which remained small until King Prithvi Narayan Shah and his army expanded it from 1744 onward. During the war between Gorkha and the East India Company in 1814-16, the British were impressed by the Gorkhals' bravery and began recruiting soldiers from Nepal after the war ended. As the Nepali government opposed this process of recruitment, people from Nepal were encouraged to settle in places in India, such as Dehradun, Darjeeling and Shillong. Later, the Rana regime, which was established in 1846, gave formal clearance to the recruitment (Subba 1992: 57). A study by Banskota has shown that Thakuris, Khas, Magars, Gurungs, Limbus, Sunwars, Rais from central and eastern Nepal were recruited as Gorkhas from the Gorakhpur and Darjeeling depots (Banskota 1994). As there were flexible rules relating to migration, many Nepalese people migrated to various places in India, Sikkim and Bhutan. Furthermore, by 1864, and issued through a charter, the British government allowed the Gorkha regiment to buy land in places such as Shillong, Dharamsala, Almora, Dehradun and Gorakhpur (Golay 2009).

The formation of the Gorkha identity was related to this recruitment process. Bidhan Golay has argued that Gorkha identity was a construct of the British colonial discourse of 'martial race', consisting of 'the praise of the dogged bravery and masculine qualities of the Gorkhas' (Golay 2009: 78). Using a Foucauldian perspective, he says:

It also collapsed multiple identity and fluidities, typical of the Gorkha society then, and represented them as a single identity. The ethnic identities were stereotyped and continuously reproduced through a discursive practice... The Gorkha subject was dislocated by stripping off his past and relocated him back again as a deterritorialised subject of 'history' (Golay 2009: 79).

Due to the amalgamation of different identities, a singular identity evolved. It helped in nurturing the identity of 'composite Nepalinness'. A feeling of *we-ness*, encompassing the caste and ethnic boundaries of the Nepali *jati*, was discussed in Nepali public spheres during the Rana period, particularly in the diasporic communities in India (Onta 1996). This awareness came in opposition to Bengali and Hindi nationalism. According to Chalmers (2003), it was a Madhesi-less Nepali 'we' that could not extend beyond a hill solidarity. The post-1950 Nepali state, especially the Panchayat polity after 1960, continued this nationalism until 1990. During the Panchayat period, Nepali language, Hindu religion and monarchy were the three symbols of Nepali nationalism (Burghart 1994).

Until 1990, criticising this nationalism was not easy because the Panchayat constitution safeguarded these three symbols. However, after a democratic political system began in 1990, the environment changed. Scholars and activists demanded a new Nepali nationalism that accommodated cultural and linguistic diversity (Shah 1993, Sharma 1992). Although the 1990 constitution accepted Nepal as a multi-ethnic and multicultural country, thus providing space for the ethnic activism of Janajati groups (Onta 2006), it also attempted 'to impose a national identity based on the cultural and linguistic heritage of one minority' (Fisher 1994: 14).

One of the demands of the April movement of 2006 was a 'New Nepal': a restructuring of the Nepali state and a redefining of Nepali nationalism. When the interim constitution of 2007 was adopted on 15 June 2007, the umbrella organisation of indigenous people and nationalities, the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) was dissatisfied because it included only one of its demands: a secular state. The demands that were not incorporated included the right to use ethnic languages in government and education, and 'proportional representation for ethnic nationalities in all sectors of the state, right to self-determination, restructuring of the state into ethnic and regional autonomous regions' (Hangen 2007). This dissatisfaction was not only limited to ethnic groups. The leaders of the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum (MJF) also felt excluded due to the constitution not including the word 'federalism'. The arrest of these leaders for burning copies of a draft of the constitution on 16 January 2007 ensured activities that gradually led to the 21-day Madhesi uprising. This movement was a response to hill-centric nationalism, and the constitution was amended as a result of it (Jha 2007). This movement

contributed to the growth of a nationalism based on the Madhesi identity. This nationalism was a manifestation of the dissatisfaction of the Madhesis about their systematic exclusion from the state machinery, and it resulted in the Madhesi demand for inclusion through the federal state (Hacchethu 2007). Whilst studying the national symbols and identities that were presented during Prashant Tamang's participation in 'Indian Idol 3' we should not forget these nationalisms.

On 15 June 2007, *The Kathmandu Post* published a feature about Prashant by Avas Karmacharya with the headline, 'Prashant Tamang at Indian Idol 3'. The article declared: 'And one among the ten finalists is Prashant Tamang. Belonging to Nepali origin, Prashant's melodious voice has made him one of the heartthrob contestants of the international show'. Beside this, it also included the views of three people from the music and fashion sector; Ram Krishna Dakal, a singer; Alok Shree, a music composer and Sugaika KC, Miss Nepal 2005. It is interesting to analyse the views of KC. According to the newspaper, she said:

All Nepalis should be proud of Prashant Tamang. It's not a joke to reach that level of competition and that too on an international platform. And I'm so thankful to all the Indians who've been sending votes for him even though he doesn't belong to their communities (Karmacharya 2007: 1).

In contrast to what the Nepali media thought about Prashant, a Madhesi interviewed by a researcher investigating the 2007 Madhesi uprising expressed the following views on the subject of Nepali nationalism:

The pahadis from India are not questioned about their loyalty to Nepal. Many Nepalese think that just because they are Pahadis their loyalty to Nepal is intact, despite being born in India. On the other hand we who are born in Nepal, whose ancestral homes are in Nepal, are called Indians (Mathema 2011: 48).

This is why the Madhesi scholars Chandrakishor, C. K. Lal and Ram Rijan Yadav viewed Prashant as a continuation of hill-based nationalism. All three argued that Prashant's popularity exposed the hollowness of Nepali nationalism, which was simply another form of the *pahade rastrabad* (hill

nationalism) promoted by King Mahendra during the Panchayat period. Chandrakishor thought that modern Nepali nationalism excluded the Madhesis while yet accepting people of Nepali origin living in Darjeeling, Sikkim and Bhutan as Nepalis. He even argued that the Prashant phenomenon threw cold water on the gains of the popular movement of 2006 and the Madhesi revolution (Chandrakishor 2007). In another article, C.K. Lal expressed the hope that Nepali nationalism would be more accommodative (Lal 2007). Similarly, citing the examples of the singer Aruna Lama, the painter Lainsingh Bangdel, the politician Ranbir Subba, the film director Tulsi Ghimire and the actress Niruta Singh, who all came from West Bengal to Nepal, Yadav argued that the Nepali state did not recognise the Maithili-speaking Indian Dharendra Jha 'Dhirendra' who had contributed a lot to the Maithili language (Yadav 2004 v.s.).

It is interesting that Janajati groups were perceived as supportive of Prashant Tamang, despite their longstanding critique of Mahendra's nationalism. I found no Janajati voices expressing any scepticism about the Prashant phenomenon in the Nepali media. In fact, it was quite the opposite. The Tamang Ghedung Sangh both campaigned to support Prashant and collected money for him (Gyawali 2004 v.s.) One way of reading this is that, although Janajatis were opposed to Panchayati nationalism, most were for hill nationalism and against Madhesi nationalism. Having failed to find any criticism of the Prashant Tamang phenomenon from Janajati activists, despite them criticising the governments of the Panchayat period for being communal, I argue that we need to see the Prashant issue as something more complex than simply a resurfacing of Panchayat-era nationalism. Yet, we should not forget that the main manifestation of this nationalism was similar to hill nationalism. An editorial published in the Nepali daily *Rajdhani* claimed that Prashant's victory had proved that Nepali hill origin people were brave and clever (Rajdhani 2007). While the Janajatis supported Prashant, initiating campaigns to collect money to send SMS votes and resulting in people visiting Darjeeling and Sikkim to distribute money, the nationalism presented in the Nepali media in Prashant's name was mono-cultural, solely representing hill nationalism.

The Nepali language as a symbol

The language celebrated in the coverage of Prashant Tamang in the Nepali media was Nepali. This represented the language of the conquerors (Malla

1979) when the Tamangs of Nepal were searching for a Tamang identity, but from the very first news items in the Nepali media, published on 8 June, one of the main symbols used to prove that he was Nepali, besides being a person from Darjeeling, was the language he spoke at home. These news items informed the reader that, during one episode of 'Indian Idol 3' one of the judges, Javed Akhtar, asked Prashant about the language he spoke at home. When Prashant replied that he spoke the Nepali language, Javed praised him for his Hindi, and for pronouncing some sounds not available in the Nepali language (Bhattarai 2064 v.s.a).

On 23 June, *Kantipur* published a full-page news story with two headlines; 'Kathmandu Taranga' [Kathmandu Wave] and 'Achanak Nayak' [Suddenly a Hero]. The first article had no byline, and informed the reader that the Nepalese were happy to see a Tamang police officer singing in the auditions. It also conveyed the information that he spoke with one of judges, Udit Narayan Jha in Nepali and that he had been selected as a representative of Indians of Nepali origin. In this article, his mother tongue was seen as the symbol of Nepaliness. The article contained a quote from one Vivek Karki of Maharajgunj in Kathmandu, who said that it was a source of pride for the Nepalese to have a person who was both of Nepali origin and Nepali speaking on an Indian platform. Furthermore, he stated that he would make efforts to ensure Prashant became the winner if there were provisions for the sending of SMS from Nepal (anon. 2064 v.s. a). Although the headline suggested that 'Prashant fever' had reached Kathmandu, there was no campaign to support Prashant at that time in the area. People were watching 'Indian Idol', but the fever only arrived in Kathmandu in September 2007.

Prashant, by ethnicity, belongs to the Tamang community. However, he does not speak the Tamang language. Until 1990, in comparison to Nepali, Nepal Bhasha and Maithili, there were few printed materials in Tamang (Hutt 1986). After the 1990 constitution declared Nepali as *rastra bhasha* (official language), and all other languages in Nepal as *rastriya bhasha* (national languages), a literary tradition began in the Tamang language. A scholar of South Asian language presented Tamang as the language that could create 'a pan-Tamang ethnic identity' (Sonntag 1995: 109). Again however, the question arises as to why the media's focus was on Nepali and not on Tamang, the language that the ancestors of Prashant abandoned after their migration to Darjeeling. To find the answer, we

have to go through the history of the Nepali language and engage with the debate on both the national language and the official language.

Nepali, which is quite similar to Hindi, was brought into Nepal by immigrants to Western Nepal. An earlier name of the Nepali language was Khas bhasha. There is a belief amongst ethnic activists that the decline of the other languages of Nepal went hand-in-hand with the ascent of this language. A report submitted by the Institute of Integrated Development Studies (IIDS) to the National Planning Commission in 2002 presented some cases of the suppression of local languages. One example was the then-King, Rana Bahadur, ordering Limbus to use the Khas-Nepali language instead of their own language whilst corresponding with the state (Subba 2002).

However, the expansion and acceptance of the Khas-Nepali language was more complicated than the report conveyed. Studies of the Nepali language show that the Khas language was popular amongst the people of Western Nepal, including Gorkha. Even before King Prithvi Narayan Shah extended the territory, Khas-kura speaking people had settled in the Kathmandu valley and the hills around it:

The migration of Parbatiyas over a widespread area and their infiltration of areas traditionally inhabited by other ethnic groups provided not only a large and extended community of speakers of the Khas language, but one which also had a strong enough sense of solidarity with fellow Parbatiya (whether this was based on linguistic or caste affinity) to welcome the rule of a Parbatiya dynasty in the area where they lived (Owen-Smith 2006: 28).

Although ethnic identities were fluid, the Khas language was related to the hill or parbatiya identity (Whelpton 2005). This is one of the reasons why Tibeto-Burman groups from the hills adopted the Nepali language, whilst people from the plains (the Madhes) were reluctant to do so.

As the Khas language became the language of administration and government, it was associated with the power of Gorkha, resulting in people calling it Gorkha Bhasha. With the penetration of the state machinery into their lives, people speaking certain Tibeto-Burman languages began to abandon their ancestral languages, whilst others became bilingual (Owen-Smith 2006). Examples of this include many of the Magars speaking Nepali

after the Gorkha conquest, and many Newars from the Kathmandu valley speaking both Nepal Bhasa and Nepali (Whelpton 2005).

Although Khas-Nepali had been a lingua franca since the Gorkha conquests, it was in 1930 that it was given the status of the official language of Nepal (Burghart 1984). Before this, the Gorkha Bhasa Prakashini Samiti had been established in 1913 in order to promote and censor Nepali literature (Hutt 1988). The Nepalese living in different parts of India during the Rana period nurtured this language as a national language before it was declared as such in Nepal. The constitution promulgated in 1958 mentioned Nepali in the devanagari script as the national language. This ended the debate on the possibility of using Hindi as a national language that had been started by the Nepal Tarai Congress in 1951 (Gaige 1975). Laws were subsequently changed in order to make Nepali an authentic language of both legal and commercial transactions (Hutt 1988). The Panchayat polity consolidated the use of the Nepali language in education and communication through various plans. Although we lack any policy documentation that demonstrates that the Panchayati state suppressed local languages, we have instances in which people were dubbed ‘communal’ when they promoted their own culture, tradition and language and not Nepali national culture (Maharjan 2011). The mantra of this polity was *ek bhasha, ek bhash, ek desh* (one language, one costume, one country), a modified version of the slogan *hamro raja, hamro desh; hamro bhasha, hamro bhash* (our king, our country; our language, our costume). The slogan from which it was modified is said to have been coined by the poet Bal Krishna Sama, and further articulated by a representative from the Lalitpur District during the first Intellectuals Conference called by Mahendra in 1962 (Shah 1993).

Scholars and activists had criticised this policy during the Panchayat system. In a mild tone, K. P. Malla said:

His Majesty’s Government of Nepal is determined, not only to promote Nepali as an instrument of national integration, but also to discourage all linguistically divisive tendencies. The government does not sponsor any publications in any other Nepalese languages (Malla 1979: 146).

In a semi-academic and activist style, Sitaram Tamang claimed that the one language policy had helped to strangle other languages in Nepal. Consequently, Tamang demanded the recognition of other languages

as national languages. Giving the example of Switzerland, which had adopted the three languages of Germany, France and Italy as official languages, he argued that a multi-lingual policy would not hamper the feeling of national unity. Instead, he warned that the 'one language, one dress policy' was inimical to unification (Tamang 1994[1987]).

Even the 1990 constitution legalised discrimination against minorities, in terms of their language and religion, by declaring Nepal as a Hindu kingdom. Furthermore, the Nepali language was stated as the national language, despite the fact that there were demands for this not to happen (Hutt 1994). There was, however, some leeway in the 1990 constitution, which held that the government's responsibility extended to promoting and preserving other languages, a declaration which prepared roads for ethnic activism. Many actors and institutions evolved to disseminate the grievances of minorities.

The declaration of all languages as national languages by the 1990 constitution did not change the way in which the Nepali state saw other languages. Although this constitution defined the country as multicultural and multi-lingual, by declaring other languages as national languages, internal diversity was still taken to be a threat to national unity (Malagodi 2008) and the monolingual official language system still prevailed in administration and governance. This could be seen clearly in 1997, when the local bodies of Kathmandu and Rajbiraj Municipalities adopted the bilingual policy of using both Nepali and local languages in 1997 and the Supreme Court ordered a stop to the policy on 1 June 1999. Ethnic activists have dubbed this a 'black day' in Nepali history.³

Whilst the provisions related to language in the Interim Constitution of Nepal 2063 [2007] appear to be liberal, they are simply a continuation of the old mentality. Article 5, under 'Language of the Nation', says this:

- (1) All the languages spoken as mother tongues in Nepal are the national languages of Nepal.
- (2) The Nepali language in the Devnagari script shall be the language of official business.

3 From 25 July 1997, the Kathmandu Municipality decided to use both Nepal Bhasa and Nepali language as official languages. Lalitpur, Bhaktapur, Thimi, Kirtipur and Rajbiraj Municipalities followed the Kathmandu Municipality's decision. Rajbiraj Municipality used Maithili and Nepali languages (Lama v.s. 2056).

- (3) Notwithstanding whatever is written in clause (2), the use of one's mother tongue in a local body or office shall not be barred. The State shall translate the language used for such purpose into the language of official business for the record (Yadav 2009: 99).

This was against the demand of activists and politicians such as Upendra Yadav, who had been criticising the one official language policy (Yadav 2003). Although these provisions appear to ease the use of national languages in official business, they also agree on the supremacy of Nepali. As argued by Phanindra K Upadhaya, sub-clause (3) is 'linguistic trickery'. He argues that 'the representatives of the political parties who debated longer than anticipated on making the constitution as inclusive as possible, ultimately succumbed to the rhetoric of denial no different than those of the past rulers' (Upadhaya 2011: 125). Instead of this policy of denial, the linguistic expert Yogendra Prasad Yadav recommends a bilingual policy that recognises both the lingua franca and regional languages (Yadav 2009).

The media coverage tried to show that the Nepali language represented a national identity that unified all the Nepalese in the world, a concept that was believed in Darjeeling. Another example proves this intention. On 22 September 2007 *The Kathmandu Post* published a letter to the editor from Rabindra Kr. Yadav, who stated:

After the Nepalis living inside and outside Nepal watched Prashant Tamang speaking in Nepali language in spite of being an Indian in the very show, they went banana[s] after him for seeking financial support both at home and aboard to send him SMS (Yadav 2007: 5)

Historically, the Nepali language enabled immigrants, especially Tibeto-Burman-speaking people from Nepal, to interact with each other in Darjeeling. After a long struggle, 1992 saw the Indian government including the Nepali language in the 8th schedule of the constitution. Thus, in the context of India, the Nepali language is a symbol of unity amongst the Nepalese and constitutes 'the basic of Nepali ethnic identity outside Nepal' (Hutt 1997: 116). This is in contrast to the Nepali language being a state-constructed symbol of national unity in Nepal. Ramrijan Yadav argues that although India had authorised the Nepali language, Nepal had not provided such a status to the Madhesi languages (Yadav 2064 v.s.)

His argument suggests that he is dissatisfied with the status given by the interim constitution to all languages of Nepal.

On the pretext of supporting Prashant Tamang, Nepali media praised the Nepali language as a traditional symbol of Nepali identity. One possible reading of this is that, in an indirect way, they praised a mono-lingual policy. Another reason for this was, undeniably, the international arena, an issue to which I shall return later in this paper. Ultimately, the Nepali media promoted monoculturalism instead of multiculturalism.

The Nepali cap as a symbol of national identity

Another aspect of the national identity of Nepal discussed in the Nepali media was the national dress. A photo of Prashant wearing a Nepali cap surfaced in early September, by which time he had reached the top three contestants with Amit Paul and Emon Chatterji. In Darjeeling on 3 September he wore a Dhaka topi and was escorted by bodyguards supplied by Sony Entertainment Television (SET). Though the Nepali media published photos of him, no news outlet mentioned the cap he wore at this time. Instead, they were interested in the activities of his fans. His wearing of a Nepali cap became a topic of discussion in the Nepali media only after he had won 'Indian Idol' on 23 September and his mother had laced a dhaka topi on his head while he was on stage. The next day, newspapers like *Kantipur* (Bhattarai 2064 v.s.b), *Gorkhapatra* (Shrestha 2064 v.s.), *Rajdhani* (anon. 2064 v.s.b) and the *Rising Nepal* (Timilsina 2007a) all highlighted his wearing of the cap.

Writing in *The Rising Nepal*, Prasun Timilsina, asked, 'What more [do] the Nepalese want than their national cap portraying the Nepalese culture on the head of the Indian Idol?' (Timilsina 2007a). Prashant wore this type of cap during his concerts in Kathmandu and Pokhara, and wore a bhadgaunle topi when he met the late Prime Minister, Girija Prasad Koirala. In one photo, Koirala was pictured placing a Bhadgaule cap on Tamang's head.

These kinds of caps became popular during the Panchayat period, but this does not mean that people did not wear them before this time. This is clear from an article published in 1956 in which the author expresses the wish that the Nepali cap, *daura-suruwal* and coat should be made mandatory (Mahananda 2011 v.s.) In another article, published in a Nepali magazine, *Nepal*, the author claimed that the concept of national dress was

institutionalised in 2011 v.s [1954-5] on the occasion of the coronation ceremony of King Mahendra (Basnet 2069 vs.). During the Panchayat period gazetted government workers had to wear the national dress, including a cap; male members of the general public had to wear one in order to enter a government office; and it was mandatory for men to wear it in the photo for a citizenship certificate. These practices did not end after 1990. A magazine report sums up the importance of the Dhaka Topi during the Panchayat period:

... demand for the cloth soon skyrocketed, along with the demand for daura suruwal, due to the rule imposed by the government under King Mahendra's reign. During Panchayat times, all high-ranking officials were required to be in the national attire and all other office staff had to be wearing at least a Nepali topi. According to a retired government official, those among the lower category of staff who did not want to buy a Dhaka topi could lease one for one rupee from one of the nearby stalls selling cigarettes and beetle-nut. Then they'd wear it during the office hours and return it back at the end of the day... The nationalist fervor attached to the daura surwal and Dhaka topi was at its peak during Mahendra's rule (1955-1972) (Pokharel 2008).

The national dress was not a subject of debate among ethnic activists. Instead, it was the Madhesi activists who raised this issue. Gajendra Narayan Singh, the Madhesi leader of the Nepal Sadbhavana Party, raised this issue in 1992 and subsequently he and six other MPs went to the Parliament wearing dhoti and kurta, demanding that this should also be deemed to be the national dress (Sapkota 2069 v.s.)

Even after 1990, males applying for a citizenship certificate were still required to wear a Nepali cap in the photograph they submitted with their application. The application form stated that 'a black and white photo must show both ears wearing a Nepali traditional hat' (Laczo 2003: 78). This was seen as a discriminatory provision. A report published by UNESCO claimed that the cap was mostly worn by Parbate-caste Hindus from the hills and the majority of Nepalis had no habit of wearing it. It further said that although Muslims and Sikhs had different caps, and Christians and Kirats were not used to wearing the cap, all had to wear it in order to get the certificate (Pandey et al 2006). Whilst this report's

claim was partly true, in that we see the Kiratis wearing this kind of cap, it is also correct that this cap is linked to the identity of a group of hill Hindu males. The requirement to wear a cap in the photo for the citizenship certificate ended after the April 2006 Revolution.

Although the main headline over the letters page of *Kantipur* on 25 September was 'Dhaka topi on Prashant's Head', only one of the seven letters was directly related to it. A section of one letter stated, 'The Topi is a symbol of Nepal, but we from Nepali territory have left off wearing the Topi. We have forgotten national dress'. It criticised Sher Bahadur Deuba for wearing a suit and tie whilst meeting the US President, Bill Clinton, some years earlier and then minister Hisila Yami for wearing a pair of jeans whilst taking her oath. The letter then added, 'Prashant is of Nepali origin and a Nepali speaking person. His nationality is Indian. Topi is not his ethnic dress' (Bista 2007). Despite this, the topi and the khukuri knife were part of the identity of the Nepalese in India, and the topi that Prashant wore had a khukuri pin affixed to it. This is also a symbol of the Gorkha army, and this fashion is more popular in Darjeeling than in Nepal.⁴

For Madhesi leaders, the national dress was a symbol of hill nationalism. During the Madhesi uprising, people wearing Nepali caps were targeted. Several writers in Nepali magazines also saw the topi as an anti-Madhesi symbol: for example, a letter to the editor of *Nepal* magazine from Rajiv Kumar Dev, a Madhesi, questioned the tradition of searching for nationalism through the topi and asked how this would help in bringing dhoti-wearing Madhesis into the mainstream (Dev 2064 v.s.) However, this type of criticism was rarely published, suggesting that the Nepali media were inclined to promote one culture in the name of Prashant, despite the fact that the Madhesi people could not relate to the symbols of Nepali nationalism and national unity used in relation to him. As Stuart Hall has argued, national symbols and culture are also a 'structure of cultural power' (Hall 1996: 616), and as such, the Nepali media usually support the dominant group's symbols. The Nepal government published a notice in the *Nepal Gazette* on 23 August 2010, which reconfirmed the status of the old national dress.⁵

4 My thanks to Ramesh Rai, my colleague at Martin Chautari, for pointing this out to me.

5 Information available at: http://www.moha.gov.np/uploads/news/file/Dress_20111021113636.pdf. [Accessed on 22 October 2012.]

In this context, the Nepali media were clearly interested in portraying the cap as a symbol of national unity. As this cap is the symbol of hill nationalism, the media debate supported mono-cultural, not multicultural nationalism.

Prashant during the crisis of identity

Some news articles presented Prashant as a new symbol of national unity during a crisis of identity. Samuel P. Huntington argues that challenges to established national identities come from three different sources: other national identities; sub-national identities; and transnational identities (Huntington 2004). The Nepali media did not see the national identities of other countries or the transnational identities of global institutions as a threat to Nepali national identity. Instead, what the media feared was the sub-national identities of race, culture, ethnicity and gender.

For example, on 22 July 2007, *Nepal* magazine published an article by Narayan Khadka entitled 'New Basis of Nationalism'. In this article, Khadka claimed that the support that Prashant was receiving from Nepalis was due to a feeling of nationalism. He also expressed his concern about the displacement of Pahadi people from the Madhes and the killing of Pahadi civil servants there (Khadka 2064 v.s.). The main concern of writers who framed their articles around the crisis of identity was the deteriorating relationship between Madhesis and Pahadis in the Tarai (Bishwokarma 2064 v.s.). However, Prateek Pradhan, the then editor of *The Kathmandu Post*, argued in the article he published when Prashant reached the final of 'Indian Idol' that 'Smaller groups of indigenous people, dalits, Badi women, Madhesis et al are also unknowingly contributing to the bickering that is affecting the integrity of the country' (Pradhan 2007: 4). Pradhan was clearly portraying subnationalisms as the main threat to national identity. He further argued:

The story of Prashant Tamang is a lesson for all. It is clear that no matter where Nepalis are living, they consider Nepal their motherland, and will not blink over their identity. Obviously, there is a warning to all ill-intentioned groups. But at the same time, it is also a warning to all vested interests within Nepal that are fulfilling their aims at risk of nationality and integrity. There is definitely no need to be terrified by the warnings of a foreign diplomat, but we should be always keep

our eyes and ears open, and remain prepared to fight back [against] any element that threatens our national identity and our sovereignty (Pradhan 2007: 4).

After 2007, there had been an outcry in the Nepali media and in human rights circles regarding the displacement of Pahadis. In response to this, Bhaskar Gautam argued that the performance of the Nepali media was worse during the Madhesi uprising because it was guided by a Pahadi mentality, which provoked Madhesi community against the Nepali media (Gautam 2064 vs.). A bibliography (Manandhar and Bista 2064 vs.) on the Madhes uprising including news coverage highlights the fact that the media paid insufficient attention to the demands of the Madhesis. What most of these media ignored was that communalism was not the main feature of the uprising and also, as International Crisis Group claimed, the state's response was harsh (ICG 2007).

In Pradhan's article, concern was expressed that the Madhesi and the ethnic movements were challenging Nepali national identity. This can be linked to the shift of the intellectual debate on issues of differences and diversity to a new discourse about the dangers of chaos. Saubhagya Shah took the restructuring project, which accelerated after 2006, as a drive to replace 'the earlier national narrative of Nepal unification and unity' with a 'counter-narrative of diversity and difference'. He further stated that, 'The tension between universal ideals of citizenship and localized subjectivity can be potentially disruptive in state making process' (Shah 2008: 8).

An editorial in the English weekly, the *Nepali Times*, argued that the Prashant Tamang phenomenon represented a manifestation of Pahadi nationalism:

At one level the Prashant Tamang phenomenon showed the current Nepali craving for a feel-good story, the need for a knight in shining armour who, even if he can't rescue us, will make us feel momentarily proud. At another, it proved the need for national symbols when the motherland itself is being torn apart by centrifugal identity politics... Prashant epitomizes the shared geography, shared history, shared lingua franca of Nepalis no matter what their passport. But he also underlines a flaw in our perception of ourselves and the way

Nepaliness has traditionally been defined by hill-centric nationalism... We wonder if there would be the same interest or excitement in Nepal if, instead of Prashant, an Indian of Nepali madhesi origin was the finalist. Probably not. (anon. 2007). 'Idol worship'. Sep 28, p. 2.

Yet the term, 'a knight in shining armour', shows that the *Nepali Times* also believed that there was a crisis of identity in Nepal during 2007. This feeling of insecurity arose from the ideas of multiculturalism. Though there was criticism of Padhadi nationalism, it was minimal. It was the feeling of crisis that helped to gain support for Prashant in the Nepali media.

Prashant as an anti-Indian symbol

Although a few articles and letters to editors (e.g. Yagesh 2064 v.s., Pandit 2064 v.s.) claimed that Prashant Tamang was a symbol of Indian identity, more presented Prashant as a symbol that opposed the Indian hegemony over Nepalis in India. India's problematic relationship with South Asian countries such as Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh means that anti-Indian sentiment can be a part of nationalism. The perception of India as a hegemonic power has not changed, despite India's South Asia policy changing from the use of hard power such as military intervention, diplomatic coercion and economic sanctions to the use of soft power such as intergovernmental relations and economic co-operation after 1990 (Wagner 2005). In the case of Nepal, anti-Indian sentiment has been the main force of Nepali nationalism since 1950 for both left and right, also allowing King Mahendra and Birendra to maintain their rule from 1960 onward.

One concern of the Nepali media was the treatment of the Nepalese in India, as expressed in a news article published in *Samaya* magazine of 6 September: 'Nepalis believe that the success of Prashant will change hatred towards Nepalis in Darjeeling' (Sawa 2064 v.s.). This account merely mentioned the issue, but it was discussed in detail in an article entitled 'Prashant's Journey to Victory: Identity Movement of Nepali Speakers' published in the *Annapurna Post* on 6 September, and written by Karun Dhakal. It even mentioned that Prashant had once been presented during the 'Indian Idol' programme in the uniform of a Chowkidar. This angered Nepalese in India who saw it as an attack on their identity. Dhakal added, 'Now the victory of Prashant is no longer his personal victory; it

is related to the prestige and identity of Nepali speaking people in India' (Dhakal 2064 v.s.). In another article by Geetanjali Allay Lama, published in *The Kathmandu Post* on 20 September, Prashant was presented as the new image of Nepalis, which countered the Indian stereotype of Nepalis as bahadurs and chowkidars. She wrote:

We love him because he officially lifts away the mantle of the stereotypical 'Gorkha Gatemen', the epitome of servility and docility, donning Khaki, a precariously perched Dhakatopi, brandishing a Khukuri and speaking mongrel Hindi, an image that has dogged us for generations (Lama 2007).

In an article entitled, 'Will Prashant Win?', published in *Samaya* magazine after he reached the final, Achyut Aryal criticised the biased behaviour of the Indian media. Aryal informed the reader that, although Prashant's competitors were interviewed or made to sing on Indian TV channels like Aaj Tak and Star News, Prashant was not given these kinds of opportunities. He criticised the comments made by one of the judges, Anu Mallik, who once blamed Prashant's singing performance on cigarettes or tobacco, and by a guest singer, Sonu Nigam, who requested the audience to vote on the basis of the quality of the singing. It also discussed the preferences of judges., alleging that Alisha was biased towards Chang, Anu Mallik towards Emon and Javad Akhtar to Ankita, whilst no judge preferred Prashant (Koirala 2064 v.s.). He also painted a pathetic picture of Darjeeling, mentioning that the votes cast for Prashant were votes of frustration resulting from the neglect of Darjeeling by the post-colonial Indian government that had, incidentally, prided itself on tea from Darjeeling.

In an article published in *Kantipur* on 11 September, and entitled 'Bharat ma Nepali bhawana' [Nepali Feeling in India], Shrunuti Sing discussed why it was that Prashant wept when a judge praised his singing. She argued that the structure of the programme and the comments of some judges and members of the audience were biased towards Prashant, and that was why Indians of Nepali origins were fighting for their identity. She hoped that the behaviour of Indians towards this community would change in future if he won the the contest (Singh 2064 v.s.). In another article, Dil Sahani discussed his feelings and thoughts regarding the victory of the two final contestants. According to him, a victory for

Amit would represent the victory of a backward state, whereas a victory for Prashant would represent the victory of a minority backward state (Sahani 2064 v.s).

Prashant sang the song, 'Bir Gorkhali', after he was announced as the winner. The song was related to the Gorkhaland identity, and his singing of the song was subsequently praised in the Nepali media: 'He sang the song of bravery of brave Gorkhas. As he sang the song, all Nepalese might have sung with him' (Timilsina 2007a). Actually, this song by the Mantra Band was only popular in Darjeeling before this. It promoted feelings of being Gorkha or Indian Nepali alongside a manifestation of the Gorkhaland movement. Prashant stated in an interview that, 'It was said that if there was time I had to sing a song. And I was interested to sing the song liked by all. The word 'Gorkhali' touches my heart every time and I sang' (Anushil 2064 v.s.).

The Nepali media also highlighted the plight of Prashant's fans in Meghalaya in two reports published on 13 and 14 September in *Kantipur* and *Nepal Samacharpatra*. In the first, written by Upendra Pokharel, it was claimed that Prashant's fans were being compelled to participate in Amit's campaign, even being threatened with being kicked out of the state should Amit not win the contest. It also informed the reader that these fans were not allowed to enter Public Call Offices(PCO) and had to go into hiding to send SMS votes for Prashant Tamang (Pokharel 2064 v.s.). Similarly, Ramesh Samdarshi wrote about the physical and mental torture that the Nepalese were experiencing in Meghalaya (Samdarshi 2064 v.s.). These reportings presented the images of Indians who were harassing Indian Nepalis.

Conclusion

This discussion has situated the debate on national identity, sub-nationalisms and anti-Indian Nepali nationalism within the Nepali media's adulatory representation of an Indian Nepali, Prashant Tamang, in *Indian Idol 3*. Except for a few Madhesi writers, most of the media celebrated Prashant as a new symbol of Nepali unity. But what was praised were the old national symbols, in direct opposition to the then vibrant debate on the need to recognise the cultures of different ethnic groups. The media aimed for unity through a singular identity, and not for multicultural identity. Thus, multiculturalism retreated and was replaced by monoculturalism as the dominant theme in Nepali media representations of Prashant Tamang in 2007.

The debate on a 'New Nepal' which would be totally different from the previous, monocultural Nepal, had grown after the April 2006 movement and the 2007 Madhesi uprising. The state had begun to address the exclusion of Janajatis, Madhesis, sexual minorities and others and the government-owned media organisation, the Gorkhapatra Corporation, had also started to publish sections of its Nepali broadsheet, *Gorkhapatra*, in the languages of different ethnic groups. However, Prashant Tamang provided an opportunity to writers who were not supportive of the idea of multiculturalism and the Janajati and Madhesi movements. Similar to the discourse prevalent during the Panchayat period, which construed the demands of ethnic minorities for a recognition of their culture as an impediment to national unity, Prashant was presented as a new symbol of national unity or a 'hero' for Nepal and the Nepalese all over the world during a time of identity crisis in Nepal.

One reason for this is the dominant position of Bahuns, Chhetris and Newars in the Nepali media (Onta and Parajuli 2058 v.s.). Many writers and journalists from these communities praised and presented Prashant as a symbol of hill nationalism. Although Janajatis were opposed to Panchayat period monoculturalism, many of them were not opposed to hill nationalism and not supportive of Madhesi nationalism: this was also substantiated by the media coverage of the Madhes uprising.

Another factor favoring a retreat from the multiculturalism discourse was anti-Indian nationalism in Nepal. This became vocal due to the 'Indian Idol' contest being played out in both the international and Indian arenas. Prashant gave the Nepali media a platform from which to debate the Indian government's behaviour towards the Indian Nepalis and Indian domination in Nepal. In the international arena, national identity usually prevails over sub-nationalisms, and the Nepali media acted accordingly. It is unlikely that there would have been the same praising of national language and national dress in the context of a reality show staged inside Nepal. In such a case, the debate would more likely focus more on questions of sub-nationalism.

This paper has shown that due to these reasons, and contrary to what Kymlica has argued in relation to ethnic groups and minorities, there was a retreat from multiculturalism in the Nepali media's representation of Prashant Tamang. But was this retreat a reflection of a growing opposition

to quota systems in Nepal? It is difficult to prove. The media were only a small part of the Prashant Tamang fever that gripped almost all of Nepal at this time, and further research among the people who participated in the campaign of making him the Indian Idol would be needed to provide an answer.

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