Rising Ethno-Cultural Nationalism in Nepal: Postmodern Illusion or Democratic Delusion?

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On 10 April 2008, Nepal turned a new page in its history. Nearly two decades of violence and instability caused by an ongoing political, economic, and cultural crisis ended with the stunning electoral success of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). In addition to resolving the well-known structural and economic imbalances of the country, after five decades of failed development, Nepal must also find a way to resolve the crisis of rising ethno-cultural nationalism amidst continuing conditions of inequality. We suggest Nepali nationalism provides a grand narrative that goes to the heart of the future of Nepal and its prospects for a sustained democracy.

[Keywords: conflict; democracy; ethnicity; nationalism; Nepal]

You don’t make peace by talking to your friends. You have to make peace with your enemies.

– Nelson Mandela to Northern Irish Politicians

To be sure, we are witnessing history in the making. Against insurmountable odds (notwithstanding the significant and continuing counter-insurgency efforts against Maoist forces by the alliance of the United States of America, United Kingdom, India, and the King over the past fifteen years),⁠ and contrary to the predictions of virtually all western-trained political and academic pundits who are so-called ‘experts’ on Nepal, the former Maoist rebels have surprised the western world with a stunning and decisive electoral success in the historic election of 10
April 2008. The Maoist\textsuperscript{2} victory did not come by stealth, but only after two decades of failed economic and social development that cost 20,000 lives, displacing nearly half a million people from their homes, and setting the economy in a downhill spiral after the disastrous liberalisation policies through the tripartite alliance of the World Bank, Nepal’s multiparty system of the 1990s, and Nepal’s business class. Nowhere in the world has a rebel army chief, famously known as ‘Prachanda’, been given the opportunity to head both the national army and the government. Two points are worth mentioning at the outset.

Firstly, this is not the first successful collusion in Nepali history between the radical left and the mainstream political parties; just witness the democratic revolution in 1990 and the Seven-Party Alliance with the Maoists in April 2006. Such effective collaborations are a function of the coalition parties’ ability to call upon a deeply historical and native nationalism and defeat the King’s monarchy. However, one cannot simply ignore the dominant imperialist influences from both the United States of America and India through their past unconditional support of the monarchy and continuing counterinsurgency efforts against the Maoists that, in the past, prevented the very alliances that spurred the peace process and restoration of civil government in 2005 (Maskey and Deschene 2008). To be sure, as many forces, both external and internal, will coalesce to actively resist and undermine the new Maoist government. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (CPN [M]) may have to take the role of an opposition party significantly delaying the momentum of the new government and increasing the risk of a failed state. One thing is clear: Nepal can ill afford such a colossal failure at this historical juncture.

Secondly, the current transition from the insistence on a majority rule system to full consideration of all oppressed groups through inclusive and proportionate democratic rule is spawning a new nationalism that is grounded in the historical, economic, and social conditions of Nepal. For more than two centuries, the ethnic, linguistic, and regional diversity of Nepal has been deliberately suppressed by the centralised feudal state. The struggle for identity and equal rights along these lines, together with the struggles of women, marginalised castes, and indigenous communities is carving out a new system of political rule. Federalism, autonomy, right to self-determination, proportional representation, and inclusive democracy are now the key concepts shaping the consciousness of the Nepali people. The question is: will the newly formed Maoist leadership be able to usher in a new nationalism, a positive one based on pluralism, non violence, democracy, and social justice?
During Nepal’s second experiment with democracy in the 1990s, the blurring of boundaries between leaders’ personal and institutional interests gave birth to a political culture of clientelism. However, new social movements that cut across traditional separations of gender, social classes, caste, indigenous people, and various ethnic groups are increasingly challenging the position of authority determined by birth, lineage, and patronage. As David Gellner (2007) points out, although practically everyone in Nepal is aware of her/his caste and ethnicity, caste has not been a respectable source of identity for quite some time. A shared source of national identity was supposed to define all Nepalis until 1990. At that time, many people from minority backgrounds felt that a great weight had been removed from their shoulders when the demise of the Panchayat ideology institutionalised Parbatiya supremacy while claiming that all of Nepali society was homogenous. Ethnic differences began to acquire increasing political salience, especially because of the first publication, in 1991, of data on caste and ethnic-group affiliation. But lower castes, ethnic groups (janajatis), religious minorities (mainly Buddhists and Muslims), and people of Indian origin (madhesi) experienced the national identity propagated in schools and through government organisations as highly exclusionary. Thus, if the period from 1960 to 1990 was one of nation-building, the eighteen years since then have been a time of ethnicity-building. Today, ethnic groups are seeking to remould the pre-modern feudal culture of mutual distrust, political betrayal, and revenge into a post-conflict, progressive, and nationalistic culture based on a shared future of social justice, democracy, and peace.

Nationalism is defined as

the ideology that holds that the nation, ethnicity or national identity as a fundamental unit of human social life.... Nationalists define nations on the basis of certain criteria, which distinguish one nation from another.... These might include a shared language, shared culture, and shared values, but the most important is probably now ethnicity. Most nation-states appeal to a cultural and historical myth to justify their existence and legitimacy’ (http://wikipedia.org/wiki/nationalism).

In this sense, one could argue that nationalism is an overarching meta-narrative powered by particular political and socio-cultural agenda of dominance. As such, it often subdues and subsumes competing (for example, minority) narratives that get in the way of its hegemonic tendencies. Paradoxically, however, it is rarely immune to challenges and even changes. Just as such a meta-narrative forms subjects, it can also
transform them with changing historical imperatives. Such is the law of the historical ebb and flow underlying any narrative of nationalism. Nationalism, in other words, is a volatile terrain, one where different nationalist currents compete and contest, each vying to establish its primacy or supremacy, fight back its peripheralisation in the country’s national identity, and secure its legitimacy, in whichever way it is articulated and anchored in the particularities of the society and geography of the nation.

However, historical evidence suggests that nationalism rarely emerges as a meta-narrative unless it can establish its roots firmly within a nation-state which Richard Burghart defines as ‘... a form of government that is seen to be an expression of the will or character of a culturally unique people and whose political boundaries are delimited with reference to the territorial distribution of the people’ (1984: 101).

This leads to two questions: (i) how and when was the nation-state of Nepal formed and (ii) how did Nepali nationalism develop? Guided by these questions, we discuss Nepali nationalism as a political ideology, historical force, and socio-cultural process, emphasising the roles played by the institutional monarchy, the Nepali language, and Hinduism. Accordingly, this paper is divided into three sections: (i) formation of the Nepali nation-state, (ii) construction and consolidation of Nepali nationalism, and (iii) concluding remarks refocusing the future of Nepali nationalism on pluralism, non-violence, and social justice.

Formation of Nepali Nation-State

During the pre-unification period that lasted until 1769, Jayasthiti Malla incorporated much of the Kathmandu Valley’s population into formal Hinduised sub-castes with detailed norms and codes of conduct to move Nepal out of its ‘Dark Ages’. His three sons, who inherited his rule, divided the Valley into three administrative units (urban centres): Kathmandu (Kantipur), Patan (Lalitpur), and Bhadgaun (Bhaktapur). In 1482, the Valley state was formally divided into three separate – and often rival – mini states, eventually resulting in their political and moral decay as the three royal courts competed to outshine each other in terms of pomp and glitter rather than socioeconomic progress. In the late 1760s, the three Malla kings were run over by the advancing army of Prithvi Narayan (Prithvinarayana) Shah, the king of Gorkha, one of the fiefdoms in the central hills, whose territorial (imperial) ambition is legendry in the historical lore of post-unification Nepal.

Prior to ‘unification’, the Kathmandu Valley was the only Nepal known to non-Valley inhabitants and foreigners. Even up to the late
1970s, it was not uncommon among many rural residents to identify Kathmandu as Nepal. For instance, if someone travelling from the rural hills to Kathmandu was asked where s/he was going, the response would often be ‘To Nepal’. In short, the image and identity of Nepal, both internally and externally, was confined to Kathmandu.

Outside the Valley, the territory that is called Nepal today was divided into 46 rajyas (fiefdoms), including Gorkha, founded in 1559 under Dravya Shah. Associated with immigrant Hindus from India and fleeing Muslim invaders, the heads of those separate fiefdoms ruled over their respective subjects of both Indian and Tibetan origins. While those of Indian origin were tied to the caste system and hierarchies, the hill natives of Tibetan origin (whose arrival predated Hindu immigrants) initially had no caste affiliations; rather they were associated with ethnicity, often defined as tribal groups (Caplan 1970; Macfarlane 1976; Bista 1987; Bishop 1990). Regardless, rulers of the rajyas were constantly mired in quarrels, and there was no serious attempt at consolidating the dominions to establish a larger ‘nation’ or state beyond small territorial confinements.

In 1743, Prithvi Narayan, the Gorkha Raja, began to conquer and bring disparate rajyas under his rule. His was an ambition to create one ‘unified’ muluk or des (desa, desh), which in Nepalese means country or nation. His grandest ambition lay in the conquest of the three city-states of Kathmandu Valley – agriculturally rich, economically prosperous, and culturally prodigious. The conquest of the entire Valley and its Newar inhabitants was completed by 1769, thus unleashing the era of dynastic Shah rule of Nepal.

The new state was geographically central and widely recognised for its new and unprecedented economic strength and military might. As opposed to the previous Licchavi and Malla rulers, the Shah began to actively engage in the production and propagation of a strong nationalist ideology. Mark Liechty (1997) points out that they, like their Shah successors, did, to some extent, practise a policy of exclusion of Europeans (since the encounters were less than friendly); yet the policy appears to have been far from being applied with a nationalistic zeal. Thus, the formation of a unified ethnic identity for the Nepalis coincided with the hegemonic articulation of a national narrative ready to subordinate and subsume all other competing narratives.

Prior to the Gorkha conquest, the identity of the indigenous Newars and the geographic area of Nepal were the same, whereas the new kingdom increasingly distanced itself from its original indigenous Valley identity. Following the establishment of the Shah rule, the new Nepal
emerged as the central domain of the Parbtiyali ruling class, from which they extended and projected their growing power. After Prithvi Narayan’s death in 1775, Nepal’s territorial conquest reached as far as the Satlej River to the west and the Teesta River to the east.

The competition between the new identity of Nepal and the identity of its predecessors manifested itself in the naming of the new nation-state. Frances Hamilton (1986/1819) reported that the nobles and soldiers of Gorkha despised the word Nepal, perhaps because it was synonymous with the Newars whom they had defeated, but who were perceived to be culturally far more advanced than the Parbatiyas. It is, therefore, highly likely that, in their eyes, retaining Nepal as the name of the new nation would symbolically mean the assimilation and dominance of the culture of the ‘vanquished’, thus tacitly legitimising the Newar ‘cultural superiority’. In the victory quarters, Gorkha was the name of choice which personified the glory of the Shah roots and, hence, its Parbatiya heritage. Therefore, a narrative of nationalism firmly grounded in Parbatiya supremacy was born.

**Construction and Consolidation of Past Nepali Nationalism**

Pratyoush Onta refers to the monarchy, Hinduism, and the Nepali language as ‘the triumvirate’ of what he calls ‘official Nepali nationalism’ (1996: 38). However, he mainly explores the development and promotion of Nepali as the national language, along with the writing of bir (heroic, brave) history as a mechanism to sanctify the Parbatiya narrative of Nepali nationalism (Onta 1996, 1997). In this section, we will highlight how the crown-centred national polity and the Hindu caste mould converged to solidify the Parbatiya narrative as the official version of Nepali nationalism. We will also add a discussion of the role of territoriality and the significance of the final politico-geographical demarcation of Nepal in 1816 (Burghart 1984; Gurung 1997; Whelpton 2005: 173).

**Territoriality, the Crown, and ‘Asal Hindusthan’**

The issue of territoriality goes much deeper than its key role as a boundary marker. The Anglo-Gorkha (Anglo-Nepal) war broke out in 1814 when the Gorkhali imperial ambition collided with British territorial interests. Following the defeat of the Gorkha army, British India drew specific boundary lines between the two countries. Consequently, the country lost virtually all of its hard-won territorial gains, thus being confined it to its current boundary. The defeat was totally
humiliating to the national psyche, but, ironically, it hastened the rise of Nepali nationalism, as it pushed the ruling class to consolidate what was left to preserve their national power and authority.

When the British-imposed boundaries effectively put an end to the territorial ambitions of the Gorkha empire, its outward orientation took a dramatic turn. As Mahesh C. Regmi puts it, ‘A nation that had been outward-looking for at least three generations was suddenly compelled to develop an inward-looking orientation’ (1984: 7). The ruling circle became intently focused on protecting national sovereignty and cultural heritage from the British forces and consolidating disparate territories (rajyas) within the national boundary. These two interests went hand in hand, since protecting the national sovereignty required internal consolidation of diverse groups, whether defined geographically or ethnically (Burghart 1984).

It is important to note that, although those rajyas were brought under one flag during the Gorkhali imperial march, they were far from being consolidated into one nation. As Regmi states, many were granted ‘a substantial measure of local autonomy…. [T]he Gorkhali rulers did not achieve political unification solely through military conquest, and often political compromises … were considered more expedient’ (1984: 18). Harka Gurung (1997) characterises the Gorkhali tactics of unification as various forms of diplomacy, cunning, and ruthless vengeance. They were brought under one flag as vassal, tributary rajyas. So, given the conquered rajyas’ relatively relaxed ties to the central authority, the so-called unification looked more like a loose Gorkha federation than one Gorkha nation with a dominant national identity.

Particularly when their power and authority had been greatly shaken in the wake of their defeat, any miscalculation from the Gorkhali rulers could have readily triggered a wave of cessation from the loose federation and reverted the country to its pre-unification days. Thus, from the Gorkhali rulers’ vantage point, protecting the sovereignty of the newly demarcated territory was the demand of the post-war time: (i) to safeguard the national sovereignty and integrity from further erosion and (ii) to preserve their political interest and authority from becoming disintegrated.

Achieving these entwined goals was required to create one nation with one national identity, a prerequisite to a meta-narrative of nationalism. Obviously, the externally oriented imperial model of nationhood that Prithvi Narayan had chartered was defunct under the new geopolitical reality of the subcontinent (Pfaff-Czarnecka 1997). The only viable – and most logical – alternative open to them was to become
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internally focused, turning the Gorkha federation into one Gorkha (Nepali) nation through systematic consolidation of the previously acquired rajyas within the new territorial domain.

It is at this juncture that we see – whether by design or simply as a by-product of unfolding political events – nationalism presenting itself on the public stage and gradually growing into a larger narrative. Although Prithvi Narayan was long gone, he was heralded as a great, farsighted leader and nation builder, a leader who, as the legend went, was guided by the Hindu deity Gorkhanath and later blessed by Taleju, the tutelary deity of the Newars (Burghart 1984), to embark on an imperial path and unite the nation. Ever since his rise, the crown was projected as the source of national unity and bir history (lore). In addition, regarded as the reincarnation of Hindu God Vishnu, the king was a religious symbol with his authority divinely ordained and, hence, just and beyond public reproach. Thus, at the core of the emerging nationalist tale was the message that only under the crown’s stewardship could the country remain unified and defend its national sovereignty against the ever-present British imperial shadow.

As history informs us, few issues light the nationalist fire faster than the existence of an external enemy – whether real or perceived. Projection of British India as an invading, encroaching bogeyman went beyond national sovereignty; it was also a matter of preserving the national purity of Nepal, the last preserve of what King Prithvi Narayan had proudly pronounced ‘asal Hindusthan’ (the pure land of Hindus). As a result, the sanctity of national sovereignty was also fundamental to maintaining Nepal as a pure domain of Hinduism, free of any ritualistic pollution caused by the British firangis and Mussalmans (Muslims) whom the Hindus called mlakshas, meaning the polluted (Shrestha 1997: 52). Subjected to the Mughal (Muslim) and British (Christian) empires, India – the ‘other’ Hindusthan – was, by implication, no longer pure and sacred (Burghart 1984; Gurung 1997; Onta 1997; Whelpton 2005).

Since, as Gurung (1997) aptly notes, the Hindu social order was prevalent in the country, Hindu orthodoxy found wide reception across the new Nepal territory. ‘Heritage Hindusthan’, as Gurung refers to it, was already present, dating back to ancient Nepal. Later, Hindu immigrants, who fled Mughal India to find safety and shelter in the hills, acted as active agents of its diffusion in the country. It was those immigrants who later came to be known as the Parbatiyas, with the Bahuns (Brahmans) and Chhetris (Kshatriyas) presiding at the top of their caste hierarchies. They were apparently the flag carriers of the nationalist ideology embedded in ‘asal Hindusthan’. The spread of this ideology also meant social ordering of the entire population according to
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the Hindu caste system, systematically incorporating into its lower ranks the diverse people of Tibetan origin who previously had no caste affiliation (ibid.).

While the crown-centred, Hinduised narrative of nationalism was still on the rise, the country underwent a tectonic shift in its political landscape. In 1846, some ten years after the political demise of Prime Minister Bhimsen Thapa, who controlled the country’s political machinery for thirty-one years (Stiller 1973; Whelpton 1991), Nepal witnessed an epochal event, commonly known as the Kot Parba, a massacre at the palace courtyard (Joshi and Rose 1966; Nanda R. Shrestha 2002: 32-34). In its aftermath, a bhardar member (courtier) from a Parbatiya clan, Jang Bahadur Kunwar (Rana) orchestrated his appointment as prime minister and, subsequently, inaugurated his dynastic Rana premiership for the next 104 years (ibid.).

Jang Bahadur and his successors became the ultimate authority during the Rana period. He reduced the Shah monarchy to a figurehead, but elected not to depose it, though he could have easily declared himself the new king. The decision to retain the institution of the Shah monarchy was tactical in that he understood its power as a national symbol in its Hindu purity and Parbatiya dominance. With this astute recognition, like his predecessor bhardars, Jang Bahadur built his national power base around the crown. Furthermore, in 1854, he promulgated the national legal code called the Muluki Ain. The Muluki Ain was not only designed to consolidate, legitimise, and impose authority across the nation, but it also reinforced ‘Hindu caste rules on various ethnic groups’, thereby giving added impetus to the selective narrative of Nepali nationalism.

Nepali nationalism had fully arrived by 1846, a Parbatiya narrative invention had been built in the image of the folkloric bir glory of the Gorkhali Raj and the ideological orthodoxy of the Hindu Raj, with crown its source and central axis. But, despite its strong foundation, Nepal’s fledgling nationalism still faced some issues. First, regionally, the southern Tarai and northern trans-Himalayan borderlands – both inhabited by non-Parbatiya people – remained largely out of imperial reach and influence. Thus, the central narrative, exclusionary from the outset, was confined to the central Katmandu Valley. This has continued to be a serious issue for the many indigenous groups in the Tarai who today demand self-determination and autonomy. Second, the conflict between naming the region – Nepali versus Gorkhali – revealed lingering ambivalence regarding the primacy of the national narrative. In the absence of one consistent name and its repeated use, the narrative lacked focus and
Several major and interrelated impediments kept Nepali nationalism from becoming an integral part of the common people’s national imagining, thus stunting its growth and expansion beyond its narrow regional and socio-demographic core. (a) To start with, lack of transportation and communication infrastructure, which in essence meant that, internally, Nepal remained merely a composite of localised pocket economies, largely isolated from each other in terms of regular interactions and transactions. (b) A fundamental lack of a national public education system which could have been perhaps the most significant, efficient, and enduring facilitator of nationalism in public consciousness. Formal education was limited to the Nepali elite in fear that education of the masses could lead to unrest and uprisings. As a result, lower echelons and non-Parbatiya groups were not only excluded from having any voice in the official narrative of nationalism, but were scarcely socialised into it in a systematic fashion. (c) Absence of public support for the oppressive practices of Rana rule given that justice, equity, and economic development were virtually non-existent. While the conditions for the masses deteriorated, as their wealth was systematically drained, the Ranas themselves indulged in conspicuous consumption of fancy imported goods and incorporation of foreign culture, including Indian performances and plays in Urdu, the language of the subcontinent’s Muslims, regarded by Nepali Hindus to be polluted (Leichty 1997; Onta 1997). Combined with their self-serving political subservience to the British, the Ranas created an unmistakable impression that they were openly spoiling the sacred image of ‘asal Hindusthan’. Therefore, any national narrative under Rana tutelage was tainted and troubling in public eyes, since the Ranas lacked moral authority.

With all of its pieces in place, Nepali nationalism experienced a significant leap forward after the downfall of the Rana regime in 1951, particularly during the Panchayat Raj (1960-90). In December 1960, King Mahendra launched a palace coup against the first democratic government of Prime Minister B.P. Koirala, elected in 1959 (Nanda R. Shrestha 2002). After jailing Koirala, along with many of his associates, and abolishing democracy, the King instituted the Panchayat system. Although sold to the public as a home-grown partyless system, one well suited for the national soil, climate, and culture, Panchayat was basically a one-party system: the King’s party, as the King directly controlled it and guided all its apparatus. The King actively pushed nationalism to the forefront of his national agenda in order to deflect any criticism of his
anti-democracy coup, on the one hand, and to legitimise his Panchayat Raj, on the other.

In fact, under the pretext of nationalism, King Mahendra created an anti-democratic political landscape where any criticism of the monarchy – justified or not – amounted to being unpatriotic and anti-nationalist. Jailed leaders of Koirala’s democratic government and anybody engaged in party activities were characterised as anti-nationalist and some were charged with treason (Joshi and Rose 1966). Thus, over a period of thirty years, from 1960 to 1990, one could argue that Panchayat as the monarchy stood for Nepali nationalism and patriotism. Anything else was suspect.

In terms of its configuration, Nepali nationalism under the Panchayat Raj was little different from its previous manifestations. What was different, however, was that the king now directly controlled its public production and propagation. Some of the public mechanisms that King Mahendra initiated, and later his son King Birendra pursued, to spread the fire of nationalism across the nation included: (a) making public education universal with continuous praise for royal family; (b) exploiting the electoral system inherent in the Panchayat system, where at the local level people could elect their representatives, to feed the illusion of popular democracy where the people were citizens rather than subjects; and (c) the rhetoric of bikas (development) began to take a central and omnipresent role in the national narrative.

Largely underwritten by foreign aid and loans, central planning was deployed as a national development approach, and every five years, a new national plan was formulated and implemented with a populist tone. The running theme entrenched in planning was one of ‘economic growth with justice’ (Nanda R. Shrestha 1990, 1999; Bhandari 2006). Regarding the pace of national development, the King even claimed that Nepal had to achieve in twenty years what took advanced countries 200 years. Such rhetoric, though certainly a great sound bite, was highly unrealistic for the historical particularities of Nepal. Nevertheless, the constant stream of bikas slogans engendered hope and aspiration for a brighter future among the general public. It also gave them a sense that the government/King was working on their day-to-day lives. Thus, the nationalism that the King was promoting had a kaleidoscopic effect of looking like civic nationalism, inclusive and participatory, though it was largely monarchical in make-up.

Empty slogans go only so far, however, in keeping the public pacified. With each passing year, the veneer of the Panchayat Raj that King Mahendra had carefully constructed as a symbol of Nepali nationalism and as a foundation of national development began to
unravel. As poverty grew and the socioeconomic disparity between the rich and poor magnified, the nakedness of Nepal’s ‘failed development’, as Devendra R. Pandey (1999) characterises it, was openly exposed (Shrestha 1997; Dahal 2003; Ramesh Sharma 2006). The monarch’s promise of progress and prosperity for the people increasingly came into question, and opposition to his Panchayat Raj escalated, eventually leading to its collapse in 1990.

The Future of Nepali Nationalism

While it is difficult to assess how much Nepali nationalism has suffered since the demise of the Panchayat Raj, there is no doubt that it has entered a new phase with the Maoist victory in the historic election of 10 April 2008. Nepali nationalism has arrived at critical crossroads in its historical evolution. In a way, what is transpiring in contemporary Nepal is not much different from the drama of identity politics (that is, ethnicisation of politics, history, and cultures) being staged in many western countries, sometimes with a deep racist undertone. As Bose (1998) remarks, ethnic identity tends to peak in times of crisis such as political uncertainties and economic downturns. The manifestation of ethnic politics in Nepal is compounded by the fact that the country, like most other underdeveloped nation-states, is now entangled in what is described as the ‘polycentric regimes of governance’ that include both internal and external forces, for example, from the human rights regime to the World Trade Organisation, the United Nations, and numerous civil society agencies (Ramesh Dahal 2008). Such extra-state grids of power ‘have weakened the base of constitutional patriotism, national cohesion and centripetal forces provoking reactive re-tribalisation and incoherence ... [in] the political space of democracy’ (Dev Raj Dahal 2003: 23). This coupled with rising rural-urban inequality, persistent poverty, and increased expectations of relative wealth have created fertile ground for the Maoists to become a central political-economic contender able to forge a new nationalism.

A rising tide of what is commonly known as the janajati (ethnic, minority) movement, a form of ethnic nationalism, is increasingly cutting into the heart of the national, governmental, and cultural alignments including civil society (ibid.; Gellner 2007). What we see in this janajati movement is a socially informed response to decades of aged, official state nationalism. As a result, the question of Nepali nationalism has surfaced as a hot topic of debate. The debate is engulfed in not only growing political activism as a central feature of the janajati movement, it is also being hotly pursued within the academic community (Des
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Chene 1996; Onta 1996, 1997; Gellner et al. 1997; Guneratne 1998; Nanda R. Shrestha 1999; Gurung 2003; Giri 2007; Hachhetu 2007). Such antipodal currents are hardly surprising though, especially given the method in which ethnic groups were historically absorbed into the Hindu caste system by the ruling class dominated by the Bahuns and Chhetris (Bista 1987; Bishop 1990; Shrestha and Bhattarai 2003: 8-12, 130-134; Giri 2007). Furthermore, the issue has gained momentum because of the global awareness of and emphasis on minority rights, and adverse consequences of globalisation which invariably fall disproportionately on the lower socio-demographic layers of society, most notably the landless poor who comprise between one-third and one-half of the rural population of Nepal.

The debate intensified following the ‘restoration’ of multiparty democracy in 1990. However, at the same time, inequality, poverty, and ecological devastation have all increased significantly, leading several key scholars to the conclusion that liberal democracy and economic development are simply not compatible (Adhikari and Timberlake 2007; Wagle 2007). The Maoists must combine a postmodernist state nationalism with a new postmodern politics of culture, identity, and ethnicity under the banner of social justice and an end to colonialism. It will be necessary to walk a tight rope in forging this new nationalism in order to not agitate the simmering Tarai groups who are demanding their rights and representation. Prachanda’s recent inclusion of Tarai group leaders in the new cabinet is both effective and wise.

In fact, the Maoist party has listed among its forty demands that ethnic communities should be allowed to form autonomous regions and that mother-tongue education should be guaranteed in an effort to stop racial exploitation. In one proposal, the entire country is divided into nine ‘autonomous’ regions (six based on ethnic lines such as Tharuwan Region in western Nepal), which would be the first level of government below the national. Clearly, it is a perfect time for oppressed groups throughout the countryside to have their voices heard; the Maoists have gained considerable popularity with these people by demanding that Nepal be proclaimed a secular nation and the system of untouchability be eliminated.

The relegation of janajati cultures and identities to the margin with little space to grow is, indeed, a historical reality that few can deny. Janajati advocates accuse the prevailing multiparty Nepali nationalism of employing a hegemonic nationalistic ideology, rooted in the Bahun-Chhetri (Brahman-Kshatriya) axis of power and authority. For instance, ever since the Shah dynastic rule began in Nepal in 1769, the Parbatiya
Bahuns and Chhetris have enjoyed an absolute monopoly over the country’s prime ministerial post, with one aberration in the late-1980s, when it went to a Newar. In addition to their political domination, they have enjoyed a huge share of civil service (bureaucratic) employment, though they constitute only about 30 per cent of the total population of the country (Gurung 1997; Whelpton 1997).

Yet, at times, the janajati rhetoric is filled more with the doses of sweeping polemics than evidentiary documentation of their case. On the other hand, the proponents of prevailing Nepali nationalism seem almost paranoid or, at least, deeply disturbed by the janajati movement, as they see it as a direct threat to their ‘privileged’ position, though their opposition is normally camouflaged in the garb of national integrity and sovereignty. To illustrate this sense of paranoia, here is a quote from the noted scholar Prayag Raj Sharma:

[T]he increasingly shrill anti-Bahun pronouncements by some in the ethnic leadership can have far-reaching implications, including the undermining of the very concept of the Nepali State, its unity and integrity. If this process of uncritical lambasting continues to its natural denouement, today’s Bahun-bashing for what it means to the notion of Nepal – will harm all population groups of the country, regardless of class, place of origin, religion or ethnicity. . . . When opportunistic scholars and the ethnic leaders repeatedly raise the anti-Brahmanism bogey, they must understand that they are questioning some of the fundamental tenets of the Nepali national characteristic. The bogey seems to negate all of Nepal’s historic legacies and its political heritage (2004: 219-21).

Irrespective of how this raging debate unfolds, the ability of the Maoists to effectively include the various Tarai groups in a system of proportional representation has created the need for a new and transformative Nepali nationalism. One thing that appears certain at this juncture of Nepali nationalism is that its central axis, the monarchical base, has finally been destroyed once and for all (Shrestha and Bhattarai 2003: 284-85; Tiwari 2007; Adhikari and Timberlake 2007; Economist 2008).

**Conclusion**

Since the 10 April 2008 elections, the janajati movement is still on the rise, and the Bahun-Chhetri nexus is on the defensive. The national economy is at a standstill and globalisation continues to cause disturbances in the socio-cultural fabric and political governance of Nepal. The narrative of nationalism finds itself searching for not only an acceptance
by the historically marginalised caste and ethnic groups, but also for its renewal. The success of the Maoists, to a large extent, depends on their ability to continue to draw upon the country’s deep history and struggles for freedom to deliver on the hopes and dreams of the Nepali people. Such an effective and liberatory nationalism will be necessary to carry out the immediate and critical tasks at hand – institutionalising democracy through a republican system with proportional representation, realising a federal state with absolute rights of self-determination, and countering the significant resistance from various forces that have accrued since the Maoists’ stunning electoral success.

We would be remiss if we did not point out that Indian history (in line with all colonised countries) from both ends of the colonial experience has produced two nationalisms. The excessive and intellectually fashionable postmodern discourse on nationalism, which has dominated western social science for decades, gives short shrift to the positive and nationally liberating kind of nationalism that has historically unified diverse countries with a colonial past based on the common values of the people. Gandhi was brilliant in linking this meaning of nationalism to pride in the common values of a people rather than of just ruling elite, to bring national identity above the level of individual psychologies (Mukhopadhyay 2008). This new nationalism in Nepal is a Gandhian inspired movement and is diametrically opposed to the exclusionary nationalism of 19th century imperialism described in the previous section.

Nepalis may be poor but they have a rich spiritual and cultural heritage that has ignited the need for righteous assertions of equality and freedom from both colonial and feudal rule. Whether they metamorphose this discourse into an ideology of moral superiority or build upon Gandhian creative genius in coupling nationalism with non-violence as an absolute value will largely determine the success of Nepal’s fragile democracy. History will prove whether this new nationalism, based on an unshakeable faith and love for the pluralist value of the common people, coupled with cries for rural justice and the ‘right to live’, is strong enough not only to sustain itself in the short term, but also tackle the immediate challenges ahead. Writing a new constitution to bring all parties together in a restored multiparty democracy with special attention to the janajatis will clearly be an overwhelming task for the new government for the near future.

Prospects for continuing democracy in Nepal will crucially depend on an overall improvement in the living conditions of the vast masses of rural poor and the marginalised. Focusing on only one factor – political,
social, or economic progress – could have grave consequences for Nepal’s post-conflict status. The Maoists must be careful to make their transition to power as gradual as possible in order to strengthen their legitimacy and credibility (Ramesh Sharma 2006; Bal Gopal Shrestha 2008). Rebuilding the multiparty electoral system will go a long way to renew the faith of the people and alleviate their fears. To deepen their discourse of ‘nationalism, democracy and living’, the Maoists must quickly capitalise on their new role of building a radical participatory democracy freed from the tendency towards militarism.

Still, in the short-term, at least, the Parbatiya dominance of politics and bureaucracy will continue, the Hindu polity will still carry its clout, though the caste rigidity may wither away as Madhesi groups rise in the political process, and the Nepali language will remain as the lingua franca. But these are less likely to define and determine the future course of Nepali democracy and nationalism, and their core identity, at least, not to the vast majority of Nepal citizens, though many foreign social scientists, diplomats, members of the highly influential expatriate/NGO community, development consultants, tourists, and other national image-makers will continue to emphasise them in order to authenticate their academic accounts, travelogues, and postcards.

Notes

1. The state had taken different approaches to foil insurgency such as integrated security and development, Killo Sera II, Cordon, Search and Destroy, creation of a special armed police force, mobilisation of military, imposition of state of emergency, fixing bounty on heads of Maoist leaders, formation of unified command, and creation of village defence committees. However, these approaches and strategies were unable to control the armed conflict; they, in fact, are largely responsible for provoking it.

2. It is important to note that the Nepali Maoists have nothing to do with China, though they derived their inspiration from China’s Mao Tse Tung and Peru’s Shining Path. Their Maoism is quintessentially Nepali, as it has evolved to fit the particular historical conditions of present day Nepal. For example, Nepali Maoists believe in using the market for many goods and services and intend to have positive relations with international community including India.

3. The word Parbatiya/Parbate (and Pahariya/Pahari [also Pahadiya/Pahadi], derivative of pahar[pahad]) is derived from parbat which means mountains (pahar means hills which are somewhat lower in altitude than mountains). However, etymologically, it carries two distinct meanings: one geographical and another politico-cultural. Geographically, the Parbatiyas are inhabitants of the parbat region. But, politico-culturally, the Parbatiyas are people of Indian/Hindu origin whose ancestors fled Mughal India and settled in the Nepal hills (Bista 1987; Bishop 1990; Nanda R. Shrestha 2002). Their origin and caste designations set them apart from those of Tibetan origin with no ethnic affiliations prior to their involuntary absorption into the caste hierarchies, although they both occupy the same geographical regions. At times, the word Parbatiya is also used pejoratively against the Bahums and Chhetris of this
group. Specifically, the word has an exploitative connotation, meaning they are dubious/immoral exploiters of ethnic groups (Caplan 1970). In their common use, the two words Parbatiya and Pahariya are interchangeable regardless of the context in which they are applied. But these etymological distinctions are applicable only within Nepal, not elsewhere. Outside of Nepal (say, in India), they lose their subtle but significant differences. When somebody in India calls somebody a Parbatiya or Pahariya, the reference is to a person from Nepal regardless of her/his caste or ethnic affiliation. In this sense, these terms are also used synonymously with the words Nepali and Gorkhali. They all mean the same thing: somebody from Nepal (exception being the Tarai inhabitants of north Indian origin). It should also be pointed out that not all people who inhabit the Tarai are Madhesi. The term Madhesi literally means dweller in the madhes (madhyades) or the plains. Although, informally, anyone living in the Tarai can be called a Madhesi, it has come to mean an ethnic meaning (just as Parbatiya or Pahade means ‘hill-dweller’). It refers to plains-dwellers of Indian, Hindu origin, usually with a negative connotation.

References


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