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MACALESTER

# *Democracy and Cultural Diversity in Nepal*

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I would like to focus my presentation on *janajati* movements and their contributions in strengthening democracy and preserving cultural diversity in Nepal. Initially, my plan was to assess impacts of the *janajati* movement specific to the concepts and practices of decentralization and local autonomy in Nepal. However, for the lack of space, I would like to limit myself to the task of sketching a broader overview of the movements, by presenting you with some of the key threads of the cultural activism and its achievements since 1990.

The democratization process in Nepal is an unfolding process that has enabled both powerful and innovative mobilizations of societal groups, as well as newer forms of abuses of state power. The contemporary *janajati* movements in Nepal comprise part of this unfolding process of democracy, demanding new terms for peoplehood and preservation of cultural diversity beyond the model of "traditional communal harmony" in the country. The movement is one of the effective projects that speaks out against abuses of state power by the culturally hegemonic minority elite. As a social movement, it attempts to chart an alternative course and vision for social change in the contexts where formal democratic institutions have failed to effectively address the profound structural problems of inequality and injustice.

Before discussing the contribution of the movement to the democratic process, it will be useful to sketch the historical background from which such activism emerged. The public expression of ethnic identities in Nepal is a relatively recent phenomenon made possible by the democratic transformation in 1990. The people's movement in 1990 in Nepal, which culminated in a new constitution, provided a major landmark in shifting ideas about the nature of Nepalese society and the state. The new constitution departed significantly from the previous position, which denied the recognition of cultural plurality in the country. During the autocratic Panchayat political regime before 1990, any debate pertaining to ethnicity or culture other than "national" culture fashioned in line with high-caste

Hindu ways, was taken as communal or anti-national and therefore met with strong official opposition. The Panchayat regime infused the rhetoric of modernization with the established Hindu order during the 1960s to continue the state agenda of centralization and extending control over the territory and people. The genesis of the Hindu state in Nepal, however, goes back to the forceful annexation of smaller political units in Nepal by Prithvi Narayan Shah in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the state was crystallized during the subsequent Shah-Rana rule in the country. One of the unique features of the Hindu state in Nepal has been its forceful incorporation of Nepal's diverse non-Hindu indigenous population into a hierarchical schema of caste categories. Cultural ideals borrowed from Hindu-India and political-administrative methods modeled on the British-Raj effectively culminated in the Hindu-Raj in 19<sup>th</sup> century Nepal. This model has not only enabled a class to control material and symbolic power, but also to silence all forms of dissident voices representing cultural diversity and to make open opposition virtually impossible for more than two centuries.

The *janajati* movement rests on the shared concerns that virulent discrimination persisted historically in multicultural Nepal. The movement is based on the common experience of the ethnic and indigenous populace that, despite the traditional rhetoric of 'unity in diversity' and democratic equality, discrimination is continually reproduced. They feel it intensely in almost every dimension of their lives, including economic prosperity, political participation, educational access, and cultural dignity.

The indigenous people's movement, locally known as the *janajati* movement in Nepal, stands out among similar movements in South Asia due to its impressive capacity for creating new values and its success in uniting diverse ethnic groups throughout the country. The *janajati* movement has emerged as one of the powerful forces in the democratization process in Nepal during the 1990s. This is a significant achievement in the democratization process in Nepal. The achievement is particularly remarkable when

we examine it against the background of a hostile general political climate towards cultural issues. As a critical force in Nepali society, the *janajati* movement contributes to strengthening democracy in Nepal in two ways. First, through the use of various strategies and tactics of contestation, the movement brings changes in the national policies within the horizon of the Nepali nation-state. Second, through the rejection of the state in its existing form as exclusionary, hegemonic, and antidemocratic, it creates a new discourse for an alternative vision of democracy.

One of the main tactics employed by the ethnic activists to influence national policies has been street demonstration and protest. These contemporary modern forms of protest are often rooted in the spontaneous but isolated indigenous rebellions of the past. The contemporary mobilization, however, significantly diverges from past forms of resistance. The main feature of the modern mobilization has been its coordinated and directed effort to influence the central authority. Several such mobilizations have taken place during the last decades in the country. On March 6, 1999, for example, ethnic organizations staged a general strike that included road blocks, marches and demonstrations in the capital city to protest against the historical state oppression of ethnic and indigenous peoples in Nepal and to demand linguistic equality on the part of the Nepali Congress Government. The strike was called by one of the ethnic organizations, *Manka Khala*. All ethnic organizations including the National Federation of Nationalities (NEFEN) supported the strike to make it a success. Beginning from a rally to pressure the new Constitution Draft Committee to declare Nepal a secular state rather than a Hindu Kingdom in 1990, several agitations of various scopes were organized on cultural grounds. Similar demonstrations took place throughout 1992 and 1993 against the government's decision to introduce mandatory Sanskrit language classes in school. During the later half of 1998, ethnic activists made another significant move in the popular mobilization, in coalition with human rights groups, against the Supreme Court's decision of June 1998 to ban the *Newari* and *Maithili* as additional languages of official use in three local bodies and districts. The most recent mobilizations, although small in scale, included protests spread across the different parts of the country against state violence, organized in solidarity with 38 ethnic organizations during May, 2000.

These events manifest the increased ability for active forms of resistance on the part of *janajati* activists. Both national and international contextual factors are conducive to the growth of the movement, providing the necessary political space for it to grow and achieve concrete gains. The emergence of a relatively non-repressive government after the people's movement in 1990, allowing for the freedom of speech, has been the main positive factor for sharp-

ening the movement internally. International interest and support for indigenous people's struggles, particularly by the UN, have helped to link the movement agenda with universal values and international solidarity.

The *janajati* movement has contributed to strengthening democracy in the country by transforming the public sphere. The movement's activists view the public sphere of on-going political debates as one of the main sites for the reproduction of discriminatory policies and practices that they oppose. They also see the public sphere as a critical space for creating alternative discourse and for the positive construction of identity. Activists involved in the indigenous people's movement have entered into the public sphere in myriad ways. By engaging in the production of auto-ethnography, they articulate their common experiences of oppression by the state elite and of their resistance against it, as well as their supposedly authentic cultural past. They have produced a considerable amount of printed material in the form of newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, books and other texts directly related to the recovery of identity, the articulation of movement goals and the refusal of hegemonic representation. The narratives produced in these materials are communicated to audiences at local, national and transnational levels to varying degrees. Such communication involves different media and forums. If the sharing of ideas with local communities relies heavily on oral presentations with simplified descriptions, generally with use of local language in informal village meetings, dissemination of the materials to urban based, educated audiences and the international community involves more sophisticated argumentation communicated in either Nepali or English language. The forums, which range from informal meetings in rural villages, through academic and political seminars in Kathmandu, to global conferences in Geneva or New York, have become important mediums and platforms for voicing the people's concerns. This phenomenon of participation in multiple sites of debate has transformed the public sphere in Nepal and forced issues of democracy and cultural diversity into all lay, political and academic discourses.

Since its inception, the *janajati* movement has consistently combined a strong emphasis on indigenous identity with cultural or group rights issues. The participation in the public sphere has also been instrumental in raising these issues as part of the debate on Nepali democracy. It has enabled ethnic activists to stress the issues of social justice to the wider public, propose positive collective identities, and articulate their demands with the principle of cultural rights. They have challenged official misrepresentations of their societies as being backward. Publicly, they have denounced the state caricature of ethnic groups as a part of the Hindu caste hierarchy, which categorized indigenous groups as impure caste *matwali* (alcohol drinkers) and

adopted the self-identities of *janajati* (nationalities or ethnic groups) and *adivasi* (indigenous people or original inhabitants). Ethnic activists and their organizations have popularized the notion of discovering "cultural roots" wherein members of the ethnic groups try to find their authentic culture and history, unpolluted from the Hindu rituals and values. Many ethnic festivals and rituals have been revived and made public or even official events. Ethnic groups have publicly rejected Hindu festivals like *Dashain* as a political ritual and symbolic form of domination, which was previously fashioned as a "national" festival. The terms desanskritization or dehinduization are gaining currency in general use to refer to the reversed processes of Sanskritization (Srinivas 1966), earlier described as taking place in the Himalayas (Bista 1972, Sharma 1986). This debate has strengthened the pan-*janajati* identity as the symbolic glue that holds the movement together. On the whole, this phenomenon has direct implications in effecting major transformations in the prevalent views of Nepali society and history.

The *janajati* movement is also credited for shaping a broader social movement critical for democracy in the country. One of the striking features of the *janajati* movement is that it is not led by one single organization. The organizations involved in the movement come from an established network of associations carrying out cultural, political, quasi-political and developmental activities. More than 50 ethnic organizations working on cultural promotion came into existence in 1999. The Nepal Federation of Nationalities (NEFEN) emerged out of these organizations as a coordinating confederation and now has 33 member organizations. Their activities range from direct action to advocacy, from local to central levels. The most recent example of collective action is NEFEN's celebration of its eleventh anniversary during its fourth general assembly on August 9, 2000, on the occasion of International Indigenous People's Day. Representatives from all member ethnic organizations participated in the assembly with a slogan of "Struggle for Indigenous People's Rights." The assembly put forward three main agendas for the indigenous people's movements. First, the struggle for equal share in statecraft and resources; second, indigenous people's cultural promotion and the reconfiguration of national identity; and third, the right to self-determination for development and governance. NEFEN and its member organizations believe that the organizational and movement process simultaneously clarify new visions of social praxis based upon cultural rights while at the same time influencing liberal and left politics. While the coordination of diverse ethnic organizations with marked regional differences, concerns and interests shows a promising practice of diversity management, it also is characterized by occasional disagreements over strategies and priorities. Practices within the

ethnic organizations in dealing with multiple interests foster democratic practices in general.

Apart from ethnic organizations, several non-governmental organizations also emerged during the decade, which mainly attempt to address the pressing economic situation of the majority of the indigenous population as well as other marginalized groups. The emergence of civil societies such as these is definitely a strong aspect of the democratization process in the country.

The explicitly political aspect of the *janajati* movement is another important factor in contributing to democratic processes in the country. There are more than 15 political parties and fronts organized on the basis of linguistic, regional and ethnic lines throughout the country. Some of the ethnic political parties took part in the past general elections with their distinct political programs. Members from the *janajati* community who joined major political parties have influenced the party policies to include issues of cultural rights. Major political parties such as the Nepali Congress, the Nepal Communist Party (UML), the National Democratic Party and various other smaller Communist parties have forwarded their programs for ethnic groups and minorities. The Nepal Communist Party (Maoist), currently involved in an armed insurgency called the "People's War," has even proposed cultural autonomy and the right to self-determination for indigenous peoples. One of the achievements of this effort to change the system from within is reflected in the current level of representatives from the indigenous population in the Parliament. There are about 40 Parliament members belonging to different political parties who represent indigenous/ethnic communities. One remarkable event of a political nature that supported the *Janajati* movement was a meeting of these Parliament members. The meeting was organized by a voluntary group of academic activists in July 2000 in Kathmandu. Setting aside their political and ideological differences, Parliament members discussed the problems of ethnic and linguistic discrimination in the country and possible ways for addressing them through parliamentary actions. The meeting also clearly identified a need for an ethnic caucus in parliament to advance the cause. The political aspect of the *janajati* movement, therefore, manifests the strategy of working with existing political institutions. This complements the other strategy related to its social movement origins, that is one of opposition and protest from outside the system.

One of the first cultural diversity related goals achieved by the *janajati* movement was winning the recognition of Nepal as a "multicultural, multilingual and multireligious" country in the 1990 constitution. Results of the indigenous peoples' struggle are also reflected in the other recent measures undertaken by the Nepali state. The most significant



one is the establishment of the National Committee for Development of Nationalities. The process of establishing the committee paved a way to pass a bill on July 6, 1998, which clearly identified 61 ethnic and indigenous peoples in Nepal. This has formally ended the widely diffused assertion that "everybody is indigenous in Nepal" and made the term *janajati* and *adivasi* publicly unambiguous. Another important development is the attempt to introduce education in indigenous languages in primary schools and to revise history textbooks in schools. All major political parties have outlined programs for ethnic minorities, even though many of these programs are limited to rhetoric. In the Ninth Five Year Plan (2054-2058 v.s.), the National Planning Commission has devoted a section to strategies of development for ethnic and indigenous peoples. In September 1999, the government passed a bill on local autonomy and decentralization in which they formally talked a great deal about indigenous peoples. Other smaller achievements include broadcasting programs in indigenous languages on the national government sponsored radio, and declaring the Tamang/Gurung community new year, *Lhosar*, an official holiday. Another key demand of *janajati* activism – that indigenous communities be granted the right to self determination and political local autonomy within the structure of the Nepali nation state — is under debate. Many non-*janajati* politicians argue that such an action would threaten the integration of country.

Despite these achievements, ethnic activists believe that government actions in favor of sustained assertion of homogenized control over the indigenous population have also intensified during the period. Increased allocation of state resources to institutions and regions that support hegemonic goals and the continued exclusion of indigenous people in the state apparatus, together with exacerbated counter-insurgency violence in indigenous people's areas, are taken as the main ways for undermining the indigenous peoples' movement. Most of the measures taken by the state are legitimized on the grounds of national integration and development. Despite the recognition of the "pluricultural" nature of the society, the Nepali constitution still maintains that the country is "the only Hindu Kingdom in the World." These issues provide further reasons for continued activism.

The *janajati* movement has effectively highlighted the profound crisis of the popular legitimacy of the existing

form of Nepali democracy. Nevertheless, the *janajati* movement also reveals the paradoxes and challenges that can emerge as any social movement grows. As critics of *janajati* movements have pointed out, the *janajati* movement has to figure out a more encompassing definition of "janajati" to include the marginalized populations in collectively navigating the process of social change. The current concentration of demand oriented tactics and the urban centered nature of their activism should be complemented by the development of concrete and more realistic political and economic reform proposals that can reach people beyond cities. In order to gain more popular support, the movement will need to work on its strategies of dealing with cultural diversity and poverty issues in the country that address the problems of poor high-caste Brahmin/Chhetri and low caste *dalits*, as well as those of indigenous peoples. Balancing gender in movement leadership has always been an important aspect to improve in the future.

In conclusion, the *janajati* movement in Nepal has demonstrated that it is a unique form of activism and part of a broader social movement. The movement continues to intensify itself by sharpening its critique of democracy and by preserving cultural diversity. It has its own distinctive features. I would like to outline five salient features of the movement. First, it is different from a secessionist ethnonationalist struggle as it does not seek a separate state from Nepal. The *janajati* movement has not contested the nation-state itself, but its definition and terms are being seriously challenged. Second, it has consistently avoided violence, at least till now. Third, the movement draws from the universal values of human rights and democracy and forms part of the global process through its linkages to international networks. Fourth, the movement combines class and ethnic issues in its struggle for social justice. Fifth, it embarks on a struggle not only for material but also for symbolic resources. This is a struggle for systems of meaning and for understanding how the world should be ordered. These features indicate that cultural diversity and the democratic processes have been the central themes in the *janajati* movement during the last decade. This raises the larger question of how a modern nation-state, which rests on homogenizing ideals, should deal with diversity and equality. The issue of co-existence with difference and diversity seems to be the democratic challenge throughout the world.