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Review of 'Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nepal: Identities and Mobilization after 1990' edited by Mahendra Lawoti and Susan Hangen

Nilamber Chhetri
Jawaharlal Nehru University

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Book Reviews



Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nepal: Identities and Mobilization after 1990

Edited by Mahendra Lawoti and Susan Hangen. Contemporary South Asia Series. London and New York: Routledge, 2013. 265 pages. ISBN 9780415780971.

Reviewed by Nilamber Chhetri

Collective mobilization based on ethnic, linguistic, regional, and religious identities have taken center stage in the Nepali state structure. Surfacing during the 1990s, these identity-based movements made rapid inroads into the political fabric of Nepal, and challenged and shaped the notion of nation and the structure of the Nepali state. In *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nepal*, scholars examine this complex process by exploring the dynamics of identity-based movements and their evolution in Nepal. The book includes contributions from a wide range of scholars working on the Himalayan region and utilizes a cross-disciplinary approach to unearth the process of identity-based mobilization in Nepal following the People's Movement of 1990. The book analyzes how such mobilizations in Nepal are structured by political, cultural, social, and economic inequalities fostered by the state in the past, and how such mobilizations have been shaped in subsequent decades by socio-political transformations. In the introduction,

Mahendra Lawoti and Susan Hangen provide a conceptual framework for the issues of nationalism and ethnic conflict by analyzing the processes involved in producing the state-centric notion of nationalism in Nepal during the Panchayat era (1962-90). They discuss the historical antecedents of ethnic mobilizations and provide an overview of the movements mobilized by indigenous nationalities, Madhesis, Dalits, and Muslims, important background for more elaborate discussions on those issues in subsequent chapters.

The volume's ten essays offer historical and empirical accounts of identity-based mobilization in Nepal and is organized into three sections: Part I contextualizes nationalism and ethnic conflict, Part II focuses on identities and movements, and Part III examines trends in Nepal's ethnic and nationalist movements and conflicts. In Part I, Krishna Bhattachan historically contextualizes the issue of ethno-politics as it has unfolded in Nepal since the early 1990s. Through his study, Bhattachan dispels the myths of intergroup harmony and also rejects the view that ethno-politics will eventually lead to national disintegration. Rather, he suggests ethno-development as a new paradigm for maintaining ethnic plurality in Nepal. Mallika Shakya employs historiography complimented by ethnographic fieldwork to analyze how the Nepali state, in its course of historical

transformation, privileged certain groups within the economic domain and thereby instituted inequality while maintaining a narrative of ethnic neutrality. Exploring this intricate and complex relationship between ethno-politics and economic structures, Shakya writes, "as long as political rule informs the way ethnic order is interpreted, ethnicity will continue to cross paths with economic policymaking" (p. 77).

Case studies on different identity-based movements form the major part of the second part of the book and include papers by scholars studying mobilizations raised by Dalits, indigenous nationalities, Madhesis, and Muslims. Through empirical case studies the contributors demonstrate the conflict-ridden nature of identity claims in Nepal. Highlighting the complex universe inhabited by Dalits in the Nepali polity, Steve Folmer suggests that identity politics for Dalits becomes untenable because, unlike indigenous nationalities, Dalits face an ambiguous situation because they share the same cultural elements with the upper castes. They engage in what Folmer calls a "politics of anonymity," a strategy to conceal their identities by switching from *jat* (caste) to *thar* (clan) names (p. 94). He characterizes the status of Dalits as a 'structured liminality' placed between social and political status only to be ameliorated by forging an identity free of internal contradictions. The volume also

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Nilamber Chhetri on *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nepal: Identities and Mobilization after 1990*

offers important insights on the mobilization raised by Muslims in Nepal, most notably in the chapters by Megan Adamson Sijapati and Mollica Dastider. Sijapati's chapter focuses on the construction of the Muslim community through discursive strategies and the duality of identities shared by Muslim forums in Nepal to assert their religious identity and their commitment to the Nepali nation-state. Similarly, Dastider interrogates the intersection between Muslim and Madhesi identities in Nepal, which she characterizes as "mutuality in conditions of mutability" (p. 173). Her chapter highlights the process through which Muslim leaders try to negotiate religious and regional identities, refusing to choose binary categories. Similarly, analyzing the strategy adopted by ethnic groups to assert their indigenous national identity, Hangen's chapter provides a crucial analysis of the Mongol National Organization and their demands to boycott Dasain in eastern Nepal. Hangen's chapter sheds a great deal of light on how ethnic groups forge collective identities to foster a collective self in opposition to the hegemonic identity, i.e., the political dimension of Hinduism promoted by the Nepali state. Charting through a complex interpretation of cultural memory and lived experiences, Hangen highlights how the call to boycott Dasain acts like a "mnemonic practice that instantiates a particular remembering of the past" (p. 124).

Part III of the book consists of two chapters by Lawoti. In the first chapter he traces the contours of ethnic movements in Nepal and explains the differential levels of mobilization among them by considering factors such as the availability of political opportunities, the state's attitude, modes of mobilization, and the history of mobilizing a group's autonomy. Comparing different ethnic movements along such indicators, Lawoti argues, "the Nepali experience suggests that movements can gain enough strength to force the state to concede to their major demands if groups have a relatively cohesive and long history of independent political mobilization" (p. 219). In the final chapter of the book, Lawoti explores the major consequences of ethnic politics on the Nepali state and argues that as a result of these frequent ethnic mobilizations, the Nepali polity is transforming itself from a mono-ethnic state into a poly-ethnic polity. He writes that these transformations, coupled with accommodative policies and stringent protection of minority rights, could address the issue of violent conflict and separatism in Nepal.

Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nepal is a timely and welcome intervention as it offers valuable insights into the differential mobilization patterns of identity-based movements in Nepal. The beauty of the text lies in organizing discreet chapters on disparate issues in Nepal and

in linking them together to set out broader questions for further investigation. In many ways the authors predict the nature of the ethno-politics that has unfolded in Nepal in recent years. The book will certainly be of interest to academics and researchers interested in exploring issues related to the state, nation, and ethnicity in South Asia. In this regard, the present volume can be regarded as a valuable contribution to the interrogation of the complex and intertwined issues of ethnicity and nationalism in Nepal.

Nilamber Chhetri is a doctoral candidate at the Center for the Study of Social Systems in the School of Social Sciences at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, India. His doctoral thesis examines the growth and proliferation of ethnic associations in the Darjeeling hills and their demands for recognition as scheduled tribes in contemporary times. His research interests include the social history of ethnic groups in India and Nepal, ethnic minorities and the politics of recognition, social movements, and issues of nationalism.