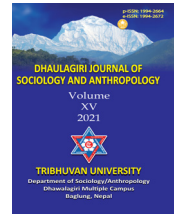


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Middle Castes Against Hill High Caste Political Domination in Nepal: Can Indian Experience Be A Lesson?

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Abstract

This study examines the problems and prospects of middle caste politics in Nepal based on similar political developments in north India. It investigates the processes of middle caste and class formation in the two countries and goes on to examine demography and upper-caste political strategies. Taking the Federal Socialist Forum Nepal (FSFN) and its trajectory as an example of middle caste political formation, it shows that the middle castes are at a disadvantage in Nepal than their brethren have been in north India. FSFN's new merger with two political parties recently further shows the difficulty of mobilizing a middle caste political force and mounting a sustained challenge against the political domination of the hill upper castes. This paper also analyzes emerging caste relations in contemporary Nepal.

Keywords: Nepal politics, caste system, OBCs, ethnicity, North India, Madhesi politics

Introduction

The Constitution of Nepal promulgated in 1990 had officially banned caste-based and ethnic political parties in the country.¹ With the implementation of a new constitution in 2015, which makes no such restriction, the traditional caste and ethnic groups are likely to play crucial roles in electoral politics. One can already see the emergence of unexpected cross-ethnic political alliances and mergers. Blair (2018a, 2018b) has speculated that Nepal's "marginal" groups might unite as a formidable political force, similar to an OBC (Other Backward Caste)-like political formation in north India. Basnet (2019) has termed the formation of the Federal Socialist Forum Nepal (FSFN) in 2015 as an OBC-like "middle caste" experiment in Nepal. Building on the idea of middle castes, this paper further assesses the problems and prospects of the rise of

OBC-like politics in Nepal. Nepal and India share open borders and have historically interacted closely. Although the predominantly Hindu neighbors outlawed caste-based discrimination decades ago, caste remains a powerful social and political force on both sides. Hence, it makes sense to assess whether Nepal will see a political trajectory similar to Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (UP) in north India. Based on an analysis of the FSFN and its trajectory so far, this paper shows that an OBC-like political formation is much more difficult in Nepal than it has been in the case of north India.

By middle castes, I mean those numerous groups in-between the "sacred-thread" wearing upper castes (the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, and their equivalents) and the Dalits in the traditional caste hierarchy in South Asia.² I treat the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) phenomenon in India as a manifestation of middle caste politics.³ Even

¹ In People's Movement II in 2006, the Maoists and the mainstream political parties joined hands against the monarchy, which was abolished in 2008. For an account of the "democratic revolution" from a long-term macro historical perspective, see Mishra (2015).

² For the sake of simplicity, I will not pursue the Dalits and the Muslims (but see footnote 28). At times I use the term "lower castes" to mean both the middle castes and the Dalits.

³ Jaffrelot (2003), drawing on the *varna* model, refers to the "Vaishyas" as "intermediate" castes above the Shudras who



though the category of the OBCs has been contested (Chennur, 2019; Deshpande & Yadav, 2006), it has come to be identified with the groups above the Dalits and below the “twice-born.” A government study in 1953 estimated the OBC population at 32%, while another in 1980 put it at 52%.⁴ Demand for reservation in the public sector and struggle against the political domination of the upper castes have animated OBC politics since the 1960s (Frankel, 2014; Jaffrelot, 2003; Varshney, 2000; Witsoe, 2013).

In the context of Nepal, I use the term middle caste to refer to dozens of ethnic groups (the *janajatis*) and some Madhesis such as the Yadavs in the southern plains.⁵ The historical basis of middle caste-ness in Nepal can be traced back to the legal code promulgated by the Rana Prime Minister Jang Bahadur Rana in 1854 (Höfer, 2004).⁶ Unlike in India, where the tribal discourse has long existed to designate “non-Hindu” marginal groups, the 1854 code in Nepal placed the country’s ethnic groups in the middle order.⁷ The population of the middle castes thus conceived varies from 45% to 50% depending on where one puts some “ambiguous” castes.⁸

make up the proper OBCs. But his classification is ambiguous. The Yadavs have, for example, claimed a Kshatriya status; they have been referred to as both the Vaishyas and the Shudras (Jaffrelot, 2000b, 2003; Michelutti, 2008). For a similar depiction of the Kapus in Andhra Pradesh, see Chennur (2019). The Vaishya and Shudra discourse are largely absent in Nepal. My use of the term “middle castes” is thus generic—groups which are not upper castes and Dalits.

⁴ India last reported caste groups in its 1931 census. Unless stated otherwise, all caste figures in this paper, mostly drawn from published works, are estimates from that census or other studies such as sample surveys. The 52% figure includes about 8% non-Hindu OBCs (Varshney, 2000).

⁵ The Yadavs in Nepal consider themselves as a “middle caste” (Rakesh, 2015: 65, 70). The idea of middle caste has been used by other authors in Nepal; see, for example, Pariyar (2018).

⁶ Brian Hodgson (1874: Part II, 39), who spent from 1820 to 1843 in the British Residency in Kathmandu, wondered about the status of the Magars and the Gurungs, two of the major ethnic groups, in the “Hindu principles” in this way: “...both the Gurungs and Magars...have been adopted as Hindus. But...they have been denied the [holy] thread, and constituted a doubtful order..., not Vaishya nor Shudra, but a something superior to both the latter—what I fancy it might puzzle the Shastristo explain on Hindu principles.”

⁷ It is tempting to view Nepal's ethnic groups as equivalent to India's scheduled tribes. That might be true for a few smaller groups, but there are also crucial differences. Whereas the upper caste hill elite monopolized the public resources, demographically significant ethnic groups, perhaps barring the Tamangs in the central hills, shared resources with the ruling class as junior partners. In Nepal, the tribal discourse is absent. It does not mean that the distinction between caste and tribal groups is transparent in contemporary India (Xaxa, 2008).

⁸ By ambiguous castes, I refer to the presence of castes among Madhesis and the Newars. Three groups of upper-caste elites—the *parbate*, the Newar, and the Madhesi—can be distinguished

Although I use the middle caste concept to emphasize that the new political formations are initiated and led by the traditional middle castes in Nepal, it is a mistake to assume that these groups are the same as the traditional groups in the South Asian ritual hierarchy. One can argue that the new middle caste is built on the ruins of the old caste hierarchy. Since the early twentieth century, economic and political changes have been crucial in this understanding. Sheth (1999) has described this process as “secularization of caste” and the resulting class formations as “classification” of castes in India. Economically and politically, the middle castes have come to occupy the middle order. This new middle caste formation demonstrates the decreasing salience of the traditional hierarchy and competition for economic and political goods. Consequently, the politics of middle castes is flexible, open-ended and opportunistic (Frankel, 2014; Gupta, 2005; Sheth, 1999, 2006). One implication of this flexibility is that the middle-caste-led political parties often enter into seemingly contradictory alliances, as we will see later.

While eschewing using a middle caste label, Blair (2018b) has argued that Nepal’s middle castes could and *should* follow the “Bihar model.” By Bihar model, he means a politics of “dignity” followed by “development” through the elevation of the OBCs to the political leadership. He argues that the provisions of proportional representation (PR) seats in the new constitution facilitate OBC-like political mobilization in Nepal. Blair has, however, overlooked new political developments, such as the formation of the FSFN. FSFN was formed out of the mergers of one plain (Tarai) and two hill-based ethnic parties in 2015 (Basnet 2019). The merger between the three ethnic parties came when the ethnic polarization between the Madhesis (dwellers of the southern plains or Tarai) and Pahadis (the hill dwellers) was perceptibly at its peak. The party was initiated and led by leaders from the hill and Madhesi middle castes. Much like OBC advocates in north India, it invoked “socialism” as its political ideology, and the party also engaged in anti-Brahmanical rhetoric although in a muted tone, compared to south and north India. The party has proposed redrawing Nepal’s newly created federal states along ethnic lines as its main political programs. The FSFN has, however, gone through two significant mergers recently.

In this paper, I draw on insights from comparative research in India (Frankel, 2014; Jaffrelot, 2003; Varshney, 2000) and examine the problems and prospects of Nepal’s OBC-like middle caste political mobilization. In explaining

in Nepal. The dominant upper castes, also at times called *parbate* (hill) upper castes, were initially associated with the military campaign of the Shah dynasty that founded modern Nepal in the eighteenth century. Unless stated otherwise, by ruling upper castes I mean the dominant *parbates*. The 1854 code put the upper castes from both the groups below the *parbate* Bahuns and the Chhetris, but they were placed above the middle caste ethnic groups (Höfer, 2004). I will return to the roles of the ambiguous castes in middle caste politics later in the paper.

why India's south saw an end to upper caste domination soon after independence, while the same did not happen in the northern Hindi belts until the early 1990s, the comparative research shows that the differential outcomes were a result of a complex interplay between the modes of mobilization, demography, and upper caste political strategies. This research shows that southern India, following an "ethnic model," contested the caste hierarchy itself, whereas the north, following the Sanskritization model, affirmed the caste hierarchy, and the upper castes—the Brahmins, the Kayasthas, the Bhumihars, and the Rajputs—tried their best to thwart their ambitions (Jaffrelot, 2003). The OBC politics eventually emerged in the north in the 1960s when the upper caste domination was contested by peasant leaders such as Charan Singh, who advanced the interests of middle caste-class peasant-proprietors, and the "socialists" who mobilized middle castes, i.e., OBCs, with demand for affirmative action. By the early 1990s, the OBCs became the dominant political players via this socialist strategy.

Although the ethnic groups of middle castes have made impressive gains in Nepal in recent years, the political domination of the upper castes remains unabated. After the promulgation of the new constitution in 2015, the local, state, and federal elections have been conducted. The elected bodies at all three levels are more inclusive than before (Paswan, 2017, 2018a, 2018b). However, the middle castes have failed to challenge the political domination of the hill upper castes, as demonstrated by the domination of the hill upper castes in the "mainstream" political parties such as the Nepali Congress and numerous communist parties, as well as the top echelons of the state institutions. Nepal at this stage then appears to have taken a different path from the one observed in north India since the 1960s.

In examining the continuing upper caste domination and the prospect of the middle caste challenge in Nepal, I first investigate the empowerment of the middle castes in Nepal while drawing a parallel with north India. I then explore the demography and upper-caste political strategies. While the middle caste demography, going by the Indian experience, is seemingly favorable to the middle castes in Nepal, but the upper caste demography is not. Similarly, the upper caste political ideologies and strategies are likely to challenge the middle caste aspirations. Finally, I examine the new mergers—with the Naya Shakti Party, Nepal (NSPN) in 2019 and the Rashtriya Janata Party, Nepal (RJPN) in 2020—that the FSFN has undergone in recent years. Here, I argue that the new mergers show the difficulty of engineering an OBCs-like middle caste political force in Nepal while also pointing out that these mergers also illustrates the kind of "flexible" politics that the middle castes are likely to engage in (Gupta, 2005; Sheth, 1999, 2006),

Middle Castes Empowerment in North India and Nepal

In north India, the power of the traditionally dominant upper castes was buttressed by the zamindari land tenure system instituted by the British through the Permanent Settlement of 1793 (Jha, 1980; Mitra, 1980; Sharma, 2005). In this system, upper-caste zamindars monopolized ownership of the agricultural land. In contrast, in much of the south, the *ryotwari* system created peasant-proprietors which catapulted the middle castes into the middle class. The land tenure system coupled with the demographic composition, which I will discuss in the next section, in part, aided different modes of mobilization in the two regions (Frankel, 2014; Jaffrelot, 2003). Most contemporary OBCs in north India, such as the Yadavs and the Kurmis, toiled as laborers and tenant cultivators of the upper caste zamindars and engaged in violent clashes with their landlords in the early twentieth century (Bose, 1991 [1985]; Jha, 1977). Such bitter history fueled their subsequent mobilization.

After independence, the Congress party dominated by the upper castes in India benefitted politically as the party leaders created "vote banks" by maintaining patronizing relations with the lower castes. Although India achieved remarkable institutional stability, Nehruvian socialism and development ideology kept the middle caste question at bay. In the newly-established Indian multiparty polity, the upper castes in north India mainly joined the Indian National Congress (INC) party. The upper castes obstructed the land reform programs; even then, some benefits trickled down to cultivating "upper" OBCs such as the Yadavs. The land reform, along with the accompanying green revolution and the development of alternative sources of economic opportunities in the growing non-agricultural sectors, also empowered the OBCs economically (Witsoe 2013).

First used by Nehru in 1946, the OBCs category was vaguely referred to in the Indian Constitution to empower the "backward" groups (Jaffrelot, 2006).⁹ In the 1960s, "socialists" animated the middle caste OBCs by advocating affirmative action—the "quota" politics—for them (Frankel, 2014; Jaffrelot, 2003; Witsoe, 2013). Besides, the OBCs category has been frequently debated in courts and the media. The violent upper caste reaction against the OBCs in the wake of the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations in 1990 further helped crystallize an "emotional" OBC identity and form a "vibrant and subjectively experienced political community" (Yadav, 1996).

The experience of Nepali middle castes resembles that of India in certain respects, but there are also differences. In Nepal, from 1846 to 1951, the Ranas, who were loyal to the British in India, ruled the country while treating it as their family fief. Rana family members and their upper-caste relatives principally benefitted from the state. Nepali hill

⁹ The term "class" signified Nehru's effort to distance himself from caste, which, he believed, would vanish with modernization and "development" (Jaffrelot, 2006).

upper castes, much like in north India, disproportionately gained from the state largesse, which included liberal land grants (Regmi, 1976, 1995).¹⁰ After the fall of the Ranas in 1951, the monarchy gradually ascended to power. King Mahendra abolished multiparty polity in 1960 and began his party-less Panchayat “democracy.” A series of land reforms were implemented soon after the end of the Rana rule. The influential landlords, just like in north India, managed to hold on to their possessions through legal loopholes and lax implementation (Regmi, 1976) and created a support base for the monarchy. Even then, similar to India, Nepal’s middle castes benefited from land reform to some extent (Mishra, 2015). Further, the land reforms made many people legal owners, added security to the tenants, and fixed upper ceilings for landowners. The reforms thus created a stable land market where those with the means could acquire land freely.¹¹ In addition, the proliferation of mass education after the end of the Ranas helped create middle-class elite among the middle castes.

In Nepal, dissatisfaction and resentment against the upper caste domination existed for a long time in different parts of the country, and on some occasions, they were expressed violently (Caplan, 1970; Holmberg, 2006). Compared to north India, these violent conflicts were not organized and sustained (Gellner, 1997b).¹² Nepal’s middle castes have historically fashioned their political strategies depending on the political context and opportunity. When the monarchical Panchayat period (1960-1990) put severe restrictions on civil rights, the ethnic organizations first adopted, much like in north India, the Sanskritization approach (Gellner, 1997b; Guneratne, 2002; Jones, 1976; Sharma, 1977; Upreti, 1976). But around 1980 after a referendum created a relatively open environment, Nepal’s middle caste ethnic groups changed their mode of activism by publicly contesting the political domination of upper castes and rejecting the “Hindu” caste hierarchy like in south India.¹³ Once they adopted this strategy, the ethnic organizations gained remarkable concessions from the Nepali state. The Nepali state, for example, formally recognized ethnic groups as indigenous nationalities in 2002. Currently, the indigenous model is well accepted, even though the Nepali state has not accepted all of its

rights and claims. Nepal became a secular state in 2006. One of the most visible recent achievements has been job reservations for ethnic groups and other minorities in the public sector. The Madhesi movement of 2007 contributed to federalism and electoral reform, which have been institutionalized in a partial proportional representation (PR) system in the new constitution. The recognition of caste-based and ethnic political parties after the 2006 political change was an outcome of this long struggle.

Lower castes in Nepal, like the OBCs in north India, have demanded reservations in the public sector since 1990, but they have rarely struggled for it jointly as the OBCs did in India. When in 2003 the government announced affirmative action and went on to implement it in 2007, Nepal’s upper castes, unlike in north India, hardly protested against it.¹⁴ Ethnic organizations and parties, however, failed to get several of their key demands addressed, and their bitter experience while drafting the Constitution of Nepal 2015 inspired sections of the middle castes to overcome their ethnic differences and form the Federal Socialist Forum Nepal (FSFN) (Basnet, 2019). As I indicated above, the FSFN is yet to credibly challenge the hill high caste domination of politics. To understand the persistence of the high caste power, one needs to examine demography and upper caste political strategies.

Demography and the Upper Caste Strategy

Demography and the upper caste political strategies are two of the critical forces in shaping regional differences in OBC politics in India (Frankel, 2014; Jaffrelot, 2003; Varshney, 2000). The proportion of the upper castes has been way lower in southern India than in the north. In 1931, in Tamil Nadu, for example, the upper caste Brahmins were merely 3%. In contrast, they were 10% in UP, and the total population of the upper castes combined was about 20% (Jaffrelot, 2000a).¹⁵ Because of the smaller size of the upper castes in the south, lower castes successfully challenged the former’s political power in the early twentieth century. In contrast, in Nepal, this condition is substantially different.

¹⁰ It is not clear to what extent the Madhesi upper castes benefitted. There had been liberal land grants to a few temples in the plains. A few demographically significant middle caste hill ethnic groups also benefitted by virtue of their participation in the military and trade monopolies.

¹¹ Earnings from the British and Indian military service may have thus helped many middle caste hill ethnic groups to acquire land.

¹² In the effervescent aftermath of the 2006 political change, some *janajati* activists did engage in incendiary sloganeering against the high castes, and a few acts of violence were reported from the eastern hills (Adhikari & Gellner, 2016).

¹³ The late King Birendra called for a referendum asking people to choose between a reformed party-less Panchayat and a multiparty system in 1979. For the politics of the referendum, see Baral (1984); Shaha (1990). The Panchayat won by a narrow margin, allegedly through electoral rigging.

¹⁴ When a new constitution was being discussed in Nepal, upper castes did raise their voice against affirmative action and “ethnic federalism” in 2012 (Adhikari and Gellner 2016). Upper castes occasionally make the well-known “merit” arguments in social media.

¹⁵ In Andhra Pradesh, another southern state, the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas represent respectively 3% and 1.2% of the population (Jaffrelot, 2000a).

Table 1: Caste Composition in Nepal and Bihar

Castes	Bihar	Nepal*	Nepal**
Upper Castes	17.7	36.3	31.3
Middle Castes	46.0	45.0	50.0
Dalits	18.3	12.2	12.2
Muslims	16.8	4.5	4.5
Others	1.2	2.0	2.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

* including the Newars in the ruling elite group.

**including the Newars in the middle castes. I will return to the presence of the caste system among the Newars and Madhesis later.

Source: For Bihar, reconstructed from Blair (2018a). Nepal data are from the 2011 census. In contrast to Blair (2018b, 217), I include the Thakuris and the Sanyasis (2.5%) in the Upper Castes group. These latter groups, along with the Bahuns and the Chhetris, have been collectively recognized as the “Khas Aryas” in the Constitution of Nepal 2015.

Table 1 above presents the demography of Bihar and Nepal along with the politically meaningful major caste/ethnic divisions and compares them directly. Thus reformulated, the population of the middle castes in Nepal stands at around 45% (the Yadavs 4%, other Madhesi middle castes 10.9%, the *janajatis* 30%) excluding the Newars and about 50% if the Newars are included.¹⁶ This population proportion of the middle castes is roughly similar to Bihar, and it is slightly better in Nepal if the Newars are included in this group. The middle caste demography indeed appears promising for the middle caste challengers. But, what about the upper castes? As comparative studies in India have shown, the proportion of the upper castes is essential in understanding the dynamics of middle caste OBC politics in India. Table I shows that in Bihar, the upper castes are about 18%.¹⁷ However, in Nepal, they are 31% (36% if the Newars are collectively included), which is almost double the share of the upper castes in Bihar. In India, affirmative action at the state level was implemented much later in northern states than the southern ones. Scholars have attributed this lag to the resistance by the upper castes, whose share of the population was comparatively large in the north (Frankel, 2014; Jaffrelot, 2003, 2006; Varshney, 2000). Going by the Indian experience, it is then instructive that the middle castes will find it extremely difficult to challenge Nepal's proportionally much larger upper caste population.

Furthermore, middle caste groups, including those in the FSFN, are divided along religious, regional, linguistic, and ethnic lines. Similarly, intra-group relations are

¹⁶ Blair's inclusion of the Newars in the elite group can be justified (Onta, 2006). But the Newars have also resented their cultural marginalization and are an important constituent of the NEFIN.

¹⁷ The corresponding figure for UP is 20% and 41% respectively (Verma, 2001).

fraught with caste and class divisions. Later, I will return to the most important of the divisions, i.e., the Madhesi-Pahadi divide. The Indian experience also shows that the size of specific caste and ethnic communities matter as the larger groups tend to monopolize public benefits. The revolt against the “upper’ OBC Yadavs by the “lower” OBCs in Bihar shows just that (Kumar, 1999). Already, in Nepal, many Madhesi groups fear, owing to the large size of the Yadavs, the “Yadavanization” of the plains politics (Basnet, 2019; Karn et al., 2018).¹⁸ Similar concerns have been occasionally raised regarding the Nepal Federation of the Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) as a few large groups tend to monopolize organizational resources and public benefits.¹⁹ These socio-demographic factors complicate the unity and identity of the middle castes. In contrast, the upper castes will face less difficulty unifying themselves since they have a few groups and have interacted closely as dominant castes for hundreds of years.

Upper caste political ideology and strategies further frustrate middle caste aspirations in Nepal. As I described above, Nepal has been dominated by the hill upper castes since modern Nepal came into existence in the eighteenth century. Nepal underwent political and economic changes similar to India after Rana's rule in 1951. While modern education expanded rapidly since 1951, the economy stagnated, prompting scholars to author provocatively titled books such as *Nepal in Crisis* (Blaikie et al., 1980). Agriculture, the traditional source of livelihood for most people, has ceased to provide both income and prestige.

Moreover, the alternative avenues for status and income have been scarce. In this context, politics became a central theatre where ambitious and upwardly-mobile upper-caste men—mostly men—from the margin battled it out with the monarchy-centered ruling elite in Kathmandu. The popularity of communist parties for the aspiring upper caste leaders has been staggering in Nepal.²⁰ In contrast to the Indian zamindars supporting the INC, an overwhelming majority of Nepal's contemporary upper caste leaders have come from small peasant family backgrounds from across the country.²¹ This new ruling class in Nepal speaks the language of revolution and social justice and is anti-

¹⁸ The discourse of Yadavanization originated in UP and Bihar. It refers to the 'monopolization of public resources by the Yadavs.

¹⁹ The NEFIN was initially established as the Nepal Federation of Nationalities (NEFEN) in 1990 (Onta, 2006). The NEFEN was rechristened as the Nepal Federation of the Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) in 2003.

²⁰ In the current ruling communist party, for example, Prime Minister KP Oli is a hill Brahmin man. All of his four challengers—Pushpa Kamal Dahal, Jhala Nath Khanal, Bam Dev Gautam and Madhav Kumar Nepal—are hill Brahmins. I am not positing here a 'Bahunist' biological or psychological essence to explain the political domination of the Bahuns. Nor do I mean that they were always solely motivated by power and wealth. Many are ideologically committed, and the motivation itself might change over time.

²¹ For a similar account of caste and communist mobilization in rural West Bengal in the 1960s, see (Ruud, 1994).

Brahmanical in its public rhetoric.

This internal squabbling among upper-caste factions was visible since the end of Rana rule, and it only intensified during the Panchayat period (1960-1990). The Panchayat could not have coopted the newly educated upper castes given their large demographic size, unlike in India. The educated upper-caste men from the margin formed complex networks and justified their struggle for power with widely available ideologies in the post-colonial world such as development, nationalism, democracy, and socialism. The upper castes from the margin successfully challenged their brethren led by the Royal Palace, forcing the monarch first to concede to a constitutional monarchy and multiparty system in 1990. However, it was far from over. The ultimate show of the upper caste wrangling came in the bloody Maoist insurgency (1996-2006) under the leadership of two well-known hill Bahun men, Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Baburam Bhattarai. The insurgency eventually paved the way for a republic. The latest political upheaval may have established the Bahuns at the helm of affairs.

As far as the middle castes were concerned, the upper caste infighting often opened up “political opportunities” for them (McAdam, 1982). A section of the Kathmandu Newars who felt marginalized by the state’s cultural politics often aligned with the upper caste *parbates* from outside the valley. Many hill ethnic groups in eastern Nepal and the Yadavs in the plains supported the communist parties not only because upper castes showed sympathy to the ethnic causes but also because many thought that caste and ethnic categories would vanish once socialism fused politics, economy, and society (De Sales, 2010). These multifaceted social, economic and political conditions partly explain Nepal’s chronic political instability since the 1950s.

The new ruling class, i.e., upper castes from the margin, has used deft organizational strategies for mobilizing the middle castes. Soon after the ethnic and Dalit movements emerged as powerful forces after the 1990 political change, the upper caste-dominated mainstream political parties quickly established ethnic and Dalit “departments” in their party organizational structure. They routinely appoint token numbers of maverick ethnic and Dalit leaders in the party committees.

One of the implications of this radical, universalist ideological posturing and organizational strategies is that the mainstream parties, particularly the communists, continue to attract their cadres from the middle caste ethnic groups. This phenomenon is often rued as “cooptation” by ethnic scholars and activists (Lawoti, 2007). More importantly, middle castes, with their “parochial” ethnic ideologies, find it hard to owe the poor and downtrodden from their groups and among the Dalits and the Muslims. These ideologies and organizational practices further buttress the political power of the upper castes.

Since affirmative action was introduced in Nepal

only recently, the *parbate* upper castes and the high caste Newars have monopolized the country’s powerful institutions such as the civil administration, the military, and the judiciary. This condition also means that improved political representation for the lower castes does not translate into political power easily.²² What is more, as the lower castes and Madhesis started showing autonomy from the mainstream party patronage, particularly after the 2006 political change, the upper caste elites seem to have entered into a new era of truce, as evident from the drafting and promulgation of the 2015 Constitution (Adhikari & Gellner, 2016; Basnet, 2019). Clearly, despite several similarities with their north Indian brethren, the demography and political strategies of Nepal’s upper-caste elites are different and Nepal’s middle caste challengers would find this elite much more formidable than their Indian brethren. FSFN’s new mergers further hint at the difficulty of solving Nepal’s upper-caste riddle.

Upper Caste Riddle and the New Mergers

As I hinted above, since the FSFN was formed in 2015, it has gone through two major mergers. The first merger took place in May 2019 with the Naya Shakti Party, Nepal, led by former Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai. The new party was named the Samajbadi Party, Nepal or the Socialist Party, Nepal (SPN). Less than a year after the first merger, in a dramatic move amidst the Covid-19 lockdown in April 2020, the SPN merged with its rival in the plains politics, the Rashtriya Janata Party Nepal (RJPN). The new party has been named the Janata Samajbadi Party Nepal or the People’s Socialist Party, Nepal (PSPN).²³ The PSPN, just like the SPN, has adopted the ideology and programs of the original FSFN (PSPN, 2020). Even though it looks like a continuation of the old FSFN, these mergers show how intractable the socio-economically powerful upper castes have been for the middle caste challengers and how the middle caste politics, just like in India, is a flexible and open field and bears the marks of class politics (Sheth, 1999, 2006).

A few powerful ethnic groups like the Newars in the Kathmandu valley and the Madhesis in the southern plains, whom I have treated as if they are the middle castes so far, have dual faces in that they claim “distinct” ethnic identity concerning the larger society and the Nepali state while they have their caste systems and upper-caste elites (Gellner, 1997a; Jha, 2014; Maharjan, 2012; Onta, 2006). Their elites are instrumental in advancing ethnic claims and at times feel proximity to the middle castes, but they also tend to be close to the “mainstream” political parties. The

²² For an account of a different trajectory of a similar process in Bihar, see Witsoe (2013).

²³ The last merger took place in an apparent reaction to a controversial ordinance by the current Oli government. The ordinance was allegedly issued to split the SPN. The government rescinded the ordinance in a few days. The Oli government lost the preliminary majority and deposed from power in July 2021.

Newar and Madhesi upper-caste elites have cooperated and competed with their *parbate* brethren for hundreds of years. Second, when the FSFN was announced, a little known Khas Samabeshi Party (KSP) was also included apparently in the hope that a section of the hill Chhetris, the country's largest group, would jettison their upper-caste status and claim a Khas ethnic identity, but that has not happened and there are no signs of it happening any time soon.²⁴ Instead, the mainstream parties appropriated the term Khas Arya and made it a respectable constitutional category with reserved seats in the parliament in the PR scheme.²⁵ This move will likely discourage the formation of the separate Khas identity and further unite the hill upper castes.

The new mergers as the party of all "marginalized" groups, as Blair (2018a, 2018b) would have suggested, makes some sense since both the Madhesi and the Newars have long struggled against the discriminatory Nepali state. The formation of the new party after the merger also raises new questions. The latest avatar of the FSFN, the People's Socialist Party Nepal (PSPN), has included two influential leaders who are Brahmins—Baburam Bhattarai from the hills and Mahanta Thakur from the plains.²⁶ As scholars in India have argued, the middle caste politics is essentially open, flexible and strategic (Gupta, 2005; Sheth, 1999, 2006). In this sense, the FSFN must have sought to capitalize on the biographical capitals of these two leaders. Former Prime Minister Bhattarai was one of the "architects" of Nepal's Maoist insurgency. Mahantha Thakur, a veteran Nepali Congress leader until 2007, formed the Tarai Madhes Lokatantrik Party (TMLP) apparently to guard the interests of the non-Yadav Madhesi upper castes in the plains (Jha, 2014; Tewari, 2012). The TMLP had merged with several other Madhesi parties and formed the Rashtriya Janata Party (RJP) in 2014.

Although the new party has endorsed socialism and the political program of redrawing the federal states, with the influx of a large number of upper caste leaders in the party and at least the two at the top, the PSPN is sure to come under pressure to abandon its anti-hill upper-caste rhetoric since the rhetoric is not going to be appealing to its upper caste voters in both the plains and the hills. Anti-upper

²⁴ For a discussion of Khas identity and Khas Arya discourse, see (Adhikari & Gellner, 2016; Bista, 1995, [1967] 2004).

²⁵ Lower caste activists had invented the term Khas Arya only recently to criticize the hill upper castes. This invention was often used pejoratively and probably meant to distinguish the *Parbate* upper castes from the Newar and the Madhesi upper castes. Earlier the equivalent term used to be the Bahun-Chhetris or Chhetri-Bahun. The government in May 2012 under pressure from upper caste activists, accepted that the *Khas Aryas* would be recognized as an "indigenous nationality." The government, however, rescinded the decision in a few days under pressure from *janajati* activists.

²⁶ In a new twist, the Janata Samajbadi Party has seen further defections and division. Leaders with the RJP has largely left the newly formed party. This paper was prepared and submitted for review before the latest division in Janata Samajbadi Party. I will not deal with the latest division.

caste rhetoric had been an important element of OBC politics in both north and south India. Further, even if the PSPN engages in such rhetoric, it will unite numerically large upper-caste groups and give rise to formidable upper-caste Khas Arya ethnicity (Adhikari and Gellner, 2016).

Nor have the mergers solved the problem of the hills and plains divide. Already, in the FSFN, the division was stark. In the words of one central leader I spoke to, the Madhesi and the Pahadi middle castes are united in the issue of "inclusion," but they differ when it comes to the touchy issue of "nationalism." At the close of 2019, newspapers reported a rift between Bhattarai and the former-FSN Madhesi leaders. A few Madhesi leaders had raised the issue of the poor showing by the new party in the hills in the by-elections where Bhattarai was expected to perform well. In other words, the inclusion of upper castes in the party's new avatar has put constraints on the party's strategic options.²⁷ One can interpret this new avatar as the suspension of the middle caste political ambition, but one can also interpret the new avatar as a form of "flexible" and open politics in the face of insurmountable upper-caste demography and political strategy.

Conclusion

Taking an example of the Federal Socialist Forum, Nepal (FSFN) and its trajectory, I have argued that an OBC-like middle caste political mobilization against the hill upper caste domination in Nepal began to emerge in 2015. But I have also shown that the situation in Nepal is much more complicated than in north India. I have argued that the forces of demography and upper-caste political strategy have proven adequate to tame the middle caste tides so far. The FSFN's merger with new parties with upper-caste leadership and bases shows the difficulty of mounting a sustained challenge against the upper caste political domination. The new party can still play the lengthy and uncertain politics of constitutional amendment for ethnic federal states, but it will be forced to play down the rhetoric against the upper caste domination. On the other hand, the hill upper-caste elites have an easier task of unifying themselves since they have only a few groups to unite and a long history of close interaction. With their larger population proportion compared to north India and their invocation of universalistic ideology like communism and socialism, they are likely to remain a formidable force in the foreseeable future.

Some authors have remained skeptical about the long-term viability of middle caste politics, even in north India. In contrast to Yadav (1996), Jaffrelot (2003: 386), for example, wondered whether the OBCs really "constitutes a social and political category" even though the OBC category has become a potent political symbol and has been successfully tested for its electoral efficacy. Analyzing

²⁷ Basnet (2019) has detailed the internal divisions and contradictions within the FSFN.

India's 2019 Lok Sabha election results, he concluded that the *jatis* and class might have become new electoral forces in north Indian politics (Jaffrelot, 2019).

New forms of middle caste politics might emerge in the future since caste-based and ethnic parties emerged only recently in Nepal, and party politics is still evolving. The state and local politics contributed significantly to the OBC causes in India. Nepal adopted federalism only in 2015, and elections for local, state and federal bodies have taken place only once. It is also not clear how far the caste and ethnic parties will mobilize voters from their groups away from upper caste candidates. It is worth remembering that it took more than three decades for the OBCs to challenge the upper castes convincingly in north India. Will Nepal's middle caste aspirants have to wait for a few decades? As things stand, the trajectory of the FSFN and its two mergers show a bumpy road ahead.

Finally, what does the middle caste politics I have described in this paper tell about the character of the caste system in contemporary Nepal? I argued above that the mobilization of the "new" middle caste is not based on the ideology of traditional ritual hierarchy. To begin with, Nepal's hill caste system has been thought of as more "liberal" than the Indian one (Bista, 1991; Gaige, 1975). New economic opportunities, mass education and electoral politics since the 1950s are central to understanding this new formation. Rising middle classes and movements from below have contributed to the substantial changes in the caste structure.²⁸ But the de-ritualization has also taken place from above. I have discussed how "atheist" communist parties dominate Nepal's local and national politics. A significant section of the upper castes has thus changed not only in their ideological rhetoric but also in their everyday practices. In 2015, I asked a series of questions to Bahun priests in eastern Nepal about their perception of changing "Hindu culture." None of them blamed the ethnic movements, Westerners, or Christians, as the mainstream media often do, for the supposed "decline" of the Hindu culture; in their eyes, Nepal's Bahun political leaders were to be blamed for the cultural declines they had witnessed in recent decades. I agree with Indian scholars who have underscored the importance of class and de-ritualization of the caste practices at least when it comes to the inter-caste relations and inequality between the traditional middle and upper castes (Basnet, 2015; Basnet and Jha, 2019; Gupta, 2005; Sheth, 1999, 2006; Vaid, 2014; Varshney, 2000).

²⁸ Because of their marginalization, the Muslims (4.5%) and the Dalits (12.2%) are yet to organize and challenge the conventional forces credibly. But it is probably a matter of time before they emerge as powerful political forces (Paswan, 2020). If and when that happens, the middle castes and the hill-dominated parties are likely to find themselves in an unenviable position of having to negotiate with a third force. For a summary of the conditions of the Dalits in South Asia, see (Jodhka & Shah, 2010).

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