



Academic View

Ethnic Movement in Nepal: Interactions Between State and Non-State Actors

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the nature and role of ethnic movements taken place in Nepal. It basically highlights the pattern of interactions between state and non-state actors participated in ethnic movements. In the backdrop of the essence of rise and extent of influence, authors have explored the result experienced by the participants in this movement. It has further depicted the realms of change induced in the causation of ethnic movement. Trajectories of movements, forms of these movement, focus of movements and the collectivity generated in movement have also been investigated here in this paper.

Keywords: Ethnic movement, Nepal, Organization, Representation, Trajectory

Introduction

Ethnic movements in Nepal have played a critical role in bringing about political and social change, highlighting the importance of inclusivity and representation in governance (Derucza, 2016; Lawati & Hangen, 2013; Toffin, 2009). Ethnic movements have been diverse, with each movement representing the unique cultural and political aspirations of different ethnic groups. These movements have emerged in response to various social, economic, and political grievances, and have utilized a range of tactics to mobilize support and bring attention to their demands (ibid).

In Mishra's (2012) framework, there are two phases of ethnic movements in Nepal, namely ethnicist movements I and II. According to him, ethnicity is not inherent or fixed, but rather a socially constructed concept that creates a structure which places large segments of diverse peoples and populations into the middle of the encompassing caste hierarchy. This hierarchized differentiation produces a variety of emotions among members of ethnic groups, ranging from feelings of alienation and bitterness to a sense of powerlessness or a desire for revenge. The ethnic groups started raising awareness among their own community members who carried the group's surname as an ethnonym. They adopted the group surname as a suffix to their own name to create a shared common identity and participated voluntarily in the cultural development of their community. The ethnic movements that have emerged in Nepal, some of which have transformed into distinct political entities, serve as a compelling response to a

fundamental paradox. This paradox arises from the pervasive dominance of a selected group of ethnic elites, notably the Bahun-Chhetri, who wield significant power within the state, effectively governing over all other ethnic communities. This intricate interplay between economics and ethnopolitics in Nepal raises intriguing questions (Lawoti & Hangen, 2013).

The evolution of Nepal's ethnic movement is a captivating journey that began with a primary focus on the cultural enrichment of distinct community groups. However, this narrative took a pivotal turn after the 2006 Second People's Movement when ethnic organizations started veering towards active political involvement. This shift cast a spotlight on social exclusion and inclusion concerns, which swiftly emerged as a fresh and compelling area of scholarly and policy interest. As a result, individuals from historically marginalized segments of society, including women, Dalits, various ethnic communities, and individuals with disabilities, emerged prominently in their endeavors to foster the development of their respective groups (Magar, 2015). To grasp the historical roots of Nepal's ethnic movement, one must rewind to pivotal figures such as Lakhan Thapa, Suk Dev Gurung, and the 1924 A.D. Newars' revolt. These early trailblazers were primarily driven by the noble cause of preserving the language and culture of their ethnic communities. Their pioneering efforts laid the foundation for the proliferation of indigenous ethnic organizations (ibid). Nepal's indigenous ethnic movement arose in response to political and economic deprivation linked to the traditional caste system. Seeking equality through democratic means, these movements assert distinct group identities based on historical suffering and exclusion from state resources. After the restoration of democracy in 1990, these groups collectively called for equal participation. The Maoist conflict further fueled their demands, leading to increased political representation. However, the lack of clear leadership vision has hindered effective solutions. Initially, the movement focused on cultural development but later shifted towards collective action, forming the Nepal Adibasi Janajati Mahasang (Bhattachan, 2009; Magar, 2015).

From an anthropological perspective, the *Janajati* Movement's ideology is based on outdated essentialist ideas. Its leaders assert that individuals are permanently tied to a single ethnic or caste group from birth and cannot change during their lifetime. This viewpoint sees cultures and societies as unchanging, distinct entities closely associated with specific geographic regions, overlooking internal hierarchies and cultural diversity within ethnic groups. This approach aligns with early anthropology but contrasts with contemporary views that emphasize the fluidity of ethnic boundaries, their historical construction, and the blending of cultures worldwide (Toffin, 2009).

In the context of such nature and features of ethnic movements, this study aims to reveal the nature and pattern of Nepali ethnic movements. Further, this paper has documented the aspects of ethnic movements applying qualitative analysis.

Methods: This paper has been based on the secondary data and is intended to explore the dynamics of ethnic movements taken place in Nepal during different periods. The research based academically written and published articles on the ethnic movements from native and foreign scholars have been reviewed and referred as the sources of information and data. Authors while preparing this paper have used qualitative methods and approach in the study. Particularly, it has been written from sociological and anthropological outlook focusing the qualitative aspects of ethnic movements initiated in different

decades of political history of Nepal. Finally, the authors have explored the pattern and nature of interaction between state and non-state actors initiated within the ethnic movements.

Analysis and Discussions

The Intersection of Ethnic Identity and Social Movement Theory

According to Snow and McAdam (2000), collective identity is a fundamental aspect of social movements. This refers to a shared sense of identification among a group of people who come together to pursue a common goal. Similarly, Nepali ethnic movements are often characterized by a strong sense of collective identity based on shared cultural, linguistic, and historical ties (Adhikari, 2007). Social movement theorists argue that mobilization occurs when individuals and groups come together to pursue a common goal (Tilly, 2004). In the context of Nepali ethnic movements, mobilization often involves the use of protests, demonstrations, and other forms of collective action to raise awareness about the issues facing a particular ethnic group (Tamang, 2010). Moreover, the resource mobilization theory postulates that social movements necessitate resources such as finances, human resources, and media to achieve their objectives effectively (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). In the case of Nepal's ethnic movements, crucial resources such as financial aid from the diaspora, media exposure, and international support have significantly aided in the continuation of these movements (Baral, 2015). The new social movement theory prioritizes the significance of identity and cultural matters in social movements. This theory proposes that social movements are successful when they can mobilize around issues related to lifestyle, identity, and culture (Calhoun, 1993). In the context of ethnic movements in Nepal, the new social movement theory suggests that the success of these movements is dependent on their ability to mobilize around issues related to ethnic identity, language, and cultural practices.

Historical background of emergence and expansion of ethnic movements in Nepal

Ethnic movements in Nepal have emerged as a response to the discrimination and marginalization experienced by ethnic groups in Nepal. These movements seek greater recognition and representation for ethnic identities, languages, and cultures (Magar, 2015, Toffin, 2009). The Muluki Ain, which was Nepal's civil and criminal legal code from 1854 until the Rana regime's downfall in 1951, created legal discrimination in the country. This law divided the population into different *jat*, including both castes and ethnic groups, and imposed a rigid caste hierarchy. The code also enforced different laws and punishments for each group. The code even dictated and discriminated among different caste in terms of commensality and sexual relationship. Ethnic and regional groups in Nepal have a long history of opposing the state, with at least 25 such mobilizations taking place between 1770 and 1979 (International Crisis Group, 2011). The majority of these were led by the Limbus and Rais, two ethnic groups from the eastern hills of Nepal. From the 19th century until the 1950s, the eastern hills saw a series of Limbu rebellions, which were sparked by the loss of land to upper caste migrants and state attempts to revoke local autonomy. To avoid further resistance and given the strategic location of *Limbuwan* at the sensitive border, the early Nepali state granted far-reaching autonomy to Limbu headmen in a royal decree of 1774. Under the *thekkathiti* system (1820-1951), these headmen controlled communally held and legally inalienable *kipat* land, collected taxes from clansmen and tenants living on it, and were allowed to maintain militias and dispense justice (ibid).

Ethnic organizations began to emerge in Nepal only in the late 1970s, and their activities gained momentum after the political changes of 1990. These organizations have two primary objectives: preserving their cultural heritage and fighting for equal rights and representation within the Nepali state. To address this discrimination and preserve their unique cultural practices, ethnic organizations are actively engaged in activities that promote their cultural and historical backgrounds. They place a significant emphasis on revitalizing their traditional practices, such as medical treatments, music, and clothing styles. By doing so, these organizations aim to preserve their cultural identity and assert their right to participate equally in Nepali society (Geiser, 2005). Geiser further argues that the Maoist movement in Nepal advocates for indigenous ethnic groups' rights and self-determination. They declared autonomy for various regions, including the Tamang Autonomous Region in 2003. Ethnic movement has shifted from cultural to political focus after the 2006 second people's movement (Magar, 2015). The Maoist conflict has mobilized liberation front along ethnic lines, such as the Magarat Liberation Front and Tharuwan Liberation Front, controlling their regions. As some groups split from the Maoist movement, the conflict has taken on an increasingly ethnic dimension (Lawoti, 2010).

Trajectory, Dynamics and Roles of State and non-State Actors in Ethnic Movements in Nepal

The ethnic movement in Nepal refers to a range of collective actions (Tilly, 1978) and demands made by various ethnic groups in the country. This movement is rooted in the historical and structural marginalization of certain ethnic groups in Nepal, who have faced discrimination and exclusion in various aspects of social, economic, and political life. The trajectories of this movement illustrate how social movements work and how they interact with state and non-state actors to have an impact. The following are some of the key ways in which the ethnic movement in Nepal has evolved and interacted with different actors:

- **Identity Formation:** The ethnic movement in Nepal has led to the formation of collective identities among different groups through shared culture, language, and history, fostering a stronger sense of belonging. Social movements create identities based on shared grievances, experiences, or values.
- **Demands for Autonomy and Self-Determination:** The ethnic movement in Nepal demands greater autonomy and self-determination, including federalism and devolution of power, to have more control over their affairs and decisions affecting their lives. Social movements often seek political representation, autonomy, and participation.
- **Emergence of Ethnic-Based Political Parties:** Ethnic-based political parties and organizations emerged in Nepal's ethnic movement, advocating for their communities' rights and interests and challenging traditional political elites. Social movements create new political actors to represent marginalized groups and challenge the status quo.
- **Internal Divisions and Competition:** Nepal's ethnic movement has faced challenges such as internal divisions, competition among groups, and opposition from the state and mainstream political parties. Social movements with diverse interests and agendas can weaken due to internal divisions, reducing their effectiveness.

- Impact on Policy and Society: Nepal's ethnic movement raised awareness about marginalized groups, led to policies for greater inclusion and representation, challenged traditional elites, and fostered political competition and pluralism.

Various state and non-state actors have played crucial roles for the initiation and success of the ethnic movements in Nepal. While the state has tried to suppress the movement by use of force, the non-state actors like The Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) organize people and try to bargain with the state for their various demands. While other non-state actors like international organizations and civil society are continuously working for the support of ethnic movements, NEFIN has played a most significant role.

McCarthy & Zald (2001) has highlighted the roles played by Social Movement Organization (SMO's) and Social Movement Institutions (SMI's) as non-state actors in their studies. In the context of ethnic movements in Nepal, NEFIN played a crucial role. The *Mahasang*, a part of NEFIN, has been at the forefront of all ethno-political activities in Nepal since the 1990s. Their primary objective is to promote their respective cultures and rectify discrimination suffered by ethnic and tribal groups. They demand political and public employment reservation, recognition of their languages, education in their mother-tongue, and recognition of all *janajati* languages for use in state affairs. Recently, the *Mahasang* has raised concerns about human rights, biological diversity, and indigenous knowledge systems (Toffin, 2009). NEFIN produced a list of 61 "nationalities" in 1996, later reduced to 59, recognized by the government in 2002. NEFIN proposed a fivefold division based on the state of advancement of these groups. In 2003, the organization was renamed NEFIN, and the term *aadivasi* was included in the movement's definition.

The increase in globalization has led to greater internal differences and a retribalization of ethnic groups, resulting in the loss of their unique identities and characteristics. However, in Nepal, there has been a noticeable trend towards greater openness and contact between different ethnic groups in recent decades due to factors such as migration, education, and economic ties. The ethnic movement initially focused on the cultural development of community groups, but later shifted towards claiming political rights and establishing political organizations after the 2006 Second People's Movement in Nepal. This led to the emergence of social exclusion and inclusion issues and ethnic movements in Nepal are seen as a way of resisting the paradoxes that exist in society. The inclusion of individuals in these movements had negative effects on the movements' leadership and momentum (Silver, 2015; Upreti, 2014; Lawoti & Hangen, 2013) which became a new field for academicians and policymakers to work towards the development of the marginalized sections of society (Magar, 2015). The movement's evolution from cultural to political demands highlighted the need for greater representation and access to political power for ethnic groups, and spurred the development of new fields of study and policy to address issues of social exclusion and inequality. Ethnic groups in Nepal have demanded participation, representation, and equal access to state resources, which has led to the implementation of reservation policies in government recruitment through the Public Service Commission (ibid).

Nepal's Ethnic Movements in the context of Global Ethnic Mobilization

Ethnic movements have been a common phenomenon around the world, and Nepal is no exception. The ethnic movement in Nepal is primarily focused on addressing the social, economic, and political exclusion of marginalized ethnic groups. One of the most prominent ethnic movements in the world is the Kurdish movement, which seeks to establish an autonomous Kurdish region in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Like the ethnic movement in Nepal, the Kurdish movement is also concerned with issues related to identity, cultural rights, and political representation (Balci, 2015). Similarly, the Quebec separatist movement in Canada seeks to establish a separate French-speaking state within Canada and is concerned with issues related to linguistic and cultural identity (Rousseau, 1992). Likewise, in the context of Zapatista movement in Mexico, which seeks to address the socio-economic and political exclusion of the indigenous people of Chiapas. The movement is concerned with issues related to land reform, cultural autonomy, and indigenous rights (Haar G. 2004).

Overall, the ethnic movement in Nepal has been a significant force for change and has contributed to greater awareness and recognition of ethnic diversity and pluralism. However, its future trajectory remains uncertain, and it will continue to face challenges and opportunities as Nepal moves ahead in the 21st century.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Nepal's ethnic movements have been instrumental in raising awareness about the rights and representation of marginalized ethnic groups. They have led to policy changes, increased political competition, and a greater recognition of ethnic diversity in the country. However, these movements have also faced challenges such as internal divisions and competition. The future trajectory of ethnic movements in Nepal remains uncertain but will continue to shape the country's social and political landscape in the 21st century. Further research and policy efforts are needed to address the complexities of ethnic identity, inclusion, and representation in Nepal's evolving democracy.

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