



# More “Daju-Bhai” and “Didi-Bahini,” Less “Janajati” and “Adivasi”: Re-reading the Debates of Ethnicity and Indigeneity in Nepal

Prem Bahadur Chalaune

## Abstract

*In this expository paper, I aim to illuminate the intricate political processes shaping the discourse of ethnicity and Indigeneity through a collaborative framework involving NEFIN (Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities), International Organizations, Anthropologists, researchers, and the Nepali state. This study delves into the socio-political importation and imposition of the term “Indigenous people,” examining its origins, development, and transformation from ethnicity to indigeneity - a shift orchestrated by a select few and adopted by many. Through a detailed sociological lens, I trace the reemergence of this new construct, highlighting how it has been engineered and adopted across various spheres. By integrating my analysis with the critical perspectives of scholars who have engaged thoughtfully with these issues, I provide a nuanced picture of the situation both within Nepal and beyond. Finally, I argue that both the ideas of ethnicity and Indigenous as ambiguous and ambivalent in the Nepali context, suggesting that their continued use could potentially lead to further conflicts.*

## Article history

Manuscript received: 11 March 2024

Feedback: 24 July 2024

Final acceptance: 7 August 2024

## Corresponding author

Prem Bahadur Chalaune  
[premchalaune@gmail.com](mailto:premchalaune@gmail.com)

## Article DOI: In NepJOL

## Copyright information

Copyright 2024 © The author of each article. However, the publisher may reuse the published articles with prior permission of the author.

**Keywords:** Development Organization, donor, Ethnicity, Indigeneity, Indigenous People, NEFEN, NEFIN.

## Background

When the process of federalization and state restructuring was being planned for Nepal in 2015, the metonyms “indigenous people” or “adivasi Janajati,”<sup>1</sup> which

1 I use the terms Indigenous, Adivasi, Janajati and Indigeneity interchangeably throughout the paper.

has been the subject of constant hoopla led by a few individuals, was pushed into acceptance without much sensible thought and discussion. Since every citizen of this nation has immigrated at some point in history, with some arriving early and others subsequently, the question of who is, and who is not Indigenous, is in itself an inherently divisive contrivance. These metonyms have been fiercely propagated in Nepal since 1990<sup>2</sup> and ethnic identity was positioned within the coterminous core of politics. Following 1990, there was a dramatic rise in the popularity of ethnic-based organizations that invoked identity-based claims hugely creating frictional division. These organizations then entered the national political sphere, separating caste, ethnicity, religion, and geography by aligning with the global regulatory project.

With the proliferation of identity-based politics in the years following 1990, several cultural groups united under the banner of the Nepal Federation of Ethnic Nationalities (NEFEN) to assert the “ethnies” status and exert pressure on the government and state of Nepal to grant separate recognition to their language, culture, religion, and consolidated movement. Soon, the terms “ethnic” and “indigenous” surfaced parallelly, eventually developing into Indigenous nationalities (Gurung, 2012). In the observation of Mishra (2012), the discourse of indigeneity and the formation of this new category entered in Nepal as a part of a global process initiated and fostered by large-scale international organizations.

Systematically starting in the late 1980s, international organizations like the United Nations (UN), the World Bank (WB), the Department for International Development (DFID), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and numerous other international governmental and non-governmental funding agencies facilitated and financed in bolstering activities in the name of Indigenous People. Their financial assistance through grants and funding programs fueled the activities of ethnic based organizations in terms of activism, movements, symposiums, seminars, research, and publications.

A handful of individuals showed up for this purpose in forming Nepal Janajati Mahasangh (Nepal Federation of Nationalities – NEFEN), which was changed into Nepal Adivasi Janajati Mahasang or Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) in 2003. Since then, NEFIN became one of the prioritized NGOs for the donors and lots of money was pumped in for materializing their several activities. While the International Labor Organization (ILO) endorsed a convention called

---

2 Here, I do not mean to imply that there were no collective cultural organizations in Nepal before 1990. They existed, but there are not many studies on the formations, motives, and functioning of these groups either prevailing independently or under the banner of certain political parties. I chose the year 1990 because it saw a significant increase in political parties, identity politics, and parties aligned with the goals of donor community. The story of Indigeneity also emerged as a compelling narrative within the context of politics and development.

ILO-169 in 1989, globally advocating for the rights and welfare of Indigenous and tribal communities, NEFIN lobbied, along with the support of donor agencies, to get the convention ratified in Nepal in 2007.<sup>3</sup> The idea of guaranteeing the rights of the Indigenous People had diffused globally. This soon became a cult among numerous Nepali cultural groups advocating for their new identity of indigeneity, something that was slated by a few but quickly grew to involve many.

From 1991 onwards, they succeeded in expanding their membership by adding several cultural groups and instigated their protest by claiming their movement as the rights of their group, i.e., Indigenous People. Although the identity-driven movement commenced by Nepal Janajati Mahasangh gained momentum until 1996, the Maoist party declared underground war from 1996 to 2006, embracing their agenda as a war tactic to win loyalty and to mobilize many cultural groups, calling it a “People’s War”. Individuals residing in the rural hinterlands of Nepal and belonging to different cultures were made to join the war upon the assurances that they would get a separate state of their own based on their ethnic identities. Once Maoists were eyeing to join mainstream liberal politics, the ethnic or indigenous people’s movement was forcibly heightened during and after the political transition of 2006.

In this way, the recognition of their newer identity as indigenous people, developed again inside the dynamic of the then political process. After ethnic groups were made, listed, defined, and merged under a classificatory strategy, a separation was drawn between indigenous people and other populace. A series of circumstances ensued in 2008 with the first elected Constituent Assembly (CA), when political leaders came under increasing pressure to recognize indigenous identity and grant special rights or privileges along with separate ethnic federalization. As a result, Hindu caste groups of Brahmin, Chhetri, Thakuri, Sanyasi, and Dashnaami were classified under some peculiar category called, “Khas.”<sup>4</sup> Such opposite categories bred ambiguities and stimulated the doubtful and confronting situations among and between the cultural groups residing in different locations of Nepal. It not only exacerbated the complexities and challenges for a country like Nepal but also left room for future conflict and swept under the rug the existing class-based and other kinds of inequalities and disparities. It may remind one of the socio-political situations during the

---

3 While countries from Scandinavia including Denmark and Norway, and countries from Latin America including Bolivia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras and Peru, and no countries from Asia and Africa had ratified this international convention, Nepal became the first country in South Asia and second in the entire Asia to ratify the Convention on Indigenous and Tribal people (169).

4 These groups too formed an alliance, and demanded for the prior rights or special privileges along with ethnicity-based federalization. They too voiced against the demands of Janajati that they are also one of the largest groups in the country and they equally possess right to be Indigenous and should have special privileges on similar account of the Janajati groups (Shrestha, 2012).

period of British colonization in India that racially separated caste and tribe. Following the global shift in the political sphere after 1950, along with the rise of international organizations cultivating the idea of right-based regimes, the Global South was compelled to embrace all kinds of policies and laws in their homeland. In the same context, this study delves into the socio-political importation and imposition of the term “indigenous people,” investigating its origins, evolution, and transition from an ethnic designation to the concept of indigeneity - a transformation initiated by a limited group but embraced by a broader audience. By employing a comprehensive sociological approach, I examine the development of this emerging construct, emphasizing the processes through which it has been shaped and integrated into diverse contexts.

The paper is divided into five sections. In the first section, I explore how the lexicon of Janajati is linguistically flawed, epistemically vile, and supposedly tricky, illustrating the complexities and conflicts that have arisen from these categories. In the second section, I examine the political motivations and implications behind the adoption of the term “indigeneity,” analyzing how this concept has been embraced and the factors driving its popularity. The third section delves into the broader political consequences of subscribing to indigeneity, discussing how its acceptance has affected various social and political agendas. In the fourth section, I present an alternative viewpoint to the prevailing narratives discussed earlier, offering a critical analysis, and the final section presents my reflections. Each section builds on the previous one, examining the interplay between politics and identity in the context of indigeneity.

### **Caught between Janajati and Adivasi**

In the Nepali context, an array of publications, especially those authored by Western anthropologists and followed by their Nepali counterparts, have misleadingly overused the metonym ethnicity and its preferred Nepali name Janajati. Conceptually, the lexicon that continued to be backed and bolstered in the Nepali context is linguistically faulty, epistemically unpalatable, and supposedly problematic. Etymologically, “Jana,” “Jati,” “Janajati” and “adivasi” all originate from the Sanskrit root. Jana is an all-inclusive term that means human race, people, and the world, whereas, “Jati” connotes variation in terms of nationality and people living in a world of varied cultures. Moreover, Jati also refers to a group made up of people with different religious beliefs and faith backgrounds. The term, Janajati, however, is a group of people who live a nomadic life by dwelling in a forest depending on roots and tubers. Adivasi is generally used to refer to those people who have been residing in a particular country, place, and geography for a very longtime.

However, the language and discourse surrounding ethnicity and indigeneity is primarily influenced and shaped by Western anthropologists with their polemic angles and the preconceived position they make against Brahmin-Chhetri and

others. The mostly produced ethnographies pitted Brahmin-Chhetri vs Janajati and presented highly contentious, polarizing themes.<sup>5</sup> Their work made a pervasive effect on many, belonging to several disciplines, and was compelled to accept whatever has been propagated. Special funding was allotted to the research on the theme of ethnicity after 2006. Production of such works was highly promoted in academia.<sup>6</sup> The term Janajati has the least existence (except for a very few groups) in present-day Nepal since there are so few communities that dwell or live in the jungle and engage in shifting cultivation. The way these labels are now applied, there are fewer chances to unite the Nepali population, complicating the existing lived realities and splitting them along the oppositional lines, fostering divisive identity politics.

Anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista, who was a staunch supporter of ethnic ideas, bent his vent on the gradual rise of various ethnic organizations. In his unpublished report, *Ethnicity: Its Problems and Prospects*, which he prepared for CNAS in 1985, Bista reacted to how ethnic organizations were being formed for political motives and the issues being ethnicized were jeopardizing the process of national integration (KC and Kharel, 2017). The 1990 Constitution of Nepal explicitly used the term Janajati in Article 26, acknowledging their relative social deprivation. Similarly, the Nepal government's Gazette in 1997 described Janajati as those communities, who have their original and distinct language and culture but are socially backward in comparison to other caste groups. Nonetheless, Nepal Janajati Mahasangh functioned as a federal umbrella bringing together several forceful movements related to various groups claiming themselves as Janajati. The federation reinforced in shaping the ethnic identities including Limbuwan Mukti Morcha, Khumbuwan National Front, Mongol Liberation Organization, and Rastriya Janamukti Party that proclaimed political, cultural, religious, and linguistic differences from the Parbatiyas or Hill people.

To put it clearly from the observations made by anthropologist James F. Fisher (2012) who questions the relevance of the Western model of ethnicity in the present Nepali scenario, the burgeoning of this concept is shaped by the country's shifting political setting. Fisher, who holds an extensive experience working in and understanding Nepal, believes that there are no distinct cultural groups and the idea of understanding Nepal through ethnic lenses is based on a fundamental error (Fisher, 2012, pp. 116-123).

---

5 There are many ethnographies of this kind. Paradoxically, those works were accepted in a blindfolded manner and frequently cited instead of questioning and reexamining them. The critical assessment made by Anthropologist Dilli Ram Dahal on Lionel Caplan's work, "Land and Social Change in Nepal," published in *Himal* (Dahal, 1996) has become less common in Nepali Sociological and Anthropological circles in the days that have followed.

6 The review of these works needs a separate treatment and is not the scope of this paper.

Of course, there are several cultural groups living in various parts of Nepal, each carrying on different migratory histories and stories. Similarly, their lived lives also inherit the challenges and experiences of not having access to decent health and education, a dignified living, and equitable wages. These individuals exist or are scattered throughout Nepal, who endure daily challenges, are denied access to numerous opportunities and necessities, and do not have the same level of privileges that other groups do. Despite of many being in the same boat, the ethnographies and the constructed anthropological category completely overshadow the existing realities.

However, the breakdown of cohesive uniformity further arises when one group of people are called 'sons of the soils' and cobbled together as indigenous or *adivasi* by opposing another as latecomers. This has led to the unlikely bifurcation, which has only reinforced the tribalization process that was witnessed during the British colony in various parts of the world. To illuminate it from the African case, Adam Kuper (2003) reveals that, in South Africa as colonial and apartheid regime ended after the 1980s, the indigenous identity has been used and abused as part of neocolonial tactic in order to divide and rule. The revival of the indigenous identity of most of the tribal groups and the division of African peoples into the category of indigenous versus non-Indigenous was just a drift to racism.

While in the context of Nepal, Shrestha (2012) opines that the politics behind indigeneity is to establish a myth that the Janajatis are the sons of the soil and other (upper-caste Hindus) are just the migrants. In a similar line, Mishra (2012) argues that politics behind the claim of indigenousness is much more powerful than that of the ethnic: the former has been construed to award an unassailable firstright over the latecomers and newcomers while the latter merely stresses diversity and specificity. Mishra leaves the clue that the politics behind indigenousness by lending categories, resources, information, and legitimacy is to create a global cocktail circuit from various groups and elites around the world to manage statecraft. He sees the shift from ethnicity to indigeneity in Nepal as part and parcel of the global historical process and the invention of the new metonym of indigeneity and indigenous peoples' movement as a by-product of the world systemic process in the care of donor agencies. Hence, according to him, while the lobbies and pressures of the donors continued to foster identity politics, it made the Nepali state concede to the interest and agendas of the international organizations, and, in turn, its ability to take decisions weakened. With this, the section underneath delineates, how international organizations have propagated and institutionalized the idea of indigenous and indigeneity within the governmental machinery and nurtured it within Nepal.

### **Subscribing the Term**

The UN's 1993 proclamation of the Year of indigenous people made the idea of indigeneity chic, particularly among English-speaking Western-trained individuals, those directly and indirectly serving in INGOs, GOs, and the local NGOs funded

by these organizations. Many individuals served as high-paid consultants to these companies along with those who made it a political business. Organizations like the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII), which is the UN's central coordinating body for matters relating to the concerns and rights of the world's indigenous people, and the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) have been advocating for the indigenous rights, shaping and influencing the discourses and policy frameworks globally. The UN guidelines shaped the global discourse and made a stark impact on people, communities and activists collaborating across borders and influencing the indigenous movement globally.

To Leve (2011), the invention of the new metaphor of indigeneity and politics of indigeneity is the result of a global identity machine that includes a transnational assemblage of institutions, processes, ideology, and framework. Leve claims that if international organizations like IMF, WTO, World Bank, UN, and international non-governmental organizations are involved at the transnational level in manufacturing identity politics, the governance mechanism, bureaucracy, and NGOs partake at the national level in the production of identity politics and indigeneity-based claims. Although legal instruments like the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) provide a normative framework for recognizing and protecting indigenous people's rights and influencing national legislations and policies, UNDRIP is also held responsible for instigating competing claims over land ownership and resource extraction and political autonomy, sparking debates and creating the conflict of polarization.

Considering Leve's observation, it's fitting to map the proliferation of identity-based politics and the invocation of indigeneity in post-1990 Nepal within the context of the rise of neoliberal governance strategies of privatization and marketization of key public institutions. In the view of Leve, to make these neoliberal programs uncontested, the politics of identity and indigeneity were cultivated. To juxtapose Leve's perspective, in the African case, Kuper (2003) contends that indigenous is just a fancy word popularized by the UN agencies and used in the place of what we call primitive, ancient, hunting-gathering, tribal, native, and aboriginal. Debunking the myth of indigeneity, Kuper says that indigeneness is no more than a justification for claiming special rights. For Kuper, the division of people between indigenous and non-indigenous is like a return towards new kinds of apartheid and a drift to racism. Kuper (2003) cites the resistance of South African Boers in illustrating how problematic it is to define someone as indigenous and others as non-indigenous. The inaugural day of the indigenous Peoples' Forum held in Geneva in 1996 was disrupted by the South African Boers demanding that they should also be given to participate in the forum claiming that they equally are indigenous.

In the case of Nepal, a few groups of people who lobbied to reframe what they projected as ethnicity, shifted to the newly canonized term indigenous bringing



the identity-based politics into another form. The political change of 1990 in Nepal coincided with a global rise in identity politics, which led to the assertion of ethnic identities in Nepal by asserting the issue of language, religion and their share in the politics. Following the political change of 1990, Sadbhavana Party was campaigning the cause for an autonomous Terai and Nepal Bhasa Manka Khala sought to promote Newari culture and language. In 1996 the Janajati Mahasangh formed a taskforce, which defined the term Janajati as a group that has its “own mother tongue and traditional culture but not belonging to the Hindu caste system.” In the same year, the Mahasangh enlisted 61 groups as Janajati and later it was reduced to 59, when it was recognized by the government in 2002. However, in August 2003, the term adivasi was ascribed in the definition of the movement, which gave the organization a new name, Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN). After 2006, NEFIN continued belligerently calling for the “rights” and “inclusion” of only those who had been enlisted, while ignoring and excluding those who were unlisted and were categorized as Parbatiya or Khas-Arya or Bahun Chhetri.

Presenting the contradictions inherent in defining one group as Indigenous and another as non-Indigenous, Shrestha (2012) demonstrates a case in the context of Nepal by arguing how the Indigenous identity was emphasized with the demand for ethnic federalization in the first Constituent Assembly (CA) after 2008. While the political leaders with Janajati and Madhesi backgrounds formed a Janajati caucus to pile pressure for increasing their political and economic clouts in the name of Indigenous rights, the Hindu caste groups of Brahmin, Chhetri, Thakuri, Sanyasi, and Dashnaami came under one lumpy Khas category and established an alliance to combat ethnicity-based federalization. The Khas also made similar demands as that of the Janajati caucus that they too are the natives and should share similar privileges as that of the Janajatis. Shrestha (2012) and Chhetri (2012) note that initially the Khas category was used only to identify highland Chhetris of the Karnali region, at least until the 1980s, which now became the umbrella or overarching identity of Brahmins, Thakuris, Sanyasis, Dasnamis to counter balance the proliferation of indigeneity and ethnic federalization. The labeling of Indigenous vs non-Indigenous and striving to systematically institutionalize it in a society where no kind of ethnic and racial conflict exists has the potential to breed racial prejudice. Attempts to instigate such a troublesome concept when the political turmoil was at its height may develop distrust and skepticism not only against those ethnic based organizations but also raise doubts on the humanitarian approach as claimed by the UN.

## **The Politics Behind**

Again, in the African case, Kuper (2003) illustrates not only the intricacies surrounding the distinctions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous but also the politics shaping the debates of inclusion and exclusion and representation and misrepresentation. Initially, the terms aboriginal, tribal, or native were used to denote the people who now are considered as Indigenous. But after the end



of the colonial and apartheid rule in South Africa, the term Indigenous replaced the term native. Names of Indigenous Peoples underwent frequent changes. For example, Sami for Lapp, Inuit for Eskimos, and Sans for Bushman. The Indigenous Peoples' Forum, from where the South African Boers were intentionally excluded, was later filled with the delegates of the UN and some of the NGOs to speak and make a decision for Sami, Inuit, Sans, Australian aborigines, and Amazonian people. It signals the involvement of the UN agencies and NGOs in the myth-making of indigeneity by creating a divide between people based on caste, language, and geographical and historical variations. Such a politics of indigeneity and activism of Indigenous is similarly widespread and found outside Africa.<sup>7</sup>

The politics of inclusion and representation in the Nepali context reveals the politics predominated by NEFIN and only the limited groups of Newars, Gurungs, Rais, Sherpas, Magars, Thakalis and Tamangs. They contended that the invention of indigeneity was a result of unequal power relations between the state and society (Gurung, 2012; Bhattachan, 2012). To them, firstly, the nature of Nepali ethnicity appears unique, unambiguous, solidified, and concrete. Secondly, all ethnic groups are distinct in terms of language, religion, and culture. Thirdly, to consolidate their ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identity, they realized the significance of reverberating their primordial identity (Gurung, 2012; Bhattachan, 2012) as a pan-national phenomenon, which appeared as a batch of pride for them.

This rhetoric has been instrumentalized in claiming themselves as Indigenous and made it the defining criterion of social inclusion and representation following the political change of 2006. For its political project, NEFIN started receiving huge amount of funds from various international donor organizations. NEFIN's sources of funding had expanded "dramatically over the previous years" (Hangen, 2007). Similarly, the case was reported where the UK-based government department drew severe criticism in Nepal for administering overseas aid for funding the numerous programs of NEFIN (Shrestha, 2019).

If the NEFIN's definition of inclusion and representation of Indigenous communities belong outside of the Hindu fold how one reckons those groups with their feet in two boats? For example, what about those Newars and Madhesis, who follow the Hindu faith and inherit the occupational caste system, and have a strong belief in untouchability. How can one disregard the highest posts and positions and the wealth earned by various Newari families, be it during the Panchayat or in post-Panchayat political set-ups? This has been explicitly clarified

---

7 In the edited volume, *The Politics of Indigeneity: Dialogues and Reflections on Indigenous Activism* by Sita Venkateswar and Emma Hughes (2011), experiences from different parts of the world- South America, New Zealand, post-colonial Africa, and Asia- are presented. Chapters in the book agree that Indigeneity is a relational process and evolves not only under the purview of power relations but also by Indigenous activism spanning several countries.

by the position taken by Shrestha (2012) himself. Such a blanket approach treating all Brahmins-Chhetris as rulers and dominant is flawed and misleading (Shrestha, 2012). This line of reasoning is driven by prejudice, panicked responses, and inconsistent data and information. Shrestha debunks indigeneity as a myth and reveals that there has been a meaningful representation in the parliament, cabinet, and other high-ranking official positions from different ethnic and regional bodies in the previous political regimes. Shrestha's views are validated by Mishra (2012) by arguing if all Brahmins-Chhetris of Nepal are rulers, rich, and privileged, then why are most of those groups residing in mid and Far-Western regions of Nepal are in the lower rung in terms of human development indices. According to Mishra, the urban-based, educated, affluent, influential and the ones who have good connections with the present and past rulers from the families of priestly Brahmins, holding military positions, and engaged in commercial backgrounds and those who held power and prestige in post-1950s political settings represent the privileged groups, compared to others.

The Valley-based Newars, who were privileged to enjoy many state facilities, compared to other groups from the very beginning by serving as bureaucrats and holding key governmental and developmental positions before 1990, suddenly started claiming that they were the autochthonous of the Valley.<sup>8</sup> The Jyapu Mahaguthi, which is the caste association of the Newari peasants of Kathmandu, often underlines the primordial link of Kathmandu's Newars with the Indigenous deities of the valley. The Newari peasants symbolically took refuge in such rituals to express their control over the soil and claimed themselves as the "sons of the soil" (Toffin, 2009). The change of the names from Newar to "Newa" reveals how the new ethonyms were intended to express the local linguistic identities. As Newars became Newa, Gurungs became Tamu, and Thangmi became Thami.

### **Fluidity to Faultiness**

After 2006, many Nepalis were caught in a perplexing situation, where they not only witnessed the surge in identity-based politics but also experienced the surmounting consequences of claiming and reclaiming the autonomy over certain geography, which they thought they had inhabited for centuries. The forceful assertion of these claim makings and counter-claim makings were divisively palpable in their actions and movements, campaigns and slogans, graffiti, and various means and methods of protests. Also, it was a peak time when key political actors sat for the negotiations over the newer intricacies concerning state restructuring and federalization policies. In this situation, the idea of indigeneity was much hyped and the agenda of inclusion and exclusion took the central stage. As such, it was a state of disorder and bewilderment particularly for those who

---

8 I have no intention of demeaning or clumping everyone into this category. I am using this case to demonstrate how individuals or people belonging to different member groups are equally privileged and underprivileged in Nepal.

were kept under the category of Brahmin and Chhetri on the one hand, and those who were labeled as Janajati adivasi on the other, and were compelled to keep mum in this conflicting situation. Because, it was related with the direct benefits associated with the possible future affirmative actions and also it was a kind of biting a bullet for many to speak against the agendas floated by their own group.

Unlike the Janajati movement itself and the actors and activists, who were pitching for their uproar, the entire phenomenon of the indigeneity and indigenesness was also boosted by the epistemic productions of anthropologists. For instance, to anthropologists like David Holmberg (2012) and Sara Shneiderman (2012), the nature of Nepali indigeneity relies on growing Ethnic consciousness. To Holmberg (2012), all Ethnic groups are coterminous with Indigenous groups. Going a step further, Shneiderman (2012) presumes that Ethnic groups of Nepal were impeded from being Indigenous by the previous autocratic regimes. As a result of their ethnic consciousness, they restructured their own identity and became Indigenous nationalities in tandem with the restructuring of the Nepali state. While Holmberg and Shneiderman value the sense of cultural recognition for propelling the Ethnic activism towards indigeneity, the key deficiency of such Indigenist articulation lies in seeing Ethnicity and indigeneity envisioning from the obsolete anthropological lenses of divisibility, partiality and the position of polemicist rhetoric.

Plenty of historical evidence and published materials by both Nepalis and non-Nepalis have revealed the influx of migrant's arrival in the history and making of Nepal and Nepalization process. In the same context, Mishra (2012) argues that the claim of Indigenesness appears more powerful than that of the Ethnic. While the former has been constructed to award incontestable first rights over the latecomers and newcomers, the latter stresses on diversity and specificity. But, if all are migrants, what is the marker that differentiates early-comers from late-comers? Hence, the construction of Indigenous identity, based on who came first is (re)produced only to divide people on the basis of descent, original descendants, early settlers and late settlers, and so forth to justify one sided claim in the forms of special privileges or prior or exclusive rights over the forest, water, grazing lands, and other sorts of natural resources.

Gellner (2012) finds such calculations contradictory and ambiguous and wonders how long one has to live in a particular place to be considered an Indigenous. Gellner's question may appear appropriate after seeing Sherpa labeled as an Indigenous group, whose history in Nepal is shorter than that of Brahmins-Chhetris. So, what is the criterion to define the Indigenesness? For Gellner, even the issue of granting preferential rights to one and not to others remains highly contentious. Because, in the Nepali context, there are differences among the Indigenous groups themselves. Some may be more affluent, privileged and Indigenous than others. For instance, Raute, Kusunda, Chepang, Tharu, Santhal, and Munda may be more Indigenous than Thakali, Gurung, Magar, Rai, Sherpa Newar, and so on. In comparison to the former, the latter are more visible,

global, privileged and reaping the benefits from various state and developmental institutions in the name of Janajati and indigeneity.

Likewise, it is also inapt and hollow to examine the case on the two popular approaches that define and discuss the nature of Ethnicity and indigeneity in the Nepali context. First, the primordialist or essentialist approach makes Ethnicity revolves around the belief that Ethnic identities are fixed, inherent, and based on unchangeable characteristics such as biology, culture, language, or religion. Here, Ethnicity is viewed as the physical and cultural traits that individuals inherit by birth and cannot alter throughout their lives. This approach to Ethnicity often reinforces the idea that Ethnic identities are natural and predate modern societal structures. It assumes that Ethnic identities are intensely rooted in the pre-historic ties of common decent, shared culture, and kinship and Ethnic boundaries are stable and fixed through language, religion, and caste (Barth, 1969).

Second, the anti-essential school of thought or social constructivist model substantively challenged this position. For instance, Gellner (2012) articulates that the nature of Nepali Ethnicity is fluid and hybrid as there are the documented cases of Bahuns becoming Newars, Newars and Chhetris becoming Gurungs, Bura becoming Chhetris, Tibetans becoming Chhetris and Byansis becoming Tibetans. Similarly, Mishra (2012), James Fisher (2012), William Fisher (2003), and Ram Chhetri (2012) have stressed not to comprehend the nature of Nepali Ethnicity as mystical, magical, bounded, and in easily identified terms.

In order to understand this, we equally need to take into consideration the cross cutting phenomenon of shifting alignment, where one group doesn't loath to get fused into other cultural terrain, and at times, even sees another's identity as their own. To justify it from the observation made by Fredrik Barth (1969) on Pathans and Baluchis in Pakistan, there are several instances in Nepal as well where individuals or groups display shifting alignments and merge into another group. According to Barth, although they looked like two different people, there were social, cultural, and economic conditions where both groups gave up their identities as Pathans and Baluchis. In that sense, the shifting alignments are quite natural and obvious in the process of social-cultural interactions between the groups. In the same manner, Paul Spencer (1973) has examined the trend of population drift from camel-herding Rendille to Cattle-herding Samburu in northern Kenya. It depicted how people shifted "from one niche to another, one set of allegiances to another, over time and have thereby changed the kind of people that they are" (Gellner, 2012, p. 93).

However, in the Nepali context, Fürer-Haimendorf (1964, p. 27) wrote of different groups being absorbed into the Sherpas. Gellner has written about Bahuns of Nepal becoming Newars (1997, p. 12). In the north-West of Nepal, Nancy Levine saw how "one Bura village became Chhetri; a Tibetan village became Bura, another Tibetan village citing Bura and Tibetan antecedents in which the crossing of ethnic boundaries commonly occurs and a Byansi village than became

Tibetan...” (Levine 1987, p. 85). Similarly, the marital ties of Magars with Thakuris in Nepal enabled hypergamy because of which the boundary between tribe and caste became blurred (Toffin, 2013). It also reveals the prospects of mobility between different cultural and caste groups. For instance, the Newari merchants had the advantage of becoming Tibetan Buddhists in Tibet and Hindu Buddhists in Nepal. They had families and wives at both places. As a result, they adopted different socio-cultural identities. In his book *Sherpas*, James Fisher (1990) illustrates how the Sherpas of Nepal had loyalty toward the Nepali king on the one hand and religious alignment towards the Dalai Lama on the other.

In another case, in making the story and history of Janajati, Anthropologists Arjun Guneratne (2003) is skeptical of the way host societies are dependent on Western Anthropologists to define their socio-cultural traditions. Guneratne’s study on Tharu, “Many Tongues, One People: The making of Tharu Identity in Nepal,” states how Tharus were also perplexed about the nature of their Ethnicity as the Anthropologists studying them were. Although Tharus knew that they were a community, they didn’t know “how to define it” (Fisher, 2012). Thus, Western Anthropologists defined it for them. In the same manner, the Thakalis too wonder about their homeland and culture and are eager to discover them. Thus, they expect the Anthropologists to help them find it (Fisher, 2012, p. 118). But Fisher has admitted that he made a grave mistake by trying to understand Nepali Ethnicity. “I used to think there were some mysterious, essential, mystical or magical characteristics...but it was the mistake of essentialism” (Fisher, 2012, p. 122). To Fisher, “...they are ultimately not just Bahuns or Janajati or Dalits or Madhesis, but that they are all also daju/bhai and didi/bahini” (Fisher, 2012, p. 123).

Thus, in the process of forcefully situating Nepali experiences into the lingo of Ethnicity and indigeneity, the cultural variation and mosaic of Nepali society, despite its flexibility and fluidity, have been heavily politicized and is seen in the oppositional category by Ethnic organizations like NEFIN. Here, two important questions can be raised: How did NEFIN become so powerful to drive and dictate the policies related to different Ethnic groups of Nepal? Why is the tradition of anthropology that mostly revolves around the ambit of documenting and grouping particular cultural groups as “ethnies” suddenly changed its color towards portraying the groups in divisions by aligning either with the state and structural elements and eventually entering into the domain of law, politics, donors and development, and constitution?

## Conclusion

From the preceding analysis, it is evident that the politics of indigeneity in Nepal—particularly the transition from Ethnic to Indigenous identity—have been studied by both Nepali and non-Nepali Sociologists and Anthropologists. Still, the scholars diverge in their interpretations: some attribute this shift to global influences and transnational identity politics, while others point to the political maneuvers

surrounding the political transitions of 1990 and 2006. However, the limitations of these studies stem from their reliance on established theoretical frameworks of primordialism and constructivism, which may not be applicable in the Nepali context.

My analysis posits that the transformation of Ethnic identity in Nepal must be situated within the broader context of neoliberal advent and the global inequalities brought by the policy choices of donor agencies. Thus, the concept of indigeneity emerges not merely as a product of global identity politics but also as the policy implications brought by neoliberal values. It reveals how neoliberal capitalism exploits and exacerbates social differences to serve political and economic agendas through the construction and cultivation of oppositional categories. Indigeneity, therefore, can be seen as a mechanism of late capitalist accumulation that reconfigures social divisions by delineating populations into categories such as “original inhabitants” versus “migrants” or “early settlers” versus “latecomers.” These categories influence land claims, preferential rights, and special privileges, mediated through both Indigenous rhetoric and neoliberal policies.

This neoliberal approach to indigeneity has intensified social stratification and Ethnic tensions within Nepal. By fostering adversarial identities and amplifying caste and Ethnic divisions, it obstructs the development of collective resistance to capitalist exploitation, instead engendering fragmentation and conflict. In a country known for its rich cultural diversity, the reduction of complex social realities to a binary classification of “Indigenous” versus “non-Indigenous” oversimplifies the intricate socio-cultural landscape. Groups such as Bahuns, Chhetris, Dashnamis, Sanyasis, and Dalits are homogenized under the term “non-Indigenous” or “Khas,” while ethnic groups like the Magars, Gurungs, Sherpas, Thakalis, and Tharus are grouped as “Indigenous.” In doing so, the societies that were once traditionally harmonized with “Daju-Bhai” and “Didi-Bahini,” relations (as precisely observed by Fisher) are being disharmonized by reclassifying the social and cultural groups into the ethnic categories of “Janajati” and “adivasi.”

This oversimplification not only distorts the nuanced social realities of these communities but also advances neoliberal interests. By conflating various socio-economic realities—such as bonded laborers with landowners, debtors with moneylenders, and workers with factory owners—into ethnic frameworks, these categorical distinctions obscure the true socio-political dynamics at play. Consequently, this reductionist approach benefits a small elite within each category while marginalizing the impoverished and disenfranchised, thereby perpetuating social inequalities.

## Acknowledgements

I am thankful to the anonymous reviewers of the earlier versions of my paper for their invaluable comments and suggestions. I, however, take the sole responsibility in case of any errors and mistakes.

## References

- Barth, F. (1969). Introduction. In F. Barth (Ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (pp. 9–38). George Allen & Unwin.
- Bhattachan, K. B. (2012). Indigenous people's right to self-determination in Nepal. In C. Mishra & O. Gurung (Eds.), *Ethnicity and Federalization in Nepal* (pp. 139–165). Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Tribhuvan University.
- Chhetri, R. B. (2012). Some thoughts on the bases for federalization in Nepal. In C. Mishra & O. Gurung (Eds.), *Ethnicity and Federalization in Nepal* (pp. 210–223). Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Tribhuvan University.
- Dahal, D. R. (1996). The fallout of deviant Anthropology. *Himal*, 9(3), 50.
- Fisher, J. F. (1990). *Sherpas: Reflections on Change in Himalayan Nepal*. University of California Press.
- Fisher, J. F. (2012). Reification and plasticity in Nepalese ethnicity. In C. Mishra & O. Gurung (Eds.), *Ethnicity and Federalization in Nepal* (pp. 116–123). Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Tribhuvan University.
- Fürer-Haimendorf, C. v. (1964). *The Sherpas of Nepal: Buddhist highlanders*. John Murray (Publishers).
- Gellner, D. N. (2012). Fluidity, hybridity, performativity: How relevant are social-scientific buzzwords for Nepal's constitution building. In C. Mishra & O. Gurung (Eds.), *Ethnicity and Federalization in Nepal* (pp. 91–102). Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Tribhuvan University.
- Guneratne, A. (2003). *Many tongues, one people: The making of Tharu identity in Nepal*. Cornell University Press.
- Gurung, O. (2012). Evolution of indigeneity, identity, and autonomy in federal Nepal. In C. Mishra & O. Gurung (Eds.), *Ethnicity and Federalization in Nepal* (pp. 193–209). Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Tribhuvan University.
- Hangen, S. (2007). *Creating a "new Nepal:" The ethnic dimension*. East-West Center.
- Holmberg, D. (2012). Cultural rights in the residues of an irreversible history. In C. Mishra & O. Gurung (Eds.), *Ethnicity and Federalization in Nepal* (pp. 103–115). Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Tribhuvan University.
- KC, G., & Kharel, P. (2017). The dynamics of representing Nepal's struggle for modernization: From Nepalization to fatalism. *Dhaulagiri Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 11, 130–150.
- Kuper, A. (2003). The return of the native. *Current Anthropology*, 44(3), 389–402.



- Leve, L. (2011). Identity. *Current Anthropology*, 52(4), 513–535.
- Levine, N. E. (1987). Caste, state, and ethnic boundaries in Nepal. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 46(1), 71–88.
- Mishra, C. (2012). Ethnic upsurge in Nepal: Implications for federalization. In C. Mishra & O. Gurung (Eds.), *Ethnicity and Federalization in Nepal* (pp. 58–90). Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Tribhuvan University.
- Shneiderman, S. (2012). Restructuring the state, restructuring ethnicity: Situating Nepal in contemporary scientific debates. In C. Mishra & O. Gurung (Eds.), *Ethnicity and Federalization in Nepal* (pp. 224–237). Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Tribhuvan University.
- Shrestha, B. K. (2012). Federalizing back to the Baise Chaubise days: An anthropological perspective on ethnicity as the basis for state restructuring in Nepal. In C. Mishra & O. Gurung (Eds.), *Ethnicity and Federalization in Nepal* (pp. 37–57). Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Tribhuvan University.
- Shrestha, P. M. (2019). New policy aims to bar foreign NGOs from financing religious and political institutions. *The Kathmandu Post*, (February 21).
- Sita, V. & Hughes, E. (2011). The politics of indigeneity: Dialogues and reflections on indigenous activism. Zed Books.
- Spencer, P. (1973). Nomads in alliance: symbiosis and growth among the rendille and Samburu of Kenya. Oxford University Press.
- Toffin, G. (2009). The Janajati/Adivasi movement in Nepal: myths and realities of Indigeneity. *Sociological Bulletin*, 58(1), 25–42.
- Toffin, G. (2013). *From monarchy to republic*. Vajra Books.

## Author's Bio

Prem Bahadur Chalaune teaches Sociology at the Central Department of Sociology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tribhuvan University, Nepal. He has earned MA and MPhil degrees from Tribhuvan University.