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Issues and Challenges of Ethnicity in Nepal: Arguments Against Primordial Conception

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Abstract

This article seeks to invalidate the primordial conception, manifested in academia and activism in Nepal arguing that ethnic identities are not fixed and given rather they are contingent and fluid. The fluidity takes the shape during the interaction and communication of different ethnic groups and communities. The continual intergroup interaction contributes to construction of mix-identities. The process of making mixed identities reject the scholarly view that ethnicity is biological. Biological traits of ethnicity further lose its shape in the process of migration that forms the identity in different way. Notwithstanding the reality of loss of territorial inhabitation of specific ethnic groups as it were in the past, ethnic scholars and activists voiced the idea of ethnic federalization which was already invalidated by the constitution of 2015 AD. Stating that, our argument is not against the inclusion, representation and dignity of the marginalized groups in Nepal. The issue of language and proper representation of the ethnic groups are to be addressed and include diversity of the groups in mainstream. In contrast, the issue of right of ethnic self-determination in the back of ethnic federalization is not feasible because of the existence of diverse ethnic and non-ethnic groups and also their cohabitation throughout Nepal. This article also seeks to discuss the challenges ethnic movement experiences. The party affiliate and indoctrinated movement has lost its independent character on one side and the failure of ethnic based political parties demanding on ethnic federalization explicitly and implicitly on the other proves that right of self-determination is invalidated. This study is purely qualitative. To argue against the spirit of primordial conception, Content analysis has been chosen as the method.

Keywords: ethnicity, primordial conception, constructivism, inclusion, right to self-determination

Introduction

The state restructuring agenda in Nepal, generally manifested into the form of inclusion of all marginalized groups in the mainstream was quite uncontested after overthrowing monarchy and establishing federal republican democracy. However, federalization under the framework of ethnic identity in constitution making process attracted varied groups of scholarship as well as the general public into the discourse. This agenda contributed to intensify the riots through the ethnic movement. Moreover, Madhes movement, though regional identity it encompassed, claimed the death of dozens of

agitators in the course of creating pressure to the state to guarantee one Madhes one Pradesh in soon to formulate constitution. Even after the formation of constitution provisioning federal state on the basis of identity and capability in 2072 BS, dissatisfaction of ethnic groups has fired concerning the drawing lines and naming the provinces. The last episode of such dissatisfaction has been mounting currently in the Koshi province demanding Kirat Pradesh.

The term ethnicity or ethnicity identity has long been debated topic in the scholarship of social sciences. This is mainly because of the politicization of ethnicity. No single shot definition has given by any scholars. We mention here some of the arguments of the scholars on what the ethnic ethnicity signifies. Defining ethnic groups, Hutchinson and Smith said “it is a common proper name, having common ancestry, shared historical memories, elements of common culture, a link with homeland and sense of solidarity” (1996, pp:4-5). Jones has the opinion that ethnicity is a social and psychological entity constructed from cultural dimension (Jones, 2002). Argument that has come from Barth has drawn splendid attention when he argues that ethnicity is constructed in boundary lines and interaction of the groups with other individuals, thus changing the original form of groups once the boundaries set are crossed (Barth, 1998). Ethnicity is the cultural representation that does not remain static when it happens to associate with larger sections of other community. Thus, this is produced, reproduced and transformed over time (Baumann, 2004).

The ethnic identity based movement is not anew. It has long historical and social tradition. Before contemplating the historical development of identity and ethnicity, better way to delve deep into the issue is to debate on the theoretical lenses pertaining to the nature of identity and its embeddedness with the social construction of history. Pri-mordialism is the one that bases itself on the fixed attributes definition of ethnicity which has become the concern of almost all ethnic activists and many Anthropologists (Mishra, 2012). The agenda of ethnic federalization, sometimes battles the field of body politic, revolves around primordially. This school of ethnicity holds that identity is unchanged, ascriptive, bounded, biological and unique like a frozen lake. The accounts by this school can be attributed to the fact that ethnic people identify by self and others as belonging to a particular group (Mishra, 2012). It largely implies that ethnic status is stable, unchanged and remains forever notwithstanding the fact that change is inevitable part of the nature, let alone social life, organization and structure. Contesting the dogmatic and essential view of ethnicity framed into the notion of primordialism, constructivism argues that ethnicity is not static like a frozen lake, rather a flowing water. Ethnicity is socially and historically constructed in course of interaction with other institutions over time. The primordialist nature of ethnicity alters itself with the interaction with the social structure, state and international system over a long period of time. Ethnic people in Nepal, as also the case persists everywhere, are not isolated rather pass on with the mixture with non-ethnic groups. Mishra further reiterated, “All Nepalis, regardless of their belonging, are necessarily implicated in such structures, e. g. to earn living, engage in power relations, marry, and set norms and goals and so on. The manner in which they are implicated in those structure shapes the nature of interaction and relationship among them”(2012).

Appiah (2018) argues that ethnicity is produced and reproduced with the level assigned to the groups and the way they respond to it. The responding mode of the groups with the certain recognition assigned by the external factors like state and others definitely modifies the nature of identity. Brubaker (2016) also notes that ethnic groups are constructed, contingent and fluctuating. He invites interesting

discussion with the way ethnic groups form their identity without groups and in so doing, they find themselves in different mode of social life amid combining and reconciling the elements of other ethnic groups. Ethnic relations today are the product of historical process of accommodation and group's ethnic identities are coincident with the changes in their economy and social life (Levine, 1987). He states that social boundary among Thakali in Nepal is blurred and hard to draw the lines between them. All the boundaries drawn on the basis of putative descent, residence, cultural practices, and ritual purity are no more as they were. So drawing social boundaries are often contested. This so happens due to the incorporation of these groups with the larger social structural parameters. Groups combine, recombine, split and unite. Then the so-called typical features of ethnic groups change interacting with the larger structure.

James Fisher (2012) makes the argument that ethnicity is plastic and goes through reification in Nepal. He notes that Tharus are different to each other. They do not appear as the unified and homogeneous ethnic community. At the minimum, they hold meeting in Nepali language and feel that they once has original Tharu language but for the time being, they have lost it.. They exhibit their unity at a moment they are to deal with political and economic apparatus of the state. On the other hand, Thakalis are divided with the claim that some are Hindu and some are Buddhist. The case of Sherpa, for Fisher is that they are indifferent to the search of their identity. Non-sherpa people residing in Himalayan region claim that they are Sherpa for economic benefit. Even Magars do not fall under the same category, diverse into Mainstream Magars living in Midwestern hills who accompanied Shah s' King in expanding Gorkha kingdom, Kham Magar, Magar of Tichurong in Dolpa district and finally, mother tongue losing Magar who speak Nepali only.

The implication of the ideas of Fisher is that no ethnic groups are homogeneous and uniform, they are rather differentiated into segments. Some of them have quit what was called original identity and adopted different identities. For instance, Magars' convergence into Neplai speaking group is evidently clear that ethnicity has the elements of plasticity and flexibility. The reflection of this reality explicitly and implicitly contests the notion of primordialism about the fixed, unchanged and rigid nature of ethnic identity.

As I stated above, the politicization of the ethnicity and identity is not new phenomenon in Nepal. But it was sometimes latent and sometimes manifested. The level of intensification of the issue is again largely shaped by the historical specificity and consistent with the world system. The certain period of the issue to materialize is concomitant with the way contemporary world structure influences it since the local has not remain within the cemented walls, it is articulated with global phenomenon. So the inception and the consolidation of the agenda of ethnicity and identity traces back the specific historical point in association with the forces of external.

Taking the reference of ILO C. 169 and its rectification by Nepal in 2007, Bhattachan (2012) argues that the demand of indigenous people of Nepal is the right to self-determination. Therefore, right to self-determination to the ethnic population is mandatory to address the reality of their historic significance. This issue demands further discussion for clarity whether right to self-determination, a common agenda of ethnic movement activists, some political elites and intellectuals like Bhattachan and others, borders on the absurd or holds some water. I will discuss it in the Section of Issues of Ethnicity and federalization in Nepal.

Objectives

This article aims to highlight the great debate and divide on the issues of ethnicity and federalization that has claimed the prominent space in academia and also in the sphere of activism in Nepal over years. Though the academia finds divergent viewpoints whether primordialism surpasses the idea of constructivism and vice-versa, the activism is loud to maintain the need of primordial overriding constructivism in the process of restricting the federal set up in Nepal. However, we take the side of constructivism to validate the primordialist conception based on its static and status-quo essence. In so doing, this article discusses the major issues and agenda of the ethnic movement currently in Nepal. In addition, this also explores the challenges of the ethnic movement in context of Nepal.

Methods and Materials

This study is purely qualitative based on the review of secondary literature about ethnic identity, its issues and challenges. Therefore, this has applied the content analysis as the data collection tool. This research has identified ethnic movement as the unit of analysis and broad range of previous works are reviewed to manage the data according to certain categories, words and themes such as constructivism, Primordialism, ethnic identity, issues and agendas and challenges of ethnic movement. Then, we grouped the contents in different categories and the data have been interpreted based on the theoretical orientation of primordial and constructivism. Qualitative content analysis is the process that analyzes document based on the existing knowledge. (Elo and Cyngas, 2008). The theory of Lenin in particular has been considered as influential historical text that largely took the side of right of self-determination to the indigenous groups which is followed by Krishna Bhadur Bhattachan in Nepal with thought provoking mindset. Whereas the conception against assigning the right of self-determinations to the certain groups in state structuring and restricting process by Rosa in Russian context has been validated by Chaitanya Mishra and others. To support the constructivist tradition against the primordialism, many other scholarly works have been reviewed. To discuss the issues and challenges of ethnic movement in Nepal, language, proportional representation, ethnic identity in federalism, inclusion and right of self-determination are the major categories. In the view of conclusion, this article reviews the existing literature concerning primordial and constructivist line of ethnicity formation and its dynamics. Invalidating scientific ground of primordial conception, this article establishes that constructivism can extensively explore the issue of identity. This has discussed the issues and challenges of ethnicity in context of Nepal.

Result and Discussion

Issues of Ethnicity and federalism in Nepal

The recently implemented constitution of Nepal (2072) is the document of consensus between the major political forces of Nepal. Filippov and Shvetsova (2013) term such consensus as contract. Therefore, constitution may be regarded as the contract based on the certain nature of coalitions. Drawing away from Liker, The authors argue that as the coalitions between political forces change, Contract about the federalism also undergoes the sea change. This argument truly applies to the Nepalese context. The constitution of 2072 was promulgated on the basis of consensus of major political parties and with disconsensus of the major forces aligned with Madhesi identities who become vocal against

the institutional arrangement and with soft disagreement of ethnic identities. The following main issues can be pinpointed as the issues of ethnicity and federalism in Nepal.

The issue of inclusion and proportional representation

The demand of ethnic groups regarding the inclusion of marginalized sections of populations into mainstream channeled through different redistributive measures in decade of 2050 and it got canalized to the more consolidated form after the success of popular movement. The provision of proportional representation election system and fixing the certain quotas to the ethnic indigenous communities are the achievements gained. The demand of marginalized groups to allocate more resources to these groups by increasing the rate of representation is now on forefront and counter-argument also persists that positive discrimination would bring social inequality and social injustice because other non-included groups in such channels would be discriminated. In future, the intensity of debate for and against the positive discrimination will, for sure, rise up.

The Issue of language

Language is the instruments that always connects the people together and binds the people in the common thread of identity. A long standing diversity responsible for the formation of majorities and minorities in contemporary politics and therefore, in need of accommodation in plural societies is a language. The protection of linguistic minorities contribute to expand the horizon of minorities rights.(Moreno and Colino, 2010). Therefore, the issue of language becomes significant and it has established as the agenda of ethnic movement. Though constitution has permitted to build the local curriculum in schools in local languages, the implementation has not drawn attention of concerned authorities. The constitution has identified all the ethnic languages as the national language. This implies that linguistic preservation domain has been accounted into consideration by the state but the more attention should be required on process of effective implementation. Multinational education has suffered in terms of its implementation. There is lack of precise identification of languages, writing scripts, available texts books and reading materials, training to the teachers, clarity in practices, awareness of the multiple languages and positive viewpoints of the teachers to the local language (Rai, 2018). For effective implementation, the issues to be dealt with are changing the attitudes of teachers, conducting research on knowledge production aiming to develop multilingual education and managing the diversified presence of students (Regmi, 2012). Therefore. The concerned bodies should concentrate on how to effectively bring in action provision of recognition of all national language and introduction of multilingual education in schools.

Federalism based on the ethnic identity

The most burning issue of ethnicity and federalism in Nepal is the formation of the states based on ethnic identities. Though inclusion and federalization were instrumental issues in the past, now being achieved, the issue of nature of federalism is still under the debate of contention. Nepal is officially declared federal state. For me the nature of federalism in Nepal is basically territorial except Madhes Prades. It does not represent the ethnic identities as such, regional marginalization is believed to be addressed not resolving the dissatisfaction though). It has heavily rejected the notion of ethnic identities in course of constitution of federal set up. The response of government and major political parties is evidently demonstrated against the movement of Ethnic groups in eastern Nepal demanding the naming of provinces with reflection of identity. Thus, the issue of ethnicity and federalism in Nepal

is still relevant because the real stakeholders of federalism have not willingly accepted the nature of federal state. Specifically, federalism was introduced in Nepal as the byproduct of democratic movement as argued by Lecours (2014). It didn't become the movement of mainstream. It was treated as the movement of Madhesi and ethnic people. I argue here that federalism was really agreed upon to incorporate ethnic issues. But as the time passed on coalitions of political forces changed as the bargaining power of parties shifted. The real movers and shakers of ethnic federalism squeezed to the level their voice would be suppressed and anti-ethnic federal forces achieved the triumphant victory in second constituent assembly. Therefore, constitutionally framed federalism could not satisfy the aspirations of those who really stood strong to implement the idea of federalism in Nepal and sacrificed the lives. Those discontent were mainly Ethnic groups including Madhes. They demanded federal structure in which naming of the provinces implies ethnic identity with the rights of self-determination. In addition, the main agendas of the ethnic movement revolves around the issues of self-determination and regional autonomy and federal state based on the traditional homelands of indigenous groups (Bhattachan, 2002). Thus, the issues are plausible to consolidate movements in the days to come.

The Right to Self-determination to the ethnic indigenous communities

The most attention drawn issue is arguably the right to self-determination to the nations (here ethnic indigenous groups) in the current scenarios of federalism. The federal model of Nepal is currently implemented with territorial basis of federalism and multiethnic spirit of federalism is undermined notwithstanding the fact of aspirations of ethnic people in Nepal. The long standing issue of ethnic people is right to self-determination to the nations. And it has drawn plentiful attention by the international and national scholarship. The international discussion was possibly initiated by Vladimir Lenin who backed the issue and argued that right to self-determination is imperative to different national communities in specific historical point (Lenin, 1977). He further argued that in the first stage of capitalist revolution, right to self-determination addresses the aspirations of majority of population of national communities in their certain specific geographical unit. In contrast, Luxjemberg(1976) refuted the notion of Lenin(1977) stating that in the phase of bourgeoisie revolution, right of self-determination is flawed idea since it may possibly be snatched by the handful of capitalists at the expense of the marginalized communities. It acts effectively in favor of people only in socialist state. Turning back to Nepal, the right of self-determination of the nation concerns the prime agenda of ethnic movement.

It is fruitful to bring the lively debate about the issue between two sociological scholars from Nepal. Mishra (2012) is one who always stands against this issue. He argues that the notion of identity and ethnicity is fluid. The prior conceived idea that ethnic groups should be characterized based on their biological features. The notion of primordialism to define the ethnic boundaries as fixed and never changing is itself a distorted idea because the primordialists believe that ethnic identity is formed with birth traits and finds its space in kinship (Nasongo, 2015). What they lack is that society keeps on changing and birth traits remains constant over time. It assumes the reality as the static phenomenon. Drawing from the idea of Frederick Barth, Mishra reiterated that ethnic groups in course of interaction with other non-ethnic-groups loses its prior shape and always concomitant with the global process that actually shapes the national and regional issues. In stark contrast of Mishra, Bhattachan (2012) backs up the idea of self-determination stating that ethnic groups considering their historical identities be

assigned with the rights of self-determination with secession. Bhattachan and other ethnic activists frequently argue that the so-called unification process of Prithvi Narayan Shah snatched the right to self-determination of the ethnic groups to accelerate the process of Hinduization.

Challenges of Ethnicity and Federalization in Nepal

Firstly, analyzing the notion of self-determination for and against, I here argue that foremost, the debate about the right to self-determination of the nations was historically and socially constructed. It was introduced with the process of decolonization. The ex-colonies were supposed to exercise right of self-determination and not the ethnic groups. They were historically suppressed by the foreigners. Therefore, they were meant to free themselves of the colonial domination. The right to self-determination is not necessary in Nepal since Nepal was never a colony. Moreover, Nepal is mosaic of multi-lingual, multi-religious and multiethnic nations. The distribution of population and geographical areas of Nepal is largely heterogeneous. People from multiple background in terms of language and ethnic groups live together even in small areas. Ethnicity based federalism never yields positive result since there are 125 ethnic groups in Nepal. How many ethnic groups should be given the right of self-determination and autonomy?(Bhandari, 2014).If somebody opines that confiscation of land of the ethnic groups by the shah dynasty should be compensated with the right to self-determination, it becomes misconception in the sense that monarchy is mere history in Nepal and Nepalese state is officially federal democratic and secular state. The inclusionary provisions are slowly compensating the marginalized communities. Now the Nepali state does not represent any specific caste and ethnic groups. In the democratically evolved societies, any caste and ethnic groups can flourish without any hindrance from the state authority.

Secondly, if one turns to the need of compensating the marginalized groups for the injustice they were compelled to face, on the rationale of their biological identity, it largely means to turn almost 250 years back. The significant value of the society is not to go back to the history and shape the state apparatus, the need of the time is to move forward and be consistent with the national and global system that we have today. The assumption that ethnic states are necessarily formed out of the right to autonomy is false. Very few nations are ethnically federal and almost all the nations are not mired into the federal form that ensures ethnic autonomy (Bhandari, 2014). Is it scientific to keep the state aloof from the change of world system that is constantly shaping the national system and the ethnicity itself? What is the rationale of primordialists to question over the Monarchial rule founded upon the natural biological features if they argue in favor of special rights to the ethnic groups on the same basis? Recognizing the ethnic groups with the right of self-determination is paramount to the acceptance of any forms of autocratic rule.

Thirdly, Primordialists often argue in favor of self-determination drawing the arguments from Lenin. They completely turn their ear deaf on the striking fact that national communities in Russia had predominantly occupied the territory with maximum majority of the population (Lenin, 1977). Nepal has different composition of population. No any ethnic groups in Nepal represent majority of population in their self-defined and claimed autonomous territorial spaces. The Committee of Restructuring of state and Distribution of State Powers which was formed to recommend the model and numbers of provinces in the first CA had proposed 14 ethnicity based provinces. However, the CA was sadly scrapped without accomplishing its mandate to promulgate the constitution. Sharma(

2013) has brilliant analysis of ethnic population composition in the provinces. He wrote that Jadan and Sherpa provinces had only 0.2 and 0.4 percent of national population while Mithila and Tharuwan only represent 29.50 and 16.3 percent of national population respectively. The condition of other proposed provinces is not so different. Therefore, the right to self-determination with the prerogative role of the concerned ethnic groups in state may intensify the tensions among the people. The valorizing ethnic rule at expense of other communities in certain territory will definitely invite the civil war dismantling the existing tolerance between the caste and ethnic communities in Nepal. Therefore, the mix-ethnic realities and their unprecedented unity in diversity has been the main feature of Nepal. All should be concerned carefully to celebrate the syncretized nature of Nepalese society that could contribute to maintain peace and prosperity in Nepal.

Fourthly, the main thrust of ethnic federalism is right of nations to self-rule with secession. It means the right of nations to separate from the state if they don't entertain to be the citizen. Federalism that ensures the self-rule to address the cultural diversity to manage the divisions may lead to disintegration (Anderson, 2009). If the ethnic groups decide to test their lot in separate state mechanism, the sources cannot sustain. The availability of natural resources and other economic feasibility hardly support the separate state in Nepal. The most important reality today is the connectedness of the state with foreign nations. The smaller and weaker state are always vulnerable because of the influence of strong states as argued by Mishra (2006). Moreover, political stability and internal contradiction can sweep away the existence of the state. The question of connectedness becomes the crucial issue.

Fifth, the ethnic movement is still staggering not having the solid shape to force the central state to surrender to their demands. This happened largely due to the division of the ethnic groups and their affiliation and strong commitment to the political parties. They have been frequently failed in sustaining the ethnic political parties independently. This is well evident that Asok Rai led ethnic parties soon lost its strength and newly emergent Resham Chaudahari's party is yet to prove its long-term impact in Nepali politics. The most debatable and also pertinent question posed to the ethnic leaders is about their trust to formulate and sustain independent ethnic movement. Their loyalty towards the position holding national parties may possibly be their aspirations to exploit the authority and resources attached with parties. NGOs and INGOs have strongly swallowed the independent movement.

The state and political parties should be serious to address the genuine problems of ethnic identity in federal design of the state. Their historical cultural and social heritages are to be protected by the state because their cultural properties are the national properties and the strong and prosperous nations can be imagined making the nation inclusive and democratic.

Conclusion

The conception of primordialism emphasizing on the static and conservative ethnic identities is flawed since that does not conceive the changing tempo of ethnic identities in terms of interaction and cohabitation with other human groups over years. Maintaining consistency with what constructivism had defined ethnic identities, I state that this is an as evolving idea that contributes to produce and reproduce identities giving the shape to socially diverging construction in Nepal. Based on primordial conception, some activists and academic argue that ethnic groups should enjoy the right to self – determination and self- autonomy as the identities are unique and given. Those who take the side of constructivism note quite different views about ethnic identities stating that identities are changing.

There is no any given, gifted and rigid. Therefore, the agendas of ethnic movement in Nepal, mostly primordial are distorting. These issues of self-determination and others are harmful that may lead to the national disintegration.

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