

Recognition and Identity of Minorities in Nepal

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Abstract

This article underpins the multitude of minorities' identity in cultural diversity of Nepal. Identity for conscious beings including the underprivileged in Nepal becomes crucial when they feel being discarded and marginalized in almost all aspects of the political territory wherein they deserve the right to lead respectful citizenry lives. This paper questions the deprivation of the minorities including Muslims, and Dalits from the social and political engines of development. The article seeks to unleash the minorities from the pool of domination, and oppression by exploring the solutions to the problems as faced by the deprived communities over the centuries in Nepal. Identity is associated with the cultural and social properties which are sought after by the respective groups. These properties enrich the communities and let them express and retain their significance through in both societal and political lives. The existing literature shows that Muslims, and Dalits are the most marginalized and deprived communities in almost all sectors of political, social and cultural life the country accorded as the nation to respect the principles of equality, diversity, and justice in the constitution of Nepal 2015. However, these communities suffer inequality, injustice, and discriminations in nearly all respects of life. The state does not seriousness in identifying and addressing the problems of these communities in a substantive manner. This paper by employing the qualitative research design has studied the secondary data on identity and recognition of the deprived communities to investigate into the status of Muslims, and Dalits in the light of the principles of multiculturalism.

Key Words: Culture, Diversity, Ethnicity, Identity, Minorities, Nationality, Recognition,

Introduction

Nepal is a multiethnic country wherein people observe distinct rituals and lead diverse lifestyles. They speak different languages, have different faiths, celebrate discreet festivals, and put on different types of clothes. Their beliefs are different and have varied social and cultural assumptions in accordance with their economic class, religious backgrounds, social positions, and geographical locations. Muslims and Dalits are different from each group. They come under two different communities with distinctive cultural and

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social features. Their belief systems are different and they lead lives uniquely. However, they have equal political status in Nepal as all of these categories are marginalized and discriminated in many ways across the country. Despite the inclusive nature of the constitution of Nepal 2015, these three communities are still staggering behind in the pace of development. This paper discusses social, cultural and political marginalization of Muslims, and Dalits and the implications of the imposed discriminations and oppression. By critically analyzing the theoretical concepts of culture, identity, and recognition, the article advocates for the rights, political, social and cultural justices of these communities in the so-called multicultural nation, Nepal. Besides, this paper questions whether Nepal is a multicultural country or pluralistic nation. Overall, the article elucidates the concepts of multiculturalism and pluralism in the lens of culture, identity and recognition of the most marginalized communities Muslims, and Dalits in Nepal. Culture is one of the crucial properties of every community. “[Culture] is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (Hofstede, 1994, p. 5). The culture determines the identity of every community. It has psychological impact which retains its hold on the minds of people who belong to a particular group. On one hand, it unites people of similar lifestyles. On the other, it divides people based on the distinctiveness. People seem prepared to lose their lives for their sake of their identity that is associated with their respective cultures. James D. Fearon defines identity:

refers at the same time social categories and to the sources of an individual’s self-respect or dignity. There is no necessary linkage between these things. In ordinary language, at least, one can use “identity” to refer to personal characteristics or attributes that cannot naturally be expressed in terms of a social category, and in some contexts certain categories can be described as “identities” even though no one sees them as central to their personal identity. Nevertheless, “identity” in its present incarnation reflects and evokes the idea that social categories are bound up with the bases of an individual’s self-respect. (1999, p. 2)

The reflection of identifying features is in the personalities of the people of a particular category with distinct culture. The culture of Muslims differs from that of Dalits and the culture of the latter is different from that of the former. They are Dalits because of the Hindu social system. As long as they are within the system, they are oppressed and discriminated. The caste differences matter in Hinduism because it practices caste divisions based on the occupations of people and the social and cultural status of people within the caste system are determined accordingly. Dalits who are put on the lowest stratum of caste hierarchy are behaved and discriminated accordingly. They are forced to suffer caste stigma and pay the penalty for the crimes they have never committed. The people of the upper ladders including Vasisya, Chhetris and Brahmins tend to control the lives of Dalits economically, socially, culturally and even politically. However, the cases and problems of Muslims are different from Dalits in the sense that members of the former are the victims of religious minorities.

Discussion

Minorities in term of religion, ethnicity and caste in Nepal are segregated and culturally, economically and socially marginalized. This paper discusses the segregation and marginalization of Nepalese Muslims, and Dalits who have been excluded from the power positions over the centuries not because of their incompetence but due to the hegemony of Hinduism, and caste system in Nepal. Nepal—a pro-Hindu nation—has been declared a secular state constitutionally. However, the dominance of Hindu values, and norms privileges its devotees in retaining their supremacy in almost all aspects of society. Consequently, the identity, and recognition of minority religious communities including Muslims and that of the lower caste groups in Hindu social system is questionable.

The members of Muslim and Dalit communities in Nepal live in fear and mistrust. The members of the mainstream suspect and frighten the members of the minority groups. They have been excluded from the power positions in almost every sector of social, cultural and political domains. Both Muslims and Dalits have less exposure and expression. They seem introverted before the people of the majority communities. Long-time exclusion of these communities has developed low confidence among the members. Besides, their competence and contributions are underestimated in almost all domains of societal life. They lack access to the resources and power positions which can empower them to explore their potentials and can lead dignified lives.

Because of exclusion and deprivations, the cultures of both Dalits and Muslims are not privileged. Instead, they are looked down upon in most of the cases of social affairs. The very insulting situation has created a wide rift between the minorities especially Muslims and Dalits and the people of the privileged communities primarily Brahmins and Chhetris who predominantly control almost all sectors of Nepal. Their domination does not prevail only in political, social and cultural but also in psychological domain i.e. people of both Dalit and Muslim communities feel insecure and low-confident when facing merit-based competitions. On the other side, the privileged people feel overconfident and more competent. This psychological fostering discourages the former from participating in competitions and it boosts up morale of the latter to move ahead. Recognition of talents becomes possible provided that there is exposure. In the context of poor participation of Dalits and Muslims in public affairs, they get more underestimated and detached from the power exercising engines in terms of political, social, and cultural positions. This systematic marginalization of these two communities has derailed the mission of proportional development of all societies and communities even after the new constitution 2015 in Nepal.

Culture is mostly symbolic as the routinely practices of a community are the bases of its identity. Both Dalits and Muslims observe certain ceremonies and celebrate festivals that retain their cultural identity. Undoubtedly, most of the cultural practices of Dalits are similar to those of the privileged Hindus including Brahmins and Chhetris. The question

arises when Dalits are deprived of participating in the observations of the Hindu cultural practices and ceremonies as sustained in the temples and other holy places. The privileged Hindus do not seek to cope with the Dalits because of their low caste status in the Hindu social system. Consequently, Dalits are segregated as their participation is shunned by the people of the upper caste. Hence, Dalits can neither observe their cultural practices nor can they participate in the public space for observing the Hindu festivals and practices. Culture:

. . . consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of an for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other, as conditional elements of future action” (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952, p. 181).

The excerpt clarifies that concept of culture that the reflection of culture is in the behaviors of the members of a particular cultural group. Culture can be realized in both ways directly and indirectly. Actions, behaviors and ideas acquired by the members of a specific group of people are the symbolic representations of culture. Almost every culture is rich with distinctiveness. Cultural groups should not be discarded and underestimated in a society wherein pluralism prevails. Nepal, a country of diverse communities and religions including Dalits and Muslims respectively, seems to have respected the principles of pluralism but has failed to address the fundamentals of multiculturalism. Even many communities do not seem awakened about the concept of culture which is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Taylor, 1870, p. 1). Taylor explains the concept of culture connecting it with its composite elements. Culture is not simply the rituals and belief system. It includes knowledge, morals, social laws, and capabilities and habits. Of course, the habits and competence of Dalits and Muslims are different from those of other communities. However, their abilities and powers cannot be discarded. Most of the Dalits are artisans, technicians and service providers in the Indian subcontinent countries. They have been contributing to the economic development of their respective countries over the centuries. In the same line of argument, Muslims across Nepal have specific skills and technical knowledge. Their dress code and norms and values are different from those of Hindus, Buddhists and Christians. However, it does not be justified that they lack competence or their culture is poor.

Instead of isolating cultural groups with distinctiveness, the state must create opportunities for them so that they can feel identified and recognized as the identity and recognition allow minority cultural groups including Dalits and Muslims to perform better as productive forces wherever they are. In fact, the definition of culture is complex. Helen Spencer-Oatey defines culture as a “fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations

to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioral conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behavior and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behavior" (2008, p. 3). Sometimes, the individual behaviors of the group members of a particular culture go beyond the parameters of that particular cultural group. It indicates that people including Dalits and Muslims in Nepal learn things from other cultural groups basically Brahmins and Chhetris and bring about their learning into practice as well. Consequently, they gradually become liberal not only in their values and assumptions but also get open to welcoming the differences as reflected in the social behaviors of both Dalits and Muslims. Besides, Spencer-Oatey (2012) has defined culture:

To analyze why members behave the way they do, we often look for the values that govern behavior But as values are hard to observe directly, it is often necessary to infer them by interviewing key members of the organization or to content analyze artifacts such as documents and charters. However, in identifying such values, we usually note that they represent accurately only the manifest or espoused values of a culture. That is they focus on what people say is the reason for their behavior, what they ideally would like those reasons to be, and what are often their rationalizations for their behavior. Yet, the underlying reasons for their behavior remain concealed or unconscious. (p.3)

To adjust in a community, the members of the cultural group behave in accordance with the parameters set so far. Those who defy any of the principles are outcast. On the one hand, the members of the group are expected to satisfy their community. On the other, they are sought after to cope with the changing scenario in a pluralistic society. The members of Dalit and Muslim communities are in dilemma specifically youths as they are forced to follow the norms and values of their respective cultures. Meanwhile, they have to adapt to the broader society dominated by the values and norms of the majority culture. Eventually, they suffer ambivalence in the sense that they can neither detach themselves from their original group nor can they completely adopt the new culture. Besides, they are hardly accepted by the people of the mainstream culture as well. Because of the multidimensional problems, the members of the minority communities especially Dalits and Muslims suffer in Nepal. Their identity becomes questionable when they are in a broader space. They cannot put themselves in a specific zone. Identity is "people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" (Hogg and Adams, 1988, p. 2). Both Muslims and Dalits seem unidentified because they do not remain Dalits and Muslims completely by strictly attaching themselves to their cultures of origin and at the same time; they fail to assimilate into the mainstream culture even if few members endeavor to do so. The majoritarian culture does not accept them because of their distinct norms and values which are looked down upon the people of the mainstream culture. Their identity becomes a barrier to the assimilation as "Identity refers to the ways in which individuals and collectivities are

distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities” (Jenkins, 1996, p. 4). The demarcations create identities of specific group members. Consequently, most of Dalits and Muslims feel upset with their cultural identities. Therefore, they seek to create a new identity by adapting to the modern norms and values. Their endeavors seem to have started with the adoption of new occupations and widely acceptable clothes. This practice goes against the fundamental of identity theory which focuses on the core aspect of identities that are “relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self” (Wendt, 1992, 397). Although the aspects of identities are assumed to be specific and stable, they are subject to change in the context of the pluralistic society. The impact of dominant cultures is likely to be on the minorities including Dalits and Muslims in Nepal. The normative features of their identities are questionable as some of them are missing and some new aspects of other cultures have become dominant in their lifestyles.

Both Muslims and Dalits are entrapped between their cultures and the cultures of the mainstream society in Nepal. Their social identity has become terribly affected and therefore, their recognition as distinctive communities is questionable. In fact, social identity is part of life to almost human beings wherever they are born and what social backgrounds they belong to. Nevertheless, the pluralistic society of Nepal is reluctant to cooperate with Muslims and Dalits so that both of them can retain their identity and can move for recognition. “By social identity, I mean the desire for group distinction, dignity, and place within historically specific discourses (or frames of understanding- about the character, structure, and boundaries of the polity and the economy” (Herrigel, 1993, 371). There have been diverse discourses about both Dalits and Muslims in Nepal that generally they are considered incompetent, uncivilized, unholy and burdensome. These stereotypes do not only discourage these communities from actively participating in social, political and cultural activities but also deprive them of retaining their social identity.

Conclusion

Lives of the minorities especially Muslims and Dalits are not as commendable as imagined by the constitution of Nepal 2015. The democratic norms and values as accorded in the constitution are hardly expressed in the behaviors and practices by the members of the mainstream culture. Although identity and recognition of all groups including minorities and majority should be guaranteed and protected, Dalits and Muslims have not been independent in retaining their social identity and they have not been encouraged for having recognition as well. Social justice, equality, acceptance and recognition of all including minority and majority groups must be ensured for the holistic development of a nation. The people of a country have both individual and collective identities. Minorities particularly Muslims and Dalits in Nepal are expected to lose their individual identities for complete assimilation in the mainstream. Nevertheless, the members of majority culture in Nepal do not seem to accept these minorities when the latter retain their social and cultural identity. The conflict between and among the cultural groups arises when none of them are

prepared to welcome the differences although the distinctive features of the cultural groups in a multicultural society are the fertile properties which can and do help the country to prosper more than in a pluralistic society that prioritizes only the majority culture and the rest remain on the margin.

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