

The Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture, 2003

# TRIDENT AND THUNDERBOLT CULTURAL DYNAMICS IN NEPALESE POLITICS

*by*  
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The neglect of human rights is the certain recipe for internal and international disaster. The powerful secessionist movements that are found throughout the world are nurtured by neglect. The erosion of national sovereignty by global forces, from trade to communications, has paradoxically been accompanied by an increase in the means to ensure its separateness: the right to differ has, tragically, become the fight to differ.

–Nelson Mandela  
'The waning nation-state'  
*New Perspective Quarterly*  
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## I. INTRODUCTION

The contest for minds is buttressed by symbols of power. One such early manifestation was the porcupine quill (*dumsi-kanda*) as a divination arrow and which is still invoked by tribal priests in Nepal. The Shaman's *mantra* (incantation) tradition was superseded by refinements of *tantra* (esoteric) and then *sutra* (philosophic) traditions. It was along this trajectory that the *phurba* (magical dagger) became transformed into the *dorje* (thunderbolt). The *trisul* (trident) is associated with Mahadev of the Himalaya. This wielder of the trident must have been a refulgent foe since the Hindus exalted him as one of their trinity. Although bearing a sectarian stamp as Shiva, he also traverses the tantric world as Bhairav. Since both the trident and the thunderbolt are part of the Himalayan heritage, they need not be interposed as adversarial symbols. Kathmandu Valley, the kernel of Nepal, had a tradition of religious symbiosis despite the presumed iconoclastic vendetta of one Shankaracharya in the 11th century. However, such a state of syncretism was destroyed by the cult of later conquistadors by imposing the hegemony of their particular language, religion and culture.

Most states grow round a nucleus and expand by conquest and aggrandisement. The case of Nepal was no different.<sup>1</sup> It was created in the second half of the 18th century through territorial conquest by the Gorkha principality. The extensive area politically unified by the Gorkhali rulers included diverse geographic and cultural regions. Their domain lay in the contact zone of Caucasoid and Mongoloid peoples and the two population groups represented distinctive social characteristics. The former, including the conquistadors, were caste-stratified Hindus with an Indo-Aryan language while the latter were egalitarian tribal people speaking Tibeto-Burman languages with discrete territories. The formation of Nepal as a state evolved through the appendage of

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<sup>1</sup> Gurung, 1989, p. 134.

peripheral regions of the mountains and plains to the core of the hill realm.<sup>2</sup> Hinduism constituted the state ideology while the *khasa-kura* (Nepali) language was made the official vehicle of communication. Hinduisation was accompanied by colonisation of tribal areas and social ordering of tribes into hierarchical castes. Therefore, national identity and later Nepalese nationalism was rooted in the image of hill Hindu elites and their Nepali (*khasa-kura*) mother-tongue.

## II. MONOPOLISTIC POLITY

Since the 11th-century Muslim invasion of India, Hinduistic orientation became a reactionary response across the Nepal hills. In Kathmandu Valley, Jasyasthitiraj Malla (1382-1395) introduced an elaborate caste system among the Newar. In Gorkha, Ram Shah (1605- 1633) adapted this model into a less structured form. The Sen rulers from Palpa to Bijayapur claimed themselves to be *Hindupati* (champions of Hinduism). This theocratic tendency was basically a reaction against the Muslim menace in India. The decline of the Mughal led to the emergence of British rule and the eminence of the Christian faith. Such a historical compulsion led the Brahman orthodoxy in the Nepalese court to construct a Hindu haven against, first, the Muslim and, then, the Christian regimes. One of the initial acts of Prithivinarayan Shah after the conquest of Kathmandu Valley was the expulsion of Capuchin missionaries from Patan. He visualised Nepal as 'asil Hindustan' (pure land of Hindus). Since then, Hinduisation became the *raison d'être* of the Nepalese state.<sup>3</sup>

The *Muluki Ain 1854* was a written version of the social code that had long been in practice in parts of Hinduised Nepal. Its caste categories diverged from the four *varna* of the classical Vedic model and instead had three basic divisions to accommodate the tribal peoples between the pure and impure castes. These were further classified into five hierarchies with the following order of precedence.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Burghart, 1984.

<sup>3</sup> Gurung, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Höfer, 1979, p. 45.

- A. Wearers of holy cord (*Tagadhari*)
- B. Non-enslavable alcohol-drinkers (*Namabsine Matwali*)
- C. Enslavable alcohol-drinkers (*Mabsine Matwali*)
- D. Impure but touchable castes (*Chhoi chhito halnya naparne*)
- E. Impure and untouchable castes (*Chhoi chhito halnya parne* or *Ma ju pim*)

The scheme was biased in favour of dominant Bahun, Thakuri and Chhetri hill castes. Though included in the first hierarchy (A) as pure, the tarai Brahman was ranked below the Chhetri and Newar Brahman. The Newar Brahman was in turn placed below the Chhetri. The second hierarchy (B) included the Magar and Gurung, long associated with the Gorkha regime, and also the Sunuwar who received the *lal mohar* (royal seal) to use Bahun priests in 1825. There was no reference to the Rai and the Limbu, the last tribals to succumb to the Gorkhali rule. The third hierarchy (C) included peripheral Bhote, Tharu, and some smaller tribes and descendants of freed slaves (*Gharti*). The fourth (D) and fifth (E) hierarchies were considered impure castes with the distinction that the former were 'touchable' (no water sprinkling needed after contact) and the later 'untouchable' (purification necessary after contact). Of the six included in 'D' hierarchy, four were Newar sub-groups, Muslim and Mlechh (European). The lowest hierarchy (E) had six artisan castes of the hills and two Newar scavenger sub-groups. The *Muluki Ain* was silent about the status of Madhesi (tarai) castes, be they touchable or untouchable. There was discrimination in the level of punishments which differed according to the caste hierarchy of the person, that is, the extent of penalty was tied to the level of ritual purity.

The old legal code was revised nine decades later (1963) by amending some penal clauses on untouchability. The Constitution of Nepal 1990 guarantees the right to equality by stating that the State shall not discriminate against citizens on the basis of religion, colour, sex, caste, ethnicity or belief (Article 11.3). However, the above constitutional right is negated by a clause in the *Muluki Ain* as amended in 1992 which states that the 'traditional practices' at religious places shall not be considered discriminatory. This means that those castes once categorised as untouchable would still have no access to shrines and temples.

In the same way, adherence to 'traditional practices' would imply exclusion of ethnics and lower castes and, therefore, inequality in other spheres also. Thus, social discrimination and untouchability has remained a fact of everyday life 'in the world's only Hindu kingdom'.

The make-up of a country is determined by the current of history. In the case of Nepal, one can visualise three incarnations of the State since the medieval period: proto-Nepal of the Kathmandu Valley, imperial Nepal stretching from the rivers Sutlej to Tista, and feudal Nepal confined by the rivers Mahakali and Mechi.<sup>5</sup> The Nepalese state has maintained its independent status for a long period but it is yet to emerge as a nation. The country has been unified only geographically but not socially and economically. The social model of national unification so far has been Hinduisation which is alien to the multi-ethnic foundation of the country. The much quoted *Dibya Upadesh* imagery of the garden of 4 *jat* and 36 *varna* implied the former as flowers and the latter as weeds by virtue of their discrimination!

The stultifying hold of the *Muluki Ain* becomes obvious by comparing Nepalese society to that immediately across its western and eastern borders. The continuing exploitation of *Dum* (Dalit) in west Nepal is a relict of the situation a century ago in Kumaon and Garhwal. If that is the past Hindu Nepal preserved, the future of Nepalese society can be envisaged by looking east of the Mechi river. While the *Muluki Ain* pundits busied themselves with rituals and sycophancy at home, the Nepali-speaking population in Darjeeling and Sikkim pioneered the defining of Nepalese history, literature, and inclusive politics. In contrast to the tagadhari monopoly in Nepalese politics, Darjeeling and Sikkim allowed free play to all caste/ethnic groups because of the extant social dynamism that was unencumbered by caste strictures.

### III. PERSISTENCE OF DIVERSITY

The policy of the Gorkhali/Nepalese state since the late 18th century has been the creation of a Hindu theocracy by suppressing ethnic iden-

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<sup>5</sup> Gurung, 2001, pp. 197-198.

ties in order to consolidate and centralise power. This state ideology became progressively conservative through the Shah (1769-1846) and Rana (1846-1951) regimes. The democratic respite (1951-1960) was a period of political turmoil with no consideration for social concerns. However, it was during this interregnum that the population census 1952/54 made available the data on language and religion for the first time although censuses date back to 1911 in Nepal. The Panchayat regime (1960-90) adopted a policy of national integration based on assimilation in the image of a particular culture group, i.e., monopoly of the Hindu religion and the Nepali language to maintain the supremacy of Parbatiya high castes. Since the restoration of democracy in 1990, the country's Constitution has conceded that the State is multi-ethnic and multi-lingual although the hangover of a 'Hindu kingdom' continues. One analyst has described the phases of Nepalese social formation as the empire model of the Shah and Rana periods, the nationalistic model of Panchayat period and a patchwork of minorities since 1990.<sup>6</sup>

Since democracy sanctifies the majority, population size has become significant. The population census of 1991 was the first to provide ethnicity and caste data. Data on ethnicity/caste, language, and religion reveal cultural persistence despite over two centuries of state diktat towards homogenisation. There is even a strong tendency towards identity assertion as evidenced by the social demography of the last decade (1991-2001).

*Ethnicity/Caste:* The number of ethnic/caste groups reported has almost doubled since the 1991 census (Table 1). New caste groups reported in the 2001 census are from the tarai while new ethnic groups are reported both from the hills and the tarai. Nearly a quarter of the tarai population is made up of these new castes. Of the total population, the new ethnic/caste groups identified account for 6 per cent. Thus, the social composition of Nepalese population is made up of 57.5 per cent caste groups, 36.4 per cent ethnic groups and 6.2 per cent others.<sup>7</sup> Hill caste groups lead with 38 per cent of the total population, followed by hill

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<sup>6</sup> Pfaff-Czarnecka, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Gurung, 2002c.

ethnics (26.6 per cent) and tarai caste groups (19.5 per cent).

**Table 1: Social Composition of Population, 2001**

Social Group	Ethnic/Caste Group			Population	%	Share of new groups
	1991	2001	Increase			
<b>A. Caste</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>13,070,480</b>	<b>57.5</b>	<b>24.6</b>
1. Hill	9	9	0	8,638,797	38.0	
2. Tarai	22	44	22	4,431,683	19.5	
<b>B. Ethnic</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>8,267,293</b>	<b>36.4</b>	<b>1.7</b>
3. Mountain	3	5		190,107	0.8	
4. Hill	11	20	9	6,038,530	26.6	
5. Inner Tarai	7	7	0	251,117	1.1	
6. Tarai	4	12	8	1,787,539	7.9	
<b>C. Others*</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>1,399,161</b>	<b>6.2</b>	
<b>7. Total</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>22,736,934</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>6.0</b>

\* Including Churaute, Bengali, Muslim and Sikh

The country's present population can be also considered on the basis of their native area and Nepal Mandala perspectives. The first disaggregation reveals the proportion between the highlanders (*Pahade/Parbate*) and the lowlanders (*Madhesi*) as:

<i>Elevation Zone</i>	%
Highlands (mountain & hills)	65.4
Lowlands (inner tarai & tarai)	32.8
Zone Unspecified	1.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Of the total population, nearly two-thirds are of Parbate/Pahade origin and a third of Madhesi origin. People of the mountain and inner tarai are in an absolute minority and marginalised.

As the Kathmandu Valley happened to be the core of Nepal, its native Newars had their own conception of the neighbouring peoples.

Placing themselves at the centre of this regional setting, their designation for others were *Sain* for Mongoloids, *Khain* for Caucasoids, and *Marsya* for the lowlanders. It is also true that the Newar culture complex itself was founded on a Sain base, and moulded into the Khain caste division by rulers of Marsya origin. According to such Newari classification, today's Nepalese population has the following break-down:

<i>Newari Designation</i>	%
Khain (Khasa)	38.0
Marsya (Madhesi)	33.6
Sain (Bhote)	22.0
Newa (Newar)	4.6
Unspecified group	1.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The ethnic/caste groups vary widely in their population size, from 164 Kusunda to 3.6 million Chhetri. There are only six groups that exceed a population of one million; of these four are ethnic (Table 2). Another five have half to one million. Two dozen groups have a population of 10,000 to 50,000. The next in sequence are 22 groups in the population range of 1,000 to 10,000 and 20 in the range of 100,000 to 500,000. Four groups, all ethnic, have populations of less than 1000.

**Table 2: Ethnic/Caste Groups by Population Size, 2001**

Population Size	Caste	Ethnic	Others	Total
+ 1,000,000	2	4	-	6
500,000 – 1,000,000	2	2	1	5
100,000 – 500,000	17	3	-	20
50,000 – 100,000	10	6	-	16
10,000 – 50,000	13	11	-	24
1,000 – 10,000	6	13	3	22
Less 1,000	-	4	-	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>97</b>

Source: Gurung, 2002c.

*Language:* The population census of 1952/54 reported 44 languages/dialects in Nepal. Later censuses reported fewer languages to assert the predominance of Nepali. Thus, the number of languages declined to 36 in 1961, 17 in 1971, and 18 in the 1981 census. The number of languages/dialects reported increased from 31 in 1991 to 106 in 2001. The 2001 census records an additional 22 Rai, 17 ethnic and 12 other languages/dialects. This represents a veritable Tower of Babel. There is some variation in population change by language family during the ten-year period of 1991-2001. Those with Tibeto-Burman mother tongues increased by one-third compared to only 21.6 per cent for those with Indo-Aryan mother tongues (Table 3). The increase of those speaking Nepali as a mother tongue was only 18.8 per cent. As a consequence, the dominance of population with Nepali as the mother tongue declined from nominal majority (50.3 per cent) in 1991 to minority (48.6 per cent) in 2001. On the other hand, the population of Dravidian language (Jhangar) recorded an increase of 88.6 per cent, presumably through in-migration (Table 3).

**Table 3: Change in Population by Language Family**  
(in per cent)

Family	1991	2001	Change
1. Indo-Aryan	80	79.1	21.6
<i>Nepali</i>	50.3	48.6	18.8
2. Tibeto-Burman	17.0	18.4	33.4
3. Munda	0.2	0.2	20.8
4. Dravidian	0.1	0.1	88.6
5. Others/Unstated	2.8	2.2	-2.8
All	100.0	100.0	23.0

The most significant change was the increase in the level of mother tongue retention among the ethnic groups. Of the 19 groups for which the 1991 and 2001 censuses provide both their ethnic and mother tongue population data, only four show a decline in the retention level. These are Dhimal, Rai/Kirant, Bhote/Sherpa, and Thakali (Table 4). Eight ethnic groups record a retention level exceeding 70 per cent in 2001. The contrasting cases are Rajbansi and Raji with more mother tongue

speakers than their population while Kumal has only a few speakers of their mother tongue.

**Table 4: Change in Mother Tongue Speakers to Ethnic Population**  
(in per cent)

Ethnic Group	1991	2001	Ethnic Group	1991	2001
1. Rajbansi	104.1	135.2	11. Chepang	68.5	70.5
2. Raji	90.4	100.0	12. Darai	60.0	68.7
3. Limbu	64.0	92.9	13. Newar	66.2	66.3
4. Jirel	86.5	92.5	14. Gurung	50.7	62.4
5. Tamang	88.8	92.0	15. Danuwar	46.7	59.8
6. Dhimal	89.5	88.6	16. Thakali	51.8	49.6
7. Tharu	83.2	86.8	17. Magar	32.1	47.5
8. Dhami	75.4	82.6	18. Majhi	20.6	30.1
9. Rai/Kirant	83.6	75.3	19. Kumal	1.8	6.6
10. Bhote/Sherpa	99.1	77.6			

*Religion:* The census of 1952/54 recognised only three religious groups (Hindu, Buddhist, Islam) and reported 88.9 per cent population of the country to be Hindu. Subsequently, Christian and Jain religions were reported in 1961, Kiranti and Sikh in 1991, and Bahai in 2001 (Table 5). The 1991-2001 census data show a divergent trend in the popula-

**Table 5: Change in Population by Religion**  
(in per cent)

Religion	First reported census	1991	2001	Change
1. Hindu	1952/54	86.5	80.6	14.6
2. Buddhist	1952/54	7.8	10.7	69.7
3. Muslim	1952/54	3.5	4.2	46.0
4. Christian	1961	0.2	0.5	226.0
5. Jain	1961	0.0	0.0	-45.7
6. Kiranti (Mundhum)	1991	1.7	3.6	157.0
7. Sikh	1991	0.1	0.0	-36.6
8. Bahai	2001	-	0.0	-
Others/Unstated		0.0	0.4	402.7
All		100.0	100.0	23.0

tion change by religion. It declined for Jains and Sikhs. Hindus, adherents of the State religion, increased by only 14.6 per cent. In contrast, Muslims increased by 46 per cent, Buddhists by 69.7 per cent, Kirantis by 157 per cent and Christians by 226 per cent. While the dramatic increase of Christians was mainly due to conversion, the increase in Buddhist and Kiranti populations was due to the ethnics' reversal from Hinduism to own religious traditions. Conversely, the decline of Jains and Sikhs may be attributed to their alignment with Hinduism as their pan-religion. Even then, over 5 million ethnic people are reported under the Hindu fold.

A comparison of population increase of ethnic/caste groups and their population by traditional religions reveals a significant evidence of cultural assertion. During 1991-2001, caste population increased by 25.2 per cent (Table 6). On the other hand, the population claiming to be Hindu increased by only 14.6 per cent. The Muslim social group population increased by 49 per cent compared to an increase of 46 per cent in Islamic followers. In contrast, the population of ethnic groups traditionally aligned to Buddhism increased by 24.9 per cent and their number as Buddhists by 69.7 per cent. Those claiming adherence to native religions was even more dramatic in the case of Kirant ethnics. While their population increase during 1991-2001 was 28 per cent,

**Table 6: Population Increase by Ethnicity/Caste and Religion, 1991-2001**

Categories	Related Group	Increase %
A. Caste people	- Hill (9) and Tarai (41) castes	25.2
	- Claiming Hindu religion	14.6
B. Ethnic groups	- Bhote, Byansi, Gurung, Hyolmo, Newar (60 per cent), Sherpa, Tamang Walung	24.9
	- Claiming Buddhist religion	69.7
C. Musalman	- Muslim, Churaute	49.0
	- Claiming Islam religion	46.0
D. Kiranti ethnics	- Limbu, Rai, Sunuwar, Yakha	28.1
	- Claiming Mundhum tradition	157.0

those claiming Kiranti (Mundhum) religion rose by 157 per cent. Since Kiranti was first recognised as a religion in the 1991 census, the proportion of Kiranti ethnics claiming to be its followers has increased from 36 per cent in 1991 to 73.9 per cent in 2001. Social demographic data of the last decade clearly evidence a strong tendency towards identity assertion based on ethnicity, language and religion.

#### IV. THE THREE CONTENDERS

Basically, there are three main social groups that have been marginalised by the State's biased monopolistic policy. These are the *Janajati* (ethnic) on the basis of culture, the *Dalit* (untouchable) on the basis of caste, and the *Madhesi* (tarai) on the basis of geography. An enquiry into the distribution pattern of their population is germane to locate areas of ethnic activism as well as to map future autonomous areas. There is no duality as to the identification of the tarai as the heartland of the Madhesi movement. This region has a population exceeding 10 million which also includes about 3 million hill migrants. The population of Madhesi ethnic and caste groups are mostly concentrated in the tarai. The distribution pattern of Janajatis and Dalits shows the former predominating eastwards and the latter proliferating in the west. This divergent schema fits well into the broader Himalayan pattern determined by their migration trajectory: Mongoloid ethnics from the east and north and Caucasoid castes from the west and south. In the Indian Himalayan states, the Scheduled Tribe (Janajati) population constitutes 63.7 per cent in Arunchal Pradesh and only 4.2 per cent in Himachal Pradesh.<sup>8</sup> Conversely, the population of Scheduled Castes (Dalit) is a low 0.5 per cent in Arunchal Pradesh and constitutes 25.3 per cent in Himachal Pradesh. In Nepal also, their distribution has an inverse relationship, that is, the Janajanti and the Dalit occupy discrete spaces (Figs. A & B)

During the 1991-2001 decade, the Janajati population increased from 6.4 million to 8.4 million or by 30.8 per cent. This increase was higher than the country's total population increase of 23.0 per cent. Of

<sup>8</sup> Gurung, 2002a, Table 2.



the total Janajati population, about half live in the hills and over one-third in the tarai (Table 7). In terms of regional population, they constitute a progressively higher proportion from west to east in the hills and inner tarai zones. The western mountain region has the least proportion (3.8 per cent) of Janajatis while the central mountain region is home to 93.2 per cent. Of the 13 geographic regions, five regions have a majority of Janajati population.

**Table 7: Distribution of Janajati and Dalit Population**

Geographic Region (No. of districts)	Janajati, 2001		Dalit, 1991	
	%	% of Regional Population	%	% of Regional Population
A. Mountain (15)	5.2	31.4	5.2	11.6
1. West (8)	0.3	3.8	3.6	16.3
2. Central (3)	0.6	93.2	0.1	4.3
3. East (4)	4.2	58.2	1.4	7.2
B. Hill (36)	48.1	47.7	46.2	16.0
4. West (10)	3.4	16.2	24.1	38.5
5. Central (13)	17.9	44.1	16.0	14.9
6. Kathmandu Valley (3)	10.9	56.0	0.9	2.1
7. East (10)	15.8	59.3	5.3	7.1
C. Inner Tarai (6)	12.4	47.9	7.4	11.5
8. West (2)	3.4	38.5	3.8	17.5
9. Central (2)	5.1	49.3	1.7	6.8
10. East (2)	3.9	58.8	1.8	10.9
D. Tarai (18)	34.3	28.0	41.3	13.9
11. West (4)	8.7	41.4	5.5	11.7
12. Central (3)	6.1	29.6	8.4	16.9
13. East (18)	19.4	24.7	27.3	13.6
NEPAL (75)	100.0	37.0	100.0	14.5

The Dalit population increased from 2.2 million of 1991 to 2.5 million in 2001 or by 13.8 per cent. The largest Dalit caste, Kami, declined by 7 per cent due mainly to identity change to other castes. Thus, despite the claim of Dalit activists of their much larger numbers, they now constitute only 13.6 per cent of the total population compared to 14.5 per cent in 1991. The following quotation of

Chokhamela<sup>9</sup> provides insight into two basic problems regarding the Dalit:

If You had to give me this birth  
 Why give me birth at all?  
 You cast me away to be born: You were cruel.  
 Where were You at the time of my birth?  
 Who did You help then?  
 Chokha says: O Lord, O Keshava, don't let me go.

First, the fatalism of the Dalit is evident from the supplication to Keshava, another name for Krishna. Since high castes lord over the Dalit through divine sanction, it is an exercise in futility. Second, the book's title, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, illustrates the adoption of a neutral term *dalit* (oppressed) in place of *achhut* (untouchable) that is both pejorative and illegal.

In 1991, 46.2 per cent of the Dalit population lived in the hills, 41.3 per cent in the tarai, 7.4 per cent in the inner tarai, and 5.2 per cent in the mountain zone (Table 7). In terms of regional distribution, the western regions had a higher proportion of Dalits. They constituted over 16 per cent of the population in the western mountain and the western inner tarai, and a high 38.5 per cent in the western hills. The eastern mountains and eastern hills had less than 7.5 per cent while Kathmandu Valley had only 2.1 per cent since the Newars were not enumerated by caste, thus subsuming the *ma ju pim* (water unacceptable) in their larger fraternity.

The Janajati, Dalit and Madhesi groups remain subjugated in governance. Yet there is still lack of conjunction in their struggle owing to the old fault lines. Although the Nepal Federation of Nationalities has the affiliation of 48 groups, the problems of hill and tarai Janajatis diverge widely. The same problem of regional variation confronts the Dalit movement with the hill group sharing the language and religion of the establishment. The Madhesi includes both caste and ethnic peoples whose agenda of regionalism has to transcend linguistic, religious, and

<sup>9</sup> Zelliott, 1992.

cultural differences. Despite such anomalies, they share many areas of common interest as people marginalised by the State. Their agenda of convergence revolves round political autonomy, social equality and economic opportunity. The three marginalised contenders have the potential of becoming a formidable force if their core demands are moulded into a collective agenda for social equality and inclusive democracy.

## V. CONTEST FOR SPACE

History is the construction of the conquerors while the vanquished are left only with bitter memories. The present Nepalese history is also the story about rulers and their legitimacy. The extended Nepal was created through conquest, cunning and diplomacy. Delving deeper into the past, one may discover various episodes of ethnic protest, contest and insurgency.<sup>10</sup> The brave stand of Kirtipur Newars was recorded inci-

**Table 8: Ethnic/Cultural Episodes**

Year	Episode	Area
1770	Limbu revolt and expulsion	East of Arun
1778	Limbu language suppression	East of Arun
1793	Murmi (Tamang) revolt	Nuwakot
1808	Khambu (Rai) revolt	Bhojpur
1858	Gurung (Sukhdev) revolt	Lamjung
1867	Dasain boycott (two Rais killed)	Dhankuta
1870	Limbu language suppression	East of Arun
1875	Magar (Lakhan) revolt	Gorkha
1876	Gurung (Supati) revolt	Gorkha
1925	Tsering Norbu Lama and four monks exiled	Patan
1937	Buddhist monks exiled	Kathmandu
1950	Kiranti insurgency	Eastern hills
1951	Tamang peasant revolt	Nuwakot
1964	Kirant opposition to <i>kipat</i> abolition	Eastern hills

**Source:** Harka Gurung, 'Rastriyeta ra janajati'. In Mary des Chene (ed), *Nepalko Sandharbhama Samajik-Aarthik-Rajnaitik Avadharanaharu*, Himal Books (forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> Bhattachan, 2000, p. 140.

dentally by a foreign witness. Other revolts by the ethnic people are to be retrieved from folklore of which only a few remain as anecdotal. In the late 18th century, there were Limbu and Tamang revolts (Table 8). The following century experienced uprisings by the Gurung and Magar in central hills as well as those by the Rai and Limbu in eastern hills. The early half of the 20th century was marked by religious persecution targeted mainly against the Buddhist clergy in this land of the Buddha. The 1950/51 political struggle against Rana regime was also accompanied by Kiranti and Tamang insurgencies. The abolition of the *kipat* system in 1964 that ended customary rights over tribal lands was followed by violent Limbu protests in the eastern hills.

Nepal's state ideology on social formation is still based on the Hindu caste system of superior and inferior status by birth. The designation of the country as a 'Hindu kingdom' which sanctifies such discrimination has been the mainspring of the marginalisation of Dalit castes as well as of the Janajati, who do not fall within the caste system. Thus, the low castes are discriminated on the basis of ritual status and the indigenous people on cultural grounds. Such ascriptive discrimination is against the spirit of right to equality of Article 11 (3) of the 1990 Constitution. The Constitution of Nepal, 1990, also has some provisions that are against linguistic equality. Article 6 (2) stipulates that 'Nepali in the Devanagari script is the *language of the nation* of Nepal and it shall be the official language'. Other languages spoken in the country are designated as '*national languages of Nepal*' and inadmissible for official purposes. When attempts were made to introduce Maithili and Newari languages at the local government level in 1998, the Supreme Court ruled it illegal.<sup>11</sup> Article 18 (2) specifies that education in the indigenous language can be imparted only up to the primary level. Meanwhile the State continues to subsidise Sanskrit (which is not a mother tongue of any Nepalese social group) at all levels of education.

The consequence of such religious and linguistic discriminations is the entrenchment of high caste Hindus in the bureaucracy and the power structure. Available data provide clear evidence of a correlation between caste hierarchy, on the one hand, and literacy and economic status, on

<sup>11</sup> Maharjan, 2000.

the other.<sup>12</sup> That is, the lower the caste rank, the higher the illiteracy level and propensity to poverty. Adult literacy rate for high caste groups ranged from 42 to 58 per cent (Table 9). It was 35.2 per cent for hill ethnics and 23.8 per cent for Dalits. Among those with higher education degrees, 88.8 per cent were high caste, 6.2 per cent ethnics and 3.1 per cent Dalits. Social groups with a higher level of literacy and education also lead in per capita income. That of the high castes exceeded the national average of Rs 7,673 (Table 9). It was Rs 6,603 for hill ethnics and Rs. 4,940 for the Dalit. Similarly, household proportion below poverty line shows a relationship with social hierarchy. The official data puts 42.6 per cent households to be below the poverty line for the country. It was 25 per cent for Newars (Hinduised and urban), 34 to 50 per cent for high castes, 45 to 71 per cent for hill ethnics and 65 to 68 per cent for Dalit castes.

**Table 9: Literacy and Income, 1996**

Social Group	Adult Literacy Rate (%)	Per Capita Income (Rs.)
<b>A. Caste Group</b>		
Hill Bahun	58.0	9,921
Hill Chhetri	42.0	7,744
Tarai Castes	27.5	6,911
Artisan Castes	23.8	4,940
<b>B. Language Group</b>		
Newar	54.8	11,953
<b>C. Hill Ethnics</b>		
Gurung, Limbu, Magar, Rai, Sherpa	35.2	6,603
<b>D. Religious Group</b>		
Muslim	22.1	6,336
<b>E. Others</b>		
Nepal	<b>27.6</b>	<b>7,312</b>
	36.7	7,673

Source: CBS, 1996; World Bank, 1997a  
Adapted from NESAC, *Nepal: Human Development Report*, 1998, Annex 7

<sup>12</sup> Gurung, 2003a, Table 6.

The monopoly of high castes in education and resources is well reflected in their entrenchment in administration and politics. The social structure of power elites has changed only marginally since the mid-19th century (Table 10). Indeed, there is even evidence of an increasing stranglehold of high castes in the bureaucracy. Of the applicants to the gazetted post in fiscal years 1996/97-1997/98, an overwhelming 82.9 per cent were Bahun-Chhetri and only 3.7 per cent hill ethnics. Among those qualifying, 83.1 per cent were Bahun-Chhetri and 3.4 per cent ethnics.<sup>13</sup> Such imbalance is also evident from the temporal trend. In 1983/84, those gazetted to government posts included 69.3 per cent high castes and 3.0 per cent ethnics. By 2000/2001, the newly gazetted personnel were 87.0 per cent high castes and 0.5 per cent ethnics. Thus, indigenous people and lower castes remain subjugated in governance.

**Table 10: Composition of Governance Elites**

Social Group	1854 <sup>a</sup>		1999 <sup>b</sup>	
	No.	%	No.	%
1. High caste (Hill)	166	78.3	763	66.2
2. High caste (Newar)	32	15.9	152	13.1
3. High caste (Tarai)	2	0.9	138	11.9
4. Ethnics	6	2.8	97	8.4
5. Dalit caste	-	-	2	0.3
6. Other (Caste unidentifiable)	6	2.8	-	-
Total	212	100.0	1,158	100.0

a. Signatories of the *Muluki Ain*, 22 Dec. 1854.

b. G. Neupane, 2000, p. 82.

Structural change in polity does not necessarily mean change in societal values. The restoration of democracy in Nepal (1990) similarly is beset with a contradiction between the new political superstructure and traditional culture. Recent ethnic activism in the country is against the established pattern of dominance. It has taken various forms, drawing on linguistic, religious, ethnic and regional allegiances. Yet the political elites still remain entrenched in the old mould. The Constitution

<sup>13</sup> Gurung, 2002b, p. 4.

of 1990 that provides full individual freedom still qualifies the country as a 'Hindu Kingdom' as a relic of past hegemony. Furthermore, there is evidence of assertion of neo-Brahmanism, be it the Nepali Congress government's decision to make Sanskrit compulsory in secondary schools (1993) or the communist government's decision to introduce radio newscasts in Sanskrit (1995). This has been so since the political parties are dominated by high castes. Although most parties subscribe to affirmative action referred to in Article 27 (10) of the Directive Principles of the Constitution, none have implemented the programme when in government. The Nepali Congress with the longest tenure in government since 1990 has the most conservative approach on social equality (Table 11). In comparison, leftist parties have a more progressive stance but they remain rhetorics of manifesto since only the CPN (UML) had a brief spell in power.

**Table 11: Ethnic Agenda and Party Position**

Agenda	NC	RPP	NSP	CPN/ UML	CPN/ ML	CPN/ Maoist
1. Secular state				ö	ö	ö
2. Language right			ö	ö	ö	ö
3. Affirmative action	ö	ö	ö	ö	ö	ö
4. House of Nationalities		ö		ö	ö	ö
5. Autonomy			Regional			Ethnic/ Regional
6. Right to self-determination						ö

**Source:** Harka Gurung, 'Rastriyeta ra janajati'. In Mary des Chene (ed), *Nepalko Sandharbhama Samajik-Aarthik-Rajnaitik Avadharanaharu*, Himal Books (forthcoming).

The Maoists have a vested interest in wooing the Janajati and Dalit—the oppressed groups.<sup>14</sup> They have mobilised various ethnic and regional liberation fronts to their class war since the majority of the Janajati and Dalit are poor. The ethnic ones are Kirant, Magarant, Newar, Tamsaling, Tamuwan, Tharuwan, Dalit and regional ones are Seti-Mahakali, Bheri-Karnali, and the tarai. The Maoist movement has provided scope for

<sup>14</sup> Gurung, 2003b, p. 11.

significant participation of the Janajati and Dalit in the political process.

## VI. REFLECTION

National integration is much more than obedience and conformity: it denotes unity and allegiance to a single nation-state. Therefore, nation-building is a political idea and an ideal. Discourses on ethnicity and nationalism tend to contrast between the primordialist and the instrumentalist positions.<sup>15</sup> The former, viewed as essentialist, assumes ethnic identity as given social characteristics that persist over time. The latter, labeled modernism, considers ethnic/national identity as the creation of elite groups to gain economic or political advantage. The distinction between the two perspectives need not be autarchic or absolute. Ethnic identities do persist and are maintained without political motivation, simply as a sense of group solidarity such as the ethnicity which searches for identity (symbolic ethnicity).<sup>16</sup> Since the study of ethnicity and nationality pertains to politically induced cultural change, it is secondary whether the symbols invoked are ancient or recent. Basically, such enquiry is about 'the process by which elites and counter-elites within ethnic groups select aspects of the group's culture, attach new value and meaning to them, and use them as symbols to mobilise the group, to defend its interests, and to compete with other groups'.<sup>17</sup>

However, if one proceeds beyond ethnic identity towards nation-building, the instrumentalist perspective has a particular significance. Nation-building involves deliberate manipulation of identities at a different level in which the state plays the key role. 'For individuals to be able to cultivate national feelings, it is important that the story the nation tells itself about its past should be generally believed, but need not be historically accurate.'<sup>18</sup> This also involves conflict management among contending groups that may range from imposition in despotic regimes to dialogue in democratic ones. The emergence of ethnic identities in

<sup>15</sup> Gellner, 1977.

<sup>16</sup> Oommen, 1994.

<sup>17</sup> Brass, 1991, p. 75.

<sup>18</sup> Tamir, 1995.

Nepal is not an arrival of a new phenomenon but rather the expression of what had been latent. The identities that remained submerged during Shah and Rana regimes and suppressed during the Panchayat period are being asserted in the new democratic polity with pluralist policies. The determining factor has been the changed political context.

The social ferment emerging in today's Nepal is the outcome of suppression during the past regimes. Monopolistic social norms of the State are being questioned and the established pattern of dominance is being challenged by activist groups based on ethnic, linguistic, religious and regional allegiances. There are three rationales why the agenda of marginalised people deserves consideration. First, marginalisation is not the problem of the Janajati, the Madhesi and the Dalit alone. Since these communities constitute more than two thirds of the total population, it is a national problem whereby the State's intrinsic strength is emasculated. Second, it is futile to expect democratic norms and respect for fundamental human rights in a setting of social inequality based on ascriptive values. Third, targeting development towards marginalised social groups would directly contribute to poverty alleviation as they constitute mostly the poor.

Intervention measures for marginalised people will vary according to the nature of their problems (Table 12). In the caste of Janajati, the concerns relate to cultural (equality in language and religion) and political rights (representation and autonomy). In the case of Dalit, the concerns are for social equality and livelihood sustenance. For the Madhesi, the main concerns are hill dominance, linguistic exclusion and the issue of citizenship. Government efforts so far have had minimal impact since the programmes do not address the structural problems. Some of these relate to constitutional provisions on social equality, cultural diversity, and positive discrimination. The amendment of the Constitution into a secular state would resolve the problem of cultural domination over the Janajati and discrimination of the Dalit. Giving official status to other languages would not pose any threat to the status of Nepali as the *lingua franca* of the country. Jaime Torres Bodet's succinct observation is most apposite here: 'As long as in the same nation some people have all the technical advantages of education and while others in large numbers exist without even an alphabet, social peace will

**Table 12: Intervention Areas**

Social Group	Problems	Intervention
JANAJATI	<i>Cultural</i> 1. Religious discrimination 2. Linguistic discrimination	1. Secular state 2. Official status to Janajati languages
	<i>Economic</i> 3. Low literacy 4. Unemployment	3. Education targeting 4. Affirmative action
	<i>Political</i> 5. Poor representation 6. Subjugated governance	5. Proportional representation 6. Ethnic autonomy
MADHESI	<i>Cultural</i> 1. Linguistic discrimination	1. Official status to tarai languages
	<i>Economic</i> 2. Employment bar	2. Recruitment in army
	<i>Political</i> 3. Hill dominance 4. Citizenship problem	3. Regional autonomy 4. Ascertain long-term residents vis-à-vis recent immigrants
DALIT	<i>Social</i> 1. Caste discrimination	1. Secular state
	<i>Economic</i> 2. Poor literacy 3. Unemployment 4. Landlessness	2. Free education 3. Seat reservation 4. Alternative livelihood
	<i>Political</i> 5. Poor representation	5. Collegiate election

be a mocking mirage.<sup>19</sup> Regarding unemployment, the deprived communities need affirmative action with seat reservations in the public sector employment. In the political arena, the Janajati need propor-

<sup>19</sup> Quoted by Townsend, 1972, p. 97.

tional representation while the Dalit can have better representation through collegiate elections' instead of nomination as at present. Regional autonomy would benefit the Janajati and Madhesi who constitute the majority in their native areas.

The constitutional provision of equal rights for all remains theoretical since the marginalised are unable to exercise what is guaranteed. Given the monopoly of high castes in education and bureaucracy, equality of opportunities has no relevance to Janajati and Dalit who are unable to compete. What they need is positive discrimination in education and economic opportunity to enhance their capability. In the education sector, the anchor of advancement, the literacy rate provides an objective criterion for identifying the target communities. In the employment sector, disadvantaged groups need seat reservations. Other affirmative actions in economic spheres include skill enhancement and access to land for the landless.

Political expressions, ethnic or otherwise, become especially salient during periods of power transition. This is what Nepal is experiencing presently under a democratic environment. The ethnic and regional demands so far have been mostly of the secondary type, e.g., civil ethnicity, seeking to compete for resources within the system. The trend of the last three general elections also indicates people's preference for mainstream politics. However, there is still the possibility of more aggressive expressions, even violence and irredentism, if legitimate demands for social justice and political equality are not conceded by those entrenched in power. What Nepal now needs to devise is a polycentric nationalism that fosters a feeling of belonging among all sections of society which in turn will promote national integration.

My presentation opened with a quotation by an African leader. I will conclude with an idea from Latin America's most enduring literary personality:<sup>20</sup>

The paradox is this: if economic rationality tells us that the next century will be the age of global integration of the world's econo-

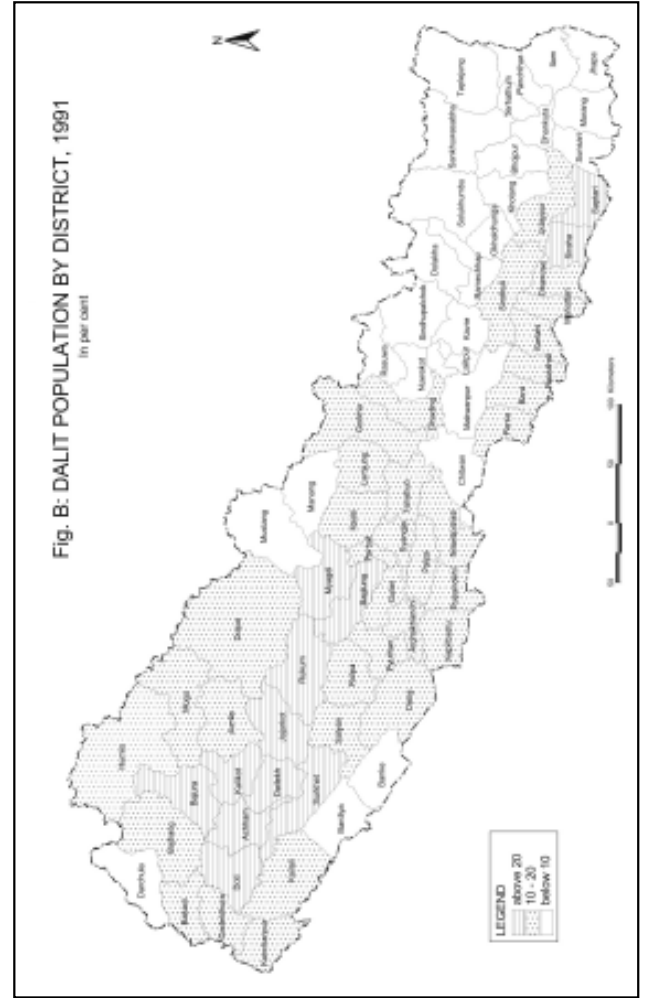
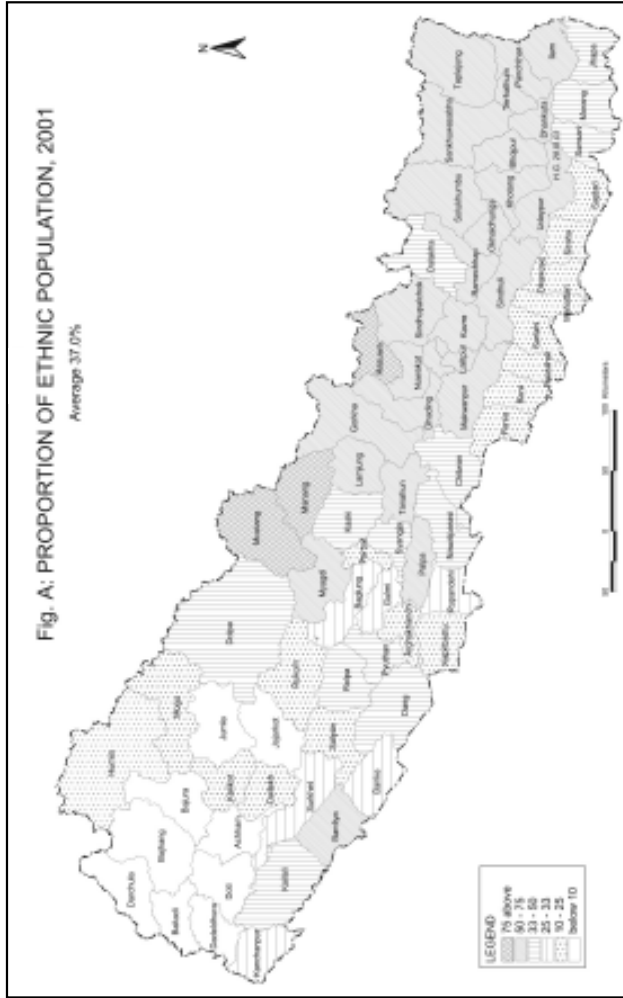
mies, cultural 'irrationality' steps in to inform us that it will also be the century of ethnic demands and revived nationalisms. Both reason and imagination tell us that the name of solution, that point where you can balance the demands of integration and those of the nationalities, is federalism.

—Carlos Fuentes

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<sup>1</sup> The Panchayat system had a provision for a graduates' constituency until 1975.

<sup>20</sup> Fuentes, 1996, p. 105.



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