The Idea of Nepal

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Back cover shows Mahesh Chandra Regmi in the audience at the inaugural lecture on 24 April, 2003. Photograph by Bikas Rauniar.

INTRODUCTION

To speak in the name of Mahesh Chandra Regmi is a great honour, perhaps the greatest honour, that the academic community of Nepal can bestow on a fellow scholar of Nepal—so I am deeply touched and I hope that I can live up to Regmi's standards, if not of historical depth and knowledge, at least of academic commitment.[1]

Regmi was a trailblazer as a historian who wrote in depth, at length, and in beautiful detail on the economic history of Nepal. Astonishingly, he seems to have been largely self-taught and self-motivated (Gaenszle 1993; Onta 2003). Selflessly, he unearthed, translated, and published obscure documents in the Regmi Research Series so that other scholars could use them. He was also a kind of trailblazer and exemplar in another way: for those historians and social scientists working outside the academy in Nepal today, and supporting themselves through NGO work, consultancies, and so on. He did not apply for a university post and did not wish to tie himself to any such master. He worked out how to support himself as an independent scholar. He was entirely self-motivated; he was a true and dedicated scholar, in the full sense of that word, to the end of his days. He showed that, with determination and dedication, it is possible to earn one's living, support one's family, and to produce monograph after monograph of pure scholarship as well. In that, as in so much else, he was an example to us all.

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1   Many thanks to those friends who at short notice and at the last minute did their best to save me from errors of fact, interpretation, and language: D. Acharya, K.P. Adhikari, M. Hutt, C. Letizia, D.P. Martinez, J. Pfaff-Czarnecka, and J. Whelpton. I alone am responsible for the errors that remain.

I first met Mahesh Chandra Regmi in December 1975 and visited him at his home in Lazimpat from time to time when I returned to Nepal for two years, 1982–84, to do my doctoral fieldwork, and subsequently. I would like to pay tribute not just to his scholarship, but also to his unwavering materialist outlook, which never forgot the toiling peasant on whose labour all other forms of production depended and still depend. His lifelong interest in questions of privilege, inequality, and exploitation, for all that he focused mostly on the nineteenth century, remains very contemporary; the problems have not gone away.

My theme today is the manifold different ways in which Nepal has been imagined, especially its imagination as a national space and the kinds of people who make it up. My lecture will be largely chronological without in any way constituting a conventional history. Nor will I attempt to *explain* recent political transitions, for example, as the consequence of underlying economic and structural changes, as Chaitanya Mishra did in his Regmi Lecture (Mishra 2015). I will be content if I succeed in outlining clearly what has changed and what has not.

I start with a consideration of Nepal as a sacred centre, and then pause to consider whether the notion of Nepal being an 'interface' between two major cultural areas to north and south has value. I then consider Nepal as an empire, as a nation-state, and finally as a multi-ethnic federal state. Nepal's history lives on in the present, and without an understanding of this history, and of Nepal's particular geographic situation, no reasonable assessment of future options is possible. Specifically what I want to emphasise today is that the hierarchical notions of the past live on as the unofficial, often unspoken, framework of social life today, in spite of officially egalitarian and inclusive language and in spite of the support given by the law and the constitution.

I am well aware of the danger of hubris in taking up the theme of Nepal's changing national identity and speaking in the heart of Kathmandu before an audience many of whom have lived through and have to continue to live through what I am attempting to capture

in a short lecture.[2] Nepalis present today may well ask, as one of Des Chene's interlocutors once did, 'Do anthropologists ever go beyond stating the evident?' (Des Chene 2007: 221).

The topic of national identity has many possible aspects and it will be impossible to mention even half of them. Furthermore, the idea of what Nepal is and should be has changed enormously and is today deeply contested. I will only be able to touch on some aspects, which seem to me to be some of the key points. You will have to forgive me if, through lack of space and insufficient time, your favourite theme or author is passed over in silence.[3]

Like everyone else, I am dependent on the work of many friends and colleagues, as well as many scholars and writers whom I have never met. There are far too many to acknowledge here, but their names are recorded in the books and articles I have co-edited and co-authored. Not only do we all stand on the shoulders of giants; scholarship is, despite the long and lonely hours in the study, a long-term collective enterprise, carried on in the old days through letters, and today by email, blogs, and shared posts on Facebook.

I did not know it then, but my very first academic article based on fieldwork in Nepal and entitled 'Language, Caste, Religion, and Territory' (Gellner 1986) took up themes which have become ever more salient, and to which, on a larger national scale, I, along with many others, have found it necessary to return to again and again. Of the four key terms, I shall say most about the first two, language and caste/ethnicity, somewhat less about territory, and least about religion, but all four are deeply implicated in competing 'ideas of Nepal'.[4]

That paper seemed almost to write itself. I sat down in the

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2   On national identity, among many other references, one should see Burghart (1984), Gellner et al (1997), Hutt (1988, 1997), Whelpton (1997, 2005, 2017), Whelpton et al (2008), Onta (1996a, 1996b, 1997, 1999), and Chalmers (2003).

3   In particular, I regret not being able to include consideration of various literary representations (see, i.a., Subedi 1978, Hutt 1991, 1998, 2010, 2012a; Onta 1997, 1999; Des Chene 1996, 2007; Chalmers 2003).

4   I have examined competing ideas of democracy in Nepal elsewhere (Gellner 2007b). Likewise, for secularism, see now Gellner et al (2016).

summer of 1984, fresh from the field, and I wrote out the themes about which young Newars, when they became aware that I could speak their language, had passionately wanted to engage me. I interspersed their testimony with some history (especially that of Dharmaditya Dharmacharyya, the first Newar cultural nationalist), some written sources, and some quotations from K.P. Malla, as well as from the influential Nepal Bhasa weekly newspaper, *Inap*, edited by K.P.'s younger brother, Malla K. Sundar. I still possess a draft of my article covered with K.P.'s beautifully neat comments in red ink. What was provocative in my analysis, at least at the time and from the point of view of Newar intellectuals who were seeking to return to Newar roots, was my insistence that Newar culture had much more in common with the Indic traditions to the south than it did with the Sino-Tibetan traditions to the north (I return to this point below, while discussing the 'interface' idea).

Before embarking on my survey, I must say a few words about the danger—increasingly acknowledged but hard to avoid—of methodological nationalism.[5] The age of modern nationalism has been relatively short, dating in some countries from the eighteenth century, for most of Europe from the nineteenth century, and for most of the rest of the world from the twentieth century. This is not to deny that it is possible to identify a few premodern proto-nationalisms that anticipate the themes of twentieth-century nationalism in some parts of the world, in what is now the UK or Sri Lanka, for example (Hastings 1997). The key point is that only in the modern period does a nationalist stance become more or less obligatory and

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5   On this, see further Wimmer & Glick Schiller (2002), Gellner (2012). Though he did not name it or conceptualize it in this way, Richard Burghart was in effect recognizing this danger, and indicating how to tackle it, when he wrote, 'The concept of the nation-state in the governmental discourse of modern Nepal is identifiably European; that is to say, it is an intercultural equivalent of the modern Western concept and is intended by the Nepalese government to be recognized as such by its citizens and by other states. Yet the formation of this concept also occurred in an intracultural context that cannot be separated analytically from Nepal's intercultural field of relations' (Burghart 1984: 102).

universal; only in modern times does the world come to be divided up without residue into nation-states. In the age of nationalism it is widely assumed that nations are given in the nature of things; they become part of the common-sense, taken-for-granted framework of the world. Historians, notoriously, have frequently written in a nationalist mode, projecting backwards into the past the forms of attachment and political boundaries of the present. Social scientists, economists, UN bodies, the world of sport, and many others take the nation-state as the obvious container and unit of comparison, without questioning whether like is being compared with like. By focusing on the history of one contemporary nation-state I run the danger of implicit methodological nationalism. I am fully aware that the story cannot be told adequately without putting Nepal into its wider context, which means, above all, South Asia, but also implies its links to the wider world, including Tibet and China.

One issue that cannot be avoided is ethnicity. To avoid consideration of new and emergent kinds of identity at the sub-national level would be a mistake equivalent to methodological nationalism. One can call it methodological ethnicism: the error of assuming that the particular ethnic distinctions that are current at the moment have always existed as they do today. By contrast, the approach I am advocating views such distinctions as the outcome — in some cases the very recent outcome — of interacting political and social processes. Ethnic identity (which as a general concept includes what in South Asia is called caste identity) is always a work in progress, always subject to change and development.

NEPAL AS A SACRED CENTRE

It is well known, and has been said many times, that in the past the term 'Nepal' referred to the Kathmandu Valley (hence it is sometimes referred to as the Valley of Nepal). There are perhaps, even today, old people in the hills of Nepal who say 'Are you going to Nepal?', meaning 'Are you going to Kathmandu?'. It was surely

with this referent that the word 'Nepal' was used in the old national anthem, in the now long-forgotten line 'let us maintain the Lord's command over Nepal' (just as the sixth verse of the UK's national anthem, never sung today, refers to 'crushing the rebellious Scots').[6]

'Nepal' was already an established place-name in the second half of the 4th century CE when the emperor Samudragupta claimed the kings of Nepal, Assam, and Bengal as vassals (Slusser 1982: 31). Within Nepal, we have three records of its use in inscriptions from the 6th century in the form *swasti naipalebhyah* or 'greetings/ blessings to the people of Nepal' (or possibly 'rulers of Nepal') (Malla 2015: 271). All three inscriptions come from the valley of Tistung and Chitlang. K.P. Malla is confident the greetings are intended for the Nepa clan of cow- and buffalo-herders inhabiting Tistung-Chitlang (ibid: 243, 279). Thus, it is possible that whereas by this time 'Nepal' was used by outsiders to refer to the entire region of the Kathmandu Valley, for insiders the term had a more restricted use, referring only to the people (or rulers) of Tistung and Chitlang. If that is correct, it would be an ancient parallel to the 19th-century situation, in which the British had extended the term to cover the entire domain of the Shah kings, whereas for insiders it still referred only to the Kathmandu Valley.

The Kathmandu Valley was, at least from the 3rd century CE and possibly earlier, an outpost of the Hindu-Buddhist civilisation of the Gangetic plains. Precisely for this reason, Sylvain Lévi visited Kathmandu for three short months in 1898. His astonishing erudition enabled him to gather enough material in this time for his ground-breaking history in three volumes. The very marginality of Nepal, its late-coming to the Indic path of civilisation, meant that it could be a microcosm for understanding the whole history of South Asia (and one should make allowance, in his use of language, for the fact that Lévi was writing nearly 120 years ago):

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6   See Gellner (1986: 125), Hang (2011). On Nepal's new anthem, see Hutt (2012).

Populated by non-Aryan races, converted and civilised by Indian Buddhism, conquered and absorbed by Brahmanical Hinduism, Nepal has already passed through the first three stages of Indian history. Having entered late into the process, it has yet to experience the final phase, on which it is just embarking, but in which India has long been engaged: the struggle against Islam and European domination. This is precisely the distinguishing feature of Nepal's history and the reason why it is so instructive. Ceylon is India arrested at the stage of Buddhism and separated by the overwhelming force of foreign influences. Kashmir is India itself. Nepal is India in the making (*Le Népal, c'est l'Inde qui se fait*). In a territory so limited that it almost seems to have been designed as a laboratory, the observer can easily grasp the sequence of steps which from ancient India have given rise to modern India. He can understand by what mechanism a handful of Aryans, carried by a bold march into the Panjab, where they came into contact with a barbarous multitude, were able to subjugate, enlist, tame, and organise it, and to propagate their own language with such success that today three quarters of India speak Aryan tongues. (Lévi 1905, I, 28; my translation)

Lévi's vision was capacious and took in the whole of Asia. He saw Nepal as a 'laboratory' and 'time-machine' for the study of South Asian history as a whole.[7]

During the early Licchavi period, it is possible to trace a process of adaptation of Sanskritic models to local culture.[8] The terms

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7   This was the framework within which I and many others set out to study Newar Buddhism (Lienhard 1984; Gellner 1992; Lewis 2000; von Rospatt 2001), though my work and that of Todd Lewis engaged also with how the tradition was changing. For Indra Jatra, see Pradhan (1986) and Toffin (2009). For the city as a whole, see Levy (1990). On the built environment, see Gutschow (2011). On the cultural history of the Valley, Slusser (1982). Des Chene (2007) dismisses this whole line of research as the 'Nepal as fossil' view (cf. Onta 1997: 73).

8   Sharma (2004: Chs 2–3; 2015).

Nepalarajya, Nepalabhukti, and (once) Nepalamandala are all used in inscriptions to designate the territory of the Licchavi kings (Vajracharya 1973). Whether *mandala* also had an overlapping religious meaning at that period is less certain. But by the Mediaeval period the Valley was conceived both religiously and politically as a mandala, that is to say as a sacred space with a centre and geometrically arranged divinities in the cardinal directions.[9] Still today, when Vajracharya priests perform a ritual for their Buddhist patrons, they start by reciting the 'intention' *(samkalpa)* which locates the action in time and space, and without which the ritual cannot be efficacious:

> …in the Kali world era… in the northern Pāñcāla country of the Bharata continent, in the Himālayas, in the region of Vāsuki [the *nāga* or holy serpent], in the Power-Place *(pītha)* called Upachandoha, in the holy land of South Asia *(āryavarta)*, in the home of Karkotaka, king of serpents, in the great lake called 'dwelling of the holy serpents', in the place of the *caitya* Sri Svayambhu, which is presided over *(adhisthita)* by Sri Guhyesvari Prajnā Pāramitā, in the land presided over by Sri Manjusri, in the land (or mandala) of Nepal, which has the form of the mandala of Sri Samvara [i.e. Cakrasamvara, the main Buddhist Tantric deity], … [listing many other gods and holy sites] … here, within Nepal Mandala, in the city of Lalitapattana, in the kingdom … of Aryavalokitesvara [i.e. Karunamaya-Matsyendranath].[10]

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9   For the crucial role of the mandala in the construction of space in the Kathmandu Valley, see Gellner (1992: 190–2), Burghart (1984: 116), Levy (1990: 153f), Shrestha (2012: 37f), Pickett (2014: 116–18). On the mutual implications of religious, social, and spatial hierarchies, see Gellner (1992: 41–50). Davidson (2002) argues that the connection between political and religious senses of *mandala* was crucial to rise of Tantra in South Asia, precisely at the time of Nepal's Licchavis.

10 Gellner (1992: 191; all but the third brackets original). On the significance of the *samkalpa* in ritual, see Michaels (2016).

Ritually and symbolically, and in the holy language of Sanskrit, Newar Buddhists locate themselves in this way as part of what the prominent American Sanskritist Sheldon Pollock (2006) calls the Sanskrit cosmopolis, that is to say, the Sanskrit-based civilisation that once reached from central Asia to the islands of Southeast Asia. Unlike their Tamang neighbours and some other Nepalis, Newar Buddhists—a minority of enthusiasts apart[11]—do not derive their legitimacy from Tibetan Buddhism to the north. They recognise that the Tibetans follow the same religion but, if anything, consider themselves the teachers and the origin. The Kathmandu Valley saw itself (and to a degree Newars still see themselves) as an island of sacredness and civilisation in a sea of rustic simplicity (*jangali*-ness), the inheritors and inhabitants of a *punyabhumi*, or sacred land. The apogee of that sacredness and civilisation was to be found at the heart of the old cities of the Kathmandu Valley, Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Lalitpur (Patan).

Thus, Nepal (the Kathmandu Valley) defined itself as the northern edge of the civilised world. According to Pollock, Samudragupta's Allahabad inscription claiming overlordship of Nepal, Assam, and Bengal provided the model of kingship that subsequently spread, with the Sanskrit language, as far as Kashmir and Afghanistan to the north, Java, Bali, and Cambodia in the southeast (Pollock 2006: 143, 241). It was as part of this 'Sanskrit cosmopolis' model that Nepal constituted itself as a sacred centre.

Fourteen centuries later, when in 1769 Prithvi Narayan Shah, the King of Gorkha, 40 miles to the north-west, conquered the Valley, he did not reject this religious geography. Prithvi Narayan may have despised the Valley's inhabitants as soft and unmartial, but he was keen to define his realm as a true Hindustan. His successors built and endowed many temples, continuing the tradition of maintaining the Valley as a sacred centre. The Hindu rituals of today's Parbatiya Brahmins, just like the Vajracharya *samkalpa* given above, locate Nepal in Aryavarta, in the northern part of Bharatavarsha, and in

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11   For Newar contacts with Tibet, see Lewis (1996), and for converts to Tibetan Buddhism, see Levine & Gellner (2005: Ch. 9).

the region of Pashupati (though without the elaborate list of gods and localisations found in the Buddhist version).[12]

Thus, Nepal, in its religious self-perception, may be a sacred *margin*, a pilgrimage destination in the holy Himalaya (Michaels 2008); simultaneously it continued and continues to constitute itself as a sacred *centre*. Furthermore, the conquest of India first by the Muslims and then the British meant that the central lands of Hinduism were defiled by their lack of Hindu rulers. Nepal became, in the eyes of its rulers and those close to them, the *only* and *last* truly Hindu country (Burghart 1984: 116). That vision of Nepal as a Hindu nation continues to attract many adherents today.

NEPAL AS INDO-TIBETAN INTERFACE?

I have so far emphasised Nepal's relationships to the south and mentioned that Newar Buddhists derive their tradition from the south, not the north, despite the fact that Buddhism died out in India.[13] It is my contention that for reasons of history and geography the links to the south are overwhelmingly important. In my work on Newar culture and society I have stressed the ways in which the Kathmandu Valley has always been a full part of the South Asian culture area, no more culturally distinct than any other region (Gellner 1995). In this I was arguing against those who view Newar culture in layer-cake fashion: a layer of Indianisation on top with a core of indigenous, tribal culture underneath, to be found most clearly among the Jyapu or Maharjan agriculturalist caste.[14] This model seemed and still seems

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12 Michaels (2016: 51–2), Sharma (2015: 34). It is striking that the long, philo-sophically sophisticated, and detailed statement of Brahmanic and Vedic orthodoxy found in Anuparama's Sanskrit inscription from early sixth-century Hadigaon is openly hostile to Buddhism, but at no point does it try to localize its arguments or to claim Nepal for Hinduism (Acharya 2007).

13 Some parts of this section were first presented in a keynote lecture at the Association of Nepal and Himalayan Studies conference on 28th October 2011 in Minneapolis.

14 An interesting variation on this view is the indigenist model put forward by

to me to be far too static and to ignore the interactive, and class-based, nature of cultural collective self-definition.

Having said this, Nepal has a northern border and there have been important cultural, economic, diplomatic, and, on occasion, military links (and wars) with Tibet and China. The case that is hardest for my argument is that of the Tamangs. The Tamangs clearly are much more deeply influenced by Tibet and Tibetan culture than any other Janajati group in Nepal, with the exception of the Sherpas and similar Tibetanids, as Höfer calls them (1979: 43–4). Among the Tamangs (Holmberg et al 1999; Campbell 1997, 2013), as among the Hyolmo (Clarke 1980) and Thangmi (Shneiderman 2015), those downhill and closer to the plains culture are of lower status, those uphill and closer to Tibet are of higher status. In these cases, the relationship is inverted, or at crucial periods in the past and for substantial periods of time was inverted. The north is valorised over the south.

Yet, as many have described for Tamangs (Höfer 1978, 1986), Rais (Allen 1997), and others, once they were incorporated into the Gorkhali state, such Janajati populations, even if only lightly Hinduised in other respects, learnt pretty rapidly how they were supposed to behave in a caste-structured Hindu state (Pfaff-Czarnecka 1997: 432). Their elites often began to adopt more high-caste and Hindu ways of behaving. The very adoption of the ethnonym 'Tamang' was an attempt to improve their status, or at least to differentiate themselves from the mass of 'Bhotiyas' (Höfer 1979: 147–8; Ramble 1997). Today, even more, Tamangs who are reconstructing their culture—creating the new Lhochhar festival, for example, as David Holmberg (2016) has described—are looking to the Nepali state for recognition and beyond it to a global audience. As he and many others have pointed out, the emphasis on ethnic uniqueness is performed in a way that is uniform and pan-Nepali—indeed global. The message of a unique cultural identity is performed in a uniform framework of speeches, folk dances, and prize-givings.

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local intellectual Baldev Juju (see Gellner 2011).

In short, in the Himalaya—with some local and partial exceptions—the relationship to the north and the relationship to the south are not equal and symmetrical. The notion that there might be an equivalence between the two is, of course, seductive and the attempt to make Nepal a 'pivot' or 'bridge' between north and south is now often stated as an aspiration of political or diplomatic policy. It was suggested by the phrase 'Indo-Tibetan Interface', which was once popular.[15]

Today, it seems to me incontrovertible that the relationship between north and south is non-symmetrical for the vast majority of the inhabitants of the Himalaya. The inhabitants of Nepal and of the Indian Himalaya do not empty the streets and offices in order to watch TV serials of The Epic of Gesar in Tibetan. They do not even know who Gesar is. They have not spent generations going to the cinema to watch Tibetan movies. They do not flock in their millions to the cities of Tibet in search of work, education, and a better life, or to flee political conflict at home. They do not send massive amounts of remittances from the People's Republic of China to Nepal. I would estimate that for about 90 per cent (perhaps more) of Nepali citizens, Tibet is a faraway country of which they know nothing and care less. It is true that for a small minority who live along the border, it is possible to enter, trade, and even work in the TAR. It is also true that for a bigger number, their religious traditions link through to Tibet; nowadays, however, study at Tibetan monastic institutions is far more likely to involve relocating to Bauddha (Khasti) in Kathmandu or Dharamsala in India than moving to Tibet. Nepali followers of Tibetan Buddhism seek out lamas who can teach in Nepali rather than in Tibetan.

It is a corollary of this that Nepali intellectuals—even those enamoured of Maoism and professionally interested in the history of China—are extraordinarily (one might say culpably) ignorant of the history and culture of Tibet and its experience of communism. It must have been an especially bitter irony for Tibetan refugees in Nepal that

15 See Fisher (1978). Unfortunately the state of knowledge at the time, and the lack of a systematic comparative vision, meant that the volume fell short of the ambitious overview imagined by Sol Tax in the preface.

they fled an oppressive Maoist state only to be confronted by true-believing Maoists in Nepal demanding contributions to the cause.

In short, the problem with the 'interface' view is that (a) it makes the two centres as the focus, because the interface is, by definition, an interface between two (or more) somethings; (b) for most of the Himalaya the balance between the two sides is so unequal. In quantitative terms the *amount* of their culture that people in the Himalaya get from the south is far greater. In terms of the places they are likely to visit, the pull of the south is much greater. In terms of political influence, the south is much stronger. While rejecting older simplistic views that presupposed a straightforward spectrum or a smooth gradation of cultural change from south to north, and while acknowledging that relations are many, complex, and may change in different directions over time, overall, for the vast majority of Nepal's inhabitants, there is a bias in the north-south relationship that is heavily weighted towards the south. Starting from a different point and in a plea for anthropologists to start taking Nepali political and literary history seriously, Mary Des Chene has come to a similar conclusion:

> Nepal's non-colonized history is precisely what connects it to South Asia. A non-colonial nationalism with deep roots in colonial India, a current political relationship with India that has its roots in Nepal's relationship with British India, a history of labor migration that is similarly rooted in the political-economy of British India. And a vision of the nation premised on the Nepali language, the monarchy and Hinduism as its defining features, a vision forged in contradistinction to colonized India. (Des Chene 2007: 218).

NEPAL AS EMPIRE

Des Chene's invocation of these long, deep, and enduring links to India brings me ahead of my story. Before Nepal was a nation-state, it was an empire, albeit on a small scale, and confined to the Himalaya

by the colonial power to the south. Many of today's predicaments stem from that fact. Prithvi Narayan Shah, once widely lauded as 'the Great', the father and founder of the nation, is today seen as a controversial figure. The index finger of his statue outside Singha Darbar, raised to the heavens in order to symbolise the unity of the nation, has been broken more than once. Many other statues of him have been removed irrevocably. His followers are reduced to bringing out cardboard images to place where his statue once stood.

We can follow Richard Burghart in his seminal article (1984), whose account was in turn heavily indebted to M.C. Regmi. Burghart stressed that the Shah kings, Prithvi Narayan and his immediate successors, thought in terms of the possessions *(muluk)* of which the King of Gorkha was the owner or master *(malik)* and that the boundaries of these possessions had no necessary connection or correspondence to particular countries *(desa)*, with particular environments, peoples, and cultures. Sometimes particular 'countries' might fall wholly within their possessions; in other cases, they could be divided.[16] As an empire, the Shah kings' possessions comprised many different peoples and 'countries'.

In his last monograph, *Imperial Gorkha*, M.C. Regmi discusses the 25-year period of Gorkhali rule in Kumaon. 'For the Gorkhali rulers,' he remarks, 'it was easier to conquer territories than to govern them' (Regmi 1999: 43). He notes that villagers, subjects, in the heartland were treated much better than those further afield: when the payment of taxes was resisted, through subterfuge, in the far east of the country or in Dailekh, the offenders were punished severely. By contrast, when villages in Kaski protested against the highhandedness of *jagir* holders, their objections were listened to and they were offered incentives (Regmi 1999: 13). Inhabitants of the Tarai likewise felt, and still feel, that they are treated as an internal colony by an imperial power (Gaige 1975), as do some Tamangs living extremely close to the capital (Holmberg et al 1999). Those

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16 Prayag Raj Sharma (1997: 474) is surely right that, though the *muluk* versus *desa* distinction has considerable merit, to add to it a further distinction between *des* and *desa* 'sometimes seem[s] over-laboured.'

excluded from state benevolence still today feel that some citizens are more equal than others.

This perception of the Gorkhali state as favouring some groups over others has led to the radical re-evaluation of the figure of Prithvi Narayan Shah. The historian Kumar Pradhan (1991: 153f) initiated this revisionist trend, arguing that to see the Gorkhali conquests as akin to Italian or German unification is an anachronistic 'hindsight view' (ibid: 154) of Nepali history, a nationalistic fiction. Thus, while Prithvi Narayan remains the great nationalist leader for some, for others he has become the arch colonialist, who reduced their part of contemporary Nepal to servitude and its inhabitants to the status of second-class citizens. On this view, Prithvi Narayan—so often anachronistically lauded for the multiculturalism of his view of his kingdom as a 'garden of 4 *varnas* and 36 *jats*'—in so far as he had an ideal kingdom in mind, was really only interested in ruling a 'true Hindustan', of being a pure and legitimate ruler in the Hindu sense, but not in any modern sense of nation or national belonging.[17]

Despite this absence of modern nationalism in the eighteenth century, M.C. Regmi stressed that there was a notion of the state or *dhunga* (literally 'stone'), to which loyalty was owed, regardless of who held the position of head of state (1978; 1999: xi). By implication there was therefore a kind of proto-nationalism at work even in the early nineteenth century. Whelpton (1997: 42, 2005: 56) has followed him in this interpretation and drawn on the observations of B.H. Hodgson, the British resident in Kathmandu from 1820 to 1824, in support. Nepal was not, therefore, purely and simply a patrimonial state, where loyalty was owed only to the person of the ruler, even though the idea that the kingdom was the property of the ruler and his family was the overwhelmingly dominant model. There was at the same time, and despite the very hierarchical nature of the state, a kind of proto-nation and a notion of the state as something beyond the particular people who happened to occupy its leading positions.

This proto-Nepali identity was based in the heartland of mid-

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17   See discussions in Pradhan (1991: 155–6), Sharma (1997), and Shrestha (2016).

western Nepal. It focused primarily on the upper castes but it stretched to incorporate Gurungs and Magars, as well as Dalits as inferior artisan specialists. For all those associated with the regime as it conquered the hills to the west and east there were economic benefits; these also came to be shared by emigré Newars, who populated many of the hill towns (Iltis 1980; Lewis & Shakya 1988). Beyond that heartland, the rule of the Gorkhalis, as they were known, was experienced much more like imperial conquest. In the far east, Pradhan (1991: 184) writes, 'the Kirats could not reconcile themselves to the Gorkhali conquest of their land.' And he concludes: 'the Gorkhali conquests created a unified kingdom, but not a unified society' (ibid: 201). Pradhan stresses, following Regmi, the primarily economic impulse behind the conquests (ibid: 156; Regmi 1971: 9).

Imperial Nepal was, quite explicitly, based on hierarchy: a spatialized caste hierarchy that excluded Dalits to the edge of the settlements they served; a social hierarchy of differential rights that categorised the rest of the population as 'alcohol-drinkers' versus 'cord-wearers', 'enslavable' versus 'non-enslavable', and (among Brahmins) 'priestly' versus 'non-priestly'. These differences were codified and used as the framework of the state's system of laws in the famous Muluki Ain of 1854 (Höfer 1979). Hierarchy did not prevent the emergence of shared culture, however, as witness the authentically Nepali cult of the goddess Swasthani, which spread from Newar origins to be taken up enthusiastically by Bahuns and Chhetris (Birkenholtz 2017).

NEPAL AS A NATION-STATE

The legal framework introduced by the Ranas lasted until the mid-1960s. The Panchayat period of guided democracy from 1960 to 1990 was Nepal's period of nation-building par excellence. King Mahendra, his son, Birendra, who succeeded his father in 1972, and their ideologues sought both to reject the past in order to build a modern future for Nepal and at the same time to legitimate the

power of the Shah kings. This Panchayat ideology tied together monarchical leadership, developmentalism, the suppression of political parties as divisive and communal, the Hindu religion, and nationalism as a single package that for almost thirty years garnered international acceptance and considerable internal support.[18]

Language and power

A key part of this new nation-building agenda was a new role for the Nepali language. It was already, and had long been, the major lingua franca throughout the hills of Nepal and beyond (spoken widely as far as Assam). It was in practice the language of government from the beginning of the nineteenth century.[19] But the establishment of a national system of schools represented a new departure, because it meant that the state was embarking on the massive project of creating citizens and determining what language they would speak, read, and write, not only in their dealings with the state, but—this was the long-term aim at any rate—in their dealings with each other and at home as well. Nepali had become the national language, the language that children were expected to learn and use in school, even if their home language was different. The aspiration to build a nation around the Nepali language was clearly expressed in the National Educational Planning Commission Report of 1956 (which is otherwise remarkable mainly for its prescriptive tone and empty verbiage):

> Local dialects and tongues, other than standard Nepali, should be vanished [sic] from the school and playground as early as possible in the life of a child… The study of a non-Nepali local tongue would mitigate [sic] against the effective

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18 Onta (1996a) shows how, in school textbooks, the history of the nation was re-written to exclude mention of service in foreign armies, even as the narratives sought to celebrate examples of bravery in battle.

19 Prime Minister Chandra Shamsher is supposed to have made Nepali the government's official language in 1905, but this is as yet undocumented (Hutt 1988: 43).

development of Nepali, for the student would make greater use of it than Nepali—at home and in the community—and thus Nepali would remain a 'foreign' language. If the younger generation is taught to use Nepali as the basic language, then other languages will gradually disappear, and greater national strength and unity will result… The limited amount of time and the tremendous burden… do not justify the inclusion of additional languages… The Commission has considered this problem carefully, and… wishes to resolve the country's language problem quickly before it grows worse or is aggravated by the spread of multi-lingualism in primary school. (Pandey et al 1956: 96–7)

Later this same aspiration was summed up in the Panchayat-era slogan, *ek bhasha, ek bhesh, ek desh* (one language, one dress, one country).[20] It built on an old, empire-period hierarchical view that saw minority languages as 'jungly', backward, and needing to be eradicated. At the same time, the proponents of Nepali felt under threat from more powerful languages to the south, and wanted to 'develop' and 'uplift' the Nepali language, which they feared was also lagging behind other 'developed' languages (Chalmers 2003: 122, 136, 241f).[21] This was a movement that started in Varanasi and Darjeeling and only later spread to Nepal.

What the language reformers (advocates of Hindi in India, supporters of Nepali in Nepal) were trying to do was to create a Herderian world made up of separate and distinct nations, each with their own culture and language, but internally homogeneous. Of course, partisans of minority languages (Nepali in India, Newari, Tamang, etc, in Nepal) also share the Herderian vision, but their aim is to *prevent* homogeneity at the national level and to promote it only

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20 There were different versions of this slogan some of which included 'king' and 'religion' as well. Schoolchildren would chant *hamro raja, hamro desh, pran-bhanda pyaro chha* ('our king, our country, dearer than life itself'). All these seem to go back to the poet Balkrishna Sama (Whelpton 1997: 75n19).

21 See also Hutt (1988), Onta (1997, 1999), Pradhan (2016).

at the ethnic level. This language ideology Pollock dubs 'Western linguistic monism' or 'linguism' (Pollock 2006: 505–11). A vision more at odds and more incompatible with the actual practice of South Asia would be difficult to imagine. The traditional linguistic situation of South Asia Pollock calls 'hyperglossic'. In a hyperglossic world there are multiple languages and multiple identities. The notion of the 'mother tongue' barely makes sense. Rather, there is a hierarchy, with different forms of language, or even different languages, being spoken at different niches and levels, both by different people and by the same person in different contexts.

Nepal Bhasa, the language of the Newars (Newari as it is more commonly known), is a typical 'language of place' *(des bhasa)*, in Sheldon Pollock's terminology. Although a Tibeto-Burman language in origin, it has been subject to two millennia of influences from the south, so that there are numerous Sanskrit and Prakrit loans, even down to the level of grammatical items. Many of the older loans are so adapted as to be unrecognisable (e.g. *tipu*, 'couple', from *stri-purus)*. Knowledge of Nepali has always been widespread, varying according to gender, caste, and class. In high-status families in the early 20th century, and perhaps earlier, it was common for fathers to speak Nepali to their sons, so that they would acquire the language of the rulers and be enabled to get jobs in government. But for the majority, Newari was their language. At the same time, there had long been influence from North India, with words and literary models influencing Newari so that there are many registers and dialects. Beyond that, there was and is the sacred role of Sanskrit as the language of liturgy and scripture.

All this meant that there was a language hierarchy in 20th-century Kathmandu, with Sanskrit at the top, and village Newari at the bottom, with Nepali, as the language of rule above Newari, but below Sanskrit. Today English provides an alternate 'top' language, so that there is a double-headed hierarchy. Hindi slots in above Nepali, but below the top two languages. Any word or expression from a 'higher' language or idiolect can be imported into a lower one, for emphasis, or to stress the prestige, learning,

and/or cosmopolitan polish of the speaker. But lexical items from the 'lower' language can never be intentionally incorporated into the higher one; communication simply fails, or is rejected, when this is done. Nationalism intervenes in that the Nepal Academy occasionally encourages different Sanskrit loans from Hindi, in order to differentiate the two languages. Official stipulation, as in France, often loses out to English loans. 'Airport' is rendered *vimansthal* officially (unlike Hindi *vimanpattan* or *vimanashraya*; compare Hindi *tapman* to Nepali *tapkram* for 'temperature'), but even the buses that go there are labelled *e-arport*.[22]

Today, under the pressure of universal schooling and intense competition for post-school careers, the majority of Newar parents, and especially those in the upper castes and with middle-class aspirations, have started systematically speaking Nepali to their children. In fact, the majority of Newars now have middle-class aspirations, whatever their actual position. As a consequence, in the next generation the language hierarchy will be considerably simplified, with the bottom rung completely, or largely, eliminated.[23]

The same hierarchical hyperglossia is evident in the Nepal Tarai bordering India. Language there is said proverbially to change every 10 *kos*. Maithili blends imperceptibly into Bhojpuri, which blends into Awadhi. Everyone, on the Nepal side of the border, is multilingual, speaking the local language at home, Nepali in schools and offices, Hindi as a link language for films, politics, and business, and many also know English. There is the same hierarchy, in that words can be borrowed from Hindi or English and used in Nepali, Maithili, or Bhojpuri, but not vice versa.[24] There is the same process of language

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22 Michael Hutt has pointed out to me that the vast majority of *tatsama* loan-words are in fact the same in both Nepali and Hindi. The few exceptions, such as those cited, stand out all the more.

23 A handful of dedicated activists are fighting this trend. Some have set up a school, Jagat Sundar Bwonekuthi, dedicated to teaching in Nepal Bhasa (Shrestha & Van den Hoek 1995; Gellner 2004, 2015; Pradhan 2016). There is also a campaign to have a trilingual (English, Nepali, Nepal Bhasa) pre-primary school in every Newar settlement led by Dipak Tuladhar.

24 Hyperglossia in the Maithili-speaking regions is very well described by

change, so that urban, middle-class children may understand Bhojpuri, but are more comfortable in Hindi or even English.

In fact, some words *did* move 'up' the hierarchy, but this is largely forgotten or downplayed (examples that have gone from Newari into Nepali are *jhyal*, *sukul*, *pasal*; I am no linguist but it seems likely to me that the word *re* to indicate reported speech in Nepali comes from Tibetan-Burman languages, as some other grammatical constructions may also do). Those people who have a little ethno-nationalist consciousness notice the way words from 'higher' languages appear so frequently in their language. They tend to make remarks such as 'our language isn't pure', 'he [the anthropologist] speaks much better than we do', 'we should speak pure Newari/Tamang, etc, but we don't', and so on. Those with a lot of ethno-nationalist consciousness will try to reverse the natural hierarchical flow and deliberately speak in a pure idiolect that is far from ordinary speech and contains lots of neologisms (e.g., Nepal Bhasa *tajilaji*, 'customs', for *samskriti)* to replace all the borrowed words. This makes it quite hard for others—even educated others—to follow sometimes.

For Nepali nationalists a single language, shared by the whole nation, was supposed to create a nation of equal citizens. In fact, of course, some citizens—those whose mother tongue it was—were left more equal than others. I have started my consideration of Nepal as a nation-state by focusing on language; let us turn now to ethnicity and caste.

National identity and belonging
Social anthropologists are familiar, at least since Forsythe's (1989) analysis of German identity, that what looks from the outside like a singular national identity, what is supposed to be a nation of equal citizens, is in practice, and in the way people experience it, a hierarchy. Certain people are considered more German than others (those from the old West Germany more so than the 'Ossies' from the

Burghart (1996: Ch. 14) in a paper originally published in 1993 and composed quite independently of Pollock's influence.

old East Germany; both of these being more central than descendants of German ancestors living in other east European countries). Thus, there are, at the level of everyday interaction and unthinking assumption, gradations of German-ness (and the same goes for any other national identity). Some belong more than others. Another way to put this is to say that national identities usually have an 'ethnic core' (the story may be more complicated in settler societies, and in these cases the core may expand more rapidly than in 'old' societies to include new groups of migrants who were formerly considered outsiders). Generations of anthropology students have been introduced to this fact about identity — that it is a digital distinction imposed on an analogue reality — through Eriksen's textbook (1993: 113f) on ethnicity and nationalism.

We can adapt this model to the present case and posit a paradigmatic core of Nepali identity, which is based — from the point of view of the state, which is dominated by them — in the traditions, language, and culture of the Bahuns and Chhetris (see Figure 1).[25] In a second ring around this core, the culture of the Janajatis is accepted as contributing to the 'authentic mix' of Nepal, particularly in the area of music and folk dancing. Some Janajatis may be considered more 'central' than others. Thus the Magars and Gurungs, who have long had a close link to the ruling elite and have provided many of the foot soldiers both in the Nepal Army and in the Gurkhas of the British and Indian armies, may be said to belong to this historic national core. At the same time, Bahuns and Chhetris from the Far West region of the country often feel marginalised and indeed receive recognition as such, in terms of reservations and other economic facilities.[26]

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25 For reflections and case studies on belonging in the Nepalese and Himalayan context, see Pfaff-Czarnecka & Toffin (2011) and Toffin & Pfaff-Czarnecka (2012). On belonging more generally, see Pfaff-Czarnecka (2013).

26 For the musical reflection of these geographical relationships, and the way in which the music industry came to focus on the music of the West Central region as the paradigm for a national folk music tradition, see Stirr (2012, 2017: Ch. 1).

Figure 1: **A representation of the unofficial hierarchy of macro-categories and ethnic groups in Nepal**
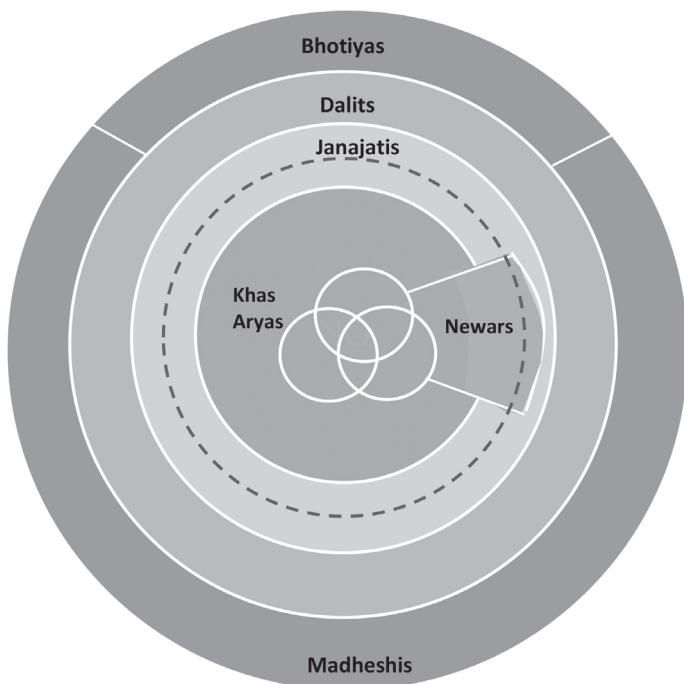
The Newars, who are the traditional inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley, tend to resent being relegated to this second circle. They view themselves as simultaneously central (because of their ancient culture and association with the Kathmandu Valley) and disadvantaged (and therefore deserving of the label 'Janajati'). Meanwhile, other Nepalis tend to see them as unequivocally part of the Establishment, precisely because of their association with the capital and because of their relatively high levels of wealth and education.[27] Tamangs, situated close to the capital but deprived of development, are a kind of rural proletariat, kept backward by the

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27 On the Newars, i.a. see Gellner (1986, 2003, 2011), Toffin (1984, 2007), Shrestha (2012), Pickett (2014).

Ranas in order to provide porters, servants, and concubines.[28] Dalits, who played a key role in spreading Hindu ideas of hierarchy among Janajati populations, occupy a ring further out.[29]

The people of Tibetan and Indian culture (Bhotiyas and Madheshis respectively) are considered even further away from the heart of 'Nepaliness' than even this. Some do not regard them as Nepali at all. This is especially difficult for Madheshis, identified by culture and language with India, the principal 'other' against which Nepali nationalists seek to define themselves. Some Madheshis, led by C.K. Raut, have concluded that they will never be accepted as Nepali (the Hrithik Roshan riots in December 2000, when Madheshis in Kathmandu were targeted following incorrect reports that the Bollywood star had made anti-Nepali remarks, was a key event for Raut). Raut concluded that the only solution is for the 'Madhes' (i.e., the Tarai region) to secede; he has tried, without success, to enlist Indian support for this aim (Raut 2015). Other minorities, such as Dalits (conceptualised mainly in terms of what they lack), and Muslims (often seen as the paradigmatic 'internal other': Sijapati 2011), fit into this model at different points depending on the contexts; explicitly or implicitly both groups are often excluded from representations of belonging to the Nepali nation.

This hierarchy of belonging within the nation had no place in the *pays légal* during the Panchayat period (1960–1990). Officially, everyone was now equal and caste had no status before the law. But, none the less and surreptitiously, Bahun-Chhetri models dominated the construction of the Nepali version of the educated and developed person (Pigg 1992). The national language was their language and the one national dress (referred to in the slogan above) was their shirt *(daura/labeda)*, baggy trousers *(suruwal)*, and Nepali cap *(topi)*, or at least so it seemed to the minorities.[30]

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28 See Campbell (1997, 2013), Holmberg et al (1999), March (2002), Steinman (2016).

29 See Cameron (1998), Guneratne (2010), Kisan (2005), Ahuti (2010), B.K. (2013) on Dalits.

30 There is a subtlety here: love of, and attachment to, the Nepali language

NEPAL AS MULTICULTURAL FEDERAL REPUBLIC

New kinds of ethnic identity and the creation of new macro-categories

With the 1990 People's Movement, Nepal entered a new world of freedom and public openness, one where for the first time in thirty years political parties could organise and compete in elections, and where ethnic groups and castes could come together in a way that had not been possible before. Politics, especially party politics, became pervasive. 'If the period of 1960 to 1990 was one of *nation*-building, the 17 years since then has been a time of *ethnicity*-building' (Gellner 2007a: 1823; original emphasis).[31]

A key part of the process of creating new ethnic identities has been to perform them in everyday life, by inventing new ethnically inflected ways of greeting (thus 'Jwajalpa' for Newars, 'Sevaro' for Limbus', 'Pyaphulla' for Tamangs, and so on). Another crucial modality was to hold big ceremonies, to perform ethnicity, in a very public way (Krauskopff 2003), and to create new, specifically ethnic public holidays (especially celebrations of the New Year). Holmberg shows how radically Tamang identity and performance have been transformed since the 1970s and concludes, 'If ritual is indeed about social production, a new order has emerged in Nepal ritually before it has emerged constitutionally' (Holmberg 2016: 320). Some measures are already there in the constitution, including those permitting language teaching in other 'languages of the nation' at the primary level. Multilingual education advocates needed those provisions and had to cite them in order to get their schools registered (Pradhan 2016).

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is something that had to be taught and learned, as part of the creation of a national consciousness, in opposition to Bahuns' traditional attachment to Sanskrit.

31 See Hangen (2010), Fisher (2001), Guneratne (2002), Lawoti (2005), Gellner (2007a), Gellner et al (2008), Lecomte-Tilouine (2009a; 2009b), Lawoti & Hangen (2012), Toffin (2013: ch. 3), Adhikari & Gellner (2016), Shneiderman (2015). On the reconstruction of religion in this period, see Letizia (2011, 2013, 2014) and Gellner et al (2016).

Table 1: New macro-categories in post-1990 Nepal

New, post-1990, Macro-Category	Older Term	Still Older Term
Khas-Arya (31%)	Bahun-Chhetri (i.e., Brahmin and Kshatriya)	Khas (primarily Chhetris), Tagadhari ('wearers of the sacred thread/cord')
Janajati (c. 37%; claim 40% or more)	'tribes' or 'hill tribes' (i.e. Magar, Gurung, Tamang, etc), but also including plains tribes	Matwali ('alcohol-drinkers')
Madheshi (c. 30%; claim up to 50%)	'Madhise' (pejorative)	'Indian' (madheshi)
Dalit (13%; claim 20% or more)	'small castes', 'untouchable' (i.e., Kami, Sarki, Damai, and others)	'those whose touch requires purification'; 'unclean'
Others (Muslims and others) (4–5%)		

A completely new terminology started to emerge, one that was unknown in the years before 1990, a new way of grouping castes and ethnic groups into large blocs or, as I call them, macro-categories (see Table 1; I have used the terminology of Dalits and Janajatis above, but it is something of an anachronism to use it for the pre-1990 period).[32] Four major ethnic macro-categories have emerged, all with new names that were not in general use before 1990: Janajati, Madheshi, Dalit, and Khas-Arya. 'Janajati' is a neologism borrowed from Hindi and/or Bengali for those groups who were formerly known as 'hill tribes', though they include the Tharus, and other smaller groups, who inhabit the Tarai plains belt. Newars are also officially classified as Janajatis by the government, but this is controversial for many people, as noted above (Gellner 2003). 'Madheshi' refers to the plainspeople of Indian cultural and linguistic background; of the

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32 To be absolutely precise, the term 'Dalit' was known to a few intellectuals before 1990, and it was even used in Nepal by Ambedkar during his visit in 1956, the year of his death (Cameron 2010: 16). However, it was only after 1990 that it began to be widely used and recognized. Likewise, the term 'Madheshi' existed, but only became the name for a broad category of Nepali citizens after 1990.

four macro-categories it is the one with the most fluid denotation: it is highly contested whether Muslims and/or Tharus are full members of the category or not. 'Dalit' is the term, also borrowed from India, for those groups who used to be considered Untouchable. (It is by no means universally liked by Dalits themselves; but there is no widely accepted alternative.) 'Khas-Arya' is the most recent neologism to emerge and refers to the former 'high' castes of the hills, i.e., Bahuns, Chhetris, and allied small castes (such as Thakuri and Sanyasi).

The five macro-categories break down into three larger groups—Khas-Arya, Janajati, and Madheshi—comprising approximately 31 per cent, 36 per cent, and 15 per cent, respectively, and two smaller ones: Dalits (13 per cent) and Others (5 per cent).[33] If Tarai Dalits, Tarai Janajatis, and Tarai Muslims are included, the Madheshi total increases to 32 per cent. This means that, very roughly, the three major groups in the country, the Khas-Aryas, the Janajatis, and the Madheshis, are all somewhere around one third of the total. Table 2 shows the major groups included under each of these headings.

What we are now learning to call the Khas-Arya (and were and are more colloquially referred to as 'Bahun-Chhetris' or 'Chhetri-Bahuns') have been the dominant group of the Nepali nation-state, ever since it was formed in 1769. As several studies have shown, they dominate state and establishment employment out of all proportion to their percentage in the population as a whole.[34] The history of Nepal since 1990 has been one of the struggle to incorporate the other groups within the structure of the state, and the increasing use of 'reservations' (affirmative action) to ensure some degree of proportionality in politics, education, and state employment. The pushback from the Khas-Arya, especially against ethnic-identity-based restructuring of the state, was a large part of the explanation

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33   These five groups are fuzzy-edged and contested ethnic macro-categories. One should bear in mind that all percentages tend to be inflated by activists, so that these proportions will inevitably be seen as controversial.

34   For tables demonstrating these imbalances, see Neupane (2000), Lawoti (2005: 104–6), Maharjan (1999: 63–4), Hachhethu & Gellner (2010: 138), Sijapati (2013: 153–4), Bennett et al (2013), Y.B. Gurung et al (2014).

Table 2: **Major castes, ethnic groups, and macro-categories of Nepal**

Parbatiyas ('hill people'), now 'Khas-Arya'	Hill Janajatis	Language loss among hill Janajatis	Taraians/ Madheshis ('plains people')	Others
Bahun 12.2%	Magar 7.1%	68%	Tharu 6.6%	Muslim 4.4%
Chhetri 19%	Newar 5%	34%	Yadav 4%	
DALIT (hill) 8.1%	Tamang 5.8%	11%	DALIT (plains) 4.4%	
	Rai 2.3%	16%	(+ many small groups)	
	Gurung 1.9%	50%		
	Limbu 1.4%	14.5%		
Totals 39.3%	**+ c. 27.2%**		**+ c. 28%**	**+ 5% = 100%**

Sources: Nepal Census 2011 census (total: 26,494,504) with figures for hill minority language loss from 1991 census. Otherwise percentages are as analysed in Tamang et al (2014: 6–9).

Notes:

1. Macro-categories (see further, Table 1) are in small capitals; Janajati groups are underlined; in English, 'caste' tends to be used to be used of groups within the Parbatiya/Khas-Arya and within the Madheshis, 'ethnic group' for groups within the Janajatis; but in Nepali all are equally *jat* ('species', 'kind', 'birth').

2. Dalits = former Untouchables; Janajatis are mainly those who were formerly called hill tribes. All figures and some labels are likely to be disputed. The label 'Madheshi' is particularly disputed. Bahun and Chhetri Parbatiyas around the time of the 2013 election came to be labelled 'Khas-Arya' (sometimes Parbatiya Dalits are included in this macro-category).

3. Estimated figures for language loss are taken from Whelpton (1997: 59). Calculating language loss figures from the 2001 and 2011 censuses is less reliable because many ethnic organisations campaigned for people of group of X to return their 'mother tongue' as X, regardless of whether it was spoken or not.

4. Total Dalits 13.1 per cent (hill Dalits 8.1 per cent), total Janajatis 35.8 per cent, total Khas-Aryas 31.25 per cent, total Madheshis 15 per cent (not including Madheshi Dalits 4.4 per cent, Tarai Janajatis 8.6 per cent, or Muslims), total Others 4.8 per cent (including 4.4 per cent Muslims).

for the failure of the 2012 first Constituent Assembly (Adhikari & Gellner 2016), and played a role in the crisis that engulfed Nepal following the declaration of the new constitution in September 2015.[35]

It is probably no coincidence that there is more than a passing resemblance between Nepal's macro-categories and the large electoral blocs that are familiar to students of north India: 'forward' castes, OBCs (the 'Other Backward Classes'), Muslims, and SCs ('Scheduled Castes', i.e., Dalits). The main and obvious difference between India and Nepal is that in Nepal the 'tribals' replace OBCs, because in most of north India the STs ('Scheduled Tribes') are few and far between. At the same time, presumably because the Nepali terminology has been worked out right at the end of the twentieth century rather than 50 or more years earlier, it lacks the overtly evolutionist overtones ('forward', 'backward') of the Indian concepts. Rather, the language in Nepali is spatializing, talking of exclusion, marginalisation, or 'pushing to the border'/'bordering' *(simantikrit)*. This reminds us that indeed many of the excluded groups are to be found near Nepal's very long borders with Tibet and India. Even those who are not at the borders of the country are often pushed to the borders of settlements.

After 1990 the notion of reservations (affirmative action) for the disadvantaged along the Indian model began to be increasingly accepted. In 2003 the government decreed that 45 per cent of civil service posts should be reserved, of which, 33 per cent would be for women, 27 per cent for indigenous nationalities, 22 per cent for Madheshis, 9 per cent for Dalits, 5 per cent for disabled people, and 4 per cent for the backward regions (Adhikari & Gellner 2016: 2023). It was less than 40 years since the state-sponsored hierarchy of the old Muluki Ain had been abolished. Now there was to be state-sponsored redemption from hierarchy. Furthermore, *within* the category of Janajatis, there is a system of 'advantaged' and 'less advantaged', dividing the Janajatis into five separate categories. When he first saw this framework a Newar activist friend remarked, 'This is an upside-

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35   On the travails of the Assembly, see also Snellinger (2015).

down caste system!' It puts Newars (and Thakalis) into the most advantaged category, in other words, at the very back of the queue for benefits. He and his friends had long been arguing, in attempt to get Newars to accept that they were Janajatis and should throw in their lot with the Janajati movement, that they would benefit from reservations. Now they were effectively being excluded from them.[36]

In the introduction to an edited collection on dominant ethnic groups, E.P. Kaufmann wrote, in words that now seem prescient:

> global narratives of liberal multiculturalism, embedded in both global and national institutions, are driving an ever-greater wedge between modern nations and their dominant ethnic groups. (Kaufmann 2004: 1)

The special entitlements targeted to minorities have in many cases generated strong counter feelings (expressed vituperatively on social media and elsewhere) on the part of those who are not so entitled. This has certainly increased group sentiments (or 'communalism') at all levels. To be a Nepali is now mostly to belong to one of these big macro-categories. To be placed in the 'other' category is to be marginalised. The sentiment that they had been consigned to the 'other' category, was a major factor in the emergence of the new 'Khas-Arya' identity (Adhikari & Gellner 2016).

Summing up, there are at least three different contexts that need to be distinguished:

1. the formal and legal context in which all Nepali citizens, regardless of ethnicity, count as equals;
2. the context of inequality and state action to address it: most agree that some recompense is required for historical injustices and exclusion, but there is disagreement about how much and who should benefit;

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36 See Gellner (2007a) and Gellner & Karki (2007) on the framework; also Shneiderman (2013). It is not fully incorporated into law and is used in some contexts but not in others.

3. the backstage context in which some groups are considered, consciously or unconsciously, more centrally or more paradigmatically Nepali, and therefore more entitled, than others (as in the unspoken hierarchy of belonging illustrated by Figure 1).

That Madheshis and Tharus are not regarded as fully Nepali was a common complaint during the political troubles of 2015 and it provided the title of the controversial Human Rights Watch report into the violence that followed the killings in Tikapur: 'Like We Are Not Nepali' (HRW 2015). On a less tragic note, one could cite K.P. Malla's protest at the use of a picture of Birganj street scene on the front cover of John Whelpton's *A History of Nepal* as having 'nothing to do with history nor with Nepal—ancient, modern or in the making'(Malla 2015: 463).

CONCLUSION

It is a common mistake for outsiders who know a little about Nepal to imagine that ethnic affiliation or caste determines everything about Nepali society, that once you know a Nepali's caste, you know everything about them. It is an equally common error (among economists, or migration experts, for example) to think (or assert, or just assume without even realising it) that ethnicity means nothing—all that matters is poverty and economics. Moreover, we most certainly need to get beyond the idea that only minorities have ethnicity. Majorities and dominant groups have ethnicity, too. In case anyone in the developed world had not learnt this basic sociological fact, there have been several political upheavals in 2016 that have brought the point home very forcibly.

Within the lifetime of today's senior citizens Nepal has moved from a genuinely hierarchical society, where all difference implied rank and where genuine difference was tolerated and encompassed, to an avowedly egalitarian society that guarantees human rights

and equality in its constitution. Rank and status still exist, of course, but they can no longer be openly asserted. Status differences must, rather in the manner that Louis Dumont argued, be denied, hidden, disavowed, and reintroduced as a form of radical genetic or national difference. It is inevitably painful to change the hierarchical, empire-based models of the past and replace them with universal equality. Revolution, says Ludden in a previous Regmi Lecture, is the 'forced — and the awkward, contested, and sometimes violent — intervention to purge empire from the nation' (Ludden 2008: 15).

I have hinted at the importance of territory, but have not been able to do the theme justice. Nepal — as everyone knows — has the most spectacular and challenging territory on earth, from the high Himalaya to its open frontier with India in the south. I have traced the long transition from Nepal as a sacred mandala, a part of Bharatavarsha, a sacred centre with power radiating outwards, encompassing and tolerating many contradictions and oppositions, to Nepal as a federal, secular republic where every inch of Nepali territory, however far from the capital, is supposed to be as valuable as any other. One is reminded of Margaret Thatcher claiming that Londonderry (in Northern Ireland) is every bit as British as Finchley (her constituency at the outskirts of London). This was palpably untrue, and if it had been true she would not have needed to say it.[37] By emphasising that 'Nepal' as it was then was part of the Sanskrit cosmopolis, I have tried to show that even then Nepal was part of a transnational, globalised network.

The philosopher Ian Hacking (1986, 1996) has written about 'making up people', about how new kinds of personal identity have emerged that were previously unknown. Hacking is interested in medical syndromes. He argues that whether or not syndromes can exist before they are named (and it depends on the case), what is undeniable is that new ways to be a person emerge once the name and the diagnosis are there to be owned by particular people. He advances two propositions for the reader's consideration:

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37 On Nepal's frontiers, see Shrestha (2011), Gellner (2013), Baral & Pyakurel (2016), and Cowan (2016).

A. There were no multiple personalities in 1955; there were many in 1985.

B. In 1955 this was not a way to be a person, people did not experience themselves in this way, they did not interact with their friends, their families, their employers, their counsellors, in this way; but in 1985 this was a way to be a person, to experience oneself, to live in society. (Hacking 1986)

What used to be called multiple personalities is now called Dissociative Identity Disorder. Hacking believes that both these propositions are true, whereas, if you substitute 'high-functioning autists' for 'multiple personalities', B remains true but A becomes false. In other words, high-functioning autists definitely existed even before our ability to name them. Hacking proceeds to identify ten different processes that happen in chronological order once a new syndrome is identified: counting, quantifying, creating norms, correlating, medicalising, biologising, geneticising, normalising, bureaucratising, and finally reclaiming the identity.

Clearly ethnic identities are not medical diagnoses. None the less, there are some parallels in the ways that they emerge and become normalised. Not all the processes that Hacking lists occur in the case of ethnic identities, but the counting, correlating, occasional biologising, normalising, bureaucratising, and reclaiming of identity certainly do happen (examples of counting, bureaucratising, and claiming ethnic identities have been given above). In the 26 years since 1990, the incorporation of new kinds of identity into the state has been a major political process in Nepal. These new macro-categories have become the basis for political action. They have acquired an existential reality that is threatened by changes to the proposed provincial boundaries of federal Nepal.[38] Whether the boundaries express or violate those identities has become one of the key questions of the day. No one knows how these conflicts will end, or whether the competing ideas of Nepal—federal or unitary, multicultural or hierarchising—can be

38   See Sharma et al (2009), Shneiderman & Tillin (2014), Karki & Edrisinha (2014).

reconciled. Nepal did agree to institute a federal system, but it is a decision about which an increasing number of Nepalis seem to be having second thoughts.

I end with a song that I found deeply moving when it first appeared in 2014 (I am not especially susceptible to emotionality when it comes to songs). It is sung by well-known Nepali singers Pashupati Sharma and Devika KC and is called 'Hami Nepali Teej'. It shows a young couple who are sitting under a pipal tree surrounded by people. It could have been the centre of a village but urban villas are visible in the background. On the tree is a sign saying 'Village Expulsion Programme'. It is clear that the young couple are being thrown out of the village for daring to marry across caste boundaries. The young man is labelled 'untouchable' *(achhut)*, so we know he is a Dalit. The artists, Sharma and KC, arrive on the scene, realise what is going on, and start to sing that there is no caste, that 'we are all Nepalis, that's all I know'. It is beautiful and moving, precisely because everyone knows just how counter to reality it is. It expresses a beautiful idea of Nepal—but in doing so Pashupati Sharma could not avoid controversy; by using the colloquial caste names, he incurred the wrath of young Dalit activists and had to apologise. Conflict and politics cannot be avoided.

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Mahesh Chandra Regmi
(1929-2003)

The Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture was instituted by Social Science Baha in 2003 to acknowledge and honour historian Mahesh Chandra Regmi's contribution to the social sciences in Nepal.

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