

REVIEW: THE BRAVE NEW WORLD OF ETHNICITY IN NEPAL

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Mahendra Lawoti and Susan Hangen. 2013. *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nepal: Identities and Mobilization After 1990*. London: Routledge. xvii + 288. Two maps, two charts, and seven tables. ISBN: 10:0415780977; 13:978-0415780971 (hardcover 137.72USD, mobi 89.99USD, mobi rental 45.88USD).

With each political and social transformation of the Nepali state and nation, social scientists have attempted to explain the relationship between nationality and ethnicity in Nepal. If the scholarship of the Panchayat era largely ignored the conceptual debates of ethnicity in favor of studying nationalism (Bista 1991, Burghart 1984) and ethnic conflict (Caplan 1970, Gaige 1975), the subsequent era of multiparty democracy, the so-called "Janajati yug" (Des Chene 1996), theorized ethnicity as a social construction created vis-à-vis the social policies of the state (Fisher 2001, Guneratne 2002, Gellner et al. 1997). In the wake of the 2006 shift from a Hindu monarchy to federal republic, and the ethnic-based demands of the Maoist insurgency and federalism debates of the constituent assembly, ethnicity requires yet another rethinking. Sara Shneiderman has led the way arguing that

acknowledging that ethnicity is inevitably constructed is not the end of the story but the beginning of understanding the ongoing, radically real life of such constructions today for the people who inhabit them (2014:280).

Although ethnicity might indeed be constructed, it has only grown as a social force in twenty-first century Nepal as intellectuals have

adopted the academic depiction of ethnicity and made it their own (Shneiderman 2014).

Despite its sub-title reference to 1990, the volume under review is better understood as an attempt at deciphering the meaning of ethnicity in Nepal's post-insurgency era. The two articles written prior to 2006, by Krishna Bhattachan and Hangen, each provide prescient glimpses into the logic of ethnicity in contemporary Nepal defined less through impositions of the dominant high caste Hindu state (as the 1990s social construction argument saw it) and more through assertive tactics and mobilizations, what Lawoti and Hangen call "people-centric nationalism" (citing Brubaker 1998).

The second significant shift of this volume is a move away from the earlier emphasis on indigenous nationalities, or Janajati, in favor of highlighting the struggles of other minority groups - Madhesis, Muslims, Dalits - who have increasingly sought and gained public voices and political momentum in the last decade. For instance, in the seminal 1997 edited volume, *Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom*, eight of the nine ethnographic chapters were devoted to Janajati groups, only one of which (Tharu) is not geographically located in hills or mountains. In contrast, only one of this volume's five chapters on specific groups covers indigenous nationalities - Hangen's chapter on the Dasain boycotts in the hills of eastern Nepal.

The inclusion of new groups into the discussion of Nepali nationality and ethnicity does not represent a unity of minority groups, however, as Lawoti and Hangen warn in the introduction. An interweaving theme of the chapters is the ways in which historically marginalized groups reproduce exclusion by drawing lines between each other. For instance, Janajati pay little attention to Dalit concerns, just as Madhesis dismiss Tharu demands and Limbu ignore Rajbansi. Although ethnic politics might be deepening and expanding democracy in Nepal, it is not forging a coordinated challenge to the state.

The Maoist insurgency did, of course, challenge the state and built its army heavily on the frustrations of ethnic minorities. Few

people saw this coming in 1995 when Krishna Bhattachan's chapter (Two) 'Ethnopolitics and Ethnodevelopment' was first published. Rather accurately, Bhattachan predicted that the state's refusal to recognize ethnopolitics would lead to insurgency, which indeed occurred the next year with the launching of the Maoist Revolution in 1996. And although the Maoists did not initially embrace ethnicity, Bhattachan (looking back on his previous article in the 2010 written postscript) justifiably points out that the 1998 shift in Maoist focus from class to ethnicity, gender, linguistic, religious, and regional issues planted the seeds of their success with Janajati, Madhesi, Dalits, and women groups.

While successive Nepali governments silenced the politics of ethnic minorities, they privileged other ethnic groups in economic arenas. In arguably the most innovative chapter of the collection, Mallika Shakya (Chapter Three) grounds ethnic inequality in the state's legacy of economic paternalism. For instance, the early Shah state protected Newar traders against foreign traders, namely the East India Company. The Ranas, meanwhile, reversed the Shah protectionism by encouraging Indians, particularly Marwaris, to not only enter, but dominate Nepali trade (with joint-Rana family partnerships, they owned up to one-third of all Nepali businesses) and early industrialization efforts. The supposed "ethnic neutrality" of the successive Panchayat state was anything but, as high caste Bahun-Chhetri became the state's favored entrepreneurs. Despite the liberalization of the Nepali economy in 1992, the exclusive communalism of Nepali business only sustained the domination of the Bahun-Chhetri and Marwari. Finally, the "patriotic capitalism" of the brief Maoist governments attempted to support ownership by the Janajati and other lower castes, but one wonders if the short-lived Maoist control of Singha Durbar made any lasting difference.

Moving from structural to individual cases, Steven Folmar's contribution (Chapter Four) identifies a key problem for the remaining chapters of the book (and for the social science of Nepal): how to categorize Nepali Dalits, a minority without an ethnicity. Since much of the Nepali nationalism debate is framed in terms of

ethnic or identity politics defined by religious, racial, linguistic, cultural, or geographic differences, how do we account for inequality only based on "intrinsic purity"? Since Dalits share language, geography, religion, and "racial" identity with high castes, Folmar argues that:

Dalits occupy the paradoxical position of being a part of a society to which they cannot belong – considered a part of Parbatiya society by outsiders, but not Brahman or sometimes even human by the elite elements within Parbatiya society (92).

As such, "Discrimination occurs in forms subtle enough to give the appearance that it does not happen" (92).

Similar to Dalits, Nepali Muslim identity cannot be reduced to ethnicity. For Nepali Muslims, divided by geography, language, and doctrines, the question becomes how to recognize internal heterogeneity while fostering cohesion as a minority within the larger nation of Nepal. Megan Adamson Sijapati (Chapter Five) suggests that Nepali Muslims develop a "translocal orientation" to both Mecca, the center of their religious identity in the Islamic nation (*quam* or *millat*), and to Nepal, the nation (*muluk*) of their birthplace. In the wake of "Black Wednesday," 2004, when the murders of twelve Nepali laborers in Iraq instigated anti-Muslim violence in Kathmandu, it has become increasingly necessary to forge a pan-Nepali Muslim identity.

Susan Hangen's (Chapter Six) ethnographic account of Dasain boycotts in eastern Nepal marks a distinction not of geography, religion, or ethnicity, but that between activists of the Mongol National Organization (MNO) and the community they represent. She documents how activists construct an "oppositional history" against the hegemonic narratives and state-sponsored rituals of Dasain. Instead of representing the victory of Durga "good" over Mahisasaur "evil," the MNO reinterprets Dasain as a time of mourning for Mahisasaur, the "ancestral father" of all Mongols, and the conquest of Aryans (the Nepal state) over Mongol land and

sovereignty. In practice, however, Hangen depicts an ambivalent reaction to the boycott in which people still ate meat and met with family to celebrate Dasain, but stopped taking *tika* as a form of protest.

Much like what Black Wednesday and Dasain mean for Muslims and non-Hindus, respectively, the Madhes Andolan of winter 2007, has significantly shaped the Madhesi experience in new Nepal. Although the 2007 moment (following the King's abdication, Maoist peace agreement and anti-Madhesi violence) provided the opportunity for Madhesi protests to surface, Bandita Sijapati (Chapter Seven) anchors the uprising historically in the extractive and exclusionary interventions of the Nepali state in the Tarai. She argues that Madhesi identity is forged more in opposition to years of exploitation than from any source of unity. Deprived by the internal colonization of the Tarai by the Rana state, the social alienation of the Panchayat state, and the structural violence of anti-Madhesi citizenship laws and increasing Pahadization of the Tarai since 1991, Madhesi identity is best understood as produced through misrepresentation. The violence of 2007, Sijapati claims, marked an end to the state's neglect of Madhesi demands and a harbinger of future conflict "if there are no transformative changes in its institutions, national narratives and state ideologies" (164).

Building on the chapters on Muslims and Madhesis, Mollica Dastider (Chapter Eight) provides a specific look at Muslim Madhesis who, she argues, refuse to choose between religion and region as the main source of their identity. While they have historically aligned themselves in terms of class with other agricultural workers in the Tarai who were mostly Hindu Madhesis, the rise of Hindu extremism has effectively weakened those inter-religious alliances, particularly in urban centers.

Lawoti's two concluding chapters (Nine and Ten) return the book's attention to comparative analysis in accounting for the presence or lack of ethnic resistance in Nepal, which he measures through movement capability (strikes), extreme faction (armed groups), ethnic party formation, government representation, and

concessions received. In particular, he compares the relative success of Madhesi and Limbu movements versus the lack of success by indigenous nationalities (Janajati) and Dalits. Limbus and Madhesis, he documents, have a long history of anti-Rana mobilization, followed by political movements in the 1950s, which resurfaced in the 1990s. Madhesis are united by a language other than Nepali (Hindi), effective political parties, and a relatively high level of education. He attributes the relative strength of the Limbus to territorial attachment, cultural-linguistic homogeneity, and higher education. Other indigenous nationalities, in contrast, are more disconnected by language and group identity and lack territorial concentration. Finally, Dalits, despite receiving the most discrimination, NGO support, and international attention, are less politically mobilized because of their lack of cultural differences from the dominant group, relatively lower education levels, and lack of territorial concentration and history of mobilization.

In the final chapter, Lawoti points out two ironies of Nepal's brave new world of ethnic politics. First, while the opportunity for ethnic assertion has expanded for historically marginalized groups, traditionally privileged groups (what he calls the CHHE: Caste Hill Hindu Elite) have increasingly organized themselves as ethnic groups and mobilized against ethnic based state formation. In the most extreme case, the Nepal Defense Army represents one such high caste Hindu group that violently targets Muslims and Christians. The second is that is that the 2006 peace agreement unleashed additional ethnic violence and armed conflicts, which have grown further amidst the political uncertainty of Nepal's temporary government of constitution writing.

In spite of the increased violence surrounding social difference, Lawoti is optimistic about the successes of post-2006 Nepal. The constituent assembly is Nepal's most representative government body to date, and the army and judiciary are becoming more inclusive. Furthermore, the state has eliminated or weakened the symbols of CHHE domination. The Hindu state and monarchy are gone, and the upper caste culture of the state is gradually making

room for other voices. Ultimately, Lawoti maintains, Nepal is moving towards a multi-nation state "where in place of one ethnic group's hegemony, more ethnic groups will be recognized and have a voice in how the country is governed" (250-251).

Lawoti and Hangen, along with all of the contributing authors to this volume, must be applauded for producing the first, in what one hopes will be a long line of portraits of the changing dynamics of what it means to be Nepali in post-insurgency Nepal.

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