STATE OF NEPAL

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Ethnicity, caste and a pluralist society

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It is difficult to find elsewhere in the world a country as small in area as Nepal with such a variety in population. Nepal is a cultural mosaic inhabited as it is by an amazingly diverse array of ethnic, caste, linguistic and religious communities. The 1991 Census of Nepal recorded 60 caste and ethnic groups (mostly Indo-Aryan and 'Mongols') and 70 languages and dialects (mostly Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman). In terms of religions, the census lists Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and local faiths, but the Hinduism-Buddhism interface itself provides so many variations that it is often difficult to put a name on the belief system.

This cultural fertility is a consequence of several waves of migration over two thousand years, with some consolidation, as a result of the political unification of the territories occupied by migrant communities. The ethnic groups, speaking Tibeto-Burman languages such as the Gurung, Tamang and Limbu, migrated at different times from regions across the Himalaya far to the north and east, with the Sherpa and some of the Tibetan-speaking groups having arrived more recently from the same general direction. The Nepali-speaking Bahun (Brahmin), Chhetri (Kshatriya) and Thakuri as well as the service caste dalits, collectively known as Parbatiya ('hill people'), migrated in from the west and south. The ethnic group known as the Newar is a composite of several communities who migrated into Kathmandu Valley over two millennia. In the tarai plains, some 'indigenous' communities such as the formerly forest-dwelling Tharu, Sattar and Santhal have probably been around for over two millennia as well, whereas others such as the farming Maithili-speakers of the eastern tarai arrived later.

Over the centuries, these different communities, each with its own language, religion and culture, settled in different parts of Nepal's plains, hills and high valleys. They established separate but fluid political units, mainly small chiefdoms and principalities, although there were also larger political units such as the kingdom of the Mallas in the west and of the Lichchhavis based in Kathmandu Valley. In the second half of the eighteenth and the first decade of the nineteenth century, Prithvi Narayan Shah, ruler of the small hill principality of Gorkha at the centre of present-day Nepal, and his immediate descendants conquered and politically amalgamated these different political units into the Gorkhali empire, now known as Nepal. Some migration into the eastern tarai continued even after the political unification of the country.

The Tibeto-Burman-speakers settled in regions where, owing to the difficult terrain and the unfordable rivers, they developed as discrete communities in distinct pockets. For example, the Limbus and Rais have their own regions in the eastern part of Nepal; the Tamangs reside in the area around Kathmandu Valley; the Gurungs reside in the hills of central Nepal around Pokhara Valley; and the Magars in regions south and west of the Gurung habitat. The peopling of this landscape by the Indo-Aryans was different, for they spread through the length and breadth of the country, aided by the Gorkhali conquest. It can thus be generally said that while the Tibeto-Burmans give Nepal its extraordinary demographic diversity, the Indo-Aryans have provided the connections that have bound the country together as one.

The 1991 census data is considered flawed by some because of the biased manner in which the different categories of the population were recorded, but it does provide us with a general picture of how this national cultural diversity is currently structured. In a country as geographically and demographically complex as Nepal, there are various ways to look at the population: by religion, language, region (hill or plain), caste/ethnicity; and because there are inter-cutting identities as well, it makes the study even more complex. The census classifies 86.5 per cent of the population as Hindu, 7.8 per cent as Buddhist, 3.5 per cent as Muslim and 2.7 per cent as 'others' (Kiranti, Christians, Jains and Sikhs). In terms of mother tongues spoken, 77 per cent use Indo-Aryan languages (14 in all), 20 per cent speak Tibeto-Burman languages (17 in number) and three per cent speak other languages, including Munda and Dravidian. Speakers of Nepali as

their mother tongue constitute just over 50 per cent of the populatio (See Table 1).

In terms of caste and ethnic break-up, the country is essentially conglomeration of minorities, with the two largest groups comprisin but 16 per cent (Chhetri) and nearly 13 per cent (Bahun) of th population. None of the other groups constitute more that 10 pe cent of the population. In term of groupings, the 1991 census recorde 40.3 per cent of the population as hill-based Parbatiyas (Chhetri-16.1 per cent, Bahun–12.9 per cent, and the three 'untouchable' an other service castes, dalits–11.3 per cent). The janajati ethnic groups of both hill and plains taken together, constitute 35.5 per cent of th population, whereas the hill ethnic groups alone make up 26.5 pe cent of all Nepalis. The major hill ethnic groups are the Magar Newar, Tamang, Rai, Gurung and Limbu. The Tharu (6.5 per cent constitute the largest ethnic group in the plains.

Another way to classify the population of the country is betwee the Pahadi and Madhesi. The former is the term applied to the hil communities of Nepal, comprising both the caste-structured Parbatiy as well as the ethnic janajati. They constitute 66.8 per cent of th population. Due to migration in the last half century, a larg proportion of this Pahadi population now lives in the Tarai plains As a counterpoint to the Pahadi are the Madhesi, people of tara origin, among whom are found caste, linguistic, religious as well a ethnic groups. Together, the Madhesi make up the rest (32.1 pe cent) of the population.

Like the Pahadis, the Madhesi are not linguistically or religiousl homogeneous. The 12 ethnic groups from the Tarai, including th Tharu, Kumal, Majhi and Rajbanshi, constitute 9 per cent of the tota national population. Madhesi Hindus, with 20 castes, make up 15. per cent of the national population and speak a variety of language and dialects. Maithili (11.8 per cent) is spoken in the east, Bhojpu (7.5 per cent) in the central tarai, and Awadhi (2 per cent) to th west of the Narayani river. Tarai Muslims also have a significar presence, making up 3.5 per cent of the national population.

Despite its overwhelming cultural diversity, Nepal is predom inantly a Hindu kingdom with a Hindu polity, though not necessaril a Hindu society. Over the centuries, nature-worshipping, animist c Buddhist communities have been gradually 'Hinduised', mainly du to the conquest of non-Hindu communities by Hindu kings and th migration of Parbatiyas to different parts of Nepal. Whereas th

Table 1. Caste and ethnic groups, languages and religions

Major classifications		Major caste/ethnic groups	Language family	Religion
Hills and mountains: Pahadi 66.8%	Ethnic communities 26.5%	Magar (7.2%)	Tibeto-Burman=20% Tamang (4.5%) Newari (3.7%)	Buddhism, animism, etc Buddhists (7.8%)
		Newar (5.6%)		
		Tamang (5.5%)		Hinduism Hindus (86.5%)
		Rai (2.8%)		
		Gurung (2.4%)		
		Limbu (1.6%)		
		Sherpa (0.6%)		
	Parbatiya castes 40.3%	Chhetri (16.1%)		
		Bahun (12.9%)		
		Service castes (11.3%)		
Other people living in the hills/mountains 1%			Indo-Aryan=80% Nepali-speakers (50.3 %, including people from non-Indo-Aryan communities); Others: Maithili (11.8%) Bhojpuri (7.5%) Tharu (5.4%) Awadhi (2.0%)	
Plains: Madhesi 32.1%	Castes 15.9%	Yadav (4.1%)		
		Brahmins (0.9%)		
		Various Kshatriya castes (0.8%)		
		Kalowar and other 'impure' castes (3.2%)		
		Musahar and other 'untouchable' castes (2.8%)		
	Ethnic communities 9%	Tharu (6.5%)		Other religions Muslims (3.5%)
	Others 7.2%	Muslims, Sikhs, Marwaris and other groups listed as 'Others'		
99.9%				

Source: David Gellner, Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka and John Whelpton (eds). Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom. The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Nepal. Amsterdam: Hardwood Academic Publishers, 1997; and Harka Gurung. Nepal: Main ethnic/caste groups by districts, based on population census 1991. Kathmandu: the author, 1994

ethnic groups of the hills have been historically confined to the different regions of Nepal, the Parbatiya spread out across the country, providing the motive force for Hinduisation. This process intensified after the political unification of Nepal and more so during the Rana era (1846-1951); there was no let-up during the Panchayat regime (1961-1990) either, and to some extent is continuing even today. The 1991 census recorded 86.5 per cent of the population as Hindu, although that figure is disputed by many who are convinced about an inherent bias in census-taking.

What is called the Hinduisation of Nepal was actually 'Parbatiyasition', that is, the spread and imposition of the culture of the Parbatiya, most significantly their language, Nepali (originally known as Khas or Khas Kura), and religion, Hinduism. Even though Kathmandu Valley itself had long been a centre for Hindu devotion and pilgrimage, it was the Gorkhali kings who spread the faith in its diverse forms across the mid-hills of Nepal. The process of Parbatiyasition was, and to a degree continues to be, facilitated by the state, because a majority of the ruling elite since the time of King Prithvi Narayan have been 'high-caste' Parbatiyas, who were actively supported by the Newar elite of Kathmandu, the majority of whom were also Hindu. The subordinated communities responded with accommodation and assimilation, but also with out-migration or resistance, sometimes violent.

Regardless of the reality on the ground, Nepal is usually represented as a Hindu kingdom where different castes as well as ethnic, linguistic and religious groups have co-existed peacefully. The state and the ruling elite take pride in what they see as 'unity in cultural diversity' and never tire of repeating King Prithvi Narayan's famous statement: 'This country is a flower garden of four *varnas* and thirty-six *jats*.' There is some truth to this claim because Nepal, unlike so many countries, has remained relatively free of ethnic, religious, linguistic and caste violence. However, the subordinate groups are beginning to question this picture of tolerance and pluralism. Particularly since the restoration of multi-party democracy in 1990, the open political atmosphere has allowed the emergence of an energetic movement of ethnic assertion, whose leadership might regard Nepal as a pluralistic society, but one that is characterised by hierarchy, dominance and oppression.

As is only natural for a country with such a multiplicity and inter-linked collection of identities, there are different views when it comes

to identifying the dominant, oppressive community. According to the janajati (mainly hill-ethnic) leadership, claiming to represent the 'original inhabitants' of Nepal, this dominant and exploitative group is made up of Bahuns, the Chhetri warrior castes and the Thakuri ruler class. According to the leaders of the Madhesi people of the tarai, it is the Pahadi hill people in general, whether Parbatiyas or janajati, who have been dominant and discriminatory. In their mind, the Pahadis have arrogated to their hill and mountain terrain the definition of Nepal's self-identity, and have pushed the plains people to the status of second-class citizens. On the other hand, 'low' caste dalits argue that it is the 'upper' castes and ethnic groups, whether from the hills or the plains, who dominate and discriminate. Thus, leaders of the dominated groups variously point to the Parbatiya, Pahadi, Madhesi, janajati and 'upper' caste groups as the sources of economic, political and cultural discrimination. In other words, they raise issues pertaining to the political economy as well as the politics of cultural diversity and inter-caste relations in Nepal.

Different models of a culturally pluralist society have been articulated by the state and by different communities over the past two centuries. Throughout this period, the ruling elite in Kathmandu Valley have tried to impose their vision of a plural society within the framework of their understanding of Hindu society and polity, a fact that is reflected in the laws and codes promulgated by different rulers. Following the work of anthropologist Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, it is useful to discuss three periods: a) the establishment of the Gorkhali empire up to the end of the Rana regime (1769-1950); b) the Panchayat period (1961-1990); and c) the decade following the restoration of democracy in 1990. How did the different population groups negotiate these periods, and in which circumstances did they seek assimilation and accommodation or resistance and separation? This will help in understanding the debate that has been taking place nationally since 1990 concerning ethnicity, caste, state and society. It is important to study the models of plural society proposed by the state and the dominant communities on the one hand and by the leadership of the ethnic movement on the other, and refer to a possible model for an ideal pluralist Nepali society.

Hierarchy, diversity and the Hindu polity 1768-1950

The political unification by conquest and other means of the 60-odd political units populated by different ethnic communities, posed a challenge to the ruling Parbatiya Hindus. Rather than imposing a uniform culture throughout the newly expanded kingdom, their primary concern was exercising political control and extracting revenue from the newly conquered territories. At the same time, the elites did need an overarching framework to integrate the diverse communities of the newly expanded kingdom, and also to establish it as a pure and true Hindu land, an '*asal* Hindustan' as Prithvi Narayan Shah called it. The model that was already available to them and most suited to their plans was the caste system, which provided the legal and social structure into which Nepal's diversity could be organised and subsumed in a single hierarchical—Hindu—order.

This explains Prithvi Narayan's celebrated definition of his new kingdom as a garden of four *varnas* and thirty-six *jats*. The 'unifier' king, tenth direct ancestor of Nepal's King Gyanendra, used this formula to include all of his subjects, Hindu and non-Hindu, caste-based as well as ethnic. *Varna* refers to people of all castes, and *jat* in its more general meaning refers to communities, including castes as well as ethnic and religious communities. There are those who question whether Prithvi Narayan accepted cultural diversity, but there is no doubt that he understood the reality of the plural character of his rapidly expanded realm. Some scholars have argued for the Indian case that at least some interpretations of the Hindu theory of kingship and polity did not preclude cultural pluralism, and it could be argued that the model society Prithvi Narayan of Gorkha espoused was that of cultural pluralism within the broad framework of a hierarchical caste system. Cultural differences were accepted, but with different communities and castes ranked in a hierarchical order depending on the degree of similarity and difference with the cultural norms and practices of the 'upper-caste' Nepali-speaking Hindus. Nevertheless, it can be said that the 'unifier king' was more accepting of cultural diversity and provided greater autonomy to the different cultural groups than did his successors.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the new ruling elites had consolidated their power and were firmly ensconced in the palaces of the Malla kings in Kathmandu. The kingdom became progressively more integrated and centralised, both politically and

administratively. Meanwhile, with the blessings of the state, the land-hungry Parbatiya populace began migrating in ever-larger numbers to territories populated by ethnic communities. While the rulers were mainly concerned with extracting revenue for themselves and in consolidating their hold over the kingdom, as time went by they became increasingly interested in imposing a more homogeneous cultural matrix on the kingdom as well.

This process of Hinduisation, spearheaded by the migrating Parbatiya, progressed rapidly after Jang Bahadur Kunwar seized power in 1846 and established the hereditary Rana *shogunate*, which effectively ruled the country until 1951 while maintaining Prithvi Narayan's Shah successors in the royal palace as titular monarchs. The era of conquest was over, and consolidation required a more 'unified' kingdom, and in trying to establish Nepal as a true Hindu land, the Ranas were less tolerant of cultural plurality. Eight years after Jang Bahadur seized power, he promulgated the first Muluki Ain (a national 'civil code'), a set of laws that was to be valid throughout the kingdom. The code dealt with many subjects such as land tenure, inheritance and even sexual relations, but by far the most important portion dealt with inter-community relations. The Muluki Ain articulated a more worked-out vision of a plural society within a caste system than Prithvi Narayan's model. It conceptually integrated all the different linguistic and ethnic groups as well as existing castes into one overarching hierarchy. All groups in mid-nineteenth century Nepal, therefore, came under the following five categories:

1. Wearers of the holy thread *(tagadhari)*: Bahun, Rajput, Chhetri, various Newar castes, etc.
2. Non-enslavable alcohol-drinkers *(namasinya matwali)*: Magar, Gurung and some Newar castes, etc.
3. Enslavable alcohol-drinkers *(masinya matwali)*: Limbu, Kirat (Rai), Tharu and the general category of Bhote, including Sherpas, the group now known as Tamang and other groups with close Tibetan cultural affiliation, etc.
4. Impure but touchable castes: Newar service castes—butchers, washermen, tanners—Europeans and Muslims.
5. Impure and untouchable castes: Parbatiya (blacksmiths, tanners, tailors) and Newar (fishermen and scavengers) service castes.

There were obvious challenges in trying to force-fit the diverse communities into these categories, particularly because some of the groups were not 'castes' by any definition of the term. The first, fourth and fifth categories incorporated the Hindu caste groups proper, with the exception of European and Muslims. The second and third categories *(matwalis)*, with the exception of Newars, on the other hand, were janajati ethnic groups outside the pale of the caste hierarchy till then. Some were made 'enslavable' and others not, seemingly in accordance with the communal power play during those days of national consolidation. And because the Newars of Kathmandu Valley were structured internally along the lines of religion (Hindus and Buddhists) and also had a complex caste system of their own, they had to be dispersed among four of the five 'caste' categories.

Though all groups within these broad five categories were not 'castes', the Muluki Ain prescribed caste status for them based on Hindu notions of purity and pollution in many domains of social life, such as inter-caste commensality of boiled rice, acceptance of water, and sexual relations. The code also proscribed certain practices, such as consumption of beef, which was not taboo among many ethnic communities. On the other hand, the Muluki Ain did allow for some degree of autonomy in some areas, especially concerning marriage and inheritance. Further, the Muluki Ain was to some extent neutral as far as Muslims, Buddhists or other religionists were concerned, neither encouraging nor prohibiting their practice of faith.

The five categories thus represented permutations of the two basic caste and non-caste communities, with structuring and ranking according to the norms of 'high-caste' Parbatiya Hindus. Although the Muluki Ain recognised and accepted some degree of cultural diversity, it translated cultural differences into hierarchical 'caste' categories. For example, the ethnic communities that consumed alcohol were categorised as *matwali* and ranked lower than most of the Parbatiyas. Punishment for infringing laws, especially concerning inter-caste relations, were more severe for them than for the wearers of the holy thread. Since the Muluki Ain had structured the social universe into a broad caste-based classification, there was a lot of pressure on non-Hindus to conform to Hindu norms, at least in their public behaviour and inter-caste relations.

The spread of Parbatiya Hindu culture was, of course, not only a

result of state domination and subjugation of the minorities; ethnic communities themselves responded in various ways to the new dispensation. For example, Magars and Thakalis—particularly the elite among them—sought to integrate themselves into the dominant culture by using Bahun priests, celebrating some Hindu festivals, and opting for the Nepali language. The Gurung of the central Nepali hills, meanwhile, divided their lineage-based community into two major categories, the higher status grouping which they termed 'four castes' *(char jat)* and the lower status grouping known as 'sixteen castes' *(sohra jat)*, in emulation of the Hindu caste system. There was thus an attempt to reduce the differences with the dominant Parbatiya community, and at the same time amplify the differences within other ethnic groups. The widespread recruitment of Gurung, Magar, Rai and Limbu soldiers into the British and Indian armies also helped spread Parbatiya culture among the ethnic groups. Nepali became the *lingua franca* in these armies and rather than employ different priests according to ethnicity, Bahun priests were used to perform rituals for the soldiers.

In large measure, the ethnic communities either assimilated into the dominant culture or turned insular to protect what they had remaining. However, some resisted the process of Parbatiya-isation, actively or passively. This seems to be one of the reasons why the Limbus of Nepal's far east migrated in large numbers to adjacent Sikkim and Darjeeling. Towards the end of the Rana regime, the Limbus staged a revolt against Parbatiya incursions into their homeland which threatened their unique form of communal land-holding (known as *kipat*). The Tamangs, who, due to their proximity to Kathmandu Valley, were among the most subjugated of the large hill ethnic groups of Nepal, are known to have on occasion resisted the imposition of Parbatiya culture. Meanwhile, communities living in remote areas where the state had not managed to establish its dominance, such as the Sherpas of the eastern high valleys, simply ignored the central dictates.

Equality, homogeneity and the Parbatiya culture 1961-1990

The Rana regime was overthrown in 1951 but this did not result in major changes as far as the relationship between the ethnic groups, non-Hindus and 'low' castes were concerned. Nepal continued to

be ruled by 'high-caste' Parbatiyas, and the laws from the Rana period were essentially retained. Though an interim constitution was put in place, the Muluki Ain of the Ranas remained in force. The ruling elites obviously wanted to enhance political and cultural unity within the framework established earlier—a fact reflected in their policies regarding language and religion.

The government attempted to promote Nepali as the national language and the sole medium of instruction in schools. The first National Educational Planning Commission went so far as to argue in the early 1950s that, '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.' Similarly, the Hindu ruling elite tried to show the numerical dominance of Hindus in Nepal by classifying even some non-Hindu ethnic groups as Hindus. This is reflected in the instructions given to the enumerators of the 1952-54 census: 'Assign as Hindus the worshippers of the five deities (Ganesh, Shiva, Vishnu, Sun, Devi) such as Bahun, Chhetri, Magar, Gharti, Gurung, Sarki, Damai, etc.' It is because of such insensitive policies and directives that language and religion have emerged as the two major contentious issues as far as the hill ethnic groups are concerned. In the tarai, language is the major focus of Madhesi activists who are fighting Pahadi domination.

After nearly a decade of confusing political arrangements following the overthrow of the Rana regime in 1951, Nepal experimented briefly with multi-party democracy in 1959-1960. In December 1960, King Mahendra overthrew the elected government of B.P. Koirala and later instituted the Panchayat political system, with himself as absolute monarch. The Panchayat period (1960-1990) witnessed a concerted effort to implement the ideals of nation-state, that is, to forcibly evolve a nation with a common culture and language. To achieve this end, there was a move towards greater centralisation of politics and administration, with an emphasis on transportation and communication as a means of modernisation and development. The spread of Nepali-based education and growing employment opportunities in the rapidly-expanding government bureaucracy and development projects were other ways in which the nation-building project continued. The Panchayat elite viewed cultural diversity as an impediment to nation-building, modernisation and development, and hence great emphasis was

placed on homogeneity in the population.

At the beginning of the Panchayat era, due to the dynamics of domestic politics and the perceived need to join the rest of the world, the state sought to replace the hierarchical social order based on the caste system by recognising cultural diversity and equality of all citizens before the law. Caste and ethnicity were no longer significant legal categories although they continued to remain socially valid. The caste system, though not explicitly abolished, was absent from the new Muluki Ain introduced in 1963 by King Mahendra.

Ethnic communities as legal categories disappeared from the legal discourse, but they did resurface to some extent in the national census as linguistic and religious categories. Demographic classification in the census remained discriminatory, since it recorded a large number of people who practised other faiths as Hindus. Linguistic classification of the population provided only a rough, and perhaps misleading, data on the ethnic communities because many of them had given up their mother tongues or were bilingual, leading to their classification as Nepali-speakers. The law as well as the census thus attempted to 'erase' caste and ethnic identities of the population to bring about a more egalitarian society as well as to wipe away cultural differentiation that existed in a diverse land.

The Madhesi population posed a sensitive problem for the state and the ruling elites, especially because of Nepal's economic and political dependence on India and the open border between the two countries. The ideals of nation-state pushed the Kathmandu government to implement policies that would ensure a common language and culture. However, many Madhesi communities had highly developed languages and cultures which could not be so easily suppressed, especially given the ease of trans-border movement of people and ideas and the commonalities between the populations on both sides. Close cultural, economic and kinship ties across the border helped the Madhesi population in general to resist assimilation into the dominant national Nepali (Parbatiya) culture.

The Panchayat state's policy was to encourage massive migration of the Pahadi people to the tarai. The eradication of malaria, the construction of roads and other infrastructure and the clearing of forests and opening up of new lands made the tarai plains a magnet for people from the hills. In order to forestall the people south of the border from moving into the newly cleared territory, the government encouraged Pahadis to move to the plains.

Equality, pluralism, and cultural dominance 1990-2001

The attempts by cultural or ethnic organisations to preserve their space in a culturally homogenising Nepal had begun in the Rana era, sometimes working out of India. This process continued, albeit in a low key, during the Panchayat period as well, and the number of such organisations grew over the years, and particularly after the 1980s. The authorities allowed them to function but only as long as they did not become overtly political. It was only after the restoration of democracy in 1990 that ethnic, religious and linguistic communities as well as 'low-caste' groups, emboldened by the rights bestowed by the Constitution, organised themselves to protect their cultures, languages and religions.

Long subdued and unable to make their demands under the authoritarian regime led by the king, the citizens at large aspired for a new social order. The long-suffering ethnic, linguistic and religious communities hoped for an egalitarian, pluralistic society in which they would be treated as equals by the dominant Parbatiyas, where cultural differences would be accepted and valued, and where their cultures and languages would receive state recognition and support.

The Constitution of 1990, drafted by representatives of political parties and some independents, responded to some of these aspirations. It declared Nepal to be a 'multi-ethnic, multi-lingual...Hindu and constitutional monarchical kingdom'. The Constitution granted equal rights to all citizens before the law and prohibited any form of discrimination based on religion, race, caste or ethnicity. It bestowed on the various communities the right to profess and practise their traditional religion (although it prohibited conversion), to protect and preserve their culture and language, and to educate their children in their own mother tongues up to the primary level. It also recognised the languages spoken by the different communities in the country as national languages *(rastriya bhasa)*. The Constitution thus gave official recognition to cultural diversity based, to some degree, on the notion of equality. It was in response to the Constitution's egalitarian provisions that the 1991 census for the first time classified and recorded the population according to linguistic, religious as well as ethnic affiliations.

However, for all its liberalism, the Constitution also managed to circumscribe cultural pluralism with two important qualifications:

first, its definition of Nepal as a 'Hindu kingdom' and second, its declaration of Nepali as the language of the nation *(rastra bhasa)* and official language. The primacy given to Hinduism and the Nepali language, mainly due to pressure from Parbatiya Hindus from across the political spectrum, indicated that the dominance of the Parbatiya ruling elite had continued into the modern democratic era. (All of Nepal's major political parties, as well as the Maoists who claim to support ethnic assertions, are dominated by 'high-caste' Parbatiyas, particularly Bahuns.) Thus, behind the official model of cultural pluralism and equality, a hierarchy of cultures or the dominance of one culture over others (through language and religion) can be discerned. The state does make efforts to promote the cultures and languages of the non-Parbatiya, but these tend to be more symbolic than real.

Non-hierarchical pluralism: the politics of cultural difference

The cultural, ethnic and linguistic discontent that had been simmering for decades surfaced after what has been called the 'Kathmandu Spring' of 1990. Numerous new ethnic, linguistic, religious and caste-based organisations were established while the existing ones became more active. These organisations were involved in two kinds of activities. The first was to inculcate a sense of cultural self-pride. The emphasis here was on promoting the use of their mother tongues, particularly among the young, and to recover their own histories through research or by reviving or reinventing traditions and customs. The second was to force changes in state policies and laws in two areas: one concerning the protection and development of their cultures and languages, and the other relating to affirmative action or positive discrimination that would ensure a more equitable share of economic and political resources in areas such as education and government jobs—both of which are dominated by 'high-caste' Parbatiyas, especially Bahuns, and also by 'high-caste' Hindu Newars.

Language became the most visible and emotive issue around which the activists mobilised within and among communities. While most communities were willing to accept Nepali as the *lingua franca* in the country, they demanded active state support for the development of their own individual languages, insisting on their use as the medium of instruction in schools in their traditional homelands, especially up to the primary level. They also sought recognition of their languages as the official language in their strongholds, in addition to or even in place of Nepali. And, finally, they objected to the requirement of proficiency in the Nepali language for entry into government service, arguing that it automatically favoured the Parbatiya, and particularly the Bahun among them.

The other major issue around which ethnic and religious communities have cooperated is in demanding that the Constitution declare Nepal to be a secular state rather than a Hindu kingdom. The demand for a secular state by non-Hindus perhaps has more to do with the history of Hindu dominance and enforcement of Hindu norms among non-Hindus than with the currently defined nature of the state, for it is open to question whether Nepal is in fact a 'Hindu state' today as it undoubtedly was before 1950. It is certainly true that Nepal is predominantly Hindu in terms of the dominant culture and religion, the percentage of population who profess this religion, and some of the laws carried over from the earlier periods, for example, laws relating to inheritance and the prohibition on cow slaughter. However, the Constitution itself and most of the other laws are not based on Hindu law. Nepali society may not be secular, but in many ways, the state is. But what is important is the perception of non-Hindus. A declaration of Nepal as a secular state would signal to all that the state does not discriminate on the grounds of religion and considers all faiths to be equal. It may also force the state to remove all the vestiges of (Hindu) religious law which remain on paper today.

Ethnic and linguistic activists have also demanded that the state provide them with better access to economic and political resources, such as jobs in the civil service. There is currently a great disparity between the 'upper-caste' Parbatiyas and Newars on the one hand and the rest on the other, regarding employment in the civil service, in the education sector, in leadership of political parties, in the development and NGO sector, and so on. For a large section of the ethnic, linguistic and religious communities, economic and political issues are perhaps more important than cultural and linguistic issues. Ethnic leaders have accordingly been demanding reservations in government jobs for non-Parbatiyas. For the Newars, who are relatively better off than other ethnic communities, culture and language tend to be more important than economic and political issues.

Some activists have also advocated a federation of mini-nations within Nepal, or in extreme cases, even separate states based on 'nationalities' in the traditional homelands of the major ethnic and linguistic communities. While the majority of the ethnic and linguistic organisations may not have such aspirations, the very existence of such voices indicates the extent to which ethnic assertion has progressed under the free atmosphere of the democratic era. Unfortunately, as the ethnic activists have discovered, freedom to air one's views does not mean much when the 'establishment' does not respond to even the most minimal demands. Fears are sometimes expressed that these sharply-worded demands for autonomy may lead to sectarian or ethnic violence or even a balkanisation of Nepal. While such a possibility cannot be ruled out, it appears that a majority of the leadership of the non-dominant communities would not support such action. What they aspire for is a genuine plural society, where all cultures and languages are treated as equals, and where opportunities are not concentrated among the Parbatiyas.

Cultural diversity is accepted and celebrated by most Nepalis. At the same time, ethnic activists like to stress their difference from the dominant Hindu communities. During a conference in 1994, the federation of 21 ethnic groups known as the Nepal Federation of Nationalities (NEFEN), along with some other groups, renamed themselves 'indigenous peoples' in reaction to the United Nations' call for a Decade of Indigenous People. They defined their 'indigenousness' in opposition to Hindus, i.e., as those communities which possess their own traditional language, culture and non-Hindu religion, and whose society was traditionally egalitarian rather than hierarchical or caste-based. Other characteristics of this indigenousness included displacement from original homelands, deprivation of traditional rights to natural resources, and neglect and humiliation of their culture and language by the state.

This celebration of cultural diversity and distinct cultural identities by the (hill) ethnic communities, unfortunately, falls somewhat short of celebrating a genuine egalitarian society and for that matter a genuine pluralistic society. For example, ethnic activists have not shown much solidarity with the dalit castes, which are economically and politically more deprived than most of the ethnic groups. Neither has the ethnic leadership, which is primarily hill-based, shown much empathy for the non-ethnic communities of the tarai. This could either be because the tarai communities are considered Hindus, or, more

likely, because they are considered lacking in 'Nepaliness', a characteristic often defined in terms of Pahadi (hill) identity. In this way, the hill ethnics are themselves harking back to the hill-origins of the Nepali nation state and its definition as such by the ruling elites.

The Madhesi have equal, if not more, cause for grievance with the state and the ruling groups. As with the hill ethnic groups, their languages and cultures are devalued and they have limited access to the economic and political resources at the centre. However, unlike the hill ethnic communities, their very loyalty to the country and even their nationality is suspect among the hill-centric establishment as well as among the Pahadi population in general. Madhesis are seen by many hill people—even among the leadership of the discriminated ethnic groups—as 'foreigners' of 'Indian origin'. As a result, the Madhesi people face many social hurdles, the most significant of which exhibits itself in the difficulty Madhesis have in acquiring citizenship papers. This is not only because, culturally and linguistically, the Madhesi are similar to Indian citizens across the border, but also because many of them are recent migrants.

The Madhesi population, with the exception of the Tharu and 'upper-caste' Maithili-speakers, has not been as active as the hill ethnic groups in demanding equal treatment. The Sadbhavana Party has been championing the cause of the Madhesis, but it has yet to succeed in providing an overarching unifying umbrella for them, partly because the people of the tarai too are divided by language, religion and caste.

Models of plural societies

There is no country in the world that today does not have two or more communities living within the same political unit. Since cultural pluralism has now become a worldwide reality, how to deal with difference is a challenge everywhere. How should culturally dominant groups perceive and treat groups and communities that are different from them? And how should the subordinate groups perceive and treat other communities, including the dominant community? Failure to tackle this challenge—and instead trying to force the issue through assimilation or radical separation—has, historically and in contemporary times, led to racial, communal and ethnic violence, and, in extreme cases, to ethnic cleansing and

balkanisation. Nepalis, therefore, need to learn from other contemporary plural societies as well as their own history to face this challenge.

One global tendency has been for nation states to move towards homogeneity of cultures and the erasure of differences, either by assimilation into the dominant culture (the 'melting-pot' of the United States), or 'disappearing' the minority community through 'ethnic cleansing' (Nazi Germany, or the Hutu-Tutsi conflict of Rwanda), or partition based on differences, whether of religion (India-Pakistan) or ethnicity (the Balkans). The alternative is allowing heterogeneity of cultures within nation states, and there is wide acceptance of the reality of nation states made up of pluralistic societies.

There are, or were, several types of plural societies, each with different ways of perceiving and treating cultural difference. The most common is the hierarchical pluralistic society, as exemplified by colonial societies and the old Nepali model, where one racial, ethnic, religious, or linguistic community stands dominant. Rarer are the non-hierarchical pluralistic societies, for example the Dutch and the Swiss models, where the different communities are considered equals. In both types of pluralistic societies, we find societies characterised either by separation of communities based on difference or by interaction and cooperation between different communities. An extreme example of the former type is the apartheid-era South Africa. This separation of communities based on race was common to all white colonial societies.

A positive example of non-hierarchical society characterised by separation is the Dutch model of 'pillarisation' *(verzuiling)* of society along denominational and ideological lines. For example, Roman Catholics, Protestants and socialists would all have their own associations, unions, schools, and sometimes even different stores where they shopped. There was very little interaction between the different 'pillars', all of which were considered equal. In contrast to this Dutch model, plural societies characterised by interaction and cooperation between different communities are to be found mainly in hierarchical plural societies such as the old Indonesian model of relations between Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, the old Sri Lankan model of interaction between Sinhalese and Tamils, and to some extent, the Indian model of pluralism between Hindus and Muslims during the Mughal and British periods. The last was exemplified in examples such as the use of different languages in

their interactions with people of the other religious faith and with their co-religionists. Hindustani (a mixture of Hindi and Urdu) was used in conversation between Hindus and Muslims, whereas Hindi was used by the Hindus among themselves and Urdu by the Muslims.

In Nepal, there have been three models of society, as reflected in the laws enacted by different political regimes over the past two hundred-odd years. These three models may be seen as part of a kind of dialectical movement. In the first model, during the Gorkhali and Rana regimes, cultural pluralism was recognised but differences were translated into hierarchy with reference to the caste system and Parbatiya values. The antithesis to this model was the Panchayat model of the nation state, which did not recognise cultural difference and instead envisioned a society where all citizens were equal and assimilated into a single homogeneous, national culture. Ethnicity was not the basis for legal identity. The synthesis of the two models, one plural and hierarchical and the other homogeneous and non-hierarchical, is the plural and non-hierarchical model envisioned by the Constitution of 1990. Ethnicity has again become one of the bases for legal identity. However, in this model too, as we have seen, the culture, religion and language of the Parbatiya remain dominant. In other words, the 1990 Constitution too does not offer a model of a truly egalitarian, non-hierarchical plural society.

The model of pluralism offered by many leaders of the non-dominant ethnic, linguistic and religious communities is that of a non-hierarchical, plural society which values differences and encourages and facilitate the diverse communities to maintain their separate identities. However, even their model suffers because the proponents are not really concerned about the plight of 'low' castes on the one hand, or the Madhesi communities on the other. The Pahadis, including the ethnic groups, have a deep-set and historically-conditioned disdain for the dalit, and are suspicious about the nationalist credentials of the Madhesi.

Furthermore, in their model of pluralism, the different communities would not only maintain their distinct identities, they would also have little interaction or cooperation between each other on an everyday basis. The radicals among the ethnic activists would even reject pluralism altogether and establish separate nation-states or nations for different communities. Their models, thus, do not envisage a dynamic society where the different communities, while maintaining their separate identities, interact and influence each

other. In this sense, it seems as though the ethnic leadership wants to replace the fuzzy and even fluid boundaries between the different communities—which is a reality in many cases—with more impermeable boundaries in which groups and identities are rigidly defined and immutable. They are thus attempting to stop or reverse the historical process that shaped the formation of different communities and their identities in relation to other communities, forgetting that identity is always relational. The Newar, Tamang, Rai, Tharu and even the Parbatiya, for example, are all categories (ethnonyms) that are used for populations who were not necessarily homogeneous within themselves in the past, and are not so even in the present.

Fortunately, most members of these subordinated communities aspire for a non-hierarchical plural society in which cultural differences are valued and members of different communities interact and cooperate as equals, and in which they can negotiate their dual identities both as members of their distinct communities and as Nepalis with a common expanded culture, which includes cultural elements and symbols from the diverse communities. In other words, they wish for a society that is constituted of culturally diverse, distinct and equal communities, which also interact with each other and are united as members of a single nation-state.

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