

BUDDHISTS IDENTITY POLITICS IN NEPAL SINCE 1990s

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ABSTRACT

Buddhist identity politics in Nepal came after the establishment of multi-party democracy in 1990. Buddhists see themselves as those groups that do not fall under the traditional four-fold classification of Hindu Varna system. Buddhists are asserting their identity as part of the Janajati movement. The movement spread as a response to the country's Hinduisation process and attempt to build Nepali Nationalism initiated by Prithvinarayan Shah and to the complex set of discrimination and inequalities by the Hindu high caste. Buddhists under the umbrella of Janajati movement assert their identity and resist against wide ranges of issues such as, their exclusion from the mainstream politics. Their demand for a Secular state has wide resonance among all the ethnic minorities in Nepal

Keywords: Ethnic Groups, Hinduism, Identity Politics, Janajati Mahasangh, Monarchy, Nationalism, Secularism.

INTRODUCTION

The term identity politics refers to forces organizing and appealing to a group defined by specific ascriptive characteristics and mobilizing this group identity as a means of gaining access to power. These characteristics are usually, but not exclusively those ascribed by virtue of birth to parents or to a particular religion or ethnic group, par excellence. Power here may be either control of or influence in the state or access to control over resources.¹

Identity politics invokes political arguments that focus upon the self interest and perspectives of social minorities, or self-identified social interest groups. In a state, identity politics is intimately linked with the debates and conflicts surrounding the state's character, role and very existence.² Not all members of any given group are necessarily involved in identity politics. To participate in identity politics, a group may, or may not be marginalized class of people. However, the advocates of such politics are informed by a self-belief and self schema that they are in fact a marginalized group. Typically, these group identities are defined in term of race, ethnicity, religion and gender. Identity politics is driven by several motivations. One aim of identity politics has been to empower the oppressed to articulate their oppression in term of their own experience. This involves a process of rising consciousness that distinguishes identity politics from the liberal conception of politics as driven by individual self-interest.³

"Identity", in its broadest sense, includes both socially defined and often visible characteristics as race, gender, and ethnicity as well as other aspects of groups and individuals, such as belief system, worldview, ideologies and religions, that are not always considered part of identity but that increasingly form the basis of major cleavages among people. Some of these characteristics may be hard to change while others are, at least potentially, matters of option. The question of choice plays a vital role in the aspects of identity. It begins with the assumption that an individual can choose their identity, perhaps by deciding on a particular kind of life or by giving or withholding their loyalty to a particular group. So identity becomes a measure of the freedom of action that people have within the larger society. By contrast, when states or other powerful institutions can effectively limit identity choices by enforcing conformity to norms or ideals, individuals' freedom of action is restricted and can be considered to be in a state of decline.⁴

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Identities also represent entitlements to shares of a group's or society resources. Conformity to the common identity proclaimed by social or political groups becomes increasingly important to the group's bargaining power in identity politics. The identity of a group makes political action possible. Without a common identity, individuals cannot form a collective agent. The individuals too cannot be either the subject or the object of action without an identity which directs him towards others in transactions. Identity is not maintained in isolation, it exists in the system of relations.⁵ That is, it involves a necessary interaction with others in a system of shared understandings.

The issues of identity, its representation in the state structures, and demarcation of federal lines among the states are more complex than they appear. Such as, adoption of Hindu state by the 1990 constitution of Nepal which was framed in the background of movement for the restoration of democracy is on the one hand, reverence to uninterrupted history of Nepal's religious identity as Hindu kingdom, but it is on the other hand, contested by emerging trends for secularism under democratic disposition in the post-1990 period. The 1990 constitution of Nepal upheld a number of features of Hinduism-based Nepali nationalism, including the official title of Nepal as a Hindu state; whereas the nation constitutes the people irrespective of religious, race, caste, or tribe.

NATIONALISM IN MONARCHICAL INSTITUTION

The institution of Monarchy in Nepal remained the most important symbol of Nepali nationalism till the end of 20th century. A broad consensus prevailed recognizing its historical role in both the making of modern Nepal and integration of the diverse population into a single nationhood.⁶ Gorkhanization or Hinduisation, a process initiated by Prithvinarayan Shah was strenuously followed by his successor over the period of next two centuries. The age old imperial guidelines became the source of the four pillars of Nepali nationalism that came to be identified in popular perception. These are: (1) Unquestioned power and authority of the Hindu King of Gorkha or in other words Gorkha Supremacy, (2) The primacy of the Hindu ethos in national life or declaring Hinduism as the state religion, (3) Social integration through the Hindu social system based on caste divisions and (4) Making Nepali language as the national language.⁷ In this way Hinduism, Monarchy and Nepali language became the conventional symbols in the process of identity formation in the Gorkha state that became the 'modern Nepal'. The role of Gorkha dynasty, first in unifying and then in establishing their hegemonic influence through a practice of patriotism that demanded total and unquestioned loyalty to the King, came to constitute an inseparable feature of modern Nepal.⁸

The Panchayat regime (1960-1990) in Nepal imposed the values and norms of the dominant group-its language (Khas-Nepali), religion (Hindu) and culture (hill- high caste) on the entire society. The languages, cultures and religions of other groups were marginalized to the extent that some languages are at the risk of extinction. In addition, indigenous nationalities (adibasi janajati), Dalits (traditional-untouchables) and Madhesis (people living in the Terai plains), who comprise over two-thirds of the population, have been excluded politically, economically and socially.⁹

ASSERTION OF BUDDHISTS IDENTITY SINCE 1990 CONSTITUTION

Since the restoration of a multiparty democracy in 1990, identity politics has become a major force in Nepali politics. The Buddhists of Nepal have mobilized to demand greater inclusion within the political system as well as social and cultural rights. They argue that high-caste Hindus from the hills have monopolized the state since its inception in the late eighteenth century, and this has created political, economic and social disadvantages for other groups of people. The Buddhists and ethnic minorities culture could not get due space even in the 1990 Constitution, hence, their cultural identity was at risk. The 1990 Constitution reiterated the long promotion of Hinduism as the state religion, and the Hindu character of the kingdom was retained.

The Buddhists who were ethnically and culturally diverse people for the first time came out openly to demand a better share and for redefinition of their role in the decision making process of the country. Demand for secular state is obviously the main agenda of minorities' religious group. Unlike the history of Hindu-Buddhist coexistence, now Buddhists have built an informal alliance with other minority religious groups in exerting pressure for secularism. On 30th June 1990, the largest demonstration took place organized by the Nepali Buddhist Association. 25-30,000 people walked through the centre of Kathmandu urging 'Give us a Secular State, Buddhism is not just a branch of Hinduism'. This march too ended up at the open air theatre at Tundikhel in the middle of Kathmandu. Several Buddhist scholars addressed the crowd including Bhikshu Amritananda. He deplored the notion that Hinduism and Buddhism were the same and called strongly for a secular state. Their speeches emphasized on how Buddhists had been suppressed.¹⁰

The Buddhists demonstration came as a total shock to most of the Nepalese Hindu politicians. According to the 1981 census, only 1 in 20 of the population of Nepal was Buddhist.¹¹ Moreover, the Buddhists had a reputation for living

peacefully almost invisibly alongside the Hindu. Asha Ram Sakya, a Buddhist scholar and leader of the Nepal Buddhist Association maintained that the Buddhist population shown as 5.3% in the 1981 census, was totally wrong. Tamangs were not Hindus, Gurungs were not Hindus, nor were the Sherpas, the Chepangs, the Rais and the Limbus of the Eastern Nepal. In addition there are minor nationalities who are all Buddhists. In reality, the Buddhists of Nepal are not accurately reflected in census. When the census officers arrived, Buddhists, majority of whom are not educated, would be asked about their religion. They would ask, 'Do you worship Ganesh?' They would answer "Yes". Because Ganesh is identified as a Hindu god, they would be written down as Hindu. But in Nepal, Hindus worship Buddha and Buddhists worship Ganesh. That does not mean that all are Hindus, it is just a result of the long cultural intermingling and interaction between Hindus and Buddhists. And it also does not mean that Buddhism is just a branch of Hinduism, which the government of the Nepal claimed.¹² It was in fact true that many Nepalese combined elements from both Hinduism and Buddhism in their religious practice, making it very hard to draw a clear dividing line. For example, among the Newar community, there are both the believer of Hindus and Buddhists and to demarcate a line who is a Hindu and who, a Buddhist; is not easy. But regardless of the exact numbers, even if a majority of Nepal's Buddhists were not conscious of themselves as such in the past, slowly they are getting aware with the increasing level of education and through other means of information dissemination technologies. In fact, growing number of intellectuals like Asha Ram Sakya, a Buddhist scholar and leader of the Nepal Buddhist Association were attempting to reclaim their culture and religious identity as Buddhists.¹³

Assertion of identity politics became highly visible in post-1990 movement. The first political party with representatives from Buddhists was founded in 1990. It was the Nepal National People's Liberation Front and Nepal Rastriya Janamukti Morcha.¹⁴ The programme was to fight for equality for the entire racial and ethnic group in the country. A more extreme party was the Janajati Party established on 19th August 1990, led by Khagendra Jang Gurung. In addition, several other organizations sprang up all putting forward demands on behalf of the Tibeto-Burman speaking people, who are Buddhists. Among these was the Nepal Tamang Ghedung, established on 7th June 1990. This group demanded a special constitutional recognition of the Tamang community who lived in the hill around the Kathmandu Valley. Although the Tamang were numerous, they were amongst the least privileged of all the ethnic groups in Nepal.¹⁵ Thus, the common demands of all these various organization were to declare Nepal as secular state, equal recognition of all the ethnic languages, proportional representation for all the minority communities in political-bureaucratic structure, education and the public sector, ameliorate the socio-economic condition of the people through positive discrimination by the state.

These organizations represented a spectrum of opinion ranging from the extreme to the moderate. Yet they all shared certain basic common concerns. Their integration into Hindu society varied from group to group. The Magar, for example, reckoned themselves as proper Hindus, while the Tamang claimed that they were Buddhists. The Limbus in Far Eastern Nepal had managed to preserve large parts of their native religion and culture. Many Gurungs, Magars, Limbus and Rais had generally been restricted to access state benefits. The Tamangs were not eligible to join the Gorkhas and had remained cut off from a major source of income. In addition to these were the Thakalis, who were a small group. But these people had made a good living on the main trade route to Tibet.¹⁶

BUDDHIST POLITICS UNDER JANAJATI UMBRELLA

The politics of Buddhists identity is not isolated. One of the more remarkable development in Nepal after 1990, was the rapid growth of ethnic organizations. Each seeks to promote the welfare and culture of the single ethnic group, such as the Gurung or the Tamang. Most of the demands and grievances of the Buddhists in Nepal are similar with that of the Janajati Mahasangh. Thus, many of these organizations joined an umbrella organization, the Janajati Mahasangh (Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities), which was the dominant voice in the mid 1990s.¹⁷

The Janajati Movement may be seen as a response to the country's strained unification in the 19th century and perpetuating complex set of discrimination and inequalities resulting from this situation. The Buddhists are the majority in Janajati Mahasangh, but all the Janajati are not Buddhist, and their demands are also being expressed through the Janajati movement. The movement has played a key role in channeling ethnic grievances in a non-violent way and in democratizing the political system. The Buddhists under Janajati Mahasangh had articulated its political demands primarily by operating as a lobbying or pressure group, working to influence members of the various governments to accommodate the interests of their communities. During the drafting of the 1990 Constitution, the Janajati Mahasangh made recommendation to the Constitution Commission and their demands which have remained fairly consistent, include that the government declare Nepal as a Secular state, reform the Constitution, ensure linguistic equality for all the people, introduce a federal system of government, and develop an affirmative action.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

Thus, the resurgence of Buddhists and other hill ethnic groups after 1990 Constitution led to the new movements partly, because of the wrong state policies of nation building and partly because of the increasing awareness of the Buddhists and other ethnic groups. The Hinduized Constitution and the predominantly Hindu population of the country seem to have created a feeling of insecurity among the religious minority population of the country. The religious minority like Buddhists had vociferously demanded that the new Constitution should declare Nepal as Secular state.

To create political stability and a more democratic polity, the state should adopt the policies that create an inclusive political system. State representation of the Nepali Nation should reflect the diversity of the population which includes the political aspiration and identity of the Buddhists as well. The state must ensure that the ethnic nationalities including Buddhists are adequately represented in any decision-making bodies, through appointment, reservation or a proportional election system. May the new Constitution of Nepal represent all the minorities' aspirations and upholds the majestic plurality!

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