

## **Political Mobilization of the ‘Khambu Rai’ In the Janajati (Ethnic) Movement of Nepal**

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**Abstract:** *The situational shifts in a history has led the ethnic community of Eastern Nepal popularly known as Khambu Rai to enter from a movement of revivalism to the war of separate nation. Situating the position of the Khambu Rai's will help to understand the greater picture of the ethnic issues of Nepal and their repercussion outside it.*

**Keywords:** *cultural identity, hinduisation, identity, nationalities, sanskritisation.*

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### **I. Introduction**

The history of the Hindu kingdom of Nepal for a long time remained to be centered around the genealogy of the ruling dynasties which focused on the national unification. Right from Prithivinarayan Shah (king of Gorkha), who unified the kingdom of Nepal in 1768 and those who came after him although had clearly realized the diversity in the culture, language and ethnicity of the population of Nepal but somehow integrated the country through different mechanisms including the ideological impositions like the supremacy of the Hindu ethos in national life, social integration through the Hindu social system based on caste division and the unquestioning power and authority of the Hindu king of Gorkha. Consequently, the spell of the imposed nationalism lose its power where the ethnically and culturally diverse population started to seek and redefine their role and place and demanded for a new adjustment within the state. Instead of belonging to the same country the conquered territory by the Gorkhali and the people there never achieved a sense of common identity with those who ruled them.

In this way, the far eastern part of Nepal which is particularly known as Kirat land, the ethnic groups there, the Khambu rai being the one has always identified themselves as a distinct from the caste Hindus on the basis of their culture and religion. The ethnic consciousness of the people of Nepal is quiet old and if it is the case of far eastern Nepal it was nurtured by the geographical condition of that area and forced by the nature of rule in the country. Their geographical location in the far eastern region from the kingdom helped the Kirantis (mongoloid group of people speaking a Tibeto- Burman language) there to practice their own culture and were largely been left to their own devices. From the time of Prithivinarayan Shah itself the Kirantis people were allowed to keep possession of their communally owned Kipat land and they had the autonomy of ruling these land on the basis of their customs and rules. However, throughout the nineteenth century increasing tension was caused by the movement of the Parbatiya (Brahmin, chettris, etc) settler into their territory and their encroachment of the kipat land.

### **II. Rise Of Ethnic Activism**

Ethnic communities of Nepal time and again had to suffer in the hands of the high caste and their cultural survival again came in threat with the 1854 muluki ain (civil code) introduced by Janga Bahadur Rana which provided a legal framework to Vedic prescription by putting the ethnic groups into the fold of Hindu based hierarchical caste system and these code translated diversity into inequality. The fact remains that the state which classified and divided its population as a means to assimilate and rule the diverse segments through a state-sanctioned hierarchy always followed a exclusionary politics of domination, discrimination and deprivation and prevented the ethnic groups of social, economic and political recognition.

The basis of the development of some sense of unity especially among the ethnic groups of being ‘Paharis (people of the hills) and a common struggle of rejection and marginalization under the caste-Hindu rule was a gradual process ending with mushrooming of various organizations demanding for reprisal of their two hundred years of Hindu domination with their recognition of ethnic and cultural distinctiveness along with sharing of resources and representation in the government.

Nepal as a country was always politically unstable and with the democratic revolution of nineties the pace of ethnic and caste (Madhesies and Dalit) mobilization increased markedly because of loosening of restraint on political activity and freedom of expression. The term like ‘Janajatis’, ‘Madhesi’ or ‘Dalit’ seemed to appear and within a few years became so widely used and acknowledged. Janajati (Newars, Tamangs, Magars, Gurung, Sherpa, Limbu, Rai, Tharu and others) as a term became popular in the mid eighties among a small group of ethnic activists who deliberately translated into English as ‘nationalities’ referring to ‘groups of people, each of which

has a common and distinguishing linguistic and cultural background and form one constituent element of a larger group (as a nation) suggesting that each of these aggregations of people is "potentially capable of forming a nation state". The Janajati activists set out to demarcate and shape a new social system one that is non-hierarchical and non-discriminatory. They set out to challenge the symbols of the nation, subversively appropriate and recodify signs, and look within their own group's history and traditions for symbols of unity around which their community may be re-imagined and mobilized.

Janajatis as a social group in this process turned into a political entity (nationalities) which began to bargain with the state for increased social, political and economic rights for the citizen. They started to legitimize their action by citing a history of subordination, land theft, and slavery at the hands of the ruling elite, they even started to emphasize a number of stark dichotomies like Janajati and Jati, indigenous and non-indigenous, Hindu and Non-Hindu, flat nose and pointy nose, all of which call attention to ongoing processes of discrimination. Ultimately, they establish new sets of categories within which to locate peoples: foremost in this process is re-writing of their community histories and a demand for a reconceived National historical narrative. The ethnic groups founded on the claims of identity and culture now started to express the narrative of their history based on facts, fictions and myths. The census report of 1999 and 2001 showed that the people identified with Hindu religion and Nepali language (as mother tongue) decreased from 86.5 to 80.6 and from 50.31 to 48.61 respectively. This clearly indicated that there was a kind of ethnic assertion to disassociate Janajatis from the history of the post-unification period.

The main thrust of the Janajati movement being the recognition of their distinct identity as non-Hindus that contend against the historical process of Sanskritisation and Hinduisation. Their attempt to continue with the suitable historical past through the re-creation of the narrative of history has more to do with emotion than reason. The resurrection of the bond between Janajatis and their culture though equally was for the dignity and self-respect of their group but it has a lot to do with the reconciliation of the mis-treatment suffered by them in the hands of Hindu monarchical rule. Their cultural identity is based on the political claims like ethnic provinces for fair representation in the government and administration, reservation in the state organ and federalism with provinces comprising ethnic groups as dominant. The issue of Janajatis got additional impetus with the declaration of 1994-2002 as the decade of indigenous people to highlight their problems and then the local issue became the part of the global movement. With the passing of the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) Act in 2002 the Janajatis got the response to the various inequality and discrimination with legal provisions. The report of Nepal committee for the UN year of Indigenous people also made the concern of the Janajatis clear: "We, the indigenous people of Nepal, wish to protect our ethnic identities ... and we are working to re-describe history. We want to write our histories ourselves". The wishes of these minorities founded on the claims of common identity and culture they believed can be best expressed through a proper history. Then there past emerged from a mixed of sources including traditional myth, local history and also the royal chronicles.

The natural and the most inevitable consequence of the cultural identity politics is the necessary claims for self-determination, in the form of autonomy or independence and since the state was unable to come up with any satisfactory policy and programme to address the ethnic problem they are on their way to new demands like separate territory.

### **III. Construction Of Mongoloid Consciousness**

'Mongols' is a popular term through which the Khambu Rai including the others are best recognized and in a broader view these race is one of the so called 'mulbasi' (aborigine) of Nepal. This group of people is adopting a racial ideology on the one hand and invoking their culture and tradition on the other claiming an exclusive identity as the indigenous and demarcation of their territory in eastern Nepal. This kind of problem related to identity is not new in Nepal at least since few years because the country which has failed to consider the aspiration of multi-ethnic groups or the Janajatis have already experienced a 'people's movement' (Jan Andolan) which was directed to anti-Brahmanism on the one hand and imbalance or unequal access to economic and political resources on the other. Situating the context of Khambu Rais of eastern Nepal their problem of identity is one of the Janajatis problems. The kind of cultural revival this group of people is ensuring definitely roots to the grievances which they suffered in the Hindu kingdom with strict high caste favoritism. The identification as a distinctive group on the basis of ethnicity (religion, culture) and regionality resulted in their demand for exclusivity which remains to be one of the most powerful social and political forces in the modern world. So, these people with their distinctive cultural heritage as their core tend to become viable political communities. The formation of their ethnic identity is largely shaped by their historical experiences of their sense of feeling to endow the nation of their dreams with a common history, based on shared ethnic memories, as well as sense of common destiny, emanating from those shared memories. The shared memories or the rectifications or justification of their past remains to be the basis for their political mobilization. Immanuel Wallerstein quotes, "The past can only be told as it truly is, not was. For recounting the past is a social act of the present done by men of the present and affecting the social system of the present...". Today, the need of these people to structure their cultural identity has compelled them to create

pressure for redefining their ways of life. With the realization of these fact that their cultural revival or re-creation of their past seeks its own recognition of some sense. The strategy of 'identity' is used for the construction and the achievement of social and material consequences. The khambus structured in their ethnic lines, is mobilizing and strategically re-creating their identities with political affiliations. Their identity is gradually been shifting from purely symbolic level to the political arena (Khambuwan mukti morcha) for the greater rights. The social structure in which they evolved has largely shaped their opinion formation regarding their identity as rightly said by Cohen 'Ethnicity has no existence apart from inter-ethnic relations' and even in these postmodern times it is probably more usual for identities to appear fixed and immutable to those who actually hold them. The establishment of the multi-party democracy in the nineties which let loose the free flow of expression and the interaction provided the platform for ethnic activism and the ethnic groups including khambus began to be conscious of their cultural differences.

The identity crisis of the Khambu Rai has reached to an extent that today they see their grievances meted only in the autonomous separate territory of Khambuwan (or Kirat Pradesh). In this process, their effort to link the culture with the history of Nepal to a great extent has helped to evaluate their existential realities.

The construction of cultural identity altogether is the creation of people and the active role of some of the ethnic people there has greatly helped by making people realize the suppression under the different monarchical ruler of Nepal. The ideology of race as of a Mongol breed (who constitute about 80% of the total population) has worked a lot for 'biologically self-perpetuating' and promoting their cause, mobilizing the people of these racial brand to enter into the war of identity. Their experience of marginalization in economic, political and cultural field and their deprivation in everyday life had its reaction through a violent revolution for the first time in 1996. That struggle specially if taken the case of khambu rai of eastern Nepal has developed in a new shape in the form of their recognition of their distinctiveness through a clear demarcation of their territory (khambuwan).

The rapid and the extreme transformations which the human society has undergone and the consequent breakup of the traditional structures and the previous affective social units had made people attach more towards their ethnic communities. The world in which everything is moving and shifting people search for a group to which they can belong forever and the identity group is the one which give them such assurance. But the identity or the cultural identity itself is not fixed or immutable, but is dynamically ascribed in the present. The cultural identity of the khambu rai is more a product of the interactions of the social others, political environment, prevailing categorical distinctions, social context rather than putative ancestry or territorial origin. Ethnic (cultural) identity is situational and continually changing. Various factors has worked towards the shaping of the identity of khambu rai like pursuit of recognition and dignity as they feel to be denigrated so far, feelings of empowerment considering their victorious past and a dream to realize the same and the most important one their constant fear and anxiety of losing their identity. Everyday life in which one operates these sense of who we are and what we could become get intensified through interaction or the creation of culture. Culture thus acts as a vehicle through which world is made meaningful to oneself and oneself meaningful to the world. The kind of suffering these people experience although tends to be real but the process through which they started to embellish their culture, 'objectification of their social life' inventing their tradition in order to represent them are the construction for the access to social, economic or cultural entitlement of various kinds. Self-knowledge of these people about themselves is rather a construction no matter how much they feel it to be like a discovery and is never altogether separable from their claims to be known in specific ways by others. Cultural identity is never a settled state but a process of continuous construction and modification, which very probably will never come to an end, however much particular groups go on inventing themselves. Khambu Rai though claims their ultimate goal to be attainment of their separate state although in future it may happen that their culture gets modifications in other forms for the realization of much greater ascription.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The worldwide consensus that the assertion of identities definitely has its linkage to certain claims, does not truly describe the ethnic problem of Nepal as the cultural discrimination, subjugation by the Hindu domination, exclusion from the state decision making processes and socio-economic deprivation of these ethnic groups is the core issues and the reality raised by the ethnic organizations. The significance of the issue lies in these fact that even if their cultural rights are assured, their present demand of self-determination has a long way to go since in a multi-ethnic country like Nepal there will be a practical problem in the creation of ethnically homogenous regions like Khambuwan due to diversity and mixture of people across ethnic boundaries and possibly there is a tendency of increasing instability and a pressure for secession among the sub-units of the ethnic groups.

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