

Call for abstracts

Negotiating ethnicity in Nepal's past and present

September 12 - 14, 2005

Kathmandu

Since 1990, ethnicity formation has provoked a large number of public debates in Nepal, and it has remained on the political agendas until the beginning of 2005. Immediately after the 'spring awakening', the image of a multicultural, multi-religious and multi-lingual Nepalese society emerged as a powerful counter-project to the official rhetoric describing Nepal in an assimilative and homogenising language during the Panchayat period. However, the project to depict the Nepalese society as 'multicultural' has proven to be an embattled ground where diverse visions, strategies and grievances have come to intersect and to contest each other. The aim of the conference is to understand these negotiations and specifically to grasp the dynamics of 'ethnicisation' and 'de-ethnicisation' in Nepal's past and present. The conference's architecture is designed around several crucial topics pertaining to ethnicity formation as well as to alternative projects. At the same time, the conference also aims to locate Nepali experiences within a wider South Asian and global contexts.

1. On the popularity of ethnicising discourses in contemporary Nepal

Currently, ethnicising discourses tend to influence peoples' conceptions of social orders all over the world, and they dominate much of political communication inside and outside Nepal. According to the critics, the 'ethnic paradigm' is based on the closure of we-groups using culturalist criteria and resulting in exclusionary practices; for its proponents, it is a necessary devise in order to mobilise resources and to realise rights. The 'ethnicisation of the political' is activated wherever the ethnic paradigm comes to dominate the political agendas and when it captures a substantial share of public representations, charging the discourses emotionally and instrumentalising them in social negotiations. With ethnicity as a mode of social ordering ranking high on political agendas, certain individual and collective actors manage to get access to political forums and media more easily than others, whereas other discourses tend to be silenced.

The major question to be addressed in the first panel is: why and how did the discourse(s) about ethnicity (*janajati*) become dominant at a particular juncture in Nepalese history and why did the

discourses about other cultural groups (religious, regions) get overshadowed or even forgotten? Thinking about the question of ethnicity in Nepal, we have to locate the ethnic issue (*janajati* issue) within the broader question of cultural difference (thus including issues pertaining to religion (Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, animisms, etc) and region (Madhesis, Tibetans, etc.) and also perhaps even Dalits. For instance, there was a time when there was a lot of discussion about conversion especially to Christianity, but this issue was slowly overshadowed by the *janajati* issue and then the Maoist movement. And earlier there was the issue of the Tarai.

Thus, the 'ethnic paradigm' has recently become the dominant model silencing other discourses such as class, region and religion. This panel seeks papers seeking to explain this shift in discursive reconfigurations. Is the attractiveness of the 'ethnic paradigm' to be seen in the previous marginalisation and exclusion of ethnic population, with grievances coming to light, once the democratisation process unfolded from 1990 onwards? If so, through which interconnections were ethnic discourses imported to Nepal? Is its attractiveness to be at least partly attributed to its strength and popularity in the global space? Is it especially to be seen in the context of the paradigm shift in the aftermath of the 1990-political transformation? Or are the alternative discourses not powerful enough at the current political moment? Can the 'ethnic paradigm' be seen as a powerful resource that can be deployed in order to reach particular goals?

2. The diversity of stakeholders and their discourses on ethnicity

The 'ethnic paradigm' is not uncontested and there is no agreement regarding its contents and shapes. The second panel seeks therefore to 'map out' the key-actors involved in political debates on the ethnicity issue and to grasp their diverse discourses about ethnicity (and cultural differences). The key actors include Maoist leaders, state officials and politicians, leaders and members of various ethnic organisations, academicians (Nepalese and foreigners), journalists, donors and others (such as possibly tourists and entrepreneurs in the tourist business).

It will be of interest to see which arguments, which discursive figures and which images are in use. Do they coincide or do they diverge? How is the validity of a discourse justified or rejected? Do the diverse discourses form a discursive field in the sense that they borrow from one another, or challenge the opposite (thus unacceptable) positions, while simultaneously taking up the opponents' concerns? To what extent is there a diversity of ethnic discourses to be observed, differences based on different objectives of particular ethnic groups? Are there strong contestations between and within ethnic groups? Is there a regional dimension to be grasped? Do discourses in Kathmandu coincide with those carried out in local contexts (urban and rural)?

3. The shift of the 'ethnic paradigm' during the last 15 years

Even during such a short span of time after the 'spring-awakening' of 1990, the discourses on ethnicity and on other dimensions of social boundaries have most certainly shifted. The third panel invites papers that seek to elaborate on these transformations. Has the term '*janajati*' gained in popularity? Are there new notions that are challenging the 'ethnic paradigm', such as the notion of social exclusion? How do diverse discursive figures come to intersect? Are other claims becoming more urgent such as those made by the Dalits? Are there shifts in public attention and / or

recognition? Are there shifts in identity politics to be discerned? (For instance between 'minority protection', 'majority protection (nationalist argument)', 'politics of recognition' etc.?) Is there a tendency for ethnic discourses to lose their immediacy at present ('de-ethnicisation')? Which factors make for all these changes?

4. Ethnicisation and its consequences

What are the consequences of these discourses for 'practices' - i.e., in terms of social inclusion and exclusion, power, status, inter-ethnic relations, etc.? To this panel contributions are invited that look at both state laws and policies (a.o. legal amendments, political representation) and also the 'popular' culture and practices. Equally important is the study of discourses and practices of ethnic groups vis-à-vis other ethnic groups, high and low caste Hindus, Madhesis, Christians and Muslims. Also, the gender dimension deserves attention in this field: are ethnicising discourses re-configuring gender relationships? Furthermore, the issue of emerging solidarity networks formed between diverse movements and organisations and their action, or lack thereof, should be discussed. And: how have identity politics contributed to shaping the nature and scope of the political communication space in Nepal?

5. Ethnicisation and de-ethnicisation in Nepal's past

In order to grasp the present-day dynamics of ethnicisation and de-ethnicisation, the history of Nepal provides a fascinating field of inquiry. This topic is in fact so broad and so understudied that it could be discussed in a separate workshop with several panels. Some of the key issues and topics which could be addressed in this panel are:

- a) Moments of ethnicisation in the Nepalese history: To this panel contributions are invited that will analyse key-moments when ethnic categories have been shaped and deployed in political language and measures. Such 'moments' can be seen in
 - a. the promulgation of Muluki Ain in the year 1854,
 - b. the petitioning by ethnic actors to amend stipulations within the Muluki Ain,
 - c. ethnic ordering in political rituals, especially on the occasion of Dasain,
 - d. the connection between ethnicity and enslavement,
 - e. the implications of the introduction of the term 'Gorkha' and of Gorkha-recruitment,
 - f. negotiations over communal land-rights (*kipat*);
- b) Discovery and use of history as argument - discourses of past wrongs, *vamsavalis* as argument;
- c) Ethnicity formation in the context of development and of environmentalist discourses;
- d) The role of language in the processes of ethnicity formation;
- e) The role of religion in the processes of ethnicity formation.

Nepal's 'ethnic paradigm' from a comparative perspective

In addition to papers on Nepal, the conference will invite scholars working on issues of ethnicisation and de-ethnicisation in other national contexts, for instance in India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Ecuador, Nigeria, Canada and Switzerland. Their contributions would not be confined to one panel. These scholars will be asked to present papers about their own countries in different panels and in two public lectures.

We solicit abstracts of about 300 words from interested scholars on any one of the themes/issues outlined above. The deadline for submitting abstracts to the Social Science Baha (baha@himalassociation.org) or any of the conference coordinators is 15th May, 2005. Only a limited number of abstracts will be accepted, based on quality and relevance. Participants are expected to make their own travel arrangements; however, local expenses (hotel/meals) in Kathmandu will be covered.

Important dates

Deadline for submission of abstracts	May 15, 2005
Information about acceptance of abstracts	May 30, 2005
Submission of papers	August 15, 2005

Conference coordinators

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