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Caste and Ethnic Area and Identity Politics in Nepal: An Anthropological Perspective

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Abstract

Every individual and ultimately the group try to identify him or herself as distinct as and more supreme than others through some symbols. This identification process is used by human beings as a tool for either psychological or biological or we can say the survival benefit. In this way, identity becomes a means of benefit. There may be so many types of identity symbols and cultural identity is one of them. Sharing the same identity symbols creates a distinct culture area. The culture area is a geographical concept of culture. This article examines the identity-making politics in modern Nepal based on different cultural elements, particularly caste and ethnicity. Therefore, this article proposes the concept of 'caste and ethnic areas,' other than culture areas, which are widely used in anthropological literature. Data were collected from primary and secondary documents and observations of Nepalese politics over a long period. A retrospective research design was applied in this study.

Keywords: Caste, Culture, Culture Area, Ethnic Group, Geographical Area

1. Background

It is taken for granted that caste and ethnicity are components of culture on the one hand and every caste and ethnic group may have similar kinds of culture on the other hand. However, a particular ethnic identity may subsume many different cultural identities (Guneratne, 2002). Again, ethnicity itself symbolizes the geographical and cultural groups. Ethnic or nationality is a social group with its mother tongue, native area, and religious tradition (Gurung, 2003). Here, we propose the terminology 'caste and ethnic area' other than 'culture area' in the context of Nepal, though we have emphasized 'culture area' because it is well-established in geography and anthropology.

It is said that there is a political interest within cultural consciousness (Tamang, 2062). The purpose of this article is to describe the identity-making politics of Nepal based on various castes and ethnic areas. Though various caste/ethnic groups have diffused in different parts of Nepal, they still centralize in their traditional areas (Gurung, 2003). Caste and ethnic areas have been described based on some similar kinds of cultural elements such as religion, language, and historical habitation, etc.

2. Methodology

This study was based on a retrospective design. This research was based on data collected from secondary materials and observations of Nepalese politics over a long period. Experiences were another method of data collection in this study. It is not described in every detail of ethnic area and form and content of different autonomous culture-based states proposed by different political and ethnic organizations, but it is a bird's eye view over this matter.

3. Conceptual Clarity

The word 'culture area' was first probably used by O. T. Mason (McGee and Warms, 2013). A culture area is a geographical unit of culture (Kroeber, 1939). A norm or standard form of tribal culture readily distinguishable from others is called a type of culture that has its geography and the segregation of cultures of the same type will form a geographical area characterized by the type (Wissler, 1965). The concepts of culture region, a cultural region, culture area, cultural area, and culture sphere are used by different scholars in anthropology and geography with similar meanings. However, the concept of culture area originated from museum curators and ethnologists during the late 1800s as a means of arranging exhibits. It was the classification of museum collections on natural geographical lines instead of evolutionarily schematic ones, according to Boas, as quoted by Kroeber (1939).

Variety of things including physical, for example, climates, landforms, and natural vegetation and so on and human for example cities, towns, custom, religion, agriculture, transportation systems, and industries and so on (i.e. culture) characterize our planet. A culture region is a portion of the Earth's surface that has common cultural elements. The culture region is the place where certain cultural traits or cultural communities are located. There are varieties of cultures on Earth and each contributes to global diversity and culture regions. Cultural geography is the study of these varieties of cultural differences that characterize the people and land.

The culture region is identified based on one or some cultural elements such as religion, language, subsistence system, political and social organization, etc. Every culture region may have some kind of cultural landscape. Culture landscape consists of material aspects of culture that characterize the Earth's surface. That includes buildings, shrines, signage, sports and recreational facilities, economic and agricultural structures, crops and agricultural fields, transportation systems, and other physical things.

Anthropologists also use the terminology 'culture area' but similar meaning with 'culture region.' This term is used to describe the areas within which the ways of life of the residents are relatively distinctive and homogeneous (Berreman, 1963). The concept of culture area is a means to an end and the end may be either understanding of culture process or the historic event of culture (Kroeber, 1939). But the anthropological concept *kulturkreis* is not synonymous with culture region.

Culture area is an area or region encompassing a group of cultures, usually contiguous, which share a set of traits that distinguish them from the cultures in other such areas, also the group of cultures within such an area (Weiss, 1973). A culture area is defined as a more or less contiguous ethnographic area inhabited by peoples who share cultural traits to an extent that distinguish them from other societies (McGee & Warms, 2013).

However, every cultural region may have a certain diversity. Certain names can be coined for a certain region based on dominant cultural elements. Culture region is not primordial but historical. Due to the different reasons,

it may be changed, disappear, expand, and contract. Identifying and mapping culture regions shows us a particular geographical area where particular cultural traits or cultural communities are located.

Human beings should make a strategy for survival according to the environment and terrain where they live. People of different regions may have different problems and prospects and may also have different knowledge, perspectives, and experiences to tackle them. That is why, culture may be different and ultimately culture region, too.

4. Empirical Findings

4.1. Indian Sub-Continental Context

Berreman (1963) described the different culture areas of India, Burma, Nepal, Pakistan based on cultural tradition and culture type (similar culture rather than a real continuity) and broadly categorized them into four cultural traditions within the two culture types as follows:

Cultural type	Cultural tradition	
1. Aryan of Indo-Iranian	a.	Indian or South Asian
	b.	Afghan-Iranian or Southwest Asian
2. Tibeto-Burman	a.	Tibetan
	b.	Southeast Asian or Burman

4.2. Nepalese Context

Geographically, Nepal is divided into several segments by the mountains, rivers, and terrain. Geographical diversities parallel to the ecological diversities in terms of climate, physical features, landscape, and altitude. Historically, different castes and ethnic groups have been come into Nepal and settled here. Politically, due to the different reasons including geographical ones, Nepal is divided into different petty states in its long history. Though Nepal is an isolated land cut off with sharp finality from the north and south, this has always become the 'melting pot' for both the people of the north and south. These historical, political, and geographical facts, which are not mutually exclusive, create different culture regions within the country and influence the present identity politics of Nepal.

Nepalese culture regions are broadly categorized by Berreman (1963) according to the three geographical elevations of Nepal. South-Asian culture, Indo-Aryan language, Hinduism, and settled agriculture- continues from the plain of North India are found in people of Terai except Tharu. People of the western and eastern part of low and middle Himalayas practices South Asian culture and combined culture with Tibetan, Indian and aboriginal characters respectively may continue from Southeast hill cultures. Tibetan culture-Tibetan language, Lamaistic Buddhism, and combination of pastoralism and settled agriculture found in Himalayan people also continue from Tibet. Table 1 also broadly categorizes the caste/ethnic region of Nepal.

The national population census of 2011 also proved that Nepal is a multiethnic and multilingual state. Among slightly more than 2.6 million Nepali people, there are more than a hundred ethnic and lingual groups. The report of the Central Bureau of Statistics (2012, p. 4) states;

> There are 125 caste/ethnic groups reported in the census 2011. Chhetri is the largest caste/ethnic groups having 16.6% (4,398,053) of the total population followed by Brahman-Hill (12.2% ; 3,226,903), Magar (7.1% ; 1,887,733), Tharu (6.6% ; 1,737,470), Tamang (5.8% ; 1,539,830), Newar (5.0% ; 1,321,933), Kami (4.8% ; 1,258,554), Musalman (4.4% ; 1,164,255), Yadav (4.0% ; 1,054,458) and Rai (2.3% ; 620,004).

> There are 123 languages spoken as mother tongue reported in census 2011. Nepali is spoken as mother tongue by 44.6 percent (11,826,953) of the total population followed by Maithili (11.7% 3,092,530), Bhojpuri (6.0%; 1,584,958), Tharu (5.8%; 1,529,875), Tamang (5.1%; 1,353,311), Newar (3.2%;

846,557), Bajjika (3.0%; 793,418), Magar (3.0%; 788,530), Doteli (3.0%; 787,827), Urdu (2.6%; 691,546).

In the words of Stiller (1975, p. 13), "This area was always an area where the Mongolian people from the north and the Indo-Aryan people from the south met and mingled." Although different ethnic groups have their own traditional homelands, due to the different opportunities and challenges, people within the country are also migrated and intermingled.

Any country may fit into many different culture regions. Nepal is considered as the 'ethnic turntable of Asia' (Hagan, 1971). There are more than 123 castes/ethnic groups living within the small territories of Nepal. Different censuses and researches show that these groups cover only caste and ethnic groups other than language groups, for example. Bengali and religious groups Churaute, Muslim, and Sikh. The ethnic label is applied either by outsiders/state (e.g. Tamang) or by people themselves (e.g. Magar) in Nepal (Guneratne, 2002). Under the Tharu ethnic identity, many cultural groups live in *Tharuwan* as they claim.

Because certain caste/ethnic group is traditionally concentrated in certain areas, it is customary to call this place as the land of this particular caste or ethnic group, for the example, *Kirant Pradesh* for hill region eastward from *Sunkoshi* river, *Magarat* for the land between *Karnali* and *Gandaki* rivers, *Khasan* for westward from *Karnali* river, *Bhot* for high Himalayan region and *Tharuwan* for whole terai (Bista, 2001). Shrestha (1981) demarcates the habitation of different caste and ethnic groups into three layers as the core area, middle area, and peripheral zone. Kroeber (1963) believes that culture areas are mostly addressed by geographical name however they also denote particular culture. But, Nepalese cultural areas are expressed by ethnic names such as *Limbuwan*, *Khambuwan*, etc.

5. Identity Politics

Nepali state not only organized the people into different castes and other groups in the Varna framework but also has tried to Hinduize them in different historical periods. People also felt proud to be Hindus. But, the present identity politics of Nepal based on caste and the ethnic area comprising with the history, language, and traditional habitation, etc. is cultural revival and partially culminated as the establishment of the federal state. The concept of caste/ethnicity is related to cultural change inspired by politics (Gurung, 2066). There are both positive and negative aspects of political mobilizations based on ethnicity (Sah, 2013).

According to Lawoti (2007) between 1770 to 1979, there were at least twenty-five ethnic and regional-based mobilizations against the state, most occurred among ethnic *Limbus* and *Rais* in the eastern hills. After the establishment of democracy in 1950, the first regionalist movement was made by The Nepal Terai Congress demanding the autonomous Terai state (Thapa, 2009). After the re-establishment of democracy in 1990, various ethnic organizations based on certain regions and ethnicities were established and eight organizations among them came under the single umbrella of 'The Nepal Federation of Nationalities'. Due to the cultural consciousness, people began to de-Hinduize after the reestablishment of democracy in 1990. The state has also been accommodating the demand for different groups of Nepal. In this way, today, Nepal is in the process of de-Hinduization the kingdom and thus the 'rules of the game' are changing (Skar, 1995).

The main demand of regional organizations after the reestablishment of democracy in 1990 was an autonomous state based on ethnicity in their respective geographical areas. But claim to separate states by different organizations was sometimes overlapping. *Khambuwan Rashtriya Morcha* was the first revolutionary ethnic organization founded in 1992 started the identity politics by demanding the *Khambuwan* as an autonomous state based on culture region. It claimed the area of present districts of Udayapur, Khotang, Bhojpur, Okhaldhunga, Solukhumbu, Dhankuta, Sankhuwasava, Ramechhap, Sindhuli, Dolakha, Saptari, Sunsari, Siraha, and parts of Sarlahi, Mahottari, Dhanusha and Morang (*Khambuwan Rashtriya Morcha*, 2010). 'Federal Limbuwan State Council' was another region-based ethnic organization of Limbus established in 2005 but the Federal Democratic National Forum and Federal Limbuwan State Council (Revolutionary) were emerged by splitting this organization later on. They demanded the Limbuwan autonomous state comprising the nine districts of the

eastern part of Nepal-Taplejung, Panchthar, Ilam, Jhapa, Sankhuwasabha, Terathum, Dhankuta, Morang, and Sunsari.

The Interim Constitution of Nepal was amended for the first time on 14 March 2007 within two months of its promulgation on 15 January 2007. The amended provision of the constitution declared that the form of reconstructing Nepal would be federal as well as it opened the way for a more inclusive democracy. The first amendment of the constitution was the outcome of the Madhesh movement. Hachhethu (2007, p. 1) observes:

> Madhesh uprising – a 21-day long mass movement participated in by large masses of the Madheshi population – was an unprecedented event parallel to *Janandolan II* of April 2006. It was a landmark event in bringing out regional-based ethnonationalism as one of the prominent issues in the national discourse on restructuring the Nepali state.

The State Restructuring Commission was formed on 14 July 2010 to provide suggestions regarding the federal division of Nepal (BBC News/Nepali, 2010). However, members of the commission could not reach the meeting point in the case of the federal division of the country. Among the nine members of the commission, six members including the president suggested 11 provinces. Among these provinces, seven would be based on ethnicity and they would be Kirat, Magarat, Tamsaling, Newa, Tamuwan, Limbuwan, and Tharuwan. Similarly, members of the commission suggested that three provinces would be according to geography and they should be Karnali-Khaptad, Mithila-Bhojpura-Koch-Madhesh, and Lumbini-Avadh-Tharuwan. The last one is a non-geographical province for Dalit. The remaining three members of the commission submitted a separate report with the suggestion of six provinces; based on strengthens and probability demarcated by rivers (BBC News/Nepali, 2012).

Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) started its armed revolt 'people's war' in 1996. Although it was a class war Maoists raised the issues of caste and ethnicity of Nepal. The election of the Constituent Assembly (CA) was the bottom line of the Maoist when they were negotiating with the government. They practiced the federal division of Nepal in their party's organization during the wartime. Finally, the alliance of seven parties and Maoist launched the people's movement in April 2006. In the pressure of the movement the direct regime of King Gyanendra's had ended. The election of CA was held in 2008. More than 60 percent of the newly elected members were associated with left-oriented politics in the CA and it was truly inclusive because the elected members were from different social dimensions, and it broke out of the mold of Nepal's socio-political culture of "institutionalized exclusion" (Manchanda, 2008). However, the first CA could not draft the constitution for the country. After nearly four years of political negotiation, in May 2012 it was dissolved before it could finalize the long-awaited constitution (Pokharel & Rana, 2013).

The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) sketched out the federal structure with thirteen provinces during the CA election, 2008, consisting of two regional and eight ethnic ones, with the Madhes ethnic state subdivided further into three linguistic units (Thapa, 2009). They were, *Seti-Mahakali, Bheri-Karnali, Magrat, Tharuwan, Tammuwan, Tambasaling, Kirat, Limbuwan, Kochila, Newa, Abadh, Bhojpura*, and *Mithila*. Changing Maoist Party - United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (2013, p. 11) proposed 11 provinces in its commitment paper (manifesto) of the second election of the constituent assembly. Maoist replaced it with *Madhesh,* a single province, instead of *Abadh, Bhojpura*, and *Mithila*, as proposed in 2008. Remain were the same as in 2008. The Communist Party of Nepal–Unified Marxist-Leninist (UML), which had come out most strongly against the recognition of identity as a basis of federalism. Another major party Nepali Congress did express its clear vision about neither federal boundaries nor its bases (Thapa, 2009).

Finally, the Constitution of Nepal promulgated by the constituent assembly in 2015 established the federal system of government in Nepal. The constitution has divided Nepal into seven provinces. But, the concept of a federal state based on cultural identity is not materialized.

The main movement after the conflict in Nepal is related to the demand for caste/ethnic-based federal state (Snaidarman, 2013). Different movements run by indigenous organizations gradually develop as the movement

for regional autonomy (Gurung, 2013). This kind of identity-based federal state became a more controversial issue among other political parties and people.

American continent can be divided into different areas, not only as of the cultural areas but also natural areas and historical areas in the sense that they are culturally, geographically and historically uniform (Kroeber, 1939). Whatever the ethnic-based provincial states were demanded by different organizations of Nepal, these are cultural/ethnic areas in the sense that within each, culture and ethnicity is relatively uniform; historical areas in the sense that each area is tried to be demarcated based on the separate state before the unification of Nepal, geographical areas in the sense that within each geography is relatively uniform and traditionally in the sense that some areas are traditional homeland of certain ethnic groups. But, sometimes historical areas and geographical areas are overlapping, for example, Limbuwan culture areas. Limbuwan activists demand the Limbuwan state covering the different geographical areas-Himalayan, Hilly, and Terai - on the historical base. There is no inherent reason why peoples of one broad cultural tradition should comprise a political entity (Berreman, 1963).

6. Conclusion

The social composition of Nepal can be identified based on their geographic origin or homeland. Caste and ethnic activists have demanded different autonomous states as a caste or ethnic state in different geographical regions based on their habitation with similar kinds of caste and ethnicity from the historical period. Likewise, the demand for separate *Madhes Pradesh* is based on both culture and geography. But, the demand for *Tharuhat* based on ethnicity lies in the same region. Yes, some ethnic and cultural groups still concentrate in a certain geographical area but their population is not in majority.

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Appendices

Table A

Caste\ethnic region in Nepal

Community	Traditional area	Race	Mother tongue	Religion
A. Indigenous \ Ethnicity				
1. Trans-Himali	North-west frontier	Mongoloid	Tibeto-Burman	Boudha and
2. Cis-Himali	Eastern frontier	Mongoloid	Tibeto-Burman	Bon
3. Matwali-Khas	Western hill	Caucasoid	Indo-Aryan	Boudha
4. Indigenous (Newar)	Nepal valley	Mixed	Newari	
5. Ethnic group	Mid & east hill	Mongoloid	Tibeto-Burman	
6. Ethnic group	Inner terai & terai	Mongoloid	Tibeto-Burman	
B. Caste groups				
1. Parbate	Western hill	Caucasoid	Indo-Aryan	Hindu
2. Immigrants (Newar)	Nepal valley	Mixed	Tibeto-Burman	Hindu
3. Madheshi	Southern frontier	Caucasoid	Indo-Aryan	Hindu
C. Others				
1. Muslim	Southern frontier	Caucasoid	Indo-Aryan	Muslim
2. Marwari	Southern frontier	Caucasoid	Indo-Aryan	Jain
3. Christian	Southern frontier	Miscellaneous	Miscellaneous	Christian

Note. Extracted from Gurung (2003)

Table B

Population Nepal by caste/ethnicity

Caste and Ethnicity	Number	Percent
Total	26,494,504	100.00
Chhetri	4,398,053	16.60
Brahman - Hill	3,226,903	12.18
Magar	1,887,733	7.12
Tharu	1,737,470	6.56
Tamang	1,539,830	5.81
Newar	1,321,933	4.99
Musalman	1,164,255	4.39
Kami	1,258,554	4.75
Yadav	1,054,458	3.98
Rai	620,004	2.34
Gurung	522,641	1.97
Damai/Dholi	472,862	1.78
Limbu	387,300	1.46
Thakuri	425,623	1.61
Sarki	374,816	1.41
Teli	369,688	1.40
Chamar/ Harijan/ Ram	335,893	1.27
Koiri/Kushwaha	306,393	1.16
Kurmi	231,129	0.87
Sanyasi/Dasnami	227,822	0.86
Dhanuk	219,808	0.83
Musahar	234,490	0.89
Dusadh/ Pasawan/ Pasi	208,910	0.79
Sherpa	112,946	0.43
Sonar	64,335	0.24
Kewat	153,772	0.58
Brahman - Tarai	134,106	0.51

Kathabaniyan	138,637	0.52
Gharti/Bhujel	118,650	0.45
Mallaha	173,261	0.65
Kalwar	128,232	0.48
Kumal	121,196	0.46
Hajam/Thakur	117,758	0.44
Kanu	125,184	0.47
Rajbansi	115,242	0.43
Sunuwar	55,712	0.21
Sudhi	93,115	0.35
Lohar	101,421	0.38
Tatma/Tatwa	104,865	0.40
Khatwe	100,921	0.38
Dhobi	109,079	0.41
Majhi	83,727	0.32
Nuniya	70,540	0.27
Kumhar	62,399	0.24
Danuwar	84,115	0.32
Chepang /Praja	68,399	0.26
Halwai	83,869	0.32
Rajput	41,972	0.16
Kayastha	44,304	0.17
Badhaee	28,932	0.11
Marwadi	51,443	0.19
Satar/ Santhal	51,735	0.20
Jhangad/ Dhagar	37,424	0.14
Bantar/Sardar	55,104	0.21
Baraee	80,597	0.30
Kahar	53,159	0.20
Gangai	36,988	0.14
Lodh	32,837	0.12
Rajbhar	9,542	0.04
Thami	28,671	0.11
Dhimal	26,298	0.10
Bhote	13,397	0.05
Bin	75,195	0.28
Gaderi/Bhedihar	26,375	0.10
Nurang	278	0.00
Yakkha	24,336	0.09
Darai	16,789	0.06
Tajpuriya	19,213	0.07
Thakali	13,215	0.05
Chidimar	1,254	0.00
Pahari	13,615	0.05
Mali	14,995	0.06
Bangali	26,582	0.10
Chhantyal/Chhantel	11,810	0.04
Dom	13,268	0.05
Kamar	1,787	0.01
Bote	10,397	0.04
Brahmu/ Baramo	8,140	0.03
Gaine	6,791	0.03
Jirel	5,774	0.02

Dura	5,394	0.02
Badi	38,603	0.15
Meche	4,867	0.02
Lepcha	3,445	0.01
Halkhor	4,003	0.02
Punjabi/Sikh	7,176	0.03
Kisan	1,739	0.01
Raji	4,235	0.02
Byasi/Sauka	3,895	0.01
Hayu	2,925	0.01
Koche	1,635	0.01
Dhunia	14,846	0.06
Walung	1,249	0.00
Munda	2,350	0.01
Raute	618	0.00
Hyolmo	10,752	0.04
Pattharkatta/ Kushwadiya	3,182	0.01
Kusunda	273	0.00
Lhomi	1,614	0.01
Kalar	1,077	0.00
Natuwa	3,062	0.01
Dhandi	1,982	0.01
Dhankar/ Dharikar	2,681	0.01
Kulung	28,613	0.11
Ghale	22,881	0.09
Khawas	18,513	0.07
Rajdhob	13,422	0.05
Kori	12,276	0.05
Nachhiring	7,154	0.03
Yamphu	6,933	0.03
Chamling	6,668	0.03
Aathpariya	5,977	0.02
Sarbaria	4,906	0.02
Bantaba	4,604	0.02
Dolpo	4,107	0.02
Amat	3,830	0.01
Thulung	3,535	0.01
Mewahang Bala	3,100	0.01
Bahing	3,096	0.01
Lhopa	2,624	0.01
Dev	2,147	0.01
Samgpang	1,681	0.01
Khaling	1,571	0.01
Topkegola	1,523	0.01
Loharung	1,153	0.00
Dalit Others	155,354	0.59
Janajati Others	1,228	0.00
Terai Others	103,811	0.39
Undefined Others	15,277	0.06
Foreigner	6,651	0.03

Note. Data extract from Central Bureau of Statistics (2012)