

OCCASIONAL PAPERS IN
SOCIOLOGY & ANTHROPOLOGY

5 EMERGING ETHNICITY AND
ASPECTS OF COMMUNITY ADAPTATION

CENTRAL DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY & ANTHROPOLOGY
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ETHNICITY AND NATIONALISM
IN THE NEPALI CONTEXT
A Perspective from Europe

Uwe Kiewelitz

In the contemporary world, ethnicity and nationalism are burning issues. Even a cursory look into the daily media proves this point. While ethnic strife within national boundaries – and often in order to draw new national boundaries – is being documented daily on the television and is featuring prominently in the newspapers, university colloquia and research papers have also wrestled with scientific answers to it as one of the prominent social issues of our times (cf., for example, Brass 1991; v.d. Berghe 1990; Erikson 1993; Hargreaves/Leaman 1995; Kellas 1993; Krueger 1993; Ratchiffe 1994; Smith 1992; Vermeulen/Govers 1994; Waldmann/Elwert 1989).

As ethnic movements have sprung up with unprecedented violence in countries as different as (former) Yugoslavia and the USSR, Rwanda and Burundi, as we witness the painfully near disintegration of Canada after the separatist votes in Quebec, and as the controversy between the Palestinians and the Israelis has reached a new turning point with the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, we are painfully beginning to ask ourselves: Which kind of glue holds today's states together? The execution of one of the foremost intellectuals in Nigeria is just the latest event in the series of violent actions involving the divergent forces of ethnicity and nationalism.

Depending on our understanding of what makes up an ethnic group, and what constitutes 'ethnicity', we can open the box of case examples the world over with other long-standing examples of civil strife: Ireland, South Africa, Tibet, and Sri Lanka are only the most prominent examples of social antagonism which runs along religious, ethnic, and/or racial lines.

Under this overall scenario of our present world, it is certainly time to discuss the problems and prospects of ethnicity and nationalism with a view on Nepal, a country in which social division – along religious, ethnic, even major linguistic (Tibeto-Burman vs. Indo-Aryan) and racial lines – is so much more prominent than the national glue which holds the country together.

As my knowledge and insights about Nepal and the region, however, are limited and only slowly emerging after one year of work in the Hindukush-Himalaya, I would like to reflect from my personal

viewpoint as a German and European and mainly draw on the anthropological literature written there and in the USA during the last five years. By this, I hope to throw some new light on a debate which has only begun and which deserves to be highlighted much more strongly in the intellectual and the public sphere in the country.

ETHNICITY AND NATIONALISM: WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

Ethnicity and nationalism are very complex social phenomena with whose understanding scientists have grappled for decades. Consequently, definitions and descriptions abound, many of which are not fully compatible with each other. However, a certain consensus seems to have been established in the major anthropological literature (for the best and most current overview, cf. Erikson 1993), out of which we can draw a conceptual basis for a better understanding. I will attempt to do this in the following paragraph.

Ethnicity and nationalism are related phenomena. Both are forms of **collective identity formation** (cf. Foster 1991: 235). In the first case, that of **ethnicity**, such a group identity formation refers to relationships between groups – above the family level – which consider themselves, or are considered, as culturally distinctive from other groups (Erikson 1993: 42) with whom they have a minimum of interactions. Such **ethnic groups** can be defined as endogamous collectivities which postulate, through selected (!) traditions, a distinctive identity (Orywal/Hackstein 1993: 598).

In the second case, that of **nationalism**, we are concerned with social processes involving groups (ethnic or otherwise) which relate to the creation, strengthening or defense of a territory which they regard as a state according to their own definition (cf. Elwert 1989: 449; Erikson 1993: 99). Such groups – usually called **nations** – can be understood as collectivities of people whose members believe that they are ancestrally related (Connor 1992: 48) and have a spatially bounded and sovereign character (Anderson 1993: 15).

In empirical terms, the following important considerations about the worldwide distribution of the two phenomena can be made:

- Only a minority of the world's states are those in which a circumscribed ethnic group is identical to the state territory: in 1971, only 12 out of 132 states fulfilled this criterion, whereas all the rest were truly multi-ethnic (cf. Antweiler 1994: 140); van den Berghe puts the estimate of such multi-ethnic states at about 85% (v.d. Berghe 1990: 5).

- Thirty - five out of the 37 major armed conflicts in the world in 1991 were internal conflicts, most of which could be aptly described as ethnic conflicts (cf. Erikson 1993: 2).

Both ethnicity and nationalism have certain commonalities with, but should still be conceptually separated from, other 'centric' processes such as racism or feminism (cf. Antweiler 1994).

Interestingly, both phenomena as described – and possibly constructed² – by social scientists, also have a number of characteristics in common (cf. Erikson 1993: 100 f.; Verdery 1994: 49):

- their understanding as **social process and social relations** rather than as static cultural phenomena;
- the idea of **fictive kinship** between the members of the respective group (ethnic group or nation);
- the creation of such relations through **everyday interaction** ("*Ethnicity emerges and is made relevant through social situations and encounters, and through people's ways of coping with the demands and challenges of life.*" Erikson 1993: 1)³; the same is illustrated for the process of national culture formation (Foster 1991);
- the **postulate of unity and homogeneity**, and the **common belief in shared culture and origins** as the basis for the collectivity;
- the **relational concept, including the drawing of clear boundaries**, i.e., a cognitive division between a homogenous 'us' and a differentiated 'them' (in Germany described as 'Wir-Gruppen-Prozesse', cf. Elwert 1989; Waldmann/ Elwert 1989; Barth 1969);
- both concepts, as far as social scientists judge them, relate to forms of social organization (Verdery 1994: 35) and **active social construction**, meaning that the phenomena are not 'natural', but created by social groups; in this sense, even the nation has been aptly called an 'imagined political community' (Anderson 1993);
- both phenomena draw on a combination between an '**altruistic**' or **symbolic, and an instrumental aspect**: the creation of 'meaning' or identity formation, on the one, and the utilization for political legitimization and political action in view of the limited resources, on the other hand: they "*simultaneously*

provide agents with meaning and with organizational channels for pursuing culturally defined interests" (Erikson 1993: 18; also cf. p. 101);

- both forms of social organization have **effects on people's consciousness** in as much as they produce a felt sense of 'difference' with regard to certain others.

The commonalities identified here exhibit a number of interesting characteristics, which at the same time illustrate the state of art and tendencies of current social science research on the subject. First of all, it becomes aptly clear that both nationalism and ethnicity are not thought of as 'primordial' or objective facts, but that their situational and subjective characteristics are given prime concern. This mainstream of theoretical thinking began with the ground-breaking work of Fredrik Barth (1969; cf. Vermeulen/Govers 1994), emphasizing the social processes of boundary formation in ethnic identity building rather than 'objective' cultural variables, i.e., showing how organized groups of people actively constructed their identity.

Secondly, the inherent duality between a group (or nation, for that matter) and its counterpart for identity formation is an important consideration as well because it takes the point of observation beyond one social entity (the classical anthropological focus).

Thirdly, the double impact on the symbolic as well as the political sphere is a further decisive issue which has spawned as much scientific as political debate.

When reflecting on these commonalities, one could conclude that ethnicity is just a variant of nationalism. Indeed, this is a position which a number of anthropologists have taken in the past. But Katherine Verdery rightly if pointedly asks whether nationalism is really nothing more than just 'ethnicity backed by an army' (1994: 42). A look into both of these phenomena which are each inspired by history can, however, show that there are differences.

ETHNICITY AND NATIONALISM: ORIGINS AND GROWTH

For long periods of history – and some present-day situations as well – the dominant forms of collective identity formation were exerted either through some forms of kinship systems or through states which were usually founded on dynastic principles, again implying kinship regulations (cf. Andersen 1993). While there seem to have been a few individual cases of rudimentary national ideology, nationalism and ethnicity as defined above were largely absent. The political organization of the state relied for its formation and fixation on the

adherence to a – usually religiously founded and sanctioned – dynasty, which made it possible for very different ethnic groups with different languages and other diverging cultural traits to coexist without a pressure for homogenization. Indeed, through marriage as a prime agent of kinship formation, dynasties were enlarged, leading to the incorporation of many different ethnic groups under one monarch. This political process, as in the Habsburg Empire, united people as different as Hungarians, Jews (the 'Kaiser von Oesterreich' was also the King of Jerusalem), Serbs, and Germans (cf. Anderson 1993: 28).

With the waning of the 'cultural glue' of religions and the dynastic order since the 17th century, and the beginning project of capitalism, modernization, and industrialization in the age of discovery – with the concomitant inventions of new and ever faster communication means and the printing press – a new form of 'imagined community' came into being: the nation. While all nationalism tries to establish a connection to 'prehistoric times', the phenomenon is thus largely recent. Indeed, the French Revolution can be said to mark the beginning of nationalism in the above defined understanding.

It is argued that the development of nationalism as a new form of collective identity formation was a necessary follower of industrial capitalism, as this required "a standardization of skills, a kind of process which can also be described as 'cultural homogenization'." (Erikson 1993: 104). In the words of Williams (1989: 429):

In the formation of identities fashioned in the constraints posed by the nexus of territorial circumscription and cultural domination, the ideologies we call nationalism and the subordinate subnational identities we call ethnicity result from the various plans and programs for the construction of myths of homogeneity out of the realities of heterogeneity that characterize all nation building.

If we accept this position, we could conclude that it was this 'myth of homogeneity' (Verdery 1994: 50) which in effect created 'ethnicity as difference' from the more latent forms of ethnic identity formation. Thus, while the process of ethnic identity formation can be understood as a universal process, in time and space (Orywal/Hackstein 1993: 603), the politically vociferous form of ethnicity only developed as a response to the threat of nationalism which tended to neglect, even tried to eradicate, ethnic difference. In fact one could postulate: *the stronger the case was, and is, made for nationalism, the stronger the reactions of ethnic groups who fear to be losers of the nationalistic project.*

Recently, the projects of a 'multicultural democracy' within a nation, or of a plurinational social and political entity have become

more pronounced, at least on the level of intellectual debate in the United States, Germany (cf. Cohn-Bendit/Schmid 1993) or the European Union. However, exactly this time marks the reappearance of the most cruel (civil) wars in the name of nationalism or ethnicity.

One of the interesting social facts about the phenomena of ethnicity and nationalism is that while until the 1960s scientists were thinking of 'ethnicity' – then called 'tribalism' or 'nativism' – as a vanishing category under the influence of the increasing 'nation-building' character of the world, the 'melting pot' phenomenon and the influences of globalization, from the late 1960s onward, it was evident that political identity formation under 'ethnic' considerations was reappearing on the international agenda, not only in the so-called 'Third World', but with equal thrust in Europe and North America. And it was in fact mostly in the industrialized and modernized countries of Europe and North America that a doubt was cast on national identity formation by a number of ethnic movements: the Flemish in Belgium, the Scots and Welsh in the United Kingdom, Catalans and Basques in Spain, Bretons in France, Moluccans in the Netherlands, and American Indians in the USA (cf. Smith 1992: 1; Kievelitz 1986). This, indeed, was the birth of the term 'ethnicity'.

Therefore, while only nationalism and nation-building were anticipated to occur worldwide, the reality since the 1960s shows a complex array of ethnic claims and clashes: urban ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples' movements, violent uprisings and suppressions of 'proto-nations' (Kurds, Sikhs, Tamils, Kashmiris), 'ethnic cleansing' (Berghe 1990) side by side with 'multicultural democracies' (Cohn-Bendit/Schmid 1993). In fact, 'ethnicity' against 'nationalism' is presently one of the 'classics' in national and – at least for the 'proto-nations' – even international conflict scenario.

Thus, shortly before the end of the century we still experience the simultaneous persistence of the nation-state as well as of ethnic identity in the face of attempts at larger political and cultural units (like the European Union) and an emerging 'global ecumene' (cf. Foster 1991) – meaning a world increasingly tied together and homogenized by political, cultural, and mass-communicative processes. This ubiquity of the two related phenomena of collective identity formation under the combined pressures of homogenization and 'segmentary identities' (Erikson 1993: 152) to the extreme of post-modern individualism deserves continued social science attention.

EXAMPLES FROM EUROPE

It is difficult to find, when looking at European movements for ethnicity and nationalism, cases which are comparable to that of

Nepal. Neither does one find the multiplicity of ethnic groups in most of the countries which is so characteristic for Nepal, nor the constellation of young parliamentary democracy and centuries-old kingdom. Nevertheless, some cases might be illustrative of the potential problems coming up for Nepal in the future.

The case of **Germany** is interesting for its peculiar 'national issues' during the past 150 years of history. Germany exhibits a long history of emigration and immigration and thus actually a resulting multicultural society, which however is constantly denied by politicians up to the present day (Bade 1995). On the contrary, historically, the idea of a German 'nation', born only in the beginning of the 19th century and originally directly inspired by the French Revolution, was always prevailing; it was an understanding of nation which was founded on patrilineal descent and common history. While originally its aspiration was democratic and egalitarian (culminating in the 'Frankfurter Nationalversammlung' – national assembly – in 1848), it picked up more and more conservative speed in the late 19th century. The myth of the homogenous nation, united by German descent ('blood'), was increasingly abused by the political rulers (the King and the President of the Reichstag) and in consequence not only led to two terrible world wars, but even more so to the incredible conscious attempt at ethnocide of the Jewish and Semite people in Germany and Eastern Europe, led by a pseudo 'national socialist' ideology.

While the complex political, social, and mass psychological phenomena behind German history are essentially beyond this contribution, it is important to recognize some of the implications for modern-day politics. The idea of 'nation' in Germany has lost most of its appeal with the post-war generation. History as a medium of identity formation has become very difficult to allude to in the face of these brutal events of the recent past. However, the idea of common ties by descent ('blood') is still visible in German laws – this being the basis for determining citizenship up to today (cf. Cohn-Bendit/Schmid 1993: 201) – as well as in everyday German reflections of identity: there are Germans and there are 'Auslander' (foreigners). Yet this simple boundary formation in practice does not hold true, as at least six different degrees of 'Germanness' can be differentiated (cf. Erikson 1993: 113 ff.), which quite evidently cut across territorial boundaries. Presently more than 7 million foreigners do live in Germany, many of them for at least two generations.

In consequence, the construct of a 'multi-cultural democracy' is slowly gaining ground in political debate (cf. Cohn-Bendit/Schmid 1993), meaning the unemotional acceptance of the fact that Germany

has been, and is, an immigration country, and that politics as well as social realities should be constructed around the idea that multiple identities (both between and even within persons!) do not harm the strength of a constitutional democracy, but can actually enrich it. In the words of Michael Walzer:

I will identify myself with more than one group: I will be American, Jew, East Coast inhabitant, Intellectual and Professor. Imagine a similar multiplication of identities everywhere on earth, and the world will begin to look like a less dangerous place. When identities multiply, passions will subside.

(Cohn-Bendit/Schmid 1993: 348; my translation)

Whether such an attempt at a new definition of our German collective identity/identities will be successful in future, only time will tell.

Other European cases might be interesting as well, when drawing comparisons to Nepal. For example, there is the case of Spain, which is a country in which parliamentary democracy has only been established 20 years ago, but in which the monarchy has a long history. The beginning of this democratic venture, which was accompanied by a strong appeal to nationalism, was almost immediately counterbalanced by ethnic movements in the regions of Catalonia and the Basque country (Euskadi), which have long-established ethnic identities. The movements were, and still are – at least in the case of the Basques – political in their struggle for regional autonomy; an ideology which the ‘national project’ was not ready to accept. The King, playing a very positive role in the establishment and strengthening of democracy, nevertheless, did not play a significant role up to the present in preventing increasing violence from, and against, the separatist movements.

Spain is illustrative of the problems of containing ethnic violence once it has begun and been suppressed for some time. Violence and counterviolence tend to retaliate, keeping the state tethered to a precarious problem (cf. Kievelitz 1986). Spain is also illustrative of a country which in a historic period lost its ‘vitality’ and international importance when attempting to suppress the diversity it contained within. The rich and vibrant culture which had developed especially in Southern Spain by the first half of the second millennium with the intermingling of Jews, Arabs, and Christians of different ethnic origins, was step-by-step destroyed in the name of a pure Spanish Christianity until the 17th century. The advanced scientific and university culture of the country as well as the specific forms of art (like the ‘mudejar’ art, a peculiar combination of European and Arabian art expressions) which had been the hallmark of

Spain for centuries, was thus lost (cf. Cohn-Bendit/Schmid 1993: 204 ff.).

The case of former **Yugoslavia** can hardly be left out when discussing ethnicity and nationalism from a European perspective. It is the brutal civil war which has shocked, more than any other event in the past decades, the Europeans, for mainly two reasons:

- with the political developments after the past two world wars, most (especially Western) Europeans had assumed that developments in politics as within civil society in the European countries had led to a point where external warfare – especially in the context of the East-West antagonism – was still probable, but internal warfare was practically ruled out;
- the emerging ‘European dream’ of a larger collective identity slowly being formed from within Central Europe, which would be able to solve political and economical challenges in the future, was severely shattered in the course of the five-year war in former Yugoslavia. The European Community/Union in fact proved unable to contain the brutal killings – which even came close to ethnocidal/genocidal proportions; it was not even successful in helping to end the war.

The peculiar fact about former Yugoslavia from the point of view of ethnicity and nationalism is that for two generations, ethnic identities – existing between Serbs and Croats as well as other ethnic groups of the country – were of low importance in the context of the Socialist nation-building efforts of Tito.

There had been peace between Serbs and Croats since 1945, and the rate of intermarriage between the groups had been high. Serbs and Croats speak the same language. Perhaps the main differences between the groups are that they practice different variants of Christianity, and that they use different scripts. (Erikson 1993: 38 f.)

Nevertheless, with the political vacuum appearing after Tito’s death and after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, former ethnic boundaries were reactivated, mainly because of political power interests. They were practically declared ‘impermeable’, even though Yugoslavs who had undergone interethnic marriage and who were living in countries outside of Yugoslavia often did not even know which ethnic group they should affiliate to. Furthermore, presumed cultural differences were discovered despite ‘objective facts’ to the contrary, and they were declared irreconcilable. In fact, following the arguments of Barth (1969), one could presume that cultural variation

between Serbs and Croats would become a more established 'fact' after the ethnic war, the drawing of new boundaries – like it has been decided upon now in the Peace Treaty – and the resulting actual separation of the two ethnic groups. Ethnicity – as almost exclusively driven by political aspirations and power interests – has thus created a way to a new nationalism which is purely ethnically based: there will be a Serb country and a Croatian country. The incredible loss of lives and destruction which had to be paid for such a redrawing of the political landscape and the unsolvable oddities that have been created – for example, an ethnically divided Sarajevo – are the result of ethnic nationalism gone wild.

CONSEQUENCES FOR NEPAL

It seems to be as fascinating as it is complex and difficult to apply scientific knowledge about ethnicity and nationalism – and especially their combination – to the case of Nepal. In this last chapter, I will only make a few pragmatic and cursory remarks, without any authoritative arguments. However, I hope that they will at least be, in the context of what has been said before, intellectually stimulating.

Nepal provides a complex case for the discussion of ethnicity and nationalism for at least the following reasons:

- it is a multiethnic state with at least 35 groups which can be differentiated on linguistic and/or ethnic grounds (cf. Bista 1972; Dahal 1995);
- even the linguistic majority of Nepali speakers is clearly heterogenous and, according to their own criteria, would certainly exhibit a number of internal boundaries, mostly on caste rather than 'ethnic' grounds;
- the country exhibits, like Britain and other European countries, a combination of dynastic principles of social organization with emerging ethnic and nationalist ideologies;
- its limited natural and political resources are quite unequally divided between different collectivities of people.

In consequence of these characteristics and of the international influences, it can be assumed on pure theoretic grounds that both ethnicity and nationalism are on the rise. In fact, a surfacing of both processes can clearly be observed at least since the time of a more or less pure dynastic reign was over with the advent of multiparty democracy in 1990 (Bhattachan 1995: 134).

Let us first have a look at the process of **nationalism**. Clearly, one would presume such a process to increasingly take place

as a consequence of modernization and as a reaction to the 'natural order of diversity' in a diversified and fragmented mountain ecology. In fact, the theoretically described process of boundary formation can easily be verified from public debate. As it appears, it is often drawn in contrast to India, the country which is the economically as well as politically most important counterpart among all the states surrounding Nepal. Ideologically, India can, and actually seems to, figure at times as an overpowering adversary in opposition to which the ruling parties since the democratic rule in 1990 have repeatedly tried to establish the image of the Nepalese nation. Nevertheless, the creation of collective identity is much more difficult than the creation of a binary opposition, for the very facts of the multi-ethnic base of the country and the physical limits work against overcoming this situation fast. The very vehicles of nation-building, in the terms of Anderson (1993), that is, the advent of industrial capitalism with its concomitant language unification, communication, infrastructure, and printing press establishments, show severe limitations which might not be overcome in the near future. Even the important vehicle of education (cf. Goldstein-Kyaga 1993, exemplifying the Tibetan case) shows the same limits to providing a more unified collective identity, bearing in mind that Nepali does not account for much more than one half of the country as the first language/mother tongue (Baral 1995: 44).

The vehicle of religion – in theory a vehicle pre-dating nationalism as a unification agent (Anderson 1993) – assumes importance in the attempt for *Hinduization*: not only for its potential in homogenizing the 'imagined community of Nepalis', but for its actual potential of dividing it along the ethno-linguistic lines (cf. Bista 1992). To this end, the King and the Kingdom might play a related, yet less controversial role. However, overall religious pluralism is still a fact of Nepalese culture, and religion seems to play the least controversial role in the question of unity or division in Nepal (cf. Dahal 1995: 168).

In essence, then, the national project, at least as a nationalistic project, remains fairly unstable; and this, I might be allowed to say, seems to be fair enough, if one draws on the case of neighboring Bhutan for an illustration of the consequences of an – in my eyes often chauvinistic – ethno-nationalistic ideology with regard to ethnic pluralism and tolerance.

What about the issue of **ethnicity**, then? Clearly, as the attempt – apparently of the ruling upper caste Hindu part of society – becomes increasingly rigorous to define and proclaim the nation (cf. Bhattachan 1995; Bhattachan/Pyakuryal 1995), ethnic identity

formation might quickly go beyond the purely symbolic level and try to enter more strongly the public political arena in the contest for claims on the limited resources. In fact, this is also what seems to have happened since about 1990, as many ethnic groups – mostly those of non-Indian/Hindu origin – have started to establish their own political or ‘cultural’ organizations and to put forward their claims.

One could presume that, as long as resources are scarce, and the pressure for increased nationalism remains high, ethnicity will tend to be increasingly heard and seen in the political arena – potentially even with connotations of violence and repression (cf. Bhattachan 1995: 134-137).

As the cases of Germany, Spain, and former Yugoslavia should illustrate, the negative impacts in terms of economic and social costs of an increased antagonism between nationalism and politically instrumentalized ethnicity can be enormous. Reconciliation between the legitimate social and cultural striving forces behind both phenomena is the main challenge for a society.

What could be the prospects for Nepal under such a scenario? With this question, I finally leave the position of the impartial scientist. Both the ethnic and the national projects seem to me to have a certain legitimacy and persistence for Nepal in the sense that, while the overcoming of internal antagonistic differences and inequalities is of prime importance (this would mark the trend toward, and legitimacy for, a certain nationalism), it has to be linked, under a concern for equity and social stability, with the realignment of resources to different groups (this would mark the trend toward, and legitimacy for, ethnicity).

Two options can be foreseen from my point of view:

- a. the more demanding – and in the near future possibly unrealistic? – option being the development of a **multi-cultural democracy which constitutionally defines itself as a nation characterized by pluralism.**⁴
- b. the more ‘opportune’, i.e., on close range realistic, option could be a **political concentration of all major forces in society on the project of poverty alleviation rather than on nationalism or ethnicity.**

Poverty is the most urgent and vexing problem of Nepal, with up to 70% of the population defined as being poor. Poverty is partly based on ethnic lines, and in as much as the political project of poverty alleviation might also concern group-related poverty, it would require the acknowledgment of ethnic identities – maybe even through

quota systems – before their overcoming can be attempted. But clearly poverty cuts beyond those into other social divides: those of class, caste, and gender (cf. Dahal 1995). Therefore, the project of poverty alleviation has the potential to bring together major social and political forces across ethnic divides in overcoming rampant poverty, leading to a more equitable, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural society for all Nepalis. It could – and in my opinion should – therefore be the task of social scientists, and foremost anthropologists, to

- help to **clarify the options**: this would mainly relate to theoretical and comparative studies of the different South Asian and international models of multi-cultural nation-building and poverty alleviation available;
- help to **elucidate the constraints**: this calls mainly for investigations into the complex topic of collective identity formation (cf. the questions put forward in Verdery 1994) and the role of different social actors (e.g., the King; political parties; social movements; etc.) in it; and
- **reflect the actual societal process**, including the politics of culture, the culture(s) of politics, and the role of science itself in that context.

NOTES

1. This article is a revised version of a paper presented at a seminar on **Ethnicity and Nation-Building** organized jointly by the Central Department of Sociology and Anthropology and The South Asia Institute of the University of Heidelberg in Kathmandu, Nepal, on December 22-23, 1995.
2. The ‘creation’ and support of ethnicity – more than nationalism – through social sciences, mostly anthropology, is at present a strongly debated issue (cf. Wicker 1995).
3. This marks for Erikson one of the main reasons why anthropology is the prime science to investigate such phenomena (Erikson 1993: 1).
4. In this context, the case example of Indonesia with its ‘unity in diversity’ is illustrative for comparative purposes.

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THE ISSUE OF NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN NEPAL An Ethnoregional Approach

Krishna B. Bhattachan¹
Kailash N. Pyakuryal

Roti bhaneko chillo mitho, kura bhaneko khasro mitho.
(Call a spade a spade)
- A popular Nepali saying.

There is no doubt whatsoever that the problems related to the various ethnic and depressed caste groups in Nepal constitute the singlemost serious issue of the day facing the Nepalese society after the people's movement of 1990. People here have ever since been asking: Will Nepal face ethnic problems as acute as in Sri Lanka or Yugoslavia? Can the process of national integration in Nepal be really equated with the idea of a 'melting pot' as is often done? Is Nepal a 'garden of all castes and ethnic groups' in the real sense? And, should the monopoly of the dominant Hindu hill caste groups end?

Articles have, no doubt, appeared to address these queries.² But most of them have somehow ignored the policy implications of such ethnoregional problems in the context of national integration. This article intends to show that there was no rational ethnic policy in Nepal in the past nor is there any at the present. It also suggests that the ethnic-paradigm should be treated as a central element in everything related to planning, policies, and programing. Alleviation of poverty also demands a serious discussion of the various dimensions of ethnic issues. In that context, this article expects to generate a rational discussion of the implications of ethnoregional problems for the social and national integration of Nepal.

For the purpose of this discussion, **ethnicity** has been defined as a process of reciprocal, common identification (or 'peoplehood') marked by (a) symbols of shared heritage, including language, religion, and customs; (b) an awareness of similar historical experience; and (c) a sense of in-group loyalty or 'we feeling' associated with a shared social position, similar values and interests, and often, but not inevitably, identification with a specific national origin. **Social integration** is a condition of achieving a relatively cohesive and functioning interaction system in a society among different people as a precondition to national integration. Finally,

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national integration is a progressive process of identifying commonalities with respect to common goods but maintaining and promoting the distinct ethnic identity of each group through social integration within the framework of the current international political boundaries. To achieve national integration, all the ethnic groups must have shared values in which the cultural aspirations of each group are also reflected. However, in order to protect diversity within a framework of these shared values, at least three measures need to be taken: (a) ending all kinds of negative discrimination and promoting positive discrimination to overcome the historical disparities that may subsist between the various groups; (b) promoting equal opportunities; and (c) making education practically accessible to all.

This article is divided into seven sections: (1) Nepal: a Country of Diversity; (2) A Brief Review of the State's Position on Ethnic Issues; (3) Decentering the Concept of National Integration; (4) Increasing Significance of Ethnic Identity; (5) Hotspots of Ethnic Conflicts; (6) Issues at Stake; and (7) Ethnic Reconciliation.

NEPAL: A COUNTRY OF DIVERSITY

Nepal is a country of diversity in terms of race/caste and ethnicity, language, religion, region/ecology, society, and culture. All these diversities revolve around the center of ethnicity that calls for a multi-paradigm approach in its developmental plans, strategies, policies, and programs.

Racial Diversity

Nepal's racial composition is derived mainly from two major groups, Mongoloid and Caucasian.³ Whereas the Mongoloid people, many of whom are indigenous peoples, are relatively isolated geographically and more close to the Tibetans, the Caucasians are close to the people of the Indo-Gangetic plain, particularly Bihar and Uttar Pradesh of India.⁴ This makes these two groups culturally distinct from each other. The other two groups are Dravidian (*Jhangad/Dhangad* and Proto-Australoid or Pre-Dravidian (*Satar/Santhal*) in origin.

During the last two centuries, the hill Chhetris, particularly Thakuris, ruled the country and other hill Chhetris and Bahuns were the most privileged caste groups in Nepal, which always remained very close to the royalties with access to and control over most of the available resources. As an exception, the Newars, one of the Mongoloid groups shared those resources with hill Bahuns and Chhetris mainly because they have been for a long time the dominant urban-oriented ethnic group in the Kathmandu Valley.

Linguistic Diversity

Ethnic identities and languages go hand in hand in Nepal where over 70 languages are spoken.

The National Language Policy Recommendation Commission (NLPRC) has noted that there are, on the one hand, multi-lingual caste and ethnic groups, and on the other, diverse castes and ethnic groups, which speak single or multiple languages.⁵ The rulers have taken advantage of such complicated linguistic situation to impose and rationalize Nepali as the only official language in Nepal. Nepali language is increasingly being perceived by various ethnic groups, whose mother tongue is not Nepali language, as imposed by the rulers. However, quite a few ethnic groups have now started to rediscover their scripts and teach their languages to their children and adults. The Nepal Sadvabana Party has gone so far as even to demand official recognition of Hindi as the official language in the Tarai region, although it is the vernacular language of not one minority even there.

Nepali language has been imposed by the hill Bahun-Chhetri rulers as the official language of Nepal and the 'democratic' constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal-1990 declares Nepali as the *Rashtra-Bhasha* ('national-language') and other native languages as *Rashtriya-Bhashaharu* 'languages of the nation'. Sanskrit has been made a compulsory course of study for the high school students. Such a policy is viewed by the ethnic groups as a strategy of dominant caste groups to deprive their children of higher education. The *Nepal Janajati Mahasangh*, which is a federation of 22 indigenous and marginalized ethnic groups, has demanded an equal status for all the languages, including Nepali and withdrawal of the government's decision on Sanskrit as well as support for education in their respective mother tongues.

Religious Diversity

People in Nepal follow different religions, namely, Animism, Bon, Lamaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, and there may be many sects even within each of these religious systems. Among them, Christianity is of recent development and Christians have been blamed by the Hindus for large-scale conversion of the Hindus and Buddhists, which the Hindus argue, the Constitution does not allow.⁶ Actually the Constitution of 1990 explicitly declares Nepal as a Hindu kingdom although people remain divided on this point and the issue of secularism has sharpened the debate recently. The Constitution, however, allows everyone to practice the traditional

religion of one's own family. The Trident, the Thunderbolt, the Crescent, and the Cross are all thus seen here in conflict with one another, even if the Trident remains a dominant force due to the constitutional and legal protection given by the state.⁷

Regional Diversity

Ethnogeographically speaking, regional variations exist due to the land's extreme ecological diversity. The country is divided into three main ecological regions, five development regions, and 12 ethnic regional clusters.

The three ecological regions are: (i) the Mountain, (ii) the Hills, and (iii) the Tarai. The nature and cultures of these three regions vary significantly. Politically, the hill peoples have been dominant in the Mountain as well as the Tarai. Therefore, there is a direct conflict between the hill and the Tarai peoples.⁸

The five development regions demarcated during the course of the Panchayat rule are: (i) Eastern Development Region, (ii) Central Development Region, (iii) Western Development Region, (iv) Mid-Western Development Region, and (v) Far-Western Development Region. Among them, the Central Region is the most affluent, the Eastern Region is relatively better off, the Western and the Mid-Western regions are somewhat behind the Central and Eastern Regions, and the Far-Western Region remains the most neglected area where the Chhetris, Magars, and Tharus are heavily concentrated with the third group suffering most.

Until 1768 there were 12 ethnic regional clusters: (i) *Awadhi*, (ii) *Bhojpuri*, (iii) *Jadon*, (iv) *Khambuan*, (v) *Khasan*, (vi) *Kochila*, (vii) *Limbu*, (viii) *Magarat*, (ix) *Maithil*, (x) *Nepal*, (xi) *Tamba Saling*, and (xii) *Tamuan*. King Prithvi Narayan Shah of Gorkha conquered the city states of Kathmandu Valley, and absorbed all the petty states in his process of 'unification.' This led to the emergence of a centralized government under a single sovereign called *Maharajadhiraj* ('the Emperor'). However, the ethnic-based political parties which have emerged recently, for example, the *Nepal Janajati Party* and the *Nepal Jani Party*, have demanded federalism based on those ancient traditional ethnic regional clusters.⁹

Society and Culture

The diversities described above have helped Nepal to develop a plural society and culture. Dahal, who identifies more than 100 distinct ethnic/caste clusters, aggregates them into five broad groups: (a) Hindus with caste origins; (b) Newars; (c) ethnic/tribal groups; (d) Muslims; and (e) others (Sikhs, Bengalis, Marwaris, and Christians).¹⁰

A more logical grouping, however, would be: (1) high caste Hindus of the Hills; (2) high caste Hindus of the Tarai; (3) low caste Hindus of the Hills and the Tarai; (4) indigenous and marginalized ethnic groups; (5) Muslims; (6) Sikhs, Bengalis, and Marwaris; and (7) Nepali citizens of European origin.¹¹ The rites-de-passage and religious practices, norms and values, kinship features, and culture patterns of these groups differ, often significantly. Such differences make Nepal a small world in itself. But while many take it as a matter of strength, the privileged groups consider it a source of weakness and future problems.

Such diversities demand pluralistic approaches for uplifting the standard of people's life here. The official ban on household production of liquor and cow slaughter hurts the sentiments of many people.¹² Similarly, the imposition of Sanskrit language at the high school level by the state and the absence of a policy on vernacular language as a medium of teaching deprives them of equal educational opportunities. What works for one group, moreover, may not work for another. An income generating program of pig raising, for instance, would not succeed amongst the devout Bahuns and Muslims, just as the agents of development programs, who can speak only in Nepali may not succeed in non-Nepali speaking communities. Bhattachan writes:

Nepal's status of underdevelopment has remained the same for several decades as one of the last 12 poorest countries in the world, a fact which itself indicates the failure of the past development paradigms to change the quality of life of the poor Nepalese peoples. One of the crucial reasons for such stagnation is the ignoring of ethno-development in all development plans, programmes, policies, and strategies. Unless the current and future development plans and programmes are geared towards ethno-centered development, stagnation will continue for a long time.¹³

As caste/ethnicity is at the center of Nepalese social structure, the ethnic paradigm should get a central focus in all plans, both in the perspective as well as five year plans.

STATE'S POSITION ON ETHNIC ISSUES

According to the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal - 1990, Nepal is a **Hindu kingdom**. The constitution recognizes Nepal as a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, democratic, independent, indivisible, and sovereign nation.¹⁴ The description of Nepal as a single nation-state is self-contradictory in nature as it at the same also recognizes the plural nature of ethnic groups and cultures. Nepal is also a multi-religious state and religion, like racial origin, language, and nationality, is one of the important attributes of ethnicity.

Though the constitution provides an individual the right to adhere to and practice one's own religion (thus recognizing the existing multiple religions in Nepal even if at the same time it also underlines the dominance of the Hindu caste groups by labeling the country a Hindu kingdom), it prohibits conversion into another religion.¹⁵

The state appears to accept the responsibility of establishing coordination among different ethnic groups with different racial origins, castes, religions, and languages by eliminating all kinds of economic and social inequalities.¹⁶ Though the constitution of Nepal thus does not overlook the fact of economic and social inequalities among the various ethnic groups, the policies and programs of His Majesty's Government of Nepal (HMG-N) do not reflect a sincere effort to deal with these inequalities with appropriate justice as stipulated under the Constitution.

Until 1990 HMG-N did not even collect census data regarding ethnic affiliation and it was only in the 1991 census that ethnic information appeared. However, the caste and ethnic groups identified in the 1991 census report have not been free from the criticism of various ethnic groups for being too biased in favor of the hill Bahun-Chhetris and Hindus. Census data have as a consequence invited attributes such as *nithyanka* ('false data').

During the Panchayat period, no development programs were implemented for raising the quality of life of the underprivileged ethnic and depressed caste groups, barring the half-heartedly implemented *Praja Bikash Karyakram* ('Chepang Development Program'). Even after 1990, the interim government and the Nepali Congress government formed after the general election of 1991 did not care to consider the ethnic reality in formulating government plans, policies, strategies, and programs. It was only in the annual program of the Nepal Communist Party (United Marxist and Leninist) government in 1995, that HMG-N allotted some nominal budget for the upliftment of the underprivileged and native ethnic groups.¹⁷ But these programs could not address the major issue of ethnic exploitation nor could they put the underprivileged ethnic groups on an equal footing with other privileged groups.

The present coalition government of the Nepali Congress Party, the National Democratic party, and the Nepal Sadvabana Party, too, has a program for the development of Chepangs and other ethnic groups, such as Raute, Musahar, Jhangar, Dom, Dusadh, Satar, and Dhimal. There is also a program for the upliftment of the native ethnic groups. The objective of these programs for the 1995/96 fiscal year is limited to the study of the socio-economic conditions of these

ethnic groups and to the establishment later of a foundation for the promotion and development of their culture.¹⁸ Recently, a task force formed by HMG/N has submitted its report about the establishment of a foundation for upliftment of the nationalities.¹⁹

Such programs, as they are, make the native ethnic groups merely a subject to be studied. The state does not seem to show any sincerity in recognizing the continuing unequal distribution of rewards and privileges; nor does it demonstrate any serious change in ethnic policy which would show a certain modicum of progress. The Prime Minister recently touched upon the idea of establishing a foundation in the near future in the course of his address in a national convention of the Gurungs. But mere setting up of a foundation or even creation of a ministry of ethnic groups would hardly help to materialize social justice in Nepal. In the place of such ceremonial harangues, the ethnic-paradigm should be internalized at all levels of public policies and by all public actors, including the political leaders, bureaucrats, and social workers.

DECENTERING 'NATIONAL INTEGRATION'

In Nepal the concept of national integration had a single meaning until 1990. Till then, the hill Hindu rulers interpreted the concept in terms of Hinduization, Sanskritization, and Nepalization. Their source of such inspiration was King Prithvi Narayan Shah's saying: *Nepal char jat chhattis varnako phulbari ho* ("Nepal is a garden of four castes and thirty-six varnas").²⁰ The 'assimilation theory' of national integration, practiced elsewhere, was advocated in Nepal by both the Western and Nepalese scholars and the development practitioners, too, had been influential in reinforcing such a monolithic notion of national integration. But now the decentering of such a monolithic notion of national integration has, somehow, begun. In the changing context, the traditional notion "should be interpreted as the king's idea of internal autonomy to bind the different ethnic groups into a single territorial nation-state, or into a multi-ethnic nation-state."²¹ Another scholar notes: "... the old model of integration is no longer acceptable to the different ethnic groups. Ethnic nationalism is taking deeper and deeper roots."²²

Poudyal is of the opinion that "... the process of national integration is to bring together the culturally disparate parts into a closer approximation of one nation. In the process of national integration, however, the ethnic groups should be given a chance to maintain their 'minimum value-consensus' in society."²³ Poudyal's conception of national integration is problematic for ethnic groups

because these groups, if his prescription is to be followed, will get a chance to maintain 'minimum value-consensus' and the rest might still be imposed by the ruling Hill Hindu Bahuns and Chhetris.

In a marked contrast, Gurung argues: "National integration is a political idea and an ideal. It implies a national state where citizens have full right without any form of segregation."²⁴ But if the concept of national integration is a political concept, then it should not be the monopoly of the ruling Hill Hindu Bahuns and Chhetris to define it according to their convenience to protect their vested interests, that is, the interest to control political, economic, cultural, and other resources of Nepal. Recently, however, alternative thinking about the concept of national integration is emerging.

Fisher, in his interpretation of *Mahakabi* Laxmi Prasad Devkota's poems, says: "If national unity depends on the acceptance of a framework in which multiple cultures or flowers are allowed to compete without one dominating the whole system or garden, then it may require the resurrection and embracing of indigenous 'sprouts'."²⁵

Leaders of all political parties are divided within their parties on ethnic issues. Some strongly favor, others strongly oppose the ethnic paradigm. Unlike the dominant political parties, however, Nepal Sadvabana Party has taken up the goal of safeguarding the ethno-regional concerns of *Madhesiyas* as a prime issue.

INCREASING SIGNIFICANCE OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

Many Nepalese wonder why there is an increasing significance of ethnic identity in an open society and why ethnicity did not matter much before 1990. The best answer to these curiosities was given by Cohen who said: "Ethnicity has no existence apart from inter-ethnic relations."²⁶

Historically, before the so-called 'unification' of Nepal or the 'Gurkha expansionism' there were many independent small states, including 22 and 24 principalities which lived in isolation. Most of the diverse cultural, linguistic, religious groups, and their social institutions and identities evolved during those times. In *Lig Lig* in Gorkha, during those old bygone days, the person who won the race was selected as the king. Later, the high caste Hindu rulers imposed 'Gorkhanization,' Hinduization, Sanskritization, and Nepalization by imposing first coercive legal and then, more recently, constitutional measures.²⁷ The rulers, following the East India Company's strategy of 'Divide and Rule,' divided the indigenous ethnic groups into several factions. For example, Gurungs were divided into four castes and sixteen sub-castes, and the *Dus* (Ten) Limbus were divided into hundreds of *Subbas*.²⁸ It, therefore, appears that the rulers themselves

were against social integration in Nepal. Until the fifties of this century, most Nepalese peoples also lived in isolation due to a lack of modern transportation and communication facilities and because of the state policies.

But during the last five decades, Nepalese people have increasingly been coming in close contact as a result of the revolution in transport and communication facilities in the country. With the re-introduction of the multi-party political system in 1990, various ethnic and caste groups are 're-discovering' and asserting their ethnic and caste identity. One reason was the gradual increase in the number of educated people among the various ethnic and underprivileged caste groups, especially after the 1950 revolution. Three other factors, namely, (a) extreme inequality in the distribution of resources, (b) homo-social reproduction of the 'power elite,' and (c) state-protected dominant-subordinate ethnic group relations over these resources, have prompted various ethnic and underprivileged caste groups not only to rediscover and reconstruct their ethnic identity but also to assert it very strongly. In response to such challenges, the hill Bahuns, Chhetris, and Thakuris have begun to undergo a certain self-transformation through ethnicization. According to Sharma:

An interesting current trend is that the Hindu caste groups are also beginning to get 'communalised', that is, gaining an ethnic identity all their own. Earlier, the Bahuns – the Brahmins of the Nepali hills – had formed part of the ruling class. Hence they had little reason to develop a communal psychology as did the under-privileged, discriminated groups The Thakuri and Chhetri castes of the hills, too, are beginning to show a tendency to look upon themselves as distinct cultural groups with separate roots and origin. The untouchable castes of the pre-1963 *Muluki Ain*, actually, have even more justification – as an exploited and still-exploited class – to forge a new identity of their own. The trend, thus, is that even the so-called culturally homogenous groups are beginning to seek to build their new political and economic security under the spell of 'ethnicisation.' The process of cultural atomisation seems to have begun.²⁹

About such trends, as pointed out by Sharma, Bhattachan has this to say:

Sharma has noted a recent process of communalization of the Hindu caste groups, especially as seen in the birth of 'Bahun ethnicity' and 'Chhetri ethnicity'. Thus it indicates that the Bahun-Chhetri's monopoly over power has already begun to erode to a point of threat that needs to be defended by them implying that sharing or losing power is unacceptable. *One wonders how Bahuns-Chhetris would have responded if they were suppressed and oppressed like low caste and non-caste ethnic groups for two centuries? How might have they reacted if the next two centuries they have to live like low caste and non-caste ethnic groups of the last two centuries?*³⁰ (emphasis added).

HOTSPOTS OF ETHNIC CONFLICTS

Viewed in a larger perspective, many social scientists, political leaders, and ethnic activists have lately begun to realize that Nepal harbors potentials for ethnic violence and communal riots, and there may be many such hotspots. Those hotspots, however, differ sharply in the perspectives entertained by the various actor groups in the national scene – dominant caste/regional groups, depressed castes, ethnic, and regional groups.

In Nepal there are several hotspots of ethnic violence at the international level:

- The Indian news media often claim that some of the towns in Nepal Tarai, particularly Rautahat, Kalaiya, and Nepalgunj, are hotspots of Hindu-Muslim conflicts and also that Pakistan uses these areas as centers of underground subversive activities against India. On the other hand, Nepalese press often reports that the RAW (Research and Analysis Wing), *Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, and *Siva Sena*, all of India, are fanning communal tension in various parts of Nepal. Nepalese people living and working in various parts of India and Indian people living and working in various parts of Nepal also provide grounds for sensitive ethnic issues in the two countries.
- Mustang area has been very much in the news recently through the national and international press. The Nepalese press recently reported on the seizure by Nepal army of a sizable amount of arms from the walled township of Mustang. The photo exhibition of the walled city in Lalitpur at the end of 1995 was actually related to the Free Tibet Movement in Nepal.
- Nepal has given shelter to about 100,000 Bhutanese refugees in Eastern Nepal. The process of repatriation has been very slow. Meanwhile, some conflicts between the Bhutanese refugees and the local community have also been reported.
- A large number of people of Nepali origin live in Sikkim, Assam, and Darjeeling of India and in Bhutan. Subhas Ghising of Darjeeling has been well known for his *Greater Nepal* slogan.³¹ Early this year, his scheduled visit to Kathmandu for a public address was thwarted when His Majesty's Government expressed its inability to provide adequate security for him.

Besides these factors, some endogenous factors have also been identified as potential threats to national integration by prominent social scientists:

- In Eastern Nepal, in what is known as *Kirant Pradesh*, Lionel Caplan has researched on Hindu-Tribal (hill Bahuns versus indigenous Limbus) conflicts, said to have occurred due to a take-over of the Limbu *Kipat* land (communal land) by the Bahuns.³² Although during the last three decades no serious violence has been reported, tension is mounting up due to the ongoing displacement of the indigenous people by the Hill Bahuns. Bir Nembang's *Limbu Mukti Morcha* and Gopal Khambu's book *Khambuan ko Awaj (The Voice of Khambu People)* are its reflections.
- It was Beenhakker who first disaggregated data about the various key positions in politics, bureaucracy, police, and military on an ethnic basis and noticed persisting severe inequality between the hill Bahuns and Chhetris and others.³³ The book by Gaige (1975) focuses on the discrimination against the *Madhesiyas* (the people of Tarai) by the *Pahadiyas* (the hill people), cited later by Blaikie, Cameron, and Seddon.³⁴ Finally, political groups like the *Sadvahana Parishad* (later party) and social groups like the *Nepal Janajati Mahasangh* picked up their ideas and brought it up at the national political stage. The ethnic conflicts thus exist at two levels: One, Bahun-Chhetris, whose total combined population, according to the census of 1991, is 29 percent of the total population of Nepal, but control about 70 to 90 percent of the total key political, bureaucratic, military, and police positions.³⁵ The remaining 71 percent of the total population have been deprived of these positions for the last two centuries. Therefore, majority of the ethnic and low caste groups are in direct conflict with hill Bahun-Chhetris. Two, the population of Tarai is a little more than those of the hills and mountains put together, but all those positions are controlled by *Pahadiyas* (hill people). *Madhesiyas* (the people of Tarai) have been deprived of their share in those positions. Therefore, the people of the Hills and Tarai people are in direct conflict with each other.

- Traditionally, the high caste Hindu Bahuns, Chhetris, and Thakuris in the hills and the Brahmans, Kshyatriyas, and Vaishyas in the Tarai have been exploiting the untouchables (low caste groups). Therefore, the *Dalits* (depressed caste groups) are in direct conflict with the high caste Hindus.
- In terms of faith, Hindus are in direct conflict with Muslims.
- Hill residents of the Far Western Region in Nepal had almost empathized with their neighbors in India during the Uttarakhand Movement last year, possibly because they bear an intense feeling of deprivation themselves versus the south and the center.³⁶ Such a situation itself might prove an explosive issue in the future.

These ethnic hotspots can be managed and mediated only by ethnic approaches in policies, plans, and programs at various levels.

ISSUES AT STAKE

There are many issues at stake that need immediate attention from the policy makers. They are:

Right to Self-Determination: There is a demand for the right to self-determination by the indigenous peoples of Nepal, influenced by either the leftist views or by the ILO and the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations. Others, argue that since nations do not exist in Nepal, the right to self-determination is not applicable here.³⁷ Still others insist that the voters use such right when they cast their ballots on the election day. Those who stand for right to self-determination, moreover, propose that the state should give this right to all ethnic groups, but quite a few also advocate cession if the state continues to suppress their legitimate demands.

Federalism or Local Autonomy: Ethnic and region-based political parties, such as Nepal Janajati Party, Nepal Sadvabana Party, Nepal Rastriya Jana Mukti Morcha, and non-political organizations, such as Nepal Janajati Mahasangh and its 22 affiliated ethnic organizations demand federalism or local autonomy, but their demands differ at three levels.³⁸ Nepal Janajati Party demands federalism based on the traditional 12 ethnic regional clusters but its opponents see it as irrelevant today due to the emergence of mixed communities in all those clusters. Nepal Sadvabana Party calls for federalism based on the dichotomy of the Hills and the Tarai. Nepal Rastriya Jana Mukti Morcha advocates federalism based on administrative

considerations, not on ethnic or ecological regional grounds. But all the ruling political parties of the past and present, except Nepal Sadvabana Party, have rejected such demands and go, instead, for 'decentralization,' which, in practice, has only meant more and more 'centralization.'

Human Rights and Rights of Indigenous People: Public feelings ran high last year when a minister of a left government announced that each ethnic group should be able to practice the human rights guaranteed by the Constitution.³⁹ The Hindu fundamentalists took it as a license for 'cow slaughter' and there was a nationwide uproar, even a call, for the first time in the history of Nepal, for a '*Nepal Bandh*' (Nation-wide Close Down) by the Hindu fundamentalists. Nepal Janajati Mahasangh and its affiliated ethnic organizations declared their intention to counteract it. The bandh, which was called off at the last moment, could have brought a violent clash, because a number of *Janajatis* made public their decision to slaughter cows if the state was to take sides with the Hindus. The Constitution does forbid the slaughter of cows, as a national animal, but it also recognizes the religious rights of its citizens. For many ethnic groups eating beef is not a taboo; it is rather an established practice. The principle is thus in sharp contrast with practice.

Demands for the rights of indigenous peoples are increasing under the patronage of the United Nations which declared the International Decade for the World's Indigenous Peoples in 1994. In Nepal, about 20 affiliated ethnic organizations of Nepal Janajati Mahasangh have claimed themselves to be the indigenous peoples of Nepal. But the government and many Bahun-Chhetri leaders either deny the existence of such peoples or claim themselves to be as indigenous as others. Recently, the HMG-N delegates to an UN conference in Geneva to discuss the draft of the rights of the indigenous peoples claimed that the UN's concept of indigenous peoples is inapplicable to Nepal.⁴⁰ Such policy vacillations could easily aggravate the situation further.

Citizenship Certificate: Citizenship is another vexing issue as there are scores of people who have not yet received their citizenship certificates without which they can not enjoy legally provided rights and privileges, including the purchase and sale of land.⁴¹ The situation has been more confusing due to the open border between Nepal and India which leads to free movement of people from both sides. The leaders of Nepal

Sadvabana Party have called for facilitation of the process of citizenship certification. But government efforts have been less than serious. The real crux of the issue is a cut-off date for citizenship certificates. Further delay on the issue could set off widespread communal violence.

Sanskrit Education and News Broadcast: His Majesty's Government of Nepal has introduced compulsory Sanskrit language curriculum at the high school level, and has also started news broadcast in Sanskrit language, along with a few other 'national languages': Newari, Tamang, Magar, Rai, Hindi, and Gurung. Nepal Janajati Mahasangh and some factions within the political parties, including the Nepali Congress Party, Nepal Communist Party (United Marxist and Leninist), United People's Front, and Nepal Sadvabana Party, have, however, strongly protested against such government decisions. The reasons forwarded are: (a) Sanskrit is a 'dead language,' that is, it is not in day to day use by the people, and it is useless to make it a compulsory course at the high school level, and to broadcast news from the state-owned Radio Nepal; (b) Compulsory Sanskrit education has been devised to reduce the scope of higher education of the non-Bahun-Chhetris because most *Janajati* and non-Brahman *Madhesiya* students are likely to fail in such courses and drop out at the school level; (c) These moves are a part of the process of Hinduization in a heterogenous Nepalese social system which puts the non-Bahun-Chhetri people in disadvantage. Whereas the opponents of Sanskrit argue that there are dozens of 'national languages' that should get priority in the news broadcast because a large number of people speak these languages, they also ask why a dead language should be able to get such a high priority. Rationalization of such state recognition is perceived to be based on emotion rather than rationality.

ETHNIC RECONSCIENTIZATION

Political change in South Asia today is at a crucial historical juncture. This is true elsewhere, too; for example, in the former USSR and Yugoslavia. The emerging ethnic conflicts and the economic reforms proposed by the multi-national organizations have raised widespread concerns because the existing order has tended to sustain the existing socio-economic inequalities, which could thus spawn far reaching negative effects on the process of social and national integration. Although ethnic conflicts and their resolution have now occupied the center of the democratic agenda in a number of South Asian countries,

the failure of the process of social integration has led to separatist movements in Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, and Bhutan.

In all multi-ethnic societies, the lack of reforms has now added another new dimension: the problem is how to reform the state in a situation where political power is shared among different ethnic communities. Legalization of ethnopolities in such a context becomes crucial for ethnodevelopment.⁴² The various facets of Nepalese policy making – political, economic, social, cultural, religious, and ideological – should reflect its diverse composition and the dominant national political parties should take a leading role to ensure sufficient socio-economic, cultural, and political participation of the ethnic groups and to eradicate negative discrimination and reinforce positive discrimination instead.

Improved transportation and communication networks in Nepal have helped the diverse, isolated ethnic groups to come close together than ever before. But in that process they have also started to perceive and feel more clearly and more closely the stark discrepancies and glaring disparities that exist in the arena of social justice among various ethnic groups. These perceptions have become magnified because while the traditional, feudal relationships have survived, despite recent political changes, the modes of perception have changed. Some ethnic groups have retained their dominance in the socio-economic and political power structure, while others continue to suffer exploitation and denial of rights. This necessitates a new set of social relations based on equality and social justice which means a new process of ethnic reconscientization must evolve.

CONCLUSION

Nepal has been a country of extreme diversity in terms of ethnicity, language, religion, ecology, and economy. It will remain so in the future. When Nepalese people living within a defined political boundary begin to see their common destiny in living together retaining all their diversities, then only their transformation into a real nation-state could be said to have begun.

The sentiments of the various ethnic groups may be interpreted as ephemeral political gimmicks but the recorded history of the past 200 years of Chhetri-Bahun domination in the political, social, and cultural life of the Nepalese people is not. So far, such sentiments have been viewed by the dominant group as nothing more except psychological upsurges against deprivation, but if these grievances take the form of political movement, the shape of present-day Nepal may not long remain the same in the future. The aim of social and national integration is not elimination of differences between the

different ethnic groups but to recognize and respect such differences and make conditions conducive for the communities to live together in a more productive way within an established national boundary. For such harmony to attain, widening disparities – political, economic, and social – need to be reduced.

For protecting diversity within a framework of shared values, the government should ensure participation of different groups of people. The state should design plans, policies, and programs to minimize and eliminate all kinds of state-promoted and -protected discrimination and ensure the socio-cultural, economic, political, and human rights of all ethnic groups on equal terms fostering the process of social integration. This alone can ultimately lead to national integration. The people who are in the high seats of power should seriously take up the ethnic approach as a critical measure for solution. For, if status quo continues, the Nepalese people will have to pay dearly at the cost of the nation's peace and prosperity. According to Wallerstein:

There are four principal ways in which ethnicity serves to aid national integration. First, ethnic groups tend to assume some of the functions of the extended family and hence they diminish the importance of kinship roles; two, ethnic groups serve as a mechanism of resocialization; three, ethnic groups help keep the class structure fluid, and so prevent the emergence of castes; fourth, ethnic groups serve as an outlet for political tensions.⁴³

In brief, if Nepal intends to prepare itself for the twenty-first century as a prosperous and peaceful society, all plans, policies, and programs should place the ethnic paradigm at the center of these activities. The time bomb of ethnic violence is already ticking and no one knows when it will detonate. But there is still time to correct the present course and prevent disaster.

NOTES

1. This article is a revised version of a paper presented at a seminar on **Ethnicity and Nation-Building** organized jointly by the Central Department of Sociology and Anthropology and The South Asia Institute of the University of Heidelberg in Kathmandu, Nepal, on December 22-23, 1995. The authors thank Prof. G. S. Nepali (Tribhuvan University) for his thoughtful comments.
2. For an analysis of the issues related to national integration and disintegration after the people's movement of 1990, see Bhattachan (1994); Fisher (1993); Jha (1993); Koirala (1995); Nepali (1995); Poudyal (1992); Shah (1992); and Sharma (1992). For a detailed analysis of such issues during the partyless Panchayat period, see Gaige (1975); Gurung (1989); Manandhar and Amatya (1989); and Sharma (1986). For discussion about ethnicity, see O'Neill (1994); and Pyakuryal (1982).
3. The Tibeto-Burman language speaking ethnic groups are generally called *Thepches*, and the Indo-Aryan language speaking groups are termed *Chuchches*.

4. A Task Force on the Foundation for Upliftment of the Nationalities identified 61 nationalities in Nepal (see HMG-N 1996).
5. See NLPRC (1993:10-11). For detail about language issues, see NJM (1993); and Toba (1992).
6. See Shah (1993) for details about Christianity in Nepal.
7. See Sharma (1994) for issues related to Islam religion in Nepal.
8. See Dahal (1992); Gaige (1975); and Jha (1993) for details on such conflict.
9. The *Nepal Janajati Party* was not recognized by the National Election Commission of His Majesty's Government on communal ground.
10. See Dahal (1994).
11. Indigenous peoples include the Newars.
12. If cow slaughter hurts the sentiments of the Hindus, then a practical alternative would be to replace cow as a sacred national animal by another animal which would not hurt the sentiments of all religious groups in Nepal.
13. See Bhattachan (1994:143).
14. See HMG-N (1990:9). For details about the ethnic issues raised during the making of the constitution, see Bhattachan (1993a).
15. See HMG-N (1990:9).
16. See HMG-N (1990:11).
17. See NPC/HMG-N (1995 a; and 1995b).
18. See NPC/HMG-N (1995c).
19. Krishna B. Bhattachan, one of the authors of this article, served as a member of this task force.
20. Different scholars translate this saying in different ways, due possibly to an error (or a mistake?) in the choice of terms, particularly *Jat* and *Varna*. According to the Hindu Varna model developed in *Manusmriti*, there are four Varnas, viz., Brahman, Kshyatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra, and there are many castes within each of these four categories. Prithvi Narayan Shah, instead, chose to specify the situation in terms of four castes and thirty-six Varnas. The Tibeto-Burman language speaking ethnic groups do not perceive them as falling under any of these Varnas and caste groups because these are applicable to Hindus only. Some Nepalese historians say informally that the *Dibya Upadesh* was, in fact, not written by the king but by some officials of the Gurkha palace.
21. See Bhattachan (1994:138).
22. See Nepali (1995).
23. See Poudyal (1992:134).
24. See Gurung (1989:133).
25. See Fisher (1993:14).
26. See Cohen (1978:389).
27. For a discussion on the concept of Gorkhanization, see Manandhar and Amatya (1989).
28. *Subba* is a title given by the rulers to the local administrative authorities. Such titles were given to many other ethnic groups, including the Thakalis and the Gurungs in the western part of Nepal.
29. See Sharma (1992:8). Also, for Khas ethnicity, see Bista (1995).
30. See Bhattachan (1994:135).
31. See Dixit (1993); and Rose (1994).
32. See Caplan (1970).
33. See Beenhakker (1973).
34. See Blaikie, Cameron, and Seddon (1980).
35. For detailed data, see Beenhakker (1973); Dahal (1993); Gaige (1975); J.B.R. (1973); and Jha (1993).
36. For details on the movement, see Aryal (1994).
37. See Bhattachan (1995); Magar (n.d.); and Thapa (1994) for detailed analysis of right to self-determination.
38. *Ibid.*, for analysis in detail of federalism and local autonomy.
39. See Bhattachan (1993b); Dahal (1993); NAC/IDWIP-N (1994); and TNCIY/WIP-N (1993).

40. Personal communication with the officials of the Nepal Janajati Mahasangh.
 41. See Gaige (1975); and Jha (1993).
 42. See Bhattachan (1995).
 43. See Wallerstein (1971: 673).

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BHEJA AS A STRATEGIC CULTURAL CONVENTION
Community Resource Management
in the Barha Magarat

Suresh Dhakal

ne important if informal cultural institution that regulates all the functions, feasts, and festivals of the Magars of west Nepal is *Bheja* that affects almost every sphere of their day-to-day life. Although there exists a significant ethnographic literature on the Magars otherwise, it has never been highlighted so far. This article intends to contribute a little in that direction.¹

Put briefly, *Bheja*, which coordinates various rituals of the Magar Community, helps to establish and maintain the community with a certain system of production and enables it to interact harmoniously with nature. Rituals, like the whole culture of which they form a part, have their economic aspects as well the ecological ones and this ritual may be considered a typical way of the Magar way of adapting to their environment.

This analysis and interpretation of *Bheja* is primarily guided by the factors delineated by Rappaport's proposition in his recognized work *Ritual Regulation of Environmental Relations among a New Guinea People*. He proposes that most of the functional studies of religious behaviors in anthropology have as an analytical goal the elucidation of events, processes, or relationships occurring within a 'social unit' of some sort. This 'social unit' is not always well defined, but in some cases it appears to be "... a congregation, a group of people who participate together in the performance of religious rituals".

As Rappaport believed and quoted, the following statement by Homans (1941: 172) represents fairly the dominant line of anthropological thought concerning the functions of religious ritual. According to him, 'ritual actions' do not produce a practical result on the external world - that is one reason for calling them ritual. But to make this statement is 'not to say that ritual has no function'. Its function is not related to the world external to the society but to the 'internal constitution of the society'. It gives the members of the society confidence; it also dispels their anxieties; it disciplines their social organization.

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Bheja is an organized body to gain some social goal even though there is no vertical hierarchy to be achieved among the members. Moreover, its existence allows the social/cultural anthropologists to explore and extract the facts about *Bheja*.

Since this article is about one specific cultural tradition of the Magars, it will be relevant to highlight the Magars in brief. Magars have been recognized as simple, polite, honest, brave, and sacrificial in nature. As one of the most numerous indigenous groups of the country, they hold a significant place in terms of population composition,² considered to be the indigenous people of the *Barha Magarat*³ (literally, the twelve regions of the Magars). But, nowadays they have become so widely scattered that they are not new to any other place or group within Nepal. The outside world, however, came to know of Magars only after the British began recruiting soldiers in Nepal for their Gurkha regiment. Wherever and whatever the condition they may be in, they love to maintain their cultural identity. For instance, if asked what makes them a distinct social group, the more traditional/older among them are probably likely to reply that it is the possession of their own language, religion, folklore or custom. The younger ones try to regard their group identity in light of the contribution made by their forefathers in the process of national integration.⁴ The Magars are Mongoloid in appearance and speak a Tibeto-Burman dialect. Their economy is subsistential, primarily based on agriculture, which is practiced only for survival. A considerable amount of grain they produce is spent in making *jaad* and *raksi* (locally brewed beer and liquor). They are very fond of *jaad* and *raksi*, and consider these an inseparable part of their life. Recruitment in the British and Indian army has always remained a center of attraction for most, if not all the, young Magars, and they are well recognized for their sacrificial spirit and bravery among the armies. Employment in foreign army is much sought after for both status and financial reasons, even by the relatively prosperous individuals of the community.

Whatever controversy there may be about their position in the Hindu caste ladder (or debate on their Hindu identity), they consider themselves Hindus. Some also claim that they are Buddhists (Bista: Himal 5:10). However, they are divided into hundreds of sub-castes (Sharma 049: 279; Baral 050: 28). But there is no hierarchical stratification among them and all are treated equally (Baral 050: 30). Politically, militarily, and socially, they occupied a high position in the social scale in the past, but now are suffering from a certain inferiority complex. In this context, Bista is of the opinion that Bahuns are to be blamed for it (Bista: Himal 052: 10). Recently, some

of them who are working for upliftment of the group claim that they are aiming to gain their 'lost' status. The Magars, who carry the legacy of both the rulers and subjects, have developed some of their own specific cultures, which is heavily influenced by their subsistence pattern and exploitative technology or vice versa. Even today, one can observe many such traditions that still exist. *Bheja* is one prominent example of such specific tradition which helps to keep the community intact and functioning.

ORGANIZATION

Bheja is a colloquial term,⁵ which resembles *Guthi* of the Newars, in its religious functions, and *Dhikuri* of the Thakalis in its economic functions. However, there are significant differences, too. While the other two traditions have been studied and analyzed in detail, *Bheja* remains a novel theme for study. No etymological meaning of *Bheja* exists in the Magar and Nepali languages. It is, therefore, a painstaking task to trace out its origin and development.⁶ During the study period in the field, no one was found who could specifically trace its origin and historical course of development. They rather tended to refer to times unknown on the origin of the community itself. This ignorance does not mean that it has a rudimentary existence among them. They are rather deeply attached to it. In fact, it is so deeply rooted in their lifestyles that it seems difficult for them to confine it to a single definition. *Bheja* is *Bheja* and may mean many things. As a matter of fact, they can not even think of their life in its absence. Thus, the tradition is well established and accepted although still sans a rigorous definition.

There may be more than one *Bheja* in a single community cluster and a single *Bheja* may include more than one cluster. The size of the *Bheja* may differ according to the size of the cluster and any geographical and other forms of disparities. Each and every household of the cluster is supposed to be a member. No specific quality or criterion has to be fulfilled to become a member, but exclusion leads to social ostracism, a pariah status. A member may be suspended, purged, or excluded if he does not attend *poojas* (worship) without a serious reason and if he does not agree to abide by its rules and regulations.

Certain *Bhejas* may allow even the non-Magars to become members, including the untouchable households of the same and a neighboring cluster if the Magars are dominant and others are in minority, but they have definitely more limited roles than the Magars may have. Thus, invited members can neither be the *Mukhiya* (the chairperson) nor a *Pujari* (the priest). Nevertheless, it is not like any

ethnocentric institution or organization which raises voice for ethnic sovereignty and caste purity. Generally, an aged and respected male member of the community is the chairman. Called *Mukhiya*, he is selected by a meeting of the members of the *Bheja* after the demise of the previous one, and is no more than a titular figure. It seems a formal role which does not differ much from the role of other members. However, he chairs the meetings and plays a key role in making some concrete decisions. His presence and suggestions are expected in all meetings. Sometimes, he even orders members to carry out some specific jobs. But, he does not enjoy any particular right or privilege. In the various *poojas* (worships) performed, a *Pujari* (priest) is also needed, who is generally called *Kiwara* or *Kumar* (an unmarried lad).

Around the last month of every year, there is a special *Bheja* event – *Susupak Bheja* – which works as a general assembly of the organization. No household would miss the occasion. This is the time when the rules and regulations are made, corrected or revised; wages, meat price, and other important matters are discussed and decided for the year following; and the *Mukhiya* is selected, if necessary. Therefore they call it *riti-thiti basalne Bheja* (norm-establishing *Bheja*). In some areas it is also known as *Chandi Bheja*, when village matters are discussed at length. Abolition of old customs and practices and adoption of new ones constitute its central tasks (Baral, 050: 124).

FUNCTION

There are no formal, specific rules regulating and binding the various social functions that *Bheja* serves. Yet one common rule is that any decisions regarding religious activities (such as annual *poojas*) and social, agricultural celebrations (for instance, *natley*: an off day) are taken at the *Bheja* meetings. Primarily, it functions to maintain and modify the cultural traditions, social order, and the system of production in the changing context. These functions, however, can be viewed from different perspectives some of which have been briefly discussed below.

Religious Functions

Magar community is a self-perpetuating saturated community. They regard themselves as Hindus and some claim that they are Buddhists, but their religious traditions and practices indicate they are animists.⁷ They certainly do not worship idols of gods or goddesses such as *Vishnu*, *Krishna*, *Ram*, *Laxmi*, or *Kali*, as other Hindus do. Rather they worship their ancestors in one or other forms. *Baje-Bajai Pooja*, *Parange pooja*, *Bes kang Bajai pooja*, *Mandali Baje-Bajai Pooja*, *Panch*

Kanya Mai Pooja, *Ban Jhankri pooja* are forms of their ancestral worship. Every such *pooja* has a legend directly related to the history of their forefathers. They believe that if they do not worship properly and are unable to appease the ancestral spirits, disaster may follow. Therefore they are loyal to their ancestors and worship them with devotion and piety. Such *poojas* do not require temples and specific shrines for deities. The place for the ceremony is fixed by the *Bheja* itself. Generally, they choose a hill-top nearby, in the middle of the forest where cutting timber and livestock grazing is banned. Areas around such places remain densely green. The system therefore has acquired a certain 'conservationist color', a belief system which is a form of their ecological adaptation. Sacrifices of pigs, male buffaloes, goats, and fowls are necessary for all such *poojas* except in *Panch Kanya Mai Pooja* where slaughtering of pigs is not permitted but five different kinds of animals and fowls are slaughtered, called *Pancha Bali*.

They also worship the sun, river, tree, snake, and earth as gods and goddesses. This appears as their way to maintain a close relationship with nature. *Poojas* of ancestors and nature take place seasonally and, often, also annually. *Bheja* manages and makes all the arrangements for *poojas* which are performed on some particular days of the various seasons. To arrange *pooja*, a meeting is called to fix the date and assign roles and duties to members. For *pooja* they do not employ any outsider or high caste priest. Rather they select an unmarried boy from their own community. Certain special functions, such as prayers for soliciting blessing, are, however, performed by the *Mukhiya*.

Agricultural Functions

Another significant cultural practice of the community is *Natley*, a day when people do not work outside the house, specially on the farm. This system prevails in other communities, too, but it is more common among the Magars. The day differs from place to place and from group to group, since it is fixed by *Bheja*. Often, *Poomima*, the full moon day, is observed as the day of *Natley* or it is *Aunsi*, the new moon day. In some areas they simply select Monday or Wednesday.

In the past, outsiders and strangers were prohibited to enter the village and villagers to go outside on the day of *Natley*. The defaulters were penalized. On such a day *Bheja* (i.e., a man assigned by *Bheja*, in most of the cases, the *Mukhiya*) offers *dhuup* (incense) to *Bhumi* (the earth), called *Main Dhare*.

The local people interpret *Natley* in their own ways. It allows people and their oxen rest after a long tiring agricultural work and

gives them time to spend with their own family. Such regular meetings make social interaction also possible.

Most of the agricultural works are done by what goes by the name of *Parima* (reciprocal exchange of labor), and sometimes by a temporarily formed labor group known as *Bhaijari* (or *Hori* in certain areas). Thus formed labor groups are regulated by *Bheja* and are not offered any wage except two meals and drinks (Baral 050: 58). Wage labor is not considered a prestigious job and only the landless people are involved in it for their livelihood. *Bheja* fixes the date for work in the field and all households get an opportunity to do their work properly on time and according to their need. *Bheja*, of course, was not started for such farm work. But it can now fix and even revise the wage for labor. The Magars therefore do not face labor crisis during the peak farming seasons.

Economic Significance

Although *Bheja* does not operate any particular economic activity directly, its direct influence can be seen in the various decisions that directly or indirectly affect the economy of both the Magar village and its individuals.

Bheja performs important management functions by fixing the price of sacrificial meat which is to be charged from the member households. For example, if the price of pork is 40 rupees per kg at one *Bheja* and Rs. 50 per kg in the next one, and if the member of the latter one wants to buy the pork from the former one, he pays Rs. 50, not Rs. 40. In some cases, such meat is not sold to the outsiders or those who are not the members of the body.

Since the area is densely populated by Magars and they need such animals at the time of *pooja*, it sometimes becomes necessary to procure animals from other communities. Some *Bhejas* have started now rearing animals for sacrifice. For this purpose, a certain amount of money is collected from every member household to buy piglets. An indigent member household, which can not buy and rear its own animal, is given the piglets for rearing. The sacrificial pork is distributed among all the member households. The price of the pork thus fixed is often considerably lower than the one prevailing in the market. Half of such money goes to the household which reared the pigs and, with the other half, the piglets are bought for the future *pooja*. Apart from the economy it brings, the system also solves the problem of scarcity of sacrificial animals.

Although every member household does not keep fowls and goats, they need them at the time of *pooja*. They then prefer to buy them from the members of the same *Bheja*, which encourages some of

them to rear such animals as a major source of income. Thus the market is also ensured for sale of the livestock raised.

Now some of the *Bhejas* of the study area have started raising levy from member households. The money collected is lent out to the members with an interest, to be refunded when another member needs that money for some serious occasion, such as death, serious illness, or accident. Part of the money is used to buy household items such as steel plates, jars, jugs, *kachauras*, cups to drink *juad*, and cooking utensils, utilized at the time of feasts and other rituals. When not in use, they are rented. Individual loans are also offered to fellow-members. In this way, *Bheja* is also taking on the form of a local self-help bank.

Resource Management

Bheja is one appropriate way of community management of public resource. In many rural areas, consumer groups have been formed for resource utilization and management. But keen competition for scarce resources has brought failure of such groups, even social conflicts. The Magar community is an exception in this context. Decisions are made and implemented on the basis of consensus of the members. The actions, fines, and punishments, taken against those who violate the rules and regulations, are all determined by *Bheja*.

Khoria (the slash-and-burn mode of agriculture), a part of the traditional farming system of the Magar people, is applied to the slopes of the government forest. They cut down small trees, slash bushes, and burn them so that they provide nutrients to the crops. This also prevents weeds and wild plants from growing. In most of the area, such a practice has now been banned for various reasons. However, in periods of drought and shortfalls in production caused by hailstorms, floods, and pests, the community allows *Khoria* cultivation, for it is then the best alternative for deficit food management. However, no wanton slashing and burning is permitted. The issues decided by *Bheja* on such occasions are collective in nature: who is in severe need and which part of the forest is to be used for the purpose. Often those who cultivate *Khoria* land must offer a part of the grain harvested or money as rent or *sherma* to the *Bheja*. If, however, *Khoria* is done on a private *lhose*, *sherma* is paid to the owner.

Activities such as construction and repairment of irrigation canals, roads, and trails are taken up by the people according to the decisions taken in the *Bheja* meetings. In managing common property, *Bheja* thus plays a quite effective role.

Nutrition

Since the geo-climatic conditions of the agricultural space occupied by Magar territory do not favor high-yield cultivation, they practice subsistence agriculture and grow only a few vegetables. A considerable amount of the grain they produce, moreover, goes into distilling *jaal* and *raksi*. This adversely affects their nutritional intake which is obviously low. But the frequent *pooja* rituals partly make up for their nutritional deficiency since these ceremonies ensure a continuous supply of animal protein and other nutrients from the animals and fowls slaughtered. On such occasions, younger children are treated with well-cooked pork to let them take weight. Plumpness in the community is held to be synonymous with health.

Dispute Mediation

In ordinary circumstances, when some dispute arises among the members of the community (or between its members and outsiders), the case is taken up by the kins of the parties in conflict. When they fail, the case is referred to the *Mukhiya* of the *Bheja*. If his decision is acceptable to neither party, the case is put before a public assembly called by the *Bheja*. It is a practice which is still quite popular (Baral 050: 59). Discussion follows on various aspects of the issue and fines and compensations are set by that gathering. Till recently, the money thus collected went into drinking parties or, else, the disputant groups used it up. Most of the conjugal disputes such as elopement, forced marriage, and *jaari* (compensation money paid by the abductor of a woman to her previous husband) are solved by the *Bheja*.

Community Solidarity

Bheja also serves an integrative role in Magar society by fostering community solidarity and social consensus. It gives the community the feeling of a single extended family.

The real significance of the institution becomes evident on critical social occasions. At the time of marriage and other social ceremonies, for instance, it helps in the performance of specific tasks and ceremonial functions.

When, moreover, someone from a member household dies, others extend their helping hand to the grieving family, join in the funeral procession and death rituals. During the thirteen days of mourning (*tera din kriya basne*), the member households visit the deceased family with a *mana* (about 1/2 kg) of hulled rice and one rupee, which is used on the thirteenth day of mourning (*teraun*). On

that day, the members and others are invited to partake of the feast called *Sudhyain*.

They also help each other at the time of happier occasions like marriage, *chewar*, and *pooja*, when families, relatives, and acquaintances assemble for help and celebration.

Entertainment

On a *pooja* day, the member households do not work in the fields. The family members and their relatives are expected to be at home or the place of *pooja* to celebrate. Drinking *jaal* and *raksi* and merry-making, jokes, and laughter are common. Young boys and girls gather in groups for dancing and singing contests. Dances vary according to the occasion and season. Sometimes such groups go door to door dancing and singing, but most of the time they gather in a common place, like *rodi*, and sing and dance throughout the night. Even the elderly members, both male and female, participate.

On such occasions women and children appear quite active. All the arrangements inside the house are basically done by women who have a hectic schedule preparing foods and drinks and exchanging *pahur*, the gift. Some women also participate in *pooja*.

CRITIQUE

Bheja, however, is not without its problems. Some may perceive in it the scope for raising communal feelings and social conflict with other *jats* (caste groups). It can certainly become a place for articulation and aggregation of their ethnic passions, where they can be more sensitive about their communal identity. Since all social functions are generally determined and monitored by the *Bheja*, it may also be hindering the growth of modern institutions. In certain cases, *Bheja* also seems to be bypassing the official institutions, such as the VDC, court, police, etc. Above all, it has drawn fire from the non-Magars for the waste of money it causes on various rituals. Some 'higher caste' people are of the opinion that rituals have impoverished quite a few Magars. Children are held back from schools, for social merry-making.

After the restoration of the multiparty system, politicization has set in also in this traditional institution which is showing partisan trends. Some elder persons are therefore genuinely worried over the prospects of an increase in social strife and community disintegration.

CONCLUSION

Although *Bheja* performs regular religious tasks of the community, it has a broader impact on the overall activities and functioning of the *Barha Magarat* and has become one inseparable part

of the Magar life there. Primarily, it helps to maintain social integrity of the community through various functions and keeps its cultural identity alive.

It supplies animal protein to the members of the society; creates the market for the local livestock, such as goats, pigs, etc.; makes the arrangements required for entertainment; creates the forum for citizen interactions; fosters mutual help and respect; and facilitates the process of socialization.

Bheja also fixes the labor wage, arranges common property management (e.g., forest resource management), and sets up mechanism for mediating community disputes.

All such functions, however, need a good flow of information and communication. *Bheja* fulfills this community need. The flow of information is essential not only for fulfilling such roles, but also for the process of overall development, especially, sustainable development in the present-day context.

Recently, however, *Bheja* has tended to fragment into smaller-sized groups of fifteen to twelve households. A household in such a condition can easily enter into a new *Bheja* in case of expulsion from an old one. This is beginning to effect its traditional functions, particularly because of increasing politicization and partisanship. The institution is therefore growing weaker, specifically in the management of community resources and mediation of community disputes. The steady inroads of market economy have further diluted its capacity. People are today more interested in new and imported cultural norms and values. Nowadays, the Magars are trying to break down the barriers and boundaries of traditions and culture in their pursuit of growth and modernization. The overall consequence is fragmentation and weakening of *Bheja*.

All, however, is not lost yet. Revival and renovation can still put back life into this time-honored institution. NGOs/INGOs can play a key role in a proper reassessment and restructuring of the *Bheja* in the new developmental context of the approaching 21st century.

NOTES

1. The information on which the article is based was collected during the fieldwork conducted between January and April in 1994 in a VDC of eastern Palpa, undertaken for the completion of the Master's degree dissertation. Later, the work was followed up during the next field visit in July-August 1994 for Community Dispute Mediation Study funded by the Asia Foundation, Kathmandu. The information presented here in this paper was collected through interviews and participant observation methods. Thanks are due to Dr. Ganesh Man Gurung, Head of the Department and Dr. K.B. Bhattachan for their helpful comments and suggestions. The author is

- grateful to Pari Thapa and Dal Bahadur Rana Magar for providing valuable information.
2. According to the latest data of the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) of His Majesty's Government (HMG), 7.24 percent, i.e., 1,339,308, of the Nepalese people belong to the Magar community of which 32.05 percent speak Magar language as their mother tongue.
 3. The hill regions of Rapti, Lumbini, and Bheri zones are collectively known as *Barha Magarat*, and Magars are considered to be the pioneer settlers of this area.
 4. When Prithvi Narayan Shah, the father of modern Nepal, in the 1750s, consolidated the many petty kingdoms scattered across the land, he counted heavily upon his Magar soldiers, the only Tibeto-Burman group among the people in his army. Others were Bahuns, Khasas, and Thakuris (cf. Stiller, 1967).
 5. Jiro Kawakita in his book "Hill Magars and Their Neighbours" mentions the term *bheja khelne* on the basis of his fieldwork done in Thakkhola region in 1958. According to him, the phrase refers to an archery contest. He writes (p. 399), "On February 29, I saw *bheja khelne* of the Sahabet villagers in fallow paddy fields. In the autumn of 1958, I saw a similar archery context in a Thakali village in the Thakkhola. According to the villagers of Syang, they have an archery contest *Mei* on the day of the festival *Kimi Chheji*, held on a full moon day of Phalgun. In the evening, they drink liquor and boys dance, while women are the audience. But when I inquired about this to the people of my study area, none of them knew about this kind of tradition among them and informed that their culture and the culture of Lekali Magars (the Magars of High altitude), the Kham Magars, differ tremendously" (cf. Molnar, 84: 22 in "Asia High Land Societies", ed. James Fisher).
 6. When the same query was put before MP Dal B. Rana Magar of Palpa, he noted that the practice of *Bheja* indicates that Magars were the systematic rulers of the past. The practice can be seen as one of the surviving legacies of the past Magar administration.
 7. According to B. Bhusan, (*Dictionary of Sociology*, 1984), the term 'animism' was used for the belief that all objects, both animate and inanimate, are permanently or temporarily inhabited by spirits or souls. The spirits have been conceived of as beings with an existence distinct from, and therefore capable of, surviving the death or destruction of, the persons, animals, plants, or objects they inhabit. Often all activities have been believed to be caused by these spirits. Usually, there has been also a belief in the existence of the spiritual beings with powers over the lives of men. The spirit inhabiting objects of nature as well as those in the spirit world may be worshipped or treated with fear and/or respect. In fact, E.B. Tylor has maintained that animism might be man's earliest form of religion.

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THE RAJBANSHIS OF RAJGADH Community Adaptation in the Environment of Eastern Tarai

Hari P. Bhattarai

This essay tries to give a short description of the human/cultural ecology of the Rajbanshis, an indigenous people of eastern Tarai. It puts its stress on the various cultural strategies adopted by the Rajbanshis for their survival in their immediate ecological environment and is based on the assumption that human societies adapt to their natural environment through culturally structured activities. It explains the subsistential mode of land-use and social and natural resource utilization in the context of the changing environment with the primary focus on how the Rajbanshi are adopting various subsistence devices in order to maintain their social and cultural life.

People-environment interaction is a frequent subject matter of ecological studies in today's anthropology (Barth 1956; Vayda 1969; Rappaport 1979; Orlove : 1980 ; Hawley 1986) and adaptation is one central concept in such studies (Anderson 1972; Bhasin : 1988). The concept **adaptation**, refers to the process through which people make effective use of the energy potential of natural resources available in the area through their culturally structured activities (Bennet 1969; Haaland 1991). In its social aspects, adaptation is a process involving individual people who react to their social and physical environment according to their view of the situation and the knowledge of 'realities' they have to face (van Beek 1993). This body of knowledge is usually termed 'perceived environment' (Hardesty 1977) and is believed to act as an external mediating factor between change and cultural reaction. Population distribution, settlement patterns, socio-political organizations, domestic economic structure, kinship ties and exchange system, and utilization of different social and ecological niches are concrete examples of adaptive strategies to the environmental condition adopted by the people of different environments in different periods of time in order to survive (Barth 1964, 1967, 1969; Dahal 1983). However, my central argument in this paper will be that adaptation to the environment cannot be assessed without consideration of the degree to which particular land-use practices and other facets of lifestyle are ecologically sensitive and environmentally sustainable. The processes of adaptation should be analyzed by understanding the local environmental knowledge

available for land utilization and other natural resource management practices maintained by the people.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical angle in this paper will be cultural-ecological, in which a particular society is viewed from the perspective of its interaction with its physical as well as social environment. The concept of cultural ecology first proposed by Julian Steward in 1955 and the method of cultural ecology has been applied to the study of different human societies; for example, hunter/gatherer (Steward 1955), pre-industrial farmers (Geertz 1963; Netting 1968), pastoralists (Edgerton 1971, cited in Moran 1982), and contemporary rural societies (Stevens 1993), which primarily focus on the cultural strategies adopted by these societies in order to survive in the given environmental conditions³. The Stewardian style of cultural ecology tends to utilize a culturally defined human population as the unit of analysis to focus on the cultural rather than biological adaptations (Moran 1982). Although Steward regarded ecology as an important causal factor behind social institutions, he was clear that not all features of culture can be explained in terms of ecological adaptation (Gurung 1992). He was of the opinion that cultural ecology pays primary attention to those features whose empirical analysis shows them closely involved in the utilization of environment in culturally prescribed ways. He calls these features the 'cultural core' that includes exploitative technology, economic organization, population patterns, and sociopolitical system which are most closely related to subsistence activities and economic arrangements and suggests that only these core elements have adaptive significance (Steward 1955). It is clear that the concept 'cultural ecology' is primarily concerned with the search for cultural regularities and explanation of culture in environmental forms by understanding the relationship between technology and the environment. But in this paper, I shall try to explain how the environment itself is affected by certain cultural activities of the people paying attention to the possibility of environmental change and degradation occurring as a consequence of human activities and shall try to assess whether the non-core elements like language, religion, art, and values have any adaptive significance⁴.

If we conceptualize the Rajbanshi social system from the cultural-ecological perspective, the core elements consist of *hall kodal* (subsistence technology), population pattern, and *khetipati* (economic activities and subsistence) and the non-core elements consist of various kinds of their annual ritual cycles, *Lilas* and other values related to Hinduism, and their own types of art and cultures⁵. Thus,

here the theoretical focus of cultural ecology will be the interplay between environment and productive technology from the environmental side and the role of non-core elements in the adaptive processes of the Rajbanshis. That is, culture and environment are interdependent and have a dynamic relationship in which both culture and environment continue to adapt and readapt as each changes in response to the other's influence.

The cultural-ecological method adopted for this study postulates a relationship between environmental resources, subsistence technology, and the behavior required to apply technology for resource utilization. It demands examination of the interaction of societies and social institutions with one another and with the natural environment. The method of cultural ecology consists of three procedures: (1) analysis of the interrelationship between a subsistence system and its environment; (2) assessment of the behavior patterns associated with a given subsistence technology; and (3) ascertaining the extent to which the behavior patterns entailed in a given subsistence system affect other aspects of the culture.

ETHNO-ECOLOGICAL VIEW OF COMMUNITY HISTORY

A study of the course of adaptation and its fluctuations and changes has to focus on both the internal organization of the group and the specific characteristics of the environment where the people live. This has to be done in a historical framework because the essence of adaptation is related to the changing relationships of people and the social and physical environment (van Beek 1993). Of course, since the historical sources on Tarai people are few, one has to rely on the oral tradition, climatic data over several centuries, the political history of Tarai, and the official records of both the British East India Company and the Nepalese government. In this context Gaige (1975) writes:

It appears that nearly all the settlers in early Tarai history were of Aryan or pre-Aryan indigenous stock. The ancient and medieval history of the region is a cyclical one in which men and forest have dominated in turns. From time to time, people from more settled part of the Gangetic plain pushed back the forest, cleared the land, and established settlements that grew into kingdoms. When the kingdoms withered away because of natural calamities or war, the forest reclaimed the land.

However, from the beginning of the seventeenth century, the dense Tarai forestland was continually cleared and settled by tribal people more permanently. According to Hamilton (1819), the majority of the inhabitants of eastern Tarai were plain tribals. Tharus were spread throughout the whole region and the Rajbanshis, Meches, and Gangais inhabited the far eastern Tarai.

The Rajbanshis - one of the groups of the great Bodo/Boro or Bara family - entered India in the 10th century B.C. from the east and settled on the banks of the Brahmaputra and gradually spread over Assam and the whole North and East Bengal and East Nepal (Sanyal 1965; Gautam 1994). They have often been referred to as *Koch* or *Coche* (regarded as their historical and original name) who were a very powerful nation during the 17th and 18th centuries. About that time, however, they were absorbed by the British in India and Jhapa and Morang, their territories, were annexed to the kingdom of Nepal by king Prithvi Narayan in 1774 (Bista 1972). In this context, Berlic (1985) writes:

We do not know very much about their ancient time. The Barae people (for us, Bara means Bodo and not Bhar), inhabitants of the areas of the actual State of Manipur (India) could be the Bodos. At the end of the middle age, a group of this big ethnolinguistic family, the Koch, occupied (India). They had conquered a part of the ancient Thai-Ahom kingdom (which once included the western half of the Assam on one side and the eastern half of the Morang on other, with all the intervening country (Hodgson 1878, cited in Bista 1972). It is only in the 16th century that these new Masters of the region took the name of the Rajbanshi.

In Nepal the Rajbanshis stand for the relatively large and dominant groups of people living in the eastern part of the country - namely Jhapa and Morang districts. In their physiognomy and racial traits they could be classified anthropologically as Mongoloid (Sanyal 1965; Berlic 1986) and are more closely related to Tharus, Satars, and Danuwars than to any other people living in the areas. But unlike the Tharus and Danuwars, who are widely distributed in the plains, the Rajbanshis are found mainly in the area between the Koshi and Mechi rivers in Nepal and further east and south across the Indian border (Bista 1972).

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries most of the Tarai tribal people including the Rajbanshis practiced *slash-and-burn* cultivation, shifting their location every three or four years when the land lost its fertility. Although the land remained fallow for a long time, it was not reclaimed by the forest because of continual grazing by the herds of cows and buffaloes driven north from India during the dry season by Ahirs and other caste Hindus (Gaige 1975). In the twentieth century, the intervention of technology controlled malaria and turned the Tarai into a new frontier for human occupancy⁶. This resulted in a major shift of the population from the Hills to Tarai with far reaching consequences in population distribution and land-use change⁷. The pattern of change followed closely that which took place in other parts of the Gangetic plain. That is, the *slash-and-burn* cultivation was replaced by intensive farming and nomadism was

replaced by permanent settlement in response to the changing context of ecology and demographic structure of the Tarai.

Thus, the rapid growth of population, increasing rate of internal and external migration, competition for limited resources (land and forest), and different government policies to use and allocate these resources have affected every aspect of these people. Natural resources, particularly forests and grazing lands, have been decreasing and deteriorating in the area resulting into unintended and unanticipated environmental consequences. The increasing rate of resource deterioration has threatened not only the environmental balance and conservation of natural species, but also the basic needs of subsistence of the vast majority of the population, including the Rajbanshis living in the area.

If we conceptualize the distribution of cultural sub-traditions within a population as different streams, the Rajbanshis thus participate in many such streams which are also shared by the members of other groups. There are, however, some typical socio-cultural features or traditions which both Rajbanshis and others recognize as exclusively Rajbanshi. For instance, one can cite the consumption of meat in the course of performance of death rituals, performance, the system of taking bride price in marriage, the worship of their village deities, absence of the concept of menstruation as a pollutive process, abandonment of the sacred thread, and their typical dress and settlement patterns (Bhattarai 1994).

STUDY AREA AND POPULATION

The Rajbanshis, the focus of this study, inhabit Rajgadh village of the Rajgadh VDC of Jhapa district (26° 20" - 26° 30" North; 87° 45" - 87° 00" East). It comprises a narrow strip of alluvial plain with a very low altitude of about 100 feet from the sea level. It has a sub-tropical climate with a good deal of humidity in its atmosphere which is hot in summer and moderately cold in winter. Rajgadh receives approximately 234 mm of rainfall annually (CBS 1991). The total study population comprised 335 individuals (171 males, 164 females in a total of 59 households). The sex and dependency ratios were 104 and 0.87 respectively. The household size of the village ranged from two to fourteen with an average of 5.67 persons per household. More than half of the study population (52%) stated that they could not read and write (i.e., were illiterate). Only one percent of the population has the education of S.L.C. equivalent and more.

SOCIAL ECOLOGY

The village is heterogenous in term of its ethnic composition. The major caste/ethnic groups of the area are Brahman/Chhetri, Rajbanshi,

Satar, hill Matwalis (Magar, Rai, Newar), Saha, Kalwar, Malaha (Fishermen), Thakur (Barber), Ganesh, Muslim, and occupational castes such as Kami, Damai. Among these groups, Rajbanshi, Satar, and Ganesh are indigenous inhabitants whereas most of the Brahman/Chhetri, hill Matwalis, and occupational castes are hill migrants who arrived in different phases of time during the last fifty years. The other remaining groups like Saha, Kalwar, Malaha, Thakur, and Muslim are of Indian origin who were invited to settle in the area during the Rana Regime to maximize agricultural production and to increase land revenue in the Tarai.

The Rajbanshis are mostly agricultural people. Therefore, in most of the cases their villages are found in an open space in the middle of their farms. Occasionally, they also build a village for a group of persons with their cultivated land elsewhere because they prefer to live with their community. In every village, there is a relatively rich and big landowner who is known as *Deoniya*. He acts as the chief of the village. Thus, a Rajbanshi village consists of a comparatively bigger house of *Deoniya* (landlord) and a group of smaller houses of his sharecroppers and other landless people who work as wage laborers for him. There is thus no well defined village boundary under such condition and the boundaries are not marked out with fencing or pillars. However, the villagers know the boundary of their village which often consists of an imaginary line along some big tree or big earthen embankment on the cultivated land known as *dhur*.

The basic residential, social, religious, and economic unit of the Rajbanshis of Rajgadh is the patrilineal nuclear family. This unit consists of a man, his wife, and their unmarried children, usually occupying a single dwelling. In some cases, a household may consist of two or more married males, their wives, and unmarried children, all working on the same undivided land. Such households are termed here as joint families, which may split into two or more residential units, regularly occupying outbuildings, away from the main house. In joint families, however, the basic economic unit is not a residential unit. All the individuals share in the family occupation and eat from the same hearth in joint families.

In most cases, the head of the family is the eldest active male of the household. He bears the final responsibility and is the sole authority for the family's well-being and everyone is supposed to work and act according to his direction. The wife of the eldest male, regardless of whether the latter is living, is the head of household chores and of all the females, particularly in the joint family. The practice of patrilocality in the Rajbanshi community can be seen from the fact that after the death of the household head, the responsibility and authority are both transferred naturally to the eldest son, but the eldest woman of the household becomes the titular head of the household upon her husband's death, if there are no younger sons or brothers to take over.

The Rajbanshis of this village prefer to live in nuclear families than in extended or joint families due to inadequate land-holding and poor fertility of the soil. About 81% of the total 59 Rajbanshi households belong to the nuclear families. It seems that their family types are more or less influenced by the size of land-holding and other resources available for subsistence. The rules of inheritance are on the 'principle of ownership by birth' and the exercise of inheritance rights by the Rajbanshi always proceeds through stages. A separation from the main household usually occurs as brothers divide their father's property and the final division of the property usually occurs after all the sons of a man have got married and have established separate households. In most cases, however, the process gets delayed until after their father's death.

SOCIOCULTURAL PRACTICES AND ADAPTATION

There are two main ways of relating socio-cultural systems (rituals, festivals, etc.) to the environmental phenomena: either showing that items of the socio-cultural system function as a part of the whole system that also includes the local ecological phenomena or else showing that the environmental phenomena are responsible in some manner for the origin or development of the socio-cultural system under investigation (Vayda 1969). The festivals and rituals which the Rajbanshis have been celebrating are associated with one or the other of the Hindu pantheon. The Hindu concept of sacredness (e.g., sacred cow, trees, and plants) is one of the sustainable or beneficial relationships that have evolved in the course of the interaction of human population with the natural environment over time (Harris: 1974). Both of these ways are applicable in the study of the socio-cultural system of the Rajbanshis. For example, the tradition of conspicuous consumption and expenses in their *rite de passage* evolved from their dominant position in the arenas of resource use and allocation in the past. These customs were functional in the past, when there were enough resources for consumption or distribution for continuing the production in the succeeding years. Thus, the environmental attributes (high soil fertility, abundance of natural vegetation) are responsible in the origin of the customs of conspicuous consumption in marriages and death rituals among these Rajbanshis of Nepal Tarai. On the other hand, these rituals and festivals like *Maghesagaranti*⁸ and performance of various *Lilas*⁹ function as the part of the ecosystem that help to maintain the local ecosystem by consuming the excess or surplus production in the appropriate season. *Maghesagaranti* is celebrated in the middle of January (a cold season in the area) and is believed to be the best period for meat consumption in that hot climatic area. The *Lilas* also act as

recreational institutions for the Rajbanshis, as there are no other entertainments in a concrete sense.

Likewise, festivals such as *Aashari Ghasari*, *Kadsiruwa*, and *Rangsiruwa* are more or less related to the environmental potentiality of the area. *Aashari Ghasari* is celebrated in the month of Ashadh (July). Rajbanshis worship the forest as god *Indra* (king of the heaven and god of rain) to get good rain all over the year on this occasion. Since all the lands of the area are rainfed, this festival reflects the role of forests in rain which is an inherent part of their life. Both *Rangsiruwa* and *Kadsiruwa* are related to the land, the only permanent source of livelihood for the Rajbanshis. These festivals are celebrated on the second and third days of Baisakh (the third week of April) respectively. All the Rajbanshis of a village collectively worship land for its sustainable fertility: their mud-play signifies the value of soil and land in their survival. Thus, the socio-cultural features of the Rajbanshis in some respect are the product of the local environmental phenomena. But, at the same time, they also act as a part of the local ecosystems.

TECHNOLOGY

Every human society employs techniques in order to appropriate resources from the environment. Each technique is a combination of material artifacts (tools and machines) and the knowledge required to make and use them. Thus, the technology of a human group is the total system of means of production by which the group interacts with its environment. This includes the use of tools, the pattern of works, the information of the knowledge employed, and the organization of resource for productive activities. The numbers and kinds of tools a society uses are related to the cultural practices and life-styles of its members. The material culture of the Rajbanshis, which is reflected in their productive technology and the means by which they have been exploiting the resources around them appear simple. They fulfill their subsistence as the natural environment permits them with their simple technological knowledge of irrigation, ploughing, and transportation. As they are agriculturists of the plain region, they have been using their traditional simple technology in order to survive in that environment because it has been comparatively productive until now. Since technology and environment form a single system together, if one changes, ultimately the other one also is effected. Due to population growth, migration, immigration, and forest depletion, the soil fertility of the area has changed, and to manage this change, these people have also changed their technology of subsistence. For example, they have adopted a culture of cultivation of cash crops

including the technology of groundwater irrigation, and improved varieties of crops in spite of the cultivation of cereal crops of local varieties, depending on the monsoon. However, changes in the traditional mode of subsistence are not significant as in other areas and as among other people such as the hill folk.

Agriculture is the main subsistence of the Rajbanshis, which is exclusively based on human and livestock power but they sometimes also use the rice and flour mills located in the village. Agriculture, as a result, is labor-intensive for those crops harvested in winter such as tobacco and wheat. Almost all of the Rajbanshis rarely use chemical fertilizers but use frequently both manure and animal dung. The shortage of firewood due to deforestation and other constraints posed by the forest guards have induced them to use cattle-dung as a cooking material which is a convenient form of energy for the rural women due to its long lasting heat giving capacity. On the other hand, use of animal dung as firewood has also a certain negative impact upon farm production since alternative sources for fertilizing the field are lacking. Usually the Rajbanshis use the following implements for their agricultural activities:

1. *Hal* - plough
2. *Kodal* - spade/ho
3. *Kurali* - axe for splitting wood
4. *Kachiya* - sickle for harvesting
5. *Hasuwa* - sickle for jute plant
6. *Dao* - chopper for cutting wood
7. *Bossila* - smaller axe for cutting and splitting wood/bamboo
8. *Dhangni* - club to break the clods after ploughing
9. *Moai* - harrow
10. *Passini* - spud

The use of these agricultural implements shows that they depend heavily on human and animal labor rather than machine for cultivation. Their *hal* is similar to those used in other regions of Nepal – a wooden structure with a wooden moldboard and iron share and hook, pulled by oxen or buffaloes. The plough is connected to the yoke with the help of *jotar* (jute string). As the use of the plough is the main characteristic of subsistence agriculture, it is an important tool for tilling agricultural land. The digging spade – *kodal* – is used mostly in making terraces during the rainy season to hold back water for transplanting paddy and is another prime agricultural implement. However, the other tools like club, Jadder, spud (specially used for weeding kitchen garden, and jute and tobacco plantations), and sickles are also used frequently. Implements which are used for extraction of forest materials such as firewood, or are used as housing materials, such as ploughing wood etc., are axes for splitting wood; small axes

and chisels, specially used for making wooden agricultural implements like plough; and the chopper used for cutting bamboo and fence-making and other purposes. These tools have been used by these people for generations. No changes are yet evident in the size and shape of these tools, except the plough. Some Rajbanshi households have been using an improved form of plough made from iron plates provided by the local cooperatives and the Agricultural Development Project.

These people depend heavily on the monsoon for irrigation because there are no irrigation facilities. They simply raise *aali* (embankment) around the small plots of land called *khutti* with the help of *kodal* to preserve water and prevent soil erosion.

Their only means of transportation is the Bullock Cart, drawn by bullocks and sometimes by male buffaloes. It can go over the unmetalled roads, muddy fields, and over small embankments of about two feet height. It is generally used to fetch corn and hay from the fields, firewood from the forest, merchandise from the market, and even people. It is usually made of wood, bamboo pole, iron sheets, and has an axle.

They have been using spinning and weaving implements to make jute strings from jute fiber for use in household articles, partly for their own consumption and partly for sale. Such articles are *dhokra* (a jute cloth used as bedsheet), *sutli* (jute thread for tying the parts of the hut), and *rassi* (rope to keep the cattle tied in cowsheds).

They also make fishing nets and traps from bamboo and dry jute plants which they use for fishing in their paddy fields during the rainy season after the paddy is planted when they have time away from the farm. The small fish, thus collected, Sun-dried and preserved in a bamboo pot, are called *sidol* (dry fish), which make a prestigious and tasty curry.

ECONOMY AND SUBSISTENCE

As in most Nepali villages, the main source of livelihood among the Rajbanshis is agriculture supplemented locally by animal husbandry, small scale trade, and wage labor. The pattern of landownership extant today in Rajgadth dates from the dawn of the Rana rule; may be, even earlier, when the practice of allotting land to the household for cultivation was perhaps established. State ownership was the traditional form of land tenure, called *raikar*. In the absence of private property rights on the *raikar* land, the cultivator could enjoy only the rights to cultivate the land and enjoy its produce subject to the payment of the rent to the state. Although, state land had been registered in favor of the cultivators before the first quarter of the 20th

century ended, a large disparity remained in land-holding size even after the Land Reform Program of 1964 Land Act prohibited landowners from appropriating in excess of half of the annual yield of the land. Also, the cultivator who acquires tenancy rights cannot be evicted by the landlord except through a judicial decree. But in practice, these provisions are not effectively implemented.

Dhanhar (paddy land) and *bhith* (dry land) are the main land types of the study village as classified on the basis of irrigation facilities, soil types, and types of crops cultivated. It has a total of 235.15 ha of cultivable land, out of which 194.91 ha is *dhanhar* land (82.88% of the total cultivable land). Likewise, there is 40.91 ha of *bhith* land (17.11% of the total land under cultivation). The land-man ratio and land-household ratio in the study village are 0.15 ha per person and 0.88 ha per household respectively. *Adhyan* (sharecropping) and *thekka* (fixed rent) are two ways of land renting in this village. Mortgaging of land was also reported in significant numbers (five cases, or 8.4% of the 59 households) in the study area which is locally known as *Biaj Marauni*.

The *Brahman/Chhetri* group has the largest amount of land-holding per household compared to other ethnic groups in the study area. Out of the total cultivated land 235.15 ha, more than 50%, i.e., 118 ha is owned by the Brahmans/Chhetris. Rajbanshis who had owned about 74% of the total 212.15 ha cultivated land in 1964-65 owned only 41.15% (96.78 ha) in 1992-93. Their caste status and literacy skills enabled them to take advantage of the administrative regulations on land acquisition. In addition, the heavy expenses on life cycle ceremonies and social occasions⁸ of the Rajbanshis forced them to sell their lands to the hill immigrants because very few of them (about 5% of the total 59 households) could fulfill their social and cultural obligations (including ceremonial expenses) with their farm surplus and savings. All others (95% of the total households) have to sell land (54.24%) or mortgage (8.47%) and take loan (32.24%) from the local moneylender (usually hill Brahman) to meet their social requirements. As the size of land-holding ranges from 0.002 ha to 30.6 ha per household, majority of the Rajbanshis are now engaged in agriculture either as marginal landholders or as tenants and sharecroppers of the big landholders (Rajbanshis or Brahmans/Chhetries).

As land and family size is not distributed equally among the households in the study area, the degree to which each household produces its own food varies considerably. It generally depends on the quality and quantity of the land processed by the household and the number of members in the family. Although the average land-holding

of the sampled households is 1.08 ha, more than 50% of the households produce grain to meet only three months' requirements. Thus, diversification and intensification of crops and exploitation of local resources (wage/*dini* labor, firewood selling) to earn cash are the main strategies adopted by the Rajbanshis to manage population growth, land scarcity, and social and cultural needs.

As in other rural areas of Nepal, the farming practice of the study area is characterized by mixed farming, which includes agriculture, animal husbandry, and horticulture. Agricultural activities are characterized by simple traditional techniques where manual labor and animal power are used for ploughing, sowing, weeding, harvesting, and threshing. Changes in demographic structure through natural growth, migration, and immigration, and its resultant pressure on the agricultural sector have altered the cropping patterns of the study area. In the past, when land was in abundance and population size was relatively small, people used to grow only one crop of paddy which was transplanted (in most cases, seed broadcasting was the rule in over two-thirds of the paddy land) in July/August to be harvested in November. For the remaining months of year, land was kept fallow when large flocks of cattle and buffaloes grazed there. This fallow period provided sufficient time for regeneration of the natural soil nutrient, on the one hand, and absorption of the excreta of cattle and buffaloes on the field soil, on the other. It had a positive effect upon land productivity. Some of the large land-holding Rajbanshis here still follow such mode of cropping because they own enough land.

In the course of time, as population increased, there was fragmentation of land and single cropping could not meet the increased demand for food and other requirements. As efforts were made to intensify the farming practices to adjust to the changing social and natural environment, winter crops were introduced along with improvement in the irrigation system. With the arrival of the hill people, maize and millet were also introduced around the 50s. The fallow period of land between two crops has shortened and the frequency of crop rotation in the same land in a year has increased. In addition to paddy, Rajbanshis have started to grow maize, wheat, millet, and summer paddy (where irrigation is possible in winter). Gradually, subsistence farming is being monetized. Various cash crops such as tobacco, jute, vegetables like chilies, tomatoes, and potatoes have been cultivated for their own consumption and partly for sale which are recent developments in the local economy. Weekly market facilities can fetch cash from these products. Such a situation induced Boserup (1965) to forward the hypothesis that "As population grows and land-holding becomes insufficient, agricultural practices tend to

become intensified", which is primarily based on the *Law of Least Effort*. This law holds that cultivators do not normally intensify or adopt technological innovation for intensive agriculture except when forced by the pressure of population on resource. The general patterns of intensification include increasing amounts of land being brought under cultivation, a shortening of fallow periods leading up to multi-cropping, a shift from dry to irrigated agriculture, change from natural grazing to producing fodder, and increasing inputs of time into agriculture on the part of the community. However, as the area is flat and fertile which makes transportation easy and market facilities available, it is profitable to exchange agri-production into cash. This provides income throughout the year to fulfill recurrent and contingent expenditure of the Rajbanshis irrespective of population pressure and land scarcity. This means that environmental condition may be as important as population pressure and land scarcity in determining the cropping intensity of a particular geographical area.

Work on the farm is done by the members of the family. Excluding the children below five years, the old, and physically disabled members of the household, all participate in economic production. In many cases, they may handle all the activities - ploughing; harrowing; breaking clods; weeding maize; and transplanting tobacco, millet, and paddy seedlings. Some well-to-do households maintain keep attendants for domestic service and farm work. Generally, these attendants are poor Rajbanshis, who often prefer to live in the Rajbanshi households because their food habits resemble. There is often a pre-arranged contract between the employer and the labor hand. The relatively better-off households occasionally grant loan to labor households during critical periods and supply them food grains when food shortage occurs on the understanding that the latter would work as labor hands during the peak farming seasons. Basically this type of relationship exists between landlord and sharecroppers living on the free land of the former. Hiring of labors on daily/monthly wages for ploughing, transplanting, weeding, and harvesting is also in practice. Transplantation of paddy is usually carried out by women labors called *Ropahar*. However, the use of labor is affected by a variety of factors such as quality of soil, irrigation facilities, types of crops grown, size of holding, ability of farming and availability of other types of labor, distance of the land-holdings from the homesteads, and the span of peak season for farm operation.

As farming gets more intensified and diversified, there is greater demand for labor. The labor of family members alone often cannot meet the demand. The Rajbanshis along with other ethnic groups of

Tarai have developed *hauli* as an indigenous system of labor exchange for the peak agricultural season and *dini*, which is concerned with remuneration for the labor concerned in kind, is also in practice. *Hauli* is used mainly during transplantation of tobacco and preparation of *fari* (process of making bundles of tobacco leaf when the leaf is separated from stem). *Hauli* is not like 'exchange labor' in the sense that it is not necessarily reciprocal. The household which hosts *hauli* has to provide food with meat and other varieties of curry and *muri* (poprice) or *chura* (bitten rice) to the person at work. This system is not only economically important (the hosts can thus save quite a large expenditure). It can also preserve social integration. Since anyone can be called for work, irrespective of his wealth and social prestige, it helps to maintain emotional interdependence in the Rajbanshi society. However, women are not usually allowed to go for *hauli*, nor is there any rule that the head of the family must go for it. The well-off households send other persons to work for them and pay them in cash/ kind. Defaulting brings social ostracism. Such practice plays a significant role in strengthening the Rajbanshi economy. They not only fulfill their daily labor demands, but also save good amounts of cash. In *dini*, a group of laborers is hired for harvesting, threshing, and winnowing of paddy and wheat, even in extracting jute fibers. Generally, the laborers receive 1/8th of the total production of their work from the landowner.

The agricultural calendar begins in March/April and ends in November covering about nine months. Paddy, maize, wheat, millet, oilseeds, and lentils are the major crops grown. Jute and tobacco are extensively grown as cash crops. Green vegetables are grown partly for consumption and partly for sale. Usually, cereal grains satisfy the subsistence needs of the Rajbanshis, whereas the cash crops provide an extra income to fulfill other household requirements. Since all of these are labor-intensive crops, their level of production can be raised by increasing labor inputs. However, today, there is little land for continued expansion and labor input in the area is already so high (Mishra, Uprety, and Pandey 1992) that labor intensification alone can raise production only minimally. There is intensive demand for labor only at certain times of the year, i.e., during the peak agricultural season. Consequently, a large part of the labor force must find employment elsewhere or it has to be employed during the slack agricultural seasons in other sectors. Such free time (off - farm period) is used to exploit what Yengoyen (1975) has referred to as 'micro-economic niches' (cited from Pofferberger 1976) such as small trade, seasonal migration, cottage industry, collection and selling of firewood and timber, in order to supplement the household income.

Many Rajbanshis have started to exploit the microeconomic niches available in the area and other places up to Kathmandu, and are now reaching as far as the Indian states of Punjab, Hariyana, and Delhi.

It was also observed that land use for growing crops is more or less determined by socio-religious and cultural practices, although the combination of crops is varied depending on the local soil condition and available irrigation facilities. One can easily observe that farmers here have extended agricultural land as much as possible to respond to the growing population pressures. Different types of crops are grown in the same field (mixed cropping) to overcome the shortage of cultivable land. The choice of crop to be cultivated is determined by their habits and cultural values. The Rajbanshis thus manage to grow two or more crops in the same land at the same time. Mixed cropping helps to maintain the fertility of soil through utilization of different proportions of soil nutrients. Some leguminous plants provide extra nitrogen to the soil and can be utilized by another crop, which is mixed with legume. Hence, their knowledge of mixed cropping not only helps to understand their realization of the given ecological constraints but also helps them in many other ways to survive despite land scarcity. The major patterns of mixed cropping practiced by the Rajbanshis are:

- Paddy + *Khesari* + Pulses and Soybean (on the levees of paddy land)
- Maize + Cucumber + Pumpkin + Beans
- Mustard + *Musuri* (*Lens culinaris*) + Radish
- Potato + Green vegetables

The difference in consumption and economic status of the Rajbanshi households has also influenced cropping patterns in the study area. Acute need often leads the poor Rajbanshi peasants to sell their best expensive crops. These peasants consume crops that are in lesser demand in the market. This explains the reason for selecting crops for the family farm. The subsistence farmers primarily need cereal food for their survival, whereas the affluent farmers with surplus production prefer to grow better grain species for their consumption and get better price from their sale. However, even this trend has been changing recently. Three households out of fifty-nine cultivated tobacco and green vegetables which fetch more profit than other cereal crops (cereal grains can be easily bought by the profit money obtained from the sale of cash crop). Farmers often invest their extra time also in small business and kitchen gardening to gain more cash.

Rajbanshis also keep parts of their farmland fallow, leaving domestic animals in the fallow fields, grazing them on harvested

fields, and applying manure and compost obtained from grasses, forest leaves, and residue of previous crops to maintain soil fertility. Sometimes they use chemical fertilizers (mostly nitrogenous), which the average subsistence farmers cannot afford. Hence the traditional use of dung manure supplemented with compost made from dry weeds, forest leaves, and crop residue predominates. Although the combination of crops varies depending on the local soil condition and irrigation facilities, the general cropping pattern is changing from extensive to an intensive one. The general cropping pattern remains as follows:

| Land Type | Fallowing Pattern and Period | Evaluation |
|------------------|--|--|
| A. Dhanahar Land | 1. Paddy -- (7 months) - Fallow 2. Paddy - (2-3 months)- Maize/ Oil Seed/Jute/Vegetables 3. Paddy - Wheat - Paddy | Extensive Semi-Extensive Intensive |
| B. Bhith Land | 1. Tobacco - (8 months)- Fallow 2. Jute/Maze - (3-4 months) - Mustard Oil Seed | Extensive Semi - Extensive |

Animal husbandry is an integral part of the rural agricultural system. In addition to manure, draft service, and dairy products, domestic animals contribute additional income. Cattle and buffaloes are kept as a source of draft power, milking, and farm. The males are used for drafting carts and ploughing and females for milk. Rajbanshis keep cows, oxen, buffaloes, male buffaloes, and goats. Some households provide animals to other households without transferring ownership to be kept in *Adhiyan* system (lambs are equally distributed between the owner and the caretaker). Ducks and pigeons are also reared. As the domestic animals play an important role in the socio-economic and religious life of the community, they reflect the status of the owner in the society. Since Rajbanshis claim Chhetri's status in the caste hierarchy, they do not domesticate pigs and chickens following the custom of high caste Hindus and consume goat meat, not pork and chicken.

Apart from the additional income that the sale of these animals and their products (milk, ghee, curd, and meat) fetches, there is also manure that helps in maintaining soil fertility. As chemical fertilizers are costly and sometimes not available in time, manure is of great importance in the local farming system. Altogether, 321 animals were raised by the sample Rajbanshi households - 90 cows, 28 buffaloes, 73 oxen, and 130 goats. On the average, one cattle produces about 2 kg of dung per day whereas buffalo brings 3 kg and goat about 100 gram. Thus annually, 163 cattle produce 118,990 kg of dung, 28 buffaloes bring 30,660 kg, and 130 goats 4745 kg which altogether is 154,395 kg for the 59 sample Rajbanshi households. The average

amount of compost available per household is 2617 kg which can contribute to increase soil fertility without spending hard cash for chemical fertilizers. The uneven distribution of animals and differences in their types, however, render compost production per household unequal. Animal husbandry in the study area is thus directly related to its agro-economy. As subsistence agriculture is a dominant part of its economy, animal husbandry provides not only manure but also the basic foodstuff. Due to the fragmentation of holdings and lack of grazing lands, however, the number of domesticated animals is decreasing.

Rajbanshis also practice a system of renting animals locally called *Pana*. The household which hires the animal (oxen/buffaloes) and annually pays 12-15 mounds of paddy to the owner of the animal uses it for ploughing or draft purposes. He is also responsible for its caring and rearing. Generally, the landlords who hire out oxen to their sharecoppers get their rent during the period of paddy harvesting.

Since animal husbandry is an integral part of the agriculture system of Rajbanshis, the number of livestock and agricultural productivity depend upon the availability of forest resources. A close relationship thus persists between the forests, rainfall, and agricultural productivity as much of the land in the study area is rainfed. Forests play an important role in sustaining land productivity by providing dung manure supported with bedding materials from the forest which also provides grass and fodder. Thus, agricultural production, the principle source of livelihood of the Rajbanshis, is directly related to the quality and quantity of wild vegetation. If the forest cover decreases, fewer animals can be raised. Consequently, smaller amounts of manure will be produced. Crop yield will decline and shortfalls in production will mean grain deficit. Forest resources thus play a key role in sustaining village economy by directly or indirectly contributing to agricultural production.

Although agriculture is the backbone of Rajbanshi economy, income from farm alone is not enough to maintain the households because many households have inadequate land-holding. Moreover, population increase means food deficits and additional expenses. People have to buy clothes, iron implements, salt, cooking oil, soap, tobacco, kerosene, and spices, which call for income beyond what their land brings. They thus engage themselves in off-farm or subsidiary economic activities: wage labor, firewood/timber collection and selling, small trade and business, services, and seasonal migration. Off-farm activities thus provide alternative opportunities to generate cash which also helps to raise the social status of a household by providing means for spending in different social sectors. Hence, the

overall production system of the local Rajbanshis is clearly domestic or peasant in nature and their economy supports Firth's definition of peasant economies "...a system of small-scale producer, with simple technology and equipment often relying primarily for their subsistence on what they themselves produced such a small scale productive organization, built upon the use of close relation with primary resources has its own concomitant system of capital accumulation and indebtedness, marketing and distribution" (cited in Dahal: 1983).

FARM ECOSYSTEM AND ECO-CULTURAL-RELATIONS

The vast majority of the people living in the study area depend on agriculture for their livelihood, which itself is heavily dependent on forestry for its sustenance. But the farm ecosystem is relatively self-contained and provides most of the needs of the farm family for food and shelter. The family farm management system in the study area can be deemed as a complex arrangement of soil, water sources, natural vegetation, crops, livestock, labor arrangement, and other cultural and social resources that a farm household manages in its production.

In the past, the interaction and balance developed by the local farmer between crop production, livestock raising, and forestry allowed sufficient levels of agricultural production. More recently, however, rapid population growth and fragmentation of land-holdings throughout the region have brought increased competition for scarce resources disturbing the ecological balance. As a result, yields are declining, a consequence of declining land fertility due to lower nutrient flow through the forests. Consequently, people have changed their cultural practices, adopting new technologies for the improved varieties of crops, and new consumption patterns. Again, intensification of agriculture is another example of change in the local cultural practices by means of which the people have responded to the decline in crop yield.

The existing relationship between crops, human population, livestock, and forest shows the cultural-ecological relationship in the study area. It can help one to see how the local ecosystem is maintained or disturbed by the prevailing socio-cultural practices of the people. The entire environment of the village can be divided into three main ecological components: (1) physical or abiotic component which includes heat, water, land, and climatic conditions; (2) biotic component which includes all the living organisms such as plants including crops and wild vegetation and human population; and (3) cultural component which includes knowledge, value and belief

system about cropping patterns, choice of crop cultivation and animal raising, people's consumption patterns, and the technologies used by them to extract resources from the environment. The ecosystem or ecological system of the study area then becomes a relatively stable set of organic relationship between the livestock, forest, crops, and human population in which energy, material, and information are in continuous circulation and where all these components can be seen in terms of their systemwise repercussions. The Rajbanshis of the study area can thus be understood as a population not only in terms of their social organization but as an integral part of the ecosystem with a common set of distinctive features by which they maintain a common set of trophic (energy) relationship within the ecosystem which they occupy. This also means the Rajbanshis are to be identified distinctly from other population in the study area in terms of the position of the 'niche' which they occupy in the total ecosystem.

All the livestock including cattle and water buffaloes are key links in the village ecosystem as providers of manure which when composted with wild vegetation and agri-residue is used to fertilize the fields. The male cattle and buffaloes are necessary for ploughing the field and females are used for production of milk and offspring. They can also produce significant amounts of manure. Livestock provide meat, milk, and other dairy products for the human population and the human population maintains livestock by investing labor, capital, and time. Human population and livestock are thus in a symbiotic relationship in terms of population interaction. Human population, again, invests capital, labor, and time for cultivating and harvesting crops, which provides them food grain for meal and cash for various kinds of expenditure. This is an example of a symbiotic relationship among the human and cultivated plant species. In this way, energy, material and information in continuous circulation maintain a stable set of organic relationship between the livestock, forest, crops, and human population up to a certain energy level. If one element of the ecosystem extracts more energy without recycling, then the ecological balance gets disturbed causing severe side effects.

Forests have always been an inseparable part of the subsistence activities of the people which not only provide fuelwood, timber, herbs, and grazing lands for livestock but also help to protect them from natural calamities such as soil erosion, landslides, and floods (Bajracharya: 1983). Forests in addition provide timber and poles for housing, livestock sheds, furniture for households as well as farm implements and tools for the local people. The local people use the forest products such as birds, fish, wild animals, fruits, and honey for direct domestic consumption, and bamboo shoots, mushrooms, certain

kinds of herbs, and honey are significant sources of food and income from the forest. The forest thus becomes a renewable source of production of goods and services and is an inherent part of the human environment, as well as a medium for recycling energy and waste products.

This same resource (forest) is becoming scarce day by day, a scarcity reflected locally in the number of houses needed to collect loads of firewood. In this context, many Rajbanshis reported that whereas a few decades ago it took only one hour to collect one *bhar* (a load that an ordinary man can carry) of firewood, now it takes about 4-5 hours. On an average, one household requires one *bhar* of firewood a day; their consumption is relatively higher than among the hill folk in the area. The high consumption is mainly due to the large and deep ovens in local use and the production of hulled rice which needs large amounts of firewood. It was also observed that a significant amount of timber was being smuggled by many local people to get cash causing massive deforestation in the area which adversely affects the local ecological balance.

The decrease in livestock raising due to fodder and grazing scarcity has a negative impact on subsistence farmers of the area. The question of fodder and grazing shortage in the forest is crucial because in the absence of fodder and grazing land fertilizers cannot be produced, and without sufficient fertilizer the production level inevitably declines, which ultimately disturbs the people's subsistence patterns. The environment then becomes more hazardous to exploit. Thus, it seems essential that some system be developed to re-establish and maintain the balance between man and his environment.

Although, there were no institutional and social/cultural mechanisms to control and maintain the natural resources such as the forest land developed by these people similar to the *Kipat* system of the Rai and Limbus and *Shingo Nawa* of the Sherpas in the Hills and Mountain respectively (Fisher 1990, Shrestha *et al* 1991), they have recognized the need of a social mechanism to control and maintain man's relation with the environment in the form of collective *pooja*. They worship green trees as deities and perform *poojas* before entering the forest to collect timber and firewood. They never cut and fell down the green trees unless there is a sharp need. Usually they fulfil their timber needs with dead and dried trees. Branches are used as firewood material. But this tradition of resource control has disappeared gradually because of population pressure and the state policy toward the forest resources (Bajracharya 1983). Before 1951, the state also encouraged villagers to reclaim the forest land in order to maximize state revenue (Regmi 1978).

As the human population depends heavily upon the wild vegetation of forest land (see Rai 1985) in terms of ecosystem, the human population supplies or recycles very few nutrients in turn because no system of tree plantation has so far developed to contain the process of deforestation. As the human population has grown and continues to grow, more and more demands are placed upon the forest rendering any recycling provisions difficult. As the local arable land gets extended, the forest area shrinks, and the consequent decrease in fertility brings a decline in the yields. In addition, the reduction of forest land also narrows down grazing area reducing the fodder available for the livestock which adversely affects the scope of livestock raising.

Population increase in the study area has not only led to the depletion of forests and fuelwood, fodder, timber, and grazing opportunities. Removal of the forest cover has also accelerated soil erosion. Increasing grain deficiency among the farmers was one obvious consequence.

Finally, loss of ground cover due to disappearance of natural vegetation also results in a process of aridization (Hoffpauir 1974) whereby the moisture contained in the soil gradually gets reduced through evaporation. Besides reducing the immediate fertility of soil, aridization leaves a longer term impact on the region's climatic pattern. A relatively low, uncertain rainfall due to irregular start of the monsoon, observed since a few years, is one manifestation of aridization here. In order to maintain a harmonious life pattern, a balanced relationship between the various components of the local ecosystem must be maintained. The only alternative would be more and more eco-hazards in the future.

CONCLUSION

In an agricultural society like ours, cultural ecology is concerned with the strategies used to transform the natural environment into a system for the sustainable generation of natural resources and then to use these for subsistence and profit. Cultural ecology in this context becomes the study of adaptive processes by which human societies and cultures adjust through subsistence patterns to a given environment. The lack of other alternatives more reliable than agriculture for earning a living has affected lands and forests adversely due to the increasing pressure of population which brings economic and social deprivation of the Rajbanshis solely dependent upon these resources. In certain respects the migrants have even replaced these people from their native land. As land becomes scarce, Rajbanshis have started to intensify and

diversify their agricultural practices by improving irrigation system, adopting crops like wheat and maize, and by changing their cropping practices. But the degree of change is limited and is determined by the ecological potential and the economic condition of these people for investment in improving the existing situation. A general pattern of shift from mono-cropping to multi-cropping and mixed cropping, and from cereal cultivation to cash crop cultivation has also been observed in the study areas. They have also started growing vegetables for sale and run small scale trading businesses and have taken to seasonal migration to generate sources of cash. Thus, even as the subsistence activities are changing, the respective socioculture practices of the people are also undergoing some modifications to meet the changing needs of the time. They have changed their food habits and have started to use maize and millet in their diet. They have also considerably substituted their conspicuous consumption and other expenses on tradition and rituals, adopting alternative forms such as *Dhuki* and *Damedome Biha* in their marriage practices. They are now abandoning the custom of *Bhumi Dan* (Land Gift) during rituals because time and resources are in shorter supply. All these changes in the local socio-cultural practices and economic activities have developed as their resistance to the environmental conditions and are the culturally structured adaptive strategies of the Rajbanshis for survival in the changing context of Rajgad and its environs.

NOTES

1. This article is based on the author's field material collected for his Masters degree thesis on the Rajbanshis of Rajgad VDC of Jhapa in 1993 - March 1994. The fieldwork was funded by the Tribhuvan - Bergen Human Ecology Programme, Kathmandu.
2. The author is grateful to Dr. Krishna B. Bhattachan for his helpful comments and suggestions.
3. For details on the application of the cultural ecological method to study different human societies, see Moran (1982); Netting (1980); and Rambo (1983).
4. For a more extensive and detailed understanding of the core and non-core elements of cultural ecology, see Rambo (1983).
5. See Sanyal (1965); Berile (1985); and Bhattarai (1984) for details about the non-core elements of the Rajbanshi culture which basically includes the Rajbanshi language, religion, art, and values.
6. See Gurung (1989).
7. See Ojha (1983), and Dahal (1983).
8. In the festival of *Maghesagaranti* a large amount of goat meat and fish is consumed and slaughter of 20-30 goats in one Rajbanshi village is common.
9. Play or drama of the gods such as Ram and Krishna is frequently arranged in the Rajbanshi village in winter after the crops are harvested. The host households pay and provide good food to a group of 20-30 participants of the *Lila* and other guests for about a week to fifteen days.
10. See Bhattarai (1994) for details on the ritual expenses of the Rajbanshis.

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**KURMA, KOLA, AND KURI
AS COMMUNITY CONCEPTS**
Patrilineage, Deities, and Inside-Outside
Dichotomy among the Rana Tharus¹

Ganesh Man Gurung
Tove C. Kittelsen

As is the case with the Tharus in general, the Rana Tharus have been very little studied, and knowledge about them is scarce.² Thus, in addition to being an interesting field for anthropological studies, research on the Rana Tharus, can break new ground for policymakers as well as on the developing ethnic identities. Most important of all, we see our own work as a much needed basis for further research on the Rana Tharus.

This paper which focuses on the Rana Tharus in Kailali and Kanchanpur districts in the southwestern corner of Nepal³, elucidates the role of patrilineage in their social system, the relationship between the people there and their deities, explicates the significance of inside and outside dichotomy, and explains their marriage system in terms of their lineage hierarchy.

The area of field work is a part of the Terai, with its flat stretches of agricultural land and patches of forest⁴. The Rana Tharus are now settled farmers, but were earlier described as shifting cultivators. Today, they grow paddy, wheat, and a variety of lentils and vegetables. They also raise cattle, goats, sheep, chickens, and geese. In addition, fishing is an important part of women's work after the monsoon. Few Rana Tharus are wage-laborers.

KURMA PATRILINEAL SYSTEM

The Rana Tharus live in patrilineal extended households. Brothers often live together in one household with their wives, unmarried children, and married sons with their own families. Thus, the household is a segment of a patrilineal descent group. There may be several houses around a courtyard and sometimes more than fifty people, but as long as they "eat from one kitchen", as our informants put it, they are seen as one household. Another term used for this social unit is a *ghar*, which also means house. When one talks about,

for example, *Surmeha ghar* or *Pipariya ghar*, one refers to 'the house' (i.e., the household/patrilineage) which moved here from Surmeha village or Pipariya village. The household runs the farm together and the brothers of the patrilineage own land jointly. When a household splits, whether as a matter of convenience or due to family trouble, and a new household is established, a new branch of *kurma* (patrilineage) is also created.

Usually, all members of a *kurma* who live in one village build their houses close to each other in the same village quarter. This group is the first to be approached for help when a household is in trouble, but one also counts on more distant *kurmas* on such occasions. The *kurma* also plays a role in providing a taboo-group when it comes to marriage. This applies to the whole *kurma*, whether close or distant. The *kurma* also worships the same lineage deities, which are represented by small circular or square bumps made of cowdung/mud or by a wooden peg⁵. These are located just outside the entrance to the kitchen (a low platform) and inside the deity-room (*kola*) next to the kitchen. By noticing the size, shape, and number of lineage-deities represented outside a house, Rana Tharus can, at least theoretically, recognize members of a certain *kurma* (patrilineage). We will come back to the lineage deities in more detail below.

In addition to the household's patrilineage (*kurma*), the village itself is a socially important unit in this society. Although Rana Tharu villages, like all villages in the country, are organized according to Nepali laws on local organization, they also have their own social and religious leaders. This system of traditional leadership has survived the Panchayat rule, and is still working in the new political environment after the 1990 movement.

The village leader is called a *bhalemansa*. He is elected by the *kitcheri*, a village meeting, where each house (household) is represented by one male member. If the villagers are not satisfied with the services of the *bhalemansa*, or if he rejects re-election, they elect a new one. Some *bhalemansas* have been continuously in charge of their villages for many years, and in some villages the son of a former *bhalemansa* has been elected. However, the seat of a *bhalemansa* is open to anyone who commands the respect and confidence of the villagers. The *bhalemansa* has the last word on village matters, but problems are discussed in the *kitcheri* (the village meeting) before a final decision is made.

A village *choukidar* is elected on the same principles as the *bhalemansa*. He is the messenger of the village, and is responsible for implementing the decisions and plans of the *bhalemansa* and the *kitcheri*, such as organizing road maintenance and other village work,

The *choukidar* is also trained by the *gauthehara* (village shaman/priest) in performing village rituals in his absence, and is responsible for preparing the rituals, i.e., collecting or buying what is needed for the *pooja*. In at least two of the villages we visited, the *choukidar* was a Dangora Tharu. It was obviously not seen as a problem that he worshipped Rana Tharu deities on behalf of the Rana Tharu villagers, although he worshipped his own Dangora Tharu deities at home.

In a Rana Tharu village there may be many *bharras*, or local healers, while there is only one *gauthehara*, i.e., main village shaman/priest⁶. The *gauthehara* is chosen by the village meeting, *kitcheri*, because of his good reputation as a shaman/priest and can be replaced if his services are not considered satisfactory.

In big *poojas*, where more than one ritual official is needed, the local *bharras* may assist the *choukidar*. However, the *bharras* do not usually have anything to do with village level worship. They are healers rather than priests, and are approached by the villagers individually when somebody is ill. Rana Tharu *bharras* are sometimes used by other ethnic groups, and Rana Tharus also use Dangora Tharu or *pahari* healers.

KOLA COSMOLOGY: RELATION BETWEEN PEOPLE AND DEITIES

As we have mentioned in the introduction, the relationship between the Rana Tharus and their deities is what they consider extremely important. We will describe some aspects and areas of life where this can be seen quite clearly.

Firstly, the relationship to the deities is important with regard to the house and the lineage. In fact, what constitutes a Rana Tharu house as such is the location of a certain set of deities. This is in congruence with McDonough's observation among the Dangora Tharus. He writes: "... the presence of these deities identifies a house as such. Without them, the building is not a proper house at all for the Tharus" (McDonough in Barnes/de Coppet/Parkin 1985: 184). We have mentioned that a household may well consist of more than one building, but it is nevertheless called 'one house' (*ghar*). Now, the building which contains the household's deity room (*kola*) and kitchen (*rosaiya*) is also called a 'house' (*ghar*). As we see it, this is the house; the other buildings are called *pal*. It is this house which is built according to cosmological principles, with the two purest and most important rooms, the *kola* and the kitchen (*rosaiya*), to the north. The north is cosmologically important because it is known as 'the abode of the gods'. This notion is shared between the Rana Tharus and the Dangora Tharus (cf. Krauskopf 1987) and Hindu societies in general⁶.

When setting up a new building, whether *ghar* (with deity-room) or *pal*, the first pillar is offered a *pooja* before the building can start. Thus, the deities are included in the building of the house from the start. When a new *ghar* is built, the ritual is more elaborate, since the lineage deities (*kurma deuta*) have to 'move into the house' before the people themselves can start cooking or living there. In other words, the deities have to be installed in a house before the house is seen as fit for human beings. Some of the *kurma* deities have their seats in the *kola*, while others are placed just outside the northern entrance. All of them are freshly made (of mud/cowdung) when a new house is built, and they receive a *pooja* at the *bhaura khane* ritual, which can be taken as a 'house warming' ritual. On this occasion, family and neighbors are also given a meal. Only after this ritual is performed, and one has done one's duty to the deities and co-villagers, can the family move in.

The lineage as such also has a special relationship to a certain set of deities, and the members of a patrilineal descent group (*kurma*) worship the same *kurma* deities. This means that all households in the *kurma* have the same gods and goddesses in the *kola* and outside the door (e.g., *Parvati*, *Niradhar*, *Nagaritai*, *Durga*, *Bishahar*, and *Kariya*), and that they worship them according to the same rules. Each *kurma* gives specific offerings to their various deities on specific occasions, such as festivals and life-cycle rituals. All the deities do not 'eat' the same thing; rather they receive *pooja* according to their individual need. The ritual official in each household (the eldest man or woman) propitiates the deities on behalf of the household. In this way, one can see that the relationship to a certain constellation of deities is that which unites members of the same *kurma*. This is the way in which Rana Tharus talk about *kurma* membership, for example, with regard to marriage. A girl would not say that "I cannot marry him because he is my cousin", but rather "I cannot marry him because we have the same deities".

Secondly, the relationship to the deities is important on the village level as well. Just as each *kurma* has its own constellation of deities, so does each Rana Tharu village have its own deities, with their representations in the village shrine (*bhuiya*). The shrine plays an important role in village life, and we will describe it in some detail.

Although the villages may vary in shape and size, they all have a village shrine to the south of the village settlement, usually close to a *peepal* tree. There is no building; only an open flat square plastered with cowdung/mud and sometimes with a wooden or tile-roofing. This shrine contains representations of deities which are worshipped by all villagers, regardless of *kurma* membership. The deities are represented by small circular or square bumps of cowdung/mud, much like the

ones outside each house, or by a wooden peg. *Bhuiya* is the name of the shrine, but *bhuiya* itself is also considered a female deity, sometimes explained as having a male counterpart.

Some of the deities in the *bhuiya* are the same as the *kurma* – specific deities (such as *Parvati* and *Nagarihai*), while others (such as *Saat Bhawani*⁵, *Mari*, *Patchaua*, and *Langura*) are only found in the *bhuiya*. In addition to the deities, people deify local shamans (*bharas*). Other local heroes are also worshipped in the *bhuiya*. In a few cases, *poojas* are performed just outside the *bhuiya* area, and we were told that these *poojas* are for certain *bhuts* (spirits) rather than deities.

It is interesting to note that village deities no longer receive blood sacrifice. The villagers claimed that the deities did not mind this, as long as they were asked beforehand whether they would accept the ‘substitutes’. The reason for this change in worship practice, according to some of our informants, was that animal sacrifice had become too expensive. It is tempting to see this as an adaption to caste Hindu customs. We will come back to this issue at the end of the paper.

The importance of the *bhuiya* stems from the fact that it is seen as necessary for the well-being of the people and the protection of the village. One informant described it as ‘the foremost place’, i.e., the foundation place of the village, which had to be established before people could settle in the area. Another informant claimed that the Rana Tharus could definitely not have been semi-nomadic earlier, simply because “once a *bhuiya* is established, it cannot be moved”. When referring to the *bhuiya* in the way, the Rana Tharus are, of course, not referring to the *bhuiya* as an area, but to the deities which are seen as inhabiting this area. Establishing a *bhuiya* means giving the deities a place to stay in the village. Without the deities, the village area is not protected and cannot be inhabited by people. One informant emphasized that the villagers would die, if there was no *bhuiya* in a village.

This is similar to what Krauskopff (in *L’Ethnographie* 1987: 131) describes among the Dangora Tharus of Dang, where she notes that the creation of a village shrine is a way of “... setting bounds to the wandering spirits of the site within the limits of the dwelling-area”. She describes the boundaries of the village as “symbols of a power-struggle between men, represented by the priest, and the spirits of the area” (ibid 131). This, we believe, also holds true for the Rana Tharu village shrine, although there are differences in Dangora and Rana Tharu religion and cosmology.

The maintenance of a good relationship with the protective village deities is considered so important in Rana Tharu society that a special person is given the responsibility of doing this on behalf of

the villagers. We have described earlier how this responsibility is shared between the *gauthehara* and the *choukidar*. Thus, one might say, the deities are given a place in the social structure of each Rana Tharu village, in that their propitiation is seen as a part of the responsibility of the village leaders. Further, the functioning of the village organization secures proper performance of village rituals, and thus the best possible relationship to the deities, in that the ritual officiant can be replaced if his work is not considered good enough.

If there is a lot of trouble in a village (quarrels, fightings, illness, epidemics, etc.), this is often seen as a sign that the village deities are not ‘satisfied’ for some reason. In one of the villages we visited, the *bhalemansa* told us that the deities in the *bhuiya* (village shrine) are bigger than the ones people have in their house, and that when the *gauthehara* comes to the village in order to recreate peace and order in times of trouble, he will only worry about the ‘mood’ of the village deities, not the various *kurma* deities. “If the deities get angry, there will be trouble (*badmas*) in the village!” This may happen when the proscribed village rituals are performed, and the *gauthehara* may suggest yet another *pooja* in order to recreate a balanced relationship between the people and the deities who protect them.

Thirdly, the importance of the relationship with the deities becomes apparent in some of the wedding rituals. We will give a few examples:

As a part of the preparatory rites, in the morning on the day before the wedding, the father of the bride and the father of the groom perform the *Banaspati pooja*, each in their respective villages. This is a *pooja* given to *Banaspati*, the goddess of the forest. It is performed close to the village, under a *sal* tree. Accompanied by seven (in the groom’s case) or five (in the bride’s case) male members of the *Kurma*, the officiant offers ghee (clarified butter), sweets, and cloves on a ritual fire (*aghiani*) under the tree, sprinkles water around it, and does *namaskara*. Cotton thread, colored yellow with turmeric powder, is tied five or seven times around the tree toward the right. *Ghee* and sweets are later distributed as *prasad*. After the worship, some wood is cut, and with this wood one lights the fire for cooking *puri* (wheat breads fired in *ghee*) for the wedding.

Here, the participation by the deities is needed for the wedding to be successful. No food is cooked for the wedding before *Banaspati* has received offerings, seen as a right due to her as one of the deities of the area inhabited by the Rana Tharus. As we interpret it, she then “answers” by giving (symbolically) the fuel needed for the preparation of food for the wedding.

A *pooja* also has to be done in the house, where the *kurma* deities receive some of the *puris*, i.e., the first food made for the wedding. Then the deities in the village shrine (*bhuiya*) also receive a *pooja*. In the afternoon, on the day before the wedding, the mothers of the bride and the groom, in their respective villages, go with the village *choukidar* (or other ritual officiant) to do this *pooja* at the village shrine to the south of the village. All the deities represented there have their *sthan* ('seat', i.e., their representation) plastered with fresh cowdung before receiving the offering of *puris*, together with *ghee*, spices, *sharbat* (sweet water), etc.

This is the last of the preparatory rites before wedding. Now all deities have received offerings, and will protect people and participate in wedding. At the *bhuiya*, even 'unknown' *bhuts* (sprites) receive offerings¹⁰. Thus, no supernatural beings in the vicinity are left out on this occasion.

INSIDE-OUTSIDE DICHOTOMY

The Rana Tharus themselves do not refer to the 'inside'/ 'outside' dichotomy explicitly, so this should not be seen as an ethnic term. However, we see this dichotomy present in many situations in regard to various aspects of social and religious life. We will try to show how it is made relevant at the cosmological level, in the household and wedding rituals. The dichotomy is manifest where one state is considered in many ways better, purer, safer or more proper than the other.

On the village level, this dichotomy becomes evident when we look at the relationship between the villagers and the people. Since the village is seen as an area protected by its deities, the outside of the village is, obviously, less safe than the inside. Or, in other words, one's own village is seen as the safest. One has established a relationship with the deities inside the village, and can count on their protection. If one wanders around too much 'outside' (*bahira*), said a Rana Tharu, it would not be surprising if one gets ill. The illness may well be caused by the *bhut* of the 'outside'.

The same is reflected in the term used for the *bhuiya* by one of our informants. He mentioned it as 'the entering point' of the village. As we understood it, this has nothing to do with where people enter the village, but refers to the fact that evil spirits are believed to enter the village from the south. Thus, they will encounter the deities in the *bhuiya*, which is always situated to the south of the village settlement, and, hopefully, be stopped by them. The evil spirits of the 'outside' are stopped from entering 'inside' by the deities, who are part of the village 'insiders'.

As we have already mentioned, there is a deity-room (*kola*) in every 'house' (*ghar*). In contrast to the world outside, this room is the innermost space of the house. Only *kurma* members, whom we chose to call 'insiders' here, can enter this room. All others, i.e., non-members of the *kurma* and thus 'outsiders', would pollute the room and make the deities angry if they ever enter this area. The term 'insider' includes all male members of the patrilineage and their unmarried daughters. In Rana Tharu society, it also includes the unmarried women. Those, who are allowed inside the *kola*, either have the same lineage or have the same identification to the lineage deities. The custom under which the in-married women are allowed into the *kola* and to participate in rituals for the *kurma* deities is not common among the Dangora Tharus. This practice shows the special status of Rana Tharu women compared to the women of many other groups on the subcontinent. We will come back to this in our section on the marriage system.

The inside/outside dichotomy is also relevant on many occasions during the wedding rites. When the *bharru* has been to the house of the bride a few days before the wedding in order to 'see the deities' (*deuta dekhan*), and has found everything to be OK, the girl is not allowed outside her house until the wedding day. This was explained to us as a sign of shyness: "If she walks around outside, she is not shy. But, then people will talk behind her back". However, we were also told that she could not risk the trouble from the 'spirits of the outside'. Here, we see the inside/outside dichotomy reflected once again. The inside of the house is seen as a protected area; and especially with such a big event as a wedding coming up, the girl must be cautious.

The food needed for the wedding party¹¹ has to be brought from the outside of the house, and it must be the *kurma's* own production. Samples of all the foodstuff have to be blessed by one of the local *bharras* before these can be used for cooking. This, we were told by the *bharru* as he was blowing his *mantras* (protective spells) on the various items, is done in order to guard off the spirits which might have been imbibed in the food. Only after the spirits from the outside are driven away for sure, are these items considered fit for wedding dinner.

The notion of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' is also relevant with regard to the groom's arrival at the bride's house on the wedding day. He and his party are 'outsiders', and although they are welcome as honored guests after a while, at the outset they are 'stopped' symbolically from entering the courtyard of the bride's house. This is usually done three times; first by the *choukidar* (village watchman/

messenger), who is hired for fetching water, etc. at the wedding; then by the *karbariyha* (women from the village who help with cooking, cleaning pots, etc. at the wedding); and then by the younger sisters of the bride. As we see it, these people are all representing the 'inside' – either the village or the patrilineage of the bride's father¹². They ask for a small sum of money before they let the groom and his party pass in. In this way, the difference between the 'inside' and the 'outside', as well as the bringing together of two lineages at marriage, is symbolically referred to.

The groom is stopped again when he is on his way into the *kola* (deity-room) in his own house on the day after the wedding ritual (in the girl's house). His sisters stop him this time, and they will not let him pass with his new wife "until they are given a cow". (Usually, however, they give up after being promised a small amount of money.) This time it is he who brings someone from the 'outside', i.e., the girl, who was, until the wedding ceremony, a member of her own father's lineage.

The fact that the bride, after this ritual, is actually allowed into the deity-room of her new house signifies that she is accepted 'inside'. Not only is she accepted, but it will be her duty from now on to respect the deities of her husband's lineage. Before anything else, she has to bow to these *kurma* deities, both outside and inside, and only then can the rest of the rituals in the groom's house start. In her parents' house, she has now become an 'outsider'. When the main wedding ritual is finished, she has been 'transferred' to her husband's *kurma* (lineage), and cannot enter her previous *kurma's kola* (deity-room) again.

When the groom arrives in his own village together with the bride and the wedding party, a *pooja* has to be performed at the village border before they are let in. This *pooja*, we were told, is for the *bhut* (spirits) rather than for the deities. The spirits of the outside could follow the wedding party inside the village, if they are not warded off by this *pooja*¹³.

The first aspect, i.e., the importance of the relationship between the people and their deities can lead to or be responsible for the second aspect, namely, the significance of distinction between 'inside' and 'outside' connection of a person. That which is within the realm of the deities, either the *kurma* deities or the village deities, is seen as having some kind of added value:

MARRIAGE SYSTEM

In this part of the paper, we look closer at the marriage system of the Rana Tharus in terms of their lineage system.

Marriage "refers to a polythetic class of phenomena", according to Needham (1971b:5, cit. Comaroff). Anthropologists have had difficulties in finding a universally applicable definition of the term. This is so because "the cross-cultural variability in the social organization of gender relations and the existence of rare forms of marriages in specific societies render such definitions invalid" (Seymour-Smith/Macmillan 1986: 179). The term covers a great variation of different practices and ideas linked to the creation of a new bond between two persons and their respective families.

Fruzzetti (1990: xix) writes that "for Hindu society, marriage is central to the social order", and that "love-marriage unites two individuals, whereas a Hindu marriage unites the son and the daughter of two lines". In Asian societies in general, whether Hindu or not, a marriage relationship has greater importance for more people than it has in the West. Among the Rana Tharus, we would claim, in addition to the creation of good future for the couple and the creation of children, the most important aspect of marriage is to create a long lasting, mutually beneficial, and balanced relationship between the two families.

We see marriage customs as adapted to a specific social and religious reality, and, therefore, as important carriers of information about this reality. This view of marriage as a 'mirror' of important aspects of society is, of course, received wisdom in anthropology and not our invention. It also corresponds broadly to Bennett's view on marriage among the Brahmans/Chhetries of Narikot:

... marriage (also) reveals a great deal about the relative status of men and women, and about the structures of caste and kinship.

(Bennett 1983: 71)

In Rana Tharu society, they have a betrothal system, *magani*¹⁴, where children down to the age of four or five can be 'reserved' for marriage with a certain person when they reach the marriageable age¹⁵. The most common way of inaugurating a *magani* relationship is through the help of a *majpatiya*, i.e., a marriage broker. Both women and men can be *majpatiyas*, but people insist that they have to be respected persons who are on good terms with everybody. There is usually one *majpatiya* on the girl's side and another on the boy's side. Any friend, villager, or a family member can take the role of a mediator, but some persons are known to have been *majpatiyas* for many *magani* relations and to have good information about available boys and girls in the vicinity. Hasan (1993) mentions that such *majpatiyas* are approached by the parents of eligible boys and girls and are asked to propose a suitable match. "He is continuously in search of

girls who want to leave their husband for one reason or another (and keeps a mental list of such girls" (ibid. 59).

The Rana Tharus do not use an astrologer for comparing the two parties before a marriage process can start. It is the responsibility of the *majpatiya* to see to it that the two families match, i.e., first of all, to ensure that the alliance is socially acceptable.

Traditionally, the Rana Tharus have been group-endogamous. Although they have been seen as 'backward' by others, they themselves claim to have a status superior to other groups, and have not allowed marriage outside the group. This rule of group-endogamy seems to be losing its grip though. There are now quite a few examples of Rana Tharus marrying Dangora Tharus and Paharis. Such marriages are usually 'love-marriages', i.e., they are entered into by the boy and girl without planning and arrangements made by their parents. These marriages are talked about in derogatory terms by some Rana Tharus, and may not be accepted in the beginning by the boy's or girl's families. However, it seems that the couple is accepted after some time, and there is no strong social stigmatization of such mixed marriages. As one informant put it: *Biha gare sakyō, bachha pani bhayo, ke game tū?* (They are already married, and have children as well; what could one now do about it?).

The Rana Tharus do not allow marriage between people of the same patrilineage (*kurma*), as we have already mentioned, i.e., people who "have the same deities". This goes back seven generations on the father's side and three on the mother's side. Hasan (1993) writes that a relationship between a boy and a girl of the same *kurma* is not at all possible to regularize, and that the couple would become outcasts for ever. This strict lineage-exogamy is still valid.

While being lineage-exogamous, the Rana Tharus are traditionally *kuri* - endogamous. The *kuris* are best explained by using an example.

Among the Rana Tharus, as well as among the Dangora Tharus, some houses are built in the reverse (*ultha*) order of the 'normal' design. These houses have their kitchen to the south instead of the north. McDonough claims that this is the practice of certain clans among the Dangora Tharus of Dang, and that these clans are not seen as socially inferior to other clans in this society (McDonough in Barnes/de Coppet/Parkin 1985: 186). In Rana Tharu society, however, they are definitely seen as socially inferior. This is reflected in statements like: "No other *kuri* would ever marry an *Uthawa*."

This is where the term *kuri* becomes significant. We are not really sure that the *kuris* are clans. All Rana Tharu lineages seem to belong to certain *kuris*, but our informants never explained these

social units to us in terms of a common ancestry. The *kuris* create a social hierarchy, perhaps akin to the caste-system, since the single units seem to be classified after diet and other practices, indicating the degree of purity as the principle of classification. These conclusions, we have to admit, are drawn from a rather uncertain set of data. But, so far, this seems most intelligible to us.

It was interesting to note that some of the people we talked to denied that they belonged to any specific *kuri*. "We are all Rana Tharus", they said. However, when we mentioned this episode to some other people in the village, they smiled and said that "there is no wonder why they would not tell you their *kuri* name; they are shy", indicating that these people belonged to a low *kuri*. In denying membership to a low *kuri*, these people were trying to avoid stigmatization. Quigley describes the same phenomenon among diaspora Newars, where people of lower caste seem to 'forget' their ancestor's clan name. "There is little doubt that this obliteration of caste distinctions, producing greater fluidity in marriage alliances was, and remains, a common practice in diaspora Newar settlements", writes Quigley (1986: 78). Although not a common practice in Rana Tharu society, the development of such strategies may be a sign of changes to come.

Our informants were not sure of the number of *kuris*, nor did anyone list exactly the same names¹⁶. What they did emphasize was that one should, ideally, marry within one's own *kuri*. A few of the lower *kuris* are said to intermarry, but we will still describe the Rana Tharu marriage system as isogamous, i.e., they practise marriage between people of the same status. This *kuri* - endogamy is not rigid, however, but our informants claimed that it was more rigid earlier.

While dowry is common in most (Hindu) groups around them, the Rana Tharus have a bride-price system. There is a correlation between marriage payments and other features of social organization. Among the Rana Tharus, the fact that they are traditionally isogamous and the fact that women in this society are not seen having less (ritual) value than men have may account for the bride-price practice. The lineages of the bride and the groom are seen as socially equal (having the same *kuri*) and ritually equals (there is no difference between wife-givers and wife-takers). Thus, it can be seen as logical that the one who receives something (the groom's family receives a woman) should also give away something¹⁷. "These payments serve to legitimize marriage relationships at the same time as they signify or mark the transfer of rights in women and/or children" (Seymour-Smith/Macmillan 1986: 142).

The wedding payments do not only include a sum of money paid by the groom's family at the time of the wedding, but also sweets and other gifts given throughout the *magani* years. From the inauguration of the *magani* relationship until approximately a year before the wedding, the boy's family has to give certain prescribed varieties of sweets and other gifts at certain intervals¹⁸. This practice knits the two families together and the gifts are seen as a part of the marriage payment. This is reflected in the fact that a sum equaling the price of the sweets has to be paid back to the boy's family if the girl or her family breaks the relationship.

Rana Tharu women can break off a *magani*, but then she must find another man whom she can marry, and who is willing to pay back the *magani* price. She can also leave her husband for another man, without being socially stigmatized. Although the picture painted by some writers of the 'liberated' Rana Tharu women is not correct, it is a fact that they have a social and ritual status quite different from that of women in some of the other groups in the South Asian subcontinent. We will make a comparison with the Dangora Tharus again, who are, in many ways, their closest neighbors.

Krauskopff writes that in-married women have an ambiguous status among the Dangora Tharus of Dang, since they are marginal to their husband's patrilineal unit (in *L'Ethnographie* 1987: 154). The Dangora Tharus do not entertain the orthodox Hindu ideas about women who have been perceived as ritually unclean by the latter group because of their physiology¹⁹. This, claims Krauskopff, is the marginality to the husband's *kurma* which makes them ambiguous. This ambiguity makes them unfit for participation in *kurma* deity worship in her husband's *kurma*, and girls are also not allowed to participate in these rituals in their father's house before marriage.

In Rana Tharu society, the in-married women do take part in the worship of the *kurma* deities. In some lineages (namely those with a female main deity), the women are even responsible for doing *pooja* to the household deities. In these lineages, ritual knowledge is passed on from a woman to her eldest daughter-in-law. There is no rule for excluding unmarried girls from participating in the household rituals, as far as we could observe. The women also take part in certain rituals at the village shrine, although they only perform the rituals themselves in the *bhuiya pooja* before the wedding of their children.

CONCLUSION

We hope that this paper can stimulate further research on the issues taken up here. The first part of the paper, took up certain aspects of the social and religious life of the Rana Tharus which reflect implicit

notions and ideas in their society. These are, firstly, the notion of the deities as protectors of the people and village, and therefore the necessity of including them in all aspects of life. This makes the relationship between the people and their deities a basic one, both within each *kurma*, i.e., patrilineage, and at the village level. Secondly, the concept that the 'inside' is different from 'outside' is an underlying idea in this society. This goes for the inside/outside of the house as well as the village, and has connections to cosmology. This dichotomy also becomes relevant at a more abstract level, with regards to lineage membership.

In the context of explicating how these characteristics cut across the spheres of family life, village life, and cosmology, wedding rituals were used as a particular example. The Rana Tharus have elaborate wedding rituals which reflect, in many ways, the characteristics of their society mentioned above. In the last part of this paper, some aspects of the Rana Tharu marriage system were discussed, in the context of the *kurma* and *kuri* hierarchy and the status of Rana Tharu women. In that context, it was also obvious that while Rana Tharu women are definitely very different in some ways from other women in the area, their life is a far cry from the picture of the former princesses of Rajasthan pushing their husbands' plates with their feet.

NOTES

1. This paper was presented at the Conference on "Nepal: Terai Cultures, Democracy and Development" (June 9-11, 1995) organized by the Norwegian Institute for International Affairs in Oslo.
2. The Tharu population has been mentioned in various books from the last century, and studied by Srivastava, Mathur, Majumdar, and others in between the forties and sixties. In these early materials Tharus are seen as far more homogenous than has later been acknowledged. Recent literature on the Tharus (cf. Rajaure, McDohaugh, Krauskopff) has concentrated on the Dangora Tharus. The Rana Tharus are only explicitly dealt with in the works of Gurung and Skar, as well as by Hasan in his book "Affairs of an Indian Tribe" (1993). This book is the only monograph on the Rana Tharus. But it deals with the Rana population in Uttar Pradesh, India.
3. Ganesh M. Gurung has done field work among the Tharus in 1989 and in 1993/95. His last field work was financed by the Norwegian Research Council. Tove C. Kittelsen is an MA student of social anthropology at the University of Oslo. Her field work in 1993/94 was financed by NIAS, The Norwegian Research Council, Statens Lånekasse for Utdanning, and The University of Oslo. Her field work in 1995 was financed by the Norwegian Research Council.
4. The Rana Tharus live in the districts of Kailali and Kanchanpur in Nepal and in parts of Uttar Pradesh in India. The national border between the two countries runs through Rana Tharu community zone, but Rana Tharu culture is very similar on both sides of the border.
5. The Rana Tharus have no images or figures to represent their deities. At both the house and village levels, the deities are represented by simple cowdung/mud bumps (or, in some cases, a small wooden peg). Often they have no representation at all. On many occasions, the offerings are simply

- done at a spot on the floor/ground which is cleaned with water or cowdung/mud first.
6. Despite the differences between them in status and practice, the *gauthehara* is often also called *bharra*.
 7. Only a few of our informants referred to the Hindu representations of the mountain Kailash as the 'abode of the gods'. However, the notion of the north as a location indicating an upward direction (cf. Krauskopff 1987) as the direction of the mountains, and a place which some of the deities visit when they 'go away' part of the year, was clearly present.
 8. Our informants distinguished these 'Seven Sisters' as *Durga*, *Kalimata*, *Gahibi*, *Hantula*, *Situla*, *Gonga*, and *Hulka*.
 9. The Rana Tharus have two wedding seasons. In the first wedding season (Dec./Jan.), the deities are offered *puris*, as are the wedding guests, while both the deities and the guests are offered *malida* (rice flour fried in *ghee*) in the second season (Feb./March).
 10. This is done in the field next to the *bhuiya*. At the end, the rest of the offerings are thrown "in all directions" to *bhuts* with no names, we were told.
 11. A group of people accompanying the groom to the bride's house.
 12. Her younger sisters are unmarried, who thus still belong to their father's lineage.
 13. The spirits receive alcohol, spices, water, *ghee*, etc., and at the end of the ritual, one of the wedding guests runs around the whole group of people gathered there ("while holding his breath") with an egg in his hand. This egg is then thrown away, together with two small figures made of dough (said to represent the bride and the groom).
 14. The term refers both to the system of betrothal and to the male/female fiancé.
 15. We were also told that some people would make an agreement even before the birth of their children that their children would be ritual friends (*gunj/mit*) if they are of the same sex, and *maganis* (fiancés) if they are of the opposite sex.
 16. Some of the names of the *kuris* are: *Thakur*, *Bishierna*, *Batta*, *Kiptu Batta*, *Badaiyak*, *Giri*, and *Dangra*.
 17. This was seen as obvious to our informants, who did not see their own practice of bride-price as 'selling a daughter', as one hillman put it. On the contrary, a young educated Rana Tharu girl said that the dowry practice could be seen as 'buying a husband'.
 18. That is, this pattern is followed in the proper/big *maganis* (*acchu magani*), while there is a possibility of doing less elaborate rituals (*chilam magani*) according to the economical status of the boy's family.
 19. The Rana Tharus are similar to the Dangora Tharus in this respect.

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