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Chequered Trajectory of State Restructuring Process: A Study of Chhetri Mobilization

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BACKGROUND

Pokhara-based Chhetri Samaj Nepal (CSN) was the most active outfit to voice the sentiments of the dominant Bahun and Chhetri communities during the first Constituent Assembly (CA-I) that lasted from 2008 to 2012. Led mostly by educated Chhetri men, who were mainly middle-class professionals, it gained momentum in a short period. The agenda of state-restructuring, triggered with the settlement of a decade-long Maoist insurgency and the end of the historic *Jana Andolan* (2006), was taken as a challenge to the longstanding “harmony” of the diverse Nepali society by mostly the educated upper- and middle-class individuals of Bahun and Chhetri communities. The politicization of minorities and the vociferous demands of identity recognition increased the feeling of “otherization” among these communities. The same feeling of “otherization” was not just represented but also politicized by the outfits like CSN as CA-I started its job of drafting the constitution (Adhikari and Gellner 2016).

“Those movements by Chhetri and Brahmans were the movements of reaction; they were reacting against the Maoist’s agenda of ethnic

federalism,” said Rabindra Adhikari, Pokhara-based Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Lennist (CPN-UML) leader.¹ In broader terms, there were two major push for the movement: 1) the increase of political and organizational activities of identity groups (popularly known as *Adivasi/Jajanati*) in the post-1990 democratic era followed by the Maoist’s attempt of upholding the issue of marginalization of *Janajati* groups in Nepal; 2) consolidation of Gurungs under the common political umbrella of the demand for Tamuwan province in the central hill region. The apprehension that “Chhetri-Brahmans started being vilified as oppressors after the change that came in 2046 v.s.” played a role in the emergence of the communal organization of Chhetris in Pokhara.² The demand of Tamuwan—which, as per the activists, would protect the identity of Gurungs and ensure their proper representation in the state—was one of the major immediate triggers for the Chhetris to get organized and mobilized. Pokhara—the valley which is a popular tourist hub and is now the capital city of the Gandaki Province—is coveted by Bahuns and Chhetris. Many of them claim that they and not Gurungs built the settlement. A Pokhara-based intellectual³ said that though Gurungs were always there in the outskirts of the city, it was mostly Bahuns and Chhetris who came and settled in the region in the beginning. So, according to him and many others, this

¹ Adhikari was interviewed on January 18, 2018 in Kathmandu. He later died in a helicopter-crash.

² Dil Bahadur Kshetry, the prominent Chhetri Samaj leader, said this in the interview conducted on December 23, 2017 (This interview was conducted in Pokhara by the journalist Keshav Sharan Lamichhane for me). The same sentiment was echoed by other Chhetri leaders and intellectuals who were interviewed in Pokhara during my visit that lasted between November 20 and 29, 2017. However, activists like Pan Bahadur Gharti, Juna Kumari Gurung, Karma Gurung and Saraswati Gurung deny the claims made by the Chhetris. They say that no such threat was posed against any other communities by organizations like Tamu Dhi or NEFIN.

³ Conversation with a Pokhara-based intellectual, January 2022. As this piece was being edited, I had conversations with a few Pokhara-based intellectuals to respond to the comments made by the reviewers of this chapter.

community was irritated when Gurungs laid their claim mainly in the Pokhara region as a capital of Tamuwan.

The grievance of minorities and historically excluded communities was simmering underneath the political ground in the decades of democratic exercise in Nepal. Though it can be argued that the Maoist insurgency (1996–2006) was in itself the loudest of expressions of the same contention, the assertion of ethnic, gender and caste identities wasn't as clearly pronounced during the insurgency. CA-I, elected in 2008, by far the most inclusive of any elected bodies in Nepal's history, would become the cauldron of the differences and divisions that historically existed in Nepali society.

Among some significant issues put forward for the restructuring process to begin, federalism was the major component. Initially proposed by the then Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) and later raised by Madhes-based parties as one of their major demands, the mainstream parties like Nepali Congress (NC) and CPN-UML did not accept it easily. Thus, the reluctance to incorporate federalism in the Interim Constitution (IC) 2007 was taken as a conspiracy against the state-restructuring process by the Madhes. Following several rounds of protests and demonstrations (sometimes violent) led by the Madhes-based parties, NC and CPN-UML agreed to adopt federalism. Given the fact that federalism is a complex political system for any country, its adoption in a deeply asymmetrical society like Nepal would not be easy, and conflict was bound to unfold. However, elected CA-I would be the most legitimate and useful space for these conflicts to emerge and resolve peacefully.

Defying the expectations of many, CA-I failed to be such a democratic space. It does not mean that the assembly could not begin necessary debates in its committees. Many significant deliberations, discussions and debates took place and several pressing issues were resolved by the pro-active roles played by the CA-I members. But the party elites—who remained mostly occupied in the bargaining of the state-power—could not make use of the assembly to resolve

contentions that unfolded. All the issues that emerged were majorly used as bargaining tools for the power game that took place, not in Baneshwor (where the CA was located), but in Singha Darbar (where lie the apex executive offices).

Martin Chautari, the Kathmandu-based research institute, published updates about the proceedings and functioning of CA-I in its regular policy briefs. Out of eight policy briefs published between May 2009 and March 2013, six are entirely focused on enhancing public dialogue about the functioning of CA-I. The first policy brief (MC 2009a) shows clearly that the formal and required processes within CA-I were pushed to the backburner by the major leaders as they were busy managing the power struggles fought outside of the CA. Majorly, the rift between the Maoists and the Nepal Army and specifically between Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal “Prachanda” and the then Army Chief Rookmangud Katawal affected the constitution-writing process and also created hurdles in taking the peace process forward towards a resolution.⁴ The second policy brief (MC 2009b), which was published marking the first year of the first meeting of CA-I, mentions that only six CA committees had submitted their concept paper drafts to the main body of CA-I. Most significant of the committees, including four thematic and one constitutional committee, had not submitted the concept paper draft in more than a year’s time. Accordingly, the remaining four policy briefs accentuate the fact that the discussions and other necessary proceedings that took place in the CA (or rather that should have taken place in the CA) were never the priority of the top leaders who were the key players in all the significant affairs related to politics and the constitution-making process. Most of the briefs highlight their absence in the CA and the serious apathy shown towards actual deliberations on pressing issues inside CA have been proven with required facts and data (MC 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2012).

⁴ The details of the Katawal-scandal, as it is known in popular parlance, has been explained in Jha (2014: 69–85) where the role of India has also been described.

As hinted by the briefs, the top leaders of major political parties hijacked the whole process and made several deals in closed rooms outside of the assembly. Unnecessary party pressures and whips, the impact of changes in power equations, etc. influenced the debates in the thematic committees. Thus, the contentions could not be resolved in the assembly.

The contentions surrounding federalism spilled out on the streets of several cities. When federalism was discussed as the best available answer and cure to the historical exclusion of several ethnic groups like Gurung, Rai, Limbu, Tamang, etc., a considerable section of Bahun and Chhetri communities felt they had been “otherized” in the whole process. Adhikari and Gellner (2016) have explained the reasons why and how this feeling of otherization grew among these sections of the dominant communities.

My research was undertaken to understand the premonitions that the dominant Bahun and Chhetri communities had on the state-restructuring agenda as a whole and federalism in particular. These feelings of trepidation were pronounced well in the mobilizations led by Pokhara-based CSN. Thus, the study basically focuses on the activism led by CSN in voicing the fear, premonition and contentions of the dominant communities on identity-based agendas that largely defined the CA-I politics. For this research, I interviewed a number of key players of the organization in Pokhara during my field visits to that city in 2017 and 2018. In addition, I reviewed several writings and documents the intellectual activists of the CSN had produced as a part of their movement. Similarly, I conducted interviews with the supporters of the idea of identity-based federalism, including ethnic activists and Maoist leaders based in Pokhara and Kathmandu. The press coverages of the events and relevant videos uploaded on YouTube have been reviewed as well. The lack of proper archives of local newspapers and audio recordings of the interviews conducted by local radio stations forced me to depend on the memories of activists, intellectuals and journalists interviewed for this research.

In the following sections, I first trace the pretext for the CSN to mobilize Chhetri and Bahun communities against identity-based federalism. For the same, I try to explain how Gurungs—a considerable section of the population in and around Kaski—organized their community and asserted their identity in the two decades following the restoration of democracy in 1990. Then I will discuss the growing aspiration of Gurungs to restore their ethnic land called Tamuwān in the years after the historic political change of 2006. I then trace the initiation of the Chhetri communal organization in Pokhara and its subsequent development. The chapter then majorly focuses on the activities of the CSN: how it organized the communities, educating them about the necessity of rising against the demand of identity-based federalism, and the way the communal agitations of the Chhetris and Bahuns took place.

Also, the chapter deals with the ideas articulated by Chhetri leaders and scholars which made a solid basis for the CSN to stand firmly as an organization. To chart out the activities that the revived organization started to consolidate and mobilize Chhetris against identity-based federalism, I extensively borrow information from a recent book written by the most prominent leader of the movement, Dil Bahadur Kshetry (2074 v.s.), who is an academically trained historian with more than a dozen books to his credit.

ADIVASI/JANAJATI MOVEMENT AND THE ASPIRATION FOR TAMUWAN

Any careful reader of Nepali history would see the conspicuous exclusion of non-Hindu and non-Nepali-speaking people from state structures. Even if Dalits are Hindus, state-led exclusion and legal ostracization of the community is such a phenomenon that no one can afford to ignore (Höfer 2004[1979]). It is assumed that the main reason behind social, cultural and economic inequalities faced by *Janajati* communities is political inequality. With the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990—which shared power among different political parties and the monarch—a space was made for the excluded groups to make a dent in the hitherto existing state

structures. One of the most comprehensive studies of the emergence of the *Adivasi/Janajati* movement in post-1990 Nepal has been done by Pratyoush Onta where he claims that:

One of the most influential social movements that Nepal has seen in the post-1990 era is the *ādivāsī janajāti* (indigenous nationalities) movement. In the main, this movement is concerned with creating a Nepal in which discrimination against “ethnic” Nepalis who make up about 37 percent of the population does not exist. (Onta 2006: 303)

With the restoration of democracy, “at least on paper, ethnic affiliations were given a degree of official recognition they certainly did not have in the institutions or ideology of the preceding Panchayat regime” (Gellner 1997: 6). Likewise, scholars had started noting the surfacing of ethnic politics right after 1990. “Ethnic politics surfaced dramatically and unambiguously with the dawn of democracy in spring 1990, and gathered momentum during the drafting of the democratic constitution later that year” (Sharma 2004: 219). According to Onta (2006), in the democratic setup of post-1990 Nepal, eight different *Adivasi/Janajati* organizations came together to form an umbrella organization called Nepal Janajati Mahasangh; the name⁵ of the organization was later changed to

⁵ Onta (2006) has extensively dealt with the politics of naming this organization and defining the term *Adivasi/Janajati*. He has mentioned the arguments of both the groups—one favoring the word “indigenous” and the other claiming “indigenous” as an improper term for indicating Nepal’s *Janajatis*—and written about the context of these varied opinions regarding the term used in the name of the organization. In the interviews I conducted with Pokhara-based CSN leaders, most of them said that they would want to separate the two words—*Adivasi* and *Janajati*—and not club them together because, as they argued, all *Janajatis* are not indigenous groups of Nepal. According to them, Chhetris have historical evidence to claim “indigenouness;” so it is not just the prerogative of the *Janajatis* to use the term to exclusively identify themselves by it.

Nepal Adivasi Janajati Mahasangh, and in English, Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN). Another distinct achievement in this front post-1990 was the promulgation of an Act which recognized fifty-nine *Adivasi/Janajati* groups and laid out a proper definition of the term. The Act⁶ defined indigenous nationalities as “a tribe or community as mentioned in the schedule having its mother tongue and traditional rites and customs, distinct cultural identity, distinct social structure and written or unwritten history” (NFDIN 2003: 32). In the same paper, Onta discusses the existence of dozens of *Janajati*-organizations that mostly focused on cultural and social aspects and also organized “identity promotional activities” and others that ran “rights awareness programs.” This means, the democratic setup which ensured the rights to speech and assembly and enabled the organization of cultural and political activities, created a public sphere even for the excluded groups like *Adivasi/Janajatis* and Dalits. As time passed by, different groups of *Janajati*-activists also started publishing newspapers and magazines and writing scholarly papers and books, aiming to popularize their demands for equality, identity, and justice.⁷ The major demands put forward by the *Adivasi/Janajati* movement, as summarized by Onta (2006: 307), were: “constitutional reforms, the declaration of Nepal as a secular state, equality in linguistic rights, equitable representation in state and other institutions, access to common properties and resources, the right to self-determination and ethnic autonomy.”

There were ample critics of these organizations and majorly of the claims of indigenesness and demands put forward by the activists. Mainly the criticism was focused on the tendency of

⁶ Onta (2006) has also pointed out six major confusions created by listing fifty-nine groups as indigenous nationalities; major confusions are around who and who should not be given reservations and another pressing issue is that of diversity within the groups like Thakali, Newar and Rai and the ways to address this diversity.

⁷ See Onta and Humagain (2017) for a detailed discussion on the emergence of *Janajati* magazines after 1990. They have also shed light on the nature of the contents published in these magazines.

denouncing “Brahminism,” which, according to the critics, was taken by the *Janajati* activists as the root of all ills affecting Nepali polity. Acknowledging the exclusion of *Janajatis* from state-structures and putting in perspective their demands for recognition and rights, Prayag Raj Sharma (2004: 222) has defended the dominant caste “Bahuns” against the “onslaught” that some *Janajati* “desperadoes” hurled on them:

Nepal’s earlier land tenure system was indeed exploitative. But the hallmark of feudal orders has always been that any group which can exploit another, does. This basic human trait of selfishness so exists in all groups and cannot be imputed to any one religion or philosophy. One might also say that the groups that were known as the Matawali were downgraded only ritually. Apart from this, life in the hills was not marked by great isolation among Bahuns and members of other ethnic groups. There was a lot of sharing, and a lot in common. Brahminical orthodoxy of the plains adapted and softened itself to fit into the hill lifestyle. Social relationships were formed at various levels between Bahuns and other communities. The way Bahuns dressed and attended to work was not markedly different from that of the rest. (Sharma 2004: 222)

Despite the criticisms, the activities of small communal organizations, ethnic-identity-based parties and NEFIN continued. However, a new twist came in the whole scenario after the Maoists made identity one of their main political agendas. The then insurgent Maoists roped in the groups and individuals who understood identity as a significant political agenda. Unifying with Gopal Kirati, who was heading the armed ethnic outfit Khambuwan Morcha in 2001, was a major decision for the Maoists to show their leaning towards the agenda of ethnic identity (Sharma and Khanal 2064 v.s.; Magar 2064 v.s.). In 2002, the party announced nine autonomous regions out of which six were based on ethnic identity: Tharuwan

Autonomous Region for Tharus; Magarat for Magars; Tamuwan for Tamus (Gurungs); Tamsaling for Tamangs; Newa for Newars; and Kirat for Rais and Limbus (Adhikari 2014). With this, they consolidated their organizational bases in the central hills, the Madhes, and also in Gurung settlements in the west. When they came to mainstream politics and participated in the elections for the CA in 2008, they floated thirteen provinces that had repeated the majority of the ethnic provinces as per their 2002 model.

This agenda floated by the Maoists triggered interest among the Gurungs living in Kaski and surrounding regions about having a state in the name of their community—Tamuwan. “Though Gurungs were putting efforts in preserving their culture and language right from the Panchayat days, it was the Maoists who first brought this agenda of identity-based federalism. We liked the agenda and thought that it is always good to stand for our identity,” said Karma Gurung, the chairperson of Tamu Dhi, a vibrant cultural organization of Gurungs based in Pokhara.⁸ According to her, Tamu Dhi was established on May 22, 1985, to help the community to protect its tradition and culture. Pan Bahadur Gharti, who was the chairperson of NEFIN-Kaski when the movement for Tamuwan was ongoing during CA-I, also said that the initial trigger for Tamuwan was the Maoist’s agenda of identity-based federalism.⁹

TAMUWAN IN POKHARA AFTER 2006

The politics for identity was played out conspicuously on the streets of Pokhara after the demands first floated by the Maoists gained some momentum. Prithvi Chowk is one of the busiest thoroughfares in Pokhara. Though the formal name of the chowk now is Lakhan Thapa Chowk, locals still call it Prithvi Chowk. On May 2, 2007, it is reportedly said that members of the Young Communist League (YCL), the youth wing of the CPN-M, swarmed at the chowk and started hurling stones at the statue of King Prithvi Narayan Shah,

⁸ Gurung was interviewed in Pokhara on November 26, 2017.

⁹ Gharti was interviewed in Pokhara on January 27, 2018.

who has been respectfully hailed as the maker of modern Nepal by many. Amid a huge demonstration, the Maoist cadres fell the statue of the king to the ground (Samadhan 2064 v.s.a). Following this, the Maoist cadres also demolished the other three statues of King Mahendra and Birendra installed in different thoroughfares of Pokhara (Samadhan 2064 v.s.b).

Later, some *Janajati* activists floated the idea of using the name of Lakhan Thapa for the erstwhile Prithvi Chowk. Thapa, who comes from the *Janajati* Magar community, is claimed to be the first martyr of the country. According to Keshav Sharan Lamichhane (2072 v.s.), Kaski-based Magar Sangh decided to collect money to build Thapa's statue to install in the place where once King Shah's statue stood. The collection of funds and the job of installation were completed under the leadership of Purna Singh Rana, the chair of Kaski Magar Sangh. The statue was unveiled by the then Maoist Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai on February 12, 2013. A local NC leader, who wants to remain anonymous, said, "This whole episode of replacing King Prithvi's statue by that of Lakhan Thapa was viewed as a defeat of Chhetris and victory of *Janajatis*. Chhetris were not happy right from the beginning when Prithvi's statue was demolished."¹⁰

Before this, the provision in the IC 2007, which put Bahun-Chhetris under the "Others" category, had infuriated the community. In Part 7, Article 63(4) of the IC and in Article 7(3) of the Election to the Members of the Constituent Assembly Act, 2007, there were five clusters—including *Adivasi/Janajati*, Dalit, Backward Region, Madhesi and *anya* ("Others"). This "Others" category is for Bahun, Chhetri and Dashnami. This way of clustering communities in the constitution and in one of the important Acts was taken as the otherization of the dominant communities by the leaders of CSN and other such organizations (Adhikari and Gellner 2016).

As the constitution-writing process began in CA-I, several mass rallies and programs were organized to voice the demand for Tamuwan (Samadhan 2068 v.s.a, 2068 v.s.b). These rallies were

¹⁰ He was interviewed in Pokhara on November 24, 2017.

addressed by not just the Maoist leaders but the Gurung leaders of CPN-UML and NC also participated in the program. “Maoist’s Dev Gurung, UML’s Prithvi Subba Gurung, NC’s Indra Bahadur Gurung attended a program organized in Pokhara to call for the states based on identity and economic viability. They said they would be compelled to call for a movement if Tamuwan is not established when the country is federalized” (Samadhan 2068 v.s.c: 1). Intellectuals like Om Gurung and Krishna Bhattachan were also invited as speakers in the programs organized to put forward the demand for Tamuwan. “The Maoist party and NEFIN were the main organizers of these kinds of programs in Pokhara,” said Dipendra Shrestha, station manager of Annapurna FM, Pokhara.¹¹ Hinting at the speeches made by academics like Gurung and Bhattachan, Krishna Bahadur Thapa, CPN-UML Kaski district leader, who also was one of the leaders involved in reviving the Chhetri organization, said, “Foreigners come to study Nepal and get fascinated by our harmonious and peaceful relationships but our sociologists and intellectuals do not understand our society.”¹²

In the course of these programs and demonstrations, as claimed by almost all CSN leaders (Thapa 2066 v.s.; Kunwar 2066 v.s.) and some journalists, the Tamuwan supporters shouted slogans like these: “Bahun jati Kashi ja, Chhetri jati phasi ja” which roughly means, “Bahuns go to Kashi (Banaras, India), Chhetris hang yourselves;” and the other slogan that they claim to have shouted was, “Bahun-Chhetri katinchha, alo ragat chatinchha” which roughly means, “We will behead Bahun-Chhetris, we’ll taste raw blood.” When asked about these slogans, Juna Kumari Gurung, a *Janajati* activist and a lawyer, said, “*Janajati* leaders in Pokhara are not that insensible to shout such slogans. Some fringe elements or some ill-intentioned people mixed up in the crowd might have said so. These were never

¹¹ Shrestha was interviewed in Pokhara on November 28, 2017.

¹² Thapa was interviewed on August 21, 2017 at the CPN-UML Kaski office, Pokhara.

the ideas of any *Janajati* organizations in Pokhara.”¹³ Pan Bahadur Gharti said, “We do not have the expertise to write such slogans. Indeed, we always failed in articulating our demands properly to non-*Janajati* communities. But we never had this policy to say anything against other castes and groups. We just demanded our rights for Tamuwan state.”

Janajati leaders and Tamuwan supporters, who participated in rallies organized by the Maoists or NEFIN, might not have decided formally to include such violent slogans. But it can be assumed that such slogans were shouted by angry groups of protesters during rallies. Whatever may be the case, many in Pokhara believe that such violent threats were given by the Tamuwan supporters to Bahun-Chhetris. Even if this was just a perceived threat or a rumor, it created ripples among non-*Janajati* communities in the region. This situation also contributed to the revival of the dormant Chhetri organization and the formation of the Brahman Samaj Nepal in Pokhara. “Many Chhetri-Bahun believed that if they conceded to turn this region into Tamuwan, Gurungs would act like Kings and impose orders on others, they thought that they would be compelled to learn the Gurung language and only Gurungs and no others would be allowed to be the rulers of the state. This frightened general Bahun-Chhetri people” said journalist Dipendra Shrestha. When asked how this “message” was spread among the masses, he said, “It was probably spread through the programs, mass meetings, memorandums they submitted, pamphlets they wrote, and rallies organized by Chhetri Samaj and other such organizations.”

REVIVAL OF THE CHHETRI SAMAJ NEPAL (CSN)

The first-ever communal organization of Chhetris in Pokhara was formed in 1996, eleven years after the Gurung organization Tamu Dhi was established. In Pokhara’s Ward No. 17 neighborhood, few Chhetri men felt the necessity of forming a community organization that would help unite the Chhetri community. On June 22, 1996, they

¹³ Gurung was interviewed in Pokhara on November 28, 2017.

formed an organization named Chhetri Samaj Pokhara-17 under the leadership of Netra Bahadur Lamichhane, who has been identified as a “social worker” by historian Dil Bahadur Kshetry (2074 v.s.: 41). Including the chairperson Lamichhane, there were nine Chhetri men in the organization. “The organization was formed to protect the dignity of Chhetris and for the larger national interest” (Kshetry 2074 v.s.: 40).

However, according to the same book, the organization confined itself to Pokhara and conducted nothing more than a few cultural activities. After the end of the tenure of the first committee, the organization was renamed Chhetri Kaji Samaj on December 24, 1998, and the responsibility was handed over to a new committee. The new committee of seven male members was led by Rudra Bahadur Karki; this time a new advisory committee of four men was formed. Historian Dil Bahadur Kshetry was also one of the members of the advisory committee. According to Kshetry, though the name was changed and the advisory committee was added, the organization could not expand beyond Pokhara and limited its role in conducting a few traditional and cultural activities. With its minimal activities, the committee was in place for nearly eight years before a new committee was formed on September 5, 2006, through a general convention.

The convention formed several committees under the leadership of Major Purna Singh Khatri. In addition to the central committee, five other regional committees were formed this time. The organization spread its presence in five cities through these regional committees— Pokhara, Kathmandu, Dhankuta, Dipayal and Surkhet. “Chhetri Kaji Samaj was formed because of the increase in the tendencies of suppressing Chhetris,” said Chandra Bahadur Thapa, the current chairperson of CSN.¹⁴

The same Chhetri Kaji Samaj was later converted into Chhetri Samaj Nepal (CSN) on December 13, 2008, through a general convention held in the hall of Pokhara Academy, Batulechaur.

¹⁴ Thapa was interviewed on August 21, 2017 in the CSN’s office, Pokhara.

There are two somewhat similar versions as to how and why the organization was given this new twist in 2008. The first version of the story was recounted to me by one of the key players of the CSN, Kumar Khadka.¹⁵ He said:

I had returned to Nepal to participate in the second *Jana Andolan* from England. I was involved in the movement and contributed as much I could to make it successful. As the movement became successful, I went back to England. I had a plan to settle permanently there and came back after a few months to take my family along. When home, I started going to play badminton with my friends in the mornings. We would switch the radio on to listen to the morning news as we played. One morning as we were listening to the radio, it was perhaps Annapurna FM, which took an interview with the Maoist leader Dev Gurung. When the interviewer asked Gurung about how they were planning to develop this country, he said, “Bahun-Chhetris and their ancestors have been exploiting this country for generations and now it is time that the conditions should change.” When we listened to his menacing statement against our already dead forefathers and us, we seriously discussed the matter. That discussion led to the formation of a group named Chhetri Swabhiman Manch with five people in it. I, Krishna Thapa, the current district chair of CPN-UML, Ram Bahadur Baniya, Padam Bahadur Karki, and I forgot the name of one member now—we five decided to form this group to inform about the threats against our community. I canceled the plan of going back to England and stayed back to take this campaign forward. We organized a program to discuss the matter with others in the hall of Pokhara Academy after a few days. Dr Dil Bahadur Kshetry was invited to enlighten us about the contributions of our ancestors and the crisis that we were

¹⁵ Khadka was interviewed on November 27, 2017 at his residence in Pokhara.

facing. We expressed our desire to take the campaign forward to unite Chhetris with him. Till then, we did not know that Dr Kshetry was one of the patrons of the already existing Chhetri Kaji Samaj. He asked us to join the organization and take the responsibility of running it instead of forming another Chhetri organization. After several discussions and activities following that meeting, we later reorganized Samaj to form Chhetri Samaj Nepal under the leadership of Dr Kshetry.

Another slightly different version of the same story has been mentioned in the book by Kshetry (2074 v.s.: 46–47). He has quoted Padam Bahadur Karki as saying:

With the success of the 2062/63 v.s. *Jana Andolan*, the underground parties came out to the open and started voicing their party stances. In this context, on the last Tuesday of the month of Chaitra 2063 v.s., Dev Gurung, the then politburo member of the Maoist party, was invited to address the Gurungs gathered in Pokhara to celebrate their traditional *Tohte parva*. In his address, he accused the Bahun-Chhetris of being feudal exploiters and oppressors. He also said that they have suppressed the *Janajatis* for 240 years and asked Gurungs to be united to retaliate against the Bahun-Chhetris and to make them the slaves. This way, Dev Gurung condescendingly denounced the identity and existence of the Bahun-Chhetris. This kind of disrespectful remarks by Gurung and his party's tendency of abandoning the class issues to attack Bahun, Chhetri and Thakuri brought together the youths of Batulechaur. We were Krishna Thapa, Kumar Khadka, Ram Bahadur Baniya, Yagya Bahadur Karki, Arjun Adhikari, Jeevan Devkota and myself. We realized the necessity of standing firm against the extremist tendencies of attacking against the existence of Khas Chhetri, Brahman and Thakuri. Thus, we thought of the concept of forming [Chhetri] Swabhimani Manch.

Though these two accounts are slightly different with respect to a few facts, both of them said that it was the statement of Dev Gurung which prompted them to start a new campaign against the “extremist” stance of leaders like Gurung and his party. From both the accounts, it is known that the campaign was merged with the pre-existing Chhetri Kaji Samaj to form the new CSN in 2008.

Herein a question arises: did Gurung make such a knee-jerk anti-Bahun and anti-Chhetri statement? It is very difficult to check whether Gurung said the lines as claimed by Khadka and Karki. Since the local newspapers of Chaitra 2063 v.s. could not be accessed and Annapurna FM has not kept the archives of the interviews of the time, such fact-checking is not easy. But if Gurung’s writings can be any clue to find the answer to this question, here is one example: “In Nepal, since the time of unification, which happened before two centuries, the feudal Brahminist state has encroached the rights of inhabitant *Adivasis* and several regional social groups and they have been oppressed by the state. This is an uncontested truth” (Gurung 2063 v.s.[2062 v.s.]: 180).

Though he has not explicitly asked *Janajatis* to suppress Bahun-Chhetris, he has prioritized the issue of the marginalization of ethnic groups like the Gurungs and has identified Bahun-Chhetri domination as a problem. Likewise, another leader of the party, Suresh Ale Magar, who is regarded as one of the proponents to float the issues of *Janajatis* in the party, has written about the historical marginalization of certain groups extensively drawing from the ideas that Lenin (1977) and Stalin (1913) delivered on the “national question” (Ale Magar 2005). No such lines as quoted by Khadka and Karki are found in their writings.

However, it is likely that the tenor and the choice of words (in the quoted speeches) by Gurung might have sounded as menacing to the general Bahun-Chhetri people. Even if the lines were not the same as claimed by Khadka and Karki, it is understood that Gurung’s statements were taken as threats by many Bahuns and Chhetris like Karki and Khadka. Above all, the political stance of the Maoist party

and the remarks along the party line made by leaders like Gurung were the immediate triggers for the revival of the CSN.

In addition to this, the “racist and violent” slogans which, as per the claims of the CSN leaders made rounds in the demonstrations for Tamuwan, seemingly threatened the non-*Janajati* communities. Not just slogans, probably the vocal use of words like Bahuns, Chhetris, and portrayal of these communities as “oppressors” or simply “dominant” might have caused irritations among those who never liked the identity aspirations asserted by the *Janajatis* after 1990.

ASSERTION OF CHHETRI IDENTITY

The urge behind some CSN stalwarts to revive the organization and gear up its activities against this identity assertion by *Janajatis* can be read in some of the publications published during and after the movement. I have taken three major publications to understand the push behind moves of the CSN as CA-I started debates on the idea of state restructuring. They are *Chhetri Awaj* (2066 v.s.), the journal published by CSN; *Arya-Khaska 15000 Varsha* (2070 v.s.), an edited volume, which has nine articles written by some of the accomplished male scholars coming from Bahun and Chhetri communities; *Chhetri Udgat* (2074 v.s.), a journal published by a Kathmandu-based Chhetri organization named Chhetri Samaj Rashtriya Mahasangh.

The main argument that all these publications want to highlight are: 1) Bahuns and Chhetris are the indigenous groups of Nepal;¹⁶ 2) Bahuns and Chhetris have not oppressed other groups, rather a huge section of the Khas-Arya population are reeling under poverty; 3) Chhetri is the community which played a vital role in keeping Nepal intact as a sovereign nation; 4) “Ethnic federalism” is a flawed model and is an anti-Nepal idea which will eventually

¹⁶ Though not explicitly mentioned as a work written to support the CSN movement or any other mobilizations organized for the assertion of Chhetri identity, Gopal Shiwakoti (2014) has written a book to chronicle a detailed history of the Khas community. He also claims the community as an indigenous community of Nepal.

disintegrate the country; and 5) The idea of “ethnic federalism” is pushed by foreigners and a few *Janajati* intellectuals who are funded by international organizations.

In *Chhetri Awaj*, nine articles repeat the same claims of CSN—that Khas is the indigenous group of Nepal. Drawing from the Gopal Vamshavali, the Khas-history written by Bal Krishna Pokharel and the works of Suryamani Adhikari, all the articles have claimed that Khas have been in Nepal even before the Lichhavis. And the evidence for this claim is taken from a fifth century inscription made by the Lichhavi King Mandev in Changunarayan. “The written history of Nepal begins from 464 AD when Lichhavi King Mandev made an inscription in Changunarayan Pillar saying that I have been living here as per the rules set for Chhetris” (K.C. 2066 v.s.: 32).

The majority of articles included in *Arya-Khaska 15000 Varsha* have also repeated the same claims of indigenesness of Bahuns and Chhetris. For example, Bipin Adhikari (2070 v.s.), in his essay, mentions a war in which, according to some historical accounts, King Ashoka, the Indian emperor of the Maurya dynasty, fought with Khas living in Nepal. This has been done to prove the indigenesness of the community. In other publications, some of the writers, in trying to supply written evidence to claim the indigenesness of Chhetris, have claimed that there has been no mention of other groups like Kirats in the Lichhavi-era inscriptions found in Changunarayan and Thankot (K.C. 2066 v.s.; Koirala 2014; Kunwar 2074 v.s.). “In terms of development, those groups like the Gurung, Magar, Rai, Limbu, etc., which have already been almost equal to Bahun-Chhetri have been popularizing their claims for indigenesness. Not just this but taking up leadership in the name of *Adivasi/Janajati*, they have overshadowed the real *Adivasi*-groups” (Regmi 2066 v.s.: 77).

Other articles have claimed that the Khas community was a non-Hindu community in the beginning and later—roughly after the fourteenth century AD—this community was Hinduized. Thus, according to Poudel Chhetri (2066 v.s.), this community is not as rigid in following the Varna system as the Hindu-Bahuns

in Nepal are. Some of them (Lamichhane 2066 v.s.a; Khadka 2066 v.s.) have also claimed, borrowing explanations put forward by Dor Bahadur Bista, that even today many Chhetris live as *Matwalis* (liquor drinking groups). They have focused on this aspect of the community to claim that Chhetris are not strict Hindus who would strictly follow the caste system to oppress other “lower castes” or non-Hindu groups.

The writers collected in the above-mentioned volumes have also flagged the “contributions” that the Chhetris have made to give a shape to modern democratic Nepal. For example, Kumar Karki (2074 v.s.: 71) writes, “Out of nineteen people killed in the second *Jana Andolan*, eight of them were Chhetris. In the ten-year insurgency led by the Maoists, many Chhetris have given their lives.” Others have written about the contribution of Chhetri leaders like Prithvi Narayan Shah who contributed to the unification and integration of Nepal. “To claim Prithvi’s unification drive as an effort of the entire Khas community to suppress other communities is nothing but a misinterpretation of history” (Khatri 2066 v.s.: 129).

Articles on federalism mostly focus on how parties like the Maoists, organizations like NEFIN, and a few sociologists and anthropologists were putting efforts in flaring up the agenda of “ethnic federalism.” Terming identity-based federalism as “*Jatiya Sanghiyata*,” they have said that since no “*Jatiya Rajya*” existed in the history of Nepal and since the unification campaign was never an attempt of colonizing the smaller “nations,” the demand of “*Jatiya Sanghiyata*” has no basis. “Barring some exceptions, Nepal never had ethnic states. Kirat and Madhes were never independent states” (K.C. 2074 v.s.: 10). Others have argued that since there is no proper evidence to call a particular region the root of any particular *Janajati* group, ethnic-federalism cannot be adopted (Regmi 2066 v.s.; Basnet 2066 v.s.).

Another major issue that they have raised is the foreign funding and interests in ethnic federalism. Uttam Basnet (2066 v.s.) sharply criticizes the scholars and organizations who have worked on the issues of ethnicity and federalism and accuses them of being driven

by external interests which do not want stability and peace in Nepal. “Let no one take an offense but it seems many kinds of chaos have begun after the higher studies on sociology and anthropology began in Nepal” (Basnet 2066 v.s.: 159). He goes on to say that in the name of studying different castes and ethnic groups, the harmonious relationship among these groups has been disturbed by scholars. Regmi (2066 v.s.) also points out the role of INGOs and NGOs funded by foreign donors in fomenting the conflict among different groups in the name of identity-based federalism.¹⁷

More than the worry about ethnic conflict, the writers in the above-mentioned volumes seem to have been terrified by the raised ambition for statehood among the *Janajati* groups. The realization of the statehood of Tamuwan (to give an example) would slight Chhetri-Bahun to the margin and they would be devoid of all the prerogatives and privileges that they have enjoyed from the state—this seemed to be the main fear of these writers.

Most of the writers in these volumes actively participated in CSN’s movements.¹⁸ Though they came from different political orientations and backgrounds, they stood together to revive the CSN and start a movement against the restructuring of the Nepali state along identity lines. Since none of the major parties extended formal support to the movement, it was led mainly by scholars and a few educated middle-aged men.

¹⁷ The accusation against INGOs and NGOs for “manufacturing” discourse around marginalization and identity-politics is not something which is unique to the CSN movement. The last detailed report on how these international donors paid for the debates on “identity” has been published by the Centre for Investigative Journalism, Nepal (CIJ). It is available at <http://cijnepal.org.np/2014-06-07-08-29-29/>; accessed June 1, 2022.

¹⁸ Many were sympathizers of one political party or the other. Dil Bahadur Kshetry is known to have his leanings towards the monarchy. The most active member of the CSN, Kumar Khadka was a known cadre of NC but as he became more active with CSN, he initiated his own Akhanda Nepal Party. But now he is back to being a leader of NC. Likewise, another member Krishna Thapa has been an active leader of CPN-UML.

PROTESTS AND DEMONSTRATIONS LED BY THE CSN

“Educate, organize, agitate,” three words spoken by the renowned Indian intellectual and activist B.R. Ambedkar, has now become an oft-repeated maxim among various individuals and groups fighting for Dalit rights in South Asia (Ambedkar 1979). Nepal is not an exception. But Ambedkar is quoted in this chapter not to inquire about whether Dalits in Nepal have followed the footsteps laid out by him, it is rather to describe how a “dominant” community (which is a pole apart from the Dalits) lived up to the ideals of these three words, consolidating its political strength. Born out of anger and frustrations against the Maoist’s idea of state-restructuring and loud demonstrations demanding Tamuwān, CSN worked hard to educate Chhetris about their indigenoussness, glorious past, and unique culture, organized them around their ideas of national unity (*rashtriya akhandata*), their definitions of inclusion, and finally made them ready to agitate against the agendas of state-restructuring: particularly, against identity-based federalism and inclusive democracy.

EDUCATION AND ORGANIZATION

Within one month of its revival under the leadership of Dil Bahadur Kshetry, CSN laid out the basic agendas of the organization and all the members in the organization vowed to work to achieve these agendas. Five-point agenda, with its nationalist overtones, explains CSN’s and its leaders’ ideas of state-restructuring and inclusion. They are as follows:

- 1) The state should treat all equally paying heed to the age-old traditions of co-existence and tolerance within the context of maintaining national unity and ethnic harmony.
- 2) When federalism is to be adopted, the country should be divided into five provinces. The existing five development regions should be converted into five federal provinces. Ethnicity, language, and religion should not be considered for the naming of these

- provinces. Instead they should be named on the basis of the names of mountains and rivers.
- 3) The basis of federalism should be geography and not ethnicity, language and religion.
 - 4) Reservations should not be given based on caste but should be provisioned on the basis of class.
 - 5) The decision regarding sensitive national issues like religion and the flag should be taken by the sovereign people. This means such national issues should be resolved through a referendum. (Kshetry 2074 v.s.: 50)

It would not be an overstatement to say that the above-mentioned basic guideline-tenets passed by the “first meeting” of the revived CSN stand conspicuously inimical to the ideas of identity-based federalism and inclusive democracy. However, this does not mean that the Maoists and all ethnic parties unanimously and strictly followed the particular definitions of identity-based federalism and inclusive democracy. Though they shared some of the ideas and agreed with significant aspects of the definition, there were various understandings of identity-based federalism at play similar to the heterogeneity one expects within ideologies such as communism and liberalism.

Viewed through the lens of inclusive democracy and identity-based federalism, the federal structure proposed by the CSN was no federalism in essence. One may disagree with this particular lens taken to read the proposed structure, but she cannot dismiss the validity of this question: would the same “tried and tested” model of five development regions, now revived as provinces of a federal country, solve the problems which became the fertile ground for a decade long insurgency? When asked the question to a CSN leader, who wants to remain anonymous, replied, “We thought five development regions would avoid ethnic tensions. The best model on a geographical basis would be five development regions turned into provinces. But we were open to any other ideas except the

federal structure which would give priority to ethnic, religious or caste identities.”¹⁹

Likewise, CSN’s idea of class-based inclusion was not uncontested. There were several reasons for different groups and political parties to disagree with class-based inclusion. But CSN carried it forward with its own explanation. Its leader Dil Bahadur Kshetry said:

There are both rich and poor people in every community in Nepal. The reservations given to particular castes or groups would be usurped by the elites of these groups. It could never serve the real needy people. So, we asked to make arrangements to give reservations to the poor and needy people.²⁰

A noted political analyst, who wants to remain anonymous, is doubtful of this idea. He says, “Class, in itself, is an identity so taking the class as a sole basis for reservations would gloss over caste and ethnic asymmetries that exist in Nepali society. It does not solve the problem of the marginalization of certain groups but it most likely will aggravate it.”²¹

Contentions apart, CSN spread the above-mentioned agendas through the networks they built in various parts of the country. The agendas were floated among the masses through 1) a Mahayagya; 2) a motorcycle rally and Kalash Yatra organized during the Mahayagya; 3) a mass meeting organized in Kathmandu’s Khulamanch; 4) a Sima Jagaran Abhiyan (border-awareness campaign); and e) the organization of a communal beauty pageant—Miss Chhetri Nepal. In addition to this, CSN also organized trainings for its members to orient them about the organization’s agendas. “Other means to take their agendas to the public was through press releases, letters of the memorandum submitted to the government and non-government organizations, and through their publications,” explained journalist

¹⁹ This person was interviewed in Pokhara on November 24, 2017.

²⁰ This was said in an interview taken on November 24, 2017 in Pokhara.

²¹ Personal communication in Kathmandu on December 20, 2017.

Dipendra Shrestha. As CSN expanded and the sympathizers grew in number, they also started publications of periodicals and the production of dedicated radio programs. Contents of some of these publications have already been described above.

CSN organized a Mahayagya in Pokhara mainly to collect money and build funds for the organization. Started on September 27, 2009, the ten-day Mahayagya was an opportunity for the CSN leaders to mingle with hundreds of people and let them know the agendas and activities of their organization (Poudel Chhetri 2066 v.s.). The Mahayagya not just had religious pandits as speakers but influential political leaders like Gagan Thapa and Bidya Devi Bhandari and bankers like Himalaya Shumsher Rana were present to grace the event. Thapa, a NC leader renowned for his eloquent oratory, was present in a *daura suruwal* (which Chhetris claim as national dress) to address the mass gathered in the Mahayagya. In the course of his speech, he not only endorsed the CSN's claim of indigeneness but also assured the Chhetri elders to not let "his politics disrespect them."²² By this, he probably meant he would not make any decision that would go against the interests of the Chhetri Samaj.

According to Dil Bahadur Kshetry, the motorcycle rally was participated by nearly 4,000 youths; they were asked to wear *daura suruwal* during the rally. The spectacular rally was a big show which could draw the attention of young people towards the message that the organizer was trying to convey. Likewise, hundreds of men and women were present in the Kalash Yatra; all of them wore traditional attires and queued up carrying *kalash* in their hands. These spectacular demonstrations not just worked as effective advertisements of the Mahayagya but were also an efficient ways to convey the message of the organizer—a love for their traditional costume, rituals, religion and identity.

²² The speeches delivered by Gagan Thapa and Bidya Devi Bhandari and by CSN's Kumar Khadka have been uploaded in this YouTube link: www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=qtn8w_EnExE; accessed December 5, 2017.

The successful Mahayagya collected a total sum of NRs. 67,835,076 from the donations. After the CSN paid the expenditure of NRs. 2,820,632, it was left with a hefty income of NRs. 65,014,444 (Kshetry 2074 v.s.: 54). On the opening day of the Mahayagya, the CA-I member Surya Bahadur KC, a local entrepreneur, donated more than 10 million rupees. KC's generosity encouraged other rich Chhetri individuals, families and organizations, to make generous donations to the Mahayagya. According to Kshetry (2074 v.s.: 54), the income was later invested in purchasing a building for the organization. Local entrepreneur and NC-leader Anand Raj Mulmi said, "The initiatives launched by Chhetri Samaj were wholeheartedly supported by wealthy Chhetris of Pokhara."²³ CSN's building, which is painted in dark green color, stands proudly in a corner of the Pokhara Valley.²⁴

Set as a successful example, many of the district committees organized similar Mahayagyas in their respective districts. According to the details presented in the book by Kshetry (2074 v.s.), all of these Mahayagyas were successful in collecting a considerable amount of money. Initially, the district committees sent 3 percent of their income to the central committee but later some of them showed reluctance to do so.

To spread CSN's agendas and their cultural and political ideas about Nepali society, it organized a mass meeting in the Khulamanch of Kathmandu on February 11, 2010. The other purpose of the meeting was to demonstrate the strength of Chhetri's consolidation. Dil Bahadur Kshetry writes, "Samaj felt the need to show off the strength to those national and international elements who deny the existence and identity of the Chhetris, to make them realize the unity among nationalist Chhetris for the protection of national unity and to let them know that Chhetris have come together to

²³ Mulmi was interviewed in Pokhara on November 24, 2017.

²⁴ According to a local journalist, "The choice of military's dark green color for the building is probably a decision taken consciously to showcase the valor of Kshatriyas." Personal communication, November 23, 2017.

protect the community's and the nation's identity" (2074 v.s.: 55). He claims that thousands of Chhetris from all seventy-five districts had come to Kathmandu to attend the program. The footage of the mass meeting shown in the news uploaded by a portal called Nepal News proves the claims made by Kshetry. In the video, a huge mass shouts slogans like, "Jatiya rajya chahidaina" (we don't need ethnicity-based provinces), "Jatiya agradhikar, bikhandanko adhar" (special privileges to ethnicity is the basis for secession), etc.²⁵ Kumar Khadka, another prominent leader of CSN, said, "We asked our people to arrange for their stay in Kathmandu and they arranged food on their own. It was spontaneous support for the cause."²⁶ The mass meeting not only engaged hundreds of people and oriented them in the agendas of CSN, but the demonstration of Chhetri-strength also raised doubts about the acceptability of the agendas floated by parties like the CPN-M. At the same time, it might have emboldened the forces which were already reluctant to accept the proposal of state restructuring.

Another big show was the observation tour to Susta organized by CSN on December 18, 2010. Susta, which lies on the Nepal-India border in Nawalparasi, is an example of unresolved border disputes for decades now.²⁷ The Nepali settlers in the region, who are affected by floods in the Narayani River, accuse India to have snatched their lands and made them homeless. Though time and again the border disputes are raised in the Nepali media and also by the political parties of Nepal, no government has taken the issue seriously and has never negotiated with India to solve them. Every time, when Nepal's political parties—most often the communist parties—get antagonized by India's maneuverings in Nepali politics, they tend to speak about Susta. The Maoist party launched a campaign after it

²⁵ Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMk-Sv0LaFI; accessed December 18, 2017.

²⁶ Khadka was interviewed in Pokhara on November 27, 2017.

²⁷ See Baral and Pyakurel (2015) for the details of Nepal-India border disputes in Susta.

had to resign from the government in 2009 following the Katawal-scandal. The Maoists believed that India played a role to support the then Army Chief Rookmangud Katawal when they wanted to fire him from the post.

According to the details presented in Kshetry's book (2074 v.s.), hundreds of Chhetri men and women went to observe the "land-encroachment" done by India in Susta.²⁸ The campaigners of Samaj had worn their traditional *daura suruwal* and *gunyu cholo* to demonstrate their faith in the "national dress" which they took as symbols of nationalism. They also organized a program to felicitate Buddhi Narayan Shrestha, the border expert who has written books and essays on the Nepal-India border disputes, and Gopal Gurung, a local person of Susta, who according to Kshetry has fought bravely against land encroachment in the region. The public meeting organized in Susta was addressed by Shrestha, Gurung and leaders from CSN. In addition to this, CSN also made a documentary film about the dispute, and the film was sent to national and international media and also to international organizations like the United Nations (UN) and European Union (EU). Kshetry's account of the observation tour presented in the book gives a sense that CSN wanted to invoke anti-India nationalist sentiment among the Chhetris. This might have helped further consolidate the unity in the community cultivated by CSN.

CSN put another effort to attract young Chhetris towards its organization and agendas. For this, it used a popular patriarchal market tool called beauty pageant.²⁹ On July 21, 2012, it organized

²⁸ Though the book mentions about this event in detail, news-coverage of the event could not be traced in newspapers like *Kantipur* and *Nagarik*. If any local papers carried the news, their archives could not be accessed during my research.

²⁹ Wolf (2002: 87) has criticized such pageants from a gender-perspective. She says, "A man's right to confer judgment on any woman's beauty while remaining himself unjudged is beyond scrutiny because it is thought of as God-given. That right has become so urgently important for male culture to exercise because it is the last unexamined right remaining intact from the old list of

Miss Chhetri Nepal in Pokhara. According to the details presented by Kshetry in his book, nineteen Chhetri girls participated in the event from which Dipika Pahari, a local from Pokhara, was declared Miss Chhetri. Compared to the pageants sponsored by corporate and business enterprises which majorly focus on the publicity of the goods they produce, the main focus of CSN's beauty pageant was to promote the "traditional costumes and cultures" of the community.

The young Chhetris, educated and brought up in a consumer culture promoted by the market-economy, would certainly be affected by the neoliberal consumerist ethos of the market. CSN might have thought of pageants as an effective platform to cater to the consumerist tendencies of the young Chhetris. Molding the attractive tool of the market in their interest, the CSN leader tried to rope young crowds in their communal campaigns. They were perhaps impressed by the beauty pageants organized by other communal organizations of the Newars and Kirats in other regions.

Following the footsteps of the political parties—especially the communist parties—CSN organized "prashikshan" (training) to orient the leaders and cadres in the "basic principles and agendas" of the organization. "Training was organized to keep the organization disciplined, to make the members ... aware of our policies, objectives and working guidelines," has been stated by Kshetry (2074 v.s.: 86) in his account of CSN's history. Educated and senior members were appointed as trainers to impart required education about principles and policies of the organization. The first training program was organized in Pokhara on August 8–9, 2009. These training programs worked as a means to bring people together and increase camaraderie among them and make them loyal to the cause upheld by the organization. As an effective means of organization, the training programs were organized by several district committees of CSN.

CSN also used mass media like radio to popularize its agendas among the locals of Pokhara. To better inform about the activities

masculine privilege: those that it was universally believed that God or nature or another absolute authority bestowed upon all men to exert over all women."

of the organizations and make people aware of their struggle for the “protection of Nepal’s existence and Chhetri-identity,” CSN decided to buy time in Barahi FM, Pokhara, for a dedicated radio program. According to Dil Bahadur Kshetry, the program was produced by Uttam Basnet, a member of CSN. The weekly radio-show incorporated regular activities, historical facts about the community, and audio materials about Chhetri traditions and cultures. The program was aired for a few months and was brought to an end in February 2013. After this experimentation with the radio, CSN planned to publish its mouthpieces in print. CSN-Kaski published two issues of the magazine called *Swabhiman*. The CSN then decided to publish *Chhetri Awaj*, a journal of research articles and promotional materials but it was discontinued after one issue. The publications incorporated essays, research articles, historical accounts, commentaries and literary writings. All of these writings focused on the community, its identity, its historical contributions, and the justifications of the activities of the organizations. The editorial in *Chhetri Awaj* stated as much:

Articles that shed light on erroneous and illusive understandings about indigenous groups, ethnic and migrant groups, ethnic and regional federalism have been incorporated in *Chhetri Awaz*. It is also a collection of nationalist poems and those articles which highlight the need of the organization and accentuate the significance of the Chhetri identity and the existence of the community. Other articles deal with the issue of federalism and explain the disadvantages of ethnic-regional federalism. (*Chhetri Awaj* 2066 v.s.: Page not mentioned)

Not to mention here some of the press releases, thank you letters, and the letters of memorandum that the CSN addressed to various groups and organizations would be to write an incomplete story about the efforts CSN put in education and organization. The tell-tale extracts given below, taken from some of its significant

releases and letters, must be enough to highlight the significance of these dispatches. Take for example, this extract from a Letter of Memorandum sent to the Ambassador of Switzerland to Nepal, the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator and the Ambassador of the Delegation of EU to Nepal:

We, the people of Caucasian stock (Khas-Aryan root) accounts [sic] for around 60-65% [sic] have sacrificed our lives, blood and toil for the formation of modern nation, national integrity and ethnic goodwill since the inception of Nepal, but unfortunately, we have been categorized as “others” instead of “indigenous groups” in the interim constitution of Nepal 2006 [sic] and are deprived of our indigenous rights as par [sic] with the provision of ILO 169. Do you think that certain leaders and parties have such rights to sideline us without the national referendum and democratic process? Are you sure that we are “others” than the indigenous people of this nation? If not, we would like to draw your attention to listen to our genuine demands and act accordingly without engaging in any activities based on the “ethnic line” that will finally invite our nation to the brink of ethnic conflict and civil war. (Kshetry 2074 v.s.: 469)

The second example is extracted from a thank you letter sent to Top Bahadur Rayamajhi, the then Minister for Local Development and a senior leader of the UCPN-M:

Chhetri Samaj Nepal would like to extend its heartfelt thanks to you for your pledge to wear the national costume, *daura suruwal*, in deference to the age-old respect that the dress has maintained in Nepali society. We are happy to acknowledge that you, as a nationalist son of a Chhetri, have chosen to pay respect to one of the established symbols of national unity. ... We would like you to know that all nationalist Chhetris are with you. (Kshetry 2074 v.s.: 449)

This letter was sent when Rayamajhi decided to wear the *daura suruwal* as a minister in the Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai-led cabinet. The cabinet had decided to scrap the mandatory rule of wearing the *daura suruwal* as a “national costume” by the male ministers while in office.

The third example is an extract from one of the press releases issued by CSN and signed by the chairperson and general secretary of the organization:

A handful of people, who have received a huge amount of money from foreign donor organizations including DFID and follow the diktats of these organizations, are trying to create a rift and conflict between *Janajatis* and Khas Chhetris in the name of the Adivasi/Janajati Mahasangh. We would like all to be alert about their attempts. (Kshetry 2074 v.s.: 457)

This press release was probably a response to the statements put forward by the leaders of the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) in support of identity-based federalism.

Along with the above-mentioned activities, after its revival in 2008, CSN was in a drive to form various committees—that of women, intellectuals, ex-servicemen, youths, entrepreneurs, artists, advocates, teachers, etc. Each of these sub-committees had nearly a dozen people as executive members. Likewise, it also made efforts in either merging or having cordial relationships with many other Chhetri communal organizations. With the robust network in major towns and zonal headquarters, CSN could reach the masses with its agendas. Given the size of the organization and the publicity activities it conducted, CSN looked no less organized than any political party of the country.

AGITATION

Above mentioned mobilizations like the mass-meeting held in Khulamanch, Kathmandu in February 2010 and rallies conducted during the Mahayagya in Pokhara in September 2009 were the early

and robust agitations organized by CSN. But other significant rallies and demonstrations started only from mid-2011 as CA-I was having heated discussions on federalism—mostly about its structure, number of provinces and their names. As CA-I approached its “last” deadline of May 28, 2012, CSN confronted the supporters of Tamuwan in Pokhara. During that period, members of CSN, which was in alliance with Brahman Samaj and other communal organizations, went to Baneshwor, Kathmandu to demonstrate in front of the CA building.

In February 2011, Samaj allied with a Kathmandu-based organization called Chhetri Samaj Rashtriya Mahasangh and named the joint committee Chhetri Rashtriya Andolan Samiti. The alliance announced a peaceful movement to fulfill their demands. They announced a protest program which included the submission of a letter of memorandum to the concerned CA committee. Starting on May 2, 2011, they organized a one-hour sit-in protest in the District Administration Offices of all the seventy-five districts. On May 7, they called for a strike in Rapti Zone followed by similar strikes in Gandaki, Dhaulagiri and Lumbini Zones on May 8. Likewise, they also called for strikes in Surkhet, Dailekh, Chitwan, Kavre and Dhading districts.

Kshetry claims that all these demonstrations and strikes were successfully held. “Chhetris of various places made the movement successful while facing different obstructions and the state’s attempts to suppress them” (Kshetry 2074 v.s.: 135). After these protests in the districts, the Samiti started a relay hunger strike in front of the CA building on May 16, 2011. As the government paid no attention to all these peaceful protests, the Samiti decided to announce a two-day (May 22 and 23) strike in Kathmandu. As the strike was enforced successfully in Kathmandu, the government invited them for negotiations. The negotiation concluded by signing a six-point agreement between the government and the Samiti. The government became ready to form a study committee to list Chhetris as an indigenous group and to prioritize class in the reservations given in different sectors. Another significant achievement for the Samaj was the government’s readiness to arrange for accepting Chhetri as a

group with a distinct identity in ensuring proportional representation in the election (Adhikari 2074 v.s.).

When the Samiti and CSN felt that their demands were not fulfilled by the government and various kinds of agitations by several ethnic groups demanding identity-based federalism continued, the CSN made another alliance with Brahman Samaj Nepal, Thakuri Samaj Rashtriya Mahasangh Nepal, Nepal Dashnami Samaj, and Vibhedmukti Pragatishil Samaj. The alliance was named Rashtriya Akhandata ra Jatiya Sadhbhavka lagi Samyukta Sangharsha Samiti (Joint Struggle Committee for National Unity and Ethnic Harmony) which demanded to list Brahman, Chhetri, Dashnami and Dalits under a broad Khas-Arya cluster in the category of indigenous groups. Another major demand was to avoid ethnicity and identity as the basis for federalism. In the first phase, they repeated the same kinds of protest programs like submitting memorandums, announcing strikes in different development regions and districts, and organizing a relay hunger strike to draw the attention of the political parties towards their demands. They also organized rallies and mass meetings in places such as Surkhet, Sarlahi, Kathmandu, Jhapa, Rupandehi, etc. At the end of all these protest programs, they called for a general strike in the entire country.

In the second phase, the Samyukta Samiti asked revered personalities—like senior bureaucrats, social workers and intellectuals—to issue statements against “ethnic-federalism.” Also, they asked some of the renowned *Janaajati* intellectuals and revered personalities to issue the same kinds of statements. They also requested the then President of Nepal, Ram Baran Yadav, to issue a directive to the CA to not adopt ethnic federalism. Also, they asked the President to “not sign the constitution if the CA passed ethnic-federalism” (Kshetry 2074 v.s.: 137). Lastly, they gave an ultimatum to the government and the CA to not pass “ethnic-federalism” and warned that if they did so defying the ultimatum, the Samyukta Samiti would burn the constitution and declare “our” (namely, one drafted by the Samyukta Samiti) constitution. Alongside, they

continued street demonstrations. “We organized the religious *yagya* and read religious texts like Chandi and Rudri in public places of several parts of the country,” said Narayan Adhikari, the chairperson of Brahman Samaj Nepal.³⁰

As the second phase of the movement began, Pokhara saw a bitter confrontation between the supporters of Tamuwan and Brahman-Chhetri-Dashnami alliance. Let me quote a piece written by journalist Ameet Dhakal (2013) in which he has drawn a word-picture of the confrontation that took place in Prithvi Chowk-turned Lakan Thapa Chowk, Pokhara:

The Maoist party, which floated the agenda of identity-based federalism with Pokhara as the main city and political hub, had installed a board that welcomed the visitors to Tamuwan Ganarajya—the Gurung land. Both the parties—one led by Chhetri Samaj and the other led by Tamuwan-supporters—were busy taking out rallies and organizing mass meetings. In this course, not just the city-dwellers but the village folks also started swarming to Pokhara. Both the parties had supporters from surrounding villages come to the city. One group would announce a strike and once that strike ended, another group would jump to call another phase of the strike. As this wrangling was ongoing, one day a huge Chhetri Samaj-led mass headed towards Prithvi Chowk. As the number increased, the mass rally started acting like a mob and their target became the Tamuwan-board installed by the supporters of the identity-based federalism. As they were trying to pluck the board off the ground, the news made rounds in the city. This agitated the Tamuwan-supporters and they gathered in the same Chowk. Now the Chowk turned into a battlefield where Chhetri Samaj activists and supporters gathered on one side and on the other side were Tamuwan-supporters and activists. Security forces stood in between them and did not budge from their position

³⁰ Adhikari was interviewed in Pokhara on November 27, 2017.

even if they were being hurled with stones from both sides. This continued for some time till a huge downpour forced the crowd to disperse.³¹

As the second phase of protests by the Samyukta Samiti was ongoing, another three-point agreement was made between the Samiti and the government on May 17, 2012. This agreement stated the pledge to list the Khas-Arya as an indigenous group. Another important agreement was to give the rights of naming the provinces to the parliament and the right to take the final call was given to the provincial assemblies. If needed, each assembly would go for public consultation to name the concerned province.

However, just five days after signing the agreement with the Brahman-Chhetris, the government signed a contradictory nine-point agreement with another agitating group called Adivasi/Janajati Samyukta Sangharsh Samiti. The agreement signed by the government and the representatives of *Janajati* activists stated that “attention of the government has been drawn towards the disagreement of the *Adivasis/Janajatis* about the recognition of indigenouness given to Brahman, Chhetri and Dashnami” (Kshetry 2074 v.s.: 482). The latter agreement contradicted the agreement signed by the government with the Brahman and Chhetri alliance on May 17 (see also Chapter Eight, this volume).

This infuriated the activists of the Brahman-Chhetri-Dashnami alliance and led to the third phase of the movement. It was the street protest of May 28, 2012. Supporter of the Chhetri Samaj-alliance gathered on the western side of the CA building whereas on the eastern side were the *Janajati* activists. As an eyewitness, I saw Baneshwor as a battlefield where both sides tried to overpower each other. Security forces had cordoned off the CA building and were

³¹ However, Tamuwani-activists interviewed in Pokhara said that the government security forces always favored CSN and did not react strongly against their demonstrations but were always hostile towards Tamuwani-demonstrations.

stationed in between the two agitating groups and tried their best to not let any of the groups break the barricade. The battle continued the whole day and ended with the news of the demise of the CA without the promulgation of the new constitution late in the evening.

CONCLUSION

Agitated by the provision of putting the Chhetri community in the *anya* (Other) category in the IC 2007, disappointed for being clubbed with the dominant Brahmans, unhappy for being portrayed as rulers and oppressors, and threatened by the assertion of several ethnic groups in support of identity-based federalism, the Chhetri community, based in Pokhara, decided to organize and revolt. Reviving a dormant communal Chhetri organization based in Pokhara, few educated Chhetri men, who had different party-leanings and affiliations, decided to stand against the agendas of identity-based federalism and inclusive democracy first floated by the Maoists. With consistent efforts put into the education and mobilization of the common Chhetri population, they successfully staged agitations several times. Since almost all the leaders and active members of CSN were educated, they had the potential to not just articulate their agendas but also to convince and mobilize the masses.

The disgruntled Chhetri and Bahun groups could have voiced their agendas in the elected constituent assembly through the elected members of their communities. The visible reluctance of parties like NC and CPN-UML in accepting the agendas of restructuring—mostly federalism—might have initially bolstered the groups to start voicing their disgruntlement. But as time progressed, groups like CSN did not find elected CA-I members of NC and CPN-UML reliable because they were equally reluctant to reject the idea of identity-based federalism. There were many instances where it looked like the NC and the CPN-UML became ready to accept some form of identity-based federalism as they negotiated with the Maoist and the Madhesi parties. This increased the suspicion of CSN leaders. Hence, they focused their attention on organizing

and educating their community so that eventually when the decisive moment came, they could agitate against the potential decision of the CA to pass identity-based federalism.

Alongside, the Maoists and several other outfits—who claimed to have upheld the agenda of identity-based federalism—did not work towards articulating their demands of justice, fair representation, identity recognition, etc. to non-*Adivasi*/*Janajati*-Madhesi communities. It is interesting to note that even the activists at the village and district levels, who were supposed to work towards strengthening their organizations, did not have a robust understanding of identity-based federalism (Mishra 2015). Lack of serious dialogue with the diverse masses and overt interest among the Maoist, Madhesi and *Janajati* leaders in making their agendas as bargaining chips for the seats of power at Singha Darbar and Baluwatar further complicated the issue. Acute realization of the need to overcome the historical exclusion of a huge section of the Nepali population confronted the feeling of “othering” by the dominant section (Adhikari and Gellner 2016).

Amid the vehement protests staged both by the groups demanding identity-based federalism and those countering it, CA-I came to an end without promulgating any constitution. The failure of the most inclusive and democratically elected body, which had the historic mandate of restructuring the state and ensuring it legitimately through the promulgation of the constitution, was a huge disillusionment for those who were expecting a leap towards a genuinely inclusive *loktantrik* Nepal.

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