

Chaitanya Mishra and Om Gurung, eds. 2012. *Ethnicity and Federalisation in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Tribhuvan University.

The papers in this volume emerged from a symposium on ‘Ethnicity and Federalization in Nepal’ organized by the Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology of Tribhuvan University in April 2011. Federalism was the most serious bone of contention in the first Constituent Assembly (CA) and perhaps the main reason behind its untimely demise in 2012. Since then, Nepal has seen a second CA elections, a major earthquake, a new constitution, and a suffocating blockade, but the fate of federalism remains unclear.

According to Mishra and Gurung, the symposium had two objectives. The intellectual objective was to “bring the knowledge and insight of world and international history and theory to bear upon the ideas and problematic of ethnicity, nationality, indigeneity, ethnic boundaries, ethnic fluidity, recent and worldwide rise of identity and ethnicity, etc.” (p. 1). The more immediate political objective was to “give a legitimate foundation to Nepal’s agenda for federalization” (p. 1). It is not possible to touch on each of the 19 papers in the volume in this brief review, but I will give an overview and note strengths and weaknesses.

TK Oommen’s keynote address underscores the distinction between nation and ethnicity as well as between nation-states and national states. For Oommen, a nation emerges when there is a unity between territory and culture whereas ethnicity results from dissociation between the two. Oommen believes that “the obsolete notion of nation-state of the West European vintage” (p. 8) upholds monoculturalism, conflates citizenship and nationality, and relentlessly pursues the homogenization of diverse

societies. He identifies three specifically South Asian challenges to building democratic national states: social hierarchy sanctioned by the ideology of caste system; cultural heterogeneity based on linguistic diversity and religion, and externalization of minorities. He states that the most credible way to federalize national states in South Asia is by “[c]onceding maximum possible political and cultural autonomy to national minorities” (p. 14). Unfortunately, Oommen mistakenly states that Hinduism is Nepal’s state religion, five years after Nepal was declared secular.

In her chapter, Bandita Sijapati uses the case study of Muslims in Nepal to discuss political integration and multiculturalism in democratic societies. She starts with a brief overview of Muslims in Nepal and neatly highlights the diversity within the community with reference to “their system of internal hierarchies, regional factors, gender relations as well as school of thoughts” (p. 17). Sijapati’s focus on multiculturalism centers on two principles: political integration and recognition of difference. She argues that the political integration of Muslims in Nepal requires “harmonizing the notion of individual citizenship with cultural and religious communities” (p. 25) and accommodation of diversity that addresses exclusion of Muslims in the political and economic sphere. She believes that the recognition of difference in the case of Muslims can be achieved through secularism and by granting special minority rights.

Bihari Krishna Shrestha is the only writer in the collection who unequivocally opposes federalization on any basis. For Shrestha, federalization will only perpetuate feudalism in the country. Interestingly, he paints the success of community forestry in Nepal as a case of genuine devolution of power that can offer a way to reformulate Nepali polity and society. However, Shrestha underplays the extent of exclusion faced by various communities in Nepal and reduces Nepal’s endemic problems to a mere lack of good governance.

Chaitanya Mishra has the most substantive paper in the collection, both empirically and theoretically. He engages with, and critiques, the Barthian idea of ethnic boundaries to emphasize the fluid and socially and historically constructed nature of ethnicity and argues that the very nature of ethnicity makes it an untenable basis for federalizing the country. Mishra, taking a structural historical and world systemic approach, explains that the current upsurge of ethnicity in Nepal is “principally not about ethnically platformed federalization.” Instead he states that the current struggle is “much more

about seeking a livelihood, about democratic and equal citizenship and, therefore, the expansion of opportunities and the promotion of inclusion” (p. 85).

David Gellner explores social science buzzwords on ethnicity such as fluidity, hybridity and performativity and their relevance in the Nepali constitution building process. Gellner also adheres to a constructivist perspective on ethnicity but reminds us that ethnicity is not easily changeable from the individual’s point of view. Furthermore, he observes that though identities are fluid and malleable, they cannot be dismissed as unimportant and politically irrelevant. Likewise, James F. Fisher identifies two types of identity construction, using plastic and concrete as his metaphors. Fisher endorses the first type and urges us to see the construction of ethnicity in relation to larger political, social, cultural economic and historical contexts, giving cases of Tharus, Magars, Thakalis, and Sherpas to validate his point.

Sara Shneiderman’s paper “conceptualizes the twin processes of state formation and ethnicity formation in Nepal in a dialectical fashion” (p. 224). Stressing that regarding ethnicity as a constructed category does not contribute anything meaningful to the debate, she urges that “we need to understand how, why, when and by whom ethnicity is produced, and what forms of consciousness emerge in the process of that production” (p. 224). Therefore, departing from Mishra’s point, she argues that ethnicity is both fluid and static as well as process and object at the same time, calling for recognition of ethnicity’s affective power. For Shneiderman, the content of ethnic consciousness is what needs to be understood while debating ethnicity.

David Holmberg stresses the limitations of modern notions of human rights to understand cultural and collective rights. Departing from individual-centered human rights discourse that views “culture” and “society” as reified categories independent of human beings, Holmberg believes that culture is an ongoing, dynamic process through which humans produce themselves. In the context of Nepal, cultural rights should be recognized as “the power for people to produce themselves differently and not just as generic Nepalese citizens” (p. 109).

Krishna Bhattachan, Mahendra Lawoti, Om Gurung and Balkrishna Mabuhang strongly support and recommend ethnicity as the basis for federalization in Nepal, invoking the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous people (UNDRIP) and ILO 169 to bolster their reasoning. In his paper Bhattachan traces the evolution of the idea and

practice of self-determination in the world and in Nepal and assesses recommendations made by the CA committee in relation to federalism and self-determination. Bhattachan believes that self-determination is “a natural, inalienable and indivisible right of indigenous peoples” (p. 140) and makes a strange claim that all indigenous peoples around the world share same views on self-determination. For Bhattachan, free, prior and informed consent and control “over ancestral land or territories, forest and other natural resources” (p. 146) make up the core elements of self-determination.

Lawoti evaluates two major models of federalism proposed in Nepal. The first one has 12–14 regions which Lawoti calls a poly-ethnic model, while the other one has 5–6 regions, called a mono-ethnic model by the writer and supposedly touted as “non-ethnic” by those favoring “bahunist logic.” (p. 174) He uses inclusion, conflict management, development, and democratization as four criteria to evaluate the two models and concludes that the poly-ethnic model shines as the more inclusive, conflict mitigating, pro-development/efficient, democratic, and accountable model of the two. The major weakness of the “non-ethnic,” 5–6 regions model is that it “does not recognize that Nepal is ethnically diverse beyond superficial platitudes and does not acknowledge the domination of the CHHE [Caste Hill Hindu Elite], an ethnic group” (p. 180). Similarly, Mabuhang argues that only ethnicity-based federalization is capable of ending hill Bahun monopoly of state structure. Om Gurung tracks the history of indigeneity, identity, and autonomy in Nepal and identifies the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) as the protagonist in Nepal’s *Ādivāsī Janajāti* movement. According to Gurung, “the search for their primordial cultural attributes led to the identity movement” (p. 196) and the search for cultural and political identity gave rise to the indigenous people’s movement in Nepal. Embarrassingly, Gurung erroneously states that King Gyanendra dismissed the elected government of Sher Bahadur Deuba before the parliament was dissolved.

Yam Bahadur Kisan and Ganesh BK offer Dalit perspectives on federalism in their papers, and both attempt to tackle the question of non-territorial federalism. Kisan finds the creation of an homogenous province in heterogeneous Nepali society completely unrealistic and stands in favor of special/compensatory rights for Dalits for their historical exclusion and discrimination, as well as sub-provinces or local federal units, and the creation of a National Dalit Assembly. However, he has an ambiguous

stance as his notion of a Dalit Assembly in many ways mirrors non-territorial federal ideas. On the other hand, BK unambiguously affirms non-territorial federalism as essential for Dalit liberation in Nepal along with legal protection against discrimination, pro-Dalit affirmative action, and proportional representation. He opines that non-territorial unit for Dalits can take a form of Dalit Assembly that will be equivalent to provincial assembly in terms of its rights and powers.

Editing is the weakest aspect of the book. It is replete with typographical errors and does not follow a uniform reference style. Moreover, several in-text citations are missing from listed references. It would also have been much better had the editors arranged the chapters according to their themes and contents rather than presenting them in an alphabetical order of the authors' first names. Further, the book offers *Janaajāti* and Dalit perspectives on federalism, but fails to incorporate any Madhesi contributors. However, the book is successful in acquainting readers with various approaches to ethnicity and their links to federalization. More importantly, the book is useful to get a handle on the highly charged public discourse that animated and perhaps decimated the first CA.

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