

# Symposium on Ethnicity and Federalisation

Kathmandu, Nepal, April 22-24, 2011



Central Department of Sociology and Anthropology,  
Tribhuvan University

This symposium seeks to explore and examine arguably the most contentious issue pending in the Constituent Assembly of Nepal, that of whether or not — or to what extent — ethnicity can provide the best possible platform for a federal structure for a new, in-the-making, state of Nepal. The Constituent Assembly of Nepal, it may be noted, was formed through general elections in April 2008 following a popular movement-led suspension of monarchy in April 2006. The first meeting of the Constituent Assembly formally declared Nepal as a republic on 28 May 2008. The principal political parties have agreed, and the *Interim Constitution of Nepal (2007)* declares, that Nepal shall

become a federal state. However, the political, economic and cultural — and intellectual — bases of federalisation remain to be agreed upon.

The search for appropriate bases for erecting a federal structure has also been the single most widely debated public issue. Books, magazines and newspapers, political party deliberations, civil society debates, international and donor policy discussion, etc. have all attracted a very high level of attention on ethnicity and federalisation. Ethnicity has been widely discussed, in a fashion similar to geographical features, local and regional economic articulation and exchange,

national integration, fiscal feasibility, multiculturalism and pluralism, etc. as platforms for restructuring of state along federal lines.

While the components of ethnically-based restructuring have not yet been fully articulated, discussions in the Constituent Assembly include those related to redrawing of provincial boundaries along ethnic lines, 'dual citizenship' of a province as well as the nation-state, and privileged citizenship, e.g. 'prior rights', in relation to access to natural resources and electoral representation. The Constituent Assembly is also considering

alternative and/or additional modes of ensuring equity and inclusion of members of ethnic groups, women, and regionally and otherwise marginalized groups. (Ethnicity, as used here, also includes Madhesi ethnicity.)

Yet, we believe that there has been less than adequate dialogue and discussion on this important issue among those who have investigated ethnicity the most and, therefore, can legitimately be expected to know it the best. The reference here, of course, is to anthropologists and sociologists who have investigated Nepali society and ethnicity for long, the preceding five decades in particular. We believe that Sociology, Anthropology and allied social sciences are uniquely equipped to handle this theme and provide intellectually rigorous and insightful perspectives. These disciplines can, we believe, contribute to enrich both public education and the dialogue and negotiation in the Constituent Assembly. This they can do by bringing in the weight of history and scope of theory to bear upon (as also to learn from) the specificity of the dialogue and negotiation on ethnic and other forms of federalisation in Nepal today. The historical, theoretical, regional and Nepal-specific insights that they can bring to the dialogue and negotiations can well prove to be of high and durable significance for crafting a future state of Nepal.

Further, we believe that this is a great opportunity for academics in Sociology, Anthropology and allied social sciences to implicate and weave together their rigor and insights on ethnicity, democracy, equity and inclusion and provide singularly important input to a national-level political-constitutional framework. In addition, exploration of such issues and processes may also provide

valuable input to sketch provincial and local level political, economic, legal, social service-related and administrative frameworks and policies. More generally, this symposium can also provide an opportunity to locate ethnicity and indigeneity within democracy, specific and changing nature of generation of livelihood, poverty and inequality, deruralisation, differentiation and hierarchisation, urbanisation, commodity and labor markets, migration and

diaspora, fragmentation of social life, individualisation, capitalism and many other structures and processes characteristic to the present world-historical context. This is also a place, of course, to review the validity and utility of essentialist, constructivist, instrumental, etc. nature of ethnic and other social identities. In essence, the value that anthropologists and sociologists could add to this intellectual and political issue could be immense and durable.

## Objectives

This symposium has two principal objectives. The *first* objective, as noted, is intellectual: To bring the knowledge and insight of world and international history and theory to bear upon the specificity of the current dialogue on ethnicity and federalisation in Nepal. In addition, we believe that this symposium also intends to provide academics an opportunity to realign accumulated knowledge and insight on world history and theory based on the empirics of the debate and negotiations in Nepal today. One output of this is going to be an enriched base of knowledge on the shifting interface between ethnicity on the one hand and other key feature characteristics to Nepal and the world today. This, in turn, may lead to better teaching, learning and frontier-level research within and outside of Nepal. Another outcome is going to be the publication of a book written by an eminent body of social scientists.

The *second* objective is more immediate, 'practical', strategic and, for Nepal's immediate future, potentially extremely significant. The symposium aims to give a more solid foundation to Nepal's federal structure than has been possible so far, by providing information, knowledge and insights on the interface between ethnicity and federalisation to members of the Constituent Assembly and leaders of various political parties. In addition, an initiative is under way to bring together interested academics and researchers in a joint forum with some members of the Constituent Assembly, those in the committee on state restructuring and distribution of power, the committee for determining the base of cultural and social solidarity, and the broader and more powerful constitutional committee in particular. A related but broader output is public education through direct participation in the symposium of public intellectuals and an extensive use of the media.

## Contributors

We are inviting approximately 10 well-known international and 14 Nepali sociologists, anthropologists and other social scientists as contributors to this symposium. Almost all of the contributors have published extensively on questions of ethnicity, polity, economy and culture of Nepal. In addition, contributors who are not able to be physically present in the symposium are also encouraged to send in their papers. We shall summarise their write-ups in the symposium for the benefit of the participants.

## Participants

The principal participants are members of the Constituent Assembly and its relevant committees. Leaders of political parties represented in the Assembly, leaders of ethnic and 'non-ethnic' political organisations, civil society leaders, the media as well as academics and public intellectuals are the other participants.

## Host Institution and Organising Committee

The Central Department of Sociology and Anthropology (CDSA) of the Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Kathmandu, is the host institution for the symposium. The organising committee is led by the department. Members of organizing committee are the following: Chaitanya Mishra, Professor of Sociology (Chair of Symposium); Ganesh Man Gurung, Professor of Sociology and Chairperson of the Screening Committee of Social Inclusion Research Fund; Manju Thapa Tuladhar, Lead Adviser of Social Inclusion Research Fund; Ram Bahadur Chhetri, Professor of Anthropology; Suvash Darnal, Managing Director of Samata Foundation; Om Gurung, Professor of Anthropology, Head of CDSA; and Yogendra Yadava, Professor of Linguistics. The Secretary of the organizing committee is Mr. Dinesh Prasain, Lecturer at CDSA.

### Advisory Committee and Financial Sponsors

An advisory committee, comprised of experts from collaborating and funding partners, technically assists the organising committee. SIRF/SNV Nepal (funded by the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Nepal) is the main funding partner coordinating the advisory committee and other co-sponsors include Action Aid Nepal, DanidaHUGOU and SUPPORT Nepal (funded by Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs).

### Mode of Presentation and Dissemination

The symposium is expected to run two parallel sessions over a three-day period. An exclusive meeting with members of the Constituent Assembly will be held in the morning of 25<sup>th</sup> April. Interested contributors may utilise this events to meet and discuss relevant issues with them. This may give the contributors an opportunity both to put forth their own ideas and to learn about the contents as well as the crafting process of the constitution to date.

As a *symposium* centered on a key public issue, it seeks to provide space for presentation not only to the designated contributors but also to a few representatives from the major political parties. It is expected that at least some of the contributors invited are likely to engage themselves in one-to-one interaction with journalists. The secretariat facilitates this request on an individual basis.

Following the symposium, and because one of the principal objectives of the symposium is to provide input to the Constituent Assembly, a summary of each of the presentations will be prepared in the Nepali language and distributed to the members of the Constituent Assembly and other stakeholders within two weeks. It is expected that the presentations will be revised soon after the symposium and a print-ready copy will be available by the middle of 2012.

## Thematic structuring of the symposium and illustrative themes

It is hoped that authors implicate, in their papers, both encompassing conceptualisations of ethnicity, polity, economy, culture and so forth *and* the specific character of such institutions and processes in Nepal today. The following is an illustrative list which may, among others, help us to structure the symposium.

### *A. Ethnicity and indigeneity at large*

This theme draws attention to sub-themes such as: Ethnicity across history and culture; essentialist, constructivist, instrumentalist, etc. debates in ethnicity and indigeneity; ethnicity, subordination and inequality; ethnicity, multiculturalism and pluralism; causes and consequences of ethnic conflict; ethnicity, devolution of power and federalisation; and history, memory and ethnicity.

### *B. Ethnicity, politics and state*

This theme may comprise the following sub-themes: Ethnicity, federalisation and the modern state; ethnicity, indigeneity and nationalism; ethnicity and political conflict; rise and wane of ethnic movements; democracy, ethnicity and the pluralist agenda; and ethnic politics, the right and the left.

### *C. Ethnicity and economy*

This theme comprises, among others, the following: Capitalism, ethnicity and indigeneity; capitalism and unitary and federal statehood; economic inequality and ethnicity; changing modes of livelihood generation, identity and ethnicity; urbanisation, 'uprooting' and

ethnicity; ethnicity and class politics; diaspora and ethnicity; regional and national economic articulation and ethnic and indigenous rights.

### *D. Comparative historical and international experience*

This theme may comprise the following sub-themes: Ethnicity and federalisation; ethnic conflict and conflict transformation; decentralisation, devolution and ethnicity; ethnicity, privileged citizenship, democracy and the modern state; political party, ethnicity and ethnic movement; ethnicity and inclusionary policies.

### *E. Ethnicity, cross-sectionalities and federalisation*

This theme may include sub-themes such as: Ethnicity, gender and federalisation; Dalits and federalisation; marginalised regions, resources and federalisation; federalisation and retrenchment of old elite; federalisation and minority rights.

### *F. Nepal, ethnicity, federalisation*

This theme, which may provide key empirical grounding to many of the papers, may comprise the following sub-themes: The 'casteist' state and society and the rise of ethnic movement; ethnic mapping of Nepal; evolution of 'ethnic restructuring' of state; 'ethnic-plus' federalisation; distribution of resources and capabilities across and within ethnic and other groups; culture, language and federalisation; ethnicity, privileged citizenship and democratic state; imagining the future of ethnic polity, economy and culture; ethnicity and strategies of inclusion; ethnic federalisation and India and China; 'high-caste' groups and the ethnic upsurge; the 'donor community'; ethnicity, equity and the state; and equity and inclusion sans ethnic federalisation and privileged citizenship.

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