

A New Nepali Republic: An Opportunity of Multicultural Identities

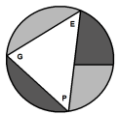
Pawan Kumar Sen

Introduction: Demand of an Inclusive Democracy

A demand of an inclusive democracy emerged after 1951 when the Nepali polity opened up with the abolition of the oligarchic *Rana* regime.¹ But, it was only after the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990 that political leaders and activists from historically excluded groups such as *Janajati* (indigenous people), *Dalit* (so-called untouchable people) and *Madhesi* (plain people)² groups began to demand it with a new intensity. They asserted full religious, cultural and linguistic rights (collectively called as 'identity rights') in a more organised manner.

An umbrella organisation of indigenous associations called the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) was established in July 1990 and brought together about twenty of the ethnic and cultural associations. They demanded the state to recognise their unique culture, religion and language. Various groups and associations contested the Hindu identity of the Nepali state when the Constitution was being formulated between May and October 1990.

There were demonstrations by Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim associations, and ethnic organisations representing the predominantly non-Hindu hill indigenous groups, all of them demanding Nepal to be

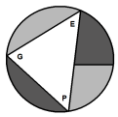


declared a secular state. This stance was supported by leftist, liberal, and republican elements (Hutt 1993: 37; Pfaff-Czarnecka 1997: 444; Sharma 1997: 488). The grievances of the hill indigenous groups and other non-Hindu groups against the Hindu state were intertwined with their perception of the state having privileged the culture and religion of the Hindu high-caste hill group. The NEFIN also demanded that Nepal be transformed from a unitary state into a federal state.

Unitary versus Inclusive Conceptions of Nepal

Despite these movements and demands, the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal of 1990, promulgated under the multiparty democracy (after the abolition of the autocratic *Panchayat* regime), declared Nepal a 'Unitary Hindu and Constitutional Monarchical Kingdom'. Even though the 1990 Constitution recognised Nepal as a multi-ethnic and multilingual nation, it retained the Hindu identity of the state, and did not recognise languages other than Nepali (previously known as the *Gorkhali* language, *Khas kura* or *Parbate kura*)³ as the official language.

Thus, the hegemony of the religion and language of the Hindu high-caste hill group continued even under the 1990 Constitution. So, it could not promote the spirit of an inclusive democracy, and recognise the diversity and plurality of Nepali society. This Constitution failed to incorporate the aspirations of the indigenous and other marginalised groups. Their hope of recognition of the plurality of Nepali society remained unfulfilled. Thus, the identity movements after the April 1990



mass movement, too, could not deliver significant reforms in the structure of the Nepali state. However, an open atmosphere (i.e. freedom of expression and other rights) guaranteed by the 1990 Constitution provided ample opportunities for identity-based movements within the established political structure.

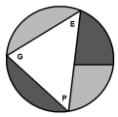
These movements clearly demanded a more inclusive policy that could recognise the identity and basic rights of marginalised groups. This situation compelled the state to recognise cultures, religions and languages of all marginalised groups. It allowed a space for the assertion of voices of the excluded, under-privileged and marginalised groups.

Non-Hindu indigenous groups and other religious minorities continued to demand that Nepal should become a secular state instead of a Hindu state. The United Nations' 1994 declaration of the "International Decade of the World's Indigenous People" for the period 1995-2005 also fuelled the debate on cultural recognition and minority rights in Nepal.

These groups demanded a multi-linguistic policy with the right to use local languages at the local administration instead of only Nepali. The demands for religious and linguistic rights were tied up with the demand for federalism. Indigenous and *Madhesi* groups had envisaged that they would achieve these rights if the demand for federalism were fulfilled (Sen 2013: 201; Sen 2018: 55).

Movements of Political Parties

The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (CPN (Maoist)) amplified the



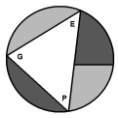
identity issue as it defied the cultural, religious and linguistic monopoly of the Hindu high-caste hill group since February 1996 (when it formally started its armed conflict against the Nepali state). Along with other rights, it demanded equal religious rights for indigenous and non-Hindu groups, and called for an ending of the state's alignment with Hinduism and the Hindu monarchy. The movement also raised its voice in favour of equal linguistic rights for non-Nepali speaking indigenous and *Madhesi* groups.

The Maoist movement further raised the issue of ethnic autonomy. It has rightly been said that the dominance of the Hindu high-caste hill group across ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic lines, and in terms of the distribution of power and resources, were regarded as salient causes and grievances of the Maoist insurgency (Baral 2006: 197-198; Mishra 2007: 109).

Thus, the two movements—one organised by indigenous people's associations, under the leadership of NEFIN, adopting peaceful means of protest and another organised by the CPN (Maoist) adopting armed insurgency against the state—had a cumulative effect on the formation of ethnicity- and regional-based identity.

Scholars of Nepali politics agree that the strongest opposition to the cultural domination of the Hindu high-caste hill group came from the Maoist and the *Janajati* movements (Khanal 2006: 169-171; Toffin 2006: 233). This was so because it was one of the areas where the agendas of the indigenous people and of the CPN (Maoist) converged.

So, these movements made significant contributions to forcing the

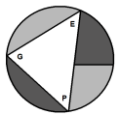


Nepali state to accept multiculturalism and inclusive democracy. The movements had brought the issue of various rights, including the religious and linguistic rights, to the forefront. They demanded secularism with equal status of all religions and multilingualism with a right of using local languages at the local government level instead of only Nepali (see further Sen 2013; Sen 2018).

The Seven-Party Alliance—an alliance formed by the seven agitating parliamentary political parties formed on May 2005 to protest against the King's take-over of February 2005—called a nationwide mass protest movement and march on 6 April 2006 against the autocratic monarchy to which the Maoists extended their support. Major political parties like the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist) (CPN (UML); *Eikrit Marxbadi Leninbadi* (EML)) already had a common plan with the CPN (Maoist) to first sideline the King, then abolish the monarchy and declare the country a republic after the successful end of the movement (Toffin 2006: 220-221).

The King reinstated the House of Representatives because of the mass protest and the major political parties formed a government. Beside this, the major political parties conceptualised new structures of the state: federalism, secularism and multi-lingualism. They discarded the single-cultural paradigm and stepped forward for the multi-cultural paradigm instead. They wanted equal space in the state's power structure and equal share in the state's resources for all Nepalis who have different sub-national identities.

However, an opinion poll conducted in 2007 showed that a majority of



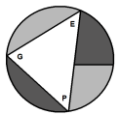
the Nepali political elites (then parliamentarians) first liked to associate them with the overarching national identity, not with sub-national identities such as ethnic, regional, religious and linguistic identities etcetera. This elites poll showed that an overwhelming majority of them (87 percent) first liked to identify themselves as Nepali only (International IDEA 2008: 77).

Among the general public too, public opinion polls taken between 2008 and 2011 revealed that a vast majority liked to identify them as Nepali only, not with any sub-national identity (The Asia Foundation 2011: 42). A series of recent public polls also reveal that more people in the general public think that relations between different castes, ethnicities and religions are improving between 2017 and 2020 (The Asia Foundation 2020: 74). This demonstrates that the rise of the ethnicity- and regional-based identities does not harm the national identity overall, and thus does not necessarily or even likely drive the country to disintegration.

Conclusion: The Major Transformation Appears to Succeed

The first convening of the elected Constituent Assembly held in May 2008 formally declared the country a federal democratic republic state. Leaders of *Janajati* and *Madhesi* protest movements regarded the declaration of the country as a federal democratic republic as being the first and primary step toward paving a way for institutionalising a new Nepali national identity based on multiculturalism.

In September 2015, an overwhelming majority of the elected Constituent Assembly members (almost 91 percent) endorsed the new

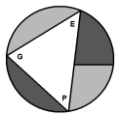


Constitution. The new Constitution defines the 'State of Nepal' in its Article 4(1) as "an independent, indivisible, sovereign, secular, inclusive democratic, socialism-oriented federal democratic republican state" (Constituent Assembly Secretariat 2015). The new Constitution has recognised and assimilated the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious and (other) multi-cultural characters of the Nepali state. It has recognised the voices of the entire spectrum of the people, not of only a majority, advantaged and dominant (Sen 2016: 57).

Promulgation of the new Constitution is the most important incidence toward institutionalising a new Nepali identity based on inclusion, pluralism, and multiculturalism (see further Sen 2015; Sen 2018). In addition to it, a mixed electoral system with a proportional system has been adopted to enhance the political representation of the historically excluded communities (including women).

This constitutional provision has already begun to yield good results. In the elected House of Representatives in 2017 (the latest election in the country), the proportion of representatives belonging to hill Dalits became 7 percent which had been non-existent in the elections of 1999. The proportions of those from *Madhesi* groups and hill indigenous groups had been 20 percent and 21 percent respectively in 1999, which increased to 27 percent and 24 percent respectively in 2017. It indicates that the representation of the communities that were excluded in the past in the elected bodies has remarkably increased.

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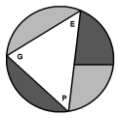
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Endnotes

1. The *Rana* regime was an oligarchic system always headed by a premier belonging to a particular family group called Rana. Nepal was ruled under this regime for 104 years (from September 1846 to February 1951). The regime had maintained total isolation from the rest of the world.
2. *Madhes* is the plain land situated in the southern part of Nepal spread from East to West, which is also commonly known as *Tarai*. People originally living there are known as *Madhesi* whose languages and cultures are similar to those of Northern India.
3. *Gorkhali* language, *Khas kura* or *Parbate kura* was renamed 'Nepali language' only in 1933 as a part of the construction of homogeneous national identity (Gellner 1997: 5). It is an offshoot of Sanskrit—an ancient language of the Indo-European family. It is the mother tongue of the (Hindu) high-caste hill group and hill Dalits.

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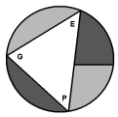
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