

Book Review

Germination of Ethnic Politics in Nepal

The Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal: Democracy in the Margins

Susan I. Hangen, 2010

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Central Concern of the Book

The book is a product of extensive ethnographic fieldwork of doctoral dissertation in eastern Nepal concentrating more in a particular village of Ilam district. The central concern of the book is to outline the rise of ethnic politics and the democratisation process in Nepal since 1990. Further, it sheds light on how the politics in the margins in terms of marginalised and excluded indigenous peoples, peripheral location and ideological discourse took place and how people in the margins interpreted and engaged with the democratic political system. It provides a clear picture of strategies and activities of more radical ethnic political party Mongol National Organization (MNO) and other social organizations like Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN), an umbrella organization of 59 ethnic groups. The book has also pointed out the key underlying causes of not getting prominence by such ethnic parties in mainstreaming political sphere.

The book gives sense of intermingling nature of social and political movements of ethnic social organisations and political parties. It tries to highlight the cultural politics that was adopted by the ethnic party MNO with a view to gain the support of sentiment from the people to grasp the political power. However, it has not brought the political ideologies of indigeneism of ethnic political parties like MNO in its fullest form. It has analysed the manifestation of democracy in rural periphery from the cultural perspective. However, the political shift in Nepal was a form of political modernisation that has almost been untouched from this perspective. The author has concentrated more on static vision (Toffin, 2009) of cultural and religious revitalisation of ethnic groups through the social

and political movements. She has not touched the issues of identity movements and culture sensitivity as today's notion of post-modernism.

The author has analysed and interpreted these phenomena mostly from the narratives of ethnic party leaders, cadres, supporters, and activists. She did participant observation and got sense of realities of party's vivid activities and strategies. But, the author could not bring much the perspectives of other non-ethnic groups about how they perceived and experienced such radical movement against high caste Hindus or forms of Hindu dominance. Such a negative case could add value for understanding the movements. On the other hand, this type of ethnic movement could be a means of dismantling the society and weakening social cohesion and harmony. The author has left lapses on such genuine issues even not showing the possibilities and prospects of such social disorder. Let me judge the Chapter-wise concerns of the author in the following section.

Chapter Highlights

The introductory part of the book presents a brief scenario of political revolt of 'Second People's Movement-2006' accompanying with the movement of indigenous nationalities and the Maoists. But, I feel the lack of rigorous discussion of the root causes of such time and again political movement from the ethnic perspective. It could be more relevant to set the scene in such an entry point of the book to discuss the authoritarianism, social inclusion/exclusion, economic disparities, racial and ethnic discrimination, Hinduism, cultural and social suppression and oppression and so on as the key causes of people's movement. Further, the author has furnished the background of MNO and has discussed a bit of her ethnographic and theoretical orientations while studying MNO. She has attempted to show her study's significance and relevance in terms of three concepts of margins, namely, marginal ethnic groups, peripheral or rural areas against centrally controlled politics, and emergence of political ideologies.

In Chapter I, the author has provided the very brief review of Nepal's authoritarian political history together with the movement of ethnic groups. In addition, she has viewed the persistence of inequalities between ethnic and high caste Hindus in terms of state benefits of occupying overwhelming majorities of positions of government mechanisms and political parties. She has argued that the state was responsible for labelling and formation of ethnic identity treating them as a single group such as Rai. But, she could not raise the critical issue of process of homogenising diversified ethnic groups under the single ethnic identity creation ('Adivasi Janajati' or 'Mongols') and hierarchies in terms of achieving benefits within the ethnic groups.

Further, the Chapter outlines the rise of the indigenous nationalities movement after 1990 and its major goals of achieving equality and identity. It compares the main types of ethnic organisations and ethnic parties. The author has argued that the social movements of social organisations were oriented more with political agendas in line with ethnic parties.

For me, it could be far better if the author could have raised the distinguishing goals and roles of such social and political organisations and their movements visualising through theoretical and policy perspectives. Further, she has pointed out the positioning of ethnic parties like the MNO as marginal place within the movement and their participation in election in the 1990s. But, she has argued that the construction of ethnic identity ‘Adivasi Janajati’ or ‘Mongols’ for the diverse group was one of the most significant outcomes of the movement.

In Chapter II, the author has briefly described sporadic and unorganised historical movement of ethnic groups. She has brought the movements of Limbu against their ancestral land tenure and Tamangs against unfair practices of capturing lands by high caste Brahmins around Kathmandu valley and Newars’ linguistic movements as noticeable resistance of ethnic groups during the era. But, she has left many lapses of information of important historical movements of ethnic groups such as the revolt of Lakhan Thapa and Supati Gurung against Rana regime. However, she has vividly brought the silent or muted resistance of ethnic groups against the dominance or suppression or oppression or exploitation of high caste Hindu rulers in the Panchayat era.

The author has discussed the central concern of post 1990 movement to ensure the political rights of ethnic groups in a well manner. Being specific, she has highlighted the major demands made by the ethnic social organizations and their parties as promoting more inclusive, representative, and responsive state, a new constitution, federal system to ensure ethnic autonomy with right to self-determination, reservation, secular state, and elimination of monarchy. On the other side, the author has argued that the movement was against the continuation of assimilatory policy of ‘One Language and One Culture’ Hindu. Therefore, the ethnic movements equally focused on preservation of their own ancestral culture, language, and religion. For me, this was a form of resistance against homogenisation through Hindunisation. The writer could not go beyond the Hindu acculturation process. The most powerful force of globalisation, which has not left the ethnic groups as well as high caste Hindus, has homogenised or acculturated in global culture could be another aspect of discussion.

In addition, in this Chapter, the writer has tried to dig out the key causes of low performance of ethnic parties. She has argued that those parties continuously lose the support of people in elections because of lack of viability, lack of resources, restrictions to registration, lack of fund, lack of experience of party cadres, and lack of networks. Further, she has pointed out the party’s informal and centralised organisational structure which left village activists with little ability to initiate party activities and the variation roles that people could hold in the party, supporter activists or leaders. She has extracted the key strategies of MNO such as traveling, district assembly and mass-meetings to building support for the party.

Further, in this Chapter, the writer discusses the MNO's discourse of establishing racial identity, 'Mongol', with biological markers including other markers such as culture, language, and religion. She has beautifully presented the critical argument of MNO that the term 'Adivasi Janajati' cannot give the identity of ethnic groups as it means the people with no land or nomadic or gypsies. She has presented the term 'Adivasi Janajati' or Indigenous Nationalities as the imported term from the west to align the world indigenous movement. The argument does not convince me fully. 'Adivasi Janajati' or Indigenous Nationalities is obviously a newly constructed identity of ethnic groups in Nepal. For me, identity keeps shifting over time (Rai, 2012). The ethnic groups have been dispersed all over the country as nomads and some of them are residing in their ancestral lands since the time immemorial. In this sense, for me, the term 'Adivasi Janajati' or Indigenous Nationalities represents the ethnic groups of Nepal.

In Chapter III, the author has highlighted the possibilities and limitations of political actions in her study site in the 1990s by examining the operation of the MNO. She has discussed the party mobilisation where the party gained control of the local government in local election. The author has carefully judged that the elected officials from the MNO in the village government and found that they operated the village government much like the representatives from other parties did. She has argued that this low performance of MNO elected officials was caused because the village government did not control resources or set local policies through which they could advance radical political ideas.

In continuation of Chapter III, in Chapter IV, the writer has coherently discussed underlying causes of low performance of MNO in local administration. In doing so, she has pointed out the entrance of Panchayat leaders in MNO due to insecurity from communists with prominent ideologies and the people of unsatisfied groups due to their negative interactions with the high caste Hindus. Further, she has indicated that the village chairman's ties with district officials were weakened due to critical ideological stance towards central state policies and village did not receive funds of project channelled through district. This was an example of bias against critical political ideologies.

In Chapter V, the author has emphasised MNO's politics of culture. The party gave an effort to constructing a unified Mongol identity through cultural productions. The author has analysed the production of calendar which was an alternative to the national Vikram Sambat calendar. She has further attempted to present the reinterpretation of celebrating Tihar that was partly owned by MNO supporters. The MNO songs defined Mongols as brave, masculine warriors who should fight for their rights in their own country and an MNO cassette celebrated the diversity of Mongols. Through these cultural productions, the MNO challenged the dominant construction of the Nepali nation.

At this point, the author has failed to discuss nationalism and layers of nations within the ethnic groups. She has presented Nepali as an equated notion with Hindus. Challenging the dominant construction of Nepali nation is against the ethnic groups. Nation does not

exist within supra national level only rather it exists in the macro level too. Being Nepali does not mean to be Hindus. Therefore, the author has missed to generate the realities on how the radical ethnic politicians and activists perceive this issue. Do ethnic groups not have Nepaliness? Were they only 'Mongols' or 'Adivasi Janajati'? I observed the gaps of seeking such ethnic constructions in this Chapter.

In Chapter VI, the author has attempted to explore the MNO's involvement in cultural transformations at the village. She has presented the adoption of Buddhism by Gurungs in her study village and restriction by local state authorities to establish a Gumba or Buddhist temple insisting that they must register it. This was the manifestation of the policy of one religion Hindu or Hindu state or an example of the Hindu bias of the state. Likewise, the author has presented the campaign of MNO activists for everyone to boycott Dashain. These activities were against the process of homogenising the diverse ethnic groups in the name of religion eradicating their ancestral identities. The author has argued that the MNO aligned this case with its goals of encouraging all Mongols to abandon Hinduism, defining Mongols as not Hindus. She simply has discussed what were out there in the sense of resistance against state dominance and religion as a means of popularising the ideology of the MNO. However, she could not bring the intrinsic relations of politics and religion theoretically.

In conclusion, the author has well examined the emergence of more ethnic political parties and hence increased politicisation of ethnic movements. She has clearly analysed the participation of these political parties including the MNO in the 2008 Constituent Assembly election. Moreover, she has clearly shown the dominance of Maoists' ideologies in the latest era of mainstreaming political movement. She has argued that the Maoists' political ideologies of secularism and federalism based on ethnicity with right to self-determination supported the ideals of MNO that it started to advocate prior to the Maoists People's war. The author has pointed out this ideological dominance as the key reason of not performing better in the election of the Constitution Assembly. For me, this is a clear example of weaker ideological stand point of MNO by discarding the existence of others.

Finally, the author has made a descriptive analysis of the rebirth of MNO after the 'Second People's Movement 2006' with the emergence of its Kathmandu based 'sister organization' called the Mulbasi Mongol Youth Assembly (MMYA). She has presented the scenario of how MMYA mobilised students who were recently migrated to the city. She has recapitulated the book with the critical argument of disjunctive democracy (lapses in theory and practice) that had happened in rural areas like Ilam and argued that this disjunctive democracy in the margins may create the possibilities of violence in ethnic groups.

Final Commentary

The book has presented the narrative discussion of the political phenomena of ethnic groups in a coherent manner. The author has attempted to be reader friendly in terms of

gender sensitive language use and in the use of other political terminologies. I observed some lacking of appropriate theoretical generalisation which I have raised in the above critical discussion. The author could bring the issues of indigeneity, indigenism, and social identity theories in visualising their cultural practices and identity construction.

Moreover, the author has left the rooms of discussing international context of ethnic movements such as the movement of Latin America which could be significant to see its relevance in the context of Nepal. It could be seen the relevance of secessionist or separatists movements of Southeast Asian countries with the movement of ethnic groups of Nepal but I found this part missing in the book. Likewise, she became unable to discuss the global interventions and international human rights frameworks in relation to indigenous peoples as these discourses from the west have become the contributing factorsto empowering the disempowered ethnic groups to advocate their rights.

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