

Appraising 'Indigeneity': Review of Gérard Toffin's *The Janajati/Adivasi Movement in Nepal: Myths and Realities of Indigeneity*

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Abstract- The following review attempts to contextualize French ethnologist Gérard Toffin's ethnographic analyses of indigeneity discourse in contemporary Nepal within the broader body of work that has emerged from different ethnographic standpoints vis-à-vis the Janajati/Adivasi movement. The article, published in 2009, was chosen for its novelty: its focus on discourse analysis in the chosen sociocultural context, while potentially exposing itself to criticism for debunking certain 'myths' associated with matters of autochthony and ethnic and social grouping. Additionally, the essay evaluates the merits of Toffin's key arguments to address some of the chosen article's primary research questions.

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, social movements have emerged as an essential force in Nepal's sociopolitical landscape, driven by coordinated actions of multiple social groups. These movements have openly contested Nepal's dominant political power structure, which has been dominated by men from a segment of the hill Bahun and Chhetri (or "high caste") groups, and have been led by Women, Dalits (the "low caste"), Madhesis (from the southern Tarai plains), and Adivasi Janajati (Indigenous peoples) communities, respectively, and collectively.

The First People's Movement of 1990 is credited with bringing about the reinstatement of democracy in Nepal and opening space for organized collective action. When in power, the autocratic monarchy imposed severe restrictions on and suppressed any signs of dissent. However, since 1990, the scope for mobilization strategies against multifaceted inequalities and the resultant long-standing grievances in the country has broadened. Notably, mainstream political parties assumed that a social equilibrium would 'naturally' result from

modernization and viewed issues of language, gender, caste, and ethnic equality as relatively unimportant. Following the Second People's Movement of 2006, the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) was signed between the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (CPN-M) and the Seven-Party Alliance (SPA), along with the decision to draft an Interim Constitution the following year.

In both the CPA and the Interim Constitution, mobilization by excluded socioeconomic groups played a crucial role in incorporating topics relevant to their interests, such as proportional inclusion in state structures. Social and economic inequality, linguistic and cultural rights, secularism, caste- and ethnicity-based discrimination, and the acceptance of diversity and identity were among the basic concerns raised by social movements in the 1990s, which were essential to changing Nepal's public discourse and advancing democracy. The 1990 Constitution's acknowledgment of Nepal as a multilingual and multiethnic nation was the first victory of social mobilization. However, the practical manifestation of their primary demands has remained unsatisfactory. Although the various disadvantaged groups have a shared history of marginalization, their individual experiences and interactions with the state have resulted in different paths of resistance.

Various scholars have conducted ethnographic, anthropological, and historical studies of the Janajati Movement in Nepal. Among anthropologists, Bimal K. Matsumoto and Dor Bahadur Bista have extensively studied the impact of the Janajati Movement on Indigenous communities and interactions between ethnic identity, development, and social structures in Nepal, respectively. While Sara Shneiderman's research has centered on themes of transnational indigeneity and citizenship in the Himalayan region, Jaya Chandra's research has focused on the social organization of Janajati

communities. Ram Bahadur Pandey has also worked on the sociocultural dynamics of the Janajati Movement. Mukta S Tamang has examined indigeneity, identity politics, and the role of external actors in shaping the Janajati movement, often altering its grassroots nature. Ethnographic studies have largely focused on the internal dynamics and social organization of janajati groups or the context of emergence, motivations, and the broad political and cultural impact of the Janajati Movement. Gérard Toffin's work has chosen to question the fundamental assumptions of identity, self-consciousness, and claims of indigeneity within the janajati communities of Nepal. The text aims to critique essentialist narratives that have aimed to mobilize communities within the Janajati Movement and to shed light on the fluidity of cultures, tribes, and societies. Overlaps in the interactions and practices of these two seemingly distinct communities are also examined.

II. THEMES AND KEY ARGUMENTS

Distinctions between castes and tribes

Adivasi Janajati, or 'Indigenous nationalities,' are referred to as ethnic groups in Nepal, constituting around 37 percent of the country's population.

Throughout the history of state-building, janajati mobilization can be categorized into four stages of resistance. The anti-state movements by various janajati groups transpired with the expansion of the Gorkha Empire from the mid-18th century, for the land belonging to native communities began to be used as grants to 'reward' and support its political leaders and soldiers. The second stage, which existed between the Rana period and the early 1950s, was characterized by intermittent janajati uprisings, which were brutally suppressed by the oppressive regime.

Ethnic communities have been regarded as possessing a "strong sense of distinctiveness," supported by the argument that the janajatis view themselves as groups that do not constitute the 'Hindu varna system' and instead emphasize the historical and present-day 'total separation' of caste (jati) and tribe (jana). Tribal identity has therefore been given a degree of absolute separateness and definitiveness.

In this regard, Toffin elaborates on the strong belief in a "golden age," which corresponded to an egalitarian primitive state of ethnic tribes before contact with the Parbatiya caste-organized people.

Resulting misconceptions portray the janajatis of the 18th and 19th centuries as innocent mountain inhabitants, quickly exploited by eager, crafty lowlanders. As an example, he quotes the Tamangs, Paharis, and Ghales, who believe that the Bahun-Chetri elite castes have exploited them on multiple occasions. Many Nepalese hold similar beliefs and stereotypes about caste and tribal traits, and several academics and intellectuals, including Dor Bhadr Bist in his 1991 book *Fatalism and Development*, have incorrectly internalized and perpetuated these 'facts' of an unchanging, rigid dichotomy.

Gérard Toffin highlights the scope for tracing the historical interconnectedness between different janajati tribes and Hindu castes through similarities in religious, cultural, matrimonial, and social practices across the country. He opined that the boundary between castes and tribes is blurred by the continuities in economic, religious, military, and marital relations. However, the existence of certain distinctions between the two broad societies is reiterated by refuting the perception of tribal groups as 'backward' Hindus, or 'disconnected,' 'reactionary,' and/or 'secondary' elements of the Hindu world. Furthermore, Toffin believes that identifying the borders between two or more janajati clans can often be challenging. He argues that it is impossible to preserve the equivalence between one ethnic group and one particular culture as 'unique,' especially through the sanction of 'authentic' primitiveness.

Contextualizing the Janajati Movement

While historicizing the ethnic diversity within the regions that broadly constitute Nepal at present, Toffin underscores the importance of the country's unification in the 18th century and the subsequent migration of Hindu Parbatiya people from the west to the east in shaping unequal tribe-caste relations. The incorporation of varied tribal communities and the usurpation of their lands marked, according to him, the consistent devaluation of the dignity and sociocultural status of these communities. Such a process was exacerbated by the state-sponsored 'Nepalization' during the 19th and 20th centuries, which established the hegemony of one pantheon of religious beliefs over other ways of organizing faith. Although ethnic groups were classified as castes (jati) of 'pure status,' they were made to occupy a low rank within the hierarchical caste and social systems.

Toffin further comments on the systematic exclusion of ethnic communities from positions of administration, socioeconomic privilege, and political power in the contemporary period and the continuation of their treatment as 'second-class' citizens. He argues that the emergence of the Janajati Movement in the 1980s can be explained by the intensified experience of subordination, inequality, injustice, and discrimination endured by the ethnic tribes, followed by Nepal's political unification in the 19th century. In the second half of the 20th century, during the autocratic Shah monarchy, a third period of opposition emerged. In addition to stifling dissent, King Mahendra's implementation of the Panchayat system in 1960 promoted homogenization in the name of "national unity." Like other communities, janajatis were supposed to become "Nepali" by assimilating into the political and social mainstream and internalizing the dominant groups' language, culture, religion, and ethos.

Around 150-250 listed janajati organisations and their leaders have shaped the general ethnicisation of politics and the formation of political and personal consciousness among janajatis in Nepal. This constitutes the fourth stage of janajati opposition. The formation and political activities of the Nepal Federation of Nationalities (NEFEN) or the Nepal Janajati Mahasang, which later became the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) or Nepal Janajati Adivasi Mahasang, have been referenced by Toffin, along with their success at diverse mobilization and raising inclusive affirmative action demands. A critique of the extent of internal representation within the Mahasang has also been discussed.

Discourse on Indigeneity, Autochthony, and Ideologies within the Janajati Movement

Toffin discusses the history of the term 'Indigenous,' which began to be institutionalized in the discourse of the Janajati Movement around 2003, and the politics of its usage. The discussion of the autochthony paradigm is substantiated by reference to the Tharu origin myth, which may have led them to adopt Theravada Buddhism in light of *bahunvad* (Brahmanocracy) and hierarchical discrimination in Hinduism. They claim to be related to the first descendants of the Buddha, who they believe was born in the Nepalese Tarai, where they have long resided. Similarly, claims to

indigeneity made by the Newar peasants within the Kathmandu Valley, referring to themselves as adivasis and identifying themselves vis-à-vis regional Indigenous deities, Buddhism, and multi-caste processions, are seen as a valid justification for exerting control over the soil and territory they presently inhabit. For many janajati communities, claims to indigeneity entail the irrefutable right to occupy and possess territory and resources. Gérard Toffin regards the potential for such a development to undermine democratic freedom and mobility.

He further suggests that the core ideology of the Janajati Movement, driven by anti-Hinduism and anti-Brahminism, is essentialist and exclusive, as its leaders tend to view boundaries between different ethnic and caste groups as rigid and the resulting identities as static, with no scope for future change. Toffin believes such an argument renders cultures and societies changeless, strictly delineated, and homogeneous units by negating the region's history of cultural fluidity, and is based on orthodox anthropological conceptions of identity and territory. Additionally, the traditional discourse on ethnicity pays less attention to vertical relationships than to conventional horizontal ones within and amongst janajati communities.

Expressing his take on the conception of indigeneity in Nepal, Toffin takes the bold stand of disagreeing with the existence of Indigenous people in the country. In contrast, he is willing to accommodate the argument only if most Nepalese people (including the Bahuns and Chetris) are viewed as Indigenous, for most, if not all, Nepali ethnic groups are settlers from 'abroad' in the 'melting pot' that is the Nepal Valley. Hence, accounts and histories of settlement and origin are considered complex and ambiguous, for claims to Indigenous status and territory can be evaluated only from the reference point of the beginning of 'ethnic' encounters with the Parbatiya Hindu castes in the 18th century.

Federalism v/s Autochthony?

Based on the above-mentioned conventional arguments revolving around ethnicity, origins, and indigeneity, there have been several demands within the Janajati Movement to implement a federal delineation of the country and to mark separate geographical regions ('ethnic enclaves') where diverse ethnocultural and linguistic communities are concentrated at present. Toffin comments on the superficiality and lack of nuance in such demands, for neither do they elaborate on proposed power-

sharing arrangements nor on the criteria for indigeneity and the basis for land allocation in light of contemporary heterogeneity within Nepal.

Considering the interconnectedness and growing instances of social mobility within castes and tribes, the implementation of mono-ethnic enclaves becomes further complicated. It could lead to large-scale population displacement and impose a financial and economic burden on the various stakeholders involved. Divisions of this kind could also threaten national integrity through claims to relative suitability for autonomous existence. Along with the origin myths of certain ethnic societies, such demands have been regarded as antithetical to modern democratic values.

Globalization and indigeneity

Gérard Toffin also evaluates the rising ethnicization of Nepalese politics against the impact of globalization, modernization, and exposure to global politics on the country's various ethnic groups. He elaborates on several janajati activists joining or being inspired by the work undertaken across international networks, such as the Asian Indigenous People's Pact and the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. The functioning of international organizations and frameworks, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), has yielded similar effects. Coupled with modernization, greater internal differences have emerged within the Movement and tribal communities, as has the phenomenon of 'retribalization.'

III. DISCUSSION

Gérard Toffin critically engages with the multifaceted meanings of indigeneity and the politics of discourse surrounding it. Nepal has been widely viewed by many in South Asia solely as an "erstwhile Hindu kingdom" or as a homogeneous geographical and cultural space. In this light, Toffin's work serves as a critical entry point into Nepal's ethnocultural, religious, and social diversity. Toffin's research has duly addressed the chosen research gap, i.e., conducting a discourse analysis of the myths and arguments forwarded by different janajati organizations and communities to claim control over land and other resources within the country. He has also presented a backdrop of the Janajati Movement while questioning its essentialist rhetoric and its homogenizing effect on the vast

differences within and amongst janajati communities. The assessment of demands raised for structural and federal reorganization opens avenues for further research.

However, there is a marked absence of women's role in shaping, influencing, and building indigeneity discourse across time and space. In the People's War, the objectives of attaining ethnic equality, abolishing untouchability, securing linguistic and cultural rights, and ensuring equal access to education, employment, and development opportunities motivated many janajati and Dalit women to enlist in the war. No mention has been made of how janajati women have authored, engaged with, and made sense of the consistent changes both within and outside their immediate communities during various phases of political activity beginning in the 1980s, as well as their role in maintaining the interconnectedness witnessed and described in cases of caste-tribe continuum, which by itself functioned as a key argument in the earlier parts of the article. The lived experiences of Dalit, Madhesi, and janajati women with sexism and other types of discrimination have only lately come to light. Since patriarchal subordination is common to all ethnic, caste, cultural, religious, and social communities, gender could have also served as a significant lens for exploring the above-mentioned continuum in a new light. Further, examining the intersection of multiple identities, including but not limited to caste, class, religion, tribe, and gender, would have brought more attention to lesser-known irregularities within the janajati discourse formation and areas of internal disapproval/resistance.

Lastly, the primary arguments forwarded against the existence of indigenous groups in Nepal and threats to democratic functioning might require greater historicizing and more mindful and elaborate justifications, for at present, they could be interpreted as a means of invisibilizing the oppression and injustices endured by 'ethnic' communities in Nepal. The need for implementing affirmative action for disadvantaged groups (here, the adivasi communities) is uncontested, and the definition of the term 'Indigenous' requires a more critical, etymological, and conceptual re-evaluation.

IV. CONCLUSION

The present essay examines Gérard Toffin's analysis of the myths and realities of indigeneity and its discourse in Nepal, highlighting tensions between

its foundational, essentialist rhetoric and modern democratic principles. In Nepal, the Janajati/Adivasi movement has become a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, shaped by multiple layers of exclusion and inaccessibility driven by economic, social, and cultural discrimination. The Janajati Movement has raised pertinent questions about identity and belonging, while its reliance on essentialist rhetoric inspired by autochthony is identified as problematic because it asserts a fixed, primordial connection to the land to define indigeneity. Moreover, Toffin has successfully depicted the Janajati movement as anything but a monolithic entity, representing a complex array of voices and perspectives across the country. As a starting point for future expectations of the Movement, there is a need to bring into existence more inclusive, accessible, and participatory governance mechanisms in Nepal. While evaluating their demands and aspirations, the member communities' distinct histories, cultures, and varied experiences must also be taken into account. This could help advance an inclusive and equitable future for Nepal's 'indigenous' communities—one that acknowledges their rights, autonomy, and dignity by implementing the resulting suggestions through responsive policy interventions.

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