

Premise; Problems And Prospective of Ethnic Studies in Nepal

— Dr. Dipak Raj Pant

Premise

The most worthy and essential of a careful study about Nepal is the Nepalese peoples themselves. In order to be able to understand the ethnical diversity and socio-cultural development of Nepal, one must pay attention to the fact that Nepal is a land where a host of peoples and cultures have met, fused and continued to form a somewhat unique and single 'identity'.

Few countries display such ethnical, linguistic and cultural diversity and complexity within such a small area as Nepal. Any careful observer can note that Nepalese ethnic scenario shows a very different picture from the ethno-demographical maps of other countries.

At a first glance the distribution of the ethnic groups seem chaotic. Generally, there are no closed areas of settlements. The various groups are scattered over the irregular topography and have been constantly in contact and fusion with each other in an extraordinary way, thus have generated a supra-ethnical

'identity' which can be identified as 'Nepalese'.

Without bearing in the mind the ethno-demographic complexity and disuniformity and, at the same time, the fundamental supra-ethnic 'identity' resulted from a long historical process any ethno-graphical observation (in its purest sense) of a particular group or of a number of groups in Nepal is bound to remain scientifically incomplete and culturally misleading.

Ethnic studies imply two basic scientific disciplines: *ethnology* and *ethnography*. And these two imply a cross-disciplinary investigation with the help of other branches of inquiry i. e. sociology, history, archaeology, linguistics, ethno-musicology, demography, ecology and human geography and so on.

Ethnos is an ancient Greek term which originally denoted some generic concepts i. e. 'race', 'people', 'nation', 'community', 'group', 'an offshoot of a particular origin' etc. In a wider sense, by *ethnology* we understand that branch of knowledge which inquires about

the quantitative facts as well as comparative basis in order to comprehend the cultures and peoples. It undertakes deeper study of the theoretical problems that arise out of the comparison and analysis of human groups and cultures. While *ethnography* accomplishes the description of individual cultures and groups basing mostly upon the empirical and quantitative examinations.

By ethnic studies, which constitute very important part of cultural anthropology, we have to comprehend both. Ethnic studies have wider affiliations with other disciplines than has any other phase of anthropological science. Because it treats of the 'achievements' and the very 'process' of achieving of peoples in all their variety.

Problems

Great number of peoples (*ethnoses*) inhabit the Himalayas, exhibiting various stages of socio-economic growth and cultural dynamism. Like all great mountains, the Himalayas have not only acted as a barrier to separate peoples, but they also canalize the communications between the two sides. Nepalese territory, the most important part of the Himalayas, served as a special 'bridge' between different cultural worlds.

Ethnoses in Nepal Himalayas represent quasi-stable entities of people historically formed on certain geographical contexts and possessing relatively specific features of language, magico-religious system: social patterns, psychology and self-awareness (the awareness of their unity and difference from all the other similar units).

Due to a variety of socio-economic factors (*facilities, visibility, resources, demographical changes etc.*) part of ethnic groups

in Nepal have migrated or are in process of migration to other regions especially to the fertile plain (*Terai*), semi-urbanized and urbanized centres and even to other countries. As a result, the geo-cultural contexts constituted by ethnic groups are by no means compact. Many peoples are distributed among many regions. This has left an imprint on the structure, identity and character of relevant ethnic units and in all aspects of their cultures.

In Nepalese context, heterogeneous historical development has resulted in the conjugality of the types of ethnos and socio-cultural formations becoming quite ambiguous. It is fairly difficult (and can be misleading) to class a certain people with a definite 'type' (racial, religious or social) since many groups may be insufficiently marked with the attributes which distinguish a nation from a community, community from a tribe, a tribe from a small tribal group (*ethnics*). This is due to two basic facts: first, *most of the Nepalese ethnoses are in the midst of the development and transformation of their 'type'*; and then *the 'type' of archaic religiosity - which has been at the core of all traditional cultures - has distinguished the groups but never contraposed them.*

The cosmo-biological, spiritual, doctrinal and mythico-ritual bases of 'archaic' (we can also call 'popular' in the broadest sense) religiosity of the Hindu, Buddhist or any other magico-religious system in the Himalaya have never been sharply divided and incommunicable amongst them. The magico-religious "archaicity", of which all ethnic cultures are expressions, has been insulated in different cultic and doctrinal channels in varying degrees. We can take note of a long historical synthetic process in the cultic and

mythico-legendary contents.

These two facts (*'archaic' religiosity common to all and transformation under new living conditions*) have led many groups of people to the experience of a change (in some cases within the lifetime of a single generation) in their 'national' self-awareness, the awareness of belonging to a specific socio-cultural and political conglomerate that is 'nation'. Any ethnic study which wants to be scientifically valid and culturally productive must bear in mind these facts which are characteristic of Nepalese context.

Prospective

Once the background and specific characters of the Nepalese context is evidenced our attention turns to the main problems and objectives of ethnic studies in Nepal. In simple terms, socio-economic development and national cohesion are the two closely interrelated issues for us.

Theoretical preoccupation with cultural evolution, diffusion and description of cultural curiosities can hardly be reconciled with the real problems of conflict, adjustment and development that are pressing us. The most common desire of many foreign anthropologists to study only 'uncontaminated' ways of life or the so-called 'pure' groups and cultures and thus to 'discover' things and facts of Nepal may give their work an intellectual quality and glamour of pioneer but it has no relevance for the people's life and social problems of Nepal. Sometimes it may have adverse effect on those 'minorities' (ethnoses and ethnicos) which already feel insecurity and urge for self-affirmation, and, on the Nepalese studicians who borrow their terminology and method since a proper native anthropological

forum is not yet ready in Nepal.

Another very important point to be discussed is the proper method and procedure through which the ethnic studies should be executed. In today's intellectual and academic circles, where 'specialization' seems to be the only valid research criteria, the ethnic study as a whole and as we are going to suggest may seem too generalized at first glance. The absence, however, of a proper general study is the reason why so many 'specialized' works are incomprehensible to many lay-men and scholars alike. Besides, the limit of so-called 'specialized' works are explicit from the very fact that they often deal with one of the derivants or tangential aspects of a phenomenon which remains shrouded in mystery since its original and complete form is far from being comprehended.

Ethnic studies demand cross-disciplinary approach which can assure large and accurate datas about the various aspects of the ethnoses being studied. The scientific route of the ethnic studies may be divided into three main sections.

First of all, there should be the formal comprehension of the ethnos or ethnicos in all their variety and aspects. It begins with extensive theoretical research and field-works by an inter-disciplinary equipe preferably formed by the educated and capable individuals of the same ethnos. In each geo-cultural context and according the type, size and structure of the ethnic group being studied the components of the operative equipe should be selected. The formal comprehension constitutes the first level of investigation, it aims to have a round picture of the whole situation and history so we can

say it *historical phenomenology*.

The second section is generally a more profound phase of study of the results obtained from the first section. This consists of a direct and careful examination of the interrelations and interactions and to a deeper analysis of the groupings thus created. It finds, or better 're-discovers', the distinct characteristics which are unique and demonstrative of the organic unity of the phenomenon being studied through comparison. We can call it *critical and typological analysis*.

The third section is generally an exploration of the values, principles and laws governing the phenomena of ethnoses and ethnicos. It is based upon the results and remarks obtained from the comparative, critical and typological analysis. So it is the illustration of the role, place, values, laws and principles behind all situations and changes. We can call it *interpretation* which constitutes and explains the true nature of ethnic realities and even predicts the further probabilities. This is impossible to accomplish without having the global description through the historical phenomenology based upon the empirical and factual comprehension (without value-judgements, tendencies and a-priori). Then again, it is difficult without the investigation through typological analysis based upon the comparative and critical examination.

Then it is upto the competent organs of policy-making and execution who may apply the results of research and utilize for better programming and investment in socio-economic planning. With time, it is being increasingly realized that to implement practical policies requires knowledge of native customs and insights into the past and present of native groups' lives. For better social and national

cohesion, which should not be minimized or neglected as a main socio-political question, the ethnic studies may decisively contribute. For a well-integrated society, peace and progress we must work hard for the better understanding of ourselves.

List of Suggested Readings

A. For theoretical preparation and orientation:

BENEDICT, R.

Patterns of Culture, Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1934.

BOAS, F.

The Mind of Primitive Man, New York: Free Press, 1965 (5th ed.).

BROOK, S.

Ethnodemographic Processes..., Moscow: U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences, 1986.

DAMISH, H.

L'horizon ethnologique in 'LES LETTRES NOUVELLES' no. 32, Paris.

FORDE, C. D.

Habitat, Economy and Society, London: Methuen & Co., 1934.

LEVI-STRAUSS, C.

Race et Histoire, Paris: UNESCO, 1952.

LEWIS, I. M.

Social Anthropology in Perspective, Middlesex-New York-Auckland: Penguin Books, 1977 (reprint).

LOWIE, R.H.

History of Ethnological Theory, New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1937.

NAIR, K. S.

Ethnicity and Urbanization, New Delhi: Ajanta publ., 1978.

RADIN, P.

The Method and Theory of Ethnology, New York-London: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1933.

B. For critical evaluation of the miscellaneous works (mostly ethnographical attempts) concerning Nepalese ethnic reality:

BERREMAN, G. D.

Hindus of the Himalayas: Ethnography and Change, Berkeley - Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1972 (2nd ed.).

BISTA, D. B.

The People of Nepal. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar (2nd).

H.M.G. Nepal

Mechi dekhi Mahakali (in 4 vols.), Kathmandu: Department of Information - Ministry of Communication, 2031 B S.

MACDONALD, A. W.

Essays on the Ethnology of Nepal and South Asia (Bibliotheca Himalayica ser.

3, vol. 3) Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 1975.

FISHER, J. (ed)

Himalayan Anthropology, The Hague: Mouton Publ., 1978.

Trans-Himalayan Traders, Delhi-Varanasi: Motilal Banarasidas, 1987 (1st Indian ed.)

Von FURER-HAIMENDORF, C.

The Sherpas of Nepal, Berkeley-Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1964.

WALTER, F.

Attempt at an Ethnodemography of Middle Nepal in 'CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF NEPAL' (ed. C. Von Furer-Haimendorf), Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1974.