

## Debate of Ethnic Identity in Nepali Politics: An Examination of the debate from the Kisan Community of Eastern Nepal

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### Abstract

*The Kisan is an ethnic group of Nepal lived in Jhapa district only. It is a Tarai origin group with 773 populations which is traditionally organized under its own political organization, the Mahato system. The Mahato is a hereditary community head which is supported by Wokil (minister) and Sipahi (Police). These traditional authorities run a well functional community court which maintains peace and harmony in the community and works for the preservation of cultural practices. Along with the establishment of multiparty democracy, the community is exposed to external situations: political parties and economic organizations, advocacy groups, donor agencies and so on. A few literate Kisans seeking employment opportunities interfaced with the advocates of National Federations of Indigenous Nationalities and Action Aid Nepal after multiparty democracy. As a result, they had motivated and established a non-governmental organization for ethnic welfare. After establishment of the Kisan Community Development Academy (club in the Kisan language), the community is formally divided into two groups: the illiterate Kisans involved in community court under their traditional authorities and the literate Kisans involved in the newly established club. The club ran literacy and sanitation programs and constructed toilets and water taps. Mainly, it was involved in socio-cultural change and identity politics by the support of the above mentioned organizations. On the contrary, the traditional authorities involve in the preservation*

*of community culture and maintain peace and harmony. The literate Kisans involved in identity politics are motivated for salaried jobs, not for cultural preservation for Kisan identity.*

**Keywords:** community court, Mahato, political organization

### 1. Introduction

The Kisan is an ethnic group of Nepal living in the border areas of Jhapa district to West Bangle of India. The group is closed to non-Kisans of the surrounding, does not prefer to interact with them in daily life, and follow their own cultural practices, speak own (*Sadri*) language and organize under their own political organization. Traditionally, the group is involved in subsistence farming along with animal raising and hunting and gathering of small games. They also claim that they were the original cultivators of the land of North-East Jhapa. Along with modernization and change, the Kisans are displaced from the land based occupation and involved in tea garden labor and construction works. As a part of Nepali society, the group is also influenced heavily by the political change of 2006 which established multiparty political system in the country. Thereafter, some of the educated youths have formed a club and involved in identity politics by affiliating to National Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NAFIN).

The Kisans are claiming as an indigenous group of the Tarai (plains land of southern Nepal), similar in outward appearance to other Tarai groups. They are living in Jhapa district of Nepal for more than 150 years as Kisans but their kin groups are living across the border of Nepal to India as Nagasia. In Nepali language, *Kisan* means "farmer." According to Vidyarthi and Rai (1985), the Nagasia were the rulers of Madhyapradesh of India until 16th century. Hence, the group was migrated to Bengal as well as Nepal after displacement from their original territory. As an indigenous group, the Kisans are not well known, even to academics in Nepal. The Central Bureau of Statistics (2008) shows the Kisans populations in some hill and Tarai

districts of Nepal. However, in Nepal the Kisans are found in Jhapa districts only. The people identified as Kisan in the hills of Nepal are the low caste Dalit groups, the *Sarki* (Kattel 2012).

The Kisans in Jhapa district are one of the marginalized groups of Nepal in terms of resource occupancy, population, education, position in formal organizations and network of relationships and so on. On the contrary, the group is well organized within the group under their own political organization, have strong community court and law and the law implementing organizations and authorities.

This article attempts to introduce the Kisans, their political organization and community court and impacts of the debate of identity politics of Nepal to the community from anthropological perspective. The central proposition of this article is to highlight whether the identity politics is favoring for the protection of traditional/indigenous culture of an ethnic group or it is just a slogan for the benefits of some educated youths. The required information of the article was collected from the field by the researcher himself by applying various anthropological methods.

## 2. Theoretical Considerations

“Ethnic based federalism with the rights of self determination is the only solution of identity politics” is the slogan of the United Nepal Communist Party (Maoists) led by Prachanda and Nepal Communist Party-Maoists led by Baidhya regarding state restructuring in Nepal. The slogan has accepted by some of the hill (Tibeto-Burman language groups) and Tarai ethnic groups of Nepal without understanding the hidden interest of the Maoists to increase its supporters throughout the country in open political system. Some of the scholars involved in ethnic advocacy are also motivated with the slogan. In my understanding, extreme leftist wants to establish unitary political system. The examples are the present political system of North Korea, China and the previous United Soviet Socialists of Russia (USSR). Identity is related to ethnicity and ethnicity is related to origin, culture

and tradition, relation to land and in the present day relation to the resources: access to natural as well as socio-cultural and political resources, language and feeling of unity. More than the definitions of anthropology, the present debate of “ethnic identity” in Nepal emphasizes on the formation of federal state in the name of an ethnic group. Hence, without considering the traditional cultural harmony of a multiethnic society, they are advocating for group rights to power and politics. Democracy is considered as a best political process as well as an ideology flourished in liberal political economy. Respects for individual freedom and rights and choices are the basic principles of liberal democracy (Dahl 2000). Individualism, individual freedom and choices, liberty and human rights and justice are the basic characteristics of democratic societies in the Western Europe. This has put me in dilemma whether leftist ideology respects for ethnic identity and identity based federalism or is it possible to establish caste/ethnic based rights in substantive democracy (Dahl 2000).

In social anthropology, ethnicity is a hot issue of discussion. According to Waber, ethnicity is a biological perpetuating unit (1919 cf Barfield 1997). The argument found inappropriate by the European scholars during 1970s where multi-ethnic societies and cultures were emerging due to modernization and development. Barth (1969) defined ethnic group writing introduction of the book “Ethnic Groups and Boundary” as: (1) ethnicity is a form of social organization; (2) the ethnic boundary that defines the group and (3) characteristic of self-ascription and ascription by others. In the view of Cohen (1974) ethnicity is a group consciousness. According to Vermeulen and Govers (1994), ethnicity refers to the consciousness of (ethnic) culture. Thus, the traditional static approach shifted to interactional approach to ethnicity.

The post modern societies are mixed up of various groups and cultures. The present political process treats all citizens equally based on educational qualification, skills and competency. Hence, ethnic issue can be a debate of identity and group consciousness but it cannot be pre-requisite qualification for inclusion in economic and political process. In democracy, all citizens of a state, despite the class, caste,

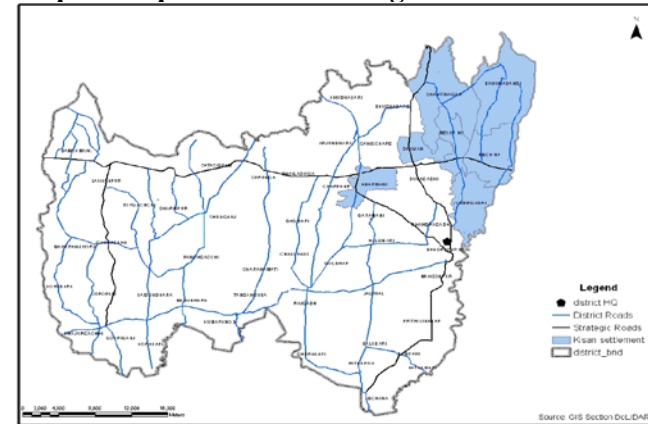
ethnicity and gender, have equal rights and can be access to political position through election. Similarly, educational qualification and professional skills are the basic requirements for bureaucratic positions. So in a multi ethnic society, instead of developing qualifications and skills of an individual/group for competition, it is ridiculous to demand an ethnic based reserved position, facilities and further more an ethnic based federalism. Ethnicity and issue of identity is contextual (Barth 1969), it changes as per the context, situation, and time. We are in the doorstep of new Nepal formation. Instead of the creation of Nepali ethnicity of all caste and ethnic groups with equal feeling and glorious living why should we debate for an ethnic identity based federal state. Human history proved that discrimination based on caste/ethnicity or colour is intolerable. So, why do we advocate for the same again. Moreover, the democratic political system that we have established allows every citizen to claim the rights and enjoys the freedom and choice but the obligation of each individual is to respect other's rights and freedom (Dahl 2000).

### 3. The Kisans and their Settlement

The Kisan, as discussed above, is a Tarai group of Nepal. They have been living along the north-eastern boarder of Jhapa district for the last seven/eight generations. The total population during this study (2009) was 773 which divided into 160 households. There are nine main villages of Kisans scattered in five VDCs and one municipality (see Map 1). The table 1 shows the population of the Kisan in each Municipality / VDC of the study area.

The Kisan settlement area covers about 50 square km, from the lower belt of Anarmani VDC to the upper area of Shantinagar VDC. A VDC is divided into 9 wards and Mechingar municipality is divided into 13 wards. The VDC and municipality are the formal local government bodies in Nepal. The Kisans of Jhapa follows the formal political divisions, although they have their own divisions, into nine villages, to organise the community in a systematic way.

**Map 1: Jhapa District Showing the Kisan Settlements**



Kisan settlements are located at some distance from non-Kisan settlements, and almost all Kisan villages are by the roadsides, river banks, and near the forests. There are five to nine houses in the Kisan settlement, and to them this constitutes a village, or *Gaam*. A Kisan house lacks adequate space and is not divided into rooms. In general, one house in each Kisan village is bigger than other houses. This bigger house has a yard where children gather and play. The bigger house has a separate room or a house for meeting where children could play in the day and adults could gather in the evening for meetings. The same meeting room was also the place where the Kisan authorities gathered to discuss village problems.



A Kisan house for community meeting



Kisan houses are turn opposite of the road

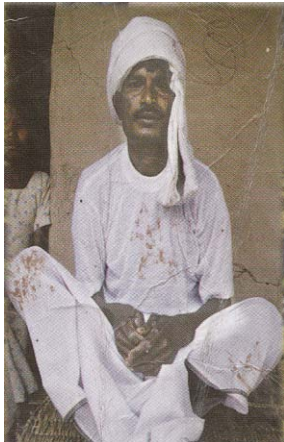
#### 4. Political Organization

The Kisans are divided into different families, clans, castes, classes, occupations, villages/settlements, and toles. Despite all these differences the Kisans are unified and organised under their political organisation, which are well defined with specific roles and functions and as effective and functional as the mechanisms of a modern state. The Kisans identity of an individual is rooted in interactions with the immediate family, and gradually matures through interactions with relatives, neighbours and the government authorities. A Kisan, as a

culturally situated individual, interacts with other community members and institutions accordingly. The political organisation of the Kisan is strong enough to control the activities of a community member. The community accords special space and significance to authority figures, including the family head, the village head, and the community head that have the responsibility and acknowledged authority to enact punishment and reward.

The central political organization is organized under their *Mahato*, two *Wakil* and nine *Sipahi*. The main function of the Kisan government is to execute the community laws, organize community court and maintain peace and order in the community. The *Mahato* is selected from the Kisan Sabha (a meeting of all household head of the Kisan) which organizes annually. Normally, the *Mahato* is selected from the same family (hereditary the elder son of the existing *Mahato*) but the assembly determines and selects which one individuals of the family is appropriate for being the community head. It is fact that only male is selected for the *Mahato* and can select the son of brother's family of the existing *Mahato*. The high preference is given for such individual who does not drink liquor and does not involve in family business.

The community head, the *Mahato's* authority is based on the understanding of him as the living representative of the god and the guardian of the entire community. In the community, the *Mahato* and his *Teliya* sub-caste kinsmen also claim higher status and enjoy greater freedom than others. The Chief of a simple society, like the *Mahato* of the Kisan, enjoys greater power than the head of modern state because they are understood as possessing superior, if not divine, power and are accepted as a unifying symbolic force that reinforces a community's collective identity (Gluckman 1973). The present *Mahato* Bhabir Kisan's house is located in ward no 4 of Machinagar Municipality (Magurmadi village). The present *Mahato* has no permanent asset except a small hut (see the photograph of the present king and his house). His power is symbolic and political, rather than economic.



The Kisan Mahato, Bhabir



House of the Mahato

## 5. The Community Court

The main community justice delivery mechanism of the Kisans is the community court which is known as *Kachchheri* among the community members. The *Mahato* is the chief judge, the *Wakils* assistant judges, and the *Sipahi* are the functionaries in the *Kachchheri* meetings. In the case of village court, the *Sipahi* is the chief judge and his assistant is the functionary. The *Mahato* is responsible for rendering the court's final decisions. The *Wakils* have been given managerial roles, and the *Sipahi* have to present the disputing parties in a session of the community court.

There is no written documentation of the origin of the *Kachchheri*. None of the informants was able to trace the history or myth of origin of the *Kachchheri*. One *Sipahi* speculated that the *Kachchheri* originated with the permanent settlement of the community. Dispute as a universal phenomenon of a society, must have always had some method of dispute resolution. The same dispute resolution mechanism might have evolved into the *Kachchheri*. He further speculated that there was not always such defined law, authority, and the community court. In the beginning, senior members

or respected individuals of the community might have initiated the *Kachchheri* by settling community problems. The original dispute resolution practice recognized as effective mechanism continued through the addition of required formal components. Hence, the present community court might be the advanced form of primitive dispute resolution practices.

Although *Kachchheri* service is voluntary, and community authorities harbored no expectation of compensation, they are dedicated to their work for the *Kachchheri*, in order to preserve their customary practices and maintain order in the community. A universal feeling of unity and devotion to community is found among the Kisans. The court and its authorities play important roles in maintaining this feeling.

Kisan authorities are very conscious of the need to deliver justice consistently and equitably. If a simple case, resolvable at the village level, goes to *Kachchchheri*, it will be said that the *Sipahi* of that village is inactive adding to the *Wakils' and Mahato's* burden. Therefore, the *Sipahi* does his utmost to resolve issues at the village level, sometimes in coordination with the *Wakil*. It is generally accepted among the Kisans that the *Kachchheri* provides equitable justice. However, there is a provision for a special appeal to the *Mahato*, who will review a case that remains disputed. If the *Mahato* rules that injustice has been committed, he will punish the responsible *Sipahi* and *Wakil*; in general, the *Mahato* slaps the *Sipahi* and *Wakil* publicly in the *Kachchheri*.

The office of the *Kachchheri* and the rest of the political apparatus, as well as the Kisan club, are in the house of the former *Mahato*. The house of the present *Mahato* is in the same location. The *Kachchheri* organizes mediation sessions as needed, on an average once a week. During a session, the *Sipahi* and *Wakil* will present the circumstances of the case, and the *Wakil* will outline possible resolutions. The *Mahato* listens to the information and renders final decision. The house with signboards is the office of the *Kachchheri* and a senior Kisan is going to attend the *Kachchheri* meeting (19<sup>th</sup> Feb 2009).



A Kisan house used for offices of the Kisan court and the club



An old Kisan going to Kisan court

## 6. The Kisan Club and Identity Politics

The democracy of 1991 has given an unexpected freedom to Nepali people who were socialized in party-less political system. Thereafter, tremendous political parties and interest groups emerged and involved in political, ethnic and right advocacies. Meanwhile, a political group (which was known as Maoist later) being unsatisfied with the multi-party democracy became underground and initiated insurgency against the existing multiparty political system. They motivated different groups of people by raising hopes and aspirations and fortified the insurgency. As a result, peaceful Nepali society which was just exposed to multiparty political system became fractions into various interest groups at micro level and into for and against the insurgency at macro level.

The Kisan community as a part of Nepali society was maintaining relationship among the community members with their traditional organization and with non-Kisans with existing socio-cultural practices. Meanwhile, some national and international non-governmental organizations reached the community with the slogan of community development and ethnic awareness in which a few literate young Kisans got employment. Nonetheless, the literate Kisans set up a club named Kisan Community Development Foundation which was

established with the objectives to create awareness among the community members about education, sanitation, and so on. The club was led by only the graduate Kisan of Makurmadi (Dhulabari Municipality 4). The Kisan club was supported by National Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NAFIN) and Action Aid Nepal (AAN) for community development activities.

There was a debate among the Kisans about the establishment of the Club. The Kisan authorities were not in favor of the Club because they did not want to expose their culture and did not want to bring change in the community by the support of external organizations and individuals. However, after one year's discussion with community authorities, the only graduate Kisan, in the support of the representatives of NAFIN and AAN, has decided to establish a club. The authorities did not agree on the decision and did not take part in any activities of it. However, the *Sipahi* of Makurmadi is involved in the club as an advisor and watch its activities closely. Thus, the literate Kisans registered a non-governmental organization in District Administration Office in 1996 which is known as club among the community members. Thus, from the beginning of the club, the literate people advocate for ethnic identity and social change from the support of the above mentioned organizations. On the contrary, the illiterate Kisans are organized under the traditional authorities and community court and maintain peace and harmony in the community.

As a result of the club politics, the Kisan community is divided into two groups. A group of simple and illiterate people who are interested in continuing their traditional political organization and community court and maintain relationship with non-Kisans on the basis of traditional socio-cultural practices. Another group of literate youth organized under the club and actively involved in ethnic identity and awareness raising program in the community with the support of advocacy organizations. As a result, unity of the community is weakened and decision of the Kisan political organization and community court is not effectively implemented. The educated youths involved in the club do not respect the traditional

political organization and community court and are not interested in attending the Kisan Sabha. Similarly, the Kisan authorities (*Mahato*, *Wakils* and *Sipahis*) are not interested in club politics and other activities.

However, the Kisan club is familiar among the literate youth Kisans because of salaried jobs for identify politics and community awareness programs. Moreover, the Kisans are enlisted as an endangered ethnic group out of the 59 ethnic groups in the Indigenous Nationalities Act 2002. The government of Nepal decided to provide social security allowance NRs 500 per month to each Kisan. This enriches the fame of the club among the community members.

The traditional organization is offering community justice and the modern organization is creating awareness in the community. There is benefit of both the organizations for the community but the educated youths do not see the future of the traditional political organization and community court in the changing contexts and do not go to court and do not accept the power of traditional authorities. This is an interesting contradiction that the people involved in identity politics do not want to preserve the traditional cultural practices, the community court and the authorities. Hence, it raised a question that weather identity politics is for cultural preservation and awareness or for certain benefits.

Thus, a traditional cultural group integrated through their own political organization is fully divided into two sections. The one who is not motivated from identity politics is involved in cultural preservation voluntarily. Another involved in identity politics is not motivated for cultural preservation such as *Kachchheri* and *Mahato* system. Therefore, the Kisan Sabha has not been able to elect an educated youth in the *Kachchheri* authority. The attempt of educated youth seems involved in earning instead of protection and preservation of traditional cultural practices. As result, not only traditional socio-political organization and cultural practices of an ethnic group is being despoiled but also weakened unity of the community and their norms and values.

## 7. Conclusion

The Kisan community is exposed to non-Kisans of the surrounding for the last fifty years but to multiparty political system, physical infrastructures and external organizations very recently. When the community faced non-Kisans in their territory, the group organized themselves by developing certain socio-cultural values and coped with situation. When the groups exposed to multiparty political system, it is divided into literate and illiterate and also organized accordingly. Hence, the group divided into two factions for the first time: one (illiterate community members who are in favor of community court and traditional authorities) for preservation of traditional cultural practices and maintaining peace and harmony in the community and another (literate community members who are in favor of the recently formed club) for identity politics and socio-cultural change through community awareness programs. Thus, the unified community is divided into two groups as each Nepali household is divided into different political parties just after the democracy of 1991.

Ethnic issue is escalated in Nepal more than expectations of political parties due to intended interests of political advocates who were supported by external donor agencies. The history of hill origin people along with Kirantis and Magars goes back to the history of Nepal. The history of Newar also tells us the truth that the group is formed by merging all caste and ethnic groups of the areas in the past. Kathmandu was known as Nepal in the past and it was a melting pot of all caste and ethnic groups. There are some unique caste/ethnic groups claim original of Nepal. They are Rahutes, Kumal, Jirel, Sunuwar, Tharu, Dhimal, Bote, Danuwar and so on. On the contrary, history of arrival to Nepal of the Gurung, Tamang, Santhal and some of the hill and Tarai groups is relatively shorter. However, the new groups are appeared as organized which is also favored by the donor agencies without knowing their original history and attachment to the land. As a result, issue of ethnic rights, identity, and inclusion are flourished in the country as a hot debate. However, none of the

activists and donors is seemed aware of the situation that whether their support is helping for a cultural preservation and a group unity or not as like the Kisans.

Here, I want to remember the argument of Barth that organization, education and demography play crucial roles for shaping adaptation of the people (Barth 1981). Hence, young educated kisans involved in the club are well organized because of salaried job and external support may mislead by mal-motive political parties.

Finally, the study of the Kisan concludes to our understanding of contemporary identity politics by questioning if such politics is aimed at protecting indigenous cultural practices or only creating spaces for educated youths to advance a limited agenda. Recent political events have introduced the debate over a federated state structure among politicians, academics and the general population. As a result, most caste and ethnic groups have formed their own organizations and involve in identity politics with the claim of ethnic federal states. In this process, most of the groups have revitalized their traditional socio-cultural practices and strengthened their ethnic identity by re-joining kin and sub-caste groups. The Kisan of Jhapa have also established Kisan club to raise awareness on socio-cultural, educational, environmental and political issues among the community members. Almost all educated Kisans are involved in this organization. On the contrary, the traditional political organization and community court of the Kisan have failed to elect an educated individual in their authorities. The educated individuals have less interest in voluntary work for these organizations, and are affiliated with the newly formed organization.

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