

ETHNICITY AND NATIONALISM
IN THE NEPALI CONTEXT
A Perspective from Europe

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In the contemporary world, ethnicity and nationalism are burning issues. Even a cursory look into the daily media proves this point. While ethnic strife within national boundaries – and often in order to draw new national boundaries – is being documented daily on the television and is featuring prominently in the newspapers, university colloquia and research papers have also wrestled with scientific answers to it as one of the prominent social issues of our times (cf., for example, Brass 1991; v.d. Berghe 1990; Erikson 1993; Hargreaves/Leaman 1995; Kellas 1993; Krueger 1993; Ratchiffe 1994; Smith 1992; Vermeulen/Govers 1994; Waldmann/Elwert 1989).

As ethnic movements have sprung up with unprecedented violence in countries as different as (former) Yugoslavia and the USSR, Rwanda and Burundi, as we witness the painfully near disintegration of Canada after the separatist votes in Quebec, and as the controversy between the Palestinians and the Israelis has reached a new turning point with the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, we are painfully beginning to ask ourselves: Which kind of glue holds today's states together? The execution of one of the foremost intellectuals in Nigeria is just the latest event in the series of violent actions involving the divergent forces of ethnicity and nationalism.

Depending on our understanding of what makes up an ethnic group, and what constitutes 'ethnicity', we can open the box of case examples the world over with other long-standing examples of civil strife: Ireland, South Africa, Tibet, and Sri Lanka are only the most prominent examples of social antagonism which runs along religious, ethnic, and/or racial lines.

Under this overall scenario of our present world, it is certainly time to discuss the problems and prospects of ethnicity and nationalism with a view on Nepal, a country in which social division – along religious, ethnic, even major linguistic (Tibeto-Burman vs. Indo-Aryan) and racial lines – is so much more prominent than the national glue which holds the country together.

As my knowledge and insights about Nepal and the region, however, are limited and only slowly emerging after one year of work in the Hindukush-Himalaya, I would like to reflect from my personal

viewpoint as a German and European and mainly draw on the anthropological literature written there and in the USA during the last five years. By this, I hope to throw some new light on a debate which has only begun and which deserves to be highlighted much more strongly in the intellectual and the public sphere in the country.

ETHNICITY AND NATIONALISM: WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

Ethnicity and nationalism are very complex social phenomena with whose understanding scientists have grappled for decades. Consequently, definitions and descriptions abound, many of which are not fully compatible with each other. However, a certain consensus seems to have been established in the major anthropological literature (for the best and most current overview, cf. Erikson 1993), out of which we can draw a conceptual basis for a better understanding. I will attempt to do this in the following paragraph.

Ethnicity and nationalism are related phenomena. Both are forms of **collective identity formation** (cf. Foster 1991: 235). In the first case, that of **ethnicity**, such a group identity formation refers to relationships between groups – above the family level – which consider themselves, or are considered, as culturally distinctive from other groups (Erikson 1993: 42) with whom they have a minimum of interactions. Such **ethnic groups** can be defined as endogamous collectivities which postulate, through selected (!) traditions, a distinctive identity (Orywal/Hackstein 1993: 598).

In the second case, that of **nationalism**, we are concerned with social processes involving groups (ethnic or otherwise) which relate to the creation, strengthening or defense of a territory which they regard as a state according to their own definition (cf. Elwert 1989: 449; Erikson 1993: 99). Such groups – usually called **nations** – can be understood as collectivities of people whose members believe that they are ancestrally related (Connor 1992: 48) and have a spatially bounded and sovereign character (Anderson 1993: 15).

In empirical terms, the following important considerations about the worldwide distribution of the two phenomena can be made:

- Only a minority of the world's states are those in which a circumscribed ethnic group is identical to the state territory: in 1971, only 12 out of 132 states fulfilled this criterion, whereas all the rest were truly multi-ethnic (cf. Antweiler 1994: 140); van den Berghe puts the estimate of such multi-ethnic states at about 85% (v.d. Berghe 1990: 5).

- Thirty-five out of the 37 major armed conflicts in the world in 1991 were internal conflicts, most of which could be aptly described as ethnic conflicts (cf. Erikson 1993: 2).

Both ethnicity and nationalism have certain commonalities with, but should still be conceptually separated from, other 'centric' processes such as racism or feminism (cf. Antweiler 1994).

Interestingly, both phenomena as described – and possibly constructed² – by social scientists, also have a number of characteristics in common (cf. Erikson 1993: 100 f.; Verdery 1994: 49):

- their understanding as **social process and social relations** rather than as static cultural phenomena;
- the idea of **fictive kinship** between the members of the respective group (ethnic group or nation);
- the creation of such relations through **everyday interaction** ("*Ethnicity emerges and is made relevant through social situations and encounters, and through people's ways of coping with the demands and challenges of life.*" Erikson 1993: 1)³; the same is illustrated for the process of national culture formation (Foster 1991);
- the **postulate of unity and homogeneity**, and the **common belief in shared culture and origins** as the basis for the collectivity;
- the **relational concept, including the drawing of clear boundaries**, i.e., a cognitive division between a homogenous 'us' and a differentiated 'them' (in Germany described as 'Wir-Gruppen-Prozesse', cf. Elwert 1989; Waldmann/Elwert 1989; Barth 1969);
- both concepts, as far as social scientists judge them, relate to forms of social organization (Verdery 1994: 35) and **active social construction**, meaning that the phenomena are not 'natural', but created by social groups; in this sense, even the nation has been aptly called an 'imagined political community' (Anderson 1993);
- both phenomena draw on a combination between an '**altruistic**' or **symbolic, and an instrumental aspect**: the creation of 'meaning' or identity formation, on the one, and the utilization for political legitimization and political action in view of the limited resources, on the other hand: they "*simultaneously*

provide agents with meaning and with organizational channels for pursuing culturally defined interests" (Erikson 1993: 18; also cf. p. 101);

- both forms of social organization have **effects on people's consciousness** in as much as they produce a felt sense of 'difference' with regard to certain others.

The commonalities identified here exhibit a number of interesting characteristics, which at the same time illustrate the state of art and tendencies of current social science research on the subject. First of all, it becomes aptly clear that both nationalism and ethnicity are not thought of as 'primordial' or objective facts, but that their situational and subjective characteristics are given prime concern. This mainstream of theoretical thinking began with the ground-breaking work of Fredrik Barth (1969; cf. Vermeulen/Govers 1994), emphasizing the social processes of boundary formation in ethnic identity building rather than 'objective' cultural variables, i.e., showing how organized groups of people actively constructed their identity.

Secondly, the inherent duality between a group (or nation, for that matter) and its counterpart for identity formation is an important consideration as well because it takes the point of observation beyond one social entity (the classical anthropological focus).

Thirdly, the double impact on the symbolic as well as the political sphere is a further decisive issue which has spawned as much scientific as political debate.

When reflecting on these commonalities, one could conclude that ethnicity is just a variant of nationalism. Indeed, this is a position which a number of anthropologists have taken in the past. But Katherine Verdery rightly if pointedly asks whether nationalism is really nothing more than just 'ethnicity backed by an army' (1994: 42). A look into both of these phenomena which are each inspired by history can, however, show that there are differences.

ETHNICITY AND NATIONALISM: ORIGINS AND GROWTH

For long periods of history – and some present-day situations as well – the dominant forms of collective identity formation were exerted either through some forms of kinship systems or through states which were usually founded on dynastic principles, again implying kinship regulations (cf. Andersen 1993). While there seem to have been a few individual cases of rudimentary national ideology, nationalism and ethnicity as defined above were largely absent. The political organization of the state relied for its formation and fixation on the

adherence to a – usually religiously founded and sanctioned – dynasty, which made it possible for very different ethnic groups with different languages and other diverging cultural traits to coexist without a pressure for homogenization. Indeed, through marriage as a prime agent of kinship formation, dynasties were enlarged, leading to the incorporation of many different ethnic groups under one monarch. This political process, as in the Habsburg Empire, united people as different as Hungarians, Jews (the 'Kaiser von Oesterreich' was also the King of Jerusalem), Serbs, and Germans (cf. Anderson 1993: 28).

With the waning of the 'cultural glue' of religions and the dynastic order since the 17th century, and the beginning project of capitalism, modernization, and industrialization in the age of discovery – with the concomitant inventions of new and ever faster communication means and the printing press – a new form of 'imagined community' came into being: the nation. While all nationalism tries to establish a connection to 'prehistoric times', the phenomenon is thus largely recent. Indeed, the French Revolution can be said to mark the beginning of nationalism in the above defined understanding.

It is argued that the development of nationalism as a new form of collective identity formation was a necessary follower of industrial capitalism, as this required "a standardization of skills, a kind of process which can also be described as 'cultural homogenization'." (Erikson 1993: 104). In the words of Williams (1989: 429):

In the formation of identities fashioned in the constraints posed by the nexus of territorial circumscription and cultural domination, the ideologies we call nationalism and the subordinate subnational identities we call ethnicity result from the various plans and programs for the construction of myths of homogeneity out of the realities of heterogeneity that characterize all nation building.

If we accept this position, we could conclude that it was this 'myth of homogeneity' (Verdery 1994: 50) which in effect created 'ethnicity as difference' from the more latent forms of ethnic identity formation. Thus, while the process of ethnic identity formation can be understood as a universal process, in time and space (Orywal/Hackstein 1993: 603), the politically vociferous form of ethnicity only developed as a response to the threat of nationalism which tended to neglect, even tried to eradicate, ethnic difference. In fact one could postulate: *the stronger the case was, and is, made for nationalism, the stronger the reactions of ethnic groups who fear to be losers of the nationalistic project.*

Recently, the projects of a 'multicultural democracy' within a nation, or of a plurinational social and political entity have become

more pronounced, at least on the level of intellectual debate in the United States, Germany (cf. Cohn-Bendit/Schmid 1993) or the European Union. However, exactly this time marks the reappearance of the most cruel (civil) wars in the name of nationalism or ethnicity.

One of the interesting social facts about the phenomena of ethnicity and nationalism is that while until the 1960s scientists were thinking of 'ethnicity' – then called 'tribalism' or 'nativism' – as a vanishing category under the influence of the increasing 'nation-building' character of the world, the 'melting pot' phenomenon and the influences of globalization, from the late 1960s onward, it was evident that political identity formation under 'ethnic' considerations was reappearing on the international agenda, not only in the so-called 'Third World', but with equal thrust in Europe and North America. And it was in fact mostly in the industrialized and modernized countries of Europe and North America that a doubt was cast on national identity formation by a number of ethnic movements: the Flemish in Belgium, the Scots and Welsh in the United Kingdom, Catalans and Basques in Spain, Bretons in France, Moluccans in the Netherlands, and American Indians in the USA (cf. Smith 1992: 1; Kievelitz 1986). This, indeed, was the birth of the term 'ethnicity'.

Therefore, while only nationalism and nation-building were anticipated to occur worldwide, the reality since the 1960s shows a complex array of ethnic claims and clashes: urban ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples' movements, violent uprisings and suppressions of 'proto-nations' (Kurds, Sikhs, Tamils, Kashmiris), 'ethnic cleansing' (Berghe 1990) side by side with 'multicultural democracies' (Cohn-Bendit/Schmid 1993). In fact, 'ethnicity' against 'nationalism' is presently one of the 'classics' in national and – at least for the 'proto-nations' – even international conflict scenario.

Thus, shortly before the end of the century we still experience the simultaneous persistence of the nation-state as well as of ethnic identity in the face of attempts at larger political and cultural units (like the European Union) and an emerging 'global ecumene' (cf. Foster 1991) – meaning a world increasingly tied together and homogenized by political, cultural, and mass-communicative processes. This ubiquity of the two related phenomena of collective identity formation under the combined pressures of homogenization and 'segmentary identities' (Erikson 1993: 152) to the extreme of post-modern individualism deserves continued social science attention.

EXAMPLES FROM EUROPE

It is difficult to find, when looking at European movements for ethnicity and nationalism, cases which are comparable to that of

Nepal. Neither does one find the multiplicity of ethnic groups in most of the countries which is so characteristic for Nepal, nor the constellation of young parliamentary democracy and centuries-old kingdom. Nevertheless, some cases might be illustrative of the potential problems coming up for Nepal in the future.

The case of **Germany** is interesting for its peculiar 'national issues' during the past 150 years of history. Germany exhibits a long history of emigration and immigration and thus actually a resulting multicultural society, which however is constantly denied by politicians up to the present day (Bade 1995). On the contrary, historically, the idea of a German 'nation', born only in the beginning of the 19th century and originally directly inspired by the French Revolution, was always prevailing; it was an understanding of nation which was founded on patrilineal descent and common history. While originally its aspiration was democratic and egalitarian (culminating in the 'Frankfurter Nationalversammlung' – national assembly – in 1848), it picked up more and more conservative speed in the late 19th century. The myth of the homogenous nation, united by German descent ('blood'), was increasingly abused by the political rulers (the King and the President of the Reichstag) and in consequence not only led to two terrible world wars, but even more so to the incredible conscious attempt at ethnocide of the Jewish and Semite people in Germany and Eastern Europe, led by a pseudo 'national socialist' ideology.

While the complex political, social, and mass psychological phenomena behind German history are essentially beyond this contribution, it is important to recognize some of the implications for modern-day politics. The idea of 'nation' in Germany has lost most of its appeal with the post-war generation. History as a medium of identity formation has become very difficult to allude to in the face of these brutal events of the recent past. However, the idea of common ties by descent ('blood') is still visible in German laws – this being the basis for determining citizenship up to today (cf. Cohn-Bendit/Schmid 1993: 201) – as well as in everyday German reflections of identity: there are Germans and there are 'Auslander' (foreigners). Yet this simple boundary formation in practice does not hold true, as at least six different degrees of 'Germanness' can be differentiated (cf. Erikson 1993: 113 ff.), which quite evidently cut across territorial boundaries. Presently more than 7 million foreigners do live in Germany, many of them for at least two generations.

In consequence, the construct of a 'multi-cultural democracy' is slowly gaining ground in political debate (cf. Cohn-Bendit/Schmid 1993), meaning the unemotional acceptance of the fact that Germany

has been, and is, an immigration country, and that politics as well as social realities should be constructed around the idea that multiple identities (both between and even within persons!) do not harm the strength of a constitutional democracy, but can actually enrich it. In the words of Michael Walzer:

I will identify myself with more than one group: I will be American, Jew, East Coast inhabitant, Intellectual and Professor. Imagine a similar multiplication of identities everywhere on earth, and the world will begin to look like a less dangerous place. When identities multiply, passions will subside.

(Cohn-Bendit/Schmid 1993: 348; my translation)

Whether such an attempt at a new definition of our German collective identity/identities will be successful in future, only time will tell.

Other European cases might be interesting as well, when drawing comparisons to Nepal. For example, there is the case of Spain, which is a country in which parliamentary democracy has only been established 20 years ago, but in which the monarchy has a long history. The beginning of this democratic venture, which was accompanied by a strong appeal to nationalism, was almost immediately counterbalanced by ethnic movements in the regions of Catalonia and the Basque country (Euskadi), which have long-established ethnic identities. The movements were, and still are – at least in the case of the Basques – political in their struggle for regional autonomy; an ideology which the ‘national project’ was not ready to accept. The King, playing a very positive role in the establishment and strengthening of democracy, nevertheless, did not play a significant role up to the present in preventing increasing violence from, and against, the separatist movements.

Spain is illustrative of the problems of containing ethnic violence once it has begun and been suppressed for some time. Violence and counterviolence tend to retaliate, keeping the state tethered to a precarious problem (cf. Kievelitz 1986). Spain is also illustrative of a country which in a historic period lost its ‘vitality’ and international importance when attempting to suppress the diversity it contained within. The rich and vibrant culture which had developed especially in Southern Spain by the first half of the second millennium with the intermingling of Jews, Arabs, and Christians of different ethnic origins, was step-by-step destroyed in the name of a pure Spanish Christianity until the 17th century. The advanced scientific and university culture of the country as well as the specific forms of art (like the ‘mudejar’ art, a peculiar combination of European and Arabian art expressions) which had been the hallmark of

Spain for centuries, was thus lost (cf. Cohn-Bendit/Schmid 1993: 204 ff.).

The case of former **Yugoslavia** can hardly be left out when discussing ethnicity and nationalism from a European perspective. It is the brutal civil war which has shocked, more than any other event in the past decades, the Europeans, for mainly two reasons:

- with the political developments after the past two world wars, most (especially Western) Europeans had assumed that developments in politics as within civil society in the European countries had led to a point where external warfare – especially in the context of the East-West antagonism – was still probable, but internal warfare was practically ruled out;
- the emerging ‘European dream’ of a larger collective identity slowly being formed from within Central Europe, which would be able to solve political and economical challenges in the future, was severely shattered in the course of the five-year war in former Yugoslavia. The European Community/Union in fact proved unable to contain the brutal killings – which even came close to ethnocidal/genocidal proportions; it was not even successful in helping to end the war.

The peculiar fact about former Yugoslavia from the point of view of ethnicity and nationalism is that for two generations, ethnic identities – existing between Serbs and Croats as well as other ethnic groups of the country – were of low importance in the context of the Socialist nation-building efforts of Tito.

There had been peace between Serbs and Croats since 1945, and the rate of intermarriage between the groups had been high. Serbs and Croats speak the same language. Perhaps the main differences between the groups are that they practice different variants of Christianity, and that they use different scripts. (Erikson 1993: 38 f.)

Nevertheless, with the political vacuum appearing after Tito’s death and after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, former ethnic boundaries were reactivated, mainly because of political power interests. They were practically declared ‘impermeable’, even though Yugoslavs who had undergone interethnic marriage and who were living in countries outside of Yugoslavia often did not even know which ethnic group they should affiliate to. Furthermore, presumed cultural differences were discovered despite ‘objective facts’ to the contrary, and they were declared irreconcilable. In fact, following the arguments of Barth (1969), one could presume that cultural variation

between Serbs and Croats would become a more established 'fact' after the ethnic war, the drawing of new boundaries – like it has been decided upon now in the Peace Treaty – and the resulting actual separation of the two ethnic groups. Ethnicity – as almost exclusively driven by political aspirations and power interests – has thus created a way to a new nationalism which is purely ethnically based: there will be a Serb country and a Croatian country. The incredible loss of lives and destruction which had to be paid for such a redrawing of the political landscape and the unsolvable oddities that have been created – for example, an ethnically divided Sarajevo – are the result of ethnic nationalism gone wild.

CONSEQUENCES FOR NEPAL

It seems to be as fascinating as it is complex and difficult to apply scientific knowledge about ethnicity and nationalism – and especially their combination – to the case of Nepal. In this last chapter, I will only make a few pragmatic and cursory remarks, without any authoritative arguments. However, I hope that they will at least be, in the context of what has been said before, intellectually stimulating.

Nepal provides a complex case for the discussion of ethnicity and nationalism for at least the following reasons:

- it is a multiethnic state with at least 35 groups which can be differentiated on linguistic and/or ethnic grounds (cf. Bista 1972; Dahal 1995);
- even the linguistic majority of Nepali speakers is clearly heterogenous and, according to their own criteria, would certainly exhibit a number of internal boundaries, mostly on caste rather than 'ethnic' grounds;
- the country exhibits, like Britain and other European countries, a combination of dynastic principles of social organization with emerging ethnic and nationalist ideologies;
- its limited natural and political resources are quite unequally divided between different collectivities of people.

In consequence of these characteristics and of the international influences, it can be assumed on pure theoretic grounds that both ethnicity and nationalism are on the rise. In fact, a surfacing of both processes can clearly be observed at least since the time of a more or less pure dynastic reign was over with the advent of multiparty democracy in 1990 (Bhattachan 1995: 134).

Let us first have a look at the process of **nationalism**. Clearly, one would presume such a process to increasingly take place

as a consequence of modernization and as a reaction to the 'natural order of diversity' in a diversified and fragmented mountain ecology. In fact, the theoretically described process of boundary formation can easily be verified from public debate. As it appears, it is often drawn in contrast to India, the country which is the economically as well as politically most important counterpart among all the states surrounding Nepal. Ideologically, India can, and actually seems to, figure at times as an overpowering adversary in opposition to which the ruling parties since the democratic rule in 1990 have repeatedly tried to establish the image of the Nepalese nation. Nevertheless, the creation of collective identity is much more difficult than the creation of a binary opposition, for the very facts of the multi-ethnic base of the country and the physical limits work against overcoming this situation fast. The very vehicles of nation-building, in the terms of Anderson (1993), that is, the advent of industrial capitalism with its concomitant language unification, communication, infrastructure, and printing press establishments, show severe limitations which might not be overcome in the near future. Even the important vehicle of education (cf. Goldstein-Kyaga 1993, exemplifying the Tibetan case) shows the same limits to providing a more unified collective identity, bearing in mind that Nepali does not account for much more than one half of the country as the first language/mother tongue (Baral 1995: 44).

The vehicle of religion – in theory a vehicle pre-dating nationalism as a unification agent (Anderson 1993) – assumes importance in the attempt for *Hinduization*: not only for its potential in homogenizing the 'imagined community of Nepalis', but for its actual potential of dividing it along the ethno-linguistic lines (cf. Bista 1992). To this end, the King and the Kingdom might play a related, yet less controversial role. However, overall religious pluralism is still a fact of Nepalese culture, and religion seems to play the least controversial role in the question of unity or division in Nepal (cf. Dahal 1995: 168).

In essence, then, the national project, at least as a nationalistic project, remains fairly unstable; and this, I might be allowed to say, seems to be fair enough, if one draws on the case of neighboring Bhutan for an illustration of the consequences of an – in my eyes often chauvinistic – ethno-nationalistic ideology with regard to ethnic pluralism and tolerance.

What about the issue of **ethnicity**, then? Clearly, as the attempt – apparently of the ruling upper caste Hindu part of society – becomes increasingly rigorous to define and proclaim the nation (cf. Bhattachan 1995; Bhattachan/Pyakuryal 1995), ethnic identity

formation might quickly go beyond the purely symbolic level and try to enter more strongly the public political arena in the contest for claims on the limited resources. In fact, this is also what seems to have happened since about 1990, as many ethnic groups – mostly those of non-Indian/Hindu origin – have started to establish their own political or ‘cultural’ organizations and to put forward their claims.

One could presume that, as long as resources are scarce, and the pressure for increased nationalism remains high, ethnicity will tend to be increasingly heard and seen in the political arena – potentially even with connotations of violence and repression (cf. Bhattachan 1995: 134-137).

As the cases of Germany, Spain, and former Yugoslavia should illustrate, the negative impacts in terms of economic and social costs of an increased antagonism between nationalism and politically instrumentalized ethnicity can be enormous. Reconciliation between the legitimate social and cultural striving forces behind both phenomena is the main challenge for a society.

What could be the prospects for Nepal under such a scenario? With this question, I finally leave the position of the impartial scientist. Both the ethnic and the national projects seem to me to have a certain legitimacy and persistence for Nepal in the sense that, while the overcoming of internal antagonistic differences and inequalities is of prime importance (this would mark the trend toward, and legitimacy for, a certain nationalism), it has to be linked, under a concern for equity and social stability, with the realignment of resources to different groups (this would mark the trend toward, and legitimacy for, ethnicity).

Two options can be foreseen from my point of view:

- a. the more demanding – and in the near future possibly unrealistic? – option being the development of a **multi-cultural democracy which constitutionally defines itself as a nation characterized by pluralism.**⁴
- b. the more ‘opportune’, i.e., on close range realistic, option could be a **political concentration of all major forces in society on the project of poverty alleviation rather than on nationalism or ethnicity.**

Poverty is the most urgent and vexing problem of Nepal, with up to 70% of the population defined as being poor. Poverty is partly based on ethnic lines, and in as much as the political project of poverty alleviation might also concern group-related poverty, it would require the acknowledgment of ethnic identities – maybe even through

quota systems – before their overcoming can be attempted. But clearly poverty cuts beyond those into other social divides: those of class, caste, and gender (cf. Dahal 1995). Therefore, the project of poverty alleviation has the potential to bring together major social and political forces across ethnic divides in overcoming rampant poverty, leading to a more equitable, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural society for all Nepalis. It could – and in my opinion should – therefore be the task of social scientists, and foremost anthropologists, to

- help to **clarify the options**: this would mainly relate to theoretical and comparative studies of the different South Asian and international models of multi-cultural nation-building and poverty alleviation available;
- help to **elucidate the constraints**: this calls mainly for investigations into the complex topic of collective identity formation (cf. the questions put forward in Verdery 1994) and the role of different social actors (e.g., the King; political parties; social movements; etc.) in it; and
- **reflect the actual societal process**, including the politics of culture, the culture(s) of politics, and the role of science itself in that context.

NOTES

1. This article is a revised version of a paper presented at a seminar on **Ethnicity and Nation-Building** organized jointly by the Central Department of Sociology and Anthropology and The South Asia Institute of the University of Heidelberg in Kathmandu, Nepal, on December 22-23, 1995.
2. The ‘creation’ and support of ethnicity – more than nationalism – through social sciences, mostly anthropology, is at present a strongly debated issue (cf. Wicker 1995).
3. This marks for Erikson one of the main reasons why anthropology is the prime science to investigate such phenomena (Erikson 1993: 1).
4. In this context, the case example of Indonesia with its ‘unity in diversity’ is illustrative for comparative purposes.

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THE ISSUE OF NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN NEPAL An Ethnoregional Approach

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Roti bhaneko chillo mitho, kura bhaneko khasro mitho.
(Call a spade a spade)
- A popular Nepali saying.

There is no doubt whatsoever that the problems related to the various ethnic and depressed caste groups in Nepal constitute the singlemost serious issue of the day facing the Nepalese society after the people's movement of 1990. People here have ever since been asking: Will Nepal face ethnic problems as acute as in Sri Lanka or Yugoslavia? Can the process of national integration in Nepal be really equated with the idea of a 'melting pot' as is often done? Is Nepal a 'garden of all castes and ethnic groups' in the real sense? And, should the monopoly of the dominant Hindu hill caste groups end?

Articles have, no doubt, appeared to address these queries.² But most of them have somehow ignored the policy implications of such ethnoregional problems in the context of national integration. This article intends to show that there was no rational ethnic policy in Nepal in the past nor is there any at the present. It also suggests that the ethnic-paradigm should be treated as a central element in everything related to planning, policies, and programing. Alleviation of poverty also demands a serious discussion of the various dimensions of ethnic issues. In that context, this article expects to generate a rational discussion of the implications of ethnoregional problems for the social and national integration of Nepal.

For the purpose of this discussion, **ethnicity** has been defined as a process of reciprocal, common identification (or 'peoplehood') marked by (a) symbols of shared heritage, including language, religion, and customs; (b) an awareness of similar historical experience; and (c) a sense of in-group loyalty or 'we feeling' associated with a shared social position, similar values and interests, and often, but not inevitably, identification with a specific national origin. **Social integration** is a condition of achieving a relatively cohesive and functioning interaction system in a society among different people as a precondition to national integration. Finally,