

## ETHNIC AND RACIAL STEREOTYPES: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF IDENTITY POLITICS IN NEPAL

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### ABSTRACT

*As per the scope of this paper, it attempts, in its first part, to offer an operational definition of the term "stereotype." Then it scrutinizes three visual images to demonstrate how racial /ethnic stereotypes are constructed. The first image is extracted from Jo Sharp's Geographies of Postcolonialism. The second image comes from Mike Chappel's The Gurkhas and the third cartoon sketch is taken from The Kathmandu Post. In its final part, the paper explains how some ethnocentric elites in Nepal, motivated and funded by western agencies, are attempting to homogenize /stabilize the complex social racial and ethnic texture. The paper concludes that such stereotypical and monolithic representations can provoke racial and ethnic issues resulting in disintegration, xenophobia and conflict in Nepali society.*

**KEYWORDS:** Stereotype, race/ethnicity, representation, marginalization, indigenous

A stereotype is simplistic representation that reduces persons to a set of magnified and often derogatory traits of people as a group. It implies that a given category (for instance, Magar or Bahun in Nepal's context) has universal characteristics that are applied to every member of that group. The stereotyped representation is often based on rigid cultural metaphors into a hackneyed image that typecasts people. Etymologically, "stereotype," as used in printing press, is a process for making printing plates. In sociology, it is a set of simplistic generalizations. Stereotypes are sometimes linked to prejudices based on race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, and just about any other social category. A stereotype is a socially constructed "mental pigeonhole" into which events and individuals can be sorted, thereby making such events and individuals comprehensible: mother, patriot, prostitute, terrorist, foreigner, etc. As stated by Fowler "stereotypes are categories which we project onto the world in order make sense of it" (17). To support this argument, the shown below is a picture of hands of two different people with different skin colors.

Racial stereotypes are very common in the visual images of advertising. The image depicted in Figure 1 may have multiple interpretations. Superficially, the two hands together suggest unity, brother /sisterhood and cooperation. The juxtaposition of two hands may suggest equality in diversity. The adult hand is supporting the child's conveying the message of interdependence. This type



*Fig. 1. (Sharp 90)*

of interpretation is motivated by the consensual approach of the western liberalism. But this interpretation misses the unequal power relationships between the black and the white. There is a hidden conflict behind. This image reminds one of Rudyard Kipling's dictum of "white man's burden" that sees the non-white as "half-child and half-devil." The bigger hand is male and white which is actively supporting the black one which is smaller and belongs to a child. In this sense, the image reduces the black and white people's relations into binarized positions between the first world and the third world. The white color represents the clarity, rationality and transparency whereas the black color may connote mystery and lack of transparency. The relationship is asymmetrical since the white hand is an adult hand but the black hand is that of a child. That means the white hand is well developed and responsible whereas the black one is underdeveloped. Thus the image makes simplistic notions of white as "mature" and black as "immature." The image creates a situation in which the white man's hand supports the black from below which seems to be part of his mission to civilize the baby and immature non-white person.

In the west, the racial stereotypes are reinforced in the visual images of the military discourses. Mike Chhapel, in his book, *The Gurkhas*, depicts a picture, as shown in Fig. 2, of a young Nepali who seems to be happy looking and testing the sharp edges of his *Khukuri*. This image is depicted in a larger social context of the Gorkhas and their taking part in the foreign army. This requires some more explanation of the historical background. In Nepal the term "Nepali" is used to refer to three notions: as a language spoken by people who are known as culturally Nepali; as people who speak Nepali language and follow that culture; and as people who reside inside Nepal's territory as its citizens. Culturally the terms "Nepali" and "Gorkhali" are used interchangeably and in this sense all the citizens of Nepal are not included. The term "Nepali" can mean a person following Nepali culture, speaking Nepali language residing any part of the world including West Bengal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Dehradun. Nepalis (in the sense of Gorkhalis /Gurkhas) are stereotypically represented in literary and non-literary discourses as aggressive, martial race, fighting and mercenary tribes (Streets qtd. in Power and Baker 91). In this sense, the Chhetris, Magars, Gurungs, Rais and Limbus are known as "brave" soldiers. For this reason, Bahuns enlisted themselves in the British and Indian army by changing their names in which they had to add "Bahadur." In the British military discourse, Nepalis, mostly Chhetris, Magars, Gurungs, Rais and Limbus, are grossly treated as "Gurkhas" who are thought to be less intelligent and have no command over emotion. In this connection Hickey ironically puts: "extremely brave and did not hesitate to draw their knives and kill even in quarrels among themselves (qtd. in Caplan 135). Racial prejudices against Gurungs, Rais and Limbus are common among people of Nepal. These *janajatis* are tagged as quarrelsome drunkards, ever quick to draw their *khukuris*, and fit for serving in the army but not for education and qualified employment. At times, when they are useful, they are eulogized as "the bravest of the brave, most generous of the generous, never had country more faithful friends than you"(Turner qtd. in Caplan 126). Very often they were stereotypically represented as: aggressive, martial race, fighting and mercenary tribes (Streets qtd. in Power and Baker 91). Even at home, Nepali soldiers, serving foreign nations, are eulogized as "veer Gorkhali." Whether it is outside the country or at home, this type of stereotypical approach is reductionist and homog-

enized since the term "Nepali" is unstable and contingent with multiple meanings and realizations.

The image depicted in Figure 2 shows a young man who seems to be happy in touching the sharp edges of the *khukuri* (kukri). As depicted in Fig 2. Nepali young men are stereotypically described as "happy warriors, proud and content to be soldiers, and capable of finding humors in the direst of circumstances" (Chappel 5). This



Fig. 2 (Chappel 3)

idea is internalized even by many people of Nepal. Nepalis are said to be brave due to the fact that they can work as mercenary soldiers who can exchange their blood with money. But most people of those countries (say, India and Britain) do not like soldering and do not like to take risk of the war but admire the Nepali young men as brave. Thus, the photograph depicted above perpetuates the idea that Nepali young men especially those belonging to *janjatis* are mercenary and ready to fight for any nation other than their own nation. This type of gross generalization is reductionist and homogenized idea which is constructed by the imperial military discourse and continued by western literary imagination. This is merely a social construct as there is no any innate connection that Nepali young men are mercenary and war prone.

Ironically, the same strategy of reductionism and stereotype has been used by some scholars in Nepal recently. Some scholars, basically university professors belonging to the elite class, have attempted to background the issue of economic class and have tried to foreground the identity politics of race and ethnicity. Interestingly, their researches are funded by European and US agencies that are interested in provoking racial/ethnic issues in Asia, specially, in China (Tibet), Nepal, India, Burma, and other countries. While teaching in American universities, they advocate for multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism but in Nepal they take explicit ethnic / racist and essentialist position. This strategy is best exemplified and represented in his article "Ethnic Predilections" by Mahendra Lawoti in *The Kathmandu Post* (May 6, 2011).

The graphic image depicted below in Figure 3 extracted from *The Kathmandu Post* (May 6, 2011), shows two men under the same umbrella. This image is the appropriate illustration of the mental image which is stereotypically represented in the paper. The two men depicted in the Figure seem completely contradictory to one another. The man to the left is the point of departure since it is the first element of the visual syntax. The man is depicted with his hand on the head expressing the mental state of despair. His facial texture is not seen that indicates that he has no any specific



Fig. 3 (*The Kathmandu Post* May 6, 2011)

identity knowable to his viewers. Most parts of his body are exposed and he is wearing a single turban to cover his parts of the body. His hands and other parts of the body give the impression that he is a hard working person. The umbrella over his head is torn. The umbrella, symbolically, the state does not provide him shade. He is under the open sky. The second participant in this graphics is the image of an Aryan faced person wearing formal dress shirt and trousers and the umbrella over him provides a shade from the rain and the heat of the sun. Symbolically, the state sponsors him safe shelter. The image attempts to reduce the complicated social texture into just two categories. These two persons are not facing each other. Like the verbal message in Lawoti's article, this image seems to convey the message that the history of hitherto Nepali society is the history of conflict between the two races: hill *Bahun/Chhetris* and ethnic people.

The identity of a person is conditioned by various social factors such as economic class (whether the person is a farmer's son or a minister's), region (whether one lives in New York or in a remote village in Nepal), age, profession (whether one is a professor or a laborer), ethnicity /race, physical ability, religion, nationality, sex, gender, sexuality, and so on. Of them race /ethnicity is only one social variable in the discourse of identity politics. So the identity of a Bahun or a Limbu is the composite construct of these variables. So taking only one factor (race /ethnicity) is always incomplete.

If one believes GayatriSpivak, a real representation of the marginalized people can never be made since there is no social space (subject position) from which they can speak for themselves. Always they are represented by those in power. A professor has to say for an uneducated farmer in an abstract and philosophized discourse for an elite reader. What is more, the English medium broadsheet daily (*The Kathmandu Post*) is beyond the reach of the person depicted on the left.

In Nepal's context, the disadvantaged indigenous people like Chepangs, Raute, and Bankaria are never in the position of speaking for themselves but they are represented by elite of one kind or the other. They will never get the facility of affirmative action since the elite ethnicists, the upper crust of the indigenous people, will always reap the benefit.

If one believes Linda Alcoff, speaking for others is politically illegitimate. One can speak *about* but not *for* the other. So the article published in *The Kathmandu Post* and this one written by myself are merely "conversations" between "us" (professors and philosophers) about them "marginalized people." Thus, the person depicted above to the left cannot be represented either by the graphics artist or the feature article author because these authors are economically, educationally, regionally, and professionally elite living in the metropolitan setting. Here, the representation is always a partial truth.

Lawoti, finds those scholars naïve who believe that ethnic identities are not

monolithic. He further states that identities are socially constructed. Then, he focuses his attention to a so-called caste group called Brahmin. For him, throughout history there are some changes between Brahmin and Bahun in terms of some rituals. Despite some changes, he adds, "Bahuns existed then and they exist now as privileged group. The Bahun has been a state -favored group throughout Nepal's history. Their privileged position has remained constant" (6). Lawoti also points out that G. P. Koirala, K. P. Bhattarai, Jhalanath Khanl, and Prachanda [Puspa Kamal Dahal] all have become prime ministers in Nepal since 1990.

No one can disagree with Lawoti that in Nepal's history there were many unfair treatments done by the dominant /ruling people to marginalized people, that in the past the Public Service Commission's processes were Brahmin-friendly and Hinduized and Sanskritized, that most of the prime ministers belonged /belong to the Brahmin family. The question is how the category of Bahun as a caste group in Nepal's social texture can be delimited. The category, Bahun, as stabilized by Lawoti is not a rigid category made up of with "state-favored and privileged group" (6). For a rigorous researcher, this category can better be described along a horizontal continuum. On one extreme there are Bahuns who are most state-favored and holding the most privileged position (Judges of the Supreme Court, for instance), on the other extreme, there are *Bahuns* who are the most underprivileged (the helpers in Restaurants of Indian cities, for instance). So the problem with Lawoti's article and the visual image is that the traits of some members are superimposed onto the whole group. The idea that being a member of Bahun caste is to holding a privileged position is a false equation that equates the set category Bahun with the subset category Dahal or Koirala. Sometimes, it seems to be misleading to generate ideas by someone's names. For instance, Mahendra, Krishna, Om, Ganesh, Narayan, Girija, all are names emerging from the same cultural factors. Even though Hindu deities' names are given to people, to conclude that Krishna Bhattachan must be a Hindu since Krishna is the name of Hindu deity may not be a valid conclusion.

If one follows Lawoti's conclusions, one should judge the categories of Bahun, Chhetri, Madhesi, Newar, Dalit, women, Americans, Indians as blanket terms and as a result overlook the complexity and nuances of the social texture. Concluding that all Bahuns are holding the privileged position can misrepresent the reality of some Bahuns who are working as helpers in the household of non-Bahun. Such gross remarks, as stated earlier, can corrupt interpersonal relations, disturb social cohesion and mutual tolerance among people, warp public policy, and play a role in the worst social abuses, such as mass murder and genocide.

Of course, no one disagrees in the present context of Nepali politics that the state and its people should work for creating an egalitarian society based on social harmony and cohesion with all people belonging to various regions, religions, classes, age-groups, professions, ethnicities, physical conditions/abilities, and languages. Of course, the state should, for a limited span of time, invest its additional support in terms of reservation and or affirmative action as compensation to certain disprivileged groups like Chepang, Raute, "Badi" and others so that they could be uplifted to a certain level. While arguing about the social issues, the emancipatory theories should speak on behalf of all types of disadvantaged people. Lawoti's scheme remains silent about the issues of the so-called caste Bahun and Chhetriis who are economically and regionally marginalized. Lawoti and his school of thought show no interest



about those social variables.

What people understand is that if one is a Chhetri from the Hill, one must be a ruler. If one is a Madhesi, s/he must be a marginalized person. Categorizing a person just by caste, religion, region s/he belongs to is a reductionist approach. People should be judged on the basis of what they do, how they behave, not on the basis of what their names, religions, and ethnicities are. In Nepal, there are some Chhetris who look exactly like people of so-called Tibeto-Berman origin. One cannot say, unless their names are revealed, they are Hindus. The socio-cultural diversity is so complex that reducing them into ten or eleven ethnicities would be just futile. Even the term "Hindu" is contested in the context of Nepal. Some people seem to be Hindu by their names which are borrowed by the Hindu mythology such as Indra, Krishna and Ganesh. Others are Hindu by their beliefs. Some others are Hindu by practice and performance of the rituals. It is often said that the Chhetris and Bahuns converted all indigenous people into Hindus. This is also partially true because Newars of Kathmandu practiced Hinduism long before the Bahun and Chhetris came to Nepal. Because of this fact, the total population of the Hindus is more than the population of Bahuns and Chhetris and Dalits. And among Bahuns and Chhetris there are people who are nonbelievers of Hinduism.

Some elite ethnocentric scholars have been producing literature by exclusively focusing on race and ethnic issues. For them, other social variables such as class, profession, region, and physical ability are just irrelevant. Their move is not truly emancipatory and bottom-up since they address the reality of elite ethnic groups. For instance, out of the six MBBS seats for janjatis at Institute of Medicine, Tribhuvan University, Maharajgunj, four went to Newars of Kathmandu. In this sense, taking the issues of caste and ethnicity exclusively does not support the people in the margin for their upward mobility in terms of access to state resources; it only serves to make a horizontal shift, a process which can be termed as "elitization of the elites."

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