MONASH University

Rewriting the Nation: Politics, Culture, and Representation in Contemporary Nepali Literature

Prakash Subedi

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Abstract

This study analyses contemporary Nepali literature to examine how socio-political issues of inclusion and exclusion based on language, caste/ethnicity, religion, and geographical region, emerge in Nepal's recent past. Starting with the People's Revolution (I) in 1990, gathering momentum with the Maoist uprising between 1996 and 2006, and culminating in the People's Revolution (II) in 2006 and Madhes Revolution (2007), Nepal has undergone momentous changes in its national fabric in the last three decades, the most important among them being the transformation of the country from a unitary Hindu monarchy to a federal secular republic. Through an investigation of the literature of this tumultuous period, this study explores the issues that have been foregrounded, and offers a framework within which to read and interpret it. Much of the mainstream literature written before 1990 is now seen as being complicit with the Khas-Arya homogenising mission of the state in an otherwise largely heterogeneous nation. Therefore, these contemporary literary works are studied alongside works from the past to see how the idea of the nation, the construction of identity, and the experience of belonging have operated differently across time and context, and what input and impact literature has had towards both maintaining the status quo, as well as resisting and questioning it.

This study finds that, starting in the 1990s, and growing in the last decade and a half, writings from different and discrete marginal locations have noticeably claimed a place in the mainstream literary landscape, which was previously monopolised by the upper caste Khas-Arya male writers. Issues pertaining to minoritised languages, castes/ethnicities, religions, regions, and gender, which had largely been side-lined through the 250 years of the nation's modern history, have now moved centre stage. Moreover, apart from the content, there are also distinguishable changes in the linguistic and stylistic features of literature. Regional and ethnic varieties of Nepali, which were considered substandard and, therefore, unacceptable

for literary usage, are finding their way into works of poetry, fiction, and plays. There is a flourishing trend of reclaiming what used to be, disparagingly, termed ‘native folklore’ and of revitalising indigenous and ethnic myths, as wellsprings of metaphorical language and literary allusions. Instead of deriving its themes and language from the hegemonic Hindu-Sanskrit repository or the colonial-era influence of Western sources, contemporary Nepali literature has taken a pronounced ethno-cultural turn, and in doing so, it has embraced a more confident local and native character. Moving away from reigning preoccupations with either exclusionary statist-nationalistic concerns or universal humanistic-romantic motifs of the past, in the recent decades, new Nepali literature has been rewriting established and received narratives of the nation. This study argues that these contemporary writings have become the forerunner in envisioning a more inclusive imagined community by articulating a more radical account of Nepali story-telling and creative literary production.

Declaration

This thesis is an original work of my research and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signature: ……………………

Print Name: Prakash Subedi

Date: 04/06/2021

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May we all be able to come out of the “dreary desert sand of dead habit”![1]

May all beings be happy!

Bhavatu sabba mangalam!

[1] Rabindranath Tagore: “Chitto Jetha Bhayshunyo” (“Where the Mind is without Fear”), (*Gitanjali*, 1910)

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Nation, Nationalism, and Nepali Literature: A Narrative of Exclusion and Resistance

A Narrative of Marginalisation

Nothing illustrates the socio-political upheavals Nepal has undergone since the 1990s better than Shrawan Mukarung's celebrated poem "Bise Nagarchiko Bayan" ("Testimony of Bise, the Tailor"). Written around the turn of the 21st century, at a time when the war between Maoist insurgents and the state was at its peak, the poem charts the 250-year long history of Nepal under the Shah Monarchy and raises some compelling questions regarding its nature and character. Bise, as if drunk or mad, cries out:

> Master!
> After two-centuries and a half
> In this Gorkha state[1]
> I have gone mad.
> My head is spinning
> The earth has moved to the sky
> And the sky to the earth
> My sight is blurred
> And I see you with ten heads.[2] (17)

Bise Nagarchi was the tailor, and a trusted advisor, to Prithvi Narayan Shah (1723-1775), who became the king of Gorkha, a small principality in Western Nepal in 1743, and embarked on a mission to 'expand' his principality. Shah's successful conquest laid the foundations of modern Nepal, and until the political change of 1990, his expansionist mission was upheld by the state as an act that unified all the heterogeneous groups into one strong nation, or even better, a garden of different flowers, as the popular Nepali saying goes. However, in recent years, Shah's project of expansion has been recast by Nepali indigenous

[1] The Nepali word Mukarung uses here is "राज्य" (state), and not "देश" (country) or "राष्ट्र" (nation).

[2] All translations from Nepali-language texts cited in this study, unless specified, are mine.

and ethnic groups, and groups facing linguistic, religious, and regional marginalisation, as an imperialist mission that resulted in the hegemony of the Nepali language, the Hindu religion, and the Khas-Arya hill culture at the expense of all other languages, cultures, and religions.[3] In this context, Bise Nagarchi, who belonged to the 'untouchable' group, the lowest rung in the hierarchical Hindu caste system, and whose 'duty' it is to serve the 'masters', i.e. all the upper-caste people, as tailors and musicians, becomes the most appropriate carnivalesque figure to voice this resentment.

There are a few things we can take note of in the above lines. First, even today, it is not uncommon for Dalits, the 'untouchable' group, to vent their frustration while they are, or pretend to be, drunk. Socially-sanctioned conventions permit them the liberty of speaking against entrenched injustices during a drunken state, which would be unimaginable when sober and could lead to severe punishment. This is the cultural license and creative strategy Bise seems to be employing here, that allows him to interrogate the master via what Russian formalist, Mikhail Bakhtin, terms the carnivalesque. As Terry Eagleton argues in his book on Walter Benjamin, "carnival is a licensed or approved form of transgression" and turns the status quo upside-down by rendering "existing power structures alien and arbitrary" (146). Second, Bise does not call his country 'Nepal', instead, he calls it the 'Gorkha state', drawing attention to the political fact that, even today, the Nepali state functionally represents the small hilly Gorkha principality rather than a country comprised of people from a range of ethnic, linguistic, religious, and regional backgrounds. Next, while the "ten heads" might refer to the ten Shah Kings who ruled Nepal, it is also a reference to the ten-headed demon king, Ravan, from the Hindu epic *Ramayana*. Legend goes that Ravan received the boon of near-immortality from the Hindu god, Shiva. He is not invincible, but extremely difficult to kill even for the God-king Ram, an incarnation of the god, Bishnu. Considering the fact that

[3] Therefore, in this study, I have referred to it as 'unification/expansionist' mission.

the Nepali Hindu king was portrayed and promoted by the state as an *avatar* or earthly incarnation of Bishnu, likening him to Ravan, instead of Ram, reverses the traditional hierarchy of gods and demons in a potent allegory. The figure of the sky moving to the earth and vice-versa sums up the carnivalesque shift in power that the poem simultaneously symptomatises and anticipates. The Bakhtinian reversal of high and low personas itself hints at the polyphonic and heteroglossic nature of the Nepali state.

Mukarung's poem, lauded by Khagendra Sangraula as the "the most important manifesto of cultural consciousness" after Bairagi Kaila's "Mateko Maanchheko Bhasan" ("Rant of a Drunk Man") (qtd. in Basnet n.p.), written in the 1970s, does more than display Bise's misery and helplessness. At some point, Bise's desolate tone changes into an insurgent one, and he starts questioning the rulers and their intentions over the centuries: "I have been with you for two-centuries and a half/ How can I be a terrorist?" (19).[4] These lines point to the fact that Maoist rebels whose cadre-base was comprised largely of either the low-caste Hindus or the indigenous and ethnic peoples[5] were referred to as 'terrorists' by the state. The point here surely is that the only way the state can account for its rebellious factions is to disown them—the 'terrorists' are not alien to the state but, for two and a half centuries, have demonstrated their central place within its exclusionary logic. Thus, Bise's voice comes to represent not only the remote historical past but also the insurgency of the immediate moment—moments the poem sees as genealogically connected. Not only does Bise doubt if the "Gorkha state" is as great as it has claimed to be for years, but he also questions the very

[4] Mukarung uses the word 'आतङ्ककारी' here ("म कसरी आतङ्ककारी हुन सक्छु?") (19).

[5] The term commonly used in Nepali is 'आदिवासी-जनजाती', meaning 'indigenous-ethnic' peoples. The Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN), an umbrella organization of Nepali indigenous/ethnic peoples, uses the word 'आदिवासी-जनजाती' in Nepali, and 'indigenous nationalities' in English (https://www.nefin.org.np/en/). While there are debates on the use of the term "indigenous," because Arya-Khas Nepalis have claimed that they are indigenous too since they are have been living here for thousands of years, in the course of this study, the term indigenous nationalities or peoples is used to refer to ethnic people not belonging to the Hindu Khas-Arya group.

idea of its greatness. The poem thus hints at the rapid and momentous changes Nepal as a country, and monarchy as an institution, underwent during those years, by presenting a creative genealogy for the present moment:

> Master!
> How did the mighty peaks of the bygone days
> standing before the Gorkha state
> become so small today?
> How have the wholesome and bright people of yesterday
> become so bloody and hideous today?
> Why do I see the Daraudi River flowing uphill?
> Why do I see this palace in ruins? (18-19)

As it moves towards its conclusion, the poem raises challenging questions regarding the idea of the nation. Bise asks, "Did the king, or the people, build this kingdom?" (19). He points out how the credit for nation building has been claimed by those who were in power, while the contributions made by thousands of Nepalis have been completely forgotten. He asks: "I am in this country as long as its soil has a history/ How can I be antinational?" (20). *Arashtriya tattwa* (antinational elements) was a term used during the 30-year Panchayat system to refer to anyone who held views different from the state, especially those who were fighting for multiparty democracy. The term is not very different in implication from the word *deshdrohi* ("traitors to the country") (Whelpton 45), as the Rana rulers[6] used to refer to those fighting to democratise the nation in the 1930s and 1940s, or *atankavadi/atankakari* (terrorists), a term used by the state to refer to the Maoist rebels in the recent years following a global rhetorical trend. Though seemingly addressed to the king, the poem does more than just criticise the Shah monarchy. It narrates the stories of exclusion, oppression, suffering, and anger experienced by millions of Nepalis during more than two and half centuries of Shah rule in Nepal.

[6] The Ranas relegated the king to the position of a titular head and ruled Nepal as prime ministers on a hereditary basis for 105 years, from 1846 to 1951.

A pioneer in this literary direction, Shrawan Mukarung is not alone in raising such questions. Writers belonging to marginalised locations of all kinds—ethnic, linguistic, religious, and regional—have come up with powerful voices critiquing the state in the last two decades. Basanta Basnet, in his essay "Dashak 60 ko Saundarya"[7] ("Aesthetics of the Decade of 60"), locates the decade of 2060 Vikram Samvat (which corresponds to 2004-2014 AD) as the period when writers writing with a new identity consciousness found their voice and their foothold in the Nepali literary landscape for the first time. He elaborates: "Writings from alternative positions using indigenous expressions and representing their custom and consciousness dominated the field…their books sold the most, and they won both the readers and the awards" (Basnet n.p.). A quick survey of these writings shows that the movement of "ethnic nationalism" (B. G. Shrestha, "Ethnic Nationalism in Nepal" 22) started in the 1990s found a strong literary voice only during the following decade. These contemporary writings are different from those that preceded them, in their concern not only with the general issues of democracy and equality but also with issues related to identity. While the earlier writings emphasised a united national identity that derived from the people rather than the state, they did not address differentials of power among the people. The new writings have taken the question of nationalism in a different direction, particularly in terms of raising questions related to linguistic, ethnic, religious, and regional identity. In fact, for a country that brought the powerful and longstanding Hindu monarchy to an end and declared itself a federal secular republic in 2007, no other issue has received as much attention as inclusive nationalism. To establish a context for these contemporary debates, the next section presents an overview of the formation of Nepali nationalism over the last two and half centuries[8] from the founding of

[7] Nepal follows Bikram Samvat (BS) as its official calendar, which is approximately 56 years 8 months and 15 days ahead of the Gregorian calendar. The decade of 60s, therefore, corresponds tentatively to the period between 2002/2003-2012/2013 AD.

[8] Prithvi Narayan Shah ascended to the throne of Gorkha in 1743, and immediately started his mission of unification/expansion immediately. He conquered Kathmandu in 1768, but the mission continued even after that

modern Nepal, and an analysis of the bases on which the state enacted its exclusionary policies.

Formation of Nepali Nationalism: A Historical Overview

The evolution of Nepal as a modern nation and Nepali nationalism can be divided into five major periods.

1. *The Period of Unification/Expansion (1743-1814)*

Before 1743, present-day Nepal was comprised of more than 50 small principalities, most of them based on ethnic groupings. After ascending to the throne of Gorkha in 1743, at the age of 20, Prithvi Narayan Shah started an aggressive expansion of his principality. By the time he died in 1775, the small principality in the western hills had been transformed into a powerful kingdom, a result of his "sound logistical preparations" as well as his "political skills and a shrewd combination of conciliation and intimidation" (Whelpton, *A History of Nepal* 35). After his death, this mission was carried further by his younger son, Bahadur Shah, and his daughter-in-law, Rajendra Rajya Laxmi Devi. By 1814, the borders of the Gorkha Kingdom extended "eastward to Sikkim and westward to Kangra" (Hutt, *Modern Literary Nepali* 4).

The rise of Prithvi Narayan Shah and the broad footprint of the Shah dynasty thereafter can be seen as the beginning of Nepali nationalism. This was the first time in Nepali history that people from several small principalities, defined mainly by their distinct ethno-linguistic identities, were brought together and subjected to the norms, values, and regulations of the larger administrative power. This version of Nepali nationalism was based

until 2014. Thus, depending on the point from where one chooses to count, the Shah Kings ruled modern Nepal for some 240 to 265 years.

on the key components that defined the Shah monarchy and the Gorkha Kingdom, namely, the Nepali language (known as *Gorkha Bhasha/Parbate/Khas Kura* until the mid-20th century), Hindu religion, and the assumed superiority of Hindu upper castes. It goes without saying that the Gorkhali Khas-Arya version of nationalism could not accommodate a large majority of people with other socio-cultural and regional identities in its definition and criteria. Pradip Giri claims that "the present state was established by suppressing two fertile civilizations, i.e. Newari and Maithili" (Giri n.p.), whereas in reality, it was more than just two "civilizations". Many other rich cultures, Kirats in the East, Tharus in the south, Khas in the west, and Tamangs, Magars and Gurungs in the central hills, to name a few, had to pay a huge cost for the rise of the Shah dynasty, in terms of the obliteration of their socio-cultural identity as well as their marginalisation in the larger state structure.

2. *Anglo-Nepal War, Sugauli Treaty, and the Rana Period (1814-1951)*

Nepal's defeat at the hands of the British in the Anglo-Nepal War (1814-16), led to the signing of the humiliating Sugauli Treaty in 1816, which marked the next turning point in the history of Nepal and the formation of Nepali nationalism. Despite being permitted to maintain its independence, the treaty had far-reaching consequences for Nepal. It put an end to the expansive mission of the Shah Kings who ceded more than one-third of the recently consolidated state to the British Empire. It also led to a situation where Nepal's internal and external affairs came under the close supervision, or even control, of the British, via their permanent representative in Kathmandu. According to Ali Riaz and Subho Basu, this turned Nepal into a "de facto British protectorate between 1816 and 1923" (3). The Sugauli Treaty, thus, badly bruised the ego of the Nepali warrior class that considered itself almost invincible in the early years of its unificationist/expansionist mission. One of the ways to heal this wound was to turn the story of defeat into one of victory, which went on to become one more

defining feature of Nepali nationalism. “As it was not annexed,” Pratyoush Onta explains, “Nepal’s nationalist rhetoric instead celebrates the [Anglo-Nepal war] as the story of Nepali bravery at work” (*The Politics of Bravery* 41), even though the consequences of the defeat were colossal. Thus, in addition to the Nepali language, Hinduism, and the Shah monarchy, “Nepal’s non-colonized past” was rendered as “another essential element of that narrative [of nationalism]” (“Creating a Brave Nation” 39).

Jung Bahadur Rana (1817-1877), took advantage of the chaos resulting from the rivalries and intrigues that proliferated in the palace, especially after Prithvi Narayan Shah’s death. The conflicts and grievances that arose in the aftermath of defeat in the Anglo-Nepal war and the Sugauli Treaty, helped to establish an oligarchy, the Rana regime, that ruled Nepal from 1846 to 1951 (Thapa and Sijapati 14). This “new aristocracy” (Jain 79) relegated the king to the position of a titular head, vesting the de facto ruler with the hereditary title of prime minister. Concerned with nothing beyond remaining in power and ensuring a lavish lifestyle for themselves, the Rana regime worked as close allies of the British, which served their mutual interests. For the British, this arrangement ensured a “regular supply of the Gurkha recruits into their army” as well as their desire “to see Nepal under their hegemony,” while in return, the Ranas could “rule the country so long as the British ruled in India” (Amatya 33-34) without any hindrances. This created an oligarchy that concentrated all power and privilege onto itself, suppressed and exploited its people to the limit, maintained a largely feudal state, and was, in the words of Thapa and Sijapati, a “dark blot on the history of Nepal” (14). But since it was backed by the British in India, there was no possibility of the Rana regime coming to an end while the British remained in India. No one knew this better than the first generation of modern Nepali politicians who fought against the British in India, hoping that once the British left India, the end of Rana rule in Nepal would not be too far away. As anticipated, after India gained independence in 1947, an armed revolution arose in

Nepal in 1950-51, which with the participation of King Tribhuvan brought the 105-year long Rana rule to an end.

3. A Brief Experiment with Democracy (1951-1960)

After the success of the 1950-51 revolution, Nepal entered a new stage which can be considered the third major landmark in the formation of the Nepali nation and its nationalism. This was probably the first time that common Nepalis became aware of the larger territory and administration to which they belonged, and their strength and their rights as citizens. For B P Koirala, one of the leaders of this revolution, this was when the formation of a true nationalism took place for the first time in the country's history. He claims that during the revolution, "people belonging to all castes, creeds and religions…raised a united voice. A strong feeling of togetherness was created across the nation, and this led to the rise of nationalism" (Koirala, "Rashtriyata: Nepalko Sandarbhama", i.e. "Nationality: In the Context of Nepal" n.p.). Koirala maintains that this was the first time the people of Nepal had accomplished something with a nationwide spirit, suggesting that the anti-Rana revolution was a historical event that made Nepalis a part of the larger "imagined political community", to use Benedict Anderson's conceptual phrase (6). In 1959, the nation's first general elections were held. Nepali Congress, the party that had led the revolution against the Ranas, came to power and its leader, Koirala, became the prime minister for the next 17 months, from May 1959 to December 1960. Both the house of the parliament and the cabinet, for the first time in the history of Nepal, noticeably acknowledged and reflected the socio-cultural heterogeneity of the country. According to Joshi and Rose, in a short period, Koirala's government accrued a "record of accomplishment unparalleled by that of any previous government in Nepal" (qtd. in Thapa and Sijapati 17).

4. The Panchayat Period (1960-1990)

Unfortunately, the spirit of change and enthusiasm heralded by the 1951 Revolution came to an end early in 1960, when King Mahendra led a royal coup, suspended the parliament elected by the people, jailed all the political leaders, and started a non-party Panchayat System[9] that lasted for the next 30 years, until 1990. Most of the debates on nationalism taking place at present in Nepal are, in one way or the other, responses to the definitions and practices established during these 30 years, which in turn were based on the parameters established by the monarchical system and, to a large extent, the Rana regime that preceded it.

For the first time in Nepali history, Panchayat carefully designed and systematically implemented its version of nationalism. Pradip Giri holds King Mahendra responsible for setting up "a very narrow definition of nationalism by stepping on the territory consolidated by P N Shah" (Giri n.p.). From national icons and emblems to the national anthem and national songs, from themes, subjects, and even styles of literary and artistic works to dress codes for people, everything was dictated and implemented by the state. For this purpose, Panchayat exploited the power and resources of the state, including the newly established channels of mass communication and education, including newspapers, radio, and textbooks. The fallout from this project was that anyone and anything that did not conform to the narrow criteria of approved nationalism was deemed either an 'antinational element' or a 'foreign agent'. There was little change to the criteria for defining Nepaliness that had been in place for the last two centuries; they just became even more detailed and specific. The "triumvirate

[9] The name derives from a traditional Hindu system of governance popular in South Asia, and King Mahendra described it as "suiting the Nepali soil" ("नेपाली माटो सुहाउँदो") in contrast to the 'imported' democratic system. Though it had the provisions of elections at the local councils (गाउँ पंचायत) and district councils (जिल्ला पंचायत) that formed the national legislature, National Panchayat (राष्ट्रिय पंचायत), the ultimate power remained with the king, and he ruled "unhindered by the pressures of parliamentary democracy" (Whelpton, *A History of Nepal* 101).

of official Nepali nationalism," according to Onta, "the monarchy, Hinduism and Nepali language", onto which the narrative of a brave history with a 'non-colonised' past was added, continued "[misrepresenting] at its best and [wiping] out at its worst the cultural identities of many ethnic groups" ("Creating a Brave Nation" 38).

5. *From a Multiparty Democracy and "People's War" to a Federal Republic (1990-)*

The People's Revolution of 1990[10] brought the absolute monarchy and the Panchayat System to an end and replaced it with a constitutional monarchy and multiparty democracy. This change created a more open atmosphere for political discussion, and for the first time, grievances related to linguistic, ethnic, religious, and regional exclusion, were openly debated by the public. The removal of censorship on speech and publication that had existed during the Panchayat years encouraged the promotion and dissemination of dissentient voices and ideas. This change, however, had its own limitations and could not fully accommodate the aspirations of the people because of limits on inclusion and differential access to resources. Moreover, instead of acknowledging and embracing diversity, there still were attempts, according to Onta, to "remould the dominant national narratives so that somehow they [could] encompass all claims to cultural distinctiveness within Nepal while serving, like past narratives, to inculcate loyalty to the Nepali state" ("Creating a Brave Nation" 38). According to Gopal Kirati, "The 1990 constitution enabled the oppressed nationalities to rise up... but it did not give them their rights" (qtd. in Adhikari 501). Moreover, constant discord among the ruling parties, and the instability resulting from the frequent changes in the government, added further to the "long-standing and deep-seated antagonism" between the Nepali

[10] It is now referred to as People's Revolution I, after the 2006 revolution, which is referred to as People's Revolution II.

Congress and Communist hard-liners (Thapa and Sijapati 67), which ultimately led to the Maoist uprising in 1996.

The Maoist uprising, commonly referred to as the *Jana-yuddha* (People's War), lasted for ten years and resulted in the deaths of more than 17,000 people, including security forces, Maoist rebels, and civilians. Furthermore, Nepal witnessed the Royal Massacre in June 2001, in which ten members of the royal family, including the king, queen, crown prince and their entire immediate family, were killed. Gyanendra, the brother of the deceased King Birendra, ascended to the throne in the aftermath of the massacre and attempted to reinstitute absolute monarchy by dissolving the parliament in February 2005, as his father had done in 1960. However, the combined force of the decade-long Maoist insurgency, and the huge mass protests of April 2006, now known as the People's Revolution II, forced him to abandon his efforts. These events gradually laid a path for the end of the monarchy. In April 2008, the Constitutional Assembly elections were held, and in May, the first meeting of the Constitutional Assembly made a "unanimous declaration of the end of the monarchy" (Baral 140) that had ruled modern unified Nepal for 250 years, and Nepal was declared a republic.

The transitional years have proven to be progressive on certain grounds. September 2015 saw the promulgation of a new constitution, with local, provincial and federal elections held in 2017, returning more inclusive representative bodies than ever before. However, there are still many who believe, in the words of Bal Gopal Shrestha, that "after the 2006 change, the state power has just shifted from the king to the same high caste Hill Hindu Bahun and Chhetri elites,"[11] and that virtually nothing else has changed (Shrestha 63). Considering the state's repeated failures to keep its promise of inclusion and equality, indigenous and ethnic people have every right to be doubtful. It is notable that on February 15, 2018, the day that K P Sharma Oli became the first elected prime minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of

[11] Mahendra Lawoti uses the acronym CHHEM to refer to this group, i.e., Caste Hill Hindu Elite Males (21).

Nepal under the terms of the new constitution, he instructed the male MPs of his party to wear *daura-suruwal* and female MPs to wear *sari-cholo*. This attire is identified with the Khas-Arya community that has remained in power since the rise of the Shahs and is considered by many to be the last bastion of Panchayat nationalism (Saud n.p.). Sarita Tiwari's poem "Hubahu" ("Look-alike") represents this fear:

> The new ruler of the republic
> looks exactly like
> the old one
> He has the same cunning smile
> and the same fake gestures
> in the same manner
> exactly in the same way
> he strokes his moustache
> and tells lies. (Tiwari 5-13)

Thus, while the state has always attempted to present itself as a "garden of four *varnas* and thirty-six *jatis*" (4 castes and 36 sub-castes), an epigram attributed to P N Shah's *Divya Upadesh* (*Divine Teachings*) (Panta 36), in reality, it has mostly been a playground for Pahade (hill-origin), upper-caste Hindu men. Everyone else, women, the non-Hindu indigenous people, Dalits, people from the plains, mountains and the mid- and far-western regions, and people coming from linguistic backgrounds other than Nepali and following religions other than Hinduism, have been treated as *jhar* (weeds), to use an expression common in Nepali identity politics discussion. Poets and writers keep coming back and responding to this epigram as one of the foundational lies of Nepali nationalism. For instance, in his poem "Upekshit Phool" ("Neglected Flower"), Hangyug Agyat declares:

> An ostracised flower till now,
> I will now become a thorn. (Agyat 19)

In the same manner, Shrawan Mukarung addresses this image in his poem "Jangali Phool" ("Wild Flower"):

In villages
towns
and cities
they just call me-
a wild flower
but
in the wilderness
I do have a different name. (98)

In these lines, Mukarung poignantly laments the state's failure to give people from the margins the respect they deserve, or to even acknowledge their self-avowed identities.

Drawing upon this survey, the upcoming sections provide a brief overview of the grounds on which policies of exclusion have been enacted over more than 250 years, to establish the context for the upcoming literary discussion. A more detailed examination of the specific bases of marginalisation will be provided in the respective chapters.

Grounds for Exclusion

1. *Ethnicity/caste*

According to the 2011 Census,[12] there are a total of 131 ethnic groups in Nepal. Among them, nine ethnic groups have a population of more than one million, and seventeen other ethnic groups have a population of more than one-hundred-thousand. However, if we consider access to resources as well as opportunities for political representation and employment in government jobs from the state, upper-caste Hindus (Brahmins, Chhetris, and Thakuris), i.e. the Khas-Aryas from the central hills, have always remained at the centre of power. Both lower-caste Hindus, the Dalits, as well as the non-Hindu indigenous people, the *Janajatis*, and people from geographical regions other than the hills have remained

[12] Slightly outdated, this, however, is the latest census report on Nepal. The next National Population and Housing Census (NPHC) was supposed to be carried out in June 2021, but has been postponed due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

marginalised. Despite the advent of the republic and the abolition of Panchayat, we still have a situation where a majority of Nepalis do not feel that they fully belong to the nation. David Gellner claims that except for the Khas-Aryas, and a certain section of the Newar population, all the other groups of Nepal (*janajati, dalit, bhotiya*, and *Madheshi*) find themselves excluded from the "heart of Nepaliness" (24). Hangyug Agyat aptly describes this situation in his poem "Afno Birano" ("Familiar/Stranger"):

> The village is yours
> But the secretary isn't
> The district is yours
> But the CDO[13] isn't
> The headquarters are yours
> But the officers aren't
> The country is yours
> But the ruler isn't. (26)

As these lines show, the result of this ethnicity-based exclusion is that the majority of people find themselves to be outsiders even in their own homes. While the villages, districts, headquarters, and the country as a whole equally belong to the non-Khas-Arya people, the poem exposes that all the offices are monopolised Khas-Arya officials and representatives. In fact, Dor Bahadur Bista holds that this is the main reason behind Nepal's backwardness. "Nepal's strengths," Bista writes, "have always been in the indigenous qualities of its various ethnic groups" (8), who were in the past known as "effective merchants and craftsmen" (2). Yet these skills and trades have been lost after being ruled for centuries by the Khas-Aryas who hardly valued or promoted them.

[13] During the Panchayat years, Nepal was divided into 75 districts, and the CDO (Chief District Officer) was the highest administrative official, usually referred to as "जिल्लाको राजा" (king of the district). Two new districts have been added in the changed administrative division, and the authority and influence of the CDO remains more or less still the same.

2. Language

According to the 2011 Census, there are 123 languages spoken as mother tongue in Nepal. Among them, five languages are spoken by more than one million people, and fourteen languages are spoken by more than one hundred thousand people. If we look into the recent division of the country into seven federal provinces, there are two provinces (Provinces no. 2 and 7)[14] where a language other than Nepali is spoken as a mother tongue by a majority of the people, while in Province no. 2, Nepali is not among even the top three languages spoken as a mother tongue (Sharma 28). Despite these statistics, Nepali has been enforced as the only state language and the language of both administration and education. The privileged position that Nepali enjoys today is most importantly because it is the language of the ruling community.[15] From the time of P N Shah's unification/expansion until now, the Nepali language has been favoured and promoted by the rulers and the state through several state policies. A National Educational Planning Commission Report of 1956 recommended that "local dialects and tongues, other than standard Nepali, should be vanished [sic] from the school and playground as early as possible in the life of a child" because "the study of a non-Nepali local tongue would mitigate [sic] against the effective development of Nepali, for the student would make greater use of it than Nepali—at home and in the community—and thus Nepali would remain a 'foreign' language" (qtd in D. N. Gellner 20). The conviction underlying this policy was that "if the younger generation is taught to use Nepali as the basic language, then other languages will gradually disappear, and greater national strength and unity will result (qtd. in D. N. Gellner 20). Gellner points out that, "for Nepali nationalists, a single language, shared by the whole nation, was supposed to create a nation of equal

[14] Provinces 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 have now been named Bagmati, Gandaki, Lumbini, Karnali, and Sudurpaschim respectively. At the time of this study, names of Provinces 1 and 2 have not been finalised.

[15] According to the 2011 Census, Nepali is spoken as a mother tongue by 44.6% and as a second language by 32.8% of the people. For more details on the "Rank and Share of 15 Major Mother Tongues" of Nepal, refer to Appendix C (p. 259).

citizens. In fact, some citizens—those whose mother tongue it was—were left more equal than others" (21). Though there has been a change in this policy and attitude, especially after 1990, since which time all other mother-tongue languages spoken in Nepal have been officially considered as 'national languages', much harm has already been done, a lot of which is probably irreversible.

3. Religion

In his *Divya Upadesh*, probably considering the fact that India had previously been ruled by the Muslim Mughals and later by the British/Christians, P N Shah claimed that Nepal was the "asil Hindusthana", i.e. the real Hindustan (Panta 36). Shah's claim shows the inextricability of religion from the monarchy and the idea of nationalism affiliated with it. It also points to the questioning and future disintegration of the unified ideal of a Hindu nation that was imposed on a diverse society. Shah expelled the Christians then living in Kathmandu and ensured that Hinduism remained not only a way of life but also a way of governance. This legacy was carried on by all the future rulers of Nepal. The 1854 *Muluki Ain* (*Law of the Country*),[16] the first criminal and civil code of Nepal implemented by the first Rana prime minister, Jung Bahadur Rana, created the policy ground for a number of hierarchies, by keeping the high-caste Hindus on the top of the ladder and relegating low-caste Hindus and non-Hindu indigenous and ethnic people to the bottom. It was, in Richard Burghart's words, "a spatialized caste hierarchy that excluded Dalits to the edge of the settlements they served;

[16] *Nepali Brihat Shabdakosh* indicates that the words "Muluki" and "Ain" are both borrowed from Arabic (*Arabi*) "mulk" (1028) and "aain" (163) respectively. Like many other South Asian languages, Nepali has a long history of borrowing profusely from Arabic and Persian. Michael Hutt has listed a number of words of Persian origin used even as early as in Bhanubhakta's *Ramayana*, widely considered to be the first major work of Nepail literature, such as *hajur* (a respectful way of address/response), *hukum* (command), *phauj* (troops), *malik* (master), *matlab* (meaning), and *khabar* (news) (*Nepali, a National Language and Its Literature* 121). Even today, it is not uncommon to refer to the country/nation as *muluk* in Nepali. It is, however, both interesting and ironical that a country, which has always tried to distance itself from the Mughal/Islamic rule and religion, has used Arabic/Persian words to refer to the first (and the extant) National Code.

a social hierarchy of differential rights that categorised the rest of the population as ‘alcohol-drinkers’ versus ‘cord-wearers’, ‘enslavable’ versus ‘non-enslavable’, and (among Brahmins) ‘priestly’ versus ‘non-priestly’” (116). This project reached its peak after a century when King Mahendra declared that “[a]ll natives are identical” (*saman*) or “one and the same”[17] (qtd. in Burghart 120). Despite sounding like an egalitarian idea, this was a ploy to assimilate all the heterogeneous peoples along with their languages and cultures into the dominant hill Khas-Arya Hindu culture. While it was primarily a political move, religion was a foundational ingredient, in terms of which faith was adopted by the state and which ones were excluded from both the national narrative as well as the state mechanisms.

Even in today’s secular republic, the traditional religious roots embedded in Nepali politics continue to play a part. National Army Day is celebrated on a Hindu religious holiday, *Mahashivaratri*,[18] while the head of the state and the government take part in many of the Hindu (sometimes, Buddhist) rituals formerly attended by the king. The Hindu religion colours many of the banal expressions of governance and political power in the country including the custom of receiving *tika* from the president and the prime minister on the day of Dashain, the biggest Hindu festival in Nepal, another vestige from the days of the monarchy. But this biased approach does not lie only in the state’s embrace of the Hindu faith and its favouring of it in every possible way, but also in its intolerance towards other religions. For example, this double standard was evident recently when a village municipality’s decision to grant some budget for the construction of a local church became controversial, though hundreds of temples receive a budget from the state every year (see, for instance, “Church Banauna Budget Biniyojan”, i.e. “Budget Allocated to Build a Church”).[19]

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[17] समान / एक र समान

[18] Literally, ‘the great night of Lord Shiva’, it is an annual Hindu festival celebrated in February/March according to the Lunar calendar.

[19] https://www.sajhapost.com/2018/02/09/103029.html?fbclid=IwAR0Ft6lgKWFukDqC4pU9BxMBRRkfC4RhTYWU62yV43_OjHo2I0v1fjePjc

4. *Geographical Region*

Swapnil Smriti, in his poem "Chakrapath" ("The Ringroad")[20], describes the region-based exclusion that has been in practice in Nepal for more than two centuries: "Nepal is inside the Chakrapath/Democracy is outside the Chakrapath" (28). In another poem entitled "Baluwatar", Smriti portrays Baluwatar, the official residence of the Prime Minister of Nepal:

> Baluwatar is a picnic spot
> that acts as if it is not on the map of my country
> All the people outside are famished
> But there is an unending party in Baluwatar. (38)

As a country ruled for centuries by kings from the central-hills, Nepal has always been Kathmandu (and central hills) centred, while a large section from the plain lands in the south and the mountains in the north have remained at the extreme margins in terms of access and opportunity to government services. Even the Nepali speaking, high-caste Hindus from the mid- and far-western hills have remained marginalised. Pradeep Giri claims that the Nepali ruling class from the days of P N Shah until today has always considered Madheshis, Nepalis living in the southern plains, as non-native. He is of the view that this attitude grew stronger during the Rana period, was briefly diffused after the 1950-51 revolution, but during the rule of King Mahendra, "the old discrimination was re-enacted, and this led to further widening of the gap" (Giri n.p.). Prashant Jha states that "the Tarai found no mention at all in school curricula, except as a breadbasket" and there was hardly anything that "a Madheshi could relate to when he was taught in classroom—the language of instruction, the historical figures who were being mythologized, and the hill-centric cultural practices were all alien to him" (Jha 173). "But that was the aim," Jha explains, "to make him more Nepali through pedagogy and force him to be ashamed of his own roots," and not much has changed in the attitude of

[20] Chakrapath (the Ringroad) is a 27 km long road that encircles the inner city of the Kathmandu valley, which is also home to all the central (now, federal) government offices and business complexes.

the state towards Madhesh even now (173). While Madhesh has been under the spotlight in recent years, the fate of geographical exclusion has been shared by other regions, too, such as the mountains, the eastern hills, and the regions in the mid- and the far-west.

Literature in the Changed Context: Writings from the Margins

In another poem by Shrawan Mukarung, "Anuhar Khojirahechha Rambharos" ("Rambharos is Looking for His Face"), Rambharos, a poor farmer from the southern plains (his name, "dependent on Lord Ram" i.e. without any worldly riches, indicates as much), stands stunned in front of the "plain mirror of democracy" because he cannot see his face in it (22). He searches for his face in every possible place but finds only the marks of his slavery, his labour, blood, sweat, and tears. His face is to be found nowhere, not even in the songs he has been singing for ages during his own festivals. With his eyes "burning with fire" (22), Rambharos admonishes the poet:

> O poet!
> I disposed of your beloved poet
> I broke the statue of your beloved poet into pieces
> Who erected the statue of your poet, like a scarecrow,
> near me?
> O poet!
> I lost my face from the very day
> your poet stood here! (26)

During the Maoist insurgency which began in 1996 and culminated in the 2006 People's Revolution II, and even more so during the Madheshh Movement (2007), statues of the poets Bhanubhakta Acharya and Laxmi Prasad Devkota were destroyed, and books such as B P Koirala's *Sumnima* were burnt in different parts of the country.[21] These writers were denounced for their socio-cultural backgrounds, while their works were accused of

[21] Koirala was accused of appropriating and defaming their goddess, Sumnima. Martin Ganeszle notes that the Rais "did not appreciate this appropriation of their creator goddess by an elite Bahun, and in the mid-1990s there was even a public burning of the book in Biratnagar" (Gaenszle 339).

collaborating with the state in its homogenizing mission and of being disrespectful towards the marginalised communities. Mukarung's poem responds to the causes and implications of those events and raises questions about representation and exclusion in Nepali literary works.

Yug Pathak claims that destroying Bhanubhakta's and Devkota's statues during the Madhesh revolution was "evidence of the fact that Madheshi people had rejected them as canonical figures" (185) since they rarely found themselves reflected in the mirror of their writings. In rejecting them, they were also rejecting a body of literature that has been identified as "Nepali literature" but that predominantly represented the experiences and identities of only one section of Nepali society. Therefore, while a section of Nepali readers venerates these poets, readers coming from other languages, cultures, and regions, who feel unrepresented or misrepresented in their works, question and reject them, even more so in the wake of recent uprisings. "The purpose of literature," Pathak argues, "is to restore the lost pride of the people, to raise back their drooped heads" (194). Accordingly, he asks, "What purpose does literature serve if it is not rebellious even in a society where the majority of people have been humiliated and shamed on one excuse or the other?" (195). Pathak contends that as the so-called national literature, Nepali literature has always represented and spoken for the ruling class that has imposed socio-cultural homogeneity in an otherwise heterogenous country, and undermined its diversity.

Critics like Yug Pathak and C K Lal have characterised the pre-1990 Nepali literature as being an accomplice of the ruling class and collaborating with the state in its homogenizing mission. When we consider the fact that the majority of mainstream Nepali writers until the 1990s were men who came from an upper-caste Hindu background, it is not very surprising that even though they heralded revolutionary political ideas at different points in history, they neglected to address issues related to ethnicity, language, religion, and region, which have always complicated questions of national politics in Nepal. The writings of

Bhanubhakta Acharya and Motiram Bhatta, the precursors of Nepali literature, were aimed primarily at establishing an 'ideal' Hindu society. Laxmi Prasad Devkota, Lekhanath Paudyal, and Balkrishna Sama, who made certain departures from their predecessors, still portrayed Nepal as an exemplar of Hindu high cultural ideals. In the works of these seminal Nepali writers, the nation was often considered a spiritual entity whose characteristics derived from the religious and cultural values of the privileged class of upper-caste Hindus. Even when writers like Devkota and Koirala deployed humanistic and inclusive images, the model of inter-caste/region/religion relations was determined by the tastes and interests of the privileged classes rather than those on the margins.

It was only during the Panchayat years that these issues of the poor and the ethnically marginalised started receiving some long-overdue attention. But considering the avalanche of state-sponsored nationalism and strong censorship of alternative expressions, literary or otherwise, that did not meet its criteria, not much was done during the Panchayat period to either acknowledge the linguistic and cultural diversity of the country or to question the homogenizing project of the state. Thus, the writers of the Panchayat period can be given some leeway on the ground that issues of freedom and democracy were of more immediate concern during the autocratic regime and they could not address matters of cultural and ethnic inclusion as well. Yet it is also not possible to overlook the fact that most of these 'progressive' writers came from an upper-caste Hindu background, and the Nepali nationalism they depicted also represented their interests and concerns. This need not be a self-explanatory statement, but in Nepal's context, questions of diversity and inclusion were certainly treated as secondary in the first national democratic struggle. When one takes into account works such as Bhanubhakta Acharya's *Badhu Shikshya* (*Lessons for the Daugher-in-law*), Laxmi Prasad Devkota and Bal Krishna Sama's works on linguistic nationalism that ultimately led to a suppression of other languages, and Madhav Prasad Ghimire's and Bhim

Nidhi Tiwari's works that justify the missions of the Shah rulers at the expense of the communities that disagreed with them, one can concur with C K Lal that the writers and artists "who are supposed to be the vanguards of progress" were lagging the "farthest behind in envisioning a new Nepal" (34).

Even after the country embraced multiparty democracy in 1990, and the monarchy was relegated to constitutional status, the socio-cultural change could not keep up with people's aspirations. Poet Hangyug Agyat, for instance, claims that the 1990's change "couldn't address the issues of marginalised class and ethnicities" (Agyat, "Hami Raharle Arajak Baneka Hainau", i.e. "We Didn't Become Anarchists by Choice" n.p.). Agyat talks about the time when he and his friends considered the possibility of working together with the progressive (Communist) writers. But, he explains, since "they had a one-way understanding that there was no discrimination other than class, working together with them meant being bereft of [one's] ethnic and cultural aesthetics" (n.p.). This led him, along with two other writers, Upendra Subba and Rajan Mukarung, all hailing from the indigenous Kirat community in the eastern hills, to start the *Srijansheel Arajakata* (Creative Anarchy) movement. It helped bring the issue of ethnic identities into the mainstream of Nepali literature through the publication of powerful literary works written from ethnically marginalised perspectives and also through initiating a critical debate on this issue.

In recent years, especially during and after the Maoist war (1996-2006), the People's Revolution II (2006) and the Madhesh Revolution (2007), and even more so after the declaration of Nepal as the secular Federal Republic in 2007, there has been an upsurge in writings from the margins, both from writers belonging to marginalised castes/ethnicities, languages, religions, and regions, and from writers from the more privileged backgrounds, who consider themselves allies of marginalised groups. While it will take some time to see the nature and the extent of change in other walks of life, over the last fifteen years, literature

has been trendsetting in articulating the aspirations of marginalised communities and bringing them into the mainstream. A closer look at contemporary Nepali literature shows that writers are not talking only about old statues or living under their shadows, but also about shaking them up. Bimal Bhaukaji's poem, "Salik ra Salik Hallaune Maanchhe" ("The Statue and the Statue Shaker"), for instance, describes a man who falls while "shaking a black statue raised in the middle of the road" (5-6). But when he falls, he falls "shaking the whole country" and setting "the history of the nation" right (24-25). Contemporary Nepali writing is replete with earnest appeals to question official history, to examine its exclusionary values and practices, and to take nothing for granted. Rajab, in "Kharab Sattako Itihas" ("History of a Bad Regime"), concludes that while writing a history, those who "are good at /writing the history of bad government" (13-14) are chosen. In the same vein, Avaya Shrestha, in his poem "Sandeha" ("Doubt"), asks people to question everything including "the history written by the great historians" (13) and "all the values and beliefs of the world" (14).

Nepal's new national anthem, "Saiyau thunga phoolka hami", i.e. "a garland of hundreds of flowers", in terms of the content as well as the process through which the anthem was selected, is yet another striking example of the transformation both Nepali literature and the idea of the nation are undergoing in the recent years. The old Nepali national anthem, "Shreeman gambhir Nepali, prachanda, pratapi, bhupati", i.e., "Illustrious, profound, the awesome, glorious Nepali monarch" (Hutt, "Singing the New Nepal" 310) that was in effect from 1899, was essentially an eulogy of the king, not very different from the British national anthem "God Save the King/Queen". While the old national anthem was getting unpopular, especially among the "politicised and intellectual classes for many years" since as early as the 1980s, and there were voices raised "in favour of changing the national anthem during the Constitution-drafting process that followed the Jan Andolan of 1990," it remained the official national anthem until 2006 (Hutt, "Singing the New Nepal"). It was only in 2006, after Nepal

transitioned from a Monarchical system to a Federal Republic that the new government initiated the process of selecting a new national anthem. Through a nationwide competition, "Saiyau thunga phoolka haami", a song by a virtually unknown 34-year old ethnic poet, Byakul Maila, was selected by the National Anthem Selection Taskforce, and was later set to music by renowned composer Ambar Gurung. From an anthem written by a well known Brahmin poet which sang the glory of the king to one written by an unknown ethnic poet that primarily sings of the people and the country, this is an important cultural and symbolic shift in Nepal's new socio-political context.

Research Questions and Scope

In this study, I examine these contemporary literary works with reference to specific points of exclusion in Nepal's context: language, caste/ethnicity, religion, and region. I analyse the nationalistic aspirations of marginalised Nepalis in the changed political and social context of contemporary Nepal and relate them to older expressions of nationalism that have also thematised these issues but from a more privileged perspective. The primary question that I seek to answer is: how do contemporary Nepali literary works in a variety of genres, particularly those written from marginal locations and perspectives, question and challenge the established narrative of nationalism, and envision a more inclusive one? This study focuses on works of poetry, fiction, plays, and literary essays written by writers in the wake of the People's War; it considers the mechanisms they use to respond to the exclusions enacted by the state and analyses the solutions they offer, if any, for a way out and forward. Most current writers interested in addressing questions of inequality have directly or indirectly participated in the two, and in some cases three, major political events that Nepalis have lived through, namely Panchayat, the anti-Panchayat democratic movement of 1990 and

the Maoist insurgency. I will also explore how the poetry, fiction, plays, and essays produced by these writers extend and challenge the ideologies that have grounded these movements.

I examine the relationship between the state and writers, the role literature has played in propagating/contesting specific narratives of the nation, and the differences in the ways that issues of ethnicity/identity have been dealt with at various historical periods. Since these major events, and the distinct periods they mark, have occurred within the lifespan of many contemporary writers who have either witnessed or participated in them, placing the writings from these periods alongside each other can help illuminate the changing dynamics of Nepali nationalism. A comparative approach also helps to highlight the closeness of the milieu of Nepali writers even when they are worlds apart ideologically. Therefore, I focus on three different perspectives to examine the issues of exclusion and marginalization: First, I consider how contemporary writers who come from the margins deal with the long tradition of exclusion and dismissal and portray their past histories, present realities and future aspirations in relation to the nation. What approaches, themes, styles and strategies do these writers employ in their efforts to become the "vanguards of progress" (Lal 34), or in "restoring the lost pride of the people" (Pathak 194)? Secondly, how do the works on these issues by contemporary writers who do not belong to these marginal locations compare to works by the writers from those margins, both in their content and style? How do their perspectives differ, if at all, from writers coming from the mainstream socio-cultural milieu in the past?

Rambharos asks poets and writers to "find [his] face" in their works:

> O poet! O new poet!
> Find my face in your poem
> Find it today! Find it right now!
> Only then I will keep your statue in my heart. (26)

Mukarung suggests that works of art and literature give people their ‘face’, their identity and recognition, and their sense of belonging to a nation. Therefore, when they do not feel included and accommodated in mainstream narratives of the nation through art and literature, it is probably not very surprising that statues of writers from this tradition are broken, and their books are burnt. It becomes the responsibility of the ‘new’ poets/writers to write in a way in which everyone feels included. Pathak urges that Nepali literature should “come out of the tradition of hagiographical and eulogistic modes of writing established by the monarchical system,” arguing that literary appreciation should be based on critical assessment (195). Otherwise, Pathak warns, “only statues will be found in literature, it will not include the lives of common people” (196). In such a case, literature will still be enjoyed by a handful of people, but “common people will not be interested in it because the reflection of their lives won’t be found there” (Pathak 196). One of my aims in this study is to consider how recent literary works differ from the works of the past in how they tell the stories of people from the margins.

For this purpose, I have chosen influential and representative literary texts from the last two decades, especially after identity politics came to the forefront during the Maoist rising in 1996. These texts concern themselves with issues of ethnicity/caste, language, religion, and region—four categories by which individuals and groups were excluded in Nepal. The majority of these texts are written by people belonging to one (or more) of these marginal locations under discussion. However, a number of literary texts written by writers not belonging to marginal locations but making strong cases on the issues of marginalisation have also been cited and discussed (for instance, Laxmi Prasad Devkota, Dhruba Chandra Gautam, Amar Neupane, and Yug Pathak). Here is an overview of the primary texts that I will be investigating in the course of this study:

1. Language: In this section, I primarily focus on the works of Kirat writers, especially those belonging to the movement called *Sirjansheel Arajakata*, and the ones who came after them, to explore how through their use of a more colloquial ethnic/regional variety of Nepali spoken by Kirat (as well as non-Kirat) people living in the eastern hills of Nepal they critique the notion of a standard, pure form of literary Nepali language. I examine works such as Shrawan Mukarung's *Bise Nagarchiko Bayan* (2010), Upendra Subba's *Lato Pahad* (2015) and *Kholako Geet* 2013), Hangyug Agyat's *Karangko Hirasat* (2003), and *Adharatko Tangsing* (2015), and Rajan Mukarung's *Damini Bhir* (2013), among others, to explore how they question depictions of the Eastern Hills people and their dialect in mainstream Nepali literature. I will also consider their treatment of issues that have not been written about before in an altogether different language and style, and what this enables.

2. Ethnicity: Ethnicity has long been one of the biggest contributors to systemic discrimination in Nepal. In this section, I focus on contemporary works of Nepali literature by both Tamang and non-Tamang writers that deal with the Tamang ethnic group and shed light on the history of exclusion based on ethnicity. Works I will consider include Beena Theeng Tamang's poem "Rato Ghar" (2015), Phulman Bal's play "Sonam Gyalmo" (2018), and Yug Pathak's novel *Urgenko Ghoda* (2012). Since these works, and a number of works written on the suppression, exploitation, and marginalisation of ethnic people, such as Swapnil Smriti's poem "Kathaa- Ghumaaune Chautarimaa Kabhrako" (2016), and Pranika Koyu's "Ma Sumnimaki Chhori" (2020), make use of ancient myths to interpret and understand the present-day reality, I explore these works under the broad subject of ethnic myths and mainstream history.

3. Religion: Ruled by a Hindu monarchy for much of its modern history with Hinduism as the state religion until 2015, religion is another important category under analysis in this

dissertation. In this section, I examine literary works written about people belonging to religions other than Hinduism, with a focus on works dealing with Nepali Muslims. For this purpose, I will analyse Laxmi Prasad Devkota's works (*Muna Madan*, “Ek Sundari Chyaminiprati”, and “Damai Dai”), Ahuti’s poems (“Gahugoro Africa” and “Baisau Shatabdima”) (2014), Hangyug Agyat’s “Jadau Bhandina” (2015), Swapnil Smriti’s “Purano Majdoor” (2016), and Pancha Kumari Pariyar’s “Cloud, Daughter, and Me” (2019), Narayan Dhakal’s short story “Irfan Ali” (1995), Nayan Raj Pandey’s novel *Loo* (2012), and Phulman Bal’s short story “Kajol Khatoon” (2016), as well as works by the Muslim folk poet, Ali Miya, collected in *Sashwat: Anthology of Contemporary Poems from Pokhara* (1989) and *Ali Miyako Awaj* (2000). I will also cursorily examine other works dealing with marginalised religious groups such as Trishna Kunwar’s *Seraj Amhed* (2010) and Amar Neupane’s *Paniko Gham* (2013).

4. *Region*: Considering the fact that Nepal has, for a long time, been mid-hill centred in every area including literature, both as the place where the majority of the mainstream writers came from as well as the subject of most literary works, in this section, I analyse works dealing with the regional margins, with a focus on the portrayal of the Tarai-Madhesh region of Nepal. In this context, I focus on Nayan Raj Pandey’s *Ular* (2012) and Prakash Shah’s *Abba* (*Father*, 2014), and compare them with works on the region from the past such as B P Koirala’s short story “Madheshtira” (1949), Bhawani Bhikshu’s short story “Maujang Babusahebko Kot” (1960), and Dhruba Chandra Gautam’s novel *Alikhit* (1984). I will also examine works relating to other marginal regions such as Ramlal Joshi’s *Aina* (2016) that tell the stories of life in the mid-western and far-western hills and plains, and works by Kirat writers dealing with the eastern hills.

CHAPTER 2. THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

Changing Narratives of Nepali Nationalism and Approaches to Reading Contemporary Nepali Literature

Changing Narratives

Nepal is a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, and multi-faith country with a diverse geographical makeup. Until recently, it was divided into three horizontal geographical regions, the mountains, the hills, and the plains, and five vertical administrative units, overlapping the three horizontal regions, called "development regions", Eastern, Central, Western, Mid-Western, and Far-Western, fourteen "Zones", and 75 "Districts". The 2015 Constitution restructured the country into seven states loosely organized around ethno-regional lines. Despite its ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, since its inception in 1743, the 'imagined community' of this nation has never reflected this heterogeneity in a substantive way. Though the catchphrase Nepal is a "shared garden of four *varnas* and thirty-six *jatis*" (Panta 36) has resonated over the years, it has remained at best a platitude and at worst a mask for disguising the hegemonic nature of the state. In fact, clichés like these have exposed the inconsistency between the rhetoric and the reality of such national narratives.

It goes without saying that every nation and nationalism is the product of a specific socio-political and cultural context. Therefore, while an attempt to understand a particular nation by using an approach developed in another setting can provide us with an extraneous lens to broaden the perspective, we should also be careful about the context from where these approaches come. Anthony Smith cautions against generalizations in the study of nationalism:

> Chameleon-like, nationalism takes its colour from its context. Capable of endless manipulation, this eminently malleable nexus of beliefs, sentiments and symbols can be understood only in each instance; nationalism in general is merely a lazy historian's escape from the arduous task of explaining the

> influence of this or that particular nationalist idea, argument or sentiment in its highly specific context. (79)

Despite this caveat, it is important to consider the events and ideas that constitute Nepali nationalism in the context of prevailing theories of nationalism.

The way one chooses to narrate the story of a nation varies largely in the way one defines the term ‘nation’ itself. The theorisation of the nation in broader socio-cultural terms defining groups of people having a common origin, a shared past, and shared language, religion, and culture, goes a long way back in time, as outlined in the works of the primordialist/perennialist schools (Pierre van den Berghe, Clifford Geertz and Edward Shils), and the neo-perennialist and ethno-symbolic schools (Anthony Smith, John Armstrong, and John Hutchinson). For modernist theorists of nationalism, namely Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, and Benedict Anderson, nationalism is a more recent phenomenon, an outcome of the rise of technology, industrialisation, and print capitalism in the late 18th/early 19th century. According to Smith, from the pre-World War II “perennialist assumptions of the transhistorical reoccurrence and longevity of nations,” and the modernist domination for the next fifty years after that, the study of nationalism has now “arrived at a critical juncture” (*Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach* 133). He provides a long list of “new, often overlapping departures” in the field, ranging from “feminist and gender interpretations” and “cultural studies of ‘hybridised’ national identities and multi-culturalism” to “post-national and globalisation approaches; and the study of ‘everyday nationhood’ and the consumption of nationalism” (133). Nepal’s case does not appear to be much different in this regard. There has been a shift in recent years from the understanding of nationalism as a monumental notion that the state imposes upon its people and they quietly accept to an idea that nationalism is fundamentally and ultimately about people, and it is the people who delineate and embody it. It is the time, in Bal Gopal Shrestha’s words when

"non-Khas nationalities" have begun "asserting their own national identities within the boundaries of the current state" ("Ethnic Nationalism in Nepal" 22).

Approaches to Reading the New Nepali Literature

Contemporary Nepali literature is a rich ground where attempts to question and challenge the old, monolithic, and exclusionary narrative of the nation and propose and promote more inclusive narratives are taking place. In this study, I propose some overarching theoretical frameworks and some issue-specific approaches to reading contemporary Nepali literature in particular and understanding the changing narrative of Nepali nation/nationalism in general.

1. *Modernity, Nationalism, and Nepali Nationalist Literature*

The very forces of modernity that had been instrumental in introducing the concept of nationhood in the Western world from as early as the 18th century onwards, were also used by the Nepali state to the same end and proved effective in accomplishing the same results to a large extent. In this sense, mainstream Nepali nationalism, as we know it today, is largely a manifestation as well as a product of 'Nepali modernity'. According to Eric Hobsbawm, "The basic characteristic of the modern nation and everything connected with it is its modernity" (14), even though "in its modern and basically political sense the concept *nation* is historically very young" (18). One of the factors behind the 'success' the Panchayat system achieved in implementing its version of Nepali nationalism may be the fact that it was coeval with the belated waves of modernity that arrived in Nepal with its opening up to the rest of the world in the early 1950s.

In line with what Benedict Anderson theorises in *Imagined Communities*, Panchayat marked the moment when Nepal, for the first time, experienced what can be likened to "print-capitalism" (45): schools opened throughout the country, and textbooks designed carefully

from the perspective of Panchayat nationalism were disseminated which, for the majority of people, was the first instance of knowing where the state thought they 'belonged'. In the same vein, the state newspaper, *Gorkhapatra* (literally meaning "document/letter from Gorkha), established in 1901 and published weekly with limited circulation, became a daily in 1961 and was circulated more widely, reaching every district headquarters. Similarly, Radio Nepal, established in 1951, became a crucial disseminator of the state program. Thus, within a few years of an all-around state intervention, Nepalis, who probably had very little awareness about the places and people beyond their immediate region, became members of a larger "imagined political community" (Anderson 6).

An educational system that leads to mass literacy, another criterion for the development of nationalism outlined by Ernest Gellner, was also partly attained in the early days of the Panchayat system. Gellner proposes that nationalism is "essentially the general imposition of a high culture on society, whose previously low cultures had taken up the lives of the majority, and in some cases of the totality, of the population" (57). More specifically, it constitutes the "generalized diffusion of a school-mediated, academy-supervised, idiom codified for the requirements of reasonably precise bureaucratic and technological communication" (57), which appears to have been borne out in the way Nepali nationalism was constructed during the Panchayat era. However, this nationalism did not come close to the "establishment of an anonymous, impersonal society, with mutually substitutable individuals" (57) that Gellner presents as the outcome. On the contrary, Panchayat nationalism created a more conservative and monolithic nation, that thrived on socio-cultural partiality and exclusion.

Hobsbawm's claim that nationalism is "constructed essentially from above, but which cannot be understood unless also analysed from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people, which are not

necessarily national and still less nationalist" is also relevant here (10). In retrospect, we can see that the nationalism envisioned by Panchayat was based on a systematic imposition from above of one set of linguistic, socio-cultural, and political ideas upon a population made up of an immense variety. While there was no dearth of dissenting voices in literature, due to heavy censorship, only those works that Panchayat approved would reach the larger audience.

2. *Nepal after 1990: Awakening of Ethno-Symbolic Nationalism, and Indigenous Aesthetics*

There are many grounds upon which the proponents of ethno-symbolic nationalism, namely Armstrong, Smith, and Hutchinson agree with the modernist theorists of nationalism, such as the modern nature of nations, and, in the words of Smith, the "importance of conceiving nations as 'real' sociological communities…embedded in specific historical and geo-cultural contexts" (*Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach* 13-14). There are, however, some important points where they differ, especially in emphasizing the ties that existed prior to the formation of modern nations, in the forms of, according to Smith, "memories, traditions, values, myths, and symbols" (14). While most modernist theorists of nationalism, including Anderson, Gellner and Hobsbawm, do not highlight the role of ethnicity in nationalism, in fact, downplay it, for ethno-symbolists that is exactly where the roots of the modern nation lie. Smith elaborates:

> Theoretically, ethnicity, for all its problems, provides a more fruitful basis for explaining key elements of the distinctive shape and character of nations and nationalisms. Historically, we can trace a number of important cases of transformation of ethnic communities into 'nations', and an even greater number of cases where the symbolic elements of different ethnic groups fed into, or were used by, subsequent nationalisms in their nation-forming activities. To omit all reference to ethnic elements in the past and present is to make the task of explaining the contents and appeal of nations and nationalism infinitely difficult. (18)

Smith claims that even though nations can be formed by political institutions, “over the long term they require the ethno-cultural resources to create a solidarity community, mainly because of the critical importance for a sense of national identity of subjective dimensions,” which is why “nations cannot simply be seen as elite projects” (21).

In the context of Nepal, identity politics have become increasingly influential since the 1990s. Mahendra Lawoti and Susan Hangen believe that “ethnic mobilization and conflicts, which surged forward in Nepal after the restoration of democracy in 1990, have further increased in 2006,” and that “these movement based on ethnicity, language, caste, religion, and regional identity, have become increasingly central players on the contemporary political stage, reshaping debates on the definition of the Nepali nation, nationalism and the structure of the Nepali state” (5). To understand the changing dynamics of what Lawoti and Hangen call the pre-1990 “state-led” nationalism and the post-1990 “people-centric” nationalism in Nepal (5), the ethno-symbolist approach that takes into account “the cultural elements of symbol, myth, memory, value, ritual and tradition” (Smith, *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism* 25) can be very useful.

Equally relevant here is the idea of indigenous aesthetics which has been discussed in relation to works of art and literature by artists and writers of African-American and Native American or Canadian origin since the second half of the 20th century, and more recently in the context of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and the Maoris in New Zealand, among others. A number of critics admit that this is a field that is “only just becoming understood” (ahtone [sic] 3), and that there is still a dearth of criticism of indigenous/Aboriginal art (Garneu 1-2). Indigenous/ethnic aesthetics follows from the notion that “most ethnic groups possess aesthetic values central to their culture that are embodied in particular art forms such as music, visual arts, and drama or myth” (Neperud et al. 16). This notion, in recent decades, has also been used to discuss indigenous/ethnic literature and art

elsewhere. Tara Lal Shrestha, in his essay “Ke Ho Adivasi Janajati Saundarya?” (“What is Indigenous Ethnic Aesthetics?”), claims that Nepali indigenous/ethnic aesthetics are different from both Nepali mainstream ‘Khas-Arya aesthetics’ as well as Western aesthetics, and the mainstream writers and critics consider indigenous/ethnic aesthetics to be “weak, primeval, and immature” (n.p.). Shrestha characterises indigenous/ethnic literature as being close to the native land, language, culture, religion, and community, and, therefore, “aimed at a greater welfare of the community at large” (n.p.). David Garneu, in the context of indigenous art, emphasises that “indigenous criticism is not about adopting the critical habits of the mainstream and forcing a tough translation on your colleagues” (2). He elaborates: "You have to build a multi-cultural toolbox—and that takes a great deal of time and work. You need to develop a critical approach that does not humiliate your colleagues or break other Aboriginal protocols for being a proper human being (2).

In this study, I take the notion of ethno-symbolism one step further and examine works of contemporary Nepali literature, especially the ones written by indigenous/ethnic Kirat, Tamang, and Madheshi writers, to explore how they articulate an alternative concept of aesthetics than the one established by mainstream Nepali literature until now. As Jaune Quick-to-See Smith puts it, the culture of the indigenous/ethnic people is immersed in its specific area:

> Traditional goods, ceremonies and art come from the indigenous plants and animals as well as the land itself. The anthropomorphism of the land spawns the stories and myths. These are the stuff of culture which keep identity intact. (qtd. in Leuthold 198)

The use of indigenous/ethnic myths and folklore to shed light on the past and to understand the present reality is one of the methods employed by the writers that I explore in this study, and in more detail in the chapter dealing with ethnicity.

3. *Understanding Nepali Nationalism and Reading Contemporary Nepali Literature in the light of Postcolonialism and Internal Colonialism*

Though the mainstream political and literary position has been to claim that Nepal was never a colony of a foreign power, Nepal's relationship with the British Empire was not as straightforward as it is usually portrayed, and Nepal remained a quasi-colony in many ways. The 1950-movement, claimed by B P Koirala as the first nationalist movement, came in response to a regime that was buttressed by the British in India. In this regard, insights derived from postcolonial theories might shed some light on the case of Nepal. While the 1950-movement brought an end to the British-supported Ranas, India stepped into the shoes of the previous colonial masters and Nepali nationalism ever since has been shaped in relation to it. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Nepali nationalism, since the 1950s has been defined by a strong current of anti-Indian sentiment. According to Sanjay Upadhaya, under the Panchayat system, "Nepali nationalism was often measured in direct proportion to anti-Indianism" (57). This rhetoric has not changed much during the multiparty democracy years after 1990 and the republic years since 2007. Moreover, generations of Gurkha recruitment into the British army, as Roshan Kissoon puts it, "one of the last vestiges of the Empire" (Kissoon n.p.), or the "Relics of the Empire", as the title of Mary Des Chene's well-known study on the Gorkha soldiers[22] goes, raises critical questions about Nepal's independence and sovereignty even today.

Considering its condition of 'non-postcoloniality, it is all too easy to differentiate Nepal from its South Asian neighbours and place it apart from them. While Nepali politicians and intellectuals have stressed Nepal's difference from the rest of South Asia, in regards to its

[22] They are more commonly referred to as the 'Gurkha soldiers', or simply the 'Gurkhas' in the West, which is Anglicized form of the word 'Gorkha'. Depending on the context, I have used both variants, 'Gorkha' and 'Gurkha', in this study.

‘non-colonised’ past, Des Chene asserts that Nepal’s non-colonized history is “precisely what connects it to South Asia” (218). She elaborates:

> A non-colonial nationalism with deep roots in colonial India, a current political relationship with India that has its roots in Nepal’s relationship with British India, a history of labour migration that is similarly rooted in the political-economy of British India. And a vision of the nation premised on the Nepali language, the monarchy and Hinduism as its defining features, a vision forged in contradistinction to colonized India. (218)

Des Chene emphasizes the need to engage in a “certain kind of postcolonial scholarship” to fully understand Nepal’s situation, though, she warns that it will not be a “particularly familiar kind” (219). While Nepali nationalism as seen through the perspective of postcolonial studies would appear quite different from the nationalisms of other South Asian countries since their encounter and experience with the empire was completely different both in kind and degree, some kind of postcolonial engagement would help us better understand it. Pratyoush Onta also stresses the need to think of the history of Nepali nationalism in “more nuanced ways than as a ‘derivative discourse’ of colonialism” (“Activities in a ‘Fossil State’” 97). He explains, the “history of Nepali nationalism should be thought of as being both influenced by the colonial presence in South Asia and also one that was socially constructed in conscious opposition to it in ways that we could, decisively call ‘Nepali’” (97).

According to historians, the way Nepal’s power centre dealt with its peripheral territories in the past was not much different from the way an empire treats its colonies, nor does it seem to have changed much even at present. Burghart states that before Nepal was a nation-state, “it was an empire, albeit on a small scale, and confined to the Himalaya by the colonial power to the south,” and “many of today’s predicaments stem from that” time (13-14). According to Mahesh Chandra Regmi, for the Gorkhali rulers “it was easier to conquer territories than to govern them” (43). Whether it was issues of taxation or justice, they had two different policies: a more lenient one for people nearer to them, for instance in the central

hills, and a more severe one for the people further afield whose ethnicities differed from those of the ruling classes. Kumar Pradhan claims that the "Gorkhali conquests created a unified kingdom, but not a unified society" (201), and even after two hundred years, the situation has not changed much. A similar complaint was heard in 2015 from the people of Tarai-Madhesh who alleged that when people from other parts of the country staged protests against the proposed restructuring of states, their concerns were instantly addressed, whereas similar demands from the Tarai-Madhesh went unheard for months and ultimately led to dozens of deaths. Harka Gurung also states the migration of Hindus "from the drier West to the humid east" in search of economic progress led to the Hinduisation of those regions which was "accompanied by the colonization of tribal areas" (502-03). This is where the theory of internal colonialism appears to be particularly helpful in understanding Nepal's case better.

The theory of internal colonialism was first conceptualised in detail and popularized by Pablo Gonzalez Casanova in the mid-1960s, and was later developed by writers and theorists such as Andre Gunder Frank, Sergio Salvi, Harold Wolpe, Michael Hecter, and Charles Pinderhughes in recent times. These ideas have been used primarily to explain and study the continuing oppression of some sectors of the colonial society even after the end of colonialism, but are helpful in understanding any society involving "relations based on domination and exploitation among culturally heterogeneous, distinct groups" within a state (Casanova 33). According to Casanova, "internal colonialism corresponds to a structure of social relations based on domination and exploitation among culturally heterogeneous groups" (33). At the time the theory was proposed, David S Walls asked if "internal periphery" would be a better term to use than "internal colony" (232), but later theorists have regularly used it both for the postcolonial as well as non-colonial societies. Paulo Henrique Martins, for instance, finds the theory of internal colonialism "important to explain, on the one hand, the horizons and the current interest of postcolonial, anticolonial, and decolonial

criticism, and, on the other hand, the place of politics in heterogeneous societies" (Martins n.p.). Even though Nepal was never directly colonized, it offers a classic case of liminal/covert colonialism. Observing how colonialism operated in neighbouring India, the Nepali rulers, who were allies of the British rulers, learned and implemented a number of colonial practices and policies at home, thus, indirectly participating in the colonial project. Moreover, as mentioned above, historians such as Mahesh Chandra Regmi have likened the Gorkha state to an empire and its treatment of the areas it conquered as being very similar to how the British treated their colonies.

Charles Pinderhughes' definition of internal colonialism as a "geographically-based pattern of subordination of a differentiated population, located within the dominant power or country" (236) is especially relevant in this context. According to Pinderhughes, "this subordination by a dominant power has the outcome of a *systematic* group inequality expressed in policies and practices of a variety of societal institutions, including systems of education, public safety (police, courts and prisons), health, employment, cultural production, and finance" (236). Pinderhuges' ideas appear to be pertinent if we consider the Nepali history of domination and oppression of linguistic, religious, ethnic, and regional margins through policies of systemic disadvantaging.

4. *Reading Nepali Literature in the Light of Theories of Power, Discourse, Hegemony, and Dominance without Hegemony*

Michel Foucault had a deep interest in literature, but nowhere in his vast body of work did he outline a specific or detailed critical approach or method to reading literature. Dieter Freundlieb, in his essay "Foucault and Literature", admits that Foucault "never provided us with any detailed theoretical account of how the results of his work might be applied to the study of literature" (301). But works ranging from his early archaeological phase to his final

lectures provide interesting insights into many aspects of society and history, including works of literature and the role of the author. In the present case, my study benefits from Foucault's ideas in two ways: Firstly, Foucault sheds light on how the notions of power, knowledge and discourse influence not only smaller institutions like prisons, hospitals and school but also larger institutions such as the nation state, too. Secondly, through his approach to history as a process of ruptures, gaps, and incoherencies, rather than an unbroken chain of events leading up to an unfragmented whole, and his treatment of literature as a discourse/counter-discourse, Foucault gives us a distinct perspective to understand the relationship between literary production and larger discourses of state power and marginalisation. In *Archaeology of Knowledge*, he writes: "The history of thought, of knowledge, of philosophy, of literature seems to be seeking, and discovering, more and more discontinuities, whereas history itself appears to be abandoning the irruption of events in favour of stable structures" (6). In my reading of literature about marginalised communities of Nepal, I derive insights from Foucault to shed light on the discourse of 'Nepaliness' formulated and disseminated through the power of the Gorkhali state. I also consider how the state maintained its grip on a largely heterogeneous society through homogenising policies that involved different forms of exclusion, confinement, and gaze.

Hegemony, or "domination by consent" (Ashcroft et al. 134), was an idea concept popularized by the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci, who, in his influential work, *Prison Notebooks*, investigated how "the ruling class was so successful in promoting its own interests in the society" by convincing other classes that its interests were "the interests of all" (Ashcroft et al. 134). Gramsci held the view that "ideas and opinions are not spontaneously 'born' in each individual brain: they have had a centre of formation, or irradiation, of dissemination, of persuasion—a group of men, or a single individual even, which has developed them and presented them in the political form of current reality" (197).

Gramsci's theory of hegemony illustrates how a state mechanism works to promote the agendas of those in power by convincing the masses that these agendas advance the interests of the majority. Taking the discussion of hegemony one step further, ideas from the Indian Subaltern Studies group, especially Ranajit Guha's concept of "dominance without hegemony", are also helpful in shedding light on Nepal's history of dominance in general and the marginalization of Tarai-Madheshh in particular.

According to Antonio Gramsci, the exercise and continuation of the rule of the elite class, especially in colonial and capitalist societies, comes mostly from seemingly consensual means. That is to say that the lower class willingly accept and adopt the ideas and practices of the elite class as norms or standard. This is how colonial rule in the past and capitalistic rule in modern times have been able to successfully impose the social, cultural, and linguistic norms of the elites upon the majority of the population and continue to rule without much resistance. Guha, however, cites the case of India as an anomaly to the practices and consequences of colonialism elsewhere in terms of hegemony. Guha's view, in Amalendu K Chakraborty's words, is that while two elite classes, the British and upper caste/class Indian, contested for power in the subcontinent, "neither of these ruling elite classes represented 'hegemony' which, according to the Gramscian analysis of Western European history, meant that the state's natural juridical power exercised by the ruling class was obtained by it either through moral and cultural persuasion of the people or derived from their common consent" (374). In the case of India (or, South Asia), unlike in colonial Africa or South America, for instance, the colonial state was autocratic and coercive, but not hegemonic, that is dominating by consent. A study of the contemporary marginal Nepali societies, especially those in the northern mountains and the southern plains, shows that while they were dominated and coerced by the hill-origin Hindu Khas-Aryas, they somehow escaped the moral and cultural persuasion of the elite group. Guha's ideas are illustrative if we consider the fact that even

after more than 250 years of ‘one language-one culture’ policy, there are still many regions in Nepal where dominance and the exclusion of minorities are extreme, and yet their languages and cultures are still intact to a great degree since the persuasion of the state did not reach the grassroots, even when its coercion did.

5. *Contemporary Nepali Literature and ‘New Regionalism’*

Literature focusing on the lives and cultures of people from more remote regions has long been denoted as regional literature or local colour and has usually been, as Charles Crow puts it, “undervalued by literary historians, and by university textbooks and courses” (1). Talking about the American literary scene in the 1990s, Crow discusses two trends that altered the disregard of the ‘regions’: first, the growing interest, demand for and supply of books with “a regional emphasis”, and second, the trend towards the “re-evaluation of the canon” (1) that began in the 1960s but became more widespread in the 1980s and 1990s. While the timeline may be different, with the advent of new historicism, cultural studies and identity politics, this seems to be a global trend. With the publication of recent works such as *The Romance of Authenticity: The Cultural Politics of Regional and Ethnic Literature* (2004) and *Regionalism and the Reading Class* (2008), and the renewed interest in the study of regions and regionalism, we seem to be at the phase that Jeremy Wells calls the “arrival of the regions” (2). Nepal, too, has a long tradition of regional literature, with writers such as Bhawani Bhikshu, Shankar Koirala, Dha Cha Gotame (Dhanush Chandra Gautam), and the Assam-based Indian-Nepali writer, Lil Bahadur Chhetri. However, a renewed literary and critical approach towards regional writing can be seen after the 1990s, and even more so after 2006-07, resulting from and responding to the socio-political changes in Nepal and the cultural awareness they brought. Works of fiction on Tarai-Madhesh such as *Ular*, *Loo*, *Abba*, *Raja Salahesh, Dulari*, and *Pather,* poetry and fiction by Kirat writers from the eastern hills, and

works such as Buddhisagar's *Karnali Blues* and Ram Lal Joshi's *Aina* that tell the stories of mid- and far-western Nepal, can be seen as establishing a new movement that we can refer to as the trend of 'new regionalism' in the context of Nepali literature.

According to Michael Billig, there is a "continual 'flagging', or reminding, of nationhood" in ways that are otherwise not considered to be 'nationalistic' (8). Nationhood provides, "a continual background for their political discourses, for cultural products, and even for the structuring of newspapers. In so many little ways, the citizenry is daily reminded of their national place in a world of nations" (Billig 8). As a consequence, he argues: "this reminding is so familiar, so continual, that it is not consciously registered as reminding. The metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building" (8). In this way, these semiotic practices take the form of everyday nationalism, supermarket nationalism, and banalities of all sorts. While on one level, everyday semiotic practices, the language and costumes, foods and songs, cultures and traditions, reinforce a certain nationalism, this current remains in tension with the simultaneously alienating effects of the same acts and objects. What if these markers of national identity constantly remind an individual of his or her difference, and the nationalism that is reproduced on a daily basis is not what s/he identifies with? What if the national fetishes, the flags, the signs, and the emblems, instead of making the individual feel connected, push him or her further towards the margins? Considering the fact that national emblems and national heroes come from a particular socio-cultural background, and the majority of people may find it hard to identify with them, banal nationalism can be a helpful tool in examining everyday instances of Nepali nationalism. But here, too, the production of a unified national community does not seem to constitute the logical end. In Nepal, as elsewhere, it is the processes and mechanisms through which nationalism articulates itself rather than the end result that deserves more attention.

Finally, in the gap between the current breakdown of statist Nepali identity and the future establishment of a more inclusive one, Nepali nationalism can only be characterized by its rifts and ruptures. Attempts to narrate a pristine pre-Hindu past in which marginalised ethnic groups would find secure ground for their identities points up these rifts rather than concealing them. All these attempts hint at forms of national division rather than commonness and inclusion. In this sense, theories that posit a common and secure national community as the outcome of either historical forces or political struggle seem to be negated by the story of Nepali nationalism. In this context, perhaps the closest theory of nationalism that equates to Nepal's situation is Homi Bhabha's contention that nations constitute ongoing narratives that "lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realise their horizons in the mind's eye" (Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* 1). It is, therefore, my aim to examine narratives that have attempted to articulate the Nepali nation over the course of its modern history, with a special focus on the recent years, through the prisms provided by the above-mentioned theoretical approaches. I will also consult theories and studies dealing with linguistic, ethnic, religious, and regional nationalism in South Asia as well as other parts of the world in the chapters dealing with language, ethnicity, religion, and region.

Nepali literature has always moved closely with the political movements of the nation. The expansion era of P N Shah carried a heroic tone whereas a tone of pity and lamentation took over in the literary works written in the aftermath of defeat in the Anglo-Nepal War (1814-1816) and the Sugauli Treaty (1816). Writers were at the forefront of the struggle against the Ranas, and during the Panchayat years, they were divided into pro- and anti-Panchayat camps, the former promoting the Panchayat ideals, and the latter heralding a voice of resistance and change through their writings. Likewise, the role literature has played in giving voice to people from ethnic, linguistic, religious, and regional margins in the post-1990 democratic era, and even more so in the post-2007 republic era, has been quite

significant. However, it is also important to re-evaluate the associations drawn between canonical writers and ideological movements that have become ossified in readings of Nepali literature. A close reading of selected texts can help to parse these relationships, challenge the monovocal literature of a select group, and identify the polyphonic nature of a new, multicultural Nepali literary landscape. For this purpose, this thesis will closely analyse literary texts written from/about the marginal locations not only for their content but also for their language, stylistic choices, and sources of metaphorical language. Such an analysis will help to illustrate the focus and emphasis of Nepali literature, both in what it has been dealing with and how, over the years, and how that has undergone a transformation in recent years. Making literary texts the basis for theorising the nuances of Nepali nationalism will help to emphasise its singularity but also place its concerns within a larger discussion. Moreover, to achieve this objective, along with the above mentioned theoretical frameworks, I will refer to historical, political, and sociological/anthropological writings on Nepal, and considering the contemporaneity of the subject, a number of journalistic writings, too, so as to inform the analysis with relevant and adequate contextual information.

Researcher's Positionality and Omissions

I was born and grew up in the western hills of Nepal, in a village that was both remote and backward in many ways. We did not have access to a motor-road or electricity, the nearest health post, which was either closed or unattended most of the time, was about an hour away, and the nearest town was three hours away. While poverty and hardship defined village life in general, I belonged to a lower-middle-class Brahmin family, and we had a comfortable life in general. The village was comprised of Brahmin, Chhetri, Magar, Dalit, and some Gurung families. When I started my primary school, I had friends from all ethnic, caste, and socio-economic backgrounds. As I moved from the primary level to the lower-secondary and the

secondary levels, to my surprise, many Magar, Gurung,[23] and Dalit friends gradually disappeared from the school. I realised that attending school regularly, something that I took for granted, was a big commitment for many of the Dalit students who came from extremely poor economic backgrounds. While the school itself was not very expensive, my Dalit friends were still expected to work, earn their own livings, and support their families from a very young age. In addition to that, they suffered discrimination and unfair treatment at every step of their lives that were already marred by economic difficulties. By the time I was in the lower secondary level, there were only a very few Dalit friends left, most of whom dropped out even before they could reach high school. Also around that time, my Magar and Gurung friends also started disappearing, and I came to know that they were supposed to train physically and go to the recruitment camps to try their luck in the British or the Indian army, a tradition many of these families had been following for generations. The training was tough, the selection process was brutal, and not all of them would be successful in getting into what was believed to be a dream job. After repeated periods of absence from the classroom, however, many of them would ultimately drop out. It was not uncommon, therefore, for an intake to start with students from all the caste and ethnic groups, and ultimately end up with Brahmin and Chhetri boys, because most of the Brahmin and Chhetri girls would also get married by the time they reached high school or drop out because education for girls was not considered as important as it was for boys.

I also had other advantages over my friends. The language that we spoke at home, for instance, was also the language we used at school, which was not the same for many classmates. My Gurung friends spoke a different mother tongue at home, and my Magar

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[23] Magars are the third largest ethnic groups of Nepal, making 7.1% of the total population, and Gurungs, with 2% of the total population, are 11th in the population ranking. Along with Rai and Limbu, Gurungs and Magars are the favoured groups for recruitment in the Indian and the British armies. For most of its history, only a handful of men would have been be recruited from outside these four ethnic groups. In the recent years, recruitment is theoretically open to all ethnicities, yet in practice these four groups are still favoured.

friends spoke a very different dialect of Nepali,[24] which was not considered refined enough to be used in the classroom or for writing papers in the exams. When I look back now, I may have performed better in my studies than my Dalit friends because of the socio-economic edge I had over them. Similarly, I also had an upper hand compared to my Magar and Gurung classmates because of my language. Not all Brahmins and Chhetris were financially well off, and, in fact, many Magar and Gurung households, especially those who had a family member in the British or the Indian army, were richer than them. But in a country where their language was the national language, their religion was the state religion, and where all the teachers in the school and all the officers in the government offices came from their community, the dreams, the goals, and the pathways for life became very different for the Brahmin and Chhetri boys early on.

As I moved further ahead in my studies through high school to the university, I became more aware of the broader structural disadvantages and discrimination at work along ethnic, linguistic, religious, and regional lines. The political change of 1990 for the first time opened up possibilities for such debates and discussions. Similarly, the 1996-2006-Maoist insurgency and the 2006-People's Revolution, in which I also actively participated, not only exposed this system of long-standing and deep-rooted discrimination and inequity but also opened up possibilities to change it. For me, therefore, this study is an attempt to explore and understand the society I grew up in through the lens of literary works from the past and the present. Moreover, it is also an opportunity to contribute to a better understanding of society through a detailed study of the socio-political changes reflected in contemporary literature. As a poet, translator, and academic belonging to the 'wrong side of history' who witnessed discrimination and injustice, both incidental and systemic, I approach this topic from a

[24] Magars have a language of their own which is spoken by some 3% of the total population. Magars in the Baglung, Parbat, and Myagdi region, however, despite having a considerable population, speak a dialect of Nepali rather than their own mother tongue.

dissenting position with an awareness of what was there in the past and the change that is taking place at present. I am aware of the fact that I am a product of countless structural privileges, and, in the course of this research, whenever possible and applicable, I employ autoethnographic insights, "a research method that utilizes the researcher's autobiographical data to analyse and interpret their cultural assumptions" (Chang 9). I try to use personal experience to analyse socio-cultural experience, to shed light on the socio-cultural, political, and economic system that was unjust and discriminatory, and to highlight the attempts made to change it in the recent decades. I am, however, aware of the methodological challenges and ethical dilemmas involving a reflexive researcher, such as "limited realities that the academic voice is capable of conveying" and the possibility of the academic voice perpetrating a "violence against those whose realities it claims to write" (Dauphinee 805-06). Therefore, I use it more as a sidelight to illuminate the substantial parts of the study and findings based primarily on close reading and analyses of literary texts.

I am aware that, at its very heart, a nation is not only a linguistic, ethnic/racial, religious, and regional construct but also a gendered one. A full account of the relationship between gender, nationalism, and literary works in the context of Nepal is well warranted and necessary but a topic of that scope would need to be considered within a much larger project than the limited space it would find in this one. Therefore, while this study takes into account how issues of gender intersect with exclusions enacted on the basis of language, ethnicity, religion and region, and discusses works by women writers wherever possible, it does not include a detailed discussion on the topic of nationalism and Nepali literature from a gender perspective.

Nepali Dalits share their ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds with the dominant upper-caste Khas-Aryas. This sets them apart from the indigenous-ethnic people whose linguistic, ethnic, and religious background is different from the Khas-Aryas. Since

this study mostly derives its vigour from a juxtaposition of these two ethnic-cultural backgrounds, it falls short of doing justice to the case of Dalits due to the cultural commonality they share with the ruling class. Therefore, while I cite multiple examples from literary works dealing with Dalits and make an attempt to discuss the issue of caste discrimination throughout this study, it is yet another topic that calls for a more comprehensive study with a different theoretical orientation in the context of nationalism and Nepali literature.

Similarly, literatures in languages other than Nepali, some of which had a rich tradition in the past, such as Maithili, Bhojpuri, and Newari literatures, are undergoing a slow revival at present. Moreover, even those languages and cultures that do not have a robust written literary tradition do have a rich folk tradition. These are other important areas for study that would enrich and broaden our understanding of nation and nationalism in the Nepali context.

CHAPTER 3. LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

The Mute Nation Speaks: Use of Regional-Ethnic Variety of Nepali in Contemporary Nepali Literature

The Mute Nation

In Shrawan Mukarung's poem, "Anuhar Khojirahechha Rambharos", Rambharos, a Madheshi man[25] from the southern plains of Nepal, feels devastated because when he looks into the mirror of democracy, he finds everything else in it except his own face. In another of Mukarung's poems, "Jangali Phool", the wild flower suffers dejection because while it has a specific name of its own in the jungle, in the city they just call it a 'wild flower', and deny it any individuality or distinctiveness. Similarly, in Hangyug Agyat's poem, "Mujikna", a young girl, Mujikna, looks at the mirror and is disgusted by her own face because she, an ethnic Kirat girl with mongoloid features, does not bear any resemblance to the beautiful Khas-Aryan[26] actresses she has seen in numerous Nepali films.[27] Further, in the story "Lato Pahad" ("Mute Hills")[28] by Upendra Subba, when the protagonist, Kokma Thuley, is falsely accused of cow slaughter and arrested, his family and neighbours find themselves helpless and literally 'mute' because none of them speaks the language that the state administration

[25] The term *Madheshi* (meaning, inhabitants of *Madhesh*, the southern plains of Nepal) was used derogatively to refer to the people of *Madhesh* until the *Madhesh Andolan* (Madhesh Revolution) in 2007 during which *Madheshi* activists reclaimed the term and started using it proudly to refer to themselves and their movement. Now it has gradually turned into a neutral term to refer to the people living in the plains, previously known more commonly as the Terai/Tarai (तराइ), and now more as Madhesh (मधेस) or Tarai-Madhesh (तराइ-मधेस).

[26] Also known as Parbatiyas/Parbates, these people of Indo-European ethno-linguistic group include Brahmins, Chhetris, and Thakuris, and have remained in power in Nepal throughout its modern history.

[27] I can understand Mujikna's predicament when I look back at my own growing up years and think about the cultural and literary materials at my disposal then. Some of the most popular actors and actresses of those days were Bhuvan KC, Shiva Shrestha, Arjun Jung Shahi, Krishna Malla, Rajesh Hamal, Karishma KC, Kristi Mainali, Sharmila Malla, Gauri Malla, and Mithila Sharma. The only ethnic actors we could see were the notorious villains like Sunil Thapa and Yuvaraj Lama, or those who were in the insignificant minor roles.

[28] This text, included in a short story collection of the same title, *Lato Pahad*, but mostly unfolding as a play about the screening of a film called *Lato Pahad*, does not clearly fit into any of the literary genres.

speaks or understands, nor do they have a clue about the complex legal process one has to undergo in dealing with a case like that.

These examples, all drawn from Nepali writings of recent years, highlight a serious problem underlying Nepali literary culture in particular, and the Nepali state and society in general, namely the historical refusal to acknowledge the multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi-cultural, and multi-ethnic composition of the society, and the ongoing practice of denying a voice to anyone other than the Nepali speaking Khas-Arya Hindus from the hills. They illustrate the circumstance where a majority of writers seem to speak only for the dominant establishment and are silent as far as the voiceless majority on the margins are concerned. It is a situation where many Nepalis have neither access to, nor fair representation in so-called Nepali literature. But apart from highlighting the devastating effects of this practice of silencing and suppressing the people on the linguistic, religious, cultural, regional and ethnic margins, these new writings are also potent examples of the attempts made to give a voice to the mute people.

Borrowing the term from Upendra Subba's anthology of short stories, *Lato Pahad*, this chapter explores the notion of linguistic exclusiveness and 'muteness' in the Nepali context, and how it is being questioned in works of contemporary Nepali literature. By analysing these literary works, which are distinctly different from their predecessors' both in their content and style, this chapter also explores the ways in which these writers attempt to give voice to the otherwise 'mute nation'. While there has been a proliferation of such writings from all the different margins, particularly after the 2007 political transformation of the country from a Hindu monarchy to a secular federal republic, the *Sirjansheel Arajakata*, a vibrant literary movement launched by three Kirat writers in their representative quest to make Nepali literature inclusive, especially in terms of language, has been one of the forerunners in this change. This movement has been prolific in its output and influential in

both initiating literary discussions and inspiring a number of new movements and young writers. Therefore, this chapter draws examples primarily from the works of the *Sirjansheel Arajakata* movement and its followers.

In this chapter, I begin with a brief survey of theories that discuss the relationship between language and nation. I follow this with an overview of languages and language policy in Nepal to highlight how monolingualism has prevailed for such a long time in an otherwise highly multilingual nation and the detrimental effects this has had on people speaking a mother tongue other than Nepali. Finally, I investigate the case of mainstream Nepali literature, and how its exclusive and monolithic character is being contested by contemporary writers from the margins. While I draw examples from different sources, present and past, my focus is on the works of the *Sirjansheel Arajakata* movement. Therefore, I will introduce the Kirat community and the *Sirjansheel Arajakata* movement before moving on to an analysis of their works to show how they challenge the hegemony of the standard Nepali language as well as mainstream Nepali (Khas-Arya) literature. While doing so, I will focus on their practice of drawing their figurative language from sources other than the Khas-Arya, Hindu-Sanskrit mythical, religious, cultural, historical, and literary repository, and of employing regional-ethnic varieties of the Nepali language which were/are considered non-standard, sub-standard or inferior and hence deemed inappropriate for literary works until recently. I will end the chapter by drawing some conclusions regarding the significant changes contemporary Nepali literature is undergoing. Notwithstanding all the positive changes, there is still much to be done until all the people on the margins can find a voice and are represented in the literary mainstream. Therefore, the conclusion will include a brief discussion on the limitations of the recent works that are being done as well as the issues that are still waiting to be addressed.

Language, Nation, and Nationalism

Language has always served as a paradoxical element in the formation of group identity. On the one hand, it has functioned as a cohesive force, bringing the 'insiders' closer together, while on the other it has acted as an aversive element, pushing the 'outsiders' further away. While language is usually cited as "the basis of common identity" in the context of a nation, Michael W. Foley and Matthew Carr explain, "national languages...represent significant exclusions that cannot always be ignored in discussing the formation of a political 'we'" (136). A nation almost always has people speaking more than just one native language, and therefore the case of the 'insiders' and the 'outsiders', of 'us' and 'them', does not remain as simple anymore. Therefore, as Rosalind Mitchison identifies in her study of Wales, an appeal to linguistic nationalism can actually "divide rather than unite a nation" (6), especially if the national language is not spoken by a large majority of its population. In the following section, I explore the idea of language and nation and its complex relationship, its development over time, and its contemporary bearing on the case of Nepal.

The relationship between language and nation has been under sustained discussion from the late-18th and early-19th centuries, considered by many theorists of nationalism, including Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson, as the period of the rise of modern nation states. While it is commonly agreed that a serious examination of the notion of linguistic nationalism started with Johann Gottfried Herder and the German Romantic movement, Mary Anne Perkins, in her study on religious and metaphysical language in European national consciousness in the late 18th and early 19th century, cites many examples to prove that this concept was in existence long before late 18th century-early 19th century German Romanticism. She quotes Roland Sussex's claim that "language and language customs have always been a vital element of national survival" for the Slavs, and Hugh Seton-Watson's assertion that the English national consciousness was formed in the fourteenth century when

“the new ‘English’, a combination of Anglo-Saxon and Norman French, began to be adopted for official business, as well as being the vehicle for Chaucer” (Perkins 23). Similarly, through the influence of thinkers such as Cardinal Richelieu, “the idea of linguistic frontiers was prevalent in France long before the eighteenth century” (Perkins 24). Also, in England, the idea of “language as a mark of true nationhood” (Perkins 24), which developed primarily from the influence of Edmund Burke, was already widespread in the early nineteenth century. Despite these individual cases, Perkins however admits that “the relationship between linguistic and national identity was most fully and richly developed in philosophical and literary terms” by the German Romantics (26) from where it spread to the rest of Europe, and then to other parts of the world. “For a truly German patriotism to develop,” she writes, “it was necessary for Germans to find a common bond; this was found neither in political organization nor religion, but in language and literature” (Perkins 26).

German Romantic philosopher, Johann Gottfried Herder, considered language as the most fundamental component in the formation of a nation. He wrote: “Has a nation anything more precious than the language of its fathers? In it dwell its entire world of tradition, history, religion, principles of existence; its whole heart and soul” (qtd. in Oakes 22). For Herder, language was the “core value of people’s *volkgeist* (national spirit)” (qtd. in Oakes 22), and it was through language that people came together and became part of a close-knit group. It was through language, Herder stated, that people had their place in a *Volk*: “I think every *Volk* has its identity through their language” (qtd. in Fox 244). British historical sociologist and one of the proponents of ethnosymbolism, Anthony D. Smith, also admits, “the notion that nations are really language groups and therefore that nationalism is a linguistic movement, derived from Herder’s influence” (182). Herder’s contemporary, Wilhelm von Humboldt, took these ideas a step further and claimed that language was “identical” to people. “Language is, as it were, the outer appearance of the spirit of a people,” Humboldt wrote, “the language is their

spirit and their spirit their language" (Humboldt and Losonsky 46). Yet another contemporary of Herder and Humboldt, Johan Gottlieb Fichte, held that "men are formed by language far more than language is formed by men" (qtd. in Yu 24).

These German philosophers were not alone in emphasizing the importance of language in the formation and sustenance of a nation. Thomas Davis, an Irish writer and the organizer of the "Young Ireland" movement, was one among many others to be influenced by these ideas. "A nation should guard its language more than its territory," Davis stated, and claimed that "a people without a language of its own is only half a nation" (qtd. in Briody 38). Similarly, Friedrich von Schlegel, claimed that "the care of the national language is at all times a sacred trust" (236). It is not at all surprising, therefore, that when nationalism gradually evolved into a distinct field of academic inquiry in the second half of the 20th century, language was the focal point of discussion. Many of the modern thinkers of nationalism reiterated that industrialization and modernization were the forces that led to the rise of nations in the 18th century, and language remained at the centre in this important shift. They especially emphasized the criterion of mass literacy, and the necessity and ability to speak one common language, as the prerequisites for the formation of modern nations, a point that Anderson builds on in his theorisation of imagined communities.

Ernest Gellner believed that nationalism inhered in the imposition of a minority high culture upon a majority low culture. And, for this purpose, the nation-state imposed a "school-mediated, academy supervised idiom, codified for the requirements of a reasonably precise bureaucratic and technological communication" leading to the establishment of an "anonymous impersonal society, with mutually sustainable atomised individuals, held together above all by a shared culture of this kind, in place of the previous complex structure of local groups, sustained by folk cultures reproduced locally and idiosyncratically by the micro-groups themselves" (E. Gellner 57). Since the formation of a nation was possible only

when there were literate and numerate citizens capable of operating the industrial machinery, according to Gellner, language remained at the centre in both building and sustaining a nation. Similarly, for Anderson, the key to the creation of nations, the imagined communities, lay in the "revolutionary vernacularizing thrust of capitalism" (39). The invention of the printing press, the publication and circulation of the newspaper, and the development of a literate culture united people into a connected community, and therefore language, remained at its heart. "Through that language, encountered at mother's knee and parted with only at the grave," Anderson wrote, "pasts are restored, fellowships are imagined, and futures dreamed" (154).

Hobsbawm was perhaps one of the very few theorists belonging to the modernist school of nationalism who did not acknowledge national languages as the "primordial foundations of national culture and matrices of national mind" (51). In his attempt to find out what constitutes popular proto-nationalism, Hobsbawm considered language as one of the possible constituent elements. He considered national languages to be "semi-artificial constructs" (54), and claimed that they could hardly be a criterion of nationhood "except of the rulers and the literate" (56). While Hobsbawm acknowledged that it may not be irrelevant to it, he concluded: "Language in the Herderian sense of the language spoken by the Volk was therefore plainly not a central element in the formation of proto-nationalism directly" (59). Ethno-symbolists such as Smith, Armstrong, and Hutchinson, look at the propositions of the modernists critically, as being elite-oriented, and emphasise the role of cultural and symbolic elements in the formation and sustenance of modern nations. Though they do not highlight the role of language as much as their modernist predecessors, their focus on "myths, memories, values, and symbols" (Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era* 143) brings language again to the forefront as a medium through which these cultural components are kept alive and propagated.

A survey of many non-Western nations formed during and after the second half of the 20th century following the European model of nationhood shows that while some nations started with relatively higher linguistic homogeneity, most were originally heterogeneous in their makeup, in terms of language as well as many other socio-cultural components, such as ethnicity and religion. But even in such cases, there have always been efforts to impose homogeneity through a series of political, educational, linguistic and religious-cultural policies. The results of these policies have been more destructive than constructive, as the examples of South Asian countries like India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and recently Bhutan, reveal. Elana Shohamy, in her book *Language Policy: Hidden Agendas and New Approaches*, sheds light on how language in modern nation-states has become an indispensable instrument for hegemony and control, which ultimately ends up playing "an integral role in the creation and perpetuation of unified, homogeneous ideologies" (43). Usually, language education policy (LEP) is employed in this context providing a "powerful mechanism for creating de facto language policies" (Shohamy 92) since children in most countries are obliged to attend school. Robert McColl Millar claims that it actually "suits a nation-state to ignore its multilingualism, for economic, social or, regularly, political and ideological reasons" because "it is easier (and cheaper) to reach (and govern) a population in one language" (19). Moreover, since "one language may be of higher prestige than any other spoken in that territory" it can lead to a "hegemonic assumption of superiority" (Millar 19), which is in favour of the ruling class in the long run.

Languages Policies in Nepal and their Consequences

The Nepali state implemented similar policies of control and homogenisation from as early as the 18th century when the first Shah King of the 'unified Nepal', Prithvi Narayan Shah, consolidated more than 50 principalities into a powerful kingdom and laid the foundation of

modern Nepal in the 1760s -1770s. This process continued through the Rana Period (1846-1951), the Panchayat Period (1960-1990), and even after multiparty democracy in 1990. Despite having a very diverse and heterogeneous ethnic, linguistic, and religious makeup, the rulers of Nepal were successful in imposing their language, religion, and socio-cultural practices upon the masses, namely the Nepali language, Hinduism, and the caste-based Hindu socio-cultural codes.

The antipathetic attitude of the state towards its ethnolinguistic diversity and its detrimental consequences are evident even in something as basic as the number of languages recorded in the Nepali Census, conducted every ten years. According to the 2011 Census, there are 123 languages spoken as mother tongue in Nepal (Sharma 30). Among them, 5 languages are spoken by more than a million people, and 14 languages are spoken by more than one hundred thousand people, which in itself is remarkable if we consider the two and a half centuries long one-language policy that Nepal underwent. The recent figures are especially interesting to see in the light of the census reports from 1952/54 and thereafter. The first census, held in 1952/54, recorded 58 languages spoken as mother tongues in Nepal. However, there was a sharp decline in this number in the subsequent censuses: 36 languages were recorded in 1961, 17 in 1971, and 18 in 1981 (Sharma 29). According to Pitamber Sharma, this decline in the number of languages was the result of the "high-handed state policy of promoting the Nepali language and the consequent neglect of other languages" (29). Sharma's claim rings true if we look at the census reports after multiparty democracy was restored in 1990, and after Nepal was declared a secular republic in 2007: 32 mother tongues were recorded in 1991, 92 in 2001, and 123 in 2011. Sharma attributes this unprecedented rise in reporting the number of mother tongues in recent decades to the "rising awareness among minority ethnic groups regarding their cultural and linguistic identity" (30). In retrospect, we can speculate that while all of these languages were still in use on the domestic

front, there are two main reasons why they were not recorded in the earlier census reports. One is attributable to the role of the state, which through the data collectors progressively and deliberately disregarded and obliterated any language other than Nepali. The other arises from the reluctance of the people to identify their mother tongue in the census as a result of the shame inherent in the inferior status of their language.

While the recent census reports offer a more optimistic picture indicating a change in the way people have started looking at their languages, there is not much change in the practices of the state yet. If we consider the recent division of the country into seven federal states, there are at least two states where a language other than Nepali is spoken as a mother tongue by the largest number of people (States no. 2 and 7). Moreover, in State no. 2, Nepali is not among even the top three languages spoken as a mother tongue by the largest number of people (Census 2011). Despite these statistics, Nepali is the only "Nation Language"[29] and remains the language of administration, education, media and literature in those states as everywhere else in Nepal today.

It goes without saying that the privileged position the Nepali language enjoys today is primarily because it is the language of the ruling community. Since the time of P N Shah's unification/expansion of the country in the late 18th century until now, the Nepali language has been favoured and promoted by the rulers through a number of state policies. However, apart from the Gorkhali conquest and the subsequent favouring of the Nepali language by the state, there were other factors that contributed to the spread of Nepali. Kumar Pradhan traces the history of the Nepali language to the thirteenth century and claims that it would be a

[29] *The Constitution of Nepal* (2015) considers Nepali as the *Rashtra Bhasha* (राष्ट्र भाषा/Nation Language), apparently the 'state language', whereas as all the other languages spoken in Nepal are categorised as *Rashtriya Bhasha* (राष्ट्रिय भाषा/National Languages). While the two words sound very similar, language activists believe that this is just another ploy to continue the hegemony of the Nepali language, while apparently giving a symbolic recognition to other languages.

"mistake to think that the Khas-kura or Parbate or Gorkhali spread only as a result of the conquest of Gorkha" (*A History of Nepali Literature* 8). He elaborates:

> [T]his language appears to have spread to other principalities even before they were conquered…. Many Khasas appear to have been employed in service for the Newar kings of the valley and many seem to have made permanent settlements in its outskirts. They must have been sufficiently in large numbers in the valley proper. A few inscriptions of the Newar kings in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries are in the Khasa language. (8)

The existence of inscriptions in the Nepali language in Newar kingdoms of the Kathmandu valley long before they were consolidated into the Gorkha kingdom is evidence of the fact that this language, which had its origins in western Nepal, had gradually spread to its eastern parts long before P N Shah's conquest. Pradhan ascribes the "rapid spread" of Nepali to the fact that Nepal had (and, has even today) so many languages and dialects, mostly unintelligible to one another, which called for another contact language, and Nepali gradually took that place (*A History of Nepali Literature* 9). Francis Buchanan Hamilton's 1802-03 observation that the *Khasa* speech (as Nepali was called during those days) was "making rapid progress in extinguishing the aboriginal dialects of the mountains" (qtd. in Pradhan, *The Gorkha Conquests* 203) shows how the language had spread beyond the area of its origin long before the rise of Shah kings. According to Pradhan, such widespread use of the language "could not have resulted from the military conquests of Gorkha alone" (*A History of Nepali Literature* 9). Pradhan, however, reiterates that the ascendancy of Gorkha gave "new importance to this language as it came into a wider official use" (*A History of Nepali Literature* 9). He infers that "[t]he political and administrative unity and the official status that the language obtained after these conquests undoubtedly accentuated the process already started with the eastward migration of the Khasas" (*A History of Nepali Literature* 9).

We may consider it an irony that one of the important roles in carrying the Nepali language to the remotest regions of Nepal where even the state did not have much access,

was played by the British-Gorkha soldiers, all of whom came from ethnic groups speaking a different language, usually Magar, Gurung, Rai or Limbu. The language that was used to instruct and train these recruits in then British-India was Nepali, and when these soldiers went back to their villages during their leave, or after retirement, they carried the language to the remotest Nepali villages. Some of the earliest schools in the Nepali villages were started by these ex-Gorkha servicemen, and Nepali, the only language most of them knew how to read and write, became the sole medium of instruction.

The Ranas, who turned the Shah Kings into mere figureheads and ruled Nepal as de facto hereditary prime ministers from 1846 to 1951, did not introduce any new language policies to the country. During this period, too, Nepali was the language used in military and administrative services throughout the country, as well as in the few schools accessible only to the Ranas and the Kathmandu elites. But any public policy, be it on language, education or anything else, was considered to be a move towards raising awareness among the people, and therefore a threat to the Rana regime. This apparent ‘unplanning’, to use Ram Ashish Giri’s term (discussed in more detail in the upcoming pages), concomitantly worked to further strengthen the already dominant Nepali language.

A National Educational Planning Commission Report of 1956, prepared largely under the guidance of its American advisor, Hugh B Grant, recommended that “local dialects and tongues, other than standard Nepali, should be vanished [sic] from the school and playground as early as possible in the life of a child” because “the study of a non-Nepali local tongue would mitigate [sic] against the effective development of Nepali, for the student would make greater use of it than Nepali—at home and in the community—and thus Nepali would remain a ‘foreign’ language” (qtd. in D. Gellner 21). The belief underlying these suggestions was that “if the younger generation is taught to use Nepali as the basic language, then other languages will gradually disappear, and greater national strength and unity will result” (qtd.

in D. Gellner 21). David Gellner rightly points out that, “For Nepali nationalists, a single language, shared by the whole nation, was supposed to create a nation of equal citizens. In fact, some citizens—those whose mother tongue it was—were left more equal than others” (D. Gellner 21). Policies like these remind one of Foucault’s claim that schools “serve the same social function as prisons and mental institutions—to define, classify, control, and regulate people” and that the educational system is a “political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it” (239). The point to keep in mind here is how, in contrast to the older forms of regulatory governance, institutions in the modern state implement different methods to discipline, and as much as the physical space of the school and classrooms, the curriculum and the language of instruction contribute towards that goal.

While Nepali was the de facto official language since the days of P N Shah’s unification/expansion in the late 18th century, it was only in 1959 that it was officially declared the state/national language of Nepal. Even though the state had always promoted and administered a one-language policy, the mission became more aggressive after the establishment of the Panchayat System of governance by King Mahendra in 1962. During this period, alongside the promotion of the Nepali language, there also were systematic attacks on other languages: “the Newar and the Hindi language movements were suppressed” (Yadava 97), and there were times when the possession of texts written in any other ethnic languages was treated as a “criminal offence”, while the use of scripts other than Devanagari was made “illegal” (Pradhan 6).

According to Pratyush Onta, during the Panchayat system, “the monarchy, Hinduism and the Nepali language” acted as the “triumvirate of official Nepali nationalism” (38). He explains:

> Making the Nepali language its medium, this national culture was propagated through state-owned print and radio media and most forcefully, through the

> standardization of school-level educational textbooks since the early 1960s… It is this national culture which is said to have misrepresented at its best and wiped out at its worst, the cultural identities of many ethnic groups. (Onta 38)

During its thirty years, the Panchayat system left no stone unturned in its implementation of the ‘one nation, one language’ policy. Following the steps of other modern nation-states that were, to quote E Gellner, maintainers of the “inescapably homogeneous and standardising education system,” Panchayat pursued the same with its educational, linguistic, cultural and religious policies. Nepali became the language of the medium of instruction at all levels of education. It became the sole language of administration and for all forms of official communication. It was also the language used in the national media, namely *Gorkhapatra*, the daily newspaper, Radio Nepal, and Nepal Television. Consequently, as the penetration and dominance of the Nepali language kept increasing, all the other languages continued to be disregarded and suppressed.

Giri uses the term “unplanning of languages” to refer to this process of gradual favouring of the Nepali language and the side-lining and even suppression of all the other languages: “By ‘unplanning’ of languages, I mean deliberate avoiding, delaying, and ignoring of language-related issues, or imposition of hidden agendas (invisible planning?) in the pretentious contention of nationalism in order to create and promote language hegemony in favour of the languages of the dominant groups” (32). He claims that it was almost impossible for speakers of mother tongues other than Nepali to keep their languages alive in such a hostile environment. It involved extra effort, brought no economic advantage, and, it was argued, could even hinder “fluency and mastery of the prestigious national language”. Thus, speakers of indigenous languages were gradually compelled to “abandon their mother tongues in order to succeed economically” (34). “This unplanning of languages” has, Giri concludes, helped the elites to maintain their “linguistic advantage and competitive edge over others, and better access to education, employment and economic success” (42).

The 1990 *Jana Andolan* (People's Movement I) which brought the Panchayat system to an end and re-established multiparty democracy, can be seen as an important milestone in changing this unmerited system. Dominik von Halbach points out that 1990's political change "paved way for greater recognition of ethnolinguistic rights, including the right to mother tongue education at primary school level, by enshrining provisions in the newly drafted constitution" (Halbach n.p.). The implementation was not as reassuring as the constitutional provision, as mother tongue education never materialized in action. But it certainly opened up space for discussion and debate, paving the way for further struggle. Later, the 10-year long Maoist insurgency, which started in 1996 primarily as an ethnic rebellion, with cultural, religious, linguistic, and regional grievances adding momentum to it, was key in making people aware of their ethnic, linguistic and religious identities and rights as well as the oppression and exclusion they had been undergoing for more than two hundred years. According to Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, "Following the political liberation and ethnic revival in the early 1990s, the Maoists fully incorporated ethnic grievances and demands into their own project, but they simultaneously displaced the epicentre of social criticism by identifying another origin of social evil in the 'old power' and its feudal structure" (6).

The 2007 Interim Constitution of Nepal and the subsequent 2015 Constitution of Nepal have positively responded to the multilingual aspirations of the people.[30] While there have been some efforts towards the implementation of these constitutional provisions in recent years, it probably is too early to say how these promises may materialise and bring a change to the existing conditions. Yogendra Prasad Yadava sees language as the main hindrance for people on the margins to access the services and benefits of the state even today: "Minorities

[30] Article 6 of the *Constitution of Nepal 2015* states that "[a]ll native languages spoken in Nepal are National languages of Nepal." Similarly, Article 7b mentions that "[b]eside Nepali language, the Provinces can choose one or more other languages spoken by majority population of that province for government work." (*The Constitution of Nepal*).

in Nepal have been deprived of accessing social, economic, and political benefits of the national system. The existing language policy is a major factor that has created a linguistic barrier against benefitting from the national system" (95).

The Mute Nation Speaks

1. *Muteness as a Trope in Nepali literature*

Before we move on to a discussion of Nepali literature, and the attempts made by contemporary writers to question and challenge the dominant literary canon, it is important to start by scrutinising the term "Nepali literature" itself. Though the term *Nepali sahitya* (Nepali literature) gives the impression of encompassing all literary traditions and writings from Nepal and is commonly used with that purport (and pretension), in reality, it only represents the literature written in the Nepali language. When we bear in mind the fact that currently there are more than 120 languages spoken as mother tongues in Nepal, and that many of these languages have long and rich literary traditions, at least in the past, while those languages devoid of a written literary tradition have a rich oral tradition, the term "Nepali literature" appears to be deficient. Therefore, while I use the adjective "Nepali" for convenience, I use it with an awareness that in a cultural, historical, and linguistic sense, it is a misnomer.

The term 'mute' nation, in this context, is derived from the title of Kirat[31] writer Upendra Subba's anthology of short stories, *Lato Pahad* (*Mute Hills*).[32] The title story, "Lato Pahad", is the tale of a Kirat family from the eastern hills of Nepal, which brings together cultural as well as socio-political issues faced by the family and the community. The family is

[31] Kirats are an ethnic group living in the eastern hills of Nepal, speaking a number of languages of the Sino-Tibetan family. They had a distinct history and existence until 1774, after which they became the part of the Gorkha kingdom. More about Kirats in upcoming pages.

[32] This title reminds one of the lines from Laxmi Prasad Devkota's famous poem "Pagal", translated by the poet himself into English as "The Lunatic": "You call the mountains mute/Orators do I call them" (Devkota, *The Lunatic and Other Poems* 49).

comprised of Kokma Thuley, his wife, Fangjangkumma, his five or six-year-old son, Fangjang, and his old mother. Kokma Thuley is renowned for making and playing *chyabrung,* a drum played at religious and secular occasions in the Kirat community, and usually accompanied by dance. His obsession with *chyabrung* is such that he even forgets his responsibility towards his family, as long as he gets to play it and dance, in which he outdoes everyone else in the village. But this obsession with *chyabrung* frequently puts not only him but also his family in trouble.

The story highlights the problems faced by Kokma Thuley and his family members, which ultimately become representative of the problems faced by the members of the Kirat community. Fangjung attends the local primary school, where the medium of instruction is Nepali, and not Limbu, his mother tongue. His inability to understand the language creates a number of confusions, some of which are funny, though many others have serious and tragic consequences. After a series of humiliating experiences, being punished by the teacher and bullied by his classmates, Fangjung drops out of school even before completing his first year (class 1). Some of the problems faced by the family and the Kirat people are internal to the community, but many others, such as the issues related to religion, language, education and administration, are related to state policies. Towards the end of the story, Kokma Thuley's cow dies, and he skins it so that he could make a *chyabrung* out of it since he has broken his old *chyabrung* during a brawl. He is, however, arrested by the police on the charge of killing a cow.[33] He tries to tell them the truth, but no one listens to him. When his wife cries for help, Kedang, a neighbour tries to comfort her: "Don't cry, *bhauju* (sister-in-law). We will ask someone who knows about these legal matters" (220). In response to Kedang, Naspate Budha, another neighbour, berates her: "Do we even have anyone like that [who knows the

[33] The old national code of Nepal, *Muluki Ain*, considered cow slaughter as a crime punishable by life imprisonment. This provision is still intact even after the country has transformed from a Hindu Kingdom into a secular republic.

legal matters] in our village? I always ask you to teach our children their language [i.e., Nepali], but no one listens to me" (220). Nevertheless, he consoles her: "Don't cry. We'll find someone. I am sure there is someone who will understand our sufferings. Someone who can speak for *mute* people like us" [my italics] (220). The story, in a mise-en-abyme structure as the screening of a film of the same title, ends with the director talking to the audience: "Thank you, everyone. This is all I could do this time. Film *Lato Pahad* made by a mute Limbu" (Subba 222).[34]

The ability to speak and be heard is directly connected with one's "agency", a term defined by Ashcroft et al. as the ability to freely and autonomously "initiate and perform an action" (6). In the absence of agency, "muteness" or the inability to speak and be heard can be a condition faced by both individuals as well as the communities. While muteness may sometimes appear as a state existing on its own, it is usually just one end of an axis, at the other end of which lie variants of "silencing" and "deafness". Moreover, it may be argued that whereas "deafness" can more often be a deliberate choice, "muteness" is often imposed as a result of social, political or economic exclusion and oppression. Occasionally, muteness may be agentic, a deliberate tactic of non-cooperation among disenfranchised individuals and communities. Muteness has been a topic of inquiry in postcolonial studies, Holocaust studies, psychoanalysis, subaltern studies, and disability studies. In her study of muteness in Holocaust fiction, Sara R. Horowitz holds that "muteness instantiates a consistent movement of displacement—geographic, historical, linguistic, symbolic—that characterizes both the event and its subsequent reflections and depictions. Ultimately this movement centres on a displacement of language as such which aspires finally to silence" (38). If we look at the operations of the Nepali state, especially during the Panchayat years, we can see similar

[34] Limbu is one of the groups within the Kirat community, along with Rai, Sunuwar, and Yakkha. The language people of this community speak is also called Limbu.

schemes of displacement on all fronts, with the ultimate focus on language and the aim of silencing.

While muteness is an awful state, there is something worse than muteness itself: being spoken for or represented by someone who is the very cause of the muteness. Cameron Fae Bushnell, in his discussion of music in postcolonial literature, claims that muteness can be an "alternative to speech, which might, if deployed, prevent the kind of 'speaking for' the Other that renders the subaltern doubly mute" (83). If we look at the history of Nepali literature and the tradition of representation, Nepalis from different marginal locations, have thus been doubly muted. Muteness is not a desirable condition, nevertheless, it can be used as a strategy in art and literature to highlight the cases of the silenced margins. The message muteness can thus get across is usually far more accurate and powerful than the one delivered by someone else on behalf of those who are mute.

The trope of muteness is present in a range of contemporary Nepali writing, especially those dealing with people from the ethnic, linguistic, religious, gendered, and regional margins. Kokma Thuley in *Lato Pahad* cannot correspond with state authorities and tell them that he did not kill the cow because they speak a different language. Laxi, a young Dalit woman from the eastern hills, in the novel *Damini Bheer* (*Damini Cliff*), cannot understand what Kathmandu, the capital city, speaks about because she faces constant disregard and indifference from the people there. In Nayan Raj Pandey's *Ulaar* (*Overturn*), Premlalawa, a poor rickshaw driver from the southern plains, whose land has been grabbed by cunning politicians like Rajendra Raj and Shanti Raja, does not understand why they say one thing and do something else and agrees to all of their guileful proposals. Similarly, characters from Ram Lal Joshi's collection of short stories, *Aina* (*The Mirror*), Buddhi Sagar's novel, *Karnali Blues*, Shyam Shah's collection of short stories, *Abba* (*Father*), and Rajan Mukarung's novel *Hetchhakuppa*, all deal with the issue of muteness (and, deafness), depicting situations where

it is difficult for someone from the lowest strata of the society, the non-national-language speaking 'non-citizen', to speak to those on the higher rungs of the ladder, as well as to understand them, if they ever respond. While these examples can also be regarded as plain cases of incomprehension, the sheer imbalance of power between the two groups involved asks for scrutiny beyond that. It is always the groups belonging to the margins that suffer from this situation of incomprehension. While the other group, the one belonging to power and privilege, does not even notice the lack of understanding, for the marginalised group, the consequences of this incomprehension, muteness and deafness, are severe. For Kokma Thuley, for instance, this unfortunate state of muteness can lead to life imprisonment, and for Premlalawa, it has cost him his entire property, the land he inherited from his parents.

An overview of contemporary Nepali literature written from the linguistic margins reveals two parallel efforts by writers to challenge the existing linguistic and literary dominance and to bring about a change to this situation. On the one hand, these writings present a strong voice of protest against the hegemony of the Nepali language, and on the other, there are conscious, well-planned, and organized attempts to use it differently from the ways it has been employed until now. For instance, contemporary literary works from the margins are progressively refuting the established norms of standard Nepali and using ethnic and regional varieties of Nepali to tell their stories. In an attempt to explore and employ their indigenous aesthetics, they are also finding and using new sources of metaphorical language from their cultural heritage, rather than the mainstream Khas-Arya Hindu-Sanskrit tradition. The *Sirjansheel Arajakata* movement initiated by writers of Kirat heritage has been the spearhead in this regard. In the upcoming section, I briefly introduce the Kirat community, from which the *Sirjansheel Arajakata* movement emerged, and the notable attempts made by this movement in questioning the muteness of the nation.

2. *The Kirat People, Sirjansheel Arajakata Movement, and the Questioning of Muteness:* The Kirats, or the Kirati people, are ethnic groups of Tibeto-Burman heritage who have lived in the eastern hills of present-day Nepal (and, in the Sikkim and Darjeeling regions of India) for hundreds of years. The group is comprised of four main ethnic communities, Rai, Limbu, Yakkha, and Sunuwar. Kirats claim to be one of the "oldest races of Asia, with prestigious origins" (Schlemmer 1) and are believed to have ruled the Kathmandu valley from as early as 1500 BC until 400 AD, when they were defeated by the Lichchhavis and pushed towards the eastern hills. Now referred to as *Limbuwan* (i.e., the land of the Limbus), this region was divided into 10 Kirat principalities in modern times and ruled by Kirat chieftains, until it merged into the Gorkha kingdom in 1774 following the Gorkha-Limbuwan treaty, known as the *Nun-Pani Sandhi* (Salt-Water Treaty). Under this treaty, the Kirats were able to retain control of their communal land "under a customary form of tenure which has come to be known as 'kipat'" (Caplan 3). The *kipat* system was gradually limited by the state and brought to an end by King Mahendra's "Land Reform Act" in 1964. According to Lionel Caplan, "the conversion of these [*kipat*] lands to *raikar*[35] allowed for their alienation to Hindu groups" (3-4). The Kirats, who rejected the Gorkhali rule since the annexation of Limbuwan, were further infuriated by this act. Moreover, the state's discriminatory political, linguistic, religious, and cultural policies had made them, like many other ethnic groups of Nepal, feel like outsiders within their own country. This underpinned an anti-state stance throughout their history which is little changed today. These grievances have found expression in different forms, from the formation of political movements such as *Kirat Rashtriya Mukti Morcha* (Kirat National Liberation Front) to a number of literary and artistic movements, most recently, *Sirjansheel Arajakata*.

[35] According to Mahesh Chandra Regmi, *raikar* is "a system of 'state landlordism' under which the rights of an individual to utilisation and transfer of the land are recognised by the State so long as taxes are paid" (qtd. in Caplan 3).

The *Sirjansheel Arajakata* is a Nepali literary movement started by three Kirat writers, Hangyug Agyat, Rajan Mukarung, and Upendra Subba in the year 2000, “to urge the inclusion of ethnic identities within mainstream Nepali literature” (Khaniya). While many prominent Kirat writers were writing before them, including Bairagi Kainla and Shrawan Mukarung, the trio realised that not enough was being done in Nepali literature to give a voice to the ethnic people, represent their issues, and so make Nepali literature inclusive and accessible for all. According to Hangyug Agyat, the principal theorist of the movement, the movement set five conditions for “a true Nepali literature” in the changed historical context: plurality in thoughts, multicultural awareness, ethnic consciousness, poetic freedom, and freedom to make a creative decision (Agyat, “Uttarvarti Soch: Kehi Sandarbha, Kehi Anubhuti”, i.e. “Post-Oriented Thoughts: Some Contexts, Some Impressions” n.p.). Rajan Mukarung, in his discussion of Hangyug Agyat’s poems, proposes that the core aims of the movement are to “question all the deep-rooted conventions, and examine the so-called norms and conventions, that were forcefully imposed [upon the ethnic people] yesterday, by the parameters of the present-day heartbeats” (15). These writers declared the establishment of “Creative Anarchy” as the beginning of the “end of anarchy” that had existed until then in the field of Nepali literature (Agyat, “Sirjansheel Arajakata, arthat, Arajakatako Antya”, i.e. “Creative Anarchy, i.e., the End of Anarchy” n.p.), and have had a significant impact on Nepali literature during the last two decades.

Agyat, through his poetry and essays, Mukarung, through his novels, and Subba, through his poetry, short stories, plays, and film scripts, have made a remarkable intervention in the contemporary Nepali literary landscape. The movement has been a success on many fronts: many of their books (for instance, Subba’s *Kholako Geet* and *Lato Pahad*, and Mukarung’s *Damini Bheer*) have become successful in the literary market, and have won some of the most prestigious Nepali literary awards (for instance, *Damini Bheer* was awarded

the Madan Puraskar in the year 2012, while *Lato Pahad* won the Padmashree Sahitya Puraskar in 2015).[36] Most importantly, they have not only mainstreamed issues heretofore considered irrelevant and styles previously regarded as sub-standard, but have also inspired a host of new writers to follow their trend. The *Rangabad* ("Colourism") movement led by Dharmendra Bikram Nembang, Swapnil Smriti, Chandrabir Tumbapo, Chandra Yongya, and Bimil, and the *Uttarawarti* ("Post-Oriented") movement involving Sagun Sushara, Bhawani Tawa, and Raj Mangalak (Bhattarai xix), are two such movements led by younger Kirat writers founded on the ground cleared by *Sirjansheel Arajakata*. There are similar shifts evident in both content and style in the writings of contemporary Tamang, Newar, and Madheshi writers, all of which draw some inspiration from the *Sirjansheel Arajakata*. While these writers and poets of the younger generation continue to make an impact on mainstream Nepali literature and transform its hegemonic character under movements of different names, Agyat claims that in order to understand these contemporary movements, the writers and their works, one has to understand the *Sirjansheel Arajakata* movement (Agyat, "Uttaravarti Soch: Kehi Sandarbha, Kehi Anubhuti" n.p.).

Yet another aim of the *Sirjansheel Arajakata* movement is to acknowledge, examine, and promote the works of ethnic writers from the past who have either been disregarded and forgotten (such as Sirijanga and Jita Bahadur Sinjali Magar) or have lost their ethnic identity through the recognition bestowed upon them by mainstream literature (for instance, Bhupi Serchan and Parijat). Agyat asserts:

> Nepali literature will be incomplete if ethnic literature is left out. Since the time of Bhanubhakta, Nepali writers of ethnic heritage have been contributing significantly to the development of Nepali literature. Without the writings of Sirijanga, Jit Bahadur Sinjali Magar and others, Nepal would probably never become a whole. (Agyat, "Janajati Sahityako Avalokan ra Samrakshanko Sawal", i.e. "Question of Study and Convervation of Ethnic Literature" n.p.)

[36] Madan Puraskar (Madan Prize), established in 1955 and awarded annually by the Madan Puraskar Trust, is arguably the most prestigious literary award in Nepal. Similarly, Padmashree, established in 2010 and awarded annually by Khemlal Harikala Foundation, is also considered among the highly regarded literary awards.

Since almost all ethnic writers have a mother tongue other than Nepali, the choice of language for literary writing becomes a difficult question for them. Agyat does not shy away from accepting both the necessity and the importance of writing in the Nepali language instead of one of the ethnic languages. He justifies the choice made by ethnic writers in the past as well as the present to write in the Nepali language:

> *Khas-Parbate* [i.e., the Nepali language] is now more than just a medium language [contact language]; it has now become a language that we need all the time and everywhere. Moreover, this is the only language that we can write in so that our message about the sufferings of ethnic people reaches out to the rulers. Language and literature are not the private property of anyone. *Khas-Parbate* language belongs to the ethnic people too, and they can use this language to write their literature. But only when the subject matter of such literature deals with the life and the world of the ethnic people, it becomes ethnic literature. ("Janajati Sahityako Avalokan ra Samrakshanko Sawal" n.p.)

However, as we discuss later in this chapter, while these writers use the Nepali language to tell their stories, they use it in new ways, unlike canonical writers in the past, such as Lekhanath Paudyal, Laxmi Prasad Devkota, or Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala, or Madhav Prasad Ghimire and Madan Mani Dixit in more recent times who used 'standard' Nepali, quite often showing a heavy Sanskrit influence.

Arguments advanced by proponents of the *Sirjansheel Arajakata* movement as well as their works evoke the theory of "minor literature" propounded by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. During their discussion of Franz Kafka's works, Deleuze and Guattari introduce the concept of minor literature which they define as "not the literature of a minor language but the literature a minority makes in a major language" (16). A minor literature has three major characteristics: "it involves all the ways in which the language is effected by a strong co-efficient of deterritorialization", "everything in them is political", and "everything has a collective value" (Deleuze and Guattari 16, 16, 17). Talking about deterritorialization, in Kafka's case, this involves "the impossibility of not writing", "the impossibility of writing in

German”, and “the impossibility of writing otherwise” (Deleuze and Guattari 16). This characterisation is equally applicable to Nepal’s ethnic writers who cannot remain silent, but when they have to write, the only language available to them is the language they are committed to write against.

Similarly, talking about the political nature of minor literature, Deleuze and Guattari assert: “Minor literature is completely different: because it exists in a narrow space, every individual matter is immediately political. Thus, the question of the individual becomes even more necessary, indispensable, magnified microscopically, because an entirely different story stirs within it” (16). Everything has a collective value, claim Deleuze and Guattari, because “what the solitary writer says already constitutes a communal action, and what he says or does is necessarily political—even if others do not agree with him” (17). Talking about Upendra Subba’s collection of short stories, *Lato Pahad*, another Kirat poet, Swapnil Smriti, in the inner blurb of the book, says: “None of these stories [collected in *Lato Pahad*] asks for a separate Limbu state, but they express infinite love towards their historical homeland, and its rich culture” (n.p.). Smriti implies that these stories are political by their very nature without being overtly political. The act of writing for writers coming from minority cultures like Kirat itself immediately becomes political.

Talking about the language in which the minor literature is written, Deleuze and Guattari sum up: “everyone who has had the misfortune to be born in the country of a major literature must write in its tongue, as a Czech Jew writes in German, or an Uzbek Jew writes in Russian” (18). When we look at Nepali literature written by Kirat writers, as we shall see in the upcoming analysis, it fits closely within the concept of minor literature in this regard, too. Nepali Kirat literature, therefore, is not a literature of a minor language (Kirat) but the literature of a minority group in a major language (Nepali). Moreover, while the Kirat writers

do not have the privilege of not writing, they do not have the privilege of writing in their own language either, and, therefore, should write in Nepali.

A 'New Literature' in a 'New Language'

1. *Alternative Source of Figurative Language (Khas-Arya/Hindu-Sanskrit vs. Ethnic/Indigenous)*

Literary language is characterised by its use of figurative language as well as the richness of its historical, cultural, religious, and literary allusions. It goes without saying that these creative figurations come from a specific historical, cultural, religious, and literary source(s). Before moving to a comparative discussion on the sources of figurative and metaphorical language in the Nepali literature of the past and the present, let us briefly consider figurative language itself.

Figurative language or non-literal language makes use of figures of speech such as simile, metaphor, onomatopoeia, personification, oxymoron, paradox, hyperbole, idiom, allusion, and so on. According to M H Abrams, figurative language is a "conspicuous departure from what users of a language apprehend as the standard meaning of words, or else the standard order of words, in order to achieve some special meaning or effect" (96). While figures are usually taken to be "primarily poetic," Abrams states that they are "integral to the functioning of language and indispensable to all modes of discourse" (96). George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in their well-known work on metaphorical language, *Metaphors We Live By*, have something very similar to say:

> Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish—a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language. Moreover, metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. For this reason, most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. (3)

Thus, while there is a widespread idea even among academics and writers that metaphorical language is primarily a poetic language, the reality is that it is as integral a part of everyday usage as it is of literary language. Lakoff and Johnson claim that metaphor is “as much a part of our functioning as our sense of touch, and as precious” (239).

The same principle applies in the reception of metaphorical language, too. Herbert Colston, talking about the reception of metaphorical language, states that “with adequate contextual support, the processing of nonliteral language can occur as rapidly as the processing of comparable literal language” (109). While certain aspects of metaphorical languages are universal, many are specific to a linguistic and cultural tradition. Barbara Dancygier and Eve Sweetser, in their book *Figurative Language*, shed light upon the fact that while some metaphors are “remarkably stable across language and cultures” (7), many others are specific to time, place, language, and culture. To illustrate, they cite a metaphor used by Taiwanese speakers of Mandarin, “Romantic-relationship management is kite flying,” and claim that while this is not “obviously accessible to English speakers,” it would perhaps be “entirely opaque to members of cultural and linguistic communities where kite flying [is] unknown” (8). In the upcoming sections, we will discuss this idea in more detail taking examples from Kirat writings meant for general readers of Nepali literature, most of whom are unfamiliar with the Kirat myths and their metaphorical language.

As indicated above, in the mainstream Nepali literature, metaphorical language, literary allusions, and references primarily come either from the ancient Hindu-Sanskrit tradition or from the modern Khas-Arya state-sponsored history. The example of a courageous hero, or a benevolent king, or an ideal daughter, are all to be found either in the Hindu-Sanskrit epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, or in the modern-day myths made up and disseminated during the rule of the Shah kings, such as the stories of the valour, wisdom and

far-sightedness of King P N Shah, the bravery of Khas-Arya Nepali soldiers in the Anglo-Nepal War (1914-16) like Balabhadra Kunwar and Bhakti Thapa, and so on. There was very little space in these tales for hundreds of Nepali ethnic groups to either tell their stories or relate to and identify with anything that was being narrated. According to this mainstream narrative, the foundations of Nepali literature were laid when the *Adikavi*, the first poet of the Nepali language, Bhanubhakta Acharya (1814-1868), translated the Hindu epic *Ramayana* into Nepali, and writers and poets after him followed suit. Lekhanath Paudyal (1885-1966), wrote poems and epics that closely emulated Sanskrit poetics. Even Laxmi Prasad Devkota (1909-1959), the 'greatest' Nepali poet (*Mahakavi*) who is credited with modernising Nepali literature, borrowed themes from the Hindu-Sanskrit tradition for his major works of poetry such as *Shakuntala*, *Ravan-Jatayu Yuddha*, *Sita Haran*, *Rajkumar Prabhakar*, *Dhumraketu*, and so on. Poets and writers coming after them carried this trend further. The Hindu-Sanskrit literary tradition, thus, has been the primary source of figurative language for mainstream Nepali literature until recent years. Apart from that, the narrative of the "*bir* (brave) history", to use Pratyoush Onta's term (146), which is primarily a glorified history of Shah kings, is the other popular source of figurative language. Sama's play *Amar Singh*, Tiwari's play *Silanyash*, and Ghimire's short epic, *Rashatranirmata,* for instance, draw heavily from this history, where the Shah Kings are presented as symbols of valour, courage, far-sightedness, and benevolence.

Contemporary literary works of the *Sirjansheel Arajakata* movement, and other Kirat poets, mark a clear shift from this mainstream tradition. Most of these poems, written by emerging Kirat voices, simultaneously attempt two things: they question the hegemonic Nepali language and the dominant Khas-Arya, Hindu-Sanskrit culture and tradition, and they do so by exploring their own native indigenous/ethnic myths and folklore in order to revive their obliterated roots as well as to guide the path ahead. Swapnil Smriti's poem, "Kathaa-

Ghumaaune Chautarimaa Kabhrako" ("Story of the Kabhra Tree on the Round Chautari")[37] is a noteworthy poem in this context. It opens with the scene of a *chautari*[38] under the *pipal* (sacred fig) tree where the grandmother rests the load of taro leaves and starts "weaving the yarns of her tale" (97): "Grandson, a long time ago/here was a giant *kabhra* tree" (97). The story unfolds with the description of the *kabhra* tree and its significance to the villagers:

> Three long, long ropes couldn't encircle its trunk
> No mad raging storm could shake it
> Neither could floods or landslides take it with them:
> That giant, that *kabhra* tree –
> It was the *mainam*[39] of the village life
> It was the *murumsitlang*[40] of the power of the settlements… (97)

Her tale continues: "They say – the ancient civilization of the locals/was all in the heart of that *kabhra* tree!" (98). The grandmother goes on, "The tangle of the that *kabhra*'s roots was fragrant with the scent of ancient communism[41]/And the tops of the *kabhra* was the Shangri-La[42] of singing cranes!" (98).

But things do not remain the same forever. In the "year so and so – a long time ago" (98), one of the great-great-great grandfathers has a nightmare, in which a thunderbolt splits the *kabhra* tree. When he wakes up, he sees in a fork of the tree, a "three-leaf sapling of a *pipal*, springing from wild-cat turd" (98). And, as the *pipal* "bore[s] its roots into the *kabhra*" (99), and grows bigger and bigger, the *kabhra* gradually becomes "just a hollow heart and

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[37] I have cited these lines from Prawin Adhikari's translation of the poem. But instead of the concise title published in the translated version ("The Kabhra Tree at the Chautari), I have mentioned the equivalent original title in Nepali here, "Story of the Kabhra Tree at the Round Chautari").

[38] A *chautari* is a round or rectangular platform built with stones, usually under some shady trees (most commonly, figs) in the hilly trails of Nepal. It primarily provides a resting place for travellers, but if it is located near the village, it can also function as a place of gathering.

[39] *Mainam*: Annual Kirat worship to ensure dignity and spiritual well-being of all the family members.

[40] *Murumsitlang*: The central wooden pillar of a house, underneath which the spirits of the ancestors are believed to dwell.

[41] "आदिम साम्यवाद" (98)

[42] "सांग्रिला राज्य" (98)

flaky bark" (99) and meets a slow death. The death of the *kabhra* tree has a huge impact on the villagers' life, the grandmother tells:

> Listen, now–once the old *kabhra* fell, they say–
> The heads of young men and women fell
> The children became lifeless, like well-stitched dolls
> The *Mundhum*[43] *dharma* of the wise old fell–
> The hearts fell and the country fell (100)

As the *pipal* grows bigger and its branches spread wider, the Kirat "Shangri-La" is gradually taken over by misery, hunger and thirst, oppression and exploitation, envy and grudge, hatred, rage and war. The story never actually comes to an end because it is "longer than the Tamor river" (73). The grandmother reminds the grandson that it is time to go home to feed the hogs. As they slowly walk towards their home, this time the grandson carrying the load of the taro leaves, the grandmother tells the final bits of the story, and probably the most heartrending ones.

Sanman Chemjong, who hails from the ethnic Kirat community and writes under the pen name Swapnil Smriti (meaning, 'dreamy reminiscence'), is a powerful voice in recent Nepali poetry. Adept at telling the stories of the past to contemporary readers, Smriti has been praised for "incorporating new metaphors, characters and stories into his verse" (Prasai). He has published two collections of poems so far, *Rangai Rangko Bheer* (*A Cliff of Many Colours*) (2005) and *Baduli ra Sudur Samjhana* (*Hiccups and Distant Memories*) (2011). Like many of his other poems, "Kathaa- Ghumaaune Chautarimaa Kabhrako" narrates the tale of how the Khas-Arya civilization, represented by the *pipal* tree gradually took over and destroyed the ancient egalitarian Kirat civilization, symbolised by the *kabhra* tree, and infected the Kirat society with all kinds of vices. Smriti achieves this telling with an interesting reversal of metaphors.

[43] *Mundhum* is the religious scripture/folk literature of the Kirats "consisting of legends, folktales, prehistoric accounts, and sermons, moral or philosophical exhortations in a poetic language" (Limbu 17).

Pipal (*Ficus religiosa*, or sacred fig), along with *bar* (*Ficus benghalensis*, or banyan), are considered holy tree by Hindus in Nepal and elsewhere in the subcontinent, and are worshipped on many occasions throughout the year.[44] Planting a *pipal* and a *bar* tree and erecting a *chautari* (resting place) underneath their shade (sometimes accompanied by a stone water tap and a watering hole nearby) was considered to be one of the highest religious acts among the Hindus of the Nepali hills until recently. While motor roads have gradually transformed the scene, the hilly trails of Nepal are still abundant with *chautaris* shaded by *pipal* and *bar* trees. *Kabhra/kabhro* (*Ficus lacor*), on the other hand, is a common tree lacking such religious or symbolic importance. While *pipal* is replete with religious and symbolic importance, it has hardly any practical usefulness, except perhaps providing shade along the hilly trails. *Kabhra*, a fodder plant, on the other hand, is the more useful tree in the Nepali hills, where agriculture is still the main occupation for the majority of the people. Cattle feed on its green leaves, its dry leaves are used for bedding in the sheds, its young buds are edible and are used to make pickles, and *kabhra* wood is used both as firewood and timber. Therefore, while the turning of the *pipal-kabhra* metaphor upside-down may appear like the only natural thing to do, this is nothing less than revolutionary when seen in the context of centuries-old literary and religious-cultural tradition.

The Kirat region had its own distinct existence and identity in the eastern hills of present-day Nepal until its annexation by the Gorkha king in 1774. Smriti's poem is a moving account of how the arrival of the state-backed Hindu Khas-Arya civilization gradually uprooted the indigenous culture and way of life, from religion to language and literature. Therefore, when Smriti decides to narrate the story of a once-glorious civilization brutally trampled by another, he has the responsibility not only of re-exploring the forgotten tale but

[44] *Pipal* is considered sacred by the Buddhists too, and in their case the sacredness comes from the fact that Buddha is believed to have attained enlightenment (*nirvana*) while meditating under *Bodhi Briksha*, a *pipal* tree.

also of narrating it in a new language, with metaphors other than the ones imposed and internalised by the dominant culture. Smriti's poem makes a poignant and telling juxtaposition of these two trees, one bearing religious and symbolic relevance in the Hindu culture, and the other having practical significance in the broader non-Hindu society, and thus the *kabhra* tree becomes a potent metaphor pitted against the *pipal*.

Pipal (along with *bar*) is a popular metaphor in ainstream Nepali literature. *Pipal* is quite commonly used as a metaphor for purity, sacredness, and benevolence. Similarly, it is worshipped by the Hindus as a reincarnation of Lord Vishnu and is, therefore, not very uncommon to use *pipal* to signify what is frequently referred to as the *Sanatan Hindu Dharma*, the 'eternal, Hindu religion'. The *pipal* and *bar* are also frequently cited as symbols of undying love, and Nepali songs and love poems are suffused with their images.[45] In the context of this literary and folk tradition where *pipal* is used to signify something absolutely positive, Smriti presents it as something inherently evil: born out of evil, the "wild-cat turd", and spreading evil. It is not only the *pipal* tree, but the round *chautari* under its shade is also an equally dreaded site. This is because it is the place where "so many despots out for conquest/stopped to rest", who "tied their horses to *pipal* roots/and whistled their deathly calls" (100). It is also the place where the great-grandfather of the boy was "hanged and lanced" (101). It is the very spot where his great-grandmother "then with child/was picked and thrashed, picked and thrashed/until her belly tore open…" (101). Thus, the evil *chautari* under the ominous shade of the *pipal* tree becomes a powerful symbol of the state that has, for hundreds of years, been indifferent and uncaring of its people's needs and violently

[45] A popular song "Janam Janam Jiula Sangai", for instance, has lines where a couple pledge their love for each other by "making an oath on" (*bhakera*) or by "touching" (*chhoera*) *bar* and *pipal* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEKe-mx5Ikw&list=RDpEKe-mx5Ikw&start_radio=1). In another song, a man returns home remembering the shade of *bar* and *pipal* (*bar pipalko chhayalai samjhi*) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O0QQkRSx0WM). There are many other songs that use the *bar-pipal* metaphor such as "Deuralami Bar Pipal Chautari", "Pipal Chheuma Bar", and so on.

hostile towards them. Therefore, the grandmother concludes: "Grandson! On that round *chautari* –/no matter how long we sit to rest/we remain just as tired!" (100).

A number of other poets coming from the Kirat background undertake similar literary exercises. They no longer re-tell the stories of the ancient Hindu texts, the *Vedas*, the *Puranas*, the *Ramayana*, or the *Mahabharata*, as the mainstream writers always seem to do. They do not rely anymore on old and worn out metaphors coming from these sources. Instead, they turn to their folklore, indigenous scriptures, and myths to find their stories and come up with an entirely new metaphorical language. Moreover, in Smriti's poem, after resting at the round *chautari* and listening to the grandmother's story, when they finally get up to leave for home, it is not the grandmother but the grandson who carries the load of taro leaves, that was, till now, being carried by the grandmother. This is symbolic of the need to carry the heavy load of history further, to become aware of it, and to tell it to the new generation. Likewise, young Kirat writers like Smriti seem to be responsibly transferring the "load" of their heritage onto their own shoulders and carrying it further for future generations.

Kirat scripture, *Mundhum*, and Kirat deities such as *Tageraningwafumang*, *Lepmuhang*, *Falgunanda* and *Budhasubba* are very frequently mentioned in these poems, and so are *mantras* such as *thak bachchek thak* and *thak fururu*, all very new and unfamiliar to non-Kirat readers. Readers come across a new set of greetings (*sewaro*, for instance), as well as a new array of onomatopoeic sounds, again completely different for readers of mainstream Nepali poetry.[46] Birds, animals, and vegetation take a new signification in these poems, different from how they had been portrayed in mainstream poetry until now. Even some everyday habits and practices are described in a new light. For instance, alcohol is always portrayed in

[46] *Tetlung tetlung tetlung, tere tere tere* (Hangyug Agyat), *Simi ee ee ee* (sound of the Semekwan bird weeping, Upendra Subba), *ka ka kude…ga, ka ka kude…ga* (sound of a mother hen, Upendra Subba)

a negative light and associated with degradation in the Khas-Arya tradition, and it gets a similar treatment in the mainstream Nepali literature. However, in these Kirat poems, alcohol not only becomes a part of everyday life but is also a sacred offering for indigenous gods.

In Subba's *Kholako Geet* (*The Song of the Brook*), for instance, *Tageraningwafung* visits the poet in his dreams (7), the speed with which the youngsters marry and divorce these days reminds the poet of *Lepmuhang* (9). He wants to get the wings of the *satdhul* bird for his daughter so that she can fly in the sky (34). The flooding rivers of the city remind him of the *seme:kwa* [sic.] bird (40). He provides a long list of paraphernalia that one needs to carry out the ritual of *Mangena* such as the flowers of *Hangwathok*, *Semfung*, and *Pangbo:kafung* [sic.] (63). Agyat, in *Adharatko Tangsing*, refers to *Lepmuhang* (34), but also mentions *Tangsing* (67), *Tageraningwabhumang* (68), and *Kesami Namsami* (69). A reader of Manglak's collection of poems, *Limbuni Gaun*, comes across words like *Namsung* (15), *Yamsing* (15), *Adangme* (25), *Sehonamlang* (29), *Yumasammang* (65), and Smriti in *Baduli ra Sudur Samjhana* makes recurrent use of words like *Tageraningwabhumang* (23), *Yumasammang*, *Thebasammang* (75), *Mainaam* and *Murumsitlang* (97).

If we look at these words as figurative devices, we find that they come from three major sources: Kirat scripture (*Mundhum*), myths and rituals; ethnic/local names of places (mountains, hills, rivers etc.) in the Kirat region; and, Kirat words used in everyday life. For instance, mythical characters such as *Tageraningwabhumang* (self-created, omnipresent Kirat deity), *Lepmuhang* (a religious man in ancient times who was devoted to *Tageraningwabhumang*), birds like *satdhul* (a sister who died when her brother disregarded her and turned into a singing/crying bird) or *semekwa* (a mother who killed her daughter accidentally and then turned into another singing/crying bird) all come from Kirat scripture, the *Mundhum*. Similarly, *Mangena* (Kirat ritual to uplift someone's dignity and self-worth), *Yupparung* (the ritual of offering a coin to the baby, which is later used during his/her

wedding, too), *Samdakhung* (a death ritual), and *Mahukwa* (a ritual to clear hurdles in life), all come from the same source. *Mukkumlung*, *Silauti*, *Tumbewa, Sohonamlang*, which feature in some of these poems, are all Kirat religious sites in the eastern hills, but none well-known to people outside the Kirat community. Similarly, instead of well-known names, these poets insist on using Kirat names for places, and therefore Mount Kumbhakarna and Mount Kanchanjungha (both clearly recent Hinduised names) are referred to by the names *Faktanglung* and *Kewalung* respectively. *Palam* (a Kirat ritual song), *nambha* (crops growing from leftover seeds), *chyabrung* (a Kirat drum), *sewaro*[47] (a Kirat greeting), and the like, derive from everyday Kirat life.

For a 'general' reader of Nepali literature, these words may appear as a hindrance in reading, and there is no other way than referring to a glossary to find out what they mean.[48] But there are several things happening simultaneously in this process. Kirat poets are excavating their forgotten myths and stories and retelling them not only to their own group but to a wider community. Similarly, readers get acquainted with an unfamiliar heritage, a different but rich world which existed in their neighbourhoods all along, yet they were never aware of or cared about it. For those who care to explore further, not only through indexes, glossaries, and dictionaries but also by acquainting themselves with people living around them, there is a rich mine of knowledge awaiting them. The most important thing that is happening in this literary exploration and experimentation is that while these Kirat writers are reviving their dying myths and retelling them to a wider audience, they are also setting an

[47] In the Kirat/Limbu language, worshipping of the deities is referred to as *sewa mepma*, *sewa chokma* or even *sewa salam*. While the word *sewaro* sounds like it has been derived from the Sanskrit/Nepali *sewa*/*seva* (to serve), Swapnil Smriti, in a personal interview, pointed towards the possibility of it being derived from the Limbu sound *se* or *sese* (meaning, pure/healthy/lively), which is the root of a number of other Limbu words and expressions.

[48] While some of these books have glossaries of Kirati/Limbu words (such as *Hetchhakuppaa*, *Limbuni Gaun*, and *Lato Pahad*), many others (for instance, *Karangko Hirasat*, *Adharatko Tangsing*, *Baduli ra Sudur Samjhana*) do not. In many cases, I have taken help of poet Swapnil Smriti to find out the meaning of Kirati/Limbu words through a number of interviews conducted through Facebook Messanger in between February 2019 and August 2021.

example. They are inspiring people from other ethnic groups to do the same, to take pride in their heritage and legacy, and claiming a space for them because they are not any less valuable than the so-called mainstream narratives. Literary writing and story-telling thus become consciousness-raising exercises in addition to a cultural/intellectual pursuit.

2. *The Use of 'Non-Standard' Variety of Nepali*

Languages in a multilingual society always exist in a hierarchical relationship to one another. H. Ekkehard Wolff recognises that "in multilingual societies, there will always be a language question in terms of inequality, power, and differing attitudes toward language," and it is unlikely that "any of the languages involved will ever truly merit the label "neutral" in these regards" (n.p.). Minglang Zhou lists several factors behind this "hierarchical relationship" such as "languages' access to resources, including official status, domains of use, legal protection, financial support, channels of spread, number of native speakers, number of second languages, and technical support" (41). Moreover, the state apparatus makes use of overt and covert policies that aim at favouring and co-opting one or more of these languages as the state or national language(s), and side-lining, disparaging or even systematically wiping out others. Most of the discussions on nation, nationalism and language revolve around this topic. But there is another important aspect of language use that is equally relevant in this context: the practice of, and the attitude towards, the use of language varieties other than the standard, usually referred to as dialects. This section begins with a brief discussion of language varieties, and an overview of the history regarding their use in other literary traditions, especially English. It then investigates the change in use and attitudes towards regional and ethnic varieties in contemporary Nepali literature and the meanings and implications of this change.

John Cunnison Catford defines language variety as a “subset of formal and/or substantial features which correlates regularly with a particular type of socio-situational feature” (qtd. in Gregory and Carroll 12). According to Elizabeth Closs Traugott and Mary Louise Pratt, although language-users “shift their speech habits according to the degree of formality required, the subject they are talking about, the genre, and medium,” the term ‘language variety’ usually refers to the linguistic habits of people from “different regions, social classes, and ethnic groups” (309). The major distinction between different languages and the varieties of the same language (dialects), according to Alissa Melinger, is often drawn on the basis of “size, prestige, and mutual intelligibility” (73)[49]. While the term ‘dialect’ has been more commonly used in the past, ‘variety’ is the preferred term in recent times, owing both to its more neutral connotation, compared to the hierarchical connotations of ‘language vs. dialect’, as well as its broader signification. The term “dialect”, according to Kate Burridge and Tonya N Stebbins, brings to mind something “rather quaint and rustic”, a “haphazard, vulgar or provincial aberration of a ‘real’” (240). Therefore, I use the term ‘variety’ in this discussion to refer to ethnic and regional dialects of the ‘standard’ language.

In the course of the formation of a nation state, among different varieties of a language, the variety used by those in positions of power comes to be regarded as ‘standard’ and is used for communication in formal contexts as well as in education, administration, literature and the mainstream media. Just as “political power is the crucial factor” in choosing a state or a national language and not “numerical dominance” (Holmes 101), it is a similar case in choosing variety as the standard, too. Varieties associated with prestige, and political and economic power become the standard, whereas other varieties of the same language,

[49] Melinger elaborates, “All three of these criteria are problematic and can lead to artificial distinctions and inconsistent classification. Norwegian, Danish and Swedish are granted full language status (prestige) despite high levels of mutual intelligibility, whereas Mandarin and Cantonese are classified as dialects of Chinese (low prestige), despite low levels of intelligibility” (73).

depending on a number of measures such as the regional, ethnic, social, and even economic background of the speakers, are viewed as 'substandard'/'nonstandard', and are generally reserved only for communication in informal contexts and in-group conversations. According to Janet Holmes, what we now call Standard English, for instance, emerged in the fifteenth century from a variety of regional English dialects "largely because it was the variety used by the Court and the influential merchants of London" (76). Joshua Fishman explains, "one speech variety is usually associated with status, high culture, and aspiration towards social mobility" while other varieties are associated more with "solidarity, comradeship and intimacy with low status group" (qtd. in Stafford et al. 255). While none of the varieties of a language is "necessarily less complete, less logical, less 'language' than a language" (Gregory and Caroll 12), it is not uncommon to refer to the standard variety as a language and the remaining varieties as dialects. Max Weinreich's well-known observation that "a language is a dialect with an army and a navy" (qtd. in McWhorter) explains how one of the varieties that is backed by power gradually achieves the status of a standard (state/national) language, while other varieties of the same language are relegated to a substandard status and looked down upon as dialects.

Charles Ferguson, in his pioneering study of diglossia, distinguishes what he calls the "standard" and the "regional" dialects as "high variety" and "low variety" (25-27). He discusses their differences in terms of features such as function (formal/informal), prestige (high/low), literary heritage (presence of a sizable body of written literature/lack of it), acquisition (as a mother tongue/formal education), as well as other attributes such as standardization, stability, grammar, lexicon, and phonology. While we may have come a long way in the study of language, the attitude towards 'regional dialects' or the so-called 'low varieties' seems to be still, or largely, the same.

When we investigate the history of written literature, it is not surprising that it is the so-called standard variety that is favoured over its nonstandard variants as a literary language for several reasons. It is the variety, after all, that is used and endorsed by those who are in power and the intellectuals around them, and is considered to serve a combination of "unificational, prestige, and frame of reference (or code of correctness) function" (Traugott and Pratt 324). Traugott and Pratt also hold that "the extensive use of colloquialisms or regional, social or other varieties in literature to portray a character or indicate social meanings," is a "fairly recent" phenomenon (335). Taking examples from the history of English literature, they elaborate:

> In the early periods of English literature, authors wrote mainly in their own dialect. Whatever social meaning this dialect conveyed derived from the use of English as opposed to Latin, or, in the Middle of English period, French. It did not derive from contrast with other varieties of English. (335-336)

They argue that the advent of the printing press in the late 15th century had a homogenizing effect on the language, but there were also attempts to gradually incorporate language varieties other than the standard in the writings, especially after the Renaissance. The nonstandard varieties that were reserved in Shakespeare's plays for rustics and clowns, achieved more respectable status only during the Romantic period when poets set forth on a mission to write in the language used by the common people. Traugott and Pratt consider Robert Burns (1759-1796), "best remembered for his representations of his native Lowland Scots dialect in poetry" (337), as an important figure in making the nonstandard variety of English popular in the literature. Similarly, John Clare (1793-1864), who, according to his biographer, Jonathan Bate, was the "greatest labouring-class poet that England has ever produced" (Bate n.p.), is yet another notable poet in this context. Now recognized as the "finest and most prolific of all English rural poets" (Goodbridge n.p.), Clare wrote poems in his Northamptonshire dialect and resisted using the 'standard' English of his time.

The next important figure who is credited with bringing about a major turning point in both using a nonstandard variety in literature and popularizing it was Mark Twain. According to Traugott and Pratt, Twain's novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* published in 1885, used a nonstandard variety, i.e. Black English Vernacular (BEV) instead of Standard American English (SAE) for the first time, "not for local colour, but for character":

> [*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*] is the first sustained attempt to break through the levelling force of the standard written language to an individual voice using a "poor White" boy as the narrator, and hence the boy's language for the frame of reference of the novel. It is also the first major work in which the level of incongruity between the standard and vernacular is drastically reduced by rendering the narrative itself (as a first-person narrative) in the vernacular, not just the dialogue. (338)

Even though there was a long tradition in English literature of using a nonstandard variety to portray, through dialogue, a rustic, uneducated, unsophisticated or clownish character from as early as Chaucer, continued by Shakespeare and the writers coming after him, it was Twain, who, for the first time, made a shift from using it only for dialogue to using it as a narrative language, and from using it mostly for a comic purpose to a non-comic one.

While there is a growing use of nonstandard varieties in literary works as well as a gradual change in attitude towards such usage over the centuries, we should not forget that a negative outlook towards the use of nonstandard varieties persists. For instance, in a recent article entitled "A Difficulty with Dialect", British novelist Debbie Taylor sheds light on the intolerant attitude of the publishers towards the use of a language variety in a literary work. When she was getting ready to submit her novel, *Herring Girl* (2018), to the publishers, Taylor confesses, she was "advised early on that the dialect was a 'barrier' to the readers, and that [she] should *ethnically cleanse* [her] manuscript even before it was submitted" (my emphasis) (Taylor n.p.). Faced with this difficult choice between 'ethnically cleansing' her work of all the 'dialect' or opting for self-publication, she confesses that she chose the middle path, which she calls the "dialect lite" option (Taylor n.p.). What we can conclude from this

example is that though we have come a long way from the times when the use of varieties other than the standard was completely unheard of in literature, the aversion towards it still holds strong. While in Taylor's case, the cleansing might have been required for commercial reasons, in other cases political and social forces might have been more vital. Be that as it may, the negative attitude towards nonstandard varieties is evident, and continues.

According to bell hooks, in cases like these, the problem does not lie in the language itself, but in how the language has been used in the past and the present, by whom and to what end. Discussing the legacies of standard (white) English and black English in the United States, she says, "it is not the English language that hurts me, but what the oppressors do with it, how they shape it to become a territory that limits and defines, how they make it a weapon that can shame, humiliate, colonize" (296). She elaborates, it has taken a very long time "for white Americans to acknowledge diverse languages of native Americans, to accept that the speech their ancestral colonizers declared were merely grunts or gibberish was indeed *language*," and it is difficult for her "not to hear in standard English always the sound of slaughter and conquest" (296). In response to the question of what a black man should do with white English, she says the language would need to be "possessed, taken, claimed as a space of resistance…a potential site of resistance" (297). hooks, speaking on behalf of all black people, and by the same token on behalf of everyone else who has had no option but to use the oppressor's language, channels Caliban: "We take the oppressor's language and turn it against itself. We make our words a counterhegemonic speech, liberating ourselves in language" (301).

hooks' ideas apply to those speaking a language or a variant of a language that has been considered nonstandard, or substandard, and therefore unbefitting in respectable contexts, such as education, the media, and literature. When these voices go unheard there seems to be no other way than to take up the 'oppressor's language', and this is what contemporary

Nepali literature from linguistic, ethnic, and regional margins seems to be doing. Even though they have a language of their own, years of restrictions and rejections have rendered it unserviceable in the mainstream space, especially when they have to use it to talk to the oppressor. The only option left for them is to use the oppressor's language and turn it, through multifarious interventions and abrogations, into something, not just different but new altogether. As the following discussion on the Kirat writers shows, this use of the Nepali language by Kirat writers is distinct from the way it has been used by those in the political and socio-cultural mainstream for decades.

Some of the earliest uses of language varieties other than the standard in Nepali literature are seen in the works of Guru Prasad Mainali (1900-1971) and Bhawani Bhikshu (1909-1981). Mainali, in his stories collected in the anthology *Naso* (*The Ward*), represented the regional and ethnic varieties spoken by the people from the eastern and western hills of Nepal, as well as the Newars of the Kathmandu valley. He, however, reserved the nonstandard variety almost always for the minor characters, whereas his protagonists almost always spoke standard Nepali. Bhikshu's short story "Harjit" ("Win-Lose") is one of the first instances of the sustained use of a language variety, unlike the stereotypical representation of a variety found in other writers. While writers coming after them gradually made use of the non-standard varieties, they usually did so stereotypically and again almost always reserved it for the 'less than noble' or minor characters. Even progressive and rebellious writers from a linguistic background other than Nepali, such as Bhupi Serchan and Parijat, seem to have fallen into the same trap. Suyogbir, the central character and the narrator of Parijat's renowned novel, *Sirishko Phool* (*Blue Mimosa*), an ex-Gorkha soldier, most likely comes from an ethnic community speaking a language other than Nepali. But the novel is written in the 'standard' Nepali, and so are all the dialogues spoken in it. Dhruba Chandra Gautam's novel, *Alikhit* (*Unwritten*) (1983), is an interesting example in this case. A writer from the

southern plains, narrating the story of the same region, he generously uses both the regional Nepali variety and the local language, Maithili, sometimes to the extent of unintelligibility for the speakers of standard Nepali. But he, too, ends up repeating the same trend followed by several writers before him, reserving the regional variety for the minor characters, and making almost all of his major characters speak the standard variety. This may appear to be the obvious thing to do in this context, since all of the major characters are *Pahades*, but it also foregrounds the fact that while it is a story about *Madhes* and the *Madheshis*, it is entirely told from the perspectives of Pahade men.

We can see a transformation in the attitude towards language varieties especially after the 1990's political change that brought identity issues openly and strongly to the surface for the first time. While the use of regional and ethnic varieties was mostly reserved for dialogue in works of fiction, it was gradually used in poetry, too. Shrawan Mukarung, for instance, uses language varieties from different regions and strata of society quite frequently in his collection of poems, *Bise Nagarchiko Bayan*. In the poem, "Bise Nagarchiko Bayan", for instance, Mukarung evokes the dialect of a poor hill Dalit man, whereas in the poem "Anuhar Khojirahechha Rambharos", he adduces the language of a Madheshi man. There is a growing use of varieties, both regional and ethnic, in Nepali literature especially after 2007's political change, a change largely brought about by identity politics. Many of these writers themselves fought to bring about the changes and can be seen using the space brought about by the political change to write about newer issues in newer voices. In the following sections, I note some of the prominent contemporary literary works that use nonstandard varieties of Nepali generously, and in original ways.

Buddhisagar's *Karnali Blues* (2010) is one of the most popular novels of recent times in terms of generating critical interest, as well as for being one of the all-time Nepali bestsellers. *Karnali Blues*, along with Narayan Wagle's *Palpasa Café*, another bestseller from

recent times, is believed to have opened up a new chapter in the Nepali publishing industry (Lamichhane). In a review of the novel, Peter J Karthak generously praises Buddhisagar's attempt to move beyond the Sanskritised Nepali language by bringing together all the local varieties of the Nepali language:

> The settlements' carpetbaggers don't fuss with Sanskrit. Rather, the pages have local Tharu dialects of Bhagi Ram, west Nepal's guttural expressions delivered by Brisha's mother, and the Kumaon-Garhwal-Khasan-Sinjali vernacular of Nepali spoken by Jarilal in Kalikot. These variations are Nepal's very own, and readers will enjoy deciphering their nuances. (Karthak n.p.)

Karthak hints at the fact that Nepali writers had formerly imposed the standard Nepali language on their characters, whatever ethnic or linguistic background they might have come from, and disregarded the dialect they really spoke. With works like *Karnali Blues*, however, this ungracious and heedless practice seems to be finally changing for the better.

Another writer who deserves a mention in this context is Nayan Raj Pandey. His powerful novels narrate harrowing tales of the hardships that downtrodden people from the southern plains have undergone over the ages. *Ular* (2000) and *Loo* (2011), make generous use of the languages from Tarai, including the Tharu language. Like Buddhisagar, he has also been praised for an authentic representation of the low-land varieties, especially the Nepali language spoken by the Tharus, the largest ethnic group from the south-western plains. Other contemporary writers such as Ramlal Joshi, Shyam Shah, Beena Theeng Tamang, Bimala Tumkhewa, and Phulman Bal, just to name a few, continue this trend of representing non-standard varieties of Nepali in their works. Joshi's *Aina* (2015), which won the prestigious Madan Puraskar, uses the dialects of the mid- and far-western hills and plains in abundance. Some of the stories like "Parda" and "Shrimati Jugunidevi" make use of the Tharu language so much so that speakers of standard Nepali have to struggle hard to understand them. *Abba* (2016), by Shyam Shah, who hails from the southern plains, also makes profuse use of both the Tharu language as well as the variety of Nepali heavily influenced by the languages of the

Terai such as Bhojpuri, Maithili, and Awadhi. While we can go on citing more individual examples like these, it is the Kirat writers from the *Sirjansheel Arajakata* movement, again, who deserve a more sustained discussion in this context. By collectively using regional and ethnic varieties of Nepali in their literary works, these writers have popularised such usage and established this practice in the literary mainstream. In the following sections, along with some works of poetry, I will examine in detail two works of fiction, Subba's *Lato Pahad*, and Muakrung's *Damini Bheer*, with a focus on their use of nonstandard language varieties.

Upendra Subba's *Lato Pahad*, a collection of thirteen short stories, and Rajan Muakrung's novel *Damini Bheer*, along with another novel, *Hetchhakuppa* (2013), stand out in important ways from all the earlier works of Nepali fiction, even from those that make use of the nonstandard varieties of the Nepali language. Firstly, unlike the works of fiction from the past, where the protagonists would speak the standard variety and the nonstandard variety would usually be reserved for minor characters, the situation reverses here: it is the protagonists who speak the dialect in these works, while the characters who speak the standard variety, if any, are more often than not relegated to the minor roles. More important than that, however, is the fact that these works, probably for the first time, use dialect not only for dialogue but also for characterization and as a narrative language. In that sense, *Damini Bheer*, in particular, is the first major work of Nepali literature in which, to use Traugott and Pratt's words, "the level of incongruity between the standard and vernacular is drastically reduced by rendering the narrative itself" (338) in it. *Damini Bheer* can, thus, be considered a major turning point in the use of regional/ethnic varieties in Nepali literature. *Damini Bheer*'s success in the market,[50] as well as its popularity among the critical

[50] It has sold more than 50,000 copies by now, and won one the most prestigious Nepali literary awards, *Madan Puraskar*. This novel in particular, and the "Sirjansheel Arajakata" movement in general, have initiated an intense critical debate among Nepali critics and intellectuals regarding both the content and the style of Nepali literature as well as its historical legacy.

community, also signal the fact that there is a growing acceptance of the use of language varieties in Nepali literature. Nor should we forget that this acceptance is part of the larger socio-cultural change in attitude towards people and cultures other than the dominant mainstream. If we consider that, until recently, ethnic and regional dialects were subjects of caricature, ridicule and humour even on national radio and television,[51] this is a big step towards acknowledging, accepting, and respecting the difference.

This variety of Nepali, which according to Elizabeth and Pratt's criteria, could come under both a regional and ethnic variety, is spoken by the Kirat people of eastern Nepal. While it is generally legible for people speaking Nepali anywhere else (except for specific Kirat lexical items that get sprinkled here and there), we can see that it is heavily influenced by the way the Kirat language[52] is spoken. A detailed study of Kirat would be better undertaken by a sociolinguist, however, I present some examples here to show how this variety is different from the standard. I explore how these variations could be symptomatic of larger socio-cultural differences as well as indicative of the changes the society is undergoing.

The first story in the collection *Lato Pahad*, "Prabhu Maila", opens with Purne's complaint about the heat very early in the morning: "Uis, yati byanai yo gham ni ke biddi charko haao" ("उइस् ! यति ब्यानै यो घाम नि के बिद्दी चर्को हाओ"/Oh, it's so hot early in the morning) (7). Apparently just a simple exclamation, this sentence is in itself a telling example

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[51] Dipak Raj Giri and Dipashree Niraula, both well-known artists, ran a program called "Ram Bilash ra Dhaniya" (Ram Bilash and Dhaniya) on the national radio, Radio Nepal, in which they imitated the accent of people from the southern plains, the terai. Similarly, Sandeep Chhetri, a well-known comedian, still runs a program on Kantipur Television, in which he blackfaces, and dresses up as a *Madheshi*terai*Madheshi* man, Mithai Lal Yadav, and interviews celebrities in a terai accent. These are just two examples, and there are many more.

[52] Kirat is a Sino-Tibetan language spoken by the Kirat people living in the eastern hills of Nepal as well as north-eastern India (Sikkim and Darjeeling) and southern Bhutan. The language has four dialects, Phedape, Chhathare, Tambarkhole and Panthare, among which Phedape is believed to be the most widely spoken and understood.

of the variation in question. A similar expression in standard Nepali would be something like this: "Oho, yati bihanai yo gham pani ke bidhi charko ho" ("ओहो, यति बिहानै यो घाम पनि के बिधी चर्को हो"). Upendra Subba's version, however, shows two things in particular: firstly, the speaker is an uneducated person coming from the hills, and, secondly, expressions like "uis" (उइस्) and "hao" (हाओ), both interjections, indicate that he belongs either to the Kirat community or lives/comes from somewhere close to the Kirat settlements in the eastern hills. "Hao" (हाओ), an interjection usually coming at the end of the sentence and used very frequently by Kirat speakers, is repeated throughout, eight times in a ten-page story. Some other words and expressions, typical of Kirat, include "sewaro"/"sewa" (सेवारो, सेवा, Kirat greetings), "mulang" (मुलाङ, a curse word), which are also found recurrently in *Damini Bheer*. In *Damini Bheer*, Mukarung repeatedly uses "pan" (पन) instead of the 'standard' "pani" (पनि), and "bhapan" (भापन) instead of "bhae pani" (भए पनि).

Another feature of the way the Nepali language is used in both of these works of fiction, as well as a number of works of poetry by contemporary Kirat writers, is the excessive use of the nasal 'ng' (ङ्) sound in first-person imperative verbs, which is a result of the mother tongue interference. To cite just a few examples from Lato Pahad, "uthau" (उठौं) in standard Nepali becomes "uthung" (उठुङ) (9) here, "thalau" (थालौं) becomes "thalung" (थालुङ) (16), "farkau" (फर्कौं) becomes "farkung" (फर्कुङ) (32). Similar examples recur in *Damini Bheer*, too: "dekhungla" (देखुङ्ला) (23) instead of "dekhaula" (देखौँला), "darangne" (डराङ्ने) (151) instead of "daraune" (डराउने), "thang" (ठाङ) (153) instead of "thau" (ठाउँ), "lagchhung" (लाग्छुङ) (154) instead of "lagchhau" (लाग्छौँ), "chalangchha" (चलाङ्छ) (163) instead of "chalauchha" (चलाऊँछ), "padhangne" (पढाङ्ने), "khelangne" (खेलाङ्ने) and "chalangne" (चलाङ्ने) (180) instead of "padhaune" (पढाउने), "khelaaune" (खेलाउने) and

"chalaaune" (चलाऊने). This usage may just appear as a cosmetic change but if we consider how Nepali language and literature have evolved in a censorious manner so far, interventions like these are important steps towards a bigger change in the literary landscape in terms of both content and form.

Nepali language is very rich in onomatopoeia, and the Kirat variety appears to be even richer. In addition to regular onomatopoeic expressions, these works introduce a whole new set originating from the Kirat language. Here are some examples from Upendra Subba's *Kholako Geet*: "Simiee…ee…ee" (सिमीइँ...इँ...इँ.../cry of a bird called *Semekwa*) (41), "Asa e ma mo e..e..e" (सा ए मा मो ए...ए...ए.../cry of a mother at the death of the daughter) (41), थक बच्चेक बच्चेक/ थाक फुरुरु (chanting from the *Mundhum* used during *Mangena*) (62), "chhui chhui khyaap…/chhui chhui khyap…" (an expression used during a dance called *Singkhyale* following the moves in the beats) (73). Similar examples can be found abundantly in many of the works of fiction and poetry of the *Sirjansheel Arajakata*.

There are differences beyond just the phonological and lexical level, too. One regular feature found at the syntactic level in the Kirat variety of Nepali is a new form of the verb which seems to be an amalgamation of the Nepali version of "used to" and "unknown present" (known as *agyat bartaman*), unique to the Nepali language. So, something that would probably either be "hunthyo" (हुन्थ्यो) or "hudo rahechha" (हुँदो रहेछ) becomes "hunthechha" (हुन्थेछ) (24), and "pugthyo" (पुग्थ्यो) or "pugdo rahechha" (पुग्दो रहेछ) becomes "pugthechha" (पुग्थेछ) (24). The Kirat also seem to have a unique way of adding a negative marker, hardly found in standard Nepali. For instance, what would perhaps be "hudainathyo" (हुँदैनथ्यो) or "nahune/nahudo rahechha" (नहुने/नहुँदो रहेछ) becomes "nahunthechha" (नहुन्थेछ) (33). Usages like these, which are now seen more frequently in social media, too, are examples of the confidence ethnic writers are gaining in using the

otherwise 'non-standard' variety in their writings and starting an important intervention in changing the language of literature.

The use of a more direct, apparently less polite in 'standard' Nepali, and uncompromisingly forthright language seems to be another feature of the Kirat variety, like many of the rural varieties. One common example of this is the frequent use of "timi" (तिमी) or even "ta" (तँ) (the less polite forms of "you") even when referring to someone as respectable as your teachers or parents, who would, in standard Nepali, be addressed as either "tapai" (तपाईं) or "hajur" (हजुर). This might be a way of circumventing hierarchical modes of address more prevalent in and imposed by dominant Khas-Arya culture. At the other extreme of this is the rampant use of profanity, especially in *Damini Bheer*, which probably is also the first Nepali literary work to do so.

At the syntactic (and sociolinguistic) level, we find several instances that would be considered incorrect in terms of subject-verb agreement in standard Nepali. Here is an example from the story "Sugut" ("Spirit") in *Lato Pahad*: "Timi nafarkane bato gais" (तिमी नफर्कने बाटो गइस्, you left never to return) (121). The sentence uses a moderately polite form of you "timi" and a less polite form of verb "gais" together in a sentence. A 'correct' sentence in 'standard' Nepali would either be "Ta nafarkane bato gais" (तँ नफर्कने बाटो गइस) or "Timi nafarkane bato gayau" (तिमी नफर्कने बाटो गयौ). Similar examples can be found in the case of subject-verb agreement in the case of number, namely, a singular verb used for a plural noun, as well as gender, a masculine verb for a feminine noun. These practices can be considered as forms of "abrogation", a term used to refer to the "rejection by post-colonial writers of a normative concept of 'correct' or 'standard' English used by certain classes or groups, and of the corresponding concepts of inferior 'dialects' or 'marginal variants'" (Ashcroft et al. 3-4). In the context of the Nepali language and literature too, Kirat writers appear to be deliberately

rejecting the normative concept of 'correct' or 'standard' Nepali, and using variants, previously considered not only as inferior or marginal but also as ungrammatical and incorrect. This, on the one hand, is a challenge to the prescriptive idea of what a literary language should be like, and, on the other, is an effort to transform what has looked exclusively like a 'Khas-Arya literature' into 'Nepali literature' in the real sense. Since the mainstream Nepali literature insisted on using 'pure Nepali' (*visuddha Nepali*), using ethnic and regional varieties or words from other languages was always discouraged. However, as far as the comprehensibility of such literary usage by the larger Nepali speaking readership is concerned, we should not forget the fact that ethnic groups in Nepal have, at least in the modern times, lived more in interaction with each other than in isolated water-tight compartments. Therefore, at the level of everyday usage, there is a greater comprehensibility of minority languages even by the Nepali language speakers, and code-switching and code-mixing is not very uncommon.

One more feature that stands out in the Kirat Nepali variety can be seen in the context of the speech act. Traugott and Pratt state that "certain kinds of speech acts may be associated with specific groups of people, not merely particular situations" (334). Every linguistic community possesses unique speech acts that arise from some aspect of its history, tradition, and culture. As an example, they cite the practice of ritual insults found among Black speakers in the US, also referred to as "playing the dozens," "sounding," or "signifying" (Traugott and Pratt 334). Two types of speech acts in particular, common in Kirat culture, find their way into these literary works: the use of *palam*, and the use of *Mundhum*-style expressions in real-life situations, such as wedding and death. *Palam* is a narrative poem, made up of short rhymed lines, sung in a group during the observation of a cultural festival called, *Dhan-nach* (paddy-dance), as they hold one another's hand, form a circle and dance in a slow beat. There seem to be a broad range of subjects, starting from the creation of the

world to modern-day life and hardships. Many contemporary Kirat poets try to emulate the *palam* style in their poems, and in some cases, incorporate a real *palam* into their poems. In the poem "Khyalima Hareko Dhruba" ("Dhruba, Defeated in the *Khyali* Dance"), Upendra Subba, for instance, incorporates a *palam* by another poet, Madan Chongbang.

As mentioned above, Kirat scripture *Mundhum* is the backbone of Kirat culture, and many aspects of Kirat life are coloured, shaped, and guided by it. With modernisation, urbanisation and the migration of Kirat people to the cities, its influence may be gradually declining. Yet it is *Mundhum* that Kirat people turn to when they have to deal with anything beyond the regular operations of life, from the interpretations of signs and dreams to birth, marriage and death rituals. Apart from the stories and references to the various characters discussed above from *Mundhum*, there are spontaneous, articulate, poetic outpourings in the *Mundhum* style that feature regularly in literary works, too, which stand out as something unique to Kirat culture and Kirat Nepali literature. They are found commonly in the works of both poetry and fiction.

These literary works introduce a whole set of new sounds, interjections and onomatopoeic words to the readers who have primarily consumed works in standard Nepali until now. They also generously use words from Kirat languages, which for a while might appear as obstacles in the flow, but ultimately enrich the reader's knowledge of the civilization and culture they may not have been familiar with. Local, and arguably more authentic names of people and places recur every other page. In addition to all of the above, as discussed earlier, this language variety expresses a democratic and more egalitarian aspect of the Kirat civilization, in contrast to the mainstream Khas-Arya culture. While standard Nepali is laden with many layers of honorifics, the Kirat dialect seems relatively free from

such stratification, arguably signalling a more equalitarian society and interpersonal relationship.[53]

These changes in literary practice should not be seen in isolation. There are similar changes taking place in Nepali theatre and film. In the case of Nepali films, for instance, the main actors ('heroes' and 'heroines' as they are popularly called), for decades, always came from the Khas-Arya communities, with physical features such as big eyes, pointed noses, relatively taller stature, and fairer skin, whereas the 'villains' and the comic characters more often came either from the hill ethnic groups with slanted eyes and flatter noses, or the southern plains with their darker skin. In recent years Nepali films have included a more diverse and realistic cast. Actors from ethnic backgrounds like Dayahang Rai, Maotse Gurung, Pushkar Gurung, Buddhi Tamang, and Rishma Gurung, and Pramod Agrahari, Ramesh Ranjan, Rabindra Jha, from a Madheshi background, and Najir Hussein, from a Madheshi-Muslim background, have become household names for Nepali movie-goers. Similar changes can be seen in the storylines of these films and the issues they raise. For instance, some of the critically acclaimed and commercially successful Nepali films in recent years, such as *Soongava, Dance of Orchids* (2012), *Kalo Pothi* (2015), *Seto Surya* (2016), and *Bulbul* (2019), have dealt with issues of exclusion and have characters from the social and ethnic margins in the lead roles. Sushant Gurung observes that "there is a growing trend of turning the stories of the marginalised people into subjects of literature and films" in recent years, and acknowledges that "such a trend is natural because these issues were foregrounded by political movement and change" (Gurung n.p.). Changes in literary language, as well as in other spheres of cultural production, are perhaps just some aspects of a bigger transformation.

[53] Standard Nepali has 5 levels of honorifics (which means, there are five possible versions of the English 'you': तँ, तिमी, तपाईं, हजुर, सरकार/मौसुफ). The Kirat dialect usually uses only the 'lowest' two, 'तँ' and 'तिमी'. But this stratification in Nepali (or a lack of it in Kirat) is not limited to the second person only, it works in similar ways in the third person, too.

The fact that a book like *Damini Bheer* written by an ethnic writer in a regional/ethnic dialect of Nepali, telling a regional/ethnic story, was able to become a bestseller, and the winner of the most prestigious literary award, speaks volumes about the change that the Nepali literary landscape has undergone in the recent years.

Damini Bheer, the tough ragged cliff that needs to be torn down before a road can be built so that the village can be modernised, is a metaphor for many things that should be demolished so that an inclusive society based on justice and equality can be established. The state-sponsored mainstream literature, language, and culture imposed on the ethnic and indigenous people are some of those cliffs, and Rajan Mukarung's novel in particular, as well as the *Sirjansheel Arajakata* movement in general, are some of the successful attempts at breaking those cliffs. Literary works like *Lato Pahad* and *Damini Bheer*, and their success, are potent examples of the fact that the hills are not 'mute' anymore: they are actively and enthusiastically searching for their voice and have probably begun to find it, a voice to question, challenge, and change the centuries-old injustice and exclusion, and a voice to tell the untold stories of their past and their present.

This is, however, not to say that this movement is not short of blemishes and blind spots at all. For instance, while these writers have been successful in breaking stereotypes about themselves, they have not been able to do the same with other ethnic and marginalised communities. In fact, there are instances where they have taken the stereotypes popular in the socio-cultural mainstream about other ethnic communities and reproduced them. Mukarung, for example, introduces a very rich, authentic and variable representation of the eastern hills/Kirat variety of Nepali throughout *Damini Bheer*. However, when it comes to the representation of a language variety used by a community other than his, he easily reverts to the stereotypical. The Newar variety of Nepali spoken by one of the major characters, Tyson Dai, is a representative example. Tyson Dai, an ex-boxer who now runs a cheap tavern in

Kathmandu, is a powerful presence in the story. But his dialogues are unfortunately nothing different from the stereotypical caricatures used to make fun of the Newars, the ethnic inhabitants of the Kathmandu valley, every day in mainstream and social media. It is the same with his Madheshi characters, an inaccuracy found in the stories by Subba in *Lato Pahad*, too. Smiriti commits the same crime in his poem "Madhesh", where he essentialises Madheshis as well-cleaners, *panipuri*-sellers, and garbage-collectors (*kabadis*). In fact, only recently there was a defamation case filed in the Supreme Court of Nepal against two books, *Ailani* and *Nathiya,* and a film, *Pandit Bajeko Lauri*, all three purportedly speaking against the barbaric tradition of forcing women of the *Badi* community into prostitution. *Badi* activists claimed that these works insulted them and hurt the sentiments of the community at large (S. Gurung n.p.).[54]

Conclusion: Accomplishments and Limitations

This survey of literature coming from different regional and ethnic locations, and more specifically Kirat writers belonging to the *Sirjansheel Arajakata* movement and its adherents provides a glimpse of the change contemporary mainstream Nepali literature is undergoing in both its content and style. The movement has not only questioned the hitherto hegemonic and exclusionary traditions of Nepali literature but also demonstrated how things can be done differently. In this sense, the works of *Sirjansheel Arajakata* can be seen as symptomatic of the changes Nepali literature in particular and Nepali society, in general, has undergone in recent years in terms of embracing differences and giving voice to people from the margins who have remained voiceless for hundreds of years. This change can be seen as the creation

[54] The Supreme Court verdict on the case read: "Our individual freedom or right to write and publish should not undermine the self-respect of anyone else….This bench hopes that while publishing new editions of *Ailani* and *Nathiya,* as well as while creating other works of literature in the future, writers and publishers will be careful about not being disrespectful or hurting the sentiments of any individuals, class, or community" (S. Gurung n.p.).

of what Bhabha holds as a "third space", a place where the forms and styles of the dominant Nepali language mingle with the marginalised ethnic language, leading to the creation of a new 'hybrid' form of literary expression, an "inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity" (*The Location of Culture* 56). This is an outcome of a negotiation between the literary forms of Khas-Arya and ethnic aesthetics. Similarly, this regional and ethno-cultural turn in Nepali literature can also be seen as one of the examples of 'new regionalism' in Nepali contemporary Nepali literature. The main difference between the old regional literature, or the 'local colour', and the 'new regionalism', as we can see in the above discussion, and discussions elsewhere in this study, lies in the fact that unlike the former, the latter has an avowedly resistant and resilient approach and tone.

In a nutshell, Nepali literature has come a long way from a point where Rambharos from the southern plains, Mujikna from the eastern hills, and 'wild flowers' of all sorts from different marginal locations, were ignored, under-represented, or misrepresented. The path has brought them to a point where they are gradually finding their voice in mainstream culture and literature, and this time, quite often through writers from their own backgrounds. While there are still a number of limitations as well as constraints within the Kirat movement and elsewhere, both in terms of literary writings as well as larger socio-political agendas, some sections of the mute nation are finally getting to speak, and are being heard.

What should not be forgotten here, however, is that not all ethnic communities or margins have been able to come up with a literary movement or voice as vibrant and powerful as the Kirats yet. For instance, Madheshis, the natives of the southern plains belonging to four of the largest language groups in Nepal, Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, and Tharu, still remain at the margins of mainstream Nepali literature. While there are a couple of Madheshi writers such as Shyam Shah, Shivani Singh Tharu, Muna Chaudhari, and Ganesh Prasad Lath, who have made a mark in the mainstream Nepali literary scene, that is too

inadequate considering the fact that the Tarai-Madhesh region comprises 50.02 per cent of the total Nepali population (Sharma 5). Except for a few recent works, such as Nayan Raj Pandye's *Sallipir* (*Pine Needles*) (2016), the Himalayan region, which is home to some 6.7 per cent of Nepalis (Sharma 5), remains largely unrepresented as well as inaccessible to Nepali literature. Moreover, we are yet to see promising writers from the marginalised Muslim and Christian religious communities who can speak or write for themselves. Lastly, while there is a growing number of women's voices among the Khas-Arya writers, we are yet to hear as many women's voices from the above-discussed margins, too. Therefore, while a lot has been achieved in a very short time, and there is much to be optimistic about, there is still a long way to go until Nepali literature can truly represent as well as speak to people of all backgrounds.

I sum up this chapter with some lines from Sarita Tiwari's poem "Jibro" ("Tongue"), in which she expresses her shock at her newfound ability to speak in a society that always mandated her to stay quiet:

> In the past
> My tongue was not long like this!
> How did it get
> So long
> Paper-thin
> And sharp?
> Like a knife? (108)

Her 'tongue' is representative of all the 'tongues' that are finally beginning to speak, and, by doing that, scaring those who muted and silenced them for ages. Tiwari declares that her tongue is no more a "mute sense-organ" (110).

CHAPTER 4. ETHNICITY AND LITERATURE

Ethnic Myths and Minority History: Ethnicity and Contemporary Nepali Literature

> My love,
> as you ride Urgen's horse
> and go around the winding road,
> you will find
> my primeval village. (Tamang 1)

"Urgen" is a mythical hero belonging to the ethnic Tamang community of Nepal, frequently invoked in contemporary Nepali literature by Tamang as well as non-Tamang writers. The character was popularised in recent times by Yug Pathak through his novel *Urgenko Ghoda* (*Urgen's Horse*) (2010), and many of these contemporary writers portray Urgen as one of the links to a time when Tamangs had the pride of having their own kingdom, the Tamsaling, which was brought under Gorkhali domination during the late 18th century through an allegedly deceitful war. Like Bina Theeng Tamang in the lines cited above from the poem "Rato Ghar" ("Red House"), many of these writers derive their inspiration by unearthing Tamang myths and reinterpreting them in the present, as a way to understand the past, and a means to retrieve the glory of the time when they were free and self-governing, and not under the domination of another ethnic group and its language, culture, and religion. The journey towards reclaiming the lost independence and equality is a long and winding one, Tamang seems to suggest, but if one takes off on an appropriate vehicle, such as "Urgen's Horse", and follows the right path, like the one guided by ancient myths, it is quite possible to arrive at the "primeval village" (Tamang 1).

In this chapter, I explore the issue of ethnicity, one of the major bases of socio-cultural and political exclusion in Nepal. The chapter discusses the relationship between ethnicity and nation/nationalism, and presents a case of marginalisation based on ethnicity, by focusing on one of the major ethnic groups of Nepal, the Tamangs. There several reasons

behind choosing Tamangs for this focus. With 5.8% of the total population, Tamangs are the fifth largest ethnic group of Nepal, after Chhetri, Bahun, Magar, and Tharu (Sharma 19). Similarly, the Tamang language, spoken by 5.1% of the total population, is also the fifth largest mother tongue, after Nepali, Maithili, Bhojpuri, and Tharu (Sharma 32). The largest population of Tamangs live close to Kathmandu, forming what was referred to as the 'ring area' during the Maoist insurgency, yet they remain one of the most marginalised ethnic groups. Though proximate to Kathmandu and the centre of political power for centuries, Tamangs have always been relegated to subservient roles of the lowest kinds: men working as stable boys, porters, and army orderlies, and women serving as maid-servants, mistresses, and surrogate mothers and wet nurses for the royal and the upper-class children of Kathmandu. The recent proliferation of literary works on Tamangs, some of which I am discussing in this chapter, addresses this historical state of subservience. The chapter begins with a brief discussion of theories of nation and ethnicity and offers an overview on the history of exclusion of the ethnic groups in Nepal in general, and the Tamangs in particular. It then examines how contemporary Nepali literature has employed myths to reinforce ethnic marginalisation and, in more recent times, to address and challenge these practices. It includes a reading of select contemporary literary texts examining how age-old Tamang myths are unearthed and reinterpreted in the present.

Nation, Ethnicity, and Myths

While almost all of the foremost European theorists of nationalism have acknowledged ethnicity as one of the important components in the making of a nation, there is a clear difference in emphasis between them. For instance, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, and Benedict Anderson consider notions of nation and nationalism as features of the modern world. For them, while ethnicity may contribute to the formation of the nation, in the

beginning, it is only a matter of contingency rather than necessity. According to John Hutchinson, modernists claim nations to be “radically distinct from ethnic groups which are quasi-kinship groups, maintained by myths of common descent, a sense of shared history, and distinctive culture” (652). Nations, for them, above all are “‘rational’ political organizations, and though they may employ selectively ethnic symbols, this is for decorative rather than substantive purpose” (Hutchinson 652). To the question of whether or not nations have (ethnic) “navels”, Gellner’s famous reply is that “some nations have it and some don’t, and in any case it’s inessential” (Gellner 367). Renon, in the same vein, downplays the ethnic basis of nations and claims that “ethnographic considerations have…played no part in the constitution of modern nations” (255). For him, neither ethnicity nor language, religion, or community of interests alone can supply “an adequate basis for the constitution of a modern nationality” (Renon 258). Hobsbawm, too, is fine with using the word “ethnicity” in the context of “common origin and descent, from which the common characteristics of the members of an ethnic group are allegedly derived” (63). However, he is against the “genetic approach to ethnicity” which he considers to be “plainly irrelevant, since the crucial base of an ethnic group as a form of social organization is cultural rather than biological” (Hobsbawm 63). For him, ethnicity is not irrelevant to modern nationalism since “visible differences in physique are too obvious to be overlooked and have too often been used to mark or reinforce distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘them’, including national ones” (65). However, he is not willing to give ethnicity a centre-stage in the national project. Hobsbawm’s conclusion, therefore, is that, “the most obvious ethnic differences have played a rather small part in the genesis of modern nationalism” (67).

Theorists belonging to the primordialist/perennialist and ethno-symbolist schools disagree with the views held by Renan, Gellner, Anderson, and Hobsbawm regarding the relationship between ethnicity and nation, and present a predominantly ethnic emphasis.

Thomas Eriksen notes that “nationalism and ethnicity are kindred concepts, and the majority of nationalisms are ethnic in character” (118). Anthony Smith distinguishes between civic and ethnic nationalism and believes that ethnicity provides “a more fruitful basis for explaining key elements of the distinctive shape and character of nations and nationalisms” (18). Smith’s conviction is that while political movements can lead to the formation of nations, in the long term they need the “ethno-cultural resources to create a solidarity community, mainly because of the critical importance for a sense of national identity of subjective dimensions” (21). That is also the reason why Smith argues that “nations cannot simply be seen as elite projects” (21).

For Hutchinson, too, central to the analysis of ethnicity is the question of “origins, the recovery of memory, and of a ‘usable past’ by which to negotiate the problems of the present” (653), a point especially relevant in the context of literature written from the margins using ethnic myths. He notes that nationalist movements usually “reinforce pre-modern institutions and values, particularly religious, which redefine the modern state and conceptions of citizenship” (654). Instead of dismissing such parallels and resemblances between ethnic revivals and the pre-modern national movements, Hutchinson suggests, the “object of scholars should be to determine whether there are recurring factors in history cutting across the pre-modern-modern divide that generate ethnic resurgences” (654). Hutchinson points out the problems in the modernists’ focus on “cultural homogeneity” because of which they fail to highlight that “most nations are riven by embedded cultural differences that generate rival symbolic and political projects” (654). As a result, he argues, the “modernists’ view of nation-formation as culminating in a sovereign, united, and homogeneous society is problematic” (654). From this perspective, the lost ethnocultural ground is where the search for collective identity begins. Even Gellner admits that “national ideology suffers from pervasive consciousness … Its myths invert reality: it claims to defend

folk culture while in fact it is forging a high culture […] It preaches and defends cultural diversity, when in fact it imposes homogeneity…" (*Nations and Nationalism* 124, 125).

This is where ethnic contestation, in a spirit of self-preservation as well as the claim for identity and inclusion in the narrative of the nation, comes into action. To use Partha Chatterjee's words from *The Nation and Its Fragment,* without preserving or reclaiming both the sanctity and sovereignty of the "private" spiritual sphere where unanimity among the members prevails, it is almost impossible to take care of the "public" or the "outside" (12). Chatterjee suggests, it is only the unanimity of the members of the community in the private domain that gives strength to win the real battle that has to be fought in the public domain. The ethnic myths, the resources from the inner domains, which are intact from being hegemonised by the dominant culture, are thus, strategically used to challenge the state's disruption as well as to re-claim and revive the marginal community's cultural glory.
The use of ethnic myths and indigenous folklore in contemporary Nepali literature as a resistance against the powerful state, as we shall see in the upcoming discussion, can be seen in this light as an attempt to wake up and unite the community members for such a battle. The use of nationality, in the perception of cultural nationalists, is "prior to the state (a mere human artefact)"; it is "due to the primary allegiance of individuals and cannot be extinguished by the loss of the state" (Hutchinson 657).

If we look at how nationalist movements based on ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural foundations have been raging all over the world since the late 20th century, and even more during the first two decades of the 21st century, we may be persuaded by the perennialist/primordialist and ethno-symbolist claims, at least in some measure. In the context of multi-ethnic nations, it is not very uncommon to treat the myths related to the dominant groups as if they were historical events, and, by the same token, to deal with historical events related to the minority ethnic groups as if they were myths, and then dismiss

them. In the context of Nepal, the Bhrikuti-myth backed by the state and the many ethnic historical accounts dismissed by it at the same time, exemplify such a practice. With socio-political change and historical-cultural awareness, however, those groups that were once written out of history may attempt to recreate their history by imbuing elements from the stories that may have survived only as myths or hearsay over the years with historical or political immanence.

Dipesh Chakrabarty holds the view that history is a subject primarily concerned with the crafting of narratives. According to him, any account of the past "can be absorbed into, and thus made to enrich, the mainstream of historical discourse" if two questions lead to affirmative answers: "Can the history be told/crafted? And does it allow for a rationally-defensible point of view or position from which to tell the story?" (16). The singular criteria he seems to set for the narrative is that of plausibility: "The story has to be plausible within a definable understanding of what plausibility may consist in" (16). This explication helps understand the history of the "majority-minor [ethnic] groups" of Nepal, and in constructing "a narrative" of those "that has not left its own sources" (Chakrabarty16). The approach of recreating history through myths implemented by contemporary Nepali writers, who we will discuss in more detail in this chapter, not only fulfils Chakrabarty's criteria of minority history but also seems to be one of the very few means of constructing a narrative where not many sources have been left intact.

While human interest in myths is as old as the history of civilization, Dona Rosenberg believes that until the twentieth-century myths were viewed primarily as "symbols of external environment" (xx). In the twentieth century, with thinkers such as Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Joseph Campbell, "the symbolic interpretation of myths moved from the external environment to the internal environment of the unconscious mind", or even further to what Jung and Campbell referred to as the expression of a "universal collective unconscious"

(Rosenberg xx). There have also been many other approaches to the study of myth in the twentieth century, such as Mircea Eliade's interpretation of myths as the "essence of religion, conceived from a genuine religious experience," Paul Radin's economic interpretation, and anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss' view of myths as possessing a common structure, and as "abstract constructions rather than narrative tales or symbolic experience" (Rosenberg xxi). Similarly, French critic and semiotician, Roland Barthes, in his works, especially *Mythologies* (1957), explored the semiology of myth creation and proposed newer ways to study cultural materials in modern times. He compares cars with Gothic cathedrals, the "cultural work done in the past by gods and epic sagas" with the work done by "laundry-detergent commercials and comic-strip characters" (Barthes 128), and modern films with ancient myths. He has inspired people to find links between the old world and the new in unusual places and uncommon ways, as we will also see in some of the experiments in contemporary Nepali literature.

In *Politics of Myth*, Robert Ellwood revisits the lives and works of three important figures associated with the "upsurge of popular and academic interest in mythology" in the mid-twentieth century: the analytic psychologist Jung, the historian of religion Eliade, and the widely read public mythologist Campbell (Ellwood vii). The interest in myths for them, Ellwood writes, was not merely aesthetic: "these interpreters of ancient myth said much to lead their public to believe that a rediscovery of meaning in myth could contribute to solving the personal and social problems of those tumultuous times" (vii). The unsavoury side of these otherwise distinguished figures is that "all three mythologists have at times been associated with the politics of the extreme right, even according to some charges, with sympathy for fascism and anti-Semitism" (Ellwood vii).

Smith offers a solution to the impasse created through a simultaneous attraction towards ancient myths and their superheroes, and their apparent incongruity with modern

democratic societies and nations. He claims that modern nations are formed out of both ‘civic’ and ‘ethnic’ components. The most important civic component, he states, is the “extension of legal rights and duties to all strata, culminating in the ideal of citizenship for all classes” (Smith, “The Myth of the ‘Modern Nation’” 10). Likewise, for all ethnic components, shared “historical memories and myths of descent are particularly important” (Smith 10). He claims that “the theme of a distant heroic age is often significant for later generations of *ethnie*, when the community is in decline and its members suffer oppression, division or exile” (Smith 14). This a particularly relevant point in the context of this study. Ethnic groups in Nepal, such as the Tamangs, have suffered exclusion and marginalisation for hundreds of years, and need something to remind them of their rich past to rekindle the fire of their lost glory. Smith further elaborates:

> With the coming of nationalism, such myths take on a new life. Not only are they elaborated and fleshed out by historical and linguistic scholarship, they become standards and models for inspiring a national regeneration, and their very idealisation allows for different messages of inspiration for the present. (14)

Thus, Smith suggests, the civic components of the nation guide the everyday functionality of life, society, and the state, whereas the ethnic components such as myths and history nourish the cultural and spiritual needs of individuals, society and the nation. Such myths have been used to make claims on the nation by native people in a colonial setting as well as by the indigenous/ethnic people dominated by one or more elite groups in multi-ethnic states all over Europe, South America, Africa, and Asia. The Irish nationalist movement of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries furnishes an illuminating example. Irish nationalism, in its attempt to get rid of British control and restore the sovereignty of the Irish people, invoked Gaelic culture in a range of forms that included the Irish language, folklore, myths, as well as Irish literature, music, and sports. Timothy White states that “in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a Gaelic revival gained momentum as it sought to build upon cultural

roots of an idealised ancient Irish nation" (50). This mythic basis of Irish nationalism "was employed to inspire a nationalist revolution and develop national policy after independence" (49). The movements of nationalism, as we have seen, range from national liberation movements aimed at establishing a separate nation/state to intra-state ethnic, linguistic, religious, regional nationalism movements, commonly referred to as nationalisms of minorities, aimed at inclusion and representational composition of the state. While there is a significant difference in terms of their ultimate goals, there are also a number of important similarities since both of them involve a struggle between dominant and marginal/peripheral entities along similar lines. Therefore, insights and ideas from one context are always helpful to understand and explain the other. For instance, just like the Irish nationalist movement invoked elements from their indigenous culture, such as the language, folklore, and myths, in its attempt to establish the sovereignty of the Irish people, ethnic movements in Nepal are also using their language, folklore, myths, songs, and literature in their effort to be united and to make their voices heard.

Ethnicity, Myths, and History: The Case of Nepal

"For long," Ramesh Pokharel states, "ethnicity was a matter of imposed categorization on some ethnic groups having different origin, language, culture, and tradition from the dominant groups—Brahman and Chhetri" (2). The first wave of awareness, as well as the opportunity to change this prejudicial system, came in the 1950s when the autocratic Rana rule was brought to an end through an armed revolution, and democracy was established. This change, unfortunately, did not last long enough to herald any substantial transformation in the status of the ethnic groups because of King Mahendra's coup in 1960 that led to the establishment of an absolute monarchy, the Panchayat system, which lasted until 1990. While the state, in general, saw some signs of widespread modernisation in education, mass

communication, and the development of physical infrastructure, the suppression of Nepal's ethnic communities through censorships of their languages, cultures, and religions, grew worse during this period. Real awareness about ethnic marginalisation and a call for change came only in the 1990s, after the re-establishment of multiparty democracy through the People's Revolution I. According to Pokharel, "as the ethnic groups became conscious of their marginalization, they formed ethnic organizations and started fighting for their rights" (2). With the revival of democracy in 1990 and the formation of a republican state in 2008, "the ethnic groups in Nepal have themselves defined and categorised ethnicity by associating it with indignity" (Pokharel 2).

The purported superiority of the Khas-Arya people, and their history, language, and culture, was one of the core ideas the Nepali state propagated from the earliest days of unification/expansion. This project received further prominence, and achieved more success, especially during the Panchayat years (1960-1990). Pratyoush Onta has carried out some in-depth studies on how the state, during this period, created and propagated a narrative of *bir* history, or the brave history, as a part of the 'national history' (*RI*, i.e. *rashtriya itihas*). In this process, the governments in the post-Rana period, and more specifically during the Panchayat years, "appropriated this *bir* history of Nepal as one of the central themes of Nepali national culture. Backed by the state apparatus, this national culture was both elaborated in and disseminated through print, radio, and visual media as well as educational resource materials" (Onta 214). Through textbooks prescribed in school and university syllabi, patriotic songs played on Radio Nepal, films produced by the state, and other forms of cultural dissemination the state glorified those who fitted into this narrative and removed those who did not. The list of those who were glorified, Onta writes, "begins with Prithvi Nayaran Shah, and includes Bahadur Shah, Amar Singh Thapa, Bhakti Thapa, and Balbhadra Kunwar" (222); stories about 'heroes' popular before the pre-nationalised textbooks "that

could not fit into non-ambivalent *RI* were simply dropped from the textbooks of the 1960s and later" (229).

Gaje Ghale, for instance, a soldier in the British Gurkha Regiments, who showed utmost bravery in the war in Burma against the Japanese, was a familiar name in Nepal, mainly through the stories about him in school textbooks. This, however, changed "when textbooks were nationalized in the latter part of the 1960s" (Onta 119), and Gaje Ghale's story was dropped. A soldier heralding from distant hills, belonging to an ethnic group, fighting a war for the British in distant Burma did not fit into a purportedly unambiguous and undebatable *bir narrative* the Nepali state was trying to establish. Onta explains: "the objective of these schoolbooks was to socialize my [Onta's] generation of Nepalis to a vision of the nation without ambivalences" (229). Pruning history was just one part of this project. The other part of it was to present Hindu myths (or, appropriated Buddhist myths) as if they were part of the same history. Thus, Hindu mythical figures such as Sita and Janak, and dubious mythical characters from the upper-caste Khas-Arya community such as Bhrikuti were glorified as *rashtriya bibhuti* (national heroes), whereas historical figures hailing from ethnic communities were categorically disregarded. Only after the socio-political change in the 990s was the list updated to include a few figures from the non-Khas-Arya communities such as Pasang Lhamu Sherpa (from the ethnic Sherpa community), Shankhadhar Shakhwa (from the ethnic Newar community), and Mahaguru Falgunanda (from the ethnic Kirat community).

The case of Bhrikuti is another classic example of how the state successfully transformed a questionable myth into a historical event and turned a fabulous figure into a popular household name. School textbooks included stories about Bhrikuti, supposedly a Nepali princess, daughter of the Thakuri king, Amsuvarma, who was married to the 6th-7th century Tibetan king, Songsten Gampo (Shrangchang Gampo). This diplomatic marital

alliance, as the story goes, helped establish friendly relations between Tibet and Nepal and was instrumental in spreading Buddhism in Tibet. Bhrikuti was eulogised as the Nepali daughter who made her country proud by what she did abroad. She was the subject of a number of popular patriotic poems and national songs. Thus goes one of the most popular Panchayat-era national songs by Madhav Prasad Ghimire:

> Sita (with her virtues) influenced Lanka and India, in the south
> Bhrikuti rose like a star in China and Tibet, in the north
> This was the place where the Buddha found the first fountain of wisdom
> This was the place where Lord Shiva brought the first morning of creation.
> (Ghimire n.p.)

Every Nepali who grew up during the Panchayat era and even after most likely learned this song by heart and sang it in the school assembly every day along with the national anthem. According to Onta, "the writing of a history as *Rashtriya Itihas* (RI) and its teaching in schools through standardized textbooks – a key means of its dissemination – were at the centre of the state-sponsored effort to make students into citizens socialized and loyal to a particular image of the nation" (Onta 215). The story of Bhrikuti and Madhav Prasad Ghimire's poem are just two of many similar examples.

More recent studies have questioned the authenticity of the Bhrikuti myth, and have accused the orchestrators of Panchayati nationalism of overstretching the Green Tara story found in the Tibetan sources[55] just because it fitted well into a narrative glorifying the Khas-Arya heroes, even when they were not real. After a close reading of accounts from historians such as Surya Bikram Gyawali, Baburam Acharya, Dhanabajra Bajrachayra, Gyanmani Nepal, and Min Bahadur Shakya, Govinda Neupane claims that there is "no mention whatsoever of Bhrikuti in any Lichchhavi record" (Neupane n.p.), the period to which she

[55] Tara is a popular goddess in Tibetan Buddhism, sometimes described as a consort to some Buddhist deities. They are of two major kinds, the White Tara who is believed to have "incarnated as the Chinese Princess," and the Green Tara, believed to have "incarnated as the Nepali princess" (https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tara-Buddhist-goddess).

supposedly belonged. Neupane believes that Bhrikuti was glorified as a part of the Panchayati nationalistic campaign, and warns, "To present a dubious character as a real historical figure is to mock history" (Neupane n.p.). He further asks, "Why doesn't a topic that has been criticized by dozens of historians get a mention in the curriculum? What does it mean to teach a wrong history?" (Neupane n.p.). Yug Pathak, in the same vein, expresses his disapproval of such practices and states: "Gone are the days when you could cover up by singing eulogies of Bhrikuti. It is time to strengthen Nepali women in general" (88). He goes on to note that, "The nation is not going to progress only through the prosperity of the Khas-Nepali language. National life should include voices from all the mother tongues. Nationality cannot be shaped only through the accolades of the generals but should include the story of slavery suffered by Rajbanshi, Tharu, and Chepang people" (Pathak 89).

It is no surprise that mythical characters like Bhrikuti have become an integral part of Nepali history and curricula, whereas real historical figures coming from ethnic, regional, or disadvantaged backgrounds, such as Bise Nagarchi, a Dalit, King Salahesh, a Madheshi, Lakhan Thapa and Gaje Ghale, both ethnic men, and Yogmaya, who led a movement against the patriarchal society, have always been treated more like fictitious characters, and only recently appeared in mainstream history or literary works. The impact of an exclusionary history can be much worse than we sometimes realise. According to Hobsbawm, bad history is actually "dangerous" (63). "The sentences typed on apparently innocuous keyboards," he cautions, "may be sentences of death" (Hobsbawm 63). Quite often, as it has been in Nepal's case, it leads not only to the death of some individuals but the obliteration of cultures and civilizations altogether.

Tamangs of Nepal: Myths and Contemporary Literature

While there is an agreement about the privileged position and high-handedness of the Khas-Aryas, and their exploitation of ethnic groups, not all ethnic groups have faced the same kind, or extent, of marginalisation in the history of Nepal. Susan Hangen emphasizes the fact that "ethnic diversity in Nepal is highly complex: there are multiple and overlapping categories of identity, and specific ethnic labels have shifted over time" (3).

> Some ethnic groups were enlisted to meet the bulk of the expanding state's need for labour. Magars and Gurungs were recruited into the army. Tamangs, residing in territories directly surrounding the Kathmandu Valley, the seat of state power, endured heavy taxation and compulsory labour requirements. During the state-building process, many ethnic groups lost land to high-caste Hindus, as was the case for the Limbus of far eastern Nepal in the nineteenth century. (8)

A point emphasised by Krishna Hachhethu regarding the complexity of ethnic demography should not be missed here. He notes:

> Numerically all groups are minorities in Nepal and the largest one, Chhetri, constitutes 15.80 percent. The combined strength of hill Bahun and Chhetri is 28.54 percent. They (including hill low castes) have, however, long been treated as the majority group, because the people identified with Nepali language and Hindu religion are in majority, 48.61 and 80.6 percent respectively. (218-19).

Chakrabarty provides further perspective on this majority-minority debate when he observes that "minority and majority are, after all, no natural entities; they are constructions. The popular meanings of the words 'majority' and 'minority' are statistical. But the semantic fields of the words contain another idea: of being a 'minor' or a 'major' figure in a given context" (18). Nothing could be truer than this in the context of Nepal. While the ethnic groups form a 'majority' in Nepal in terms of demography, they have always remained as a 'minority' in terms of access to power and resources. Brahmins and Chhetris combined, for

instance, make only 28.8% of the total population (P. Sharma 19),[56] whereas, even today, they occupy more than 50% of the government jobs and political positions.[57]

The first national code of Nepal, the 1854 *Muluki Ain*, brought the diverse caste and ethnic groups into a single caste-based framework, the Hindu *varnashram* system, which previously was a categorisation only for people belonging to the Hindu caste groups. It categorised the majority of ethnic groups, such as Magar, Gurung, Rai, and Limbu, as *namasinya matwali* (non-enslavable alcohol-drinkers), whereas Tamangs (then referred to as *Bhote*) were put under the category of *masinya matwali* (enslavable alcohol-drinkers). Thus, from the very foundational years of the nation, we see Tamangs being exploited more than any other ethnic group. Anne Kukuczka claims that the "low position assigned to the Tamang in the nascent state" and the act of prohibiting them from joining the British or Indian Gorkha or even Nepal army can be attributed to "a combination of socio-economic and ideological factors" (403). Kukuczka points, in particular, to the proximity of their settlement to Kathmandu, and the intent of rulers and aristocrats there to monopolise Tamang labour for both state as well as personal services: "labour in the formation of the Nepalese nation state thus carried symbolic power by enabling the elites to reproduce a dominant position over the people living within the territory" (404). Other factors that apparently contributed to the disparaging Hindu perception of the Tamang were that "they were perceived as consumers of beef, practitioners of Buddhism, and as a subjugated population, all attributes being in opposition to the Hindu nascent state order" (Kukuczka 405).

Living in the ancestral hills surrounding the capital city, always at the service of the rulers and aristocrats, they remained in "dark right under the lamp,"[58] as one Nepali proverb

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[56] According to 2011 census, Chhetris, the biggest caste/ethnic group, make 16.6%, and Bahuns (Brahmins) make 12.2% of the total population (P. Sharma 19).

[57] According to *The Kathmandu Post*, in the fiscal year 2018-19, Brahmins and Chhetris together made up 55 percent of all candidates recommended by the Public Service Commission (https://tkpo.st/2q3Cqtk).

[58] "बत्ती मुनी अँध्यारो"

goes. Even today, Tamang women top the list of women who are duped, taken to India and forced into sexual slavery.[59] Just like the way the *Muluki Ain* described them, the majority of Tamangs remained categorically ‘enslaved’ by the state until the re-establishment of democracy in 1990. Like most other Nepali ethnic communities, Tamangs were virtually absent from mainstream Nepali literature until the 1990s. Thanks to several Tamang and non-Tamang authors, the scenario has changed significantly in recent years. In the upcoming sections, I look into a selection of contemporary literary works that shed light on the Tamangs, namely “Rato Ghar”, a poem by Bina Theeng Tamang, *Sonam Gyalmo*, a play based on Tamang folk tales by Phulman Bal, and *Urgenko Ghoda*, a novel that attempts a modern re-interpretation of old Tamang myths. These three works unearth ancient Tamang myths as well as old historical anecdotes and use them to comment on the present socio-political reality. According to Ellwood, “the two major apertures available to generic myth in the modern world were in individual psychological procedures and in nationalism” (29). While the availability and employment of these myths certainly do have individual psychological consequences, the focus of the discussion here is to examine the relationship between nation, nationalism, and the formation of exclusionary national narratives, as well as to question and challenge their construction.

Bina Theeng Tamang’s poem “The Red House,” the first stanza of which has been cited at the beginning of this chapter, opens with an invitation the poet persona makes to her beloved (and, to her readers) to visit her “red house” in her primeval Tamang village. For this, she challenges, you have to ride a white horse similar to the one ridden by the mythical

[59] According to a *Kathmandu Post* report, “seven out of every ten girls who are victims of sex trafficking are from indigenous communities, according to the Shakti Samuha, an organisation which works against trafficking. Most of them come from Sindhupalchok, Kavre and Makwanpur districts surrounding the Kathmandu Valley. These districts have a high population of marginalised communities, especially Tamangs. Girls from the Tamang community, who were historically forced to serve as courtesans and concubines to the rulers in Kathmandu, make up most of the victims of sex trafficking to India and other countries.” (https://kathmandupost.com/opinion/2018/04/08/strengthening-tamang-women)

Tamang hero, Urgen, and go along the winding road before you can arrive at the village. However, once you arrive at the village after this long journey, the poet assures, you will be welcomed by the "cherry blossoms", the "laughing silver feather grass", and the "moving leaves of *siru* grass" (1). Once you step on the primeval land, if you look at the right corner of the first turning, you will see "a red house" (1). This is the house, the poet says, where she took her first toddler steps holding her father's hands, and where she saw dreams in her mother's eyes. This is also the house where she saw her grandfather, "whose grey beard/carried the story of one whole era" (2), and his big *dhyangro*, a drum used by Tamang shaman. While the first part of the poem might present the illusion of an idyllic Tamang village, the darker realities it has undergone are soon exposed. Tamang continues, this is where her grandfather told her "stories" about her "grandmother's skirt" and "the landlord's horses," her "aunt's shawl" and "the general's muzzleloader rifle," "her brother's bones" and the "Rapti river" (2). While she does not elaborate exactly what happened to her family members, through a few symbols she hints at a harrowing tale of how the soldiers would come into the Tamang village with guns, brutally kill the men, and rape the women, an act that would force them to commit suicide, either by hanging by a shawl or by drowning in the Rapti river. She says, she had heard many other stories and read many "red books", i.e. books related to communist/Maoist rebellion, in that "red house" (2), before finally leaving it, apparently to join the revolutionaries.

The "red house" is, thus, symbolic of all the houses and the lands drenched with blood spilt during countless episodes of injustice and cruelty inflicted on the Tamang and other ethnic groups by the state and its rulers, from the unification/expansionist mission of the Gorkha Kingdom until the near past. The red house evokes the *chautari*, the resting place mentioned in Swapnil Smriti's poem "The Story of the Kabhra Tree at the Round Chautari," which, too, has seen countless atrocities. As we shall see in Yug Pathak's novel *Urgenko*

Ghoda, Tamang settlements in the hills around the Kathmandu valley were one of the most fertile grounds for Maoist uprising in the late 1990s. As such, the "red house" where people read "red books" and become revolutionaries is also the symbol of the land which played a key role in overturning the Hindu monarchy. The primeval village the poet describes is apparently a sleepy hamlet hiding in the midst of beautiful nature, but it is also a village that has witnessed uncountable horrors. The village is also "primeval" because despite being so close to the capital city, it has been completely disregarded by the rulers, and is still 'primitive' even in the 20th or the 21st century. Urgen's mythical horse, thus, becomes a thread that connects the glorious past and the dismal present. It reminds the Tamangs of who they really are and links them to their long-forgotten glorious myths that have been replaced by the histories of the Khas-Arya rulers. The poem ends with a powerful message the poet sends to her mother, that the present era needs more rebellious daughters like her:

> Mother, from that house
> Please send
> Many children like me
> My age is waiting for them here. (3)

The poet persona, after listening to the stories of atrocities enacted upon her family and community by the state, has decided to leave the house and join the revolutionaries to change the system. She urges her mother, and all the mothers from the houses that have experienced such atrocities, to send more children like her to join the war against the unjust system.

Sonam Gyalmo (2018) by Tamang writer Phulman Bal is a play based on old Tamang myths intermingled with some historical characters and events reinterpreted for the present times. It was performed at Shilpee Theatre, Kathmandu, in 2018, directed by Sonam Moktan, and garnered praise from the critics for the new approach it took to recontextualise the discussion of myth, history, and ethnicity. The play begins with a modern-day Tamang wedding, where families and priests from the bride and the groom's side come together and

participate in an odd blend of old and new rituals, symbolic of a society where the traditional rituals and beliefs are being rapidly replaced by modern customs and manners. The bride and the groom sit on a decorated platform surrounded by their families. The *tamba* (priest) from the groom's side, as a part of the Tamang wedding ritual, starts by singing a song that tells the story of Tamang creation myths:

> Long ago in the empty sky
> Formed a *dorje gyadam*[60]
> Fire settled upon air
> The water settled upon the fire
> Foam formed upon water
> Dust formed upon foam
> Earth formed upon the dust
> Mount Sumeru was formed
> Four angles and four directions were formed
> On all four directions of the earth
> Everywhere people were born
> Gods ruled the sky
> Snakes ruled the underworld
> Hunters ruled the space (2)

Tamangs, in the more recent times, follow a localised form of Buddhism close to Tibetan Buddhism. Their socio-cultural practices, however, are heavily influenced also by Bonism, shamanism, and nature worship, too. The creation myth cited above presents Tamang civilisation and culture as a vibrant confluence of that variety of religious and cultural traditions. Moreover, this complex imagining of the creation of the universe challenges the dominant Nepali construction of ethnic people as primitive and unsophisticated. It not only reveals that the Tamangs had a rich and intricate creation myth, but also that they had a strong and ingenious culture of storytelling.

The wedding proceeds with a fusion of old Tamang rituals and modern practices, songs and dances, as well as conflicts between the old and the new generations regarding how certain rituals and practices should be carried out. As the bride and the groom pledge their

[60] *Dorje gyadam:* The base/foundation, a locus of 'eight directions', on which all the creation takes place.

loyalty to each other, the priest from the groom's side proposes to tell a story that took place about a century and a half ago, in the year 1877.[61] According to the story, Sonam and Gyalmo were a newly married couple who lived in mid-19th century Nepal, when Jung Bahadur Rana was the prime minister and the de facto ruler of Nepal. When Rana was near their village during a hunting expedition, he saw Gyalmo and was instantly enchanted by her beauty. He ordered his soldiers to take her to his camp. He planned to take her with him to Kathmandu once the hunting expedition was over, and add her to his concubines. Gyalmo pleads with him to let her go: "My prayers to you, your majesty! I have just been married. I am supposed to go to my husband's house with gifts tomorrow. Please let me go. I touch your feet" (17). Rana, however, turns a deaf ear to her heartfelt plea and forcefully takes her to his camp. When Sonam comes to know that his newly married wife has been abducted by the king, he is devastated. In a state of desperation and rage, he declares that he will go and kill the abductor of his wife, even though he may be the "king."[62] Sonam screams, "I've already been destroyed, therefore, whoever it may be, I will chop him into two. I won't leave anyone" (18). The villagers stop him by saying that the abductor is excessively powerful, so he needs to act with tact and caution.

The next day, a young man pays a visit to Rana in his hunting camp to resolve a legal problem he has been facing, a common practice during that time. When asked what he wants, the young man says he wants to behead his *jaar*, the man who stole his wife. Completely unaware of who the young man or his *jaar* might be, Rana cites the provision he had included in the *Muluki Ain*, the legal code he had introduced some years ago after his return from a visit to England, and declares, "Go, behead him. You surely don't need to come all the way

[61] The year Jung Bahadur Rana died.

[62] Even though the Ranas were technically prime ministers, they had assumed the title of *Maharaja*, i.e., king, and were referred to with the same title. This is not surprising at all considering the fact that they indeed were the de facto rulers of the country, and the Shah Kings were relegated to the roles of mere figureheads.

to ask just that…. Go! Kill him right now. Nothing will happen to you" (25). Even before Rana realises who he is talking to or what is happening, the young man pulls out his *khukuri* knife from its sheath and strikes Rana on his head. As Rana breathes his last, he orders the soldiers not to bring any harm to Sonam because he was only following the law. However, the soldiers attack him with their swords anyway. The play ends with Sonam dying in Gyalmo's arms, as a poem is recited in the background:

> It was us
> who took care of your gun
> and your sword–
> It was us
> who made the warm leather boots for your feet–
> It was us
> who swept the horseshit in your stables–
> And, it was us
> who took care of your brown-maned horse
> But, your majesty, you arrived at our homes
> for your hunting games
> You hunted our dreams down,
> and, you skinned us of our happiness
> [. . . .]
> Your majesty!
> You asked me to slay my *jaar*
> What crime did I commit? (25-26)

The play raises a number of pertinent issues related to the history of domination and exploitation of the Tamangs. As mentioned above, it was Jung Bahadur Rana who commissioned and implemented the first civil code of Nepal, the *Muluki Ain* in 1854, after his return from England, which is considered to be an important step towards modernising Nepal. But the *Ain* also underpinned the foundation of caste hierarchy, Hinduisation, and the subordination of ethnic peoples in modern times. It brought all the non-Hindu ethnic groups, including Tamangs, under the Hindu caste system for the first time. Bal's play, in this way, seems to be an act of vicarious revenge enacted at present for a crime committed in the past. The play, however, also reflects that ethnic people in general, and the Tamangs in particular, have been discriminated against and exploited for hundreds of years and that now is the time

to make up for that on all the available fronts: political, legal, social, cultural, and literary. According to Dipesh Chakrabarty, minority histories "express the struggle for inclusion and representation that are characteristic of liberal and representative democracies" (15). Attempts to re-read and reinterpret history and myths through literary works, as in cases like this, can be seen as a part of the larger struggle for inclusion and representation in the narratives as well as the mechanisms of the state. Moreover, subversive stories like these, where the 'heroes' of yesteryears are exposed to be 'villains', and the anonymous subaltern people are portrayed as the real heroes, serve a two-way function of questioning and correcting the past as well as extending hope for the present and the future.

Bal uses a clause from the law implemented by Jung Bahadur Rana and an incident from his life to revisit and question a popular historical story. Firstly, there was a clause in the *Muluki Ain* of 1854 that allowed a man to kill his *jaar*, i.e. the man who stole or eloped with his wife. Secondly, historically there is a mystery around the cause of Jung Bahadur Rana's death. He is believed to have died during a hunting expedition in Pattharghatta, but there is still a debate among historians regarding how he died. Bal picks up the thread from this story popular in the Tamang community, and by using the above-mentioned clues, in one strike, takes an act of distant and indirect revenge against Jung Bahadur, the *Muluki Ain,* and the exclusionary state, on behalf of his Tamang community. The play mythologises a historical event, and at the same time, historicises a hearsay that has taken the form of a myth in the Tamang community. In an interview, Bal described how he arrived at the decision to follow this line of the story:

> Growing up, I was touched by this particular story and was inspired to find out if this is only a fictional rendition or a recorded history. Then I came across several myths and alternative histories surrounding Rana's death. And, while researching, I found out that the alternative history about the *jaar* (a person who elopes with your wife) was the most authentic. ("How Did Jung Bahadur Die?" n.p.)

He, however, does not claim that this is the authentic story: "While the drama plays around this certain alternative history, it doesn't, however, purport to be the authentic history" ("How Did Jung Bahadur Die?" n.p.). He also believes that there could be more to the story, or there might even be a different story altogether. Therefore, the main aim behind writing the play, he says, was that he "[wanted] this history to be explored more" ("How Did Jung Bahadur Die?" n.p.).

Lily Zubaidah Rahim, in her study of ethnicity and indigenous minorities in Southeast Asia, acknowledges that "the typical stuff that myths are made of…does not need to be enamoured with substantive content and accord with factual history so long as its ethnic members accept it" (3). Bal's retelling of an otherwise questionable hearsay, thus, holds functional credibility because it is a story that the majority of Tamangs believed for a long time, and, at this point, it serves a strategic function. In the nation-building process, Rahim notes, "competing national visions that contradict those of the political elites [are] muted" (19). Yet in the long run, those muted visions can also claim inclusion in the national narratives, and, to that end, ethnic myths and stories, like this one, function as useful stockpile. Barthes believes that the worth of myth lies in its ambiguity. He states that myth "hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion. […] driven to having either to unveil or to liquidate the concept, it will naturalize it. We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature" (300). Bal's story fulfils Barthes' criteria of neither "too obscure to be efficacious" nor "too clear to be believed" (299). The story of Jung Bahadur Rana's death, as told by Bal, has enough enigma around it to allow one to take some liberty with it, yet it is not presented as a historical fact. Nonetheless, it is still used as an opportunity to question the wrongdoings of the past, and to point out that it is never too late to take corrective measures.

When other girls get back to the village after Gyalmo is abducted, one of them tries to let the villagers know what happened to her. In her state of nervousness and concern, she first says that Gyalmo was "was hunted (*sikar*),[63] before correcting herself and saying Gyalmo "was taken by the 'king' (*sarkar*)" (17).[64] This juxtaposition between the king and the hunter/hunting expedition (*sarkar* and *sikar*), the authority who is supposed to be the protector but actually is the predator, explains what ethnic people expected of their rulers and what they have been in reality for hundreds of years. Similarly, the above-mentioned poem with which the play ends foreshadows the end of the Rana regime or the end of any form of authority that is based on the suppression and exploitation of its own people.

Urgenko Ghoda by Yug Pathak is a novel written with the 1996-2006 Maoist armed insurgency as its backdrop, and the struggle of the Tamang people for liberation from the exploitative state as its central theme. At the centre of the story is Mhendo, a Tamang woman in her early twenties, who is brigade commander of an insurgent unit. She has joined the Maoist force intending to liberate her Tamang community in particular and transform the country in general. When the story opens, Mhendo is pregnant and is on leave from her battleground responsibilities. She is sad about having to leave the battle at a crucial point when the rebel forces are gaining the upper hand over the government forces. But she is also happy about becoming a mother and is eagerly looking forward to bringing the new life into being in a safe place. The story is told through parallel narratives, dealing with the past and the present, with a "mixture of 'faction'[65] and magical realism" (Hutt, "Writers, Readers, and the Sharing of Consciusness: Five Nepali Novels" 25). The central narrative deals with

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[63] "ग्याल्मोलाई शिकार…[ले लाग्यो] ।" (17)

[64] "ग्याल्मोलाई सरकारले लाग्यो ।" (17)

[65] A term used to refer to "nonfiction novels which include both real and fictional figures and events" (Hutt, "Writers, Readers, and the Sharing of Consciusness: Five Nepali Novels" 29).

Mhendo, who is on a long walk with a guide and her compatriot Pallavi, who represents yet another marginalised group, the Madheshis, to a place where she can safely deliver her baby.

The second narrative takes the reader back to Mhendo's childhood. Day after day, as she walks through the rugged hills and forests towards her shelter, she recalls her childhood filled with poverty, hardship, and humiliation. She also remembers the growing sense of rebellion in her community, particularly ignited by Rup Chandra Bishta (1933-1999), popularly referred to as Rupchan, a politician who became a folk hero in the 1970s-80s. She recalls her father's quest to know more about the history of his community, and Sonam, the artist, who has visions of his ancestors and carves a stunning life-size stone statue of the mythical hero, Urgen. She describes how, like her father, she started seeing Urgen's white horse whenever she felt deeply about her community, its heritage, and its exploitation by the state. Hence, for these Tamang leaders and activists, the white horse and its rider, Urgen, become symbols of rebellion against all forms of oppression and a beacon of hope and freedom. Urgen's horse, the white horse that moves like lightning, pervades the novel and electrifies a whole generation of Tamangs. Whenever Mhendo is excited, the horse visits her; whenever she is overwhelmed, the horse visits her, too. It visits her when she is lonely and dejected as well as when she is impassioned and confident. When she spreads the map of the "ring-region" comprised of the Tamang settlements that surround the Kathmandu valley, during her strategic plan to attack Kathmandu, "Urgen's horse starts revolving around her like a flying saucer. The speed of the horse would be such that it would be invisible like the air…" (200). When the battalion splits due to internal conflicts, Mhendo sees the horse going mad, flying around blind, colliding with objects and getting hurt, as Urgen appears helpless and unable to control the horse. Thus, Urgen and his horse also symbolise an anarchic impulse underlying Maoist insurgencies, and their attempt to transform the existing system.

Mhendo gives birth to a baby girl. After a few months, she leaves her in the care of Silikmo, the woman who had given her shelter and joins the rebel army again. The army forms a ring around the Tamang settlements in the Kathmandu valley, and Mhendo leads the combat. She dies in battle, but not before realising that they are very close to victory. Her last words, as the eyes of the white horse look at her, are: "Urgen! I saved the pride of our homeland, Tamsaling. See, I fought fearlessly, and I am embracing death courageously. Tamang is a heroic community, too" (256). Silikmo, the woman who is taking care of her baby girl names her Mhendo, conveying a message that while one rebel may die, there will be another to carry the fight forward. It also reminds us of Bina Theeng Tamang's poem, "Rato Ghar," which ends with an appeal made to the mothers to give birth to more children so that they can continue the battle for liberation. Similarly, like Phulman Bal in *Sonam Gyalmo*, Pathak also blends facts with fiction and myth with history to create a world that is fictional yet truer than many of the mainstream historical accounts especially of the state's encounter with and treatment of ethnic peoples.

Ellwood holds that myth connects "the self to society and world, unlike rationality, which depersonalizes and objectifies that which is other than self" (28). For him, the paradox in becoming a mythical hero lies in the ability to belong to the tribe, and yet transcend it:

> Even in primordial tribal societies, the hero's role was ambivalent, for the hero must emerge out of an organic society that has a rich collective consciousness. The hero who transcends that collectivity must also be a part of it, so that it is the tribe's values that are made visible and timeless in the grand authentic gestures of the hero, the Odysseus or Siegfried. (Ellwood 29)

Ellwood believes that the collective has deteriorated today, through a "false uprooted individualism wrought by commerce and industry, into the depressed counterfeit collectivity of the modern city" (29). It can only be saved, Ellwood claims, by new heroes "who retrieve the power latent in ancient symbols" (29). While Ellwood's comments are about modern society in general, they also make sense in the context of societies where one group of people

has annihilated the self-respect of another group by destroying their history. In this context, myths remain the only way not only to trace the erased past but also to find symbols of hope and courage for the future. The Tamang hero, Urgen, seems to embody not only the need to belong to the tribe but also the features to transcend it. While he is deeply rooted in Tamang culture and heritage, he is also equally identifiable to members of any other marginalised ethnicity. Yuba Sammang, Theba Sammang, Sumnima and Paruhang from the Kirat myths, and King Salahesh from Maithili myths, to name a few, can be cited as similar examples of heroes rooted in one ethnic culture but relatable to others.

One more thing that stands out in all these works is how every story involves three generations of characters, the grandparents, the parents, and the children. As we can see in the above-mentioned works, as well as in Swapnil Smriti's poem, "Katha- Ghumaune Chautarima Kabhrako," the grandparents' generation has lived through both the glorious past of their tribe as well as its the torturous present. It is their grandchildren who can rebel against the present and dream of a return to the glorious past and more egalitarian society in the future. As discussed in Chapter 3, in Smriti's poem, after resting at the round *chautari* and listening to the grandmother's story of suffering, the family finally get up to leave for home. This time, however, it is not the grandmother but the grandson who carries the load of taro leaves. This is symbolic of both the need to and the act of carrying the heavy load of history further, of passing it on to the new generation. Just like their own characters, Swapnil Smriti, Beena Theeng Tamang, and Phulman Bal, too, seem to be taking over the responsibility of transferring the "load" of history, in the form of myths and stories from their ancestors, onto their shoulders, and carrying it further.

The fact that a significant number of folklores and myths are still intact reveals both the failure of the coercive state in completely hegemonising the ethnic communities as well as the possibility of rebuilding a more comprehensive ethnic history and socio-cultural

system based on that knowledge. Moreover, these literary works, just like the works by Kirat writers discussed earlier, constitute a ‘new regional literature’ as they tell the story of resistance from the regions, stories that are ‘new’ to the mainstream Nepali literature, and that challenge the existing narratives of nation, nationalism, and belonging. Apart from the use of the Tamang myth, *Urgenko Ghoda* also makes considerable use of code-switching between the Nepali and the Tamang languages. Firstly, it challenges the way Nepali mainstream literature has been written in the past; secondly, it demonstrates that despite hundreds of years of marginalisation, many aspects of the culture, including language, religion, and myths, are still alive. Mhendo declares, “No, we are not a coward race, we can also fight. We are not only porters, but we also have pride too, and a free life. We cannot live in oppression anymore” (53).

Conclusion: Countless ‘Urgens’, Countless ‘Mhendos’

“The paradox of nationalism,” Hobsbawm believed, “was that in forming its own nation, it automatically created the counter-nationalism of those whom it forced into the choice between assimilation and inferiority” (12). Challenges faced by the nation-states from indigenous, ethnic, linguistic, and other minorities illustrate that paradox. By finding grandeur and glory in what was for a long time depicted as inferior, these minority communities refuse to be assimilated into the so-called elite culture. Smriti in “Katha Ghumaune Chautarima Kabhrako” tells the tale of a resting place under a big *Kabhra* tree, which has seen as many cases of inconceivable cruelty inflicted upon Kirat people as Bina Tamang’s “red house.” Shrawan Mukarung, in “Testimony of Bise, the Tailor”, tells a similar story of many generations of Dalits exploited by the rulers and upper castes, where Bise becomes the representative mythical subaltern hero. Upendra Subba, in many of his stories in *Lato Pahad*, and poems in *Kholako Geet*, and Hangyug Agyat in a number of poems, refer to

similar Kirat myths and heroes. Tageraningwafumang, the self-created, omnipresent Kirat deity, for instance, seems to be used as an equivalent to the Hindu god, Brahma. Similarly, the story of Lepmuhang, who saves a fish and, in return, is warned about the upcoming great flood, reminds us of Manu from the Hindu scripture, *Matsyapuran*, on the one hand, and the Biblical hero, Noah, on the other.

Muna Chaudhari in her novel *Jayabardhan Salahes* tells the story of a part-historical, part-mythical king of Madhesh/Mithila, King Jayabardhan Salahes, an embodiment of valour and compassion who is never mentioned in mainstream Nepali history, myth, or literature. For Madheshi and Tharu communities, who have been rarely mentioned in a positive light, if at all, either in historical accounts or mainstream Nepali literature, portrayals like these are attempts to find a usable past, to use Hutchinson's term, to intervene with the problems of the present. As we shall see more in Chapter 5, on regional exclusion, during all these years, there was very little Madheshi students could relate to in their classrooms where "the language of instruction, the historical figures which were being mythologized, and the hill-centric cultural practices" (Jha 173) were all unfamiliar and strange to them. Stories like these, therefore, serve a number of purposes, such as providing the people from the margins something they can relate to, and reminding them of a past they can be proud of. A time for the heroes from the margins, who were pushed into oblivion for centuries, seems to be finally here.

Along with this literary and cultural mission of unearthing the hitherto buried ethnic heroes, contemporary writing from the ethnic margins also interrogates the heroes previously established by the state, such as Bhrikuti and Balabhadra. The questioning, however, is not only limited to mainstream myths but also expands to include ethnic myths wherever any form of injustice is evident. Pranika Koyu, a Kirat poet, in her poem "Ma Sumnimaki Chhori" ("I, the Daughter of Sumnima"), uses the age-old myth of Paruhang and Sumnima to

highlight how injustice was rampant even in the so-called golden days, and that even after hundreds of generations, women suffer today in the same way Sumnima, the very first mother, suffered at the hands of her men. According to the Kirat myth, when mother Goddess Sumnima rejected the advances of God Paruhang, he "wreaked havoc on earth" (n.p.), and made the earth and all its inhabitants suffer from a long period of drought. As if that was not enough, he tricked Sumnima and impregnated her, but soon left her alone to raise the kids by herself. Koyu writes:

> My birth is a cruel farce
> I am either an outcome of a manipulative design
> Or a proof of a sadist lover
> A daughter of my mother's unwanted lover
> I am only Sumnima's daughter. (n.p.)

Most of the contemporary Nepali poets and writers, as we saw in the discussion above, use ethnic myths as links to the past glory and as the sources of ethnic dignity and honour at present. Koyu, however, takes a different approach: she not only points out the domination and exploitation of women in the myths propagated by the patriarchy but also employs them to highlight contemporary problems. Her poem cautions all ethnic writers and activists regarding the use of ethnic myths. While such a myth can be used as a link to the glorious ethnic past, it can also be a storehouse of unjust practices and discriminatory traditions, as seen in the above poem, and therefore there is the need for a more selective, careful, and critical recounting.

To use a Kirat notion, this revival of myths can be seen also as a beginning of *mangena*, a Kirat ritual for revitalizing and re-instilling self-worth and dignity in person. As the story goes, after creating the world, Porokmiba Yambhamiba felt like creating a man, because the world without a man looked incomplete. First, he made men out of gold and silver and blew life into them. However, these men only kept staring and did not speak at all. Therefore, he threw them away. Then, he created a man out of the mud and blew life into

him. This man started moving and was also able to respond when called. However, he was neither smart nor strong, and Porokmiba Yambhamiba was disappointed in him. He, therefore, threw him with such a force that he was shoved into the earth. The story continues:

> So, what kind of man would suit this creation, and utilise this earth? He mixed the droppings of the *danfe* bird[66] with dewdrops and monsoon rain. He created a man out of it and blew life into him. This man started speaking, moving, and was quite robust. Porokmiba Yambamibha was angered by the fact that the gold and the silver men who would have been immortal could not do what this man of flesh with only a short life could do. In a fit of anger, Porokmiba Yambamibha spat on his face, and the man's head immediately drooped down. He appeared defeated and dejected. What should one do now? Lord Tagera Ningwafuma[67] said to Porokmiba Yakbhamiba: 'Perform a *mangena* for him, lift his head up.' Then, Porokmiba Yakbhamiba performed a *mangena* for the man. As if the consciousness was back, as if his fear was gone, the man revived, he rejuvenated, and he held his head high again. (Pathak 13)

Yug Pathak, in *Mangena: Nepal Manthan* (*Mangena: Nepal Discourse*), uses this Kirat myth to describe the plight of Nepalis oppressed and humiliated based on their ethnic, religious, linguistic, regional, or gender identity. He argues that it is already too late for their pride and dignity to be restored through a *mangena* performed by the state, or by the writers and artists respectfully acknowledging their existence and treating them with honour. Pathak declares, "This *mangena* will only be achieved when all the people can see their face in the mirror of the state" (14).

Chakrabarty stresses that a 'good' minority history is about "expanding the scope of social justice and representative democracy" (477). Myths can be incomplete and misleading; they can also be jingoistic and self-serving. However, they can also be a place to start the work towards writing a good minority narrative, and through them, restoring honour, self-esteem, and dignity in people whose heads have been drooping down for centuries because of the injustice of those who were supposed to be their guardians and custodians. In a society

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[66] The Himalayan monal (*Lophophorus impejanus*)

[67] Also referred to as Tageraningwabhumang.

where all historical traces of a people have been wiped out, myths can contribute as connecting threads to the lost past. When Bimala Tumkhewa, therefore, makes an earnest call to "rectify this history" (41) in her poems, she herself has taken the first step towards rectifying it. That is what these literary works are trying to do: taking the first step towards reminding Nepalis, especially those belonging to the marginal locations, of what has been forgotten, and, by doing that, urging them to move towards righting the wrong.

CHAPTER 5. GEOGRAPHICAL REGIONS AND LITERATURE

Not in the Country's Map: Regional Marginalisation and Literary Representations of Tarai-Madhesh

> They
> seized our eyes with which we'd see
> seized our ears with which we'd hear
> seized our brains with which we'd think
> In return
> they gave us
> a *topi*
> a *daura*
> and
> a *suruwal*, and said–
> you are now
> Nepali citizens. (Bishta n.p.)

These lines from the poem "Nagarikta" ("Citizenship") by Min Bahadur Bista succinctly describe the price many Nepalis have paid for more than two centuries in the name of nation, nationalism, and citizenship. Nepali 'national' uniform[68] for men is comprised of *daura*, a long shirt with cross-tied flaps, *suruwal,* long, tight trousers, and a *topi* (more commonly called *dhaka topi*/*bhadgaunle topi*), a Nepali cap. Designed for the *pahad*, the hills of Nepal, but imposed just like other components of socio-cultural hegemony by the hill-origin rulers and bureaucrats upon people in the rest of the country, *daura*, *suruwal* and *topi* have, for a long time, stood as symbols of the homogenising state and oppressive bureaucracy. This attire, suitable for the moderate climate of the hills, is, on the one hand, not warm enough for the mountainous regions of the north, and, on the other, too hot for the subtropical regions of

[68] After the 2007 political change, there is no single "national uniform" prescribed by the constitution or laws. However, it is still mandatory in practice for government minsters and high placed officials to wear the national dress during formal occasions, and failing to do so can lead to controversy, and even punishment. For instance, Paramanda Jha, a Madheshi politician and the first vice-president of the republican Nepal faced a huge controversy and backlash in 2008, when he took his oath in Hindi, instead of Nepali, wearing *kurta-pajama*, instead of *daura-suruwal*. He was forced to retake the oath, and this time he did it in Maithili, wearing *daura-suruwal*.

the south. Yet, all the political leaders and government employees, and even people in general especially during formal programmes, are required to wear this outfit. Failing or declining to do so is considered an act of disloyalty towards the nation.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the dominant Pahade people from the hills refer to the people living in Tarai-Madhesh derogatorily as *dhotis*, literally, people wearing a *dhoti,* a loincloth, instead of *daura-suruwal*. The metaphorical implications of the term are that these people are not true Nepalis, and are either pro-India or even worse, actually Indians. Clothes, however, are just one of the many bases on which the people of Tarai-Madhesh have been systematically discriminated against by the hills-centric state, routinely ridiculed by the mainstream media, and continually looked down upon by the dominant Pahade people. Their relatively darker skin colour, the regional and ethnic variety of the Nepali language they speak, resulting from the mother tongue interference of languages such as Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, and Tharu, and their cultures and traditions persistently end up becoming the subjects of disparagement and derision. The discrimination does not stop there but extends to a lack of equal opportunities in government jobs and recruitment into the Nepali Army, citizenship and land rights, representation in the national parliament and government, and even in the ratio of federal budget allocation. Even though Tarai-Madhesh is the most fertile region in the country, and more easily accessible than the hills and the mountains, it is not surprising that the region has the lowest literacy rate and the highest ratio of poverty, both of which result from long-term marginalisation and exclusion.

Regional Exclusion and Tarai-Madhesh

The Shah Kings who ruled Nepal for more than 250 years, until 2007, were Nepali speaking Arya-Khas Hindus from the mid-hills, and their socio-cultural, religious, and linguistic identity ultimately became the foundation of the national identity, the *Nepalipan*, or

Nepaliness. C K Lal claims that the "history of the production of the *Nepalipan* identity dates back at least to the reign of King Prithvi and it continues to be churned to this day" (9). The ethnic Magars, Gurungs, Rais, Limbus, and Tamangs, despite coming from the hills, and even serving as allies in the expansionist missions of the Shah kings, were far from this identity primarily because of their different languages, cultures and ethnicities. Muslims and Christians evidently could not be close to Nepaliness because of their 'foreign' religious identity. People from the mid- and far-western regions as well as those from the Tarai-Madhesh and the mountains were never considered as equal citizens because they came from geographical regions both different and far away from the so-called heart of Nepaliness,[69] and had in many instances, their own linguistic and cultural tradition different from the mainstream. David Gellner, in his essay "The Idea of Nepal", illustrates this graded marginalisation through four concentric circles: At the centre of this circle of Nepaliness are the Khas-Aryas, the Janajatis form the second circle, the Dalits are placed in the third circle, and, the Bhotiyas from the northern mountains and the Madheshis from the southern plains are placed in the outermost circle (23).

Overlaying this cultural matrix, Nepal is made up of three horizontal geographical regions: the mountains on the northern side bordering with the Tibetan region of China, the hills and valleys in the middle, and Tarai-Madhesh, the plain lands on the south bordering with Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The Tarai region, which is now more widely referred to as Madhesh or Tarai-Madhesh,[70] covers 23.1 per cent (34, 119 square kilometres of land) of the

[69] This is even more complicated than it may appear at the first sight, and includes many other different variables of identity. For instance, even within the hill-origin people of Khas-Arya ethnicity, this proximity with the power-centre is not uniform. The hill-origin Khas-Arya people, for instance, are made up of two groups: the first group is comprised of the upper-caste Brahmins, Chhetris, and Dashnami Sanyasis, and the second group is made up of Dalits such as Kami, Damai, Sarki, and Badi. Even though the Dalits, who form about 10% of the total population, belong to the ruling class in terms of ethnicity, religion, language and geographical region, they have remained as one of the most disadvantaged groups, too.

[70] During the Panchayat period, the term 'Tarai' was commonly used to refer to this region. After 1990, and even more so after the 2007 Madhesh Revolution, Madheshi's have been referring to this region as Madhesh, and the term has been more frequently used in the nation media, too. The Tharus of this region, however, have

nation, and holds 50.15 per cent of the total population (Upreti et al. 12). The original inhabitants of Tarai, the Madheshis, according to Arjun Guneratne, are "the descendants of people who have either immigrated into the Tarai from North India during the last two centuries or who were already settled in the region when it was incorporated into the Nepali state" (xvi). The ethno-linguistic demography of Tarai-Madhesh, like the rest of the country, is quite heterogeneous and can be divided into four major groups: indigenous Janajatis (ethnic people) living in Madhesh for generations (for instance, Tharus), Madheshis of Indian origin, Madheshi Muslims, and Pahadi Madheshis (hill-origin people in Tarai-Madhesh) (Upreti et al 6-7).

Guneratne mentions that this region "produces most of Nepal's GDP and government revenue, and is home to nearly half the population" (xvi). Yet, he elaborates, the loyalty of this people towards the Kathmandu establishment has always been a matter of "deep concern to the ruling elite" (xvi-xvii). There are many reasons behind the state's distrust of the region. On the one hand, the proximity of Tarai-Madhesh to India, and its sociocultural and linguistic associations with the people on the other side of the border have always led the Pahade rulers to suspect that the region might be more loyal to its southern neighbour than to Kathmandu. On the other, this region includes many intra-regional cultural centres such as Mithila, Bhojpura, Awadh, and Tharuhat which have their own vibrant linguistic and socio-cultural traditions, some of which, in the past, were considered superior to those of Kathmandu.[71] Due to their proximity to the neighbouring Indian towns, most of the trade and socio-cultural exchanges are oriented towards the south and not the north. This has always made the local people less dependent on Kathmandu, and made it more difficult for Kathmandu to impose its

been reluctant to refer to themselves as Madheshis, and have rather preferred the term Tarai. For all these reasons, I have used the term Tarai-Madhesh to reflect these shades and contestations of claims and belongings.

[71] Maithili Brahmins were considered superior to the Pahade Brahmins and were employed by the Malla kings of Kathmandu until the Gorkhali takeover. The native Newari culture of Kathmandu is influenced to a large extent by the Maithili culture, and Maithili *bhajans* are sung in many Hindu temples of Kathmandu even today by the Newars of Kathmandu.

socio-cultural norms and linguistic policies and practices on them, and thus ‘integrate’ the Madheshis into mainstream culture.

Another factor that makes Tarai-Madhesh an important case study for regional exclusion is that this region acquired and expressed a sense of regional consciousness before any other marginalised regions of Nepal. It was the base of the Nepali Congress’ fight against the autocratic Rana regime in 1950-51, which ultimately ended oligarchical rule and established democracy in Nepal for a short period. Tarai-Madhesh voted overwhelmingly in favour of multiparty democracy in the 1980 referendum that was supposedly held to let the people choose between a non-party Panchayat System and multiparty democracy, in which Panchayat won by a slim majority of 54.8% (Shah 69). The region participated robustly in the 1990 *Jana Andolan I* (People’s Revolution I), which ultimately re-established constitutional monarchy and multiparty democracy in Nepal. Tarai-Madhesh region was also a major participant in the 1996-2006 Maoist insurgency and *Jana Andolan II* (People’s Revolution II) and, through the 2007 *Tarai Andolan* (Tarai Revolution), was instrumental in ensuring the federal system in the *Interim Constitution of Nepal 2007*.

Despite being at the avant-garde of national political changes as well as regional consciousness, academic and intellectual discussion and research on Tarai-Madhesh has remained disappointing in both volume and quality. In his pioneering work on the Tarai-Madhesh, *Regionalism and National Unity in Nepal* (1975), Frederick H Gaige highlights the obsession of scholars, both local and foreign, in the 1960 and 70s with the mountainous and hilly regions of Nepal, and their lack of interest in the Tarai-Madhesh region. Gaige writes: “the plains region of Nepal—the Tarai—has received comparatively little attention from either Nepali or foreign scholars, perhaps because it is hot, dusty, topographically undramatic and, until recently, malarious” (Preface xiii). While the Tarai seen by Gaige in the late 1960s and early 70s has significantly changed, especially in terms of accessibility and the

prevalence of malaria, the intellectual neglect remains the same even today. In the "Introduction" to the 2009 reprint of Gaige's book, too, Guneratne notes: "scholars of Nepal, both domestic and foreign, have tended to gravitate to Nepal's highlands for their research problems and study sites, even as the population and the relative importance of the Tarai to Nepal's future has grown" ("Introduction" xvi).

Tarai-Madhesh in the Mainstream Nepali Literature

Written after the 2007-political transformation, Shrawan Mukarung's poem "Anuhaar Khojirahechha Rambharos" features Rambharos, a poor man from the Tarai, who stands in front of the "plain mirror of democracy" [72] and is heartbroken to realise that the mirror reflects everything except his face:

> Where was one of the men of this earth?
> In this long brutal and deceitful travel of time
> The face dropped off somewhere
> Rambharos was dismayed
> Eyes burning with fire
> He is now in a search of his face. (22)

Rambharos looks around and witnesses the proofs, as well as the fruits, of his labour everywhere. The limitless land he tilled is there, the trees and the roads are there, the well formed by his tears, is there, too. The infinite horizon of dreams that expands in front of him, and the ground of civilization that he has tended with care for ages are all there, along with all the "images of suffocating ages/spent as ploughman, coolie/ or worker" (25). From this sweeping overview, it is only his face that is missing. After much contemplation, he is able to identify the culprit who was responsible for editing him out of the picture—the poets and writers, who always represented the hegemonic state and never wrote about the ordinary

[72] Mukarung uses the word *lokatantra* (literally, people's rule), which is different from the word used for democracy during the Panchayat period, *prajatantra* (literally, subjects' rule), and the word more commonly used in the recent years, *ganatantra* (literally, republic).

people. He raises his finger towards the rulers of the land and declares: “The day your poet stood in front of me/I lost my face” (26). Rambharos finally demolishes the statue of the poet erected on his land, and thus invokes the “new poet” of the changing times:

> Oh poet, Oh new poet
> Find my face in your poem
> Find today! Find now!!
> And then I will keep your statue in my heart. (26-27)

Mukarung’s poem is a powerful criticism of mainstream Nepali literature’s exclusion of marginalised communities in general, and Madhesh in particular. Mainstream Nepali literature mostly ignored Madhesh, just like all the other marginalised groups, and most of the literary writings on Madhesh came only after 1990 when Nepal transformed from a system of absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy. Prashant Jha, in *Battles of the New Republic: A Contemporary History of Nepal*, shares his experience of growing up as a Madheshi boy in Kathmandu in the 1980s and 90s, and describes how Tarai-Madhesh was completely omitted from the national narrative:

> From a historical and political perspective, the Tarai found no mention at all in school curricula, except as a breadbasket. There was little a Madheshi could relate to when he was taught in classrooms—the language of instruction, the historical figures which were being mythologized, and the hill-centric cultural practices were alien to him. But that was the aim, to make him more Nepali through pedagogy and force him to be ashamed of his own roots. (173)

In the next section, I present a reading of literary works on Tarai-Madhesh from the past and the recent times, as the nation and the region passed through different stages of marginalisation and transformation, from the 1940s till now. In this context, among the literary works from the past, I present a reading of Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala’s short story “Madheshtira”, Bhawani Bhikshu’s short story “Maujang Babusaheko Kot”, and Dhruva Chandra Gautam’s novel, *Alikhit*, as representative examples of how mainstream Nepali literature before and during the Panchayat years portrayed the Tarai-Madhesh region. There

has been a considerable increase in the number of literary works on Madhesh in recent years, and these works can be divided into two broad categories: those written by non-Madheshi writers (i.e., Pahade writers), and those written by Madheshi writers themselves. From the first group, I discuss poems by Shrawan Mukarung ("Anuhar Khojirahechha Rambharos") and Swapnil Smriti ("Madhesh"), and works of fiction by Nayan Raj Pandey (*Loo*) and Ram Lal Joshi ("Parda"). Among the works by contemporary Madheshi writers, I present a reading of Shyam Shah's collection of short stories *Abba*. Through this analysis, I aim to find answers to questions such as how the portrayal of Tarai-Madhesh in Nepali literature has evolved over the decades, how the depiction of the area by Madheshi writers differs from the outsiders, and what implications such differences have. The eventual objective, however, will be to examine how the Tarai-Madhesh region has suffered historical marginalisation and exclusion from the Pahade state, and if there is any change in that treatment in the recent decades following a number of socio-political movements and revolutions.

1. A Region that Welcomed Everyone: Tarai-Madhesh before 1950

The vast land of Tarai-Madhesh was only sporadically populated until the 18th century. Most of it was covered by dense forests, including the famous *Charkoshe Jhadi*[73] (literally meaning, 12-kilometre long forest), providing a home to profuse wildlife, including elephants, one-horned rhinos, and tigers. During the Rana period, the rulers' interest in the Tarai-Madhesh was focused on a handful of features. Firstly, there were gigantic *sal* trees[74] through which they curried favour with the British, who used them to build the railway lines in India. Secondly, the dense forests provided excellent recreational ground for big game

[73] One *kosh*/*kos* is approximately 3 kilometres (1.91 miles).

[74] Sal (*Shorea robusta*) is a tree native to the Indian subcontinent. It can grow up to 25 metres in height and the trunk can be as big as 2-2.5 metres diameter. Its popularity as timber wood has led to a rapid deforestation of the Tarai-Madhesh region.

hunting, where they also frequently invited British rulers in India as well as visiting monarchs from the UK. Thirdly, the land revenue made this region attractive to the rulers in Kathmandu. Towards the late 19th and early 20th century, in a bid to generate more revenue, as well as to expand its support base, the government offered hundreds of *bighas*[75] of land as *birta*[76] to government officials, army chiefs and soldiers, and encouraged migration to this region. However, before 1950, only very few people from the hills migrated to the region, owing primarily to the fear of endemic malaria (Guneratne xix). Eventually, there was a mass migration from the hills especially after 1950, to the point that the immigrants soon outnumbered the natives.

Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala (1914-1982), who led the movement against the Ranas in 1950, and became the first elected prime minister of Nepal in 1959, was also a prolific writer. Koirala's grandparents came from the hills, but he was born and grew up in Tarai, and knew the hardships of life there. According to Michael Hutt, "the most common theme of his stories and novels (of which Koirala published four) was the relationship between men and women, but a significant number of stories also dealt with social issues" (*Himalayan Voices* 177). Despite his attempts at being sympathetic to the people of Tarai, for whom he fought, Koirala wrote most of his stories from a Pahade Brahhin man's perspective. "Madheshtira" ("Going to Madhesh") is a tale of migration from the hills to the plains, probably set before the mid-twentieth century. People who migrated from the hills to Tarai-Madhesh in the 20th century belonged to two different groups. Some of them were rich, powerful, and close enough to the seats of power in Kathmandu to have received large amounts of land as *birta*. However, the majority of the people migrated to the plains to escape the extreme poverty and

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[75] One *bigha* is 20 *katthas*, i.e., about 6,772.63 square metres.

[76] *Birta* was a system of tax-exempt privilege land ownership the rulers granted to their close supporters as a way to maintain their grip. It was abolished in 1959 by the first democratically elected government led by B P Koirala.

hardship of the hills. “Madheshtira” is a story of the latter group. It depicts a group of five people, a young widow, an old man, and three young men, Gorey, Bhotey, and Dhaney, who are on their way to Madhesh on foot. They have been walking together for days, and all of them have different dreams about the place they are heading to. The men have been jobless in the hills and are going to Madhesh to find work. The young widow has the dream of selling her jewellery to buy a small piece of land, build a house, and start a happy life. She says, “I am planning to set up a home and start a family in Madhesh. Just running a small farm. I have heard that it is easy to do farming there. You get land almost free” (136). She takes care of everyone in the group in the course of the journey and even offers them food that she has been carrying with her. But she is fondest of Gorey, and during their many days of walking, she has been dreaming of marrying and settling down with him once they reach the much-awaited land.

The next morning, however, she is horrified to find that Gorey has disappeared with all her jewellery, and all her dreams suddenly come to an abrupt end. The old man tries to console her by saying that she will still be able to find a husband and start a family because Madhesh offers generously to everyone. However, for the young widow, who had begun the journey with enthusiasm and hope, the story ends on a note of deep sadness and disappointment:

> She was not very young anymore. She had plans to attract a young man with her jewellery and money. She had dreamt of a small house, kids, a dream she had held close to her heart since she was young. All came down like a house of cards. She looked at the plain lands on the south, as everyone else was doing, but without any enthusiasm. (142)

After all that she had was stolen, and the man she dreamed of marrying had vanished, the young widow does not have the option of going back to the hills. She learns an early lesson, that, regardless of all the stories of abundance and hope she has heard, her life in Madhesh is not going to be an easy one.

Despite its brevity, Koirala portrays a telling picture of the Pahade migrants arriving in Madhesh during the mid-20th century through this story. On the one hand, Madhesh is presented as a land of opportunities that welcomes anyone and provides them with the chance to build a better life, at least better than the life of starvation in the hills. On the other, there is also a hint of the hardships that are waiting for the new migrants in the new land. Most of the stories written in the past as well as in recent times present a one-dimensional relationship between the Madheshis and the Pahades, in which the Pahades are always portrayed as the powerful and wealthy perpetrators and the Madheshis as the perpetual victims. Koirala's story, however, through characters like the old man, the young widow, and the jobless young men, shows that not all the migrants from the hills were rich and powerful people. Moreover, even though the particular group of migrants described in this story is comprised of poor and powerless people compared to the more powerful aristocrats who ultimately took over Madhesh, they are coming to Madhesh not only with needs but also with greed and cunning, as exemplified by Gorey. Similarly, Gorey also shows the early signs of the cunning and exploitative Pahade man in Madhesh he may ultimately become, similar to the characters we will see in a number of literary works in the upcoming discussion. The importance of this story also lies in that it is one of the first stories about Pahade migration to Tarai-Madhesh, and the beginning of enduring internal colonisation. Similarly, the story also makes a subtle commentary on the patriarchal society and the treatment of women, especially the widows in the mid-twentieth century Nepal.

2. *Birta, Jadauri, and the First Awakening: Tarai-Madhesh in the 1950s*

Nepali Brihat Shabdakosh, comprehensive Nepali dictionary published by Nepal academy, defines *birta* as "a land that one receives either by showing bravery or as promotion; a land for which one does not have to pay a tax; an exempt land from which one is allowed to keep

all or some of the collected revenue" (915). The word, as used in the everyday idiomatic expression, can refer to anything that someone gets for free, or without much hard work or effort, and is therefore worthy of being both exploited and disregarded. Similarly, *Nepali Brihat Shabdakosh* defines the word *jadauri* as "a piece of cloth that you pass on to someone after you have used it enough; old cloth; cloth so old after use that it is ready to be discarded so that someone else can use it" (443). In this section, through some literary examples, I explore how the Tarai-Madhesh region was treated as *birta* and *jadauri* even in the 20th century

John Whelpton compares the state's treatment of Tarai to that of the regions of the far-west, like Kumau, that were treated like colonies, and claims that:

> [T]he Tarai was also in many ways a colony, although a better managed one. The great bulk of the cultivators were always from the plains and, in the pre-Rana period, so were many of those in intermediate positions in the revenue-extraction hierarchy. However, Madheshhis were never part of the inner core of the *bharadari* and when the *jimidar* system for tax collection was introduced by Jang Bahadur those appointed were predominantly from the hills. The superior status of hillmen in the Nepalese state was made clear in the *Muluki Ain*, which ranked Parbatiya Brahmans higher than Madheshhi ones. Since a common sense of separation from the plains was the main thing that hills Nepalese shared, Madheshhis were naturally felt to be outsiders. Conversely, even though they might appreciate the Nepalese government's land-tenure policy, few Madheshhis can have felt any strong sense of identity with the Gorkhali state. (58)

Thus, apart from the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural differences, the ownership and control over the land was yet another factor that distanced the Madheshis from the Pahade state. In 1951, the 104-year old Rana regime was brought down by an armed revolution, and the Nepali Congress party came to power. In 1959, through the Birta Abolition Act, the Nepali Congress government formally brought this unjust system to an end. But the disparity in wealth, an outcome of prolonged subjugation and exploitation, and the social hierarchy established through an unfair socio-political system were there to stay.

Bhawani Shankar Gupta (1914-1981) who wrote under the name Bhawani Bhikshu was the first major writer of Madheshi origin in Nepali mainstream literature. Bhikshu's mother tongue was Awadhi, a variety of Eastern Hindi spoken commonly in certain parts of Nepali Madhesh, and his early writings were in Hindi. According to Michael Hutt, his writings in Nepali have been criticised "because his prose lacks the spontaneity of a mother-tongue writer, his sentences are sometimes awkwardly constructed, and his vocabulary tends to be somewhat grandiose. Nevertheless, his stories are regarded highly for their thoughtfulness and subtlety" (Hutt, *Himalayan Voices* 206). Just like today, it was not easy for an outsider from the provinces to be accepted by the literary coterie of the Kathmandu-based Pahade Nepali writers in the mid-20th century. This made him change not only the subject and style of his writing but also his unmistakably Madheshi surname 'Gupta' to a more neutral literary alias 'Bhikshu' (meaning, monk/beggar).[77]

Bhikshu's short story "Maujang Babusahebko Kot" ("Maujang Babusaheb's Coat"), written about a decade and a half after Koirala's "Madheshtira", introduces the changing Madhesh during the 1950s. Maujang Babusaheb, a "bad tempered, rude and irrepressible" Rana aristocrat living in his *birta* land in Madhesh, has as a very proud possession, a "long, pink Benson overcoat" (215).[78] The coat was given to him many years ago by a Rana general in Kathmandu, referred to as "P.K.J", and even though the coat has become old and tattered, Maujang Babusaheb still wears it with pride and gratitude. It not only reminds him of his visits to the splendid Rana palaces in Kathmandu but also the days when people unquestioningly respected the authority of people like him. Times have changed now, however, since the Rana rule has ended, new men have come into power, and the old social

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[77] Michael Hutt, in his biography of *Bhupi Serchan The Life of Bhupi Serchan: Poetry and Politics in Post-Rana Nepal* narrates an incident where Krishnabhakta Shrestha called Bhawani Bhikshu, then a member of the Royal Nepal Academy, "a bloody Indian" in his own office (55-56).

[78] These citations are taken from Michael Hutt's translation of the story collected in *Himalayan Voices* (1991).

values and systems are gradually crumbling. Maujang Babusaheb, nevertheless, still wears the old Rana coat proudly, like an insignia, wherever he goes. When, during a meeting, a young local Congress party leader suggests to Babusaheb that he probably should not wear the coat when the central government's home minister comes on a tour in a few weeks, he is deeply offended: "How uppity the lower castes are becoming," he thinks (219).

> Should I come dressed in a 4-paisa[79] vest and loincloth just because it's warm? The minister's coming from Nepal,[80] so he'll be wearing a woollen coat. However hot it is, the generals always wear uniforms made of soft cashmere. You haven't a clue about these things—is this how affairs of state are conducted? (220)

In the past, he muses, someone as despicable as the low caste Congress party member would have been thrashed for such impudence, but the times have changed. "What to do?" Babusaheb asks himself, "This wretch would never have dared to make fun of this coat before" (220).

As the visit of the central government's home minister approaches, Babusaheb realises that the collar of the coat has become frayed and filthy. Since he cannot trust the local tailors to handle such a precious item, he travels to Lucknow in India by train and gets it fixed by spending a hefty amount of money that would be enough to buy a new coat. "Do you think I could find a new coat as good as this one, even for 100?" Babusaheb asks rhetorically, and answers himself, "Even if I had ten new coats, they could not compare with this one" (220). A big reception is organized to welcome the minister, and Maujang Babusaheb attends it proudly wearing his old threadbare pink coat. Everyone at the reception stares at the coat, "wide-eyed, and although smiles [come] to their mouths, none of them [laugh]" (222). But Babusaheb, unaware of the mockery, is on a "lofty mental plane" (222). A big shock comes

[79] 100 *Paisa* makes 1 *Rupaiya* (Rupee).

[80] Kathmandu, even until the 1960s, was referred to as 'Nepal'.

later when the Congress party member jolts Babusaheb's arm while his hands are still in his pockets, and "the old coat [rips] from the corner of the pocket to the bottom of the garment":

> But could the mighty Maujang Babusaheb weep and wail in front of that worthless man? In the old days, he would have set the Alsatian on him and had him torn to pieces. But he did not have that option today; Babusaheb's attitude was no longer one of high and mighty greatness. With an immense effort, he suppressed a feeling of total anguish. Babusaheb was neither dumb with grief, nor did he even permit himself a cry of rage. All he said was, "Oh, what's happened?" and managed to calm himself with a careless gesture. (223)

Babusaheb walks out of the reception, takes off the coat, hands it to a minion, and later, upon arriving home, hangs it on its nail. Everyone in the house is shocked to see his prized possession destroyed and anticipate some terrible reaction. However, to everyone's surprise, he makes the most casual declaration they had ever heard, "Nothing has happened. I just went to meet the minister, and then I came home. The Ranas' rule is ended" (223).

Described by Hutt as a "masterly analysis of the attitudes and beliefs of a senior Rana in the years after the fall of his family's regime, in which an old coat symbolise the glory of his past" (*Himalayan Voices* 187), "Maujang Babusahebko Kot" is also an insightful story of changing Madhesh in the 1950s. The old aristocracy is dying, the revolutionary Nepali Congress and its people are coming to power, old feudal practices of *birta* are being abolished, and just like the threadbare coat, the centuries-old exploitative system is coming to an end, too. By making Maujang Babusaheb so easily accept the fact that the coat has become too old and is good to be discarded towards the end of the story, Bhikshu also seems to be foreshadowing something seriously regressive in the future he beheld. The old feudal lords are already prepared to make a comeback in new forms and resume their old roles. This time, they will not wear woollen coats or *daura-suruwal*, but will slip into the region's working-class uniform of *dhoti*, *kurta*, and *gamchha.* However, nothing will change in the way they maintain their grip on the region. It will only get worse.

The title of the story immediately reminds us of the short story "The Overcoat", by the renowned Russian writer, Nikolai Gogol, which has been seen as a critique of oligarchy and bureaucracy. On closer observation, however, it is not only the similarities but also the differences that become apparent. In Gogol's story, the overcoat belongs to Akaky, an impoverished clerk, who has worked hard to buy the prized possession, when he can no more repair the old threadbare coat. In the present story, however, the coat belongs to a rich and powerful man, who can choose to either mend it and keep wearing it or discard it, as time changes. In both cases, the coat represents prestige and honour, the symbolic significance of which seems to be constant during Akaky's time, whereas they are changing rapidly in the times Babusaheb lives. Hutt describes the Rana period as a time of "exploitation, censorship, and oppression", but as evident in this story, there is also a "nostalgia for the ostentatious grandeur of the age" (*Himalayan Voices* 187), especially for those who had seen it from proximity, and enjoyed its privileges. For someone like Babusaheb, there is an urgent need to disown the coat to transition to a new role in the changing system, yet the attachment to the old coat, symbolic of the old times, remains until the end.

The land Babusaheb received and ruled as a chief for decades was a *birta*, and the second-hand coat that he received from the high placed Rana general in Kathmandu was a *jadauri,* something the general considered old and bad enough to be discarded. The story suggests that Tarai-Madhesh, in the same way, has been treated as a *birta*, literally and metaphorically, as well as *jadauri*, something that one does not have to be accountable for and can just be exploited as long as it suits and then discarded. While this story seems to end with a ray of hope, it is also unmistakably pointing towards the Panchayat system that followed and lasted until 1990 and was not any better than the Rana rule that preceded it. The story presents an interesting situation where so much is happening for the sake of the pursuit of power and domination. The old regime is not ready to give up on the power and privileges

it has been enjoying, but a counter-force with its counter-discourse seems to be ready to topple it over. The grip of the old discourse is so strong that it makes a comeback soon enough, albeit in a new garb but is substantially the same, or worse.

3. Non-existent, Invisible, Curtained: Tarai-Madhesh during the Panchayat Years (1960-1990)

> "These people have been exploited, they have been sucked, and they don't know this yet. The day they will come to realise this…."
> "It's been years since that is also being said."
> "Looks like, along with every possibility for a change, a contradiction is born, too. Now we have to wait for a time when the possibility is born, but not the contradiction."
> "Then there will be a revolution, but why shouldn't a contradiction be born with a revolution?" (125)

This is an extract from a longer conversation among three characters, Rishi Ram, Shekhar Raj, and Gautam, from Dhruba Chandra Gautam's novel *Alikhit*, first published in 1983. These young educated men belong to a team of archaeologists who have come from Kathmandu to Birahinpur, an impoverished and melancholic Madheshi village, for an archaeological excavation. They are horrified by the poverty, exploitation, and injustice prevailing there, but the revolution that Rishi wishes for and anticipates never takes place.

Birahinpur, or Birahinpur-Barewa, is a village that, according to the novel, does not exist "in the map of the country" (80). Ruled by the Pahade landlord, Bishwanath Prasad Singh, who used to be a Jimdar[81] in the old Rana days, and is now a Pradhan Pancha, the elected head of the entire village, in the new Panchayat system, Birahinpur is a place where everyone, except the Jimdar's family and his henchmen, lives in dire poverty and are abused and exploited to their last breath. Suffering is a way of life for every single inhabitant. As if

[81] During the Rana period, *Jimdar* was the post given to hill-origin tax collectors in Madhesh. In the hills, they were called *Jimwal*/*Jimuwal.*

their hardships and exploitation by the Jimdar are not enough, they are visited by dacoits from the neighbouring village regularly. Their houses are burnt, they are physically assaulted, or even killed, and anything valuable and useful is looted. The only respite from a life of hardship come from drowning oneself in the deep, dark, and cold Dorahantal Lake located at the borders of the village, and many residents choose that path to end their suffering. During their few months stay in the village, the archaeologists see more suffering and death than they have seen in their entire lives.

One day, to everyone's disbelief, the entire village of Birahinpur, with all its houses and people, and with all their sufferings, suddenly disappears without leaving any trace of its existence. This disappearance of an entire village, however, is not noticed by the state because "it was a village that never had a proof of belonging to the country" (218). To say that a village "whose existence had never been verified" (218) disappeared would mean nothing to the official records of the state, and, therefore, it was not a matter of concern to the officials. Surprisingly though, even for the villagers from the neighbouring villages, the disappearance of Birahinpur was not a tragic incident because they never really registered or bothered about its inhabitants. However, they offer a range of different speculations as to what might have happened to the village. Some think that it may have been destroyed by fire, others offer that there must have been a flood, while still others believe that it probably was caused by some supernatural calamity. Another suggests, "there was so much sin in the village, so this happened" (218). One person even declares that they must all have drowned themselves in the Dorahantal Lake. Similarly, the Jimdar seems to be the least bothered by the fact that an entire village, that he ruled and exploited, and had disappeared overnight. He says: "I can't say what happened. But just let it go, who can stop what's bound to perish? Let's believe, just like men, even villages and settlements have their good times and bad times" (218). Rishi, however, concludes: "The village got wiped out because there was no

rebellion. When defiance dies in people, when their resistance against cruelty exists no more, they get wiped out one day. There was no rebellion in Barewa" (129).

Dhruba Chandra Gautam (b. 1943), like Koirala, came from a Pahade family that migrated to Tarai, where he was born and grew up. *Alikhit* is a cruel account of what has happened to *Madhesh* at the hands of Pahade rulers over time. What stands out in Gautam's characters is that it is not only people such as the Jimdar, the local administrators, and the police but also those who have come for the excavation from Kathmandu who are all Pahades, too. Except for the local feudal lords, no villagers have any agency whatsoever in deciding how they should live their lives and are always at the mercy of others. It is the tale of an unwritten Tarai-Madhesh still waiting to be written, and to be written in terms of facts and truths rather than myths and stereotypes of backwardness and inferiority, the major reason behind which is again the discriminatory state and Pahade supremacy.

Adept at wit, satire, dark humour, and understatement, Gautam produces several one-liners that succinctly summarise the state of affairs in the course of the novel. He, thus, describes the village in one place: "To say that the sun does not rise in that village would be unrealistic, but what [the villagers] could find even during the day was darkness" (118). Similarly, he portrays the wretched condition of Musahars like this: "The only difference between the Musahars and the pigs they kept was that they used only two legs to walk" (183). Narrating the never-ending sufferings the villagers of Birahinpur undergo, Gautam writes: "There is a robbery every year; if there is no robbery, there is drought; if there is not drought, there is flood; and, a man grows old witnessing all this…if he doesn't witness this, his life becomes dull and dreary" (127). Written when the Panchayat system was at its height, Gautam, thus, presents a fearless criticism of the system in this novel. He, however, ends the novel on an extremely pessimistic note with no way out for a change to this situation. Moreover, we cannot also ignore the fact that, despite his sympathy for the residents of

Birahinpur, his Pahade superiority also gets reflected time and again in the way he portrays the Madheshi characters, and refers to them as "Madise" even in his narrative language, and essentialises their "Madise-ness" (24).[82]

"Parda" ("Curtain"), collected in Ramlal Joshi's anthology *Aina* published in 2016, is a story that takes place in the Tharu settlements, a major indigenous tribe of Tarai-Madhesh, in the 1970s-80s. The narrative opens with an interaction between a young girl, Hasina, and the narrator, Suman, "who have met each other after 18 years" (35). Suman used to be a stay-home tutor at Hasina's house some 28 years ago before he left for the district headquarters. Hasina invites him to her home, offers him snacks, and Suman is lost in a flashback of the days when he had come to the Madheshi village of Mainapur with his uncle, referred to as Baidar Kaka,[83] for his higher studies, and was a witness to many unforgettable incidents that took place in the village. *Jamindar* (landlord) Khemcharan Chaudhari was the chief of this dense Tharu village, where Baidar Kaka's family was the only Pahade household. As he continues living at Khemcharan's house, tutoring his two daughters, Suman comes to know more about the *jamindar*'s life of prestige and indulgence, and the relationship between the old *jamindar* and his young second wife, Patrani. Suman also witnesses Baidar Kaka's gradual rise in wealth and influence in the Tharu village, which he uses not only to put gullible Tharus in a debt trap and lure them into indentured slavery, commonly known as *kamaiya*, but also to sexually exploit their wives. As Baidar Kaka's wealth, power and influence rise, he is able to form a friendship with the *jamindar*. He frequently visits his home for late-night drinking parties, gets involved in a sexual liaison

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[82] "मदिसेपन"

[83] *Nepali Brihat Shabdkosh* defines *baidar* (also, *bahidar*, where *bahi* means 'record book') as a "writer [scribe/copyist/record keeper] at a government office" (896). During the days when almost everyone was illiterate, being a *baidar* meant both that the person came from a family that could teach him to read and write, and also that he had both prestige and power in the society.

with Patrani, and becomes the illicit father of her three children, Ramcharan, Nikhraun, and Hasina. When the matter becomes too unbearable for him to tolerate, the *jamindar* instead of taking any action on Baidar Kaka, kills his own wife. Tears roll over Suman's eyes as he recalls how Hasina, who was only 17 months old then, cried over her mother's death as her dead body was pulled out from the well, as he sees her standing in front of him 28 years later.

Pahade perpetrator vs. Madheshi victim is a common trope in stories on Madhesh, but Ramlal Joshi takes it one step further. This time, it is not just the common, downtrodden Madheshis who have been wronged by a Pahade man, but a landlord and chief of the village who has been disgraced. Sadly though, the eventual revenge is not enacted upon the Pahade Baidar, but upon Patrani, who is killed by her own husband. The fact that it is not only the practice of "blaming the victim" that is rampant here, to use William Ryan's terminology (26), but also unjustly and disproportionately punished, shows the dynamics and hierarchy of power relationships among the Pahade and Madheshi men and women. Despite being the chief of the village, Khemcharan is still unable to hold Baidar answerable for the wrongdoing. Among many other stereotypes, the story presents one more stereotype here, the stereotype of Pahad as masculine and powerful and Tarai-Madhesh as feminine and weak. Moreover, even when the whole of Tarai-Madhesh suffers in cases like these, it is again the people at the extreme margins, the poor, Dalits, and women, who suffer more than anyone else. Just like *Alikhit*, an unwritten story the writing of which does not make any difference in the way the village is being treated perpetually, "Parda", the veil, also symbolises the countless 'veils' used to either cover or justify the sufferings of the oppressed people. The *parda* of lies used to cover up the real reason behind Patrani's death is just one of them.

'Invisibility', a trope commonly used in Black American literature, following Ralph Ellison's famous novel *Invisible Man* (1952), appears to be a common motif in Nepali

literature on Madhesh, too. Todd Lieber, in his essay "Ralph Ellison and the Metaphor of Invisibility in Black Literary Tradition," discusses three different states of invisibility:

> "[I]nvisibility" suggests the situation of a group stripped of its native culture and forced to adhere to alien standards and values while its own cultural qualities were ignored; socially it reflects the conditions of a group whose basic plight was long overlooked or pushed into obscure shadows; perhaps most significantly it embodies the complex psychological dilemmas of men without a sense of vital group identity, whose sense of individual human identity is often denied by the dominant society. (86)

In *Alikhit*, the whole village, along with its inhabitants and their sufferings, is invisible both to the local landlords and administrators as well as to the rulers in Kathmandu. They exist, as clear as daylight, with all their pangs of hunger and starvation, their pain and suffering, yet they are virtually invisible to the larger state apparatus as much as to the local administration. Similarly, in "Parda", the sexual acts of Baidar Kaka and Patarani, are veiled by a flimsy curtain in two ways. For *jamindar* Ramcharan, these activities are 'invisible' because he cannot protest against the Pahade Baidar and take action. For Baidar, on the other hand, Patarani's husband, even though he is the chief of the village, is invisible, because he is a Madheshi, and a Tharu, at that, and therefore someone who can be disregarded.

If we look into the operation of the Nepali state, it seems to have used several criteria, ranging from language, religion, and culture, to origin, skin colour and the way of livelihood to divide and classify its people into more and lesser Nepalis. When the project of dividing and classifying continues through many state-sponsored policies and practices, such as education, laws, land ownership policies and citizenship laws, people's sense of themselves and others is shaped by categories such as superior and inferior, master and slave, and so on. The way Pahade and Madheshi characters in the above-discussed stories behave seems to be guided by the assumed and expected roles they have internalized through state policies and practices to a totalizing extent. The residents of Birahinpur are ready to disappear rather than

stand up to Jimdar, and the *jamindar* is more willing to kill his wife than punish the real culprit.

4. *Still 'Overturned': Tarai-Madhesh in the 1990s*

> *Ulaar*: In the local language of Tarai, when a *tanga* or a cart has more weight than it can carry and gets imbalanced or overturned, it is called *ulaar*. Other less frequently used terms are *unaar*, *ullar*, *unar*. (From the inside cover of *Ulaar*)

Nayanraj Pandey's novella, *Ulaar* (1992), is the story of Premlalawa's struggle for life and love from the hot and heartless Madheshi town of Gaganganj to the streets of the capital city, Kathmandu. Premlalawa is orphaned at a very young age when his father is hit by a truck when he was only eight, and his mother dies of asthma a year later. From early on, he has huge respect for Rajendraraj, the hill-origin local leader. After all, it was Rajendraraj who helped Premlalawa extract compensation from the truck driver, a generous amount of eight thousand rupees. Even though people said that "Rajendraraj took eighteen thousand, and gave him only eight" (29), Premlalawa does not believe in what he deems to be baseless rumours. Rajendraraj deposits Premlalawa's money in the bank, and when he is ten, buys him a *tanga*, a horse-drawn carriage. Similarly, Rajendraraj helps him sell his ancestral land and house when he is sick and runs out of money for treatment. While Premlalawa does not also understand why Rajendraraj asks him to tell Shilababu that the price of the land is a hundred-thousand rupees, and is made to sign a receipt of a hundred-thousand rupees, while he receives only thirty thousand in hand. There is no way he can find out the reason, or grasp the deceit, so he remains grateful to Rajendraraj for his seeming kindness.

As Premlalawa grows up, he is attracted to the Badini girl,[84] Draupadi, a prostitute. He dreams of marrying her someday and is hurt when she serves other customers. As the story progresses, we get to know how Premlalawa, whose family once owned extensive plots of land at the centre of Gaganganj, ultimately ends up in a shabby hut, working hard as a *tanga*-driver to make ends meet, while the local hill-origin political leaders get richer and more powerful day by day. After his horse, Basanti, dies while carrying dozens of people at a time during an election victory rally of Shantiraja, Premlalawa makes a trip to Kathmandu to seek compensation, so that he can buy a new horse. Only after facing repeated insults and humiliation in the government offices of Kathmandu and its streets from Pahade people, does Premlalawa arrive at his epiphany: "During his five days of stay in Kathmandu, Premlalawa came to pieces. The hope and faith within him perished" (82). He finally realises that there was no point in running after Shantiaraja, the newly appointed transportation minister, and "there was no meaning in visiting Pulchowk, Singhadarbar, Baluwatar, and party offices" (82).[85] Exhausted, hungry, and crestfallen, he takes a bus back to Gaganganj. As if what had already happened was not enough, when he arrives home, he finds his *tanga* stolen, and his house burnt down. Premlalawa finds himself in a real predicament: "He couldn't cry. He couldn't laugh either. He couldn't walk. He couldn't run away. He couldn't scream in distress. He just sat down and looked at his broken house" (84). Despite all these devastating events, and even after arriving at the point of complete breakdown, Premlalawa, gathers himself together and decides to take one firm final step. He sells the last piece of land his hut stood on to Shilababu through Rajendraraj for ninety thousand rupees but receives only thirty

[84] "Badi is a traditionally untouchable Hindu caste in Western Nepal. The population of 7000 Badis is spread across the hilly and upper Terai regions of Nepal. Badi men work as fishermen, keeping most of the catch for their family's consumption, and make drums and pipe from wood to sell to neighboring villages. Badi women work as prostitutes, beginning in puberty and continuing until they are too old to attract customers, or get married." (https://sites.google.com/a/mtholyoke.edu/slaveryinnepal/badi-pratha)

[85] Singhadarbar houses all the ministries of Nepal, including the Prime Minister's office. Baluwatar is the official residence of the Prime Minister, and all the official residences of ministers are in a residential complex in Pulchowk.

thousand. With the thirty thousand rupees, he buys a piece of land far away in the village of Paraspur and again buys a tanga and a horse.

The novella ends at a point where Premlalawa has come out of the movie theatre watching a Hindi film with his friend Kaluwa. As the scenes from the film gradually fade from his eyes, other scenes take over. He remembers his father who was hit and killed by a truck, and the folksongs sung by him. He recalls how his family had once had a house at the centre of the town but was displaced from the Main Road to the Surkhet Road, from Surkhet Road to Korianpurawa, and from there even further to Paraspur. He realises that "people like [him] are always pushed away" (90), and is surprised how "such a bitter, sharp, heavy and deep thing entered into his mind" (90). At this point, Premlalawa makes some resolutions: From now onwards he will never offer a free ride to Rajendraraj and his family on his *tanga*; he will not accept burdens like Shantiraja on his *tanga*, either; and, more importantly, he will not allow his tanga to get *ulaar*, i.e. overturned. After this, he sets off to act on his final resolution, to marry Draupadi. He knows that his community will not accept a *badi* woman, but he also knows he will only have to spend some seven hundred rupees on a party to please them and win their approval. While Premlalawa may look like a person with the least agency from this discussion, it should be noted that Draupadi has even less agency than he does. He has at least arrived at a form of self-recognition that has evaded many before him. Although powerless to act, he now at least knows what has happened to him, and this could be the point from which real change might spring. For Draupadi, however, any possibility of escape from a wretched life and change is still dependent on the mercy of the most oppressed man.

As in the previously discussed works, in *Ulaar*, too, we find the shrewd Pahades grabbing the lands of guileless Madheshis, and pushing them further away into the hinterland until their last piece of land is seized. We also see Pahades such as Rajendraraj, Shilababu, and Shantiraja assuming the role of local and national leaders, representing the majority

Madheshis of the region. Here, too, we see the continuing systemic exploitation of the Madheshis on all fronts and at all levels that has been discussed earlier. However, since *Ulaar* was first published in 1992, two years after the end of the Panchayat system, and the advent of multiparty democracy, as such we can identify some differences, too. Just as the old feudal lords transformed themselves in the 1960s after the advent of the Panchayat system, the same people we met in "Maujang Babusahebko Kot" have cunningly made themselves ready for the new system. They look gentle, they speak softly, and they mention words like people, development, and welfare. At the end of the day, however, these servants of the people, as they like to address themselves, are even worse because, unlike the wicked feudal lords from yesteryears, they hide so much of their wickedness under their mask of gentility and politeness. If there is any honesty, sympathy, and benevolence left, it is seen only among the poorest, the most deprived, and the rough and foul-speaking lot.

Some impacts of the 1990s political change can also be seen in the way the novella ends with Premlalawa's resolutions that he will not let the load of injustice and exploitation inflicted by the Pahades make the *tanga* of his life go *ulaar*. He is not only determined to offer any more free rides to anyone but also to refuse a ride to people like Shantiraja that he deeply despises. The *ulaar* in the title represents the heavy weight of injustice and the colossal burden of exploitation that Madheshis have experienced over the ages at the hands of the Pahades, and that, with the advent of democracy, they are eager to overthrow. But the socio-cultural and economic realities do not change as easily as the political systems change. Shyamal, in the preface of the novel, aptly notes the persistence of the status quo even after the so-called political transformation: "*Ulaar* means imbalance. When there is an imbalance, the *tanga* faces *ulaar*. Just like Shantiraja's boys rode on Premlalawa's *tanga* until it went *ulaar*, even today's democracy which is still run by the feudal lords of yesteryears rides on

the people until the whole system gets *ulaar*" (19). In the twenty-year edition of the book published in 2012, Nayanraj Pandey writes:

> It's been twenty years since Premlalawa and Draupadi came as characters in *Ulaar*. Today, even after twenty years, they are not free and have no time to read their own life stories. Every time I touch a new edition of *Ulaar*, my heart aches a bit. Today I am writing these words as the constitution of federal and republic Nepal is about to be drafted, but my heart has not stopped aching. My ache will stop only on the day the *tanga*s driven by people like Premlalawa will not be upturned anymore. I hope that day will come, someday. And, on that day, I will ask Premlalawa: "Premlalawa, did you read *Ulaar*?" (12-13)

The beginning of the Maoist insurgency in 1996, the active involvement of hundreds of Madheshi youths in the insurgency, and the ultimate explosion of Madhesh in 2007, which I will discuss in more detail in the upcoming section, means that the day never arrives. This generation, just like the generations before it, kept facing the *ulaar* of their dreams and were disappointed by a state that never stopped claiming that it worked in their favour yet never stopped inflicting injustice on them either.

5. *The advent of Liberation, the Continuity of Oppression: Madhesh Revolution 2007, Hopes, and Disappointments*

Although Madhesh has always been at the forefront of political transformations in Nepal, it never fought those battles for itself. Every time there was a bigger concern at stake, Madheshis were told, and that theirs were petty preoccupations of a region. The 1950-armed rebellion was to overthrow the Rana regime, so said the leaders to the people of Tarai-Madhesh, and they participated enthusiastically. The 1980-Referendum, though rigged and lost, was to decide whether the country wanted to continue with the non-party Panchayat system or a system of multiparty democracy and a constitutional monarchy, and Madhesh voted overwhelmingly for democracy. The 1990 People's Revolution was intended to take the country back from the clutches of the tyrannical Panchayat System, they said, and Tarai-

Madhesh came out into the streets in thousands. The 1996-2006 Maoist insurgency, followed by the 2006 People's Revolution, were meant to overthrow the monarchy for good and to establish a republican state, and the people of Tarai-Madhesh fought courageously as always. Thus, each time the fight was for something or someone bigger, and never for Madhesh. As a result, the Madheshi aspiration for justice, equality, recognition, and respect as fellow citizens was never fulfilled. A time to uplift the lives of the Madheshi people and allow them an opportunity to live with dignity in their own country never came. Always represented and ruled by Pahade leaders and rulers, Madhesh remained disregarded, neglected, humiliated forever. While a long-awaited and much-needed revolt against the ages-old injustice, exploitation, and cruelty never took place in Dhruba Chandra Gautam's novel *Alikhit*, such a revolt did take place in the Tarai-Madhesh region of Nepal in January 2007, and "shook the fragile Nepali state in the aftermath of the overthrow of the monarchy and the restoration of democracy" (Mathema xv).

The 2007-Madhesh Revolution had far-ranging impacts on both the regional and the national politics of Nepal. Firstly, it forced the then all-party government to include the clause on federalism in the 2007 Interim Constitution, which the Pahade politicians were otherwise reluctant to consider, and which was formally included in the 2015 Constitution. Secondly, the provision of proportionate representation not only elected the largest number of Madheshis to the Constitution Assembly in the history of Nepal but also saw two Madheshi politicians, Ram Baran Yadav and Paramananda Jha, elected as the first president and vice-president of the Federal Republic of Nepal. Thirdly, the Madheshi parties won the majority of seats in the newly federated Province Number 2, their regional base, and formed a Madheshi government, with a Madheshi-Muslim, Mohammad Lal Babu Raut, as their first chief minister. Fourthly, over this period there has also been an extensive analysis of Madheshi history and culture that has led to many historical, political, and sociological studies, more

than ever before in Nepali history. People coming from Madhesh have re-claimed the term 'Madheshi' and have been referring to themselves proudly as 'Madheshis', which was until then used only by the hill-men as a derogatory and humiliating expression.

This has also been a very fertile period in terms of literary production. A number of mainstream Pahade writers as well as many Madheshi writers have published works on Madhesh in numbers never before seen. From hill-origin writers such as Shrawan Mukarung, Hangyug Agyat, Swapnil Smriti, Nayan Raj Pandey, Ram Lal Joshi, Amar Neupane, and Trishna Kunwar, and Madheshi writers such as Shiwani Tharu, Muna Chaudhari, Ganesh Prasad Lath, Shyam Shah, and most recently, Sapana Sanjeevani, to name just a few, Nepali literature has received more literary works on Madhesh in the last 15 years than in the entire history of Nepali literature. While some people described the 2007 Madheshi uprising as a threat to Nepal's national integrity, many others believe that this uprising was not only inevitable but also necessary and that it has actually "strengthened the integrity of Nepal by bringing Madheshis closer to the Nepalese state" (Mathema 90). In the following sections, I examine three stories by a young Madheshi writer, Shyam Shah, to consider how he regards and narrates Madhesh in these changing times.

Shyam Shah is one of the promising new Madheshi writers. *Abba*, his collection of twelve short stories, is set in the present-day Madhesh, at the time when the change Madhesh was long waiting for seems to be finally here. The Madhesh Andolan (2007) has been acknowledged in the constitution of Nepal,[86] the demand for proportionate representation has been enshrined in the constitution, and many provisions on affirmative discrimination have been implemented. Shah tells the stories of contemporary Madhesh set against the backdrop of hundreds of years of marginalization and injustice, but face-to-face with the changing

[86] Preamble of the *Constitution of Nepal 2015* reads, "Remembering the glorious history of historical peoples' movements and armed struggles time and again and the sacrifice made by people for national interest, democracy, progressive change, and recognizing the martyrs, the disappeared citizens and the victims…" (*2*).

times, where the posts of local and national leaders are no longer monopolized by Pahade men but occupied instead by Madheshis. Through his stories, Shah seeks to answer the question of whether, after all the political transformation, the reality on the ground for the common Madheshi people has changed much at all.

"Muktiko Agaman" ("The Arrival of Emanicpation") takes us to the issue with which we began this chapter, i.e., citizenship. It is the story of Ram Khelawan and his family's prolonged yet unsuccessful struggle to get a citizenship certificate. The struggle started with his grandfather, and continues until the present, with no success whatsoever. Shah writes:

> They didn't know when their forefathers were living in this village. But they have been here as long as they have known, and the village belongs to them. When they stepped on this land first, they didn't even know to which country the land belonged. As they lived and grew on the soil of this village, no one asked the proof of where they belonged to. But when they started looking for proof of their existence, they asked, "Where is your citizenship card?" (74)

After repeated attempts during the Panchayat system, and even after the advent of democracy and liberation, Ram Khelawan is still unable to get a citizenship certificate, that precious piece of paper without which he is barred from his basic claim to, and rights as a citizen. Frustrated with this situation, his brother, Mukti, joins the Maoist rebels and is killed. The Maoist war and consequently the Madhesh revolution are both "successful", but Ram Khelawan's dream of getting the document still remains a dream. At the end, when his final attempt to get the certificate also fails, he realises that freedom, equality, and change, one more time, have come only in papers or slogans, but not in reality. This time he does not even feel sad or disappointed. He rather comes to an understanding that independence and equality are more important than a piece of paper. He is determined to fight one more battle for them so that no one should fight for citizenship in the future.

Citizenship has remained one of the most contentious issues for the Tarai-Madhesh region. While transborder marriages and migration are cited as the reasons behind strict

measures implemented in awarding citizenship certificates to the Madheshis, Nepali citizenship laws in the past and in recent times as well have remained clearly discriminatory. The Citizenship Act of 1964, for instance, had a clause according to which, to get citizenship, "an applicant was required to speak and write in Nepali" (A. Lal n.p.), unfulfillable criteria for a large majority of Madheshis who spoke a mother tongue other than Nepali. Similarly, while the 1990 Constitution removed the Nepali language requirement, it still kept the patrilineal clause intact, according to which "a child's father was required to have been a citizen at the time of the child's birth" (A. Lal n.p.), again an unfulfillable condition, if, for instance, the child's father was from the other side of the border. Even today, because of discriminatory rules like these, thousands of Madheshis are denied citizenship certificates. While being deprived of a citizenship certificate leads to practical difficulties in every step of life, from attending a school or getting a job to owning a property, citizenship is just one example of how the state looks at its Madheshi citizens. This is both a systemic as well as an attitudinal problem that has its roots in the unitary monarchical system and has not changed even during the federal republican era. While the story ends on a positive note, it also hints towards the need and possibility of another revolution. But the question that looms large here again is if so many movements and revolutions in the past failed to bring about a real change, how should one believe that another revolution will guarantee such a change?

"Latiko Chhoro" ("The Dumb Girl's Son"), another story from the republican era Madhesh, is the tale of a young and physically attractive but mentally retarded and dumb girl, Lati,[87] who one day appears in the Madheshi town of Sundar Bazar from somewhere. Lati survives by begging and has an assertive nature. People tease her, and she attacks them with sticks and stones. The story takes a startling turn when the news that Lati is pregnant spreads

[87] The word *lati* (adjective) in Nepali means a dumb girl or woman, but it is also commonly used as a name to refer to such a person.

like wildfire in the town. All the respectable men in town, from the assistant sub-inspector Prem Bahadur Thapa, and the teacher, Ram Prasad Sharma to Bisanath Babu, the chief of the town, are suddenly alarmed and unnerved. They hold a town meeting and using both cash as a bribe, as well as threats, convince Surja Chamar, a poor Dalit man, to admit that he is the one who impregnated Lati. They hand over some money to Surja Chamar and send them away, and they are soon forgotten. But after some years, Lati returns to Sundarbazar again when the Madhesh Revolution is at its peak, not with Surja Chamar but with a seven-eight-year-old son who looks exactly like Bisanath Babu. General elections are held around the same time, and amid whispers and murmurs, Bisanath Babu wins the election. A few days after the election, Lati's son suddenly disappears. Everyone guesses what might have happened to him but all choose to remain silent, while Lati keeps crying for her son.

The motif of muteness recurs here in a different setting, but not in a completely different manner if we consider how power relations operate. In the story, on the one hand, there is Lati who is abused and exploited by almost all the 'respectable men' of the town but is unable to protest against the injustice she and her son suffer. On the other, there are the able-bodied people from the town, who choose to remain mute witnesses of Lati's ruination. Since all the perpetrators are powerful men, and no one is willing to take the risk of enraging them, which reminds us of the residents of Birahinpur who would rather disappear than stand up against their oppressor. In this pessimistic picture of Madhesh, the people in charge may have changed, but the system has not. For hundreds of years during the monarchy, Kathmandu treated Madhesh as a wasteland, and considered Madheshis as not only dumb but also 'bastard children'. Shah's story, through characters like Lati and her son, finds that things have changed little, even in the republican times, when the Madheshis are represented and ruled by Madheshi leaders, their own people. While the story is about a mute woman, it

is also about a region that has been muted and ignored for too long. Unfortunately, the mute people seem to have been forced to remain silent even when their 'own people' are in power.

Another story by Shah, "Mantriki Premika" ("The Minister's Girlfriend") sheds light on what the new politics and the new leaders are like after the success of the Madhesh Revolution. The protagonist, who is only referred to as 'he', was difficult as a child, wayward as a boy, and rowdy as a young man. Because of his reckless, almost stupid audacity during the Madhesh Revolution, he is catapulted to a leadership position overnight. During the election campaigns, he reads speeches written by a lawyer, but at the end of every speech, he does not forget to raise his fist in the air and shout "Jai Madhesh!" (66). He wins the election in the heat of the Madhesh revolution with the highest number of votes. The party chairman refuses to promote him because he thinks it is too early for him to be a minister. But he does not have the patience to wait until it is time, and declares, in order to become a minister "[He'll] either break [the chairman's] head or break the party" (68). Indeed, soon the party breaks, and when there is a reshuffle in the government, he becomes a minister. Does he do anything differently? No, in fact, he is probably worse than the Pahade leaders against whom he and his people fought. The story ends on an uneventful note at a dimly lit *bhatti* (inn/pub), where the minister has come to meet his old girlfriend, who is now married to someone else. As he flirts with her and makes a grab for her, the husband looks on helplessly. After all, "a minister had come to his *bhatti*" (58).

"Mantriki Premika", like the previous two stories, "Muktiko Agaman" and "Latiko Chhoro", presents yet another pessimistic depiction of Madhesh, an unchanged picture of the changing times. The faces have changed, but the attitudes of those who have arrived in power in recent years are still the same. In fact, if we keep in mind that Madheshis have arrived from a time when they were oppressed by the outsiders to when they are oppressed by the insiders, the situation has become worse. This, unfortunately, fits into the perpetual practice

of the oppressed turning themselves into oppressors when they perceive a weaker party, an idea discussed in detail by Paulo Freire in his well-known work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968). According to Freire, "the oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor are fearful of freedom" (29), and this duality leads them to act like their oppressors. A practice that is more commonly seen in postcolonial societies, it also makes sense in the case of Nepal if we consider that Tarai-Madhesh has been nothing better than an internal colony of the Nepali Pahade state. Most of the Madheshi leaders portrayed by Shah in his stories seem to fall into this category of the oppressed who turn into oppressors themselves. If Shah's stories are to be believed, there seems to be hardly anything the Madheshis can be proud of about the recent political change, except that their stories are finally being written by Madheshi writers and not anymore by the outsiders. This is not enough, yet it is not something to be overlooked or undermined either.

Conclusion: Too Long a Wait, Too Slow a Change

Since the *Madhesh Andolan* (Tarai Revolution), and the transformation of the country from a unitary Hindu monarchy to a federal secular republic in 2007, the region of Tarai-Madhesh has undergone some big changes, not only in terms of gaining political rights but also in terms of its presence and say in mainstream culture and literature. Maithili, Bhojpuri, and Awadhi speaking Madheshi writers are gradually claiming responsibility for telling the stories of the marginal locations, a role previously occupied by the Nepali speaking Pahade writers. Political representation has improved significantly and, if not the national politics, at least the regional and local politics has come under the control of the Madheshi people. However, as much as there are stories of hope such as Nayan Raj Pandey's *Ular* or Ramlal Joshi's "Parda", there also are a great number of tales of suspicion and doubt such as Shyam Shah's *Abba*. Swapnil Smriti's poem "Madhesh" also portrays a picture of Tarai-Madhesh

where the rich and powerful are still enjoy the same privileges, whereas the poor and the downtrodden continue to endure hardships as they have since time immemorial:

> This year
> is not very different from the previous years.
> The *jamindar* is whistling the same song
> as he drives away with a load of rice on his tractor
> The colour of the fog
> that rises from the paddy fields is same too… (17)

Published the promulgation of the new constitution, the poem is doubtful as to whether the change the people had fought for has yet arrived. The *jamindar* is taking away all the rice, as has always happened, leaving the farmer's family to starve. Similarly, Shah's characters like Ram Khilawan are still waiting for their citizenship certificate, while Lati is still waiting for justice. Contemporary literature on/from Madhesh, whether written by Pahade or Madheshi writers, seem to be largely writing along the lines established by pioneer writers like Bhawani Bhikshu and Dhruba Chandra Gautam. The majority of stories and poems still deal with the injustice, exploitation, abuse, and humiliation that the poor people of Tarai-Madhesh suffer at the hands of those in power. As seen in Shah's stories, the perpetrators are not only Pahades anymore, since several Madheshis have assumed local and national leadership roles and have been endowed with power and prestige. Except for the fact that the new oppressors, their own kind, have replaced the old, nothing seems to have changed yet.

Similarly, despite its visible rise, if we consider the demography, there still are not many Madheshi writers in the mainstream Nepali literature, and there are some justifications and implications of this absence. Firstly, unlike elsewhere in Nepal where people now primarily use the national language, the people of Madhesh still largely use their mother tongues such as Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, and Tharu. On a positive note, this, however, shows both the inability of the state to impose its homogenizing 'one language and one culture' policy, as well as the resistance and resilience of the Tarai-Madhesh region as a

whole to retain its language and culture. In that sense, Tarai-Madhesh also remains as the last frontier of the Nepali state that has successfully resisted the hegemony of the Nepali language and the hill Khas-Arya culture. Further, Tarai-Madhesh has a rich literary and cultural history of its own, especially in its Maithili, Bhojpuri and Awadhi regions, and rich folk culture and oral tradition in Tharuhat. Sandwiched between the need to preserve their own language and culture on the one hand and to negotiate with the so-called national language and culture on the other, Madheshi linguistic, literary, and cultural traditions have suffered heavily in the past. How Madheshi writers and intellectuals today will chart a course between these two extremes, and whether or not they will be able to recapture the rich history of their mother tongues, on the one hand, and yet make strong interventions in mainstream Nepali literature and culture on the other, is something only time will tell. But one can say with certainty that, along with some regions of the mountains, where the state mechanisms still struggle to get access, Tarai-Madhesh is among those regions which, to use, Ranajit Guha's term, has faced "dominance without hegemony" (60). Min Bahadur Bista's poem cited at the beginning of this chapter that denounces the state for seizing the "eyes", "ears", and "brains" with which people "see", "hear" and "think" independently, and replacing them with the homogenising propaganda of nationalism, lays bare the mechanisms of hegemony that the state tried to impose on its minority peoples. However, the fact that even after more than 250 years of one-language policy there still are more than 120 languages spoken in Nepal, indicates that the policy of homogeneity has not been completely successful.

Despite the long journey undertaken, it sometimes feels that the situation of Mahdes seems to have arrived back at the point where it was before the political change. On May 28, 2020, Bimal Prasad Srivastava, a Madheshi member of parliament, protested in the federal parliament a statement given the day before by Karma Chhiring Sherpa, president of the All

Nepal Football Association (ANFA), the governing body of football (soccer) in Nepal. Sherpa had said:

> We started the Grassroots Program for football in coordination with the Nepal Army in Saptari, Siraha, Dhanusha, and Mahottari [districts of Tarai-Madhesh]. Firstly, it was to attract the kids of Tarai towards football, secondly, [it was meant] to teach them nationality. Because when we go to Tarai, we can see that the feeling of nationality is less. Therefore, apart from producing new football players, at least they will sing the national anthem, and talk about Nepal when they come to learn football in the barracks of the Nepal army. I have considered Grassroots Program as the most significant contribution of my life. ("ANFA Adhyaksha Sherpako Abhibyakti Vivadma", i.e. "ANFA President Sherpa's Statement in Controversy" n.p.)

It is disheartening to see that even after all these socio-political upheavals and changes, the deep-rooted attitude of the Pahade people regarding Madheshis has not changed much at all. They are still considered less 'nationalistic' than the people from the hills and the mountains, and the Pahade rulers and administrators still consider it their responsibility to train the Madheshis in becoming more 'nationalistic'.

In another case, addressing the parliament on June 6, 2020, Pradip Yadav from the Sanghiya Samajwadi Party accused the Minister of Finance of being discriminatory to Province Number 2 (Madhesh Province) in the federal budget allocation and threatened to take the government to the Supreme Court. Even though "the ratio of poverty is higher in Madhesh Province," Yadav said, "it received only 20 million for poverty alleviation, whereas other [Pahade] provinces like Karnali, Gandaki and Far-western province received more than a hundred million each" ("Pradesh Number Two Lai Kina Kum Budget?", i.e. "Why Less Budget for Province no. Two" n.p.). The socio-political and cultural changes the country in general and Tarai-Madhesh, in particular, have undergone since the 1990s, and even more so after 2007, cannot be underestimated. Yet, recurring episodes like these suggest that there is a very long way to go until the attitudes, policies and priorities of the state towards Tarai-Madhesh undergo a real change. On the positive side, the fact that policy-level

discriminations like these, which would have gone unnoticed in the past, are being vocally challenged in the house by lawmakers of Madheshi background. As we saw in the discussion above, this is what the Madheshi writers are also trying to do—raising a voice and speaking for themselves. If not elsewhere, at least, therein lie some rays of hope.

CHAPTER 6. RELIGION AND LITERATURE

Still a Hindu Nation: Minority Religions and Contemporary Nepali Literature

> The smell of my forge is in your temple idol
> the smell of my sweat in the pan
> on your hearth's tripod
> Have the nerve to meet my eyes pious one.
> either roast my existence in red hot embers
> and have the nerve to uphold dharma
> or rip up the learned pages that humiliate me
> and have the courage to set them ablaze
> I am the Kami who made the god of your temple
> the brown Africa of this round rock. (Ahuti 9)[88]

These lines from the poem "Gahugoro Africa" ("Brown Africa") by a prominent Nepali Dalit intellectual, activist, and writer, Bishwabhakta Dulal, who writes under the pen name, Ahuti, hold up for examination the myriad and minute ways in which Hindu upper-caste are dependent on Dalit craftsmen. To run their everyday lives and to maintain the rituals and traditions of their religious practices, Hindus have to call upon the creative skills of Dalits, and yet the latter are discriminated against by the same religion. Through the voice of a *kami*,[89] a blacksmith, Ahuti's poem sends a direct challenge to the upper-caste hegemony and the scriptures that support it. He asks the worshippers of the Hindu deities, usually presented as statues in the temples, to look the lower caste craftsman in the eye and confront the double standards of a religion that has set up such a hierarchy. The poem draws parallels between the colour-based discrimination in Africa and the caste-based discrimination in Nepal (and South Asia), and portrays Dalits oppressed by the upper-caste Khas-Aryas as 'brown Africans'.

Caste-based hierarchy and discrimination based on Hindu scriptures and codes have existed in Nepal in various forms for thousands of years. The first step towards reinforcing

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[88] Translated by Mary DesChene and Mahesh Maskey

[89] In everyday language, blacksmiths are still referred to as *kami*, tailors/musicians as *damai*, and cobbler/leather workers as *sarki*, words that are now considered derogatory.

this discrimination through legal provisions was apparently made by Jayasthti Malla, a 14th-century king of the Kathmandu valley, then known as Nepal valley, through what is now cited as the first legal code in Nepal. Referred to as "Nyayabikasini" or "Manav Nyaya Shastra", this code was derived primarily from the ancient Hindu legal text, *Manusmriti*.[90] It led to the formal implementation of *varnashram dharma*, the classification of people into a hierarchy of castes.[91] In modern times, P N Shah envisioned Nepal as the *Asila Hindusthana*, the "pure land of the Hindus" (Panta 36). In 1854, through *Muluki Ain*, the country's first national civil and criminal code, Jung Bahadur Rana, the first Rana prime minister, formally brought the ethnic groups into a system built on caste-based hierarchy originally devised for the caste groups, through further categorisation in the code. In 1963, King Mahendra amended the *Muluki Ain*, and among many other progressive changes, made all caste-based discrimination punishable. However, even in the 1990s, the question of caste and governance remained pertinent because even decades after untouchability was made punishable by law, it was still widely in practice throughout the country, especially in the rural regions. Today, two decades into the 21st century, Dalits, who are Hindus by birth, but outside the *varnashram* rung, are still prohibited from entering most of the Hindu temples in Nepal. They are not allowed to share the water taps, local tea shops, and many other public spaces with people from the upper castes. Marriage with Dalits, even today, lead to social expulsion or even death. Discrimination based on caste, however, is just one among the many discriminations that are rooted in Hindu religious beliefs, practices, and social and legal arrangements made by the state. Discrimination against other minority religions, such as Buddhism, Kirat, Bon,

[90] Atributed to Manu, and believed to have been written sometime in the 2nd or the 3rd century BC, *Manusmriti* is an ancient Hindu legal text, and the basis of a number of Hindu laws in the more recent times, too. Among many other aspects of personal, familial, social, and national laws, it also presents an outline of the place, roles, and responsibilities of the four *varnas*: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra.

[91] *Varnashram Dharma*, originally a division of life into four states, *Brahmacharya* or the student life, *Grihastha* or the householder's life, *Vanaprastha* or the retired life, and *Sanyasa* or the life of renunciation, is now more commonly used to refer to the caste system that is still in practice in Hindu societies of South Asia, especially in Nepal and India.

and Prakriti, as well as the so-called ‘foreign’ religions such as Islam and Christianity, is an extension of the same religio-cultural traditions.

The *Interim Constitution 2007* declared Nepal a secular country and the *Constitution of Nepal 2015* endorsed and implemented that provision. This was a big change for a nation that had practically been a Hindu state for more than 250 years. In this chapter, through a reading of Nepali literature from the past as well as the recent years, especially after the country’s transition from Hindu kingdom to a secular republic, I explore different dimensions of the relationships between the Hindu majoritarian state and the minority religions, as well as the relationships among people following these religions. The chapter begins with a brief historical overview of how the Nepali state has dealt with the question of religion from 1768 to the declaration of the secular republic in 2007, and how the relationship between the state and religion(s) has been negotiated and evolved over the years. Since my research primarily focuses on literary texts, I will explore this evolution as it is reflected through the history of Nepali literature.

While a number of Nepali writers from Laxmi Prasad Devkota to Modanath Prashrit have written about Dalits in the past, it is only in recent years that Nepali literature has begun to deal with the broader issues of religion in the context of socio-political exclusion and discrimination. Contemporary Nepali literature written from the margins has not only shown the problems underlying the way the Nepali state has operated with regard to its minorities throughout its modern history but has also raised questions regarding such problems and presented possible ways to address them. Therefore, in the second part of this chapter, I discuss more recent works of poetry and fiction, written after 1990, when Nepal transformed from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy with multiparty democracy, and even more of those written after 2007, when the country was declared a secular republic. This part of the chapter is divided into three subsections, each focusing on literary works dealing with the

issues of Dalits, the so-called foreign religions, Christianity and Islam, and the ethnic/indigenous religions.

From a Hindu Monarchy to the Secular Republic

Nepal is a multi-religious country with people following more than ten religious faiths, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Kirat, Christianity, Prakriti, Bon, Jainism, Bahai, Sikhism, and others. According to the 2011 Census Report, 81.3% of Nepalis are Hindus, 9% are Buddhists, 4.4% are Muslims, 3% are Kirats, and 1.4% are Christians (Pitamber Sharma 40). Other religions such as Prakriti, Bon, Jainism, Bahai and Sikhism are followed by less than 1% of the population. While this report may appear to offer a straightforward account of Nepal's religious demography, the census has a history of exclusion of its own. Pitamber Sharma's outline of the 2011 census of Nepal gives some hints regarding the attitude of the state towards different religions in the past, and some of the changes in recent times. In *Census 2011 Update*, Sharma notes that the first census of Nepal carried out in 1952/54 listed only three religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam (39). Jainism and Christianity were added to the list in 1961. Christianity, however, was removed from the list in 1971 but added again in 1981. In 1991, three more religions, Kirat, Sikh, and Bahai made it onto the list. It was only in the 2011 Census, after the country transformed from a Hindu monarchy to a secular republic, that a more complete picture of Nepal's religious demography became visible for the first time, almost sixty years after the first census. However, even now, almost all religious communities, apart from Hinduism, believe that they have been under-represented in every Census Report.[92]

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[92] Underrepresenation in the Census Reports is one of the issues intellectuals and activists belonging to the linguistic, ethnic, and religious minorities in Nepal have been raising in recent years. For instance, Abdul Salam Khan, in his book *Nepal and Nepali Muslims*, cites Muslim organizations and Muslim intellectuals to claim that the population of Muslims in Nepal is higher than recorded in the Census (34). In her article "Janajatis want to stand up, and be counted" in the *Nepali Times*, Hemlata Rai cites a number of ethnic intellectuals such as Shanta Bahadur Gurung, Balkrishna Mabuhang, and Krishna Bhattachan, who express their dissatisfaction at the way

When discussing the history of Hinduisation in Nepal, it is customary to consider the mission of unification/expansion launched by the Hindu king from Gorkha, P N Shah in 1743 as the starting point. Shah, who became the first king of unified Nepal after defeating the Malla kings of the Kathmandu valley, claimed in his *Divya Upadesh*, that Nepal was the "asil Hindusthana", i.e. real Hindustan" (Panta 36), an assertion probably arising from the fact that India had previously been ruled by the Muslim Mughals and later by the British/Christians. The fact that in Nepal, until recently, India, in general, was not referred to as Hindustan, but as Muglan, a country "ruled and defiled by the Mughals" (S. Sharma 24) supports this speculation.[93] By projecting Nepal as the truly Hindu Kingdom, and establishing the mechanisms of the state along the lines of Hindu socio-cultural, economic, and political philosophy, P N Shah laid down the foundations of a Hindu state, which were stepped up further by his successors.

A point not to be missed here is that while making Hinduism the foundation of the unified state, deriving and implementing codes and laws from it purportedly began with P N Shah, the Hinduisation of the region had begun much earlier. Harka Gurung, geographer, anthropologist, and one of the pioneers of research on ethnicities in Nepal, claims that the "project of Hinduisation was not a Gorkhali invention" (501). Hinduisation in the hills, according to Gurung, "gained momentum after the Muslim onslaught [in the subcontinent] from the tenth century onwards. With Muslim advances further east, the retreat of Hindus to hill sanctuaries became a regional phenomenon" (501). Hinduisation, according to Gurung, was accompanied by the "colonization of the tribal areas" (502). The Hindus gradually

Nepali Census data collection is designed, and claim that the population of the ethnic groups is underrepresented (Rai).

[93] Sharma has offered another explanation to this: "This must have been because the polity was not governed by a ruler who enforced the socio-cosmic order–the *chaturvarnashram dharma*–by means of the 'five punishments' (25).

migrated from the drier regions of present-day western Nepal to the more humid east, which had a beneficial impact on the ethnic population, too:

> The tribal economy relied mainly on swidden cultivation and pastoralism. Hindu migrants and their Hinduized cohorts brought new agricultural methods (terracing and irrigation) and artisan skills with Untouchable castes. In a way, these had 'modernizing' influences on primitive economies that met the state's expectations of increased revenue. (Gurung 502-503)

Despite the economic benefits, there were obvious losses on socio-cultural grounds for the non-Hindu ethnic groups because, in Gurung's words, "the polity and society of Nepal were indeed devised in the image of a Hindustan. To begin with, the etymology of the place-name Gorkha itself was Goraksa (cow protection), symbolic of the sanctity of the cows for Hindus" (Gurung 504). Other socio-cultural and political arrangements aligned with the Hindu socio-cultural hierarchy would gradually follow, and these lines would be firmly established over the centuries.

The foundations of the Hindu kingdom laid by P N Shah were further consolidated by his successors. Kathmandu's king, Jaya Prakash Malla's attempt to get help from the British during P N Shah's attack led the already Hindu kingdom to become even more defensive of its religious faith. This further intensified after Nepal lost the Anglo-Nepal War in 1816, and ceded more than one-third of its territory to British India through the Sugauli Treaty. In 1854, Jung Bahadur Rana implemented the *Muluki Ain*, which not only acknowledged but also legalised and imposed further stratification in the social, cultural, and religious hierarchies. The upper-caste Hindu position remained secure on the highest rung of the ladder, while the low-caste Hindus remained on the bottom. It was, in Richard Burghart's words, "a spatialised caste hierarchy that excluded Dalits to the edge of the settlements they served; a social hierarchy of differential rights that categorised the rest of the population as "'alcohol-drinkers' versus 'cord-wearers', 'enslavable' versus 'non-enslavable', and (among Brahmins) 'priestly' versus 'non-priestly" (116). This *Ain* was different from the previous laws and

practices, since the time of Jayasthiti Malla, in two areas. First, it brought the non-Hindu ethnic people, or the *matwalis*, under the rubrics of Hindu laws, by placing them under the categories of *namasinya matwali*, i.e. non-enslavable alcohol drinkers, and *masinya matwali*, i.e. enslavable alcohol drinkers. Second, Muslims and Christians, the so-called followers of foreign religions, were also given a place in this hierarchy as *pani nachalne, chhoichhito halnu naparne*, i.e. water-unacceptable but touchable (Bennett 225). It is important to emphasise here that even when the ethnic *matwalis* and the 'foreign' Muslims and Christians were accommodated within the framework, the Dalits still remained at the bottom-most position in the hierarchy, *pani nachalne, chhoichhito halnu parne*, i.e. water-unacceptable and untouchable.

The *Muluki Ain* took immense pride in Nepal being a Hindu country. It said: "We have our own country, a *Hindu Rajya*, where laws prescribe that cows shall not be slaughtered; no women and Brahmins be sentenced to capital punishment…In this age of *Kali*,[94] this is the only country where Hindus rule" (qtd. in S. Sharma 25). By the same token, the *Ain* also refused to accept the existence of any other religions in the country. In the *Muluki Ain*, only Hinduism was defined as *dharma*; and, the non-Hindu religions like Islam and Christianity were called *mat*, 'beliefs', which must not ruin *dharma* through proselytization (Letizia 83).

The project of Hinduisation slackened briefly and the country opened up to heterogeneous ideas and identities after independence from the Rana Regime in 1951. However, the atmosphere of freedom came to an end soon enough, with King Mahendra's royal coup in 1960. He implemented a partyless Panchayat system and declared that "[a]ll

[94] Hinduism believes in a cyclical view of time, and divides time and history into four eras: *Satya Yug* (the Golden Age), *Treta Yug* (the Silver Age), *Dwapar Yug* (the Bronze Age), and *Kali Yug* (the Iron Age, the age of falsehood). It is believed that after the present and final era, *Kali Yug*, comes to an end, the universe will be destroyed, and *Satya Yug* will begin, once again.

natives are identical (*saman*) or ‘one and the same’ (*ek ra saman*)” (qtd. in Burghart 120). Despite sounding like an egalitarian idea, it was in reality a ploy to shape all the heterogeneous people along with their own languages and cultures in such a way that they would resemble more and more the dominant culture. Nepal during the Panchayat system, too, took great pride in and represented itself as the world’s only Hindu kingdom. The Hindu monarch was heralded as a reincarnation of the Hindu god, Vishnu, in national media and popular culture. School textbooks included prayers of Hindu gods and goddesses, essays on Hindu religious sites, as well as stories from Hindu scriptures and mythologies. National radio and television started their day with Hindu prayers and songs and ran religious programs with almost exclusively Hindu content. The idea of the nation thus created by the Panchayat system was exclusively a Hindu one, and there was practically no place for people following any other religious faith in this narrative.

If we consider how the Nepali state dealt with religions other than Hinduism from the early days of state formation in the 18th century until the Panchayat days, we can see three different approaches depending on the religion. The approach towards Buddhism and other indigenous and ethnic religions was to co-opt them by claiming that they belonged to the larger Hindu family, and then to gradually Hinduise them. The approach towards Muslims was primarily to limit them to where they already were, and virtually ignore them, yet make sure that they did not proselytize. Among all the minority religions, the attitude of the state towards Christianity has remained the most hostile right from the beginning. It was only after the 1990s transformation that the Christians in Nepal were able to come out openly. However, the hostile attitude of the state, the mainstream media, and people in general, towards Christians still runs strong.

The Constitution of Nepal 1990, in Article 4 of its “Preliminary”, defined the country as a “multiethnic, multilingual, democratic, independent, indivisible, sovereign, Hindu and

the Constitutional Monarchical Kingdom" (2). Even though Nepal continued to be officially a Hindu Kingdom, the democratic system, freedom of expression, and the proliferation of mass media brought a general awareness among people regarding their identity along gendered, linguistic, religious, ethnic, and regional lines. This awareness ultimately led to a substantial change in the *Interim Constitution of Nepal 2007*, which was carried into the *Constitution of Nepal 2015*. The "Preliminary" of this constitution defines Nepal as "an independent, indivisible, sovereign, secular, inclusive democratic, socialism-oriented federal democratic republican state" (8).[95] Similarly, the Clause related to the Right to Equality (18) categorically mentions that the state "shall not discriminate among citizens on grounds of origin, religion, race, caste, tribe, sex, economic condition, language or geographical region, ideology and such other matters" (15). In addition, the Clause on the Right to Religious Freedom also clearly states that "each person shall be free to profess, practice, and preserve his/her religion according to his/her faith" and that "every religious denomination shall, maintaining its independent existence, have the right to manage and protect its religious places and religious trusts in accordance with law" (20-21). Moreover, there are several special measures guaranteed by the new constitution on the basis of which religious minorities are ensured proportionate reservations in political representation as well as government jobs.

Religion and Nepali Literature: An Overview

The majority of mainstream Nepali writers, during its 150-year long history, have always envisioned and articulated the nation in Khas-Arya Hindu terms (or, occasionally, in Hindu-

[95] A point to be noted here is that there is a clause titled "Explanation" added to this provision which elaborates "For the purpose of this article, 'secular' means protection of religion and culture being practiced since ancient times and religious and cultural freedom" (8). This was a latter addition to appease Hindu hardliners who were displeased with the idea of secularism, and carried a nationwide movement to declare Nepal a Hindu country again.

Buddhist terms). State indoctrination, especially during the Panchayat years, went so far that even the non-Hindu writers fell into the trap of a "single story", to use Chimamanda Adichie's words (Adichie n.p.). They internalised the terms and rhetoric of the Hindu state, reproduced them in their works (the Muslim poet, Ali Miya, is a classic example of this whom I will discuss later in this chapter). In this section, I briefly discuss the Hindu-Sanskrit roots of mainstream Nepali literature that led to the growth of a colossal tree in the so-called "garden of four *varnas* and thirty-six *jatis*" (Panta 36), under which it is virtually impossible for any other flowers to grow and bloom.

What we now refer to as Nepali literature has deep and strong Hindu-Sanskrit roots. One of the reasons behind this is that the Nepali language, earlier known as *Khas Kura*, *Parbate Bhasha*, or *Gorkha Bhasha*, has its roots in the Sanskrit language, and much of its early literature includes the translating, transcreating, or retelling of Hindu myths and stories from Sanskrit scriptures and literature. Moreover, the formative years of the Nepali language and Nepali literature closely coincided with the formation of the Hindu state, and they evolved together, side by side, one supporting and influencing the other. Even though Bhanubhakta Acharya (1814-1868) is widely considered to be the first major poet of the Nepali language (*adi kavi*), many minor poets and writers were writing in Nepali before him, too. Poets and writers such as Shuwananda Das, Radha Ballav Arjyal, Shakti Ballav Arjyal, Udaya Nanda Arjyal, Bhanu Datta, Pandit Divya Keshari Arjyal, Gumani Panta, Bir Shali Panta, Bidhya Keshari Arjyal, who wrote during the unification/expansionist mission led by P N Shah and his successors in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, were mostly Brahmins associated with the royal court of Gorkha. Their poems were usually written in the tradition of *bir rasa* (mode of heroism/courage)[96] matching the jubilant mood resulting from the many

[96] "The theory of rasa is attributed to Bharata, a sage-priest who may have lived sometime between the 1st century BCE and the 3rd century CE….The principal human feelings, according to Bharata, are delight, laughter, sorrow, anger, energy, fear, disgust, heroism, and astonishment, all of which may be recast in

victories won by the Gorkhali soldiers. Many of these poets invoked the Hindu war goddesses, Durga and Kali, in their poems, and then went on to eulogise P N Shah and the bravery of the Gorkhali Army. These writers also wrote prose accounts of the wars and the unification/expansionist mission. Apart from that, they also translated and retold stories from Hindu mythologies in the Sanskrit language for the Nepali audience in the then-nascent Nepali vernacular.

Nepal's defeat in the Anglo-Nepal war (1814-1816) and the signing of the Sugauli Treaty led to the ceding of more than one-third of its territory to British India which had a significant impact on Nepali literature. The celebration of courage and bravery that was central to Nepali literature until then was completely abandoned and replaced by the literature of *bhakti* (devotion).[97] Bhanubhakta Acharya, "the first poet to be accorded the distinction of having founded an authentically 'Nepalese' genre of Nepali verse" (Hutt, *Nepali, a National Language and Its Literature* 5), clearly reflects this shift of mood and tone in his works. His translation of the *Ramayana* from Sanskrit into Nepali, widely considered the first work of Nepali literature, is a significant example of this change. *Ramayana* tells the story of the life and exploits of Ram, who is worshipped as a reincarnation of Lord Vishnu. While other Hindu religious stories such as *Mahabharata* present a more complex view of the word, *Ramayana* presents a one-dimensional world, where complete devotion to Lord Ram is prescribed as the only way to moksha, the ultimate liberation. Moreover, Hindus in Nepal and South Asia have, for centuries, regarded the characters of *Ramayana* as embodying the best ideals to live for, such as the most dutiful son (Ram),[98] the most devoted wife (Sita), the most

contemplative form as the various rasas: erotic, comic, pathetic, furious, heroic, terrible, odious, marvelous, and quietistic. These rasas comprise the components of aesthetic experience." (https://www.britannica.com/art/rasa)

[97] "*Bhakti* (Sanskrit: "devotion") in Hinduism, a movement emphasizing the mutual intense emotional attachment and love of a devotee toward a personal god and of the god for the devotee." (https://www.britannica.com/topic/bhakti)

[98] In fact, Ram is usually referred to as *Maryada Purushottam*, the best among the dutiful men.

faithful brother (Laxman), and the best devotee (Hanuman). For all these reasons, *Ramayana* seems to be a fitting story to be translated in the post-Sugauli Treaty era. A Brahmin from the priestly class, educated in the Sanskrit tradition, his other works, *Badhushiksha*, *Bhaktamala*, *Prashnottari*, and *Ram Gita*, follow the same Hindu-Sanskrit literary tradition as well as Hindu socio-cultural convention. Moti Ram Bhatta (1866-1896), who is given credit for the "establishment of the 'Founder Poet's [Bhanubhakta's] hallowed reputation" (Hutt, *Nepali, a National Language and Its Literature* 5), was also a poet himself, and his works such as *Pikadut*, *Pralhad Bhakti Katha*, and *Usha Charitra*, continue the Hindu *bhakti* tradition.

From 1846 until 1951, the Rana prime ministers and their family members turned the Shah Kings into mere figureheads and ruled Nepal in an oligarchic manner. The Ranas, according to Kumar Pradhan, "feared a conscious and awakened populace and suppressed any simmer of discontent or even incognito criticism with a heavy hand" (74-75). Therefore, they attempted to cut the country off from the rest of the world and restricted the public's access to education. The only kind of works that people were able to write, publish, and read openly during this period were either religious or devotional poems and songs, or eulogies of the rulers. However, some works of literature that came out in the first and the second quarter of the 20th century, such as Krishnalal Adhikari's *Makaiko Kheti* (*Cultivation of Maize*) (1920) or Lekhanath Paudyal's poem "Pinjadako Suga" ("Parrot in the Cage") (1917) are believed to be allegorical, portraying both the suffering people were undergoing during the Rana regime, and hinting at an undercurrent of protest. *Makaiko Kheti* was outwardly a book on agriculture focusing on the cultivation of corn, but it had a number of references with the potential of double entendre, and was suspected by the Rana rulers of "being a political satire and thus seditious" (S. Pandey n.p.). The book was confiscated, Adhikari was arrested, and later died in prison. Similarly, "Pinjadako Suga", on one level, "describes the condition of the soul trapped in the body, a common theme in Hindu devotional verse," and on the other,

possibly "bewails the poet's lot as an employee of Bhim Shamsher" (Hutt, *Himalayan Voices* 23). Michael Hutt alludes the popularity of the poem to the fact that "it is one of the earliest examples of a writer criticizing the Rana families who ruled the country at the time" (Hutt, *Himalayan Voices* 23).

The works of the trio-laureates of Nepali literature, Lekhanath Paudyal, Laxmi Prasad Devkota, and Balkrishna Sama, are suffused with themes from the Hindu religious and mythical traditions, too. For instance, Paudyal's works like *Tarun-Tapasi*, *Satya-Kali Samvad*, *Mero Ram, Ganga-Gauri,* and *Satya-smriti*, Devkota's works such as *Nepali Shakuntal Mahakavya*, *Ravan Jatayu Yudda*, *Sitaharan*, and *Dhumraketu*, as well as Sama's *Prahlad* and *Dhruva,* all derive their subject matter from the Hindu-Sanskrit tradition. Devkota and Sama, however, were also among the first notable Nepali authors to gradually move away from this practice, either by reinterpreting Hindu myths in a more secular light or by writing literary works dealing purely with romantic and humanistic concerns or social issues. This shift can be attributed to several factors such as the growing accessibility of modern, secular education, increasing socio-cultural and political awareness in the wake of the anti-British movement in India, and the subsequent anti-Rana revolution in Nepal. Gopal Prasad Rimal, one of the vocal challengers of the Ranas, "the first 'revolutionary' Nepali poet and the first to reject the use of meter" (Hutt, *Himalayan Voices* 74), is another notable figure in this context who wrote powerful political poems in free verse such as "Amako Sapana", "Santwana", and the famous national song "Rato ra Chandra Surya",[99] which is popular even today.[100]

[99] Nepali flag has the white sun and the moon on the red background.

[100] After Nepal transitioned from the monarchical system to a republic state, a popular campaign was launched that demanded "Rato ra Chandra Surya" to be declared the new national anthem. While the new national anthem, "Saiyau thunga phoolka hami eutai mala Nepali" ("We Nepalis, a garland of hundreds of flowers") by until then unknown ethnic poet, Byakul Maila, was chosen from an open competition, "Rato ra Chandra Surya" still holds the position of an unofficial 'national song' for Nepalis in Nepal and abroad.

Another important break from religion in literature, both in terms of ideas or subject matter as well as style, comes with B P Koirala. His novellas and short stories such as *Tin Ghumti*, *Narendra Dai*, *Babu, Ama ra Chhora* all deal with socio-psychological issues. Even when his works deal with religious subjects, for instance, novellas like *Modiyain* or *Sumnima*, they interpret religious issues from socio-cultural perspectives or use the religious aspects to make secular claims. Koirala's *Sumnima* is very important in this regard because it is arguably the first work of Nepali literature that juxtaposes Hindu-Sanskrit culture with the indigenous Kirat culture, so as to compare and contrast them. It shows that the latter is not at all inferior to the former, and may actually be superior in many regards. Other important writers who carried this tradition of 'secular' literature forward during the 1970s and 1980s include Bhupi Serchan, Parijat, Ramesh Bikal, Mohan Koirala, and Dhruba Chandra Gautam, among others.

Despite the secularisation of content in general, Nepali literature remained partial to Hinduism for much longer in the sense that it rarely told the stories of people belonging to any other minority religions. Characters belonging to minority religions feature very rarely in Nepali literature, and even when they occasionally do, their role is as a foil or an appendage to the story of upper-caste Hindu characters. To see that trend change in Nepali literature, we have to come all the way to writers like Narayan Dhakal in the post-1990s era, or to Nayan Raj Pandey, Phulman Bal, Trishna Kunwar, or Amar Neupane in the post-2007 Republic era.

Religious Minorities in Nepali Literature

In this section, I examine literary works from the post-1990s era, and even more from the post-2007 era, a time when writers proactively started to tell stories of people belonging to the religious margins. This section is further divided into subsections, each subsection

focusing respectively on the literary representations of Dalits, the so-called foreign religions, Islam and Christianity, as well as the indigenous religions.

1. *Dalits in Nepali Literature*

Since Dalits are a part of the Hindu caste system and have always been categorised as Hindus in the census as well other socio-cultural categorizations, they do not fit tidily into the mainstream discussions of religious marginalisation. The usual practice is to classify them as a social or socio-economic category within Hinduism and to exclude them from any discussion dealing with religious discrimination. Ahuti, in his essay "Navin Bhashya Nirmanartha" ["For the Creation of a New Narrative"], claims that the suppression and discrimination of Dalits in South Asia in general, and Nepal in particular, has been going on for at least 3000 years (n.p.). Since the Hindu scriptures and codes such as *Manusmriti* were used to justify the discrimination, to relegate them to the lowest rungs of the social ladder, and to suppress and exploit them, I argue that the discrimination and suppression of Dalits is indeed a religious question, perhaps 'intra-religious', nevertheless a religious issue. The fact that this discrimination was codified and implemented in Nepal through several legal codes from as early as the 15th century until the second half of the 20th century, asks for a study of this exclusionary tradition not just from a socio-economic perspective but also a religious perspective. Moreover, the growing trend of Dalits converting to Christianity cannot be explained only from a socio-economic standpoint either and begs for an explanation that involves a consideration of religion.[101]

Unlike people from other religious margins, Dalits have featured in Nepali literature from much earlier times. From the greatest Nepali poet Laxmi Prasad Devkota in the early 20th century, and Marxist writers such as Mondanath Prashrit and Khagendra Sangraula

[101] Despite all the hurdles and limitations, Mitra Pariyar argues that "conversation as least lays the foundations to freedom from the tyranny of caste" (Pariyar n.p.).

during the Panchayat years, to contemporary Dalit and non-Dalit writers, Dalits have found their voice in Nepali literature more often than any other religiously marginalised group. Published in 1936, *Muna Madan* is arguably the best-known work of Nepali poetry and is one of the earliest work to question people's superiority based on caste and religion. The poem claims that it is not what caste one is born into but how one treats other people, especially those in need, that decides one's superiority:

> A Chhetri born
> I touch these feet of yours with no disgust
> Man's measure is his heart, not caste. (Trans. Padma Devkota 75)[102]

Madan, the protagonist in this long narrative poem,[103] is on his way home from a trade trip to Tibet to provide a better life for his newly married wife, Muna, and his old mother. When he falls sick on his way back, his friends leave him to die. But he is rescued by Bhote,[104] a Tibetan man (or, probably a Nepali man from the mountains), who takes him home, and takes care of him until he gets well and is ready to resume his journey back home. Before he leaves, Madan offers him some gold as a token of gratitude, which Bhote politely refuses to take. As a Chhetri, Madan is higher in the caste hierarchy and is not supposed to touch the feet of Bhote, a man belonging to the caste below him. But Madan is so moved by the selfless service of Bhote that he touches his feet in gratitude, and speaks the above lines. The last of the above-cited lines is so popular that it has attained the status of a proverb in Nepali. If we

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[102] Michael Hutt's translation of the lines goes like this:

> This son of Kshetri touches your feet
> But he touches them not with contempt
> A man must be judged by the size of his heart,
> Not from his name or caste. (38)

[103] Shorter than an epic, but longer than a poem, the long narrative poem is called *Khandakavya* (also referred to as short epic), and was one of the popular genres of poetry especially in the decades of 40's, 50's, and 60's. Devkota's *Muna-Madan* is a fine example of this genre.

[104] Tibet was referred to as "Bhot" in the past, and people from Tibet were called "Bhote". The word now frequently is used to derogatively refer to ethnic people of Mongloid or Tibeto-Burman heritage, especially from the mountain regions.

take into account the fact that caste discrimination is rampant in Nepal even today after Devkota wrote those lines some eighty-five years ago, it can be taken as both a courageous and a pioneering statement. It can, however, be seen as fruitless too if we consider that the most popular line by the most popular poet, even after so many years, has remained as nothing but a sweet-sounding cliché.

In another poem “Damai Dai” (“Brother Damai”), Devkota takes the persona of a tailor and describes the plight people belonging to this caste undergo in their everyday lives. Devkota, thus, described how the upper-caste people treated the Dalits:

> A statue of the god, yet detested by another man
> The same sinews, same blood, yet one’s suppressed by the other (4)

At one point, the tailor describes the attitude of the upper-caste people towards them: “They kiss the dogs, but they spit on us” (4.). In the same vein, he describes how the lower caste untouchables are perceived by those belonging to the higher caste: “We are sewage, we stink, we are germs” (5). He laughs at the hypocrisy of the upper-caste “religious man”, and weeps at the miserable condition imposed upon them by the caste system at the same time.

Devkota’s poem “Ek Sundari Chyaminiprati” (“To a Beautiful Chyamini”), dedicated to a beautiful sweeper-woman (*Chyamini*) belonging to the untouchable Chyame caste, tells a similar story. The poem begins with a description of the unparalleled beauty of the *Chyamini*:

> Hail, beautiful blossom!
> Divine exception
> Cast in marble
> Do accept my appreciation. (74)

Devkota makes use of paradoxical and even antithetical images to describe her. At one point he calls her a *kujat rani* (low-caste queen), and at another, he describes her as *jatiki e tirtha* (pilgrimage of caste). He movingly praises her as a “beautiful flower” that had to break the rock of exclusion and contempt with its roots before it could even bloom. Devkota considers

the beauty of this woman as a slap in the face of the priests, who have declared the most beautiful creation of god untouchable, and her fight for existence in the society as something exceeding the wars of Kurukshetra in the *Mahabharata*. He urges the 'untouchable' beauty to touch everyone and, through her touch, to destroy all the scriptures which are the basis of all forms of discriminations. Devkota concludes by imploring her to cleanse humanity:

> Beauty queen! Take a broom
> Clean the street
> "Humanity survives! Sewage triumphs!
> Just promote this much!" (76)

Hidden beneath Devkota's meditation on beauty and injustice, there is the glimpse of a revolutionary instinct that hints at a more vocal protest against the inhuman practice of untouchability. This is worked out in fuller detail in the works of writers coming after him. However, we cannot also completely ignore the fact that Devkota's description of the Chyamini involves some forms of exoticisation, which can, unfortunately, be the starting point of exploitation, too.

More vocal literary works on Dalits started appearing after the 1990s political change, and even more so after 2007. During this period, Dalit writers like Ahuti and Pancha Kumari Pariyar, and a host of non-Dalit writers like Khagendra Sangarula, Shrawan Mukarung, Rajan Mukarung, Hangyug Agyat, Swapnil Smriti, and Binod Bikram KC have published powerful works of poetry and fiction that not only portray the discrimination that Dalits have suffered for hundreds of years but also call for change.

Similar to the poem "Gahugoro Africa" cited at the start of this chapter, Ahuti's collection with the same title has several poems that not only critically examine the notorious history of atrocities suffered by Dalits but also try to look forward to the future with some optimism. For instance, the poem "Baisau Shatabdima" ("In the 22nd Century") imagines an

egalitarian future society where discrimination is a thing of the distant past, and all the people will live a life of dignity and respect. Ahuti writes:

> The light of the sun will be here
> And the moon of the night will be here too
> A gentle breeze will go around kissing the earth
> But there won't be any emperors anywhere
> Bugles, poisonous like the jimsonweed flowers will, no longer sound
> The children won't be forced
> To use their leg bones as barrels of guns
> The next 100-year river of sweat and blood
> Will wash away most of the ugly remains
> Of the 20th century.
> Today's remnants of Jung Bahadur will become history. (45)

The above lines begin with a sense of hope that the future may bring, they also vividly portray the hardships and injustices experienced by Dalits over the ages. However, the very fact that it will take a "100-year river of sweat and blood" to wash away the "ugly remains" reveals the extent of the injustice that has taken place in the past. Moreover, the prospect of Dalit people having to wait until the 22nd century, another 100 years, to be treated as humans respect sounds like an impossible dream of the future and more like a commentary on the harsh realities of the past and the present.

Shrawan Mukarung's "Bise Nagarchiko Bayan", cited and discussed at the beginning of this study, is another well-known poem from recent times that vehemently protests against the oppression and exploitation Dalits have suffered at the hands of the ruling elite. After declaring that he has gone mad in "this Gorkha state/after 250 years," Bise chides himself for being a whiner. He goes on:

> It's only my worthless wife who was killed
> It's only my wretched daughter who was raped
> It's only my shabby hut that was burnt
> Why should Bise get mad just for that?
> Shame on you Bise
> I have gone mad, master!
> I have gone mad. (18)

These lines present a horrifying picture of how Dalits were, and still are, treated by the state, and how they are expected to remain quiet even in the face of the most appalling injustices. The poem starts with a confession that he has gone mad and ends with a hint of rage and rebellion when he asks: "Where are my feet?/Where is Bise Nagarchi?" (21). The political and social shake-up of recent times has been so overwhelming that it will take everyone some time to find a foothold. But once the dust finally settles, the poem seems to hint, they will see that the age-old hierarchies are finally beginning to crumble. Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish* writes, "[i]n the darkest region of the political field, the condemned man represents the symmetrical, inverted figure of the king" (23). The power of the rulers is inversely proportional to the power of the people, Foucault suggests, and the surplus power of the king comes from the diminished power of the people. Bise, the impoverished Dalit man, is that inverted figure of the ruler, who belongs to the socio-cultural and ethnic group of the kings and the priests, gives everything to the king, and yet has been forced to remain at the bottom and suffer. But as this poem signals, if the people at the lowest rung of the ladder are forced to remain there forever, a day will come when the ladder itself will be overturned or destroyed. Or, in Mukarung's words, the earth will "[move] to the sky" and "the sky to the earth" (20-21).

Kirat poet, Hangyug Agyat also takes the figure of the tailor in his poem "Jadau Bhandina" ("I Refuse to Say Jadau")[105] to comment on caste discrimination.

> I am *Damai*, a tailor
> You go to the Constitution Assembly
> Wearing the *daura-suruwal* that I stitched
> Tell me,
> Who are you drafting the Constitution for?
> Is it for the one
> Who does not let me enter into the temple?
> Is it for the one

[105] *Jadau* is a greeting used by Dalits to greet people from the upper-caste groups.

Who does not let me go to the water tap?
Is it for the one
Who keeps crushing me to the ground
With his feet of *Varnashram*?
Tell me,
For whom are you drafting the Constitution?

The 10-year-long Maoist insurgency that started in 1996, mostly as a rural-based uprising, culminated in Kathmandu-centred mass protests, now referred to as the "People's Revolution II", in 2006. King Gyanendra was forced to give up his powers, and a unicameral government was formed that conducted elections for the Constitution Assembly. Members of the Constitution Assembly thus elected were assigned with the responsibility of writing an inclusive, progressive, and democratic constitution for the 'New Nepal', a phrase much-repeated during that time. In the lines cited above, a *Damai,* i.e. a tailor belonging to the lowest Dalit caste, is asking a member of the Constitution Assembly about the document that he is going to draft. The evident tone is one of distrust: disbelief about the fact that the new constitution will really bring a change in the lives of people who have lived on the political, economic and socio-cultural margins for centuries.

"Purano Majdoor" ("Old Labourer") by Swapnil Smriti also deals with the problem faced by Dalits. The poem is about a shoemaker, a *Sarki*, another untouchable caste in the Hindu caste hierarchy, who makes shoes for the rulers and other upper-caste people. Each pair of shoes, apparently representing each act of service delivered by Dalits to their upper-caste masters, keeps pushing him further away from his rights as a citizen. First, he makes a pair of golden shoes, and they fit perfectly on the feet of the god. The god puts them on, enters into the temple, and closes the door forever on the shoemaker.[106] He makes another pair of shoes out of his own skin, and this time the shoes are taken by the emperor, and the

[106] Dalits were not allowed to enter into most of the Hindu temples until recently. While the laws now prohibit such discriminating practices, it is still practiced in many temples, especially the smaller ones in the villages, where people personally know each other.

doors of the royal palace are forever closed for him. With whatever skin is left on his body and the bodies of his family members, he makes a few more pairs, and the politicians take these. Thus, the doors of Singha Darbar, the administrative headquarters of Nepal, are forever closed to him, too. No one pays the price of the shoes, and no one respects the labour of the shoemaker. All are happy to step on him by wearing the same shoes he made and to keep on oppressing and exploiting him. The poem ends with the reversal of the tone of subservience and helplessness:

> Before I die
> I want to show my skill one last time
> I want to make a new pair of shoes
> And I want to put them [on] myself
> Where is the skin of the emperor?
> Where is the emperor?
> Where is he? Where? Tell me where? (53)

These lines show that injustice has prevailed for too long, and the oppressed people who have lost their forbearance, are now coming after their political leaders. If the wait for the dream of equality and justice is deferred any longer than this, the only outcome will most likely be another explosion, in some form of social and political revolt.

As these examples show, the poets and writers before the recent socio-political movements made use of pathos to portray the misery of the Dalits. Contemporary writers, on the other hand, write in a language of anger, protest, and challenge. While poetry from the past can make one cry, contemporary works generate anger at the injustice and challenges the readers to take action against the inhuman practices. The tone in early writings about Dalits, as seen in Devkota's "Damai Dai", for instance, is predominantly one of helplessness and pity, which clearly changes into a tone of outrage and rebellion in the more recent poems, as we can see in Ahuti's "Gahugoro Africa" or Smriti's "Purano Majdoor". I sum up this section with the final lines of Ahuti's poem, "Gahugoro Africa":

From the shoes of your feet to the cap on your head
From the furthest horizon of your eyes to the beats of your heart
Where am I not, I am everywhere.
How can you make me ‘untouchable’, oh ‘touchable’ one?
Either dare to stand in the witness-box of history
Or have the courage to change yourself
Have the courage to meet my eyes, priest
I am an untouchable of the twentieth century!
I need an assessment of my humiliated history
I want freedom at any cost! (Ahuti 11)

Ahuti, by the very title of his poem, “Gahugoro Africa”, has compared the oppression of the Dalits by the upper-caste Hindus to the domination of the natives in Africa by the Westerners, and, thus, promoted the idea of the Dalit community as an internal colony within the ‘Gorkha empire’. As mentioned above, Mahesh C Regmi used the term ‘imperial Gorkha’ to refer to the Gorkhali treatment of the far-western territories of Kumaun (now in present-day India), but also applicable in the case of other marginalised regions and communities, too. Dipanker Dey, in his essay “India: The Context of Its current Internal Colonialism,” claims that different forms of colonialism “still exist in India” and that India still exhibits “internal and regional colonialism” (265). The main argument Dey forwards to support his claim is the “theory of dependency” (265). Many postcolonial theorists have used dependency theory to explain “the continued impoverishment of colonized ‘Third World’ countries on the grounds that underdevelopment is not internally generated but a structural condition of global capitalism itself” (Ashcroft et al. 77). They claim that underdevelopment is not an “early stage in the process of development” but rather a consequence of the “global structure of dominion” (Ashcroft et al. 77). When we reflect on how impoverished and disadvantaged Dalits (and, other marginalised religious and ethnic groups) still are even after the state has guaranteed access to education and opportunities to employment, we should not forget the system of dependency and the structural iniquities that still exist. Pancha Kumari Pariyar, a contemporary Dalit poet, summarises it well in her poem “Cloud, Daughter, and Me”, where

a mother is guilty of not being able to keep her daughter warm when she freezes in a cold night:

> [M]y daughter woke up crying:
> "*Ama*, I'm cold–"
> I cannot cover my daughter with those blankets of clouds
> and my arms alone cannot keep her warm
> the moon is dimming
> the cluster of warm clouds is disappearing–
> I'm growing cold
> and she is like ice, snow. (n.p.)

Just as the daughter is dependent on her mother to stay warm, people on the margins are dependent on the state for their survival. The mother is unable to keep her daughter warm despite all her efforts because of her poverty and her extreme living conditions. The state's neglect of its disadvantaged people, however, is built into the socio-political structure, and is both deliberate and malevolent.

Before concluding this section, it is useful to briefly draw a comparison between Nepali and Indian Dalit literature/literature on the Dalits. While there is a long history of folk/oral Dalit literature by the Dalits themselves in both Nepal and India, substantial mainstream attention to the Dalit issues, however, began only around the early 20th century, more or less in the same manner in both the countries, i.e. through the writings of non-Dalit writers such as Premchand in India and Devkota in Nepal, about the Dalits. Indian Dalit writing made a significant shift from the 'etic' approach, i.e. 'outsiders' writing about the Dalits, to 'emic', i.e. Dalits writing about themselves, with powerful interventionist movements, such as the Dalit Panthers, in the late 1960s-early 1970s. According to Susie J. Tharu, K. Satyanarayana:

> Although it is possible to identify a few Dalit writers from earlier times, the real originality and force of Dalit writing, which today comprises a substantial and growing body of work, can be traced to the decades following the late 1960s. Those are the years when the Dalit Panthers revisit and embrace the ideas of Babasaheb Ambedkar, and elaborate his disagreements with the essentially Gandhian mode of Indian nationalism, to begin a new social movement. In the following decades, Dalit writing becomes an all-India phenomenon. (21)

In the decades after that, the Dalit writers have taken the responsibility of telling their own stories, and with writers like Omprakash Valmiki, Ajaya Navaria, Jaiprakash Kardam, Mohan Mimishray, Susheela Thakbhaure, Kusum Meghval, and Surajpal Chauhan, "Dalit literary space has expanded and made a place for itself…becoming a formidable body of sophisticated and contemporary writing in the languages of India" (M. N. Chakraborty 415). Laura Brueck, in her discussion of Hindi Dalit literature, states that these writers "display a heightened awareness of the literary and social impact of manipulating and interweaving various registers of language" (18). Among others genres, Dalit autobiography has emerged as a powerful genre in which Dalit writers recount their experiences first hand, and has "created an important literary space for the expression of Dalit cultural identity" (Beth 248). With the arrival of writers like Padam Sundas, Ahuti, Panchakumari Pariyar, and a host of younger writers, Nepali Dalit writing is also finally beginning to take the much-awaited 'emic' turn. However, compared to the Indian Dalit writing, there is still a long way to go until Dalit writers can take over the responsibility of telling their own stories, which is, until now, still being assumed by the non-Dalit writers. Similarly, while a slow change backed by education as well as legal provisions is on its way, my own experience of growing up in the Nepali hills, where caste-based discrimination is deeply etched into everyday life until today, and work and the prejudice and intolerance is still rampant, this appears to be one of the most rigid practices to uproot.

2. *Muslims*

Muslims have been living in Nepal from as early as the 15th century. According to Nazima Parveen, Muslims came to Nepal in four different phases. The first wave (1484-1520) comprised a section of Kashmiri Muslims who came to Kathmandu as traders since it was an important trade centre between India to the south and Lhasa to the north. The second phase

took place in the 17th century when several kings from the Nepali hills, including P N Shah, invited Muslims from India to train their armed forces in Mughal warfare techniques and making firearms (Parveen 3). The third phase occurred during the mutiny of 1857 in India when “a sizable number of Muslim nobles and servants took refuge in Kathmandu” (Parveen 3). The fourth and final phase took place in 1959 when China took over Tibet, and among those who fled were “over 100 Muslim families” who arrived in Kathmandu (Parveen 3). This, however, is more a story of Muslims in the Nepali hills. The larger population of Nepali Muslims still live in the plains, Tarai-Madhesh, and share historical and cultural similarities with the Muslims of north India.

According to the 2011 Census report, Muslims make up 4.4% of the total population of Nepal. While this is not at all a negligible figure for a country of 30 million people, Muslims have, however, maintained a very low profile and have lived quietly for most of the modern history of Nepal even though there has been systematic discrimination against them from the state. As briefly discussed above, the 1854 *Muluki Ain* brought them under the Hindu caste system and categorised Muslims as *pani nachalne, chhoichhito haalnu naparne* (water-unacceptable but touchable). Sudhindra Sharma, in his essay “How the Crescent Fares in Nepal”, summarises the status of Muslims in Nepal:

> Historically, though the Hindu state has provided the Muslim minority with the freedom to practice Islam, it also has imposed several restrictions. While providing land grants for the construction of mosques and madrasas and establishing cemeteries, for example, it has issued a strict ban on proselytizing and cow slaughter. (Sharma n.p.)

While still difficult, the treatment of Muslims in Nepal has otherwise been relatively better than what other minority religious groups in South Asia (for instance, Muslims in India, and Hindus in Bangladesh, Pakistan, or Sri Lanka) have undergone. Sharma, in the course of his essay, cites many scholars to find an answer to the question of why Muslims do not face extreme hostility and are protected in Nepal. According to Marc Gaborieau, a French

anthropologist, the Hindu majority does not take the Muslims in Nepal as a threat because "they constitute a small minority and maintain a low profile" (qtd. in "How the Crescent Fares" n.p.). Similarly, Mohammad Mohsin, a sociologist who became active in Nepali politics during the Panchayat and the democracy, believes that "the atmosphere is not highly charged because the hill and Kathmandu Muslims do not react quickly to communally motivated events and tend to trust the same state machinery" (qtd. in "How the Crescent Fares" n.p.). Sharma concludes: "It may also be that the Hindu majority does not feel great animosity towards Islam because Nepal has never been subjected to Muslim rule. And then, Nepal has not undergone the trauma of partition based on religion as has a large part of the Subcontinent" ("How the Crescent Fares" n.p.).

Although Muslims have not faced extreme hostility from the state as well as the Hindu majority population, social discrimination, and a general indifference towards them is visible in all walks of life, including literature. Even the smallest of the Nepali towns have a Muslim settlement who specialise in certain trades (such as butchery and bangle shops), but their settlements are always relegated to the most morbid edges.[107] The fact that such a sizeable population living in Nepal for more than five centuries is virtually absent from literary writings or any form of work of art tells much about its status in the state. The first work of Nepali literature that involves a Muslim character in some details is a short story titled "Irfan Ali" (1994) by Narayan Dhakal, who was involved with the Nepali Communist movement and jailed during the Panchayat years. "Irfan Ali", possibly based on a real incident as indicated by the author in the postscript, is the story of a Muslim man who is brutally killed in a prison in Kathmandu during the Panchayat years, a time when political parties were banned, and the king and his men ruled the country in an autocratic way. Irfan Ali is a young, illiterate Muslim man from a poor family in Madhesh. He has been arrested

[107] This is the reality of most of the Dalit settlements, too, even today.

for a theft that he did not commit, and put into prison in Birgunj, a city in the eastern Tarai. When there is communal violence in the prison, he is again falsely accused of being involved in it and moved to a bigger, more secure and evidently harsher prison in the capital city.

Irfan Ali is already in serious trouble when the story begins. On the second day of his arrival in Kathmandu, he is found digging the prison garden to get some soil. He wants to build a *chulho*, a makeshift firewood oven, and cook his meal. However, in the background of some political prisoners digging a tunnel in another prison in Kathmandu and escaping recently, *naike,* the head prisoner, Dal Singh, and the prison guards presume his innocent act of digging the garden to get a *dekchi*-full of soil dangerous. He is taken into the infamous "Room no. 8", and tortured for hours by the *naike*, in the presence of other prison authorities. In the course of the torture, he is repeatedly interrogated about the terrorist organization he belongs to or the foreign embassy in Nepal he works for, questions that make no sense at all to the clueless Irfan Ali. During the torture he is frequently insulted for being a Muslim: the *naike* repetitively hurls the curse words s*ala Musalte* ("bastard Muslim") (Dhakal, *Irfan Ali* 50) at him. When the torture gets too much, Irfan Ali, in a state of unbearable pain and desperation, cries "Allah", which, needless to say, invites even more brutal torture. After hours of torture, and repeated wails that reverberate through all the prison cells, Irfan Ali breathes his last, but the insults do not end even after that. He is stripped naked to examine whether or not he is circumcised and make sure he really is a Muslim. The story ends with a hint that, as in many other similar cases, his dead body will also pass through a regular medical process that will certify that the death was caused by an "ordinary accident" (57).

Other prisoners, apparently all Hindus, who have been there for a longer time and are aware of the unwritten dictates of the place, discuss this incident during the "7 o' clock news time" (55). The first prisoner chides the now dead Irfan Ali for not opening up to them. The second berates him for not being friendly with his fellow prisoners. The third pities on him

for what he had to undergo, and wonders what might have happened to his family after he was imprisoned. And, the fourth asks why the authorities were so suspicious about him, and whether he was really involved with some political parties. William Ryan, through his study of American society, exposed the practice of blaming the poor for their poverty and the weak for their weaknesses. He termed it "blaming the victim" and described the practice as "applying an exceptionalistic solution to a universalistic problem" (Ryan 13). In this case, even for the other prisoners, many of whom might have been the victims of an unjust system, blaming the victim seems to be the easiest way to understand the incident, rather than trying to find the reality behind the sheer injustice. Such practices, however, are evident in many other instances, too. The teacher and the classmates make fun of Fangjang in *Lato Pahad*, for instance, which ultimately leads him to drop out of school, where his only mistake was his inability to understand a language that he never had an opportunity to learn.

"Irfan Ali" is the story of an innocent man who suffers under a discriminatory and repressive state. During the 30-year Panchayat period, many revolutionaries who fought against it underwent torture and were even brutally killed. Many innocent Nepalis, who had nothing to do with politics, also suffered during this period, and Irfan Ali represents all of them. However, there is more to the story than just the suffering of an ordinary Nepali. It is also the story of a man who is from the socio-cultural, economic, and regional margins in a Hindu Kingdom ruled by hill elites. In addition to his poverty and illiteracy, what makes Irfan Ali an easier target is his unmissable otherness: he is a Muslim man in a Hindu country; he is a Madheshi in a country ruled by the Pahade rulers and bureaucrats; he speaks *dehati*, the rural vernacular of the plains, in a country where the ruling class only speaks and understands Nepali. While it could be just another case of discrimination and injustice during an autocratic regime, several things in the story make it a case of religious prejudice. All of the perpetrators, Dal Singh, the main guard, and all the other guards, are Hindus. Irfan Ali is

arrested for petty theft, which, as the story suggests, he probably did not even commit. When there is a religious riot in Birganj, he is moved to a prison in Kathmandu. Even his torturers hardly believe that he was digging an escape tunnel when they see him scratching the earth for a pot-full of soil. Yet, they do not want to miss this opportunity to torture a "wretched Muslim" (50), and by making an example of him, scare all the remaining prisoners. Irfan Ali is completely oblivious of the larger context and the reasons for his misfortune, which makes the story even more disheartening. The story thus provides a window into how minorities were treated during the Panchayat years. Moreover, while the state may not have directly planned tortures or killings like this, the attitude of the state towards minorities and the perennial exclusion of Muslims from the socio-cultural mainstream made them vulnerable to such attacks.

Foucault believed that while "traditionally, power was what was seen, what was shown, and was manifested," disciplinary power, in modern times, is "exercised through its invisibility" (187). However, the prison was an exception to his postulation. He held that "prison is the only place where power is manifested in its naked state, in its more excessive form, and where it is justified as a moral force" ("The Intellectuals and Power" 105). Prison, in itself, is a place that justifies torture, and when the prisoner comes from a weaker marginal location, the officials take "the right to punish" (105) for granted. According to David Gellner, Bhotiyas and Madheshis are among those who are the furthest away from "the heart of Nepaliness" (Gellner 23), and Madheshi Muslims, unlike Madheshi Hindus, are placed even further down in that hierarchy. In that sense, Irfan Ali becomes an easy scapegoat, a punching bag, on whom the prison guards can vent their anger and frustration resulting from their inability to intervene in larger issues such as stopping political prisoners from escaping, or the fear of an impending revolution.

“Kajol Khatoon”, a short story by Phulman Bal, from the 2016 collection of the same title, narrates an incident from 2001 when rebel Maoists stopped a passenger bus bound to Birgunj for operating on the day they had declared a strike. They poured petrol over the bus and set it alight, without letting the passengers disembark. Five residents of Birgunj, all Muslims returning home to celebrate the last day of Eid with their family, including an eight-year-old girl, Kajol Khatoon, were killed (Hutt 384). Bal relates this incident to similar outrages taking place all over the world and poses a serious question through its central character: “Should it be Kajols who die everywhere?” (Bal 34).

Prashant, the narrator of the story, is in Hyderabad, India, to take part in a month-long seminar on “war and terrorism” (31). One morning, while returning to his hotel from a walk, a Muslim girl in her mid-teens, her head covered with a black shawl, stops him to ask the way to Nizam College. He tells her which bus to take, and she leaves, but her innocent face, her cautious glance, and her nervous manners leave a lasting impression on him. He keeps thinking about her during the rest of his time in the city. Towards the end of his stay he meets her again, and this time she tells him her story. Her name is Kajol Khatoon, and she is from Muharem, a village in southern Kabul. Since her parents and brother died in an explosion, she has been living in a refugee camp along with her sister. She is in Hyderabad with her friends to attend a course at Nizam College. She is shocked when she discovers that he is actually from Kathmandu. She tells him that only that morning she had heard the news from Nepal that a young girl named Kajol Khatoon was among those who died when a bus was set on fire.

Kajol’s suffering in Kabul came from entirely different circumstances than those that Kajol in Nepal underwent. Yet, Prashant uses this otherwise tenuous link to contemplate the fate of minorities everywhere. Insurgencies strike where they can—their role is to create a collective sense of panic and disenchantment with the authorities. They, therefore, pick

targets of opportunity before moving on to more prominent targets. It is likely that the Maoist rebels' action was not specifically targeted at the Muslims. However, it would have been far more difficult to set fire to a bus full of people returning home on the eve of Dashain, the biggest festival of the Hindus.[108] Minority groups are easier targets in cases like these, and they pose no threat of retaliation. Paradoxically, in this particular case, even the rebels allegedly fighting for equality and justice are not only indifferent to but add to the sufferings of the religious minority.

Over the years, Kajol Khatoon has become a symbol of the innocents who suffer when bigger forces fight for their selfish motives. Chandra Kishor's poem entitled "Kajol, the Earth Is Still Dark," is dedicated to her and other innocent victims of war:

> Yes Kajol,
> No light has appeared here yet,
> The earth is still dark.
> Bombs are growing up from the green ground instead of grain,
> The environment is suffocating in the acrid smoke of gunpowder,
> A contemptible hunt is going on.
>
> But no one is innocent,
> Whoever you blame, only you are innocent, Kajol!
> Although you fell prey to pitilessness,
> No one is burning in the fires of remorse. (qtd. in Hutt 385)

The poem presents a picture of the time when the Maoist insurgents were at war with government forces, and every new day would start with news of more deaths and destruction. Among those who died were innocent citizens like Kajol, who were oblivious of what was going around them. In this sense, Kajol becomes a symbol of the voiceless, the downtrodden people from the furthest margins, the calves that are crushed when the bulls fight,[109] as a

[108] There were brutal incidents of that nature, though, such as the Badarmude bus explosion of a passenger bus in 2005 by the Maoist rebels, which killed more than three dozen people.

[109] "साँढेको जुधाइ, बाच्छाको मिचाइ"

Nepali proverb goes, which is equally true of the sufferings Kajol from Kabul has undergone, too.

Loo (*Heatwave*), a novel by Nayan Raj Pandey, was published in 2012 after the Hindu kingdom transformed into a secular republic. It is a novel that presents a more complex picture of Nepali society than the hints and snapshots presented either in Narayan Dhakal's "Irfan Ali" or Phulman Bal's "Kajol Khatoon" (or, Trishna Karki's stories such as "Seraj Ahmaed" and "Burka", collected in *Seraj Ahamed,* and Amar Neupane's stories from *Paniko Gham* such as "Salik" and "Badalmuni"). *Loo*, meaning heatwave, is the story of a small village, Pattharpurawa, in the southern plains of Nepal, near the Indian borders. It is the story of Madheshi people belonging to different socio-economic, ethno-cultural, religious, and linguistic groups, and the only thing that seems to connect them is the hardship they have endured together. The novel is divided into seven different sections, each narrated by different characters. The first section is narrated by Radiolal, the second by Bajrangi, the third jointly by Brijlal, Radiolal, and Bajrangi, the fourth by Devaki, the fifth by Karim, the sixth jointly by Brijlal, Tutey Pandit and Karim, and the seventh by Nusrat. The novel also has an epilogue where the novelist appears to sum up the story and offer some concluding remarks and insights. At the centre of the novel lies the story of Ilaiya, his growth and transformation from an obstinate brat to a sensitive young man, and his unrequited love for a Muslim girl, Nusrat. But along with his story, there are also the tales of the Madhesh and the Madheshis, as well as an exploration of the dynamics of Hindu-Muslim as well as Pahade-Madheshi relationships. The story illustrates the intolerance and injustice Nepali Muslims face in their everyday lives. For instance, Nusrat suffers from the pranks of her friends when she is a child, and from the Hindu goons when she grows older. Similarly, a Muslim is blamed, and all the Muslims in the village are castigated and assaulted when someone

defecates on the clay prepared to make idols of Hindu gods and goddesses during Navaratri, an offence, we later come to know, committed by a Hindu man.

Pandey has dedicated the book to the people "who have been ignored by those within the borders and tortured by those beyond the borders" (*Loo*). As a village at the southernmost borders of Nepal, the presence of the Nepali state is virtually nil, whereas the Indian state, in the form of *SSB* (*Sima Suraksha Bal*, i.e., Border Security Force), seems to be omnipresent. In fact, after a series of incidents involving the removal of border pillars separating Nepal and India, as well as powerful criminals capturing the farmlands on the Nepali side, the novel ends by noting that the village actually lies in India now. The story moves ahead with many role-reversals. Ilaiya, for instance, starts as an appallingly wicked character, but ends as a man with a heart of gold, whereas Radiolal, who appears in most of the earlier sections as a sympathetic character, finishes as an evil one. The story seems to be showing how, ultimately, the Pahades become dominant over the Madheshis, the Hindus over the Muslims, and, India represented by the likes of the SSB, politicians and local goons from Uttar Pradesh, over Nepal. This is an experience that residents of Pattharpurawa undergo on a regular basis in the novel, just as Nepalis from the Tarai-Madhesh experience in their relations with their own government as well as the forces across the border regularly.

There are some characters in the novel, such as Radiolal, who are clearly evil. The author, on the whole, however, seems to be implying that whether they are in the hills or the plains, or whether they are Hindus or Muslims, Nepalis are mostly peaceful and accommodating, and the problems faced by Madheshi Muslims are primarily the result of Hindu-Muslim conflicts in the neighbouring Indian towns. Because Nepal does not have a history of recurring religious riots, and the state, despite being discriminatory on many other accounts, has been careful regarding the security of Muslims, Pandey's inference may have some substance. But if we keep in mind that this is the work of a Hindu writer of Pahade

origin (even though hailing from Madhesh), his unwillingness to hold the Nepali state and the Nepali Hindus accountable when the Muslims' suffering is concerned is revealing. Similarly, in the epilogue, Pandey admits that he wanted to write "an ideal love story of a Hindu and a Muslim" (213), and regrets that the story did not take that turn. This could be the outcome of a deeper Hindu psyche at work that took over the author's otherwise conscious effort at writing a Hindu-Muslim love story with a happy ending. But this could also equally be the nation's social, cultural, and religious norms that would militate against such an outcome that stopped Pandey from ending the story on a happy Hindu-Muslim union.

Despite its shortcomings, we can see that from a time before the 1990s when there was virtually nothing written about the Muslims in Nepali literature, we have arrived at a point where more and more writers are writing about them. As far as Muslim writers themselves are concerned, while there is a rich tradition of Urdu *shayari*[110] among Muslim men even in Nepal, as elsewhere in South Asia, there is still a dearth of Muslim writers writing in the Nepali language. The only well-known Muslim name in Nepali literature is that of Ali Miya (1918-2006), who is a curious product of Panchayat nationalism. Miya, popularly known as "folk poet" was born in the hills of western Nepal, served in the British Army as a part of the Gurkha Battalion, fought in World War II for the British, and wrote and sang songs of the beauty of the Nepali hills and mountains, and the glory of the Nepali kings. Most of his poems closely resemble the ones written by some of the most loyal 'royalist' poets of the Panchayat era. For example:

> Mechi in the east, Kali in the west, Kaski Kot in the middle
> Tarai Sunauli in the south, Kailash Tibet in the north
> This is the country of Araniko, Balabhadra, and Bhakti
> This is the place where Janak and Buddha used to teach. ("Ban Pani Ramailo", i.e. "Even the Wilderness is Delightful" 11-12)

[110] *Shayari* is a popular form of poetry in Urdu, and is comprised of one or more rhyming couplet(s). The poet is called *shayar*, each rhyming couplet is called a *sher*, and a number of *shers* make a *gazal*, which usually has a rhyming scheme 'aabacada'.

During the Panchayat system, school and university textbooks were filled with poems that described Nepal as a beautiful country located in between the Mechi River in the east, the Mahakali River in the west, Tarai in the south, Kailash in the north. They would describe Nepal as a country that produced brave warriors like Balabhadra Kunwar and Bhakti Thapa who fought valiantly against the British in the Anglo-Nepal War (1814-1816), great artists like Araniko who made a big name for himself in Tibet and China, and wise men like king Janak and the Buddha. Other items that would usually be in the list would include Sagarmatha, that is Mt. Everest, Amar Singh, the Nepali commander in the Anglo-Nepal War, Sita, the daughter of King Janak, who married Ram from Ayodhya in India, Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha, and so on. Also, there would be a list of animals and plants considered indigenous to the hills and the mountains, *buki* flower, rhododendron, *danfe*, the Himalayan Monal, and the holy cow. To quote Prashant Jha, just as "the Tarai found no mention at all in school curricula, except as a breadbasket" (456), so, hardly any other ethnicity, culture, religion, or region found a mention in these narratives either.

The stanza cited above from "Ban Pani Ramailo" reads as if it were composed out of the list of terms handed over by Panchayat officials. In fact, in the next stanza of the poem, Miya mentions "smiling mountain peaks", "sweet-smelling *buki* flowers", and the beautiful "rhododendron garden", to make the list complete. These symbols feature again in the poem "Mero Desh Nepal" ("My Country Nepal"), where he talks about the "smiling mountain", and the flora and fauna from the mountains, "*kasturi*, *munal*, *chamri*[111], *danfe*" (9). He talks about the bravery of Balabhadra Kunwar, Bhakti Thapa, and Prithvi Narayan Shah in this poem, too. Even more surprising is the fact that, in this and other poems, he repeatedly alludes to Hindu myths and Hindu gods and goddesses.

[111] Chauri, i.e. the yak.

> We are the in-laws of Lord Ram and the family members of Sita[112]
> We are a brave nation, and we act for the good of the whole world
> In the Dwapar era, Kuber's kingdom was here, and he flew the Pushpak Biman
> And, our forefathers had shown their courage to the world in the wars. ("Mero Desh Nepal" 9)

Similarly, in the poem "Ghar Pani Chhaina Dai Mero" ("I Don't Even Have a Home, Brother"), Miya says that he is "tempted to bring the *Satya Yuga*", the era of righteousness, mentioned in the Hindu scriptures, where everything is perfect (8). In the poem "Tyo Kavi Kasto Chha?" ("What Is that Poet Like?"), he writes: "One who, as a human, does not serve another human/Will not be able to cross the Vaitarani River, and will get caught up in the hell" (3). According to the Hindu scripture, *Garuda Purana*, only those who live a virtuous life will be able to cross the Vaitarani River, and go to heaven, whereas the rest will be swept away by the river and taken to hell. Similarly, in the poem "Rani Chari" ("Scarlet Minivet Bird"), Miya asks:

> Should I become Bali, the king, and give generous donations
> Or, Should I become Bidur, and offer wisdom to all
> Should I become Kuber, and amass massive wealth
> Or, shall I become Arjun, and defeat all in the war? (2)

Bali, Bidur, Kuber, and Arjun, are all characters from Hindu mythology, and Miya repeatedly refers to them. Meanwhile, his own ethnic and religious identity as a Muslim from the Nepali hills, or any aspect of his faith is nowhere mentioned. In this way, Miya becomes the sort of 'true Nepali citizen' that the Panchayat system aimed at producing, someone who was perfect in his loyalty to the trinity of Panchayat ideals, the monarchy, Hinduism and the Nepali

[112] Ram is a Hindu god, worshipped as the sixth incarnation of lord Vishnu. He is believed to have been born in Ayodhya, in present day India, and married to Sita, the daughter of King Janak, from Janakpur, in present day Nepal.

language, and definitely not an 'antinational element'.[113] Unfortunately, he could only achieve this at the expense of his own religious and cultural identity.

3. Christians in Nepali Literature

John Barclay, in his essay "The Church in Nepal: Analysis of Its Gestation and Growth" dates the earliest recorded entry of Christians into Nepal to 1628 when Father Cabral, a Jesuit priest, visited Kathmandu (189). According to Barclay, the first Christian missionaries to live and preach in Nepal were the Capuchin fathers from the Vatican, who arrived in Kathmandu on March 14, 1703 (189). They converted the local Newars to Christianity and built a small church in Wotu Tole ("History of Christians in Nepal" n.p.). When the Gorkhali king P N Shah was planning to attack Kathmandu, Jaya Prakash Malla, the king of Kathmandu, sought the help of the East India Company. The Gorkhalis defeated the army that was en route to Kathmandu. After the Gorkhalis took over Kathmandu, the Christian community was held responsible for the scheme of inviting British soldiers to fight the Gorkhalis, and were expelled. The Capuchin fathers and a small group of local Christian converts left the Kathmandu valley in 1769 and found their way to Bettiah, India. This was one of the early incidents that led the rulers of the newly consolidated Hindu state to form a negative view of Christians. The defeat of Nepal in the Anglo-Nepal War (1814-1816) and the signing of the Sugauli Treaty (1816) led to further resentment against the British and the Christians. However, a small group of people continued to practice Christianity and secretly convert people into the faith. Whenever these activities came to the notice of the state everyone involved would be punished. This trend continued throughout the Panchayat years.

[113] "अराष्ट्रिय तत्त्व" (anti-national element), or more commonly, its abbreviation "अ.त.", was a term used to refer to anyone who did not agree with or comply with the guidelines of the nation, nationalism, and ideal citizen that the Panchayat laid out.

It is important to note here that while the historical records show that Nepalis started converting to Christianity from as early as the 17th century, the state continually refused to acknowledge their existence, even until the second half of the 20th century. It was only in 1961 that the census report finally mentioned them, only to be dropped again in the 1971 report. From 1981 onwards Christians have been regularly listed in the census reports. With the decadal growth of 226% and 268% in the periods between 1991-2001 and 2001-2011 respectively, Christianity is the fastest-growing religion in Nepal at present. This rapid growth, primarily gained through proselytization, is another reason why Hindus are wary of the Christians. It is not surprising, therefore, that those who were against transforming Nepal from a Hindu to a secular country still believe that federalism and secularism were primarily Christian-donor-driven agendas.

Despite the change in constitutional provisions and the modestly growing number of Christians, the general bias of the state and people from other faiths against Christians has not changed. For instance, since multiparty democracy was introduced in 1990, all the major political parties in Nepal have formed and maintained a Muslim wing, but no political party has a Christian wing, so far. Similarly, news about Christians in the mass media is either non-existent or mostly negative and unlike all the other religious minorities, Christians are on the whole absent from Nepali literature, even today. Just like the state and the majority of the Hindu populace, mainstream Nepali literature has persistently avoided them, or whenever they are mentioned, portrayed them in a negative or comical light. The only literary work that has dealt with a Christian character at some length is "Prabhu Maila" ("Lord Maila") in Upendra Subba's anthology *Lato Pahad*. However, even a writer like Subba, who is known for his works about people from the margins, has not been able to maintain an empathetic attitude towards a Christian character. Prabhu Maila, a devout Christian convert is presented as a laughing stock, mocked throughout the story and ultimately chastised.

Prabhu Maila's real name is Keshman, but since he is the second son in the family, he is known as Maila.[114] After living a rough life and earning notoriety in his village, he escapes to Assam and starts working as a labourer. There he comes in contact with the rebel Bodo people, converts to Christianity, and transforms from an unrestrained scoundrel to a devoted believer. He returns to the village after some years and starts working as a publicist of Christianity. Wherever he goes and whatever he talks about, he always refers to Prabhu, i.e. the Lord. Therefore, the villagers give him yet another name, Prabhu Maila (literally, Lord Maila). In this particular episode, he comes across a group of villagers, Dabaley, Purney, Kokma Thuley, and Mansingh, who are carrying goods from the town in the plains to their village in the hills. As soon as he meets them, his preaching begins, and this irritates the tired Kirat porters right from the beginning. After walking together for a while, the porters stop for lunch. They make a fire, cook some lunch, and take a portion each from their share and give it to Prabhu Maila. When Prabhu Maila, instead of thanking them, thanks "the Lord a million times" for "providing him a lunch even in the middle of the forest" (16), Kokma Thuley goes mad. He hurls away Prabhu Maila's lunch and starts shouting at him. The story ends with Prabhu Maila leaving the scene uttering "I became a diamond thrown into the pig shed" (17).

"Prabhu Maila," on the surface, is a light-hearted story supposedly intended to make readers laugh. However, the story appears in an anthology that has been praised for its portrayal of people and cultures from the margins. This raises the question of whether Subba, in his attempt to give a voice to one minority group, is laughing at another. Despite a pugnacious past, Prabhu Maila seems to be a devout Christian. Even when he is made fun of or threatened with violence, he does not lose his calm or retaliate. Instead of being rewarded, these virtuous qualities are turned into fodder for jokes, and if any inference can be taken

[114] In Nepal, it is customary even today to address children in the order of their birth: the oldest boy is called *jetha* (*jethi*, if it's a girl), the next one is called *maila* (*maili*), and in the same way *saila* (*saili*), *kaila* (*kaili*), and so on. The youngest one is called *kanchha* (or, *kaanchhi*).

from the ending of the story he is punished for becoming a Christian. In this sense, Subba's characters in this story, all from the minority Kirat religious background, seem to be in unison with the exclusionary attitude of the state while dealing with another, even weaker, minority group. This is yet another example of the oppressed turning themselves into oppressors discussed in the previous chapter. In most of his works, Subba is critical of how the minority Kirats (and other ethnic and religious minorities) are treated by the state and the Khas-Arya establishment, whereas in the case of Christians, he seems to be siding with the perpetrators, and taking upon the role of an oppressor.

4. *Ethnic/Indigenous Religions in Nepali Literature*

Many of the indigenous religions, such as Prakriti, Bon, and Kirat that were earlier considered to be sects within Hinduism, are now categorised separately in the Census reports. As mentioned above, the first census carried out in 1952/54 listed only three religions, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. It was only in the 2011 Census, we gained a more complete picture of the diversity of religions in Nepal when more than ten religions identified in the report. People following Hinduism, Buddhism, and indigenous religions have lived together in Nepal for hundreds of years, even sharing shrines and deities in many cases. Since its formative years, and even more so during the Panchayat period, the state has sought to put them under the umbrella of Hinduism, and treat all the heterogeneous faiths as one group. While there were some isolated efforts in the past, more substantial and sustained attempts toward reclaiming and embracing separate religious identity among indigenous-ethnic people took place only after the 1990s political change. The 2007 transformation of the country was an important milestone in that direction.

In recent years, many ethnic/indigenous writers, have written and published powerful works of poetry, fiction, and drama that, on the one hand, protest against the religious

hegemony of the Hindu state, and on the other, highlight their rich religious traditions and myths. Poets from the ethnic Kirat community, as in other fronts of dissent, seem to be leading the movement on this front, too. In the works of these Kirat writers, the old rituals come to replace the new ones, there are repeated references to Kirat gods instead of Hindu Gods, there are references to Kirat religious myths, and even an image of the indigenous homeland, Limbuwan, as an eternal concept, as eternal as the universe imagined by any other religion. As discussed in Chapter 2, mainstream Nepali literature is saturated with allusions to Hindu-Sanskrit literature, mythology and worldview. Contemporary Kirat writers have not only held back from referencing that tradition but also draw their metaphorical language from their scriptures, for instance, the *Mundhum*, and Kirat folklore. Bairagi Kainla, a renowned Kirat poet, and ex-Chancellor of Nepal Academy, in his preface to Hangyug Agyat's poetry anthology *Karangko Hirasat* (*The Ribcage Prison*), "Race Consciousness and *Karangko Hirasat*" writes: "In the recent days, ethnic discrimination, gender and social inequalities, and languages, religions, and cultures belonging to marginalised people are beginning to find a space in Nepali literature" (5). He urges people to accept and welcome this change because "if the intellectuals and creative people do not take this change in ideas and actions positively, it only gives space for those aiming at creating social disharmony" (5).

According to Hindu mythology, demon king Bali (Mahabali) was very powerful and wealthy and exercised control over the whole universe. Since this put the gods in a difficult position, Lord Vishnu went to him disguised as a dwarf, the *Baman avatar*, and asked for land equal to his three steps. Bali, who was known for his utmost generosity, did not realise the deception, and in a moment of hubris, immediately accepted the request. But this unusual request went topsy-turvy when Baman, i.e. the dwarf avatar of Vishnu, grew into a gigantic being. His first step covered all the earth and the underworld, and his second step covered all the skies and heavens. Known for his infinite generosity, when he asked where he should put

his third step as promised, Bali requested him to put it on his head. Thus, Mahabali was pushed to the netherworld by Baman's foot, and 'dharma' was 'restored' to the universe.

Kirats, on the other hand, believe that Bali or Mahabali mentioned in the Hindu stories, is the Kirat king Balihang from Kirat myths. Therefore, in recent years Kirat writers have interpreted this story as yet another one of Khas-Arya domination over the indigenous-ethnic people through treachery and deception. In the poem "Ma Balihangko Abhyudaya" ("Resurrection of Balihang"), Agyat declares that the indigenous peoples will not be cheated by the Hindu 'gods' anymore or sacrifice everything just for the sake of becoming generous:

> I have
> Resurrected from the netherworlds
> Sprinkling water
> Upon the faces of my fainted kinsfolks
> A resurrection of Balihang
> First, against coward treachery
> Next, against the fistful of the night. (53)

Agyat uses the story of Bali as a parallel to the story of the domination of ethnic people by the Khas-Arya people in Nepal. But unlike in the original version, this story ends with the resurrection of Balihang from the netherworld, and his coming back to encourage people to fight against injustice. This poem also reminds us of how the vast native lands that belonged to Kirats, Madheshis, and Tharus were taken by the state, and that the Khas-Arya elites, in the last 150 years or so, through force and through a number of deceptive laws and expropriating provisions such as *birta*, have been doing so (as discussed in Chapter 5).

In another poem "Ganeshnath", Hangyug Agyat asks why only Hindu rules and traditions should prevail in a country where so many religions and scriptures co-exist: "Father Pundit!/Why should only your scriptures rule the country?" (33). In response to such a question, it was common to make an allegation of separatism when people from the margins and minority groups asked for their rights. Agyat asks:

How is it separatism
when we try to be ourselves?
And how your Varna-system
not separatism for the whole of humanity? (33)

The *varna* system, as we have discussed above, is the most divisive and the longest-lasting discriminatory rule in Nepal. Therefore, Agyat expresses his disagreement when the indigenous-ethnic people are accused of being 'separatist' when they ask for equal rights.

Another important aspect of these poems is that in them the old Kirat traditions and rituals are more common than Hindu traditions and rituals. There are repeated references to the Kirat rituals of *Tangsing*, *Mangena*, and *Yupparung* in the poems of Agyat and Subba (65). We find recurring references to Kirat gods instead of Hindu Gods in these poems such as "Budha Subba" (Mangalak 49), "Yummasammang-thebasammang" (Smriti 75), and "Tageraningwa bhumang" (Smriti 23). In *Karangko Hirasat*, "Limbuwan", the land of the ethnic Limbus (Kirants), is portrayed as an everlasting region. Agyat writes: "Ask the gods who live near Faktalung/Where is the ink that can write an end of Limbuwan?" (36).

Contemporary Kirat poetry is undergoing a clear shift in terms of its religious identification. While on the one hand, Kirat poets question the hegemony of the Hindu state, on the other, they are reclaiming and celebrating their religious roots, traditions, and rituals. Since much of the political and social history of the people on the margins has been destroyed and lost during the prolonged hegemonic regime, one of the ways to reconstruct it is by going back to the religious roots and rituals. Through attempts to find answers to contemporary problems in old traditions and rituals, these Kirat poets not only try to reconnect to their roots, but by doing so, they resist the dominant religious force. In the case of Muslims and Christians, and to a large extent, Dalits too, their stories are being told not by themselves but by poets and writers coming from other ethnic/caste groups. Indigenous poets and writers

stand out in this regard in the sense that they have arrived at a point where they can tell their stories themselves.

Conclusion: Still a Hindu State?

Dashain, the biggest festival of Hindus in Nepal, has achieved the status of the national festival over the years. During a month-long celebration that segues into another festival, Tihar, all schools, universities, and most of the government offices are closed, and the entire country comes to a standstill. People living or working abroad return to Nepal, and people living in the cities go back to their family homes in the villages. The most important day of Dashain is the tenth day, *Bijaya Dashami*, when everyone receives *tika*, *jamara*[115], and blessings from the senior members of their family. During the monarchy era, apart from receiving *tika*, *jamara*, and blessings from their family members, many people, including government officials in Kathmandu, would go to the royal palace to receive *tika*, *jamara*, and blessings from the king. Even after the country transformed into a secular republic, presidents and prime ministers have awkwardly put on royal robes from yesteryears and continued to offer *tika*, *jamara*, and blessings to government officials as well as commoners. This is just one of the many religious-cultural roles that heads of the secular republic have inherited from previous Hindu kings, and they are regularly criticised by intellectuals and the media for not upholding the spirit of the secular republic.

There is another aspect to Dashain apart from the uproar it creates every year when the leaders of the new republic re-enact the roles of the erstwhile monarchs. There has also been a trend in recent years among some ethnic groups to boycott the festival altogether.

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[115] *Tika* is prepared by mixing rice grains in yoghurt and vermillion powder. *Jamara*, the barley sprouts, are sown on the first day of Dashain, *Ghatasthapana*. They are usually kept in a dark room, and therefore grow into yellow sprouts, which are cropped and used on the tenth day in the place of flowers, which are a common part of every other Hindu worships and rituals.

While Dashain was celebrated by these groups for many generations, the consensus among them now is that the festival was imposed upon them by the Hindu state, and one of the ways they can come out of the clutches of Hinduism and reclaim their original indigenous culture is by rejecting older dominant practices altogether. While there are many Hindu festivals celebrated throughout the year, Dashain has been the particular target of protest because it is publicized by the mainstream media and the politicians as the national Nepali festival. Therefore, every year during Dashain, Nepali newspapers and magazines, as well as radio and television, are filled with pro- and anti-Dashain articles and talk shows that pit indigenous intellectuals and activists against the Hindu activists.

Even in the secular republic, cow slaughter is strictly prohibited by the law in Nepal. The *Muluki Ain* refers to it as *gau hatya*, meaning “cow murder”, and it can be punishable by life imprisonment. The irony of this provision is that many Nepali ethnicities, including most of the religious minority groups, including Dalits, in principle, eat beef. This contradiction can be seen in the Nepali media which regularly reports news about cow slaughter, false charges, and the arrests that follow. Writers like Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala in the 1960s to Upendra Subba in recent times have dealt with the issue of cow slaughter in their literary works. In “Lato Pahad” by Subba, when the protagonist, Kokma Thuley, is falsely charged with cow slaughter and arrested, his family and neighbours find themselves in a helpless situation. None of them speaks the language that the state administration uses or understands, nor do they have any clue about the complex legal process they have to undergo in dealing with a case like that. In *Sumnima*, written by Koirala[116] more than half a century before “Lato Pahad”, there is a similar issue dealt with in a completely different way. In ancient times, a Hindu prince defeats the indigenous Kirants and Bhillas, the natives of the eastern hills and

[116] In politics, he is usually referred to as B P Koirala (or, simply B P), whereas in literature, he is generally referred to as Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala.

plains respectively, and declares that cow and pig sacrifices will be banned within his territory. The decree stupefies both the communities and the leader of the Bhilla clan urges the community to go for a final do-or-die war with the Hindu prince. The Kirat chief, Bijuwa, however, comes up with a wiser plan that will, on the one hand, save them from Hindu retribution, yet also let them continue with their tradition of sacrificing cows and pigs to their gods. He tells his people: "It is not a wise thing to slaughter ourselves [by going to war with them] just because they do not allow us to slaughter a cow within their territory. Let's just move the place of slaughter beyond their territories, and their prohibition will not be effective there" (*Sumnima* 27).

If we consider that *Sumnima* was written in the 1960s and *Lato Pahad* very recently, one might expect the latter work would be bolder in raising this issue. However, that is not the case. In *Sumnima*, Koirala does not appear to be against cow slaughter. In fact, through the character Bijuwa, he seems to advocate for the provision of different laws for different people and regions based on their different cultures, religions, and traditions. Subba, however, does not question the legal provision at all. He simply tries to show that, like Kokma Thuley, many people have been falsely accused of cow slaughter, and are suffering as a result of these charges. This difference in stance between the two writers, writing at different times on the same issue, could be a result of their different beliefs and viewpoints. If we keep in mind that Subba lives in a society that has come out of the 30-year-long Panchayat indoctrination as a Hindu nation, he must be writing with an awareness that speaking in favour of cow slaughter openly is not easy, and may generate fury in the Hindu establishment.

The way people deal with the issue of cow slaughter is just one example of how the norms of the old Hindu state still hold strong. Even in a secular republic, the traditional

religious roots embedded in Nepali politics continue to play a strong role. Chiara Letizia, in her essay “Shaping Secularism in Nepal”, summarises this ambivalent situation:

> The state is still involved in the management of trusts associated with Hindu gods and temples; government funds are spent on Hindu religious festivals; cow slaughter and conversion are still outlawed; many laws are still based on Hindu norms and values; Hindu temples are found in government buildings, schools, military camps and courts; public holidays are mostly Hindu festivals; and the president of the Republic has in many instances replaced the former Hindu King at public religious functions. In short, secularism seems to face many challenges. (Letizia 67)

Letizia calls Nepal a “post-secular laboratory, where the state’s policy must walk a tightrope, upholding ‘absolute’ secular values such as equal citizenship, and yet balancing the Hindu majority tradition, Hindu fears, and the claims of minorities for social, political and religious recognition” (97). The works of literature written during this period also reflect Letizia's claim. On the one hand, there is a proliferation of literary works dealing with minority religions. On the other, as evident in Subba’s “Lato Pahad” and “Prabhu Maila” or Pandey’s *Loo*, Hindu majority beliefs still significantly influence what is being written and how.

There have been significant changes since 1990, and even more since 2007, in terms of the approach of the state towards religious minorities, as well as their representation in mainstream Nepali literature. All the religions have been tallied and listed in the recent Census reports, there are public holidays during the important festivals of all minority religions, including Christians and Muslims, and the state, as well as the national media, have begun to provide space for all the religions and not just Hinduism. People from religious minority backgrounds have reserved access to jobs in the government and other constitutional bodies. Moreover, as we saw from the above examples, stories from the religious margins have begun appearing in mainstream Nepali literature. While religious minorities in general, and Muslims and Christians in particular, are still underrepresented in Nepali literature, and unlike the case of Kirat writers, religious minorities are yet to find their voice, though the

steps being taken towards this are promising. In brief, while there is no doubt that this is just a beginning and there is much to be done, there are some bright signs in terms of the participation of religious minorities in the state structure in general and their representation in Nepali literature in particular.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION

An Ethno-Cultural Turn, and the Advent of an Inclusive Literature

Nepal's literary landscape has changed beyond recognition in the last thirty years or so. The first major transformation during this period took place in the publication industry, the mainstream readership, and the multifarious literary activities happening simultaneously with them. In her essay "Reaching One's Own People, Reaching the World," the Nepali-Canadian diasporic writer, Manjushree Thapa states that even in the early 2000s, "a print run of five hundred [was] the norm for a short-story or poetry collection, and a print run of two thousand [was] considered phenomenal" (67). Thapa's claim rings true about the state of the Nepali publishing industry from its formative years in the 1950s to the late-1990s, even though normative best sellers of the earlier eras certainly sold more than these numbers on a regular basis. These would include the *Madan Pursakar* winners, literary works prescribed in the school and university syllabi, and popular classics such as Devkota's *Muna Madan*, Bhupi Serchan's *Ghumne Mech Mathi Andho Manchhe*, or Parijat's *Sirishko Phool*. As this study has demonstrated, the scenario gradually started changing after the 1990s People's Revolution and the introduction of multi-party democracy. On the one hand, this political transition ensured basic minimum freedom of expression and removed censorship on a wide variety of literary-cultural products in general. On the other, the worldwide forces of globalisation and neoliberalism that also came to Nepal introduced an open market economy, which brought more investment from the private sector into the publishing industry. Furthermore, rising literacy, growing numbers of writers from more diverse backgrounds, and a heightened interest in home-grown stories, resulting largely from indigenous and ethnic identity movements, have also contributed to this flourishing new wave of contemporary literatures.

It was Narayan Wagle's *Palpasa Café*, a 2005 novel written with the Maoist insurgency as its backdrop that proved to be a turning point for the Nepali publishing industry and readership. The novel sold more than 25,000 copies in the first year of its publication and is now claimed to have sold more than 150,000 copies in all formats. What Kiran Krishna Shrestha of Nepalaya, the publisher of the book, shared during an interview about a survey he conducted before publishing *Palpasa Café* is quite revealing with regards to what these numbers mean: "When we asked the publishers about the number of copies we should publish, we received very discouraging suggestions. Most of them recommended to print 1000 copies, a handful advised printing 2000" (K. Shrestha, *Entrepreneur Kiran Shrestha of Nepalaya* n.p.). Wagley, an editor of the then largest selling Nepali broadsheet daily, *Kantipur*, was already popular with his weekly column titled "Coffee Guff" ("Coffee Talk"), especially among a younger generation of readers, for his casual, conversational style of writing, which contributed to the acclaim of the novel, too. The success of *Palpasa Café*, not only in terms of sales but also in generating a wider critical discussion, significantly boosted this new trend in Nepal's publishing industry. From a time when literary works were mostly published either by Sajha Prakashan, or the then Royal Nepal Academy,[117] both government-owned and regulated institutions, much of Nepal's publishing industry has now shifted to the private sector. Dull prints on pale papers have been replaced by beautifully designed glossy

[117] *Gorkha Bhasha Prakashini Samiti* (Gorkha Language Publication Committee), which was later named *Nepal Bhasha Prakashini Samiti*, was established in 1913 with an aim of promoting Nepali language and literature. Michael Hutt mentions that the Committee had a dual role, that of "publishing books that met its approval" as well as operating "a strong code of censorship" (7). Its instruction read: "If anyone wishes to publish a book, he must first bring it to the committee for inspection. No book may be published without the stamp of the committee's approval.... If a book is published without the committee's approval, its publisher will be fined 50 rupees. If the contents of this book are deemed to be improper, all copies will be seized and punishment proclaimed and meted out" (qtd. in Hutt, *Himalayan Voices* 7-8). While the Committee's power as the single authority for censorship decreased when it was turned into a cooperative called Sajha in 1961, with some occasional exceptions, it largely remained as conservative wing of the government, and avoided publishing anything overtly political. Similarly, *Nepal Sahitya Kala Academy* (renamed, Royal Nepal Academy in 1967, and Nepal Academy in 2007) was established in 1957 under the patronage of the king, and remained largely pro-Panchayat during its foundational years. Even after the 1990 (and, 2007) political transformation, most of the academicians are elected on the basis of their affiliation to the ruling political parties, and the Academy is seen as a largely pro-government institution, even today.

books. It is not uncommon for a 'bestseller' to easily sell more than 50,000 copies in recent years, and several other books, such as Buddhi Sagar's *Karnali Blues*, Amar Neupane's *Seto Dharti*, Jagadish Ghimire's *Antarmanko Yatra*, and Bijaya Kumar's *Khushi* are claimed to have hit that mark.[118] This newfound literary enthusiasm, however, is not limited just to the growing readership of printed books in the open marketplace but is evident in the periodical press too. These days, almost all the Saturday supplements of broadsheet dailies,[119] and all the weekly and monthly magazines, have a separate section reserved for literature. Book clubs and discussion forums have popped up in every major city. Literary festivals organised in Kathmandu and other cities are attended by thousands of people every year. These multiple factors attest to a vibrant milieu where new voices can enter the arena and find expression.

The content, form and language of literature, as well as the background of the writers, have undergone an enormous transformation, as the thesis chapters have shown. Thapa, in her 2018 Martin Chautari Foundation Lecture, "(Almost) Everything I learned about Nepali Literature is Wrong," expressed her regret and revulsion at the fact that Nepali literature, for most of its 150-year long history,[120] has been comprised almost exclusively of writers hailing from just one ethnicity and region:

> As my engagement with Nepali literature deepened, I noticed that other than a few "regional" writers, most writers were centred in Kathmandu, as were their stories. It was also hard to miss the glaring fact that most writers were Bahun or Chhetris and based in Kathmandu; and the overwhelming number of writers were men. The invisibility of women, Dalits, *janatatis* [ethnic people], and writers from outside of Kathmandu—the exclusivity of Nepali literature—puzzled me at first, and then began to needle [sic] me. (Thapa 223)

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[118] In a personal interview (via. Facebook Messenger on March 8, 2018), Ajit Baral, proprietor of Fine Print, one of the leading publishing houses in Nepal, told me that his best sellers sell more than 50 thousand copies in general. Fine Print recently (August 2021) launched the *Shatasahasra sanskaran* (one hundred thousand copies edition) of Haribansha Acharya's autobiography *China Haraaeko Maanchhe*. Apart from serious literary works, works of popular fiction such as Subin Bhattarai's *Summer Love* and *Saya*, and Krishna Abiral's *Rakta Kunda*, are also claimed to have sold more than 50 thousand copies.

[119] Nepal has only one day weekend, on Saturday, in general.

[120] Bhanubhakta's *Ramayana*, considered to be the first major literary work in the Nepali language, is believed to have been written in the 1850s (Hutt, *Nepali, a National Language* 119). It, however, was published only in 1887, through the initiatives taken by another poet from the formative years of Nepali literature, Motiram Bhatta (Hutt 126).

When we remind ourselves that the majority of educated or literate people, even until the 1980s, were upper-caste men, an elite group to which not only most of the writers but also the majority of readers belonged, it is not very surprising that even the subjects of their writings had a very limited scope. Moreover, even when they wrote about people and places beyond their immediate domain, they mostly assumed an outsider's perspective. Yug Pathak points out the result of this was that "the life and social values reflected in this literature was very limited and inadequate" (183).

In another essay, "The Democratization of the Nepali Language," Thapa describes her early years of learning the Nepali language and reading Nepali literature as her "introduction to Nepal's Chhetri-Bahun language and literature" (Thapa n.p.). Thapa is not alone in holding this view. As discussed in Chapter 1, critics such as Yug Pathak in *Mangena*, C K Lal in *To be a Nepalese*, and several poets and writers from the ethnic, linguistic and regional margins, have highlighted the exclusionary nature of mainstream Nepali literature. Just like the publication industry, the Khas-Arya monopolisation of mainstream Nepali literature was forced to change gradually from the 1990s, due to the growing awareness of socio-cultural exclusion and the assertion of identities and expressions among indigenous-ethnic peoples. The 1996-2006 Maoist insurgency further exposed the hierarchy and divide that existed in Nepali society along ethnic, linguistic, regional, and religious lines, and intensified the emerging voices of erstwhile marginalised and minority populaces. With the ethnic and regional polarisation Nepali society underwent during the decade-long Maoist war, and the heated debates that took place during this period along socio-political and cultural fault-lines, Nepali literature took a significant ethno-cultural turn. Minority issues and marginal voices became prominent in the mainstream and public sphere from the first decade of the 21st century, resulting in the earlier narratives of dominant Nepali literature undergoing a tectonic

shift. Till then, Nepali writers had been working with two major orientations: on the one hand, there were writers preoccupied with the state's call to serve in its integrationist mission of *eutai bhasha eutai bhesh* (one language, one costume), such as Bhimnidhi Tiwari, Dharma Raj Thapa, and Madhav Ghimire. On the other, there were writers who had vowed to struggle for the universal ideals of freedom, democracy, equality, and justice, as seen in the works of Bishweshwor Prasad Koirala, Gopal Prasad Rimal, Bhupi Serchan, Ramesh Bikal, Dhruba Chandra Gautam, and the like. This was a transformative time when diverse literary voices in Nepal took a huge stride from abstract humanistic themes to more concrete local concerns.

One issue that should not be overlooked here is that from as early as the Rana period, mainstream Nepali writers had written passionately about the injustices prevalent in Nepali society and the hardships and sufferings of the downtrodden people, sometimes in symbolic and roundabout ways, at other times in more direct and forceful ways. Every society has its own understanding, and pace, of progress, and these writers worked with the awareness that their age could afford. It may be unfair for us to expect these 20th-century writers to intervene in what we could now call 21st-century concerns. During the earlier periods, the universal issues of freedom and democracy probably appeared to be more pressing, and they took centre stage. Issues of minority languages, ethnicity and religion did not surface as matters of urgent and immediate concern, as is true in the literatures of other regions of Asia and the colonised worlds. Moreover, one might argue that without addressing the issues of basic rights and freedom of expressions, it was not possible for the more specific issues of ethnic inclusion to gain prominence.

At the same time, we cannot overlook the fact that the majority of the 'progressive' or even 'revolutionary' writers, who fought and wrote against the autocratic Panchayat system, were men from the upper-caste Hindu background. What they wrote primarily represented their immediate concerns and what they thought to be matters of importance. Even when

these writers adopted a humanistic viewpoint, the issues that they highlighted and the solutions that they put forward, were usually determined by the concerns of their privileged positions rather than of those on the margins. Therefore, while the democratisation of Nepal was a process that started as early as the 1930s, and continued through a series of important movements throughout the 20th century, and mainstream Nepali literature was a big contributor to this struggle, the democratisation of Nepali literature, especially in its inclusion of diverse marginal linguistic, ethnic, religious, regional, and even gender voices, is distinctly 21st-century attainment.

As this study shows, contemporary writers are now prolifically writing about what has been cited as the major grounds of exclusion in Nepal: gender, caste/ethnicity, language, religion, and geographical region. As exemplified by contemporary Kirat writings, the narrative of a single superior, pure Nepali language is being challenged, and different regional and ethnic varieties, many of them heavily influenced by mother tongues other than Nepali, are finding their ways into mainstream Nepali literature. Similarly, as we saw through a survey of contemporary writings on Tamangs, indigenous and ethnic concerns that were hardly mentioned in the mainstream literature during its nearly 150-year long history, have now become primary subjects. Ethnic myths and folklore are being unearthed and re-told, old monolithic versions of history are being questioned and (re)written, and multiple alternative genealogies are being crafted. Indigenous and ethnic aesthetics are making an intervention in a field almost exclusively dominated by Hindu-Sanskrit and Western conceptualisations of art, literature, and beauty. These newfound possibilities of re-exploring indigenous histories and reclaiming ethnic glory through the medium of native languages, cultures, and myths has also shed light on how far the homogenising mission of the state has penetrated, and what strata of the indigenous/ethnic cultural component are still intact. There has been a visible shift from the contemplation of the prosperity of the *Nepali jati*, the Nepali people at large as

a homogenised entity, to the long-endured sufferings of specific *bhasha-bhashi* and *janajati*, the dialect speaking indigenous and ethnic peoples.

In the same vein, as exemplified by a growing body of literary works on Nepali Muslims, the almost complete absence of religious minorities in mainstream literature is progressively changing, and while there is still much to be done, some important steps have been taken in the direction of their acknowledgement and inclusion. Similarly, geographical regions that remained peripheral to the seat of power in the central hills, such as the mountains on the north, the Tarai-Madhesh on the south, and the remote hills in the far-east and far-west, which had remained peripheral if not non-existent subjects of Nepali literature are increasingly being written about. In addition, issues of gender and disability are also finding their place in mainstream Nepali literature. These days, it is not uncommon to see a new book coming out every week that digs into one or the other issue of marginalisation, issues that have never been written about in Nepali literature before that. Within a very short period of time, Nepali literature has been able to tell the stories of *badis*, *kamlaris*, *deukis*, and *kariyas*.[121] Kings defeated by the Gorkhalis and written out of history, as in Yogesh Raj's *Ranahar*, and women who rebelled against the repressive patriarchal state, as in Neelam Karki Niharika's *Yogmaya*, have been re-discovered and recognised in literary works.

Another very important change that has taken place in Nepali literature over recent years is that more and more people from the margins are writing their own stories, in contrast to a long tradition of being represented by outsiders, usually upper-caste men. It is not writers like Bishweshwor Prasad Koirala who are writing about Kirats anymore; Kirat writers themselves, such as Rajan Mukarung, Bimala Tumkhewa, and Pranika Koyu have stepped in

[121] *Nathiya* (2018) by Saraswati Pratikshya is a novel on Badi women who have been forced into prostitution for several centuries. Krishna Abiral's novel *Kariya* (2020) deals with a system of slavery that was in practice until the 20th century. Several poems and plays as well as autobiographies have been written on the topic of *Kamlari*, a form of bonded labour involving girls that was in practice in the western plains of Nepal until the beginning of the 21st century.

to shoulder the responsibility of telling the stories of their own Sumnima. Phulman Bal, Bina Theeng Tamang, and Raju Syangtan, to name a few, are writing powerful stories of the Tamangs. Buddhisagar and Ram Lal Joshi are telling tales of hardship from their remote far-western hills, and Prakash Saha and Muna Chaudhary are writing about the sufferings that Madheshis and Tharus have undergone for hundreds of years. Jhamak Ghimire's *Jeevan Kanda ki Phool* is the story of her struggle growing up and living with disability, and Niranjan Kunwar's *Between Queens and the Cities* is the story of a gay man and the shaping of queer identity in Nepali society. Similarly, Neelam Karki Niharika, Anbika Giri, Bimala Tumkhewa, Bina Tamang, Uma Subedi, Archana Thapa, Sarita Tiwari, Sima Abhas, Pragati Rai, Saraswati Pratikshya, and Siwani Singh Tharu, to name a few, are continuing the tradition of questioning the patriarchy begun by women writers of the past such as Parijat, Banira Giri, Toya Gurung, Bhagirathi Shrestha, Prema Shah, and Dev Kumari Thapa.

It is important to reiterate here that it is not only the background of the writers and the content of literature but the form, language and style of literature that have undergone some important changes. From a time when Nepali literature was written in what was referred to as *shuddha*, or even better, *vishuddha* Nepali (standard/'pure' Nepali), a language "codified over the Panchayat era and promoted through the schools, and through cultural institutions such as the Royal Nepal Academy" (Thapa 22), it now incorporates language varieties from diverse ethnic and regional backgrounds. The practice of sourcing metaphors and figurative language from indigenous repertoires, and using allusions from ethnic myths and folklore, is becoming more and more common. With a host of new writers, diverse content from heterogeneous backgrounds and sources, changing style and language of literature, and the arrival of new books on a myriad of indigenous topics every week, in the last fifteen years, Nepali literature has taken important steps towards the possibility of becoming a

heterogeneous, polyglot and multi-vocal literature, in its attempt to become truly inclusive and representative.

Since the major change Nepali literature has undergone is more visible around the time of and after the 2007 political transition, this may give the impression that it was the political changes that single-handedly heralded literary and cultural change, but that is not the whole truth. As mentioned above, the changes in literature were underway from as early as the 1990s, or even before that, when the process of political transition was just beginning. In fact, if we look at the history of modern Nepal, as in every other country, writers and artists have always been at the forefront of political transformation. Bishweshwor Prasad Koirala, the leader of the anti-Rana movement was himself a renowned and prolific writer. A number of Marxist politicians such as Modanath Prashrit, Pradeep Gyawali, and Pradeep Nepal, progressive intellectuals like Khagendra Sangraula, Manjul, and Bimal Nibha, and notable writers like Parijat, were actively involved in the anti-Panchayat movement and wrote prolifically to expose its autocratic nature. There was an even larger number of writers and artists who participated in the 2006 People's Revolution II.[122] Beginning with Krishna Lal Adhikari in 1920, dozens of writers were persecuted by the state during the Rana, the Panchayat, and even the post-1990 democratic years. Therefore, as much as literature has benefitted from the socio-political changes, writers and artists have contributed equally to bring them about.

Diverse content as well as the non-dominant identity of the writers in contemporary Nepali literature is reflected also in the literary awards given in recent years. Over the last ten years, three women have won the most prestigious Nepali literary award, Madan Puraskar, namely Jhamak Ghimire (*Jeevan Kandha ki Phool*, 2011), Radha Paudel (*Khalangama*

[122] On Chaitra 30, 2062 Bikram Samvat (i.e., 12 April , 2006), writers and artists gathered at Gurukul Theatre in Kathmandu with an aim of defying the curfew imposed by king Gyanendra, and were brutally attacked by the police. These days, "Srashta Chaitra 30" award is given every year to writers who have contributed

Hamala, 2014), and Neelam Karki Niharika (*Yogmaya*, 2018). This number is significant if we consider the fact that the only other woman who has won it in its sixty-three-year long history was Parijat (*Sirishko Phool*, 1965). Moreover, nine out of ten books that have been awarded the Madan Pursakar in the last ten years, tell the story of/from one or other margins. Chandra Prakash Baniya's novel, *Maharani*, for instance, that won the Madan Puraskar for the year 2020, is the story of a forgotten queen from a small principality in western Nepal. *Ranahar*, by Yogesh Raj, awarded in 2019, is the story of the king of Bhakatapur, Ranajit Malla, who was defeated by the Gorkhali king, P N Shah, and is a fine example of rewriting history from the perspective of those who were defeated in the Gorkhali expansionist war. In the same vein, *Yogmaya* by Neelam Karki Niharika, winner of the award in 2018, is a biographical novel revolving around the life and times of Yogmaya Neupane (1867-1941), a Nepali poet, social reformer, and spiritual leader, who led sixty-seven women to mass suicide in 1941 as a protest against the treatment of women by the then patriarchal society and the state. Ghanashyam Kandel's epic, *Dhritrashtra*, awarded in 2017, recounts the story of *The Mahabharata* from the perspective of the blind king, Dhritrashtra, and highlights the issue of disability and the need to look at it from a different perspective. Ramlal Joshi's *Aina*, which won the award in 2016, tells the story of the mid- and far-western region of Nepal, mostly left out by the mainstream Nepali literature throughout its history. Rajan Mukarung's *Damini Bheer*, which won the prize in 2013, is a powerful commentary on ethnic, regional, linguistic, as well as caste and gender-based exclusions. Similarly, Amar Neupane's *Seto Dharti*, the winner in 2012, is a harrowing tale of a child-widow, told by a male writer. In his 2014 essay, "Writers, Readers, and the Sharing of Consciusness: Five Nepali Novels", Michael Hutt discusses "five of the most commercially successful Nepali novels of the period 2005-2010" (28), and observed that "despite the prevalence of a discourse of inclusion in Nepali society during the period, none of these novels was written by a woman or by a member of a

marginalised or minority group (28). He, however, hoped that "a survey of this kind conducted five or ten years from now will discover a greater multiplicity of voices and a continued florescence of new perspectives" (28). The present studied carried out about ten years after Hutt's survey, as the above list shows, finds literary works from gendered, ethnic, and religious margins as not only already being popular commercially but also successful in making imperative interventions in the Nepali literary mainstream.

It is not possible to infer much just by cursorily looking at an award given over a few years. Moreover, literary awards may have their own interests and limitations. When the Madan Puraskar was awarded to a purportedly anti-establishment book, *Damini Bheer* by a self-proclaimed 'anarchist' author, Rajan Mukarung, in 2014, a section of the Kathmandu literary circle suspected that the Madan Pursakar Guthi was attempting to ride the wave of political transformation and working towards changing its otherwise moderately conservative image through an indigenous/ethnic endorsement.[123] The ramifications of mainstream literary awards trying to consecrate themselves by awarding ethnic writers or promoting books with indigenous contents can be many, but at the least, it proves that the literary trend, as well as the book market, are in favour of writers from the margins and books on indigenous subject matters. The possibility of yesterday's establishment reaping the harvest of today's change is not a bright prospect, but for a change that is only a decade and a half old, it is probably too early to make a broader and more valid hypothesis.

[123] There are occasions in the past when Madan Puraskar was given to progressive writers like Parijat and Modanath Prashrit, even though not to their more 'political' books. Majority of the books that have been awarded in its 63-year long history have been those that are, in essence, apolitical in nature. Some examples include *Nepalko Kanooni Itihaasko Ruprekha* (*An Outline of the Legal History of Nepal*, 2059 BS), *Nepalko Simana* (*The Frontiers of Nepal*, 2057 BS), *Dukhanta Natak ko Srijana Parampara* (*Creative Tradition of [Nepali] Tragic Plays*, 2055 BS), *Nepali Rastrya Jhanda* (*The Nepali National Flag*, 2053 BS), *Madhyamik Nepali Gadhyakhan* (*Modern Nepali Prose-Fiction*, 2050 BS), *Likchhabi Sambatko Nirnaya* (Decisions of Likchhabi Calendar, 2043 BS), *Nepalka Paramparagat Pravidhi* (*Tradition Technologies of Nepal*, 2036 BS), *Karnali Lok Sanskriti* (*Folk Tradition of Karnali*, 2028 BS), and *Nepali Nirwachanko Ruprekha* (*An Outline of Nepali Elections*, 2027 BS), etc. Compare that to the books that were awarded in the last fifteen years: fourteen of them are literary works, and the majority of them deal with marginal issue of one or the other kind.

Moreover, we should not forget that despite the bright prospects for Nepali literature, these changes are neither comprehensive nor lacking in contradictions. To begin with, while an attempt at the 'abrogation' of the so-called Nepali language is underway, and while many contemporary writers are effectively using regional and ethnic varieties of Nepali, works of literature written in languages other than Nepali, even in those languages that have millions of users, can still be counted on the fingers of one hand. Even languages that once had a rich literary tradition and were suppressed during the Rana and the Panchayat period, such as Nepal Bhasha (Newari) and Maithili, have not been able to revive their literary traditions in recent times. In this sense, Nepali has turned into an even more dominant language with a consolidated power. With the growing influence and dominance of the Nepali language through all kinds of mass media and social media, the possibility of minority languages reviving their literary tradition is, unfortunately, getting smaller.[124] Similarly, while those ethnic groups that have growing access to education and resources are becoming their own storytellers, other groups that are further away from "the heart of Nepaliness," to quote David Gellner (23), such as Bhotiyas from the mountains, Muslims from both the hills and the plains, and a large section of Madheshis are still more likely to be represented by outsiders. As we have seen in the discussions in the previous chapters, important interventions have been made to change the status quo of Nepali literature with considerable success, yet there is a long way to go before what is commonly called Nepali literature can also be the literature that is truly representative of and, at the same time, accessible to the Newars of the Kathmandu valley, to the Rais, Limbu, and Tamangs of the central and eastern hills, the Sherpas of the mountains, and the Madheshis and Tharus of the Tarai-Madhesh.

[124] On a positive note, there is, however, a growing trend of making films in ethnic languages in the recent years, mostly showcasing their history as well as their socio-cultural and religious practices.

Apart from the larger socio-political transition and visible literary changes, there are also changes taking place in the everyday markers of 'banal nationalism' indicating that this ethno-symbolic turn is a far-reaching one. The new generation of ethnic parents who were given mainstream Nepali/Khas-Arya names by their parents is now giving ethnic names to their children. In fact, even among the grown-ups, while their official name may have come from Sanskrit/Khas-Arya sources, there is a growing trend of adopting an ethnic name for literary and artistic purpose. The same people who were discouraged from learning their mother tongue and were encouraged to speak Nepali even at home by their parents, so that it would be easier for them to 'assimilate' in the mainstream culture, are now seen encouraging their children to speak their mother tongue. Traditional ethnic costumes and jewellery, which were until recently old-fashioned are making a comeback not only during cultural celebrations and festivals but are also as part of the metropolitan fashion, and are proudly sported by the younger generation. Ethnic music and dances are gradually gaining popularity among the younger generation in the cities, as well as in the immigrant communities all over the world. Ethnic cuisines are becoming visible on the restaurant menus. There seems to be a growing sense of pride in having an ethnic heritage, and in owning it, displaying it, or even flaunting, it.

All political transitions from an old established system to a new one are complicated processes, and Nepal is no exception. The 1951 democratic change came to an early end in 1960 when King Mahendra staged a coup. The 1990's democratic transition was overshadowed by the Maoist insurgency that began in 1996 and climaxed in 2002 when King Gyanendra consolidated all power to himself and made an attempt at direct rule. Similarly, the path to political stability since the transition of the country into a secular federal republic in 2007 has been an equally bumpy one. People's expectations after such a political transition, are high, and so are the disappointments when things do not proceed as per their

expectations. While other indicators of progress may have taken time to manifest, or fizzled out even before they could materialise, the change in awareness regarding the historical and systemic discrimination as well as the rights to equality and justice, usually manifested in artistic/literary progress, has been both an unfailing source as well as an irreversible hallmark of every Nepali political transition. As reflected in the literature of each period, the 1951-transition heralded the principles of the right to life and liberty, the 1990-revolution ensured the ideals of political rights, and the 2007-transformation is on its way to establishing people's cultural rights in terms of acknowledging linguistic, ethnic, religious, and regional identities and enshrining them in the fabric of the national narrative. The pretence of homogeneity in a largely heterogeneous country has been clearly exposed, and important steps towards acknowledging and institutionalising diversity are underway. The most promising place where these ideals of inclusion are reflected in the Nepali literature of the past fifteen years. Despite all its limitations, an exciting body of contemporary Nepali literature is growing into an irrefutable testament of the transformations Nepali society has undergone in recent years in recognising, accommodating, and empowering heterogeneity.

I sum up this study with some lines from Nayan Raj Pandye's novel *Shallipir* (2016), which not only succinctly summarise the sufferings of a 'muted' nation but also presage its emergent movements of introspective observations and articulate expressions:

> We did not speak, and that's how we forgot to speak
> During the journey, we did not turn back to look at ourselves
> And, that's how we stopped recognising ourselves
> We mixed up with the flock of sheep, and we became sheep
> We mixed up with the herd of yaks, and we became yaks
> [. . .]
> Speak out once
> Turn back and look at yourself once
> You don't need a blessing from gods
> The moment you know yourself, you become a man
> You turn into a man from a sheep
> You turn into a man from a yak. (Pandey, *Sallipir* 44-45)

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Appendix A

Number of Caste/Ethnic Groups by Census

Caste/Ethnic group	1991	2001	2011	Increase (1991-2011)
Caste	**30**	**51**	**58**	**28**
Hill Caste	4	4	4	0
Tarai Caste	16	32	34	18
Hill Dalit	5	5	5	0
Tarai Dalit	5	10	15	10
Ethnic	**26**	**45**	**64**	**38**
Mountain	3	5	9	6
Hill	11	20	34	23
Inner Tarai	7	7	7	0
Tarai	5	13	14	9
Other	**4**	**4**	**3**	**-1**
Hill	1	1	0	-1
Tarai	3	3	3	0
Total	**60**	**100**	**125**	**65**

(Sharma, Pitamber. *Some Aspects of Nepal's Social Demography: Census 2011 Update* 17)

Appendix B

Rank and Share in Population of 15 Most Numerous CE Groups, 1991-2011

CE Group	**2011**		**2001**		**1991**		**Social Group**
	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	
Chhetri	1	16.6	1	15.8	1	16.1	Hill Caste
Bahun	2	12.2	2	12.7	2	12.9	Hill Caste
Magar	3	7.1	3	7.1	3	7.2	Hill Ethnic
Tharu	4	6.6	4	6.7	4	6.5	Tarai Ethnic
Tamang	5	5.8	5	5.6	6	5.5	Hill Ethnic
Newar	6	5.0	6	5.5	5	5.6	Hill Ethnic
Kami	7	4.8	8	3.9	7	5.2	Hill Caste/Dalit
Muslim	8	4.4	7	4.3	9	3.5	Tarai Religious
Yadav	9	4.0	9	3.9	8	4.1	Tarai Caste
Rai	10	2.3	10	2.8	10	2.8	Hill Ethnic
Gurung	11	2.0	11	2.4	11	2.4	Hill Ethnic
Damai/Dholi	12	1.8	12	1.7	12	2.0	Hill Caste/Dalit
Thakuri	13	1.6	14	1.5	13	1.6	Hill Caste
Limbu	14	1.5	13	1.6	14	1.5	Hill Ethnic
Sarki	15	1.4	15	1.4	15	1.5	Hill Caste/Dalit
Per Cent of Total Population	77.1		76.9		78.5		

(Sharma, Pitamber. *Some Aspects of Nepal's Social Demography: Census 2011 Update* 19)

Appendix C

Rank and Share of 15 Major Mother Tongues

Mother Tongues	**1991**		**2001**		**2011**	
	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%
Nepali	1	50.3	1	48.6	1	44.6
Maithili	2	11.9	2	12.3	2	11.7
Bhojpuri	3	7.5	3	7.5	3	6.0
Tharu	4	5.4	4	5.9	4	5.8
Tamang	5	4.9	5	5.2	5	5.1
Newar	6	3.7	6	3.6	6	3.2
Bajjika	NR	NR	12	1	7	3.0
Magar	8	2.3	7	3.4	8	3.0
Doteli	NR	NR	NR	NR	9	3.0
Urdu	12	1.1	13	0.8	10	2.6
Rai	7	2.4	9	2.4	11	2.3
Abadhi	9	2	8	2.5	12	1.9
Limbu	10	1.4	10	1.5	13	1.3
Gurung	11	1.2	11	1.5	14	1.2
Baitadeli	NR	NR	NR	NR	15	1.0
Total	94.1		96.2		95.7	

(Sharma, Pitamber. *Some Aspects of Nepal's Social Demography: Census 2011 Update* 32)

Appendix D

Population by Religions, 1991-2011

Religion	**Populati-on 1991**	**%**	**Populati-on 2001**	**%**	**Populati-on 2011**	**%**	**Dec-adal Gro-wth 1991 - 2001**	**Dec-adal Gro-wth 2001 - 2011**
Hinduism	15,996,953	86.5	18,330,121	81.3	21,551,492	81.3	14.6	17.6
Buddhism	1,439,142	7.8	2,442,520	10.7	2,396,099	9.0	69.7	-1.9
Islam	653,218	3.5	954,023	4.2	1,162,370	4.4	46.0	21.8
Kirat	318,389	1.7	818,106	3.6	807,169	3.0	157.0	-1.3
Christian-ity	31,280	0.2	101,976	0.4	375,699	1.4	226.0	268.4
Prakriti		0.0		0.0	121,982	0.5		
Bon		0.0		0.0	13,006	0.0		
Jainism	7561	0.0	4108	0.0	3214	0.0	-45.7	-21.8
Bahai		0.0	1211	0.0	1283	0.0		5.9
Sikhism	9292	0.1	5890	0.0	609	0.0	-36.6	-89.7

Others/ Unstated	35,262	0.2	78,979	0.3	61,581	0.2	124.0	-22.0
	1.849,1097	100.0	22,736,934	100.0	26,494,504	100.0	23.0	16.5

(Sharma, Pitamber. *Some Aspects of Nepal's Social Demography: Census 2011 Update* 40)