

Negotiating Ethnic Identity in the Himalaya - The Tamang in Nepal

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"[T]he discourse on ethnicity has escaped from academia and into the field. [...] [T]here is certainly a designer organism out there now, bred in the laboratory and released into the world to be fed by politicians, journalists, and ordinary citizens through their words and actions" (Banks 1996: 189).

In the Nepalese Constituent Assembly elections of 2008 among the 74 registered parties, the Tamsaling Nepal Rastriya Dal (Tamsaling Nepal National Party, TRD) promoted the concept of transforming Nepal into a federal state based on ethnic groups' ancestral homelands. The claim for ethnic groups' self-determination is one of the major political issues the Constituent Assembly is facing today while working towards a new constitution for what was the world's last Hindu kingdom. Already in the early 1990s, Parshuram Tamang, who at that time was head of the Nepal Tamang Ghedung (Nepal Tamang Association, NTG), Nepal's largest national Tamang organization, argued for a cantonal approach and the reorganization of the local government in order to decentralize power and enable ethnic communities to actively engage in politics. Significantly, as early as 1992 he referred to the group that constitutes 5.6 percent of the total Nepalese population, and thereby forms the third largest ethnic group in Nepal², as a "nation, which has inhabited [the] hills for longer than any other group" (Tamang 1992: 25). These developments are embedded in a broader process of ethnic activism in Nepal, which started to flourish after the Panchayat era³ came to an end in 1990 with the massive protests of the Jan Andolan, the first people's movement.

Besides the Dalit's and Women's movements, adivasi janajati (indigenous nationalities) activism, united under the leadership of the Nepal Janajati Adivasi Mahasangh (Nepal Federation of Indigenous People, NE-FIN), is the major civil society movement in post-1990 Nepal. It aims to shape a new constitutional and political framework that ensures rights

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and inclusion of the country's diverse ethnic groups. With the establishment of the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) in 2002 and the subsequent recognition of 59 *adivasi janajati*, the government responded to the overall demands of ethnic activists and officially acknowledged issues related to the ethnic cause. Furthermore the Nepalese government signalled its obligation towards the special support of ethnic groups by defining specific targets for the development of *adivasi janajati* in the Three Year Interim Plan 2008-10. By ratifying the ILO No. 169 Convention on Indigenous and Tribal People, the only legally binding international instrument concerned with the rights of indigenous people and the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People in 2007, Nepal joined the worldwide discourse on indigenousness at the legal level and promised its commitment to international standards.

This selection of events in the Himalayan country's recent history illustrates the fact that the discourse on ethnicity and its consequent political demands are an integral part of the current political debate. Therefore, following Banks (1996: 189), I will argue that Nepal provides one example of how the discourse on ethnicity is no longer a solely academic exercise but has entered the public and political sphere. Identities based on the fact of belonging to a particular ethnic group were accepted as valid legal categories in post-1990 Nepal and now form the basis for the implementation of government actions and programmes. After the restoration of multi-party democracy in 1990, the new political and legal framework enabled more groups and individuals to actively participate in the discourse on ethnicity, which was strongly shaped by and in response to the adivasi janajati movement in Nepal as well as the international discourse on indigenousness. At the same time the categories produced in the current discourse have to be interpreted with reference to ethnicity formation processes linked to the Nepalese state formation.

By focusing on the Tamang the article endeavours to provide a detailed analysis of the process of ethnicity formation and ethnic activism for one particular Nepalese ethnic group. After a brief outline of the main academic positions towards the study of ethnicity, an examination on how this category has been utilised by scholars to describe people's identity in the Himalayan region follows. Subsequently a depiction of the Tamang embedded in the western discourse on ethnicity provides an anthropological perspective on Tamang identity before the role of



the Nepalese state formation in the creation of a pan-Tamang identity is examined. In the second part of the article the post-1990 political framework and its implications for ethnic activism will be outlined. A brief discussion of the general *janajati adivasi* movement is followed by an analysis of Tamang ethnic activism. It will be demonstrated, that activists in order to serve their "imagined"⁴ group's specific needs and to legitimate social, economic and political claims highlight certain elements, which are assumed to constitute ethnic identity. By focussing on one ethnic activist the importance of individuals in defining the discourse will be demonstrated, after which an examination of the Nepal Tamang Ghedung, the oldest and largest Tamang organization of Nepal and the Tamsaling Nepal Rastriya Dal, the first ethnic based Tamang political party will illustrate the changes the *adivasi janajati* movement as a whole has undergone between 1990 and 2010.

Ethnicity and Ethnic Identity: Primordialism, Instrumentalism and Beyond

When studying the literature produced on ethnicity in the past decades it becomes obvious that despite its popularity in academia and the public discourse, the concept is fuzzy, applied in a variety of contexts and used to describe many different things. Therefore Banks draws the conclusion that ethnicity is best understood as "a collection of rather simplistic and obvious statements about boundaries, otherness, goals and achievements, being and identity, descent and classification" (Banks 1996: 190). Chapman et al. define ethnicity as an abstract noun "meaning what you have if you are an 'ethnic group'" (Chapman et al. 1989: 15), simultaneously pointing out the potential of the term to stress the duality of "us" and "the other" since not everyone in today's world is classified as belonging to a particular ethnic group. The discourse on ethnicity is furthermore surrounded by debates on the process of classification, history, race and nationalism among others, which makes the issue even more complex.⁵

In the conventional academic literature two main approaches towards the study of ethnicity can be distinguished: primordialism and instrumentalism (O'Reilly 2001: 3; Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 7ff.). The primordialist approach treats ethnicity as a cultural given, that is a permanent and fundamental aspect of human identity, which has per-



sisted over long periods of time. Therefore the sum of certain features such as language, dress and so on is assumed to constitute the core of ethnic identity. Hence scholars adopting the primordial approach are mainly interested in identifying the features constituting primordial ties and examining in which ways they shape people's lives (ibid.: 8). Today scholars usually try to distance themselves from a primordialist approach to interpret ethnicity because it simplifies and tends to display identity as fixed and unproblematic. Smith (1986: 16f.) for example, even though suggesting that an ethnic group generally exhibits six features (a collective name, common myth of descent, shared history, distinctive shared culture, association with a specific territory and sense of solidarity) to a varying degree, carefully distances himself from primordialist assumptions. However some anthropologists favour the primordial view in so far as they argue scholars should adopt the emic perspective or the "native's point of view" in order to take into account the self-perception of the group, rather than imposing external explanations of ethnicity on the people they study. By contrast, instrumentalists stress the constructed character of ethnicity, which they argue developed in a particular historical and social context and can be utilized to serve a group's social, economic and political claims. Glazer and Moynihan (1975: 5) in their oftencited collection of essays Ethnicity: Theory and Experience for example define ethnicity as a social fact and a relatively recent phenomenon.

The instrumentalist approach is today by far the more commonly adopted one in the analysis of ethnicity. Instrumentalists are concerned with the power structures underlying claims over ethnicity and aim to analyse the ways in which certain features of ethnic identity are highlighted and chosen to represent a group. Nevertheless, some scholars also highlight the danger of interpreting ethnicity in overly instrumental terms. O' Reilly (2001: 4) adds for consideration that even though ethnic identities are to some degree constructed and politicized, the features chosen in the struggle for resources have a deep meaning for the people studied. Besides these two main approaches, especially in the past two decades scholars have started to overcome the dichotomy and to think further. Banks (1996: 185ff.) suggests an approach that shifts the focus on ethnicity from the ethnographic subject to the analyst. He describes ethnicity as an analytic tool invented by western scholars to understand and interpret the actions and feelings of the people they study. Furthermore this approach offers analysts the opportunity to communicate with each other about phenomena observed and studied



in a shared academic language. This view on ethnicity can be read as being part of a broader development in anthropology, which started to question core concepts such as kinship and called for a more reflexive and critical approach towards the discipline itself.⁶

The Concepts Applied to the Nepali Context

After the democratic opening of Nepal in 1990 and the growing presence and visibility of ethnicity in the political sphere, scholars working on Nepal started to pay more attention to ethnicity and identity issues.⁷ A major contribution to the discourse was the edited volume Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom: The Politics and Culture of Contemporary Nepal⁸ that unites historical and anthropological perspectives. In the introduction David Gellner provides a detailed account of the theoretical debate and adds some modifications for the South Asian context. In postulating that an ethnic group does not necessarily need a shared myth of origin, an observation he makes in reference to the Newar community of Nepal, he adapts Smith's six criteria for the Nepali context, but is careful to state at the same time, that ethnic feelings develop in particular contexts of opposition and competition and can therefore be understood as a response to contemporary pressure (Gellner 2008, 1997: 9ff.; 16). Even though he explains in detail the weaknesses of the primordial approach, he states at the same time, "no extreme instrumentalist position will be defended here" (ibid.: 7). In response to a critical book review of the essay collection by a Nepalese scholar, Gellner formulates five rules addressing the question how ethnicity and nationalism should be studied: Ethnicity and nationalism are by no means "natural" categories and need to be studied from the perspective of ordinary people, since it would be mistaken to assume activists and the people they aim to represent share the same agenda. Scholars should be aware of group boundaries' fluidity and context-dependency. Finally ethnicity and nationalism need to be studied in historical context (ibid.: 1-10). In more recent works, he criticizes a primordial approach more directly; for example in an article about ethnic organizations in Nepal he states that "[a]ny form of primordialism, whether biological or other would be quite out of place in the analysis of contemporary groups" (Gellner and Karki 2008: 115).



In general most scholars favour instrumentalism in the analysis of Nepalese identity and ethnicity formation and stress their constructed character. Nevertheless there exist also critical voices towards the instrumentalist approach. Mukta Lama-Tamang (2009: 274) for example warns that understanding identity and ethnicity as a product imposed by powerful others might favour the dominant discourse at the expense of the margins and might deny a group's history. In the introduction of another major contribution that aims to present a variety of approaches towards the study of ethnicity, the authors come closer to Banks' notion of ethnicity as a scholarly concept by stating "...the notion of ethnic group is a western construction which has no exact equivalent in the Himalayan region..." (Lecomte-Tilouine and Dreyfuß 2003: 2). In the same volume Martin Sökefeld challenges the dominance of ethnicity as an analytical framework in the study of identity processes. He argues that by highlighting ethnicity as the major factor constituting a person's identity scholars overlook the fact that a person possesses a variety of identities. Thus he suggests a more postmodernist approach that combines the psychological focus on individual self-identity and the social science approach towards identity as being mainly determined by the relation towards other people, that is the identity of a group (Sökefeld 2003: 307ff.). Significantly Krishna Hachhetu (2003: 217f.), a Nepali scholar and political scientist, draws attention towards the fact that the approach of foreign and Nepali scholars differs in so far as that while most foreign scholars slightly favour an instrumentalist approach, Nepali scholars tend to opt for a joined approach of primordialism and instrumentalism in the study of ethnicity. In addition, native analysts, that is scholars from within ethnic groups tend to see the ethnic movement in Nepal from a perspective that highlights the struggle against discrimination and the principles of equality and move beyond the theoretical debate about primordialism versus instrumentalism (Bhattachan cited in Hachhethu 2003: 218).

It follows from this short overview that ethnicity as an academic concept itself is subject to change and constant negotiation. The following analysis of the post-1990 Nepalese political framework and Tamang ethnic activism is articulated within the framework of instrumentalism. However this is a western academic approach that has its limitations, especially when taking into account the views of ethnic activists and scholars who formulate a differing approach to legitimize their interpretations of history and economic, social and political claims. Furthermore



ethnicity is only one factor contributing to a person's or group identity. I will make use of the term ethnic category when talking about the abstract academic concept, since it leaves open to which extend people included in this category perceive themselves as an ethnic group. In contrast the term ethnic group is applied when it comes to political categories, which are in usage and defined by certain actors (Gellner 2008, 1997: 30).

Who are the Tamang? - Anthropological Perspectives

People today who fall under the ethnic category Tamang are settled around the Kathmandu valley and as far as the Tibetan plateau to the North. Towards the west the Buri Gandaki River constitutes a natural boundary to Gurung territory and in the east Sherpa and Rai groups border Tamang areas. In addition Tamang have also migrated in significant numbers to the Tarai, Nepal's southern region and to Sikkim and Darjeeling in India. With a total number of 1,282,304 people, the Tamang constitute 5.6 percent of the total Nepalese population and hence form the fifth largest group in the country, if Chhetri and Bahun are listed as separate groups. However, other groups are frequently included as Tamang in the census and non-Tamang groups can come to be incorporated into the community over a period of time, which already reveals some problems in defining fixed boundaries of ethnic labels such as Tamang (Holmberg 2005, 1989: 20).9

In the anthropological literature the Tamang are generally perceived as being composed of distinct groups, which moved across the border from Tibet in many successive waves of migration during the Ghorkali state formation. The term *Tamang* was not common in general official usage in Nepal until the twentieth century. In 1932 a government decree declared that people formerly known as Bhote, Lama or Murmi were now officially named Tamang. ¹⁰ Elder men from a Tamang community northwest of the Kathmandu valley remember that roughly at the same time this government decree was promulgated, an official visited the village requiring all men to recognize a document stating they would no longer be called or call themselves Bhote or Lama, but Tamang. However Lama is still widely used for self-designation in the region (ibid.: 17). Even though the term *Tamang* can be found in Tibetan texts dating back to the thirteenth century and the Tamang's forefathers shared

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a "minimal or latent identity, based on common cultural and linguistic criteria and on the awareness of a common, mostly mythically substantiated origin" (Höfer 1979: 148), the extent to which the term was applied to, and used by, a particular group of people remains unclear. Thus as both written resources and oral accounts suggest the term *Tamang* as a label for a defined group lacks clarity, historical depth and tells little about the groups' ethnic identity.

Significantly, among themselves, Tamang apply their own categories to designate people within and outside their respective community. Despite the fact that the ethnic category Tamang subsumes western and eastern subgroups, western Tamang see no deeper connection to the easterners than they do to people known by the ethnic label Gurung. According to Campbell (2008, 1997; 206ff.), Tamangs living east of the Bhote Kosi River in Rasuwa district, which has the largest population of Tamang in Nepal, are referred to as Shyarpa "east people" by the Tamang of the river's western side, who are vice versa designated as Nuppa "west people" by those living eastwards of the river. Shyarpa consider Nuppa as more traditional, which is reflected for example, in their wearing of more traditional dress and differing song styles. Furthermore for western Tamangs the label Shyarpa includes not only people generally referred to as Tamang, but Sherpa communities as well. Within the community of eastern Tamangs, people distinguish between Tamang and Ghale, based on the former eating beef, and the latter having their own terms for "elder brother", "elder sister", "father" and "grandmother" and differing honorific expressions. In this specific local setting Gurungs and Bei also form part of the local community and share the same basic social and cultural structures. Therefore outsiders tend to apply the term Tamang to the whole community, whereas from an emic perspective this is incorrect.¹¹ In the Helambu region a main social distinction within the Tamang community is made between Lama and Tamang; the former who are generally wealthier, present themselves as Sherpa to outsiders. As these regional emic accounts on ethnicity categories reveal, ethnicity and identity processes are much more complex than a single label suggests. A person can be linguistically Tamang, but denies this identity in terms of dietary rules, as it is the case for Ghale. Furthermore identities are context-dependent and subject to strategic use, illustrated by the fact that some Tamang choose to present themselves as Sherpa or Gurung outside their own community.

Thus, in terms of regional perspectives on ethnic identity it can be



argued that eastern and western Tamang are not conjoined into a common society. This can be partly explained by the social organization of the Tamana that focuses on a circle of kin restricted to a number of neighbouring villages. Villages are linked by the practice of reciprocal exchange being at the core of Tamang social life. Exchange is built around the opposition of patrilineal clans and their connection through bilateral cross-cousin marriage (Fricke 1988: 3). Reciprocal exchange is not merely a fact of social life, but embodies an orientation towards life. It therefore constitutes a cultural logic, which is reflected in Tamang myth and rituals. However, the practice of cross-cousin marriage and the organisation of the community into patrilineal clans can also be observed among other groups in Nepal, especially those inhabiting the hill areas. The same is true for religion: Tamang practice a form of Buddhism closely related to that of other hill groups like Sherpa and Gurung, which too finds it source in Tibetan Buddhism. Hence, social organization in patrilineal clans, cross-cousin marriage and the following of a certain form of Buddhism are not features unique to the Tamang and thus do not separate them from other groups. Assuming that language is another factor contributing to a group's ethnic identity is similarly not successful in explaining the existence of a distinct Tamang ethnic identity. Western and eastern dialects differ to a large extent - in fact, both dialects are not closer to each other than to languages like Gurung, Thakali or Manangi, all of them belonging to the same language family (Glover cited in Holmberg 2005, 1989: 21)

Thus the contribution of a primordialist approach towards the study of ethnicity, that is the assumption that a stable core of features constitutes a particular group's ethnic identity, is limited in explaining the existence of a distinct Tamang ethnic identity. As Levine (1987: 75) points out, heterogeneity within and between primary named ethnic groups is characteristic in the Nepalese context. Campbell (2008, 1997: 222) shares Levine's argument that being Tamang is of minor importance in social interactions. However, he puts into perspective the assumption that the label Tamang is of no meaning at all in a non-local context by stressing the possibility of establishing a relationship in terms of kinship when Tamang discover each other's clan affiliation. As a result of the primordial approach's limitations, in adopting a more instrumentalist approach, anthropologists suggest that the Nepalese state formation played an essential role in the creation of ethnic labels and identities.

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As Holmberg puts it:

"The Tamang as a named category of people...emerged not out of time immemorial from hidden Himalayan valleys but with the formation of the state of Nepal (Holmberg 2005, 1989: 12)."

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State Formation and it's Role in the Creation of a Pan-Tamang Identity

State formation in Nepal was initiated through the military conquest of the Kathmandu valley in 1768 by King Prithvi Narayan Shah, ruler of the small principality Gorkha. In the following decades 60 formerly independent political units inhabited by diverse groups were brought under a central administration based in Kathmandu through conquest, negotiation and alliance and a feudal-like polity began to emerge. Further expansion of the territory came to an end in 1816, when the Himalayan kingdom was defeated by the British East India Company and lost territories in Sikkim, Kumaon and Garhwal acquired by Prithvi Narayan Shah and his direct successors. The imposition of the Treaty of Sagauli in the same year was a crucial point in modern state-formation; ending the expansion and fixing the southern boundary it gave Nepal an internationally recognised state territory and paved the way for further internal consolidation (Burghart 1984: 226). Already at the end of the eighteenth century Prithvi Narayan Shah provided a source defining Nepal as a Hindu kingdom and consequently legitimized Hindu kingship in his Divya Upadesh: "[...] this will be a true Hindusthan of the four varna and thirty-six jat" (Stiller 1968: 44). By this formulation he included all people living in the conquered territory irrespective of their religion, caste or ethnic affiliation within the framework of Hinduism. 12 Although the Hindu framework introduced by Prithvi Narayan Shah aimed to subsume the various groups, it was the introduction of the legal code Muluki Ain (MA) in 1854 by Jang Bahadur Rana which codified and fixed the status of all castes and ethnic communities within a legally binding national Hindu social hierarchy.13

The 700-page legal code dealt with topics such as land tenure and law of inheritance, but most of the chapters were dedicated to intra- and inter-caste relations. In the MA all groups were equally called *jat*. The main distinction was between *tagadhari* "wearers of the holy cord"



who formed the elite of society and included Chetri, Bahun, Thakuri as well as several Newar castes, and *matwali*, the various alcohol consuming *jat*. The *matwali* were further divided into non-enslavable and enslavable alcohol drinkers, impure but touchable and untouchable *jat*. All ethnic groups were classified as alcohol drinking, but pure *jat*, ranked between high and low Hindu castes depending on the degree of similarity and differences they shared with the high caste Hindus. Laws, rights and duties were applied according to one's status within the hierarchy and membership of a certain group contained economic and political significance. Hence the MA translated cultural differences into hierarchical caste categories based on Hindu notions of purity and pollution (Pfaff-Czarnecka 1999: 52; Pradhan 2002: 9). Is

When looking for a direct reference revealing the position of the Tamang within the legal code, one is confronted with the striking fact that the label does not appear at all. Tamang are subsumed under the category Bhote, which generally refers to Tibetan-speaking groups. In consequence Tamang are ranked within the category of *masinya matwali* "enslavable alcohol-drinkers" and are not included in the group of *namasinya matwali* "non-enslavable alcohol-drinkers" like other hill ethnic groups such as Gurung and Magar.

The low position assigned to the Tamang in the nascent state can be attributed to a combination of socio-economic and ideological factors. Tamangs inhabited and possessed lands adjacent to the Kathmandu valley, the centre of the new administration and ruling elites. In addition important trading routes between India and Tibet were situated in Tamang populated areas towards the north, which then were of crucial economic and strategic importance. Many Tamang lost their lands to high-caste Bahun and Chhetri immigrants through money lending, and land formerly used as pasture and forest was transformed into the immigrants' private properties - in most cases with support of the Rana government. Almost all labour required by the government was performed by Tamang due to their proximity to Kathmandu, even though compulsory labour was not limited to this area. The practice of rakam, regular compulsory labour obligations for the military's and administration's requirements in return for usufruct land, had a deep impact on villagers' daily life and beyond. The threat of physical violence in the form of beating and the confiscation of their land by government officials if villagers failed to perform their duties or openly opposed the system was omnipresent (Holmberg et al. 1999: 75). As a consequence



Tamang migration was very limited, they were prevented from taking employment outside their settlement areas and from participating in trade and hence lacked experience outside the valley. Campbell (2008, 1997: 224ff.) argues, that the monopolization of Tamang labour for state services was also the main reason for prohibiting recruitment from the districts adjacent to Kathmandu into the Gurkha army. Tamangs who wanted to sidestep this rule had to change their names in order to get enlisted.

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. To a certain extent the history of state labour linked the perception of cultural differences to a division of labour. Tamang generally were excluded more than other groups from participation in the Hindu state and defined as people who labour. Certain Tamang communities assumed this state-ascribed identity – Campbell reports that the Tamang term for load-carrying people is often used in rhetorical conversations to describe a fundamental economic identity defined by subordination. The employment of many Tamangs in today's trekking industry can be interpreted as a continuing pattern: Tamang are still the ones carrying loads for the Kathmandu elites and are excluded from making profits (ibid.: 227). Nevertheless not all Tamangs work as porters and labour is only one fundamental aspect contributing to the self-perception of an individual or group.

Besides the proximity to Kathmandu, according to Holmberg (1989: 23f.) three factors contributed to the Hindu perception of the Tamang: 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. In fact, Bhote are the only group described as beef-eaters in the MA. Respect for the cow is an integral part of the Hindu social order and one criterion for the differentiation of social and religious groups. Until recently the importance of the cow was also reflected in its usage as an official symbol for the Hindu monarchy (Michaels 2008, 1997: 79-100). Therefore associations of Bhote-Tamang with violence against cows, which is in contrast to actual social Tamang practices, exaggerated their otherness and enforced their separation from Hindu society. Furthermore in practicing Buddhism and following Lamas, Tamang recognized a competitive socio-religious order and might have enforced Rana fears of solidarity with Tibet rather than the new emerging state. This perception was further strengthened by the



proximity of Tamang territory in the North to Tibet and historical links of some Tamang polities to its neighbour. The combination of Tamang's traditional settlement area around the Kathmandu valley and along the trading routes towards Tibet and their cultural practices which were perceived as opposing the Hindu social order contributed to their role as labourers in the feudal-like state and consequently led to their relatively low position in the MA.

Being labelled Tamang by the administration of the newly emerging Nepalese state had far reaching political and legal consequences. It was of less relevance in the local and regional socio-cultural context, where Tamang continued applying their own terms to describe themselves and people within and outside their respective communities. The decision to introduce the term Tamana in differentiation to Bhote in 1932 was mainly motivated by the state's desire to designate a larger proportion of its population as well-incorporated citizens and to prevent possible claims by Tibet over border areas. Except for Höfer (1979: 148), who argues Tamang possessed a latent shared identity prior to the state's interventions most scholars agree that it has been the state introducing the label and attaching significance to it, which was primarily noticeable in administrative contexts. Foreign government officials like the Scot Francis Hamilton, who worked for the East India Company and visited Nepal in 1802, and later on non-Nepalese researchers made use of the labels provided by the state to facilitate communication between each other. Although the state tried to fix identities for its own purposes, individuals did not only endure this process, but applied creative strategies to get advantages in specific contexts, such as the use of ethnic labels by Tamang in order to be included on the recruiting lists of the Gurkha army shows.

The emergence of Tamang as a label for a pan-group identity is thus directly linked to the formation of the Nepalese state. However, it is likely that people gradually started to accept state definitions. Greater mobility after the end of the Rana era when villagers started to openly oppose the *rakam* system brought together Tamang from diverse regions. During the Panchayat regime Tamang began to organize themselves and new government policies as well as the intensified work of ethnic activists after 1990 contributed to the establishment of a pan-Tamang identity. These post-1990 dynamics will be discussed in more detail below. If today's ethnic identities are seen as new phenomena from an instrumentalist point of view, it is important to note, that at the

same time they are directly connected to the categories produced by the ideology of state formation (Holmberg et al. 1999: 67).

A New Political and Legal Framework in Post-1990 Nepal

The Jan Andolan of 1990, the first people's movement brought about the restoration of a multi-party democracy after 30 years of the autocratic Panchayat system. During Panchayat rule the creation of a strong national identity i.e. a homogenising Nepali identity and culture in favour of the Parbatiya, the dominant high-caste Hindus of the hill region including Chhetri, Hill Bahun and Thakuri, became the ultimate goal and political ideology. Thus this period in Nepalese history can be described as a time of state-driven nation-building. The features chosen in order to achieve this goal were the Nepali language, Hinduism and the Hindu monarchy: "...the triumvirate of official Nepali national culture" (Onta 1996: 214).

Activism, the practice of campaigning to influence the world in line with an actively articulated programme, as defined by Gellner and Karki (2007: 363), can be traced back to the Rana era, but gained more importance during Panchayat times, even though it was massively restricted. A number of ethnic and cultural organisations tried to preserve their identity vis-à-vis the dominant Parbatiya culture. They were allowed to function as long as their agenda did not become too political. Especially since the mid-1970s the state was criticized more and more by ethnic activists due to its failures concerning the access to welfare and political participation for the majority of people and the socio-economic development of the country. A decade later an increasing number of ethnic, religious and regional communities were creating a sphere of public protest where they addressed their critique and demands for state-restructuring and inclusion. The Jan Andolan, a united front of a wide spectrum of political parties, ethno-linguistic, regional and religious organizations, demanded the drafting of a new constitution that acknowledged the diversity of Nepal's population and the restoration of multi-party democracy. In the spring of 1990, after several months of demonstrations and street battles, King Birendra was forced to legalise political parties again and allow the drafting of the constitution.

The 1990 constitution was awaited with high expectations by members of historically subordinated groups including *janajati*, Dalit, regional, religious groups and women. The new constitution defined Nepal as a



constitutional monarchy. The Preamble of the constitution assigned sovereignty from the king to the people, thus the constitution recognized a symbolic shift from passive subjects to active citizens. Article 4 (1) defined Nepal as a "multiethnic, multilingual, democratic, independent, indivisible, sovereign, Hindu and Constitutional Monarchical Kingdom," Even though the terms "multiethnic", "multilingual" and "democratic" were entirely new and recognised the cultural diversity to some extent, Nepal remained a Hindu monarchy. Furthermore Article 27 (1) clearly ascribed the legitimacy of the king to the fact that he is a descendant of "the Great King Prithvi Narayan Shah and an adherent of Aryan Culture and the Hindu Religion". This article apparently reinforced narratives of the Panchayat era. Nepali was again privileged and declared to be the language of the nation and official language, while all languages spoken as mother tongues were ascribed the status of national languages (Article 6). The constitution introduced various fundamental rights including the right to equality irrespective of religion, race, gender, caste, tribe or ideology (Article 11 (3)) right to property (Article 16) and the right to preserve and promote one's language, script and cultures, and to educate children in their mother tongue (Article 18). However the right to religion was limited, since in Article 19 (1) conversion was banned. Thus the constitution provided a legal framework allowing a new level of political freedom and hence political parties, non-governmental, social and ethnic organizations proliferated. The provisions made in the constitution and the new form of government opened the possibility for a shift in the interpretation of symbols and also contained a commitment to respond to demands raised by the state's citizens. In contrast to the democratic innovation, the definition of Nepal as a Hindu kingdom, the privileging of Nepali language and the limitation to the right of religion favouring Hinduism caused disappointment among members of the Jan Andolan, since they symbolized the continuing dominant influence of high-caste Parbatiyas. In addition the persistent inequality in terms of minority representation in government bodies and political parties, as well as the differing results concerning Human Development for different ethnic and caste groups in sectors such as life expectancy, literacy rate and years of schooling, provided a basis for further activism that lead to further extensive political changes in the recent history of the country. 16 The shifts Nepal experienced in the transitional phase between the 1990s and 2000s are summarized by Hachhetu (2003: 244) as follows: a shift from mono-cultural to multicultural nationalism, from

majoritarian to consensual democracy, the breaking of major traditional perceptions of nationalism and the building of new values and systems for national integration.

IPOs, NEFIN and Ethnic Parties - Ethnic Organizations in Nepal

The political and constitutional framework provided after 1990 further opened the possibility for and encouraged more groups to enter the discourse on ethnicity, identity and equality even though activism concerned with group identities did exist before 1990. However, the new political and legal framework led to an unprecedented rise of organizations of all shades.

Susan Hangen (2010: 38f.) proposes the following classification of main organization types within the janajati movement: social organizations representing single ethnic groups known by the name Indigenous People's organizations (IPOs) in reference to the international discourse, federations of these organizations within and across ethnic boundaries with the Nepal Adivasi Janajati Mahasang, the National Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN), as the main representative of *ianaiati* issues at the national level, professional organizations for *janajati* journalists and lawyers and ethnic political parties. 17 No systematic survey exists so far about the exact number of IPOs, however there has been a dramatic growth of organizations at the national and international levels between 2006 and 2009 (Lama-Tamana 2010: 19).18 Estimates suggests that the number of these organizations adds up to several hundred, whereby all larger janajati groups including Tamang, Magar, Newar and Gurung, have major organizations with established branches in districts all over the country. Due to their autonomous radius of operation they can be counted as separate organizations, increasing the total number of organizations even further. A growing number of IPOs also managed to establish partner organizations around the globe within the last decade.

The activities and programmes run by the IPOs are diverse. The promotion of *janajati* identity includes the celebration of festivals, birth anniversaries of historical figures, holding of literary programmes and *sanskritik karyakram*, cultural programmes. The latter aim to present the identity of a group through the performance of their assumed traditional dances, songs and the wearing of traditional dresses. Further-



more by promoting a certain set of festivals and denying others, such as Dashain, a major Hindu festival closely linked to the former monarchy and seen as a symbol of oppression, subordination and enforced acculturation, IPOs aim to shift the meaning of long-standing traditions and symbols. 19 Rights awareness activities regarding language, religion and mother tongue education and the publication of magazines, newspapers and history books, which reinterpreted and challenge the dominant historical discourse are other activities of IPOs. Research and propagation of history, culture, language and literature are closely interrelated to this effort. Further programmes run by IPOs include the promotion of lawyers', journalists', women's and students' professional rights, income generating activities and social services. By challenging the former state's promotion of a homogenized Nepali identity on the basis of Parbatiya culture, IPOs' actions and programmes have a clear political dimension, even though they primarily aim to revitalize culture and to preserve ethnic group's identity.

The success of the adivasi janajati movement can at least be partly traced back to its strong and visible presentation at the national level by the umbrella organisation NEFIN. NEFIN, at that time known by the name NEFEN, was founded in 1990 by seven member organisations and has currently 54 member organizations on the basis of a "one organization for each ethnic group"-policy, thus encouraging the formation of new ethnic organizations.²⁰ However, the current policy of having one representing organization for each group brings up the question on which basis this representing body is chosen and whether it represents the entire respective ethnic group. At the beginning mainly founded to coordinate the activities of its member organizations, NEFIN soon developed into a strong force uniting the adivasi janajati voice at the national level, formulating the aims and demands of the movement, pressuring the government, political parties and international agencies and binding the Nepali movement to the international discourse. Since 1992 NEFIN annually issues a declaration addressing the demands of indigenous people. In its early years NEFIN was mostly concerned with the construction of a collective identity for Nepal's ethnic groups, hence establishing Nepal's ethnic groups under a united label as a legal political actor. Since no ethnic group constitutes more than 7.1 percent of the total population, it is more likely that they can pressure the government as a united group and enforce their demands. NEFIN's operating principles underwent a major shift after 2002. Before that NEFIN worked



primarily as a pressure group trying to influence political parties and the government. Later on it adopted more radical methods of political protests as their participation in street rallies, marches and demonstrations during the second *Jan Andolan* in April 2006 for the restoration of democracy after the royal take overs in 2002 and 2005 shows. Currently NEFIN is implementing, coordinating and monitoring programmes for the development of *adivasi janajati* under the Janajati Empowerment Programme (JEP) for which it received financial support from foreign donor governments. The acceptance of NEFIN as the representative of Nepal's ethnic groups by the government is furthermore reflected in the fact that in 2007 NEFIN and the interim government signed a 20-point agreement about the establishment of proportional representation based on ethnicity in the Constituent Assembly (CA).²¹

In contrast to IPOs and NEFIN, ethnic based political parties try to seek direct political power to improve the situation of ianaiati. They are headed by leaders, who are frustrated with the exclusionary selection processes of mainstream political parties, which did not manage to give janajati issues a significant place in their election manifestos and failed to improve the situation of ethnic groups in Nepal (Hangen 2010: 44). Ethnic political parties aim to make the government more representative and responsive towards ethnic demands. Both their agendas and aspirations for direct political power locate them in a more radical spectrum of activism even so they operate in the democratic context provided by the state in contrast to armed forces e.g. liberation fronts.²² Ethnic territorial self-representation and the right to self-determination is a core issue for ethnic political parties. With the experience of failed decentralization in the 1990s they argue ethnic territories are a way to acquire a higher level of independence from the central administration by ensuring access to political participation for marginalized groups at the same time. Ethnic political parties still have a marginal position within the adivasi janajati movement, although their participation in the elections increased from two parties in the 1990 election to eleven in the Constituent Assembly Elections 2008.



Adivasi Janajati - A Definition Exercise

The construction of a collective identity vis-à-vis the dominant Parbativa culture was one of NEFIN's main objectives during its early years. The right to negotiate a new identity for Nepal's ethnic groups was facilitated through the democratic framework provided after 1990. The emergence of and the campaigning for the term adivasi ianaiati thereby reflects the changed political climate in Nepal as well as the linkage of the movement to regional and international discourses on ethnicity. Concerned activists adopted the term *janajati* at the end of the Panchayat era from Darieeling Nepali which itself introduced the term from Bengali where it already was in frequent use to refer to "tribal" groups. NEFIN started to promote the term just after its foundation in 1990, NEFIN and most adivasi janajati organizations favour "nationalities" as the English translation for *janajati*, which indicates a strong political agenda, since the term "nationalities" bears association with claims over territory in English. From an anthropological perspective the term *janajati* subsumes groups formerly known by the label "ethnic group", which itself is a problematic term as discussed above. In the Nepali context it can be traced back to the category matwali, the alcohol drinking jat in the MA, which consisted predominantly of ethnic groups.

During the 1990s the janajati movement developed stronger ties with the international movement on the rights for indigenous people, which gained more prominence throughout the world when the United Nations declared a Year of Indigenous People in 1993 and afterwards extended it to a decade. Parshuram Tamang was elected to the Council of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2002, NEFIN and IPOs started to send delegates to the annual forum of the UN in New York and as a result networking with similar movements all over the world became an important feature of adivasi janajati actions. The amendment from Nepal Federation of Nationalities (NEFEN) to Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) in 2003 by adding the local term adivasi to the organization's name reflects the internationalization of the movement. While the opposition towards high-caste Hindus was the main identity marker of janajati groups during the 1990s, the influence of the international indigenous movement brought about a shift towards stressing the indigenousness of Nepal's ethnic groups by ignoring the fact, that most ethnic groups of Nepal have myths of origins towards the South and North. Consequently the verifiability of

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claims highlighting the indigenousness of Nepal's group from a scholarly perspective is highly doubtful. Therefore it reveals political rather than scientific factors for a shift in the terminology.

In 1996 the Nepalese government responded to the *adivasi janajati* movement's claim to recognize its constructed pan-identity by accepting a Task Force Report recommending a list of 61 *janajatis* and the installation of a national foundation for Nepal's ethnic groups.²³ Consequently a National Committee for the Development of Nationalities was founded and in 2002 with the passing of the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities Act (NFDIN), Nepal got its first government institution concerned with *adivasi janajati* issues. This step constituted an important caesura in the history of Nepal and a muchacclaimed success for NEFIN and the movement as a whole. The Ministry of Law, Social Justice and Parliamentary Affairs confirmed a final list of 59 *adivasi janajati* of Nepal on the basis of the following definition:

"'Indigenous Nationalities' means a tribe or community as mentioned in the schedule having its own mother language and traditional rites and customs, distinct cultural identity, distinct social structure and written and unwritten history" (NFDIN 2003: 7).²⁴

This definition differs from the features submitted by the Task Force Report, as that janajati adivasi are not necessarily outside the fourfold Hindu Varna, which might have been too radical for a government Act. Both, the definition provided in the Act and the Task Force Report Committee's definition classify janajati adivasi on the basis of certain features being in accordance with the primordial view on ethnicity. Yet Dalits and certain Madhesis groups, who live in the Tarai region and have strong linkages to India, are excluded from becoming members in NFDIN on the basis of their assumed Hindu identity, even though Dalits are outside the fourfold Hindu varna system. Resources are denied for those groups, irrespective of the fact, that Dalits and janajati shared a similar agenda during the Jan Andolan: questioning a political climate denying the recognition of its citizens' cultural differences and limiting participation in the state and access to resources to a few privileged groups. Dalits, who constitute about 8.7 percent of the Nepalese population and belong to the most disadvantaged groups in the country, are facing difficulties in mobilizing resources and support from international donors since they cannot draw on a well-established international discourse.

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Out of the 59 recognized groups 18 are from the mountain region, 24 from the hills, 7 from the Inner Tarai and 10 from the Tarai. Only 43 among the 59 groups were enlisted in the 2001 Census, according to which *adivasi janajati* account for 36.4 percent of the total population. Due to the missing 11 groups, NFDIN estimates that the total number of indigenous nationalities constitutes 42 percent (NFDIN 2003: 3). The government's definition, even though a success for the movement, was at the same time exposed to critique from activists and scholars. One point of criticism regarding the undifferentiated picture provided in the government schedule about the 59 groups' socio-economic status led to a further classification into the categories of endangered, highly marginalized, marginalized, disadvantaged and advanced groups.²⁵ The Tamang were classified as a marginalized group like the majority of *adivasi janajati*. This classification now forms the basis for programmes developed by the government and NEFIN.

This fact illustrates, that today the term adivasi janajati is widely accepted as a legal category that unites diverse heterogeneous groups into a single overarching community on the basis of cultural features, which are opposed to high-caste Hindus and closely connected to the international discourse on the rights of indigenous people. Therefore these developments provide an example for human agency and creativity in the negotiation and construction of identity and ethnicity.²⁶ Labelling an ethnic group adivasi janajati today means participating in an international recognized and positive received discourse and having access to political and economic resources for the development of the respective group. A former derogative identity label perceived as threat to national unity and associated with backwardness changed its meaning during the 1990s and is now desirable. Therefore more groups might be encouraged to file a petition for the recognition in the government schedule in order to benefit from the label, what is perceived as a positive development by actors such as NEFIN but might lead to struggles over limited resources. Another discourse might arise about the question whether all janajati are automatically adivasi or if a further differentiation is necessary. This could possibly lead to a weakening of the movement.



Tamang Activism - An Overview

Tamang organizations can trace their roots back to the 1950s, when Tamang activists where involved in the revolution of 1950-1951, which overturned the Rana regime. In 1956 the first Tamang Committee was formed, however the term *Tamang* was not in usage in organizing forums till the end of the Panchayat era, which might be explained by the autocratic climate that was critical to any activism especially when based on ethnic affiliation. During Panchayat rule Tamang organizations had to operate in the underground and were mostly concerned with the preservation of culture and language (Tamang interviewed by Krämer 1995: 42). After the 1990-movement, a new generation of Tamang activists was enabled to apply a more radical political vocabulary and openly questioned the power relations in Nepal. Since the end of the 1990s claims over territory and the struggle for group rights have became more important features in accordance with the overall political climate created by the *adivasi janajati* movement as a whole.

Most Tamang actors and organizations within the janajati adivasi movement can be described as what Onta (2006: 303) calls "non-political institutional agents" by which he means entities that are not directly linked with political parties and governments, "Non-political institutional agents" include janajati adivasi organizations, media and academia. Today the Tamang have about 25 organizations in the Kathmandu valley alone among which the Nepal Tamang Ghedung (NTG) is the largest and most influential one. Hence Tamang belong to the well-organized adivasi janajati like other major groups such as Magar, Gurung and Newar, The mainstream Tamang movement is dedicated to a peaceful struggle within the democratic framework provided in post-1990 Nepal.²⁷ In addition Tamang managed to establish organizations around the world, a process that intensified since the end of the 1990s. Tamang organizations in Australia, the UK, Bhutan, China (Hong Kong), India, Myanmar, Thailand and the USA raise funds, promote Tamang culture among the Diaspora community and build a bridge between the international Tamang community and the adivasi janajati movement in Nepal. Furthermore Tamang activists discovered the World Wide Web, as a useful tool for advancing their cause and reaching a wide Tamang and non-Tamang audience.

Tamang are by comparison well-presented and active in radio and TV. In 2005 about 10 FM broadcast stations were offering programmes



in Tamang and 40 Tamang individuals where involved in the production of programmes in Tamang language. According to Pratik Tamang (cited in Onta 2006: 339) these radio programmes have been an inspiration for the younger generation to write literature, create songs and music in their own language. Thus they contribute to the creation of a new Tamang identity of which people can be proud. Surprisingly most productions are done on a voluntary basis and lack support from the major organizations. Due to the limited access to mainstream print media, activist started to publish a number of irregular publications spreading various views in the public sphere. Since the Tamang Media Group (TMG) was founded in 2004, Tamang have a professional actor who is dedicated to enhancing Tamang media personnel's qualifications and skills through organizing various training and discussion programmes and bringing together Tamang communicators and strengthening the voice of the Tamang community.

Parshuram Tamang – A Central Personality for the Tamang Movement

The leadership of the janajati adivasi movement is for the most part in the hands of male urban intellectuals with a university background.²⁸ Parshuram Tamang, professor for economics at Tribhuvan University, is a central figure for Tamang activism and the movement as a whole. He was among the individuals pushing forward the foundation of NEFEN in 1990 and served as the organization's general secretary between 1996 and 2000. At the national level Parshuram Tamana is active in the Indiaenous Nationalities' Campaign for Human Rights and is a core member of the Environmental Coalition of Indigenous People's Organisations of Nepal. He functioned as the president of the Nepal Tamang Ghedung till 2008 now serving as their chief advisor and is chairman of the International Tamang Council, which among other things brings together Tamang from various regions for Conferences. Parshuram Tamang also works in several government initiatives concerned with the rights and development for adivasi janati. For example, he was a selected member of the influential committee for advising Radio Nepal on multilingual broadcasting. Furthermore he published several articles and conference papers on Tamang and adivasi janajati issues in national and international magazines and newspapers. In 2008 Parshuram Tamang founded



the first Tamang ethnic political party, the *Tamsaling Rastriya Nepal Dal* who ran in the CA elections 2008.

One of Parshuram Tamang's main objectives has always been the establishment of links between the adivasi janajati movement in Nepal and the international sphere concerned with indigenous people. He was an elected member in the Council of the United Nations Permanent Forum in Indigenous People in 2002 by the Asia Regional Indigenous Conference for a three-year basis and got re-elected in 2005 for another time in office. In addition he served as an executive member for the Asia Indigenous People's Pact between 1996 and 2000, a regional Asian organization and was executive secretary for the International Alliance's secretary based in London from 2000 to 2002. Furthermore he is a coordinating member for the International Alliance of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples of the Tropical Forests, a worldwide network of organisations representing indigenous and tribal peoples living in tropical forest regions. Members of NEFIN criticized his leadership style and penchant for the international networking route while Tamang was acting as the organization's general secretary. Their fears that issues at home might languish got partly confirmed when NEFIN failed to hold a regular general assembly in 1998. Despite this criticism Parshuram Tamang is a well-known representative and expert for adivasi janati issues and has developed strong ties with the international discourse on Indigenous People and human rights of minorities. He is involved in a number of Tamang organizations and represents the Tamang as a whole on the national and international level.

I want to highlight two critical points concerning ethnic leadership that are applicable for the movement as a whole. First as already mentioned, the majority of ethnic leaders are well-educated and based in urban areas. With a university background and as a member of a certain group, they have a double legitimacy in speaking for their respective group. Therefore the discourse produced by ethnic group's thinkers answers certain demands. Consequently their statements have to be examined carefully in this context and should not be taken as mere facts. The second important question that arises within the framework of *adivasi janati*-activism is "Who speaks for whom?" As intellectuals and scholars who at the same time often have international linkages ethnic leaders have the knowledge and the tools to define and lead the discourse, possibly at the expense of other voices and interpretations within their ethnic group. In addition the majority of "ordinary" people



in Nepal are occupied with daily needs and economic survival, thus issues such as ethnicity, identity and demands arising from the ethnic movement do not constitute a major part in their lives. The agenda activists promote is therefore not necessarily shared by most of the people it aims to represent. Ethnic leaders' statements have to be compared to and enhanced by views of other members of the respective group in order to get a more accurate picture of the discourses.

Nepal Tamang Ghedung – Advocating Tamang as an Ethnic Group

The NTG is an autonomous non-profit organization that aims to speak for "the whole Tamang people" (Tamang interviewed by Krämer 1994: 41) and represents the group in NEFIN. Ghedung is a *Tamang* word and means association or organization. Thus the Nepal Tamang Ghedung is the association of Nepal's Tamang – the claim to act for all Tamang is hence already reflected in the organization's name. The NTG was reorganized in 1988 and traces its roots back to 1956 when the first Tamang Committee was founded. Today the organization has district committees in 62 out of 75 Nepalese districts and in addition 500 village level committees. The expansion took place mainly between 1990 and 1995 in order to connect urban activists and the rural Tamang population (Lama-Tamang 2009: 284). It was accompanied by activities such as *Lhochhar* and Buddha's anniversary, *Sanskritik Karyakram* and the boycott of Dashain.

The aims of the NTG are presented as follows on their homepage: First, the preservation and promotion of the language, script, arts, skill, literature, history, religion and cultural, and social, economic, political and civil rights of the Tamang people. Second, the promotion of human rights, women's, children's and indigenous people's rights on the basis of Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Bill of Rights, and emerging rights in the international arena. Third, the creation of awareness about the constitutional and legal systems and the promotion of democratic rights. Fourth, contribution to the national and international standard setting processes for the establishment of the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples and marginalized communities who are historically victims of racial, ethnic or national, linguistic, religious and regional discrimination. And fifth, developing and promot-

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ing friendly relations and partnerships with other ethnic communities to strengthen the national unity and all round development of the country and to network with the national and international organizations of similar objectives. Noticeable about this list is the international rhetoric and cross-references made to the international discourse. The NTG locates its aims within the framework of international human rights and the rights for indigenous people, an orientation that most likely was promoted by Parshuram Tamang, who was the NTG's president till 2008 – already in 1994 he stressed the fact that all concerns of the organization are within the scope of human rights (Tamang interviewed by Krämer 1994: 42).

From the Nepal Tamang Ghedungs' self-conception and its aims, two interrelated questions result: In which ways does the organisation define Tamang as a distinct ethnic group and how does the NTG justify and explain its claim to represent all Tamang of Nepal? From an anthropological perspective it is doubtful that the Tamang form a single ethnic group, a point of view clearly opposed by Tamang ethnic thinkers. Therefore the discourse on Tamang identity led by Tamang activists is embedded in a process of reinterpreting history and highlighting certain aspects which are assumed to be features constituting ethnic identity and bear importance for the struggle over resources whereas other features, which might contradict a distinct Tamang ethnic identity, are neglected.

Parshuram Tamang asserts that the Tamang form an ethnic group or even stronger a "nation" by stating: "Tamangs have their own language, their unique lifestyle and religious beliefs" (Tamang 1992b: 25). The emphasis on language is particularly interesting since scholars generally agree that *Tamang* consists of various dialects which are mutually incomprehensible and resemble the same degree of similarity between each other as to languages such as Gurung and Thakali. When asked by Krämer about western scholars' assumption that the Tamang label comprises a number of different groups most visible by the autonomous status of languages spoken by the groups, Parshuram Tamang answered, "...there is only one language" (Tamang interviewed by Krämer 1994: 47), which he admits consists of different dialects. Furthermore, Parshuram Tamang concludes that a common language, which all Tamang "...should be able to call [...] their own" (ibid.) needs to be developed and cultivated.

This argument and the stress on language development are in line



with the emphasis on language stressed in the 1990-constitution. Nepal was defined as "multi-lingual" (Article 4 (1)), mother tongues were ascribed the status of national languages (Article 6) and mother tongue education was guaranteed (Article 18). With the introduction of new language policies and programmes, for example the attempt to broadcast in various adivasi janajati languages on Radio Nepal, the struggle over resources began.²⁹ The government classified four categories of language development: most developed languages, languages in the process of developing a written tradition, languages without a written tradition and dying languages. In a second step a three-phase action plan for the implementation of mother-tongue instruction in school was defined. It is remarkable that *Tamang*, a language without a written tradition till the early 1990s managed to develop a variety of language materials including newspapers, magazines, journals, learning materials, literacy materials, literature, poems, plays, fiction, folk songs and films by 2007.30 Tamang today is most of the time written in the Devanagari script. However, in 1994 Parshuram Tamang claimed Tamang should be written in Tibetan to depict the sounds properly since the language is closer to Tibetan than South-Asian language such as Nepali. Interestingly this is followed by the assertion that using the Tibetan script would also fit with the Tamana's 'religious tradition' (ibid.: 47). In doing so, it becomes clear, that his consideration is not only with the language itself, but contains a political statement as well: the distance of Tamang culture and tradition to the dominant *Parbatiya* culture which is and especially was a common ground to unite on during the 1990s when NEFIN and other IPOs highlighted cultural aspects differentiating them from high-caste Hindus. Similarly his views about the equality of men and women in Tamang society are a point of further distinction between Tamang and Parbatiya society. However he also states that equality has deteriorated with the influence of Hindu cultural values. A lack of equality on the organisational level becomes obvious, when taking into account the low number of women representatives in Tamang organisations, as it is true for the representation of women for adivasi janajati as a whole.

Another point closely connected to language issues is the definition of the Tamang community's boundaries. While according to the 2001 Census Tamang constitute 5.6 percent of the total Nepalese population, in 1992 Parshuram Tamang suggested a total number of 18 to 20 percent (Tamang 1992b: 27). Notwithstanding that the first Census data

on ethnicity were only produced in 1991, this high number might not entirely be a consequence of a lack of data, but might result from political considerations. Sonntag (1995: 115) notes the tendency of some Tamang language strategists to define Tamang as an umbrella language for several Tibeto-Burman languages including among others Gurung and Thakali. By imposing their language on other Tibeto-Burman speaking groups they might seek to incorporate more people into the Tamang community to legitimate claims over resources. Simultaneously the practice of some communities in Nepal's north to identify themselves as Tamang in particular contexts, serves Tamang ethnic activist's purposes to subsume those groups under the Tamang label.

The reinterpretation of historical events to create a continuous shared history for all Tamang is another important part of the ethnic argument generated by activists. In Parshuram Tamang's historical account the Tamana have a common origin and today's differences in language and customs are only a result of the geographical distribution of Tamang settlements. With reference to Lichhavi inscriptions, Parshuram Tamang presents a theory that Tamang might be the earliest immigrants to Nepal. This assumption is particularly important for claims of indigenousness and hence for justifying the adivasi status of Tamang. Thus, Parshuram Tamang counters arguments by western scholars, who agree that the arrival of the first migration wave of Tamang happened in the 11th century. In short according to Parshuram Tamang, since the arrival of the Lichhavi the history of the Tamang has been characterised by exploitation and destruction of traditional culture (Tamang 1992a: 45). Parshuram Tamang sees the issuing of the official government decree in 1932, which officially introduced the term Tamang as an administrative category as a consequence of Tamang demands. Finally the Tamang gained the right to call themselves and be called by their proper name (Tamang interviewed by Krämer 1994: 47). The interpretation of this event as an answer to Tamang demands shifts the reasons for the recognition of the label Tamang from a state-driven administrative necessity serving the state's own interests to an emphasise on Tamang agency. Whether or not the decree took Tamang claims into account, it most probably must have been a minority of Tamang who campaigned for the recognition of the label.

The argumentation of the NTG answers to certain needs of the group and response to the *adivasi janajati* discourse as well as government policies as the examination of language issues and the reinterpreta-



tion of history above reveals. Throughout the 1990s one of the main objectives was to establish the Tamang as a distinct ethnic group like NEFIN aimed to install adivasi janajati as a legal category. By highlighting Tamang's distinct religion, customs and language, Parshuram Tamang applies primordial features to constitute the group's identity. Historical events which western scholars use in their argumentation as evidence for the state's influence in creating a pan-Tamang identity are reinterpreted by Tamang. He stresses the exploitation and its consequences from which demands for compensation result, yet he reduces the administration's role in the formation of a Tamang identity as his comments on the 1932 decree shows. With the introduction of a new language policy the need to create a shared Tamang language gained more importance and might have enabled the incorporation of smaller groups into the Tamang fold. Thus the identity discourse pushed forward by ethnic activists and their respective organizations might contribute to a homogenization of people's identity for example by defining a certain set of language features as the single Tamang language. By reinterpreting national historiography activists offer a counter version to the dominant state discourse; however the question remains how far it reflects the oral history, experiences and opinions of all members of the community they claim to represent.

Tamsaling Nepal Rastriya Dal and the Claim for Ethnic Territories

Like other ethnic political parties, the TRD was founded prior to the CA elections in 2008, since civil society organizations were not allowed to participate and ethnic activists feared their demands would weigh little in the drafting of a new constitution without a proper representation. The party, headed by Parshuram Tamang won 20,657 votes. Thus out of the eleven ethnic based parties it was one of the two parties, which did not get a seat in the CA. However, it would fall short to measure the success of ethnic parties solely on their election results. Ethnic political parties challenge the dominant discourse by speeches and writings, they aim to raise the participation of ethnic groups in elections and government bodies and they carry out cultural events that advance political ideas (Hangen 2010: 17).

The term Tamsaling in the party's name refers to the Tamang's an-



cestral homeland. Thus the party is mainly concerned with Tamang, even though according to the party manifesto it aims to represent all adivasi janajati groups. Today several organisations and political parties are involved in the Joint Struggle Committee for Tamsaling, among them are the TRD and the NTG. The first political usage of the term Tamsaling, which means "the land of the Tamang" dates back to the late 1980s when the Tamba- Sa- Ling Mukti Morcha, ("the land of the Tamang's Liberation Front") was founded (Lama-Tamang 2009: 271). Later on the name was changed to Tamsaling by the NTG. The Federal Democratic National Front (FDNF), which got two seats in the CA elections, set up the "Tamsaling Autonomous State Council" in 2006. Two years earlier the Maoists had declared Tamsaling as one of the nine autonomous regions that should be set up in the future republic of Nepal. The Tamsaling territory includes approximately nine out of Nepal's 75 current administrative districts.

Parshuram Tamang's approach towards ethnic territories has changed over the years. While in the early 1990s he was arguing for a cantonal approach, recently he was suggesting to take into account a group's ancestral homeland. This means the majority group of a particular region would get a guaranteed shared of 51 percent in the regional legislature while smaller groups would get a share most likely based on their group size. Later on Tamang put these statements into perspective by highlighting that the details are still in the process of consideration (Gellner et al. 1998: xxxv, xii). Like in the discourse on identity, Parshuram Tamang and other ethnic activists re-read national history in order to support their claims for Tamsaling. According to the activists after the Gorkha conquest of Tamang territory at the end of the eighteenth century, Tamang policies were dissolved. Consequently the new rulers expropriated Tamang land and gave it to Bahun and Chhetri migrants. Tamang were displaced from their ancestral lands. Under Rana rule the Tamang had to perform compulsory labour and experienced a common suffering.

The issue of ethnic territorial autonomy is central to the demands of ethnic parties and has also become an important claim for most IPOs.³¹ While the CA is working on a new constitution and the restructuring of the country into a federal state, it is highly debated on which factors the division of the country should be based on. Given the ethnic diversity in Nepal, the variation in group size and the spread settlement areas of the Nepalese population it seems impossible to implement ethnic units,



without privileging certain groups among others. Another question concerns the consequences of a right to "self-determination". In English the term usually includes the right of secession, what according to Gellner et al. (2008: xxxv) most activists in Nepal do not include in their understanding of the concept. Although many questions regarding ethnic territories are still being debated, the CA will be measured to a large part on its success in establishing a federal state on lines acceptable to all.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that the post-1990 developments in Nepal provide one example for what Bank describes as the entering of the academic concept ethnicity into the public and political sphere. Enabled by the post-1990 legal framework and a new political climate in which disadvantages based on one's belonging to a particular ethnic category could be addressed, the adivasi janajati movement under the strong leadership of NEFIN campaigned for the recognition of adivasi janajati as a legally valid category. While in the early 1990s the common ground to unite various heterogeneous groups into a single identity was their assumed cultural opposition to dominant high-caste Hindus, the discourse shifted later towards the stress of indigenousness, which was inspired by the growing internationalization of the adivasi janajati movement and a global emphasize on indigenousness initiated by the UN proclamation of a Year and subsequently a Decade of Indigenous People in 1993. Hence the movement was creatively ignoring the fact, that most of Nepal's ethnic groups trace their myths of origins back towards the South or North. The establishment of NFDIN was an important success for the movement since the government, applying a primordial definition of ethnicity, officially recognized the category adivasi janajati as the basis for the implementation of programmes. However, other disadvantaged groups like Dalits and Madhesis are excluded from becoming members in NEFIN due to their assumed Hindu identity.

The categories produced within the *adivasi janajati* movement are directly linked with the state formation as it has been shown for the Tamang. The proximity of their settlements to Kathmandu, the centre of the newly emerging state and the practicing of beef-eating and Buddhism contributed to their otherness, their status as labourers and hence their subjugated position within the MA from 1854. Only in 1932



was the label Tamang officially introduced by a government decree - an event differently interpreted by scholars and activists like Parshuram Tamang, Furthermore consensus exists among most scholars that a pan-Tamang identity is a comparatively recent phenomenon and thus advocating an instrumentalist approach towards the study of ethnicity, scholars highlight the role of the state and the context-dependency of the production of ethnic categories. Today Tamang belong to the well-organized groups in Nepal, a fact that partly can be attributed to Parshuram Tamang who was closely connected with NEFIN and decided on the international advocacy road to get support for his visions and the movement as a whole. It is crucial to note that most activists by virtue of both having an intellectual university background and being members of their respective group follow an agenda and have the knowledge and authority to speak for the group as a whole. However, 'ordinary' people and activists do not necessarily share the same view on issues related to ethnic identity, the interpretation of history and resulting claims. Therefore ethnic activism can possibly result in the homogenization of a group by promoting a certain set of practices and features and denving others.

With the discussion of arguments and issues highlighted by the NTG and the TRD, I have tried to show how the *adivasi janajati* movement has unfolded itself between 1990 and 2010. Whereas in the early years the emphasis was on creating a distinct Tamang identity to legitimate claims over resources e.g. language development, today the argumentation of the NTG and TRD is located within the discourse of ethnic territories based on ancestral homelands. Claims for autonomous ethnic territories gained more prominence at the end of 1990s when the *adivasi janajati* movement had already established itself as an important actor and possessed more influence and self-awareness. Finally, as the article has aimed to demonstrate, it has been political agendas arising in a particular historical context that shaped different actors' definition and usage of the concept of ethnicity.

Endnotes

In this article I use the term 'ethnic group' to designate groups officially recognized as *adivasi janajati*. Therefore the Hindu popula-



tion is not described as an ethnic group. However, in the case of Nepal the common notion of a minority-majority approach in defining ethnic groups is challenged since no single group accounts for more than 50 percent of the total population and Dahal (1995: 166) suggests that a particular group can be at the same time majority and minority depending on the specific economic, political, social context.

- This number is based on the 2001 census for castes and ethnic groups. If excluding Chhetri and Bahun, the Magar form the largest ethnic group with 7.1 percent, followed by the Tharu constituting 6.8 percent. Census data for population by mother tongue differ slightly and identify 5.2 percent of the population as Tamang mother tongue speakers. For critical comments on the Nepalese Census' methods of data collection see Gurung 1997: 520; Pradhan 2002: 5.
- 3 The Panchayat period was commenced in 1960 with the overthrow of the first democratic ally elected government by King Mahendra thereby abandoning the democratic developments which had been taking place between 1959 and 1960 after the Rana regime was overturned in 1951.
- A term introduced by Anderson in his seminal work "Imagined Communities". There he argues that even though members of a particular nation do not know each other on a personal level, the idea of a shared community exists in their minds (Anderson 1983: 15). Since ethnic activists in Nepal like Parshuram Tamang think of their respective group as a "nation" or "nationality" it seems appropriate to apply the term also on a smaller scale and in a non-European context.
- In the Nepali context of ethnic activism, theories on nationalism are of particular interest since they can be used to critically examining the relation between the state and its citizens. In addition Gellner (1997: 10) for example emphasizes the fact, that in many languages no distinction is made between nationalism and ethnicity.
- 6 See for example Schneiderman's A Critique of the Study of Kinship (1984) for a critical examination of kinship. There the author argues that despites its earlier usage as a universal feature of human

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kind, kinship is an academic category and to a certain extent the invention of western anthropologists that privileges western concepts in interpreting other people's realities at the expense of emic categories.

- 7 The new political climate also enabled scholars to focus on these sensitive issues while research was much more restricted during Panchayat times.
- 8 Republished in 2008 under the title *Nationalism and Ethnicity in Nepal.*
- 9 Fürer-Haimendorf (1975: 234) for example notes, that Tibetan-speaking groups in the far west refer to themselves as Tamang in official contexts and the same is true for people in Langtang and Karmarong (Höfer 1979: 149). The reasons for this strategy can not be discussed in detail here, yet the designation Bhote or Bothiya for Tibetan-speaking groups bears a derogative connotation indicating backwardness and a lack of loyalty towards the Nepalese state. Significantly in Humla, a region in Nepal's far west, people formerly classified as Bhotiya were told to be Tamang by government officials in the first half of the nineteenth century. The reason might have been to prevent Tibetan claims over Nepalese territory. Therefore it was crucial to present people living in the border area as proper Nepalese citizens (Levine 1987: 79-80).
- The term Murmi may have derived from Tibetan *mur* for frontier and *mi* for people. The shift from Murmi to Tamang reflects a transformation from the margins of Tibetan to the margins of Nepalese society of the population designated by the term (Macdonald 1975: 129).
- 11 A similar situation is reported by Holmberg (2005, 1989: 20) for the community of western Tamangs, who also differentiate between Ghale and Tamang.
- Whereas some scholars argue caste is a defining feature of South Asian society, little consent exists on how caste ultimately should be interpreted. Furthermore in the last three decades scholars started focussing on the at least partial British colonial impact in the creation of categories such as caste. It is crucial to note, that Nepali does not differ-



entiate between ethnic group and caste – the term *jat* is used for both in daily life as well as legal documents like the *Muluki Ain* (MA) from 1854. Only very recently educated Nepalis started to apply the term *jati* when referring to ethnic groups and *jat* when referring to caste (Gellner et al. 2008, 1997: 541). The article cannot aim to provide a final definition of the term caste. Therefore I will deploy the term caste according to its usage in the conventional academic literature on Nepal and *jat* when referring to the MA.

- 13 The hereditary rule of Rana Prime ministers lasting till 1951 began in 1846 when Jang Bahadur Rana gained power through the Kot massacre. Consequently the Shah kings were reduced to the statues of symbolic monarchs, while all the power remained with the Ranas.
- The implementation of the MA and its consequences for Nepal's population varied within the country depending on the level of administration already established. It was particularly strong in areas with a high proportion of *Parbatiyas* while groups living in high mountain areas were less confronted with and influenced by the regulations of the MA (Höfer 1970: 40).
- Höfer (1979: 37-42) argues that the MA was a necessary tool to re-legitimate the identity of Nepal based on a national Hindu caste hierarchy against British India while at the same time motivating the solidarity of her citizens. The MA presented a caste hierarchy supporting and strengthening the dominant position of its ruling *Parbatiya* elites while covering all people of the kingdom within a single Hindu hierarchy under Gorkhali rule.
- Whereas the literacy rate among Bahun is 58 and among Chhetri 42 percent, *janajati* literacy rate is limited to 35 percent (excluding Newar, among whom literacy rate is 54.8 percent). The literacy rate among Dalits is reported even lower with 23.8 percent. Considerable differences also exist in terms of life expectancy. Life expectancy among Bahun amounts for 60.8, among Chhetri 56 and among Newar 54.8 years, in contrast *janajati's* life expectancy only averages 53 years (NESAC outcomes as presented in Hacchetu 2003: 226); Detailed statistics about the representation of *janajati* groups in the House of Representatives and Member's of parties' Central Committee and their interpretation are



provided in Hacchetu 2003: 239; Krämer 2002: 179-198.

- Lama-Tamang (cited in Onta 2003: 321) distinguishes between fourteen different types of organizations based on their main topics of activism: religious, culture, development and advocacy, language and literature, social service, songs and music, history and museums, journalism, lawyers, intellectual and civil society, NGOs, women's issues, student affairs, *adviasi janajati* political parties, ethnic liberation fronts and councils. Though, most organizations focus on more than one issue.
- The more stabilized political situation in Nepal after 2006 when government and Maoists signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement might have contributed to the growing number of organizations.
- A detailed analysis of the shifting of meanings in the course of ethnic activism in Nepal using the example of the boycott of Dashain by the Mongol National Organization after 1990 is provided by Hangen 2005. See Pfaff-Czarnecka 2003 and Campbell 1995 for an analysis of Tamang communities who no longer celebrate the Hindu festival.
- Among the founding members there were two Rai organizations and one organization for each of the following ethnic groups: Gurung, Magar, Newar, Limbu, Rai and Tamang (Gellner and Karki 2008: 109). Only five groups are currently without representatives in NEFIN: Bankariya, Hayu, Kusunda, Phree, whose main settlement area is in the hills and Raute who live in the Inner Tarai. Gellner et al 2008: xxvii.
- For detailed information on NEFIN's objectives and missions as well as the JEP consult www.nefin.org.np; a summary of the challenges NEFIN is currently facing is provided by Hangen 2010: 40f.
- At present 69 armed liberation groups are reported for Nepal. Most of them are based in southern Nepal and seek an autonomous Tarai state (Phatak and Uprety 2009: 4).
- The Task Force Report Committee included six Nepalese members: three politicians, an anthropologist, a development sociologist and a secretary of the Ministry of Local Affairs (Gellner and Karki 2008: 110).



- Three formerly separately listed villages decided to form one ethnic group, the Tingaule, while the Manangis decided to belong to the Gurungs. The Yakha were listed as a separate group on the latter list (Gellner 2007: 1824, 1828).
- Onta (2006: 316f.) states that the basis for this classification provided by NEFIN and later accepted by NFDIN is to a certain extend obscure. NEFIN classified the groups using various human development parameters, but did not submitted a detailed list of those parameters to NFDIN. For critical comments on the definition in general see Onta 2006: 314ff.
- A counter definition on the basis of race, paraphrased with the term "Mongol" was promoted by the Mongol National Organization in sharp contrast to NEFIN's and the majority of *janajati adivasi* organisation's definition of *adivasi janajati*, which was mainly based on cultural features. However this parallel discourse was not able to attract support among the ethnic organizations in Nepal (Hangen 2010: 49-57).
- When in 1998 the Maoist formed the "Tamang National Liberation Front" some frustrated and more radical orientated cadres joint them. But this is only a marginal numbers of activists and therefore the exception (Lama-Tamang, 2009: 285).
- The under-representation of women within the *janajati adivasi* movement and the absence of any forum to address women's issues and the persisting patriarchy led to the foundation of the National Indigenous Women Federation (NIWF) in 2000. Today organizations from 31 different ethnic groups are brought together under this umbrella organization.
- 29 Radio Nepal started broadcasting in eight languages in 1994, Tamang was one of them (Sonntag 1995: 113).
- Among 56 languages evaluated in a survey by Yadava (2007), six managed to produce materials in all categories mentioned. Besides *Tamang*, the other languages were *Awadhi*, *Hindi*, *Limbu*, *Maithili*, *Newari* and *Sherpa*.



During the 'people's war' the Maoists answered to ethnic discontent and incorporated demands of ethnic activists into their agenda, which brought them considerable support. In 2003 they declared eight of nine autonomous regions by holding massive public ceremonies in the respective areas (Gellner et al. 2008: xxix- xxx).

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Appendices

I: The Caste Hierarchy as presented in the Muluki Ain of 1854

1. tagadhari "Wearers of the holy cord"

Upadhyaya Brahman

Rajput (Thakuri) ("warrior")

Jaisi Brahman

Chetri (Ksatri) ("warrior)

Dew Bhaju (Newar Brahmins) E

Indian Brahmin

Ascetic sects (e.g. Sannyasi)

"Lower" Jaisi

Various Newar castes * F

2. namasinya matwali "Non- enslavable Alcohol- drinkers"

Magar * E

Gurung * E

Sunuwar * F

Some other Newar Castes * F

3. masinva matwali "Enslavable Alcohol- drinkers"

Bhote * F

Cepang * E

Kumal (potters) *

Havu * E

Tharu * E

Gharti (descendants of freed slaves) *

4. pani nacalnya choi chito halnunaparnya impure, but "touch-

able" castes

Kasai (Newar butchers) E

Kusle (Newar musicians) E

Hindu Dhobi (Newar washermen) E

Kulu (Newar tanners) E

Musulman *

Mleech (European) *



 pani nacalnya choi chito halnuparnya untouchable castes Kami (blacksmith)/ Sarki (tanners/ shoemakers) Kadara (stemming from unions between Kami and Sarki) Damai (tailors and musicians) Gaine (minstrel) Badi (musicians) Pore (Newar skinners and fishermen) E Cyame (Newar scavengers) E

E - ethnic group

* - position (status) within the caste group is not precisely determined Source: Muluki Ain as presented in Höfer 1979: 45.

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II: Classification of 59 Adivasi Janajatis Based on Socio-Economic Status, NFDIN Act 2002

Regina	Fadangered	Highly	Marginalized	Disadrambged	1
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	į	Demonstra	Kees		
	į	Mark			
Tarri (10)	Kism	Dhomak (Ratherm)	Dhimal		L
•	Merke (Bodn)	Been	Ganesi		
		Santhal (Satar)	Rationshi (Keett)		
			I appeariya		
			near		
Tech (59)	10	12	8	15	7
		_	_		-

Source: Adapted from NEFIN www.nefin.org.np.