

## The Changing Dynamics of Nationalism: A Reading of Select Fiction from Nepal

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### Abstract

The monarchy, Nepali language, and Hinduism have been instrumental in the development of Nepali nationalism, and issues related to ethnicity, language, race, and region have been systematically ignored in the formation of the Nepali state. Likewise, the national literature of Nepal until the 1990s was dominated by writers from the Hindu upper caste who spoke primarily of and for the ruling class, often undermining the diversity of an otherwise heterogeneous nation. However, the political upheavals witnessed by Nepal in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have led to an upsurge of groups searching for ‘national identities’ on ethnic and regional grounds. This has also brought key changes to the literary landscape of Nepal, and contemporary writers have been increasingly drawn to the emerging new voices and identity movements aimed at questioning the prevalent notion of ‘inclusive nationalism’ with its central axis on the monarchical base and Parbatiya supremacy. Against the backdrop of a renewed debate on nationalism and the structure of the state in Nepal, this paper seeks to examine the changing dynamics of Nepali nationalism as encapsulated in contemporary fiction from Nepal. The paper examines the rising ethnocultural and regional nationalism in Nepal in two contemporary novels, *Karnali Blues* (2010) and *The Wayward Daughter* (2018), by two prominent Nepali writers, Buddhisagar Chapain and Shradha Ghale, respectively. *Karnali Blues* has been hailed as a pioneering work in introducing ‘new regionalism’ in the context of Nepali literature. It narrates the story of mid- and far-western Nepal and aptly captures the lives of groups belonging to the margins. Shradha Ghale’s *The Wayward Daughter* focuses on a Janajati family and portrays a rich cross-section of Nepali society influenced by the lived realities of class and caste. The paper explores the diversity of life, region, and population in Nepal as depicted in both novels, thereby validating the necessity to understand Nepali nationalism in terms of region, class, religion, and ethnicity. This is also reflective of the changing narrative of Nepali nationalism.

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Nation, Ethnicity, Regionalism, Religion, Nepal, Fiction

### Introduction

Nationalism in Nepal has its roots in the aggressive expansionist mission of King Prithvi Narayan Shah (1723–1775), who conquered or unified more than 50 small principalities based on ethnic groups of present-day Nepal and transformed the tiny Gorkha principality in the western Hills into a powerful kingdom. The seventy-year long Shah dynasty came to an end in

1846 when Bahadur Kunwar Rana massacred many members of the royal household in an event known as the *Kot* massacre. He neutralised the power of the monarchy but retained it as a symbol of the unity of the kingdom. Jang Bahadur assumed the title of “Rana”, and laid the foundation of the Rana regime, which ruled Nepal on a hereditary basis for 31 years (Hutt, *Himalayan Voices* 2). The “Revolution” of 1951 put an end to the Rana rule, and King Tribhuvan Shah was restored to power through an alliance with the Nepali Congress, marking the advent of democracy and the beginning of a modern period in the history of Nepal. This tryst with democracy was disrupted in 1960 when King Mahendra dismissed the decade-long parliamentary democracy as an “alien system unsuited to Nepal” (Hutt, *Himalayan Voices* 3) and introduced panchayat democracy. The new system asserted the role of the king and promoted the royalist project of nation building and territorial unity until 1990, when the panchayat regime was overthrown by the pro-democracy movement, and the king accepted a constitutional role. The non-colonised past of Nepal and the pivotal role of the Shah Hindu kings in the formation of Nepali nationalism indicate the centrality of the state in the formation of Nepali identity. Nepali nationalism fits into the concept of “state-framed” nationalism defined by Brubaker, where a nation is:

conceived as congruent with the state, and as institutionally and territorially framed by it [...]. In state-framed nationhood or nationalism it is the state not citizenship that is the cardinal point of reference; and the state that frames the nation need not be democratic...the notion of state-framed nationhood or nationalism enables us to talk about the way in which linguistic cultural and even (narrowly) ethnic aspects of nationhood and nationalism may be framed, mediated and shaped by the state. (300)

This version of Nepali nationalism promoted “a homogenising collective Nepali identity, disregarding the socio-cultural diversity of the country’s population” (Malagodi 237). Nepali language, Hindu religion, and the superiority of the upper caste Hindu Parbatiya group were the common grounds identified for unification of this heterogeneous group, and until the 1990s, the evolution of Nepali nationalism rested on these three concepts of “Hinduization,

Sanskritization, and Nepalization” (Bhattachan 23). Promotion of religious identity helped legitimise the institution of monarchy and promote “Hindu Nationalism” (Upreti 540) in Nepal. This narrative of Hindu nationalism in Nepal has been questioned and interrogated in recent years, especially after the political upheavals of the 1990s. The People’s Revolution of 1990, also known as *Jana Andolan I*, restored multiparty democracy in Nepal and has been identified by scholars as an important period, bringing about some key changes in the social and political scenario of the nation. Although, in the long run, the democratic forces that ruled the country after 1990 failed to “address the issues of caste, class, gender, geographical exclusion, marginalisation, and discrimination” (Upreti 218) and people received “very little from democracy” (Thapa 154), scholars agree that with the adoption of the new constitution in 1990, “a debate on nationalism emerged [and] Nepali citizens began to exercise their constitutional rights and assert their political views and identities” (Upreti 217). Manjushree Thapa observes that democracy gave the people of Nepal “a sense of what it meant to be sovereign” (Thapa 141). Riaz and Basu opine that the movement “ruptured the hegemonic ideology of a constructed Hindu identity” (2) and led to the emergence of “democratic pluralism and a new space for political activism” (13). Though the ‘hangover of the Hindu kingdom continued” (Gurung 5), state-sponsored nationalism became less relevant and “cultural homogeneity was strongly disputed” (Bhandari 425) after the 1990s. Thus, movements such as the People’s Revolution I (1990), the Maoist Revolution (1996 and 2006), the People’s Revolution II (2006), and the Madheshi Revolution (2007) have brought changes to the Nepali nation, now identified as a federal secular state. These movements calling for recognition of the Nepali state on ethnic, religious, and regional grounds are reflective of the changing scenario and shifting grounds of Nepali nationalism.

The literature from Nepal written before the 1990s shows a similar scenario, as questions of diversity and problems of the marginalised received little concern in early Nepali literature. This was also because “apart from a handful of notable exceptions, its authors were male, either Brahman or high-caste Newar, and based in Kathmandu” (Hutt, “Writers, Readers, and Sharing of Consciousness” 19). Moreover, the project of national development during the Panchayat era, when the king retained absolute power, was directed at a “wilful re-imagining of a common Nepali identity,” and to promote this end, “a Nepali-language literary canon was invented [...] with Bhanubhakta Acharya heralded-falsely-as the country’s ‘first poet’” (Thapa 124–125). While political and social changes and instability continue to pose a challenge to the country, the literary scene of Nepal has noticed many changes with the abolition of the panchayat system and the promulgation of the new constitution in November 1990, which allowed for “new freedom of expression and publication” (Hutt, “Writers, Readers, and Sharing of Consciousness” 19; Thapa v). A testimony of this change may be seen in the new national anthem of Nepal “a garland of hundreds of flowers”, glorifying the diversity of people and the country and composed by an unknown ethnic poet Byakul Maila, which has replaced the old anthem “Illustrious, profound, the awesome, glorious Nepali monarch”, composed in glory for the king by a well-known Brahmin poet (Hutt, “Singing the New Nepal” 310). Similarly, in the scenario of contemporary Nepali literature, an upsurge of new voices from or on the ‘margins’ has opened up possibilities for newer ways of understanding the Nepali nation. Contemporary Nepali writers address various forms of marginalisation based on language, ethnicity, religion, region, and gender, which suggests the changing concerns of Nepali writers from the ‘margins’ as well as from the ‘mainstream’. Manjushree Thapa’s translations of Nepali short stories and poems published in *The Country is Yours: Contemporary Nepali Literature* (2009) capture this diversity and “sense of voices that have come to articulation after 1990” (xiii). Equally noteworthy is the steady growth of Nepali writing in English, which dates back to Lakshmi

Prasad Devkota's writings during the anti-Rana movement. A compiled bibliography of Nepali writing in English by Mui Pun shows the proliferation of writing after the 1990s. Pun states that with the wider readership of works by Samrat Upadhyay and Manjushree Thapa, the canon of Nepali writings in English has been rapidly expanding, and writers like Rabi Thapa, Sushma Joshi, Sheeba Shah, and Greta Rana have contributed to its growth. Pun also notes that the translations of Nepali writing into English have been of great importance in this regard.

Thus, unlike the literature of the pre-1900s, contemporary writers and writings from Nepal represent the diversity of the nation in its different aspects. In this article, I explore this shift of 'focus' through the reading of two novels set against the backdrop of the 1990s, a period of immense historical, political, social, cultural, and literary significance in Nepal. The article aims to examine how contemporary Nepali writers, by including regional, religious, and ethnic diversity in their works, help understand the Nepali nation in alternative ways. Moreover, the two writers selected for this study belong to different groups in terms of gender and ethnicity. Shradha Ghale belongs to the Janajati group, which has been represented and given a voice in the novel. Buddhisagar Chapain belongs to the upper caste Hindu community, but his novel raises pertinent questions on the issue of regional and caste/ethnic marginalisation, apparent in the large canvas of the novel, which includes characters from almost 'every' strata of society. In understanding nationalism in the specific context of Nepal, I am influenced by Gellner's arguments that the phenomenon of nationalism may vary according to contexts and different historical periods; in fact, at some historical periods it may be absent, and when present it may not be shared equally by all classes, ethnic groups, and genders. As Gellner puts it, "nationalism is not natural" (3). Gellner also stresses the need to study nationalism in the historical context of a nation. The setting of the two novels—*The Wayward Daughter* (2018) and *Karnali Blues* (2010)—against the backdrop of the 1990s in two different and faraway locations also invites

attention in terms of the regional diversity of Nepal. By exploring how the democratic movement affected the common populace and their dreams and aspirations, I argue that Nepali nationalism needs to embrace within its fold the concerns of the common people, like food, shelter, security, health, and poverty alleviation.

### **The ethnic turn and *The Wayward Daughter***

*The Wayward Daughter* (2018) by Shraddha Ghale focuses on the predicament of a Janajati family and their conflict of identity in the urban setting of Kathmandu. The Janajatis of Nepal are one of the “largest ethnic groups demanding the rights of indigenous nationalities” (Hathechu 235). In the caste hierarchy of Nepal, the Janajatis, often derogatorily referred to as “Matwali (liquor drinking),” are originally neither Hindu nor Nepali-speaking people (Hachhethu 218). They include most of Nepal’s Tibeto-Burman and Indo-European non-caste ethnicities, who were often described as “tribal” for their distinctive social organisation (Riaz and Basu 53). In Richard Bughart’s early study on the history of the formation of the nation-state in Nepal, this marginalisation is traced to “the interpretation of country in terms of species” (113). Bughart suggests that by the mid-twentieth century, “the government had consolidated its preeminent claim over the territory of the kingdom and therefore was inclined to look upon the ethnic groups of the kingdom as social bodies (*jat*) rather than as territorial bodies (*des*). Groups of people, such as the Limbu, customarily referred to as the natives of a country, were referred to by the government as a “species” (117). Therefore, this inequality between the dominant group and the minority group is a product of the historical process of national integration in Nepal. In recent years, literature on ethnic identities has questioned this historical process of ‘Nepalization’ based on Parbatiya culture and Hinduization. Shraddha Ghale’s *The Wayward Daughter*, centred on a Janajati family, showcases the dilemma of this group caught in a crisis of identity against the backdrop of the democratic movement of the

1990s, which led to an “intensification of ethnic activism and opened up new debates concerning their status in Nepali society” (Riaz and Basu 52).

The novel is set in Kathmandu in the 1990s, with occasional mention of the ancestral village of the Tamule family in Lungla. The impact and momentum of the people’s movement for democracy are clearly felt in Kathmandu with “protesters [...] red flags [...] shouting Panchayat Murdabad, bahudal Jindabad” (27). The collective rage of the people against the royalist regime fills the city with mutinous energy as members of the banned political parties shout slogans like “Death to the Panchayat system!” Victory to the multi-party system!” (37). Clashes between protesters and police and the deaths of innocent men turn into an everyday affair. The “starry red flags of the Democratic Party and the hammer-and-sickle flag of the Leftist Party”, and slogans like “Scoundrel King, leave the country” (38) announce the fading monarchy and advent of democracy. With the launch of the anti-Panchayat protest, “Pancha rallies [...] a procession of men in *daura suruwal*, the official attire of government employees, [...] with larger-than-life portraits of the King and Queen” (38) became an everyday sight in Kathmandu. For the common people, this parading becomes insignificant, disruptive, and a matter of joke while public meetings, demonstrations, and strikes paralyse life in Kathmandu. Sumnima and her sister Numa do not comprehend the situation, but they sense that “something momentous was happening. A drama was unfolding in the streets, there was buzz of expectancy in the air” (41).

Sumnima’s father, Gajendra Bahadur Tamule (referred to as Gajey or Tamule ji), and mother, Premkala, belong to the Kirat community, a Janajati group in Nepal. Many ethnic families in Nepal had accepted the Hindu culture and upper caste way of life for “upward mobility and status”. As noted by Gérard Toffin:

During the 19th and 20th centuries, an enduring process of Hinduization took place in the hills. It can indeed be called a process of Nepalization since the state-backed Hinduism became the pillar of the Himalayan kingdom. Most ethnic groups adopted elements from the Hindu dominant culture: rites of passage performed by a Brahman priest, marriage prescriptions according to Hindu rules, worship of Hindu gods, et cetera. (28)

The Tamule family is an instance of this acceptance of Sanskritization and Hinduization. Premkakra observes that slothful and superstitious, the Tamules were “dupes of high-caste Bahuns and Chhetris, copycats who aped high-caste manners down to the cadence of their sugary speech, self-abasing fools who looked down on fellow Matwali tribes and called them ‘Bhote’, a catch-all term of insult for all Matwalis including the Tamule” (26). Tamule ji’s devotion to Hindu rituals goes back to his father, who embraced the ways of high-caste Hindus and struggled all his life to attain Brahmin godliness. Though the high-caste people in the village shunned him and did not accept food from him, his faith in the inborn piety of the Hindus was unshakable. From chanting Sanskrit mantras to marking his forehead with sandalwood paste and fasting three days a week, Tamule ji’s father practised every ritual of the high-caste Hindus, “who ruled their lives in myriad avatars-as landlords, priests, soothsayers, moneylenders, generals and kings” (60). The imitation of Brahmin ways gives him a sense of superiority to others of his caste, imbuing in him a sense of piety and dignity that shape his behaviour and demeanour. During her first visit to Lungla, the ancestral village of her husband, Premkala realises that by practising “Bahun-style rituals” (32), the Tamules rank themselves higher than other Matwali tribes. In the Satyanarayan Puja organised in honour of the newlyweds, Premkala is often cornered as a “pig-eating Limbuni” and treated like an “untouchable”. Premkala does not share her husband’s enthusiasm for religious formalities and, in sheer disgust and irritation, calls him a “*Chimse* (mimic) Bahun” (30). The royalist regime promoted this image of a harmonious tradition as a distinctive mark of Nepali identity that integrated the nation. The adoption of Hindu culture by ethnic groups and the restrictive



environment of the panchayat system did not allow any resistance to this dominance in the power structure of the country.

The restoration of democracy in 1990 provided ‘some’ space for the needs and interests of the excluded groups, with ethnic activism on the rise. Shraddha Ghale attempts to capture this change in the family of Premkala in Kathmandu. Premkala’s father, Jemadar Sher Bahadur Limbu, is also a victim of caste dynamics. His shared ancestral land in a village in a far-flung district is passed on to high-caste settlers “plot by plot, gradually and lawfully ...like a slow-spreading calamity” (45). After retiring from the British Indian Army, Jemadar Sher Bahadur Limbu decides to move to Kathmandu and is one of the “first Limbus to own a property in the capital city” (45). The detailed description of the festivals, customs, traditions, rituals, and eating habits of the Limbu tribe and interspersed dialogue in Newari language chart a space for the marginalised, otherwise considered “Bhote [...] jungly tribes only good at drinking, dancing and frittering their lives away” (43). When Tamule ji marries Premkala, his father warns him not to defile the purity of the house with pork, but in Kathmandu, Tamule ji cannot resist the pork delicacies popular among his wife’s people. Premkala’s family in Kathmandu conveys a sense of assertiveness against the constructed ethno-religious order of the state and depicts a changing scenario. Her brother marries an upper-caste Chhetri girl as it is no longer a legal offence in a nation where “not until long ago, a Matwali like him would have been punished by law for daring to court a high-caste woman” (43).

One year into the multiparty democracy brings new hopes, and Tamule Ji quits his job at the electrical corporation, joins an international NGO, and is gradually able to live the life of his dreams. The Maoist struggle also intensifies, and news of violence, arrests, and killings increases; the streets of Kathmandu feel the tremor of the “People’s War and New Democratic Revolution” (200); slogans painted in red appear on college walls in Kathmandu. In far-flung,

poverty-ridden districts, the Maoist insurgency gathers momentum, and different dissenting groups begin to gain hold. Signs of these changes are seen in Tamule Ji's village in Lungla. Rai Kaka's son, Dammar, joins a liberation group fighting for the oppressed castes and ethnic groups. Under his influence, the family refuses to celebrate *Dasain* (Durga Puja), which they consider a Hindu festival imposed by the King. Tamule Ji expresses his solidarity with the new generation: "The younger generation is not like us. They are not willing to accept the domination of Bahuns and Chhetris" (213). But the generation of Tamule ji and his brother Tikaram belong to a confused, lost generation. As both of them try to come to terms with their identity, they trace their ancestry to non-Hindus who came from Tibet and settled in the west, asserting that Tamules in the west do not follow Hindu rituals and speak their own language, but the ones like them in the east have assimilated into the Hindu kingdom. To the most crucial question of why their great-grandfathers decided to become Hindus, Tamule ji can only surmise that the people had no choice.

While the Janajatis can hope for inclusiveness and recognition of identity, for the people of Terai, it was still a distant dream in the 1990s. On her way to Kathmandu, Sumnima's cousin Ganga is unable to relate to the vast flat land of Terai and the dark men and women in the bus. Very quickly, she imbibes the condescending attitude of the Kathmandu dwellers towards the "dark skinned men from the southern plains" (98), who came from borderland villages and worked as hawkers, tinkers, and pedlars. Identified as "black Madheshis," they are seen as threats and outsiders, their identity marked by their skin colour, dress, and poverty. In Kathmandu, Ganga notices a young teenager shouting at an old vegetable seller, "Sale dhoti, are you trying to cheat us? I'll give you one flying kick and send you back to India" (98). In Premkala's childhood memories, Madhesh invokes the image of hot, dusty towns with paan-stained roads and crowds of dark-skinned people: "men in dhoti and kurta, women in garish-

coloured saris” (191). The difference in region, dress, skin colour, and language (they spoke a mix of Hindi and Maithali) identifies the Madhesh as ‘Other’, someone to be dreaded and feared. Premakala’s uncle warns her, “These Madiseys are third-rate people, all thieves and crooks” (191). The Madheshis and people of Terai were never considered equal citizens of the country and have been identified as a threat to the unity of the Nepali nation. Shradha Ghale’s novel captures this ‘otherization’ of the Madheshis, thereby raising the need to identify and address the problems of this region and group.

In all the political turmoil, Sumnima is caught between her father’s rural past, the constant pouring of relatives and cousins, and her high-class friends and new-found love. Sumnima sees class as a barrier as she has to manoeuvre amongst her high-class, affluent friends and her crush on Radio Jockey Sagar. As the narrative moves forward, the country faces another threat with the rage against multi-party democracy, the launch of the People’s War, and the Maoist attacks in several districts outside Kathmandu. Sumnima fails to connect to the Maoist insurgency: “People’s War? It sounded grandiose and far-fetched. The idea of some people in far-flung district raging war against government seemed somewhat ludicrous” (178). The novel ends with an indication of the intensifying conflict of the Maoist insurgency in the countryside. In Kathmandu, the educated new generation like Sumnima dreams of moving out of “poor, unstable, war-torn Nepal” (262) while her cousin Ganga is happy that her family has moved out of Lungla to a small town for “as long as one lived in Nepal, one progressed forward by moving into, not away from Kathmandu” (263). The novel ends on a note of uncertainty surrounding the fate of the country, with strikes, shutdowns, road blockades, and an increasing number of people fleeing the villages to escape the Maoist recruitment drive.

**The Terai-Madhesh, regional marginalisation, and *Karnali Blues***

Buddhisagar Chapain's first novel, *Karnali Blues* (2010), was originally published in Nepali and translated by Michael Hutt in 2021. In the "Translator's Afterword," Hutt states that this book is different from literature published in Nepali over the past hundred years. While most Nepali writers have taken the capital Kathmandu as the setting and reference point, in *Karnali Blues*, "Kathmandu is on the margins of the story, and the central narrative continues to unfold elsewhere" (411). Another mark of departure, as mentioned by Hutt, lies in the use of different dialects of Nepali and local versions of Tharu in the original text, which serve "to reveal the class and caste identity of the characters" (Hutt "Singing the New Nepal" 306). The novel offers a peek into the 'margins' of the nation. The Terai-Madhesh, characterised by regional, socio-cultural, and linguistic diversity, has a heterogeneous population of indigenous Janajatis, Tharus, Madheshis, Muslims, and Pahadis. Though Terai-Madhesh has been an active participant in the political struggle of the country, literature and scholarly work on this region have been scarce, and it has received very little attention in comparison to the hilly and mountainous regions of Nepal (Gaige xiii). The sensitivity to the socio-political context of the time makes Buddhisagar a pioneer of writings set in the Terai-Madhesh regions of Nepal.

As the central character of the novel, Birsa Bahadur, attends to his sick father, who lies dying in a hospital bed, the reader is drawn into a world of radical changes undergoing in Nepal. The early years of Birsa in the towns of Matera and Katase are set against the backdrop of Nepal's restored democracy after the People's Revolution of 1990. Later, as Katase Bazaar begins to depopulate, the family moves to Manma in Kalikot district, where they thrive for some time. But the conflict begins to impinge on daily life; the town is cut off by the Maoists, and the army moves in. The central character eventually moves to Kathmandu for higher studies, but the action of the novel does not move to Kathmandu. For Birsa Bahadur, Kathmandu is "a foreign territory, and the novel charts a journey towards the centre from a

geographical and cultural location that a Kathmandu perspective constructs as marginal” (Hutt, *Himalayan Voices* 27).

The novel invokes the region and focuses exclusively on the flora, fauna, and regional specificities through the childhood memories of the protagonist. Seen through the eyes of Birsa, this space can be understood and experienced as a stand-in for the ‘nation’. Raymond Williams’ understanding of the term “country” in English is of particular importance in understanding rural spaces. He notes that in English, “‘country’ is both a nation and part of a ‘land’; ‘the country’ can be the whole society or its rural area” (1). Similarly, Relph’s suggestion of “meanings imbued in landscapes” (122) may particularly be applied to rural landscapes, which can serve as a setting for the meaning of a nation. The novel invokes the remoteness, poverty, lack of basic health care, economic disparity, extreme terrain and weather conditions, and lack of development in the region. The regional specificities of the novel indicate the distance and remoteness of the place, which is also a mark of its ‘difference’. The photographic and detailed description of the place is an instance of new regionalism in the literature of Nepal, where the landscape becomes a character asserting its distinctiveness.

Kailai, a backwater district of Nepal, is located some 250 miles away from Kathmandu and has a mixed population of indigenous Tharus and the hill people known as Pahadis or Parbates. The hill people who moved down to the plains for economic reasons dominate all aspects of commerce and trade, and the indigenous Tharus live in much humbler circumstances. The term Tharu “refers to dispersed groups of people located in the inner Terai region despite the widespread presence of malarial fever and dense forests in the nineteenth century” (Riaz and Basu 76). The novel contains a wealth of Tharu characters and stories, and though not delineated in detail, it is not possible to imagine the novel without these characters. The Tharus, one of the original inhabitants of the Terai region, have faced systematic marginalisation and

discrimination from the hill people. The recent Terai-Madheshi Revolution (2007), demanding recognition and equal representation for the people of Terai-Madhesh, indicates the long conflict between the hills and Terai, as reflected in the voices of the marginalised Tharu characters. Bhagiram Tharu, the fan-waver, lives under a tall Sal tree and is a part of the region, one who summons “Ban Devi”. He is angry at the hill people, who have used up all the forest and disrupted the ecology of the Terai region. The Sal trees are unique to the Terai region, and Bhagiram is forced to leave his place under the tree when a man from Dailekh comes down to Madera and sets up a tea shop near the tree. Bhagiram’s shout: “This is my tree! Bandevi Mata gave it to me [...]. You have no right to this tree” (72) is unheard, but it is a witness to the simmering discontent of the Tharus. When Birsa’s family moves from Madera to Katase Bazaar, he sees Bhagiram standing with a grinning face and shouting out, “Parbate, I did a lot of good and bad things to you. But I am your old uncle, so forgive me” (145). Bhagiram here refers to his pranks on Birsa, but his words and his ‘grinning face’ hint at the conflicting and hostile relationship between the Pahadis and the Tharus. This increasingly points to the need to address the historical marginalisation of the Tharus and integrate the people of Terai into the ‘national imagination’ of Nepal. Similarly, the bonded Tharu labourers who serve the Pahade landlord show their respect and obeisance before him but “insulted him in their minds and spat on the ground” (89) when he was gone. Raja Saheb’s death at the hands of his Tharu labourer, Khusiram Choudhury, is symbolic of the concealed anger of the indigenous Tharus against the domination of the Pahadis and the Monarchy. Khusiram claims to work for the party; he tells Birsa that, “If the party succeeds, I won’t have to work for Raja Saheb any more. I’ll build my own house. I’ll marry a girl” (89). The fervour of the democratic movement is felt differently by different groups, providing a “space for the excluded groups to organize and mobilise themselves to promote their interests” (Hacchetu 232).

Language, skin colour, dress, and economic status act as common denominators in the marginalisation of the Tharus. The Tharu *gaon* in the novel is identifiable by the noise of pigs and dogs, indicating the barrier and woefully limited interaction between the people of the hill and the Terai-Madhesh. The submerged, unrecorded history and displacement of these people are powerfully communicated through the description of Katase Bazaar. Built by clearing away catch and jujube trees, no one knew how the dense forest of Chattiban came to be named Katase. According to local Tharu “oral tradition”, in the early 1960s, a large number of high-caste Hindu migrants from the hill areas settled down in the Tharu areas in Terai and evicted them from the land they had farmed for generations (Riaz and Basu 136). Birsa’s words that people say Katase Bazaar was “built on a graveyard” and “human skulls had been found several times during the digging of house foundations—skulls without lower jaws. The Tharus bury their dead, so people said that these skulls were those of the Tharus” (146), is indicative of the invisibility and displacement of the Tharus.

The Muslims in Nepal find a representation in the character of Bir Singh Dhama, who is nicknamed Saddam Hussein by the people of Katase because of his ‘obstinate’ nature (181). His real name is not known to anyone, and Saddam became a representative of the ‘invisible’ Muslims in Nepal. The suspicion, discrimination, and prejudice of the people towards the Muslims are indicated through the character of Saddam; he opens a ‘Medikal’ without a licence, keeps empty medicine boxes, cheats and charges more from the people and pays no attention to the Inspector’s threats. Birsa recounts that as Saddam’s profits grow, rumours begin to spread that Saddam had committed “rape [...] was a criminal [...] was accused of murder [...] police were searching for him” (184). Saddam dies under mysterious circumstances; his body is fished out of the river, and the police ‘make’ a report that “he got drunk, slipped off the bridge and died” (228); his tragic end, seen through the eyes of Birsa,

evokes a sense of pathos and reiterates the discrimination and invisibility of the Muslims in Nepal. While Birsa's parents sympathise with him and are saddened by his death, for the other people of Katase, he is an untrustworthy man "with no name or place" (226). For several days after the tragic incident, Birsa is haunted by Saddam's words: "I'm like a bird—*bhurra bhurra*. Tell me, does a bird have a home anywhere?" (228). While the Tharu characters identify with 'the place', the Muslims could not claim any space in the 1990s, and the novel raises pertinent questions about Muslim identity in Nepal through the character of Saddam.

The novel indicates the mobilisation of the Tharus following democracy and the Maoist insurgency thereafter. Many of Birsa's friends join the Maoist group, and tension prevails in the novel with news of explosions and violence. The growing conflict and implicit issues of caste, class, and gender in the novel become more poignant when seen through the eyes of a young boy. The novel ends with the death of Birsa's father in a Jeep on the way to his village. The bad and dusty road, guarded by police personnel, indicates the intensifying conflict with the Maoists. The reader is left with a sense of hopelessness amidst the remoteness of the region and the uncertainty looming on the 'outskirts' of the nation.

The 1990s were a delicate moment of transition in Nepal; the marginal and insignificant manifestations of 'Monarchy' in both novels indicate the 'importance' of the common people in the Nepali state. Both novels address the need to understand the Nepali nation and nationalism on inclusive and fluid grounds in a plural society where many diverse groups may be variously affected by the nation in different ways. Both novels set in the 1990s depict the lives of the people during this time in two different locations. The novels end on a note of uncertainty and aptly capture the socio-political contexts of the time. The "centre-margin" dichotomy, understood in the context of Nepal in terms of region, caste, class, and economic disparity, explored in the novel is symptomatic of a new Nepali literature and its envisioning



of an inclusive nation. The novels provide multiple points of view, much like the plural character of the nation. Moreover, most of the characters in the novels are caught up in their personal struggles, which also compels the reader to think along Gellener's argument that in the specific context of contemporary Nepal, nationalism and ethnicity often play only an "occasional role" in the "conscious lives" of ordinary people, "much of the time a kind of a backdrop of which they are hardly aware" (4).

### **Conclusion**

From the discussion of the two novels, one can concur that a 'new' Nepali nationalism was still at a very nascent and formative stage in the 1990s. Scholars see the Panchayat Raj as an important period in the consolidation and propagation of "crown-centred national polity [...] and Parbatiya narrative as the official version of Nepali nationalism" (Bhandari 11). However, this version of Nepali nationalism failed to reach and consolidate the remote regions and did not diffuse down to the popular level. Poverty, lack of development, and growing socio-economic disparity were the major factors in the demise of Panchayat Raj and its version of nationalism. The two novels set against this backdrop illustrate this period of crisis and also the changing dynamics of Nepali nationalism by including a multitude of characters, voices, opinions, and feelings, thus drawing attention to the centrality of regional, ethnic, and class diversity in Nepal. The novels hint at the identity and ethnic politics that aggravated after the collapse of the Panchayat Raj in 1990. With the Maoist insurgency, Janajati, and Terai movements, the question of Nepali nationalism is being widely discussed in various scholarly works. Mahendra Lawoti and Susan Hagen refer to the pre-1990s as an era of "state-led" nationalism and the post-1990s as an era of "people-centric" nationalism in Nepal when "the movement based on ethnicity, language, caste, religion, and regional identity has become increasingly central players on the contemporary political stage, reshaping debates on the

definition of the Nepali nation, nationalism, and the structure of the Nepali state” (5). Contemporary literature from Nepal adds to this ‘debate’ on nationalism by addressing the ‘concerns’ of the ‘people’ who constitute the nation. To accommodate this diversity Nepal needs a “new transformative Nationalism” (Bhandari et al 19) based on the pluralist values of the common people, which would consider the historically marginalised castes and ethnic groups and challenge the Hindu Polity and Parabatiya dominance. Harka Gurung opines that “Nepal now needs to devise a polycentric nationalism that fosters a feeling of belonging among all sections of society, which in turn will promote national integration” (22). In this context, it is commendable that contemporary writings from Nepal focus on a diversity of themes, thereby speaking for a more inclusive nation.

Michael Hutt opines that although many contemporary writers from Nepal are upper-caste Hindu elites, “the new Nepali discourse of equality and inclusivity has clearly had an effect upon the content of their writings. In [contemporary] novels, readers will find articulations of minority, gendered, and regional perspectives that have only rarely been found in this genre of Nepali literature before” (Hutt, “Writers, Readers, and Sharing of Consciousness” 28). This is all the more assertive as writers from both “marginal locations” and “dominant upper-caste Hindus” engage in this alternative voice. To this end, Buddhisagar Chapain and Shradha Ghale belong to the generation of contemporary writers from Nepal who challenge the purist conception of a homogeneous Nepali nation by celebrating its diversity and giving space to the marginalised, as evident in the novels discussed in this paper.

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