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Constructing Ethnicity and Identity of Bantawa Rai in Eastern Nepal

Raju Kumar Rai^{1*}

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ABSTRACT

Ethnicity refers to the state of belonging to a particular ethnic group, generally recognized by both its members and others based on shared social and cultural characteristics. This study examines the processes involved in constructing and reconstructing ethnicity and identity among the Bantawa Rai in eastern Nepal. The theoretical discussion of this study is based on a constructivist approach, which provides a framework for understanding ethnicity as a dynamic and socially constructed phenomenon. The study relies on data collected from both primary and secondary sources. Secondary data has been gathered from various published and unpublished books, journals, articles, and research reports. Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews, observations, key informant interviews, and focused group discussions with cultural experts, teachers, ethnic activists, and political leaders. Informants were selected using a purposive sampling method to ensure relevant insights. The findings confirm that ethnicity is not a fixed entity but a dynamic and evolving process shaped by social and historical conditions. The construction of ethnicity and identity involves weakening of cultural differences and intensification of cultural homogeneity, influenced by geographical isolation, migration across ethnic boundaries, and increasing interactions with external groups. Additionally, increased mobility, social contact, and engagement with global forces, along with the decline of pre-capitalist economic structures and transformations in social organization, contribute to the evolving identity of the Bantawa Rai community.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnicity is the state of being ethnic or belonging to a certain ethnic group (Kellas, 1998; Yang, 2000; Green, 2006). An ethnic group is defined as a group of people who are generally recognized by themselves and/or the others as a distinct group, with such recognition based on social or cultural characteristics. Drawing on the works of Max Weber (1968) we shall call 'ethnic groups' those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization or migration (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007). Like ethnicity, identity or ethnic identity is also a valued and perhaps the most imprecise concept in the contemporary world. The concept of identity refers both to individuals, and collectivities. It is a concept that encompasses how individuals perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. Identity is, however, formed through the process of self-categorization and identification. As discussed by Hogg & Abrams (1988) identity is "people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" (Stets & Burke, 2000). Identity is objectively defined as location in a certain world and can be subjectively appropriated only along with that world. Ethnic identity belongs to the category of social identities as the person is part of a group that is the group of people who have common language, religion, customs, tradition and history. Following Barth (1969) ethnic identities are maintained and sustained through delineating ethnic boundaries of one group from the

other. He further explains that ethnic groups as largely self-perpetuating, sharing fundamental cultural norms and values, and having communication, interaction and a membership. However, ethnic identity involves a sense of belonging and shared experiences, values and customs with the specific group.

Ethnicity, as defined by Barth (1969), is a product of negotiation—a dynamic social process that is continuously constructed, reconstructed, or chosen based on circumstances (Chhetri, 2012; Fisher, 2001; Wimmer, 2002a, 2008b). It involves the social elaboration of collective identities, wherein individuals perceive themselves as part of a larger group with shared characteristics. Ethnicity and ethnic identity are socially and historically defined categories, uniting people through common ancestral, social, cultural, or national experiences. Fundamentally, ethnicity encompasses social and psychological phenomena tied to a culturally constructed group identity. It is a collective identity rooted in shared ancestry, heritage, religion, culture, nationality political, language, and territory. As such, identities are not fixed but are formed, reshaped, and mobilized in pursuit of specific social and economic objectives (Birhan & Christopher, 2024).

Studies on ethnicity and ethnic identity in Nepal emphasize that ethnicity is a socially constructed, reconstructed, and negotiated phenomenon—rendering it a fluid and dynamic concept (Mishra, 2012; Chhetri, 2012; Shneiderman, 2012; Levine, 1987; Guneratne, 2001; Hangan, 2007; Fisher, 2001). This fluidity is

¹ Department of Sociology, Tribhuvan University, Nepal

* Corresponding author's e-mail: rajurai.cu@gmail.com

shaped by the creation and maintenance of social and symbolic boundaries that distinguish one ethnic group from another (Gray, 2012). As Gray (2012) argues, the core socio-logic of ethnicity lies in the formation and preservation of these boundaries. Ethnic groups do not emerge solely from inherent cultural differences; instead, specific cultural traits are selectively emphasized and mobilized to define and differentiate ethnic identities. In this context, ethnicity can be understood as a sense of identity that evolves over time, bringing people together through shared characteristics and cultural practices such as language, historical experience, lifestyle, and, in some cases, religion.

Issues & Problems

Ethnicity and identity are a subject of ongoing debate in contemporary discourse. The understanding of ethnicity and ethnic identity varies, largely due to the subjectivity, multifaceted nature, and fluidity of identification. For some scholars, ethnicity is viewed as a natural phenomenon, tied to an emotional sense of belonging or attachment to a specific group. Hence, it is ascribed and seen as fixed concept. Conversely, other scholars argue that ethnicity is more flexible, changeable, and malleable. From this standpoint, ethnicity is considered socially and historically constructed, making it fluid and adaptable to changing contexts. Although, the instrumentalist school of thought takes a different approach, considering ethnicity as a tool for advancing self-interest. Individuals use it as a rational choice to minimize social costs and maximize socio-economic rewards. Despite the variety of perspectives on ethnicity, it is evident that ethnicity holds different meanings for different people. Each theoretical approach provides a unique lens through which to explore whether ethnicity is fixed or fluid.

In Nepal, the issue of ethnicity remained largely unrecognized until the 1990s, primarily due to the strong discouragement of ethnic discourse under the Panchayat regime (Whelpton *et al.*, 2008, as cited in Magar, 2016). Only after the national census of 1991 was ethnicity officially acknowledged. Magar (2016), in her article Ethnic Movement and Ethnic Identity Construction Process in Nepal, argues that ethnic movements and the process of ethnic identity construction became more prominent following the political changes of the 1990s. Similarly, Hagen (2010) notes that the transformation of the state and the rise of identity politics have remained in flux since the 1990s. However, Hachhethu (2003) asserts that ethnic activism in Nepal can be traced back to the dawn of democracy in 1951.

The discussion of ethnicity and identity has gained increasing prominence in Nepal, particularly through indigenous nationalities movements. Various ethnic organizations have been established to promote ethnic issues, support cultural development, preserve social and cultural identity, and foster a shared sense of belonging within specific ethnic communities. Some of the key organizations include: Kirat Rai Yayokkha (established

in 1988), Kirat Yakthung Chumlung (since 1989), Nepal Tamang Ghedung (founded in 1956), Tharu Kalyan Karini Sabha (Tharu Welfare Society) (since 1949), Thakali Sewa Samiti (since 1982), Nepa Bhasha Manka Khalah (since 1979). These organizations have played a vital role in shaping discourses on ethnicity in Nepal, although they often present differing perspectives on the conceptual framework, definitions of dominant and minority groups, and interpretations of caste-ethnic relations (Hachhethu, 2003). However, while these movements and discussions have highlighted ethnic concerns, they have not extensively examined the processes of constructing and reconstructing ethnicity and ethnic identity in Nepal from the disciplinary lens of sociology. This gap underscores the need for further sociological exploration into the dynamic processes that shape ethnic identity in the Nepali context. The issues related to the construction and reconstruction of ethnicity and identity among the Bantawa Rai community of eastern Nepal have not been adequately explored in previous studies. In fact, research on ethnicity and identity within the Bantawa Rai context remains limited. Recognizing this gap, this study aims to examine and analyze the processes involved in constructing and reconstructing ethnicity and identity among the Bantawa Rai in eastern Nepal.

The theoretical discussion of this study is based on a constructivist approach, which provides a framework for understanding ethnicity as a dynamic and socially constructed phenomenon. In this context, the study seeks to address the following research questions: what is ethnicity, and how is it defined in the context of the Bantawa Rai? What is the relationship between ethnic identity and social boundaries? Is identity ever solely based on territorial or physical boundaries? How is ethnic identity constructed, and what factors and actions contribute to its reconstruction? How does cultural distinctiveness influence boundary formation in the context of identity and ethnicity? How have ethnicity and ethnic identity evolved over time? and In what ways has globalization influenced the formation and transformation of ethnic identity? By addressing these questions, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamic nature of ethnicity and identity among the Bantawa Rai and explore how social, historical, and global factors shape their evolving identity.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is based on fieldwork conducted between September and November 2023 in Ward No. 2 of Hatuwagadhi Rural Municipality, located in the Bhojpur District of eastern Nepal. The area was deliberately selected for its relative ethnic homogeneity in terms of caste, language, religion, and cultural practices. The research draws upon both primary and secondary data sources. Secondary data were obtained from a range of published and unpublished materials, including books, journals, articles, and research reports. Primary data were collected through various tools and techniques,

including in-depth interviews, observations, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions with cultural experts, teachers, ethnic activists, and political leaders. Informants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of knowledgeable and relevant participants. Methodologically, the study employed a mixed approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods to examine the process of constructing and reconstructing ethnicity and identity among the Bantawa Rai. Despite the study area, I had conducted in-debt interview schedule with Bantawa Rai professionals residing in Lalitpur District to gain additional insights into the dynamics of ethnic identity formation and transformation in urban contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Bantawa Rai: History, Myth and Mundum

The Bantawa Rais are the primary inhabitants of the eastern hilly regions of Nepal. Traditionally, they are known as mountain dwellers, nature worshippers, animists, and indigenous landowners. According to local myths, the Bantawa Rai originated from the Himalayan range and began to settle in the region, where they embraced nature worship. They possess a unique and distinct socio-cultural identity, with specific norms, values, and customs. Although the Bantawa Rais have a Mongoloid appearance, they are not of Mongolian descent. They stand apart from other ethnic groups due to their own language, religion, art, morals, customs, rituals, and customary laws. The term 'Bantawa' is derived from two words: 'Bona,' meaning 'jungle,' and 'Tawa,' meaning 'guest.' Therefore, the etymological meaning of Bantawa is 'the guest from the jungle' (Rai, 2017; Hatuwali, 2017). There is variation in the spelling and pronunciation of the term among both foreign and native speakers. Some variations include Bontawa, Buntawa, Bontuwa, Bantawa, and BAntawa, all of which refer to the same language or clan of the Rai people.

The Bantawa Rai possess their own distinctive language, religion, art, morals, traditions, rituals, and folklore. Their mother tongue, known as the Bantawa language or 'Bantawa Yang,' is a unique aspect of their cultural identity. The Bantawa language is partially influenced by the Tibeto-Burman language family. Furthermore, it is subdivided into four major dialects: Hatuwali, Aamchoke, Dilpali, and Dhankuteli.

Religious practices among the Bantawa Rai are deeply intertwined with their cultural identities. Just as the Veda of Hinduism, the Quran of Islam, the Bible of Christianity, the Śvētāmbara of Jainism, and the Tripitaka of Buddhism are religious scriptures for their respective followers, Mundum serves as the sacred scripture for the Bantawa Rai, rooted in oral tradition. Orality is a key feature of Mundum. According to Siwahang (2068), 'Mundum is an ancient form of religious scripture, even older than the Rigveda of Hinduism.' Gaenszle (2002) notes that Mundum can be understood as 'oral tradition,' 'ancestral knowledge,' or more generally, a 'traditional

way of life.' Chemjong (1967) explains that 'the word Mundhum signifies great strength, and the Kirati people of eastern Nepal consider it a true, holy, and powerful scripture.'

Yamphu (2014) further elaborates that Mindum is an ancestral knowledge of the past, which guides customs, manners, and rituals in the present. He further argues that Mindum is not merely myth or history but rather a voice from the past, a philosophical text, and a social and political narrative. Similarly, Puma (2017) describes Mundum as a traditional religious text that is both verbal and performative, a magical tradition as old as the Kirat civilization, based on animism. It serves as a source of inspiration, information, ancestral knowledge, and guidance for daily life.

The term 'Mundum' is derived from two Bantawa words: 'muna' meaning 'man' and 'dum' meaning 'talking.' Etymologically, Mundum refers to the act of talking or discussing topics such as origin, civilization, inspiration, information, enlightenment, development, identity, and the changes of human beings in particular. More broadly, it focuses on the guidance of the way of life, morals, customs, and rites of passage. Mundum holds great socio-cultural significance within the Bantawa Rai community. It is primarily based on rhythmic oral tradition, recitation, and performance, with the major means of expression being singing, chanting, and reciting. Mundum recitation and performance are carried out by actants or shamans—such as Mangtangpa, Dowa, and Nakchhong. These shamans are not only ritual experts and knowledgeable elders but also the key religious practitioners and performers of Mundum. They serve as the main sources and authorities of Mundum rites, rituals, and customs.

In the Bantawa Rai community, these shamans play a vital role in religious practices. They act as intermediaries between humans and the spirit world, conducting rituals, healing ceremonies, and divination based on the teachings of Mundum. As such, Mundum is an integral part of the social, cultural, and religious practices of the Bantawa Rai community.

In fact, Mundum can be seen as a combination of rhythmic oral tradition, narratives, and ritual performance, encompassing legends, folktales, prehistoric accounts, morals, and philosophical teachings, all expressed in the poetic language of the Bantawa Rai community. It holds significant religio-historical value and socio-cultural importance within the community. The content of Mundum primarily consists of mythical stories, including mythologies and accounts of the genesis of the universe and living beings. These stories are narrated and recited in oral poetic language during the ritual practices of the Bantawa Rai. Mundum is pronounced using various terms in different languages and dialects, including mundum, mutdum, mitdum, mundhum, mukdum, mindum, mugdum, muntum, muddum, dumla, diumlaa, pellam, tamra, mukdhum, mugdhum, palakhe, risiya, ridum, and khyaltamra.

Social Construction of Ethnicity and Identity

Ethnicity and identity are dynamic and fluid concepts that are socially and historically constructed. They are not fixed or inherent characteristics but are shaped by a range of social, cultural, political, and historical factors. The social construction of ethnicity refers to the ways in which societies categorize and define groups of people based on perceived similarities in language, culture, religion, and other shared traits. These categorizations are not natural or biological; they are created and reinforced through societal processes such as laws, policies, cultural norms, and everyday interactions.

Similarly, identity is constructed through social relationships and cultural practices. It is influenced by how individuals perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others, often shaped by factors such as ethnicity, gender, class, and nationality. As individuals engage with different social and historical contexts, their identities can evolve and shift over time. The process of constructing and reconstructing ethnicity and identity is fluid and ongoing. As societies change, so do the meanings attach to ethnic groups and personal identities. For example, migration, globalization, and intergroup contact can lead to the blending of cultures, which in turn can influence how ethnic identities are defined and understood. Ultimately, the social construction of ethnicity and identity challenges the notion that these categories are fixed or essential, highlighting that they are subject to change and negotiation based on social contexts and collective experiences.

The social construction of ethnicity refers to the process through which the concepts, categories, and boundaries of ethnic groups are shaped and defined by societal factors, rather than being inherent or natural. In other words, ethnicity is not a fixed or objective category; it is a product of social, cultural, and historical influences. Society classifies people into distinct ethnic groups based on perceived similarities in culture, language, religion, and other shared characteristics.

For some scholars, ethnicity is linked to ancestry and is deeply rooted in a primal bond to one's ancestral bloodline. In this view, ethnicity is a natural phenomenon grounded in family and kinship ties, which are based on the concept of fixity. However, other scholars argue that ethnicity is not a fixed set of specific, distinguishing attributes or a rigid bloodline, but rather a fluid and potentially malleable set of relationships (Mishra, 2012). Ethnicity is, therefore, a socially and historically constructed and reconstructed phenomenon. In sum, ethnicity can be viewed through both lenses: as something rooted in ancestry and kinship, or as a socially constructed phenomenon that evolves over time based on changing cultural, social, and historical contexts.

Mishra (2012) argues that the social world, including ethnicity, ethnic differences, and 'indigeneity,' is historically and socially constructed. In the context of Nepal, contemporary ethnic and indigenous movements are not entirely new but have emerged as direct responses to past

experiences. These movements have gained prominence, particularly with issues related to inclusion, identity, and the existence of ethnic groups. Today, ethnic movements are increasingly focused on the culture and identity of these groups. As Adam Kuper quotes Boutros Ghali, 'The indigenous-peoples' movement was not only about land or hunting rights. It was, even more fundamentally, a concern of culture and identity' (Kuper, 2003).

Ethnicity is a socially and historically constructed phenomenon that is continually reconstructed. The fluidity of ethnicity largely depends on the structure and restructuring of the state, the market, and the agency of the ethnic group itself. For example, the Tamang identity was significantly reconstructed by the state (Mishra, 2012). Similarly, the identity of Dolpokaik-speaking Magars was reshaped by the interplay of the state structure, the market, and the agency of the Kaike Magars themselves (ibid). Furthermore, scholars such as Stuart Hall, Etienne Balibar, and Immanuel Wallerstein argue that ethnicity must be seen as a flexible and malleable social construction, drawing its meaning from the specific circumstances of those who invoke it. As Smith (1998, citing Wallerstein 1987 in Green, 2006) notes, 'ethnicity has no essence or center, no underlying features or common denominator.' Ethnicity is, in fact, a fluid, emergent concept grounded in the changing political and material conditions of life. It must be understood in tandem with these factors, as ethnicity is politically constructed (Shneiderman, 2012). It is not determined solely by language, religion, dress, or boundaries (Fisher, 2012). For example, Sherpas and Magars may not have and share the same ethnic identity in different contexts. Instead, ethnic groups are socially constructed through the creation and maintenance of boundaries that separate one group from another.

Indeed, ethnic groups are fluid and deeply connected to a set of social, economic, and political processes. As Gray (2012) reminds us, ethnic groups are not static; their existence, meaning, characteristics, and boundaries can evolve over time. According to Rai (1985), the present Rai communities have undergone shifts in identity throughout Nepali history—first identified as 'Khambu' during King Prithvi Narayan Shah's reign, then as 'Kirati' during the Rana period, and more recently as Kulung, Thulung, etc., moving away from the traditional Rai identity (Rai, 1985; Karki, 2010).

Constructing Ethnicity and Identity: Towards an Analytical Framework

The construction of ethnicity and identity is primarily analyzed through multiple levels and dimensions of social organization. This analytical framework focuses on four key elements such as (a) the weakening and demise of pre-capitalist structures in social, cultural, economic, and political domains at various levels of social organization, (b) increasing geographical isolation and migration across ethnic boundaries, (c) strengthening mobility, contact, and interaction with outsiders or global forces and (d) the dilution and weakening of cultural diversity/

differences, leading to the intensification of socio-cultural homogeneity.

Within this framework, I propose that variables (a) and (b) are closely correlated, where (a) drives (b), and together they influence (c). These three elements are mutually interrelated and ultimately lead to (d). (See details in Figure 1.) Finally, these four variables are inextricably linked, collectively contributing to the transformation of ethnicity and identity among the Bantawa Rai in eastern Nepal.

The weakening and eventual demise of pre-capitalist systems can be understood through the historical transition of multiple levels and dimensions of social organization. Drawing on the work of Mishra (2012), capitalism and democracy have played a significant role in promoting ethnic fluidity. Moreover, the decline of subsistence economies and the dissolution of communal or tribal systems have been key drivers of this process. The majority of informants in this study agree that the transition from a subsistence economy to a more commercial and market-oriented agricultural system, along with the expansion of markets and the exchange of goods and services beyond local boundaries, has been a crucial factor in reshaping the ethnicity and identity of the Bantawa Rai community.

According to Mr. Shyam Kumar Rai (54) market-driven production and distribution have replaced feudal and traditional economic systems, leading to increased geographical isolation, mobility, and interaction with

‘outsiders.’ Engagement with individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds, cross-cultural exchanges, and interethnic relationships foster the adaptation and blending of cultural practices, contributing to the construction and reconstruction of new identities among ethnic groups. Thus, increasing geographical isolation and migration across ethnic boundaries are key factors in shaping the evolving ethnicity and identity of the Bantawa Rai.

The increasing mobility, contact, and interaction with ‘outsiders’ and global forces have expanded the Bantawa Rai people’s exposure to diverse knowledge, experiences, languages, morals, and traditional practices. As Wallerstein (1984) noted, globalization fosters worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life, leading to social interdependencies and changes. This process involves the movement of capital, goods, information, and people across borders.

For a long time, many Bantawa Rai youths have served in the Indian and British armies. Additionally, they have sought employment in countries such as India, Malaysia, Dubai, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Korea. The majority of informants believe that such movements and mobility contribute to the dilution of cultural differences and the intensification of cultural homogeneity through acculturation and assimilation. This, in turn, promotes and accelerates changes in the ethnicity and identity of the Bantawa Rai people.

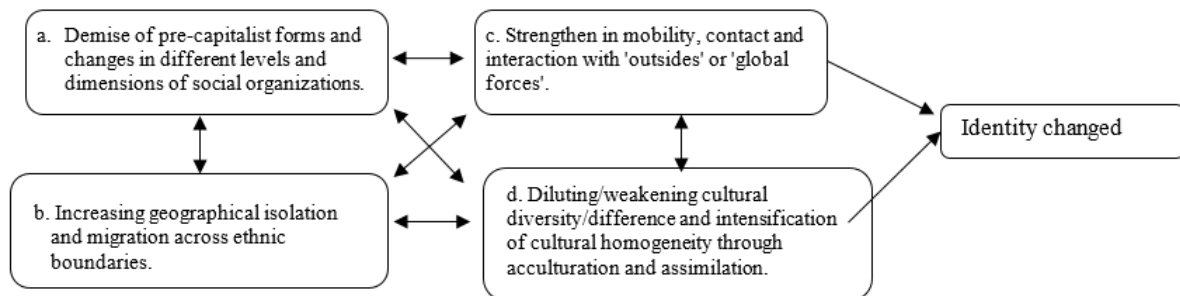


Figure 1: Elements of identity change in Bantawa Rai

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that ethnicity and identity are fluid and socially constructed phenomena. The construction and reconstruction of ethnicity and identity are shaped by social and historical conditions, which include the weakening of cultural differences and the intensification of cultural homogeneity. Additionally, factors such as increasing geographical isolation, migration across ethnic boundaries, enhanced mobility, greater contact and interaction with external groups-outsiders, and the influence of global forces play a significant role in reshaping identity. The demise of pre-capitalist structures, along with various levels and dimensions of social organization further contribute to this ongoing process among the Bantawa Rai in eastern Nepal.

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