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REVIEW ARTICLE

Thicker than blood: political parties, partisanship, and the indigenous identity movement in Nepal

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Abstract: The Nepalese indigenous identity movement took the nation by storm during the tremulous politics of the 2000s and toppled the status quo, paving way for a series of legal changes in favour of Nepal's many minority communities. However, the movement has suffered setbacks since 2010 as various minority communities have denounced many of its objectives, including its most prominent demand for ethnic/identity-based federalism. The study draws on empirical observations and in-depth interviews with 21 participants to examine these setbacks. The findings reveal that partisanship has played a significant role in discouraging the indigenous movement. Partisanship has an inimitable presence in many Nepalese people's lives, as it provides emotional, ideological, and instrumental support and is a powerful source of self-esteem and self-identification. The indigenous movement, therefore, began to lose momentum when it pitched a strongly resistant partisan identity in direct opposition to the newly discovered/recovered indigenous identities.

Keywords: Indigenous movements, identity movements, political parties, partisanship, Nepal, Tamang.

INTRODUCTION

In 2007, Nepal became one of the only 22 United Nations (UN) member states, and the first South Asian member state, to sign the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, 1989 (No. 169) (ILO, 2007). Nepal is also a signatory to the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (LAHURNIP *et al*., 2017). Domestically, the Civil Service Act was amended in 2007 to introduce a quota system that reserves 45% of the civil service seats for the members of marginalised communities. The government took these steps to acknowledge and redress the centuries-old ethnic grievances in Nepal. Throughout a long period of Nepal's modern history, a caste-based hierarchy has divided the diverse Nepalese society into two groups: one with structural social privileges composed of the 'upper caste' Bahun-Chettri and Thakuri, and Kathmandu valley Newars and the other without any structural social privileges composed of the rest of the population, including the Dalit 'untouchables', Madhesi from the southern plains, Adivasi Janajati, *etc*. The caste system has thus served as a political instrument for control and oppression by the rulers, aristocracy, and the 'upper caste' throughout many epochs (Levine, 1987), which consequently instigated Nepal's ethnic or indigenous identity movement (Gellner, 2014; Adhikari & Gellner, 2016).[1] Although there have been sporadic episodes of ethnic resistance throughout the Nepal's history, until the early 1990s that the ethnic struggle did not become a powerful political force (Gellner, 2009). During that decade, the country's emerging democracy, the liberalisation of the economy, and global discourses of development and indigeneity merged together to give a new direction to the ethnic struggles. The movement fuelled the Maoist rebellion (1996–2006), contributed to the aboliton of the 240-year-old monarchy in 2008, and became arguably the most potent political force of the last two decades.

The fall of the monarchy and the subsequent political changes provided the ethnic movement with an unprecedented mileage. The Maoist party, which

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capitalised on caste and ethnicity-based issues to fuel its rebellion, emerged in 2008 as the leading party in the Constituent Assembly (CA). The government had significant representation from the minority groups and minority-focused articles were added to the interim constitution at a relatively brisk pace. Encouraged by these events, the ethnic/indigenous movement joined the Madhesi, Dalit, and other minority-based movements under the umbrella of the identity movement to exert stronger and more unified pressure on the CA. The identity movement, which claimed to represent over 60 per cent of the country's population (Lahurnip *et al*., 2017), demanded recognition and reparations for discrimination based on the caste and geography, which they declared could be guaranteed only if the country embraced the controversial ethnic/identity-based federalism (Lahurnip, 2016) that would prioritise a few ethnic groups and communities in an extraordinarily Cosmopolitan country. However, the two older parties, the Nepali Congress (NC) and Communist Party of Nepal United Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML), patently opposed this demand. Furthermore, as the movement progressed, it sparked bitter dissension among groups and communities throughout the country. The subsequent polarisation resulted in countless open confrontations that lasted over a decade, with violence in many places killing hundreds of people and displacing thousands as an overwhelming sense of insecurity engulfed the nation (South Asian Terrorism Portal; Asia Foundation, 2017). The situation reached an impasse as the Maoists and the two centrist parties failed to reach a consensus on a new federal model, even after four government reshuffles in little more than four years. Consequently, the first CA was dissolved, and the second CA election (2013) reinstated the NC and CPN-UML into power.

Following this second CA election, the identity movement lost its major political ally in the Maoists. The Maoists retracted their support for the ethnic/identity-based federal system, implying that the party's stand on ethnicity was the primary reason for its defeat as the party spokesperson relayed in a press conference (Gellner, 2014). Similarly, many ethnic-based parties that had emerged in the first CA failed miserably at the polls. The NC-UML coalition, with Maoist support promulgated the new constitution in 2015, declaring Nepal a federal state based on geography. The disapproval of identity-based federalism (indicated by the reinstatement of NC-UML to power) has prompted many – intellectuals and laypersons alike to assert a lack of support for the identity movement at the grassroots level. However, the issues that the movement thrust into Nepalese politics, such as the socio-cultural and politico-economic discrimination of minorities, remain a reality for a large part of the Nepalese society. It is therefore worthwhile to investigate why many people from minority communities did not vote in favour of an ethnic/identity-based federalism that might have been advantageous to their communities.

The studies on the indigenous identity movement of Nepal have largely focused on the role of various ethnic groups, activists, and even international communities in the progress of the indigenous identity movement in Nepal. These studies have overlooked the critical contribution of the political parties and partisans to the major social movements for over half a century including the recent indigenous movement. Likewise, most of the studies, international partners and activists identify the elite Bahun-Chettri Hindus hegemony as a pivotal obstruction to the movement as well as ethnic/identity-based federalism (Castillejo, 2017; Lahurnip, 2016). However, many have argued that the movement itself is not representative of the heterogeneous experience of the communities that cut across complicated economic, political, geographical, cultural, and other nuanced factors which could explain the setbacks that ensued (Upadhyay, 2013; Gellner, 2001). I argue that partisanship, which forms a crucial part of the everyday lives of many members of the ethnic communities, has been one such obstacle to the progress of the ethnic/identity-based federalism in Nepal. Although a few studies have directly implied the influence of political parties in the indigenous identity movement (Hangen, 2011, 2013; Shneiderman. 2009; Snellinger, 2010); Adhikari & Gellner, 2016), they have failed to recognise partisanship as an inseparable aspect of the political parties in Nepal, thus leaving a huge gap in the comprehensive understanding of the movement which the article attempts to address.

Recent studies have shown that partisanship plays direct and indirect roles in social movements by influencing the partisans' political and non-political behaviour (Westwood *et al*., 2018). Campbell *et al.* (1960) define partisanship as a set of beliefs and feelings that culminate in a sense of 'psychological attachment to a political party. Following Campbell's pathbreaking study, research has focused on two aspects of partisanship: one stream focuses on the emotional aspects that orient a partisan towards a party; the other, based on the rational choice paradigm views partisanship through the lens of instrumentalism (Huddy *et al*., 2018). According to the first approach the partisanship is an enduring identity strengthened by the emotional affiliations (identifying with some or many stereotypes associated with the party) and has psychological roots. The second approach stresses utility maximisation as the driving force behind the political decision-making and involvement. The partisans thinking to make a rational choice to recognise

how the affiliation to the party benefits them. Although most studies have focused exclusively on one approach or the other, partisanship is mostly a mixture of the two (Huddy *et al*., 2018). Furthermore, an increasing number of studies agree that partisanship has a social nature, generates strong emotions, drives behaviour, and is relatively stable over time. This has prompted many scholars to concur that partisanship is a form of social identity (Green *et al*., 2004; Greene, 1999; Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018).

Considering partisanship as a social identity can shed light on various aspects commonly associated with it, like strong attachment to a party, categorisation and factors that affect it, inter-party conflicts, bias and discrimination, conformity to party norms, and the conditions under which it generates collective action (Huddy, 2001). Interestingly, these are all traits of partisanship in Nepal (Snellinger, 2010; O'Neill *et al*., 2020; Dahal, 2010). Furthermore, as a social identity partisanship provides a sense of self-esteem and a shared identity which explains its relative stability over time. Party memberships as identities prescribe and evaluate who the partisans are, what should they believe, and how should they behave (Hogg, 2016). This invariably leads to comparisons with those the group considers in-group or categorises as out-group based on group-specific traits, norms, or stereotypes (Hogg, 2016). These norms and traits are expressed through norm-specific behaviour (Hogg, 2016). Additionally, these categorisations lead to biased processing of information, favouring the in-group and discriminating against the out-group (Kunda, 1990). Studies also suggest that in-group favour is stronger than the out-group discrimination, but in situations where groups feel threatened there is an increased discrimination against the out-group (Mummendey & Otten, 1998). However, partisan loyalty is strong, finite and context-driven (Mummolo *et al*., 2019): the recognised norms and behaviour typical to a party are differently internalised and expressed by different partisans according to a specific contexts. Additionally, if the established norm, or a new norm, conflicts with an individual's other preferences (policy views, instrumental benefits, *etc*.), it limits norm-related behaviours. These insights of shed new light not only on the parties and partisanship in Nepal but also on their implications for the identity movement.

The paper is an outcome of a field research conducted in the second half of 2018 for my doctoral studies, which was largely focused on the identity movement and dealt with political parties peripherally. During my field visits, I observed a pattern in many interviews and everyday practices of people directly reflecting the stance of the political party they supported. This prompted me to consider whether the political parties and loyalties affected the progress of the Nepal's identity movement, and this article is an effort to answer this question. The study adopted a qualitative mixed method as described by LeCompte & Schensul (2013), complementing empirical observation with the interviews and a rigorous literature review. The primary objective of the study was to determine how partisanship played out in a real-life scenario and how it is related to the broader indigenous identity movement at a time of political polarisation for which the method was appropriate for its flexibility and comprehensiveness. For my doctoral research, there were 73 purposely sampled individual participants, out of which 21 were selected as key informants for the current study as they were politically active, involved in many developmental works, and were the village 'know-hows', exhibiting influence in the focal municipality's socio-political landscape. All 21 informants were national or local members or leaders of one of the three political parties (8 NC, 7 CPN-UML, 6 Maoist) who were currently or had been involved in local government and developmental activities. The interviews were semi-structured with questions pertaining directly to the identity movement, such as views on the movement, Tamsaling, ethnic organisations, festivals, artefacts, views on various communities, political parties, *etc*. With these 21 participants, open interviews of biographical nature was followed the first. The empirical observation included daily interactions among the various partisans, festivals, life events, political activities, ethnic activities, displays of party loyalty and benefits, *etc*. Most of the interviews were recorded, but not the informal conversations and no photographs were taken.

The data were analysed using LeCompte & Schensul's (2013) toolkit, which includes the following steps:

1. Data reduction or crunching: Data were crunched into categories congruent with the conceptual framework and research questions. While the movement and parties agreed on many demands of indigenous peoples, there were significant differences on some issues concerning the identity movement. Hence data were categorised on the basis of the individuals' support or opposition to the movement and identity-based federalism, views on prime rights and Tamsaling, reasons for support or opposition, views on and practices of cultural activities, participation in ethnic activism, association with ethnic organisations, views and practices regarding the caste system, support for political parties and displays of loyalties, possible reasons for party association, interaction with other ethnic groups and political parties.

2. Examining relationships and thinking patterns: The empirical observations were corroborated with the interviews with the informants, which were then compared with their party's standpoint and practices on indigenous issues. Thinking patterns were noted for their frequency and similarity with their respective political party's stances on the issue.

3. Theorising: Local explanations were taken beyond the specific case and linked to a broader theories to explore possible reasons for the occurrence. The patterns and political-non-political behaviour of the participants were analysed using the theoretical frame explained in the introduction section and related to the broader indigenous movement which is presented in the descriptive form in the second part of the article.

The data and analysis were audited with the help of two experts in ethnography and presented to a committee of five members (a theorist, and four social science experts including the same two experts).

The case study is based on the Tamang community of the 'Great Gorge' municipality of Bagmati province. Tamangs are one of the largest Adivasi Janajati (indigenous groups), comprising 5.6% of the total population (CBS, 2011), and are very politically active. They belong to the Tibeto-Burman clan believed to have migrated from the central Asian plateaus (Zemach-Bersin, 2005), especially Tibet (Kukuczka, 2011). The community's support for Tibet during the Nepal–Tibet battle of 1855–56 led the Shah regime to segregate them from the mainstream society. For over 200 years, Tamangs were exploited for rent, taxes, and labour and were excluded from opportunities in education, civil service, and military service (Holmberg, 1996; Zemach-Bersin, 2005). This historic marginalisation has continued as reflected in the lower living standards of Tamang compared to other groups. This has prompted many episodes of Tamang resistance throughout the history, most noticeably in the recent years. Similarly, the Great Gorge municipality is an ideal selection for a microcosmic view of the identity movement in Nepal. Although most of its inhabitants are Tamang, there is a significant population of Bahun-Chettri, Newar, and Dalits. Majority of Tamangs in the municipality acknowledges the continued privileges accorded to the 'upper caste' Bahun-Chettri and the overall treatment of Tamangs as inferior. Nonetheless, there is neither a uniform view about the Bahun-Chettri nor significant hostility towards them. Furthermore, the rural municipality has witnessed many democratic struggles, most notably the 1990s uprising, Maoist rebellion, and recent ethnic movement, and boasts partisans from all three major political parties. At the time of my field research, CPN-UML and the Maoists had already united at the national level, but supporters continued to identify themselves as either CPN-UML or Maoist. The nascency of the unification, the incompleteness of the merger, and the rising tension between the leaders of the newly formed Nepal Communist Party (NCP) might have fuelled The members to be reluctant to be identified as a member. Hence, I have separated CPN-UML partisans from Maoist partisans. Additionally, I use the term partisans loosely, to imply active members, vocal supporters, and anyone who voted for the party in the previous election.

The study is case-specific and not comparative, which limits its generalisability. However, I have simultaneously related the case to the broader national context to alleviate this limitation. The names of the participants and the municipality have been changed to ensure anonymity. The paper is divided into four parts, followed by a conclusion: The first part discusses the political parties' interrelatedness with the partisans; the second part discusses partisanship as social identity; the third part discusses the how partisanship drives not only political but also non-political behaviour of the people, and the fourth part explains how the partisan identity might have deterred the indigenous identity movement.

CASE STUDY

Political parties, partisans, and their intricate co-dependence

Throughout Nepal's modern history, there have been three major political parties: the democratic socialist NC, centrist but 'moderately left' CPN-UML, and far-left Maoist. These parties have rich histories, ideologies, and practices that can be understood as an institutional culture (Snellinger, 2010). NC is the oldest party, having been formed in 1940 to overthrow the Rana regime, and led the democratic uprisings of 1950, 1990, and 2006 (Shah, 2019). NC is a mass-based, liberal-democratic organisation (Gupta, 1994), and the public recognises that democracy and individual freedom are the foundation of the party's position (Snellinger, 2010). Due to lack of direction and strategy, NC is considered more flexible than others, lacking in discipline and rules, and largely ad hoc in its operation. As the oldest party, it has a vast and diverse support base, including the regional elite groups who joined and supported the party to retain their local influence (Thapaliya, 2019). The Maoist party formed in the 1990s is ideologically farthest from NC. The party's promise of an egalitarian society and a people's rule as its guiding principles came at a crucial point when the democratic exercise had begun to attract increasing criticism for rampant

corruption and favouritism that continued to benefit only a small section of the society (Shneiderman, 2009). Thus, the Maoist ideology was especially appealing to the downtrodden and rural masses, who remained on the sidelines despite political reforms (Sales, 2003). The party was initially organised as a militia or underground guerrilla group, but it relaxed its strict communist stance after joining mainstream politics. CPN-UML sits in the ideological middle ground between the Maoists and NC. They describe themselves as centrist but moderately leftist, as they are a communist organisation that has engaged in multi-party democratic politics since 1990s. As the second oldest party, CPN-UML was the primary opposition to NC throughout the 1991–2005 democratic period (Shneiderman, 2009), growing in popularity since 2000 as a spill-over effect of the increasing criticisms of NC. In sharp contrast to NC, the Maoists and CPN-UML organize deliberately and have a strict code of conduct for members and partisans (Snellinger, 2010). The supposed ideologies or institutional culture of the three parties and the associated party culture operate as social guide for partisans to identify themselves and others or create their own group identities (Snellinger, 2010), as the case of the Great Gorge municipality exhibits.

The Great Gorge municipality's early engagement with politics has created a prominent NC and CPN-UML support base, although the Maoists also have notable representation. Based on past electoral wins, NC has the strongest representation in the municipality, which elders claim has a long history as the party itself. Elders credit NC members during the Panchayat era for raising awareness against the tyrannical absolute monarchy and introducing the idea of democracy. Although many remained elusive about their support for the then-banned party, support increased as the democratic struggle began to pay off nationally. This support was further strengthened two decades later when the all-powerful leaders of NC visited the municipality to fulfil the promise of schools, electricity, and telephone services in the area. For many *Kangressi* (NC partisans) including 5 key informants, this incident, in addition to the NC's 'glorious' history, liberal ideology, and commitment to democracy, is the basis for their continued support for the party despite its many setbacks, even during the terrifying era of Maoist rebellion.

During the Panchayat era, the communist ideologies of CPN-UML became appealing, especially to many poor and disfranchised inhabitants attracted to its idea of an egalitarian society devoid of class and caste differentiation, which increased its support base in the municipality. The rise of CPN-UML can to some extent also be attributed to the personal differences that began to surface among NC supporters. In the 1980s, as the municipality became increasingly involved in the pro-democratic struggle, many political events were significant in raising the political consciousness of its inhabitants. Among such events, the Piskar Massacre, which occurred only a few miles away from the municipality, was particularly significant. In January 1984, on *Maghe Sankranti* a major festival for many communities including the Tamangs – Piskar held its annual Jatra (public festival). Some CPN-UML activists used the occasion to protest the oppressive state. Although the protest started peacefully and there was a minimal provocation, police officers executed a pre-planned attack on the activists and other participants, killing two people and injuring and imprisoning many more. For some informants, this incident became pivotal for their support of CPN-UML and the communist ideology. Decades later, support for the communist ideology also formed the basis for many municipal residents to support the Maoists. The failure of democracy to meet the expectations of the poor and the inability of CPN-UML to hold the communist ideology and practices intact inclined many disenchanted communist followers towards the Maoists, which was also the case for at least 3 key informants. During its active rebellion, the Maoists indoctrinated, politicised, and recruited inhabitants of the municipality by force or consent, thereby increasing the number of its partisans in the municipality.

Apart from ideological inclination, one of the salient features of Nepalese partisanship is political patronage: 'a dialectical interplay of modern democratic concepts and traditional patron-client behaviour of leadership and masses operating within the state and political parties' (Dahal, 2010). In Nepal, against a strong historical backdrop of patriarchy, the caste system, and paternalism, patronage serves as a set of social norms through which people navigate their social lives (Snellinger, 2010). As a mutually beneficial social tie, patronage is a source of valuable economic gains with unemployment and a lack of social welfare remaining a significant problem in the country. Some aspects of political patronage include the giving of government posts, transfers, and promotions to supporters, allocation of development resources (Dahal, 2010; Adhikari, 2013), and even protection in criminal cases. Party patronage often is best expressed through the localised English term 'source force'. In common usage, source force refers to the political network from which one can benefit in economic and social contexts. In return for source force, partisans become a crucial resource in anchoring their party's presence within the political system and in controlling communication flows (Kopecký, 2019). Additionally, as electoral systems have been institutionalised, patronage has been

a key instrument in retaining and expanding electoral reach. All three parties have sustained a reliable base of partisans by relying on the patronage system. The Maoist party has relied on intimidation and extortion, often disguised as 'donations' from businesses and government organisations, to sustain its cadres even after the active rebellion (Adhikari, 2013). As the largest party in the 1990s, NC overwhelmingly favoured its partisans for formal and informal positions. Interestingly, in recent years, CPN-UML has strengthened its support base in all areas much more efficiently than the other parties. After being in government four times in the 1990s, CPN-UML has been part of the government uninterrupted for the last 15 years. As a result, it has expanded its party network throughout many sectors, such as education, bureaucracy, NGOs, private investment, *etc*. (Stabilisation Unit, 2018). Additionally, the normalization of nepotism and favouritism in all sectors of the society suggests that the political parties have become a means of survival for many as a person needs one or the other party to navigate through the challenges of life, as can be illustrated by some examples from the Great Gorge municipality.

In mid-2018, I attended to the funeral of a resident in the municipal Gumba (Buddhist temple). The tiring 7-day affair was attended by hundreds of people paying final tribute to the deceased. At the funeral, two large NC flags stood at the entrance and smaller party flags were placed alongside the Buddhist flags next to the photograph of the late gentleman. Many NC supporters came from the nearby places and from the capital to help with the rituals and honour their late friend. The costly and lengthy procession was largely managed by the municipal party office. On another occasion, as recalled by an elderly Maoist leader, a dispute arose between two young men after a few drinks that led one to being imprisoned for seriously injuring the other. The next day, a group belonging to the Maoist party accompanied the injured to the police station and convinced the police to drop the case. As both individuals supported the Maoists, the party became a mediator in the dispute. According to the inhabitants, incidents such as these are all common, as many affirm that the party has a 'duty' to take care of its supporters. Conversations with a few local leaders revealed that they often find it difficult to uphold these expectations. A CPN-UML member who works at the government Veterinary Office stated that supporters sometimes had unrealistic expectations of the party:

> "It is difficult to make the supporters understand what the party can and cannot do for them. They expect us to provide everything; rice at home to jobs for their children. They assume that the party is their parent who is responsible for everything." (CPN-UML Leader 4)

Party networks remain the most trusted way of acquiring sought-after positions, such as jobs at municipal offices, government schools, or local NGOs, and government contracts for infrastructure and development programmes. Some will occasionally admit that partisanship is an even stronger bond than blood, as the case of a contract government employee illustrates. Grace Tamang is a local resident who had worked in the municipal office for over seven years and was among the very few local women with such experience. However, the new local government refused to renew her contract after the local election of 2017, even though two of the members including the Ward Head, were among her close relatives. According to the municipal office, she is no longer qualified as a local because she was married to someone outside the municipality. However, Grace continued living in the municipality even after her marriage. She claims that the real reason for the non-renewal of her contract was her support for a party that was not well represented in the local government. Nevertheless, she was able to regain her contract using 'source force' from her party's national leader. Similarly, three NGOs operate in the municipality in various fields such as microfinancing, women's and children's health, education, and capacity-building. These NGOs are open or rumoured supporters of CPN-UML, which, according to many residents, has led to programmes being dedicated mostly to communist-supporting clusters. Additionally, some NC members asserted that they were hesitant to ask for services from the NGOs because they knew all too well that they would not be heard. What is interesting in these cases is that unapologetically favouring and supporting a fellow party supporter is considered an acceptable norm.

Partisanship as social identity

A person's ideological, emotional, and instrumental dependence on a group in most cases culminates into a social identity and provides a source of security, well-being, and self-esteem. (Tajfel, 1979). Correspondingly, partisan identity in Nepal can be better understood through the much-discussed Nepalese term '*afno manche*'. *Afno manche*, which literally means 'one's close people', refers not only to close familial ties like family and relatives but also to the social networks one identifies with and relies upon. Dor Bahadur Bista first studied the term and its significance to Nepalese society in his much-celebrated book Fatalism and Development in 1991. He argued that the creation and maintenance of a group of dependable close-knit people (*afno manche*) is an important feature of Nepalese society: 'the distinction between the group "us" and the rest as "them" manifests itself in every walk of social, cultural, political, and economic life. Everything inside the circle of "us" is predictable, and

the rest is external and unpredictable. Therefore, there is a constant need to maintain the boundary' (Bista, 1991: p.97). Within this conception, the political party serves in the present day as a carefully constructed group of *afno manche*, which provides security, identity, and a sense of well-being and self-esteem, and which can be relied upon in good and bad times. Parenthetically, there is a constant need to maintain membership within such groups and to enhance the group identity. In the Great Gorge municipality, political parties have been part of peoples' everyday lives as *afno manche* for decades. As such, '*Kangressi*' (NC supporters), '*Emale*' (CPN-UML supporters) and '*Maobadis*' (Maoist supporters) constitute like-minded people who share some similar or distinctive 'traits' and often rely on their respective groups for emotional and instrumental support.

In the municipality as in many parts of the country, leaders and partisans usually function as a tight-knit social entity with a lack of apparent formality encroaching well into an individual's personal space. Leaders and supporters are typically assigned to fictive kin relations – *dai*, *didi*, *aama*, *buwa* (brother, sister, mother, father) *etc*. – and for many the party does indeed serve as a surrogate family that is obliged to provide emotional and economic support when needed. Four (4) key informants during semi-structured interviews, voluntaries, introduced themselves by stating their name and surname followed by the respective party they supported suggesting an association with their party is integral to their identification. Additionally, 5 of the key informants who were senior members of their respective parties, were considered as '*dai*' (brother) by their respective parties' partisans and were crucial to the decision-making process of these partisans in political and even non-political matters. For instance, these party leaders were often consulted on matters concerning local development activities, disputes, employment and even life events such as accidents, funerals, and marriages. Similar respects were accorded to some of the more senior national leaders of the parties who occasionally visited the municipality. Any noticeable deviations from political cues from these leaders especially in the case of the Maoists and the CPN-UML parties were regarded as serious offences that could land partisans in serious trouble with their party. This is in line with O'Neill *et al*. (2020)'s finding that leaders of political parties are often seen as patrimonial figures who demand almost blind loyalty from their followers. In 2017 during a preliminary visit to the municipality, I met a *Kangressi* supporter who often wore a party's badge with its founder's picture even during non-political events like marriage or community meetings. He said he regularly wore the badge because the leader is like his '*ba*' (father), and he likes honouring him. This picture of the party as a surrogate family can be linked to the relative stability of partisanship over a sustained period and makes the party integral to many people's lives.

The first exposure of most Nepalese citizens to a party practice occurs at a relatively young age, as an element of family or neighbourhood socialisation or through schools, political events, *etc*. This socialisation introduces individuals to party-specific traits and norms that influence their political and non-political behaviour. As repeated representations, imposed codes of behaviour, or organisational cultures endlessly recreate normative values and identities (Borgenson, 2005: p.71), individuals internalize and express a party identity through normative behaviour or conformity to party-specific practices.

The personal is political: political parties and the political and non-political behaviour of partisan.

People follow their party's lead either because it reflects their views or because they depend on expert cues to engage in politics (Sniderman *et a*l., 1991). In Nepal, such influences of political parties are most prominent during moments of heightened and intensified socio-political activities such as social movements. Social movements with their 'prophetic function' (Snellinger, 2010), serve as opportunities for political parties and their supporters to redefine, elaborate on, and justify their political agendas, ideology, identities, and even ways of life. These have also been deciding factors in political parties' electoral successes and failures. Correspondingly, the identity movement forced the older political parties NC and CPN-UML, which had never presented a comprehensive position on ethnic or identity issues, to enunciate their stand on their fundamental demand for ethnic/identity-based federalism. Despite having acknowledged and pledged redress for many ethnic/identity-related grievances, the two political parties were never in favour of an ethnic/identity-based federalism as it conflicted with their ideologies and the interests of their voter base. NC had long maintained that a strong democracy was the only antidote to caste or class-based inequalities, including ethnic issues. The party put democracy forward as an ever-evolving and accommodating ideology with the potential to resolve all social conflicts. Similarly, CPN-UML, saw themselves as architects of a radical social transformation that required all participants to give up primitive ethnic identities in favour of a modern homogenous national identity as Shneiderman (2009).

The Maoists which have a largely ethnic partisan base, in contrast, encouraged, and supported ethnic/

identity-based federalism. The party viewed distinct ethnic and regional identities because of unequal development between communities, as opposed to the other communist party CPN-UML, which typically saw ethnic or regional identities as a type of backwardness (Stabilisation Unit, 2018). During its 10-year war, the Maoists adopted many tactics to publicize their support for ethnic movements, including instigating the idea of setting up 14 ethnicity-based autonomous states and running a parallel government from 2001 to 2005 following this model in many rural areas (Stabilisation Unit, 2018). In government, the Maoists were the foremost proponents of ethnic/identity-based federalism, encouraging and participating in the nationwide movement. After the debacle of the first CA, the parties strategised to crystallise their stand on the contentious issue. For instance, NC's 2014 manifesto was clear on its stance on 'rights for all' and this continued even after the promulgation of the constitution, as demonstrated in the 2017 manifesto, which stated '*Sabai atne desh, Sabai lai jodne kangress*' (the country has a place for everyone, and congress binds everyone together). Similarly, the 2015 election manifesto of CPN-UML supported special representation for minorities while hinting at the disapproval of ethnicity-based federalism by restating a vision of the pluralist Nepalese state and society.

The three major political parties all relied on their partisans and cadres to sustain their hold on the masses during the identity movement. The Maoist party was able to lure and recruit an aggregation of the ethnic minority by coercion or consent. Maoist partisans became influential in politicising ethnic minority communities, especially in rural areas, and organising protests, strikes, and shutdowns in which the use of violence was not uncommon. It also relied on partisans to extort money to sustain the party and the identity movement. Once it joined mainstream politics, the party strengthened the movement by giving its supporters important positions in government and NGOs. Meanwhile, the other two parties mobilised their partisans to push back against the movement. The pro-ethnic slogans of the Maoists and the ethnic narratives they told were countered by partisans of the older parties in various ways. For instance, when the Youth Communist League (YCL; a Maoist youth body) announced strikes and protests in Kathmandu, Biratnagar, Birgunj, Nepalgunj, Dhangadi, and other cities, partisans of NC and CPN-UML held peace rallies with themes of unity in diversity. In several cases, these resulted in clashes with YCL. The partisans of NC and CPN-UML promoted pro-unity slogans, such as '*himal pahad terai koi chaina parai*' (No matter where one is from- the mountains, hills or plains- we are one) during many pro-unity rallies attended by people of diverse ethnicities and religious backgrounds. These parties also exploited their overwhelming presence in the public and private sectors, including the media, universities, and other intellectual sectors, to counteract pro-ethnic discourses and garner support against the growing identity movement. In rural areas, their partisans became useful tools for resistance against the growing ethnic awareness, especially during the second CA election campaign. The partisans and the public alike began to look at these events and the respective stances of the three political parties on ethnic issues as norms of these parties. Hogg (2001) suggests, if they are to fit in, the group members must adopt attitudes and norms consistent with the group. As such, the partisans of the three political parties internalised and expressed these norms through their political as well as non-political behaviours, as the Great Gorge municipality illustrate.

In the municipality, all the supporters of the NC whom I interviewed fervently opposed the idea of Tamsaling (one of the 14 provinces proposed in the identity movement to prioritise Tamang people) and the ethnic/identity-based federal model. They agreed that the Tamangs needed more opportunities in politico-economic arenas but did not believe that the identity movement in its current form would provide such opportunities. On the contrary, they stated that the last few years had shown that it would only create divisions instead of uniting people. Many CPN-UML voters and partisans including all 7 key informants from the party shared similar views: they denounced the need for identity-based federalism while acknowledging that some positive discrimination was needed for Tamangs. These sentiments were shared by most of the inhabitants, as reflected in the last few local and national elections. In the national election, NC and CPN led the municipality. Likewise, in local elections, the Maoists polled poorly as Tamang and Bahun-Chettri candidates from NC and CPN-UML who were vocal opposers of the movement emerged as clear winners.

The Maoist supporters in the municipality including the 6 key informants, strongly supported the idea of Tamsaling and what it stood for. Even after the promulgation of the constitution, some partisans, especially those associated with ethnic organisations, such as the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) (often referred to as a 'sister' organisation of the Maoist party (Pradhan, 2019) and Tamang Ghedung, continued to speak of an autonomous Tamsaling as an essential right of the Tamangs and called for amendments of the current constitution. These organisations hold documentary screenings on Tamang history and occasionally carry out ethnic activism and protests

targeting the local and national governments. Although the documentary screenings are meant for everyone, the attendees are mostly Maoist supporters. When people from other parties join, most of them condemn the contents of the documentaries or are sceptical about the intentions of the meetings. Staunch partisans of the other two parties, especially NC which has a conflictual history with the Maoists, usually avoided these gatherings. During the active rebellion, Maoists targeted mostly NC partisans for extortion, kidnapping, and murder throughout the country. In the municipality, strong NC partisans recall in horror the lives and property lost to the Maoists and for some, like the former village chairman who lost his wife in a Maoist-instigated ambush, the revulsion against all things known as Maoist is quite intense. These aversions manifest passionately during political activities, especially during election periods.

The discussion of party-related topics is not restricted to elections and can be considered a favourite Nepalese pastime, often accompanying morning or afternoon tea. The municipality's Bazar has many tea shops, most of which have a client base belonging to a particular party. During heightened political tensions, people stick to their tea shops. Supporters of all three parties share a mutual suspicion, and at least 11 informants stated that they mostly preferred to work and interact with their fellow party members to avoid unnecessary conflicts and suspicions. Some also stated that the supporters of each party have specific ways of working and thinking, which causes confusion and conflicts with the approaches of the members of other parties. These demarcations along party lines are drawn rather clearly and exhibited quite openly. Party flags, party-specific calendars, posters, and party symbols drawn on the walls can be found in many houses as proud declarations of support. The borders are quite rigid, and many do not like overstepping them even in very personal matters like family and marriage. Most members of an immediate and extended family support the same party, with only a few exceptions. Similarly, many people feel that intermarriages between members of one party and those of another party are unpreferable. Spousal, parent-child, and sibling relationships that cross party lines can become tense, especially during elections. One member of such a mixed household admitted that he rarely goes home during elections to avoid arguments with his father.

Partisanship also affects other very personal domains of a person's life, including religion and culture. Cultural performances and religious rituals have long been understood in rural Nepal as primary areas for political expression (Shneiderman, 2009). The most common cultural protest in recent times is boycotting Dashain (often considered to be the national festival with Hindu roots) and rediscovering community-specific festivals (Hangen, 2013). In the Great Gorge municipality, Dashain remains the most celebrated festival, although a few Maoist families have discontinued or subdued their Dashain celebrations for consistency with their ethnic activism. Accordingly, at least two of the families that I interviewed choose to consume beef, which is considered a sin by most Hindu and Buddhist communities but is historically associated with Tamang culture. A similar trend has also been reported in the case of Teej, which is a woman-centred festival widely associated with the Bahun-Chettri culture. Previously, Teej was widely celebrated by women from many ethnic backgrounds, but this decreased in the aftermath of the identity movement. In the municipality, I learnt that the festival was boycotted by many women, and not just staunch Maoist supporters. Some said they shunned it because it was a festival for Bahun women that conflicted with Tamang culture and religion. A deeper study, however, revealed a different and more interesting reason. It so happened that NC supporters organised the Teej celebration on the community ground that year, with the initial participation of most villagers, including men. When the performances began, however, arguments arose between the organisers and CPN-UML supporters regarding performers and finances. As the conflict began to escalate, the CPN-UML leaders asked their supporters to boycott the event. Thus, the boycott had more to do with loyalty to their political party than issues of ethnicity.

Partisan identity versus ethnic identity and the implications for the identity movement

The implication of party loyalty for the progress of the identity movement is better understood by exploring various aspects of partisan identity. As discussed above, parties act as agents for like-minded citizens (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). As such, *Kangressi* or *Emale*, one can argue, clusters/categories that comprise people, who do not have a strong faith in the ideology of ethnicity/identity-based federalism or who do not choose to be associated with it. Correspondingly, the members of these groups are people whose life experiences and choices are not necessarily represented by the radical movement. As members of their respective parties, they conform to their party-specific norms, and this conformity is not merely surface-level behavioural compliance but rather a deeper process of internalising and enacting the group's prototypical norms (Huddy *et al*., 2018). Within this understanding, the opposition to ethnicity/identity-based federalism by these two partisan groups suggests the internalisation and expression of their respective party's norms.

Partisanship as a social identity also leads to the categorisation of people into in-groups and out-groups, causing favouritism and discrimination and often leading in-group members to denounce or disregard the norms of other groups to boost their group's esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Greene, 1999, 2004). There have been many spontaneous and organised actors in the history of the identity movement in Nepal, but it is the Maoists that have actively driven the movement in recent times. The strong and almost synonymous association of the Maoist party with the identity movement, I argue, has affected the progress of the movement in the municipality and the country at large. In the Great Gorge municipality, like elsewhere, parties elicit hostility between partisans and their opponents (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Westwood *et al*., 2018). The three parties' ideological foundations, especially those of the NC and Maoists, are starkly different, resulting in many disagreements between them. During the Maoist rebellion, although other parties also suffered atrocities, NC was the main target of Maoist violence in the country. The history of conflict between the Maoists and the other two parties, especially NC, might have also contributed to a rejection of the Maoist agenda, including ethnic/identity-based federalism. The animosity across party lines implies a reduced willingness among NC and CPN-UML supporters to treat Maoist actions, even those that may resonate with their own lives, as legitimate.

Furthermore, partisan identities have considerable stability and diminish the political influence of the short-term events on party loyalties (Green *et al*., 2002). In the case of the Great Gorge municipality, as in the country at large, issues of identity or ethnicity are not a new idea, but their politicisation is nonetheless understood as a short-term event (Regmi 2003; Upadhyay 2013). Municipal CPN-UML leader and former development worker prophetically stated:

> "I do not deny the existence of caste-based discriminations but the way [the ethnic activists and Maoist leaders] have gone about is very superficial. Additionally, the caste system is losing its rigidity which will eventually make things like ethnic movement obsolete." (CPN-UML Leader 1)

Such scepticism over whether the movement represents or benefits the lives of the members of ethnic minorities and over the durability of the movement has weakened support for the identity movement. Scepticism toward ethnic movements also supports the idea that partisanship may exert a stronger psychological bond than affiliation with racial, religious, linguistic, or ethnic groups (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). A study by Westwood *et al*. (2018) stated stronger identification with a party than ethnic identity can be attributed to the fact that parties are generally reflections of a person's deliberate choices and decisions. In contrast, ethnicity has been handed to him at birth, which eliminates personal freedom (Matinovich, 2017).

Furthermore, the identity movement in Nepal has been publicly driven by a handful of experts and activists who have, in most cases, openly supported the Maoist party. An intense dislike for this party may be a reason for the cynicism many people hold about the movement. For instance, 5 NC respondents, 4 CPN-UML respondents, and one former Maoist supporter exclaimed that the so-called experts and activists of the movement are nothing but puppets of their 'international masters', who only care about their benefit and know little about the reality on the ground. Similarly, the local chapter of NEFIN does not enjoy as much support in the focal municipality as in other parts of the country which might be attributed to the organisation's association with the Maoist party. Another Tamang-based organisation, Tamang Ghedung, has met a similar fate. NC once led Tamang Ghedung but, since the 2000s, most members of the organisation have been from the Maoist party. Many residents in the municipality including the 13 key respondents attested that their association or disassociation with an ethnic organisation is determined by the party which leads it at the given time.

The support of partisans for their own party's norms, ideology, and directives, does not mean that ethnic members of the parties do not acknowledge the discrimination and marginalisation of their community. All Tamangs interviewed from NC and CPN-UML accepted that their community was marginalised and some even expressed sympathy for the identity movement. However, they were strongly against the idea of ethnicity/identity-based federalism as it symbolised the most prominent feature distinguishing their party from the Maoists. The first CA not only posed a threat to their party's power but to its group members' collective social standing, in which issues of ethnicity/identity-based federalism remained the most prominent and contentious factor threatening the future of the parties. Additionally, as political parties are integral to people's lives, a party's successes and failures become personal (Huddy *et al*., 2018) and its members are motivated to protect and advance its status and electoral dominance to maintain its positive distinctiveness (Huddy, 2001). Under such pressure, partisans aggressively mobilised themselves according to the party norms and directives for the second CA elections, leading to the dissolution of ethnic/

identity-based federalism. Furthermore, the discourse of identity or ethnicity in Nepal is controversial and often argued not to be representative of the heterogenous Nepalese society in which 'everyone is indigenous, and everyone is an immigrant'. The identity movements may also have been negatively affected by the major political parties, including the Maoists, having all been led by Bahun-Chettri men throughout their history.

CONCLUSION

The discourse on the identity movement in Nepal has overlooked the complex relationship between the movement, political parties, and partisanship. Studies show a long-standing interrelationship between the political parties and social movements with overlapping, mutually dependent actors, including partisans. Partisans and political parties are known to be mutually dependent. All individuals are associated with a political party because of their ideological predispositions or instrumental reasons or, in most cases, the overlap of the two. Similarly, political parties depend on partisans for their very existence, as partisans are indispensable to maintaining and expanding their voter base and achieving electoral successes. Once established, partisanship is a powerful, stable identification that affects the partisans' political and non-political behaviours in correspondence to party norms or traits. Partisans will in some contexts exhibit their party's 'stereotypical' ideological beliefs even when they run counter to their own (Snellinger, 2010). This understanding of partisanship provides valuable insight into the Nepalese identity movement, especially to explain why the movement could not garner much support for ethnicity/identity-based federalism during the constitution promulgation period.

Parties are deeply intertwined into people's everyday lives in Nepal, often providing emotional and instrumental security and a source of self-esteem as a group of *afno manche*. Nationally, and in the focal municipality, parties, especially NC and CPN-UML, have impacted the better part of the inhabitants' lives and provided them with a sense of emotional and instrumental security. Most people, therefore, strongly identify one party or another. As such, the relative lifespan of partisanship over assumed short-term events like the identity movement might have compromised support for the movement. Furthermore, social identities such as partisanship are known to create in-groups and out-groups and corresponding discrimination, and partisans are likely to proclaim their group membership most vehemently in times when the group's identity is threatened, which was the case during the recent indigenous identity movement. There were clear stakes for the parties during the first and second CA- the Maoist party's very existence depended on the movement, and the future of NC and CPN-UML would also be set by how they responded to it. Acknowledging their diversity of voter bases and established ideologies, the two parties took a stand against ethnic/identity-based federalism in sharp contrast to the Maoists. This stand became a norm of both parties, which their partisans enacted by denouncing many aspects of the identity movement, including ethnic/identity-based federalism. Likewise, the two older parties have strong roots in the focal municipality, which also has a history of serious confrontations between the NC and the Maoists. Apart from the destruction of infrastructure, some members of the NC party lost their families and friends to the insurgency. The level of animosity across party lines created during the Maoist rebellion might have contributed to a reduced willingness to treat the activities of the Maoists and affiliated ethnic organisations such as the NEFIN and Tamang Ghedung, as legitimate, even if many non-Maoists could relate to the ethnic issues to varying degrees. This had clear implications for the identity movement and the rejection of its most prominent demand for an ethnic/identity-based federalism, implying that partisanship in some contexts has stronger bonds than ethnicity, i.e., partisanship can be thicker than blood.

This article presents a thumbnail of a wide-ranging and complex phenomenon in which multiple identities collide with each other in numerous ever-changing social and political contexts. As the study only provides a case-specific understanding, comparative studies on a bigger scale are needed to give broader insights into the phenomenon. Future studies may also explore the nexus between the political parties and the government and non-government organs, such as the bureaucracy, bilateral donors, NGOs and academic institutes. Research along these lines might provide a better understanding of the heterogeneous and diverse Nepalese society that never ceases to amaze.

END NOTES

1. I use the terms 'ethnic' and 'indigenous' interchangeably because the terms are (mis)understood as synonymous in the Nepalese political context.

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