Ethnicity, Identity and Collective Memory

Pradeep Acharya*

Collective memories or a set of shared beliefs and/or reconstruction of historical experiences of an ethnic group has been found to be an important dimension of ethnic identity, which constitutes a subjective marker of ethnicity. Given the context, this paper aimed to describe the various objective and subjective markers of ethnicity and identity. Based on the in-depth interviews and oral narratives analysis of the informants carried out among the members of Pahari community living around the Kathmandu valley, the paper has attempted to highlight the major markers of Pahari ethnicity. The analysis of the oral narratives, empirical studies in the past and the historical documents shows that a unique ethnonym, the language and dialects, collective memories, traditional practices of livelihood in the given geographical locality and ascription from the neighborhood etc. as the major markers of ethnicity. Furthermore, it also shows that, despite the transformation in the objective markers of ethnic identity, the collective memories of the past, particularly based on diverse mythologies, have been a very important factor in the dimension and dynamics of ethnicity among the Paharis of Nepal as a separate ethnic group and one of the listed nationalities of Nepal.

[Keywords : Ethnicity, Identity, Collective memories, Subjective and objective markers]

1. Ethnicity and Identity

Ethnicity and identity are closely associated concepts in social sciences and it is very difficult to understand them separately. Ethnicity seems to be broader than

* Lecturer, Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu (Nepal) E-mail: <pradeep@cdsatu.edu.np>
the concept of identity and at the same time identity have other dimensions which is meaningful without any association with ethnicity. Ethnicity as identity and identity as one facet of ethnicity has two aspects - individual identity and social identity. As a form of social identity, ethnicity constitutes, as Donnell (2001) states - as a process of construction of meaning on the basis of related set of cultural attributes which are prioritized over other sources of meaning. Moreover, ethnicity and identity both involves the value and norms of being different from other social groups. Social construction of identity and ethnicity are neither only the product of the different visible cultural attributes nor only the values and meaning making toward institutionalizing the differences among various social groups. It is rather a product of both subjective and objective attributes which exists as a distinguishable social fact that create inter-group and intra-group similarities and differences among the groups living in relation to each other, as Regmi (2003) states ethnicity has relational character, i.e. ethnic identity always materializes in relation to somebody else. Furthermore, such differences and similarities are made relevant through social interaction as Barth (1969) has emphasized the notion of self-ascription and ascription by others. Eriksen, (1995) states when cultural differences are made relevant through interaction i.e. it concerns what is ‘socially relevant’, not which cultural differences are ‘actually there’. Actually, cultural differences, when become less apparent because of increased contact and the general process of modernization, ethnic identity and self-consciousness become increasingly important i.e. the more similar people become, it seems, the more they are concerned with remaining distinctive. Regarding the basic distinction between the concept of ethnicity and identity, Gellner (1997) understands ethnicity as a specific historical condition and identity as a generalized sociological condition and he has exemplified the Newar ethnicity which developed during 17th century only after the Gorkhali conquest of the Kathmandu valley and hence the idea of ethnic identity was irrelevant in pre-Gorkhali period (Newar are the original inhabitants of Kathmandu valley, the current capital of Nepal, which was conquered by the Gorkha kingdom and unified into a single kingdom of modern Nepal). In fact, the idea of similarities and differences either in the forms of cultural attributes or other contemporary socially relevant constructions, the notion of ethnicity and identity emerges only when multiple groups live in a society.

In this context, this paper aims to highlight the discussion on the combination of objective and subjective attributes, social relevance, historical condition etc. that contributes to the process of social construction of ethnicity and identity and these facts are implied by a single terminology “markers” (Wimmer, 2008) of ethnicity or identity. The paper is based primarily on the theoretical discussions made on literatures on ethnicity accompanied by empirical case of Paharis, one of the ethnic groups in Nepal, based on an ethnographic fieldwork done around the Kathmandu valley, Nepal. In short, this paper is intended to revisit some preliminary questions - How is an ethnic unit constituted? How is the ethnic unit identified as a group?
What meaning does the use of particular ethnomym have under different circumstances? To what extent does there exist ethnic identity among a given ethnic group?

2. The Markers

The effort to define any ethnic unit only on the basis of cultural features becomes futile because ethnic groups worldwide can be hardly described in terms of a taxonomically unambiguous categories such as ‘clans’ or ‘cultural categories’, rather in terms on classification based on multiple levels of categorization, understood as polytheist classification, i.e. by means of possible criteria or attributes as the basis for each subdivision of a population or for agglomeration of individuals or groups. Furthermore, the classification of categories must be subjectively fulfilling the criteria of self-ascription and ascription by others as mentioned by Barth (1969). For this purpose of answering above mentioned questions, it will not be fruitful neither to attempt to demarcate the clear cut boundaries of the given ethnic groups vis-à-vis each other nor to find intra-level differentiation within the group, rather attempt to search for some objective and subjective markers in socio-historical context from the past to current situation.

Ethnic identity encompasses the incidence of several markers, both objective and subjective, based on which a group is identified as a separate category by the members themselves and the others in the neighborhood. Identity is symbolic in terms of its markers and boundaries and at the same time, it is relative concept. An individual, a group, or a phenomenon identifies itself as such by including and manifesting some markers while excluding some others simultaneously. Most often, the markers included and excluded are mutually exclusive among groups and identity is not only what one is but also what one is not. Given the context, some of the markers of ethnic identity highlighted in this paper are - ethnomym, material and non-material culture and collective memories etc., which can be significantly noticed at present context.

2.1 Ethnonym

To begin with, the name or an ethnonym is the foremost objective marker, common to all ethnic groups worldwide, that serves as the fundamental criteria for a group to be an ethnic group. The term Pahari, having various connotations and etymology, refers to all those members who understand and claim themselves to be a separate linguistic and cultural community (ethnic group) of the country as well as the members of the officially listed nationality of Nepal. The Paharis are one of the many linguistically and culturally separate groups subsumed under the ethnonym ‘Pahari’ nationality, one of the indigenous nationalities of Nepal and primarily inhabitants of the central-middle-hill of the country. They are physically Mongolian and speak Tibeto-Burman language. Nepali (1965) have mentioned the ethnonym to denote one category of Hindu Newars at the third level of Newar
caste hierarchy and the Legal Code, 1854 listed them as one of the enslavable alcohol drinkers.

2.2 Culture

Language: Another important objective marker of ethnic identity is language. The term ‘language’ and ‘dialect’ have been used here in this paper with similar connotation just to indicate the existence of separate pattern of utterances, however, they have distinct meaning in terms of linguistics. Gierson (1909), in his Linguistic Survey of India, described Pahari as representing various ethno-terminologies like Paahee, Pahee, Paadhi, Pahaaree etc and mentioned that the Pahari language to be a sub-dialect of Newari language. Similarly, Shrestha (2002), considering the innate feeling of the native speakers, has stated about pihibhya or pi bhya (Pahari bhasha or Pahari language) as autogltonym (name given to the language by the speakers) and also about Kodku Pahari or Kodku Pahari language (Kodpa). Bandhu (1967) has surveyed pahai dialect of Thokarpa, Sindhupalchok. As he reported some of the Paharis have adopted Nepali instead of Pahari. He was encountered that the Paharis from Dhuskun, Kodar gaun and Jamune of Sindhupalchok spoke Nepali where as the Paharis of Thokarpa did Pahari.

Besides, in terms of linguistic taxonomy, Pahari language belongs to Newar group of Himalayish sub-section of Bodic branch under Tibeto-Burman sub-family of Sino-Tibetan family and that the Pahari dialects has been divided into 9 sub-dialects, namely - Gamal (Balami) - Basan - Itadi (Ikudol) - Kodku - Shikharpa - Pari - Lele - Khopasi - Thosne (Noonan, 2000 as cited in Shrestha, 2002). Although Pahari dialects have multiple divisions into sub-dialects and study shows that the number of the speakers and the persons who can comprehend the given dialect is limited to certain locality and small population, it has been an important markers of Pahari ethnicity. More clearly, historical evidence of existence of separate dialect of this ethnic community has served the Paharis of Nepal to have a sense of separate ethnic identity and boundary.

Traditional Occupation: The term Pahari, vocalized as “Peehee” in their mother tongue refers to those associated with pee (bamboo or cane), as there is ample evidence of Pahari being bamboo workers in the past i.e. bamboo construct as traditional occupation. It is relevant to quote an interview of an elderly Pahari:

Life was very harder in the past. Firewood collection, nanglo (winnowing tray), bamboo baskets (doko, dalo) making was the only way to survive in the past. Even today bamboo weaving business continues, particularly during festivals but the varieties of items and scale is smaller.

Nevertheless, working with bamboo and making of baskets for daily use and distribution is not unique to Pahari group alone, rather many other ethnic groups around the hills of Nepal work with bamboo to fulfill their requirements of baskets, trays etc. What is important is that, the term Pahari, associated with bamboo in
terms of its literary meaning in their language, strongly justify this work to be Pahari’s traditional occupation, unlike their neighbouring groups like Tamang, Newars and other caste groups. It is further justified by the literary evidence regarding the study among the Paharis in the past, “Traditionally, they are principally basket makers and wood cutters, and it was from these two activities that they made their living. In 1854, Hodgson described them in the following words - they make baskets and brooms. They go to forest to cut bamboo and reeds (Chatopadhya, 1923 in Toffin, 2007) and Nepali (1965) also recognized Paharis’ livelihood relying on bamboo craft.

**Geography of Settlements**: Toffin (2007), recognized them as a “peripheral group in the rim of Kathmandu valley”. The basis of Pahari ethnic identity in contemporary times arises from the fact that the various groups identified by this ethnonym have historically shared a particular geographical territory (i.e. middle hills of central development regions around the Kathmandu valley bordered by Newar civilization in the North and sparse communities of Tamangs, Danuwars and Nepali speaking Bahun-Chhetris in the South). In addition, the current settlements of the Pahari around the seven localities, namely Kodkhu, Pare, Sikharpa, Khopasi, Lele, Itadi and Basan have also been mentioned in Toffin (2007) as the localities occupied by the seven sons of the historically stigmatized and excluded dirty cook from the royal palace.

**Marriage Rules**: Rules associated with marriage is very important in the construction of ethnic identity which also serves as a cultural markers of ethnicity. Moreover, the biological continuity of an ethnic community is maintained by blood and affinal relationships over time. All ethnic groups have a rule of endogamous marriage practices despite many instances of deviances, so do the Paharis of Nepal. Paharis are endogamous group like other ethnic groups of Nepal and marriage outside the group is not fully accepted at least in terms of cultural prescription. Pahari society is ideally caste endogamous and clan exogamous; marriage with non-Pahari does occur, but the social status of the spouse is different, particularly during the religious rituals. In some ways, they are both Pahari and non-Pahari, and while they are excluded from some ritual interactions because of their alleged impurity, they still possess the potential to produce pure Pahari descendants.

### 2.3 Collective Memory

Apart from the objective markers comprising the language and ethnonym, Paharis of Nepal also share collective memories of ‘stigmatized’ status from the historical past, who had been displaced toward the rugged hill outskirts of the Kathmandu valley and placed at lower middle level in the caste hierarchy. Paharis subjectively share, to varying degrees, the belief in the ‘degraded and displaced’ social status at the hands of bigger groups like Newar and Tamangs. Thus, such an inferior social status from history is another common thing that the Paharis do share. In addition, memories of historical exploitation by caste group around some
part of Sindhupalchok are not quite uncommon among the Paharis. Such a combination of factors has lent itself to a shaping of Pahari identity. In this context, a couple of quotes from the field is worthy mentioning here;

Paharis live inside Kathmandu valley but they are concentrated in kunaakapcha (outskirt corners, away from mainstream centers) like in Khopasi (Kabhre) etc. We were sent here by force i.e. pelera pathayako (forcibly displaced).

Pahari are inferior to Newars. Newars lived in cities from long time while Paharis used to cut firewood very recently. We cannot compete with them (hami le newar sanga sakinna).

In addition, the reflection of the historical social stigma prevalent around the neighborhood and resulting in such an inferior self-image of the ethnic group can be found in a popular Newari phrase, as mentioned by Malla (2054 B.S.) - gajamyaha pai thenjaahm (meaning, “what a Pahari-like person). This phrase is used even today among the Newars, who have been living in close vicinity with the Paharis from past to present, to ridicule someone who behaves in stubborn way.

Whenever the members of Pahari members were asked about something that differentiates them from other groups in the neighborhood, the most emphasized subjective markers have been found to be the collective memories, other than the remarkable objective markers, such as ethnonym, language, traditional occupations, locality of settlements etc. The collective memories of the Pahari members articulate the subjective image of their ethnic identity constructed by the members themselves as reflected in the diverse mythological accounts which indicates the incidences of stigmatization, inferiority and exclusion as remarked by Acharya (2017) that the current status of Paharis seems to have been subjectively expressed in the myths involving derogatory collective memories implying their ancestral connection with wild beast, associating their association with downfall in the hierarchy, as well as stigma of dirty people.

2.4 Continuity and Change : A Discussion

Livelihood Diversification : Paharis opine that, the forced displacement from town, cities and centers to rural periphery due to political events made them intermarry with other groups, change their actual ethnonyms or caste and acculturated with bigger groups nearby such as Newars and Tamangs. Such historical events have greatly shaped the trajectory of the dynamics of the markers of ethnicity in several ways particularly regarding the extent of their social relevance in contemporary Nepali society. Continuity and change in social, cultural, economic and political aspects can be observed among the Paharis of Nepal as glimpsed by the following quote made during the field by a senior citizen in his early 80s;

The life was very harder previously. Firewood collection was the only way to survive. Nanglo (winnowing tray made up of bamboo) and Dalo (bamboo
basket) making was also there but it was not sufficient. Nowadays, only during festivals, it is the important source of income. Nowadays money can buy almost everything. We are inferior to the Newars. Newars lived in cities from long time while Paharis used to cut firewood from early days to very recently. But nowadays some Paharis have improved economically by selling farm lands. Now there is a vast change, paisa bhaye pachhi je kine pani bhaye (money can buy almost everything nowadays).

The believed traditional occupation of the Paharis, i.e. bamboo craft, has changed. The reason behind this is very simple. Occupation is connected with the market demand and livelihood needs. The traditional occupation is no longer viable for livelihood and such a change in occupation has somehow blurred the visibility of one of the prominent markers of ethnic identity. However, the ethnonym Pahari derived from the word ‘pee or bamboo’ is still extant but with number of etymological multiple meanings. The most commonly faced etymological misunderstanding associated with some terminologies like Pahari, Pahadi, and Nagarkoti are certainly in the process of clarification during the regular course of interaction both real and virtual inside and outside the country, though to small extent.

**Mobility and Familiarity**: The historically stigmatized, ethnically marginalized, ethnographically less studied, so-called backward Paharis of Nepal are now living temporarily for works and studies abroad and have become a member of online communities like social media, face book etc. By and large, such recent phenomenon has not only helped to expose the Pahari members in the medias but also to be in touch with fellow members in such online communities in term of exchange of messages. The widening acquaintances with the member of other ethnic and caste group other than their usual neighborhood in everyday life have helped Paharis to identify themselves as a member of a distinct cultural and ethnic category among the general members of the other communities.

Despite the close association of the name Pahari with a specific hilly piece of geography as well as the fact of very small (almost none) migration in the Pahari history, Paharis have now travelled to India, middle east and Japan etc. Simultaneously, many Paharis are still in a marginalized condition with poor socio-economic condition and ignorance of awareness etc. At the same time, the lack of capacity to move outside the village because of both poor socio-economic condition and lack of awareness are the important reasons behind such a marginalized condition. Therefore, Pahari migration can be said to be ongoing recently leading to new dynamics and dimensions of ethnicity and identity as well as impetus for ethnic activism. One of which is reflected in the current attempt to search for the history and origin as well as in the integration of varied contestations among the geographically dispersed different geographical Pahari communities.

Before the formation of the national organization, ties of Paharis outside the valley with the mainland Badikhel, Lalitpur and other parts of Lalitpur was not so
closer in terms of familiarity and solidary. Marriage exchanges were rare and non-existent. The constant but slow urbanization of Badikhel had had effect on Paharis, many Pahari families had sold their traditional farming land (khet baari) as housing plot (ghaderi) for relatively larger amount of cash money. In addition, modification of surname (derived from ethnonym) by repositioning it to the surname of other groups, to access the then opportunities and to get rid of historical stigma too can be said to be a demand caused by such process of development involving urbanization, migration and acculturation etc.

3. Concluding Remarks

Pahari, as an ethnic category or as a cultural group, which is evident in history and earlier ethnographies based on the historical marker like occupation. Pahari sense of identity with one’s own locality, occupation, language and ethnonym continues to be very strong with lots of dynamics of continuity and changes involving numbers of transformations in historical context.

The economic strategies and the change in the traditional occupation of the Paharis are obvious for them according to the prevailing time, place, and situations. The impact of market economy, globalization, and urbanization can be clearly observed in their daily life and livelihood patterns. Most importantly, such occupational changes have not only affected their daily life, income, and livelihood but their ethnic identity to some extent. The traditional occupation, which is one of the important objective markers of ethnic identity among the Paharis, applicable in case of other caste/ethnic groups too, has replaced by other ones, the modern ones, the globalized ones. From the perspective of ethnicity, the Paharis, now do not refer to those peculiar group, working daily with bamboos at their home, rather something different. However, the fact that the Pahari’s ethnonym derived from the term bamboo continues.

Wide impacts of modern transportation, communication, education, and opportunities in the country obviously affected the Paharis of Nepal. Years of democratization, development, globalization had put different groups of Paharis in various contexts and provided them with different networks, different opportunities, as well as different cultural constraints. Temporary small population movements abroad and within country have also been an important and often overlooked effect on Pahari economic and cultural adjustments, their identity and ethnicity, and their description about themselves and others. These aspects have been particularly diverse which involved many members of the Pahari community in recent days.

Nevertheless, all the markers except mentioned here in the case of Paharis of Nepal resembles almost other ethnic groups of Nepal. The one typical marker of Pahari ethnic identity has been found to be the historical social stigma that has been continuously produced and reproduced in their collective memories, which has been in continuity unlike other markers having less or more changed over time.
References


Chudamani Bandhu, A Report of Survey on Languages, Kathmandu: Tribhuvan University, 2024 B.S.


R.K. Malla, Socio-economic Condition of Pahari of Badikhel, A masters level dissertation submitted to Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal (in Nepali), 2054 B.S.


Article Received on April 14, 2018; Accepted on June 11, 2018