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Contribution to Terai debate

Terai's Fate—Looking Within!

By
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I recall my conversation, at a social gathering in Hawaii in 1984, with *Mr. Harkha Bahadur Gurung*—many times Minister in the Panchayat Government and a staunch supporter of the Terai resettlement program in the 1980s which oversaw government-financed transfer of hill population to the Terai region. I asked him why the national leaders like him were not in favor of giving fair treatment and equal rights to people from Terai, who are known as *Madhesis* outside the terai region of Nepal?.

Without hesitation, Mr. Gurung replied: *You are a conquered people. And, as you may know, conquered people have got no rights!*

I myself being a Teraian or a Madhesi, felt insulted and hurt but, nonetheless, respected his remarks--for its honesty and him telling me succinctly why Madhesis are considered second-class citizens or non-citizens, for that matter.

Historically, Mr. Gurung is every bit correct. Nepal *Terai* (low-lands of Nepal), squeezed between the spreading Mogul—and later, British—power from the northern plains of India to the south, and the ambitious mountain warlords from Nepal's north (the likes of Prithvi Narayn Shah in the mid-eighteenth century), turned out to be almost an effortless possession for anyone with guns.

Conquest and possession of the Terai region by the mountain Kings of Nepal—Prithvi Narayan Shah being the last in this chain---became a *fait accompli* given the primitive culture and submissive behavior of the native population, not used to uniting and opposing foreign intruders and invaders!

True to its status of being a backwater territory, the Terai region of Nepal has remained a forgotten entity, existing just on the map of the country, and the Terai population residing there counted for nothing other than for making Nepal look a respectful-size domain.

Beyond the geographical facts such as the above, Nepal Terai has existed for almost nothing else. This is indicted by the extent of participation—or the absence of it--by the Terai population in the normal affairs of the country—participation in government, politics, security and defense services, foreign representation, and the modernized sectors of the economy.

In a paper I presented in 2001 to the diplomatic corps based in Washington DC--*Nepal's Politics of Exclusion*—I gave some examples of the total oblivion of Nepal Terai from international consciousness. During my more than thirty years of residence in Washington DC, not even a clerk—much less an Ambassador—has been a Terai native at the Nepal Embassy; not even a single individual--out of half-a-dozen delegates coming annually from Nepal to attend the IMF-World Bank annual meetings--has been a Teraiian; and, of the 20,000 plus Nepali-origin residents of the DC area, no more than a handful were native Teraiians.

Who is to Blame?

The sad truth about the exclusion of terai population from the mainstream of Nepalese politics and economics—and, in fact, from everything that makes up Nepal as seen from the country's image projected overseas—is that it is not the outcome of a conspiracy or evil design schemed by the *pahari* population for domination and exploitation of the region. As noted above, Terai's current predicament—call it neglect, exclusion, exploitation, dominance—is due, in part, to the outcome of the history and, part, the weakness of Terai's social environment and culture that encourage divisions in place of unity; oppression and subjugation of its subclasses, not their defense and acceptance; and submits and tolerates the worst form of abuse perpetrated by its “alien occupiers.”

Expanding on the theme of the last point: where was the Janakpur population—quarter of a million strong—when, in the early 1980s, *Dr. Laxmi Narayan Jha*, a peaceful advocate for Terai's rights, was lifted from his house in the broad daylight in mid-town Janakpur by the *Pahadi* military, with thousands of men and women witnessing the event? Reportedly, Dr. Jha disappeared without a trace—fighting for terai's rights--and not even a murmur of protests!

Another example. *Mr. Shiva Chandra Mishra* of Lohapatty, in Mahottari district, had joined the resistance movement opposing the royal coup of 1960, and lived across the border in India. He occasionally visited his family in the village by crossing the border at nights. By the courtesy of one teraiian informant, he was apprehended one night at his village by the *pahadi* military, who summarily executed him in a market place, in the plain view of thousands of on-lookers. Again, not even a hint of protest from the people Mr. Mishra was fighting for! Reportedly, the military placed round-the-clock guards at his house—not to let the family members cry for Mr. Mishra's death!

Finally, the case of *Ram Narayan Mishra* of Pipara village in Mohottari district, transport minister in BP Koirala's Government during 1959-60, who was arrested along with BP and some other Cabinet Ministers and put in Sundarijal jail. Of all the senior Congress leaders at Sundarijal jail, only Mr. Mishra did not come out alive, although he was the youngest of all those leaders in jail, and in most robust health when he went in.

Mr. Krishna Prasad (KP) Bhattarai, the ex-NC Prime Minister, told me in a conversation in early 1980s that Mr. Mishra was released alive alright but doctors at The Military

Hospital made sure that his cancer is advanced to the extent that he will not be cured when released. In fact, Mr. Mishra died soon after his release.

Later information is that Mr. Mishra was slowly poisoned over months and years to ensure his early death from “natural causes.” This was so because he was perceived by The Royal Palace as a more potential threat to the Panchayat regime than even Congress, which was largely because of Mishra’s well-known stance on restoring Terai’s power and prestige in a democratic system of government.

And, as KP added in his talks with me, Mr. Mishra was the last hope for the restoration of Terai’s rightful place in a democratic Nepal. Mr. Mishra is well-remembered for his often-repeated remarks to his NC colleagues: *Tum Logo ne Terai balo ko Mauka hi Kab Diya!* [You people never gave a chance to the people of Terai!]

However, the loss or extra-judicial killing of this charismatic leader did not even get noticed by the Terai population. Many had known of the unusual beatings, torture, and abuse he suffered at the hands of *paharia* military guards--and of his death in suspicious circumstances--but no one beyond his family members felt much for him, much less the people coming out in protests and holding rallies!

Like other heroes before him who gave their lives fighting for the Terai’s cause, Mr. Mishra’s died alone--without recognition and credit due to this Great Son of Terai!

The substance of above examples is that Teraians virtually deserve their current fate—of neglect, exploitation, disrespect and non-recognition by the well-united, fiercely committed, and supremely proud *pahadi* population. Their ruling of Nepal as a masterly race and their treatment of Terai population in the most dismissive manner imaginable—to the extent of turning them into an stateless entity in the land they have lived for thousands of years—owe more to the nature and character of Terai society and much less to the vigor and zeal of the dominant *pahadia* class!

Fishing in the troubled water!

However, the current protests, rallies, and demonstrations for the assertion Terai’s rights, however well-deserved and justified, are being viewed—at least from a distance—as something close to opportunism, very much like *fishing in the troubled water!*

Already, the staunch monarchist elements of the society are trying to label Terai protests as pro-monarchy, which is a shamelessly wrong and a wicked representation of Terai’s motives and predicament underlying this movement.

Just imagine: how can the Terai population have anything to do with the monarchy when this was the principal institution the *pahadi* population rallied behind to subjugate, intimidate, and de-humanize Teraians--so thoroughly and over such a long period of time that rivals *apathoid*? Those who are behind such labeling are nothing more than the

beaten of elements of the old order, trying to get hold of any reed they can find floating nearby, regardless of how unsupportive that can be!

At the same time, it can be said that the timing of the protests—coming just months after a thorough overhaul of the authoritarian regime that had blocked the liberation and salvation of terai population—can not be a benign coincidence!

With the authoritarian monarchy now fast disappearing--and, with that, the anti-Terai infrastructure of *pahadia state* substantially weakened-- some time should have been allowed for the dust to settle down. Instead, the terai leaders and people should have opted to utilize the new opportunities--through the exercise of their democratic rights--to assert Terai's rightful place in the new structure of the State.

One way of righting the wrong--and creating a just environment to address the long-held grievances of Terai people against the *pahadia state*-- would be the street protests and demonstrations, as is happening currently. Another would be to unite the natives through peaceful means--educate them to assert their claims at the ballot box.

Given the choice of the second option, I would favor a staunchly pro-ethnic Terai agenda—*ethnic terai people will not vote for an ethnic pahadi candidate in all the Terai districts*. This would have deprived party greats like Girija Prasad Koirala and Madhav Kumar Nepal from winning seats from anywhere in the Terai region. With ethnic Teraians making up over 40 percent of the country's electorate, Terai can claim at least that much percent of parliamentary seats. With this kind of solidarity shown by Terai population--in the exercise of their democratic rights--Terai's rightful place in the overall make up a New Nepal could be restored almost overnight.

I have nothing against the great party leaders of the likes of GP Koirala and Madhav Nepal, to deny their place in Terai politics—except for the reason that they are not ethnic Teraians. However great they may be otherwise, the ethnic *pahadia* leaders cannot fathom the ethos, the sufferings, the neglect, the exclusion, and the sheer fact of hopelessness that ethnic Teraians feel in exercising their lawful rights as citizens.

If the pahadi leaders with their Terai base would have shared the sufferings of Terai people even a bit, Terai and Nepal would been a more democratic, more just, and more prosperous a society than it is today.

However, the fact is that Terai's status has deteriorated under their very watch and ethnic Teraians are no more of a citizen now than they were under the Rana and panchayat regimes. From most accounts, it has gotten worse.

Such an outcome is not surprising, for the reason that Terai population cannot unite, which can help them escape servitude and the sub-class status that has been their lot for generations. Even if one looks at the current protests for Terai's rights in a sympathetic manner--and wishes the protests to succeed--it is unlikely that the old habits would change and gains from this movement would be long-lasting.

This is so because a race or an ethnic group used to servitude and domination can hardly be counted on to safeguard their rights and freedoms—however painfully acquired. My guess would be that, after the initial storms have passed, most Teraians would align themselves with pahadias to undermine each other, and invite the outsiders to fill the gap. Otherwise, how was it possible that a *pahadia* candidate would win in a free and fair election in places over 90 percent populated by ethnic *Teraians*?

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