

Sharp Polarisation in the Constituent Assembly

Dhruba Simkhada

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Not only are the Constituent Assembly (CA) members divided in multiple groups based on their political ideologies, but also sharply along their ethnicity, sexual orientation, geography, sector and occupation. Therefore, there is a tough polarisation inside the CA in these ethnic, geographic, gender-based, sectoral, linguistic and occupational lines. There are various pressure groups of women CA members, indigenous and ethnic CA members, Dalit members, Muslim members, Madhesi members and Marwari members, among others, which are actively working inside the CA.

The female representatives of all the parties in the CA have joined hands together to form their Women Caucus. The Caucus was established mainly to apply pressure for ensuring the rights, welfare and privileges of all Nepali women. For the management of the Caucus, these women parliamentarians have drafted a "Women CA Members' Group/Women Group Regulations".

The leadership of the Caucus is based on circular rotation between all the political parties involved. While CPN(UML)'s Usha Kala Rai has been appointed as the coordinator of the 24-member executive committee, Shanti Basnet Adhikari of CPN(UML) is its assistant coordinator, Nilam Varma (Madhesi People's Rights Forum-Democratic) is the secretary, Durga Jayanti Rai UCPN(M) is the treasurer. This is the only caucus that has been formally formed in the CA with an independent regulation. However, there are no other pressure groups (caucuses) inside the parliament which have formulated their own regulation.

Similarly, 49 parliamentarians representing all the political parties participating in the CA have formed an informal caucus of indigenous/ethnic CA members. Another front has been established by the Madhesi parliamentarians as well. This front was founded involving 83 CA members during the last prime ministerial election. Although only 83 Madhesi members are involved in this front, more than 200 CA members represent Madhes in the parliament. The main goal of forming the Madhesi parliamentarian's front was to act as a pressure group for ensuring the rights and privileges of the Madhesi people, i.e., for the implementation of "Ek Madhes, Ek Pradesh" (All Madhes as one federal unit).

The 49 Dalit CA members in the parliament representing various political parties have also united their voices and formed their group for ensuring Dalit rights. In addition to that, the Muslim parliamentarians have also united to form a group for the securing the rights of the community. Though only informal, the Muslim parliamentarians and their group is active in pressurising for the right and privileges of the Muslim community in the new constitution. To be noted is the fact that there are only 17 Muslim CA members in the parliament. Similar to the above-mentioned groups, the Marwari CA members have also come together for the benefit of their community.

Why Polarisation?

In the past, people belonging to many caste and ethnic groups, communities and sectors were left unaddressed by the state's mainstream of governance. Only a special caste and religion was able to situate itself on top of the system. The developmental activities did not reach rural and remote places. These people who waited for progress started searching for the fruits of development and questioning their identity. The political parties in the mainstream of governance could not understand this, and as a result, the polarisation of multiple communities, ethnic groups, sexual identities, and geographical started to be seen.

Though the idea of decentralisation was heard on and off during the past, the actual concept of decentralisation was never followed and/or implemented; everything was concentrated on the scope of the power-holders. One of the reasons for this rise in polarisation could be the want of freedom from the woes created by these "powerfuls". Therefore, the political parties and their leadership should understand this in time and start the process of inclusion at the state level without any further delay. It is clearly evident that the timely settlement of this polarisation is essential; and at the same time the ethnic politics is starting to get dominant.

Searching Identity within Identity

Various ethnic groups like Newar, Magar, Gurung, Tamang, Rai, Limbu and Madhesis, who have larger population and have some access to the state level, are seen demanding ethnicity-based federal states with self-determination. Similarly, in places where these ethnic groups are in majority, the other minority caste and ethnic groups have been raising voices of self-governance.

The Tharus have started demonstration against the "Ek Madhes Ek Prades" (All Madhes as one federal unit) in the Madhes itself. In the words of Tharu Welfare Assembly's former General Secretary and Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities' President Rajkumar Lekhi Tharu, "We will never sanction another series of exploitation at the hands another oppressive feudal in the "Ek Madhes, Ek Prades" form of federal state." This means that most of the Tarai-based indigenous and ethnic groups do not favour the idea of "Ek Madhes Ek Prades". They want multi-federal system in the Tarai. Equally struggling for their identity are the Muslims, who number about 11 lakhs.

On the other hand, the Hyolmo ethnic groups residing in the Nuwakot and Sindhupalchok area are not willing to endorse the Tamsaling state that the Tamangs are demanding. The Chepangs of Makawanpur and Dhading are also searching for their identity within these two districts which are claimed by the Tamangs. Similarly, the Jirels and Thamis of Dolakha are not in favour of limiting themselves within the proposed Tamsaling. The UCPN(Ma) CA member from Dolakha Chun Bahadur Thami says, "We need Thami autonomous region. We want to govern ourselves through our own administration and governance, and not at the hands of any Tamang or other groups."

These groups have been demanding their own independent autonomous states. Various groups like Thakali, Bargaun, Tangbe Magar, etc. within the proposed Tamuwani have also been searching for

their identity. The quest for identity has had such deep roots that the ethnic Bargaun group is not willing to reside under the aegis of the autonomous state of Thakalis in Mustang. The only parliamentarian representing about 4000 the Bargauns, Tashi Hyolmo Gurungseni, says, "We want an autonomous region of the Bargauns. There was no parliamentarian from our community till date; therefore, no one spoke for our rights. Now I will raise voice for my community." She informed during the meet that though her surname is Gurungseni, she does not belong to the Gurung community, and it was the fault of the age-old system of recordkeeping while issuing her citizenship by which she has got the Gurung surname. Parliamentarian Tashi adds, "The Bargaun group has its own identity; we belong neither to the Thakalis nor the Gurungs."

Similar to the above stories, ethnic groups like Ale and Dura have also been searching their identity within the identity of the proposed Tamuwan state. What is clear with these issues is that the voice for ethnic, geographic, gender-based and sectoral polarisation would keep getting louder. Loktantra (democracy) will take firm roots only when we can rightly manage these issues. If the voices of the ethnic groups are only heard and not listened to and acted upon, this will smoulder like an ember within a tinderbox.

The Indications of Polarisation

The ethnic and geographic polarisation has gained more momentum than sectoral and occupational ones in the Constituent Assembly. The proponents of ethnicity have been chanting the mantra of drafting the new constitution on ethnic grounds. Similarly, the followers of "Ek Madhes Ek Prades" have been insisting on the restructuring of the nation based on the three ecological zones of mountain, hill and Madhes; and all the Madhes-based political parties are united on this demand.

The ethnic, Madhesi and Dalit leaders representing various national-level political parties have been getting attracted towards their own community and region. Even those leaders who had occupied government posts in the past have started saying that they are working for the benefit of their community, ethnicity and region. But nothing could be said without exploring what they did for the development of their community and region in the past. It could also be argued that they have got this attraction to their community and region for clinging onto the facilities, privileges and respect that they have been getting from the past. Conversely, it could also be that they are actually dedicated to the benefit of their community.

No matter what, it is clearly evident that the indigenous, ethnic, Dalit, women, Madhesi and Muslim parliamentarians have been attracted more towards their community and region than own mother parties. This has escalated the possibilities of division in the national-level parties. The fact that the political parties, which ought to take up national issues to the forefront, could now be limited to ethnic and regional issues cannot be negated in this context. This will have a deleterious effect on the party-based politics and the sense of positive competition would get a serious blow. The fact that this polarisation could result in the rising ethnic tension in the society cannot be easily denied.

Boxes

Caucuses in the Constituent Assembly

1. Women Caucus/Group of Women Parliamentarians
2. Group of Ethnic and Indigenous Parliamentarians
3. Madhesi Parliamentarians' Front
4. Group of Dalit Parliamentarians
5. Group of Muslim Parliamentarians
6. Group of Marwari Parliamentarians