Contested Identity Politics in Nepal: Implications from Tharu Movement

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Abstract: *Globally, research on social movements reveals relatively more about identity politics, but relatively less about the mechanism and causality of the identity formation. In this context, the paper analyses the formation of identity politics in Nepal from a view point of Tharu movement, one of the largest ethnic movements in the country. Despite having a long historical background, critics suggest that the Tharu movement is increasingly contested with identity politics. Sharing part of this critique, the paper argues that the Tharu movement has been undergone with the formation of collective identity incorporating the previously neglected issues of poverty, inequality and marginalization. Following critical discourse analysis, the paper concludes that the identity politics of Tharu movement has been formed in multiple dimensions of class, caste/ethnicity, gender, region, and development status.*
Keywords*: contested development, identity politics, narratives, social movement.*

I.   Introduction

Indeed, the discourses of social movement and identity politics are highly contested. Globally, we have witnessed a numbers of struggles for justice, equity, identity, emancipation, special attention, recognition, rights and legal status. Often, these demands and issues have manifested in different forms of social movements. Diani (2000) defines a social movement as a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflict, on the basis of shared collective identity. However, McDonald (2002) and SinghaRoy (2010) argue that collective identity implies a degree of homogeneity and stability that is not appropriate anymore in a time when sociology uses new concepts such as networks, flows and complexity. In the same context, Bebbington (2009) rightly proposes that: "a social movement is a form of collective action but is not itself an actor, rather a process, sustained by a set of actions and actors…way of organising society and thininkgabout development" (p. 8).

However, the ways and processes of the social movements interact with identity politics (and vice-versa) have been still less theorized. Modernization, democratization, political ideologies and emergence of mass societies threatened the personal and collective identities and the advancement in information systems have sustained these identity-based struggles. Thus, for many scholars, the issue of identity is the central concern and key motivational factor of social movements (Tarrow 2011; Tilly 2004; Vinod and Deshpande 2013). Further, the rise of various kinds of social movements has been coupled with contesting features and issues, and it happens in modern societies with increasingly fluid characteristics. It rings true in Nepal where the society is rapidly changing with a complex set of State-society relationship (Gellner 2008; Manandhar 2011; Sapkota 2014a; Sharma 2006).

In the post-1990 context, Nepal's movement discourse has been featured with identity-based movements, and it became more apparent after the success of the people's movement, 2006.[1] Interestingly, while the people's movements of 1990 and 2006 were structural and political in nature, subsequent movements have been fuelled with the voices of identity and rights of socially disadvantaged ethnic groups. Various kinds of identity-based movements are rooting for their spaces in the local as well as national politics to claim their maximum benefits and rights in federalism, State-structuring and constitution writing process. Particularly in the Terai and eastern Hill region, the increase in the non-State actors and movements in different forms is a crucial challenge, where identity politics has been becoming an emergent motivation of political mobilization.[2]

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[1] The first 'People's Movement' in 1990 overthrew the king-controlled party-less *Panchayat* system. The second people's movement took place in April 2006 that brought the Maoists in mainstream politics and abolished the monarchy. But the process of Constitution writing and State-restructuring is still going on.

[2] According to the Home Ministry, a total number of 109 militant/ criminal groups were reported to be active in 26 districts of Nepal during 2010-11, out of which only 12 groups were classified as 'political' organizations (The Kathmandu Post, 4 August 2011). Now this has been drastically reduced and vast majority of them are either disappeared or totally passive or severely weakened by the State security forces.

Tharu movement in contemporary Nepal covers a large regional area and a wider reprsentation of the Tharu people. The Tharus are the second largest indigenous group in Nepal with 6.6 percent (1.73 million) of the total population (26.49 million) of the country (CBS 2012). A brief review of recent literature on Tharu community suggests that the issue of identity is still unresolved and it is barely of scholarly interest in research in terms of the movement. Only a few researches are available to analyse the mechanism and causality of the identity formation. In this context, this research work explores whether and how there is contestation in identity politics from the view point of the Tharu movement. In operational term, we flesh out the key research question as "How has the Tharu movement been subject to identity politics - ethnic, class, regional and developmental?"

II.   Critical review on the Tharu Movement

In spite of being a small country in the south Asia, Nepal rooms for a more than 125 caste/ethnic groups (CBS 2012). The ethnic groups are popularly known as adibasi/janajati (indigenous nationalites), who comprise 59 groups in the country. On the basis of various indicators, Government of Nepal has classified 59 indigenous nationalities into five major categories: endangered, highly marginalized, marginalized, disadvantaged, and advantaged (advanced) groups. Tharu is kept under one of the marginalized indigenous groups. With some anthropometric evidences, some authors (e.g. Ashokkirti 2008; Chaudhary 2012; McDonaugh 2008, 1989) claim that the Tharus are one of the ancient ethnic groups in the world. Historically, the Tharus had cleared forests and started cultivation in the low-lands. Since then, they have settled in the Terai region of Nepal, the southern plain region of the country. With animalistic belief, they follow distinct religious, lingual and social traditions as compared to other caste and ethnic groups. However, there is a kind of heterogenos setting of culture and practices among the Tharus in the different parts of the country (Sapkota 2014b).

The ethnographic studies that include details of the Tharu life and culture in Nepal began since the establishment of democracy in 1951 (Sapkota 2014b). Müller-Böker (1999) studied the Tharus in Chitwan district of southern Nepal from an ethno-ecological perspective. She, however, argues that a compilation of the various historical and ethno-historical sources fails to produce a clear and unambiguous picture of the origin and history of the Tharus (p. 62). Skar (1999) analysed the national, regional, minority issues which have shaped local identities and perceived as outsider's impact in Terai and neighbours. Gaige (2009) viewed the issues of regionalism and national unity in Nepal, and analysed complexity of geo-politics, economy, border problems, migration, politics of citizenship and language in the Terai region. Krauskopff (2008) beautifully examined the Tharu ethnic associations and NGOs and the issues of Tharu autonomy in State-restructuring context. However, he has less accessed the role of the external factors and donor agencies in fuelling the ethnic issue in the Tharu movement. Maslak (2003) analysed Tharu ethnicity, religion and education from a gender perspective highlighting the identity issue of Tharu daughters in the given social structure.

More recent contributions about the knowledge of Tharu ethnicity and the movement have been given by various foreign as well as Nepali scholars. All the authors largely concentrated on the application of research into the ethnic issues and agendas of the Tharu movement. In particular, the classic work of Guneratne (2002) accounts the making of ethnic identity among the Tharus from cultural and historical perspective including the various issues of State and governance, land holding, labour relations, local politics and organization of elites. However, the issue of identity is conceptualized within a narrow domain of culture or ethnicity, not including the issues of development or under-development.

III.   Conceptual and theoretical framework

With the changing dynamics of our society and its relationship with the State, the contemporary world 'society' has become a 'social movement society' (Tarrow 2011), and in fact, it is the world where identity matters (Gilroy 1997). In political sociology, the term 'identity politics' was first used by Anspach in 1979 to refer to activism of differently able people. Identity became a stock term by the 1990s and a widespread socio-economic label (Sen 2007). Gradually its conception widened to include ethnic, racial, gendered, cultural, linguistic and national identities. The formation and mobilization of collectives seem to be the product of such identities to achieve the desired goals through motivation, action and signification.

In social movement discourse, identity politics has two direct connotations. First, in empirical sense, many authors argue for the detrimental role of identity politics, particularly in the formation of collective behaviour and agency. Cerulo (1997) argues that identities emerge and movement ensure because collectives develop offences and defences, differentiation and marking, co-operation and competition, and persuasion and coercion (p. 393). Second, philosophy of identity provides the 'cognitive apparatus' (Della Porta and Diani 2006) that gives individuals a space to orient themselves in the world. This space consists of multiplicity of cultural and ideological elements which include beliefs, ceremonies, artistic forms and informal practices such as languages, conversations, stories, daily rituals across different societies.

However, Vinod and Deshpande (2013) critically observe that there seems to be much focus on data-based studies rather than on theory-building (p. 386). With some elaboration, Mary Bernstein in her overview on research on identity politics has further defined three approaches of describing identity politics: the neo-Marxist approach, the new social movement approach, and the social constructionist, postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches (Bernstein 2005). The Marxists and neo-Marxists do not consider 'identity politics' as a mechanism of challenging and bringing fundamental changes in power relations. The new social movement theorists, however, have broadened the scope and extent of identity politics, arguing that collectives are formed in SMs on the basis of values and ideology, not on the basis of either class or culture. On the other hand, poststructuralists and postmodernists criticize the notion of essentialism and universalism. For them, the identity cannot be particularized as a singular and linear motion, but it is a multiple and contextual in nature (Brubaker and Cooper 2000).

In Nepalese context, there are some contested issues in social movements regarding their nature of mobilization, setting of agenda and well-being of people. Along with this, there is a problem of categorization and positioning of some of these movements (Sapkota 2014a). Tharu movement, which claims to represent the Tharu ethnic (indigenous) group, is essentially an ethnic movement, but we could not deny the fact there are emerging voices and collective struggles of bonded labour, regional autonomy and land right. So, the formation of new collectives and identities within the movement seems to be the basic unit of analysis for identity politics. Therefore, we argue that the conceptual meaning of identity is determined by the local context and social setting where the movement occurs and develops.

With this outset, this paper does not follow any particular theory or model of identity politics. Rather, we perceive 'identity politics' as a contested, fluid, dynamic and interdisciplinary concept. In operational term, the identity politics of Tharu movement has been defined as a "collective construction of people (and their issues) as a product of politics and economy of the society". This conceptualization has been further developed into an analytical framework, as presented in the Fig. 1.
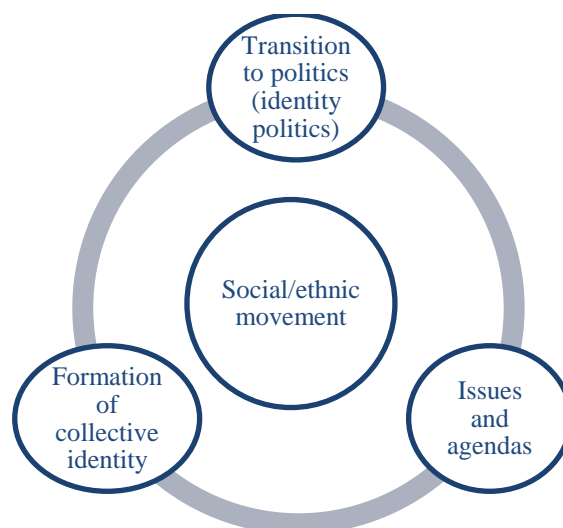

Figure 1: Operationalisation of social and ethnic movements in terms of identity politics
(Source: Developed by the author, 2014)

IV.   Methodology

To investigate the dynamics of idnetity politics and ethnic movements, a methodology is required which facilitates analysis of behavioral patterns, perceptions, causes, interrelations and interactions among the actors. Epistemologically, we have adopted a 'interpretive-criticalappraoch based on the contested connection between identity and Tharu movement, in effect, to manifest 'idnetity politics'.[3] With a social constructivist ontology, this study employed a qualitative approach in illustrating the construction of identity within the local narratives and livelihoods at grassroots.

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[3] Here, I argue that the production of knowledge in society is dialectical in nature; a synthesis of interpretivism and criticalism. Methodologically, this dialectics has been justified in the Tharu movement study with the observation of subjective reality (interpretivism) and objective reality (criticalism).

The entry point of study site was Terai region and mid-western development region of Nepal.[4] Dang district was purposively selected from these regions. In the district, the Tharu comprises about one third of the total population; and the incidence of poverty among them falls even more than the national average of the country (CBS 2012; UNDP 2009). The Dang district has had a strong base of Tharu population and movement in historical as well as contemporary period of Nepal (Chaudhary 2012; Regmi 1976, 2011; Stiller 1976). It possessed a number of active ethnic associations and activism. Following Flick (2009), the research participants were selected by employing purposive sampling method as there was not recognized open list of sampling frame. The body of data, complementary of each other, comprises one and half dozen of in-depth interviews, biographies, and eight focused group discussions (FGDs).

This paper methodologically situates 'collective identity' factors as particularistic rather than universal phenomena. The construction of identity was observed assuming that people were guided to act by the existing social relationships and the ways with which they choose to identify. The transcribed interviews were coded to identify the major categories (individual, social, cultural, political etc.). The categories, in turn, were analysed in the way how they created boundaries of "Tharu" and "non-Tharu", and "State" and "non-State" as identity. Along with this, the paper attempts to discuss the different dynamics of identity politics of Tharu movement, focusing on people's perceptions with varieties of experiences and social relations.

V.   Discussion and Analysis

5.1 Contestations in the formation of identity in the Tharu Movement

Over the last 250 years, Nepal has changed remarkably and the dynamics of change has been shaped by the political regimes and existing social relations. The regimes have served the interest of the elites, imposing power relations in favour of them. Social protest and resistance of disadvantaged groups became a part of political activities though the social movements have been ever treated as a subset of political movements. Subsequently, the issue of identity have become an inevitable fashion of modern Nepalese life, though this claim is being advocated by ethnic movements. This truly holds in Tharu movement as well. The process of identity formation, however, needs some given contexts and backgrounds, as what Brubaker and Cooper (2000) rightly argued that the identity cannot be created in the vacuum or isolated. The Tharu movement, not exceptionally, showed some localized bases of identity creation. The following sub-sections will analyse the major domains of such bases of identity creation and their implication in the Tharu movement.

5.1.1 Biological contestations (biological paradigm)

Biological similarity-based identity refers to 'racial identity', which is visible and particularly based on colour of the skin, e.g. the white and non-white identity. Yuen (1997) argues that the British construction of black includes those who are not white, like Asians, Africans and those of Caribbean descent. In the Nepalese Tharu movement context, the biological notion of identity was and is not so strong and visible. The racial colour of Tharu people is a fare black, which resembles with the colour of Madhesi people, though they are struggling for their own identity.[5] On the other hand, there are not purely white groups in Nepal as compared to the English people of the West and North. Though there were many fallacies in the State policies, Nepal did not impose any laws for "discrimination based on the colour". Modern value system of Nepalese society does not simply subscribe the colour-based biological differences though there might have some exceptional cases. Thus, the racial contradiction has been not a prominent factor in creation of identity politics for the Tharu movement. The local narratives also manifested that the colour of the Tharus is not uniformly fair black, making it an artificial and even unnecessary issue of the Tharu movement. To add, researcher got a typical counter question by a research participant in this regard:

> "People say that we (Tharus) are biologically strong and powerful….but, we want to become economically powerful. I want to ask my movement leaders that it is not our Tharu colour, but our economic rights and opportunities which can promote our income, education and health."

5.1.2 Socio-cultural contestations (ethnic paradigm)

Ethnicity is one of the basic social and cultural elements in the construction of identity. The history of holocaust, genocide, ethnic cleansing and anti-Semitism, were also motivated by the concept of ethnic difference (Huntington 1996). Most of the scholars argue that the root of the ethnic movements in Nepal is

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[4] In political-administrative terms, Nepal is divided into three ecological regions, five development regions, fourteen zones and seventy five districts. The Terai is a southern plain region, which includes 22 districts with 50.2% of the total population in the country.

[5] The Terai region of Nepal is also known as 'Madhes', and the term 'Madhesi' officially denotes all the caste and ethnic groups living in the region, except the hilly migrants (hill upper-castes, ethnic groups and *dalits*). Empirically, the term is used only for the ethnic groups of Indian sub-origin. The Tharus, Muslims and *dalits*, who historically belong to the region, are opposing to their grouping under the legislation of 'Madhesi'. For them, the making of 'Madhesi' would insult their distinct historical and cultural identity in the region. The same contestation lies in the debates in the federalism from the both parties- Tharus and Madhesis.

based on the "ethnic" identity (Hangen 2010; Lawoti, 2010), and this seems true in case of the Tharu movement as well (Sapkota 2012).

This perception was dominated in the Tharu movement leadership, which contributed for the single identity-based Tharu "ethnic" creation among the Tharu people themselves and among the others who differ from the Tharu ethnicity. They proposed an 'essentialist' approach and claimed that it is only the cultural issue (exclusion, marginalization) that rooted the movement. However, the local social setting of the Tharu community in Dang revealed a little bit different picture. Many Tharus have had inter-caste marriages and a few love marriages were also witnessed with the castes that were treated as the 'enemies' of the Tharus. There were different kinds of cultural programs and institutions jointly celebrated and hosted by all the castes of the community. The kadkandar system[6] of the Tharu community was also desirable in many villages, and even the non-Tharus were also hosting that institution. The celebration of the Maghi festival[7] was another melting point of all the identities into the same bowl. Each member of the community was being wished by each other irrespective of his or her caste or ethnic background.

In Saudiyar VDC-9, there was a Tharu model village, jointly developed by all the castes and ethnic groups of the VDC, but was managed by the Tharus themselves. In spite of being a Brahmanic identity[8], the researcher was also invited to stay there for a long time and was provided an ample opportunity to observe the things very closely and natively. The dressing pattern, food habits, language, and customs were also being modernized and reformed into the changing context. While this researcher visited a district level Tharu movement leader, his kids were welcoming me in Nepali language. They were studying in an expensive English-medium school nearby the district headquarter. I started to talk them in the Tharu language, but they remarked me that they could not know their native Tharu language. But, ironically, their father insisted that the conservation of Tharu language and culture was a basic issue of Tharu identity. He further claimed that equity was also a crucial dimension of the Tharu movement, though he would not like to explain his legacy of landlordism to lead the movement in the Dang district. Indeed, this reveals a contradiction of grand narrative with local narrative, connoting a post-modern theoretical orientation. From this perspective, Tharu movement is a celebration of postmodern era, where along with all pluralities, the ethnicity is also celebrated. This schooling is a liberal one to reset the ethnic identity formation, however it fails to go into the historical roots and economic and class conditionality of the movement.

5.1.3 Political-economic contestations (class paradigm)

Marxist school looks for the base of identity in terms of economic similarities and differences. Marx (1928) has perceived the universalized collective identity based on the economic structure and production relations that lead to the creation of identities in the process of political mobilization and class struggle. With this assumption, Marxists and neo-Marxists do not consider 'identity politics' as a mechanism of challenging and bringing the fundamental changes in power relations. Rather, it is understood in symbolic, cultural, or psychological terms (Bernstein 2005).

At local level, the Tharu community has revealed more dimensions beyond the caste/ethnic, and this was the indication of how the identity was being formed or deformed. Research participants recalled themselves with multiple identities and expressed the common phrases regarding class, for example, "we are poor class", "our caste is oppressed class", "our basic problem is poverty and inequality", "we are the tax-maker of the national State", and, "we cleared the forest and started cultivation, but denied to access the land". These collective notions indicated the following implications of identity politics:

First, though the leadership was strategically adopted the ethnic identity and they less likely interested in the class issues; most of the poor Tharu people formed their identity around a 'poor class'. They also expressed the need of poor people, poor farmers in particular, to be united and mobilized for their rights and emancipation. These expressions indicated a level of class consciousness, which if will be motivated for class mobilization, a class movement will call. In fact, it seems a basic issue of what Marx called 'the basic structure'. Marx, on the other hand, considered culture as 'the superstructure' serving the interest of the economically dominant class. Neo-Marxists though have raised the technique of change; nevertheless they continue to hold on to the centrality of class identity.

Second, identity politics recognizes all types of identities and collectives. However, some research participants also claimed that ethnic issues did not contribute to settle the class issues of Tharu people; why most of the Tharus were poor and why there were also rich people to rule the majority of people? Further, they

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[6] Kadkandar (also called 'aguwa' and 'badghar' in different purposes) is the village head system, traditionally practiced by the Tharu community. In this system, people nominated their leader to manage and lead the village issues.
[7] The Maghi is one of the greatest festivals of Tharu community and celebrated for a week as a festival of New Year. This festival is also celebrated by other caste and ethnic groups of Nepal.
[8] Brahmin is treated as upper caste in the Hindu caste hierarchical system.

also remarked that there were not only the Tharus, but also non-Tharus were the 'poor class' deprived from development and opportunity. All the poor would have the common issues of low wage, landlessness, exclusion and underdevelopment. For them, cultural and religious identity was an elite propaganda ('bourgeois construct' in terms of Marxist term), aimed at the exploitation of the wage labours, landless people, poor farmers, kamaiyas and kamalary[9] (the 'working class' for Marxists).

Third, in spite of having a long history of Tharu movement that focused primarily in ethnic issues (identity), local narratives of people revealed that it virtually maintained the exploitative power relationships and never challenged the existing political system. In turn, it gave more focus on the soft and superficial issues of upper class Tharus and rich farmers. The agenda sating of the movement was elite-captured; there was less representation of wage labours, women, tenants, kamaiya and kamalary. In effect, all these factors weakened the possibility of class movements.[10] The State, on the other hand, did not recognize the grassroots causes of the movement, and it was more or less also grabbed by the ethnic elites of the different castes. All these contradictions were mutually functional to promote and continue oppression. A farmer from Dang district lamented the appearance of identity politics as:

> "You know, I am Tharu, but I am a poor and landless people. I am unable to afford the fees of children in English-medium school, because of my poverty, not because of my caste. Everyone talks about my caste. But, who cares about my poverty? My grandfather and father tilled the land of Tharu landlord. They became kamaiya and the bondage restricted our freedom until now…Though I participated in the movement; I don't know how the Tharu ethnic movement will fight against the landlords and rich people for the sake of poor people from both the Tharu and non-Tharu caste."

This argument theoretically situates with the Marxist approach of class, which distinguishes class politics from identity politics. However, critics are argued for its narrow vision regarding identity politics (Bernstein 2005). In one hand, we cannot generalize that the contemporary Tharu movement is purely ethnic, which fails to address the issue of inequality. On the other hand, the separation of culture (cultural factors like ethnicity) from class and political economy in the given context is not scientific. This is why I argue here that the class serves as a grand narrative while the Tharu ethnicity serves as a meta-narrative in the identity construction of the Tharu movement. Conventionally, the issues like sex, race and religious minority identities are rooted in culture, but, in reality, they have a political-economic dimension which we could not deny or suppress.

5.2 Contestations in the power dynamics of identity formation of Tharu movement
5.2.1 Claims vs. counterclaims

With the declaration of democracy in 1951, Nepal made the first foot-print towards the modernization. Different kinds of reform movements at a socio-historical level emerged in the 1950s amongst the disadvantaged groups of the society, which can be said to have laid the foundation of ethnic movements (Regmi 2011; Sharma 2006). Within the given framework of political economy during the Panchayat era (1960-1990), the emergence of openly ethnic movements was a further challenge to the State, as described by different scholars. The Tharus can boast one of the earliest ethnic movements in Nepal in the Tharu Welfare Society founded in 1949 which is today the representative body of the Tharu in the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN). Since post-2006 period, an increasing number of observers come to acknowledge that the Tharu movement has been increasingly widened in terms of ethnic representation, inclusion, empoweremtn and identity.

Empirically speaking, the movement organizations had different viewpoints about their issues and the ways of solutions. In Dang, the Tharu movement seemed to be contested in terms of its strong rejection of 'one madhesh, one pradesh (federal State)', which is believed as the significant achievement of Madheshi movement in 2008. The Lamahi bazar was one of the epicentres of Tharuprotest and resitace. The local leadership of theTharu movement had a claimthat the Terai region must be restructured federally to ensure their own Tharuhat region as autonomous zone. On the other hand, most of the district level leaders and movement organizations were divided according to the party-lines and their wing. It means that though there was a collective Tharu identity in the movement, there was also parallel existence of micro-level and local narratives and identities. The

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[9] While *Kamaiya* is a male bondage system, *Kamalari* is a female bondage system, practiced in the western Terai districts of Nepal, including the Dang. They represent a 'sub-class' within the 'Tharu caste'. Though these systems have been outlawed by the Government of Nepal in 2002 and 2013 respectively, there are some hidden practices still reported. Further, the issues of their rehabilitation and livelihood security are still prevalent.

[10] In 1960s, there were historical peasant's movements in Dang district, but they could not continue as formal institution as a part of Tharu movement.

social construction of such identities was based on the heterogeneous context setting of the Tharu movement. This kind of identity formation was galvanized by the differences in language, tradition, regional dominance, access to the production means (e.g. land and wage) and economic statuses of the people.

The claims and counterclaims of social movement are generally the functions of movement networks and organizations (Tilly 2004). A brief review of the agendas of the Tharu movement indicates that the demands of self-determination, ethnic and cultural identity and proportional inclusion into the State apparatus were the major ones.[11] The way these policies and issues found resonance at the local level was quite variable, that would contribute for the formation of contested identity politics. There was a wide network and coverage of Tharu welfare society (TWS) in Dang, and it was working in welfare and cultural affairs particularly in Chailahi VDC. The TWS, founded in 1951, represents a deep-rooted historical legacy of the Tharu culture and welfare. However, its cultural orientation (lingual, religious, and customs) gradually seemed insufficient or irrelevant in the changing political context of the social change. It was being replaced by the formation of an umbrella organization-Tharuhat Joint Struggle Committee (TJSC) – was executed from central to local level. The role of TJSC became detrimental in the setting of agendas, establishing local networks, negotiating the State actors and organizing protest activities. However, the leadership of TJSC was also divided and there was not also regularity in their protest activities to maintain the public participation. One of the civil society leaders of Ghorahi municipality in Dang analysed the leadership in this way:

> "In recent days, the voices of the movement are passive, and gradually eroding. Where did the organization disappear and where did the leaders work? If the movement was a continuous project, and its leadership was committed, then the impact of movement in society would have more positive…But, it has only increased the bargaining power of the leaders"

5.2.2 Strategies, behaviours and negotiations

In fact, the formation of identity determines the formation of groups aligned with specific agendas, though contested in case of the Tharu movement. The way of group formation and agenda setting further determine the group behaviour, and hence positioning the strategies and policies. Tully (2003) argues that the strategies and claims made by groups in various struggles which fall within the description of identity politics are varied (p. 519-20). It follows the next issue in identity politics: how are the demands formed and who should speak for the group? To capture the above mentioned questions, let us discuss the two parties of the Tharu movement in the study area:

a) The demanding group: the Tharu people in general and movement organization (e.g. TJSC) in particular, making demand for legal and political recognition, accommodation, special rights, implementation of ILO 169, etc.
b) The giver group: the groups or the institutions, to which the demands were proposed; the State in general and the government in particular including bureaucracy and governmental bodies. The major political parties in the district, however, played a dual role (demanding and giving) in the movement.

With the formation of these identified groups, a negotiation started to take place inter-and-intra-group level. At first, the negotiation took place among the member organizations of TJSC. The negotiation was debated itself because of different ideological and political intervention into the TJSC. The Tharu welfare society, on the other hand, proposed comparatively a flexible proposal regarding the federalism based on co-existence of various caste/ethnic groups. But, still there was more focus on the leadership of the movement, credit of the achievements, and managerial issues of the movement. A number of NGOs (e.g. BASE) were also dominating in the TJSC, so some people also charged the movement as donor-centric. Ironically there was not any representation of farmer's group, groups of kamaiya and kamalaries, and land-right movement groups. Thus, it seemed that the issues of lower strata of Tharu community lost their voices in the negotiation with the leadership. A member of Kamaiya Mukti Samaj, Dang asked me counter questions regarding the identity and negotiation as:

> "Let me ask you what our identity is. Everyone talk about identity in Kathmandu. Yes, we are Tharu, but we (kamaiyas) were just used as parts of the vehicle. What we get? Our emancipation was never remained a focused agenda of the Tharu movement"

Second, there were still contradictions in the giver group, i.e. the State and government authorities. It is due to the fact that the agreements made by the government with different ethnic and movement groups were

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[11] For detail, see also, Tharu National Indigenous NGO Federation, at: http://Tharufed.org.np/cms/index.php?page=movement.

debated and highly contested among each-other.[12] The government did not want to lose the historical privileges and power sharing in favour of the marginalized groups and castes. The Tharus were not exceptional from this historical tragedy, though some local and national Tharu leaders and elites celebrated such non-recognition of the Tharus.

Whatever the contestation was in the movement group (Tharu) and giver group (the State), the negotiation between them was tensed and pro-longed. During this process, the local identities multiplied and rapidly increased to the whole Dang district and Terai region. In turn, it contributed for the nationalization and internationalization of the Tharu identity. Thus identity politics became a cyclic process of dialogue and negotiation between the Tharu and the State. However, as we argued earlier, the movement group members/organizations has multiple identities (personal, regional, class, cultural and ideological), there was a problem in the management of such conflicting identities. Whose identity should be counted, and whose not? These issues are still debated, though the identity of the Tharu movement has been politicized as according to the identity of leadership. This has made the identity of Tharu movement more contested discourse.

5.2.3 Political and institutional factors
Social movements have often helped to place issues on the political agenda (Amin 2010). In terms of political economy, however, movements are likely to be more reactive (CPRC 2008). This is also true in Nepalese context of the Tharu movement, which has been coupled with elitist agendas and populist programs. In Dang, there were some critical reflections regarding this.
First, the political transition emerging from a long-decade Maoist's insurgency (1996-2006) has had a disruptive impact on development activities of rural areas. Elected local bodies were vacant since 2002 and the service delivery system of government was weak and almost nil. I would argue this as a structural-political crisis which has been playing a crucial role in making identity issue contested at the local areas Moreover, there is a huge ideological and political gap among the major political parties to address the present crisis. Due to gradual erosion in self-esteem, dignity and freedom of common people of society, a kind of ethnic identity has developed with despair, dissatisfaction and frustration. Tharu ethnicity also deserved this construction of identity.
Second, different kinds of Tharu civil society organisations were emerging rapidly and advocating Tharu unity and common welfare. However, most of these organisations have been politically divided and there was a kind of strategic difference among them, thus making it difficult to define Tharu identity in a collective way. Instead, those groups were strategically used to create 'critical mass' for the demonstrations and strikes called by the Tharuhat Joint Struggle Committee (TJSC). The members of these organisations were asked (somehow compelled) to participate in the programme and give collective voice. Though there was a very weak coordination, these organisations collectively worked in some social welfare programmes. In 2013, they rescued 42 kamalaries from the different villages of Dang district. Though the Tharu movement claimed to be a true representative of the poor people, the local leaders have been less worried about the agendas of community development, land reform and agricultural modernisation.

5.2.4 Power dynamics: whose reality counted?
Identity politics in Nepal is characterised by a struggle against historically rooted elitism. The discourse of social movement focuses on conventional approach rather than a transformation of unequal social relations and power dynamics. The power structure within the Tharu movement is more complicated. Given the historical link between leadership and the movement, some crucial aspects have been articulated in the study area. The landlords (*jamindar*) and tax collectors (*chaudhary*) were the historically benefitted Tharu elites who have served the interests of the ruling class of the Kathmandu. In the movement leadership, they still had a direct influence in setting the agenda and mobilizing the people under their umbrella. Some research participants in the field also expressed that most of the leaders of Tharu movement were either from the main political parties, or from the legacy of previous landlordism or of being a well-off citizen of the society. For example, there were two contrasting viewpoints regarding the identity and Tharu movement:
"We are achieving the Tharu ethnic identity, which would guarantee the emancipation of the historically marginalised Tharus … It is an outcome and a motto of our ethnic movement…"

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[12] The 5-points' agreement between Tharuhat Joint Struggle Committee and the Government of Nepal held in 2009 March 14 was also contrasted with the agreement that Government made with Joint Madhesi Struggle Committee, particularly in terms of their recognition and claims in federal States.

"What happened to me? What did the identity give for women? I am a housewife of a poor family. Please don't ask me what we got and will get! .... I am unable to feed my kids – this is all about my identity!"

The first expression mentioned above represents the claim of one of the movement leaders in the district. He was claiming the achievements of the movement in favour of the people. Contesting this, the second point of view criticizes the achievements from a local perspective. A kind of lamentation and frustration revealed here from a critical feminist outlook. A political analyst working in Kathmandu, when asked about this contestation, stated:

"Both [movement and identity] are very burning issues in Nepal's politics...They are embedded with the power structure of the society…. but the issue of identity has not been advocated as the product of dependency and underdevelopment. Unfortunately, ethnicity is becoming the single issue of identity, which will supress the issue of unequal class structure and social relations."

VI.   Conclusion

Ethnic dimension of identity has dominated the mind-set of upper leadership, but local people would like to reveal their multiple issues and identities relating class, ethnicity, gender and region. In this context, it was evident that the Tharu movement failed to address the underlying issues and multiple dimensions of identity. However, this revealed a number of issues in identity formation process within the Tharu movement. Some of the critical issues can be presented as follows:

➢   The dynamics of the identity has been changing from local (rural) to regional (Terai) and national (State-restructuring) politics.
➢   There is a dialectical relationship between ethnic identity and Tharu movement; between leadership and followers; between agenda of the movement and well-being of people.
➢   Identity is a process which is shaped by social relations and power structure of the society. Most significantly, Tharu movement has created different spaces and images to make the issue of identity politics contested.

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