A STUDY OF MAGARS AFFILIATED WITH THE NEPAL MAGAR ASSOCIATION:
TRANSITION FROM ASSIMILATION TO IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

By
Shyamu Thapa Magar
Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University
July, 2013

Dissertation
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Graduate School of Asia Pacific Studies, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Japan.
ABSTRACT

Ethnic identity construction process in Nepal started after the 1990s people’s movement replacing the thirty years of the Panchayat Political System. Major ethnic groups in the country started to form their own social organizations for the cultural and social development of their communities. In order to make collective demands, they established Nepal Janajati Mahasang (Nepal Federation of Nationalities). It brought alliance among various ethnic groups to form a common forum against social discrimination of the earlier caste based society. Indigenous ethnic groups along with women, Dalits and other disadvantaged groups began demanding equal participation, representation and access to the resources of the state.

This study analyzes the transition of Magars from having been assimilated into the older social system into forming a distinct group identity among others in Nepal. Data for this study was collected from a yearlong fieldwork in Nepal. This study is based on qualitative research following anthropological ethnographic study. Several Magars and non-Magars were selected for key informant interviews, focus group discussions with Magars affiliated with Magar Associations and some case studies of those Magars who had contributed to Magars’ identity construction movement. Eight districts including Kathmandu, the capital, were chosen to collect data as multi-sited study. Magars are the unit of analysis of this study.

Like many ethnic groups, the Magars too have constructed their group identity using cultural codes such as dress, defining their language(s), declaration of a national festival, declaring Buddhism as their religion and demanding for a Magarath autonomous region. These criteria are seen as necessary for promoting the group’s
distinctiveness. Above all, the endonym (or autonym) of Magar being attached to names plays an important role to bring them into an imagined Magar community united under the various Magar associations (like the Nepal Magar Association) established for the development of the community. Membership with various Magar ethnic social organizations has helped them to develop individual as well as group identities. Political situation also plays an important role in the construction of the group identity. Group identity has become a mechanism to claim their political rights in the country. Most Magar individuals working as activists are found affiliated with some political parties. This affiliation plays an important role for individuals to network with fellow political indigenous ethnic and non-indigenous ethnic members to lead towards personal and group benefits. The new process while creating the imagined Magar community is affected by the politics among Magars is visible. The Magar attached with their names plays important role to unite them as a group creating imagined Magar community.