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“We Were Kings Here Once”: Gendered Constructions of Magar Ethnicity in a Speech by Gore Bahadur Khapangi¹

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In the paper that follows, I argue that a close linguistic analysis of a politician’s speech has the potential to shed light on rapidly changing conceptions of ethnicity, gender, and power among Magars in Nepal. Because this paper marks a significant departure from my previous work on Magar love letters and childbirth practices, I ask the reader’s indulgence as I begin to explore this new area of research.

In one respect, at least, this new project shares with my previous work a similar starting point for analysis in that I have chosen to look at an event in the Magar village of Junigau, which is in Palpa District, Nepal. On the morning of January 2, 1993, my research assistant, Harkha Bahadur Thapa, showed up at my house to ask me to tape record a Magar politician’s speech for him. Gore Bahadur Khapangi, the head of the Rastriya Janamukti Party (National People’s Freedom Party) and the General Secretary of the Nepal Magar Sangh (Nepal Magar Association), was scheduled to arrive on foot in Junigau that afternoon, and Harkha Bahadur wanted to have a record of the speech of this man he greatly admired.

To place this event in time, recall that the People’s Movement occurred in 1990, not even three years before this speech. By 1993, the Rastriya Janamukti Party (RJP) was holding cultural and political events around the country, and the RJP’s leader, Gore Bahadur Khapangi, was already famous enough to be pictured on calendars, which I saw hanging in Junigau and elsewhere.

It may not seem very surprising that the RJP has made significant inroads in a village such as Junigau, which consists of about 1200 people, all but one family of whom are Magars. And yet, in 1993, when Khapangi gave his speech,

¹ I would like to thank Susan Hangen for inviting me to participate in the panel, “A Decade of ‘Democracy’ in Nepal.” I would also like to thank Harkha Bahadur Thapa and Mukta Tamang for sharing their interpretations of parts of the speech with me. Any mistaken interpretations that remain are my fault entirely. Finally, I am grateful to Gore Bahadur Khapangi for allowing me to tape record and analyze his speech.

and for some years after, the RJP did not enjoy much support, except among young, educated men. In 1993, women of all ages and older men told me they were wary of, or completely unaware of, Khapangi’s positions. They considered the young male supporters of the RJP to be rash or even dangerous. By the 1999 elections, however, three of Junigau’s four wards elected members of the RJP to the Village Development Committee.² All of these wards had previously been represented by members of the Congress Party. The fourth ward continued to be represented by a member of the Communist Party (MLA). Khapangi himself ran for a seat in the national parliament from Palpa District in 1999 but lost. Nationwide in the 1999 elections, the RJP won no seats but garnered a total of 92,567 votes, roughly one percent of the votes cast.³

There were undoubtedly many reasons for the increasing popularity of the RJP in Junigau, only one of which is the speech I analyze here. Still, I believe Khapangi’s 1993 speech in Junigau marked a turning point in the village’s political history. The speech lasted for almost two hours and required 23 single-spaced pages to transcribe. Khapangi touched on politics, history and morality. And while he spoke mostly in Nepali, which is the first language of Junigau residents, he tossed in many English, Magar, Hindi, and Sanskrit words and phrases, always translating them for his audience. All in all, it was a tour de force, a speech that demonstrated considerable oratory skill and passion.

Although Khapangi delivered the speech I analyze here a number of years ago, the sentiments he expresses in it remain the central tenets of the RJP. In an e-mail message I received from Khapangi dated 11 December 2000, he states that there have been very few “changes in philosophy or strategy” of the RJP since 1993. And in an interview published in the newspaper *Kantipur* on 1 December 2000,

²This information comes from a letter written to me by Harkha Bahadur Thapa, dated 8 August 2000.

³The election results were reported on the Nepal Home Page, <http://www.nepalhomepage.com/politics>.

Khapangi emphasizes the same goals as he did in the Junigau speech he gave almost eight years earlier.

In the remainder of this paper, I provide an overview of Khapangi's 1993 speech, then quote selected excerpts from the speech, focusing on three themes that appear repeatedly throughout the two-hour address: Magar ethnic identity, gender, and which path to choose for a better future.

An Overview of the Speech

The speech consisted of five main sections. In the introduction, Khapangi states that Nepal is a Brahman (*bahunjatiya*)⁴ country. He also argues that Magars are Nepal's main aboriginal ethnic group/caste (*jati*), not because they are more numerous than other groups, but because they used to be kings. Here is an excerpt from the beginning of his speech:

Magars are an aboriginal group (*adivasi*) of this country. And they're also the main caste/ethnic (*mul jati*) group. According to this meaning of main caste/ethnic group, it's not just because the Magars' population is larger than the Gurungs', larger than the Tamangs', larger than the Tharus' – or shall we say, it doesn't work to say original inhabitants (*mul vasi*) just because the Magars' population is larger than the Sherpas' or the Rais and Limbus'. Original inhabitants means that Magars were even kings at one time in Nepal.⁵

In the next section, the longest segment of his speech (almost an hour in length), Khapangi provides his audience with an account of history, focusing on how Magars and Brahmans arrived in Nepal many hundreds of years ago. He associates Brahmans with the Aryas who, he claims, moved into what is now Pakistan around 1500 B.C.E. This section also contains a short history of Buddhism, along with an assertion that the Buddha was a Lichavi, the ancestral ethnic group of Magars. Finally, Khapangi argues that neither the Rana era, the Panchayat era, nor the post-Panchayat era brought ethnic freedom (*jatiya mukti*) for Magars, especially since Magar men have continued to serve in foreign armies and to fight other countries' wars.

In the third section of the speech, on politics, Khapangi criticizes both the Congress Party and the Communist Party (UML), arguing that neither offers Magars the possibility of ethnic freedom since all are controlled by Brahmans.

⁴ As it was not possible to use a devanagari font in this journal, Nepali words are placed in regular font, and in italics.

⁵ I have used the following transcription conventions. Underlining denotes words that were spoken emphatically. Parentheses contain the actual Nepali words. Brackets contain nonverbal actions. Words in double quotation marks were said in English. Words in single quotation marks are direct quotes of others' remarks.

Khapangi defines ethnic freedom, in part, as the ability to study to the M.A. and Ph.D. levels in one's own language, and the ability to develop one's own history and culture. Khapangi states that the only way to achieve ethnic freedom is to establish a decentralized federalist government with the "politics of proportional representation" (Eng.). Parliamentary seats, as well as educational and professional opportunities, would be apportioned to each caste/ethnic group according to its population.

In the fourth section of the speech, Khapangi discusses several problems Nepal faces with India, arguing that Girija Prasad Koirala's government gave in too readily to India's wishes because Koirala shares Aryan blood with those in the Indian government. He even quotes the English saying, "Blood runs thicker than water." Issues Khapangi raises include trade, transport, work permits for Indians, salt, security, and hydroelectric power, especially at Tanakpur. When it comes to relations with India, Khapangi says that the surrounding hills look down on the Magar men of his audience and tell them that, although they were once kings and brave fighters in World War II, they are now like mangy dogs in their own country, because they have sold their nationality.

And in the final section, Khapangi concludes his two-hour speech by stating that no path, other than the RJP, exists for Magars who want ethnic freedom. But, he warns, Magars must also give up some of their bad habits, such as drinking and gambling. They must also educate their children, instilling in them reading habits. He urges his audience not to follow Hinduism, "the Brahmans' dharma," but instead to revert back to Buddhism, the religion, he says, Magars once practiced. He even tells his listeners not to allow Brahmans into their homes, but rather to exclaim, "*choyo!*" when a Brahman touches a Magar's food or drink. Most important of all, Khapangi says that if his audience members (all men) have daughters-in-law who speak the Magar language, they should tell their daughters-in-law to speak Magar to their children. Khapangi ends his speech by mentioning Rigoberta Menchu, who, he says, stated that the problems of the "Red Indians" began the moment Christopher Columbus set foot in their land 500 years ago. Similarly, he claims, the problems of the Magars began 800 years ago when the first Brahman set foot in Nepal. Neither group of people is any better off than animals in a zoo, Khapangi concludes.

Magar Ethnic Identity

Identity, for Khapangi, comes down to shared blood, shared history and shared customs. First and foremost, however, is blood (and he uses this English word frequently). Here are some excerpts:

There [in China] we, we – whose noses are like this [pushes

nose flat], whose eyes are sliced like a “blade,” whose foreheads are flat, whose cheeks are chubby, who are short people, who are stocky and dark people – this sort of people are in “China” even now – in Sikyang Province there, we were known by the name Yuchi – Yuchi. It would be good for you all to remember – this is the stuff of history.

As soon as “Mongol” is said, it is assumed that we came from “Mongolia.” Not at all. According to the veins, to people’s origins, or, let us say, according to blood, “blood,” we are of the Mongol strain. Our veins are Mongol veins. The noses of the people of China are also like this [flattens own nose] – they’re not straight like a long, thin gourd (*ghiraula*). [Laughter.] Their eyes don’t look like a blade has sliced them, like a “blade” has cut them. Look at the people of China even now. That’s exactly – and then look at Japan, look at Korea, look at Vietnam, look at Kampuchea, look at Burma, look at Thailand. Look at the people of different countries, and then look at Nepal. Think about the type-color (*rup-rang*) of people from different countries. Even now if you dressed a Magar woman Japanese style in a “skirt,” she would look just like a Japanese woman – because their type-colors all match. For this reason, our origin lies in this direction [i.e., to the east].

As is evident in the previous excerpt, Khapangi traces the blood of Brahmins back to the original Aryas and ascribes to them a particular physical type and negative personality traits. Nepali Brahmins share these characteristics with Indians, Khapangi claims. Listen to this next excerpt about why Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala went behind the backs of his people to offer the Indians Nepali hydropower:

Yes, this happened according to a blood relationship because the English have a saying: “Blood runs thicker than water.” This means that blood is blood. His [i.e., Girija Prasad Koirala’s] blood and the blood of those in New Delhi match, you know. Yours and mine don’t match. Ours would match with China, would match with Japan, would match with Korea, would match with Thailand, but it wouldn’t match with India – but Girija’s does match.

Khapangi sums up his definition of Magar ethnic and national identity in the following excerpt:

Today we are just like foreigners in our own country. As I said, the English have written hundreds of thousands of books calling us “Gorkha”; they couldn’t write “Nepali.” So, today we are not able to be called “Nepali.” If we are anything, we are Magars. Our nationality is Magar.

Gender

There were many gendered aspects of Khapangi’s speech, both in the rhetoric itself and in the social context

in which it was delivered. First of all, his entire audience, with the exception of myself, was male. Most listeners were retired soldiers from the Nepali, Indian, or British armies. Occasionally, a woman would wander past the schoolyard with a load of fodder and firewood on her back and would stop to listen for a few minutes, but in general, politics were viewed in Junigau at the time (and still are viewed today) as a masculine domain. This speech was no exception.

Khapangi recognized this and clearly assumed a male audience as he was speaking. For this audience he constructed a version of Magar masculinity that drew on prevailing ethnic stereotypes of the “martial races” in order to urge his listeners not to cave in to India’s (and the Nepali government’s) scare tactics:

Trust makes you brave. Trust makes you a “hero.” He who is brave is manly – the future will be his. “Future belongs to the brave.” Whoever is brave will have the future placed in his hands. But you in this world have come from fighting in World War II. In Japan’s attack, when they exploded bullets and bombs, you came back brave. But when you think you won’t be able to eat salt [because of an Indian embargo], how weak you feel! Be trusting. Trust. In this world, if there’s something a person wants, there’s nothing that can’t be. In order to frighten Afghanistan’s mujahadeen, the Soviet Union sent 150,000 soldiers. But the mujahadeen from there were saved by Afghanistan’s hills, thorns, cliffs, pockets, rivers, streams, mountains, and valleys. No one should create in us a doubt that if we’re attacked, and someone drops hardware, drops “bombs,” drops “rockets” on us, that we won’t be saved by our own hills, thorns, cliffs, and pockets. They [i.e., the mountains] are remembering us and looking down at us, thinking, ‘How brave you were in the world, and in Nepal you were kings, but today in Nepal you walk around like a mangy dog.’ Today those Kalipar hills are looking at you. This is our history, they say.

And here is another excerpt with gendered overtones:

‘In Nauthanma Bazaar, Nepali soldiers in the British Army (*lahure*) have arrived with thousands of rupees,’ was a song that used to be sung. The young women from village homes used to hurry off to festivals to see whether they could find soldiers to elope with. [Laughter.] Let us not forget this history. But they didn’t let the young women know that they had sold Nepal’s rule [to the British Raj]. And they came back having suffered bad fortune at the hands of the British. How would our villages’ young Magar women know this – young women?

The following exhortation, implicitly addressed to the older men in his audience, is repeated twice, once at the beginning of his speech, and again at the end:

That being so, what I will say in conclusion is this: if you search for a Magar girl in Kalipar [a Magar-speaking area] for your son to marry, you must have that Magar daughter-in-law speak Magar to her children. Make this happen for sure. Even now if there are a few daughters-in-law who have little toddling boys and girls, give an “order” to that daughter-in-law: ‘Speak Magar to your sons and daughters!’ Give that one an “order.” [Laughter.] Because we have to think about this.

To conclude this section on gender, I present one of the most evocative excerpts from Khapangi’s speech. In it Khapangi makes fun of the fights that can occur within families when family members (all men, of course) belong to the two main opposing political parties, Congress and Communist. In the following story, the men fight and fight until one of them dies, making one of the women in the family a widow. The women of the family are portrayed as being caught in the middle, unable to quell the fighting:

Until recently, before this party [i.e., the RJP] existed, there used to be one brother-in-law (*sala*) in the Congress Party and one brother-in-law (*bhena*) in the Communist Party kicking and kicking (*khuta-khut*) each other until the older sister became a widow – kicking and kicking! [Laughter.] Right? Or, there used to be a father in the Congress Party and a son in the Communist Party, kicking and kicking until the daughter-in-law became a widow. [Laughter.] Think about it.

The Best Path to Choose

Khapangi makes quite clear which path he thinks his listeners should take to obtain ethnic freedom. First, they must leave off bad habits, like drinking *raksi* (distilled rice alcohol) and gambling, habits that are traditionally associated with Magars. Khapangi tells the following story, which elicited a raucous response from audience members, who by that time had been listening to Khapangi for almost two hours straight:

I want to leave you with a Magar story. There was a son of an old, old Magar, and in the morning he would drink *raksi*, in the evening he would drink *raksi*, and during the day – in fact, whatever time it was, he would be drinking *raksi*. The father felt very bad. And the father said to the son: ‘Hey, Son, rather than drinking this *raksi*, eat fruit, drink milk or yogurt, eat fish and meat; it’ll stick to your body,’ he advised. The son had studied just a little bit, up to the SLC. What he said was, ‘You’ve spoken correctly, Daddy; when will I begin to feel the effects of your talk, when will

I feel it? Ahh, nowwww I’m beginning to feel it,’ he said after taking some [of his father’s] *raksi* out and drinking it. [Raucous laughter.] What tasty talk I have told you! Listen, eh? [Continued laughter.] What delicious talk I tell you! Remember this. The meaning of this story is this: if you can’t give up your own bad behavior, your children won’t be able to drink *raksi* made in America. [Laughter.] Well, may your and my children be able to drink “scotch whiskey” made in Britain! May they be able to drink *raksi* made in Japan! Now, remembering these things, we must be able slowly, slowly to leave off the drinking of *raksi*.

Finally, Khapangi urges his listeners to join the RJP. He asserts that this is the only way for them to achieve ethnic freedom. In particular, he asserts forcefully that proportional representation and a decentralized government are the only political acts that will benefit Magars:

If this were a decentralized government, these ones [i.e., Brahmans] wouldn’t be able to cheat us. Magars would rule in a Magar-majority place, and Brahmans would rule in a Brahman-majority place. The RJP has put forward the statement that, until this system exists in Nepal, this ethnic group/caste (*jat*) won’t find freedom. In order to obtain this, each caste/ethnic group’s population should be measured, and then according to that population figure, each group will be able to serve the country. If the Magar population is 300,000, then Magars should have 30 “seats” in “parliament.” If the Brahman population is 150,000, then they should have 15 “seats” in “parliament.” In each place, in each profession, there should be proportional representation; that’s this party’s opinion. What the Brahmans say to this is, this is a party based on caste/ethnicity, this is a communalist (*sampradayak*) party. Well – the system of giving people of all castes and ethnic groups control and authority in an equal manner is what this party calls the “politics of proportional representation.” Or, let us say, each group gets equal representation, whether Brahman, Damai, Kami, Sarki, or Chhetri. Our desire is for everyone to get “seats” according to population.

In conclusion, while I am only at the beginning stages of this analysis, it seems clear to me that in this speech from 1993, Gore Bahadur Khapangi made important claims concerning ethnicity, gender, and the path Magars should take to achieve freedom. We as scholars of South Asia would do well to listen carefully to what Khapangi and other politicians say if we want to understand the constantly shifting terrain of ethnicity, caste, and power in Nepal.