The Age of Rights: Towards an anthropology of civil society associations in Nepal

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This dissertation examines the emergence of a ‘culture of human rights’ in Nepal, by focusing on the triangular relationship between civil society organisations (CSOs), the international discourse on human rights, and the social, legal and institutional changes that have characterised the country’s recent history.

Its main objective is to illustrate the mechanisms through which the rights discourse has become a language for formulating claims and for articulating social conflicts in Nepal, encompassing and replacing the developmentalist discourse, and displacing, while contaminating, political ideologies. To this end, this work attempts to: 1) highlight how the ‘culture of rights’ has transformed the expression of ethics and (indigenous, caste and gender) identities, redefining socio-economic problems in terms of injustice and identities in terms of rights; 2) show its impact on national policies and the Nepalese normative framework, as well as its echo in the new constitution, and 3) point out the consequences, limitations and paradoxes of the multifaceted use of the international rights discourse as a new post-political ideology in Nepal.

Such an objective can only be achieved through an ethnography of CSOs which, more than any other social force, have introduced, disseminated and domesticated the international human rights discourse. The rise of these associations represent a major phenomenon in contemporary Nepal. Since the first Jana Andolan (1990), voluntary associations and community groups, clubs and committees, ethnic
and religious organizations, NGOs and federations have multiplied, emerging as a major driving force behind several Nepalese social movements, such as the Dalit, Janajati and gender justice movements. Yet, despite their decisive impact, the role of CSOs in the social, political and legal changes that have affected Nepal since 1990 remains barely known, with the exception of the category of ethnic associations. The present research attempts to clarify this role through a transversal ethnography of Nepalese associations, at the various levels (local, national, trans-national) and across the various fields (social, political, legal) where they operate.

The first section looks at the micro-level of the neighbourhood and city of Pokhara, the focus of the field research, through a study of three specific association networks: mothers’ groups, neighbourhood development associations and Dalit (low-caste) associations. In the second section, I focus on ethnic minority (or ‘indigenous nationality’) associations and on parbatiya (Nepali high caste of hill origin) groups. The third and final section is dedicated to the interaction between the judiciary and civil society in Nepal, as emerges from an analysis of litigations filed at the Supreme Court by associations specialised in the defence of human rights.

To sum up, the overall aim of this research is to identify: 1) the mechanisms through which the human rights discourse has asserted its hegemony, becoming the dominant medium through which collective demands and social conflicts can be articulated; 2) the role played by CSOs in this process, and 3) the impact of the culture of human rights on the expression of local ethics, identities and politics, as well as on Nepal’s legal and constitutional framework.

**Keywords:** Nepal, civil society, associations/NGOs, social movements, anthropology, human rights, Public Interest Litigation (PIL)

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