

Helpdesk Research Report: Identity Politics in Nepal

Date: 13/02/09

Query: Please identify literature concerning 'identity politics' in Nepal over the past 20 years.

Enquirer: DFID Nepal

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1. Overview

The Panchayat regime (1960-1990) in Nepal imposed the values and norms of the dominant group – its language (Khas-Nepali), religion (Hindu) and culture (hill 'high caste' male) on the society as a whole. The languages, cultures and religions of other groups were marginalised to the extent that some languages are at risk of extinction. In addition, indigenous nationalities (adibasi janajati), dalits (traditional 'untouchables') and madhesis (people of Indian ethnicity living in the Tarai plains), who comprise over two-thirds of the population, have been excluded politically, economically and socially. Women, as well, even those of 'high caste' also suffer from exclusion and marginalisation.

In 1990, the Panchayat regime was overthrown, a new Constitution written and a multiparty system re-established. These reforms did not properly address the exclusion of marginalised groups. Ethnic centralisation continued: power remained concentrated in the centre with other regions exceedingly neglected in every aspect: in governance, development, communication, transportation, health, education, etc. The political reforms, however, did provide the space for such grievances to be mobilised and heard – resulting in the emergence of 'identity politics'.

There are three main types of identity-based organisations in Nepal: the indigenous peoples organisations that represent a single ethnic group; the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN), a federation of the indigenous peoples organisations; and ethnic political parties, which have little clout given the ban on their registration in the 1990 Constitution. The NEFIN has received the greatest attention and recognition from the state and has been successful in getting a few of its demands satisfied. There are several reasons why identity politics and ethnic demands have gained in prominence in recent years. They include:

- The cumulative effect of years of work by ethnic activists since 1990 – as well as the general disillusionment with the performance of mainstream parties - has given issues of ethnicity greater primacy. Ethnic activists have also been effective in linking to the increasing global emphasis on minority rights.
- The Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) – Maoist insurgency, which began in 1996, has been successful in appealing to ethnic and social discontent and, in turn, gaining the support of different minorities—women, dalits, indigenous nationalities and madhesi.

- Despite concerns that Maoists may be using identity politics only for their own political expediency, they have nonetheless given prominence to issues of ethnicity and exclusion. They have also created ethnic liberation fronts and have been successful in establishing nine autonomous regions in Nepal (six ethnic and three regional);
- Political reforms since 2006 - the democratic reforms, ongoing constitutional debate and the declaration of a 'federal republic' in 2008 - have made this a critical period in Nepal. Diverse ethnic nationalities, that have been neglected over the years, are eager to be heard and to benefit from changes and the restructuring of the state. As such, identity politics has become more pronounced among ethnic groups and political parties.

Most mainstream ethnic and dalit movements have been peaceful. There has, however, been a tendency in recent years of activists to urge the taking up of arms against the state if demands are unmet. This shift can be partly attributed to the precedent set by the Maoist insurgency. Violent practices by the Maoists, who also articulated ethnic demands, contributed to the perception that violence could be used as a tool to articulate identity needs. Moreover, the success of the Maoists in gaining attention and responses from the centre have also highlighted the effectiveness of violence to achieve goals. The recent violent protests by madhesis in the Tarai region has also resulted in attention from the centre, which had previously ignored this group – and has made the madhesis now one of the more prominent identity groups. In order to prevent further violence, much of the literature stresses that the centre acknowledge and respond to all identity movements and legalise ethnic parties.

The needs and demands of various disadvantaged groups are different. It is important not to group disadvantaged groups together, but rather to understand in what particular ways groups are marginalised and excluded. Interventions should include the redistribution of physical (land ownership and income generation schemes) and human assets; the targeting of basic service provision to disadvantaged groups; and the establishment of broad representation in policy-making and state institutions. Federalism and the implementation of a reservation system are important mechanisms, currently being discussed in order to facilitate greater inclusion and participation. Efforts to define and rework administrative boundaries along ethnic, linguistic, and regional lines will be challenging. Reservation systems that require the identification of individuals as members of recognized marginalised groups will also be challenging.

An alternative approach to addressing identity politics is proposed by Gellner. He argues that a more appropriate and beneficial way of viewing Nepal is to abandon the elite's traditional emphasis on purity and to emphasise instead the country's 'hybridity' and history of mixture. This would better reflect the reality of the situation in Nepal and could help to diffuse group divisions. These proposed solutions, however, can be considered controversial not only among those of high caste who stress purity, but also by those who seek to mobilise based on ethnicity.

2. Key Documents

General

Hangen, S., 2007, 'Creating a "New Nepal": The Ethnic Dimension', Policy Studies 34, East-West Centre Washington, Washington, DC

<http://www.eastwestcenter.org/fileadmin/stored/pdfs/ps034.pdf>

This study explores the emergence of ethnic politics in Nepal. Despite the political reforms after 1990, the study finds that political exclusion of marginalised groups increased. At the same time, the reestablishment of a multiparty system allowed for identity politics to become a major force in Nepali politics. There are three main types of identity-based organisations in Nepal: the indigenous peoples organisations that represent a single ethnic group; the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN), a federation of the indigenous peoples organisations; and

ethnic political parties, which have little clout given the ban on registration in the 1990 Constitution. The study focuses on the indigenous nationalities movement. It finds this to be the most developed identity movement, in contrast to the Dalit and Madhesi movements. The indigenous nationalist movement has a stronger network of organisations and has advanced demands in a more coherent fashion. It seeks to increase the social, economic and political power of indigenous groups, to revive their religions, languages and cultures; and to end the dominance of the high caste Hindus. The indigenous national movement has received greater state attention and analysis by scholars. The study finds that it has contributed to democratisation in Nepal by transforming dominant national discourse; creating awareness of ethnic issues in society; and pressuring the state into addressing ethnic inequality.

Since 2006, the government has made decisions that converge with the long term demands of indigenous nationals. The peace accord and Interim Constitution, however, still do not meet their demands nor those of other marginalised groups. NEFIN wants explicit inclusion of ethnic issues in the Constitution and to be included in the decision-making process. The Madhesi movement was also critical of the Constitution and conducted protests that turned violent in Tarai. The violence extended to clashes with Maoists, which raised the question about how committed Maoists are to the ethnic agenda. Although Maoists have adopted ethnic issues and established ethnic liberation fronts, indigenous nationalist leaders have been concerned about whether Maoists will continue to prioritise ethnic issues.

The recent violence of the Madhesi movement, the study argues, could be attributable to the lack of state recognition of this group. The state has recognised the NEFIN, which has encouraged the NEFIN to operate through the political system, and the Dalits, by setting up an institution to address Dalit issues. The state, however, has not paid much attention to the Madhesis. Further, the success of the Maoists in coming to share power in government after violent revolution has also set a precedent and potentially encouraged the use of violence to achieve goals. The study recommends that the state acknowledge and respond to all identity movements and legalise ethnic parties in order to prevent the risk of further violent conflict.

Gellner, D. N., 2007, 'Caste, Ethnicity and Inequality in Nepal', Economic and Political Weekly, 19 May

<http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/midea/pdf/darticle2.pdf>

This brief article looks at the history of caste and ethnicity in Nepal and the growth of ethnic movements. The period between 1960 to 1990 was supposed to be one of nation-building; however, the article notes that the shared national identity that was promoted during this time was one based on the dominance of Brahmanism and the exclusion of lower castes, ethnic groups (janajatis), religious minorities and people of Indian ethnicity (madhesis) living in the Tarai region in the south. The janajati/ethnic movement has been driven primarily by anti-Brahmanism and dissatisfaction of the dominance of high caste Hindus, particularly Bahuns, in public life. This dissatisfaction has grown with publication of census information, which reveals that bahun account for only 13 per cent of the population. The reestablishment of multiparty democracy in 1990 provided the space for 'suppressed' voices to rise and has resulted in a period of ethnicity-building.

The Maoists in Nepal, the article argues, developed a strategy to use ethnic difference to their benefit. They established a Magar-dominated 'special district' in west Nepal, which lay the foundation for subsequent declarations of autonomous regions in 2004. The entire country was divided into nine 'autonomous' regions, which were to be the first level of government below the national. Six of the nine regions were named on an ethnic basis. The article also points to the Maoists as contributing to the rise of ethnic militancy in Nepalese Tarai. Nepal is in a state of political transition and those living in the Tarai have acted to ensure that they are heard in the centre. Madhesis have faced continued exclusion from the centre. Although commissions were established in the 1990s by the government to address inequalities faced by women, by janajatis

and by dalits, there was no acknowledgment of the madhesis. Dalits, the article cautions though, are on all criteria worse off than any other group and require pressing attention.

See also: **Gellner, N. D., 2007, 'Democracy in Nepal: Four Models', Seminar, August**
<http://ora.ouls.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid%3Aad5b421a-2a13-48f8-be7b-9b0adbbf4170>

Whelpton, J., Gellner, N. D., and Pfaff-Czarnecka, J., 2008, 'New Nepal, New Ethnicities: Changes Since the mid-1990s', preface in Nationalism and Ethnicity in Nepal, Vajra Books, Kathmandu

This preface provides an overview of the evolution of issues of ethnicity and exclusion in Nepal since 1990. It states that while these issues were already present in the early 1990s, they were not central to political debate among the Nepalese intelligentsia as they are today. Throughout the 1990s, ethnic activists organised and forged international links with international minority rights and indigenous peoples frameworks. Successive governments have responded, to varying degrees, to ethnic demands – for example the expansion by 2000 of news broadcasts on Radio Nepal to a total of seventeen local languages, and the allowance of languages other than Nepali in the school system. The cumulative effect of years of work by ethnic activists – as well as the general disillusionment with the performance of mainstream parties, has given issues of ethnicity greater primacy.

In addition, the Maoist insurgency has played a key role in drawing more attention to issues of ethnicity. Maoists have been successful in appealing to ethnic discontent. Their insurgency progressed in part through tapping into grievances and ethnic activists' demands. Grievances amongst the Kham Magars in west Nepal, for example, played a critical role in building the initial support base from which they launched their 'People's War' in 1996. Despite the ambiguities surrounding the relationship between Maoists and those with ethnic demands, the Maoists have given prominence to issues of ethnicity and exclusion. They have pushed for ethnic autonomy and were successful in establishing nine autonomous regions, six of which would be ethnic homelands (for Magars, Kirats, Newars, Tamangs, Gurungs, and Tharus) and three regional. There have been recent tensions, however, between Maoists and some janajatis groups, which has led to renewed suspicion over how dedicated Maoists are to ethnic and caste issues: "The Maoists have encouraged and drawn strength from ethnic revolt, but are finding it impossible to keep control of the result" (xv).

In addition to the historic role of ethnic activists and Maoists, the preface points to another key reason why ethnic questions have become central to the current constitutional debate: "The major parties arguably seem less important as sources of power and patronage. This has created an atmosphere in which pressure groups of all kinds feel emboldened to force their concerns on the community in general by direct action of various kinds" (xv-xvi). This has allowed for the space to discuss provisions for a system of reservations and federal structures, although much disagreement persists as to the details of such systems and structures.

Lawoti, M., 2007, 'Contentious Politics in Democratising Nepal', Chapter One in Contentious Politics and Democratisation in Nepal, M. Lawoti, ed., Sage Publications
<http://homepages.wmich.edu/~mlawoti/documents/PDF%20Docs/ContentiousPolitics&democratization.Lawoti.CPDN.Sage.pdf>

This chapter introduces the book 'Contentious Politics and Democratisation in Nepal'. Contentious politics refers to 'collective political struggle'. The book focuses on collective struggles that have targeted the state and features the Maoist insurgency, identity movements and collective public protests since 1990. It notes that more than two-thirds of the population, including the indigenous nationalities (adibasi janajati), dalit (traditional 'untouchables') and madhesi (people of the Tarai plains), are excluded from influential realms of governance in Nepal.

The small ruling elite, dominated by high-caste Hindus, have concentrated most of the state power at the centre. As a result, there have been few points for people to access the government. Those with grievances were forced to target the executive at the centre. Exclusion, centralisation, as well as rising inequality have contributed to contentious politics in the form of protests, social movements, and support for rebel movements – i.e. the Maoist insurgency.

The chapter notes that national/ethnic conflict has occurred throughout Nepal's history; however, the identity movements of the indigenous nationalities, dalit, madhesi and minority religious groups gained momentum after 1990, utilising the space provided by the open polity. They are fighting for the equal recognition of their language, religion and culture, as well as for equal opportunities in political, economic and social spheres. The chapter stresses that while most mainstream ethnic and dalit movements have been peaceful, there has been a tendency in recent years of activists to urge the taking up of arms against the state if demands are unmet. The author attributes this potential move toward violence to the Maoist insurgency and its violent tactics, deteriorating law and order conditions and the emergence of self defence committees/vigilante groups.

Shrestha, N. and Dahal, D. R., 2008, 'A Narrative of Nepali Nationalism: Past, Present, and Future', unpublished manuscript

This paper discusses the evolution of nationalism in Nepal. In discussing the future of Nepali nationalism, it likens the situation in Nepal to identity politics in many Western countries – which peaks in times of crisis such as political and economic uncertainties. The indigenous nationalist and ethnic movements in Nepal have gained strength not only because of dissatisfaction with the history of exclusion by the brahmin ruling class and the weakening of the monarchy, but also the paper argues, because of the increasing global emphasis on minority rights as well as the implications of globalisation on notions of nationalism.

Lawoti, M., 2007, 'Political Exclusion and the Lack of Democratisation: Cross-National Evaluation of Nepali Institutions using a Majoritarian-Consensus Framework', Commonwealth and Comparative Politics, vol. 45, no. 1, pp. 57-77
<http://homepages.wmich.edu/~mlawoti/documents/PDF%20Docs/CCP.crossnationalevaluation.07.pdf>

This paper examines the extent to which indigenous nationalities, madhesi, dalit and women are excluded groups – despite constituting more than two-thirds of the population of Nepal. The Caste Hill Hindu Elite Males (CHHEM) are the cultural and resource-wise dominant group. Past studies have found that they dominate politics, the executive, Parliament, the judiciary, civil administration, academia, industry and commerce, civil society, local government, and educational and cultural leadership. Caste Hill Hindu Elite women, however, are excluded.

Pradhan, R. and Shrestha, A., 2005, 'Ethnic and Caste Diversity: Implications for Development', Working Paper Series, no. 4, Nepal Resident Mission, Asian Development Bank: <http://www.adb.org/Documents/Papers/NRM/wp4.pdf>

This paper explores ethnic and caste diversity in Nepal and its correlation with poverty and development. Prior studies had demonstrated that poverty was concentrated among the rural poor, women, various disadvantaged caste-based and ethnic groups. The paper discusses the history of Nepal and finds that with the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990, ethnic groups and dalits mobilised around past grievances along ethnic and caste lines. In particular, they demanded state protection and the development of their cultures and languages; and affirmative action to ensure a more equitable share of economic and political resources.

The paper identifies a discernable pattern to the geographic spread of various ethnic and caste groups. It finds that the populations living in regions far removed from the centre of power had lower levels of human development. The representation of disadvantaged groups was better at local levels of governance, however, than at the national level. The paper stresses that the situation of women belonging to disadvantaged ethnic and caste groups is generally worse.

The paper emphasises the importance of understanding and managing sociocultural diversity in order to promote more equitable development outcomes. It states that the promotion of social inclusion involves understanding how project participants define patterns of exclusion. Interventions should include the redistribution of physical (land ownership and income generation schemes) and human assets; the targeting of basic service provision to disadvantaged groups; and the establishment of broad representation in policy-making and state institutions.

Do, Q.T. and Iyer, L., 2007, 'Poverty, Social Divisions, and Conflict in Nepal', World Bank Policy Research Working Paper, no. 4228, World Bank, Washington, DC
http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=984620#

This paper reports the findings of an econometric analysis of the economic and social factors that contributed to the spread of the violent Maoist conflict in Nepal. The analysis found that the greatest predictors of conflict in Nepal are poverty and geography. Conflict intensity was significantly higher in places with greater poverty and lower levels of economic development. Mountainous and forested areas had greater conflict intensity as these are opportune areas for rebels to hide easily. In addition, the analysis found that social diversity - caste divisions in society and linguistic diversity - were not good predictors of conflict. To the extent that conflict was associated with caste polarization, this could be explained instead by the fact that lower caste groups have limited access to economic opportunities.

Dahal, D. R., 2003, 'Social Composition of the Population: Caste/Ethnicity and Religion in Nepal', Population Monograph, Volume 1, Central Bureau of Statistics, Government of Nepal, Thapathali, Kathmandu
<http://www.cbs.gov.np/Population/Monograph/Chapter%2003%20%20Social%20Composition%20Of%20the%20Population.pdf>

This paper provides information on caste/ethnicity and religion on the basis of the 2001 census. It also discusses the strategic decisions made concerning the gathering and publication of census data. The democratic movements of 1950 and 1990 produced a change in the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) and encouraged the documentation of diversity through the collection of data on caste/ethnicity, language and religion in Nepal. It wasn't until the end of the Panchayat regime (1960-1990), which maintained Hindu supremacy, that the CBS actually provided information on caste/ethnicity in Nepal. There is still debate about whether the provision of such detailed breakdowns will be divisive or whether it will facilitate participatory political culture of people based on language, religion or culture. This paper argues that the CBS data is very useful as by documenting even the smallest groups, it allows policy-makers to discover the cultural groups that may require special state-sponsored protection for such things as language and culture; and to better target the specific development needs of various social and cultural groups.

Lawoti, M., 2003, 'The Maoists and Minorities: Overlap of Interests or a Case of Exploitation', *Studies in Nepali History and Society*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 67-97

<http://homepages.wmich.edu/~mlawoti/documents/PDF%20Docs/MaoistsorMinorities.SINHAS.2003.pdf>

This paper explores the questions that have been raised about whether the Maoists are genuinely concerned about the demands of indigenous nationalities, dalit, women and other oppressed groups or whether their support for such groups is solely to draw them into the insurgency. Ethnographic studies have shown a high level of participation of some of the indigenous nationalities, such as the Tamu mai/Gurung, Kham Magar and Thangmi. There have also been reports indicating the high involvement of women. Journalist accounts have also claimed a high level of dalit participation. The most significant impact of the Maoist insurgency on minority groups, this paper argues, is the airing and recognition of some of the minority grievances and issues by the state, mainstream political parties, dominant society and donor agencies. The paper argues that the government may have started to acknowledge and address grievances in order to prevent further support for the Maoist insurgency; and because of its concerns over the precedent set by the Maoists that violent conflict is possible in Nepal.

There are concerns, however, that the Maoists may not properly address the needs of certain identity groups in Nepal. The concessions that have been gained from the government, the paper argues, have been minimal. In addition, while all minority groups may benefit from the social changes that have been occurring in Nepal, the paper notes that Maoists have neglected the issues of dalit, madhesi and small indigenous groups. Further, the Maoist insurgency may have hindered the strength of mainstream ethnic movements by recruiting away those who would have otherwise joined such movements. This is cause for concern as while ethnic issues are by definition the primary concern of ethnic movements, they are only one of the many issues of concern to Maoists.

Lawoti, M., 2003, 'Centralised Politics and the Growth of the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal', *Himalaya: The Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*, vol. 23, pp. 49-58

<http://homepages.wmich.edu/~mlawoti/documents/centralizingpolitics&Maoists.Himalaya.2003.pdf>

This paper discusses ethnic centralisation and the participation of minorities in the Maoist insurgency. It argues that while the state is weak in terms of development and service delivery, it has been forceful in its policy of mono-cultural nationalism. This policy has sought to impose the values and norms of the dominant group – its language (Khas-Nepali), religion (Hindu) and culture (hill 'high caste' male) on the society as a whole. As a result, many languages face extinction and many groups have lost land and culture. Although, policies have improved since the end of the Panchayat period, they still continue as a result of the ethnic centralisation of the state. Minority perspectives, interests and needs are not well represented or included in government policies.

The Maoists have raised the issues of self-determination, cultural and regional autonomy, and linguistic, religious, and gender equality more vociferously than other mainstream non-ethnic political parties. They have also formed many ethnic liberation fronts. As such, the Maoists have been popular among minority groups, evidenced by the high participation of indigenous nationalities, dalit and women in the insurgency.

The paper argues that in order to address the problems associated with ethnic centralisation, efforts must be made to diffuse power such that different political and socio-cultural groups can access it. This could be through the creation of a federal structure, through democratisation of political parties and through a proportional electoral system.

Eck, K., 2007, 'Recruiting Rebels: Indoctrination and Political Education in Nepal', Paper presented at the 36th Annual Conference on South Asia and the 2nd Annual Himalayan Policy Research Conference, 10-14 October, Madison, WI

https://repository.unm.edu/dspace/bitstream/1928/3308/1/KristineEck_RecruitingRebels.pdf

This paper examines the factors that lead to the rise of the Maoist insurgency. It finds the situation on Nepal was conducive to the mobilisation of large parts of the rural population with ethnic and economic grievances: "The marginalization of lower castes and ethnic groups has been largely dismissed by successive governments who have done little to appease this grievance, leaving these groups under-represented at the policy-making level. All of this has occurred within the context of a highly under-developed country with widespread poverty, as the failure to secure steady economic growth exacerbated existing tensions between the haves and have-nots. Economically, there is a sense that there are two Nepals, with Kathmandu's average GDP almost four times that of some rural regions. At the same time, the state has little presence in the countryside due to weak local and district governance structures" (p. 6). The Maoists were able to capitalise on this discontent by offering an alternative to the current system. They also tied their ideological ideas to rhetoric on Nepalese nation-building – an alternative nationalism that would recognise the value of indigenous participation. In addition, the Maoists were effective in adjusting their rhetoric to the grievances of the differing local communities from which they recruited. In villages dominated by ethnic minorities, for example, Maoist demands for ethnic equality were emphasized; whereas demands for gender equality were stressed when recruiting women.

Graham, G., 2007, 'People's War? Self-Interest, Coercion and Ideology in Nepal's Maoist Insurgency', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 231-248

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713636778>

This paper examines the processes through which ordinary rural Nepalis came to support the Maoist insurgency. Evidence exists that Maoists pursued a deliberate strategy of recruiting indigenous groups. Class coalitions can be a weak basis for establishing collective action. Ethnic or regional groups, however, are more conducive to collective action as they are less porous and more determinate – especially when marked by language or distinct social practices. The paper states that: "Maoist campaigning, as well as (to probably a much greater extent) the insurgency itself, appear to have altered sociopolitical conditions such that long-established, but previously weakly 'activated', relational boundaries could suddenly be marshalled as a basis for collective action. The fusion of the Maoist ideology (in effect a 'new belief' for many people) with pre-existing but freshly reinforced identities has proved particularly potent because the 'irrational' commitment of the former to a culture of armed insurrection became one of the tokens by which the latter was subsequently defined and defended. Thus, violent practices associated with a revolutionary ideology became the norms by which many people articulated their perceived identity" (p. 243). The decision of ordinary individuals to resort to violence to advance their pre-existing ethnic or ideological claims is attributable not only to the Maoists but also, the article claims, to the actions of the Nepali state. The state's aggressive and belligerent response to the violent uprising resulted in the thorough alienation of local populations: "The desire to avenge police aggression, and in particular their abuse of women, has been widely invoked as an important cause of insurgent violence" (p. 243).

See also: **Bhattachan, K. B., 2003, 'Indigenous Nationalities and Minorities of Nepal', *Minority Rights Group International, London***

http://madhesi.files.wordpress.com/2006/09/bhattachan_report.pdf

De Sales, A., 2000, 'The Kham Magar Country, Nepal: Between Ethnic Claims and Maoism', European Bulletin of Himalayan Research, vol. 19, pp. 41-73
http://www.thdl.org/texts/reprints/ebhr/EBHR_19.pdf#page=41

This paper discusses the Kham Magars, a Tibeto-Burman population in west Nepal. It notes that identity politics were unheard of in the region in the early 1980s. Ethnic movements, the paper notes, that emerged after the establishment of parliamentary democracy in 1990 are organised primarily around land, language and religion. National elections during the 1990s, however, did not address any of these concerns. Nor did they bring into power anyone from ethnic organisations. The neglect by the dominant political process of these identity claims has rendered them live, potentially revolutionary, issues.

The Kham Magar clans inhabit about thirty compact villages in the higher parts of the Rukum and Ropa districts. They have conserved or developed many of their own unique cultural practices. As a result of their relative isolation, ethnic activists had made little impression on them until recently. The presence of Maoists in Khmar Magar 'country' and the subsequent fighting between Maoists and the state has had an impact on the rural population. Villagers caught up in the chaos of guerrilla war have developed nostalgia for their country because they have been forced to leave it or because they have had to see it torn apart by the fighting. It has fostered an intensified sense of identity in relation to their Kham Magar country.

Mechanisms to Address Identity Politics

Sharma, V. R., 2007, 'Comparative Study of Federation Proposals for Nepal', Liberal Democracy Nepal Bulletin, vol. 2, no. 2
https://repository.unm.edu/dspace/bitstream/1928/3053/1/COMPARATIVE_STUDY_OF_FEDERATION_PROPOSALS_Vijaya.pdf

This paper argues that a federal structure is best suited for Nepal – and in particular, one based on cultural subdivision. It notes that there is a need for a federal structure because of the wide disparity in income, education, and participation in political processes among different socio-cultural groups and among different regions of the country. Decentralisation has been discredited as prior governments failed to devolve powers and strengthen institutions necessary to make decentralisation work.

While the Maoists, the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, various organizations of madhesis, and many scholars all advocate for a federal restructuring, there is no consensus yet on how this should be achieved. The paper explores two options: "In the current context of Nepal, a territorial federation may be called a *mechanistic approach* of creating states, because this approach considers physical resources, infrastructure, physical distances, and terrain as more important than the aspirations of cultural autonomy of a sizeable population of marginalized citizens of the country. On the other hand, a cultural federation would be a *humanistic approach* of creating states, because fulfilling the aspirations and demand of the marginalized groups of people would be the most important goal. The first approach attempts to equally subdivide resources and development potential to maximize the potential level of income of each constituent political subunit. But, this approach works best when the population is homogeneous in preferences. In a country of diverse population groups it ignores an important fact that proportional representation system of national and provincial legislative assemblies will suffice to dissuade ethnic and linguistic groups of people from demanding cultural autonomy. This is a big assumption. Ethnic tensions will simmer in territorial federation and may explode if various ethnic interest groups of the country find it necessary to act in unison and to pursue violent means to back up their demand of cultural autonomy. The insurgency currently waged by the two factions of Janatantrik Tarai Mukti Morcha in east Tarai, the recent Tarai bandhs first organized by the Nepal Sadbhawana Party and now by the Madhesi People's Right Forum, the communal violence that erupted in Nepalgunj, and the brutal carnage in Gaur are the warning signals of this trend.

Cultural federation may preempt this trend by letting ethnic interest groups have cultural autonomy in the states meant for them” (p. 15). A cultural subdivision, instead, the paper argues, offers a greater promise of durable peace and stability of federation and would also help improve economic efficiency in delivery of governmental services.

The paper also advises that “in spite of attempts of creating states based on cultural homogeneity, there would still remain a number of cultural groups in sizeable population in almost every state. Therefore, it would be wise to give non-ethnic secular names to states to clearly convey the message that states would not discriminate among cultural groups. For the same reason, it would be advisable to have a proportional representation system for state assemblies and to have an independent cultural board in each state to advise the state government on matters related to the practice of language, culture, and religion in the state” (p. 17).

Middleton, T. and Shneiderman, S., 2008, ‘Reservations, Federalism and the Politics of Recognition in Nepal’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 10 May

This brief article discusses the context for the implementation of reservations and federalism in Nepal. While both are considered necessary to address grievances and to work toward peace and stability, the question is how to create a system that best serves the long-term interests of Nepal’s marginalised communities, as well as the nation state as a whole. The government will face immense challenges in reworking administrative boundaries along ethnic, linguistic, and regional lines. In addition, there will be difficulties in implementing new policies of affirmative action in a country where there are not adequate provisions for certifying individuals as members of recognized marginal groups. The article argues that a thorough evaluation of administrative and social ramifications is critical; however, these details feature little in the demands made by marginalized groups nor in government dialogue.

Gellner, D. N., 2005, ‘Ethnic Rights and Politics in Nepal’, *Himalayan Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, vol. 2, pp. 1-17

<http://www.isca.ox.ac.uk/staff/academic/gellner/documents/EthnicrightsinNepal.pdf>

This paper discusses progress and limitations in the area of ethnic rights and politics in Nepal. The 1990 Constitution placed sovereignty in the people rather than the monarchy. In addition, the old definition of Nepal as ‘an independent, indivisible and sovereign monarchical Hindu Kingdom’ was changed to ‘a multi-ethnic, multilingual, democratic, independent, indivisible, sovereign, Hindu and Constitutional Monarchical Kingdom’. Since then, a range of groups with different claims have come to the fore. There is the politically non-aligned Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) as well as more radical bodies. There are also ethnic political parties, which were refused recognition by the Election Commission in 1991. NEFIN has made progress with its demands and as in the case of women and dalits, the government has accepted the need for a commission to address inequalities and look after their interests. The principle of reservations (i.e. reserving positions for dalits, women and janjatis) was also accepted by the post-2002 government.

The paper highlights that issues and solutions surrounding ethnicity and caste in Nepal are based on the assumption that everyone belongs to only one ethnic or caste group by birth – and that this cannot be changed. It argues, however, that a more appropriate and beneficial way of viewing Nepal is to abandon the elite’s traditional emphasis on purity and to emphasise instead the country’s ‘hybridity’ and history of mixture. This would allow for historic injustices and imbalances to be addressed while also maintaining a common national identity. In government schools, for example, primary teachers should be permitted to use the local language alongside Nepali ‘language of the nation’ (as currently occurs in only one Newari-language school). The paper also advocates for the ability of people to tick more than one box concerning questions on ethnic

or caste identity or religious affiliation. This would better reflect the reality of the situation in Nepal and could help to diffuse group divisions. These proposed solutions, however, can be considered controversial, the paper notes, not only among those of high caste who stress purity, but also by those who seek to mobilise based on ethnicity.

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Websites visited

Asian Development Bank, Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Google, Google Scholar, GSDRC, Ingenta journals, International Crisis Group, Minority Rights International, Nepal Study Centre - University of New Mexico, SOAS, Tibetan and Himalayan Digital Library, Tribhuvan University, University of Oxford, Western Michigan University, World Bank

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