

Nepal's Ethnic Struggles: From History to Political Assertion

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Abstract

Ethnicity remains a contentious issue in Nepalese politics, gaining prominence after the Second People's Movement in 2006. While the 1990 restoration of democracy highlighted identity and inclusion, marginalized ethnic groups continue to struggle against a historically centralized and exclusionary state. Despite federalism under the 2017 Constitution, ethnic representation remains disproportionately low, with less than 25 percent of parliamentary seats occupied by ethnic minorities. Over four election cycles—two for the Constituent Assembly (2008, 2013) and two for the federal Parliament (2017, 2022)—around half of Nepal's 126 ethnic groups remain unrepresented, underscoring persistent inequalities. Applying Theda Skocpol's structural approach, this paper examines Nepal's ethnic movement, assessing whether it constitutes a social movement or a revolution. Skocpol's framework—state crisis, institutional constraints, and international influences—helps analyze the movement's causes and impacts. This article uses archival research to synthesize existing studies and applies the historical-comparative method to analyze political transitions and social changes across time and space. While ethnic activism contributed to the fall of the Rana regime, the Panchayat system, and the monarchy, it has not led to a complete societal transformation like revolutions in France, China, or Russia. Instead, Nepal's ethnic movement aligns with new social movements prioritizing identity, self-determination, and cultural rights over radical economic change. The paper traces the movement's historical roots, from exclusionary policies under the Rana and Panchayat systems to indigenous activism post-1990. The Maoist insurgency (1996) further catalyzed ethnic demands for representation and autonomy, while international frameworks, such as UNDRIP, reinforced global support for indigenous rights. Despite these developments, structural inequalities persist, and the effectiveness of federalism in addressing ethnic grievances remains debated. By applying Skocpol's perspective, this study provides insights into Nepal's ethnic politics, representation, and federalism's evolving role.

Keywords

Ethnicity, Inclusion, Federalization, Constitution, Movement.

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1. Introduction

Ethnicity remains a pressing and contentious issue in contemporary Nepalese politics, gaining significant prominence following the Second People's Movement in April 2006. The restoration of democracy in 1990 played a crucial role in bringing identity and inclusion to the forefront of Nepal's political landscape, leading to repeated movements advocating for the rights of marginalized ethnic groups. During the Rana and Panchayat regimes, ethnic minorities protested against the highly centralized political system dominated by high-caste Hindus. However, these movements were largely ineffective in bringing about substantial change. With the establishment of a republic and a federal governance structure following the promulgation of the new Constitution of Nepal in 2017, two general elections have been held. Despite these changes, ethnic representation in Parliament remains disproportionately low, with members from ethnic communities comprising less than 25 percent of the total 275 parliamentary seats. Although the state has recognized the rights of ethnic groups and their identities through federalism, the issue of their representation in state institutions continues to be widely debated.

The state of Nepal was historically built upon hierarchical caste structures, with high-caste Hindus benefitting from state privileges while ethnic groups faced marginalization (Hangen, 2010). From the unification of Nepal by Prithvi Narayan Shah to the enactment of the Muluki Ain in 1854, the state reinforced caste-based discrimination, privileging the Parbatiya elite. The Rana and Panchayat regimes further solidified Hindu cultural dominance, suppressing ethnic identities and imposing Nepali language and traditions. Even after the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990, ethnic groups continued to face exclusion from political and economic power, fueling grievances that contributed to the Maoist insurgency and broader social movements seeking ethnic rights and inclusion. The Indigenous Nationalities Movement emerged as a response to these structural inequalities, with marginalized ethnic groups organizing to

reclaim their cultural, linguistic, and political rights. Various ethnic organizations, such as NEFIN, played key roles in advocating for indigenous rights, while international frameworks like the UN Declaration on Indigenous Peoples provided external support. The ethnic movement in Nepal aligns with Skocpol's structural perspective on revolution, as state oppression, internal grievances, and global influences have shaped its trajectory (Skocpol, 1979). While not a full-scale revolution, the movement has successfully challenged state policies and continues to push for autonomy and recognition, highlighting the ongoing struggle for ethnic equality in Nepal.

Political parties in Nepal have not taken a clear stance on ethnic rights, despite creating separate organizations to address the needs of ethnic groups. This ambivalence contributed to the current political deadlock. Ethnic groups demand recognition of their rights in the new political framework, but progress has been slow, leaving issues of identity and representation unresolved. The Nepali Congress and Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) have expressed support for federalism based on ethnicity, language, and geography, but neither has clearly defined their stance on ethnic rights. Their reluctance to endorse a federal system based on ethnic identity, especially the single-ethnic provinces proposed by the Maoists, has played a significant role in the dissolution of the constituent assembly and the failure to promulgate a new constitution. However, political parties had made consensus on seven provinces and addressed in new constitution of 2017.

The ethnic movement in Nepal has sparked debates on social exclusion, political power, and identity. Some scholars, like Mishra, argue that the movement's core goal is to gain control over economic and political resources, rather than focusing solely on cultural or identity-based claims (Mishra, 2012). Meanwhile, Pandey highlights the missing class dimension in the discussions on inclusive development and the unequal distribution of power and resources (Pandey, 2010). Over the course of four election cycles—two for the Constituent Assembly in 2008 and 2013 and two for the federal Parliament in 2017 and 2022—around half of Nepal's 126 officially recognized ethnic groups remain unrepresented in Parliament. This persistent under-representation has fueled ongoing political discourse regarding the effectiveness of Nepal's federal system in addressing ethnic concerns. Beneath the broader ethnic movement in Nepal lies a complex web of debates and contentions, which

ultimately played a significant role in shaping the federal system and the new constitution. However, the effective implementation of constitutional provisions aimed at ensuring inclusivity remains an open question. This paper examines the evolution of ethnic politics in Nepal, analyzing its historical roots and the structural factors that have shaped its trajectory. By applying the structural Approach, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the ongoing debates surrounding ethnic representation and federalism in Nepal. This article employs an archival research methodology to systematically review and synthesize existing studies, providing a comprehensive understanding of the topic. In addition, it utilizes the historical-comparative method to examine past studies, texts, and cases across different time periods and socio-political contexts. By integrating these approaches, the study explores patterns of political transitions and social changes, offering insights into the evolving dynamics of societies over time.

2. Ethnicity and Indigeneity

Ethnicity encompasses shared cultural practices, perspectives, and distinctions that differentiate one group from another (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007). In essence, ethnicity represents a shared cultural heritage. Key characteristics that define various ethnic groups include ancestry, historical continuity, language, religion, and traditional attire. The concept of the “ethnic group” was introduced into social studies by Weber (1978), who described it as human groups that maintain a subjective belief in common descent, whether based on physical similarities, shared historical experiences such as colonization and migration, or both. This belief plays a crucial role in group formation, regardless of an actual biological connection. Ethnicity and race are distinct concepts: ethnicity is generally understood as the cultural identity of a group within a nation-state, whereas race is often considered a biological and/or cultural construct used to establish hierarchies of superiority and inferiority based on perceived biological differences (Barth, 1969).

In Nepal, the terms ethnicity and indigeneity are often used interchangeably, but they have distinct meanings. It is commonly assumed that all ethnic groups in Nepal are indigenous. The term indigenous originates from the Latin *indigena*, meaning “native” or “born within (the tribe).” Indigenous peoples are ethnic minorities who have been marginalized as their ancestral territories were

integrated into a modern state (Coates & Coates, 2004). They possess specific rights based on their historical ties to a particular land and their cultural or historical distinctiveness from politically dominant populations. In 2007, the United Nations adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to guide member states in formulating national policies that protect indigenous communities' collective rights, including their culture, identity, language, employment, health, education, and access to natural resources. (United Nations, 2008). Article 33 of the declaration is frequently referenced in national legal frameworks when defining indigeneity. It establishes two key principles: First, indigenous peoples have the right to determine their own identity or group membership according to their customs and traditions, without affecting their individual right to obtain citizenship in the states where they reside. Second, they have the right to determine the structures of their institutions and select their members in accordance with their own procedures.

3. State and Ethnicity

The modern state of Nepal was established in the second half of the eighteenth century, initiated by Prithvi Narayan Shah (1723-75), the founder of the Shah dynasty. The present boundaries of Nepal were solidified through the 1816 Treaty of Sugauli, following a two-year war with the British East India Company. The first significant caste division in Nepal's history occurred during the reign of Jaya Sthiti Malla (1382-95), who categorized the sixty-four castes of the Newars. However, earlier inscriptions from the Lichhavi period indicate the beginnings of the caste system (Gurung, 2008). This Hindu social code was later introduced in Gorkha by Ram Shah (1603-36). During state formation, high-caste Hindus, such as Chhetris, Thakuris, some high-caste Newars, and a few other ethnic groups, benefitted, while other groups faced economic hardships. Peasants across Nepal were burdened by land taxes and compulsory labor obligations to support the military complex (Hangen, 2010). Thus, inequalities began to emerge both before and after Nepal's state formation. Similarly, the process of Hinduization gained momentum following unification.

During the first century of the Rana period (1864-1951), Nepal's first comprehensive legal code, the Muluki Ain of 1854, was enacted, extending the Gorkhali rule over all people (Gurung, 2008). This further entrenched the political dominance of the three Parbatiya

castes (Bahun, Thakuri, Chhetri) and classified people into various caste hierarchies. At the top were high-caste Hindus, known as wearers of the sacred thread (Tagadhari), followed by the Matawali (alcohol drinkers), mostly non-Hindu and Mongoloid groups. These groups were further divided into Masine (eliminable) and Na-masine (non-eliminable). At the bottom were the impure, untouchable castes, with whom other groups could not share water. This caste hierarchy had significant political and economic implications, as only the higher castes could access state privileges.

During the Panchayat era (1962-1990), the state further solidified Nepal's identity as a Hindu society and promoted cultural homogeneity. The state advanced Hinduism, the Hindu Monarchy, and the Nepali language through the slogan "One language, one form of dress, one country" (*Ek Bhasa, Ek Bhes, Ek Des*), reinforcing cultural uniformity. The new legal code enacted by King Mahendra in 1962 removed statutory support for caste hierarchy, but Nepal remained a Hindu Kingdom, and Nepali was declared the official language (Hangen, 2010; Lawoti & Hangen, 2013).

By 1979, dissatisfaction with the Panchayat system had reached a peak, prompting the king to hold a referendum. However, the Panchayat system continued for another ten years. In 1990, the People's Movement, led by the Nepali Congress and a coalition of seven leftist parties called the United Leftist Front, resulted in the restoration of multiparty democracy after thirty years of autocratic rule. Despite this, large sections of society, particularly ethnic groups, remained politically excluded. Elites, mostly high-caste Hindus, dominated state power. Between 1990 and 2006, three parliamentary elections and two local elections were held, forming twelve governments. However, the pervasive discrimination and inequalities in Nepali society were never adequately addressed. In 1996, the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) initiated a violent rebellion, drawing many ethnic groups into the struggle for full rights and identity. From the above account, it is evident that the state played a central role in institutionalizing discrimination and inequalities. As a result, ethnic inequalities increased, becoming a significant social movement in Nepal.

4. Indigenous Nationalities Movement

The indigenous nationalities movement in Nepal emerged over several decades. During the Rana and Panchayat regimes,

marginalized ethnic groups engaged in various forms of political action against the dominance of high-caste Hindus, ranging from rebellions to revitalization organizations (Hangen, 2010). Throughout the state-building process, many ethnic groups lost land to high-caste Hindus, and the state promoted the immigration of high-caste Hindus to eastern Nepal, implementing land tenure policies that favored these settlers. These settlers often acquired Limbu land by lending money, eventually capturing it. High-caste rulers also received payments from the British government by recruiting ethnic groups such as Gurungs, Magars, Rais, and Limbus into the British army. While these groups played an active role in Nepal's unification, they were excluded from state privileges and were regarded as possessing superior fighting abilities. The cultural homogenization and language unification process was further intensified during the Panchayat system.

In 1959, the Tamangs of Dhading and Nuwakot districts began rebelling against Brahmin moneylenders and landowners, accusing them of seizing Tamang land through unfair practices. In the 1940s, some Newars published magazines in the Newari language and formed Newari Literature Associations to promote their mother tongue. These activities, though disorganized and separate, were all attempts to reclaim lost rights. In 1949, the Tharu Kalyankari Sabha was established by Tharu elites to reform ritual practices and modernize their community. After the fall of the Rana regime in 1950, organized ethnic movements began to surface. In 1954, the Thakali Samaj Sudhar Sangh was established among the Thakalis to manage community events. In 1956, representatives from Gurung, Tharu, Limbu, and Magar organizations met to form the Pichadieko Bargiya Sangh (Backward Class Organization), which was later renamed the Samyukta Janakalyan Sangh, incorporating twelve ethnic groups. During the Panchayat period, a few more organizations were formed, such as the Kirat Dharma Tatha Sahitya Uthan Sangh, Nepal Bhasa Manka Khalah, and Tharu Kalyan Karini Pariwar, but organized ethnic movements had not yet fully materialized. However, the conditions for such movements were slowly ripening and would burst after 1990 with the end of the partyless Panchayat system (Hangen, 2010; Lawoti & Hangen, 2013).

After the 1990 political changes, indigenous nationalities were still under-represented in the parliament, cabinet, administration, and judiciary. Grievances among ethnic groups had been building since

the early stages of state formation. In the late nineteenth century, the Limbu people struggled to retain their ancestral land (kipat) against the state and high-caste Hindu dominance. After the restoration of multiparty democracy in the 1990s, organized ethnic movements gained momentum. The Nepal Janajati Adivasi Mahasangh (Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, or NEFIN) was established, comprising 54 member organizations representing specific ethnic groups. Initially called Nepal Janajati Mahasangh, it began with only eight ethnic organizations. NEFIN raised public awareness about language rights, religious freedom, and cultural revitalization through pamphlets, annual meetings, and conferences in Kathmandu, focusing on topics such as "Education in the Mother Tongue." After 2002, NEFIN shifted towards more overtly political activities. In 2004, it staged street demonstrations protesting the royal takeover of October 2002. NEFIN played a vital role in the Second People's Movement, advocating for ethnic rights and the establishment of democracy. In 2007, NEFIN signed a 20-point agreement with the interim government, which promised proportional representation based on ethnicity in the Constituent Assembly. Ethnic political parties such as the Rastriya Mukti Party and the Mongol National Organization (MNO) raised awareness about ethnic rights, while the identity-based party Sadbhawana Party (NSP) campaigned to end the political discrimination against Madhesis. Ethnic political parties represented a more radical form of ethnic activism, aiming to gain direct political power for indigenous nationalities.

The Indigenous Nationalities Movement represents a new social movement, one that seeks to assert identity and defend cultural and economic rights. Ethnic groups, marginalized and excluded by the state, aim to politicize everyday life to address their hardships. Through political processes and resource mobilization, they apply pressure on the state. These groups are engaged in campaigns, fostering unity, commitment, and collective action to raise their voices and remove internal divisions. The state has been responsible for perpetuating discrimination and inequalities, failing to address the demands of ethnic groups. The armed struggle launched by the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) in 1996 further raised awareness among ethnic groups about their rights and inclusion in state institutions, seeking their support for the armed struggle. Many ethnic people joined the Maoist movement, putting pressure on the government to resolve the inequalities prevalent in society and the

state. The MNO, aligned with the Maoists, took an active part in the armed struggle. Without the support of the ethnic groups, the Maoist armed struggle would not have achieved such success. Ultimately, it was the state's discrimination that compelled ethnic groups to engage in armed activities to obtain their rights (Hangen, 2010).

Another factor in the rise of the ethnic movement is the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by the United Nations, which further raised awareness among ethnic groups about their rights. Support from international organizations has also contributed to the growth of the ethnic movement in Nepal. However, scholars and activists within ethnic groups argue that the state's oppression and discrimination, rather than the actions of international organizations, are the primary drivers of the movement.

5. Structural Perspectives and Ethnic Movement

We can analyze the ethnic movement in Nepal through Theda Skocpol's structural perspective to determine whether it constitutes a social movement or revolution and to explore its causes and impacts. This remains a subject of ongoing debate. Structuralism, as a theoretical paradigm, emphasizes systems or structures that are constructed through relationships or interactions among people, societies, or states. While structure is an essential variable in social science, it is often defined by Giddens. Skocpol (1979) employed structural perspective to analyze the revolutions in modern states, focusing on four theoretical perspectives: Marxism, Gurr's psychological theory, Johnson's Systems Value Consensus Theory, and Charles Tilly's political conflict theory. These theories, however, are not entirely sufficient for analyzing the causes of revolution. Skocpol (1979) argued that three necessary conditions for a revolution must exist: 1) an old regime state in crisis, 2) institutionally determined situations and relations of groups within society, and 3) interrelations of societies within world-historically developing international structures. Skocpol also contended that 'top-down' transformations could not prevent revolutions, as seen in the case studies of France, China, and Russia. Yet, critics argue that structural conditions alone are not enough for revolution or social movements; ideology, rational choices of groups, active mobilization networks, and coalition-building are equally important (Goldstone, 2003).

The ethnic movement in Nepal has been an ongoing process with a long trajectory of formation. The three conditions Skocpol identifies

are clearly evident in Nepal's ethnic movement, although it has not led to a full revolution within the country. First, ethnic inequalities in Nepal are state-made, enforced through various rules and regulations. The grievances arising from these inequalities have manifested as movements, but unlike a revolution, they have not resulted in a complete transformation of the society and state. Nevertheless, these movements have played a crucial role in ending the Rana regime, the Panchayat system, and even the monarchy. The ethnic movement's significance in the political history of Nepal cannot be overlooked.

During the Rana and Panchayat periods, the ethnic movement struggled to gain momentum because the state was strong enough to suppress it. Various laws were enacted that marginalized ethnic groups, such as categorizing them into the "Matwali" group and abolishing Limbu land rights. Ethnic groups were largely excluded from the state's privileges. When the Panchayat system ended in 1990, the state became politically and economically weaker, creating an environment in which the ethnic movement could gain ground. The movement began with the establishment of Nepal Janajati Adivasi Mahasangh (Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, or NEFIN). The state's weakening was further compounded by the armed struggle initiated by the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist), with many ethnic groups supporting and actively participating in the struggle. Ethnic groups began demanding their identity and the establishment of autonomous provinces. They also played an important role in the Second People's Movement, which led to significant representation in the constituent assembly after the 2007 elections. Despite these gains, the state has yet to fully address the demands of ethnic groups, meaning the movement is ongoing and has the potential to continue influencing the political landscape. Thus, Skocpol's first condition—the existence of a state in crisis—is evident in Nepal's ethnic movement, although it has not resulted in a full revolution. However, it has demonstrated the capacity to change regimes and the prevailing unequal social structure.

The internal social structure of Nepal is also supportive of the ethnic movement. Various ethnic groups have united to launch a movement centered around identity and self-determination. They are a conscious, disgruntled mass, primarily composed of peasants and marginalized groups, who are disillusioned with the state and its discriminatory practices. International relations and structures also

provide support for the ethnic movement in Nepal. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, passed on June 29, 2006, recognized the rights of indigenous peoples, including the right to self-determination and the right to practice and revitalize their cultural traditions (United Nations, 2008). The declaration also emphasized that indigenous peoples should not be forcibly removed from their lands. The global discourse surrounding discrimination and inequality has helped raise awareness of these issues. Additionally, many international non-governmental organizations are ready to support the development of indigenous communities. As a result, Nepal's ethnic movement has benefited from international solidarity.

Although the ethnic movement in Nepal shares certain characteristics with a revolution, it is not a revolution as Skocpol defines it. Rather, it represents a new social movement that demands identity, self-determination, and collective action with shared goals, resource mobilization, and political processes (Calhoun, 1993). The ethnic movement has sparked numerous debates within Nepali society. While its outcomes are still not fully visible, the movement has already made significant impacts on the social structure of Nepal. As seen in the revolutions of France, China, and Russia, a similar revolution is unlikely to occur in Nepal in the near future. Marx (1848) defined revolution as a total change in the mode of production within society, but such a transformation has not occurred in Nepal. Even if the ethnic movement succeeds, a complete overhaul of the economic system seems unlikely.

6. Ethnic Diversity in Nepal

Ethnic diversity in Nepal is highly complex, with multiple and overlapping categories of identity. Specific ethnic labels have evolved over time (Hangen, 2010). The 2001 census recorded 100 ethnic and caste groups, 92 languages, and seven religions. The 2011 census identified 125 ethnic and caste groups, 123 languages, and at least ten religions. In the 2021 census, the number of ethnic groups slightly increased to 126 and 123 languages spoken across the country. Over this period, the number of recognized ethnic groups grew by more than twenty-five, though it is believed that some groups were still not included, suggesting that the actual number may be higher. These figures reflect the diverse ethnic and linguistic composition of Nepal, showcasing its rich cultural and linguistic heritage.

Table-1: Population of major ethnic and caste groups, 2021

Group	2001	%age	2011	%age	2021	%age
Chhetri	3,593,496	15.80	4,398,053	16.60	4796995	16.45
Brahmin-Hill	2,896,477	12.74	3,226,903	12.18	3292373	11.29
Magar	1,622,421	7.14	1,887,733	7.12	2013498	6.9
Tharu	1,533,879	6.75	1,737,470	6.56	1807124	6.2
Tamang	1,282,304	5.64	1,539,830	5.81	1639866	5.62
Newar	1,245,232	5.48	1,321,933	4.99	1341363	4.6
Kami	895,954	3.94	1,258,554	4.75	1470010	5.04
Musalman	971,056	4.27	1,164,255	4.39	1418677	4.86
Yadav	895,423	3.94	1,054,458	3.98	1228581	4.21
Rai	635,151	2.79	620,004	2.34	640674	2.25
Gurung	543,571	2.39	522,641	1.97	543790	1.86
Damai/Dholi	390,305	1.72	472,682	1.61	565932	1.94
Limbu	359,379	1.58	387,300	1.46	414704	1.42
Thakuri	334,120	1.47	425,623	1.61	494470	1.7
Others	5,538,166	24.37	6,477,065	24.45	7496521	25.66
Total	22,736,934	100	26,494,504	100	29164578	100

Source: Population Census (NSO, 2021)

According to the 2021 Population Census, Chhetri is the largest ethnic group, comprising 16.45% of the total population, an increase from 15.8% in the 2001 census. Following Chhetri are Brahmin-Hill, Magar, Tharu, Tamang, Kami, and Newar, with percentages of 11.29%, 6.9%, 6.2%, 5.62%, 5.04%, and 4.6%, respectively. The data from the 2021 census shows that indigenous nationalities collectively make up more than 30% of the total population, excluding Dalits and Madhesis. When including Dalits and Madhesis, the combined percentage rises to over 60% of the population, highlighting their significant role in Nepali society. This demographic shift underscores the prominence of ethnic populations in Nepal, indicating a need for their issues to be more effectively addressed by the state.

7. Political Parties and Ethnicity

Political parties in Nepal have yet to present a clear stance on ethnic rights even after the promulgation of new constitution of Nepal in 2017, despite establishing separate sister organizations to address the concerns of ethnic groups. The political ambiguity and

conflicting actions of these parties have contributed to the current deadlock in Nepalese politics. The ethnic movement continues to demand the recognition of their rights based on the constitution, but those demands remain unmet. Nepal cannot progress without a clear resolution on ethnic identities and rights.

The Nepali Congress, a major political force, has historically played a pivotal role in establishing democracy in Nepal, adhering to the principles of social democracy. It contributed to ending the century-long Rana regime in 1950 and led the first People's Movement in 1990 to dismantle the Panchayat system. It also signed a twelve-point agreement with the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) to end the decade-long armed struggle. After the 2013 Constituent Assembly elections, Nepali Congress played a key role in abolishing the monarchy. The party's manifesto states that provinces will be determined by factors like national integrity, geographic feasibility, population, and the cultural majority of indigenous ethnic groups (Nepali Congress, 2013). However, Nepali Congress has yet to articulate a clear position on ethnic rights and federalism. It has mainly reacted to the proposals of the Maoists and the demands of ethnic groups, delaying decisions and rejecting the single-ethnic names for provinces, which has led to dissatisfaction among ethnic groups and Maoists. This indecision was a key factor in the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly without a new constitution.

The Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) (CPN-UML) played a significant role in ending the Panchayat system and became a dominant force in post-1990 elections. It also contributed to the second People's Movement in 2006 to end the Maoist armed struggle and the monarchy. In the 2013 Constituent Assembly elections, it became the third-largest party. The CPN-UML's manifesto stated that restructuring should be based on ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and geographic characteristics (CPN-UML, 2013). However, like Nepali Congress, the CPN-UML lacks a clear vision on ethnic rights and federalism, rejecting single-ethnic based provinces while proposing multi-ethnic names. The party's controversial stance on ethnic issues led to the defection of over 500 members, including party Vice-President Ashok Kumar Rai, who formed a new party to advocate for ethnic rights.

The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), which launched an armed struggle in 1996, brought significant issues of Nepalese society, including ethnic rights and identity, to the forefront. Many ethnic groups supported the Maoists in their quest to end

state-imposed inequalities. Following the Constituent Assembly elections, the Maoist party emerged as the largest. It advocated for a single ethnic-based name for federal states, but this proposal was rejected by other parties, leading to a lack of political consensus and the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly. The Maoists suggested 11 autonomous provinces and three sub-regional units to address ethnic demands (CPNM, 2013). The failure to reach an agreement among major parties following the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly has left the country in a precarious situation, with the possibility of further political unrest.

Madhes-focused parties, including the Madhesi Jana Adhikar Forum, Nepal Sadbhawana Party, and Terai-Madhes Loktantrik Party, have demanded that the Madhes region be made into a single state. The issue of federalism has sparked debates, with some calling for more than three provinces for Madhes and others demanding a separate province for the Tharu community. The defeat of these parties in the second election for the Constituent Assembly has intensified the debate around federalism. This unresolved issue was a key factor in the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly. Although the government has called for new elections, a lack of consensus among major parties raises doubts about whether they will proceed.

In 2012, members from major political parties, frustrated by the failure to address ethnic rights, formed two new parties: Sanghiya Samajbadi Party and Sanghiya Loktantrik Party, indicating that ethnic issues remain unresolved. As a result, the political landscape in Nepal is shifting rapidly. The ethnic movement is gaining momentum, and the divisions within political parties over these issues are deepening. If the state does not address these concerns, the movement may escalate beyond control. Ultimately, political consensus was reached to establish seven provinces, a decision reflected in Nepal's new constitution of 2017. However, challenges surrounding ethnic rights and federalism persist, leaving the future of Nepalese politics uncertain.

8. The Debates on Ethnic Movement

The ethnic movement in Nepal has sparked numerous debates within Nepalese society. Some people question whether it is truly a movement, while others reject the groups involved, arguing they are not indigenous people. Mishra (2010) contends that the primary objective of the ethnic movement is to gain control over the means and relations of production, with ethnic identity being primarily a cultural

aspect, while the deeper aim is economic and, to some extent, political power. He further argues that the demands for self-determination and ethnic provinces are neither democratic nor justifiable. Mishra asserts that the definition and number of ethnic groups are flexible, depending on historical-political contexts. He views the current phase of the ethnic movement in Nepal, which calls for political and economic rights, as a shift from the previous phase, which focused on social exclusion and cultural/religious discrimination before 2006. Despite his clear stance, many scholars who support the ethnic movement disagree with Mishra's views, leading to ongoing internal debates about the true nature of these demands.

Pandey critiques the absence of class analysis in the discussions of inclusive development in the country. Echoing Mishra, he argues that current debates on social discrimination fail to fully address the core features of the issue (Pandey, 2010). He highlights how the ruling class in Nepal exercises domination through control over resources, centralized administrative processes, and patronization, thereby enlarging its privileges. Debates on state restructuring in Nepal often attempt to settle issues by creating a balance of power among different identity groups based on caste, ethnicity, gender, and religion. However, these discussions typically avoid addressing the relationship between the ruling class and the ruled, particularly within ethnic groups. The critical question that remains unaddressed in the current ethnic and identity movements is the control, distribution, and use of economic resources and political power, which continues to be overlooked in the broader debate.

On the international stage, the issues of ethnicity and indigenous movements have faced criticism. Kuper (2003) suggests that these movements align with the anti-immigrant policies of Britain and the U.S. during the 1980s, arguing that indigenous claims are politically motivated to preserve Europe from immigration. Kuper views these movements as a form of resistance to the modernization of ethnic groups, asserting that they are undemocratic. Similarly, some scholars argue that the ethnic movement is not purely about culture, but rather about social identity and efforts to integrate into the globalizing world (Friedman, 1999). In an era of globalization, the concept of a "pure culture" is increasingly irrelevant, as cultures are hybridized and constantly evolving. The indigenous issue, in this view, is part of a cultural politics shaped by Western interests, aimed at spreading capitalism following decolonization and the end of the Cold War.

These debates may obscure the real issues faced by ethnic groups in Nepal, who remain highly marginalized and excluded. While many prominent Nepali scholars focus on the social and cultural identity of ethnic groups and the oppression they face from the state, they often neglect the broader processes of globalization, the world system, and the economic inequalities within these groups. By overlooking these aspects, the debates risk becoming more problematic as Nepal's history progresses, further complicating the path toward meaningful solutions.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, the ethnic movement in Nepal has a long history of development, emerging as a new social movement that gained significant momentum after the Second People's Movement of 2006 and the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Rooted in human rights, identity, and the social exclusion perpetuated by the state, the movement has sparked widespread discourse within Nepalese politics. It is characterized by collective behavior, resource mobilization, and political processes among ethnic groups. The structure of Nepalese society, including the state, internal class relationships, and the role of the international community, has all contributed to the rise of the ethnic movement. However, Nepal cannot progress without addressing the concerns of ethnic groups, as their rights and identity are intrinsically linked to the federalization of the state. Yet, it is important to note that federalization alone will not guarantee equality and the protection of ethnic rights. The politicization of the ethnic movement may, in some cases, hinder the true recognition of these rights and identities. As Pandey (2010) has argued, the class divisions within ethnic groups and the broader Nepalese society must not be overlooked in the discourse on ethnic rights. Additionally, as Mishra (2012) points out, it is crucial for ethnic groups to avoid isolation, recognizing that in an era of globalization, both individuals and groups are interconnected and confined within global processes.

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