

Challenges in Developing National Unity and Governance in Nepal

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Abstract

This article explores the challenges of nation-building in Nepal, highlighting the issues arising from its diverse, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-lingual society. The primary focus of the research is on the conflicts driven by this diversity, which pose significant obstacles to nation-building. The study draws on reliable data, statistical evidence, and historical records from credible sources. It employs a qualitative research approach, using descriptive and analytical methods to reach its conclusions. The research also considers the roles of customs, religions, and cultural practices in the nation-building process. The article addresses key areas of inequality in Nepal and examines the underlying causes of these disparities. It emphasizes the need for effective management of conflicts and inequalities to integrate diverse groups into the mainstream of nation-building, a crucial aspect for many nations today. Numerous studies have examined popular participation and political inclusion in Nepal, particularly focusing on the ethnicization of politics and identity movements in recent decades. However, due to conflicts and misunderstandings among political parties, these issues have not been effectively addressed. This lack of resolution poses significant obstacles to nation-building, as many parties exploit these issues for electoral gains rather than seeking genuine solutions. Political stability is another critical aspect of nation-building, and eliminating political instability is essential for establishing a cohesive framework.

Keywords: Federalism, identity, nation-building, recognition, transformation.

Introduction

Nation-building is an extended process aimed at uniting diverse groups to foster a sense of unity among them. In Nepal, the ongoing implementation of federalism involves

restructuring the state amidst conflicts related to regional issues, ethnic recognition, language, and other factors. Social norms play a crucial role in state formation. Reflecting on the historical context of Nepal's unification reveals significant insights into its current state structure and societal composition. The evolution of Nepal from its pre-unification states, such as Limbuwan, Khumbuwan, Kirat, Khas, Baisi, Chaubisi, Shen, and others, into a unified entity, underscores the role of power in shaping the state. The formation of a unitary Nepal under the Gurkhas was driven by power dynamics rather than a cohesive nation-state concept. This approach to state formation, which did not evolve in tandem with the principles of plurality and equality, continues to pose challenges even after the state's restructuring. The failure to embrace the foundational principles of federalism—based on diversity and equality of populations, languages, and religions—threatens the peace and unity of the nation (Ghimire et al., 2021).

In a society with diverse structures, various groups can generate conflicts, socio-economic tensions, autonomy movements, or demands for separation. Such conflicts stem from differences among people, including their thoughts, ideologies, needs, desires, and opinions. These disputes have existed since prehistoric times and have evolved alongside human development. They are persistent sources of violence within societies and nations, leading to adverse effects. Conflicts are closely linked to the social, economic, political, and cultural conditions within a country. Factors such as caste, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, hunger, and poverty often serve as precursors to these conflicts. Conflict is a primary driver of violence, including fighting, battles, civil wars, insurrections, and even terrorism. When there is discord over opposing viewpoints or mutually exclusive goals pursued by various closely related groups or parties, conflict emerges. Disagreements are natural due to differing ideas, beliefs, and philosophies. Historically, every conflict has prompted societal change, whether positive or negative (Pyakurel & Adhikari, 2013).

Nepal is characterized by its rich diversity, being multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and multi-religious. According to the 2021 census, there are 142 caste/ethnic groups identified, 17 of which are new additions since the 2011 census, which recorded 125 groups

(Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2021, p. 31). The 2011 census had enumerated 125 caste and ethnic groups, 123 languages, and 10 religious groups (CBS, 2011). Although no single ethnic group constitutes a majority, the Hindu population, which makes up approximately 81% of the total, is the largest religious group. Nepal faces significant challenges related to restructuring and reintegration. Previous democratization efforts, largely driven by elites, have continued to exclude broader participation and primarily served to reinforce the position of the elite rather than expanding popular engagement. If these issues are not addressed promptly, they risk causing widespread physical damage and psychological strain among the population, which hampers nation-building efforts and obstructs development. It has become similar ideas as Adhikari (2024c) has argued about the political condition of Nepal.

This research article delves into the principal obstacles affecting nation-building in Nepal, a nation contending with considerable social and political disparities. Addressing these inequalities is crucial for the country's reconstruction efforts, as it is vital to ensure that all citizens, regardless of their differences, are afforded a true and equal sense of identity.

Research Questions

The research has got the following research questions:

- a. What are the primary issues and the underlying causes of conflict and obstacles in nation-building?
- b. How can it be found the ways of ensuring the inclusion of the entire population in the process of nation-building?

Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of this study are as follows:

- a. To identify the primary issues and the underlying causes of conflict and obstacles to nation-building.
- b. To analyze the ways of ensuring inclusion of the entire population in the process of nation-building.

Significance of the Study

Nation-building is the process of constructing and defining a national identity through the exercise of state authority, aiming to unify the population for political stability and long-term sustainability. As Mylonas (2020) explains, this process seeks to align the state's borders with the national community. The main goal is to foster national integration, where the state's legitimacy is derived from popular support and majority rule. Essentially, nation-building involves creating or organizing a national identity and promoting equality among citizens through state power. This effort aims to reconcile the diverse groups within a state to ensure political cohesion and unity. In Nepal, integrating various groups is crucial for addressing identity-related issues and preserving national unity. This article highlights the vital role of nation-building in Nepal and advocates for authorities to resolve existing disparities and cultivate a shared sense of nationhood among the Nepalese people.

Literature Review

Nation-building is the process of forming or organizing a national identity and promoting equality among citizens by utilizing state power to bring together the diverse groups within a state. This process aims to ensure that the borders of the national community correspond with those of the modern state. The main objective is national integration, where in contemporary states, legitimate authority is closely linked to majority rule and popular backing (Mylonas, 2020). As Mahajan (1988) notes, key components of nation-building include language, culture, and tradition. Historically, sovereign states have developed through the incorporation of specific geographical areas by nations with shared characteristics.

Conflict arises when there are disagreements over differing perspectives and conflicting objectives or values pursued by closely connected individuals or groups. The inherent diversity in people's ideas, beliefs, and ideologies often leads to disputes. These conflicts are closely tied to the social, political, economic, and cultural dynamics of a nation. Factors that can ignite conflict include caste, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, poverty, and hunger. Throughout history, conflicts have had a profound impact on societies, bringing about changes that can be either beneficial or detrimental (Pyakurel & Adhikari, 2013).

The constitution drafted in 2072 aimed to reshape Nepal with a focus on nation-building. Although the goals of nation-building and fostering national unity remain consistent, the new framework of the republic has not fully aligned with these principles since the period of Nepal's unification. Social values and political dynamics have played a crucial role in this process. Nepal, a nation traditionally influenced by Hinduism, has experienced a significant impact from both internal power structures and external political pressures, contributing to its state restructuring. Despite this, the enduring Hindu influence has helped maintain national cohesion. These factors have made the process of restructuring Nepal's state much more complex (Ghimire et al., 2021).

A state-nation is characterized by its implementation of "inclusive democracy" and a type of ethnic federalism, which Hachhethu (2023) describes as "identity-based federalism" (p. 36). In Nepal, the state's restructuring has been "subverted and manipulated" by the dominant Khas Arya group to preserve and strengthen the current power dynamics, especially through their resistance to regional federalism (p. 6). The shifts in political stances by various parties on contentious constitutional issues during the drafting process reveal the conflicting aspirations and differing views on how the Nepali state should be restructured across diverse ethnic groups. Additionally, understanding the influence of intermediary agencies during the crucial period of constitution-making between 2006 and 2015 is essential to grasp the complexities involved (Hachhethu, 2023).

Nation-building involves utilizing state power to create or organize a national identity, with the aim of uniting people within a state to ensure its long-term political stability and viability. The Nepali Army has played a significant role in this process since its inception, consistently focusing on serving the nation and its people. According to Article 267 of the constitution, the Army's responsibilities include protecting the country's freedom, sovereignty, territorial integrity, unity, independence, and dignity (Paudel, 2022).

Despite efforts to maintain a distinct national identity, the small Himalayan nation has faced ongoing challenges in its nation-building journey. To fully understand this, it is essential to look at key historical moments or areas where the process of nation-building was

contested and eventually took shape. The Nepali Army is credited with significant contributions to the nation's development, while both national and international state actors, as well as internal and external non-state actors, have influenced the nation-building process in Nepal (Bhat, 2021).

Method

This article draws on both primary and secondary sources of information. The primary sources were derived from the lived experiences of individuals within the community, while secondary sources encompassed reports, books, and magazines. The research primarily used qualitative methods. Nation-building was explored through the perspectives of traditions, religions, and cultural practices, employing both descriptive and analytical approaches to form conclusions. All facts and data for this study were obtained solely from secondary materials accessed via the library. In addition, credible online resources and external links were used to investigate and confirm relevant theories and concepts.

Results and Discussion

Nepal stands out as a highly ethnically diverse nation, with a rich tapestry of different ethnic groups. The issue of ethnicity becomes prominent in any country with significant ethnic diversity, particularly when certain castes, classes, or communities dominate others. Since the restoration of democracy in Nepal, the significance of ethnicity has increased, particularly in the contexts of state restructuring and constitutional drafting. The challenge arises because Nepal's government operates within a single cultural tradition while the society itself is culturally heterogeneous.

The caste system in Nepal, rooted in Hindu philosophy, enforces a hierarchical structure. Both caste and ethnicity have contributed to confusion within Nepalese society. Caste is a social structure determined by birth, whereas ethnicity refers to a community sharing a common language, culture, identity, economic status, and social life.

In Nepal, the uneven practices prevalent in society have led to fragmented sentiments among the people, making nation-building a critical issue in the federalization process. Discriminatory practices and unequal treatment have fueled social conflicts, including the

Maoist insurgency, as these inequalities can lead to violence and pose threats to national sovereignty and integrity. Addressing these issues promptly is essential to prevent further problems.

The main emphasis of nation-building in Nepal is on the implementation and understanding of identity-based federalism, a distinct and innovative concept. Ethnic mobilization has been instrumental in the creation of an inclusive government based on majority rule. In ethnically diverse countries like Nepal, nation-building should be more closely aligned with the state-nation model rather than the nation-state model. This approach contrasts with other countries that have used nation-building processes to transition from traditional to modern societies, manage post-colonial independence, assimilate immigrants, or shift from autocratic regimes to democratic ones. Nepal's approach to nation-building remains distinctive, with language being a vital component that fosters national identity and belonging (Bhat, 2021).

The Major Issues of National Building in Nepal

The nation-building process in Nepal has given rise to several challenges, especially regarding the pursuit of a unified national identity across different groups. The reorganization of the state, power distribution, establishment of provincial boundaries, and allocation of resources have all led to conflicts. These issues stem from Nepal's diverse population, which encompasses various castes, ethnicities, languages, religions, social classes, genders, marginalized groups, and disadvantaged communities. The following discussion highlights the key sources of inequality and discrimination that fuel these conflicts:

Caste-based Issues

According to Hindu religious texts, humans originated from different body parts of Lord Brahma, with the caste system being established later. The Varnas and castes were developed over time by rulers. For example, King Jayasthiti Malla classified the Newars into 64 castes based on their professions, while King Prithvi Narayan Shah portrayed modern Nepal as a shared space for people from four Varnas and 36 castes (UNESCO, 2006, p. 13). Literature often highlights the relationships between upper, middle, and lower caste groups.

According to Gurung (2006), Nepal's caste system is primarily divided into two categories: Dalit and upper caste. The Brahmins, Chhetris, and Thakuries, who wear the Janai, are considered part of the upper caste. In contrast, those deemed untouchable are classified as lower castes, while other groups that do not fit neatly into the upper or lower caste categories are categorized as middle caste (UNESCO, 2006, p. 13). The trend of caste-based discrimination has led to significant conflicts, primarily between upper and lower castes, posing a major challenge to nation-building efforts (UNESCO, 2006, p. 14).

Ethnicity-based Issues

Social discrimination against ethnic communities in Nepal is a historically entrenched issue. The ethnic population in Nepal is not a homogeneous group but consists of various distinct communities, each with its own unique culture, customs, and languages. The challenges faced by these ethnic groups in terms of discrimination differ from those experienced by caste groups in several respects. One issue involves the state's role in providing social identity related to culture, customs, and language, while other concerns the equitable distribution of power and socio-economic resources (UNESCO, 2006, p. 30). Historically, the various principalities, each with its own political, economic, social, and cultural systems, were brought together under the Gorkha rulers, including King Prithvi Narayan Shah and his successors. This unification process was designed to control the resources that ethnic communities depended on, thereby limiting their access to these resources (UNESCO, 2006, p. 33).

As a result, ethnic communities have fought for their identity and resource rights, which poses a significant challenge to nation-building efforts.

Language-based Issues

According to the NPHC National Report 2021 (p. 31), the 2021 census identified 142 distinct castes and ethnic groups in Nepal. Of these, 125 were also recorded in the 2011 census, while 17 were newly identified and added. The 2011 census had previously documented 123 languages spoken in Nepal. Different communities use various languages, referred to as mother tongues or native languages, for communication within their own

groups. Nepali is used for communication with individuals outside their community. The Constitution of Nepal (2072), article 6 specifies that "all mother tongues spoken in Nepal shall be recognized as national languages," while "Nepali, written in Devanagari script, shall be the official language of Nepal". Individuals who speak languages other than Nepali often face discrimination and are treated as second-class citizens. This unequal treatment towards speakers of non-Nepali languages contributes to widespread dissatisfaction among the population, posing a significant challenge to nation-building efforts.

Religion-based Issues

Nepal, historically a Hindu nation, saw the introduction of various other religions during the medieval and modern periods. Religious inequality has been present in Nepal since ancient times; for example, Kirat rulers once prohibited the practice of Buddhism. Over the centuries, numerous religions have emerged in Nepal. The 2011 census reported ten religions practiced in the country, with Hindus making up 81.34% and Buddhists 9% of the population. By 2021, the proportion of Hindus slightly decreased to 81.19%, while Buddhists also saw a minor decline from 9.04% to 8.21%. Meanwhile, the populations of Muslims, Kirat, and Christians have seen slight increases since the previous census.

The current constitution guarantees that "each person shall be free to profess, practice, and preserve their religion according to their faith. However, in exercising this right, no one shall act or incite others to act in ways that contravene public health, decency, and morality, or disturb law and order, or engage in religious conversion or disturbances, as such actions shall be punishable by law" (The Constitution of Nepal 2072; Part 3; Articles 26.1 and 26.3).

Despite these legal protections, religious discrimination persists in Nepalese society, with followers of major religions often overshadowing minority groups. In particular, Muslim minorities, who are often in conflict with the Hindu majority, feel insecure and advocate for special rights. Other minority groups may also voice their concerns, presenting another challenge to nation-building efforts. The security of the women in Nepal has turned out as essential as Adhikari (2024a) has argued about the security of the elderly people in Nepal.

Gender-based Issues

Nepal's society is predominantly patriarchal, with male domination deeply embedded in various aspects of life. Patriarchy is institutionalized through legal frameworks and societal norms, affecting property ownership, political power, social status, and decision-making, which are largely reserved for men. Women are often relegated to domestic roles. Historically, classical Hindu law placed women in subservient roles, asserting that women needed control due to perceived inherent flaws. As per MANU (V, 145), "A woman should be under the authority of her father in childhood, her husband in youth, and her sons if her husband is deceased" (cited in Kumari, 1990).

Although the current constitution prohibits gender discrimination, disparities continue, affecting women, third genders, and LGBTQ± individuals. Women face control through societal norms related to purity and pollution, while third genders are often marginalized to maintain family honor. Even in death rituals, male children are given preference, exacerbating the neglect and discrimination faced by third genders and the LGBTQ± community. Women continue to struggle for equal status both within the family and society. Given that the female population in Nepal exceeds the male population, failure to create equal opportunities for women could further obstruct nation-building efforts. It has become as useful as Adhikari (2024b) has pointed out the ideas of the depersonalization for the position of the women in Nepal.

Class-based Issues

Nepalese society is economically stratified into three main classes: higher, middle, and lower. The upper class leads a life of luxury, while the lower class faces severe struggles for basic survival, resulting in a significant disparity between these economic groups. As noted in the UNESCO's (2006, p. 79) report, "The economic divide is compounded by a complex network of relationships between various societal layers, from local units to central power structures, which also reflects economic status. Analyzing social relations tied to economic processes requires a targeted approach, focusing on populations engaged in diverse economic activities to understand different status levels."

Economic disparities are evident in land ownership, occupational status, and educational enrollment patterns, with the lower class experiencing more pronounced inequalities. Participation in decision-making and access to opportunities remain limited for lower-class individuals. Poverty rates among Janajatis, indigenous groups, and Dalits are significantly higher compared to the high-caste elite. This economic inequality often leads to class struggles, such as historical instances where the lower class revolted against landlords. These economic divides present ongoing challenges for nation-building efforts.

The Issue of Underprivileged/Marginalized/Socially Backward Groups and Religions

A significant portion of Nepal's population belongs to lower economic groups, predominantly residing in rural areas across various geographic regions. These communities experience significantly lower economic access compared to their urban counterparts, with rural per capita income being notably lower. This economic disparity contributes to societal conflicts. As highlighted in the UNDP's (2006, pp. 56 and 87) report, "Dalits, indigenous groups, and socially marginalized castes predominantly live in rural areas, where their literacy rates are markedly low. Among these groups, the Dalits in the hills and Terai regions are particularly disadvantaged."

The divisions within these social categories reveal further internal stratification. Across different castes and ethnic communities, there is a widespread presence of uneducated, resource-deprived, and marginalized individuals. Geographically, the Himalayan region is the most economically underdeveloped, while the mid and far-western development regions also face significant economic and social challenges. These groups struggle to secure their fair share of resources and economic opportunities. For effective nation-building, it is crucial that they receive equitable access to resources and rights to ensure their meaningful participation in the development process. It has become as fearful as Adhikari (2020) has explained regarding the changing of the religious beliefs from one to another one.

The Ways of Inclusive Management of these Issues

The challenges faced in nation-building in Nepal are primarily rooted in socio-economic inequalities and deep-seated discrimination. These issues have fragmented

individual and group identities, creating divisions within society. To address these challenges, it is crucial to foster a sense of unity among the diverse groups, emphasizing that collective strength lies in integration. Effective nation-building occurs when the interests and feelings of all groups are harmonized.

Nepal has experienced two distinct types of movements since the eras of unification and republicanism. One movement focused on promoting democracy, while the other concentrated on securing the rights of specific castes. With the restoration of democracy, there was increased attention to these issues. The Maoist movement, for example, sought to reconcile caste and cultural identities with the state-building process. Consequently, several constitutional provisions were introduced to address these concerns. The interim constitution, drafted during the dissolution of the Maoist movement, served as a crucial document for restructuring the state and integrating these issues into mainstream politics.

This study emphasizes the effective management of inequalities, discrimination, and conflicts to encourage the active participation of various groups in the nation-building process. Political stability is also a crucial element for successful nation-building; thus, efforts must be made to eliminate political instability to establish a cohesive framework. In Nepal, nation-building largely revolves around the concept of identity-based federalism, which is a distinctive and innovative form of federalism. Ethnic mobilization has been vital in the development of a comprehensive democratic governance system over time.

In multi-ethnic countries like Nepal, nation-building should align with the state-nation concept rather than the nation-state concept. Leaders and political parties need to prioritize national interests over partisan or individual gains, which will help resolve many issues. The government should focus on ensuring that marginalized groups, such as Dalits, have direct opportunities to participate in decision-making processes, particularly when formulating laws. Additionally, an integrative approach to human capacity building should be implemented by political parties to foster collaboration and reduce hostility among their members. This approach can help build a more unified and effective governance structure. But it is not as

easy in practice as Adhikari (2022a) has argued in the process of maintaining the ecology and environment in the world.

To enhance national development, it is crucial to strengthen the connection between local governments and the federal parliament. Organizing small-scale entrepreneurship training in rural areas can help systematize and optimize income-generating activities, promoting sustainable resource management and reducing economic and regional disparities. Empowering communities to oversee and support stakeholders involved in social, cultural, economic, and development initiatives at the grassroots level is essential. Successful communities should be recognized and rewarded by the state for their effective implementation of these initiatives.

Additionally, the government must enforce legal provisions and uphold the rule of law rigorously, as this approach can foster a positive perception of governmental actions. NGOs and INGOs should be coordinated under government oversight to ensure their activities benefit targeted groups and regions effectively. Political parties should engage in constructive competition focused on development rather than obstructing progress through criticism. This approach will support a more collaborative and productive environment for national growth. The constitution of Nepal has managed better provision for the participation of all in the process of building Nepal. It has become complex task; it must have been attempted by all to build the country. It is as complex as Adhikari (2022b) has pointed out in the use of language and rhetoric in managing the position of the women in Nepal.

Conclusion

The study reveals that Nepal is characterized by a complex mosaic of castes, ethnicities, languages, religions, genders, classes, and groups that are underprivileged, marginalized, or socially disadvantaged. Discrimination and inequality are pervasive in society, with social opportunities being unequally distributed among different population segments. These disparities pose significant challenges for nation-building.

Efforts to address these social issues must focus on expanding access and opportunities for marginalized groups. However, current strategies may inadvertently

perpetuate the dominance of a few elite groups rather than achieving meaningful improvements for the disadvantaged. In policy-making, a significant portion of influential positions are occupied by core elite individuals, which hampers the effectiveness of nation-building initiatives and fails to address the needs of the suppressed populations.

Numerous studies have examined popular participation and political inclusion in Nepal, particularly focusing on the ethnicization of politics and identity movements in recent decades. However, due to conflicts and misunderstandings among political parties, these issues have not been effectively addressed. This lack of resolution poses significant obstacles to nation-building, as many parties exploit these issues for electoral gains rather than seeking genuine solutions. Political stability is another critical aspect of nation-building, and eliminating political instability is essential for establishing a cohesive framework.

It is crucial for political leaders to prioritize national interests over partisan or individual concerns to effectively resolve many of these challenges. The importance of this study lies in its potential to guide policymakers in developing strategies for social and economic growth by incorporating diverse groups into the nation-building process. Integrating marginalized and excluded communities into mainstream development can prevent social unrest and mitigate conflicts by ensuring representation across all sectors. Ultimately, this study underscores the need to educate policymakers about creating a society free from discrimination, as this is fundamental to the nation's progress and stability.

Recommendations

The government should develop policies that ensure equal treatment for all citizens, regardless of their differences. Instead of prioritizing party politics, the focus should be on serving the entire nation comprehensively. In this regard, the state should establish specialized committees tasked with addressing major nation-building challenges. These committees should include experts from relevant fields to effectively tackle the issues at hand. Moreover, the government must prioritize creating opportunities for underprivileged and marginalized groups to participate directly in decision-making processes, especially when it comes to legislative matters. Finally, an integrated approach to human capacity building should be

implemented by political parties. This approach should emphasize collaborative training and reduce internal hostility among party members.

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