

Federalism and the Political Inclusion of Indigenous Nationalities in Nepal's Local Governance

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Abstract

Federalism in Nepal was introduced to promote inclusive governance and enhance the political participation of historically marginalized communities, including Indigenous Nationalities (Adivasi Janajati). The establishment of local governments has created new opportunities for Indigenous representation and participation in decision-making processes. This study examines the extent to which federal restructuring has contributed to the political inclusion of Indigenous Nationalities in Nepal's local governance system. The chief objective of the study is to analyze the impact of federalism on the political inclusion and representation of Indigenous Nationalities in Nepal's local governance by comparing the 2022 local elections. This study examines the political representation of Indigenous Nationalities in Nepal following the institutionalization of federalism. Using a qualitative approach and secondary data sources, it analyzes Indigenous participation in local elections, particularly the 2022 elections. The findings highlight the role of federal restructuring in enhancing political inclusion, representation, and empowerment within local governance structures. The study finds that Nepal's federal system has increased the political representation of Indigenous Nationalities through constitutional inclusion and proportional electoral mechanisms. However, their participation remains uneven, with limited access to key leadership positions and continued dominance of non-Indigenous groups and males. Despite progress in ethnic recognition and local-level participation, structural and regional disparities still constrain meaningful political empowerment. This study is useful for policymakers and government institutions to strengthen inclusive policies and improve the effective implementation of federalism in Nepal. It also benefits researchers and scholars by

providing empirical insights into Indigenous political representation and local governance dynamics.

Keywords: federalism, political inclusion, indigenous nationalities, local governance, ethnic representation

1. Introduction

Federalism is a political and constitutional arrangement in which authority is divided between at least two levels of government, typically a central (or federal) government and constituent political units such as states or provinces (Oates, 1999). Each level of government operates within its constitutionally defined sphere of competence and exercises powers that are legally guaranteed, ensuring autonomy and institutional balance. This division of authority helps to prevent the concentration of power in a single center and promotes democratic governance through effective checks and balances (Watts, 2008). It also encourages cooperation between different levels of government while allowing regional units to address local needs and priorities more effectively within a unified political system (Budhathoki & Upadhyay, 2026).

Federalism, as a system of governance, has evolved through complex historical trajectories shaped by diverse political, social, and economic contexts. Its philosophical foundations are rooted in principles of shared sovereignty, democratic participation, and the protection of regional autonomy within a unified political framework (Sharma, 2023). Historically, federalism emerged as a response to the need for balancing centralized authority with local self-governance, particularly evident in the formation of federations such as the United States and Switzerland. Structural variations across federal systems reflect differing institutional arrangements, degrees of decentralization, and intergovernmental relations. Federalism is fundamentally a covenant-based system wherein constituent units voluntarily unite under a common constitution. This covenantal nature underscores its normative aim to harmonize unity with diversity, enabling cooperative coexistence within pluralistic societies (Elazar, 1987).

In Nepal, federalism emerged as a response to long-standing demands for inclusion, identity recognition, and state restructuring. Scholars argue that the country's historically centralized and unitary state system significantly contributed to the marginalization of ethnic and Indigenous communities (Hachhethu, 2007). The dominance of high-caste hill elites resulted in the exclusion of many groups from meaningful political participation and cultural recognition. This exclusion created deep-rooted structural inequalities in governance, education, and access to resources. Over time, such inequalities intensified demands for a more inclusive political system. As a result, identity-based federalism gained momentum as an approach to address historical injustices, ensure equitable representation, and promote participation of diverse ethnic and Indigenous groups in state institutions and decision-making processes within Nepal's evolving democratic framework.

Lawoti (2005) further argues that Nepal's centralized governance system produced deep-rooted exclusion of ethnic, linguistic, and regional minorities. In response, identity-based federalism emerged as a transformative agenda aimed at ensuring equitable representation, decentralization, and social justice through the restructuring of the state. Indigenous Nationalities (Janajatis) in Nepal possess distinct languages, cultures, traditions, and customary laws. Nepal is often described as a culturally diverse society, often referred to as a "colorful pot" of ethnic groups and identities (Gurung, 1995). Despite this rich diversity, Janajati communities have historically faced systematic marginalization due to state-led processes of Hinduization and cultural assimilation. These processes limited their access to political power, social recognition, and development opportunities. As a result, Indigenous

communities have continuously demanded inclusion, cultural recognition, and equal participation in state structures, making federalism an important framework for addressing historical exclusion in Nepal's multiethnic and multicultural society.

This marginalization is rooted in the formation of the modern Nepali state, where high-caste Hindu ideology was institutionalized through national unification and later reinforced by legal frameworks such as the Muluki Ain of 1854 (Gallner, 2007). These structures strengthened caste hierarchies and systematically excluded Indigenous communities from political, economic, and cultural opportunities. During the Panchayat era, the promotion of a unified national identity based on Hindu norms further suppressed ethnic diversity, resulting in long-term structural inequality and social exclusion (Bhattachan, 2001). Ethnicity in Nepal is a socially constructed identity shaped by language, religion, culture, and shared historical experiences (Neupane, 2000; Eriksen, 2010). These identities are deeply connected with social stratification and determine access to power, resources, and opportunities. Historically, such divisions have produced unequal power relations between dominant and marginalized groups, significantly influencing political representation, inclusion, and participation in Nepal's governance system.

This marginalization is deeply rooted in the formation of the modern Nepali state, where high-caste Hindu ideology was institutionalized through the process of national unification and later reinforced by legal codes such as the Muluki Ain of 1854. These institutional arrangements strengthened caste-based hierarchies and systematically excluded Indigenous Nationalities from meaningful participation in political, economic, and cultural spheres. During the Panchayat era, the state further promoted a unified national identity grounded in Hindu norms, which significantly suppressed ethnic diversity and reinforced long-term structural inequality. As a result, Indigenous communities remained politically underrepresented and socially marginalized despite Nepal's multicultural composition. Ethnicity in Nepal is understood as a socially constructed identity shaped by language, religion, culture, and shared historical experiences (Eriksen, 2010). These ethnic identities are closely linked with social stratification, determining access to resources, opportunities, and political power. Historically, such stratification has produced unequal power relations between dominant and marginalized groups, thereby shaping patterns of political representation, inclusion, and exclusion within Nepal's governance system (Chandra, 2006).

From a theoretical perspective, Stepan (1999) challenges the dominance of the U.S.-centric model of federalism by introducing the distinction between "demos-enabling" and "demos-constraining" federal systems. This analytical framework emphasizes that federalism should not be evaluated solely on structural similarity but rather on its effectiveness in promoting democratic inclusion and political representation. In the context of Nepal, the adoption of federalism following the 2015 Constitution represents a significant political transformation aimed at addressing historical exclusion and promoting inclusive governance. Local governance under this federal structure provides an important arena for assessing whether political inclusion of Indigenous Nationalities has improved in practice. In particular, the local elections of 2017 and 2022 serve as critical reference points to evaluate changes in participation, representation, and empowerment of Indigenous communities within Nepal's evolving democratic system.

1.1 Research Gap

Although several studies have examined federalism, ethnic exclusion, and Indigenous Nationalities in Nepal, most of them remain largely theoretical or focused on the constitutional design of federalism rather than its practical outcomes. Existing literature (Hachhethu, 2007; Lawoti, 2005) highlights historical marginalization and the need for identity-based federalism, but there is limited empirical analysis on how federalism has

actually improved political inclusion at the local level. In particular, there is a lack of comparative studies examining Indigenous representation in successive local elections after federal restructuring. Very few studies have systematically analyzed changes between the 2017 and 2022 local elections in terms of participation, leadership roles, and elected representation of Indigenous Nationalities. This gap limits a clear understanding of whether federalism in Nepal has translated constitutional promises of inclusion into practical political empowerment at the grassroots level, especially within local governance structures.

1.2 Research Objective

The chief objective of the study is to analyze the impact of federalism on the political inclusion and representation of Indigenous Nationalities in Nepal's local governance by comparing the 2022 local elections.

1.3 Significance of the Research Study

This study is significant as it examines the role of federalism in promoting the political inclusion of Indigenous Nationalities in Nepal's local governance system. Since the implementation of federalism, ensuring the representation and participation of marginalized communities has been a key constitutional goal. By focusing on the local elections of 2017 and 2022, this research provides empirical evidence on whether federal restructuring has translated into meaningful political empowerment for Indigenous groups. The study contributes to understanding how institutional reforms influence social inclusion and democratic governance at the grassroots level. It also helps identify progress, gaps, and challenges in achieving equitable representation in local bodies. Furthermore, the findings will be useful for policymakers, researchers, and development practitioners in designing more inclusive governance policies. Ultimately, this research strengthens academic discussions on federalism, ethnic inclusion, and democratic transformation in multiethnic societies like Nepal by providing updated comparative insights.

1.4 Delimitations of the Study

This research study was carried out under the following delimitations:

1. This study was limited to an analysis of the political inclusion of Indigenous Nationalities in Nepal, based solely on the 2022 local elections.
2. The research was confined to the specific objectives and methodological framework defined for this study, which limits the scope of analysis and interpretation.
3. The article was prepared in accordance with the rules and guidelines of the concerned journal and thus remains bound within those academic and publication constraints.

2. Literature Review

Literature review embraces both theoretical and empirical studies.

2.1 Theoretical Review

The theory of ethno-nationalism and identity politics offers a critical framework for analyzing the complex relationship between federal restructuring and Janajati communities in Nepal. This approach highlights the political salience of ethnic and indigenous identities, particularly in societies marked by historical exclusion and systemic inequality. In Nepal, Janajati groups have increasingly utilized identity-based mobilization to contest dominant narratives and advocate for inclusive governance, cultural recognition, and political autonomy. Such movements are often grounded in claims to ancestral territories, linguistic rights, and differentiated citizenship. Scholars argue that federalism, when informed by identity politics, can serve as a mechanism for rectifying historical injustices, fostering participatory democracy, and legitimizing diverse forms of belonging within the state (Smith,

1991; Kymlicka, 2007). In Nepal, the restructuring of the state into a federal system was, in part, a response to long-standing demands by indigenous nationalities for inclusion and self-determination. These communities have utilized their collective ethnic identity not only to challenge centralized power structures but also to assert their right to territorial autonomy and cultural recognition within the new federal framework (Hangen, 2010). By applying the theory of ethno-nationalism, this study explores how identity-driven claims influence political processes and reshape governance structures in a multiethnic state.

2.2 Empirical Literature Review

International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 169 is a key international instrument that recognizes the rights of Indigenous and tribal peoples, emphasizing their rights to self-determination, land, culture, and participation in decision-making processes. In the context of federalism in Nepal, ILO 169 holds significant relevance for Indigenous nationalities as it supports their demand for identity-based federalism and autonomy. The Convention advocates for Indigenous peoples to have control over their own institutions and development priorities, aligning with their aspirations for inclusive governance and equitable resource distribution. However, despite Nepal's ratification of ILO 169 in 2007, its implementation remains limited. Genuine federal restructuring in line with the Convention requires legal reforms, institutional commitment, and meaningful participation of Indigenous nationalities in shaping the federal state (ILO, 1989)

ILO and NEFIN (2005), *Discrimination against Indigenous Peoples in Nepal*, provides a critical overview of the systemic exclusion and marginalization faced by Indigenous nationalities in Nepal. It highlights how historical, political, and socio-economic structures have perpetuated inequality, limiting Indigenous peoples' access to education, employment, and political representation. The paper underscores the lack of recognition of Indigenous rights and cultural identities within state policies and development frameworks. It also draws attention to the need for affirmative action and inclusive governance to address entrenched discrimination and promote equitable development.

Upreti, Sharma, and Basnet (2012), in *The Remake of a State: Post-conflict Challenges and State Building in Nepal*, explore the complex process of rebuilding the Nepali state following the decade-long armed conflict. The book critically examines the political, social, and institutional challenges in post-conflict state building, emphasizing issues such as inclusion, governance, federal restructuring, and identity politics. It highlights the contested nature of the peace process and the difficulties in balancing diverse interests while promoting stability and democracy. The authors argue that sustainable peace and effective state transformation require addressing historical marginalization and ensuring broader participation in political processes. Their analysis provides valuable insights into the dynamics of conflict transformation, peacebuilding, and institutional reform in transitional Nepal.

Bhandari (2017) critically examines the participation of Janajati communities in Nepal's local governance structures, highlighting both advancements and persistent challenges. The study reveals that while constitutional reforms and decentralization efforts have opened avenues for Indigenous representation, systemic barriers such as socio-economic disparities, limited access to education, and entrenched political hierarchies continue to impede their full engagement. Bhandari emphasizes the importance of inclusive policies and capacity-building initiatives to empower Janajati individuals, ensuring their meaningful involvement in decision-making processes at the local level. The research underscores that genuine inclusion requires not only legislative provisions but also transformative changes in societal attitudes and institutional practices to address historical marginalization and promote equitable governance.

Sharma (2018), in *Governing the Margins: District Development and Self-Rule*, offers a critical examination of district-level governance in Nepal, particularly in the context of decentralization and federal restructuring. The study delves into how historical patterns of marginalization and centralized authority have influenced local governance structures, often limiting genuine self-rule and participatory development. Sharma highlights the complexities and contradictions inherent in implementing decentralized governance in a society marked by deep-seated inequalities and power imbalances (Budhathoki, 2025). The work underscores the necessity for a nuanced understanding of local political dynamics and advocates for more inclusive and context-sensitive approaches to governance that genuinely empower marginalized communities.

In their article *"Inclusivity in Representation: Ethnic and Gender Quotas in Federal Parliament of Nepal"*, Mishra and Thapa (2024) critically assess the effectiveness of constitutionally mandated quotas aimed at improving the political representation of historically marginalized communities, including women, ethnic minorities, Dalits, and other excluded groups. They contextualize these provisions within Nepal's 2015 Constitution, which introduced a mixed electoral system combining First-Past-The-Post and Proportional Representation, with the latter specifically intended to ensure inclusivity. Drawing on data from the 2017 and 2022 federal elections, the authors argue that while quotas have increased numerical representation, such as women holding over 33% of seats through the Proportional Representation system, substantive participation remains limited due to tokenistic party practices and structural inequalities. Party elites often fulfill quotas only to meet formal requirements, resulting in symbolic rather than transformative inclusion, particularly under the First-Past-The-Post system, where groups like Madhesis and Dalits remain underrepresented (Sapkota, 2024). The article concludes that true inclusivity demands deeper reforms in political party practices, civic empowerment, and mechanisms for post-election accountability, shifting the focus from descriptive representation to substantive political influence, thus contributing to broader debates on inclusive governance and democratic deepening in post-conflict Nepal.

2.3 Policy Review

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) promotes the inclusion of Indigenous nationalities by recognizing Nepal as a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and diverse society. It commits to ending discrimination and ensuring inclusive governance. Article 18 guarantees equality and prohibits discrimination based on caste, ethnicity, and language, while permitting affirmative action for marginalized groups. Article 42 mandates proportional inclusion of Indigenous nationalities in state organs, including political representation, civil service, and access to resources. Article 84 (2) and (8) ensure Janajati inclusion in the House of Representatives through the Proportional Representation system, while Article 176 (6) extends the same principle to provincial assemblies. These provisions aim to ensure both formal and substantive equality, addressing historical exclusion and promoting Indigenous participation in Nepal's political and administrative spheres.

The Local Government Operation Act (2017), represents a major legislative step in Nepal's commitment to inclusive and participatory governance. Enacted under the federal structure established by the 2015 Constitution, the Act institutionalizes principles of equity, representation, and local autonomy. It acknowledges the historical exclusion of marginalized communities, particularly Adivasi Janajatis (Indigenous nationalities), and mandates their inclusion in local governance. A core provision requires inclusive representation in local councils, executive bodies, and thematic committees, ensuring the participation of women, Dalits, Janajatis, and other disadvantaged groups. The Act also promotes participatory development planning that reflects local needs and priorities. By fostering equitable access to

resources and opportunities, it seeks to address structural inequalities. Aligned with federalism, it provides a legal basis for embedding social justice in local institutions.

3. Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to examine the transformations in the political representation of Indigenous Nationalities in Nepal following the institutionalization of federalism. The study focused on analyzing the historical trajectory of Indigenous political representation, reviewing the outcomes of the 2017 local elections, and, more specifically, assessing the representation and electoral success of Indigenous Nationality communities in the 2022 local elections. By exploring these developments, the research seeks to identify the extent to which federal restructuring has facilitated the political inclusion and participation of Indigenous peoples within local governance structures.

Methodologically, the study was based on the analysis of secondary sources. Data were collected from official records of the Election Commission, government reports, legal and policy documents, and scholarly publications related to electoral processes, political representation, and governance. The use of these sources enabled a systematic examination of empirical evidence while maintaining a critical and analytical perspective on the research problem. Rather than relying solely on quantitative indicators of representation, the study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the broader meanings, experiences, and institutional processes associated with Indigenous political participation. Consequently, the research provides a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the implications of federal restructuring for the political empowerment and representation of Indigenous Nationalities in contemporary Nepal, particularly within local government institutions.

4. Data Analysis and Presentation

Nepal is a multicultural and multilingual country where diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic communities coexist, shaping rich traditions, cultural practices, and social institutions. According to the National Population and Housing Census 2021, Nepal's population is 29.16 million, with women slightly outnumbering men. Under the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) Act, 2002 (amended 2020), 60 Indigenous Nationalities have been officially recognized. Indigenous peoples constitute 34.87% of the total population, with the Magar community being the largest, followed by Tharu, Tamang, Newar, and Rai communities (CBS, 2021). After the 2006 People's Movement and the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution, Nepal adopted an inclusive political framework to ensure representation of marginalized groups in state structures. These constitutional and institutional reforms have strengthened the political participation and representation of Indigenous Nationalities, particularly in local governments under the federal democratic system (INSEC, 2024).

4.1 Ethnicity and Nationalism

Theories of nationalism and ethnicity are often treated separately, yet many scholars argue that they are deeply interconnected in understanding modern nationhood. Anthony D. Smith suggests that ethnicity provides a foundational model for national identity, as nations often evolve from pre-existing ethnic communities with shared history and culture (Smith, 1986). Similarly, Walker Connor emphasizes the "ethnic nature of nations," arguing that nationhood is closely tied to a sense of common ancestry and collective identity (Connor, 1994). In contrast, Eric Hobsbawm views nationalism as a modern political ideology distinct from ethnicity, shaped by industrialization and state formation processes (Hobsbawm, 1990). Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner also highlight nationalism as a product of modern

political and cultural transformation, particularly linked to the rise of the nation-state (Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983). Paul Brass further argues that both ethnicity and nationalism are socially constructed, emerging through elite competition and political interaction rather than existing as fixed identities (Brass, 1991). Ethnic nationalism, therefore, reflects a fusion of cultural identity and political aspiration, where shared ancestry, language, and traditions shape collective national consciousness and influence the formation of modern political communities (Eriksen, 2002).

4.2 Classification of Adivasi Janajati

The classification of Adivasi Janajati in Nepal refers to the formal recognition of Indigenous Nationalities as distinct ethnic groups with unique languages, cultures, histories, and social structures. The Government of Nepal, through the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN, 2018), classifies Adivasi Janajati based on factors such as language, cultural identity, traditional occupation, geographical distribution, and level of socio-economic development. These groups are broadly categorized into five major clusters: endangered, highly marginalized, marginalized, disadvantaged, and advanced groups. This classification helps identify the level of social exclusion and ensures targeted policies for inclusion, representation, and development. It also plays an important role in promoting affirmative action, including reservations in education, employment, and political participation. Overall, the classification of Adivasi Janajati serves as a policy framework to preserve cultural diversity while addressing historical inequalities and promoting social justice within Nepal's multi-ethnic society.

Table 1: *Classification of Adivasi Janajati*

Classification	Adivasi Janajati
Endangered	10 groups: Bankariya, Hayu, Kisan, Kushunda, Kushwadiya, Lepcha, Meche, Raji, Raute, and Surel
Highly marginalized	12 groups: Baram, Bote, Chepang, Danuwar, Dhanuk, Jhangad, Lhomi, Majhi, Santhal, Siyar, Thami, and Thudam
marginalized	20 groups: Bhote, Bhujel, Darai, Dhimal, Dolpo, Dura, Gangai, Kumal, Larke, Lhopa, Mugali, Pahari, Phree, Rajbanshi, Sunuwar, Tajpuriya, Tamang, Tharu, Topkegola, and Walung
Disadvantaged	15 groups: Bahra Gaunle, Byansi, Chhaintan, Chhantyal, Gurung, Hyolmo, Jirel, Limbu, Magar, Marphali Thakali, Rai, Sherpa, Tangbe, Tin Gaunle Thakali, and Yakkha
Advanced	2 groups: Newar and Thakali

Source: NFDIN, 2018

4.3 Ethnicity, Democracy, and Federalism

Ethnicity, democracy, and federalism are often considered complexly interrelated, as ethnic diversity can both strengthen and challenge democratic systems. Some scholars argue that ethnic politics may weaken liberal democracy because citizens may vote based on group identity rather than individual civic responsibility, leading to fragmented political behaviour and competing group interests (Deutsch, 1953). However, others highlight that ethnicity can also enhance representation and inclusion when properly managed within democratic and federal structures. In multi-ethnic societies like Nepal, federalism is designed to accommodate diversity by devolving power and ensuring participation of various ethnic groups in governance (Lawoti & Hangen, 2013). This approach recognizes that ethnic identity is a persistent political reality rather than a barrier to democracy. Therefore, while liberal theory often assumes individuals act beyond group identity, empirical evidence

suggests that ethnic inclusion through federal arrangements can strengthen democratic legitimacy, improve representation, and reduce conflict by integrating diverse communities into the political system (Budhathoki, 2026).

4.4 Ethnic Recognition in Nepalese Politics

Ethnic recognition in Nepalese politics has become a central issue in the country's democratic and federal transformation, especially after the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution. Nepal's diverse population, including Indigenous Nationalities (Janajatis), Madhesis, Dalits, Tharus, and other minority groups, has long faced political, social, and economic exclusion. To address this, the constitution introduced inclusive provisions such as proportional representation, reservation quotas, and federal restructuring to ensure broader participation in governance. These measures have increased the presence of marginalized communities in parliament, local governments, and administrative institutions, strengthening their political visibility. Ethnic identity has also influenced party politics, policy debates, and demands for autonomy and cultural rights. However, challenges remain, as power is still largely concentrated among dominant groups, and full equality in decision-making has not yet been achieved. Despite these limitations, ethnic recognition in Nepal's politics represents an important step toward inclusive democracy, social justice, and the acknowledgement of cultural diversity within the federal system (Lawoti, and Hangen, 2013).

4.5 Local Government of Nepal

Local government in Nepal plays a crucial role in strengthening federalism and promoting grassroots democracy by bringing governance closer to citizens. It enhances public service delivery in areas such as education, health, infrastructure, water supply, and local economic development. Through elected representatives, local governments ensure greater accountability, transparency, and citizen participation in decision-making processes. They also empower marginalized groups, including women, Dalits, and Indigenous Nationalities, by creating inclusive political spaces under constitutional provisions. Furthermore, local bodies are essential for planning and implementing development projects based on local needs, making governance more effective and context-specific. They contribute to poverty reduction by supporting small-scale enterprises, agriculture, and employment generation at the community level. Overall, local government in Nepal serves as the foundation of federal democracy, ensuring decentralized governance, inclusive development, and improved service delivery while strengthening political stability and community empowerment (Budhathoki, 2025).

4.6 General Review of Ethnic Recognition in Nepal's First Local Election, 2017

The 2017 local elections in Nepal marked a historic turning point in the country's democratic and federal restructuring process after the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution. Held in three phases across metropolitan cities, municipalities, and rural municipalities, the elections were the first local-level polls conducted in nearly two decades. They aimed to strengthen federalism, decentralize political power, and institutionalize local governance under the new federal system. The elections witnessed high voter participation and active competition among major political parties, including Nepali Congress, Communist Party of Nepal (UML), and Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre). More importantly, they created a new political space for historically marginalized communities to participate in governance and decision-making at the local level, strengthening the foundation of federal democracy in Nepal (Election Commission, 2017).

The elections also played a significant role in promoting ethnic recognition and inclusive democracy in Nepal. Constitutional provisions on inclusion and proportional

representation increased the participation of Indigenous Nationalities, Dalits, Madhesis, women, and other minority ethnic groups in local government structures. Through reservation policies and quotas, many marginalized communities gained leadership opportunities that had long been limited in national politics. Women's participation also increased significantly, with mandatory representation in ward committees, including provisions for Dalit women, ensuring grassroots inclusion. Despite these improvements, challenges such as unequal political influence, dominance of major parties, and limited access to resources persisted. Overall, the 2017 local elections were widely regarded as a major step toward social inclusion, ethnic recognition, gender equality, and democratic consolidation in Nepal (Budhathoki, 2025).

4.7 Ethnic Representation Local Government (Local Election 2022)

Ethnic representation in Nepal's 2022 local elections reflected gradual progress in inclusive governance after federal restructuring. Indigenous nationalities (Adivasi Janajati) maintained strong participation, accounting for around 30% of candidates and elected representatives in positions open to all groups. Women's representation slightly increased to 41.21%, while Dalit representation remained limited, particularly in executive leadership positions. Despite constitutional provisions for inclusion, marginalized groups such as Dalits, women, and Janajatis continued to face barriers in meaningful political participation and decision-making at the local level. These figures reflect the notable presence and active engagement of Indigenous peoples in Nepal's local governance structures (Election Commission, 2022).

Table 2. *Indigenous Representation in Nepal's Local Government (Local Election 2022)*

Position	Total Elected Positions	Indigenous Representatives	Men	Women
Mayor (Municipalities)	293	61	59	2
Deputy Mayor	293	58	10	48
Rural Municipality Chairperson	460	160	155	5
Rural Municipality Vice-Chairperson	460	159	58	101
Ward Chairperson	6,743	2,031	2,005	26
Ward Members	26,972	7,252	NA	NA

Source: *Election Commission of Nepal (2022)*

The data from the 2022 local election demonstrate the increasing participation of Indigenous nationalities in Nepal's local governance system. Indigenous representatives secured significant positions, particularly at the ward and rural municipality levels. However, the gender distribution reveals that men continue to dominate executive leadership positions, including mayor, chairperson, and ward chairperson. Women's representation was comparatively stronger in deputy and vice-chairperson positions, largely due to constitutional provisions requiring female representation in these posts. Despite the absence of reserved seats specifically for Indigenous nationalities, the election results indicate their growing political engagement and influence within Nepal's local governance structures. Finally, although the total number of ward members was available, the separate numbers of men and women could not be found.

5. Result Analysis and Discussion

The analysis of Nepal's political and demographic context shows that the federal system introduced by the 2015 Constitution has significantly reshaped inclusion patterns, particularly for Indigenous Nationalities. The institutional recognition of 60 Indigenous groups and the adoption of proportional representation have expanded their political participation across federal, provincial, and local levels (NFDIN, 2018). The 2022 local election data further indicates that Indigenous communities hold a considerable share of elected positions, especially at ward and rural municipality levels. However, representation is not uniform, as executive leadership positions such as mayor and chairperson remain largely dominated by non-Indigenous groups and men. This suggests that while formal inclusion has improved, meaningful power-sharing in decision-making structures is still limited (Bhattarai & Bhusal, 2024).

The interpretation of findings also highlights persistent structural inequalities despite constitutional commitments to inclusion and affirmative action. Indigenous representation is more effective under proportional electoral systems than under direct elections, indicating that institutional design strongly influences political outcomes. Provinces such as Bagmati and Koshi show relatively better inclusion, while Madhesh and Karnali lag, reflecting regional disparities in political access. Additionally, although women's participation has increased due to constitutional quotas, their presence in leadership positions remains constrained (Mishra & Thapa, 2024). Overall, the findings suggest that Nepal's federalism has created important opportunities for ethnic recognition and political participation, but deeper transformation is still required to ensure equitable representation and genuine empowerment of Indigenous Nationalities (Election Commission of Nepal, 2023).

6. Conclusion

Nepal is a multicultural and multilingual country characterized by the coexistence of diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic communities that significantly contribute to its socio-cultural and institutional diversity. Since the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution and the adoption of a federal governance system, substantial institutional and constitutional reforms have been introduced to promote inclusion and ensure proportional representation of marginalized groups, particularly Indigenous Nationalities. The formal recognition of 60 Indigenous Nationalities and their increased participation in political institutions indicate a positive shift toward inclusive democracy. Empirical evidence, particularly from local-level elections, demonstrates an overall increase in Indigenous representation across various tiers of government, with notable presence at the local level.

Nevertheless, the findings of this study reveal that political inclusion remains uneven and partially realized. Although proportional representation mechanisms have enhanced the participation of Indigenous Nationalities more effectively than direct electoral systems, their access to key executive and decision-making positions remains limited. Leadership roles continue to be predominantly occupied by non-Indigenous groups and male representatives, reflecting persistent structural inequalities. Furthermore, regional disparities in representation and constrained political empowerment underscore the incomplete nature of inclusion. In conclusion, while Nepal's federal structure has significantly advanced ethnic recognition and political participation, further institutional strengthening and policy refinement are essential to achieve substantive equality and meaningful representation of Indigenous Nationalities across all levels of governance.

7. Recommendation

Based on the inclusive laws issued by the state and the reports studied by various researchers, the following recommendations are deemed appropriate in this study:

1. Out of the 60 constitutionally recognized Indigenous Nationalities in Nepal, only 15 groups are currently represented; therefore, equitable representation of the remaining 45 groups should be ensured.
2. Indigenous representation remains comparatively low in Madhesh and Karnali Provinces; hence, these regions should be given special priority in upcoming electoral processes to promote inclusive participation.
3. Women's representation is largely limited to the minimum legal provisions; therefore, their participation should be further strengthened, particularly in key leadership and executive positions at the local government level.

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