



Ethnic Diversity and National Cohesion in Nepal: Addressing Contested Identities

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Abstract

The issue of identity has played a significant role in shaping Nepal's political and social dynamics. This term paper examines ethnic diversity and national cohesion in Nepal. The study draws on scholarly articles and other relevant publications. The primary focus is on the growing tension between ethnic diversity and national integration, which has contributed to the emergence of contested identities in Nepal's nation-building efforts. For this research, relevant literature and publications were gathered from secondary sources. A descriptive and interpretive methodology was employed to achieve the study's objectives. The findings reveal that minority languages and cultural practices in Nepal have historically been marginalized, resulting in inequality and contested identities. Additionally, geographic and structural factors have intensified disparities among ethnic groups. The study emphasizes that promoting equal recognition of languages, cultures, and opportunities—together with inclusive policies and awareness programs—is vital for strengthening national integration and fostering social cohesion. It recommends that inclusive language policies, equitable access to resources and opportunities, and intercultural initiatives are essential strategies for reducing contested identities and supporting sustainable national integration in Nepal.

Keywords: contested identity, cultural group, ethnicity, national integration

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1. Introduction

According to Scott and Marshall (2009), “ethnicity” differs from race, which is typically understood in biological terms. Members of an ethnic group often share cultural traits such as religion, language, occupation, or political affiliation, going beyond mere racial characteristics. Ethnicity also differs from social class, as it can cut across socioeconomic divisions. It reflects a “we-feeling” among group members and exists when individuals claim a particular identity and are acknowledged by others as belonging to that group (Barth, 1969). Ethnicity is a complex and sensitive concept, shaping social cohesion, political engagement, and national unity. In Nepal, a country marked by significant ethnic, linguistic, and geographic diversity, tensions frequently emerge when ethnic identity intersects with socioeconomic inequalities. Following the democratic transition in 1990, ethnic consciousness increased, giving rise to new identities, organizations, and grievances, while attempts to forge a unified national identity through common language, culture, and politics largely proved unsuccessful (Sapkota, 2014; Upadhyay, 2013).

This research examines the connection between ethnicity and national integration in Nepal, analyzing how ethnic diversity and identity claims interact with initiatives aimed at fostering a cohesive national identity, especially in the context of the 2015 Constitution of Nepal.

2. Literature Review

This study draws on an extensive review of existing literature to examine the relationship between ethnicity and national integration in Nepal. The review utilizes credible sources, including academic journals, research articles, and books, which were critically analyzed to establish both conceptual and empirical foundations. It incorporates both Nepalese and international perspectives, offering a comprehensive understanding of ethnicity, contested identities, and the mechanisms of national integration. Particular emphasis is placed on the complex and often debated issues of national cohesion in multi-ethnic societies.

Political integration, as defined by Karl W. Deutsch, refers to “the integration of political actors or political units, such as individuals, groups, municipalities, regions, or countries with regard to their political behavior.” In this sense, political integration implies a relationship where the actions of political actors or units are shaped by mutual influence. Similarly, Anwar S. Dil (1968) describes integration as “the process by which individuals and groups come to see themselves and their children as part of collective experiences in history, willing to give their loyalty to the group,” emphasizing the psychological and social dimensions of cohesion.

Regarding societal integration, Majeed (2010) stresses the alignment of functional and psychological aspects of society with its collective identity or spirit. Coleman and Rosenberg (1971) highlight the importance of bridging gaps between elites and the broader population to foster a participatory political community. Jahan (1973) further notes that national integration involves establishing a political system that incorporates or transcends regional subsystems.

From a broader perspective, national integration involves recognizing and valuing a shared identity among diverse groups within a nation. Despite differences in caste, community, religion, culture, geography, or language, people acknowledge common bonds and collective belonging. National integration promotes development, stability, inter-group harmony, and reduces regional, linguistic, or caste-based discrimination. It enhances patriotism, fosters brotherhood, and encourages tolerance and social cohesion. Ahmad, Ghosh, and Reifeld (2000) observe that national integration is a multidimensional, dynamic process shaped by historical, political, social, cultural, and economic factors, which interact to sustain a functional political and social system.

Despite its theoretical clarity, achieving national integration remains challenging in multi-ethnic societies. In Nepal, political development has historically relied on national integration to bridge regional and ethnic differences and establish shared political values. However, the post-1990 democratic period demonstrates the persistent tension between ethnic identities and national unity, as seen in rising ethnic consciousness, demands for recognition, and disputes over provincial naming. While previous studies have examined ethnic mobilization, political integration, and nation-building in Nepal, few have systematically explored how ethnicity interacts with national integration under the federal system and constitutional framework.

The literature indicates that national integration encompasses both political and socio-cultural dimensions, whereas ethnicity reflects distinct cultural, social, and historical identities. Studies at both national and international levels emphasize that successful integration requires balancing loyalty to the state with acknowledgment of ethnic diversity. Nevertheless, gaps remain in understanding how ethnic identities influence, and at times challenge, the process of national integration in Nepal. This study aims to address these gaps by investigating the complex relationship between ethnicity and national integration, offering insights into how contested identities shape Nepal's nation-building process.

3. Objective and Methodology

The main objective of this paper is to explore the relationship between ethnicity and national integration in the Federal Government of Nepal. This study employs a qualitative research approach to comprehensively analyze the dynamics of ethnicity and national integration in Nepal. The qualitative aspect involves an in-depth assessment of

existing literature and scholarly discourse (Wickham, 2019) on national integration to address the research questions. An extensive analysis of existing discourse leads to the assessment of the contrasting and intertwining aspects of ethnicity and national integration. This approach provides historical context, theoretical insights, and contemporary viewpoints on ethnicity and national integration. The findings are presented under the following headings: Ethnicity and Identity in Nepal, Post-1990 Ethnic Movements and Nation-Building in Nepal, and National Integration.

4. Findings

4.1 Ethnicity and Identity in Nepal

According to Scott and Marshall (2009), the concept of “ethnicity” differs from race, which is often understood in biological terms. While members of an ethnic group may display certain racial characteristics, they also typically share cultural traits such as religion, occupation, language, or political affiliation. Ethnic groups should also be distinguished from social classes, as ethnicity often cuts across socioeconomic divisions, bringing together individuals who share—or are perceived to share—common attributes that go beyond class distinctions. For example, Jews in the United States represent a classic ethnic group: despite differences in racial background (ranging from Eastern Europe to North Africa), social class, mother tongue, political views, and religious observance (from orthodox to secular), they identify collectively as Jewish, setting them apart from—but not necessarily in opposition to—the broader American society.

Ethnicity and ethnic identity have become important and widely debated topics. Ethnicity is inherently complex and sensitive, with sociological, anthropological, and historical knowledge playing a key role in informing political discussions around it. Ethnicity refers to a group of people who share a distinct identity that differentiates them from other groups. It reflects the “we-feeling” among members, existing when individuals claim a particular ethnic identity for themselves and are recognized by others as belonging to that group (Barth, 1969).

A group is considered ethnic if its members share certain characteristics that set them apart from the majority within a culture. While an ethnic group may have biological traits linked to racial differences, these traits alone are insufficient to define ethnicity. Ethnicity is defined by a group of people who perceive themselves as connected through real or imagined shared ancestry. When members adopt the attitudes, values, beliefs, cultural practices, language, or specific dialects of their group through socialization, this is known as behavioral ethnicity (Inayatullah, 1988; Peter, 1991). Ethnicity is not something individuals can choose; it is an inherent aspect of identity.

Ethnic identity reflects a logic of cultural belonging within a community, shaped by a complex interplay of ethnic, cultural, and historical factors that distinguish one group

from another. No country in the world is racially uniform, and Nepal is no exception. The country is notable for its exceptional ethnic, linguistic, and geographic diversity. Conflicts often emerge when ethnic identity clashes with socioeconomic inequalities. Such ethnic tensions have a significant impact on national integration, which refers to the unity, solidarity, and social cohesion among people of different castes, religions, genders, and communities within a nation.

This study examines ethnicity in Nepal, considering factors such as religion, language, caste, territory, and its relationship to national integration. In Koshi Province, ethnic disputes have arisen over demands to name the province based on caste identity. The research emphasizes the importance of reducing inter-ethnic tensions, ensuring that all ethnic communities receive equitable access to political representation and economic resources.

4.2 Post-1990 Ethnic Movements and Nation-Building in Nepal

The period following 1990, characterized by the emergence of democracy amid political turbulence, evolved more into a phase of “ethnic assertion” rather than “nation building” (Gellner, 2007). The greater democratic freedoms of the 1990s allowed various ethnic and sociocultural groups to participate in multi-party politics, enabling them to reassess the social and political roles traditionally assigned to them based on ethnicity and caste. However, the government’s ongoing efforts to promote a unified national identity were weakened by violent conflicts, which reshaped and sometimes rejected established social and cultural practices during the transitional period. The risks posed to educational institutions during these conflicts have been noted as attacks on education (UNESCO, 2010), a phenomenon also observed in the post-conflict Truth and Reconciliation Commissions of countries such as Timor-Leste, Peru, and Sierra Leone.

The core nature of these ethnic movements—whether political, cultural, economic, or a combination of these—remains ambiguous. While the movements emphasize cultural identity and ethnic recognition, they often do not directly address challenges related to livelihoods, living standards, access to resources, education, healthcare, income opportunities, or poverty reduction. Development is frequently perceived as secondary to cultural rights. As a result, diverse perspectives and approaches for resolving these issues continue to emerge. Theoretically, this positions the ethnic movements neither as fully aligned with collective development efforts nor as entirely opposed to mainstream development agendas (Sapkota, 2014).

The post-1990 democratic period was unpredictable in many respects. For the first time in Nepal’s history, ethnicity-building emerged as a prominent issue. New ethnic identities were formed, organizations were established, and grievances surfaced across social, political, and economic spheres. The national identity promoted through schools and government institutions—shaped by the country’s autocratic past—was perceived

as highly exclusionary by ethnic minorities, lower castes, religious groups, and the Madhesi population of the southern Terai region. The Madhesis have argued that hill communities have developed ethnic stereotypes about them, simplifying and misrepresenting their identity based on assumed typical characteristics (Upadhyay, 2013).

Efforts to cultivate a single, unified “national identity” through a common culture, a single language, and centralized political structures have largely failed. Despite progress in infrastructure and expanded access to education in recent decades, systemic horizontal inequalities remain, hindering social integration. Recent conflicts highlight the continued political emphasis on national identity. Given the lack of comparative studies examining ethnicity versus national integration—two contested dimensions of Nepal’s nation-building process following the 2015 Constitution—this paper seeks to investigate the relationship between ethnic diversity and national integration in Nepal.

4.3 National Integration

National integration refers to the unification of diverse elements to create a cohesive whole. It fosters a deep sense of “we-feeling,” belonging, and patriotism among individuals. When effectively achieved, it enables a balanced and harmonious relationship among different segments of society, allowing people to perceive themselves as part of an integrated and stable social structure.

National integration can be understood as a process that operates at two levels: community integration and pluralistic integration. In practice, it involves the coming together of individuals from diverse backgrounds, with continuous interaction that is not hindered by social hierarchies. In such integrated settings, people develop a sense of “we-feeling,” reducing the likelihood of conflict.

Ethnicity and national integration represent a political ideology advocating for a unified nation characterized by shared values, citizenship, and collective identity, while moving beyond exclusive ethnic loyalties. During Nepal’s democratic movements of 1951, 1990, and 2006, citizens took to the streets demanding democracy and equal rights for all, transcending ethnic divisions. These movements highlighted collective action for rights and freedoms, regardless of caste, gender, or ethnicity, underpinned by shared values, symbols, and institutions (2001). The roots of national integration can be traced to the 18th century under Prithvi Narayan Shah, who unified multiple principalities. This process responded to the country’s ethnic and cultural diversity, promoting a common Nepali identity that surpassed ethnic distinctions, thereby laying the groundwork for nationalism in Nepal (Gurung, 2001).

Scholars note that national integration involves both state-building and nation-building. State-building occurs when political elites establish new institutions and structures to influence society, regulate behavior, and mobilize resources. Nation-building, on the

other hand, emphasizes the cultural dimensions of political development, encouraging people to shift their loyalty from smaller communities, tribes, or villages to a broader, centralized political system.

5. Discussion

In this study, the terms Nepali culture and national life culture are used interchangeably, as both refer to the same concept. Nepali culture embodies the collective beliefs, practices, arts, traditions, and customs of the people. It includes both tangible and intangible elements, serving as a vital foundation for national integration in Nepal, where diverse ethnic and cultural groups together create the broader Nepali identity (Gurung & Bhandari, 2008). The combined cultural practices of all ethnic groups form the nation's cultural fabric, often described as Nepal's nationalized culture (Sapkota, 2014). Examples include a shared sense of nationalism, respect for others, recognition of the constitutional monarchy as a unifying institution, and adherence to indigenous practices such as hospitality and community cooperation (Gurung, 2001).

Language, as a key component of culture, plays a central role in national integration (Coleman & Rosenberg, 1971). Although Nepali is the official national language, the mother tongues of minority communities have often been neglected or marginalized (Upadhyay, 2013). These languages, however, are essential to the country's cultural mosaic and should receive equal recognition and protection (Ahmad, Ghosh, & Reifeld, 2000). Promoting linguistic diversity alongside Nepali is crucial to fostering inclusivity, mutual respect, and understanding among different communities (Barth, 1969). The traditional idea of "one religion, language, and culture" needs reconsideration, supporting equal status for all cultural, linguistic, and religious groups while encouraging decentralized development that benefits marginalized populations (Majeed, 2010).

Historical geographic and structural inequalities have contributed to uneven distribution of resources and opportunities among ethnic groups (Sapkota, 2014). Special attention should be given to disadvantaged tribes and lower castes to improve their living conditions, while ensuring that integration preserves their cultural identity (Gellner, 2007). Constitutional provisions should support the formation of multi-ethnic organizations, allowing communities to safeguard and promote their cultural heritage without constraints, thereby strengthening social cohesion (Ahmad, Ghosh, & Reifeld, 2000).

Educational initiatives and awareness programs are essential for reducing ethnic tensions and enhancing national integration (Anwar, 1968). Following the principle of "get educated and get organized" can empower communities to participate meaningfully in nation-building (Wickham, 2019). Equal opportunities must be ensured across caste, gender, ethnicity, language, religion, class, and occupation (Upadhyay, 2013). Political

representation should reflect the proportional participation of diverse communities to guarantee fairness and inclusivity in governance (Coleman & Rosenberg, 1971).

Finally, promoting inter-caste and inter-community marriages, particularly between populations of the Terai and hill regions, can accelerate cultural integration and help reduce long-standing social divides (Gurung, 2001). Encouraging these social interactions supports acculturation while respecting ethnic identities, contributing to the broader goal of a united yet culturally diverse Nepal (Barth, 1969).

6. Conclusion

This study highlights the intricate relationship between ethnicity and national integration in Nepal. While the country's ethnic and cultural diversity strengthens its national identity, ongoing inequalities and post-1990 ethnic movements reveal that recognition of cultural differences can sometimes conflict with broader development objectives. Building an effective nation requires striking a balance between honoring ethnic diversity and promoting inclusive institutions and common values. Future research should examine the effects of policies under the 2015 Constitution, inter-ethnic political participation, education, and social integration initiatives on national unity. Recognizing ethnicity as both a source of identity and a potential cause of division can help policymakers and researchers foster a culturally diverse yet cohesive Nepal.

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