



Sudurpaschim Spectrum

A Multidisciplinary, Peer Reviewed Journal

ISSN: 3021-9701 (Print)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/sudurpaschim.v3i1-2.90851>

Published by Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Far Western University, Mahendranagar, Nepal

Challenges and Opportunities on Multiculturalism in the Context of Nepal

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Abstract

Nepal, a multiethnic, multilingual, and multicultural nation, faces both unique opportunities and persistent challenges in managing its rich diversity. While the 2015 Constitution has introduced inclusive measures—such as the recognition of minority languages, reservation policies for marginalized groups, and the declaration of a secular state—practical implementation remains limited. Previous research has largely celebrated multiculturalism’s normative ideals but has paid insufficient attention to Nepal’s persistent caste hierarchies, linguistic dominance, and unequal citizenship practices. This study addresses this research gap by critically examining how multicultural policies operate in practice and whether they achieve intended social integration. Findings reveal that, despite constitutional provisions, discrimination, cultural favoritism, and inequities in citizenship and education continue to marginalize minority communities. Globalization and tourism further complicate cultural preservation. The study stresses that Nepal’s greatest challenge lies not in policy creation but in policy execution and social acceptance. It concludes that sustained dialogue, genuine meritocracy, and proactive engagement with minority voices are crucial for maintaining national integrity in an increasingly diverse society. These critical perspectives carry significant implications for policymakers aiming to foster peace, inclusion, and equitable development in multicultural states.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Secular, Constitution, Inclusion, Diversity

Introduction

Located between two huge economies India and China, Nepal, without a doubt, is a country of multiple languages, castes, cultures, religions, and creeds. Despite being a small land-locked

country, this country is still proud of being a home to more than “one-sixth of world languages” (Gautam & Poudel, 2022, p. 81). Nepali, Newari, Rai, Tamang, Gurung, etc. is mostly spoken in Nepal. Central Bureau of Statistics (2021), 124 languages are spoken, which is recorded officially. However, there may be more languages being spoken. The unfortunate thing is that due to the dominant effect of the national language (Nepali), endangered languages are being ignored. The 2015 constitution has pledged to preserve and promote mother tongue by imparting education through basic education. The speakers of other mother tongues are switching to Nepali and English. In Nepal, English is associated with prestige in Nepal. Other languages are being overshadowed. English has become a requirement to grab better job opportunities. This can be linked to the effects of neoliberal ideologies started at the time the British colonization (Sharma & Phyak, 2017). A lot of discussions have been held, yet different governments have failed to promote other languages.

Multiculturalism is a way in which society deals with cultural diversity and religious differences. It respects and recognizes the rights of different cultural groups. Culture is an integral part of our life and an individual’s notion of morality, worldview is shaped by cultural construct. Every culture has distinct language, norms, rituals, values, culture and way of life. So, we cannot separate ourselves from culture and to think about doing so is just an abstract idea. Many cultures exist in one community and in a state. From way back culture has been the matter of innumerable discussion, debates and analysis. Therefore, multiculturalism emerged as an ideology which focuses on the fact that every culture should have the right to exist according to their values without harming the state’s unity. It emphasizes to recognize others culture as equally valuable and to protect the rights and privileges of minority, marginalized groups, women and diverse groups.

The existence of multiple cultures is nothing new. If we look at history, we find the existence of different varieties of culture living together peacefully. So, the need for and importance of multiculturalism is seen in today’s time because of the pluralistic nature of modern societies. Nepal also being multiethnic, multilingual, multi religious, and multi-cultural country is the home of social diversity. Parekh (2000) says, “The only choice to any society today is to manage and build on the creative potential of its diversity” (p. 171). He here says that the only choice we have today is to manage and utilize the benefits of it because no society in today’s time is free of diversity. Diversity is a strength if managed properly and it can be the weakness of a country if it is not addressed carefully.

So to avoid the rising conflict of diversity and to establish peace the state has gone through different political changes to address and accommodate the rights of these diverse varieties. The

government of Nepal has passed several rules and policies of inclusion in relation to education, employment, security and other areas of public life to protect the rights of minority and disadvantaged with the aim to maintain cultural equality and integration. With the emergence of the idea of multiculturalism has benefitted and provided many possible opportunities to people of less advantaged groups. As a result, the constitution of Nepal became more inclusive providing and protecting the rights of minority, disable, women and different marginalized groups. Multiculturalism has provided various opportunities to these ethnic minorities and marginalized groups.

Literature Review

The concept of "multiculturalism" gained traction in policymaking and planning circles during the 1960s and 1970s, emerging in response to new social movements in Western societies that focused on ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, and nationality. These movements shifted the political conversation beyond traditional class-based struggles, introducing fresh demands and perspectives. Over time, multiculturalism has been interpreted in multiple ways, sometimes as a political framework, sometimes as a policy approach, and sometimes simply as a description of social realities. At its core, it defends cultural diversity and pluralism, seeking to recognize and preserve the distinct identities and contributions of minority groups. Historically, multiculturalism marked a break from the assimilationist ideals of the monocultural nation-state. It also became deeply intertwined with identity politics, emphasizing the need to acknowledge minority rights and cultural differences. By the 1990s, issues surrounding the notion of "multiculturalism" dominantly revolved around human rights and social justice, paying less attention to the importance of creating a society where more than one culture exists peacefully. Social unity was overlooked (Johansson, 2022).

Multilingualism, a popular and multi-faceted phenomenon, is explored through various lenses in fields such as linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and education (Cenoz, 2013). Although it is common across the globe, scholars offer differing definitions of what multilingualism entails. Nonetheless, most research centers on the ability of individuals and communities to use multiple languages. We do not find a single definition of "multilingualism." Different bodies of knowledge and institutions interpret "multilingualism" differently. Take it for example. A multilingual person as someone capable of communicating in more than one language, either actively—through speaking and writing—or passively—through listening and reading. The European Commission (2007) similarly defines multilingualism as the capacity of individuals, groups, institutions, and societies to interact regularly in multiple languages in their daily lives.

Among the key demands of Nepal's indigenous communities were calls for linguistic equality, particularly the right to use their native languages in education and government administration. These demands emerged in response to Nepal's longstanding policy of promoting Khas Nepali as the sole official language, a move that systematically marginalized indigenous tongues and cultures. Alongside linguistic rights, the indigenous movement also championed secularism, viewing it as critical for ensuring genuine religious freedom and strengthening democracy. They argued that secularism would dismantle the dominance of Hinduism, which had been deeply entrenched under the former Hindu monarchy, and end state-sponsored discrimination against religious minorities (Tamang, 2022).

According to Savada (1991), political scientists Joshi and Rose broadly divided Nepal's population into three ethnic categories based on their origins: the Indo-Nepalese, who inhabit the fertile lower hills, valleys, and plains; the Tibeto-Nepalese, who reside in the higher hills and Himalayan regions; and the Indigenous Nepalese, including tribal groups like the Tharus and Dhimals. The distinct Madhes and Madhesi identities gained prominence following the Madhes Movement of 2007. Although the Terai-Madhes region, rich in agricultural land, is one of Nepal's most densely populated areas, Madhesi communities have long faced systemic discrimination based on skin color, regional background, language, and socio-cultural identity. Despite their internal diversity—spanning multiple ethnicities, castes, languages, and cultures—the Madhesi have struggled for recognition and rights. The government has entered into multiple agreements with Madhes-based political parties and various armed groups to address these issues (Malik, 2023).

After the political changes of 1990, people became more aware of ethnic and regional recognitions to promote their indigenous knowledge and cultures. Some successful moves to be considered are that Maithili has been established as an official language in Saptari and Newari in the Kathmandu Valley. Unfortunately, these progresses came to a halt owing to the supreme court's decision to overrule it. Madhesi people felt mistreated by not individuals but institutions (Hachhethu, 2007).

Methods and Materials

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach, relying exclusively on secondary sources. Information and facts are collected from a range of credible materials, including library archives, academic publications, online databases, and scholarly works focused on inclusion, policymaking, multiculturalism, democracy, and political representation. Historical accounts, and theoretical

frameworks are sourced from reputable institutions and verified websites to ensure the authenticity and reliability of the information analyzed. Key theories and conceptual discussions are incorporated to support a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

Results and Discussion

Nepal is the home of different ethnic varieties however, there is the dominance of high caste Brahmin and Chhetris in many spheres of political and social power. And to resolve this hierarchy the constitution has ensured the equal rights to indigenous people, Dalit, Madhesi, Janajatis, women, disable and other marginalized groups. So that they get the opportunity to participate in policy making and exercise their power equally as other dominant groups. The government implemented the system of meritocracy so that the people, despite their caste, ethnicity, gender etc. gets the opportunity to demonstrate talents.

Opportunities

With bigger percentage of population being Hindus it is the dominant religion of the country and thus Nepal was declared Hindu kingdom. As a result, other religion didn't get recognition though all the religions are equally important for the people who follow them. And in order to give the recognition to the other religions, the country was declared as a secular state under the Interim Constitution of Nepal. The state also observes public holidays in different festivals of religious communities like Budha Jayanti, Eid, Christmas, Dashain, Tihar etc. The state also has ensured the right to religion according to which people are free to protect and practice their religious beliefs.

The dominance of Brahmins and Chhetris had created the hierarchal caste-based discrimination which has been a burning issue till date. The state has included the rights of Dalit under which they have the right to free education, health security for the empowerment of the community. So, the constitution has regarded any form of discrimination, either caste, gender, ethnicity, language, religion as a punishable act. The state has also ensured the right to these indigenous, marginalized and minority groups to participate in the state bodies on the basis of inclusive principle. The system of reservation or quota is also another medium that state has used to show the inclusion. Under the civil service act, the provision of reservation or quota is given so that the marginalized, disable, women, minority groups and others could participate and make the country's bureaucracy is more representative and inclusive.

There are around one hundred and twenty-three languages in Nepal, and the demand for recognition of these languages was the other issue to be addressed. The state has been partly able

to resolve the issue by declaring all the mother tongues spoken in Nepal as national languages. And they have the right to preserve and protect these languages. Under the right to language and culture the state has ensured the right to practice and participate in one's cultural beliefs as well use and promote their language. Since the country has, patriarchal societal values women were restricted to the four walls of their household. Their rights and participation were ignored. But with the rising modernism, globalization and feminism the women realized what they are missing and felt the need to demand their rights and there was women's movement. So as a response to resolve the differences the state ensured the reservation policy in administration as well as the parliament of Nepal for the proportional representation. The state has also included several provisions for the rights of marginalized groups such as LGBTQ.

Citizenship is an important document for an individual to be legally recognized where he belongs from. One cannot obtain a passport, driving license, can't open bank account in the absence of the citizenship. Therefore, it is one of the basic requirements of an individual. In regard to citizenship, the state seems to have a liberal attitude. There is a provision of citizenship because of birth, descent and naturalization etc. These are the several opportunities that people have in multiculturalism. However, opportunities come along with the bigger challenges to sustain themselves. In an ethnically, religiously, linguistically and culturally diverse country like Nepal there are more challenges to multiculturalism than opportunities.

Challenges

Discrimination and untouchability have been one of burning issues of the time. Although the state has confirmed discrimination on any basis and untouchability as a punishable act, it has not been practically implemented. The hierarchical caste system still seems prevalent despite all the efforts of creating equality. We keep on witnessing different forms of political and social movement, protesting in demand for equal rights and recognition. It is important to bridge the gap of these hierarchy otherwise the conflict arises. The voice of marginalized should come in the focus. Managing the differences to prevent conflict is what multiculturalism is about. Similarly, the state has given the facility of reservations for marginalized, ethnic, backward, disable, women and minority groups which has been a bigger issue these days. The concept of reservation itself is considered to be against minorities. Some people consider that reservation should be based on the economic background because for them some people of lower caste as well as ethnic backgrounds have better economic grounds because of which the one who really deserves the facility must be deprived of it. So, the issue of whether there should be a reservation, if yes on what basis the talk of a town has been. Therefore, there is the demand to solve this issue in a more inclusive way.

In regard to meritocracy, the situation is not very different. The state says one should be judged on the basis of merit but when it comes to implementation there is bigger discrimination. Proponent of multiculturalism Dean A. Harris (1995) in this regard demands, “. . . a meritocracy was created in this country that can account for, and determines, the economic and political placement of each and every member of society, no matter what color” (p. xii). Meritocracy was created so that no one would be biased, and everyone would get to participate in the socio, economic and political affairs. However, whether it is the admission procedure or the job opportunity there is discrimination and the people with the connections to higher authority are definite to grab the opportunity regardless of their qualification. So, to practically implement, the policies seems to be a difficult task and likewise becomes the idea of inclusiveness. The state has tried to address the issues of religion, culture and language providing recognition. It shows tolerance and acceptance by observing the public holidays in different religious as well as cultural festivals. However, with the dominance of Hinduism it seems favoring religion. Holidays during Dashain and Tihar are longer than any other. Different organizations provide allowances during Dashain but the people who celebrate Budha Jayanti, Christmas does not get any allowance during their major festivals. Recognition to every language is given as mother tongue but we use Nepali language as a medium of teaching learning in the classroom. Written rights, privileges, and recognition are good to see but if it can't be implemented properly it creates social tension in the country. Cultural and religious differences are often seen as the reason for conflict in a nation so to successfully handle the situation is the prime requirement and as well as a challenge in itself.

Though the state has mentioned the right of citizenship to its people, in many cases it seems it has failed to do so. Modood (2008) regards citizenship in multiculturalism states: “Multicultural citizenship is to make citizenship-inclusion or integration possible on terms that respect all and in particular those who are racially excluded, culturally stigmatized and whose subjectivities are marginalized or dismissed in similar ways” (p. 550). He argues that citizenship should be inclusive and should not be biased in any way. Though the constitution has guaranteed the right to citizenship for all the Nepalese, it has failed to address the year's long issue of Madhesi citizenship. The way girls and women are “negotiating their identities through the space and roles allocated to them in a patriarchal social order,” (Sherma, 2025, p. 98), different indigenous communities are seeking a space to negotiate their inclusion and integration. They also have not got the proper representation in political space as per their population. The bigger demand for the time is to solve such issues.

Today's societies and nations are becoming more complex because of economic and cultural globalization. Development in technology and access to media and the internet has made the world

a global village. In context of Nepal tourism also plays the vital role in globalization. It brings socio cultural changes. Not only has that it become threat to different indigenous culture but values of the society, lifestyle, food habit, traditional norms etc. Inter-ethnic marriage also are common which brings fusion in the original culture so the issue of hybridity along with the question of cultural identity will come ahead. So, it is challenging to come up with the solution.

Implications

The researcher would like to share the following implications to make Nepal a more multicultural country.

1. The government should use explicit language in the constitution and focus on the feasibility of the execution of policies and pay less attention to theoretical aspects from marginalized communities' viewpoints.
2. The government should include more diverse voices and encourage the participation of marginalized communities in decision-making processes.
3. The government should include more practical ideas about revising school curricula to incorporate mother tongues based on the available expertise and resources across Nepal.
4. The government should treat the condition of multiculturalism as an opportunity to strengthen national unity and share national resources equitably and resolve problems through dialogues rather than cunning strategies and force.
5. The government should enforce strict laws against caste-based, gender-based and communal violence. Every decision has to be made on a democratic basis.
6. The government should empower incapable and people from underprivileged to compete at the local and national level for opportunities so that the quota systems are not needed.
7. National symbols and emblems must be named after geographical locations, natural resources, and local cultures. Every culture must be preserved and prioritized by the state.

Conclusion

The increasing demand of identity politics and politics of recognition has compelled the state to be more liberal, inclusive and participatory. The declaration of the federal republic in itself shows the bigger strategy of inclusion and a way to guarantee the representation, recognition

and accommodation to marginalized, indigenous, minority, ethnic and culturally diverse groups. Though there are many opportunities, the challenge of multiculturalism rules them out. The biggest challenge as a cultural, religious, ethnically and linguistically diverse country is to maintain peace and harmony. Diversity can lead to conflict and violence among groups if the differences are not handled with care. Demands for identity and recognition are other bigger challenges to be resolved. Keeping national integrity intact also becomes equally difficult. The differences should be resolved by accommodating and giving recognition. So as the proponents of multiculturalism have suggested the only possible way to overcome these challenges is through dialogue and communications.

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