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**Federalization in**

**Nepal**

## **Post-Federal Power Devolution in Nepal:**

Case studies from Koshi, Madhesh,  
and Sudurpaschim Provinces



**THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY**  
MERSHON CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL  
SECURITY STUDIES

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The Mershon Center for International Security Studies collaborated with International Alert Nepal, an international non-governmental peacebuilding organization, to conduct a peace audit of Nepal's progress in implementing the 2015 Constitution's commitments to political and social inclusion. This publication is one of three reports emerging from the project, which examines the intersecting roles of cultural identity, insecurity, and federalism in shaping contemporary ethnic- and caste-based conflict in Nepal. The project benefited from the participation of many experts, whose contributions we gratefully acknowledge.

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International Alert Nepal  
<https://www.international-alert.org/locations/nepal/>

*Cover photo provided by International Alert.*

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# INTRODUCTION

## BACKGROUND

The Nepali state, which is diverse and geographically extreme, was unified in the second half of the eighteenth century through territorial conquest by the then-Gorkha principality.<sup>1</sup> As noted by Harka Gurung, “Most states grow round a nucleus and expand by conquest and aggrandizement.”<sup>2</sup> The Nepali state, comprised of multiple nations with distinctive social characteristics, became a contact zone, where Indo-Aryan, caste-stratified Hindus dominated Tibeto-Burman, egalitarian tribal communities. This power dynamic shaped Nepal’s state ideology—with Hinduism as the state religion and Nepali as the lingua franca—and marginalizing indigenous and lower-caste groups.<sup>3</sup>

The manifestation of the aforementioned legacy continues, and systemic discrimination persists with elites undermining marginalized communities through entrenched casteism and cultural biases. However, anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista describes this as a state of “learned helplessness,” where low castes, thus defined, are discriminated on the basis of ritual status and the indigenous people on cultural grounds.<sup>4</sup> However, various social movements, led by politically aware and active groups, have encouraged marginalized groups to reflect upon the anomalies and raise their voices for equality in all forms. Through these social movements, the established pattern of dominance is being challenged by activist groups based on ethnic, linguistic, and regional allegiances.



Federalism, one of the major outcomes of Nepal’s 2015 Constitution, came into being after decades of political contestation, violent and nonviolent movements, internal and external political pressures, and even the force of nature.<sup>5</sup> **Federalism seeks to decentralize power through a three-tier governance structure (federal, provincial, and local) and address long-standing demands to right historical injustices and promote inclusivity.**

Article 138 of the Constitution highlights the state’s progressive restructuring: “The state shall be made inclusive and restructured into a progressive, Democratic Federal System.” It brings an end to discrimination based on class, caste, language, gender, culture, religion, and region, eliminates the previous centralized and unitary state structure, and guarantees political representation from all communities.<sup>6</sup> Keil and Alber aptly point out that federalism has become increasingly used as a tool of peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and democratization in deeply divided, ethnically heterogeneous and post-conflict societies by balancing shared decision-making and rule with regional autonomy.<sup>7</sup>

It is imperative to evaluate federalism’s efficacy in transforming power dynamics and improving the lives of marginalized communities. A study was necessary to evaluate whether the shift in governance system, implemented in response to demands for greater autonomy and representation (particularly from ethnic minorities who felt sidelined by the Kathmandu-centric politic), genuinely empowered marginalized communities or continued existing power hierarchies.

Despite the constitutional promises of inclusivity, historically marginalized groups in provinces like Koshi, Madhesh, and Sudurpaschim continue to face systemic barriers of various forms. Issues such as bureaucratic inefficiencies, tokenistic representation, elite capture of resources, unresolved identity grievances, and low fiscal performance suggest that federalism has yet to deliver.<sup>8</sup>

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study investigates how decentralization has altered local power dynamics and their impact on historically marginalized communities in Koshi, Madhesh, and Sudurpaschim provinces. It specifically focuses on the Kiranti, Madhesi, and Tharu communities in these provinces and aims to understand the following:



How decentralization has shifted power dynamics at the local level.



How these changes have influenced the social and political positioning of major marginalized groups, specifically the Kiranti, Madhesi, and Tharu communities.



How these shifting dynamics shape the responsiveness to the needs, demands, and aspirations of marginalized communities.

## RESEARCH QUESTION



The research question at the heart of this study is: **How has decentralization affected the power dynamics and impacted Kiranti, Madhesi, and Tharu groups at the local level in Koshi, Madhesh, and Sudurpaschim provinces?**

This study investigates which local actors (e.g., community leaders, civil society organizations, local politicians, and informal networks) have gained or lost power and why. It also aims to determine their level of power and influence, how it is exercised, and how this interplay influences the needs, demands, and aspirations of marginalized communities.

## STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER

This paper is organized into seven sections. Section one describes the study's context, purpose, research questions, and objectives. Section two outlines the methodology, including research design, data collection methods, and limitations. Section three explains the analytical framework that has been used in interpreting power dynamics. Section four provides an overview of Nepal's constitutional and legal provisions as they relate to local governance. Section five highlights key cross-cutting findings on how power has been emerging, who holds that power, their influence, and how they are exercising it. Section six presents three detailed case studies of the Kiranti in Koshi, Madhesi in Madhesh, and Tharu in Sudurpaschim provinces. These studies examine historical marginalization and analyze mobilization efforts, and findings are presented. Section seven synthesizes these findings through common analysis, drawing out shared patterns and distinct trajectories. The paper concludes with a summary of the study's key insights.

# METHODOLOGY

## RESEARCH DESIGN

The design of this study is qualitative case study to explore power dynamics at the local level and its impact to historically marginalized communities due to the decentralization of Nepal. The study identified three caste/ethnic groups: Kiranti (Koshi Province), Madhesi (Madhesh Province), and Tharu (Sudurpaschim Province). They were identified based on their population size, history of marginalization, significant mobilization around ethnic-based state restructuring, and geographical representation. The study design is based on the theory of power dynamics—mainly Steven Lukes’s three dimensions of power (visible, hidden, and invisible)—to understand the historical and current experiences, power shifts, and impacts on those marginalized in each of the identified communities.<sup>9</sup>

## DATA COLLECTION METHODS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The data collection methodology involved qualitative data from key informant interviews, focused group discussions, and power mapping exercises. Field data was further substantiated by secondary data from scholarly articles, newspaper articles, government and nongovernmental reports, and policy documents.

This research employed case examples to analyze the post-constitution power devolution in three provinces: Koshi, Madhesh, and Sudurpaschim. These provinces made significant contributions toward making federalism possible: the Limbuwan-Khumban movement in Koshi, a series of movements in Madhesh, and the Tharuhat and Akhanda Sudurpaschim movements in Sudurpaschim. All movements and protests had ethnic and cultural identity at their core. Primary data collection came from community leaders, elected officials, civil society representatives, journalists, and residents from six local government units: Ilam and Bhadrapur (Koshi), Bardibas and Janakpur (Madhesh), and Dhangadi and Tikapur (Sudurpaschim).

Qualitative data were analyzed with the approach of thematic analysis aligning with the adopted analytical framework. Transcripts from key informant interviews and focus group discussions were systematically coded and anonymized, and key highlights were further filtered for thematic analysis. The analytical framework focused on assessing power dynamics and empowerment outcomes for marginalized communities within social movements, interest groups, and identity politics.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

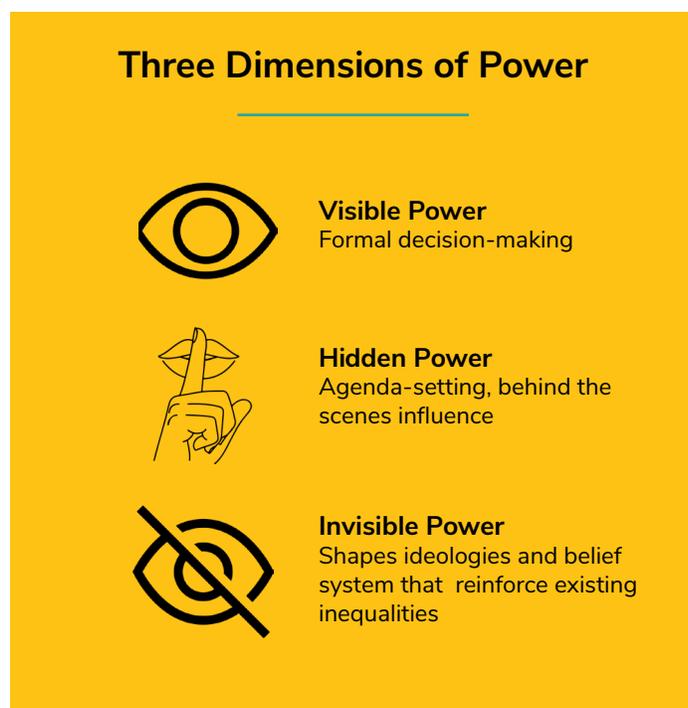
The study has several limitations, including a limited geographic scope, a focus on selected ethnic groups within Nepal’s diverse context, potential respondent bias, and a limited number of respondents despite efforts to make it as representative as possible. Additionally, the study faced resource and time constraints. The study’s generalizability of its findings is limited to the selected municipalities within the three provinces and three ethnic groups. Consequently, these findings may not be representative of all provinces or ethnic groups of Nepal. Given the politically sensitive nature of the study, and each respondent’s own experiences or observations of marginalization, their responses may have been influenced by personal biases or self-censorship. For a study of such scope, there was limited time and resources. These limitations were duly considered in the complex context of Nepal and the evolving nature of federalism in Nepal. Further, the study’s focus was on its key purpose, not all aspects of federalism.

The following case examples from Koshi, Madhesh, and Sudurpaschim take different trajectories post-federalism. In Koshi and Sudurpaschim, Kiranti and Tharu groups still hold grudges over their unmet demands for identity-based federal demarcation. Madhesh, on the other hand, continues to grapple with unfulfilled promises despite getting the name they exacted. Even if the case examples followed the same research objectives and approach, they might read differently; however, at times the issues and statements might be repeated.

# ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical framework for this case study was based on the analysis of power dynamics at the local level in the context of Nepal's decentralization. It seeks to understand how decentralization—in the form of devolved decision-making jurisdiction and shifting resources from the central to local governments—has been reshaping power hierarchies. It specifically examines how this has impacted historically marginalized groups, namely the Kiranti, Madhesi, and Tharu communities in the Koshi, Madhesh and Sudurpaschim provinces, respectively. This study was conducted with the assumption that local actors, including community leaders, civil society organizations, local politicians, informal networks and traditional institutions, play a crucial role in governance. However, the power and influence of these different actors varies based on their access to resources, political affiliations, networks, leadership, and historical legacies, as well as their ability to navigate newly formed decentralized structures. Therefore, the focus of the study was to identify the actors who have gained or lost power due to decentralization and examine the underlying reasons for these shifts in terms of social practices, relations, and evolving political alliances.

The analytical framework incorporated theories of power, particularly Steven Lukes's three dimensions of power: visible power, which refers to formal decision-making and authority; hidden power, which involves agenda-setting and behind-the-scenes influence; and invisible power, which shapes ideologies and belief system that reinforce existing inequalities.<sup>10</sup> By applying this theoretical lens, the case study attempted to unpack how decentralization affected both formal and informal power networks that influence the formal governance mechanisms and operations at the local level. This study examines how constitutional provisions, policies, and laws that embody the implementation of decentralization provide insights into how power is distributed, contested, and legitimized in the local context. It questions whether decentralization has enabled greater political participation and representation for marginalized communities, or if power has remained concentrated within dominant groups, thereby leading to the reinforcement of existing social hierarchies.

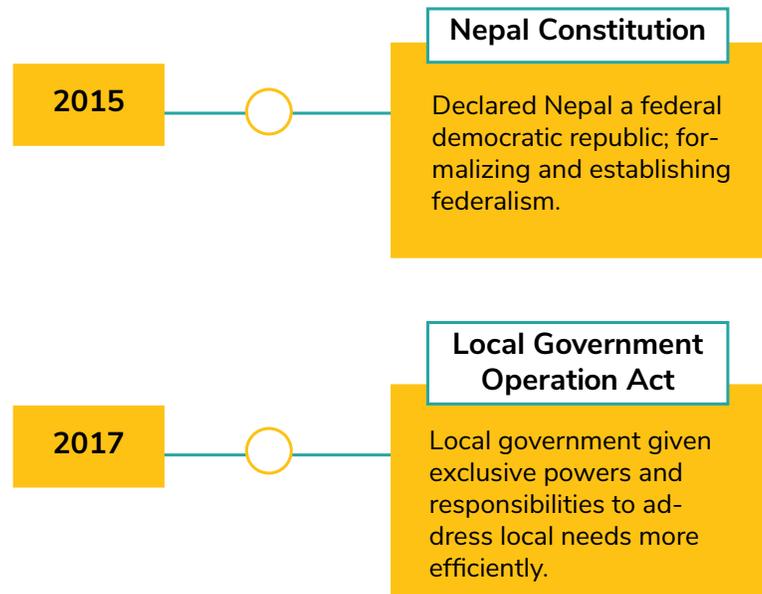


Furthermore, the framework employed an intersectional approach to assess how decentralization affects different marginalized communities in distinct ways.<sup>11</sup> Kiranti, Madhesi, and Tharu groups have historically faced exclusion due to ethnic, linguistic, and sociopolitical factors, and their experiences with decentralization are shaped by these preexisting conditions. By analyzing these conditions, the study considered how factors such as caste, ethnicity, historical grievances, and existing mobilization intersect with governance to create diverse outcomes. It also investigated how decentralized governance responded to the needs, demands, and aspirations of these groups through increased access to political power and inclusive service delivery.

By mapping the changing landscape of power and influence, this analytical framework attempted to provide a comprehensive understanding of how decentralization affects governance at the local level. It sought to evaluate whether decentralization reinforced inclusive decision-making and equitable resource distribution, or if it exacerbated preexisting inequalities by empowering certain actors at the expense of others. This approach allowed for a critical examination of decentralization's effectiveness in addressing historical marginalization and promoting meaningful political participation for the Kiranti, Madhesi, and Tharu communities.

# CONSTITUTIONALLY MANDATED JURISDICTION OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Nepal ushered in a new era with the 2015 promulgation of its new Constitution, which declared the country a federal democratic republic. This brought the country's common people hopes and expectations for a more prosperous Nepal. The Constitution of 2015 formalized and established federalism, and the Local Government Operation Act, 2017 served as one of the key legal frameworks for its implementation. Through the new constitution, the local government was granted special powers and responsibilities for the first time in the country's history. The Local Government Operation Act, 2017 allows local actors and representatives to function in consideration of local needs and expectations. Service could be provided at greater speed. This contrasts with the previous centralized form of governance, which often caused delays in service delivery.<sup>12</sup>



Schedule 8 of the Constitution outlines the exclusive powers of local governments, which include crucial responsibilities such as basic health and education services, local infrastructure development, local taxation, water supply, sanitation, agriculture, and disaster management. They are also mandated to provide civil registration services like birth, death, marriage, and migration records. Furthermore, local governments have the authority to prepare and implement their own laws, policies, and plans tailored to the specific needs of their communities. They manage local natural resources, maintain law and order through community-level policing, and are responsible for preserving local heritage and culture. In addition, local governments play a pivotal role in service delivery and grassroots development through their administrative and financial autonomy. With the enactment of the Local Government Operation Act, 2017, these jurisdictions have been operationalized, empowering municipalities and rural municipalities to function as self-governing entities capable of addressing local needs more efficiently and fostering inclusive development.

Among the major attributes of the constitution are the incorporation of expanded social and cultural rights, including group rights and empowerment of women and minorities, and its emphasis on the inclusiveness and proportional representation of all segments of the society.<sup>13</sup> Article 7 of the Constitution declares that all mother tongues spoken in Nepal are national languages, reflecting the country's commitment to cultural and social diversity. Furthermore, Article 7 (1) and (2) envisaged that apart from Nepali, which has been stated as the language of official business, a province can also select one or more national languages that are spoken by the majority of the people in the province as the language of official business.<sup>14</sup>

The Nepal Constitution's provision of seven "Other" Commissions to secure the rights of marginalized groups is another stepping-stone toward inclusiveness and democratization. Part 27 establishes seven "Other" Commissions: the National Women Commission, the National Dalit Commission, the National Inclusion Commission, the Indigenous Nationalities Commission, the Madhesi Commission, the Tharu Commission, and the Muslim Commission.<sup>15</sup> These commissions were established to improve the socioeconomic condition of underprivileged communities and protect and promote the human rights of specified marginalized and minority groups. To measure their efficacy, Article 265 of the Constitution requires these commissions to be reviewed by the Federal Parliament ten years after the Constitution's promulgation.

The Constitution of Nepal 2015 has paved the way for gender equality and political inclusion in all tiers of government. The principle of the proportional inclusion of women was operationalized in the form of gender quotas during the 2017 local election. The Local Level Election Act, 2017 mandates that in each ward, the smallest administrative unit that collectively forms a municipality or rural municipality, there will be one chair and four ward members. Two of them must be women, including one Dalit woman.<sup>16</sup> The Local Level Election Act, 2017 also stipulates that political parties must put forward at least one female candidate for either mayor or deputy mayor of the municipality.

In terms of fiscal or economic decentralization, Nepal's Constitution mandates that the government allocate and distribute equalization grants to provincial and local governments based on their expenditure needs and capacity in generating revenue. Schedule 8 of the Constitution empowers the local government to exercise fiscal decentralization.<sup>17</sup>

The constitutional framework for fiscal decentralization in Nepal is guided by intergovernmental grants, which fulfill a significant purpose to address the fiscal gap created by expenditure and revenue assignment. Three acts passed in 2017—the National Natural Resources and Fiscal Commission Act, Intergovernmental Fiscal Management Act, and the Local Government Operation Act—provide the legal framework for fiscal transfers, defining the transfers and distribution criteria for grants and revenue sharing. The provincial and local governments receive four types of grants: fiscal equalization, conditional, special, and matching. Provincial governments are also mandated to transfer funds to local governments. Revenue sharing between the three tiers is mandated as a proportion of revenue intake, with the federal government keeping the bulk (70 percent of VAT and custom excise taxes), and the rest shared between provincial and local governments (15 percent each for VAT and excise taxes).<sup>18</sup>

### Seven 'Other' Commissions to Secure Rights of Marginalized Groups

1. The National Women Commission
2. The National Dalit Commission
3. The National Inclusion Commission
4. The Indigenous Nationalities Commission
5. The Madhesi Commission
6. The Tharu Commission
7. The Muslim Commission

# CROSS-CUTTING FINDINGS ON LOCAL POWER DYNAMICS

## THE MAYOR OR CHAIRPERSON AS A CENTRALIZED POWER FIGURE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

In the federal system, even though power is supposed to be shared more broadly at the local level, local decision-making power tends to be consolidated around elected local officials, particularly mayors and chairpersons. Local governments have emerged as attractive platforms for political actors due to their crucial role in managing and deciding local development, social services, and resource mobilization. This has created conditions for an excessive concentration of power among local officials, particularly the mayor and chairperson, whose positions benefit from constitutional immunity.<sup>19</sup>

The Constitution of Nepal and subsequent policies and acts grant local government extensive authority and autonomy. They are entrusted with wide-ranging responsibilities, including local infrastructure, basic education, health services, agriculture, taxation, and local development. Despite being the lowest among the three tiers of government, local governments are granted not only broad jurisdiction but also strong safeguards for elected representatives' tenure under the constitutional framework. This generally allows them to serve full terms unless removed under exceptional circumstances such as resignation, death, legal disqualification, or expiry of the tenure.<sup>20</sup> These provisions, along with power devolution, have contributed to the emergence of mayors and chairpersons as the most powerful actors at the local level.

While the provincial and federal assembly have constitutionally provisioned opposition, local governments tend to operate in environments that are largely immune from it. Such political insulation enables mayors and chairpersons to exercise decision-making power with minimal opposition, effectively expanding their role beyond the typical expectations for elected representatives in a democracy.

These provisions have also increased criticism in recent days. A major concern raised by a political leader and social activists from the Sudurpaschim Province during a key informant interview is whether the existing delegation of power and positional safeguard, centered on a highly empowered mayor and chairperson may risk undermining democratic principles by placing too much authority in the hands of a single actor. Ultimately, the effectiveness and integrity of Nepal's local governance may depend not only on institutional mechanisms but also on the ethical disposition and leadership capacity of key local government office holders.<sup>21</sup>

## THE SHRINKING ROLE OF CIVIC SOCIETY AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Decentralization has rearranged the local power landscape by limiting the role of civil society organizations. Civil society organizations and movements have played crucial roles in community empowerment, advocacy, service delivery, and governance during the years of conflict and political transition. During the absence of the elected local government for fifteen years, civil society played an instrumental intermediary role between the state and citizens. Nongovernmental organizations, community-based organizations, and social movements were instrumental to support the local government units in facilitating dialogue, extending essential services, promoting accountability, and empowering marginalized communities.<sup>22</sup> Such roles, delegated by the 2015 Constitution to the jurisdiction of the local government, have been significantly diminished and replaced.

The robust structure and legitimacy of local government, with its elected mayors or chairperson, ward chairs, ward members, and bureaucratic workforce, now directly oversees many of these responsibilities. In this new governance model, local elected representatives have been communicating directly with their constituents and do not need civil society actors to be intermediaries.



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This shift has been accelerated by the increased people's access to social media and allowing elected representatives to connect with the public without intermediaries. Social media platforms are commonly used by the community, and elected representatives are using them for mass communication about development activities, promoting political narratives, and managing public perception.<sup>23</sup> This direct access has contributed to limiting civil society's traditional role as intermediaries in citizen-state engagement.

The situation is further compounded by the decline in the professionalism and independence of the media sector. Widely available social media platforms have increased citizen journalism, which is largely uncensored and seeks to generate viral content. This form of journalism is gaining public traction and trust, and it has disrupted traditional media ecosystems in Nepal. These platforms and the rise of new media offer opportunities for expression and public vigilance, but they also facilitate misinformation, poor quality journalism with little to no accountability and contribute to the erosion of ethical journalistic standards. Young journalists are often underpaid, poorly trained, and susceptible to political influence and financial incentives. In this environment, critical and investigative journalism, which once supported civil society's efforts to hold power to account, is on the decline.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, the common allegation in many municipalities is that mayors have been misusing the delegated power to consolidate authority, and to control and redistribute local resources for personal gain. Some mayors have been channeling local resources to nongovernmental organizations founded by their cadres. Similarly, they use their affiliated media outlets to disseminate controlled public communications, often shaping narratives in ways that compromise public interest and weaken accountability.<sup>25</sup> In effect, these affiliated organizations and media outlets function informally as extensions of their political and administrative arms and often receive preferential access to municipal funds, grants, contracts, and vital information. This preferential treatment diminishes opportunities for independent civic oversight. Such practices of conflict of interest are used not only for resource mobilization but also to control narratives and suppress dissenting voices. This trend reflects a shift toward clientelism, where power is centralized in fewer hands as local governance gains increased jurisdiction and resources.

## CONSOLIDATING POWER INTO THE HANDS OF THE FEW

Foreign labor migration is changing the sociopolitical fabric at the local level, which is shifting the balance of power. Significant numbers of youth have left the country or aspire to go abroad to study or work, particularly to the Gulf countries, Japan, Malaysia, and South Korea. This has had an alarming effect on the demographic structure of rural areas. The advantage of a youth bulge, once viewed as an asset that could transform the country, has instead facilitated the elite's dominance of social and political spaces. The young people who were the drivers of social and political reform in various critical junctures of the country are now largely absent, leaving a vacuum in civic participation and community leadership. Those who remain are often frustrated, disillusioned by the centralized political power structure, and feel that their voices and potential for meaningful change are stifled.

This vacuum has led to a consolidation of power in the hands of a few individuals, often local elites. As established residents with wider networks, local elites have been taking multiple roles within the community,

simultaneously serving as political leaders, civil society leaders, formal network members, entrepreneurs, and representatives of various community organizations. Their ability to occupy these overlapping roles enables them to maintain strong alliances and control over local decision-making processes, often with little accountability.

These individuals usually maintain close relationships with elected representatives at all levels, from local to senior politicians. Such relationships are often mutually beneficial. They play an intermediary role between the government and the local population, controlling the distribution of state resources and, in turn, helping to ensure electoral loyalty. As a result, there is a lack of opposition voices. Although the local government acts as a development entity, the constitution does not provide for an elected opposition within the municipal council. Instead, the opposition voices for accountability are expected to come from civil society, media, and younger, reform-minded individuals. The absence of youth voices and the monopolization of local power by a handful of individuals have been stifling democratic participation, weakening transparency and accountability, and reinforcing the status quo, thereby making it difficult for alternative voices or new leadership to emerge. This consolidation of power is perpetuating entrenched systems of patronage and disproportionately affecting marginalized communities who lack access to these closed networks.

## THE DECLINING ROLE OF TRADITIONAL LEADERS

The roles and influence of traditional leaders such as *Maijans* and *Bhalmansa* are declining.<sup>26</sup> As trusted cultural figureheads, they manage conflict, uphold cultural practices, and make decisions within their respective communities. For instance, in Tharu areas, Bhalmansa are elected annually during the Maghi festival, and their role is to oversee social harmony and resource management.<sup>27</sup> A local judicial committee, led by the deputy mayor or vice chairperson, is responsible for community mediation and conflict resolution, roles that were traditionally carried out by Bhalmansa and Maijans in the Tharu and Madhesi communities, respectively.<sup>28</sup> Under the Local Governance Operation Act of 2017, such informal practices are not recognized. However, in the community setting, the roles of traditional leaders are transitioning. The inclusion of women



Elders. Bhaktapur, Bagmati Province. Credit: Lisanne W

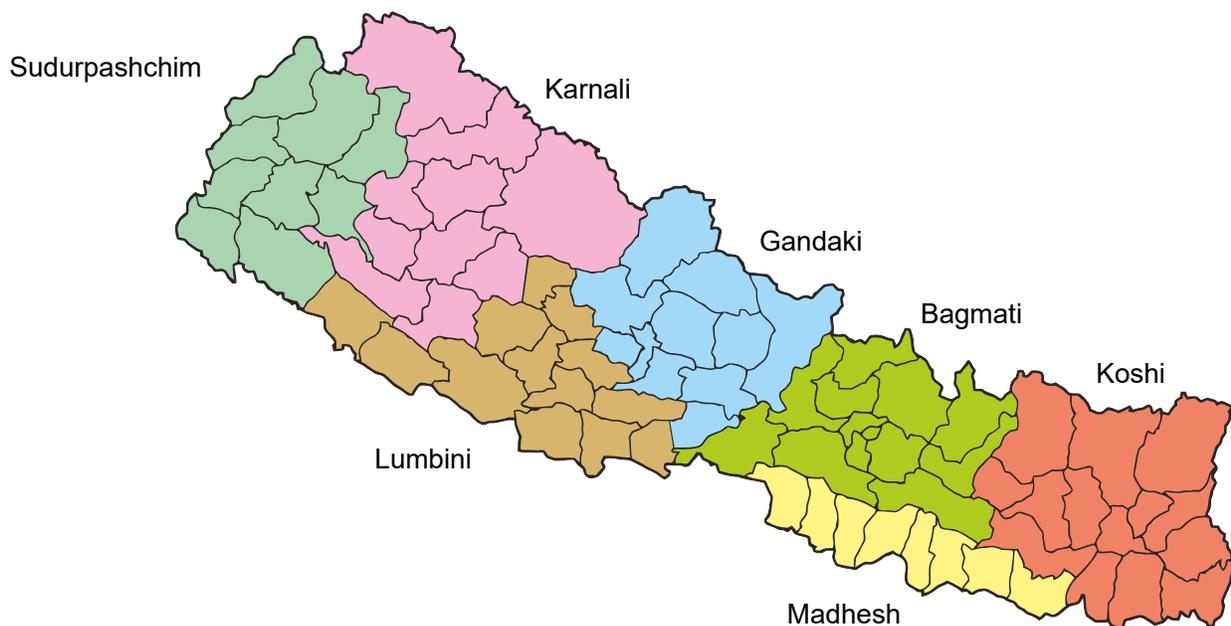
and non-Tharu individuals in democratic elections, while progressive, has contributed to a reduction in traditional leaders' autonomy and influence in their respective communities. Further, their roles are now subject to formal oversight. The decline in traditional leadership influence has significant cultural implications. These leaders were custodians of indigenous practices that are essential for maintaining community identity, and political representation may or may not prioritize long-observed cultural practices.

# CASE STUDIES: KIRANT, MADHESH, AND THARU

## RATIONALE FOR CASE SELECTION

The selection of the Kiranti (Koshi Province), Madhesi (Madhesh Province), and Tharu (Lumbini and Sudurpaschim Provinces) communities as case studies is based on their distinct yet interconnected roles in Nepal's sociopolitical transformation and federal restructuring. All three groups have faced entrenched marginalization and systemic exclusion historically through state policies, cultural erasure, or political underrepresentation. Despite their ethnic and geographic differences, they share a legacy of resistance and active participation in Nepal's 10-year armed conflict and were among the most vocal advocates for federalism as a pathway to recognition, autonomy, and equitable development.

These groups were central to the demand for identity-based provinces and continue to influence debates around inclusive governance. Their large population sizes, organized social movements, and strong local leadership provide rich ground for analyzing how federalism has impacted their aspirations and everyday lives. By focusing on the Kiranti, Madhesi, and Tharu, these case studies aim to capture the diversity of Nepal's identity politics while illuminating broader patterns of post-conflict state restructuring, political inclusion, and social justice.



Map of Nepal, showing Koshi, Madhesh, and Sudurpaschim provinces. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

# CASE STUDY ON THE KIRANTI COMMUNITY IN KOSHI PROVINCE

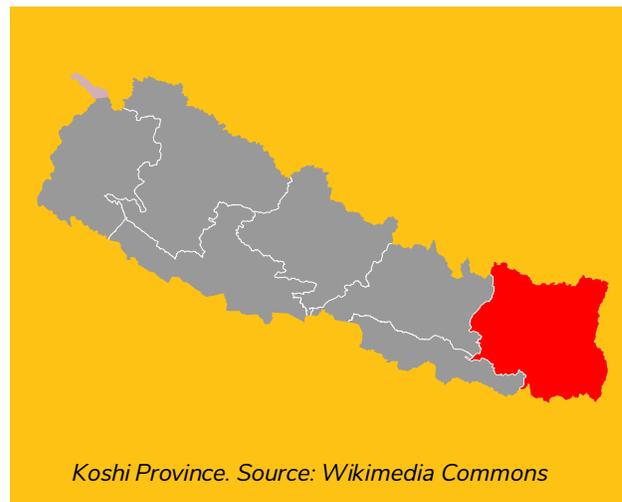
## INTRODUCTION

Upon Nepal's transition to a federal republic in 2015, the provinces were provisionally designated by numerical identifiers, such as Province No. 1 (later named Koshi), Province No. 2 (later named Madhesh), and so on. Province No. 7 was later named Sudurpaschim Province. This interim arrangement reflects Article 295 (2) of the Constitution, which mandates that the respective provincial assemblies determine the official names of the provinces through a two-thirds majority vote, ensuring broad consensus in the naming process. The Kirant community's grievances over the province's name, "Koshi," escalated into various protests, including the "No Koshi" and "No Cable Car" protests, which stem from their desire to be recognized for their ethnic identity.<sup>29</sup>

Nepal, a country of cultural diversity, transitioned to federalism with the adoption of a new constitution in 2015, bringing a shared sense of hope and optimism to many after more than a decade of political instability.<sup>30</sup> The constitution, however, was not welcomed by all. The celebration in Kathmandu was marred by protests in various parts of Nepal, especially in Provinces 2 and 7. While Province No. 1 was quiet at the beginning, tensions turned violent when political parties began disputing the province's name. The first provincial parliament failed to reach consensus between different political parties. The province was later named "Koshi" during the second term.

Koshi Province is a highly diverse region where the dominant indigenous groups are Kiranti people. They are the majority population group in the province's hilly areas, while the Terai region has a mix of caste groups with a notable presence of the Kiranti community, who have migrated there over the decades. The ongoing conflict over naming the province reflects these demographic divides and history of Kiranti marginalization by the state.

The term *Kirant* denotes the Sunuwar, Rai, Yakkha, and Limbu communities who are the native and ancient inhabitants of the eastern region of Nepal. The geography of Kirant is divided into three sections: Wallo Kirant, Majh Kirant, and Pallo Kirant. Wallo Kirant is predominantly inhabited by the Sunuwar, and Majh Kirant is predominantly inhabited by the Rai. The Limbu, along with a small number of Yakkha, primarily occupy Pallo Kirant.<sup>31</sup>



This case study explored the extent to which federalism has addressed or accommodated the Kirant community's historical grievances in Koshi Province. It specifically investigates the challenges the Kiranti face in securing their political identity, achieving political representation, and accessing rights and resources within the framework of local governance.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF KIRANT MARGINALIZATION

The Kiranti trace their origins to eastern Nepal. Archaeological evidence suggests their presence over the Kathmandu Valley and surrounding hills. However, they were dethroned by the powerful Lichavi Dynasty established in Kathmandu Valley around AD 465 and subsequently retreated eastward after losing power.<sup>32</sup>

A travelogue written in the eighteenth century mentioned that the Kiranti occupied the eastern territory of Nepal and extended their influence into what are now Rangpur in Bangladesh and Dinajpur in India.<sup>33</sup> Much later, the Gorkha unification under Prithvi Narayan Shah marked a pivotal shift to what was then considered to be the Kirant Limbu autonomous region. In the eighteenth century, during King Prithvi Narayan Shah's unification, Limbuwan was brought under central rule through Limbuwan–Gorkha treaty of 1774 (also called Nun-Pani Sandhi) that guaranteed Limbu chiefs hereditary land rights and local autonomy under the Kipat system. With this they were incorporated into a larger identity of Nepal.<sup>34</sup> The Kipat system provided a framework within which the Kiranti were able to retain a degree of local autonomy that was unique in Nepal, the most striking example of a deal struck between the central government and local powers.<sup>35</sup>

The Kipat system was formally abolished in 1964 through the second amendment to the Land Act as part of a broader national land reform initiative aimed at consolidating state authority and standardizing land tenure systems. This reform sought to integrate traditional tenure arrangements, including Kipat, into the state-governed Raikar system.<sup>36</sup>

The abolition of the Kipat system resulted in the profound alienation of the Limbu community by dismantling their traditional land rights, collective governance structures, and cultural identity tied to this unique tenure system. The conversion of Kipat land into Raikar tenure transferred legal authority to the state, effectively eroding the political and cultural autonomy of Limbu leaders and communities.<sup>37</sup> This loss has been widely perceived as a complete dispossession of ancestral rights and represents one of the most notable examples of state intrusion at the local level. Once considered the “aboriginal inhabitants,” the Limbus were absorbed into the Nepali state, and their transformation from autonomous tribal communities into tax-paying peasants was exacerbated by the loss of Kipat land. Consequently, they were not only dispossessed of land but also alienated from their culture, identity, and traditional systems of authority.<sup>38</sup> Lionel Caplan explains this in *Land and Social Change in East Nepal: A Study of Hindu-Tribal Relations*:

“

*The abolition of the Kipat land tenure system disrupted Limbu cultural identity by turning land from a communal, inalienable resource into a state-controlled, tradable asset, undermining their traditional sense of belonging and community.*

His research highlights that Kipat was central to Limbu social and cultural life, not just a landholding system. The conversion of Kipat to Raikar land severed the Limbus' connection to their territory, creating a cultural rupture that went beyond economic impacts. The most significant consequences were for cultural identity, raising fundamental questions about how the Limbus could sustain their distinctive community identity without their traditional land tenure system.<sup>39</sup>

The domination of Khas-Arya over the Kirants continued under the Rana regime (1846–1951), further intensifying the marginalization.<sup>40</sup> Nepal's transition to a monarchy-led democracy after 1951 saw the continuation of land reforms that favored Khas settlers and diminished Kirant control over their ancestral domains.

The political marginalization of the Kirant in Koshi stems from centuries of exclusion from the state's power structures. The Mulukī Ain of 1854, which translates to “Civil Code” and was promulgated by the first Rana prime minister, formalized a caste hierarchy placing Khas-Arya (Brahmin-Chettri) at the top and relegating indigenous groups like the Kirant to lower rungs.<sup>41</sup> The Kiranti faced overt suppression during the Rana regime as their leaders faced imprisonment, and Kirant lands were confiscated and redistributed to loyalists.<sup>42</sup>

Even though the current constitution declared Nepal a secular state, long-practiced policies favoring Hinduism have undermined the cultural practices of other communities. The 2021 census shows that while 74.8 percent of residents in Koshi Province are Hindu, the Kirant religion is practiced by 12.5 percent—a significant minority.<sup>43</sup> Caplan's *Land and Social Change in East Nepal* documents how Khas priests replaced Kirant spiritual leaders in

Limbu villages and enforced Sanskrit over Kirant languages.<sup>44</sup> The Panchayat System (1960–1990) under King Mahendra, intensified this suppression. The Nepal Education Policy of 1961 mandated the Nepali language in schools, sidelining Kirant dialects like Limbu and Rai.<sup>45</sup> Anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista notes in *Fatalism and Development* that this policy eroded Kirant oral traditions, *Mundhum*, which were not formally taught.<sup>46</sup>

Cultural recognition of the Kirant remains limited, despite slowly gaining momentum with various protests and political changes. The naming disputes of “No Koshi Protest” to “No Cable Car protests” against the encroachment of the sacred Mukumlung–Pathibhara temple area are attributed to that momentum, where long-marginalized groups were seeking to establish their socio-cultural and linguistic identities.<sup>47</sup> For the Kirant community, these spaces hold deep ancestral and religious significance, and their encroachment is perceived as an extension of historical marginalization.

## KIRANTI MOBILIZATION FOR ETHNIC FEDERALISM IN NEPAL

The Kiranti people have historically sought political recognition and autonomy within Nepal’s federal structure. Their mobilization for ethnic federalism gathered momentum after Nepal transitioned into a republic in 2008, following an interim constitution and abolition of the monarchy. The demand for ethnic-based federalism stemmed from historical marginalization, cultural suppression, and the desire to restore their preunification governance systems, such as the Limbuwan and Khambuwan autonomous regions. The Kiranti movement, alongside other indigenous and Madhesi groups, played a critical role in shaping Nepal’s federalism debate, advocating for provinces that reflected ethnic identities rather than neutral administrative divisions.

After 2006, as state restructuring discussions intensified, various Kiranti organizations and movements emerged, demanding an autonomous Kirant province in the eastern hills of Nepal. The Federal Limbuwan State Council, Khambuwan National Front, and Kirant Workers Party became key players, organizing mass protests, road blockades, and strikes in the Koshi region. The demand was rooted in the belief that ethnic federalism would empower indigenous communities and allow them to preserve their language, culture, and self-governance. In contrast, Nepal’s dominant political forces, particularly Brahmin–Chhetri-led parties, opposed ethnic federalism, arguing that it could lead to national fragmentation.

Despite the Kiranti people’s strong mobilization, the 2015 Constitution rejected ethnic-based provinces, opting instead for a federal division that disregarded historical indigenous territories. This decision led to widespread resentment among Kiranti activists, resulting in continued protests and movements that demanded the renaming of Province No. 1 to “Kirant Province” instead of “Koshi Province.” While the state has remained resistant to these demands, the Kiranti movement continues to push for cultural recognition, indigenous rights, and a federal structure that genuinely reflects Nepal’s ethnic diversity.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### The Naming of Koshi Province: Historical Injustice or Communal?

Seven provinces were formed by the Government of Nepal and assigned numbers on a temporary basis. Each provincial assembly would decide on a permanent name by a two-thirds majority vote. Province 1 was the last province to officially move from its temporary name to Koshi Province in March 2023.<sup>48</sup> The name, derived from the Koshi River basin that comprises a number of rivers that flow through the provinces, sparked widespread protest and discontent, particularly among the Kiranti community. Kiranti activists, various indigenous organizations, and supporters of ethnic federalism saw the provincial assembly’s decision to put forward a neutral name instead of an identity-based one, such as “Kiranti Province,” as a denial of historical and cultural rights.<sup>49</sup> The denial of their ethnic name has been perceived as an attempt to dilute indigenous claims over the province, fueling discontent among the Kiranti people.

Proponents of a neutral name argued that the identity-based name is “communal” and “divisive.” But the Kiranti activists’ claim was that their demand for an ethnic-based name is based on historical justice, not communalism. The denial of their ethnic name reflects a broader pattern where indigenous voices are ignored in decision-making, further alienating the Kiranti community. Even though some rural municipalities have been allowed to use Kiranti names, the larger provincial identity remains disconnected from its indigenous roots, exacerbating feelings of exclusion.

Aligning with the sentiment of Kiranti people, a prominent scholar from Koshi Province said the following in a key informant interview:

*“The issue of naming the province as Kirant Province is felt sadly by the larger Kiranti community. A name carries a cultural significance. Naming the province Koshi does not reflect the Kiranti community’s ethnic identity for the province which they are native to. The Kiranti believe that the naming should be done in consideration of the history of the country and region. Even non-Kiranti people feel like that. Today discussing such issues is regarded as communal, which is wrong.”*

An elected representative of a local government from the Koshi Province echoed a similar sentiment:

*“Although the region today is multiethnic, historically it is the land of the Kirants. History should not be erased but respected.”*

## Weakened Kiranti Identity Agenda

The Kiranti identity movement in what is now Koshi Province was once a prominent force in Nepal’s ethno-federalism discourse. Alongside other identity-based movements across the country, the Kiranti movement played an important role in pushing Nepal toward federalism, albeit in a different shape than an ethnic-based provincial structure. After enduring years of violent conflict and a prolonged political transition focused on state restructuring, the new constitution brought a wave of hope among the people. It was seen as the dawn of political stability, development, social inclusion, and a peaceful future. As a result, once strong identity-based movements in the Kiranti heartland have declined and lost their momentum. While the underlying grievances of Kiranti communities remain unresolved, many Kiranti people have regained hope because of the new constitution’s promises of an inclusive state and subsequent federal election. The election of a local government after an 18-year hiatus has been particularly instrumental in fostering this new optimism. With the radical restructuring now complete, the influence and power of the identity-based political leadership, once central to the movement, have diminished.

One of the activists from Ilam reflected poignantly on this shift, stating, “We had a strong network and mobilization before 2015. The community people would come to protest whenever asked. Things have changed thereafter. We feel powerless. We are struggling to revive the similar public sentiment around identity issues. We still have our agenda, but there is no public traction on this.”

The weakening of identity-based politics has several overlapping factors. These include the new constitution’s emphasis on an inclusive state, the co-option of ethnic agendas by mainstream political parties, a shift of leadership toward mainstream political parties for greater political opportunity, and the accommodation of leadership in various elected positions generated by the new federal structures.

In the 2021 provincial assembly election, the political party founded specifically to promote Kiranti identity and advocate for an autonomous Kiranti province failed to elect a single parliamentarian. In the Koshi Provincial Assembly, the mainstream political parties hold an overwhelming majority, leading both the government and the main opposition. Among the 56 directly elected assembly members, only 15 belong to the Kiranti community.<sup>50</sup> Ram Bahadur Thapamagar argues in *Indigenous Nationalities and Politics in Nepal: Constitution Assembly to Parliament* that federalism has failed to politically empower indigenous groups politically. This is reflected in their declining representation in legislative bodies and the persistence of structural inequality, despite the initial promise of greater inclusion and change.<sup>51</sup> The underrepresentation of the Kiranti group in the provincial parliament is one of the causes of the Koshi Province's naming controversies.

Furthermore, many grassroots organizations that once energized the movement have lost funding, leadership, and purpose. The movement has been weakened by the absence of strategic leadership, internal divisions among Kiranti factions, and the blaming of identity politics as “divisive” and “communal.” As a result, the Kiranti identity agenda finds itself in a state of limbo. The sense of historic wrongdoing remains in the Kiranti people, as evidenced from the protests around the naming of Koshi Province. While still valid and not fully addressed, this issue lacks the visibility and mobilization power it once had.

### Increased Awareness About Kiranti Culture but Powerless to Preserve It

The decentralization of political authority and the reservation based on caste, language, and ethnicity has significantly increased political representation of the groups. Table 1 depicts the meaningful representation of indigenous people in Koshi Province's local government.

**Table 1: Representation of different caste/ethnic groups at the local government level in Koshi Province**

Caste/Ethnicity		Khas/Arya	Indigenous People	Madhesi	Dalit	Tharu	Muslim	Total	Percentage
Mayor	Men	21	24	1	0	1	0	<b>47</b>	95.92
	Women	1	1	0	0	0	0	<b>2</b>	4.08
Deputy Mayor	Men	5	2	0	0	0	0	<b>7</b>	14.29
	Women	26	12	2	0	2	0	<b>42</b>	85.71
Chairperson	Men	15	58	4	1	3	3	<b>84</b>	95.45
	Women	1	3	0	0	0	0	<b>4</b>	4.55
Vice Chairperson	Men	9	20	0	0	0	0	<b>29</b>	32.95
	Women	14	37	4	0	3	1	<b>59</b>	67.05
Ward Chair	Men	405	623	58	10	30	26	<b>1152</b>	99.57
	Women	1	3	0	0	1	0	<b>5</b>	0.43
Ward Member	Men	687	1291	113	44	58	62	<b>2255</b>	48.80
	Women	377	719	48	1164	43	15	<b>2366</b>	51.20
Total	Men	1142	2018	176	55	92	91	<b>3574</b>	59.05
	Women	420	775	54	1164	49	16	<b>2478</b>	40.95
Total		<b>1562</b>	<b>2793</b>	<b>230</b>	<b>1219</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>6052</b>	<b>100.00</b>
Percentage		25.81	46.15	3.80	20.14	2.33	1.77		

Source: J. B. Biswokarma, *Election Results 2022: Data Analytics on the Status of Gender and Social Inclusion* (Dignity Initiative: 2023), 27.

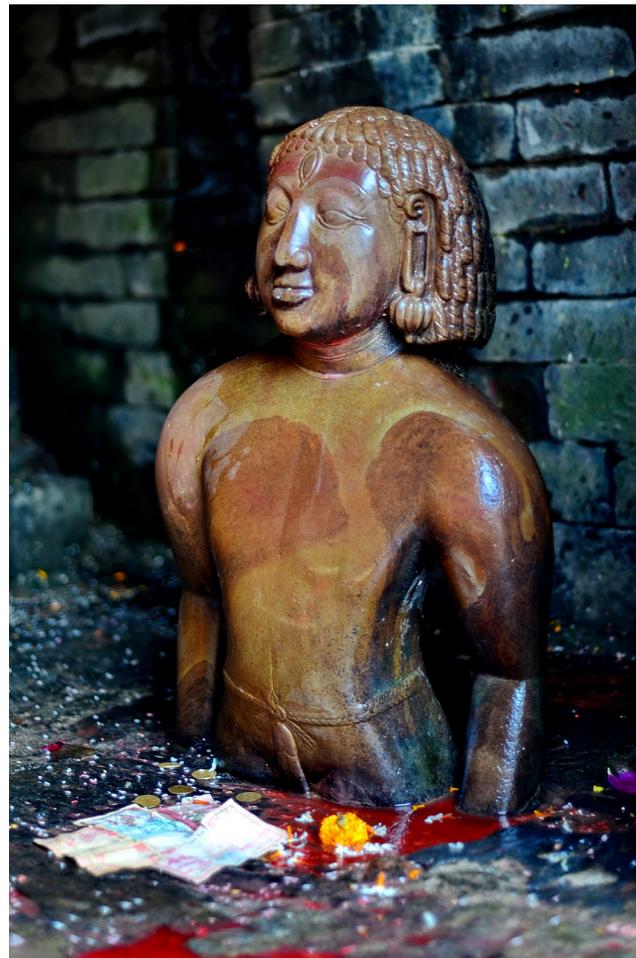
Local government has also provided a valuable platform for ethnic groups like the Kiranti to reclaim and express their cultural identity. In a culturally diverse province with over 130 ethnic communities, local government efforts have focused on celebrating and institutionalizing indigenous heritage.<sup>52</sup> Symbolic actions, including the installation of statues of Kiranti cultural figures such as Falgunanda Lingden, renaming municipalities after indigenous culture and its legacy, organizing festivals that highlight Kiranti traditions, and creating Kiranti museum and cultural centers, have become visible markers of ethnic pride and historical recognition.<sup>53</sup>

These steps have contributed to cultural consciousness and preservation among the Kiranti people, who faced attempts to assimilate into the hill-origin upper-caste Hindu culture through the Sanskritization process.<sup>54</sup> The identity movement and its accompanying discourse have helped the Kirantis to rediscover their historical roots, religious practices, and distinct languages. Building on this, local governments in Kiranti-majority areas have been working on cultural revival, including rituals, oral traditions, and the arts.

Despite these efforts for cultural revival, it is largely symbolic and faces numerous challenges in terms of sustaining them. One of the most critical challenges being faced is language preservation. Local governments, such as Halesi Tuwachung Municipality and Mangsebung Rural Municipality, took steps to preserve the Kiranti community's language by designating the language that is spoken by the local Kiranti community as an official language and instructing local schools to integrate it into their curricula. However, the initiative was abandoned due to a lack of qualified teachers, textbooks, and institutional commitment. In some cases, schools piloted programs for a short period only to discontinue them due to low enrollment or logistic problems.

Adding to this challenge is a lack of incentives to promote the mother tongue, casting doubt within the community. Many Kiranti are proud of their heritage but view Nepali and English as more practical languages that offer access to education, employment, and wider acceptance. As a result, parents rarely encourage their children to learn the mother tongue for connection or in the education system beyond cultural events or, at most, at home. Such paradox between cultural pride and practical ambition has left the Kiranti language and cultural preservation efforts in a precarious position.

While symbolic gestures and heightened awareness have kept the spirit of Kiranti identity alive, the lack of institutional support, community mobilization, and intergenerational transfer of knowledge means that the cultural revival remains vulnerable. Without concrete, sustained efforts at the educational, political, and community levels, the risk of cultural erosion remains significant despite the renewed enthusiasm to protect it.



*Statue of the Kirati god Birupakshya in Pashupati Aryaghat, Kathmandu, Nepal.  
Credit: Rajesh Dhungana*

## CONCLUSION

The controversy surrounding the naming of Koshi Province highlights a deeper and long-standing struggle between the Kiranti community and the state. It is a conflict between the historical injustices faced by the Kiranti community and state's framing of identity-based demands as "divisive" or "communal." The political settlement, marked by the new 2015 Constitution, was seen as incomplete, fueling other debate. For the Kiranti community, the decision to name the province after a neutral, geography-based term instead of "Kirant" seems to be a missed symbolic opportunity to assert their identity. The Kiranti interest group, identity-based politicians, and community see this as the state's denial of their historical presence and cultural legacy in a region they have inhabited for centuries.

The weakening of the Kiranti identity movement that played a pivotal role in Nepal's push toward federalism reflects a broader pattern of political co-optation. The controversy surrounding the naming of Koshi Province indicates that the territorial model, rather than the identity-based federal model, was a compromise. It was the beginning of political co-optation of Kiranti aspiration as the momentum and leadership of the movement were absorbed into mainstream political parties. Their agendas were subsequently addressed through various bureaucratic and political tools, such as quotas and reservations. This approach is weakening further due to migration-induced leadership vacuums.

Local governments have made efforts to revive Kiranti culture. However, their sustainability needs continuous institutional support, especially to preserve and promote language. As power becomes increasingly consolidated in the hands of a few, and younger generations have been migrating abroad or disinterested or disengage with the local affairs, the space for transformative change and cultural assertion narrows. In this complex interplay of history, politics, and identity, the naming of Koshi Province serves as both a flashpoint and a reflection of unaddressed grievances, and it symbolizes how the promise of inclusive federalism remains unfulfilled for many indigenous communities like the Kiranti.

# CASE STUDY ON THE MADHESI COMMUNITY IN MADHESH PROVINCE

## INTRODUCTION

“

*I am from Madhesh, but I was born and brought up in Kathmandu.*

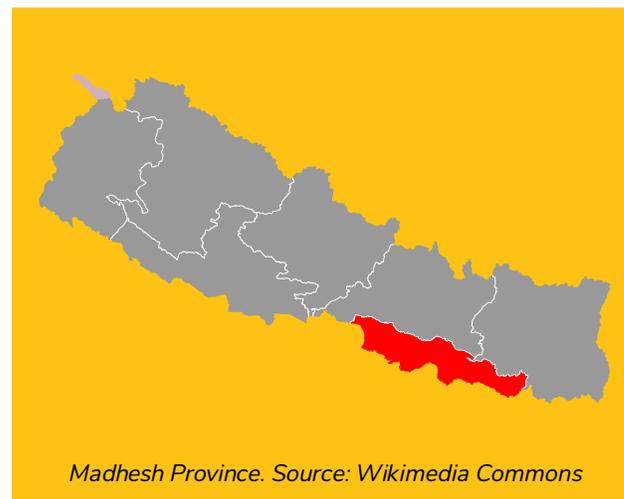
—Anonymous

*People used to wear Dhaka Topi even during sleep to demonstrate that they are Nepali.*

—A popular statement in Terai

Madhesh is the only province in Nepal to include ethnicity in its name; however, it is a miniature version of Nepal in terms of social, cultural, religious, linguistic, ethnic, political, and economic diversity. A decade ago, the first quote above would have been deemed audacious, but that is no longer the case. To be called “Madhesi” prior to 2015 would be considered bold. The second quote was a testament of Kathmandu’s ambivalence toward people from the Terai region, and the effort of Madhesi people to prove fidelity to Kathmandu. However, attitudes changed in 2015, an eventful year for Nepal that was marked by two events. One was a severe earthquake that struck near the city of Kathmandu on April 25, 2015. About 9,000 were killed, thousands were injured, and the disaster caused billions of dollars in infrastructure damage.<sup>55</sup> This tragedy was followed by the promulgation of Nepal’s new Constitution on September 20, 2015, which occurred through the Second Constituent Assembly after the First Constituent Assembly’s failure to deliver one.<sup>56</sup> Continued protests over unmet demands by various ethnic groups, especially from Madhesh, led to brutal suppression by the state’s security forces that killed more than fifty people in Madhesh. This, coupled with a halt in essential goods from India, caused severe economic hardships in the lives of Nepali. Even if the causes for the protests were legitimate, the disruption of essential supplies exacerbated the daily hardships of Nepali, who were already enduring 14-hour daily power cuts. Life came to a standstill. This effectively added fuel to the fire for an already suffering populace.<sup>57</sup>

Driven by a resurgence post-earthquake patriotism and calls for national unity, particularly among Nepal’s hill populations, the drafting of the new constitution was expedited. While most celebrated its eventual promulgation, most of the Madhesi political leadership considered it to be a regressive document. Ironically, the constitution was promulgated by the head of state, who hailed from Madhesh, and the then-prime minister who had been elected from Banke. Banke is one of the districts that Madhesi political parties demanded to be in Madhesh Province, under their “One Madhesh, One Pradesh” agenda.<sup>58</sup> The third Madhesh movement, a four-month rebellion, resulted in over fifty deaths and an unofficial economic blockade from India, which strained Nepal’s relationship with India. Despite its shortcomings, Madhesh Province got its name, and people could identify themselves as Madhesi. In addition to the province, the Madhesi Commission was formed under



Article 262 of the Constitution to document the rich history and culture of the Madhesi community, and to propose legal and institutional reforms to the Nepalese government.<sup>59</sup>

Madhesi communities, however, believe the new constitution does not fulfill their aspirations for greater representation and rights. The fervid dissent that it provoked showed the sociopolitical reality of Madhesh Province, which remains unchanged from its pre-constitution period. A harbinger of political settlement between Madhesh-based political parties and the state, the achievements of several Madhesh movements deteriorated over time. While a legitimate negotiation process occurred, it was largely one-sided, with power concentrated in the hands of the state and leaving many Madhesi demands unmet and promises unfulfilled. Political settlement, drawing on the works of Mushtaq Khan and others, possess two dimensions: social foundation and power configuration. The former captures the demography of power, while the latter captures power's geometry.<sup>60</sup> Powerful groups, based on gender, class, ethnicity, religion, or some other identity, that act alone or in concert with others, have the power to make, break, or shape the basic rules of the political and economic game. Governing elites respond to these groups in two basic ways: co-optation or repression. In Nepal, groups like MJF-D became settlement "insiders" and received benefits by being co-opted, which is why they aligned with the three parties (Nepali Congress, Communist Party of Nepal [Unified Marxist-Leninist], and Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist Centre). However, when their "Tharuhat" agenda was not entertained, they subsequently joined the "repressed" group, along with other Madhesh-based political parties that had formed an alliance called the United Democratic Madhesi Front.

Federalism, one of the major outcomes of 2015 Constitution, came into being after decades of political and natural ebbs and flows, including violent and nonviolent movements, internal and external political pressures, and natural disasters. It remains the most contested political issue in Nepal. Over the past decade, two federal, provincial, and local elections have highlighted divided opinions between ethnic versus nonethnic federalism, geographic demarcations, and power devolution in all three tiers of government are the topics for debate, discussion, and contestation. The Madhesis and Janajatis saw ethnic federalism as the answer to all their woes through their "right to self-determination," but it was only Madhesh Province that got its name, albeit in a much-compromised form.

The Madhesh Province case study attempted to understand the spillover effect of this historic achievement into the functioning of subnational governments—more specifically, the local governments in Madhesh where people could observe the changes that were brought about by their struggle and sacrifice.

## GRIEVANCES CONTINUED: HISTORY TO PRESENT

The naming of Madhesh Province did not come by easily and defied the adage, 'What's in a name?' In Madhesh's case, everything is in the name. However, the challenge lies in how effectively Madhesh functions as a federal province. Madhesh Province is struggling with several issues, including the efforts of Madhesh-based political parties to gain recognition as the national party, the irony of the Madhesi elites being treated as outsiders in Kathmandu, and the deep-rooted socioeconomic inequalities in Madhesh that post-constitution power devolution to subnational governments has failed to address. The list goes on. Krishna Hachhethu, Tula Narayan Shah, and Ram Kumar Kamat carefully outlined the following historical reasons to assert their arguments on how Madhesh Province has been systematically excluded as separate polity.<sup>61</sup>

- The old Civil Code placed the Madhesi castes in a horizontally inferior position relative to the hill castes.
- The economy of the Madhesi is largely influenced, owned or controlled by the hill elites.
- The Madhesi are generally not considered to be Nepali. Some are allegedly descendants of nineteenth-century Indian migrant workers, which further complicates their citizenship status.
- Nepal has traditionally been a hill-centric country.
- The elite society, formed back in the eighteenth century, did not comprise any Madhesi, and today's society is a continuation of that structure.

Mahendra Lawoti argues that Madhesi politics similarly faced the daunting task of challenging the status quo by disrupting a centralized political culture.<sup>62</sup> This is a political culture where elites capture or centralize power in order to exercise monopoly over governmental and formal power, rather than formulating effective policies or reaching different parts of the country with their agendas. In this light, Madhesh-based political parties risk being confined to the status of regional rather than national parties, diminishing their influence on the national agenda. This outcome is likely unless they secure a considerable mandate in the region, which might be sufficient to inform central and national policies. It is imperative that the political parties unite in Madhesh Province; otherwise, it may never come to the forefront of Nepali politics.

Historically, Madhesh has gone through systemic exclusion in political, social, and economic domains from both vantage points of politics and practice. As Frederick H. Gaige astutely pointed out almost half a century ago,

“Culturally different from the hill people and geographically isolated from Kathmandu, plains people living in the Terai were considered to be at least quasi-foreigners.”<sup>63</sup>

At that time, without any administrative mechanism to establish an individual’s allegiance as a Nepali citizen, residents from Terai were treated akin to Indian citizens. They were required to obtain a travel pass at the border town of Birgunj and present it at the Chisapani checkpoint to enter Kathmandu. An exception was made during the Shivaratri festival. The denigration of Madhesi people’s citizenship led to their systemic exclusion from politics, social, and economic domains.<sup>64</sup>

The consolidation of Madhesi identity, however, traces back to the historical marginalization and discrimination by the state, which led to the various movements throughout the course of state-building in Nepal. Much of the literature from and about Madhesh highlight the audacity of Vedananda Jha, who formed the Nepal-Terai Congress in 1951 with three striking objectives, at least for that time:

1. Establish an autonomous Terai state
2. Recognize Hindi as a state language
3. Ensure adequate employment of Terai people in the Nepal Civil Service

However, the 1959 Constitution of Nepal affirmed in Article 70, one of the shortest articles, that “the national language of Nepal shall be Nepali in the Devenagari Script.”<sup>65</sup> After King Mahendra took over the executive role in 1960, he took an unequivocal stand on the language issue, promoting Nepali nationalism on the basis of language. Dissatisfaction remained muted. Vedananda Jha, the first notable advocate of Madhesi nationalism, so to speak, co-opted with the Panchayat system, authored the book, *The Highest Democratic Ideals and the Basic Characteristics of the Panchayat Democracy*, and was later appointed Nepali ambassador to India in 1977.<sup>66</sup>

Another significant figure of the Terai/Madhesh movement was Gajendra Narayan Singh, a founder of the Nepal Goodwill Council (also known as Nepal Sadbhawana Parisad). The organization later became the Nepal Sadbhavana Party after the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990. He cited the systemic marginalization and discrimination of Madhesis in the political sphere for his departure from the Nepali Congress. He was ostracized for speaking in Hindi and wearing *dhoti kurtha*, a loincloth worn by some men in some parts of India and which is traditional Terai attire, in parliament. Even if the political party he formed split into several political parties, his legacy remains intact as a unifier of the Madhesi agenda. At a recent event to mark the anniversary of his death, leaders from all of the Madhesh-based political parties came forth and advocated for a unified Madhesh in light of recent political developments regarding the new Integrated Election Management Bill, which proposes an increase of the eligibility threshold for becoming the national party.<sup>67</sup>

## MADHESH MOVEMENTS AND AFTERMATH

The Madhesi People's Movements of 2007 and 2008 were triggered by systemic discrimination and the instigation of regional issues, specifically provincial demarcation based on ethnicity. These factors were influenced by the decade-long (1996–2006) Maoist rebellion and the precedent set by the 2006 People's Movement, which underscored the power of the people to topple any regimes.<sup>68</sup> The 2015 Madhesh movement, on the other hand, was triggered by discriminatory provisions in the constitution and the controversial demarcation of the provinces. The demarcation of the federal boundary involved extensive deliberations in the constitution assembly, along with protests and deaths. A preliminary draft of the constitution dated June 30, 2015, proposed eight provinces. An amended draft on August 8, 2015, reduced the number of provinces to six—with names to be decided by provincial assemblies—after the four major parties came to an agreement. The final draft of the Constitution, which was promulgated on September 20, 2015, lists seven provinces. Province 2 later became Madhesh Province.<sup>69</sup>

These movements resulted in significant political gains, including Nepal's declaration as a federal republic and electoral successes for Madhesh-based political parties. The movements that emerged out of the struggle for equality, inclusion, and self-governance within the context of federalism got their results, albeit temporary. However, internal divisions within Madhesh-based political parties allowed mainstream national parties to dominate the political landscape. As a result, the momentum and gains of Madhesi movements were diluted, inhibiting the Madhesi from making their mark on Nepal's national politics.

## KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Political Decentralization and Power Dynamics at the Local Level

In Madhesh, a region of Nepal known for its ethnic and cultural diversity—a true microcosm of the country—power dynamics at the local level have been significantly reshaped by post-federalism decentralization. Historically, Madhesh has faced systemic exclusion from the centralized governance. However, after the promulgation of Nepal's constitution in 2015, there has been a gradual shift toward decentralization. It has altered these dynamics by granting greater autonomy and authority to local governments. The municipal governance mechanism hardly faces any opposition, which has not only redefined governance structures but also empowered historically marginalized groups to participate in decision-making processes. Table 2 depicts the number of Madhesi communities in the local government, which is rather significant in terms of representation.

Table 2: Representation of different caste/ethnic groups at the local government level in Madhesh Province

Caste/Ethnicity		Khas/Arya	Indigenous People	Madhesi	Dalit	Tharu	Muslim	Total	Percentage
Mayor	Men	12	1	53	1	4	2	<b>73</b>	94.81
	Women	1	0	2	0	1	0	<b>4</b>	5.19
Deputy Mayor	Men	2	0	5	0	0	2	<b>9</b>	11.69
	Women	3	8	40	1	8	8	<b>68</b>	88.31
Chairperson	Men	1	1	50	0	4	3	<b>59</b>	100.00
	Women	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>0</b>	0.00
Vice Chairperson	Men	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>0</b>	0.00
	Women	2	1	47	1	4	4	<b>59</b>	100.00
Ward Chair	Men	77	70	864	33	107	108	<b>1259</b>	99.06
	Women	0	1	7	1	1	2	<b>12</b>	0.94
Ward Member	Men	101	147	1571	180	127	325	<b>2451</b>	48.27
	Women	77	108	844	1356	109	133	<b>2627</b>	51.73
Total	Men	193	219	2543	214	242	440	<b>3851</b>	58.16
	Women	83	118	940	1359	123	147	<b>2770</b>	41.84
<b>Total</b>		<b>276</b>	<b>337</b>	<b>3483</b>	<b>1573</b>	<b>365</b>	<b>587</b>	<b>6621</b>	100.00
<b>Percentage</b>		4.17	5.09	52.61	23.76	5.51	8.87		

Source: Biswokarma, *Election Results 2022*, 28.

Under the federal system, local governments in all provinces now possess relative control over resources, policy formulation and implementation, and administrative decisions. This shift has encouraged local political leaders to better represent the needs and aspirations of their community. One key achievement of federalism has been bringing governance closer to the people. It has helped to reduce the gaps in service delivery, and citizens can seek service from the representatives whom they can relate to culturally. The field data, however, refutes this conjecture. The ones who have been in power at the local level, be it formal or informal, are manipulating decisions. In one key informant interview, a journalist based in Mahesh said:

*Those who have been holding power traditionally, are continuing. To start with, they don't want to give away their strong hold easily, even if they must, they will rather choose those who are close to them, that means even if the faces have changed, power hold remains the same.*

The empowerment of traditionally marginalized communities in Madhesh is another key outcome of post-federalism decentralization. Women, Dalits, and indigenous groups, who were traditionally been excluded from political and administrative representations, have gained increased representation in local bodies. The constitutional provision of mandatory inclusion of women and Dalit women in the local government has enabled an equitable distribution of power, at least on paper. This inclusivity is supposed to facilitate the incorporation of diverse perspectives into local decision-making in line with addressing long-standing issues of social inequality and discrimination. The field data, however, portrayed a different picture. In another key informant interview, a worker at a nongovernmental organization in Madhesh said:

*[The] ethnic majority is with Yadav, but in terms of numbers, [members of the] Dalit community are in majority. The reason for this could be [that] Dalits are underrepresented in different political parties, which ultimately translates into political representation in key authority positions. They are not aware politically, economically poor and the rampant social discrimination due to prevalent caste-system in Nepal. People are yet to accept [a] Dalit as their representative; people hesitate to respect the position held by the people from [the] Dalit community. Also, other factors are [that] they are low-literate, landless and unemployed.*

Many elected representatives view local office as a means to recover their election expenses. A journalist from Madhesh said in a key informant interview, "They [Mayors] openly say they spent millions to get elected and now need to earn that back." Elected representatives openly rationalize such practices as necessary to recover their political campaign investments, while middlemen act as brokers linking political, bureaucratic, and business interests.

Together, these patterns reveal that while federalism in Madhesh has decentralized authority in form, it has failed to democratize governance in substance. Such practices are eroding public trust. Citizens who once saw Madhesh as the beacon of federalism now perceive it as one of the most corrupt provinces. In the key informant interview, a journalist remarked, "Those who lost family members in the Madhesh movements feel betrayed."

## Correcting Historical Inequalities and Inclusive Practices

The 2015 Constitution was a crucial document designed to address the historical disparities and discrimination throughout the country. At the political level, Madhesh-based political parties did not agree with it and went on to call it regressive. However, with their compromised political stature at the national level, their capacity to direct change was limited. An example of this is the unfinished business with the Provincial Civil Service Act and the Provincial Police Act. Changes in the federal government's political coalition impacts the dynamics and form of nearly every provincial government, and Madhesh is no exception. Considering this federal and provincial context, local level governments in Madhesh can only do so much to correct historical inequalities and promote inclusive practices.

According to a perception survey conducted by the Nepal Madhesh Foundation in 2022, 61.7 percent of total respondents (n=407) have faced caste-based discrimination at some point.<sup>72</sup> Even if the practice is outlawed, it is still rampant in Madhesh Province. Despite the staggering number of incidents, the number of complaints is extremely low. When it comes to complaints from female Dalit members, the number of complaints border on nonexistent. The survey results showed none of the complaints lodged were successful in having the perpetrators punished. That said, Dalits have given up hopes of getting any kind of support from the concerned authorities. The Dalit Empowerment Act (2019) is one of Madhesh Province's major achievements to address the historical discrimination against Dalits and was supposed to mitigate the aforementioned findings from the 2022 Nepal Madhesh Foundation perception survey.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, the survey reveals a concerning lack of the knowledge about the act among its intended beneficiaries, the Dalits. Only a small fraction, 2.7 percent of the total respondents, were aware of its existence.

The Dalit Empowerment Act establishes the following: a Caste-Based Discrimination and Untouchability Monitoring Committee under the leadership of the chief minister, a Dalit Development Committee under the leadership of the social development minister, a Caste-based Discrimination and Untouchability Control Unit under the provincial police, and a Caste-Based Discrimination and Untouchability Monitoring Committee chaired by a Dalit member appointed by the head of the local government. The Caste-Based Discrimination and Untouchability Monitoring Committees were to be formed in all 136 local units of the province's eight districts. However, even after three years (that is, in the second term of local government), only the Shambhunath Municipality of Saptari and the Chandranagar Rural Municipality of Sarlahi have formed such committees. Similarly, only thirty-six local levels have formed Dalit Parisad.<sup>74</sup> This provides evidence that power devolution post-federalism has set up a "form" by devising necessary policy, but it hasn't "functioned" as needed to serve the most marginalized populations or vulnerable sectors of the province.<sup>75</sup> The policy hasn't been able to address the grievances Dalits in Madhesh hold since it only exists on paper.

Locally, the analysis reveals that the dynamics are rather precarious. One of the respondents, an activist in Madhesh, noted that "Caste, money wins you power. It has not changed a bit from the past, regardless of many protests, because people from the marginalized community worry about their survival and cannot afford to speak for their rights. And in Nepal it is highly unlikely that people would get anything without asking or demanding." The statement adds into the Nepal Madhesh Foundation's 2022 perception survey findings on why so few know about the Dalit Empowerment Act. Along the same lines, another respondent noted the fate of the Mestar (also called Halkhor and one of the Dalit castes in the Madheshi community), and how they still follow the Majjan for their decisions despite living in unhygienic conditions with no proper drinking water facilities:<sup>76</sup>

“

*We follow Majjan, our leader; we follow their lead for particular person to vote. However, Majjan would take benefits in the name of people that they are supposed 'leader' of, especially during the elections and use them for their benefits. It was evident from their lifestyles, better houses, better drinking water facilities, and so forth, whereas there aren't any significant changes in general people's lifestyle and their precarity.*

”

## CONCLUSION

The onus lies with the Madhesh-based political parties—even if Madhesi elites have a strong hold on them—to address the needs of the marginalized communities. Failure to do so could trigger a series of protests against the Madhesi elite for not living up to their promises of making Madhesh an inclusive province, similar to the protests that Madhesh-based political parties made during the first and second Madhesh movements where these parties championed for their rights and especially for a province based on Madhesi identity. Madhesh, as a province, has all the elements and characteristic features that Nepal has as a country: It is multilingual, multiethnic, and multireligious. It also faces similar issues of caste-based discrimination and unequal representation and political inequality.

Different political parties have, at various times, used Madhesh as a means to gain power. Courting Madhesh's support is of paramount importance in any political activity, be it during the Panchayat system, constitutional monarchy era, violent Maoist conflict, or post-federalism politics.<sup>77</sup> However, the slight change in post-federalism politics has brought Madhesh-based political parties into decisive roles, which, due to their incessant splits, have been unable to achieve their lasting demands of proper inclusion.

In Madhesh, there is still a prevalent and deep-rooted understanding that power resides with individuals holding positions of authority, whether formal or informal (e.g., party leaders who do not hold public office). This is why they look for people whom they can connect with and influence, particularly individuals who share the same nationality in terms of race and language, at times of need. For instance, there was a practice in which individuals would visit powerful people and ask for a job without filling out a formal job application, stating that they did not trust a system run by people other than those they can relate to.



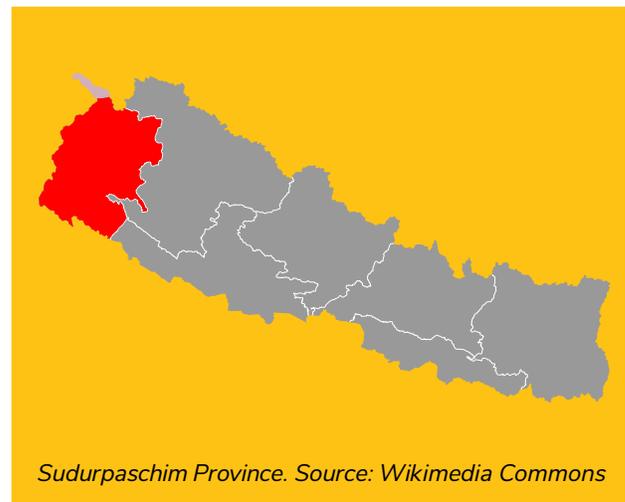
*Scenic view of rural landscape. Tulsi Chauda, Madhesh Province, Nepal. Credit: Mahesh Shrestha.*

# CASE STUDY ON THE THARU COMMUNITY IN SUDURPASCHIM

## INTRODUCTION

One participant in a focus group discussion stated that “the Madhesis got their territory as well as their own ethnic identity to name their province, Madhesh Province; the Kirantis have their own territory, the Koshi Province, although they are yet to get identity. What did Tharu get? Neither do we have our territory, and Tharu identity is a distant dream for us.”<sup>78</sup> This is a common frustration among the Tharu people from Dhangadi Sub-Metropolitan City who are frustrated with the political leadership for denying the Tharu their perceived fair share of federalism. This sentiment reflects the general disappointment within the Tharu community, which perceives the political leadership as actively denying them their rightful share in Nepal’s federal restructuring. The Tharus thus feel marginalized and believe that they have been neglected intentionally by the state.

Has the Constitution, democratically adopted on September 20, 2015 after a decade-long armed conflict (1996–2006) and various movements by different identity and interest groups advocating for state restructuring to address deeply rooted social, economic, and cultural inequalities, fallen short of the expectations of the Tharu?<sup>79</sup> It appears so. The Tharu people’s grievances highlight the unaddressed systemic marginalization of their community that has continued despite the accomplishment of the 2015 Constitution, a cornerstone of state restructuring. The state restructuring process was meant to provide marginalized communities with meaningful representation, autonomy, and equal opportunities, yet the Tharu feel they were deliberately neglected by the state.



*Sudurpaschim Province. Source: Wikimedia Commons*

One of the largest indigenous and historically marginalized groups in Nepal, the Tharu reside predominantly across the Terai regions with concentrated populations in the Teria municipalities of Lumbini and Sudurpaschim provinces. This case study explores the extent to which federalism has addressed or failed to address the aspirations of the Tharu community. It examines their challenges in securing territorial recognition, political representation, and access to rights and resources, particularly in the context of local governance under the federal system. Ultimately, this study seeks to highlight on whether Nepal’s new federal structure has truly delivered on its promise of inclusivity and justice for the Tharu people.

## THE HISTORY OF THARU MARGINALIZATION

The Tharu, who were allegedly immune to malarial parasites, have long inhabited the dense jungle of the Terai region of Nepal.<sup>80</sup> Due to its reputation as a malaria-prone area, this region was feared by the hill people, which is why they are considered one of the indigenous ethnic groups of the plains. As a result, Tharus lived in Terai region of Nepal with relative isolation. This isolation led them to develop their identity with a unique culture, language, and religion distinct from the hill people.<sup>81</sup> The malaria epidemic was a boon to the Tharu people, which ensured their freedom and kept the outsiders away.

However, after the Rana regime ended in 1951, the new government initiated a modernization effort. A pilot project was initiated in the mid-1950s in Chitwan to eradicate malaria in the Terai.<sup>82</sup> The project used DDT (dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane) pesticide to eliminate malaria-carrying misquotes. It was so effective that the

project was later extended to the entire Terai region of Nepal.<sup>83</sup>

With the eradication of malaria, the government also developed the East–West Highway, linking it with other highways to river valleys and towns in the hills. With the reduced threat of malaria and the development of a highway system, the Terai lowlands became a desirable settlement area and encouraged the large-scale migration of people from the hills. As a result, the Tharus lost their control of their land throughout the Terai region. It subsequently passed into the hands of immigrants, mostly Brahmins, Chettris, and Thakuris from the hills. The educated immigrants with caste and kinship affiliations with the local government system appropriated Tharu land.<sup>84</sup> Eventually, the majority of the Tharus themselves became landless in their own land. Deprived of the traditional source of their livelihoods, a significant number of Tharus were forced to be kept as bonded laborers (*Kamaiya* and *Kamlari*), to work for the new hill migrants.<sup>85</sup>

Tharu marginalization, which began with malaria eradication, has been further reinforced by the *Kamaiya* and *Kamlari* systems. For generations, *Kamaiya* and *Kamlari* Tharu families endured harsh conditions as bonded laborers for their landlords. Barely subsisting, this servitude has deprived them of opportunities for human development. This form of bonded labor was officially abolished in 2000, freeing individuals from landlord households. However, the conditions for freed *Kamaiya* and *Kamlari* have not changed. A lack of proper resettlement, education, and life skills has left them still landless and economically marginalized, hindering their integration into society. The consequences of land dispossession continue to affect the Tharu people, making them one of Nepal's most disadvantaged indigenous groups.

Ironically, the malaria-infested jungles, which once protected the Tharus from outside interference, had helped them maintain their freedom for centuries. However, when the government eradicated malaria and built roads, it changed the balance of power in the region. While these efforts helped Nepal develop, they also pushed the Tharu people out of their own land and made them socially and economically marginalized. Their struggles continue to this day. The collective grievances of the Tharu were used by the architect of the Maoist-led People's War, which lasted for ten years (1996–2006). The Tharus were prominent supporters of the People's War. After 2006, the Tharus supported the Tharuhat movement, which emerged in response to historical land dispossession, socioeconomic marginalization, political exclusion and aspiration for self-governance, ethnic autonomy, and land rights.<sup>86</sup>

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Unmet Aspirations and Ongoing Struggle: Discontent of the Tharu Community

The state restructuring of Nepal from a centralized to a federal system of governance is a major shift of its political landscape. However, the Tharu community feels that this has perpetuated their preexisting exclusion instead of empowering them. Despite being one of the largest ethnic groups of Nepal with 6.2 percent of the total population and the fourth-largest caste group, the Tharus have been largely excluded in the restructured state.<sup>87</sup> Their demand for a Tharu province was a pursuit of their identity, ethnic recognition, and self-governance. Most of the demands of other major ethnic groups—political recognition, identity, and political representation—were partially or fully addressed during the state restructuring process, but the aspirations of the Tharu people have been denied. One of the major deciding factors was the strong opposition and mobilization from the hill-origin, upper-caste community against the Tharu's demand for a federal province recognizing their identity.

The demand of Tharuwan autonomous federal provinces was challenged by the Akhanda Sudurpaschim movement, which was a coalition prominently led by hill-origin upper-caste communities and political elites.<sup>88</sup> This community, with its strong presence and influence on mainstream political parties, had pushed to establish a federal province that aligned with the interests of those who had migrated from the hills to the Tharu heartlands in the Kanchanpur and Kailali districts.

The Tharuhat movement turned into setbacks with the occurrence of the violent Tikapur incident of 2015.<sup>89</sup> Tharus' protest in Kailali escalated into a violent confrontation with security forces, leading to the deaths of security personnel and civilians.<sup>90</sup> This incident marked a significant turning point and was used to delegitimize the Tharu movement. Leaders of the Tharu movement were arrested, prosecuted, imprisoned, and labeled as

criminals rather than political activists. The aftermath of the Tikapur incident, and subsequent public narrative, severely weakened the core of Tharu agenda. This allowed the state to suppress their demands under the pretext of maintaining law and order that eventually deprived Tharu community from aspired federal province.

After the setback of Tikapur incident, Tharu mobilization ceased, the new constitution of Nepal was promulgated. The demands of the Akahanda Sudurpaschim movement was sanctioned in the restructured state. The Tikapur incident, however, led to the emergence of a new Tharu leader, Resham Chaudhary, who was subsequently imprisoned on charges of masterminding the Tikapur incident. His imprisonment became a rallying point for the Tharu people. He became a unifying figure to rekindle their struggle for identity and state recognition. Under his leadership, despite being imprisoned, the Nagarik Unmukti Party (NUP) was founded in January 2022. Building on the sentiment surrounding his imprisonment and leveraging the resentment and political exclusion felt by the Tharu community, the NUP emerged as a regional political force through the 2022 elections across all three tiers of government.

In 2022, the NUP established a strong presence in Tharu-majority constituencies throughout all three tiers of government, particularly in Terai areas of Sudurpaschim Province and parts of Lumbini Province. It was a significant political achievement for the Tharu community, but the larger Tharu agenda of securing a Tharuwan and meaningful representation in state decision-making, remains unfulfilled.

Prominent Tharu activists continue to express frustration with the federal restructuring, arguing that their community has been the biggest loser in the process. While some ethnic groups successfully negotiated for partial or full recognition of their identity, including names and geographical boundaries of the provinces with guaranteed political representation, the Tharu people have been left with tokenistic measures such as quotas and the Tharu Commission, both of which fail to address their core demands.<sup>91</sup>

One leading Tharu activist from Dhangadi articulates the sentiment of his community: “Our fight is with the state, not with non-Tharu people, as widely portrayed in the aftermath of the Tharuhat and Tharuwan movement and the Tikapur incident.” He further adds, “All major ethnic groups have secured their fair share in the restructured state, but our demands remain ignored. The government’s response has been superficial, offering symbolic representation rather than genuine political power.”

### **Federalism: Power Dynamics and the Tharu Community**

Prior to the implementation of federalism, the Tharu community was underrepresented in political representation. This has significantly increased across all three tiers of government in last two election cycles since 2017. Their participation in policy and political decision-making spheres has increased, areas previously dominated by hill-origin groups in their heartland. Of the 16 incumbent federal representatives from Sudurpaschim Province, 4 are Tharu. There are seven Tharu representatives in the Sudurpaschim Provincial Legislature from various political parties, five of which are from the NUP. Table 4 shows that in local governments, Tharu holds a notable representation.

Table 3: Representation of different caste/ethnic groups at the local government level in Sudurpaschim Province

Caste/Ethnicity		Khas/Arya	Indigenous People	Madhesi	Dalit	Tharu	Muslim	Total	Percentage
Mayor	Men	28	1	0	0	3	0	<b>32</b>	94.12
	Women	2	0	0	0	0	0	<b>2</b>	5.88
Deputy Mayor	Men	8	0	0	0	1	0	<b>9</b>	26.47
	Women	18	2	0	1	4	0	<b>25</b>	73.53
Chairperson	Men	49	0	0	0	5	0	<b>54</b>	100.00
	Women	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>0</b>	0.00
Vice Chairperson	Men	12	0	0	0	0	0	<b>12</b>	22.22
	Women	39	1	0	1	1	0	<b>42</b>	77.78
Ward Chair	Men	615	20	0	22	71	0	<b>728</b>	99.18
	Women	4	0	0	0	2	0	<b>6</b>	0.82
Ward Member	Men	1088	45	0	124	165	0	<b>1422</b>	48.57
	Women	636	26	0	746	98	0	<b>1506</b>	51.43
Total	Men	1800	66	0	146	245	0	<b>2257</b>	58.81
	Women	699	29	0	748	105	0	<b>1581</b>	41.19
<b>Total</b>		<b>2499</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>894</b>	<b>350</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3838</b>	<b>100.00</b>
<b>Percentage</b>		65.11	2.48	0.00	23.29	9.12	0.00		

Source: Biswokarma, *Election Results 2022*, 30.

Kailali and Kanchanpur are two Terai districts within Sudurpaschim Province that have a significant Tharu population. Tharus hold mayoral or chairperson positions in 5 of the 13 municipalities in the Kailali District and 3 out of the 9 municipalities in the Kanchanpur District.<sup>92</sup> Such a shift highlights the growing political influence of the Tharu community and departure from their historical marginalization.

The establishment and rise of the NUP in regional politics are one of the major factors behind increased Tharu representation. Emerging as a strong political force, the NUP is mobilizing Tharu voters, uniting them under a common agenda, and advocating for Tharu rights. Their influence encouraged the Tharu population to shift their voting behavior by voting in blocks to support their own representatives. This unified voting approach has enabled Tharus to challenge the dominance of non-Tharu candidates and the national parties in Tharu-majority constituencies.

### Strong Local Government: Opportunities and Challenges to the Tharu Community

State restructuring has created opportunities for individuals from diverse socioeconomic groups, including Tharus, to gain from the new power structures, especially at the local level. With greater jurisdiction and increased resource mobilization authority mandated to the local government, voters from marginalized communities have been empowered. This has enabled grassroots leadership to assume key positions at the local level in Kailali where they are leading stronger advocacy for the Tharu community's rights and interests.

A notable example is the endorsement of local policies in a number of municipalities to preserve and promote Tharu's traditional Bhalmansa practice.<sup>93</sup> Another is the locally led health initiative in Tikapur Municipality. A local journalist from Tikapur said:

*The Tikapur health initiative, by establishing health posts in each ward of the municipality, has been facilitating health services targeting women and children of the municipality. This is particularly benefiting poor and marginalized communities like Tharus who have less access and resources to quality health services. [A] similar education initiative in Tikapur has decreased female student dropouts from the school due to [a] free education program is a positive impact on the community.*

Federalism has also noticeably changed voters' perspectives. The previous narrative that only educated individuals from socially dignified backgrounds could be candidates in elections has been replaced with individuals from diverse backgrounds taking part in the political process. A member of the Chamber of Commerce in Dhangadi noted in an interview that there has been rising political awareness among the Tharu community, and Tharu representation has been growing across various sectors such as medicine, engineering, law, business, and beyond.

Together, these changes indicate a positive shift in the power dynamics of Nepal, with the Tharu community gradually gaining the recognition and influence they have long sought. However, while progress has been made, ongoing efforts are needed to ensure that their political and social gains translate into lasting reforms that address historical injustices and further uplift the community.

Despite gaining political representation, the Tharu community continues to feel that federalism has not fully addressed their long-standing grievances. One key unfulfilled demand is the creation of a separate Tharu federal province. This has led to many feeling excluded from the broader restructuring of Nepal's governance system. While decentralization has allowed for increased participation in politics, it has not translated into full autonomy or self-governance for the Tharu people. This unmet expectation has fueled ongoing dissatisfaction, as the community believes that their historical marginalization has yet to be adequately addressed.

Beyond political discrimination, bureaucratic challenges have further hindered their progress under federalism. Many bureaucrats, accustomed to centralized governance, have resisted the transition to local autonomy, often obstructing the work of Tharu-led local governments. This resistance has made service delivery inefficient and frustrating, as local representatives struggle to implement policies without interference from higher authorities. In one focus group discussion in Tikapur, participants shared that instead of supporting decentralized governance, bureaucrats are often seen as a barrier, delaying decisions and restricting local governments from exercising their full authority.

As a result, many Tharu citizens face difficulties in accessing essential public services. Bureaucratic red tape has created unnecessary hurdles, making it challenging for marginalized communities to benefit from government programs. Excessive documentation requirements, slow administrative procedures, and a lack of accountability within the system have disproportionately affected the Tharu population, limiting their ability to take advantage of federalism's supposed benefits. Despite the promise of greater local governance, the persistence of structural barriers has meant that federalism has yet to deliver meaningful change in the daily lives of the Tharu people.

## How Decentralization Has Been Impacting the Tharu Differently

Despite the structural changes aimed at fostering participation, dominant caste and ethnic groups continue to manipulate decision-making processes and reduce the participation of marginalized communities, including the Tharus, to mere tokenism. This lack of genuine representation has limited the extent to which Tharus can influence policies that affect their lives. Additionally, decentralization has significantly impacted the Tharu community's traditional governance system, known as the Bhalmansa and Barghar system. This indigenous structure, which historically handled community matters such as marriage, rituals, and civil disputes, has been gradually weakened by the establishment of local ward committees. While these committees aim to be more inclusive, they lack the cultural depth and trust that the traditional system had fostered over generations. A Bhalmansa from the Tikapur Municipality expressed:

*I have been elected to Bhalmansa for the last five years, but now I [have had] enough [of] this responsibility and [I am] thinking to quit next year. However, I doubt that my community will put pressure on [me to] continue because, unlike in the past, no one wants to be Bhalmansa. There is more work [to] coordinate with the local government, and [I] have to be careful that our conduct doesn't contradict the new laws.*

Although some municipalities have attempted to introduce laws to preserve Tharu governance traditions, many in the community remain skeptical. Instead of relying on their traditional leaders, more Tharus are now turning toward committees and police for dispute resolution, further distancing themselves from their ancestral governance system. This shift has particularly alarmed Tharu elders, who view the decline of the Bhalmansa and Barghar system as a serious threat to their culture, values, language, and identity. The erosion of these structures not only diminishes their influence over community affairs but also weakens the overall cultural fabric of the Tharu people in the region.

## CONCLUSION

For the Tharu people, decentralization has brought mixed results. On one hand, it has provided them with increased political representation through local elections, allowing Tharu leaders to participate in decision-making processes. However, power dynamics, institutional constraints, and socioeconomic inequalities continue to limit the full realization of their rights. Addressing these challenges requires stronger policies to protect marginalized groups, more inclusive governance practices, and sustained efforts to ensure equitable resource distribution. Strengthening grassroots participation, increasing financial transparency, and promoting educational and economic initiatives tailored to the Tharu community will be key to making decentralization truly beneficial for all. Additionally, targeted capacity-building initiatives and more effective land reform policies will be essential in addressing the historical injustices and economic disparities that persist within the Tharu community.

# DISCUSSING COMMONALITIES

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Nepal's transition to federalism, formalized under the 2015 Constitution, has significantly reshaped the governance landscape of the country. The case studies of the Kirant (Koshi Province), Madhesi (Madhesh Province), and Tharu (Sudurpaschim Province) provide a nuanced understanding of how this transformation unfolded across these regions and shaped identities in the course of addressing deep-rooted sociopolitical exclusion and unequal participation of the aforementioned communities. Despite holding varying degrees of historical grievances and gained political leverage after federalism, these groups exhibit common patterns and region-specific outcomes.

## Patterns of Inclusion and Exclusion

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All three cases reveal the symbolic inclusions of historically marginalized communities, be it in the form of naming of the provinces and local units, cultural representation, or quota-based representation. These changes have granted substantive political autonomy or institutional empowerment, which can be related to incremental policy gain.<sup>94</sup> For instance, while the Kirant Community in Koshi Province saw increased cultural visibility at the local level, they remain underrepresented in provincial structures, and their demand of identity-based naming of province was rejected.

Madhesh Province gained its name and symbolic institutional representation in the form of the Madhesi Commission, but it continues to grapple with caste-based exclusion and elite capture. Tharus, despite having a decades-long history of organizing through the Tharu Kalyankarini Shaba and Tharuhat movements and gaining electoral footholds through the NUP, remain economically and politically marginalized, with their call for a separate province dismissed.

These cases suggest that federalism in Nepal has followed a limited model of inclusion, one that often recognizes identity only to the extent that it does not disrupt entrenched political structures.

## Ethnic Mobilization and the Federal Bargain

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Ethnic movements have significantly shaped Nepal's federal framework. The Kiranti movement, once a key movement in identity politics, lost momentum due to internal divisions and electoral co-optation, with demographic shifts further diluting its influence. The Madhesi movement secured "Madhesh" as a province, even in the face of violent state responses to different Madhesh protests, thereby framing a narrative of regional exclusion. Likewise, the Tharu movement faced severe repression after the 2015 Tikapur incident in which eight security personnel were killed, yet it regained traction because of figures like Resham Chaudhary.

These cases demonstrate how the state's strategies of co-optation, containment, and suppression, when combined with the elite's resistance, weaken even the strongest identity-based movements over time.

## Local Power Structures and Democratic Deficits

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Across all three provinces, the decentralization of administrative power has not guaranteed democratization at the local level. Mayors or chairpersons have emerged as dominant authorities, often functioning without effective opposition. Power remains concentrated among a few local elites, many of whom consolidate through overlapping roles in politics and informal networks. Quotas have increased representation of women, Dalits, and indigenous groups, but these representatives rarely wield decision-making authority. Similarly, civil society's shrinking role, driven by expanding local government jurisdiction and clientelism, further erodes oversight. This paradox of spatial devolution, coupled with functional recentralization, reveals how federalism has redistributed rather than dismantled elite control.

## Federalism and Social Justice: Gaps and Opportunities

Nepal's federalism promised inclusion and justice, but it has failed to deliver because of a lack of proper implementation. Elite dominance persisted as traditional power holders adapted to new structures. Proportional representation has certainly diversified local government but has failed to shift power dynamics or improve service delivery. The rejection of identity-based provinces for Kirantis and Tharus reflects resistance to historical and cultural restructuring, a core demand of federalism. Opportunities remain, however. The rise of the NUP has signaled that alternative voices, while symbolic, provide a platform for future reforms and cultural gains.

## STUDY CONCLUSION

Nepal's federal restructuring promises for the devolution of power and inclusion of marginalized communities—like the Kirantis, Madhesis, and Tharus—remain work in progress. Despite creating various forms in which to operate, it has yet to deliver substantive political empowerment and structural transformation. Each case study explored how historical exclusion, ethnic mobilization, and local political dynamics interact under federalism. The gains, however, have been uneven, and decentralization has not consistently dismantled existing power hierarchies. Instead, it has, in many cases, reshaped them at the subnational level. Success will depend on how the Nepali state moves from recognition to redistribution, and from inclusion to empowerment.

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- <sup>3</sup> Harka Gurung, *Trident and Thunderbolt: Cultural Dynamics in Nepalese Politics*, Social Science Baha Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture 2003 (Social Science Baha, 2003), 1–2.
- <sup>4</sup> Dor Bahadur Bista, *Fatalism and Development: Nepal's Struggle for Modernization* (Orient Longman, 1991).
- <sup>5</sup> Michael Hutt, "Before the Dust Settled: Is Nepal's 2015 Settlement a Seismic Constitution?" *Conflict, Security and Development* 20, no. 3 (May 3, 2020): 379–400, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2020.1771848>.
- <sup>6</sup> Constitution of Nepal, 2015, [https://ag.gov.np/files/Constitution-of-Nepal\\_2072\\_Eng\\_www.moljpa.gov\\_.npDate-72\\_11\\_16.pdf](https://ag.gov.np/files/Constitution-of-Nepal_2072_Eng_www.moljpa.gov_.npDate-72_11_16.pdf).
- <sup>7</sup> Soeren Keil and Elisabeth Alber, eds., introduction to *Federalism as a Tool of Conflict Resolution* (Routledge, 2023).
- <sup>8</sup> Keshav Acharya, "The Capacity of Local Governments in Nepal: From Government to Governance and Governability?," *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration* 40, no. 3 (2018): 186–97.
- <sup>9</sup> Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (Macmillan, 1974).
- <sup>10</sup> Lukes, *Power*.
- <sup>11</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," in *The Public Nature of Private Violence*, edited by Martha Albertson Fineman and Roxanne Mykitiuk (Routledge, 1994), 93–118.
- <sup>12</sup> Local Government Operation Act, 2017, <https://mofaga.ov.np/detail/1697>.
- <sup>13</sup> Dilli Raj Gautam, "An Assessment on the Constitution of Nepal 2015," *Journal of Political Science* 20 (2020): 46–60, <https://doi.org/10.3126/jps.v20i0.31794>.
- <sup>14</sup> Constitution of Nepal 2015, Article 7.
- <sup>15</sup> Constitution of Nepal 2015, Part 27.
- <sup>16</sup> Election Commission Act 2017, [https://giwmscdnone.gov.np/media/app/public/275/posts/1721031447\\_8.pdf](https://giwmscdnone.gov.np/media/app/public/275/posts/1721031447_8.pdf).
- <sup>17</sup> Constitution of Nepal 2015.
- <sup>18</sup> Asian Development Bank, "Strengthening Fiscal Decentralization in Nepal's Transition to Federalism," July 2022, <https://doi.org/10.22617/tcs220280>.
- <sup>19</sup> Thaneshwar Bhusal and Keshav Kumar Acharya, "Five Years of Local Democracy in Federal Nepal (2017–2022)," *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies* 11, no. 2 (March 29, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1002/app5.389>.
- <sup>20</sup> According to the Local Government Operation Act, 2017, such situations include convictions for criminal offenses involving moral turpitude, violations of the Constitution or existing laws, proven misuse of authority, and a motion of no confidence passed by a two-thirds majority in the municipal council (applies to positions other than the mayor).

- <sup>21</sup> Sarmila Bagale, “The Constitution of Nepal 2015 and the Capacity of Government to Governance in Local Governments,” *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences* 9, no. 6 (2024): 286–93, <https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.96.47>.
- <sup>22</sup> After the tenure of the locally elected representatives expired in 2002, the election was not held until 2017 due to an active conflict and political transition.
- <sup>23</sup> Pramila Bhattarai, “The Use of Social Media for Political Socialization in Nepal: An Effectiveness Analysis of Platforms,” *The Outlook: Journal of English Studies* 14 (2023), 46–59.
- <sup>24</sup> Rishikesh Dahal, “The Influence of Social-Media on Agenda-Setting in Nepali Journalism,” *Patan Prospective Journal* 3, no. 1 (2023): 116–27, <https://doi.org/10.3126/ppj.v3i01.59016>.
- <sup>25</sup> From key informant interviews and focus group discussions in Janakpur, Dhangadi, and Ilam.
- <sup>26</sup> Majjan refers to a system of caste-based traditional dispute resolution practiced in Madhesi communities in Nepal, particularly in the eastern Terai region. In the Tharu community of Nepal, a Bhalmansa (also known as a *Badghar*) is a community leader, traditionally a culture figure, who is elected to settle disputes, and manage community affairs, acting as a representative and overseeing various aspects of village life.
- <sup>27</sup> Indu Tharu, “Tharu Women and Political Participation,” *The Record*, August 15, 2019, <https://www.recordnepal.com/tharu-women-and-political-participation>.
- <sup>28</sup> Judicial committees, established under Article 217 of the 2015 Constitution, are three-member bodies headed by the deputy mayor or vice-chairperson in municipalities/rural municipalities, who are tasked with settling local disputes and mediating cases in support of trained and listed community mediators.
- <sup>29</sup> Sabin Ninglekhu, “Resurgence of Indigenous Movement in Nepal,” *The Internationalist*, issue 98, accessed April 8, 2025, <https://act.progressive.international/the-internationalist-issue-98/>.
- <sup>30</sup> International Alert, “Federalism in Nepal: A Country in Transition,” March 2021, <https://www.international-alert.org/stories/federalism-nepal-country-transition/>.
- <sup>31</sup> Govinda Badahur Tumbahang, “Kiranti People and Languages of Nepal,” *Nepalese Linguistics* 23 (2008): 408–28.
- <sup>32</sup> Gyanu Maya Rai and Yang Zhuhui, “The Contribution of the Ancient Kirat Civilization in Nepal and its Consequences of Decline,” *International Journal of Social Sciences: Current and Future Research Trends* 20, no. 1 (2023): 114–25.
- <sup>33</sup> Francis Buchanan Hamilton, *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal, and of the Territories Annexed to This Dominion by the House of Gorkha* (A. Constable and Co.: 1819), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/30364/30364-h/30364-h.htm>.
- <sup>34</sup> Andrew Blunt, “From Kipat to Kathmandu: A Failed Integration of Limbu People into the Nepali State in Bilate, Ilam” (Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection 2740, Nepal: Development and Social Change, SIT Study Abroad, Bowdoin College, 2017), [https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection/2740](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/2740).
- <sup>35</sup> Ann Armbrrecht Forbes, “The Discourse and Practice of Kipat,” *Kailash* 18, no. 1–2 (1996): 39–80, [https://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/kailash/pdf/kailash\\_18\\_0102\\_03.pdf](https://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/kailash/pdf/kailash_18_0102_03.pdf).
- <sup>36</sup> Ram Kumar Ghimire, “Abolition of ‘Kipat’ Land Tenure System: The Context and Consequences,” *Tribhuvan University Journal* 27, nos. 1–2 (2010): 113–20. *Raikar* denotes all lands under the sovereign authority of the crown. Taxes were collected from the individual landowners.

- <sup>37</sup> Andrew Blunt, “From Kipat to Kathmandu.”
- <sup>38</sup> Dambar Dhoij Chemjong, “Limbuwan is Our Home-Land,” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2017), <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/2facd985-6b01-4352-b108-7a42b9bec7c1/content>.
- <sup>39</sup> Lionel Caplan, *Land and Social Change in East Nepal: A Study of Hindu-Tribal Relations* (University of California Press, 1970).
- <sup>40</sup> Khas-Arya refers to a socio-ethnic group in Nepal that historically includes communities such as Brahmin, Chettri, Thakuri, and Sanyasi/Dasnami. They are traditionally considered part of the high-caste Hindu hierarchy and are often associated with political and social dominance in Nepal.
- <sup>41</sup> Mulukī Ain, 1854.
- <sup>42</sup> Biswasdip, “History of Kirat Native People of Nepal and Indian Himalayas,” December 15, 2020, <https://Kirant.org.np/?p=23>.
- <sup>43</sup> Central Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Nepal: Results*, accessed March 7, 2025, <https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/results>.
- <sup>44</sup> Lionel Caplan, *Land and Social Change in East Nepal: A Study of Hindu-Tribal Relations* (Routledge: 1970).
- <sup>45</sup> Ministry of Education, Nepal Education Policy of 1961. The Khas language is the source of Nepali.
- <sup>46</sup> Dor Bahadur Bista, *Fatalism and Development: Nepal’s Struggle for Modernization* (Orient Longman: 1991).
- <sup>47</sup> Sabin Ninglekhu, “Resurgence of Indigenous Movement in Nepal.” The Mukumlung–Pathibhara Temple area, located in eastern Nepal, is an important cultural and spiritual site for Kirant communities, especially the Limbu people. Mukumlung is believed to be an ancestral sacred place described in Kirant oral histories and religious stories. The Mukumlung site located in the Hindu Pathibhara Temple makes the area a shared but often contested space where indigenous Kirant traditions meet mainstream Hindu practices.
- <sup>48</sup> Deo Narayan Sah, “It’s Koshi. Province 1 Gets Its Name, Finally,” *Kathmandu Post*, March 1, 2023, <https://kathmandupost.com/province-no-1/2023/03/01/province-1-assembly-endorses-koshi-as-the-name-of-the-province-by-majority-votes>.
- <sup>49</sup> Kiranti groups proposed several names, including “Limbuwan-Khumbuwan,” but “Kiranti” was chosen because it best represents the identity of the province’s indigenous groups.
- <sup>50</sup> Election Commission of Nepal, <https://result.election.gov.np/ElectionResultState2079.aspx>.
- <sup>51</sup> Ram Bahadur Thapamagar, “Indigenous Nationalities and Politics in Nepal: Constitution Assembly to Parliament,” *Journal of Nepalese Studies* 16, no. 1 (2024):152–68.
- <sup>52</sup> National Population and Housing Census 2021, <https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/results/downloads/caste-ethnicity?type=report>.
- <sup>53</sup> Kirat Community Organization of Akron Ohio, Inc., “Biography of Falgunanda Lingden,” accessed August 11, 2025, <https://kiratcommunityoh.org/literature/biography-of-falgunanda-lingden/>. Lingden is considered to be the founder of the Kirant religious revival movements in Nepal.
- <sup>54</sup> Raju K. C., “Sanskritization in Nepal: The Impact of Social Stratification,” *Pragyan* 4, no. 1 (2023): 94–101. Sanskritization can be defined as a socialization process in which low-caste people attempt to raise their status in society by adopting the values, rituals, eating habits and dress of upper castes. The introduction of the concept of Sanskritization constituted a real landmark in South Asian studies, for it showed that the caste system is not static but rather is a more fluid, dynamic form of organization which allows for considerable social mobility.

- <sup>55</sup> Hemchandra Chaulagain, Dipendra Gautam, and Hugo Rodrigues, “Revisiting Major Historical Earthquakes in Nepal: Overview of 1833, 1934, 1980, 1988, 2011, and 2015 Seismic Events,” in *Impacts and Insights of Gorkha Earthquake*, edited by Dipendra Gautam and Hugo Rodrigues (Elsevier: 2018), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/earth-and-planetary-sciences/gorkha-earthquake-2015>. The earthquake affected 8 million people from 31 out of 75 districts in Nepal and caused \$7 billion in damage as reported in the National Planning Commission’s 2015 Post-Disaster Need Assessment.
- <sup>56</sup> The second constitutional assembly started on January 20, 2014 and was successful in promulgating the new constitution on September 20, 2015. The constitutional assembly was converted into a unicameral legislative parliament until October 14, 2017.
- <sup>57</sup> Govinda Timilsina and Jevgenijs Steinbuks, “Economic Costs of Electricity Load Shedding in Nepal,” *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews* 146 (2021), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1364032121004007#preview-section-abstract>; and Govinda Timilsina, Prakash Sapkota, and Jevgenijs Steinbuks, *How Much Has Nepal Lost in the Last Decade Due to Load Shedding? An Economic Assessment Using a CGE Model* (World Bank Group: June 2018), <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/934061528378849106/pdf/WPS8468.pdf>. Between 2007 and 2017, Nepal suffered a massive electrical supply shortage, that caused up to 14 hours of daily load shedding. Over a decade, this cost Nepal more than 6 percent of its GDP.
- <sup>58</sup> Ram Baran Yadav, the first president of the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal, was born in Madhesh and served as a physician to the former Prime Minister of Nepal Girija Prasad Koirala.
- <sup>59</sup> Madheshi Commission Nepal Index, accessed January 22, 2025, <http://madheshicommission.gov.np/>; “Nepal Border Blockade: Ethnic Groups Lift Roadblocks,” BBC News, February 6, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35525018>; and Tula Narayan Shah, “Eighteen Years of Madhesh Uprising,” Kathmandu Post, February 9, 2025.
- <sup>60</sup> Mushtaq Khan, “Power, Pacts and Political Settlements: A Reply to Tim Kelsall,” *African Affairs* 117, no. 469 (2018): 670–94.
- <sup>61</sup> Krishna Hachhethu, Tula Narayan Shah, and Ram Kumar Kamat, *Politics of Representation in Nepal* (Nepal Madhesh Foundation: 2015). This case study does not attempt to elaborate on each argument; rather, subsequent sections will refer to this list and attempt to discuss them.
- <sup>62</sup> Mahendra Lawoti, *Looking Back, Looking Forward: Centralization, Multiple Conflicts, and Democratic State Building in Nepal*, Policy Studies 43 (East-West Center Washington: 2007), <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/private/ps043.pdf>.
- <sup>63</sup> Frederick H. Gaige, *Regionalism and National Unity in Nepal* (University of California Press: 1975).
- <sup>64</sup> Gaige, *Regionalism and National Unity in Nepal*.
- <sup>65</sup> Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal, 1959, accessed January 20, 2025, [https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/1959\\_constitution\\_english.pdf](https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/1959_constitution_english.pdf).
- <sup>66</sup> Lok Raj Baral, *Opposition Politics in Nepal* (Abhinav Publications: 1977). *Oppositional-Politics-In-Nepal.pdf*. Vedananda Jha served as the tenth Nepali ambassador to India.
- <sup>67</sup> Binod Ghimire, “New Push for a Law to Raise Vote Threshold to Secure PR Seats,” *Kathmandu Post*, August 11, 2024, <https://kathmandupost.com/politics/2024/08/11/new-push-for-a-law-to-raise-vote-threshold-to-secure-pr-seats>; author unknown, “Gajendra Narayan Singh Was a Revolutionary Leader,” accessed February 2, 2025, <https://ekantipur.com/news/2025/01/23/gajendra-narayan-singh-was-a-revolutionary-leader-04-32.html>; and Raja Ram Gautam, “Has the Scandal of Madhesh Politics Returned?,” accessed February 5, 2025, <https://ekantipur.com/opinion/2025/01/27/has-the-madhesh-politics-returned-53-21.html>.

- <sup>68</sup> Ramawatar Yadav, “On Being Madhesi,” *Himalaya* 29, no. 1 (2010), <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1870&context=himalaya>. This keynote speech by the former vice chancellor of Purbanchal University is a testament to the ignominious nature of Madhesi identity.
- <sup>69</sup> Deepak Thapa and Alexander Ramsbotham, eds., “Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: The Nepal Peace Process,” *Accord* issue 26 (Conciliation Resources: 2017).
- <sup>70</sup> Benjamin Reilly, *Democracy in Divided Societies: Electoral Engineering for Conflict Management* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- <sup>71</sup> World Bank, *Nepal Fiscal Federalism Update* (World Bank: 2024).
- <sup>72</sup> Nepal Madhesh Foundation, *Dalits in Madhesh: A Perception Survey Report* (Nepal Madhesh Foundation: 2022).
- <sup>73</sup> Mohan Singh Sunar, Santosh Kumar Shah, Ranju Kumari Yadav, and Hira Lal Vishwakarma, *Dalits in Madhesh: A Perception Survey Report-2022*, Nepal Madhesh Foundation, [https://books.google.com.np/books/about/Dalits\\_in\\_Madhesh.html?id=JgY70AEACAAJ&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.com.np/books/about/Dalits_in_Madhesh.html?id=JgY70AEACAAJ&redir_esc=y).
- <sup>74</sup> Shailendra Mahato, “Dalits in Madhesh Bear the Brunt of Untouchability Despite Legal Reforms,” *Onlinekhabar*, April 12, 2023, <https://english.onlinekhabar.com/dalits-in-madhesh-untouchability.html>.
- <sup>75</sup> Matt Andrews, “Form ≠ Function,” Harvard Kennedy School BSC Video Series, January 22, 2014, <https://bsc.hks.harvard.edu/2014/01/22/bsc-video-form-%E2%89%A0-function-part-313/>. This statement refers to concepts of form and function described in the video.
- <sup>76</sup> Mestar or Halkhor is one of the Dalit castes in Madhesh. A *Maijan* is a person who is considered to be the leader of the community. In rural areas of Madhesh, it is common to have a respected local figure such as a Maijan to resolve disputes. Operating under customary laws, the Maijan ensures that village conflict does not escalate into violence and disrupt civic life.
- <sup>77</sup> The Panchayat System (1960–1990) was a party-less political system introduced by King Mahendra, where centralized monarchical authority replaced multiparty democracy. It was characterized by restricted political freedoms and limited citizen participation, ultimately leading to widespread pro-democracy movements. Following the pro-democracy movement of 1990, Nepal transitioned to a constitutional monarchy with a multiparty parliamentary system. While the king’s powers were curtailed, the monarchy remained a symbolic and occasionally influential institution until its abolition in 2008. The violent Maoist conflict was decade-long armed conflict that started in 1996 and was led by the Communist Party of Nepal against the state. Rooted in socioeconomic inequality and political exclusion, the conflict resulted in over 17,000 deaths. It ended in 2006 with a Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the state and Maoist party and ultimately paved the way for Nepal’s transition to a federal democratic republic.
- <sup>78</sup> Focus group discussion, December 19, 2024, Dhangadi, Nepal.
- <sup>79</sup> Khimlal Devkota, “Cooperative Federalism in the Nepali Constitution: A Comprehensive Analysis,” *Samsad Journal* 1, no. 1 (July 2024): 51–66.
- <sup>80</sup> Nepal’s fourth largest ethnic group, the Tharu people, number over 1.8 million, constituting 6.2 percent of the nation’s total population, according to the *National Population and Housing Census National Report 2021 (2023)*. They are spread across the Mahakali River in the west and the Mechi River to the east of the Terai region of Nepal. Distinct subgroups inhabit various provinces and districts. The Dangaura, the Kathariya, and the Rana Tharus are in Sudhuraschim Province. The Chitwan Tharus are found in the districts of Chitwan and Nawalparasi. The Kochila Tharu live between the Bagmati and the Koshi Rivers. Notably, the Rana Tharu, who are counted separately in the census, comprise slightly more than 83,000 individuals, representing 0.29 percent of Nepal’s total population (*National Population and Housing Census National Report 2021, 2023*).

- <sup>81</sup> Backward Society Education Organization, “History of the Tharu in Nepal,” BASE Organization, accessed April 8, 2025, <https://nepalbase.org/history-of-tharu/#>.
- <sup>82</sup> The period of 1846 to 1951 is referred to as the Rana dynasty, a period during which control of the government lay in the hands of the Chettri family. During this period, they ruled Nepal as an authoritarian regime, reducing the Shah family monarch to a figurehead while the position of prime minister and other government positions were held by the family hereditarily.
- <sup>83</sup> Arjun Guneratne, *Many Tongues, One People: The Making of Tharu Identity in Nepal* (Cornell University Press, 2002).
- <sup>84</sup> Guneratne, *Many Tongues, One People*.
- <sup>85</sup> Kamaiya (males) and Kamlari (females) were traditional systems of bonded labor practiced in the western Terai of Nepal.
- <sup>86</sup> The Tharuhat Movement is a political and sociocultural movement primarily in the Terai areas in western Nepal. Led by the Tharu community, it emerged in response to historical marginalization, land dispossession, and political underrepresentation. It gained momentum following the abolition of the monarchy in 2008, coinciding with Nepal’s federal restructuring process.
- <sup>87</sup> Government of Nepal Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers, National Statistics Office, “National Population and Housing Census 2021,” <https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/results/cast-ethnicity>.
- <sup>88</sup> Tharuwan, often discussed by Tharuhat activists in the context of federal restructuring, refers to the demand for a separate province encompassing Tharu-majority areas. The Akhanda Sudurpaschim movement advocates for a unified far-western region of Nepal. This campaign seeks to designate all nine districts of the former far-western development region as a single province. This stance is in opposition to the demands of Tharuhat and Madhesh, which propose a single province encompassing 22 Terai districts.
- <sup>89</sup> Nabin Bibhas, “Trouble in Tikapur,” *The Record*, July 19, 2016, <https://www.recordnepal.com/trouble-in-tikapur>.
- <sup>90</sup> Ganesh Chaudhary and Mohan Budhair, “8 Killed in Tikapur clash,” *Kathmandu Post*, August 25, 2015, <https://kathmandupost.com/miscellaneous/2015/08/25/8-killed-in-tikapur-clash>.
- <sup>91</sup> “About Our Tharu Ayog,” Tharu Commission, <https://tharucommission.gov.np/en>.
- <sup>92</sup> Election Commission Nepal, <https://election.gov.np/>.
- <sup>93</sup> “Badghar Custom Legalised in Kanchanpur,” Sancharkarmi, January 10, 2022, <https://sancharkarmi.com/english/news-details/71930/2022-01-10>.
- <sup>94</sup> Michael Hayes, “Incrementalism and Public Policy-Making,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, April 26, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.133>.