

Ethnic Demography of Nepal

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1. Definition and Data

I. The basic elements of social composition include (a) race, as ethnicity/caste; (b) language or mother tongue; and (c) religion or belief. Many tend to include all these three under the rubric of 'ethnicity'. This seems misplaced. One such example leading to confusion is the terms 'Nepalese ethnic' used as in the case of refugees from Bhutan. They, however, include many ethnic/castes and are considered refugees because of their non-Nepalese political identity. They are indeed a group of people sharing Nepali language of which some have their own Tibeto-Burman mother tongue. Again, not all of them are Hindus as some follow their tribal belief. These so-called 'Nepalese ethnics' are actually a language group whether they subscribe to the semantics of Bhandari's 'Nepali' or Ghising's 'Gorkhali' Ethnicity, language, and religion do tend to overlap but treating them as discrete entities for analysis will contribute to clarity.

2. One also finds loose use of terms in Nepalese anthropological literature. This refers to transposition of linguistic labels in ethnic context such as 'Indo-Aryan' for Caucasoid or Khasa and 'Tibeto-Burman' for Mongoloid or Kirant. These two racial divisions also differ in social structure in that the Caucasoids are caste-based and the Mongoloids are mostly tribal. It would be useful here to make a subtle distinction of native terms 'jat' (caste) for the Caucasoids and 'Jati' (nationality) for the Mongoloids although they have a common etymology in the sense of 'species'. The former pertains to vertical (social) status differentiation and the latter to horizontal (spatial) groupings.

3. Early censuses of Nepal certainly included questions on ethnicity/caste of the population. The question on caste appears as schedule no. 6 in 1911, schedule no. 7 in 1920 and 1930, schedule no.

4 in 1941 and schedule 2 A in 1952/54. Questions relating to language and religion were first included and reported in the 1952/54 census. However, successive census reports did not include ethnic/caste data and linguistic data remained the only basis on the relative size of various ethnic groups. The 1991 census report provides for the first time data on ethnic/caste composition of Nepalese population. The relevant data sources are as follows:

- Vol. 1, Part V, Table 19: Caste/ethnic by residence one year ago
- Vol. 1, Part VII, Table 25: Population by caste /ethnic group
- Vol. 1, Part VII Table 26: Literacy status by caste/ethnic group
- Vol. 1, Part VIII, Table 27: Economic activity by caste/ethnic group
- Vol. 1, Part VIII, Table 28: Major occupation by caste/ethnic group
- Vol. 1. Part IX, Table 29: Major industry division by caste/ethnic group.

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4. The caste/ethnic groups are listed in cohorts of ten names commencing from tarai, hill, and then of mountain origin. There is no sequence as to their alphabetical order by name or size of their population. Neither is there any indication as to their caste or ethnic category. In the preface of each census volume, 'ethnic' is subsumed under 'caste', assuming all ethnics to be caste people. The 1991 census lists 60 ethnic and caste group. According to the regional grouping, these include 29 from the tarai, 29 from the hill and 2 from the mountain. Among those listed, three are actually religious groups: Churaute (hill Muslim), Muslim, and Sikh. Similarly, Bengali is included which not an ethnic/caste but a linguistic group. Among the tarai people, some related castes such as Khatwe/Musahar and Kanu/Teli are separately identified while many other (Badhai, Dom, Halkhor, Koiri, Lohar, Mali, Pashi, Tatma, etc.) are not listed. Similarly, excluded are some hill ethnics such as Byansi, Dura, Hayu, Khambu, Mech, and Pahari. These are obviously lumped under 'others' which range from 1,741 among mountain group to 185,994 in hill group and 1.3 million in the tarai group.

Table 1. Ethnic/Caste Composition, 1991

Geographic Region	No. of groups	Population	Per cent
Mountain Group	3	138,293	0.7
Caste	-	-	-
Ethnic	3	136,552	0.7
Others		-	1,741.
0.0			
Hill Group	20	12,420,157	67.2
Caste	9	7,457,170	40.3
Ethnic	11	4,776,993	25.8
Others		185,994	1.0
Inner Tarai Group	7	206,068	1.1
Caste	-	-	-
Ethnic	7	206,068	1.1
Tarai Group	25	5,718,770	30.9
Caste	20	2,939,175	15.9
Ethnic	5	1,452,652	7.9
Others		1,326,943	
Unstted/Foreigners	-	7,809	0.0
Total	55	18,491,097	100.0

Source: Salter & Gurung, forthcoming.

II. Composition

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5. Table 1 is an attempt at summarizing the census data on ethnicity/caste. The first order of classification is by elevation zone, as to the 'native area' of each ethnic/caste group. These are distinguished as mountain, hill, inner tarai, and the tarai. Recognition is given to inner tarai as it has numerous indigenous ethnic groups. Such geographic grouping is followed by second order of classification by social categories into ethnic, caste and others. The mountain and inner tarai zones have only ethnics as natives. The hill and tarai have both ethnics and castes. The status of Newar is problematic since it includes both caste and non-caste people. However, they qualify as ethnics owing to their distinctive language and culture. Similar is the case with Bhotia and Sherpa. As mentioned above, there is no caste group among people of mountain and inner tarai origin. The hill social group has more ethnics while the tarai has more castes. The distribution of ethnic groups by native area is shown in the Ethnographic Map and Diagram B.

6. Two-thirds of Nepal's total population belong to the hill origin group (Diagram A). People of tarai origin come next with 30.9 percent; Those of inner tarai origin and mountain origin are 1.1 percent and 0.7 percent respectively. Thus, 67.9 percent of total population are of highland origin and 32.0 percent of lowland origin. In terms of social structure, caste people constitute 56.2 percent of total population (Diagram A). The ethnics are 35.5 percent and the rest 8.3 percent subsumed as others.

7. Of the enumerated 30 castes, 9 are of hill origin and 20 of tarai origin. However, the hill castes with Nepali mother tongue, form the largest social group with 40.3 percent of total population. These include the political elites Bahun, Chhetri, and Thakuri (30.6%) as well as artisan castes Kami, Damai, and Sarki (8.7%). In fact, Kamis outnumber all other ethnics except Magar, Tharu, Newar and Tamang. The tarai has numerous castes but the proportion of dominant castes, Brahmin, Rajput and Kayastha is very small (1.6%). Of the 26 listed ethnic groups, 3 are from mountain, 11 from hill, 7 from inner tarai and 5 from the tarai. Ethnic groups of mountain origin are the Bhotia, Thakali and Sherpa. Hill ethnics include the traditional Gurkha tribes (Gurung, Magar, Limbu, Rai) who account for 14.1 percent of the total population. Other populous hill ethnics are the Tamang (5.5 percent) and the Newar (5.6 percent). The seven ethnics of the inner tarai are small isolated groups. The tarai is represented by five ethnic groups of which the Tharu (6.5 percent) form the largest ethnic group of Nepal after the Magar (7.2 percent).

III. Migration

8. The ethnographic map shows the distribution pattern of 38 ethnic/caste groups. This is supplemented by native area and their share in total population (Diagram B). The Bhotia of the mountain, and Tharu and Muslim of the tarai are spread laterally across the country. Tribal ethnics are more pronounced in eastern hill as well as eastern tarai. Central inner tarai is another area of ethnic concentration. There has been significant dispersal of people from their native area, with two main migratory trajectories. One is from the west to east, particularly after mid-18th century with expansion of Gorkhali state led by hill castes. The other is north-to-south or decent to the lowlands, a result particularly of malaria control since the 1950s. Both east-west and north-south migration processes are very pronounced in the case of people of the hills, the traditional zone of the Nepalese population.

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9. The west-to-east population movement along the hill corridor is best exemplified by the hill castes. Of the total 7.5 million hill caste people, only 1.4 million or 18.2 percent are reported in the western hills, their native area. Nearly 3 million of them are in central and eastern hills. They constitute 51.1 percent of central hill (including Kathmandu Valley) and 40.9 percent of eastern hill population. The dominant eastward trajectory is also seen in the intra-hill migration of the four hill ethnic groups with martial tradition. The Magar and Gurung of the central hills, who participated in the Gorkhali military campaigns, number 128, 818 in the eastern hill while Rai and Limbu of the east total only 12, 238 in the central and western hills.

10. Table 2 and Diagram C show the sectoral distribution of population by ethnicity/caste. Caste people outnumber ethnics in all three sectors. They are 70 percent in the western sector and just a majority in the central sector. The ethnics constitute only quarter of the western population. In both the central and eastern sectors, they are about a third of the sectoral population. The north to-south migration trajectory is obvious from the large number of people of highland (mountain and hill) origin in the lowlands.

Table 2. Ethnicity/Caste by Sector

Caste/Ethnic Group	West	Central	East	All
Caste	69.6	50.5	54.0	56.4
Ethnic	25.4	31.9	30.8	29.9
Others	4.9	17.7	15.1	13.6
All	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
(Population)	(4089715)	(6,105,216)	(8,296,166)	(18,491,097)

11. Of Nepal's total population, 52 percent now reside in the lowlands (inner tarai and tarai) districts. On the other hand, people of lowlands origin constitute less than one-third of the total population. This discrepancy between majority population in the lowlands despite smaller size of its native population can be explained by large-scale influx of highlanders. Thus, of the 12.6 million people of highland origin, 3.9 million or 30.8 percent are residing in the lowlands. People of hill origin now constitute 83.1 percent of the inner tarai and 30.9 percent of the tarai population. In contrast, among the 5.8 million people of lowland origin, only 182,284 or 3.1 percent are reported in the highlands. They constitute a mere 2.2 percent of the hill and 0.9 percent of the mountain population.

Table 3. Ethnicity/Caste by Elevation Zone

Elevation	Caste	Ethnic	Others	All	Population
Mountain	66.2	29.1	4.6	100.0	1182105
Hill	56.8	31.7	12.5	100.0	7695391
Inner Tarai	48.2	45.9	5.9	100.0	1694424

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Tarai	57.3	24.9	17.9	100.0	7919177
All	56.4	29.9	13.6	100.0	
(Population)	(10,425,518)	(5,532,916)	(2,532,663)		(18,491,097)

12. Table 3 and Diagram D show the distribution of population by elevation zones. In the mountain zone, two-third population is of caste people and 21.9 percent are ethnics. In the hill, respective shares of caste and ethnics are 56.8 percent and 31.7 percent respectively. Ethnics constitute a fair share (45.9 percent) of inner tarai population but still the caste people predominate (48.2 percent). In the tarai population, a quarter is ethnics, 57.3 percent caste people, and large share (17.9 percent) as others.

IV. Distribution

13. Divergent patterns are observable when comparing the maps of native areas (Ethnographic map) with current majority population of particular ethnic/ caste groups by district (Map II). In all, only eleven social groups emerge as the majority in population at the district level. Out of the 75 districts, the Chhetri are majority in 22 districts. The Bahun predominate in nine districts followed by the Tamang in seven. The Magar, Tharu, and Rai are in majority in six districts each. The Yadav are a majority in five districts between Bagmati and Kosi rivers. The Gurung and Muslim are more numerous in four districts each. The Limbu and Newar outnumber other ethnic/caste groups in three contiguous districts each.

14. The numerical dominance of districts by ethnicity/caste indicates both the persistence and erosion of native areas. The Chhetri stronghold of 17 contiguous districts in the west conforms to their homeland in the Karnali region. However, their majority in the tarai district of Kanchanpur, once a Tharu majority area, is due to migration in recent decades. Four other Chhetri majority districts (Dolakha, Ramechhpa, Okhaldhunga, Udayapur) are outposts in the east with a longer history. The Bahun majority districts include five adjoining districts in the central hills, one in inner tarai (Chitwan), and three in the tarai. Their majority in Morang and Jhapa is due to large-scale migration from the eastern hills. The Tamang. majority districts correspond to their native area around Kathmandu Valley. The Tharu majority districts are mostly in the tarai, their traditional habitat.

15. The districts with Magar majority are in the central hill but the core of their native area has been indented by districts with Bahun predominance. In the case of the Rai, Gurung, Limbu, and Newar, there is convergence in the group of districts with their majority population and their native area. The Yadav and Muslim majority districts are all in the tarai but with a contrast that while the former occupy five contiguous districts in Mithila region, the latter's majority districts are dispersed.

16. Diagram E summaries the regional pattern of dominance by ethnicity/caste. The most numerous first three ethnic/caste group is indicated by their percentage of population for each of the 13 geographic regions. The Chhetri outnumber others in two regions each of the mountain, hill and inner tarai zone. They are second most numerous in Kathmandu Valley and eastern tarai and third in central hill and central river tarai.

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17. The Bahun are predominant in central hill and central tarai. They are second in western mountain and central inner tarai, and third placed in central mountain, Kathmandu Valley and Western tarai. The Tamang are more numerous than others in central mountain and central inner tarai. They are second most numerous in eastern hill and eastern inner tarai. The Newar outnumber other ethnic/caste groups in Kathmandu Valley. The Tharu are predominant in western tarai, second in western inner tarai and central tarai and third most numerous in eastern tarai. The Yadav are most numerous in eastern tarai, particularly in district between Bagmati and Kosi rivers. Others second in regional population are Magar in western and central hill, Gurung in central hill, Rai in eastern mountain, and Muslim in eastern tarai. Similarly third in regional population include Kami in western mountain and western hill, Limbu in eastern mountain, Rai in eastern hill, Magar in western and eastern inner tarai, and Muslim in central tarai.

V. Linguistic Dynamics

18. This essay is focussed on ethnic/caste data. A brief inquiry into mother tongue data provides some interesting facts on cultural change among the ethnics. During the period 1952/54 - 1981, population of Nepal increased by 124.5 percent, from 8.2 million to 18.5 million. For the same period, the population of seven Indo-Aryan languages, the mother tongue of caste people, increased by 126.9 percent. On the other hand, of the 19 mother tongues spoken by ethnics, only Danuwar, Dhimal, Rajbansi, and Tharu, recorded population increases exceeding the national average (Table 4).

Table 4. Ethnicity and Language

In Percent

Ethnic Group	Language Family	Share of Total Population 1991	Increase in Speakers 1952/54-91	Retention of Mother Tongue 1991
Mountain				
1. Bhote-Sherpa	(T-B)	0.7	73.7	90.0
2. Thakali	(T-B)	0.0	115.1	51.8
Hill				
3. Chepang	(T-B)	0.0	76.0	68.5
4. Gurung	(T-B)	1.2	40.5	50.7
5. Jirel	(T-B)	0.0	55.4	86.5
6. Limbu	(T-B)	1.4	74.6	85.5
7. Magar	(T-B)	2.3	57.2	32.1
8. Newar	(T-B)	3.7	80.1	66.1
9. Rai-Kirant	(T-B)	2.4	86.1	83.6
10. Tamang	(T-B)	4.9	82.8	88.6

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11. Thami	(T-B)	0.1	40.6	75.4
Inner Terai				
12. Danuwar	(I-A)	0.1	46.7	159.6
13. Darai	(I-A)	0.0	111.4	60.4
14. Kumhal	(I-A)	0.0	-59.7	1.8
15. Majhi	(I-A)	0.1	97.6	20.6
16. Raji	(T-B)	0.0	95.4	90.4
Tarai				
17. Dhimal	(T-B)	0.1	164.8	89.5
18. Rajbansi	(I-A)	0.5	140.7	104.1
19. Tharu	(I-A)	5.4	176.2	83.2

Note: I-A = Indo-Aryan, T-B = Tibeto-Burman.

Of the 19 ethnic languages, 13 are Tibeto-Burman and 6 Indo-Aryan. All mountain and hill ethnics have Tibeto-Burman mother tongue while inner tarai and tarai ethnics have Indo-Aryan mother tongue. Rajbansi and Dhimal language are Tibeto-Burman intrusions in inner tarai and the tarai respectively.

19. Of these 19 languages, only 7 claim a share exceeding one percent of the total populations. Tharu speakers are 5.4 percent, followed by Tamang (4.9%) and Newar (3.7%) speakers. The Tharu speakers also show highest increase, by 2.8 times, during 1952/54-1991. Others with substantial increase are all from the tarai and inner tarai: Dhimal and Danuwar by 2.6 times, Rajbansi by 1.9 times. Among the hill ethnics, Rai-Kiranti, Tamang and Newari-speaking population increased 80 to 86 percent as compared to national population increase of 124.5 percent. Gurung and Thami language speakers recorded the lowest increase (40%). Among mountain languages, the increase ranged from 73.7 percent for Bhote-Sherpa to 45.1 percent for Thakali. In contrast, the number of Kumhale speakers declined by 59.7 percent in about four decades.

20. The temporal change in population by mother tongue also provides an indication in language retention by the ethnics (Table 4). In this regard, Kumhals show the least level of retention: 1,413 speakers against a population of 76,635. It is also low among the Majhi with only half the population retaining their language. Among hill ethnics, two-third Magars and half of Gurungs and Thakalis have lost their mother tongue. The percent of language retention among other hill ethnics is Chepang - 68.5, Newar - 66.1, Thami - 75.4, Rai-Kiranti - 83.6, Limbu - 85.5, jirel -

86.5 and Tamang 88-8. Bhote-Sherpa, Raji and Dhimal have retention level of 90 percent. Rajbansi appears as an exception where the language speakers exceed the number of their population.

Source: Nepal Foundation for Advanced Studies, Kathmandu, Nepal (NEFAS)

