

Relevance of Federalism in Nepal

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Abstract

There is a narrative among some sections of people across party affiliations that a small country like Nepal does not need federalism and that it only adds financial burden to the nation. This paper compares Nepal with New England of USA and tries to analyze the causes and needs for federal structure within the two. Nepal and New England are comparable in size and both have diverse demography and geography. The analysis is based on secondary data and the findings based on territorial size, population, ethnic and geographical diversity suggest that Nepal cannot be considered small to align it with unitary state model. Unlike the case of New England whose territorial model of federal structure is rooted to its historical and colonial existence, Nepal's federal structure is the result of revolutions against historical marginalization of ethnic and backward groups and thus its federal structure aligns with territorial-multinational hybrid model federalism. Furthermore, the remarkable progress achieved in the sectors of infrastructure, health and higher education during the relatively short span of federalism clearly points towards the practical applicability of federalism in Nepal.

Keywords: Ethnic diversity, Federalism, Government accessibility, Inclusive representation

Introduction and Research Framing

History of Evolution of Federalism in Nepal

The first voice related to federalism in Nepal was raised by Nepal Terai Congress just after the successful political change of 1951 (Kafle et al., 2024). The autonomous provincial status for Terai was one of the demands of Nepal Terai Congress. After the reestablishment of democracy in 1990, Rastriya Janamukti Party, Nepal Rastriya Janajati Party, Nepal Sadbhavana Party, as well as different ethnic groups demanded for the federalism (Khanal, 2009).

Maoists started revolution in 1996 after the then government turned down their 40 points demand for Nepal's transition. Though, federalism was not explicitly mentioned in the list, there were issues related to identity, power sharing, and decentralization. The demand number 20 was the demand for self governance to regions with ethnic dominance. Likewise demand number 25 talked about regional autonomy for backward areas to end discrimination between Hills and Terai. During their revolution Maoists formed different ethnic *Mukti Morchas* (Liberation Fronts) with the slogans of 'Right to Self Determination' and 'ethnic autonomy' (Khanal, 2009). The Maoists brought the idea of ethnic and regional autonomy to divide Nepal into nine autonomous provinces: Kirant, Madhesh, Tamang, Newa, Tamuwan, Magarat, Tharuwan, Bheri-Karnali and Seti-Mahakali. Bheri-Karnali and Seti-Mahakali were proposed under geographic line and rests seven were proposed under ethnic line. Such proposal along with creation of Liberation Fronts named after ethnicity popularized the sentiment in favor of federalism.

In 2006, the House of Representative which was dissolved by the King Gyanendra Shah in 2005 was reinstated by him responding to the Second People Movement led by the Seven Party Alliance. The House was later restructured to accommodate Maoists. The same House promulgated Interim Constitution of Nepal on 15th January 2007. Surprisingly, the constitution which was promulgated from the parliament in which Maoists were influential was silent about federalism. Just a day after the promulgation, Madhesh Janaadhikar Forum-Nepal, under the leadership of Upendra Yadav burnt the copies of the Interim Constitution at Maitighar Mandala, Kathmandu. The protesters were arrested under *Rajya Droh* (Treason) Charge which triggered strong movement in Terai. The movement, known as *Madhesh Andolan I* (Madhesh Movement I), gained momentum as people of Terai across party lines joined the movement demanding federalism. After about three weeks of protest and killing of 24 protesters, the government

bowed down and federal structure was included in the interim constitution. Subsequently, the first session of the constituent assembly declared Nepal as the Federal Democratic Republic on 29th May 2008.

The first constitution of Nepal drafted by the constituent assembly after over six years of exercise was promulgated in 2015. The constitution adopted federalism and divided Nepal into seven provincial states. Only one party, Rastriya Janamorcha with only three constituent assembly members in the 601 member assembly, was openly against the federalism (United Nations Development Programme, 2017).

Evidently, much of Nepal's transition to federalism stems not from elite bargains alone, but from mass mobilizations demanding recognition and redistribution of political power and resources. From the Maoist insurgency during 1996–2006 to the Madhesh Movements in 2007, 2008 and 2015, identity-based struggles framed federalism as a mechanism for inclusion, decentralization, and resistance to historical centralization in Kathmandu.

One of the most critical reasons behind the demand for federalism in Nepal was to address the historical marginalization of various ethnic, regional, and linguistic communities. Under the centralized system, governmental power was concentrated in Kathmandu and dominated by a few elite groups and elite communities (Ghai, 2011; Shakya, 2012). According to Kafle et al. (2024), the increasing demand for federalism was due to such non-inclusive nature of governments. Ethnic groups such as the Madhesis, Tharus, *Janajatis* (Indigenous), and Dalits largely faced exclusion from political, economic, and administrative decision-making (Haug & Aasland, 2008). After the 2007 Madhesh Movement I, which got support from several marginalized groups, federalism was accepted to achieve long-term political stability and a democratic political order (Hangen, 2007). Federalism was introduced to ensure representation of all groups through provincial governance. This fact is clearly reflected in the clause included in the first amendment of the interim constitution after the Madhesh Movement I, which mentions 'Nepal will be a federal democratic republic state by accepting the wishes of the Madhesi people, including the indigenous and ethnic groups and the people of backward and other regions, for an autonomous province and have their rights, while keeping the sovereignty, unity and integrity of Nepal intact, the boundaries, number, name and structure of the autonomous provinces will be determined' (Khanal, 2009). By creating provinces and allowing autonomy, federalism offers these groups greater access not only to governmental power but also to resources, eventually promoting social inclusion and equity.

As federalism was not incorporated in the 2007 Interim Constitution, it was later mandated following intense pressure from ethnic groups, and finally formalized in the 2015 Constitution, the federal model of Nepal thus represents a case of negotiated multinational federalism (McGarry & O'Leary, 2009), in contrast to federal systems derived from voluntary union (e.g., USA, Switzerland).

Background for Research Questions

Presently the elected federal bodies have served for just over eight years. However, there is growing aversion towards federalism (My Republica, 2023). The critics of federalism often narrate that a country as small as Nepal doesn't need federalism, and they see federal structure only as a financial burden to the nation. The critics undermine other issues like identity, ethnicity, culture, and above all geographical constraints for better accessibility to governments. Riding on such sentiments of some sections of people, the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) unexpectedly performed well in the federal election of 2022. One of the reasons for their unexpected good performance was that they were against federalism as they did not contest for provincial assembly seats. RSP's reservation about the current provincial setup is well known (Kathmandu Post, 2022; *Rastriya Swatantra Party favours doing away with provinces*, 2023a). Another party, Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) had submitted memorandum to the Prime Minister in 2022 demanding scraping of federalism (Kathmandu Post, 2023b). After, the recent Gen Z protest which toppled the government and led to the formation of interim government, there is possibility of interest groups to raise voices for the dissolution of federalism (Stimson Center, 2025). After Gen Z revolution, RPP has already started protesting for the dissolution of federalism and the constitution (Reuters Connect, 2025). With these backgrounds, it is high time to analyze the status and relevance of federalism in Nepal.

These pretexts cast reflection about a growing political discourse which questions the necessity of federalism in a relatively small and resource-constrained state. This critique, recently appears amplified post-Gen Z protests in September 2025, and raises core questions: *Is federalism appropriate for a small, diverse state like Nepal? If so, on what theoretical and empirical grounds?*

This paper seeks to engage this debate not just descriptively, but analytically. The core research question is: How does Nepal's adoption of federalism align with broader theories of federal design in small, multiethnic states? In answering this question, the paper draws from debates in comparative federalism around the design trade-offs between unity and diversity (Stepan, 1999; Watts, 2008), territorial versus multinational federalism (McGarry & O'Leary, 2009), and institutional performance in post-conflict and developing states (Bermeo, 2002; Panizza, 1999).

Case Selection and Comparative Logic

As the logic behind aversion towards federalism seems centered around smallness of territorial or population size, this paper brings a unique comparative perspective of relevance of federalism in Nepal by comparing the case of Nepal with New England, the north-east territory of the United States of America (USA). The New England of USA has area of 186448 Sq km (Wikipedia, n.d.-a) which is comparable to Nepal's area of 147516 sq km (Sharma et al., 2020). New England territory comprises six states of USA whereas Nepal has seven states. Though Austria, Belgium, Micronesia, and Switzerland are countries with federalism and smaller in area than that of Nepal, the similarities mentioned above set perfect combination for comparison between New England and Nepal about the causes and needs for federalism. Furthermore, USA being the oldest and largest federal country, its successful economic and developmental journey provides added perspective about federalism.

While New England is not presented as a theoretically equivalent case, it serves as an illustrative comparator to challenge assumptions that federalism is not necessary with smallness of territorial or population size. The emphasis is not on symmetrical case comparison, but rather on exploring *scope conditions* under which federalism functions effectively, even in geographically compact units.

The comparison of Nepal's federalism with that of New England of USA serves two purposes: first, to counter the argument that small territorial size or low population justifies unitary governance; and second, to contextualize federal design choices in light of historical legacies, administrative needs, and diversity management.

Nepal, despite its small size, exhibits high levels of internal diversity: ethnic, linguistic, regional, and geographic, and presents conditions commonly associated with federal transitions, including legacies of exclusion, regional inequality, and post-conflict demands for self-rule (Stepan, 1999; Ghai, 2011).

Analytical Framework and Methodology

This study applies a conceptual framework drawn from the literature on territorial and multinational federalism. It assesses federal relevance based on five analytical dimensions:

- Demographic and Geographic Diversity
- Historical Drivers of Federalism
- Representation and Inclusion
- Developmental Equity and Resource Allocation
- Governability and Institutional Design

The methodology is qualitative and comparative-descriptive, relying primarily on secondary data, supplemented by relevant institutional indicators (e.g., road length, legislative representation, development outcomes). While not hypothesis-testing in the conventional sense, the paper builds inductively toward theoretical and practical relevance.

Key Findings and Empirical Discussion

Territorial Size and Population

Despite popular claims of Nepal being "too small" for federalism, its size and population challenge such notions. Table 1 and 2 demonstrate that several New England states are significantly smaller than Nepalese provinces in both area and population. Except Maine, remaining five New England states are smaller in size compared to the area of Karnali. Furthermore, the Rhode Island has the area less than the smallest province of Nepal's Madhesh. In fact, Rhode Island is smaller than half the area of Madhesh Province.

Table 1: Areas of states of Nepal and New England

Provinces of Nepal*		States of New England**	
Province	Area (sq km)	Sate	Area (sq km)
Koshi	25905	Connecticut	14357
Madhesh	9661	Maine	91633
Bagmati	20300	Massachussets	27336
Gandaki	21504	New Hampshire	24214
Lumbini	22288	Rhode Island	4001
Karnali	27984	Vermont	24906
Sudur Paschim	19999		

Sources: * Sharma et al. (2020), ** Wikipedia (n.d.-a)

Table 2: Population of states of Nepal and New England

Provinces of Nepal		States of New England	
Province	Population (Census 2021)*	Sate	Population (April, 2020)**
Koshi	4961412	Connecticut	3605912
Madhesh	6114600	Maine	1363177
Bagmati	6116866	Massachussets	7032933
Gandaki	2466427	New Hampshire	1377524
Lumbini	5122078	Rhode Island	1097371
Karnali	1688412	Vermont	643077
Sudur Paschim	2693783		

Sources: *National Statistics Office (2024), ** U. S. Census Bureau (2023)

New England, with just over half of Nepal's population, has six state governments, reflecting long-standing traditions of local autonomy and governance. Maine, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island each has population less than the least populated state of Nepal's Karnali. If federal structures can be justified in such contexts, Nepal's federalism cannot be dismissed on the basis of territorial or population size alone.

Legislative Representation and Cost Efficiency

Critics often point to the cost of maintaining provincial assemblies. However, Table 3 and 4 show that New England's legislative density far exceeds Nepal's, with 1293 state-level legislators for a population of 15 million, compared to Nepal's 550 provincial legislators for nearly 30 million people. These figures complicate the claim that Nepal's federalism is institutionally bloated.

Table 3: Data of Sudur Paschim to be aligned with other states' data

	Koshi	Madhesh	Bagmati	Gandaki	Lumbini	Karnali	Sudur Paschim
Members of federal house of Representative (Lower House): Additional 110 Members are elected proportionally on the basis vote shares of political parties	28	32	33	18	26	12	16
Members of National Assembly (Upper House): Additional 3 members are nominated by the president.	8	8	8	8	8	8	8
Members of Legislative Assembly	93	107	110	60	87	40	53
Total	129	147	151	86	111	60	77

Source: Kpadhne (2025)

Furthermore, New England states assemblies are bicameral unlike Nepal's unicameral provincial assemblies. This fact also goes against some critics portraying provincial assemblies as unnecessarily large. Moreover, the cost of federalism must be weighed against its benefits in local accountability, inclusion, and service delivery (Breton, 2000; Watts, 2008). According to Breton (2000), the cost of federalism is in fact the cost of decentralization which would be there in any unitary state with decentralized units.

Table 4: Number of federal and state legislators from states of New England

	Connecticut	Maine	Massachussets	New Hampshire	Rhode Island	Vermont
Members of federal house of Representative (Lower House)	5	2	9	2	2	1
U S Senators (Upper House)	2	2	2	2	2	2
State Senates	36	35	40	24	38	30
Members of Legislative Assembly (State House)	151	151+3 (non-voting tribal representatives)	160	400	75	150
Total	194	193	211	428	117	183

Source: Wikipedia (n.d.-b)

Federalism and Inclusion in Nepal

A central rationale for Nepal's federalism is social inclusion in political framework. As shown by Adhikari (2023), marginalized groups (Madhesis, Janajatis) have better representation at the provincial level compared to federal

parliament. The FPTP (First Past The Post) elected federal parliament members from indigenous group in 2022 election was just 25 % against their population share of 37.8 %, whereas their aggregate FPTP elected members in the seven provinces was 34.84 % (Adhikari, 2023). Likewise, there were 28 FPTP elected Madhesi in federal parliament which is just 16.96 %, much below their population share of 29.43 % (Census, 2021) whereas total FPTP elected Madhesi from all provinces was 91 which is 27.57 % of the total FPTP elected provincial legislators of 330 (Adhikari, 2023). Thus, share of FPTP elected provincial members from Indigenous group and Madhesi are closer to their population shares, but their corresponding shares in federal parliament are much below their shares of population. This disproportionality suggests federalism is functioning as a promoter of inclusive mechanism, aligning with Panizza's (1999) claim that federalism enhances minority representation in heterogeneous societies. Furthermore, access to executive power, e.g., chief minister positions held by Madhesi and Janajati leaders, illustrates the potential of federalism to transform symbolic inclusion into substantive participation.

Development, Infrastructure, and Decentralization

Nepal's geography varies drastically from the Himalayan region in the north, hills in the middle to the Terai plains in the south, with each region having varied economic resources and developmental challenges. The centralized system failed to utilize these regional strengths effectively, resulting in uneven development. Major infrastructure, education, and healthcare services were disproportionately concentrated in Kathmandu Valley and a few urban centers (Shrestha, 2025). Federalism aims to decentralize governance and resource allocation, allowing each province to plan and implement development projects based on their local needs and resources. Prior to federalism in Nepal, local bodies received less than 10 % of the nation's total revenue. After the implementation of federalism, the combined share of local and provincial governments has reached close to 40 % (Mallik, 2025), clearly indicating equitable resource distribution in federalism. Such balanced distribution of resources eventually will reduce internal migration caused by lack of opportunities in rural and remote areas.

Road is the basic infrastructure which opens the doors for several developmental projects. The total road length in the year 2006/07 was 9399 km and in 2015/16 it reached 12898 which is an increase of less than 3000 km (Department of Road, 2018). According to the recent 2025 report the total road length of Nepal has crossed over 36000 km (MyRepublica, 2025a), an outstanding increase of about 23000 km during just about a decade of federalism. In fact, it is about the twice the road length built in the entire history of Nepal before federalism.

In 2015, there were 111 public hospitals in Nepal (Department of Health Services, 2018). The number increased to 215 in 2023 (Nepal Health Fact Sheet, 2023). The increase in number of public hospitals by about 100 percent within eight years clearly indicates faster pace of increase in people's health care accessibility.

Before the establishment of federalism there were only nine universities in Nepal. After the establishment of federalism, five more federal universities and six provincial universities have been established. Thus, the total number of universities before 2015 increased from 9 to 20 providing accessibility for higher education in different regions of Nepal.

These development indicators coupled with increased revenue sharing at provincial level support the view that federalism can accelerate local development by tailoring policy to regional needs (Shrestha, 2025; Mallik, 2025), especially in geographically challenging environments like Nepal.

Geographical Constraints and Administrative Logic

Nepal is full of geographical challenges. It is almost rectangular in shape entrenched between China in North and India in South, East and West. Its average width is 193 km and average length is 885 km. It is the land of 8 out of 14 Himalayas of height above 8000 m in the world. Mountains and hills cover over 80 percent of Nepal's area. The narrow southern plain, called Terai, covering about less than 20 percent of Nepal's area runs from East to West. The forests cover about 45-46 percent of Nepal's area, mostly in mid-mountainous regions. Transportation facility is limited due to rugged Terrain. Road connectivity in mountainous region is so poor that even today school children in mountain regions use horrifying *tuin* (Roap pulled bridge) to cross river. Only recently, all the seventy seven districts headquarters of Nepal got road connectivity (MyRepublica, 2025b). However, the connectivity to remote villages still remains challenging. The difficulty level of Terrain can be imagined from the fact that about 105 km distance between Dhulikhel to Sindhuli takes about 4 hours of drive. With this estimate, about 1000 km east-west length offers formidable challenge for accessibility. There is only one railway in Terai with total running length of just about 50 km.

According to 2023 data, New England has total road length of about 190213 km (Kansas State Historical Society, n.d.). This comes to be more than 5 times the total road length in Nepal. Rhode Island, the smallest of the New England state, which is less than half the size of Madhesh has over 10000 km road length. With such accessibility level coupled with aerial and railway facility, New England has six states. Nepal lags far behind in transportation facility. Ethnic groups in geographically isolated areas expressed frustration over inadequate representation and

access to resources (Adhikari, 2023). Thus, geographical constraint adds to less discussed, a new dimension in favor of federalism, and on this ground of geographical constraint also federalism seems indispensable for Nepal.

National Unity through Diversity Based integrity

Contrary to argument by critics that federalism could encourage division, in Nepal's context, it is a medium for national unity. By recognizing and respecting Nepal's diversity through federal units, the state provides opportunity for ownership to its diverse people. Federalism allows communities feel seen, heard, and empowered, which enhances a sense of belonging and loyalty to the nation. The federalism in India, Nepal's Southern neighbour, has been contributing to the promotion of greater stability, integrity and prosperity (Raju, 1988). Federalism is used to hold diverse population together (Stepan, 1999), and in countries like USA, Canada, Germany and Switzerland has contributed to stability, pluralism and economic development by accommodating regional diversity and distributing power effectively (Linder et al., 2021). According to Lluch (2011), autonomy in federalism adds a nuanced anti-sessionism stance. So, federalism in fact helps maintain national unity by managing diversity in multiethnic country like Nepal (Mishra, 2016), rather than suppressing it.

Theoretical Insights from the New England Case and Nepal's Federal Model

New England's state boundaries, rooted in colonial-era religious and political autonomy, are not dissimilar from Nepal's internal diversity. While New England was shaped by early political charters and geographic factors (rivers, terrain), Nepal's federal boundaries reflect a hybrid model, balancing ethnic identity, geographic logic, and administrative viability (Ghai, 2011; Khanal, 2009). This parallel highlights a broader point: federalism can emerge not only from state-building efforts but also from the need to contain pluralism within pre-existing national frameworks (Elazar, 1987; Keating, 1998).

In Nepal's case, the adoption of federalism was largely driven by the need to address historical marginalization and foster inclusion of Madhesis, Janajatis, Tharus, Dalits, and other underrepresented groups. These communities had long been excluded from centralized power structures which were largely concentrated in Kathmandu Valley. To address inclusion and decentralization, Nepal adopted mix of territorial and multinational models of federalism. Consequently, Nepal's federal structure incorporates in parts the ideologies of territorial and multinational federalism. The delineation of provinces though primarily geographic, considered ethnic and linguistic demographics to some extent. For example, Madhesh Province was designed to address the political aspirations of the Madhesi community. In the remaining six states the structures are blend of geographic, economic, and ethnic considerations. This partial accommodation of ethnic demands suggests a hybrid of territorial and multinational model.

Clearly, Nepal's federal model does not fully align with the classical territorial federalism (as in USA) or pure multinational models (as in Belgium). Instead, it represents a hybrid structure, attempting to balance national unity with ethnic autonomy (Ghai, 2011; Lluch, 2011).

The partial accommodation of ethnic demands, particularly in Madhesh from where the first voice for autonomy emerged, reflects this compromise. Such hybrid models are increasingly common in divided societies seeking stability without fragmentation (Bermeo, 2002; Linder et al., 2021).

Discussion

The popular narrative by the critics of federalism voicing for unitary state model on the ground of smallness of size of Nepal does not hold the ground either in terms of population or in terms of territorial size. Nepal's almost double population size and comparable territorial size with New England clearly appears going against the logic that smallness necessitates a unitary system (Sharma, 2020). The fact that Nepal is bordered with five Indian provinces also shows the necessity of federalism for decentralization point of view (Baral, 2019).

The existence of several states within the relatively small New England territory further illustrates the fact that territorial size and population are not the primary determinant of federalism. Historical facts, issues of identity and geographical challenges have been found to be central factors in shaping federal systems across the globe (Watts, 2008). The federalism in the USA, the oldest country having modern federal system and in India evolved from similar considerations (Elazar, 1987; Singh 2015) is largely based on these facts. Nepal's federalism can also be viewed to be aligned along similar line and critics' rhetoric centered on smallness of size only does not appear convincing.

Conclusion

Nepal's federalism is not an imported template, but an indigenous response to long-standing grievances of exclusion, and political and developmental centralization. When assessed against comparative indicators like territorial size, population, infrastructure, and representation, Nepal's federal system emerges as both justified and necessary. Furthermore, Nepal's federalism is the result of several movements which itself evidences people's expression and

aspiration for federalism. Federalism in Nepal is not just a political arrangement; it is a necessary and timely step toward inclusive democracy, social justice, and equitable development.

The comparatively much higher representation of marginalized groups in provincial assemblies compared to that in the federal House of Representative indicates suitability of federalism toward addressing the issues of inclusiveness. The significant retention of revenue at local level coupled with the astonishing increase in road length, number of hospitals and the number of universities during relatively short span of federalism are the noticeable achievements which are practical proofs to bolster the federal system.

The comparison with New England is not intended as a perfect comparison but as an illustrative challenge to simplistic critiques based on state size. More importantly, engagement with the broader federalism literature shows that Nepal's model aligns with the theoretical expectations of federalism in small yet diverse states.

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