

Perception of Inclusive Democracy and Federalism in the Magar Community of Chitwan

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Abstract

This study discusses attitudes among Chitwan Magar activists and leaders regarding the political participation of their community within an inclusive democracy and federal set-up. As such, this study seeks to find out whether these are concretely 28arima28r in the society of Magars, with special focus on political inclusion, representation, and expectations. This is reached through key research to assess the status of inclusive democracy and federalism, in the case of the Magars of Chitwan. This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in interpretive and participatory paradigms, using intensive interviews and literature review to explore the perception of the Magar activities of Chitwan and leaders regarding political inclusion and representation within the framework of inclusive democracy and federalism. The findings are 28arima28ra28ion28 by reviewing secondary sources, both historical and recent studies, on the Magar community. This study concludes that while the Magar community made major contributions to Nepal's political movements, including the Maoist insurgency, their aspirations for federalism remain largely unfulfilled. Despite past involvement, Magars continue to face political 28arima28ra28ion28o, with minimal representation in governance and decision-making. The current federal structure fails to satisfy respondents, who see no cultural or linguistic autonomy as once envisioned during Nepal's transformation into a federal republic. The notion of inclusive democracy in Nepal is still nascent and demands significant reforms to ensure equitable political representation for indigenous groups like the Magars. Essential steps include strengthening democratic institutions and promoting participatory governance to enhance inclusivity and achieve the federal vision.

Keywords: *democracy, federalism, Magar, politics, inclusiveness*

Introduction

Inclusiveness encompasses the concept that all humans within a society are equal and free from discrimination based on class, gender, ethnicity, religion, region of origin, etc. Democracy is a form of governance whereby all eligible members take part, generally through elected representatives. When inclusiveness and democracy coexist, they form an inclusive democracy, fostering an environment where individuals feel respected and valued. Such a system prioritises broad public participation, proportional representation, economic equality, and social justice, ensuring diverse groups have equal rights in decision-making (Baral Magar, 1993). Democracy exists in various forms, including direct, indirect, economic, ecological, and social democracy, all aiming to build a *29arima29ra29ion* and participatory society. Inclusive democracy eliminates hierarchical structures by distributing political and economic power equally (Baral, 1992). It allows citizens to *29arima29* resources equitably, reduce social and economic inequalities, promote environmental sustainability, and empower *29arima29ra29io* communities. Inclusive democracy promotes equality, representation, and social justice, ensuring all voices are heard and valued in governance.

Federalism divides power between the central and regional governments, allowing independent functioning while sharing responsibilities in lawmaking, administration, and taxation. It addresses specific economic, social, cultural, religious, and ethnic needs at the provincial level, contributing to national unity (Hutchinson & Smith, 1994). Federalism can be symmetrical, where all provinces have equal powers, or asymmetrical, where some have greater autonomy (Sundar, 2008). Large or diverse countries like the United States, India, Germany, Switzerland, and Nepal adopt federalism to balance central control with regional autonomy.

Magar is one of the indigenous Nepalese ethnic groups that possess distinct language and cultural identities. They are spread across all the provinces of Nepal and the neighbouring countries such as India and Bhutan. According to the National Population Report of 2021, the population of Magars in Nepal is 2,013,498, which represents 6.9% of the total population (Government of Nepal, 2023). This figure makes the Magar the fourth-largest caste group in Nepal. The Magar community is officially declared as being among the 59 indigenous ethnic groups of Nepal. Magars

have had a long presence in Nepal and are among Nepal's earliest tribal communities (Vansittart, 1993). Vansittart mentions that they originally had an ancient homeland which was traditionally known as *Magwar Bisaya*, later *Magarat* (p. 35). "The earliest documented history of the Magar people can be traced back to the year 1100 AD" (p. 35). This shows that the Magar, like some other indigenous groups, have been a part of Nepal's earliest population.

The Magar originally lived in an independent settlement area known as Magarant, extending from the eastern edge of the current-day Rukum to the current Palpa kingdom. They later extended their settlements in subsequent periods to include the Gorkha region during the medieval period. The Magar played a significant role in the unification of Nepal (Vansittart, 2020). But due to their lack of education, the Magars had never had a vigorous political vision and had been underrepresented in Nepal's political life. They had not had many opportunities to participate in politics either. This study notes the perceptions of Magar residents in the Chitwan district. Chitwan's Magar inhabitants are immigrants of Gandaki and Lumbini provinces, of districts such as Gorkha, Tanahun, Kaski, Syangja, Palpa, Baglung, Myagdi, and Gulmi, etc. who immigrated at different phases of history.

In Nepalese official history, Magar leaders have been portrayed as revolutionaries or anarchists. During the unification era of Nepal, they were politically active and were with King Prithvi Narayan Shah, his son, and his grandson. Their contributions are not documented in history. During Junga Bahadur Rana's regime, Lakhana Thapa revolted against the government and was subsequently martyred (Sapkota, 1993). He was the first martyr of Nepal, who fought for freedom from the Rana autocracy in Nepal. In the following years, many Magar people were active in politics, but their activities had been unrecognized to a great degree. The Rana autocrats had sent many Magars to serve in the British army, limiting their scope to avoid involvement in Nepalese politics. Few Magars were ministerial during the Panchayat era, and they were appointed at the whim of the king. Balram Gharti Magar was among those who managed to get an opportunity to pursue politics at this time. Once democracy was established in Nepal in 1990, a few Magars began pursuing politics with various political parties.

The Magar community, being one of the largest ethnic communities because Nepal, has a pivotal role in the ethnic movement. The movement has been guided by the Nepal Federation of

Nationalities (NEFIN), which was formed in 1991 and was renamed in 2003 as the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, a common forum for all indigenous nationalities (Horowitz, 1985). The basic principles of this ethnic movement include some significant issues like secularism, affirmative action, Buddhism, proportional representation, inclusive democracy, and indigenous nationality rights. The names used by the Magar ethnic society vary according to their settlement areas. According to Gombikram (2080 BS), the *Magarant* region was previously known as *Maharlok*. The people of this area were originally known as *Mahar*, later known as Magar (Hamilton, 1971). Some new modern researchers or writers mention that some Magars had originated in northern India. But the majority of other scholars think that the Magars had originated in the Tibet-China region and had migrated to Nepal during the early historical period.

The Magars can be divided because to two main groups: the Southern Magars, residing in *Barha Magarat*, and the Northern Magars, settled in *Athara Magarat*. This classification is linked to their migration patterns from different regions. Hitchcock (1966) states, "The distinctions between the northern and southern Magar communities indicate that they are separate groups that migrated at different periods" (p. 4). Shepherd (1982) asserts that there are at least five distinct linguistic groups among the Magars, yet each identifies itself as Magar. He suggests, "The successive groups of immigrants who settled near the Magars may have taken on the Magar name" (pp. 11–12). The *Magarant* region is further divided into two separate areas: *Athara Magarat* and *Barha Magarat*. The Northern Magars, who reside in *Athara Magarant*, speak the *Athara Magaranti* language, which has unique linguistic features, including distinct punctuation systems.

The Maoist struggle in Nepal began in 1996, demanding an end to the monarchy. Then, the Magar people were heavily involved in politics (Acharya, 2021). The Magar youth actively participated in the armed struggle against the monarchy, and this ultimately led to Nepal becoming a secular republic in 2006 (Sinjali, 2019). However, still, their socio-political status did not improve much. Among the political movements in Nepal, the Magars have played a proportionate role, like other communities (Dhakal, 1994). Their participation in mainstream political institutions has been limited nonetheless. This study examines attitudes of Magar activists and leaders in Chitwan towards the political participation of their community and future ambitions, with an introduction to federalism and inclusive democracy. The research question attempts to determine the status of federalism and inclusive democracy in Chitwan's Magar community, while

the objective is to bring these concepts to the forefront in the community. The study is centred on this research question and objective.

Literature Review

Inclusive democracy is an issue of new Marxism that encourages people to search for their identities in certain socio-economic and political contexts. The study also discusses the perception of Magar activists and leaders about inclusive democracy and federalism. The concept of ethnicity and ethnic conflict is at the centre of inclusive democracy, which is similar to the concept of (Newman, 1991). In recent years, both the theory of modernization and neo-Marxism have been revised, paying attention to ethnic conflict (Hutchinson & Smith, 1996). However, the revised modernization theories still treat ethnic conflict as a dependent variable, suggesting that economic modernization, by increasing ethnic interaction, may enhance ethnic cleavages. The Neo-Marxist approach regards ethnicity as a form of 'false consciousness,' and thus, ethnic conflict is seen as a class struggle in disguise. However, the validity of seeing ethnic conflict as a part of class struggle is challenged (p. 46).

The situation of party politics is not far from Newman's analysis in Nepal, where ethnic and indigenous people are becoming modern due to false consciousness. Smith (1981) shared the experience of contemporary politics and said, "The reason is that classes, as categories of economic interest, are likely to be subdivided according to differences in skill and income levels" (p. 5). Many researchers have conducted studies on the Magar community, focusing on various issues such as socio-economic and cultural status, language, and politics. Hitchcock (1966) describes, "Magars of Banyan Hill are changing their social and cultural values and practices due to direct contact with Hindu people" (p.79). Hitchcock's research focuses exclusively on the cultural dimensions of the Magar community.

Shephard (1982) conducted a case study on the Magar community living in Arkhala village, Nawalparasi. His research focused on the cultural and socio-economic aspects of the Magar communities in the northeastern part of the Nawalparasi district. Oppitz (1983) carried out comprehensive research in the Rolpa and Rukum areas to explore the origins of the 'Northern Magar' (Budha and Gharti). He presents three distinct narratives and analyses the community's patterns of death and kinship. Rana Magar (2062 BS) focused on the historical ethnic identity of

Magar women, as well as the culture and religion of Athar Magarant. This research delves into the economic, cultural, religious, and socio-anthropological facets of the Magar community. However, there has been a lack of research addressing the political aspects of the Magar people in any district of western Nepal.

Budha-Magar (2020) highlights the history of the Magar community: "The Magar, a significant ethnic group in Nepal, is thought to have settled in the area around 1100 B.C. Their main communities are found in Jajarkot, Rukum, Rolpa, Myagdi, Baglung, Pyuthan, Palpa, Parbat, Gorkha, and Tanahu in western and central Nepal, as well as in Sindhuli and Udaypur in the east. Over the years, they have broadened their presence across various regions of Nepal" (p. 48). The above-mentioned literature reviews indicate that most studies on the Magar community are related to socio-economic and cultural aspects. Only a few studies have addressed political issues related to the Magar people. Therefore, this study focuses on the perceptions of Magar activists regarding political issues of inclusive democracy and federalism.

Method and Materials

This study is based on a qualitative research design and an interpretive paradigm. The interpretive paradigm helps to analyse the perception of Magar activists regarding inclusive democracy and federalism. The study is grounded in interpretivism, 33arima33ra33io subjective interpretations of social phenomena, adheres to a constructivist ontology that perceives reality as shaped by the experiences of the Magar community, employs a qualitative epistemology that relies on narratives and interpretations instead of statistical analysis and embraces a value-laden axiological perspective by supporting political inclusion, representation, and social justice for 33arima33ra33io groups.

Recognising the situated nature of knowledge, the researcher adopts a reflexive approach to acknowledge and critically engage with their positionality and potential biases throughout the research process. For this study, data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Information regarding the solution to the research gap was gathered from literature reviews based on secondary sources. These data were collected from books, articles, and reports, as well as through searching the internet and the library. Primary data were collected through in-depth

interviews with the participants. A purposive sampling method was used to select the participants for this study. The study relied on semi-structured interviews with participants representing varied age groups and occupational backgrounds. Three individual Magar activists and politicians were involved in this study for an in-depth interview. Chitwan district was selected as the study area, and participants were chosen from this region. During the in-depth interviews, participants were asked about inclusive democracy and federalism. In addition to conducting in-depth interviews, observations were also made on the situation of Magar people living in different parts of eastern Chitwan, including Kalika Municipality and Khaireni Municipality, where the Magar community has a high population density.

Participants

In this study, three individual Magar activists participated in an in-depth interview. Among them, two were males and one was female. To maintain confidentiality, the respondents choose not to disclose their names. So, the participants were assigned pseudo names as P1, P2 and P3. A short description of the participants is as follows:

P1: A 65-year-old male who has been engaged in politics for the last 40 years. He is also one of the activists of the Magar community. He has completed a master's degree in social science and is also involved in self-business.

P2: A 50-year-old female who has passed a bachelor's degree and has been continuously involved in the Magar women's 34arima34ra34io for the last 20 years. She is also a member of a major political party in Nepal.

P3: A 77-year-old male who has passed the SLC examination and is involved in the teaching profession, and is an activist in the Magar community. He has also been engaged in party politics for a long time.

Results and Discussion

This section analyses the perceptions of participants regarding inclusive democracy and federalism. A democratic form of government was established in Nepal in 1950. Since then, the issues of inclusive democracy have been central to discussions in Nepal. After the end of the

Panchayat system in 1990, democracy was re-established, and party politics resumed for the second time in Nepal. However, people demanded inclusive democracy, federalism, and a republican form of government, mostly through the Maoist insurgency. Ultimately, Nepal became a republic in 2006 after the promulgation of the interim constitution. Based on the provisions of the interim constitution, the Constitution of Nepal was promulgated in 2015 AD. Under the guidelines of the constitution, inclusive democracy, party politics, and the federal form of government are functioning in Nepal (Government of Nepal, 2015). In this context, the following presents how Magar activists perceive the issues mentioned.

Magar Perceptions of Contemporary Party Politics and Inclusive Democracy

In a democratic system, party politics plays a crucial role, and political parties are central to the functioning of all political processes, like inclusiveness, federalism, amendment of the constitution or formation of the new constitution, etc. In this regard, Dahl (2005) defines politics as involving both non-political strata and political strata, where power seekers and the powerful interact. He states, "Almost all these considerations are performed through the political parties and their activities" (p. 37). The activities of political parties are as the foundation of politics in an inclusive democracy (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2004). In Nepal, political parties first held political power in 1951. Following this, the Magar people became involved in politics through various political parties and movements. In this regard, P1 notes:

In Nepali politics, the representation of Magars in ministerial roles has been quite limited. Notably, Magars have primarily held ministerial positions during the Panchayat system or in democratic periods when the monarchy held considerable power. At the beginning of the Panchayat system, Giri Prasad Budhathoki, a Magar, was appointed as the Minister of Defence. Bala Ram Gharti Magar emerged as a prominent politician, serving as a minister multiple times in various cabinets during both the Panchayat and democratic periods. Additionally, Narayan Singh Pun and Gore Bahadur Khapangi were appointed as ministers in 2002 and 2005, respectively, during periods when the king exercised significant control over the government. In 2006, after Nepal adopted a republican form of government, Magars became more actively involved in politics, and the number of Magars in the Council of Ministers increased. Three Magar figures, Barshaman Pun, Nandkishor Pun, and Ram

Bahadur Thapa, became ministers several times. Similarly, Onsari Gharti became the Speaker of Parliament. (Personal Communication, January 22, 2025).

P1 notes that the involvement of Magars in party politics in the last 70 years has been very limited. In this context, P2 highlights, "The Maoist movement brought some positive vibrancy among Magars, and some key figures actively participated in party politics, but that could not last for long. Now the situation is the same. Political parties do not show a keen interest in giving high positions to Magar leaders" (Personal Communication, January 23, 2025). Major political parties have hesitated to accept the leadership of Magars, so, except for the Maoist party, none of the other parties have provided high positions to Magar leaders. Not only at the federal level but also at the provincial level, the number of Magars in parliament is lower than their population ratio. In this regard, P3 explains, "The main leaders of major political parties are not liberal toward Magars, which is why only a few Magar leaders have participated in the government during Nepal's long historical period. The majority of the Magar population is still excluded from mainstream politics" (Personal Communication, January 24, 2025).

P3 raised the issue of the political system and the behaviour of mainstream political parties toward the Magar community. During the revolution, the concept of ethnic federalism was not effectively communicated at the local level, including the concept of the Magars. Its influence was largely limited to a small group of activists, particularly the youth in urban areas. These activists, rather than individuals from rural villages, are the ones advocating for Magar ethnic autonomy. Most people believe that granting them governing power will facilitate the proper development of the Magar territory and identity.

Magar Perceptions of Inclusive Democracy

Inclusive democracy is a crucial issue in Nepal, particularly regarding the participation of ethnic and indigenous people. In this regard, P1 notes:

This proposal offers a fair and equitable resolution to the ethnic disputes and political challenges faced by individuals from minority and 36arima36ra36io communities. Importantly, Magar activists, particularly those from various rural communities, expressed their belief that the local population, regardless of caste or ethnicity, would benefit from full local autonomy supported by sufficient resources. As a result, they 36arima36ra36 that this

should be included in the new constitution, along with strong measures for the representation of minorities and 37arima37ra37io groups in local governance (Personal Communication, January 22, 2025).

P1 focuses on the inclusive representation of Magars at the local, provincial, and federal levels, 37arima37ra37i its importance for proper representation. In this regard, P2 highlights:

From this viewpoint, democracy serves as a structure aimed at empowering and nurturing engaged citizens. To achieve this goal, government efforts should prioritise the well-being of the community. This perspective aligns with the ideals of inclusive democracy, which seeks to represent everyday citizens at the grassroots level, including the Magars (Personal Communication, January 23, 2025).

P2 noted that the contemporary democratic system only touches upon the theory of inclusive democracy but does not function in day-to-day life. P3 added some points on that:

Every ethnic group can achieve empowerment in the political system through the adoption of proportional representation that truly reflects their ethnic identities. Furthermore, it has been suggested that a lasting resolution to ethnic conflicts requires the creation of a regional province with considerable autonomy, rather than granting full ethnic autonomy to a single group, such as the Magars. There are concerns that certain ethnic extremists and militant factions might misinterpret ethnic autonomy, including the right to self-determination, as a justification for secession (Personal Communication, January 24, 2025).

All three participants expressed the view that establishing an inclusive democracy in Nepal requires more than just a numerical representation of the population. They 37arima37ra37 that, while population size is an important factor, it is not sufficient on its own to ensure that all voices and perspectives are adequately represented in the democratic process. They argued that true inclusivity involves addressing various dimensions, such as social, economic, cultural, and other disparities within the population. This includes recognizing and incorporating the needs and rights of marginalized groups, including ethnic minorities, women, and economically disadvantaged communities.

Magar Perspectives on Federalism

Nepali people have long been demanding a federal form of government. This system was constitutionally established in Nepal in 2015 after the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal, 2072. People believed that the unitary form of government was a major cause of the nation's backwardness, and the Magars specifically advocated for a federal form of government. P1 perceives the federal system of government in the following way:

The federal form of government has not brought anything for the Magars because the existing federalism has not established the cultural and linguistic autonomy of ethnic and indigenous groups. The Magars demand that federalism promote their culture and language. We seek autonomy over our territory, but this has not been achieved through federalism (personal communication, January 22, 2025).

P1 does not support the contemporary practice of federalism and criticizes it as a repetition of previous forms. He argues that no ethnic or Indigenous community has gained linguistic and cultural rights through the federal state. P2 highlights the background of federalism as follows:

The restructuring of the state and federal systems facilitates the transfer of power and resources from the central authority to local entities. However, it is crucial to establish a proportional representation system at both the central and federal levels to ensure the representation of the Magar community and other groups in various state institutions. Some activists argue that the Magar community has been sidelined within the political framework of the state, and this, along with other ethnic grievances, fueled their dissatisfaction during the Maoist insurgency (Personal Communication, January 23, 2025).

The Magars are often regarded as a marginalized and disadvantaged ethnic group. They assert that inclusive democracy is crucial for ensuring their representation in political, economic, social, and cultural domains. Furthermore, they advocate for state reform through federalism, viewing it as the most effective way to empower individuals who have been excluded and marginalized in society. P3 further notes, "People thought that, before the nation's restructuring, which aimed to eliminate federalism and ethnic autonomy, no Magars would receive any privileges (Personal Communication, January 24, 2025).

Federalism is viewed not only as a means to manage ethnic conflict but also as a democratic system that grants local populations the power to make decisions about their affairs. Furthermore, some local activists argue that the effectiveness of democracy depends on each community's ability to obtain representation within the political framework.

After the establishment of federalism in Nepal, the hopes of the indigenous people and the commitments of the Maoist revolution were not realized. Nepal has implemented federalism as a form of 39arima39ra39ion39on rather than establishing ethnic autonomy in the historical territories of indigenous people. P2 notes, "The dream of a separate federal Magar state has ended now" (Personal Communication, January 23, 2025).

Conclusion

Nepalese Magars possess a rich political history but are underrepresented in the leadership position. The country's democratization and federalization were expected to bring inclusivity, but Magars did not find any change towards their political empowerment. Federalism was introduced to make the people more independent, but it has failed to give rise to the hopes of the Magars, and they are not content with the current system of governance. Magar activists, however, feel that mere arithmetic inclusion is insufficient and that genuine efforts are needed to ensure proportionate representation, cultural recognition, and policy changes. Without genuine reforms, Nepal's model of inclusive democracy and federalism will fail to reach its potential to integrate 39arima39ra39io communities like the Magars into the national political fold.

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