# Ethnic Politics in Communist Parties of Nepal

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## ABSTRACT

*This article examines the engagement of Nepal's communist parties with caste and ethnic politics despite their formal commitment to Marxist class analysis. Classical Marxism treats class relations as the primary basis of social organization, with the economy shaping political, cultural, and religious institutions. In contrast, Communist parties in Nepal have historically prioritized caste and ethnic identities over economic issues. This divergence raises a central question: why and how have caste and ethnic politics become integral to the political practice of Nepal's Communist parties? The article argues that these parties have substantively departed from their core ideological principles by mobilizing caste and ethnic identities while continuing to present themselves as class-based organizations. The adoption of ethnic agendas by Communist parties remains deeply contested in Nepal. The proliferation of Communist parties has been accompanied by the institutionalization of ethnic organizations within party structures. The Maoist insurgency from 1996 to 2006, which originated in Magar-dominated regions, further demonstrates the strategic mobilization of ethnic grievances. Drawing on PhD fieldwork conducted in Palpa, Pyuthan, and Rolpa between September and December 2018, this article uses field surveys and key informant interviews to analyze both party practices and Magar responses. It concludes by assessing the causes and consequences of ethnic politics within Nepal's communist movement.*

**Keywords:** Communist Party of Nepal, ethnicity, identity politics, Magars

## INTRODUCTION

Nepal has long been a fertile ground for the growth of Communist parties, and since 2051 BS, the country has repeatedly experienced governments led by these parties. Numerous Communist parties claim to represent peasants, workers, oppressed caste and ethnic groups, and gendered minorities. Against this backdrop, this paper examines how and why Communist parties in Nepal have adopted ethnicity and identity-based politics. It analyzes how these parties have interpreted and articulated positions on identity-related issues such as inclusion, autonomy, the right to self-determination, and federalism since their establishment. These issues have been consistently debated within party conventions

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and decision-making bodies, indicating their centrality in Communist political discourse.

The study further examines party policies and leadership perspectives on caste and ethnic politics through interviews with intellectuals and political actors. It also analyzes party manifestos and official statements to assess the institutionalization of identity-based agendas. Empirically, the paper draws on survey data collected between September and December 2018 in Palpa, Pyuthan, and Rolpa, districts with significant Magar populations. By incorporating Magar perspectives on Communist parties, the paper evaluates whether identity-based politics reflects ideological commitment or strategic political mobilization.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Political theorists and social scientists have long emphasized the centrality of culture in shaping political processes. Huntington (2000) and Barth (1969) foreground culture as a key determinant of political behavior and collective action. Marx (1848) similarly acknowledged the role of the cultural environment in the formation of social consciousness, even as he privileged material conditions in historical analysis. In the Nepali context, class and ethnicity are deeply intertwined, with class formation in many cases structured along caste lines. The caste-based nature of the Nepali state is evident in patterns of political leadership. During the Panchayat period, political authority largely remained within Kshetri elites, mirroring the Thakuri monarchy, with few exceptions. Following the transition to multiparty democracy and later to a federal democratic republic, Brahmins have continued to dominate party leadership and the office of prime minister, underscoring the persistence of caste hierarchy within state power.

Scholarly perspectives on identity diverge significantly. Constructivist approaches view identity as socially produced and context dependent, whereas primordialist perspectives treat identity as fixed and enduring. Von (2006) situates identity politics within postmodern political thought, arguing that the recognition and mobilization of identity play a crucial role in constitution-making processes. Similarly, Holden (2006) conceptualizes identity politics as a framework for the institutional representation of plural societies and historically marginalized groups, emphasizing its normative and political significance. As noted in the *Encyclopaedia of Political Science*, identity politics emerges from personal histories, social affiliations, and territorial attachments and has increasingly shaped political mobilization around claims for recognition, inclusion, and self-determination, particularly since the late twentieth century (Kurian et al., 2011, pp. 757–758).

In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx and Engels linked the liberation of the world proletariat with the emancipation of oppressed races, stating that "a race that exploits another race cannot be free itself." This underscores that Marxism is not solely a theory of class oppression but also a framework for addressing ethnic and national discrimination. The manifesto also states, "As one person stops exploiting another, one caste will stop exploiting another." "The enmity of one caste towards another will end in the same proportion as the antagonism between the classes within the caste." Marx and Engels also asserted, "Communists will support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and

political system," highlighting their broader commitment to social transformation through class struggle.

Lenin extended Marxist theory to consider multiple social structures, recognizing that oppression is not only economic but also socio-cultural. To address these dimensions, Lenin articulated the right to ethnic autonomy and self-determination within a socialist framework (Lenin, 1983). Neo-Marxist scholars have similarly argued that capitalism produces discrimination among ethnic groups, which are socially and politically constructed through historical processes (Malesevic, 2004, pp. 25–44). Weedon (2004, pp. 10–11) further observes that class is closely intertwined with social identity, as inequalities in social relations translate into economic disparities. Weber (2019, p. 457) emphasizes that social structures are organized around social categories that intersect with class, shaping access to resources and social position. Although these perspectives arise from differing philosophical traditions, they converge in recognizing the interrelation of class and identity, highlighting tensions between Marxist principles and contemporary theories of identity politics.

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were generated through field surveys conducted between September and December 2018, using structured questionnaires, in-depth interviews with key informants guided by checklists, focus group discussions, and participant observation. In addition, observations of historically significant sites and participation in programs organized by communist parties and ethnic identity–based organizations were undertaken. Secondary data were obtained through a systematic review of relevant literature and documents.

For the survey component, samples were drawn from three districts, while the fourteen districts of ancient Magarat and the Magarat Province proposed by the First Constituent Assembly were considered the overall universe of the study. To minimize selection bias and to account for the linguistic and cultural diversity of the Magar community, cluster sampling was employed. Accordingly, clusters were formed from the twelve Magarat-speaking districts and the eighteen Magarat-speaking districts. Based on the determined sample size, six Village Development Committees (VDCs) were selected from the Magarat-speaking districts of Rolpa and from the twelve Magarat-speaking districts of Palpa and Pyuthan. These VDCs were chosen on the basis of having more than 50 percent Magar population, representing communities that speak three Magar languages and three non-Magar languages.

The selected districts exhibit significant linguistic, cultural, and geographical variation. Historically, they were administratively categorized under the twelve and eighteen Magarats of ancient Magarat. Furthermore, the villages within these districts are distinguished by notable differences in linguistic practices and cultural traditions.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Formation and Rise of the Communist Parties in Nepal

The history of Communist parties in Nepal is both prolonged and complex, marked by ideological diversity and organizational fragmentation. Since their emergence in 1949, Communist parties in Nepal have pursued multiple political strategies, including parliamentary participation, underground and semi-underground activities, and armed struggle through the People's War. In Nepal's first parliamentary election in 1958, Communist parties secured 7.2 percent of the total vote and won four out of 109 seats. By contrast, in the first federal election held in 2017, the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) achieved a historic electoral victory by winning a parliamentary majority. The party secured 176 out of 275 seats through both the first-past-the-post (118 seats) and proportional representation (58 seats) systems, obtaining 48.8 percent of the total vote (Nirwaachan Aayog, 2074 BS). Between 1994 and 2017, eight governments were led by six Communist prime ministers, indicating the central role of Communist parties in Nepal's political development and transformation.

Despite these achievements, Nepali society continues to experience persistent class- and caste-based contradictions (Basnet, 2069 BS). Communist parties have played an important role in raising political awareness and expanding the representation of marginalized and oppressed groups within state decision-making structures. At the same time, political power, party leadership, and key decision-making processes have remained largely dominated by the Khas Arya groups, particularly Brahmins and Kshetris. Sections of the Khas Arya elite have criticized Communist parties for adopting ethnic- and identity-based agendas, arguing that such issues fall outside the legitimate role of the state. Conversely, Communist parties themselves have increasingly been influenced by ethnic politics.

Caste and ethnic issues have been part of Communist political discourse in Nepal since the parties' inception. This has generated sustained debate over whether caste and ethnic questions fall within the philosophical framework of Marxism or belong primarily to identity-based political theory. While identity politics prioritizes cultural equality and difference, classical Marxism emphasizes economic equality and class relations as the primary axis of social transformation.

The formation of Communist parties must also be understood in relation to the anti-Rana struggle. Several political organizations, including Prachanda Gorkha, Praja Parishad, and the Nepali Rashtriya Congress, emerged to oppose the Rana oligarchy (Gautam, 2057 BS). The Communist Party of Nepal was formally established on September 15, 1949, under the leadership of Pushpa Lal Shrestha. Other founding members included Nar Bahadur Karmacharya, Niranjan Govinda Baidhya, Narayan Bilas Joshi, and Moti Devi Shrestha. Notably, all founding members belonged to the Newar community, despite Nepal's extensive social and cultural diversity. The party's first conference was held in Kolkata in 1951, where Pushpa Lal was elected general secretary (Subedi, 2071 BS).

Subsequent party conventions reflected both organizational consolidation and emerging factionalism. Man Mohan Adhikari was elected general secretary at the first convention in 1954, followed by Keshar Jung Rayamajhi in 1957 and Tulsi Lal Amatya in 1962. After the third convention, internal ideological disputes and personal rivalries led to repeated splits within the Communist movement. By the late 1960s, Pushpa Lal and Rayamajhi led separate Communist factions, which later fragmented further. The fourth party convention in 1974 elected Mohan Bikram Singh as general secretary, marking another phase of reorganization.

The year 1962 marked a critical turning point with the establishment of the party-less Panchayat system, which further deepened divisions within the Communist movement. Rayamajhi's acceptance of the Panchayat system intensified internal conflicts and led to the proliferation of Communist factions. In contrast, by 1989, leftist parties united to challenge the Panchayat regime, contributing to its eventual collapse and the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990. Following this transition, numerous Communist parties with underground or semi-underground origins registered with the Election Commission under various names. At present, 14 Communist parties are active in Nepal, all of which incorporate both class-based and caste or ethnic agendas within their party policies and programs.

**Ethnic Issues in the Manifestos of Nepali Communist Parties**

Ethnic issues constitute one of the most significant and paradoxical discourses within Nepali Communist politics. For decades, Nepali political debates have questioned whether ethnic agendas fall within the ideological framework of communism. Nepali Communist leaders and leftist intellectuals have repeatedly attempted to theorize ethnicity as a legitimate component of Communist politics, despite the classical Marxist emphasis on class-based organization. Since the establishment of the Communist Party of Nepal in 1949, debates on ethnic issues have remained a persistent feature of Communist discourse.

In 1951, Pushpa Lal Shrestha presented a political report on ethnic movements on behalf of the Communist Party of Nepal, consisting of twelve chapters. The report examined the nature of ethnic liberation movements following the formation of the Communist Party and analyzed the relationship between Communist politics and ethnic mobilization. Pushpa Lal expressed strong concern for ethnic issues, conceptualizing ethnic groups as *kabila,* or indigenous communities. Accordingly, the Communist Party addressed ethnic movements across economic, political, cultural, and social dimensions, emphasizing the necessity of popular movements as a foundation of party policy (Pushpa Lal, 2054 BS, p. 91).

Similarly, another party document titled *Country's Ethnic and Communist Party* emphasized the equal rights and duties of all caste and ethnic groups, arguing that collective struggle among these groups was essential to dismantle feudal and imperial domination. The document affirmed the self-esteem and agency of ethnic communities and articulated the Communist Party's commitment to opposing imperialism. The party's first convention in 1953 formally introduced ethnic politics into its organizational agenda. Moreover, the 1958 election manifesto explicitly addressed identity issues by recognizing the role of mother tongues in primary education, thereby institutionalizing linguistic rights for ethnic communities (Bhusal, 2070 BS, p. 73).

Subsequent Communist manifestos further framed Nepal as a multi-nation state, interpreting the concept of nation through an ethnic lens (Pushpa Lal, 2055, p. 15). This position, however, has been contested within the Communist movement itself. Pradip Gyawali of the CPN UML rejected the idea of Nepal as a multi-nation state, arguing instead for a nation-state model (Budha Magar, 2067 BS). In contrast, Maoist leader Suresh Ale Magar asserted that the state is not merely a territorial or political entity but a community formed through shared language, territory, economic life, culture, and social psychology, thereby equating statehood with ethnic identity (Ale Magar, 2062 BS, pp. 169–170). Similar perspectives linking language, culture, religion, and history to collective identity have been advanced in international political discourse (International IDEA, 2014, p. 19).

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) defines the nation as multiethnic, multilingual, multireligious, and multicultural, grounded in geographical diversity and shared aspirations (Nepal Sarkar, Kanun Kitab Byawastha Samiti, 2075 BS, p. 3). This constitutional definition supports the interpretation of Nepal as a multi-nation state. Political scientist Krishna Hachhethu further argues that while the nation-state model is suitable for homogeneous societies, culturally diverse societies such as Nepal require a state-nation framework that emphasizes inclusion, collective rights, proportional representation, and identity-based federalism (Hachhethu, 2023, pp. 7–14).

**Table 1**

*Ethnic Issues in Communist Parties' Conventions Since 1949*

| Party Convention | Ethnic Issues related to the Party Policy |
|---|---|
| CPN Party Manifesto (September 15, 1949) | To end all the discriminations or untouchability on caste and tribe and provides special rights (Pushpalal, 2073 BS) |
| 1st Party Convention (1953) | By eliminating discrimination based on class, caste, religion, language, and gender, and all forms of caste-based untouchability. Religion should be every person's faith (Bhusal, 2070 BS; Basnet, 2069 BS). Every person has the right to get equal education in their mother tongue. |
| 2nd Party Convention (1957) | Self-decision of ethnic rights but not implemented by the party convention due to intra-party rifts and disputes (Bhusal, 2070BS; Basnet, 2069 BS) |
| 3rd Party Convention (1962) | The party policy has provided the provision of enhancing and developing all the culture, language, and literature issues of ethnic groups or communities (Bhusal, 2070 BS, p. 198). |
| 4th Party Convention | The Elite class (*especially Bhramin and Kshetri, Thakuri*) has oppressed and discriminates against the marginalized and exploited groups. The discrimination should be in cultural, social, and economic conditions. Therefore, the People's revolution has established the equality of economic, cultural, social, and political development in ethnic groups (Basnet, 2069 BS). |

Communist parties in Nepal have consistently incorporated ethnic agendas into their political programs since the first convention of the Communist Party of Nepal in 1953. During the decade-long Maoist insurgency from 1996 to 2006, the CPN (Maoist) adopted caste and ethnic issues extensively as a central component of its political strategy. Against this backdrop, the first Constituent Assembly election was held in 2008, in which the Maoist party secured a majority of seats under the first-past-the-post system. However, the first Constituent Assembly was dissolved in 2011–2012 due largely to unresolved disputes surrounding ethnic and identity-based issues. Although the historical oppression of indigenous and ethnic groups has been widely acknowledged, political elites have largely failed to translate identity-based aspirations into substantive guarantees of equal rights.

Communist engagement with indigenous politics predates the Maoist insurgency. In 1982, CPN (Marxist–Leninist) leader Jhala Nath Khanal led the first organized indigenous movement in Bhaktapur. Subsequently, Communist parties established various ethnic unions, forums, and organizations. The All Nepal Indigenous Conference was founded in 1987 and later incorporated into the CPN (Masal), with Ram Singh Shrees as chair and Pari Thapa and Man Maya Gurung as members. The conference statute emphasized raising awareness among indigenous communities and mobilizing resistance against cultural, economic, social, and political discrimination, while advocating for ethnic rights and local autonomy (Akhil Nepal Janajati Sammelan, 2070 BS, p. 16).

Following the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990, indigenous groups, Dalit communities, and Madhesi populations increasingly organized themselves politically. The CPN UML institutionalized ethnic concerns by establishing departments dedicated to language, culture, and ethnic affairs during its fifth and sixth party conventions (Nekapa Emale, 2054 BS). In 1997, the CPN (Maoist) further expanded ethnic and caste-based organizations and integrated them into active political mobilization. Communist parties, including the UML and the Maoist Centre, also advanced proposals for ethnic self-autonomy and identity-based federal restructuring. Scholars have argued that Maoist mobilization relied heavily on ethnic, caste, gender, and regional agendas rather than class-based politics (Basnet, 2069 BS; Mishra, 2012). As Thapa (2015) notes, the Maoist movement significantly expanded political participation among women, indigenous groups, and Dalits, compelling other parties to adopt inclusionary practices. Consequently, many indigenous communities became politically aligned with the CPN (Maoist) and actively participated in the People's War (Thapa Magar, 2024, p. 158).

**Table 2**

*Communist Parties' Policy on Ethnic Identity Issues since 1990*

| Communist Parties | A Political theory of the Parties |
|---|---|
| CPN-UML | The party incorporated constitutional provisions addressing the rights of indigenous communities and participated in parliamentary elections with these commitments articulated in its election manifesto (Nirwaachan Ghoshana Patra, 2048 BS). It proposed the restructuring of the National Assembly to ensure inclusive representation of historically oppressed and discriminated groups, including indigenous communities. The manifesto further emphasized the protection of indigenous peoples' economic, social, and cultural rights, as well as their right to dignity, in accordance with international standards such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the International Labour Organization Convention No. 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (Nirwaachan Ghoshana Patra, 2064 BS, p. 17). In addition, the party advocated for a model of autonomy grounded in language, culture, ethnicity, and regional identity as part of a restructured federal Nepal (Aathau Mahadhibesan Raajnitik Partiwedan, 2065 BS, p. 8). |
| CPN (Maoist Centre) | The party endorsed the principles of self autonomy, regional and ethnic autonomous governance, and scientific socialism in its Constituent Assembly election commitments (Sambidhan Sabha Nirwaachan Pratiwaddhtaa, 2064 BS, p. 25). It further advanced demands for a Madhes autonomous state, the designation of special areas, and the protection of the rights of oppressed and marginalized communities, including indigenous nationalities, as articulated in its Seventh Party Convention (Saatau Sammelan, 2071 BS, pp. 50–51). |
| CPN (Masaal) | The party demanded the provision of ethnic or local autonomous governance for indigenous peoples, affirming their right to determine and preserve their own culture, religion, language, and related social practices (Raajanitik Pratiwedan, 2064 BS, p. 13). |
| C P N (Revolutionary Moist)[1] | The party also called for the elimination of feudal and autocratic structures, as well as *bahubad* practices, that have historically marginalized Dalit, Madhesi, and indigenous communities. It emphasized the protection and promotion of these groups' economic, cultural, social, and political rights. Furthermore, the party advocated for an identity based federal system as a means of institutionalizing inclusion and addressing structural inequality (Raastriya Bhela, 2069 BS, Asaar 2–5). |

| CPN (Marxist Leninist) | The party proposed the establishment of a Ministry of Indigenous and Community Development to promote and advance the social, cultural, and intellectual interests of marginalized and indigenous groups. It further called for the abolition of all forms of monopoly and special privileges based on caste or race, culture, religion, and language (Nirwaachan Ghoshana Patra, 2054 BS, p. 19; 2056 BS). In addition, the party advocated the formation of ethnic or language based federal provinces as part of its broader federal restructuring agenda (Saatau Mahadhibesan Tatkaalin Kaaryaniti, 2073 BS, p. 34). |
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| NWPP[2] | The party proposed a bicameral legislature, designating the upper chamber as the House of Nationalities to ensure inclusive representation (Sambidhaansabhaa Nirwaachana Ghoshanapatra, 2064 BS, p. 9). Additionally, it advocated the creation of fourteen provinces, structured on the basis of geography, natural resources, and other regional considerations (Sambidhaansabhaa Nirwaachana Ghoshanapatra, 2070 BS; Chhaitho Mahadhibesan Dastabejaharu, 2070 BS, p. 28). |
| CPN[3] | Despite constitutional and political reforms, regional and ethnic-disparities persist in Nepal. The Communist Party of Nepal asserted that self-autonomy within a People's Republic, including the recognition of autonomous regions, constitutes a legitimate agenda for the ethnic movement (Aathau Mahadhibesan, 2073 BS, Phagun, pp. 5–10). Nepal, as a historically centralized state, is home to numerous nationalities, including Magar, Rai, Limbu, Gurung, Tamang, Newar, Tharu, Madhesi, Koch, and Chepang communities. These nationalities have historically faced marginalization under centralized governance, and the party emphasized that their liberation and the guarantee of equal rights in state administration are essential for achieving political inclusion and social justice (Chanda, 2071 BS, p. 450). |

The election of the Constituent Assembly followed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between seven political parties and the armed CPN (Maoist), set against the backdrop of indigenous struggles, a decade-long Maoist insurgency, and mobilization by marginalized communities. Throughout this period, Communist parties in Nepal consistently incorporated ethnic and identity agendas into their political programs.

The CPN (Maoist)'s ethnicization of class ideology allowed the party to capitalize on the post-1990 rise of ethnic activism. The restoration of democracy in 1990 facilitated the emergence of minority movements challenging domination by high-caste hill groups. The CPN (Maoist) sought to integrate ethnic activism with class struggle, as evidenced by the establishment of ethnic and regionally based frontier organizations. Moreover, the party proposed a federal structure with nine autonomous regional governments organized along ethnic and regional lines (Hachhethu, 2009, p. 64).

However, following power-sharing arrangements, ethnic politics were often subordinated to interest-based considerations, undermining the original objectives of ethnic mobilization. Mohan Bikram Singh, chairman of the CPN (Masal), argued that the ethnic agenda had primarily advanced class-based politics, describing ethnic discourse as temporary. He further emphasized that granting self-autonomy is an effective mechanism for addressing the oppression of marginalized and exploited communities[2].

**Magar Ethnic Response towards Communist Parties in Nepal**

Survey data (see Annex -1) indicate that 54.3 percent of Magar respondents believe that Communist parties should primarily function as class-based parties. This view was held by 26 percent of respondents affiliated with ethnic-regional parties and 8.5 percent of respondents aligned with religion-culture parties. These findings suggest that the Magar ethnic group has engaged with the ethnic identity agenda since the early 1990s. Following the conclusion of the ten-year Maoist insurgency in 2006, Magar ethnic identity gained further visibility. Despite this, the Magar community has maintained a close association with Communist ideology and organizations, largely perceiving Communist parties as class-based political entities in Nepal.

Regarding ethnic organizations within Communist parties, 68.8 percent of respondents viewed the existence of such organizations positively, whereas 22.7 percent disagreed, and 8.5 percent expressed no opinion. A further survey examined the perceived purpose of these ethnic organizations: 48 percent of respondents indicated they were established to address ethnic issues, 23 percent believed they served to strengthen the party, and 12 percent viewed them as mechanisms for promoting inclusiveness within the party. Additionally, 11 percent cited Nepal's multi-ethnic composition as a rationale, 5 percent emphasized party effectiveness and cadre management, and 1 percent did not provide a response.

Survey data mentioned in Table 3, indicate that more than 51 percent of respondents perceive a rise in ethnic rifts within political parties. Eighteen percent of respondents did not recognize the caste or ethnic system, while 17 percent viewed Nepal as a multi-ethnic state. Seven percent argued that political parties use ethnic issues solely as a vote bank, and two percent highlighted the weakened role of Khas Arya groups. At the grassroots level, the Magar community expressed concerns about ethnic conflict and social inequality. Survey analysis suggests that the Magar ethnic group has not only addressed its own issues but also contributed to resolving problems faced by other communities.

In a separate survey examining the purpose of ethnic organizations within Communist parties, 47.1 percent of respondents indicated that these organizations aim to address ethnic problems, 24 percent believed they strengthen the party, 12 percent cited promotion of party inclusiveness, 11 percent referred to Nepal's multi-ethnic composition, and 5 percent highlighted party cadre management. Overall, 69 percent of respondents reported that Communist parties remain closely connected with ethnic agendas. The majority of the Magar ethnic group further believed that Communist parties have effectively addressed ethnic issues and concerns.

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2    Interviewed with Mohan Bikram Singh, 2016, Kathmandu.

The survey seems to be assured of the political liberation of the communist party, such as Magarat state, but those who have been studying Nepal's social science and politics have expressed doubts. On the other hand, the documents of the Communist Parties has raised the question of dignity of ethnic liberation but have been deceived on its implementation. The long patience of the Magar ethnic group for the Communist Party is now an idea of consideration.

Based on the field survey, it appears that the Magars are united on the issue of Magarat. They have relied on the Communist Party to resolve this issue and have also proposed the Magar Party as an alternative. It is the self-determination of Nepali citizens to decide how the Nepali state will be structured, just as the Magar has the first right to choose whether or not Magarat is necessary. The psychology of establishing a Magar and imposing discrimination against other communities is very dangerous, and the Magar seems to be well-informed on this issue. It is not a simple matter that 81.7 percent of Magars in the survey felt the need for Magarat, but 6 percent of Magars said there was no need for Magarat. It seems that the views expressed with the intention of not causing discord in the country due to Magarat should also be respected. Susan I. Hangen also agreed with respondents: "Yet democracy itself is a far more complex, multi-faceted political project than we often assume. Democracy is disjunctive and can take a variety of unexpected and unintended forms, which can include the presence of violence (Hangen, 2010, p. 168)." Shyamu Thapa wrote, The cause of demand of ethnic autonomous regions that was initiated by the Maoist political party Magars are also demanding for Magarat autonomous regions based on their historical settlement legacy" (Thapa, 2014). According to the survey report, the general public seems to be optimistic with the Communist Party, but the mature and intellectual groups criticize it. The Communist Parties are not secured to form the political structure of the Magarat. Therefore, the intellectual community that was active in the Communist Party for a long or short period of time yesterday is not affiliated with the Communist Party today. According to Jhakendra Gharti Magar:

> The survey indicates a general confidence in the political liberation agenda of the Communist Party, including the proposal for a Magarat state. However, scholars and observers of Nepalese social science and politics have expressed doubts regarding its implementation. Communist Party documents have articulated the dignity of ethnic liberation, yet in practice, these commitments have often remained unfulfilled. The prolonged patience of the Magar ethnic group with the Communist Party is now a matter of critical reflection.

Field survey data suggest that the Magars are largely united on the issue of Magarat. They have relied on the Communist Party to address this demand, while also proposing the establishment of a Magar Party as an alternative. The principle of self-determination allows Nepali citizens to decide how the state should be structured, and the Magar community has a primary claim to determine whether a Magarat state is necessary. Establishing a Magar state while imposing discrimination on other communities is considered highly problematic, yet the Magar population demonstrates a nuanced understanding of this issue. Survey results show that 81.7 percent of Magars support the creation of Magarat, while six percent

oppose it, reflecting a concern for maintaining social harmony.

Hangen (2010) observes that democracy is a complex and multifaceted political project that can take unexpected and unintended forms, including violence (p. 168). Similarly, Thapa (2014) argues that the Maoist initiative for ethnic autonomous regions stimulated Magar demands for a Magarat state grounded in historical settlement patterns. Survey findings indicate that while the general public remains largely optimistic about the Communist Parties, politically mature and intellectual groups are increasingly critical of their performance. In particular, the Communist Parties have not yet established a concrete political structure for Magarat, which has resulted in declining affiliation among intellectuals who were previously active within the party.

According to Gharti Magar (2020), the formation of ethnic parties in Nepal is driven by multiple interrelated factors, including the country's multiethnic social composition, noninclusive state and party structures, democratic and indigenous social movements, and the failure of existing political parties to adequately address ethnic concerns. The rise of new political agendas such as identity, federalism, and proportional representation, along with legal and structural changes and international influences, has further contributed to this process. Ethnic politics and ethnic parties, as manifestations of democracy, have played a significant role in Nepal's democratization. In this sense, the emergence of ethnic parties should be understood as a social phenomenon rooted in Nepal's multicultural society rather than as a deviation from democratic practice.

In Nepali politics, the influence and dominance of the Khas-Arya group are rooted both in the philosophical framework of Hindu religion and in communal structures. Classical Marxism posits that the economic dimension is the primary basis determining the superstructure of society. In Nepal, however, social class is closely intertwined with ethnic and religious identity, a situation largely shaped by the caste-based social and political system. Identity in Nepali society is not merely an external marker or form but also an inner essence, as access to opportunity, experiences of exclusion, honor, and humiliation collectively define it. Consequently, identity encompasses both essence and form. The upper-caste identity, reinforced by the feudal state system, has historically been prioritized in terms of access to state resources and social advantages, making identity itself a form of class. From a Marxist perspective, the Magar caste represents an oppressed class. Religion, culture, and other aspects considered part of the superstructure have structured economic relations in Nepali society, producing overlapping caste and class inequalities. While class conflict may be a universal phenomenon, caste conflict constitutes a fundamental characteristic of Nepali society (Budha Magar, 2080 BS).

**Magar Ethnic Response to Communist Parties in Nepal**

Survey data indicate that a majority of Magar respondents perceive Communist parties primarily as class-based political organizations, with 54.3 percent holding this view. At the same time, 68.8 percent support the presence of ethnic organizations within these parties. Respondents identified several functions of such organizations. Nearly half, 48 percent,

viewed them as mechanisms for addressing ethnic issues, while 23 percent considered them instruments for party strengthening and 12 percent associated them with promoting inclusiveness. Smaller proportions cited Nepal's multiethnic character, 11 percent, and party cadre management, 5 percent. Overall, 69 percent of respondents believe that Communist parties are consistently engaged with ethnic agendas, although the majority also feel that these parties have addressed ethnic concerns to some extent.

At the grassroots level, the Magar community expressed concern about ethnic conflict and persistent social inequality. Survey findings suggest that caste and ethnic discrimination are perceived as more immediate and severe than economic marginalization. Respondents reported experiences of social exclusion and stereotyping even when economically stable, indicating that caste and ethnic identity remain central determinants of social status and opportunity. The dominance of Khas Arya groups and the perceived arrogance of party leadership were identified as key barriers to the effective implementation of identity-based politics.

Regarding regional autonomy, 81.7 percent of respondents supported the establishment of a Magarat autonomous region, citing historical settlement patterns and cultural identity, while six percent opposed the proposal in order to avoid social discord. Field interviews reveal that although the Magar community continues to rely on Communist parties to address ethnic concerns, intellectuals remain critical of the parties' capacity to institutionalize ethnic autonomy. As Gharti Magar (2020) argues, Nepal's multiethnic composition, noninclusive state and party structures, and the failure of mainstream parties to address ethnic concerns have contributed to the rise of ethnic parties as a social manifestation of democratization.

In the Nepali context, the classical Marxist emphasis on economic class is complicated by entrenched caste and ethnic hierarchies. Upper caste identity has been reinforced by the feudal state system, while the Magar community occupies an oppressed class position. Religion, culture, and other elements of the superstructure have shaped economic relations, resulting in overlapping caste and class inequalities. Thus, while class conflict may be a universal phenomenon, caste conflict constitutes a fundamental characteristic of Nepali society (Budha Magar, 2080 BS).

**CONCLUSION**

This study examined why and how Communist parties in Nepal have adopted caste and ethnic politics despite their formal commitment to Marxist class-based ideology. The findings show that ethnic agendas have been a persistent feature of Nepali communism since its inception rather than a temporary or tactical deviation. From 1949 to 2018, Communist parties consistently raised demands related to caste, language, culture, and identity, reflecting the structural reality of a caste-based society in which class formation itself is shaped by ethnic hierarchy. The adoption of ethnic politics emerged from the limitations of economic determinism in Nepal, where social and political exclusion precedes and reinforces economic inequality. Communist parties therefore incorporated ethnic identities into party organization, mass mobilization, and electoral strategies, most visibly during the Maoist

insurgency and the post-1990 democratic transition. This strategy expanded political support but also produced contradictions between ideological claims and organizational practice. Despite advocating inclusion and ethnic autonomy, Communist parties have remained dominated by elite Brahmin and Chhetri leadership, undermining the institutionalization of ethnic liberation. Survey evidence from Magar-dominated districts indicates that while indigenous communities associate Communist parties with ethnic agendas and continue to rely on them to address ethnic concerns, caste and ethnic oppression are perceived as more fundamental than class exploitation. The study concludes that Nepali Communist parties neither fully transcend class politics nor genuinely resolve ethnic inequality. Instead, caste and ethnic agendas function as political instruments within a class-based ideological framework. This duality explains the ongoing debate over ethnic politics in Nepali communism and underscores the limits of classical Marxism in a caste-structured society.

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# Annex-I

*Response of Magars towards Communist Parties in Nepal*

| Survey Questions | Survey Districts | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Palpa | Rolpa | Pyuthan | Total Percent |
| **1. What is the nature of Communist Parties?** | | | | |
| Class-based | 24% | 43% | 28% | 54% |
| Ethnic-regional | 19% | 13% | 15% | 27% |
| Religion-culture | 3% | 4% | 8% | 9% |
| None | 5% | 8% | 6% | 11% |
| **2. Is ethnic organizations established by the Communist Parties is good or not?** | | | | |
| Yes | 38% | 41% | 42% | 69% |
| No | 11% | 20% | 9% | 23% |
| None | 2% | 7% | 6% | 9% |
| **3. If good then,** | | | | |
| Solved ethnic problem | 23% | 23% | 11% | 47% |
| Strengthen Party | 3% | 7% | 19% | 24% |
| Party may be Inclusive | 5% | 4% | 6% | 12% |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Multi-ethnic State | 4% | 3% | 6% | 11% |
| Control the Party cadres | 3% | 3% | - | 5% |
| **4. If not good then,** | | | | |
| Rise of the ethnic rift | 8% | 6% | 7% | 53% |
| Not believed in caste/ethnic | 1% | 5% | 1% | 18% |
| Only for vote bank | 1% | 2% | - | 8% |
| Role of Khas/Arya weaker | 1% | - | 1% | 3% |
| None | 1% | 1% | - | 3% |
| **5. Why parties shouldn't be liberal about identity politics?** | | | | |
| Arrogance of Leaders | 31% | 37% | 29% | 55% |
| Identity-based parties are weaker | 36% | 26% | 29% | 51% |
| The dominance of Khas/Aryans | 22% | 33% | 24% | 45% |
| Supporter of Class-based politics | 20% | 37% | 23% | 55% |
| Identity politics should be narrow | 20% | 21% | 15% | 32% |
| Not more about Identity politics | 5% | 10% | 13% | 16% |

(Source: Field Survey, 2018)