Rereading Nepal's Language Diversity and Ethno-Linguistic Movements in Tarai-Madhesh

Bhim Lal Gautam

Abstract. *This argumentative essay aims to initiate discussion, emphasizing the dynamics of language and identity politics in Nepal, particularly focusing on the period following the political shift in 1990 and the political transitions that developed after 2006. The essay inquires how and why languages are being hyped and pushed forward as a primary means within the identity movement. However, in daily life, linguistically, all languages and their dialects, including Nepali, have waxed and waned over time, transforming into an odd and unusual form. Moreover, it also poses a challenge to use them all within the diverse multilingual landscape of Nepal, where their populations are dispersed across various mixed communities. To illustrate, the essay revolves around two opposing cases of ethno-linguistic movements, specifically the Madheshi and Tharu, situated in the central Tarai region of Nepal and delves into issues concerning social inclusion, ethno-cultural recognition, political representation and the ensuing political dynamics.*

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Introduction

Language embodies the cultural essence of a community, encapsulating its traditions, values, and worldviews. It serves as the primary cultural marker that defines and differentiates the identity of an individual or group, creating a distinction between "us" and "them." In multilingual societies, linguistic diversity enriches the cultural tapestry but can also lead to political contention (see Gautam and Poudel, 2024). Highlighting the connection between language as a means of communication and a key aspect of identity and politics in the construction of ethnicity, Späti remarks, "language politics represent a crucial social and political context in which collective identities are negotiated" (Späti, 2016, p. 4). In multiethnic and multilingual countries like Nepal, where over 124 languages are spoken and 142 ethnicities exist (NSO, 2023), language

serves both as a marker of cultural heritage and an instrument for political mobilization, particularly in the context of organizationally driven, ethnicity-based identities.

The intricate relationship between language and identity politics in the context of Nepal has been influenced by various factors, such as the pursuit for recognition, as well as elements like identity-based ethnic politics, global political agendas, initiatives championed by International Organizations, and prevailing socio-political dynamics. Although several agendas were actively promoted, this sparked the disagreement regarding the inclusion and exclusion of various identity groups. Nevertheless, the intra-class dynamics within these identity groups often remain overshadowed and unaddressed amid this conflict.

This argumentative essay aims to initiate discussion, emphasizing the dynamics of language and identity politics in Nepal, particularly focusing on the period following the political shift in 1990 and the political transitions that developed after 2006. Historically, drawing on language census data and legal documents, the essay will elucidate the connection between language and identity politics in Nepal, further illuminating how the language agenda has been stirred up and strengthened after 2006 and 2009, thereby positioning it as a major concern within identity politics. It will illustrate the two contrasting cases led by Madheshi and Tharu ethno-linguistic movements in Nepal's central Tarai, bringing discussions on ethnic-cultural recognition, political representation, and social inclusion.

In doing so, it raises a question: Why are the prominences of local languages hyped and pushed forward as a primary means within the identity movement? In the realm of daily life, it has become clear that, linguistically, all languages and their dialects, including Nepali, have waxed and waned over time, transforming into an odd and unusual form, and are disused. Moreover, it also poses a challenge to use them all within the diverse multilingual landscape of Nepal, where their populations are dispersed across various mixed communities.

The main purpose of this essay is neither to be little nor stress the lack of importance of the languages spoken by various communities. These languages hold immense value, akin to Nepal's diversity and cultural heritage. As a student of linguistics, the primary objective of this essay is to understand and discuss how language relates to identity politics, as well as how the languages spoken in Nepal itself are deteriorating in a neoliberal and globalized context. The prioritization of Nepali and English has resulted in the decline of other dialects (Gautam, 2025). Of course, the linguistic hegemony not only diminishes cultural diversity but also affects access to information and participation in public life for speakers of minority languages. While policies have been introduced to promote mother-tongue education, challenges remain in

implementation, affecting the intergenerational transmission of cultural values and knowledge. Even if it is adopted in schools, workplaces and other public domains, the question pertains to its application, usage, practicality, effectiveness and sustainability.

The essay is divided into four sections. The first section, that follows Introduction, outlines the language issues in the censuses, highlighting them with socio-political and legal contexts. The second section sheds light on the politics of language in Nepal. To encourage a healthy discussion on such issues, the third section succinctly demonstrates the way language issues and (identity) politics entangle. The final section concludes by contrasting two opposing cases of ethno-linguistic movements (Madheshi and Tharu), and pleading for a broader political recognition, social inclusion, and political representation.

Language Issues across Census, Law, and Politics

Since the beginning of political unification in the eighteenth century, the Khas language, which served as the primary lingua franca in various small states across western and central Nepal, emerged as the prevailing language. The language remained in use for all kinds of administrative work throughout the Rana regime. Later, the well-known Wood Commission Report (NNEPC, 1956) formalized the use of Nepali and English languages in education, along with the option to include certain local languages for teaching. Unfortunately, this initiative rarely materialized. Nonetheless, the report highlighted the importance of the Nepali language for national unity and integrity (NNEPC, 1956). The use of the Nepali language as the only medium of instruction in education was further reinforced by the Dr. Kunwar Indrajeet (KI) Singh government in 1957 (see Dahal, 2000). Subsequently, the Panchayat Government under King Mahendra institutionalized Nepali as both the national and administrative language, thereby homogenizing the Nepali educational policy. From this point forward, Nepali emerged as the only national language, mandating its use in school education, administrative tasks, and all types of official documents. The purpose was to unify all cultural groups within the popular Panchayati slogan "*ek bhasa, ek bhesh, ek desh* (one language, one dress, one country)."

This way, the Nepali Company Act was passed in 1964, directing all companies to keep their records in English or Nepali (HMG/N, 1964). Moreover, the 1971 National Education System Plan (HMG/N, 1971) was officially implemented in all the districts, prioritizing Nepali as the compulsory subject to tactfully manage the influences of China and India within Nepali politics and its bordering areas (HMG/N, 1971). Later, these developments were documented in *the Interim Constitution of Nepal* (GoN, 2007) and the current *Constitution of Nepal* (NLC, 2015) with the following provisions:

- All languages spoken as mother tongues in Nepal are the languages of the nation and Nepali language in the *Devanagari* script shall be the

official language of Nepal (Article 6). However, a state may, by a state law, determine one or more than one languages of the nation spoken by a majority of people within the State as its official language(s), in addition to the Nepali language.

- Other matters relating to language shall be as decided by the Government of Nepal, on recommendation of the Language Commission (Article 7).[1]

Today, many local authorities and provincial governments are in the process of language officialization as recommended by the Language Commission in 2023. Bagmati province has already authorized the bill from the provincial assembly and announced Newar and Tamang as the provincial languages, in addition to Nepali. With this quick historical and political backdrop, I would like to illustrate and discuss how national censuses have recorded the languages spoken in Nepal during various political regimes.

Table 1
Number of Languages across Censuses

Census year	Number of languages recorded	Political system
1952/54	44	End of the Rana regime/ democratic movements
1961	36	Beginning of the Panchayat regime
1971	17	Panchayatr regime
1981	18	Panchayat regime
1991	31	End of Panchayat regime
2001	92	Multiparty democratic system
2011	123	Federal democratic System
2021	124 +	Federal democratic System

Source: CBS reports of Nepal.

Table 1 illustrates the discrepancies in the systematic documentation of the languages spoken in Nepal at various periods and within their political contexts. The first census of Nepal (1952/54) listed 44 languages, and the number of languages surprisingly declined in the subsequent censuses for nearly the next five decades until 2001.The late King Mahendra, upon gaining power in 1960, promulgated Panchayati Constitution in 1961 (HMG/N, 1962), which recognized Nepali as the only official language, ignoring other languages

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1   The 2015 Constitution has conferred the right to basic education in mother tongue (Article 31.1), right to use mother language (Article 32.1)) and preservation and promotion of language (Article 32.3) and also states that each community residing in Nepal shall have the right to preserve and promote its language, script, culture, cultural civility and heritage. Unless the Constitution articulates the responsibility of the government to preserve and promote the endangered languages, the efforts of the communities will be useless.

spoken throughout the country. However, with the emergence of multiparty democracy in 1991, the new Constitution emphasized the importance of the minority languages, cultures and heritages (HMG/N, 1991).[2] This shift led to increased awareness among the concerned communities regarding their languages, which in turn resulted in the systematic documentation of the various languages. The major takeaway from the political changes of the 1990s is the awareness of identity politics in Nepal, a phenomenon that was also reflected in the census data.

Furthermore, in the wake of subsequent political events, the Maoist-led underground movement lobbied for agendas and slogans centered on ethnicity. These, in turn, triggered demands to push forward the political and administrative representation of ethnic groups, based on identity and geography. Nevertheless, the national censuses after 1991 recorded 92 languages in 2001, 123 in 2011 and over 124 in 2021. Persistent gaps in the legal and historical documents, along with the political developments that followed, led to the strengthening of identity politics in Nepal. Numerous linguistic groups, including the Magar, Gurung, Tharu, Limbu, Tamang, Newar, Rai-Kirants and Madheshi, have opposed the state regarding the acknowledgement of their ethnic and cultural identities, political representation, and social inclusion. They strongly demanded linguistic diversity and identity-based federal recognition.

Language and Political Movements

Various ethnic groups and their associations have united to campaign for their cultural rights, organizing a series of protests over time. One of the key demands of the ethnic rights movements has been the recognition of their languages, cultures, and customs within the national framework. For a long time, they have been arguing that the dominance of Nepali leads to cultural erosion. Their activism highlights the complex interplay between their mother tongues and the Nepali state and society. The 1991 Constitution (HMG/N, 1991) allowed for limited linguistic rights, but Nepali remained the only official language. However, the Interim Constitution of 2007 (GoN, 2007), along with the 2015 Constitution (NLC, 2015), recognized all mother tongues as national languages and allowed provinces the right to choose local official languages, but their implementation remained weak. The Language Commission was established in 2016, but it has been ineffective due to various governmental and

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2 After the political change of 1990, the new Constitution of 1991 recognized all the languages of Nepal. It officially declared Nepali written in the Devnagari script as the official language of the nation of Nepal (Article 6.1), and other languages spoken as the mother tongue in various parts of the country were considered national languages (Article 6.2). Moreover, the Constitution included provisions for the use of mother tongue in primary education (Article 18.2), guaranteeing the fundamental rights to preserve culture, scripts and languages (Article 26.2)

administrative hurdles. Still, some local governments have started teaching in their local languages, but they face challenges caused by a lack of resources like curriculum, textbooks and trained teachers.

Although the 2015 Constitution acknowledges all the languages spoken and used in Nepal (NLC, 2015), the dominance of Nepali and English overshadows the other languages, making them virtually obsolete due to various factors, like media, music, marriage and migration, which I refer to as M4 (see Gautam, 2022). The young urban generations are often unaware of their native languages. Similarly, those scholarly ethnic advocates who champion language rights tend to prefer publishing their works in English and Nepali. In a few print publications, like *Gorkhapatra*, there is a section set aside for articles in various languages, known as *Naya Nepal*, but the interest of the concerned language and ethnic group is not attractive for such initiatives. To understand the popularity of these writings or to gather readership statistics, a thorough survey and research are required. Despite this fact, the debates persist regarding cultural preservation and political representation, and language stands as a major marker of both ethnic identity and identity movement. Thus, the language question has surfaced as a major political issue in Nepal, particularly in the aftermath of 1990 and 2006, thereby positioning linguistic identity as a springboard for political movements and identity politics.

Various ethnic groups and their respective organizations have initiated campaigns and demonstrations at numerous points in time, asserting their identity through language, religion, culture, territory and political beliefs, thereby distinguishing themselves from the Khas Arya. Many language and ethnic communities argue that the Nepali state has historically ignored their unique needs and that their voices should be better represented in the governance of the country (Sengupta, 2018, p. 2). Thus, Nepal's identity movements connected with various political movements and campaigns have been highly influential for different kinds of decision-making and policy implementation. The section below delineates two cases, the Madheshi agitation of 2007 and the Tharuhat agitation of 2009, that profoundly influenced identity movement and the political landscape of Nepal.

Madheshi movements

The Tarai Madhesh region of Nepal is inhabited by people who have called it home for centuries, alongside newcomers who have arrived at various points throughout history. Its richness lies in its linguistic diversity, with a multitude of languages spoken by its inhabitants. Maithali, Bhojpuri, Awadhi and Bajjika are widely spoken within the Madheshi community. Additionally, Meche, Rajbanshi, Santhali, Tharu, Urdu and various other languages are also spoken by the inhabitants of Nepal Tarai. Nepali and Hindi languages serve as a contact or *lingua franca* in daily life, bringing together individuals and various cultural communities residing there. The majority Madheshi community,

which primarily speaks Awadhi, Bhojpuri, Maithili and other languages, has long faced political and linguistic discrimination. Previously, other language communities were also identified with Madheshi, such as Madheshi-Tharu, Madheshi-Bhojpuri, Madheshi-Awadhi and so on (Informal conversation with a senior linguist R. A. Yadav in August 2025), but later Madheshi people became more conscious about their language, cultures and rights, especially after the restoration of democracy in 1990.

The people from Nepal's Madhesh Pradesh became more conscious and united during the Maoist movement (1996-2006) while the state ignored the voices from Madhesh, resulting in protests that erupted in 2007 and 2015 after the government failed to grant full linguistic and political rights to Madheshi speakers. Madheshi activists argue that the dominance of Nepali in governance and education prevents their full participation in national affairs. In 2022, the Language Commission recommended Bajjika, Bhojpuri and Maithili as the provincial official languages for Madhesh Province. Similarly, Awadhi and Tharu languages were recommended for Lumbini Province. The Madheshi people from the elite and educated backgrounds are fancy for Hindi rather than existing local languages. By sidelining this matter, a new term "Madheshi language," has been introduced into the socio-political discourse very recently.[3]

The Madhesh movement in Nepal reinforced the social, political, and cultural identity of the Madheshi people. Today, they proudly say, "*Ham Madheshi chhi* (we are Madheshi people). The movement started in response to the dominance and exploitation by the state led by *Pahadi* elites. However, the Madheshi leadership couldn't control the movement, and some activists targeted local *Pahadi* community members, and many innocent people became victims from Janakpur, Bara, Birjunj, Gaur and more core areas of Madhesh. While the movement's demands were not against Pahadi people living in the Tarai-Madhesh, radical slogans and anti-Pahadi actions caused fear and tension between the Madheshi and Pahadi communities. This led to the breakdown in understanding and safety, with minority groups feeling insecure due to aggressive behavior from the majority. Many people from Pahadi backgrounds, with high socioeconomic status and government jobs, moved to safer areas during the movement, forsaking their properties in affected areas out of fear. Criminal activities increased, and both Madheshi and Pahadi minorities faced threats from the majority Madheshi communities, leading to displacement. Migrants struggled to sell their properties, often pressured to sell at low prices, with neighbour taking advantage of the situation.

The main effect of this movement entirely divided Tarai-Madhesh, causing people either to return to their original places or seek safer options.

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3   It was CK Rawat, member of parliament and the president of the Janamat Party, a political party he founded in 2019 after previously leading a separatist movement in Madhesh, is the first to use this term.

Concurrently, the Madhesh movement raised political awareness, leading educated Madheshi youths to seek employment in public services, like the Public Service Commission, Nepal Police and Nepal Army. Consequently, the movement's over-politicization has caused a decline in the quality of education, health and development in rural areas because of ethnic politics.

Tharu movement

The Tharu, Indigenous People to the Tarai region, have also been active in pushing for greater recognition and rights, claiming that they are the *bhumiputra* (the real people of the land). They speak varieties of Tharu, ranging from Kochila (East), Chitauniya, Dangora and Rana (West). Historically, the Tharus have faced systemic discrimination and social exclusion, both in terms of access to resources and political representation. The Tharu community has been at the forefront of movements that seek recognition of their ethnic identity, protection of their land rights, and improvement of their socio-economic status. The Tharus are known for having one of the earliest ethnic movements in Nepal, with the founding of the Tharu Welfare Society, which now serves as the main representative body for the Tharu people within the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN). Since the post-2006 period, an increasing number of observers have recognized that the Tharu movement has grown in terms of ethnic representation, inclusion, empowerment, and identity.

The Tharus of western Nepal were historically treated as *Kamaiyas*, or bonded laborers, with their labor and land exploited by landlords for decades (Poudel, 2016). For years, the Kamaiya peasants fought against this oppression to free themselves from slavery. In the 1990s, many of them joined the Maoist movement, playing a key role in spreading the revolution throughout the western Tarai region. Kamaiya servitude was officially abolished in 2000. Most of the Kamaiyas were poor, marginalized, and landless. Rich Tharus benefited from the labor of the poorer Kamaiyas. Even though their "freedom" did not bring significant improvement to their livelihoods, it did increase their sense of dignity, political awareness, and mobility, allowing them to form solidarity and organize. In recent years, the Tharus opened a leading identity-based movement, pushing for the creation of a Tharu state known as Tharuwan or Kochila.

Seemingly, the Tharu movement has garnered support from numerous INGOs (International Nongovernmental Organisations) and Indigenous Organizations like Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) and National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN). In recent times, there has been an increasing perception among the Tharus of Nepal that they are the real ethnic/Indigenous People of the Tarai region. Their language differs in many ways, such as Purbiya (Kochila) Tharu, Chitauniya Tharu, Dangora Tharu and Rana Tharu. The Tharu living in Kailali and Kanchanpur districts claim that they are different from other groups.

Identity politics in Nepal revolves around a struggle against long-established elitism. The social movement discourse tends to focus on traditional approaches rather than addressing the transformation of unequal social structures and power relations (Gautam and Poudel, 2022). Within the Tharu movement, the power dynamics are more complex. The Tharu elites, such as landlords and tax collectors, who historically benefited from the system and served the interests of the ruling class individuals, who were in power and the political mainstream. Even today, these elites exert influence within the movement's leadership, shaping its agenda and mobilizing people in the name of political parties, groups, or associations. The leaders of the Tharu movement are either affiliated with major political parties or have ties to the legacy of landlordism, or are well-off citizens in the society. On the one hand, they maintain the necessity of uniting for the development of ethnic and linguistic identity. On the other hand, they are also involved in ruling and dominating the Tharus within their own umbrella. So, the politics of language and identity has been derailed from the main goal of ethnic and cultural development.

Dynamics of Ethnic and Cultural Movements

The adoption of federalism in Nepal in 2015 was a significant step toward addressing ethnic and cultural grievances. The new federal system divided Nepal into seven provinces, and many ethnic groups saw this as a means to secure more political autonomy and recognition. Ethnic movements in Nepal have emerged to play an important role in challenging historical marginalization and advocating for greater recognition, autonomy, and linguistic and cultural rights for marginalized communities (Gautam, 2022; Gautam et al., 2025). The ongoing debates over political representation, the federal structure, and the recognition of indigenous languages and cultures intact shape the future of Nepal's political landscape.

However, the implementation of federalism has not been without challenges. While some ethnic groups, like the Madheshi and Indigenous groups, have seen it as an opportunity for greater participation and political power, others, especially those people from the hilly and mountainous regions, have expressed differently because they think that the creation of provinces might not fully represent the rights and interests of all the ethnic minorities. However, it took more than a decade to endorse names for the seven provinces because of the conflicting claims and interests of ethnicity-based organizations and political parties. Some names once endorsed generated contestations, as is the case with Koshi Pradesh. Ethnic communities, especially Rai-Kirat, voice against this as the policies imposed by the "Hindu rulers" of the mainstream political parties. Numerous alternative names were publicly proposed, like Koshi-Sagarmatha, Limbuwan and Kirat, etc., which project specific ethnicity-based identity.

The ethnic-based identity politics in Nepal have largely been dominated by the perspective of upper class in the leadership. Meanwhile, local people are eager to express their multifaceted issues and identities related to class, ethnicity,

language, gender, and region. In this context, it became clear that various movements, like Madheshi and Tharu (including Indigenous rights movements, such as the Khuwalung and the Mukumlung) could not fully represent the deeper and complex issues associated with language, culture and identity. Any movement, it is said, should have the clear role of addressing people's real concerns rather than misguiding to the unwarranted interests.

The impact of such movements in Nepal, especially after the 1990s political change, can be seen when we find many communities have started to rename the place and other newly developed things, connecting with local and indigenous identity (Strani, 2020; Gautam and Giri, 2024). The revival of local names in Kathmandu valley (particularly in Bhaktapur, Kathmandu, Kirtipur, and Lalitpur), demonstrated by multilingual signposts, manifests the unerlying language politics in Nepal that embodies "local" culture, history and language. However, at the same time, some people are using modified and English-based names by blending the local and cultural identity with the global ("Western") cultural phenomena.

Conclusion

Ethnic affiliations often serve as the main way individuals express their identity in socio- cultural settings where diverse group of people speak multiple languages. The ethnic categories of different language groups, such as Bhojpuri, Gurung, Magar, Maithili, Newar, Rai-Kirat, Sherpa, Tharu, who live and share some common social-cultural practices in the multilingual cities like Birgunj, Dharan, Kathmandu, Nepalgunj, Pokhara exhibit distinct personal, socio-cultural, behavioral, and formal activities. From such examples, we can discern various dimensions of multilingualism, multiculturalism and diverse ethnic dynamics, where spaces and identities are shaped. People on the move often combine multiple languages or language varieties in their interactions, constructing complex identities that reference their migratory journeys derived from diverse sources where language and culture are politically linked.

Language serves as a cornerstone of cultural identity and a focal point in political discourse. Policies that recognize and promote linguistic diversity are essential in fostering inclusive national identities and ensuring the preservation of cultural heritage. Solving issues related to language, culture, and identity politics requires us to be more understanding and inclusive. One important step is to foster a harmonious atmosphere that encourages open conversations between people from different backgrounds, enabling them to learn from one another and reduce misunderstandings. For this, educational institutions such as schools, colleges and universities need to develop curricula that encompass diverse cultures, languages and ethnicities. This is one way to encourage individuals to nourish their interest in learning a new language outside their culture. Protecting and preserving endangered languages is another key phenomenon because language is not only tied to ethnic and cultural identity,

but also to national heritage. In a nation like Nepal, it is essential to foster its linguistic diversity, which contributes to Nepal's reputation and recognition globally for its rich cultural heritage. While identity politics can help highlight the struggles of marginalized groups, it is not a sustainable solution on its own. What truly matters in society is to foster connections that unite individuals, rather than merely separating them.

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