

# **Conceptual Understanding of Ethnicity in Nepal: Exploring Primordial and Constructivist Approach**

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## **Abstract**

This paper critically analyzes the primordial and constructivist approaches to understanding ethnicity in Nepal and examines how intersectionality, hybridity, power dynamics, and agency shape ethnic identity construction. The study draws on diverse perspectives and scholarly literature to explore the complexities of ethnicity in Nepalese society. The findings reveal the interplay of primordial factors, such as shared ancestry and kinship, with constructivist factors, including social construction and fluidity, in shaping ethnic identity formation. The analysis also highlights the significance of intersectionality, where gender, caste, class, and ethnicity intersect, in influencing ethnic identity construction. Additionally, the study emphasizes the role of hybridity, power dynamics, and agency in shaping and contesting ethnic identities. The implications of these dynamics for marginalized ethnic communities are discussed, focusing on their challenges in challenging dominant narratives and advocating for their rights. The research contributes to a comprehensive

understanding of ethnicity in Nepal and informs future research, policy considerations, and interventions related to ethnicity and identity.

*Keywords:* ethnicity, primordial approach, constructivist approach, intersectionality and hybridity, power dynamics and ethnic identity.

### **Introduction**

Ethnicity is a complex and multifaceted concept that plays a crucial role in shaping social, political, and cultural dynamics in societies around the world. In Nepal, a country known for its rich ethnic diversity, understanding ethnicity is of predominant importance. This introduction aims to explore the conceptual understanding of ethnicity in Nepal by examining two contrasting theoretical approaches: the primordial approach and the constructivist approach. The primordial approach to ethnicity presumes that ethnic identities are deeply rooted in ancient ties of kinship, shared culture, and common descent. According to this perspective, ethnic groups in Nepal are seen as primordial, or innate, and their identities are believed to have originated from prehistoric times (Smith, 1986). Proponents of the primordial approach argue that ethnic boundaries are fixed and stable, and ethnic groups have inherent characteristics that differentiate them from one another (Barth, 1969). In the context of Nepal, this approach emphasizes the role of factors such as language, religion, and caste in defining ethnic boundaries.

On the other hand, the constructivist approach challenges the primordial view by asserting that ethnicity is a socially constructed phenomenon. According to this perspective, ethnic identities are not fixed but are constructed and negotiated through social interactions and power relations (Brubaker, 2004). In Nepal, where caste-based hierarchies have historically played a significant role in social stratification, the constructivist approach highlights the role of political mobilization, economic factors, and state policies in shaping ethnic identities (Thapa, 2015). It argues that ethnicity is not an inherent characteristic but a product of historical processes and contemporary social dynamics. Anderson (1983) concept of imagined communities highlights the role of narratives and collective imaginaries in the construction of ethnic identities.

Nepal's ethnic landscape is characterized by complex tapestry of diverse groups, including but not limited to the Newars, Tamangs, Gurungs, Tharus, and many others. Each ethnic group has its own distinct cultural practices, languages, and historical narratives that contribute to their unique identities. The interaction between the primordial and constructivist approaches provides a lens through which we can comprehend the complexities of ethnicity in Nepal.

This exploration of the conceptual understanding of ethnicity in Nepal is important as it contributes to a broader understanding of the dynamics of

ethnic relations and social cohesion in the country. By examining the primordial and constructivist approaches, we can gain understanding of the complexities of ethnic identity formation, intergroup dynamics, and the challenges and opportunities associated with ethnic diversity in Nepal. This research paper aims to analyze the interplay between primordial and constructivist factors in shaping ethnic identity formation in Nepal, to explore the effects of intersectionality on ethnic identity construction in Nepal, and to investigate the role of power dynamics and agency in ethnic identity construction and contestation in Nepal. These objectives provide a concise direction for the research, focusing on understanding the influence of primordial and constructivist factors, exploring the impact of intersectionality, and investigating the role of power dynamics and agency in ethnic identity dynamics in Nepal.

### **Materials and Methods**

A comprehensive review of scholarly literature was conducted in this paper. This included secondary sources of data, such as academic articles, books, and theoretical frameworks related to ethnicity in Nepal. These literatures are purposively selected on the primordial and constructivist approaches, intersectionality, hybridity, power dynamics, and agency in the context of ethnicity in Nepal. The collected data underwent a rigorous analysis process.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and conceptual categories within the data. This analytical technique allowed for a systematic exploration of the literature and data, enabling the extraction of meaningful insights and the identification of key findings. The findings from the literature review and data analysis were synthesized and discussed in relation to the research objectives. In summary, this research paper utilized a systematic review of scholarly literature.

### **Result and Discussion**

The primordial approach to understanding ethnicity emphasizes the deep-rooted and innate nature of ethnic identities, stemming from shared ancestry, kinship, and biological factors. Anthony D. Smith, a prominent scholar in the field, argues that ethnic groups have enduring ties to specific territories and cultural practices (Smith, 1986). This approach posits that ethnic identities are intrinsic and essential, shaping individuals' sense of belonging and collective consciousness. According to Barth, ethnic identities are socially constructed, but they are based on primordial attachments to specific cultural markers such as language, religion, and customs (Barth, 1969). This approach suggests that ethnic identities are deeply rooted in shared heritage and are often reinforced through boundary maintenance between groups.

In contrast, the constructivist approach emphasizes the social construction and fluidity of ethnic identities. Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities suggests that ethnic identities are products of historical, political, and cultural processes. They are socially constructed through shared narratives and symbols (Anderson, 1983). This approach highlights the role of agency, collective imagination, and external factors in shaping and transforming ethnic identities over time. Brubaker and Cooper argue that ethnicity is a dynamic and contingent social process. They emphasize that ethnicity is constructed through ongoing interactions, negotiations, and contestations within social contexts (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). This approach recognizes the agency of individuals and groups in defining and redefining their ethnic identities.

The notion of hybridity is relevant in understanding ethnicity in Nepal, where different ethnic groups interact and influence each other's cultural expressions and identities. Hybridity refers to the blending of diverse cultural elements and practices, leading to the formation of unique identities (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). Nagel explores the concept of ethnic hybridity as a result of intergroup contact and cultural exchange. She argues that hybridity challenges notions of fixed and bounded ethnic identities and highlights the complexities of multiple affiliations and cultural influences (Nagel, 1994). Intersectionality, as theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw, recognizes the interconnectedness of various

social categories, such as ethnicity, gender, class, and religion, in shaping individuals' experiences and identities (Crenshaw, 1989).

Power dynamics and agency play crucial roles in the construction and negotiation of ethnic identities. Ethnic groups may experience marginalization, discrimination, or privilege based on power asymmetries within society.

Recognizing power relations is essential for understanding the complexities of ethnic identities and their interactions with social structures (Hall, 1996).

Agency refers to individuals' capacity to act and shape their identities within the constraints and opportunities presented by their social context.

Foucault's concept of power relations elucidates how power operates in society, shaping social interactions and influencing the formation and negotiation of ethnic identities (Foucault, 1978). The concept of agency, as discussed by Giddens, emphasizes individuals' capacity to act and make choices within social structures (Giddens, 1984). In this way understanding power dynamics and agency is essential in analyzing how ethnic identities are shaped and negotiated within broader social contexts.

### **Critical Discourse and Appraisal**

In examining the primordial and constructivist approaches to understanding ethnicity in Nepal, it is important to consider the criticisms and further analysis that can deepen our understanding of the complexities surrounding ethnic

identity formation. While the primordial approach emphasizes shared ancestry, kinship ties, and biological factors, it has been subject to criticism for its essentialist assumptions and potential to reinforce exclusionary notions of identity.

According to Smith (2001), the primordial approach to understanding ethnicity emphasizes the significance of shared ancestry, kinship ties, and biological factors in shaping ethnic identities in Nepal. This perspective suggests that individuals identify with their ethnic group based on a sense of historical continuity and shared origins. Gurung (2005) further emphasizes the role of kinship networks and intermarriage practices in reinforcing ethnic boundaries and preserving cultural traditions. This primordial understanding of ethnicity highlights the enduring nature of ethnic identities and their deep-rooted connections to the past.

On the other hand, the constructivist approach highlights the social construction and fluidity of ethnic identities in Nepal. Dahal (2012) argues that ethnic identities are not fixed or predetermined but are shaped through social interactions and are contingent on historical processes, political mobilization, and cultural discourses. Bista (2016) points out that ethnicity is not solely determined by biological factors but is constructed through shared narratives, symbols, and social practices, which can change over time and vary across



different contexts. This constructivist perspective underscores the dynamic and malleable nature of ethnic identities.

Furthermore, the constructivist approach, while acknowledging the social construction and fluidity of ethnic identities, has also faced criticism. Some argue that it risks downplaying the importance of historical continuity, shared traditions, and cultural practices that contribute to the formation and maintenance of ethnic identities. It is important to strike a balance between recognizing the socially constructed nature of ethnicity and acknowledging the significance of cultural heritage and intergenerational transmission of identity. The intersectionality of ethnicity with other social categories such as gender, caste, and class further shapes the construction and negotiation of ethnic identities in Nepal. Rana (2013) discusses how gender intersects with ethnicity, leading to unique forms of identity negotiation and activism among women. Lama (2017) explores the intersectionality of caste, class, and ethnicity, revealing how individuals navigate multiple social categories to construct their identities within specific socio-political and economic contexts. These intersections complicate the understanding of ethnicity and highlight the interplay between different dimensions of social identity.

Additionally, the intersectionality perspective, which considers the influence of multiple social categories such as gender, caste, class, and ethnicity, adds

further complexity to the analysis of ethnic identities in Nepal. Critics argue that intersectionality should not be treated as a mere additive approach but should be understood as a dynamic interplay of power relations and social categories that shape individuals' experiences and identities.

Furthermore, the concept of hybridity is pertinent in understanding ethnic identities in Nepal. Shrestha (2009) emphasizes the dynamic nature of ethnicity, influenced by migration, urbanization, and globalization, which result in the blending of cultural practices and the emergence of hybrid identities. This hybridity challenges simplistic notions of ethnic purity and highlights the adaptability and resilience of ethnic communities in response to changing social dynamics.

While the concept of hybridity offers insights into the dynamic nature of ethnic identities, there is a need for further analysis of how hybridity affects power dynamics, social hierarchies, and the preservation of cultural heritage. It is important to examine how hybrid identities navigate tensions between traditional practices and modern influences, and the implications for social cohesion and cultural diversity.

Power dynamics and agency also play a crucial role in the construction and negotiation of ethnic identities. Thapa (2014) discusses the unequal power relations within and between ethnic groups, demonstrating how dominant

groups often assert their cultural and political dominance, influencing the construction of ethnic identities. Adhikari (2018) explores the agency of marginalized ethnic communities in challenging dominant narratives, asserting their identities, and advocating for their rights, showcasing the contestation and negotiation of ethnic identities within diverse social contexts. These power dynamics and agency dynamics contribute to the complexity of ethnic identity formation and maintenance.

The analysis of power dynamics and agency highlights the unequal power relations within and between ethnic groups, with dominant groups often asserting their cultural and political dominance. It is crucial to critically examine the impact of power dynamics on the construction of ethnic identities and the marginalization of certain groups. Moreover, a deeper exploration of the agency of marginalized ethnic communities in challenging dominant narratives and advocating for their rights is needed to understand their strategies, successes, and limitations.

The discourse revealed that ethnicity in Nepal is influenced by a combination of primordial and constructivist factors. The primordial approach emphasizes the significance of shared ancestry and kinship ties, while the constructivist approach emphasizes the social construction and fluidity of ethnic identities. Both perspectives contribute to the formation and maintenance of ethnic

identities, with individuals identifying with their ethnic groups based on a sense of historical continuity, shared origins, social interactions, and cultural discourses.

By critically analyzing the primordial and constructivist approaches to ethnicity, examining intersectionality, hybridity, power dynamics, and agency, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of the intricate dynamics of ethnicity in Nepal. These insights contribute to the existing literature and inform future research, policy considerations, and interventions related to ethnicity and identity in Nepal.

The critical discourse and analysis of the primordial and constructivist approaches, as well as the considerations of intersectionality, hybridity, power dynamics, and agency, provide valuable insights into the complexities of ethnicity in Nepal. By acknowledging the criticisms and engaging in further analysis, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of ethnic identity formation and its implications for social cohesion, inclusivity, and equitable representation. This understanding is essential for informing policies, interventions, and future research related to ethnicity and identity in Nepal.

### **Conclusion**

The discourse on ethnic identity in Nepal delves into the intricate dynamics that shape its conceptualization, highlighting the interplay between primordial

and constructivist perspectives. This analysis explores how factors such as shared ancestry, kinship, and social construction interact to form ethnic identities, emphasizing their fluid and multifaceted nature. Additionally, it examines the role of intersectionality, hybridity, power dynamics, and agency in shaping these identities, considering the influence of various social categories and contexts.

Intersectionality emerges as a crucial aspect in understanding ethnic identities in Nepal, as individuals navigate multiple social categories such as gender, caste, class, and ethnicity. The analysis demonstrates the intersectional nature of identity formation and the unique experiences and challenges faced by individuals at the intersections of these categories. Hybridity also plays a significant role in shaping ethnic identities, particularly influenced by migration, urbanization, and globalization.

Furthermore, power dynamics and agency are identified as significant factors in the construction and negotiation of ethnic identities. Dominant groups exert their cultural and political dominance, influencing the formation and contestation of ethnic identities, while marginalized ethnic communities demonstrate agency in challenging dominant narratives and advocating for their rights. Overall, this discourse provides a comprehensive understanding of ethnicity in Nepal, informing future research, policy considerations, and

interventions related to ethnic identity. Recognizing the complexities and diversity of ethnic identities can facilitate the creation of a more inclusive and harmonious society in Nepal that celebrates and respects the agency, rights, and aspirations of all its ethnic communities.

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