

# POLITICAL CHANGE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF ETHNIC GROUP IN NEPAL

Dhan Bahadur Kunwar<sup>a</sup>, Shoyata Khatri Kshetri<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a,b</sup> Central Department of Nepalese History, Culture & Archaeology, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Corresponding author: drdbkunwar@gmail.com

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**Abstract:** Nepal is a home to a mosaic of ethnicities and languages. More than 103 ethnic/caste groups and diverse nationalities reside in the country. Despite the socio-cultural diversity, Nepal is facing a vicious cycle of poverty which mainly is the cause of spatial heterogeneity and structural inequalities. The spatial causes of poverty can be seen due to the regional imbalance in the development process, while structural inequalities have been coupled by haves and have not's. Structural inequalities have further been compounded by the caste of the country. Poverty and lack of social services (health, education, water and sanitation, etc.) remain pressing problems for rural and lower castes and indigenous peoples, despite economic development and poverty alleviation having been the primary objectives of the Nepali budget for the past years. Additionally, the bitter truth is that lower castes and minority ethnic groups are disproportionately affected by the widespread social and economic problems aggravated by poverty.

Structural inequalities set the stage for the most recent social and political upheavals punctuated by the first people's movement in 1990, a ten year Maoist people war culminating in a second people's movement in 2006 and the cessation of the monarchy and finally now, furtive steps toward constructing a new socio-political order in Nepal.

Sustainable development has been defined in many ways, but the most frequently quoted definition is from *Our Common Future*, also known as the Brundtland Report:

*"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts: (a) the concept of **needs**, in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and (b) the idea of **limitations** imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs."*

Sustainable development recognizes that growth must be both inclusive and environmentally sound to reduce poverty and build shared prosperity for today's population and to continue to meet the needs of future generations. It is efficient with resources and carefully planned to deliver both immediate and long-term benefits for people, planet, and prosperity.

The three pillars of sustainable development – economic growth, environmental stewardship, and social inclusion – carry across all sectors of development, from cities facing rapid urbanization to agriculture, infrastructure, energy development and use, water availability, and transportation. Cities are embracing low-carbon growth and public transportation. Farmers are picking up the practices of climate-smart agriculture. Countries are recognizing the value of their natural resources, and industries are realizing how much they can save through energy and supply chain efficiency.

The question facing countries, cities, corporations, and development organizations today is not *whether* to embrace sustainable development but *how*. In the case of Nepal, many ethnic groups have been using their natural resources (forest, water) for the community benefits and future generation. They have largely been dependent upon such resources for their livelihood for the generations. They have own institutional set up for the conservation and consumption of the natural resources. However, since last few decades' natural resources have been declining because

of population pressure, infrastructure development and migration. Exclusive right of indigenous communities has been threatening due to internal and external factors. For example, Majhi (Fisherman) have given up their traditional occupation because of internal and external factors. As mentioned above many disadvantage groups and ethnic minority are in the trap of vicious circle of poverty. Human development index has shown that some of the minority and marginal groups have lowest below in terms of health, education, per capita income, adult literacy ratio. Education is one of the basic indicators of the level of human development. Literacy provides scope for new opportunities. The education level of Nepalese population in general and ethnic minority and disadvantage groups in particular is very low and most manpower is labor-oriented with a marginal output. Another problem is the pronounced discrepancy in access to education across the social groups. Two thirds of ethnic groups have literacy rate below the national average.

Finally, social, economic, political and environmental aspects are equally important for the sustainable development of the community. Inclusion of minority groups in political spheres at different levels, access to health, education, economic resources is pre-requisite for long term development of the community.

**Keywords:** spatial heterogeneity, social inclusion, water availability, Structural inequalities

## INTRODUCTION

Nepal is a small country in between India and China in a comparatively small piece of Himalayan geography like a mat expanding east to west having with Mt. Everest and several high rise mountains the Himalayan region. From the cold, snowy and white with Mountains of the world in the north the hot plains of the south, called the Tarai. Like Everest, Lumbini, where Buddha was born is also a major identity of Nepal. Nepal is a country of diversity not only in terms of geographical/geological features, but also in terms of race/caste and ethnicity, language, religion, regional ecology, society and culture. Such a range of diversity has made Nepal a unique country in the world.

Nepal's racial composition is derived mainly from two major groups – the Mongolian and the Caucasian. Side by side Nepal also has other blood groups such as the Dravidian, proto Austroloid or Pre-Dravidian. Caste and ethnic identities and languages go hand in hand in Nepal, where over 123 languages are spoken according the latest census (2011). Nepali language is the official language and lingua franca of Nepal. Also, there are more than 125 caste and ethnic groups in Nepal. People follow different religion namely Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, nature worship and many other minor sects within the major religious traditions. According to Census of 2011, there are 81% Hindus (CBS, 2011: 13-14). As Nepal enters a new era marked by liberal, multi party democracy, social change and development, there are so many problems emerging regarding caste and ethnicity, empowerment of women, low caste and backward Community although the political parties are trying to settle these problems in just and democratic manner.

Despite the socio-cultural diversity, Nepal is facing a vicious cycle of poverty which is the root cause of spatial heterogeneity and structural inequalities. The spatial causes of poverty can be seen due to the regional imbalance in the development process, while structural inequalities have been complicated and coupled by the division of people in terms of haves and have not's. Structural inequalities have further been compounded by the existence of traditional caste system as a social evil of the country.

Chronic poverty, mostly in the remote and inaccessible population, low caste groups and other marginalized ethnic and/or social groups, lack of social services (health, education, water and sanitation, etc.) remain pressing problems for rural and lower castes and indigenous peoples, despite economic development and poverty alleviation having been the primary objectives of the Nepali budget since the past few decades. Additionally, the bitter truth is that lower castes and minority ethnic groups are disproportionately affected by the widespread social and economic problems aggravated by poverty.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND POLITICAL CHANGE**

In Nepal there are many reasons to believe that the valley of Kathmandu, the ever growing metropolitan city and the capital of Nepal, has been in existence with hosts of cultures and population since ancient times. Legends and chronicles speak of the organized rule of the migrant and indigenous ruling houses such as the Gopals, Mahispalas, Kiratas and Lichchhavis.

Centuries before the emergence of the archaeologically proven history of Kathmandu valley also there were rulers and people. But according to the archeological proofs, the real history starts at 185 A.D. (Tiwari , 2001:1) .

Major ruling houses of ancient, medieval and modern Nepal are – the Lichchhavi, the Malla and the Shah. In fact the history of Nepal goes back to one millennium B.C and archeologically 1800 years back. Nepal had a monarchical system since the history started up to few years back when a popular revolt dismissed kingship in Nepal.

Although a country of social, cultural and ethnic diversity, Nepal has never faced religious and social conflict; so it has developed and maintained good social harmony and religious tolerance. There have been major three political movements for the sake of democracy; first in 1951 A.D., second in 1990 and the last in 2006 A.D.

Finally, in the last people's movement the monarchical system was over thrown and a republican state was established through an interim constitution. Nepal has been declared as a republic democratic country. Structural inequalities set the stage for the most recent social and political upheavals punctuated by the first people's movement in 1990, a ten year Maoist 'People War' culminating in a second people's movement in 2006 and the cessation of the monarchy and finally now, the steps toward constructing a new Constitution by Constitution Assembly after the election for the same for two times. Despite institutionalized democracy and democratic institutions, and restoration of permanent peace, there has been social anarchy by the impact of Maoist movement of twelve years for the political change in Nepal. Such a situation is posing a threat for sustainable peace and development.

## **ETHNIC GROUPS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

After the major political change of 1950, when an autocratic family rule was overthrown through a popular movement, development has been both a priority and a challenge of Nepal. Nepal's geography, lack of resources, poor state of education and technology have been hurdles for sustainable development of people, more specifically the indigenous communities spread over the length and breadth of the country.

As said in the introductory section, Nepal has been a home to a mosaic of caste and ethnicities and languages. According to the census of 2011 A.D. there are 125 ethnic/caste groups, 123 languages and diverse nationalities reside in the country (CBS, 2011:13-14). A north Indian model Caste system is a system of social, economic and political hierarchy and in-built sources for discrimination. Gerald Berreman while talking about society in India talks not only just about the diverse groups but of diverse interest groups. In South Asia, this dilemma takes the especially vivid form of the caste system, analogous to the system of racial discrimination in America (Barreman, 1994:18). An Act promulgated in 2002, outlines the 59 ethnic groups as categorized indigenous people of the country.

The indigenous (also known as ethnic groups) people are 37.2 % of the total population of Nepal (NFDIN,2003:2).The indigenous people are classified into five groups based on development " Indigenous nationalities" means 'a tribe or community as mentioned in the schedule having its own mother language, traditional rites and customs, distinct cultural identity, distinct social structure and written or unwritten history' (NFDIN,2003:6-8) . In this connection, the ethnic groups have made their movements for the sake of more rights, facilities, reservation and inclusiveness. The awakening of the indigenous population throughout, the UN charters on these issues have been playing influencing role in the life of Nepal's ethnic awareness and development.

In Nepal mostly two races have been dominated over the country one is Mongoloid and other is Caucasoid. The Aryan or the Khas- Bahun is the lineage of the Caucasian race which is popular in Indian subcontinent, which has caste system like the high class Brahman to untouchable Dalit in low class category. In Nepal, till now some ethnic groups are in nomadic stages who do not like to settle permanently. Few of the groups have settled since 7-8 decades. Some ethnic groups are in more advanced position. They are Newar, Thakali and Gurung and few others.

Some of them are developing their economy, culture and social status. The indigenous people are classified into 5 groups based on the state of their overall development (Chepang, 2011:151), they are as following:-

Classification

Table 1: The indigenous people are classified into 5 groups based on the state of their overall development

	Category	Ethnic groups
1	Endangered	Kusunda, Bankariya, Raute, Surel, Hayu, Raji, Kisan, Lepcha, Meche, kusbadiya
2.	Highly Marginalized	Majhi, Siyar, Lohmi, Thumdam, Dhanuk, Chepang, Satar, Jhagad, Thami, Bote, Danuwar, Baramu, Sunuwar, Tharu, Tamang, Bhujel, Kumal, Rajbansi, Gangai and Dhimal
3.	Marginalized	Bhote, Darai, Tajpuriya, Dolpo, Free, Mugali, Pahari, Larke, Lhopa, Dura and Walung, Topkegola.
4.	Dis-advantaged groups	Chhairotan, Tangbe, Rai, Limbu, Sherpa, Yakkha, Chhantyal, Jirel, Byansi, Tingaule Thakali, Barhagaule Thakali, Marfali Thakali, Gurung, Magar and Hyolmo
5.	Advantaged people	Thakali & Newar

Source: NFDIN 2003.

In this context, in Nepal the 'so called high caste' Brahmans, Chhetris, and the middle position caste Newar have good influence on politics and government services, but the other caste and ethnic groups do not have important role in this field. The Kusunda and Raute are still in nomadic stage. The Chepang the last one that lived in cave are the latest to have permanent settlement, the home.

#### THE BASIC CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABILITY AND ETHNIC GROUP OF NEPAL

Sustainable development recognizes that growth must be both inclusive and environmentally sound to reduce poverty and build shared prosperity for today's population and to continue to meet the needs of future generations. It is efficient with resources and carefully planned to deliver both immediate and long-term benefits for people, planet, and prosperity.

The three pillars of sustainable development – economic growth, environmental stewardship, and social inclusion – carry across all sectors of development, from cities facing rapid urbanization to agriculture, infrastructure, energy development and use, water availability, and transportation. Many advanced cities of the world are embracing low-carbon growth and public transportation. Farmers are picking up the practices of climate-smart agriculture. Countries are recognizing the value of their natural resources, and industries are realizing how much they can save through energy and supply chain efficiency.

The question facing countries, cities, corporations, and development organizations today is not *whether* to embrace sustainable development but *how*? And, in low growth country like Nepal, these issues are still not in the main agenda of the government and practice of the people. It needs more education and awareness in order to embark on this stage of development at a par with developed nations.

Sustainable development has been defined in many ways, but the most frequently quoted definition is from *Our Common Future*, also known as the Brundtland Report ( Brundtland, 1987). (1) *Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*

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In the case of Nepal, many ethnic groups have been using their natural resources (forest, water) for the community benefits and future generation. They have largely been dependent upon such resources for their livelihood for the generations. They have their own indigenous knowledge, skill and institutional set up for the conservation and consumption of the natural resources. However, since last few decades, natural resources have been declining because of population pressure, low infrastructure development and phenomenal speed of migration.

Despite low level education growth among many of the ethnic minority groups, people are now aware of their rights. Exclusive right of indigenous communities has been threatened due to internal and external factors. For example, Majhi (Fisher/boatman) have given up their traditional occupation because of internal and external factors such as construction of bridges, movement of people, among others. There can be other examples depending on which geographic zone people come from.

One big hurdle for the development of ethnic groups is the vicious circle of social evils and highly orthodox culture pattern. People observe many rites and rituals and spend their resources indiscreetly as if there will be no 'tomorrow' in their kitchen. Behaviors such as borrowing and lending money in traditional style, spoil food grains for alcohol beverages to be consumed during rites, rituals and festivals are common. Poverty is thus rampant. Social evils such as 'witch-craft', child marriage, lack of education for girl-child, are some of the norms in rural and remote societies. These evils cut across the caste and regional boundaries.

On the other hand, ethnic groups like Newar, Gurung, Magar, Thakali, of the hills and few groups from the tarai fare better in terms of sustainable development. There is big percentage of educated population, their production mechanism is better, their social-cultural institutions are strong and committed to promote and preserve their culture and gradually they are figuring prominently in the mainstream development index. This is a positive phenomenon in terms of sustainable development.

As mentioned above, many disadvantage groups and ethnic minority are in the trap of vicious circle of poverty. Human development index has shown that some of the minority and marginal groups have lowest below in terms of health, education, per capita income, adult literacy ratio. Education is one of the basic indicators of the level of human development. Literacy provides scope for new opportunities. The education level of Nepalese population in general and ethnic minority and disadvantage groups in particular is very low and most manpower is labor-oriented with a marginal output. Another problem is the pronounced discrepancy in access to education across the social groups. Two thirds of ethnic groups have literacy rate below the national average.

Now there arguments and counter arguments regarding the need of 'reservation' or 'quota' system to upgrade the status of the backward groups and communities. When a large section of these societies, especially in the leadership circle advocate the need of reservation, others argue for the guarantee of opportunities. Reservation vs opportunity will be debated for few more time to come.

Education is the prime mover of change. With about 60% literate population, a faster track development package for ethnic minorities, dalits and disadvantaged is the only way to follow. Government and non-government agencies are now at work to bring about change in this scenario.

## CONCLUSION

The paper outlined the historical and cultural, ethnic base of Nepali culture. It was argued that in a short span of time Nepal has been through several phases of political change. But the agenda of equity based development, guarantee of fundamental and other rights have been met with partial success. Economic growth, literacy rate, mass and employment based education have been major challenges for Nepal.

(a) A country's development is possible when the entire population regardless of race, origin, location, state of the art of culture and economy, is brought to the mainstream development process. People's participation in all aspects and spheres of development is the need of the day. Once education and awareness campaign reach every household of Nepal, sustainable development agenda will not be limited to few regions, people and culture.

(b) With increased network of roads, schools, health facilities and communication it will not take long time to bring the target people – ethnic minority and other disadvantaged- to the development process. At this time in history many ethnic and regional cultures and people are experiencing the impact of tourism, globalization and sustainable growth. The urgent need now is to maximize the growth opportunities and guarantee the participation of people in both planning and implementing the pro-poor and pro-backward region plans of action.

(c) With the establishment of democracy, people are getting aware of their rights – human rights, cultural rights and other rights. This is very crucial for development. Cultural products are looking for larger markets, tourists are also looking for environment-friendly production and living situation. Country like Nepal can cash on such development and make use of the global phenomenon.

Finally, social, economic, political and environmental aspects are equally important for the sustainable development of the community. Inclusion of minority groups in political spheres at different levels, access to health, education, economic resources is pre-requisite for long term development of the community and the nation which is the integrated form of all the population and culture or cultures that dwell in the country.

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#### About the authour

Dr. Kunwar is a **Professor** and **Head** of the Central Department of Nepalese History, Culture & Archaeology, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Kathmandu , Nepal.

**Chairman:** National Luminary Hero Balbhadra Kunwar Foundation, Nepal

**Vice chairman:** Martyrs Memorial Hospital, MCO-Nepal, Kalanki

**General Secretary:** Nepal National Ethnographic Museum Bhrikutimandap, Kathmandu, Nepal.