

Newars as Janajatis

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One of the more remarkable developments in Nepal after 1990 was the rapid growth of ethnic organizations. The first attempt to build a pan-ethnic movement occurred when several ethnic organizations came together as the Nepal Janajati Mahasangh in 1990. It rendered its name in English as the Nepal Federation of Nationalities or NEFEN. It had, initially, just seven member organizations, representing the Magars, Gurungs, Tamangs, Newars, Rais (two organizations), and Limbus. The organization representing the Newars was the Nepal Bhasha Manka Khalah of Kathmandu, led by Padma Ratna Tuladhar (the well-known Kathmandu organization of this name needs to be distinguished from the Lalitpur or Yala organization of the same name, which operates independently; many people are not aware that they are separate organizations). It was quickly agreed that in principle there should be only one organization per ethnic group, and one of the Rai organizations became an observer. NEFEN expanded rapidly so that by 1995 there were 21 member organizations. Later the Nepal Bhasha Manka Khalah was replaced as the representative Newar organization by the Newa De Dabu, which is today led by Malla K. Sundar.

In 1993 the UN declared a Year of Indigenous Peoples, and this was subsequently extended to a Decade of Indigenous Peoples. Suddenly it became clear that it mattered a great deal whether Janajatis were indigenous or not, and that access to important international bodies depended on the answer. Janajati intellectuals argued that in the Nepali context all Janajatis were indigenous, which is rendered by *adivasi* in Nepali. Subsequently 'Adivasi' was added to the name of the organization so it became the Nepal Janajati Adivasi Mahasangh. In English it is the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities or NEFIN (see www.nefin.org.np). With help from NEFIN, more and more groups formed their own representative bodies. Today NEFIN has 50 members, i.e. only nine Janajati groups remain without an organization to represent them.

In January 1996 HMG Nepal set up a task force under Professor Sant Bahadur Gurung to consider how a government agency could be set up to deal with the Janajati issue (the well-known sociologist and advocate of ethnic issues, Krishna Bhattachan, was a member of the team). This led to a permanent committee being set up within the Ministry of Local Development. An Act was finally passed in 2001 that allowed for the creation of the National Foundation of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN). Signed into law in 2002 it was set up, with Professor Gurung as its head, in 2003. In 2000 the Ministry of Local Development had published a booklet with a page on each of 61 officially recognized Janajati groups. Subsequently, however, the Manangis decided to merge with the Gurungs; the Shyantani, Chintang, and Thindang formed a single group called the Tingaule; and the Yakkha were added as a separate group, thus making 59 in all. On 10 February 2002 the list of 59, as shown in the table, was confirmed by the Ministry of Law, Justice, and Parliamentary Affairs. So fast has been the development of these ethnic groups that quite a few of the 59 were not

recognized by the National Census for the census of 2001, which means that there are only rough estimates of their population size. No doubt they will all be included in the census of 2011.

Whether the Newars should be considered as Janajatis has been a controversial matter. Some Newars and many non-Newars in government positions opposed their inclusion in the first official list, on the grounds that they were neither backward, nor a homogeneous cultural group. Some Newars argued that they should not be considered Janajatis because they were something more capacious, namely a nation. The argument raged, but in the end the Newars remained on the list.

One of the many aims of the Janajati movement is to have the government accept, and the state institutionalize, a system of reservations (positive discrimination) for Janajatis. This was agreed in principle in 2003 by the government of Surya Bahadur Thapa. One of the first things that happened was that six seats were reserved for Janajatis at the Maharajganj Teaching Hospital. All six seats were taken by Newars. This tended to confirm hill Janajatis' feeling that the Newars are part of the Establishment, and not part of the excluded minorities who are in need of protection. In order to deal with the problem, which this case amply illustrated, NEFIN and NFDIN came up with a classification into five separate groups, as laid out in the table. The principle is that benefits or reserved seats will first be offered to the most disadvantaged group, labelled 'endangered' and will only to members of the two most advanced groups, the Thakalis and Newars, if there are no possible beneficiaries from other groups. It is surely understandable that benefits, in terms of scholarships, training, and other financial matters should be targetted at the most needy groups. At the same time, Professor Sant Bahadur Gurung has said that help with cultural and linguistic preservation will be provided even to the advanced groups.

Anyone who remembers the Panchayat days, and the ways in which cultural and linguistic differences were downplayed and discouraged at that time, will agree that, to an astonishing degree, the Janajati activists' agenda has been accepted both by government and by foreign donors. If there is to be a radical restructuring of the Nepali state, by one means or another, there is no doubt that Janajati (and Dalit) issues should, and almost certainly will, play a major role.

Classification of 59 official Janajatis by NEFIN and NFDIN (2004)

Region	Classification				
	Endangered	HighlyMarginalized	Marginalized	Disadvantaged	Advantaged
Mountain (18)		Shiyar (Chumba) (X) c. 1,000 Shingsawa (Lhomi, Karbhote) ? c. 2,000 Thudam c. 200	Bhote (Bhotiya) (XX) 19,261 (0.08%) Dolpo c. 20,000 Larke (Nupribe) Lhopa (Mustang) (XX) Mugali (Mugu) (XX) 10-12, 000 Topkegola (Dhokpya) 2-3,000 Walung 1,448 (0.01%)	Barhagaule (Bargau-le) (XX) c. 2,000 Byansi (Sauka, Byasi, Rang) 2,103 (0.01%) Chhairotan (Tamang Thakali, Panchgaule) ?? (XX) c. 200 Marphali Thakali (Puntan, Punel) ?? c. 2,000 Sherpa 154,622 (0.68%) Tangbe (Tangbedani) c. 400 Tingaule Thakali (Yhulkosompaimhi) c. 1,500	Thakali 12,973 (0.06%)
Hill (24)	Bankariya (XX) 44 Hayu 1,821 (0.01%) Kusbadiya (X) 552 (0.00%) Kusunda (XX) 162 (0.00%) Lapcha (Lepcha, Rong) 3,660 (0.02%) Surel 149	Baramu 7,383 (0.03%) Chepang 52,237 0.23%) Thami (Thangmi) 22,999 (0.10%)	Bhujel 117,568 (0.52%) Dura 5,169 (0.02%) Pahari 11,505 (0.06%) Phree (Free) (XX) Sunuwar 95,254 (0.42%) Tamang 1,282,304 (5.64%)	Chhantyal 9,814 (0.04%) Gurung (Tamu) 543,571 (2.39%) Jirel 5,316 (0.02%) Limbu (Yakthung) ?? 359,379 (1.58%) Magar 1,622,421 (7.14%) Rai 635,151 (2.79%) Yakkha (Dewan) 17,003 (0.07%) Yolmo (Helambu) 579 (0.00%)	Newar 1,245,232 (5.48%)
Inner Tarai (7)	Raji 2,399 (0.01%) Raute (X) 658 (0.00%)	Bote 7,969 (0.04%) Danuwar 53,229 (0.23%) Majhi (Bhumar) 72,614 (0.32%)	Darai 14,859 (0.07%) Kumal 99,389 (0.44%)		
Tarai (10)	Kisan (Kuntum) 2,876 (0.01%) Meche (Bodo) 3,763 (0.02%)	Dhanuk (Rajbanshi, Khumu) (XX) 188,150 (0.83%) Dhungar/Ghangar/ Jhangad/Dhangad 41,764 (0.18%) Santhal (Satar) 42,698 (0.19%)	Dhimal 19,537 (0.9%) Gangai 31,318 (0.14%) Rajbanshi (Koch) (X) 97,241 (0.43%) Tajpuriya 13,250 (0.06%) Tharu 1,533,879 (6.75%)		
Total	10	12	20	15	2

Note to Table: Those groups marked with an X do not have an organization affiliated to NEFIN; those with XX are not recorded to have any representative organization at all. Figures and percentages (which are the percentage of the total Nepali population of 22,736,934) come courtesy of Prof. Sant Bahadur Gurung, director of NFDIN: these follow the 2001 census. Where there is no percentage this means that the group was not a category recognized by the 2001 census; thus the figures are either unknown or are based on an estimate (note that in some cases, e.g. Yolmo, the ethnic label is not widely recognized or accepted in the region, and therefore the figures are much lower than might be expected: thus while only 579 people returned 'Yolmo' as their ethnicity, 3,986 recorded that they spoke 'Yolmo'). See www.nefin.org.np