

Quota and Identity Issue in Nepal: An Alternative Perspective

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Abstract

Indigenous, Dalit, and Madheshi people in Nepal strongly support the quota and reservation in all public, political, and economical sectors. Many others doubt that the quota and reservation might further strengthen the upper class people within Indigenous, Dalit, and Madheshi widening the gap between them. This paper examines various perspectives of identity theory in the Nepalese context. In addition, this paper critically analyzes representation of various castes in four professional institutions in Nepal. Finally, the paper concludes that the quota and reservation, if implemented in blanket, may further deepen the caste and class problem in the Nepalese society.

1. Introduction

One of the main objectives of the Terai uprising in 2006-7 was to establish the caste and cultural identity of Madheshi people. To fulfill their want, they strongly demanded the restructuring of Nepal. Transferring unitary political system of Nepal into federal system was the result of the uprising. However, the discourse of federalism was initially initiated as early as 1950 A.D. by Terai Congress and the Communist Party. Later Nepal Sadbhawana Party established by late Gajendra N. Singh in 1983 A.D., strongly demanded a federal structure (Wagle, 2018, p. 6) with special rights such as quota and reservation for Teraian people. This paper tries to analyze the quota and representation of major ethnic groups in various professional institutions, their population percentage, who benefits from the quota within the groups from the identity theory perspectives.

2. Identity Theory

Identity is a socially constructed imaginary concept of feeling oneself often with reference to another. "Identity is formed in relation to" significant others, "who mediated to the subject the values, meanings, and symbols – the culture – of the worlds he/she inhabited" (Hall, 1996a, p. 597). On the identity formation process, Hall explains that identity is

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actually something formed through unconscious processes over time, rather than being innate in consciousness at birth. To make the concept more clear, Hall (1996b) further describes that “identities are constructed within, not outside” (p.4), which provides meaning to people's psychological feelings of belongingness. People's identity is not static to birth or kin relationship. However, the process of change depends on the types of identity whether it is ethnic, caste, cultural, or professional. Identity is reshaped with respect to time and it is always in the process of being reformed and “a subject of change under social, political, and economic pressure” (Singh, 2010, p. 88). Professional identity such as engineer, doctor, lecturer, or jobholder can be changed with respect to social and economic condition. National and regional identity also can be changed based upon political condition. However, the change in ethnic, cultural or caste identity is extremely difficult, and if change occurs then it is much slower than those of the professional identity change process. Cultural and ethnic identity is often interchangeably used in most of the scholarships.

Ethnic Identity

The term "ethnic minority" defines social groups that differ from the majority of the people in the country or society in which they live. Differences may refer to language, race or religion or a combination of these characteristics. Basically, the components of ethnic identity are “self- identification as a group member, a sense of belonging to the group, attitudes about one's group membership, and ethnic involvement (social participation, cultural practices, and attitudes)” (Phinney, 1990, p. 503).

Cultural Identity

“A culture is a plan of behavior (Narroll, 1964, p. 8).” The cultural behavior is not a static thing; it changes in time either slowly or quickly. Cultural identity as described by Phinney (1990) is more connected with cultural belongings such as language; religious affiliation and practice; customary music, songs, dances, and dress; traditional celebrations, traditional family roles, values, and names; and knowledge of a particular culture and history. Every person possesses multiple identities such as professional, cultural, religious, national, kinship, caste, ethnic, ideological, territorial, etc. in different junctions of social life.

Social Identity

“Social Identity Theory” deals with ethnic/cultural issue in the society. This theory was first discussed in 1970 by Henri Tajfel and later built upon by many scholars such as Turner (1979), Hogg (1988), Phinney (1990), and Stets and Burke (2000). According to

Tajfel and Turner (cited in Phinney, 1990), social identity is “simply being a member of a group provides individuals with a sense of belonging that contributes to a positive self-concept” (p. 501). The above social identity theory captures many characteristics of the Hindu caste system. The people who believe in the castes have the self-conception of the same caste-membership. The people in this group act as socially-cognitive, motivational, socially and culturally bounded, and psychologically secure within the caste-group. Some Dalit when psychologically weak and insecure within their caste group, try to convert their religion or surname.

Caste Identity

The caste-identity, which has many similar characteristics as ethnicity, acts as a group when it competes with other castes. It often shows internal group cohesion against other groups in many social and cultural events and issues, and it may be the starting point of many conflicts among different caste groups. Caste identity is not a finite thing, but it is the perception of self in society. It is the shared ideas about self and other based on kin relational-tree. In the process, people engage and interact with each other and develop a perception of self and other identity. This identity is a part of the kin and community networks support system, which works at the time of emergency need, cultural and customary necessity, and united efforts against positive or negative causes. The caste identity is also a part of the shared ideas, which plays many roles in increasing/decreasing conflict in society.

In Nepal, this self-conception and belongingness has deep historical roots to the Hinduism and the Civil Code of 1854, which ranked the people according to caste through caste system (Haug & Aasland, 2009, p. 15). This Civil Code was amended in 1963 based on the principle of equality. However, rural people in Nepal are still practicing many components of the Hindu caste system as they relate to personal and group identity.

The caste and group identity issue in Nepal is, therefore, being negotiated as a way to grasp economic opportunities (such as jobs, seats in educational institutions, and natural resource access) and political power. Thus, the traditional Hindu caste system in Nepal is transforming into caste and different ethnic group identity which is political rather than hereditary or religious. In this sense, this paper tries to explore how this transformation is affecting contemporary Nepalese society especially in some professional sectors of Nepal.

3. Quota and Reservation System

Nepal is a conglomerate of diverse cultures, religions, languages, and ethnicity. However, social elites, which comprises of ruling class Brahman and Chhetris have traditionally dominated Nepal's state structure. Their dominance and influence exist in all spheres of

social and economic life in Nepal ranging from the government to the local level decision making processes. People belonging to Dalit, Madheshi, and indigenous groups are deprived of opportunities and access to resources and rights. Their representation in government, bureaucracy, judiciary, etc. is very low. In addition to the Dalits and indigenous groups, various other groups such as women, Madheshi, etc. have also been obliged to live as second-class citizens. Gurung (2003) points out three social groups as marginalized by the state's policy: Janajatis marginalized on the basis of culture, Dalits on the basis of caste, and Madhesis on the basis of geography. Therefore, the process of adopting a system of governance should be capable to promote wider public participation of the marginalized social groups in all sector of development process.

Many governments since 1949, tried to incorporate the decentralization policy in the country, but all of them failed. The future system of governance needs to ensure decentralization of political power to the local level, which is so far concentrated at the central level. Therefore, political forces in Nepal have converted the unitary system of government to federal system in September 20, 2015 with 33% female reservation in both parliaments.

Figure 1 and 2 shows the Nepal's government policy for the quota system in the formal employment to achieve the inclusiveness in the government machinery. The public service commission Nepal noticed required quota to all language and ethnic groups for the government employment. Women, indigenous, and Madheshi peoples are given proper importance.

Figure 1: Recently Public Service Commission Declared their Quota for Inclusiveness

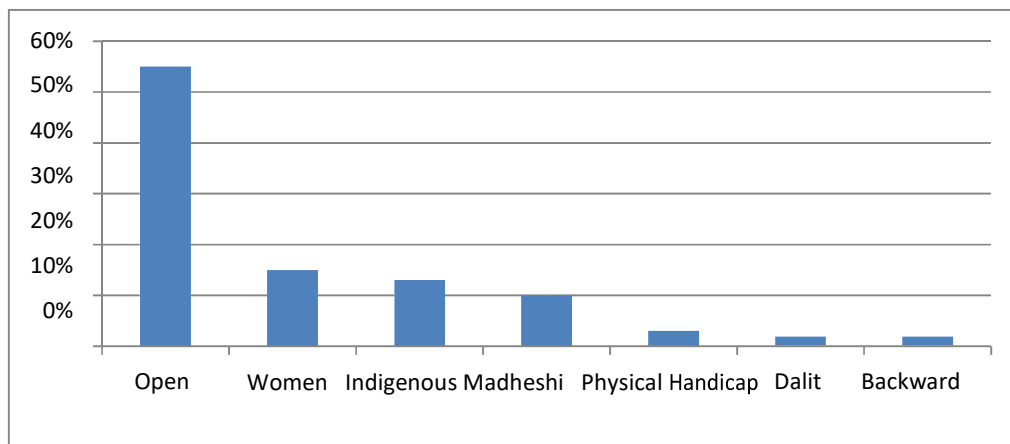


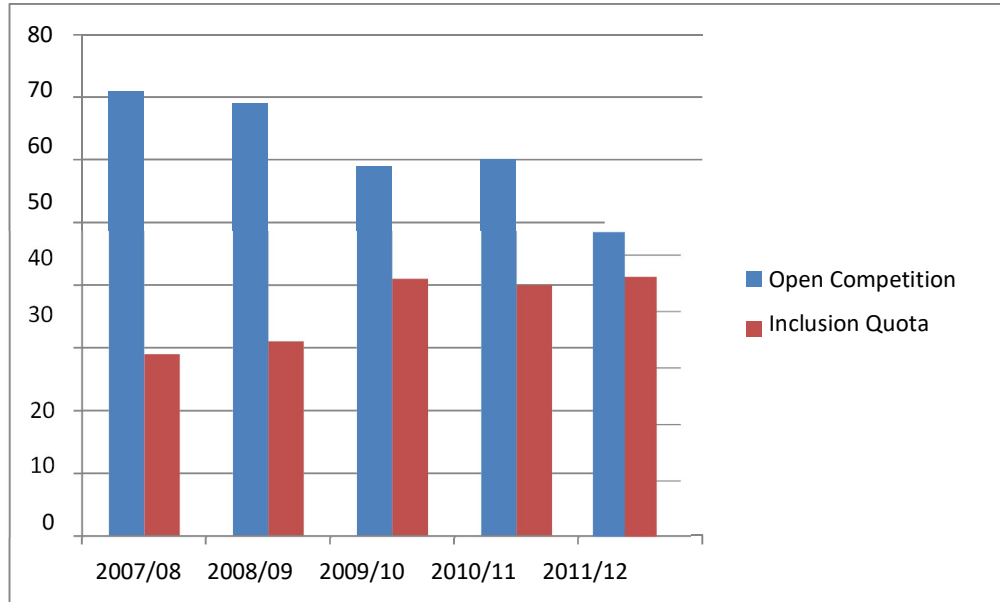
Figure 2: Public Service Commission Application Database (Inclusive Quota)

Figure 3, 4, 5, and 6 show the representation of different caste and ethnic group in various associations. These associations especially, the Bar Association and Professor Association are very active in all social and political movement throughout the Nepalese history. When researched about the caste and ethnic participations, one pattern emerged which indicates that upper caste participation in high and powerful organization is very high in comparison to their population census shown in the Figure 7. In the case of engineering professionals and bar association, the Bramin/Chhetri and Newars have higher representation. It is interesting to mention here that the Newars, who claimed themselves as indigenous people, demanded for quotas in higher level socio-political, and economic activities and representations arguing that the Newars are underprivileged people in the Nepalese community, are already over represented in those economic and political institutions. In the middle level organization, the participation of “other caste and ethnic groups” is continuously increasing.

Figure 3: General Members in the Professor Association

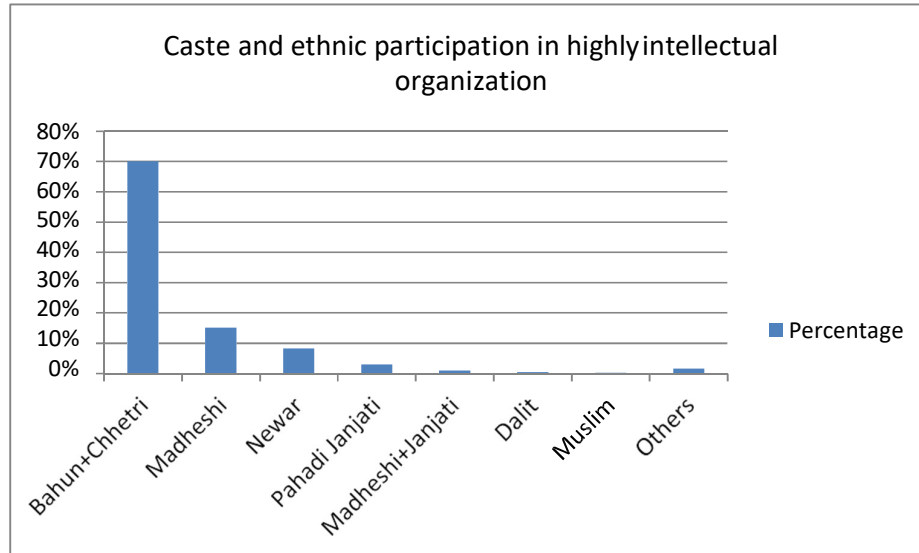


Figure 4: Registered Lawyer in Appeal Court: 2012

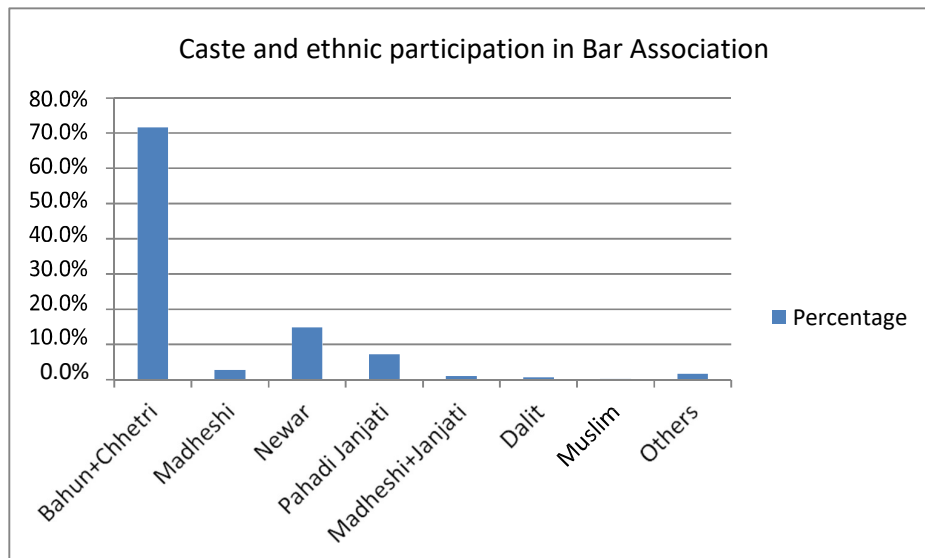


Figure 5: Middle Level Development Worker: Technical

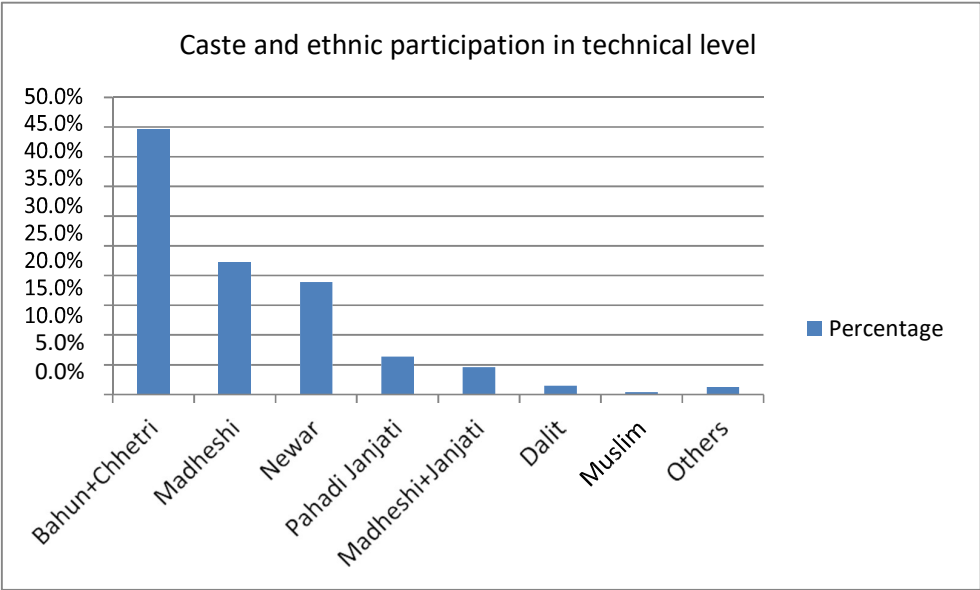


Figure 6: Number of Qualified Engineers Registered in the Nepal Engineers Association and National Level Organization of Engineers

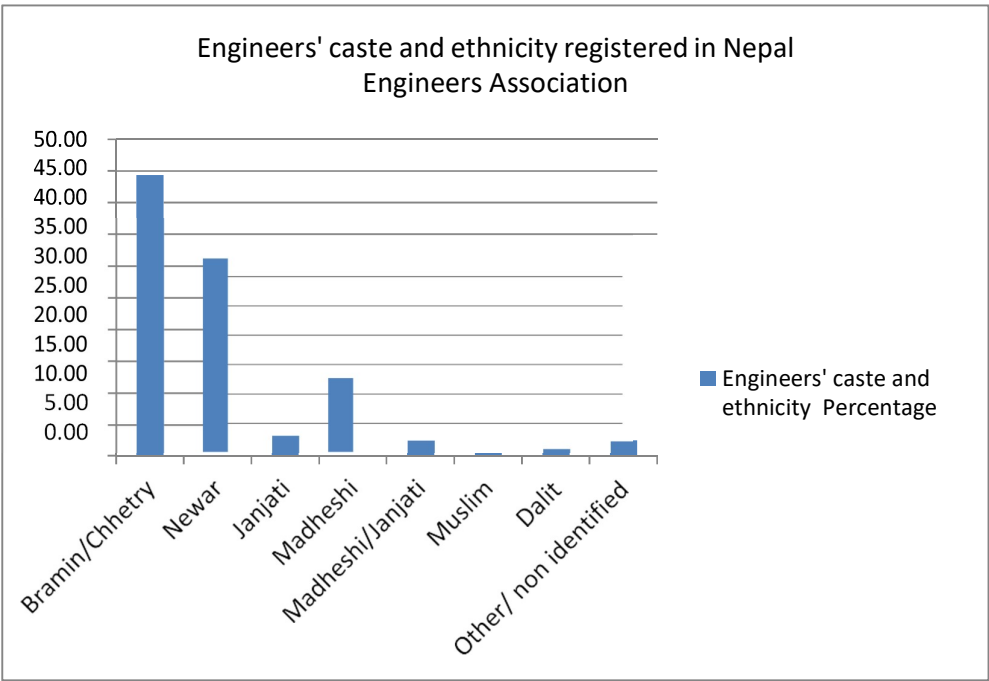
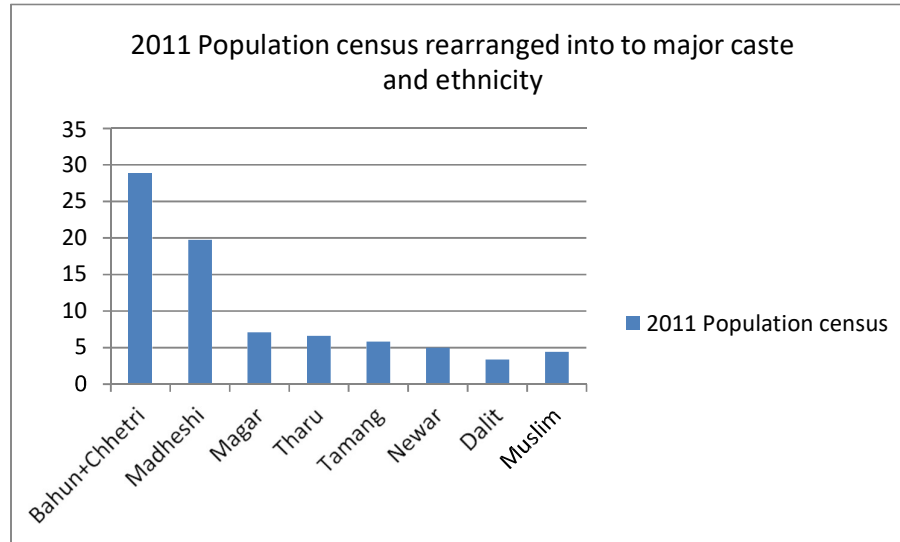


Figure 7: Population Census about Caste and Ethnicity

There is a high demand of quota and reservation in all sectors of public and private institutions for employment. In addition, quota and reservation are shouted in education and cultural sectors too. One of the major demands of the Madheshi movement is the demand of the quota in all sectors. However, whether the quota really addresses the inclusion of all underrepresented and underprivileged castes or it again facilitates to the upper sub caste and already represented rich people within the same ethnic group is to be the matter of debate. For example, Dhakal (2014) gives a detailed description of the representation of all sub-caste within the Madheshi community in the government job shown in the Table 1 below.

Table 1: Madheshi Sub-caste Representation in Various Public Services Jobs[†]

Caste	Population Percentage	Population Percentage in public service	Percentage of higher representation compare to pop
Rajput (Upper Caste)	0.158	0.889	5.6
Kayasta (Upper caste)	0.167	0.741	4.4

[†] Department of Humanity and Social Science Tribhuvan University, Nepal (2014), Published in Setipati epaper.

Bramin (Madhesh)	0.506	1.69	3.3
Bramin (Pahadi)	12.1	39.2	3.2
Thakur (Upper caste)	0.444	0.585	1.6
Newar	5.008	7.89	1.57
Sanyasi (Upper caste)	0.86	1.25	1.4
Gharti (Bhujel)	0.448	0.585	1.3
Chhetri	16.6	19.59	1.18
Kalwar	0.48	0.543	1.1

Based on the research data shown in Table 1, these are the higher percentage of the representation of different sub castes in the public services. In the table, it is clear that the upper caste people within the Madheshi community have the higher representation in public service compared to their population density such as Rajput, Kayasta, and Madheshi Bramin have the bigger representation followed by others. The lesser percentages of castes in public service are Magar, Tharu, Tamang, Kami, Musalman, Rai, Gurung, and Limbu which are the sub caste from the Pahadi Janjati communities. Similarly, Newar ethnic groups also have higher representation in public service sectors as well as in technical professional institutions.

The government rules on the quota to the backward castes and indigenous people do not specify further in detail on which castes/sub-castes within the Madheshi and Janjati are more backward and underrepresented in the public services. Because of this, those castes within Madheshi and Janjati which are already overrepresented in socio economic sectors including public service are getting more opportunities under the quota system and creating further differences between haves and have-nots.

Quota system increased the inclusiveness of the castes and ethnic groups but, most beneficiaries are from the upper class and upper sub caste within the boarder ethnic group. It is therefore, quota system might be necessary but, it should be inclusive in terms of poor class and backward castes as well as left out community. In this regard, social leaders, policy makers, community influencers, and media should play strong roles by providing factual information and analysis about the advantages and disadvantages of blanket quota system versus effective and inclusive quota system for the benefits of all left-out population. On the inclusiveness, some of the major recommendations, advised by ICG (2007, p. 4) to the Nepal government, to address the proper representation:

- i. Address the reasonable demands for political participation of all excluded groups (not just those whose protests have forced attention);

- ii. Revising the electoral system to ensure fair representation of Madheshi and all other marginalized groups, including a fresh delineation of constituency boundaries if the mixed electoral system is retained;
- iii. Implementing some immediate affirmative action measures to boost Madheshi, Janajati, and Dalit presence in the civil service

4. Conclusion

Inclusiveness through Quota and representation in all sectors of public arena is one of the major prescription for the historically, culturally, and economically suppressed people of the Nepalese society. However, the quota system is not a perfect system for the inclusiveness of all downtrodden and backward classes as well as Dalits but, this system can be scientifically used for the needy, underrepresented and underprivileged people. A high precaution should be taken for not to provide additional benefits to the social, economic, and political powerful people within the indigenous, Dalit, and Madheshi community in the name of quota and reservation system.

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