

Nepal Observer

An internet journal irregularly published by Nepal Research

Issue 72, October 18, 2021

ISSN 2626-2924

Nepal's population : immigration and structure¹

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Looking at Nepal's historical picture of the last centuries, one could easily get the impression that the country is thoroughly shaped by the Hindu religion and culture. This is due to the fact that the elite, which has identified the entire country with its own language, religion and culture since military unification some 250 years ago, has simply negated or at least marginalised other forms of culture and society right up to the present day.

Yet Nepal is home to numerous ethnic groups and castes. It is a country that has been subject to the migration of peoples and ethnic groups from all directions for thousands of years. Since the democratisation of Nepal in 1990, a consciousness-raising of these diverse social groups has begun. They have started to claim their place in the modern state by bringing their own language, culture and historicity to the fore. In doing so, they are partly challenging the national identity that has been built up and cultivated for centuries by the state elite and the hierarchical social image of the so-called high Hindu castes that is closely linked to it.

In the 1990s, it was mainly ethnic groups whose immigration history had already been somewhat researched that tried to point out that their ancestors migrated to the territory of present-day Nepal long before the ancestors of today's elite. Yet this question of "Who came first?" is actually completely misleading. Whether certain groups have been settling on present-day Nepali territory for 3000, 2000 or only 200 years is completely irrelevant when assessing the national identity of the people now living in Nepal. The last major wave of immigration, for example, involved Hindu and Muslim castes who were lured into the country from neighbouring Indian territories for economic reasons by the rulers of the time, the Rana family, from the mid-19th century onwards. Denying their descendants Nepali citizenship today sounds illusory, but it is still a reality.

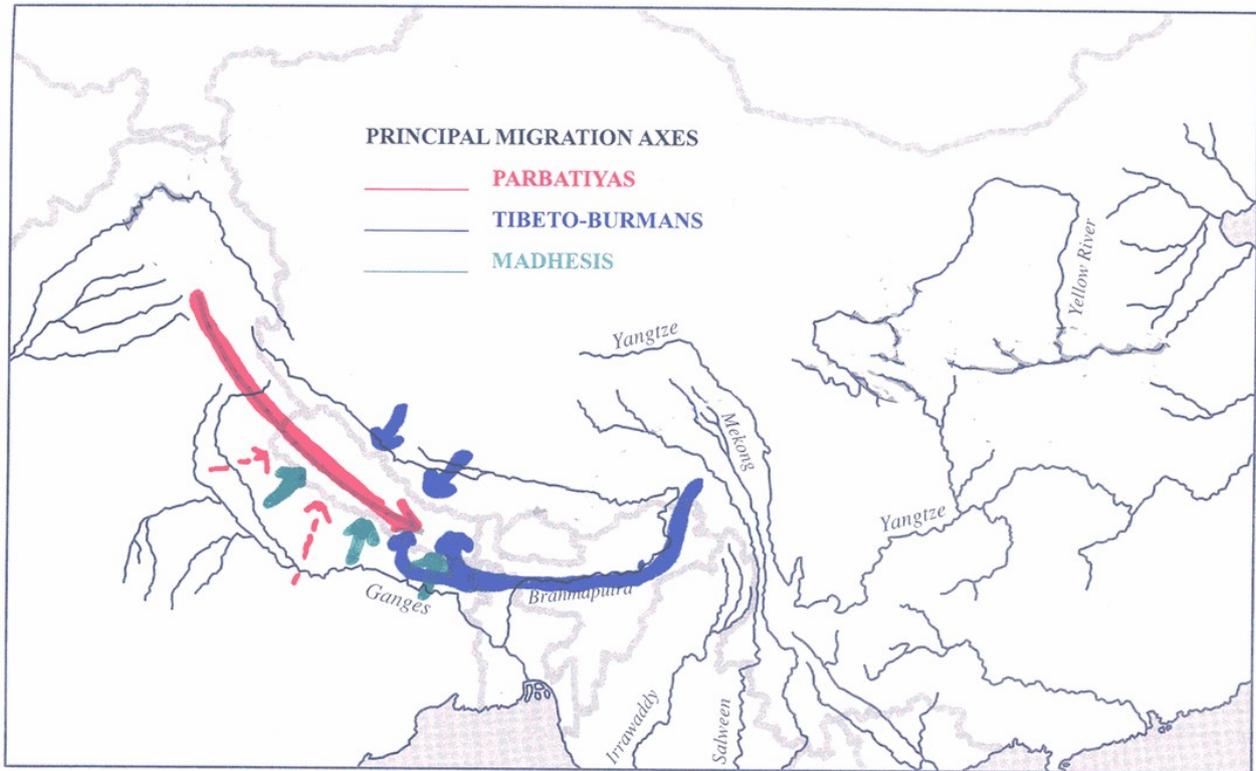
Immigration history

Since research into the ancient history of the territory that now bears the name Nepal is still in its infancy, it is not always easy to date the immigration of diverse groups. In many cases, old inscriptions, texts and documents help to prove the presence of certain population groups in early times. Ancient names of places and rivers can also be evidence.

It is certain that the oldest known ancestors of today's social groups in Nepal belong to a number of ethnic groups. For example, we are talking about Gurung (Tamu), Tamang, Magar, Rai (Khambu), Limbu and Tharu. Both linguistically and in terms of outward appearance, these groups belong to the inner-Asian cultural and social space. Research has shown that they did not migrate directly from the north, but crossed the Himalayas further east and then entered Nepal from the southeast. This is true for the ancestors of most of today's ethnic groups, at least for those of the hill country (*Pahad*), but also to some extent for those of the lowlands (Tarai). The ethnic groups of the hill country were traditionally named *Pahadiya* by ethnologists. Since about 1990, however, all ethnic groups in Nepal have referred to themselves by the generic term

1 This article has been originally published in [Nepal Connect](#) 1:3-7, February 2021 under the title "Nepals Bevölkerung: Zuwanderung und Struktur"

Janajati, which has now become generally accepted in Nepal. It is not entirely clear when the oldest groups migrated. The well-known ethnologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorff once named a period from about 1,500 BC. The historian John Whelpton speaks of the 1st millennium BC.



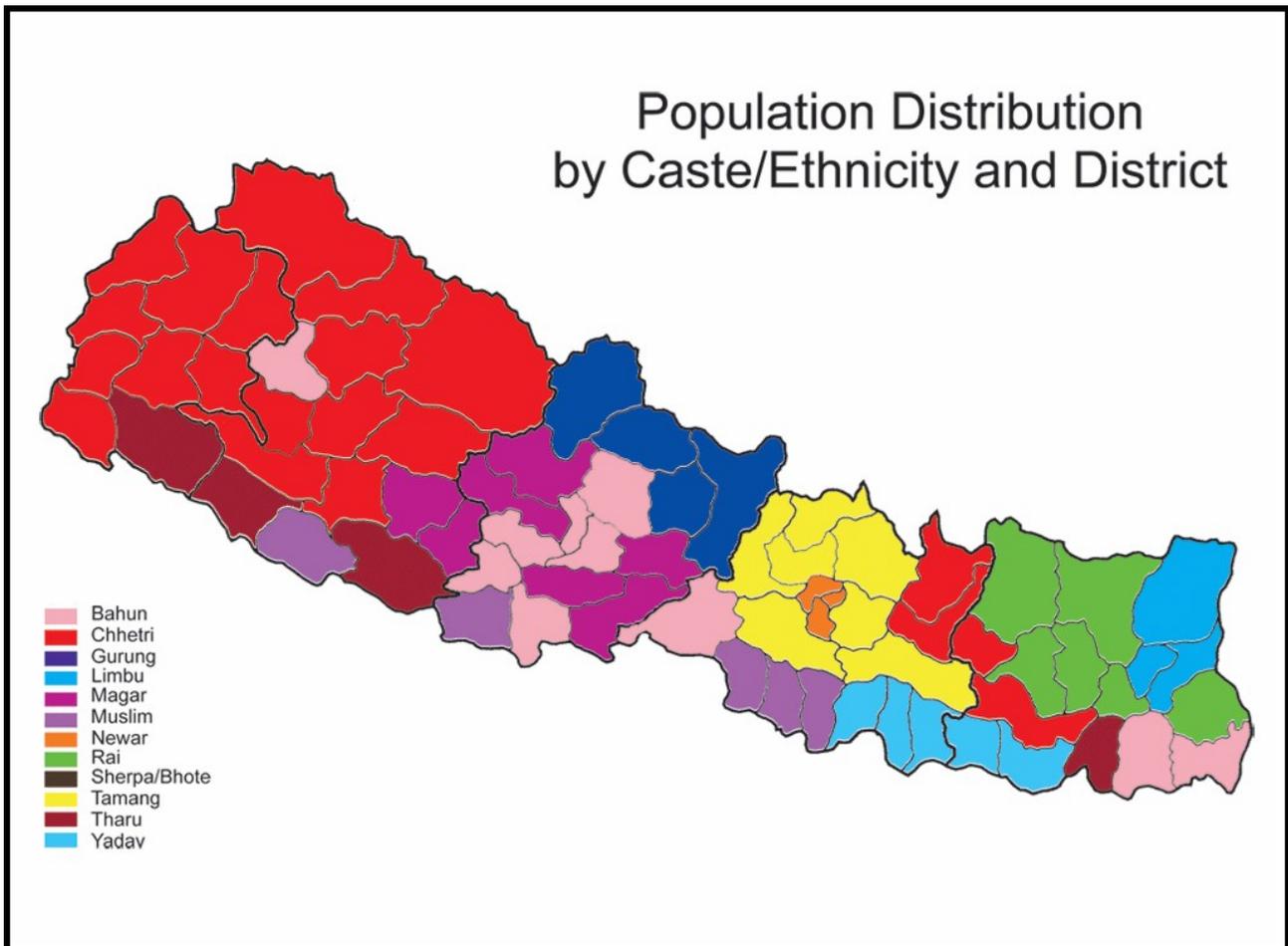
Possible migration routes according to George van Driem (2001), *Languages of the Himalayas*, quoted by John Whelpton, <https://linguae.weebly.com/nepali.html>

The next major wave of immigration came only a few centuries later from the northwest, from what is now the Indian mountain region. This early group is called *Khas*. Their language was the *Khas kura*, the *Khas* language, an early form of today's Nepali. The *Khas* were the ancestors of today's Hindu castes of the hills, who are referred to by ethnologists as *Parbatiya*. In principle, both terms, *Pahadiya* and *Parbatiya*, mean "inhabitants of the hills". Due to the respective directions of immigration, the *Janajati* groups are found much more strongly in the centre and east of the country, while the *Parbatiya* castes dominate the west of the country; there are only a few members of the *Janajati* groups here to this day. The spread of the *Parbatiya* castes over the rest of the country intensified during the military unification process in the 18th century and thereafter, especially due to the state granting of originally ethnic land to members of the now central Hindu caste elite.

In later times, other groups migrated directly to Nepal from the Tibetan areas bordering to the north. The best-known of these groups is the Sherpa, who migrated about 500 years ago. But smaller groups of other Tibetan people have also repeatedly arrived and settled in the Nepalese high mountains. These are referred to in Nepal as *Bhote* or *Bhotiya*.

The last major wave of immigration involved castes from neighbouring Indian areas in the south. The open border between the two countries has never been a real barrier. However, immigration became systematised in the mid-19th century, when the aristocratic Rana family, which had just seized complete control of the country, sought to economically develop the fertile strip of plains along the Indian border. At first, they had tried to persuade people from the mountains to relocate to the Tarai. But on the one hand, there was no shortage of land in the mountains at that time, and on the other hand, the subtropical climate of the malaria-infested lowlands did not suit the mountain dwellers. Therefore, the Ranas attracted population from the neighbouring Indian areas into the country, who were accustomed to the climatic conditions. The descendants of these caste groups are called *Madheshi*. To this day, there is a constant social exchange across the Indo-Nepal border. The Hindu and Muslim castes on both sides of the border are the same, with the

consequence of intensively cultivated marriage relations. This is the background for the problematic state classification of the Madheshi, which is exacerbated by the extreme patriarchal mindset of Nepal's state elite.



Tamang, Parshuram et al. (2006), *Nepal statistics and indigenous peoples*, Kathmandu: Nepal Tamang Ghedung

Ethnic structures

According to the immigration history just outlined, Nepal's society can be divided into three major population groups. The following population proportions are only rough estimates and require further explanation. In particular, the original home region of these groups should not be confused with their present settlement area. There has always been migration within Nepal. It has been intensified with a west-eastern tendency since the military unification of the country (1742-1816) by the Shah ruling house of Gorkha. Since the successful control of malaria in the lowland strip along the southern border with India in the 1950s, there has also been migration from the hill country to the Tarai and, to a much lesser extent, from there to the hill country. The term *Madheshi* is also disputed. It is often used to refer to all population groups whose original homeland was the Tarai. Today, the ethnic groups there tend to belong to the group of mountain ethnic groups; they all refer to themselves collectively as *Janajati*. Thus, according to this view, the *Madheshi* are merely the Hindu and Muslim castes of the Tarai. If we stick to the traditional division for now, the following picture emerges (with rough percentages of population):

Parbatiya : Hindu castes of the hill country (40%).

Pahadiya : hill ethnic groups (30%)

Madheshi : castes and ethnic groups of the southern plains (30%)

Parbatiya castes of the hill country

The caste system of the Nepali hills is very different from that of India. This is due to the fact that the middle range of the Indian caste system with its thousands of occupational castes does not exist in the Nepali hills. Here there are only a few so-called high caste groups and an equally small number of so-called untouchable castes (Dalits).

“Twice born“ castes

Bahun (Brahmans) (12.2%)

Thakuri (1.6%)

Chhetri (16.6%)

Sannyasi and Yogi (1%)

Untouchables casts (Dalits)

Kami (blacksmiths) (4.8%)

Damai (tailors) (1.8%)

Sarki (cobblers) (1.4%)

Raja, Badi, Gaine (1%)

Hindu castes of the hills

The caste hierarchy and the associated thinking as well as the interaction and coexistence of Nepal's diverse population groups will be dealt with in a separate article. Here, we will begin with a brief description of who belongs to each group. From the upper group of the *Parbatiya* castes, there are three groups to be named. At the top are the creators and upholders of caste thinking, the Brahmins, who are referred to in Nepal by the Nepali term *Bahun*. The *Bahun* group includes numerous castes in which priestly functions play only a subordinate role. The *Bahun* make up a good 12% of the total population of the country, but they dominate all areas of public life. Since the latter are primarily male, we are therefore only talking about a small minority of 6% of the population, from whose circle the state elite is recruited in all areas of public life.

In addition to the *Bahun*, the upper group of Nepali caste society also includes two groups that are called "warrior castes" (*Kshatriya*) in the traditional Indian caste system. Of course, today this has little to do with warriors. The *Bahun* are the religion- and value-oriented upper class, while the *Kshatriya* castes comprise the secular upper class or their descendants. In the Nepali hill country, the *Kshatriya* castes are again divided into two groups, the rather large group of *Chhetri* (about 16.5% of the total population) and the small group of *Thakuri* (about 1.5%), who are somewhat higher-ranking *Kshatriya* castes.

In the lower range of the *Parbatiya* castes there are only a few so-called untouchable castes, today usually called Dalit. Here, too, the caste system of the hill country is very different from that of the traditional Indian system. To name a few, there are the *Kami*, the caste of blacksmiths (about 4%), the *Damai* (tailors, about 1.8%) and the *Sarki* (shoemakers, 1.4%). The small castes of *Raja*, *Badi* and *Gaine* together make up about 1% of the total population. It should be noted in this context that in modern society, the occupational ties of

the castes mentioned are increasingly disappearing.

All these castes of the Nepalese hills have a number of things in common. They descend from the group of early Nepali *Khas*, speak Nepali as their mother tongue and are followers of the Nepali variant of Hinduism.

The ethnic groups (Janajati) of the hill country

For thousands of years, the Nepali hills (*Pahad*) have been home not only to the Hindu castes mentioned above, but also to numerous ethnic groups. It has already been mentioned that some of these ethnic groups are among the oldest verifiable population groups in the country and once migrated to Nepal in a roundabout way from the regions north of the Himalayas.

Newar (5%)

Brahman (0.1%), Bajracharya/Shakya (0.5%)
Shrestha (1%), Uray (0.3%)

Maharjan (Jyapu) (2.3%), others (0.5%)

Untouchable Newar castes (0.3%)

Other ethnic groups

Magar (7.1%)

Tamang (5.8%)

Rai (2.3%)

Gurung (2%)

Limbu (1.5%), Sherpa (0.4%), Sunuwar (0.2%), Chepang, Bhotiya,
Thami, Thakali (0.1% each), others (3.3%)

Janajati groups of the hills

All these ethnic groups belong to the Tibeto-Mongolian type of people; their languages are Tibeto-Birman languages. They are also characterised by the fact that their societies are not organised in castes, but on the basis of exogamous clans. The only exception are the Newars, whose traditional settlement area has been the Kathmandu valley for thousands of years. In the course of time, the fertile Kathmandu valley has always attracted people from the north and especially from the south, and the Newars have absorbed many ethnic and cultural elements from these groups. From a linguistic point of view, their language, Newari, also belongs to the Tibeto-Burmese family of languages. Their habitable proximity to the centre of power, which early on was alternately in the hands of Hindu and Buddhist rulers, also contributed to the emergence of cultural and religious syncretism among the Newars. The Newars often do not clearly assign themselves to one religion or the other. Even the temples are often dedicated to deities of both religions. Very early on, the Newars also adopted a caste system that was applied to both Hindu and Buddhist-oriented persons, i.e. there are both Hindu and Buddhist Newar castes.

Thus, among the Newars, one finds a Hindu upper range of Brahmin castes and commercially oriented Shrestha and, on the Buddhist side, the castes of Bajracharya, Shakya and Uday. In the middle range, the peasant caste of the Maharjan (Newari: Jyapu) represents the largest group; it makes up 2.3% of the total Nepali population. But there are also numerous occupational so-called untouchable castes, at least considerably more than in the circle of the *Parbatiya* castes.

The population of the Tarai

When we speak of the Tarai population, we are referring to those groups for whom the plains along the southern border with India have been the traditional home for a long time. In this sense, we are talking about about 30% of the population of Nepal. Today, however, more than half of Nepal's citizens live in the fertile Tarai. This is a result of migration and the reclamation of the once dense jungle areas.

Hindu castes make up a good half of the traditional Tarai population (about 16% of Nepal's total population). These are the descendants of those people who were lured into the country from the middle of the 19th century by the Rana rulers of the time in order to develop the region economically and to fill the private coffers of the Ranas, which were virtually identical to the state coffers, by means of tax money and levies. Consequently, these were the same Hindu castes who also lived on the other side of the border. To this day, close family ties are maintained across the border, which is why it remains difficult for the rulers in Kathmandu to define who from this caste group is Nepali and who is not. Even today, millions of people live here who are denied Nepali citizenship, even if their ancestors have settled in the Nepali Tarai for generations.

Hindu castes (16.1%)

Twice born castes (Brahman/Kshatriya) (2.4%)

Other pure castes, among them **Yadav** (4.1%)

Impure, but touchable castes (3.1%)

Untouchable Tarai castes (2.8%)

Ethnic groups (inner/outer Tarai) (10.7%)

Tharu (6.6%)

Dhanuk, Rajbanshi, Kumhal, Danuwar, a.o. (4.1%)

Others (4.7%)

among them Muslims (4.4%)

[Anthropologists call the Hindu and Muslim castes of the Tarai collectively as Madhesi. The Nepali state also includes the ethnic groups of the Tarai under this term]

Population groups of the Tarai

The Hindu castes of the Tarai thus have the same structure as known from Hindu castes in India, starting with Brahmin and *Kshatriya* castes at the top and ending with Dalits. The numerically largest caste group of the middle range are the Yadav (4.1%). Castes considered impure yet touchable, grouped together as Shudra in the Indian caste system, have a share of 3.1%. Unlike in the hill country, there are numerous Dalit castes (2.8%).

However, several ethnic groups are also found in the Tarai. The largest group are the Tharus, who are one of the largest ethnic groups in the country with a total population share of 6.6%. The Tharus have settled in the Tarai region for thousands of years and have long adapted to the natural and climatic living conditions. When the Rana rulers called Indian people into the country for better economic development, they used a small circle of Tharus as middlemen to control and pass on the tributes. Some of these people, known as *Chaudhari*, became wealthy and prominent in their own right over time.

Smaller ethnic groups of the Tarai, such as the Dhanuk, Rajbanshi, Kumhal, Danuwar, etc., constitute a good 4% of the country's population. Most of the ethnic groups of the Tarai, like those of the hill country, are of Tibeto-Mongolian origin, which is also evident from a linguistic point of view. But there are also a few smaller groups with links to India or Southeast Asia, but these are not significant in terms of numbers.

Finally, there are some population groups that do not fit into the pattern mentioned so far (4.7%). The largest group are Muslim castes (4.4%), whose ancestors once migrated from neighbouring Indian areas in a similar way to Hindu castes. By the time Islam spread to India and Muslim rulers gained control there, the Hindu caste system had been in place for a long time. Thus, while many people adopted the Muslim religion, they retained their social structures. As a result, the Tarai Muslims today have a caste system similar to that of the Tarai Hindus, but with different names.

At this point it is important to briefly mention the confusing term Madheshi. People in the hill country, especially those in the Kathmandu Valley as the centre of power, like to refer to the whole Tarai region somewhat derogatorily as *Madhesh* and its inhabitants as *Madheshi*. However, both the ethnologists and the people concerned themselves have a different view. According to them, only those people whose ancestors once migrated from the neighbouring Indian areas, i.e. the Hindu and Muslim castes of the Tarai, are called Madheshi. In this sense, the *Madheshi* make up only a good 20% of Nepal's population. On the other hand, most of the ethnic groups of the Tarai see their own relation to the ethnic groups of the hill country, to which they are indeed close from an ethnic point of view. They therefore like to organise themselves in the umbrella ethnic organisations that have emerged since about 1990, calling their groups *Janajati*.

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