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Ethnic Diversity and National Security: Lessons from Global Experiences and The Case of Nepal

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Abstract

Ethnic diversity, if managed well, can be an asset for a nation, enhancing cultural richness, fostering social cohesion, and strengthening national resilience. However, when ethnic issues are ill-treated, they can lead to fragmentation, violent conflicts and long-term instability. This article explores the relationship between ethnic diversity and national security, drawing comparisons from the Balkans, the United States, Europe and South Asian nations, with a particular focus on Nepal. The paper delves into historical and contemporary cases where ethnic tensions have either strengthened or undermined security, examining the crucial factors that determine the path of ethnic issues within nations. It will analyze how political leaders' handling of ethnic relations plays a pivotal role in either fostering national unity or exacerbating divisions. In the context of Nepal, characterized by its diverse geography and over 142 ethnic groups, the article argues that carefully managing ethnic diversity can serve as a stabilizing factor in national security. It emphasizes the importance of inclusive governance, effective communication and inter-ethnic dialogue to ensure that ethnic tensions do not evolve into full-blown conflicts, as has been the case in many other parts of the world. The

article concludes that while ethnic diversity poses challenges, it offers significant opportunities for national strength if managed with care and foresight.

Keywords

Ethnic Diversity, Ethnic Conflict, Inclusion, National Security, Ethnic Integration

Introduction

Ethnic diversity, while a reflection of human pluralism, has historically been a source of both richness and tension within societies. Throughout human history, ethnic issues have endured, shaping the political, social and economic landscapes of nations. While ethnic diversity can enhance cultural exchange and development, it can also lead to conflict, often aggravated by historical injustices, unequal resource distribution and identity struggles. The security implications of unresolved ethnic issues are profound, as seen in the violent eruptions of conflict globally. These ethnic tensions, when left unaddressed, can destabilize entire regions, leading to violence, displacement and sometimes genocide.

In light of these challenges, it becomes crucial for nations to manage ethnic diversity with care. Building communal harmony, fostering ethnic tolerance and promoting inclusive governance are essential to checking ethnic tensions from rising into violence. This paper seeks to examine the global landscape of ethnic conflict, with a specific focus on South Asia and Nepal, exploring the historical roots, contemporary manifestations and potential solutions to ethnic disharmony.

Literature Review

Ethnic conflict remains a persistent challenge across the globe, particularly in regions with deep historical divisions, complex societal structures, and entrenched identity politics. This issue is particularly pronounced in South Asia, where the historical legacy of colonialism, migration patterns and religion-based divisions have exacerbated ethnic tensions, fueling conflict and instability. In countries like India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal, ethnic diversity often intersects with issues of governance, resource allocation and national identity, creating profound implications for political stability and security.

The existing literature on ethnic conflict largely explores the causes and consequences of ethnic violence, often focusing on the political and socio-economic foundations of such divisions. Several studies underscore the centrality of historical injustices, marginalization and the role of state policies in either exacerbating or alleviating ethnic tensions. For instance, in India, studies on the partition and its aftermath have clarified the long-lasting scars of ethnic violence, particularly between Hindu and Muslim communities. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, the ethnic divide between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority led to a brutal civil war lasting nearly three decades, a conflict that underscored the dangers of unresolved ethnic grievances.

Moreover, recent research highlights the ways in which ethnic diversity can both positively and negatively affect national security. In the context of South Asia, where identity politics is deeply interwoven with national politics, ethnic divisions are often mirrored in the political landscape, leading to further fragmentation. Ethnic-based political parties have become prominent players in countries like Nepal, where they sometimes prioritize ethnic identities over national unity. These fragmented political

systems are often less effective in ensuring social cohesion, which in turn poses a significant challenge to national security.

Recent literature also explores the role of security forces in managing ethnic diversity and mitigating conflict. The Nepali Army, known for its inclusive approach to recruitment, stands as a model of how a diverse security force can foster national unity. By ensuring representation from various ethnic groups, the Nepali Army has managed to maintain legitimacy and cohesion within a fragmented society. This inclusion has proven essential not only for domestic stability but also for Nepal's international image as a peaceful and inclusive nation. Despite these promising examples, significant gaps remain in understanding how best to manage ethnic diversity in ways that promote long-term peace and security. There is a need for further research that explores the synergies between ethnic inclusion, governance reforms and national security outcomes.

Ethnic Conflict: Global Case Studies

Africa

Africa remains a volatile region marked by deep ethnic tensions that have been shaped by a history of colonialism, migration and ethnic rivalries. Colonial borders, drawn with little regard for ethnic or cultural groups, have exacerbated divisions and often pitted rival communities against one another (Meredith, 2013). Countries such as Nigeria, Rwanda, Sudan, and Somalia provide vivid examples of how ethnic tensions can lead to violent conflicts, genocides and protracted wars. In Nigeria, the long-standing rivalry between the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo has led to political and social instability, most notably during the Biafran War (1967-1970), which resulted in significant loss of life and displacement. In Rwanda, the genocide between the Hutu and Tutsi in 1994 left over 800,000 people dead and millions more displaced, exposing the devastating consequences of ethnic division (Sarty & Dallaire, 2004). The Horn of

Africa has experienced similarly violent ethnic struggles; Ethiopia's complex ethnic federalism has been a source of tension, while Sudan's conflict, particularly in Darfur, was driven by both ethnic and political factors, ultimately resulting in the secession of South Sudan in 2011 (Idris, 2006). Somalia, with its clan-based political structure, has also been entrenched in a cycle of ethnic and political conflict since the fall of its central government in 1991. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, ethnic rivalries combined with the scramble for resources have led to one of the deadliest conflicts in modern African history (Nasong'o, 2015).

The Balkans

The Balkans, a region historically plagued by ethnic conflict, provides a complete example of how unresolved ethnic tensions can spiral into violence (Vulliamy, 2013). From the Ottoman Empire's collapse to the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, ethnic conflict has repeatedly reshaped the political and social fabric of the region. The most notable case remains the Bosnian War (1992-1995), where ethnic cleansing and genocide were carried out against Bosniak Muslims by Serb forces (Bartrop, 2016). The international community, though present, struggled to respond effectively during the conflict, leading to the death of over 100,000 people and the displacement of millions. The legacy of the war still lingers today, as regional tensions persist among ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Croatia (Bieber, 2006).

The United States

The United States has a complex relationship with ethnic issues, primarily due to its history of slavery, forced displacement of Native Americans and ongoing struggles with racism. While slavery was abolished in the 19th century, the legacy of racial segregation, systemic inequality, and discrimination continues to affect African American communities and other racial minorities today (Massey, 2007).

Institutionalized racism, socioeconomic inequality and disparities in political representation remain significant challenges for African Americans, Native Americans, and other ethnic minorities. The struggles of Native American communities, facing historical injustices and modern-day marginalization, further illustrate the ethnic challenges the U.S. still faces (Deloria, 1988). In contemporary times, issues like anti-immigrant sentiment, Islamophobia, and racial violence remain significant challenges, despite the country's self-image as a melting pot (Huntington & Huntington, 1982).

Europe

Europe, with its history of colonialism, ethnic nationalism, and migration, is another region marked by frequent ethnic tensions. The war in Ukraine, ethnic tensions in Northern Ireland and separatist movements in Catalonia and Scotland reflect the continuing salience of ethnic and national identity as sources of conflict in Europe (Kaldor, 2001). The European Union's recent challenges in dealing with migration from the Middle East and Africa have also exposed underlying ethnic and cultural divides, particularly in countries like France, Germany and Hungary. These tensions, fueled by historical grievances, demographic changes and economic disparities, underscore the complex relationship between ethnicity and national identity in contemporary Europe. From the rise of nationalist movements in the 19th and 20th centuries to the ethnic divisions in contemporary Europe, issues like discrimination against Roma communities, migration crises and the resurgence of far-right politics have threatened social cohesion (Patterson, 2015).

South Asia

South Asia remains a hotbed of ethnic tensions, shaped by a legacy of colonialism, migration and religious and cultural divides. Countries like India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have long struggled with ethnic and communal conflicts that have led to

violent insurgencies, genocides and wars (Allen, 1992). The partition of India in 1947, which divided the subcontinent along religious lines, led to one of the most brutal episodes of ethnic violence in history, resulting in the deaths of millions and the displacement of millions more (Gould, 2012). In Sri Lanka, the Tamil-Sinhala ethnic divide culminated in almost 30-year civil war (1983-2009), Pakistan's Baloch and Pashtun populations have long felt marginalized by the central government, while India has faced violent communal clashes between Hindus and Muslims, compounded by caste-based discrimination (Engineer, 1987). Bangladesh, too, has witnessed ethnic conflicts, particularly with indigenous groups like the Chakma and Garo. The region's persistent ethnic issues continue to challenge stability, as political elites grapple with demands for recognition, autonomy and equal rights.

Ethnic Issues in Nepal

Nepal, a nation nestled in the Himalayas, is home to a highly diverse population comprising over 142 distinct ethnic groups. Historically, the hierarchical caste system deeply influenced the Nepali society, fostering inequalities and resentment among various groups. The Dalits, for example, have long been claiming of facing systemic discrimination for centuries, regarded as "untouchables" under the caste hierarchy (Hangen, 2010).

Following the 1950 political revolution and the abolition of the Rana regime, Nepal embarked on a process of democratization, but the underlying ethnic tensions could not be resolved as was anticipated. The Maoist insurgency (1996-2006), fueled by grievances of marginalized ethnic groups, such as the Madhesi and Tharu communities, forced the monarchy to cede power and led to the establishment of a federal democratic republic (Lawoti & Pahari, 2010). Despite these advances, ethnic identity politics, especially in the form of demands for greater political representation and autonomy,

continue to put the country in the run. The struggle of the Madhesi community in the southern Terai region, for instance, has centered around issues of exclusion from political power, with violent protests in 2008, 2009, and 2015 (Chamlagai, 2021). Moreover, the division of Nepal into federal provinces has sparked further conflict, especially in regions like the Far-West and the East, where ethnic groups such as the Tharus and the Mongols have contested their rightful representation. The naming of provinces, as seen in the Koshi province issue, highlights the fragility of national unity in the face of entrenched ethnic and regional identities (The Republica, 2023).

Ethnic Politics and National Security

Ethnic politics in Nepal has played a central role in shaping national security concerns. The Maoist insurgency (1996-2006), which was partly fueled by the economic and social grievances of marginalized ethnic communities, exemplified the role that ethnic prohibition can play in insurgent movements. The peace accord 2006, which ended the insurgency, did not resolve the underlying issues of ethnic exclusions and tensions have continued to manifest in various forms (Adhikari et al., 2016). The ongoing political debate about federalism, ethnic autonomy and the proper representation of marginalized groups reflects the unresolved nature of Nepal's ethnic issues.

The rise of ethnic-based political parties has further complicated national security, as these parties often prioritize ethnic identity over national unity. While this has allowed for greater political participation by marginalized groups, it has also led to increased fragmentation within the political system, with ethnic parties sometimes engaging in zero-sum politics, further aggravating divisions.

Nepal's national security is also threatened by the potential for ethnic violence. Incidents such as the Dalit temple assault in 2006 and the violence during the Madhesh

Andolan highlight the potential for ethnic tensions to escalate into broader social unrest. Moreover, the rise of ethnic nationalism, particularly in the wake of federalism, poses a risk of fragmentation, where different ethnic groups might pursue their interests at the expense of national unity (Gellner, 2007).

Managing Ethnic Diversity for National Stability

To ensure national stability, Nepal must address its ethnic issues meticulously. This requires not only political solutions, such as ensuring equitable representation and opportunities for all ethnic communities but also societal efforts to promote ethnic tolerance and amalgamation. The state must take proactive measures to end caste-based discrimination, address the grievances of the Madhesi and Tharu communities and foster a sense of national unity (Jason, 2009).

One possible solution might be to strengthen the constitutional framework to ensure that all ethnic groups have a voice in governance but again such issues might remain practically difficult though theoretically viable. The 2015 constitution of Nepal made significant strides in this regard by recognizing the rights of marginalized communities and banning caste-based discrimination (Nepal Constitution, 2015). However, the implementation of these provisions remains a challenge, and greater political will is needed to ensure that ethnic minorities are included in decision-making processes.

Additionally, promoting cross-cultural dialogue and understanding through education, media, and community initiatives can help reduce ethnic tensions. International experience, particularly from post-conflict societies like Rwanda and Bosnia, suggests that reconciliation processes, truth commissions, and efforts to acknowledge historical injustices can play a crucial role in healing ethnic divisions (Sarty & Dallaire, 2004).

Ethnicity in Security Forces and The Nepali Army

Ethnicity in security forces has long been a contentious issue across the globe. While some argue that the inclusion of distinct ethnic groups in national security institutions fosters national unity and strengthens the institution's legitimacy, others contend that ethnic factions within military and security forces can lead to internal divisions, reduce operational efficiency, and compromise national security (Enloe, 1980). The role of ethnicity in the composition of security forces can either act as a unifying force or a destabilizing element, depending on how it is managed and institutionalized. The consequences of ethnic diversity in security forces depend on several factors, including political leadership, institutional culture and the degree of inclusivity or exclusion within the forces.

In many countries, ethnicity has been a significant factor in shaping the security forces. Some nations have witnessed ethnic-based security forces that prioritize loyalty to specific ethnic groups rather than to the nation as a whole. This kind of divisive structure can lead to a lack of trust and cohesion, both within the forces and between the forces and the broader population. In such cases, ethnic loyalties can supersede national unity, leading to biased actions and potential human rights violations. A prominent example of this is the case of Rwanda before and during the genocide of 1994. The Rwandan military, which was composed primarily of Hutu soldiers, played a crucial role in the execution of the Hutu-led genocide against the Tutsi minority, illustrating the destructive power of an ethnicized security force (Reyntjens, 2021). Similarly, in Sudan, the military and paramilitary forces have long been accused of ethnic and religious biases, particularly in the region of Darfur (Mareng, n.d.). The politicization and ethnicization of security forces, in this case, exacerbated the country's civil conflict and contributed to the fragmentation of the nation. A similar trend has been observed in Nigeria, where ethnic and religious affiliations heavily influence military recruitment

and assignments. The Nigerian military has been accused of favoritism toward specific ethnic groups, such as the Hausa-Fulani, which has led to distrust and tensions between ethnic groups in the military (Anugwom, 2001).

In contrast, some countries have taken steps to integrate diverse ethnic groups within their security forces, thereby strengthening national unity and the legitimacy of their military institutions. One such example is Nepal, where the inclusion of ethnic diversity in the security forces has been largely beneficial for national security, as well as for the image of the country on the international arena. The Nepali Army stands as an admirable example of how an inclusive security force can contribute positively to both internal and external stability. Likewise, The Nepali Army has been a critical institution in Nepal, not only due to its central role in national defense but also because it has consistently exemplified inclusivity and unity in a country marked by a mosaic of ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups. From the outset, the Nepali Army has adhered to a policy of inclusivity, offering opportunities to various ethnic groups, including marginalized communities, in the ranks of the military. This approach has allowed the army to transcend ethnic divisions and create a cohesive and unified force that serves the entire nation (Upreti, 2021).

The Nepali Army's success in integrating ethnic groups into its ranks contrasts totally with the divisiveness that has occurred in other countries with ethnically divided security forces. By maintaining an apolitical and inclusive stance, the Nepali Army has been able to act as a stabilizing force in the country, standing as a national institution that commands respect and admiration. This inclusivity is not only reflected in the recruitment of personnel from various ethnic backgrounds, but also in the army's commitment to gender inclusivity, with increasing numbers of women joining the military. This broad representation has enabled the Nepali Army to maintain legitimacy among the people and secure trust from various ethnic communities thereby being the beacon of hope and an exemplary force of Ethnic Integration, Support for National

Constitution, force with Apolitical Stance, International Recognition, Commitment to Gender Equality, Disaster Response and Humanitarian Aid, Cultural and Ethnic Sensitivity, Role in Securing Borders and promoting Internal Security and managing Counterinsurgency.

Conclusion

Ethnic diversity, while a strength, can also be a source of tension when not managed effectively. The global case studies of ethnic conflict demonstrate the devastating consequences of unresolved ethnic issues. In Nepal, the complex interplay of caste, ethnicity, and regional identity politics continues to pose significant challenges to national unity and stability. However, these challenges are not undefeatable. With the right political will, societal commitment, and international support, Nepal can navigate its ethnic diversity toward a future of inclusive governance, ethnic harmony and national stability. By addressing the root causes of ethnic conflict and promoting dialogue, Nepal can ensure that its rich ethnic diversity becomes a source of strength rather than division.

In conclusion, ethnic diversity, when managed effectively, can be a powerful asset for national unity and stability, but if neglected, it can lead to severe security challenges. The global experiences discussed demonstrate that unresolved ethnic tensions often lead to violent conflict and instability. In the case of Nepal, despite strides made through federalism and constitutional reforms, ethnic tensions persist and continue to pose a threat to national security. However, the Nepali Army's inclusive approach serves as a positive example of how integrating diverse ethnic groups can foster national unity and strengthen security. To build a peaceful and secure Nepal, it is essential for the government to continue fostering ethnic tolerance, ensuring fair representation, and addressing historical grievances. By learning from both global and domestic experiences, Nepal can move towards a more cohesive society where diversity is not a source of division, but a foundation for national strength and security.

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