



## Terai Regionalism in Nepal

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### ABSTRACT

The paper examines the changing regional scenario of Terai issue and its political images with the central government in Kathmandu. The obliging role of regional political movements, elites, identity and ethnic groups is also examined in the context of Terai regionalism while focusing on the internal political development. The article also analyzes their quest for autonomy and their consequences on federalism in Nepal. The paper concludes with the remarks that constitutional role of governance and decentralized principles of federalism can perform their role in accommodating Terai civic and constitutional quest with the central government. The institutional role of political elites will count an important position in the present circumstances on their basis with the regional and national political parties.

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## 1. Introduction

Geographically Nepal is a small state with significant number of ethnic groups. Due to this heavy saddle of ethnicity, the state experienced a long live instable governance system with the incursion of excluded model of federalism (Hachethu, 2007). The state had also bear 10 years long civil war during 1996-2006. Despite this momentous period of state vulnerability, the rifts did not pose severe threat to Kathmandu as the political elites adjusted with core political parties on the basis of give and take policy. The economic, administrative and the security issues were remained before the elites but they failed to adopt a unanimous constitutional package to resolve these concerns. Over the several functional, political and administrative changes in state in the last five decades, ethnic conflicts are relatively at more dangerous lines in the present time. The only raison d'être after this rule of political incapacity, over developed structure of centralism dominated under the guise of a few ethnic class and the feudal mind set which have captured the whole system of policy making and the adaptation of disparity based administrative and economic approach. By taking this approach, the present study analyze the relevant model of federalism in the context of Terai regional, political, administrative, ethnic and constitutional autonomy. The study is organized at the approach to undermine the tangible political circumstances of politics in Terai region and its relevancy with the existing structure of federalism.

The present study is put forward by contextualizing it with the historical perspectives of governance and trends of centralization in state. It also propagates an internal political scenario and the politics of ethnicity in Terai region. It also finds the role of Kathmandu in decaying the process of autonomy and the proportional economic for the region despite their significant contribution in the economic pool of the state and as the area is still considered an underdeveloped. The post 2008 political trends and the design of a proportional share in each field from politics to economy is also an additional part of this study.

## 2. Nepal on Ethnic Lines

The history reveals the story that Nepal has been ruled under part of a number of smaller kingdoms and confederations since many centuries. The state did not unified into a single entity until monarchy replaced the old system in last quarter of 18th century under the aegis of a Gorkha fighter Pithvi Narayan Shah (Baxter, 1988) who became the monarch of the present time Nepal with the armed help from Indian tribal regions of South and centralized the system of administration. This monarchy led the state for almost 200 years and ended in 1960 with the invention of *Panchayati system* due to huge pressure of ethnic conflicts in various regions as the internal and external and within the state, migration of people was took place on huge level. This internal instability gave a boom to the rise of feudal mindset in the politics especially in the areas bordering with India which continued their rule until 1990.

The political velocity of feudal class aligned with the central regime of Kathmandu did not find their position to include the rising demands of ethno national demands of autonomy and the state spruced into the constitutional monarchy while the regional political trends in the country transformed against the central government as a *Jana Andolan movement* which was being started by Moist groups against the Royal Parliamentary government, converted into an ethnic-cum-civil strife during 1990s. This andolan killed, abducted and abused many ethnic communities and marginalized groups. This transition ended in 2006 as the King Gyanendra relinquished their powers to the people. The restored parliament passed an amendment bill in the constitution to implement the system of federalism which isoperationalizing from May 28, 2008. The reason of political instability and the inability of federalism in Nepal is the dividing multi ethnic trend in the political scenario of Nepal (Baxter, 1988). The state is an assortment of a number of ethnic groups, minority communities and lingual identities with complex socio-cultural environment (Lowati, 2008). Various ethnic groups which are settled in Nepal are described in the following table;

**Table 1: Number of Identity Groups in Nepal**

Ethnic groups/Castes	Linguistic Groups	Indigenous Nationalities	Terai Ethnic communities	Dalit Groups	Religious Groups
102	92	60	59	22	11

Source: (Report', 2002), (Minority Groups in Nepal, Accessed from <http://www.supportnepal.org/minority.html> on June 30, 2013)

The ethnic groups are the indigenous identities in Nepal. These groups are further separated in geographical context. In accordance with their socio-economic and political identity, Lawoti divided the Nepal's ethnicities into the four narrow categories. These are as under;

**Table 2: Identity Groups, Nature of Belonging and their Geographical location in Nepal**

Identity Group	Nature of Belonging	Geographical Location
Indigenous Nationalities	These are more than sixty local Tibeto-	Mountain, hills and Terai regions
Dalits	Burmon linguistic groups	Hill and Terai regions
Madhesis	Socially low caste Hindus/untouchables	Terai region
Muslims and Indigenous nationalities	These are Terai Hindu caste groups which were migrated from India dating back from 1960s	Terai region
	Economically low status local groups which are settled in Nepal	

Source: (Lawoti, 2007, p. 49)

In the arena of this complexity, the inter ethnic and intra ethnic rifts were dominated in a decade long period during 1996-2006. This marginality also provided a gaze of the regional economic developments in Nepal. Excluded nature of political system and the exploitation of the economic resources by the central government strongly advocated a number of ethno-regional political movements for constitutional autonomy and decentralized governance. These developments are also observed in Terai region as well since 2006 as the peace accord between the Kathmandu stakeholders and Moist insurgents deplored the system of government by excluding the regional political allies from that region. This excluded nature further expanded a deteriorating situation in the region which created inter-regional, intra-ethnic and state-vis-à-vis regional armed rifts and political conflicts.

### 3. An Understanding about Terai Regional Economy and Ethnicity

Geographically Nepal is divided into three main regions. The first part consisted on Himalayan territory which is predominated by ethnic groups representing their over-developed representation in civil administration and in armed services. The second regional entity is flatlands Hilly territory which is dominated by several lingual groups. The last fragmented territory is Terai region representing a complex ethnic, lingual and social environment having weak administrative and political system. The area is economically advanced, industrially developed and agriculturally progressed. The region was neglected by the central government until 1970s due to the presence of malarial cases which were then eradicated by adjoining the role of World Bank, American support fund for health and the participatory role of the international donor's institutions. The region transformed into the new hub of economic, industrial and agriculture development.

Terai regional political and ethnic groups propound that the economy and the natural resources of their territory was being exploited by migratory Hill economic, feudal and industrial elites which have institutional contacts with the Kathmandu elites. The process of this exploitation in Terai was started in 1970s, when a large number of Madhesi labors and farmers migrated from Indian state of Uttar Pradesh and the high caste Chhetris and Brahmins from Hill areas of Nepal were settled there. The process of this settlement is termed as Nepalization of Terai territory (Gaige, 1975). This Nepalization process extended the influence of the central government in its broader political and territorial image in Terai. The important industries and economic position of Terai region is described as follows:

**Table 3: Terai Districts and their Economic Potential**

District	Economic Potential
Banke	Financial services, health services, retailing, transport hub
Chitwan	Agro-industry, Health care, food processing and tourism
Dhanusa	Agro-industry, education, health care, pilgrimage site, Transport hub
Kanchanpur	Education and health services and transport hub
Kailali	Industrial hub
Makwanpur	Cement factories, large and small scale industrial units, transport hub
Morang	Agro-industry, education, trade and transport hub
Parsa	Agro-Industrial, trade and transport hub
Rupandehi	Agro-industrial, health care and educational centres, transport hub and retailing
Sunsari	Educational and financial services potential, tourism

Source: the table is derived on the basis of different sources

Terai region which is also interchangeably named as Madhes region in the present day covers almost 17 per cent of total area of Nepal with almost 50 per cent population share. The region is geographically divided into two main parts; outer Terai and inner Terai region. The former is bordered with India having agriculturally rich with the dominancy of Madhesi people who are mostly migrated from India and the local hilly migratory rich people who are settled there since 1970s. This class purchased a vast land for agriculture became an ingredient entity with Kathmandu. The later region is economically and industrially advanced having almost 17 Dalit groups, large number of inhabitant ethnic and lingual groups with the dominant presence of Tharu ethnicity which is economically backward living there for many centuries. They are usually have their inhabitants in western part of Terai region.

But their regional representation in civil bureaucracy and in other government departments did not have sufficient numbers. The main reason is the existence of marginalized ethnic groups which are divided and economically and educationally backward as the dominant groups in the these department usually belong to the Himalyan territory of Nepal which are the surrounding areas of Kathmandu and are considered the most developed Urban centre in the state. This class provides a structural institutional support to the central government in establishing the system of internal colonial system in Terai areas. It also affected the region in the political and administrative level as popularly most rich area had less representation these two organizations. The following tables are showing these differences:

**Table 4: Regionalization in Public Bureaucracy in Nepal**

Ethnic Groups/Castes	% of Population in 1991	Representation in Bureaucracy
Brahmins	12.9	41.3
Newar	5.6	33.2
Chhetri and Thakuri	17.6	14.7
Hill Social Groups	22.4	2.4
Terai Groups	32.0	8.4

Source: (Shah, 2006)

**Table 5: Political Facts about Nepal**

	Terai	Mountains	Hills	Total
Districts	20	16	39	75
Constituencies	88	23	94	205
Governance share	Min	Max	Max	
Parliamentary Representation on Population basis	Small	Large	Very large	

Source: (Hachhethu, 2007; Shah, 2006)

In accordance with these tables, the organization of ethnic groups and castes is seemingly accelerated at uneven administrative patterns in civil bureaucracy. While the table five point out that the proportional share of Terai region in the government departments or in bureaucracy is marginalized in comparison with the mountain and Hills identities. The second projection which is found in this study is that there is also non-parallel development within the Terai region. It is a core issue which has transmitted more violating elements to produce their forceful approach against the policies of the central government after 2006 *Jana Andolan*. The regional political elites, political parties and the central government is needed to re-institutionalize their policies towards Terai region and must focus its internal geographical position to resolve the dispute. In this concern, the process will encourage the rational political and administrative forces to play their role and it would be a win-win game for both Terai identity elites and the central forces.

#### 4. Complexities in Terai Regionalism: Unitary or Federal Model

The Terai regional political trends are very complex. The regional political parties and the political leadership is fragmented into a number of smaller sub groups. Despite the agitation with the centre there exist a small number of group elites who consider the Kathmandu approach as a valid loom on the political decisions. Thus the regional dominance is seemed more appropriate in comparison with the centre in Terai region on this trend of complexity. The region is not a singular identity in the national or in regional politics. It is a multi-layered ethnic and class stridden geography which have crossed many phases of political developments (Asian Centre for Human Rights, 2009). The first voice of federalism in Nepal was put forward by Madhesi regional elites from Terai region in the 20th century. Their singular claim was their geographical concentration in the southern part bordering with India. The Madhesi voiced that on the basis of their regional population census which comprised 23 per cent (Karna, 2007) in accordance with their own calculations, their representation in the civil services and in the parliament must be increased (Jha, August 2007).

There is also another group in Terai which confirms that only unitary model is very important to eliminate the political and ethnic differences in the regional and in national perspectives. A regional political group, *Chure Bhewar Ekta Samaj* which was an integral part of the seven party government alliance during 2009-11, claims to represent Hill identity in Terai region and has anti-federal and pro-Kathmandu centric political approach. The group supports to the unitary model of governance in Nepal (Asian Centre for Human Rights, 2009). They have pro-centrist Kathmandu approach. While the low caste Dalits, Muslims and other aligned to demand their basic services. They approached that the government should deliver basic needs of life rather than consuming their time on the political reformation process. These voices accelerated the potential need of identity political trends in the central regime and in region of Terai in its broader political context. This process has recently triggered the reformation process in political context. The separate voices on federalism and unitary models for Nepali state in the past, which were propounded by various political parties and ethnic groups from Kathmandu and from Terai region, are described as following:

**Table 6: Political Parties/Ethnic Groups and their Approach on Terai Issue**

Political Party/Ethnic Group	Base	Approach
Nepali Congress Party	Kathmandu	Unitary model by supporting ethnic empowerment process
Communist Party of Nepal (Mao)	Kathmandu	Federal Model by supporting ethnic empowerment process
Communist Party of Nepal (UML)	Kathmandu	Unitary Model
Brahmins	Hill region	Ethnic hierarchy with Unitary model
Chhetris	Hill region	Ethnic hierarchy with Unitary model
Others	Kathmandu	Have multi-layered approach
Terai Democratic Liberation Front	Terai	Secessionist movement during 2006-2009
Madhesi Janadhikar Forum	Terai	Federal Model
Terai MadhesLoktantrik Party	Terai	Madhesi regionalism in Terai by approaching federal model
Chure Bhawar Ekta Samaj	Terai	Unitary Model
Dalits/Indigenous ethnic groups	Terai	They approach more on re-definition of territorial identity
Indigenous Groups	Nepal	They want right to self-identity through Panchayati system
Caste Groups/Janjati Groups	Terai	They approach on re-definition of economy and identity
Others	Kathmandu	Multi-layered approach
Others	Terai	Re-definition of Nepali nationalism

Source: (A report from Forum of Journalist, 2007), (Asian centre for Human Rights, 2009), (Berman, 2011)

## 5. Impediments in Fragiling Terai

Since 2008, Terai regionalism is travelling towards inclusive model of democracy in the national political scenario of Nepal. The limitations between the central government, federal administration and regional political groups/political parties have declined. The 2008 electoral results from Terai region pointed out that the political influence of the central political parties such as Nepali Congress and UML were rejected in the final battles which considered core political bodies in Terai during 1990s (Jha, August 2007). The local population either voted for the Madhesi Political parties or the regional political elites not representing either NC or UML. While at the lower turns, the political confrontation and agitations against one another were continually promulgated in post 2008 period in Terai. The newly appointed political elites after 2008 elections from the region were predominantly from Madhesis and they were enthusiastic to control the power structure of Kathmandu rather than implementing the new socio – economic and constitutional agenda (Asian Centre for Human Rights, 2009, p. 6). Local ethnic identities and the caste groups such as Dalits, Meghar and Tharus dislocate their previous position of common Terai identity with the dominant Madhesis and now are proceeding their demand of separate geography within Terai with full economic autonomy. The following table indicates a clear line of distinction over the approaches on the issue of external and inter-Terai region:

**Table 7: The Nature of External and Intra – Terai Conflicts**

Serial No.	Kathmandu versus Terai Conflicts	Intra-Terai Conflicts
1.	Legitimate Ethnic and political Violence against the minorities/Indigenous groups/Janjatis/Dalits/Muslims.	Pahadi-Madhesi Conflictual Dynamics over demographic concentration.
2.	Trust deficit between Terai and Kathmandu administration.	Ethnic issues between the
3.	Armed conflicts between state forces and Terai secessionists.	marginalized/Indigenous groups/Janjatis.
4.	Exclusionary politics and the dominance of hierarchical minorities like Brahmins and Chhetris in the decision-making process from Hill region of Nepal.	Faultline between different caste/inter-caste and intra-caste clashes
5.	The acute centralization of resource distribution.	Class exploitation/resource exploitation
		Lingual/identity conflicts.

Source: (Bergman, 2011)

Nepal has experienced long run centralized governance under the aegis of a dynastic king with imperial tendencies to follow from the main land of Kathmandu. The civic, political and constitutional debates with regard to the regional identities had never been considered in its core legislation and policies. The core ethnic identities indulged their consciousness in the power confiscating ideology in the past and the same principle was observed in the post electoral process in Nepal when a new non-proportional political force called Madhesis proceeded to the central parliament with its largest numerical strength unlike the past political trends (Bergman, 2011). A new game of bargaining politics was started in Nepal. Rather than to oblige the different segments to discuss the futuristic constitutional approach, the political parties were more concentrating on the power principles. The federalization demand by different ethnic groups did not attract the legislative assembly in Nepal and finally the house was collapsed in 2012. An interim government is working since May 2012 on an interim

constitution which was adopted in 2007. The next general elections are seemed to contest on the ethnic and regional identities and economic demands for the different region including Terai have the indications of broader political changes in the federal trends of Nepali state.

## 6. Present Scenario and Demands of Terai

There are at least 17 identified ethnic groups that are presently living in Terai region which are at the odd differences with one another over the issue of Terai regionalism. The central forces on the other front seem in the conflictual situation in the present circumstances. The overwhelming and over-burdened representation of the Himalayan region in the central bureaucracy is another major administrative issue between the Kathmandu and the Terai region (Lawoti, 2007). Although, significant political developments in Nepal since 2008 had broken down the previous cartels from the central Himalayan region and the newly emerging ethnic identities from Terai have found their place in the central hierarchy. But the system of governance is in the deadlocked position as the political elites are at the odd lengths over certain issues in Nepal. The regional communities including Madhesis, Dalits and Tharus are facing identity discrimination from the central political elites (Lawoti, 2007). The fundamental cause is that the democratic transition of 2006 was implemented and accepted from the core political class and never been transmitted to the lower level (Lawoti, 2007). The institutional reformation also never been implemented. The different voices in Terai region over the identity demands and socio-political and economic structuralism is defined in following table:

**Table 8: Different Approaches by different Identities in Terai Region**

Tharus	Madhesis	Jantatis/Indigenous/Dalits	Others
Lingual Identity	Ethnic federalism	Cultural identity	Ethnic autonomy
Political/Social Inclusion	Proportional representation	Sharing in national/regional resources	Language/social identity
Resource mobilization	institutions	Proportional representation in institutions/power sharing	Basic needs of life
Education and Health	Decentralized	Inclusive democracy	Infrastructure development
Infrastructure development	Resource extraction		
Proportional sharing power	Regional identity		

Source: (Hachhthu, 2003), (Bergman, 2011)

According to Joshi, the phase of economic development and political inclusion have now entered in the rural periphery of Nepal which put forward the positive implications in Terai region as well, which was being neglected by the central bureaucratic forces until the recent past. Over the issue of adopting the issue of governability, different groups have different tendencies as indicating table 8. There is also a clear marginal difference among the Terai communities in socio-economic and political perspective and literacy rate. This is an assured gap of marginalization of Terai region in comparison of the remaining Nepali territory (Yadav, 2006). The external political forces also influenced in the internal political matters in the Nepali state. For example; At political fronts, India supported a federal model in Nepal with inclusive role of Madhesis while the neighboring China did not support the ethnic alignment on federalism in Nepal. The donor states from Europe and America support to the Royalist tendency in Nepal in the recent past and until now (Asian Centre for Human Rights, 2009, p. 27-28). There are also some certain communities which fears from adopting federalism, the system which will never provide them their due political rights (Bergman, 2011). For example; Dalits and Janjatis and Muslims from Terai region either not support to federalism or hesitate to launch their distinction on the parallel line with other Terai communities.

## 7. Federalism/Unitary Model: A Surgical Approach for Nepal in Resolving Terai Issue

Nepal is a multi-ethnic and multi-caste and heterogeneous state with diverse administrative setup historically organized on unitary principles under the aegis of central monarchy. The state experienced several waves of political reformation in its historical context which was unitary and centralized in its tendencies. The last resort in this phase was the *Jana Andolan II* which was started from Terai region in 2006. The fundamental objective after this movement was the transmission of politic-economic rights for the Terai region from the central government. This movement transferred into violence which was remained continued until 2008 [Although a wave of separatism is still continuing under the strong images of Terai Jan Mukti Morcha]. On the re-institutionalizing role of the central government since 2008 indulged the central political forces to re-think about the reformed governance in Nepal which include all

the major identity groups in the policymaking process. On such an issue; the debate on adopting the federalism is continued in Nepal since 2006 *Jana Andolan II* movement.

The principle authors, researchers and constitutionalists such as; George Anderson, Bargman, Lowati, Karna, Hachhthu and Bhandari have focused their tendencies on the different aspect of federalism. For example; Lowati is in favor of inclusion democratic transition in Nepal by considering all the major identity groups in the governance system while Berman and Bhandari revitalized on the ethnic trends in adopting the system of federalism in Nepal. Within Terai region, the debate over the systematic tendencies of consensus model if federalism is more critical than in the central government. There different models which simultaneously are applicable in Nepal in resolving the deep ethnic issues especially in the context of Terai regional identity. The proportional representation model which is still valid and applying in the electoral process in Nepal is encouraged in the systematic enhancement of the seats of the political parties having numerical majority in the post electoral phase. The second model is the debate of the Grand coalition (Lijphart, 1977) of the major ethnic identities/political parties/regional political elites from Hill, Himalayan and Terai region. This model becomes more complex in the contextual portion of defining the share of each ethnic group which are already in the complex tendencies in their identity complex. The easiest division and consideration in the adaptation of this formula is the post-electoral scenario and the numerical strength of the various political parties from the three geographical regions of Nepal including Hill region, Himalayan region and Terai region. the homogeneity and maturization of the political elites and the ethnic identities is very important in this concern. Otherwise, the political endanger to collapse and into the condition of severe civil war which is already exacerbating in the Terai region of Nepal.

The point while discussing and proposing the constitutional and institutional viability for Nepali state is that the state has conflict prone conditions. The relevancy and acceptability of each ethnic groups and political party is very important on this very core issue. Among the several proposed, discussed and approached models; the most important and according to the various political and constitutional experts, the more suitable one for Nepal is the decentralized federalism which can accommodate all the political parties, ethnic groups and the regional and marginalized identities. The different writers termed this model into different meanings and conceptual definitions. Bergman called it an ethnic federalism (Bergman, 2011), Lowati named it included democratic transition (Lowati, 2008), Bukhari and Kamran phrased it loose federalism in the Pakistani federal perspectives (Bukhari & Kamran, 2013) while Anderson called it a diversity in identity model (Anderson, 2010).

Before implementing the system of federalism, the Nepali elites and political parties from all the regions are required to provide *consensus building approach* in dealing with the constitutional issue. At the second step, the *accommodation* is very important to the smaller identity groups on the regional administrative and political and economic issues. The third step is the provision of *institutionalism* which is very important to evolve the state from unitary to a federal atmosphere. The federalism trend can provide broader perspective to Nepal in resolving the deep rooted ethnic and identity conflicts. The implementation of third tier of governance will accommodate the regional and local identity and the smaller ethnic groups in the local governance institutions while the major political parties and ethnic elites can perform their services at broader level in the sub-national and national atmosphere. This is most suitable in the context of Terai regional identity which is politically marginalized and still under-representative in the civic political culture except for the Madhesi identity groups. This will prevail new constitutional, ethnic, administrative, political and atmospheric approaches and discussion in the near future with its contributions and consequences at the same time. But despite its prospects and challenges, the federalism is an attractive, suitable and accepted path from the best available governance model in the present time. The system will open new avenues for the Nepali state in the context of resolving the Terai identity issues and the other political threats as well.

## **8. Conclusion**

The Terai region in Nepal is a deeply divided and geographically was an excluded territory in the recent past. The post 2008 electoral reformation changed its political scenario and broken down the 20-30 years old monopoly of the central political elites from this region and provide a decisive chance to the local elites to accommodate their demands with the

central political elites in Kathmandu to explore the regional economic and industrial development for their local populations. The second trend was to explore their position on the future constitutional design for Nepal but the process was received a long run deadlock which was finally ruptured in 2012 due to the failure of the political elites and the political parties which were representing in the Constituent Assembly. The assembly was finally smashed down in 2012 to initiate the new elections. The electoral process in Nepal has now completed and Nepali Congress claim nationwide support in 2013 elections while CPM-UML is second in row. Thus Terai regional identity is very important and crucial in the constitutional history of Nepal.

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