## **OPINION**

# Silent contributors

South Asian women's contributions must be brought into the formal economic system.

NIRMA SADAMALI JAYAWARDENA



As a child, I lived with my grandmother in a rural village in Sri Lanka where women often played an active economic role-working in sectors like farming, technology, sewing, household work or some other area. These days across South Asia, businesses led by women are on the rise, with online platforms making it easier for entrepreneurs to start with minimal investment.

If more women could be encouraged into employment in the region, it would, of course, bring wider benefits. For instance, it's estimated that if women's participation in India's workforce reached 50 percent from its current level of 31 percent, the country's annual growth rate could increase by 1.5 also the issue of poor access to education and technical skills that can hold women back in terms of development and building a business.

These barriers are starting to receive more recognition and were depicted in the award-winning film The Great Indian Kitchen. This 2021 film in the Malayalam language tells the story of a young woman who is expected to follow traditional gender roles after her marriage. The film highlights the social norms that often deter women from working or seeking education.

Most women entrepreneurs in South Asia work in the informal sector. This includes street vending, agriculture, retail and home-based industries like sewing. But these sectors and enterprises often remain unregistered and are not captured in official economic data.

For example, women in cities like Delhi in India and Colombo in Sri Lanka sell products like vegetables or handmade jewellery on the streets. Often, these women do not have legal businesses or commercial registration numbers. This limits their access to loans, social security and more formal markets. Across South Asia, only 25 percent of women have a bank account, compared with 41 percent of menthe biggest gender gap in the world.

Nepal, however, has made strides in financial inclusion, particularly



Female entrepreneurs in South in closing the gender gap. According Asia have been described as "silent to Nepal's financial inclusion contributors", as their input to the report in 2023, women's access to economy and society is still not formal financial services the previproperly understood. And when ous year was at 89 percent while their contributions go unrecogmen's stood at 90 percent-showing women can be denied that change is possible. to education and career development. Not only that, but it

can lead to women having fewer

opportunities for leadership roles,

financial security and professional

growth. It may discourage the par-

their progress in industries and

societies that could benefit from

Research often points to factors

such as a lack of education,

technical expertise, gender discrim-

ination and low self-esteem as rea-

sons female entrepreneurs may be

But after reviewing several stud-

ies, I realised there's a deeper, more

complex issue. I identified a

three-pillar effect that discourages

These are socio-cultural barriers,

which include traditional gender

roles and societal expectations; eco-

nomic and financial constraints

such as limited access to funding;

and regulatory and institutional

challenges like legal obstacles and a

lack of support systems. These

three pillars create significant hur-

dles for women who are trying to

A study looking at Mumbai,

India, found that limited affordable

transport can significantly reduce

women's chances of entering the

For example, some Indian and Sri

Lankan women are expected to stay

close to home to take care of chil-

dren or elderly relatives. This limits

their ability to travel to markets or

participate in other work. There is

workforce or starting a business.

build their businesses

women from entrepreneurship.

greater female representation.

### The barriers for women

The lack of education and technical training often restricts women's ability to develop skills and entrepreneurial nous. But it can also kpose them to exploitation b cials who can prey on their lack of legal knowledge, forcing them to face bureaucratic hurdles and

Another thorny issue is that in some cultures it is unacceptable for women to hold seniority or authority over men. Often, government policies and programmes on male entrepreneurs, overlooking women's issues. These include childcare needs or safety

In Sri Lanka, female-owned businesses face significant challenges in accessing key government incentives simply because of limited awareness. A big issue is that women in rural areas often do not hear about funding programmes, grants and financial schemes.

South Asian women's economic contributions continue to be damaged by social, cultural and institutional limitations. It is vital to recognise these contributions and bring them into the formal economic system. This should ensure that female entrepreneurs get their rightful place in the broader economic arena.

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idea, we will get back to you within a week. - Editors Drama in Nepali politics

WORDS & ECHOES

Current political parties are attempting to stage new dramas on the political stage.

ABHI SUBEDI



World Theatre Day, which falls on March 27, deserves a few words in The International Theatre Institute (ITI)—the largest performance arts organisation—takes the lead in global celebrations of this. Founded under UNESCO in 1948, the institute began celebrating Theatre Day in 1961, when people realised that performance art can save the world.

Nepal became a member of the ITI in 2000. Theatre artist and director Sunil Pokharel and I became the founding general secretary and president, respectively. Over time, other friends joined, too. Puskar Gurung and friends succeeded us in 2008. Today, Nepali theatre has made headways in diversifying performance activities through theatre groups, seminars, publications and colloquiums.

However, the challenge of matching ideology with the drama on the stage often struck the Nepali theatre creators at the erstwhile Gurukul Theatre in Kathmandu. As a playwright and member of the core group of the theatre, I understood the issue well. I knew the challenges and ecstasy of Sunil Pokharel, who performed my plays in Nepal, India and Europe. Other directors of my plays, including Puskar Gurung, Shiva Rijal and Yubaraj Ghimire, had similar experiences.

Sunil's methodology necessitated creating a dramatic mechanism that would propel the energy of performance and elicit responses from the audience. He did that quite successfully for many plays and also answered questions from the audience regarding his approach. After performing my play Agniko Katha or "Story of Fire" at a theatre in Aalborg University, Denmark, Sunil faced a



quaint question from a theatre academic: "When did the writer of this play die"? Pointing towards me, Sunil responded, "He wrote this play"

To her, a play of such nature weaved history in a unique manner. Her question prompted a discussion about Roland Barthes' concept of "the death of the Author" and the experience of a living author between us. We wondered if this Author question could also be applied to theatre. I would like to introduce this subject by shifting briefly to the realm of politics that presents different kinds of theatricality.

### Performance and politics

Performance is an interesting exercise that shares similarities with politics. I am struck by the discussions in Nepali politics about changing the political actors or erasing familiar faces. Is it similar to the discussion in literature or theatre about how the text or the drama of politics continues even after you banish the authors or leaders?

I was reading an article by political scientist Krishna Khanal published in Kantipur (March 25, 2025) with an eloquent and challenging title Netarajko Antya Kina? Or why is it necessary to end the domination of "netas" or political leaders in Nepali politics? That indicates the need to deconstruct the present political mechanism based on the structuration of what the British philosopher Bertrand Russell famously calls "leaders and followers". To Khanal, Nepali politics is moving towards some kind of crisis because of the continuation or accentuation of the selfsame political personas in leadership roles. The questions remain daunting. Will things work out by banishing the leaders or the authors of the politics?

#### Theatrical turn

Nepali politics appears to confuse the serious with the trivial. The search for idioms to justify their politics is their well-known forte. Some evoke big idioms from leftist and democratic politics; some evoke the erstwhile monarchical system. The leftists do not evoke famous personas anymore because, in the post-political times, the imago effect would not work. Dictators everywhere seek to emulate the roles of inspiring leaders of the erstwhile times. They use all the accoutrements of a democratic system, like elections, to justify their rules. The greatest threat to democracy today comes from the system of creating democratically elected dictators.

Still, our system is democratic. Some major political parties have histories of struggle and quest for the right path. I see some transformations related to the concerned party's policies and actions. The history of the old Nepali Congress has been documented and interpreted. The role played by political leaders like BP Koirala is central in the drama of the

Nepali Congress. I have read sections of a book titled Nepali Communist Andolan ra Janakrantika Aitihasik Dastabejharu or "The Historical Documents of the Nepali Communist Movement and People's Revolution' (2013). This collection provides a pic ture of a pattern of movement of the Nepali communists. The original document is a pamphlet issued on September 15, 1949, after the establishment of the Nepal Communist Party.

There are other documents like the one presented at the central committee by Pushpa Kamal Dahal, secretary general of the Nepal Communist Party (Mashal) in 1989, that call the armed struggle declared by the "Jhapa group" as meaningless, as they have adopted election as their political method. The general secretary of the communist party, Manmohan Adhikari, presenting his report at the first party conference in 1954, said, "The communist party in Nepal does not advocate for the concept of the establishment of socialism in Nepal, because it experiences that the present condition of the country is not appropriate for such programme".

We know the courses that the Nepali Congress and the communist move ments took in the following years. Other parties became prominent and also came to power. The monarchical system is gone. None of the erstwhile political parties remain in their earlier forms anymore. However, current political developments have taken a theatrical turn as the parties are try ing to stage new dramas on the political stage. Now, the drama, though it looks serious, is a farce, a burlesque After tragedy, farce comes to the political stage, says Karl Marx in his famous book The Eighteenth Brumaire Of Louis Bonaparte. The gossip of power change that is rife today, and the rumours churned out almost daily, however, show that Nepali society is at risk of losing hard-earned political gains.

A simple solution lies in making the most of the present political system. Our politicians must stop acting like jokers in a farce, as this could prove costly for the country. Remember, the world is changing and it can usher in difficult times for us. The leaders can perform their political farce, but not at the cost of the democratic sys tem and all that we have earned. Politicians would do well to make theatrical quests in Nepali politics creative and meaningful.

# The fate of regional political parties

Federal structure prioritising demographic majorities over ethnic and cultural identities limits their growth.





The discourse surrounding regional political parties in Nepal is complex and evolving. It is deeply connected with the country's transition to federalism and the ongoing struggle for identity-based representation. Despite the absence of clear constitutional and legal provisions, the existence and influence of regional parties are

This article explores legal ambiguities, provincial demarcation's challenges and the perspectives of cadres, shedding light on the role of regional parties in Nepal's political landscape.

### Struggle for legal recognition

The Constitution of Nepal and the Political Parties Act 2017 do not explicitly define regional political parties. Article 269 of the Constitution mandates that political parties' formation, registration and operation align with federal laws. However, the Act only distinguishes between national and other parties based on electoral performance. A party must secure at least 3 percent of the proportional votes and one seat in the House of Representatives to be recognised as a national party. Regional parties, often focusing on specific provinces or ethnic communities, are left in a legal grey area.

For instance, the Election Commission Nepal directed the Terai-Madhesh Loktantrik Party (TMLP), a regional party advocating for Madheshi rights, to change its name, along with 18 other parties, for being inconsistent with the Constitution and Political Parties Act. The Commission argued that 'Terai-Madhesh' was unconstitutional, emphasising a region and fostering ethnic bias.

In response, TMLP filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court, demanding the reversal of the Commission's decision and seeking a mandamus to retain its name. The petition argued that the Commission did not specify any word or letter in the party's name that violated legal provisions. The TMLP contended that a term related to a specific region highlights its con-



text and does not essentially contradict the legal provisions. The Supreme Court issued an interim order allowing the party to continue using its name until a final verdict is made. Article 269(5) of the Constitution and Section 6(1)(f) of the Political Parties Act prohibits registering political parties whose name, purpose, symbol, or flag harms a country's religious or communal unity or national integrity.

Section 32(5) of the Provincial Assembly Member Proportional Elections Directive 2017 acknowledges the existence of regional parties by allowing parties with at least 1.5 percent of the total valid votes in provincial elections to be represented in the Provincial Assembly. Unlike well-established national parties, regional parties have a more localised influence, with organisation and public support concentrated in specific areas. Recognising this, the Constituent Assembly Act 2007 included provisions to facilitate regional party participation. Section 7(14) of the Act required political parties nominating fewer than 20 percent of total members under proportional representation to maintain gender balance.

However, the Act did not mandate ethnic representation in its inclusive group list. Despite the presence of many ethnic and regional parties in the Constituent Assembly, ambiguities regarding their status remain in the Constitution. The ongoing legal battles and the lack of constitutional clarity point to the need for a more inclusive legal framework that accommodates regional and identity-based parties' aspirations.

### Provincial boundaries' impact

The demarcation of Nepal's seven provinces has been contentious, particularly for regional parties advocating for identity-based federalism. The current provincial structure—which divides historical, geographical and demographic regions—has marginalised many ethnic and indigenous communities. Provinces, except Madhesh, have been demarcated to provide a majority to Khas-Aryans. For instance, the Tharu community in Far West Nepal has opposed the Sudurpashchim Province's structure, demanding a Tharuhat/Tharuwan Province comprising districts from the Terai-Madhesh region ranging between Kanchanpur and Chitwan.

The division of provinces has diluted regional parties' influence, as their support bases are often fragmented across multiple provinces. For instance, the Tharuhat movement in Kailali has struggled to gain traction in the hill-mountain districts of Sudurpashchim Province, where the Khas-Arya community holds a demographic majority. In Eastern Nepal, where a majority of Rai and Limbu communities reside, the push for a province with indigenous identity is weakened due to boundaries that merge their area with other

Political analyst Dambar Khatiwada states that regional parties thrive when provinces have favourable boundaries and strong regional identities shaped by ethnicity, language and culture. He cites Madhesh Province, where Madhesh-centric parties benefit from a shared regional identity, while in other provinces, ethnic divisions weaken regional party influence. The current federal structure prioritises demographic majorities over ethnic and cultural identities, limiting regional parties' growth.

### Cadres and supporters' views

As regional parties face various challenges, understanding the perceptions and acceptance of leaders, cadres and supporters is essential. This insight reveals the party's ideological commitment, organisational strength and influence on federal governance.

Many regional parties, including the Sanghiya Loktantrik Rastriya

Manch (SLRM) and the Nagarik Unmikti Party (NUP), explicitly identify themselves as regional parties advocating for identity-based federalism. Kumar Lingden, Chairperson of the Eastern Part of Nepal-based SLRM, clarified that its main goal is to advocate for a province with identity and autonomy, including Limbuwan. Sudurpashchim Province, focuses on the rights and representation of the Tharu community. Thakur Singh Tharu, NUP's General Secretary, asserts that the party's regional character is evident in its organisational structure, public support and commitment to Tharu issues. However, its influence is concentrated in districts like Kailali, signaling the challenge of expanding its reach beyond its core support base.

In Madhesh Province, parties like JSP Nepal, LSP and Janamat Party struggle to balance their regional identity with national aspirations. While these parties were initially formed to address Madheshi issues, their efforts to expand beyond the Terai-Madhesh region were perceived as a dilution of their regional focus. The supporters of JSP Nepal, LSP and Janamat Party still see their parties as Madhesh-centric but feel they are losing focus on Madheshi issues in their pursuit of becoming national. They opposed removing 'Madhesh' from party names, seeing it as a shift away from their core agenda. They even criticised Madheshi leaders for prioritising national politics over regional strength, arguing that Madhesh would compel national parties to cooperate, as seen during the Madhesh Movement.

### Conclusion

Debates over regional political parties in Nepal are indicative of the broader challenges in federalism and inclusive representation. Legal ambiguities, unfavourable provincial demarcation and internal conflicts have hindered their growth. Yet, continued presence and advocacy for identity-based federalism underscore the importance of

regional politics in Nepal. Strengthening federalism and ensuring the representation of marginalised communities requires legal recognition of regional parties and reconsideration of provincial boundaries. With a focus on local issues, building strong organisational structure and joining hands with other marginalised groups, regional parties can become key players in shaping Nepal's federal future.

Chalaune and Manandhar are researchers at Democracy Resource Centre Nepal.