

Cooper Inscripton by Baise King (Khai), Rakra (Khai) and Shukra (Saka Era) 612 (BMFA 1883) or 1747 (Bikaner Saravati) in Old Khas language using Devanagari script [Wikipedia]



MAGARS AND THE NEPALI STATE

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Magars are among the largest ethnic groups in Nepal. As per the 2021 census, their population is approximately 2 million, which is close to 7% of the national population distributed across the country. They were one of the major ethnic groups in the Gorkhali army during its expansion in the 18th century.

Such was their significance during the period, Prithvi Narayan Shah declared himself the King of a Magarat (land of Magars). Shah may have been referring to the small Baisi and Chaubisi confederate states that was annexed by the Gorkhali empire and had high population of Magars. Their large presence in the Gorkhali army, which was expanding its territory between the late 18th century and the first half of the 19th century, would have made Magar officials influential in the military and political ranks. In fact, Magar scholars today claim, famous Gorkhali generals like Amar Singh Thapa, Mathabar Singh Thapa and Bhakti Thapa who fought against the British East India Company (1814-1816 AD) have a Magar lineage, although there isn't much documentation to support the argument.



Source: Ethnographic map of Nepal (Gurung 1998). Accessed from https://markturin.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2018/07/atlas_review.pdf

The community's influence in both the military and other state functions would have significantly diminished after their revolt by in the late 1860s led by Captain Lakhana Thapa, a Magar soldier. There was an underlying discontent among soldiers of the lower ranks, mostly those from the Magar community, at being mobilized to support the British in crushing India's Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, a war soldiers like Lakhana Thapa fought but believed was not theirs to fight. Prime Minister Junga Bahadur Rana, who had captured the state power from the Shah Kings, had Lakhana Thapa arrested and hanged openly in front of his villagers. By the end of the Rana regime in the year 1950, Magars were non-existent among the influential list of senior officials within Nepal Army or the bureaucracy.



A stamp issued in 2016 by the Government of Nepal commemorating the life of Lakhana Thapa Magar, who is celebrated as Nepal's first martyr.

[1] Shaha, Rishikesh. "Idea and Reality, Nepal and Rolpa." Himal Southasian, July 1, 1996. <https://www.himalmag.com/idea-and-reality-nepal-and-rolpa/>.
 [2] Kil with Dr. Shaymu Thapa Magar, dated 31/07/2023 at Department of Anthropology, Tribhuvan University.
 [3] Lecomte-Tilouine, M, The History of Messianic and Rebel King Lakhana Thapa: Utopia and Ideology among the Magars in Gellener. D (ed.) Resistance and the State: Nepalese Experiences, Social Science Baha, 2008, Pg: 249-255.
 [4] "मगर जातिको गौरवशाली इतिहास." Lokpati, December 29, 2019. <https://lokpati.com/2019/12/57623/>.
 [5] Pande, Bhim B., Tyas Bakhatko Nepal, Part 5, Phoenix Books, Pg: 50-51 and 192-195.

Despite their glorious history and a strong demographic strength, Magars remained under-represented even during the Panchayat regime. Bala Ram Gharti Magar from Rolpa was the only prominent representative from the community, who held various cabinet positions in the Panchayat government. Back then, community's weak political standing often led to police brutality in districts like Rolpa and Rukum, which are now part of the Lumbini province. Magars from this region cultivated marijuana as cash crops, selling the produce across the borders in India, mainly through Dang district's bordering town of Koilabas.

However, in 1976 the government enacted Drug Trafficking and Abuse Act, imposing a ban on marijuana harvesting, farming and its supply.[1] While the organized marijuana trade may have continued sheltered by the corrupt local administration, ordinary Magar families lost their important source of livelihood due to government control and crack-down, leading to local resentment against the state. This allowed Nepal's fledgling communist movement to establish itself in the two remote districts, which became the 'ground-zero' of Nepal's Maoist movement.

Some Magar activists have argued that the Maoist movement mobilized Magars as the foot-soldiers, in a way similar to the Gorkhali rulers did for their conquests. Although there may be some merit in that argument, evidence shows that Magars have gained in political representation and consolidation since the end of the Maoist conflict in 2006. Every government that has come to power since, has had Magar leader(s) holding a prominent ministerial position. Leaders from Rolpa like Barshaman Pun, Onsari Gharti and Jayapuri Gharti have occupied important ministerial portfolio in several governments over the past one and half decades. Nanda Bahadur Pun, who was among the senior recruits from Rolpa in the Maoist People's Liberation Army is currently the Vice President of the country, while Ram Bahadur Thapa Magar, who is also from Gulmi district in the province has held Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister's office.



Barsha Man Pun



Jayapuri Gharti



Nanda Bahadur Pun



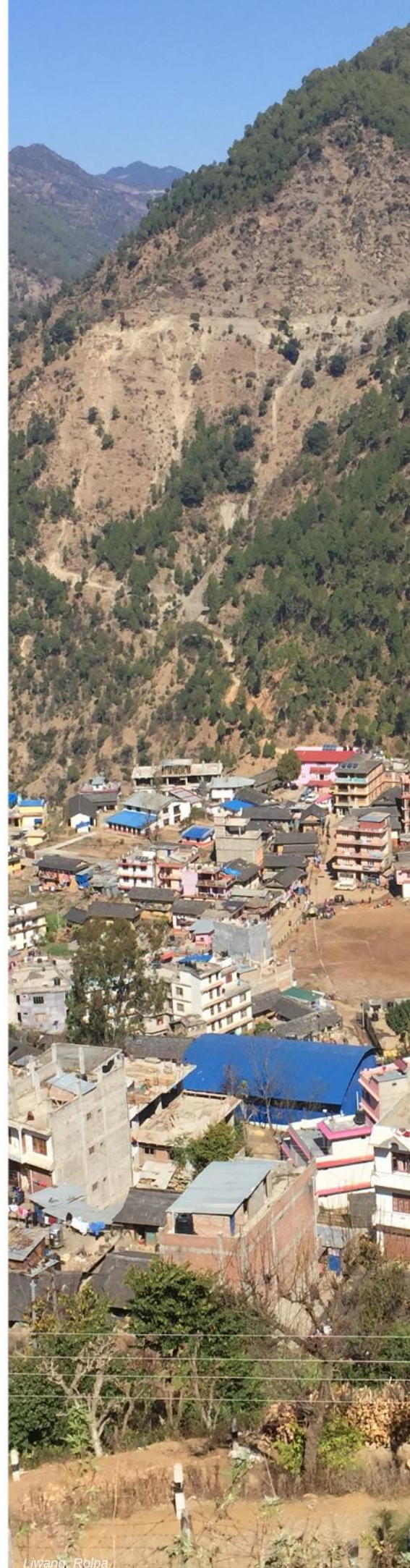
Onsari Gharti Magar



Ram Bahadur Thapa

All of the above-mentioned leaders, representing their respective constituencies, remain active and powerful in Nepali politics. Given how the distribution of power has changed in the country, and in the province, it has benefitted Magars who may have reclaimed the political influence they wielded during the early years of the Gorkhali empire.

Note: This write-up is a part of RENT SOAS-PEI research on Nepal's sub-national political settlement in the Lumbini Province.



Liwang, Rolpa