



NEPAL

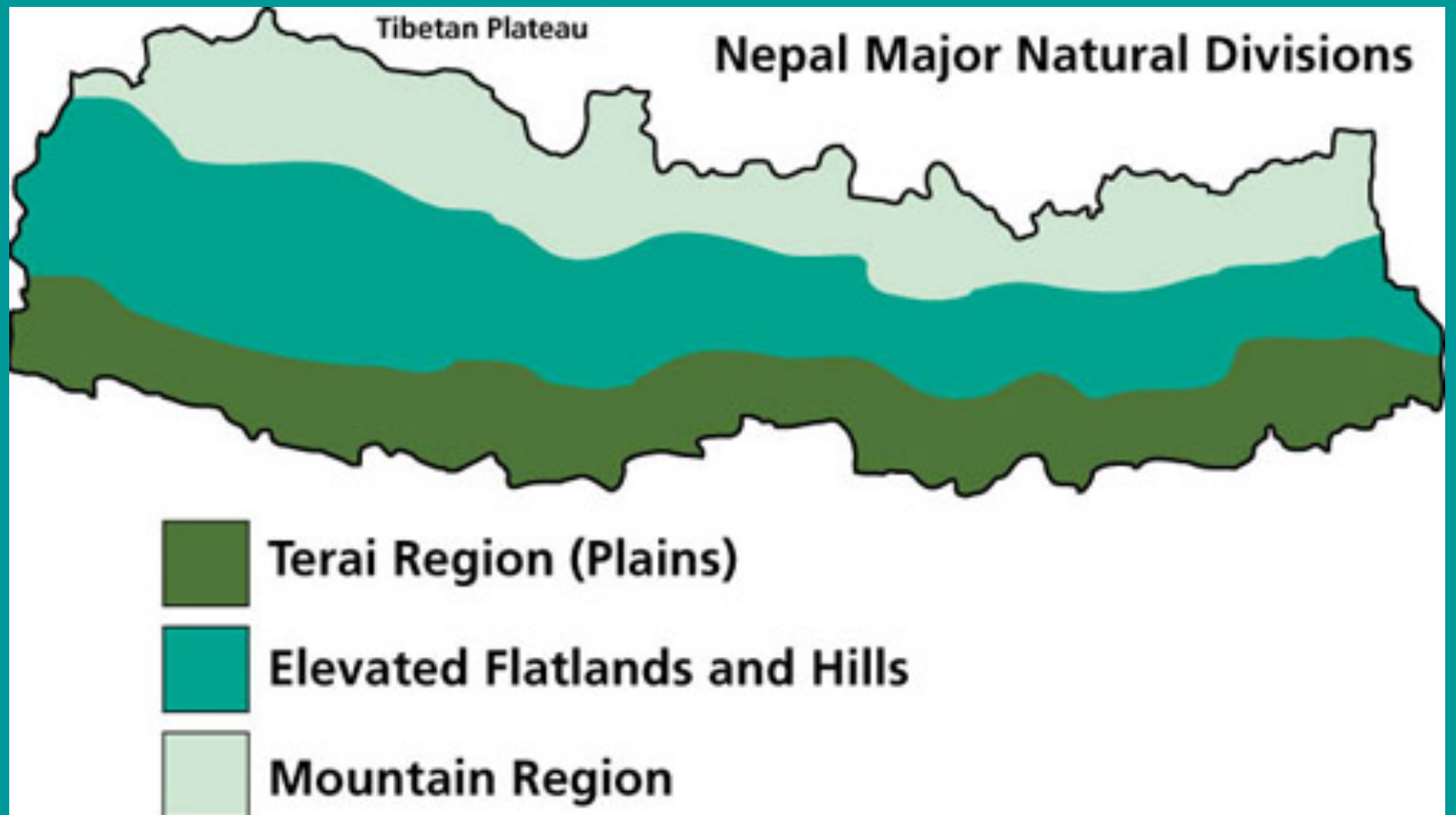
Civil Society and DEMOCRATIC UPRISINGS

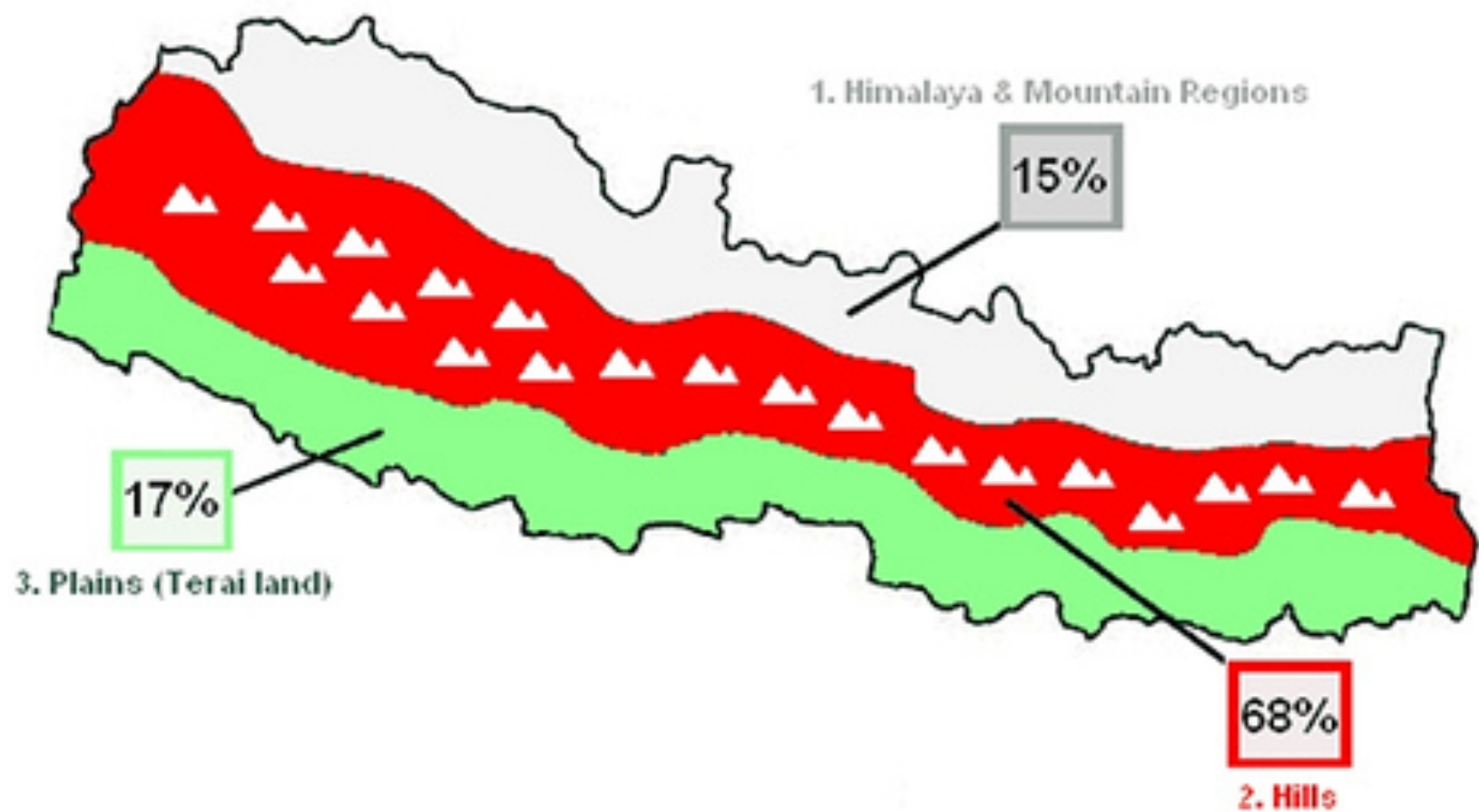
1990 Jana Andolan

by George Katsiaficas

THESIS:

Nepal is divided by class,
caste, region, language,
ethnicity, religion, gender





More Than 80% of Nepal is Higher Grounds



LANDSCAPE OF NEPAL



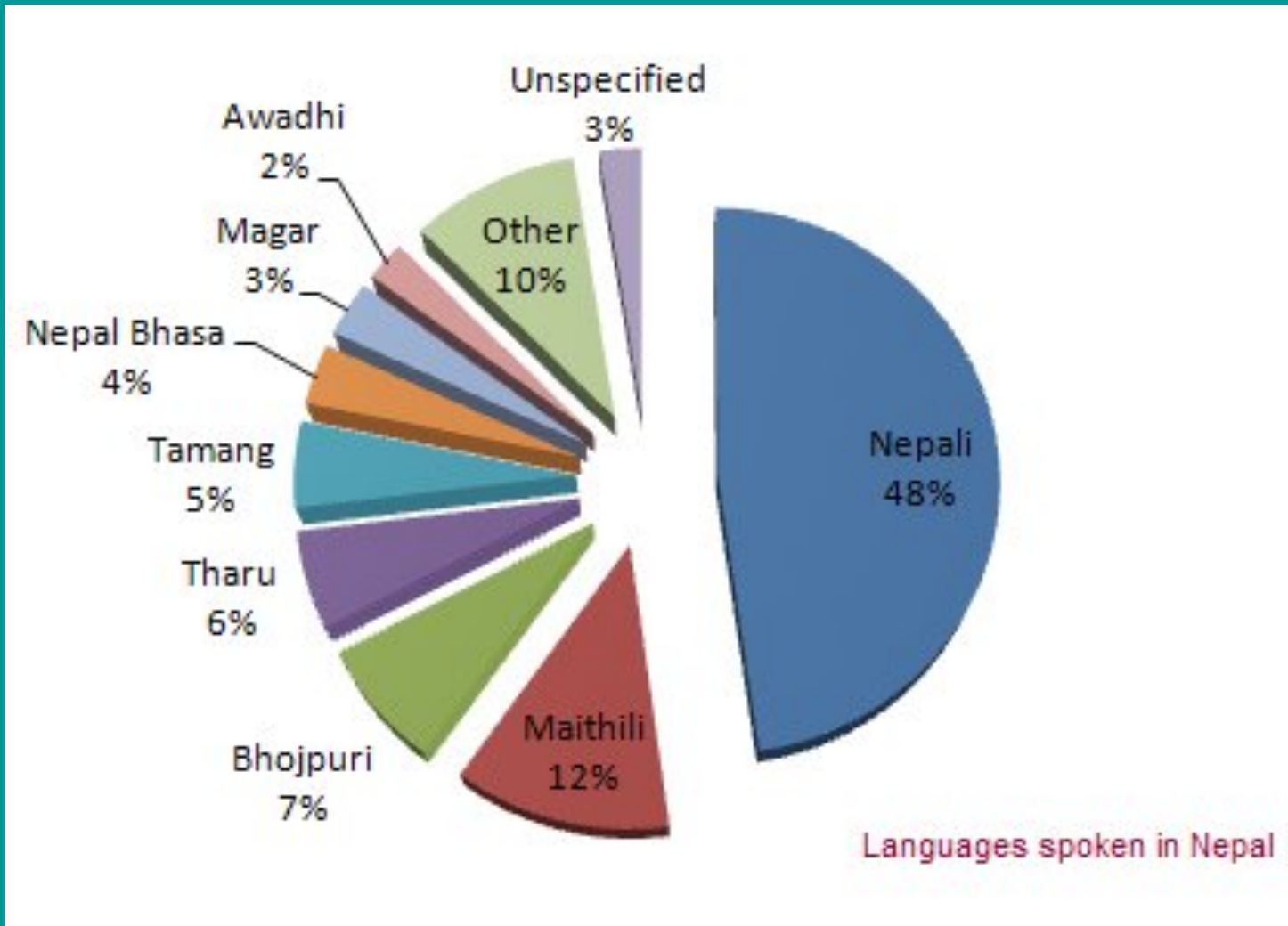
LANDSCAPE OF NEPAL

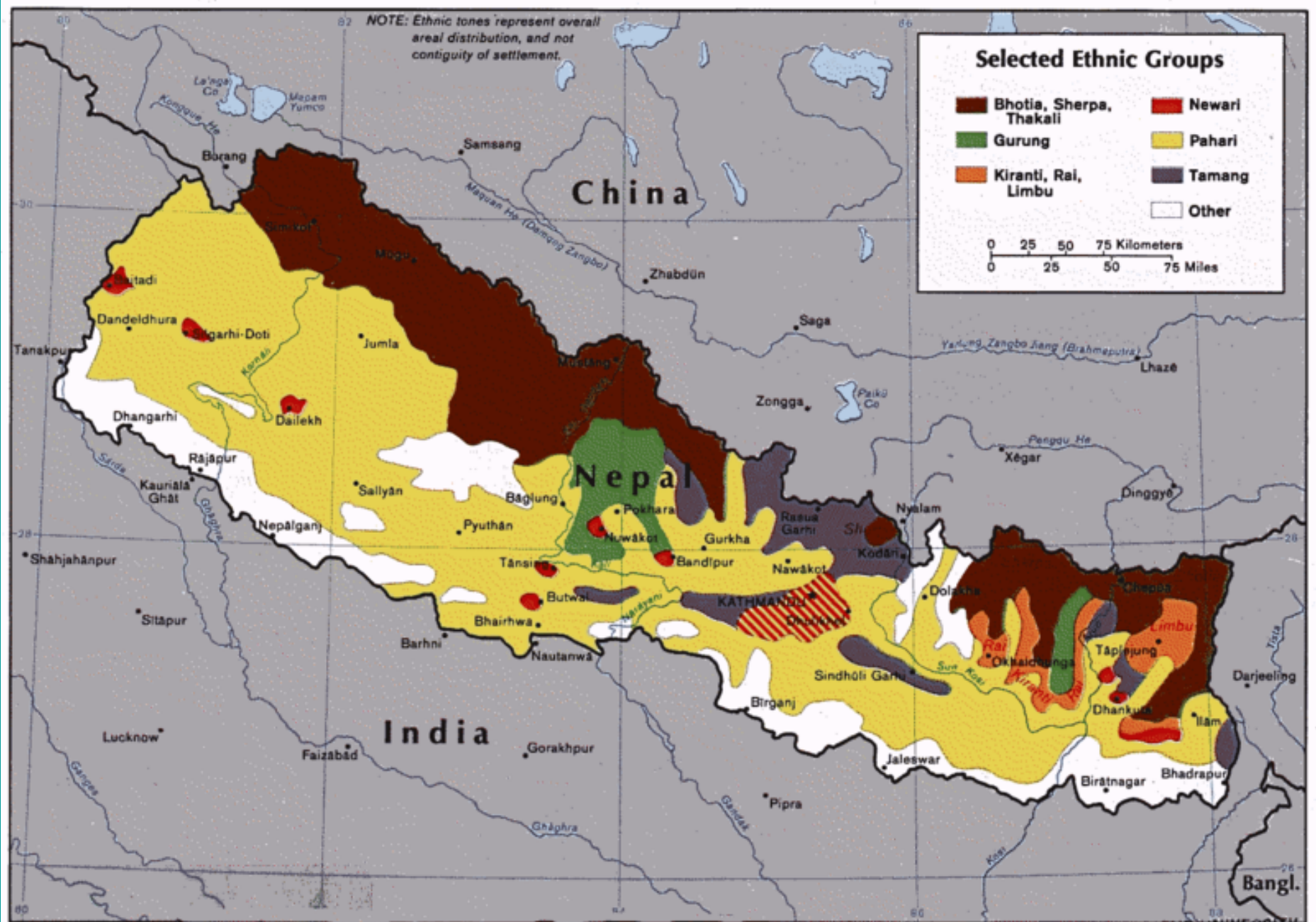


Terai: “Moist Lands”

Photo by George Katsiaficas 2009

Nepal's Languages





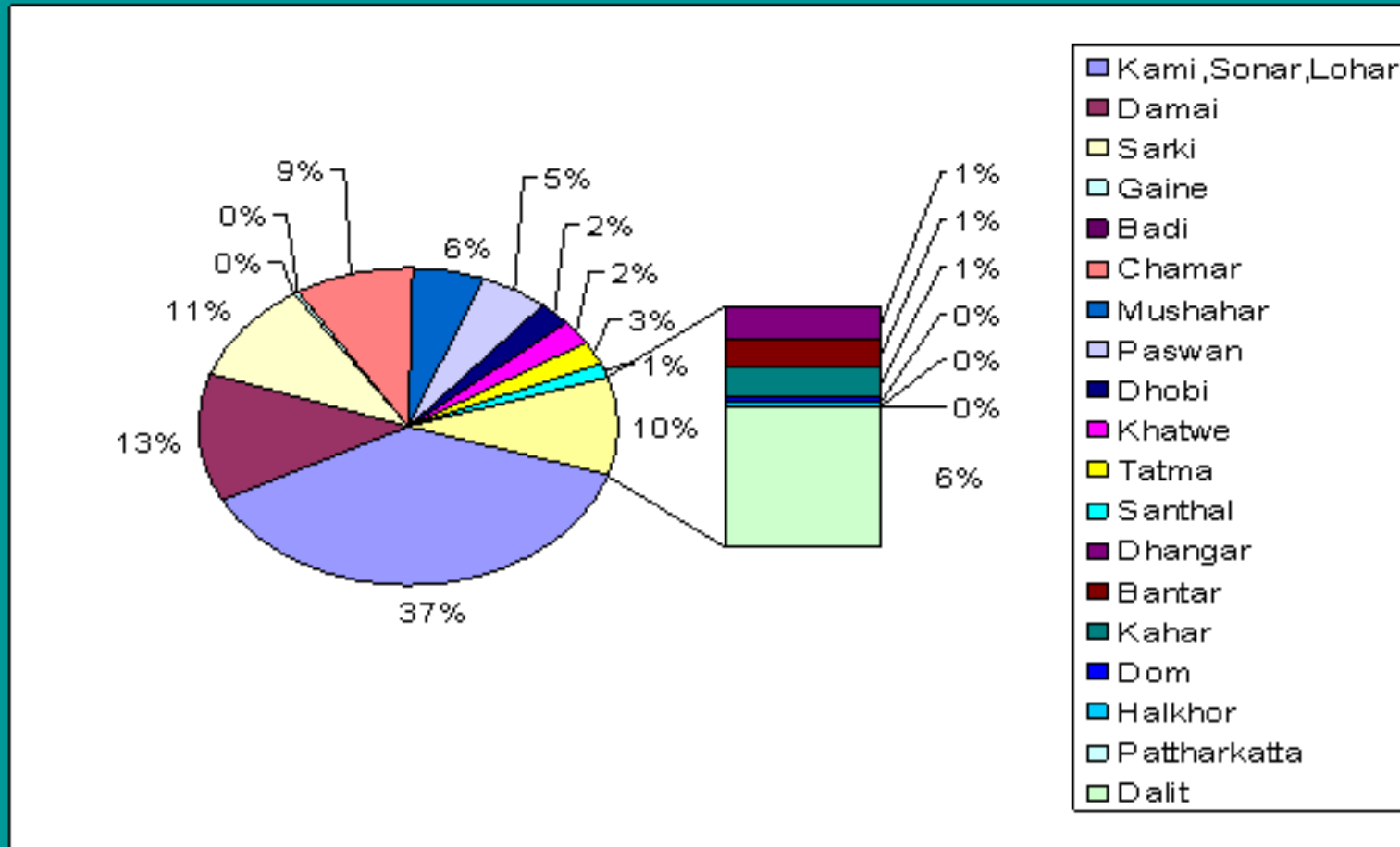
Caste Divides Nepal



Dalits prohibited from entering village temple by the local upper castes.

Caste/ Ethnicity	Under-5 Mortality Rate (per '000)	Infant Mortality Rate (per '000)	Life Expectancy at birth* (Years)
Brahman	69.0	52.5	61.4
Newar	74.9	56.0	63.2
Tharu	106.4	76.0	58.7
Chhetri	109.1	77.8	58.4
Gurung	126.3	88.6	56.1
Rai	133.0	92.9	55.3
Limbu	133.3	93.2	55.2
Magar	135.9	94.7	54.9
Tamang	141.2	98.0	54.2
Yadav/ Air	142.0	98.5	54.2
Muslim	158.3	108.6	52.2
Dalit	171.2	116.5	50.8

Dalits suffer from 205 different kinds of discrimination on the basis of caste, or work and descent, in Nepal. This discrimination deprives Dalits of legal justice and their social, economic, and human rights.



Percentage of different Dalit castes in Nepal

Religion

- In the 2001 census, approximately 80.6 percent of the Nepalese people identified themselves as Hindu.
- Buddhist and Muslims comprised 10.7 and 4.2 percent.
- The remainder followed other religions, including Christianity.

ANTITHESIS

People's Movements provide a new
basis for unity and identity

A unique blending of more than 50 different ethnicities and almost 100 languages, Nepal is also divided by class and caste, yet the country forged a new unity and identity through struggle against the monarchy. The uprising flowed from a vibrant civil society with deep roots in Nepal's past. In turn, it helped foster new grassroots initiatives and to strengthen civil institutions--especially autonomous media so vital to a free citizenry. In the uprising's aftermath, labor militancy became strident, the number of NGO's mushroomed, women mobilized to fight patriarchy, and minorities activated in struggles for autonomy.

Traditional Civil Society

- A diverse and complex web of civil relationships dating back centuries remains the foundation for Nepali everyday life. In ancient Vedic society, *dharma* simultaneously nurtured just rulers who cared for their people's well-being and a citizenry who observed established laws. So long as the kind ruled kindly, people welcomed his authority, and priestly *rishis* helped rulers observe appropriate behavior.
- More than 600 years ago, medieval guilds (or *guithis*) were “more comprehensive than the [European] guilds in their scope”
- Within some *guithis*, participatory forms of decision-making existed, and families cooperated to build small dams and create other communally beneficial projects.



Nepal's Gurkha Kings provided a sense of unity from 1768

- For centuries, Nepal was ruled by the strong monarchy.
 - In 1959 Nepal's constitution provided a bi-cameral parliament, but political parties were banned and the King had strong executive, legislative and judicial powers.
- Demands for democracy and constitutional reforms gained strength. In 1962 a constitutional amendment established a partyless Panchayat system, which continued for 30 years.
 - Those 30 years were described as inconsistent, contradictory, and the people were not happy.

Protests Begin

Despite the royal family's political domination of the country, student militancy helped unleash powerful forces. New press freedoms in the early 1980s led to the nation's first autonomous newspapers. So great was people's thirst for information that the number of the country's newspapers, anywhere between 27 and 84 between 1960 and 1980, grew five-fold from 1980 to 1990. Roads and telephones were greatly improved, facilitating communication among disparate parts of the country (and among movement activists). The literacy rate reached 40% in 1989 (up from 5% in 1952), and higher education was expanded enormously. In less than a decade from 1984, the number of students enrolled in post-secondary institutions doubled to 421,709, providing the opposition with a potent constituency for change.

Eros Effect

As with many uprisings, events in distant parts of the world have profound consequences on people who long for freedom in their own. In 1986, when the People Power revolution in the Philippines overthrew Marcos, people rejoiced, many openly musing that the king should—and even more importantly, *could*—be driven from power. During the Eastern European revolutions of 1989, especially during the fighting in Rumania (whose president Ceausescu had recently visited Nepal), people followed the uprising closely and longed to imitate it. Ganesh Man Singh, considered the “supreme leader” of the 1990 Nepalese democracy movement, related that, “With Gorbachev’s announcement of *perestroika* and *glasnost* something like this became possible even in Nepal.” By contrast, the Tiananmen protests in China were hardly covered due to the country’s delicate relations with her northern neighbor.

Poem by Vinay Raval

Once fists are clenched,

Even the Berlin wall falls down;

Once fists are clenched,

The events of Tiananmen Square take place,

Once fists are clenched,

Even Mandela is freed...

Why are we the only ones

Who do not clench our fists,

And seek to be prisoners of history?

Has the man inside us died?

THE 1990 “PEOPLE’S” MOVEMENT

Jana Andolan

As 1990 opened, neither the king nor the opposition knew what to expect for the coming year. On January 10, seven communist parties formed a United Left Front (ULF) and agreed to work with the Congress Party (NC). Together, they formed the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD). Seven more radical communist parties organized themselves into the United National People’s Movement (UNPM). While they agreed with the MRD on the short-term goal of multiparty democracy and constitutional monarchy, they also remained autonomous in order to plan their own actions.

February 18, 1990

Encouraged by the eros effect of insurgencies sweeping the planet, Nepal's main opposition parties agreed to co-sponsor mass protests scheduled to begin on February 18, 1990. As in Burma in 1988, a carefully selected date was chosen for protests to commence.

On the first day of protests called by Radio Nepal reported unrest all over the country. In over 40 places, district headquarters had been the scene of protests. One report told of police opening fire in Chitwan killing four people, after 5,000 people tried to un-arrest two movement leaders. In Hetauda, a policeman was stoned to death and many cars torched. In the first three days of the uprising, as the king's police used violent means across the country, a dozen participants were killed in Bharatpur, Bhaktapur, and Janakpur—a total of 24 in all of Nepal.

A 50-day Struggle

The seven-week struggle for democracy erupted on February 18 and lasted until victory on April 9—fifty days of courageous resistance to brutal attacks. Dozens of people were killed, hundreds wounded, and thousands arrested. Nevertheless tens of thousands of people continued to go into the streets and demand democracy.



Lawyers, doctors, engineers, students



- More than any others, students were in the forefront of initial street actions. The king closed all universities—as well as secondary and primary schools in the capital—but protests spread.
- Although most intense among Newaris in the Kathmandu valley and professionals (teachers, doctors and lawyers), the *jana andolan* came to involve all of the country's ethnic groups and castes, workers and students, farmers, and unemployed youth.

Blackouts

Blackouts became one of the movement's most important daily rituals, bringing many people into action who feared doing anything more than turning their lights out. Without anyone ordering it, they originally began in the town of Narayanghat in the Terai, and the tactic quickly diffused to Kathmandu and other towns. Beginning on March 29, blackouts became more systematic. Across Kathmandu, people plunged their neighborhoods into darkness for ten minutes every evening beginning at 7:00 p.m. It was a heartening show of solidarity and resolve—although houses that did not respect the blackout often had their windows broken. Soon the black-outs spread across the country.

People Lead, Parties Follow

The masses of people were far ahead of the parties and their secret “Joint Co-ordination Committee.” At the very beginning of the popular upsurge, on February 18, “It was clear that the extent of the mass support for the revolution came as a surprise to the opposition leaders as much as to the *panchayat* government.” While many histories treat prominent leaders and political parties as the main force of the uprising, time and again the leaders of the movement expressed surprise at the extent of the popular mobilization.

Liberated Patan

At the end of March in the Newari town of Patan (just across the river from Kathmandu), the uprising reached its highest level of expression when people took over the town and held it for a week. More than any other single battle, Patan's full-fledged popular uprising spelled the end of Birendra's reign as absolute monarch.

Liberated Patan

Liberated Patan, declared a “Zone of Democracy” and “Free State” by its people, held out for a full week. On April 1, as police were unable to enter the town, some 50,000 people assembled, shouting slogans opposed not only to the *panchayat* system but also to the monarchy. People reinforced barricades of the seven roads leading into it and deepened the trenches on their defensive perimeter.

- Within liberated Patan, nearly every neighborhood had its own autonomously organized self-defense force. Using garden tools, broom handles, and kitchen knives, women stood resolutely determined to protect their families and town.
- Whenever temple bells warned of government intrusions, residents converged on the barricades to defend their *tols*.

Patan's Example

In Kirtipur, only a few miles from the center of Kathmandu, people soon joined Patan in seizing control of the town center. The struggle developed when women led assaults on the police station in attempts to free their arrested sons. When tear gas failed to disperse the crowd, police used their guns and killed four people.

That night, residents dug trenches and built barricades on the main roads entering the town. After the funeral procession for one of the victims, people assembled at Bagh Bhairab temple for a rally. Everyone applauded the announcement made by eight *panchayat* officials when they announced their resignation from the “arrogant establishment.”

From his hospital bed, Ganesh Man Singh compared heroism there to that in Timisoara in Romania, where armed freedom fighters had only recently defeated Ceausescu's troops.

Patan's Example

Patan's Commune inspired people across the country. Following Patan's example, *panchayat* buildings were set ablaze in many towns and villages. Among urban professionals, even the pilots of the Royal Nepal Air went on strike.

While in other places, police gunfire killed people, no one were killed in liberated Patan. Tensions inside the town increased as supplies of fresh food, kerosene, and cooking oil ran low.

After a week, the government finally sent in the army to retake Patan. Rather than fight a suicidal struggle, people let the soldiers in. They knew military force could control the streets during the day—but that people would regain supremacy at night.

Unity

When the government unleashed its hired thugs (*mandales*) to beat peaceful demonstrators, new strata of the population became involved in the movement.

On April 1, television broadcasters, emboldened by demonstrators' courage and enraged by state violence, broadcast news of the unrest in Kirtipur and called on the government for dialogue. During a subsequent countrywide general strike (*bandh*) against the government on April 2, estimates placed the number of teachers involved at 50,000-60,000 and workers at 30,000-40,000.

All 55 pilots of Royal Nepal Airlines conducted a half-day strike that grounded all domestic flights; on April 5, many ministries experienced a "pen down strike," electrical and telephone workers joined the strike movement. Even the country's Foreign Minister protested the repressive measures.

Unity

The “backbone” of the pro-democracy movement in 1990 was the new professional middle class—a group whose activism also animated movements in Thailand, Korea, and the Philippines.

The new middle class may have been the “backbone” of the movement, but it drew in the working class, peasants, and urban poor.

Within a few short weeks, the uprising found support among many sectors of the urban population: doctors, lawyers, journalists, housewives, trade unionists, artists, the urban poor, and truck drivers.

Women were especially active in the valley towns outside Kathmandu, where female factory workers were well organized and played significant role in the mobilizations.

Friday, April 6

Fittingly enough, the march downtown was spearheaded in Patan by a gathering of 10,000 female factory workers. From all directions, demonstrators swarmed into the center of the city, a few hundred meters from the royal palace. Police did not intervene—in all likelihood they could not have stopped the huge throngs from converging near the palace.

Various estimated to have involved anywhere from 200,000 to 500,000 people, the huge rally (said to be the largest in all of Nepal's history) soon began to chant anti-monarchist slogans. Everywhere illegal party flags were proudly carried. A popular refrain went, "Thief Birendra, Leave the Country!" Others insulted the queen, while still more simply said, "We want democracy!"

Unity

From a distance, one observer noticed:

“A sea of humanity...marched endlessly, peacefully and unarmed...They were clapping their hands above their heads as they chanted their slogans, and from a distance they looked like participants in a sort of ballet as they waved their arms in the rhythm of their chanted demands. People in Bagh Bazaar houses were sprinkling water on them from first-or second-story windows: it was a very warm afternoon, and this was the women’s way of cooling the marchers.”

Politicians Vs. Civil Society

In a move that probably saved both the monarchy and moderate opposition leaders from being swept away by the forces in the streets, four central MRD figures (NC leaders K.P. Bhattarai and G.P. Koirala as well as ULF leaders Sahana Pradhan and R.K. Mainali) agreed to go the palace for direct talks with the king.

Apparently, when police opened fire and killed dozens of people on April 6, it was not only the king who panicked at the thought of the crowd overrunning his royal residence.

Political parties, only too eager to become legalized and handed a modicum of power, also grew alarmed.

Unfinished Character of *Jana* *Andolan* 1

Bloodshed during the *jana andolan* was far less than during European insurrections of the 19th and early 20th century. Nonetheless, human rights groups counted at least 500 people killed in the course of the national, but when the official commission of inquiry reported a year later, it established only 62 deaths. One book published the names and addresses of 1,307 persons who had been wounded. In addition to the deaths, somewhere between 8,000 and 25,000 people had been arrested.

No one was ever prosecuted for the deaths and injuries.

The new constitution gave the constitutional monarch the power to declare a “state of emergency” and take over power.

Civil Society Continued to Mobilize

While for some, the revolution may have ended in early April, for many others, the gains made then were only the first taste of victories yet to come.

Once political parties had been legalized, politicians sought to stop spontaneous mobilizations. Workers striking for decent wages were not supported, parents whose children had been killed or wounded by the king's police found no one listening to their justified complaints, and poverty remained a problem.

People wanted justice, and neither the king nor the new government would give it to them.

Long-Term Effects

- **The Uprising's Renewal of Civil Society**
- As in South Korea where the victory of democratic forces in the June Uprising of 1987 led to a tidal wave of industrial strikes, workers immediately mobilized after the democratic breakthrough in Nepal.
- On April 20, workers demanded higher wages and better working conditions, and strikes hit all Kathmandu Valley factories. Groups of office workers occupied government buildings.
- At the same time, organized relay hunger strikes and *gheraus* (encircling a person and publicly humiliating them) broke out.

Workers

A former *pancha* observed that: “Nobody is working. You go to some offices and people only come once a week to do their attendance and get their pay. The lower staff isn’t obeying the senior staff. The senior staff cannot handle the situation and find it impossible to give orders. Everywhere employees bang tables against their chiefs. The workers are always on strike.”

Between 1951 and 1979, only 74 strikes had been recorded (less than 3/year over nearly three decades), yet from 1991-1992, 128 strikes were reported. The following year, 25 strikes broke out (more than eight times the previous average. (The main reason for strikes was wage grievances, but a few were called for shorter work weeks and better conditions.)

Caste, Gender & Religion

Alongside workplace struggles, religious, cultural and social conflicts were visibly intensified. Indeed, “it seemed as if every caste, linguistic group, or ethnic community raised its voice in one way or another in the six months between the end of the revolution and the announcement of the new constitution.” For the first time, Buddhists became a visible political force. On June 30, 1990, the Nepal Buddhist Association led some 20,000 people in Kathmandu on a show of support for a secular state. Although a tiny minority, Christians also advocated a secular state.

One analyst concluded that, “The 1990 movement gave women, Dalits, and other low caste groups—ethnic groups as well as regional linguistic, religious and a plethora of other groups—the legal and political voice required to resist the old legitimacy of ascription, oppression and discrimination.”



Long-Term Effects

- In May, professors' demand for the dismissal of *panchayat* era administrators was granted; in June, a hunger strike by the Nepal Teachers' Association ended only after all their demands were met; in August, a hunger strike by journalists brought sympathetic government intervention.
- In September, radical writers and artists protested the newly reconstituted Royal Nepal Academy because of its domination by male, pro-Congress members.

Long-Term Effects

Women mobilized as never before. Some immediately began agitating for equal property rights for women. In 1992, a large protest was mounted in the Terai city of Butwal. By 1995, All Nepal Women's Association passed a "Women's Rights Charter" that formally recognized females' equal rights to family property. One of the groups that grew out of the uprising, the Feminist Dalit Organization (FDO), reveals the extent to which Nepali society was transformed after 1990.

About 20% of Nepal's people are Dalits—80% of whom live below the official poverty line. They are not allowed to enter many temples and routinely face discrimination in jobs and pay scales. In the countryside, many Dalits are landless sharecroppers; in the cities, it is estimated that 80% of sex workers are Dalits.

Bonded Laborers

Participation of women in the movement led to many families experiencing changes in everyday power relations.

Estimates reported that from 7,000 to 10,000 women and children were sold every year into the sex trade in India. Another estimate reported nearly ten times that many—about 100,000 Nepali girls every year—being delivered to prostitution houses in India. Bonded child labor was common, since rural families often needed cash. Children lucky enough not to be sold as indentured servants were often compelled to work at home since they were needed to contribute to the house and the farm from an early age. Deprived of an education, many children became lifelong illiterates—a large majority of them female.

In 1992, a Bonded Laborers Liberation formed; eight years later, legislation passed outlawing such forms of slavery.

NGOs, Co-ops, Media

In 1974, only 15 registered NGOs could be counted in all of Nepal. Seven years after the 1990 uprising, the number of NGO's had mushroomed to 5,128 that were registered with the national Social Welfare Council. In the same year, another estimate counted more than 20,000, and another analyst claimed there were at least 6000 voluntary NGOs.

The number of formally organized cooperatives also skyrocketed after the uprising: from a total of 850 prior to 1992, in 1997 nearly four times as many (3200) existed.

Most significantly, new found freedoms won and energies generated by the *jana andolan* impelled huge expansion of autonomous media. From far fewer than 400 newspapers in 1990, their number more than doubled to over 874 in 1996.

Reciprocity

Nepal's vibrant civil society helped to produce the 1990 civil uprising. In turn, the *jana andolan* strengthened many sources of civil society: independent media, cooperatives, NGOs, minority movements, feminism, and workers' movements. Today, as Nepal continues to seek a new constitution, the capacity of its people to create new forms for action, central to the victorious uprising of 1990, remains one of the country's great resources.

Uprisings and Civil Society

Understanding the mutually reinforcing relationship of civil society and popular uprisings is key to comprehending a secret to movement building: long-term organizing efforts and sporadic insurgencies can be additive and complementary. Often portrayed in either/or terms, such a dichotomy more often than not privileges patient and quiet activism over militant confrontation politics. Nepal's 1990 uprising provides a vivid and instructive example of how unlocking popular insurgency can help amplify strengths of civil society.

This mutually reinforcing relationship of uprisings and civil society is a pattern I have already discerned in empirical studies of South Korea, Bangladesh, Taiwan, and the Philippines. For this reason, I refer to these people power insurgencies as *civil uprisings*, to distinguish them from centralized armed insurrections, coups d'etat, and riots.

Political Effects

- The 50-day uprising in 1990 won a multi-party parliament and reduced the king to a constitutional monarch in a new constitution.
- Ended 28-year monarchical rule
- Sought to bring back the democratically elected government with guided democracy.
- Abolished Panchayat regime.

THE “PEOPLE’S” MOVEMENT

The renewed strength of civil society led finally to the abolition of the monarchy in 2006.

But that is another story. There is a slideshow on the 2006 uprising on this website.

For more, see my book *Asia's Unknown Uprisings* (PM Press, 2012)