



## Dispatches from The Hall of Ideas!

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### RESEARCH, EVIDENCE & STATE BUILDING\*

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I was born in the remote district of Mugu. I had the opportunity to attend Budhanilkantha School, which eventually opened doors to the London School of Economics and Yale University. Over the last decade, I have worked alongside academic giants in development economics, such as Rohini Pande and Michael Callen, attempting to bring rigorous evidence into the messy reality of governance.

A significant portion of my research has focused on the long-term impact of the Maoist revolution on state-building and inclusive development. Nepal is a unique case in comparative politics; we are a democracy emerging from a decade-long conflict that has managed to avoid reverting to violence, yet we are still “getting there” in terms of maturity. My master’s thesis explored whether the revolution delivered on its promise of inclusion and how it affected fundamental democratic metrics, such as voter turnout.

Standard intuition might suggest that regions

experiencing the most intense conflict would see a withdrawal from the political process due to trauma or displacement. However, our research found the opposite. By comparing election results from 1991 and 1994 with those from 2008 and 2013, we observed that districts where the Maoists had active parallel governance structures actually saw higher voter turnout in the post-conflict period. This suggests that the revolution acted as a catalyst for political consciousness. It was a “hard-fought” democracy, and people in those regions felt a stronger urge to participate in the new system. This is some of the first causal evidence from Nepal showing how conflict can fundamentally alter a citizen’s relationship with the state.

Tied to this research is also the debate regarding inclusion in Nepal. Inclusion is often framed as a trade-off between “efficiency” and “representation”. There is a popular narrative that quotas bring “incompetent” people into power, thereby slowing down the bureaucracy. My research into local government suggests this is a misperception. When we examine the composition of mayors in Nepal, roughly 35 to 36 per cent belong to the Janajati community. Using education as a proxy for capacity, we found that Janajati mayors are, on average, just as educated as their Brahmin or Chhetri counterparts.

\* The text is an abridged and translated version of the May 2026 edition of Sambaad @ Samriddhi. Sambaad @ Samriddhi is a monthly discussion on contemporary issues held every month. In this edition of Sambaad@Samriddhi, Mr. Chandra Jung Bhandari shares his insights on research and use of evidence on state building. This discussion was moderated by Ashesh Shrestha.

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Furthermore, our study of earthquake relief tranches showed that Janajati mayors were often quicker to deliver the second and third instalments to their citizens. This is likely due to “proximity to power”. For the first time, marginalised citizens have access to a leader who understands their specific community needs, thereby unlocking local demand for services that was previously suppressed by a hierarchical state structure.

However, the picture for gender inclusion remains starkly different. While women represent roughly 41 per cent of local government members, almost entirely due to the quota for ward members, they

If we can update the “beliefs” of citizens so they see the long-term benefits of engaging with the state, we can improve the overall efficiency of governance.

Indeed, research can help shape policies and can inform questions that are relevant. At this point, it is also important to address the debate between qualitative and quantitative research. As someone who studied both social policy and economics, I see both fields as complementary; a large-scale survey gives us the “what,” but an anthropologist provides the “why”. Both are important and must be seen as complements.



are underrepresented in executive positions. Women represent less than 3 per cent of mayors and less than 1 per cent of ward chairs. This is a profound “talent misallocation”. In a country where women make up the majority of the population, it is statistically impossible that we cannot find more than 69 women capable of being ward chairs out of 6,743 wards. Research from Yale indicates that such misallocation of talent can lead to a gap in GDP of roughly 10 percentage points. Inclusion is not just a political imperative; it is an economic one.

At the juncture that Nepal is currently in, we must also talk about state-building. State-building is as much about the psychology of the citizen as it is about infrastructure. If a citizen believes the system is working, they are more likely to contribute to state-building tasks. This can be seen in small behaviours, such as birth registration. While the government mandates registration within 35 days, many wait until the document is urgently needed.

Building on these two requires that we strengthen our knowledge ecosystem. We must empower our own universities to be centres of independent inquiry. We need a system where academics are free to find uncomfortable truths. We must also recognise that inclusion and growth are not mutually exclusive. A sustained growth model requires an inclusive foundation. If our institutions exclude significant portions of the population, the growth will eventually falter or lead to social unrest. We must move beyond ‘personality-driven’ policymaking and towards a system that is guided by evidence, rigour, and a genuine commitment to the welfare of all citizens. The challenges are significant, but the opportunity to build a more resilient and inclusive Nepal is within our grasp if we are willing to follow where the evidence leads.

