

Time for a True Population Census: The Case of the Miscalculated Thangmi

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Thangmi Woman at Lokati Sindhupalchowk. Photo: Sara Shneiderman

Preamble:

The 1991 *Population Census of Nepal* conducted by His Majesty's Government has been widely criticised for being inaccurate and heavily weighted in favour of Nepal's dominant Hindu hierarchy. Based on my own research findings among

the Thangmi (Nep. *Thami*) population of Nepal and of Northeast India I would support these criticisms.

Mitigating circumstances?

Conducting an accurate census in a country like Nepal is admittedly a challenging task. The lack of infrastructure, coupled with the remoteness of some districts present a veritable challenge to field

workers involved in the demanding process of statistical recording. Having said this, the disparity between the total

Thangmi population figure provided by the government and the more realistic figures which I will present cannot be explained solely by difficult topography.

Introduction:

In this short article I aim to set the record straight with regard to the Thangmi, a much overlooked and oppressed Tibeto-Burman ethnic group of Nepal. By contrasting the official statistics from the 1991 population census as presented in the *Statistical Yearbook of Nepal* (1999) published by His Majesty's

Government, National Planning Commission Secretariat, Central Bureau of Statistics with careful and accurate grassroots population data collected by individuals and an NGO, I will show that the Thangmi population in Nepal is

in fact nearly double the official figure.

Disparity in Figures

According to the 1991 census, the total Thangmi population is 19,103 (1999, page 52) and there are 14,440 people who spoke Thangmi as a mother tongue (1999, page 22). Of equal interest, however, is the official breakdown of the Thangmi population by district. This is where the comparative material provided by the Charikot-based NGO *Integrated Community Development Movement* and the first volume of the yearly journal *Dolakhareng* most clearly show the inaccuracy of the government's data. Below is a table showing the Thangmi population in the eastern districts of Nepal. first according to the official statistics (from page 52 of the *Yearbook*) and then according to the survey conducted between

the months of Kartik and Phagun 2054, by Mr. Meghraj Simi Rishmi Thami, editor and publisher of *Dolakhareng* (pages 38-44). (See Fig.1)

As can be seen from the above figures, there is a great disparity between the official statistics and those provided by the journal *Dolakhareng*. Some of this difference may of course be attributed to natural population growth in the six or seven years between the two surveys (1991 to 1997). This could well account for the small increase in districts like Morang (from 129 to 150 people) or Bhojpur (from 157 to 200 people). Moreover, it is of course possible that *Dolakhareng* too miscalculated the total population figures. My own feeling is that this is quite unlikely because the Thangmi communities in the eastern districts of Nepal are tightly knit as well as in close contact with

one another. The number of Thangmi houses in each village, and the breakdown of men, women and children, is common knowledge to all who live in the area. According to the above figures then, there are almost three times more Thangmi people living the eastern districts of Nepal than the official census suggests.

The Thangmi Population of Dolakha

According to the *Statistical Yearbook of Nepal*, the district of Nepal with the largest Thangmi population is Dolakha, with 11,000 Thangmi (1999, page 53). Whilst the focus on Dolakha as containing the largest Thangmi population in Nepal is correct, the figure is a vast underestimate as I will show below. The Charikot-registered NGO, *Integrated Community Development Movement* has been conducting extremely detailed profiles of the VDCs in Dolakha district over the past few years. The Belgian sociologist, Philippe de Patoul, understood the need for accurate statistical data in the area to facilitate grassroots development programmes. Realising that there was neither accurate data nor suitable software for this task, de Patoul modified Microsoft Access to make it both Nepali language compatible as well as suitably inter-relational for collating

Different Estimates of the Total Thangmi Population in the Eastern Districts of Nepal
Fig. 1

District	Official Statistics, 1991	Survey Results from <i>Dolakhareng</i> , 1997-998
Jhapa	148	300
Ilam	715	3,000
Morang	129	150
Udayapur	162	221
Khotang	54	160
Bhojpur	57	200
Sunsari	21	50
Total:	1,386	4,081

data from various villages. The result is a self-standing software package named *Nepsus* (Nepal Census), and four profiles of VDCs in the Dolakha district have been completed to date: namely Alampu, Bulung, Sundrawati and Orang. To these four should be added the 1998 *Lapilang Village Profile* (V.S. 2054), conducted before the establishment of the NGO, the

specific need (namely accurate census statistics) and has made a serious step in the direction of rectifying the abundant misinformation in Nepal. For this alone, if not for more, the NGO should be applauded. More important for my own research however, is the direct application this has for the Thangmi. Whilst the total Thangmi population of Dolakha

district has not yet been established, three VDCs with substantial Thangmi populations have been meticulously studied and the profiles made available. The following table displays the salient information from these respective village profiles.

The findings summarised in the table (Fig.2) are of considerable importance.

Fig. 2 Population Statistics from three Village Profiles in Dolakha district

Year Conducted	Alampu 1999	Sundrawati 1999	Lapilang 1998	Total
Total Population	2,228	3,424	5,025	10,677
Thangmi Population	2,025	1,177	2,454	5,656
Thangmi as % of Total Population	90.9%	34.4%	48.9%	58%

success of which convinced the concerned parties of the need for complete statistical information.

My detailed description of the origins and establishment of the NGO *Integrated Community Development Movement* is intentional. Unlike many of the other NGOs which proliferate throughout Nepal, this locally-based group has isolated a



Thangmi engagement ritual, Photo: Sara Schneiderman

Whilst the number of Thangmi people as a percentage of the total VDC population varies widely, one thing is unmistakably clear: in just three VDCs there are 5,656 Thangmi men, women and children. The implications of these figures for the total Thangmi population of Nepal are crucial.

At a rough estimate, let us say that there are 10 VDCs in the Dolakha district which have a sizeable population of Thangmi people. Moreover, based on the above figures which range from 1,177 to 2,454 Thangmi per VDC, let us take an average of 2,000 for our estimated calculations. With these figures, then, we arrive at a total of 20,000 Thangmi just within Dolakha

district (2,000 people in each of the 10 VDCs = 20,000), already more than the official figure of the total Thangmi population within the whole of Nepal (19,103 people). The official figure is clearly no longer convincing.

The Sindhupalcok Thangmi Population

After Dolakha, the district in Nepal in which the most Thangmi are found is

Sindhupalcok. According to the *Statistical Yearbook of Nepal*, there were 3,173 Thangmi in Sindhupalcok during the 1991 census (1999, page 53). Whilst accurate and detailed population statistics are not available for Sindhupalcok in the way they are for Dolakha or



Thangmi Children at Lokati Sindhupalchowk. Photo: Sara Schneiderman

for the eastern districts of Nepal. I believe that the figure of little over 3,000 Thangmi in Sindhupalcok is also a vast underestimate. During my long stay in Chokati VDC in 1998, I managed to ascertain from the local authorities that there were at least 1,200 Thangmi men, women and children in this VDC alone, and I know of at least a further six VDCs in the district with sizeable Thangmi

populations. As a conservative estimate, let us take Chokati to be a VDC with a high Thangmi population density, and posit that the six other VDCs have no more than 800 Thangmi each. In this scenario, we still arrive at a figure of 6,000 Thangmi in Sindhupalcok, once again

double the official number.

Why this Disparity?

In my opinion, there are two main reasons for the discrepancy between the official and the non-official figures. First, ethnic Thangmi and speakers of the Thangmi language usually live in remote and inaccessible areas where population surveys are difficult to conduct with any real

accuracy. It is likely that many Thangmi were not included because of this, thereby resulting in a lower total which they are not native, told me that when they first applied for jobs, they claimed to belong to one of the aforementioned West Bengal. The Sikkim population data is not so accurate, but there are many Thangmi families settled in and

Fig. 3 Estimate of Total Thangmi Population (non-official figures)

Area	Population
Dolakha	20,000 +/-
Sindhupalchok	6,000 +/-
Eastern Districts	4,081
Other Districts (Kathmandu, Ramechhap, etc.)	3,000 +/-
West Bengal & Sikkim (India)	5,500 +/-
Total (including Indian Thangmi population):	38,500 +/-
Total (excluding Indian Thangmi population):	33,000 +/-

population figure. Second, and perhaps more importantly, many Thangmi pass themselves off as belonging to other more prominent ethnic groups such as Tamang, and less frequently, as Gurung or Rai. The reason that they give for this is simply that since few people in administrative positions have ever heard of the ethnic group, admitting to being Thangmi may unwittingly result in a stream of questions about who they are and where they come from, such as inquiring whether Thangmi are low caste Hindus or indigenous Kiranti people. Moreover, when Thangmi introduce themselves to strangers, they are often mistaken for undesirable groups such as Kami 'blacksmiths' or Dhimi 'folk-healer', due to the similar sounding nature of their Nepalified name (Thami). All the Thangmi men whom I have interviewed working in areas in

ethnic groups and did not admit to being Thangmi. In brief then, these are the two most likely reasons for the disparity between the figures.

Darjeeling and Sikkim

Although not within Nepal's national borders, both Darjeeling and Sikkim have sizeable Thangmi populations. The details of the migration to these areas are interesting and complicated, and will be the substance of a later article. For the present, the population statistics should suffice. Based on data collected by the Thami societies in the area in the early 1990s, we can confidently state that there are more than 4,400 Thangmi in the whole of West Bengal and Sikkim. The breakdown is as follows: Darjeeling 2,732; Kurseong 1,208; Kalimpong 105; and Siliguri and Dooars 383, leading to a total of 4,426 Thangmi in

around Gangtok. My informed estimate, based on conversations with people from the area as well as a field visit in March 2000, is of around 1,000 Thangmi in the area. This brings the total Thangmi population in India to just under 5,500.

A More Realistic Total Figure

Based on the data as outlined above, I would propose 33,000 to 38,500 as a more realistic (albeit estimated and non-official) total Thangmi population figure. The figure requires two points of clarification. First, the total population depends on whether one counts Thangmi residing permanently or semi-permanently outside of Nepal. The Thangmi population of Darjeeling and Sikkim is sizeable, not to mention economically influential, and adding them to the total figure

adds a good 5,500 people. The official census of Nepal did not include these people, however, so in my effort to compare like with like, I have offered two totals in the table below, one including and one excluding the Indian Thangmi population. The second point of clarification I should add is to the category I named *Other Districts*. Thangmi inhabit many districts in Nepal, although they are indigenous and autochthonous to no more than two or three, and I have estimated that around 3,000 Thangmi live in non-specified districts in Nepal, including Kathmandu. For those readers

who suspect 3,000 to be a little on the high side, I would urge them to consult the *Statistical Yearbook of Nepal*, pages 52-56, where they will find that there are 465 recorded Thangmi in Sindhuli, 1334 in Ramechhap, 159 in Kathmandu and 94 in Sarlahi, not to mention under a hundred in each of 20 other districts. (See Fig.3)

Conclusion

As has become apparent in this short article, there is a great disparity between the official population statistics as provided by the government and the more likely and significantly higher figures. One of the first demands of the *janajati*

movement is for accurate population figures for the ethnic and tribal peoples of Nepal, and we can but hope that the forthcoming census will come close to meeting this need. Failing that, the oppressed ethnic groups of Nepal, such as the Thangmi, will once again be misrepresented and belittled.

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श्रद्धान्जली

किरात धर्म तथा साहित्य उत्थानका लागि आजीवन योगदान पुऱ्याउने व्यक्तित्व तथा २००७ सालको सशस्त्र क्रान्तिका योद्धा श्री आसमान सुब्बम (मादेन) को यहि जेठ १८, २०५७ सालमा निधन भएकोले वहाँको आत्माको चिरशान्तिको लागि हार्दिक श्रद्धान्जली तथा वहाको सोक सन्तप्त परिवार प्रति हार्दिक समवेदना प्रकट गर्दछौ ।

किरात सेवा समाज

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