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

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The Thangmi (Nep. Thami) population of Nepal and of Northeast India is often referred to as a mistimed population, with workers involved in the demanding process of statistical recording. Having read this, the disparity between the Thangmi population figure provided by the government and the more realistic figure 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 rich overlonged 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 the 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 14,800 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 most compelling material provided by the Charikot-based NGO Integrated Community Development Movement and the first volume of the yearly journal Dolakharenge 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. Meghnath Simi Rishmi Thami, editor and publisher of Dolakharenge (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 Dolakharenge. 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 Dolakharenge 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 in 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 Dolakha 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 Patou, 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 Patou modified Microsoft Access to make it both Nepal language compatible as well as suitable for collating.
data from various villages. The result is a self-standing software package named Nepus (Nepal Census), and four profiles of VDCs in the Dolakha district have been completed to date: namely Alampu, Bolung, 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 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 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Conducted</th>
<th>Alampu 1999</th>
<th>Sundrawati 1999</th>
<th>Lapilang 1998</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Population</td>
<td>2,228</td>
<td>3,424</td>
<td>5,025</td>
<td>10,677</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thangmi Population</td>
<td>2,025</td>
<td>1,177</td>
<td>2,454</td>
<td>5,656</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thangmi as % of Total Population</td>
<td>90.9%</td>
<td>34.4%</td>
<td>48.9%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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, which leads us to 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 Sindhupalchok Thangmi Population

After Dolakha, the district in Nepal in which the most Thangmi are found is Sindhupalchok. According to the Statistical Yearbook of Nepal, there were 3,173 Thangmi in Sindhupalchok during the 1991 census (1999, page 53). Whilst accurate and detailed population statistics are not available for Sindhupalchok, in the way they are for Dolakha or the eastern districts of Nepal, I believe that the figure of over 3,000 Thangmi in Sindhupalchok 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 Sindhupalchok, 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
adds a good 5,500 people. The official census of Nepal did not include these people. 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 Ramechap, 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 Sankranti 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.

**References**

