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EXPLORING ETHNIC ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN NEPAL: CULTURAL LEGACY AND ECONOMIC REALITIES

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between cultural identity, community support, and entrepreneurial dynamics among ethnic entrepreneurs in Nepal. The study population consists of diverse ethnic communities from Koshi Province, Nepal. The data was collected from four districts of Koshi province, viz. Morang, Sunsari, Jhapa. The research examines how traditional cultural heritage influences business opportunities while creating unique ethnic entrepreneurial challenges. The study uses a cross-sectional design. Primary data was collected from 110 ethnic entrepreneurs using a structured questionnaire, which was read to the ethnic entrepreneurs (for better comprehension), who were engaged in different businesses. The key findings revealed that cultural legacy serves as both a foundation for business creation and a potential constraint on market expansion. On the one hand, strong community networks provide essential support and resources; on the other hand, they may also limit access to broader economic opportunities. Notably, the research uncovers a paradoxical relationship where increased economic potential corresponds with heightened entrepreneurial challenges, suggesting that growth aspirations often encounter systemic barriers in mainstream markets.

These findings contribute to understanding ethnic entrepreneurship in developing economies by highlighting the delicate balance between cultural preservation and business scalability. The study highlights the need for policy approaches that recognize the value of cultural heritage and the structural obstacles facing ethnic entrepreneurs. Key gaps identified for future research include

exploring digital adaptation strategies, examining women entrepreneurs' challenges, and investigating comparative models across different multicultural contexts.

KEYWORDS: - Ethnic entrepreneurship, cultural identity, economic opportunity, entrepreneurial challenges, community support, ethnic enclaves, cultural preservation.

JEL Classification Code: L26, Z13, O17, J15

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Ethnic entrepreneurship in Nepal reflects a unique mix of cultural heritage (Pradhan et al., 2022) and economic opportunity (Maharjan et al., 2024). In Nepal, ethnic enterprises are strongly related to ethnic identity, traditional customs, and social structures. Nepal has multi-ethnic and multi-cultural characteristics (Giri, 2020). In Nepal, there are more than 120 ethnic groups with different languages (Kansakar & Tuladhar, 2020). Nepal's multi-ethnic culture has resulted in the emergence of business practices shaped by cultural values and traditions. Ethnic entrepreneurs usually face challenges, such as limited access to finance, discrimination, and a lack of formal business training (Rahman et al., 2018; Bates et al., 2007). In Nepal, ethnic entrepreneurs face similar challenges (Villanger, 2015). However, they also benefit from strong community ties and traditional knowledge that can give them a competitive edge (Carney, 2007).

Giri (2020) states that ethnic groups in Nepal have historically depended on traditional occupations and livelihood practices, which are embedded in their cultural practices and customs. Tamang (2016) shows that indigenous communities such as the Newars, Tamangs, and Magars have long been engaged in specific crafts, agriculture, and trade practices passed down through generations. This cultural inheritance has contributed to forming unique businesses, ranging from handicrafts to hospitality and ethnic tourism (Upadhyay, 2020). These businesses not only provide economic sustenance but also serve as a means of preserving ethnic traditions and customs in a rapidly globalizing world (Iyer & Shapiro, 1999). Further, Aldrich and Waldinger (1990) assert that ethnic entrepreneurship holds potential. However, its growth is not without limitations. Access to finance remains one of the primary barriers (Rahman et al., 2018) as many ethnic entrepreneurs in Nepal rely on small-scale capital, often from family or community sources, making it difficult to expand their businesses (Villanger, 2015). Moreover, ethnic businesses may be constrained by societal stereotypes and discrimination, which affects their ability to access broader markets and networks (Aldrich & Waldinger, 1990)

Ethnic businesses in Nepal often emerge from **historically prescribed occupations** (Levine, 1987). The Newars, traditionally artisans and traders, dominate handicrafts and goldsmithing (Tamang,

2016), while the Thakal is are renowned for their hospitality businesses (Adhikari, 2014). These enterprises are not merely economic ventures but also **cultural preservation mechanisms**, ensuring the continuity of traditional skills (Ma & Guo, 2024). Growth of ethnic entrepreneurship can be attributed to the limited opportunities available in the formal job market, especially for marginalized groups. Ethnic people can overcome discrimination, lack of formal education, and language barriers by starting their ethnic enterprises. Therefore, ethnic enterprises usually employ people from the same community, creating economic opportunities at the grassroots level.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Ethnic Entrepreneurship in Nepal

Ethnic entrepreneurship is a form of business ownership among immigrant or minority groups that relies on ethnic networks, collective resources, and shared identity to overcome barriers in the host economy (Gold & Light, 2000). Similarly, Aldrich and Waldinger (1990) define ethnic entrepreneurship as a strategy for economic mobility where ethnic groups use enclave economies, family labour, and informal credit systems to compete in disadvantaged market conditions. In the context of Nepal, ethnicity refers to the social identity of groups distinguished by shared cultural traits such as language, religion, ancestry, and customs. It is a complex and fluid construct encompassing primordial elements, such as kinship ties and ancestral origins, and includes social interactions and historical contexts (Ghimire, 2024).

Ethnic entrepreneurship in Nepal has gained scholarly attention as a unique intersection of cultural identity and economic activity (Maharjan et al., 2024). The studies in ethnic entrepreneurship reveal that contemporary ethnic businesses are immensely influenced by occupational caste systems (Gellner, 2007). For example, due to centuries-old skills, the Newar community maintains strong entrepreneurial traditions in handicrafts and gold smithing (Tamang, 2016). Likewise, Thakali entrepreneurs have successfully commercialized their ethnic cuisine in Nepal's hospitality sector (Adhikari, 2014).

Similarly, community social networks play a crucial role in facilitating the growth of ethnic entrepreneurship (Janjuha-Jivraj, 2003; Assudani, 2009). The informal institutions, like the Newar Guthi system, provide necessary social capital and financial support (Shakya & Drechsler, 2023). However, in Nepal, marginalized groups face significant barriers (Jones & Boyd, 2011). Subedi and Shrestha (2024) define Guthi as a social and religious institution established by philanthropists by donating movable or immovable property, income-producing assets, or funds for supporting shrines, festivals, temples, construction, and maintenance of various facilities. The digital revolution has created new opportunities (Hansen, 2019) that can be applied in the case of ethnic entrepreneurs as well. Omotosho (2023) asserts that social media platforms help traditional artisans to cut the channel levels (intermediaries) and reach global markets directly.

2.2 Ethnic Entrepreneurial Opportunity and Cultural Legacy & Identity

Ethnic entrepreneurial opportunity is strongly influenced by cultural legacy and identity (Opote et al., 2021). Ethnic entrepreneurs leverage their cultural heritage to create unique business prospects (Valentina et al., 2015). Literature indicates that shared cultural values and traditions provide competitive advantages in niche markets (Power, 2010). However, the relationship between cultural

identity and ethnic entrepreneurship is complex. Ethnic entrepreneurship can grow due to ethnic solidarity but may face challenges in mainstream markets. Similarly, ethnic entrepreneurs often benefit from their cultural heritage as a resource, transform their traditions, build social networks, and maintain their collective identity into economic capital (Foley, 2008). Likewise, ethnic entrepreneurs' cultural legacy provides a competitive edge, enabling niche marketing such as food, textiles, or cultural services (Aaltonen et al., 2015).

2.3 Ethnic Entrepreneurial Opportunity and Ethnic Entrepreneurial Challenges

The relationship between ethnic entrepreneurial opportunity and entrepreneurial challenges is paradoxical (HERATH et al., 2018). While ethnic communities create unique entrepreneurial opportunities, they face systemic barriers that limit business growth (Bates et al., 2007). Different scholars have identified various challenges faced by ethnic entrepreneurs. Bruder et al. (2011) asserted that out of many challenges faced by ethnic entrepreneurs, financial exclusion (i.e. restricting ethnic entrepreneurs from access to capital), discrimination (barriers in commercial leasing and customer acquisition), and the regulatory complexities (complicated rules and regulations) are the major problems faced by them. Basu (1998) also pointed out those ethnic entrepreneurs limited access to capital is one of the major problems faced by ethnic entrepreneurs. The problem of financial exclusion results in reliance on informal lending sources for capital at higher interest rates and higher cost of capital. Similarly, Feagin and Imani (1994) also noted that African American Entrepreneurs faced the problem of discrimination. Further, David and Terstriep (2025) noted that immigrant entrepreneurs face regulatory barriers such as bureaucratic complexities.

2.4 Ethnic Entrepreneurial Opportunity and Community Social Support

Ethnic entrepreneurship is notably influenced by community social support (Dana et al., 2020), which provides resources, networks, and cultural solidarity to immigrant and minority business owners (Bates, 1994). Likewise, Davidson et al. (2010) argue that community and social support within ethnic communities often involves informal borrowing, shared business knowledge, and access to co-ethnic labor pools. Chinatowns are examples of Ethnic enclaves (Pang & Rath, 2007). Ethnic enclaves facilitate entrepreneurship by creating a protected market and fostering trust-based transactions (Rezaei, 2011). Beyond financial capital, community social support offers intangible benefits such as mentorship and emotional encouragement (Davidson et al., 2010). Community and social support foster entrepreneurial resilience (Aldrich & Waldinger, 1990; Kipkosgei, 2022). Ethnic business associations and religious institutions often serve as hubs for networking, skill-sharing, and collective problem-solving, reinforcing entrepreneurial success (Fadahunsi, 2000; Choi, 2010).

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used a cross-sectional research design. The study population consists of ethnic entrepreneurs from Koshi Province of Nepal. Morang, Sunsari and Jhapa districts of Koshi province of Nepal. Primary data was collected from 105 ethnic entrepreneurs using a standardized structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was read and explained to the ethnic entrepreneurs for the respondents' comprehension. The collected data was coded, entered and analyzed in SPSS.

Descriptive statistical tools were used for demographic characteristics of the respondents, and for inferential purposes, the Pearson Correlation test was used.

4.0 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1
Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Variables	Groups	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	60	57.1
	Female	45	42.9
Ethnicity	Chaudhary (Tharu)	22	21.0
	Dhimal	11	10.5
	Limbu	15	14.3
	Newar	19	18.1
	Rajbanshi	8	7.6
	Sherpa	13	12.4
	Teli	17	16.2
Business	Banana	19	18.1
	Grocery store	10	9.5
	Limbu and Rai ethnicclothing shop	7	6.7
	Himalayan Medicinal Herbs	14	13.3
	Bhakka	21	20.0
	Sitra (Dried small fish from the river)	7	6.7
	Handforged Metal Pots	19	18.1
	Mercha (Medicinal Herb for fermentation)	8	7.6
	Total	105	100

Table 1 exhibits the demographic profile of the study's respondents. Out of 105 respondents, 57.1 per cent were males, and the remaining 42.9 per cent were females. This study collected primary data from seven ethnic groups. Of 105 ethnic entrepreneurs, 21 per cent were from the Chaudhary ethnic community, followed by the next highest 18.1 per cent for the Newar ethnic group. Likewise, other ethnic communities, viz. Teli, Limbu, Dhimal, and Sherpa account for 16.2, 14.3, 10.5, and 12.4 per cent, respectively. The lowest number of ethnic entrepreneurs in this study was Rajbanshi, with 7.6 per cent.

The data was collected from respondents engaged in eight different business categories. Out of 105 ethnic entrepreneurs, 20 per cent sold *Bhakka*. Bhakka is a food with a slightly conical shape made with rice flour, which is steamed (Thagunna et al., 2023). Similarly, 18.1 per cent of the respondents sold bananas in baskets, and the same number of respondents were engaged in the traditional business of metal-forged pots. In contrast, 6.7 per cent of respondents were engaged in the business related to ethical dresses. By the same number, the entrepreneurs were selling Sidra, a small sun-dried fish popular in Nepal and India (Thapa, 2016). Moreover, 13.3 per cent of the respondents sold Himalayan medicinal herbs (locally known as Jadibuti), and 7.6 per cent of

respondents were engaged in selling *Marcha/Murcha*. *Marcha* is an amyolytic fermentation starter indigenous to Nepal used to prepare alcoholic beverages (Tsuyoshi et al., 2005).

Table 2
Correlations Matrix N=105 and Reliability Statistics

Constructs	CLI	OEI	EEC	CSS	Conbach α	Likert Items
CLI	1				0.890	5
OEI	.708**	1			0.729	5
EEC	.761**	.656**	1		0.639	5
CSS	.705**	.745**	.706**	1	0.762	3
Overall Reliability	-	-	-	-	0.918	18

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). CLI=Cultural Legacy and Identity, OEI= Opportunity for Economic Impact (Economic Impact of Ethnic Entrepreneurship), EEC= Ethnic Entrepreneurial Challenges, CSS Community and Social Support.

Table 2 presents the study's reliability statistics. The questionnaire contained 18 Likert items on a five-point scale. Five Likert items were used to measure the constructs, viz. CLI, OEI, and CEE. Only three Likert items were used to measure CSS. Except for the construct CEE, the reliability statistics suggest an acceptable reliability ($\alpha > .7$). A Cronbach's Alpha value above .7 is acceptable (Cortina, 1993).

4.1 Relationship between Cultural Legacy and Identity and Opportunity for Economic Impact

The results provided in Table 2 show a significant positive correlation between cultural legacy and identity and opportunity for economic impact ($\beta = 0.708$, $p < 0.01$), which implies that cultural legacy and identity, and the opportunity for economic impact of ethnic entrepreneurship, correspond with each other. The findings align with the findings of other studies as well. Cultural elements not only differentiate ethnic businesses but also foster a sense of belonging and self-esteem among community members (Navarrete & Jenkins, 2011). Iyer and Shapiro (1999) argue that ethnic entrepreneurs can design cultural products and services that resonate with their community and the broader market and eventually impact the economy. Similarly, ethnic entrepreneurs' cultural identity provides them a sense of belonging and motivation to succeed economically while preserving their traditions (Gold & Light, 2000). Further, ethnic communities often have strong social networks that facilitate trust-based financing and customer loyalty (Uzzi, 1999). Such trust-based financing helps ethnic entrepreneurs to exploit economic opportunity (Maung, 2024). Thus, people sharing a similar culture tend to share a shared cultural identity and sense of belongingness. Such a sense of shared identity helps them overcome different entrepreneurial barriers and create products and services through shared knowledge, resulting in entrepreneurial opportunity.

4.2 Relationship between Cultural Legacy and Identity and Ethnic Entrepreneurial Challenges

The correlation analysis presented in Table 2 indicates a statistically significant positive correlation between cultural legacy and identity and ethnic entrepreneurial challenges ($\beta = 0.761$, $p < 0.01$).

The finding is counterintuitive, since the cultural legacy and ethnic identity of the entrepreneur are expected to create entrepreneurial opportunities, as stated by (Power, 2010; Aaltonen et al., 2015; Valentina et al., 2015; Opute et al., 2021). However, the findings are supported by the opinion of Gold and Light (2000), who argue that ethnic entrepreneurs may face systemic biases in the form of exclusion from formal capital access and commercial leasing in the mainstream market, because of their cultural roots. Likewise, Aldrich and Waldinger (1990) state that cultural identity may reinforce excessive in-group reliance but may also lead to exclusion from broader economic networks. Further, ethnic enterprises often focus on serving co-ethnic communities, which can limit their growth potential in a broader market (Portes & Zhou, 1992). Thus, cultural legacy and identity not only foster ethnic entrepreneurial opportunities, but sometimes they may create constraints too, if the entrepreneurs focus only on the co-ethnic community and rely excessively on it.

4.3 Relationship between Opportunity for Economic Impact and Ethnic Entrepreneurial Challenges.

The correlation test suggests a moderately positive but statistically significant relationship between opportunity for economic impact and ethnic entrepreneurial challenges ($\beta = 0.656$, $p < 0.01$). A positive relationship between the variables reflects a nuanced reality. It implies that the greater the potential for ethnic entrepreneurs to make economic contributions, the more complex and demanding their entrepreneurial journey tends to be. Zhou (2004) states that when ethnic entrepreneurs try to expand their business beyond their ethnic enclaves, they face more complex and systematic barriers such as discriminatory regulations, limited access to mainstream financial systems, and a lack of institutional support. Similarly, ethnic entrepreneurs not only draw on cultural strengths, but also face the problems of cultural misalignment with mainstream business practices when scaling up (Basu, 1998). Likewise, ethnic entrepreneurs, while seeking growth, usually face competition, regulated barriers, or systemic biases that limit their success (Aldrich & Waldinger, 1990). Thus, when ethnic entrepreneurs' opportunity for economic impact increases (in a way that can be called a growth opportunity), it also brings several challenges.

4.4 Relationship between Community and Social Support, Cultural legacy, and Identity.

The correlation between community and social support and cultural legacy and identity indicates a statistically positive relation ($\beta = 0.705$, $p < 0.01$). The result suggests that community and social support, cultural legacy and identity mutually reinforce each other. A positive relationship between **community and social support**, cultural legacy, and identity can be attributed to the fact that the success of ethnic entrepreneurs is often closely linked to their cultural background and the support structures within their ethnic communities. Ethnic entrepreneurs usually depend on community networks for startup capital (Samila & Sorenson, 2017), labour, customer bases, and knowledge sharing (Assudani, 2009). The finding is supported by the findings of Foley (2008), who stated that social and community networks offer necessary resources and reinforce the entrepreneur's cultural identity and legacy. Entrepreneurs draw on their heritage to develop culturally specific products or services, which in turn strengthen community pride and cohesion (Basu, 1998).

4.5 Relationship between Community Social Support and Opportunity for Economic Impact.

The correlation matrix presented in Table 2 suggests a statistically positive correlation between the variables ($\beta = 0.745$, $p < 0.01$). The result suggests that the more community social support the

entrepreneurs get, the higher their potential to make an economic impact. The result aligns with the findings of Gold and Light (2000), who found that ethnic communities often provide informal financing through rotating savings clubs and family loans, which are instrumental in providing opportunities for economic impact. Without community and social support, the ethnic entrepreneurs cannot make an economic impact. Similarly, strong social and community ties help in creating a loyal customer base, which reduces initial marketing cost (Portes & Zhou, 1992). Without a loyal customer network like other businesses, ethnic entrepreneurs cannot make a profound economic impact.

5.0 DISCUSSION

The strong positive correlation ($\beta = 0.761$) between cultural identity and challenges suggests that reliance on co-ethnic networks may exclude entrepreneurs from mainstream markets (Aldrich & Waldinger, 1990). The question arises: While cultural identity creates unique ethnic entrepreneurial opportunities, does it inherently limit scalability by reinforcing ethnic enclaves? Similarly, culture-specific products, such as halal food and diaspora fashion, can achieve global appeal if positioned as exotic or niche (Iyer & Shapiro, 1999). The key debate is whether ethnic entrepreneurs should dilute cultural specificity to scale, or does authenticity itself hold untapped economic potential?

Similarly, a strong correlation exists between social support and opportunity for economic impact ($\beta = 0.745$), indicating an over-reliance on the co-ethnic community. Thus, ethnic entrepreneurs may be trapped by this over-reliance. Over-reliance on the co-ethnic community's social support may create a systematic dependency rather than empowerment.

Likewise, the study revealed a positive correlation between economic opportunity and ethnic entrepreneurial challenge ($\beta = 0.656$). The greater the opportunity for economic impact, the higher the entrepreneurial challenges. Thus, ethnic entrepreneurs should be aware that expansion beyond ethnic enclaves may expose them to discrimination in financing and cultural misalignment (Basu, 1998). Thus, ethnic entrepreneurs may face the "success penalty", where their opportunity creates barriers for expansion when entering a mainstream market.

Further, the finding indicated a statistically significant positive correlation of cultural legacy with ethnic entrepreneurial opportunity ($\beta = 0.708$) and ethnic entrepreneurial challenges ($\beta = 0.761$). The mainstream consumer may portray cultural products as exotic products. Ethnic entrepreneurs should be aware that excessively modifying culture for economic gain risks cultural dilution and loss of authenticity.

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