

FROM A MOUNTAIN-RURAL TO A PLAINS-URBAN SOCIETY IMPLICATIONS OF THE 1981 NEPALESE CENSUS

MELVYN C. GOLDSTEIN, JAMES L. ROSS, AND SIDNEY SCHULER

*Department of Anthropology
Case Western Reserve University
Cleveland, Ohio 44106, U.S.A.*

ABSTRACT The preliminary results of the 1981 Nepal Census are analysed with respect to urbanization and population movement to the Terai. The paper reports a process of transformation wherein Nepal is shifting from a rural hill and mountain society to an urban-subtropical plains state.

RÉSUMÉ *Une Société rurale des montagnes se déplace vers une culture urbaine des plaines: les implications du recensement du Népal de 1981.* Les résultats préliminaires du recensement du Népal effectué en 1981 sont analysés par rapport à l'urbanisation et au déplacement de la population vers la région du Terai. Cette étude trace les lignes selon lesquelles la société népalaise, jusqu'ici rurale et basée dans les collines et les montagnes, se déplace vers un pays urbain des plaines subtropicales.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG *Auswirkungen der Volkszählung in Nepal von 1981: Wandel von bäuerlicher Berg- zu städtischer Flachlandgesellschaft.* Die vorläufigen Ergebnisse der Volkszählung in Nepal aus dem Jahre 1981 werden im Hinblick auf die Urbanisierung und die Bevölkerungsabwanderung ins südl. Nepal (Terai) analysiert. Die Veröffentlichung berichtet über die Umgestaltung Nepals von einem bäuerlichen Bergvolk zu einer mehr urbanisierten Bevölkerung im subtropischen Flachland.

That Nepal has a population problem is not news. The 1971 Nepal census reported a population of 11,555,983 and a 2 percent growth rate which translates into a doubling of the 1971 population in 35 years (Tuladhar *et al.*, 1978). However, between 1971 and 1981, Nepal increased its Family Planning programmes and activities in an effort to retard the relatively high rate of population growth. The results of the 1981 census show that this effort has not succeeded in slowing the process. To the contrary, the 1981 census reported a total population of 15,020,541 and a growth rate of 2.6 percent per annum (Gurung, 1982). This is a 30 percent increase in the growth rate between 1971 and 1981 and a doubling time of only 27 years. On the average, Nepal added 346,456 persons to the population each year during the past decade.

The 1981 census has shown other patterns of population dynamics which have major significance for the future. Two of these, urbanization and migration into the Terai, the narrow southern belt of subtropical plains, threaten to transform Nepal totally. The Kingdom of Nepal is widely considered an archetypical Hill and Mountain society. Nestled in the midst of the mighty Himalayan Range, 79 percent of Nepal's area of 145,390 square kilometres (54,362 square miles) is rough and rugged topography inhabited by tough and resourceful villagers who cultivate the steep slopes and herd sheep and goats in the upland meadows and valleys. The main exception to this is the narrow belt bordering on India which is a flat (80-350 m

above sea level), subtropical extension of the Gangetic plain known as the Terai. Traditionally, the overwhelming majority of Nepal's population resided in the hill and mountain areas. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of population in these two areas between 1952/54 and 1981.

In 1952/54, 65 percent of Nepal's population resided in the hills and mountains whereas only 35 percent lived in the subtropical, flat Terai. Twenty years later, in 1971, the Terai segment of the country had increased only slightly to 38 percent leaving 62 percent of Nepal's population hill and mountain inhabitants.

Throughout this 20-year period the percentage of urban inhabitants was small and grew little. As Table 2 illustrates, in 1952/54 2.8 percent of the total population lived in urban areas; in 1961, 3.6 percent lived in urban areas; and in 1971, 4 percent. While there has been some inconsistency in the definition of what constitutes an urban area, there is no question but that the urban sector of the society traditionally was extremely small and was growing slowly. Between 1961 and 1971, for example, the proportion of urban dwellers in Nepal increased from 3.6 to 4 percent.

The recently completed census of 1981, however, reports that a substantial shift in the pattern of Nepal's population distribution has taken place between 1971 and 1981. If this shift continues over the next 20 years it will transform Nepal from a "classic" mountain country into a predominantly flat, subtropical, and urban nation; and there is every reason to expect that these rates will increase. The

TABLE 1
Actual and projected number and percent of Nepal's population 1952/54-2011

Year	Terai (including inner Terai)		Hills and mountains		Terai plus urban areas in the hills		Hills and mountains minus Hill urban areas		Total population
	No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent	
1952/54	2,904,009	(35.3)	5,331,070	(64.7)	3,084,040	(37.5)	5,151,039	(62.5)	8,235,079
1961	3,069,503	(32.6)	6,343,493	(67.4)	3,632,786	(38.5)	5,789,210	(61.5)	9,412,996
1971	4,345,966	(38)	7,210,017	(62)	5,192,937	(44.9)	6,363,046	(55.1)	11,555,983
1981	7,030,891	(46.8)	7,989,560	(53.2)	7,445,935	(49.6)	7,574,517	(50.4)	15,020,452
1991*	10,041,806	(51.4)	9,481,758	(48.6)	10,676,415	(54.7)	8,847,149	(45.3)	19,523,564
2001*	14,342,118	(56.5)	11,034,585	(43.5)	15,308,465	(60.3)	10,068,238	(39.7)	25,376,703
2011*	20,483,998	(62)	12,500,608	(38)	21,950,168	(66.5)	11,034,438	(33.5)	32,984,606

Sources: Central Bureau of Statistics, p. 28; Gurung, p. 14; Tuladhar *et al.*, p. 7.

*Projection based on 1971-1981 growth rate.

TABLE 2
Number of inhabitants in selected urban areas 1952-2011 and total number and percent of the urban sector in Nepal

Year	Kathmandu	Biratnagar	All urban areas	% of total population
1952/54	106,579	—	238,015	2.8
1961	121,019	35,355	336,222	3.6
1971	150,402	45,100	461,938	4
1981	235,211	93,899	958,076	6.4
1991*	367,823	279,251	2,203,383	11.3
2001*	575,201	830,570	5,067,340	20
2011*	899,500	2,470,345	11,653,869	35.3

Compiled from: Gurung, pp. 7, 8; Tuladhar *et al.*, p. 7.

*Projection based on 1971-1981 growth rate.

results of the 1981 census should be analysed with respect to the Terai and urban sectors and the impending societal metamorphosis.

Table 2 shows the marked increase in the proportion of urban dwellers during the ten-year interval 1971-81. According to the 1981 census, 6.4 percent of Nepal's population now live in urban areas (Gurung, 1982). This is the result of an urban growth rate of 10.7 percent per annum¹ over that decade and it represents a doubling time of only 6.5 years for the urban sector. Given this pattern of growth (i.e., if growth continues at the same rate), by the year 2000 over 20 percent of Nepal's population will reside in urban areas. Kathmandu will grow from a city of 235,000 in 1981 to one containing 575,000 in 2001 and 899,500 inhabitants in 2011. Biratnagar, a town in the Eastern Terai, manifested a 10.8 percent annual growth rate between 1971 and 1981 and became Nepal's second largest urban area. It increased in size from only 45,000 in 1971 to 94,000 in 1981. At the 1971-81 growth rate, however, it will double every 6.4 years and will become the largest city in Nepal in 2001 with 831,000 inhabitants.

¹Gurung (1982) calculates a higher growth rate due to the inadvertent inversion of two digits in the 1971 figure for the total urban population in his Table 1, p. 8.

It will increase to almost 2.5 million inhabitants by the year 2011, a mere thirty years away.

Figure 1 projects the increase in the number of urban dwellers for the next 30 years based on the 1961-71 and 1971-81 growth rates. It shows clearly the tremendous acceleration that has occurred during the past ten years. Figure 2 illustrates the accompanying shift in the proportion of rural and urban dwellers that will take place over the next two or three decades, if the recent pattern is maintained. These projections of future growth rates are, as indicated earlier, based on the assumption that the rates of increase that occurred during the 1971-81 decade will continue in the future. In view of the serious environmental and agricultural-economic problems currently being experienced in the hills of Nepal, not only is it highly likely that the 1971-81 patterns will continue, but it is not unlikely that migration to the Terai and urban areas will actually increase in the decades ahead and that the transformation depicted in Figure 2 will occur sooner. Thus, in roughly one generation, Nepal may be transformed from a society with only a miniscule urban population to one in which over one third of the total population lives in urban areas. Nepal's very serious population problem is not merely its 2.6 percent annual growth rate, but also its internal growth differentials between different areas in the country and between the urban and rural sector. And when one takes into account that the large urban component in the Terai will have a substantial "hinterland" effect on the surrounding rural areas, the magnitude of this metamorphosis is difficult to conceive for outsiders who have lived and worked in Nepal and have considered it a classic "mountain" society.

The metamorphosis of Nepal involves more than shifts in the proportion of rural to urban populations. Equally striking is a parallel shift of population from the hill and mountain regions (which, as indicated above, comprise about 80 percent of the total area of Nepal) to the flat and subtropical Terai (and Inner Terai) areas. As indicated in Table 1, in 1952/54, only 35 percent of the total population lived in the Terai. Twenty years later, in 1971, this proportion had increased by only three percentage points to 38 percent. However, in the decade of the 1970s, the proportion of Terai dwellers in Nepal increased 7 percent

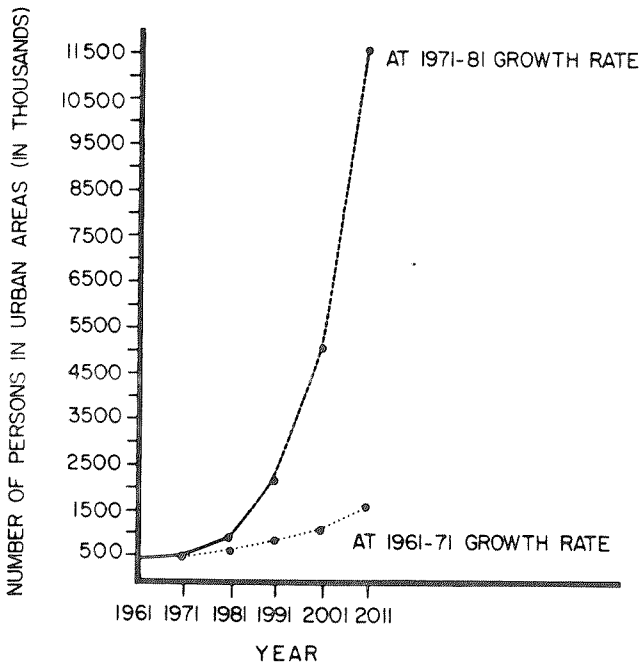


FIGURE 1. Actual and projected number of persons living in urban areas, 1961-2011.

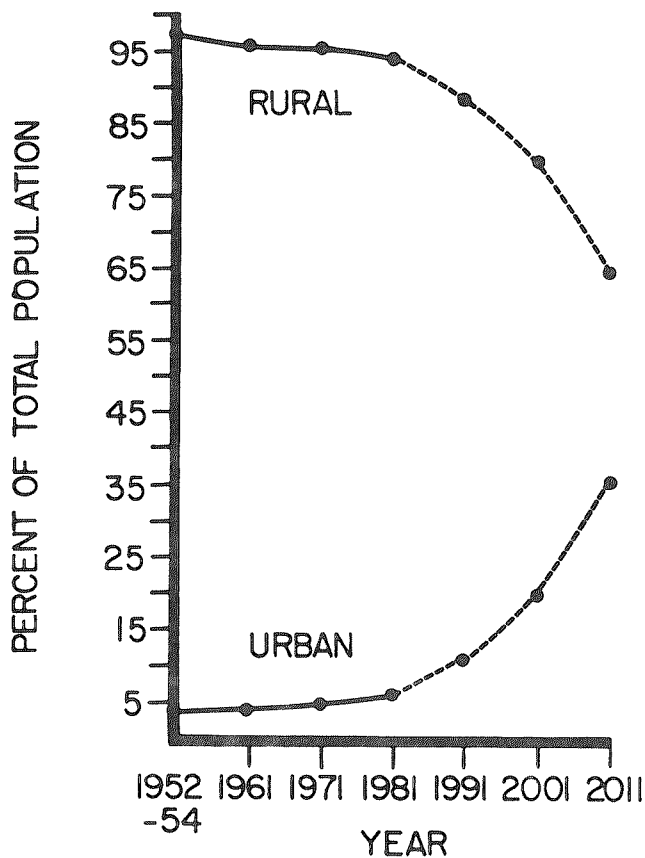


FIGURE 2. Actual and projected shift in the proportion of rural and urban dwellers in Nepal, 1952/54-2011.

per annum to become 47 percent of the total population. At that growth rate, the Terai will comprise 51 percent of the total population in 1991, 57 percent in 2001 and 62 percent in 2011 (see Figure 3). Moreover, when the Terai and the Hill urban populations are combined, 60 percent of Nepal's population will live in either urban or Terai areas in 20 years (2001) and a full 67 percent of Nepalese people will live there in 2011. The population density in the Terai (and Inner Terai) increased from an already high level of 166 persons per km² (430 per sq. mile) in 1971 to 237 persons per km² (615 per sq. mile) in 1981, and at 1971-81 growth rates, will skyrocket to 524 per km² (1,358 per sq. mile) in 2001, and to 779 per km² (2,018 per sq. mile) in the year 2011.

CONCLUSION

The census of 1981 marks a watershed in Nepal's population history. While population shifts from the hills to the Terai began many decades ago, before 1971 the increases were slow. For the urban sector, the pre-1971 increases were barely noticeable. The 1981 census shows clearly that during the decade of the 1970s the "Terai-ization" of Nepal began an exponential climb which is transforming the country from a hill to a plains state. While, in a sense, this flow of migrants was already well known in Nepal, the dramatic increase in the rate of change and its consequences in the next three decades, represents a serious challenge for the government of Nepal. Equally striking, and totally unexpected by most observers in and out of Nepal, was

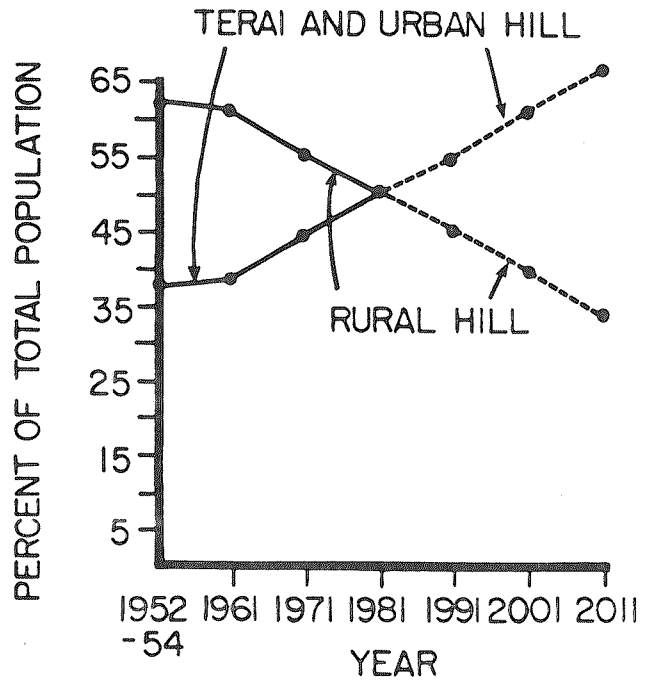


FIGURE 3. Actual and projected changes in the percent of persons living in the Terai and urban hill areas compared with those living in rural hill/mountain areas, 1952/54-2011.

the tremendous increase in the urban sector. The spectre of 20 percent of Nepal's population living in urban areas by the year 2000 and 35 percent by 2011, is difficult to comprehend, considering the nature of Nepalese society even a decade ago.

Nepal is racing headlong into an uncertain future at a breakneck speed. Whether the kindgom will be able to adjust to, and accommodate, the monumental environmental and demographic shifts that are occurring is unclear. What is clear, however, is that economic development planning must readjust its goals and assumptions to take into account the massive metamorphosis that is occurring in Nepal. The heavy concentration of effort and resources in rural development in the hills and mountains may have to be re-evaluated in the face of the changing distribution of population.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research from which this paper derives is being supported by the NIH, NICHD, Center for Population Research (5 R01 HD 13827-02) and The Population Council (CP 82. 7A).

REFERENCES

- Central Bureau of Statistics, 1977: *The Analysis of the Population Statistics of Nepal*. Kathmandu.
- Gurung, H.B., 1982: Population Increase in Nepal 1971-1981. *New ERA Occasional Paper* No. 004.
- Tuladhar, J.M., Gubhaju, B.B., and Stoeckel, J., 1978: *Population and Family Planning in Nepal*. Kathmandu.