

MODULE 2: Saptari District, Nepal Demography and Social Composition Report

The most recent data for Saptari District shows a total population of 706,255. Demographically, the district has a sex ratio of 1,010 females per 1,000 males and a literacy rate of 67.69%. Socially, it is a highly diverse area with a predominant Madheshi and Tharu population, alongside significant Muslim communities.

The core demographic and social features of Saptari District include:

Population & Demographics

- Total Population: 706,255
- Sex Ratio: 1010 females / 1000 males
- Literacy Rate: 67.69%
- Urban vs. Rural: 62.47% (441,203 residents) live in municipalities, with the remainder in rural settings.
- Age Distribution: 9.47% of the population is under 5 years old.

The social composition of Saptari District is characterized by a rich diversity of Madheshi, Terai Janajati (indigenous), and Muslim communities. The district holds a unique social structure, with specific caste groups maintaining distinct cultural and occupational identities.

Based on official records, the prominent caste and ethnic breakdown of Saptari District consists of the following groups:

Major Madheshi Caste Groups

- **Yadav:** The largest single demographic group in the district, making up 15.8% of the total population. They traditionally hold significant agricultural and political influence.
- **Teli:** Represent 7.48% of the population and are traditionally associated with trading and oil-pressing industries.
- **Dhanuk:** Composed 7.22% of the district, operating largely within the agricultural sector.
- **Other Madheshi Non-Dalits:** A collection of various intermediate and upper-tier Madheshi castes accounts for 14.1% of the population.

Indigenous Terai Janajatis

- **Tharu:** Represent 11.2% of the district's population. Saptari holds the largest concentration of Tharus compared to any other district within the Madhesh Province.

Religious Minorities

- **Muslim (Musalman):** Form a substantial social block at 9.53% of the total population. They are heavily integrated into local commerce, trade, and traditional crafts.

Terai Dalit Communities

Dalit communities make up roughly one-third of the broader Madheshi population in the district. They are categorized across several highly distinct caste groups:

- Musahar: 6.60%
- Khatwe: 6.34%
- Chamar: 4.63%
- Mallah: 2.58%
- Bantar: 2.30%
- Rajdhob: 1.91%
- Amat: 1.78%
- Other Madheshi Dalits: Grouped smaller communities comprise an additional 3.62%.

Hill Origin Communities (Minority Fractions)

Communities originating from the Hill regions of Nepal make up only a marginal portion of Saptari's total population:

- Khas (Brahman/Chhetri): 2.19%
- Hill Janajati: 1.28%

Maithili is the predominant mother tongue in the Saptari District, representing approximately 80% to 85% of the district's population. As a major Indo-Aryan language, it serves as the lingua franca across rural and urban municipalities, with communities exhibiting highly positive language attitudes and transmission rates.

Locally, the sociolinguistic mapping and variation of Maithili in Saptari break down into the following distinct categories:

1. Social Dialect Variation

Linguistic surveys and academic studies (such as those by the Linguistic Survey of Nepal - LinSuN) map the language across social stratification:

- **Caste/Class Variations:** Lexical (vocabulary) differences are heavily influenced by the class and caste structures. The speech forms typically range across Brahmin and Non-Brahmin varieties.
- **Honorifics:** The Brahmin variety often utilizes complex honorifics, whereas honorificity is comparatively simplified or rarely used in Non-Brahmin varieties (though still observed among highly educated speakers).
- **Mutual Intelligibility:** Despite these distinct social dialects, mutual intelligibility remains high, with 82% to 92% lexical similarity among these groups.

2. Geographic Positioning

Saptari District (centered in Madhesh Province, approximately 300 km south of Kathmandu) borders India to the south and the Koshi Province to the east.

- **Cross-border Flow:** The linguistic geography reflects significant cross-border cultural and linguistic interaction with the adjoining Mithila regions of Bihar, India.
- **Urban vs. Rural:** While standard Maithili is broadly understood everywhere, urban centers (like Rajbiraj) show greater code-mixing with Nepali and Hindi, whereas remote rural villages maintain older, localized dialects.

3. Linguistic Diversity & Minority Languages

Saptari is a multi-linguistic district. While Maithili is the majority language, mapping the district requires accounting for localized minority languages:

- **Tharu (Saptariya Tharu):** The second largest language group, spoken predominantly by the Tharu indigenous community.
- **Urdu & Nepali:** Spoken by specific minority populations and used in formal administration/education.
- **Other Dialects:** Minor pockets of surrounding or intermediate dialects (such as Magahi variants) are sometimes observed along the western fringes of the district.

Nepal Youth Foundation launches Phase II of Caste Equality Project!



We are beyond excited to share that earlier this month, NYF officially launched Phase II of the Caste Equality Project (CEP) in Saptari District!

Saptari District is a region of Nepal where Dalit populations (those historically called “untouchable”) face particularly complex barriers between themselves and crucial resources like education, good nutrition, safe shelter, and more. NYF is finally beginning the work of turning the tide for children living in Saptari District, bringing 30+ years of expertise—and the promise of longevity!

The Empowering Freed Kamlaris program (called the Indentured Daughters Program from 2000 – 2014) was NYF's most comprehensive, successful intervention to date. Though the program is now run wholly by graduates of the program, NYF continues to work closely with the community.

This program worked to combat an entrenched practice known as *kamlari*, in which members of the Tharu ethnic minority in Western Nepal sold their daughters (some as young as five years old) into indentured servitude in the homes of Nepal's elite. The practice, built on a foundation of predatory lending, ethnic oppression, and generational debt, robbed tens of thousands of young women of educational opportunities, cultural connection, and their childhood.

NYF successfully eradicated the practice in Nepal, empowered young Tharu women to advocate for themselves and improve the lives of their families, and is continuing to support a better future for their communities.

Dalits of Saptari: Life on the brink

A sloping piece of land by the roadside in Chinnamasta Rural Municipality-5, Saptari, is inhabited by a Dom community. Eleven families of the impoverished community, considered 'untouchable' by 'higher castes', live here on public land. In a neglected corner lies Juktidev Marik's 'house'. You have to enter the three-foot square house on four limbs. This shack is a permanent home for 65-year-old Juktidev. He squeezes himself to sleep every night, his feet tucked under his chin. The floor is covered with hay, which is Juktidev's bed. A dirty blanket doubles as his bedsheet. A black plastic sheet forms the roof.

Long ago, Juktidev had a little bigger hut where he raised two daughters and three sons. Both the daughters—Pramila and Susheela—were married before they were 16. The sons separated as they grew up. The shack was left to Juktidev. Fed up with abject poverty, his wife then left him 20 years ago. Juktidev's survival depends on the food people give him out of pity.

Doms are Dalit people who go by the surnames of Mallik in Jhapa district, Bansfore or Marik in places east of Saptari, and Marik in Saptari. In Siraha and Dhanusha, they call themselves Mallik or Dom, and in Parsa they are known as Malli or Raut. According to the 2011 census, there are 13,268 Dom people in the country, and Saptari district has the largest Dom population of 1,871.

In terms of skills, all they can do is make bamboo crafts like supali, dhala, koia, and dhakiya. Although they are 'impure to touch', things they make are considered good enough to offer to the gods.

Manilal Biswokarma, author of 'Condition of Dom and Mestar Castes in Nepal', says the Dom community lags in all sectors of life. They are socially ostracized and jobless. Their traditional skills find no market. They are denied access to the country's political process. Although there are laws to protect their rights, they face all sorts of discrimination. Lack of public awareness is largely to blame.

Devnarayan Marik of Chinnamasta-6 says: "Doms face the worst kind of caste discrimination. Treating us like other Dalits cannot solve the problem."

The Dom people are unhappy that their issues are never debated, unlike those of other indigenous and Madhesi communities. "While people from these communities are ministers and parliamentarians, we don't even have a ward chair anywhere," rues Naresh Marik of Rajgadh Rural Municipality-2. "The government never thinks of this community although it is socially, economically, and politically most backward."

As they don't own any land, they don't even have access to government support to build their own houses. "We have been living here for generations and yet we cannot build a house," Juktidev says. "Our worth is less than that of a street dog"

Religious Profile of Saptari District, Nepal

Key Religious Sites

- Chinnamasta Temple, dedicated to the Hindu goddess Chinnamasta, is one of the most significant religious sites in the district, attracting pilgrims from all over Nepal and India, and gets especially crowded during major festivals like Chhath Puja.
- **Kankalini Temple** — a popular Shakti shrine near the Koshi River's western bank, also a Shakti Peeth site
- **Shambhunath Temple** — near the Mahendra Highway, a major draw during the Siruwa Mela in Baisakh

Analysis

1. Overwhelming Hindu Majority with a Distinct Madhesi Character

At 88.4%, Saptari's Hindu population is slightly above the national average (~81%), reflecting the strong syncretic Hindu-Maithil cultural belt of the eastern Terai. This Hinduism here is heavily shaped by Maithil cultural traditions (Chhath Puja, regional Shakti worship) rather than hill-Hindu (Pahadi) traditions — visible in the prominence of Shakti Peeth shrines like Chinnamasta and Kankalini, which draw heavily from both Nepali and Indian (Bihar) pilgrims due to the open border.

2. Sizeable, Geographically Concentrated Muslim Minority

At 9.6%, Saptari has one of the higher Muslim population shares among Nepal's Terai districts — notably above the national average (~4.4%). This correlates with:

- Proximity to Bihar, India (a historically Muslim-significant region)
- Urdu being spoken as a community language in Muslim-majority pockets
- Likely concentration in specific municipalities/wards rather than uniform district-wide distribution

3. Small but Notable Buddhist Presence

The 1.7% Buddhist population is modest but slightly above what's typical for plains Terai districts, possibly linked to certain ethnic groups (some Tharu communities historically syncretize Buddhist and animist practices) or migrant hill populations.

4. Religion-Ethnicity Overlap

Religious identity in Saptari closely tracks caste/ethnicity:

- Hindu population includes dominant Madhesi castes (Yadav ~111,000, the largest single group), plus Tharu, Dalit-Madhesi groups (Musahar, Chamar, Khatwe), and a Pahadi (hill-origin) minority of Brahmins/Chhetris
- The Muslim population forms a distinct, linguistically marked community (Urdu-Maithili bilingual)

5. Cross-Border Religious Tourism as an Economic/Cultural Factor

Because Saptari borders Bihar directly, its major Hindu temples function less as purely local sites and more as binational pilgrimage hubs — an unusual feature compared to hill districts, where temple tourism is more domestically confined.

Caveat: Some sources circulate slightly older 2011-census-based figures (e.g., ~88.47% Hindu / 9.60% Muslim / 1.72% Buddhist) which are nearly identical to the 2021 figures above — indicating religious composition has remained quite stable over the decade.

Based on known geography — Saptari's Muslim population is concentrated in border-adjacent and market-town areas of the central-southern Terai belt:

- **Rajbiraj and surrounding urban municipalities** (district headquarters, trade hub) — likely above-district-average Muslim share, given urban Terai trading communities are often Muslim-Madhesi.
- **Border-adjacent municipalities** (south, near Bihar) — typically carry higher Muslim concentrations across the Terai, consistent with cross-border Madhesi-Muslim community ties.
- **Eastern municipalities near the Koshi/Saptakoshi belt** (Saptakoshi, Chhinnamasta) — strongly Hindu-dominant, tied to pilgrimage sites like Chhinnamasta Bhagawati and Kankalini temples; Chhinnamasta Bhagawati is a temple in Saptari that draws Indian pilgrims, with thousands of goats sacrificed there during Dashain, and Shambhunath is another major temple drawing Indian pilgrims for the Siruwa Mela festival — both signal entrenched Hindu religious infrastructure in those municipal.
- **Buddhist presence (1.72% district-wide)** is thin and scattered — Nepal's Buddhist concentration is mostly in hill/Himalaya districts and the Kathmandu Valley, not in Madhesh, so this is unlikely to cluster heavily in any one Saptari municipality.

<i>Maithili</i>	<i>Largest language of the district; mother tongue of the majority Maithil/Madhesi population; strong literary tradition.</i>
<i>Tharu</i>	<i>Second-largest language; spoken by the indigenous Tharu community; includes the locally distinct Kochila Tharu variety.</i>
<i>Nepali</i>	<i>National/official language; used in administration, education, and as a lingua franca.</i>
<i>Urdu</i>	<i>Spoken by a small Muslim minority.</i>
<i>Bhojpuri / Hindi (contact)</i>	<i>Not native to the district, but widely understood since Maithili speakers in the Terai are often multilingual.</i>

3. Maithili Language: Background

Maithili (मैथिली) is an Indo-Aryan language belonging to the Indo-European family, named after Mithila, the ancient kingdom traditionally associated with King Janaka and Sita (also called “Janaki” or “Maithili”). It is the inherited language of the historical Tirabhukti/Tirhut region, parts of which correspond to present-day Darbhanga and Muzaffarpur districts in Bihar, India.

Maithili is the second most-spoken language in Nepal after Nepali, and is also recognized in India, where it was included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 2003. Total speakers across both countries are estimated in the tens of millions. The language is written using the Devanagari script today, though it historically had its own script, known as Mithilakshara or Tirhuta.

Within Nepal, Maithili speakers are concentrated across the eastern and central Terai districts, with Eastern Maithili strongly represented in Morang, Sunsari, Saptari, Siraha, and Udayapur, and other varieties spoken in Dhanusha, Mahottari, Sarlahi, and surrounding areas.

4. Maithili Dialects Relevant to Saptari and the Region

.Linguists, notably S. Jha in his work on the formation of the Maithili language, describe Maithili as having several major dialect groupings. Variation arises from geography, caste, education, and social status, and Saptari district itself shows internal dialectal variety.

<i>Sotipura</i>	<i>Central Maithili (standard literary form)</i>	<i>Spoken in Dhanusha, Mahottari, Siraha, Saptari, Sarlahi, Sunsari, and Morang in Nepal; the basis for written/standard Maithili.</i>
<i>Bajjika</i>	<i>Western Maithili</i>	<i>Listed as a distinct language in Nepal; spoken in Rautahat and Sarlahi, but overlaps 76–86% with Maithili dialects of Dhanusa, Morang, Saptari, and Sarlahi.</i>

<i>Thēthi</i>	—	<i>Spoken in Munger division/Samastipur (Bihar) and adjoining Nepal districts.</i>
<i>Angika</i>	<i>Southern Maithili</i>	<i>Mainly in Bhagalpur, Banka, Munger (Bihar) and parts of Jharkhand, India.</i>
<i>Kochila Tharu</i>	—	<i>Spoken by Tharu communities specifically in Saptari and Siraha districts; some linguists classify it as a Maithili-related variety.</i>
<i>Other local varieties</i>	<i>Dehati, Deshi, Kisan, Bantar, Barmeli, Musar, Tati, Jolaha</i>	<i>Smaller community/occupational dialects found across the Maithili-speaking belt; mutually intelligible with standard Maithili.</i>

All of these dialects remain intelligible to native Maithili speakers, even where vocabulary, pronunciation, or grammar diverge — meaning a Maithili speaker from Saptari can generally understand speakers using Bajjika, Thēthi, or other regional forms.

5. Other Languages and Dialects of Saptari

5.1 Tharu (Kochila Tharu)

Tharu is the second most-spoken language in Saptari. Tharu languages are spoken across the Terai from the Mechi River in the east to the Mahakali River in the west, and Saptari falls within this belt (Madhesh Province). The Kochila Tharu variety used in Saptari and neighboring Siraha is sometimes treated by linguists as related to or influenced by Maithili, reflecting centuries of close contact between Maithil and Tharu communities.

5.2 Nepali

Nepali functions as the official/administrative language and a lingua franca used in schools, government offices, and inter-community communication, though it is spoken natively by only a small minority within the district.

5.3 Urdu

Urdu is spoken by a small Muslim minority concentrated in parts of the district, reflecting the roughly 9.6% Muslim population recorded in the 2011 census figures cited for Saptari.

6. Cultural and Literary Significance

- *Saptari is noted for having one of the highest concentrations of Maithili literary activity in Nepal.*
- *Maithili oral and folk traditions — including folk songs, dance, and painting (Mithila/Madhubani-style art) — are central to the district's cultural identity.*
- *Festivals such as Chhath, Dashain, Tihar, and Holi are widely celebrated, alongside Eid, reflecting the religious and linguistic diversity of the district.*
 - *Ongoing efforts by local cultural and literary organizations aim to preserve and promote Maithili language, dialectal diversity, and associated traditions.*

7. Summary Table: Language Family Snapshot

<i>Maithili</i>	<i>Indo-European > Indo-Aryan (Eastern)</i>	<i>1st — largest language of the district</i>
<i>Tharu (Kochila)</i>	<i>Indo-Aryan (Terai group)</i>	<i>2nd — largest indigenous-group language</i>
<i>Nepali</i>	<i>Indo-European > Indo-Aryan (Pahari)</i>	<i>Minority native speakers; widely used as L2</i>
<i>Urdu</i>	<i>Indo-European > Indo-Aryan</i>	<i>Small minority</i>

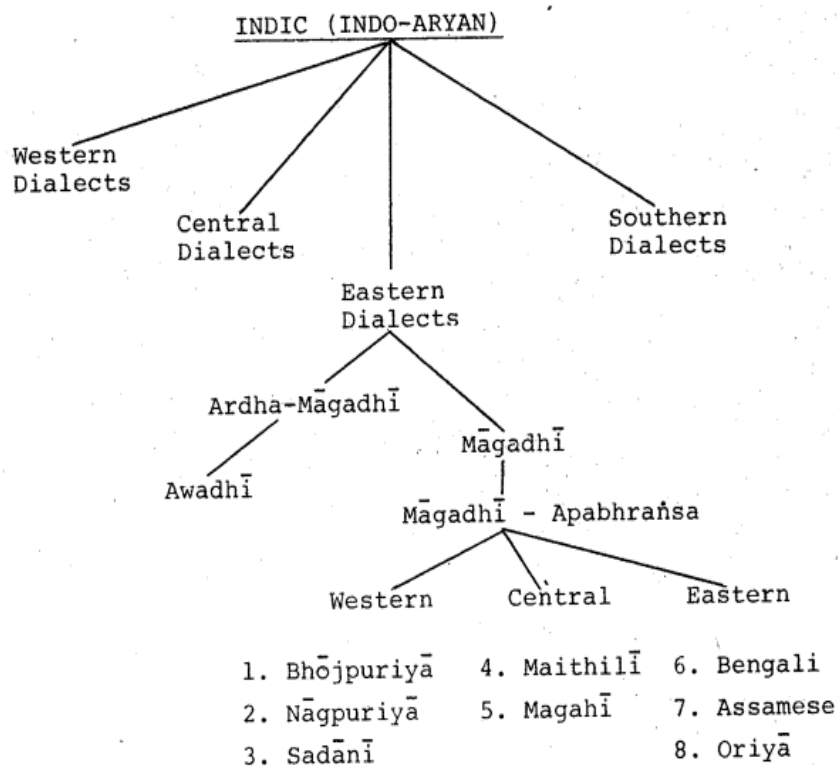


Fig. 4 Division of NIA languages, showing mainly the languages of North India; based on Chatterji (1926)

