

# Maslow's Need Hierarchy Theory with Reference to Socio-Cultural Dynamics in Nepal

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Nepal, characterized by its multilingual and multicultural makeup, displays intricate social and power dynamics shaped by factors such as caste, class, race, gender, and political ties. Its cultural customs are profoundly influenced by Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, which impact personal motivations and choices related to the environment. Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, commonly employed to explain human motivation, outlines a sequence from fundamental physiological needs to self-actualization. Yet, its relevance in Nepal's distinct socio-cultural and economic setting has not been sufficiently examined.

**Objective:** This study aims to critically examine and reconcile Maslow's Need Hierarchy Theory with Nepal's socio-cultural and economic realities to understand the dynamic fulfillment of human needs in this context.

**Methodology:** A qualitative, PRISM-based research design was employed for an exploratory review of academic literature, newspapers, and research articles. The approach emphasized thematic analysis to capture the alignment and contrasts of Maslow's theory with Nepal's demographic, cultural, and economic factors.

**Findings/Analysis:** Results reveal that Nepal's economic challenges, including high youth unemployment and inflation, prevent many from advancing beyond basic physiological needs. Socio-cultural factors such as collectivism, social prestige, and early marriage further complicate the conventional hierarchy, suggesting a more fluid and interdependent model of need fulfillment. The current socio-economic environment prioritizes immediate survival over psychological growth and self-actualization.

**Conclusion:** Maslow's hierarchy requires contextual adaptation to reflect Nepal's intertwined socio-economic and cultural fabric. The framework should be seen as flexible, recognizing the collective, dynamic nature of human needs within Nepal.

**Implication:** Integrating socio-cultural and economic factors into motivational theories enhances their relevance in Nepal. Policy, educational reforms, and social protections are critical for enabling upward mobility in need fulfillment and maximizing human potential in Nepali society.

**Type of Paper:** Qualitative exploratory Research.

**Keywords:** Maslow's Need Hierarchy, Socio-Cultural Dynamics, digital, Drug, Gen Z, need, PRISM-based research

### 1. INTRODUCTION :

Nepal is a multilingual, multicultural, and secular country with an area of 147516 square Kilometres. Nepal's current total population is 29616475. Social and power relations encompass caste, class, race, and gender, among other factors, and in Nepal, also include political party affiliation. These aspects of identity do not function in isolation; rather, various elements of a person's identity interact in intricate and nuanced ways to shape their social and political power [1]. Cultural practices are observed practices of society, which are developed through mental constructs during the process of socialization [2].

Pain of Madhesh reflecting Nepal is well explained in a reference book by [3]. The 2001 census reported that about 80.6% of Nepal's population identified as Hindu. Buddhism was practiced by around 11%, although many who identified as Hindu or Buddhist often followed a syncretic mix that included animist traditions. Islam accounted for approximately 3.2% of the population, while about 3.6% followed the indigenous Kirant religion. Christianity was observed by less than 0.5%. Hindu and Buddhist traditions in Nepal have roots going back more than two thousand years. Important religious sites include Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha, and the Pashupatinath temple in Kathmandu, a famous ancient Shiva temple. Nepal also houses many other temples, Buddhist monasteries, and sacred places representing various faiths. Nepalese philosophical thought has traditionally been strongly influenced by Hindu and Buddhist teachings, including Kashmir Shaivism, the Nyingma Tibetan Buddhist school, the writings of Bhaktapur's Karmacharyas, and tantric practices. These tantric traditions remain prominent, featuring rituals that involve animal sacrifice. Only male animals, such as water buffalo, goats, sheep, chickens, and ducks, are used for sacrifice, while cows are sacred and strictly protected from being sacrificed (Constitution of Nepal (2015); Penal Code Muluki Aparadh Sanhita (2017)). Abraham Maslow (1908–1970) was an American psychologist best known for his hierarchy of needs theory, which is widely examined in human relations theory within management studies and research. He was born on April 1, 1908, in Brooklyn, New York, where he was raised as the eldest of seven children to Jewish parents who had immigrated from Russia. Maslow later described his early childhood as lonely and unhappy. He spent much of his time reading in libraries. Maslow also studied law at the City College of New York (CCNY) [4]. After developing an interest in psychology, Maslow attended the University of Wisconsin, where he was mentored by psychologist Harry Harlow, who became his doctoral advisor. He earned his bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in psychology from the University of Wisconsin. His theory proposed that individuals have several basic needs that must be fulfilled before progressing to social, emotional, and self-actualization needs. Maslow's approach differed significantly from that of many of his contemporaries [4]. Unlike other psychologists who concentrated on disorders and abnormalities, Maslow was more concerned with understanding what enables people to flourish. He believed that Freud's psychoanalytic theory and Skinner's behavioral theory placed too much emphasis on the negative or pathological aspects of life. Maslow also thought these theories overlooked human potential and creativity. He focused his study on human behavior, proposing that different needs motivate people in a sequential order, with each stage leading to the next. According to this theory, Maslow represented human needs in the form of a pyramid. [4]. Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory of Human Motivation and Nepali Context.

## 2. PROBLEM STATEMENT :

Maslow's Need Hierarchy Theory has long been influential in understanding human motivation; however, its relevance requires reevaluation in light of the current economic, social, and cultural dynamics of Nepal. The traditional five-tier pyramid of human needs reflects the basic requirements of a different era, and may not adequately capture the complexities faced by contemporary Nepali society [5]. Nepal is currently experiencing significant challenges, including high youth unemployment and widespread outmigration, despite possessing the largest youth workforce in South Asia. This is compounded by economic pressures, with an official inflation rate of 4.4%, while actual living costs are perceived to be as high as 15%. Within this context, the majority of people are primarily engaged in meeting their physiological needs, with limited progress toward fulfilling safety needs [6]. The prevalent private-sector employment often lacks essential social protections such as social security, retirement benefits, gratuity, and health insurance. Furthermore, the conceptualization of social prestige differs considerably within the Nepali socio-cultural fabric, indicating that Maslow's framework may not fully reflect these unique perspectives. This research does not rely on statistical data but rather aims to critically examine Maslow's theory through the lens of Nepal's socio-cultural realities by reviewing diverse sources, including newspapers, journals, and research articles. This approach seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of human needs in Nepal, taking into account the socio-economic environment and cultural specificities.

### 3. OBJECTIVES :

This study aims to align Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs with the specific context of Nepal.

### 4. METHODOLOGY :

This study used a PRISM-based research design to conduct a qualitative and exploratory review of Maslow's Need Hierarchy Theory in relation to Nepal's socio-cultural dynamics. The PRISM framework directed the systematic identification, selection, evaluation, and synthesis of relevant literature to ensure a thorough and impartial review. Focusing on exploring how Maslow's theory applies and is interpreted within Nepal's unique context, the study adopted a qualitative approach that prioritizes thematic and contextual analysis rather than quantitative data. The goal of this study is to align Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs with the specific context of Nepal.

The methodology involved an extensive review of academic articles, books, newspapers, research papers, and other credible sources that discuss Maslow's theory and its socio-cultural implications. This literature was carefully selected to capture diverse perspectives on the subject, focusing on how the theory aligns or contrasts with Nepal's economic conditions, cultural traditions, and social structures. The emphasis was placed on qualitative insights derived from secondary data rather than primary statistical analysis.

By employing this approach, the study aimed to understand the dynamic interplay between basic human needs and Nepalese socio-cultural realities. The findings were framed to highlight contextual nuances and sociological perspectives, reflecting the complex environment of need fulfilment in Nepal. This methodology enables a rich, culturally sensitive interpretation of a classical motivational theory in a contemporary setting.

#### Research Design:

This study employed a PRISM-based research design [7]. The study will adopt a qualitative and exploratory approach, involving a thorough review and synthesis of existing literature on how Maslow's theory is interpreted and applied within Nepal's distinctive socio-cultural context. It will examine various academic articles, books, and credible sources that address the theory and its cultural significance, focusing on qualitative insights rather than quantitative analysis. This method enables a detailed understanding of the complex relationship between fundamental human needs and Nepalese cultural values, traditions, and social structures. The research will be designed to capture contextual subtleties and sociological viewpoints, ensuring that the review reflects the depth and complexity of Nepal's socio-cultural environment in relation to need fulfillment and motivational theory.

### 5. LITERATURE REVIEW :

Maslow proposed that human needs are organized in a hierarchy, starting with basic physiological (survival) needs at the base, and progressing to higher-level needs such as the creative and intellectual pursuit of self-actualization at the top [8]. Maslow contended that basic survival needs must be met before an individual can address higher-level needs. As one moves up the hierarchy, satisfying these needs becomes more challenging due to interpersonal and environmental obstacles. Higher-level needs tend to be more psychological and long-term, unlike the lower-level survival needs, which are physiological and immediate. Our fundamental need is physical survival, which is the primary driver of our behavior [8]. Once a level of needs is fulfilled, the next level becomes the primary motivator, and this process continues upward. The human body cannot perform well if physiological needs are unmet. Maslow viewed physiological needs as the most crucial because all other needs are secondary until these are satisfied. After fulfilling physiological needs, the need for security and safety becomes prominent [9].



**Fig. 1:** Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

After the fulfilment of physiological needs, a human is driven towards the safety needs, where they search for job security, health, and property security and because of this they start acquiring insurance policies also [10]. Once physiological and safety needs are met, the third level of human needs involves social aspects, centered on feelings of belongingness. This includes needs such as friendship, family, intimacy, trust, acceptance, affection, and love. This need is particularly strong during childhood and can even outweigh the need for safety, as seen in children who remain attached to abusive parents. The fourth level, esteem needs, encompasses self-respect, achievement, and recognition from others. Maslow divided esteem needs into two types: (i) self-esteem, which includes dignity, achievement, mastery, and independence, and (ii) the desire for reputation or respect from others, such as status, recognition, and prestige. Esteem reflects the common human wish to be accepted and valued, leading people to pursue careers or hobbies that earn them recognition and provide a sense of contribution or worth [9]. The fifth and final stage of Maslow's hierarchy of needs is self-actualization, which is achieved when an individual has satisfied all preceding needs and can concentrate on personal growth and fulfillment [10]. Self-actualized individuals are creative, content, and effective. They find meaning in life and view themselves as connected to something greater than themselves. Within any organization, those who achieve self-actualization can fully live their lives and experience fulfillment through their work and relationships. They possess a strong sense of purpose and the ability to make a positive impact on the world [11].

This important insight emphasizes the need to incorporate socio-cultural factors when applying Maslow's framework to analyze motivation in Nepal. Maslow's Need Hierarchy Theory describes a sequence of human needs, starting from basic physiological requirements to self-actualization, indicating that lower-level needs must be met before higher-level needs can drive motivation [10]. However, critiques highlight that this model often overlooks socio-cultural contexts that significantly influence how needs are prioritized and fulfilled. In Nepal, socio-cultural dynamics such as community interdependence, collectivism, and economic conditions alter the hierarchy of needs compared to Western contexts. Nepali society's emphasis on social belonging and familial bonds may shift the importance of belongingness and esteem needs ahead of individualistic self-actualization. Additionally, these needs interact dynamically rather than follow a fixed sequence [4]. The theory's rigid structure has been challenged by scholars proposing more flexible models that reflect cultural sensitivities and local realities. Therefore, understanding motivation within Nepal requires adapting Maslow's theory to incorporate socio-cultural factors, recognizing that human needs in Nepalese contexts are interdependent, fluid, and shaped by collective social values [12].

## 6. ANALYSIS :

Needs are a continuous process where the achievement of one leads spontaneously to the emergence of another. Maslow considered self-actualization as the highest realization of talents, abilities, and potentials. People are constantly motivated to reach their fullest potential. Once basic needs are met, individuals feel more inclined to become the best versions of themselves. To illustrate with a common example, a young man with an average income first strives to fulfil the basic needs of himself and his family, such as good food, clothing, and shelter, classified as basic needs. Modern studies also include sexual needs in this category. After fulfilling these needs, he seeks job stability to continue meeting his

family's basic needs without worry. He may also insure his life and property and ensure the health of himself and family. Once these are secured, he seeks love and concern from family, friends, and society. Subsequently, he aims for social prestige and recognition. Finally, at a certain stage, he pursues excellence by fully utilizing his talents. These observations align well with human behaviour [13]. However, over time and within Nepal's context-characterized by corruption, political instability, and economic challenges-the theory requires modification. The economic hardship has led to a perception of the population more as a burden than as manpower, driving millions of youth abroad annually. The lines between lower and middle classes have blurred, with widespread fear about daily survival and job security. In such an environment, basic material needs become a significant concern [12].

Even in the 21st century of globalization, Nepal's per capita income is 1,434 US dollars. If converted into Nepali currency, it is approximately Rs. 199,000. This amounts to only about Rs. 16,583 per month. Inflation is 4.4%, and based on market rates, it is nearly 15%. How can a family manage food, medicine, children's school fees, clothing, and festivals with Rs. 16,500, and how much can they save? There is a severe unemployment problem in the country, and the Ministry of Labor's weak functioning has led to widespread exploitation even in available jobs [6]. People with postgraduate degrees cannot even earn Rs. 50,000 per month. Organizations hire on temporary or casual appointments where no provisions for pension, gratuity, medical expenses, or insurance exist. Here, people do not seek Maslow's security stage but are rather engaged in trying to make ends meet. According to a report by the Nepal Demographic and Health Survey 2022, 25% of women aged 25-49 in Nepal were married before age 15, and 47% before age 18. In such a context, according to Maslow's theory, reproduction has become more dominant within physical needs, and the cycle of basic needs, such as food, clothing, etc., is driven by it. Here, the general public does not get the opportunity to reach the second stage of security needs. The disorganized education system increases enrolment but fails to develop awareness and maturity. There is a lack of sexual education [9]. The unnecessary influence of social media is breaking the conventional sequence of education, livelihood, and then marriage or love affairs. The current generation shows increased involvement in social identity, peer group formation, and love affairs during education and livelihood phases, making Maslow's hierarchy impractical in some places [4].

The Generation Z movement in Nepal represents a significant socio-political shift driven by rapid digital transformation and growing youth frustration. The movement was ignited in September 2025 after the government imposed a ban on 26 popular social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. This ban sparked widespread protests, particularly among the digitally savvy Gen Z population, who rely on these platforms for communication, economic activities, and social engagement. The protests were a response not only to the social media restrictions but also to broader grievances about corruption, nepotism, and limited economic opportunities, including high youth unemployment. Tragically, the demonstrations saw the loss of at least 74 lives and extensive property damage, highlighting the intensity of public dissent and signalling a potential systemic change despite recent governmental shifts. The Gen Z protests have become a vital expression of demand for transparency, accountability, and modernization in Nepal's political system amidst ongoing digital challenges [14]. Nepal's evolving socio-economic landscape, driven by increased internet penetration and government-backed digital initiatives, provides fertile ground for reinterpreting Maslow's theory in the context of digital needs [15-17]. Gen Z in Nepal, characterized by digital nativity, prioritizes not only physiological and safety needs but also cognitive and esteem needs through digital platforms, social connectivity, and personalized digital experiences. The digital workplace and education transformation further reflect this shift, where access to technology satisfies basic needs, while virtual communities and digital recognition address social belonging and esteem [3] [2]. Drug addiction and suicide rates are increasing as well, demonstrating the changing context as observed during informal interaction with social mobilizers. Moreover, the integration of AI and emotional intelligence in workplaces caters to self-actualization, supporting creativity and individual growth [2]. Thus, Maslow's model adapts well as a conceptual lens to understand the layered motivations of Nepali Gen Z in the Society 5.0 era, linking digital transformation with holistic human needs fulfilment.

Digital addiction among Nepal's privileged youth, often referred to as "Nepo babies," alongside rising drug addiction, reflects deeper societal challenges intertwined with corruption and inequality. As many affluent young people become absorbed in excessive digital usage, social media, and entertainment, their detachment from societal realities may indirectly foster environments susceptible to corruption. Conversely, marginalized populations, facing limited opportunities and high youth unemployment,

sometimes emulate corrupt behaviors as a survival strategy amid systemic inequities. This dynamic exacerbates Nepal's income disparity, reflected in a rising Gini coefficient, amplifying socio-economic gaps. Meanwhile, alarming data reveal drug addiction rising drastically among Nepalese youths, with about 130,424 reported drug users in 2020, a figure expected to double by 2025, mostly concentrated in urban centers like Kathmandu [18]. Phone addiction among children and youth is also a burgeoning concern, with excess screen time negatively affecting mental health and social interaction, thereby adding layers to social fragmentation. Together, these factors fuel cycles of corruption and inequality, highlighting urgent policy needs to address youth welfare, addiction, and systemic governance failings in Nepal. So, we need to redefine the basic needs of Maslow's theory, including counseling against digital and drug addictions [19-31].

## 7. CONCLUSION :

Based on the comprehensive review of Maslow's Need Hierarchy Theory in the context of Nepal's unique socio-cultural and economic realities, the following conclusion can be drawn:

Maslow's theory, foundational in understanding human motivation, provides valuable insights into the progression of human needs from basic physiological survival to self-actualization. However, the classical five-tier hierarchical model requires contextual adaptation when applied to Nepal. In Nepal, socio-cultural dynamics such as collectivism, caste, class, and political influences intertwine with economic challenges like widespread unemployment, inflation, and inadequate social protections. These factors disrupt the neat hierarchical fulfilment of needs Maslow proposed, with many individuals struggling to consistently satisfy even basic physiological and safety needs. The prevailing harsh socio-economic environment compels a focus on immediate survival rather than advancement toward higher psychological or self-fulfilment stages.

Furthermore, cultural nuances influence the prioritization and experience of needs, making belongingness and social esteem more complex and fluid concepts than Maslow's model suggests. The young Nepali population's migration trends and shifting social behaviors further complicate need fulfillment trajectories. Therefore, Maslow's hierarchy in Nepal must be seen as a flexible, dynamic framework rather than a rigid sequence, emphasizing the intertwined and evolving nature of human needs shaped by Nepal's socio-economic and cultural fabric.

This study highlights the importance of integrating socio-cultural and economic realities into motivational theories to enhance their relevance and applicability in diverse settings like Nepal. Future research could benefit from empirical investigations to refine and expand this theoretical adaptation for practical applications in policy, education, and workforce development in Nepal.

This conclusion synthesizes the study's critical insights and aligns with the objectives and findings of the research.

### 7.1 Implication:

Abraham Maslow's need hierarchy theory is still so powerful that it fits into the current human psychology of needs. The five different stages of need come one after another, but Nepal has cultural diversity and social norms, values, and ethics. In this context, the study finds certain implications that have been discussed below:

- a) Is early marriage common in Nepal, and does it contribute to an increase in early age birth ratios? Could it be considered a physiological need, but one that creates new family responsibilities in Nepal? Does this situation shift people away from progressing through Maslow's hierarchy of needs? Is sex education and awareness on early marriage necessary in Nepal?
- b) Is the high rate of unemployment and inflation making people helpless to own houses and forcing them to remain tenants? Despite working hard, are people unable to accumulate enough funds for shelter and basic needs? Should the government implement policies to promote home ownership for all citizens?
- c) Do safety needs, as defined by Maslow, motivate people to secure their jobs, careers, and property? Are most workers in Nepal's private sector deprived of social security benefits such as gratuity and provident fund? Are employees often required to work beyond the weekly hours defined in the Nepal Labor Act 2075, without overtime pay? Should the Labor Ministry and pressure groups address these issues?

- d) Are Nepalese people highly sensitive to social relations, which promotes a sense of belonging? Is this sensitivity the reason behind the preference for government jobs with average salaries over private sector jobs with higher pay? Are government job holders considered prestigious in the community? Does this indicate that belongingness and prestige are prioritized highly in Nepal?
- e) Is self-actualization, the final stage in Maslow's hierarchy, a positive strength among Nepalese people? Do Nepalese youth and housewives possess notable creativity and efficiency that remains untapped due to a lack of opportunities?

## 7.2 Recommendations:

The following recommendations are offered based on an in-depth analysis of Maslow's Need Hierarchy Theory in relation to Nepal's socio-cultural and economic context:

- It is recommended to incorporate Nepal's multicultural and socio-political diversity into motivational frameworks to better understand how intersecting identities influence need fulfillment.
- Further research should explore how ongoing economic challenges, such as youth unemployment and inflation, impact the progression through Maslow's hierarchical needs, particularly physiological and safety needs.
- There is a need to investigate the cultural practices, including early marriage and religious rituals, to assess their role in shaping or hindering the attainment of basic human needs.
- Addressing gaps in social security and labour rights in Nepal's private sector is essential to support workers' safety and job security needs as outlined in Maslow's theory.
- Educational reforms should prioritize comprehensive sex education and awareness programs to help align physiological needs with social maturity and development.
- Studies should focus on the influence of Nepali social norms on belongingness and esteem needs, especially regarding the societal preference for government employment due to perceived prestige.
- Opportunities to nurture creativity and self-actualization among Nepalese youth and women must be expanded to leverage their latent potential fully.
- Adaptations of Maslow's theory are needed to accommodate Nepal's collectivist values and fluid socio-economic realities rather than applying a rigid hierarchical model.
- Policy initiatives aimed at improving housing, healthcare, and social protections could facilitate upward mobility in the fulfillment of human needs and improve overall well-being in Nepal.

These recommendations aim to deepen the contextual relevance of motivational theories and support practical interventions in Nepali society.

**8. Editor's Note:** We acknowledge that a citation oversight occurred in the paper Maslow's Need Hierarchy Theory with Reference to Socio-Cultural Dynamics in Nepal, specifically regarding the use of the definition of cultural practices originally articulated by Dr. Andrea J. Nightingale in her work Nature–society and development: Social, cultural and ecological change in Nepal (2003) [1]. This omission was an unintentional error during the manuscript preparation and review process.

The author has expressed sincere regret for this oversight and has taken immediate steps to correct the attribution. The statement beginning with "I only saw with interest that you and your colleagues used my work..." has been replaced to prevent any further misrepresentation.

We appreciate Dr. Nightingale's understanding and thank the author for their commitment to maintaining the highest standards of scholarly conduct.

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