International Journal of Sociology and Humanities

Dr. Animesh AL Rai
Assistant Professor,
Department of Sociology,
Sudhiranjan Lahiri
Mahavidyalaya, Affiliated to
the University of Kalyani,
West Bengal, India

The Madhesi movement in Nepal: From historical marginalisation to contemporary politics

Animesh AL Rai

Abstract
The emergence of Madhesi movement in Nepal is linked to the country's history, geography, ethnic diversity, and centralized state creation processes. Nepal's southern lowlands constitute Madesh or Terai region. Almost half of the nation's population lives in this region and it is the major agricultural and industrial hub of Nepal. Despite all these potentials the region and its people have remained politically and culturally marginalized for a long time. The historical marginalization has led to the emergence of Madhesi movement that challenged the authoritarian hegemony of Hindu elites living in the hills and valleys of Nepal. The objective of the Madhesi movement is the demand for federal autonomy, citizenship rights and proper representation. This article is an attempt to understand the Madhesi movement within larger socio-political evolution of Nepal and in particular investigate the question of Madhesi identity and it's marginalisation under different political epochs by exploring the historical, geographical and demographic foundations of the Terai. The study looks into the emergence of the movement from early post-1951 political mobilization to the widespread demonstrations that followed the 2007 Interim Constitution and the adoption of the 2015 Constitution using a qualitative historical-analytical method based on secondary data sources. According to the study's findings, Madhesi movements goals remain mostly unfulfilled since state authority in Nepal has remained concentrated among hill Hindu elites despite democratic changes. The long-term political stability and democratic success of Nepal lie in acceptance and approval of the country's protracted marginalised groups and communities including the Madhesis.

Keywords: Madhesi movement, Nepal, Madesh, Terai, identity politics, marginalisation, federalism

Introduction
Nepal is a landlocked Himalayan republic that lies between India and China covering an area of 1,47, 181 sq. km. The western and eastern length of the country is approximately 885 kms and the north south length is 193 kms (Bhattarai, 2008) [2]. Nepal is further divided into three distinct topographies, which include the northern mountains, central hills, and the southern Terai plains. The highest part has a low population density and is mostly inhabited by Bhotiyas and Sherpas. Mid altitude is inhabited mainly by Parbatiyas who are high caste Hindus such as Bahuns and Chettris, and other indigenous ethnic groups who have dominated the political and cultural space of Nepal historically (Pradhan, 2009) [16]. Terai or Madesh covers about 23 percent of the total land of the country and nearly 16.9 million people accounting for 54 percent of the total population of the country lives in this region. After the Madhesi movement of 2007, the word Madesh or Madhesi has gained greater political significance. The region houses caste communities of the Madhesis, the native people like Tharus, the Muslims and hill migrants (Bennett *et al*., 2013) [1].

Nepal is heterogeneous in nature. The country is characterised by multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual population. The modern history of Nepal reflects that the state was centrally administered by the political authority that gave priority to Hindu religion, the Nepali language and the dominant cultural practice of the hills. The national identity of the country was designed and expected to be in tune with the cultural value system of the hill society. The social groups whose way of life did not match with that of the hills were mostly dominated and faced marginalisation in the process of nation-building and development of the state. The Madhesis, the inhabitants of Madesh or Terai in the southern plains of Nepal who are socially and culturally different from that of the hills have been facing marginalisation for a protracted period.

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Animesh AL Rai
Assistant Professor,
Department of Sociology,
Sudhiranjan Lahiri
Mahavidyalaya, Affiliated to
the University of Kalyani,
West Bengal, India

The region is often termed as the bread basket of Nepal for the major agricultural activities are carried out in this area. Apart from agricultural potential, terai is also significant in terms of industries and international trade. Madhesis share close ethnic and cultural proximity with India and as a result they are suspected for their identity and frequently viewed as people of Indian origin or outsiders. The Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1950, which allows free entry, movement and settlement of Indians and Nepalese nationals in each other's political territory is also one of the reasons responsible for creating such problems. Madhesis have in many occasions doubted for their citizenship and questioned about their sense of national belonging and often treated as second-class citizens (Brown, 1996; Lawoti, 2007) [3, 13].

In reaction to this historical marginalisation Madhesi movement came into emergence. Despite the fact that the first manifestations of the Madhesi political consciousness emerged during the 1950s, the movement got the development impetus only in the 1990s, after the re-establishment of democracy, and it was mostly visible from 2007 onwards. The movement demands for recognition of Madheshi's problems relating to proportional political representation, fair citizenship policies and to federal restructuring of the state (Kantha, 2010) [11]. Madhesi movement, which is both regional and identity-based, directly challenges Nepal's monocultural and hill-centric definition of nationhood.

Who is a Madhesi?
The categorization of the term Madhesi is highly disputed. Commonly it refers to the people of Madesh, terai or the southern plains of Nepal. However, not every person living on the lowland identifies themselves with this definition. Several native populations, including Tharus, Satars, and Koches, and Meches and Muslim communities inhabit the Terai, and most of them would not be comfortable with the term, especially Tharus in the middle and far western Terai and Muslims. They consider themselves to be the indigenous inhabitants of the land and they often view the Madhesis as Indian migrants. With time, the term has gained the ethnic meaning of a resident of a plain region having an Indian origin and Hindu by religion and does not include the groups such as hill migrant, tribal people and Muslims (Gellner, 2008) [5]. A key researcher of Nepal Madesh, Frederick Gaige suggests defining the term as the ones whose mother tongue is a plain or terai language, whether they live in the plains or in the hills (Bennett et al., 2013) [1]. The language commonly used in terai are Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Urdu, Hindi, Bengali and tribal languages. The distinction between the categories of the term Madhesi and Pahadi is usually interpreted as the opposite, with Pahadi denoting hill folks and languages like Nepali, Newar, Rai, Gurung, Mangar and others.

Review of Literature
The significance of ethnicity and geography in defining political power is often highlighted in scholarly works on Nepal. Pradhan (2009) [16] and Whelpton (2005) [20] argues that historically, the hill Hindu elites have been at the centre of state administration. Further, the geographical division of Nepal characterised by ethnic distinctions into mountains, hills, and plains have given rise to an uneven form of development and political hegemony of hill communities.

Research on the Terai emphasizes its deep socio-cultural linkages to North India, economic significance, and diverse population (Regmi, 1995; Whelpton, 2005) [17, 20].

Understanding Madhesi identity depends largely on Frederick Gaige's ground-breaking research on the Terai. According to Gaige (1975) [4], an important indicator of Madesh is the language. Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi and Urdu are commonly used in the Madesh. He further argues that the caste-based system of Madesh is very much similar to North Indian social systems than that of Nepal's hilly areas. Gaige's work highlights how Madhesi identity developed in opposition to the hill-centric idea of Nepali nationality.

Although there are scholars who view Madhesis as merely residents of the plains, critics believe that this term has taken an ethnic connotation whereby it uses the term to refer mainly to Hindu caste groups whose origin is Indian (Gellner, 2008) [5]. Asserting their unique identities, indigenous groups like Muslims and Tharus frequently reject themselves as being referred to as Madhesis (Bennett et al., 2013) [1]. This controversial definition affects group representation and mobilization, which has significant political ramifications. Historical research emphasizes how governmental policies institutionalise exclusion. While the Rana regime strengthened caste structures through the Mulki Ain of 1854, the Shah monarchs advocated Hinduization and Nepalisation as nation-building tactics (Tilouine, 2009; Millard, 2008) [19, 15].

The Panchayat system (1960-1990) further institutionalised monocultural nationalism by favouring Nepali language, the Hindu religion and hill dress code (Lawoti, 2007) [13]. Post-1990 scholarship focuses on ethnic mobilisation and identity politics. According to Gellner (2008) [5], this era is referred to as ethnic formation characterised by emergence of movements that sought recognition, federalism and proportional representation. An analysis of the Madhesi movement is done in comparison with other marginal struggles such as Janajat, Dalits and feminist movements (Hangen 2005) [7]. The transformations in the leadership pattern and inner division of Madhesi political parties, chronological changes in party development are analysed in detail by Kantha (2010) [11], Jha (2014) [10], and International Crisis Group Reports (2007; 2011) [8, 9]. These literatures portray the Madhesi movement as both a product of historical exclusion and a response to democratic openings that enabled marginalised groups to articulate long-suppressed grievances.

Methodology
This study is based on qualitative historical-analytical methodological approach that is primarily based on secondary data. The analysis has been based on historical documents, both in the form of national census reports, Constitution texts, policy documents, and official publications of the government, and the works of social scholars in the form of monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, and academic interpretations of the Madhesi movement. Historical comparison is employed to evaluate continuity and changes in state policies to the Terai over different periods of political rule i.e. the Shah, Rana, Panchayat and the post democratic periods. Besides, thematic analysis has been used to identify the trends of marginalisation, identity formation, and political mobilisation by Madhesi communities. The movement is

examined by exploring its main stages and by investigating the socio-political backgrounds that allowed its development and emergence of the movement. The limitations of the study are associated with the use of only secondary sources.

Findings and Discussion
In this study, the Madhesi movement has been examined using qualitative historical method using secondary data. The findings of the study highlights that the Madhesi movement is protracted in nature and have been shaped by institutionalised state exclusion. Despite many political and administrative changes, the government policies towards Madhesis have been unequal and non-inclusive. Madhesi communities have time and again challenged their marginalisation and politics of exclusion through organised political movements.

State Policies toward the Madhesis: Continuity and Change
The main finding of this study is that the government under varied political epochs in Nepal has continued to be biased and visibly hill-centric. Terai region during the rule of Shah and Rana periods was considered as a resource rich border area rather than a significant socio-economic and political region. Madhesis were viewed as socially and culturally dissimilar and they were considered untrustworthy. As a consequence, the government did not issue many Madhesis their citizenship rights and kept them excluded from state institutions. It was particularly after the end of Rana rule in Nepal that stricter citizenship policies were formulated which made many Madhesis "stateless people of Indian origin" (Brown, 1996) [3]. The Madhesis were further excluded when the government implemented the policy of Nepali language compulsory for government jobs. This created a problem for the Madhesis as majority of them did not have adequate knowledge of Nepali languages (Gaige, 1975) [4]. The marginalisation of Madhesis further heightened during the Panchayat system when the state executed the policy of one national culture based on the Nepali language, Hindu religion, and hill attire. Despite the prohibition on caste discrimination the hill high caste culture continued to control the socio-economic and political sphere (Tilouine, 2009) [19]. Further, reforms on land and resettlement policies encouraged hill migration into the Madesh, changing its demographic structure. As such, Madhesis became underrepresented politically despite being group with enormous population (Gaige, 1975; Kantha, 2010) [4, 11].

After 1990, democracy was reinstated in Nepal. The Constitution recognised Nepal as a multilingual and multicultural country. However, it was only the Nepali language that was made the official language, and the political power remained with the hill upper caste Hindus (Kramer, 2008; ICG Report, 2011) [12, 9]. This period saw an increase in institutions of democracy and people's participation in it but inequalities in political representation and policy implementation continued. This illustrates that the political system of democracy was set up but unfortunately it did not erase the culture of exclusion and inequality.

Stages of Madhesi Political Mobilisation
The present study identifies three major phases of Madhesi movement shaped by broader political condition of Nepal.

The first phase started during the early 1950s by Vedanand Jha with the formation of Nepal Terai Congress party. The main demands of the party were regional autonomy, recognition of Hindi language, and proportional representation (Jha 2014; ICG Report, 2007) [10, 8]. The major problem of this party was it failed to mobilise people and gain public support. It could also not play an influential role in the presence of national party like Nepali Congress (Maharjan, 2004) [14]. This phase was short lived that ended in 1960 with the termination of democracy and this gave way for the Panchayat system. During this period the governing authority did not entertain ethnic political mobilisations. As such the Madhesi movement became inactive and latent.

The second phase of the movement began after the restoration of democracy in 1990. It was during this time that political awareness among Madhesis had increased, and parties like the Sadbhavana Party came into existence (Whelpton, 2005) [20]. However, effective mobilisation was obstructed due to factors like internal caste divisions, elite leadership, and compromises with national parties (Riaz and Basu, 2007; Jha, 2014) [18, 10]. It was also during this stage that the Maoist revolution began in Nepal promoting ideas of internal colonisation and federalism. However, the Madhesis' problems were considered secondary and it was not brought into the limelight within the Maoist politics (Kantha, 2010) [11].

The third and most crucial phase started in 2007, after the demands of Madhesis for federalism and fair representation were not accepted and ignored by the Interim Constitution. It was the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum (MJF) in particular that organised massive protests across the Terai. This marked the shift from elite-led politics to mass mobilisation (ICG Report, 2007) [8]. The result was the state tried to suppress the movement which further increased anger and violence in the lowlands of Nepal. At last agreements were made and constitutional amendments recognised federal restructuring and promised citizenship rights, autonomy, and representation. Sadly, the implementation of the above-mentioned agreements remained unfinished (ICG Report, 2011; Bennett et al., 2013) [9, 1] as it was not executed as per the interest of Madhesi movement. The Madhesi leaders' refusal of approving the 2015 Constitution proves their unresolved objections touching on the issue of federalism, citizenship and proportional inclusion (Jha, 2014) [10].

Marginalisation and Identity Formation
Thematic analysis highlights a strong link between marginalisation of Madhesis and their identity formation. Based on shared experiences of marginalisation and discrimination the term 'Madhesi' which was earlier a simple geographical term has transformed into a contested political identity. The other groups inhabiting the southern plains of Nepal like Indigenous Tharus and Muslims rejects being labelled as Madhesis. They regard themselves as the original inhabitants of the Terai and sees Madhesis as migrants from India (Gellner, 2007) [6]. Such internal differences among the inhabitants of terai weakened the consensus among the Madhesis and made it easy for the state to control the region (Bennett et al., 2013) [1].

Language plays a vital role in both identity formation and exclusion. The demands of Madhesis to recognise Hindi and other plains languages in Nepal are considered by the hill people as an influence from India and threat to the Nepalese

national unity (Kantha, 2010) [11]. Despite being a multi-lingual country with census data approving linguistic diversity, the state continues to favour Nepali language making the Madhesis feel culturally insecure and marginalised.

Overall, the findings reveal that the Madhesi movement is not a political reaction emanating from short term shared experience of marginalisation and exclusion but a reply to protracted experience of exclusion and inequality. While political transformations have created avenues for mobilisation against the deep-rooted hill-centric governance, the internal divisions among the Madhesis have restricted lasting transformation. The Madhesi movement therefore shows both the potentials and restrictions of identity-based politics in Nepal's political system.

Conclusion

The Madhesi movement forms a long-term protest against the tradition of historically centralised and monocultural state structure in Nepal. The movement that has been rooted in the geography and demography of the Terai, reflects long-standing objections arising from exclusionary nation-building practices that favours hill Hindu elites. Since the time of the Shah and Rana regimes to the Panchayat system and post-1990 democracy, despite their economic and demographic significance, Madhesis have continued to be marginalised. The Madhesi movement is necessary to comprehend the current political issues of Nepal. Sustainable peace and democracy in Nepal require the acknowledgment of pluralism in the country and the ability to provide historically marginalised communities with an inclusive representation.

References

1. Bennett L, *et al*. Gender and social exclusion in Nepal. Kathmandu: Himal Books; 2013.
2. Bhattarai KP. Modern world nations: Nepal. New York (USA): Infobase Publishing; 2008.
3. Brown TL. The challenge to democracy in Nepal: a political history. London: Routledge; 1996.
4. Gaige F. Regionalism and national unity in Nepal. Berkeley (CA): University of California Press; 1975.
5. Gellner D. Introduction: Transformation of the Nepalese state. In: Gellner D, editor. Resistance and the state: Nepalese experiences. New Delhi: Social Science Press; 2008, p. 1-26.
6. Gellner D. Caste, ethnicity and inequality in Nepal. Econ Polit Wkly. 2007;42(20):1823-1827.
7. Hangen S. Creating a "New Nepal": The ethnic dimension. Washington (DC): East West Center; 2007.
8. International Crisis Group. Nepal's troubled Tarai region. Asia Report No 136-9. Kathmandu/Brussels: International Crisis Group; 2007 [cited 2024 Aug 17]. Available from: https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/nepal/nepal-s-troubled-tarai-region
9. International Crisis Group. Nepal: identity politics and federalism. Asia Report No. 199. Kathmandu/Brussels: International Crisis Group; 2011 [cited 2024 Sep 3]. Available from: https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/nepal/nepal-identity-politics-and-federalism
10. Jha P. Battles of the new republic: A contemporary history of Nepal. New Delhi: Aleph Book Company; 2014.
11. Kantha PK. Maoist-Madhesi dynamics and Nepal's peace process. In: Lawoti M, Pahari AK, editors. The Maoist insurgency in Nepal: revolution in the twenty-first century. Oxon: Routledge; 2010, p. 243-262.
12. Kramer KH. How representative is the Nepali state? In: Gellner D, editor. Resistance and the state: Nepalese experiences. New Delhi: Social Science Press; 2008, p. 126-158.
13. Lawoti M. Looking back, looking forward: centralization, multiple conflicts and democratic state building in Nepal. Washington (DC): East West Center; 2007.
14. Maharjan PN. The Nepali Congress: party agency and nation-building. In: Mitra SK, *et al*., editors. Political parties in South Asia. Westport (CT): Praeger Publishers; 2004, p. 165-186.
15. Millard C. Democracy and dissent in Nepal: an overview with some perceptions from the Valley of Dhorpatan. In: Gellner D, editor. Resistance and the state: Nepalese experiences. New Delhi: Social Science Press; 2008, p. 85-110.
16. Pradhan K. The Gorkha conquest: the process and consequence of the unification of Nepal, with particular reference to eastern Nepal. Kathmandu: Himal Books; 2009.
17. Regmi MC. Kings and political leaders of the Gorkhali Empire, 1768-1814. Hyderabad: Orient Longman Limited; 1995.
18. Riaz A, Basu S. Paradise lost? State failure in Nepal. Lanham (MD): Lexington Books; 2007.
19. Tilouine ML. Ruling social groups from species to nations: reflections on changing conceptualizations of caste and ethnicity in Nepal. In: Gellner D, editor. Ethnic activism and civil society in South Asia. New Delhi: Sage Publications; 2009, p. 75-103.
20. Whelpton J. A history of Nepal. Delhi: Cambridge University Press; 2005.