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E-ISSN : 2456-1045

- International Journal
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RESEARCH JOURNAL

VOLUME - 49 | ISSUE - 1

ADVANCE RESEARCH
JOURNAL OF
MULTIDISCIPLINARY DISCOVERIES

MAY
2020



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOUNDATION

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Aspect of the history of the Madhesi Movement in Nepal (1950-2007)

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

NAME OF THE AUTHOR

ISSN : 2456-1045 (Online)
 ICV Impact Value: 72.30
 GIF- Impact Factor: 5.188
 IPI Impact Factor: 3.54
 Publishing Copyright @ International Journal Foundation
 Article Code: HIS-V49-I1-C4-MAY-2020
 Category : HISTORY
 Volume : 49.0 (MAY-2020 EDITION)
 Issue: 1(One)
 Chapter : 4 (Four)
 Page : 31-38
 Journal URL: www.journalresearchijf.com
 Paper Received: 28.06.2020
 Paper Accepted: 08.07.2020
 Date of Publication: 20-07-2020
 Doi No. [10.5281/zenodo.3969216](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3969216)

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ABSTRACT

Madhesi community in spite of having a long history of origin and habitat within the present day Nepal is practically considered outsiders and they have been mostly marginalized and they face serious humanitarian problem i. e of their true identity in their own native land . This paper examines the different narratives on the 'Madhesh' identity , and situates this discourse in the ethno-linguistic mosaic of the Tarai region as well as the larger Nepal Political scenario, by identifying the reasons for their increasing assertiveness in politics . The paper argues that exploitation and discrimination by the upper caste -Pahadi migrant communities and the Nepali state has played an important role in the consolidation of the Madhesi identity. While the mainstream Madhes parties have adopted a soft stand on the issue , the armed groups are demanding outright 'independence'. Of late, the Madhesi movement has suffered because of differences between various Madhes groups. Here the study tries to explain Madhes as a region , ethnic Identity of Madhesis, socio- political conditions of Madhesis, perceptions about the Madhesis among the hill people.

KEYWORDS: Madhes, Madhesi, Madhesi Community, Identity, Ethnic- group, Madhes Parties, Madhesi Movement, Tarai Region.

CITATION OF THE ARTICLE



Sarkar SD. (2020) Aspect of the History of The Madhesi Movement In Nepal (1950-2007); *Advance Research Journal of Multidisciplinary Discoveries*; 49(4) pp. 31-38

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Open access, Peer-reviewed and Indexed journal (www.journalresearchijf.com)

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I. INTRODUCTION

The end of world war II marked the advent of a new phase of ethnic disputes in the world. The explicit was for territory converted into implicit wars for identity and recognition. This Paper embarks on a study of the underlying factors that resulted in ethnic disputes in Nepal with a focus on the Madhesis (people from the plains of Nepal).^[1] Over the years, Madhesis have suffered from a sense of discrimination and consequent deprivation^[2]. In this context, it is important to carve out here the framework or structure of Nepal to explain the present day ethnic conflict between the Madhesi and the Pahadi. The emergence of ethnic demands in the Tarai was initially witnessed during 1950's. The king's coup in 1960 sabotaged this demand and it was further impaired in 1990 with the restoration of multi party democracy. However with the institution of an interim government in 2006 ethnic demands came to the forefront^[3].

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research is mainly based on empirical data. Due to scanty primary sources, extensive field survey through interviewing the local people had been undertaken in the Terai region of Nepal. I have mainly interviewed the local Madhesi people and some of the important local leaders in the two localities of Birgunj and Kathmandu in Nepal and had also worked in some of the important libraries like Thakur Ram Bahumukhi College Library, Birgunj, Nepal, Tribhuvan University Library, Kathmandu and Martin Chauthari Library, Kathmandu for getting primary document. Apart from that, various contemporary newspaper, articles, journals and online sources available especially documentaries, reports. A lot of secondary and primary books have been gathered from the National Library, Kolkata, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

Madhes and Madhesi:

Nepal or the kingdom of Nepal as it was initially called was always been defined as the nation of the hills and Himalayas.^[4] It can be divided into four geo ecological zones: the Great Himalaya, the middle Mountains, the outer Himalaya and the Tarai.^[5] People have normally been identified as Nepali or *Pahadi* i.e. the hill origin people and the Madhesi, who were the non - Nepali speaking people originating from the plains mostly living in the Terai region^[6]

The Madhesh or Terai therefore has been referred to the plain strip of the land lying within the boundary of Nepal. The Tarai forms the fourth geo ecological zone of Nepal. Tarai is of relatively recent origin and is used interchangeably for '*Madhes*' which

is derived from the Sanskrit word '*Madhyadesh*'.^[7] Historians agree with the fact that '*Madhesh*' has been derived from the Sanskrit word '*Madhyadesh*' and Pali word '*Majhimdesh*' which means the '*land in the middle*'.^[8] Likewise the word Madhesi or the term Tarai people refers not to all the inhabitants of the Madhes but indigenous ones of this region. They were also called the Nepali citizen of Indian origin.

There are generally two schools of thoughts having distinct political connotations that attempts to define Madhes and Madhesi identity. The first school understands Madhes as a regional entity based on its geographical location. Thus people living in this region have been broadly called Madhesi or Madhesiyas. The view argues the term Madhes, which had been referred to all non - Pahadiyas, including the traditional caste hierarchy such as Brahman, Khatriyas, Vaisyas and Dalits and indigenous *janajati* ethnic groups other native tribes and Muslims. The second interpretation of Madhesi identity is through the sociological lens of identity. The region is described as a traditional homeland of tribal people and the people of the Indian origin.^[9]

Madhesis are the indigenous 'non-hill origin' inhabitants of the Tarai, which includes certain indigenous ethnic nationalities as *Tharu*, *Rajbanshi*, *Mechi*, *Dhimial* and other tribals as well as the people of different Hindu caste group whose religious traditions, languages, social lifestyles and customs, food habits and clothes are similar to those of the people living in the Gangetic plains of India. The term Madhesi has increasingly been used by both the people in the hills and the plains to refer to a large section of the Indian diaspora. Fredrick Gaige(1975) used the term 'hill people' and 'plains people' living in the Terai districts for the Madhesis. They used to speak in the plain languages such as Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhes, Urdu, Hindi and Bengali and dialects of these languages are also used by the various *Janajati* groups. The 'hill people's' mother tongue or first language is Nepali Newari, Magar, Gurung, Rai and others.^[10]

Geopolitics of the Madhesh of Terai:

Madhes was the most important region of Nepal geographically and culturally distinct from the hills. Nepal's Tarai is approximately five hundred miles long from western boundary the Mahakali river to its eastern boundary, the Mechi river. This east west border line between the Nepal Terai Indian states touches Uttaranchal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal. ^[11] In ancient times, several kingdoms like Mithila, Tirhuta, Birat, Kolia, Kochila flourished in the Madhesh. Janakpur was the capital of Madhesh, the mention of which has been found in the Ramayana. ^[12]

Madhesh is the backbone of Nepal's economy, producing about 65percent of the nation's gross domestic product (GDP) yielding about 76percent of the government's revenue and 60 percent agricultural products of the country. Which inhabits more than 50 percent of Nepali population.^[13]

The Problem of Ethnic Identity:

The problem of ethnic identity thus became an important issue in Nepal. Most Madhesis are losing their identity since they are treated as less Nepali or non- Nepali by the *Pahadis* . A chief reason is their socio - cultural, linguistic and physical affinity with the communities living immediately on the other side of the border in India, which historically was a part of Madhesi culture. Nepali or hill language speaking people from Darjeeling or Sikkim , who have been living there for generations have been readily accepted in Nepal as Nepalese and they enjoy all the socio-political benefits. A Madhesi who does not speak Nepali or any other hill language and who does not follow hill tradition and practices is not easily accepted as Nepali by the *Pahadis*. There has been a systematic process of discrimination deprivation and marginalization of the Madhesi during the last two and half centuries of the authoritarian rule perpetuated by the Shah Kings, their usurpers and the ruling hill elits of Nepal.^[14]

Migration of Indians to the Terai region:

During the early twentieth century, some population from India migrated to Nepal embarked on trade in the Tarai and Kathmandu valley. The limited development activities and the opening of few educational institution in Kathmandu also encouraged 'Indians' to migrate to Nepal. Furthermore the signing of British India's treaty with Nepal in 1923 opened fresh avenues for the migration of Indian traders entrepreneurs, skilled and unskilled laborers to the Nepal Tarai and other parts of the kingdom. Subsequently, Indian traders and businessmen, particularly the Marwari's, extended their business in Nepal and began to migrate to Nepal.^[15]

The Indian settlement into Nepal Terai therefore had a definitive historical pattern. Among other socio- economic reasons for immigration of Indian origin people into Terai, the most prominent of them however remained the policy of the Nepalese government that encouraged migration from India. To support this policy, abundant *birta* and *guthi* lands (i.e. lands assigned for charitable grants to institutions or to the nobility and members of ruling family who formed the support base of the rulers) were used in Terai to attract settlers from the hills in the region.^[16]As a result the period between mid- nineteenth

centuries till the end of Rana rule in 1950 saw enormous Indian immigration to Nepal Terai.^[17]

Towards a Political Development:

The system of governance of Nepal underwent great changes during the Rana period(1846- 1950) .The Rana regime was essentially a military oligarchy.^[18]The traditional pattern of court politics began to change from 1930's . The family politics of the ruling Ranas developed along with ideologically oriented anti Rana movement. This led to the struggle for democracy in Nepal with the formation of political parties during the 1930s, which was previously unknown to Nepali politics. The anti-Rana activity was carried on by the Nepali Youth^[19] in the terai region. Therefore Terai became strategically very crucial in the anti- Rana movement in Nepal.^[20]

The first political organization *Praja Parishad* ,an underground organization was formed in 1936at Kathmandu. Further in 1946, the anti Rana movement got a shot in the arm when B.P. Koirala established a new political party called Nepali National Congress, which pledged to bring political change in Nepal and for this it worked with the Indian nationalist to fight against the British. The Nepali Congress called for a labour strike in 1946 in support of the striking mill workers in Biratnagar. In 1948 the Nepali Democratic Party was formed in Calcutta, which later on merged with the Nepali National Congress. In 1950 the Nepali Congress came into put an end the autocratic rule of the Rana regime.^[21] Thus Terai became strategically very crucial in the anti Rana movement in Nepal. The armed struggle against the Rana regime was planned in Bairginiya - a border town in India with Gaur in Nepal, where the first fight for freedom in Nepal was initiated. This place stood as a symbol of the great sacrifices that the people of Madhesh made to bring about democracy in Nepal. Despite their strong support for democracy the Madhesi were never taken seriously. Their demand for autonomous territory had taken shape during the period of anti- Rana revolution.^[22]

Most Madhesis are losing their identity since they are treated as less Nepali or non-Nepali by the Pahadis. They have a long history of their own and are the residents of this region. These people were exploited by their social superiors. They were people of such simple and unsophisticated disposition, that they failed to see that the ruling class was treating them as Indians, Or people migrating from India. Consequently they were subjected to cruelties of various kinds, especially during the region of the Ranas. But when they eventually came to realize the reality, they gradually grow more and more vocal in protest.

Madhesi Movement : (1950- 2007)

The main problem faced by the Madhesi people are those of identity and recognition, proportional representation in the state power citizenship and nationality, language and culture. There has been an internal colonization carried out by hill dominated Nepali state dominated Nepali state against the plain people of the Terai. Various Madhesi organizations that emerged were involved in mobilization of Madhesi people against discrimination of the Nepalese state.^[23]

In 1950 the Ranas were overthrown and Nepal became a democratic country with a ceremonial monarchy. However some Terai elites who had helped the political parties to overthrow the Ranas then felt excluded from national politics. These elites thus formed a Terai centered regionalist political party in 1951 called the Nepali Tarai Congress, under the leadership of Bedananda Jha, whose main political demand was to create an autonomous Terai within Nepal and to increase the presence of Madhesis in the civil service.^[24] They also demanded the recognition of Hindi as an official language for the Terai region.^[25]

The question of citizenship was also raised during the period of 1950. Changing citizenship regulations reflect changes in the attitude of Kathmandu's decision makers towards the plains people of the Terai. Before, 1951, citizenship was defined in modern, constitutional terms. Hill people were given preference over plains people settled in the Terai, so that the plains people were relegated to a second class status. This is understandable when one remembers that the Terai was viewed before 1951 more as a colony than an integrated part of a modern nation state.^[26] After the negotiated settlement that ended the period of political turmoil in 1950-51, the need was voiced for drawing up a voters list and holding an election. Since there was no formal definition of citizenship, the Public Representation Act, of 1951 affirmed the right to vote for any inhabitant who had raised in any constituency for at least sixty days. This act, with its liberal, straight forward voting requirements, set the tone for the citizenship Act of the following year like most citizenship laws, it declared a citizen anyone who was born in Nepal, anyone permanently settled in Nepal who had at least one parent born in Nepal or any women married to a citizen. It also stated that anyone who had lived in Nepal for at least five years could acquire citizenship.^[27] Even when Terai was (autonomous), Nepalese citizenship Act 1952 was given go ahead and after each day, it was made easier of Nepalese of Hills to obtain citizenship.^[28]

In 1956, Raghunath Thakur established "Madhesi Mukti Andolon" to oppose and fight the discrimination and exploitation against Terai residents. He argued that Terai came under section 730 of UN charter and Terai was an autonomous region. Terai also had every right to make its foreign policies. He later formed "Madhesi Janakrantikari Dal" to continue Madhesh Revolution. The organizations major objectives were to snatch power from Nepalese Government for self governance; to choose capable Madhesis to make their own Army, police and bureaucrats to hold domestic and international trade of Madhesh to Madhesi people; to enforce law made by Madhesis in Madhesh; to give every Madhesi land's ownership to Madhesi people; to chase away all the enemies who had authority from Madhes.^[29] Thus the eight years between 1951 and 1959 had been politically very chaotic. High hopes for democracy were raised with the over throw of the Ranas.^[30]

During 1960- 1990s the state of Nepal attempted to assimilate the 100 plus ethnicities of Nepal into a pan Nepali identity through language, schooling and legal directives. These policies codified the cultures of upper representation in the government of any in Nepal who did not lineage.^[31] In 1960 to end the discrimination and exploitation against the indigenous people of western Terai " Terai Liberation Front" was established. As the Terai resident were deprived of citizenship and their land were being taken by Nepalese from hills, the fighters from "Terai Liberation Front" were to take up arms against the discrimination and they started an armed revolution with guerilla war strategy.

During The 1960, the organization emphasized on the development of Madhes and Madhesi people and demanded for Madhesi National police, Madhesi army, executive, legislature, independent judiciary and public service commission.^[32] Ramraja Prasad Singh, who established the New People's Front in 1976 began to mobilize the Madhesi and indigenous nationalities. Madhesi mobilization thus began to reappear during the 1980s when polity became slightly more open. In the earlier period between 1960's- 70's, the Madhesis remained largely politically inactive due to the restrictions imposed by the autocratic Panchayat regime.^[33] King Mahendra in December, 1960, banned all political parties and instituted the 'party-less Panchayat system'.^[34] Although the traditional civil code was revised in 1962, the national slogan was; "One king, one country and one language".

The younger generation of Madhesis, particularly the college and high school students were to new ideas of democracy, human rights and national self-determination. The 1970s was the decade of

student movement in Nepal. In 1972, a major student agitation was launched by the students, it began in the colleges of Terai, particularly in Morang and Biratnagar and spread to the TU campus in Kathmandu. The movement spread all over the country. In Madhes, the agitating students also took up the issues of discrimination and marginalization of the Madhesis as well as the underrepresentation of Madhesis in government service.^[35]

In 1983 Gajendra Narayan Singh a prominent Madhesi activist formed Nepal Sadbhawana Parishad a cultural organization that campaigned for greater cultural rights for Madhesis for greater cultural rights for Madhesis.^[36] After 1990, people from different communities started coming together in an organized manner and for the first time, identity politics broke new grounds broke new grounds and entered the mainstream politics with the launching of the Nepal Sadbhawana Party (NSP)^[37] by late Gajendra Narayan Singh championing the cause of the people of the Madhes.^[38] While most of the Terai inhabitants are suspected of being Indian immigrants the politics of national identity between the Pahadi and Madhesi populations made the situation worst. Even after restoration of multi-party democracy in 1990, the Janajati, Dalit and Madhesi populations were denied of their rights.

In February 1996, the leaders of the Maoist United people's front began a violent insurgency, waged through killings, torture, bombings, kidnappings, extortion and intimidation against civilians, police and public officials in more than 50 of the country's 75 districts.^[39] Political elites in the Terai recognized how ethnic divisions could be used to mobilize supporters and pressure Kathmandu and began to build a Madhesi identity movement along similar lines. The formation of the MJF in 1997 by activist Upendra Yadav was a milestone in this development. Originally an academic platform for Terai citizen to air their grievances and discuss ways in which discrimination of Madhesis by Pahadis could be addressed, the MJF become more political and radicalized during the 10 year civil war between the Communist Party of Nepal- Maoist and the government, and MJF leaders including Yadav either sympathized with or joined the Maoist with the greater financial and military standing that this alliance provided the, MJF was able to more quickly mobilize and coalesce than the indigenous Nationalities before it.

In this regard it is necessary to discuss the role of the Madhesis during the Maoist insurgency. The CPN(N) established the Madhesi National Liberation Front (MNLF) in 2000, under the leadership of Jai Krishna Goit. This was part of the Maoist strategy to

tap into identity politics and to win support among regionally excluded communities. According to the MNLF leaders, their goal was to establish an autonomous Madhes, free from all kinds of discrimination. Under the influence of the Maoist and encouraged by the ongoing people's war, the MJF propaganda pamphlet became more and more anti-pahadi accusing Pahadis of operating a "colony of torture" rooted in racial discrimination with Madhesis "Under the threat of extinction due to their domination and suppression by pahadis "Since the foundation of the state of Nepal ... at all level of society".^[40]

The Maoist established a central level ethnic section in 2000 to address the issues of marginality. In the same year various ethnic fronts including the Madhesi Rastriya Mukti Morcha (MRMM) had been formed. In 2004 a section of the MRMM, a Madhesi ethnic wing of the CPN Maoist party broke away and formed JTMM (Janatantrik Tarai Mukti Morcha or Democratic Tarai Liberation Front) an underground armed political party whose aim was to secede the Terai from Nepal. The JTMM was successful in eroding the presence of the Maoists in Madhesi dominated areas of the Terai.^[41] Meanwhile various other organizations were formed like the Madhesi Janatantrik Morcha was formed under the leadership Jay Krishna Goit in 2003. Madhesi Ekyabadhata Parishad organization was formed 2004 with the aim to give a common platform to the all different political parties and also to raise Madhesi issue. The Madhesi Tigers was formed in 2004 in order to start armed movement for Madhesi people and abolish the exploitation from the CPN Maoist.^[42]

In April 2006, Jana Andolan II was launched by the SPA, strongly supported by the Maoists. Madhesi discontent had been rising since it became apparent the April 2006 people's movement would not lead to rapid addressing of their grievances. Federalism emerged as a key demand of all Madhesi groups; armed outfit increased their activities and Maoist Madhesi tensions escalated, in some cases violently. The party, happy to be back in power and concentrating on talks with the Maoist, paid little attention to Madhesi issues or political dynamics. When the drafts interim Constitution prepared by the SPA and Maoists without broad consultation - became public in December 2006, it prompted protests.^[43]

Jana Andolan II marked the process of bringing the Maoist into the political mainstream. Describing the phase 'federal democratic republic' as the essence of new constitution, the CPN(Maoist) professed that the main task in the formation of a new Nepal was to end the centralized unitary state structure and restructure it as a federal state. The CPN(Maoist) party

was more explicit on federalism in its manifesto than other parties. The manifestos of the Madhesi Jana Ahikar Forum and Tarai Madhes Loktantrik Party, the fourth and fifth largest parties when the first constituent Assembly was elected and the main proponents of federalism, largely focused on the Tarai/ Madhes in their quest for federalism, rather than dealing with the issue from a national perspective.^[44]

In early 2007 Nepal's sleepy Tarai region became the epicenter of its continuing political turbulence. Although the post Peoples Movement II (2006), transitional government arrangements offered some benefits to *janajatis*, women and Dalits, but they granted nothing in the case of the Madhesis. This led to the Madhes uprising of 21 long days during January- February, 2007.^[45] According to Binay Kumar Mishra this was a singular movement in Nepali history that was marked markedly different from any other socio-political movement Nepal has ever witnessed, exemplified this new ethos.^[46] Madhesi people had been fighting for their natural Rights and survival in Nepal; equal rights and opportunities in all aspects of social, political and economic life.^[47] The Madhesis only demanded development and jobs and their leaders believed that all the problems of the plains, the inequality, injustice and state neglect will be resolved once they have a Madhesi federal state. But few here hold out much hope. Further they want to be respected and treated like Nepalese and also want to put an end to the decriminalization of Politics.^[48]

From 2007, the history in some manner has the mention of Madhesis, as from this very period their rebellion took a dangerous turn. Their rebellion was successful enough so that now the administration started granting them some facilities now. 2007 onwards, every demand of the Madhesis has been in some mere permission. The rebellion of Madhesis, as of today, has not stopped. It continues in some form or the other. Thus looking at the Madhesi protest of 2007 through socio-historical lens had generally been popular with academics, policy makers and non-Terai observers of the movement. This view sees the movement from the perspective of centuries of marginalization and political and social change that has hit Nepal with the end of the royal power.^[49]

III. CONCLUSION

The achievement of the Madhesi uprising are now endangered as the movement is fragmenting and weakening itself. The movement is plagued by internal struggles among different Madhesi politicians who want to make the most of the immense power to them

by the sacrifice of the people who fought against the state. One big challenge to the Madhesi movement is the revolt of different identities within the Madhesi identity is a serious blow to the powerful Madhesi Movement. The Tharus who comprise around 13.30 percent of the Tarai's population, have their own unique identity, had a very complex relationship with the Madhesis. The Madhesi political parties are not being able to unite their struggle with the struggle of the Tharu community is a big loss for the Madhesi movement. The relationship between the Pahadis and the Madhesis has also worsened since the Madhesi uprising. As a result the Pahadis were displaced from the Madhesi dominated areas of the Tarai. The Tharu activist organization, the Tarai Muslims and the Pahadi migrants in the Terai have formed a loose alliance to counter the growing political domination of the Madhesis. The uprising had made the Madhesis realize that in a new democratic Nepal they can write their own future. The uprising has made most Pahadis realize that the Madhesis were not well treated in Nepal in the past. Many more Pahadis now would support the empowerment and inclusion of Madhesis. Despite the treat from Pahadi and Madhesi extremist groups, who are trying to polarize these two groups, the majority of Pahadis have realized that Madhesis were as much Nepalese as they Pahadis.⁵⁰

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