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ETHNIC UPRISING IN NEPAL'S TARAI: THE MAKING OF MADHESI IDENTITY IN THE POST-CIVIL WAR TRANSITION (243 PP)

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This dissertation studies ethnopolitical groups and political realignment in the post-war context. There is a rich academic interest in understanding how post-war societies move forward after a civil war. An interesting aspect of this analysis in post-war Nepal is the mobilization of traditionally marginalized populations and their identities. Following the end of the Maoist insurgency (1996-2006), the rapid emergence of Madhesi identity, the surge in violence, and the popularity of Madhesi ethnopolitical groups in Nepal's southern lowlands called Tarai/Madhes were unprecedented. This dissertation explores how Madhesi identity was evolved in the post-accord Nepal. It asks: how did Madhesi ethno-political leaders define Madhesi identity in the post-Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) period? Further, how did the local Madhesi population understand Madhesi identity? How did they come to accept the Madhesi rhetoric of ethnic identity targeted against the hill-dominated Nepali state and hill people rarely seen in Nepal until 2007? Seeking to address these questions this dissertation draws on primary data gathered from the field and examines the complex identity negotiation between Madhesi groups. It also explores diverse contextual issues including state policies and practices, the changing Madhesi political context, and the impact of the Maoist insurgency on the process of Madhesi identity development. It examines the identity narratives of Madhesi leaders and local Madhesi residents, and relevant documents to understand the shift in popular support for Madhesi identity in post-CPA Nepal.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ANFSU	All Nepal National Free Students' Union
CA	Constitutional Assembly
CDO	Chief District Officer
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
CPNUML	Communist Party of Nepal, United Marxists and Leninist
HMG	His Majesty's Government
IC	Interim Constitution
ICG	International Crisis Group
IRB	Institutional Review Board
JSPN	Janata Samajbadi Party Nepal
LSPN	Loktantrik Samajbadi Party Nepal
MPRF	Madhesi People’s Rights Forum
NC	Nepali Congress Party
NCP	Nepal Communist Party
NEMAF	Nepal Madhes Foundation
NEPC	National Education Planning Commission
NSP	Nepal Satbhavana Party
NSU	Nepal Student Union
PRIO	Peace Research Institute Oslo
RJPN	Rastriya Janata Party Nepal
SPA	Seven Party Alliance
SPN	Samajbadi Party Nepal

SSM	Snowball Sampling Method
TC	Tarai Congress Party
TLF	Tarai Liberation Front
TMDP	Tarai Madhes Democratic Party
UDMF	United Democratic Madhesi Front
UNDP	United Nations Development Program

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The end of World War II marked the beginning of identity-based conflicts between ethnic, national, and religious communities throughout the world. The deeply-seated societal divisions underpinning these types of violence (both structural and direct) have produced conflicts that are protracted and intractable in nature (Aiken 2008). These kinds of conflicts and violence have always been centered around identity. "Ever since identity has been the basis for the disenfranchisement of the people, thus the foundation for their struggle for inclusion and autonomy" (K. Jha 2017, v). Peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts, therefore, have become more difficult and challenging in many societies, even after the major civil war is terminated through negotiated settlement (Aiken 2008; Bara, Deglow, and van Baalen 2021).

This dissertation studies ethnopolitical groups and political realignment in the post-civil war context. There is a rich scholarly interest in understanding how post-war societies move forward once the major civil war is ended through peace negotiations. An interesting strain of this investigation in post-war Nepal is the mobilization of traditionally marginalized populations and their identities. In the aftermath of the decade long Maoist armed insurgency (1996-2006), the emergence of Madhesi[1] identity as a powerful force, the surge in violence, and the popularity of Madhesi ethnopolitical groups in the southern lowland of Nepal known as Tarai/Madhes were unprecedented (Miklian 2008). These political dynamics added a layer of complexity to the

[1] The word Madhesi refers to the people of Tarai/Madhes –southern lowland of Nepal that borders with North India-- who share similar languages and cultures with various communities across the border of India.

political landscape of Nepal, emphasizing the need for dialogue and negotiation as integral to the peacebuilding processes.

This study explores the underpinning issues and the processes that gave rise to the Madhesi identity in Nepal, one of the newest democracies of South Asia, following the end of the Maoist insurgency. An interesting aspect of the Madhesi case was the vociferous endorsement of the ethno-territorial demands of the Madhesi people by the Maoists who in principle waged a class-based insurgency against the centralized Nepali state[2] (Hangen 2007; Kantha 2009; Lawoti 2010a; Sijapati 2013). This contrasted with the disdainful attitude of the liberal political parties including the Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal, United Marxists and Leninist (CPNUML)[3] to Madhesi demands (K. Jha 2017). The Maoists gained extensive support for their insurgency by mobilizing marginalized groups' grievances against the state (Hangen 2007; Hutt 2004; Lawoti 2010a).

The attitudes and behaviors of the Maoists during the insurgency led to the realization among the public that the Maoists would address the identity-based concerns (i.e., equality, inclusion, and autonomy) of traditionally marginalized communities including the Madhesi and others in order to maintain their political base once they came to power (K. Jha 2017). The Maoists, however, failed to fulfill these claims they endorsed during the insurgency as soon as they entered mainstream democratic politics through the signing of the peace accord (CPA) with the government in November 2006[4] (Hangen 2007; Lawoti 2010a). Instead, they aligned with the

[2] On December 24, 2007, Nepal's government abolished the Monarchy and declared the country a federal state.

[3] The CPN-UML is a leading communist party in Nepal. Despite its communist name, the party is a powerful force for democracy in Nepal. It played a key role in bringing the Maoists into the democratic system through dialogue and negotiations.

[4] The government of Nepal, as a representative of then Seven Party Alliance (SPA), a coalition of then major political parties of Nepal and the Maoist signed the CPA on November 21, 2006, which was supported by Madhesi groups.

mainstream political parties opposing the key Madhesi demands including the recognition of their identity and implementing federalism based on identity. These developments in Nepalese politics led to ethnic mobilization, protest movements, and more importantly, the development of a dissenting Madhesi identity in post-CPA Nepal.

The construction and negotiation of Madhesi identity in the post-war fluid political context, is an interactive dialogue used by the Madhesi leaders and local Madhesi people to selectively contest and resist upper-caste Pahadi (hill) domination and the existing Nepali nationalism[5] as well as restructure existing system of domination (N. Pandey 2021; Pherali and Garratt 2014). This work, therefore, examines various dynamics and processes including the historical social, political, cultural, and economic relationships between the Nepali state and the Madhesi people that contributed to the arousal of ethnic consciousness of the Madhesi people in post-CPA Nepal.

This dissertation contends that prevailing theories of identity, exclusively grounded in primordialism (which sees identities as innate and enduring), or constructivism (which views identities as [re]constructed and infinitely malleable), inherently fall short in offering a comprehensive framework to comprehend the intricacies of identity formation. Aligned with the social psychological approach to identity, this research posits that identity takes shape through the active interplay of human agency with evolving contextual issues. It also acknowledges that external factors can at times become more paramount to shaping identity. The research findings (detailed in chapters IV and V) demonstrate that the construction of Madhesi identity in post-

[5] Nepali nationalism prior to 2007 was the hill-based narrative invention built in the folkloric glory of the brave Gorkhali Raj and the ideological orthodoxy of the Hindu Raj with the Hindu King was its source and central axis. It was built on the basis of three issues: the language (Nepali, the official language of Nepal), Religion (Hindu), and the hilly King (symbol of the national unity) (Bhandari, Shrestha, and Dahal 2009, 14).

CPA Nepal was largely influenced by power and politics, especially the Madhesi experience of discrimination by the hill-dominated Nepali state and hill people. Nevertheless, the findings also underscore the essential role of human agency, notably exercised by Madhesi ethnopolitical groups. Both Madhesi leaders and locals strategically used their cultural and material resources to consolidate their group and foster a mass sense of peoplehood, catalyzing an awakening of Madhesi ethnic pride.

This introductory chapter is structured into three parts. The first section briefly discusses the background and history of the Madhesi conflict followed by the study's key research questions. The second part underlines the significance of this research project. The third section details the structure of the dissertation. In the last section, I will offer my concluding remarks.

Background and History of Madhesi Conflict

Nepal's monarchy, a Hindu kingdom, stretched from 1768 to 2008. From 1950 onwards, several attempts (both violent and non-violent) to instill democratic governments were made. In 1990, the democratic movement (*Janaandolan I*) abolished about 30 years (1962-1990) of *Panchayat* system, a system of 'guided democracy,' where the King had absolute control over judicial, executive, and legislative powers (K. Jha 2017). It introduced a constitutional monarchy and restored multi-party democracy. But the King once again seized the political power sacking a civilian government when the Maoist insurgency was at its apex in 2005.

The Maoist conflict emerged from grievances based on widespread inequities within the social structure of Nepal (Ramnarain 2016). The People's Movement (*Janaandolan II*) of April 2006, and the events that followed in its aftermath brought about a profound shift in Nepal's political landscape. Not only was the monarchy abolished, but the country also witnessed a

negotiated end to the Maoist civil war. The comprehensive peace accord (CPA) signed between the government of Nepal and the Maoist Party proposed several affirmative actions to build peace and democracy in Nepal. These included holding an election for a Constitutional Assembly (CA) to draft a new constitution, democratization of the Nepalese Army,[6] and gathering Maoist combatants in cantonments for integration and rehabilitation (ICG 2006).

The subsequent 2007 Interim Constitution promulgated by the government and the Maoists, however, failed to address the concerns of Madhesis, who had been fighting for autonomy, inclusion, equality, and dignity since 1950s. Their demands included the adoption of federalism to enhance Madhesi autonomy and access to resources in the Tarai,[7] delineation of electoral constituencies based on population density to increase Madhesi representation in the national assembly, recognition of Madhesis as an ethnic group, and their proportional representation in state organs (Mathema 2011, 115–16).

This perceived inattention to Madhesi aspirations triggered a violent ethnic uprising in Tarai during the post-CPA period. The initial spark came from traditionally marginalized groups including the then-Madhesi People's Rights Forum (MPRF),[8] recently renamed the "Janata Samajbadi Party Nepal (JSPN), and the "Nepal Satbhawana Party (NSP) fighting on behalf of those who professed a Madhesi ethnic identity. Later, the Tarai Madhes Democratic Party (TMDP), recently renamed the Loktantrik Samajbadi Party Nepal (LSPN), was formed, and joined the movement under the banner of the United Madhesi Democratic Front (UMDF). The

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[6] The key components of democratization of Nepal Army involve civilian supremacy of Nepal Army, transparency in internal system of the institution, accountable to its own action, and respect of human rights and rule of law.

[7] In this paper, I interchangeably use the words Tarai and Madhes to define the southern flatlands of Nepal.

[8] Founded after the CPA, MPRF is a relatively new political party in Nepal. In 1997, it was established as an NGO to promote ethnic self-determination rights with the formation of the Madhes autonomous region for the Madhesi people (Miklian 2008).

MPRF emerged as the most powerful Madhesi political group (Miklian 2008), raising voices against the dominant hill groups (upper-caste Pahadi Hindus such as Brahmin and Chhetri) who led discriminatory policies against the Madhesi people. For instance, Madhesis were required to obtain permission to visit Kathmandu until the 1950s (H. B. Jha 2017). During the 1990s, the government set up commissions to deal with the inequalities faced by various marginalized groups including women and Dalits, but no recognition was given to the exclusion faced by Madhesis (Gellner 2007, 1827).

Problems related to ethnicity, caste, and region have existed in Nepal ever since the country's formation in 1768. Identity politics in the Tarai, however, intensified after the Maoists entered mainstream politics. The political rhetoric of Madhesi groups during the Madhes uprising, represented in slogans such as 'Samagra Madhes, Ek Pradesh' (The entire Madhes, one province), 'Mago Madhes, Jago Madhes' (Ask for Madhes, rise Madhes), and 'Pahadis Chor, Desh Chhod' (Hill-dwellers, out of Madhes) focused on autonomy, equality, and recognition can be taken as the result of deeply rooted historical discrimination against Nepal's Tarai (Sijapati 2013).

Discrimination based on caste, ethnicity, and region exists in the Tarai. Physical markers such as color of the skin (dark brown complexion), the clothes (Madhesi males wear dhoti)[9], language (Madhesi people speak Indian origin languages[10]), and the territory (the lowland) remain the most recognizable symbols of Madhesi identity. Brass (1991) argues that language,

[9] Dhoti refers to the outfit worn by Madhesi men. It is a large rectangular piece of cloth tied around the waist and extending to cover most of the legs. Particularly, Dhoti-Kurta is Indian attire which differs from Nepal's national costume – Daura, Suruwal, and Topi.

[10] The native languages of Madhesi people include Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi and Bajjika. While Hindi is considered as the lingua-franca of the Madhesi people, many Madhesis speak Nepali as their second language.

territory, race, and food are immutable symbols of ethnicity. Culturally, racially, and linguistically Madhesis are closer to various communities across the border in north India. Thus, Pahadis' view Madhesis as less Nepali than themselves, and doubt their loyalty towards the Nepali state [11] (Hangen and Lawoti 2013).

Madhesi identity, however, is complex, and intersects with caste, ethnicity, and region thereby indicating that it is not a monolithic identity. Though 'Tarai' is known as 'Madhes' and represents the southern lowland of Nepal, 'Madhes' has come to mean much more than the geography since 2007. Madhes includes the cultural and linguistic space that exist as a basis of identity amongst the people residing in the region (Cheah 2008, 4). People from diverse Tarai Hindu caste groups, and non-caste groups live in the region. Madhesi leaders claim a singular Madhesi identity to denote all the non-hill residents of Tarai. But many non-caste groups, particularly Tharus in the western and far-western Tarai reject the Madhesi label, asserting that they are the aborigines of the region. However, Hindu caste groups, and some non-caste groups including Tharus and Muslims in the central and eastern Tarai prefer to identify as Madhesi, especially after 2007 (S. Maharjan and Sah 2013).

Though politicians in southern Nepal have used the term 'Madhes' to define local issues since 1940s, the politics on Madhesi identity did not develop until after the Panchayat era, i.e. the direct royal rule from 1962-1990 (K. Jha 2017; Miklian 2008). Therefore, some scholars articulate that state-sponsored Pahadi migration to the Tarai in the 1950s and 1980s contributed to creating Madhesis as one singular population group (Mathema 2011, 51). Their grievances arose from Pahadi domination of Madhesis assisted by the creation of ethno-political groups, including the MPRF, TMDP and NSP.

[11] Pahadis in Kathmandu and other hilly areas used to call Madhesi individuals not by their names, but by slurs such as Madhise, Marsya, Bhaiya, and Dhoti.

In the past, Madhesis supported mainstream political parties, including the Nepali Congress Party, which considers Madhes as its vote bank (Khadka 2018). Despite their support for mainstream political parties, and even for the Maoists during the civil war, the representation of the Madhesis (except some upper caste Madhesis) in state institutions was gradually shrinking (P. Jha 2014). This was because of the Nepali state's continued domination by Pahadi elites who always viewed Madhesis as outsiders or Indians (Sijapati 2013). This loss of power induced Madhesi political elites to redefine the identity of those whose origin is in Tarai (Madhesi) to unite a disparate Madhesi population who increasingly felt marginalized (Miklian 2008, 2). Support for mainstream political parties declined as Madhesis lost confidence in the Pahadi elites to pursue policies in the Madhesi interest.

The practice of state favoritism for hill groups and its discrimination towards Madhesis was raised by Madhesi leaders as the main cause of the Gaur violence (P. Jha 2014). In March 2007, violent conflict between the Maoists and the MPRF occurred, killing 27 Maoist activists (Hangen and Lawoti 2013). Incidents of killings, destruction of public property, physical attacks on government officials, the Maoists, and hill dwellers in the Tarai became part of everyday news. This event transformed the meaning of Madhesi identity from a regional one to an ethnic and racial one (Khadka 2018). The Gaur violence, and the subsequent political events (Madhesi movements) that followed in its aftermath pushed the then MPRF, NSP and TMDP to form UDMF and make a coalition.

These parties combined to win 11.3 percent of the nationwide vote in the first CA election in 2008 (Miklian 2008) and emerged as a political force in Nepal. Although Madhesi parties split into several factions after the first CA election, the SPN (recently renamed as JSPN) and the RJPN (recently renamed as LSPN) together received a similar percentage of the vote in

the federal, provincial, and local elections held in 2017 under the new constitution. They won a majority of the seats in Madhes province (called Pradesh in Nepali) and formed a provincial government there under article 168 (2) of the new constitution (see The Constitution of Nepal 2015). While the coordination of the RJPN and SPN did not last long, the JSPN still remains a powerful political force in Nepal. It has recently formed a coalition government in the Madhes province under its leadership.

Currently, Madhes is relatively peaceful. But Madhesi issues have not been completely resolved. For example, the ethnic uprising in 2015 led by the then UDMF in the post-constitution declaration context took the lives of 60 Madhesis, and the subsequent six months of border blockage by India on its land-locked neighbor in favor of Madhesis severely affected Nepal's economy (Strasheim 2019). Even today, Madhes-based political parties are putting pressure on the central government to amend the 2015 constitution to obtain greater representation in the parliament. These parties also want to redraw provincial boundaries to create one or two provinces that stretch across the entirety of the country's southern region for electoral benefits and control of resources (Groves 2017). The persistence of these ethnic grievances indicates the possibility of future ethnic conflict in Nepal's Tarai. Gurr (1970) argues that conflict rises when group members experience an increasing discrepancy between their expectations and the system's inability to satisfy them.

The main research question of this dissertation asks: how did Madhesi ethno-political leaders define Madhesi identity after the CPA? Furthermore, how did different segments of local Madhesi people comprehend Madhesi identity? How did they come to accept the Madhesi rhetoric of ethnic identity, targeted against the Pahadi-dominated Nepali state and the Pahadi people in a way rarely seen in Nepal prior to 2007? By probing these questions, this project aims

to understand how Madhesi identity was created and made salient in the aftermath of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal.

These questions are important for two reasons. First, Madhesi identity, as discussed, emerged as a powerful force in Nepal in 2007, and the subsequent political violence claimed the lives of more than 1,600 people living in the Tarai between 2007 and 2012. More than 4,000 people, mostly hill dwellers living close to the border of India, particularly in the central and eastern Tarai, were permanently displaced (Makisaka, Chingchit, and Bernard 2017). Second, the Madhesi leadership received an unprecedented level of support from the Madhesi people. This first-time event in Nepalese political history challenged the political base of mainstream political parties in the Tarai, and called into question the existing hill-dominated Nepali nationalism[12] (D. R. Dahal and Bhatta 2008, 6).

Significance of the Research

My research, as discussed, is about the formation of a dissenting identity in the post-war political context. It has significance in both identity and peace studies scholarship which are broadly discussed in chapter VI. It contributes to the field in two ways. First, as Jenkins (1996, 2008b, 2008a) articulated, the Madhesi case informs us to recognize the impact of power and politics in identity creation. It explains how new ethno-political groups emerge and interact with a post-war situation by bringing the resources in their command (Cornell and Hartmann 2007), and how these dynamics create identity, and trigger ethnic mobilization, leading to violence

[12] Nepali nationalism prior to 2007 was the hill-based narrative invention built in the folkloric glory of the brave Gorkhali Raj and the ideological orthodoxy of the Hindu Raj with the Hindu King was its source and central axis. It was built on the basis of three issues: the language (Nepali, the official language of Nepal), Religion (Hindu), and the hilly King (symbol of the national unity) (Bhandari, Shrestha, and Dahal 2009, 14).

during the post-war political transition. In this context, examining the formation of a dissenting identity is significant for understanding peacebuilding, and conflict prevention not only in Nepal, but also in other similar societies emerging from civil war.

Second, Madhesi identity, as discussed in above, has recently been crystalized in its politicized form. This research examined a case that has not received much scholarly attention nationally or globally. Most anthropological studies in Nepal have centered on the identity construction of highland ethnic and cultural groups including Newar[13], and Tamang[14] among others (Hangen and Lawoti 2013). This research, therefore, significantly adds to identity, conflict resolution and peacebuilding scholarship by allowing us to examine the validity of several theories from the discipline.

In the end, this study also has policy implications. It leads to constructive recommendations to create space for marginalized groups in promoting peace and reconciliation in a divided Nepali society. Additionally, this case analysis provides useful lessons for other transitional communities emerging from civil wars. Informing how societies feel marginalized due to elite-led peace processes (albeit this research is about identity), it suggests the need for a greater effort to ground and consolidate top-down peace processes with local aspirations and expectations.

[13] Newars are indigenous group of Kathmandu valley, who practices caste hierarchy.

[14] Tamangs are a Tibetan-Burmese-speaking indigenous group living in the mountains northwest, north, and east of the Kathmandu valley. They possess their own distinct culture, language, and religion (Buddhism). They are predominantly based in Nepal, but some communities reside in Sikkim and Darjeeling districts of India.

Chapter Outline of the Dissertation

This dissertation consists of six chapters. In chapter II, I review a variety of relevant scholarship on identity and identity-based conflict. I analyze the broader distinction between primordial and constructivist understanding of identity and highlight the limitations of both approaches in explaining the construction, reconstruction, and management of identities. Furthermore, I underscore the bridge between primordialism and constructivism by bringing social-psychological perspectives on identity. More specifically, in this chapter, I develop a theoretical framework by integrating the conceptual understanding of identity from leading scholars: Barth (1969a), Cornell and Hartmann (2007), and Jenkins (1996, 2008b, 2008a). My research is interpretive and qualitative in orientation, and this framework greatly informs the collection, management, and analysis of my research data. In this chapter, I also provide a section reviewing the existing literature on Madhesi conflict and identity. It helps to identify the gap in the literature as well as the uniqueness of the case.

Chapter III functions as a research design and methodology chapter. I use this chapter to justify the selection of the Madhesi case for studying identity nationally and globally, articulating the history of Madhesi marginalization by the hill-dominated Nepali state and the hill people. This historical review is relevant to the findings presented in chapters IV and V. In chapter III, I also define the process of the collection of my data and its analysis. In this chapter, I extensively discuss my access to the participants, selection of field site, my research strategies, and unexpected challenges I faced during my research process. In essence, this section lays out a rationale for chapters IV and V.

I present my qualitative research findings in two different chapters. I view the past experiences of Madhesi sufferings, and the role of Madhesi ethno-political groups in relation to

the development of Madhesi identity. In chapters IV and V, I present my research findings on Madhesi identity and agency in post-war context. Chapter IV examines the narratives/rhetoric of Madhesi leaders to understand their perspectives of Madhesi identity in the post-accord period. Since I found that Madhesi people's past experiences are crucial, I also use this chapter to organize and present testimonies explaining the context of Madhesi identity formation. Barth (1969a), Jenkins (1996, 2008b, 2008a) and Cornell and Hartmann (2007) argue that past experiences often exert a crucial impact on identity, as it articulates the fluid nature of identity. This chapter also demonstrates how Madhesi leaders strategically and tactically used cultural/symbolic resources to assert Madhesi identity as an ethno-territorial identity and to valorize this identity category imposed by the Nepali state, which had been an inferiority complex for them and the Madhesi people until 2007.

Chapter V is structured to build on the findings presented in chapter IV. I use this chapter to understand how local Madhesi residents understood Madhesi identity after the CPA, and how they came to support Madhesi narratives of ethnic identity designed to counter hill-dominated Nepali nationalism in a way rarely seen prior to 2007. Especially, this chapter is intended to confirm or question the research findings presented in chapter IV. This chapter shows that despite some differences in response across local Madhesi residents, the power of factors external to the group was more crucial to the development of Madhesi identity. It does not, however, mean that the role of agency is negligible in this process. Furthermore, this chapter also provides a justification for the top-down process of Madhesi identity construction. In sum, the research findings presented in chapters IV and V provide an insightful perspective on understanding the construction and reconstruction of ethnic identity.

Chapter VI provides concluding remarks. It summarizes the entire findings of this research project and discusses the theoretical implication of this study. In this chapter, I also answer the subset of my key research question: what constituted local Madhesi people to accept Madhesi rhetoric of ethnic identity targeted against the hill dominated Nepali state and the hill people rarely seen prior to 2007. It then puts forward the importance of my dissertation in terms of peace promotion and conflict prevention in Nepal and other transitional societies. In the end, the research weaves the empirical data and suggests directions for future research based on the analysis presented here.

Chapter Conclusion

The study of the development of Madhesi identity in post-CPA Nepal is as complex as it is significant. It is because post-war societies frequently suffer from political instability, economic stagnation (Kubota 2017), and resurgence of identities (Thurairajah 2020), as they seek to restore peace and stability. In brief, identity formation in the post-war context is a complex phenomenon that requires meticulous investigation. My research focuses on the impact of contextual issues including power and politics on the process of identity formation. But it considers ethno-political groups as active agents in this process. During their intense interaction with others in the new context, they bring with them diverse cultural, symbolic, and material resources including their preexisting identities that are crucial to understanding the resurgence of identity, ethnic mobilization, and violence in the post-civil war transition. In my dissertation, I provide a complex but fascinating view of Madhesi activism and the divergent contextual issues, as they are crucial to understanding the development of Madhesi identity in post-accord Nepal.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter begins with an introduction of some key concepts that are central to the study of identity. It then discusses the major theoretical debates within the identity literature that provides various perspectives on how identity groups are formed and how collective identities are produced and reproduced. The existing scholarship on Madhesi identity will be reviewed to demonstrate the uniqueness of the case and the gap in the literature. The final section provides a conceptual framework that guides my dissertation research.

Prior to reviewing existing scholarship on identity formation, it is important to define some basic concept of identity. Social identity is a complex phenomenon with psychological, sociological, and political dimensions. Identity is generally viewed as how we perceive ourselves and how others view us in terms of the group to which we belong. Human social identity revolves around similarities and differences positioning us in relations to others (Jenkins 1996, 5). Therefore, it is an essential part of human social relations.

There are several ways to study social identity, particularly in examining how identity groups are formed, how and when they become polarized, and how and under what circumstances a collective sense of peoplehood is created. There are different expressions of social identity. These include ethnicity, nationalism, race, religion, and so forth. Probably, ethnicity is the most essential form of social identity because it underpins all other identities (Cornelissen and Horstmeier 2002, 63–65). Ethnic identity, however, is a complex phenomenon,

and its study is puzzling. One of the reasons for this is that an ethnic identity can be both rigid and fluid at the same time (Horowitz 1985; Cornell and Hartmann 2007; Hancock 2016; Jenkins 1996, 2008b, 2008a).

Smith (1993) defines ethnicity as "a named human population of alleged common ancestry, shared memories and elements of common culture with a link to a specific territory or homeland and a measure of solidarity" (49). He describes it as an almost ineffable construct infused with the power of religion and myth. By contrast, scholars like Barth (1969), Nagel (1994), Brass (1991) and Eriksen (2010) define ethnic identity as fluctuating, negotiable, and situational. Individuals perceive their ethnicity as distinctive but their identities in some situations are also imposed by outsiders (Eriksen 2010).

Ethnic identification promotes unity through shared history, culture, and experience that are transferred to younger generations (Smith 1986, 22–23). Thus, social identities including ethnicity are a social process of understanding who 'we' and 'they' are in a given social context (Cornell and Hartmann 2007, 264). Based on Cornell and Hartmann (2007) and Jenkins (1996, 2008a, 2008b), I view social identity, including its ethnic expression as a social radar, as a way of making sense of our social world through the perception of our similarities and differences through our interaction with others.

The study of social identity including ethnicity has been a focus in a variety of scholarly disciplines. Sociology, anthropology, and political science view ethnicity at the group level, whereas in psychology it is studied at the individual level (Hancock 2010). Individual and group level understandings of ethnicity, however, are interconnected. Social psychological theories view the 'self' developing through continuous interactions with 'others'(Cooley 1902; Jenkins 1996, 2008b, 2008a; Mead 1934). In fact, social psychological approaches view ethnic identity

as a process or continuum, not as an end point or a settled issue. The following section reviews various existing approaches to understanding identity.

Approaches to Understanding Identity

The notion of identity has been used in a variety of ways in the study of cultural differences and social interaction (Guneratne 2002). These approaches are divided into two broad categories: primordialism and constructivism. In contemporary identity scholarship, social constructivism is the dominant paradigm (Brass 1991; Cornell and Hartmann 2007; Hale 2008; Hancock 2010; Jenkins 2008a; Kaufman 2001). But earlier scholarship was largely influenced by a primordial understanding of identity that regarded pre-modern forms of identity as a fundamental dimension of human beings.

Proponents of the primordial perspective to identity include John Armstrong (1982), Edward Shils (1957), Clifford Geertz (1973), Walker Connor (1994), Anthony Smith (1986), Pierre Van den Berge (1987) and Harold Robert Isaacs (1989). These scholars argue that every individual has an identity based on kinship relationships due to her/his birth into a particular group of individuals who share a common ancestry and historical experiences. This approach assumes that before an individual becomes a member of a society or a nation, she/he already possesses a sense of common origins, of cultural and/or physical sameness or of simple affinity of kind (Greenberg 1980, 14). Thus, every person has naturally given identity, which is historically and culturally determined and is enduring.

From the primordial perspective, ethnic groups are naturally formed by differences between social groupings in terms of cultural origin (Brass 1991, 70; Cornelissen and Horstmeier 2002, 61). Major markers include territory, culture, language, and religion. One's birth, or one's

rearing into a particular social group with a distinct culture shapes one's ethnic identity (Geertz 1973). Individuals identify so strongly with an ethnic group because these groups are inherently linked to peoples' deepest feelings. Based on this paradigm, one may assume that when one's group is threatened, one's self is threatened (Hale 2008). The emotional sentiments attached to ethnic identity, thus, generate violence or other forms of divisive behaviors in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies.

"No enduring world order can be created which ignores the ubiquitous yearnings of nations in search of roots in an ethnic past, and no study of nations and nationalism that completely ignores that past can bear fruit" (Smith 1986, 5). Though the term nationalism has multiple connotations, it is a political sentiment that says "one's own group, or nation[15] should be politically autonomous" (Kaufman 2001, 16). Leading identity scholars such as Brass (1991), Connor (1994), and Smith (1993) have used the term 'ethnonationalism' or 'ethnic nationalism'[16]while linking ethnicity and nationalism together. Ethnicity, according to them, helps nationalism to emerge through myths of common origin, shared historical memories, and cultural contents. However, unlike other scholars, Smith is more comprehensive in critiquing modernist scholars' (i.e., Anderson 1983; Gellner 2007) assertions that nationalism in modern nation-states would have no ethnic base. These scholars perceived the emergence of nationalism because of the "growth of vernacular languages and literacy in those languages. . ." (Solomon, Kaplan, and Hancock 2021, 947).

The divisive potential of ethnicity intersects with nationalism which may lead to ethnic mobilization and conflict. Majstorovic (1997) examined why the relationships between ethno-

[15] Nation refers to a socially mobilized group that wants political self-determination. This suggests that not all nations are ethnic groups, nor are all ethnic groups are nations (see Kaufman 2001, 16).

[16] Ethnonationalism' or 'ethnic nationalism' is a form of nationalism where the nation is based on ethnicity.

political groups in the former Yugoslavia in the post-Cold War period devolved into violent conflict. Based on Connor's theoretical approach, his analysis indicates that the emergence of ethno-national bonds is the major source of the Balkan wars. This suggests that ethnicity can give a strong impetus for nationalism to emerge. In his well-known book, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict,* Horowitz (1985, 64) also affirms that kinship serves as a catalyst for nationalism to emerge and is a reason that may lead to a violent ethnic conflict. Conflict over ethnicity often turns into a battle for identity and kinship.

"Ethnie always possess ties to a particular locus or territory, which they call their home" (Smith 1986, 28). In Nepal, the territorial cluster of the population has been divided unequally since the country was established. Thus, the primordial ties have remained somehow intact, particularly in Madhes. Sijapati (2013) says that there is a historical sense of resentment in Nepal between Madhesi people, and others who live in high/mid hills, or those who have been living in the Tarai who originate from the hilly areas.

The primordial perspective on identity has become the subject of sharp and sustained criticism in recent scholarship. Those who oppose this perspective articulate that the primordial approach to identity ignores the changeable and dynamic characteristics of identity. Verkuyten strongly (2006, 88) asserts that individual attachments vary across situations, and identity shift occurs, but the primordial understanding is unable to account for these variations. For example, some Pathan tribespeople of Afghanistan permanently abandoned their Pathan identity when they joined nearby Baluch tribes in Pakistan (Barth 1969a, 1969b).

Therefore, in accordance with other scholars, I believe that primordialism does not capture the change and variations of ethnicity sufficiently. This does not, however, mean that ethnic identity lacks its authenticity and the emotional power attached to it. Ethnic identity

develops during our early socialization. In this process, cultural meanings related to ethnicity including language, history, and values develop with emotional and self-evident frame of references. We do not easily give up these attachments developed in our early life. "Ethnicity is not primordial. It may, however, depending on the situation be a primary identification . . . when it matters to peoples, it really matters" (Jenkins 2008b, 87).

Conversely, a contrasting view of identity appeared in the 1960s to 1980s that questioned the primordial explanation of identity formation. Led by new developments in studies on ethnic identity, social constructivist scholars (e.g., Anderson 1983; Barth 1969; Brass 1991) critiqued the enduring nature of identity. Rather than considering identity as objectively real, or as an assumed given, they devoted more attention to the ways in which identities are created and recreated, and the social, cultural, historical, and political processes related to them. The essence of constructivism is that identities are not static or fixed, but dynamic and negotiable in terms of social environments, processes, and interactions (Anderson 1983; Barth 1969; Fearon and Laitin 2000; Kaufman 2001). Social constructivism introduced a new perspective into identity studies – an individual or collective sense of peoplehood.

In his seminal work, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Barth (1969a) contends that the creation of ethnic difference is always contingent upon situational context and group boundaries, which serve the political and social interests of the group involved. Inspired by Max Weber's conception of ethnic group formation, he promulgates a novel approach and argues for a critical focus on the boundary separating ethnic groups rather than the cultural contents that it encloses (Barth 1969a, 15; Hancock 2010, 2016). In other words, cultural commonality is the product of processes of boundary maintenance. It does not signify group membership. Rather, identity

formation and change are deliberate processes of maintaining the boundary. In sum, identity groups hold internal power to define group memberships.

Building on the Barthian approach, Jenkins introduces a complex yet an innovative approach to identity. Social identity, for him, is transactional and interactional in nature. This transaction, however, is of two kinds of processes: internal and external (Jenkins 1994, 1996, 2008a). In the first, members of an identity group have power to define identity internally because the group is a self-aware collectivity. In the second, their collective identities are influenced by powerful external others including government policies. But external factors can become more potent and can influence internal group formation (Jenkins 1994; Nagel 1994).

In India, in the 1950s, for instance, the provision of constitutionally guaranteed parliamentary representation and civil service positions for members of scheduled caste groups contributed to the formation of group identity. The political mobilization of Untouchables resulted in the creation of an Untouchable political party --the Republican Party. This affirmative action sparked a backlash, and a Hindu revival movement among upper caste Hindus who "judged Untouchables to have unfair economic and political advantages" (Nagel 1994, 157). In brief, identity groups are power players, but sometime external powers can influence identity.

Another set of constructivist approaches has utilitarian value. Scholars like Glazer and Moynihan (1975) and Hechter (1975) point out that modernization – the process of moving from traditional communities to modern societies – proceeds unevenly in multi-ethnic societies. It usually benefits some identity groups or some regions over others within the country. Hechter (1975) articulates that "internal colonialism" – a condition of subordination of one ethnic group over another – exists to the extent that the culturally dominant group based on power, prestige, and social norms gains economic and political benefits by subordinating an ethnically or racially

identified minority population in a country with multi-cultural societies. The essence of this approach is that structural inequality based on social institutions leads to the formation of collective identity.

However, Brass (1991) critiqued this approach arguing that relative deprivation does not create identity on its own. A mass sense of peoplehood can only occur if there is some existing conflict between elites from different groups or between state authorities and the elites from dominant groups. Ethnic identity is made through the strategic interests of elites. “Elite consciousness is a precondition for mass ethnic consciousness; elite consciousness lends color, form, and direction to the subjective belief of the mass of people” (Guneratne 2002, 17). It occurs at all levels of state-building with the socio-political and economic boundaries of the state largely determined by dominant classes to define the in-group as good and the out-group as bad (Hancock 2010, 1670).

The preceding theoretical discussions suggest that a constructivist approach to identity construction views identity as either fully contextual and instrumental, or infinitely malleable, overlooking the emotional sentiments and power attached to our identity. Cornell and Hartmann (2007, 70) articulates that theories that rely greatly on contexts for their explanations discount the sentiments and experiences of many ethnic populations. Further, academics such as Hale (2008, 24) and Hancock (2016, 411) argue that similar to primordialism, social constructivism also has limitations in articulating identity due to its overt emphasis on boundary construction and maintenance at the expense of cultural contents.

Therefore, Jenkins argues, in acknowledging the limitations of primordialism and social constructivism, that “cultural stuff” matter in identity construction. Cultural content serves as a basis for categorization. But identification always is a dialectic between our similarities and

differences. Unlike other contemporary identity scholars, Jenkins brings power relationships into the study of identity (Jenkins 1994, 1996, 2008). His emphasis on external categorization is relevant to the Madhesi case because it helps us understand how the power and authority of other social actors including the discriminatory policies and practices of the hill-dominated Nepali state since its foundation influenced the internal identification of the Madhesi group.

Jenkins further defines the "nominal" and "virtual" dimensions of identity, as they reflect how social categorization works (Jenkins 1994, 218). According to him, nominal is the name, while virtual is the experience. These two intertwine in the ongoing production and reproduction of identity and its boundaries. The distinction between nominal and virtual is basic to the understanding of identity. A group can have a similar name, but its members might have different experiences. Thus, changes in virtual identity can produce changes in nominal identity, and vice versa. Because the virtual category implies the content of identity, an examination of the virtual identity helps us understand the salience of Madhesi identity in the post-CPA period.

Jenkins underlines this dynamic through his idea of primary socialized identities. Identities such as selfhood, humanness, gender, and under certain settings kinship and ethnicity are primary identities – that have more value in the society – that develop over time through a child's socialization. Although Jenkins says that all identities are the product of social constructs, he recognizes the presence of emotional power in primary identities.

Motivated by symbolic interactionism, particularly with the work of George Herbert Mead (1934) and Charles Horton Cooley (1902), Jenkins asserts that the individual identity embodied in selfhood is not meaningful in isolation from others. For Mead (1934), the creation of 'self' is an ongoing process. It is the synthesis of internal self-identification and the external definition of oneself by others. Through the distinction between 'I' and 'Me', Mead defines the

social aspect of the self. Briefly stated, 'I' is an individual's response to the attitude of society and 'Me' comprises the internalized attitude of significant others.

Cooley's (1902) widely known concept of the 'looking-glass self' states that individual and society cannot exist independently, rather they are products of one another: "each to each a looking-glass reflects the other that doth pass" (1902, 184). For him, "Social consciousness or awareness of society, is inseparable from self-consciousness, because we can hardly think of ourselves excepting with reference to a social group of some sort, nor of the group except with reference to ourselves"(Cooley 1907, 776). This view holds that individuals' membership in different identity groups and the construction and maintenance of identities are natural processes. Overall, our identity is partly determined by how we perceive what society thinks about us.

The social psychological approaches to identity developed by Cooley and Mead influenced many identity scholars. Barth and Jenkins both believe in the transactional and interactive nature of social identities. The key difference between these two scholars when articulating the process of identity formation is that Barth focuses on a social process of identity that creates and recreates group boundaries. However, as discussed earlier, Jenkins gives more emphasis to the social categorization of identity and does not ignore 'cultural stuff' in articulating identity. By doing this, Jenkins goes beyond Barth. For him, the categorization of a group by power and authority is crucial in the comprehensive understanding of identity.

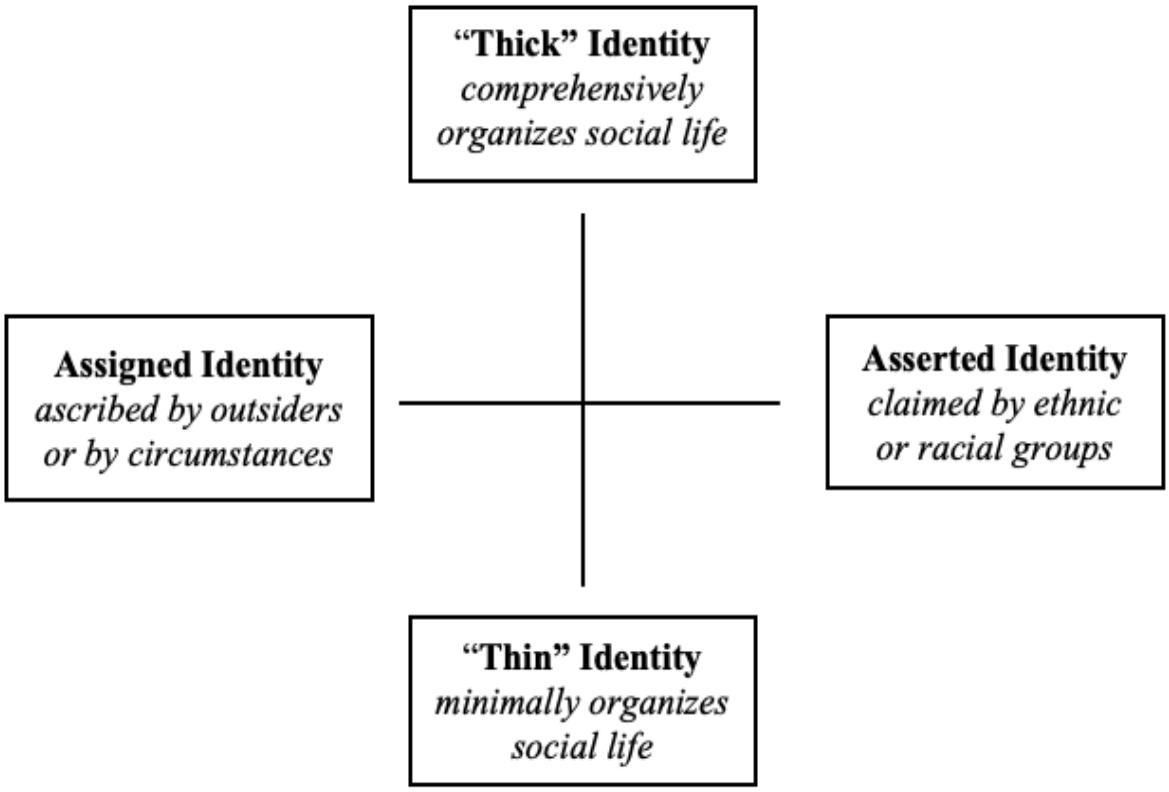
Despite the importance of external categorization in understanding social identity construction, Jenkins, however, argues that key to this analysis are the actors involved in this process (Jenkins 1996, 2008a, 2008b). In this way, he also recognizes the role human agency plays in the process of identity construction. A question arises here is: how does an identity group negotiate its identity in order to generate a subjective sense of peoplehood? Building on

Cohen's (1985) conception of the symbolic construction of community, Jenkins argues that identity groups can manipulate or politicize identities to some extent by using real or invented cultural symbols. This does not, however, imply that identity can be manipulated infinitely. Jenkins takes a dynamic perspective in articulating culture and argues that culture is also produced are reproduced during interaction, within which people find shared meanings.

Methodologically similar to Jenkins (1996, 2008a, 2008b), Cornell and Hartmann (2007) argue that ethnic identity is formed in the interaction between groups and contexts. "Construction involves both the passive experience of being made by external forces, including not only material circumstances, but also the claims that other people or groups make about the group in question, and the active process by which the group makes itself"(Cornell and Hartmann 2007, 83). The crux of this argument is that peoplehood is created as an identity group responds to new situations. Ethnic identity, therefore, is situational, fluid, and flexible. But it retains the key insights of primordialism, which resonate with Jenkins' assertion that primary socialized identity holds power akin to the primordial power. The fact that identities are constructed does not imply that they do not carry meanings for those who subscribe to them; taking something as true does not make it less of a construction (Cornelissen and Horstmeier 2002).

This approach involves two dimensions of ethnic identity as variables: the comprehensiveness of the identity, and the extent to which it is assigned and asserted. The former refers to the degree to which an identity dominates social life. For the latter, assignment, refers to what other peoples or groups say we are; and assertion denotes what we claim to be (Cornell and Hartmann 2007, 76). These scholars use a diagram (reproduced in Figure 1) to illustrate this process.

Figure 1: Two Access of Variation in Ethnic Identity



Source: Cornell and Hartmann (2007, 86)

The horizontal axis of the framework presented in Figure 1 shows the relative significance of internal and external forces shaping ethnic identity. The vertical axis articulates the extent to which an ethnic identity organizes people's social life. A thick ethnic tie is one that organizes great deal of social life and both individual and collective action. A thin ethnic tie is one that influences relatively little social life and action (Cornell and Hartmann 2007, 85). In the

process of identity construction, the comprehensiveness of identity --the degree to which social life, and individual and collective action are organized around a distinct set of meanings, values, history, ancestry, etc. -- shifts from thin to thick and vice versa. Using the example of Hutu and Tutsi identities in Rwanda, and comparisons between mid-nineteenth and late-twentieth centuries, Cornell and Hartmann demonstrate how the comprehensiveness of these identities became thick in the later stages of the twentieth century. This also illustrates how ethnic identity changes over time.

These scholars divide issues influencing identity into two categories: contextual and group factors. Contextual factors entail politics, labor markets, social institutions, residential spaces, culture, and daily experiences (Cornell and Hartmann 2007, 171). Politics including political systems, forms of political organizations and informal practices, and government classification systems may have a significant impact on developing a subjective consciousness of peoplehood. Group assets such as physical, cultural, and behavioral characteristics, preexisting identities, social capital, human capital, and symbolic relationships can define a particular set of conditions that increases the salience of an identity over others.

In order to create collective consciousness of peoplehood, groups “still have to make their own sense of those conditions and in that process make themselves” (Cornell and Hartmann 2007, 245). In this process, the group can use resources available to them such as preexisting identities, and cultural and symbolic resources through which they can construct and communicate meanings. They can create stories based on history and a particular set of beliefs that capture the essence of their peoplehood. Or they can invent new cultural symbols to signify an identity, and to tell what that identity means to those who carry it (241). Political elites also can fabricate identity. They should, however, act to interpret and give voice to the experience of

the society. This resonates with the Madhesi case as it is argued that Madhesi elites were the main actors in raising subjective consciousness of the Madhesi peoplehood (Hachhethu 2007; Karki and Wenner 2020).

Social Identity theory (SIT), a well-known theoretical framework originally propounded by Tajfel and Turner (1979), is also relevant to the study of identity and its development. This approach posits that every person uses cognitive differentiation and categorization to maintain positive social identity. This is a psychological process that helps to clarify social context and make it understandable to individuals who employ certain physical traits, language, or experience to distinguish different social groupings and place her/himself in a particular group based on their perceived similarities with others in the group. As a sociological process, social categorization produces the establishment of group boundaries founded in the exclusion of others from the group (Cornelissen and Horstmeier 2002, 61).

In this process, an individual becomes a part of a group and vice versa. In short, we perceive our self-esteem and dignity based on our memberships within a group, and the status of the group within the society. When people belong to a group that has lower status with respect to other groups, they can leave the group, make downward intergroup comparisons that flatter the ingroup, concentrate only on the dimensions that make the ingroup relatively favorable, devalue dimensions that reflect poorly on the ingroup or engage in social change to raise the group's social status (Hornsey 2008, 207).

Building on SIT, some scholars (Smeekes and Verkuyten 2015; Vignoles et al. 2006) argue for continuity in the identity making process. Vignoles et al. (2006, 329) argue that people are motivated to construct identities defined by self-esteem (a sense of self-esteem), continuity (perceive themselves as continuous over time), distinctiveness (as being different from others),

belongingness (included and accepted within their social contexts), efficacy (as being competent and capable), and meaning (having a meaningful life) (cited in Smeekes and Verkuyten 2015). Their emphasis on continuity in the process of identity construction suggests that identity groups define their present and foresee their future in connection with their past.

History is essential for people to understand their identity. It offers them narratives that defines who they are (Hancock 2019, 244). The work of Hancock (2014) illustrates how narratives of past abuses in the form of chosen trauma,[17] psycho-cultural interpretations and dramas[18] and fear of extinction[19] continued to produce sectarian identities in Northern Ireland (445-47). The centrality of history is particularly important in the Madhesi case, as various Nepalese scholars (K. Jha 2017; Kantha 2009; Mathema 2011; Upreti, Poudel, and Ghimire 2012) have argued that the deep-rooted historical discrimination of the Madhesi people by the Pahadi-dominated Nepali state and the Pahadi people led to ethnic mobilization and violent Madhesi movements following the end of the Maoist insurgency. In summary, past experiences influence our understanding of intragroup and intergroup relations. The next section reviews existing scholarship on Madhesi identity to identify the gap in the literature as well as the uniqueness of the case.

[17] Chosen trauma defines the continuous mourning processes that affects later generations through the transformation of memory of events and feelings associated with them (see Hancock 2014, 446).

[18] Psychocultural interpretations are deeply rooted worldviews that help groups define their relationship with others. Psychocultural dramas are conflicts between groups based on their understanding of history (see Ross 2001, 159).

[19] Fear of extinction explains a condition in which a subordinate group sees its future uncertain due to the imminent threat from other groups (Horowitz 1985, 175).

Pertinent Scholarship on Madhesi Identity

Madhesi identity, as discussed in Chapter I, has recently been politically crystalized. Despite Madhesi identity becoming the foremost issue gripping Nepalese politics over the past fourteen years, there is a distinct lack of scholarly studies about the formation of Madhesi identity in the post-war period and its impact on Nepal's post-war peacebuilding process. Most of the existing literature on the Madhesi movement focuses on the historical marginalization of Madhesis in the Nepali state, movement processes, and outcomes (Pherali and NEMAF 2021). The comprehensive studies on the emergence of Madhesi identity in the post-war context have received scant academic attention (Gellner 2007; Hangen and Lawoti 2013; P. Jha 2014).

Post-conflict Nepal offered a new federal constitution, proportional representation of marginalized groups in state institutions, secularism, federalism, and a republic. But a large section of the population, and the ethno-political groups in the Tarai are still dissatisfied with the constitution adopted in 2015. It failed to address their main demands, including better political and economic representation, an end to a discriminatory citizenship law, and the creation of an autonomous Madhesi province.[20] These dynamics triggered another spasm of political unrest particularly in the central and eastern Tarai in 2015 (Strasheim 2019).

The instability in 2015 indicates that political stability in Madhes will depend on how the central government addresses local demands in the days and years to come. The other reason that could lead to political instability in Madhes in the future is that Madhesis have remained the strongest group demanding ethnic autonomy and federalism in Nepal. The work of Lawoti (2013) underscores the growth of ethnic parties in Nepal in 2008, particularly after the

[20] Though a Madhes province was created with eight Tarai districts, where caste Hindu Madhesis have a majority, they did not get an autonomous Madhes province stretching across the entire Tarai region as they had campaigned for.

conclusion of the Maoist insurgency (228-231). This study, however, offers limited insights to this dynamic, and provides a general literature in explaining the situation of ethnic demands in Nepal.

Mathema (2011) analyzes the historical, social, political, and economic factors that led to the violent Madhesi movement in 2007 and 2008. By critically examining the Madhesi conflict through a rational choice perspective, he argues that the violent Madhesi ethnonationalist movement helped other marginalized groups in Nepal begin their own identity-based movements to pursue their political interests in the post-civil war transition. Mathema's work, however, does not provide any insight into the formation of Madhesi identity in post-CPA Nepal.

The work of Sijapati (2013) discusses the dynamics of the Madhesi conflict in 2007. By integrating identity conflict and social movement literature, she asserts that the causes of the Madhes uprising were historical discrimination of the state against the people living in the southern plains in addition to the opportunity structures (i.e., political transition) that the Maoist insurgency had created. This study offers a greater insight into the history of Madhesi victimhood and Madhesi conflict. However, it leaves the main issue on the ground and does not address how Madhesi identity became a rallying force for diverse groups of Madhesi people living in the region after the war.

Miklian's (2008) essay says that the interesting aspect of the Madhes conflict is the re-definition of Madhesi identity. This Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) working paper outlines how conflict actors, especially the United Democratic Madhesi Front (UDMF), re-shaped Madhesi identity from one based on a distinct geography to homogenous ethnic and racial categories through various means such as the re-interpretation of the complex Tarai history. The ethnic rhetoric Madhesi elites utilized was a powerful tool for ethnic recruitment,

which resulted in targeting hill-people, the Maoists, and state representatives. However, this research is concise and lacks comprehensive details on the transformation of the meaning of Madhesi identity from its geographical connotation to ethnic and racial categories.

The recent scholarship of K. Jha (2017) explores the nexus between Madhesi identity and the conflict. This study encapsulates the formation of Madhesi identity along with identity politics in neighboring countries, global awareness of ethnic identity, and its implications for Madhes. It also discusses the construction of Nepali nationalism, which she argues led to the onset of the Madhesi struggle. The nature of Jha's work requires the researcher to dig deeper into the theoretical framework to scrutinize Madhesi identity, including the primordial and constructivist debate. However, her research lacks such a framework, resulting in an incomplete grasp of Madhesi identity.

Karki and Wenner (2020) examine the multiple meanings associated with the toponyms Tarai and Madhes to demonstrate how the interpretation, insistence on the use, and denial of the term Madhes became instrumental in the symbolic resistance against the exclusionary idea of the Nepali nation and the struggle for belonging to it. Their findings demonstrate that the reappropriation of the name Madhes is boon and bane for the political actors. Though it helped Madhesi group to challenge the dominant notion of belongings, the exclusionary notion of this name triggered Tharu ethnic movement and conflict in the Tarai in 2009. While the research, pointed out that Madhesi identity was constructed in the post-war transition, it did not illustrate the overall process how Madhesi actors negotiated Madhesi identity during the post-CPA period and how contextual issues influenced in this process.

In summary, most of the existing literature reviewed above provides a general idea of the formation of Madhesi identity in post-CPA Nepal. Miklian's piece, as discussed, offers a clue

that the meaning of Madhesi identity shifted its focus from geography to ethnicity and race after 2007. He underlines the effort of Madhesi leaders in this process, who frequently asserted Madhesi identity as: "Madhesi people are not simply Tarai citizens, but a true ethnicity with caste structures" (Miklian 2008, 6). The major issue that none of the existing literature points out is the complex negotiation of identity between Madhesi group, and the diverse contextual factors in which it took place, including the opportunities or constraints brought by Nepalese politics, and the new political context created by the Maoist insurgency during the process of Madhesi identity construction.

This dissertation aims to fill this gap by exploring how popular support shifted towards Madhesi identity in the aftermath of the Maoist civil war. It examines the role of Madhesi ethno-political groups in this process. This study does not, however, ignore contextual issues such as the impact of Nepalese politics including state policies and practices on the Madhesi people. These dynamics may have had a significant impact on the development of Madhesi identity. Several leading identity scholars (i.e., Cornell and Hartmann 2007; Jenkins 1996, 2008a, 2008b; Nagel 1986) have argued that political factors can exert a high impact on identities. The following conceptual framework will guide my study to help understand the process of Madhesi identity construction in the post-CPA period.

Theoretical Framework

In this research, I view identity construction as the product of contextual factors, and group/individual level action. I draw particular attention to how contextual issues, especially the power and authority of the state played a role in the external categorization of Madhesis, and therefore, possibly influenced the internal identification of the Madhesi group (See Figure 2).

Barth (1969) contends that the formation of identity boundaries is a dialectical interaction between group identification and social categorization. One of the shortcomings of Barthian approach, however, is its neglect of power in validating identity (Jenkins 1996, 95-98). Identity creation as a two-way street does not mean that each is equally notable in specific instances.

In order to address this issue, I will turn to Cornell and Hartmann's (2007) and Jenkins's (2008a, 2008b) theorization of identity. I will examine how contextual factors influenced the process of Madhesi identity creation in the post-CPA period. Contextual issues comprise politics (i.e., political systems, forms of political organization and informal practices), government classification systems, and everyday experiences. Group factors entail pre-existing identities, internal relationships, social capital, human capital, and symbolic resources (Cornell and Hartmann 2007). These scholars consider politics as an important contextual factor. For Jenkins, however, power and politics are central questions to identity. This is important for the Madhesi case as it is argued that socio-political exclusion and marginalization of the Madhesi people since the foundation of the country was the key factor in raising Madhesi peoplehood (Kantha 2010). Concurrently, Jenkins articulates that contexts of different times and places are vital to understanding the process of identity creation. Therefore, external factors such as politics including formal and informal state policies and practices, the Maoist insurgency, and the post-war Madhesi political context are crucial aspects that could have influenced the process of Madhesi identity construction.

Jenkins (1996), and Cornell and Hartman (2007), however, argue that even if external categories are key to the process of identity construction, central focus should be placed on the points of views of the actors themselves (Cornell and Hartmann 2007, 245; Jenkins 1996, 86–89). If so, how do the actors negotiate their identity during turbulent times? For Jenkins, elites, or

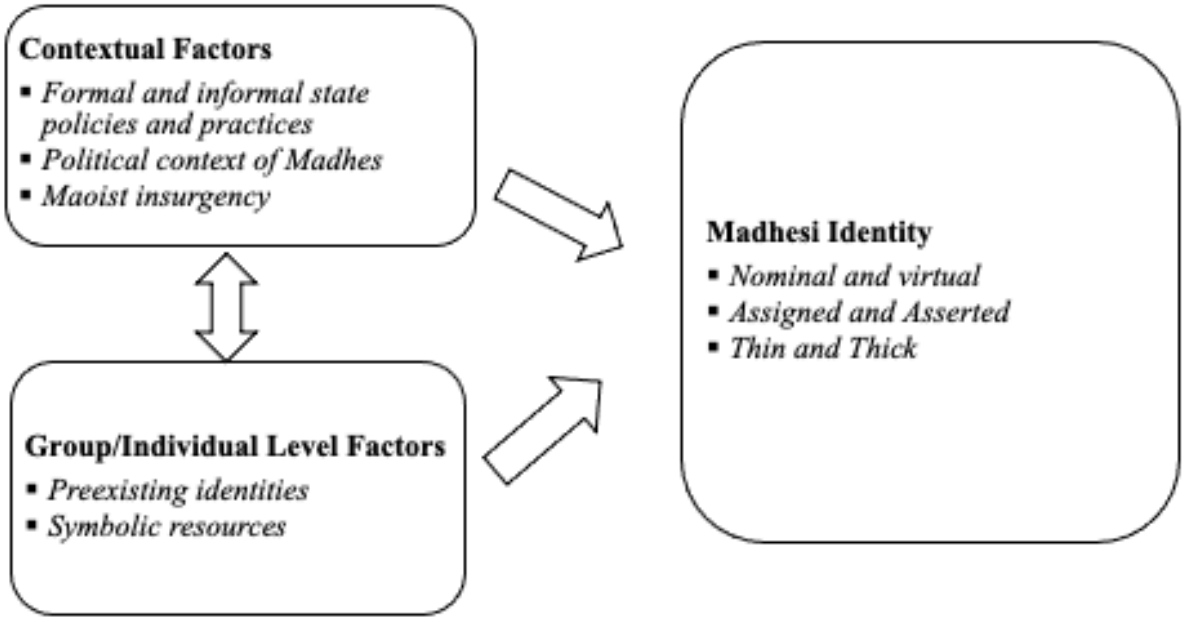
groups, as discussed, can use cultural symbols of some sort to homogenize the population. Cornell and Hartman, however, assert that even if the group lacks a rich culture and history, some of its members can create stories as their way to present themselves as an ethnic group with distinct physical and cultural characteristics. Political elites, as discussed, also can invent cultural symbols, or may strategically re-interpret official history to create a sense of peoplehood. In doing so, the elites must address the interests of society. This does not mean that identity is simply a tool that elites exploit for their political gains. In sum, identity making is a two-way process. Groups under some contexts construct an ethnic identity. This identity holds the power of a core identity that cannot be erased easily (Hancock 2016, 415).

Based on this framework (see Figure 2), I will investigate the role of Madhesi groups in understanding the development of Madhesi identity in the post-CPA period. Since external categorization is crucial in the process of identity construction, I will explore the overall impact of formal and informal state policies and practices on Madhesis by tracing the political history of Nepal. Madhes, especially the central and eastern Tarai, as a locality is important, as it is the place where the conflict was most intense. The political Madhesi contexts including the impact of the Maoist conflict are important, as they can shed light on how the process of identity development was influenced.

By integrating ideas from Barth, Jenkins, and Cornell and Hartman, I will triangulate ethnic identity from three directions: the nominal and virtual (name and its consequences), assigned and asserted (what others say we are and what we claimed to be), and the comprehensiveness (thin and thick) of Madhesi identity. These three dimensions are interconnected as the nominal and virtual categories will help to develop the comprehensiveness as well as the external categorization and internal identification of ethnic identity. The key

objective of this study is to understand how the mass consciousness of the Madhesi peoplehood was created following the CPA in 2007. Though my research is interpretive-qualitative in orientation, this model serves as a resource to collect and analyze my data to investigate how Madhesi ethno-political groups defined Madhesi identity following the Maoist insurgency, and how power and politics influenced the internal identification of these groups.

Figure 2: Exploratory Theoretical Framework



Source: Developed by the author based on his reading of the literature

Chapter Conclusion

The process of identity formation can be purposeful, disinterested, unintentional, or entirely circumstantial (Cornell and Hartmann 2007, 264). Identity develops in relation to the way identity groups meet their perceived needs and pursue their interests in a changing socio-political setting. Therefore, identity groups are active agents in the negotiation of identities. The formation of a social identity is the process of constructing a narrative of in-group/out-group distinctions. As Cornell and Hartmann (2007) argue, identities are backed by certain stories, which have consequences. Identity groups utilize them through the use of cultural symbols to interpret their past experiences including the discrimination and exclusion they endured from other social actors including the state.

This project adopts both inductive and deductive approaches to study the construction of Madhesi identity in post-CPA Nepal. While not primarily aimed at theory testing, this approach enables researchers assess the alignment and deviations of data with established theories, facilitating potential revisions and extensions to existing theories (Bingham and Witkowsky 2021). It is difficult to understand the post-accord emergence of Madhesi identity without a detailed exploration of diverse contextual issues including Madhesis' experience with the hill-centric Nepali state and the hill people in the past. As Jenkins (1996) articulates, identity categories are assigned by powerful external others, and identities are internally claimed by individuals or groups. It is the affirmation of that identity by the group members which makes that identity significant. The process of forming an identity is therefore influenced by both internal and external factors.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This dissertation uses an interpretive qualitative approach that allows for an in-depth analysis of the Madhesi sub-national ethnopolitical groups' efforts to construct Madhesi identity in post-CPA Nepal. The overarching goal of this project is to understand how Madhesi identity was constructed following the end of the Maoist insurgency. It examines how Madhesi leaders defined Madhesi identity after the CPA. Further, how different segments of local Madhesi people understood this identity during post-CPA period. How they came to support the Madhesi rhetoric of ethnic identity targeted against the hill-dominated Nepali state and the hill people after the CPA. It also explores the way contextual factors contributed to the external categorization of identity and further influenced their internal identification. An interpretive qualitative approach is best suited to effectively address these research questions. It allows researchers the flexibility to explore the perspectives of homogenous and diverse groups of people to help unpack differing perspectives within a community (Choy 2014).

This chapter presents my study's research and methodological framework. It includes discussing the necessity of an interpretive qualitative approach in my investigation of Madhesi ethnopolitical groups. I also provide a rationale for choosing a case study approach and the selection of a case for my study and describe the methods of data collection and their analysis. I contextualize this chapter by discussing case-specific events such as my entry into the Madhesi community (albeit the COVID-19 pandemic restrained my travel and fieldwork for this

research), the recruitment of interviewees, and the interview processes during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The philosophical assumption underlying this study informs the interpretive qualitative approach. From an ontological or theoretical perspective, my research emphasizes the concept of multiple realities. I follow social constructivist ideas that meanings are socially and historically constructed. The subjective meanings are not simply imprinted on individuals but are developed through social interactions and historical and cultural norms that operate in individual lives (Creswell 2007, 21). My research aims to explore the processes Madhesi groups involved in making their identity boundaries in the post-CPA transition. From an epistemological premise, this study assumes that truth or knowledge is not detached from human beings. Instead, it is integrated into the social context through which knowledge is produced. In qualitative research, researchers and respondents have an inseparable relationship. The researcher is value-laden and must employ approaches of subjective interaction and communication to understand the subjective realities of respondents (Creswell 2007, 18). A qualitative approach "allows researchers to understand the meaning people have constructed about their world and their experiences; that is, how do people make sense of their experiences"(Merriam and Grenier 2019, 5)?

Concurrently, the nature of my research questions enabled my adoption of a qualitative approach. This research is primarily guided by how questions. The key objective of my research is to understand how Madhesi ethnopolitical groups defined Madhesi identity in post-CPA Nepal and how power and politics influenced in this process. Yin (2014), Merriam (1998) and Creswell (2007, 18) argue that an interpretive qualitative approach is a most applicable methodology if the research is guided by 'how' questions. This approach allows researchers to "collect as many

detailed specifies from research setting as possible, then set about the process of looking for a pattern of relationship among the specifies" (Hatch 2002, 10).

Research Design: A Case Study

Research design is a strategy that a researcher uses to integrate the various components of the research in a coherent and logical manner in order to ensure that their research problems have been effectively addressed; it provides the blueprint for collecting, measuring, and analyzing data (De Vaus 2001). For this research, I choose a single case study design. Since I am interested in studying Madhesi ethno-political groups in the southern plains of Nepal and their narratives of Madhesi identity, a single case study is the most appropriate research methodology. The nature of my research questions makes case study design a natural fit. "Case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied" (Stake 2005, 443).

An advantage of a single case study design is that it allows for a nuanced and detailed investigation of the subject. It examines the past and present of a certain phenomenon within its boundary. Another methodological benefit of a case study design is that it allows for the adoption of discourse analysis in the analysis and interpretation of my research data. This approach situates texts such as interview transcripts, archives, and field notes within their social contexts and unpacks implicit meanings. In this context, a meticulous examination of language using what Gee (2010) has defined as the "seven building tasks" of language (significance, activities, identities, relationships, politics, connections, sign systems and knowledge) can explain "the creation and maintenance of social norms, construction of personal and group identities, and the negotiation of social and political interaction" (Starks and Trinidad 2007, 1374). This research seeks to examine not only the identity narratives of Madhesi leaders and

local Madhesis, but also to analyze contextual factors that would have served for the external categorization and influenced Madhesi groups' internal identification.

In addition to this, a case study design gives scholars leverage to probe more pertinent questions of the 'how' and 'why' (Yin 2014). In this research, Madhesi identity construction is the phenomenon under study, and it has specific boundaries. This bounded system is a single entity (Merriam and Grenier 2019) based on the factors of timing (Madhesi identity arose as a powerful force in the post-CPA period), space (it took place in Nepal, particularly in the southern plains of Nepal), and components (the political and social actors involved).

The single case study design also allows researchers to study informal units (Gerring 2004, 344) along with its primary focus on a single unit. The unit of analysis in a case study is specific and complex, and is defined by the context (Gerring 2004). Yin (2014) argues that a case study can be designed as embedded, holistic, or both. The emergence of Madhesi identity as a powerful force in the post-war Nepal is an intricate phenomenon that needs detailed investigation. Thus, despite the unit of analysis being Madhesi ethno-political groups, this is a holistic case study. My research focuses on Madhesi political parties as they are the main actors in the process of Madhesi identity development. The research questions, therefore, take me towards two categories of populations within Madhesi groups: senior Madhesi leaders, and local Madhesi people or local elites including Madhesi activists and academicians from both Madhesi and non-Madhesi[21] backgrounds.

"The discrimination and exclusion within Madhesi community is high, as only few Madhesi elites are capturing power and resources" (Upreti, Poudel, and Ghimire 2012, 22). Therefore, understanding how, despite having deep structural constraints within Madhesi society,

[21] Non-Madhesi group include indigenous people (Tharus, Rajbanshis), Muslims and hill-origin people living in Tarai (Gellner 2007).

diverse Madhesi populations came to align with Madhesi identity in the post-accord period requires an in-depth study of contextual issues along with group actions. Upreti, Paudel and Ghimire (2012) opine that only certain Madhesi caste groups such as Jha, Yadav, Singh etc. are dominant in politics and have been capturing power and resources. The same groups are more at the forefront of power, politics, property, and privilege in Madhes than other marginalized groups. Backward communities like *Dalits* (Untouchables) have traditionally been exploited by the Madhesi elites. This practice has not significantly changed.

This research, therefore, examines contextual issues such as formal and informal state policies and practices, the Maoist insurgency, and the post-war transitional Madhesi political context that could have served a crucial role in the external categorization of Madhesis, and influenced the internal identification of Madhesi groups. The comparative analysis of identity reflections between Madhesi leaders and local Madhesi people, along with the examination of contextual issues, allowed me to understand the shift in popular support for Madhesi identity after the CPA in Nepal.

Case Selection: Madhesi Ethnopolitical Groups

The potency of a single case study design is that it provides a rationale for the selection of the case. "Achieving the greatest understanding of critical phenomena depends on choosing the case well" (Stake 2005, 450). Stake's argument is underlined by the foundation of the case itself. A case study is a design that allows an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon. It focuses on a particular subject with an accurate question and a systematic approach. The selection of a case is mainly guided by the research question and the theory (Stake 2005; Yin 2014). These

scholars, however, assert that researchers can use a conceptual framework to guide the study, but it is not essential. Therefore, in an efficient case study design, the case must be distinct.

The violent Madhesi upsurge in the post-CPA period was unprecedented. Kantha (2010) notes that the hitherto sleepy Tarai region of Nepal became the epicenter of political turbulence immediately after the CPA in 2006. Particularly, the people of hill-origin residing in the region became deliberate targets (Upreti, Poudel, and Ghimire 2012). The magnitude of the 2007 uprising was so sharp that it compelled the then seven major political parties (SPA) and then Maoists to make the first amendment to the interim constitution they themselves had written (Mathema 2011, 25; Upreti, Poudel, and Ghimire 2012, 5). The amendment was made to give the term *Madhes*[22] to that territory and to ensure federalism while restructuring the state that Madhesis had been demanding for decades (Upreti, Poudel, and Ghimire 2012).

Other minority groups such as the Limbu[23] in the far eastern region, and the Tamang surrounding the Kathmandu valley also engaged in conflict against the Nepali state, but their demands related to ethnicity were never taken seriously by the government (Lawoti 2013). Therefore, the study on Madhesi ethno-political groups merits examination on the basis of its uniqueness. Furthermore, the Madhesi case is illustrative from an international perspective. It provides us an almost real-time analysis of the subjective construction of a dissenting identity in the post-war context. My research seeks to analyze how Madhesi identity became a rallying factor, and what constituted a diverse Madhesi population to accept Madhesi rhetoric of identity directed against the hill-dominated Nepali nationalism in a way rarely seen in the political history of Nepal prior to 2007.

[22] The term Tarai and Madhes are interchangeably used in this research.

[23] In Nepal, Limbus are a Sino-Tibetan ethnic group native to the eastern hill and mountainous region.

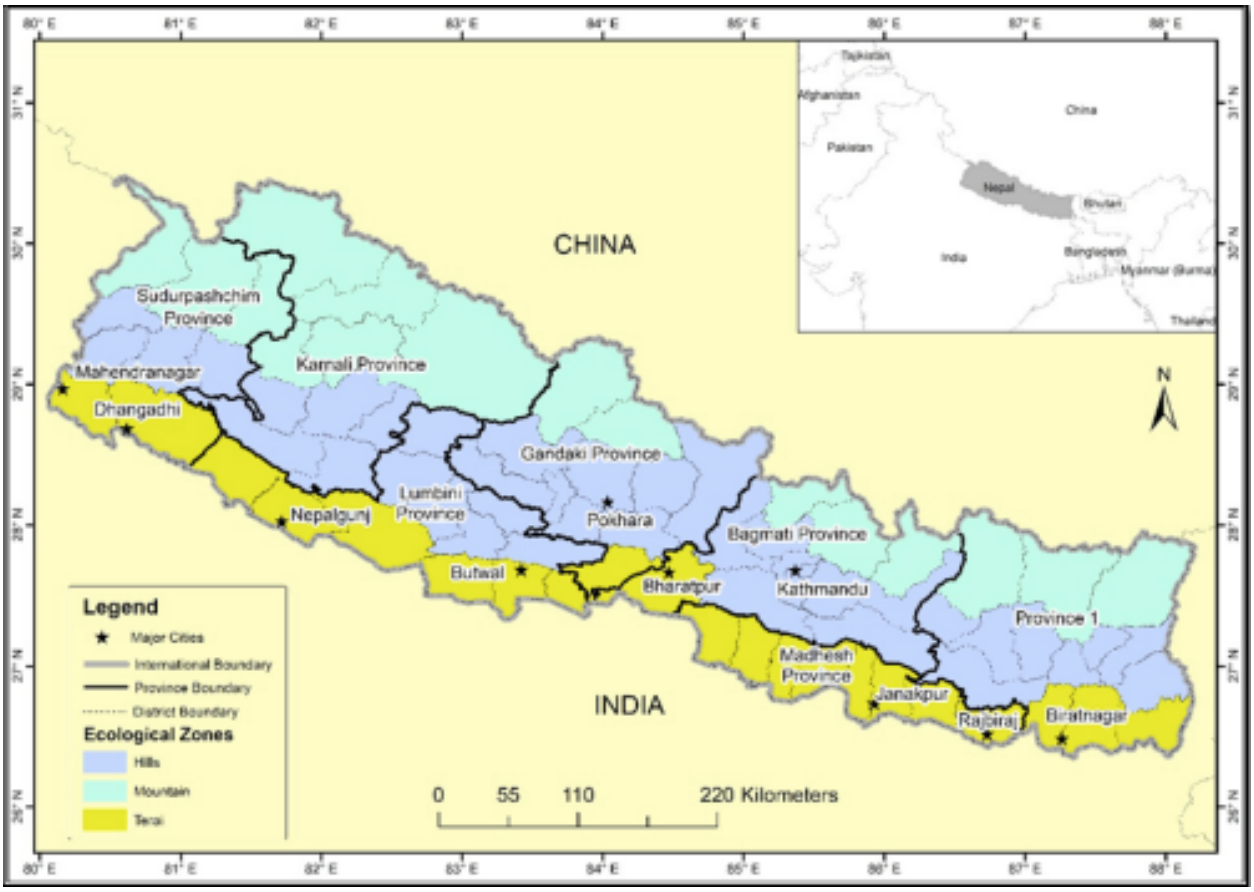
Site Selection: Tarai/Madhes

The southern plains of Nepal, Tarai/Madhes (see Figures 3 and 4) is the agricultural and industrial heartland of the country. It comprises much of Nepal's best fertile land, forest resources, small-scale industries; and also has a significant share of its large-scale industries (Gaige 1975). The region serves as the grain basket for the survival of the bulk of Nepalese citizens. Tarai also contains much of Nepal's major trade and transit routes, a landlocked nation that is geo-politically sandwiched by two Asian powers: India and China. The northern Sino-Nepal frontier is characterized by difficult terrain because of the mighty Himalayas. The southern Indo-Nepal border is porous, and easily accessible due to its flatter geography. Most of Nepal's foreign trade routes through this borderland. Tarai also has a significant historical, cultural, and political background that cannot be ignored when studying the Madhesi identity. "*Videh-Mithila* and *Kapilbastu* are the centers of Hindu civilization and the birthplace of Lord Buddha respectively" (Mistry 2019, 207).

Figure 3: Geographical Map of Nepal

Source: Walton et al. (2018)

Figure 4: Provincial Map of Nepal



Source: Sharma, Baral and Sapkota (2013)

The terms "Tarai" and "Madhes" have been used to define the southern plains of Nepal. However, "Tarai" has also been used in different ways. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, Tarai is "a strip of undulating former marshland that stretched from the Yamuna River to the west to the Brahmaputra River in the east." The term used in the Nepalese context, however, refers to "the plains region adjacent to the foothills within Nepal's national boundaries" (Gaige 1975, 3). The Tarai was not naturally an integral part of Nepal. Historically, the territory bounced between the hill kingdoms nestled in the Himalayan foothills and mid-hills and small kingdoms of the north Indian plains (Michael 2010). Moreover, in the 19th century, the rights to

this territory fluctuated between Nepal (then known as Gorkha/Gurkha) and the British East India Company, leading to the Anglo-Gurkha War of 1814-16. Though the geographical unification of Nepal by the hill Hindu king Prithivi Narayan Shah in 1768 marks the beginning of Nepal's political history, Nepal officially annexed the Tarai region during its unification and subsequent expansion. That lasted until the signing of the Sugauli Treaty between Nepal and the East India Company in 1816 (Gaige 1975; K. Jha 2017; Whelpton 1997, 2005).

The British captured all of the Tarai region during the Anglo-Gorkha War and returned it to Nepal in two phases after the Sugauli Treaty. The territory east of the Rapti River to the Koshi River (mostly lying in today's Madhes province) was returned nine months after the treaty, while the land west of the Rapti to the Mahakali River was returned after 44 years (K. Jha 2017). These territories are generally called Tarai/Madhes in Nepal and the people living there are known as Madhesi[24]. Some of these people supported the British East India Company in the Anglo-Gurkha war (Goit 2007). Therefore, it is argued that the social, economic, and political exclusion of the Madhesis in Nepal is due to their support for the British during the Anglo-Gorkha war.

The Tarai initially comprised 17 districts, which were demarcated into the outer Tarai (core Tarai) and the inner Tarai valleys (Vitri Madhes) (Guneratne 2002). The Tarai's governance was recently restructured and incorporated 21 of Nepal's 77 districts (Budhathoki et al. 2020), which also include part of Siwalik range and hills. Hence, many Madhesi scholars and activists argue that the inclusion of Hill areas in Tarai districts was part of a deliberate policy by the hill-dominated government to reduce Madhesi influence in political power. This is also in

[24] Today, most of the caste Hindus in the Tarai strongly identify as Madhesi. The Tharus, who view themselves to be the natives of the territory, hesitate to identify as Madhesi. Majority of Nepalese Muslims live in the Tarai region, but do not like to be called Madhesi.

line with the existing structure of the newly formed Madhes province, which only consists of 8 central and eastern Tarai districts.

The Tarai region is home to 50 percent of Nepal's 26 million people (NPCS 2012). It is also one of the ecological zones of Nepal. Geographically, Nepal has three geographic zones: mountains (Himal), hills (Pahad), and plains (Tarai). The north of the country is the mountain. Only 7 percent of the country's population lives in the mountain zone. South of the mountain zone is the hill zone, where 43 percent of the population lives (NPCS 2012). Between the Mahabharat and Siwalik hills are Dun valleys known as Bhitri Madhes. Downhill of the Siwalik is the core Tarai extending up to the Indian border in its south comprising 23 percent of the total land area of Nepal (NPCS 2012).

The Tarai is a cultural mosaic, inhabited by an amazing diversity of cultural and linguistic communities. Among the country's population in the Tarai, 63.1 percent are people of Tarai origin, which includes Tarai Hindu caste groups and non-caste groups. Furthermore, 35.7 percent trace their origin to hills (Pahadis), while the remaining 1.2 percent comprise various other identities. Tarai higher and middle caste groups comprise 28.3 percent, and Dalits (lower castes) make up 8.8 percent of the Tarai's population (P. Sharma 2014, 22). Together they have majority in the central and eastern Tarai which lies in Madhes province today. Some of them also reside in western and mid-western Madhesi districts. The 'Tharus', who are believed to be the earliest inhabitants in the region constitute 13.4 percent of the population within Tarai. They are concentrated in the far western Tarai and are spread over in good numbers in the central and eastern Tarai. Tarai Muslims[25] make up 8.3 percent of the population (P. Sharma 2014, 22) and

[25] Muslims are the minority religious community in Nepal and constitute 4.4 % of Nepal's total population. About 96 percent of the Muslim community resides in the Tarai, while the other 4% live in Kathmandu, Gorkha, Nuwakot, and the western hills (NPCS 2012).

have strong presence in Banke, Rautahat, and Parsa districts (Mathema 2011). They are also spread in most of the Tarai districts.

The word Madhes has been used as a synonym for Tarai. But it has developed a distinct political connotation since 2007. Madhes is much more than the physical composition of the region; it encompasses cultural and lingual space that exists as a basis of identity amongst the people living in the region (Cheah 2008). Those who claim to be Madhesi argue that Madhesis are non-Pahadis with plains language as their mother tongue regardless of their place of birth or residence (ICG 2007). They include Tarai's Hindu caste groups, non-caste groups (such as Tharus, Rajbanshis, etc.), and Tarai Muslims. Before the post-accord uprising, Madhesi people would rarely identify themselves as Madhesi. This preference has changed after the 2007 Madhesi agitation. Today, politically conscious Madhesis prefer to identify first as Madhesi, then as Nepali. But most Tharus, reject this definition and claim an independent identity (ICG 2007; Upreti, Poudel, and Ghimire 2012). However, a minority Tharu population in the central and eastern Tarai is comfortable with being identified as Madhesi. Tarai Muslims claim that they are not Madhesi, though most of them feel comfortable with that definition (Mathema 2011). In this context, the undisputed Madhesi population seem to be the Tarai Hindu caste groups including Dalits. Gellner (2007) used the term Madhesi to refer to the caste-organized people of Indian origin lived in the Tarai for generations.

Tarai is a multi-lingual space. The people of the Tarai speak non-Nepali languages such as Maithili, Bhojpuri, Tharu, Awadhi, and Bajjika as their native languages. But, many of those who speak non-Nepali languages also speak Nepali (K. Pandey 2017). As detailed in Table 1, Maithili is the second most spoken language in Nepal after Nepali with 11.7 percent of Nepal's population speaking Maithili as their mother tongue. Bhojpuri is spoken by 5.98 percent of the

population, while Tharu is spoken by 5.77 percent. The linguistic fabric extends to include Awadhi, embraced by 1.89 percent of Tarai people. The Bajjika speaking community constitutes 2.99 percent of the population. Hindi and Urdu are used as mother tongues by 2.61 percent and 0.29 percent of the population. Hindi serves as the lingua franca of Madhesi communities.

Table 1: Major Mother Tongue Speakers in Nepal and the Tarai

Mother Tongues	Total speakers in Nepal	Percent	Total speakers in the Tarai
Nepali	11,826,953	44.64	3,494,710
Maithili	3,092,530	11.67	3,004,245
Bhojpuri	1,584,958	5.98	1,542,333
Tharu	1,529,875	5.77	1,479,129
Bajjika	793,416	2.99	791,737
Urdu	691,546	2.61	671,851
Awadhi	501,752	1.89	500,607
Rajbanshi	122,214	0.46	121,215
Hindi	77,569	0.29	46,933

Source(s): NPCS (2012), Yadava (2014), Pandey (2017)

Linguistically, Madhesis are settled in the Awadhi speaking belt (Western Tarai), the Bajjika speaking belt (Central Tarai), the Bhojpuri speaking belt (Central and western Tarai) such as Rupandehi, Nawalparasi, Parsa and Bara districts, and Maithili speaking belt (Eastern and Central Tarai) (Mathema 2011, 3; P. Sharma 2014, 36). Though protests erupted in these areas during the 2007 Madhesi movement, the conflict became intense and violent in the *Bhojpuri* and *Maithili* speaking belts. Initially, the protests focused around Lahan and Janakpur, but central and eastern Madhesi cities such as Malangawa, Birjung, Lahan, and Biratnagar also faced major clashes (ICG 2007). That might be the reason Madhes province (see Figure 2) is formed including only eight Madhesi districts while restructuring the state in 2015. Though Madhesi parties have political organizations in many Tarai districts, Madhesi politics seem to be

centered on Bhojpuri and Maithili speaking belts. The majority of these areas are located in the Madhes province. Furthermore, a high portion of Madhesi leaders also come from these areas.

In brief, many Madhesi politicians, and scholars argue that the entire Tarai region, stretching from the east (Jhapa) to the west (Kanchanpur) of Tarai is Madhes. But Madhesi politics, as discussed, is more centered in Maithili and Bhojpuri speaking belts located in today's Madhes province which includes the major Madhesi towns such as Janakpur and Birjung. These dynamics also provide a rational to my selection of the participants mostly from these areas.

Religion and Caste Systems in the Tarai

Currently, Nepal is a secular state governed by a new constitution adopted in 2015. But its population is pre-dominantly Hindu. Hence, religion has always been a political issue in Nepal. While Nepal is renowned as the birthplace of Buddha,[26] the country was originally established as a Hindu nation by King Prithivi Narayan Shah. Historically, the rulers followed certain practices and cults, which distinguished them as true Hindu rulers, and made the kingdom a sacred place (Gellner and Letizia 2019). King Prithivi Narayan Shah established Nepal as "Asal Hindustan" (pure Hindustan), a space created for true Hindus, in contrast to the Indian Hinduism conquered by Mugals (Muslims) and the British (Burghart 1996; Gellner and Letizia 2019). Therefore, the religion of the group or caste they belong to has often (though not always) been a key marker of their identity.

There is, however, difference between how Hinduism is practiced by people in the hills and people in the plains in Nepal. For instance, the Holi festival in the Tarai is celebrated a day after its celebration in the hills. Tarai Hinduism is also considered more orthodox than hill

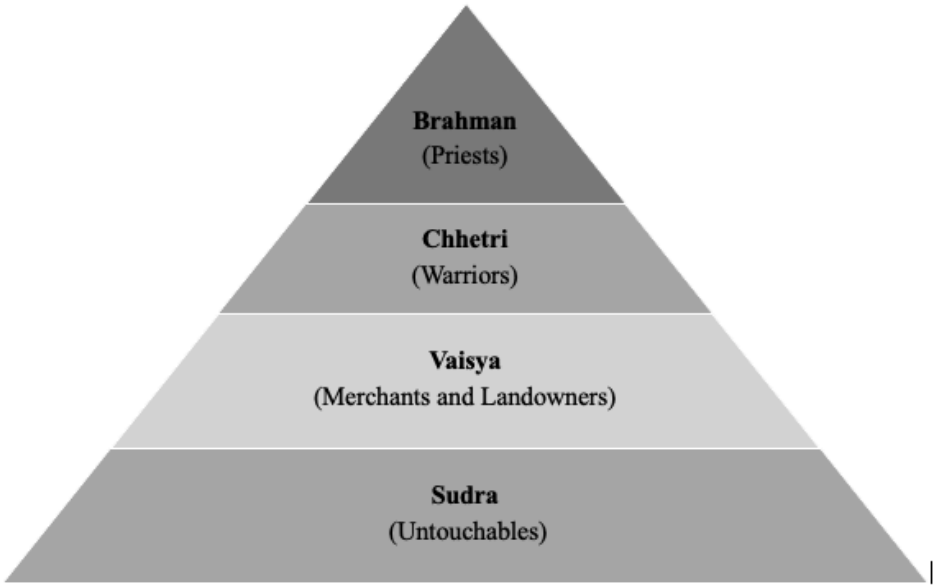
[26] Buddha was born in Lumbini located in the western Tarai of Nepal.

Hinduism, which incorporates some Buddhist traditions. Tarai Hinduism, however, is influenced by Muslim culture and traditions (Whelpton 2005).

Muslims make up a significant portion of the Tarai's population. Central Tarai, particularly Rautahat, and Kapilbastu districts, has become a home to a majority of the country's Muslim population (Dastider 2013). Buddhist hill-ethnic groups have also settled in the Tarai. But their numbers are negligible. Since the 1990s, some Tharus, who claim to be the original inhabitants of the region, started advocating for Buddhism throughout the Tarai (Gellner and Letizia 2019). Aside from this, many Tarai areas also practice animist beliefs.

Castes are ethnic groups within a single society and their relations to each other are based on particular ideologies of purity and pollution (Guneratne 2002, 37). The Hindu caste system (as shown in Figure 5) is hierarchical, where each group is associated with a particular occupation. The Brahmans, who are on the apex on the social hierarchy were traditionally associated with the priests, while Chhetris, who are on the second rank, were associated with warriors. Similarly, Vaishyas, the third-ranked caste were involved in business, and the lowest-ranking Sudras, were untouchables, and associated only with service castes.

Figure 5: Hindu Caste Hierarchy



Source: Developed by the author based on the reading of literature

In Nepal, the state established a caste ideology and caste relations during the nineteenth century. The Muluki Ain (first national code) was introduced to govern social relations within the Hindu kingdom of Nepal where people were divided into different social groups called Jat.[27] These groups were ranked based on whether they wore holy thread or drank alcohol. The Muluki Ain gave hill Brahmins (Brahmans) the highest position in law and society. This hierarchy, however, neglected many Madhesi groups (Bennett, Dahal, and Govindasamy 2008), who had their own complex caste system similar to that of India. Furthermore, Tarai Brahmins and Chhetries were also ranked below the hill Brahmins and Chhetris. Table 2 provides a detailed preview of major caste/ethnic groups in Nepal:

[27] The term 'Jat' in general encompasses all the different kinds of communities, including castes, ethnicities, and religious communities (Pradhan 2005, 7).

Table 2: Caste/Ethnic Groups in Nepal with Regional Divisions

	Main Caste/Ethnic Groups (7)			Caste and Ethnic Groups with Regional Divisions (11) and Social Groups (103) from 2001 Census
Caste Group	1	Brahman/Chhetri	1.1	Hill Brahman
				Hill Brahman
			1.2	Hill Chhetri
				Chhetri, Thakuri, Sanyasi
			1.3	Tarai/Madhes Brahman/Chhetri
				Madhesi Brahaman, Nurang, Rajput, Kayasta
	2	Tarai/Madhesi other castes	2	Tarai/Madhesi Other Castes
				Kewat, Mallah, Lohar, Nuniya, Kahar, Lodha, Rajbhar, Bing, Mali, Kamar, Dhunia, Yadav, Teli, Koiri, Kurmi, Sonar, Baniya, Kalwar, Thakur/Hajam, Kanu, Sudhi, Kumhar, Haluwai, Badhi, Barai, Bhediyar/Gaderi
	3	Dalit	3.1	Hill Dalit
				Kami, Damai/Dholi, Sarki, Badi, Gaine, Unidentified Dalits
			3.2	Tarai/Madhesi Dalit
				Chamar/Harijan, Musahar, Dushad/Paswan, Tatma, Khatwe, Dhobi, Baantar, Chidimar, Dom, Halkhor
Adivasi/Janajati	4	Newar	4	Newar
				Newar
	5	Janajati	5.1	Hill/Mountain Janajati
				Tamang, Kumal, Sunuwar, Majhi, Danuwar, Thami/Thangami, Darai, Bhote, Baramu/Bramhu, Pahari, Kusunda, Raji, Raute, Chepang/Praja, Hayu, Magar, Chyantal, Rai, Sherpa, Bhujel/Gharti, Yakha, Thakali, Limbu, Lepcha, Bhote, Byansi, Jirel, Hyalmo, Walung, Gurung, Dura
			5.2	Tarai Janajati
				Tharu, Jhangad, Dhanuk, Rajbanshi, Gandai, Santhal/Satar, Dhimal, Tajpuria, Meche, Koche, Kisan, Munda, Kusbadiya, Patharkata, Unidentified Adibasi/Janajati
Other	6	Muslim	6	Muslim
				Madhesi Muslim, Churaute (Hill Muslim)
	7	Other	7	Other
				Marwari, Bangali, Jain, Punjabi/Sikh, Unidentified Others

Source: Bennett, Dahal, and Govindasamy (2008).

The Tarai Economy

The Tarai, as discussed above, is the agricultural and industrial heartland of Nepal. It contains much of Nepal's most fertile land, forest resources, and industry. The region serves as Nepal's food basket, feeding more than 50 percent of the national population. It contains much of Nepal's major trades and transit routes. Most of Nepal's international trade passes through this frontier. Historically, Nepal's Kings had understood the strategic importance of the Tarai since the time of King Prithivi Narayan Shah (Guneratne 2002). So did the British. The Anglo-Nepal war was fought when the East India Company controlled most of the Tarai, which served as a major source of tax revenue (Sah 2017). Their goal involved weakening the Kathmandu's revenue to weaken its government.

The development of transportation in the region also led to dramatic changes. The extension of the Indian railroad system to the Nepal-India border in the late 19th century had a huge impact on the Tarai (Gaige 1975, 35). The Indian market became accessible to raw materials from the Tarai including rocks, timber, and jute. Hence, the agricultural development of the Tarai was enhanced. This in turn led to the establishment of industries. In Biratnagar, mills were being established in the late 1930s and 1940s to process jute, rice, cotton, and sugar (Tulachan and Felver 2019).

Today the Tarai contributes about two-thirds of the country's GDP. But many young Madhesis, like their Pahadi counterparts have migrated to Persian Gulf (including Saudai Arabia, and Qatar) and Southeast Asian countries (Malaysia, and South Korea) to work as low-skilled workers. One of the main reasons for this is the low marginal productivity of labor in traditional agriculture and the consequent low wages in Nepal (B. P. Sharma 2013). The trend of mass labor

migration increased particularly after the emergence of the Maoist insurgency. Today Nepal's economy is heavily reliant upon remittances from these workers.

The Politics in the Tarai

To grasp the collective assertion of Madhesi identity in post-CPA Nepal, it is crucial to understand the formation of the Nepali state and its conflictual relationship with Madhes and Madhesis.[28] King Prithibi Narayan Shah, a hill-Hindu king of a small Gorkha principality unified the Nepali state by militarily expanding its territory and annexing Tarai into Nepal in 1768. This geographic unification process excluded Madhesis. They were marginalized even further by his successors, the Shahs, and the Ranas. These rulers treated Madhes as more of a colony of the hill-dominated Nepali state rather than a constituent part of it[29] (K. Jha 2017; Sijapati 2013).

Thus, the Tarai has historically been a space for anti-government political activities. In the past, Nepalese politicians would study in Indian universities. They would become involved in student politics in Indian universities (Gaige 1975). Some of them also participated in the Indian independence movement. With its open border, India has been a sanctuary for members of Nepal's political opposition for decades. In the past, many of Nepal's political parties including the Nepali Congress (NC) operated out of India, which resulted in the anti-Rana[30] revolution in Nepal in 1940s. The NC has been a dominant force in the Tarai. The communists also found

[28] The history of modern Nepal can be divided into four main epochs: the early Shah period (1769-1846), the Rana oligarchy (1846-1951), a period of democratic transition (1951-1962), the *Panchayat* autocracy (1962-1990), and the Democracy period (1991-present). It is argued that Madhesi were marginalized in all epochs of Nepal's history. Chapters IV and V provide more detailed information about Nepal's political history and the Madhesis' relationship with the Nepali state.

[29] Chapters IV and V provide a detailed history of the Madhesi marginalization by the hill dominated Nepali state.

[30] The years between 1846 and 1951 marked the Rana era in Nepal. It is the period, the control of the government rested in the hands of hereditary Rana Prime Ministers. During the Rana period, the de jure monarchy was reduced to ceremonial position.

their base in the Tarai in the 1960s (Upreti 2006), where the neighboring Indian Naxalite communist movement helped strengthen their political base. Gaige (1975) asserts that the NC used Madhes as its vote bank without providing equal political power to the Madhesi people. This neglect also contributed to the emergence of identity politics and resistance in the Tarai.

Historically, both violent and non-violent movements have often coexisted globally (Chenoweth and Schock 2015). Nepal became a democracy following the 1950 revolution that ended the Rana regime. Madhesi people were as equally involved in this conflict as their hill counterparts. Eastern Tarai was the epicenter of the movement. But the end of the Rana regime[31] did not result in major changes as far as the relationship between the state and the Madhesi communities (Gaige 1975; H. B. Jha 2017; K. Jha 2017; Mandal 2013; Sijapati 2013). The upper-caste hill-Hindu elites continued to govern Nepal and to promote the political and cultural national unity established by earlier rulers. This was reflected in various state policies. For instance, the 1956 National Education Planning Commission report stated, "if the younger generation is taught to use Nepali as the basic language, then other languages will gradually disappear, and greater national strength and unity will result" (NEPC 1956, 96).

Following the removal of Hindi language from school education in the 1950s, the Madhesi population resisted. Inspired by the Indian Independence Movement (Bharat Chhodo Andolan), prominent Madhesi leaders including Bedanand Jha, Chairman of the Tarai Congress Party (TC) called for demonstrations against the government. Several public meetings and demonstrations were organized in different Tarai towns (H. B. Jha 2017). In response to this resistance, Nepalese authorities banned all sorts of protests, and ignored the protestor's demands. This resulted in a violent clash between the TC and hill nationalists in 1957 in Eastern Tarai. But

[31] With the end of the Rana regime came the Panchayat system (1962-1990) after a short interval of democracy (1950-1962) where the king had absolute control over Nepal's legislative, bureaucratic, and legal affairs.

the movement failed to gain much ground after its leaders lost the 1959 parliamentary election (Gaige 1975; H. B. Jha 2017; P. Jha 2014; Whelpton 2005). It has also been argued that when other national parties developed, they adopted the language issue that was the sole agenda of the TC, which undercut its campaign.

In 1956, Raghunath Thakur, a prominent Madhesi activist, organized the radical 'Madhesi Mukti Andolan' (Madhesi Liberation Movement) to combat Madhesi discrimination and exploitation. He said that the Tarai is a non-self-governing territory, and is an autonomous region as defined by UN Charter section 73. He argued that the Terai also had the right to develop its own foreign policy (Goit 2007). He later formed the 'Madhesi Janakrantikari Dal' to continue his campaign. Its main objectives were to confiscate power from the Nepalese government to implement self-governance; to form their own Army, police, and bureaucrats; to hold domestic and international trade for Mahdes to Madhesi people; and to provide land ownership rights to every Madhesi. Thakur also lobbied with many leaders in India to popularize his movement, but failed to gain momentum (Goit 2007; ICG 2007; P. Jha 2014; Whelpton 2005).

During the same period, another militant group, The Tarai Liberation Front (TLF) also started armed resistance in Western Tarai (ICG 2007; Upreti, Poudel, and Ghimire 2012). However, the violent resistance failed, as the government's security forces killed the group's leaders in the 1960s. Despite the widespread dissatisfaction with hill dominance, no opposition groups were able to undermine the *Panchayat* regime.

It was only in the 1980s that identity politics emerged in the Tarai with Gajendra Narayan Singh's Nepal Satbhavana Parishad (Goodwill Council), a cultural association that became the Nepal Satbhavana Party (NSP) after 1990 (H. B. Jha 2017). The immediate reason for the

creation of the council was a government commission report that recommended the sealing of the Indo-Nepal border and the banning of Hindi, while accusing Madhesis of being Indian immigrants. This outraged Madhesi leaders who vehemently insisted that while there could have been some immigration, many people had been living on the same land for generations. The Satbhavana demanded recognition of the Hindi language, citizenship for the Tarai's people, federalism, and social inclusion for the Madhesi population (K. Jha 2017; P. Jha 2014; Upreti, Poudel, and Ghimire 2012).

The success of the People's Movement (*Janaandolan I*) in 1990 led to the end of the Panchayat system. The 'Satbhavana Parishad' became a political party, although many Madhesi leaders continued their membership in national political parties. While the constitution-drafting committee, comprised of representatives of a few major political parties and the King set out to write a new constitution, the NSP called for an election to the Constitutional Assembly (CA) and demanded federalism (P. Jha 2014). In the 1990s, the NSP won a few parliamentary seats but failed to build a strong political organization and expand its political platform beyond upper caste bases in a few Tarai districts. Nonetheless, it succeeded in rejuvenating Madhesi identity politics, at least to a certain context, until its founder passed away in 2002 (K. Pandey 2017).

Overall, identity politics in Nepal, which had previously existed but remained largely dormant since the 1950s, unquestionably gained substantial credibility with the restoration of democracy in the 1990s. It brought opportunities for previously excluded groups including Madhesi to mobilize and assert their identity-based agendas. But interestingly, it was the Maoist People's War (1996-2006) that brought ethnic grievances to the forefront of national politics (Hangen and Lawoti 2013, 17). The Maoists' proposal for ethnic identity-based state restructuring led to fierce debate in two CAs over the proposed names and boundaries of the

provinces (Paudel 2016). The ethnic rhetoric fueled demand for identity-based provinces across the country, but protests were most evident in the Tarai leading to Madhesi movements in 2007, 2008, and 2015.

Methods of Data Collection

The data collection for this research began at the end of March 2021 and lasted until November 2021. Having successfully defended my prospectus, I received IRB approval for this research at the end of January 2021 from the Kent State University Institutional Review Board. The entire world, at that time, was suffering from the novel coronavirus, later recognized as the COVID-19 pandemic. Nepal did not remain untouched by this epidemic. Like many countries around the world, the Himalayan nation[32] faced multiple challenges. These included months of nationwide lockdowns, travel restrictions, closure of schools, colleges, and businesses, and halting of domestic and international flights among others (Poudel and Subedi 2020).

The pandemic severely affected my earlier plan to collect data for this study. While the original plan included fieldwork and extensive face-to-face interviews with various individuals and actors in Nepal, particularly in the Tarai, the pandemic did not allow for it. Traveling and fieldwork in Nepal, particularly in the Tarai became difficult. Therefore, I utilized all the necessary steps and conducted data collection remotely.

A hallmark of a case study design is the use of multiple data sources, a strategy that helps maximize data credibility (Patton 1990). In this research, I used interviews and archival research methods for data collection. This study relies on in-depth interviews as the primary data gathering instrument for understanding Madhesi groups' narratives of identity. The archival

[32] Nepal is recognized as a Himalayan nation. Most of the world's tallest mountains including the Mt. Everest lie in the northern part of Nepal that borders Tibet, an autonomous region of the Peoples Republic of China.

research method is used to acquire contextual information and the history of Madhesi identity. More specifically, this method helped collect supporting and supplementary data to confirm, or question information taken from interview sources. Bowman (2009, 30) asserts that documents can be analyzed to verify the veracity of research findings taken from other sources including interviews. Additionally, the application of data triangulation (combining multiple sources of data) in case study research strengthens the study's credibility (Jentoft and Olsen 2017, 3)

Interviews (Semi-structured)

Interviews provide a useful way for researchers to learn about the world of others (Andrea and James 2005, 698; Qu and Dumay 2011). Since this project aims to understand the perception of diverse political actors, including Madhesi leaders, Madhesi activists, and supporters of Madhesi parties, interview is the most appropriate method of data collection. Interviewing, however, is not as simple as it appears. "Successful interviews demand not only skills such as active listening and note taking, but also careful planning and sufficient preparation" (Qu and Dumay 2011, 239). In terms of the interview design process, there are many decisions that must be taken early such as who to interview, how many participants will be required, and what type of interviews will be conducted (Qu and Dumay 2011).

In this research, interviews were conducted virtually via zoom video conferencing technology. This study, as mentioned, comprises two categories of informants: senior political leaders from Madhesi parties; and local Madhesi residents (local elites) including Madhesi activists, Madhesi think tank scholars, and academicians from both Madhesi and non-Madhesi backgrounds. The selection of the second group of participants helped to uncover similarities and differences in the understanding of Madhesi identity between Madhesi leaders and others. Since

this group of informants includes people from non-Madhesi backgrounds, they offered more authentic accounts of Madhesi identity.

I employed semi-structured interview questions to investigate deeply about the senior Madhesi leaders' understanding of identity. Open-ended questions are well suited for the exploration of perceptions and opinions of respondents regarding complex and sensitive issues and enable probing for more information and clarification of answers (Barriball and While 1994, 330). The major goal here is to understand how Madhesi leaders assert their identity. I set specific interview questions to obtain relevant information about Madhesi identity. I also used probes to elicit more elaborate response from these interviewees. However, while talking about Madhesi identity, these leaders often raised issues of Madhesi discrimination by the hill-dominated Nepali state and hill people since its inception. I gave them enough time to share their personal experiences of suffering by hill-people, and understanding of other contextual issues including state policies and practices which they thought were discriminatory against Madhesis.

To uncover an in-depth understanding of Madhesi identity within the second group of participants, I also used semi-structured interview questions. I employed the same interview questions for both groups of interviewees. But I asked additional interview questions of this group of participants to understand their insights on contextual factors, including the Maoist insurgency that could have influenced the development of Madhesi identity. As discussed in above, Madhesi identity appeared as a powerful force only after the signing of the CPA between the government and then Maoists in 2006.

Conducting interviews, however, is not easy. It requires a great deal of planning before, during and after the interviews (Mero-Jaffe 2011). One of the important tasks is to establish access to and rapport with pertinent individuals and actors. Since I am an individual from non-

Madhesi background, I had to build trust and rapport with Madhesi individuals in accessing different participants for interview. Addressing this challenge, I utilized my existing networks that I developed from my previous work at the Local Peace Committee in Nepal. Friends in Nepal engaging in Nepalese politics and are working in national and international NGOs became a great help in finding and tapping in to a Madhesi network. My status as a research scholar also became some help. I was aware that Nepalese political community is quite open to scholarly inquiry.

These techniques helped me build trust with the Madhesi community, which is "essential to the success of interviews" (Andrea and James 2005, 708), and to make the connection required for formal interviews with different individuals and actors from Madhesi and non-Madhesi background in the Tarai. After becoming familiar with Madhesi activists, mid and local level politicians, and think tank scholars, I set up appointments to conduct in-depth interviews with them to get their insights on Madhesi identity. My objective here was to understand how they identify themselves. The recruitment of non-Madhesi respondents was to explore divergent opinions about Madhesi identity. It also revealed useful information about how external categorization worked in the development of Madhesi identity.

I used a combination of snowball sampling and purposive sampling in the selection and recruitment of participants. "The selection of an appropriate sampling design is a key decision that affects the type of conclusions that one can draw later during data analysis" (Riveria, Kozyreva, and Sarovskii 2002, 663). I used snowball sampling method (SSM) to recruit a second group of interview participants including mid-level local Madhesi leaders, Madhesi activists, academics, and development workers from Madhesi and non-Madhesi backgrounds in the Tarai. There were two ways in which I employed the snowball method. First, I asked my contact

person, a Madhesi activist for the names of individuals I could set up interviews. Second, I was able to obtain names of individuals at the end of interviews. In these instances, I asked each participant for the names of the possible interview subjects. SSM is a widely used sampling technique in qualitative research design. It helps researchers access new participants (Merriam and Grenier 2019).

Purposive sampling method was used when selecting senior Madhesi leaders. This method gives researchers a way to decide what needs to be known and sets outs to identify key people who are able and are willing to provide information by virtue of their knowledge and experience (Bernard 2017). The names of the respondents were selected on the basis of my individual judgement, believing that they could provide necessary information needed for this research. I recruited this group of participants based on their engagement in Madhesi politics, and their portfolios in Madhesi political parties. Many of these leaders had served as ministers in the national government at different times. Most of them are existing parliamentary members of the national and provincial parliaments in Nepal. Some even are serving as ministers in the national as well as in provincial governments.

I had planned to conduct between 30 and 35 interviews in my prospectus. Upon the completion of 28 semi-structured interviews, I observed an overall saturation of the data. Respondents in this category include 11 senior Madhesi leaders from different parties and 17 supporters of the Madhesi parties. Initially, I was not confident that conducting interviews virtually via zoom in Nepal would be possible. I doubted if participants would have access to the technology. After the first few interviews, I became confident that it was feasible. I also realized that participants felt comfortable and were expressive interacting virtually via zoom. Most women interviewees shared with me their ease interacting from home. Prior to the interview, I

used to think that social and cultural taboos of interacting with Madhesi women existed due to their distinct socio-cultural orientations. I did not experience such challenges in the interaction with woman participants.

Many interviewees were curious about my interest in studying Madhesi identity. These Madhesi people might have thought that people of hill-origin, like me had no substantial academic interest in Madhesi concerns. But they did not judge me differently. Rather they thanked me for doing research on Madhesi identity. Despite my non-Madhesi background, they were interested in sharing their views with me about Madhesi identity, and social, economic, and cultural issues of Madhes. The narratives of the second group of participants were more diverse than the senior Madhesi leaders. That include their definition of the Madhesi identity before and after the CPA.

The demography of my participants reflects my attempt to capture the diversity of Madhes in terms of caste, gender, and ethnicity. I interviewed 20 male participants and 8 female interviewees from diverse castes, ethnicities, and religions. While comparing the number of women participants with that of men, the number of female participants is small. This is because Madhesi women are less engaged in public life even today due to their traditions and culture. Maharjan and Sah (2013) argue that Madhesi women continue to be subjected to discrimination because of their traditions, and state policies; they have never been fully integrated into Nepal's social, economic, and political arenas.

In constructing my interview questions, I was particularly interested in exploring how interviewees define Madhesi identity before and after the CPA. Therefore, my questions were more centered on Madhesi identity. The language chosen for the interview was either Nepali or English based on the interviewee's preference. Most of the participants preferred to interact in

Nepali. I initiated the interaction in Nepali to put the interviewee at ease. The use of the Nepali language often had a soothing effect, for participants and for me. I employed the Nepali language for interviewing senior Madhesi leaders, as well as other participants who spoke little or no English. I would sometimes switch to English if the participants expressed a preference. That happened with a few highly educated interviewees. The participants of this research were politically conscious individuals. In terms of age, almost all of them were above 25 and had directly seen or experienced the conflict.

Interviews, as mentioned, were held in Zoom. Whereas conducting interviews using video conferencing technology has some limitations such as the researcher's inability to observe participants' physical space and respond to body language and emotional cues (Gray et al. 2020), using Zoom gave me easy access to diverse participants and saved time and resources. For each of the participants, I explained the ethical protocols prior to the interview. I clearly told them that interviewees have the right to not answer any questions or to end the interview at any point without any penalty. I also made it explicit that all the records will be saved in the researcher's password-protected personal computer and the researcher only has access to that computer. I also clarified to them that the data I collect is only for research purposes. Before I proceed to the formal interview, I obtained their consent via emails. I also took their verbal consent to record the interview. This also helped participants to know the details of the subject matter and the interview process of my research.

Confidentiality was guaranteed. But none of the participants were worried about the protection of their identity. Some even gave me permission to utilize their names if needed. All the participants agreed to be recorded. Some of them asked for providing them the interview transcript prior to its use. The majority of participants did not request interview transcripts, and

some even asked me not to send them. To be transparent and fair about the transcript, I emailed most of them the interview transcripts within two weeks of the interview. Mero-Jaffe (2011) articulates that transferring of transcripts to participants ensures the validity of the transcripts and strengthens the quality of the research. Interviewees were also advised that should they find a reason to correct, clarify or make additions to the interview, they were invited to do so. But only a few of them responded to the transcripts.

I began the interview with questions about their family and health to establish a positive initial impression. After that, I gradually asked them questions about Madhes, and Madhesi identity. During the interviews, I took notes and recorded interviews to secure an accurate account of the conversation. No interviewees refused to be recorded. My interviews lasted on average forty-five to sixty minutes. The conversation with some academics and political leaders was long, between seventy-five to ninety minutes. After each interview, I immediately reflected upon the interview process, the main themes discussed, and the exciting stories that came up. I also wrote down the background information of each informant and typed down my own reflection on the informants' personalities. This reflection later became a part of my data. Additionally, the field notes provided important clues in analyzing the data. Philippi and Lauderdale (2018, 381–82) note, field notes can be valuable when examining data because they provide detailed information about the study context, encounters, interviews, focus groups, and documents.

I meticulously transcribed and translated each interview immediately after the end of our conversation. I tried my best to make the interview transcript as original as possible. Sometimes it took me 1-3 days to complete the transcription of an interview. Gawlewicz (2016, 38) asserts that the language we use represents all the individual experiences we have collected; therefore, a

conscious translation should be a priority while gathering the data in a language different from the language in which we present our findings. But translating and transcribing interviews manually is a time-intensive process. However, the accent of the participants, the slang they used, their diction increased my interest and curiosity to transcribe the interviews manually.

Archival Research

Archival research is a broad range of activities that comprise locating, evaluating, and systematic interpretation and analysis of the sources found in archives. These sources entail a wide range of written texts, visual images, artifacts, and varieties of records relevant to the particular study (Dallen 2012). As discussed above, I collected a wide range of documents including the government archives of Nepal to explore the history and contextual information of Madhesi identity. I also used documentary data to cross validate the information gathered from interviews. Though most textual data was collected electronically, some documents including the Madhesi parties' election manifestos were obtained from Nepal.

Madhesi ethno-political rhetoric is directed against the hill-dominated Nepali nationalism and the state. Throughout this research process as well as in my informal interaction with several Madhesi individuals I came to know that Madhesi social, cultural, and political history is not well written in old historical archives of Nepal. This absence, however, also became important to bolster my arguments. I also accessed government documents such as national laws, regulations, and policy papers to explore the historical context of Madhesi populations and parties. Furthermore, I conducted a review of news sources that discussed accounts of Madhesi identity and the Madhesi conflict for the contextual understanding of Madhesi identity. These news sources include English language Nepalese newspapers and magazines such as Nepali Times,

Himal South Asia, The Kathmandu Post, and My República, and Nepalese language newspapers such as Kantipur, and Nagarik.

Furthermore, I reviewed a wide range of national and international scholarship, including books and academic articles written in Nepali, English, and Hindi languages about the socio-political, demographic, and economic issues of Madhes, and the Madhesi identity. Reports on Madhesi identity and conflict written by national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were also examined. These include International Crisis Group reports, and Informal Service Center bulletins among others.

In addition to this, I reviewed documents written on Madhesi political parties by the parties themselves, or journalists, or academics as a primary source of information that promulgated the Madhesi identity. Party documents such as election manifestos of the major Madhesi parties also provided insight and the major narratives employed at that time. In brief, all this documentary evidence also acted as cross validating information gathered from interview sources.

Challenges Faced during Data Collection

Many participants with whom I interacted generously gave me their time and offered thoughtful reflections. Some even asked me to contact them for additional information, if needed. I informally interacted with some of the participants after the interview. It was not, however without obstacles. One notable challenge that I faced involved the recruitment of senior Madhesi leaders and interviewing them. Initially, I sent them email invitations to participate in my research. But most of them did not reply to my emails.

This put me under pressure. In consultation with my friends and my contact person (a well-known Madhesi activist), I sought another option to reach out to these leaders. I made several international calls to them. Friends in Nepal helped find their cell phone numbers. Initial interactions with them became cordial. Many of them showed their interest to participate in my research. Setting appointments for interviews with them, however, became difficult. On the one hand, they rarely replied to my emails, on the other, their cell phones used to be either busy or turned off most of the time.

I also faced additional challenges even after the meeting was scheduled. Most Madhesi leaders did not join the meeting on time, even though the dates and time had been agreed upon days and weeks in advance. Sometimes, I waited for several hours to begin the conversation. Interviews were held mostly at late night or early morning because of the time difference between the US and Nepal. This kept me awake for many nights. Scheduled interviews with some of these interviewees were canceled several times at the last minute without prior notice. Some of them never came into contact after this, although I did several follow-up calls to reach out to them.

Interviewing senior Madhesi women leaders was also quite challenging. Prior to my research, I used to think that these leaders would be punctual. But I did not experience that in my collection of the data. I also faced difficulties to contact them and scheduling a meeting for an interview. Like many of their male counterparts, initially, all of them showed their interest to participate in my research. But it took me months to interact with them. Several times, they also canceled the interview at the last minute. They, however, informed me when they were unable to make the interview.

Additional circumstances also affected my data collection. First, the COVID-19 pandemic restricted my traveling and fieldwork in Nepal. It also made me totally dependent on others in obtaining some textual data that are unavailable electronically. Since Tarai/Madhes borders the north Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the impact of the COVID-19 was more severe there. This delayed my collection of the textual data written in Hindi, Maithili, and Bhojpuri languages. Second, the dramatic change in Nepalese politics also added another layer of difficulty to interact with Madhesi leaders. At the time I was collecting data, there was an intense intra-party power struggle among senior leaders within the Nepal Communist Party (NCP), then ruling largest political party in Nepal.

The rivalry ended with the split of the NCP, and then prime minister KP Sharma, Oli lost his majority in the parliament. These political upheavals affected the governments at the center as well as in provinces. The political instability caused by the split of the NCP, and the termination of the then prime minister KP Oli-led government as well as some provincial governments also helped split the then-largest Madhesi party. The main Madhesi party, "The Peoples' Socialist Party," which was newly formed uniting then two major Madhesi parties: "The Federal Socialist Party", and "The National Peoples' Party" failed to complete its unification. All these occurrences delayed my interaction with senior Madhesi leaders.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is a systematic way of uncovering meanings. It involves organizing and exploring data to recognize patterns or key ideas, develop explanations, identify themes, and make interpretations (Hatch 2002, 148). It is a process that could help researchers answer their research questions. The key in qualitative data analysis to identify patterns (Saldaña 2014). In

qualitative research, the collection of the data and the analysis of it occur most often in parallel. Stake (1995) argues that data analysis is an iterative and reflexive process that begins at the start of the data collection rather than at its conclusion.

Qualitative researchers often switch between data collection and data analysis during their fieldwork to improve the quality of their data. I conducted my interviews between early 2021 and the end of the year and transcribed them for analysis. During this timeframe, I frequently read my field notes and interview transcripts in a preliminary readthrough exercise. This practice helped me in a meaningful way to organize my data. It also enabled me to identify areas where I need to gather more information before I proceeded to code and categorize the data for my analysis. Between my field notes (54 pages) and 28 recorded interviews, I collected a substantial quantity of textual data. I coded these data using NVivo qualitative data analysis software.

Coding is a process by which researchers generate concepts from and with data by gathering or categorizing content related to specific theme or idea. This process involves fragmenting and classifying text to create explanations and comprehensive themes in the data (Creswell 2007). More specifically, it entails "making sense of huge amounts of data by reducing the volume of raw information, followed by identifying significant patterns and finally drawing meaning form data, and subsequently building a chain of evidence" (Wong 2008, 16). Charmaz (2001) calls it a "critical link between data collection and interpretation" (Saldaña 2013, 3). Strauss (1987) argues that "the excellence of the research rests in large part on the excellence of coding" (27).

Sang and Sitko (2015) discuss two main approaches to the coding of qualitative data: a priori (deductive) and a posteriori (inductive). For the former, codes are drawn from the literature

or theoretical framework; for the later, codes are drawn from the data itself. This research used a combination of both coding process to analyze or interpret the data. Initially, I used inductive strategy to identify patterns and themes emerging from the data. I then aligned them with themes derived from my theoretical framework [discussed in chapter II] so that I could identify explanations for the patterns and themes. As Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019) noted, "the combination of inductive and deductive coding help researchers to remain open to the surprises in the data while at the same time stay attuned to existing theory." (264). This process helped me not only to identify patterns and themes in the data, but also to "understand my findings in relation to existing research, examine how my theoretical framework explained my findings (where it didn't), and provide actionable meaningful implications and recommendations" (Bingham and Witkowsky 2021, 144).

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a fundamental part of qualitative research. It involves researchers examining their own position, judgment, practices, and belief systems in relation to the population group and issues under study during data collection and interpretation. The main goal of reflexivity is to uncover and address any personal biases that could impact research outcomes (Berger 2015). Throughout this research process, I was keenly aware of my identity at play. Firstly, my identity as a non-Madhesi marked me as a member of a dominant group, potentially obscuring the inherent power imbalances between the majority and minority. I also acknowledged the risk of overlooking the challenges, prejudices, and discrimination that the Madhesi community had endured historically. This awareness guided my efforts to uphold objectivity and impartiality in my research.

Previously, like many from hill communities, I held misconceptions about the Madhesi community's advocacy for Hindi as Nepal's national language. I mistakenly viewed it as a threat to the integrity of the Nepali state. However, as I engaged with Madhesi leaders and local Madhesis, my perspective underwent a profound transformation. I began to understand how the dominance of the Nepali language directly impacted the lives of Madhesi people, particularly in their education, and career opportunities within state institutions. To maintain a balanced view, I actively encouraged diverse voices and examined them in objective way.

Another dimension of reflexivity emerged during my initial attempts to establish connections with Madhesi activists. Initially, my email invitation to potential participants received no response, leading me to wrongly assume that Madhesis might hold biases against scholars from the Pahadi community. Furthermore, a few participants who had initially agreed to interviews withdrew, further reinforcing this impression. However, as I cultivated relationships with the local Madhesi network, I discovered that these actions were more a matter of personal preferences rather than a reflection of the entire Madhesi population. This realization prompted me to adopt a more open and direct approach to my interactions, ultimately fostering close bonds with participants who gradually became more willing to share their inner thoughts with me.

Trustworthiness, Validity, and Reliability

Trustworthiness in research is a way of ensuring a through and rigorous analysis and generating an interpretation that accurately reflects participants' meanings. It includes internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Guba and Lincoln 1994). These scholars further argue that researchers can employ varieties of strategies including peer-debriefing,

triangulation, and providing transparent descriptions of the research process to achieve credibility and increase the trustworthiness of their research and findings.

I executed many of these strategies to increase the trustworthiness and validity of my research findings. First, I employed different sampling strategies to make my sample diverse and representative. My participants came from a wide range of backgrounds (e.g., caste, religion, ethnicity, and gender). It enhanced my research data and improved the reliability of its findings by bringing a greater range of views and perspectives. Second, I engaged in peer debriefing. Throughout this research process, I shared my ideas and concerns with my peers who have conducted similar research in other countries and have a critical understanding of the identity dynamics of conflict and peace. I received critical comments from them. I also presented my research findings and insights at some conferences, where I received some useful feedback. But it was not as detailed as the comments I received from my peers.

Third, I employed data triangulation which involves combining multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research to develop a more comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Patton 1999). As discussed earlier, this project employed interviews and archival research techniques to acquire information. Using both helped to counter one source's weakness with another source's strength. Reflexivity -- self-appraisal in research--is another strategy I used to increase trustworthiness of my research results. As the research process unfolded, I became more cautious of my personal beliefs, judgements, and assumptions that could taint the data and affect the entire research process and outcome. I situated myself as non-exploitative and compassionate towards my research subjects, which helped to minimize the negative effects of power between researcher-researched relationships. Berger (2015) argues that the aim of being reflexive for the researcher is to turn the research lens back on oneself, recognizing and taking responsibility for

one's own situatedness within the research, as well as its effects on the setting and the people being studied, the questions being asked, and the data collected.

Finally, I also provided a thick description of my collection of the data, sample population, and interpretation of the data. Rubin and Rubin (2012) argue that by providing an in-depth transparent description of the data collection and the rigorous method of data analysis, researchers can strengthen the validity of their research and findings.

Ethical Concerns

"Ethical tensions are part of the everyday practice of doing research"(Guillemin and Gillam 2004, 261). This project employs multiple methods of data sources. Thus, ethics are an important issue that needs to be dealt with before, during, and after the research process. To address this problem, first, I completed my Institutional Review Board (IRB) application through Kent State University. I did not carry out any portion of this research without a prior consent from IRB.

Second, social, and cultural taboos of interacting with Madhesi participants exist. Thus, I became sensitive in interviewing my participants. I did not violate any socio-cultural boundaries that I may take for granted as a person from a non-Madhesi background. Throughout this process, I built trust and rapport with my participants. Building rapport with informants is a key issue in field work (Mazzei and O'Brien 2009). Otherwise, members of Madhesi society could be wary of me. Before I proceed to formal interview, I obtained "voluntary, informed consent" (Fujii 2012, 718). This helped participants to know the details of the subject matter and the interview process of my research. Prior to the interviews, all participants of this study were provided with a clear description of the potential costs and benefits of this research.

Another issue that I addressed throughout this process was my ability to maintain the confidentiality of research participants. Prior to the interview, as discussed, I told each of my participants that I would remove their personal identifiers and replace them with identification codes. None of them, however, raised concerns about the possible exposure of their identity. Some even told me to use their name if necessary. It could be because many of the interviewees were politically affiliated individuals. But I deleted personal identifiers of all the participants to maintain the ethical obligation of my study. In addition to this, I also made it clear that after the completion of data collection and coding process, all the data would be stored safely in my personal computer. Finally, gender norms were fully taken into consideration. However, contrary to my pre-interview concern about the challenges of interacting with Madhesi women due to existing cultural taboos in Madhesi society, I encountered no problems interviewing them. This made the data collection effort easier.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter provided details about the research design that guided this study. It includes how data were collected and analyzed, the relevant methodological challenges, and the difficulties encountered by the researcher during the data collection process. It also presented a case for a qualitative case study in researching the question of how Madhesi ethno-political groups transformed historical Madhesi grievances into a political agenda in the post-civil war transition in Nepal. It informs the reader how the research agenda can be achieved by collecting a wide range of data sources.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF CASE STUDY FINDINGS I:

NARRATIVES Of MADHESI LEADERS

This chapter examines how Madhesi political leaders asserted Madhesi identity following the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. Especially, it focuses on the process of how Madhesi leaders negotiated their identity during their intense socio-political interaction with others, particularly Nepal's Pahadi dominated state and the Pahadi people in the changed political context. It analyzes Madhesi leaders' socio-political experiences and identities by examining the themes derived from the field data. The concept of Madhesi identity is examined in the following dimensions: pre-war experience, self-identification, symbolic resources (cultural references), and history.

Madhesi identity development, as discussed in Chapter III, is mostly evident from interview data. But I have used archival research to critique, question or supplement the information taken from interview sources. In this category, I interviewed eleven senior Madhesi leaders mostly from two major Madhesi parties (i.e., Peoples Socialist Party and Democratic Socialist Party). Interestingly, these parties were merged during my data collection. But this merger did not last long. Recently, they split again due to new developments in Nepal's national politics.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section briefly narrates the changed political context of Madhes under which Madhesi leaders negotiated their identities. The second section investigates the pre-war socio-political experiences of Madhesi leaders to understand how their earlier experiences influenced their assertion of Madhesi identity following the comprehensive peace accord (CPA) between the Maoists and the government of Nepal. Third, I analyze different expressions of self-identification by Madhesi leaders based on the themes mentioned above. The last section provides the conclusion of my analysis.

The Changed Madhesi Context

Identity construction is most evident during periods of political and social change, including regime change (Brass 1991; Cornell and Hartmann 2007; Jenkins 1996; Tilly 2002). It is because such periods are often characterized by the breakdown of authority, thus creating several opportunities for ethno-political activism. These new situations may encourage individuals or groups to rethink their ideas about themselves or to see themselves and the world around them differently. They also may become a force for social change (Cornell and Hartmann 2007, 211). In Nepal, Madhesi activism gained momentum due to three changes in political structures following the Maoist insurgency in 2007.

First, the end of the Maoist conflict created a political vacuum in Madhes. Even though Madhesi leaders had been raising their voices against the state's prejudices since the 1950s, it did not gain much ascendency in Nepal's national politics until 2006 (K. Pandey 2017). It was because freedom of expression and organization was curtailed during the 30 years of autocratic *Panchayat* regime (1962-1990) (Gellner 2016; Hangen 2007). In 1990, following the reintroduction of democracy, a critical concern for identity and inclusion emerged. But the

negligence of the mainstream parties, and the emergence of the Maoist conflict overshadowed these issues, although social inclusion was one of the main agenda items of the Maoists (Upreti, Poudel, and Ghimire 2012).

This political landscape, however, shifted as the Maoist insurgency ended in 2006 through peace negotiations. The 2006 popular movement (*Janaandolan II*) paved the way for ending the Maoist conflict and toppling the Hindu monarchy (Strasheim 2019). The sidelining of the King and entry of the Maoists into mainstream politics ushered in a new situation creating uncertainty. It was a time of political transition with a virtually collapsed state. Everything was being negotiated (Gellner 2007). This rapid political transformation gave previously marginalized groups, including the Madhesi, ample opportunity to assert their identities to achieve new rights, to ensure greater participation in the new political system, and to gain greater autonomy (Tamang 2017).

Second, in 2005, during the King Gyanendra's political coup, the mainstream parties vowed to uphold marginalized groups, ensuring the legitimacy of their identity-based agendas (Sijapati 2013). But when they returned to power in 2006, these parties discounted the Madhesi agenda and focused more in dealing with the Maoists (Hangen 2007). The Maoists made no effort to fulfill their war-time promises of social inclusion to Madhesis (Gellner 2007; K. Jha 2017). For instance, the mainstream parties and the Maoists passed the Interim Constitution (IC) on January 15, 2007, which lacked an explicit commitment to federalism, a major Madhesi demand (ICG 2007). This exclusion from the peace process increased the fear of permanent marginalization, leading Madhesis to alter their status quo (Sijapati 2013). It could be the reason most Madhesi leaders believe the Maoists had no influence in developing the Madhesi identity (Fieldnote 07/06/2021).

Third, the Nepalgunj riot provided an opportunity for Madhesi leaders and activists to mobilize people against the Pahadi-dominated state and Pahadi people. On December 26, 2006, Nepal Satvavana Party (Anandi Devi) organized a strike to protest the IC. In response, the government used force to restore order. This response, however, resulted in a communal riot between Madhesis and Pahadis in the Tarai town of Nepalgunj (Mathema 2011). While contentious from Pahadi people's perspective, it is argued that Pahadis vandalized Madhesi owned businesses and attacked them with the support of the police. The riot and the police's protection to Pahadi people was digitally recorded and broadcast across Tarai. This incident entrenched Madhesi antagonism against Pahadis (Mathema 2011; Sijapati 2013; Upreti, Poudel, and Ghimire 2012).

In response to dissatisfaction with the IC, the Madhesi People's Rights Forum (MPRF) organized a protest movement, engulfing most of Nepal's southern plains in an escalating cycle of violence, protest, terror, and anarchy (Kantha 2009). The government and the Maoists tried to quell the protest by force. The movement, however, was sustained, compelling the state to negotiate with the MPRF.[33] Kantha (2009) contends that the 2007-2008 Madhesi uprising transformed the political landscape in the Tarai drastically by turning Madhesi discontent into conflict and rendering the government powerless to suppress it. Furthermore, it helped increase Madhesi awareness of their rights and identities.

[33] The violent Madhesi uprising temporarily ended with the signing of the 22-point agreement between the Government of Nepal and the MPRF on August 30, 2007 (see Appendix IV). The key points of the agreement were restructuring Nepal into a federal state, acceptance of Madhesi identity by the state, and making the state more inclusive. But, as the government delayed implementing the agreement, the UDMF started another demonstration on February 13, 2008. The protest ended after the UDMF and the Government of Nepal signed an eight-point agreement on February 28, 2008 (see Appendix V).

Pre-war Experiences

This section examines Madhesi leaders' pre-war experiences to understand their expression of Madhesi identity in the post-war Madhesi context. The rise of Muslim identity after the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka in 2009 (Imtiyaz and Mohamed Saleem 2022) and the emergence of African American identity in the end of the American Civil War (Eyerman 2004) were all influenced by their political realities. It is, therefore, important to identify Madhesi leaders' pre-war sociopolitical experiences to understand their different articulation of Madhesi identity following the CPA. Bentley (1987) argues that in order to understand ethnic group formation and mobilization, we must identify aspects of common experience that enable ethnic leaders to mobilize their followers.

The Madhesi narratives captured by my interviews portray Madhesi experiences of perceived discrimination and suffering in different epochs of Nepal's political history.[34] During my data collection, Madhesi leaders were more expressive sharing their stories of discrimination by the Pahadi-dominated Nepali state and the Pahadi people since the *Panchayat* Period. Most respondents in this category experienced life during this era. Some of them, however, shared their understanding of Madhesi suffering from earlier periods of Nepal's history. During interviews, Madhesi leaders often noted that the historical experience of oppression and discrimination faced by them and the Madhesi people by the state since its foundation compelled them to assert their identity during the political transition to ensure their new rights, social inclusion, and autonomy in the new system.

[34] The modern history of Nepal can be divided into early Shah period (1769 -1846), the Rana period (1846 -1951), a period of transition (1951-1962), the Panchayat period (1962-1990), and the Democracy period (1991-present).

Early Years, National Unification, and Madhesi Exclusion

From the narratives about the early years, the recurring theme is the exclusion of Madhesi people in the formation of modern Nepal. Scholars like Gellner (2007), Whelpton (1997, 2005), Pfaff-Czarnecka (1997), and Sijapati (2013) have analyzed Nepal's territorial unification process and its subsequent socio-cultural, economic, and political impact on Madhesi people. Though controversial from the perspective of the state and the Pahadi people, who view King Prithvi Narayan Shah as the country's founding father, many respondents explained that Nepal's territorial unification was simply a military conquest, rather than a genuine process of building unity among the people:

> *When Nepal was formed, King Prithivi Narayan Shah said: Nepal is a common garden of 4 castes and 36 sub-castes. … After that, what happened is Nepal's geography was united but there was no emotional integration. ... State building cannot be solely based on soil. It is formed when soil and heart are integrated. … A lack of emotional unification existed among people of different castes, ethnicities, and classes living in Himal (Hill), Pahad (Mountain), and Tarai (Plain). Despite the country's diversity and plurality, it was not governed accordingly. The country was governed under the idea of one nation-state. This led to diverse kinds of discrimination such as political, social, and linguistic discrimination against those who had different identities. (Interview 25)*

> *The unification that happened was geographical unification. Emotional unification couldn't happen. (Interview 24)*

The anecdotes of interviewee 25 illustrate the Madhesi exclusion in the formation of modern Nepal during the *Shah* era. The sentence "King Prithvi Narayan Shah…" indicates that although King Prithvi Narayan Shah understood Nepal's cultural pluralism, his successors neglected this diversity, and ruled the country without regard for people with different identities. Here, a variety of 'us' vs 'them' identity frames are evident, demarcating the boundary between Madhesis and Pahadis. The term "one nation-state" suggests that as soon as the country was unified, the *Shah* rulers enforced hill-Hindu (Pahadi) culture in the Tarai without treating Madhesis as equal citizens. The sentences "Nepal's geography was united…" (interview 25) and "The unification that happened…" (interview 24) have similar political implications. It may indicate that Madhes was largely controlled to appropriate its resources. The discontent of Madhesi's exclusion during *Shah* period is further evident in the following:

> *Upon annexing the land (Tarai/Madhes) to Nepal, the British feared discrimination against the Tarai people and stated in the treaty (The Sugauli Treaty) that such discrimination would not happen to the people living in the region. But, in reality, that did not happen. Madhesis were never given a space in Nepal's polity. (Interview 26)*

It is evident from the sentence ("the British feared…") that some Madhesi people favored the British during the Anglo-Gurkha War (1814-16). It was, therefore, written in the *Sugauli Treaty*[35] that there would be no discrimination against the people living there after the British returned that land to Nepal (Mandal 2013). This, however, did not result in the acceptance of

[35] The Anglo-Guokha War (1914-16) ended with the signing of the Sugauli Treaty between Nepal and the East India Company. This treaty also paved the way to officially fix the boundary between Nepal and British India for the first time in Nepal's history.

Madhesis as true Nepalis. In fact, they were perceived as a threat to national security after this event. Hutt (2020) and Hachhethu (2007) assert that the prohibition against Madhesis serving in Nepal's security forces is the legacy of their support for the British.

The Madhesi marginalization further escalated during the *Rana* regime. The *Ranas* viewed Madhes as their personal estate. They appropriated Madhesi resources, but disregarded Madhesi culture and denied the Madhesi people a place as equal citizens of the country (Gaige 1975; Sijapati 2013; Upreti, Poudel, and Ghimire 2012). The following narratives allude to the sentiment to Madhesi discriminations during the *Rana* oligarchy:

> *They (Ranas) considered Tarai as a conquered land. ... They did not treat the people there as citizens. The relationship was merely a matter of collecting taxes and enforcing the law. You can see. . . Madhesis never gained promotion above Baidar*[36]*, regardless of how much they studied during Ranas. (Interview 22)*

> *Few Madhesi elites were appointed to the Post of Subba, Adhikari*[37] *to extract tax from Tarai during the Rana era. But political rights and participation never happened anywhere, locally, or nationally. Likewise, the state never recognized their (Madhesi) language. (Interview 24)*

[36] 'Baidar' is a junior administrative post created by Ranas to facilitate the running of government affairs. This position is still in existence in Nepal's bureaucracy.

[37] Subba and Adhikari were senior administrative posts created by Ranas to streamline government operations (see Regmi 2002).

The stories demonstrate the picture of Madhesi victimization during the *Rana's* reign. The syntax "They considered Tarai…" (Interview 22) indicates that the Ranas used Tarai as an internal colony to increase their personal wealth. Madhesis were treated as if they were all means to generate wealth for the *Ranas*. This include collecting taxes, cutting timber, and cultivating the deep forest into rich farmland. The adverb "merely" suggests that the relationship between the state and the Madhesis was similar to that between a colonizer and the colonized. The sentences "Madhesis never gained …" and "Few Madhesi elites…" by interviewees 22 and 24 have similar meaning. These indicate Madhesi underrepresentation in state institutions. The use of "never" by interviewee 24 ("the state never recognized…") suggests the cultural exploitation of Madhesis. In brief, the *Ranas*, as their *Shah* predecessors, exploited Madhesis by appropriating resources without including them in state affairs and recognizing their culture and languages.

Panchayat, Nationalism, and Madhesi Exclusion (1962-1990)

The *Panchayat* regime succeeded the *Rana* oligarchy following a short democratic intermission between 1951 and 1962. Some Madhesi leaders actively engaged in the 1950 democratic struggle against the Ranas. In fact, the revolution against Ranas started from Madhes, and "Krantidwar" in Gaur town of central Tarai stands as a symbol of the sacrifices Madheshi people made for democracy (K. Jha 2017, 4). It is ironic that Madhesi issues were not taken seriously despite their contribution to democracy. Their demand for an autonomous Tarai was discarded by the post-*Rana* regime. Rather, ethnic suppression became overt with the consolidation of Nepali nationalism during the *Panchayat* period.

This led to systemic sociocultural, economic, and political discrimination against Madhesis. Many scholars (e.g., Gellner 2007; K. Jha 2017; Pfaff-Czarnecka 1997; Whelpton

1997) have documented the consolidation of Nepali nationalism in the *Panchayat* period and its subsequent institutionalization of discrimination against Madhesis. Many interviewees recalled instances of cultural exclusion because of the rise of aggressive Nepali nationalism:

> *…in the Panchayat period, they (Hill-Hindu elites) did not accommodate Madhesis while making national emblems. They made Lophophorous (Himalayan bird) a national bird. Cows (sacred animal for Hindus) are available all over the world, it does not have any meaning. The color became crimson (red) which is not available in the Tarai. There were such isolationist policies in politics. Then, language is one language (Nepali). That's how it went. It failed to address diversity. (Interview 26)*

The anecdote of the interviewee 26 illustrates the disregard of unique Madhesi culture and Tarai region by the *Panchayat* regime in defining the national identity and the resulting grievances of Madhesi people. The reflections "They made Lophophorus a national bird," "The color became crimson. . .," and "Then language is one language" have similar political implications. These linguistic similarities suggest that the national symbols set by the *Panchayat* regime to define the national identity failed to account for Nepal's cultural diversity including the unique Madhesi culture and the region. The discontent of the cultural exclusion of Madhesis is further evident in the following:

> *Ek Bhasha, Ek Vesh [one language, one dress], what is this? Nepal is not a state of one language, and one dress. During Panchayat period, it was forced saying Ek Bhasha, Ek Vesh. (Interview 25)*

During the Panchayat regime . . . our language and culture were attacked. (Interview 24)

Devanagari script was used in our public service commission's exam. Devanagari script was also used in our curriculums. Everywhere Devanagari script's Nepali was taught. Attempts to delete other language or identity were made. (Interview 21)

The *Panchayat* regime consolidated the idea of Nepal as a Hindu society and sought to create homogenous population. They officially promoted hill-Hindu religion, Hindu Monarchy and Nepali language (language of the hill people) as signifiers of the national community (Hangen 2007). The *Panchayat* era slogan "Ek Bhasa, Ek Vesh (One language, one dress)" reflects the state's forceful efforts to create cultural homogeneity, which undermined the different languages spoken in Tarai and its culture including Madhesi customs, and festivals (Pradhan 2011). The use of interrogation ("What is this?") by interviewee 25 implies Madhesi resentment against the imposition of the hill culture including Nepali language and custom. The use of the words "attacked" by interviewee 24 and "delete" by interviewee 21 suggest that they viewed the imposition of the Nepali language and the custom as an attack on Madhesi identity.

These events, as discussed in chapter III, led to the dissident movements in the Tarai in the 1950s. For example, the Tarai Congress Party (TC) was established in 1951. It launched a 'Save Hindi Movement' to counteract the propagation of Nepali as the only official language of Nepal in 1957, which led to the gradual emergence of ethnic polarization in the Tarai (Gaige 1975; R. Mishra 2006; K. Pandey 2017). "In 1958, a Madhesi movement in the name of Madhes Mukti Andolan (Madhes Liberation Movement) started to fight for justice" (Deysarkar 2015,

689). These movements, however, either failed to get traction against the *Panchayat* regime or were co-opted by it.

Democracy, Exclusion, and Madhesi Discontent (1990-2006)

The *Panchayat* regime was overthrown by the restoration of multi-party democracy in 1990. The Madhesi communities contributed equally to this struggle for democracy. They hoped that a democratically elected government would help address their concerns including their equal representation in state institutions and recognition of their culture (K. Jha 2017). However, there was not much progress towards an inclusive democracy. The democratic years continued to witness the exclusion of minority groups, including Madhesi (Lawoti 2008). In every aspect of the state, from its institutions to political parties, hill domination continued. Many scholars (K. Jha 2017; Lawoti 2008; Malagodi 2013; Sijapati 2013; Upreti, Poudel, and Ghimire 2012) have articulated Madhesi underrepresentation in the state institutions after the restoration of democracy. This is also evident in the following:

> *The participation of Madhesis in the government, bureaucracy, and let's say the ministries is still not inclusive. (Interview 27)*

> *There should be the reservation for Madhesi to every institution of the state in terms of their population. That should also be in the army. Why are Madhesis not allowed to hold senior positions in the military? Why do Madhesis become only cook, Sebak (assistant), and inspector, and retires? Is it enough for Madhesis? Can't Madhesis give security to this state? If they cannot, who is providing security to this border? (Interview 28)*

The testimony of the interviewee 28 alluded to the minimal presence of Madhesi people across the state apparatus compared to their population. The word "should" implies a call to action, which indicates that the interviewee wants this discrimination ended. The interrogative sentence (Why are Madhesis…?") indicates anger over the restriction of Madhesi people to hold senior positions in the national army. I also found similar patterns in later sentences ("why do Madhesis become only cook…?" "Can't Madhesis give security….?"). This linguistic pattern shows irritation with the lack of Madhesi representation in all state organs, especially in the national military.

In addition to their poor representation in the state institutions, some interviewees also shared their experiences of marginalization and domination in the mainstream political parties including the Nepali Congress Party (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal, United Marxist and Leninist (CPNUML). They blamed these parties for not giving them space as well as for ignoring Madhesi grievances:

> *I have struggled a lot for democracy, but Nepali Congress party did not give me any space. Because I was a Madhesi. Many of my juniors (Pahadi leaders), however, never had to struggle, became mighty, and overtook me. Those who are general secretaries and spokespersons today were my activists at that time. Why this? The first thing that comes is I was a Madhesi. Therefore, they prevented me from moving forward. My contribution was not less than Anand Prasad Dhungana. He became a minister. He always got the ticket. Lila Koirala, Basant Gurung they moved forward. I struggled a lot. However, the Nepali Congress never allowed me to run for office. (Interview 22)*

The testimony of interviewee 22 shows perceived Madhesi marginalization in the NC. It also explains why several Madhesi leaders quit the NC after the CPA and engaged in Madhesi politics. The sentence "I have struggled a lot for democracy…" implies that despite the diligent work and the seniority of interviewee 22 in the NC, he was never given a chance to serve in leadership positions. The sentence "my juniors never had to struggle…" suggests that despite being juniors and making fewer contributions, Pahadi leaders easily got opportunities in the party and the government. The interrogation "why this?" indicates his anger about being discriminated against because of his identity. This resonates with many scholars' (Gellner 2007; Miklian 2008) assertion that the behavior of the NC compelled many Madhesi leaders feel that the party used Madhes as its vote bank, offering little in terms of Madhesi leadership positions. I identified a similar situation in the CPNUML:

> *…the time I was a parliamentary member from the UML party, several democratic movements started. The state was brutally oppressing the Madhesi communities. Many people were killed. I told the party that you are making caste/ethnic based institutions for Muslims, Gurungs, and Tharus, but are not giving them rights. We raised these issues at the 5th and 7th conventions of the UML party. The party got that much vote from Madhes, but it put only one Madhesi leader at the central committee of the party. I raised these issues from there. The UML is a single caste/ethnicity dominant party. It does not give rights to Madhesis…Hence, rather than sitting as a member of the parliament without giving rights to my Madhesi voters, I resigned from the party and entered Madhesi identity politics. (Interview 24)*

The anecdote shows the dismal presence of Madhesis in the UML's party leadership. The language content of the interviewee 24 is similar to that of the interviewee 21 above. The sentence "The party got that much vote from Madhes…" implies that despite their continued pressure, and the popular support it had received from Madhes, the CPNUML did not provide leadership opportunities to Madhesi leaders in the party and the government. The tone of the language in the second half of the narrative is aggressive. The short sentence, "The UML is a single caste/ethnicity dominant party," sounds bold. It depicts the respondent's attitudinal change toward the UML party that he had understood.

The exclusion of Madhesi people, however, was not limited to political life. There were socio-economic disparities between Madhesis and rest of the population, although it remains a controversial subject. Hill scholars such as Upreti, Poudel, and Ghimire (2012) argue that Madhesi people were not marginalized and excluded in all aspects of their socio-economic status. However, some of the participants alluded to Madhesi's socio-economic exploitation and marginalization:

> *We were discriminated economically... The issues came relating to our livings, relating to our "rojiroti" (livelihood). We were being poor day by day. Our farms were destroyed, our financial condition deteriorated. (Interview 19)*

> *Economically, opportunities shrunk, and exploitation increased. They (Madhesis) were … economically exploited…. (Interview 26)*

Due to that (lack of political access) Madhesis had to suffer politically, economically, and socially. (Interview 22)

The narratives of interviewee 19 alluded to the socio-economic discrimination of Madhesis. The sentence "We were discriminated financially" may suggest that the government paid only scant attention to developing the Tarai region. A UNDP (2009) report also shows that except for some Madhesi upper-caste groups, other Tarai caste groups, lag behind the upper caste high hill groups in terms of their socio-economic status.

Switching to the narratives of their exclusion from political and economic life, the main theme is abuse and humiliation. Many respondents related their stories of being treated as second-class citizens by the so-called hill nationalists in the hill-dominated areas. These include debasing them with ethnic/racial slurs. The following illustrates some of their experiences:

Once we were travelling to Kathmandu by road. We stopped in Muglin to eat. While eating, there was something wrong on the food. When we complained, he (the owner of the restaurant) said, you Muji Marsya (bloody animal). That was one incident. Another, a doctor working at Bir Hospital once ordered a cloth at my boutique. The boutique misunderstood his order and did not make the garment in the way he ordered. . . . he scolded us saying you "bloody Indian." (Interview 28)

. . . when I came to Kathmandu for the first time. . .I was in left politics… many people did not know me at that time. I spoke in Hindi when I lived in Kathmandu for a couple of months. Particularly, people living here (in Kathmandu), and even in the grocery stores thought that I came from Bihar or India and gave respect to me. But when I began to

talk in Nepali, they started despising me . . . calling Madhise, and so and so. (Interview 26)

When we were in Kathmandu, the Newars used to say Manu Makhu Marsya Kha. (Interview 22)

The testimony of the interviewee 28 alludes to their frustrations, and articulates the power enjoyed by the hill people. The use of slurs "Muji Marsya" (bloody animal) and "bloody Indians" explain how the Madhesi people irrespective of their status were debased by Pahadi salespersons or bullied by a medical professional of hill-origin. The following serves another example of Madhesi embarrassment:

We were often called Dhoti, Madise. While walking in Kathmandu. . ., greengrocers used to say this is Madhise cauliflower, that is Nepali cauliflower. Many times, I experienced this when buying vegetables at Mangal Bazar. In 1993, I asked the price of cauliflowers, I lived in Shankhamul at that time. The greengrocer told me this is 25 rupees, and the other is 30 rupees. I asked him why? He told me that this is "Madise" cauliflower, and this is Nepali cauliflower. That touched my heart. I asked him, "do you know where Madhes is"? He said no. I told him it's not good to say like this. Madhes is also Nepal. I experienced this myself. I told him not to insult like this, not to say "Madise." (Interview 27)

The narrative of interviewee 27 emphasizes the aversion to Madhesis and their marginalization. The syntax "While walking in Kathmandu…" indicates traditional prejudices, and the sense that

Madhesis are not loyal Nepalis but a kind of Indian fifth column (Gellner 2007). The sentence, "I told him not to insult like this…" alludes to the interviewee's repugnance at being labelled as Madise. In brief, the historical experience of Madhesi discrimination and exploitation served to promote their ethnic distinction or even stirred ethnic resentment. These sentiments influenced Madhesi leaders' ethnic expression in the post-war transition.

Assigned and Asserted Identities

"Self-identification" refers to the label people use to describe themselves. Analyzing the self-identifications of the Madhesi leaders disclosed divergent narratives from the pan-Nepali discourse that views Madhesi identity only on a regional or racial label (Gautam 2012). Historically, the terminologies Tarai and Madhes have been used synonymously to denote Nepal's southern flatlands (Hutt 2020). But in recent times, particularly after 2007, Madhesi leaders and activists prefer to use the second to refer to "the land, its culture and the people in totality" (Karki and Wenner 2020, 8). For these Madhesi leaders and activists, Tarai represents only the flat terrain.

The classifications outsiders make of a group become a major factor in the process of identity development (Cornell and Hartmann 2007; Jenkins 1996, 2008b, 2008a). In Nepal, the words Madhes and Madhesi are still insults to the hill nationalists who believe they are the only true Nepalese. The derogatory slurs such as 'Madise,''Madhise,' 'Madise,' 'Marsya', 'Dhoti'[38],

[38] Dhoti, as discussed, refers to a costume worn by men in Northern India and Southern Nepal. It consists of a stripe of cloth tied around the waist extending to cover most of the legs. In Nepal, it has been used as a marker of othering. Hill people have long used this as a slur to defame Madhesis as not true Nepalis, but Indians. This is because Madhesi people (particularly the plain caste Hindus) share cultural ties (e.g., language, culture, traditions, and marital relations) with Indians living across the border.

and 'Indian' are the identities assigned by Gurkha rulers [39] to the Madhesi people who share a close kinship and cultural affinities with people from north Indian territories.[40] As a Nepali citizen, I have also seen Pahadi people calling them Madise, Marsya, Bhaiya, Indian, or Dhoti in hill dominated areas. To them, the person would be a foreigner, i.e., Indian. Madhesi people, therefore, used to express their repulsion at being referred as Madhise. Many interviewees shared similar views about the evolution of Madhesi identity:

> *... the state assigned that (Madhesi) identity for us with humiliation while connecting it with India, and questioning our nationalism, just knowing the fact that our color of the face matches with Indians. You see, it's our unfortunate, Lumbini (the birthplace of Gautam Buddha) was a separate state. When it was annexed to Nepal, Gautam Buddha became a Nepali, and how did Lumbini dwellers become Madhise, Marsya, and Indian? Sita (Hindu Goddess), for Hindus, is a great person. Sita is the symbol of our pride, and those living in Janakpur (capital of Madhes province) are Madhise, Marsya, and Indian? (Interview 28)*

The statements of the interviewee 28 show that the Madhesi identity of the Tarai people was assigned by Nepali state, raising question about their devotion to Nepal. This also highlights the alienating power possessed by labels such as Madhise. The use of interrogative sentences

[39] Nepal was known as Gorkha before the early twentieth century. The name appeared after Gorkha King Prithvi Narayan Shah geographically united the country. The Gorkha government began referring to its kingdom as Nepal only in 1930 (Burghart 1996, 119).

[40] Tarai and Madhes have been synonymously used to define Nepal's southern plains since its foundation. The 1854 Muluki Ain (civil code) has defined the term "Madise" as the residents of Madhesa (see Khatiwada, Cubelic, and Michaels 2021). The terms Madhes and Madhesi were mostly erased from state legal documents and school textbooks during the *Panchayat* period. However, the colloquial use of these term persisted among people.

("When it was annexed …", "Sita is the symbol…") expresses a distinct resentment towards the hill-dominated Nepali state, and the repulsion at being labeled as Madhise. Following are other examples of past depictions of Madhesi identification:

> *Well, there was Madhes in the past. Some people used to call us Madhesi. The state did not give attention. They (hill people) used to call us "Madise" not Madhesi. … Even in Kathmandu, people said "Mana Makhu Marsya kha" [It's not human, it's Madise in the language of Newars, an indigenous group of Kathmandu Valley, who practices caste hierarchy (Gellner 2007)] etc. They called us Marsya (animals), not Madhesi. (Interview 27)*

> *Unfortunately, looking at our face, people here say that we are, Madhise, Indians. People say he is an Indian to insult or to defame him. (Interview 25)*

> *Madhes is the name given by the hill. I knew about Madhesi identity after I came to Kathmandu. Because people here used to say Madhise. From Madhise, it became Madhesi. I started to learn what Madhesi is and realized that I am a Madhesi. (Interview 26)*

Despite their disinclination, Madhesi people were pejoratively called Madhise. This means they are second class citizens and disloyal to the nation compared to the hill people (Gellner 2007; K. Jha 2017). By using the metaphor "Mana Makhu Marsya kha," interviewee 27 implies that

Madhesis were defined as non-humans in the past, especially in Kathmandu[41]. The noun "Marsya" suggests that Newars were more prejudiced towards Madhesis.

Probably because of this, Madhesi identity or Madise category remained a source of inferiority complex for many Madhesi leaders and the people until 2007 (Field note 07/21/2021):

> *That population (Madhesi population) never talked about Madhesi identity. What that population said was, we are Bhojpuria; we are Maithil; we are Tharu; we are Rajbanshi. After the Sugauli Treaty, they said we are Nepalese Rajbanshi, we are Nepalese Maithil, we are Nepalese Bhojpuri, we are Nepalese Abadhi, we are Nepalese Tharu, and we are Nepalese Muslims. Talking about identity, while talking in terms of religion, they said we are Nepalese Muslim, Nepalese Maithil based on language, culture. I am talking about Madhesi identity. (Interview 22)*

> *In the past, we did not accept that (Madhesi) identity. Saying Madhesi used to be considered as an insult or hatred. The term Madhesi was not used in a respectful manner. (Interview 25)*

> *Earlier, we never identified as Madhesi. (Interview 27)*

The sentence ("That population never…") suggests that the Madhesi people would rarely identify themselves as Madhesi in the past. They called themselves Nepali instead of Madhesi

[41] Kathmandu is the symbolic representation of the Pahadi dominated areas.

due to the hatred they felt towards Madise category. This shows their rejection of the pre-existing identities. The following quote further illustrates this refutation:

> *In the past we were so much despised for engaging in Madhes based party. We felt isolated. (Interview 21)*

It is clear from the testimony of interviewee 21 that previously, not only expressing Madhesi identity, but also participating in Madhesi identity politics was considered disgraceful. The reason might be the dismal public support the interviewee's party received prior to 2007. This is also apparent from the use of the word "despised."

Group identification, however, cannot exist in a social vacuum. Under certain circumstances, social groups may use the same historical negations of powerful racial/regional categorizations to positively valorize their identities, as in the USA by African-Americans following the civil war (Eyerman 2004; Jenkins 2008a). In this process, however, they can modify, succeed, add to, combine, supplement, or fragment their preexisting identities (Cornell and Hartmann 2007). In Nepal, after 1990, particularly following the Maoist conflict or the 2007 Madhesi uprising, Madhesi leaders began to assert themselves as Madhesi. The following narratives provide more insight into this issue:

> *I am proud to be a Madhesi. . . This is a matter of prestige for me. (Interview 18)*

> *Madhesi is my identity… this identity gives me honor. The way people look at me would be respectful. Therefore, it is extremely important for me. (Interview 21)*

We feel proud to be a Madhesi. (Interview 24)

This Madhesi identity is connected to my existence. It is associated with my nationality. This identity is for the prosperity of my country. This is the symbol of my pride. I am a Madhesi. (Interview 28)

Madhesi identity is very important…this identity is linked with equality, equal participation, and inclusion. If this movement does not go ahead, if the state does not accept this identity, we need to make our decedents understand this. Therefore, I have great respect to my identity. (Interview 22)

The testimonies of interviewees 18, 21,22, 24, and 28 demonstrate the shift in Madhesi identity from being a derogatory marker of nationalists' doubt to a proud marker of identity and belonging following the Maoist insurgency or the Madhesi uprising. Today, calling Madhesis "Madhise" might still be a popular racial slur, but it does not offend Madhesis. (K. Pandey 2017). The tone of the sentences sounds positive. It indicates that their pride is now symbolized by Madhesi identity.

Furthermore, the majority of the participants in this category defined Madhesi identity in terms of ethnicity or even stronger nationalism, emphasizing their cultural affiliation with territorial legacies:

I am from a humid province, a plain province which has its own identity. "Chhath[42]*" happens in our house. Deepawali is celebrated differently. We have our own tradition, culture, and rituals. In terms of the color of the skin, I am a black person. By caste, I am an individual from Madhesi caste such as the castes here: Yadav, Shah, Dalits such as Ram, Paswan, who is a Nepali, but has Madhesi identity. Every individual has two identities. But we are the Nepalese citizen of Madhesi identity. While saying I say I am a Nepalese citizen of Madhesi identity. (Interview 19)*

Madhes is the land where we live in. . . . being a Madhesi means having a certain attire, food, and lifestyle. (Interview 24)

We are Madhesi not only because it is a region, but also because of our culture, language, traditions. All these make us Madhesi. Madhes means its culture, religion, attire, color, territory, etc. That makes our identity. (Interview 27)

Based on the statements of the interviewee 19, being a Madhesi means residing in Madhesi territory (homeland), having some physical characteristics (i.e., black appearance), and following Madhesi cultures (i.e., traditions, customs, festivals, food, and lifestyles). The sentence ("I am from humid province…") implies his attachment to the land and the culture. The sentence ("We have our own tradition...") suggests that the interviewee considers Madhesi people as culturally homogeneous and distinct from Pahadis.

[42] Chhath is the main festival of Madhesi Hindus, as well as the large Hindu population in the Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. This is not a festival of the hill-Hindus. They celebrate Dashain and Tihar as the greatest festivals. But nowadays, many hill-Hindus living in the Tarai celebrate this festival.

Those who identified themselves based on ethnicity in some cases followed the family tradition, exhibiting a 'primordial loyalty' (Geertz 1963):

> *… our culture, and identity that we got from our forefathers, we feel proud on it. We are Madhesis, we are different. To establish our identity, and to eliminate the domination and insult, movements took place. So, we feel proud to be Madhesi, and to live in Madhes, and we are Nepali (Interview 27)*

> *Well, I'm proud of being a Madhesi born from my mother's womb. The region where I was born was called Madhes by the state, and the people were called Madhesi. Obviously, I was also called Madhesi. I was also oppressed like other Madhesis. Whenever there is a community, I naturally belong to that community. As a Madhesi, I don't have any shame … I have no sense of inferiority. I am a bonafied citizen of this country. (Interview 25)*

In the statements above, the interviewees' self-identifications come in a permanent lens. These primordial types of frames represent an issue of primary socialized core identities. While Jenkins (1996) views identity from a constructive lens, he offers an integrative theory in the form of primary socialized identity. These are core identities –selfhood, humanness, gender, and under certain contexts kinship and ethnicity –that develop early with a child's socialization. They are more robust and resilient to change in later life (Hancock 2016, 411). Hence, the self-descriptions of the interviewees 27 ("our culture, and identity…") and 25 ("I am proud of being a

Madhesi…") imply that under some contexts, an identity which is used as the basis for discrimination is often claimed to have the power of core identity (Hancock 2016).

Concurrently, while asserting Madhesi identity as an ethnic label, most of the respondents disagreed with the way it has been viewed by the state or hill-elites since the Panchayat period, i.e., only on a regional label. They accused the state of attempting to control the region and its people. Maharjan (2022) wonders how Madhes (ethno-territorial space) was transformed into Tarai (regional space) in Nepal's past fifty years, especially during the thirty years of cultural nationalism. This is also reflected in the following:

> *The regional issues were brought to suppress ethnicity. If you look at … why King Mahendra said: Hamro Raja Hamro Desh, Eutai Bhasa Eutai Bhes (Our King, our country, one language, one attire)? Because he wanted to annihilate the ethnic identity that was present in Madhes. (Interview 22)*

The statements allude to the objection to defining Madhesi identity solely by regional basis. The word "annihilate" suggests that the Nepali state has, for many years, sought to erase the ethnic components (i.e., culture, traditions, lifestyles, and customs etc.) of Madhesi identity. The supply of an answer to his own question ("why King Mahendra...?") indicates the interviewee's confidence in the *Panchayat* regime's knowledge of distinct cultural identity of the Madhesi people. Other interviewees also shared similar views:

> *You might have studied Nepal's geography. We had studied in Nepal's geography, Madhes, Inner Madhes, Pahad, and Himal. There is Madhes, Inner Madhes, Pahad and Himal. How did this become a region? There would be regions even in a single state. It is*

in all over the world… Living in Nepal and asking them (Pahadi rulers) to give equal rights to Madhesis, did it sound regional? (Interview 23)

In the past, Madhesis were seen from the angle of geography and a region. (Interview 24)

The difficulties here is we often defined Madhes based on geography or region. … Madhes's issues were discussed as Tarai's issues. Tarai means low land. … When we talk about Madhes in terms of region, we should understand that it had population. (Interview 22)

The narratives suggest that despite Madhesi identity being an ethno-territorial identity, it was erroneously defined as purely regional. The interrogations used by interviewee 23 ("How did this…?" and "Living in Nepal…?") highlights his dissatisfaction with previous depictions of Madhesi identity. Furthermore, the language contents of interviewee 23 are similar to those of interviewee 22, indicating that the term "Tarai" does not signify the culture in the region. The sentence ("When we talk about Madhes …") sounds realistic. There is an implied urgency in the word "should," suggesting that we should rethink how we understand Madhesi identity. This resonates with Cornell and Hartmann's (2007, 213) contention that in developing their identities, group members may give greater significance to the collective identities they already possess, which may differ from those imposed by others[43].

However, a respondent from The Peoples' Socialist Party [formerly known as Madhesi People's Rights Forum (MPRF)], self-defined as a Madhesi. He did not, however, describe

[43] Here I want to note that both Madhesis and Pahadis use the term Madhes, they just have different meanings for the term.

Madhesi identity from an ethnic viewpoint. Instead, the respondent defined it from a complex political perspective, underlining the political exploitation of the Madhesi people by the Pahadi-dominated state:

> *It [Madhesi identity] is neither a caste-based identity, nor an ethnic identity. This is a political identity. There are the issues of power sharing, political participation, and recognition. It was not recognized that Madhesis are Nepalese like others (Pahadis). Sometimes they [Madhesis] were called Bihari (Indians), sometimes others, and kept them without having citizenship. It made such a big population stateless. (Interview 26)*

The sentence ("There are issues of …") suggests that Madhesi identity is based on experience associated with group's socio-political position in Nepalese society. These narratives, however, contradict with MPRF actions taken to make this identity prominent during and after the Maoist insurgency. Miklian (2008) argues that during the war, MPRF documents were fundamental in the effort to redefine the word 'Madhesi' to incorporate ethno-racial elements. His different assertion of Madhesi identity, therefore, may be due to his current political position in Nepal's national politics, or his desire to increase his party's political base throughout the nation (Field note 09/15/2021).

In summary, the self-descriptions of the Madhesi leaders above exhibit that Madhesi identity now seems to be more of an ethnic identity than regional one. But this does not mean that it lacks territorial significance. N. Pandey (2021) argues that while the Madhesi boundary is a social boundary, it has a territorial component as well. The following section examines how Madhesi leaders asserted "cultural stuffs" in relation to Madhesi identity during the intense

interaction between Madhesi people and Pahadi people in the post-war historical political context of Nepal. Jenkins (2008a) contends that the concept of ethnicity is rooted in culture, but is produced and reproduced during interaction.

Cultural and Symbolic Markers

Symbolic resources are the range of collective representations that groups can use to define what that identity means to them. These include stories, celebrations, cultural practices and so on (Cornell and Hartmann 2007). For Jenkins (2008b, 136–37), the name of an identity (nominal identity) can be symbolic by itself. "It may be further symbolized in heraldry, language, dress, ritual, and other material and practical forms." In Nepal, the cultural and symbolic markers that constitute Madhesi identity were reproduced in the context of intense socio-political interaction between Madhesis and Pahadis. When the socio-political interaction between these two groups became sharp in the post-war transition, Madhesi leaders deliberately reinforced their culture and symbols to express that the Madhesi group is internally cohesive and different from others, i.e., Pahadis.

First, they became more assertive in their claim to their perceived common culture:

> *Our food habit, dress code, tradition, languages are also similar. Brahmins, touchable, untouchables everyone celebrate Chhath . . . Although different languages are spoken in Madhes, in some places there is Maithili, in some places there is Bhojpuri, and in some places, there is Bajika, we understand each other's language. So, the language, and culture also have united us. (Interview 27)*

We (Madhesis) also have Holi, Diwali, and Chhath. . . we are one in terms of culture. It has united us. … We go to one another's home, celebrate our festivals. This civilization has also united us. (Interview 21)

Culture has united us. It has bound the entire Madhesis in one. Even if Tharus are separated, we have a festival called 'Samachakeba' that both Madhesis and Tharus celebrate. Likewise, 'Chhath' is one festival, Maghe Sakranti is another. Our culture is the same. Muslims also celebrate Chhath. . . Many Tharus say we are not Madhesi, but our culture is the same. In 'Maghe Sakranti,' they eat Dahi (Yogurt), Chiura (beaten rice), and Laddu (sweet). They also offer sesame seeds (to God). We also do the same. We are together in terms of culture. (Interview 28)

We have our history, background, own culture, own language, and own traditions. We have made it common to unite the Tarai people living from Mechi to the Mahakali. (Interview 26)

If you meet a Madhesi from Biratnagar and from Bardiaya, or a Madhesi from Kapilbastu or from Sarlahi, there is no such difference on their way of life. (Interview 19)

These narratives explain Madhesi leaders' belief that Madhesis possess a common culture that includes their eating habits, dress code, and way of life. The use of short sentences [e.g., "Our food habit…" (interview 27); "We also have Holi, Diwali and Chhath" (interview 21); "Culture

has united us" (interview 28)] indicates important points. This underlines that cultural markers are important characteristics of Madhesi identity. The noun "Chhath" is stated in all the narratives, which indicates that Chhath is the common festival of Madhesis. But it also gives a sense of politicization of the plain caste Hindu culture. For example, the culture of Tharu's and Muslim's ["even if Tharus are separated…"; "Muslims also…"] (interview 28) does not neatly fit into the Madhesi cultural category.

In similar fashion, they also stressed their cultural separation from Pahadis while defining their identity. Eriksen (2010, 17) states "when cultural differences regularly make a difference in interaction between members of groups, the social relationship has an ethnic element." In my data collection, most of the Madhesi leaders expressed their cultural differences from Pahadis in the manner described below:

> *Madhesi is the one whose culture is different. Let me give you an example. All the Hindus play Holi. On the day of the full moon, the hill Hindus play. The next day of the full moon, Madhesis play. Holi is the same, but culture is different. Dashain is there. In Dashain, people in the hills start to eat meat since Ghatasthaapana (first day of Dashain) . . . In Madhes, from Ghatasthaapana to Durga Puja, until the puja is completed, they do not eat meat. Religion is the same, but the culture is different. (Interview 23)*

> *The man whose father-in-law touches his feet respectfully with his head is not a Madhesi (He is a Pahadi). For example, I touch my father in law's leg. My daughter in law also touches my father in law's leg. My daughter also touches to my father in law's feet. We have the culture of touching to father and mother in law's leg. There is no issue of*

untouchability with father-in-law. . . Those who touch fathers in laws' legs with their head are Madhesis. (Interview 20)

Madhes has its own culture, language, identity, religion, art, clothes, territory, festivals, fasting, Tihar. We have all these things. Based on this, Madhes has its own distinct identity. (Interview 27)

Our (Madhesis') everyday language and food are different (from Pahadis). Despite being in the same place in terms of religion (Hindu faith), we are different in terms of language, and culture. (Interview 24)

Madhesis' appearance, language, dress code, culture match with Indians living across the border. (Interview 25)

The anecdotes show that by reinforcing Madhesi traditions, festivals, rituals, and cultural practices (the way festivals are celebrated differently in Pahad and Tarai), Madhesi leaders defined that Madhesi group is culturally apart from Pahadi group. Here, as Miklian (2008, 6) argued, they did not take into account the diversity within the Pahadi group. The language contents of the interviewees 23 and 20 are similar, indicating that there is distinct cultural difference between Madhesis and Pahadis despite their shared Hindu faith. These include the way the same Hindu festivals are celebrated differently in the Tarai and Pahad.

Concurrently, Madhesi elites, as Brass (1991), and Jenkins (1996, 2008b, 2008a) argued, also epitomized certain elements of culture to express the concept of their shared culture and to generate a sense of peoplehood. As a shared symbol of Madhesi identity, Dhoti was created and

used as a resource to defend the Madhesi community as a distinct cultural community. Madhesi leaders recognized that they possess a deep-seated sense that Dhoti is such a symbol that separates Madhesi group from Pahadi group, even if the younger generation of Madhesi people do not wear it (N. Pandey 2021). An interviewee stated:

> *Our language, culture, dress code has also been attacked. You have to wear Daura, Suruwal and Topi (national dress code of Nepal). In Madhes, however, people wear Dhoti. I wear Dhoti myself. Our identity is Dhoti, and Kurta, I cannot wear Daura, Suruwal and Topi. They (Pahadileaders) tell us to come to the parliament only wearing Daura and Suruwal. What is this? No. (Interview 25)*

The statement shows the anger of interviewee 25 about the imposition of Pahadi outfits on Madhesi people. The term "have to" indicates an impersonal obligation, suggesting that he sees it as an attack on Madhesi culture. It is evident from the tone of the language and the use of the word 'No' that the interviewee resists wearing the imposed hill outfits on the Madhesi people. The noun "Dhoti" is used more frequently than others, which indicates that the interviewee perceives it as a sign of pride and the marker of Madhesi identity. The assertion of Dhoti as a signifier of the Madhesi identity is also evident from the following:

> *Nepal had created a coin of 2 rupee. You must see it. … On that coin, there is an image of a farmland where a farmer is holding a plough. The attire of that farmer is Daura, Suruwal and Dhaka Topi. What I say here is Nepal has 18 percent agricultural land. Among this, 15 percent land is in the Tarai or Madhes. When it comes to the depiction of a farmer on a coin, why is there no depiction of a Madhesi majority farmer? Does a*

farmer live in Madhes wear Daura, Suruwal and Topi? Those who live in Madhes wear Dhoti, Kurta, and Gamchha. (Interview 28)

The narratives underscore the interviewee's anger over the deep-rooted cultural exclusion of Madhesi people, and her symbolic restatement of pride in Madhesi attire. The use of the interrogative sentence ("Does a farmer live …?") exhibits her agitation against the hill-centric state, as well as her rejection of the national emblem (national dress code), which does not represent the cultural outfits of Madhesi people. This is also a symbolic revolt against the hill domination of the Madhesi people, who were often called "Dhoti" (a derogatory term) by the hill people. The assertion of Dhoti as a cultural symbol is also reflected in the following:

For instance, people wearing Dhoti, Kurta, Pajama, Lungi, or Gamcha were there. But Kathmandu (the state), or the hill, or those who understood impeached it. The impeachment was so strong that it stuck there, asserting it. You know at certain time something become fixed like cement. When it sets, it becomes wider. It happened from Mechi to Mahakali, from Birjung to Nepaljung, from Biratnagar to Mahendranagar. (Interview 20)

Madhesis were called Madise, for Mahdise they (Pahadi People) called Dhoti, for Dhoti, they called Bhaiya. (Interview 21)

From the interviewees 20 and 21, it is evident that 'Dhoti' had since long been used by the hill people as a racial slur for 'Othering' Madhesis. The tone of the language seems low and negative, which may suggest that the leader was frustrated by the harsh treatment that Madhesi

people had received from the hill people in the past. The word "impeachment," and the use of metaphor "You know at certain time something become fixed like cement" (Interview 20) imply the degree of hatred Pahadis had for Madhesis in the past. Pahadi people used Dhoti as a slur to criticize Madhesis' patriotism, which compelled them to recognize it as a symbol of their identity in the aftermath of the Maoist conflict.

Madhesi leaders have recognized since 2007 that Dhoti has become an effective means of creating a sense of solidarity among Madhesi people, at least about their struggle for recognition. They used Dhoti to recollect Madhesi discrimination by the state. One of the popular slogans of the Madhesi movement, which targeted cultural inequality, was "Both 'Dhoti' and 'Topi' (hillman's cap) should get equal respect" (Gellner 2007, 1827). Jha (2016) contends that the Madhesi movement has restored the cultural pride in Madhesi attire; causing a transformation wherein the previously derogatory term 'Dhoti' no longer carries offense for Madhesis. Hence, Dhoti symbolically created the basis for ethnic mobilization as it was assigned a collective meaning based on which a Madhesi community was constructed.

In summary, the politicization of Madhesi culture and symbols formed the basis for Madhesi mobilization in opposition to the state and the Pahadi people. N. Pandey (2021) argues that Madhesis' own experience of cultural difference was schematized by using Madhesi ethnic boundaries during the post-war transition. Masking the linguistic and cultural variations within the Madhesi group, Madhesi leaders sought to represent Madhesis as a single entity by referring to the commonalities of culture that include their customs, lifestyles, and eating habits. Having done so, they established a powerful narrative that Madhesis have been subjected to cultural dominance, economic exploitation, and political marginalization because of their cultural

differences from Pahadis. In the following section, I will analyze how Madhesi leaders defined Madhesi history in relation to the Madhesi identity development.

History

Ethnicity is primarily a sense of belonging to a particular ancestry and origin (Cornell and Hartmann 2007). Nepali history writing is primarily focused on the internal dynamics of royal dynasties and regime changes (Tamang 2009). The political and social history of Tarai civilization is poorly documented in Nepal's national history (Burkert 1997; Neupane 2000). In my interaction with Madhesi leaders, they noted that there is nothing positive about their identity and political struggle in Nepal's history. A respondent said, "Those who wrote about us are people from the hills. Where did they take a good look at the Madhes (Interview 23)?" Hence, Mathema (2011) asserts that the Madhesi communities were made to believe in a Nepalese history written by elites who not only omitted parts of history that show Madhesi's glorious past, but also blurred the history that reveals a close relationship between Madhesi people and other people of Nepal far before the foundation of Nepal.

Following the CPA, it seems that Madhesi leaders reframed a complex history of the Tarai through the lens of current events to define Madhes as a historical space and Madhesis as the real people of the Tarai region. As discussed, first, they reaffirmed the term Madhes, and disregard the term Tarai, articulating that the latter lacks historical and cultural significance for the southern plains of Nepal. For them, Madhes represents the culture, civilization, and territory of Nepal's southern flatlands along with its historical value. Hence, to define the origin of the term Madhes, several respondents made reference to ancient Madhyadesh (middle country), the

Gangetic plains located between the Himalayas and the Vindhya Mountain of classic Aryabharat (country of Aryans):

> *The word Madhesi has not pronounced in the world. This word has not used for any group or community in the world. First, Madhesis are only in Nepal. Different meanings have been made on this word. Prior to the formation of Nepal, this continent (land) used to be called Madhya Desh or Middle country. From there, it is said that Madhes is derived. (Interview 25)*

> *If we go to its historical background, in ancient times, the land between the south of Mahabharat and the north of Vindyanchal mountain used to be called Middle country. It was not an independent country but a middle part. It's like Janpad. There were 5-6 Janapads within the middle country. For instance, Kashi, Cheli, Anga, and then Shakya's republic, which Gautam Buddha has also explained, Angadesh used to be called for the side of Bhagalpur. Mithila was also a Janpad. This is an ancient issue. (Interview 26)*

> *. . . there was Madhya Desh [Middle country] prior to the formation of Nepal and India. (Interview 24).*

These accounts reflect Madhesi leaders' conviction that the term Madhes is derived from Sanskrit word Madhyadesh. The sentence structures of the interviewees 24, 25 and 26 are similar. This linguistic pattern demonstrates their belief that the word Madhes holds historical weight, cultural affiliation, and representation of specific national locality (homeland). It also shows that the Madhesi identity boundary is both cultural and territorial. However, authentic

documents supporting the argument that Madhes comes from Madhyadesh are limited (Upreti, Poudel, and Ghimire 2012).

Second, Madhesi leaders connected their lineage with the mythological history of the sacred places of Lumbini and Mithila (Videha) to define their descent. Based on the birthplace of Gautam Buddha,[44] the founder of Buddhism, and the holy kingdom of King Janak,[45] whose capital Janakpur still bears the same name in Nepal, several interviewees identified that the Madhesi people are their descendants:

> *Who came first in Nepal, Janak or Jaya Prakash Malla (last Mall king of the Kathmandu valley)? Who came first, Gautam Buddha or Prithivi Narayan Shah (founder of Modern Nepal)? We are the people of big history. (Interview 23).*

> *They (Madhesis) are the descendants of Janak and Buddha. Madhesis did not come from any other places. (Interview 25)*

> *If we go to the historical background of these people (Madhesis), their history is thousands of years older than Nepal's history. At the time these civilizations were flourishing, there was neither Nepali civilization nor the beginning of the word Nepali.*

[44] The Buddha, the founder of Buddhism was born in 623 BC in holy place of Lumbini, located in Kapilbastu district of Nepal's western Tarai.

[45] Hindus believe that Janak was the king of ancient Mithila, who ruled over the Mithila kingdom in the 7th century BC, which had its capital in Janakpur lying in today's Dhanusha district of central Tarai. According to Ramayana (Hindu religious epic), Ram (incarnation of Lord Bishnu-the God of preservation) from Ayodhya city of Magadh, India married Sita (incarnation of Goddess Laxmi-the Goddess of fortune), the daughter of king Janak.

Therefore, the first thing is that these Madhesi communities are the sons of this soil. (Interview 26)

These stories illustrate the Madhesi leaders' claim that Madhesi people are the descendants of Buddha and Janak. It also alludes to their symbolic attachment to the territory. The notion of territory, as conceived here, transcends merely physical space, and includes culture, history, and politics. The use of interrogation ("Who came. . .") by interviewee 23, suggests that the interviewee is not happy with the way Madhesi people with such old history have been taken in Nepal as the most recent immigrants from India.

Concurrently, Madhesi leaders reinterpreted Nepal's national history to define themselves and Madhesi people as the original inhabitants of the Tarai. The history of modern Nepal begins with the territorial unification of the country in 1768 by the King Prithvi Narayan Shah. Prior to this, Gopal Banshi (Cowherder), Mahispaal Banshi (Buffeloherder), Kirant, Lichhavi, and Malla rulers ruled over Nepal[46] simultaneously (P. Dahal 1999; Gaige 1975; R. Shah 1992; Whelpton 2005). Though little is known about Nepal's ancient history, mainly the origin of early rulers (R. Shah 1992), some respondents stated that their ancestors were those rulers:

...from "Pauranik" period or "Baidik" period, to Gopal Bansh, Mahish Bansh, Lichhabi Bansh . . .you might have studied Lichhabi Bansh. They were also the people of Madhes. Therfore, Madhesis are the main inhabitants of Nepal. If this soil belongs to someone, it belongs to Madhesis. If there are sons of the soil in this country, we are those (Interview 20)

[46] The Kathmandu used to be called Nepal during early period of Nepal.

Earlier Madhesis had power in their hand. In history, you see Mahispaal Banshi, Gopal Banshi. (Interview 24)

The narratives illustrate Madhesi leaders' assertion that Madhesis are the real inhabitants of the country. The use of the terms "Gopal Bansha", "Mahish Bansha" and "Licchabi Bansaha" by interviewees 20 and 24 alludes to their belief that early rulers of Nepal were the ancestors of Madhesis. While no documents trace the origin of Gopal Banshi and Mahispal Banshi rulers, several scholars have noted that Licchabi rulers came to Nepal from Vaisali of Northern Bihar in India (M. M. Mishra 2006; R. Shah 1992).

Following the Lichaabis, the Malla ruled over small kingdoms in the Kathmandu valley [47] until the foundation of Modern Nepal (Dahal 1999; Shah 1992; Whelpton 2005). During the Malla period, King Nayandev of Karnata dynasty established a Mithila/Tirhut kingdom,[48] which had its capital in Simrongarh in Nepal's central Tarai (P. R. Sharma 1983). During my interaction with Madhesi leaders, many referred to the Tirhut/Mithila kingdom and praised the Mithila culture's influence on Kathmandu valley during the Malla era:

Madhes was in existence prior to king Prithivi Narayan Shah who unified Nepal invading Baise (22), Chaubise (24) principalities. There was Tirhut kingdom. Simraungarh was its capital. King Harishimhadev was the last king there. You might have known, Mugals

[47] Prior to Nepal's unification by Prithivi Narayan Shah, the country was divided into several small principalities. Within Kathmandu, there were three small Malla kingdoms: Kantipur, Patan and Bhadgaun.

[48] The kingdom included both sides of the Indo-Nepal border such as northern Bihar's Champaran and Purnia districts, as well as Nepal's eastern and central Tarai region.

attacked there. To save his life, or to save his culture, he went to Bhaktapur taking his "Kul Devi" (deity) Taleju which is still there in Bhaktapur. (Interview 20)

As the remnants of them, even today this (Madhesi) culture is around Kathmandu. It has old languages. Even now, Machndranaath and Dharmashala are in Kathmandu. . . There were kingdoms like Simraungadh, Birat, and Sailesh in Madhes. (Interview 24)

The narratives depict the existence of the Tirhut/Mithila kingdom in the Tarai between the 11th and 14th centuries[49] and its relationships with the Malla kingdoms in Kathmandu valley. The sentence "To save his life…" implies a friendly relationship between Tirhut and Malla rulers. Several scholars and historians (i.e., Shah 1992; Sharma 1983) have documented Mithila's rich cultural history and its influence on the Malla kingdoms in Kathmandu. For example, Maithili was the official language of the court in Kathmandu. Mithila dramas also flourished in Kathmandu at that time.

Further indicating Madhesi civilization, some of them also brought the reference of Sen kingdoms in the central and eastern Tarai in the 18th century:

If you look at the 18th century, when king Prithvi Narayan Shah unified Baise-Chaubise (22-24) principalities, there was the kingdom of Sen dynasty in Hetaunda, Chaudandi, and Bijayapur. They had their kingdoms in Tarai and Madhes. Therefore, if we talk about the history of Tarai and Madhes, it has the history prior to Nepal's unification. (Interview 19)

[49] The kingdom was annexed by Mugal emperor Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq of Delhi at the end of the 14th century.

The anecdotes reflect the existence of three kingdoms of the Sen dynasty in the Tarai, which interviewee 19 believes were the people of Madhes. The use of the term "Sen dynasty", refers to the latest existence of Madhesi civilization in the Tarai, prior to the formation of modern Nepal.

In terms of their ancestry and sense of belonging in modern Nepal, many leaders said that Madhesi people have been living in the Tarai prior to the boundary separation between Nepal and British India in early 19th century. Though contentious from the hill nationalists' perspective, who view Madhesi people as the new Indian immigrants, Mathema (2011, 46) argues that long before the existence of Nepal or India, there were people in the Tarai under different kingdoms. Those kingdoms sometimes expanded, and at other times became colonies of kingdoms outside of the Tarai. Some parts of those kingdoms are now under Nepal while others are under India. Thus, Madhesis are not the descendants of Indian immigrants but the original inhabitants of the region. This is reflected in the following:

> *These kinds of people are in Nepal and India. When demarcating the boundary (between Nepal and British India), some remained in this side, and some remained in other side, but the people are the same. The demarcation also went here and there at different times. . .After the Sugauli Treaty, Banke, Bardiya, Kailai and Kanchanpur we got from the British in the form of Naya Muluk (new country). It means that land was there prior to the formation of Nepal and India. People were living there. There was population. For the people living there (Nepal), today's rulers said Madhesi. (Interview 25)*

> *See, this land (Madhes) was already here. The population (Madhesi) was already here. (Interview 22)*

These statements refer to the existence of the Madhesi civilization prior to the formation of the border between Nepal and Britain's East-India Company. The sentence "For the people…" by interviewee 25, denotes that Madhesi people have been living in the region for generations, and Gurkhali rulers named them Madhesi. Hence, they are not Indian immigrants, but instead the real people of the Tarai. This, however, also gives a sense of politicization of Madhesi history.

The narratives not only hide the fact that a large number of Indian immigrants settled in the region since the Rana regime (Gaige 1975; Miklian 2008; Upreti, Poudel, and Ghimire 2012), but also excludes the history of those indigenous groups (including Tharus) who disassociate themselves from the Madhesi boundary, and have been living in the Tarai since an unknown period (Miklian 2008). Nevertheless, the data shows that by reinterpreting a complex history of the Tarai from the point of view of current events, Madhesi leaders were able to create a narrative that Madhes is an ethno-territorial space, and Madhesis are true Nepali citizens as well as the victims of the Pahadi-dominated Nepali state. This echoes with a popular slogan of the Madhesi uprising that caught everyone's attention in Nepal, "Speak with pride that you are a Madhesi: not a foreign fugitive, but a son of the soil" (Tamang 2017, 102).

Madhesi leaders noted that the Gorkha/Gurkha annexation of the Tarai marks the beginning of Madhesis' loss of their homeland and identity. A theme that emerged from the data is "internal colonialism." These leaders, as discussed, said that the hill-centric state always undermined their sense of belonging and attachment to the territory they reside in. The Shahs and Ranas, for example, gave Madhesis' land to their families, courtiers, and military officers in the form of *Birta and Jagir* (land grants) (Gaige 1975; Regmi 1988; Shrestha 2018). The land was further expropriated and given to hill-migrants through land reform practices during the *Panchayat* era (MPRF 2008; NSP (A) 2008; TMDP 2008). Additionally, Madhesis were not

given equal opportunities in national politics. Their distinct culture and costumes were disregarded even after the restoration of democracy in 1990 (Interview 21 and 24), which led them to mobilize support for an autonomous Madhes province and for equal rights and dignity for Madhesi people following the CPA.

Madhesi leaders, in this context, conceptualized their homeland (Madhes) and used this theme as one of the rallying points for ethnic mobilization. For example, the campaign slogans such as "Entire Madhes, one province," and "Jaya Madhes" (Glory to Madhes) (MPRF 2008; NSP (A) 2008; TMDP 2008) echo their ethno-territorial claim. Similarly, while sharing the political history of Madhes, these leaders made references to earlier Madhesi struggles against the state. This is reflected in the following:

> *In 1951, Bedanand Jha formed "Tarai Congress." Through Tarai Congress, he raised the issues that Madhes has its own identity, Madhes is suffering from political problems, the equality issues of Madhes, the Hindi language issues of Madhes among others. It means the history of Madhesi struggle, and the history of Nepal have moved forward together. (Interview 19)*

> *. . .Bedanand Jha formed Tarai Congress. He didn't succeed. . .Gajendra Narayan Singh's Satbhawana Parisad was formed to continue the movement saying we are Madhesi. (Interview 22)*

> *To address Madhesis's concerns . . . earlier Tarai Congress was formed. Then Nepal Satbhawana Party came and won 6, 5, and 3 seats in the three elections (after 1990) and*

went to the parliament. At that time, it was like a regional party. This agenda was also limited within the region. (Interview 28)

The narratives underscore the Madhesi struggle for autonomy and inclusion since the 1950s. The noun "Tarai Congress" by interviewee 19 and 28 suggests that the party sought to create Madhesi identity by advocating for Tarai autonomy, Hindi language recognition, and inclusion of Madhesis in civil services in the 1950s. The term "Nepal Satbhavana Party" indicates that next generations of Madhesi leaders campaigned for federalism, citizenship, recognition of Hindi language, and Madhesi inclusion in state institutions in the 1990s. While both campaigns failed to achieve political ascendency, the latter was able to revive Madhesi activism. In summary, by forwarding a historical narrative that rewrites a complex history of the Tarai, Madhesi leaders were able to construct a narrative that defines Madhesis as a distinct people, and the original inhabitants of the Tarai with a historical trajectory setting them apart from Pahadis.

Chapter Conclusion

Our identity is not solely determined by our construction, nor by the categorization of external forces (Cornell and Hartmann 2007, 106). This suggests that social identity is the product of a group's interaction with new socio-political contexts. The examination of Madhesi leaders' identity narratives demonstrates that the creation of Madhesi peoplehood in the post-CPA period seems to be largely influenced by pressure from the outside or the power of circumstances. In this case, it is the hill-dominated Nepali state. Especially, the Nepali state's policies and practices that discriminated against Madhesis for their political participation and their access to power and resources contributed greatly to creating a boundary between Madhesis and Pahadis.

But the analysis presented here demonstrates that Madhesi leaders also played a significant role in consolidating Madhesi identity in the post-war period. By skillfully using symbolic resources such as Madhesi culture, symbols, and history, Madhesi leaders were able to create an emotive discourse that Madhesi people are culturally distinct from Pahadis, historically the original inhabitants of Tarai, and the victims of a hill-dominated state and hill people. This narrative perhaps inspired the allegiance of their people.

In addition to this, by redefining the Madhesi identity from a regional label to an ethno-territorial label, they were able to valorize the Madhesi identity category imposed by the Nepali state, which had been an inferiority complex for them and Madhesi people until 2007. This would have also created ethnic solidarity within the Madhesi group. Miklian (2008) claims that by shifting the meaning of Madhesi identity, Madhesi leaders were able to polarize society into Madhesi versus Pahadi camps. However, understanding a holistic sense of Madhesi peoplehood in the changed political context also requires an understanding of how Madhesi locals

understood their identities in the post-CPA period. In the following chapter, I will examine the process by which the Madhesi locals negotiated their identities.

CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS OF CASE STUDY FINDINGS II:

NARRATIVES OF MADHESI LOCALS

This chapter examines how local Madhesi residents (local elites) understood Madhesi identity following the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) between the Maoists and the government of Nepal. Particularly, it investigates the extent to which the shared narratives of a distinct Madhesi identity among Madhesi leaders identified in the previous chapter are replicated among the Madhesi locals. It is therefore geared towards examining the process of identity formation among Madhesi locals and accessing the effectiveness of the top-down discourse detected in the previous chapter.

I explore socio-political experiences and identities of seventeen participants from Madhesi and non-Madhesi backgrounds by examining the themes derived from the field data. Many of my informants are from Madhes province including local Madhesi leaders, think tank scholars, academics, and local journalists among others. I selected these participants based on their abilities to answer my questions. Table 3 shows the status of my interviewees:

Table 3: Status of Local Madhesi Residents

	Profession	**Gender**	**Caste/Religion**	**Location/District**
1	Madhesi Activist/NGO worker	Male	Madhesi Hindu-Backward caste[50]	Saptari
2	Deputy Mayor/Local Madhesi leader	Female	Muslim	Parsa
3	Dalit Activist	Male	Madhesi Hindu-Lower caste	Dhanusha
4	NGO worker	Female	Madhesi Hindu-Upper Caste	Parsa
5	Student/Researcher	Female	Madhesi Hindu-Upper Caste	Mahotari
6	Lawyer/Madhesi Activist	Male	Madhesi Hindu-Upper Caste	Mahotari
7	Women Activist	Female	Madhesi Hindu-Backward caste	Saptari
8	Development worker	Male	Muslim	Sarlahi/Morang
9	University Professor	Male	Madhesi Hindu-Upper Caste	Parsa
10	Government Official (Retired engineer)	Male	Madhesi Hindu-Backward caste	Mahotari
11	NGO leader/Think Tank Scholar	Male	Madhesi Hindu-Upper Caste	Dhanusha
12	Local Social worker	Male	Tharu	Parsa
13	Local Madhesi leader	Male	Muslim	Parsa
14	Local Tharu Activist	Male	Tharu	Saptari
15	Journalist/Political Columnist/Engineer	Male	Madhesi Hindu-Upper Caste	Mahotari
16	College Teacher (Retired)	Male	Tharu	Saptari/Parsa
17	Local Journalist	Female	Madhesi Hindu-Lower caste	Kapilbastu

Source: Developed by the author based on the information of his data

I included non-Madhesi participants to explore critical understandings of Madhesi identity from outside the group.[51] As in the previous chapter, I examined Madhesi identity along four dimensions: pre-CPA experience, self-identifications, cultural and symbolic resources, and

[50] The term Backward caste (used in this study) refers to Tarai Hindu occupational caste or middle castes. Untouchables (Dalits) are low caste Hindu groups and belong to the bottom of Hindu caste hierarchy.

[51] Many Madhesis still believe that Muslim and Tharu (minority groups) belong to the Madhesi group, and it was a ploy by the government to put them in separate categories. Many Muslims and Tharus, however, claim that they are different.

history. The development of Madhesi identity among local Madhesi residents is also evident from interviews. Using interviews as a primary source of data clearly entails challenges; information obtained from interviews can be biased or selective (Strasheim 2019, 85). Therefore, I supplemented the information gathered through interviews with other primary and secondary sources to verify the validity of information gathered from interviews.

This chapter is organized into three main parts. The first section examines Madhesi locals' socio-political experiences prior to the CPA. The second section critically reviews their understanding of the impact of the Maoist insurgency on the process of Madhesi identity development. The third section examines Madhesi locals' different expressions of self-identities based on the themes stated above. The last section provides an overall conclusion of the chapter.

Pre-CPA Experience

A clear conclusion emerging from the narratives of Madhesi locals is that the deep-rooted Madhesi discrimination by the Pahadi-dominated Nepali state, detailed by Madhesi leaders as the key issue behind the development of the Madhesi identity, was confirmed by an overwhelming majority of the Madhesi locals I spoke to. During interviews, many of these respondents talked about their experience of and discontent with perceived Madhesi exploitation and discrimination both during and after the *Panchayat* rule. Particularly, they provided a detailed account of the Nepali state's discriminatory policies and practices against Madhesis. A few of them also described their understanding of the Madhesi sufferings during Nepal's early years. A dominant theme that emerged from their narratives of early years, which corresponded with that of Madhesi leaders, is Madhesi exclusion from the national unification process:

The foundation is that in Nepal's nation building, the nation builder or the victor called Prithibi Naryan Shah's time onwards, it is said Tarai incognita in geography. It means, a territory whose mapping has yet conducted. Tarai was taken like this. The land is there. But there are no residents. It means the land has to win first and establish your own population (Pahadis) there. Because of this, until Bahadur Shah's (King Prithivi Narayan Shah's younger brother) time, "Birta" (land grants) were distributed without considering the presence of the people there. Employment was given for Army people, and the royalists. This resulted into a resentment, which was obvious. The locals (Madhesis) there helped the British during the Anglo-Gorkha war (1814-16) . . . that deepened Gorkha's hatred on these people (Madhesis). The Gorkhas' understood that these are not our people . . . They suffered from Gorkhali colonialism. Those people realized that life would be easier under "Firangi's" (British) colonialism. They would not take the land the way Gorkhalis did. But unfortunately, opposite had happened. For strategic interests, the East-India Company returned that land to the Gorkhali palace. So, the division existed there further deepened. (Interview 15)

The testimony reveals Madhesi dissatisfaction with their exclusion from the process of Nepal's territorial unification. The repetition of the word "land" suggests that king Prithivi Narayan Shah and his descendants conquered Madhes, and distributed Tarai lands to their army officers to support the unification campaign without any regard for Madhesis (Sah 2017). This resulted in the Madhesi revolt in the early 19th century. The sentence ("Because of that. . .") indicates that Madhesis sided with the British during the Anglo-Gorkha War that was fought over border disputes (Whelpton 2005). This event soured Madhesi relations with the Nepali state, placing

their Nepali identity into question, and making their access to state power difficult (Karki and Wenner 2020; K. Pandey 2017; Whelpton 2005).

This discrimination was prolonged during the Rana regime. The Ranas, as discussed in the previous chapter, treated Madhesis as colonized subjects. They executed policies and practices of isolating Madhesis from the rest of Nepalese society. For instance, Madhesis were restricted from traveling to Kathmandu (the capital city), requiring permission from the authorities until 1958 (Gaige 1975; K. Jha 2017; Karki and Wenner 2020; Whelpton 2005). More importantly, the Ranas denied space for Madhesis in national politics. An interviewee said:

> *Earlier, Ranas created "Bhardari Shabha (an assembly of courtiers, family members, and relatives)." If you look at that list of Bhardari Sabha, you will find a handful of Madhesis there. (Interview 1)*

The word "Bhardari Sabha" implies that during Rana oligarchy, the Ranas used to have a council for making major decisions regarding state affairs, in which Madhesi participation was almost nonexistent. Whelpton (2005, 58) writes that Madhesis were never included into "the Bhardari inner core." The Ranas also introduced laws that favored hill elites. For example, the *1854 Muluki Ain*, the first national code, prioritized the hill-Hindu culture, while tying rights, privileges, and obligations to specific caste categories. It gave cultural legitimacy to the dominant upper caste hill elites (Brahmins and Chhetries) to control the country's political and administrative structures (Pfaff-Czarnecka 1997; Whelpton 1997, 2005). Furthermore, Jung Bahadur Rana, the first Rana Prime Minister initiated the "Jamindari" (landlordism) system of tax collection, in which hill people made up the majority of workforce (Whelpton 2005). In brief,

the early Nepali rulers regarded Madhes more as a colonial possession that served the economic and other interests of Kathmandu elites, than as a constituent unit of Nepal.

Furthermore, many of my respondents pointed out a variety of policies and practices implemented by the Pahadi-dominated government that discriminated against Madhesis after the end of the Rana oligarchy in 1951. The following are key themes that emerged from the data, explaining Madhesi experiences of perceived marginalization and discontent prior to the CPA:

- Citizenship Issue
- Language Issue
- Migration and Overpopulation
- Madhesi Marginalization in State Apparatuses
- Electoral Underrepresentation
- Economic Development and Disparities
- Abuse and Humiliation

Citizenship Issue

The state's policies and practices in relation to the various groups it controls can influence their desire to survive as separate entities (Brass 1991, 50). With the end of the Rana regime, Nepal introduced its first citizenship law in 1952. The Citizenship Act of 1952 specified liberal provisions for obtaining citizenship. Under this Act, anyone could acquire citizenship through birth, being permanently settled in Nepal and having at least one parent born in Nepal, or by living in Nepal for at least five years, or for women, through marriage to a Nepali citizen (Nepal Citizenship Act 1952, Article 2, 4). Designed in accordance with the 1962 Constitution of Nepal,

the Citizenship Act of 1964 replaced the Citizenship Act of 1952 with strict citizenship acquisition measures to control the inflow of Indian immigrants. It is argued that the *Panchayat* regime at that time perceived India as the main threat of Nepal's' sovereignty and its own rule (Chaudhary 2015; Gaige 1975).

The 1964 Act is viewed as a turning point for Madhesi discrimination regarding citizenship. It changed the rules for inclusion in the Nepalese national identity. The act removed provisions for citizenship by birth and distinguished between citizenship by descent[52] and naturalization. For citizenship by naturalization, it required fluency in speaking and writing Nepali and evidence of domicile in Nepal for two years for people with Nepali origin and fifteen years for people with non-Nepali origin (see Nepal Citizenship Act 1964, Article 6).[53]

Already perceived as Indians, their lack of birth certificates and other legal documents including the land ownership title to prove their Nepali heritage made it nearly impossible for many Madhesis to acquire citizenship based on descent (ICG 2007). The requirement of fluency in Nepali placed Madhesis at a distinct disadvantage. Since they speak North Indian dialects as their native tongues, the Nepali requirement prevented them from becoming Nepalese citizens even through naturalization. In addition, neither the 1962 Constitution nor the 1964 Act defined Nepali origin. It was interpreted as meaning "Pahadi origin," which was used to define Madhesis as Indian (Gaige 1975; K. P. Pandey 2022; Sijapati 2013).

The 1990s saw the transition from a "partyless" *Panchayat* to multiparty democracy, but the citizenship policy remained the same. The 1990 Constitution of Nepal followed the same

[52] This provision required evidence such as parents' or grandparents' citizenship certificates or their birth certificate to obtain citizenship based on descent. It is argued that this affected many Madhesi youths whose parents were uneducated farmers and did not possess citizenship certificates by the time they were born.

[53] Also see the Constitution of Nepal, 2019 (1962), pp. 3-5 for articles 7 and 8 (Nepal 1962).

provisions of the 1962 constitution and the same 1964 Act remained in effect until 2006 (K. P. Pandey 2022). This resulted in millions of Nepalese citizens being stateless, mainly in the Tarai region.[54] This is reflected by the following interviewees:

> *If you look at the citizenship laws made after 1950, one condition was kept. To obtain the Nepali citizenship, one should be able to speak Nepali language. How could they (Madhesis) speak Nepali language? (Interview 6)*

> *They (Madhesis) were not given citizenship. My mother got citizenship in 1991-92 after the Nepali Congress government came. When my mother died in 2006, she had been married for 55 years. One among them who gave condolences was Ian Martin (Head of the United Nations Mission to Nepal). He asked me how long your parents got married . . .They were about to reach 56 years of their togetherness, I said. For my mother to become a citizen, it took 40 years. Getting citizenship was a difficult task. Nepal's 1962 and 1990 constitutions each stated that citizenship would be granted to those who speak Nepali. For those women who married Nepali boys, citizenship would be issued 15 years after their stay in Nepal. (Interview 9)*

> *One was citizenship's issue. Making different laws and rules, Madhesis have been denied citizenship for years. (Interview 7)*

[54] The government of Nepal constituted an independent commission under the pressure of political leaders from Tarai in 1994 which concluded that about 3.5 million people, mostly from the Tarai region were deprived of citizenship (Hachhethu 2007; K. P. Pandey 2022).

Everything was pretty much biased towards Madhesis, starting with the citizenship provisions. (Interview 5)

See, the people who have been living in this territory . . . my fourth, fifth generations have been living here. I am struggling for getting a citizenship certificate . . . Even now, thousands and millions of people have not got citizenship. (Interview 13)

These responses illustrate the impact of the discriminatory citizenship provisions of the 1962 and 1990 Constitutions on Madhesis. The interrogation ("How could they. . .") by interviewee 6 exhibits anger against the *Panchayat* policy of requiring Nepali language proficiency for acquiring citizenship. The sentence ("For those women…") by interviewee 9, indicates that Madhesi women who came to Nepal after marriage were at a distinct disadvantage due to the 15-year domicile requirement. Though debated from the hill perspective, Upreti, Poudel, and Ghimire (2013) noted that many Madhesis in the past were deprived of government services and other opportunities due to their lack of citizenship.

Those who regarded citizenship policies as discriminatory also viewed Nepali bureaucrats' attitudes and behavior as problematic for Madhesis' acquiring Nepali citizenship certificate:

People who have lived in Madhes have a strong feeling that Madhesis are given citizenship looking at their face. (Interview 14)

In Nepal, the formality does not have a value, the oral is law. In constitution, it is written that citizenship can be obtained from Mother. The Chief District Officer (CDO)) says we

do not accept the constitution. We should get the circular from the Ministry of Home Affairs. The CDO did not give the citizenship. The case was filed in a court. The court said it cannot be enforced until the law is made . . .To make the law, the bill was tabled to the parliament, which did not approve. Due to current liquid politics, it came from the ordinance. The court overturned the ordinance. In case the court accepted the ordinance, CDO would overturn it. Because it does not resonate with the manifested principle. (Interview 15)

The narratives underscore the difficulties Madhesis had faced in obtaining citizenship not just because of legal requirements, but also due to the mindset and behavior of government officials (who come mostly from the hills). The word "face" (Interview 14) implies race, indicating these officials' racial prejudice against Madhesis, who often deny citizenship to them by looking at their appearance. Mathema (2011) noted that those Madhesis who applied for citizenship had to deal with humiliating citizenship interviews in the past.

In 2006, the government, therefore, amended citizenship law and addressed many of Mahdesis' concerns regarding citizenship.[55] But Madehsis are still vocal against some citizenship provisions stipulated in the constitution. They are putting pressure on the government to amend the constitution promulgated in 2015 by the Constitutional Assembly. The primary bone of contention is the cooling-off period for the naturalization of foreign women marrying Nepalese men. Madhesi law makers argue that they should give naturalization immediately after marriage since cross-border marriages are common in the Tarai. But the major political parties, especially the leftist parties reject this argument citing nationalism. Their push for change seems to be

[55] Under the Citizenship Act of 2006, those who were born or domiciled in Nepal permanently prior to April 13, 1990, became Nepalese citizens by birth, which benefitted many Madhesis (K. P. Pandey 2022, 77).

motivated by the Indian *Citizenship Act, 1955*. The *Act* states that a person who is married to an Indian citizen must be "ordinarily resident in India for seven years before making an application for registration" (The Citizenship Act 1955, Section 5 (1) (C)). The citizenship issue has divided the entire Nepalese society. This has prevented the government from making laws to address this issue.

Language Issue

Language policies may trigger ethno-national conflict in communities where language is an influential marker of communal identity (Brass 1991; Colulombe 2001). Following the end of the Rana regime in 1950, education was primarily focused on Nepal's nation-building. The government used Nepali as an instrument to promote a single identity, and culture (Hangen 2007; Tejendra Pherali and Garratt 2014). In 1956, it adopted Nepali as the only language for instruction in public schools. Until then, Hindi was a teaching language in the Tarai (Gaige 1975; Hangen 2007; Sijapati 2013), where most people speak non-Nepali languages.

In 1956, the National Education Planning Commission (NEPC) recommended mandatory Nepali language instruction in public schools. The commission justified its recommendation by stating, among other things, that it would prevent preparing textbooks in multiple languages; and that different communities of Nepal could easily understand Nepali language (NEPC 1956, 104). However, its political aim was to promote a monolingual nationalistic ideology (Hangen 2007; Tejendra Pherali and Garratt 2014; Sijapati 2013). As a result, the K. I. Singh government restricted the use of Hindi in schools after 1957 (H. B. Jha 2017). The 1959 Constitution of Nepal declared Nepali the national language of Nepal. The 1971 New Education System Plan was implemented to "harmonize multi-lingual traditions into a single nationhood" (HMG 1971,

14). The 1990 constitution further recognized Nepali as the official language of Nepal (Malagodi 2013).

During my data collection, almost all the Madhesi locals I interviewed agreed with the Madhesi leaders' assertion that homogenization and enculturation accelerated by the promotion of Nepali language led to the suppression of their culture, language, and identity. But more than this, they said that it adversely affected Madhesis' academic and professional achievement:

> *Prior to the Maoist conflict, the state was completely biased towards Madhes and Madhesis. The policies such as "Ek Bhasa, Ek Bhesh" (one language, one dress) were there. . . Nepali language was given preference . . . Even in the textbooks, the words, diagrams, pictures did not represent Madhesi people or Madhes. These made it difficult for us to study and secure a high grade in school. . . Regarding the Public Service Commission examination, many capable Madhesi individuals have been marginalized due to the medium of language (Nepali) utilized in the exam. (Interview 2)*

> *Due to the language barrier, we don't have many Madhesis in the Public Service. (Interview 4)*

> *Then came the Nepali education policy. "Nepalizing" everyone . . .Whole generations of Madhesis remained outside of school. Even those people who are currently functional in Kathmandu and who did their early education in Madhes struggled with the language. The medium of instruction in Nepali was a real struggle for them. . . Still in, even in the*

day in Madhes, because it's not their native language, you know, children still struggle to go to school. (Interview 5)

Language became a big barrier for Tarai and Madhes to assimilate with the state. They (Madhesi students) did not know the language (Nepali). Teachers who were there in Madhesi villages were not fluent in Nepali. (Interview 9)

The testimonies demonstrate a detrimental effect of enforcing the teaching and use of Nepali in the Tarai by the post-Rana governments. The content and assertions presented in interviews 2, 3, 4, 5, and 9 are similar. These suggest that the use of the Nepali language as a medium of school instruction, and civil service examinations not only weakened the academic performance of Madhesi students but also prevented them from obtaining public sector jobs in Nepal. This ultimately benefited the people of hill origin, whose mother tongue is Nepali (Gaige 1975; Mathema 2011; Tejendra Pherali and Garratt 2014). This change in policy, as discussed in chapters III and IV, gave rise to an ethno-national movement and conflict in the Tarai in the 1950s.

Hill Migration and Over Population

Migration in the Tarai is a contentious issue in Nepal. It is interesting to note that both Pahadis and Madhesis view each other as new arrivals in the Tarai. The region was considered a Malarial hell until the 1950s (Mathema 2011). Despite the Ranas' encouragement, many Pahadis were uninterested in migrating there until the second half of the twentieth century. This compelled the Ranas to accept Indian settlers moving to the region for economic development (Alden Wily, Chapagain, and Sharma 2008; Whelpton 2005). In the 1960s, however, the

*Panchaya*t government enacted resettlement programs and encouraged hill migration to the Tarai for economic gains. Facilitated by the malaria eradication programs from the late 1950s through the 1970s, the government sought to reduce population pressure in the hills, and to increase agricultural output in the Tarai (Alden Wily, Chapagain, and Sharma 2008; Gaige 1975; Guneratne 2002). The government also passed the Lands Act in 1964 to alter the relationship between landowner and tenant (Gaige 1975). Though highly debatable from the hill perspective, many interviewees viewed these policies and practices as part of the *Panchayat* government's ploy to "Nepalize" or "Pahadize" the Tarai region:

> *Two kinds of migration had happened from the hills to Tarai. One was that the Tarai land was straightforwardly distributed after bringing the land reform policy. The state distributed Madhesi Jamindars'(landlords) lands to Pahadis . . . They had the power, police, and CDOs . . . The excessive lands were seized and distributed. What they did was by making the East-West highway, new cities were developed. All those jungles were cut down and the lands were distributed to "Pahadis". That created a fear in Tarai and Madhes that population influx would make them minority . . . Look at Chitwan (central Tarai distict). In 1961, the population of Tharu was 83 percent. Now the Tharu population is only 26 percent there. The same has happened in Bardiya, Banke, Kailali, Morang, Jhapa, Sarlahi, Bara, and Rautahat. In all Tarai districts, the population influx was made from the Top. It was all planned. It is like the Israeli occupation in the West Bank. Similarly, there was a company named "Resettlement" . . .The government of Nepal made a resettlement company and gave a certain amount, a certain bigha of land, and some cubic of wood. That's how the government helped them to make homes to resettle hill people. (Interview 9)*

In the past, people in the Tarai had land. Others did not have. The land reform act might have some beneficent face. But because of this, many Madhesi landowners had to lose their lands. Those who migrated here from Pahad, they were distributed lands, by making policy . . . Many lands were given destroying the forests. The jungle from New Road to Barahathwa was very dense in the past . . . Within 20 years, all settlements have done there. All these are the people of Pahadi origin. . . Madhesis have lost their lands; lost their rights . . . Look at the east, Rajbansi were the landholders . . . Today, if you look at "Rajbansis" in the eastern Tarai, they are no more landlords. All of them have become poor. Today, the landlords of these places are Koiralas and Aryals (hill people). They have the domination there. (Interview 8)

The narratives explain Madhesi locals' belief that *Panchayat* policies of land reform and resettlement were a conspiracy to minoritize Madhesis in their own land. The sentence "It was all planned" (Interview 9) suggests that although these policies were deemed as economic necessities by the *Panchayat* government, the political motivation behind them was different. It helped increase the Pahadi population in the Tarai. Similarly, the word "land reform" appears in both narratives (Interview 8 and 9), indicating that Madhesi's lands were seized by bringing land reform policies and given to the hill-migrants during the *Panchayat* regime, strengthening Pahadi domination in the Tarai. This resonates with many Madhesi scholars' (K. Jha 2017; M. Jha 2016; Mandal 2013; Sijapati 2013) argument that the resettlement programs and the Lands Act were intended to solidify control over the lucrative agricultural and industrial Tarai region.

But scholars like Gaige (1975), Alden Wily, Chapagain, and Sharma (2008), and Whelpton (2005) partially agree with this argument, stating that most hill migration in the Tarai after 1950 occurred spontaneously, caused in part by the eradication of Malaria and the

construction of the East-west highway. Moreover, they also argue that a large migration occurred not only from the North (hill to Tarai), but also from the South (India to Tarai). Even today, the Pahadi group dominates the Tarai districts except those (in central and eastern Tarai) located in Madhes province where most Indian migrants have settled (see chapter III). Further, they noted that the 1964 Lands Acts had many loopholes, which mostly benefitted the landowners. But none of these scholars entirely deny that these policies and practices contributed to 'Nepalization' or 'Pahadization' of the Tarai region, strengthening Pahadis' dominance in the region.

Marginalization in the State Apparatus

The Madhesi leaders' argument regarding Madhesi exclusion in the state apparatuses was strongly confirmed by their followers. During interviews, almost all respondents stated that despite the democratic restoration in 1990, state institutions were unfriendly to Madhesis in terms of their representation and participation. Furthermore, they also expressed their anger and discontent with the state for not allowing Madhesis to hold top level key positions in public institutions. This is echoed in the following:

> *In Nepal, look at the judiciary, there is nowhere proportional representation. There is the representation of a single ethnic group. In Nepal. look at the parliament, there is also this kind of representation. Look at the bureaucracy in Nepal, there is no representation of Madhesis. When did a Madhesi become the Prime-Minister in this country? When do we see this day? In bureaucracy, look at the Secretary, Under Secretary, and CDO (Chief District Officer). All represent one ethnic group. (Interview 3)*

If you look at the behavior of the state, the state behavior was a kind of unitary, centralized, and exclusive. One group had the control over the state structures. Either it was in politics or in other institutions of the state, which we called bureaucracy. After this, in security institutions, or in the areas of development; whatever the structures the state has, only one group had control. Madhesi communities had remained only as a taxpayer and a voter. (Interview 7)

If you look at the data of Nepalese bureaucracy, you do not find Madhesi presence more than 10 percent. At the time (2006-7), it was less than 10 percent. Their presence was only in the technical areas. Madhesis were blocked in 3 to 4 areas such as home ministry, defense ministry, finance ministry, and security forces. (Interview 9)

The anecdotes illustrate Madhesi exclusion in all state institutions. The use of interrogations ("When did a Madhesi ...?" and "When do we…?") by interviewee 3 reveals his anger towards the state for not letting Madhesis hold major positions in state institutions. The conditional sentences ("If you look…") by interviewee 7 and ("If you look at the data, . . .") by interviewee 9 also reflect this reality. Cottrell and Ghai (2008) pointed out Madhesi exclusion in Nepal's executive affairs and their underrepresentation in key executive positions. They stated:

Between 1951 and April 2006 there were together 1341 ministers. Of these Ministers 26.8% were Bahuns (though Bahauns are 12.7% of the total population of Nepal); 28.2% were Chetri/Thakuri (these groups being 17.3% of the population); and 10.1% were Newar (who are 5.5% of the population). Group from Tarai (Madhesi) had held 15.3% of the post despite being 33% of the population. All holders of the position of Prime

Ministers were from these three caste groups, Bahun, Chetri and Newar, as were 94% of the home ministers. All Chief Secretaries of the government, thus far, had belonged to the three dominant groups (Cottrell and Ghai 2008, 3).

The data demonstrates the dominance of Hindu upper-caste hill groups in Nepal's bureaucratic, affairs since the 1950s. Those who defined Madhesi exclusion from state institutions, strongly expressed their concern at their dismal presence in the military:

The Nepal Army, or the Royal Nepal Army as we used to call it, used to recruit people based on their appearance. They used to deny recruiting Madhesi people just looking at the color of their face. By looking at their faces, the Army used to assume the Madhesi people were unfit to serve in a security institution. (Interview 12)

Because of their origin, the Madhesi people were not accepted into security institutions (Nepal Army). Madhesis were not considered loyal to the country. (Interview 2)

Till 2007, they (Nepal Army) recruited none (Madhesis) in the combat position. They used to hire doctors, engineers. Do you know the reason? Because Pahadi doctors did not like to go to the Army for work. Later the Military hospital made rules and laws to allow Army doctors to work at private clinics. Therefore, only Madhesi doctors and engineers used to join the military. Bir hospital's doctors would get the name and fame and could work outside. But the Army doctors would not get that. I think after 1990

policies were changed. Besides the technical vacate, they would not hire Madhesis. (Interview 9)

The narratives underline Madhesis' restriction in Nepal Army in terms of their recruitment and their concern at this discrimination. The word "Army" appears in all the narratives, indicating the military's prejudice towards Madhesis. The sentence ("Till 2007, . . .") by interviewee 9, suggests that except for some technical positions, Madhesi's were largely excluded from combat roles until 2007. As discussed in the previous chapter, Madhesi exclusion in the Nepal Army is the result of their support for the British in the Anglo-Gurkha War (Hachhethu 2007; Karki and Wenner 2020; K. Pandey 2017).

Electoral Under-representation

The electoral process is viewed as discriminatory by a few Madhesi locals, contributing to Madhesi underrepresentation in national politics. Upreti, Poudel, and Ghimire (2013) noted that district re-demarcation, electoral constituency allocation, and distribution of those constituencies have all contributed to Madhesis' dismal representation in the electoral process. Shah (2006) contends that the 1963 administrative district demarcation was unfair. By disregarding ecological and social dynamics, the *Panchayat* regime incorporated various portions of the Siwalik hills and mid-mountain areas in the Tarai districts. The electoral constituencies were also designed in terms of geography which increased hill dominance in legislative decision makings following the Rana regime. Pherali and NEMAF (2021, 53) further argue that the "restructuring of 75 administrative districts was unfairly based on land mass instead of population density." This had "a significant political implication in terms of hills returning more representatives than the Tarai."

These policies and practices continued even after the restoration of democracy. Despite the 1990 constitution requiring an increase in parliamentary constituencies with population growth, it was not fully implemented. Hachhethu (2007) notes that the population of Tarai increased from 43 percent in 1991 to 48 percent in 2001, but there was no increase in the number of constituencies. It has also been argued that electoral constituencies in Nepal are distributed in a North-South step pattern, with the intention of having a sizable hill electorate in every Tarai district (ICG Report 2007). Though Madhesi leaders did not raise this issue during my interaction, most of their party documents including their parties' manifesto for the 2008 Constitutional Assembly (CA) election (MPRF 2008; NSP (A) 2008; TMDP 2008) strongly underlined this issue. An interviewee stated:

> *The state institutions were designed in such a way that the representation of Madhesis would be low, particularly at the decision-making level. The first democratic election was held in 1959. The representation of Madhesis in the decision making at that time was minimal. This happened because electoral constituencies were built in terms of geography. Population was not given a priority. . . During the Panchayat System, King Mahendra introduced a different electoral system. . . In 1963, he brought the concept of districts. Madhes was confined within 20 districts. However, hills were divided into 55 districts. Even at that time, Madhesi population was bigger . . . During Panchayat, districts were used as electoral constituencies. Each district would have 1-2 representatives to the legislature. So, the representation of Madhesis was not more than 10-15 percent. After the 1990 democratic movement, new constituencies were designed, which helped to add the number of constituencies in Madhes. Whereas the entire*

electoral system was almost the same, the redesign of electoral constituencies alone did not increase Madhesi representation beyond 20 percent between 1990 and 2006. (Interview 1)

The narratives strongly suggest that Madhesi underrepresentation in national politics is also a function of the electoral constituency system. The sentence, "The state institution…" suggest that hill rulers since the end of the Rana regime prioritized land mass over population to re-designed districts, and electoral constituencies, which benefitted traditional hill elites. Sijapati (2013), therefore, argues that the re-engineering of electoral constituencies was a grand strategy to exclude Madhesis from the legislative process. In sum, the re-engineering of electoral constituencies based on population has still remained one of the major political demands of the Madheis people and the parties.

Economic Distribution and Development Disparities

The economic distribution and development disparities described by a few Madhesi leaders resonated with many Madhesi locals. They expressed dissatisfaction with budget allocations and expenditures in the Tarai. While contentious from the hill perspective that views poverty, deprivation and backwardness as a national problem, and not an issue of any particular region (Upreti, Poudel, and Ghimire 2012), several participants noted that despite the region accounting for more than two thirds of the nation's gross domestic product, the government did not invest enough in this territory:

If you look at from an economic perspective, the highest revenue is generated from Madhes to the government. From the border and the customs, a huge revenue comes.

Whatever comes, is from Madhes. If you look at the budget of Madhes and Pahad, there is a big difference. (Interview 17)

We also sometime look at the state's budget. Most of them (Hill elites) have utilized it in Pahad. The Tarai has been allocated a limited budget . . .Each year India gives some economic assistance. Look at BP Koirala hospital in Dharan. It was built by the Indian government. But the government of Nepal moved it to a hilly area. What is the benefit of it for Madhesis? (Interview 16)

If you look at the budgetary system or read documentations of the National Planning Commission, how much does this state give to the Madhesis? Madhes Province is getting a total of two percent of Nepal's budget. We only get the two percent of the total budget of this country. (Interview 13)

We still do not have equal share with the amount of foreign aid that drops in. (Interview 5)

The stories demonstrate perceptions of disparity in economic allocation between the hills and the plains. The use of conditionals "If you look at…" (Interview 16 and 17) is indicative of the fact that the interviewees find this comparison important and the distribution insufficient. Likewise, the sentence structures of interviewees 5 and 16 are analogous, implying disparity in sharing foreign aid development programs between Madhes and Pahad. While research has not been conducted much on this topic, Madhesi scholars like H. B. Jha (2017) and K. Jha (2017) have argued that development initiatives as well as budget allocations have never been equal for the

Tarai. But Upreti, Poudel, and Ghimire (2013) critique this claim, asserting that low population density, high cost of development projects, and higher per capita investment cost in the hills and mountains are some of the key reasons resource distributions seem to be higher in these areas. However, they do not entirely deny that resource distribution in the Tarai was unscientific.

Abuse and Humiliation

Identity construction is significantly connected to routine public behavior such as abuse, shame, and humiliation. "Verbal abuse and violence, in particular are concerned with the beating of ethnic boundaries through the enforcement of definitions of what ethnic other is or must do" (Jenkins 2008, 67). During interactions, many of my interviewees in accordance with the Madhesi leaders shared their stories of humiliation and mistreatment at the hands of so called "genuine Nepalis" in hill-dominated areas. These include insulting and mistreating Madhesis by using ethnic/racial slurs. The following explores some of their experiences:

> *I was in Kathmandu. A Madhesi was selling vegetables. The People there did not trust his weighing machine. He was blamed for not weighing properly. He said to them "I had not given less. Rather I have given more." People charged him saying you Biharis (Indians) are like this. They called him Bihari just looking at his face. Bihari or non-Bihari is determined by the person's citizenship, ID card or paper documents. People mistreated him saying Bihari. (Interview 17)*

> *In Birjung (a major Madhesi city), I used to consider myself 100 percent Nepali. No one could question my identity. But when I came to Kirtipur (Kathmandu) almost 35 years*

ago, someone asked me a question: "Sir ko Indiama Ghar Kaha ho" (Where is your home in India, Sir?) That made me surprised. . . I told him that my home is in India's Birjung. (Interview 9)

. . . my home lies in Dandimathai village of Mahotary district. I was studying there. My sister got married. My brother-in-law had a job in Butuwal (western Tarai town). He was an Auxiliary Health Worker. My father suggested me to go to sister's place for my study. From a Madhesi village, where Nepali used to be taught in Hindi, I reached Butuwal for my study. It was my first encounter to Nepali language. There is a small story that I want to connect. All my cohorts were Gulmelis, Palpalis, Syangalis (hill people). They came to Butwal from the hills for study. I could not speak Nepali. . . I remember an incident in my class. It was the lunch time. Behind there was Tinau river. We used to eat our lunch sitting on a stone in the bank of Tinau river. After we returned, someone killed and hung a lizard on the blackboard in my class. One lady said, that "Madeshia" or "Marsya" what she said I barely remember, might have done in class. That badly impacted very much on my mind. (Interview 6)

The narratives demonstrate Madhesi aggression and frustration at being treated as foreigners. The use of the words "Bihari", "Indian" and "Madheshia" or "Marsya" by interviewees 17, 4 and 8 respectively gives an image of how Madhesi people have been denigrated, and how their Nepali identity has often been suspected in the eyes of so-called hill nationalists. The sentence ("But when. . .") by interviewee 6 illustrates his anger at the way hill people perceive people with non-Nepali accents and darker skin as Indians.

Pherali and Garratt (2014, 42) accentuate this discrimination presenting a scenario:

Figure 6: Picture of Social Humiliation of Madhesis

Scene 1
A Pahade hawker knocks on the gate of Kathmandu city's house with strawberries in his traditional hilly basket.

The landlady asks: *Dai Kafal Kasari ho*? [Elder brother, what rate are the strawberries?]

Pahade hawker: Bis ruppe mana ho, baini. [Twenty rupees per mana, younger sister.]

The landlady asks: *Bis ta Mahango bhayenara, dai? Milayear dinusna*. [Isn't twenty expensive, elder brother? Could you consider the price please?]

Scene 2
A Madhesi hawker shouts outside the gate – *Ye . . . alu, kauli, ramtoirya, tamatar . . .* [potatoes, cauliflower, ladyfinger, tomatoes]

The same landlady asks: *Ye Madise golbheda kasari ho*? [Ye, Madise, how much are the tomatoes?]

Madhesi hawker: *Hajur. . .kilo ko das rupaiya parchha hajur* [My lady, ten rupees per kilogram, madam]

The Landlady: *Kati mahango, ali sasto de.* [That's expensive. Make it cheaper!]

Source: Pherali and Garratt (2014, 42)

The picture reflects so-called "real Nepalis" daily abuse of Madhesis in Kathmandu, the capital of the country. The word "Dai" in scene 1 shows the respect that Pahadis give to fellow Pahadis, whereas the term "Madise" in scene 2 implies their prejudice towards Nepalese people of Indian origin. This difference in treatment is also reflected in sentences ("Could you. . .") in scene 1 and ("Make it cheaper") in scene 2. It also reveals the Pahadi peoples deeply rooted discriminatory attitude and mindsets towards the Madhesi people. In summary, the deep-rooted perceived Madhesi discrimination and oppression by the Pahadi-dominated state and the Pahadi people as

outlined by the Madhesi locals seem to be contributed to their awareness of their entrenched alien identity as Madhesi in the aftermath of the Maoist insurgency. The following section examines how Madhesi locals perceived the Maoist insurgency in relation to the rise of Madhesi identity after the CPA.

The Maoists and the Madhesi Identity

Between 1996 and 2006, the Maoist conflict capitalized on minority grievances. While the conflict was initially concentrated in hilly areas, it became increasingly appealing to Madhesis from 2000 onwards (Strasheim 2017). The Maoists vowed to end the upper-caste Hindu dominance, demanded a secular state, federalism, language and cultural rights, and self-determination for marginalized groups (Hangen 2007). This increased Madhesi support for the Maoists. During insurgency, they formed the "Madhesi National Liberation Front" to achieve greater recognition for Madhesis. They pursued fast-track political change using violence, which lured prominent Madhesi leaders from mainstream parties (Cailmail 2008).

The Maoists, however, failed to fulfill their earlier promises once they entered mainstream politics. Instead of maintaining Madhesis' identity-based concerns raised during the conflict, the Maoists aligned with traditional forces that opposed Madhesi issues of recognition and autonomy (K. Jha 2017, 81). For instance, as discussed in chapter IV, the Interim Constitution passed by the Maoists and the Seven Party Alliance (SPA),[56] did not express a genuine commitment to federalism, a long-held Madhesi demand. In response to these actions, prominent Madhesi leaders such as Upendra Yadav left the Maoist party and continued their independent movement for Madhesi rights and recognition. This led most of the Madhesi

[56] The Seven Party Alliance (SPA) was a loose coalition of major political parties, formed in 2005 to fight against the King's autocratic rule and to integrate the Maoist into democratic politics.

leaders, as discussed in the previous chapter, to argue that the Maoists had no role in the making of Madhesi identity.

The majority of the local Madhesi residents, however, did not fully agree with this argument. In their view, stating that Maoists had no influence in the process of Madhesi identity development is inaccurate. While the Maoists remained uncommitted to Madhesi agendas once they entered democratic politics, their insurgency, according to them, increased Madhesi awareness of their rights and identity (Field note 6/13/2021). This is echoed in the following:

> *The Maoist conflict brought one type of awareness and empowerment to Madhesis such as we need to fight for it. This thing also helped Madhesi leaders unite. The kind of awareness that your identity is not a shame (Interview 4).*

> *[the] Maoist insurgency helped change societal power relationship how I have seen. . . I travelled. I did see people talked freely; you know; how especially people at the very margin were liberated or felt liberated because of the Maoist movement. . . So, no doubt, it did help raise the issue (Interview 5).*

> *The Maoist conflict created a background. It provided a message for Madhesis, i.e., we need to fight. If we fight, we will get (Interview 6).*

> *The Maoist defined the people how they are exploited in terms of culture, religion, languages, and so on in the society. This brought a huge change in Madhes (Interview 8).*

Based on the narratives, it is evident that despite the Maoists abandoning Madhesi agendas after the CPA, the conflict influenced diverse Madhesi leaders and activists to unite and launch a powerful campaign against hill-domination. The assertions, content, and substance conveyed in interviews 4, 5,6, and 8 are notably similar. This linguistic pattern indicates that by establishing a discourse that Madhesis have been culturally, economically, and politically discriminated by the hill-dominated state, the Maoists – a powerful national actor in the eyes of Madhesis – enabled marginalized Madhesis to speak up against the hill domination they had endured for a long time. Hachhethu (2007) notes that the Maoists' insurgency contributed uniquely to Madhesi activism by promoting socio-economic change, which was appealing to Madhesi society. The Maoist rebellion had raised Madhesi grievances and instilled anti state sentiments among the Madhesi society particularly through the political campaigns of the Madhesi National Liberation Front (Pherali and NEMAF 2021).

However, these respondents said that though the Maoists' insurgency increased their awareness of Madhesi rights and identity, it was the Madhesi ethno-political groups who consolidated Madhesi identity following the CPA. In their view, it is the outcome of the continued struggle of the Madhesi ethnopolitical groups against the hill domination since the 1950s. Hachhethu (2007) noted that the entry of the Madhesi People's Rights Forum (MPRF) helped to expand the scope of Madhesi nationalism following the CPA. This is reflected in the following:

> *I would like to say that the Maoist movement triggered the identity issues of Madhes to flare up, to unite as a group, even to form a party, and become a force to be reckon in this country. But for the awareness about the existence of Madhesis, they should not be*

attributed. That was already over there. And that was in pre-existence in last several decades, much before than the Maoist came into being. (Interview 11)

. . . yes, the Maoist conflict was one of the issues. But it is not the only factor. There were so many other issues. For instance, after the 1990 democratic movement, Nepal Sadbhavana party was born. Gajendra Narayan Sing raised this issue. (Interview 6)

The Maoist movement strengthened itself by capitalizing on identity issues. And the fact given is that the force that suddenly seen like it has erupted as a volcano from Madhes was a force in building for fifty years before that. So, it wasn't really the Maoist movement that suddenly made Madhesis enlightened. That enlightenment was happening for years, years and years. The Maoist Movement what it just did was led the way for that eruption of what was building there for years and years. (Interview 5)

The testimonies underscore the efforts of the Madhesi parties in consolidating Madhesi identity following the CPA. The sentence ("But for the…") by interviewee 11 suggests that although the Maoist conflict brought strong awareness among Madhesis' about their rights and hill domination against them, the rapid rise of Madhesi identity would have been nearly impossible without the struggles of Madhesi parties (Gautam 2012). In brief, the findings demonstrate that while the Madhesi parties represent the main actors in the process of the Madhesi identity construction, the Maoist movement undeniably contributed greatly to giving Madhesi identity a voice. The following section investigates how Madhesi locals understood their identities following the CPA.

Assigned and Asserted Identities

Identity develops from a dialectic of self and other. Some aspects may come from the self, but many come from the reflection of the other (Barth 1969a; Hancock 2010; Jenkins 1996, 2008b, 2008a). In Nepal, as discussed in previous chapter, only Pahadis are considered as 'genuine Nepalis.' Madhesis are viewed as 'Others', i.e., recent settlers from India. They grew up being called as 'Madise', 'Madhise', 'Marsya', 'Dhoti', 'Bhaiya,' and so forth (Gautam 2012, 6). All the participants that I interviewed said that the Madhesi identity was initially an assigned identity imposed by the Pahadi-dominated state or Pahadis to exploit Madhesis, who are culturally, regionally, racially, and linguistically different from Pahadis. This is stated in the following:

> *There are people like us across the borders (in India), but no one calls them Madhesi. The state or Pahadi population/community called us Madhesi. (Interview 1)*

> *Prior to 2007. . . the Tarain (plains) people, particularly, those speaking Maithili, Bhojpuri, Abadhi languages, and having cultural differences such as wearing Dhoti, Kurta, and Gamchha (Madhesi cultural attire) when visiting Kathmandu, this term (Madhesi) was used. It was in the derogatory form. (Interview 6)*

> *By calling people from southern Nepal 'Madhesiaya', 'Masya', and 'Marsya', the term (Madhesi) was established. The word "Madhesi" was used to pejoratively call black people living in the south. (Interview 8)*

In the beginning, Madhesi identity came as a negative manner. (Interview 15)

Based on the narratives, the Madhesi identity at its inception was a label ascribed to the Madhesi people, while questioning their Nepali identity (Gautam 2012, 6). The sentence structures of interviewees 6, 8, and 15 are similar. These suggests that the Madhesi label was inflicted on those whose culture differs from the pan-Nepali culture. The word "black people" (interview 8) indicates that the Madhesi tag was also applied to humiliate Madhesis whose racial characteristics differ from Pahadis.

In the same way as Madhesi leaders, the Madhesi category remained a matter of disgrace for almost all Madhesi locals until 2007. This is due to the hatred and shame attached to it. Therefore, these people identified themselves as Nepali or Tarains (plains people) instead of Madhesi. Several academics (K. Jha 2017; Miklian 2008; K. Pandey 2017) have documented Madhesi's past denial of their pre-existing identity category. This is reflected in the following narratives:

In the beginning, we tried to hide this identity because there was so much hatred and stereotypes associated with it. For instance, there was an understanding that Madhesi would be black, dirty, etc. The Pahadi-backed state did not give us space. We were out of state power and detached from the community. Therefore, we wanted people to call us Nepali, not Madhesis. We did not want the Madhesi identity. (Interview 1)

The youths from Madhes used to deny Madhesi identity until 2007. (Interview 3)

Prior to 2007, there was a shame attached to it (Madhesi identity) for many people. (Interview 4)

The words "hide" (interview 1) and "deny" (interview 3) emphasize Madhesis' rejection of this identity category in the past due to the hatred, shame, and prejudice associated with it. The sentence ("For instance. . .") by interviewee 1 explains why Madhesis preferred to be recognized as Nepali or Tarain in the past.

Likewise, for some participants, security concerns also prompted their rejection of the Madhesi label in the past. This theme, however, was not apparent with the Madhesi leaders:

In the past, Madhesi people did not like to identify themselves as Madhesi. In hill dominated areas, it would make us feel insecure. Our seniors used to tell us about the physical attacks they endured from hill people when speaking about Madhesi identity. (Interview 2)

It (self-identifying as Madhesi) would be risky even now if Madhesis did not reach the level of deputy prime minister. In 1990, I used to feel that self-identifying as "Taraibasi" (resident of Tarai) was conditioning. It was tough to say "Madhesi." So, I used to ask how it would be to say Tara Nath Sharma's (a popular Nepali literary artist) term "Taraili (people of Tarai)?". . . After the mid 1990s I had courage to say I am a Maithili. To assert as "Madhesi", I had to wait until the Maoist during their movement openly formed Madhesi division. (Interview 15)

It is evident from the anecdotes that some participants rejected the Madhesi label not only because of shame reasons, but also for security concerns (fear of possible backlash). The statements by interview 2 ("In hill dominated areas . . .") implies that asserting themselves as Madhesi in hill-dominated areas used to make them feel unsecure. It would make them anti-nationals. This also resonates with the sentence by interviewee 15 ("It would be risky…").

Race and ethnicity are not simply labels that are assigned to people; they are the true identities they accept, reject, redefine, and defend as circumstances dictate (Cornell and Hartmann 2007, 81). Following the CPA, an increasing number of Madhesis began to assert Madhesi identity as a proud marker of their identity and belonging (Karki and Wenner 2020). Here, the assertion of the Madhesi identity expressed by Madhesi leaders appears to be confirmed by most of their followers. Many of them said:

> *I feel proud to be a Madhesi. I have been continuously fighting for the Madhesi women, the Madhesi community. It has been ten years now. I will continue this even in the coming days. (Interview 7)*

> *We feel more comfortable calling us Madhesis. After 2007, opinion makers were developed in Madhes. They also influenced. (Interview 4)*

> *Very important (Madhesi identity) I would say. That's (Madhesi) who I am, you know. That's precisely who I am. (Interview 5)*

This identity is very important for me. I am a political person at this time. The person I am today is because of my Madhesi identity. (Interview 2)

After 2007, we claimed as Madhesis. This happened particularly after the Maoist came to the peace process. (Interview 1)

The narratives demonstrate the shift in Madhesi identity from a derogatory marker to dignified identity. The use of the short sentences in all the narratives imply that their pride is now symbolized by Madhesi identity. Hachhethu's (2007, 5) writes that the percentage of people of Madhesi origin who preferred to identify themselves as Madhesi first increased from 19 percent in 2004 to 48 percent in 2007, while their preference for national identity decreased from 40 percent to 18 percent during this period.

However, not all the respondents I interviewed described themselves as Madhesi. Two of the three participants from the Tharu group refused to self-identify as Madhesi. One who described himself as a Madhesi said it was his compulsion to live in society:

We are living in Madhes, living with Madhesis. We are also attached with Madhesis. But . . . Tharus do not call themselves Madhesi. They call themselves Tharu or Nepali. On this issue sometimes conflict happens. Why are you trying to show that you are different from Madhesi? They (Madhesis) ask us. We tell them to call Tarain and ask how you came to be a Madhesi. You call yourselves Madhesi and include Tharu in Madhes. Where did Tarai vanish? (Interview 16)

For me, Madhesi identity is just an instrument to gain power. Nothing more than this. (Interview 14)

We have to live in this community. We should accept communal things. Sometimes, the situation comes that you have to accept it in compulsion. So, the acceptance of this identity is our (Tharus) compulsion (Interview 12)

The narratives demonstrate 'Tharus' difficulty in self-identifying as Madhesi. The interrogations by interviewee 16 ("Why are you . . .?") and ("Where did Tarai vanish?") reflect the respondent's anger over "Madhesization" of the Tarai. Concurrently, the word "compulsion" (interview 12) implies that the respondent is forced to accept this identity due to their (Tharus') minority status in the community. Perhaps this explains why many scholars (Gellner 2007; K. Jha 2017; Karki and Wenner 2020; Miklian 2008; K. Pandey 2017; Sijapati 2013) have noted that some Tharus in the central and eastern Tarai do not object to being called Madhesi. The situation, however, is different for Tharus in the western Tarai where they have demographic domination.

By contrast (to Tharu respondents), two of the three Muslim interviewees strongly self-identified as Madhesi, while one described himself differently:

I feel good to be called Muslim. My original identity is Muslim, a minority religious identity. This is my pure identity. I am a Nepali. The matter of proudness is that I am a Nepali. There are many caste, ethnic and religious groups in Nepal. My identity is from Muslim community. I imagine like this. Regionally, I am living in Madhes and in Madhesi land, if someone call me Madhesi, its fine. (Interview 8)

The narratives demonstrate the preference for Muslim identity over Madhesi identity. The words "Muslim" and "Nepali" are repeated, indicating the interviewee's preference to recognize as Muslim and Nepali. The sentence "Regionally, I am…", however, indicates that the respondent does not object to being called Madhesi, despite its lack of importance to him.

More importantly, the assertion of Madhesi identity as an ethnic marker of their identity and belonging, as proclaimed by most Madhesi leaders after 2007, was also shared by the majority of this group of respondents. During interviews, many of them defined Madhesi identity through an ethnic lens combining their culture and territory:

> *Madhes has a culture. It (Madhesi) is an imagined community . . . Therefore, as a person, being a Madhesi, means my culture, my history, my language, my geography, my economic system, and my livelihood. I feel proud to have them. There is no point of feeling ashamed. This is primarily a psychology, which gives you recognition to stand . . . (Interview 3)*

> *For me, Madhesi identity is language. Languages like Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi Urdu, Hindi speaking. Having unique culture. The geography I already told. (Interview 4)*

> *. . .it is a community that is excluded and not included in this state or nation's definition whose language is different from the Nepali language. These are linguistic communities. (Interview 9)*

> *My understanding of Madhesi identity is the product of attire, geography, culture, and the language. (Interview 1)*

The language contents of the interviewees 1, 3, 4, and 9 are similar. These indicate many of the interviewees' belief that being a Madhesi means living in Madhes (homeland), following Madhesi cultures (languages, food, attire, cultural practices, territory and so forth), and having a Madhesi lifestyle (perhaps dependent on agriculture). The sentence, ". . .it is a community…" by interviewee 9 suggests that Madhesi is a distinct community, which stands apart from the traditional definition of Nepali nationalism rooted in the hill-Hindu religion, Hindu Monarchy, and Nepali language (K. Jha 2017; Karki and Wenner 2020; Whelpton 1997).

Two respondents who defined Madhesi identity in the form of ethnicity also viewed it through a permanent lens:

> *Being Madhesi means an individual who is born in Madhes, being raised here, following its culture, and remaining in this geography, gained cultural and political experiences. (Interview 2)*

> *Madhesi are those whose native language includes Mathili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi and live or born in Madhesi territory of Nepal. (Interview 7)*

In these statements, they identified themselves in permanent terms rooted in their cultural origins. The words "born", and "Madhes" appear in both narratives, indicating their powerful attachment to their homeland. For them, Madhes serves as their birthplace, and a marker of their ancestry and origin. This identity label can be a part of their primary socialized core identity which is "socialized in a manner that gives more weight than other identities acquired later in life" (Hancock 2010, 1668).

Similarly, a majority of Madhesi residents also agreed with the Madhesi leaders' rejection of the former depiction of Madhesi identity as purely regional. During interviews, many of them opined that the meaning of Madhesi identity shifted its focus from being purely regional to ethnic following the CPA. But they did not deny that the Madhesi identity boundary has a territorial marker:

> *Without land, there would be no people. Ethnicity is defined differently in Nepal. Identity is for people. Their culture, civilization, language. (Interview 3)*

> *Prior to 2007, Madhes was frequently known as Tarai. There was a narrative of this. We have been studying "Himal, Pahad, Tarai, Kohi Chhaina Parai (mountains, hills, plains, no one is a stranger") . . .After 2007, despite the ruling class or Pahadi communities preferring to call Tarai (regional identity), those living in Madhes, particularly, Madhesi communities called it Madhes (ethno-regional identity). (Interview 7)*

The narratives illustrate an objection to the previous understanding of Madhesi identity as a regional identity. The syntax, ("without land . . .") by interviewee 3 illustrates his anger over the earlier portrayal of Madhesi identity, and his assertion of it on an ethnic basis. This echoes in the sentence by interviewee 7 ("After 2007. . ."), illustrating Madhesi claim of ethnic identity against the wishes of the ruling hill elites. The following are additional examples which provide more insight into it:

> *If you look at the 60 years of it (the history of Madhesi identity), it has transitioned from a geographical unit and people based there as Taraians, you know, initially as it was.*

Tarai was largely a geographical identity, a geographical connotation. The geography in itself was not enough to capture everything that Madhesis' demands were about. . . Therefore, it had to be redefined in terms of ethnicity that included your color, your feature, language, food you eat, the clothes you wear. . . Hence, ethnicity is, I think, more profound. It does in itself imbed a geographical relation with it. So then, to capture the totality of what the idea of Madhes was or Madhesi was, it was important to redefine it in terms of ethnicity. . . So, a social identity that has been politically asserted . . . So, just to get that holistic thing, it has been re-defined. (Interview 5)

Change definitely happened. . . . Prior to 2007, it was considered as simply a geography. . . Now, it (Madhesi identity) is highly politicized identity due to the movements. . . Particularly, Madhesi identity received ethnic meaning after 2007. For instance, Madhes has its own region, different cultures, language, and it has relationship (cultural ties) across the border (in India). I feel these all are somehow relating to our identity. If you travel to Madhes even today, every household has a family member from India married to Nepali. We have cultural exchange as well. (Interview 4)

I think after the Movement, regionalism, and ethnicity submerged. Yes, the region is there. But what happened is the political force established it as an ethnicity. The term Madhesi has written in the constitution, Madhesi is written in laws. Madhesi Commission has made. . .Madhes Province is formed. Another important factor to establish this identity is federalism came to Nepal due to the Madhesi movement. (Interview 9)

The rise had happened after 2007. Madhes is a geography and is also an ethnicity. . . At that time (during the Madhesi movement), an attempt to distinguish between Tarai and Madhes had happened. But the current development has defined the Madhesi identity based on ethnicity. In this sense, we also say not all ethnic groups living in Tarai are Madhesi. (Interview 10)

The statements allude to the transition of Madhesi identity from a solely regional to an ethno-territorial identity after the Maoist civil war. The sentence ("The geography in itself . . .") by interviewee 5 indicates the interviewee's belief that the nomenclature "Tarai" does not capture the culture, history, territory, and people in totality the way the term "Madhes" does. This led them to accept the new identity.

Some contentions concerning Madhesi identity (regional/political vs. ethnic identity) seen among Madhesi leaders also appeared with some Madhesi locals. Two interviewees (from Tharu group) refused to accept Madhesi identity in the form of an ethnic identity:

Usually, an ethnic group has a long history. Madhesis do not have a long history. These people say Madhesis are ethnic. Because they do not have a long history, we are not being able to accept them as an ethnic group. (Interview 16)

"Madhesi" terminology until today is based on regionalism. (Interview 14)

The narratives alluded to some Madhesi locals' belief that Madhesi identity even today is either regional or political identity, not an ethnic identity. The emphasis on the word "history" (Interview 16) implies the interviewee's rejection of the Madhesi identity in the form of ethnicity

due to their lack of Madhesi history. Guneratne (2009) and K. Pandey (2017) argue that Tharus claim to be the original inhabitants of the Tarai, considering both Madhesis and hill-people as new settlers in the region, lacking historical roots.

Nevertheless, despite some differences, the self-identification of the majority of Madhesi locals indicates that the centrality of Madhesi identity has gravitated towards ethnicity from regional label since 2007. This, however, does not mean that the Madhesi identity lacks territorial significance. The following section examines how Madhesi locals understood "culture" in defining Madhesi identity boundary during the post-CPA period. More importantly, it analyzes whether the "cultural stuffs" asserted by Madhesi leaders confirm with Madhesi locals.

Cultural and Symbolic Markers

Cultural (re)construction encompassing the reinforcement of existing culture is a key aspect of identity-based movements. The mobilization process involves the use of cultural claims, icons, and imagery. Cultural symbols and meanings are (re)produced as ethnic movements emerge and grow (Nagel 1994, 166). Madhesi culture and symbols, the signifiers of Madhesi identity, were reproduced and reinforced during the socio-political transition. This was to define the Madhesi group as culturally unified and distinct from the dominant Pahadi group. While a few Madhesi locals expressed cultural differences within the Madhesi group, during interviews many of them, in line with the Madhesi leaders, became strongly assertive of their perceived common culture:

Madhesi identity is particularly about the place that borders India. People living in this region have a close relationship with what we call "Roti Beti" (cultural and family ties) relationship with the people living across the border . . . Madhesis share a common culture that includes language. Madhesi people . . . share similar mindsets. . . Even in the past, we experienced similar problems, politically, socially, etc. (Interview 2)

Culturally, if you look at people from the east to the west, they wear 'Dhoti.' People in the east plough, so are people in the west. If we look at culture and festivals, people in the east and west (Madhes) celebrate the same festivals. (Interview 3)

There is a kind of cultural uniformity. Even though there are Muslims, they are the same. There is a similarity in language. Culturally, unity among the people (Madhesis) is seen. (Interview 9)

Talking about Madhesi culture, we wear "Dhoti, Kurta, and Gamsa" (Madhesi cultural attire). We also celebrate festivals that other Madhesi celebrate. Talking about the food, whatever available in Madhes, like "Daal and "Roti", we eat those food. We don't like "Dhido" (corn porridge eaten by hill people). (Interview 12)

The stories illustrate the local Madhesis' belief that there is cultural commonality within the Madhesi group. These include their attire, food, territory, way of life, festivals, and cultural practices. The term "Roti Beti" (Interview 2) denotes Madhesis' family (marital/cultural) ties with the people in North India. The sentence ("People in the east…") indicates Madhesis'

cultural attachment to their land. The term "festivals" is repeated in interview 3 and 12, implying plain-Hindu festivals like "Chhath" are the common festivals of Madhesis. But, as discussed in previous chapter, this indicates the manipulation of Madhesi culture. The festivals and religion of caste Hindus (who claim as Madhesi) and Tharus and Muslims are different, although they reside in the same territory.

Concurrently, these people also highlighted their cultural contrasts from Pahadis while defining their identities at the brink of socio-political transition. During my data collection, a majority of my local respondents were increasingly vocal about their perceived cultural differences with the Pahadi people:

> *In terms of culture, Dashain is the festival of Pahadis, not ours. We do not celebrate Dashain the way Pahades do. We do not do Tika Talo*[57] *for 12 days. Actually, we do not do Tika Talo in Madhes. (Interview 1)*

> *Let's say we have Holi in Tarai. Holi is celebrated in Pahad in one day. But in Madhes, it is celebrated in another day. Likewise, the clothes, food, marriage system are different from Pahad. Our societal and political backgrounds are different. In terms of economy, the people of Madhes are mostly depended on land. They are not depended on state resources. Therefore, in every issue these things are reflected. (Interview 6)*

[57] Vijaya Dashami is the most auspicious and tenth day of Dashain festival in Nepal. While it is celebrated all over Nepal, Madhesis call it the hill-Hindu festival. On this day, the elder person in the house, usually the parents, offers Tika (a mixture of rice, yogurt, and vermillion) and Jamara (yellow sacred grass) to their family and provides blessings with Dakshina (money).

Culturally, most of them (Madhesis) have adopted Hindu religion. Their way of celebrating their festivals, and the way they do rituals are little bit different from Pahad. For instance, Dashain is celebrated in Pahad and here. But the way people celebrate Dashain in the hills and here is different. Deepawali is celebrated in there and here. The practice of celebrating Deepawali here and there is different. . . Likewise, Chath is a big festival in Madhes. Most people celebrate Chhath here. Holi is celebrated in there and here. There (Pahad) is the culture of throwing balloon. But here people use colors and utilize Bambo Pichkari (water gun made of bamboo) to spread colors. These are cultures. So, despite adopting Hindu religion, the way it is practiced in the Madhes and Pahad is different. (Interview 16)

. . . our (Madhesis') language is different, our culture is different, our food is different, our traditions and customs are different. We have our own. From small to the big we have festivals. Therefore, we are Madhesis. We have Abadhi language, Maithili language, Bhojpuri language. Because of these differences, I say that I am a Madhesi . . .There are differences between Madhesi and Pahadis. (Interview 17)

The statements indicate that by reaffirming their "cultural stuff" including their traditions, festivals, apparel, language, and cultural practices, Madhesi locals in alignment with the Madhesi leaders defined Madhesis as culturally distinct from Pahadis. Here, they masked the linguistic, religious, caste specific, and cultural diversity that exists within the Madhesi group (N. Pandey 2021). The use of short sentence ("We do not celebrate Dashain…"), ("But in Madhes…"), and ("But the way people…") by interviewees 1, 6 and 16 simultaneously denote important points, highlighting their distinct cultural differences from Pahadis despite sharing the Hindu religion.

These encompass the way Hindu festivals are celebrated differently or on different days in Madhes and Pahad.

Furthermore, many of them, such as the Madhesi leaders, emphasized certain aspects of their culture such as their attire to convey the notion of their shared identity. They valorized "Dhoti," which used to be a derogatory term for Madhesis, as a shared symbol of the Madhesi identity. This helped them unite and mobilize for the Madhesi cause. Cohen (1985) argues that symbolic repertoire transforms the reality of differences with the appearance of similarity; it unites people in their opposition, both to each other and to those, outside. During interviews, these respondents claimed that Dhoti is an important cultural symbol of Madhesis. They also expressed their deep attachment to this symbol, and despair over the Pahadi outfits imposed on them by the state under the guise of Nepali nationalism. The following illustrate this argument:

> *Madhesi identity, what we argue is the guarantee of our attire, language and culture. So, being a Madhesi means that no one should tell that the clothes, Dhoti, Kurta, and Gamsa (cultural attire of Madhesis) that we wear are not national dresses of Nepal. No one can rebuke us if we wear Dhoti, Kurta, and Pajamas and walk in Kathmandu. If someone wears Topi (the hillman's cap), he is a Nepali. When wearing Daura, Suruwal, and Topi (Nepali national dress), you prove you are a Nepali, but when you wear Dhoti and Kurta, you don't? We challenged this concept. (Interview 1)*

> *My attire has to be respected. My traditions and culture have to be respected. This is the Madhesi identity that I have understood. I cannot be a Nepali just by wearing Daura and Suruwal, I am also a Nepali wearing Dhoti and Kurta. That is my identity, and I wear*

Dhoti and Kurta. If I have to take an oath in the parliament, I will wear Dhoti Kurta. . . That is the identity that I am looking for. (Interview 13)

. . . there should be a respect for one's identity. There should be unity in difference, as each flower in a garland has its own existence. Or the environment where I was raised, my accent, my behavior, my culture, my language should be brought to life. After this . . . I can feel proud to be a Nepali. It does not mean that a fixed set of dress, a fixed language, and a fixed culture should be followed. (Interview 2)

The sentence ("Wearing Daura, Suruwal, and Topi…") by interviewee 1 demonstrates anger against the state's imposition of the Pahadi attire on Madhesis and the traditional understanding of being a Nepali. The sentence ("We challenged this concept") shows how "Dhoti" as a symbolic resource unified and mobilized diverse Madhesis in opposition to state's socio-political and cultural dominance of them.

The following are other examples of "Dhoti" as an icon of Madhesi identity:

Regarding the culture of Madhesis, the attire "Dhoti, Kurta, and Gamchha" has remained the identification of the Madhesi people. (Interview 12)

We have our clothes "Dhoti." (Interview 17)

Culturally, if you look at people from the east to the west of Madhes, they (Madhesis) wear Dhoti. (Interview 3)

These anecdotes depict the pride that Madhesi locals have in their cultural outfit as a symbol of their identity. The sentence ("We have our…") by interviewee 17 seems bold. It illustrates the interviewee's deep attachment to this identity marker. The word "Dhoti" appears in all the narratives, indicating their rejection of Nepali nationalism, which viewed them as 'Others', and their pride in Madhesi cultural attire. Many scholars (K. Jha 2017; M. Jha 2016; Karki and Wenner 2020) have noted that the Madhesi movement compelled hill elites to reconsider Nepali nationalism that was based on the very notion that being a Nepali means wearing a specific set of clothes, speaking a particular language, and possessing certain facial attributes.

In summary, many of the Madhesi locals in line with the Madhesi leaders during the historical post-war transition reaffirmed their culture and used their reinvented cultural symbols to express a sense of belonging and affective attachment among the Madhesi people. Moreover, their cultural distance from "Others" enabled them to mobilize as a collectivity to confront the Pahadi dominated state and the Pahadi people (N. Pandey 2021). The following section investigates whether the history Madhesi leaders defined in the previous chapter resonates with their supporters.

History

From the data, it seems that the Madhesi history articulated by the Madhesi leaders as a carrier of their peoplehood does not fully confirm that of their followers. Tarai history, as discussed in previous chapter, is missing in Nepal's national history (Mathema 2011). The history books prescribed for university and school curriculums in Nepal have rarely featured the history of the Tarai civilization. During interviews, like Madhesi leaders, some interviewees also said there is nothing about Madhesi history in Nepal's national history. An interviewee stated:

. . .the reason why I call Madhesis de-historicized people who do not have a history of their own because you will not see a mention of Madhesi history in the history books of Nepal. Where was I when I was doing my schooling? I read about Mahendra, Birendra, Tribhuvan (former Kings of Nepal), who not. Did I read about Girija Parasad Koirala, about Bhattarai (former Prime Ministers), who not? But then, Nepal's Prithvi Narayan Shah (founder of the modern Nepal) united it. But you know, what are the different geographical regions of Nepal? What was Tarai? It has such rich literature. It has such rich art. It has so much, you know, within it. But was I introduced to anything? I was kept away from realizing my own history. I was kept away from realizing my own identity. Therefore, that whole puzzle and confusion that in a Gorkhaland, when people spoke of "Gorkhali, Gorkhali", I never fit into that "Gorkhali". So, who am I? was a big question. Because to be a Nepali, you have to be a "Gorkhali" was the kind of understanding that I had throughout my schooling. So, where did I fit of the history of Bhimsen Thapa (the first Prime Minister of Nepal) going and killing people with his "Khukuri" (Nepalese' national weapon) in Anglo-Nepalese war. Where is my history, where is my people? Am I a Gorkha? No, I'm not. Then, who am I? is a very big question that we all grew up with. (Interview 5)

The anecdotes refer to the poor documentation of Madhesi history in Nepal's history, and Madhesi anger at the hill-dominated state for overlooking their identity in national chronicle. The word "de-historicized" is repeated, implying that Madhesi history has yet to be adequately written in Nepal's national history. The interrogations ("Where is my history…?") and ("Am I a Gorkha?") imply their rejection of national history, which has mostly focused on the stories of royal families and regime changes, and the bravery of the Gorka soldiers (Onta 1996).

Even with limited resources, however, a majority of respondents (nine out of seventeen) shared alternative interpretations of modern Nepal's national history more in line with Madhesi leaders in support of Madhesi indigeneity in the region. But the remaining respondents were unaware of Madhesi history (Field note 07/04/2021). During interviews, many preferred the term Madhes over Tarai, arguing that the first represents their culture, history, geography and population (Gellner 2007; K. Jha 2017). But only four of them claimed that the nomenclature Madhes is derived from ancient Madhyadesh (middle country) or Majjhimadesh --middle country in Buddha's Pali language -- (Watters 1898), and embodies their history:

> *It (Madhes) has history. The lineage goes up to Buddha. In Pali language, Madhes is known as "Majjhimaadesh". This middle country had a geography that you can research. (Interview 3)*

> *The word Madhes is derived from Madhyadesh. This is what is understood if reviewed the documents. Those who have been living in this geography are called Madhesis. (Interview 13)*

The words "Madhaydesh" (Interview 13) and "Majjhimadesh" (Interview 3), as discussed in previous chapter, imply their belief that the name Madhes holds historical significance, cultural affiliation, and territory representation of the Madhesi population. However, this argument is not consistent. Though most respondents expressed their unfamiliarity with the origin of the name Madhes, some even considered it unreliable:

Those who defined the origin of Madhes linking it with "Madhyadesh" is I think sublimated. It's a search to provide justification for the Madhesi history. The term Madhayadesh is perhaps defined in "Bishnupuran" (Hindu scripture) as the land between "Bindhyanchal" and the Himalayas by Aryas. This all (entire Nepal) is the region of Aryas. Based on this, Kathmandu also lies in Madhyadesh. That'a not Madhyadesh. (Interview 15)

The term Madhes came into use much later. Earlier, the word Tarai used to be used quite frequently. Tarains means people live in the plains. We read these things in our textbooks as well. . . Some say the word (Madhes) is derived from the term Madhyadesh, which I do not think much reliable. (Interview 8)

These anecdotes refute the claim of many Madhesi leaders' and some followers' that Madhes originates from ancient Madhyadesh or Majjhimadesh and therefore has a historical value. The sentence ("It's a quest . . .") by interviewee 15, a renowned Madhesi think tank scholar, implies that it is a new attempt to justify Madhesi history.

Furthermore, the Madhesi leaders' claim that Madhesis are the decedents of King Janak and Buddha was expressed by only two respondents. None of them proclaimed that Nepal's early rulers were their ancestors. Neither did they share anything about the early history of Tarai civilization. However, while claiming their ancestry and origin in modern Nepal, majority of them (nine respondents) said that Madhesis had lived in the Tarai long before the boundary settlement between Nepal and the British East-India. They are, thus, true inhabitants of the Tarai:

We are the sons and daughters of this soil. Because we came here (Nepal) with land. After the 1816 Sugauly Treaty, this land came under Nepal. We have been living here since generations. The land sometime came here (Nepal), sometime went there (British India). The British, during colonial era, demarcated this political boundary, which officially brought us in Nepal. So, we are the people associated with this land. (Interview 6)

Madhes came under Nepal in two phases. First, from the "Sugauli Treaty" the Koshi river in its east to the Rapti in its west, Madhesh came under Nepal without the Madhesi consent. British gave that land to the Gorkhalies . . . Banke, Bardiya, Kailai and Kanchanpur (western Tarai) which is known as Naya Muluk (new country) was annexed to Nepal in Janga Bahadur Rana's period. The British gave it to Nepal as a gift for helping them to control the citizens' riot (as part of the Independence Movement) in India. The Nepali State through migration internally colonized this territory . . . They liked the territory, its resources such as land and forests, but treated Madhesi people as 'Others.' (Interview 3)

My grandfather's grandfather was here. . . It means 3-4 generations that we have been living here. How can we become Indians? We are often blamed for coming from India. Geographically, where India used to be. It is said that Nepal was up to Naugadh. Later, it was gradually captured (by the British). How did we become Indians? Upto Naugadh is Madhes because we are Nepalese through Naugadh. Later, other (Nepal) captured . . ..

But we have been the permanent residents. If 3, 4, 5 generations are here, where did we come from? . . . (Interview 17)

The narratives demonstrate local Madhesis' belief in the existence of Madhesi settlements in the Tarai for much longer than Nepal has existed. The interrogations ("How can we . . .?") and ("How did we . . .?") (Interviewee 17) are indicative of anger at 'genuine Nepalis who often see them as new Indian settlers. Chaudhary (2015, 26) notes that there has been a tendency among some hill-elites to portray Madhesis as new migrants despite their long history and culture. But this narrative, as discussed in the previous chapter, gives a sense of politicization of Madhesi history. It includes most of those (Indian immigrants) "who can only trace their Tarai root around 1955" (Miklian 2008, 5).

These respondents, as with many Madhesi leaders, however, said that hill-rulers had internally colonized Madhes ever since it was annexed in Nepal. The early rulers treated Madhesis as colonized subjects (Interview 1 and 3). The Panchayat regime further undermined their identity. Their land, as discussed, was confiscated, and given to Pahadis. Even after democratic restoration, they were called anti-nationals. This compelled them to accept Madhesi identity and rally under the slogan of "The Entire Madhes, One Province" in 2007 to ensure their autonomy, recognition, and inclusion.

Further providing their coherent history, as with Madhesi leaders, they also strongly referred to previous Madhesi struggles for recognition:

In 1951, Madhesis formed a political party called "Tarai-Congress" . . . Since that date, Madhesis' agendas were raised . . During "Panchayat" era, political parties were banned. Though the "Tarai-Congress" was fused within Panchayat, other parties were

formed. If you look at the context of those parties, you will see them raising voice for separate Madhes (autonomy), and separate Desh (independent country), and citizenship issues. Eventually, under the leadership of Gajendra Narayan Sing, "Satbhawana Parishad" was formed at the end of the Panchayat regime. They raised Madhesi issues of federalism, inclusion, citizenship, and the identity . . . After 1990, . . .The "Satbhavana Parishad" was transformed into the "Satbhavana Party (Interview 7)

Madhesi movement has its own history. There were leaders in the past such as Gajendra Narayan Singh, Ram Raja Prasad Singh, Durgananda Jha. (Interview 8).

For instance, after the 1990 Movement, Sadbhavana party was born. Gajendra Narayan Sing raised this issue. (Interview 6)

The narratives underscore the seven decades long history of Madhesi struggle for equality, inclusion, and identity. The word "Tarai Congress" is repeated (Interview 7), marking the inception of Madhesi struggle in the 1950s. The name "Gajendra Narayan" appears in all the narratives. It indicates that by forming the Nepal Satbhavana party, he revived Madhesi activism in the 1980s and 90s, though the party did not achieve much success.

The entire narrative, however, does not serve as a collective and complete account that glorifies Madhes as a historical space and valorizes Madhesis as a distinct people. The Madhesi locals' assertion of indignity stemming from their claim of residence in the Tarai prior to Nepal's formation, and their perceived experience of discrimination after its annexation into Nepal seem convincing and in line with Madhesi leaders. But the overall narrative lacks historical depth. Unlike Madhesi leaders' coherent narrative of the real or putative Madhesi history, their stories

do not say anything about the early history of Tarai civilization. Cornell and Hartmann (2007, 238) argue that the history should be a complete one, with pivotal episodes and recurring themes that characterize the people as distinctive. In brief, the analysis of the Madhesi locals' narratives of Madhesi history shows that the history did not serve as a symbolic resource capturing the essence of Madhesi peoplehood.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter is structured to build on the findings of the previous chapter. Despite some differences in response across the Madhesi locals, the investigation of their narratives confirms that the salience of Madhesi identity in the post-CPA period was largely influenced by the power of factors external to the group. Particularly, the hill-dominated Nepali state's policies and practices that discriminated against Madhesis as well as the hill nationalists' everyday humiliation of them contributed to sharpening the boundary between Madhesis and Pahadis during their intense interaction in the post-CPA political transition. Moreover, unlike the Madhesi leaders' assertions, the findings above demonstrate that the Maoist insurgency had in part an influence on the development of Madhesi identity.

Concurrently, the analysis also confirms the effort of the Madhesi leaders in consolidating the Madhesi identity in the post-war transition. Particularly, the poignant narrative that Madhesis are culturally distinct, and victimized by the Nepali state because of their different cultural values as detailed by Madhesi leaders when reaffirming and utilizing their symbolic resources prompted most locals to be mobilized as a collective to ensure autonomy, inclusion, and dignity for Mahdesis in the new system. This group of participants, however, did not replicate Madhesi history as a symbolic resource.

In the end, the analysis also shows that the reinterpretation of Madhesi identity from a regional to an ethnic frame, and from a derogatory marker of nationalists' doubt to a dignified marker of identity and belonging deconstructed the traditional conception of Nepali nationalism that excluded Madhesis. This interpretation of Madhesi identity made political, social, and economic sense for Madhesi locals to organize. Because they were reluctant to be handicapped

by stereotypes the dominant Pahadi society assigned to them. This further aided in the Madhesi leaders receiving support from the local Madhesis.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This chapter begins with a summary of the major empirical findings. It then highlights the empirical and theoretical contribution of this research. Suggestion for future research will be addressed in the last section. This project aimed at understanding the processes of Madhesi identity formation in the post-comprehensive peace agreement (CPA) period between the government of Nepal and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists) in Nepal in 2007. It set out to examine this key issue through an examination of the central research question: how did Madhesi ethno-political groups define Madhesi identity in the post-war transition? Furthermore, how did diverse local Madhesis or the supporters of Madhesi parties understand Madhesi identity? What constituted them to support Madhesi rhetoric of ethnic identity?

The first part (Chapter II) of the thesis presented a discussion of identities, both broadly in the literature and more specifically in Nepal's Tarai region and contextualized the formation of identity during the time of crisis, i.e., post-war transition. I critically reviewed a wide-ranging identity literature and developed a theoretical framework by utilizing the works of leading identity scholars such as Barth (1969a), Jenkins (1994, 1996, 2008a, 2008b) and Cornell and Hartmann (2007). Though my research is qualitative and exploratory in design, this framework provided an informed understanding of social identity or guideline for analyzing the experiences

and identities of Madhesi leaders from Madhesi ethno-political groups and local Madhesi residents to understand the salient of Madhesi identity following the CPA.

Chapters IV and V together addressed how Madhesi ethnopolitical groups negotiated their identity during their intense interaction with significant others (e.g., the Pahadi dominated state and the Pahadis) during the post-war political transition, and how diverse contextual factors influenced in these processes. These encompass the historical relationship between Madhesis and the hill-dominated centralized Nepali state, and the opportunities and constraints the decade long Maoist insurgency had created in the post-war political transition. Jenkins (2008a) notes that acknowledging the social construction of ethnic identity requires recognizing (a) the significance of power and authority relations (domination) in that process, and (b) recognizing the nominal and the virtual aspects of ethnic and other social identities.

Chapter IV presented Madhesi leaders' articulation of their experiences and identity. The findings demonstrated that the creation of Madhesi peoplehood in the post-CPA period was largely shaped by factors external to the group or circumstances. In my case, it is the Pahadi-dominated centralized Nepali state and the Pahadi people. The state discriminated against the Madhesis through policies and practices that denied them access to power, resources, and participation in social, economic, and political life; and did not recognize their identity and culture. The hill community constantly humiliated them by doubting their identity. These dynamics influenced Madhesis to unite following the civil war:

> *There are 56 castes within Madhes. . . All of them have their own caste identity. They have their own caste culture. Despite having all these problems, when the issue of rights and identity comes, no one would be Yadav, Tharu, Musahar, Bahun, Chamar, Dusad,*

etc. All of them become Madhesi because discrimination happens to them being a Madhesi. Different treatments happen to them as a Madhesi. For example, in the street of Kathmandu, if someone from the hill sees a Madhesi face, he is called "Madise" not Yadav, Sauji, Chamar from Madhes (Interview 25)

There is diversity within the Madhesi community. Dalits here have their own stories of pain. Santhal (an indigenous group) also lies in the Madhesi community. They have their own stories of suffering. There is a problem related to class and caste. Madhes is a caste-based society. In a caste-based society, Sudra (untouchables) have their own pain and stories. Visayas (merchants and craftspeople) have their own. Brahmans have their own. Despite having all those things, all of them were discriminated by the state. (Interview 26)

When rulers attack Madhesis, our grievances and mutual differences become secondary, it starts centering in one issue. Discrimination has happened to Dalits, Muslims, Tharus. That issue connects all of us. (Interview 28)

What united all these Madhesis is because everyone there were victims. People of any castes and ethnicities did not get anything there. Neither they had access to the state, nor they had education, employment, and participation. Neither any Madhesis were in the army, nor in bureaucracy. They were in nowhere. No caste and ethnicities appeared there. All of them were one. We raised this agenda, and all of them accepted. They realized that this is a genuine Madhesi issue, and for our rights we have to speak, and

fight. Our goal was the same. For example, those who did small works such as shoe stitching, vegetables selling, or clothes selling in Kathmandu, Pokhara or any Madhesis who worked in bureaucracy or doing business, all of them were discriminated in their own place. Because of this experience, they united. (Interview 27)

However, despite these contextual constraints, during their interaction with the Pahadi-centric state, Madhesi leaders also brought their pre-existing cultural resources, which were shaped and reshaped by their previous personal and collective experiences and ongoing sociopolitical developments. In the post war situation, they valorized Madhesi identity which had been an inferiority complex for them and Madhesi people until 2007. In doing so, they resisted the meaning of 'Madise' identity the Pahadi society imposed on them and redefined it from a regional label to an ethno-territorial frame. Here, the contents of the identity (virtual dimensions) changed, but the name (nominal dimensions) remained the same. Based on my analysis, this shift in identity replaced the derogatory and powerless identity of the Madhesi people assigned by the dominant upper-caste hill society.

Concurrently, the narratives revealed that Madhesi leaders invented and used symbolic repertoires including their cultural and geographic differences, cultural symbols, and history and built an emotive narrative that the Madhesi group is homogenous, culturally distinct from the Pahadi group, historically the original inhabitants of Tarai, and the victims of the Pahadi-dominated state and the Pahadi people. By doing this, they ethnicized Madhesi identity and their experiences to "arouse on group members a sense of commonality, exalted significance, and collective power" (Cornell and Hartmann 2007, 237). Despite the dehumanizing and debilitating constraints, Madhesi leaders asserted their version of Madhesi identity and built a community of

their own. As Cornell and Hartmann (2007, 211–12) argued, identities are constructed through interaction between, on the one hand, the opportunities and constraints groups encounter on construction sites (including their relationships with other variously empowered groups), and, on the other, what they bring to that encounter.

Chapter V presented local Madhesi narratives to understand their perspective of Madhesi identity in the post-CPA context. This chapter also served to confirm the findings of Chapter IV. Despite some differences among local Madhesis, the analysis demonstrated that there is a cohesive understanding of Madhesi identity among the local Madhesi people. The general depiction emerging from the local Madhesi narratives is that the salience of Madhesi identity in the post-CPA period was largely influenced by their historical relationship with the Pahadi-dominated state and the Pahadi people.

Moreover, these narratives provided evidence of the influence of the Maoist insurgency in this process which contradicts many Madhesi leaders' claim that the Maoists had no role in the formation of Madhesi identity. Many of them argued that the Maoist insurgency provided a basis for the Madhesi revolt:

> *Maoist insurgency strategically articulated Madhesis' inner desire. It reframed/reset the agendas. Maoists focused on ethnic groups. They strategically brought ethnic issues to attract these people into their movement. As you know, to attract people from different ethnic communities, their voices should be articulated. Maoist intentionally did that. . . For instance, they formed "Madhesi Rastriya Mukti Morcha" under Maoist leadership, and gave a roadmap to address these problems through federalism and inclusion. They also showed a template of how future federalist Nepal would be. This dynamic provided*

an energy to Madhesi society. From this point, Madhesi society revolted. In this context, Maoist rebellion established a foundation for the Madhesis to revolt. (Interview 1)

Honestly speaking, Maoist insurgency boosted the emergence of Madhesi identity. It generated consciousness among us. We understood that if we do not speak, we cannot achieve anything. If Maoist conflict did not take place, it would take years for Madhesi identity to get a shape like this. (Interview 2)

"Identity construction is not passive. People assert their identities within the constrains that circumstances allow but according to their own interpretation of interests and the resources they have in command" (Cornell and Hartmann 2007, 165). Interviews with local Madhesis confirmed the manipulation of Madhesi identity by Madhesi leaders in the Tarai. Particularly, the poignant narrative that Madhesis are culturally distinct, and victimized by the centralized Nepali state because of their different cultural values when reaffirming and utilizing their symbolic resources prompted many local Madhesi residents to be mobilized as a collective to ensure autonomy (identity-based federalism), inclusion, and dignity for Mahdesis in the new system. This finding is consistent with Miklian's (2008, 2) observation that the demand for *Ek Madhes, Ek Pradesh* (the entire southern plains as one federal Madhes), by the United Democratic Madhesi Front (UDMF), which has redefined the identity of people in the Tarai as distinct from those outside of it, has exacerbated ethnic division and violence at the grassroots level.

Concurrently, the local Madhesi narratives also revealed that the reinterpretation of Madhesi identity from a regional label to an ethnic frame, and from a derogatory marker of nationalists' doubt to a dignified marker of identity and belonging deconstructed the historical

conception of Nepali nationalism that viewed Madhesis as "Indians." The etymological association of Madhesis with Madhes serves both to underscore and strengthen their bonds to Madhes and act as a symbolic protest against being labelled as Indians by Pahadis (Karki and Wenner 2020). This version of Madhesi identity made political, social, cultural, and economic sense for local Madhesis to support Madhesi identity. Because they were reluctant to accept the stereotypes that the dominant Pahadi society assigned to them. These dynamics led to the construction of Madhesi identity.

Another critical issue that requires some discussion here is the development of Madhesi residents' perspectives on Madhesi identity after the CPA. Interviews with local Madhesis in Chapter V revealed that their assertion or acceptance of Madhesi identity in the post-CPA period was influenced by their past experiences of the Maoist conflict and the Madhesi movement. In her study of the resurgence of American Indian ethnic identity between 1960 and 1990, Nagel (1995, 958) argues that social movements exert a significant impact on individuals who themselves personally witness or become directly involved in protest action. These movements provide individuals symbolic and material resources to claim or reclaim ethnic identity. Younger Madhesis interviewed indicated that the Madhesi movement enhanced their understanding of Madhesi identity:

> *I learned and understood Madhesi identity after 2006. Our seniors (Madhesi leaders) made various campaigns to educate Madhesi people. They taught us what Madhes is, its origin, how this territory remained backward, and how being Madhesi we have been subjected to discrimination. It helped me understand Madhesi identity. I also started*

reading literature about Madhesi identity. After understanding these issues, I engaged in the Madhesi movement/politics. (Interview 2)

Personally, I realized it (Madhesi identity as ethnic identity) during the Madhesi Movement . . . When the first Madhesi movement started than I felt oh…I am a Madhesi. I have to speak for it. At that time, I realized, where I was respected and where I was hated as a Madhesi. I recalled my past experiences. Then I came to a conclusion that I was discriminated because I was a Madhesi. That realization happened during the Madhesi movement. The movement made me enlightened. (Interview 17)

After 2006, opinion makers were developed in Madhes. They also influenced. There was lot of talks about it, articles about it. A lot of articles were written about Madhesi identity. Why it is important, why the movement is going on, why do we need decentralization (federalism). These issues were brought under various discussions. . . although I realized it earlier. But these issues were more defined between 2007 and 2009. (Interview 4)

As discussed in previous chapters, the socioeconomic and cultural aspects of Madhesi life were the focal concern of the Madhesi movement. Though these young Madhesis were aware of their deep-rooted marginalization and exploitation by the Nepali state, the movement provided them a space to acknowledge and reflect on their identity and their past. That led them to re-identify themselves as "Madhesi."

In contrast, the narratives also demonstrated that the middle-aged and older generations of Madhesis were conscious of their cultural and geographical commonalities and their exclusion long before the Madhesi movement began. They were aware that the dominant Pahadi society had treated them unfairly for centuries, referring to them as 'Madise' (a single group) perpetually:

> *Personally, I realized it a while ago. . .In 1995, I was an editor of an English daily newspaper. I used to do these works when I was teaching at the University. Living in Kathmandu was tough economically. At that time, I traveled all over Tarai. During my travels, I had that realization. In 2002, I read an article by Babu Ram Ji (Maoist ideologue) published in Lal Madhes (newspaper), where he had said that Madhesi is a colony. I had my own understanding. But at that time, I was convinced. I knew that this identity was gradually transferring to ethnicity. But the fact that this (Madhesi) movement would happen this early and people would choose death for this identity was beyond my comprehension. (Interview 9)*

> *I first encountered with this term (Madise) in class eight when I went to Butwal for study. There I realized. I was alone there. After that, I came to Janakpur for my college education. In college, I was the president of the "Bidyarthi Manch" (Student forum), RRM campus in Janakpur. During the time, All Nepal National Free Students' Union (ANFSU) and Nepal Student Union (NSU) were only able to win the student council election. At that time, we raised issues such as why Madhesis could not get recruited in the army. We brought slogans such as "why don't we be in the police"; "why can't we become the CDO in Nepali state"; "we must become", and "where do you go after the*

study, and you just go for the same teaching." "If you are Madhesis, there are no other space beside teaching." I am telling you about the things prior to 2007. I think it was during 1997 -98, prior to 2000. We won. . . I had that enlightenment. I had made like-minded people around 5000 in the college. We had a big group. (Interview 6)

Hence, their assertion or acceptance of Madhesi identity (in the form of ethno-regional identity) can be taken as their quest for a dignified identity in 'New Nepal.' From a social-psychology framework, individuals seek a secure sense of self striving to achieve positive social identity; this pursuit can lead to 'exit' (Tajfel and Turnerr 1986). This finding also suggests that ethno-political leaders cannot manipulate identity infinitely; the people on the ground are not passive followers of leaders; they are conscious and cannot be duped (Fearon and Laitin 2000). They follow the leaders if the latter's appeal effectively accommodates "the interests of other social classes within the ethnic group" (Brass 1991, 46).

Overall, the post-CPA period (e.g., Madhesi movement) served as the best context in which Madhesi leaders and local Madhesi people met and imagined each other. In this changed political context, the Madhesi leaders and local Madhesis collaborated to secure their rights, autonomy, and more importantly the recognition of their identity based on geography, cultural and linguistic commonality, and the shared experience of suffering at the hands of a shared enemy (the Pahadi dominated state and the Pahadis), contesting the dominant power that constantly alienated and excluded them and misrecognized their identity. This led to a consensus between the Madhesi leaders and local Madhesi residents: no matter whether we speak Bhojpuri, Maithili or Bajika or whether we are upper caste or lower caste or are rich or poor, we belong to the same Madhesi group.

Research Findings and Theoretical Connection

As discussed throughout this study, identity development is underpinned by social psychological theories of identity, which underline that identity evolves over time. It places interaction between circumstances and groups at the heart in these processes. It accepts the fundamental validity of circumstances while retaining key primordial insights. In this process, it involves a great deal of activism. The interaction between external and internal forces is not, however, the same everywhere. It is possible that circumstances sometimes play a major role (Cornell and Hartmann 2007).

Concurrently, identity construction does not merely involve defining boundaries (Jenkins 2008a). It also involves the assertion or assignment of meanings (Cornell and Hartmann 2007). Both boundaries and meanings are changeable as groups respond to new situation. In this process the comprehensiveness of ethnic identity may change from thin to thick or vice versa (see chapter II). Jenkins (2008b, 199), therefore, argues that "identification is never unilateral, never isolated, and never without consequences." The findings of this research support this understanding both Jenkins and Cornell and Hartmann have about how the interaction between groups and diverse contextual factors leads to the development of identity during the situation of flux and are consistent with the literature on social identity and conflict in general.

The findings presented in chapters IV and V showed a plurality of actors in the process of external categorization. These include the hill-dominated Nepali state (through policies and practices), and hill people (through their attitudes and behaviors). However, the role of the state is key in this process. It excluded Madhesis from the country's geographical unification process. The Shah and Rana rulers further adopted a policy of barring Madhesis from politics, civil administration, and the army, treating Tarai as the colony of Kathmandu-based aristocrats (Karki

and Wenner 2020). The *Panchayat* system further protected this discrimination between 1960 and 1990, as it promoted Nepali nationalism, whose basic tenants were Hinduism, Monarchy, and the Nepali language (see chapters IV and V for more details).

The *Janaandolan I* brought about the transition to democracy in 1990. But the multi-party democratic system neither met the aspirations of excluded groups, nor addressed their grievances (Gurung 2019, 43). The traditional hill elites still controlled the political system. The Maoist insurgency took shape in response to these discriminations. The insurgency brought some awareness among Madhesis (see chapter V), although many Madhesi leaders denied the Maoists' contribution in this process (see chapter IV). The success of the *Janaandolan II* and the signing of the CPA brought some hope among Madhesis. But the IC crushed their hopes, causing them to fear permanent exclusion. Madhesis revolted against this backdrop. The changing political context provided them with the opportunity structures to revive Madhesi activism which was initially started in the 1950s (see Chapters IV and V).

The (re) construction of identity "involves not only circumstances but also active responses to circumstances by individuals and groups by their own preconceptions, dispositions and agendas" (Cornell and Hartmann 2007, 81). In the Madhesi case, context is not the only factor. The Madhesi ethnopolitical groups also brought their own conception of who they were when interacting with the hill dominated state and the hill people. They were helped in this enterprise by the existence of a named category (i.e., Madise/Madhise category) sanctioned by the hill society (see chapter IV and V). For many Madhesis, the 2007 Madhesi movement, built on a long history of defiance against the exclusionary notion of Nepali nationalism served as catalyst point for awakening ethnic consciousness. This shows what Nagel (1995) articulated, the power of human agency in individual and collective redefinition. Both Madhesi leaders and

residents carried an assigned and thin Madhesi identity prior to 2007, although they knew their cultural differences from Pahadi society (see chapters IV and V). The way the comprehensiveness of Madhesi identity became thick for Madhesi leaders and many residents in the wake of CPA shows the complicated outcome of the exclusionary state and society relations. It can be argued that the Nepali state sought to promote peace and national unity by adhering to the existing national ideology, but Madhesis contested it by asserting a strong ethnoterritorial identity.

The Madhesi movement, as discussed, brought Madhesi leaders and residents together. In this new political context, they used their cultural and material resources to resist the imbalanced relationship between the state and the Madhesi people to achieve their goals. They used their cultural capital to solidify their group and to distinguish themselves from Pahadis. Through this, they challenged inequities and negative implications associated with both boundary and position, accepting, resisting, and reshaping the dominant hill society's conception of "Madhesiness." This led to the awakening of Madhesi ethnic pride. This process transformed the meaning of Madhesi identity from a regional label to an ethnic frame without losing its core content. However, in this process, more than cultural resources, circumstantial constraints – shared experience of sufferings by shared enemy – were influential. This finding reveals that even though ethnicity is a cultural phenomenon, its construction and reconstruction must be sought in state and minority group relations.

Contribution of this Study

This research makes three important contributions to the study of social identity, peacebuilding, and Tarai studies. First, this study argues that perceived experience of Madhesi

marginalization, exploitation and deprivation by the hill centric Nepali state and the hill people led to the rise of Madhesi identity in the aftermath of the Maoist insurgency. This finding demonstrates that the salience of Madhesi identity in the post-CPA period was largely influenced by power and politics. Though Madhesi ethnopolitical groups asserted their version of Madhesi identity and built a community of their own using their real or putative cultural resources. This finding essentially provides empirical boost or contribution to the social identity scholarship which has mostly focused on internal process of group identification at the expense of the power of social categorization (Jenkins 2008a). The Madhesi case shows us the need to recognize the significance of power and authority relations (domination) in the process of identity construction. It explains how new ethno-political groups emerge and engage in a post-war political transition by mobilizing the resources at their arsenal, and how these dynamics crystalized Madhesi identity, triggering an ethnic mobilization that led to violence.

The second contribution of this research specifically relates to the literature on institution-building (i.e., constitutional design, electoral system, governance system, etc.), and power sharing in post-conflict peacebuilding in multi-cultural societies. “Important opportunities for peacebuilding may be lost if intervening actors fail to acknowledge the dynamic nature of ethnicity and opt for policies that institutionalize ethnic differences” (Simonsen 2005, 297). This research supports this argument and demonstrates the need for inclusive effort and long-term structures to address society’s deep divisions.

As discussed in Chapters IV and V, Madhesis’ voices were grossly underrepresented in peace negotiations and in discussions of post-war institutional reform. They were not invited to participate in decision making (Strasheim 2019, 91–92). This created a fear of permanent discrimination among Madhesis in the new system. As a result, Madhesi leaders called on the

Madhesi people to suspend their differences and unite behind a common goal. They appealed to the most fundamental values and principles that Madhesi people share, which remain unarticulated in normal times. These dynamics increased the salience of Madhesi identity, establishing it as the key marker of the Madhesi people. This led to political unrest and violence in the Tarai. The findings of this research therefore broaden our understanding on the nexus between power sharing and identity. It provides insights into how identity groups' exclusivity in the peace process derails peace settlement efforts and advocates the need for an inclusive approach to peacebuilding.

Third, this research also contributes to the literature on Tarai studies. Despite Nepal becoming a popular place for studying identity and culture by many national and foreign scholars, most anthropological or ethnographic studies have primarily focused on the identity formation of indigenous and ethnic groups in the highland [hills and mountains] (Fisher 2001; Hangen 2011; Shneiderman 2015; Whelpton 1997). There have been very few studies focusing particularly on the Tarai (lowland) region. Except for some recent academic scrutiny on the Madhesi rise of ethnic identity (e.g., Jha 2017; Karki and Wenner 2020), most academic projects have centered on the identity construction of other social groups in the Tarai, mainly the Tharu (Guneratne 1998, 2002, 2007, 2009; Krauskopff 2007, 2018; K. Pandey 2017). Until now, the development of Madhesi identity in the post-war context has not been extensively studied. This project, therefore, has already started to fill this gap.

Policy Recommendations

This research also has two policy implications. As Hancock and Allen (2022) noted, signing of a peace agreement between the state and the rebels does not instantly bring peace.

Rather, it depends on how the state encompasses various stakeholders and engages them with the opportunities and challenges generated in a post-conflict period. Therefore, to achieve a sustainable outcome, peace processes must encompass all relevant actors, such as previously marginalized groups, and their identity-based concerns. These incorporate the inclusion of marginalized populations in state institutions, as well as the recognition of their identity and culture. Failure to address these concerns could lead to ethnic mobilization and violence in the post-war period. Paffenholz (2015) noted that exclusion is one of the key reasons why groups resort to violence and protest.

Interviews with Madhesi leaders and Madhesi residents revealed that Madhesi ethno-political groups following the CPA, utilized cultural and material resources and created a master narrative that Madhesis have been discriminated against and oppressed by the Nepali state because of their cultural differences. As discussed in my empirical chapters, Madhesi identity was hardened by these dynamics, culminating in a mass violent protest in the Tarai in 2007 and afterwards. The long-standing social, political, and economic inequities also provided a basis for the emergence of several militant groups in the Tarai during the fragile post-war political context, most with secessionist goals. This caused the large numbers of Tarai dwellers to live in fear of violence during the transition.

In response to these movements and conflict, the Nepal government has made promises and plans to make Nepali society inclusive. It has brought affirmative policies such as quota systems to address the exclusion of marginalized communities including Madhesis, and has recognized their identities in the new constitution (Gurung 2019). However, dissatisfaction has remained among Madhesi parties over the boundaries of newly created provinces, electoral representation and affirmative action policies, constituency delineation, and citizenship related

issues. On September 20, 2015, Nepal's new constitution passed amid deadly protests by Madhesi parties across the Tarai that continued for months, leaving 57 dead (ICG 2016).

Among all the concerns of Madhesis discussed above, citizenship is the most contentious. The 2006 Citizenship Act granted citizenship by birth to anyone born in Nepal prior to April 13, 1990[58], which benefited Madhesis. But due to the lack of a legal process, the children of those parents who had acquired citizenship by birth have not been able to acquire citizenship by descent (The Kathmandu Post 2022). Even though the government recently introduced a Citizenship Bill to amend the 2006 Citizenship Act to address this issue, due to the strong pressure from civil society and the main opposition party, the president refused to endorse the Bill that was passed by the parliament, leaving an estimated 500,000 people, mostly Madhesis without citizenship (Ganguly 2022).

Likewise, political parties have not reached consensus over a cooling off period for granting naturalization to foreign women marrying Nepali men. The Madhes-based parties claim that they should be given naturalization immediately after marriage since there is an existing culture of cross-border marriage in the Tarai. But politicians of the major political parties have rejected this argument, justifying it on the basis of nationalism and national security. This disagreement over naturalization has affected many Madhesi women's access to citizenship.

Furthermore, despite all the development in politics in Nepal over the past 15 years, Madhesis peoples' socio-economic status has not improved. The socio-economic status of the Madhes province is an important indicator that illustrates the socio-economic conditions of the Madhesi people and the impact of historical marginalization by the state. Nepal's Human Development Report (2020) indicates that the multidimensional poverty index of Madhes

[58] See Nepal Citizenship Act 2006, Article 3 (Governent of Nepal 2006)

province in 2014 was 58.6 percent, which is the second highest of the seven provinces in Nepal.[59] The report further illustrates that the human development index of the Madhesi province in 2020 was 0.51, the lowest of the seven provinces.

Madhesi identity has already hardened much beyond what it was in the wake of 2007 (K. Jha 2017). There are still some radical Madhesi groups (albeit invisible now) seeking secession. Considering this development, it is likely that Madhes will become the epicenter of another round of ethnic conflict unless these issues are adequately addressed. Therefore, detailed information provided in chapters IV and V, can help policy makers, the government and major political parties in Nepal understanding how, and under what circumstances, ethno-political groups emerged in the Tarai, the hardening of Madhesi identity, and how these pose continuing challenges to Nepal's transition to peace and democracy. Without such an understanding, appropriate and effective policies and interventions are difficult to design.

Another policy implication of this research is that the post-war peace settlement requires greater consensus among political actors. In Nepal, the post-war peace process was elite driven. This process excluded other power contenders including Madhesis, Janajatis (indigenous peoples), women, and Dalits (scheduled groups) who have been historically excluded from mainstream social and political life and deprived of social services. Members of these groups felt aggrieved at being left out of the peace negotiations and not receiving adequate attention to their concerns, including their inclusion in the status apparatus, their desire for self-governance (federalism), and recognition of their identities (P. P. Khatiwada 2014).

As discussed in chapters II and IV, the CPA promised to carry out a restructuring of the state to address problems related to marginalized groups (CPA 2006) . But following the CPA,

[59] The report shows that Karnali Province had the highest multidimensional poverty ratio (58.8 %) in 2014.

the political elites (both from SPA and the Maoists) involved in peace processes focused more on their own power, positions, and patronages, neglecting their earlier commitment to federalism, and recognition of Madhesis' identity and culture (Ghai 2011; Goodhand et al. 2021). Madhesi leaders interpreted Madhesis' exclusion in peace negotiations, and not mentioning of federalism in the IC as the hill-centric state's continuation of treating Madhesis as second-class citizens. In this ambiguous political context, they called for action and engaged in a protest movement under the banner of Madhesi identity. This later turned into a violent armed confrontation dividing the country into Pahadi versus Madhesi camps.

Therefore, by highlighting how the elite-led peace processes excluded Madhesi groups from tabling their deep-rooted identity-based concerns and discussing their position in the new state system, and how these groups took advantage of their cultural and material resources (perceived discrimination), and announced a protest movement, which triggered ethnic mobilization, violence, and identity formation during post-accord period, this research (albeit about the formation of Madhesi identity) offers useful lessons for other societies emerging from civil war. Particularly, this study suggests the need for procedural changes for a policy change in the peace settlement process to ground and connect top-down peace processes with local aspirations and expectations.

Directions for Future Research

This study investigated the processes of Madhesi identity construction in post-war Nepal, i.e., the context marked by fluid politics and regime change. By demonstrating the nexus between state policies and practices, and identity, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex processes of identity formation during the post-war political

transition in both Nepal and other transitional societies. Further research on this topic is still relevant to add to the existing knowledge in social identity literature. The following subsections articulate some interesting avenues of research related to minority identities during periods of social and political changes.

Potential for Field Work

First, further studies on Madhesi identity can be conducted by doing fieldwork in the Tarai. My research is primarily based on virtual interviews with senior Madhesi leaders, and local Madhesis (local Madhesi elites) who are educated and have access to technology (i.e., email and internet). This limitation restricted me from interviewing wider Madhesi residents who were personally involved or witnessed Madhesi movements. They could provide more accurate information about Madhesi identity. Therefore, doing fieldwork and having face-to-face interviews with Madhesi leaders and a range of local people in the Tarai has the potential to unlock more nuanced picture of the development of Madhesi identity in the wake of the CPA.

In addition to this, some respondents said in the interviews that a new culture has developed in Madhes after the Maoists-government peace agreement. The symbols that were placed to promote traditional Nepali nationalism in Madhes including statues of the Shah kings (hill-Hindu kings) and the first poet of the Nepali language,[60] were demolished and replaced with symbols representing Madhesi nationalism, language, culture, and history. These include the erection of statues of Madhesi political leaders, Madhesi martyrs (those who lost their lives during the struggle for recognition), and Madhesi literary artists (e.g., Maithili poets):

[60] Bhanu Bhakta Acharya (1814-68) is known as the first poet in Nepali. He is one of the most revered poets in Nepal.

Madhesis demolished statues of all the Pahadi rulers in Birjung (a major Madhesi town) . . . Rajbiraj (another Madhesi town) now has a statue of Gagendra Narayan Singh (a renowned Madhesi leader). Likewise, in Janakpur, the statues of Saket Mishra and Durgananad Jha[61] *(Madhesi leaders who fought against Panchayat), who threw bombs at the King, have erected. The statue of Vidapati (a renowned Maithili poet) has been established in Janakpur, Rajbiraj, and Birjung . . . You know, movement creates the space. (Interview 9)*

I see a culture coming up. (Interview 5)

The COVID-19 pandemic restricted my ability to travel to Nepal and the Tarai. This limitation prevented me from collecting and analyzing data related to these cultural issues. As Nagel (1994) argued, the creation of new symbols and the abandonment of the old, discredited symbols and rhetoric reflect the effort of Madhesi groups to create internal solidarity, and to challenge the prevailing negative definition of Madhesi identity. Therefore, future research based on fieldwork in the Tarai may shed more light on these cultural issues and provide more insight into the processes of Madhesi identity formation.

Potential for Inter-Case and Inter-Site Comparison

Moving forward, the development of Madhesi identity can be conducted from a comparative perspective. The Tarai region, as discussed in earlier chapters, is home to various cultural, linguistic, and religious communities. Tharus are the dominant population, particularly

[61] Durganand Jha and Saket Mishra were earlier Madhesi leaders who fought against the dictatorial Panchayat rule, it is said that Durganand Jha was hanged to death and Saket Mishra was concealed by the Panchayat government.

in the mid-western and far-western Tarai, although they have a significant presence throughout the region. Moreover, they are believed to be the region's original inhabitants (Gaige 1975; Guneratne 2007, 2009). In 2009, just two years after the Madhesi movement, the Tharus launched their own protest movement to establish a "Tharuhat" province in the Tarai, distancing themselves from the Madhesi identity, which they had accepted in 2007:

> *. . . the Tharus and the Madheshis have been contending with the Pahadi identity for decades, the two agitations added the additional burden of competition against each other in the form of indigenous-immigrant contention within the region. These agitations also revealed the complex interconnection of the ethnic identities the region is facing. The challenge the Tharus posed to the Madheshi agenda came not only as a temporary outburst of the Tharu anger but as a seriously planned effort of de-legitimizing the increasing hegemony of the Madheshi upper and middle castes. (K. Pandey 2017, 319)*

In this context, a comparative case analysis can provide a more nuanced picture of the formation of Madhesi identity and the subsequent experiences of Tarai communities. This would also be an excellent opportunity to investigate the Tharu resentment of the Madhesi identity in the post-war political transition in Nepal.

The comparative case analysis can be further expanded to include other minority groups outside the Tarai region, mainly the Limbu in eastern Nepal. This group has been protesting upper-caste state dominance for a long time (Hangen 2007; Hangen and Lawoti 2013). The comparative analysis between the Madhesi group in the Tarai, and other non-Madhesi communities in the hills (i.e., Limbu) can provide additional insights into nexus between

experiences and identities in the process of identity construction during the period of political change.

Despite my focus on Madhesi community, I am also interested at the possibility of researching a variety of minority groups in Nepal, such as Tamang and Dalits (Untouchables). It would be illuminating to study the resurgence of the ethnic identities of minority groups other than Madhesi such as Tamang, Dalit, and Limbu in Nepal following the end of the Maoist insurgency. Particularly, the Limbus are considered to be one of the largest and most active groups in eastern Nepal. The scrutiny of the ethnic identities of these minority groups would not only provide useful lessons about the way these minority identities were produced and reproduced following the Maoist insurgency, but also provide interesting insights on the historical relationships between these cultural communities and the state.

In the end, the study of the Madhesi case provides insights not only into the process of negotiating a dissenting identity in the post-war political setting. But the analysis presented here lends credence to the importance of studying identity to prevent conflict and promote peace in societies emerging from civil wars. Especially, my research informs scholars and practitioners of peacebuilding to view identities and cultural diversity as assets rather than obstacles to post-war peacebuilding. Identities do not always clash; they can coexist, intertwine, and encourage reproachment with other social groups. Identity, in this context, can become a tool for peacebuilding (Umeyama and Brehm 2021, 83–84). But it is possible for identity conflicts to resurface in multi-ethnic societies during the post-CPA period, causing a stall in peace processes because of power relations among social groups. Power relations are interrelated with identity (Umeyama and Brehm 2021). The changing political environment often forces identity groups to consider their power and position in society. A thorough understanding of these local and

national identity dynamics is essential for peacebuilding success in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies. Failure to do so in Nepal resulted in the violent Madhesi movement, dividing the entire country into Madhesi versus Pahadi camps. This is the lesson this case study provides, which can be applied to other post-conflict societies to prevent conflict and promote peace and reconciliation.

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APPENDICES

Appendix I: Recruitment Letter to Research Participants

Invitations to participate in research
(date)

RE: Seeking Your Expert view on Madhesi Identity in the Post-War Transition in Nepal

Dear xxxxxxxxxxxx,

My name is Adhik Badal. I am a PhD student in the Department of Political Science at Kent State University (Ohio, USA) and I am conducting my dissertation on Madhesi identity. I am conducting interviews as part of my research to increase our understanding of how popular support shifted towards Madhesi identity in the aftermath of the Maoist insurgency. As a xxxxxxxxxx, you are in an ideal position to give me your expert view on the subject, and I would appreciate having the opportunity to conduct an interview with you.

Our conversation would last between 45 minutes to an hour. Your responses to the questions would be kept confidential unless you decide otherwise.

There is no compensation offered for this study. As this is a voluntary participation, you may decline to answer any question or end the interview at any time. But your participation will be a valuable addition to this research, and findings could lead to greater understanding of the development of Madhesi identity, and its importance to the future of Nepal.

I look forward to hearing from you and to setting up a mutually agreeable time for us to meet remotely. This project has been approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or complaints about the research, you may contact my advisor, Dr. Landon Hancock at xxxxxxxxx or call the IRB directly at 330-672-2704.

Thank you for your consideration. I will follow up with you within the next week to confirm whether you will participate.

Sincerely,

Adhik Badal
Department of Political Science
Kent State University

Appendix II: Letter of Consent

Study Title: Ethnic Uprising in Nepal's Tarai: The Making of Madhesi Identity in Post-Civil War Transition

Principal Investigator: Landon E. Hancock, Ph.D.
Key Personal: Adhik Badal, Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Political Science
Kent State University

You are being invited to participate in a research study. This consent form will provide you with information on the research project, what you will need to do, and the potential benefits and risks of the study. Your participation to this study is voluntary. Please read this document carefully. It is important that you ask questions and fully understand the research in order to make an informed decision. You will receive a copy of this document for future reference.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand how Madhesi identity was created in the aftermath of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal's Tarai.

Procedure

You are invited to participate due to your expertise or connection with Madhesi politics and identities in Nepal. I am seeking to reach individuals like yourself with pertinent experience and knowledge at different levels. Although there are no anticipated risks to participate in this study, I will take all the necessary precautions to protect your identity, like the use of pseudonym in any future analysis. This interview should take approximately 45 minutes to an hour. During the interview, I will ask questions about your understanding of Madhesi identity. A written transcription of the interview will be sent to you within the week of the interview upon request.

Audio-Video Recording, and Photography

In order to add in the accuracy of the transcription, audio/video recording device will be used to record the interview. This recording will be employed solely for this study and will not be publicly available or use for any other purposes. It will be protected in a safe by the researcher. Interview data will be destroyed once it's purpose will be completed. However, you have the right to refuse to be recorded.

I agree to be recorded: Yes____, No____
If providing participants, the opportunity to review the records:
I would like to review the (recording/transcripts) prior to their use: Yes____, No____

Benefits
This study may not benefit you directly. But your participation on this project will help understand how new ethnic identity emerges in the post-war transition, and how it triggers ethnic movement and conflict not only in Madhes, and/or in Nepal, but also in countries with recent political transitions.

Risks and Discomforts
There are no anticipated risks to participate in this study beyond those countered in everyday life.

Confidentiality
Your signed consent form will be kept separate from your study data, and responses will not be linked to you. Your information will be protected within the limits of the law, but due to the nature of the internet, there is a possibility that a third party (such as a hacker) may view information that can identify you without your permission. However, any identifying information will be kept in a secure location and only the principal investigator and key research personnel will have access to the data. Research participants will not be identified in any publication or presentation of the research result.

Compensation
There is no compensation, financial or otherwise, included in participation of this study.

Future Research
Your de-identified information will not be used or shared with other researchers.

Voluntary Participation
Your involvement in this project is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to participate, or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty.

Contact Information
This project has been approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or complaints about the research, you may contact Dr. Landon Hancock at xxxxxxxxx or call the IRB directly at 330-672-2704.

Consent Statement and Signature
I have read this consent form and have had the opportunity to have my questions answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

Name: _____

Signature: _____Date: _____

Appendix III: Interview Guide

Each interview will last approximately 45 minutes to an hour and will be audio-visual recorded, if the participant agrees, to aid in the accuracy of the transcription. Interviews will be confidential to minimize the risk of involvement to interview participants.

Transcriptions from the interview will be assigned a code and all identifying information will be removed. The code key and audio recordings will be saved on a high-capacity flash drive and secured in a locked filing cabinet, with only the principal investigator and researcher able to access it. The transcriptions will be saved on a separate flash drive and stored in a locked office.

Different questions are prepared for two categories of participants: (1) Madhesi leaders and (2) locals. The first is for senior Madhesi leaders, and the second is for Madhesi locals. The first interview questions are divided into two sections. The first is introductory in nature, although it discloses interviewees' understanding of contextual issues and their relationship with the rise of Madhesi identity. The second is designed to uncover participants' understanding of Madhesi identity.

Concurrently, the second interview questions are categorized into three. The first section is introductory in nature. The second is designed to disclose participants' understanding of contextual issues and their relationship with the emergence of Madhesi identity. The third section focuses on Madhesi identity, examining how local Madhesi residents identify themselves.

Prior to beginning the interview, I will ensure that the following items are addressed with each participant:

- Personal introduction
- Introduction to the study
    - Purpose: understand how Madhesi identity was formed and made salient in post-war transition.

- Consent to participate and consent to record.
- Questions and assurances.

Interview Questions for Senior Madhesi Leaders

Part 1: Background

1. Comment on the place of Madhes in Nepali imagination and political landscape.
2. How do you see Madhes and Madhesis today?

Part 2: Madhesi Identity

3. How would you describe Madhesi Identity?
    a. [Prompt]
        i. Tell me more about the history of Madhesi Identity.
4. What does it mean to be a Madhesi do you think?
5. How important is the Madhesi Identity for you?
6. Has this Identity changed over time?
    a. [Prompt]
        i. [Tell me more] how the meaning of Madhesi identity shifted its concentration from regional one to ethnic and racial categories.
        ii. When did you realize that Madhesi identity is an ethnic identity?
        iii. How did you come to this conclusion?
7. How do you see caste-based identities in the Tarai? How do you describe their relationship with Madhesi identity?
8. Do you think your perspective is shared by others at different levels?
9. Do you think it's a source of conflict? Why or why not?

Conclusion

10. Before we conclude this interview, is there anything you would like to add about Madhesi identity that we did not discuss?

Interview Questions for Madhesi Locals

Part 1: Background

1. Comment on the place of Madhes in Nepali imagination and political landscape.
2. How do you see Madhes and Madhesis today?

Part 2: Contextual Factors and Madhesi Identity

3. How would you describe the relationship between contextual issues and the rise of Madhesi identity in the post-war period?
    a. [prompt]
        i. How do you see the Maoist insurgency in this process?

4. How do you define the Nepali state and its relationship with Madhes and Madhesis?
    a. [Prompt]
        i. Do you think this dynamic affected on the emergence of Madhesi identity?
        ii. Tell me more about state policies (formal or informal) that you think were biased for Madhesis.

5. How was the relationship between Madhesis and that of others (Pahadis) in the Tarai prior to 2007? Has this relationship changed?

Part 3: Madhesi Identity

6. How would you describe Madhesi Identity?
    a. [Prompt]
        ii. Tell me more about the history of Madhesi Identity.
7. What does it mean to be a Madhesi do you think?
8. How important is the Madhesi Identity for you?
9. Has this Identity changed over time?
    b. [Prompt]
        i. [Tell me more] how the meaning of Madhesi identity shifted its concentration from regional one to ethnic and racial categories.
        ii. When did you realize that Madhesi identity is an ethnic identity?
        iii. How did you come to this conclusion?

10. How do you see caste-based identities in the Tarai? How do you describe their relationship with Madhesi identity?
11. Do you think your perspective is shared by others at different levels?
12. Do you think it's a source of conflict? Why or why not?

Conclusion

13. Before we conclude this interview, is there anything you would like to add about Madhesi identity that we did not discuss?

Appendix IV: 22-Point Agreement between the Government of Nepal and MPRF

The Government of Nepal and the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum, Nepal (Madhesi Peoples' Rights Forum) signed a 22-point agreement on August 30, 2007. The following is the unofficial translation of the agreement extracted from peace agreement database (https://www.peaceagreements.org/).

Agreement between the GoN and Madhesi Janadhikar Forum, Nepal

Realizing the sentiments of the movement of the Madhesi people as a continuity of the historic People's Movement of 2006/07, and in order to end all forms of discrimination against Madhesis, Adivasi/Janajatis, Dalits, women, backward classes and minorities, including the Muslim community, practiced by the centralized and unitary state for a long time and to create an environment enabling all Nepalese people, inclusive of Madhesis, to join the single national mainstream and move forward by restructuring the state as an inclusive democracy and federal structure, the Government of Nepal and the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum [Madhesi Peoples' Rights Forum], Nepal, today, conclude the following agreement:

1. To immediately implement the government's decision to honor all Madhesi activists killed during the Madhes movement and to provide compensation to their families.
2. To provide relief to those injured, rendered blind and disabled during the Madhes movement and to provide immediate medical treatment for all injured people who are yet to receive treatment.
3. To withdraw all cases filed against the leaders and activists of the Forum during the Madhes movement.
4. To ensure proportional representation and partnership of Madhesis, Adivasi/Janajatis, Dalits, women, backward classes, disabled people, and minority communities, including Muslims, who have been excluded for generations in all organs and levels of government and in power structures, mechanisms, and resources.
5. To immediately establish a commission of experts for state restructuring and ensure that its constitution is inclusive.
6. While restructuring the state, provision shall be made for a federal governance system with autonomous provinces/states, while keeping the sovereignty, national unity, and integrity of Nepal intact. The rights, nature and limits of the said autonomy will be as determined by the Constituent Assembly.
7. To accord national recognition to the dresses, languages, and cultures of the Madhesis.
8. To ensure appropriate proportional representation in all political appointments made by the government and all services, including in Foreign Service and the education sector, as well as in commissions.
9. To give public holidays on major festivals of the Muslims. To enact laws to protect Madrassa Board as well as the community, language, sexes, religion, culture, and customs and traditions of the Muslims.
10. To fully guarantee human rights by ending all discriminations based on ethnicity, language, sex, religion, culture, national and social origin, political and other

ideologies.

11. To establish a trilingual language policy consisting of (a) mother tongue, (b) the Nepali language and (c) English for official transactions, education, and international communication.
12. To solve the following Dalit-related problems:
    a) Make provision for severe legal punishment for practicing caste discrimination and untouchability.
    b) Effectively implement the policy of free and compulsory education, at least up to primary level, for Dalits.
    c) Make provision for special opportunities and reservations in education and employment.
    d) Make provision for alternative means of livelihood for landless Dalits by providing them with land for building houses.
13. To solve problems related to citizenship by redeploying the Citizenship Distribution Teams to villages for easy and accessible distribution of citizenship certificates.
14. To adopt a balanced and just policy for the distribution of revenue and income from the State to the Madhes and remote regions.
15. The process of returning houses, land and other property seized by the CPN (Maoist) is continuing and will be continued with urgency along with the return of weapons seized by them [CPN (M)] to their rightful owners.
16. To establish an Industrial Security Force to industrialize the country and to guarantee industrial security, as well as increasing production.
17. Both parties to stay committed to conducting the Constituent Assembly election in an impartial, peaceful, and fear-free environment. In order to ensure the impartiality of the Constituent Assembly, make necessary arrangements to prevent the misuse of the State's mechanisms, resources and power, including by the current Legislature-Parliament.
18. The Ministry of Information and Communications to appoint Madhesi media experts and journalists in all organs and levels of government-owned media, including electronic and print media, and to ensure inclusive proportional representation of Madhesis in the government communication commission, agencies, and delegations.
19. To create a search team to conduct a special investigation into the abduction and disappearance of Jitendra Sah, chairperson of the Madhesi Youth Forum and to immediately make his status public.
20. To immediately establish a High-level Task Force for Inclusion to formulate policies and laws necessary for the inclusion of Madhesis, Adivasi/janajatis, Dalits, women, etc. in all organs and levels of the State.
21. To accord constitutional guarantee for the rights of ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities based on the principles upheld by the United Nations and international human rights organizations on the rights of minorities.
22. To withdraw the various movements being carried out by the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum. The GoN shall immediately fulfill those agreements that can be implemented promptly and shall fulfill other provisions in course of time. A joint Monitoring Mechanism shall be established to carry out and oversee the implementation process and to periodically review the implementation.

Sd. Upendra Yadav
Coordinator
Madhesi Janadhikar Forum,

Sd. Ram Chandra Poudel
Coordinator
GoN Talks Team

Date: August 30, 2007

NOTE: While still demanding the establishment of a republic and a proportional electoral system, the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum, Nepal shall give top priority to the Constituent Assembly election and shall participate in it while continuing its efforts to make it a success.

Sd. Upendra Yadav
Coordinator
Madhesi Janadhikar Forum, Nepal
Date: August 30, 2007

Appendix IV: Government of Nepal and UDMF 8-Point Agreement

The Government of Nepal and the United Democratic Madhesi Front (UDMF) signed an 8-point agreement on February 28, 2008. The following is the unofficial translation of the agreement extracted from Miklian (2008).

Respecting the sentiments and aspirations of the Madhesi people of Nepal, expressed during the protests and movements that they have organized time and again for equal rights, this agreement was signed between the Government of Nepal and the United Democratic Madhesi Front, to ensure (the establishment of) a federal democratic republic in Nepal (with a) multiparty democratic system of governance, by guaranteeing equality, freedom and justice for all the nation's people, as well as by putting an end to all types of discrimination. This agreement will be immediately implemented. The points of the agreement are as follows.

1. The state shall declare as martyrs those who were killed during the Madhes movement and shall provide adequate compensation to those maimed and those who are yet to receive compensation. Similarly, arrangements shall be made for those injured during the movement to receive medical expenses and those martyred shall be given due recognition and their families shall be provided rupees 1 million as relief, and those arrested shall be immediately released.

2. By accepting the Madhesi people's call for an autonomous Madhes and other people's desire for a federal structure with autonomous regions, Nepal shall become a federal democratic republic. In the federal structure, power shall be divided between the centre and states in a clear manner according to the (constitutional) list. The states shall be fully autonomous and shall enjoy full rights. By keeping Nepal's sovereignty and integrity intact, the decision regarding details of the (constitutional) list and the division of power between the centre and the states shall be made by the Constituent Assembly.

3. The existing legal provision for 20 percent, in Sub-section 14 of Section 7 of the Election of Members to the Constituent Assembly Act 2064, shall be changed to 30 percent.

4. It shall be mandatory for the state to carry out appointments, promotions and nominations in a manner such that there is inclusive proportional representation of Madhesis, indigenous nationalities, women, Dalits, (people from) backward regions and minority communities in all state bodies, including the security sector.

5. Proportional, inclusive and group entry [tr. entry in the army as a group] of Madhesis and other communities shall be ensured in order to give the Nepal Army a national and inclusive character.

6. The Government of Nepal and the United Democratic Madhesi Front request all armed groups agitating in the Tarai to come to talks for a peaceful political process and to find a solution through dialogue. The Government of Nepal will take immediate steps to create a conducive environment for this purpose. We appeal to everyone to help conduct the

Constituent Assembly election on 10 April in a peaceful, violencefree, impartial, fair and fear-free environment.

7. The Government of Nepal will immediately release all those who have been detained, withdraw cases filed against Madhesi leaders and party cadres of the Forum as well as of other parties, and immediately implement all other points of the 22-point Agreement signed between the Government of Nepal and the Madhesi People's Rights Forum on 30 August 2007 (2064 Bhadau 13).

8. All protest programs called by United Democratic Madhesi Forum shall be immediately withdrawn. The Government of Nepal will be responsible for the constitutional, legal, political and administrative aspects of the points of this agreement. The government shall form a high-level monitoring committee including members of the Front to monitor the implementation of this agreement.

Signed,

Rajendra Mahato, National Chairman Sadbhavana Party
Upendra Yadav, Madhesi People's Rights Forum
Mahantha Thakur, Chairman, Tarai Madhes Democratic Party
Girija Prasad Koirala, Prime Minister, Government of Nepal