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Research Article

Fluid formulations: A study of varied interpretations of Madhesi identity

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Abstract

This paper is an examination of the ways in which the residents and political actors of the *Tarāi-Madhes* (lowlands) in Nepal construct and contest Madhesi identity. It juxtaposes interpretations of Madhesi along geographic, linguistic, ethnic, and religious lines, with the experiential aspect of "being a Madhesi." The paper demonstrates how Madhesi evolved into a politically charged, emotion-laden identity category, and argues that the experience of being othered is central to the construction and reification of Madhesi identity.

Keywords

Madhesi; Nepal; identity; othering

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Introduction

The idea of Nepal is inextricably linked to the imagination of its mountains. Yet, it is the lowlands of the country, colloquially called *Tarāi*, *Madhesa*, or *Tarāi-Madhesa*, and its people, that are central to understanding Nepali politics in recent years. The mélange of topography, languages, and people that populate the flatlands lie at the heart of ongoing contestations about who or what constitutes the country and how its diversity shapes the awareness of being a Nepali.

The lowlands of Nepal occupy around 23 percent of the country, consist of one-thirds of the total agricultural land, and over 80 percent of all of Nepal's industries are located in ten Tarai districts alone (Rimal et al. 2018). Demographically, it is home to approximately 51 percent of Nepal's population, of which 63 percent of the people are of plains origin, 36 percent of hill origin, while the remaining are classified as others in the 2011 census (Goodhand et al. 2018). The people of plains origin include the plains caste groups, *Tarāi Janajāti* (plains indigenous groups), and Muslims, who constitute 19.86, 9.75, and 4.4 percent of Nepal's population respectively (Dahal 2014).

The lowlands have, however, been treated more as a "colonial possession serving the economic and other interests" of the Kathmandu-based rulers from the hills "than as a constituent unit of the newly-founded Kingdom" (Regmi 1984: 13) ever since the formation of the modern state of Nepal in the 18th century. Despite Nepal's status as a multinational democracy,[1] Nepali national identity promoted by the state since the 1950s draws upon the cultural tenets of the high caste Hindus of the hills. It is particularly exclusionary to the people of the plains as it "privileges [hill] traditions and norms" (B. Sijapati 2013: 151). Furthermore, due to geographical proximity with India and cultural and linguistic similarity with north Indian caste groups, the Nepali state and people from the hills have always cast suspicion on the "Nepaliness" of plains people (Gaige 1975; Gautam 2008).[2]

Such othering has resulted in three massive protests in the lowlands termed the Madhes *āndolan* (movement) in 2007, 2008, and 2015/16 in the aftermath of a decade-long armed conflict (1996–2006), and amidst heated political debates on ethnic rights and state restructuring in Nepal (2007–2015).

Madhes, a locational term signifying the plains of Nepal, and Madhesi,[3] a term used to refer to "the plainspeople of Indian cultural and linguistic background" (Gellner 2019, 269) both became highly contested terms in the aftermath of the 2007 Madhes uprising (Karki and Wenner 2020). Madhesi, as an identity category, warrants examination as it is "an ethnic category still very much in the making" (Gellner 2014) with a "fluid denotation" (Gellner 2019: 269). Scholarly works that examine the construction of Madhesi identity, specifically the reasons behind why and how "Madhesis were made Madhesis," remain lacking, as has been noted by Gautam (2008: 117). Myriad interpretations of the term Madhesi thus persist in scholarly works,[4] and the word remains contested in practice and officially undefined.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines Madhesi identity by highlighting what it means to be a person from the lowlands of Nepal. It is guided by the research question: What kind of experiences shape plainspeoples' understanding, construction of, and identification with an identity category? The paper is also an endeavor to consolidate the varied interpretations of the term Madhesi and examine the reasons for these variations. I make two arguments in this paper. First, the experience of being discriminated as the Other by the Nepali state and hill people is foundational to understanding the Madhesi identity category. Second, understanding Madhesi as an emotion-laden, politically charged experiential identity category can aid scholarly analysis by overcoming definitional issues tied to which groups of people belong to it or not. This paper does not intend to provide a definition of Madhesi identity, but seeks to highlight how articulations of "Madhesi" involve significant gatekeeping, boundary

maintenance, and problematizing of human mobility.

The remainder of this paper is organized into six sections. The upcoming section outlines the concepts used in this paper, followed by a discussion of the methodology. Section three provides a brief history of discrimination and dissent in the plains. Section four is a detailed discussion of Madhesi identity along geographical, linguistic, caste, ethnic, religious, and experiential lines. Special emphasis is place on my respondents' experience of being treated as the Other. Sections five and six discuss the findings of this paper, contextualize them, and conclude the paper.

Conceptual framework

I use the concept of identity to inform my analysis. This paper takes a social constructivist stance on identity, which implies that while an individual has a role in constructing one's identity, the ability to construct and choose an identity is constrained by the wider social and cultural context. Referring to Jenkins (2008: 18), I understand identity as:

> …our understanding of who we are and who other people are, and, reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and of others (which includes us). It is a very practical matter, synthesizing relationships of similarity and difference. The outcome of agreement and disagreement, and at least in principle always negotiable, identification is not fixed.

This definition shows that otherness is an unavoidable aspect of identity. Through othering, a "dominant in-group ('Us,' the Self) constructs one or many dominated outgroups ('Them,' the Other) by stigmatizing difference - real or imagined - presented as a negation of identity and thus a motive for potential discrimination" (Staszak 2020: 25). At the level of nation-states, the identification of the Other facilitates the formation, articulation, and maintenance of national identity (Petersoo 2007) .

Identity, nevertheless, is a fluid, malleable, and negotiable construct (Jenkins 2008). A constructivist understanding of identity, however, also makes it a contested category of analysis. Owing to the complexities and vagueness of the term, several authors (Rattansi and Phoenix 2005; Maleševic 2003) argue that identity as an analytical category should be abandoned altogether. Identity "...is too ambitious, too torn between the meanings of 'hard' and 'soft,' the essential meanings and constructivist qualifiers, to be used in sociology" state (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 2). However, defending the significance of identity as a conceptual toolbox, Jenkins (2008) emphasizes that though constructed, identity is not entirely imaginary, as it is experienced in everyday life. He further argues that the experiential aspect of identity is partly related to categorization by others, which has real consequences. Identity can influence allocation: "what, and how much, you get" (R. Jenkins 2008: 198). Consequently, identity can be a useful tool of resistance for oppressed groups (L. D. Jenkins 2003).

The simplification of an individual's identity, which is an amalgam of age, gender, class, caste, ethnicity, region, religion, and nation, among other factors, into one category is problematic and can have disastrous consequences (see Scott 1998). Cognizant of the dangers of oversimplification, I use the concept of identity for analysis because my respondents used the term "*Pahicān*" (identity).[5] The Madhes movements, which form the backdrop of my research, were also framed by my interviewees as "*Pahicān ko ladāi*" (fight or struggle for identity or recognition of identity).

Besides arguing for the usefulness of identity as an analytical category, and by focusing on the Madhesi category, this paper also makes an empirical contribution to identity studies in Nepal. Currently, identity research in Nepal is largely about castes and ethnicities that reside in the mid-hills and mountains such as Tamang (Tamang 2009; Campbell 1997; Holmberg 1989),

Newar (Gellner 1986; Doherty 1979), Thakali (W. F. Fisher 2001), Rai (Allen 1997; Russell 1997; Gaenzle 1997), Gurung (Macfarlane 1997; McHugh 1989), Magar (de Sales 2000; Molnar 1982), and Thagmi (Shneiderman 2015), among others. Among the people who live in the lowlands, academic literature on Tharu, a group that claims autochthony to the Tarai-Madhes, is most extensive (Müller-Böker 1993, 1997; Krauskopff 1995, 2018; Guneratne 1998, 2002, 2010) followed by writings on Muslims (M. A. Sijapati 2017, 2013, 2011; Dastider 2013, 2007, 1995; S. Sharma 1994; Gaborieau 1985, 1978, 1972). Other plain caste ethnicities and caste groups are under-researched with few works on the Maithils (Acharya 1981; Burkert 1997), Santhal (Buggeland 1999), Yadav (Dahal 2012), and Dhimal (Rai 2013). This paper seeks to address this empirical research gap.

Methodology

The empirical part of this paper is based on data collected through 55 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in various parts of the central and eastern lowlands of Nepal: Kathmandu, Lahan, Rajbiraj, Dhalkebar, Birgunj, and Golbazar in 2017, 2018, and 2019.[6] Some among my interviewees were embedded in Madhesi politics, such as politicians, political analysts, and Madhesi rights' activists, while the rest were university lecturers, migrant returnees, hospital staff, nonprofit staff, and journalists. I used the purposeful sampling method to select my interviewees because "the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting *information-rich cases* for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term *purposeful* sampling" (Patton 1990: 169, emphasis in original). I also used the snowball or chain sampling method to locate participants, and random sampling to get diverse views on the issue. Interviews were conducted in the Nepali vernacular and simultaneously transcribed and translated into the English language on f4 transkript and MAXQDA software. Data analysis for this paper was inspired by grounded theory and qualitative document analysis, and information was coded and analyzed in MAXQDA.

One of the questions I asked my respondents was to define the term Madhesi and relate their experience of being a person from the plains either currently living there, or in Kathmandu. This paper uses the data gathered from my respondents' answers to this question and instances when Madhesi identity was mentioned in relation to the topics under discussion. In the interviews, I observed that whether or not someone was categorized a Madhesi was a sensitive topic which evoked despair, anger, frustration, and pride in my interviewees. Before I present the findings, I acknowledge my standpoint as an urban hill Chhetri woman. My ascribed *Pahāḍe*[7] (a person from the hills) identity was obvious to my respondents due to my surname. Some respondents, thus, felt the need to clarify that they are speaking about the hill-centric state and not hill people while discussing how the Nepali state has treated the peoples of the plains.

History of discrimination and dissent in the plains

Scholarship on the Nepali lowlands and its people, according to Gautam (2008), agrees upon two things. First, the "Madhesi" have been discriminated against and forsaken by the Nepali state. Second, the loyalty of the "Madhesi" toward the Nepali state, as well as their "Nepaliness," is doubted and questioned. Consequently, Gautam (2008) argues, "Madhesis" in contemporary Nepal are treated as second-class citizens and their presence in Nepali state mechanisms is negligible. This has resulted in the rise of regional and ethnic political parties, and established Madhes as a distinct political power in Nepali politics (ibid). Understanding the reasons behind scholarly consensus on the discrimination faced by the lowlands and its people warrants a brief discussion about the history of the modern state of Nepal with a focus on the economic

exploitation, cultural domination, and political subjugation of the region.

In 1744, a king of the hill principality of Gorkha in Western Nepal, Prithvi Narayan Shah, launched a military campaign to expand his kingdom, laying the foundations of modern-day Nepal (Stiller 1993). The Gorkhali state acquired the plains after the conquest of hill kingdoms that claimed them, and it took nearly a hundred years for the Nepal-Tarai to acquire its current form (Michael 2010). The fertile lands of the plains were prized possessions for Gorkhali rulers due to the revenue they generated in addition to providing an income for landowning elites (Ojha 1983). Social and cultural interactions between the hills and the plains remained limited throughout the 18th and 19th centuries as rulers restricted mobility of people across the regions by prioritizing the interests of the political elites, as well as military considerations (Regmi 1984). Additionally, Tarai residents were barred from politics, civil administration, and the army, resulting in their status as second-class citizens (Gaige 1975).

Culturally, the Nepali state has historically privileged hill people and endorsed their cultural tenets. The *Mulukī Ain* (Law of the Land) 1854, for instance, placed the entire population of the country in a caste hierarchy institutionalizing inequality among the people (Hachhethu 2003). The law places upper castes from the plains below the hill upper castes in hierarchy, while many Tarai middle castes and indigenous groups are not mentioned which, according to Bennett, Dahal, and Govindasamy (2008) reflects the marginal position occupied by the citizens of the plains during that period. Likewise, the 1962 Constitution of Nepal defined and institutionalized the basic tenets of Nepali national identity as the monarchy, Hinduism, and the Nepali language (Onta 1996). The *Pancāyata* regime (1960–1990), an autocratic system of rule by the monarchy, promoted a Nepali identity based on "*Eka bhāṣā eka bheṣa eka deśa*" (One language, one dress, one country), drawing on the cultural tenets of the high caste hill rulers. This implied assimilation to the cultural norms of the high caste Hindus from the hills, and of the people living in the hills and mountains more broadly, and was thus particularly exclusionary for the people of the plains.

The struggle for rights and recognition of the distinct identity of the people of the lowlands began in the 1950s, after the overthrow of the Rana autocracy, due to the maltreatment of the region and its peoples as colonial subjects during the Shah and Rana rule (Gautam 2008; Regmi 1984; Gaige 1975). The *Nepāla Tarāi Kāṃgresa Pārṭī* (Nepal Tarai Congress Party) was formed in 1951, whose main aims were an autonomous state in the Tarai, recognition of Hindi as a national language, and ensuring adequate employment of the plains people in civil service (Joshi and Rose 1966: 138). While the party eventually disintegrated, its objectives continued to be listed as demands in all the subsequent protests in the region, including the Madhes Movements of 2007 and 2008 (B. Sijapati 2013). Likewise, in 1956, Raghunath Thakur "Madhesi" launched the *Madhesī Mukti Āndolana* (Madhesi Emancipation Movement) and later *Madhesī Janakrāntikārī Dala* (Madhesi People's Revolutionary Party), demanding an end to the oppression of Madhesis and advocating for their rights. Self-identifying as a Madhesi, in his 1958 Hindi booklet *Paratantra Madhesa aura uskī Saṃskṛti* (A dependent Madhes and its culture), Thakur mentions "how the term 'Madhesi/ya' that was imposed by the state during the Rana regime then became a term for self-identification to counter the state" (Gautam 2012: 177). Thakur's analysis of the Madhesi struggle as the search for emancipation from alienation and colonization by the hill-centric Nepali state has gained wide traction in Nepali politics since the 1990s.

After the end of the *Pancāyata* regime in 1990, the new political climate aided diverse ethnic and cultural groups in Nepal to assert their difference and rights (Hangen and Lawoti 2013). In 1983, *Nepal Sadbhāvanā Pariṣada* (Nepal Goodwill Council) was launched as a cultural association to work for the political and cultural rights of the

Madhesi. It was registered as a political party in 1990 as the *Nepāla Sadbhāvanā Pārṭī* (Nepal Goodwill Party). The Maoist War (1996–2006) further revealed deep-rooted chasms in Nepali society along caste, class, gender, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and geographic lines (Adhikari 2014). While the Maoist war was fought mostly in the hills, in 2000, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) or CPN (Maoist) formed the *Madhesī Rāṣṭriya Mukti Morcā* (Madhesi National Liberation Front) to fight for the rights of the plains people.[8] In doing so, the CPN (Maoist) became the first national level party to systematically raise the concerns of the lowlands (Gautam 2008).

The end of the Maoist war culminated with a non-violent overthrow of the 240-year-old monarchical rule in Nepal. However, it was the Madhes Movement in 2007 and 2008 that institutionalized federalism in Nepal. Building upon the range of issues raised by politicians and activists from the plains since the 1950s - such as demands of the Nepal Tarai Congress Party - the main demands of the 2007 Madhes Movement were: state recognition of Madhesi identity; institutionalizing federal democracy in Nepal; the creation of an autonomous Madhes province; delineation of electoral provinces based on population; and proportional representation of all ethnic groups in state organs. Initial protests were triggered after the arrest of the leaders of the *Madhesī Janādhikāra Phoram* (Madhesi People's Rights Forum), then a loose network of politicians and activists from the plains, who burned the copies of the Interim Constitution on January 16, 2007 claiming that the statute did not ensure federalism and delineate electoral constituencies on the basis of population (B. Sijapati 2013). In February 2008, the government signed an agreement with a coalition of plains-centric parties committing to carve an Autonomous Madhes Province and adopt federalism in Nepal. Yet, when the Second Constituent Assembly was preparing to promulgate a constitution in 2015, the people of the plains protested again. The protests revolved around four major issues: the delineation of province boundaries, delineation of electoral constituencies based on population, inclusive proportional representation of all ethnic groups in state organs, and change in citizenship provisions (International Crisis Group 2016).

The discussion on Madhesi identity, which became a highly contested word in Nepali politics in the aftermath of the 2007 protests, takes place against this backdrop of dissent in the plains. As Hachhethu (2007: 2) notes, "Madhesi identity has historically been asserted by political activism" and received due recognition by the Nepali state as a consequence of the Madhes movements. In the subsequent section, I elaborate upon the diverse ways in which Madhesi identity has been interpreted, constructed, and delimitated based on primary and secondary data. I discuss how geographical, linguistic, caste, and ethnic criteria are used to define Madhesi identity, and the contestations tied to those criteria juxtaposing them with the lived experiences of the people of the plains. I further elaborate upon the experiential aspect of being a Madhesi, tying it to the experience of othering, arguing that such discrimination has helped the heterogenous population of the plains collectively identify as and reify Madhesi identity.

Categorization of Madhesi identity

The interpretation of the term Madhesi varies among Nepal scholars, Nepali politicians, political analysts, activists, and people of the plains because of the diversity of the place, and the fluctuating relationship of various groups in the plains with the term Madhesi characterized by its acceptance and rejection at different junctures in Nepali politics. As late as July 2020, the Women and Social Committee of Nepal's parliament issued a directive to the Madhesi Commission,[9] a government-formed body for the welfare of the Madhesi community, to define the term "Madhesi." Even so, the term is used widely in practice by the state. A reservation policy introduced in 2007 allocates 23 percent of the total reserved seats in civil service for Madhesis (Sunam and Shrestha 2019). Prospective civil service

applicants under the Madhesi category need a recommendation from the local government and based on the document, the Chief District Officer authenticates that a person is Madhesi. Political parties also have quotas reserved for Madhesis for proportional representation elections.

The 2011 census of Nepal lists 48 caste-origin groups in the Tarai, and over 99 percent of these groups identify as Hindus, comprising 19.86 percent of the total population of Nepal (Dahal 2014). Though the census does not use the term "Madhesi," these 48 plains caste-origin groups are often referred to as Madhesi in writings about the ethnic diversity of Nepal (see Kharel, Thapa, and Sijapati 2016). In addition to these caste groups, the *Tarāi Janajāti* (plains indigenous group), Muslims, Pahādi (people of hill origin or hill migrants),[10] and recent migrants from India such as the Marwadis, Bengalis, and Sikhs also populate the plains. Dahal (1992) argues that an ethnic divide in the Tarai-Madhes exists between hill migrants and plains people, between plains Hindu caste groups and plains indigenous people, and between the plains Hindu high- and low-caste groups.

Against this backdrop, who qualifies as a Madhesi, and what criteria are highlighted in the definitions of the term by scholars and the people of the lowlands? Based on my fieldwork and secondary data analysis, I discuss how an individual is defined as a Madhesi on meeting certain geographical and non-geographical criteria such as language, ethnicity, religion, and experience, in the next section. I further elaborate on the experiential dimension of Madhesi identity connecting it to discourses on the internal colonialization of the Nepali lowlands and the experience of being othered.

Geographic criteria

> *Garv se kahu hum Madhesi chhi, bhagauda nai dhartiputra chhi* [Say it with pride that you are Madhesi, not a foreign fugitive but a son of the soil]
>
> (A CPN [Maoist] slogan widely painted on public walls across Kathmandu during the 2007 Madhes Movement)

The geographical interpretation of Madhesi has two dimensions as evidenced by the slogan above: the association of Madhesi with the toponym Madhes, and the place of origin or history of migration. As Madhesi is etymologically associated with Madhes,[11] Madhesi confers an ownership of the place Madhes (Interview 13, 2017; Dahal 2008). It is also emphasized in the definitions of Madhesi as "non-hill origin people" living in the Tarai-Madhes (Shah 2006; Karn, Limbu, and Jha 2018). Nayak (2011) is an exception in terms of using Madhesi as an umbrella term to describe everyone living in the lowlands: Janajatis, "Pahadi Madhesis" (migrants from hills and mountains who came to the lowlands during the 1960s and 70s on account of state-promoted migration and for better livelihood), and "Indian Madhesis" (migrants from the Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh before the 1950s). However, most of my interviewees rejected the attribution of Madhesi to hill migrants, apart from politicians, who opined that people who live in the Madhes are Madhesi.

This leads us to the second aspect of the geographical dimension of Madhesi identity: the ways in which the mobility of the residents of the lowlands is tied to their exclusion from the Madhesi category. Interviewees of hill origin, born and raised in the plains, expressed unease with the usage of Madhesi for recent migrants from India, particularly businesspeople, while labelling people who had migrated from the hills many generations ago as Pahādi. This unease was articulated by residents of Birgunj and Lahan as an "identity crisis" because they are called Madhesi while travelling to Kathmandu but Pahādi in Birgunj and Lahan.[12] People of hill origin, both caste groups and the *Janajāti*, whose ancestors migrated to the plains, perceive their categorization as a person of hill origin as an imposition that undermines their relationship with the lowlands. "The 2007 Madhes Andolan made a *Madhesko Pahāde* (Pahāde

from Madhes) but as a person born, raised, educated in the Madhes…whose family has lived in the plains for over 200 years I do not identify with the term," a journalist explained (Interview 10, 2017).

For hill people of the plains who lay a claim to Madhesi identity, a Madhesi activist (Interview 15, 2017) made a forceful counterpoint:

> Let us say you grew up in the Madhes and now ask why am I also not a Madhesi? I was born and raised in Kathmandu, but am I a Pahade? My community is different. If you grew up in Janakpur as a Karki, Thapa, Ghimire [hill castes] then you are a Pahade of Janakpur just as I will be a Madhesi of Kathmandu. Why should I claim that my son born here [in Kathmandu] is a Pahāde? There is a clear division.

This quote shifts the focus away from the place as the source of the distinctiveness of Madhesi identity to community. The interviewee claimed the Madhesi community refers to plains people who are similar to each another in the ways in which they practice Hinduism and caste stratification despite linguistic diversity. Nonetheless, contestations on Madhesi identity remain rooted in the spatial link between Madhesi and Madhes, and therefore questions persist about the exclusion of hill migrants and inclusion of recent migrants, particularly businesspeople from India under the "Madhesi" category.

Migration from India is a thorny issue in the discussion of Madhesi identity.[13] Academic studies on immigration from India to the Tarai-Madhes are exceptionally few (see Kansakar 2003, 1984; Dahal 1983, 1978), and this topic has been ignored by scholars researching on the region, as has also been noted by J.R. Sharma and S. Sharma (2011). Though some scholars (Parmanand 1986; Sinha 2009; Subba 2018) have defined Madhesi as "Nepalis of Indian Origin," associating the origin of the Madhesi with India, others perceive it as offensive and an example of how hill people suspect the loyalties of the plains people to the Nepali nation (see Karn, Limbu, and Jha 2018).[14]

It is important to note that associating "Madhesi" with India is challenged by "Madhesi" scholars and activists also because the genealogy of various hill caste groups can also be traced to India, but their identity is not defined along those lines, and neither is their belongingness to the Nepali nation questioned on that account. Madhesi is neither a diaspora nor the translation for Indian translated in Nepali asserts Yadav (2010).[15] Madhesi claims to autochthony, which is connected to a wider discourse on indigeneity often tied to spatial fixity and priority in time as the source of rights, is nonetheless contested in the plains by Tarai indigenous groups, most prominently by Tharu (Guneratne 2010). All these issues demonstrate how the definition of Madhesi along geographical lines is highly disputed.

Ethnic, caste, and religious criteria

The definition of Madhesi along caste and ethnicity is arguably less contentious than the geographic interpretation of the term. Gautam (2008) argues that Hindu caste groups, Muslims, and recent migrants from India call themselves Madhesi. There is indeed broad consensus among scholars that plains Hindu caste groups are Madhesi, but no agreement on which other groups residing in the plains qualify as Madhesi (see Dahal 1992, 2014; Hachhethu 2007; Kharel, Thapa, and Sijapati 2016). Goodhand et al (2018), for instance, explain Madhesi as "non-Pahadi people living in the Tarai of Indian Hindu origin." Some Muslims, nonetheless, associate with the term Madhesi (Interview 20, 2017; Dastider 2013). Others perceive the issues of Nepali Muslims to be exacerbated on account of their religion, and thus seek recognition as Muslims instead (Parveen 2012). A Muslim activist noted associating with the term Madhesi followed by disillusionment with it due to the practical implications of being listed as Madhesi:

> Earlier we embraced the category Madhesi.…But later we dissociated

> with the term because within the Madhesi category they [Madhesi politicians] gave seats to Jha, Yadav [plains Hindu caste-groups] but not to Muslims.... So, we demanded that Muslims be mentioned as a separate category in the constitution. (Interview 38, 2018)

Likewise, the indigenous people of the plains also have a fraught relationship with the term Madhesi. Tharus, who constitute 85.4 percent of the total population of plain indigenous groups (Dahal 2014), protested their placement under Madhesi, demanding that the government categorize them as a distinct group in 2007 (Guneratne 2010). Some scholars (Bose and Niroula 2015: 128) have therefore argued that "the construct of Madhesi identity is assimilationist and hegemonic" while others such as Pandey (2017: 315) have interpreted Tharu protests as being against the "Madhesization of the Tarai." However, at different political junctures since 2007, Tharu leaders have either embraced or rejected the term (Interview 55, 2019; Sarbahari and Chaudhary 2017). Dhimal, another plains indigenous group, also reject the term Madhesi to define themselves (Rai 2014).

Linguistic criteria

In one of the earliest comprehensive academic works on the Nepali lowlands, Gaige (1975, 216) defines "plains people" as "those who speak plains languages[16] as their mother tongues or first languages, whether they were born or live in the plains or the hills." While Gaige does not use the term Madhesi, most activists among my respondents used Gaige's definition of plains people as their interpretation of the term Madhesi. Hachhethu (2007) and Dahal (2014), however, limit Madhesi identity to plains Hindu castes who speak Maithili, Bhojpuri, Bajjika, and Awadhi. Politicians, interviewed for this article, fluctuated between using Madhesi to refer to everyone living in the Madhes, or only to those who spoke the plains languages as their mother tongues. This can be interpreted as a strategy to placate all segments of the population living in the plains: those who identify as Madhesis as well as the non-Madhesis.

Against this backdrop of acceptance, rejection, and contestation surrounding the term "Madhesi," the meanings attached to it are ever evolving and malleable. Contestations regarding who is or should be considered a Madhesi have therefore paved the way for defining this term based on an experiential basis. The ethnic, religious, linguistic, and geographic interpretations of Madhesi identity are criteria predominantly used by scholars, politicians, and activists, and to a lesser extent by the common people of the plains themselves. However, the experiential dimension of Madhesi identity focuses entirely on individual experiences of "feeling" like a Madhesi. The experiential criteria also highlight Madhesi as an external label which fueled resistance, redefinition, and ownership of the term.

Experiential criteria

> Madhesi is a constructed identity. It does not have an anthropological basis because it is not an ethnicity... Madhesis were not born Madhesi. It was a name given to us by the state and the people living in the hills. (Interview 28, 2017)

Madhesi, as the quote suggests, is a word historically used by outsiders - the Nepali state and hill dwellers - to refer to people of the plains (see Thakur 1995). While Madhesi implies people who live in the Madhes, "*Madhise*" (the derogatory form of Madhesi), used in speech by people from the hills, denotes outsiders or immigrants from North India (Yhome 2006). Madhesi identity is therefore not just ascribed but also experienced.

The focus on the experience of being termed and discriminated against as Madhesi also arguably overcomes the linguistic, geographical, cultural, caste, and religious divides amongst the people in the plains. Dastider (2000), for instance, claims that

despite religious differences, Muslims also identify with plain caste groups as Madhesi against hill domination. Madhesi is thus not an ethnicity but rather an "identity of resistance," writes Lal (2013: 12). The association of plains indigenous groups' leaders with the term Madhesi while bargaining with the Nepali state for political gains can also be explained as part of such resistance (see *The Kathmandu Post* 2015). Therefore, Nepali writer, Dalit activist, and politician Aahuti claims, "people who have been derogated as *Madhise* are Madhesis" (Aahuti as cited in Basnet 2018). In the upcoming section I further elaborate on the experiential aspect of Madhesi identity highlighting what my respondents framed as a case of othering and internal colonization.

The angst of the other

The othering of people who identify as Madhesi is rooted in the formulation of Nepali identity which is predicated on being different from India as the "other" (Bhandari 2016). As difference from India and Indians is a defining feature of Nepaliness, it has social and political repercussions for the people of the plains, whose "religious traditions, languages and the caste system, their food, style of clothes, forms of entertainment and even personal mannerisms are cultural characteristics they share with people who live across the border in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar" (Gaige 1975, 12). The Madhesi have to repeatedly combat the suspicion of being Indians and constantly prove their loyalty to the state (see A. Lal 2020, 2017; Karna 2015; Yadav 2010).

Narrations of the experience of othering by my respondents involved interactions with Pahādi bureaucrats and Pahādis living in the Madhes, or while traveling outside the Madhes, particularly to Kathmandu, or traveling outside of the country. In describing those encounters, phrases my respondents used were "It was when I realized I was a Madhesi," "I became a Madhesi (*Ma Madhesī bhae~*)", "I was made a Madhesi (*Ma Madhesī banāīe~*)."[17] Given the emotional nature of the issue, I noted a distinctive change of tone in my respondents as they became unsettled while recounting such instances of misrecognition.

Seated outside a teashop in Rajbiraj, the headquarter of Saptari district in central Tarai close to the Indian border, a recent graduate (Interview 16, 2017) described the moment he "became a Madhesi" as:

> Before I went to India for my high school, I did not know who a Madhesi or a Pahade was. In the institution I attended, there were around 140 Nepalis out of which around 27 were from Siraha, Saptari, and Dhanusha districts [Tarai districts]. It was there that I realized that we are not citizens of Nepal. Indians along with students from other countries would tell us, "You don't look like a Nepali." And the Nepali students from the hills would also tell our Indian classmates, "They are definitely not Nepali, their forefathers immigrated to Nepal from India . . . ." My family has lived here for seven generations and if one generation lived for 50 years on an average then seven generations would be 350 years. It makes us "Bhoomiputra" (Sons of the soil).

This incident was linked to the beginning of his Madhesi rights activism. At other times, the mention of such misrecognition seeped into the conversation while discussing border tensions, as in the case of a politician I interviewed in Lahan, the district headquarters of Siraha district in central Nepal. Discussing an incident near the Nepal-India border in Tilathi, Siraha (see Jha 2016), the politician emphasized how Nepali politicians and bureaucrats refrain from condemning border encroachment while Madhesis protest and protect the borders. He then added, "And then they tell us we are not Nepalis!" in exasperation. A politician in Rajbiraj (Interview 19, 2017) further explained that the Madhesis participated in the Madhes Āndolan directly or indirectly because of the admonishment and maltreatment they have faced for being a Madhesi

by Pahādi and the Pahādi-dominated bureaucracy. The Madhes movements, therefore, were not just about amending the constitution but a fight for respect and recognition (Interview 1, 2017; Lal 2017; Shah 2019).

Apart from the encounters with the state and Pahādi in general, phrases and words such as "When I was in Kathmandu," "the people of Kathmandu," or just "Kathmandu" were frequently used by my respondents while discussing their personal experience of discrimination. Kathmandu, in these accounts, referred to all people living in the place in the most expansive definition of the term, while in its limited form it indicated the Newars of Kathmandu, such as in this account by a woman (Interview 42, 2018) in Golbazar, Siraha.

> I am a Madhesi married to a *Pahāde Bahun*, and we have a house in Kathmandu . . . When I am with my sisters-in-law, they say "Madhise's shop," a "Madhise does this or that" like other Kathmandu residents who say "Madhise" and "Bhaiya." It really hurts me. Even though I keep trying to correct them and use the term they use and say, "I am a Madhise too." it seems too deeply engrained in their minds to change . . . Once I was at the pharmacy to buy medicine in Kathmandu. The boy at the counter called someone on the phone who perhaps asked, "Who is there?" and the reply was "An Indian has come." I asked him "How come I am an Indian? I can speak better Nepali than you. You are a Newar; you cannot even speak Nepali properly. I have a Nepali citizenship too." I do not know if I was right or wrong in saying so, but that experience ignited a feeling of revolt within me.

Specifying discrimination faced during interactions with the people of Kathmandu and to interactions with Newars, a group that claims indigeneity to Kathmandu, reveals the fault lines in the relationship between hill indigenous groups in Nepal and the Madhesi. While the fight of both the Madhesi and indigenous peoples in Nepal is similar on account of marginalization of their languages and the dominance of hill upper castes, the "angst of *janajāti* is different" (Interview 29, 2017). The loyalty of the *janajāti* to the Nepali nation and their nationality, unlike that of the Madhesi, does not face scrutiny (Interview 29, 2017 and Interview 40, 2018).

According to C.K. Lal (2013), the notion of internal colonialism[18] is key to understanding the unequal relationship between the Pahādi-Madhesi accentuated by the othering of Madhesi in Nepal. "Internal colony" is also a term widely used in practice by Madhes-centric political parties and politicians to describe the way the Nepali state treats Madhesis, as well as by my respondents. Referring to the ruling party leaders during the Madhes Movement (2015–16), a journalist pointed out how they never travelled to the hinterlands of the plains to placate the protesters "as if it [Madhes] were a colony" (Interview 12, 2017). A human rights worker (Interview 8, Kathmandu) further elaborated on state repression during the Madhes movement (2015–16):

> I examined six dead bodies. Some had their heads blown off. No law in Nepal allows that, at most people are shot dead. There was no trace of sympathy. . . . The bureaucracy along with other organs of the state perceived the movement as a war against them. So, there was excessive suppression. The dead bodies looked as though they participated in a fight with enemies of another country, not participants of a political movement.

This observation is also highlighted in a Human Rights Watch Report on the 2015–16 Madhes movement and police crackdown on protesters titled "Like we are not Nepalis" (see Human Rights Watch 2015) lending further credibility to the perception of Madhes as an internal colony of the Nepali state. Political analysts and activists, therefore, argued that Madhesi strongly

demanded federalism through the Madhes movements as it would give Madhesi an opportunity to rule themselves and address the problem of internal colonization. As an activist (Interview 15, 2017) elaborated:

> Madhes is the space in which Madhesis can talk of their rights, dignity, integrity. It is where Madhesi want to be empowered. Once it is empowered there then it can negotiate with the Nepali state. Therefore, the Madhes has always demanded federalism. There was always this understanding among Madhesi that the Nepali mainstream will never give us equal representation, inclusion. So, we will demand our own place and make it better.

Not everyone, however, shared this view. A leader (Interview 5, 2017) of a separatist movement in the plains argued that demands of Madhes movements and Madhes-centric political parties such as amendments to the constitution or an increased intake in the army was akin to trimming the leaves of a tree. "It will not make any difference when the roots lie just where they are. That is why we seek a separate Madhes. We have identified the root cause of the problem to be colonization and we must be free from it," he added.[19]

The experiential dimension of Madhesi identity thus draws upon everyday experiences of othering and frames the structural discrimination of the lowlands and its people as a case of internal colonization. Madhesi as an experiential identity also underscores its emotive aspect. Despite scholarly and everyday contestations about Madhesi identity, it is a lived reality for plainspeople who face discrimination for being Madhesi. Such discrimination consequently brought the heterogenous population of the plains together to join the struggle for rights and recognition of Madhesi identity for political bargaining with the Nepali state. Whether plainspeople have always identified as Madhesi or "become" Madhesi after experiencing maltreatment by the hill high caste dominated bureaucracy, security forces, or Pahādis in Kathmandu and elsewhere, the experience of discrimination became a rallying point for the Madhes movements. Instances of private injuries aided the struggle against public injustice (Honneth 1995) as participants of the Madhes movements in eastern and central Tarai protested the othering of Madhesi. The movements not only helped redefine, own, and assert Madhesi identity, but also reified it.

Misrecognition, migration, and colonization

Instances of misrecognition and othering of people who reside along the borderlands by mainland people or inhabitants of the national capital, and evidence of internal colonialism have been documented elsewhere in South Asia too (Osuri 2017; Rahman 2002; Sabaratnam 1986; Das 1978; McDuie-Ra 2013; Middleton 2013; Wenner 2013). The case of the Madhesi in Nepal is thus not an aberration. The articulation of discrimination faced by Madhesis as an instance of internal colonization by the hill-centric Nepali state resonates with Middleton's (2020) research in Darjeeling in North-east India among the Gorkhas. Additionally, McDuie-Ra's (2017) analysis of the Northeast Indian category is also relevant to this paper.

In a study about Northeast Indians in the Indian capital of New Delhi, McDuie-Ra (2013) contends that the collective experience of discrimination and misrecognition by mainland Indians has contributed to the emergence of a shared identity as Northeast Indians which is otherwise absent in Northeast India due to the diversity of the place. The experiential aspect of Madhesi identity is similar. Madhesi identity is similar to the Northeast Indian category also on account of how the latter has become a basis of solidarity in times of crisis, though the Northeast category was initially used by outsiders (McDuie-Ra 2017). Different linguistic, religious, and caste groups in the Tarai-Madhes have also coalesced around Madhesi identity at critical political junctures despite Madhesi

being an imposition by outsiders. Madhesi identity, similar to the Northeast category "has an existence, one that it is felt, articulated and called upon, albeit with fuzzy and even contentious boundaries" (McDuie-Ra 2017: 31).

Some scholars (Sinha 2009; Subba 2018) have drawn parallels between the misrecognition of Gorkhas in Northeast India as Nepalis by mainland Indians and Madhesi in Nepal as Indians by the hill people. The struggle for recognition of Madhesi identity, however, is markedly different from the Gorkhas with regards to the way the former seeks respect and acceptance of cultural, linguistic, caste, and kinship ties with Indians who live across the border. Neither the existence of India nor the similarity of plains people with Indian immigrants is framed as part of the problem of misrecognition of Madhesi in Nepal by activists and politicians who identify as "Madhesi" unlike the Gorkhas' case (see Subba 2018).[20] Madhesi identity politics demands "recognition on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition has previously been denied. . . . The demand is not for respect 'in spite of' one's differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself as different" (Kruks 2001: 85).

The discourse on Madhesi and Gorkha identity is, nonetheless, similar with regards to the issue of transnational migration between Nepal and India, which is either denied, ignored, or disputed in both instances. Madhesi claims to being "sons of the soil" is contested and defied by Tārai-Janajāti, who claim autochthony to the place. Similarly, the Pahādi of Madhes reject this phrase to describe themselves, perceiving it to be a denial of their belonging to the place. People of hill origin in the plains further contest the categorization of recent migrants from India as Madhesi while they remain excluded.

By highlighting migration as a contentious aspect of Madhesi identity, I am not denying the civilizational past of the region, nor claiming that the Tarai-Madhes was devoid of human settlement prior to the formation of the Nepali state. I am underscoring, however, that defining Madhesi identity in terms of place of origin and migration from India remains a complex and polarizing issue. On the one hand, the cultural, linguistic, caste, and kinship ties with people across the border in north India are ostensibly owned and celebrated in the discussion of Madhesi identity post 2007. On the other hand, transnational migration from India to Nepal in the discussion of Madhesi identity is overlooked in scholarly works and avoided in practice. The need to emphasize Madhesis as belonging to the Tarai-Madhes - both by underscoring the etymological association of the Madhesi with Madhes and laying claim to autochthony - could be due to the systematic othering of Madhesis as quasi-foreigners or foreigners by the Nepali state. The construction of Madhesi identity is thus a political choice to an extent limited by state power as one of the "main organizing principles behind ethnic identifications" (Scott 2008: 177). It is also characteristic of the broader discourse on ethnic identity in Nepal where laying claim to "sons of the soil" status has become the norm. Efforts at boundary maintenance and gatekeeping in the articulations of Madhesi identity are indicative of the persistence of essentialist articulations of identities in practice despite broader consensus in academia about the constructed nature of identities. Even so, identity as an analytical category is useful in understanding struggles for recognition in a multi-ethnic context such as that of Nepal. As Alcoff and Mohanty (2006) succinctly argue, the theoretical issue with regard to identities is not whether they are constructed or not but their political relevance and the difference those constructions make.

With reference to internal colonization, the Madhesi case resembles Middleton's (2020) analysis of Gorkhas in Darjeeling who have been economically exploited, culturally othered, and politically marginalized. The point where the Madhesi case differs is the success of the Madhes movements in forcing the Nepali state to admit its role in the marginalization of the plains-people and make political concessions.

The establishment of a federal province consisting only of Tarai districts, named Madhes Pradesh, has further consolidated the gains of the movement, territorially underscoring how Madhes and Madhesis indisputably belong to the Nepali polity.

Conclusion

This paper had two aims. First, to consolidate the varied interpretations of the term Madhesi and articulate the reasons for it. Second, to understand the experiences that shape the understanding of, construction, and identification with Madhesi identity. With regard to the first aim, the paper highlights the geographic, linguistic, ethnic, religious, and experiential dimensions of Madhesi identity drawing upon primary and secondary data. I demonstrate how the definition of "Madhesi" along geographic lines, focusing on place of origin and migration history, is arguably the most contested. Descriptions of Madhesi identity thus remain in a state of flux as plains indigenous people, Muslims, and hill migrants continue to debate their relationship with the Tarai-Madhes and the term Madhesi.

The second aim of my paper is linked to the first. I argue that understanding Madhesi as an emotion-laden, politically charged, experiential term can aid scholarly analysis. The experiential dimension of Madhesi identity is tied to the othering of the Madhesi as foreigners in Nepal, and articulated as a case of internal colonization. Madhesi as an experiential term, a manifestation of the collective experience of othering, also elucidates why the heterogenous population of the plains participated in the Madhesi struggle for recognition of identity at different critical junctures in history despite contesting the Madhesi label. As an emotional political category, people who identify with the category and defy it in various stages of political bargaining with the state can vary, underscoring the fluid, negotiable nature of Madhesi identity. However, as this paper largely draws upon fieldwork in central and eastern Tarai, future research in Western Tarai could further illuminate the relationship of plains indigenous groups with Madhesi identity.

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Endnotes

1. A "nation-state that defines itself as democratic and contains a significant degree of internal diversity" (Gagnon, Guibernau, and Rocher 2003).

2. People living along the northern borderlands of Nepal who share cultural, linguistic, and religious ties to Tibet have historically had their Nepaliness questioned too. However, the categorization of those groups as hill indigenous post 1990 and the fact that Nepali national identity is constructed against India as the 'Other' (see Bhandari 2016) makes the discrimination faced by plains people different and more acute.

3. All interpretations of Madhesi are contested thereby the subject of analysis in this paper.

4. See (Parmanand 1986; Dahal 1992; S. G. Shah 2006; Gautam 2008; Nayak 2011; Parveen 2012; Hachhethu 2013; Sijapati 2013; Bose and Niroula 2015a).

5. Other meanings of *Pahicān* are to identify, recognize, discern something or someone.

6. The locations that are part of this study were primarily determined by the interviewees who were present there during the time of fieldwork and because central Tarai was the epicenter of the Madhes movements.

7. Both Pahāḍe and Pahādi mean 'a person from the hills' or 'of hill origin.' Pahāḍe is the colloquial and also derogatory form of Pahādi which also means an 'wild, uncultured or uncivilized'("Pahadiya/Pahadi/Pahade" 2010).

8. The CPN (Maoist) had previously formed the *Thāruvāna Mukti Morcā* (Tharuwan Liberation Front) in 1998 and in 2003 declared 13 provinces in Nepal two of which in the Tarai - Thāruvāna Province in Western Tarai and Madhes Province in Eastern Tarai. This demonstrates a history of considering indigenous groups in the lowlands to be distinct and separate from Madhesi.

9. The Madhesi Commission has listed 151 *jātjāti* (caste/ethnicity) as groups that fall under 'Madhesi community' including Tharu and Muslim.

10. Pahādis living in the lowlands are not a homogenous group. It refers to hill-castes including hill Dalits, and hill *janajāti* or indigenous groups.

11. Madhes is the shortened form of Madhya Desh (Middle Country) or 'the land lying between the Himalayas and the Vindhyas' (Turner 1931, 491).

12. Here it is important to link instances of discrimination on being perceived as 'Madhesi' with institutionalized discrimination faced by 'Madhesi' from the Nepali state historically. Madhesi activists and scholars therefore reject the claim to Madhesi identity by hill origin people who live in the lowlands even though they might be looked down upon by hill-based population due to their residence in the lowlands.

13. In 1983, a government report on migration in the Tarai districts triggered riots in the region.

14. Karn et. al. (2018: 279) contend that hill dwellers perceive Madhesis as people of Indian origin or proxy Indians, while "Madhesis themselves claim that they are original inhabitants of the Tarai region." The authors, however, neither define "originality" nor address the Tarai Janajati's claim to autochthony to the region.

15. In 2018, India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj had to apologize after referring to crowds gathered to listen to the Indian prime minister in the city of Janakpur in Eastern Tarai as an Indian diaspora on Twitter.

16. "These are languages spoken by people who live on the Gangetic plain, either on the Indian or Nepalese side of the border. The major languages are Hindi, Urdu, Maithili, Bhojpuri and Bengali; languages spoken by fewer people include Jhangar, Marwari, Rai and various dialects of these languages such as Awadhi and the Morang Pradesh dialects" Gaige (1975: 216).

17. My respondents mentioned that they identified as members of a certain caste line prior to being ascribed the label "Madhesi."

18. Pinderhughes (2011, 236) defines internal colonialism as a "*geographically-based* (emphasis in original) pattern of subordination of a differentiated population, located within the dominant power or country."

19. Since the time of the interview, the separatist movement has ended and Province 2 consisting of eight districts in the plains - Saptari, Siraha, Dhanusha, Mahottari, Sarlahi, Rautahat, Bara, and Parsa - has been named Madhes Province, partially materializing the long-held demand for a separate province in the lowlands.

20. This in part is due to a history of mass eviction of Nepali-speaking populations from Myanmar in the 1940s, from the northeastern Indian states of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Manipur in the 1980s, and from southern Bhutan in the 1990s, resulting in Gorkhas' "anxious belonging" (Middleton 2013a) to the Indian state. The association of Gorkhas with Nepal does not help Gorkhas' attempts at securing recognition as indigenous tribes from the Indian state either (Middleton 2015).

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