

A peer-reviewed open-access journal indexed in NepJol

ISSN 2990-7640 (online); ISSN 2542-2596 (print)

Published by Molung Foundation, Kathmandu, Nepal

Article History: Received on December 30, 2022; Accepted on May 1, 2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/mef.v13i01.56080>

Rethinking Madhesi Politics of Recognition

Nirodh Pandey

Tribhuvan University

Author Note

Mr. Nirodh Pandey is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Tribhuvan University, Nepal. He holds an M.Phil. in Anthropology from Tribhuvan University, Nepal. His research interests include livelihood, identity politics, and governance.

Correspondence concerned in this article should be addressed to Nirodh Pandey, Department of Anthropology, Patan Multiple Campus, Lalitpur. Email: nirodhpandey@gmail.com

Abstract

A gradually emerging dissension in the micropolitics of the Madhesi community has not received the attention it deserves in scholarly discourse. This article makes an effort to understand the contexts and processes that made pan-Madhesi identity intrinsically problematic and seemed to be rife with internal conflicts. Drawing on the lived experiences collected through ethnographic interviews with the Madhesi people who belonged to the low-caste groups and admitted to being poor, it is argued that while overemphasizing the socio-cultural recognition of the Madhesi community, Madhesi politics of recognition undermined the issues of economic inequality prevailing within it for a long time. As a consequence, over time, the ties of low-caste groups with the elitist leadership of high and middle-caste groups in terms of socio-cultural and economic aspects resulted in certain fissures or divisions in the Madhesi community. This prompts us to rethink the Madhesi politics of recognition and to argue that pan-Madhesi identity was not a cohesive identity that guaranteed parity of participation of the Madhesi population irrespective of their caste and class position.

Keywords: pan-Madhesi identity, politics of recognition, caste, class, economic inequality

Rethinking Madhesi Politics of Recognition

In the aftermath of the Madhesi Uprising of 2007, a surge in Madhesi identity politics dominated Nepal's political landscape. It rapidly rose to the apex of the national discourse, attracting the attention of academics, researchers, and political commentators. The firmly held belief that the Pahadi ruling elites misrecognized the Madhesi community and systematically excluded them from the national mainstream served as the foundation for the politics of recognition (Pandey, 2022; Sijapati, 2013). Put differently, historical exclusion and marginalization, and systemic structural discrimination of the Madhesi people set the conditions for the rise of the collective consciousness of a pan-Madhesi identity at the macro-level (Hachhethu, 2007; Jha, 2017; Mathema, 2011; Sah, 2017; Upreti et al., 2013). However, a gradually emerging dissension in the micro-politics of the Madhesi community – the political, economic, and socio-cultural cleavages and confrontations posing problems to the pan-Madhesi identity – has not received the attention it deserves in scholarly discourse.

Even though scholarly literature acknowledges heterogeneity in the Madhesi community in terms of language, culture, class, caste, and other socio-political aspects, it has not received enough attention from the Madhesi forces themselves (Tewari, 2012). The issues of multiple identities emerging in the Madhes and social inequalities rooted in the caste system have not been studied adequately (Rajak, 2017). Viewing the politics carefully at the local level, one could discern that the pan-Madhesi identity has cast a shadow over the heterogeneity in the Madhesi community. Nevertheless, any attempt to draw attention to the differences that exist within the Madhesi community is met with whataboutery accusations (Gurung, 2016). As a result, the existing studies on Madhesi identity issues are 'ethnographically thin' and have led to 'ethnographic refusal,' a refusal of the thickness (Ortner, 1995).

Against this backdrop, this article makes an effort to understand the contexts and processes that made pan-Madhese identity intrinsically problematic and seemed to be rife with internal conflicts. The principal question that is grappled with is why and how the socio-political rifts or divisions, particularly at the level of caste and class, made the pan-Madhese identity contentious. In doing so, it transcends the "top-down" approach that treats politics of recognition as identity politics—claims for the recognition of cultural difference in the pursuit of political gains—and favors the "bottom-up" approach that seeks an alternative politics of recognition that can overcome the reification of identity and displacement of politics of distribution.

Drawing on Fraser's (2003a) analysis of social groupings as two-dimensional categories—a combination of both class dimension and status dimension—I look at how the Madhese peoples belonging to the lower strata in the spectrum of caste and class have been suffering from both economic and socio-cultural impediments in their everyday lives within the Madhese community. Contrary to the 'identity model' of recognition (Honneth, 2003; Taylor, 1994) that undermines the issues of political economy, class, and distributive justice, Fraser's (2003a) 'perspectival dualist' analysis or 'two-dimensional' conception of justice deserves utility for the discussion of emerging discontents within the Madhese community. For both Taylor (1994) and Honneth (2003), recognition is concerned with self-realization, i.e., identity. But, for Fraser (2003a), there is no single conception of self-realization that is universally shared. So, she urges understanding recognition as a question of status and examining its relation to economic class. Her thesis that distribution and recognition are co-fundamental and mutually irreducible dimensions of justice seems genuinely insightful in analyzing the micropolitics in the Madhese community. Building on this idea, it will be argued in the succeeding paragraphs that the Madhese politics of recognition overwhelmingly eclipsed the economic inequality that has been

prevailing in the Madhesi community for a long time. In other words, it will be illustrated that the Madhesi politics of recognition could not involve the issues of land rights, equitable distribution of economic opportunities, and access to social goods as aspired to by grassroots Madhesi people.

Methodology

This study is based on research conducted in Birganj, the main city in central Tarai, Nepal, in 2018. As an ethnographer, my aim was, as Malinowski (1922) says, to grasp the native's point of view, their relation to life, and their vision of their world. To accomplish this, I conducted ethnographic interviews with Madhesi individuals from different walks of life, such as local political leaders, social activists, movement participants, peasants, laborers, and students, particularly those who belonged to low-caste groups and admitted to being poor. The lived experiences of such Madhesi individuals vis-à-vis Madhesi identity politics remained my primary ethnographic sites. In addition to the firsthand qualitative data that were collected by conducting ethnographic fieldwork, secondary data have also been used to substantiate the arguments. An inductive mode of analysis has been adopted to discuss how research participants described their experiences of being Madhesi and how their understandings of identity politics changed over time.

Ethnographic Context

The Madhesi community is divided into numerous castes that are organized in a hierarchical manner along the socio-economic spectrum (Gaige, 2009 [1975]; Rajak, 2017; Rakesh, 2015). With reference to the data of the 2011 Census, Dahal (2014) mentions that 48 Madhesi castes have been categorized in a distinct hierarchical structure reflecting four Varna systems - Maithil Brahman (Brahman), Kayastha (position not clear) and Rajput (Chhetri) are placed at the top of the hierarchy, 30 caste groups are placed at the middle in Vaishya category,

and 15 groups are placed at the bottom in Sudra category. The significant number of Madhesi castes was, in part, due to the more complicated economic system that has emerged on the plains over the previous millennium and continually divided occupational castes into more specialized groups (Gaige, 2009). Because Madhesi society is openly caste-based, caste culture, which has been practiced for millennia, has a significant impact on the social, economic, and political status of the population (Rakesh, 2015). Indeed, caste is the primary determinant of all aspects of Madhesi's social life (Rajak, 2017). One could observe that caste-specific occupations, responsibilities, and obligations still exist in the Madhesi community, notwithstanding the penetration of modernization. Madhesi groups are still segregated in everyday socio-cultural and economic activities based on where they fall on the caste continuum.

In Tarai-Madhes, social interactions are governed by caste distinctions, which also heavily influence political decisions and frequently influence economic stratification (ICG, 2007). Caste factors continue to significantly influence local and regional politics (Gaige, 2009; Upreti et al., 2013). While high-castes and some middle castes, such as Yadavs in the Tarai-Madhes, enjoy cultural, political, and economic privileges (Basnet, 2019), low-caste Madhesi have faced indignities of untouchability and social ostracization (Tewari, 2012). Though caste is perceived as a socio-cultural aspect and class as an economic phenomenon, as Sharma (2014) notes, both are not antithetical formations. It becomes evident (as discussed below) that there exists a proximate caste-class nexus in the Madhesi community. Caste-class nexus implies the observation of caste and class as mutually inherent phenomena - caste has always inhered class, and the latter has never been devoid of caste (Sharma, 2014). Viewed in this way, the high-caste groups (Maithil Brahman, Kayastha, and Rajput) belong to socio-economic level 1, middle-caste groups belong to socio-economic level 2, and 15

low-caste groups, also called Madhesi Dalit belong to socio-economic level 3 (Dahal, 2014).

Rajak (2017) argues that the life-world of the Madhesi people has been significantly affected by what appears to be a causal relationship between caste and class. In a similar vein, Ahuti (2018) explains that the caste system in Nepal plays a significant and determining role in how a class is constructed. The caste system in Nepal, according to Bista (1991), gives legitimacy to the class structure. With a few notable exceptions, most of my research subjects believed that their economic circumstances were influenced by their place in the caste system—that is, the higher one's caste status, the better one's economic circumstances, and vice versa.

At the local level, the majority of Madhesi landlords and business classes are from high and middle-caste families (Hatlebakk, 2007; Upreti et al., 2013). A substantial difference in how wealth and resources are distributed reveals the caste-class nexus in the Tarai-Madhes. Low-caste Madhesi, also called Madhesi Dalit, who make up about one-fifth of the population of Madhes Pradesh, are the most marginalized and impoverished group (Nepali et al., 2018). The poverty incidence or headcount rate for Madhesi Dalit is 38.2 percent, compared to 18.6 percent for Madhesi high-caste groups and 28.7 percent for Madhesi middle-caste groups, according to the Nepal Human Development Report (NHDR, 2014). Madhesi Dalits have the lowest per-capita income of any caste or ethnic group in Nepal (NHDR, 2014). Land ownership has a significant impact on the Madhesi communities' economic standing, and the distribution of land is closely tied to caste status (Hatlebakk, 2007). As revealed by my research participants, the Madhesi Dalits are severely landless. For survival, this group is engaged in either traditional caste-based occupation or as farm and non-farm laborers. When compared to other groups, this one is the most exploited in terms of their wages. Even now, Madhesi non-Dalit and Dalit households maintain some feudalistic

forms of patron-client relationships. The majority of Madhesi Dalits are impoverished and live in poorly run families where they are unable to afford even the most basic goods and services. Low levels of education, as well as social and economic exclusion, translate into limited opportunities in economic and political spheres (NHDR, 2014).

Preceding discussions, in some ways, illustrates how deeply ingrained caste and class rank are among the Madhesi people. Such a context has triggered to produce fragmentations or ruptures in the Madhesi identity politics. In what follows, drawing on ethnographic data, I discuss why and how contestation over Madhesi identity politics occurred at the local level.

Ruptures in the Madhesi Politics of Recognition

“Which Madhesi are you referring to? Whose identity are you talking about?” A local-level cadre of a Madhes-based Party belonging to a low-caste group put a counter question to me when I asked him what encouraged Madhesi people to engage collectively in identity politics. He asserted that throughout Tarai-Madhes, there are various Madhesi groups that range in socioeconomic spectrum from lower-caste to upper-caste, landless to landlords, and poor to rich. He further contended, “Low-caste Madhesi who are mostly landless and poor experience prejudice, oppression, and exploitation within the Madhesi community in everyday life. But, such a reality was put aside in the course of the struggle for identity by the political leaders mostly representing high and middle caste.” According to him, low-caste Madhesi has not been given space at the local level to represent themselves politically in a meaningful way. He shared with me that he wanted to become a candidate as a ward chairperson in the local-level election held in 2017 but could not get a chance to compete in the election because of his inability to make financial expenses. As the date of nomination of candidates was approaching, he realized that ‘money’ was not only of utmost importance for

getting the victory in the election but also for being nominated as a candidate. “It is almost impossible for the low-caste Madhesi who mostly have a poor economic background to become representatives in the leading positions in the local levels because the election turned out to be a matter of money and muscles,” he alluded. He accused high and middle-caste Madhesi elites of their static tendency to undermine the political and economic aspirations of low-caste Madhesi.

In a similar vein, a recently graduated student belonging to a low-caste claimed that it is difficult to comprehend the Madhesi category when all Madhesi are included in the same status group. He observed that despite some positive changes in the Madhesi people's self-esteem and others' perceptions of them brought about by various Madhesi movements, high and middle-caste Madhesi have continued to keep quiet about the socioeconomic injustices and discrimination faced by the low-caste Madhesi. He said, "What about the dignity of those Madhesi who are at the bottom of an extremely stratified Madhesi society?" He issued a warning that an internal uprising against the socio-political domination of Madhesi upper castes is likely if the socioeconomic problems of Madhesi Dalits are ignored. He stated, "Although they have not yet formed a political organization, organizing among young educated Madhesi Dalit has begun. They have now started to challenge the notion of inclusion and representation in the Madhesi community." He further added that the new generations of Dalits have started to perceive the Madhesi community differently by opposing the norms and ideals of the unequal and unfair Madhesi society.

Another member of the low-caste, who worked on a daily-wage basis in Birganj, vehemently expressed his dissatisfaction with Madhesi identity politics. According to him, high and middle-caste elites and politicians utilized “Madhesi identity” as a ploy to seize political control for personal or factional advantage. He anticipated that Madhes *Andolan* (movement) would also be concerned about the livelihoods of individuals who were forced to rely on day-to-day wage labor

for the lack of access to the land for cultivation and economic opportunities. Although he acknowledged that dignity, respect, and recognition are also necessary, he believed that ensuring economic opportunity is more important for a decent living.

Similar complaints about Madhesi identity politics were made by an adult member of the Tatma sub-caste group who lives in Chhapkaiya, Birganj, and works as a laborer there. He also anticipated that the Madhesi *Andolan* would be a turning point in resolving the issues faced by the common people. Over time, he came to understand that the leaders had organized the people to make them a ladder to negotiate for political power. In his opinion, the Madhes *Andolan*, over time, disrupted the daily life of poor families. Many poor Madhesi lost their *roji-roti* (means of livelihood) and had difficulty for the survival. He didn't think that focusing merely on identity would likely be sufficient to address the hand-to-mouth issue faced by both rural and urban poor. He stated that identity politics alone cannot secure the progress of the people if resources and economic opportunities are not easily accessible.

The repetitive cry of Madhesi leaders for identity was criticized by a member of the Chamar sub-caste group who was engaged in shoe policing and stitching on the side of the road close to the Ghantaghar. "Madhesika pahichan" and "Madhesika adhikar" (identity and right of Madhesi) sounded as if the Madhesi leaders opened their mouths while giving a speech, but they rarely discussed the *vikas* (development) of Madhes, or the economic advancement of common people, according to him. The politics of Madhesi identity was only on the agenda of those Madhesi leaders and elites who owned *bigahas* of land, industries, factories, and business, not of the *aam* (common) Madhesi people who had to work extremely hard on a daily basis to survive.

A Birganj-based journalist echoed the aforementioned accounts. In his understanding, too, the common Madhesi people were less concerned with identity politics and more interested in a fair distribution of resources. He pointed out that while Madhesi leaders and activists turned identity into a political negotiating tool, they failed to convey to the majority of the grassroots population how their identity struggle translates into viable political and economic changes that affect the Madhesi community's very fabric. Instead, in his observation, the leaders squabbled about political issues, ignoring the problems with economic redistribution.

In a nutshell, a shared experience of the Madhesi people with whom I had a conversation in Birganj was that the Madhesi people were ardent participants in the successive movements of 2007, 2008, and 2015. But, as the disruption in routine life and border blockade continued becoming the last resort in the movement against the promulgation of a new constitution in 2015, grassroots support progressively decreased, and Madhesi identity politics started to lose its momentum. Identity politics simply became a business for politicians and their passionate followers in later days. Violent clashes between protesters and those who opposed them happened in Birganj. The majority of the Madhesi people were looking for alternate strategies to continue their movement because the lost income, especially for the poor, had a significant negative influence on their way of life.

These narratives imply two caveats: the furtherance of political marginalization and economic inequality among low-caste Madhesi people. Madhesi Dalits are the most politically marginalized and are hardly ever represented in the top echelons of political parties, whether they be national or Madhesi (Tewari, 2012). For the Madhesi Dalit, their state of disproportionately lower political representation and exclusion from the executive positions in the provincial and local governments is the embodiment of caste ideology by political

parties (International Alert, 2019). Madhesi Dalit contends that Madhes movements over time have politically empowered high and middle-caste groups, and there is no compatibility of political interests and goals between upper castes and low castes. As Basnet (2019) has argued, Madhesi politics merely reflected the struggle between high-caste and middle-caste groups, particularly the Yadav, for political domination of the southern plains. Thus, the experience of political marginalization has fueled a sense of discontent and disappointment among the Madhesi Dalit communities (International Alert, 2019). Given the stronghold of the caste system and its ideology in everyday life, the rise of the middle caste as the dominant political group and the exclusion of the most marginalized groups from the spheres of government can generate conflicts at the Tarai-Madhes (Rai, 2019).

It is to be noted that the gap between the economic expectations of low-caste and impoverished Madhesi and their actual achievements has deepened. The Madhesi movement could not change the situation of Madhesi Dalits, who were forced to live with the uncertainty of food, shelter, and clothes. Poverty entangled with landlessness seems rampant among the Madhesi Dalit because of the structural disparities or exploitation maintained by high and middle-caste groups. Upreti et al. (2013, p. 113) noted that there is no substantive difference between the past and present of Madhesi Dalits in terms of their livelihood stress, exploitation by elites, and structural inequalities. While the high-caste groups form just a minuscule proportion of the Madhesi population but have the highest human development indicators in the whole country (Tewari, 2012), the overall socio-economic condition of Madhesi Dalit is deplorable, and they are the most vulnerable group owing to ingrained discrimination and rigid social system and religious dogmas (Chaudhary, 2015). The Madhes movement largely centered on identity and did nothing for the poor, homeless, and landless people, as the Madhesi leaders were not willing to give power and resources to them (Upreti et

al., 2013). While focusing on political rights, the Madhesi parties have failed to interfere with the political economy of Madhes in order to ensure that all Madhesi participate in the political and economic process and their general economic and cultural development (Subedi, 2016).

This implies that understanding identity politics as solely a politics of recognition is problematic. It becomes evident that identity politics no longer adequately reflects the interests and demands of Madhesi people belonging to the low caste who strive for equality—the capacity to take part in or be included in sociopolitical processes under conditions equal to those of dominating groups. While Madhesi has undoubtedly been misrecognized by Pahadi in general, Madhesi from lower social classes and castes, in particular, have been ignored or misunderstood. Many low-caste Madhesi who also identify themselves as poor has felt that dominating groups rarely represent their ‘image’ in their words and deeds.

Marginalized Madhesi people have perceived that the Madhes uprising was a struggle for political representation and leadership positions rather than for social and economic changes in Tarai-Madhes (Hatlebakk, 2007). As a result, Madhesi people, especially those lying at the bottom of the caste and class hierarchy, have been furious and frustrated not only with the government and national level political parties for denying Madhesi people's rights in general, but also with Madhesi parties and their leaders, in particular, for their inability to be effectively organized and united among themselves and to persuade the Madhesi people that their ultimate goal is a just society socio-culturally, politically, and economically.

Yadav (2013) argues that the Madhesi leaders who revolted earlier for their rights began to be divided by internal revolt due to their lust for political power, resulting in a series of establishing political parties under their own

leadership. Less agreement existed among the Madhes-based political parties and their leaders over the tactics to be used to mobilize the Madhesi people behind a common cause than in political negotiating regarding participation in government. Madhesi leaders 'opportunistic' behavior and conduct have become apparent through their ambition to seize political power and continual engagement in politics. The factionalism and dissolution of Madhesi political parties have been facilitated by their indulgence in bickering over the number and kind of government ministries as well as, more significantly, who must represent in the government and assume leadership. Although Madhes-centered parties and their leaders agree that the Madhesi population is overlooked and thus excluded from the national mainstream politically and socially, they lack coherent ideologies and agendas that are likely to bring them together. Factional politics and deep divisions in the Madhes have been perceived by common Madhesi as a sign of the leaders' weakness, shortsightedness, excessive competition, and changeable leadership as well as their desire for political power, conflicting personal interests, and lack of a unified vision. As different Madhesi political parties experienced internal conflict and lacked consensus on short- and long-term strategies, the path taken by Madhesi identity politics seemed like 'a rebellion without a roadmap' (ICG, 2007).

Theoretically, though Madhes-based political parties advocate for the inclusion of all Madhesi irrespective of caste in the state affairs, high and middle-caste people dominate in practice, and hence the frustrated minority caste groups have started to raise their identity issues being away from just Madhesi (Upreti et al., 2013). Low-caste Madhesi acquired this consciousness as a result of their experiences of discrimination and subsequent exclusion from high and middle caste dominated local and regional politics. Despite having a significant impact on elections, the low-caste Madhesi are not allowed to participate in local politics. In light of the diversity in Madhesi society, the organizational structure of Madhes-

based political parties appears to be exclusionary. The notions of inclusion and representation for low-caste Madhesi have become a myth. However, in recent years, though in tacit forms, the political representation of the Madhesi Dalit by upper caste groupings is being questioned and challenged.

Thus, it becomes apparent that Madhesi identity politics is under attack from Madhesi groups, particularly those who are socio-economically and politically repressed and disenfranchised. Chaos and misunderstanding have developed among these communities as a result of the ambivalent viewpoints taken by Madhesi elites and leaders regarding the movement's applicability as well as their disparate interpretations and representations of it. The pan-Madhesi identity exaltation of the elitist leadership has outpaced the emergence of many identities linked to various socio-political and economic problems of various groups. Low-caste Madhesi tends to diverge from the upper-caste elite-led Madhesi identity politics in recent years. Over time, they have come to understand that the Madhesi identity politics dictated by their traditional overlords may not always fulfill their needs, demands, and aspirations (Guneratne, 2009).

Subedi (2018) argued that Madhesi identity politics became a powerful force when the bourgeoisie and middle class fought for their due share in national forums and opportunities. The upper caste Madhesi elites use community identification as a means of furthering their personal agendas (Dahal, 2008). Additionally, they are attempting to impose a pan-Tarai identity on a geographical area that is divided in numerous ways as part of their strategy (Dahal, 1992, 2008). Such a tendency clearly implies that the cultural forms, values, and practices of ethnic groups become political resources for elites in competition for political power and economic advantage (Brass, 1991). Madhesi elites managed to turn Madhesi identity politics into a mere strategy to compete over political power for their own sake.

Reification of Identity and Displacement of Economic Inequality

In light of the discussions made in the preceding paragraphs, it becomes evident that equating the politics of recognition with identity politics encourages both the reification of group identities and the displacement of the politics of redistribution (Fraser, 2003b). The major political actors in Tarai-Madhes have simply associated identity politics with recognition politics. Even though certain Madhesi leaders in the succeeding Madhesi uprisings brought up the subject of redistribution, their focus was on ensuring political representation. They were therefore charged with emphasizing identity too much while disregarding the public's demands for economic equality. The leaders shouted out more in favor of addressing social, political, and cultural inequalities while remaining silent over economic inequities that disproportionately affect the Madhesi people.

Because most political actors in Madhesi politics were members of upper and middle-caste families, wealthy landowners, or both, it was evident that they rarely discussed the economic disparity that they attempted to maintain to some extent in order to maintain and control their influence over the region's politics and economy. Since upper-caste households make up the wealthiest households in a relatively affluent area of Nepal, Hatlebakk (2007) was correct to claim that the main demands of upper-caste landlords have not been economical. For their own advantage, they favor increased autonomy in Tarai and political representation in Kathmandu (Hatlebakk, 2007). However, this pattern was not exclusive to the Madhesi. Lawoti (2007) noted that the associations of different groups have primarily highlighted cultural and political issues, while their community members are concerned about economic opportunities as well.

Leaders and elites from the Madhesi community hold conflicting views on how to interpret the link between identity and economic disparity. Madhesi elites and leaders have faced a 'redistribution-recognition dilemma,' in the words

of Fraser (1995). When considering politics at the local-level, there is an underlying tension between local development requirements and larger identity issues (Karn et al., 2018). Since the rise of the educated middle-class and rising bourgeoisie gave rise to the Madhesi identity politics (Subedi, 2018), the grassroots population appears to be relatively resistant to identity politics, as their main concerns have been accessed to land ownership, economic opportunities, services, and facilities for health, education, drinking water supply, sanitation, and other infrastructures.

According to the status model proposed by Fraser (2003a), what requires recognition is not group-specific identity but rather the status of individual group members as full partners in social interaction. The struggle for recognition, as understood by the marginalized Madhesi, has not only been concerned with self-realization but as a matter of justice. As Fraser (2003a) notes, misrecognition is wrong and unjust that some individuals and groups are denied the status of full partners in social interaction simply as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of cultural value in whose construction they have not equally participated, and which disparage their distinctive characteristics, or the distinctive features assigned to them. The narratives of low-caste Madhesi people imply such a corollary.

Because of the historically institutionalized pattern of the hill-high-caste values that always subjugated the Madhesi culture in Nepal, the Madhesi people, in general, never participated in national social and political affairs as full partners. Low-caste Madhesi people, in particular, had to witness the same situation at the local level due to the Madhesi high-caste values and institutions dominated by them. So, provoking a pan-Madhesi identity does not address the sub-identity of the low-caste Madhesi people since they are completely excluded from or denied their involvement in the local politics and culture.

Despite this, the call for justice made by low-caste Madhesi appears to be ‘three-dimensional’ – the political dimension of representation, the economic dimension of distribution, and the cultural dimension of recognition (Fraser, 2007). Marginalized Madhesi believes that placing too much focus on identity politics has encouraged the reification of Madhesi identity while simultaneously sidelining the politics of redistribution. The dominance of a few predominant groups cast a shadow over the Madhesi community's fight for equality. One may argue that Madhesi is looking for what Fraser (2003b) offers: a different politics of recognition, a non-identitarian politics that can correct misrecognition without encouraging displacement of redistribution and reification of recognition. Low-caste Madhesi people rejected the existing trend of their leaders and elites to reify Madhesi identity and believed that their political and cultural status should be seen in connection to their economic class.

Conclusion

While Madhesi are battling the Pahadi-dominated Nepali state for recognition and representation at the national level, there are internal conflicts at the local or regional levels as the many excluded communities try to establish their own unique identities and spaces (Tewari, 2012). There are still unresolved contradictions between the pan-Madhesi identity and the Madhesi sub-identities, as well as between identification and redistribution. Low-caste Madhesi has experienced double marginalization: they have been excluded from state programs, which are often reserved for upper castes, as well as from socioeconomic and political privileges that are available locally and regionally. Low-caste Madhesi rarely has access to the socioeconomic and political privileges that are available locally or regionally since upper and middle-caste groups have a firm hold on those privileges.

Obviously, diverse groups of Madhesi deserve the right to equality, dignity, and full citizenship overthrowing the centuries of oppression and humiliation not only by the Pahadi-dominated state but also by rich and high-caste Madhesi groups. Marginalized Madhesi desires equal dignity not only in the arena of cultural politics but also in the arena of the economy. Denial of equal access to economic resources, income, and employment opportunities and their cultural subordination within the Madhesi community has further marginalized the poor and Dalit. In particular, the low-caste Madhesi groups have been suffering from unequal access to political power, resources, and life opportunities within the Madhesi community for a long time.

Low-caste Madhesi poverty, subordination, and social isolation are caused not only by governments' negligence but also by the dominant caste system and class system in Tarai-Madhes. Therefore, unless it is coupled with economic development, a focus on pan-Madhesi identity alone is likely to be useless for the just Madhesi community that marginalized Madhesi people want. One could argue that 'identity' needs to be understood beyond the limited sense of identity politics, with which it is frequently confused (Rai & Shneiderman, 2019). As emphasized by Fraser (1995), the injustice faced by low-caste Madhesi is simultaneously cultural and socioeconomic; both are rooted in the processes and practices that have systematically disadvantaged these groups of people vis-à-vis high- and middle-caste groups. Drawing from Fraser, it can be put forth that the socio-economic injustice of low caste Madhesi rooted in the political-economic structure of Nepali society in general and Madhesi society in particular, gives rise to exploitation, economic marginalization, deprivation, and cultural or symbolic injustice is rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication which give rise to cultural domination, non-recognition, and disrespect (Fraser, 1995).

There have been emerging many internal tensions and contradictions in the ties between people from various castes and social classes and the elitist leadership resulting in certain fissures or divisions in the Madhesi society. Put differently, contradictions and tensions abound in the socio-cultural and political-economic exchanges or relationships between the groups that are situated at the opposing ends of the caste hierarchy. This prompts us to rethink Madhesi identity politics and to argue that it was not a cohesive identity that guaranteed parity of participation of the Madhesi population irrespective of their caste and class position.

References

- Ahuti. (2018). Nepali samaj ra barga nirman [Nepali society and class construction]. *Madhes Adhyan*, 6(6), 177 – 209.
- Basnet, C. (2019). The federal socialist forum: Incipient of middle caste politics in Nepal? *Studies in Nepali History and Society*, 24(2), 355 – 380.
- Bista, D. B. (1991). *Fatalism and development: Nepal's struggle for modernization*. Orient Longman Ltd.
- Brass, P. (1991). *Ethnicity and nationalism: Theory and comparison*. Sage Publications.
- Chaudhary, D. (2015). *Tarai/Madhes of Nepal: Anthropological study*. Ratna Pustak Bhandar.
- Dahal, D. R. (1992, May 1). Grasping the Tarai identity. *Himal Southasian*, 5.
- Dahal, D. R. (2008). The 'Madhesi' people: Issues and challenges of democracy in the Nepal Tarai. In D. Gellner & K. Hachhethu (Eds.), *Local democracy in South Asia: Microprocesses of democratization in Nepal and its neighbors* (pp. 128-149). Sage Publications.
- Dahal, D. R. (2014). Social composition of the population: Caste/ethnicity and religion in Nepal. In *Population monograph of Nepal* (volume II, pp. 1-49). Central Bureau of Statistics.
- Fraser, N. (1995). From redistribution to recognition? Dilemmas of justice in a post-socialist age. *New Left Review*, 212, 68-93.
- Fraser, N., & Honneth, A. (2003). *Redistribution or recognition?: A political philosophical exchange*. Verso.
- Fraser, N. (2003a). Social justice in the age of identity politics: Redistribution, recognition and participation. In N. Fraser & A. Honeth, *Redistribution or recognition?: A political philosophical exchange* (pp. 6-109). Verso.
- Fraser, N. (2003b). Rethinking recognition: Overcoming displacement and reification in cultural politics. In B.Hobson (Ed.), *Recognition struggles*

- and social movements: Contested identities, agency and power* (pp. 21-32). Cambridge University Press.
- Fraser, N. (2007). Reframing justice in a globalizing world. In T. Lovell (Ed.), *(Mis)recognition, social inequality and social justice* (pp. 17-35). Routledge.
- Gaige, F. H. (2009 [1975]). *Regionalism and national unity in Nepal*. Himal Books.
- Gautam, B (Ed.). (2008). *Madhes Bidrohako Nalibeli* [Details of Madhesi Revolt]. Martin Chautari.
- Gautam, B. (2008). Madhesi bidroha: Nairashyata ko rajniti [Madhesi revolt: The politics of despondency]. In B. Gautam (Ed.), *Madhes bidroha ko nalibeli* [Details of Madhesi Revolt] (pp. 1-36). Martin Chautari.
- Guneratne, A. (2009). Introduction. In *Regionalism and national unity in Nepal* (pp. XVI-XXVIII). Himal Books.
- Gurung, B. (2016, June 10-16). What about whataboutery? *Nepali Times*, 812.
- Hachhethu, K. (2007, August 22-24). *Madhesi nationalism and structuring Nepali state* [A paper presentation]. Seminar on Constitutionalism and Diversity in Nepal 2007, Kathmandu, Nepal, Organized by CNAS, TU in collaboration with MIDEA Project and ESP-Nepal.
- Hatlebakk, M. (2007). *Economic and social structures that may explain the recent conflicts in the Tarai of Nepal*. CMI.
- Honneth, A. (2003). Redistribution as recognition: A response to Nancy Fraser. In N. Fraser & A. Honneth, *Redistribution or recognition? A political-philosophical exchange* (pp. 110-197). Verso.
- International Alert (2019). *A sense of hope: Understanding post-federal dynamics among marginalized community in Nepal's Tarai region*. International Alert.

- International Crisis Group (ICG). (2007). *Nepal's troubled Tarai region*. Asia report No. 136. ICG.
- International Crisis Group (ICG). (2011). *Nepal: Identity politics and federalism*. Asia Report No. 199. ICG.
- International Crisis Group (ICG). (2016). *Nepal's divisive new constitution: An existential crisis*. Asia Report No. 276. ICG.
- Jha, K. (2017). *The Madhesi upsurge and the contested idea of Nepal*. Springer.
- Karn, S., Limbu, S. T., & Jha, K. (2018). 2017 local elections in Madhes: Discussions from the margins. *Studies in Nepali History and Society*, 23(2), 277-308.
- Lawoti, M. (2007). Contentious politics in democratizing Nepal. In M. Lawoti (Ed.), *Contentious politics and democratization in Nepal* (pp. 17-47). Sage Publications.
- Malinowski, B. (1922). *Argonauts of Western Pacific: An Account of native enterprise and adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Mathema, K. B. (2011). *Madhesi uprising: The resurgence of ethnicity*. Mandala Book Point.
- Nepal Human Development Report (NHDR). (2014). *Beyond geography: Unlocking human potential*. Government of Nepal & United Nations Development Programme
- Nepali, S., Ghale, S., & Hachhethu, K. (2018). *Federal Nepal: Socio-cultural profiles of the seven provinces*. Governance Facility.
- Ortner, S. B. (1995). Resistances and the problem of ethnographic refusal. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 37 (1), 173-193.
- Pandey, N. (2022). *Asserting peoplehood: Geopolitics, misrecognition and ethnogenesis of Madhesi identity in Nepal Tarai* [Unpublished Mphil thesis]. Central Department of Anthropology, Tribhuvan University.

- Rai, J. (2019). *Deepening federalism: Post-federal analysis of marginalized communities in Nepal's Tarai region*. International Alert.
- Rai, J. & Shneiderman, S. (2019). Identity, society, and state: Citizenship and inclusion in Nepal. In D. Thapa (Ed.), *The politics of change: Reflections on contemporary Nepal* (pp. 83-108). Himal Books.
- Rajak. R. K. (2017). Madhes andolan, jat byabastha ra Ambedkar dristikon [Madhes movement, caste system and Ambedkar perspective]. *Madhes Adhyan* 5, 85-102.
- Rakesh. R. D. (2015). *Caste system in Tarai Madhes*. Adroit Publishers.
- Sah, R. M. (2017). *The middle country: The traverse of Madhes through war, colonization and aid dependent racist state*. Adroit Publishers.
- Shah, S.G. (2006). *Social inclusion of Madhesi community in nation building* [A paper presentation]. Civil Society Forum Workshop for Research programme on social inclusion and nation building in Nepal, June 2006, Kathmandu, Organized by Social Inclusion Research Fund.
- Sharma, K. L. (2014). Explaining caste-class nexus: Continuity and change. In A. Pankaj & A. Pandey (Eds.), *Subalternity, exclusion and social change in India* (pp.338 – 354). Foundation Books.
- Sijapati, B. (2013). In Pursuit of recognition: Regionalism, Madhesi identity and the Madhes andolan. In M. Lawoti & S. Hangen (Eds.), *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nepal: Identities and Mobilization after 1990* (pp. 145-172). Routledge.
- Subedi, J. (2016). Madhesko artha-samajik rupantaran: Rajnitik dalharuko dristikon [Socio-economic transformation of Madhes: Perspectives of political parties]. *Madhes Adhyan*, 4, 9-34.
- Subedi, J. (2018). *Pahichanko badalido rajniti* [Changing politics of identity]. *Madhes Adhyan*, 6, 93-112.

- Taylor, C. (1994). The politics of recognition. In A. Gutmann (Ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition* (pp. 25-73). Princeton University Press.
- Tewari, R. (2012). Inclusiveness in political parties in Madhes. In R. Tewari & A. P. Sah (Eds.), *The landscape of Madhes: Politics, society and economy of the plains* (pp. 5-42). Nepal Madhes Foundation.
- Upreti, B. R., Paudel, S. B., & Ghimire, S. (2013). *Ignored or ill-represented? The grievance of Terai-Madhes conflict in Nepal*. Adroit Publishers.
- Yadav, D. (2013). Madhesi rajnitik dal: Udaya ra bivajan [Madhesi political parties: Rise and division]. *Madhes Adhyan*, 1(2), 147-163.