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Politicizing Ethnicity: Tharu Contestation of Madhesi Identity in Nepal's Tarai

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The Madhesi movement of 2007 and the Tharuhat movement of 2009 redefined the ethnic relation between the self-identifying Tharu and Madhesi communities. At that time, the Tharu not only contested Pahadi (hill-origin) identity but also vehemently confronted the increasing hegemony of Madhesi caste groups by challenging the notion of Madhes, Madhesi labeling, and the demand for a single Madhes province across the Tarai,¹ as put forward by the Madhesi community. Tharus who enthusiastically participated in the 2007 Madhesi movement, appeared to be against the same identity just two years later. Why did they turn around? This chapter argues that the Tharus sensed the systematic initiation of Madhesization of their centuries-long indigenous identity, while Madhesi activists and leaders undermined the concept of the Tharuhat, Tharu

¹ “Madhesh/Madhes” and “Tarai/Terai” are used synonymously to refer to the southern plains of Nepal; the other way to denominate the region is by coalescing these terms “Tarai-Madhes” but, still, these terms have not gained unanimous acceptance. Tarai—having a geographic connotation—seems more neutral and more inclusive of all the groups from the east to west of the region than the term Madhes; however, some Madhesis still feel uncomfortable with it.

language and culture, by continuously insisting on the Madhesi label, a Madhes province, and the Hindi language. Their eventual challenge to the Madhesi label raised questions about the legitimacy of the Madhesi movement, a fact that some Madhesi leaders claim is political blackmail. This article seeks to bring out the Tharu-Madhesi contestation in relation to identity claims and state restructuring in Nepal, particularly with reference to the Tarai.

THE SETTING

Nepal has witnessed a host of identity movements since the liberal constitutional changes of the 1990s. The tempo of these movements increased in the aftermath of the 2006 political change in which the monarchy was challenged, and subsequently abolished in 2008. This chapter focuses on the identity movements that have been taking place in Nepal's southern Tarai, particularly after the People's Movement in 2006 and the promulgation of the Interim Constitution in 2007. Nepal witnessed a Madhesi movement in the southern plains (Tarai) immediately after the promulgation of the Interim Constitution (IC) 2007, demanding a federal form of governance and inclusion of the Madhesis in all state apparatuses. In 2009, just two years after the Madhesi movement, the Tharus—the largest ethnic group scattered east to west in the Tarai—launched their own protest strike, dissociating themselves from the Madhesi identity, which they had ostensibly accepted in 2007. They then demanded their own Tharuhat province in contradiction with the demands of Madhesis. They thus challenged Madhesi identity for the first time in their history of ethno-political struggle (Ranjitkar 2009; Guneratne 2009).

The Madhesi movement is known mainly for its demand for regional autonomy with self-determination in the Tarai, along with a federal system of governance and proportional representation in the 2008 Constituent Assembly (CA-I), among others (Shah 2007). However, the Tharuhat movement demanded the elimination of the term “Madhesi” from the IC that had been inserted after the Madhesi

movement in 2007, as well as recognition of a distinct Tharu identity (TSSS 2009). This chapter examines how this identity contestation between two non-hill groups is taking shape in the larger context of ongoing political transition and ethnic movements in Nepal.

Nepal suffered from a decade-long insurgency beginning in 1996, and culminating in an agreement between the mainstream political parties and the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M)² in 2005, and the subsequent People's Movement in 2006. The success of the People's Movement raised the aspirations of different social and cultural groups including the Tharu-Madhesi contestation, which occupied a distinct space in the broader framework of ethnic movements in Nepal since 2007. Definitions of the Madhesi vary in the literature, though one may identify two main contrasting interpretations. The first sets broad criteria, incorporating all Indian-origin castes, Muslims and indigenous groups living in the area long before the commencement of the unification process. Writing on the caste system in the Tarai, Bista (1991: 49) notes that “[a]part from the most recent migrations, the majority of the [Tarai] people are indigenous.” The second interpretation, however, restricts the Madhesi identification only to Hindu caste groups which have close familial, cultural and linguistic ties with the groups of the north Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, and are late immigrants to the region from the south. This article follows the second interpretation of the Madhesi, thus not incorporating the Tharu, other indigenous groups, or Muslims.

The Tharus are a linguistically and culturally distinct endogamous group internally divided into several subgroups living in different parts of the Tarai (Guneratne 1994). As an ethnic category, they constitute the largest share in the demographic composition of the region (13% of the Tarai population in the 2011 Census) and claim to be the indigenous people of the Tarai (Guneratne 1994; CBS

² This party has passed through several splits and mergers since then and is now officially known as the CPN-Maoist Centre. CPN-Maoist (Baidya-led) and CPN-Maoist (Chand-led) are two other main splinters from this party.

2012). Among others, the Tharu were key players in the Madhesi movement in 2007 because the polarization between the Tharus and the Madhesis had not yet turned confrontational. One reason was that the rhetoric around the movement was aimed at the “hill dominance” of Nepali politics. In other words, non-hill-origin groups had loosely organized under the overarching Madhesi label to counter this dominance.

MADHESI IDENTITY IN HISTORY

The Madhesis have experienced four turns in relation to historical identity formation. Here we include identity formations associated with the establishment of the Nepal Terai Congress in 1951; the establishment of Nepal Sadbhawana Party (NSP) in 1990; the Madhesi Rashtriya Mukti Morcha (MRMM) in 2000; and finally, the Madhesi movement in 2007. “Madhesi” as a form of ethnic identity had not gained much currency until a veteran Nepali Congress leader Vedananda Jha split from the party and formed the Nepal Terai Congress party in 1951 (ICG 2007). It was the first organized effort that turned Madhesi identity into an ethno-political identity, especially as the new party lobbied for an autonomous Tarai; recognition of Hindi as the national language; and inclusion of the Madhesi in the civil service (Yhome 2006; ICG 2007; Hachhethu 2009). Subsequently, another prominent Madhesi leader, Raghunath Thakur, formed the Madhesi Mukti Andolan (MMA) in 1956, demanding autonomy for the Tarai; the inclusion of the Madhesis in the state apparatuses; and guarantees regarding land ownership rights (ICG 2007). Though Jha and Thakur were passionate about the autonomous Tarai, the demand faded away when Panchayat rulers co-opted Jha (Hachhethu 2009) and killed Thakur in 1981. This side-lined the newly emerged Madhesi movement until 1985, when Gajendra Narayan Singh formed the Nepal Sadbhawana Parishad (Hachhethu 2009). The Parishad then turned into a regional political party under the name of Nepal Sadbhawana Party

(NSP)³ after the restoration of democracy in the 1990s, though the name itself did not give any sense of regional and ethnic flavor. NSP also raised the issues of citizenship, recognition of Hindi as a second language, Madhesi youth enrollment in the national army, and a slew of development-related concerns (Hachhethu 2009). It succeeded in reviving and continuing the Madhes based identity politics at least in part until the death of its founding leader in 2002. The death of Gajendra Narayan Singh resulted in the splitting of the party and the fragmentation of the Madhesi movement, until the formation of the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum-Nepal (MJF-N)⁴ which rose as the main voice of the Madhesi discourse, especially through the widely known Madhes *andolan* (movement) in 2007.

Besides the Nepal Terai Congress and NSP, Nepali Congress and Communist factions had also established close connections with the Madhesi and the Tharu communities since their formation in 1947 and 1949 respectively (Gaige 2009[1975]). Particularly the Nepali Congress, during its armed struggle against the Rana regime, and during the Panchayat rule, had made the Tarai its base for political mobilization. But the Tarai-based parties claimed that Nepali Congress and the communist forces turned a deaf ear to Madhesi concerns, thus making them realize the need for such regional actors (Gaige 2009[1975]). Hachhethu (2007) claims that the escalation of the Maoist insurgency in the Tarai brought another turn to Madhesi ethno-nationalism when the CPN-M formed the Madhesi Rashtriya Mukti Morcha (MRMM) as its sister organization for the political mobilization of the Madhesi people in 2000. The CPN-M was

³ Although the NSP, after the death of its founder Gajendra Narayan Singh in 2002, passed through several splits, Rajendra Mahato-led faction still has considerable influence in both the Tarai and national politics.

⁴ MJF-N, an NGO before 2007, turned into a Madhesi party after the Madhes movement of 2007 and also went through several splits and mergers. Notably, Bijay Kumar Gachhadar split from it forming another party with a similar name, Madhesi Janadhikar Forum-Loktantrik. Later in 2015, MJF-N merged with two hill-based parties, Sanghiya Samajbadi Party and Khas Samabesi Rashtriya Party under the name of Sanghiya Samajbadi Forum.

successful in articulating the plight of the Madhesi Dalits, although the Madhesi realized the influence of the Maoist insurgency later than other groups. The insurgency became successful in getting the issues of inclusion, language, cultural rights and self-determination endorsed among the lower rungs of the Madhesi communities, but also absorbed the issues of ethno-nationalism (Hachhethu 2009).

Except for a few historic locations and indigenous settlements, large parts of the Tarai saw a massive influx of migrants from the north and the south only after the eradication of malaria in the 1960s (Gaige 2009[1975]). Before this, the Rana rulers had invited largely India-based Marwari traders to begin trading, and various north Indian caste peoples to make use of the huge amount of uncultivated plains land. Since then this region has been continuously receiving migrants from the south and the north. For instance, the region accommodated 35.2 percent of the total population in 1952/54, 48.4 percent in 2001 and 50.3 percent in 2011 (CBS 2014: 19).

Madhesi communities were, in many respects, ignored in the formation of modern Nepal. This is not surprising, as cultural divisions between the hill and the Madhesi communities can be traced back for centuries. In contemporary politics, strong imaginaries have given way to an intensified polarization with Madhesi self-assertion in the form of ethno-political mobilization from the time of the Nepal Terai Congress. Moreover, cultural, linguistic, and religious affinities between the Madhesi and their neighbors over the southern border in India, have resulted in the Madhesi being accused (especially by their highland neighbors) of being “pro-Indian.”

Certainly, the pro-Hindi inclination of Madhesi leaders appeared since the very beginning of the movement in the 1950s (Gaige 2009[1975]). This has perhaps contributed the most to the Madhesi being often referred to as “Indians.” This is also the lynchpin of the identity clash between the Madhesi and the Pahadis, and now between the Madhesi and Tharu communities. Pahadi relations with the Madhesi have also remained strained since the beginning of the conception of Madhesi as an ethno-political identity (Yhome 2006).

Moreover, Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) claims that the restrictive concept of modern Nepali nationalism based on the monarchy, hill cultural values, and the Nepali language always excluded the Madhesi people from the national mainstream on the one hand, and their distinct cultures and cross-border interactions have led the Pahadis to view them with suspicion and derision on the other (ICG 2007).

Admittedly, the Madhesis have experienced difficulty in claiming a share in the nation-building process due to their non-inclusion in the process of Nepal's unification initiated by the early Shah kings. Some scholars even assert that the Gorkha community did not get enough support from the dwellers of the Tarai because a great number of the Madhesis had turned loyal to the East India Company and fought against Gorkha during the Anglo-Nepal war. This, some assert, raised questions about the loyalty of the Madhesi to the Nepali state from then onwards (Pathak and Uprety 2009). The Tharu people, on the other hand, remained safe from this allegation because of their Nepali indigeneity, though they were also absent from the unification process.

Despite the widespread use of Madhesi identity as an overarching ethnic label, it was not seen in a positive light until the Madhesi movement turned the tables, making Madhesi self-assertion, in effect, an identity capable of negotiating politically with the Nepali state. But within the short span of two years, this reconstituted Madhesi movement of political self-assertion met with a crisis, as different groups in the Tarai felt the newfound political identity of the Madhesis did not serve their particular cultural, religious, and indeed political interests. Among the Tharus, this fear eventually led to a clash with the Madhes movement, namely the Tharuhat movement in 2009.

THE NEW MADHESI IDENTITY: THE MADHES MOVEMENT OF 2007

Nevertheless, the Madhesi movement in 2007 changed Nepali ethno-politics substantially. The MJF-N, an NGO till then, launched

a protest strike against the newly promulgated IC in January 2007, claiming the Constitution was not sufficiently inclusive. Shah (2007) summarizes the demands of MJF-N as such: “a federal system of governance and regional autonomy with rights to self-determination; proportional representation according to the population size in the Constituent Assembly; re-delineation of the constituencies; and representation of Madhesi people in state organs and programs.” These demands received wide media coverage, and intensive debates took place in favor of and against the stated provisions. But protests turned violent when one protester was shot dead by a CPN-M cadre in a central Tarai town (Mathema 2011). The demands later ended with a twenty-two-point agreement with the government (Hachhethu 2007; Mathema 2011) that at least in principle accepted the principles of proportional representation; recognized Madhesi identity, culture, and language; expressed commitment for a federal structure while restructuring the state; agreed to eradicate all sorts of discrimination in recognizing regional languages; and agreed to award citizenship to all eligible Madhesis (History n.d.).

The political strength of the MJF-N before the uprising was negligible. It announced a protest in the same fashion as similar organizations did but this time the non-Pahadi mass (including the Tharus) was vehemently mobilized under the loose label of the Madhesi. The movement radicalized the Madhesis and changed the political dynamics of the Tarai as well as of the country (Mathema 2011). This movement provided a fertile ground for the mushrooming of the Madhesi parties and associations. Even notable Madhesi and Tharu leaders already in national parties either formed new Madhesi parties or joined the MJF. A year later, in February 2008, the Madhesi parties formed a temporary forum under the banner of *Samyukta Loktantrik Madhesi Morcha (SLMM)*,⁵ which announced

⁵ The SLMM was first formed in February 2008 as a loose temporary alliance jointly by Nepal Sadbhawana Party (Mahato-led), Tarai Madhes Loktantrik Party (TMLP) and the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum-Nepal. As the new Madhesi parties surfaced in the subsequent years the number of the allies kept changing but they

an indefinite strike declaring that the government was indifferent to addressing Madhesi demands acknowledged in the twenty-two-point agreement. The strike continued for several days, and ended with the signing of an eight-point agreement with the government similar in tone to the twenty-two-point agreement previously made between the government and the MJF-N (Mathema 2011). The SLMM protests helped to further institutionalize Madhesi concerns, and beefed up Madhesi political parties' bargaining power.

The aggregate effect of the movements launched by the MJF-N in 2007 and the SLMM in 2008 was the revival of ethnic nationalism, on the one hand, and Pahadi-Madhesi contention, on the other (Hachhethu 2007). It was also an expression of discontent against the systematic exclusion of Madhesis; a quest for their inclusion in all spheres of social and political life (Hachhethu 2007); and a long-due awakening of the state towards the ethnic and nationalist aspirations of the Madhesis (Cheah 2009). These movements were viewed also as a "deterrence against the emerging trend of left dominance in national politics in general and against the CPN-M's aggressive campaign of party building in particular" (Hachhethu 2007: 3).

THE THARU MOVEMENT OF 2009

The Madhesi movement in 2007, as I described above, drew from many groups living in the Tarai, including ethnic groups, Muslims, Dalits and other minorities, that had all been marginalized communities under the former rulers of Nepal (ICG 2007; Cheah 2009; ACHR 2009). These people seemed to have developed a sense of anti-hill solidarity that brought them under the umbrella of Madhesi identity. Due to this, the Madhesi label was not uncomfortable to the

frequently kept reviving the SLMM when they needed a stronger political force to pressurize the government. Even right before and after the promulgation of new Constitution in 2015, the SLMM was again revived to protest against the Constitution and is active until now. Seven Madhesi parties were the allies of the SLMM but six allies (except the Sanghiya Samajbadi Forum-Nepal, formerly known as the MJF-N) went into merger under the new name of Rashtriya Janata Party Nepal on April 20, 2017.

Tharus up to this point. According to Tharu activists, as I describe in the following section, Madhesi leadership subsequently expressed indifference to the needs and aspirations of the Tharus, and other indigenous groups, leading towards a new form of ethno-political dynamic in the region. Thus, the Tharus became the most vocal of anti-Madhesi groups.

The history of the Tharu organized struggle for retaining unique social and cultural recognition goes back to the creation of the Tharu Kalyankarini Sabha (TKS) in 1949. It had experienced the influence of ongoing “caste” reform movements of that time in India in its relatively early formation, and the TKS primarily aimed at reforming “caste” norms governing the “Tharu caste” (Krauskopff 2003: 201). These mainly dealt with abstaining from alcohol and reducing the costs of cultural feasts. Likely the oldest ethnic-based organization of its kind in Nepal, the TKS is now the representative body of the Tharu people in the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN), an umbrella organization of Nepal’s *Janajati* groups. As a member of NEFIN and representative of the Tharu, TKS has been actively engaged with the particular concerns of Tharu communities, whereas the Backward Society Education (BASE)⁶ has been working on developmental concerns rather than being actively involved in the ongoing ethno-political debate in Nepal. On the other hand, the political changes that began in the 1990s led to a mushrooming of Tharu ethnic and political organizations, of which a few are engaged in promoting Tharu culture and traditions, while others have appeared as ethno-political organizations. Subsequently, the Maoist insurgency and the People’s Movement of 2006 further facilitated the emergence of several Tharu associations. These were either as temporary and loose associations or relatively permanent ones.

A close look at the agreement between the government and the MJF-N in 2007 and SLMM in 2008 reveals that there is no

⁶ A well-known NGO established in 1990 and working for the cause of the Tharus of western Nepal.

reference to the Tharu people, while the Dalits and Muslims are addressed explicitly. Tharu leaders felt that both agreements failed to address the concern of the largest ethnic group in the region despite their contributions to the Madhesi movement. Rather, the movement came to be a threat to the identity of the 1.7 million Tharus (Guneratne 2009). Tharus' realization of being ostracized by the upper caste Madhesi leaders from the mainstream of Madhes was first expressed in the form of mass protest two years after the Madhesi movement in which they also had been actively involved.

The enlisting of Tharus and other ethnic groups in the Tarai under the umbrella of the Madhesi identity, and recognition of the Tarai as Madhes in the first amendment of IC in March 2007 infuriated Tharu communities across the region, leading to peaceful protests against the amendment. The Tharuhat Samyukta Sangharsha Samiti (TSSS),⁷ however, mobilized Tharu communities throughout the Tarai in March 2009, paralyzing everyday life in the region, and only ending when the government expressed commitment to addressing Tharus' demands. When the government showed reluctance to implement changes, the TSSS launched a second phase of protests a few weeks later in April 2009. Here, the focus was against the articulation of a "single Madhes province across the Tarai" by Madhesi political parties (Maycock 2011: 80).

In 2014, the TSSS once again submitted a memorandum to the prime minister urging the government to remove the Tharu community from the list of Madhesi people. Demands included recognizing the Tharus as the indigenous people of the Tarai (Tharuhat in their words), as they found the government again enlisted the Tharus under the Madhesi category in the Constituent Assembly Member Election Bill and Nepal Health Service Bill

⁷ TSSS (which literally stands for Tharuhat Joint Struggle Committee [TJSC]) was a temporary alliance of twenty political parties and organizations associated with Tharus.

(fourth amendment) in 2013 overriding the agreement of 2009 (The Himalayan Times 2014).⁸

The Tharu movement of 2009 was against a new form of “centralized feudalism” taking root in the “one province across the Tarai,” since Madhesi concerns attained momentum during the Madhesi movement and onwards in the Tarai (Tharu n.d.). The major agenda of Tharu leaders was to delist them as Madhesi, but perhaps more importantly, to delimit the Tarai into Tharuhat province(s) [Tharu n.d.]. Their claim of Tharuhat suggests that the Tarai, considered by the Tharus as their ancestral land, is not Madhes but Tharuhat. The identity of Tarai as Tharuhat, thus, contradicts the territorial justification for Madhes claimed by Madhesi parties. Unsurprisingly, the Madhesi parties, namely the NSP, MJF-N and TMLP, are uncomfortable with the idea of a Tharuhat province across the Tarai as, for them, Tharu communities are constituents of Madhes, and not the other way around. Referring to the Tharu protest in 2009, Sheppard (2009: 224) emphatically states that the classification of the Tharu people as Madhesis “is not only insulting, as Tharus are ethnically dissimilar from the Madhesis, (who are more recent migrants from India), but it denies them benefits that are afforded to other Adivasi/Janajati [indigenous nationalities] in Nepal.” Provocatively, Guneratne (2009: 19) challenges the argument of historical precedence by stating that “the Tharu consider themselves to be indigenous to the Tarai, predating both Madhesi and hill people as inhabitants of that region ...” (see also Nayak 2011).

Since the movement in 2009, the Tharus have made claims for a Tharuhat autonomous province in the context of the restructuring of the Nepali state into federal units, though failing to see their demands addressed when the new constitution was promulgated in 2015. Meanwhile, the Tharu communities of western Nepal resorted to street protests, shouting slogans for Tharu autonomy in the region, while hill-origin groups of far western region demanded an “indivisible far west.” Disagreement with the centralized Nepali

⁸ These two bills were endorsed by the parliament in March 2014.

state has been ongoing, although no policies expressly exclude the “Tharus” and “Madhesis” overtly. In 2011, discontent took another turn when discussions over inclusion, federalism and self-determination of the Tarai became a main agenda of the state. Besides Tharu disagreement with Pahadis of the far western region—disagreements that appeared before the collapse of the Constituent Assembly in 2012—their disaffiliation with the Madhesi label (and movement) have solidified the ethno-political divisions in the Tarai that were once significantly less defined.

KEY ISSUES OF DISAGREEMENT BETWEEN THE THARUS AND THE MADHESIS

The following section explores how the Tharus came to feel the increasing dominance of Madhesi elites on the Tarai agenda and why they preferred to stay away from the Madhesi label. In the previous sections, the controversy over “Tarai” and “Madhes,” Madhes province and concern about Tharuhat and Tharu distinctness were discussed. However, the emergence of the Madhesization process in the Tarai has yet to be explored in-depth. Here, Madhesization refers to the process whereby Tharu communities, other Tarai ethnic groups, Pahadis, Muslims and minorities felt increasingly ostracized because of the growing influence of Madhesi upper and middle castes on politics, bureaucracy, civil life, and on the bargaining table with the state.

The relationship of the Tharu people with immigrants to the Tarai from the border districts of India is substantially different from their relationship with the Pahadis (Guneratne 2009). Guneratne further refers to how Tharus had served the hill states as revenue functionaries, which had given them a position of power vis-à-vis these immigrants. The Asian Centre for Human Rights (ACHR) in its briefing paper, brings out the point of Tharu-Madhesis antagonism (ACHR 2009). Here, what is highlighted is how Madhesi hegemony dominated Tharu identity during and after the 2007 Madhes movement. Madhesi political parties claimed that the Tharus were Madhesis because they also lived in Madhes, shared similar cultural

practices as Madhesi castes and were exploited by the state. From the Tharu perspective, such assertions made little sense. Rather, according to ACHR, “Tharu activists see [even] Madhesi upper caste as exploiters as well, who came over from across the border and took over the land” (2009: 11).

Some Madhesi leaders claimed that Tharuhat movement was conspired by the Pahadis against the Madhesis, though Jha (2009) claimed that the movement was the result of anti-Tharu discrimination and anger. The Madhesization further placed the Tharus at risk of losing indigenous characteristics and assimilating into the encompassing category of Madhesi, who had already been feeling excluded from the Nepali nation building process. Thus the Madhes movement, against their expectation, turned to be counterproductive. The outcome is that the Tharu-Madhesi relationship declined in the few years after the Madhes movement (ACHR 2009). Tarai minority groups along with the Tharus fear that if parts of the region are to be given autonomy under the Madhesis, they would further suffer from the Madhesi hegemony and be marginalized (Saferworld *et al.* 2011).

A better way to substantiate the Tharu-Madhesi disagreement is to synthesize it under the broader conceptual framework of the indigenous versus immigrant settler debate. Various studies on the Madhesi and Tharu communities, for example, acknowledge the earlier origin and indigenous character of the Tharus in the region, predating the Tarai caste groups and Muslims (e.g., Bista 1991; ACHR 2009; Gaige 2009[1975]; Guneratne 2009; Nayak 2011). In many respects, such studies have only helped Tharus’ claims.

THARU AND THE MADHESI POLITICAL PARTIES

The Election Commission of Nepal registered more than two dozen Madhesi political parties for the CA-II elections held in 2013. Many of them have their central offices in Kathmandu and have published their manifestos in Nepali, claiming Hindi as the lingua franca of the Tarai. Thus, the study of the manifestos of the Madhesi parties which have a say in national politics can be an entry to understanding the

Tharus' amorphous position in mainstream Madhesi discourse that emerged from the Madhesi parties' indifference to the Tharus.

The Tharus' larger claim is that the MJF-N has used the terms Madhesi and Tharu in a mystifying way because the party seems uncertain whether the Tharus should be treated exclusively as Madhesi, or whether they should be left with their independent identity outside the Madhesi label. The cover page of MJF-N's election manifesto, for example, states an autonomous Madhes province as one of its aims. The use of the phrase "autonomous Madhes province" here seems tricky and amorphous. First MJF-N fails to delineate the proposed boundary of the autonomous Madhes state, and lacks a comprehensive plan for how the Tharus and other non-Madhesi communities in the Tarai would be incorporated with fuller recognition of their independent ethnic identities (see also Jha 2013).

The ambiguity in MJF-N's manifesto is that, on the one hand, the party accepts the Tarai as a mixed habitat of people from the mountains, hills and Tarai regions, and expresses a commitment to recognizing its uniqueness. On the other hand, the party lobbies for one Madhes province that has already been challenged by the Tharus, as well as by the hill communities living in the Tarai. Likewise, the TMLP also favors an autonomous Madhes province but lacks clarity in its manifesto over whether the Madhes province would be a single unit stretching across the whole of the Tarai, or just a part of it (see TMLP 2013).

Madhesi Janadhikar Forum-Loktantrik (MJF-L), headed by Bijay Kumar Gachhadar,⁹ had proposed two autonomous provinces across the Tarai—Tharuhat and Madhes—while suggesting eight provinces in the hill and mountain region (ekantipur 2013). One striking point here is that MJF-L also has not clearly conceptualized the term Madhesi but has indirectly acknowledged the boundary between

⁹ Gachhadar, a Tharu, was a leader of Nepali Congress before he joined the MJF-N after the Madhes movement of 2007. Later he split from the MJF-N and formed MJF-L shouldering the cause of the Tharus.

the identities of the Tharus and the Madhesi. MJF-L's proposal of two provinces across the Tarai partially suited the demands of the Tharus and simultaneously contradicted with the demand of "one province across the Tarai." Similarly, NSP led by Rajendra Mahato also proposed two provinces across the Tarai; one east of Narayani river and the other to its west. At the same time, this party also seemed to favor the idea of an autonomous Madhes province, which is contradictory to the MJF-L's two province notion (NSP 2013). Its delineation of the boundary of Madhes province—east from Narayani—raised grave concerns over the independent existence of a large number of Tharu communities and other Tarai ethnic communities living in the eastern Tarai, although the party claims it favors an autonomous Madhes province. Mahato states, "If the people of Madhes agree, then Madhes could be a single Pradesh. If consensus cannot be forged, then there could be up to two provinces" (Kharel 2013).

An analytical look at the manifestos of four major Tarai-based parties gives the impression that the Tharu-Madhesi contention is widening, since, first, the parties do not seem unanimous in recognizing Tharu identity from the larger Madhesi label; second, though they seem aware of it, there is an unwillingness to provide Tharu identity with defined territories in their political commitments. This has, in-turn, inspired the Tharus to consolidate and lobby for Tharuhat and Tharu identity, eventually checking the effort of encompassing indigenous identities of the Tarai within the amorphous category of the "Madhesi." The Tharus have, in many regards, managed to use Tharuhat movement as a road block to slow the momentum of the overall Madhesization of the Tarai.

PRO-HINDI INCLINATION OF THE MADHESI PARTIES

It was in July 2008 that the TKS and TSSS organized a protest rally and a one-day strike against the newly elected Vice-President

Parmananda Jha, for taking the oath of office in Hindi.¹⁰ Interestingly, another self-identifying Madhesi, Ram Baran Yadav, elected as the first president of the newly declared republic of Nepal, avoided using Hindi while taking the oath of office. The claim of the protestors was that the vice-president disrespected the constitution as well as sentiments of the indigenous people of the Tarai by taking the oath of office in a “foreign language,” the national language of the neighboring country India (ekantipur 2008). However, Guneratne (1994) suggests that TKS in its earlier years had conducted meetings in Hindi, Tharu and Nepali languages, in order to bridge the language gap between Tharus from different regions of the Tarai, as they found it difficult to communicate in any single Tharu dialect (Guneratne 2002). In a sense, the Tharus had used Hindi also as a lingua franca to communicate among their various sub-groups. Questions, thus arise regarding the reason the Tharus now call Hindi a “foreign” language.

This seems no more than a “politics of language” in the Tarai. And this dates back to the 1950s when the Nepal Terai Congress first lobbied in favor of Hindi. This party launched the “save Hindi movement” as a counter-response to the effort of furthering “the cause of Nepali as the official language” in the Tarai during the 1960s (Singh 2010: 42; see also Gaige 2009[1975]). The Pahadis challenged this movement but the Tharus remained silent in those days but now how have they felt threatened due to the use of Hindi? It is because the language politics in the Tarai has considerably influenced the social, political and inter-ethnic dynamics of the region since the 1960s. The pro-Hindi activism emerged in the 1950s has passed through several ups and downs in conjunction with the mainstream Madhesi movements but it gained further currency after the 2007 Madhes movement.

Hindi is a newly developed language in comparison with other south Asian languages spoken in the Tarai, such as Maithili, Awadhi,

¹⁰ Jha, a Madhesi upper caste and a retired judge, from MJF-N had been elected for the post of vice-president.

Bhojpuri and Tharu. These languages predate Hindi and, in many respects, there is a concerted attempt to refuse its use. Some have observed that Maithili speakers consider Hindi far inferior to their language (Burkert 1997) so it has not been considered as a mother tongue of any groups of the region.

The size of the Hindi speaking population also seems insufficient to support pro-Hindi activist claims since only less than one percent population has reported speaking Hindi as their mother tongue in the Tarai (see Table 1). Moreover, according to Chudal (n.d.: 10) Hindi, “mostly spoken as a second language ... its history representing Indian nationalism during the Indian independence movement has given [it] the identity of a foreign language for Nepalese” (Chudal n.d.: 10).

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

Mother Tongues	Total Speakers in Nepal	Total Speakers in Tarai
Nepali	1,18,26,953	34,94,710
Maithili	30,92,530	30,04,245
Bhojpuri	15,84,958	15,42,333
Tharu	15,29,875	14,79,129
Awadhi	5,01,752	5,00,607
Urdu	6,91,546	6,71,851
Rajbanshi	1,22,214	1,21,215
Hindi	77,569	46,933

Source: CBS (2012).

Emphasizing their own mother tongue, and delinking from Hindi, the Tharus have created “a clear language barrier with the *Madhesi*” (Krauskopff 2003: 240; italics in original). This barrier primarily has sustained the Tharu-Madhesi cultural and linguistic divide and contributed to retaining Tharu identity intact. Ranjitkar (2009) refers to a claim made by an eminent Tharu leader that increasing Madhesi hegemony would virtually erase the independent identity of the Tarai ethnic groups and cause the loss of the political rights

they could enjoy as indigenous people. The Tharus felt alienated from the Madhes movement and realized the need for their own struggle for independent identity due to the Madhesi leaders' fascination with Hindi and indifference to Tharu and other languages of the Tarai. This ultimately led the Tharus to feel being systematically marginalized in their own land. The Madhesi leaders' lobbying for Hindi as a common language in the Tarai (The Times of India 2011) further sparked Tharu suspicion of identity loss in recent years.

Table 2: Demographic Distribution of Second Language Speakers

Second Language/Region	Nepal	Tarai
No second language	15,610,524	6,835,045
Nepali	8,683,433	4,560,951
Hindi	1,225,933	1,205,189
Maithili	195,189	190,366
Bhojpuri	159,379	156,900
Tharu	84,615	81,463
Urdu	45,613	43,981
Awadhi	41,012	40,924
Subtotal	26,045,698	13,114,819
Others and unstated	448,806	203,886
Grand total	26,494,504	13,318,705

Source: Calculated by the author from CBS (2012).

The question the Tharus are intrigued with is why the Madhesi leaders do not insist on making other local languages a medium of intergroup communication since there are already a large number of people speaking languages other than Hindi. This intrigue rests on the fact that though most of the Madhesi leaders have come from Maithili speaking population (ICG 2007) they have given less emphasis on the cause of the Maithili language and culture; rather they have turned to be pro-Hindi activists.

The Madhesi parties' advocacy for Hindi which is neither a mother tongue of a group nor spoken by the large population has created ample space for the doubt of Madhesizing of the Tharus. The advocates of the use of Hindi have not been able to come up with the strong evidence to challenge the Tharu response to Hindi as a foreign language. Still, only 9 percent of the Tarai population claim that they use Hindi as their second language of communication whereas 34 percent use Nepali (see Table 2). This goes against the assertions of the Madhesi parties that Hindi is the most preferred second language in the Tarai. So, weak logic put forth by the Madhesi parties helped fuel the Tharu movement to resist the increasing non-Tharu elements over their identity by challenging the promotion of "foreign language."

CONCLUSION: CONTRADICTIONS AND PARADOXES

Debate on the Madhesi identity first appeared in response to the "hill dominance" in the 1950s in the form of political activism for the Madhesi people, their culture, needs and aspirations. In the meantime, the debate contributed to legitimize the hill-Madhes polarization. The new form of ethnic contention between the Pahadis and the Madhesis redefined the way these people were interacting with each other. Despite the diversities and hierarchies within the Madhesis, the formation of the Madhesi identity in contradiction with the Pahadi further widened psycho-social division in the form of broader categories of *the Pahadis* and *the Madhesis*. Thus the Pahadi-Madhesi divergence remained the dominant ethnic discourse in the Tarai for a long time though there were other few efforts of institutionalizing other cultural identities such as of the Tharus and the Muslims.

For the last few years, the ethno-political discourse has entered into a more knotty phase because of the Madhes and Tharu movements, and their conflicting priorities as discussed above in this chapter. The close look at these two movements and their connections raises a conundrum of ethnic identity debate in the region. The Madhes

movement provided wider space to the Madhesis and empowered them to get their aspirations established and fulfilled. Furthermore, the movement changed Nepal's political course, bringing on the issues of ethnic federalism and political inclusion. But, at the same time, the movement lacked clarity in concisely redefining the Madhesi identity, and building trust with the Tarai ethnic groups and others. Thus, the movement itself sowed the seed of the Tharuhat movement when the Madhesi advocates failed to recognize the diversities and complexities of the region.

Besides the fact that the Tharus and the Madhesis have been contending with the Pahadi identity for decades, the two movements added the additional burden of competition against each other in the form of indigenous-immigrant contention within the region. These movements also revealed the complex interconnections of the ethnic identities the region is facing. The challenge the Tharus posed to the Madhesi agenda came not only as a temporary outburst of the Tharu anger but as a seriously planned effort of de-legitimizing the increasing hegemony of the Madhesi upper and middle castes.

The Madhesis' failure to retain the strength of the Madhes movement turned out to be counterproductive. The endorsement of the Madhes and Madhesis in the IC 2007 through its first amendment came as a shock to the Tharus, which resulted in ethnic schism and identity clash with the Madhesis. Then, for the first time, the Tharus realized the need to structure their disagreement in such a way that it could defy the legitimacy of Madhesi claims. Their challenge successfully redefined the ethnic discourse of the Tarai, bringing the notion of the Madhes and the Madhesi into the scope of sociological scrutiny. It has also resisted the increasing hegemonic influence of the Madhesi upper and middle castes on the ethno-political dynamics of the region, instantaneously rejecting the demand for a single Madhes province and the recognition of Hindi language.

There was a period after 2007 when the term "Madhesi" had become a catchphrase among the Madhesis. This is evident if one

looks at the growth of the political parties in the Tarai with the “Madhesi” label. Heated discussions on the meaning of the term had been observed in first Constituent Assembly. The SLMM was very vocal in promoting the Madhesi label but unfortunately it lost fascination with it just after a decade of the Madhes movement that had legitimized the Madhesi label in both the national and everyday ethno-politics in Nepal. The MJF-N removed the word “Madhesi” from its party name when it merged with other two other parties in 2015. The other five allies of the SLMM (except NSP)¹¹ also did not feel necessary to continue with the term “Madhesi” in their party names after the merger in 2017. Removing the “Madhesi” label from the party names only does not de-legitimize the Madhesi identity and pacify the Tharus’ fear. But it is an indication that the vocality of the Madhesi for the Madhesi label that had invited the misunderstanding with the Tharus is gradually toning down in the changed political context of Nepal in recent days.

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¹¹ The name Nepal Sadbhawana Party does not include the word “Madhesi.”

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