



# THE BAREFOOT RESEARCH INITIATIVE IN THE MADHESH PROVINCE

*A Project Summary Report*



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# Introduction

This Summary Report<sup>1</sup> emanates from the Barefoot Research (hereafter BR) initiative of Martin Chautari.<sup>2</sup> This initiative advocates for the inclusion of those who have been directly or indirectly denied the opportunities to do social science research and facilitates the dissemination of knowledge from below. In particular, the initiative seeks to enhance the capacity of civil society members to document their grassroots-based activism and facilitate the travel of those activism-related issues from the grassroots to national or province-level discourses. In so doing the BR initiative helps to widen the scope of rights-based research advocacy in Nepal.

Phase I of the BR initiative was implemented in three districts of the western Tarai of Nepal (erstwhile Nawalparasi, Rupendehi and Kapilvastu) between November 2017 and June 2019. Lessons learned from that phase (Martin Chautari 2020; Sha and Maharjan 2020) allowed us to expand the outreach of the BR initiative into the Madhesh Province from December 2020 to December 2022. This Report primarily documents the experiences of managing/executing phase II of the BR initiative in the Madhesh Province.

There are three contexts to remember as we discuss the experiences and the outcomes of phase II of the BR initiative. First, there is an asymmetry in the knowledge production landscape of Nepal which

<sup>1</sup> This report is a longer version of the Research Brief 36 (see, Martin Chautari 2023).

<sup>2</sup> See, Martin Chautari (2020) for details on this initiative. See, Sha and Maharjan (2020) for one outcome of this initiative.

is primarily dominated by Kathmandu-centric civil society. At the same time, the state of teaching and research in the humanities and social sciences (HSS) in the Madhesh Province is rather dismal (Martin Chautari 2022). Given this fact, the BR initiative aims to enhance the capacity of grassroots-based individuals and civil society organizations (CSOs) for democratic knowledge production in the Madhesh Province. Put more generally, in a devolved polity with three tiers of government—federal, provincial and local—the BR initiative aims to harness the documentation and articulation of knowledge from locations outside of the Kathmandu Valley.

Second, in doing so, the BR initiative uses the analytical lens of various authors to distinguish itself from other research practices in order to claim the “right to research” (Appadurai 2006), the “capacity to aspire” (Appadurai 2004) and to participate in “democratic citizenship” (Dreze 2002). These analytical lenses<sup>3</sup> help us to explore the possibilities of democratizing research. According to Appadurai (2006), the principle of “documentation as intervention” by people from a humble educational background can open the doors for a wider conception of research. Thought this way, research can then be part of everyone’s right and not the exclusive privilege of people with high formal degrees. This re-rendering of the idea of research is helpful to generate aspirations among those grassroots activists and researchers who are subjected to an uneven distribution of capacity to contribute to knowledge production due to a lack of knowledge resources such as formal education, training, mentorship, inadequate social capital, financial insecurity and weak cultural/political linkages. As we know, taking part in a democracy requires one to be informed of one’s rights to achieve socially valuable goals. The emphasis of the BR initiative is to enhance the access and aspiration

<sup>3</sup> See, Martin Chautari (2020) for a succinct discussion of these analytical lenses.

to research/knowledge production among ordinary citizens as part of the exercise of democratic citizenship.

Third, the BR initiative is not an exercise in academic research that primarily builds on an existing set of related literature. Instead, it involves research carried out by individual activists/researchers who are themselves directly or indirectly related to the research they choose to undertake. After formulating ideas and strategies for research based on or near their lived experiences, the barefoot researchers undergo a mentoring process as part of a capacity enhancement exercise. In so doing they learn to document and articulate their advocacy/experiences and narrate their research findings, thereby enhancing the spaces of “deliberative democracy” in the society at large. Through this exercise, they also augment their capacity to influence and contribute to policy at various levels of government.

This Report has three additional sections. The next section deals with how we planned and executed the BR initiative in the Madhesh Province. The following section summarizes the research conducted by barefoot researchers and demonstrates, through their own testimonies, how their capacity to do so got enhanced after their participation in the BR initiative. Finally, the concluding remarks highlight the BR initiative as a possibility via which applied socio-political research can be done amid the constraints witnessed in the HSS teaching and research in the Madhesh Province (Martin Chautari 2022).

## Practicing a Barefoot Research Initiative in the Madhesh Province

We planned, managed, and executed the BR initiative in the Madhesh Province by taking into consideration the following three contexts. First, while research on the Madhesh Province has been happening from various sources, there is a crisis in the production of competent researchers in the HSS disciplines in the existing colleges



of the Province (for details see Martin Chautari 2022). Given the dilapidated situation of HSS teaching and research in the Province, this crisis is likely to remain with us for at least the medium-term. Hence, the BR initiative was planned as an attempt to contribute modestly to the production of social researchers in the Madhesh Province. We thus scouted for *interested* researchers who possess experiential knowledge either informed by their locally-embedded activism or by the fact of them being local researchers who work in the communities they write about and do advocacy for. These individuals do not intend to become academic researchers. Rather, they were motivated to demonstrate their “reflective capacity” on the advocacy they had done directly or indirectly and encouraged to document their experiences and reflections in a thorough manner.

Second, given that only a limited number of individuals could be enrolled in our BR initiative, we tried our best to ensure the *representation* of interested researchers across the gender, class, caste, regional and ethnic diversities found in the Madhesh Province. Finally, we also looked for social events, themes and processes that are relatively *under-researched* in the Madhesh Province. This search and the earlier-mentioned effort to ensure representation were part of our attempt to make the BR initiative as inclusive as possible.

The selection process of barefoot researchers lasted for several months during the year 2021. During that process, we mostly looked for individuals who were committed to document their advocacy/experiences and who were also motivated to inquire and analyze further their chosen themes. This selection process was challenging since the creative space of activists/CSOs is rather limited in the Madhesh Province.<sup>4</sup> We asked those who showed an initial interest to participate in a formal training session where they presented their

<sup>4</sup> The situation was pretty similar in the western Tarai where Phase I of the Barefoot Research initiative was earlier implemented (Martin Chautari 2019).

proposed research ideas and received feedback from those who were present.

In the end we worked with 15 individuals who have researched and documented various topics over the course of more than a year. These individuals received further formal collective trainings and also benefited from one-to-one mentorship guidance provided by Martin Chautari researchers and other external experts. These trainings and mentoring are the core activities of our BR initiative. Given the differential abilities of the selected 15 barefoot researchers, it was challenging to access their needs and design the collective training modules that would be useful to every researcher. Moreover, they also required different types of one-to-one writing and editorial assistance. Out of the 15 researchers, we were successful in helping 12 to come up with publishable output. We discuss their work in the next section.

## Summary of the Work Done by Barefoot Researchers

In this section, we will highlight the ideas that have been researched by a selected group of barefoot researchers. As mentioned earlier, these ideas were informed by their respective activism/experiences which they have now documented as part of our BR initiative. The written outputs can now form the basis for “research-based advocacy” by these individuals. They can also function as reference sources for others including activists, journalists, academic researchers and policy makers in various domains of Nepali public life. We will also demonstrate the capacity enhancement achieved by these researchers as they took part in the BR initiative. To do so, we will briefly contextualize the personality of these researchers in terms of their prior educational, professional and activist experiences and quote from their testimonies obtained recently.

## *Landlessness among the Dalits*

In the Madhesh Province, Dalits constitute 17.29 percent of the population (Nirwachan Ayog 2079 v.s.: 43) and by every social indicator they are extremely marginalized. One of the causes of their marginalization is landlessness and their lack of citizenship certificate. There have been several attempts by the Government of Nepal to enhance access to land for the landless. However, such initiatives have fallen disproportionately short of their targets as far as the Madhesi Dalits are concerned.

Om Prakash Ram, the land rights activist from the Dalit community, has attempted to bring rich grassroots insights into the issue of landlessness among the Dalits. He brings focused examples from Ward no. 2 and 7 of Gujra Municipality in Rautahat District to show how Dalits are rendered landless despite possessing land. Although the Government of Nepal has formed 14 land commissions (Ghimire 2021) since the early 1950s, the problem of Dalit landlessness continues to exist since they do not have documentary proofs to claim their rights to the land on which they live. Moreover, since many of their settlements are in the public lands (forest, road, river bed, government land, etc.), it is procedurally difficult to register such lands in their respective names.

Ram is located near the sites of his research and has been immersed in land rights activism for many years. His prior relationship with the community helped him to gather information from the field and analyze the processes leading to landlessness among the Dalits in the Madhesh Province. While working in various NGOs, he had completed a Bachelor's degree in education. He has been associated with the Rautahat District Land Rights Forum which is under the umbrella of the National Land Rights Forum-Nepal, a forum uniting those who are deprived of land rights—bonded laborers, tenants,

the landless, farmers, *haruwa*, *charuwa* and trust land farmers—and inciting them to action.<sup>5</sup> This association had opened several training opportunities for him in the past dozen years.

However, Ram had never published anything related to his activism. When we approached him to ask if he was interested in writing about the issue of landlessness among the Dalits, he was initially reluctant to join our BR initiative. This is how he remembered the moment:

I had been advocating landlessness issues among the Dalits for a while. But, I did not know “What is research?” and “How to do research?” Even if I wanted to do research, it was not possible for me because I had neither the training nor basic knowledge about research. ... I used to ask my seniors how I could become a researcher. They had told me that I needed to do a PhD to be a researcher. But then, I only had a bachelor’s degree and thought that becoming a researcher was not for me.

When I was contacted to join the BR initiative, I was asked if I was interested in doing research on the issues I have been advocating for many years. However, I had my doubts if I could do it. ... I was told that I should write about the issue of Dalit landlessness. “If your text is understood by the people who read it and if they think what you have written is relevant, then that is research,” I was told. Eventually, the fear about research I had turned into confidence.<sup>6</sup>

Practicing the principle of “documentation as intervention” (Appadurai 2006), Ram gathered information systematically from his activism experiences, analyzed it and has now written a narrative

<sup>5</sup> See, <https://landportal.org/node/13225>; accessed January 5, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Testimony of Om Prakash Ram, January 10, 2023.

that is ready for dissemination. This text is another form of his advocacy.

### *Access to Justice for Rape Victims*

Gunjan Kumari Ray has documented the difficulties faced by women who seek justice after being subjected to various forms of violence, especially rape, in the Madhesh Province. She has presented four case studies based on which she critically argues against the tendency of mediating rape cases outside the courts by creating undue social and political pressure on the victims. These mediations often translate these heinous crimes against women to simple transgressions for which the perpetrators go free after rendering a simple apology. She adds that such social phenomena create multiple challenges to women victims as they seek justice.

Ray hails from Mahottari District. She has more than a decade-long experience in the field of Women and Children's Rights in the Madhesh Province. Previously, she was recognized as the best journalist in the region. She has also worked as a non-gazetted second class officer at the Dhanusha District Court, Janakpurdham. As a social activist, she has been advocating the rights of rape victims in the Province where she has made remarkable strides despite receiving direct and indirect threats of violence against herself. Her motivation comes from her previous work experience as the Mahottari district coordinator of the advocacy project "Justice Sector Reform Project Focused on Women's Access to Justice." Since 2013, she is also a registered mediator at both Dhanusha District Court and Mahottari District Court.

When we invited her to enroll in our BR initiative, Ray was apprehensive about the idea of "research." She was not sure how to document her activism experiences into a researched narrative. She considered herself as an "activist" whereas she thought of researchers

as those who have abilities, training, and experiences to process information with theoretical richness and robust methodological knowledge. She now states:

All I knew before was that research is a difficult journey. However, in the process, if provided opportunities with mentoring support, the mere documentation of our data from advocacy experiences are enough to do research.<sup>7</sup>

### *Conservation of Natural Resources*

Practicing the BR initiative in the Madhesh Province provided us the lens to understand the processes of the development of civil society at the grassroots level. Here we highlight the successful case narration of a youth activist's struggle—via auto-ethnography—to protect the Dhanushadham forest. Dev Narayan Mandal is a well-known activist and environmental conservationist in the Madhesh Province. He is the founder-CEO of the organization Mithila Wildlife Trust (MWT).<sup>8</sup> He acquired his basic education in his village in the erstwhile Mithileshwar Mauwahi (now called Mithila Bihari) Municipality and later went to India to pursue a Bachelor's in Commerce degree. Notwithstanding his formal educational degree, his work experiences are related to wildlife rescue and rehabilitation in India.

Based on those work experiences, Mandal was motivated to do similar work in the Madhesh Province. Most importantly, his childhood memories of the Dhanushadham forest and the ruined condition of the forest when he returned from India led him to advocate for the protection of the forest. Meanwhile, his two works related to the rescuing of snakes and documenting the migrating

<sup>7</sup> Testimony of Gunjan Kumari Ray, January 11, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> See, <https://mwt.org.np/>; accessed January 29, 2023.

birds in the Madhesh Province led him to initiate his own institution, the MWT. Through MWT, he advocates for the conservation and restoration of natural resources, national forests and wildlife. Mandal has strong linkages within the provincial and local governments and has worked with them on various conservation-related projects. All that he has achieved so far is due to his perseverance to learn, advocate and practice as an activist.

Mandal's story shows how a youth, inspired by his own intrinsic motivation, can protect a community forest from the greed of local mafias and poachers. Particularly, the contribution of a motivated individual mobilizing the support of a community to protect the forest without any strong organizational backup is to be noted. This is an example of the development of civil society at the grassroots level. Other youth activists can learn from this example.

When we requested Mandal to enroll in our BR initiative, at first, he was confused about the topic he could write about. At that time, for him, the “research/documentation world” was limited to conducting research related to the rehabilitation of reptiles, birds and other wildlife at the grassroots level in the Madhesh region. However, imagining himself as a social researcher was a bit challenging for him. After a series of conversations, he was convinced that an auto-ethnography of his struggles to protect the Dhanushadham forest counted as research. When we asked him to narrate the experiences of being a researcher in our BR initiative, he said “Earlier, to me, research meant scientific research, namely, in the natural sciences. But now, I am confident that I can also be a social researcher.”<sup>9</sup>

### *Women in Local Governments*

Women have been traditionally overwhelmingly under-represented in electoral politics in Nepal. While the situation at the federal level continues to remain abysmal, after the promulgation of the new

<sup>9</sup> Personal Communication, January 11, 2023.

constitution in 2015, the situation at the level of local governments has changed a bit for the good. The Local Level Election Act, 2017, “mandated that political parties fielding candidates for both mayor and deputy mayor posts must include a female candidate in both urban and rural municipalities” (Tamang 2018: 312). In addition, two of the five ward members also need to be women, one of whom must be a Dalit. As a result of these provisions, after the 2017 elections for the 753 local governments, two percent of all elected mayors and 92.5 percent of all deputy mayors were women (Mahato, Paudyal and Baruah 2019). These women had a five-year tenure.

Salma Khatun is a former mayor of Pokhariya Municipality in Parsa district of the Madhesh Province. She was one of the few Muslim women elected as deputy mayors in the 2017 local government elections (Bidari 2018). Previously, she had an illustrative career as a radio journalist. She had acquired her college education from Parsa District with a Bachelor’s in Education. Later, after working as a radio journalist, she obtained an MA in Mass Communication and Journalism from Bangladesh.

In our BR initiative, Khatun’s write-up is an auto-ethnography of her experiences as the Deputy Mayor of Pokhariya Municipality. Initially, she intended to also consider the experiences of other women deputy majors to validate her research since she was not sure that the narration of just her own experiences can be considered “research.” However, later, she dropped the idea of interviewing other deputy mayors and instead just focused on her own story.

Her write-up gives a thick description of her personal experiences as a deputy mayor. According to her, women serving as deputy mayors in local governments are subjected to deep-rooted patriarchy. This patriarchy constitutes a major obstacle for women who want to provide good governance in local governments. Khatun provides rich insights which can help in the formulation of informed



policy to advocate for a better working situation for elected women representatives in local governments (cf. Tamang 2018).<sup>10</sup>

### *Struggle for Citizenship Certificate*

Lack of citizenship certificates is a major problem in Nepal's Tarai including the Madhesh Province. There are two factors for this lack. First is the complication related to the categorization of the citizenship certificate into at least three types, namely, citizenship by descent, citizenship by naturalization and citizenship by birth. If the mother and father both have citizenship by descent, their children can get citizenship fairly easily. In the other criteria (especially citizenship by birth), due to the fact that the law has not been amended, the difficulties of acquiring citizenship have been perpetuated (Sharma 2022). Second, the lack of citizenship is a nationwide problem but it disproportionately affects the Madheshis since they are seen as "lesser Nepalis" due to their alleged cultural proximity to Indians.

Jitendra Kushwaha, a 24-year-old student from Mithila Municipality in Dhanusha District, is still completing his bachelor's degree. When he joined the BR initiative, he was an activist struggling for his own citizenship certificate. Moreover, he had been denied citizenship formally (in a written document) despite the fact that he had a court verdict in his favor from the appellate court (high court). However, when he produced the court order at the Chief District Officer's (CDO) office in Dhanusha, they declined to give him his citizenship certificate. The CDO office didn't cite a reason but gave a vague response for its denial.

In his write-up, Kushwaha brings rich documentation of how the struggle for citizenship certificate impacts the lives of the concerned individuals. He argues two points that are worth noting. First, there was ignorance among these individuals about the citizenship

<sup>10</sup> See Bidari (2018) for a report on Khatun after she had been in office for a year.

certificate due to a lack of realization of its importance as a needed “paper document” in their daily lives. Second, their struggles to acquire the citizenship certificate make them aware of their rights as equal citizens in the country. No matter how painful and cumbersome the process to acquire the citizenship certificate might be, it helps them to gain hope in the democratic process.

Given that he did not have a citizenship certificate, Kushwaha did not have a bank account at the time when he joined our BR initiative. Thus, we contacted the organization Barefoot Lawyers Nepal, an entity formed by Raksha Ram Harijan, a member of our first cohort of barefoot researchers. Harijan is defending Kushwaha in his court case at the Supreme Court. Kushwaha narrated his experiences in the following manner:

I wanted to study technical subjects like many of my friends. But, I could not study that because I don't have a citizenship certificate. Before and after I enrolled in the BR initiative program, there is a considerable difference. One difference is that I started to take education more seriously. Meanwhile, I started to actively fight my case for the citizenship certificate in the court. Writing about my struggle as part of the BR initiative has given me a sense of relief. In doing so, I got the confidence to register my voice, fight injustice and advocate social causes. During this phase, I also got a judgment in my favor in the court for a PAN [permanent account number] card.<sup>11</sup> Also, I am now a certified writ facilitator [who helps in writing application and preparing legal documents] to the general public in the Dhanusha District Court.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> The PAN number is needed for all individuals who have a taxable income.

<sup>12</sup> Testimony of Jitendra Kushwaha, January 9, 2023.

Kushwaha enumerates his own struggle for citizenship as an “intervention” from the grassroots level. His research initiates a meaningful dialogue as an informed citizenry, a necessary condition for deliberative democracy. It thereby contributes to rights-based policy advocacy.<sup>13</sup>

### *Understanding Political Violence in the Tarai*

Nepal experienced a decade-long insurgency between 1996 and 2006. After the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Government of Nepal and the erstwhile insurgents, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), in 2006, political violence in Nepal took another turn with the rise of ethnic nationalism. In particular, two consecutive Madhesh Movements in 2007 and 2008 disrupted the social relationships between the Madheshi ethnic groups and Pahadi (hill community) ethnic groups. One such disruption led to political violence with the establishment of a new political force, the Chure-Bhawar Rastriya Ekata Party. Often the activities of this political party subsumed politics, violence, and crime in such a way that it was difficult to demarcate their boundaries.

Social research on “violence” is often complex and difficult but such research is necessary to understand how “violence” originates and how it can be reduced. Moreover, an ideal democracy should always strive towards “peace.” To do so, under-researched topics such as “violence” done in the name of a political party and its uncalled-for legitimacy need to be documented and debated in the public.

Sabin Khanal—a resident of Sarlahi District, teacher, and social activist—had witnessed the Chure-Bhawar movement since its inception. During the time of the conflict, he wrote short opinion pieces to promote social cohesion between the Madheshi and

<sup>13</sup> As Kushwaha’s write-up was being prepared for publication, he managed to get his citizenship certificate on January 29, 2023 (see Sakhakarmi 2079 v.s.).

Pahadi groups in and around the East-West highway of the Madhesh Province. He had traveled extensively in the area, gathering detailed information about the Chure-Bhawar group and getting to know many political actors from both the communities.

Khanal's article done for our BR initiative shows how the politics of the Chure-Bhawar movement began with violence and ended with violence. In that process, the lines between violence, crime, and politics were blurred. He shows, on the one hand, how the leadership of the Chure-Bhawar movement was involved in a spiral of violence including murder as well as disturbing the peace and tranquility in the region while, on the other, defending their political "violence" by forming the militia to protect the so-called owner/identity of the Pahadi community in the Tarai (those mostly based on the East-West highway).

When we asked him to narrate his experiences in our BR initiative, he said:

As a social activist, I have observed Chure-Bhawar movement closely. I also knew the thinking of the people involved in it. I have personally seen how a Pahadi behaved with a Madheshi and vice-versa during that time. The BR initiative gave me confidence that I can contribute via research to better understand the Chure-Bhawar movement and its fallout.<sup>14</sup>

### *Questioning the Use of the Parliamentary Development Fund*

Social audits or research on public programs are rarely a priority in Nepal. In our BR initiative, research on the Parliamentary Development Fund (PDF) was prioritized since this would enhance

<sup>14</sup> Testimony of Sabin Khanal, January 23, 2023.

the discussion and discourse about accountability and transparency at the local level.

Surendra Kamati hails from Siraha District. He has over 14 years of journalism experience. Currently, he is the district bureau chief of *Naya Patrika* daily, a major newspaper published from Kathmandu to which he contributes news and feature stories regularly. He also works for various local newspapers, radio and television.

As a journalist, Kamati's daily struggle is to identify news content to report. In this regard, he has been trying to document the PDF program of the federal government which has been implemented since 1994 in various forms and under different names. The PDF provides direct financial support to legislators to carry out development activities in coordination with local authorities in their respective constituencies. In 1994, this program was started with an allocation of NRs. 250,000 to each legislator. By 2019, the amount had increased to NRs. 60 million.

However, it is interesting to note that, since 2008, the federal parliament consists of two types of legislators: 1) those directly elected under the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system; and 2) those elected under the party-list proportional representation (PR) system. The PDF allocated to a directly elected legislator is considerably more than that allocated to a legislator who was elected from the PR system. For instance, for the fiscal year 2073/2074 v.s. (2016/2017), the former got NRs. 30 million whereas the latter got NRs. 5 million only. Since then only the former have gotten PDF allocations. In particular, women legislators who were likely to be denied candidacy for the FPTP elections by their respective parties and were later elected under the PR system became victims of this amount allocation discrimination.

Over the years, there have been many news reports regarding the misappropriation of PDF allocations by several legislators. What is surprising to note is the continuation of the program in almost every

federal budget barring a few ones. In our BR initiative, Kamati's write-up can be considered as a social audit or a citizen inquiry into the PDF program implemented by the legislators from the Siraha District. In his article, he shows how the PDF serves the interest of the local political cadres, institutionalizing corruption at the grassroots level. Kamati argues that the PDF program compromises the values and norms of parliamentary democracy as it undermines healthy competition. Those who are legislators get an undue advantage with their PDF allocations against their political challengers who are not elected representatives. His research not only raises accountability and transparency concerns but also narrates the story of how the democratic process gets stunted at the grassroots level.

Kamati shared his experiences in our BR initiative in the following manner:

Because I have to do news reports almost on a daily basis, I used to gather data on various socio-political issues. This is a routine activity for me. One such issue is the PDF where I had collected data over many years. However, I had only basic knowledge about research. I learned research by doing news reports and investigative journalism. I had written 2000–3000-word-long articles but I did not have experience in writing longer research articles (6000 words plus). This was a challenge for me: how to articulate despite having enough data. ... Now, I can differentiate what is research and how it is different from mere reporting about any incident. I am now confident that I can produce long researched analytic write-ups.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Testimony of Surendra Kamati, January 24, 2023.

### *Conflicting Land Relations vis-à-vis the State*

In the Tarai/Madhesh, it has been witnessed that one can use/utilize the land but the ownership of it is not extended to those families for decades. The private vs. public land debate relates to a conflictual situation between the state and those (citizens) who are struggling to claim their ownership legally.

Ranjit Kanaujiya presents a case study of the land conflict in Gaushala Municipality, Mahottari District. He argues that the lack of land ownership is leading to difficulties in town planning in the heart of the marketplace of the municipality. Also, he argues that the land conflict disproportionately impacts those who are marginalized.

Ranjit Kanaujiya is a Dalit social activist and a resident of Gaushala Municipality. In our BR initiative, the case he presented is something that he had witnessed in his daily life as a resident. He has supported victims in various forms and tried to petition for their legal rights in various government offices. In doing so, he had knowledge about the sources of land conflict vis-à-vis the state. In his article, he identified three sources of conflict. First, in 1983 v.s. 200 *bighas* of land (almost 55 acres) were allocated to Shree Nigaul Gopal Gaushala, an entity supported by the rulers of Darbhanga (Bihar, India) to establish a cow farm. Since 2022 v.s. various governments did the land survey and subsequently people settled on that land by paying rent to the government. However, since 2066 v.s. the government has not allowed them to pay rent nor has it decided who its legal owners are. Second, the source of conflict is Guthi (government-regulated social organization) Sansthan land where almost 100 households face difficulties related to land ownership/registration. The majority of these households are Dalits and poor landless people. Third, with respect to government-owned land in rural areas, those who are connected to the state apparatus could legally register their ownership of the land while the marginalized communities are rendered landless.

When we invited him to enroll in our BR initiative, Kanaujiya said that the idea of research should be able to solve the problems of the people. He shared his experiences in the following ways:

As a social activist and educated youth, whenever I meet the people in my neighborhood, they request me to suggest a way to solve their land ownership issues. When Martin Chautari (MC) contacted me to enroll in the BR initiative, I thought that this was the best way to pay back to my society by raising the issue of land ownership and thereby advocating the cause on behalf of the marginalized ... I had conducted research earlier but the experience in the BR initiative was different. Had I done this research individually, I may not have succeeded in writing an analytic piece. However, MC provided constant support, knowledge resources, interaction with experts, and help to connect with journalists and intellectuals. The written drafts were subsequently revised with the help of a mentor assigned by MC. For me, the BR initiative became a learning-by-doing, interacting, and collaborating enterprise for intellectual and academic support to write an analytic research piece.<sup>16</sup>

### *Assessing the “Beti Padhao, Beti Bachao” Program*

The Beti Padhao, Beti Bachao (BPBB) is a social security program implemented by the Madhesh Province government since the fiscal year 2074/2075 v.s. (2017/2018). This program intends to empower girl children with various interventions such as distributing cycles to them, providing contribution-based subsidized insurance scheme and combating gender-based violence as a campaign in the Madhesh Province. For instance, child marriage is disproportionately higher in the Madhesh Province as compared to other provinces whereas

<sup>16</sup> Testimony of Ranjit Kanaujiya, January 26, 2023.



girl children are subjected to various socio-cultural discrimination/barriers to pursue their education. The BPBB became a flagship program of the Madhesh Province government in the newly federal Nepal.

In our BR initiative, Kusumlata Tiwari examined the BPBB program with respect to free bicycle distribution to girl children in the public/community schools. This program is newly implemented by the provincial government; however, little research has been conducted to assess the impact of the program from the perspective of girl children in the schools. In her research, Tiwari examined the usefulness of this program at the grassroots level.

Tiwari hails from Gaur, Rautahat District. She chose to do a case study of Juddha Secondary School in Gaur to examine the impact of the bicycle distribution program. She argues that the BPBB has not only helped girl children continue their education but has also empowered them. Moreover, she specifically argues that BPBB's bicycle distribution "shortened" the distance between their homes and the school for girl children. It increased their enrollment in the school and improved their attendance. She argues that despite the BPBB program being mired in corruption allegations and mismanagement on the part of the provincial government, the positive impact made by this program also needs to be recognized.

When we requested Tiwari to enroll in our BR initiative, she was also doing an MPhil at the Central Department of Anthropology of Tribhuvan University. Her initial training as an ethnographer and the fact that she is a resident of Gaur put her in a situation to conduct "participant observation" of girl students in the Juddha Secondary School. This enabled her to inquire about the BPBB program's impact on their daily lives. In a way, hers was a kind of applied research which brings out how social security enhances freedom and how "bicycle" can be an artifact of liberation for girl children to claim education as their "right."

She narrated her experience in the following ways:

I have had the opportunity to research different issues in the Madhesh before. Participating (in the BR initiative) in research with the constant interactions with my peers and mentors and engaging in research workshops in the Madhesh with the Madheshi scholars has made my experience distinct from the research experiences I had earlier.<sup>17</sup>

### *Decoding Hate Speech Narratives in the New Media Platforms*

The new media—particularly social media networks such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, TikTok, etc.—offers a platform for freedom of speech and expression. However, the misuse of such spaces is becoming rampant, not only in Nepal but beyond. One such misuse is the hate speeches targeted to denigrate people on the basis of race or identity, etc. Hate speeches in social media also foster deep-rooted prejudices and intolerance that further work as a catalyst to incite discrimination in society. At times, it is very difficult to demarcate where freedom of speech/expression is a “right” and hate speeches made on social media platforms are “offenses” prohibited by law. In our BR initiative, one inquiry was made in this direction with a descriptive case study of “hateful expression against Madheshi community in the new media.” Studying hate speeches analytically and deconstructing the processes of everyday racial and xenophobic discrimination in Nepal provide insights that need to be debated among concerned stakeholders so that appropriate measures can be taken to combat hate speeches.

BP Sah is a 32-year-old journalist and a youth activist from Sabaila Municipality in Dhanusha district. He has more than a decade long experience as a journalist. He has been actively involved

<sup>17</sup> Testimony of Kusumlata Tiwari, January 22, 2023.

in the campaign for making Nepali media “inclusive.” In 2013, BP Sah along with other journalists, particularly from the Madheshi community, launched a hunger strike nearby the administrative center (Singha Durbar) of the Government of Nepal (GoN). They demanded that more Madheshis be included in the media. They also called for an end to hate speeches/prejudices/discrimination (direct or indirect) targeting the Madheshi community in media contents. The GoN tried to address their demands by forming a high-level committee and BP Sah worked as a member of that committee. He also founded an online news portal—[www.hulakinews.com/](http://www.hulakinews.com/)—to bring the voices of Madheshis into the media. This reflected his long-term advocacy and commitment to the cause of inclusive media in Nepal.

In his write-up, he has documented his advocacy/past experiences to combat hate speeches against the Madheshis. His memory of his own advocacy on this theme serves as “data” in his write-up. He argues three points that are worth noting here. First, the new media—because of its facility for repeat watching in YouTube etc.—is different from the older platforms. Their repeat availability facilitates the documentation of hate speeches and the lodging of complaints with the government agencies for remedial measures. Second, despite the existence of the “Cyber Bureau” in Nepal, established to combat hate speeches, Sah shows that the state had failed to take any action against the individuals inciting denigration against the Madheshis with respect to the particular cases he has documented. He argues that this is also discrimination in itself. Third, the new media has become another “space” to discriminate and denigrate racially and this space is ripe for generating socio-cultural and political conflict. The policymakers need to be sensitive to such issues as early as possible.

Sah narrated his experiences in our BR initiative in the following manner:

I started to get familiar with the research world and to identify myself as a researcher. I have had over a decade-long experience as a journalist. I have reported over a thousand news and have written hundreds of feature articles so far. I always thought that I had good enough skills to “write”. However, I can now differentiate between news reporting or opinion write-ups vis-à-vis research-based articles. ... Despite having “data” informed by experiences of activism, I realized that one needs to enhance analytical abilities to do research. No matter, how many university degrees one may acquire, the research-based article is difficult but you can learn by doing it.<sup>18</sup>

### *Critically Reflecting the Functioning of the Madhesh Provincial Parliament*

After the promulgation of the new Constitution of Nepal (2015), three major changes were institutionalized, namely, republic, federalism, and proportionate inclusion of marginalized groups in the state apparatus. The constitution envisioned a three-tier government system: federal, provincial and local governments. The constitution enshrined the principles of cooperation, co-existence and coordination between the three levels of governments. In this way, the constitution foresees the strengthening of the multiparty competitive federal democratic republican system of governance based on pluralism. In the BR initiative we intended to understand the functioning of the provincial government.

Manju Yadav is a former legislator (2017–2022) in the Madhesh Provincial Assembly. She is a political activist who has been advocating the issues of women and marginalized communities. Despite being a full-time political activist, she has also developed an

<sup>18</sup> Testimony of BP Sah, January 24, 2023.

academic research interest. She has completed an MPhil degree in Population Studies from Tribhuvan University. When we approached her to enroll into our BR cohort, she narrated her experience in the following manner:

Being a legislator of the Madhesh Province, I was always skeptical about the everyday functioning of the Assembly. As an activist, I always try to uphold the rights of the marginalized and have advocated for inclusion. That is why, my concern always is whether or not the Assembly can internalize social inclusion. To that extent, I was disappointed, especially, when the subject committees were formed.<sup>19</sup>

Yadav chose to make the subject committees of the Madhesh Provincial Assembly her research topic as a way to assess the functioning of the Assembly as a whole. She counted on her experiences as a provincial legislator for five years as data for her analysis. In this way, she could bring rich insights into the functioning of the subject committees. The research on subject committees in the assembly helps us to assess the effectiveness of the governance carried out by the Provincial Government. Therefore, the subject committees' (provincial or federal) functioning is crucial to understand how accountability and transparency are being institutionalized in the newly federal Nepal. Such research adds value to public knowledge and enhances "deliberative democracy."

Given that federalism is newly practiced in Nepal, there are various shortcomings observed in the functioning of the provincial government. Yadav has researched five out of seven subject committees and has provided a detailed description of how they were formed and how political *bhagbanda* (sharing of the spoils) compromised the essence of these subject committees. She has unpacked their

<sup>19</sup> Testimony of Manju Yadav, January 23, 2023.

inner political dynamics. She has raised the following issues in her article: first, the subject committees' formation was delayed due to political *bhagbanda*; second, the subjective committees failed to recognize the expertise of the legislators in the Assembly; third, the social inclusion principle was compromised when the committees were formed; and finally, the Madhesh government and their line agencies failed to collaborate with the respective subject committees.

### *Researching the Under-researched Social Categories: Soit and Solkan*

There are various facets to social discrimination in society. Such discrimination can broadly be categorized as active and passive discrimination. Active discriminations are those that intentionally target certain caste, class, race, gender, minorities or marginalized communities. Such discriminations happen either due to conservative social stigmas/thoughts or embedded social and cultural practices that denigrate individuals or communities. To some extent, the state prevents such active discrimination by law, making such discriminatory practice a criminal offense. However, passive discriminations are generally not intentionally targeted but such discriminations are deeply engrained in the socio-cultural and political imagination. Moreover, they are rarely discussed in the public domain partly because they are also difficult to research analytically. In our BR initiative, we have also experimented with unpacking one such passive discrimination widely present in the social imaginaries in the Madhesh Province: *Soit* and *Solkan*. The range of discriminatory practices that correspond to the social imaginaries in the form of *Soit* and *Solkan* groups do provide an informed pluralistic lens to observe society and its discontent.

When we enrolled Gopal Thakur in our BR initiative, he was already an acclaimed scholar of linguistics and culture in the Madhesh region. He is also a well-known socio-political activist. Initially he

wanted to research the controversy regarding the naming of the province (erstwhile, it was called Province Two). There were at least two strong proposals to name Province Two: Mithila or Madhesh Province. Thakur later argued that the contestation between these two names was obvious in the surface politics of the province. What was not obvious was the social, cultural and political divide hidden in the *Soit* and *Solkan* categories. He later chose to study this hidden divide. He argues that the *Soit* consists of the so-called upper caste, class and linguistic groups with cultural aspiration that is different from that of the *Solkan* who are the majority in terms of population but are subjugated with reference to their caste, language, and cultural practices in the province.

In our BR initiative, Thakur writes as a cultural activist championing the voice of those who have been marginalized as *Solkan*. He narrated his experiences in the following manner:

As a linguist, I have been involved in the socio-linguistic survey in the Madhesh province and elsewhere in Nepal. Traveling from Janakpur to Rajbiraj by bus, I realized that there is a linguistic difference within the same language group (Maithili) between the general people's tone and tenor from those so-called elites speaking the standardized language. This is something I also noticed strongly from my experience at Radio Nepal while discussing with my colleagues. Why is there a vast difference between the people speaking the same language (Maithili)? This was troubling me for a long time. To search for an answer, I role-played as a sociologist/ anthropologist to understand the difference between the *Soit* and *Solkan* groups.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Testimony of Gopal Thakur, March 3, 2023.

Thakur argues that if we understand the *Soit and Solkan* categories, it will help us to understand how passive discrimination is practiced and how it has become, directly or indirectly, embedded in the everyday life of the citizenry in the Madhesh Province. He has also enumerated his experiences and scholarly insights to show discriminatory practices between the *Soit* and *Solkan* groups in terms of socio-economic, linguistic and cultural differences. He has raised concerns for policymakers to take note of how the social imagination entrenched in the form of *Soit* and *Solkan* categories is germinating the seed of a possible social conflict among various caste, class and linguistic groups in the Madhesh Province.

## Concluding Remarks: The Need to Expand the BRI in Other Locations

The cases discussed above indicate several positive aspects of the BR initiative. First, a democratic society requires ordinary citizens to be informed and for them to be informed, some ability to conduct research by those citizens is needed. The twelve cases discussed here show that the BR initiative can augment the ability of such ordinary citizens to claim their “right to research,” thereby helping them to enjoy “democratic citizenship.”

Second, these cases show that the possibilities of democratizing research at the grassroots level are enormous. At least two aspects of research democratization might be highlighted here: who can do research and what counts as research? Regarding who can do research, the conventional understanding of “research” has induced a fear in ordinary citizens who think that research can only be done by “experts” who are especially trained for that purpose. Instead the BR initiative has partly alleviated that fear by practically demonstrating that research need not be the sole prerogative of individuals with high formal degrees. In this way, we believe that the BR initiative



is an institutional turn “to deparochialise the idea of research and make it more widely available” (Appadurai 2006: 176) to ordinary citizens. It is an institutional turn because our BR initiative, now implemented in two different parts of Nepal, modestly introduced a new way to include grassroots-based individuals in the domain of research, albeit on a small scale.

The answer to the question “what counts as research” is related to the politics of methods in practicing social research. Sociologist Micheal Burawoy calls for provincializing the social sciences which means “to bring the social sciences down to earth by *provincializing* their universalism, their disciplinary divisions, and their methodology, grounding them in their particularity and their specific context of production” (Burawoy 2005: 508–509). This observation is also relevant in the case of our BR initiative. As highlighted earlier, in the BR initiative, the experiences of the barefoot researchers informed by their activism was the primary data of their research. In their written narratives, we then invited them to demonstrate their reflective capacity on that data as a practice of social research. Such practice has been grounded in the cultural, political and social contexts of the Madhesh Province.

Third, the practice of the BR initiative called for the study of important applied socio-political themes that have been, relatively speaking, *under-researched* in the relevant regions. This under-researched state of specific themes is partly due to the fact that the regional institutions of higher learning are in a crisis as far as the production of new researchers are concerned (Martin Chautari 2022). It is also due to the fact that the other public entities, such as journalism institutions and civil society organizations are not independently strong enough to raise and report those themes robustly and consistently. In this context, the work done by the barefoot researchers have provided visibility and relative clarity to some important themes. Journalism institutions and policymakers can use the outputs of the barefoot

researchers to further advance public discussions and scrutiny of those themes.<sup>21</sup> Such public engagement will expand the critical space of civil society in the Madhesh Province and elsewhere and strengthen the foundations for public recognition of the importance of grassroots-based research advocacy. Such recognition of locally embedded knowledge emanating from grassroots-based activists will deepen the social life of democracy in Nepal. These positive aspects and outcomes of the BR initiative provide a strong argument regarding why the barefoot research initiative needs to be expanded to other locations inside Nepal.

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<sup>21</sup> According to Bishwa Mani Pokhrel, editor of *Madhesh Dristi*, in the local newspapers of the Madhesh Province, “There is a dearth of content on the socio-political issues of the region. Instead, the news pages are filled with what is reported in the Kathmandu mainstream media. We are constantly in search of local research content. [Hence] we plan to publish the [barefoot] researchers’ contents as opinion editorials once the research drafts are finalized.” Personal communication, December 16, 2022.

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