

Kalpana Jha. 2017. *The Madhesi Upsurge and the Contested Idea of Nepal*.
Mumbai: Springer.

The Madhesi Upsurge and the Contested Idea of Nepal is an approximately hundred-page, compact volume that aims to provide a historical overview of the formation of Madhesi identity in Nepal in order to understand the context of Madhesi uprisings that have captured national and international media attention in recent years. Jha's stated objective is to "gain an understanding of underlying reasons, problems, and motivations for mass uprisings" (p. vi) in Madhes, and she uses informal interviews with prominent Madhesi public figures as well as newspaper articles, and historical documents to advance her central argument that the Madhesi upsurge cannot be understood as a spontaneous eruption—it is the result of a long history of exclusion and the amalgamation of social and political factors that have allowed for a consolidated movement to take shape.

Although the book is structured as a monograph, the seven chapters do not build on each other in a cohesive manner, and each of the chapters

could be read independently of each other as a journal article. Jha begins the book by tracing several decades of state formation processes in Nepal, explaining how “the one language policy, unitary state, and the discriminatory citizenship policies especially impacted the Madhesi” (p. 5), and she argues that political shifts that took place from 2006 onwards played a huge role in increasing Madhesi discontent with governance structures. Jha then proceeds to compare consolidation of Madhesi ethnic identity in Nepal with various ethnic conflicts in South Asia; devoting sections to India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and China. In the chapters that follow, Jha tackles the question of how Nepali identity has been imagined and understood since the period of monarchy to the transition into a republic, and she concludes that symbolic exclusion of Madhesis from the idea of Nepali-ness has a strong historical precedent.

Jha examines the Madhes *Āndolan* of 2007 and the protests following the promulgation of the new constitution in 2015 in the context of the various facets of Madhesi discontent at the lack of representation, and she posits that dissent took the violent shape that it did because of the absence of state structures that could address ethnic grievances. She spends the final couple of chapters trying to locate the Madhesi upsurge in the context of globalization and co-dependence with India, and a particularly well fleshed out section is one that talks about the scapegoating of Madhesis, according to Jha, “anti-India nationalism [is] fostered by the Kathmandu polity as the ultimate face of Nepali nationalism. Madhesi are looked upon as proxy Indians and considered a threat” (p. 71). The Madhes-India symbiosis as portrayed by mainstream Nepali media is scathingly critiqued, and Jha concludes the volume with an examination of contemporary Madhesi politics and hypotheses about where the movement could be headed.

One of the main strengths of the book is that it is very well researched, and readers interested in Madhesi politics can find numerous valuable documents through looking at the reference sections of each of the chapters. One noteworthy work that Jha cites is the 1956 Hindi treatise by Raghunath Thakur titled *Paratantra Madhes aur Uski Samṣkṛti* that may be an interesting read for those looking to trace the history of discourses surrounding Madhesi ethnic identity.

The book is written in a very accessible manner, and even those who are completely unfamiliar with the idea of Madhes can follow along with Jha’s arguments and gain a general understanding of the background of Madhesi protests. Because Jha’s explicit objective is to understand the

current moment in Madhesi politics, the analytical insights that deal with post-2015 ethnic issues are new and unlikely to be found in many other scholarly publications. Because Madhes area studies is a newly emergent field, this book, in addition to *Tarai/Madhesh of Nepal: An Anthropological Study* by Deepak Chaudhary (2011) and *The Middle Country: The Traverse of Madhesh through War, Colonization and Aid Dependent Racist State* by Ram Manohar Sah (2017), serves as important introductory material paving the way for more scholarship surrounding issues pertaining to Madhes.

A major weakness of the book, however, is that because the scope of the subject material it tries to tackle is so overwhelmingly large, analysis throughout the chapters remains superficial, and none of the numerous subjects that are addressed get the rigorous treatment that they deserve. This is especially evident in the chapters that discuss globalization and ethnic conflicts outside of Nepal—while the effort to understand Madhesi ethnic conflicts with reference to debates about nationalism and sovereignty are interesting, they end up not adding anything to the central arguments that Jha makes, and are incredibly reductive in nature. In the chapter “Ethnic Awakening in South Asia: Drawing Analogy with Nepal,” Jha attempts to condense complex issues surrounding ethnicity and governance in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and China in a couple of hundred words, a gargantuan task to take on, and the result is a cursory outline that illuminates nothing about the Madhesi uprisings. Similarly, the chapter “Globalization and Ethnic Upsurge” is full of inanities such as “the structural conditions of stability and reproduction of capitalist societies are not at all functionally guaranteed” (p. 63), and Jha fails to sufficiently demonstrate the links between US global hegemony (something she spends a couple of pages talking about) and Madhesi counter-hegemonic movements.

While the book does briefly talk about the links between the struggles of Madhesis, Tharus and *janajātis*, the interconnectedness between the discontents of marginalized identity groups across Nepal vis-à-vis upper-caste Pahadi governance and symbolic as well material exclusion is not fleshed out as well as it could have been. Jha delves into political science theories such as Benedict Anderson’s imagined communities in order to critique the Nepali national project, but a close engagement with these theories to explore nuances of ethnic grievances in Nepal is absent. The genealogy of Madhesi ethnic discontent in Nepal that is presented in the book

does not converse with literature about similar issues surrounding other ethnic identities, and this appears to be an opportunity that has been squandered.

The fact that Jha consistently embraces a comparative global perspective, insistent on placing Madhesi protests in the context of social and political upheavals elsewhere in the world, means that this books is likely to be very legible to readers with a general interest in Madhesi issues. The volume is definitely valuable as an introduction to Madhesi identity formation in Nepal, but it is not streamlined and focused enough to be particularly stimulating for specialists in the study of Madhes or Nepali ethnic politics at large.

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