

Madheshi Question and India-Nepal Relation

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Abstract: *This research paper aims to provide a comparative analysis of Nepal's Tarai / Madhesh Movements through the lens of the political opportunity structure theory in social movements. Specifically, it focuses on Tarai / Madhesh Movement I initiated by the Forum for Madheshi People's Rights in 2007, which achieved success following the establishment of a federal state in Nepal, and Tarai / Madhesh Movement II led by the United Democratic Madheshi Front and the Tharuhat Joint Struggle Committee, representing Tarai / Madheshi parties and Tharu organizations respectively, which faced failure due to disagreements among political elites regarding the creation of two provinces in the Tarai / Madhesh region.*

Keywords: India-Nepal Relations, Nepal, Madhesh, Historical overviews, Terai, Citizenship, Tarai / Madhesh movements and India, Identity, Ethnicity, Federalism, Democracy, Border, Immigration, Political Movements, Bilateral Cooperation, Economic Relations, Cultural Relations, Regional Dynamics, Minority Rights, Political Integration, Socio-economic Development.

1. Introduction

The relationship between India and Nepal has been strong due to their geographical proximity and shared religious, linguistic, and cultural heritage. This connection is further exemplified in the robust state-to-state relations that have steadily strengthened over time, despite political shifts in both nations in recent years. Regular high-level visits have played a crucial role in deepening these ties. Both countries have consistently recognized and cherished each other's significance and have frequently referred to their relationship as 'special' on numerous occasions. The connection between India and Nepal is influenced by the geopolitical dynamics of the region. Positioned on the northern frontier of India, Nepal's southern border extends to the plains of India. This geographical proximity places Nepal within India's strategic sphere. Nepal is a landlocked country located on the southern slopes of the Himalayas, shares borders with Tibet to the north and India to the south. With frontiers connecting both India and China, Nepal's significance to India has increased since China's full sovereignty over Tibet was established. It can be seen as a buffer state between India and China. Nepal maintains an open border with India, bounded by the east, south, and west. In terms of geography and politics, Nepal holds a distinct position within the South Asian Region. In the 2015 Tarai / Madhesh movement, the primary demand was the creation of two federal units in the Tarai / Madhesh region. However, this movement ultimately failed to achieve its objective and concluded "without any significant achievement" (Jha, 2018). This prompts us to inquire about the factors that contributed to the success of Tarai / Madhesh Movement I and the subsequent failure of Tarai / Madhesh Movement II. This paper aims to address these crucial and pertinent questions. The roots of the Tarai / Madhesh movement can be traced back to the 1950s when the Tarai Congress Party was formed in 1951. After a period of decline in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s, the movement regained momentum with the establishment of the Nepal Sadbhavana Parishad (Nepal Goodwill Council) in 1985. This historical overview provides context for understanding the Tarai / Madhesh movements of 2007 and 2020. Subsequently, I will conduct a comparative analysis of Tarai / Madhesh Movements I and II to examine the factors that

contributed to their respective outcomes. Since assuming power in May 2014, the Modi government in New Delhi has undertaken a strategic shift in its foreign policy, focusing on strengthening bilateral relations with Nepal. The primary driver behind the Indian government's engagement with Kathmandu at the highest political level is China's growing investment in Nepal's infrastructure, energy, and other sectors. Both India and Nepal have a mutual interest in maintaining close relations with each other, recognizing the benefits that such a relationship can offer to both nations.

In the context of the current census conducted in 2021, this research paper aims to explore the intricate relationship between the Madheshi Question and India-Nepal relations. The census provides a timely opportunity to delve into the demographic, social, and political aspects of the Madheshi community and its implications for the India-Nepal relationship. By examining the census data and analyzing the narratives surrounding the Madheshi Question, this study seeks to shed light on the evolving dynamics between India and Nepal and their impact on the Madheshi community.

In the subsequent sections, this paper will delve into the historical context of the Madheshi Question, explore the relationship between India and Nepal, analyze the census data, and examine the implications and potential solutions related to the Madheshi Question in the context of India-Nepal relations.

Overall, this research paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the Madheshi Question and its significance in the evolving dynamics between India and Nepal, while also providing valuable insights into the complexities of identity, representation, and cross-border relationships in the South Asian region.

2. Historical Overview

India and Nepal share a deep-rooted historical and cultural bond, resulting from centuries of interactions and cross-border exchanges. The geopolitical proximity and open border between the two nations have further fostered economic and social linkages. Historically, India has played a significant role in Nepal's economic development,

providing trade opportunities, investment, and infrastructure support. The birth of the modern state of Nepal occurred in 1768, marking the end of its division into 54 principalities. It was King Prithvi Narayan Shah from the Gorkha principality who unified Nepal and became its ruler. The Shah kings governed Nepal until 1856. Subsequently, Jang Bahadur Rana, a relatively low-ranked courtier, seized power in 1856 by eliminating his political adversaries during a gathering. This event led to the establishment of the Rana family rule, which significantly reduced the kings' authority, rendering them figureheads with nominal power (Regmi, 1975; Shah, 1990).

In February 1951, the Nepali Congress (NC) launched an armed struggle that resulted in the overthrow of the Rana family rule and the establishment of democracy. This marked a significant shift in the political landscape of Nepal, replacing autocracy with a democratic system.

The Tarai / Madhesh region aligned itself with the East India Company during the war (Goit, 2007). However, due to cultural and physical differences from the hill regions and their similarities to India, as well as their support for the British during the Anglo-Nepalese War (1814-1816), the Nepali state, which was predominantly controlled by the hill elites, treated the Tarai / Madhesh people as second-class citizens until the advent of democracy in 1951 (Gaije, 2009; Jha, 2018). Permission was required for them to travel to the capital city of Kathmandu, and they had limited opportunities for representation in the state's power structures. The Tarai / Madhesh region functioned as an internal colony of the central government, with the elites benefiting from its resources while neglecting its development (Jha, 2014; Kantha, 2010a).

Prior to the establishment of democracy in 1951, the Tarai / Madhesh region did not witness significant protests the discriminatory practices imposed by the Nepali state. Democracy, being a political system that encourages diverse perspectives, provides an opportunity structure for marginalized groups to voice their concerns against state-sponsored marginalization. Beda Nanda Jha, who broke away from the Nepali Congress (NC), founded the Tarai Congress (TC), a regional party representing the interests of the Tarai / Madhesh region. The TC advocated for various demands, including the establishment of an autonomous Tarai province, recognition of Hindi as a regional language, and equitable employment opportunities for people of plains origin within government services (Gaije, 2009; Gupta, 1990).

In 1990, a joint movement led by the Nepali Congress (NC) and the United Left Front of seven communist parties successfully campaigned against the Panchayat system, resulting in the restoration of democracy in Nepal. Following the restoration, the Nepal Sadbhavana Parishad underwent reorganization and transformed into a political party known as the Nepal Sadbhavana Party (NSP). The NSP advocated for various issues, including federalism, the recognition of Hindi as an official language, reservation of government services for people of plains origin, and amendments to the Citizenship Act of 1964.

The 1990 constitution of Nepal emphasized popular sovereignty, guaranteeing civil and political rights such as freedom of expression, organization, and assembly. Additionally, it granted every community residing within Nepal the right to preserve and promote its language, script, and culture. This constitution also declared Nepal as a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society, which represented a significant departure from the past homogenizing approach of the ruling Pahadis and reflected a positive shift toward pluralistic nation-building (Gellner, 2008; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2008).

However, despite these progressive ideals, Nepal did not transition into a federal state, and Hindi did not receive official language status. The Citizenship Act of 1964 remained unamended, and there was no provision for reservation of government services for people of plains origin. Consequently, the NSP opposed the constitution, highlighting the unaddressed concerns and demands of the Tarai / Madhesh region (Hoftun et al., 1999).

2.1. Economic Dimensions

The Madheshi region, situated in the southern plains of Nepal, has significant economic significance due to its proximity to India. This geographical location has fostered extensive cross-border trade and economic exchanges between the two countries. The Madheshi region serves as a vital gateway for trade with India, facilitating the movement of goods, services, and people.

The economic ties between India and the Madheshi region are robust and multifaceted. Trade flows between the two countries involve a wide range of products, including agricultural goods, manufactured items, and other commodities. The Madheshi region, with its fertile lands and agricultural potential, contributes substantially to Nepal's agricultural output, meeting domestic demands and catering to export markets in India.

In addition to trade, the Madheshi region attracts significant Indian investment in various sectors, including manufacturing, infrastructure, and energy. India's investment in the Madheshi region has led to the establishment of industries, factories, and infrastructure projects that contribute to economic growth and job creation.

However, the Madheshi Question, which revolves around issues of identity, representation, and rights of the Madheshi community, also has economic implications. The Madheshi community has long demanded fair and equitable access to economic opportunities, resources, and representation in political and administrative institutions. They seek to address historical grievances related to discrimination, marginalization, and unequal distribution of economic benefits.

The current census in 2021 provides an opportunity to assess and address these economic dimensions of the Madheshi Question within the broader context of India-Nepal relations. It calls for a comprehensive understanding of the economic disparities and grievances faced by the Madheshi community and the formulation of inclusive policies that

promote economic development, social justice, and equal opportunities for all.

2.1.1. Political Dimensions

The Madheshi community, residing in the Tarai region of Nepal, has long-standing political concerns and aspirations. They seek greater representation, participation, and inclusion in political processes and institutions. The Madheshi population, with its distinct cultural, linguistic, and regional identity, has called for recognition and respect of their rights and interests within the broader framework of Nepal's political landscape.

The political dynamics between India and Nepal play a crucial role in the Madheshi Question. India, as a neighboring country, has historical, cultural, and linguistic ties with the Madheshi community. The political relationship between India and Nepal influences the aspirations and demands of the Madheshi population.

The Madheshi community often looks to India for support and advocacy in their pursuit of political representation and addressing their grievances. India, as a regional power, has a vested interest in ensuring stability, inclusivity, and harmonious relations in Nepal. Consequently, India's involvement and engagement in addressing the Madheshi Question can have significant political ramifications.

The current census in 2021 provides an opportunity to examine and address the political dimensions of the Madheshi Question within the framework of India-Nepal relations. It necessitates an inclusive and participatory approach that acknowledges the political aspirations and concerns of the Madheshi community. Meaningful political representation, equitable distribution of power, and addressing historical grievances can contribute to political stability, social harmony, and strengthen the India-Nepal relationship.

3. Tarai/ Madhesh movements and India

The Tarai / Madhesh movements in Nepal have significant economic and political dimensions, with India playing a crucial role in shaping these dynamics. In 2021, these aspects have come into focus as the movements continue to influence the economic and political landscape of the Tarai / Madhesh region. The Tarai / Madhesh movements in Nepal and their relationship with India have been significant aspects of the socio-political landscape in the region. The Tarai, also known as the Madhesh, is the southern plains region of Nepal, bordering India. The movements in this region have revolved around various demands, including political representation, ethnic rights, and economic development. India continues to exert significant influence on Nepali politics, although its influence has diminished compared to the past. Throughout history, India has played a crucial role in the success of democratic movements in Nepal, including those in 1951, 1990, and 2006 (Baral, 2012). India has expressed its support for federalism in Nepal, which led to its backing of the Tarai / Madhesh Movement I (Jha, 2014; Sharma, 2019).

India, as a neighboring country, has played a crucial role in the Tarai / Madhesh movements. Its influence has been evident in shaping the political dynamics and outcomes of these movements. Historically, India has supported the demands of the Tarai / Madhesh region, particularly in terms of federalism and recognition of their cultural and linguistic identity.

During Tarai / Madhesh Movement I, India played a mediating role between the movement leaders and the Nepali government, contributing to its resolution. However, the involvement of India also sparked anti-India sentiments among the Pahadi population (hill-dwelling Nepalis), which was skillfully exploited by political elites opposing the movement.

In Tarai / Madhesh Movement II, India's involvement had mixed consequences. While it boosted the morale of movement leaders and cadres, it also resurrected anti-India sentiments among the Pahadis. The political elites effectively used this sentiment against the movement, leading to a different outcome compared to the first movement.

The relationship between the Tarai / Madhesh movements and India is complex, influenced by historical, cultural, and political factors. It highlights the interplay between regional aspirations, cross-border dynamics, and national interests. Understanding this relationship is crucial for comprehending the socio-political landscape of Nepal and its implications for bilateral relations between Nepal and India.

In recent years, there have been efforts to improve India-Nepal relations and address the concerns raised during the Madheshi Question. Diplomatic dialogues and engagements have taken place to bridge the gaps and find common ground. The evolving political landscape in Nepal and India's shifting foreign policy priorities have also influenced the dynamics of their relationship.

The Terai region, comprising the Eastern and Western Terai, was incorporated into Nepal through agreements with the East India Company, with the Eastern Terai in 1816 and the Western Terai in 1860. However, despite its integration into Nepal, the Terai region has experienced a long history of discrimination and marginalization by the Nepalese government. This has fueled a growing demand for increased autonomy and recognition of the region's distinct identity.

The Terai region has a rich historical and cultural heritage that sets it apart from the rest of Nepal. Over the centuries, it has developed its own unique characteristics and has maintained a separate identity. The people of the Terai have faced ongoing injustices and have tirelessly fought for their rights as Nepali citizens.

As previously mentioned, India has played a significant and influential role in the success of Nepal's democratic movements. Particularly in Tarai / Madhesh Movement I, India acted as a mediator between the movement leaders and the Nepali government, ultimately contributing to its resolution (Jha, 2014; Sharma, 2019). It is worth noting that

India's involvement prevented the mobilization of the army against the movement, which had a positive impact (Kantha, 2010).

4. Madheshi Movement and its Impact on India-Nepal Relations

The Madheshi Movement in Nepal refers to the socio-political agitation led by the Madheshi community residing in the Terai region of Nepal, which shares a border with India. This movement aimed to address the grievances and demands of the Madheshi community, which includes issues of representation, inclusion, and equitable distribution of resources and opportunities. The Madheshi Movement had a significant impact on India-Nepal relations. Due to the cultural, ethnic, and familial ties between Madheshis and people in the Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the movement had repercussions on both sides of the border. India, as a neighboring country, closely monitored the situation and played a role in facilitating negotiations and dialogue between the Nepalese government and the Madheshi leaders.

The movement strained the India-Nepal relationship at times, as there were concerns about the potential spillover of unrest and agitation into the Indian side of the border. The Madheshi leaders also sought support from political parties and groups in India, further complicating the situation. The Indian government had to carefully navigate its response, balancing its commitment to the principles of non-interference in internal affairs while addressing the concerns of the Madheshi community and maintaining stability in the region. Efforts were made to address the Madheshi demands through political dialogues and constitutional reforms in Nepal. The promulgation of a new constitution in 2015, which included provisions for greater representation and inclusion of marginalized communities, was seen as a significant step towards addressing the concerns of the Madheshi community. This helped ease tensions and improve India-Nepal relations, as both countries recognized the importance of stability and cooperation for mutual prosperity. Overall, the Madheshi Movement had a profound impact on India-Nepal relations, necessitating diplomatic efforts, negotiations, and reforms to address the grievances of the Madheshi community and maintain peace and stability in the region. The movement highlighted the complexities of the socio-political dynamics in Nepal and underscored the importance of inclusive governance and representation for sustainable development and harmony.

During the initial phase of their "People's War," the Maoists faced challenges in exerting influence over the government in Kathmandu, as they lacked significant support in the Tarai region. To overcome this, the Maoists strategically tapped into the sentiments of the Madheshi community and successfully established their Tarai wing, known as the MRMM (Madheshi Revolutionary Movement). The Maoists incorporated the genuine demands of the Madheshi people into their agenda and expanded it with two additional dimensions. However, the dynamics shifted following the Madhesh Movement in 2007. The recent movement in the Tarai region resulted in diminishing Maoist influences (Yadav, 2004). The Madhesh Movement, driven by the

genuine demands of the Madheshi community, reshaped the political landscape and created new dynamics in the region. As a result, the Maoists' grip on the Madheshi population weakened, as other political forces and movements gained prominence.

5. Conclusion

The controversy surrounding the citizenship concerns of Madheshis and Indian immigrants arises from the blurred distinction between descent based Madheshis and Indian immigrants. Unfortunately, the stakeholders involved in this controversy have shown a lack of practical efforts to address the issue, instead prioritizing their own political interests. The failure of the Nepali state, India, and the Madheshi parties to differentiate recent Indian immigrants from descent based Madheshis has generated anxiety among non-Madheshis. The non-Madheshis' concerns primarily revolve around Indian influence rather than the Madheshis themselves. However, both sides of the political spectrum have failed to effectively communicate this reality. The United Democratic Madheshi Front (UDMF), for instance, focuses on appeasing the Madheshi population and expanding its electoral base. Consequently, their public statements are carefully crafted to avoid disregarding the sentiments of Indian immigrants. Descent-based Madheshis face the constant burden of proving their Nepali identity and distinguishing themselves from recent Indian immigrants. This situation is not unique to Madheshis alone. Dutta (2012) highlights a similar predicament faced by Assamese Muslims in maintaining a distinction from Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants, influenced by a new form of Hindu-Muslim binary.

As the Madheshi identity continues to evolve and its definition is shaped by the influx of Indian immigrants, it becomes crucial for descent-based Madheshis to establish a distinct framework for their Madheshi identity. This framework would serve to delineate a clear boundary between themselves and Indian immigrants. In the Nepali media, a new term, "nawanagarik" (new citizen), has gained popularity in reference to Indian immigrants who obtained citizenship by birth under the Citizenship Act 2006.

After the constitution was promulgated, the coalition government of the Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) made efforts to establish a separate province consisting of five plains districts: Rupadehi, Parasi, Dang, Banke, and Bardiya. However, their attempt failed as the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) (CPN-UML) did not support it.

Subsequently, the government conducted local elections in two phases. The Federal Socialist Party-Nepal (FSP-N) participated in both phases, while the National People's Party-Nepal (NPP-N) took part in the second phase only. Both parties achieved significant success in Province 2, not only in the local elections but also in the provincial elections, leading to their formation of the provincial government. In the federal parliamentary elections held in November and December 2017, these parties continued to perform well in Province 2.

The CPN-UML emerged as the largest party in the parliamentary elections and formed the government with the support of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre). Eventually, the CPN-UML and the CPN (Maoist Centre) merged to form the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN). On the other hand, the NPP-N supported the government without directly participating in it but later withdrew its support after a few months. In May 2018, the FSP-N joined the government, but it exited from the government in December 2019.

Notes

For details, see "Documents of the Nepali Congress" (In Nepali) compiled by Gagan Thapa, Pratap Paudel; and Shankar Tiwari (2067 B. S)

The party was established in June 2015 with the merger of the Forum for Madheshi People's Rights of Upendra Yadav, the Democratic Federal Socialist Party of Ashok Rai, and the Khas Socialist Party of Upendra Karki.

In this article, the usage of the term 'Madheshi' has been restricted to refer to the descendants of Indian-origin caste groups, but not the Muslims and indigenous Tarai settlers such as the Tharus, Rajbansis, Dhimals and others.

The Maoists effectively articulated a Maithili catchphrase, hum dharti putra chi, bideshi bhagauda nahi (we are the sons of the land, not the alien ones), during the later years of insurgency

According to National Population Commission (1983, pp.8–9), 91.5 per cent of total immigrants in Nepal had settled in the Tarai, of which Indian immigrants comprised 96 per cent in 1961 and 95.6 per cent in 1971. The same report (p.10) cites from the Indian Ministry of Overseas Affairs that 3.32 million Indians had migrated to Nepal, of which 2.39 million had acquired Nepali citizenship. Till then, 62.5 per cent of Indian immigrants had already acquired Nepali citizenship, whereas only 20 persons out of 40, 000 Indian immigrants could acquire citizenship in Bhutan (p.10).

These notes and briefings are available in the website of the Ministry.

The Bill is available at <http://www.parliament.gov.np/parliament/np/bills/registeredbills.htm>

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