Politicising ethnicity: Tharu contestation of Madheshi identity in Nepal's Tarai

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The Madheshi agitation of 2007 and the Tharuhat agitation of 2009 redefined the ethnic relation between the self-identifying Tharu and Madheshi communities. At that time, the Tharu not only contested Pahadi (hill-origin) identity but also vehemently confronted the increasing hegemony of Madheshi caste groups by challenging the notion of Madhesh, Madheshi labelling, and the demand for a single Madhesh province across the Tarai[1], as put forward by the Madheshi community. Tharus that enthusiastically participated in the 2007 Madheshi agitation, appeared to be against the same identity just two years later. Why did they turn around? This article argues that the Tharu sensed the systematic initiation of Madheshisation of their centuries-long indigenous identity, while Madheshi activists and leaders undermined the concept of the Tharuhat, Tharu language and culture, by continuously insisting on the Madheshi label, a Madhesh province, and the Hindi language. Their eventual challenge to the Madheshi label raised questions about the legitimacy of the Madheshi agitation, a fact that some Madheshi leaders claim is political blackmail. This article seeks to bring out the Tharu-Madheshi contestation in relation to identity claims and state restructuring in Nepal, particularly with reference to the Tarai.

Introduction

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

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[1] 'Tarai' seems more vernacular whereas 'Terai' is usually preferred by western scholars so I prefer the former. Moreover, 'Madhesh/Madhes' and 'Tarai/Terai' (spelling varies) are used synonymously to refer to the southern plains of Nepal; the other way to denominate the region is by coalescing these terms 'Tarai-Madhesh' but, still, these terms have not gained unanimous acceptance. Since the Tarai – having a geographic connotation – seems more neutral and more inclusive of all groups from east to west of the region than the term Madhesh a section of the Madheshis still feel uncomfortable with it.

2008. This article 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 Madheshi agitation in the southern plains (Tarai) immediately after the promulgation of the Interim constitution, demanding a federal form of the governance and inclusion of the Madheshi in all state apparatuses. In 2009, just two years after the Madheshi agitation, the Tharu – the largest ethnic group scattered east to west in the Tarai – launched their own protest strike, dissociating themselves from Madheshi identity, which they had ostensibly accepted in 2007. They then demanded their own Tharuhat province in contradiction with the demands of Indian-origin Madheshis. They thus challenged Madheshi identity for the first time in their history of ethnopolitical struggle (Ranjitkar 2009; Guneratne 2009 in Gaige 2009 [1975]).

The Madheshi agitation 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, among others (Shah 2007). However, the Tharuhat agitation demanded the elimination of the term 'Madheshi' from the Interim Constitution that had been inserted after the Madheshi agitation in 2007, as well as recognition of distinct Tharu identity (TSSS 2009). This paper 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 mainstream political parties and the CPN Maoist[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-Madheshi contestation, which occupied a distinct space in the broader framework of ethnic movements in Nepal since 2007. Definitions of the Madheshi 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 Madheshi identification only to Hindu caste groups which have close familial, cultural and linguistic ties with the groups of north Indian states Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, and are late immigrants to the region from the south. This article follows the second interpretation of the Madheshi, thus not incorporating the Tharu, other indigenous groups, or Muslims.

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

The Tharu 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 percent of the Tarai population in the 2011 Census) and claim to be the indigenous people of the Tarai (Guneratne 1994; CBS 2012). Among others, the Tharu were key players in the Madheshi agitation in 2007, because the polarisation between the Tharu and Indian-origin Madheshi had not yet turned confrontational. One reason was that the rhetoric around the agitation was aimed at the 'hill dominance' of Nepali politics. In other words, non-hill-origin groups had loosely organised under the overarching Madheshi label to counter this dominance.

Madheshi identity in history

The Madheshi have experienced four turns in relation to historical identity formation. Here we include identity formations associated with the establishment of the Tarai Congress in 1951; the establishment of Nepal Sadbhawana Party (NSP) in 1990; the Madheshi Rastriya Mukti Morcha (MRMM)[3] in 2000; and finally, the Madheshi agitation in 2007. 'Madheshi' 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 Tarai Congress Party in 1951 (ICG 2007). It was the first organised effort that turned Madheshi 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 Madheshi in the Civil Service (Hachhethu, 2009; Yhome, 2006; ICG 2007). Subsequently, another prominent Madheshi leader, Raghunath Thakur, formed the Madheshi Mukti Andolan (MMA)[4] in 1956, demanding autonomy for the Tarai; the inclusion of the Madheshis 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 Madheshi movement until 1985, when Gajendra Narayan Singh formed the Nepal Sadbhawana Parishad[5] (Hachhethu 2009). The Nepal Sadbhawana Parishad then turned into a regional political party under the name of Nepal Sadbhawana Party (NSP)[6] after the restoration of democracy in the 1990s, though the name itself did not give any sense of regional and ethnic flavour. NSP also raised the issues of citizenship, recognition of Hindi as a second language, of Madheshi youth enrolment in the national army, and a slew of development-related concerns (Hachhethu 2009). It succeeded in reviving and

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[3] Literally Madheshi National Libration Front (MNLF).
[4] Madheshi Liberation Movement (MLM).
[5] Literally Nepal Goodwill Council.
[6] The NSP, after the death of its founder Gajendra Narayan Singh in 2002, although passed through several splits Rajendra Mahato-led faction has still considerable influence of both the Tarai and national politics.

continuing the Madhesh 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 Madheshi movement, until the formation of the Madheshi Janadhikar Forum-Nepal (MJF-N)[7] which rose as the main voice of Madheshi discourse, especially through the widely known Madhesh *Andolan* (agitation) in 2007.

Besides the Tarai Congress and NSP, Nepali Congress and Communist factions had also established close connections with the Madheshi and the Tharu communities since their formation in 1947 and in 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 mobilisation. But the Tarai-based parties claimed that Nepali Congress and Communist forces turned a deaf ear to Madheshi concerns, thus making them realise the need for such regional actors (Gaige 2009 [1975]). Hachhethu (2007) claims that the escalation of the Maoist insurgency in Tarai after 2002 brought another turn to Madheshi ethno-nationalism when the party formed the Madhesi Rashtriya Mukti Morcha (MRMM) as its sister organisation for the political mobilisation of the Madheshi people in 2000. The CPN-Maoist was successful in articulating the plight of Madheshi Dalits, although the Madheshi realised 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 lower rungs of the Madheshi 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).

Madheshi communities were, in many respects, ignored in the formation of modern Nepal. This is not surprising, as cultural divisions between the hill and the Madheshi communities can be traced back for centuries. In contemporary politics, strong imaginaries have given way to an intensified polarisation with Madheshi self-assertion in the form of ethno-political mobilisation from the time of the Tarai Congress. Moreover, cultural, linguistic, and religious affinities between the Madheshi and their neighbours

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[7] MJF-N, an NGO before 2007, turned into a Madheshi party after the Madheshi agitation of 2007 and also went through several splits and mergers. Notably, Bijay Gachchhadar split from it forming another party with a similar name, Madheshi Janadhikar Forum-Loktantrik. Later in 2015, MJF-N merged with two hill-based parties, Sanghiya Samajwadi Party and Khas Samabesi Rastriya Party under the name of Sanghiya Samajbadi Forum.

over the southern border in India, have resulted in the Madheshi being accused (especially by their highland neighbours) of being 'pro-Indian'.

Certainly, the pro-Hindi inclination of Madheshi leaders appeared since the very beginning of the movement in the 1950s (Gaige 2009 [1975]). This has perhaps contributed the most to the Madheshi being often referred to as 'Indians'. This is also the lynchpin of the identity clash between the Madheshis and the Pahadis, and now between the Madheshi and Tharu communities. Pahadi relations with the Madheshi have also remained strained since the beginning of the conception of Madheshi 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 Madheshi 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 (2007).

Admittedly, the Madheshi 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 Madheshi had turned loyal to the East India Company and fought against the Gorkha during Anglo-Nepal war. This, some assert, raised questions about the loyalty of the Madheshi 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 also absent from the unification process.

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

The new Madheshi identity: the Madheshi agitation of 2007

Nevertheless, the Madheshi agitation in 2007 changed Nepali ethno-politics substantially. The MJF-N, an NGO till then, launched a protest strike against the newly promulgated Interim Constitution in January 2007, claiming the Constitution was not sufficiently inclusive. Shah (2007: online source) summarises the demands 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 Madheshi people in state

organs and programmes'. These demands received wide media coverage, and intensive debates took place in favour of, and against the stated provisions. But protests turned violent when one protestor was shot dead by a CPN Maoist cadre in a central Tarai town (Mathema 2011). The demands later ended with an agreement[8] with the government (Hachhethu 2007; Mathema 2011) that at least in principle accepted the principles of proportional representation; recognized Madheshi identity, culture, and language; expressed commitment for federal structure while restructuring the state; agreed to eradicate all sorts of discrimination in recognising regional languages; and agreed to award citizenship to all eligible Madheshis ('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 organisations did, but this time the non-Pahadi mass (including the Tharu) was vehemently mobilised under the loose label of the Madheshi. The agitation radicalised the Madheshis and changed the political dynamics of the Tarai as well as of the country (Mathema 2011). This agitation provided a fertile ground for the mushrooming of the Madheshi parties and associations. Even notable Madheshi and Tharu leaders already in national parties either formed new Madheshi parties or joined the MJF. A year later, in February 2008, the Madheshi parties formed a temporary forum under the banner of Samyukta Loktantrik Madheshi Morcha (SLMM),[9] which announced an indefinite strike declaring that the government was indifferent to addressing Madheshi demands acknowledged in the 22-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 22-point agreement previously made between the government and the MJF-N (Mathema 2011). The SLMM protests helped to further institutionalise Madheshi concerns, and beefed up Madheshi political party bargaining power.

The aggregate effect of the agitations launched by the MJF-N in 2007 and SLMM in 2008 was the revival of ethnic nationalism, on the one hand, and Pahadi-Madheshi contention, on the other (Hachhethu 2007). It was also an expression of discontent against the systematic exclusion of Madheshis; 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 Madheshis (Cheah 2009). These

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[8] Popularly known as 22-point agreement.
[9] The SLMM (literally United Democratic Madheshi Front) was first formed in February 2008 as a loose temporary alliance jointly by Nepal Sadbhawana Party (Mahato-led), Tarai Madhesh Loktantrik Party (TMLP) and the Madheshi Janadhikar Forum Nepal. As the new Madheshi parties surfaced in the subsequent years the number of the allies kept changing but they frequently kept reviving the SLMM when they needed stronger political force to pressurise 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 Madheshi parties were the allies of SLMM but as the six allies (except the Sanghiya Samajwadi Forum-Nepal, formerly known as the MJF-N) went into merger under the new name of Rastriya Janata Party Nepal on April 20, 2017. So, the SLMM now has only two allies and the discussion on the need of has been initiated.

agitations were viewed also as a 'deterrence against the emerging trend of left dominance in national politics in general and against the CPN (Maoist)'s aggressive campaign of party building in particular' (Hachhethu (2007: 3).

The Tharu agitation of 2009

The Madheshi agitation 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 marginalised 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 Madheshi identity. Due to this, the Madheshi label was not uncomfortable to the Tharus up to this point. According to Tharu activists, as I describe in the following section, Madheshi 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-Madheshi groups.

The history of the Tharu organised struggle for retaining unique social and cultural recognition goes back to the creation of the Tharu Kalyankarini Sabha (TKS)[10] 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 2008: 201). These mainly dealt with abstaining from alcohol and reducing the costs of cultural feasts. Likely the oldest ethnic-based organisation 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 organisation of Nepal's ethnic 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 Education Society (BASE)[11] 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 begain in the 1990s led to a mushrooming of Tharu ethnic and political organisations, of which a few are engaged in promoting Tharu culture and traditions, while others have appeared as ethno-political organisations. Subsequently, the Maoist insurgency and 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 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

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[10] TKS literally stands for Tharu Welfare Society.
[11] A well-known NGO established in 1990 and working for the cause of the Tharus of western Nepal.

to the Madheshi agitations rather, the agitations came to be a threat to the identity of the 1.7 million Tharus (Guneratne 2009 in Gaige 2009 [1975]). Tharu realisation of being ostracised by the upper caste Madheshi leaders from the mainstream of Madhesh was first expressed in the form of mass protest two years after the Madheshi agitation in which they also had been actively involved.

The enlisting of Tharus and other ethnic groups in the Tarai under the umbrella of Madheshi identity, and recognition of the Tarai as Madhesh in the first amendment of Interim Constitution on March 2007, infuriated Tharu communities across the region, leading to a peaceful protests against the amendment. The Tharuhat Samyukta Sangharsha Samiti (TSSS)[12], however, mobilised Tharu communities throughout the Tarai in March 2009, paralysing everyday life in the region, and only ending when the government expressed commitment to addressing Tharu 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 Madhesh province across the Tarai' by Madheshi 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 a list of Madheshi people. Demands included recognising the Tharu as the indigenous people of the Tarai (Tharuhat in their words), as they found the government again enlisted the Tharus under the Madheshi category in the Constituent Assembly Member Election Bill and Nepal health Service Bill (fourth amendment) in 2013[13] overriding the agreement of 2009 ('Tharus demand' 2014: online source).

The Tharu agitation of 2009 was against a new form of 'centralised feudalism' taking root in the 'one province across the Tarai', since Madheshi concerns attained momentum during the Madheshi agitation and onwards in the Tarai (Tharu n.d.). The major agenda of Tharu leaders, was to delist them as Madheshi, 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 Tharu as ancestral land, is not Madhesh but Tharuhat. The identity of Tarai as Tharuhat, thus, contradicts the territorial justification for Madhesh claimed by Madheshi parties. Unsurprisingly, these Madheshi 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 Madhesh, 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 Madheshis 'is not only insulting, as Tharus are ethnically dissimilar from the Madheshi, (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

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[12] TSSS was a temporary alliance of 20 political parties and organisations associated with Tharus that literally stands for Tharuhat Joint Struggle Committee (TJSC).
[13] These two bills were endorsed by the parliament in March 2014.

historical precedence by stating that 'the Tharu consider themselves to be indigenous to the Tarai, predating both Madhesi [sic] and hill people as inhabitants of that region …' (see also Nayak 2011).

Since the agitation in 2009, the Tharu have made claims for a Tharuhat autonomous province in the context of the restructuring of Nepal 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 western'[14]. Disagreement with the centralised Nepalese state has been ongoing, although no policies expressly exclude the 'Tharu' and 'Madheshi' 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, and largely due to the Madheshi agitation. 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 Madheshi label (and movement) have solidified the ethno-political divisions in the Tarai that were once significantly less defined.

Key issues of disagreement between the Tharu and the Madheshi

The following section explores how the Tharu came to feel the increasing dominance of Madheshi elites on the Tarai agenda; and why they preferred to stay away from the Madheshi label. In the previous sections, the controversy over 'Tarai' and 'Madhesh', Madhesh province and concern about Tharuhat and Tharu distinctness were discussed. However, the emergence of the Madheshisation process in the Tarai has yet to be explored in-depth. Here, Madheshisation refers to the process whereby Tharu communities, other Tarai ethnic groups, Pahadis, Muslims and minorities felt increasingly ostracised because of the growing influence of Madheshi 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-a-vis these immigrants. The Asian Centre for Human Rights (ACHR) (2009) in its briefing paper, brings out the point of Tharu-Madheshi antagonism. Here, what is highlighted is how Madheshi hegemony dominated Tharu identity during and after the 2007 Madheshi agitation. Madheshi political parties claimed that the Tharu were Madheshi because they also lived in Madhesh, shared similar cultural practices as Madheshi castes and were

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[14] Far western is one of the five regions consisting of the parts of the western hills and the Tarai delineated vertically for development purposes.

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

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

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

A) Tharu and the Madheshi political parties

The Election Commission of Nepal registered more than two dozen Madheshi political parties for the Constituent Assembly election held in 2013. Many 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 Madheshi parties which have a say in national politics can be an entry to understanding the Tharus' amorphous position in mainstream Madheshi discourse emerged from the Madheshi parties' indifference to the Tharus.

The Tharu larger claim is that the MJF-N has used the terms Madheshi and Tharu in a mystifying way because the party seems uncertain whether the Tharus should be treated exclusively as Madheshi, or whether they should be left with their independent identity outside the Madheshi label (see MJF-N 2013). The cover page of MJF-N's election manifesto, for example, states an autonomous Madhesh province as one of its aims. The use of the phrase 'autonomous Madhesh province' here seems tricky and amorphous. First MJF-N fails to delineate the proposed boundary of autonomous Madhesh state, and lacks a comprehensive plan for how the Tharu and other non-Madheshi communities in 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 for people from the mountains, hills and Tarai regions; and expresses a commitment to recognising its uniqueness. On the other hand, the party lobbies for the notion of Madhesh province that has already been challenged by the Tharu, as well as the hill communities living in the Tarai. The TMLP also favours an autonomous Madhesh province but still lacks clarity in its manifesto over whether the Madhesh province would be a single unit stretching across the whole of Tarai, or just a part of it (TMLP 2013).

Madheshi Janadhikar Forum-Loktantrik (MJF-L), headed by Bijay Kumar Gachchhadar[15], had proposed two autonomous provinces across the Tarai - Tharuhat and Madhesh - while suggesting eight provinces in the hill and mountain region ("MJF-Loktantrik proposes two provinces" 2013). One striking point here is that MJF-L also has not clearly conceptualised the term Madheshi but has indirectly acknowledged the boundary between the identities of the Tharus and the Madheshis. MJF-L's notion 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 favour the idea of an autonomous Madhesh province, which is contradictory to the MJF-L's two province notion (NSP, 2013). Its delineation of the boundary of Madhesh 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 they favour an autonomous Madhesh-Pradesh [Madhesh 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' (quoted in Kharel 2013: par 3 and 5).

An analytical look at the manifestos of four major Tarai-based parties gives the impression that the Tharu-Madheshi contention is widening, since, first, the parties do not seem unanimous in recognising Tharu identity from the larger Madheshi 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 Tharu to consolidate and lobby for the Tharuhat, and Tharu identity, eventually checking the effort of veiling indigenous identities of Tarai into an amorphous category of 'Madheshi' - indeed, a sign of Madheshisation. The Tharu have, in many regards, managed to use Tharuhat agitation as an road block to slow the momentum of the overall Madheshisation of the Tarai.

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[15] Gachhchhadar, a Tharu, was a leader of Nepali Congress before he joined the MJF-N after Madhesh agitation in 2007. Later he split from the MJF-N and formed MJF-L shouldering the cause of the Tharus.

B) Pro-Hindi inclination of the Madheshi parties

It was in July 2008 that the TKS and TSSS organised a protest rally and a one-day strike against the newly elected vice-president Paramananda Jha, for taking the oath of office in Hindi.[16] Interestingly, another self-identifying Madheshi, Dr 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 neighbouring country India ('Tharu Community Protest Jha's use of Hindi' 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 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 Tarai Congress first lobbied in favour 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 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 then. The pro-Hindi activism emerged in the 1950s has passed through several ups and downs in conjunction with the mainstream Madheshi movements but gaining currency after the 2007 Madheshi agitation.

Hindi is a newly developed language in comparison with other south Asian languages spoken in the Tarai, such as Maithili, Awadhi, 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 1990) so it has not been considered as a mother tongue of any groups of the region.

Table 1: Major mother tongue speakers in Nepal and the Tarai

Mother Tongues	Total speakers in Nepal	Total speakers in the Tarai
Nepali	1,18,26,953	34,94,710
Maithili	30,92,530	30,04,245

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[16] Jha, a Madheshi upper caste and a retired judge, from MJF-N had been elected for the post of vice-president.

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

The size of the Hindi speaking population also seems insufficient to support pro-Hindi activist claims since only less than one percent population has been 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).

Emphasising their own mother tongue, and delinking from Hindi, the Tharus have created 'a clear language barrier with the *Madheshi'* [emphasis in original] (Krauskopff 2008: 240). This barrier primarily has sustained the Tharu-Madheshi 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 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 Tharu felt alienated from the Madheshi agitation and realised the need for their own struggle for independent identity due to the Madheshi leaders' fascination with Hindi and indifference to Tharu and other languages of the Tarai that ultimately led the Tharu to feel systematically being marginalised in their own land. The Madheshi leaders' lobbying for Hindi as a common language in the Tarai ('Madhesis demand Hindi as common language' 2011) further sparked Tharu suspicion of identity loss in recent years.

The question the Tharus are intrigued with is why the Madheshi 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 Madheshi leaders have come from Maithili speaking population (ICG 2007) they have given less emphasis on the cause of Maithili language and culture, rather turned to be pro-Hindi activists.

Table 2: Demographic distribution of second language speakers

Second language/region	Nepal	Tarai
No second language	1,56,10,524	68,35,045
Nepali	86,83,433	45,60,951
Hindi	12,25,933	12,05,189
Maithili	1,95,189	1,90,366

Bhojpuri	1,59,379	1,56,900
Tharu	84,615	81,463
Urdu	45,613	43,981
Awadhi	41,012	40,924
Subtotal	*2,60,45,698*	*1,31,14,819*
Others and unstated	4,48,806	2,03,886
Grand total	**2,64,94,504**	**1,33,18,705**

Source: CBS, 2012 (calculation mine)

The Madheshi 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 Madheshising 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 nine percent of the Tarai population claim that they use Hindi as their second language of communication whereas 34 percent use Nepali (see above table). This goes against the assertions of the Madheshi parties that Hindi is most preferred second language in the Tarai because Nepali appeared the most preferred second language of communication. So, weak logics put forth by the Madheshi parties helped fuel the Tharu agitation to resist the increasing non-Tharu elements over their identity by challenging the promotion of 'foreign language'.

Conclusion: contradiction and paradoxes

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

For last few years, the ethnopolitical discourse has entered into a more knotty phase because of the Madheshi and Tharu agitations, and their conflicting priorities as discussed above in this paper. The close look at these two agitations and their connection raises a conundrum of ethnic identity debate in the region. The Madheshi agitation provided wider space to the Madheshis and empowered them to get their aspirations established and fulfilled. Furthermore, the agitation changed Nepal's political course, bringing on the issues of ethnic federalism and political inclusion. But, at the same time, the agitation

lacked clarity in concisely redefining the Madheshi identity, and building trust with the Tarai ethnics and others. Thus, the agitation itself sowed the seed of the Tharuhat agitation when the Madheshi advocates failed to recognise the diversities and complexities of the region.

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

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

There was a period after 2007 when the term 'Madheshi' had become a catchphrase among the Madheshis, which is evident if one looks at the flooding the Parties in the Tarai with the 'Madheshi' label. Heated discussions on the meaning of the term had been observed even in the first Constituent Assembly. The SLMM was too vocal in promoting the Madheshi label but unfortunately, it lost fascination with it just after a decade of the Madheshi agitation that had legitimised the Madheshi label in both national and everyday ethnopolitics in Nepal. Because the MJF-N already removed the word 'Madheshi' from its party name when it merged with other two parties in 2015 and other five allies of SLMM (except NSP)[17] also did not feel necessary to continue the term 'Madheshi' in the name of the party after the merged in 2017. Removing the 'Madheshi' label from the party names only does not delegitimize the Madheshi identity and pacify the Tharus' fear. But it is an indication that the vocality of the Madheshi for the Madheshi 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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[17] The name Nepal Sadbhawana Party does not include the word 'Madheshi'.

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