

MADHESH AND MADHESHI: A GEOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORIC PERSPECTIVE

March 20, 2007

MADHESH AND MADHESHI: A GEOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORIC PERSPECTIVE

- Vijay Kanta Karna, Senior Journalist, Nepal



In geographical term, Terai means a flatland stretching from the foothill of the Himalayan region in the north to the Vindhyachal Parbat (Vindhyachal Mountain) in the south situated in central India and Nepal. The term Madhesh itself is derived from Sanskrit word 'Madhyadesh' that implies to the Gangetic plain and the Vitri Madhesh area bordering India on the southern side and spreading north up to the foothill of Siwalik range. The Terai region, which is mostly a flatland, is geographically and culturally distinct from the hills. According to the population census in 2001, it occupies 23 per cent of total area and 48.5 per cent of the population of Nepal. Most of the Terai inhabitants are plains (?) people or Madheshi whose religious traditions, language, caste system, food, style of clothing and other social customs and manners are similar to the people of Indo-Gangetic plains in the south. Fridrich Gaige (1975) used the terms 'hill people' and 'plains people' living in Terai districts, and defined a) "plains people are those who speak any one of the plains languages as their mother tongues or first language, whether they were born or lived in the plains or hills" the plains languages being Maithili, Bhojpur, Awadhi, Urdu, Hindi and Bengali, and dialects of these languages used by Janjati groups, and b) "hill people whose mother tongue or first language is one that predominates in the hill region of Nepal such as Nepali, Newari, Magar, Gurung, Rai and others. Madhesh has a long historiography dating back to the kingdom of Vaideha or Mithila established in eastern to central Madhesh and a part of the present day north Bihar, India (Malangia, 1997). In the mid western Madhesh, Shakya kings ruled in 600 BC, the Buddha belonging to the Shakya dynasty was born in 563 BC. Similarly, kingdoms were established in Simraungarh in the present day Bara district. In Madhesh, several kingdoms were established and ruled by many dynasties (Thakur, 1956). These states perished with time and were abandoned and the land converted into forests. Gaige (1975) concluded: "the ancient and medieval history of this region is a cyclic one in which men and forests have dominated in turns". The archeological studies through ancient arts, artifacts and monuments and excavation of historic sites (as in the case of Lumbini) of Madhesh, have not been done so far. Such studies would tell the ancient history of this region. Unlike the detailed historical study and research of Kathmandu Valley and other hilly regions, the Pahadi scholars and historians have never given any importance to the history of Madhesh and completely ignored the region. A few Madheshi historians and scholars who, due to lack of resources, have not yet

pdfMachine

Is a pdf writer that produces quality PDF files with ease!

Produce quality PDF files in seconds and preserve the integrity of your original documents. Compatible across nearly all Windows platforms, if you can print from a windows application you can use pdfMachine.

Get yours now!

studied the complex ancient history of Madhesh. In recent decades, Kapilvastu, the birth place of Lord Buddha, received worldwide recognition and support for meaningful excavation and detailed study and renovation of key sites. After the unification of Madhesh in Nepal by Prithivi Narayan Shah in 1769, its border was again re-drawn by the Sugauli Treaty concluded between British India and Nepal in 1816. The treaty scattered the people in Madhesh across the boarder that divides India and Nepal internationally. The Madheshis have ever since been divided till this day. (Singh, Amresh 2004, Restructuring of Nepali State: A Madheshi Perspective)

Area and Population

The total land area in the 20 Terai districts is 34,109 sq km which accounts for 23.1% of the country's total area (Table 1). In 2001, 48.4% of the country's total population of 23.2 million lived in Terai districts with a density of 329 persons/sq km. Terai plain and Vitri Madhesh together cover 15.6% of the country's total area.

Madheshi Issues:

Exclusion of Madhesh and Madeshis Social Exclusion

Social exclusion is defined as "the inability of our society to keep all groups and individuals within reach of what we expect as a society and the tendency to push vulnerable and difficult individuals in the least populous places".

Language:

'Until 1958, Terai residents (plains people) as well as Indians were required to stop at the border town of Birgunj to obtain passport before proceeding to Kathmandu. Passports were then checked at Chisapani Garhi on the route to Kathmandu. Before 1951, one's nationality appears to have been determined primarily on linguistic basis. Nepalese subjects were the "hill folks" who spoke Nepali or hill languages such as Newari, Magar and Gurung etc. For this reason passports were not required for people traveling to Kathmandu valley from the eastern or western hills.' (Gaije: 88). Thus, in early 1950s language was the major factor for separating as well as discriminating Madheshi as outsider. This mindset continues until now.

Poverty:

People living under absolute poverty line in Nepal are currently estimated to be 31%. However, about 46% of Dalits, 41% of Muslims and 33% of indigenous Janjati population are below the poverty line (World Bank, 2006). Together these three major ethnic groups have 52.6% of the total Madheshi population. The rest 47.4% of the Madheshi people have lower poverty level. The above poverty data indicates that a large proportion of Madheshi households are excluded from the mainstream development. Poverty itself is the main factor of exclusion; the poor people could not afford basic education, primary health care, sanitation practices and decent housing. The data and information so far available (Per Capita Budget Allocation and Primary Sector Development Index, Source: Sharma and Shah 2002- New ERA, ICIMOD 1997) indicate that the Terai districts having higher proportion of Madheshi population have much lower socio-economic index values

pdfMachine

Is a pdf writer that produces quality PDF files with ease!

Produce quality PDF files in seconds and preserve the integrity of your original documents. Compatible across nearly all Windows platforms, if you can print from a windows application you can use pdfMachine.

Get yours now!

compared to districts where hill people are in dominance. Government and political institutions have been advocating and focusing poverty reduction program mostly in the hills and mountains, and they have been convincing the donors that only the hills and mountains have large number of poor people (Source required for this statement). It appears that until now, the politicians, policy makers, decision makers and national planners who are themselves hill origin people have ignored the socio-economic development issues of Madhesh. The fact is that the Madheshi people are not in the right place and their voices are not heard or considered.

Land Ownership:

Acquisition of land assets is linked to citizenship issues. Since the knowledge of writing and speaking Nepali language was the clause in the Citizenship Act of 1960s for obtaining citizenship certificate, it was intentionally formulated to deny citizenship to Madheshi. The Madheshis of Terai, who have been living for several generations, are denied citizenship certificate due to their in-competency in Nepali language and without citizenship, land registration deed (lalpurja) is impossible and hence so many Madheshi are Landless. Landlessness has become a major problem among Madheshi community. The recent report indicates a grave situation particularly in Dalit, Janjati and Muslim ethnic community; about 37% of Dalits, and 32% of Janjati households do not own agricultural land while 41% of Muslims are landless. About 79% of Mushar, a Dalit community, do not own land; they have the lowest literacy rate of 7.3%.

Education:

The literacy level of the Madhesis in Terai (including inner Terai) is only 38.4 per cent as compared to 65.6 per cent for the Pahadi (including Himali) group. The Dalits are the most deprived group of population in Nepal, with only 39.2 per cent literacy. There is, however, substantial difference in the literacy level between hill Dalits (47.9%) and Terai Dalits (23.4%). Terai Dalits are on the lowest rung of socio-economic development ladder. Similarly, the literacy rate of Janjatis of Inner Terai and Terai together is only 50 per cent as compared to 58.7 per cent for Himal and 63.2 per cent for Hills. The literacy rate of Terai castes (including Muslims and excluding Janjatis and Dalits) is only 35.2 per cent as compared to 72.0 per cent for hill castes groups. Thus, the literacy level of hill castes is more than twice that of Madhesi castes. (Source: Calculated from Harka Gurung's Nepali Document, Janajati Nepali-Au 8. Doc.) A study done by Dr Devendra Chhetry, entitled 'Educationally Disadvantaged Ethnic Groups of Nepal', conducted under MIMAP Project of APROSC and IDRC, in December 1996, points out the existence of a wide disparity in literacy rate between the Madhesi and Pahadi populations of Terai. 'The average literacy rate of the Pahadi origin groups living in the Terai region is 54.5 per cent, while that of Terai origin groups population living in the Terai region is 26.4 per cent. The wide gap between the Pahadi and Terai origin population in the Terai region is a serious matter which warrants immediate attention of the policy makers"

Economic Exclusion Employment in Civil Services and International Agencies Organizations

Three castes/ethnic groups namely Brahmins, Chhetris and Newars have dominated the civil service in the country. In 1991 these three castes constituted

pdfMachine

Is a pdf writer that produces quality PDF files with ease!

Produce quality PDF files in seconds and preserve the integrity of your original documents. Compatible across nearly all Windows platforms, if you can print from a windows application you can use pdfMachine.

Get yours now!

36% of total population in Nepal but occupied 89.2 percent of position in civil service, while Madheshi community accounted for 32% of population but occupied only 8.4% of position in civil service. This indicates that Madheshi people have been highly discriminated in government services. It is interesting to note that in 1971 these three castes had occupied 89% of posts in civil services. Thus the pattern of civil service had not much changed over the past twenty years having these Brahmin, Chhetris and Newars dominating the civil service over the years and it is very unlikely that this trend will change in near future (Pashupati Rana's Nepal's Fourth Plan: A Critique. (Yeti Pocket Book Ltd 1971) pp 18- 19; D.N. Dhungel's article "The Nepalese Administrative System" in Contemporary Nepal .P.P. 122-123). Out of the total 1,012 manpower involved in 91 international organizational agencies in 2001, there were 142 (14.1 %) Foreigners, 817 (80.7%) Pahadis and 53 (5.2%) Madhesi. (Source: UNDP (2001). Directory of the United Nations and Its related Specialized Agencies in Nepal, September 2001, UNDP, Kathmandu)

Representation in Cabinet, Constitutional Bodies and High Official Posts

The Pahadi Brahmins and Chhetris control most of the powerful positions and influence the government and other governing institutions with their action. They consider Madheshi as 'non-Nepali' or 'less Nepali' and as its consequence, the latter, gets excluded from a higher posts unless he is in their high level of confidence. A very low or negligible representation of Madheshi can be seen in constitutional bodies and in higher posts/ designation — where people make national policies, and are the key decision makers and policy implementers. (Relevant data can be sought from: Singh, A. (2003) Restructuring of Nepali State: A Madheshi Perspective)

Representation in Judiciary

About 8 per cent of the total judges of the country are from Madhesi communities whereas the remaining 92 per cent are from hill communities. Participation of judges from Madhesi communities at the Appellate Court is 14.9 per cent, which could be considered a 'high level of participation' compared to 3.7 per cent at district courts.

Political Exclusion Electoral Constituencies

The average population per constituency is considerably higher in Terai districts (127,414) than in the mountain (73,026) and 109,081 in the hill districts. This reduces the number of parliamentarians representing Terai region where about 96% of the country's total Madheshi people live while increases their number from hills and mountains where 82% of the country's total Pahadi people live.

Excerpts from the author's paper presented at a Discourse on Inclusion in the Context of Federalism organized by the Friends for Peace on March 10, 2007, in Kathmandu.

The remaining portion of the same paper by the author has already been pasted in the telegraphnepal.com website last week-ed.

pdfMachine

Is a pdf writer that produces quality PDF files with ease!

Produce quality PDF files in seconds and preserve the integrity of your original documents. Compatible across nearly all Windows platforms, if you can print from a windows application you can use pdfMachine.

Get yours now!

source::http://www.telegraphnepal.com/news_det.php?news_id=340

pdfMachine

Is a pdf writer that produces quality PDF files with ease!

Produce quality PDF files in seconds and preserve the integrity of your original documents. Compatible across nearly all Windows platforms, if you can print from a windows application you can use pdfMachine.

Get yours now!