

Madhesh or Terai and Tharus or Madheshis: New Frontier of Etymopolitics in Nepal

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(A response to the [article by Bhulai Chaudhari](#), The Telegraph Weekly, Nepal, March 2006)

With the growing consciousness among Madheshis towards their rights and identity as evident from even the recent Madheshi movement, as some people have been preferring the use of word Madhesh (for example, parliamentarian Matrika Yadav's interview in 'Nepal' on 28 January 2007 [1], and opinion of noted columnist C. K. Lal in Social Science Baha's conference "Nepal Tarai: Context and Possibilities" [2]), few activists like Bhulai Chaudhary (The Telegraph Weekly, March 2006), without basing on plausible arguments, have come up with the radical opinions of no existence of Madhesh at all in Nepal! Such claims coming at current sensitive time when all Madheshis have risen united against the centuries long discrimination from the state and have been protesting on unprecedented scale, it may be possibly targeted at foiling their effort, by making crevices in the unity of Madheshis and producing ambiguity in the definitions of cause and goal of the movement or even creating confusion in the definitions of Madhesh and Madheshis themselves. Alternatively, it may be just an attempt of few quarters to gain popularity and political space by creating controversial bumps at such fragile turns, though baseless it may be. For example, some quarters have been trying hard to take out the identity of Tharus out of the identity of Madheshis at such a moment of united struggle for their rights, something similar to how the state divided Madheshis into different lingual groups in its first census for imposition of Nepali language solely, in educational and administrative system, and thus "diluting" the demands of Madheshis by dividing them when they revolted back in 1950s (Guneratne, 1998: Modernization, the State and the Construction of a Tharu Identity in Nepal, pp.758, The Journal of Asian Studies, vol. 57, no. 3).

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This essay reviews the opinions put forward in the article by Bhulai Chudhari (The Telegraph Weekly, March 2006) and provides an insight into the issues with the evidences to remove the confusion created in people, deliberately or indeliberately, by that article.

TERAI/MADHESH:

Terai (also written as Tarai) stands for “a strip of undulating former marshland, that stretches from the Yamuna River in west to the Brahmaputra River in the east” (Encyclopedia Britannica). It is used to refer to the region of marshy grasslands, savannas, and forests at the base of the Himalaya range, in India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. Etymologically, the word Terai is presumed to be derived from Persian, meaning “damp”, and various Hindi and Urdu dictionaries also define it as land at the foothills of mountains, often damp and swampy (Gaige 1975: Regionalism and National Unity in Nepal, pp.2, University of California Press). Encyclopedia Britannica also implies the meaning of “Terai” as “moist land”. From Tharu language point of view, as put forward by some authors, it is assumed to be derived from “Tar” meaning “low” thus rendering the meaning of “Terai” as “low-lands”, though the transnational, trans-ethnic and trans-lingual usage of word Terai may put this etymology into question. Whichever may be true, but all the existing etymologies of Terai, defines it in terms of terrain features and has geographical connotation.

Madhesh refers to the Terai region specific to Nepal, approximately 25 to 35 km wide broad belt of alluvial and fertile land stretching from Mahakali river in the west to Mechi river in the east between Indian border in the south and Sivalik/Chure Range in the north. Etymologically, Madhesh has been claimed to be derived from word “Madhyadesh” (mid country), or “Matsyadesh” (fish country) whose capital is said to be in Birat Nagar. With the evolution along time, along with its historic values and usages, the word Madhesh has acquired cultural aspects into it that today it represents a way of life and different aspects of life-styles of people living specifically in the region. Whether it is Madheshi-Haat or Madheshi-color; whether it is Madheshi cuisines or Madheshi “boli-byabahaar”, the word has integrated different cultural aspects into it, and thus stands with a cultural connotation.

Its (a) historical significance, (b) historical usages, (c) cultural and better representative connotation, (d) representation of specific national locality, and (e) freedom from colonized connotation are some of the reasons why some historians and organizations have been advocating the preference of word “Madhesh”, over the word “Terai”. The word “Terai” lacks all of those characteristics: its historical relevance and usage is modern; it refers to terrain features rather than cultural space and does not represent any aspect of people living there; it is used in India, Bhutan, and Bangladesh in addition to Nepal to refer to regions in those countries as well and thus is not specific to particular country; and its usage was popularized by the state’s policy of what some intellectuals call “internal colonization” and thus carries derogatory colonial connotation. Use of word Terai has been argued to be a symbol of still living in the colonial mindset, resulting from what Dr. Fredrick Gaige referred as a process of “Nepalization” of Madhesh.

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Now let's look at the points on which Chaudhari bases his claim of promoting word "Terai", and completely deleting word "Madhesh". The author claims: *"the available authoritative records of Nepal, from the time of formation of New Nepal and up to now "Madhesh" word has not been used for Tarai."*

The statement like this reflects either sheer ignorance or blatant passion for falsifying the facts. The truth is almost opposite, from the time of formation of New Nepal there have been literally uncountable usages of "Madhesh", both authoritative and general. Whether it is authoritative document like Prithvi Narayan Shah's letter to Bhagavanta Nath (published in Purushartha, December 1949) writing "The boundaries have been extended to the Kankai river in the Madhesh and the Hasabharyakhola and the Tamor river in the hills." or it is administrative establishment like "Madhesh Bandobast Adda" or "Madhesh Report Niksari" or "Kumarichok Madhesh Pahila Phant", there are virtually innumerable usages of Madhesh, which prove how false and baseless above claim is. In fact, in pre-1950 era, word Madhesh was always preferred in authoritative and legal documents as seen from the numerous historical papers.

Further, the author tries hard to throw the existence of Madhesh to some part of India near to Narbada River, Vindhyaachal, Prayag, Ambala or Kuruchettra. So what about all those legal codes, regulations, taxation system formulated in the name of "Madhesh" and administrative units like "Madhesh Bandobast Adda" or "Madhesh Report Niksari" or "Kumarichok Madhesh Pahila Phant" that were part of Nepalese government structure? Were they established by Nepalese Government for those Indian regions and operating in those central Indian territories near Kuruchettra, Prayag or Ambala? Definitely not. They were all for Terai region of Nepal and were operating in Terai region of Nepal. Such claims may give instant popularity by raising controversy, but leads no where as they are produced disregarding all historical facts and evidences available. In terms of analogy, the proposition the author has made in this context is equivalent for one to call himself non-existent and try to change his name at mid-age after using his name for decades, just because one day he finds someone else in other remote village also used to have similar or somewhat resembling name.

Secondly, the author's claim of Nepal being divided into three regions called Himal, Pahad and Terai as a justification does not qualify on historical basis, as before these words were popularized by school text books with the introduction of new education system, those regions were referred as "Bhot", "Parbat" and "Madhesh" (see different Birta Confiscation acts), and according to another similar classification they were referred to as "Hyundes", "Pahardes" and "Madhyadesh or Makes" (Burghart 1984: The Formation of the Concept of Nation State in Nepal, pp. 107, The Journal of Asian Studies, vol. 44, no. 1). And even after popularizing the word Terai by the state, the usage of word Madhesh has been always there in those text books and often appears sidewise in brackets or on its own, synonymously. Therefore, the use of word "Terai" is comparatively newer than "Madhesh", and was popularized in post 1950 era in the same line of Nepalizing every other aspects including education, language, dress and national symbols, and thus carries a colonial connotation with it. This fact is further justified from the opinions of noted columnist CK Lal, expressed in the following excerpt:

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“C.K. Lal asserted that the term ‘Madhesh’ refers to the cultural space where Madhesis reside. He said he preferred the term ‘Madhesi’ to ‘Tarai-Basi’ because the word ‘Tarai’ carries the connotation of internal colonization.” [2] “Nepal Tarai: Context and Possibilities” Conference, Social Science Baha, Mar 10-11 2005, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Further, it should be noted that even though “Terai” was popularized in writing, when it comes to referring people of the region, “Terai-basi” is seldom colloquially used, rather “Madhesi” (and sometimes its derogatory variants) is directly used.

Third, basing on the argument that because a couple of writers like Tony Hegen or Prakash. A. Raj in “A Nepalese Discovers His Country” used word Terai, or some organization for its geological survey used the word “Terai”, the author produces the following claim:

“This amply clarifies that Madhesh is as such a part of Nepal is completely wrong, ill intentioned and also a deception of the real facts as well. Tarai is not Madhesh. Thus, it would be an injustice to call Tarai a Madhesh.” What about looking for Malgudi as mentioned in numerous R.K. Narayan’s books? Mentioning of word “Terai” in a couple of novel-like books a decade ago is not ample evidence for the above high claim made by the author. Also, neither do its finding in current Nepal Parichaya book or some other school texts justifies above, as the author has used them to justify the claim. In Nepal, the curriculum changes with the change of the government. When royal government of King Gyanendra took over, they planned for completely different education system, currently we have tons of correction sheets sent by curriculum development center (texts changed so rapidly that they didn’t even get much time and resource to change the whole book), and possibly when Maoists come into the government in few years, we will be reading completely different version of historical texts. So these contemporary class textbooks should not be produced as historical evidence, for justifying the use of “Terai”.

Lastly, Terai is not derived from or equivalent to Tirhut, and thus historical presence of Tirhut does not form the basis for how the author has promoted word “Terai” depending on it. Further, Tirhut did not cover the whole region of Madhesh as of now, from Mechi to Mahakali, and a large part from current Indian territory was also included in it, thus mapping Tirhut roughly to the area of ancient Hindu kingdom of Mithila. Also, it should be noted that in 1908 four Indian districts of Darbhanga, Muzaffarpur, Saran and Champaran were officially named as Tirhut, as revival of historical presence of Tirhut, and Tirhut is an administrative geographical unit of Bihar state of India.

THARU/MADHESHIS:

Madheshis are residents of Madhesh sharing the correlated regional, cultural and lingual space of Madhesh. Tharus, living in Madhesh (both vitri-Madhesh and bahiri-Madhesh as the government divide on its legal documents) and sharing the correlated regional, cultural and lingual space, are Madheshis. Neither all Madheshis are Tharus, nor all Tharus are Madheshis. Tharus have significant settlements in Naini Tal and Champaran area of India as well. Madheshis constitutes dozens of other groups (ethnics/castes/

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aborigines/religious groups) in addition to Tharus. Tharu community is one of the aborigine Madheshi communities, said to be inhabiting the region for centuries.

Any claim like Tharus as only inhabitants of the Terai region, as made by the author, is misleading of historical facts, as other aborigine groups like Rajbansi, Jhangad, Satar, Dhimal, Meche, Mushahar, Danuwar, Dhanuk etc. also inhabited the region. Also, at times, the word Tharu was used to collectively represent all people living in Tarai, regardless of their ethnicity or origin, “as status summation for the various peripheral aboriginal groups that occupied Tarai” (Krauskopff: 1990, *The Tharu and the Hindu Kingdom of Dang/Nepal*, L’Homme, 116, 30(4), pp. 32). Therefore, the claim by the author of sole occupation of Tarai by Tharus is misleading. As far as issues of migration of some of the other ethnic groups is concerned, every community at some point of history are immigrants, and Tharus also immigrated at some point in the history. Ghimire (1992, *Forest or Farm? The Politics of Poverty and Land Hunger in Nepal*, Oxford University Press) states that Tharu migrated from India in 15th and 16th century, and thus are of Indian-origin as many other communities of Madhesh and Bahun-Chettris of hills including King’s dynasty are. Therefore, it is unfair share of discrimination to attach “Indian-origin” only to certain communities of Madheshis, but not to Bahun-Chettris of hills or Tharus of plains who also migrated from India.

Tharus have been inhabiting Madhesh, intermingled with other different Madheshi ethnic groups in geographical and cultural spaces as inseparable communities, and they have been gloriously and proudly living together for centuries, facing the same problems.

CONCLUSION:

From above discussions, arguments and evidences, following points can be noted as summary:

1. Madhesh and Terai refer to the same geographical region, in the present context of Nepal. However, Terai region is also found in India, Bangladesh and Bhutan, and ‘Terai’ refers to their respective regions when used in their contexts.
2. Madhesh and Terai, both have been in use indiscriminately and synonymously in general context, in present day Nepal.
3. Madhesh includes the connotation of identity and culture of people living in the region, whereas Terai refers to geographical feature or terrain characteristics of the region.
4. Terai, popularized by enforcing the policy of “Nepalization” and lingual-cleansing process carries the connotation of “internal colonization”.
5. Madheshis are residents of Madhesh sharing the correlated regional, cultural and lingual space.
6. Tharu community living in the same region of Terai of Nepal or Madhesh, and sharing the regional, cultural and lingual space, is a subset of Madheshi community.

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[1] <http://www.kantipuronline.com/Nepal/Archive/228th%20issue/sambad.php> (“say Madhesh, not Terai”)

[2] http://www.himalassociation.org/baha/day%201_tarai%20conference.htm (“preferred the term ‘Madhesi’ to ‘Tarai-Basi’ because the word ‘Tarai’ carries the connotation of internal colonization”)

(Note: The author of the essay does not recommend any preference, but the essay was meant for clearing the confusions raised by the aforementioned article.)

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