

Proud to be Madheshi?

By Bindu Chaudhary

It is a different matter being a citizen of a country and belonging to a country. One may have a citizenship certificate of a country and be entitled to equality and justice enshrined in the constitution, but it is as well possible that it only remains in the book of law. Madheshis constitute one third of the total population of Nepal (33%), but are meagerly and inadequately represented in Nepal's socio-economic and political front. Their representation in government bureaucracies is only between five to ten percent, in police force below five percent and in Army it is negligible.

The government policies were deliberately discriminatory against Madheshis, Janjatis and other minorities since the Rana regime and during the Panchayat era. The Ranas exploited the Hindu Caste codification to serve their ends, and the Panchayati era government marched with King Mahendra's "one-culture, one-language, one-religion, one-country" definition of national unity to "Nepalize" all other ethnic groups. Eventually, Madheshis were left out in the cold.

Even now, the Madheshis are not only barred from access to equal resources and opportunities, but also don't feel as mainstream Nepalese, because of the way they are perceived, treated, and presumed. Madheshis grow up being called or referred to as "Madise, Marsya, Kale, Dhoti, Hapsi, Indian..." by the so-called 'true' or 'genuine' Nepalese- the "Pahadis" and other hilly inhabitants. In Nepal, there are gender specific discrimination, caste based discrimination and discrimination based on geographical location. How can a country be developed when it is ruled only by the so-called few 'elite' groups- the men, the upper caste and the Pahadis and hilly people?

In Nepal, only Pahadis are considered to be 'genuine'/'ethnic' Nepalese; people from Madhesh are like "foreign invaders"! I must admit, many of the Pahadis and other hilly groups are too naïve in their knowledge. They would simply call all Madheshis as Indians (though there is nothing wrong to be an Indian), or dhotis, or vice versa! If Goddess Sita and Lord Buddha are from Nepal in spite of belonging to Madhesh, it needs some common sense to call Madheshis as Indians and Indians as Madheshis; bliss their ignorance! In fact, except those from the Tibeto-Mongoloid races, all Nepalese had roots from India- the Karnataka dynasty kings ruled Kathmandu, and the Ranas have migrated from Rajasthan in India.

We derive our identity from the world around us. Our self-image is developed through what we see and what is shown to us or what we think and what people think of us. When one is viewed negatively and is insulted time and over again because of the way they are, the way they look or because of their origin, there is some sort of discomfort that sets in

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the mind. Imagine a Madheshi child being raised outside of Madhesh/ Terai community amidst the Pahadis, and who grow up being name called, laughed at and projected as inferior than the Pahadi counterparts.

Good self esteem comes from being treated positively and getting positive reinforcements not only by significant others but also by the society they counteract with. Consequently, there are Madheshis who do not allow the negative reinforcements from the society affect their lives, there are others who would turn hostile towards their counterparts and call tooth for a tooth. There are still others who use "denial" (completely rejecting the thought or feeling- I am not angry with them, or they don't put me down!) and "reaction formation" (turning the feeling into opposite- I think they are really great!) as their defense mechanisms and try to change themselves 'outwardly' to gain acceptance in that community that looks down upon them. They shape themselves through the desire of others, to be 'seen' in the society they live in- though the self-styled image is only a fraud or an emotional wound to hide from their own eyes.

This later category of Madheshis living in the Pahadi community seem to be in a real 'identity crisis' in an attempt to 'become' or 'look' Pahadis themselves. They consciously and deliberately let go (and even 'forget') their language, culture, tradition and roots in order to gain acceptance by the Pahadis and/or to be superior to the "orthodox" Madheshis! I understand, who would want to be called a 'Madise' or 'Marsya' which are pejorative connotations for Madheshi, 'like Nigger (offensive name for a black person), Kike (offensive term for a Jew) or Faggot (offensive term for an openly homosexual man)? But however cosmetic changes one would bring about outwardly, it would only remain a piece of paper pasted over a gaping hole. Racism is not a biological, but a sociological problem which cannot be solved by doing 'cut' and 'paste' by those discriminated, but has to be 'deleted' by those who discriminate.

Forgetting ones identity need not necessarily command esteem; there are many Madheshis who have earned a lot of name, fame, respect and esteem within and even outside the Madheshi community in spite of remaining closely bound to their roots and land; in spite of speaking their own Madheshi language; following their own rituals and culture; and in spite of proclaiming that they are proud Madheshis.

I have seen Madheshis turned Newars/ Paharis of Kathmandu who find arranging matrimony for their children a distasteful task, because they are either of both are neither of one- accepted by both yet unaccepted by any. However generally, the 'genuine' Madheshis take over the preference when it comes to matrimony, because they would not want to be name-called, all over again! Inter-caste marriage is still unacceptable in Nepal, and when it comes to the Pahadi- Madheshi matrimones, it still is big news. However, love is blind, and Pahadi-Madheshi matrimones do take place, because 'Kale' Hain to kya hua Dilwale Hain!

In a country so obsessed with characterizing what it means to be a genuine Nepali, Madheshis who endured the insanity of the Hritik Roshan episode knows what it means to be a 'lesser' Nepali; or those who face hassles getting citizenship certificates knows

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what it means to be born in Terai Nepal; and those who change their surname, their language and their attire, their culture and tradition... knows what it means not fitting into the concept of the so-called "Nepalipan". However, Madheshis cannot go about living under a veil by letting their rich culture and tradition slide thoughtlessly- to be 'promoted', or to be 'demoted'? No comments. I would rather admire a culture that would allow me to speak of myself in high terms and where I would not have to eclipse myself to prove I am worthy.

Of course, one need not be ashamed of one's roots, thanks to the significant number of Madheshis who are proud of who they are and speak their mother tongue, respect their culture and observe their festivities and rituals amidst the non-Madheshis. The equation is simple- if you accept a label, it is yours; and if you don't, it isn't really yours- you do not have to 'fit in' to be accepted. Sum and substance, the so-called self-acclaimed 'greater' and the 'higher' and the 'powerful' need to come out of their comfort zones to broaden the sense of 'Nepaliness' to embrace the whole population of Nepal. A Nepali does not have to be a Pahadi or a Himali to be a Nepali. A citizen cannot be a 'genuine' or a 'not-so-genuine' citizen.

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