The end of World War II marked the advent of ethnic disputes in the world. The explicit wars for territory transformed into implicit wars for identity and recognition, perhaps, because a part of the population still felt colonised even after the official end of colonial rule. Ever since, identity has been the basis for disenfranchisement of the people and thus the foundation for struggle for greater autonomy.

This text attempts to unveil the underpinning factors that gave rise to ethnic dispute in one of the newest democracies of South Asia, i.e. Nepal, with a central focus on ‘Madhes’. The emergence of ethnic demands in the Tarai region (plains now known as Madhes) was witnessed in the 1950s. However, the king’s coup in the 1960s sabotaged this demand. This demand was further strained in 1990 with the restoration of multi-party democracy where the people’s expectations of political inclusion were high but their demands were not met. It was only with the institution of the interim government in 2006 that ethnic demands came to the forefront. Considering the brewing Madhesi sentiment to acquire identity of a Nepali in contrast to the quintessential Pahadiya (hill) identity imposed by the ruling elites this was inevitable.

What was interesting to observe in the case of Nepal was the vociferous endorsement of the ethno-territorial demands by the political parties of the far-left like Maoists which was as opposed to the eschewed attitude of the liberals like the Nepali Congress (NC) to these demands. The support base that the Maoists garnered for the ‘jana-yuddha’ (lit., people’s war, 1996–2006) was through the mobilisation of ethnic groups, which resulted them in emerging as the strongest party in the elections of 2008. This was followed by the recognition that if they intended to keep their support base intact, ethnic demands had to be addressed. However, the Maoists failed to materialise the claims of identity-based federalism into reality. They rather co-opted with the forces opposing Madhesi demands of recognition and autonomy.

This work, therefore, seeks to explain various dynamics involved in the ensuing Madhesi uprising. It aims to (1) analyse the repeated failings of the Constituent Assembly to draft a constitution that could institutionalise the ethnic demands, thus leading the country into prolonged transition; (2) discuss the larger geo-politics in
relation to the ethnic upsurge in Nepal; (3) illuminate the major risks and concerns surrounding the unfolding political climate in Nepal; (4) address the dynamic interplay between social, economic and political structures vis-à-vis Madhesi movement; (5) unravel the relationship between the donor regime and the state to explain the development of the movement; and (6) delve into the cultural flows across the border vis-à-vis Indo-Nepal relations.

The issues that propel my analysis are: the difference between people’s expectations and the questionable direction that the political developments have taken after the Jana Andolan-II (People’s Movement-II in 2006), the process of redefining Nepali identity, the shift in understanding Madhesi identity vis-à-vis Nepali identity, the major influential factors that shaped the Madhesi movement and the political trajectory in Nepal.

Methodology

This study was largely exploratory in nature. Madhesi identity had been studied as a purely political concern, where the social aspect of the identity construction had not been explored. Therefore, the primary objective of the study was to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, problems and motivations for mass uprisings. The Madhes issue is an ongoing and contested one and this study was conducted amidst this ongoing conflict between the state and Madhesi people, thus making it a challenge to reach any conclusion. Therefore, the best-suited approach for this study was the qualitative model. Qualitative research designs tend to work with a relatively small number of cases as “… for qualitative researchers, ‘detail’ is found in the precise particulars of such matters as people’s understandings and interactions. This implies the non-positivist model of reality. As discussed by Silverman, the qualitative researcher stresses on the socially constructed reality and the situational constraints that shapes the inquiry. Hence it seeks to answer why of a particular social experience than what of the process” (Silverman, 2005). This is also best explained as “a field of inquiry in its own right” that “privileges no single methodology over any other” (Kamberelis, 2005).

For the purpose of this study, I consulted both primary and secondary sources of data. The first round of primary data was collected in Kathmandu. I conducted in-depth interviews with the key informants, drawing from a pool of expertise and varied backgrounds—academics, political analysts, journalists and human rights lawyers, and FGDs with local youth consisting of students, professionals and farmers to capture varied perspectives. I also embarked on a field trip of three months to three districts which were listed under the security sensitive areas of Nepal: Bara, Parsa and Rautahat. Although these districts were the core study areas, I also travelled briefly to other districts like Rupendehi and Kapilvastu to get an overview of the situation. I relied upon newspapers for primary source data, as this was an ongoing event throughout the study period. Further, I consulted online portals and studies to research observations and findings about Madhesis and ethnic politics in Nepal at large. I have also tried in this research to connect the local issue
with the global phenomenon of identity politics, keeping central focus on Madhes through consultation of various research studies and articles in newspapers and online journals. I benefited hugely from discussions with key informants, as follows, and acknowledge their contributions to this study. Their views are mentioned throughout the book, with specific comments being anonymous.

1. Tula N. Shah, Executive Director of Nepal Madhes Foundation (NEMAF), Kathmandu, Nepal
2. Dipendra Jha Advocate Supreme Court and Chairperson of Tarai Human Rights Defenders Alliance (THIRD-Alliance), Kathmandu, Nepal
3. Lal Babu Yadav, Professor of Political Science at Tribhuwan University and CA member from UML, Kathmandu, Nepal
4. C.K. Lal, journalist and political analyst, also an established columnist based in Kathmandu
5. Krishna Hacchhethu, Professor of Political Science at Tribhuwan University, Kathmandu, Nepal
6. Bijay Kumar Jha, Retired school teacher and civil society member from Rautahat district, Nepal
7. Rudra Narayan Jha, Human Rights Activist, Rautahat District, Nepal
8. Umesh Lal, Activist from Kalaiya in Bara District, Nepal
9. Shailendra Kumar Gupta, Chairperson, Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ), Rautahat district, Nepal
10. Gopal Shivakoti (Chintan), Human Rights Lawyer and member of Unified Communist Party of Nepal
11. Ramesh Dhungel, historian and cultural expert
12. Niranjan Sharma, former lecturer of history at Faculty of Social Work, St. Xavier’s College, Kathmandu
13. Upendra Thakur, local journalist with the Kantipur Television, Bara district, Nepal
14. Nihar Nayak, Expert, Nepal Chapter, Institute of Defense Studies and Analysis (IDSA), New Delhi
15. Sangeeta Thapliyal, Professor, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi
16. Babu Yadav, politician, Sadbhawana party, Bara District, Nepal
17. Hira Lal Agrawal, local businessman based in Bara District, Nepal

Mumbai, India

Kalpana Jha

References

The Madhesi Upsurge and the Contested Idea of Nepal
Jha, K.
2017, XVII, 111 p., Softcover
ISBN: 978-981-10-2925-7