

MADHESI

A Disadvantaged Social Group

BY RAM PRAKASH YADAV*

'I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.'

- Rev. Dr Martin Luther King

The purpose of this article is to highlight the need for reservation for Madhesi in the present road map for civil service reforms. In Terai, including Inner Terai¹, Janajati (indigenous people) and Dalits together constitute one-fourth, the people of hill origin constitute about one-third and Madhesi constitute 41 percent of the total population (Table 1). The Madhesi, who are at an extremely low level of socio-economic development, are totally ignored by this road map.

Linguistic Dimension in the Definition of Madhesi and Pahadi

The people of hill origin (Pahadi) speak Nepali either as their mother tongue or, if a Janajati/ Dalit/ tribal, then as the second language. On the contrary, the people of plains origin (Terai) speak a language other than Nepali both as the mother tongue and as the second language. Until 1958, Terai residents as well as Indians were required to stop at the border town of Birganj to obtain passport before proceeding to Kathmandu. Passports were then checked 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 or Gurung. For this reason passports were not required for people travelling to Kathmandu valley from the eastern or western hills.' (Gaige: 88). Thus, in early 1950s language was the major factor for separating Madhesi from Pahadi populations. This mindset more or less continues until now.

Reservation for Excluded Groups

In his article, entitled 'Trident and Thunderbolt: Culture Dynamics in Nepalese Politics', Dr. Harka Gurung has succinctly emphasised that: "Basically, there are three main social groups in Nepal) that have been marginalised by the state's biased monopolistic policy. They are the Janajati (ethnic groups) on the basis of culture, the Dalits (untouchables) on the basis of caste, and the Madhesi (Terai) on the basis of geography." Recently, His Majesty's Government announced a so-called "road map" for recruitment in the civil service, proposing 20 percent reservation for women, 10 percent for Dalits and 10 percent for Adibasi/Janajati (indigenous communities) for a period of five years from April 2004. Dr. Krishna Bhattachan, a sociologist, has pointed out several deficiencies of this road map, particularly "the omission of the Madhesi in the progressive agenda of the government, which is all the more alarming since this will

MADHESH AND MADHESI

In geographical terms, the Terai is the northern fringe of the Indo-Gangetic plains abutting the foothills of the central Himalayas. It is a long and narrow strip of plains in the southern region of Nepal adjacent to the foothills of Siwalik or Churia range. The Terai region is also called 'Madhyadesh' lying between hills in the north and the Indo-Gangetic plains in the south and the plains people inhabiting this region are called Madhesi. The Terai, consisting of mostly flatland, is geographically and culturally distinct from the hills. Most Terai inhabitants are plains people whose religious traditions, language, caste system, food, style of clothing and other social customs and manners are similar to the people of the Indo-Gangetic plains in the south. It is difficult to define Madhesi, however, one may get a notion of the people by looking at the names of the various castes such as Kurmi, Baniya, Kori and Kahar.

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1. Terai (also sometimes referred to as 'Tara') means 'the plains' (see box text.)

further alienate the Madhesi and by breeding infighting it could prove suicidal.' Minister Buddhiman Tamang, however, claimed that the Madhesi have been accommodated through the reservations allotted to women, Dalits and indigenous peoples since they crosscut into these groups. (The Himalayan Times, Dec.29, 2003). In my view, this is not correct, but simply an excuse for not including Madhesi in the reservation allotment.

First of all, one does not find any explanation of why only three disadvantaged groups have been selected for reservation. There is no dispute that these groups have not been represented in the civil service adequately or in proportion to their populations and deserve reservation. There are, however, also other groups that have been equally, or even more, discriminated in this representation. One such group is the Madhesi.

Table 1:
Disaggregated Population of Terai, based on Social Groups, 2001

	Population	Percent Terai	Percent Nepal
Nepal	23,151,000		100.0
Terai	11,213,000	100.0	48.5
a) Janajati	2,038,103	18.2	8.8
b) Dalits	888,280	7.9	3.9
c) Terai Castes	4,588,098	40.9	19.8
d) Hill Origin	3,698,519	33.0	16.0

Source: CBS, Population Census, 2001.

Literacy Rates of Different Social Groups

It is generally recognised that literacy level is a good proxy for the level of socio-economic development of the communities concerned. The literacy level of the Madhesi in Terai (including Inner Terai) is only 38.4 percent as compared to 65.6 percent for the Pahadi (including Himali) group. The Dalits are the most deprived group in Nepal, with only 39.2 percent literacy. There is, however, substantial difference in the literacy level between hill Dalits and Terai Dalits, the latter being on the lowest rung of the socio-economic development ladder. Similarly, the literacy rate of Janajati of Inner Terai and Terai together is only 50 percent as compared to 58.7 percent for Himal and 63.2 percent for Hills. The literacy level of hill castes is more than twice that of Madhesi castes. 41 percent of the Madhesi population (other than Janajati and Dalits) is at an even greater disadvantage than the Janajati of Terai. If the total population is categorised into two groups; first, those above 50 percent of literacy and second, those below 50 percent of literacy, one finds clear difference in terms of literacy rate between

the Terai and the hills, including the mountains. In the hills, most of the population, except Dalits, are in the first category whereas in Terai most of the population, except Terai Janajati, are in the second category.

If the purpose of the government's positive discrimination in favour of Dalits and Janajati is to enhance their participation in the state's affairs, there is no reason why such favourable discriminatory policy should be denied to the remaining Madhesi groups.

Literacy Rates of Madhesi and Pahadi Communities in Terai

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 percent, while that of Terai origin groups population living in the Terai region is 26.4 percent. 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." Another very important finding of Dr. Chhetry's study is with regard to gender imbalance. He reports that; 'the female-male literacy ratio among the Pahadi origin population is 52 females per 100 males and that among the Terai origin population is 28 females per 100 males. This indicates that the gender issue in terms of literacy is more serious among the Terai origin groups than among the Pahadi origin groups.'

Exclusion of Madhesi in Professional Discussions

Hira Bishwakarma's article in Kantipur, dated January 7, 2004, entitled 'Dalits in Search for Liberation', groups the population of Nepal into three categories: First, a group which includes Bahuns, Chhetris and Newars, considered the most privileged classes of people in Nepal; second, that of Janajati; and, third, that of Dalits. He calls both Janajati and Dalits the most exploited groups. Yet, he has ignored another highly disadvantaged group of people, i.e. Madhesi. It is unfortunate that Madhesi are mostly ignored in many discussions on the problems of poverty and exclusion. The literacy data clearly indicate that Madhesi are not much different from Dalits as far as literacy is concerned and also they have much lower

Table 2:
Representation of Different Castes/Ethnic Groups in Civil Service in 1971 and 1991

Caste/Ethnic Group	Percentage of Population in 1991	Share in Civil Service Employment (in Percent)		Proportional differences index in 1991***
		1971*	1991**	
		1971*	1991**	1991
Brahmin	12.9	32.0	41.3	3.20
Chhetri and Thakuri	17.6	21.0	14.7	0.83
Newar	5.6	36.0	33.2	5.93
Brahmin/Chhetri /Newar	36.1	89.0	89.2	2.47
Terai	32.0	7.0	8.4	0.26
Hill Social Group	22.4	4.0	2.4	0.11
Others	8.3			

Source:

*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*. pp 122-123.

***Proportional difference index = percent share in civil service employment in 1991/ percent share of population in 1991.

literacy rate than the Janajati of both hills and Terai. Thus, it is clear that all Dalit, Terai caste groups and Inner Terai Janajati groups are at a much lower level of literacy as compared to other groups. This clearly justifies the inclusion of Terai caste groups (Madhesi) in the government's reservation in its administrative reform road map.

Representation of Different Caste/Ethnic Groups in Civil Service

The above analysis is based on segregating Janajati and Dalits from other Madhesi castes and presenting their literacy figures. But, the analysis now will include Janajati and Dalits of Terai and Inner Terai together with other Madhesi castes. After all, they are first Madhesi and then Janajati or Dalit. Here, the term, Madhesi, implies all the population of Terai except hill migrants' (pahadi) population. Table 2 shows that three castes/ethnic groups, namely Brahmins, Chhetris and Newars, dominate the country's civil service. In 1991, these three castes/ethnic groups constituted 36 percent of Nepal's total population, but they occupied 89.2 percent of the positions in the civil service. Accordingly, the remaining population of Terai and hill social groups accounted for 64 percent of the population but they occupied only 10.8 percent of the positions in the civil service and their participation in governance in relation to their proportion in the population is by the factor of a mere 0.2. The Madhesi population accounted for 32 percent of the country's population but they occupied only 8.4 percent

of the posts, with a proportional difference index of 0.26. The table indicates that both Madhesi and hill ethnic groups have been highly discriminated in government services.

The pattern of civil service has not changed much over the past twenty years, indicating the dominance of the highest three castes in the civil service over the years and it is very unlikely that this trend will change in the near future.

Table 3 presents castes/ethnicity index of participation in governance in 1999. It is a comprehensive table, encompassing a broad base of participation, collating several sectors and activities. The table also reconfirms the over-representation of Bahuns, Chhetris and Newars by the factor of 4.81. In contrast, the hill Janajati and Dalits have only around a third (0.35) of representation, with

almost the same representation (0.36) of Terai Madhesi. Hill Dalits have the lowest participation index of 0.03, which implies that they would have only 3 percent of participation if they were represented in proportion to the country's overall population. This table shows the same level of representation in governance by hill Janajati and Terai Madhesi and therefore Madhesi equally justify for inclusion for reservation in the government's 'road map' for recruitment in the civil service.

Representation in Judiciary and National Legislature

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

Speaking of the two houses of parliament composed after the 1991 election, Brahmins held 38.1 percent of the total seats and Newars 8.3 percent, the highest proportions. They retained their numbers even in the election of 1999 where Brahmins, Chhetris and Newars dominated the seats in the Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament, constituting 65.2 percent of the seats whereas they represented only 36 percent of the population. On the other hand, both Madhesi and hill social groups constituted only 17.4 and 14.7

**Table 3:
Caste/Ethnicity Index of Participation in Governance, 1999**

High Level Officials in	Bahun /Chhetri	Newar	Bahun/Chhetri /Newar	Hill Janajati	Hill Dalit	Hill Janajati and Dalit	Madhesi	Total
Judiciary	190	33	223	3	0	3	9	235
Constitutional bodies and commissions	181	32	223	4	0	4	18	235
Council of ministries	14	6	20	2	0	2	3	25
Public administration	20	3	23	4	0	4	5	32
Legislature	159	20	179	36	4	40	46	265
Political party leaders	97	18	115	25	0	25	26	166
Local government	106	30	136	23	0	23	31	190
Industry/trade	7	20	27	0	0	0	15	42
Education sector	75	11	86	2	1	3	7	97
Cultural organizations	85	22	107	6	0	6	0	113
Science and technology	36	18	54	2	0	2	6	62
Civil society	41	18	59	1	0	1	4	64
Total	1011	231	1242	108	5	113	170	1526
Percent	66.36	15.18	81.54	7.104	0.261	7.365	11.124	100
Percentage of Nepal's population	31.6	5.6	37.2	22.2	8.7	30.9	30.9	99.1
Proportional difference index	2.1	2.71	4.81	0.32	0.03	0.35	0.36	5.52

Sources: ESP, *A Strategy to Empower Nepal's Disadvantaged Groups, Document 1, p 10, based on Nepal Institutional Manpower Directory, 1999 in Neupane 2000.*

percent of the seats while representing respectively 32.0 and 22.4 percent of the population. Thus, one finds a serious imbalance in representation in our law-making body, i.e. national legislature. In Terai, in the election of 1999, 46 seats were won by candidates of hill origin and 42 seats by candidates of Madhesi origin, indicating increasing influence of hill people in Terai constituencies. Dr.Gurung points out that: "...this increase in hill dominance is primarily due to the change in Terai social demography through in-migration. People of hill origin now constitute 30.9 percent of the Terai population. Four out of the 18 Terai districts record majority population of hill origin: Jhapa (70.1 percent), Kanchanpur (70.3 percent), Nawalparasi (56.5 percent) and Morang (50.9 percent). Hill origin people range from one-third to half of the district's population in Kailali, Sunsari, Rupandehi, Banke and Bardiya. Such a change in social composition of voter population affected the choice of candidates for political representation." (Gurung H., 'Nepal Social Demography and Expressions', p 160.) According to the 1952/54 Population Census, only 6 percent of the Terai population was of highland group (hill origin) and 94 percent of the population was of lowland group (Madhesi), whereas it changed to 32 and

68 percent respectively in 1991. (Gurung, *Social Demography and Expressions*). This clearly indicates a very high level of migration from hills and mountains to Terai districts.

The Madhesi's Issues

1. Solidarity

The socio-economic issues of Madhesi are not receiving national attention due to internal divisions and lack of solidarity among Madhesi themselves. Independent commissions of Janajati, Dalits and women have been formed by the government, completely ignoring the Madhesi. This has further created divisions among Madhesi by segregating Janajati and Dalit of Terai and lumping them with Janajati and Dalits of hills and mountains, thus weakening the common voice of Madhesi for advocating their cause. It is very likely that the Madhesi will be overshadowed by the dominant hill Janajati and Dalits and their problems may not get fully addressed. For instance, Tharus belong to Adibasi/Janajati group and are fighting for liberation from bonded labour system and land for the landless, while the hill Janajati are taking up a movement on the question of language and culture as their priority areas. Similarly, within Dalits

there is a hierarchy of upper and lower castes. Hill Dalits consider themselves superior to Terai Dalits. Madhesi are also divided along the lines of different political parties, where they are usually in minority and cannot influence national policies in their favour. Even Nepal Sadbhawana Party, which is concerned about Madhesi's problems, has now been divided into two political parties, which is very unfortunate. The Madhesi population is also composed of more than sixty ethnic and caste groups with tremendous variations in language and culture, the only common factor being their non-hill origin. They indigenously belong to Terai with great similarity in culture and language with the people of the Indo-Gangetic plains, adjoining the Nepalese border. So, it is suggested that all Madhesi, whether Adibasi/Janajati, Dalit, Muslim or other castes, should find a common ground to solve their problems rather than seek separate identities and be inward-looking just within their own narrow caste boundary or group. This calls for solidarity among all Madhesi irrespective of their caste or ethnicity or religion to protect their common interests.

2. Pahadisation of the Terai

Secondly, the 'Pahadisation of the Terai' policy of the government is promoting migration from the hills to Terai and reducing the overall proportion of Madhesi in the Terai. This, indeed, is the government's strategy of 'weakening the Madhesi'. Since hill Brahmins and Chhetris are relatively well educated and tend to be more aggressive in economic, social and political matters, they are able to get hold of local leadership rather quickly. Also, the high caste hill migrants tend to have better access and support of local administration due to their common cultural background with government officials. Dr Fredrick Gaige, in his study, *Regionalism and National Unity in Nepal*, conducted in early 1970s in three districts (Jhapa, Kapilbastu and Kailali), found that 'the hill Brahmins and Chhetris represented by far the largest percentage of migrants who acquired land, 50 percent of all migrants acquiring land in Jhapa, 75 percent in Kapilbastu and 48 percent in Kailali. Given the large-scale migration into Jhapa and Kailali, this will eventually put much of the land in these two heavily forested districts into the hands of hill Brahmins and Chhetris. The government is reinforcing this trend by putting most, if not all, of the land confiscated through the land reform programme into the hands of settlers from the hills' (p.81).

At the same time, Dr. Gaige has pointed out the contradictory policies of the government in respect of the protection of forest in Terai and Pahadisation of the Terai through settlers from hills in the forest. He points out the fact that 'despite the occasional effort to

force hill settlers out of the forest, the government is not likely to object as strenuously to this settlement pattern as it would if the forest areas were being settled by plains people, whom government officials suspect of being migrants from India' (p. 82). While a large number of settlers from the hills have permanently settled in the Terai forest area by deforesting and converting forestland into agriculture land, plains people have lost their traditional right to use these forests. With the introduction of community forestry in the area, the hill settlers have totally taken over forest areas through their community forest users groups and denied the plains people of their traditional rights of access and use. There has been a continuous process of dis-empowerment of Madhesi from the resources, which they had used for many generations. Thus, with the introduction of community forestry (which is suitable and applicable mainly for the hills) in Terai, Madhesi have systematically been dis-empowered of their traditional right to use forest resources.

Dr. Gaige predicts that "most of the four far-western Terai districts, half or more of Sunsari and Morang districts, and most of Jhapa in the far-eastern Terai, the northern third of Parsa, Bara, Rautahat, Sarlahi and the three mid-western Terai districts will be settled predominantly by hill people." He also points out in his study that "the eradication of malaria has been a far more important stimulus to settlement of hill people in the Terai than the resettlement projects. To what extent is the Terai being Nepalised (Pahadised) through the migration process? In another generation or two, when most of the remaining forests have been cut down, one will be able to draw a line east and west across a map of Terai, separating fairly clearly the settlement area of the hill people and the plains people. The line will follow closely the southern fringe of the forest as it stood at the time of the 1951 revolution" (p. 85).

3. Citizenship

Citizenship provides one with the identity of belonging to a nation and grants access to services and power. "It is a symbol of legitimacy for people living within their national boundaries. Citizenship is a bond between the individuals and the government of a nation and, therefore, important in the process of national integration" (Gaige: 87). A very large section of the Madhesi population is without citizenship certificate an issue causing great anxiety for Madhesi. People of the nationally dominant hill culture and people of the regionally important plains culture have lived often in suspicion of each other over time. "Citizenship legislation framed by representatives

of the nationally dominant hill culture during the 1960s reflects this suspicion, for it makes the acquisition of citizenship more difficult for people of plains origin living in the Terai" (Gaige: 87). Citizenship legislation framed after the restoration of democracy in 1990 is not much different. The citizenship legislation of the early 1950s was nondiscriminatory. However, the citizenship legislation of the 1960s was formulated in a very different atmosphere. This was after the royal coup and political leaders of Nepali Congress party were in exile and they initiated underground activities from the Terai and border areas of India, which posed a threat to the royal government. This resulted in formulating a discriminatory legislative act for citizenship, particularly for the plains people of Terai. The requirement of speaking and writing the national language, i.e. Nepali, was inserted in the act, which clearly punished the plains people of Terai due to their lack of knowledge of Nepali language. Though they may have settled for several generations, Madhesi are denied citizenship certificate due to their lack of knowledge of writing and speaking Nepali language.

The Right to Land

Citizenship is required for acquiring land, including agricultural land. Most of the farmers in Terai are tenants and landless, and they must produce their citizenship certificate for buying land or registering the title of the land they work on in their names. Even when there is a government policy for addressing the issue of exclusion, the majority of the citizenship-less poor is likely to be excluded from acquiring property and services provided by the government. The landless of the Terai have failed to qualify for the ownership of land since they do not have citizenship certificate while the landless hill migrants can qualify for the ownership of such distributed land. It is a catch-22 situation for the landless of Terai origin. You need land registration deed (*lal purja*) to prove that you belong here and then you qualify for citizenship, but to

acquire *lal purja* you must have citizenship certificate. Most of the citizenship-less Madhesi are living in this paradox, their number being 3.4 millions.

Aspirations of Madhesi

The Madhesi's search for identity and sense of belonging in the nation-state of Nepal is of prime importance. To fulfil this goal, they have four main aspirations, which are as follows.

1. A liberal policy on citizenship so that most of the citizenship-less people can get their identity and fully participate in building this nation as bona fide citizens.
2. Official status for Hindi language as the 'lingua franca' that binds all Madhesi together.
3. Employment quota for Madhesi in civil service and army, thereby bringing them in the mainstream of national development
4. A federal system of government to recognise their separate identity.

In order to bring about national integration, balance and harmony are two basic ingredients. No group of citizens should feel to have been deliberately discriminated by the state and deprived of equal opportunities in national affairs. There should be proper balance in the representation of various castes and ethnicity in the administration and other agencies of the government to impart a sense of equitable participation. This requires a change in attitude to treat every one on equal, fair and equitable basis. A more harmonious attitude in the rulers to accommodate every citizen of the country in nation-building is the prerequisite. Not only geographical but also representational integration is essential: Equitable participation and sharing of benefits are central to this process.

'The strong and the gifted have special responsibilities to those who are not so blessed, and we all have responsibilities to each other, our country and planet. We believe in ourselves and in our future. One man could make a difference and that every man must try.'

- John F. Kennedy ■

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