
Volume 29

Number 1 *The Tarai: History, Society, Environment*
No. 1 & 2

Article 14

2010

On Being Madhesi

Ramawatar Yadav

Purbanchal University, Biratnagar, Nepal

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

Yadav, Ramawatar (2010) "On Being Madhesi," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 29: No. 1, Article 14.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol29/iss1/14>

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

RAMAWATAR YADAV

ON BEING *MADHESI*

Keynote Address Delivered by Ramawatar Yadav at the International Conference on “Nepal Tarai: Context and Possibilities”, organized by the Social Science Baha in Kathmandu, 10th March 2005.

His Excellency the Ambassador of India, Distinguished Participants, Invited Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is indeed a distinct honor and a proud privilege for me to be invited to give a keynote speech to the International Conference on “Nepal Tarai: Context and Possibilities”, organized by the Social Science Baha of Lalitpur. I would like to thank the organizers for their trust in me.

On 25 July 2004, I received a letter of invitation from Deepak Thapa of the Social Science Baha asking me to provide an inaugural address to the Tarai Conference that was then being proposed. I gave a cautiously worded and non-committal reply to that. For more than half a year, I did not receive a word from the Baha about the Conference. I had more or less given up on the Conference; in the changed political context of the country, it could have been postponed indefinitely, if not cancelled altogether. To my utter surprise, on 14th February 2005 (of all the days, on Valentine’s Day) I received a telephone call and an email in Pokhara from Dr. Sudhindra Sharma informing me that the Baha had decided to go ahead with the Conference after all and that they were thankful to me for having accepted the invitation to give the keynote address—which I really never had. At any rate, I wish to thank the organizers for according *tarai/madhese* the status of a topic worthy of serious academic discourse in Nepal, and I urge you, Ladies and Gentlemen, to view my presentation in the light of the above stated context. I also beg the audience’s indulgence to allow me to share reminiscences of my past experiences of being a *madhesi*.

I might as well begin my presentation with a description of a number of real-life anecdotes to set the tenor of the Conference so to speak.

1. **Late Prof. Mishra, Vice-Chancellor, while traveling** in a crowded Sajha Bus in Jaleshwar en route to Kathmandu, was forced by a group of young pahadi travelers to leave his seat and travel by

holding the iron railings for a considerable distance.

2. A Muslim professor of political science was dumbfounded to see his son being addressed by a Laboratory School teacher as “Raju Shrestha”. Upon confronting the teacher, he was very disconcerted to find that his son, being unable to bear the disgraceful treatment meted out to him as a *madhesi* by fellow classmates, had instead changed his last name.

3. A Newar fellow passenger with his inebriated and broken Hindi speech laced with a garlicky smell confronted a *madhesi* professor of English and me while travelling in a crowded Kirtipur-Kathmandu bus one early evening. As was his wont, he wanted to carve out a conversation with us in Hindi, which we declined. He would leave only after I blurted out a number of incomprehensible German sentences in fast speech.

4. An anthropologist-turned-sociologist-turned-activist was once invited to Keshar Mahal to share his views on Dalits of Nepal with the officials of the High-Level National Education Commission—of which I was Member-Secretary. Upon seeing me, he immediately described me as a *sadbhavana*. What I told him in retort soon made him realize that he had mistakenly played with fire.

5. An erstwhile colleague of mine was appointed Chairman of the Nepal Public Service Commission. One day during a conversation, he was a little too keen to learn about the exact location of my village—lest I was an Indian. In answer to his query, I named a couple of neighboring villages—one of which he happened to have known about. No sooner had I named that certain village than the Chairman interjected: “Yeah, but isn’t it the same village where some Nepali families live?”

Ladies and Gentlemen! My encounter with the term NEPAL was early. My father introduced me to this term first. He had to travel to Nepal (i.e. Kath-

mandu) for litigation purposes. He didn't quite mind the *rahadani* (i.e. passport) that he had to receive in Thankot to enter Nepal as a *madhesi*; nevertheless, as a vegetarian he did find it a little incongruous that the Newars would stockpile their chicken eggs on heaps of rice in the Asan bazar of Kathmandu.

My encounter with the term *pahadi* was early too. My mother, a village doctor of sorts, used to barter medicinal herbs and flattened dry tealeaves with the "non-washing, stinking, and lice-killing" *pahadia* for rice. Only later did I discover that my sample of the first *pahadi* I met was after all a Tibetan refugee, struggling to sneak into Jayanagar—the nearest Indian town linked with the then Nepal Jayanagar Janakpur Railway.

My official identity as Nepali and my induction into Nepali-hood came the rather hard way. The *badhakima*, Mr. Badri Bikram Thapa, would simply not grant me the Nepali citizenship—no matter what—although a number of refugees from Burma with high cheekbones and flat noses were offered citizenship certificates almost instantly. I had to wait to receive my citizenship certificate until a university degree holder, Mr. Tej Bahadur Prasai, was appointed as *anacaladhisa* (Commissioner) at Jaleshwar.

Ladies and Gentlemen! My physiognomy and my last name attest to the fact that I am a *madhesi*. I do not hold strong political views of a specific dispensation. I have never visited any party office. I am not a political activist either and I do not wish to create social dissension, much less a revolution in this country. All I wish to do is to share with you some perspectives on being a *madhesi*.

As anyone may ascertain by consulting a map of Nepal, the *tarai/madhese* is a strip of low-lying territory about five hundred miles long and about twenty miles broad, lying between the hilly parts of Nepal in the north and the Indian provinces of West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand in east, south and west. The territory consists of a total of twenty districts of modern-day Nepal.

The *tarai/madhese* remains till today the least known, the least studied, and the least researched territory of Nepal, in spite of the 50-page bibliography on "Tarai Studies" published by Sanjog Rupakheti in *Studies in Nepali History and Society* (Rupakheti 2000). The above bibliography is, at its best, incomplete and it contains in main the unpublished and probably un-publishable Master's theses and HMG and NGO reports, and innumerable works published by Indians in India on matters Indian. The territory has been an object of colossal neglect ever since Western historians such as William Kirkpatrick (1811), Francis Hamilton (1819), Daniel Wright (2007 [1877]), H. Ambrose Oldfield (1974 [1880]), and Perceval Landon (2001 [1928]) wrote on Nepal. Occasional and casual references are indeed made to places like Simrongarh, Lumbini, Janakpur and Morang Biratnagar. Interestingly, the modern-day *tarai* is spelt as Turye (Kirkpatrick 1811: 280) and Landon (1928: 3) has the following to say on Lumbini:

Rummindei (i.e. Lumbini) as being in Nepalese territory it **must be understood that I do not assert** that in those early days anything like the present of Nepal existed. These territories were then and long afterwards remained in the hands of the ruling dynasty of the Ganges Valley, and they are included here because at the present moment they form part of the existing territory of Nepal.

Lately, the political and/or administrative and organizational restructuring of the territory of *tarai/madhese* and other regions of the country has ensued a lot of scholarly debate. A fresh perspective on redrawing the boundaries has been proffered in a number of publications, including the ones by Sharad K.C. (*Himala Khabarpatrika*, 28 February-13 March 2004) and Khim Ghale (*Kantipur*, 14 March 2004, p. 7). I leave the issue of redrawing the boundaries of *tarai/madhese* to politicians and geographers and cartographers. Suffice to say, it has always bothered me as a resident *madhesi* of the Dhanusha district to be represented in the parliament by a Subedi, a Giri, a Malla, a Koirala, and a Dhungana.

Ladies and Gentlemen! A *madhesi* is the stuff Nepali novels like *Alikhita* (2040/1983) are made of. Dhruvachandra Gautam's *Alikhita* is an exemplary example of the classic put-down of *madhesi*; as a matter of fact, one may call it an axis of *pahadi* arrogance.

Alikhita's heroes eat two meals a day and fornicate with the Bhojpuri-speaking *madhesi* women in the village of Virahinapura Bareva. The fornication is without any foreplay, and the metaphor of screw is so pervasive that many pages of the novel are littered with the acrid and fetid smell of semen spilled all over. Narayani Zone is depicted as Erogenous Zone in the novel. Interestingly, the general impression being given is that the *pahadi* characters are doing a great favor to the Bhojpuri speaking *madhesi* women by providing them the pleasure of illicit sex.

V.S. Naipaul shows an excessive preoccupation with raw excreta in *An Area of Darkness* and *India: A Wounded Civilization*. The author of *Alikhita* too has a fetish about excreta and urine. Many a time, the author describes in sufficient detail how a *madhesi* woman squats out in the field to ease herself only to arise with a sudden jerk upon the slightest approach of a male in the vicinity. I wonder how adroitly the author would describe the lactating women oiling their bare dangling breasts and naked thighs and hinds in broad daylight in the streets of Kathmandu—the same city of Kathmandu that was said to be "built on a dunghill in the middle of latrines" (Wright 2007 [1877]: 12).

The author of *Alikhita* seems to take sadistic pleasure in describing how a destitute and hungry *madhesi* is debased into eating *dal-bhat* from a dish that was used by *zimdari* as a pissing-pan against the payment of one day's wages. As if that was not enough, the *madhesi* character is made to say almost euphorically that after all the urine belonged to none other than the *Zimdari*.

Ladies and Gentlemen! Sometime during V.S. 2051 (1994-95), a number of individuals, apparently the Rais and/or Limbus, staged a public burning of B.P. Koirala's novel *Sumnima* (1970) in Biratnagar. This was highly regrettable. I read the novel again and again to figure out why those individuals were filled with an overwhelming sense of outrage. Michael Hutt (2003: 36) came to my rescue, and he offered a succinct analysis. I quote:

... *Sumnima* appears to have been identified by certain individuals as a text created by a member of the politically dominant Bahuns to slander the culture of a marginal janajati community. These individuals therefore took it upon themselves to stage a public burning of the book, which for them symbolized the political marginalization of their community and the denigration of its culture.

I cannot quite tell how many *madhesis* know about the publication of *Alikhita*, much less read it. I am told that *Alikhita* was even serialized on Nepal Television. Recently, parts of the novel were recorded in the author's voice for preservation in the archives of the Library of Congress, Washington—apparently as samples of exemplary literary writings in Nepali.

My assertion is that the author's presentation of the discourse on the epistemology and representation of the Other versus Self as manifested in a fictionalized account of the *madhesa* region is, at its best, stereotypical, myopic, prejudicial, stigmatizing, derogatory, denigrating, and outrageously insulting. Clearly, the author is not "politically correct" in his depiction of *madhesa*. It does hurt to read the account, and it might fill the *madhesi* reader with a sense of shame and outrage.

Anthropologists and sociologists of Nepal—cf. D. R. Dalal (1992) and Hari Prasad Bhattarai (2004)—have tended to describe three types of ethno-cultural cleavages in the country: (a) the *pahadi-madhese* divide, (b) the split between the high caste Hindu groups, i.e. the Hill Bahuns, Thakuri, Chettri and Newar versus the indigenous groups or *janajati* and (c) the Bahun and Newar groups versus the high caste Hindu groups and the low caste Hindu groups. Nevertheless, in the ultimate analysis, at the macro level the only divide worth its name that is at the core of the conflict is the *pahadi-madhese* divide. No attempt at national integration in Nepal will succeed unless the *pahadi-madhese* divide is equitably and amicably addressed.

Incidentally, the *pahadi-madhese* dichotomy is not unique to Nepal. A strikingly similar paradigm of "pahari-deshi" distinction in Kumaon in North India is reported in a fascinating study by Joanne Moller (2003), except that her representation of the Kumaoni "pahari-deshi" distinction in Uttar Pradesh is a mirror image of the *pahadi-madhese* dichotomy in Nepal, wherein quite the reverse is the case:

Even though there are administrative and government posts in the districts of Nainital, Almora, and Pithoragarh, most of the high-grade posts are filled by well-educated high class plains men, the more menial lower scale offices are filled by local hill people. Locals feel unable to compete for high jobs and remain at the lower end of the social and economic ladder. Kumaoni people also feel politically marginalized and resent the fact that they have very little say in the running of Uttar Pradesh and of their hill region. They dislike being governed by Lucknow, where the administration of Kumaon is in the hands of non-Kumaoni, non-pahari civil servants (Moller 2003: 261).

A word on the identity of the *madhesi* is in order here. A *taraia/madhese* is not a diaspora. A *madhesi* is not an Indian translated into Nepali medium, either. A *madhesi* is as much a Nepali as a Nepali can be. Admittedly, some of the signs, i.e. attire (hence the derogatory appellation, *dhotiwala*), housing structures, cultural forms of behavior (the son-in-law offers obeisance to the father-in-law by touching his feet, and not vice-versa), language (to a *pahadi*, Maithili, Bhojpuri, and Awadhi utterances sound like Hindi), and most importantly, appearance (hence the appellation *kalo marsya* or even Indian) do highlight the difference of a *madhesi* from a *pahadi*. This is characteristic of a plural society, and a *madhesi* has the right to be different and yet be a Nepali. Incidentally, the old terms of abuse such as *madise* or *marsya* have rubbed off their sharp edges of bitterness; recently, a new term of abuse, i.e. *o bhaiya* ("hello brother") is doing the rounds in the streets of Kathmandu and other urban centers—*pahadis* prefer to use this scornful term of address for the *madhesi* vegetable and/or fruit vendors.

Earlier, I referred to the Nepali literati's representation, or rather misrepresentation of *madhesi* in brief. Mention may also be made of a blatant case of the Nepali literati's tremendous neglect of the *madhesi* men of letters. I am referring to the composition of the present academic council of the Royal Nepal Academy, wherein no sitting member from *madhesa* was deemed desirable to be appointed. This is hardly surprising in the context that none of the major political parties have as their agenda the development of *madhesa* and *madhese*. None of the major political parties of the country have ever appointed *madhesi* intellectuals as advisors. A bizarre practice was observed: the Nepali Congress would only seek the opinion and advice of a Baral or an Acharya, the RPP would occasionally call on a Pradhan, while the CPN/UML would invariably go to a Dhaubhadel. *Madhesi* political leaders are few and far between too: one may mention a Yadav or a Thakur for the Nepali Congress, a Nidhi for the Nepali Congress Democratic, a Ray for the RPP, and practically none worth the name for the CPN/UML. No wonder that the Nepal Television rarely interviews *madhesi* leaders and men of letters.

Not only is there discrimination in Nepal, it is rampant

When Mr. Lyndon Clough, the British Council Representative, selected me as number one candidate for the British Council Scholarship in 1965, Mr. Lab Bahadur Pradhan, an Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Education protested immediately. The Ministry of Education simply would not permit me to avail myself of the scholarship under one pretext or the other. Tara Nath Sharma, the number two candidate, got the award. I had to wait until an Englishman (actually, he was a Welshman) occupied the English Chair in Tribhuvan University in 1968-69 to be nominated to the British Council award without being interviewed. Later, when I was selected for the Fulbright Hays Scholarship as number one candidate to pursue a Ph.D. course in Linguistics in 1973, the Secretary of the Ministry of Education, Mr. Krishna Bahadur Manandhar, changed my name from the first to the second position. In the meantime, Mr. Gabriel Campbell, Director of the US Education Foundation announced that the number two candidate had received “confirmation” from a U.S. University prior to the first candidate and that therefore a total of two scholarships would be offered in Linguistics. A crisis arose in the Ministry of Education as to whether Nepal could afford to have two linguists—one M.A. and one Ph.D.—linguists were then like snakes in Ireland. The Education Minister, Mr. Krishna Raj Aryal, failed to decide. So did a number of members of the National Education Committee, such as Soorya Bahadur Shakya, Harka Gurung, Mohammad Mohassin and a few others whose names I do not quite recall at the moment. Ultimately, it was Mr. Govind Bahadur Lohani, Secretary of the Manpower Planning Division of the Planning Commission who decided that to have more than one linguist was not injurious to the health of the nation after all. It was no different when I received the Senior Fulbright Visiting Scholarship in 1989—only this time a number of Tribhuvan University professors were hell-bent on changing my name from the first candidate to the second. It took me seventeen years to be promoted from the gazetted third class to the rank of the gazetted second class. I had the fortune to work under countless Secretaries in the Ministry of Education—one of whom had started his job eleven years later than me. I was also most vulnerable to constant transfers; one Congress Minister of Education transferred me thrice in a row from one office to another, and even kept me in Keshar Mahal as a jobless, nay useless, Joint-Secretary for seventeen months. An equally hilarious situation existed in Tribhuvan University too. If I performed well in an interview, the TU Vice Chancellor, the Dean, and other officials accused me of having dominated the Indian expert during the interview. On other occasions, if I spoke better than my colleague (then my judge) during an interview, the English professor would say to me that I had the gift of the gab. There was no escaping it, it appeared.

Ladies and Gentlemen! I may be viewed as a fine sample and a living example of what a *madhesi* can or cannot achieve. Throughout, I have faced an unseen enemy—my *madhesi*—although I cannot quite calibrate the exact extent to which *madhesi*hood might have been a robust and an undis-

puted deterrent to my upward mobility in life.

Let us hope that in the changed political context of Nepal, the old adage “Only a tiger-cub happens to hunt the elephant, not a kitten” does not come true anymore.

Ladies and Gentlemen! I was asked by the organizers to set the tenor of the Conference. I sincerely hope that I have done just that. Thank you; thank you very much.

REFERENCES

- Bhattarai, H.P. 2004. “Cultural Diversity and Pluralism in Nepal: Emerging issues and the search for a new paradigm.” *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* 31(2): 293-340.
- Dahal, D.R. 1992. “Grasping the Tarai identity.” *Himal* 5 (3): 17-18.
- Gautam, D. 2040 V.S./1983 A.D. *Alikhita* [Unwritten]. Birganj: Author.
- Ghale, K. 2004. “Rajyako punarsamracanama bahasa.” *Kantipura* 14 March, p. 7.
- Hamilton, FB. 1986 [1819]. *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal*. New Delhi: Asian Education Services.
- Hutt, M. 2003. “Reading Sumnima.” In M. Lecomte-Tilouine and P. Dollfus, eds. *Ethnic Revival and Religious Turmoil: Identities and Representations in the Himalayas*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- K.C., S. 2004. “Maobadabata jatibadatira.” *Himala Khabarapatrika*. 28 Feb-13 March. 13 (22): 28-31.
- Kirkpatrick, W. 1811. *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal*. London: W. Miller.
- Landon, P. 2001 [1928]. *History of Nepal*. Vol. 1. Delhi: Adarsh Enterprises.
- Lecomte-Tilouine, M. and P. Dollfus, eds. 2003. *Ethnic Revival and Religious Turmoil: Identities and Representations in the Himalayas*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Moller, J. 2003. “Insiders and Outsiders: Community and Identity in Kumaon, North India.” In M. Lecomte-Tilouine and P. Dollfus, eds. *Ethnic Revival and Religious Turmoil: Identities and Representations in the Himalayas*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Oldfield, H. A. 1974 [1880]. *Sketches from Nepal*. Delhi: Cosmo Publications.
- Rupakheti, S. 2000. “Tarai studies.” *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 5 (2): 299-349.
- Wright, D. 2007 [1887]. *History of Nepal*. New Delhi: Rupa and Co.

Prof. Ramawatar Yadav is the Vice Chancellor of Purbanchal University, Biratnagar, Nepal