Madhesi Women and the

Politics of National Belonging in Nepal

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# Table of Contents

Introduction ... 4

Chapter 1: Whose “National Community?” ... 26

Chapter 2: Political Mobilization of Madhesis ... 37

Chapter 3: Women at the Border and National Belonging ... 50

Chapter 4: The Political Uses of Nostalgia and the Nepali National Story ... 66

Conclusion ... 78

Bibliography ... 82
Introduction

On September 16, 2015, 598 constituent assembly members voted on the new constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal. 507 members voted for the constitution, 25 voted against, and 66 abstained from vote. The then-President Ram Baran Yadav signed the document, promulgating a constitution 7 years in the making. The government encouraged the public to celebrate the occasion with light, and many in Kathmandu complied, the streets filled with people holding candles and oil lamps, setting off fireworks and waving the national flag. National newspapers the following day were replete with photographs of people dancing, crying tears of joy and talking about their pride in the “birth of a new sovereign nation.”

Outside of Kathmandu, the story was very different. Hundreds of thousands of people were absolutely livid and staged a blackout where they switched all their lights off in a “day of darkness.” In the districts of Bara and Parsa, many hoisted black flags atop their houses to oppose what they saw as a fundamental betrayal. They claimed that the document was an opportunistic power grab after civil society had been debilitated by the April earthquakes. In their eyes, the new constitution did not guarantee the rights of those who were the most vulnerable; women, lower caste people, and the ethnically marginalized. Even though political rhetoric emphasized the principles of equality of opportunity and progressive policies, what the constitution actually did was ensure the dominance of the traditional political elites: upper caste people who live in the hilly region, known as the Pahadis.
The most vocal protests against the constitution came from the Madhesis, who primarily live in the southern Terai plains (sometimes referred to as Madhesh). People of Madhesi origin across the globe expressed discontent in a variety of ways, burning copies of the constitution and effigies of the then prime minister KP Oli (who once compared Madhesis being killed by police officers to “mangoes falling from a tree”) from Rajbiraj to Dallas, Kathmandu to D.C.; staging massive rallies and strikes. One of the most sustained forms of protests was what has come to be colloquially known as “the blockade,” when Madhesis stopped the flow of goods in the India-Nepal border in order to put economic pressure on the government to make amendments to the constitution.

The government responded with great force. Security personnel shot at crowds of protesters across towns in Madhesh and at least 50 people died in 2015, with a great many more being forcibly disappeared. Human rights groups calling for accountability from the government were kicked out of the country, and no amendments were made. Instead, the Maoists, UML, Congress and even some Madhesi leaders parroted the rhetoric of the new constitution as “safeguarding the rights of all Nepali brothers and sisters in a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural state.” The protests gradually lost steam, as the blockade’s crippling impact on the economy led to many in the north beginning to resent the Madhesis and doubling down on their support of the constitution. Madhesis, after facing unrelenting brutality of police forces for months on end, called an end to the blockade and the protests gradually came to a halt by 2016.

It was in the aftermath of the protests that I went home to Nepal in the summer of 2016, and during an internship at an online news outlet, worked on a project about Madhesi women and their participation in the blockade and other forms of protest. The
project, which culminated in a couple of articles published on Setopati.net, involved having short conversations with a couple of dozen Madhesi women. I asked questions such as “What do you think about the new constitution?” and “What do you think of the protests?” and the responses I got were mostly optimistic, with women talking about how there was a great deal of oppression and structural injustice that needed to be rectified through an organized movement. As somebody of Madhesi-origin, committed to Madhesi liberation as an emancipatory ideal, I was heartened by what I was hearing and I wanted to do further research on Madhesi women and their activism. I expected to find sustained activist energy and support from women of diverse backgrounds across Madhesh that would eventually lead to the constitution being amended to be truly representative of all Nepalis.

The research that I proposed to do for my senior thesis was about the “ways in which Madhesi women have responded to the denial of their fundamental rights, how they have participated in protests to an unprecedented degree and how this moment signals a turning point in Madhesi women’s engagement with the Nepali state.” While I did find a great deal of resistance and claims-making from the state during the course of the ten weeks when I was doing research, needless to say, this imagination of a politically enlightened Madhesi activist fully committed to what I perceived as egalitarianism and progressivism proved to be largely inaccurate. I was hoping to find people talking about the rights of Muslim minorities, lower-caste people, and women; proclaiming faith in a functioning, inclusive, democratic state. However, in their scapegoating of Indians, profession of love and loyalty for the ex-monarch, disdain for the (admittedly terribly functioning) democratic system, and dismissal of differently situated Madhesis’ needs, my
respondents were often not completely subverting hegemonic discourses of Nepali-ness and who got to claim it.

In this thesis, I will argue that Madhesi claims for recognition from the Nepali state are not radical breaks from previous understandings of Nepali national belonging. Predemocratic articulations of Nepali national identity and articulations of Nepali national identity by subaltern Madhesi women are not mutually exclusive and oppositional entities. Instead, the latter has emerged from the former and as such delimits the ways in which political belonging in Nepal can be imagined and understood in the current moment. Through discussions of the emergence of Madhesi-ness as a category for political mobilization, the precarity of women’s statuses at the border, and nostalgia for the monarchy, I will show that the terms of asserting belonging in the Nepali nation-state do not challenge normative Nepali national identity, and yet, they can be successful in challenging the government and making demands that are potent and often revolutionary.

The Making of the Modern Nepali Nation

Before exploring the complexities of Madhesi political identity and the ways in which it has gained salience in recent times, it is worth briefly outlining the major political transformations that have taken place over the course of modern Nepali history.

The territorial state of Nepal as it exists today was largely in existence by the second decade of the nineteenth century. Unlike most countries in South Asia, Nepal was never colonized by the British and did not experience an anti-colonial movement. However, in the late 1940s, it did experience a pro-democracy movement against the Ranas, a set of domestic autocratic rulers who treated the whole country like their personal fiefdom. After
decades of covert organizing, a loose coalition of political parties overthrew the regime in 1951, and the Shah monarchy was reinstalled. Tribhuvan Bikram Shah became the first monarch of the modern Nepali nation-state.

The first government of post-Rana Nepal was a Rana-Nepali Congress coalition government led by the last Rana prime minister. The “Interim Government of Nepal Act” came into force, and while the constitution enshrined certain rights, such as freedom of speech and peaceful assembly, freedom to form associations and freedom to practice any occupation, executive power was vested in the king who could exercise it directly or through a prime minister nominated by him.

Tribhuvan Shah died in 1955, and his son, Mahendra Shah came into power. Mahendra experimented with representative democracy, but by 1960, he sought to consolidate his hold over Nepali politics and society by installing the Panchayat system. Under the Panchayat system, Nepal was declared “an independent, indivisible and sovereign monarchical Hindu State” with Nepali as it’s national language, and all executive, legislative, and judicial power was ultimately derived from the king. The slogan of the government was “one king, one country, one language, one culture,” and there was a great deal of investment in constructing the nation as a homogenous entity. By 1967, “partyless democracy” was added to the preamble of the constitution and the government declared all oppositional politics effectively illegal. There was a large increase in the inflow of foreign aid to Nepal in the Panchayat decade, and the state used the language of “development” and construction of some high-profile infrastructure projects such as national highways and hydropower plants to legitimate its authority and consolidate power.
Mahendra died in 1972, and his son Birendra Shah, educated at Eton College, University of Tokyo, and Harvard University, inherited the throne. Many were hopeful that Birendra’s cosmopolitanism and what appeared to be worldliness would translate into his full reinstatement of multiparty democracy, but the Panchayat system continued, and it was business as usual for a long time. By the spring of 1989, however, popular frustration with the system had reached a crescendo, and a trade impasse with India as well as worldwide uprisings against authoritarian regimes provided the context for an anti-Panchayat movement led by the Nepali Congress and the United Left Front (a coalition of different Nepali Communist Parties). Thousands of people took to the streets to stage what became the first people’s movement, the Jana Andolan, and when the Panchayat system fell in April of 1990, absolute monarchy in Nepal was significantly tamed. The king no longer had complete control over the executive branch of the government.

The post-Panchayat government needed to create a new constitution to replace the 1962 one that had been overseen by Mahendra. The constitution-writing process was a tussle between political parties that wanted to strip the monarchy of all power and place the Nepali army (very large in proportion to the population of the country) under the civilian government, and Birendra, who sought to retain as much executive power as possible. The document ended up being a compromise, and although it was undoubtedly progressive compared to the 1962 constitution, it contained discriminatory elements such as the alienation of religious minorities through the inscription of the “Hindu Kingdom” and declaration of children’s citizenship being contingent upon father’s nationality that made Nepali women lesser-citizens. For the first time, the constitution recognized Nepal as

\[\text{1 It is important to note that the military remained staunchly loyal to the palace}\]
multilingual and multiethnic, but it did not adopt any policies to rectify injustices done to historically marginalized communities.

Elections were successfully held in 1991, and Nepali people, particularly those who had been marginalized by the upper-caste-class-Nepali-speaking (as a shorthand, referred to as “Khas-Arya” people because of their origins in the Khas civilization) people, were hoping that the decade after the people’s movement would be one of real systemic change. However, amidst bickering between political parties whose leaders were still very much upper-caste hill men and the persistence of Mahendra-inscribed structures of incompetence and impunity, nothing really happened. It was in the midst of this exhaustion and hopelessness that the Maoist insurgency grew in the 1990s.

In February 1996, the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN-Maoist) declared war against the Nepali state. It called for a radical transformation of governance structures and society, and demands included making the country a secular people’s republic, federalism, land reform, and a robust welfare state. The Maoists conducted their war primarily from rural areas and the countryside, a strategy that was an inversion of the usual form of political action in Nepal that has tended to be based in urban areas. Their strongholds were midwestern districts of Rolpa and Rukum in the hilly region, but their influence gradually spread, and by 1998-1999, many districts in the hilly region and some in the Terai were under Maoist control. While the Maoists did talk about the rights of Madhesis in the Terai and there were a couple of prominent Madhesi Maoists, the movement, even at its strongest, remained fairly hill-centric, with the midwestern hilly region remaining the base from which warfare against the Nepalese army was conducted.
The Nepalese army was at its repressive worst during the Maoist insurgency and the military’s excesses served to strengthen popular support for the Maoists. Both the Maoists and the military forces killed, maimed, forcibly disappeared, and harassed people, but the level of repression that national armed forces engaged in was flagrant enough to antagonize many and make them join the Maoist party. The Maoists were able to use fissures in the Nepali state that throughout the 1990s consisted of inept political parties jockeying for the power hungry king’s endorsement to develop a strong popular base. By 2001, they had enough popular support to be able to dictate the agenda of national politics in Nepal.

In 2001, in an event that has come to be known as the Royal Massacre, several members of the royal family, including the king Birendra, were shot by crown prince Dipendra, who himself was found to be in a coma and died a couple of days later. The event is shrouded in secrecy and conspiracies about what happened abound (numerous fictionalized and pseudo-historical accounts of the incident have consistently been best-selling books), and Birendra’s younger brother, Gyanendra became king. Gyanendra’s distaste for democracy was well-known even before he came into power, and Maoist calls for abolition of the monarchy intensified. Under Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, there were a couple of rounds of talks between the Maoist rebels and the government, but in November 2001, all attempts at dialogue were abandoned and Gyanendra declared a state of emergency. He also promulgated the “Terrorist and Disruptive Acts (Prevention and Punishment) Act” (a move that the American government and some other western powers supported) that effectively meant the suspension of all civil liberties. The death conflict of from the conflict rose rapidly, there were numerous arbitrary arrests and a great deal of
media censorship. On a personal note, I remember weeks of phone lines being cut and the only thing on television being the government news channel airing Gyanendra’s speeches, and even as a child, I experienced what was happening as clearly dystopian.

Although Birendra’s rule was by no means democratic, it became clear that what Gyanendra was envisioning was an even more repressive regime, a return to his father Mahendra’s Panchayat ways. In 2005, 3 years after Gyanendra suspended the 1990 constitution, some groups of civil society activists organized mass rallies across the country, and the second people’s movement took place in the spring on 2006. The Maoists and a coalition of seven parliamentary parties reached a compromise consisting of the Maoists agreeing to support a multi-party democracy that led to unified political opposition against the monarchy. Thousands and thousands of people took to the streets for what would become nineteen days of continuous protests in Kathmandu and beyond. About twenty people were killed and hundreds injured. As a result of these protests, Gyanendra abdicated the throne on April 24, 2006. “His Majesty Gyanendra’s Government” now became the “Government of Nepal” and the country was declared secular. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement, signed by the Government of Nepal and CPN-Maoist in November 2006 ended the decade long armed rebellion.

Since then, the popularity of the Maoist party has declined dramatically, and the dominant political climate is one characterized by deep disillusionment. The Constituent Assembly, tasked in 2008 with drafting a new democratic constitution, failed numerous times, primarily due to disagreements about federalism, and the promulgation of 2015 was done through a “fast-track” method as a way to sidestep formal procedure.
The Rise of Ethnic Politics

Ethnicity has always been an important component in Nepali history and politics. According to Sara Shneiderman and Louise Tillin, the legal codification of ethnicity can be traced back to the 1854 Muluki Ain, national legal code, which "classified all Nepali communities within a structure of caste hierarchy that enabled labour extraction by the Hindu state. It also attached both the terms of labour and land ownership--through the system of kipat, or ethnically-based collective land tenure--fundamentally to specific ethnic identities" (Schneiderman and Tillin 2015, 34). I am unable to provide a detailed account of the genealogy of ethnic formation here, but the important thing to note is that hundreds of years of ethnic and caste based social organization by the state led to Madhesis, Janajatis (umbrella term for indigenous people who reside primary in the hills), and Dalits (lower caste people) accruing generations of disadvantages.

But until 2006, besides some scattered rebellions across the country, ethnicity did not take center stage in any popular movements. Both the first and the second people’s movement were spearheaded by well-educated, often upper-caste Pahadi urbanites. The Maoist movement, at least in its inception, paid lip service to the rights of ethnic minorities, but their agenda ultimately ended up being hill-centric, with upper-caste Pahadi men in leadership positions in the party. The issue came to a head during negotiations over federalism in the writing of an interim constitution in 2006. Madhesis and Janajatis had been emphasising decentralization as a way of moving away from a hill-centered political and cultural ethos at least since the 1980s, and Maoists claimed that they were going to take a staunchly federalist stance against the ruling hill-centric Congress and United Marxist Leninist party. They did not, and the Madhesis were very angry.
In January-February 2007, an unprecedented rebellion took place in Madhes, with Madhesis claiming that once again their needs had been sacrificed by politicians who used them as a voting bloc or support base but did not ultimately care about them. Although the protests were about federalism, they were also about racism at large. There were plenty of grievances against the fact that since the 1950s, a combination of negligence and malice had left Madhesis disproportionately poor, jobless, uneducated, and denied of cultural membership in the Nepali nation.

There has not been much historical work (at least in English) that properly documents the ways in which the state has inflicted structural violence upon Madhesis. However, two policies that had large implications are important to note. In the mid-1950s, there was state program that encouraged Pahadi (hill-resident) migration to the Terai in order to establish a hegemony of Pahadis in the Terai. Between the early 1950s and 2001 census, the hill-origin population had grown by almost twenty-nine fold while the Madhesi population had grown by less than four-fold (Gautam 2008). Also in the 1950s, the Panchayat system required that in order to acquire a citizenship certificate that was a prerequisite for land ownership, applicants needed to speak and write Nepali. Most Madhesis speak Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, and Hindi, but not many speak Nepali, and many Madhesis, despite living in Nepal for generations, were not Nepali citizens. In addition to the formal disqualifications, bureaucrats, who were largely of Pahadi origin, engaged in a great deal of harassment and aggression towards Madhesis and the Madhesi experience in the public sphere was one characterized by deep discrimination.

The 2007 Madhesh uprisings came as an unexpected shock to the establishment, but did lead to the then Prime Minister, GP Koirala of the Nepali Congress party to declare in a
speech that federalism would be enshrined in the constitution. The Interim Constitution was amended to include a provision that guaranteed a “democratic, federal system.” The promise of federalism in 2007, and the subsequent failure of the establishment to deliver on the promise, provides some of the context for why the 2015 Madhesh Movement happened.

Beyond the deception involved in ratifying a document in a “fast-track” process without a large democratic base of support, there are a couple of clauses in the 2015 constitution that Madhesis saw as particularly egregious. On paper, Koirala’s 2007 promise of a federal system was kept, but the boundaries of the proposed states were such that Pahadis would be the majority, and therefore in positions of power, in almost every state. The citizenship clauses make Nepali women married to foreign men unable to pass citizenship to their children, and foreign women married to Nepali men get a “second-class” citizenship where they are unable to run for positions in civil service and participate in politics. There are more complaints against the constitution-- a smaller percentage of parliament, 45%, is to be elected through by proportional representation instead of the 58% guaranteed in the interim constitution, a step-backwards in terms of inclusion because the PR system helped many people from historically marginalized communities get elected.

The language of various clauses in the constitution is filled with jargon and internal inconsistencies. However, Madhesis claim that the clauses surrounding federalism and citizenship are clearly targeted in bad-faith particularly towards them because Madhesi residents will not be a majority in any federal provinces. Moreover, due to cross-border marriages with Indian men and women being the norm, Madhesi women are most likely to
have stateless children and be denied full participation in politics. As a result, Madhesis felt a profound sense of betrayal and frustration after the ratification of the 2015 constitution. Despite their repeated agitation, it appeared that Nepali-speaking hill-origin people appeared to be at the center of the Nepalese national project, and that a significant portion of the southern population were excluded.

My interviews with women from a couple of towns and villages in Madhesh cannot fully illuminate the emergence and growth of Madhesi political consciousness from 2007 to the present. But what it can do is provide an account of how Madhesi-ness is articulated and used as the primary mode of demands for recognition today. The particular experiences of my respondents can provide avenues for thinking about how localized features of ethnic consciousness emerge out of matrices of power that are shaped by historical trajectories.

Methods

I conducted my research over the summer of 2017, and it was primarily interview based. I talked to women from the cities of Janakpur and Birgunj (where protests in 2015 were the most concentrated) and villages on the peripheries of the two cities, Suga and Kalaiya. I spoke to about 30 women including politicians, household help workers, police officers, and homemakers.
Birgunj is a town with a population of over 200,000, and the languages that are most commonly spoken here are Bhojpuri, Maithili, and Hindi. It lies on the border with Raxaul in the North Indian state of Bihar. Referred to in middle-school social studies textbooks as the “gateway to Nepal,” the town is of significant economic importance as it is the primary inland-port through which fuel as well as many other goods and services are imported from India and its harbors. During the blockade in 2015, Birgunj became the center of protests as residents from the town, by shutting down the border, effectively managed to bring the national economy to a standstill.

While Birgunj is one of the few places in Nepal besides Kathmandu that is referred to as a city, it is not urban in the sense that many people in the West would understand cities to be. Most inhabitants have been in the area for generations, and the architectural composition consists of some concrete buildings that house businesses and temples in the center of the city with residential areas in the peripheries consisting primarily of mud huts. Because Birgunj is a center of trade and commerce, there are some wealthy people who live
in fortified enclaves in the central part of town, but many residents of the town are barely scraping by. In recent years, due to a boom in the remittance economy (with many Nepali men migrating to the Gulf, Malaysia, South Korea and some other places to work as manual labourers), the cash-spending power of some segments of the population has increased. Private hospitals, schools, shopping centers and recreational centers have cropped up. But, as is the neoliberal story in much of the Global South, growth has taken place very unevenly, and there is great heterogeneity in the lives of people living in different parts of the town.

Janakpur is a little further removed, although still quite close, to the Indian border. It has a population of around 170,000, and most people speak various dialects of Maithili. Known as the birthplace of the Hindu goddess Janaki and the center of the “Mithila civilization” it is a center for religious tourism, with thousands of people from across South Asia coming to the town for pilgrimage every year. Janakpur also has a reputation as the epicentre of dissidence in Madhesh, since the 2007 protests were largely concentrated here. Like Birgunj, Janakpur consists of a sprawling city-center surrounded by semi-rural residencies in the periphery. Life in Janakpur is punctuated by a discourse of unsafety. "Gundas (Thugs),” loosely affiliated with Madhesi political parties, hold a great deal of power, and often terrorize residents of the town through robbery and general harassment. The streets of Janakpur are more hostile to women than perhaps any other place in the Terai, and public space is conspicuously very male.

As villages close to large towns, Kalaiya and Suga have some important characteristics in common. There are very few health and educational services, and residents from the villages will often need to make trips to the towns regularly for
everything from buying clothes to getting government paperwork done. The roads in both places are ruined to the point of being non-existent, and in the monsoon, it becomes next to impossible for people to leave their homes. Due to massive out-migration amongst men to Kathmandu and to the Gulf for employment, populations in both villages are largely old and female. The men who are left behind frequently do not have jobs, are extremely resentful of the Kathmandu establishment, and they are the ones who sustained momentum in the 2015 protests, taking to the streets every day to make demands from the Oli government.

My fieldwork in all four places consisted of hanging out with women as they accomplished various daily tasks: cooking, feeding their children, washing clothes, and washing dishes. I approached women sometimes by myself and sometimes with family and family friends (Pushpa aunty, Tinu, Swati, and Pragya were of enormous help in approaching some people) to ask questions about politics as it related to their lives. We sometimes talked over tea and snacks and sat on porches during mid-day lulls. Other times, I awkwardly sat in the corner as people bathed, pulled lice out of their children’s hair, or watched television shows. Some women were annoyed, some bemused, but generally, women were happy to humor me and treated me with kindness and warmth. I also had the opportunity to interview some women in group settings at adult literacy classes in Birgunj thanks to Pushpa aunty, who is a government school teacher.

My respondents were of very different backgrounds and positionalities, and although they were all “Madhesi women,” the category of Madhesi woman does not necessitate a unified view on politics. Depending on the region I was in, whether it was a village or town setting, the class and caste background of the women I was talking to, and the level of education they had, I heard very different accounts of what Madhesi-ness as an
identity, and “Madhesi resistance” means. While many women talked about specifics of what made the constitution unfair, pointing to gerrymandering, ethnocentrism, and economic discrimination, for some, it was those who had staged the blockade who were in the wrong, and “making a fuss” about a document that people in Kathmandu had written made little to no sense. For many, the monarchy and King Birendra’s regime was what was remembered as the “good old days.” An interviewee in her late 70s pointed to me, “there was a lot of fear, but at least there was stability because you knew who to be afraid of.”

Many respondents were exhausted from the protests, from the arbitrary use of force by security personnel, and by the way in which some Madhesi politicians had used unrest as an opportunity to make money from selling goods on the black market. Attitudes towards politicians were overwhelmingly negative, with all my respondents, besides those involved in the party system themselves, saying things like “there are no honest Madhesi politicians, only thugs.”

While the differences in how the protests were perceived and how Pahadi-Madhesi relations were dependent on multiple axes of difference, class was a notable factor in who even felt like they had the right to have opinions on politics. In the next section, I will discuss the ways in which class played an important role in my status as a researcher and a “native” anthropologist.

“Don’t know” responses and the “native” anthropologist

My interviews with most women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds invariably started with the answer to the question “What do you think about Nepali politics?” leading to women saying things like “I don’t know anything about politics, ask my husband!” “I
don’t have enough education to be able to talk about politics” and “Why are you asking me about politics, I am illiterate!” When pushed further and asked about specific things like “What do you think the government needs to do for your village?” many women were more willing to start talking, but the reluctance to saying anything about politics reveals something about political discourse as a classed resource, a phenomenon Pierre Bourdieu’s insights on culture and politics can help illuminate.

In his book Distinction, Bourdieu offers an analysis of the political disenfranchisement of marginalized people in 1970s France, claiming that non-responses, non-opinions, and the substance of opinions are worth taking seriously to understand how people with “low levels of capital” are excluded from the field of politics. For Bourdieu, the “sense of being entitled to be concerned with politics, authorized to talk politics” (Bourdieu 1984, 409) is part of an “opinionated habitus” that comes from high levels of education and a certain kind of socialization. When marginalized people say that they “don’t know” anything about politics, it cannot simply be understood as a lack of interest, but needs to be seen as a result of a habitus that does not confer people in dominated parts of the social space the same sense of entitlement and obligation to participate in politics as it does to the dominant classes.

Bourdieu’s explanation of the relationship between class and politics is important to note because it explains to a certain degree why my interviews with lower-class women were often shorter and did not contain elaborate opinions on the state of politics in Nepal while my interviews with higher-income women were often much longer and in-depth, getting into details about policy proposals and amendments in the constitution. It is not simply that richer women cared more or were more informed, but rather that “the
propensity to speak politically, even in the most rudimentary way...is strictly proportionate to having the right to speak” (Bourdieu 1984, 411). The specificity of social conditions that produce certain kinds of habitus that lead to differing levels of political capital are integral to understanding who participates in politics and what this means for society at large.

Another dimension of who was willing to talk to me and for how long has to do with my own positionality as a researcher-- a Nepali woman who speaks some of the languages spoken in Madhesh; Maithili, Bhojpuri and Hindi, with a distinctly Kathmandu-ite urban twang. Kirin Narayan’s reflections on what “native” anthropology means are useful to underscore here in relation to my own work:

In some ways, the study of one’s own society involves an inverse process from the study of an alien one. Instead of learning conceptual categories and then, through fieldwork, finding the contexts in which to apply them, those of us who study societies in which we have pre-existing experience absorb analytic categories that rename and reframe what is already known. The reframing essentially involves locating vivid particulars within larger cultural patterns, sociological relations, and historical shifts. At one further remove, anthropological categories also rephrase these particulars as evidence of theoretical issues that cross culture (Narayan 1993, 678).

On the one hand, I was treated by respondents as someone to whom common sense notions about politics and social life did not need to be explained (This was most evident when I asked questions about what Pahadis were like: the answers inevitably started with “you already know”). On the other, since I was someone embedded in the social relations of the area, I was somebody who perhaps could not be trusted. Because of my urban-ness and phenotypical “upper-casteness,” I am aware that many lower caste respondents were hesitant to share views and opinions that were explicitly about “upper caste folk” and the ways in which there is caste-based exploitation in Madhesh.
An instance in which this was most clearly evident to me was when I was interviewing a group of women in an adult literacy class in Birgunj, where the participants were almost exclusively lower-caste. One of the women was giving an impassioned speech about Kayasthas and Brahmins being “leeches” and stepping over the bodies of Dalits and Muslims for their own ends, when somebody walked up to her and whispered in her ear that I was the granddaughter of a well-known Kayastha professor from the area. The woman who was speaking then quickly apologized profusely, despite my insistence on being happy to hear what she had to say, and she began talking about how Pahadis were at fault instead of upper-caste Madhesi, never once again during the course of the rest of our interview mentioning anything about upper-caste people.

I use this instance as a caveat to show that during this research, I was, by no means, an objective and impartial outside observer. Despite not having grown up in the areas that I was doing fieldwork, my identity as a an upper-caste Madhesi woman simultaneously made me an ally and an adversary, a confidant and somebody meriting suspicion.

There were, as is to be expected when talking about politics, huge differences in how my respondents thought of the Madhesh Movement. Despite the differences, however, some striking patterns emerged. What became the pivotal component for me in understanding Madhesi women’s narratives was political claims-making through the deployment of the very discourses that have historically been used to disenfranchise and marginalize Madhesi populations in order to assert belonging in the Nepali nation-state. The political ideology of the Nepali polity has historically revolved around the monarchy, state-backed Hinduism, the Nepali language, and a hill-centric cultural ethos. My respondents talked about Nepali-ness, and their place in the Nepali national imaginary,
very much within this epistemological framework, asserting Nepali citizenship without challenging hegemonic Nepali nationalistic forms. Citizenship claims were very much directed towards recognition by the state which meant that there was great focus on legibility, and women's articulations conveyed a strategic essentialism where a particular understanding of Madhesi-ness was the starting point in order to make demands from the Khas-Arya government.

In the chapters that follow, I will explain how women understood the Madhesi political project and the ways in which they both subverted and subscribed to dominant visions of Nepali nationality. Chapter 1 situates the Madhesis within broader literatures of nationalism, belonging and difference, Chapter 2 traces the emergence of Madhesi-ness as the category for political mobilization. Chapter 3 is an analysis of the inclusions and exclusions in the category of “Nepali” in relation to the status of women, and the complications of national belonging at the border. Chapter 4 talks about experiences of political disenchantment through nostalgia for the monarchy and disdain for Madhesi politicians in contemporary Madhesh.

By showing how Madhesi women's strategies for claiming belonging in the Nepali national community as well as demands for citizenship rights falls within the discursive framework of the Khas-Arya state, my aim is not to imply that the Madhesh Movement is not “radical enough” nor that it has reproduced an exclusionary normative Nepali identity. Rather, it is to show how--as numerous postcolonial theorists have pointed out (Bhaba 1994, Chaterjee 2004), revolt, opposition, and subversion do not emerge in a vacuum, but involve a complex process of negotiation with epistemologies that become normative and commonsensical. My hope is that a critical understanding of Madhesi-ness today can serve
to strengthen its emancipatory potential in the new regime of identity politics in Nepal and expand the meanings of what it is to be a Nepali citizen.
Chapter 1: Whose “National Community?”

Benedict Anderson has famously offered a definition of the nation as an “imagined political community”: “It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (1991, 6). Anderson’s definition presupposes consensus amongst residents of a nation about what national membership entails, but what if the criteria of membership are not co-constructed, but a result of impositions from those who hold the most power? Ideas for Nepali national membership emerge from a particular history of domination and subordination, and the inclusions and exclusions inherent to the process of “imagining” have bearings upon how claims to Nepali citizenship can be made by Madhesi today. In this chapter, I will show how literatures of nationhood, citizenship, recognition, and belonging can illuminate how articulations of Madhesi-ness in the contemporary moment have taken certain forms.

The concept of the nation has historically been explored in relation to two different paradigms-- a primordialist approach that supposes that the nation is a “natural” category founded upon fundamental similarities between people of a certain “heritage,” and a modernist approach that supposes the nation to be a modern ideology and movement. Rogers Brubaker claims that both the “primordialists” and the “constructivists,” who otherwise have widely diverging views of nationhood and nationalism, do not question nations as real entities, both conceive nations as “collective individuals, capable of coherent, purposeful, collective action” (1996, 14). For Brubaker, we should not ask “what is a nation” but rather: how is nationhood as a political and cultural form institutionalized within and among states? How does nation work as a practical category, as a classificatory scheme, as a cognitive frame? What makes the
Brubaker’s line of questioning is useful to think through with regards to the Nepal as an “imagined community” and where Madhesis fall within this imagination. Nepali nationality as a “practical category, as a classificatory scheme, as a cognitive frame” in the way it operates today can be traced back to the nineteenth century. According to historian Richard Burghart, defining what Nepali identity became an important project largely due to greater interactions with colonial India. The demarcation of the border between British India and Nepal in 1816 that sparked the formation of the concept of the Nepali nation-state. Important episodes that played a significant role in the idea of Nepali national identity were “the designation of Nepali as the official language of the Nepali realm, c. 1930,” “the implicit differentiation of the kingship from the state, c. 1960,” and the formation of “cultural uniqueness of the Nepalese state, c. 1960” (Burghart 1984). For Burghart, therefore, a certain commonsensical understanding of the Nepali “national community” coagulated by the 1960s, and the monarchy was integral to the construction of a hegemonic discourse on Nepali nationalism. Burghart emphasizes that in addition to centering the monarchy as essential and inherently Nepali, Nepali nationalism was predicated on the idea of separateness from India.

The fact that Nepal was situated on the periphery of a powerful colonial regime obliged the government to legitimate the basis of its polity in a way that made sense not only to its subjects but also the British, and subsequently, to the government of the Republic of India...the government claims that its boundaries are determined by the territorial distribution of a culturally unique people and that its governmental system is an expression of culturally formed will. In this changing field of intracultural and intercultural relations, one may recognize the features of the
modern nation-state as the Nepalese government legitimates itself on native terms but through foreign eyes (Burghart 1984, 122).

In order to be taken seriously as a national entity by the British Colonial, and after Indian independence, the Republican Indian regime, Nepal legitimated itself as a culturally homogenous group. Difference from India became a defining feature of how Nepali identity was understood. The idea of Nepali as a primordial collective became commonsensical, and was predicated on the construction of India as a powerful--and threatening--“other.”

The implications of difference from India becoming the defining feature of Nepali national identity are large for Madhesis living in the Terai because of the commonalities that they have with north Indians living across the border. Frederick H. Gaige argues that Terai inhabitants’ “religious traditions, languages and the caste system, their food, style of clothes, forms of entertainment and even personal mannerisms are cultural characteristics they share with people who live across the border in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar... North Indian plains culture predominates in the Terai” (Gaige 1975, 12). Because of proximity to Indian-ness, therefore, the incorporation of Madhesis into an imagined community of Nepal that sees India as almost a “pollutant” force proves to be particularly challenging.

According to Gaige,

Anti-Indian-oriented nationalism mobilizes support for the government among middle-class hill people, but it also thwarts the process of national integration, because many hill people have difficulty making the distinction between plains people who are Nepalese citizens and those who are Indian citizens, and some anti-Indian sentiment is automatically transferred to the Terai population (Gaige 1975, 202).
The evolution of Nepali national identity as based on a homogenous “national culture” has constructed Madhesis fundamentally “un-Nepali” and made political belonging in the Nepali nation-state precarious. With alterity thrust upon them based on their ethnic identification, claiming rights and recognition from the Nepali state is challenging for Madhesis. How then, do Madhesis make claims to political belonging in a context where dominant articulations of the national community tell them that they do not belong? It is this question that the next section aims to explore.

**Citizenship, Belonging and Recognition**

Political belonging in the national community has been theorized most extensively with regards to the idea of citizenship. In T.H. Marshall’s canonical formation, citizenship is “full membership in a community with all its rights and obligations” (Marshall 1950). Citizenship, in Marshall’s definition, gives everyone in the national community “the same status as peers in the political public” (Young 1989, 263), but a central tension in the conception of citizenship is that “it starts from one of the great historical paradoxes of modernity-- the fact that the moment of universal emancipation was also the moment of female and racial subordination and exclusion” (Werbner 1998, 2).

Many theorists have studied citizenship with a critical lens on the false universalism of citizenship claims, and according to Pnina Werbner, many have also argued that “universalist invocations of the abstract individual, the bearer of democratic civil and political rights, constitute merely an ideological smokescreen” (Werbner 1998, 2). Werbner believes, however, that although a critique of universalism may be appropriate in the West where political and social rights are relatively well established, the rejection of universal
ideals cannot provide a real understanding of democratic struggles in developing nations. Werbner advocates for a more nuanced engagement with universal citizenship as a discourse circulating in the developing world.

Even when it invokes freedom and equality and masquerades as rational, masculine and universal, citizenship as a discourse is necessarily replete with unmarked inconsistencies and contradictions, precisely because it is embedded in everyday power relations and particularist ideologies. It is nevertheless perpetuated, much like witchcraft, by situational selection and the ad hoc secondary elaborations of belief. These allow its protagonists to continue to believe in the reality of-- in this case-- utopian ideals of freedom and equality (Werbner 1998, 4).

What Werbner sees as the value of paying close attention to the idea of universal citizenship is its power to mobilize people and its evocative strength. That is, even though universal citizenship may be a myth, the idea of individuals who can have duties towards and deserve rights from the state is one that is used for real political change.

Besides the idea of universalism and “inalienable rights of individuals” coming from the liberal political tradition, another way of thinking about citizenship especially with regards to difference has been “cultural citizenship,” theorized by Renato Rosaldo. According to Rosaldo, the central hypothesis of the cultural citizenship project has been “that people in subordinated communities struggle to achieve full enfranchisement and that they search for well-being, dignity and respect in their ordinary everyday lives...cultural citizenship is a process by which rights are claimed and expanded” (Rosaldo 1994, 77). The departure that Rosaldo’s cultural citizenship makes from universal citizenship is that its demand for the “right to be different” is more focused on the micropolitics of belonging within plural communities, whereas universal citizenship is more directly concerned with the state.
Aihwa Ong also uses the idea of cultural citizenship but configures it differently whereby the state remains important, for her, cultural citizenship is a reference to the cultural practices and beliefs “produced out of negotiating the often ambivalent and contested relations with the state and its hegemonic forms that establish the criteria of belonging within the national population and territory. Cultural citizenship is a dual-process of self-making and being-made within webs of power linked to the nation-state and civil society” (Ong 1996, 80).

Citizenship, in the various ways in which it has been studied by social theorists and anthropologists in the twentieth century is no doubt an important way of understanding belonging in the nation-state, but Nira Yuval-Davis argues that thinking about citizenship is not enough and theorizes a politics of belonging—“Politics of belonging encompass and relate both citizenship and identity, adding an emotional dimension which is central to notions of belonging” (Yuval-Davis et al. 2006, 1). For Yuval-Davis, studying political belonging separately from citizenship with reference to “social locations, identifications and emotional attachments, and ethical and political values” (Yuval-Davis 2011, 21) can provide an analytical framework useful for understanding issues surrounding “struggles around the determination of what is involved in social belonging, in being a member of a community, and of what roles specific social locations and specific narratives of identity play in this” (Yuval-Davis 2011, 21). Understandings of political belonging, therefore, move beyond the reciprocal relationship of rights and responsibilities between individuals and the state to offering insights about the ways in which people experience their existence within a state in more symbolic terms.
Belonging in the nation-state and claims-making has also been extensively explored by theorists talking specifically about the politics of recognition. In a foundational essay titled “Politics of Recognition,” Charles Taylor talks about the recognition for one’s “authentic self” by the state as a feature of justice, “non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, reduced mode of being” (Taylor 1994, 25). Recognition, or lack thereof, has a huge implication on how people experience political belonging in that misrecognition excludes certain members of the political community from the national imaginary. For Madhesis, non-recognition as Nepali and misrecognition as Indian is an important factor in how claims to national belonging can be asserted.

Madhesi claims to political belonging in the Nepali national community have changed a great deal from the pre-2007 Maoist era to the 2007 protests to the post-2015 moment. A useful way to think about this evolution is by paying attention to the varying ways in which they have deployed difference over the course of the past two decades. When Madhesi demands were engulfed within the frame of the larger Maoist political agenda, they were making claims to universal citizenship in a Werbnerian sense. Marginalized people; janajatis, Madhesi, lower-caste people, and religious minorities; mobilized through a rhetoric of the political and social rights for all. When the Maoist project failed in 2007 when it was clear that substantive rights for Madhesi was not going to be a priority for leaders in the party, demands for cultural citizenship and recognition from the state began being asserted.

It was no longer enough to talk about a universal subject who deserved rights, but the particular injustices done to ethnically marked communities came to the fore. In other
words, Madhesis started making claims to cultural citizenship as Madhesis, and identity politics became much more salient for people than a Maoist class based discursive framework. In the current Nepali political milieu, ideas of citizenship, belonging and recognition are both discourses mobilized for Madhesi political action as well as useful analytical categories for scholarly research. “Madhesi demands” are demands for formal, procedural equality in the form of universal and cultural citizenship rights, symbolic belonging in the nation-state, and recognition as Nepali from the state and society, subverting the historic misrecognition of Madhesis as Indian.

**Madhesi Heterogeneity**

While the categories of “Madhesi” and “Madhesi woman” are politically very important in the contemporary moment, neither are in any way bounded and unambiguous. Yuval-Davis' invocation to study political belonging intersectionally is an important one.

Even at the same time and in the same place, not all people affect and are affected by specific politics of belonging in the same ways. Intersecting and intermingling social locations along different power grids in society--such as along class, ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, stage in the life cycle and so on--although unstable in themselves, shifting and contested as they are, have crucial effects on the ways different political projects of belonging construct and represent them, the access they have to any decision-making power or any other resources associated with these projects and even the extent to which they are allowed to be included in them at all (Yuval-Davis 2006, 8).

Following Yuval-Davis, I will spend this section talking about difference as it relates to Madhesi identity, and the ways in which multiple axes of inequality color the ways in which demands from the state can be made in Nepal today.
Many forms of inequality and difference determine the ways in which populations can make claims to political belonging in the nation-state. Gender is particularly significant in how certain populations experience and interact with the state. According to Anne McClintock, “the very definition of nationhood rests on the male recognition of identity” and “despite nationalisms’ ideological investment in the idea of popular unity, nations have historically amounted to the sanctioned institutionalization of gender difference” (McClintock 1993, 61). McClintock argues that women have typically been “construed as symbolic bearers of the nation, but...denied any direct relation to national agency” (McClintock 1993, 61). She proposes a feminist theory of nationalism that commits itself to investigating the gendered formation of sanctioned male theories and paying scrupulous attention to the structures of racial, ethnic and class power that continue to bedevil privileged forms of feminism.

Although McClintock acknowledges power and privileges within feminism, some scholars take their critique of feminism further in relation to the constitution of the category of “woman.” For Chandra Talpade Mohanty, it is necessary to challenge the “assumption of women as an already constituted and coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial locations” because it “implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy which can be applied universally and cross-culturally” (Mohanty 1988: 64). In line with Mohanty, Etienne Balibar argues that “from an emancipatory standpoint, gender is not a community” (Balibar 1995, 67). Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has written about women and difference in relation to the postcolonial Indian state, arguing that the state constructs women “primarily in their difference from men by formulating laws and policies specific to them, but also by
differentiating *among them*" (Rajan 2003, 2). For Rajan, the construction of ‘women’ by the state, “both as a unitary category and as a differentiated one--is primarily the work of the state in its governmental function” (Rajan 2003, 2).

This need to question the unitary category of “woman” is crucial when talking about Madhesi women because there is no single “Madhesi woman.” People’s identities are shaped by their caste, class, place of origin, ability, and marital status among other axes of inequality. Homogenizing Madhesi women’s experiences is what Mohanty calls “analytically as well as strategically problematic,” and close attention needs to be paid to how subalternity manifests in unequal ways within people who share one aspect of their identity.

“Madhesi women” are not a singular group, but the role that the state plays in interpelling people into the category is worth considering.Clauses in the new constitution make it next to impossible for a single woman or a woman married to a foreign man to pass Nepali citizenship to her children. Since Madhesi women are traditionally much more likely to marry Indian men, these clauses disentitle them from the procedural and formal equality of politically belonging within the nation-state. According to Ong’s formulation of cultural citizenship, Madhesi women cannot “escape the cultural inscription of state power and other forms of regulation that define the different modalities of belonging” (Ong 1996, 80).

In the following chapters, I take my inspiration from feminist scholars who warn against homogenizing and essentializing any particular kind of “woman.” At the same time, my analysis acknowledges the fact that “making and being made” by the state render particular identifications to be politically salient at particular points in time. I thus explore
questions of Nepali identity through articulations of belonging by Madhesi women while simultaneously problematizing the category as existing a priori. What kinds of life and politics are available to Madhesi women in a regime where only certain kinds of “Nepali-ness” are intelligible to the state?
Chapter 2: Political Mobilization of Madhesis

I went to Janakpur mid-July, in the height of monsoon. Janakpur is, to use the problematic classificatory scheme that many Nepalis do, “more developed” than most places in Terai. Compared to villages in its periphery, it has better infrastructure, but monsoon every year makes the town look effectively ravaged. The absence of sewage paths means that water, mud, trash, human and animal excrement, all combine into a sludge that covers paths across the town. As soon as you exit the center square, you will find sugar-cane fields, narrow paths, and mud-thatched huts in pastoral fields, but the core of Janakpur itself exists as a semi-urban, semi-rural, totally unkempt, somewhat sordid place.

The state of the roads means that people are rendered effectively immobile unless they are either willing or forced to trudge through the muddy paths. Because I would not have time to visit Janakpur at the less mucky time in the summer, I ended up with some difficulty hopping from house to house anyway, showing up to people’s homes with grim sludge-covered bare feet to ask them questions about politics.

Because the sorry state of the roads was on everybody’s mind, that is often what conversations began with, and I found it striking that many women talked about poor infrastructure and lack of maintenance of roads in terms of a specifically Madhesi marginalization. Janaki, whose house was next to a giant (very smelly) pothole exclaimed with bitter sarcasm when I asked her what her demands from the government were—“Look how greaaaat these roads are! So clean! Basically Switzerland! Chee, Madhesi sab ke aadmiye nai ganaichai (They don’t think Madhesis are humans).”

Janaki was not the only one for whom the incompetence and ineffectuality of the government to offer basic goods and services was understood in terms of discrimination
against Madhesis. Beyond Janakpur, even in Birgunj, Suga, and Kalaiya, when women voiced complaints, they did so explicitly as Madhesi citizens. In this chapter, I aim to explore how it is that claims-making through Madhesi-ness became the dominant form of expressing grievances, and ultimately of large scale political mobilization. What did people understand as constitutive of Madhesi identity? How did they come to make demands from the government through asserting their collective identity as Madhesis? In what ways did difference among Madhesis inform the ways in which the political programme was understood? And when were the differences stark enough that “Madhesi-ness” as a mobilizing force reached its limit?

What constitutes a Madhesi collectivity?

If we view Madhesi ethnic identity as a primordial category that exists a priori, there is no need for us to question that people politically mobilize as Madhesis. However a truism of the critical social sciences is that there is nothing natural about people organizing along certain lines instead of others. The fact of Madhesi ethnic collectivity becoming important to people, therefore, is something worthy of close examination. My respondents, in their ideas about who is and is not Madhesi, revealed the ways in which the category is rife with contradictions and contestations, and yet, it remains powerfully salient as an identity through which to express political grievances.

Rambha Devi was a 60 something year old woman that I had a conversation with in Birgunj. I talked to her while she was making rotis for her 5 year old grandson to take to school for lunch on a weekday. She was taken by surprise when I asked her to elaborate on what she thought were things that made one a Madhesi. “You’re a Madhesi,” she said to me,
bemused. "Do you question that you're one of us?" When I asked her if she could take a shot at defining the word Madhesi for me, she said "I mean, we are Madhesi because we are born in Terai. People who are born in Terai are Madhesi. People who are born in Pahad are Pahadis. It isn't more complicated than that." I asked her if the fact that I was born in Kathmandu, in the heart of Pahad, made me Pahadi and not Madhesi, she said: "Well it isn't just about where you were born, it's about culture. You are of a Maithili culture. You speak Maithili and have a Maithili culture so you are Madhesi and a Maithili woman."

Lata, a bank-teller in Birgunj who was probably in her mid-40s, was a Nepali-speaking woman who would register as Pahadi to anyone who met her, and she expressed some definitional concerns that pointed to the ways in which Madhesi-ness is not always clear cut.

I was born in Hetauda and then moved to Lalbandi and then I have lived in Janakpur ever since then. I speak Maithili, I speak Nepali. I celebrate Dashain and I celebrate Chhath. When I go to Kathmandu, they call me 'Marsya' and when I am here they call me 'Pahadiya', this is all made-up, we are all Nepali and need to live in harmony.

While Lata's response to feeling alienated from Madhesi-ness as well as Pahadi-ness was to critique the political legitimacy of ethnic categories in and of themselves, what is important about her account is the way in which it shows that the rigidity of the categories is often artificial. Because Madhesi-ness is simultaneously ethnic, linguistic, and geographical, there are ways in which it is available as an identity marker for people in certain ways and times.

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2 Both towns in the Terai region
3 Dashain is a festival often associated with Pahadis while Chath is predominantly celebrated by Terai-dwellers
4 Derogatory terms for Pahadi and Madhesi
and not others. The important criteria to Madhesi-ness differ starkly from person to person depending on her social location.

For example, I talked to Sunaina in Kalaiya. She was decked in large amounts of gold jewelry and clearly of great wealth. Her account of Madhesi-ness consisted of an emphasis on unique cultural characteristics.

Everybody is proud of the culture they are born in and so am I. Our lifestyle, clothing, food, way of life, everything is unique. We value propriety and modesty. We value respect for our elders, Madhesi culture is about being traditional and about having laaj (shame).

Sunaina was proud of unique cultural traits that she understood as inherent to being Madhesi, but when asked about the Madhesh protests, she said “I don’t think about these things very much, maar-kaat [violence and bloodshed]. We should all be thinking about peace.” For her, a strong identification as Madhesi did not mean that she had a strong investment in the political demands of Madhesis as a people.

What Rambha Devi, Lata and Sunaina’s accounts of Madhesi-ness show is that the meanings of the term vary greatly, and the fact that the Madhesh protests emerged as it did cannot be explained in terms of an activation of a certain ‘ethnic block’ that always existed as coherently formed and mutually recognized. In other words, Madhesis did not politically organize as Madhesi because there was an agreement on the primordial origins of the group or any naturally existing tribal affiliation. The category of Madhesi-ness needed to be consolidated politically for the protests to occur, and the way in which this consolidation happened is what I turn to analyzing in the next section.
Legibility of Discrimination

When you walk the streets here, how many young men do you see loitering about? Do they have any jobs? Pahadi kids, as soon as they are out of school they manage to get jobs. Our kids, they just loiter. When you go to the hospital, do they give you a proper checkup? No, no they don’t. Pahadis like to be above, and they want to keep us down.

-Munni, mid-30s, Birgunj

When we apply for jobs, Madhesi quotas, Pahadi quotas, Janajati quotas are there. If you apply through the Madhesi quota, they will say you are ‘uneligible’ [sic]. When there is open competition, with no quotas, I promise you that Madhesis would get all the jobs. But when Madhesi quotas are in place, it is a way to filter out qualified applicants. This is obviously discrimination. If you go to a bank in Birgunj, you will see only Pahadis. Even if the Pahadi candidate is unqualified, whether he/she has the knowledge or not, he/she will get the job. No matter how much we struggle, we don’t get jobs.

-Pragya, mid-20s, Suga

Munni and Pragya are from very different socioeconomic backgrounds. Munni works as a house-maid for many upper-caste families in the Chapkaiya neighborhood in Birgunj, moving from one household to the next during the course of a day, cooking, washing dishes, mopping, babysitting, picking up and dropping kids off from school. She has three children, one son, who graduated from high school last year (‘+2,’ as it is known in Nepal) and two daughters, one of whom had just gotten married to a man in Patna and one who is in 6th grade and also works as household help during non-school hours, washing peoples dishes and clothes. Munni wears sindoor on her forehead and a mangalsutra, so she probably has a husband, but he did not come up in conversation.

Pragya has a bachelor’s degree. Her father is a high school science teacher at Damodar School in Jaleswar, a nearby town, and her mother is a housewife. She had just gotten fired from a banking job when I talked to her, and was looking for a new job. She had

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5 Vermillion applied at the parting line of a woman’s hair and a black and gold beaded necklace, markers of marital status
found the process to be daunting and frustrating and believed that the main reason things had been so difficult for her was the fact that she was Madhesi.

Munni and Pragya’s accounts exemplify how economic disenfranchisement across class lines is legible to people through the framework of ethnic discrimination. Considering the economic condition of Nepal in the current moment and the high levels of unemployment, complete lack of a social safety net, and a generalized sense of bad governance, it isn’t necessarily true that Pahadis are universally well-off while Madhesis are not. However, in the understanding of many of my informants, the point is not that opportunities across the board for Nepalis are limited. Rather, the opportunities that are available all go to Pahadis, and Madhesis are the most vulnerable.

Madhesi disenfranchisement was often talked about in the same breath as Pahadi privilege, and the most common sentence I heard from my interviewees, across cities, age groups, economic status, and caste was “Pahadi sab bahut hepaichai (The Pahadis discriminate against us).” Sunaina, the wealthy woman from Kalaiya, had the following to say about the conscious exclusion of Madhesis by Pahadi actors.

We don’t think ourselves to be different from Pahadis, but they do. They are very conscious of the ways in which they are different and hepaichai (discriminate). Isn’t that what’s happening? In our behavior and dealings, we are steadfast. We have never thought of ourselves as weak. We want unity and to get along, but Pahadis will not treat us with even the most basic respect.

My informants expressed grievances that were wide in breadth and scope: lack of access to clean water and good roads, rude treatment by medical professionals, romantic rejections, difficulty in obtaining legal paperwork, and most frequently, lack of good jobs. What was common in people’s narratives was the idea of Madhesi exclusion predicated on the privileges of Pahadis. Pahadis were understood as having proximity to power that
Madhesis did not, and the baseline of what I heard from many of my respondents was “We are Madhesi because we are not Pahadi and because we are not Pahadi we suffer.”

There is a widespread consensus that Pahadis have accrued wealth, state benefits and services, as well as social power at the expense of a generalized Madhesi other. This seems to be at least one important reason why the category of Madhesi holds such political potency. People understood their sometimes highly individual circumstances as part of a large scale scheme of exclusion by those with most power in the nation-state. This is why Pragya and Munni, from different towns, speakers of different languages (Pragya talked to me in Maithili while Munni in Hindi), different castes and different classes, could rally behind a common political programme as first and foremost Madhesi. The women I talked to believed that if the state granted them rights as Madhesi, the various slights they felt and disadvantages they dealt with in their day-to-day existence would be alleviated.

These Madhesis were effectively making claims to cultural citizenship in a Rosaldian sense, which is an assertion of belonging in the nation-state despite cultural difference from mainstream Nepali society. It is useful, however, to understand Madhesi cultural citizenship through an Ong-ian lens as well. Ong critiques Rosaldo’s conception of cultural citizenship as attending “to only one side of unequal power relationships” (Ong 1996, 80). “It gives the erroneous impression that cultural citizenship can unilaterally constructed and that immigrant or minority groups can escape the cultural inscription of state power and other forms of regulation that define the different modalities of belonging” (Ong 1996, 80). For Ong, it is important to pay attention to cultural citizenship as a mode of subjectification -- the simultaneous making and being made by the state. Placing Rosaldo and Ong’s differing conceptions of cultural citizenship together to understand Madhesi
claims to belonging, it appears as though the conscious project of the Madhesh Movement is a Rosaldian assertion of belonging, but the very fact of Madhesi identity being mobilized to make cultural claims is a product of state subjectification that marks certain people as Madhesis. In other words, Madhesi claims to cultural citizenship emerge from the ways in which the regulatory schemes of the state have produced Madhesi subjects.

While state subjectification as well as people's mobilization of difference play a part in cultural citizenship claims as Madhesis, this does not mean that the category is robust and free from tensions and fissures. Many of my informants were hyper-conscious of the fact that not all Madhesi needed or wanted the same things, and that 'Madhesi' demands necessarily needed to prioritize and de-prioritize issues that affected different people in differential ways. In the next section, I will talk about some of the ways in which the category of 'Madhesi' to make demands becomes less useful.

Fault Lines

I talked to two neighbours, Komal and Kamakshi, mid-morning on a hot summer day in Birgunj. Their children had been sent off to school and they were sitting in the courtyard, chatting and taking a brief rest before they started making preparations for lunch. When I asked them if they would be interested in talking to me about the Madhesh protests, they initially thought that I was part of an NGO and were dismissive-- “Tora sab sanke kateb abai chai, hamar sab ke faida kathu nai (There are so many like you who come to gather information and make money from it, we get absolutely nothing in return).” When I explained I was a student, both women warmed up, brought me some juice, and talked in
great detail about support for the protests, disillusionment with politicians, and discontent at the state of affairs.

Komal and Kamakshi were both adamant that the protests were absolutely necessary. "We've been suffering for such a long time," said Komal "If the protests hadn't happened now they would think that we would take their shit for another hundred years."

Neither woman had schooling past middle school, but they both talked about historical continuities of injustice in poignant ways. The talked about the horrors of the Panchayat regime, betrayal by the Maoists, and the need to take back power from the repressive state. Both women were broadly in agreement about many political issues, but when the conversation turned to economic inequality as it related to being Madhesi, Komal's account was very different from Kamakshi's.

Komal claimed that rich Madhesis who could afford to pay bribes were no different from Pahadis. "Garib na mara ta (It's the poor who die)," she said. She talked about the blockade and the fact that rich Madhesis were able to buy grains at a hundred times the market rate, while poor people, unable to access even essential goods, literally starved. She talked about the ways in which in the lawlessness that characterises much of Nepali public life, ethnicity is of less relevance than the money one is able to expend on getting things done through extra-legal means. Kamakshi, on the other hand, was adamant that wealth could only take a rich Madhesi person so far, and ultimately, no amount of disposable cash could account for the "ghrina (disgust)" that characterises Pahadi attitudes towards Madhesi.

Komal and Kamakshi's disagreement points to the ways in which political mobilization of group identity often involves a certain level of homogenization that
obfuscates very real differences and power hierarchies that can render interests of sub-groups contradictory to each other. Komal and Kamakshi were talking about class, but considering the ways in which wealth and familial lineage are tied in southern Nepal, they were also talking about caste. The Madhesh protests, in being about Pahadi discrimination against Madhesis and state negligence, could not be about the oppression of lower-caste Madhesis, or for that matter, Nepalis, by upper-caste people. An awareness of the fact that the interests of upper-caste Madhesis were likely to be centered in demands made from the government seemed played a part in the extreme resentment many of my respondents felt towards politicians. Because politicians and an expanding class of political middlemen often hailed from backgrounds of wealth and/or affiliations with criminal organizations, for many lower-caste Madhesis, supporting the Madhesh protests required them to overlook the fact that even if federalism was granted on so-called Madhesi terms, not all Madhesis would benefit in the same way.

Because I was talking only to women, the most striking suspension of difference for a higher Madhesi cause became most clear to me in its relationship with gender. Many of my informants talked about the ways in which they faced challenges not only in the public sphere but also in their own homes. Moni, a young woman in Kalaiya who was probably under 20, just-married, with henna on her palms and lahathis\(^6\) on her wrists had the following to say about Madhesi girls

Madhesi girls have never gotten the chance to get ahead, in education, in household work. Our culture is bad for women. The view is, what are girls going to do from studying? The treatment is very different. The discrimination is not true for Pahadi women. For them, both husband and wife work and earn money. Madhesi men will say “I will earn money, you take care of the household. Don’t get a job, don’t leave the home.”

\(^6\) Special bangies married women wear for a couple of months after marriage
The fact that a bad Madhesi culture was posited as one that was in opposition to a good Pahadi one is worth noting, but what I want to highlight here is Moni’s recognition of gender-based discrimination as an important aspect of social reality. However, when I asked Moni if there were any needs that Madhesi women had that were different from that of men in the protests, she simply said “No. The Madhesi cause is for everyone, our sons and our daughters, fathers and mothers.”

Moni’s elevation of the ‘Madhesi cause’ as being more important than the particular difficulties faced by Madhesi women can be understood with reference to the absence of a self-consciously feminist political programme in Nepal, something that Seira Tamang has written extensively about. According to Tamang, the proliferation of Non-Governmental Organizations’ projects to uplift “illiterate, backward Nepali women from poverty” in the post 1990 moment is the backdrop against which a national women’s movement has been unable to coagulate. Tamang argues that Madhesi women’s absence from development programmes targeted towards Nepali women has played a part in why many Madhesi women do not articulate their needs in gendered terms.

Compared to Janajati and Dalit women, Madhesi women have not been as successful in pushing their agendas via NGOs. The sphere and activities of NGOs and civil society in the Madhes is comparatively smaller because of the historical neglect by the state and foreign aid-giving agencies. Exemplifying this is the fact that the draft DFID/World Bank report on social exclusion in Nepal, which was completed in June 2005, did not have a chapter on the Madhes (Tamang 2009, 71).

The reason this is important is that the Nepali “women’s movement,” with its strong ties to post-1990 NGO led developmentalism, has excluded Madhesis, and as a consequence, Madhesi women’s issues are not seen to be in the gambit of women’s issues at large. Like Moni, therefore, many Madhesi women often choose to heighten their ethnic identity
concerns, while gender discrimination and violence are not be understood as being part of the ethnic movement.

The veiling of women’s concerns was something that was most apparent to me in what my respondents had to say about sexual violence by armed forces during the protests. Women made oblique responses to harassment and assault by the military. Pragya brought up the fact that the police “touched women in ways that they shouldn’t have,” but she framed this as separate from the protests, an unfortunate occurrence. Gender violence was not something that women saw as a Madhesi grievance, and the rights of women were not part of what the Madhesis were fighting for.

The unique predicament of women in the new constitution, especially as it related to cross-border marriages with Indian men and the consequences this would have on their citizenship status, was something that was occasionally brought up as an issue of concern. But even though concerns pertaining to Madhesi of different positionalities were recognized, the movement itself was ultimately a pan-ethnic, agendered one organized around the collective suffering understood by all Madhesis. Inter-group differences could not be adequately addressed with the rubrics and vocabulary of the movement.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to show how the category of Madhesi as unified through the experience of political grievance was clearly successful in rousing much of the Terai dwelling population. It captured people's imaginations in a way that allowed for unprecedented political action. However, in politicizing a primary 'Madhesi' identity, there was a temporary suspension of other forms of difference and mass participation in the
movement was predicated upon the depoliticization of other identities. My respondents talked about the Madhesh movement as concerned with the ethnic collective and did not articulate gender difference as being important at all. And yet, the particularly precarious status of women played a part in the discursive strategies for claims-making that Madhesi women deployed. In the next chapter, I will explore the ways in which although women do not talk about their grievances in gendered terms, gender plays a part in how women make claims as Madhesis.
Chapter 3: Women at the Border and National Belonging

Mahima is a woman in her 40s who was born in a village in Sitamarhi district in Bihar, India, to a middle-class ethnically Yadav (“lower caste”) family. She has two older sisters, both of whom married Yadav men in Uttar Pradesh (also in India) when she was very young. When Mahima was 15, the patriarch of a Yadav family from Mahottari, Nepal came to find a “light-skinned, domestically oriented, soft-spoken wife” for his oldest son, who was 22. He talked to a couple of Yadav families, and decided that Mahima was the best fit for his son. Mahima was soon married to Pravesh, a Nepali man who owned a small grocery store in Suga. After the wedding, Mahima travelled from her nahira (natal home) to sasura (marital home) back and forth every month for a couple of years till she finished high school, and then she moved to Suga permanently, and has been living there with her husband ever since. They run the grocery store together, with help from one of their grandsons. She tries to go to Sitamarhi once or twice every year, usually for weddings and funerals, but as she has aged, her knees have become bad and she cannot go to her nahira very often.

Mahima’s life trajectory is like that of many Madhesi women who reside in Southern Nepal. Cross-border caste endogamous marriages are the norm, and almost every Madhesi family living in Nepal has familial networks that extend to India. When I asked Mahima whether she thought she was Indian or Nepali or both, she said, “My household is in Nepal, all my children were born here and I have lived here for so long, how could I possibly be Indian?”

This chapter is an exploration of how women like Mahima negotiate their position within the Nepali nation-state. How do Madhesi women born in India and Madhesi women
born in Nepal experience Nepali-ness differently? What are the strategies Madhesi women use in order to make citizenship claims within the framework of a Madhesi political subjectivity? I argue that because the national status of Madhesi women at the border is so precarious, women make claims for rights and for material goods on behalf of their Nepali children through what Pnina Werbner calls “political motherhood.”

Gender and National boundaries

Much of the literature on gender and the nation has focused on the centrality of women to the national project, primarily as its biological and cultural reproducers and as the producers and maintainers of ethnic and national boundaries (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989, McClintock 1993). According to Tamar Mayer,

One of the most important aspects of the relationship between women and the nation is the fact that control of women’s reproduction carries with it control of women’s bodies and women’s behavior, for women’s bodies (along with territory) are where the nation constructs its identity. Because women’s bodies are so entangled with the nation’s identity...they become the battleground not only between men and women but also between men of one nation and the men of another. Women who defy the hegemonic ideology are outside the group, they are ‘them’ in us-them constructions of the nation; they are the enemy, and in this sense, mark the boundaries of the nation (Mayer 2004, 157).

Madhesi women, who frequently straddle the Nepal-India border through marital ties, complicate Nepali national identity through border-crossings. As a consequence, they are subjected to the most stringent of state-regulatory regimes. An ‘ideal’ or Nepali family for the Nepali state would involve a Nepali man married to a Nepali woman who reproduces ‘pure’ Nepali children. For Madhesi families at the border, the unit of the family is not a corollary to the unit of the ‘national’ family, which renders Madhesi women an almost polluting force. This calls for Madhesi women, both Indian and Nepal-born, to find various
strategies to make cultural citizenship claims from the Nepali-state in highly gendered ways. This is not to say that demands are made as women, the agendered category of ‘Madhesi’ subsumes any possibility for a political project that is primarily about the concerns of women. Rather, within the context of demanding rights as Madhesis, the precarious condition of women with regards to their national-affiliation means that the discursive strategies they use to make claims end up being different than those available to men.

India and Nepal: Exchanging Daughters and Bread

A phrase I heard repeatedly from Maithili-speaking women across different towns was that there is a “beti-roti ke sambandha” between India and Nepal. This translates into “Daughter and bread relationship.” Daughters end up being ‘exchanged’ cross-nationally through marriage; and food, amongst other aspects of culture, is shared amongst people north and south of the Bihar-Uttar Pradesh-Terai border. Like Mahima, most women who were born in India that I talked to firmly stated that since their households were in Nepal, they had given “tyaag (sacrificed)” their Indian citizenship, but this was not a universally held sentiment. Some women challenged the notion that marrying into a family living in Nepal made them Nepali by default.

During an adult literacy class in Birgunj, I talked to two women, Mamata and Sangeeta. Mamata was born in India while Sangeeta was born in Nepal. This is the exchange that took place between them:

Mamata: (Smiling) I am Indian. I believe in Modi-Sarkar [government]. Nepal sarkais completely useless
Sangeeta: Heyy what a liar
Mamata: How am I lying? I was born in India, obviously I am Indian
Sangeeta: Well, what if you were born in India? Women have no jaat [caste]. As soon as you got married to a Nepali man, you became Nepali. Your household is here, you work here, your children were born here, you are not Indian, you are Nepali.

This exchange demonstrates the way in which national affiliation is understood in patrilineal terms by most women, and when some India-born women try to assert Indian identity, they are critiqued. There is no possibility of a both-and, as national identification is often understood as necessarily singular. One of my respondents, Lata, also born in India, said: “When I am in my nahira I am Indian, when I am in my sasura, I am Nepali.” Her mother-in-law, Bhumika, promptly chastised her. “What is this Indian business, as soon as you married into a family here you stopped being Indian, you are Nepali.”

Madhesi women born in India often talk about themselves as Nepali, and when they refuse to do so and claim to be Indian, they are policed by Madhesi women born in Nepal. Part of the reason why Madhesi women are insistent upon separating themselves from India is the anxiety of being Madhesi as “not Nepali enough.” Because difference from India is the central tenet of how hegemonic Nepali nationality is conceptualized, Madhesis are easily excluded from the national community as Indian interlopers. Strong insistence on women born in India as having ‘shed’ their Indian-ness is a way to assert the Madhesi claims to cultural citizenship in the Nepali national body as ‘authentic.’ The adage of “beti-roti ke sambandha” and “women have no jaat” outside of marriage is a convenient way to try to maintain the Nepali-Indian binary and assert belonging in the Nepali national community. The logic in operation is that if women born in India become Nepali as soon as they marry a Nepali man, their Indian-ness cannot be used to invalidate Madhesi claims to Nepali citizenship.

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7 Caste, lineage, or ethnic belonging
“I have documents to prove it”

While the adage “beti-roti ke sambandha” and patriliny-based explanations for who is and is not Nepali seem to suggest that the transition from ‘being’ Indian to ‘becoming’ Nepali is seamless, there are ways in which Nepal-born Madhesi women are sometimes still insistent on separating themselves from Indian-ness by distinguishing themselves from people who were born in India. Moni, who I talked to in Kalaiya, had just gotten married, and moved from Mathiyani, which is very close to the border with Bihar. This is what she had to say about her nationality:

It is true that some people here are Bihari, there is no doubt about it at all. Many Indians have established settlements here. Me, my grandparents and my parents are all from Nepal, 100% Nepali. I have documents to prove it, my birth certificate, citizenship certificate, all are from Nepal.

Moni’s reference to ‘father and grandfather’ and birth in Nepal was not unique. Many Madhesi women asserted that their Nepali nationality was a consequence of them being born in Nepal, plain and simple. By using birth and possession of documents to prove citizenship, however, these women excluded Indian-born women from the category of Nepali. Like Moni, many women did believe that some Madhesis, even those who were living in Nepal, were in fact, Bihari, and therefore less Nepali than them.

Some Nepal-born women talked about wanting to distance themselves from India-born women and not wanting any ‘Indians’ in their family. Sapana, whose son was “of marriageable age” (he was 19) was on the lookout for a suitable bride for him, and sitting outside the temple, chatting with her neighbour about the difficulties of finding “good Bhumiyar girl.”

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8 A ‘lower’ caste/ethnic sub-group
There are so few Bhumiyar girls in Nepal these days worthy of marriage. They all have degree-shegree and are too big for their shoes. Even so, I’m finding a Nepali bride for my son. No Indians in my family.

When I asked Sapana why she was hesitant to find a good Bhumiyar girl from India, she cheekily responded “ohina (No reason at all).” This evasion may have had to do with her reading of me as an urbanite who would shun her for expressing beliefs about Nepali national superiority, but I have no way of knowing for sure. A more concrete articulation of prejudice against India-born women was offered by Pratishtha, a Maoist politician who I spoke to in Janakpur.

Pratishtha has a Master’s Degree in economics from Tribhuvan University, one of the only public universities in Nepal. She is from a Yadav family, and she claimed that while many Yadavs don’t let their daughters get very much education because of their ‘backwardness,’ her father was a schoolteacher and encouraged her to prioritize school all her life. She got married at the age of 18 to a man from a village next to hers (in Nepal), and she had parents-in-law who were happy to ‘let’ her continue attending classes as long as she stayed on top of taking care of things in the home. Pratishtha husband was a science teacher at the local high school and very well-respected, but about 10 years ago, he very suddenly suffered from a undiagnosed brain disorder that made him unable to work for money. Family tensions heightened because of his condition, and she moved with him from their village to the town of Janakpur. For the first couple of years of living in Janakpur, Pratishtha held various primary school teaching jobs, but upon encouragement from neighbours and friends who noted her charisma and networking abilities, she was encouraged to get into politics. She knew somebody who was in the Maoist party and decided to join.
I talked to Pratishtha in her home in Janakpur. Her husband, who cannot speak or walk very well anymore, brought me pakoras and juice while I talked to her. Most of Pratishtha’s answers to my questions were rehearsed cliches that sounded like excerpts from public speeches (“Madhesh is burning with passion and rage! What we need is even more rage so that we can show this shitshow of the government what we are capable of! We will never lose!”). But when asked about whether she thought India-born women married to Nepali men should have the same rights as Nepal-born women or not, she offered an elaborate, thought out response.

No. You might not want to hear this but I’ll tell you why. See, India is more developed than Nepal, and the women in India have made more progress than we have here. More of them go to and finish school, get good education, become qualified for government positions. Then they get married to men here and compete for Nepali government jobs. Because their life opportunities have been so much better than ours, they are likely to do better in lok-sewa [civil service] exams, and get jobs that we should be getting. Some jobs need to be for our betis [daughters] so they don’t continue to fall behind.

I did not hear specific sentiments quite like Pratishtha’s in relation to natural-born citizens getting access to certain jobs from other women, but Pratishtha’s position as a popular leader of a political party in Janakpur makes her viewpoint significant. In drawing an explicit distinction between India-born and Nepal-born women, she is pointing to the way in which a certain understanding of national belonging does come into play in the political project even though the Madhesh movement is explicitly against mainstream Nepali nationalism that excludes Madhesis.

Because being seen as “Indian infiltrators” who have no basis for making claims from the Nepali state is a cause of anxiety for Madhesis, Nepal-born Madhesi women
articulate themselves as more Nepali than India-born women in order to assert that
Madhesi claims to Nepali national belonging are legitimate.

There is a way in which India-born women are thrown under the bus in a symbolic
sense, in the Madhesi political project. While they are expected to stop seeing themselves
as Indian and devote themselves wholly to Nepal, they are still not ‘as Nepali’ as somebody
born in Nepal is considered to be. This seeming paradox-- by which Madhesis both
interpellate and alienate India-born women—is a consequence the tensions that are ever­
present for those at the border. Ethnicity does not directly map on to the arbitrary borders
of nation-states, and subjects need to find ways to reconcile their frameworks of who is and
is not ‘one of them’ within the rigidity of national identification. Many people who live in
Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have much in common, linguistically, culturally, and ritually, with
people in Terai, and in a sense, they are all Madhesi. Yet, to use Madhesi as a category to
make demands from the Nepali nation-state, there needs to be a distancing from all things
Indian. This is why India-born women are told to shed their Indian-ness to be Nepali
through their husbands, while many Nepali-born women continue to hold on to a notion of
themselves as ‘more Nepali’ than those born in India in order to legitimize their claims to a
uniquely Nepali Madhesi-ness. Ultimately, because prejudices against Madhesis are framed
around the idea of all Madhesis being Indian, Madhesi people engage in discursive practices
to claim Nepali-ness by adhering to a Nepali-Indian binary where one has to ‘tyaag’
[sacrifice] some ‘essence’ of being Indian in order to be a Nepali subject.

Yet although Nepali-born women sometimes make an effort to separate themselves
from India-born women as “more authentically Nepali,” it is important to note that
ultimately, for the government and powerful forces within the nation, ultimately, any and
all Madhesis can be excluded as Indian. Nepal-born women’s claims to ‘authentic’ Nepali nationality through birth is a discursive strategy to claim belonging in the national community. But as Ong’s critique of Rosaldo’s cultural citizenship shows, unilateral constructions of self as belonging to a particular community is not enough-- the ways in which people are read by the state are just as important. Ultimately, while Moni (born in Nepal) may see herself as more Nepali than Mahima (born in India), both Madhesi women are not Nepali enough in the eyes of the dominant national culture. Regardless of country of birth, therefore, Madhesi women’s claims from the state cannot be made in terms of identification with Nepali-ness, and claims-making through difference is more effective than claims for universal Nepali citizenship.

The next section explores how political motherhood emerges as a way in which Madhesi women, regardless of their country of birth, are able to make demands of the state. Because individual claims by Madhesi women are so easily dismissed by the Nepal government, women need to draw attention away from themselves and emphasize their status as mothers in the national body in order to make claims to citizenship.

Political Motherhood

Just as demanding Madhesi cultural citizenship is about an emphasis on difference in order to make demands from the state, Madhesi women assert claims specifically in terms of the fact that they are mothers. Pnina Werbner’s notion of political motherhood is useful in understanding this phenomenon. Drawing from Jennifer Schrimer’s analysis of ‘motherist’ movements in Latin America, Werbner describes political motherhood as the process of the feminization of citizenship, whereby “maternal qualities-- caring,
compassion, responsibility for the vulnerable" are valorized as "encompassing and anchored in democratic values" (Werbner 1999, 221). For Werbner, political motherhood is about making claims to citizenship not *despite* being women, but through the introduction of "new human qualities into the public sphere, and to define them as *equally* foundational in the legitimation of a political community." (Werbner 1999, 221). In other words, for Werbner, political motherhood involves demands for citizenship based upon the characteristics associated with being a mother.

For Werbner, political mothers, through their status as mothers, are making claims to citizenship for themselves. An introduction of ‘motherly’ characteristics into claims for citizenship is necessarily about the challenging of the public-private divide. For Madhesi women, however, discourses of motherhood appeared to be not about *self*, but a politics of futurity oriented towards children. Women I talked to evoked their children and their ‘squandered futures’ with great frequency during interviews. When I asked about what it is that the Madhesh movement was about, responses were almost universally about wanting better lives for children.

Runa was a washerwoman who I talked to in the village Suga, and she spoke with great passion about the Madhesh movement and what it meant to her. She talked about her reasons for supporting and participating in the protests as being about having children whose future she was worried about.

> See, I'm withered and old. I do my job, go home, eat, sleep, my life is going as it is. But my children, it breaks my heart to see them waste their lives away because there is nothing to do. I have been working this hard all my life to send my kids to school, to make their lives less miserable than mine, but my son loiters the streets, doing nothing, he can’t find a job because there are no jobs.
Runa’s response was far from uncommon. When women talked about political demands, they hardly ever phrased things in terms of what they needed, it was always about what needed to happen for the children. For Werbner, political motherhood is about making citizenship claims through an emphasis on difference-- women should get rights not despite their status as mothers, but precisely because of it. My respondents complicated this notion to a certain degree. They were making demands as mothers, but it was not about valorizing maternal traits in order to make individual claims. Instead, the claims were about what the nation owed to the children. It is important to point to the compulsion from which this emphasis on futurity emerges. Women were not talking about their children and not themselves because they had no demands from the state as individual citizens. Rather, knowing that their individual demands could easily be discredited as non-Nepali and inauthentic, talking about their Nepali children was the only viable means through which to make political claims.

The primary reason why political motherhood plays out in this way in Madhesh where claims for selves are not made by women has to do with the precarity of women’s statuses at the border-- and anxieties surrounding being seen as a ‘pollutant’ to the nation-state. Because so many Madhesi women were born in India, and even when born in Nepal, they are so often dismissed as Indian, making demands as individuals is not an effective strategy to assert national belonging. Talking about children born in Nepal, “pure” citizens, creates a discursive distance from India, thus potentially legitimating Madhesi demands in the eyes of the Nepali state.
In an article about Vietnamese marriage migrants in Singapore, Brenda S.A. Yeoh et al. talk about how the negotiation of citizenship rights for foreign-born women is dependent on the unit of the family:

The politics of inclusion/exclusion at the family/household level impinges directly on their (weak) positioning within the nation-state...immigrant wives are inserted into the geobody of the nation-state as dependents of their husbands, and can only be legitimately incorporated into the nation-state via their roles and identities within the ‘family’ (as wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law) (Yeoh et al. 2013, 149).

This distinction between incorporation at the level of the family and incorporation into the national-body is useful in understanding the status of India-born women. The terms of belonging for India-born Madhesi women into the national Nepali body are contingent upon their status as wives and mothers of people born in Nepal. Their link to Nepali-ness is established within the context of their family relations, but as individuals, they do not have a basis through which they can make demands from the Nepali state.

So far, I have talked about the ways in which Madhesi women demand rights in a liberal enlightenment sense, something Marshall talks about with reference to civil and political citizenship. Civil citizenship, for Marshall, consists of “the rights necessary for individual; freedom—liberty of the person; freedom of speech, thought, and faith; the right to own property and to conclude valid contracts; and the right to justice” (Marshall 1950, 94). Political citizenship is the right to “participate in the exercise of political power, as a member of a body invested with political authority or as an elector of the members of such a body” (1950, 4). A third dimension of citizenship, for Marshall, is social citizenship, which encompasses “the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society.” (1950, 4). My respondents were
making claims to political, civil, and social citizenship, but their claims went beyond asking for rights. Their demands were often very rooted in material goods and benefits that they believed their children were entitled to. In the next section, I turn to James Ferguson’s analysis of the politics of distribution to try to understand material claims-making as political praxis of marginalized communities.

**Politics of Distribution**

Bhagyalata was a newly married woman whom I talked to in Birgunj. Local norms dictate that newly married women be bashful, not speak too loudly, not look people in the face, not be particularly opinionated. While of course, resistance to these norms is plentiful and there are numerous outspoken women around, at least around older family members, many women often take pains to appear quiet and meek.

Bhagyalata did not care. I went into her house in the middle of the day, when she was serving lunch to her husband and her father-in-law. Their house was small and the only place where I could talk to her would be where the men were eating. Aware that for many women I had spoken to earlier, answering interview questions about politics around their father-in-laws would be awkward, I told Bhagyalata that I could come talk to her at a later time. She insisted that it was totally fine despite her father-in-law’s disapproving glances. “He thinks he’s the king of the world,” she whispered to me when she pulled me to the side, “more like a balding old bully!”

She was very vocal about her stance on the Madhesh movement and her criticism of the police and armed forces. She described in vivid detail castrations and mutilations that she thought they deserved. Her father-in-law did not say anything but made annoyed
grunting sounds and chewed loudly and censorially. When Bhagyalata began talking about what she wanted from the government, she used the language of motherhood, despite not being a mother herself yet:

In India, kids get bicycles to go to school, they get good lunches. Our kids, ghanta! (nothing). This harami sarkar gives us nothing at all. In India they have fuel, food, rations, why won’t this government give us anything? Our kids deserve to have bicycles and food and an education, to have better lives than we do. If Indians can have that, why can’t we?

Bhagyalata’s use of the Indian government as the referent for a ‘good’ government is interesting in its own right because of the way in which she dismissed Indian-born women as “those Biharis!” later on during our conversation. But what I want to call attention to here is the fact of motherhood being a mode of claims-making for women regardless of whether they themselves have maternal status or not. The reference to our kids was one that held potency for many women, and political motherhood was available as a discursive strategy for actual mothers and non-mothers alike.

What is also notable about her statement is direct claims from the state for material goods such as bicycles, food and fuel on behalf of the children. Bhagyalata was not alone in asserting that the government owed Madhesis actual material goods-- many of my respondents often went beyond asking for rights and recognition to talk about how a good government was one that gave people things.

James Ferguson’s insights on the inadequacy of the language of rights-based politics is useful in understanding how many Madhesi women understand the role of the government. According to Ferguson, “while a language of ‘rights’ often dominates the discursive field of contemporary politics...key contemporary demands for ‘service delivery’ in fact invoke a kind of distributive politics that is both more fundamental, and sometimes
more politically potent, than the neoliberal ‘rights talk’ within which it is often subsumed” (Ferguson 2015, 47). Ferguson argues that a “direct claim to material goods is rather more forceful than the affirmation of legal abstractions such as rights, even when those rights explicitly go beyond the traditional ‘liberal’ package of political and civil rights to address socioeconomic conditions such as housing” (Ferguson 2015, 48). Most of my respondents talked about Madhesi hakk (rights) and the language of rights was very salient, but this existed alongside a demand for access to actual goods. My respondents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, in particular, understood the state as having responsibilities of care that they were failing to deliver. Ferguson’s intervention is important in demonstrating that political belonging goes beyond the symbolic-- for the most marginalized, abstract “equality of opportunity” is not enough, there needs to be equality in outcome.

**Conclusion**

My goal in this chapter has been to show some of the ways in which Madhesi women make claims, for rights and for goods and services, from the Nepali state, through a complex negotiation with hegemonic discourses of Nepali-ness. They are hyper-aware of the fact that their citizenship is precarious, and thus use strategies that are least likely to discredit them as Indian. Nepal-born women’s differentiation of themselves from Indian-born women as well as claims-making through a particular mode of political motherhood that emphasises children and futurity are both consequences of narrow constructions of national identity that exclude Madhesis. The reality of the fact that Madhesis both in North India and South Nepal share cultural characteristics, language, and familial bonds is
difficult to square with the fact that the Nepali government wants Nepali citizens who are "pure Nepali"—"not Indian." Therefore, for Madhesi women, claiming citizenship in the Nepali national body involves particular deployments of gendered discourses, such as "beti roti ke sambhanda" and political motherhood to make demands.

Even though gender is not politicized in the Madhesh Movement’s cultural citizenship project, for Madhesi women, womanhood is very salient in how belonging can be claimed.

In the next chapter, I move from a discussion of a political claims-making within the boundaries of ‘legitimate Nepali-ness’ delineated by dominant Pahadi culture, I move to a consideration of the ways in which the weight of national history stunts possibilities for certain kinds of political imaginings of the Nepali nation.
Chapter 4: The Political Uses of Nostalgia and the Nepali National Story

It was better when the king was in power. Whatever happened, the king did. Now there are 20 different ministers, 20 separate fights. Nowadays it’s all about “this one is Indian, this one is Nepali, this one is Madhesi.” This one is my relative so let me do things for him. The king had no affiliations towards relatives or anything, no Madhesi or Pahadis. For him, the whole populace was the same. They say that the king is an avatar of Vishnu\(^9\). We are kingless now, we are godless.

-Jhari Devi, mid-50s, Birgunj

I talked to Jhari Devi in her living room in Birgunj while she watched an episode of the popular Hindi soap opera *Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai*. I asked her if I should come speak to her at a different time, but she insisted that she was perfectly capable of multitasking, and talking to me while following the plot line was not that big of a deal. Jhari Devi kept stopping what she was saying to pay attention to the television set every time there dramatic music signaled that something important was happening, and ultimately, I gave up trying and watched the show with her, asking questions about politics that she answered during commercial breaks.

Jhari Devi’s responses to my questions were often nonchalant, and while she did support the Madhesh protests (“I’m glad they happened, they needed to happen”), she did not emote very much at all till she started talking about the ex-king. “Birendra’s days were the glory days,” she said, sighing. “Democracy is the worst thing that has happened to this country.”

I was surprised by Jhari Devi’s comments and initially thought that they might be anomalous, perhaps she was especially taken by the charisma of the ex-king. But across

\(^{9}\) A Hindu God
towns and cities, across age groups, I found that most women talked about life under the monarchy being better than it is now.

Nepal was under Shah monarchical rule for 240 years. In various iterations, the stance that the monarchical state took in its nation-building project was to force homogeneity upon the populace. Prithvi Narayan Shah, the ruler whose conquest provided Nepal with its current geopolitical shape in the late 1700s, famously described his newly conquered kingdom as the land where “four estates and thirty-six castes existed in perfect equilibrium” (Riaz and Basu 2010, 70), and “the territorial unification of an ecologically diverse, ethnically heterogeneous land required a unifying social mechanism of control that would buttress the hold of a centralizing polity: hence, the Shah rules privileged the Hindu caste hierarchy of ruling Parbatya [Pahadi] elites” (Riaz and Basu 2010, 70).

Over a century later, the Monarch Mahendra, in the declaration of Nepal as a Hindu Kingdom in the constitution of 1962 “sought to cash in on the popular belief based on certain verses in the Geeta, the sacred Hindu text, that the King represents the incarnation of Lord Vishnu. These declarations not only affirmed the Hindu character of the state and polity, but also accentuated the marginalization of population groups who were not in the Parbatya [Pahadi] caste.” (Riaz and Basu 2010, 70)

While over two centuries of state policy regarding Madhesi cannot be neatly summarized here, what is important to note about the Shah regimes relationship with Madhesi people is that (1) ethnic discrimination against Madhesis was institutionalized through state policy that privileged upper caste Pahadi men and (2) legitimacy of the king was purported to be based largely on religious grounds.
Considering that this is the historical context for the abolition of the monarchy, it seems intuitive that Madhesi people would think of the end of the monarchy and the transition to democratic rule as a good thing. In the milieu that I grew up, it was inculcated as common sense that the king was a despot and we were all better off as citizens with institutionalized democracy. I assumed that most Madhesi women shared this understanding, but for my respondents, the Shah regime, especially Birendra’s rule, was a time to be reminisced with great fondness.

“We are all godless now”

It ran smoothly before. Birendra looked after us. Now who looks after us? These netas (politicians) look after their own pockets and nothing else. When the king was in power, there were public goods. The streets were neat and clean. Look at the state of everything now. These netas don’t do anything.
-Sunaina, Kalaiya

For many of my respondents, Birendra, “the good king,” and the ways in which “life was better before” was a direct reference to the fact of politicians in general, but specifically Madhesi politicians, failing to serve the Madhesi population. Women felt nostalgia for the monarchy, and while I was initially tempted to read this as an actual desire to return to Birendra’s rule because of the failure of transition to an effective democracy, there is a great deal of literature on nostalgia that suggests that it is better understood not as a desire for return as much as an expression of discontent for the present. Svetlana Boym offers the following definition of what she calls ‘utopian nostalgia.’

Utopian nostalgia is nostalgia for the Common Place, which is both a memory place and a rhetorical topos (the two intimately connected), but the utopianist forgets the rhetorical side of the common place. Nostalgia for the Common Place becomes
particularly pronounced during a time of crisis, a crisis of the previous forms of community and communication, whether the Greek polis, a feudal empire, a totalitarian state, a personal or national home, a community of spirit, a community of blood. (285)

Boym’s understanding of utopian nostalgia is useful in understanding Jhari Devi and Sunaina’s reverence for the king. Nostalgia for the monarchy is not about a desire for its restoration, but a reaction to the crisis of governance today. Considering the state of affairs post 2007, the present moment can be understood as one of crisis, and it is worthwhile to think through the ways in which Madhesi women articulate their disillusionment with the promises of democracy in order to understand the political uses of nostalgia for the monarchy.

“All Politicians are Frauds”

There have been 10 prime ministers in power in Nepal since 2008. No government has survived for longer than a year, and there has been no stability and security or illusion of rule of law. My respondents were acutely and painfully aware of this fact, and many expressed exasperation at politics, talking about the ways in which they could not rely on politicians to keep any promises or serve the people.

While women expressed great disdain for all politicians, a great deal of rage was directed specifically towards Madhesi politicians who were seen as treacherous. Sometimes, women contrasted Pahadi politicians, “good patrons” who “at least served Pahadi people” to Madhesi politicians, “lying snakes.” The snake metaphor came up repeatedly, and many women placed special emphasis on the fact that Madhesi politicians
claimed to be working for the good of Madhesi people when in reality they did not care at all.

See the thing with Pahadi politicians is that they don’t give a damn about us but they’re at least helping their people, getting them jobs. Madhesis are gahumans (cobras). They sting you. During election time they will come to your home, touch your feet [miming a politician touching somebody’s feet] “Vote for me, I’ll bring water, electricity, build toilets, bring factories, make roads!” When they win, they couldn’t care less if you live or die. They’ll treat you like scum.
-Sangeeta, at an adult literacy class in Birgunj

While the perception of politicians as untrustworthy and slimy extends across nations and time periods, the frustration expressed by Sangeeta and many other women that I spoke to was more potent than a generalized dissatisfaction with the political class. Women experienced the failure of Madhesi politicians to deliver goods and services as a moral betrayal that translated into expressions of deep discontent and lack of faith in politicians to lead the Madhesh movement in a direction that would be constructive. It is important to note that like Sangeeta, many women talked about dissatisfaction with politicians in terms of their failure as patrons in a particular kind of patron-client configuration. The reason why politicians were “snakes” is that they promised specific goods and services, (water, electricity, roads, factories) as the basis for asking for votes and then failed to deliver on promises made to individual constituents.

The language of clientelism in talking about discontent with politicians is important in thinking about how governance today is compared to governance during the monarchy. For many women, the king “took care of all, Pahadis and Madhesis alike.” The factual correctness of this may be debated, but the king as the caretaker of “all Nepalis” was contrasted with Madhesi and Pahadi politicians as patrons catering to their specific ethnic
clientele, and not doing it very well. Some women talked about the king as a “guardian,” and the absence of the king as akin to a household without a father figure.

In one house if there is one guardian, it works well. What the guardian dictates is what happens, he makes the final decision. What everybody says the guardian listens to and understands. This is how the country runs. Now it’s like the guardian is dead and the brothers are fighting amongst each other. Madhesis have their politicians, Pahadis have their politicians. There is no unity. In a household, if 4 brothers are pooling money together, then there is harmony. If everybody is acting selfishly only for themselves, then how can there be peace?

-Kaushalya, Suga

For many of my respondents, the king had divinely sanctioned authority to be a guardian of the nation, and politics today exists in a moral vacuum of clientelistic relationships that are not effective. References to “the good king” and his “superior” governance practices therefore become a mode of critique for the instability and incompetence of the state today. The function of nostalgia for a lost political past can be thought of in terms of its ability to provide what Kathleen Stewart calls “cultural form.”

In positing a “once was” in relation to a “now” it creates a frame for meaning, a means of dramatizing aspects of an increasingly fluid and unnamed social life. Nostalgia is an essential, narrative, function of language that orders events temporally and dramatizes them (Stewart 1984) in the mode of “things that happened,” “could happen,” “threaten to erupt at any moment.” By resurrecting time and place, and a subject in time and place, it shatters the surface of an atemporal order and a prefab cultural landscape. To narrate is to place oneself in an event and a scene—to make an interpretive space—and to relate something to someone: to make an interpretive space that is relational and in which meanings have direct social referents. (Stewart 1988, 227).

From Stewart’s configuration, nostalgia is not as much about what it is that is being remembered, but the act of narration itself, “ordering events temporally and dramatizing them” becomes a way in which people make sense of a social landscape that does not have a coherent order of its own. My respondents had many narratives that tried to explain the cataclysmic failure of governance
post 2007, and one that was recurring was that of corruption. Women drew a moral contrast between the king, who was “honest and true,” with the corruption of politicians. Narratives of corruption were very important in how people talked about their lack of trust and faith in politicians and democracy in general, which is what I will talk about in the next section.

Narratives of Corruption

In Janakpur, a shopkeeper named Damini whom I interviewed at her store took me to her neighbour’s house. “You’re looking to talk to women? Chal, there is a wedding at my neighbour’s house, you will find 30 women sitting and gossiping, they can talk your ears off.” I went with Damini to the house that was blasting Bhojpuri wedding trumpet music, and sat discreetly next to a group of women, young and old, who were chatting, laughing, and making sherbet for the baarat, the groom’s party, that was to come the next day. When the trumpets eventually calmed down and the women agreed to gave me their attention, I told them that I wanted to ask some questions about the Madhesh movement and the state of politics.

One of the women laughed, “Politics! You think we know anything about politics? We don’t pay attention to these things, ask questions about how to make achaar and we can tell you!” They humored me anyway and started talking about their perceptions of the state of affairs, and as it turned out, everyone had strong opinions about how terrible Madhesi politicians were.

*Chors* (thieves) they all are! Every single one!

Looking at our politicians makes me feel like *Kalyug* has come.

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10 A type of dried delicacy that takes months to make
11 In Hindu mythology, an age characterized by avarice and fragmentation of the moral order
A story one woman told was about a Madhesi government official affiliated with a major political party receiving a 5 lakh rupee grant (approximately 5000 USD) to install water filters in people’s homes. He went to every house in Janakpur ward number 5, telling people that he was going to give them water filters so that they would have access to clean drinking water. A couple of months passed and nothing happened, and then about 50 filters were brought on a tractor and given to a very small percentage of the families that they had been promised to. The woman was incredibly irate “Water filters, my foot! The asshole gave a couple out for show, and the rest of the money, straight to his pocket.” The water filters themselves were apparently of terrible quality, and they were spoilt within a couple of months.

Narratives about corruption like this one were plentiful. Many women told stories about Madhesi politicians syphoning off money that was supposed to be used for the development of Madhesh. While there is no reason to doubt that there is rampant corruption and many politicians do indeed use public money for private gain, the telling and retelling of stories of corruption that is part of everyday life for Madhesi women is perhaps as important as the corruption itself. According to anthropologist Akhil Gupta, “narratives of corruption help shape people’s expectations of what states can and will do, and how bureaucrats will respond to the needs of citizens” (190). For many women that I spoke to, it appeared that because corruption was understood to be endemic amongst Madhesi politicians, it was understood as inherent to democracy. Thus, what came before democracy, the monarchy, was therefore a better state where resources were allocated in a just and fair manner.
Madhesh Movement without Madhesi Politicians?

What does it mean, then, for Madhesi women to have little to no faith in Madhesi political leadership to serve Madhesi people and bring about meaningful social change, while expressing overwhelming support for the Madhesh movement at large? Perhaps part of the answer can be found in thinking about post-socialist nostalgia for the Soviet Union.

Nostalgic discourses and practices work concretely in different political and cultural moments. One purpose that it has served across various temporal and spatial contexts is that of critique. Anthropologist Dominic Boyer talks about a kind of nostalgia in post-socialist Eastern Europe that “ultimately has less to do with the recovery of a past or past-phantom than...the politics of the future” (25). Boyer claims that in Eastern European nostalgia of idealized pastness sets out to accomplish “two very contemporary projects in communication and knowledge: (1) to signal and voice estrangement from the fact that post-Socialist transformation in Eastern Europe has been a process steered by social and political interests largely lying outside Eastern Europe, and (2) to make a claim upon a right of future self-determination” (25-26).

Although Boyer is speaking of a very different context, the idea of nostalgia being tied to the politics of the future is useful in thinking about Madhesi women’s relationship with Birendra’s rule. The monarchy is thought of as a past where corruption was not endemic, the nation was “united” and goods and services were provided to everybody and not to ethnic groups in a clientelistic arrangement. What narratives of a corrupt, bureaucratic, incompetent government contrasted with a smoothly functioning monarchy that is irretrievable do is help provide a basis for demanding change, in the contemporary moment, through an assertion of cultural citizenship as Madhesis.
Fear and Stability

While I have talked mostly about women who painted an idealized picture of the monarchy where everything was better, some women were very cognizant of the ways in which monarchical rule was based on instilling fear in people, and in a very broad sense, people now had 'more freedom.' Sujita, who was probably over 90 years old and very critical of the fact that I was walking around Kalaiya immodestly without a shawl over my head, expressed nostalgia for the monarchy that was not utopic, perhaps even a little dystopic, in nature.

Things were better under the king. The reason why is that people were afraid. You couldn’t say things that were critical of the government, or the army would take you, you would be killed. As long as you minded your own business, you were fine. Now, there is no way to escape the maar-kaat (bludgeoning). Anybody can say and do whatever they want. There is no order. Having a thos (forceful) government is how peace is kept.

I don’t think too many women shared Sujita’s Hobbesian view of society, but her articulation of the maar-kaat, quotidian violence, reveals the extent to which people are fatigued from violent, unpredictable upsurges and turnovers that have characterized life post-2008, and the extent to which some stability, either through the success of the Madhesh Movement or any other avenue possible, is thought to be urgent and necessary.

The fact of nostalgia being the mode of critique of the failing Nepali state and Madhesi politicians is a consequence of the monarchical state’s successful construction of a certain normative nationality that serves to limit people’s political imaginations. I am not referring to the failure of political imagination in a normative sense but rather, pointing to the enormous weight that hundreds of years of propagation of a singular national story has
had on people’s ability to understand what politics can be. What Madhesi women ultimately want is a good quality of life for themselves, their families, and their children, and democracy in its current chaotic, almost anarchic form is failing to give them that. But because the Nepali story has so strongly been tied to the king, it is difficult for people to think outside the frame of the monarchy to understand what a Nepali nation that is not despotic can be. A consequence of the singular national story is something that is very apparent in how people think of the word ‘Nepali.’

When I asked my respondents the question “Do you consider yourself Nepali,” they often said yes, but common linguistic patterns suggested that Nepali was often equated with Pahadi, and Madhesi women did not always express ease about using the word ‘Nepali’ to describe themselves. The fact that Nepali is both the term for nationality as well as the language spoken by dominant Pahadi groups in the north is the most straightforward answer to why many Madhesi do not usually use the label of Nepali to talk about themselves, but there is more to this hesitation.

Because the Nepali nation-building project emphasized homogeneity; ethnic, linguistic, and cultural, Madhesis have found themselves excluded from discourses surrounding Nepali-ness, and as a result, Nepali is not a very salient category for them. In some ways, the strength of identification with Madhesi identity and the use of it as a category for mobilization comes to be a proxy for nationality in terms of defining affiliation: almost all my respondents are clear in their understandings of self as Madhesi, but many are not in invested in defining themselves as Nepali. Aafreeda, who I spoke to at a meat shop in Birgunj while she broiled a chicken, had the following to say that demonstrates the deployment of a ‘Nepali-Madhesi’ dichotomy instead of a ‘Pahadi-Madhesi’ one.
Nepalis get jobs in Birgunj, we all know this. They don’t need anywhere near the qualifications that Madhesis do in order to get the same jobs. This Nepali ‘hadap’ (monopoly) needs to stop, it is deeply damaging.

It was clear that Aafreeda was in fact, talking about Pahadis and not all Nepalis as she did at one point in our conversation talk about how Madhesis are Nepali too, but the confusion epitomizes how cultural citizenship as Madhesi is far more salient for Madhesi than citizenship as a generalized Nepali subject. Making Madhesi separate from Indian is important to people in order to be legible to the Nepali state, but ultimately, even when people do understand themselves as Nepali in an abstract sense, the label of ‘Nepali’ remains one reserved for the ‘other’ and not for themselves.

Conclusion

Nostalgia for the monarchy, and fixations upon an idealized past do not come from a desire for return. The story of the Nepali nation that emphasises the centrality of the monarchy that has been told and retold over the course of centuries and becomes a frame through which Madhesi are able to critique contemporary politics. The story of Nepali homogeneity that is irretreivably linked to the monarchy has been a powerful one, and while Madhesi cultural citizenship is in part about claims to national belonging, the category of ‘Nepali’ remains one that Madhesis often do not feel great proximity to.
Conclusion

Almost three years after the Madhesh Movement began, it appears that the Madhesis have lost. The central demands--reconfiguration of federal boundaries and revision of citizenship clauses--have remained unmet, and the government has held local elections without the consent of large swathes of the Madhesi electorate. KP Oli, a Pahadi notable primarily for his ethnocentric nationalist rhetoric, is prime minister yet again, and large scale popular mobilization has come to a halt. Disappointment and despair has replaced the period of hope and revolutionary energy in the south.

While the long term effects and symbolic implications of Madhesi political mobilization are not to be underestimated, this is perhaps as good a moment as any to reevaluate the principles of political organizing in Terai and reimagine the ways in which political claims from the Nepali state can be made in the future.

In the preceding chapters, I have tried to show the ways in which discursive forces of hegemonic Nepali nationality have shaped how Madhesi women understand claims to Nepali citizenship. Organization as Madhesi (chapter 1), a construction of a Nepali-Indian binary (chapter 2) and the idealization of a religious patriarchal social order (chapter 3) can all be understood as a strategy for claims-making that is based on the deployment of the very rhetorics used to marginalize Madhesis in the first place. The terms of asserting belonging in the Nepali nation-state has not challenged, but in some ways, reproduced the narratives of what being Nepali means.

A more emancipatory politics of belonging is possible. Madhesis can make claims by focusing less on legibility from the male Khas-Arya state that has certain understandings of what Nepali-ness can mean, but rather, by creating and articulating a Nepaliness that is not
inherently antithetical to Madhesi identity. The Panchayat ideology of “one nation, one language, one people” has had far-reaching consequences, and because it was so integral to the Nepali nation-building project, has shaped what people across the country understand being Nepali to mean. I believe that Madhesi women, as Nepalis who have been most harmed by the violence of this phenomenon, can and should be at the forefront of destabilizing dominant discourses about what it means to be a Nepali citizen.

Nancy Fraser’s interventions in theorizing the politics of recognition are a useful way to think about a Madhesi emancipatory politics of the future. In a 2000 essay titled ‘Rethinking Recognition,’ Fraser outlines some of the problems with the politics of recognition and offers a roadmap of how understandings of recognition can be expanded for emancipatory promise. Fraser points to the fact that much of what is an identity based politics of recognition faces two central problems-- that of *displacement* and *reification* (Fraser 2000, 108). The problem of displacement is that in an era of economic globalization, and the radical exacerbation of economic inequality “questions of recognition are serving less to supplement, complicate and enrich redistributive struggles than to marginalize, eclipse and displace them.” The problem of reification is that “the routes [recognition] struggles take often serve not to promote respectful interaction within increasingly multicultural contexts, but to drastically simplify and reify group identities.” (Fraser 2000, 108).

For Fraser, an alternative approach that addresses these problems involves “treating recognition as a question of social status” (Fraser 2000, 113). Fraser’s status model “understands social justice as encompassing two analytically distinct dimensions: a dimension of recognition, which concerns the effects of institutionalized meanings and
norms on the relative standing of social actors; and a dimension of distribution, which involves the allocation of disposable resources to social actors" (Fraser 2000, 116). In other words, Fraser calls for a coupling of the politics of recognition with the politics of redistribution.

The reason this is important for Madhesis is that in the current moment, although there is a great deal of group cohesion, recognition and cultural citizenship in a Rosaldian sense is the framework of mobilization and it is unable to account for how differently situated Madhesis have different needs. Moving forward, perhaps there can be an assertion of rights that takes multiplicities of experiences into account and shifts how Nepali-ness is understood as a conceptual category. While strategic Madhesi essentialism is what allowed for the movement to take shape in the way it did, there appears to be space for strategic alliance-building with other marginalized groups within Nepal, like Janajatis who have also been historically othered by the establishment.

The notion of the ‘unthinkable,’ offered by Michel-Rolph Trouillot in his seminal work *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, is also useful in what it reveals about Madhesi-ness. For Trouillot, the Haitian Revolution was ‘unthinkable’ because it challenged the “ontological and political assumptions of the most radical writers of the enlightenment” (Trouillot 1995, 82). In other words, the Haitian revolution could not be thought within the range of possible alternatives because Europe lacked the instruments of thought-- the problematics, concepts, methods, and techniques-- necessary to conceptualize it (82). Trouillot also talks about silencing in terms of how history is produced and how history-writing is connected to power, calling for an analysis of how powerful write history in a given way in particular situations.
What Trouillot’s interrogations and invocations offer is an avenue for Madhesi to posit a fundamental epistemic and political challenge to Nepali-ness through the “filling of silences” in Nepali historiography and imagining a political future where the exclusionary frameworks of hegemonic Khas-Arya forces break down. In other words, claims to citizenship can be made without subscribing to the idea that Nepali-ness needs to be based on non-Indian-ness, various Madhesi constituencies’ needs cannot be made subservient to some kind of unitary “grand Madhesi cause,” and stability can be imagined in a form that is not one of a masculinist Hindu centralized state.

My project has been to center subaltern women’s experiences to think through issues of citizenship, belonging and recognition in Nepal. The length and scope of this project means that conclusions are necessarily somewhat speculative in nature. More rigorous and long term work needs to be done in order to gain a comprehensive picture of Madhesi history, politics, and demands for citizenship. In particular, the relationship between other identity based political movements (Janajatis being one example) and Madhesi activists is one that is likely to be fruitful in potentially providing frameworks for imagining new versions of Nepali nationality that have room for non Khas-Arya citizens.
Bibliography


Appendix: Interview Questions

- Tell me about your life. Where were you born? How long have you been in __ (village/town) for? Who are the members of your family and what do they all do?
- Do you think of yourself as Madhesi? What makes someone Madhesi? What are differences between Pahadis and Madhesis?
- Do you think of yourself as Nepali?
- What are things about being Nepali that you are proud of?
- Do you take part in Nepali politics? In what ways do you participate? Is it important to participate in politics?
- What are your thoughts on the protests that happened/ have been happening recently? Should they have happened? Do you support what the protesters are asking for?
- (If they talked about being support of the protest): What things need to happen/ who needs to do them for you to feel like the protests were successful?
- What do you think the Nepali government owes its citizens? What are your concerns and demands?
- What is the relationship between Pahadis and Madhesis in the __ (village/town) you are in? Have they changed in the time you have been here?
- What do you think about being referred to as Indian? Are you offended when you are called Indian, or is it a broadly accurate statement?
- What do you think of democracy? Is it good?
- What do you think about the ex-king?
- Are things better now than they were when the king was in power, or are they better now?