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Where the Plains and Hills Collide: Understanding Nepal’s Political Tension Through Tharus in Chitwan

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Where the Plains and Hills Collide: Understanding Nepal’s Political Tension Through Tharus in Chitwan

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Abstract

Nepal’s new constitution was received with both jubilation and violence. Protests swept across the plains of Terai leading to a blockade with India and a deadly fuel crisis. One’s opinions on the situation depend heavily on one’s own ethnicity, caste, and regional location. This research takes a deeper look into one ethnic minority, Tharu, to better understand Nepal’s complex political situation. Through many conversations in Chitwan, with both high and low castes, one can piece together a most intriguing analysis of Nepal’s politics. The political divide in the nation is severe and shows no willingness of compromise. The constant struggle between nationalism and ethnic identity may have reached its pinnacle in Nepal. The future of Nepal awaits the answer.
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Prologue
“Wake Up,” Siman shouted from just outside my window. I slowly rolled over and checked my clock; it was 6:00 AM. I wanted to go back to sleep but eventually the persistence of Simone and the noise of the chickens prevailed. I put on a sweatshirt and pants that were covered in prickers from the soccer match the night before. “Suara,” Siman said pointing at my legs. I finally put a name to the plant that has invaded my wardrobe. “Suara,” I muttered to myself as I made the futile attempt to pull a couple out and toss them into the breeze. We made our way across the narrow path that connects the homestay and village. The sun was just rising and the mustard plains of Terai were covered in a thick mist.

I sat and drank coffee while Siman pointed out various plants, birds, and animals. He spoke very softly and I usually needed him to repeat himself a few times before I understood. As we sat, a small boy sauntered towards us. Siman greeted him and the boy looked up at Siman affectionately. “His name is Prim,” Siman informed me. Prim made little eye contact with me but seldom took his eyes off Siman. He stood about three and a half feet high and had a large head with a soft baby-like face. Snot streamed out of his left nostril and ran down his lip. At first glance I thought he was no more than two or three years old and was surprised to find out that he was six. “Elephant?” Prim said pointing towards the hotel across the river. After gaining the approval of Siman we traced the rivers edge towards the bridge.

Siman suddenly shouted as he jumped off the riverbank into the shallow water. He threw his hand into the water and pulled out a crab and held it high over his head. He wore the crab like a bracelet as we walked. Prim ran to Siman’s side every time his small legs failed to keep pace. Siman snapped off the crab’s claws and handed the crab to Prim. He squealed in excitement though hesitantly put the crab on his wrist as he had seen Siman do earlier. After a short walk we reached the half finished bamboo bridge.

Loose bamboo rods were placed on top concrete cylinders across the river. Siman hopped up onto the first cylinder and slowly crawled to the next one. Prim struggled to swing his leg up onto the platform. I gently lifted him by his pants and placed him on the concrete. He too crawled across. I placed my foot on the wet bamboo thinking my balance was superior to the Tharu boys. The bamboo rolled over and I realized that, I too, would have to have four points of contact. Tourists watched from the balcony of the Hotel at what must have been an entertaining spectacle. A tall white man, a nine-year-old Tharu, and what appeared to be a baby crawling on top bamboo across the river. Prim was just in front of me. He sniffled repeatedly in between his violent laughter. Half way across I was surprised no one had fallen in. Then, with only a few feet remaining, two bamboo shoots parted and
Prim splashed into the water. Siman and I laughed as Prim climbed up the riverbank.

We wove through the fancy hotel landscape to where they kept their elephants. “That’s Suzanna and her baby,” Siman announced pointing at a large elephant and her calf. The calf playfully threw a burlap sac on to its head while Suzanna ate hay. Although living in less than satisfactory conditions the two elephants appeared to be happy. It was only after looking closely that I saw a thick iron chain underneath the layer of hay. The chain was wrapped around the elephant’s feet and attached to a large metal pole. It was sad thinking they might spend their lives in chains, restricted, and unable to fulfill their brilliant potential.

Introduction:
On September 17th 2015 Nepal’s Constituent Assembly officially endorsed the new constitution. The announcement inside the assembly evoked jubilation and applause, a feeling shared by millions of Nepali. At the same time, protests over the new constitution have swept across Nepal’s southern region, Terai. Madhesis, ethnic minorities in the south, have raised concerns over important issues stated in the constitution. The protests have blocked the border between Nepal and India leading to a fuel crisis that jeopardizes the safety of its citizens. Their demands are specific but point to larger issues of injustices and oppression felt by the groups for centuries.

To research this issue I spent one month in the Terai region. I lived in a Tharu community in Chitwan. Tharu is a separate distinct group from Madhesis. The term Madhesis refers to anyone who is indigenous to the Terai region. In that sense, Tharu can be labeled as Madhesis. Madhasis generally refers to those who migrated from Indian provinces such as Bihar. Under usual circumstances, Tharu’s and other ethnic minorities would distance themselves from the Madhesis identity. However, the ethnic minorities of the south are currently protesting under the title of Madhesis. Tharu’s are the oldest and largest ethnic group in the Terai region. With a population of 1,533,879, Tharu people make up 6.75% of Nepal’s population. Tharu is the third most common language spoken in Nepal coming behind Mathili and Nepali. It is believed that they have inhabited the Terai region for over 3,000 years.

The intent was to use Tharu as a medium to better understand the current political situation in Nepal. This research project could have been completed using any of the marginalized groups in Terai such as Madhesis. Most articles written on the subject refer to the ethnic minorities in Nepal’s southern plains as “marginalized”. The definition of marginalized is, “treat (a person, group, or concept) as insignificant or peripheral”. The word is frequently used but not entirely understood. How have these groups been mistreated? Are they still thought of as insignificant groups in Nepal? By spending time in Terai and visiting Tharu Villages in Chitwan such as Gothuali, the term marginalized gained a more significant meaning. The examples found in Chitwan are unique to the area but the weight of oppression has been felt all across Terai. By learning of the historical injustices and the present day limitations for Tharus in Chitwan, one can better understand the current political situation.
After better defining marginalization, I interviewed and conversed with a handful of Nepali about the constitution and the current political situation. About half of the participants were Tharu or Madhesis. The other half were people whose families migrated to Chitwan from the Hill region of Nepal. For this reason I refer to them as “Hilly” or “Hill” people. It is not meant as a derogatory term, only to differentiate between the opinions of those indigenous to the plains and those who have recently moved to Terai from central Nepal.

The stark difference in opinion was staggering. Of those who had an opinion, all of the Tharus or Madhesis I spoke with believed the constitution to be bad. In opposition, all of the Hill people I spoke with believed the constitution to be good. It must be noted that these are the results from just a handful of participants. I am not broad-brushing the opinions of all people who identify with these groups. Like most complex situations there are exceptions to the rule. The results do, however, point to an indisputable and fundamental problem in Nepal. This paper delves into the mindsets and arguments of both groups.

Marginalizing Tharus In Chitwan:
The Eradication of Malaria

For the first half of the 20th century 90% of Chitwan’s population was Tharu. The region was plagued by malaria and it was virtually uninhabitable for migrants. After thousands of years living in the region, Tharu’s became less susceptible to the virus allowing them to almost solely inhabit the region. In 1954 the government of Nepal and the World Health Organization eradicated malaria in the area allowing thousands of Nepali to migrate to the fertile southern plains. Over the next couple of decades Tharus went from dominating the Terai region to a minority of around 14% of the population. The majority of the migrants were Pahadi looking for cheap land and economic opportunities. The Tharu community believes their lack of education allowed migrants to strip them of their homes, possessions, and freedom.

“They threw my father in with the goat,” Seani said. Seani Mahato is a grandmother and lives in the small village of Gothuali. She sat on her front porch separating out rotten mung beans. She speaks calmly when talking about her father. Migrants from the hill region used to sell her family milk and other dairy products. Once her father accumulated some debt they kidnapped him and threatened him. Seani’s family had no money so her father gave up their land to repay his debt. “He was not...brave,” she said though unhappy with her word choice and clarified further saying he was “scared and uneducated”. I asked her about education to which Seani admitted that neither she, nor any of her siblings, had gone to school, believing it was not important. I inspected a handful of mung beans before tossing them into the basket. Seani laughed at me and gently plucked out one of my approved beans. She peeled back a thin layer to reveal an insect inside.

Premeshwor Mahato is a baker and a farmer. He went to school for a few months before ultimately dropping out. He recalls a time when 40-45 of his family lived together in the same house. “Big families were needed to work the farms,” he concluded. His family had a bad crop of rice and his father took out loans from the hill people. Eventually the debt became too much and Premeshwor’s grandfather was forced to divide the family. “We all took a piece of the debt with us,” Premeshwor said after scolding a chicken for attempting to enter his home. The debt was 5,000 NPR ($50 U.S. Dollars) but at the time he was only making around 600 NPR a year. Premeshwor started working on hill people farms to pay back his inherited debt.

A grainary outside of Premeshwor’s house.
Bhisnu Mahato, 79, is one of the oldest members of his village. He grew up in a village named Hardi. His father was educated in India and moved to Nepal. Speaking about migration Bhisnu said, “They used to calculate how much our land was worth and show people how much they would have to pay in taxes”. Having mostly used a trade and barter system many Tharu’s did not understand the concept of money. Bhisnu said that people were intimidated by owing money and were happy to work on farms instead of owning them. Bhisnu said that after their land was taken by the Pahadi his father, one of the few educated men in Hardi, went to court. After losing the case they moved out of Hardi and started the village now known as Gothuali. viii
In 1973 Royal Chitwan National Park was established by the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation. The government relocated 22,000 people out of the jungle. ix Tharu’s mud homes need new material annually and people no longer have access to the materials needed for construction. Today, many concrete houses are being built replacing the traditional Tharu home. Padampur is one of the villages that was moved outside the jungle. The original location was spacious and had accessible water. The new location was smaller and had no access to water. Most people received one third of the land they once had and received minimal compensation for the other two thirds. x

Along with the creation of a national park came tourism. Again many of the Tharu people were uneducated and afraid of owing money so almost no one saw the business opportunity at hand. In a chapter entitled The development of The Chitwan Region Müller writes, “The large hotels employ a considerable amount of day laborers. For posts calling about special qualifications, however, people are recruited largely from Kathmandu. Hotel managers all come from Kathmandu”. xi Today there is a wide selection of hotels and homestays in close proximity to the national park; virtually none of them belong to Tharu people. Two years ago Omraj Mahato built Tharu Community Homestay. “Many people are watching to see if I succeed,” Omraj said, referring to his new business. The whole community is aware of Omraj’s new business venture. When I asked Bhisnu Mahato (The 79 year old mentioned above) what the future of Tharu’s in Chitwan looked like his answer was Omraj.

The homestay is only eight small rooms set in traditional style Tharu mud housing. However, its economic outreach is much bigger. Offering cooking classes, dance lessons, village walks, and handicrafts making, the Tharu Community
Homestay is giving back to the locals. “These are my people, I like to help them as often as possible” Omraj remarks. The money is mostly given to Tharu women who are largely unemployed though extremely hardworking. The homestay is a just one of a few options tourist have to actually give back to the indigenous people of Chitwan. Some other hotels are known to use the Tharu name to generate income.

Located just across the river from Tharu community homestay is Sapana Village. It is a fancy resort with nice landscaping, bright lights, restaurant, and even their own elephants. I spoke with Dharba Giri, the owner of Sapana Village. He told me of his struggle of living in poverty only to be gifted money by a tourist to buy land and open up a hotel. After he opened Sapana Village Giri knew he wanted to give back to the Tharu community. Giri listed off an impressive list of charitable mission projects. Lonely Planet even writes “This relaxing lodge is an excellent option for those interested in Tharu culture. Set up with the aim of supporting local Tharu community...”. Besides building bathrooms and water wells for communities Sapana Village is also constructing a school for the needy. Giri told me the school will open in three months time.

“Spit in my face if it opens in three months!” an old colleague scoffed after I told her of Giri’s proposal. The women I spoke to preferred to stay anonymous. “He has been giving the same pitch about that school for twenty years now”. The woman I spoke to originally dreamt up the idea of the school. She stopped working on the project with Sapana Village after Giri’s reluctance to put plans into action. She put things even more bluntly saying, “He uses the school to take money out of the pockets of tourists”. And the money donated to Giri to start his hotel and help him crawl out of the depths to poverty? “His father was one of the most wealthiest men in society, he already owned that land,” she said. She claims he drove up the price of the land and used the money to buy the land from himself. While I don’t have official documentation of the transaction others have backed up the claim.

What I didn’t realize is that Sapana Village has become something of a joke between some members of the Tharu community. They took me to one of the toilets that was donated by Sapana Village. The finances for this particular bathroom came from a donator from Holland named Jokes. Sapana Village merely organized its construction. As seen in the picture below, Sapana Village is written in large, more visible letters below Jokes name. All of Sapana Village’s projects are branded in large letters. There is some good that has come out of Sapana Village’s philanthropic activity. Unfortunately from speaking to the community it appears a lot more could be done. “I just do not like it because he is using our Tharu name” a villager said. Other hotels in the area owned by the Pahadi do not even acknowledge the Tharu people. At least Sapana Village builds a few bathrooms.
Nepal’s Caste System

Former king of Gorkha, Jung Bahadur, founded Nepal in 1768. He unified over sixty different political parties in the region. One of the main challenges to the
functioning state was its diversity. Jang Bahadur Rana was the first Prime Minster of the Rana dynasty that lasted from 1848 until 1951. Jang Bahadur Rana implemented a legal document called the Muluki Ain in 1854. The Muluki Ain was a legal social hierarchy rooted in the Hindu caste system. There were two primary groups or Jats; Tagadhari, meaning "holders of the holy chord, and Matwali or "alcohol consumers". Matwali is broken up into four subgroups, touchables and untouchables and non-enslavable and enslavable. Today there are four social classes in Nepal, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra.

The Panchayat system was put in place in 1960 and lasted until 1990. King Mahendra formulated the regime after overthrowing the first democratically elected government. The King outlawed political parties in Nepal making the monarchy the most powerful in government. This regime led to the first of two peoples movements in Nepal in 1990 and 1996. Minority groups rallied together in an effort to keep their own identity and maintain a voice in government. With the current border protests in 2015, Nepal is no stranger to the fight for this cause.

The Tharu belong to the Janajati, a group reserved for indigenous “tribal” people living in the corners of Nepal. The Janajati have recently been placed into the Vaishya caste. The majority of the Hill people I spoke to were ethnically Chetri and belonged to the Kshatriya caste.

For Tharu's, and other lower caste ethnicities, Nepal's caste system may be the most suppressive force in their lives. The caste system ensures that you are born with a status in Nepal and have no opportunity to change. With each new generation in Nepal the affects of the caste system seem to dissipate. However, after only spending one month in Terai, it is clear that it still is a prominent issue. As David Gellner, author of Caste, Ethnicity and Inequality In Nepal, observes; “Not only do people themselves know what their own ascribed Identity is, others usually know too, simply from their surname”. This awareness creates a barrier in the social structure of Nepal.

My first observation is the two groups rarely intermingle. Marrying outside of your social class is still a rarity in Nepal. I never even witnessed the two groups so much as share a meal together. Most of the interactions I witnessed came at the restaurant at the homestay where I was staying. "I don't like serving them", said one Tharu waiter, an opinion shared by his brothers. The hill people were most likely to complain and often times did not leave enough money to cover the bill. One bill total came to 2,450 NPR. “2,000 NPR is fine”, the customer said not even giving the Tharu server a chance to approve. The condescending comments and sense of entitlement from the Hill people towards the Tharu staff were prominent. After a long night one of the staff members turned to me and said “This is why I hate my job sometimes, these are the people I have to say, “hello, how are you?” to everyday.”
Arguments of Tharu’s and Madhesis

There is a unified protest going on in the Terai region. The Tharu’s have joined with Madhesis in the plains of Terai to raise important issues. I spoke to
Shiba Chaudhary the vice president of Tharu Students Society, a major organization leading the charge for the Tharu political movement. “We, not just us but everyone, feels that now is the time to fight for our rights”, he said. Shiba thinks that the Tharu working with the Madhesis is a key strategic movement. “We speak for all the smaller ethnic groups who have been oppressed; it’s not just a Tharu Madhesis movement, it’s all of Terai”. It is a movement for all ethnic and marginalized communities throughout Nepal. Shiba believes ethnic minorities in the south have been discriminated against for two and half centuries through caste, region, and economic conditions. Shiba says a unified south is the only way to defeat the hilly people. “We who were indigenous are ruled by the hilly people, we need to fight for equality. We should fight against hilly people first”. Shiba told me that certain precautions are being taken to ensure that Tharus will not ultimately be ruled by Madhesis in the south. The groups need to work together first if they want their voices to be heard. So what exactly are the group’s demands?

There are three major changes the Madhesis would like to see in the constitution. The first, and most important, is the re-delineation of federal boundaries with a Madhes autonomous state in the south. The proposed states approved in the constitution are shown in figure 1. The borders run north to south and include a mix of hilly, mountains and plains region. The Madhesis proposed map is shown in figure 2. It divides the Terai region into two major states.
The Madhesis Youth website says the following about the proposed borders:

“Notice how Madhesh and Tharuwan have their own states and more importantly, it includes only regions consisting of flat plains and remain joined. Unlike the federal maps of 2015, this map was not carved out in silo by just one political party or Madhesis or Tharus or Limbuwans or Khambuwans or Magars. It was decided by an eight-member State Restructuring Commission (SRC) that was formed by major parties to recommend the Constituent Assembly (CA) a best possible model to federalize the country…It was the best chance Nepal had to formulate a federalism model that was inclusive and acceptable to most of the people.”

There would be a Tharu state from Chitwan to the west and a Madhesis state east of Chitwan. There is less integration of the hilly region with both the mountains and plains region. The idea behind the Madhesis states would keep families and culture together and make it easier to travel east and west along the Terai region. They feel by dividing the Terai region up into many states, the government is not taking into account their unique identity.

The second demand is equal representation in the government. Lower caste communities make about 71% of Nepal’s total population but only make up a small fraction of the government. The federal states in the new constitution allow a centralized government in the hilly region. Allowing Terai to have their own states would allow them to appoint government jobs and have more influence in the government. “If you make up 7% of Nepal’s total population you should have 7% of governmental jobs,” Shiba argues. It was clear the 7% was referring to Tharu’s total population of Nepal.
Many people feel that the voices in the government do not speak for or represent them. The graph below shows the historical breakup of the Nepali government. Despite only being 29% of the total population, the high caste Brahmin and Chetri hold a resounding amount of political power.

The third and final recommendation the Madhesis and Tharus make is for the right to citizenship. Clause 6 of Article 11 of the new constitution has stated that a foreign woman married to a Nepali man can acquire naturalized citizenship in accordance to the federal law.\textsuperscript{xxiv} The clause however says nothing about a Nepali women married to a foreign man. There is growing concern that the new constitution creates “second class” citizens. In an official statement the Nepali government addressed the issue saying “The constitution guarantees that every citizen by descent or naturalization, shall be equal before law and no person shall be denied the equal protection of the law. There is no question of discriminating its own citizens”.\textsuperscript{xxv} The statement again fails to address the discriminatory clauses on women’s citizenship.

This mostly affects the Madhesis who admittedly have closer connections to India. Many marriages occur between Indians and Madhesis in Nepal. However with the open border system and Terai’s close geographical location with India it is natural that many marriages occur between Nepali and Indians in this region. The
identity that people associate with adds to the complications. I spoke with Raj, who has lived in Nepal for forty years selling vegetables. When I asked him if he was Nepali or Indian he hesitated for a moment before deciding on Indian. His children were born in Nepal but also do not have citizenship in Nepal.\textsuperscript{xxvi}

I met with a woman named Bikani Mahato, a Tharu women who married an Indian man and moved to India. She had three children. After years of abuse Bikani made the decision to flee from her husband and return to Nepal. Bikani is a farmer and has accumulated debt after breaking her thumb and being held out of work. Her children, all girls now age fourteen, twelve, and seven, don’t have and cannot get citizenship in Nepal.\textsuperscript{xxvii}

Even those who are eligible for Nepali citizenship and other official documentation have a hard time obtaining it. Again, most government jobs are held by those in the Hill region and Madhesis and Tharus claim that they will not give them citizenship and other official documentations. Even when trying to get permits to build Tharu Community Homestay Omraj admits he needed to throw a party for government employees before he could get the building permits. Others believe they are required to jump through unnecessary hoops to obtain state documentation.

The common theme between all three demands is equality. Madhesi feel underrepresented in Nepal and think now is the time to make their voice heard. “Closing the border is the only way they will hear us in Kathmandu,” said Shiba. The people of Terai have no immunity to the fuel crisis. The people I spoke to in the villages believe the Madhesis protests are more important than the fuel crisis. Moti Singh is a Madhesi and sells dried fish in Chitwan. He carefully balanced dried fish in two sacs over his shoulders. He measured one kilogram to his scale as he spoke; “It’s all about equality, do the math, look at the data, it’s not fair” he said as he delicately added a few dried fish to the scale.\textsuperscript{xxviii}
Arguments of People From The Hills

Although I already stated this point in the introduction it is important to reemphasize it again. These are opinions and arguments of just a handful of people and do not speak for Nepal as a whole. However, the people I spoke to live in the Terai region amongst Tharu and Madhesis people. I can only assume that the majority of people living with the division of hills, i.e. Kathmandu, only feel the same way if not stronger. Again, the objective of this research is to get a pulse of how people feel about these issues. The points and opinions expressed below were the common talking points and arguments made through a series of conversations with people from the Hilly region. I also pulled from current event articles from major media sources. Generally the three main points made against the Madhesis protests have to do with nationalism, development, and a belief that India has ulterior motives.

The first stat that is almost always brought up is the 90% approval of the new constitution. “This is higher than India and the US” MC, a teacher at Himalayan Secondary school, said emphatically.\textsuperscript{xxix} Nepal has been waiting for this new constitution for over eight years and many feel it is a great success. When asking about general feelings with Secretary Ward Sharon Neupane, he said “It is a great, not perfect, but constitution.”\textsuperscript{xxx} Most people reiterate this point and say that nothing is perfect. When asked about what needs to be fixed Neupane responded, “I don’t know, there is probably something we will find years later and need to fix”. All feel that generally the new constitution is a huge victory for Nepal.

One of the best aspects of the new constitution is the division of states. The new borders that run north to south make the most sense developmentally. “Its all about the money! You would be crazy to not touch the Indian and Chinese borders”, exclaimed 23 year-old Prakash. As far as economics go, having clear trade routes with two major world powers would be extremely beneficial to Nepal. Besides the obvious economic factors there is hope to unify all of Nepal.

Nepal is a unique country in it has three different biotopes, the plains, the hills, and the mountains. “Three different flowers. Imagine yourself in a bus going from one region to another seeing three different flowers all in one ride”, Said another teacher at Himalayan Secondary School. For him the federal states in the constitution allow for a blending of three different people into one. For many of the hill people the only way Nepal develops is if people commit to being Nepali above all else. By blending the three regions the constitution creates one national identity, Nepali.

The Nepali identity argument is applied when talking about representation in the government. If everyone is from Nepal why does it matter who is representing
you in the government? More importantly the people from the hills are more Nepali then those from the plains. When talking about the Madhesis Prakash said, “They are not Nepali, they are Indian”. For the hill people, putting a perceived Indian into the Nepali government is counterproductive to creating the self-sufficient and developed Nepal that is needed. In addition to this argument several of the hill people interviewed question the population statistics of Terai. Some believe the stats are inflated to make Madhesis and Tharu population higher than it really is.

Not giving citizenship to foreign spouses and children of Nepali women is all about protecting the political integrity of Nepal. “Would you let an Indian born man be the president of the United States?” questioned MC. In addition to the political problem giving citizenship to Indian born men and children will create a less authentic Nepali. All of the Hill people I spoke with believe the Madhesis are just a puppet for the Indian government. All of the issues play directly into what India wants. By raising the population in the Terai region and putting Madhesis in political power India gains control of Nepal. Some go as far to say that India wants to take over Nepal and erase the borders. Regardless, by having Madhesis in government India would have their way in all the actions of Nepal.

Most notably, India needs access to the water in Nepal. The Himalayas supply one third of all drinking water in Asia. The Kali River that runs through India comes directly from Nepal. It is no secret that India wants to build water reservoirs in Nepal. It will also ensure that Nepal continues to rely almost completely on India for supplies, a problem that is ever more prevalent during the blockade. Hill people believe Nepal has the natural resources and drive to be almost entirely self-sufficient. “If we utilize the hydropower that is available in Nepal, we can do anything” said Prakash.

People are angry that India has any leverage or power over the internal affairs of Nepal. Nepal faces the disadvantages that come along with being a landlocked country. Does Nepal’s dependence on India force them to forfeit their rights to operate their own government freely? What makes matters worse is the belief that India is only looking out for its own vested interests. “Just Google India’s demands, all they want is control of our government,” MC proposed.

Rubble near the gate leading into India.
-Birganj
- Article 63(3) – India recommended that a clause providing Madhesi’s with electoral constituencies proportional to their population be re-inserted in the text.

- Article 21 – India recommended that ‘proportional inclusion’ be re-inserted in a clause that gives various groups the right to participate in state structures.

- Article 283 – India recommended that the stipulated qualification (being citizens by descent) to hold high-ranking government posts be expanded to include those, like many Madhesis, who have acquired citizenship by birth or naturalisation.

- Article 86 – India recommended that instead of giving each state a fixed number of representatives — which would put the Madhesi at a disadvantage, National Assembly representation should be based on the population of each state.

- Article 154 – India recommended that the timeframe for delineation of constituencies be 10 years, as per the Madhesi parties’ demands, rather than the 20-year timeframe laid out in the latest version of the Constitution.

- Article 11(6) – India recommended, as per the demands of Madhesi parties, that the acquisition of naturalised citizenship be automatic on application.

- India also recommended that parts or the entirety of the disputed Kanchanpur, Kailali, Sunsari, Jhapa and Morang districts — that are home to a large population of Madhes — be included in the Madhes provinces.

This list comes from a media source in India. Most notably in this list is the word “recommended”. It is not a recommendation if India has blocked the border. Nepal is being deprived of cooking fuel, medication, and other essential commodities. If India is ultimately behind the blockade, they are coercing Nepal for their own interests. The media is in agreement with this line of thinking. The major headlines from the Nepali Times read *India-Locked, It’s Not about the Constitution*, and *“Stay Away From Nepal”*. All articles condemn India for depriving Nepal of its natural resources in an attempt to get what they want. In an editorial entitled *Proxy War* the author writes:

“But by now the Madhesi people’s struggle for dignity has turned into a proxy war in which they are doing India’s bidding. It was not a coincidence that the Madhesi Front decided to cut off supplies to Kathmandu by blocking border points only after India’s Ministry of External Affairs merely took ‘note’ of ‘a’ constitution and expressed concern over ‘difficulties’ facing Indian freight companies and transporters due to ‘the prevailing unrest’ in the Terai.”

They believe the Madhes issue and constitution are effectively just an illusion. One group of Hill people even went as far to say that India is paying Madhesi to protest, offering as much as one million rupees for those who die in protests. Many think, even without incentives, the Madhesi close cultural connections with India is enough to make Madhesi protests on India’s behalf.
Conclusion

There is an undeniable zeal to the nationalistic mindset. Today, Nepal’s GDP ranks 156 out of 185, making it one of the poorest countries on a global level. Despite its small size, Nepal’s tourism and natural resources stemming from the Himalayas are a sizable bargaining chip in Nepal’s struggle for national relevance. Positioned between India and China, Nepal has a front row seat to the rapid development and economic prowess that is possible in a short time. Tired of living in the shadows of these nations most Nepali are eager to crawl out of the depths of poverty. This outward thinking and eagerness has blinded a nation to the fight for equality inside its own borders.

The Terai region has been dehumanized. General opinion has reduced the people of Terai to "culturally Indian". Even those who migrated to the area think little of their neighbors of the lower caste. Little attention or appreciation is given to the people who produce nearly 65% of Nepal’s food and agriculture. No one talks about the women carrying babies on their back and seed on their head; to the men who wake up before the sun to fertilize and harvest the fields; to the children who shepherd the livestock instead of attending school; to the families who live with no shoes, tattered clothes, and little food. These are the people of Terai. They are a people that have been marginalized for centuries and believe now is the time to fight for equality. Nepal has turned their back on them.

They argue that the constitution has a 90% approval rating. They ignore the fact that 57 Madhesis political leaders boycotted the vote. The 532 people who did vote were all high caste Nepali from the hill region. They like the division of federal states. They ignore the families that will be divided in the Terai region. They believe that granting citizenship to men and children of foreign countries will lead to an Indian led government. They ignore women like Bikani who fled India with her three children who are now stateless.

The unifying of Nepal, all humans are humans, argument only sounds good on paper. In reality this nationalistic point of view is stripping Nepal of the culture that is rooted so deeply in its soil. Nepal has 125 official languages and many different ethnicities. Nepal is often referred to as “different flowers all in one garden”. This saying is as much fanatical as it is whimsical. It is a shallow argument that ignores the complexities of even the flowers in its simplified metaphor. In reality different flowers require different amounts of sun, water, room to grow, and soil types. Asking people to sideline their culture and heritage for the betterment of the nation is a dangerous path to head down.
History has to turn to the rise of nationalism in Europe in the 19th century. The romanticizing of nations led to heavy colonization and the enslavement of thousands of Africans. One does not even need to mention the effects of Germany or the Soviet Union’s nationalistic approach. The point is not to say Nepal is on the verge of a mass genocide. Rather, the ideology that comes from nationalism is dangerous. There are far too many ethnicities inside Nepal to achieve a single unified Nepali identity. Blood has already been spilt in Nepal trying to protect these cultural distinctions. If changes in thinking do not occur more violence is inevitable.

People are, understandably so, hopeful for rapid development. In actuality, true development is well balanced and treats social aspects equally with economic. People in Nepal are giddy with excitement at the prospect of opening more trade routes with China. Such narrow sightedness ignores the human rights millions of Chinese have traded for economic success. Most people are just excited to distance themselves from India. In my interviews with hill people the expletives and racial slurs used towards Indians were common. The hatred for the country does not fall short of blatant racism. This hatred extends to the Madhesis who they believe to be Indian. By no means are Madhesis people hanging Indian flags from their doorway. I have concluded that the hill people’s claims merely mean that the people of Terai do not share the same hatred and racism towards neighboring India.

Perhaps what is most shocking is the long list of rumors and conspiracy’s created during this political tension. The word conspiracy usually has the connotation of a minority group. Right now in Nepal it is the majority of the population who partake in the tirade of fact-less headlines and false accusations. The media, which is largely run by high caste hill people, has taken advantage of a vulnerable populace. A populace who, after a long history of political struggle, warfare, and a 7.8 earthquake, is looking to finally place the blame somewhere else. Nepal needs a victory. The pressure built up inside the borders is palatable and pointing the finger to India relieves some pressure temporarily. The spotlight deserves to be on new Prime Minister Oli and the corrupt ineffective government of Nepal. People should be rallying behind the Madhesis in a fight for equality. Instead, all of the attention and anger has crossed the border. That anger is temporarily misplaced but eventually truth will prevail and Nepal will have to deal with the issues on the table.

Nepal is on the brink of its most important decision in its long history as a nation. Currently, the people are floating in the Barri Rapti River with two possible destinations. On one side there is Sapana Lodge, bright lights, neatly trimmed landscaping, luxurious rooms, and even their own elephants. It is a hotel built on the caste system and standing on weak moral foundations. It uses and oppresses the lower caste to increase the profit of the hotel. On the other side of the river is Tharu Community Homestay, traditional mud huts, Tharu paintings, and a Tharu owner. It
only has a few small rooms but offers many opportunities for the community. Until a decision is made people are drowning in the river. The negative effects of the fuel crisis are immeasurable. The stakes are high for a decision of this magnitude. I can only hope that social equality prevails. That Nepal will wake up from their nationalistic hypnosis and stand with the Madhesis in the fight for human rights. Although, I admit, it is all easy to say from my vantage point, in a boat passing by.


3 Ibid.


14 Ibid.


21 See sources in under graph on page ()

22 Nepal Constitution 2015 (2072 BS)—Nepali, English


25 Bikini Mahato interview. A friend’s home. Gothuali, Nepal

26 Moti Singh interview. November, 8, 2015, at the Market. Tandi Bazaar Nepal


Ibid.


Methodology

Data was primarily collected through field observation and interviews. Fieldwork was conducted in Chitwan as well as a short visit to Birganj. The most important aspect was being thought of as a friend rather than a tourist. By immersing myself in the community and living like a Tharu, the conversations and interviews I had were much more genuine and meaningful.

For finding information and stories about the history of Chitwan and how Tharus were marginalized I targeted elderly Tharus that have lived in the area their whole lives. I asked them about their childhood and life growing up as well as thoughts on the present day life. Finding Tharu’s with stories of oppression was not a difficult task. Seemingly everyone has a story. A translator was needed for these interviews, as the majority of elderly Tharu do not speak any English.

Tourism in Nepal was largely based on interviews about Sapana Lodge. I spoke with Dharba Giri after a professor recommended it. After I received some negative feedback about his hotel I dug deeper. I looked for people who had real information and connection to the hotel. It was only after my interview with an anonymous subject that I felt comfortable adding this piece into my research. I would not have included this research if there was not conclusive evidence of fraudulent activity.

For political commentary from Tharus and Madhesis I targeted younger more involved and educated people. Interview with Shiba Chudhary was important because he provided insider information on the Tharu political movement. Most often the subject would come up if someone asked why I was in Chitwan. People were more than happy to share their two cents on the issue.

Opinions and commentary from the hill people was an unexpected aspect of my research. I worked the bar at the homestay where I was living. As hill people ordered drinks many were shocked to see I was working instead of a local. This led to many conversations. Entire parties of hill people would invite me to their table to talk. Two men, Bhisnu and MC, were my most frequent interviews. They returned several times each time bringing new educated friends. By the final visit the men came with rehearsed arguments for me. For hours we would debate the politics of Nepal. It was in these conversations especially that I based much of my research on.
Limitations

• Language Barrier

• Transportation was difficult with the fuel crisis, would have been beneficial to travel more around Terai.

• Protests and violence made it too dangerous to visit the most affected areas. During my trip to Birganj I was not allowed to get close to the border.

• Availability to a research facility or library for texts and other resources

• Not being in an area with a higher Madhesis population. Seeing how an entire Madhesis village lives and interacts would have been beneficial to my research.

• Many interviews with participants were informal and could not be quoted in my research. Having a second interview and using their words and opinions would strengthen the paper.

• With so much being written about the subject, there are many false stories and facts floating around. It is always difficult sorting through to make sure everything is the absolute truth.

• Time is the most restricted limitation of all. With such a complex situation like this, the pulse of Nepal should be taken from many different places. From Kailiai to Janakpur and even Kathmandu. With ethnicity and diversity being such an important aspect to this paper, it could be improved by studying in different regions.
Ideas for Further Study

- How does opinions change as you move east and west across Terai?
- How does oppression change across Terai
- How does common people in Kathmandu feel about the Terai region, have they ever visited?
- Who is the real oppressor? In this paper I never used the word oppressor, only oppressed. It is difficult to label a population of people in Nepal as oppressors because they too face difficult circumstances. How do they view themselves vs. those of the lower caste.
- Study an even more marginalized ethnic minority. How do small minorities feel about Madhesis movement, do they feel apart of it?
- Study at protests sites and talk to the people protesting
- What is India’s perspective? Study across the border and get a fresh view on the issues. What is their media saying?
- Media in Nepal. Where are people getting their information? How do the media outlets change?
- More than anything, just being in the area as this all unfolds would be the most beneficial for further study. Whether it takes weeks, months, or years, new stories occur everyday. The best way to fully understand and research it is to be present and keep up with the news.
Bibliography

Bikini Mahato interview. A friend’s home. Gothuali, Nepal


Shiba Chaudhary, Vice President of Tharu Students Society, Interview. November, 14, 2015.

Tharu Community Homestay. Tandi Bazaar, Nepal.