

Chapter IV

Socio-Cultural Context of Madheshi Identity

IV. 1 Madhesh: The Land and Introduction of the People

Nepal has three different ecological zones: high Himalayan ranges bordering Tibet in the north, Mahabharata Mountains and Hills in the middle and the flat stretch of plain land bordering India in the south. These three different zones have also been considered as the division for administrative and socio-economic planning. Tarai has twenty districts out of the total 75 districts in the country and is the home for 49 per cent of the country's population (CBS: 2001). The population comprises more than 35 caste groups, 25 ethnic nationalities, 10 Dalit communities, and other religious minorities. Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Tharu and other similar languages are spoken across the region. People residing in Nepal Tarai are Madheshis, whose culture is distinct from the hill culture.

Tarai is defined as the landmass at the foothills of Nepal's Himalayan mountain and hill ranges, beginning typically from the succeeding low hill chains called the Mahabharata, Siwalik and Churia ranges to the wet and swampy land to the south, touching the vast Gangetic plains of India.

In the present context, there are three definitions to describe the geographic area of the Nepal Tarai:

- Under this definition, formulated on the basis of geographic features, Tarai includes the long and narrow strips of the Nepali foothills and the adjoining lands all the way south from the Afghan Hindukush in the north-west to India's Arunachal Pradesh in the far north-east; while the Nepal Tarai embraces Nepal's lateral Himalayan foothills in the middle of northern South Asia.
- The second definition includes the foothills within Nepal's own national boundaries, called the Siwalik or Chure-Bhanwar Range in the north and the adjoining lowlands or plain lands up to the Indian borders in the south.
- The third definition is forged in the context of the present-day political and administrative boundaries determined by the Government of Nepal. Under this definition, Nepal Tarai is a geographic entity consisting of mostly low and flat

lands in the southern length of the country between the hills in the north and the Gangetic plains under its control, with the adjoining strip of North India bordering in the south.

This particular landmass is called the Madhesh of Nepal Tarai, approximately 800 km long from its eastern boundary ranging from the Mechi River to its western delineation, reaching the Mahakali River. The estimated average width of Madhesh ranges from 30 to 50 km north–south.

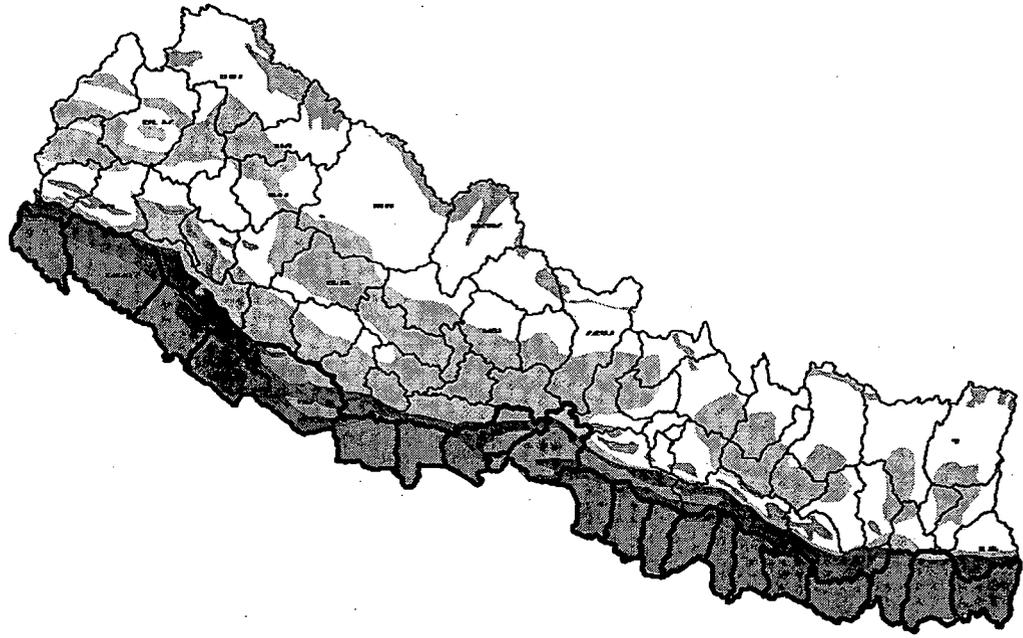
The total land area in the twenty Tarai districts is 34,109 sq km, which accounts for 23.1 per cent of the country’s land area amounting to 147,484 sq km (Table 4.1). In 2001, 48.4 per cent (11.212 million) of Nepal’s population of 23.2 million lived in Tarai districts with a density of 329 persons per sq. km. Tarai plain and Vitri (Inner) Madhesh together cover 15.6 per cent of the country’s total area.

Table 4.1. Land Area in 20 Tarai Districts

Ecological area	Area in sq km	Percentage	% of Nepal
Mid-mountain and Siwalik	11,041	34.2	
Tarai plain, including Vitri Madhesh	23,068	67.6	
Total	34,109	100	23.1

Source: ISRSC (2004).

Madhesh is renowned for the World Heritage Site of Lumbini in Kapilvastu district in the western region denoting the birthplace of Lord Buddha. Central and eastern Madhesh is the seat of Mithila culture, with its identity chiefly enshrined in Janakpur, the birthplace of Sita, the consort of Lord Ram. Madhesh abounds in exotic and indigenous fauna and flora of Nepal, with several national park reserves and bird sanctuaries to house them. Arable land and water resources are in plenty in Tarai districts; nearly 47 per cent of the country’s arable land (about 3 million hectares) and about 28 per cent forest area lie in this region. The groundwater available in the region could irrigate 1.9 million hectares of land. All the rivers flow through this region to India.



Tibetan- Tethys Zone

Tertiary Leucogranite Higher Himalayan Zone

Lesser Himalayan Zone

Paleozonic Granite

Siwalik

Recent Deposit

Tarai Zone

Source: Geology of Nepal, Rajan Kumar Dahal, 2006

Figure 4.1. Geological Map of Nepal

IV. 2 Madheshis

Madheshis are the indigenous “non-hill origin” inhabitants of the Tarai. They include such indigenous ethnic nationalities as Tharu, Rajbanshi, Meche, Dhimal and other tribals as well as the people of different Hindu caste groups whose religious traditions, languages, social lifestyles and customs, foods and clothes are similar to those of the people living in the Gangetic plains of India. People of different religious beliefs such as Islam, Sikhism and Jainism and other faiths, including ancient animism and nature worship, are also found in the Madhesh mosaic.

The term Madheshi has increasingly been used by both the people in the hills and the plains to refer to a large section of the Indian diaspora. However, some scholars doubt the efficacy of the term Madheshi as a tool for academic analysis (Dilli zl.2, no-1, 2002: 12).

The word is derived from the Sanskrit Madhyadesh, meaning thereby the mid-country between the Himalayan foothills in the north and the Vindhyas in the south. People living in this region came to be known as Madheshis or Madheshiyas (Jha, HB 1993: 1; Shrestha n. 45: 165–6). According to C.K. Lal, a noted Nepali political analyst, when the Aryans came 3500 years ago, they referred to the Tarai region as Madhyadesh or central country. The Nepali rulers later on corrupted it as Badesh and referred to the indigenous people such as the Tharus as Badeshis. It was only of late that Badhesi became Madheshi (Lal, CK 2002: 13).

It would appear that Lal includes the indigenous groups such as Tharus as Madheshis. However, some scholars have another viewpoint. Harald O. Skar, in his study of the Rana Tharus of Tarai, refers to the tribal groups such as Tharus, Rajbansis, Satars, Dunawars and Darias as indigenous people of the region; he used the term Madheshi to refer to immigrants from India (Skar 1995: 180–1).

In this context, the view of the Madheshi National Liberation Front (MNLF), circulated in a pamphlet, may be noted:

We, Madheshi community, are the Maithili, Bhojpuri and Awadhi language speaking community who have been living in Nepal from east to west since medieval times. We will run our own governmental system separately in the Bhojpuri, Maithili and Awadh regions, making the ethnic right of self-determination as its base.

Rajendra Mahato, a prominent Nepal Sadbhavana Party leader, opines that “Madheshis are a community having their own distinct identity” reflected in their “culture, language, and dress”, and they speak “Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Maithili, Hindi,

and Marwari” (Mahato, Rajendra 2005). Madheshi International, an organization “for madheshis to fight for their due rights and dignity”, defines Madheshi as “a person from lowland (Tarai) of Nepal, who is of Indian-origin orientations and racial roots”.

Recently, Madheshi intellectuals have been distinguishing Indian-origin Madheshis from Nepali-origin Madheshis. For instance, Chandra Kishore Jha, editor of *Tarai News Magazine*, is of the view that Nepali-origin Madheshis are the indigenous people of the Tarai, while Indian-origin Madheshis are those who migrated from India after 1950 (Jha, CK 2005).

Geographically, Madhesh means mid-land or low land. Culturally, however, the term implies an “inferior place”. According to Shrestha, this negative image of the Tarai “could have been linked to its deadly malarial and relatively uncivilized environment” (Shrestha n. 45: 165–6). The term thus connotes a negative meaning to mean “an alien or an uncivilized immigrant from northern India” (ibid.). The term Madheshi is used as a synonym for a “person of Indian origin” by the hill people or Paharis. As Parmanand, a noted Indian scholar on Nepal affairs, has rightly observed, the term is employed disparagingly for people of Indian origin in Nepal (Parmanand n. 49: 2008).

Madheshis are sometimes called Taraiwallas or Tarains. Another disparaging name given to them is Dhotiwallas (wearers of Dhoti) (Labh, K. 1995). C.K Lal has tried, unsuccessfully as it turns out, to popularize the terms Taraili and Taraibhasi. Caste groups in the hills, even descendants of emigrants from India, are not called Madheshis. They share the same hill-valley or Parbatiya culture and speak Nepali. Secondly, the term Madheshi has a topographic reference (Upreti n. 47: 97).

Hence, Indo-Nepalese people of the Tarai include those who migrated from India to Nepal since the second half of the nineteenth century. However, the legality of the definition is problematic, as many Indo-Nepalese do not possess the Nepali citizenship certificate. This would mean that two types of population constitute Indo-Nepalese people of Nepal Tarai. They are:

1. Any person of Indo-Aryan family settled in Tarai who possesses Nepali citizenship, and
2. Any person of Indo-Aryan family in Tarai who does not possess Nepali citizenship certificate but who also does not hold or wish to hold Indian

citizenship either and, therefore, technically, is a stateless person residing in Nepal.

The present study would use the term Indo-Nepalese as defined above to refer to only such persons of the nineteenth-century migration phenomenon and thereafter. This category of people cannot be treated as Indian migrants because they are Nepalese by any definition. The term Indo-Nepali has been employed by others earlier; for instance, by Nanda Shrestha to refer to two distinct categories:

The first category includes those who fled India and moved to the safe sanctuaries of the Nepal hills several hundred years ago, in the wake of the Muslim invasions of northern India. The hill group of Indian origin – popularly known as paharis (hill dwellers) – includes descendants of high-caste Hindus, mostly of Brahman and Kshatriyas (Chhetri) status. This segment of the Indo-Nepali population, at the apex of which stands the royal family, has played the most dominant role in local as well as national politics and governance. Other ethnic groups, including those of Indian origin that settled in the Tarai and, with some exception of Kathmandu. (Shrestha, Nanda R. 2002: 85–7)

The second group of Indo-Nepali identified by Shrestha is that of Madheshis:

The second group of Indo-Nepali people primarily includes Tarai inhabitants excluding hill migrants in the region. Generally identified as the *madhehsis*, they were relocated to Nepal from northern India. Most of them were actually encouraged by the government of Nepal or its agents to move into the Tarai for settlement during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the country was attempting to expand its revenue base through agricultural land settlement. Although some of those Indian migrants later became large landowners in the Tarai, most of them remain peasants with small tracts of land or no land at all. They belong to different sub-ethnic groups with their own respective dialects as the primary medium of communication. Although their felicity with Nepali has greatly improved over the years, they use it only when necessary. (ibid.)

This study will focus on the second group of Indo-Nepalese. The term Indo-Nepalese is preferred because it characterizes a cultural and ethnic connotation rather than a political one. Secondly, the concept of Nepal came to exist under a unified ruler in the mid-nineteenth century on the one hand, and the notion of India under British India became fairly popular by the turn of the nineteenth century.

Both the terms Madheshis and Indo-Nepalese would be employed interchangeably, as many Nepalese view Madheshis as Indo-Nepalese, and vice versa. However, not all Indo-Nepalese are Madheshis in both cultural and geographic sense. For instance, Marwaris, Sikhs and Kashmiris who have settled in Kathmandu Valley cannot be called Madheshis in the cultural or geographic sense. At the same time, not

all Madheshis are Indo-Nepalese: for instance, indigenous groups like Tharus and some Maithili caste groups.

The study will also employ terms such as Indian migrants and Indian community. The term Indian migrants will be used to refer only to the third category of people discussed earlier, i.e. the seasonal or floating migrants. The term Indian community will be used to refer to Indian nationals residing in Nepal and not Indo-Nepalese people. Table 4.2 presents figures for Tarai-based population groups.

Table 4.2. Disaggregated Population of Tarai Based on Social Groups

Description	Population (in '000)	Tarai (%)	Nepal (%)
Total	11,213	100	48.5
Janjatis	2,038	18.2	8.8
Dalits	888	7.9	3.9
Tarai castes	4,588	40.9	19.8
Hills-originated	3,698	33.0	16.0

Source: CBS 2001, *Population Census*.

IV. 3 Madhesh in Prehistoric and Medieval Periods

Archaeological evidence indicates that human evolution began in Madhesh in the prehistoric period. The human fossils of prehistoric man—the Butwal man or Nepipithecus—are estimated to be eleven million years old. Recently, a tooth of the prehistoric man Ramapithecus was found near Butawal, which is estimated to be one million years old. Likewise, some stone tools were found in the Chure Hills of Nawalparasi district estimated to be nearly _____ years old (Bista 1991: 17). Based on these facts, it can be said that human beings have been living in this region from the prehistoric period.

During the Neolithic age, the first plains caste people who settled in eastern Tarai were Ahirs, cowherds by occupation (Mishra, Y. 1981: 17). According to the mythological texts, during the ancient and mediaeval age, Madhesh was the home of Ashrams of mystics, hermits, saints and sages. The Ashram of Balmiki was in Triveni, or as it is called by the Indian people living across the border, Bhainshalotan, of Lumbini zone. The river Gandaki is named after a hermit called Gandak; the river Koshi is named after a hermit called Kaushik. According to the Hindu holy texts, the place for exercising austerity by a sage called Gautam was in Madhesh. The mystic Yaagyanwalyaka's Ashram was in Dhanusha district (Shrestha 2057: 154). In the

ancient period, in this region there were many federal states, among them Mithila or Videha, Tirbhukti, Shakya, and Koliya.

Madhesh has a long historical background dating back to the kingdom of Videha or Mithila established in eastern to central Madhesh and a part of the present day north Bihar, India (Malangiya ____). In mid-western Madhesh, Shakya kings ruled in 600 BC. The kingdom of Simraun Garh was established in the present-day Bara district (Thakur, Upendra 1979).

Archaeological studies through ancient arts, artefacts and monuments and excavation of historic sites (as in the case of Lumbini) of Madhesh have not been done so far. Such studies would tell the ancient history of this region. Pahadi scholars and historians have, however, completely ignored the region. A few Madheshi historians and scholars have tried to make such a study but have lacked resources.

IV. 4 Political Configuration of Madhesh

After the incorporation of Madhesh into Nepal in 1769 by King Prithvi Narayan Shah of Gorkha, the map of Tarai was redrawn by the Sugauli Treaty concluded between British India and Nepal in 1816. The treaty caused the people living in Madhesh to remain separately across the international borders dividing India and Nepal. Madheshis have ever since been divided, with no change in their status.

The political boundary of Nepal changed several times during the early nineteenth century (1806–1860), and so did the southern strips of the Tarai or Madhesh. The reason was the Gorkhali expansion of the Shah kings along the Himalaya in the late 18th and early 19th centuries paralleling the British advances on the Gangetic Plains. There were inevitable conflicts between the administrators and armies of the two contenders whenever they came face to face.

At the end of the eighteenth century, the British embarked on a programme of rationalization of their administration. The British felt that the administrative measures, such as the Permanent Settlement of 1793, with regard to land revenues and proper protection of the people subject to their government, required a clearly defined and demarcated boundary. The easiest way to achieve these goals was to establish border lines along the ranges of the hills. This made some sense from the military point of view as well. Although the disputed land (Tarai) had comparatively

insignificant value for the East India Company, it had great importance for the Nepalese, for whom it formed a part and parcel of the real fruits of their conquests.

Once the military structure grew to the size required for the continued expansion of Nepal, only the large stretches of the very fertile land in the Tarai, both cultivated and virgin, could satisfy the increased demands for space and resources that the system required. It was from these lands that the military commanders and the upper echelons of government were paid their salaries (Stiller, LF 1975: 19).

In order to settle the border disputes, the East India Company put forward two options before Nepal: either accept an annual stipend of 200,000 rupees to be paid by the Company to the Bhardars (relatives of the ruler) for relinquishing their rights over their lands in the Tarai territories or face imminent war. Since Nepal did not want to lose the Tarai belt at any cost, its rulers chose the second option. The contest for the control of Butwal and Shivraj (the present Kapilvastu and Rupandehi districts) in western Tarai ultimately led to the Anglo-Nepali War of 1814–16. The British also considered annexing the Nepal Tarai as a means of cutting off this valuable source of revenue and thereby financially crippling the government in Kathmandu (Gaige 1975: 25).

As per the ensuing terms and conditions of the Sugauli Treaty of December 1816, Nepal lost the entire Tarai to the East India Company. One year later, however, the eastern and central strips from the Mechi River to the western Rapti river were returned to Nepal. In 1860, after the Gorkhas aided the British during the Indian “Sepoy” Mutiny (1857-58), western Tarai was also returned. The present international boundary of Nepal, from Mechi to Mahakali, is the political demarcation that has been put into effect since 1860.

IV.5 Socio-Cultural Heritage of Madhesh

THE MITHILA KINGDOM OR VIDEHA

The kingdom of Mithila extended from the Himalayas in the north to the Ganges on the south and between the Kosi and Gandak rivers. The ancient texts enumerated that fifteen rivers irrigated the land of Mithila. The kingdom was known as Yajnaksetra, Videha and Tirabhukati (Tirhut) also. The kingdom became famous not only for being the birthplace of Sita, the heroine of Ramayana, but for Rajarshi Janak, Yajnavalkya

and Gargi, who had made great contributions in systematizing and developing Hindu social doctrines and philosophy in Aryavarta at the dawn of the Hindu civilization (Pandey 1999).

The *Satapatha Brahmana* mentions that Videha Madhava laid the foundation of the Janaka dynasty and Aryan culture in the region. Ninety-four kings of the Janak dynasty ruled over Mithila, including King Siradhvaja Janaka (1500 BC), the father of Sita. It has been said in the Mahabharata that the Pandavas lived in Mithila in exile. Karna and Bhimasen were said to have conquered Mithila. The king of Mithila was killed in the war of Mahabharata while fighting against the Pandavas on the side of the Kauravas (Pandey 1999).

According to Kautilya, Karala Janaka was the last king of Mithila and after him it became a republic under the Vajji Confederacy. The Jain Chronicles mention that Mahavir passed six rainy seasons in the kingdom of Mithila. In the fourth century, when the Guptas came to power in India, Videha became a province of their domination and came to be called Tirabhukti. After the fall of the Guptas in the seventh century, King Sasanka of Ganda annexed it within his domination. However, when he died, the province came under the direct control of the Vardhans. In the last quarter of the seventh century Tirabhukati was under the rule of King Adityasen of Magadha. In the eighth century, the Palas of Bengal captured Tirabhukati and ruled the region till the eleventh century (Pandey 1999). In the last decade of the eleventh century (AD 1097) Nanyadeva of Karnat dynasty captured Mithila and ruled the state from Simraun Garh. Nanyadev had been credited in the records for the unification of Tirhut after launching several successful military campaigns. Under the Karnat dynasty Tirhut made significant progress on the economic, social and cultural fronts. The period of Karnatas is called the 'golden age' of Tirhut. The Karnatas ruled over Mithila for about 225 years. After Gayasuddin Tughlaque conquered Mithila, for about three hundred years the region was under Muslim rule, after which it came under the rule of the Sens of Makwanpur. In AD 1762, during the rule of Digavandhan Sen, Prithvi Narayan Shah conquered Makwanpur and since then the whole eastern Tarai, including Tirhut or Mithila, became a part of Gorkhali dominion.

IV. 7 MONUMENTS, ARTS AND ARTEFACTS

S. Buch has mentioned that the palace of King Janaka was a "beautiful palace of varied types with picture drawings" and was surrounded by several tanks, canals and

squares (Buch 1: 169). The agriculturists lived in huts made of straw, reed, bamboo, clay and unburnt bricks. Buddhist works mention that big houses and buildings were mostly in the crowded and noisy cities and the ordinary men lived in “one-storey wattle and dump huts with thatched roofs” (Pandey 1999). The Mithila school of art was characterized by high technical accomplishments and a kind of mechanical grace and elegance. The sculptures of Simraun Garh, Valmikinagar, Janakpur and Murtiya clearly display these features in their modelling. The best example of Mithila sculptures is the panel of mother and child of the Ram temple at Janakpur. There are a large number of sculptures of Siva, Vishnu and Shakti at Simraun Garh and Janakpur. The temples of Mithila are divided into three major groups, called Sikhara type, Gumbad type and Ekachari Bangala type. The present temple of Goddess Janaki marks the culmination of temple architecture in the region of Mithila. Mithila women were lovers of art, culture and music (Rakesh 1994).

IV. 8 CULTURE

Script. The script of Maithili language, called Mithilakshar, was developed from the Brahmi script. There is a similarity between Bengali, Newari and Maithili scripts. All the ancient scriptures, documents and manuscripts are written in this script. (Pandey 1999).

8. a Dance. The dance tradition of Tarai is centuries old. Some of these dances are described below.

Folk or religious dances are mainly devoted to Goddess Durga, Shiva, and Krishna. *Jhinjhia* is performed on Dasain, the festival and devoted to Durga, the goddess who symbolizes the victory of virtue over vice. Young girls perform this dance during night with burning lamps on the top of water jars, which they carry on their heads. Male and female dancers perform *Jat-Jatin* after the rainy season. It is both a duet and group dance. The male dances as Lord Shiva and the female as Parvati. They express their grief, grievances, agonies and anguish in musical tones. *Sama-Chakwa* is a duet dance and performed for a full fortnight under the starry sky. Madheshi women sing and dance and pray for their brother's life and successful attempt in every effort. *Kirtaniya* is devoted to Lord Vishnu, Ram and Krishna by mainly men. *Nachari* is dedicated to Lord Shiva, danced on Mahasivaratri and Basantpanchami. *Bhagata* is performed by men to ward off evil spirits. *Kaharba* is a

popular dance of western Nepal. The dancers move from door to door, sometimes from village to village, singing and dancing in a group of four or five. *Mungrahawa*, also called stick dance, is a popular dance of the Tharu community of western Nepal and Chitwan. It is characterized by hand and hip movements. *Sakhiya* is a popular female folk dance in western Nepal; it is performed during Durga Puja. In *jhumare* folk dance women in a group or in a circle sing songs. *Fagua* or *Hori* is a dance of youthfulness, romance and the spirit of spring. *Bidesia* is a dance drama full of songs, music and literary flavour. It expresses the pangs of separation of a woman from her husband (Rakesh 1994: 27).

8. *b Languages.* Many languages and dialects like Maithili, Awadhi, Bhojpuri, Tharu, Hindi, Rajbanshi, Santhali, Satar, and Urdu are spoken by Madheshis. Maithili is the dominant language in eastern Tarai, in Morang, Sunsari, Saptari, Siraha, Dhanusha, Mahottari, Sarlahi, and Rautahat districts. Bhojpuri dominates in districts Bara, Parsa, Chitwan and Nawalparasi. Awadhi is spoken mainly in districts Rupandehi, Kapilvastu, Banke, Bardia, Kailai and Kanchanpur Hindi serves as the lingua franca from the Mechi River in the east to the Mahakali River in the west (Thakur, R. 1959: 21–24).

In the past, the languages spoken in Tarai were also the languages of court and the culture of the Newar kings, along with Tibeto-Burman dialects in Kathmandu Valley. The court language of Patan in Kathmandu Valley was closely allied to Maithili in AD 1650. Similarly, Awadhi, Maithili and Bengali were used as languages of culture in the court of Newari kings. Many plays were written in these languages in Nepal right down to the middle of the eighteenth century (ibid.). Maithili is the only language which has had a long and rich tradition of written literature.

Customs. The traditional dress of most Madheshis includes Dhoti, Ganji, Kurta, and Gamachha for the men and sari and blouse for women. In certain communities such as Satar, the men use merely a Langoti, a length of cloth that merely covers the private parts. A growing trend among the educated people has been a shift towards westernized apparel. In the Tharu community the dress of women is Cholo and Ghaghra/Patuka (Jha, HB 1993). Purdah, the tradition of keeping women in seclusion, is still practised in varying degrees. Madheshi women do not move out of their houses as freely as hill women. Most Muslim women dress like Hindu women. Madheshi

women fancy decking themselves with gold and silver ornaments. At marriage, the in-laws invariably give ornaments to the bride.

8. *c Major Festivals.* Important Madheshi festivals include Makar Sankranti, Holi, Jur Shital, Chaurchan, Durgapuja, Dipawali, Jitiah, Chhaith, Sama-Chakewa, Eid and Moharum (Jha, H.B. 1993: 10). *Makar Sankranti* is observed on 14 January to mark the change of season. People take bath early in the morning and offer sacrifices before the fire. They eat gur, til and ghee and khichari. *Holi* is a festival of colours. People throw colours and colour powders on one another and rejoice. They eat sweets, meat, and drink bhang. Singing, beating of drums and dance accompany the merriment. *Jurshital* is the beginning of the New Year (Vikram Samvat) in spring. In the early morning, the elders sprinkle water on the heads of youngsters and bless them. Water is also poured on the roots of mango trees. On this occasion people throw mud upon one another. *Chaurchan* is a corruption of the Sanskrit word Chauth Chandra, meaning the fourth day of the lunar calendar month of Bhadra. People worship the moon god and offer him different kinds of sweets. The next day, God Ganesh, the symbol of good omen, is worshipped by schoolchildren. *Durga Puja* is the most important festival of Nepal. Idols of Goddess Durga are made in villages and towns. Durga is the symbol of power and divinity, who killed powerful demons. Durga Puja begins on the day of Ghatasthapana (setting up a religious pitcher for worship) and ends on the tenth day called Vijayadashmi (the day of victory). It was on Vijayadashmi that Lord Ram attained victory over the demon king Ravan during the Treta period. *Dipawali* is the festival of lights, also called Lakshmi Puja or Sukha Ratri. Lakshmi is the symbol of wealth and pleasure. People clean their surroundings and decorate their houses with lights all over. On *Jitiah*, celebrated in the month of Kartik, Madheshi women pray for longevity for their children by fasting. On *Chhath* Surya the sun god is worshipped. On the first day the setting sun is worshipped and the next morning the rising sun is worshipped. Devotees offer various delicacies to the sun during the evening and morning pooja in the local ponds and rivers. *Sama Chakewa* is celebrated particularly in the Mithila region of Tarai following Chhaith puja. Women make colourful toys and artistic figures with clay, jute and sikki. A pauranik (mythological) story is commemorated each year with the view that innocent people should not fall victim to backbiters in society. *Eid* and *Mohuruum (Tajia)* are

festivals of the Muslims. Many Hindus also join the Muslims during Tajia (Jha, HB 1993: 8).

IV. 9 WORLD HERITAGE SITES IN MADHESH

9.a Lumbani. Sita, the consort of Lord Ram, was born in Janakpur, the capital of Mithila. Lord Buddha was born in the lovely garden of Lumbini in southern Tarai. Janakpur, the capital of Mithila, Biratnagar, the capital of King Birat, Kapilvastu, the capital of Sakya dynasty and Simraungarh, the capital of Karnat kings are some historical and sacred places of Madhesh (Rakesh 1994: 164).

9.b Simraungarh. In Simraungarh ancient relics and archaeological remnants are still found in plenty. They are remnants of a famous fortress during the Karnat dynasty. King Nanyadeo of the Karnat dynasty founded the fortress. During those days it was believed to be the centre of Hindu civilization. King Nanyadeo of Tirhut entered Nepal in 1097 (ibid.: 174) and ruled over there. The last king of Simraungarh, Harsimhadeo, fled Tirhut due to the attacks of Muslims and established his kingdom in Kathmandu Valley.

IV. 10 The Present Tarai

Culturally, the people living in the border areas of Nepal and India (Bihar and Uttar Pradesh) are not only similar in physical appearance, language, food habits and apparel but there also occur marriages frequently between the people living across the two sides of the border districts.

Tarai has seen almost a fourfold increase of population over the last five decades, from 2.9 million in the 1952/54 census to almost 11.3 million today (Dilli 2004). Tarai has the highest density of population (330 persons per sq km) and the highest average household size (5.75 persons per household) in Nepal as a whole (CBS, 2001 census).

Table 4.3. Population by Census Year 1952/54 to 2001

Census Year	Total population of Tarai with percentage	Annual Growth Rate between the Censuses
1952/54	2907000 (35.2)	—
1961	3422000 (36.4)	2.0
1971	4345000 (37.6)	2.4
1981	6567000 (43.6)	4.1
1991	8606000 (46.6)	2.8
2001	11312000 (48.4)	2.8

Source: CBS, 1952-54 to 2001 Census Records

For the Tarai region, the limit to land resource was not conceived until the mid-1970s. With the abolition of all forms of land grant systems and contractual arrangements that had contributed to the expansion of cultivated land, the state itself undertook the task to expand further the cultivated land of the region. The Rapti Valley Development Programme in 1958 was the first effort in this direction. In 1964, the Resettlement Company as a separate organization for systemic implementation of the resettlement programme was established. By 1977, the company had implemented ten major programmes in the districts of Jhapa, Chitwan, Nawalparasi, Bardiya, Kailali and Kanchanpur (Joshef, Elder 1976).

In the beginning, the objective of launching such programmes was to resettle the landless victims of floods and other natural calamities of the hill region. But later on the programme was used to settle the repatriated Nepalese from Burma and Assam in India. Retired Army personnel were also accommodated, especially along the border zones with India as a defence measure to protect the Nepali territory in the open border area. These developments were accompanied by malaria eradication and the construction of highways and roads. All these made Tarai an attractive destination for the landless and marginal farmers of the hill region. During the 1960s, 92.2 per cent of the interregional migrants of the country opted for Tarai as their destination. The corresponding figures in the 1970s and 1980s were 77.9 per cent and 82.8 per cent respectively. In addition, in 1964, the Land Reform Programme was introduced, which forced a large number of absentee landlords to settle in Tarai (Dilli 2004: 4).

The influx of the hill population has been a significant demographic event of the past few decades, and several new towns have been developed where hill meets plain, with hill majorities. These include, from west to east, towns like Mahendranagar, Tribhuvan Nagar, Butwal, Bharatpur, Hetauda, Dharan and Damak.

The western districts of Kanchanpur, Kailali, Bardiya, Banke and Dang Deokhuri have 30 to 50 per cent Tharus, and thus the hill people make up the second-largest group. Rupendehi has 60 to 70 per cent of the hill people and half of the population of Nawalparashi district is constituted by the hill people. In Chitwan and Jhapa districts nearly 70–80 per cent of the people are of hill origin (ibid.: 4). The rapid demographic changes of Tarai have been causing an adverse impact on Madheshis in terms of cultural and social values. Due to close interaction among Pahari and Madheshi people many intermarriages have taken place, which is also weakening the social and cultural system of Tarai.

The Tarai Hindu caste groups dominate in Dhanusha, Mahottari, Siraha, Saptari, Bara, Parsa, Sarlahi, Rautahat and Kapilvastu districts. Rautahat, Bara, Parsa, Kapilvastu, and Banke have the highest number of Muslim population. Saptari, Siraha, Dhanusha, Mahottari, and Sarlahi districts have the highest number of Yadav population.

IV. 11 TARAI DEMOGRAPHICS

According to the census report of Nepal 2001, out of 103 caste and ethnic groups in Nepal, 48 belong to Madhesh. The Tarai Adivasi/Janajati groups constitute 1,533,879 or 6.8 per cent of Nepal's population and 13.6 per cent of Tarai population. Tharus are numerically the largest in Kanchanpur, Kailali, Bardiya, Banke, Dang, and Sunsari districts. Among the Hindus, the Yadav caste is the largest numerically (895,423), who constitute 4.1 per cent of the population of Nepal and 7.9 per cent of the Tarai population; they are numerically highest in number in Dhanusha, Mahottari, Siraha, Saptari, and Sarlahi. Muslims (971,056) constitute 4.3 per cent of the total population and 8.6 per cent of the Tarai population; they are numerically highest in Rautahat, Bara, Parsa, Kapilvastu, and Banke. However, many Madheshi and tribal scholars have contested the data. They argue that census reports are always manipulated by the state to serve the interests of the dominant group. The census report shows less strength of Madheshis and the tribals in spite of the fact that they constitute 36 per cent (Madheshi) and 29 per cent (tribals or Janjatis) population. Madheshi scholars and activists especially from the Nepal Sadbhawana Party claim that their population is around 50 per cent of the population of Nepal.

Table 4.4: Break-up of Madheshi Population as per 2001 Census

Sl. No.	Caste/ethnicity	Population	Per cent
Caste group		3464249	15.24
1	Yadav	895423	3.94
2	Teli	304536	1.34
3	Koiri	251274	1.11
4	Kurmi	212842	0.94
5	Dhanuk	188150	0.83
6	Sonar	145088	0.64
7	Kewat	136953	0.60
8	Brahman	134496	0.59
9	Baniya	126971	0.56
10	Mallah	115986	0.51
11	Kalwar	115606	0.51
12	Hajam	98169	0.43
13	Kanu	95826	0.42
14	Sudhi	89846	0.40
15	Lohar	82637	0.36
16	Nuniya	66873	0.29
17	Kumhar	54413	0.24
18	Haluwai	50583	0.22
19	Rajput	48454	0.21
20	Kayastha	46071	0.20
21	Badhae	45975	0.20
22	Barae	35434	0.16
23	Kahar	34531	0.15
24	Lodha	24738	0.11
25	Rajbhar	24263	0.11
26	Bhediyar	17729	0.08
27	Mali	11390	0.05
28	Kamar	8761	0.04
29	Dhunia	1231	0.01
Dalit caste groups		904924	3.98
1	Chamar	269661	1.19

2	Musahar	172434	0.76
3	Dusadh	158525	0.70
4	Tatma	76512	0.34
5	Khatwe	74972	0.32
6	Dhobi	73413	0.32
7	Bantar	35839	0.16
8	Binda	18720	0.08
9	Chidimar	12296	0.05
10	Dom	8931	0.04
11	Halkhor	3621	0.02
Ethnic groups		2814927	12.38
1	Tharu	1533879	6.75
2	Muslim	971056	4.27
3	Rajbansi	95812	0.42
4	Marwari	43971	0.19
5	Santhal /satar	42698	0.19
6	Dhagar	41764	0.18
7	Gangai	31318	0.14
8	Dhimal	19357	0.09
9	Tajpuriya	13250	0.06
10	Bangali	9860	0.04
11	Punjabi	3054	0.01
12	Kisan	2876	0.01
13	Kache	1429	0.01
14	Munda	660	0.00
Unidentified dalit		173401	0.76
Unidentified caste/ethnic		231641	1.02
		22736934	100

Source: CBS census report 2001.

Madheshis have been preserving their traditional culture despite various influences from outside. Yet many evil practices, such as casteism, dowry system, discrimination against women, child marriage, etc. have become closely linked to the traditional system (Jha, HB 1993: 19).

Despite having basic infrastructure and access to schools and other facilities, Madheshis as a whole (excluding the few high-caste Hindu groups) are less educated than the hill people. The literacy data of the Tarai people, based on the 2001 census, suggests that excluding a few high-caste Hindu groups such as Kayasth 82.05 per cent, Maithili Brahmin 71.21 per cent, and Rajput 70.33 per cent, some other Hindu merchant groups (Halwai, Baniya, Kalwar, Teli and Sudhi) and other 36 Hindu caste groups of Tarai have literacy rate below 40 per cent (the national level literacy rate is 54.1 per cent). The lowest literacy is that of Tarai Dalits, between 7.3 per cent (Musahar) and 34 per cent (Dhobi). The Muslim population has only 34.7 per cent literacy rate; the largest Hindu caste group, Yadavs, have hardly 40.8 per cent literacy rate. Not a single Janajati group of Tarai has literacy rate above 50 per cent. The literacy rate of Tharus, the most populous group of Tarai, is only 47.1 per cent. The literacy rate of Madheshi women is the worst. Except a few high-caste Hindu Madheshi women (such as Kayastha, Maithili Brahmin and Rajput), the literacy rate of the Muslim and Yadav women is only 12.6 per cent. The Millennium Development Goals of the government suggest that by 2015, everybody will be literate in Nepal. Considering the present literacy rate of Madheshis, it will take at least another fifty years before every Madheshi woman will become literate in the Tarai (Dilli 2004: 6). The details of the other indicators like health condition, per capita income, poverty, allocation of per capita development budget and employment of Madheshi people are discussed in Chapter 5.

Thus, Madheshi groups as a whole seem to be lagging in many socio-economic indicators compared to the hill groups. A study made by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) in 2003-04 on district development indicators suggests that Tarai districts that have the higher percentage of Madheshi population are much behind in socio-economic indicators than districts that have higher percentage of the hill population. Tarai districts that have a higher

percentage of Janjatis, followed by the hill population and others are “intermediate” in socio-economic indicators of development (ibid.).

IV. 12 Summary

From ancient times until the mid-eighteenth century, Madhesh or Tarai region had a history of its own. Although various kingdoms rose and fell in the region, there was a historical and geographic continuity in the changes. The identity of Madhesh or Tarai region from the historical perspective was thereby established long before the emergence of modern nation-states. The region’s rich culture and heritage in arts, religion, culture and literature, discussed above, also proves that the region continues to have an independent identity. Only in the mid-eighteenth century this region lost its political identity to the Gorkha rulers. However, the political changes have not uprooted the rich culture of the region that has now formed the identity of Madheshis. But the demographic changes of Tarai have been causing an adverse impact and diluting Madheshi culture and identity. The hill people are trying to impose their own culture on Tarai. There is an urgent need to protect and promote the unique culture and languages of the region.

The implications of the Madheshis’ cultural identity are important for the nation-building process in Nepal. No integration processes were at work in the country’s nation-building since its inception. The culture of Madheshis was never given representation in Nepal’s mainstream cultural ethos, which further alienated Madheshis from the state as there were no cultural symbols of the nation which they could relate to. National cultural symbols play a critical role in integration processes as they provide a feeling of attachment to the nation. The absence of these attachments meant deepening alienation. The mainstream national culture then is seen as a threat fostering a sense of cultural invasion. This arises from the fact that the ruling elite perceived Madheshi culture as cultural invasion because of the Madheshis’ close cultural similarities with north Indian culture. As subsequent chapters will show, the ruling elite of Nepal tried to impose “Nepali national culture” on Madheshis, which has been resisted. Such policies not only created a rift between the communities but also slowed the nation-building process. An understanding of

Madheshi culture while examining Nepal's nation-building process is imperative as it may provide a better perspective.