Preface

The growing assertion of ethnic and regional identities in recent times is a major challenge to the process of nation-building in many multi-ethnic societies. The relationship between ethnicity and nation-building has both negative and positive influences on each other. Societies that discriminate on the ground of majority and minority are particularly vulnerable to the negative aspects of this assertion of identity.

The concept of nation-building fosters awareness among people, creates legitimate public authority and builds an integrated national commitment. It indicates a change through a gradual and slow process in the social, economic, political and psychological spheres, leading to the building of a cohesive national society. Group assertion on the basis of ethnicity has a negative impact on nation-building as it works against social cohesion. Therefore, national identity is a must for the process of nation-building. Most states have interpreted their national identity in unitary form and tried to construct it on the basis of language of majority. In nations that are constructed of plural societies, however, a democratic political and social order based on parity and economic development, ensuring access to resources and developmental attainments to all population groups on an equitable basis ensures healthy nation-building.

In Nepal, the modern state system came into existence in the later half of the eighteenth century. Before the advent of the Gorkhas, Nepal was an agglomeration of several principalities representing different groups and communities. King Prithvi Narayan Shah was conscious of the fact that the kingdom of Nepal was founded out of diverse and feuding ethno-cultural groups. He adopted a multi-dimensional approach to build a strong and unified state of Nepal. However, in this exercise he followed a stratified hierarchical model for the society based on the Hindu caste system that maintained brahminical supremacy. As a result, the Brahmins along with Chhetris belonging to the hill region acquired social prestige as well as supremacy in politico-economic and administrative fields. Identification
with the hill culture and caste hierarchy became important in determining the power and prestige of the various social groups. The people of Tarai and non-Hindu tribal communities, who were placed at the lowest social level, were encouraged to follow the hill cultural traits. Though the Shah dynasty recognized plurality, its successive members did not accord equitable rights and status to the different population groups. In this dispensation the various tribal groups remained at the periphery, with the state emerging as a predatory Hindu state. The monarchy tried to assert its political authority on the basis of the Hindu identity of state.

This has given rise to many problems. The people of Mongoloid origin have expressed strong reactions against the Hindu domination on the one hand, and discrimination towards them by the Brahmin-Chhetri-dominated elite on the other. The ethnic assertiveness of a number of Mongol groups has now become a demand for self-rule. Bir Nembang, a Mongol leader, thought in terms of a separate self-ruled state in Limbuwan; the Rais have demanded a separate of Khambuan. Madheshis also have raised their voice for recognition of their identity and their right to political and social participation. The ethnic groups sought alignment with the political parties, who in turn tried to exploit the organized strength of the former. This state of affairs has been facilitated by the fact that the formation of political parties along religious and cultural lines is prohibited under the constitution of 1990. Various ethnic groups and minorities in Nepal are also demanding recognition of their linguistic and cultural identity and a share in power and economic resources.

Nepal is essentially composed of Pahadi (hill) and Madheshi (plains) ethnic groups. The ruling elites are mainly the hill people, chiefly Brahmins and Chhetris. In spite of the simmering discontent among various ethnic groups, the ruling elites have made no serious effort to accommodate them. Instead, their legitimate grievances were labelled as anti-national and a threat to national unity or integrity. This led to insecurity among the ethno-national groups such as Madheshis and Janjatis. They perceive these policies with suspicion and view the nation-building exercise in progress as nation destroying, development as exploitation and controlled democracy as internal colonialism. These groups have seen themselves as being
excluded from the Nepali state and have taken cudgels against its arbitrary policies.

In Nepal, the state has become an instrument of protecting the interests of the majority hill (Pahari) people at the cost of the minorities’ interests. It is biased in its policies and practices. The discriminatory Citizenship Acts and land reform schemes of successive governments have adversely affected the Madheshis. The main problems faced by Madheshis are those of identity and recognition, proportional representation in state power, citizenship and nationality, language and culture. There has been internal colonization carried out by the Hill-dominated Nepali state against the plains people. Tarai has been the base of Nepal’s economy, contributing 76 per cent of GDP in the 1970s and about 70 per cent in recent years. However, Tarai’s share in developmental budgets has been less than 20 per cent. The declaration of Nepali as the official language in 1956 was directly responsible for the loss of employment opportunities for Madheshis, whose mother-tongue is not Nepali. The discrimination against Madheshi students was also manifested in the instruction of the government regarding the use of only Nepali as the medium of instruction in the middle and high schools.

Tarai is the most backward and poorest region of Nepal in terms of socio-economic indicators such as literacy, medical facilities, road construction, irrigation, per capita income, power supply, etc. Madheshis have consistently demonstrated opposition against control and misuse of their resources by the outsiders. Madheshis have a distinct cultural identity, with their own languages (Braj, Awadhi, Bhojpuri, and Maithili). Their festivals (Holi, Maghi, Chath, Judshital, etc.) are different from those of Pahadis despite similarity of religion, dress, food, and way of life. Another base of the emergence of their identity is negative discrimination. A third basis of Madheshi identity has been established by the sacrifices made by prominent Madheshis such as Ram Narayan Mishra, Sheikh Idris, Sunder Jha Shashtri, Mahendra Narayan Nidhi, who suffered in national life only because they were Madheshis.

The present-day ethnic turbulence in the Madheshi community revolves around the local issues with the nationalist desire to gain control over their natural resources. In this regard, a meaningful step would be to
share power with Madheshis to check the influx of non-Madheshis into Tarai and proportional representation to Madheshis in various services, including the army. Madheshi nationalism is a response to non-Madheshi domination through the centralized state system and excessive intervention in their affairs by the state. The strong sense of being a separate ethnic community with a separate history, culture and identity provides the Madheshis an opportunity to perceive themselves as a nation. However, over the years the Madheshi movement has also suffered from certain inherent weaknesses, particularly internal dissent regarding the objectives and methods of the movement.

Various Madheshi organizations have been involved in Madheshi mobilization. They include the Tarai Congress, Nepal Sadbhawana Party, Madheshi People's Right Forum, etc. The Maoist insurgency has given a new dimension to ethnic and regional consciousness of the greatly deprived population of Nepal. Madheshis first formed Madhesh Muktai Morcha, a sister organization of the Maoists, who are committed to establishing an autonomous state for Madheshis and have even promised to give the right of self-determination to Madheshis. Such a situation has given space to many other ethnic and regional organizations. Some organizations believe in non-violent methods but there are some semi-militant organizations as well.

There is a need to study systematically these struggles against discrimination against the Madheshi people and to try to find the reasons for their failure to achieve their goals. This study becomes all the more relevant in the context of the emerging ethnic and regional identity in Nepal. The present study proposes to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the rise of Madheshi identity and its implications for nation-state building in Nepal, focusing on the Madheshi movement in the light of the theoretical framework discussed above. The objectives of the study are as follows:

- To examine identity politics in Nepal,
- To understand the nation-building process in Nepal,
- To examine the emergence of Madheshi identity,
To analyse the social, political and economic problems of Madheshis, and

To examine the impact of Madhesi identity on nation-building in Nepal.

To accomplish these objectives, the study has sought to test the following hypotheses:

- The emergence of identity politics tends to have both positive and negative impacts on the nation-building process;
- Socio-economic and political discrimination made by the state has prompted the emergence of Madhesi identity in Nepal; and
- The nation-building process in Nepal has faced serious challenges due to the lack of sincerity and vision of the ruling elites.

The work is divided into seven chapters by themes of inquiry. The first chapter explores the theoretical premises of issues such as ethnicity, nation-building, regionalism, minority and majority. An attempt has also been made to develop an analytical framework on the rise of ethnic movements and their implications for nation-building. Chapter Two focuses on different ethnic groups and their societies on the basis of language, culture and traditions. The issues of regional movements based on ethnic identity in Nepal have been further examined in detail. In this context the effect of these movements on nation-building in Nepal has been analysed. Chapter Three examines the emergence of ethnic groups and its implications for nation-building, with an overview of the various ethnic movements in Nepal. The historical canvas for analysis ranges from the period of Prithvi Narayan Shah, the Panchayat system under King Mahendra and King Birendra, to the nation-building process under multi-party democracy after 1990. Chapter Four examines in detail the issues of the history, language and cultural practices of Madheshis, while highlighting the distinctness of these aspects from those of the Pahadis. Chapter Five analyses the issue of political, economic and legal discrimination against Madheshis, in terms of the Madheshis' political problems and representation in the various layers of state powers, the
problem relating to citizenship and nationality, identity, recognition, and internal colonization. The impact of the Maoist movement on Madheshis and their movement is also discussed. Chapter Six examines how the Madheshi identity has been influencing Nepal's nation-building. The chapter critically assesses the Madhesi movements since 1950 under the monarchy and subsequently under the constitutional monarchy, the potential of the current Madhesi movement, and the critical issues that pose challenges to the process of national integration in Nepal. Chapter Seven summarizes the arguments and draws appropriate conclusions from the foregoing analysis. Based on these conclusions the proposed hypothesis is tested. For practical benefit, the chapter also formulates some conceptual arguments on ethnicity and nation-building in multi-ethnic societies.

In view of its nature and scope, the study has adopted historical, descriptive and analytical methods. Data have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources have comprised government reports, census records, constitution, parliamentary and legal documents and the literature generated by Madheshi organizations. Secondary data have been collected from various books, journals, magazines and related Websites. Where necessary and possible, interviews were held with leaders and activists of the Madhesi movement as also government officials.

Taking into account all aspects of the Madhesi movement and nation-building process the thematic structure of the proposed study in terms of survey of literature deserves special attention, which may be described as follows:

Analytical Underpinning of the Emergence of Ethnic Groups and Nation-building: Addressing the emergence of ethnic movements and their implications has become a critical aspect of any nation-building process. Much literature is available on the emergence of ethnic groups and nation-building. Some of it focuses on conceptualization of the emergence of ethnicity and nation-building process in the context of a particular country or in general. The study by Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (1991), a notable example of this literature, provides
theoretical perspectives on ethnic movements and conflicts. It is a useful tool in understanding the rise of ethnic movements and sub-nationalism in Nepal.

Phadnis, in *Ethnicity and Nation Building in South Asia* (1989), gives theoretical explanations of various terms related to ethnicity. Her study also discusses the ethnic movements and ethnic identities in the South Asian countries, including the problems of the Tarai people in Nepal. Gurr (1993) writes that ethnic conflicts are a serious and growing challenge to domestic and international security. Deliberate discrimination by dominant groups is a source of insecurity among the minorities. Economic inequalities are more resistant to change than political inequalities. The source of most communal conflicts relates to the minorities' assertion of their equal rights. Communal conflicts of all types in every part of the world have been restrained or transformed by political accommodation entailing autonomy, pluralism and power sharing.

Ahmed (1996) explains why and how nation-building in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka has been resisted by some cultural groups, which claim a separate national identity and demand special rights over territory. The emergence of nationalist claims against the state, however, is a process gradually moving in only one direction or always ending up in armed conflict. Separatist nationalists may mobilize substantial support among members of the group on whose behalf it is asked, or the support base can wither away under the impact of overall socio-economic change or accommodation within some autonomy formula. In principle, the international political order has generally been indifferent, if not directly hostile, to the demand for national self-determination raised by disgruntled cultural groups against sovereign states, whose territorial integrity is sanctioned by international conventions and treaties. On the other hand, notwithstanding a bias in favour of status quo, the asymmetry and anarchy in the global power balance provide hostile neighbours, regional powers, big powers and superpowers ample opportunities to fuel ethnic conflicts in newly formed or unstable states.

Haque (1997) writes that newly independent states have a plural-cultural social order, which makes the process of national integration
difficult. The crisis of national identity and integration due to the emergence of ethnic grievances is severe. Intense fragmentation, factionalism, politicking, intertribal and intra-tribal clashes, etc. have marred the development of nationhood. Only sincere political negotiations between the parties involved in conflict can bring peace. Guelke (2004) writes that ethnic conflict has been at the centre of the discipline of both politics and international relations since the end of the Cold War. The outbreak of ethnic conflict is seemingly the primary source of political instability both domestically and internationally. Liberal democracy seems most likely to achieve both legitimacy and durability in the long run in ethnically divided societies. At least within such societies, the rule of justice, understood by the parties as fair treatment in the achievement of reconciliation, is a difficult task to accomplish.

An Overview of Ethnic and Regional Groups in Nepal: Yadav (2003) analyses the emergence and failure of various ethnic organizations in Nepal. In particular, he examines the discrimination perpetrated against Madheshis and proposes ways to end it. The study highlights various Madheshi organizations and their failure to achieve their goals. Kathmandu-centric organizations have been engaged only in promoting their self-interest. Personality clashes among Madheshi leaders are the main cause of their failure to unite the Madhesi community.

Bhattachan (1995), dealing with different ethnic movements—Janjati, Dalit and Madheshi—in Nepal, focuses on various Janjati movements. He maintains that different ethnic groups showed their discontent against the state from its inception in the modern period but the discontent became more vociferous after 1990 with the reinstatement of the multi-party system. Bhattachan’s study examines, with various examples, how the state protects the ruling elites at the cost of marginalized groups and how different ethnic groups are asserting their identity and rights. Bista (1987) provides a detailed account of the ethnic composition in Nepal. The study provides a perspective on the settlement pattern of different ethnic groups. It explains the socio-cultural features of the various societies, such as traditional festivals and ethnic dress, and family relation patterns.
Rakesh (1994) analyses the cultural facets of the Tarai people from an historical perspective. The history of Mithila culture and traditions are briefly discussed. The study also provides a history of Lumbini and Simroungarh. The author claims that the Madhesis' civilization is the richest and oldest in Nepal. To prove his argument, he has linked Madheshi identity to the historical legacy of Mithila, Lumbini and Simroungarh, all of which formed parts of the Tarai region. Gurung (1998) writes about the discrimination faced by various population groups in Nepal on account of the state's biased monopolistic policy. The Janjatis face discrimination on the basis of culture, the Dalits on the basis of caste and Madhehsis on the basis of geography.

**Emergence of Madhesi Identity:** Yadav (1997) analyses the history of Madheshis and points out the discrimination to which they have been subjected under the various regimes in Nepal. He focuses on how the hill people captured the land of Madhesis and tried to undermine their language, culture, and traditions. The book also deals with the Tarai economy and its contribution to Nepal’s economy. Thakur analyses the various types of discrimination faced by the Madheshis. The terms Madhesh and Madheshi were first popularized by the author. He also discusses the internal colonization by the Nepal state in Tarai from an historical viewpoint. Singh writes an account of the problems of Madheshis in the areas of language and economic and political representation. He makes a plea for the Tarai people's involvement in decision-making and gender representation to them in government services, including the army.

**Madheshis and Nation-building:** Gaige (1975) focuses on the contribution of Tarai to the national economy and also the impact of land reform policy and huge internal migration in Tarai. Lal (2002) deals with the problem of national integration in Nepal in the context of Tarai. He also provides an account of Tarai’s cultural and geographic features. The book also highlights the current problems faced by Madheshis.

The literature surveyed here reveals that though there is considerable material available on various facets of ethnicity and nation-
building in Nepal, no full-length study has been conducted so far on the emergence of Madheshis as an ethnic group and its impact on the nation-building process.