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Discourse, Language, Power, And Identity: A Critical Analysis of Madheshi Marginalization in Nepal

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Abstract-- This paper attempts to analyse discourse to uncover the opacities within it that contribute to the exercise, maintenance, or reproduction of unequal relations of power in Nepal. The first part introduces the concepts associated with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and the method employed. The corpora for analysis are collected from media texts, political speeches, newspapers, reports of NGOs and INGOs, and agreements related to the Madhesh Movement in 2007. They are analyzed using interdisciplinary approaches of CDA, especially in the light of Van Dijk's model of social cognition. The second part discusses how dominant discourses have contributed to producing power, dominance, and discrimination in Nepalese society. The final section analyses the rise and fall of the Madhesh Movement, which has led to the present conflict between power elites and power seekers. It concludes with a suggestion for quick action to bridge the gap between increasing polarisation before it is too late.

Keywords-- Discriminatory discourse, Critical Discourse analysis (CDA), power structure, Madhesh movement, search for identity

I. INTRODUCTION: DISCOURSE, IDEOLOGY, AND CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Discourse is more than just a use of language; it is a social practice that produces and reproduces power in society. Every society is guided by a certain ideology or belief system that influences its social practice, including discourse. Therefore, understanding the ideology behind the text or talk in a particular society is necessary to understand the discourse, which can be better achieved through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

CDA is an approach used to analyse power dominance and social discrimination created through discourse with the intent to emancipate the marginalised and oppressed group. Practitioners of CDA analyse and understand the underlying ideology in the discourse and oppose the power dominance, inequality, and discrimination it creates. This paper, thus, aims at analysing the role of discourse in creating power, dominance, discrimination, marginalization, and inequality in Nepalese society.

The paper follows interdisciplinary approaches of CDA, specifically Van Dijk's model of social cognition, to unpack the role of discourse. According to Van Dijk (1993), social cognition is the necessary theoretical and empirical interface that shows the relation between society and discourse, mediating between the micro- and macro-levels of society. Discourse is created and controlled by powerful elites to produce and reproduce power and dominance. Power, in this context, means having control or managing the minds of others, which is achieved by creating knowledge or discourse. Knowledge, therefore, seems to be the main source of power in today's world.

Knowledge can be defined simply as a shared belief justified by a speech community based on the criteria established by such an epistemic community (Van Dijk, 2013). Since knowledge is guided by social cognition, it is relative to a particular community culture, field, and society. Van Dijk (2013) further states that knowledge is gained from three sources: experience and observation, discourse (text and talk), and inferences based on previous knowledge, with the latter, making inferences, appearing to be a major source. In this sense, text or talk is just 'a tip of an iceberg'; the larger area is hidden between the lines, in the mind of readers, based on their personal experience, reading, and social context. Thus, we need to see text in the context where the mental context is more important than the physical one.

The corpora for the present study were collected from news, speeches, human rights organizations' reports, interviews on TV, media reports, text, images, blogs, etc., concerning Madheshi and their movement over the last one and a half decades, from 2007 to date. The interrelationship between texts, or intertextuality, was established to analyse the relationship between discourse and power and dominance. Strands (themes) were developed based on the data, and they were discussed and interpreted in light of CDA approaches. In particular, the article seeks to explore the hidden ideology behind how (and why) the same events and news related to Madhesh were reported differently by Kathmandu-based media, local media, and international human rights organisations.



The paper's subsequent content is divided into three sections: first, informing readers on how discourse created dominance and discrimination over marginalised groups; next, analysing the Madhesh movement, its rise, and fall in the last 15 years; and finally, looking at the possible solution of the present conflict in the country, followed by a conclusion.

II. DISCOURSE AND THE MECHANISM OF DOMINANCE

Discourse plays a significant role in creating power and dominance in society. Dominance can be defined as “the exercise of social power by elites, institutions or groups that results in social inequality, including political-cultural, class, ethnic, racial and gender inequality” (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 250). In the Nepalese context, discourse has enabled a tiny group of hilly elites from the upper-caste Hindu religion to exercise power over groups such as Dalit, Tharus, Madheshi, and Muslims, resulting in discrimination and marginalisation (Pfaff-Czarnecka, Stokke & Manandhar, 2009). Although Nepal observed a drastic change in power-sharing from a centralized monarchy to decentralized federal republic states, the ideology of this group has remained the same: they want to hold power and rule the ‘Other’ communities socially, culturally, linguistically, and economically.

Dominant discourses have supported power elites in the (re)production of power and dominance in Nepalese society.

III. DISCRIMINATORY DISCOURSE IN NEPALESE HISTORY

Throughout Nepalese history, discourse has been used as a tool to rule people, traceable back to the unification of the nation by Prithi Narayan Shah. His famous statement, *Nepal chaar varna chhatish jaatako shanjha phulbari ho* (Nepal is a garden of four varnas and thirty-six castes) (Bhattachan, 2009), divided people beyond the *Vanran* division (*Brahman*, *Chhetri*, *Baisiya*, and *Sudra*) in the Hindu religion. This proved to be a dominant discourse for exclusionary practice in Nepal. Each group was assigned a particular set of jobs, which enabled one group to have power and rule over other communities, becoming the bedrock for dominance and inequality for centuries.

Similarly, the first-ever law in Nepal, *Muluki Ain* (country code) of 1954, formally legalised discriminatory practices. It categorised people into a four-tier caste hierarchy: *Tagadhari* (sacred thread wearing), *Matwali* (liquor drinking), *Pani nachalne chhoiee chito halnu naparne* (water unacceptable but no purification required), and *pani nachanlen chhoiee chito halnu parne* (water unacceptable and purification required, i.e., untouchable), alongside sub-categories of *Masine* (deserved to be slaved) and *Namasine* (do not deserve to be slaved) (as cited in Bhattachan, 2009). This placed Brahmin and Chhetri, one-third of the population, in a higher state position, allowing them to rule indigenous groups, *Aadibasi*, *Janjatis*, *Madheshis*, and *Tharus*. Since then, these latter groups have been socially, culturally, and legally excluded, marginalised, and discriminated against in their own state. Thus, *Muluki Ain* legally institutionalised discriminatory practice, excluding the ‘Other’ groups from the nation's mainstream.

King Mahendra's characterisation of Nepal as “One king, one country; and one language, one costume” (Bhattachan, 2009) was another significant discourse that defined a particular group as more Nepali than others and sustained discriminatory practices. This is still used as a parameter to define Nepali nationalism, where Nepali speakers with *Daura*, *Surwal*, and *Topi* are considered more Nepali than other groups with different social-cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The *Panchayat* government created a unified national identity with the slogan of ‘*ek bhasha, ek bhash, ek dharma, ek desh*’ (one language, one way of dress, one religion, one nation), aiming to assimilate people with varied cultural and linguistic practices into a Nepali identity based on the cultural practices of elite, high-caste hill Hindus (Weinberg, 2013).

Ultimately, dominant discourses on caste division and nationalism are historically produced and legitimised by powerful groups (Wodak, 2009). They have seemingly become ‘common sense’ with no space for counter-discourse. The alternative discourse is considered an act of breaking conventions. However, as Foucault claims, discourses are not eternal; they come and go, leaving history (genealogy) behind (Gibbs, 2015). The notion of nationalism in the Nepalese context is also observed to be changing from monolithic to inclusive over time.



IV. SOCIAL INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION: THE 'SELF' VS. 'OTHER' DIVIDE

After *Jana Andolan II* (people's movement) in 2006, Nepal observed a drastic political change, undergoing five multiple transitions in a compressed period: from monarchy to republic, war to peace, unitary to federal, Hindu kingdom to a secular state, and monolithic exclusive nationalism to an inclusive notion of citizenship (Jha, 2014). With the promulgation of the new constitution in 2015, Nepal formally accepted these transitions, but Kathmandu does not appear to share power with disadvantaged groups, including Madheshi, in practice. A famous politician, Gagan Thapa, pointed out that while the constitution and laws accommodate a diverse Nepal, society is yet to adapt to the idea of a new Nepal (Thapa, 2015).

Discrimination appears to continue for Madheshi, a marginalized group and co-traveler of these changes. The powerful group seems to be following the principles of **delay, denial, and division** to sustain their dominance. They delayed fulfilling the demands of the Madhesh movements, denied them while making the constitution, and divided Madheshi into different states so they could be ruled forever. Consequently, there is a growing sense of alienation and frustration among Madheshis for being treated as 'Other'.

Madheshis are apparently a socially, culturally, and linguistically excluded group. The difference is visible in the statement by reporter Prashant Jha, who is often asked, "Are you Nepali?" in Kathmandu and "But you don't look like Nepali" in Delhi (Jha, 2014). Conversely, Prashant Tamang is taken as Nepali in Kathmandu, even though he is an Indian singer. This is not merely a difference in castes (Jha and Tamang); it represents the social mental cognition of Nepalese society, which sees an Indian as Nepali and a Madheshi as an Indian due to social, cultural, and linguistic similarities. There is a visible category of 'Self' and 'Other' based on community, ethnicity, language, culture, and region, where Madheshis are excluded from the 'Self' category, while Indians in Darjeeling seem to be included as an in-group. This might be why most Nepalese supported the movement for Gorkhaland in India but opposed the demands of Madheshi, although both movements intend to gain power and protect their language, culture, and identity (Khatriwada, 2017).

Within Madhesh, there is internal discrimination; some castes face greater marginalisation. This region is controlled by 'Bhurabaal,' a blend of so-called higher castes, including *Bhumihar*, *Rajput*, *Brahman*, and *Lala* (Dutta, 2017). Lower castes like *Mushhar*, *Chamar*, *Dom*, *Bin*, *Hajam*, and *Khatbe* face double marginalisation from both the state and within Madhesh. Caste discrimination seems to be a common social problem across Nepalese society, regardless of geographical differences. Social discriminations such as caste discrimination, *Sati Partha*, and untouchability have been part of Nepalese society historically, existing in all groups (*Madheshi*, *Pahadi*, and *Janjati*) as promoted by *Muluki Ain*. However, power elites and media exaggerate this social problem mainly for Madheshi to make it a political issue and marginalise them. They justify their dominance by positively representing the 'Self' and negatively representing the 'Other' (Van Dijk, 1993).

V. THE DISCURSIVE STRUGGLE: *DAJU* VS. *BHAIYA*

The term *Bhaiya* has a similar meaning to *Daju* when a Madheshi uses it for an elder brother, but when used by non-Madheshis, it carries a negative meaning. It is often used to mock and tease people from the Terai region. Besides *Bhaiya*, they are also called '*Dhoti*,' '*Madishe*' (with 'e' at last), '*Bihari*,' and '*Indian*' to label them as foreigners who cannot have the same status as other Nepalese. The intensity of the meaning depends on the intent of the interlocutor and the purpose of the usage.

This is understood through Foucauldian notions of **construct and subject positioning**, where a particular understanding constructs the subject through discourse (Willing, 2013). Being positioned as '*Bhaiya*' means becoming an object of legitimate interest who can be scolded, discriminated against, or even punished like a second-class citizen or an outsider, *Bihari* or *Indian*. Conversely, being positioned as *Daju* carries a positive connotation, worthy of respect and fair treatment.

From Van Dijk's model of social cognition, these derogatory words are the verbal representation of a social cognition towards Madheshi, that they are second-class people who do not deserve equal treatment. Initially, these words may appear natural in speech. People in Kathmandu often do not feel unusual calling a street vendor from Madhesh with broken Nepali as *Bhaiya*, but another one, a *Pahadi* with better Nepali and comparatively white skin, is called *Daju*.

This verbal discrimination is reflected in behavior and social practice in the form of exclusion, where in-group members benefit, and vice versa. This discriminatory practice is observed in day-to-day interactions, whether a conductor asks for the fare or a common Nepali talks to an unknown person from Terai. They are often mocked and discriminated against based on their culture, language, and clothing.

Moreover, famous politicians and police officers have been found using such derogatory terms. An Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) report documented 'hill origin people' shouting racial slurs like '*Madheshi Chor Desh Chhod*' (Madheshi thief leave the country) and police using slurs like '*Biharis, go back to India*' against protesters (Asian Human Rights Commission, 2015). A top influential leader like KP Oli termed the largest human chain movement by Madheshi from Mechi to Mahakali as '*Makhhesanglo*' (Chain of flies) and the death of protestors as '*rukha baata dui char aamp jharu*' (falling a few mangos from trees). He also mocked Madheshi, suggesting that if they needed all plain areas, they should go to UP and Bihar in India, implying that a state on the Moon could not be demanded (Anurag, n.d.). The use of such negative symbols, metaphors, and hyperboles has become a discursive practice to sustain power (Van Dijk, 1993) and undermine Madheshi and their demands. This reflects the attitude of hilly elites towards Madheshi, treating them as second-class citizens, similar to how white rulers treated black people (and still treat immigrants) in the USA. However, after the achievements in 2007, terms like *Dhoti* and *Madheshi* are being used by youths to dignify the community, reflected in a social media campaign where many Madheshi youths replaced their surname with "Dhoti" (Sharma, 2015). Nevertheless, when used by individuals from other groups, they still often convey a negative meaning.

VI. DISCOURSE AND THE ROLE OF NATIONAL MEDIA

Media, extending beyond just newspapers, seems to be supporting discriminatory discourse intentionally or unintentionally. All Nepalese mainstream media, including press, TV, publications, movies, and radio, are controlled by the hilly elite. Most news editors, writers, reporters, directors, and actors in the movie industry belong to this group. It is difficult to find even a single news editor from Madhesh in Nepali media; thus, their voices are suppressed, opinions are censored, criticized, and often presented in a negative light.

During the Madheshi protests in 2015, multimedia journalist David Caprara covered the events for various international media outlets. In his reportage, '*How the Mainstream Nepali Media has Skewed Public Perception of the Madheshi Crisis*', Caprara (2016) mentions that mainstream Nepali media warp public perception through selective coverage of events without context, avoiding detail, fact, and data. He further explains that they intentionally twist headlines to spearhead half-truths, present their own opinions as news, and exclude real voices from other communities. Moreover, they often dilute the agendas and opinions of Madheshi and present their own biased view as news and reports.

This is evident in the news by Bahadur (2007), who wrote, "The Madheshi Janadhakar Forum's behaviour starkly differs from the list of demands (see appendix 1) ...disrupting communal harmony". He then listed each demand and justified why they were wrong. He also created a sense of fear, claiming that "some of the demands appear unreasonable and illogical: especially right to self-determination...is potentially fatal because it essentially provides an autonomous geographical region a legal and political right to segregate and declare itself as an independent nation if it desires to do so" (Bahadur, 2007).

Biasedness is clear in the representation of marginalised groups' demands. These voices are either unheard or, if presented, are censored and often diluted by the writer, reporter, and editor. Negative issues from the Madheshi group are highlighted, which were seen in the reporting of the Kailali event. The national media highlighted the killing of 8 police officers as an act of brutality but deemphasised the death of a toddler in the same event. They intentionally avoided capturing the killing and torture done by police afterwards, where officers did not follow minimum force standards, shooting Madheshi and Tharu in the forehead and chest with tribal intent (Asian Human Rights Commission, 2015). In addition to print media, the Nepalese movie and TV industries also make fun of Madheshis by presenting them in a negative light.

The discussion suggests that the mainstream media supports the power elites in justifying inequalities. They employ two complementary strategies: the positive representation of their own group and the negative representation of Others (Van Dijk, 1993). The impact of such discriminatory media discourse on social and mental cognition, as well as practice, is huge.



Some school children in Kathmandu were found teasing their Madheshi colleagues, copying the exaggerated accents of funny characters from movies and TV serials. This was even performed in school programs without hesitation. This illustrates how such innocent minds become accustomed to and acquire discriminatory practices. Social cognition acts as an operating system for discriminatory behaviour and practices (Van Dijk, 1993). Ultimately, the discrimination and challenge to their identity are the reasons for the Madhesh movement.

VII. THE MADHESH MOVEMENT: A STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY AND JUSTICE

Since *Janaandolan II* in 2007, Madhesh, the southern plain land, has been a prominent issue in Nepali politics. Almost 50% of the total population resides in this region, which accounts for only 17 per cent of Nepal's total area. Despite being the birthplace of Goddess Sita and Sidhartha Gautam Buddha, it has politically been a victim of dominance and marginalization by the power elite in Kathmandu for centuries.

Rise and Fall of the Movement

Madheshis have constantly struggled for identity to achieve social and economic justice. Their voices against discrimination entered the public discourse with the rise of the Madhesh movement in 2007. The movement started at *Maiti Ghar Manadala* with a small group led by Upendra Yadav, burning the constitution. Their arrest fueled the fire in Terai, and the movement grew

(Giri, 2017). Following strong protests in 2007 and 2008 demanding federalism, inclusion, and proportionate representation, the mainstream political parties incorporated these demands in the 'Interim Constitution' and agreed to address them while finalising the constitution. This resulted in fair representation for Madheshi in the constitution assembly, and Kathmandu was compelled to accept the Madheshi identity. Madheshi became conscious of their identity and rights and could easily speak against discrimination.

However, with the failure of the first constitution assembly, the Madheshi leaders could not safeguard these achievements, and the center regained power by controlling the discourse in society through the media. Since then, there have been three great movements in the last 15 years (2007–2022).

These movements, known as Madhesh Andolan II and III, took the lives of more than 50 people during the proclamation of the new constitution. The institution was established through a fast track, disregarding all past agreements. Consequently, the Madhesh movement failed again, and Madheshis returned to their starting point. This outcome is criticized as a discriminatory constitution made to support a tiny group of hill elites in sustaining their dominance across the judiciary, legislative, and the constitutional assembly (Giri, 2017).

The Tussle Between the Power Elite and Power Seekers

The Madhesh movement is often interpreted as a fight between *Madheshi* and *Pahadi* over two contradictory nationalities (Khatiwada, 2017). In reality, it is a struggle between power elites and power-seekers, between the ruler and the ruled, between the oppressor and the oppressed. Thus, the present tension is between the state and the marginalised groups, not between *Pahadi* and *Madheshi*, as many analysts project (Jaiswal, 2015). The tussle is between a tiny group of hilly elites from the so-called upper caste, who have been controlling and wish to maintain control of the whole state, and the marginalised groups like Madheshis. This conflict will likely continue until power is shared among all groups, including Madheshi, Janajati, Tharu, Dalit, Muslims, and others. It is the product of an exclusive mentality rooted in the mindset of the ruling class for centuries (Giri, 2017). It will persist until the ruling class changes its perspective and accepts and respects the identity, language, and culture of all, finding unity in diversities.

The Deferring Dream and Increasing Polarisation

The power elites seem to refuse to share their power and still want to maintain control. They use the principle of divide and rule. Madheshi and Tharu have been divided into seven different states to prevent them from having a strong influence in any province. The demarcation of the state appears to be done as per the interest of individual leaders. For example, three far-eastern districts of the Tarai (*Morang*, *Sunsari*, and *Jhapa*) were merged with the hills into one province due to the influence of KP Oli, and two far-western districts (*Kailali* and *Kanchanpur*) were merged with the western hills into another province to ensure the influence of Sher Bahadur Deuba (Shah, 2015). The ideology behind this division is simply to maintain unequal power relations (Wodak, 2009), decreasing the possibility for Madheshi and Tharu to be in power even in their own states.

If Madhesh had been divided into two provinces as demanded, these famous leaders would lose their power in those states.

The power elites have created various discourses against Madheshi, blaming them and taking the benefit of the doubt through such discourse. They have successfully created fear among common *Pahadi* that if Madheshi were given the demanded province(s), they would merge Terai with India (Thapa, 2015). The use of metaphors and symbols such as **secessionist, pro-Indian, newcomer, and anti-nationalist** has intensified this fear, similar to how the term, ‘Waves of immigrants’ creates fear among Americans.

There is a growing polarization or mass radicalization, dividing people into two groups: *Us* and *Other*. Anger exists against the state, all political parties, and top and local leaders. The emotional and psychological gap between the in-group and out-group seems to be increasing daily (Sharma, 2017), which needs to be bridged soon. Any delay may lead to unimaginable eruptions in the future, which would be detrimental to both Kathmandu and Madhesh. Gagan Thapa (2015) explained the increasing polarisation:

“Some of those who stay in Kathmandu (pointing at some Kathmandu as Establishment, Government, and Elites) have been insensitive towards those martyrs of Madhesh, and there are some in Madhesh who want to blur out the honest and legitimate demand of Madhesh by demanding a separate state. They both are extremists. They are a complementary to each other. They pretend to act as nationalists by making ultra-nationalistic comments” (Thapa, 2015).

The current conflict will continue until Kathmandu realises this situation. As Giri (2017) suggests, it must be taken as a national issue by both Kathmandu and Madhesh, rather than being depicted as a problem of a particular region or group. Furthermore,

the solution must be sought within the country (Thapa, 2015) by all groups, considering the ground reality. A delay will bring unfortunate results in the form of suffering, frustration, and long-term conflict.

VIII. EMANCIPATION THROUGH EMPOWERMENT AND MAINSTREAMING

Empowering the ‘Other’ is the only way to bring them into the mainstream of the country, into the category of ‘Self’.

CK Lal (2017) states that a tiny group of hilly elites from the upper caste have acquired all three kinds of power—they belong to the ruling class bourgeoisie, hold state power, and control the discourse in Nepalese society. Therefore, the solution to the present conflict lies in accepting diverse identities and sharing power among them.

Steps from each group are equally important to end the present conflict. First, the government, especially the ruling elites, must truly adopt an inclusive notion of identity and nationalism. Empowering and bringing the marginalised into the nation's mainstream must be done without delay. To achieve this, the government must amend the constitution to make it inclusive, respecting the aspirations of marginalized and indigenous groups: Madheshi, Tharus, Janjati, Muslims, Dalit, etc.. Next, the only way for Madheshi to break the cyclic nature of struggle is to struggle as a whole: rise and fall as a unit. They must solve internal issues like caste discrimination and inequality within the Madheshi community. It appears difficult for Madhesh to achieve emancipation until it accepts and solves internal discrimination issues.

IX. CONCLUSION

Despite significant political transitions in Nepal, a tiny group of hilly elites from the so-called upper caste of the Hindu religion has been dominating ‘Other’ groups like Madheshi, Tharu, Adibaasi, Janjati, and Muslims. Discourses have played a dominant role in the (re)production of power, abuse, dominance, inequality, and discrimination. The dominant discourses of the media, powerful institutions, the government, and hill-based political leaders are attempting to justify their dominance and continue their hegemony. The current fight is between a tiny elite ruler and the marginalised group for equal power-sharing. In this tussle, the ‘Self’ group refuses to share power, and the ‘Other’ does not appear to give up.

The battle is likely to continue until Kathmandu and Madhesh share equal power, until Kathmandu expands the definition of nationalism, and until it embraces the notion of inclusiveness in the real sense—in day-to-day practice, in speech, action, and attitude. The increasing emotional gap is a national issue, not just a problem of Madhesh, and needs to be solved before it is too late. The longer the struggle continues, the bigger the challenges will become. While the consequences of delay are difficult to imagine, it is certain that they would be unfortunate for both Kathmandu and Madhesh.



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