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Post-Conflict Political Mobilization and Borderland Brokers in Madhesh: A Case Study of Saptari, Nepal

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Abstract. *Based on the extensive fieldwork carried out in the southern plains of Nepal, this paper, juxtaposes Nepal's post-conflict transition by framing the political events that fanned out after 2007, the reverberations affecting the dynamics of evolving center-periphery relations, and the emergence and resurgence of borderland brokers, who functioned as intermediaries in shaping the agenda of Madhesh and negotiating with Kathmandu. In doing so, the paper focuses on the provincial town of Saptari, located in the southern Tarai borderland, as a case study. By grounding the conceptual framework of brokers and brokerage, the paper showcases the connection between post-conflict peacebuilding and the role of borderland brokers. It argues that the margins of the state are crucial for understanding the dynamics of post-conflict scenarios and the power relations that prevail at the national level. This argument is further substantiated by charting three distinct individual trajectories of borderland brokers, which elucidate their strategies, networks and personalities within both local and national political domains.*

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Introduction

This empirical paper is part of a study based on the findings of a three-year research project. Conducted from 2016 to 2019 in borderland regions of Nepal, specifically at three different field sites–Bardiya, Dolpa and Saptari. The paper aims to understand and explore the southern Tarai borderlands from the conceptual lens of brokers and brokerage. Given the word limit and to facilitate a meticulous discussion, the cases elaborated in the paper are exclusively drawn from a single field site, Rajbiraj/Saptari, located in the Tarai-Madhesh region.[1]

A messy middle ground often exists between the state and society, which at times is complex to settle, yet what unfolds becomes a condition for political

maneuvering. The complex political formation that allocates boundaries to negotiate social space within the society-state relationship is worth exploring in the context of the Madheshi's recent political mobilisation in Nepal. In making sense of these relationships, this study broaches from the prism of the "margins of the state,"[2] as the primary viewpoint for understanding and explaining the social, political and economic dynamics of the "post-conflict" transition of Tarai-Madhesh.

In so doing, it challenges the prevailing top-down, centralized paradigms that have traditionally shaped scholarly analyses and policy interventions in post-conflict state-building and reconstruction. The twists and turns of post-conflict transitions at the margins remain a topic of discussion; nevertheless, they need thoughtful scrutiny. To add a different dimension to this debate, this paper proposes to enquire: How do peripheral zones influence post-conflict peace-building and reconstruction processes at the national level? What roles and effects did borderland brokers have within these processes? These inquiries will be further substantiated by the three life histories of actors who mediated or have influenced the agendas of political settlement between state peripheries and the centre, especially in relation to the political context that evolved after 2007.

A decade-long conflict between Maoists and the Nepali state concluded in 2006, following the establishment of a twelve-point agreement within the Maoists and the Seven Party Alliance (SPA). The aftermath of political occurrences took a slow pace until the local and federal elections of 2017. However, what was ensured as the autonomous and identity-based ethnic states, demanded by various ethnic and Madheshi groups, lingered for long within the newly restructured federal Nepal. The effects of identity issues related to citizenship,

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1 Following the political mobilization in the Tarai after 2007, the geography of the region–linguistically and culturally asserted as Madhesh–was claimed to stretch across the southern borderlands of Nepal, from Mechi in the east to Mahakali in the west. This expansive notion of Madhesh reflected the demands of Madheshi movements for recognition, autonomy, and inclusion within the national polity. However, with the promulgation of the new Constitution of Nepal in 2015 and the adoption of federalism, the spatial boundaries of Madhesh were significantly redefined and restricted. What was once envisioned as a broad horizontal strip of southern Nepal was formalised into a smaller administrative unit–Madhesh Province–mainly encompassing the central and eastern Tarai, thereby narrowing the territorial claim and political imagination of a unified Madhesh.

2 The phrase "margin of the state" is discussed here in Madheshi's exclusion from the Nepali state. It refers to the socio-political, economic, and cultural marginalization of the Madheshi people –primarily residing in the Tarai (southern plains) of Nepal bordering with India–within the framework and functioning of the Nepali state. This conceptual framing views Madheshis not simply as a group with grievances, but as a population that has been structurally and historically excluded from the state's core institutions, narratives, and power centers.

geographical boundaries, language, and cultural hallmarks became the forefront of political mobilisation[3]. Surprisingly, the understanding reached between the Maoists and SPA drifted dramatically in the unfolding political occurrences. From 2006 to 2017, the Maoists' agenda of "progressive restructuring of the state" acted as the rallying platform for political mobilisation in Nepal. The transition process that became visible after the reinstatement of parliament primarily focused on reforming the security sector, holding Constituent Assembly elections, drafting a federal Constitution and implementing political, economic and social transformation so that the roots of conflict are addressed. These were the core of the post-conflict peace-building processes where political mobilisation intervened.

Framing this political context as a launchpad, this paper claims state margins as the primary vantage point for interrogating the political dynamics of post-conflict stabilisation and in constituting or co-producing power relations and political settlements at the national level. While doing this, the paper challenges the usual centrist approach commonly applied to studies of (and policy responses to) post-conflict state-building and reconstruction. Instead, it provides insights into the processes of stabilization and sustainability of post-conflict transitions, which are politically contested, mediated, and remediated between the centre and the margins.

In understanding and unpacking these relationships between the centre and the margins, the paper encapsulates the agency of brokers during political transitions (both conflict and peacetime) and their active participation in political mobilisation at the periphery. Political mobilisation, in particular, is shaped by the brokers both at the centre and the periphery, who influence the outcomes in the process and contribute to the biography of borderlands (Goodhand et al., 2021). While unpacking how the state imagines and renders "its edges," the paper analytically illustrates how centre and margins are mutually constitutive, and continually sculpted by conflicts, processes of interaction, and the flows of power and resources between them (van Schendel, 2005; Scott, 2009; Goodhand, 2008; 2013; Korf & Raeymaekers, 2013; Meehan & Plonski, 2017). What is noteworthy within this process is the efficacy of the brokers, who act as a conduit and collaborator between state, market and society.

Excluding the Introduction and the Conclusion, the paper is organized into five main sections, with certain sections featuring their sub-sections. The first section discusses the politicised political contestation in Madheshi spaces, where state authority, national identity, and citizenship are continually challenged by addressing historical exclusion, spatial marginalization, and

3 These mobilisations were not free from people's entrenched aspirations of livelihood transformation and required resource sharing at various levels (Karn, 2017).

ongoing struggles over federalism. The second section addresses post-2006 political transformations that revealed deep tensions between the center and Madheshi peripheries, where elite co-optation, exclusionary state practices, and resistance movements shaped an uneven political settlement. The third section conceptualises how political brokers from Nepal's Madheshi borderlands have been central to post-conflict transitional politics, acting as strategic intermediaries between marginalized communities and the Kathmandu establishment. The fourth section examines Rajbiraj of Saptari as the locus of political brockerage. The fifth section builds on the case study of brokers –Govind Singh, R. D. Ajad and Tula Narayan Shah–highlighting the varied trajectories,[4] strategies and roles that Madheshi actors have played in Nepal's post-conflict political transformation, negotiating between center and periphery through clientelist ties, armed rebellion and intellectual activism.

Marginal Spaces, Madheshis -A Ventage Point

Over the past decade, Nepal's Madheshi-inhabited borderlands have not just been geographical peripheries but politicized spaces where competing state and local imaginaries of development, peace, and legitimacy collide. As Das (2007) and Gupta (2012) suggest, such margins become sites where state authority is both enacted and contested in everyday life, revealing deeper tensions around belonging, citizenship, and exclusion. This has led to the state authority remaining weakly embedded and persistently contested within the Madheshi socio-political space. The continued contestation has overwhelmingly featured Madheshis and Madheshi spaces, often seen as a common site of violence and contestation[5] that embodies competing visions of political security and legitimacy in the Nepali state. Simultaneously, peripheral regions that lie at the margins of state reach and control are not merely residual to these processes; rather, they actively constitute and shape the dynamics of state-society relations. They are often regions of intense interconnectivity and dynamic political and economic change (as discussed elsewhere by Goodhand, 2013; Harvey, 2005; Korf and Raeymaekers, 2013).

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4 The case study names are real ones and I have taken prior consent to use their names. I, however, take full responsibility for any errors or misrepresentations that may have crept into the article.

5 Since the onset of the Maoist insurgency in 1996, the Madhesh region of Nepal has been marked by persistent violence and contestation vis-à-vis the Nepali state. This dynamic intensified in early 2007 with a large-scale, violent mass mobilization in the Madhesh, aimed at asserting the equal rights of Madheshis within the national polity. The situation was further exacerbated by the emergence and increased activity of various Madheshi armed groups during and after the 2007 Madhesh Uprising. Despite the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution, violence and political contestation have continued, with Madheshi communities consistently raising demands related to citizenship, identity, and equitable resource distribution as part of their struggle for equal rights within the Nepali state. For a detailed analysis, see Karn (2011).

Antecedents of Madheshi's mobilisation

Madheshis are located in the southern borderlands of Nepal and have been historically excluded from power. This exclusion has long been linked to the processes of state formation and territorialisation, and is seen as uneven and contested (Burghart, 1984; Whelpton, 2005). Michel (2013) points out that the Anglo–Gorkha War of 1814–1816 and its aftermath were pivotal in shaping the territorial and political boundaries of the emerging Nepali state. The Treaty of Sugauli not only resulted in the loss of external territories but also precipitated a consolidation of the Gorkhali state's internal authority. In doing so, it laid the foundation for a hill-centric project of state-building that systematically excluded the Madhesh–geographically, culturally, and politically–from the core imaginary of the Nepali nation.

The exclusion of Madheshis was not merely limited to administrative and/or resource sharing but extended to ideological ones. Madhesh has been treated as a frontier zone that is economically useful but politically peripheral, and its inhabitants were seen as liminal citizens. Eventually, these historical exclusions ossified into structural inequalities, which became embedded in Nepal's political institutions, citizenship laws, and development priorities. This historical trajectory contributed to an enduring bifurcation between the Nepali state and its Madheshi citizens, producing a state formation process that privileged certain ethno-territorial identities over others. As a result, the Madhesh became symbolically and politically peripheral, shaping a state that was both territorially unified and internally fragmented along lines of exclusion and differential citizenship. The long arc of this marginalization feeds directly into the contemporary struggles of Madheshi communities, particularly their mobilization after the 2006 Madhesh movement in response to the post-conflict restructuring of the state. Thus, Nepal has emerged from a complex amalgamation of diverse socio-political entities, whose distinct territorial identities and socio-political imaginaries continually persisted within the framework of the new state. Madheshi borderland spaces are linked into national and global circuits of commodities, capital and investment. New metropolitan centers, along the East–West Highway, have emerged, increasingly shaped by, and in many cases dependent upon, processes of resource extraction, conflict, and development in the hinterlands. The case of Rajbiraj–once a vibrant market town and the administrative center of Saptari district–illustrates a process of reverse transformation (Jha, 2018). Over time, Rajbiraj has been eclipsed by Lahan and other smaller towns situated along the East–West Highway, signaling a significant shift in regional economic geographies. This decline disrupted established patterns of economic exchange and diminished the town's centrality in local commerce. The highway, which hosts a significant concentration of hill-origin migrants, has played a crucial role in redirecting development trajectories and investments, effectively marginalizing towns situated to its south. This spatial reconfiguration reflects broader patterns of

structural exclusion and systematic marginalization of Madheshi communities, even as the Nepali state consolidates itself as a modern nation-state. It is argued that it was "built out of negotiations and accommodations with various individuals and groups that were deeply entangled with – and drew legitimacy from – local and existing relations of power" (Rupakheti, 2016, p. 80), but not free from violence, exclusion and isolation in a power-sharing regime. Moreover, inconsistent politics during the post-1990s and the Maoists' insurgency substantially changed the political landscape of Nepal.[6]

However, the questions of the geographical construction, the precise location and layout of territorial divisions, as well as ill-defined boundaries, remained a concern for Madheshi. This continued until today and is seen as a rallying point for Madheshis, as they lost autonomy over Madheshi land. Moreover, the governing elite's behaviour towards Madheshi remained preoccupied with the maximisation and extraction of resources or at least with the preservation of their own political and economic interests (Gaige, 2009; Gautam, 2008). Furthermore, the Nepali central elite took its turn around Madheshi as if they were the ones who started questioning the very formation of the Nepali state. This has led to the Nepali state making and its relationship with Madheshi produced within a larger politico-historical perspective. The 2007 Madheshi rebellion, which emerged from the periphery, has taken various historical trajectories. Raghunath Thakur was among the early student political voices in Madhesh who started campaigning for the emancipation of Madheshi people from the Nepali state in the early 1950s.[7] Simultaneously, other Madheshi leaders, like Gajendra Narayan Singh and Ramraja Prasad Singh, continuously raised the issues of Madheshi while mobilising people at the margin politically (Karn, 2011).

The Madhesh movement of 2007 took a strong stand for the restructuring of the state and declared Madhesh as an autonomous state. The atmosphere surrounding the Madhesh, filled with doubts, despair and rage, ultimately culminated in a deal for the 2007 political transition. For many Madheshis, the negotiation for federalism represented a chance to reclaim the political space historically denied to them. Yet, the persistence of centralised state imaginaries

6 During the Maoist insurgency, the Madheshi were particularly active on the identity front. Madheshi Rashtriya Mukti Morcha (Madheshi National Liberation Front), an organisation that emerged to counter patronage politics in Madhesh, headed by the Maoists (Mishra, 2008; Karn, 2011), became the platform through which political mobilisation in Madhesh was possible. The establishment of the Madheshi Janadhikar Forum (MJF) in 1997 marked a crucial development related to the 2007 Madhesh movement.

7 Thakur was the first Madheshi political activist who proposed the idea of an autonomous Madhesh state. His *Paratantra Madhesh aur Uski Sanskriti* (1996) is recognised as the first political history book of Madhesh, addressing issues related to the state's violence against Madheshi isolation, alienation and socio-economic injustice to Madheshis in the Nepali state.

within federal mechanisms and resistance to meaningful autonomy has continued to reproduce older hierarchies, forcing Madhesh into a recurring site of contestation over legitimacy, sovereignty, and inclusion. The borderlands spaces hence became places of innovation and experimentation in rapid political mobilisation in terms of expectations of the state, and discourses about identity rights, etc. Meanwhile, the United Democratic Madheshi Front (UDMF) and several small Madheshi and Janjati outfits, including the CPN-M, merged to form a Federal Democratic Republican Alliance (FDRA) and demanded a Constitution based on federalism with territoriality and identity as its principal core (Gautam, 2013; Jha, 2014). Ultimately, it was the Madheshi political class that successfully negotiated federalism with the Nepali state through the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution. However, their demands were only partially met because of the increasing centralization tendency, along with the growing rift between the Nepali state and the Madheshi people.

Post-Conflict Transition and Madheshi in Nepali Elite Formations

The post-2006 politicking has led to a complex political settlement process in Nepal, characterised by power shifting and struggles. The breakdown of elite bargains at the centre led to the end of the Maoist conflict, resulting in different political settlements with contrasting shifts in power relations between the centre and the periphery. The incorporation of the Madheshi by the centre, as well as the Maoists' exploitation of their newfound power, led to the monopolisation of resources and a legitimacy crisis. This ultimately resulted in violent uprisings in Madhesh and the unseating of the incumbent Maoist regime. The failure to address corruption and satisfy the needs of the periphery further exacerbated the legitimacy crisis.

The political scene that ensued after the 2007 churnings revealed the contentious nature of the post-Republic political dilemma, which was repeatedly manifested through instability and changes in coalitions and constituencies, possessing a significant spatial dimension. Following the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), the new government promulgated an interim Constitution on 15 January 2007. However, this interim Constitution was outrightly rejected by various ethnic and Madheshi groups due to its ambiguous provisions on federalism, and the long-standing demands of certain marginalised constituencies were dismissed and unaddressed. Outrageous Madheshi activists immediately burned copies of the interim Constitution in Kathmandu and started agitation, which led to the arrests of a few. In opposition to the arrest in Kathmandu, a new wave of protest sparked in the Madhesh, which quickly expanded and escalated to a three-week-long Madhesh movement, popularly known as Madhesh Andolan I. The leaders of the movement suspended the protest only after Girija Prasad Koirala, the then Prime Minister, publicly responded to the demands for federalism in the amendment of the interim constitution. These agreements ensured recognition of new emerging political formations, both violent and non-violent.

In the context of this political mobilization, the interplay of bordering and brokering in Madhesh became apparent. In the evolving circumstances of political settlement, it was social forces that made up the brokering space between the state and the society, and these brokers contributed to the framing of negotiated political agendas. However, certain areas and regions, such as Rajbiraj, were seen as a traditional space to ascertain political power. The potential for political brokerage became more evident. The extended periods of flux and fragmentation, linked to post-conflict anxieties, insecurities and competition for power, formed the basis of political negotiations.

Although the CPA led to a degree of increased inclusivity within mainstream political parties, this shift was met with resistance from dominant Brahmin/Chhetri elites, the army, and elements within the traditional party leadership, who hold state power. Throughout this process, the structural segregation of Madheshi remained intact. Whether positioned as outsiders or selectively co-opted into the dominant power structures, their ambiguous belonging–neither fully inside nor entirely outside the central elite–carried profound political and economic consequences. This ambivalence not only reinforced their marginalization but also sustained a hierarchy of differential citizenship within the state. Exclusion deepened by citizenship policies and newly restructured state boundaries, retaining continued importance even after the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution and the elections held in 2017. The already excluded Madheshi were further pushed to the margins and demonised politically and socially, seen as "un-Nepali."[8] Their loyalties towards the Nepali state were repeatedly questioned and kept under suspicion. Any questioning of autonomy and inclusive political transition was seen as a threat to national integration, which was further echoed during the 2015 Indian blockade. However, in the context of local and national elections of 2017 and 2022, it appears that the issue of autonomy-based identity and claims for a greater Madheshi boundary has been settled, but temporarily, with the brokers playing a key role in this process.

Brokers and Brokerage: The Conceptual Underpinning

The deal-making brokers encompass a range of individuals, including community leaders, mid-level politicians, businessmen, administrators, and religious leaders, among others. They were the ones who raised inclusive agendas, nurtured themselves through strategic engagement, and ultimately influenced and consolidated major issues during critical negotiations. Acting as intermediaries for historically marginalised communities and the central power structures in Kathmandu, these brokers operate across political, social, and spatial boundaries. Despite their crucial role in advancing post-conflict reforms,

8 CK Lal (2011), in his thought-provoking paper, *Nepaliya Hunalai* (Lal, 2011), raises pertinent questions about what one must hold and do to become a Nepali and interrogates both explicit and implicit criteria of being accepted as "Nepali" within the dominant Nepali nationalist narrative.

their intentions remain unclear. Frequently devoid of a concrete political agenda, they sustain their relevance by carefully balancing competing interests. While they may challenge the entrenched centre–periphery divide, they also reinforce it to maintain their position as gatekeepers. By navigating and at times monopolising the "deal space"– the political arena where power, resources, and legitimacy are traded–these brokers balanced their role, making adjustments between the centre and periphery in the evolving political settlements after 2007.

Brokers can thus be defined as "network specialists," whose ability to straddle multiple knowledge systems and life-worlds enables them to act as gatekeepers across various social "synapses" or "choke points" (Wolf, 1956; James, 2011; Meehan & Ploski, 2017) and in doing so "transmit, direct, filter, receive, code, decode, and interpret messages" across these interstitial spaces (Boissevain, 1965, p. 549; Meehan & Polski, 2017). Through negotiating transactions across borders and scales (between centre and margins, across international borders), brokers shape how power is imposed, negotiated and resisted (Bierschenk et al., 2002; Lindquist, 2012; 2015; Stovel & Shaw, 2012; Sharma, 2016; Karn 2018). They enable and rework deals between communities, companies, and state entities, between peripheries and center within nations and across international borders. Therefore, brokers cannot be simply seen as "intermediaries," merely facilitating linkages and transmitting power between uneven geographical spaces. Rather, they are "mediators," whereby their ability to network across social divides gives them varying degrees of autonomy, agency and power, enabling them to "transform, translate, distort and modify" power and facilitate, filter and check access to resources (Bierschenk et al., 2002; Latour, 2005, p. 39; Mosse & Lewis, 2006; see Meehan & Polski, 2017 for a consolidated review). Brokers are deeply implicated in processes of state and market expansion at the margins of the state. They emerge as actors who influence and formulate grassroots agendas for political mobilisation because of their ability to navigate the kinds of border and boundary "synapses" characteristic of these regions.

Post-conflict period sallow an opportunity opening and a need for brokerage. Individuals who may have emerged during conflict occupy key synapses and points of friction between the national and local levels, or across key political and social divides (Goodhand et al., 2018; Goodhand et al., 2021). They tend to get things done more quickly and effectively than any other official processes. Therefore, brokers participate in and exploit this condition of chronic political unrest, serving as proactive players in these situations, persuading and tantalizing to maintain and permeate their move in the specific political transitions. They perform a stabilising function by mediating elite bargains and facilitating the flow of resources, yet at the same time, they may impede the resolution of core issues – as to do so, they would make themselves redundant. Thus, in the Nepalese context, brokers find themselves in a veritable bonanza

when they make sense of the turbulent times, especially in moments of rupture and transformation, such as conflict-to-peace transitions.

More specifically, in a high-risk environment, where the margins have become largely illegible to the state and formal governance structures are weak or absent, power is often exercised and negotiated through informal networks rather than through formal institutions. In such contexts, authority and influence are shaped by personal relationships, patronage ties, localised knowledge, and strategic brokerage, rather than codified rules or state-sanctioned processes. These informal networks not only fill the vacuum left by the state's limited presence but also redefine the contours of governance, legitimacy, and control in peripheral regions such as Madhesh. Hence, political brokers rarely operate with a clear or fixed political programme given the inherently dual and often contradictory position they occupy – mediating between multiple constituencies, including marginalized communities and the state, while navigating shifting political alliances. Their effectiveness lies in addressing political tensions without fully resolving them, since resolution could render their intermediary position obsolete. While they may appear to challenge or transcend boundaries between the centre and periphery, they often simultaneously rely on reinforcing or even hardening these divides to sustain their brokerage role. Although they articulate the demands of borderland communities, they also act as gatekeepers, controlling access and communication between marginalised groups and central power. Their ability to influence political settlements, shape centre–periphery relations and affect the trajectory of peace-building highlights the need for a deeper understanding of their complex and often contradictory role. Thus, within the post-conflict political system, brokers serve to keep the political game going and prevent a return to violence.

Site of brokers: Rajbiraj, Saptari

Saptari is one of the Tarai districts located in Madhesh Province of the newly federated Nepal. Although in the current context, its people, and polity are mostly divided into Pahadi and Madehsi cliques. Geographically, it can be divided into three units: the Chure hills range in the north, Bhawar Pradesh in the middle and Tarai in the South, bordering the Indian state of Bihar. Since the 1950s and up until the 1970s, Saptari district primarily contributed to the national economy and held a strategically significant spatial location between Nepal and India (Jha, 2018).

Once, it served as a major border crossing and a market hub for the mobility of goods and services between India and Nepal. However, in the last few decades, both Saptari and Rajbiraj have been overshadowed by the construction of the East-West Highway and the newly expanded market around it. This has led to Saptari largely remaining detached from the centre. As a result, only a handful of local elites who had access to the central elite have served as intermediaries

between Kathmandu and the residents of Saptari. The case of Saptari and Rajbiraj reveals the marginalization of the Madheshi community, manifesting how the state acted remotely and disconnected from the everyday life of its people. Although in the history of Madheshi upsurge and political mobilisation, Saptari has been a central space, and some of the first generation of Madheshi political class emerged from this space (Karn et al., 2018).

Rajbiraj, the district headquarters of Saptari, was among the first planned townships in Nepal, designed in 1938. One of the first airfields in Tarai was also built in Rajbiraj itself. Similarly, in 1959, Saptari District became the first in Tarai to have a municipality and the fourth in the entire country. During this time, the district belonged to "A" category in terms of revenue, population and strategic importance (Guneratne, 2002).[9] Saptari was ahead not only in terms of economic transactions but in many other social development indicators.

The first irrigation canal, Chandranahar, was developed in Saptari and the first batch of law colleges in Nepal was established in Rajbiraj. With the Hulaki highway connecting Rajbiraj with Kunauli, making Rajbiraj a junction between two vibrant towns of Bihar: Darbhanga and Purnea. People residing in the inner Tarai or those from the hills often resorted to Saptari, either for educational purposes or using Rajbiraj as a stopover while journeying to India for various reasons. For the locals at the Kunauli border, the previously vibrant borderland has now been converted into a ghost town. A local shopkeeper at the border crossing shared:

> Up until the 1970s, this place used to be full of vehicles. The market was huge and loaded trucks, jeeps, rickshaws, and tonga lined up on the roadside were a usual sight for crossing the border. This was a convenient route to connect towns like Darbhanga and Purnea in Bihar, India. Today, this area is submerged due to floods during the monsoon. Instead of people, now snakes bask on the road. Besides, there is no business anymore. (Interview notes, 16 February 2017)

At present, Saptari is one of the least developed districts in Nepal, with a Human Development Index (HDI) of .400-.499, and has the highest proportion of educationally disadvantaged individuals within its total population (CSO, 2021). Moreover, rice production was the highest in Eastern Tarai, and Saptari was once among the highest rice-producing districts (Regmi, 1964). The story of Saptari is representative of the plight of most Tarai towns, which have experienced isolation and stagnation over time due to the irresponsibility, exclusion and ineffective policies from the center. This has contributed to the systematic marginalisation of the space and concurrent impoverishment of the Madheshi.

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9 Nepal's districts have been categorized into three groups: A, B and C, based on their ability to generate revenue, population size and strategic importance.

Brokers and the Political Mobilisation

The influence and agency of the brokers have been conceptually and analytically discussed in the preceding sections. The three chosen broker cases, illustrated below, quickly showcase their trajectories and life histories, highlighting their rise, source of power, constituency, the reputation they have built, and the functions they performed, embodying the essence of broker and brokerage amid the evolving political landscape in Madhesh. In three contrasting cases, all individuals hail from Saptari to advocate and mediate the Madheshi cause, each representing the district, albeit in different ways and locations. All the details used in this paper have been drawn from the interactions with these borderland brokers who originally belong to Saptari.

These cases are brought into the discussion because they sought to represent and promote the interests of Madheshi communities. Nevertheless, the core of the agenda and lobbying pertained to the issue of the margins, while all actions, negotiations, and framing of the opinions were regulated from the centre. The case studies presented not only provide the individuals' political trajectories of what they are now, but they also elucidate how the post-conflict transition is contested, impacted, manipulated, mediated and remediated in the state margin. The first case of Gobind Singh, ex-Mayor (last mayor of the Panchayat era) of the Rajbiraj Municipality, gives a historical note on how brokering evolved years before democracy came to Nepal. The administrative efforts made during the Panchayat period (1960-1990) aimed at implementing some reformatory initiatives in Rajbiraj, which historically offer an important insight into the negotiating processes within that political arrangement. In a similar vein, R. D. Ajad's engagement in both formal politics and armed insurgency encapsulates the political atmosphere in Madhesh, which is marked by establishing organizations, crafting agendas, armed rebellion, political violence and grassroots mobilization. The last case of Tula Narayan Shah showcases his reputation as a big hitter in today's Madhesh. Shah, originally from Saptari, mostly based in Kathmandu, has been active through the media and civil society to shape political and constitutional debates from the centre.

These cases underscore the highly fluid nature of Madheshi politics in the present time, revealing how new organisations and coalitions are forming regularly, while others quickly become obsolete. This situation presents a considerable challenge for brokers who struggle to retain their networks intact and find it difficult to maintain the required flexibility to remain relevant and impactful within the changing structure and emerging narratives.

Singh, an ardent royalist

Govind Singh is originally from Koiladi village of Saptari. He comes from an elite Rajput family with a family background in politics. His father, the late Dr. Nageshwor Prasad Singh, was politically affiliated with the Nepali Congress

(NC) Party and an elected Member of the Parliament of Nepal in 1959. Govind Singh carried his father's legacy in Madheshi politics by staying politically engaged. Unlike his father, Ajad chose to be active under the King's regime, widely known as the Panchayat,[10] and held the position of Mayor towards the end of the Panchayat. His dealings during the Panchayat offer a crucial historical insight into the relationship between the center and the margins. The process of brokering often operated in a disguised form during that time and was embedded within the close-knit networks of the governing elite and shaped by deeply rooted socio-political practices such as *afno manche* (kinship-based loyalty and personal connections) and *chakari* (the act of flattering or currying favour with those in power- buttering) (see Bista, 1992).

However, Singh, silently and skillfully, managed Identity politics in Madhesh that emerged since 1951, in conjunction with the Nepali democratic movement and the Panchayati politics led by the King. In 1959, the term Madhesh was coined for the first time, and the Madheshi issues gained momentum within the region, Singh became actively involved in it.

Singh's predilection for politics did not stop, even after the downfall of the Panchayat. In the new political dispensation after 1990, when many Panchayati actors were entering democratic parties, Singh continued his Royalist stand by joining the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), making relations with the RPP's linchpins like Surya Bahadur Thapa and Prakash Chandra Lohani. Singh remained in the party even after 2007, when RPP itself had supported republicanism and secularism at that time. It was his strategic networking and the client–patronage relationships, of which he was a beneficiary at the margins, enabling him to maintain a politically advantageous position until 1990.

Singh recalled how he was able to negotiate development initiatives for Rajbiraj during and after the Panchayat. The allocation of resources from the centre was problematic during his tenure as a mayor, due to his direct association with the Panchayat, which was losing popularity and in a phase of decline in the centre. Similarly, the absolute centralisation of budgetary authority had also rendered the municipality with challenges in channeling the funds. The central grant for towns like Rajbiraj was already as small as four to five hundred thousand, which was allotted through the *Jilla Panchayat*.[11] The selection process of members of *Jilla Panchayat* often created challenges in budget allocation, as the elected representatives at the municipal level frequently belonged to one power block, while the district-level representatives came from a rival block,

10 The Panchayat was a partyless political system, controlled by the King as a center of power from 1960 to 1990 in Nepal. For an overview of the Panchayat era, see Baral (2012).

11 The administrative unit of the Panchayat was structured in four layers: Village, Town, District and Center. Outside Kathmandu, *Jilla Panchayat* acted as the most powerful body.

leading to tension and resource mismanagement. Therefore, there was no coordination between the two representatives. The *Jilla Panchayat* regulated the budget, setting rules and overseeing the expenses, without any coordination with the municipality. This created a dependency on the center, and the local municipality lacked autonomy in deciding its local priorities and development strategies. According to Singh, "everything functioned on personal connections." Luckily, the Secretary and the Minister of the Ministry of Local Development and the Panchayat were Singh's father's friends. This connection worked in his favour, and he was able to get the funds released to run the municipality directly from the center. This way, Rajbiraj became the first municipality to receive direct funding from the center. After that, it set a standard that was implemented in all municipalities. The system functioned through a mutual patron-client relationship, where personal boundaries were initially determined and negotiated by a selected few who supported a central regime.

Singh confidently expresses his relationship with the center, sharing his views on personal connection and the irrelevance of the term broker as:

> I was one of the influential Mayors in the region. When King Mahendra visited Rajbiraj in 1975, I met him and talked about polio vaccination. Mahesh Kumar Upadhya, vice chancellor, worked out the design of the program, and we distributed DPT and polio vaccination in the district. It is not that you need connections right now; it is a long-practised thing in Nepal. Connecting with the right people at the right place was also important in those days. But there was nothing called broker at that time. (Interview notes of Rajbiraj, 9 December 2016)

Ajad, a zealot

Ajad's case demonstrates how actors from the margin shape their political beliefs and ideology, nurture themselves and ultimately play a role in influencing the national political agenda.[12] Furthermore, it also expounds that politicking at the margins is carried out and thus impinges upon national political discourse. From the very beginning, Ajad realized that the only path to Madhesh liberation lies in armed revolution. This is why he decided to quit his teaching job and continued farming, where he could prepare himself for the Madhesh Andolan while firmly establishing his stance grounded in left ideals.

Strategically, in preparing himself for the movement, Ajad studied Law. His book in 1991, *Tarai Jal Rahi Hai* (in Hindi), served as a medium to reach out and connect with the wider masses, equipping them to organise and mobilize for waging an armed revolution. For this, he travelled back and forth to India multiple times to connect with people, persuading them about his strategies on politics and armed revolution. Ajad succeeded in establishing his connections with India's security and intelligence agency.

12 He is known as Ajad, instead of his real name, Ram Dular Shah.

Finally, Ajad's revolutionary spirit led him to establish Madhesh Mukti Sangathan (Madhesh Liberation Organisation) in 1994, in the Banke district of Nepal. This was an underground revolutionary organisation to prepare for an armed revolution in Madhesh. However, the organisation ultimately withered away as a result of an active and dedicated cadre sustaining its organisational goal. Ajad did not deter, and he went on to form another organisation called Madhesh Mukti Morcha in 1997. Later, this organisation also merged with Madheshi Janadhikar Forum (MJP) in 1999, and Ajad was appointed as General Secretary, thus taking on the responsibility he spearheaded, vigorously campaigning for federal governance, voicing for the right to self-determination and autonomous Madhesh.

Upon realizing that MJF was supported by the Maoist party and was driven by compromise politics, Ajad parted ways with the organisation. Then Ajad contested the election from Ward No. 3 of Rajbiraj as a first-time candidate for the post of Member of Parliament in the first Constituent Assembly but was unsuccessful in the election. Later in 2006, he established the Madhesh Mukti Tigers (Madhesh Liberation Tigers) in Sunsari District.

> Eventually, MLT became one of the most active underground armed groups in Madhesh during that period, which survived only for a short time. As before, Ajad disassociated from MLT, realizing that the party cadres were deviating from the core aim of the organisation. After the miserable failure of Tarai Mukti Tigers, Ajad joined hands with Jaya Prakash Gupta's [also known as JP Gupta] Tarai Madhesh Rastriya Abhiyaan, popularly known as the TaMaRa[13] campaign. Ajad dedicated himself to strengthening TaMaRa campaign to reach out to the people in Madhesh. Surprisingly, a man known to be a staunch advocate for armed revolution suddenly transformed his path into a peaceful campaigner. Interestingly, Ajad is one of the few who have tried to reach out to C. K. Raut for Madheshi political settlements. In the words of Ajad, "I tried to persuade C. K. Raut[14] to be more flexible – to shift from separatism to autonomy." (Interview notes of Rajbiraj, 13 February 2017)

Ajad's case shows how disillusioned political actors at the periphery are and the reason why they resort to violence and separatism persists. It highlights the intense competition and constant jockeying for position that characterises the process of political mobilisation in Madhesh.

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13 Jay Prakash Gupta, the former communication minister, was imprisoned for 18 months in February 2012 for corruption charges (BBC, 2012). Once he got out of prison, he started the TaMaRa campaign in 2013. After two consecutive elections held in 2017 and 2022, this campaign is now dysfunctional.

14 CK Raut is the founder of Janamat Party in Nepal, and currently a member of parliament who previously led the autonomous Madhesh Campaign.

Tula's turn

Tula Narayan Shah represents a classic example of a borderland broker who relocates himself to the centre to pursue the interests of marginal communities. Tula, who runs all his activities from Kathmandu, believes that discrimination against Madheshis is primarily concentrated in Kathmandu. His presence, his euphemist persona, and his desire to transform the centre by championing the structural exclusion of Madheshis in politics, administration, and economy, strategically demonstrate that his being in the centre is advantageous for him in all ways. From this location, Tula can leverage political power and exert greater influence. Tula's brokering is concerned with representing and shaping the Madheshi cause to political audiences at the centre, unlike other brokers who locate themselves in the borderlands and are shown and situated at the synapses between the national and local, the centre and the periphery. Nevertheless, this choice has been fraught and constantly balanced against a desire to engage and develop awareness amongst the marginalised communities of Tarai. He began his career as a cadre with Nepal Bidhyarthi Sangh, a sister organization of the Nepali Congress Party. This was around 1991, when he was doing Intermediate in Science in Janakpur. Later, he became a student leader after joining Pulchowk Engineering Campus in 1994. As a student politician, Tula could see the prevalence of discrimination against Madheshi within the party structure.

Tula's confrontation with discrimination did not end there. After finishing his BSc in engineering in 2000, Tula joined the Nepal Engineers' Association, an organisation, predominantly comprised of engineers from the older generation. Ideological polarisation and internal conflicts were rife within the party, which is why he decided to leave the Nepali Congress. The continuous racial discrimination he faced in his early educational days in Kathmandu ultimately led him towards political activism. A political cadre of Nepali Congress engaging himself in student politics, later establishes an organisation representing Madheshi engineers – the Nepal Tarai Engineers' Society (NTES). Initially, this was limited within the Madheshi intellectual circle of Kathmandu. Frustrated by the experiences at the NTES, the rampant co-optation of Madheshi in Kathmandu, and his inability to secure an engineering job due to discrimination, Tula eventually distanced himself from NTES as well. Later, in 2007, he established the Nepal Madhesh Foundation (NEMAF), a research and advocacy-oriented NGO focusing on issues facing Madheshis. Simultaneously, he worked as a journalist and introduced himself as a prominent media voice in representing Madheshi interests. Slowly, he was invited on several occasions to provide recommendations on Madheshi issues and constitutional discussions.

Tula has been vocal on Madheshi issues, which buttressed the Madheshi agenda in Kathmandu, making him a prominent player in bolstering the political agendas at the national level. One such example is his engagement in the eight-member committee formed by Baburam Bhattarai under the Constitutional Dialogue Committee, tasked with providing recommendations on five

major political issues. These include federal boundary delineation, electoral system, forms of government, citizenship, and threshold in the context of political transition.

Tula tactfully occupied his space outside formal politics, where he can engage in different ways and can be critical of Madheshi politicians. However, while reflecting on his role and the limitations of civil society, Tula joined the Sanghiya Samajbadi Forum in 2018, which was the political party in charge of Province No. 2 (now known as Madhesh Province), of Nepal. Yet, within a year, he felt increasingly redundant within the party structure and decided to leave.

Conclusions

The three cases charted out show the different paths and channels taken by borderland brokers in mediation trajectories. Their strategies shift during times of crisis and transition. Nonetheless, they also often deal with the challenges posed by central elites who centralize local agendas. These brokers used both violent and non-violent methods, adjusting their actions from stepping back to re-engaging, which emphasizes the complicated nature of their roles.

Govind Singh's case showcases how influential individuals from the margins utilize their personal networks and clientelist relationships to impact governance, influence development outcomes, and mould Madheshi politics. Ajad's trajectory demonstrates the transition of a disillusioned actor from the margins, passing through armed resistance to peaceful mobilisation, while navigating changing political ideologies and strategic adjustments. Tula's case exemplifies a borderland broker who strategically relocated to Kathmandu to engage national audiences on Madheshi exclusion, tactically balancing activism, intellectual work, and political manoeuvring from the centre. Together, these cases underscore the complex and dynamic nature of borderland brokerage, shaped by layered allegiances and competing interests and the ongoing challenges of navigating shifting power dynamics, from both the centre and their constituencies.

Through a detailed inquiry and reappraisal of the tumultuous political episode that unfolded following the 2007 political transition in Nepal, this paper comprises an analytical elaboration on the political development and the dynamics of power play in Kathmandu, alongside the defiance shown by the Madheshi community from the Southern Tarai Madhesh borderlands during this transitional phase. This defiance not only resonates with the imbalanced relationships between the center and the periphery but also embodies the audacity and dissent collectively expressed by the community from the margins against the historically powerful centre.

The question arises, along with the dramatic events that ensued after 2007 and the changes it instigated, was shaped by the people living within this

geographical margin. Undoubtedly, those voices hold significance. However, in contrast to the huge array of works that emphasize the tree while neglecting the wood, this paper has taken an alternative approach to examine and interpret the unnoticed aspects by encapsulating those dealmakers or brokers who interacted and negotiated with the center, resulting in what happened next.

These brokers, establishing their presence across all "synapses," became proactive, and those who held meaningful influence engaged with the central authority smartly to promote the consolidation of both the state and the market, while also resisting pressures to safeguard the interests of their constituencies. It is they who hyped the negotiating agendas centred on identity while also seeking to maximize political and economic gains. Thus, borderland brokers are influential in shaping post-conflict transitions, adeptly employing narratives and their expertise in negotiation to align their relationship with the central authority or other relevant actors. Therefore, to unravel the complexities of brokers and brokerage, detailing who they once were and what they have become, the paper has intertwined their trajectories with the time they lived in, the evolving political landscape in which they navigated, pointing out both their accomplishments and shortcomings. Thus, the three individual cases of these brokers I have chosen in my paper illustrate three distinct individuals from the same geography, albeit politically separate and engaged in influencing both central and peripheral spheres. The cases of Govind Singh, R. D. Ajad and Tula Narayan Shah historically contrast their paths with the political context of rise and resurgence, encompassing Panchayat, pre-Panchayat, the Maoist insurgency, the post-conflict transition, the signing of the CPA, the Republic of Nepal, and three consecutive Madheshi uprisings. Furthermore, their journey reveals varied mediation trajectories, with their coping mechanisms and strategies evolving during the periods of disruptions and change, alongside their discontent, negotiation, shifting political alliances, and co-optation, revealing their strategic approaches, the reactions they elicit, which can vary from withdrawal to comeback. Despite their common origins in Rajbiraj and their efforts to advocate for the rise and progress of Madhesh and Madheshis, it is rather ironic considering the very place they hail from. Rajbiraj, once a bustling town for economic and social vibrancy, has lost its historical allure over time, transforming into a mere ghost town today.

The "post-conflict transition" enabled a process of renegotiation. Thus, the contexts and strategic positions of these participants profoundly shaped their roles, mobility and interactions. Tula's connections with interest groups and elites at the power center, R. D. Ajad's ability to mass mobilize at the margins and Govind Singh's strategic navigation through clientelist networks have all played a significant role in Madhesh during the transitional phase. Therefore, based on these brief life histories, it can be concluded that brokering is not a role that functions in fixity, but a pre-mediated, mediated, and adaptable role in response to unfolding dynamic events.

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