Madhesi borderland brokers and Nepal’s post-war transition
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Nepal’s post-war transition has involved protracted negotiations over the relationship between the capital Kathmandu and the peripheries of the state. For nearly a year after the signing of the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, Madhesi and Tharu groups in the Tarai region – a 500-mile strip of land bordering India – violently protested against government proposals for a new constitution.

Borderland ‘brokers’ have played important roles in Nepal’s peripheries, acting as intermediaries who mediate across spatial, social, political or economic boundaries, and between communities and institutions. These brokers have been significant in facilitating post-war change in Nepal, including through efforts to renegotiate the relationship between the central Nepali state in Kathmandu and populations in the Tarai.

In the post-war period, the push and pull between groups in the periphery and Kathmandu opened up a ‘deal space’, which brokers have sought to monopolise in order to ‘trade’ in power, resources, information or ideas. The ‘deal space’ in the Tarai borderland has been one of the most politically contested regions in post-war Nepal. This article takes a closer look at post-war politics in the Tarai, focusing on the life histories of two brokers from the Saptari district in the east. Their experiences illustrate how different brokers emerge in post-war politics to connect borderland regions to the centre, and how their motivations and networks affect processes of post-war transition.

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Borderland groups have historically been excluded from powerful positions in Nepali politics, the judiciary, military and bureaucracy. These institutions have been dominated by Bahuns and Chhetris, Nepal’s hill ‘upper caste’ groups. In the post-war period, social and political leaders from the Tarai have been at the forefront of efforts to open up Nepal’s political settlement by demanding constitutional reforms based on a federal model.

Illustration (opposite): Life around the Kunauli and Jogbani border crossings between Nepal and India. © Jon Sack
Map 1: Saptari and Sunsari Districts, Nepal bordering India.

Map 2: Regional location of the border between Nepal and India.
Political settlement in the Tarai

The southern Tarai plains cover 17 per cent of Nepal’s territory but are home to approximately 51 per cent of its population. According to the 2011 census, 36 per cent of the Tarai’s population are of hill origin, 63 per cent are from the plains and may be categorised as Madhesis – although some, such as Muslims and Tharus, might not consider themselves Madhesi. A further one per cent are identified as ‘Others’. The term Madhesi is generally used to refer to non-pahadi (hill origin) people living in the Tarai of Indian Hindu origin.

Many Tarai communities have long felt sidelined in Nepal and the region includes pockets of extreme poverty and high rates of economic inequality. The Saptari district in the Eastern Tarai has been economically marginalised since the 1950s due to declining connectivity. This resulted from a range of factors including the building of an east-west highway which bypassed the district centre, Rajbiraj; limited state investment; as well as the growth of more vibrant and better-located borderland centres such as Biratnagar in neighbouring Morang district. But the Tarai has also long been an intellectual and political hub, and a key focal point for successive political and armed movements and ongoing Madhesi activism.

The Tarai region as a whole also has strong ethnic and linguistic ties with communities across the border in the Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. It is an open and integrated borderland, produced through close political, social and religious connections and flows and interactions of people, commodities and ideas back and forth across the border. Historical and contemporary political movements in the Tarai have relied heavily on cross-border connections and political patronage from India, and the region became strategically important for the Maoist movement as a place of sanctuary during the ‘People’s War’.

With the opening up of political space in Nepal after the end of the war in 2006, a number of Madhesi political parties and factions emerged alongside several newly formed armed groups. The Madhesi Movement [Madhesi Andolan] demanded that provisions for federalism be included in the 2007 Interim Constitution in protests that escalated over three weeks. Despite some initial success in the 2008 parliamentary elections, however, Madhesi political parties were routed in the elections of 2013. When new federal boundaries were finally agreed in Nepal’s long-awaited constitution in 2015, these prompted further protests in the Tarai over concerns that they reinforced existing political marginalisation. This provoked some Madhesis, with the tacit support of the Indian government, to impose an economic blockade of the border with India in the Tarai.

Since then, there has been significant progress in establishing a new federal structure in Nepal, including devolving power to the provinces and holding local, provincial and national elections. However, attempts at progressive constitutional changes in the post-war era have seen strong push-back from established elites – particularly the dominant Bahun-Chhetri groups, the army and the mainstream parties, but latterly also from the Maoists. Madhesis have continued to feel socially and politically excluded, facing discrimination and being viewed with suspicion due to their links with communities across the border with India.

BOX 6

Defining brokers and brokerage

Brokers are individuals or institutions that mediate power, resources or ideas across social, political or economic boundaries – they are networking specialists. Brokers can perform different roles. They can act as go-betweens between different political groups, as representatives of marginalised or vulnerable groups, or intermediaries in trading networks. Their roles are typically ambiguous – they often help to break down barriers but may also have an interest in maintaining or even hardening boundaries and ‘gatekeeping’ connections between centre and periphery in order to protect or enhance their mediation role. As a result, they can have varied impacts on the lives of the constituencies they represent or serve.

In much of the academic literature and in popular discourse, brokers are often depicted as self-interested, or utility-maximising agents. The research that underpins this case study takes a less normative approach by understanding brokers in their structural context. It focuses attention on how their roles are shaped by ideologies and social norms, and by the opportunities presented by wider political or social changes.

Brokers challenge or transgress boundaries. Those based in or with strong links to borderland regions may have a particularly critical role in these regions because state authority is often more limited and contested. Economic and political actors at the centre may therefore rely on intermediaries to mobilise political support or capital. Borderland brokers can be crucial in mediating between the centre and periphery or across an international border.

Political brokers of the kind analysed in this Nepal case study, who seek to influence political processes at the centre and represent borderland constituencies, may be problematic conduits for peacebuilding support. They often operate under the radar, may condone or deploy violence, and their influence on political processes may be brief. But a better understanding of how brokers operate in borderland regions could help peacebuilders develop a clearer picture of how legitimacy and authority are generated in these regions.

For further information: see Borderlands, Brokers and Peacebuilding www.borderlandsasia.org
Borderland brokers
The stories of the two borderland brokers presented here are very different but share a long history of personal engagement in Madhesi politics. They illustrate a range of brokerage roles: from interacting directly with Kathmandu politicians, to gathering information or conducting research about conditions in the Tarai, to mobilising support for Madhesi interests via mainstream political parties – or even in the case of one of them, precipitating violent mobilisation against the central state. In different ways, they have been involved in efforts to renegotiate the relationship between the central state and populations in the Tarai through advocating stronger political representation, more equitable distribution of resources, or greater autonomy. One broker toyed with ideas of self-determination and separatism. As their life histories show, brokers vary considerably in terms of their origins, their constituencies, their strategies, where they derive their power from and their career paths.

Tula Narayan Shah
Tula Narayan Shah (commonly known as Tula) is a prominent intellectual, activist and journalist who researches and advocates on Madhesi issues in Kathmandu and the Tarai. He is in his mid-40s and was born in Goithi, Saptari district in the eastern Tarai. His mother tongue is Maithili and he struggled at school because he was unfamiliar with Nepali, the official language in education institutions.

Tula’s career in student politics began in Janakpur, a large town on the border with India that became a focal point for the 1990 People’s Movement for Democracy (Jana Andolan). He became actively involved in the Nepal Students’ Union (NSU), affiliated to the Nepali Congress political party. He eventually drifted away from the NSU, frustrated at the discrimination that blocked him from progressing to a prominent position. After school he moved to Kathmandu to study engineering. Like other borderlanders, he carried the border with him and became very conscious of discrimination against Madhesis at many different levels, from struggling to find a job to facing day-to-day harassment on the streets of Kathmandu.

BOX 7
Collecting life histories
The life histories of borderland brokers in the Tarai were collected as part of a two-year research project, Borderlands, Brokers and Peacebuilding, which examined the role played by borderland regions in shaping post-war transitions in Nepal and Sri Lanka – particularly how local leaders from the margins (‘borderland brokers’) shape wider processes of post-war development, state reform and transitional justice. The life histories were generated through several semi-structured interviews conducted with these brokers in Kathmandu and Saptari between 2015 and 2017. These narratives were triangulated with data drawn from interviews with other key informants in Kathmandu and Saptari district during the same period, and from secondary sources. In addition, detailed district studies and national mapping provided further contextualisation for the brokers’ life histories.
A key incident for him that underscored this injustice and discrimination was when his father was insulted in Kathmandu by someone pulling down his dhoti (a traditional lower-body item of Madhesi clothing) — Tula cites this as spurring on his subsequent work as an activist.

During the war, Tula was largely detached from party politics and worked as a water engineer in Kathmandu. He was re-politicised by the 2007 Madhesi Andolan. In 1990 at the time of the People’s Movement he had believed passionately in state reform through democratic politics. But disillusionment with mainstream parties led him to passionately in state reform through democratic politics. Madhesi Andolan. In 1990 He was re-politicised by the 2007 peace agreement, the end of the monarchy, and including the People’s Movement, the Maoist insurgency, the signing of the peace agreement, the end of the monarchy, and two Madhesi uprisings. The Tarai has also been transformed by economic change, which has seen a fracturing of some of the older hierarchies and an elevation in the position of marginalised groups such as the Dalits.

Tula’s brokerage is primarily concerned with representing and shaping the Madhesi cause to political audiences in the capital. His role as a broker is primarily one of ‘translation’: he mediates ideas and information between political actors, civil society and donors. His legitimacy comes from his ability to mediate between these three constituencies while maintaining a critical distance from them, influencing the ‘deal space’ that opened up in the Tarai following the Madhesi Andolan by generating information and ideas that shape the public and political discourse. This in turn affects the political platforms and bargaining positions of central and Madhesi elites.

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Tula was acutely aware of the dangers of being either co-opted by political parties or trapped in the ‘NGO net’ by following donor priorities rather than his own. He also had to fend off criticism that he was surreptitiously trying to establish a political organisation. Straddling these different worlds has been difficult. In 2017 he mused: ‘I realise I’ve become very bureaucratic – it’s very difficult to be an activist and be an NGO person.’ He began to question whether he was making a difference politically and if his energies might better be spent on engaging directly in party politics: ‘I was compelled to ask myself if I had actually created the critical mass that I had intended to.’ Tula has struggled to find a balance between supporting the grassroots Madhesi cause and engaging with political actors at the centre. As the environment towards NGOs has grown more hostile in Nepal in recent years, he also faced criticism that he was an NGO dalal (‘tout’ or ‘pimp’), exploiting the Madhesi cause to further his own personal position.

Tula’s life epitomises the complex personal struggles involved in advocating for the rights of peripheral groups at the centre. He lives in Kathmandu, believing that the main barriers to Madhesi rights and representation lie in the capital. While his understanding of how power works in Nepal and how to bring about change has helped raise awareness about the Madhesi cause, he has also grown frustrated at his inability to overcome the ‘rampant co-optation’ of Madhesis in Kathmandu. There is a constant pull to be more strongly embedded in the struggles of the marginalised communities of the Tarai by mobilising grassroots support. Like all brokers, his political agency is circumscribed because his role and legitimacy depends on being able to respond to, and keep in tension, the demands of different constituencies.

“Following the creation of Province 2, the only Madhesi-majority province, Tula has decided to ‘throw his hat in the ring’ and join a Madhesi party.”

At the time of writing in 2018, Tula’s life has taken a new turn. Following the creation of Province 2, the only Madhesi-majority province, he has decided to ‘throw his hat in the ring’ and join a Madhesi party. A new political space has opened up in the borderlands – a space that Tula’s brokerage has helped create – and this inevitably will change the dynamics of brokerage. Tula’s new political persona is still unclear, but his role is likely to shift from being a ‘translator’ to a power-broker. This means directly occupying a new ‘deal space’, which will involve new challenges as he grapples with party structures, patronage and demands from the Madhesi population for tangible benefits from the new provincial structures.

His story highlights the contingency, vulnerability and frustrations of brokerage in a context of unequal power relations and during a period of rapid political change. As Jha (2014) notes, ‘his choices were not a result of abstract theoretical principles, but sprang from what life had thrown at him’. Tula’s life shows that the ‘post-war transition’ is not the only transition that has defined people’s lives in Nepal. He has experienced a range of dramatic political changes since 1990, including the People’s Movement, the Maoist insurgency, the signing of the peace agreement, the end of the monarchy, and two Madhesi uprisings. The Tarai has also been transformed by economic change, which has seen a fracturing of some of the older hierarchies and an elevation in the position of marginalised groups such as the Dalits.

RD Azad

RD Azad was also born in Saptari district. He is in his 60s and has a very different political and social outlook from Tula. Although both have made Madhesi politics their life’s work, Azad still lives in the village of his birth in a remote rural setting near the border. And while Tula is a pragmatist, Azad is fiercely ideological and has been an uncompromising advocate of Madhesi rights – for him, ‘abstract theoretical principles’ matter a great deal.

At the same time, his career embodies the labyrinthine and conflictual politics of Madhesi groups, involving multiple organisations and frequent alliances and splits. At times he has engaged in formal politics and stood for elections, while at others he has gone underground and supported violent revolutionary politics. In this sense his role and focus as a broker is fluid. When engaged in formal politics he mediates links within the fragmented Madhesi periphery, as well as between the periphery and the centre, but when
he goes underground he drops out of these brokerage networks entirely.

Like Tula, Azad comes from a middle-class, land-owning family. He was educated in the Tarai and then worked for 17 years as a government secondary school teacher, during which time he joined the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN)-Masal (now defunct faction) and studied communist literature. It was while working in the hills that he became politicised, voraciously reading about Marxism and Leninism with other teachers who were to become foot soldiers and leaders in the Maoist movement. He subsequently returned to his father’s occupation of farming in his home village of Kochabakhari with the goal of ‘preparing himself for the Madhes Andolan’.

By this time, he believed that armed revolution was the only way to achieve liberation for the Madhesi people. The precise form that this liberation would take and the means to achieve it were not always consistently articulated, but two demands remained constant: first the right to self-determination of the 24 districts of the Madhes, and second the recognition of Hindi as the official language of the Tarai. While working as a farmer, he travelled widely across the Tarai, cycling from village to village. In the aftermath of the 1990 Jana Andolan, he published a book about the Madhesi cause, Tarai jal Rahi Hai (Tarai is burning). The book was heavily influenced by revolutionary Marxist-Leninist thinking and was written in Hindi, which is spoken widely across the Tarai.

As political parties representing Madhesis emerged in the 1990s, Azad again travelled widely across the Tarai and into India, promoting his book’s message and developing his political networks including through occasional interactions with the Indian intelligence services. Mirroring Tula’s political trajectory, he became increasingly drawn to identity politics, albeit a much more radical variant. Drawing inspiration from another borderland group, Sri Lanka’s LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), he established an underground revolutionary organisation in 1994 – the Madhes Mukti Sangathan (Madhes Liberation Organisation). The group began to prepare for an armed revolution in the Tarai but soon folded because, according to Azad, it lacked a motivated cadre.

In the wake of this failure, Azad re-evaluated his strategy and switched to mainstream party politics. He formed the Madhes Mukti Morcha in 1997, which two years later merged with Madhesi Janadhikar Forum (MJF) and campaigned for a federal system and a more autonomous Madhes. In 2006, however, he returned to the path of armed revolution, spending time across the border in India and setting up the Madhes Mukti Tigers (Madhes Liberation Tigers) in Sunsari district. Although it was one of the most active underground armed groups in Madhes during that period, it only lasted for a short time.

Azad’s retreat back into radical, separatist politics can be seen as a rejection of the very notion of a ‘deal space’. According to this position, the problem was one of ‘internal colonialism’ and the imperative was to expose contradictions rather than make deals: ‘we are a very dangerous people to the government – they are watching us carefully…by legal and constitutional means the Madhesi can get nothing.’ The Mukti Tigers were formed ‘in great haste’, but Azad left after he became disillusioned with the growing influence of criminal elements and the indifference of his cadres. He contested and lost parliamentary elections in 2008 for the MJF, and subsequently left the party, concerned about the Maoist influence in the organisation. After the failure of Mukti Tigers, Azad joined a political campaign led by the Madhesi politician JP Gupta – Tarai Madhes Rastriya Abhiyan (TaMaRa). Azad continues to work with the TaMaRa Campaign and has abandoned armed revolution in support of a more peaceful strategy.

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There appears to be a recurring pattern to Azad’s political career. Attempts to enter formal Madhesi politics and to play a brokering role, usually involving mediating between Madhesi leaders and their support base in the Tarai, lead to disillusionment and a return to more radical politics. In many respects Azad is too much of a purist and an ideologue to play the role of broker for any length of time. While he believes an armed revolution may emerge in the future, he feels that people in the Tarai are not yet ready for such a movement. But he remains committed to this option: ‘If all other doors are closed then you may have to resort to violence. It all depends on the thoughts and actions of the state ruling class.’

However, this position is not widely supported within the Madhesi political movement and Azad remains a marginal figure. His radical position and lack of networks in Kathmandu mean he has limited direct influence on the ‘deal space’ that opened up after 2007. At the same time, Madhesi politicians can use the threat that radicals like Azad represent to extract concessions from the centre. Azad’s life highlights the complex linkages between leftist, Maoist and Madhesi political mobilisation, the intense jockeying for position that characterised the emergent Madhesi movement, and the interplay between armed revolutionaries and mainstream multi-party politics.

**Conclusion**

The two brokers explored here primarily derive their power and influence from their position as representatives of borderland communities. They share a broad commitment to greater political inclusion for the Madhesi population. While Azad has sought in the past to harden boundaries between centre
and periphery by engaging in separatist politics and armed insurgency, Tula mediates across spatial and socio-political boundaries, working through the media and civil society to shape discourse and political debates in Kathmandu. Azad is more deeply rooted in the Tarai while Tula positions himself at the centre in Kathmandu.

Yet it is striking that both have led lives of frequent movement – between the Tarai and Kathmandu, within the Tarai borderland region, and across the border. In both cases, the border is a strategic resource and reference point. Its existence enabled Tula and Azad to mobilise political connections, take sanctuary or generate economic benefits to increase their leverage vis-à-vis the centre – for example during the blockade. The two brokers differ in how they balance mobilising constituencies in the periphery and engaging with political actors at the centre. An emphasis on one comes at a cost to the other. The flipside of Tula’s engagement with the political centre has been weak relationships with the periphery, while Azad’s focus on grassroots mobilisation has made him increasingly irrelevant in the political mainstream.

While it is tempting to view them as individuals who pursue clear strategies to promote the interests of their constituents, an examination of their lives reveals the messiness and unpredictability of post-war transitions.

The cases highlight three key points about the approaches used by borderland brokers in post-war transitions. First, they demonstrate how these figures may operate through a variety of channels or pathways – including violent and non-violent action. As highlighted by Azad in particular, brokers may be involved in both mainstream and violent revolutionary politics, and these are often closely intertwined. Second, how they engage is liable to shift over time. Windows of opportunity to empower their constituencies or further their own political interests are often quite fleeting and need to be seized quickly. Brokers risk irrelevance if they are unable to adapt to new political currents or trends. Third, the changeable character of post-war politics necessitates flexibility and triggers considerable doubt and frustration for brokers themselves. While it is tempting to view them as individuals who pursue clear strategies to promote the interests of their constituents, an examination of their lives reveals the messiness and unpredictability of post-war transitions. Individuals react to events as much as shape them. Muddling through, their political agency waxes and wanes according to shifting centre-periphery relations, the resilience of their networks, their organisational base, and their ability to mobilise and connect constituencies and coalitions. Both Azad and Tula have been adept at reacting to the moments of rupture that characterise post-war transitions, but both allow their political objectives very long-term time horizons.

This focus on individual brokers goes beyond analysis of group interests, thinking more about how different actors negotiate and develop relationships within and across different spaces, at different moments and with varied impact and influence. This draws attention to how these figures mobilise and maintain support, whether through violence, coercion and fear, through the delivery of information, resources or services, or through shared norms and legitimacy. In contrast to conventional political settlement analysis, which tends to focus on material interests and power relations, an exploration of the lived experience of borderland brokers illustrates the importance of ideas and beliefs – not only for driving personal pathways, but also for understanding the dynamics of elite bargaining processes and the stability, or otherwise, of post-war political settlements.