

## An Unfulfilled Promise: Analyzing the barriers to Madheshi inclusion in the Nepal Army

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### Abstract

*Nepal is a culturally, socially, linguistically and religiously diverse country, having over hundred recognized ethnic groups. This study brings the alarming issue of highly under representation of Madheshi in Nepal Army (NA). The study explores the apathy and ignorance of NA towards recruitment of candidates from Madheshi community. As a result, the presence of Madheshi people in the Nepal Army has historically been low with respect to their population share. So, the study examines the historical patterns of exclusion of Madheshi communities from the Nepal Army. It also examines post-conflict integration efforts following the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Accord, and contemporary evidence on representation and hindrances faced by Madheshis looking for military careers. This research work uses secondary sources: academic studies, scholarly articles, government reports and data, authentic media reports, and INGO/NGO analyses and interpretations to reach to a conclusion. Descriptive method has been used for analysis and the interpretation of the data. The results of the study show that despite Madheshi's population of 22.22%, their representation in Nepal Army stands at meagre 2.88%. The study also presents issues about the discriminatory behaviour toward Madheshis who have already been recruited in the Nepal Army. This article argues that the increasing representation from Madheshi communities in NA would ensure responsiveness and trust of the Nepal Army.*

**Keywords:** Nepal Army, Madheshi, Diversity, Social inclusion, Discrimination

### 1.0 Introduction

Socially, culturally, linguistically and religiously Nepal is a diverse nation (Pariyar, 2022) with 142 recognized ethnic groups (Hangen, 2010). Within Nepal, the Terai, a narrow belt in southern Nepal running from east to West is the land dominated by ethnic Madheshis population. Terai is simply the plains that extend south of the low mountain range to the Indian border (Gaige, 2013) and also serves as the rice bowl of Nepal (Nepal Army, 2025).

Terai covers 23.1% of Nepal's land mass (Madheshi Commission, 2023) and is home to more than 50% of Nepal's overall population (Jha, 2010). The majority of 22.22% of Madheshis population, excluding Tharu and Muslim, reside in Terai (Madheshi Commission, 2023). However, historical patterns show that the Madheshi community, dominant residents of the Terai, feel a sense of deprivation and exclusion from the Nepalese state (Jha, 2022). The Madheshi community have been advocating for the increased access in the Nepal Army for decades. So, this study asks: What is the current status of inclusion of Madheshis in the Nepal Army, and what policy measures might lead to better representation?

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

The Article 144 (4a) of the Interim Constitution of Nepal (2007) made provisions that the entry of the Madheshi, along with others, shall be ensured to make the Nepal Army inclusive and national in character. The Comprehensive Peace Accord (2006) also ensured to end the discrimination based on class, caste, language, gender, culture, religion, and region to ensure inclusion in state organs. The agreement between the Government of Nepal and the Madheshi

People's Right Forum, Nepal (2007) agreed to ensure balanced proportional representation of Madheshis in all organs and levels of the government and power structures, mechanisms and resources. The Article 18 of the Constitution of Nepal (2015) ensures to make special provisions to protect, and empower the marginalized communities, including Madheshi. However, representation of Madheshi people in the Nepal Army is still disproportionately low.

This study aims to examine the hindrances, challenges and opportunities for inclusion of Madheshi people in the Nepal Army to seek the answer of the following research questions:

- i. What is the status of representation of Madheshis in the Nepal Army?
- ii. Is the Nepal Army inclusive from the perspective of Madheshis?
- iii. What are the challenges and opportunities related to inclusion of Madheshi people in the Nepal Army?

### **1.2 Objectives of the Study**

The primary objective of the research is to analyze the state of inclusion of Madheshi people in the Nepal Army, with a focus on identifying the perception of the Nepal Army and the concerned bodies on the issue. The study also focuses on the challenges and the opportunities related to the issue of inclusion of Madheshi people in the Nepal Army. Specific objectives are as follows:

- i. To explore the condition of inclusion of Madheshi people in the Nepal Army, particularly numbers and percentage of Madheshi people recruited in the Nepal Army.
- ii. To identify the challenges that hinder the pace of increasing representation of Madheshi people in the Nepal Army.
- iii. To propose recommendations to the Government of Nepal, the Nepal Army and law-makers for addressing the challenges and increase representation of Madheshis in the Nepal Army.

### **1.3 Rationale of the Study**

The issue of inclusion of Madheshi people in the Nepal Army has not been extensively studied, and therefore this study hopefully contributes to the initial understanding of the issue and provide a foundation for future research and interventions. Considering the opportunities and challenges of this area of study, this research indisputably will provide a valuable insight regarding status and importance of inclusiveness in government agencies, including security forces.

### **2.0 Literature Review**

An inclusive environment is one where people from all walks of life feel valued without being judged, treated in a fairly manner and their contributions get properly appreciated (Barak et al., 2014). The proper handling of the ethnic diversity can be an asset for a country as that could ultimately strengthen national resilience as well (Sapkota, 2025). In a democratic country, an inclusive model of participation in the military helps to manage diversity and it is long-term necessity (Canadian Defense Academy Press, 2006). For armies to be more effective, productive and inclusive, the gap between the military and civilians need to be bridged for reconstruction of the nation following the peace agreements (Ruhunga, 2006).

The Gillem Board made various recommendations to improve army's employment and treatment of black soldiers following the United States victory over Japan in 1945, in which more than 900,000 Afro-American served. That resulted in the adoption of policies related to integration and equal rights for black servicing members by the Army and Navy in 1946 (MacGregor, 1981). Similarly, due to the Korean War, the number of black Marines of United States increased

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from 1,525 in 1949 to 17,000 ending widely accepted beliefs against integration in 1953 (MacGregor, 1981).

In 2015, British Army head announced that the Army needed to hire more Black and Minority Ethnic individuals for the better work of the army as only 10% of Black and Minority Ethnic were in the forces at that time (Eastern Eye, 2015). In Indian context, the Army has built a system where people from all kinds of backgrounds (Gorkha/Gurkha, Sikhs, Rajputs) serve in a single mission (Malik, 2022). The research by Munshi and Pandey (2017) revealed that army units formed from different ethnic backgrounds and regions performed better as they trusted each other in a team. Gurkha Rifles in the Indian Army is made up of certain ethnic Nepali, while Jat Regiment recruits armies mostly from Jat community. Likewise, Sikh Regiment is for Sikh Community, and likewise there are various regiments for different ethnic groups and regions (Khalidi 2001).

In Pakistan's context, then Chief of Army Staff of the Pakistan Army announced that representation of Balochis, whose presence was almost nil in 2001, would be increased by 4% in 2011 and ethnicity was a criterion for such induction. The army chief also made announcement that number of Sindhis would be increased to 17% by 2011 (Down, 2007).

Different countries have adopted various policies to integrate marginalized groups in their armies. In Nepal's context, the issues of inclusiveness got momentum after the Maoist insurgency (1996-2006) which already had several ethnic based liberation fronts including Madheshis. However, the Comprehensive Peace Accord (2006) failed to resolve the core issues of ethnic exclusions, as a result different groups did protests and demonstrations for the equal share in government organs (Adhikari et al., 2016). In this regard, Madheshi and other marginalized communities have been demanding that the Nepal Army be accepted as the National Army of Nepal where people from all caste/ethnic groups, religious groups and genders get proportional entry (Adhikari, 2015).

Power-sharing is an institutional means of concluding conflict. And for the security agencies, power-sharing means merging or integrating the conflicting factions in the armed forces (Bhandari, 2022). Actually, each factions that existed in the prior conflict need to be optimally integrated into the new army (Ruhunga, 2006). However, the ongoing political discussions on the matter of federalism, caste/ethnic autonomy and issue related to proportional representations in all the government organs clearly indicates the unsettled nature of Nepal's ethnic issues (Sapkota, 2025). The Constitution of Nepal (2015) made a significant steps by recognizing the rights of marginalized communities, including Madheshi, but the tasks remain challenging as there is still lack of greater political will for the implementations of such constitutional provisions (Sapkota, 2025). So, the state needs to take positive measures to end all forms of discriminations and address the grievances of the Madheshi.

The article 144 (4a) of the Interim Constitution of Nepal (2007) had clearly declared that the Nepal Army need to be reformed and democratized:

*"In order to make Nepal Army inclusive and national in character, the entry of the Madheshi, indigenous people, Dalit, women and people from backward area shall be ensured by law, on the basis of the principles of equality and inclusion."*

The issue of inclusion is all about representations of all caste and ethnicity in the Nepal Army and the democratization of the institution (Sharma 2010). However, the progress track about inclusiveness in the Nepal Army reflects unwillingness on NA's part to entertain Madheshis' group entry and/or the top-ranked army personnel's mindset is that such inclusion would not be beneficial for the professionalism of the military (Adhikari, 2015). However, the Nepal Army in its official website mentioned that the recruitment in the institution is totally voluntary and

competitive and it would be against their will who does not want to enter the Army and the qualified ones who wants to join the institution (Nepal Army, 2025). The then Chief of Army Staff (CoAS) Chhatra Man Singh Gurung made a statement that the inclusion of ethnic groups, community or a group into the Nepal Army could only cause conflict and violence in the country (Myrepublica, 2009). So, based on the past traditions, people from Madhesh communities feel a sense of deprivation and exclusion from the state (Jha, 2022).

The global literature emphasizes the inclusiveness in armed forces, and there are existing examples of integration of marginalized groups/communities in the armies. However, there are still limited research on how these opportunities can be contextualized in a country like Nepal, which is culturally, socially, linguistically and religiously diverse in nature. Likewise, publicly available and combined data on the Nepal Army personnel by caste and ethnicity are very scarce and limited. Existing surveys and studies show that Madheshi communities remain overly under-represented in the Nepal Army as compared to their population. The literature also indicates inclusion as both opportunities and challenges for Nepal. So, the study provides a detailed analysis of Madheshi communities' inclusiveness in the Nepal Army and recommendations to bridge the identified gaps based on the existing literatures.

### 3.0 Methodology

The study is based on descriptive and analytical methods using secondary data from scholarly works, legal texts, government documents, surveys, international monitoring reports, and data and reports related to the Nepal Army. The content and trend analysis for the study have been done with the help of published and unpublished data and information collected from government agencies, national reports, journals and newspapers. Descriptive statistics tools such as frequencies and percentages are used to analyze the quantitative data.

### 4.0 Results and Discussion

This study reveals the current state of inclusion of Madheshi people in the Nepal Army. Based on the analysis of the secondary data, findings are categorized in key opportunities, challenges, and recommendations.

#### 4.1 Status of Inclusion in the Nepal Army

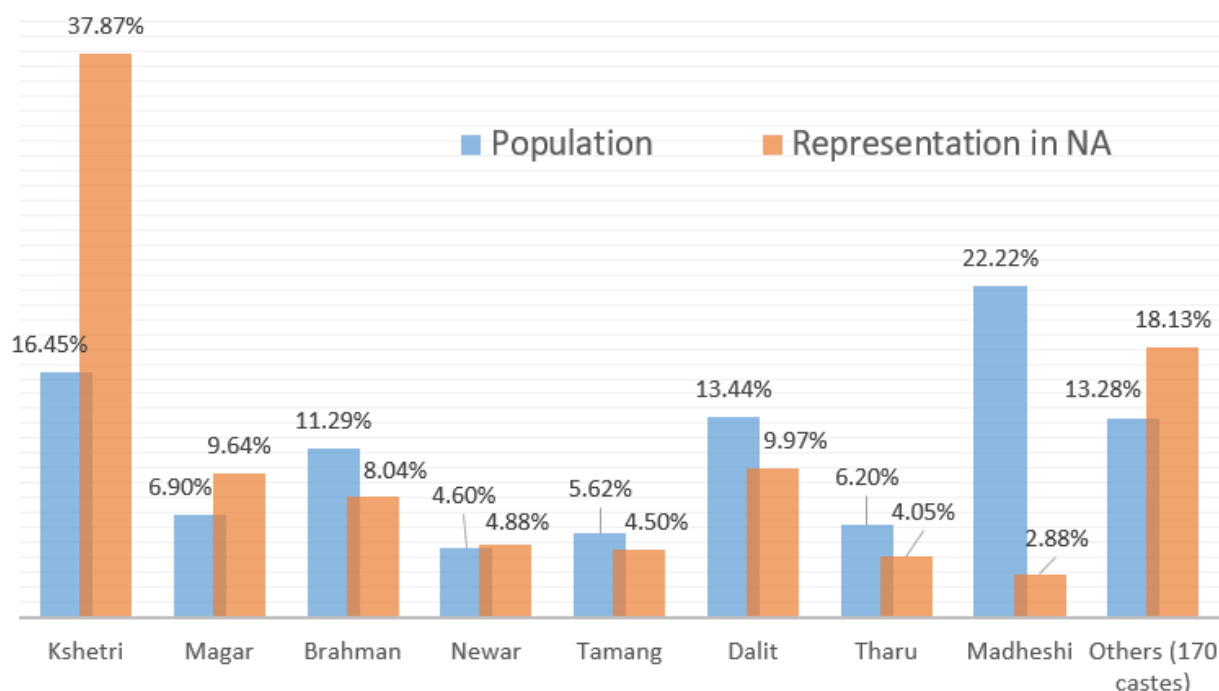
**Table 1:** Caste/Ethnic based representation in the Nepal Army

Caste/Ethnicity	Population Percent (Census, 2021)	Numbers in NA	Percentage
Kshetri	16.45	30951	37.87
Magar	6.90	7881	9.64
Brahman	11.29	6575	8.04
Newar	4.60	3990	4.88
Tamang	5.62	3683	4.50
Dalit	13.44	8154	9.97
Tharu	6.20	3310	4.05
Madheshi	22.22	2356	2.88
Others (170 castes)	13.28	14815	18.13

**Source:** Government of Nepal (2021), The Directorate of Public Relations and Information (2025), & Madheshi Commission (2023).

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The Nepal Army (2025), in its official website stated that the organization has always attempted to maintain a national character and it fully abides by the law of the land, giving priority to the inclusion of all castes, ethnic communities, genders, geography/regions and religions. The Nepal Army, in 2006, also amended its Army Act that ensures 45% reservations; and out of the 45% reserved position 20% is for women, 32% for Janajati (Indigenous castes) , 28% for Madheshi, 15% for Dalit and 5% is reserved for remote regions. Though NA states that it fully abides by the law, the data presented in the Table 1 and illustrated in Fig.1 show the different picture. The data shows that the condition and numbers of Madheshis in the Nepal Army is discriminatory.



**Figure 1:** Caste/ethnic based representation in the Nepal Army (2025). The population data is based on the Census 2021.

Figure 1 shows the dominant representation of Kshetris in NA whereas Madheshis are highly under represented. As per the 2021 Census, population of Madheshi community in Nepal is 22.22% (Madheshi Commission, 2023), excluding population of Tharu and Muslim. However, the presence of Madheshis in the Nepal Army is only 2.88%. The case of Muslim representation in NA is even worse. As per the 2011 Census, Muslims population in Nepal was 4.39%, but their

**Table 2:** Status of inclusion in the Nepal Army (as of 25 June, 2014) with reference to 2011 Census

Caste/Ethnicity	Population (2011 Census)	Population in Percentage	Percentage
Kshetri	4398053	16.60	43.50
Magar	1887733	7.12	7.38
Brahman	3361009	12.69	8.64
Newar	1321933	4.99	6.41
Tamang	1539830	5.81	5.56
Tharu	1737470	6.56	5.02
Madheshi	6253066	23.60	0.68
Dalit/Others	5995410	22.63	22.8

**Source:** *Nepal Army (2014).*

presence in the Nepal Army in 2011 was only 0.01% (Singh, 2015). On the other hand, population of Kshetri in the Nepal Army is 37.87 %, while their population as per the 2021 Census is only 16.45%. Likewise, population of Brahman is 11.29% and their representation in the Nepal Army is 8.04%. Kshetri and Brahman together make it 45.91% in the Nepal Army which is nearly half of the army personnel appointed in the institution.

The Table 2 shows that before the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal (2015), inclusion of Madheshi communities in the Nepal Army was pathetic. Although, their population as per the 2011 Census was 23.60% but their presence in the Nepal Army was only 0.68%. The comparison of the data in Table1 and Table 2 shows that the current representation of Madheshi people in the Nepal Army has improved a little bit, which is 2.88 %. On the other hand, Kshetri's domination in the Nepal Army has declined slightly as their presence in the Nepal Army in 2014 was 43.50% but in 2025 it is 37.87%. Interestingly, Magar's inclusion has increased from 7.38% to 9.64% while Tharu's presence has declined as their presence in the Nepal Army till 2014 was 5.02%, but currently their strength is 4.05%.

The Table 3 shows that the Nepal Army currently has 8 divisions: Eastern Division, Mid-Eastern Division, Far-Western Division, North-Western Division, Mid-Western Division, Western Division and Valley Division. Although, data of Mid-Western Division is not available in the official website of the Nepal Army, but in other remaining 7 divisions at least there are 107 army personnel serving as the General Officer Commanding (GOC). Conspicuously, there is not a single GOC from Madheshi, Tharu and Dalit communities in any Division of the Nepal Army. As per the recent Census 2021 data, the combined population of Madhesi, Dalit and Tharu is 41.86%. Clearly, the communities comprising nearly half the country's population have no representation in NA's GOC. On the other hand Kshetri and Bahun together have over three-fourth (81.1%) GOC in the 7 divisions of the Nepal Army.

**Table 3:** Caste/Ethnic based distribution of General Officer Commanding (GOC) in the NA.

Ethnicity/ Caste	Eastern Division	Mid- Eastern Division	Far- Western Division	North- Western Division	Mid- Western Division	Western Division	Valley Division	Mid Division	Total	Percentage
Kshetri	7	4	14	10	-	9	14	5	63	58.9
Brahman	4	2	1	6	-	4	2	5	24	22.4
Magar	1	0	0	0	-	1	0	0	2	1.9
Newar	1	0	2	1	-	1	1	0	6	5.6
Tamang	1	0	0	0	-	0	0	0	1	0.9
Dalit	0	0	0	0	-	0	0	0	0	0
Tharu	0	0	0	0	-	0	0	0	0	0
Madheshi	0	0	0	0	-	0	0	0	0	0
Others	1	0	1	4	-	2	1	2	11	10.3
Total	15	6	18	21	-	17	18	12	107	100

**Source:** *Nepal Army (2025).*

The Nepal Army asserts that the racial and cultural character of the Nepal Army does not show the real picture of inclusion in the institution but it claims that the institution is more inclusive than that of other organs of the state. However, the Table 4 shows that Madheshis' inclusion in the Nepal Police and the Nepal Armed Police Force are better than that of the Nepal Army.

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Madheshi's presence in the Nepal Police is 12% while it is 9% in Nepal Armed Police Force. The data shows that Madheshi community is still struggling for their respectable presence in the Nepal Army.

**Table 4:** Status of Madheshi representation in Security Agencies in Nepal

Security Agencies	Numbers of Madheshi	Percentage
Nepal Army	2356	2.88
Nepal Police	9482	12
Nepal Armed Police Force	5474	9
National Investigation Department	262	-

**Sources:** *Madheshi Commission (2023) & The Directorate of Public Relations and Information (2025).*

### **4.2 Status of Inclusion of Madheshi women in the Nepal Army**

**Table 5:** Women's representation in the Nepal Army

Caste/Ethnicity	Kshetri/Brahman	Janajati	Dalit	Madheshi
Percent	50.47	34.2	8.67	6.66

**Source:** *The Directorate of Public Relations and Information (2025).*

The Nepal Army started hiring women from 1961 in technical service and from 2004 in general service (Nepal Army, 2025). As per the data of the Nepal Army (2025), participation of women in the institution is 18.98%, while male participation is 81.02%. Although, the Nepal Army proudly claims that it has made important steps towards gender inclusiveness, the figures above do not support the claim. Within the women armies, numbers of Madheshis is still very low compared to Kshetri/Brahman and Janajati. Kshetri/Brahman women's presence in the Nepal Army is 50.47%. However, Madheshi women's presence is only 6.66%, as shown in Table 5.

**Table 6:** Caste/Ethnic based women's distribution in the Nepal Army Wives Association (NAWA)

NAWA's Executive Committee		
Caste/Ethnicity	In Number	In Percentage
Kshetri/Brahman	12	80
Janajati	3	20
Dalit	0	0
Madheshi	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** *Nepal Army (2025).*

The Nepal Army Wives Association (NAWA) evidences another example of the extent of undermining of Nepal's rich diversity. In the 15-member Executive Committee of the NAWA there is not a single women from Madhesi or Dalit community. Leaving aside the fact that Madheshi and Dalit together compose about one-third the population of Nepal, their nil representation in NAWA is not even commensurate with their combined representation of about 13% in NA (Table 1). Except three women members from Janajati communities, all the remaining women members are Kshetri/Brahman, as shown in the Table 6.

While looking at the international practices of inclusion in the armies and analyzing the data mentioned in above presented tables, it appears that integration of Madheshi people in the Nepal Army is not satisfactory and there are a number of challenges and hindrances for the proper integration process.

### 4.3 The Challenges

Due to the lack of a clear identification and surname listing of the Madhesi community, individuals other than the Madheshi community are enjoying the benefits that the state has promised to the Madheshi community (Madheshi Commission, 2025). The discriminatory treatment also plays role in developing aversion among Madhesis aspirants to join the Nepal Army. Even equal ranking army personnel in the institution demoralize the Madheshis by calling them by 'derogatory words', while many Madheshis were forced to leave their jobs due to lack of respect and dignity being shown to them within the circle of their friends, group, society, and institution (Adhikari, 2015). The Nepal Army has rationalized the logic that every army member is the first Nepalese, and only afterwards they have other identities (Adhikari, 2015), but the above presented issues are against such claims by the Nepal Army.

There are sizable share of Aadibasi/Janajati in the Nepal Army, but the first Chief of the Army Staff from Janajati community became only after the establishment of Democratic Republic (Sharma, 2010). However, there is no such favorable structure in the institution that army personnel from other caste/ethnicity could be the COAS (Sharma, 2010).

Madheshis youths have been rejected from the exams and tests of army recruitments after just being called as *Lure* (looking thin), *Chhipad dekhine* (looking aged), having facial blemishes (spots, acne, etc) or status of dental health. In one of the cases, a youth from Siraha failed to pass the medical test, just for having blackish teeth as his medical examiner had informed him (RCHC, 2013). The low success rates in recruitment also does not motivate Madheshi youth to join the army (RCHC, 2013). Similarly, Madheshis do not have the habit of climbing up and down the hills, while language is also one of the challenges (Adhikari, 2015).

### 5.0 Conclusion

The power and structure of the country have changed from Monarchy to Federal Democratic Republic one. People from various caste and ethnic groups try to enjoy and adopt the changes as the Constitution of Nepal (2015) has ensured reservations for the recruitments in government agencies. Madheshis have also been enjoying the changes, but such changes is yet to be significantly felt by them in the Nepal Army.

This study found that reservation policies in the Nepal Army has not been fully adopted and that have been creating hindrances for Madheshi youth from joining the institution. The study also found that if the mindset and perception towards Madheshi communities do not change, the institution may remain under the domination of a limited caste/ethnicity. In a democratic country, people expect to see people who look like them in government bodies (Bhul, 2021,) but the study reveals that Madheshis do not find such a condition in the Nepal Army. From Madhesi's perspective one can imagine how patiently Madheshis sustained their below 1 % representation in the Nepal Army for decades despite having about one-fourth of the nation's population share. There is even worse picture about Muslims representation in the Nepal army. These evidences ridicule the clauses regarding inclusive and proportional representation in the constitution of Nepal.

So, this article advocates that the Nepal Army's running system should be changed as per the Nepalese Law. It also advocates that the institution should change its structure and mentality



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according to the changing contexts, and create favorable environments in the governance so that people from Madheshi community also feel that the institution also belong to them.

In order to address these challenges, the Nepal Government should actively take initiation for the implementation of all the arrangements/policies and the agreements done with Madheshi political alliances for the inclusion of Madheshi in the Nepal Army. The government also needs to coordinate and cooperate with the executive, legislative and judicial organs to make the Nepal Army of democratic in nature. Furthermore, the Nepal Army also needs to make the institution democratic and inclusive in nature and should train their personnel as per the norms of democracy and human rights. It also needs to change its power-structure. The key/major stakeholders need to work seriously for the implementation of the constitutional provisions that ensure Madheshi people's inclusion and representation in the Nepal Army.

In conclusion, Nepal is a culturally, socially, linguistically and religiously diverse country. It is also home to a highly diverse population comprising 142 distinct ethnic groups, so the ethnic diversity should not be the barriers for anyone who wants to join the Nepal Army and serve the nation rather the ethnic diversity should be assets for the institution.

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