

The saga of C K Raut and the Madhesh's struggle for justice in Nepal

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C K Raut has transformed from separatist messiah to Nepali parliamentarian - but can he deliver justice for marginalised Madheshis and preserve their faith in Nepal's young federal republic?

THE TRAILER FOR *Dr CK Raut: The Passion* opens with a fictionalised Raut in a navy-blue suit and red tie, standing above a crowd as it chants, "What do we want? Freedom!" Raut lifts his fist into the air and says, in Hindi, "Now we will not ask for Madhesh, we will snatch it away." In a later scene, he is beaten by policemen and left bleeding. The blood drips onto a map of Nepal, cutting a line through the country's southern belt. "Jai Madhesh!", Raut shouts. At the close, unfazed after even more assaults, he breaks apart his handcuffs and growls, "Now Madhesh will not be a slave to anyone. The chains of slavery will have to be broken."

The trailer is an accurate depiction of the mythology that surrounds Raut in much of the Madhesh region, in Nepal's southern plains. Raut is thought to be a fearless advocate of the rights of Madheshi people, superhero-like in his grit and tenacity. His ability to articulate the pain of state oppression and neglect, manifest in the Madhesh's political disenfranchisement and economic despair, won him legions of supporters, and in 2006 Raut founded the Alliance for Independent Madhesh (AIM). The group described itself as an "alliance of Madheshi people, activists, parties and various organizations working for establishing an independent and sovereign Madhesh," and demanded the withdrawal of the Nepali state's "colonial" administration and security forces from the region. AIM's message was simple: progress and justice could only come to the Madhesh if the power and the people of the Pahad, the historical centre of Nepal's politics and government, were excised from it.

In the Pahad, the hill region stretching along the north of the Madhesh, this made Raut an object of ridicule, in keeping with the long-standing derision of Madheshis by Nepal's Pahadi elites. Here, the idea of fragmenting the country was sacrilege, and Raut's demand for an independent Madhesh a fanciful slogan with little political substance. But AIM gathered pace and popularity, particularly among young Madheshi men, who staged momentous demonstrations demanding a Madheshi nation-state stretching the full breadth of the southern plains. Raut was arrested and charged with sedition in 2014 under Nepal's Crime against State and Punishment Act, prompting Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch to call for his immediate and unconditional release. He was eventually let go, but continued to be in and out of prison for several years, solidifying his reputation in the Madhesh as a Mandela-esque figure fighting for liberation and justice. Raut's supporters were targeted too: in August 2018, Ram Manohar Yadav, an AIM member, died in police custody after he was detained for waving a black flag at Upendra Yadav, the deputy prime minister.

Then, in March 2019, Raut shocked his supporters by signing an 11-point agreement with the Nepal government, ending his movement for an independent Madhesh and securing his release from jail. Raut accepted the existence of an undivided Nepal that includes the Madhesh, while the government

committed to addressing the concerns of Madheshis through constitutional and democratic means. Raut described the deal as a “win-win”, but many of his staunchest backers saw it as a betrayal, an indication that Raut had sacrificed his radical ambitions for his own political gain.

The Alliance for Independent Madhesh was renamed the Janamat Party – roughly translating to “Referendum Party”, even if a referendum is not on the party’s programme. In a sharp pivot away from separatism, Raut led the Janamat Mati Yatra, a campaign to gather soil from across Nepal so as to create a garden symbolising national unity. His messaging changed sharply, but he continued to play up the personal mythology rooted in his separatist years. In Nepal’s 2022 general election, Raut was elected to parliament with a landslide victory in Saptari district, defeating Upendra Yadav.

The Janamat Party’s emergence as a strong regional political force in the Madhesh, and Raut’s own victory in his new avatar as a Nepali patriot, means that he now plays a key role in Madheshi politics and in Nepali politics at large. The urgent question for Raut, and for the Madhesh, is whether the political system he has chosen to join, which emerged from the conclusion of a long civil war, can be made to undo the generations-long neglect and denigration of the Madhesh by the Nepali state, and to deliver justice and prosperity to the country’s marginalised people.

Raut’s story runs alongside the larger saga of how Nepal, earlier a Hindu kingdom, has recomposed itself as a federal democratic republic. The frustrations and demands of the Madhesh have played a key role in this reconfiguration. Where things go from here will weigh heavily on Raut’s political legacy, and will also reveal much of the character of the new Nepal. If either or both of Raut and the revamped Nepali state fail the hopes of the Madhesh, the danger is that accumulated grievances may once again take more fiery forms, and Nepal’s latest new dawn may prove as false as its earlier ones.

The trailer for *Dr CK Raut: The Passion* appeared in 2019, shortly after the real-life Raut’s change of course. The film itself, the brainchild of some of Raut’s supporters, has still not been made, and I was told by a member of Raut’s party that it remains in the fund-raising stages. There is every chance now that it will never come to be. Especially now, it is hard to pretend that its hero and his story are as simple as the trailer makes them out to be.

WHEN I WENT to meet Raut last summer, at the Janamat Party office in Kathmandu, he was meeting with a former member of the Nagarik Unmukti Party (NUP). The NUP’s main support base are the Tharus, a marginalised ethnic group indigenous to the Madhes, and Raut was evidently trying to get the former NUP leader to join Janamat instead. To establish a larger presence, the party has been courting new demographics, including Tharus and other ethnic minorities.

The waiting room outside Raut’s door displayed a poster showing “martyrs” of the Madhesh movement, and a painting of Ram Manohar Yadav with the Janamat logo emblazoned below it. Some party members were drinking tea and were eager to tell me about Raut’s exceptional qualities.

Sharad Singh Yadav, a veterinarian, told me that Raut has the hand of god on him. At Raut’s village, he said, “you will see that little kids go to his house and use the soil on the ground as *tika*” – a mark of blessing smeared on the forehead – “so they can ace their exams.”

Rajendra Ray, a member of the Janamat Party’s central committee, said that Raut – “Doctor-saheb” to him, and many other supporters – has always said “that of the 24 hours in a day, eight hours should be for sleep, eight should be for work, four should be for your family, which leaves four hours a day to work for the *samaj*” – the society. “When you meet him you will see, he is very inspiring.”

When I was let inside, I found Raut wearing a navy-blue suit and red tie, just like his dramatic

doppelganger in *Dr CK Raut: The Passion*. While Raut adopts an aggressive, even belligerent persona in his public speeches, playing the part of a militant revolutionary, in person I found him very mild-mannered.

"When I first started giving public talks, I always asked for a chair and a desk to sit behind," Raut told me. "It took me a long time to overcome my natural shyness. You adapt and learn how to be more confident as circumstances change."

Raut's shyness and introversion is remembered by many who knew him when he was a student of engineering at Tribhuvan University's Pulchowk Campus, a short drive from where the Janamat office now stands. "CK was always looking at the ground and avoiding talking to people," Ranjit Karna, today a member of the Nepali Congress party, recalled. "He was very smart and people knew him as a brilliant student, but he was extremely shy and I would never have imagined that he would become a politician."

Chandra Kant Raut was born in the village of Mahadeva, in Saptari, the youngest of four children. His father was a schoolteacher and his mother a housewife. In his autobiography, published in 2013 and titled *Bairag dekhi bachav samma* (From Denial to Defence), Raut writes that there was not much wealth in his village. The villagers were – and still are – mainly Dalits or members of "intermediate" caste groups taxonomised in neighbouring India as the Other Backward Classes. Raut himself belongs to the Rajbhar community, which falls in the "backward" caste groups. Most people lived in huts and made a living off the land, and their livelihoods were dependent on the vagaries of the monsoons. If there was good rain and a good crop, people ate; if not, many starved.

Saptari, abutting the Indian state of Bihar, is generally flat and arable, like much of the Madhesh. Once covered with forbidding jungle, the Madhesh was aggressively cleared and settled particularly in the last century as the Nepali state looked to raise agricultural production and government revenue. People from the Pahad, encouraged by the government, descended from the hills in pursuit of land and means, and often also as civil servants tasked with imposing the government's writ. They encountered indigenous people such as the Tharus, as well as Madheshi communities distinguished by their close cultural and familial links to related groups in the Indian plains, across the open Nepal-India border. Nepali nationalist history conveniently overlooks that the government in Kathmandu, in need of labourers to settle and work the land, had intermittently encouraged these communities to migrate to the Madhesh from India, only to later treat them as akin to infiltrators.

In the 1950s, a democratic movement succeeded in ending the rule of the Ranas, despotic hereditary prime ministers who exercised real power while keeping the king of Nepal on the throne. The king was retained as a constitutional monarch, but after the country's first popular election delivered a decisive mandate for the Nepali Congress he seized absolute power for himself, maintaining the pretence of popular representation under a party-less system of Panchayat councils. Faced with ruling a vastly diverse and underdeveloped territory, which its erstwhile Rana rulers had never fully consolidated under the instruments of a modern state, Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah embarked on a nation-building programme. The official ethos of the Panchayat era, which lasted until another democratic uprising in 1990, was predicated on "one nation, one language, one people," unified under the figure of the king. The one language was Nepali, and the commanding cultural identity was that of dominant-caste Pahadis.

This made it difficult, if not impossible, for non-Pahadis, non-Nepali speakers and people outside the elite castes to participate in public and political life. The people of the Madhesh were multiply marginalised: they spoke Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Hindi, Tharu and other tongues, and typically shared cultures with communities to the south in India, with whom they often intermarried. These cross-border overlaps made them especially suspect in the eyes of Nepali nationalists, who obsessed

that India wanted to take over Nepal and was fostering Madheshis as a fifth column.

Madheshis' loyalty to Nepal was constantly questioned. Discrimination and official neglect left education, health, transport and social services in the plains in a dismal state, and the large majority of Madheshis, with the exception of landholders from dominant-caste groups, remained abjectly poor. In Kathmandu and elsewhere, an enduring stereotype formed of the Madheshi as someone eking out a living as a fruit-seller or in some other lowly job, with their dark complexion and broken Nepali considered fair game for ridicule.

In his autobiography, Raut writes that even though he was academically a high achiever from a young age, he considered leaving school to work as a migrant labourer in Punjab, far away in India, because higher education seemed economically beyond reach. Because Raut's results in his School Leaving Certificate exams were very good, his father committed to have him study further no matter how difficult it might be. Raut enrolled at Pulchowk to pursue a technical degree.

In Kathmandu, he took pains to avoid being discriminated against for his background. Though his mother tongue was Maithili, "I always spoke in Nepali, would sing Nepali folk songs and *dohori* songs, and hang out with mostly Pahadi students," he writes. "I stopped speaking in my language or talking about the customs and traditions of my village." He attempted to be as apolitical as possible, until circumstances forced an awakening.

"Since I came from a family of little means, when I came to Kathmandu, I was really focused on my studies," he notes in the autobiography. "I didn't go to too many political events, I used to reject invitations. The Hrithik Roshan incident was the turning point for me, it made me realise that I was not Nepali but Madheshi."

In 2000, Nepal was swept by rumours that the Bollywood actor Hrithik Roshan had spoken in a television interview about hating Nepal and its people. Mass demonstrations broke out against him and India, even though Roshan had said no such thing. In Kathmandu and elsewhere, Pahadi mobs attacked Madheshis, whom they saw as Indians and therefore somehow responsible for Roshan's alleged comments. The rioting left four people dead. Notably, Nepal's political leadership did not denounce the specific targeting of Madheshis even as it called for an end to the unrest.

For Raut, like many Madheshis of his generation, this was a pivotal moment. The fact that Madheshi students such as himself were being beaten up as a consequence of what an Indian man may or may not have said was a shock, he writes. It made him understand the depth of ethnic discrimination in Nepal, and to see that Pahadi domination needed to be countered systematically.

Tula Narayan Shah, a political analyst and the founder of the Nepal Madhesh Foundation, a think tank, told me that the Hrithik Roshan incident was the culmination of long-standing tensions between Pahadi and Madheshi students. In 1980, Nepal held a referendum on its system of government. The monarchic Panchayat system won out by a slim margin over a multi-party democratic system. After many Pahadi politicians had campaigned the Madhesh in favour of Panchayat rule, the government felt the need to make certain concessions to the region. As part of this, more Madheshi students had the opportunity to study in colleges in Kathmandu. Pahadi students, accustomed to seeing Madheshis as lowly vegetable sellers or construction workers, started to encounter Madheshi students as peers rather than social inferiors. Animosity grew, and there were frequent spats and fist-fights.

Shah, who also studied at Pulchowk, recalled confrontations between Pahadi and Madheshi students over cricket matches between India and Pakistan. "The Madheshi students were generally in support of the Indian cricket team, and Pahadi students would support Pakistan, Australia, England -

whoever the Indian team was up against," he said. "During the match, there would be insults hurled. By the end of the match, there would almost always be a scuffle."

Many Madheshi students turned to student political organisations almost in self defence, finding support in each other when they were insulted or attacked. Deepak Sah, one of Raut's close friends and a senior member of the Janamat Party, said he tried to get Raut to join a Madheshi group when he first arrived at Pulchowk. "At the time, he was irritated by me, saying that these ethnic divisions need not be taken too seriously, we are all Nepali after all," Sah recalled. "After the Hrithik Roshan incident, he began to think differently about the matter."

RAUT TOLD ME that, after the Hrithik Roshan incident, he was motivated to read as much as possible about Madheshi history and politics. "As a person with spiritual inclinations, I felt like I had a dilemma," he said. "I knew that Madheshi issues were very important, but I wanted to think about humanity as a whole. I wasn't sure if I was meant to devote my life to questions concerning such a limited territory. I wanted to read everything I could and find an answer."

After finishing his technical degree, Raut won scholarships for a bachelor's degree at Pulchowk, then a master's degree from the University of Tokyo in Japan and a doctorate in computer science from the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom. In all his years of study, he said, his interest in Madheshi history never left him. "I was not only focused on my technical engineering education, but also on my historical education."

Among the books that influenced him, Raut listed *Tarai jal raha hai* (The Tarai is Burning), a markedly Marxist-Leninist text by the Madheshi thinker R D Azad, and *Prachin Bharat ka Itihas* (The History of Ancient India) by the Indian Marxist historian Ram Sharan Sharma, a copy of which he acquired in Japan. Raut synthesised what he learnt into books of amateur history that he wrote himself. These include *Madhesh ka Itihas* (History of the Madhesh) and *Bir Madheshi* (Courageous Madheshis), the latter retelling the lives of historical and mythological figures Raut categorises as Madheshi – among them Manu, the putative author of the rigid caste laws of the *Manusmriti*; Sita and her father, King Janak, of the Ramayana; and the Buddha. In part because there is very little historical scholarship published from and about the Madhesh, Raut's works have become especially popular among young Madheshis yearning for an understanding of their past.

There are some key elements in how Raut tells the history of the Madhesh in his books. He holds that Madhyadesh, or the nation of Madhesh, existed since the beginning of human civilisation in the Subcontinent. The Madhesh became part of the Mughal Empire in the 14th century, he writes, and later came under the control of the East India Company. Raut says that after Prithvi Narayan Shah, who forged a unified Nepal by conquest in the 18th century, started expanding his kingdom, his Gorkha forces took control of parts of the Madhesh by paying tribute to the British and their vassals to the south. The limits of Nepal's present-day Madheshi territories were determined by treaties between Nepal and the British in 1816 and 1860: the first, which marked the end of the Anglo-Nepalese War, ceding parts of the Madhesh to the East India Company; the second, signed after Kathmandu's help in putting down the 1857 anti-British rebellion in India, restoring Madheshi territories back to Nepal.

"Madheshis fought against Gurkhali/Nepalese occupation since the first arrival of Gurkhas/Nepalese in Madhesh," Raut writes. "In the Anglo-Nepal war of 1814-16, Madheshis fought on the side of the British leading to an eventual victory over Nepal. But the British handed over the Madheshis and their land to the same enemy." Since then, the Madhesh has functioned as an "internal colony" for Pahadis, who extract wealth from its fertile plains and its people. Madheshis, in this telling, have been yearning for liberation ever since.

Raut is a sloppy scholar. His historical books contain some interesting snippets, and some of the threads he weaves together to form a coherent narrative about modern-day southern Nepal are provocative and insightful, but the idea of “the Madhesh” as a historical civilisation rather than a contemporary political category rings false. Various ethnic, linguistic and caste groups in the area have histories that cannot be subsumed under the category of “Madheshi civilisation”. On specific historical facts, too, there is plenty to question. For one thing, there was no Mughal Empire in the 14th century, when Raut says the Madhesh came under its control; the 14th century marked the zenith of the Tughlaqs, another Muslim dynasty with wide sway over the Subcontinent, and the Mughals would not arrive until 1526.

It is clear that Raut’s books were written to provide intellectual fodder for the AIM project, and he might tell the story differently if he had written them today. Beyond the flawed details of his narrative, however, there is truth to the point that politically powerful groups from the Pahad have historically had an extractive relationship to the lands and peoples to their south.

“I stand by everything I said in the books,” Raut told me. At a parliamentary budget meeting, he added, “I said to everyone that the Madhesh is being treated like an internal colony. Only about twenty percent of the taxes being raised from the Madheshi districts is actually going to Madheshi people.” The rest, Raut claimed, is being redirected elsewhere.

After completing his doctorate, Raut moved to Boston, in the United States, to take up a job with Raytheon, a major contractor and weapons manufacturer for the US military. He has never discussed his work at the corporation in great detail, but mentions in his autobiography that it was related to language models.

“When he was in Boston, CK would talk about the movie *Swades* a lot,” one of Raut’s friends from his US days, who did not wish to be named, told me. *Swades*, a 2004 Bollywood release starring Shah Rukh Khan, features a hero who gives up a coveted position at NASA so he can improve the lives of villagers back home in India. For Raut, “Shah Rukh Khan’s character sacrificing his American job to go back and do something for his country was a real fantasy.”

For the time being, Raut threw himself into Madheshi groups online. “Madheshis who lived abroad had Yahoo groups and Google groups where we discussed Nepali politics and the atmosphere of rebellion that seemed to be brewing in the Madhesh,” Raut told me. This was around 2005, near the end of Nepal’s civil war, as more people and political parties turned against an unpopular monarchy and Madheshis dared to dream of a radical change. “Because Nepali media organisations could not be trusted to report accurately on issues facing Madheshis, we opened this online portal called Madhesh.com. I was very active on many internet forums and group chats, but I was frequently anonymous.” Madhesh.com now redirects to the defunct website of the Alliance for Independent Madhesh.

Rakesh Mishra, a co-founder of the Madhesh-based research organisation North-South Collectives, was also in the United States around this time. Like Raut, he told me that the Madheshi diaspora was then very active online. Mishra remembered Raut as “Bibhasan Kumar” in the online groups.

Besides their focus on debate and discussion, these online groups also raised funds for Madhesh-based political parties fighting for Nepal to adopt federalism, proportional representation and other means of rebalancing the scales of opportunity and privilege. These demands reached a crescendo in the Madhesh movement of 2007, when the plains rose up against a post-civil war interim constitution that ignored Madheshi wishes, and again in further protests the following year. The central question was the devolution of power, breaking the traditional monopoly of the Pahad and securing greater electoral weight for the Madhesh as Nepal’s most densely populated region. In the

Madhesh, there was broad consensus that the region's economic and social problems stemmed from the fact that public life was dominated by Pahadis, even in the southern plains, and that progress required a certain level of autonomy and self-rule. Raut, however, argued that autonomy within the nation-state of Nepal was not enough – the Madhesh needed to be a separate country.

RAUT QUIT the United States and returned to Nepal in 2011. Though it was already many years since he had established AIM and its programme, he initially steered clear of political activity. When we met, he said his move was motivated by a desire to do “social good”. The *Swades* dream was still strong.

“I felt like I am needed here more than I am in America and that I have a responsibility towards my people,” Raut told me. “On a spiritual level, I never felt like life is that long. I thought about death all the time. I couldn't be like, ‘Oh, I will do something for my country in five or ten years.’ I felt the need to contribute immediately, recognising the transience of life.”

Simultaneously, Raut was seized by frustration at the country's prevailing politics. “In 2011, the constituent assembly was going to lapse without fulfilling its mandate of writing a new constitution,” he said. “The hopes with which Madheshis had elected people, it felt like it meant nothing. There were many Madheshi ministers, I believe about 54 parliamentarians – so what? They had vital posts too – minister of defence, home minister, president. Nothing was being gained.”

In 2006, after a mass movement against the monarchy, Nepal's decade-long civil war ended with the rebel Maoists agreeing to down arms and join mainstream politics. The interim constitution that followed, replacing the old monarchical one, stated that Nepal's existing unitary political structure was to be done away with but did not make a firm commitment to federalism. Major Madheshi political figures, most notably Upendra Yadav, led protests against this and other unsatisfactory provisions. The Madhesh protests, along with others by disaffected communities elsewhere in the country, culminated in amendments that promised federalism as well as the proportional inclusion in all state organs of Madheshis, Dalits, women, ethnic and indigenous minorities, and numerous other disadvantaged groups. The state also agreed to finally issue citizenship certificates to vast numbers of Madheshis left stateless by the old monarchical government, whose notion of citizenship excluded Madheshi languages and cultures.

In 2008, Nepal elected a constituent assembly to create a permanent new constitution. The Maoists, who had sympathised with Madheshis and other oppressed groups during the war, gained control of the assembly, and Madheshi parties won wide representation too. Hopes ran high that the new constitution would bring sweeping democratic changes, securing federalism and ending Pahadi political and cultural dominance. But after formally abolishing the Hindu monarchy that had ruled Nepal for 240 years, the constituent assembly stalled, with more conservative views prevailing. As the headlines filled up with news of political machinations and compromises, the general perception was that the revolutionaries – whether Maoist or Madheshi – had sold out.

“The moral decline was apparent,” Raut said. “Politicians had their wives and girlfriends occupy important positions. They were thinking about their own personal enrichment. To me, the remedy was the freedom movement.”

As represented in the materials of AIM, Raut's vision for freedom was less the manifestation of a coherent ideology and more a way to frame general grievances with the national and Madheshi political establishment. The AIM manifesto, in a section titled ‘Our Plan’, stated that the goal is to “Prepare human resources and infrastructures required for an independent Madhesh. (Establish sustainable administrative and physical infrastructures in every districts, villages, and wards); Prepare national infrastructures such as national planning commission, think tank, media house,

national newspapers, radio and TV channels for Madhesh.” The manifesto also said, “we aim to achieve independence through peaceful and non-violent means.”

One of the first events Raut organised upon his return was a conference on “The Role of NGOs/INGOs in Developing Madhesh”. This had little to do with Madheshi independence, and the invitees included decidedly non-radical figures: a government minister, Western ambassadors, and senior figures from the Indian embassy, the United Nations and the World Bank.

Raut’s priority at the time appeared to be gaining support from foreign dignitaries and officials at big international non-profits rather than organising people in the Madhesh itself. In 2011, he wrote a letter to the queen of England about Madheshis’ economic plight. A response from Buckingham Palace, printed in Raut’s autobiography in full, states, “whilst Her Majesty has taken careful note of your views on this matter, you will appreciate, I am sure, that there can be no question of The Queen interfering in the affairs of another Sovereign state.”

Raut’s efforts coalesced into a campaign of dogged self-promotion, with AIM serving less as a political programme than a marketing device for what was to become the CK Raut brand. He published *Madhesh ka Itihas* and *Bir Madheshi*, and also his autobiography and the book *Madhesh Swaraj* (Madheshi Self-rule). He also put out a documentary, *Black Buddhas*, which included some powerful scenes capturing the struggles of ordinary Madheshis.

In one, a farmer stands in his barren fields complaining that the government’s lack of investment in irrigation means that a dry season translates to starvation. In another, farmers protest outside a government office where they had been promised fertilisers. “They took our money and gave us receipts, but there is no sign of fertilisers,” one of them says. “I have come here every day for the past five or six days to collect it – still, nothing.” A voiceover states that fertilisers are available for easy purchase in nearby India, but a ban on bringing them across the border means farmers risk police harassment, or worse, if they smuggle them in so they can avoid starvation.

In 2012, the constituent assembly was dissolved after failing to deliver a new constitution. Around this time, Raut, helped by old classmates from Pulchowk and others taken with the AIM mission, began to distribute his books and the documentary in what were essentially consciousness-raising groups.

“I read *Madhesh Swaraj* when it came out and was so impressed that I convinced 60 people from my village to join his mission,” R P Singh, an engineer now living in Australia who was active in Raut’s organisation in the AIM days, told me. “He took notice of me. I was 20 or 21 years old at the time, a young man who could be an asset to the organisation, and I did group trainings all the time.” These training sessions involved screenings of *Black Buddhas*, discussions on Madheshi history and politics, and distribution of Raut’s various books. Singh conducted such sessions in the Madhesh and also in Qatar, where many Madheshis work as part of the wave of Nepali migrant labourers in West Asia.

“Alliance for Independent Madhesh was a very decentralised organisation,” Singh recalled. “The trainings were not very structured, it was a space to talk about social, cultural and political issues facing Madheshis. It got many people who were not very interested in politics before on our side since we weren’t trying to get votes or anything, just spread awareness on important matters.”

Dr Ravindra Yadav, a physician who lives in the UAE, was also involved in consciousness-raising among Madheshis in West Asia, and helped Raut build a network there. “I had faith in his integrity and commitment to the Madheshi cause,” Yadav told me. “The networks were not very formalised, we sometimes got together under the name Madheshi Swaraj.”

The Madheshi diaspora – migrant labourers in West Asia and beyond, and also well-off individuals in the West – helped boost Raut's profile and gave money to his cause. Raut, with growing support at home and abroad, began to take an increasingly radical position.

In the first few years of his return to Nepal, as Raut and his compatriots focused on building AIM as something akin to a civil-society organisation, he largely escaped state repression. Things took a turn in 2014. That September, in Kathmandu, Raut was arrested on sedition charges after he delivered a speech to a gathering of Santhals – another of the Madhesh's indigenous groups – where he called for a free and independent Madhesh. Raut responded with a "fast-unto-death" that he ended after 11 days when the government agreed to release him.

This began a pattern of arrests and releases. Raut continued to give speeches to Madheshis, often discussing "internal colonisation" by the Pahad, only to be taken away by the police and released after pressure from his supporters. By his own account, Raut was imprisoned 18 times. In a blog post published in 2017, he described the particularly brutal suppression of a mass assembly in early 2015 in the city of Biratnagar, in the Madhesh, where the police broke his right leg and took him into custody. Raut also wrote that he was refused medical assistance. In April the same year, after he was released, Raut sustained head and arm injuries from being beaten by the police.

GROWING FRUSTRATION in the Madhesh meant fertile ground for Raut's secessionist demands. After the first constituent assembly failed, Nepal held an election to create another. This second assembly was decidedly less revolutionary in its composition, and was dominated by the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) – the grand old parties of Nepali politics. In 2015, with the country still struggling to recover from a devastating series of earthquakes, the second constituent assembly pushed through a new constitution.

For women, Madheshis, Tharus and many others, the document was a heavy blow. It barred Nepali mothers from passing their nationality on to their children, upholding a patriarchal provision that allowed only fathers to do so – driven in good part by xenophobic and misogynist fears that Madheshi mothers would pass on Nepali citizenship to children from Indian fathers, who would then be a threat to the Nepali nation. Many hard-won progressive features of the interim constitution, including proportionate representation based on ethnicity, were gone. The new constitution ushered in federalism, but the newly formed federal provinces appeared gerrymandered to ensure continued Pahadi political dominance, with many parts of the southern plains lumped together with hill districts. Where some Madheshi leaders and activists had demanded that the whole of the plains be organised as one federal province, or two at most, the truncated Madhesh Province that now emerged in the country's south-east contained only part of them.

Massive protests in the Madhesh against the new constitution were met with brutal violence by state forces. Simultaneously, the Indian government, which had designs of its own for what Nepal's new constitution should look like and was angry that these had been ignored, imposed a border blockade intended to bend Kathmandu to its will. But New Delhi officially denied having taken this step, instead saying it was Madheshi protesters who were blocking all roads into Nepal from India.

Land-locked Nepal is massively dependent on goods from and transiting through India, and the blockade left an earthquake-hit country desperately short of medicines, fuel and other essential supplies. In the Pahad, which had suffered some of the worst damage, it turned public opinion sharply against India and, with suspicions cast on Madheshi protesters, against the Madhesh too. Kathmandu saw in the scenario confirmation of its view that India, which had supported Madheshi's demands for greater rights after the war, was in cahoots with the Madhesh to undermine Nepal.

If New Delhi had intended the blockade to strengthen the Madheshi hand, the move backfired. Led

by K P Sharma Oli, a strident nationalist who eagerly fanned anti-India resentment, the Nepal government hardened its stance and rode out the blockade. The protests in the Madhesh – seen as another Madhesh movement, building on the first in 2007 – fizzled out. The blockade was lifted after six months. The new constitution remained unchanged.

Having seen their demands for concessions once again ignored, many Madheshis were left feeling that their effort at democratic inclusion in the Nepali nation-state after the civil war had failed. The Madheshi parties that had led this effort, and had argued against more radical alternatives, were left battered. Raut and AIM appeared to offer an alternative.

In and out of jail, released only to speak out and be arrested again, regularly and loudly condemned by Nepal's major political leaders, Raut moved from being a relatively minor rabble-rouser to an icon of Madheshi liberation. The Nepali state's reaction to him only gave Raut more publicity and burnished his image.

Raut's public persona reached its zenith. "I was mesmerised by him," Rakesh Mishra, of North-South Collectives, recalled. "I felt like he was Bhagat Singh" – the Indian revolutionary and freedom fighter. "Every choice he made at the time seemed very deliberate, he used to wear those suits and ties to every speech he gave." Mishra thought Raut was channelling the American civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., "using respectability politics to make his point." He was also echoing B R Ambedkar, the Indian anti-caste icon, who is most often depicted in a red tie and navy-blue suit.

Ravindra Yadav saw in Raut another global political icon. "He talked like Nelson Mandela," Yadav said. "He said he was willing to stay in jail for as long as he needed to for the freedom movement."

But Raut's growing status as a Madheshi icon came at a cost for him and his family. In the town of Jaleswar, in Madhesh Province, I met Babita Devi Mahaseth, an elderly woman Raut wrote a loving post about on Facebook last Mother's Day. She had been Raut's neighbour when he lived in the nearby city of Janakpur between 2014 and 2018, and recalled that he had enormous difficulty finding a place to rent because landlords were worried about unwanted police attention. Many schools refused to enrol his children – Raut married in 2007, and has two daughters and a son – and Raut ultimately had to send them to worse schools than he would have liked.

Mahaseth described Raut's popularity in Janakpur: hundreds would come out to support him whenever he spoke. Like their leader, AIM supporters had to face down the risk of arrest, or worse.

In *Plains of Discontent*, a political history of the Nepali Tarai, the scholar Maximillian Mørch details how 2018 was an especially significant and tragic year for Raut and AIM. That May, when the Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi, visited Nepal, AIM members were arrested at a function welcoming him to Janakpur after they demonstrated with placards calling for a free Madhesh. They were later released. In August, Raut delivered a speech calling for an end to Pahadi dominance at a gathering to honour Rajib Raut, an activist killed during the 2015 protests. Days later, three AIM members were arrested for waving black flags at Upendra Yadav. They included Ram Manohar Yadav, who was then found dead in custody.

In October, government forces arrested 20 AIM members as they protested demanding justice for their dead comrade. Mørch writes that members of Ram Manohar Yadav's family were beaten by the police, leaving his widow in critical condition. Raut himself was arrested the same month for treason, along with more than 20 members of AIM. This time, there was no quick release: Raut remained in prison for months.

In March 2019, the Supreme Court of Nepal released Raut, citing a lack of evidence on the part of

the prosecution. Immediately after this, he signed the 11-point agreement with the government, headed by K P Sharma Oli, that many of his supporters would come to understand as a deal with the devil.

"I am grateful to Prime Minister K P Oli for diligently and peacefully taking the initiative to safely land our movement," Raut declared at the time. "Now it is time to move on the path of good governance, peace and prosperity."

The time in prison had evidently given Raut a new perspective. "Though I was arrested and released dozens of times, spending five months behind bars made me realise how important freedom is," he told a reporter soon afterwards.

"At the beginning it was okay," Raut told me of his time in jail. "The latter years is when I got very disappointed." As he understood it, there was not enough political awareness in the Madhesh for the movement to continue while its leader was in jail. "For example, Mandela stayed in jail for many years, but leadership roles in his organisation were never vacant. When I was in jail for 5 months the last time, the leadership almost vanished completely. I thought that it was important for me to come out, not only for my own well-being but also for that of the organisation."

Ravindra Yadav, who is not involved with the Janamat Party and does not support Raut anymore, realised that Raut was not willing to stay in jail for too much longer when he noticed a change in the modules used for consciousness-raising. "Since the organisation was decentralised, the modules used to be very flexible," he recalled. "What I started being sent in 2017 contained sentences like, 'If the pilot is steering the plane a particular way, there must be a reason. You have to trust the pilot.'"

Even so, when Raut finally struck his agreement with the government, Yadav was disappointed. "When he did it, I felt like I had wasted so much of my time, so many of my resources," he said. "He just opened a mainstream political party, there was no radical thought anymore. Of course some people that we did trainings with still like him, they think a scientist who has sacrificed his work for the betterment of Madheshis must be doing something right, but many have turned away. There is nothing in his mission anymore."

R P Singh, who was involved with AIM early on, described similar feelings. "He surrendered," Singh said. "Of course I felt betrayed. I am sure he had personal reasons, family reasons, but I felt betrayed."

Jasar Yadav, who played a foundational role in organising AIM and the self-rule movement, told me that after Raut's agreement with Oli, over 165 of the 200 or so people with key organisational roles left.

Raut declined to speak in any detail about R P Singh, Jasar Yadav, Ravindra Yadav or any of the others who walked away from AIM. But he told me, somewhat testily, that the claim about many leaders quitting after his agreement was false. "Where are they then, these people who have supposedly left?" he asked. "It's a lie spread by people who have their own agenda, there is no truth to it."

WHEN I WENT to Mahadeva, Raut's village, last summer, the fields were parched. A farmer told me it had rained for a few days, so the village planted the summer crop thinking the monsoon was coming early. "But after that, there have been no rains," he said. "The seeds are all burnt."

The livelihoods of the people in Mahadeva, like in most of Saptari district, rely almost exclusively on agriculture and remittances from relatives labouring abroad. There are few other options here. Unsurprisingly, the Janamat Party's two main campaign promises during the 2022 general election

were to create a million jobs and to provide irrigation facilities and fertilisers for all.

I asked Jageshwar Isar, a Janamat member who sits on the local ward authority, if there were any concrete plans for how the promised jobs were to be created. "As you know, there is a lot of corruption in Nepal," he said. "We will reduce corruption, and jobs will be created as a result of the governance system being strengthened."

Raut's face is plastered all over Mahadeva, and it is clear most locals feel great affection for him. "He was always so bright, I never had any doubt that he was going to go very far in life," an old classmate of his told me.

According to Bhola Paswan, a journalist and activist from Saptari, Raut's electoral victory needs to be understood in the context of caste politics in the Madhesh. "Ever since the first Madhesh movement, Yadavs have dominated Madheshi politics," Paswan explained. As the Pahadi elite was forced into retreat, it was the Yadavs, a powerful community that has historically held a lot of land in the Madhesh, that largely filled the political void. Paswan argued that Raut has provided an alternative for Dalits and the backward castes, who continue to feel alienated by Yadav politicians. "He has picked issues that are important to them in his campaign – the issues of remittance workers, farming, skills development. He has the potential to really mobilise these groups politically."

Tula Narayan Shah, the political analyst, published a newspaper piece about Raut soon after his electoral victory. He described the ubiquity of online videos about Raut, the local perception that the government was trying to kill him, the hopes that Janamat's promise of fertilisers would come to fruition. "My son, who works in Saudi Arabia, told me to vote for Raut," Shah quoted Bimal Ram, a Dalit woman, as saying. "He is a scientist from Mahadeva, the government tried to kill him, they wanted him to rot in jail. He made it out of jail somehow. All the parties are trying to combine their forces to end his career. He's such a good man! His party has helped my son, my nephews, in Saudi Arabia. That's why I voted for him."

While many women voted for Raut, Janamat's support relies heavily on the affection working-class men in particular feel towards him. There is an overwhelming maleness to the party, in terms of both its representatives and supporters, reproducing a tradition of Madheshi politics being even more patriarchal than Nepali politics at large.

Raut was relatively nonchalant when I asked about this. "Yes, it is true, at the leadership level there are fewer women," he said. "But if you look at our voters, most working-class women in the Madhesh are with us – those whose husbands are working abroad, those who work here. They are frustrated with all the other political parties."

Dinesh Yadav, a spokesperson for Upendra Yadav's People's Socialist Party-Nepal (PSP-N), told me that the hype around Raut in Saptari was all due to a cult of personality. "He's a new face, people like him for now, that's all there is to it," he said. "For politics, you need an ideology, a clearly defined programme. What is the Janamat Party's ideology?"

I put this question to Deepak Sah, Raut's friend and senior Janamat member. He answered using analogies from Indian politics: "Would you say Narendra Modi is on the political right or political left? What about Amit Shah? What about Arvind Kejriwal?" Modi heads a Hindu nationalist party and government, and Shah is his hardline right-hand man. Kejriwal, the chief minister of Delhi, has a more liberal profile in comparison, but has also pandered to Indian nationalism and Hindu communalism.

"We don't subscribe to the right and left, we care about service delivery," Sah went on. "We are

liberal, but also, to maintain discipline in the party, we need to be a little autocratic as well.”

“When Raut was talking about independence, the point was to find a historical justification for an independent Madheshi nation,” Bhaskar Gautam, a political scientist with North-South Collective, said. “I wouldn’t say there was much ideological clarity.” After the deal with the government, “there is no doubt that Oli’s nationalism brought a nationalist bent to how Raut began talking as well.”

Oli, who brought Raut into the political mainstream, is a beacon of Nepali ultra-nationalism. Had Raut’s independence movement ever become more serious, Oli would have been his natural arch-nemesis.

Raut said that the agreement with Oli was “on paper only.” He explained, “I have not been in any communication with Oli since the agreement. It was meant to get me into mainstream politics, that’s it. It has nothing to do with my popularity. If anything, it has harmed me among certain groups, not helped.”

Much of Raut’s effort in his new avatar has focussed on image rehabilitation, particularly among non-Madheshis who saw AIM as threatening Nepal’s national sovereignty. This has included strategic alliances with popular political figures whose ideology is perhaps best described as populist-technocratic, and not dissimilar to Deepak Sah’s characterisation of Janamat’s politics – ostensibly neither left nor right and focussed on “service delivery”. The most notable example here is Rabi Lamichhane.

Lamichhane, a former television host, was once best known for a world-record-setting 62-hour live [broadcast](#) titled “Buddha was born in Nepal” – a theme of rabid passion for Nepali nationalists, who rage against claims in India that the Buddha was born on Indian soil. In 2022, he leveraged his popularity to found the Rastriya Swatantra Party, or National Independent Party. The fledgling outfit surprised even itself by becoming the fourth-largest party in Nepal’s parliament following the general election that same year.

Lamichhane and Raut have spoken positively about one another in public. When Lamichhane faced controversy over his American citizenship and had to resign from his position as home minister soon after the election, Raut tweeted at him with the hashtag “#comebackhero”. (Nepal does not allow dual citizenship, and Lamichhane later gave up his US nationality.) Lamichhane recently returned as home minister, despite a growing compendium of controversies surrounding his past.

When I asked Raut about Lamichhane, he told me that his appreciation for him is not about Lamichhane’s politics. “I think he has good energy,” he said. “I appreciate that, and the fact that people have faith in him.”

Lamichhane’s appeal relies heavily on his practice and promotion of dominant-caste Pahadi male values – the same ones once anathema to AIM. He and his party have spoken against secularism and “identity” politics, and urged a return to a unitary conception of Nepal.

Raut’s attempt to align himself with Lamichhane, albeit in subtle ways, while continuing to talk about Madheshi oppression at the hands of Pahadis, can be taken in various ways depending on how one views Raut. From one perspective, it is a kind of opportunism, betraying his earlier principles to pave his way in the mainstream; from another, it is a strategy for getting key issues on the Madheshi political agenda, including liberal citizenship provisions and the devolution of power, more mainstream acceptability.

Last year, Madheshis celebrated when a long-stalled amendment to Nepal’s [citizenship laws](#) was finally brought into force, opening the door for thousands of stateless people in the Madhesh to be

recognised as Nepali citizens. Besides that, there have been no real achievements for the Madheshi cause in the time since Raut came in from the cold. Federalism remains a fiercely [contested issue](#), with the Pahadi-dominated establishment parties questioning its value while the government in Kathmandu refuses to cede due powers to provincial administrations.

“The problem with Raut as a politician is that he cannot stick to any issue for a long time,” Chandra Kishore, a veteran Madheshi journalist, told me. “He’ll use a hot-button issue to rally supporters, then immediately drop it.”

The Janamat Party has held protests in support of a farmers’ movement, with demands including pensions and insurance, free electricity for agricultural use, good supply of fertilisers and compensation for crop damage. It has held protests against government corruption and called for increased investment and job creation in the Madhesh. It has also demanded that Nepal officially observe a “Dhoti Day” alongside its observation of “Dhaka Topi Day”; the dhoti is widely worn by and associated with Madheshi men, while the dhaka topi is typical headgear for male Pahadis.

“If you compare Upendra Yadav’s report card with Raut’s after winning the election, I don’t think there is much of a difference,” Kishore continued. “Bringing up relevant issues was a shortcut to power, but there has been no follow-through.”

Kishore pointed out that the supposed security threat posed by Raut and his supporters in the secessionist years served as a pretext for the government to send large numbers of its armed forces to the southern plains, and that this militarisation of the Madhesh has not been scaled down even after Raut opted to join mainstream politics. “I think the increased militarisation of the Madhesh is going to be part of Raut’s legacy for years to come,” he said.

When I asked Deepak Sah what the Janamat Party has done in the past year, he answered with a litany of complaints: corruption, self-serving parties and politicians, rising taxes and prices, collapsing public education and health services, a beggarly economy driving hundreds of thousands to leave Nepal for work every year. Sah called on people to wake up and join the movement for the country’s development, to make a new republic and social democracy. Notably absent was any concrete achievement beyond the rhetoric. And notably absent even from the rhetoric was any mention of the Madhesh – which seems to be fading from the political vocabulary of Raut and the Janamat Party as they aim for national appeal and a wider base.

In the 2022 election, when Madhesh Province also voted for its own legislative assembly, the Janamat Party won 13 seats in the 107-seat provincial chamber. It went on to support the provincial government, led by Upendra Yadav’s PSP-N, and took charge of two provincial ministries – until a falling-out that saw Janamat withdraw from the government this January. “Our major electoral promises were about employment-generation and improving the agricultural sector,” Raut told me when we spoke this May. “I won’t lie and say that we have been able to do a lot,” he said, putting this down to how Janamat never got hold of the departments in charge of industry and agriculture under the provincial government. In other departments that Janamat did take charge of, he claimed, “it is inarguable that we had the absolute best service-delivery.” He did not offer any specifics on what departments or achievements he meant.

By this June, the incumbent provincial government teetered on the brink, faced with growing popular frustration over its poor performance in office and the turmoil from a split of the PSP-N. Raut’s party struck a deal with numerous other parties, including Oli’s Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), to form a new government with Janamat at its head. Satish Kumar Singh of the Janamat Party was sworn in as the chief minister of Madhesh Province. Now the party has its greatest opportunity and its greatest test – there will be no excuses to hide behind if its government

fails to deliver as well.

Raut was bullish on the fruits of federalism for the Madhesh. “The development that has taken place in the past six or seven years is more than what happened in the hundred years before,” he told me. “Obviously things take time, but federalism has been a boon for the country.”

Raut said that a major priority now is working towards an overhaul of Nepal’s democratic system. “Our government is very unstable,” he pointed out – a frustration widely shared across the country, with an ingrained pattern of political alliances and national governments being formed and dissolved ad nauseam. “We need to move towards a direct election, like in the USA. That will solve many of our service-delivery problems.”

RAUT NOW HAS the unenviable task of figuring out ways to talk about AIM and the self-rule movement without completely disavowing what he used to say before. “People say that I was against federalism,” he told me. “This is not true. I always thought that even if self-rule is the ultimate destination, federalism is an important stepping-stone. For example, look at Scotland. It is pretty independent, but that is because a good governance framework is there.”

During a television appearance around the time of the last election, an interviewer asked Raut bluntly, “Do you regret formerly being a separatist?” Raut replied, “When you are a kid you wear shorts, even roam around naked. When you grow up, you start covering yourself up more, dressing like an adult. It is not like you can apologise for ever having roamed around in shorts.”

In the same interview, Raut discussed his “spiritual transformation” at a meditation retreat run by followers of the godman Osho. Raut’s initiation as a *sanyasi*, when he was christened “Swami Anand Maitreya”, had been live-streamed on Facebook a few months earlier. The video, later widely circulated on social media, showed him dressed all in white, his eyes shut, sitting cross-legged and swaying to spiritual music.

“After my retreat, I thought I might be freed of my worldly responsibilities to pursue a saintly path,” Raut said in the television interview. “But then again, after planting seeds of hope in millions of people, I cannot just retreat from public life. I have to be in politics, for the people. I will not abscond from my social responsibilities, at least for now.”

Soon after this electoral win, Raut appeared on a popular podcast. “On one hand, CK Raut needs to be satisfied,” the host said to him. “But in your overall movement too, there has to be satisfaction that there is progress. What if, by chance, it doesn’t come?”

“What I say is that politics is a place to take risks,” Raut said. Earlier, he explained, “people used to worship me, they used to make statues of me – but after I made the agreement and came into the mainstream, that image has been toned down.” If he had stayed out of mainstream politics and just kept watching on from a distance, “if I had always just stayed as a god-like figure, then society would get nothing.”

The *samaj* – the society – “needs to gain something,” Raut insisted. “Even if it means I am disgraced, society needs to gain something. I have to take that risk.”△

Abha Lal

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P.S.

Himal Southasian

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