

INTERNATIONAL LABOUR MIGRATION FROM NEPAL AND CHANGES IN INTER-CASTE RELATIONS

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Abstract

Over the past decade international labour migration from Nepal to the Middle East and to Malaysia has increased exponentially. The number of Dalit migrants is also rising rapidly. There is a growing body of research on international labour migration from Nepal. So far, however, research has not looked in sufficient depth at inter-caste relations, and in particular at old institutions of patron-client (*balighare*) relations, or at how economic and socio-cultural relations may be changing as a result of labour migration. Based on household and individual surveys, combined with ethnography, conducted in a cluster of six villages located to the west of Pokhara in Kaski and their migration destinations, particularly Pokhara and Chitwan, this paper seeks to explore some of these issues, particularly the following question: does mobility from one place to another, particularly international migration, help change people's behaviour in terms of everyday caste relations?

The preliminary results from the study show that most patron-client *balighare* relationships (what in India are usually referred to as *jajmani* relationships) have either been abandoned or substantially transformed. Some old caste-based taboos have been broken and roles redefined. While some traditional non-cash-based occupations have been completely abandoned or are practised on a much-reduced scale, others have largely adapted to the new cash- and market-based economy. Due to insufficient labour, farming is in decline. With respect to commensality, 70 per cent of international labour migrant respondents have had Dalit (or non-Dalit, in the case of Dalits themselves) work- or house-mates in the country where they have gone for work. With rare exceptions, caste was no barrier to commensality. However, up to 60 per cent of these same respondents say that they would not be able to continue the same level of relations with Dalits in the private domain once they are back in Nepal. This illustrates the shifting and contextual nature of caste relations; it also highlights the importance of distinguishing public and private domains.

Keywords: international migration, Dalits, caste relations, *jajmani* system, returnee migrants

Introduction

Nepal is a country of migration.¹ Almost every clan has a history of migration from somewhere else, a history that was once recalled largely by oral means but which is now increasingly being written down. The writers are often amateur historians and the context is one where almost every group is keen to claim its own cultural identity in the public sphere.² It is clear that not all groups are equally

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² See Krauskopff (2009) and Tamang (2009), for analyses of this trend. The Jyapus, the agriculturalist caste among the Newars, are one of the few large groups in Nepal to have no myth of migration from somewhere else (Gellner & Pradhan 1995); all other Newar castes trace their origins to India (with the marginal exception

able or willing to seek out their history in this way and for various reasons Dalits are not well placed to write such histories.³

Starting in the 1990s, and taking off in a substantial way in the 2000s, the possibility of international labour migration for both Dalits and non-Dalits has brought considerable changes to the rural economy and to local social interactions. As Jeevan Sharma has shown in a series of publications, there is now a ‘culture of migration’ in Nepal that inspires Nepali youth (mostly men, but increasingly women as well) to seek employment outside the country (Sharma 2017, 2018). Adhikari and Hobley (2015), in their study of international migration from Khotang and Udaypur districts, reported that as many as 52 per cent, with an average of 38 per cent of rural households had at least one member abroad. In his study of a Pariyar village in Ramechhap, Sunam (2014) found a rate of 43 per cent households currently having someone abroad, with 67 per cent of households having a member engaged in international labour migration in some point in time. In our sample of 621 households, which systematically explored longitudinal details of household migration, 50 per cent of households currently have at least one member abroad, with 78 per cent having at least one member abroad either now or in the past. Rates of migration among Dalit castes were higher than all groups except the Gurungs (with their tradition of foreign military service); the Vishwakarmas had the highest rate of foreign migration of all. It is generally accepted that about half of all Nepali households have at least one person who is either abroad now or has been abroad (Sijapati & Limbu 2017: 13). In this area the level is generally at least as high as the national average, and in places, or among some groups, even higher.

It has often been suggested that physical mobility is necessary to escape age-old hegemonic and exploitative ties. Migration—Hirschmann’s ‘exit’ from traditional labour roles and their associated servile norms—is a way to start a new life and leave hierarchy behind. According to Shrestha’s analysis, “The increase in the Gulf-Malaysia migration rate between 2001 and 2011 explains about 40 percent of the actual decline in poverty during this period” (Shrestha 2017: 15). As well as providing an alternative livelihood and resources to invest back home, physical mobility offers the possibility to redefine social relations (Valentin 2005). Patricia Caplan (1972) was perhaps the first to research Bahun-Dalit relations in the context of migration. In her study in Dailekh she showed that by means of migration some Dalits were able to improve their livelihood and capital. Several decades later Adhikari and Hobley (2015) found that, as the ‘upper’ castes migrate to urban centres, so Dalits, having earned money abroad, were able to buy land and houses locally. The urge to escape the patron-client relations of the *balighare* system is not the only motivation for migrating to work in the Gulf. Many non-Dalits are abandoning their farms and going for labour migration as well; as Bruslé (2018) demonstrates, the dominant self-representation is that they have no choice in doing so, that they are forced out by poverty and lack of job opportunities at home (he also shows that there is a subdominant discourse that treats migration as freely chosen). For Dalits there is an extra ‘gain’ in that, however badly they are treated in the workplace while abroad, they are at least viewed and treated no differently than any other Nepali, a point that came home to one of Sunam’s Pariyar informants the moment he stepped on the airplane (Sunam 2014: 12).

In this study we were interested in inter-caste relations in the migration destination; and also in what happens when migrants return home. Several of our key interlocutors and Dalit rights activists asserted that caste-based commensality is still a pertinent issue. With the enactment of new laws, and growing pressure from activist groups for their implementation, caste relations are

of some lineages of Uray who acknowledge Tibetan ancestors, and Shakyas, some of whom claim descent from the Buddha’s tribe in the Nepalese Tarai) (Gellner & Quigley 1995).

³ Precisely for that reason, and in order to provide balance (since, so far, it has been exclusively ‘middle’ and ‘high’ castes who have tended to publish such local histories), and as part of the ‘Caste, Class, and Culture’ project feedback process, we have contributed three *vamshavalis* for the main Dalit castes in the study area (BK et al. 2017a, b, c).

transforming. What used to be publicly acceptable practices are now confined to the domestic domain; at the same time social interactions and exchanges in the public sphere are being affected.

Our preliminary results show that most of the patron-client *balighare* relationships have either been wholly abandoned or very largely transformed, usually by adapting them to the market (Parajuli 2007; Chhetri 2007). Some old caste-based taboos have been broken and roles redefined. Due to insufficient labour, farming is in decline. Almost all households in our study reported that they were in a better economic situation than they were 25 years ago. Except for a few cases, caste was not a barrier to commensality when outside Nepal. However, between 40 and 60 per cent said that they were not able to continue the same level of relations in the private domain on their return.

Methods

Quantitative data was collected in two phases in 2015–16: (1) a census of 540 households (referred to as the first household survey in this paper); limited migration-related information was collected from an additional 81 households, making a total of 621 households providing migration data; (2) an in-depth survey of 1,203 individuals from a random sample of 347 households (in this second phase castes with small numbers, such as Thakalis, were excluded). In both phases household as well individual information was collected on a range of issues, including migration and inter-caste relations. Data was collected in six neighbouring villages of a VDC (as it was then) in Kaski district, as well as in migration destinations in Nepal (mainly Pokhara and Chitwan). Migration-related data was also collected from those who had returned or were on leave from their labour migration abroad. The caste groups included in the study are both non-Dalits (priestly and non-priestly Brahmans, Chhetris, and Gurungs) and Dalits (Vishwakarma, Pariyar/Darji, and Mijar/Nepali). Overall, 818 individuals were identified as international migrants or returnees in the census, and the country of destination was determined for 802 of them. 480 (60 per cent) had been at least once to the Gulf and Malaysia as labour migrants. Overall 439 individual members of the census households were currently international migrants. Of those included in the detailed individual survey, 295, or 25 per cent, had been abroad (either for work or for study); just below half of this group (137) had worked in the Gulf and Malaysia (over half of these are Dalits). Of those who were currently working way, it was possible to include 40 in the study by interviewing them while they were at home on leave. In-depth interviews were carried out with some of the respondents, separately from the survey, on a range of issues including migration, social relations, and occupations. Interviews were also conducted with about 30 leading Dalit activists, law-makers, and professionals on a range of issues concerning Dalits. The total population of the six villages and migration destinations covered in the survey was 3,118, divided by caste as shown in Table 1. If Bahuns are split into priestly and non-priestly categories, Vishwakarmas are the largest single caste included in the survey; but if we take whole population in the whole erstwhile VDC, the Vishwakarmas come third while the two Bahun groups come first and second. The caste make-up in the sample survey is represented in Figures 1 and 2.

Table 1: Caste breakdown of the population survey (first stage)

Caste	Frequency	Percent
Dalit-Vishwakarma	674	21.5
Dalit-Mijar	197	6.3
Dalit-Pariyar	453	14.4
Bahun- priestly	318	10.1
Bahun- non-priestly	636	20.3

Chhetri/Thakuri	439	14.0
Gurung	413	13.2
Thakali	8	0.3
Total	3138	100.0

Figure 1: Percentage of individual survey respondents by major caste group (N=1,203)

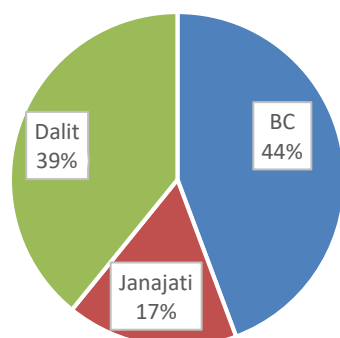
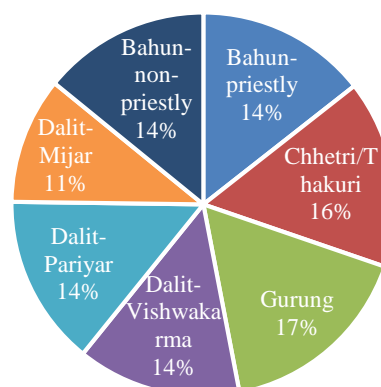


Figure 2: Second survey households by caste (N=347)



Migration details in numbers

Historically, the caste groups under consideration were highly mobile. Today, Bahuns and Dalits are found everywhere in Nepal, and Gurungs are found in many places including many advanced countries, especially the UK. Rural-to-urban migration took off mainly from the 1980s; people were seeking education, economic opportunities, and, from the late 1990s with the expansion of the Maoist insurgency, security. According to the 2011 census, over one in four Bahuns, over one in six Chhetris, and over one in four Gurungs live in urban areas, whereas only 10 per cent of Vishwakarmas, 13 per cent of Pariyars, and 11 per cent of Mijars live in towns. Bahun migration both to the Tarai (Bahuns 39%, Chhetri 27%, Gurung 22%, Vishwakarma 29%, Pariyar 30%, Mijar 18%) and to urban areas is also the highest of all these Hill groups in Nepal. In short, migration is a caste-inflected phenomenon.

Household census, household data

It is well known that international labour migration is not a new phenomenon in Nepal. We tried to measure the scale of this: our results show that in the past two generations one third of households in our first population survey had at least one member who had migrated abroad to places like India and Burma for economic reasons.⁴ Nepalis have never needed a visa to go and work in India so it is not surprising that three quarters of these migrations were to India. After malaria eradication, migration to the Tarai opened up and many people moved to Chitwan permanently. Forty-five per cent of households reported that they had at least one person within the last three generation who had migrated away on a permanent basis.

⁴ Questions about past migration were asked in the household survey (first stage). Respondents were asked if anyone from their household, within the two generations before the current one, had migrated abroad for economic reasons. 497 out of the 540 households originally surveyed responded to this question.

Currently, about 78 per cent of households (N=621) have at least one current member who has been abroad at least once for economic reasons.⁵ Currently, half of the households have at least one member who is abroad. This rate is almost equal to the national picture: the NLSS (National Living Standards Survey) 2011 showed that 53 per cent of Nepali households have at least one absentee member. Caste-wise, Dalits have the highest rate of labour migration: 87 per cent of the households in our survey have at least one family member who has been abroad for work in the past or present, while the equivalent percentage for both Gurungs and Bahuns was 89 and 66 respectively. We have information about 741 individuals on when was the first year that they went abroad (see Figure 3). The figure clearly confirms the trend that people started to migrate in large numbers after 1990 (the first political change), and, with some fluctuations, the number of those wanting to go abroad picked up during the Maoist insurgency and then shot up after 2006-07 (the second major political turning point). While the general migration figures tend to include a lot of repeat migrations (see the trend in Figure 4),⁶ Figure 3 shows the broadening base of migration, as new people enter the migration pool. In Figure 4 the high frequency of one-time migrants does not mean that people tend not to repeat. Many of the people in that figure are first-timers who are still abroad on their first migration. How often do people come and go? Our data show that the mean number of times people have gone abroad is 2.5. Before 1990 (VS 2046), migration was mostly to India. After that people started going to the Gulf countries, and it peaked a few years later. In other words, the flow of labour migration is mainly composed of repeat or returning members or new members from households where someone has already been abroad.

Some migrants who go abroad for longer periods also look for better opportunities elsewhere and try many other countries. Many earlier migrants to India later went to the Gulf and Malaysia. Some have even managed to reach higher-earning countries such as South Korea and Hong Kong, having first been to India, the Gulf, or Malaysia. The most popular destinations, from most to least popular, were: Qatar, India), Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Malaysia, (Migration to India has declined substantially in recent decades.)

Figure 3: Year of first international migration of current household members (N = 741)

⁵ This figure also includes students, who often combine studies and economic activities. This also includes those who migrated as a family or with a family member.

⁶ Of those 818 people who migrated abroad, information on repeat migration was available for 571 people.

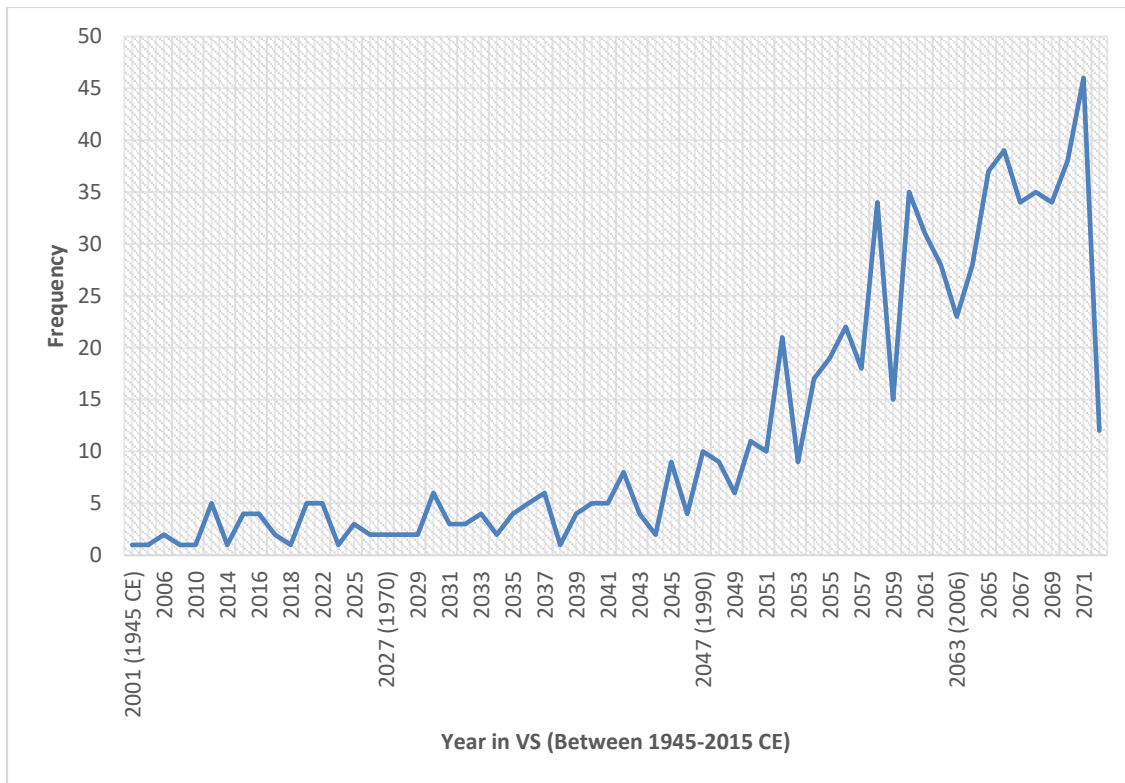
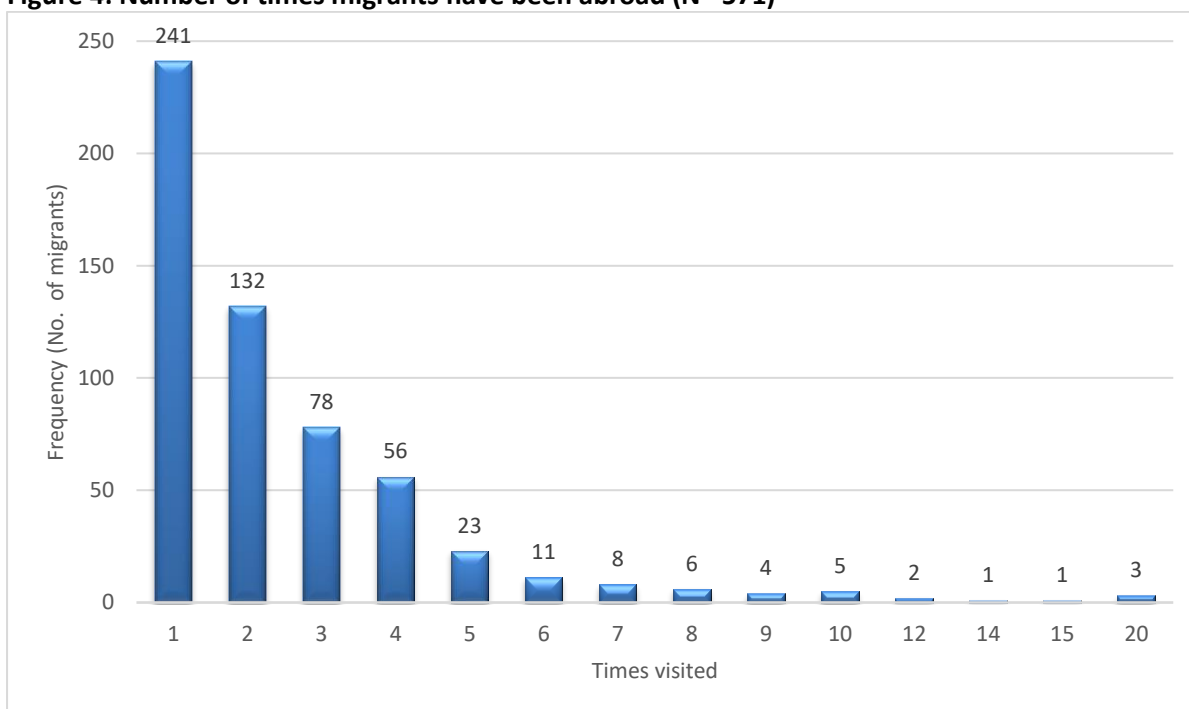


Figure 4: Number of times migrants have been abroad (N =571)



Household census - individual data

In the study villages more than two fifths (1,297) of the 3,138 individuals included in the household population survey were away from home either temporarily, semi-permanently, or permanently. Caste-wise, 45.7 per cent of BCs, 59.6 per cent of Gurungs, and 30.8 per cent of Dalits were living

away from home. Of those who had migrated, 15.8 per cent were in rural areas either of the same district or outside the district, and 30.6 per cent were abroad (22 per cent being in cheap labour destinations, including India, and 9 per cent in other countries). Over half of migrants (53.4 per cent) were living in urban areas for various reasons, including for study, and 45 per cent of total migration was to nearby Pokhara town (the core area before the municipality was expanded including nearby villages).⁷ In terms of the caste of those who migrated, slightly fewer than one quarter of Dalits were in rural and slightly fewer than one third were in urban regions; more than two fifths (45%) were abroad. Dalits' rural migration is much higher than that of the Gurungs' (9%) and higher than BCs' (13%), whereas their ratio of foreign migration is higher than Gurungs' (38%) and much higher than BCs' (18 %). Of total migrants, two thirds of BCs and over half (54%) of Gurungs are living in urban areas whereas less than one third of Dalits are in towns.

Overall, the individual migrant figures confirm the household data in showing that, proportionately, Dalits tend to go abroad more than others (and most Gurungs' migration is outside the Gulf and Malaysia). Many Gurungs have managed to move to Hong Kong and from there to the UK. Many Bahuns and Chhetris, and a few Dalits (Nepali, Pariyar), have managed to go to Korea. Some BCs are also in advanced countries such as Australia, Japan, UK, and USA, mainly for study purposes. With a few exceptions, Dalits have not been able to venture to these countries due to the lack of the required education, capital, knowledge, and networks. Among the Dalits, several Pariyars and some Nepalis and a few Vishwakarma families have managed to buy plots and build houses in town. Pariyars run small tailoring shops and have set up a separate association in Pokhara town. There is one overarching association for all people coming from these villages. A similar association is in operation in Kathmandu, but there are hardly any Dalits there.

Inter-caste Relations Abroad

In order to understand how mutual cooperation and behaviour between castes works when people are working in close proximity with each other in foreign countries, we asked a range of questions in our individual sample survey. 223 participants responded to questions about inter-caste relations abroad. 91 per cent had work- or room-mates from Nepal who were from different caste groups. Over 70 per cent of non-Dalits (76 % BC and 58 % Janajati) had Dalit work- or roommates (while 88 % and 79% of Dalits had BC and Janajati work- or room-mates respectively).⁸

Nepalis living or working together are highly likely to know each other's caste status, even if some of them attempt to conceal their identity. It is customary practice in Nepal for people to enquire about caste when they meet a stranger (see BK, this volume). Historically, as a matter social practice, people were obliged to find out other people's caste status, particularly that of Dalits, because prior to 1963 it was every individual's legal responsibility not to knowingly offer or accept water or certain food from people higher or lower in the caste hierarchy (see the reference to Ganeshman Singh's experience below). The penalties for ignoring these rules and causing someone else to suffer impurity by doing so were severe (Höfer 1979). Today, increasingly, and to a large extent, people try to avoid direct questioning, but the interest in knowing other people's caste status is still there.

⁷ People living abroad were counted as urban dwellers, unless there was information to suggest that they were living in rural areas.

⁸ The overall 91% figure takes into account the differences between the intra-caste groups too; the subsequent figures based on the three major caste/ethnic categories is lower because they aggregate all related castes/ethnicity and, thus, exclude people within each of three large groups despite there being hierarchical differences within them, i.e. between Bahun and Chhetris, or Vishwakarma and Pariyars. Here BC means Bahun-Chhetri.

How do people know about each other's caste status? We attempted to find out how people knew each other's caste while working aboard. We asked people to select one of six options:

1. I knew from Nepal (because from the same locality/area);
2. I knew from Nepal (not from the same locality/area);
3. I found out abroad (they told me);
4. I found out abroad (I found out from their surname);
5. I found out abroad (friends who knew told me);
6. Other.

The two most common answers, by a considerable margin, were 3 and 4. Identifying through surname (though not an infallible guide in every case) is in fact the easiest and most common way that Nepalis discover other people's caste identity. In our survey, respondents' answers indicated that they identified about 40 per cent of Dalits, half of BCs, and over one third of Janajatis' ethnic group/caste in this way.

When Dalits use their clan titles (*pad*) as a surname, rather than the more common and easily identifiable titles, there is often overlap with Bahuns and sometimes with Chhetris, and even with other groups. This was an intentional strategy in the past when moving away from familiar communities and entering unknown urban areas in Nepal and India (for example, all Newars tended to end up with the title Pradhan, whatever their original caste, when moving to Darjeeling). However, urban areas are not free from caste prejudices and even today Dalits often have to disguise their caste status in order to rent rooms in Kathmandu. In May 2018 Kuludevi Vishwakarma, MP shared in the parliament that she had been unable to rent a room in Kathmandu, despite trying hard for a month, because of her caste.

When people resort to changing their identity, they constantly run the risk of meeting a known person who will expose their caste status. In the past decade Dalits have begun to reject such passing strategies and instead have started proudly to assert their caste status, as a challenge to caste hierarchy. They know that the law now criminalizes caste-based discrimination. Furthermore, reservations, allowances, and concessions attached to Dalit identity have provided an incentive for self-identification and assertion of one's caste status. This was evident in the increase of the share of population of some Dalit groups in the 2011 census. Our survey shows that respondents found out caste status of 42 per cent of Dalits, an almost similar proportion of Janajatis, and over a quarter of BCs, through self-introduction. Thus, in short, surname and self-introduction were overwhelming the two most common ways, together making up between 77 and 80 per cent responses, to find out about others' caste identity. Many fewer said that they found out through friends. Rather more knew already, from Nepal.

Of course, there is much about interpersonal behaviour that cannot be captured in a questionnaire survey. People are able to guess each other's caste status from many subtle cultural cues of dress, manner of speaking, and eating and other habits. One respondent reported that he knew his colleague's caste when he spotted his sacred thread while he was taking a shower. Another said "*boli sunera*", i.e. from hearing the way he spoke. People also were able to work out their colleagues' caste by seeing their passport or looking at their name in the company roster.

So, does knowing each other's caste status have any effect on behaviour? Do labour migrants of different castes share a common kitchen? In the caste system cooked food is regarded as a much more serious pollutant than simple touch. A high number (between 8 and 9 out of 10) of the respondents reported sharing a kitchen with others, including with Dalits (about 8 in 10).

For the vast majority of the respondents (over 8 in 10) caste was a non-issue. About 10 per cent of respondents mentioned that there had been minor problems related to caste, and a very small number reported some tensions and conflicts. In answer to the question whether they had any experience of discrimination, exclusion, or prejudice, on the basis of caste, about 90 per cent

reported that they had had no such experience. The 10 per cent who reported such experiences were almost equally distributed across castes. It should be noted that there may be some element of survey bias in the findings of such smooth relations across caste divide, but we have no evidence on contrary and these findings are consistent with anecdotal reports by others. The qualitative data, excerpts of which is quoted below, and some in-depth interviews support the overall direction of the finding. However we certainly need to be cautious in interpreting these findings as they may differ from place to place and situation to situation.

So far, our quantitative data show that the issue of caste untouchability and discrimination associated with it by and large disappears when people of different castes work and live together in a migration context, particularly the kind of highly regimented context that is found in the Gulf countries. But what happens when they return home? Can they treat their fellow colleagues with the same respect as they did abroad? About half of the respondents were candid enough to admit that they would not be able to do so, and a significantly higher number of BCs and Janajatis (approximately 60%) expressed this feeling. Dalits also feel constrained to observe tradition when they return home:

We have to follow our own customs in our own home (*aphno ghar-ma aphnai chalchalan-ma basnu parchha*) - BC

How could we behave at home exactly as we do outside? (*ghar-ma bahirako jasto ekai garna kaha sakinchha?*) - BC

Outside, I don't care; at home, because of my mother and father, I cannot [do the same] (*bahira matlab chhaina, ghar-ma aama-bako karan-le sakdina*) - Janajati

Villages have their own customs, so I cannot [act the same] (*gaunghar-ma aphnai chalan bhaekole sakindaina*) - Janajati

They behave very differently depending on whether they are abroad or in Nepal. After they return to their village they go right back to their own religious thinking (*uniharu bidesh-ma ra Nepal-ma dherai pharak byabahar garchhan ra uniharu aphno gaun-ma aaepachhi euta dharmik soch-tira gaihaldachha*) - Dalit

I can, but Bahun-Chhetris cannot; they come to my house, but I feel uneasy going to their house (*maile sakchhu tara bahun chhetri-le sakdainan; uniharu aphno ghar-ma aune tara uniharuko ghar jana apthyaro lagchha*) - Dalit

There were some who expressed a clear desire for social change:

It is a social crime to discriminate (*bhedbhav garnu samajik aparadh ho*) - BC

One must know how to change with the times (*samaya-anusar calna saknu parchha*) - Janajati

I stayed with friends, worked together, and stayed as if with family; I was treated well (*sathiharu-sanga sangai basyo, kam garyo, pariwar jasari basiyo, ramro byabahar bhayo*) - Dalit

Adhikari visited Qatar in December 2018. A 35-year-old Bahun man working there as a junior manager told him:

There are two very nice Pariyar brothers (*bhaiharu*) from my village. We are very close here. We regularly visit each other [here], and eat at each other's place. I think it will be problematic when we go back to our village in Nepal. I would like them to come to my house. I cannot take them to our kitchen, because I have old parents who would not accept this, but I do not want them to eat outside either. I am looking for a solution; what I am thinking is that I will build a dining table, so that we can sit and eat together away from the kitchen, and they will not feel excluded.

Caste Relations and the *balighare* System

We sought to understand exactly how far people's traditional skills are changing, or whether they were in fact maintaining their traditional occupations. We first asked migrants if they were willing to follow the traditional occupations of their parents when they returned from abroad. This broad question allowed people to relate it to their own situation. The responses helped in understanding people's attitudes to traditional occupations including farming, and to *balighare* relationships.

A few words should be said about *balighare* relations, though there is no space for an extended discussion. On the basis of fieldwork in northern Tanahun district in the 1970s, Gaborieau (1977) provided a detailed analysis, with much of which we agree. He insisted, rightly, that there were three types of relationship between householders and service-providers: (1) ongoing personal ties (*balighare*, or *jajmani*, relations strictly speaking), (2) more impersonal piecework links, which may sometimes resemble the former, and (3) ties of mendicacy (as with wandering renunciators). We part company with Gaborieau over his insistence that in the whole of central Nepal the householder-domestic priest (*jajman-purohit*) relation has never been a hereditary or binding link, but is rather a contractual one requiring yearly renewal at every Dasain festival (Gaborieau 1977: 16). That this relationship was conceptualized in this way in the village where he worked we do not doubt; this demonstrates the degree of cultural variability in the Nepalese hills, a point that is not always sufficiently appreciated. However, Gaborieau does admit that he came across no actual cases where the *jajman* exercised his right to change his *purohit* (ibid.: 19). In any case, in our fieldsite this relationship *is* considered binding and hereditary, unlike the relationship to the ploughman, for example, which does require annual renewal on both sides. In the case of the domestic priest there is no annual renewal ceremony and the relationship can only be broken off in the most extreme circumstances. There is even an old local proverb, *hum ra dum phernu hundaina*, meaning 'The priest and the tailor should never be changed'.⁹

Change is happening, however, because of generational changes in expectations. More than half of the respondents in our second survey answered that they could not follow their parents' occupations. Surprisingly, relatively more BCs and Gurungs than Dalits were unwilling to continue their old occupations. This clearly substantiates the widespread observation that many labour migrants want to go abroad in order to quit traditional agriculture and have no desire to return to it. It is not the case that returnees never take up old occupations; but they do so as a last resort. Our household census showed that overall 10 per cent of the ricefields (*khet*) and 9 per cent of dry-fields (*bari*) in the study villages were already fallow, and this is rising fast. Apathy towards agriculture is very widespread among all groups.

Although Dalits were more likely to be open to carrying on the profession of their parents than either BCs or Gurungs, there has nonetheless been a considerable decline in the number who actually do so, with the exception of tailoring. The decline in traditional skills tells only part of the story. In the main household survey covering 540 households, we also asked directly, both to the receivers and the providers of *balighare* services, if they had stopped providing or receiving such services. We mapped the number of years since these services were stopped as well as the number of people who discontinued them (see Table 2). The services of the tantric Lama (Buddhist Gurung) who used to be paid in grain (*lama pathi*) annually by each household for warding off hailstones from their crops have halted completely.¹⁰ Even though we did not capture it in our survey, the biggest decline in the *balighare* system is the service from Mijars who used to provide *halludo* (the leather strap used to hook the long end of the plough (*haris*) to the yoke (*juwa*)). Later, other Dalit groups working as ploughman used to supply a *halludo* on a one-off paid basis. The availability of

⁹ *Hum* is a corruption of *homa*, the sacred fire that a domestic priest presides over; *dum* is an old, and nowadays derogatory, term used to refer to tailors.

¹⁰ Tamang lamas used to provide the same service to Maharjan-Jyapu farmers in the Kathmandu Valley (Gellner & Pradhan 1995: 173).

modern non-leather products meant the locally made leather tools are no longer necessary. These days there is hardly one or two people from the Mijar community doing leather-related work and none do so following the old patron-client system. This goes hand in hand with the decline in the local area of the *hali* (ploughman) system.

The picture of decline does not apply to ritual services. Local astrologers (who are not and have never been retained by means of any contract or annual payment in grain) continue to be in demand. There are relatively few astrologers, so those who are active command a large client base who travel, sometimes considerable distances, to consult them, and pay in cash. The ritual services of Brahman priests (*jajmani* or *yajamani*) have changed relatively little. Traditionally these ritual services excluded Dalits. However, starting in 2016, one of the local domestic priests faced down the opposition of his caste fellows and performed a wedding ceremony for a Mijar couple. This precedent having been set, presumably both he and other priests will now begin to be invited on a regular basis by Dalits and will agree to perform rituals for them. Normally and traditionally, Dalits have their ritual ceremonies performed by their sister's or daughter's husband or son (*jwai*, *bhanja* respectively).

In terms of the *balighare* system, two things that have changed to a moderate extent are *darjee* (tailoring) and *aran* (blacksmithing). It is rare now for either Tailors or Blacksmiths to receive annual payments in grain (*bali*). In this area Dalits were still working as Katuwals (messengers) and collecting food grains as remuneration even though their role has substantially reduced thanks to modern forms of communication and policing.

Table 2: Summary of households and service providers discontinuing *balighare* relations (N=540)

Particulars of Discontinuation		Provider: Lama	Provider: Ploughman	Receiver: Ploughman	Provider: Tailor	Receiver: Tailor	Provider: Blacksmith	Receiver: Blacksmith	Provider: Purohit**	Receiver: Purohit**	Provider: Astrologer*	Receiver: Astrologer*
Number of Households		1	80	107	12	55	11	60	3	5	1	7
Years of discontinuation	Mean years	5	19	14	18	17	18	15	26	15	5	3
	Std. Deviation		14	9	10	14	9	11	24	4		3
	Minimum	5	1	3	10	1	6	1	3	10	5	1
	Maximum	5	68	40	40	50	35	50	50	20	5	10

* Is not associated with the *bali*-system, have no contracted clients though one would loosely subscribe to it, and no grain is collected after harvest; payment is upon receiving services, there may be no payment for minor consultations.

** Though *purohits* (household priests) provide services on a permanent basis, they receive gifts (*dan*, *dakshina*), rather than pre-agreed remuneration, though practically people do give consideration to this, as and when the services are rendered. So no annual payment of grain is involved, but they do receive part of grain offerings during the *puja*.

Note to Table 2: These figures are preliminary and indicative only.

Beyond International Migration and the Maoist Movement

Changes in the situation of Dalits in Nepal have been ascribed to two major factors: international migration and the Maoist movement (Sunam 2014). However, the impact of incremental changes accumulating through a series of non-revolutionary measures and events over a longer period also deserves recognition. These changes are both overt and covert in nature and occur at various levels: local, national, and international. Discussing all of them is beyond the scope of this paper, but here we outline some small changes that have reshaped relations in the local area.

According to our respondent Mr K. Chadaro, who is in his late 70s, local Dalits set up a separate school (*bhasa pathshala*) for Dalit children about a decade after the 1951 political revolution. Since Dalits were not accepted in the village *pathshala*, they decided to open their own school. They brought a Vishwakarma teacher from Dangsing, Parbat, and ran the school up to class two. The teacher had learned to read and write while working in India. At that time there was no formal school in the area. The Dalit school ran for some years and through it a small number of Dalit men learned to read. Some eventually went onto becoming representatives from the local community and served as ward members during the Panchayat era. A reformist local Bahun Pandit eventually merged the school with village *Pathsala*, accepting children irrespective their caste background. Later this school metamorphosed into a modern public school funded by the government. It now runs up to class 10 and caters to students of both Dalit and non-Dalit communities. During the fieldwork, the chairman of the school management committee was a Vishwakarma man. According to our interlocutor, at the time when the first Dalit *pathsala* opened, Dalit elders also discussed giving up ploughing for Bahuns.¹¹ A few of them decided not to plough at all and worked as masons and carpenters instead. These two events, which may appear minor today, were extraordinary some sixty years ago.

Although local Dalits have not been able to achieve as much in education, and thereby, in higher professions, as other groups, attending school nonetheless opened new avenues. In the 1980s some Dalit students came into contact with the underground communist party (CPM-ML, later UML). Mr C. BK became a leader (deputy secretary of village committee) of the underground party at the local level. With support from other Dalit colleagues, as well as from Bahun and Gurung comrades, they conducted low-profile activism for the rights of Dalits, who were working as ploughmen. A *hali hadtal* (ploughmen's strike) was launched in 1982-3 aiming at improving their terms and conditions (see also BK, this volume). This was going on in other areas in the district too and the underground party groups were encouraging it. Their demands were moderate, yet symbolically important: the ploughman was to be called by name, not as *hali*; his perks should include clothes and shoes, two meals to be given on the day of work, and a daily allowance of raw rice to be measured with a standard *mana* measure rather than the *suse mana* (smaller measure). Different places had different systems and they wanted to have an acceptable standard adopted everywhere, and largely succeeded. They used forums such as *pujas* and ritual events at Bahuns' houses to spread their messages and they challenged exploitative social relations through songs and dances.

In the 1990s some progressive changes occurred locally. Dalits were allowed to sell their milk to the local dairy. A local Mijar man was appointed as a milk collector and driver in a Bahun-dominated workforce. Even though non-Dalits still do not buy milk from the houses of the Dalits, many non-Dalits do buy milk, butter, ghee, and curds on festivals and other occasions from the dairy. The appointment of Mr K. Pariyar as a teacher of a local school in the 1980s was itself a breakthrough. At that time, the peon of his school was the widow of a well-known educationist and pundit, who helped merge the Dalit and non-Dalit *pathsala* of the area. There was no water tap and she had to supply drinking water for all students and staff. Dalit children had to put their hands to their mouths so that water could be poured without touching them. One day, Mr K. raised the issue, and he managed to get support from others. From this point onwards, the children were allowed to drink water directly from the vessel without others pouring for them. Despite these changes, Dalit students and staff, often coming from the same villages, were still not allowed to cook when picnics were organized. A Bahun teacher told us how this changed at his primary school. In around the mid-1990s, there was a picnic planned for the student and staff. A senior student of the Mijar caste, said

¹¹ On taking up ploughing by high castes, and refusing to plough by Dalits, as revolutionary acts, see Adhikari (1991).

that he would not join unless he too was included in the cooking. This was taken on board and he was allowed to cook.

When a big community religious programme, *mahayagya*, was organized in the early 1990s the local Dalits were allowed to participate. Dalit boys also joined the team of volunteers to assist in the management of the event. On one occasion a Dalit volunteer was not permitted to distribute *prasad* blessings by an 'upper-caste' man. There was a protest, which escalated. It was resolved there and then and the Dalit volunteer was permitted to offer blessings along with everyone else. Even though no serious incidents or cases have been reported, Dalits were barred from entering some public temples. In order to prevent the local Pariyars from entering a Shivalaya temple in their village, a rule was instituted prohibiting all but the officiating priest from entering the temple. Between the time of our fieldwork and the time of writing (early 2019) this has changed and everyone can enter the temple freely.

After the advent of the multiparty system in 1990, the local Dalits voted for different political parties, including NC and RPP, but most supported the UML. A few Dalit representatives were elected in the local elections in 1992 and 1997 but their representation was far below their population proportion (Baral 2008). Lately the Maoists also attracted some Dalit youths. A few of them became interested to the party after coming into contact with its sister organizations while working in the Gulf. During the Maoist insurgency two siblings from a local Bahun family and a Vishwakarma woman, who were full-time Maoist cadres, were killed by the army elsewhere in Nepal. Four other people from these areas, including three Chhetris (two serving in the Nepal Army and one in the Nepal Police), were killed in Maoist attacks (Subedi 2067 VS) In the first CA elections, a local Vishwakarma woman, whose family came from Baglung, was elected from the Maoist party. It was a rare victory both for Dalits and for women; however, it did not leave a huge mark in terms of changing local caste relations. Now there are two Dalits representing in the national parliament; one of them is among the three directly elected Dalits in the whole country.

Economic Changes

Mapping changing landholding, assets, and income over 25 years shows that there is a considerable degree of caste-class correlation. But at the same time all caste groups are differentiated by class internally. Among the Dalits, the Mijars (Nepalis/Sarkis) are particularly well off. This, however, is not due to international migration; it has been achieved initially through hard work and canny investment. When the Lumle Agriculture Centre opened in the early 1970s, there were many jobs, with higher than usual rates of pay, in the construction sector and some of the Mijar men went to work there. Unlike other local Dalit groups, they managed to save their earnings and invest in land, as did their Bahun and Chhetri neighbours. Some bought land in Pokhara town where the price of land has increased dramatically. Later they started going abroad for work, and some even managed to go to high-earning places like Korea. Among these occupational groups, several Pariyar youths have migrated to Pokhara, opened tailoring business and settled down, and some have made a good progress, in both social and economic terms, as well in providing employment to many others. Some of them are returnee labour migrants from the Gulf and Malaysia.

In order to understand the overall direction of changes, we asked households, in the population survey, about the changes to their economic status within the last 25 years. The result shows a general positive shift in the people's economic lives across all caste groups. Only a very small portion (4%) of respondents reported a degraded situation. Overall, 80 per cent of households have experienced an improvement in their economic situation. About nine out of 10 Vishwakarma and Mijar households and three quarters of Pariyar households reported that their economic situation has improved.

We were interested to know what these changes mean in terms of generational mobility. So we asked household heads in our sample survey about the perceived intergenerational economic mobility. The comparison of status between the fathers and grandfathers shows mixed results but a proportionately higher number of household reported that their grandfather's status was either better or much better than their father's. It could be due to the population rise and fragmentation of land or service receivers, and rising costs during the father's time. For many (except Gurungs who could join the British or Indian Army) migrating to India was the only option, yet it was not rewarding. The perceived changes between the father's time and that of the respondents themselves clearly indicates upward mobility in a large number of cases: 60 per cent of respondents think that their economic situation is either better or much better than their father's. Results from both surveys indicate that, overall, economic change has been in a positive direction.

The Public-Private Divide

Prior to outlawing untouchability, the law made it binding on all parties to observe strict rules of commensality, on pain of punishment. In the run up to the 1950-51 movement, Ganeshman Singh, one of the main leaders of the Congress Party, escaped from jail in Kathmandu and was walking to India. In one village in Gorkha he asked a lady for water and she responded by asking for his caste status. When he lied and said he was a Chhetri, the lady refused to give him water because she was a Vishwakarma. She would have risked harsh punishment if she had done so (Singh 2072 VS). One respondent told us how some Bahuns locally used to plough their own fields away from the eyes of the public. About 65 years ago, a Bahun man had hired a young Dalit boy to plough. The boy was a novice and too young to keep pace with the other workers, but could be paid a lot less than a mature trained person. So the man used the boy to save his face, while he ploughed the field himself.

When untouchability was outlawed by amendment of the civil code in 1963, it was symbolically a big move, but the law itself was toothless because it in effect legitimated caste discrimination by allowing the continuation of traditions (*riti-thiti*). Furthermore, the law only applied to public arenas. Even today, events such as wedding, deaths, and family functions come under private affairs. Generally 'upper-caste' guests refuse to take meals at Dalit weddings unless a separate kitchen has been organized for them, or the feast is organised at urban party palaces, where people do not bother to ask what caste the chef is. The assumption that caste discrimination is lesser in urban settings (Pandey et al. 2006) is only partially true. Migration to urban areas may give Dalits a chance to devise a strategy to minimize the effects of discrimination, but it does not provide a complete escape (Pariyar & Lovett 2016) as the discussion above about the difficulty Dalits experience in renting rooms shows. Party palaces are problem-free, not just because they are located in urban areas, but because, like schools, they are seen as public spaces.

On the one hand, as our survey showed, more and more people want to invite their friends and neighbours across the caste-divide to their family events. On the other hand, there is a growing resentment and pressure among young people and activists against separating caste by organizing separate kitchens. Similarly in rural areas the non-Dalits also do not want to invite Dalits because the latter are increasingly refusing to wash their dishes. The Vishwakarma man who led the ploughmen's strike many years before summed up the current state of inter-caste relations as follows:

Before 1990, non-Dalits used to invite their ploughmen and other workers to their weddings and other events. People used to be hired to carry boxes, the palanquin, and to help with other work. That was acceptable then. The invitees used to be specific people, who expected to be invited and to participate. Since 1990 people started to invite Dalit friends and neighbours as guests, but this practice is on the decline after the elections of 2008. I too am getting few invitations and no invitations from Bahuns for some time now. I am not sure why; maybe it is because they cannot

challenge Dalits who do not wash their dishes after eating. So far, many Dalits organize a separate kitchen for their upper-caste (*thula jaatka*) guests. I am not planning any event soon, but I have seen Dalits in my own place not inviting Bahuns to their events. I think it is because, if you organize two kitchens, it shows you are reinforcing discrimination against yourself. If you do not organize such a kitchen, they will refuse to eat. If your guests go without eating, it will not look good. So, to avoid this situation, it is better not to invite them at all.

The inversion of values that Parry found in Bhilai in India (and which other ethnographers have reported elsewhere) is largely borne out in Kaski:

The most striking contrast with the past, then, is that formerly the pattern of commensality at marriages, the most public occasions of all, overtly stressed the separation between castes and covertly implied their hierarchical arrangement; while in the least formal and most private contexts the rules were often given a more liberal interpretation. Today it is almost the opposite. The most public occasions proclaim the absence of hierarchy and separation between Hindu castes, while in private a conservative Kurmi might still avoid eating at the house of his (or more likely her) Mahar neighbour. (Parry 1999: 35)

In other words, in the past caste differences had to be maintained and hierarchy upheld in public, but the rules were often breached in private or in backstage contexts. But today equality is mandatory in the public sphere, and it is in the home and in private that one is likely to find caste asserted.

Conclusion

We have shown that migration was always an integral and important part of life for Hill Nepalis, but that it took off in a new and qualitatively different way after 1990. No longer is the default destination India. Much more remunerative locations are now sought out and considerable investments are made in order to reach them. Everyone from all backgrounds has been affected by this trend, but Dalits have been even more enthusiastic participants than others. For Dalits there is the extra attraction that outside of Nepal their caste is invisible to employers and even for fellow Nepalis it is largely irrelevant. The individual survey that we conducted showed that, overwhelmingly, Nepalis of whatever caste, for whatever the reason, do not care about caste differences while they are working together abroad. However, around 60 per cent of non-Dalits admit that it would be hard to be so free and easy once they return to Nepal.

Our research confirms what others have found, namely that there is an important distinction between behaviour in the public sphere and in private, a distinction that today reverses what used to be the case. In private, and despite the friendships forged in workplaces in the Gulf, Malaysia, and Korea, our evidence suggests that Dalits and non-Dalits may be drawing apart through a strategy of avoidance. Whether that is temporary, and will, in due course, once the older generation passes on, be overcome, remains to be seen. In the public sphere Dalits and non-Dalits work together in modern institutions with roles defined in more egalitarian terms, though there are still different levels of representation. Mothers' groups, cooperatives, savings and credit groups, political parties, citizen forums, and NGO programmes are a few of these modern institutions. While these changes have occurred in the public domain, the foregoing discussion has shown that economic relationships based on patron-client *balighare* relationships are also breaking down, either through the shunning of the old occupations or because they have been adapted to new, market conditions. Changes in occupational and skill patterns, partially linked to international labour migration, have resulted in improved economic conditions of all groups concerned, including Dalits. Dalits' social status is certainly changing for the better (though there is still a long way to go for complete equality). The

changes have come about thanks to a combination of incremental changes over the years achieved through low-profile activism from below, coupled with the more radical big-bang approach of the Maoist movement bringing about structural changes from above. Our research has demonstrated how the politics of assertion, separation, avoidance, and the breakdown of old institutions on the one hand, and collaborating or cooperating in a new setting and in new terms on the others, are able to go hand in hand.

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