

Introduction: Nepal's Dalits in Transition

David N. Gellner and Krishna P. Adhikari

Nepal's Dalits can claim, with some justice, to have been both marginalized and ignored. As others (including the contributors to this collection) have noted, the quantum of research conducted on them is not what their significance to Nepali society generally and their population size would merit. Reviewing work on Dalits in Nepal over a decade ago, Folmar (2007: 41) wrote that "the list of publications is quite short when compared to similar reviews for the high castes or for ethnic groups in Nepal." Now, and at last, there are signs that serious scholarship on Dalits in Nepal may be gathering pace. One can point to PhD theses by Koirala (1996), Kharel (2010), Pariyar (2016), Rai (2017), and Bishwakarma (2019), with others on the way. The growth of research about and by Dalits comes as a response both to recent Nepalese history and to the increasing prominence of Dalit issues in India and beyond (Rawat & Satyanarayana 2016). We hope that this collection of essays will be viewed as a reflection of this scholarly trend and that it may encourage and strengthen it further.

The reasons for the neglect of Dalit issues are complex but, in their broad outlines, well known. In the study of history there is an inevitable bias—for all that some historians have struggled against it—because of their reliance on written sources. The illiterate peasants and artisans of Nepal's rural areas did not leave as many historical records as the state and the literate, well-off strata of society did. Reconstructing the 'subaltern' point of view is far from straightforward, though attempts can be made.¹ If we turn to those anthropologists who have investigated Nepal's huge cultural diversity, it was perhaps natural that initially they should interact with the more powerful, the more articulate, and the more educated members of whatever local society they chose to study. When, eventually, some intrepid anthropologists did emerge, determined to study and to live with the most excluded and marginal members of society, they had to face diverse practical difficulties, which have been movingly described for south India by Moffatt (1979: Preface). Cameron (1998: 36–8), working in a part of Nepal where untouchability is very deeply embedded, and at a time (1988–90) when practising it in public was very unlikely to trigger any punishment, felt constrained to live with high castes, despite wanting to focus on Dalits; and her Dalit informants feared to feed her lest news of it got back to her high-caste landlords. Folmar (2007: 42) records: "So unusual is it for ethnographers to live among Dalits that when my students and I stayed in Jharuwarasi, a low caste village in Kathmandu Valley, a television station found it worthy of doing a story on us for that very reason."

Two key Dalit-focused monographs deserve to be recognized as pioneering, both based in west Nepal. The first, by Patricia Caplan (1972), was decades ahead of its time, both for its concentration on the Dalit population and for its focus on migration. She described a population of Mijars (Sarkis) who were relatively well off, thanks to owning fertile land. She showed that the local Bahuns were able, over time and thanks to their links to the local state, to appropriate much of that land. This was a theme that, in east Nepal, her husband Lionel Caplan had already explored, in

¹ For an attempt to read textual sources against the grain, see, for example, Wendy Doniger's (2009) attempt, controversial in India, to write a history of Hinduism from the point of view of the marginalized, including Dalits.

looking at Limbu and Bahun relations (Caplan 2000 [1970]) and this may have sensitized her to the issue of land being alienated from socially subordinate groups.²

Cameron's monograph, though published only in 1998, was based on fieldwork done in the 1980s. Cameron studied the lives of Dalits in Bajhang in far west Nepal with a particular focus on the interaction of gender and caste hierarchies. She showed how landownership, labour practices, gender roles, and caste hierarchy all work together, so that Dalit women, in return for social subordination, have greater autonomy in relation to Dalit men than high-caste women—a caste-inflected version of the 'patriarchal bargain'. Cameron concludes her book: "The people of Bhalara (and Nepal) have so embedded caste hierarchy in their sense of self, identity, and religious views that I do not predict change in this area for several generations..." (1998: 284). One must wonder whether this was too pessimistic, in the light of everything that has happened in Nepal since 1990; at the very least, Bhalara is surely ripe for a re-study that would surely be highly informative.³ The well-known study of the position of women in eight different rural locales in the 1970s (Acharya & Bennett 1981) revealed considerable variation in gendered expectations, although everywhere women worked harder than men. Although considerable cultural and regional variation certainly remains, even today, we believe that the sharp division between relatively autonomous, but low-status, Dalit women and confined, but high-status, high-caste women is now overdrawn, and the time is ripe for a re-study of Bennett's classic study of the Khas-Arya woman (Bennett 1983). High-caste women have considerably more autonomy than they did one and two generations ago; contrariwise, Dalit expectations of respectability have also moved considerably (and with variations by class and region) in the direction of widespread middle-class norms.

For most of Nepal's history, caste has been the predominant idiom through which the rulers of the country have sought to shape the cultural pluralism that seems always to have been present (Bista 1991; Whelpton 2005; Aahuti 2014). There is clear evidence of a complex caste order in the Kathmandu Valley during the Lichhavi period (Slusser 1982: 38; Sharma 2015: 24–6). Caste was certainly also present in the Khas kingdoms of western Nepal in the Middle Ages. A third source of caste was the migration of caste groups from northern India into the Nepalese Tarai, starting mainly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but certainly predating that in pockets.

As in India, it was the role of the king to regulate and legitimate caste differences. The figure of King Jayasthiti Malla (who ruled the Kathmandu Valley and environs, 1382–95) was emblematic. His very name indicated his role as lawgiver and many 'reforms' were ascribed to him in Nepali-language *vamsavalis* that in fact described the late Malla period (Gellner 1995a: 8–9). The edicts of Ram Shah of Gorkha (1605–33), also famous as a lawgiver, presupposed a framework of caste and traditional Hindu *dharmasastras*. Finally, the famous law code for Nepal as a whole (though it said little about the Tarai) was instituted by Prime Minister Jang Bahadur Rana in 1854, following his visit to Britain and France. Said to be inspired by the Code Napoléon, it was in fact very largely in the tradition of earlier law codes, though incorporating a much larger number of peoples, especially those now known as Janajatis (formerly 'hill tribes'; colloquially often referred to as 'ethnic groups').

It is an article of faith among Janajati activists today that before the arrival of caste Hindus into the hills of Nepal the social organization of Janajati groups was egalitarian. It was surely the case that Janajati social structure was indeed, in comparative terms, *more* egalitarian than the endlessly recursive hierarchy encouraged by the caste system (Bista 1991). But that does not mean, of course, that hierarchies (of clans, of older versus newer settlers, of ritual or royal status, or of gender) were

² The actual situation on the ground, as Caplan's detailed ethnography makes clear (2000: 198–9) was considerably more complex than a simple Bahun vs Limbu opposition; cf. Dahal (1996): the debate between him and Caplan is reproduced in Dahal (2015: 55–65).

³ Others who have contributed to discussions of Dalits in Nepal include Höfer (1976, 1979), Levy (1990), Maskarinec (1995), Parish (1996), Holmberg (2009), and Dahal (2010). Parish's monograph deserves detailed consideration, which would be out of place here, given his focus on the Newar caste hierarchy.

entirely foreign to Janajati groups before large-scale contact with Hindus. It is naïve sociology to blame all such hierarchy on Hinduization. The Hindu hierarchy of caste-based purity and impurity was, in many of the places in the hills where Janajati groups dwelt, introduced in the first place by contact with Dalits (rather than with 'high' castes). These Dalits arrived in remote hill villages no doubt pushed by economic necessity and, quite likely, invited as artisans with the new skills necessary for rice agriculture (particularly as blacksmiths who could maintain ploughs).⁴

Nepal's local caste systems, just like most localized systems in India, do not and did not map neatly on to the four categories of the classical *varna* system. This is not, as sometimes naively assumed, some kind of 'failure' (or success) of the Nepali systems to live up to the Indian originals (Bista 1991: 43), but is of the essence of the difference between sacred categories and models, on the one side, and, on the other, messy on-the-ground realities. The 1854 law code classified people into three broad groups: *tagadhari* (wearers of the sacred thread), *matwali* (alcohol drinkers), and water-unacceptable groups, with many layers within them based on the principles of relative purity and impurity. At a more abstract and encompassing level this hierarchy could be simplified into two categories only: the pure and the impure. Within the impure there was a categorical distinction between the 'water-unacceptable, but touchable' (*pani-nacalnyā, choichito hālnu naparnyā*) and the 'water-unacceptable and untouchable' (*pani-nacalnyā, choichito hālnu parnyā*). In the touchable category were Newar castes such as the Kasai (butchers), Kusle (musicians), Dhobi (washerman), and Kulu (tanners), as well as Muslims and Europeans (*mlechha*). All Hill Dalits fell into the second category, in the following order (giving the honorific title by which they are known today first): Vishwakarma/Kami (blacksmiths), Mijar/Sarki (leatherworkers), Kadara (offspring from the union of the first two), Pariyar/Damai (tailors and musicians), Gandharva/Gaine (minstrels), and Badis (entertainers).⁵ This category also included two Newar castes: Dyola/Pode (skinnners and fisherman) and Cyāme (Newar scavengers) (Gellner 1995b: 267). The civil code did not list Tarai castes and groups other than Indian Brahmans and indigenous Tharus in its model (Höfer 1979: 45). There are cases where local rankings of various Dalit castes does not correspond to, and may invert, the Muluki Ain scheme (Cameron 1998: 13).

All the groups that used to be placed in the impure category, including those from Tarai-Madhesh, are today broadly defined as Dalits, borrowing a term long in use in India. The three main hill Dalit castes—namely, Vishwakarma or Blacksmiths (sometimes abbreviated to VK or BK), Pariyar or Tailor-Musicians (also known as Darji), and Mijar or Leatherworkers (also sometimes known as Nepali), whose population share in the country as a whole is 4.7%, 1.8%, and 1.41% respectively—are the largest Dalit groups in Nepal. They belong to the Hill (Parbatiya, Pahadi) category and share language, religion, culture, and traditions with the hill 'high' castes. As a service group, they are found all over Nepal including in Himalayan districts and the Tarai. They reside in Janajati villages as frequently as elsewhere.

Hill Dalits, whose joint share of the population is 8.1% (according to the 2011 census), had only 0.01% of top public jobs in Nepal in the 1990s.⁶ Dalits, in general, are under-represented in every sector. Even though all Nepalis' health, literacy, and income status have improved in recent decades, deep inequalities remain. According to the human development index (HDI), based on literacy, life expectancy, and income, Madheshi Brahmans and Chhetris (a small, highly educated group) are top, with 0.625, Newars (half of whom live in the capital, Kathmandu) are second, at 0.616, and hill Brahmans are third with 0.612. The lowest ranking of all are Madheshi Dalits on 0.383; hill Dalits are higher at 0.449, above Muslims at 0.401 (UNDP 2009: 64). Whatever measure

⁴ See Höfer (1976, 1986) on the Tamangs and Allen (1997) on the Thulung Rai.

⁵ On the Pariyar, see Kisan & Dulal (2014); on the Vishwakarma, Höfer (1976) and Kisan & Rasaili (2014).

⁶ These figures were calculated by Neupane (2000), and subsequently reproduced in many other places (e.g. Lawoti 2005: 104–6; Hachhethu & Gellner 2010: 138; Sijapati 2013: 153–4). For other figures on the lopsided representation in Establishment and state jobs, see Maharjan (1999: 63–4), UNDP (2009: 160–1), Bennett et al. (2013), Y.B. Gurung et al. (2014), and D. Gurung (2015).

one takes—life expectancy, poverty (UNDP 2009: 66), average income (ibid.), or remittances from abroad—Dalits do far worse than nearly all other groups.⁷ Dalits' levels of schooling, scores and pass rates at high school (SLC), and representation in higher education are all much worse than most other groups (Bhatta 2005). Dalits are the group with by far the largest percentage of households (over 40%) living below the national poverty line, according to the 2010 National Living Standards survey (Das & Gautam 2014: 47). The same figures, as cited by Sunam and Shrestha below, show that the equivalent figure for 'high-caste' Khas-Aryas is just 18% and for Janajatis 27%.

That Dalits should 'lag behind' or 'be excluded' in this way is hardly surprising, when one considers their position in traditional caste systems as they operated in Nepal (and elsewhere in South Asia). The fact that upper castes (especially Brahmans) considered it taboo to plough the fields, though they were peasants in all other respects, meant, at least, that there was some security for Dalits who worked as ploughmen (*hali*). All the skilled artisan jobs done by Dalits were looked down upon and seen as degrading. They were correspondingly poorly paid. Some Dalits were trapped in bond relationships, generation after generation under the systems such as *haliya* in western Nepal. (The government announced the abolition of *haliya* in 2008.) In Bajhang Dalits reported being effectively excluded from the local land market (Cameron 1998: 70).

Thus, the most Dalits have always been either completely or largely landless. They depended for their livelihood on the services they provided to upper-caste households. Many such services are agriculture-related and provided on a hereditary patron-client basis. Because the payments of grain are made after the harvest (*bali*), this system is known as in Nepal as *balighare* (also known as *riti-bhagya* in western Nepal: Cameron 1998, 2007). In India the same kind of relationships are known as *jajmani* (Dumont 1980; Fuller 1989). In Nepal the term *jajman* refers to clients of priestly services only, where the service-provider has higher status than (in Nepali terms, is *pujaniya* to) the receiver. By contrast, in the *balighare* system, the relative positions are reversed. The key *balighare* relationships were with the ploughman, the blacksmith, and the tailor (see further Adhikari & Gellner, below). Other services that Dalits provided to non-Dalits included musical bands, conveying messages (*katuwal*), goldsmithing, and leatherwork. Apart from *jajmani*, there were other ritual services provided by non-Dalits, such as Lama, Jyotishi, etc. For Dalits, these long-term relationships provided security (a guarantee of a share of the harvest even in hard times) in return for subordination (Prindle 1977). As Cameron (1998: 5, 79; 2007) describes, in order to obtain ongoing material support from their patron, the Dalit service-provider was required to act out subordination, to wheedle, coax, and even curse the patron as stingy, in ways laid down and expected in local custom and in accordance with local ideas of moral economy.

In 1963, when a new national law code replaced that of 1854, hierarchical caste distinctions lost their standing under law. However, unlike in India, with its constitutionally sanctioned system of positive discrimination ('reservations'), in Nepal, during the Panchayat period (1960-90), there were no attempts to redress the historical injustices that the lowest castes had faced for centuries. Caste discrimination only began to be addressed fully after 1990. The Maoists, who deliberately targeted Dalit groups for recruitment, made more of the caste discrimination issue than other political parties had, though all paid and pay lip service to it. The elections to the Constituent Assembly of 2008 marked a watershed, as historic new proportionality stipulations meant that 49 Dalit members were elected to a Parliament of 601 MPs – an unprecedented number (36 were hill Dalits, giving them 6% of the seats, almost equal to their 7.1% share of the population).⁸ In the second CA, after the election of 2013, the number of Dalit MPs dropped slightly to 40. A series of measures of positive discrimination have been enacted targeting Dalits, which include reservations in public jobs, old-age

⁷ As noted, Muslims (concentrated in the Tarai) are also a very deprived group. Hill Dalits outscore Muslims for literacy (UNDP 2009: 67). On poverty indicators, see also CBS (2005, 2011) and WB/DFID (2006).

⁸ Darnal (2009) contains interviews with eighteen of them.

allowances, children's nutritional allowances, etc.⁹ On 16 May 2006 the reinstated parliament declared Nepal to be *chuwachut mukta* or 'untouchability-free'. On 24 May 2011 the Caste-Based Discrimination and Untouchability (Offence and Punishment) Act, 2068 (2011) was passed. This gave real teeth to laws against untouchability by extending their coverage to the private domain as well. Recently (2075 BS, 2018 CE) the Act has been amended increasing the terms of punishment substantially.

The papers that make up this issue, taken together, give a good picture of where the Dalits of Nepal have reached today. Some of them have advanced in education (Pfaff-Czarnecka) and others to positions of leadership (Kharel & Suji). Reservations have certainly helped to some extent, both in winning places in the bureaucracy for Dalits, who were virtually unrepresented there in the past, and also in providing a symbolic encouragement to others to aspire to that status (Sunam & Shrestha); migration has also opened many opportunities for Dalits to escape the unequal social relations in which they are embedded at home (Adhikari & Gellner). In some cases, intermarriage with non-Dalits has even been accepted, though at the cost of maintaining the values of caste hierarchy (Bishwakarma).

And yet, despite these avowed and incontrovertible advances, it is clear that there is still a very long way to go (BK). Dalits still suffer a level of psychic stress and mental suffering that is hugely more than what non-Dalits have to put up with (Folmar). Even those few who manage to achieve university-level education suffer a great deal on the path to their relative success and remain beset by doubts (Pfaff-Czarnecka). Prejudice against those who benefit from the nationally agreed reservations policy is still pervasive and probably growing (Sunam & Shrestha; BK). The ideology of 'merit' is a double-edged sword that places a considerable burden on Dalit applicants for places in highly competitive academic institutions and the bureaucracy (Pfaff-Czarnecka; Sunam & Shrestha). Dalit women endure multiple burdens that go beyond even what other Nepali women must face (Kharel & Suji).

In July 2017 the first-named editor attended a huge and fascinating conference, 'Reclaiming Social Justice, Revisiting Ambedkar', in Bangalore, at the invitation of the then Congress government of Karnataka. It was part political rally, part academic meeting (Gellner 2017). Pradip Pariyar, director of the Samata Foundation, and Ashok Gurung, of the India-China Center, New York, were also invited to speak on Nepal. The chief guest was Martin Luther King III, son of the famous preacher and fighter for Black rights in the USA. He told a story about one of his father's visits to India, where he was introduced to Indian schoolchildren as "an Untouchable from the USA". This comparison initially took the great man aback, but on reflection he realized that, yes, the restrictions and disabilities that he faced, as a Black man in the USA, were indeed very similar to what Dalits in India experience on a daily basis.

Nepali Dalits' struggle for respect and equal treatment is indeed on a par with US Blacks.¹⁰ As the most despised group in a country of multiple minorities, Dalits face discrimination not only from the dominant groups but also from those in the middle, such as Janajatis. They may even face discrimination and contempt from other Dalits. The skilled professions where Dalits once had a monopoly are now opening up to other castes; other castes can follow them without stigma, and often with greater success, while Dalits continue to be despised for doing so. The very name 'Dalit' is seen by many as stigmatizing, and yet it is recognized by the Constitution and it is essential to claim the label, and identify with it, in order to enjoy the rights that accrue to it. Dalits therefore suffer from what WEB Du Bois, the pioneering sociologist of African-American life, called 'double consciousness' and which has been taken up as a key term by analysts of Black life ever since (Gilroy 1993). As Folmar describes, in the first paper of this collection, Dalits must strive (as every human

⁹ For analyses of these allowances and their effects, see Drucza (2015, 2019).

¹⁰ The standard introduction to the Nepali Dalit social movement is Kisan (2005). For reflections on different aspects of it by Nepali intellectuals, see Devkota (2002).

does) for a positive self-image while simultaneously viewing themselves through the eyes of others, as worthless and contemptible. This paradox, as Folmar calls it, or double-bind, has to be faced by every Dalit and puts them in the awkward and uncomfortable situation of having to deny and assert themselves at the same time (and some would add that Dalit women face the dilemma of 'triple consciousness', having, in addition, to face the expectations and negative associations of being a woman and a Dalit woman at that). Some Dalit parents try to save their children from this dilemma, but sooner or later, when confronted by the stigmatizing slights and exclusions of other children, they come to the painful realization that they are different and regarded as lacking or lower than others, that they do not belong in the same way as other children.

There is one respect in which Nepal's Dalits do not resemble African-Americans: their status is not written on their skin. For all that others (and Dalits themselves) may believe that they can recognize a Dalit from their speech, manner of self-presentation, and general habitus, there is no way, just by looking, to distinguish a well-off middle-class Dalit from any other Nepali member of the middle class. The fact that class and acquired status are as much at play here as inherited caste or biogenetic substance is clear from social media posts by Dalit young women that they have received the backhanded compliment, 'Oh, you look [beautiful], just like a Bahuni'. It was presumably precisely in order to counteract such negative stereotypes of Dalit women (that they cannot be beautiful) that a national 'Miss Bishwokarma' competition was started in 2016. There is in fact no single 'Dalit look'. Given that in the past, in most places in Nepal, anyone who married a Dalit normally became a Dalit (contrary to the Tarai custom Bishwakarma records below), the Dalits are quite possibly the most genetically mixed group in Nepal, perhaps even more so than the Chhetris. As such, one could argue that Dalits deserve to be seen as the paradigmatic Nepalis, (a) because they have migrated to every corner of the country, and (b) because they have accepted among themselves as new members, to a greater extent than any other Nepalese descent group, affines and refugees from every other group. Dalits are therefore the Nepali nation in microcosm.

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