



Dalit identity in urban Pokhara, Nepal

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ABSTRACT

Urban migration by Nepalese Dalits has not only provided them with social, economic and educational opportunities, but also the possibility of escaping traditional caste-based discrimination. However, despite making the most of opportunities provided by the city, Dalits have not been able to pursue their political agenda to the extent of other ethnic communities. This study in the city of Pokhara, Nepal, explored Dalit identity using two rounds of focus group discussions involving a total of 23 individuals drawn from a range of Dalit caste groups with a variety of livelihoods. The results describe the caste-based discrimination experienced by the participants and the different strategies they employ to either reinvent themselves by changing names; or embracing their caste-heritage and taking advantage of affirmative action programmes. Whilst urban migration can provide some relief from discrimination, the study reveals that caste still remains prominent in the lives of Dalits in Pokhara. The paper argues that Dalit unity and elimination of intra-Dalit caste-based discrimination are needed in order to institutionalise their citizenship rights in post conflict Nepal.

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1. Introduction

The promulgation of a much anticipated new constitution of Nepal in late 2015 partially ended a prolonged political transition, including the decade long Maoist insurgency. However, ethnicity remains a contentious area in both politics and economic action (Karki, 2010; Khanal et al., 2012; Lawoti and Hangen, 2013; Adhikari and Gellner, 2016). Recent political groups, such as the Unified Dalit, Terai and Tharu movements, which are organised by various ethnic and regional groups including Dalits, Madheshis (people living in the southern Terai region of Nepal bordering India) and an indigenous group (Tharus) respectively have their roots in the issue of ethnic identity and failure of political elites to address it adequately. Instead of rejoicing in the new constitution, Nepal suffered from further instability due to political rallies and politically motivated violence. Moreover, an informal economic blockade imposed by India in 2015 in response to Madheshi concerns in the constitution making process, placed a heavy fiscal burden on an already fragile economy recovering from a series of earthquakes earlier that year.

Although significant differences exist between political parties such as the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum (MJF), Rajendra Mahato-led Nepal Sadbhavana Party (NSP), Terai-Madhesh

Loktantrik Party (TMLP) and Adivasi Janajati (indigenous people), the issue of ethnic identity brought them together for the promotion and institutionalisation of their political, social, religious and cultural and economic rights (Hachhethu et al., 2008; Nayak, 2011; Lawoti and Hangen, 2013). However, despite representing about 13.1 per cent of the Nepalese population (CBS, 2011), Dalits have failed to unite and clearly articulate their political agenda. Dalits continue to remain one of the most economically marginalised, politically excluded and socio-culturally oppressed communities in Nepal (Dahal et al., 2002; Kabeer, 2006; UNDP, 2008; Sunar, 2008). Published statistics indicate that Dalits as a group are significantly below the national average in most development indicators such as poverty - 48%; literacy - 40%; chronic childhood malnutrition - 60%; food deficiency - 85%; and life expectancy - 48 years (CBS, 2011). Furthermore, the humiliating and degrading practice of untouchability is still continuing despite the country being declared 'untouchable free' by the new constitution (Bhattachan et al., 2009; Cameron, 1998, 2009; Lamsal, 2012). This social practice ascribes a low status to certain social groups confined to menial and despised jobs within the Hindu caste system (Berreman, 1973) and within which people from higher castes avoid direct physical contact with people from lower castes and do not share food and drink touched by them.

There are strong incentives to escape the constraints imposed by caste and it can be a factor in rural to urban migration. Similar to other developing countries, Nepal has significant migration from

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rural to urban areas (Chen et al., 1996; Chant, 1998; Rigg, 1998; Woods, 2012). People migrate primarily for new economic opportunities, as cities provide jobs (Castles and Miller, 2003; Bhattacharya, 2002; Ishtiaque and Ullah, 2013), but also for social benefits such as provision of education and health care (Kochar, 2004; Roberts, 2001; Banerjee, 1991). A third reason for migration is to escape discriminatory social structures prevalent in rural districts by seeking a new identity in the relative anonymity of cities (Adhikari and Deshingkar, 2015; Picherit, 2012; Cameron, 2007; Folmar, 2007). This is particularly relevant in the case of Dalits as the extent of caste-based discrimination in urban settings is less than in rural areas (Pandey et al., 2006). Therefore, the Dalit community in Nepal is a particularly interesting case to explore migration as a way of seeking new identities.

This paper draws on a study in a small city, Pokhara, which is about 210 km from the capital Kathmandu. It investigates the space it provides to Dalit communities for defining and redefining their ethnic and cultural identities, and the ways in which they renegotiate and realign their economic activities during the current political transition in Nepal. The paper is divided into five sections. Section 2 describes the notion of caste and provides a brief review of the role caste and ethnicity in the recent political processes in Nepal. Research methods and a brief introduction of Pokhara are presented in Section 3. Section 4 presents analysis and discussion; and conclusions are presented in Section 5.

2. Caste and politics

This study focuses on the diverse ethnic group of Dalits. Dalits in Nepal and elsewhere have endured social segregation, discrimination and oppression, including untouchability, at the hands of non-Dalits particularly the higher castes, Brahmins and Chhetri, despite following the same religion and having common deities. In the past, discrimination against Dalits was so endemic that they were not allowed to be educated, serve in the army, denied rights to property, had different footpaths and water wells, and were denied entry to temples (Ahuti, 2008). Ghimire (2010) argues that it was a common belief in the past that food and water touched by Dalits should not be consumed by non-Dalit girls when their teeth begin to grow and boys should do the same when they reach ritual performing age, which is usually at very early age. Dalits have also suffered discrimination and sub-ordination at the hands of Janajati (indigenous people). For example, a study by Hofer (1976) investigated the relationship between Bishwokarma or Kaami (Dalit

caste) and the Tamangs (Janajati caste) in Chautara in Sindhupalchowk district and showed that, despite following Buddhism, Dalits suffered caste-based discrimination by the Tamangs. However, even though discrimination occurs at the level of individuals, boundaries between the castes are not clear (Mayer, 1960) and this obscures political identity.

Caste consists of social categories that are exclusive (no one belongs to more than one group) and exhaustive (everyone belongs to some group), a stratification that is still prevalent in Hindu societies all over the world where individuals inherit caste from their parents at birth (Bailey, 1963). One of the principles on which the caste system is based is the “Hindu Pollution Concept” (Hutton, 1946; Srinivas, 1952; Douglas, 2002; Dumont, 1970). These divide society into four Varnas namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishya and Sudras. The Varna system has roots in the Dharmastras (a collection of ancient Hindu religious books prescribing moral laws and religious duties and righteous). Sudras include a wide spectrum of groups, including near-untouchables. The tasks assigned to the Dalits are considered to be too ritually polluting to merit inclusion within the traditional Varna system and so the Dalits experience social exclusion.

The ritual status is derived from the relationships of individuals within a group or between groups, with respect to a pattern of interactions based on religious myths, particularly interpretation of the Rig Vedas (one of the four canonical sacred texts of Hinduism), which divides the Hindus into good sacredness and bad sacredness (Srinivas, 1952; Milner, 1994). In the 14th century, King Jayasthiti Malla stratified the society he was ruling in Kathmandu into various castes and sub castes based on the ancient system of Hindu Philosophy (Riccardi, 1977). The idea of reincarnation is inherent in Hinduism. As such, Hindus believe that good sacredness is a reward for people from the god who conducted themselves well and performed good deeds (Karma) in their previous life and bad sacredness is a punishment given to those who failed to conduct themselves well. It is believed that being high caste is a reward associated with good sacredness whilst low caste is associated with bad sacredness (Srinivas, 1952). The Muluki Ain (Legal Code) of 1854, implemented by Jung Bahadur Rana, formally legalised the caste system by dividing Nepali society into a four-fold caste hierarchy as shown in Table 1.

From a broader sociological viewpoint an equivalence can be made between Adivasi-Janajati and other caste groups prevalent in Nepal, including Madheshis, Brahmins, Adivasi Janajati, Dalits and so on, as recognisable ethnic groups. However, in practice,

Table 1
Caste hierarchy proposed by the Muluki Ain (legal code) 1854 in Nepal. Source: Höfer (1979).

Caste group of the “Wearers of the holy cord” (<i>tāgādhārī</i>)	Caste group of the “Non-enslavable Alcohol-Drinkers” (<i>namāsinyā matwālī</i>)	Caste group of the “Enslavable Alcohol-Drinkers” (<i>māsinyā matwālī</i>)	Impure, but “touchable” castes (pāni nacalnā chōi chīṭo hā Inunaparnyā)	Untouchable castes (pāni nacalnā chōi chīṭo hā Inunaparnyā)
Upādhyaya Brāhman	Magar	Bhoṭe (“Tibetanids” and some “Tibetanoids”)	Kasāi (Newār butchers)	Kāmi (blacksmiths)
Rajput (Thakuri) (“warrior”)	Gurung	Cepāng	Kusle (Newār musicians)	Sārki (tanners, shoemakers)
Jaisi Brāhman	Sunuwār	Kumāl (potters)	Hindu Dhobi (Newār washerman)	Kaḍārā (stemming from unions between Kāmi and Sārki)
Chetri (Kṣatri) (“warrior”)	Some other Newār castes	Hāyu	Kulu (Newār tanners)	Damāi (tailors and musicians)
Dew Bhāju (Newār Brahmins)		Thāru	Musulmān	Gāine (minstrels)
Indian Brahmin		Gharti (descendants of freed slaves)	Mlecch (European)	Bādi (musicians)
Ascetic sects (Sannyāsi, etc.)				Pore (Newār skimmers and fisherman)
“Lower” Jaisi				Cyāme (Newār scavengers)
Various other Newār castes				

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