

Discrimination, Exclusion and Political Participation

Class, gender and generation: mediating factors in Dalit identities in Kathmandu, Nepal

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Introduction: There is a growing resistance from Dalits against the ongoing caste discrimination in the Nepali society (Dahal *et al* 2002; Jha 2004). In this process Dalits are both assertively deploying and redefining their “traditional” identities. Despite the constitutional ban on caste discrimination, there persists an upper caste monopoly on education, jobs, and political power. This research studies the complex and changing dynamics of Dalit identity in Nepal, within a context of growing resistance and organized social movement against caste discrimination and exclusion. More specifically, this paper examines differentiation and variation in the reproduction of Dalit identities during a period of political mobilization and (presumably) heightened consciousness across (i) socio-spatial boundaries, (ii) intersections of caste, class and gender, and (iii) dimensions of social consciousness and response/agency.

Methodology: The findings are based on a research carried out in the period from February 2006 to June 2007, with householders from three Dalit communities living in Kathmandu and with Dalit activists and leaders, using an ethnographic approach of in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, participant observation, and field notes. I interviewed participants from 15 households (43 interviews) making up a purposive sample from three occupationally segregated Dalit neighborhoods: *Deula/Podae*[†] (sweeper caste), *Biswakarma/Kami*[‡] (metal worker caste), and *Pariyar/Damai*[§] (tailor/musician caste). The first two communities may be considered lower income group while the third community an upwardly mobile group.

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† The community members preferred to be called by their surname *Deula*, rather than their caste (*Podae*), because it has a derogatory connotation of “sweepers”.

‡ *Kami* is a term used to refer to traditional metalworkers. Since it is increasingly viewed as a negative term, people in this caste group started referring to themselves as *Biswakarma*.

§ The term *Pariyar* has started being used to refer to the group of people historically known as *Damai*.

The ongoing political insurgency in Nepal not only required that I capture the “politicized” voices of Dalit leadership, but that I also record for long-term purposes this unique moment in Nepal’s history.

Findings: The findings are analyzed in relation to the following themes that emerged in relation to Dalit identity and resistance: the complexity of their everyday experiences of discrimination as Dalits living in the Kathmandu valley, their level of consciousness, agency, and resistance towards humiliating and discriminatory caste based practices, and the gender dimension of these themes.

Identity: Unlike the strong political consciousness observed among Dalit activists who have started identifying openly as Dalits, other interviewees in the above three communities were hesitant to call themselves Dalits, because of the stigma attached to castes that were historically considered untouchables. The interviewees did not perceive their identity as a political one, which is necessary to carry out a fight for their rights. Only a small group among them had a general political understanding of the term ‘Dalit,’ as that of historically suppressed, oppressed, deprived and excluded people. But, the majority understood the term in its stigmatized everyday connotation – as low-caste people or untouchables. The findings show that caste identity is a crucial social marker for Dalits, as it is for other castes. While this identity benefits the upper caste Brahmin and Chettri groups, it costs the Dalits dearly. Activists talked about how caste prejudice and negative stereotypes of Dalits were deep-rooted and persistent. Professional Dalits might be educated, clean, and of middle class status, but they would still be seen as *polluted* because of their birth in the lower castes.

Discrimination: Despite living in Kathmandu – a “modern” urban space, Dalits still faced discrimination. But, the nature of the discrimination could be different from community to community. All respondents acknowledged that discrimination had declined since historical times, and that their children would not have to go through what they and their ancestors went through. Most respondents felt that caste-based discrimination had more to do with age or generational differences. Unlike the *Deulas* and *Biswakarmas*, the *Pariyars* (the upwardly mobile group) claimed that they did not face discrimination and that caste issues were almost irrelevant for them in this ‘modern age.’

Consciousness, agency and resistance: Resistance usually occurs against political, economic, ideological and symbolic domination and exploitation of the subordinate groups. There are different kinds of resistance — overt or covert, and organized or unorganized. The findings

of this research show that, in general, the respondents of both the *Deula* and the *Biswakarma* communities had internalized the hegemonic values in everyday life, through adaptation and compromise in relation to the dominant order. Their agency was manifested in the resistance at an individual level and in what might also be called everyday acts of resistance, for example fighting in water taps/wells, criticizing and mocking upper caste rituals and practices, boycotting public religious functions, tea shops, and refusing food from upper castes when they went to do wage labor (Scott 1985). Another more transformative form of resistance was in the cases whereby Dalits ignored or sidestepped, resisted, and acted against the prevailing hegemony, in instances of inter-caste marriages and the conversion to Christianity in both the *Deula* and the *Biswakarma* communities. I did not find converts in the upwardly mobile *Pariyar* community, who were proud of upholding religious tradition. In a search for equality and human dignity, some Dalits have joined religions that preach equality. Christianity has provided a legitimate platform to frame a critique of Hindu caste norms. It also exempts them from costly social investments that Hinduism incurs through costly rituals and festivals, which are economic burdens on the poor. The conversion is a challenge to Hinduism.

There is a generation gap and a generational difference in perspectives and attitudes towards discrimination and resistance. The older respondents said they did not want to fight because they had to live close to other caste groups. They felt that time, laws, and the recent democracy movement would solve their problems. But, the younger generation felt that it was their right to live freely and demand rights. They showed eagerness in taking initiatives and in organizing, but they did not know the procedures for addressing the injustices. Respondents asserted that there were no institutional mechanisms to improve their condition and that, unless their material conditions of employment, health, housing, and education were addressed, fighting for their rights would be hard. Even though they dared to organize, they were afraid of losing jobs, being ridiculed, and being boycotted. The cost of being revolutionary outweighed the benefits that could show up only in future.

Gender implications: Findings suggest that women felt the oppression on a day-to-day basis, more than men, because of the gendered division of labor, the general gender ideologies, and the gender role expectations. This is not to undermine the discrimination Dalit men faced. Men also were victims of discrimination in their workplace and in the community, and they were excluded by the state. In the household level,

however, they had male privileges. Dalit households also were patriarchal in nature characterized by gender hierarchy and male domination, as is the patriarchal nature of the Nepali society in general (Bhattachan 2001; Acharya 2003). It is important to note that patriarchy is not monolithic and studies have found that lower caste women have more autonomy than higher caste women (Bennet 1983; Cameron 1998; Kapadia 1995; Watkins 1996). According to the findings of this research, Dalit women of all the three communities had to bear the burden of household work, child rearing, and working. They were heavily involved in reproductive labor, with help from spouses and other men in some cases. Women shared their experiences of discrimination from high caste women that pertained to water issues; men were exempt from such water-related tasks and thus enjoyed a distance from this form of everyday inter-caste interaction and did not have to deal with such discrimination.

Men's controlling conservative attitudes restricted women and greatly reduced the scope of female autonomy, particularly in areas where women were confined to the domestic sphere. An important difference among the above-mentioned three communities is that the caste identity of *Biswakarma* and *Pariyar* are tied to male occupations of metal working and music/ tailoring, whereas the occupational identity of *Deula* – sweeping – is gender neutral. This made a big difference in the status and autonomy of women within their household. In the *Deula* community, gender relations were less hierarchical, and gender ideologies relatively liberal, because of women's income-earning ability and therefore a better bargaining position within the household.

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