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# The Stigma of the Name

## Making and Remaking of Dalit Identity in Nepal

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In 2009, the Dalits of Ghachok in Kaski district, just north of Pokhara, began a protest against the upper castes, demanding equal access to a forest, the provision of drinking water to their community, and the initiation of secondary-level education in the village. Soon, questions about their identity and their history in Ghachok began to dominate interactions among the protesters. In particular, they wondered why they were called Dalits; when they had first settled in Ghachok; and why they were treated as untouchables. The underlying purpose of these enquiries was to justify their demand for equal access to a forest as well as to refute their status as low-caste 'untouchables'.

Without doubt, the Ghachok Dalits already had a sense of who they are and, equally importantly, who they are not, but, the protest and its subsequent resistance from the high castes helped such ideas become stronger among them. Because they lacked adequate knowledge about their own selves, the Dalits at that time said that they could not counter what the upper castes told them, including suggesting that Dalits should remain in their (low) caste status and follow caste norms; being low-caste people it was better for Dalits not to argue with the high castes and seek equality; and if Dalits wanted equality they should have been born in a high-caste family. Further, the high castes also claimed that they were the earliest inhabitants of the village and had been nurturing the forest while the Dalits were more later migrants and had had no contribution

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1 This paper is based on research conducted from July 2008 to September 2009 under the Toni Hagen Fellowship in the Social Sciences offered by the Toni Hagen Foundation-Nepal. I am deeply indebted for the invaluable suggestions, critical comments and kindness provided Dr Rajendra Pradhan while supervising the research. I am also deeply indebted to Deepak Thapa of Social Science Baha for his support during the fellowship, for constantly encouraging me for this publication, and for editing this paper. I am also grateful to Khem Raj Shreesh and Shaileshwori Sharma for editing the early drafts of this paper. I would also like to thank Toni Hagen Foundation-Nepal for providing this fellowship opportunity and Social Science Baha for hosting me during the fellowship period.

in preserving the forest and, hence, could not claim equal access to its resources. That led the Dalits to consult with older generations about their history in the village and there emerged a general consensus, but without any written record or evidence, that they, too, were early inhabitants, having migrated to the village together with the upper castes.

Just a few months prior to the protest, the Dalits had been confronted with another difficult question regarding their identity. This centred around the adoption of a particular dress for the artistes of the cultural unit of a local club established by the Dalits. They had been wearing something that they had recently found out belonged traditionally to Gurungs. While trying to decide on a dress that belonged to Dalits, some suggested the use of *gunyu cholo* for women and *daura suruwal* for men. Since these clothes are associated more with upper-caste Bahuns and Chhetris, the club consulted many elder Dalits in the village as well as activists and intellectuals at the district level, but could not identify if there was any dress particular to Dalits. While there were suggestions that the *gunyu cholo* and *daura suruwal* be adopted since Dalits are culturally not different from Bahuns and Chhetris, others counselled wider consultations with national-level Dalit leaders since they were quite sure that there would have been certain kind of traditional costume used by Dalits in the past. As a temporary measure, it was decided the *gunyu cholo* and *daura suruwal* would be used until an alternative was found.

These two cases of Dalits exploring their identity and history (not to mention their dress) suggest that the issue of identity has assumed great importance for them. In fact, this is currently true for all caste, ethnic, religious and language groups in Nepal, including the dominant Bahuns and Chhetris. But, it is more so for Dalits since they have to bear the burden of their identity as well. The political change of 2006 that has placed questions of identity, ethnicity and social inclusion in the political limelight has conditioned Dalits, and other non-dominant groups, to redefine their relationships among each other as well as with the Nepali state as they all try to recon-

struct their identities and seek equal respect and equal share in social and state apparatuses.

One of the striking features of this process of redefinition by Dalits has been the change in their caste and group names, which, in some cases, has been very quick and without a proper understanding either of what the new name means or of the name change itself. Through an examination of this process of how caste and group names have changed and changed again and again, this paper attempts to explain the manner in which the identity of Dalits is being constructed and reconstructed in Nepal, and the role of three key actors – the state, Dalit activists and intellectuals, and ordinary Dalits – in this process.

This paper makes three central arguments. First, it demonstrates that the formation and shaping of Dalit identity is the result of an interplay among three complex and inter-related social processes: the relationship between Dalits and the Nepali state; the role of Dalit activists living mainly in the urban areas; and individual Dalits in rural communities and their relationship with the upper castes which is also conditioned by local socio-economic and political factors. Each of these social processes is further influenced by other factors, ranging from local, regional, national, transnational to global. Second, the meaning and the implication of this identity are not the same for all those involved in this process. It is a polysemic and contested identity. Third, one of the main characteristics of local rural Dalit identity politics involves the formation of a positive identity by rejecting the traditional negative one through various processes such as cultural reformation, redefinition, confrontation, and hiding and manipulating identities.

The paper has been divided into four sections: the first summarises the literature on Dalits of Nepal; the second examines the role played by the Nepali state in the emergence and shaping of Dalit identity and politics; the third describes the role of Dalit activists in giving meaning to this identity; and the final section examines local identity politics and ordinary Dalits' perception of their own identity. A caveat should be noted here that since this paper is based

on research conducted only among the hill Dalits, many of the generalisations made here are valid for hill Dalits only.

### **Dalits of Nepal**

It is not altogether surprising that anthropological studies have virtually ignored Nepali Dalits just as the Nepali state and society have excluded them from the social, economic and political mainstream. They were not unique enough for traditional anthropologists or romanticists to be interested, nor were they strategically or geo-politically important to attract the attention of colonial anthropologists. There are a great many studies on the ethnic groups of Nepal<sup>2</sup> but these hardly touched upon the Dalits who are present in almost every Nepali village, and form an integral economic as well as socio-cultural part of the village community.

This neglect is because of four (mis)conceptions among anthropologists. First, the Dalits of Nepal and the caste system itself are seen as similar to that of India, where there is ample literature on the topic. For this reason, Nepali Dalits are generally seen from the theoretical and empirical lenses employed by scholars on India. Studying the Dalits of Nepal has so far been viewed as a futile attempt in terms of a contribution to the literature on Dalits and the social sciences as a whole. Second, Dalits are not considered socio-culturally distinct from the dominant Bahuns and Chhetris, leading to the assumption that there is no uniqueness to be found in such a study.<sup>3</sup> Third, since Dalits are treated as untouchables in society and generally found living in the fringes of villages in settlements considered polluted and dirty, anthropologists may have been unwilling to live in these settlements. Fourth, anthropologists have reported facing considerable difficulties in conducting fieldwork with Dalits. This is mainly due to the fact that anthropologists who live in a Dalit household are

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2 Gurung and Bhattachan (2006) list 2,207 publications on ethnic groups in Nepal.

3 However, my own study (BK 2010) shows that although Dalits are part of the Hindu religion and culture, their own meaning of religion and culture is unique to them.

denied certain privileges and are sometimes treated as untouchables by the upper castes.<sup>4</sup>

Very few anthropologists have chosen Dalits as their subject of research. In fact, Dalits became the focus of studies only after 1990, almost four decades after Nepal opened up to foreign scholars. Tingey (1994) studied all aspects of Damai castes—including their musical instruments, their history and their music—mainly of Gorkha district in the central hill region. Cameron (1998) examined the relationship between caste and gender among Dalit women in far-western Nepal. An ethnomusicologist by training, Hans Weisethaunet (1998) studied in detail how Gaijans play the *sarangi*, reproducing the sense of struggle in their performance and the place of music in the everyday lives of the Gaijans as well as their listeners. Other studies (Caplan 1972; Borgström 1980; Maskinarc 1995) had made Dalits part, but not the single focus, of their studies. Caplan examined the changing political and economic relationships between low and high castes in far-western Nepal after the democratic revolution in 1951. She observed that the changes of the 1960s, such as the introduction of Panchayat democracy, universal adult suffrage, land reform laws, and economic and administrative expansion, provided the low castes with opportunities to become economically more independent of the upper castes and a part of the opposition. Borgström examined the ways in which the caste system, particularly the unequal patron-client relationships, influenced Panchayat democracy in the local community. Maskarinec studied shamanism in the Far-West, in which most of the shaman respondents were Dalits. In the same way, Parish's study (1997) on the caste system, which looked at high- and low-caste Newars, is also worth mentioning.<sup>5</sup> Parish found an ambivalent attitude among both high- and low-caste Newars regarding the concept and prac-

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4 Steven Folmar (2010) has described in detail how anthropologists have faced difficulties while doing fieldwork with the untouchables, and mentions how he himself faced similar difficulties.

5 See Cameron (1998) for a detailed description on the studies on caste system in Nepal.



tice of hierarchy and caste system. More recently, some anthropologists such as Cameron, Folmar and Kharel have become interested in studying Dalit identity and politics. The book *Dalits of Nepal: Towards Dignity, Citizenship and Justice* (2010) includes the works of these scholars, among others, on recent Dalit politics and identity. Their contribution is particularly important because they reveal significant differences in the nature of identity politics and the understandings of Dalit identity between rural and urban Dalits.

There have also been some studies of note outside of anthropology on Dalits by Nepali scholars (Kisan 2005; Koirala 1996 [unpublished]). While Kisan (2005) describes in detail the history of the Dalit movement in Nepal, Koirala examines the status of and barriers to the schooling of Dalit children. There are also a few research reports that focus on the development and policy aspects of Dalits (Dahal et al 2002; Bhattachan et al 2003; Bhattachan et al 2008; TEAM consult 1999; ILO 2005).

### **Role of the Nepali State**

Dalit identity and politics cannot be understood without understanding their relationship with the Nepali state, a relationship maintained by the state through the adoption of a caste system. This relationship was hierarchical and unequal for a long period, and consigned Dalits to the lowest status of untouchables. This historical wrong by the state is the main cause of the emergence of Dalit ethnicity and its subsequent politicisation.

Even today, the state continues to play an active role in Dalit identity formation and politics. Policies favouring Dalits such as inclusion, affirmative action and proportional representation have contributed to the growing importance of identity among Dalits since these require the beneficiaries to be identified by their caste and ethnic identity (as is also the case with other caste and ethnic groups currently). Despite Nepal's professed commitment to equality, these policies create unequal terms of relationships between different groups of people as well as between these groups and the state, with a resulting upsurge in ethnicity and identity politics.

As the literature from anthropology has shown, the role of the Nepali state in the emergence and construction of ethnicity and identity is an undeniable fact. In particular, the instrumental approach to understanding ethnicity has placed emphasis on how the state forms and transforms ethnic identities. Guneratne, for example, argues that 'ethnicity emerges in a political field that structures, in unequal terms, different cultural communities engaged in a competition for resources' (Guneratne 2002: 11). The same has been demonstrated by other scholars in the case of various ethnic groups of Nepal (Fisher 2001; Hangen 2000; Holmberg 1989; Levine 1987). The main cause for the emergence of ethnicity has been the unequal treatment by the state towards different groups of people. The differential application of laws and policies towards these groups structure them to compete both with each other and with the state for social, political and economic advantages and power. As the above scholars contend, such unequal terms of relationship was a consequence of the process of formation of the modern state of Nepal.

But, it is not enough to consider the Nepali state to be the sole cause for the emergence of ethnicity in the case of Dalits. The caste system (although not in the form practised in modern Nepal) and the untouchable status of Dalits were realities even before the emergence of modern Nepal.<sup>6</sup> The builders of modern Nepal only consolidated and legalised already existing practices. In fact, the untouchable status of Dalits is said to have been drawn from the Hindu ideology of the *varna* system as described in various religious texts such as the *Vedas*, *Manusmriti*, and the *Puranas*.<sup>7</sup>

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6 Bajracharya's (2030 BS) findings mention of names of the *varna* and the untouchable Chandala in the Lichhavi inscriptions indicates the practice of some form of caste system as far back as the Lichhavi period (200-879).

7 According to the *Vedas*, one of the main religious texts of Hinduism, Hindu society was divided into four hierarchical categories (*varna*) associated with particular social occupation: Brahmins (priest and teacher), Kshatriya (ruler and warrior), Vaishya (trader), and Sudra (servant) (Burghart 1978). The Brahmins were placed at the top of the hierarchy, Kshatriya below them, then Vaishya and Sudra at the bottom. Outside this four-fold *varna* system and below Sudra were untouchables, whose duty was to serve the *varnas* above them by providing

Although there had been efforts to institutionalise the caste system in pre-modern Nepal,<sup>8</sup> the process of nation-building, accompanied by Hinduisation beginning in the late 18th century, had important consequences on the development of Dalit identity and politics. The founder of modern Nepal, Prithvi Narayan Shah (r. 1743-75), with his vision of making Nepal an *Asil Hindustan* (pure land of the Hindus), initiated the process of strengthening the caste system which culminated in the formulation of the national code of 1854, the *Muluki Ain*. The primordial and religious origins about the status of Dalits as untouchables was strongly upheld by the Nepali state and manifest in laws and policies until the middle of the 20th century.

As one of the important instruments of nation-building and Hinduisation, the *Muluki Ain* provided legal affirmation to the caste system and hierarchy, and allowed for rewards and punishments for the same offence to differ according to the caste of the perpetrator.<sup>9</sup> According to Höfer (1979 [2004]), the *Ain* grouped all the people of the country, including non-Hindus, in five broad categories on the basis of relative purity and/or impurity: i) wearers of the holy thread (*tagadhari*); ii) non-enslavable alcohol-drinkers (*namasinya matawali*); iii) enslavable alcohol-drinkers (*masinya matawali*); iv) impure but touchables (*pani nachalne choi chito halnu napanne*); and v) untouchables (*pani nachalne choi chito halnu parne*). The wearers of the holy thread were accorded the highest status in the hierarchy and the untouchables, the lowest. The *Ain* not only maintained the hierarchy of castes, but also prescribed relations among castes such as with regard to food, marriage, contact and sexual relationships. Untouchables were strictly prohibited from maintaining any of these relationships with the castes above them.

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manual and menial services.

8 For example, King Jayasthiti Malla (r. Kathmandu Valley, 1382-95) categorised Newars into 64 castes and King Ram Shah (r. Gorkha principality, 1606-1636) introduced the Hindu social code.

9 Prayag Raj Sharma argues that the Code's laws embrace in letter and spirit the values and ideologies taught by the Hindu religious texts (Sharma 2004: 153).

The *Ain* had a number of important implications for Dalits: i) it placed them not only below the Hindu high castes, but also below the non-caste, non-Hindu groups such as indigenous peoples and Muslims; ii) it helped create a pan-Nepal 'untouchable' identity, subsuming all other regional and local identities;<sup>10</sup> and, above all, iii) it gave legal sanction to untouchability and caste discrimination. It is for this reason that Dalits blame the caste system and the *Ain*, which remained in effect for more than a hundred years (up until 1963), for being the primary cause of their social, economic and political oppression and exploitation in the past as well as at present. They also see the groups higher in the hierarchy as their oppressors and exploiters. Thus, the elimination of the caste system and hierarchy has been the primary aim of Dalit mobilisation.

Replacing the *Muluki Ain* with a new one in 1963, the Panchayat regime showed a commitment to equality among its citizens, and formally did away with the caste system and its inherent hierarchy. However, the system was not abolished in practice, and, in fact, also incorporated the spirit of the old *Muluki Ain* through a provision that punished untouchables for violating traditions such as transgressing caste lines. Höfer (1979) argues that 'contrary to the widespread view, the modern legislation (the new *Muluki Ain* of 1963) has not explicitly abolished the caste hierarchy'. This became aptly clear when the Palace Secretariate declared that 'the caste system itself had not been abolished' (Joshi and Rose 1966 in Höfer 1979: 188) to justify the government's intervention during the attempt by 'untouchables' to enter the Pashupatinath temple in 1965.<sup>11</sup> Thus,

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10 Different official records before the introduction of the *Muluki Ain* reveal the use of different terms by the state itself to refer to untouchables in different locations. For example, in official letters issued to local officials, *achhuti* was used to refer to the untouchables in the far-western hills (Regmi 1973a), *pauni* in the eastern region (Regmi 1973b), and *dum* in the mid-western hills (Regmi 1980).

11 Such difference between the state's commitment and practice with regard to the untouchable's cause was high during the brief democratic period as well. After the establishment of democracy, King Tribhuvan had announced the ban on untouchability and caste discrimination, but later withdrew his view with a clarification that it was not up to him to decide that individually and it was an

the 'caste system was upheld by the state, not as caste but as tradition' (Burghart 1984).

There were some differences though for although caste remained an important factor in social life it was not explicitly used by the state for official purposes during the Panchayat regime. Höfer (1979) points out that 'newspapers and official publications also avoided the use of the terms "jat" and "caste" and mostly circumscribed them by employing "varga" or "social class" respectively.'<sup>12</sup> Pradhan (2003) also mentions that 'caste and other categories of legal classification of the population, so central in the earlier *Ain*, were absent in the new *Ain* and caste and ethnicity were no longer significant legal categories although they continued to remain socially valid.' Given the minimal usage of caste for official purposes and the emphasis on achieved and equal status of all peoples, however, the Panchayat regime did help greatly decrease the significance of caste.

### **Dalit mobilisation**

Although there had been cases of individual struggles against untouchability prior to 1950 by both Dalits and others (Bishwakarma et al 2006), the collective consciousness and mobilisation against untouchability began in seriousness only with the advent of democracy in 1951. This was mainly owing to the fact that challenging the caste hierarchy directly was not only illegal, but also highly risky during the Rana autocracy. It was for this reason that the first attempts at collective mobilisation by untouchables that emerged towards the end of the Rana regime were aimed at claiming high-caste status through Sanskritisation. The first organisation formed by Dalits, the Bishwa Sarbajan Sangh, claimed the status of Brahmins and began performing Brahmanical rituals such as the wearing of the holy thread, performing coming-of-age rites such as *bratabandha*, and temple worship.<sup>13</sup>

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issue to be decided by referendum (INSEC 1994).

12 Höfer claims the new *Ain* did not even make any reference to the term *jat* except on one occasion.

13 This organisation requested the Prime Minister Mohan Shamsheer in 1950 to

Concurrent with the rise of the anti-Rana movement, a number of organisations representing untouchables emerged in different parts of the country in the last years of the Rana regime,<sup>14</sup> and the number of such groups continued to rise after the fall of the Ranas.<sup>15</sup> The early organisations acted akin to caste associations—asserting equality and rights only for their own caste groups. It was only later that organisations representing different Dalits castes united and merged to form larger and common organisations, creating a sense of a common untouchable identity and overcoming various individual caste identities.<sup>16</sup>

The upsurge in Dalit mobilisation against untouchability following the fall of the Rana regime was not the outcome merely of social and political processes at the national level but also had a transnational dimension. For, in addition to the redundancy of the caste system and the ongoing debate on democracy and egalitarian ideals in post-1951 Nepal, India's Dalit movement had an important impact and influence on the emergence of a similar movement in Nepal. By that time, the movement of the Indian Dalits had already gained momentum and they were struggling to establish their rights through a new constitution drafted under the leadership of B.R. Ambedkar, the undisputed face of the Dalit movement in India. Most of the leaders of the early Dalit organisations in Nepal, such as Sarbajit Bishwakarma and Saharsha Nath Kapali, had lived in India for several years and were duly influenced by the

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upgrade the Bishwakarma caste to Brahmin, and the Prime Minister upgraded their caste to Khadka Chhetri (a touchable caste) and allowed them to wear holy thread (Kisan 2005).

14 In 1947 (2004 BS), the Bishwa Sarbajan Sangh in Baglung district of western Nepal, the Tailor Union in Kathmandu, and Nepal Samaj Sudhar Sangh in Dharan district of eastern Nepal were all established independently of each other.

15 For instance, Nepal Harijan Sangh, Nepal Samaj Sudhar Sangh, Nepal Rastriya Pariganit Parishad and Rastriya Achhut Mukti Morcha were established in the first decade following the fall of the Rana regime.

16 See Kisan (2005) and Bishwakarma et al (2006) for history of untouchable organisations in Nepal.

Dalit mobilisation in India. Ambedkar had himself visited Nepal in November 1956 and held discussions with untouchable leaders of Nepal (Cameron 2010).<sup>17</sup>

During the Panchayat period, however, mobilisation of Dalits suffered a setback as the regime strongly discouraged politics based on caste and ethnicity.<sup>18</sup> The activities of caste and ethnic organisations were closely monitored and these groups had to prove that they were involved in cultural promotion and development.<sup>19</sup> Despite such odds, a number of Dalit organisations appeared during Panchayat times, but these organisations suffered internal rivalries and, hence, could not raise a collective voice against untouchability.

Caste and ethnicity again became relevant categories to identify people with after the People's Movement of 1990 that re-introduced multiparty democracy, providing a favourable environment for identity-based politics. The 1990 Constitution granted equal rights before the law to all citizens and prohibited any form of discrimination based on caste, religion, language and gender, in addition to declaring Nepal a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual kingdom. The *Muluki Ain* of 1963 was amended in 1992 to make caste discrimination and untouchability punishable. The 1990s saw a massive increase in the awareness and mobilisation of Dalits (along with other marginalised groups such as Janajatis, women and Madhesis). The articulation of Dalit grievances became more assertive, and their issues obtained prominence both in national discourse and politics.

Issues of caste and ethnicity gained even greater prominence

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17 Ambedkar died in December 1956.

18 Through its slogan: '*Ek Bhasa, Ek Bhes, Ek Desh*' (one language, one dress, one country), it emphasised a uniform identity of its people, 'one and same' (*ek ra saman*) (Burghart 1984), ignoring (and aiming at erasing) cultural diversity.

19 However, Whelpton, Gellner and Pfaff-Czarnecka argue that 'although radical ethnic activism had been strongly discouraged, the Panchayat regime had itself to some extent attempted to mobilise Janajati and Dalits as a counter to its opponents amongst the *Parbatiya* high castes' (2008: xix).

after the People's Movement of 2006, and the issue of Dalits has also garnered greater attention from political parties and the state. A strong law against untouchability – the Untouchability and Caste Discrimination Crime and Punishment Act, 2011 – which punishes untouchability even in the private sphere, was enacted by the parliament. As mentioned above, policies aimed at inclusion, reservation and proportional representation have also been drafted and are being slowly implemented, increasing the access of Dalits to various state apparatuses.

### **The Politics of Naming: Many Interests, Many Names**

Since names carry meanings, this section looks at how Dalits have been identified or named at different times by various actors. Such an examination of names claimed by and given to Dalits can provide insights into how Dalits have been understood by themselves and by others across time. The use of different terminology has social, political and legal consequences that help us understand the dynamics of and the state's response to Dalit politics.

As the state's policies, and, subsequently, the relationship between Dalits and the state, have changed, the terms used to refer to Dalits have also undergone many transformations. Dalits and the state have both demonstrated no preference for any particular term over another and seem to condition their preference on various social and political factors. *Achhut* (untouchable) was the widely used term to refer to Dalits during Rana times. Although legally recognised as *pani nachalne* and *choi chito halnu parne jat*, they were commonly referred to as *achhut* or *chito halnu parne jat*. This may be simply because the name given in the *Ain* was long and the meaning was the same after all, that is, 'untouchable'. However, as mentioned earlier, different terms were used across the country. *Achhut* was directly related to the idea of ritual purity/impurity and indicated not only their ritual impurity but also their untouchable status. Therefore, *achhut* had a direct bearing on Dalits and rightly described their legal and social status at that time.

Following the end of the Rana regime, Dalits began to use new



terms in place of *Achhut* such as *Sarbajan* (all people), *Pariganit* (considered backward), *Harijan* (children of god)<sup>20</sup> and *Nimna Samaj* (lower society), all of which did not directly refer to ritual impurity or their status in the caste hierarchy. The post-Rana order, including the Panchayat regime, preferred not to use terms indicating association with caste. This began immediately after the fall of the Rana regime, with the enactment of the Interim Government of Nepal Act 1951, which used *Anunnat Varga* (backward class) instead of words associated with caste. But this formulation included not only Dalits but also backward people of other castes and ethnicities. The Panchayat system, on the other hand, did not identify citizens in terms of caste and ethnicity and preferred to simply use 'backward class'.

But, by the time the new *Muluki Ain* of 1963 had been adopted, the term 'Dalit' was already being used by the erstwhile untouchables.<sup>21</sup> At the organisational level, Dalit was used first in 1967 by the Nepal Rastriya Dalit Janabikas Parishad (Nepal National Council for Development of Dalits). Panchayat officials, however, strongly discouraged the use of caste-specific terms, including 'Dalit', because they believed that the new *Ain* had erased all the differences and inequalities based on caste and ethnicity.<sup>22</sup> After the Social Service Coordination Council did not accept the word 'Dalit', the organization was finally registered as Nepal Rastriya Samaj Kalyan Sangh (Nepal National Social Welfare Organisation) in 1978. In sum, the Panchayat regime pretended that Dalits as a group did not exist.

Towards the end of the Panchayat era, Dalit leaders who were close to underground communist parties began to argue that the

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20 'Harijan' was first used by Mahatma Gandhi for the Dalits of India.

21 Cameron quotes a Dalit leader who says that the use of 'Dalit' in Nepal began after untouchable leaders heard the word from Dr Ambedkar during the latter's visit to Nepal (see Cameron 2010: 18).

22 Perhaps because the concept was so new, the 'Dalit' in the organisation's name was translated by *The Rising Nepal* as 'Depressed Class'. *The Rising Nepal*, 18 August, 1974.

condition of Dalits was similar to that of the working class, and linked the Dalit movement with the class movement. Their assumption was that the caste system was not going to end without waging a class struggle. They considered the state to be their ultimate enemy, blaming it for all the sufferings of Dalits. This was an important shift both in the Dalits' perception of their condition as well as the future direction of the movement. The term '*Utpidit*' (oppressed) began to be used. The Utpidit Jatiya Utthan Manch (Forum for the Upliftment of the Oppressed Castes), which was established in 1988, used and popularised this term, which implied that Dalits were oppressed by the others, mainly the state and the upper castes, and that they were a class of people, not a particular caste. '*Utpidit*' was hence in popular usage among Dalits who were inclined towards or involved in the politics of the Left.

After 1990, the term 'Dalit' was revived once again, and its popularity increased especially after many Dalit organisations, including the Utpidit Jatiya Utthan Manch, merged to form the biggest Dalit organisation, Nepal Utpidit Dalit Jatiya Mukti Samaj. It is interesting that both '*Utpidit*' and 'Dalit' have been used, indicating that the organisation viewed Dalits both in terms of caste and class. The state, however, was still not ready to clearly identify Dalits even in the 1990s, and referred to them in terms that did not indicate their caste background and which could also include people of any caste or ethnicity, as during Panchayat times. Hence, government documents are full of terms such as 'downtrodden', 'oppressed', 'disadvantaged groups', 'marginalised groups' and 'backward class', either in the singular or as a group to refer to Dalits (and others). The budget speeches of 1994 and 1995 used 'oppressed groups'; the Ninth Plan (1997-2002) came up with the even-more-elusive 'downtrodden and oppressed communities', 'deprived, oppressed and downtrodden community', and 'scheduled castes'; while the Tenth Plan (2002-2007) used 'Dalit and neglected communities'. But there was no clarity on who was being referred to specifically.

Dalits themselves have not consistently used a common, single

term, and that has aided the state in creating further confusion. According to Padam Sundas, former vice-president of the Upekchhit, Utpidit and Dalit Varga Utthan Bikas Samiti (Neglected, Oppressed and Dalit Class Development Committee), the name of the committee resulted from the claims of the various Dalit organisations affiliated to the political parties then in government.<sup>23</sup> Hence, the Nepal Rastriya Prajatantrik Upekchhit Jatiya Utthan Sangathan (affiliated to the then Rastriya Prajatantra Party) claimed the term '*Upekchhit*', the Utpidit Jatiya Mukti Samaj (of the CPN [UML]) wanted '*Utpidit*', and the Nepal Dalit Sangh (of the Nepali Congress), '*Dalit*'. The government took the easy way out and included everything in the name of the organisation.

The use of all these terms has important consequences for the social and political life of Dalits, and also for their movement. 'Backward', 'downtrodden' and 'oppressed' are too elastic and can easily include people of any other caste or ethnicity, and the definition of these terms is also vague and meanings can be assigned on a relative basis. For instance, it can be argued that the entire Nepali population, including Bahuns and Chhetris, are backward, relatively speaking. Using such terms can contribute to diluting the Dalit movement and the distribution of benefits to Dalits, while also masking the caste factor, the primary cause of Dalit backwardness. Thus, it is not without reason that after 1990 Dalits began to assert their identity by defining themselves clearly in terms of caste.

Since the early 2000s, '*Dalit*' has become more widely used, particularly after the establishment of the National Dalit Commission in 2002. The Interim Constitution of Nepal 2007 and recent government acts have adopted '*Dalit*'.<sup>24</sup> However, the term is yet to enter the social lives and everyday language of the people as shown by

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23 Personal communication, 18 May, 2009.

24 However, in India, where the term '*Dalit*' was invented and popularised, it is not used or accepted for legal purposes by the government. Instead, the term '*Scheduled Caste*', referring to a schedule in the Indian constitution which lists the groups known as Scheduled Castes, is used.

the continuing usage of terms such as *achhut* (untouchable), *sana jat* (low caste) and *pani nachalne* (from whom water is not acceptable), especially in the rural parts of the country.

### **Role of Dalit Activists**

Dalit political leaders have organised themselves, co-opted other Dalits into their organisations, and struggled to eliminate caste hierarchy and establish equality. At different points of time, they have urged Dalits to reject certain kinds of identity and to adopt others. In fact, the term 'Dalit' was itself initially used by a handful of Dalit leaders in Kathmandu and slowly disseminated to other parts of Nepal. But despite the widespread acceptance the term has now received, Dalit activists have defined 'Dalit' variously, and this has had a significant impact on the construction of their identity.

The actual development of an identity is not solely dependent upon structural factors such as policies of the state or on national and transnational social and political factors. As anthropologists have argued in the case of culture, human agents are required to form and transform identities and to assign meaning to them. Highlighting the role of activists in identity formation, Guneratne (2002) asserts that 'cultural conditions are not only the precondition for the development of ethnic consciousness and identity, elite role is also necessary to give force to it'. He also contends that although ethnic identity develops as the outcome of special historical and socio-political processes, the elite interpret and give value to the expression. Dalit identity was formed, popularised and given meaning by Dalit activists, particularly urban ones. It is important to acknowledge that not only the Dalit activists but also non-Dalit activists and scholars have contributed to this process. This section will examine how Dalit activists helped to give substance and/or meaning to the Dalit identity.

In contemporary national discourse, 'Dalit' has been defined and/or understood in terms of caste, class, class-caste and race. This multiplicity of understandings of what a Dalit is has resulted

from the many ways in which Dalits have been analysed. These analyses, in fact, have been influenced by broader global debates about how caste can be looked at with significant and continued academic efforts to draw parallels as well as distinctions between caste and class and also between caste and race.<sup>25</sup>

Those who view Dalits on the basis of caste consider them to be part of the Hindu caste system and at the bottom-most rank in the caste hierarchy. They consider Dalits' economic, social, educational and political backwardness to result from their place in this hierarchy. Accordingly, the emancipation of Dalits lies in fighting the caste system. This definition of Dalit is strictly limited to those groups who were treated as untouchable and categorised as *pani nachalne choi chito halnu parne jat* by the *Muluki Ain* of 1854.<sup>26</sup>

Those defining Dalits in class terms consider Dalits to be farmers, labourers, industrial workers, peasants, and belonging to other occupational groups as well. Hence, the poor, the oppressed and the exploited people of any caste and ethnicity, including occupational categories of Bahuns-Chhetris, are considered Dalits. This understanding comes from the Marxists, and the communist parties of Nepal and their Dalit wings, which attribute the caste system and caste-based economic relations to the remnants of feudalism, and, therefore, argue in favour of a class struggle in order to wipe out the caste system and the emancipation of Dalits. For instance, Koirala (1996: 2), among others, defines Dalit as 'a group of peoples who are religiously, culturally, socially and economically oppressed' and states that 'in this category, there are people of different languages and ethnic backgrounds'. The sense in which Koirala has used 'Dalit' is, in fact, derived from its meaning conceived and popularised in India by the radical Dalit Panthers in the 1970s.<sup>27</sup> Frustrated

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25 For a detailed comparative analysis of caste and race, see Natrajan, Balmurli and Paul Greenough (2009), and of caste and class, see Mohanty (2004), Beteillé (1996) and Sharma (1994).

26 Bishwakarma (2001 and 2002) and Gurung (2003 and 2005) have defined 'Dalit' in terms of caste.

27 Dalit Panthers was a militant Dalit political party formed by a young group

by the existing parties of the Scheduled Castes, the Panthers broadened the meaning of 'Dalit' to include all the oppressed classes in the society. Its manifesto defined 'Dalit' as 'All Scheduled Castes and Tribes, landless labourers, small farmers and nomadic tribes, who are committed to fighting injustice stemming from political power, property, religion and social status' (Mutatkar 1988, cited in Shah 2001: 209). But, 'Dalit' has since been adopted increasingly by those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, particularly those known as the Scheduled Castes in India.

Others understand 'Dalit' as a hybrid of both class and caste and consider the Dalits to be people who make up the lowest rank in the caste hierarchy but are also economically poor. The argument here is that class and caste are inter-related and that fighting against Brahminism (caste) as well as feudalism and capitalism (class) are required for the emancipation of Dalits.

Some define 'Dalit' in terms of race. They attribute the backwardness of Dalits to racial discrimination. Their argument is that discrimination based on caste and race is similar and that both caste and race are based on descent (Gurung 2005, JUP-Nepal 2001). As Gurung put it, '[U]ntouchability in the Hindu caste system also has [a] racial element as the ritual status of one's caste status is also based on birth' (Gurung 2005). Dalit NGOs are at the forefront of the effort to link caste with race in order to garner international support and recognition in their fight against caste since race is an internationally recognised category which is backed by stronger rights instruments.<sup>28</sup>

The dominant understanding of 'Dalit', however, is based on

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of Dalits in Maharashtra in 1972. They drew their inspiration from the Black Panthers movement in the United States, and was the first organisation which responded to upper-caste atrocities in aggressive ways. But, with time, there has been significant decrease in hostility and militancy accompanied by the movement splitting into factions (Gorringe 2005: 53).

28 On 28 June, 2013, the British government decided to include caste as an aspect of race and outlawed caste discrimination in the country (The Equality Act 2010 [Specification of Public Authorities] [Scotland] Order 2013. Source: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ssi/2013/170/introduction/made>, accessed July 3, 2013).

the caste paradigm. Even for official purposes a Dalit is recognised only on the basis of his or her caste identity. The National Dalit Commission, which has the authority to certify whether a person is Dalit or not, defines 'Dalit' as 'the caste and ethnic community who are considered untouchable by the *Muluki Ain* of 1854 and the four-fold caste system, and are discriminated and marginalised from the social, economic, political, educational, and religious mainstream of the state'.<sup>29</sup> It is mainly because of this understanding that the beneficiaries of the state's welfare policies and programmes of inclusion targeted at Dalits are identified solely on the basis of caste.

In India, the dominant understanding of Dalits among scholars is based on class, irrespective of their religion, language, and ethnicity (Zelliot 1996; Massey 1999; Shah 2001; Webster 2007; Michael 2007; Omvelt 1994). The word is essentially an umbrella term for all oppressed and exploited people such as farmers, women, peasants, workers, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.<sup>30</sup> A commonly used definition of 'Dalit' comes from Zelliot, who has researched and written extensively on the Dalits of India: 'Dalit implies those who have been broken and ground down by those above them in a deliberate and active way. There is in the word itself an inherent denial of pollution, *karma*, and justified caste hierarchy' (Zelliot 1996: 267). But, despite such attempts to define 'Dalit' on the basis of class, a Dalit is still commonly understood as a person belonging to one of the Scheduled Castes.

In Nepal, the term 'Dalit' is not a universally accepted term and some Dalit activists attribute a negative connotation to it and, hence,

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29 Retrieved from official website of the Commission on 23 October, 2011. [www.ndc.gov.np/caste-schedul-12-np.html](http://www.ndc.gov.np/caste-schedul-12-np.html). Author's translation.

30 In fact, defining 'Dalit' in this way began after the Dalit Panthers, who popularised the term in India, included a wide range of people in its manifesto. The manifesto of the Dalit Panthers, a radical group that came into prominence in the 1970s, defined 'Dalit' as 'All Scheduled Castes and Tribes, landless labourers, small farmers and nomadic tribes, who are committed to fighting injustice stemming from political power, property, religion and social status' (Mutatkar 1988, cited in Shah 2001: 209).

reject it.<sup>31</sup> While the dominant view considers its increasingly wider use to be one of the achievements of the Dalit movement and believes that it depicts the true image of being exploited and oppressed, both historically and at present (Bishwakarma 2002; Bishwakarma 2008; Ahuti 2010), those rejecting it find a negative and derogatory meaning in it since it denotes a person who is oppressed or exploited (Kapali 2002; Dilu 2008). The latter argue that the use of the term 'Dalit' does not help in emancipation from poverty and oppression as the term itself makes a Dalit feel psychologically inferior and disempowered.<sup>32</sup> This continuous debate on the appropriateness of the use of the term 'Dalit' has contributed to the formation of Dalit identity.

### **Local Identity Politics**

The project of identity and ethnicity formation is neither determined overwhelmingly by the role of the state nor confined within national boundaries. Local and regional processes that may not be under the full control of the state and transnational and global trends can play an equally important role in creating and shaping identity. The increasing activities of NGOs, INGOs and political parties against the contrasting background of existing customary practices such as untouchability have contributed to the distinctiveness of Dalit identity and politics in rural areas.

Besides, various factors help carve a different trajectory of Dalit identity and politics in local communities than that of national Dalit politics. These include, but are not limited to, economic improvement of Dalits and the weakening of their economic dependency on the upper castes, migration of Dalits to other locations inside the country and abroad, and competition or disputes over local resources between Dalits and the upper castes. A local and rural Dalit who is not educated, less active politically, and still quite

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31 Resentment against the use of the term 'Dalit' is expressed more in formal and informal discussions, seminars, and workshops than is found in written literature.

32 See Cameron (2010: 19-25) for a detailed discussion on this debate.



dependent upon the upper castes economically certainly must have a different meaning of 'Dalit' than an urban, educated, and politically active Dalit.

This part describes in detail the process and nature of the construction of identity by ordinary rural Dalits from two of Nepal's mid-hills districts, Kaski and Lalitpur, and the nature of their identity politics. Consisting of the paper's main argument and analysis, it will try to understand the meaning and implication of their identity, and changes in it through real-life, everyday experiences of ordinary Dalits. The fieldwork for the study on which this paper is based was done from December 2008 to February 2009 among the Dalits of two villages, Ghachok and Godamchaur, and since these two sites are home to Hill Dalits only, many of the generalisations of this paper are valid for that group only.

### *The Setting*

Caste is still an important aspect in an individual's life. Caste is constantly negotiated and contested, and influences and determines inter-caste interactions along with communal and individual behaviours. This engenders a different perception of identity among ordinary Dalits, unlike for Dalit leaders and activists who are generally economically independent and whose life is less and less determined by caste. Hence, caste and inter-caste relationships between Dalits and high castes are central to understanding the identity of Dalits in local communities.

Ghachok is a small, ethnically diverse, rural village lying on the bank of Seti River, just 12 kilometres north of the tourist town of Pokhara. It is one of few villages in western region of Nepal where the Dalit population is significant—753, or 26 per cent of the total VDC population. Dalits are clustered in three wards<sup>33</sup>, and even have majority in one ward. There are three Dalit castes in the village: Sarki (around 170 households), Damai (around 30 households), and Kami (five households). Bahun, Chhetri, Gurung and Magar are the

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33 Wards are the smallest administrative and political units in Nepal.

main high castes that live in Ghachok, and all these groups, both Dalits as well as the high castes, live in segregated settlements.

Godamchaur is a small semi-urban settlement located in the southern part of the Kathmandu Valley in Lalitpur district. The population of Dalits in Godamchaur VDC is 346 (or, 8 per cent of the total VDC population). Among Dalits, the Sarki constitute the largest group and the Damai the smallest. Chhetri, Newar and Bahun are the main upper castes that live in Godamchaur.

Hierarchy and untouchability are not only practised between Dalits and the upper castes, but also among Dalits themselves as well. Kami is considered superior to the other major Dalits castes, Sarki and Damai, even though the *Muluki Ain* of 1854 provides Kami and Sarki equal status (Macdonald 1983). These two castes, however, treat each other as untouchables. Below them in the caste hierarchy are the Kanara, the offspring of mixed marriages between Kami and Sarki. There is a significant number of Kanara in Ghachok, who are not easily identified as Kanara because they identify themselves as Sarki. Their Kanara identity only becomes important when they marry because, although there are cases of elopement, the Sarki do not enter into arranged marriages with them. Below these castes are the Damai who are treated as untouchable by all castes above them.

To some extent, there is economic interdependence between Dalits and the high castes in Ghachok, which is one of the main characteristics of a caste society. However, in Godamchaur interdependence is much weaker, as most of the Dalits here have adopted modern (non-caste-based) occupations. The economic interdependence is regulated by a system called the *bista* system<sup>34</sup>, in which Dalits provide their services such as sewing clothes (Damai), repairing iron tools (Kami), and ploughing fields of the high castes, who give grain to Dalits during harvests. This system is gradually being replaced by wage labour. Very few Kami and Damai practice their traditional occupation in Ghachok within the *bista* system. The tra-

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34 The *bista* system is similar to the *jajmani* system in India and is a form of economic and social relations in caste society based on the concept of barter, in which families of different castes exchange their services. The relationship is hereditary.

ditional occupation of Sarki, curing and tanning hides and repairing shoes, was given up long ago although a few people continue to repair shoes in city areas. During the agricultural off-season, most Dalit men work as carpenters and as masons, which are considered to have more respect than their traditional occupations. During the agricultural season, both men and women are engaged mostly as labourers for the high castes.

### *Caste Consciousness and Rejection of Status of Untouchability*<sup>35</sup>

There has been a massive change in the self-perception of Dalits in Ghachok and Godamchaur since 1990. The beginnings of this change can be traced to 1950 and the limited democracy of the period, with the erosion of the legal and official sanction of the caste system as well as increased mobility of Dalits, both within and outside of the country. Despite these initial positive indications, the introduction of the Panchayat system and its political and social values constrained the rise of consciousness as well as mobilisation against the continued prevalence of the caste system. But the political change of 1990 and other social and economic processes that followed helped raise caste consciousness once again. It was helped by factors such as the relative improvement in the economic condition of Dalits, the changing nature of local politics, the spatial mobility of Dalits, and interventions by NGOs and INGOs.

The economic status of Dalits in the villages improved significantly after 1990, mainly as a result of labour migration to the Gulf countries and Malaysia. This had the effect of considerably reducing their dependence upon the upper castes. For example, at least one male member from each Dalit family from Ghachok is presently employed as a labourer in a foreign country. The remittance from this labour migration has been invested mainly in their children's

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35 In order to enable a greater understanding of micro-level local identity politics, a detailed life history of a Dalit individual has been presented as an annex. This will serve to illustrate not only how a Dalit perceives himself, his caste, and high castes but will also demonstrate how he has managed or struggled to live within the caste system.

education, building houses and purchasing land. Most Dalits now assert that they are equal to the upper castes in terms of economic status and that they no longer need to depend upon others in the village for their livelihood.

It was also after 1990 that the political relationship between Dalits and the upper castes of Ghachok and Godamchaur began to undergo significant changes, with the increasing involvement of Dalits in village politics. The Dalits were able to perceive their own strength as various political parties in the village sought their support and also gave commitments towards development activities for Dalits. Some Dalits fought the local elections in 1997 at the VDC and ward levels. The presence and political bargaining power of Dalits also increased owing to the Local Self-Governance Act 1999, which had a provision for inclusion of excluded groups such as Dalits and Janajatis in local government bodies such as village, municipal and district councils. Dalits also began to participate in various committees like the Forest Management Committee, School Management Committee and VDC councils. All this political opportunity and power has helped the Dalits to compete with the upper castes and, ultimately, challenge their supremacy.

Spatial mobility (or temporary migration) of Dalits has had a significant role in creating awareness about their caste status in their villages. Dalits have a history of migration to other countries, where they did not experience caste discrimination, and also learnt the discourse of equality. These Dalits, once back in the village, introduced these ideas and began to question the caste hierarchy and the forms of discrimination based on it.

Lastly, NGOs and INGOs that came to Ghachok and Godamchaur with various programmes introduced an alternative way of life and also the concepts of equality and rights. The Dalits of Ghachok even established an NGO called Janajagaran Bikas Kendra (Public Awareness Development Centre) in 1998. These NGOs and INGOs have contributed in their own ways to creating awareness about their rights and raising their voice against discrimination. A Damai woman talked about such a positive impact in her own life:

Earlier, I did not know how to speak with strangers. I was even afraid to talk to the teachers and the VDC secretary. I would be rather nervous whenever I had to talk to them. I also did not have any idea about where and how to access resources. After I joined the women's group, I found myself confident because now I am more aware, know how to access local resources, and do not even hesitate to speak to 'big' people.

These changes have helped Dalits question the inequality between the higher castes and themselves. Also important in this awareness has been the knowledge that all these forms of injustices were not ordained by god, but created by the upper castes to perpetuate the status quo. Now, the Dalits are quick to grasp injustices by the upper castes in almost every aspect of their life – ploughing, access to the forest, drinking water and irrigation, schooling, and so on – and use such examples to describe their exploitation and discrimination by the upper castes. A Damai woman says:

Bahunns do not allow the supply of drinking water to our community. They have plenty of water, with many taps in a single household, such as in the bathroom, kitchen and courtyard. But there is only one tap in our community for about 20 households. While we do not have enough water to drink, they have water to irrigate the paddy and vegetables. They do not allow us to use the forest to meet our needs, they do not employ Dalit teachers in school, and they misuse the scholarships allocated to our children.

As a result, the Dalits have begun to re-define their status. The claims for equality and denial of the practice of untouchability have been accompanied by changes in their social and cultural practices and worldviews. This mainly includes discarding some of the traditions that are inconsistent with their claim in addition to redefining traditions and worldviews that have traditionally presented them

as inferior and impure people. Disputing with the upper castes has also been a key factor in the process of rejecting the inferior status. All these socio-cultural changes and processes have played an essential part in their claiming a positive and equal identity, which will be described in detail below.

### *Reforming Culture*

A process of reformation among Dalits of Ghachok and Godamchaur includes avoidance of those traditions and practices considered impure and having low social prestige, such as pig-raising, consumption of carrion, alcoholism, quarrelling, use of obscene language, marriage by elopement, and general uncleanness. Rearing of pigs and consumption of carrion have completely ceased. This is even more significant given that carrion was a major source of food for Sarkis in the past. Incidences of alcoholism, quarrelling, use of vulgar language, and unhygienic practices have also reduced significantly compared to the past.

The Janajagan Bikas Kendra in Ghachok has contributed much to this process by creating awareness about the negative consequences of such practices and even imposing a ban on alcoholism and carrion consumption, among others. In fact, it has made provisions to punish drunkards and carrion-eaters with public humiliation and cash penalty. During my time in the village, an old and illiterate Sarki was suspected of eating carrion. The president of Janajagan Bikas Kendra interrogated the suspect and searched for the carrion in his house. But, he did not find anything and the suspect was proved innocent. Similarly, on another occasion, after receiving recurring information about a man butchering a dead goat, the president examined the goat carcass to find out whether it had died due to disease or by some other means. When he found that the goat had been killed by a tiger, the man was allowed to consume the goat.

This phenomenon of cultural reformation may be akin to the process of 'Sanskritisation' described by Srinivas, i.e., 'the process by which a low Hindu caste, or a tribal or other group, changes its customs, rituals, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high,

and frequently, twice-born caste' (Srinivas 1972: 6). But, the requisite end result of Sanskritisation – aspiration of high-caste status by the group in question – is found to be lacking among the Dalits of Ghachok and Godamchaur, who, in reality, reject the hierarchy of castes.<sup>36</sup>

### *Redefining Cultural Meaning*

The process of redefinition includes the rejection of Dalits' untouchable status and the supposed behaviour based on it along with an assertion of equality with the upper castes. This assertion is made with the help of three aspects: blood, origin tales and culture. Some Dalits claim that all people and castes are equal; no one is high or low because their blood is the same (red). Most Dalits reject their low-caste status, often asking if the blood in their body is not the same colour as that of the other castes.

Some Dalits, especially the older generation, resort to using mythical origin tales to claim equality. According to Arun, the mythical narratives play an important role in shaping the identity of people (2007: 101). Sarkis, Damais and Kamis have their own origin stories which reject their inferior status. For example, Kamis believe they are the descendants of Bishwakarma, the god of machinery and architecture, and that the Vedas initially belonged to them. Damais believe that they have high origins since they are placed at the beginning of ceremonial processions, where they play various traditional musical instruments. The Sarkis make a similar claim, according to which the darkening of the moon during an eclipse is the result of its capture by a Sarki. Therefore, they claim that the Sarki is not an inferior caste as they are even able to capture the moon. Some Sarkis also believe that the female Sarki, commonly called Sarkini, was so beautiful that the God *Sukra* (Venus) married her in ancient times.<sup>37</sup> A Sarki described the origins of the Sarki caste thus:

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36 I have made this argument in detail in another paper (BK 2008).

37 It is believed by some rural people that a certain period every year, when the planet Venus is seen in the western sky, is inauspicious because of the fact that the Venus remains with his low-caste Sarkini wife during this time.

The Kamadhenu<sup>38</sup> cow was worried about her body after death. Although her urine, milk and dung would be used by people, she did not know what people would do to her dead body. So, she went to the God Brahma to express her concern. Brahma assured her that he would eat the meat of the cow after her death. On dying, the cow was butchered and the meat was divided into four parts for Brahma and his three brothers: one of the brothers collected only abdominal parts, another collected the bones, yet another collected the skin, and the last one collected only flesh. The brother who collected the intestine became a Brahmin, who began wearing the sacred thread (*janai*) as a symbol of the intestine. The brother who collected bones became the Sanyasi and they use *pheri* [the horn of a type of deer called Baranth]. The brother who collected the skin became Kami so that they could use it in the *khalanti* [bellows]. Lastly, the brother who collected the flesh became Sarki, and that is why they eat the *sinu* [meat of a dead animal] of the cow and work with the skin.<sup>39</sup>

These myths help make sense of how Dalits view the caste hierarchy and what they aspire towards. Sarkis have attempted to demystify the claim that their low-caste status was acquired due to the consumption of carrion or beef. In this process, they have claimed that the Sarkis did not consume carrion and beef, and that individuals belonging to all the castes were siblings originating from the creator, Brahma. They have thus repudiated the Brahmanical claim of superiority and purity.

Although Dalits may have discarded some of their past cultural practices because of which they were considered impure by the upper castes, they are now either assigning new meanings or attempting to revive these very practices. For example, the cow is worshipped as Goddess Laxmi by Hindus, including Sarkis, and

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38 In Hindu mythology, a divine cow that grants wishes.

39 Origin myths vary from place to place. For instance, Steven Folmar (2010) found a different version of origin myth among Sarki of Jharuwarasi in Lalitpur district.



eating beef is considered a sin. Despite the Sarkis having had a long tradition of eating carrion and beef,<sup>40</sup> they began avoiding it on becoming aware that it negatively affected their status. While any form of beef had been completely absent from their food for some time, many Sarkis have now begun to consume it again. A new and positive meaning has also been given to beef (but not to cow carrion). They now claim that the meat of all animals is similar, and that there is no inferior animal or meat. They have finally come to an understanding that it was the upper castes, and not science, who assigned an inferior status to pork and beef.

Many Sarkis believe that beef has medicinal properties. They also believe that they were stronger and healthier in comparison to other castes, owing to their beef-eating habit. Another commonly held belief is that Europeans consume beef for this same reason. Beef-eating also came to be viewed positively because Maoist cadres frequently consumed beef by slaughtering cows (which is still illegal by Nepali law) in the village during the insurgency. Another of my studies (BK 2010) shows that in contrast to the religious meaning of beef-eating for Bahuns–Chhetris, who consider it a sin, Sarkis have an areligious meaning associated with nutritional and medicinal value.

### *Resistance*

Dalits reject their untouchable status not only ideologically but also in practice. They immediately confront the upper castes if they are treated as untouchables or excluded from village resources. Such an attitude has played a major role in the formation and fortification of positive identity, and has also helped unite them and to form a strong sense of belonging to their respective groups.

Most of the confrontations between Dalits and the upper castes are personal and end up in small quarrels or in an exchange of remarks from both sides. For example, if a Dalit is accused of touch-

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40 Slaughtering of cows is illegal in Nepal, and, therefore, only the meat of a cow dead from natural causes is allowed to be consumed. These days, the Sarkis only consume the fresh (within a day of death) meat of a cow that has died accidentally, and not because of illness.

ing an upper caste, he or she immediately refutes implications of this action with the argument such as: 'Which part of your body has been touched?', 'Is there any mark where I touched it?', 'Is my caste written on my forehead?', 'Is Bahun written on your forehead?', etc. Although Nepali law punishes the practice of untouchability, it is striking that not a single case has been reported to the police administration or filed in the courts either from Ghachok and Godamchaur.

Besides common incidents of individual resistance, there have been two significant altercations between the Dalits and the upper castes in Ghachok that have helped strengthen Dalit unity. In 2004, a dispute erupted between Dalits and the upper castes following an argument between their respective youth clubs. In protest, for about a week the Dalits boycotted tasks they had customarily done for the upper castes such as ploughing the field, which they refer to as the Hali Andolan (ploughmen's movement).

A second quarrel broke out in 2009 when Dalits demanded equal rights to village resources from the village development committee (VDC). These demands included equal share and access to forests that had been the preserve of the upper castes only, supply of drinking water to the Dalit community, and upgrading the lower secondary school where most Dalit children studied. It should be noted that the use of the forest resources has been a source of continuous dispute for at least three decades.

When the VDC did not fulfil the demands, Dalits staged a movement, known as the Dalit Andolan, for about a month. They held various protest programmes such as locking the office of the VDC, organising rallies, mass meetings and programmes during which satire was used against the upper castes. Although their demands were aimed at the VDC, it turned out that their protests were mainly against the upper castes. As a result, the entire community of Dalits and upper castes got involved in the wrangle that followed. The Dalits chanted slogans such as 'Down with Bahunbad [Brahminism]!', 'Long Live Dalit Unity!', 'Ensure Our Rights!', etc, during their protests. Following a similar pattern of former protests,

the most significant form of protest in this case was the complete cessation of the work done by Dalits for the upper castes for about 10 days. Eventually, as the dispute grew larger, the Dalit teacher was removed from the school and the Dalits started a separate school for their children. These disputes helped create awareness among the Dalits about their status and rights in addition to inculcating a sense of belonging even as the boundary between the Dalits and non-Dalits became starker.

### Changing and Rechanging Names

The process of positive identity formation also involves changes in both individual caste and collective names. The trend has been for Dalits to adopt caste-neutral terms that do not indicate any association to caste. The most significant change has been the use of the term 'Dalit'. It replaced the traditionally used *Achhut* (untouchable) and *Sana Jat* (low caste) that had previously been associated with them. *Sana Jat* (low caste) was the dominant term in Ghachok and Godamchaur before 1990 and is still fairly used.

*Pauni* is also used sometimes, especially by the older generation, to refer to Dalits. This term was in use during the Rana period for official purposes but has lost its relevance today,<sup>41</sup> and its literal meaning is not known in Ghachok, although it is commonly understood that it refers to untouchables or Dalits. A Sarki man in his 80s speculates that Dalits were called *Pauni* because they could get anything from the upper castes by begging and could do whatever they wanted such as drinking alcohol, quarrelling with each other, speaking vulgar words, or sleeping in the streets (*je mage pani pauni ra jaso gare pani pauni*). This understanding clearly underscores their dependence upon the upper castes for their livelihood.

*Sana Jat* was associated with inferior and impure status. Etymologically, it points to inferior status, and accepting the term would mean an acceptance of the caste hierarchy. It not only carried a stigmatised meaning but also had many immediate practical

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41 The *Muluki Ain* of 1854 has used the term *Pauni* on a few occasions.

implications in the life of Dalits, such as being treated as untouchable. Thus, as the identity *Sana Jat* carried a 'heavy load',<sup>42</sup> they readily adopted the term 'Dalit' after 1990 when it was introduced in the village by NGOs, the government, political parties and the media. 'Dalit' did not carry any stigma since it did not indicate caste.

There was one more change after 1990. The caste-specific surnames that carry a lot of significance in villages and strictly regulate inter-caste relationships were gradually replaced by those that refer to clan (*thar*). Preference for *thar* is also partly because the terms are similar to that of the high-caste Bahun-Chhetri, and, hence, help mask their identity as Dalits. Since the surname continues to be the easiest way of identifying the social background of people, changing it has become a common practice among Dalits all around the country.

Caste- or ethnicity-based identities are more common in the village where individuals are still identified on the basis of their caste such as Bahun, Gurung or Sarki. Even the naming of the settlements is on the basis of caste. For instance, Sarki *Thar*,<sup>43</sup> Damai *Thar* (later known as Pariyar *Thar*), Chhetri *Thar*, Lamsal *Thar*, Bhujel *Thar*, etc, are some of the settlements in Ghachok.<sup>44</sup>

The caste names Sarki, Damai and Kami, which were once used without any problem, have now become stigmatised and Dalits feel uncomfortable with them. They also consider these terms to be highly offensive. Therefore, these have been replaced by new and updated versions which did not possess any stigma initially: Nepali, Pariyar and Bishwakarma respectively.<sup>45</sup> Although the his-

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42 A phrase used by Ben Campbell (2008) in the context of Tamang identity.

43 The literal meaning of *Thar* is clan but it is used here in the sense of a locality.

44 Recently, the name of Sarki *Thar* has been changed into caste-neutral names, dividing the village into four settlements such as Dautari Patan, Khor Patan, Majha Patan and Miteri Tole. People feel uneasy to refer to the settlement as Sarki *Thar* nowadays due to the stigmatised meaning associated with the term 'Sarki'.

45 There is no consistency in usage of these new terms. For example, the term Nepali is used and shared by all the three Dalit castes in different geographical locations. While the Kami in mid- and far-western Nepal call themselves as

tory of the usage of these terms in Nepal is not clear, it can be traced as far back as the 1920s.<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, it is only after 1990 that Dalits of Ghachok and Godamchaur began using surnames carrying less stigma and also opting for ones signifying *thar*, as in other parts of the country.

These new names were initially introduced in the village by Dalits who had access to the city or newspapers, or who had contact with district Dalit leaders. On discovering these new terms being used mostly by urbanites, those living in villages, too, began to use them. Bishnu Nepali of Godamchaur, who now uses her *thar* Magarati, began using Nepali a decade ago after others from her caste requested her to do so. Of this, she said:

Once there was a *bangur* [pig] demonstration in the village and I had to register my name for that. When they [the officials in charge of the registration desk] asked my name, I only replied with my first name, 'Bishnu.' They again asked me my *jat* [surname], but I did not know what to say. Then, a man asked them to put my surname as Nepali. Until then, I did not know that we [Sarkis] were called Nepali and others had to tell me my own *jat*.

These new terms were initially preferred because they were caste-neutral, and even new to upper-caste people. An old Sarki man explained why he preferred Nepali to Sarki: 'Nepali is rather suitable, easier to use, and tends towards equality. Sarki is understood merely as a person who consumes dead and decomposing animals. When people hear the word Sarki, they have come to associate it with a person who consumes dead and decomposing animals but a Nepali is understood as a person who remains away from the same.'

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Nepali, the Sarki in western Nepal also call themselves by this term. However, in Ghachok and Godamchaur, the term Nepali is only used by Sarki.

46 In his classic dictionary of the Nepali language, Ralph L. Turner claims that 'Kamī' was being replaced by 'Lohar' since 'Kamī' implied contempt (Turner 1931).

Most Sarkis and Damais revealed that they did not know the meaning of these new terms. Some Sarkis wondered why they were called Nepali and thought that they may have been called Nepali because they live in Nepal. Holding this to be true, they also questioned why other castes who reside in Nepal are not called the same. Therefore, many Sarkis felt uncomfortable using the term because they frequently hear people of other castes claiming that they, too, are Nepali just as anybody who resides in Nepal is one. It is not only Sarkis who have come to use the term Nepali as a surname; there are other groups, such as Kami, Damai and even Newar, who use it. In contrast, most of the Kamis in both the villages confidently claimed that they were called Bishwakarma because they were the descendants of the god Bishwakarma.

Some Dalits, however, especially older adults, are still forced to use the old surnames since these are used in legal documents such as citizenship certificates and land ownership documents. They are left without an option because these documents cannot be changed without a great deal of legal hassle. As a result, they have resorted to using either of the surnames depending on the context. For instance, a person uses Sarki for administrative purposes in VDCs, banks and the District Administrative Office where his citizenship certificate is required but uses Nepali in hospitals, NGOs, schools and political party organisations where his legal surname is not a requisite.

Now, however, even these new caste names have begun to carry stigma since people of other castes became more aware that these terms are used only by Dalits. Hence, the move to adopt *thar* terms such as Mizar, Gairipiple, Basyal, Rokaya, Dhaulakoti, Maujakoti, Senchauri and Dutaraj, among others.<sup>47</sup> The use of *thar* terms is more widespread in Godamchaur than in Ghachok because Dalits of Godamchaur have to frequently interact with new or unknown people as most of them work in the city areas. In Ghachok, much of the interaction of Dalits is limited to within the village, where their

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<sup>47</sup> Acquiring citizenship under the *thar* name was not possible until recently. It was only in the late 1990s that the government began to issue certificates with surnames different than that of the father's.

caste identity is well known. In fact, avoiding reference to their low-caste identity is possible only in situations where they have to deal with strangers.

Overall, changes in the collective and caste-specific names of the Dalit seem to follow a pattern—preference for names that further dissociated them from their caste. In other words, Dalits want to hide their caste names which they view to be an indicator of their low and untouchable status.

### **The Usage and Meaning of ‘Dalit’**

There was confusion, even discomfort, when Dalits first heard of the term that was used to collectively refer to them—Dalit. A Sarki woman in Ghachok related the discomfiture she felt when she first heard it: ‘The term surprised me and I would question myself what it actually meant, who were called Dalits, and why we were being called that.’ But, they gradually began to understand and construct their own meaning of the term.

Dalit was accepted enthusiastically because it had a positive meaning, did not indicate caste, and even had some positive implications. It so happened that following the popularisation of the term, the state introduced some welfare programmes targeted specifically at Dalits and began prioritising their participation in village politics and development programmes. NGOs, too, started implementing such programmes and local government bodies started seeking their participation as well. Political parties, especially the Maoists, advocated equality and the rights of Dalits and also warned the upper castes against practising untouchability. Dalits felt more comfortable with this umbrella term as they felt it helped reduce the various forms of discrimination previously perpetrated against them by the upper castes. The positive changes brought about by the entry of the term ‘Dalit’ into their lives was explained by a Sarki man thus:

It was really difficult to live in this village before we were called Dalits, when we were still being called Kami and Sarki. If we went to the houses of the high castes for work,

they would give us water in vessels that were not part of the household. They would also ask us to wash the dishes in which we ate. Now, after being called Dalits, these discriminatory practices have significantly discontinued.

Despite this ready acceptance, the term is not in everyday usage in the villages. It is mainly used for political or official/legal purposes, whereas traditional caste terms continue to be used for social and cultural spheres. 'Dalit' is used mostly in formal settings and public institutions or programmes, such as in the Village Development Committees, schools, health posts and Forest Management Committees in order to claim the rights and benefits provided by the government. But, the use of the term is also slowly diffusing into the social and cultural life of Dalits. With the understanding that the use of terms such as *Sana Jat* is inappropriate, people from the upper castes have also begun to use 'Dalit' for political purposes and in public and formal programmes.

With the gradual increase in the usage of the term, its meaning and manner of usage in the villages have also seen changes. Moreover, its meaning is different for different people and varies across caste, class, gender, age and education, as will be illustrated by examples below. The meaning also varies across the caste hierarchy so that the term holds different meanings for Dalits in different layers of the internal caste hierarchy. It may also vary depending on the context even for the same individual. In short, its meaning and usage is determined by opportunities and constraints to accessing economic and political resources.

The meaning of 'Dalit' has mainly been constructed in two domains: social and political. The social meaning is associated with the traditional notion of the caste hierarchy and ritual purity/impurity. According to this meaning, being a Dalit is being low caste or untouchable. The political meaning is associated with their aspiration to equality, rights and economic benefits, and considers Dalits to be a political category. This meaning resonates with national-level Dalit activists and intellectuals, whereas the social meaning



is the dominant one for ordinary Dalits in villages. If a person is said to be a Dalit, she or he is immediately placed in the category of low caste or untouchable. The initial caste-neutrality of the term has disappeared and, hence, it is used exclusively to refer to the Kami, Damai and Sarki in the villages. Due to this social meaning, it has a negative connotation for Dalits.

The social meaning has another dimension as well, particularly one that is derived from its literal sense and constructed purely in economic terms, i.e., poverty or deprivation. A Dalit is understood as a person who is very poor and impoverished and does not possess anything. Some Dalits prefer to see the term derived from *dal-inu* (to slave). For them, a Dalit is a person who toils a lot. Regarding the meaning of Dalit, a common saying among them is: '*Daline bhayeko hunale dalit vaneko ho*' (a person is called Dalit because he or she toils). As a Sarki man defined it, a Dalit is a person 'who toils very hard day and night and who cannot survive even a single day without working'.

Such a meaning of 'Dalit', however, includes the poor and impoverished of all castes, including the upper castes. But Dalits in the villages are well aware that the poor among the other castes are not called Dalit. Therefore, some Dalits argue that such individuals and families should also be called Dalits. A Sarki woman showed her dissatisfaction with the fact that she was called a Dalit but not those from the upper castes: 'There are many high-caste people who are poorer and more impoverished than us. Some are so dirty that even we hate to eat the food touched by them. Despite this, they are considered to have higher status than us. And, even though we are rich and clean, we are considered to have low status and are Dalits.'

Economically well-off Dalits do not like being called Dalit because their perception of a Dalit is someone who is poor. In contrast, poor Dalits, although they do not like the term, think that they should accept it since they are poor. For them, 'Dalit' means a state of impoverishment. A Damai man from Ghachok dislikes its meaning associated with traditional notions of caste but does not mind it

in its reference to economic status: 'It may be appropriate to call me Dalit because I am poor and of a low caste. I cannot hide my poverty. It is not reasonable to claim that I am not Dalit if I have nothing to eat in my home.'

Generally, the Dalits in the higher echelon of the caste hierarchy do not like to be called Dalit as they find stigma inherent in the term. Whenever they are outside their village and in more urban settings, they use the *thar* surname so that their identity as Dalits is masked. They even go to the extent of avoiding interactions with other Dalits. For instance, the Kamis in both Ghachok and Godamchaur consider themselves to be superior to the two other Dalit castes (Damais and Sarkis) and prefer to maintain closer ties with Bahuns-Chhetris in terms of exchanges of labour and debt as well as informal conversations.

A Kami man in Godamchaur admitted that he avoided Sarkis and Damais because, in his view, people of these castes are prone to alcoholism, have a quarrelsome attitude, and consume beef and carrion. A 30-year old Kami woman in Ghachok strongly rejected the notion of equality with Damai: 'I do not eat in Damai's house and I do not allow them to enter my home. If they attempt to enter, I immediately voice my objection. Why talk about others when I myself object to it? Until we are treated as equals by Bahun-Chhetri, we will not treat Damai as equals. Damai are inferior to us.'

Kamal Nepali,<sup>48</sup> a Sarki, repeatedly described the negative characters of Damai: 'The Damai do not think about the future; they just think about the present. They do not want to save money. They can be easily manipulated with a glass of alcohol and some buffalo meat.'

For the Damais, who rank lower in the caste hierarchy than Sarkis and Kamis, being Dalit is equivalent to being oppressed and discriminated against by the other two Dalit castes as well. In Ghachok, the Damais not only feel excluded from programmes implemented for Dalits, they also accuse the Sarkis of cornering all

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48 His life history is given in the Annex.

the benefits allocated to Dalits, and, hence, do not like being part of organisations led by Sarkis. A Damai man believes that the Sarki, who are themselves Dalits, should not treat Damai as low caste and untouchable and despairingly describes his low status in the village: 'Not only are we hated and discriminated by the Bahun-Chhetri, but also by Sarkis. I sometime question the kind of life I am living.'

The meaning of being Dalit is also different for men and women. Dalit is used more by men as they have more access to and involvement in social and political activities, both in the village and elsewhere. By their very mobility, they also tend to have varied forms of experiences of being a Dalit. As mentioned earlier, the term is mainly used in the socio-political domain in which men have more opportunities for participation. On the other hand, for women in both villages, being Dalit is being subordinated to and oppressed by men. Women understand the meaning of 'Dalit' very negatively and in terms of the bad habits associated with their men, namely, alcoholism, quarrelsomeness and domestic violence. A Kami woman in Godamchaur constantly abused by her drunkard husband explained what being Dalit means to her in particularly poignant poetic terms:

*Tyo Dalit Dalina Maatra Jaandachha,  
Thulaale Bhaneko Maandachha,  
Aafno Jaatko Kura Maandaina,  
Samajdaarima Chaldaina,  
Gharma Chulo Baldaina,  
Kahilyei Sudhrina Jaandaina,  
Tesko Baani Sudharna Sakidaina.*

(Dalit is a person who knows only how to toil,  
Who obeys the upper castes,  
Who does not listen to his own caste,  
Who does not reach any kind of understanding,  
Whose hearth in his home does not get lit,  
Who never knows how to reform,  
Whose habits can never be changed.)

### *Disenchantment with 'Dalit'*

Although the term 'Dalit' carried a positive sense initially, it has acquired a stigmatised meaning in social contexts. Many Dalits have begun to show dissatisfaction with the term as it gradually became nothing more than a synonym for what had been previously known as untouchables through various names. It is clearly echoed in a Sarki man's perception, who says: 'Dalit seems to be just a change in name. Sarki is also Dalit, Dalit is also Sarki, and Nepali is also Sarki. In fact, the basis of all these terms is Sarki. This is all deception.'

But, regardless of how they feel, Dalits are forced to use the term now because it has been granted legal sanction. Even if they can avoid this identity in informal interactions, they cannot do so in a formal setting because it is the only means to substantiate claims to benefits and rights such as scholarships; reservations in government service and education; allowances for the elderly; nominations to various government bodies; etc.

### **Manipulating Identity**

Dalits hide their identity due to the negative meaning associated with their caste. Hiding of an identity is a strategy to both negotiate and challenge caste. Caste identities are particularly hidden in interactions with strangers as a strategy to avoid discrimination against them. Some Dalits just hide their caste identity by not using it, which Folmar terms as the 'politics of anonymity' (2010: 102). According to Folmar, the 'politics of anonymity entails cloaking one's identity so that it is either ambiguous or appropriates a higher status suggesting membership in a caste to which one does not in fact belong'. Kamal Nepali,<sup>49</sup> who did not reveal his surname in an introduction programme in order to hide his identity, is a case in point. Although he did not explicitly claim high-caste status, the fact that he did not mention his caste suggests that he wanted to present himself as a high caste.

Some Dalits adopted surnames from their *thar* that are similar

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49 His life story is given in the Annex.

to those of high-caste Bahun-Chhetri in order to pass off as high castes themselves, a phenomenon called 'dissembling' by Berreman (2009) and 'passing' by Gupta (2000). But, the hiding of identity is not permanent. It is hidden only in new places and with strangers, and only if Dalits think that they will be discriminated against. It is, therefore, notable that they do not feel the need to hide their caste identity in situations where they are unlikely to be discriminated against. For example, if their caste identity is asked in tea shops and guest houses in rural areas or while inquiring about room for rent in city areas, they hide their caste identity, but they usually do not hide their caste identity in big hotels/lodges in city areas, grocery stores in both city and rural areas, and in public transportation.

Dalits hide not only their identity, but also try to give up the behaviour typically associated with them such as drinking alcohol; consuming pork, buff and beef; keeping the company of Dalits who are untidily dressed; etc. A college student in Ghachok revealed that she has been renting a room in the nearby town of Pokhara by pretending to be upper caste, and she mostly avoids pork and buffalo meat as well as inviting Dalit guests who can be easily recognised by her landlord.

Most Dalits have bitter experiences of discrimination when openly using their caste identity in new places, and, so, most of them hesitate to mention their surname when being introduced to strangers. Lalita Nepali of Ghachok described how her relationship with a high-caste woman took a negative turn when her caste was revealed:

I was once working for a high-caste woman in a nearby village. Initially, we had a very good relationship and she even addressed me as 'sister' and I also did the same because our maternal home was in the same village. She used *tapai* [an honorific for 'you'] initially. Later, when I told her my father's name, all of a sudden she used *ta* [a non-honorific for 'you'], saying, 'Oh, *ta* [you] are *his* daughter!' Later, I quarrelled with her and refused to wash the dishes I had had my lunch in.

Nonetheless, Dalit and individual caste identities are not always rejected, and depending on the context, these are sometimes asserted. This, as mentioned earlier, happens especially when the Dalits have to claim benefits of the policy of inclusion, the quota system, and programmes targeted specifically at Dalits. A Kami man in Godamchaur, who uses the *thar* name Dutaraj for himself, used Bishwakarma for his children in school, knowing that benefits such as scholarships provided for Dalit students can be withheld if a *thar* name that is similar to those of the upper caste is used.

## Conclusion

This paper demonstrated that the formation of a Dalit identity is an outcome of the interrelated efforts of the Nepali state, Dalit activists, and ordinary rural Dalits. While the state created the grounds for the emergence of a Dalit identity and Dalit politics by legally bestowing on the Dalits a low and untouchable status, Dalit activists paved the way for the development of the identity and also gave it content and meaning. Additionally, the ordinary rural Dalit's everyday experience of constant resistance and negotiation while coping with caste status has given a social and cultural meaning to the Dalit identity.

The paper also showed that the understanding of the Dalit identity is not uniform for these three key players and neither is it for any groups of individuals or actors. Since Dalit is a polysemic and contested term, its meaning varies across caste, gender, economic status, education, political background and geographic region. This can be attributed to the fact that these factors, along with the opportunities and constraints of an individual, are instrumental in the determination of the meaning of any form of identity. As Berreman puts it, 'Individuals have differential experience, differential aspiration, various advances, differential definitions of the situations, and differential relevance, which leads to differential designations and interpretation of [social] identity' (1972: 574).

A significant difference in what 'Dalit' means is observed between ordinary Dalits in rural communities and Dalit activists.

While it has a political meaning for the activists since that identity is used to assert equality, rights and social justice for Dalits, the term carries a different meaning for ordinary Dalits who engage in constant resistance, rejection, contestation and negotiation of the caste hierarchy vis-à-vis the high castes. Therefore, ordinary Dalits find the social meaning of their identity to be negative because of the reference to their inferior and untouchable condition from which they wish to escape and prefer to adopt the *thar* names that do not indicate their association with low caste status.

Dalit politics is a reflection of an unjust past associated with humiliation and subjugation and the search for an equal status by attempting to erase that past. The construction of a positive identity by discarding the negative one is the most prominent feature of local identity politics. Dalits have been reforming their culture and tradition, redefining cultural meaning, engaging in confrontation, changing their surnames, and hiding and manipulating their identities in order to claim a different, positive identity.

Lastly, the formation of Dalit identity is not based on common cultural symbols. Guneratne argues that a shared cultural symbol is not a necessary pre-condition for the development of ethnic identity and that the emergence of such an ethnic identity should be sought in politics, not culture (2002: 189). Drawing on this argument, it may be stated that the force propelling the development of a Dalit identity is based on a common historical experience of untouchability. Since Dalits are a heterogeneous group constituting of different hierarchical castes, their sub-identities along caste, gender and region cross-cut, interlace, compete and, sometimes, oppose each other. Despite the striking differences among these sub-identities, they all have a commonality – the experience of being untouchable – and thus share a strong sense of belonging to the same group.

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## Annex

### The Life of Kamal Nepali

Kamal Nepali, a Sarki by caste, is 58 years old.<sup>1</sup> A barely literate man, he works as a farmer and as a mason, and is also involved in village politics. He has spent about half of his lifetime as a *hali* (ploughman) for many high-caste households.

Although his caste occupation according to the traditional Hindu social system is tanning hides and working with leather, he has never been engaged in it. It was due to poverty that he was forced to discontinue his study after Class Three and had to join a high-caste household called *bista* or *data* (giver), as a *hali*. His family did not own any cultivable paddy fields or cattle, and so the family had to depend only on his father's earnings also as a *hali*.

Kamal's own experience as a ploughman was bitter: while ploughing required much physical labour, he was also generally mistreated by the *bistas*. He still remembers the moment as a 15- or 16-year-old working for his first plough-service, when his only option was to cry to soothe the physical pain of ploughing. Looking back, he feels that he was given even less respect than an animal.

#### Perception of Injustices and the Beginning of Resistance

Within a few years of Kamal's engagement with the *bista*, he began to notice more clearly his low status in society and the difference between his caste and the upper castes. He realised that his caste was hated, exploited and suppressed by the high castes. Kamal wanted to bring an end to such unfair practices (*niti*). He had experienced first-hand many of these existing practices such as how Sarkis would provide labour to the high castes in exchange for something like buttermilk,<sup>2</sup> the expectation of additional work from ploughmen outside of their regular work hours (mostly mornings or eve-

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1 In the year 2008.

2 In Nepali villages, buttermilk, which is a by-product of making ghee, is considered to be worthless and given free of cost.

nings) and even after the end of the regular ploughing season with either minimal or no payment, the amount of grain paid to the *hali*, and the low wage rates for daily labour.

Kamal made up his mind to begin to speak against such practices and to attempt to end them where possible. He began by supplying a smaller bundle of *nigalo* (a variety of bamboo used to make baskets) than expected to the household of a former *mukhiya*.<sup>3</sup> Sarkis had to supply a bundle of *nigalo* from the forest to the *mukhiya* for food such as grains, yoghurt and ghee that they 'borrowed' from him, even though they still had to pay in cash for the same. Though Kamal had begun to feel that having to supply the *nigalo* was a form of exploitation, he still had to supply it because his father had also 'borrowed' something from the *mukhiya*.

Although the *mukhiya* now expected a larger bundle carried by Kamal, who was stronger than his father, Kamal felt that this was the right time to resist the high castes. He, therefore, took a bundle of *nigalo* that was about half the size than those brought by the other Sarkis. When the *mukhiya* saw this, he naturally got furious and scolded him but Kamal pretended that the *nigalo* in the forest was not enough to make a good enough bundle. However, he later revealed the truth to his friends that he had deliberately brought a smaller bundle as a sign of defiance.

After this incident, Kamal was on the lookout for more such opportunities to resist. After a few years, at the age of 28, he openly asked the *mukhiya* to increase his wages, which he rightly claimed was too low to maintain a family. He also asked some Sarki women who were working for the *mukhiya*, to stop working until their wages were increased. But the women were afraid of possible threats from the *mukhiya*. This was the first time that Kamal got into a direct tussle with such a powerful person and he felt both excited

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3 *Mukhiya*, headman of a village, was a government clerical post lower than *dittha* during the Rana regime. Although such posts were legally removed by the Panchayat regime, people who formerly held the posts could still influence socio-cultural and political power relations. Sometimes the title was passed down hereditarily even though it had no legal sanction.

and frightened. Feeling cornered, Kamal threw to the ground the baskets the women were using to carry rocks. Although at loggerheads initially, the *mukhiya* had no choice but to give them a raise after a few days.

In another such incident, Kamal quarrelled with and beat a *bista*, who was a former *dittha*. The *dittha* was authoritarian and very rude to Dalits. The quarrel erupted after the *dittha* scolded Kamal for refusing to do extra work for him. Although the *dittha* was a much powerful and respected person, there had been anger building up for a long time because of the *dittha's* abusive behaviour towards him. Surprisingly, the *dittha* neither sought legal help nor expelled Kamal from his job as a *hali*. Although he had feared of his reputation in the aftermath of the incident, Kamal was in fact regarded highly by the others. This change in people's perception was also reflected by the fact that he was subsequently sent invitations for meetings and gatherings in the village.

### **Efforts to Escape Caste**

Kamal continued as a ploughman for the *dittha* for another two years. By this time, Kamal was not only disenchanted with providing such service and doing other work for the high castes, he was also frustrated in his efforts to fight against the caste system. Therefore, he made up his mind to migrate to Indian cities for work in order to escape a life of servitude. Most of the adult Sarki men, including his father and younger brother, had also migrated there. It was in 1983 that he went to Shillong, a town in Northeast India, where he worked in a coal mine for about six months, and returned home on receiving a message that his daughter was sick.

Now, Kamal did not have any interest in working again as a *hali* or in engaging in any form of traditional work. He already had had some experience working with bamboo, which was further enhanced by a three-month skill training provided by the Department of Cottage and Small Industries, where he learnt how to make bamboo products. But, Kamal was eventually forced to continue to offer his ploughing services to meet the day-to-day needs of his family as

there was not enough earning from the bamboo products or from other work he undertook.

In the same year, Kamal received a job offer from a high-caste man in Gulariya, a small town in the mid-western Tarai, but he feared possible difficulties arising from his caste status. The man told him not to fear and even committed not to reveal Kamal's caste in any case. Kamal was introduced only as a trainer.

The following year, Kamal was appointed trainer by the same organisation in Salyan District in mid-western Nepal. Although he could conceal his caste from the villagers in Salyan as in Gulariya, he could not do so from his colleagues, who could easily refer to his certificates for citizenship and bamboo-training. He expected discrimination from his colleagues who were mostly upper caste. In contrast, he was treated equally and even ate his first meal seated with the high castes. He thus recalls his uneasy experience:

I was confused when the peon called me to the kitchen for dinner. My hesitation to enter the kitchen was mainly because I felt uneasy about dining together with high-caste people. As I had to remain in Salyan for a fairly lengthy period (three months), I did not want to conceal my caste from my colleagues. I had already told them about my caste because I did not want to be seen as dishonest if they ever discovered that I was a Dalit. They were all seated on a mat in a straight line. I stopped just outside the door and when I hesitated, they again asked me to come in. I asked them directly whether I should enter the kitchen, therefore indicating that I was a low-caste man. They counter-questioned and asked me to get in and join them for dinner. It was only when they said that everyone was a stranger for the villagers, and that we could eat together, that I finally entered the kitchen and joined them for dinner.

Nonetheless, he continued to conceal his caste from the villagers and hence received the kind of respect that was usually accorded to



an upper-caste man. He entered the homes of many high castes and shared meals with them. But, he remembers that he was in constant mental turmoil because although he was behaving like he was of high caste, he knew in his heart that he was an untouchable.

A few years later, he experienced similar internal conflict on a trip of the Forest Management Committee to a village in Syangja District. This time, despite his attempt to conceal, his caste was revealed and he was consequently treated as an untouchable. He explained the confusion he felt during an introduction and welcome programme after they reached the village:

We were all sitting on chairs in a circle when the introduction programme began and the introductions of many high castes followed. I began to get worried about revealing my caste because I knew I would be humiliated and discriminated against if I revealed my caste. There had been one Kami in the tour, but he was absent during the introduction and I was, therefore, the lone representative of my caste. My confusion mainly revolved around whether I should introduce myself as Sarki, Nepali,<sup>4</sup> Dalit or nothing at all. When my turn finally came, I just introduced myself as Kamal Bahadur and omitted my caste completely.

Though he had escaped discrimination for the time being, it lasted only till the next day when he revealed his caste. While he ate dinner together with the host (Gurung) family and slept in the upper floor of their house on the first day, the next day he had to have his dinner alone and slept outside the house. Since Kamal was a stranger to the village, he did not oppose the discrimination.

### **Entering Village Politics**

Upon realising that he could not erase unfair *niti* (practices) against Dalits without being directly involved in politics and holding a po-

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4 Nepali is his recent caste name which has replaced the earlier Sarki.

litical position, Kamal began to attend village meetings and started listening to high-caste village politicians in an attempt to learn about politics.

For the first time, in the late 1980s, he became a member of a Forest Management Committee which was overseeing only a small forest. But, he soon became the vice-chair of another forest committee looking after the entire forest of the Ghachok VDC. He considers this to be the most important and challenging position in his life. In addition to leadership challenges, he also faced several defamatory allegations from high castes. Once, high castes charged him of corruption, were prepared to smear soot on his face, and to humiliate him with a garland made of shoes at a mass meeting in the village. But, Kamal was spared because of the support he received from others of his own caste. This was the first time he noticed the strength of collective effort and mobilisation. Addressing the mass meeting, he linked this issue with that of all low-caste people, and said:

They (high caste) are trying to remove our caste from the post (of vice-chairperson). Can a Sarki not become the vice-chairperson of the Committee? They do not want to see a low caste in a higher position because they have to greet and please him in order to get their work done. They are playing against us because they think that the forest is now controlled by our caste. They cannot use any produce from the forest without my approval. You (low castes) have to understand their trick. If you do not understand this, we can never participate in any committee in the village. They have the power to do anything to us. Look, this garland of shoes is not just for me, it is for our whole caste.

This event led Kamal to realise that he would not be able to succeed in his future political career without the support of people from his caste. With this realisation, he then began to make efforts to win their hearts and also began to unite them for the common cause of all Dalits. He also realised that all low castes in the village should be

united with a common voice against the high castes. And, to make room for this united voice, Kamal recognised the need to erase hierarchy within the low castes. He allowed Damai, who were below Sarki in caste hierarchy, to enter his kitchen and share meals with them despite his wife's hesitation.

As a candidate for the post of ward president from the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) in the local elections of 1992, he was defeated by a few votes. He sees the fielding of a Dalit candidate by the Nepali Congress as a strategy of the high castes to divide the low caste votes. In the local election of 1997, he again stood for the position of vice-president of the VDC, this time representing the Rastriya Prajatantra Party. He attributes his subsequent defeat to his belonging to a low caste and having to compete with high-caste people, without adequate support from either his own caste or other castes. He says:

They (Bahun-Chhetri) did not support me in the election because I was a Sarki. If I won the election, they would have to seek my help to get their jobs done, which they evidently did not want to do. My own caste did not support me either because they did not understand that I could contribute to the development of policies favouring people from my caste if I was elected. My caste is such that it can be easily bought with a glass of alcohol and some buffalo meat. They support those who provide them the alcohol and meat.

Just as he had shifted from one *bista* to other in earlier days, he now shifted from one political party to another. He ended up taking membership of all the four political parties active in the village. The main reason behind this was his expectation that every new party he entered would help the low castes. But he was left disheartened by all.

More recently, Kamal has become a strong supporter of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist).<sup>5</sup> He is a district adviser to the

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5 This was before the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) split into Unified

party's Dalit wing, the Dalit Mukti Morcha. But, he is not a whole-time politician and is still involved in various income-generating activities such as agriculture and masonry. He says that the Maoists are committed to offering to Dalits what he has been seeking: an end to the caste system and equal rights for Dalits.

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Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist).

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