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Book Review

Review of *Nepal's Dalits in Transition* by David N. Geller and Krishna P. Adhikari

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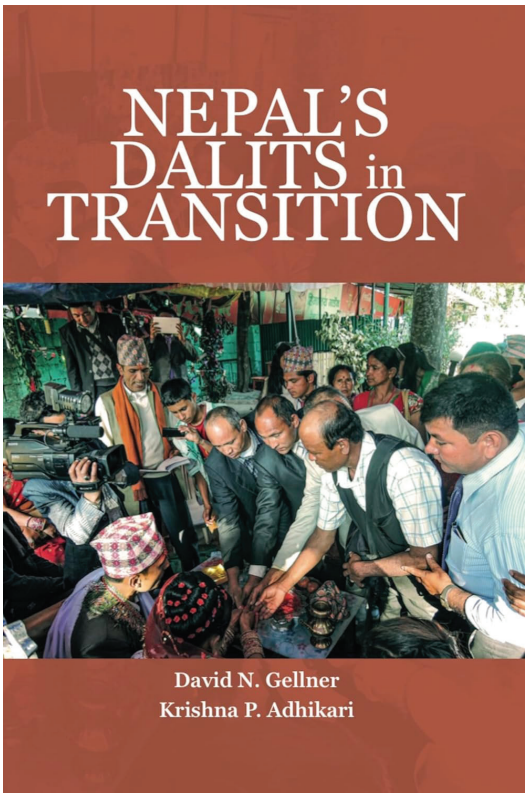

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Due to the paucity of research on Nepal's Dalits, *Nepal's Dalits in Transition* can be read as a handbook of Dalit studies in Nepal, providing a much-needed introduction to this field. Comprising thirteen chapters and an introduction, *Nepal's Dalits in Transition* provides comprehensive coverage of the wide range of issues that the Dalit population in Nepal faces, ranging from the psychological effects of belonging to the Dalit category (Ch.3) and the tension inherent in different strategies of dealing with this identity—for example, claiming vs. concealing it (Intro, Ch.6, Conclusion)—to the history of the term (Ch.2) and changes in the material conditions of Dalit lives (Ch.5,7,8). With several chapters focusing exclusively on the Tarai Dalits (Ch.9 and 10), the volume shows the diversity of Nepal's Dalit population as well as inequalities not only between Dalits and non-Dalits but also within the Dalit community (Ch.10).

Several core themes run through the volume. The first reflects the contradiction between public recognition and the claiming of Dalit identity, often characteristic of the activist path, and identity-based effacement or "strategic passing" (Ch. 13), which is chosen not only by ordinary people but also, as shown by Pfaff Czarnecka (Ch.6), by some highly educated and upwardly mobile young Dalits. Thus, many university-educated Dalit youth are reluctant to be organized based on collective identity. They dislike reservations and refuse to base their identity on suffering, choosing instead to conceal it, which is often taken as betrayal by fellow Dalits (Ch.6).

As Pfaff Czarnecka shows, despite university being a space relatively free from caste discrimination, Dalit students must grapple not only with the lack of social and cultural capital—or, as Gellner and Adhikari call it, "negative cultural capital" (p.300)—but also with dilemmas about how to reconcile their individual life paths and aspirations with the collective struggle for Dalit identity, which is still associated with low status (ibid). Furthermore, as shown by Arjun BK (Ch.4), there is no consensus among Dalits about the term, with many arguing that it stigmatizes and reinforces the boundaries between Dalits and non-Dalits. As Arjun BK demonstrates, the refusal of some Dalits to be called "Dalits" causes resentment among non-Dalits, who insist that people receiving state benefits based on the legal category should own it: "If you feel offended by the term, you should not take allowances" (p.74). Gellner and Adhikari (Ch.13) discuss five ways in which Dalits come to terms with their identity: assimilation, reparation, revolution, ethnicizing identity, and exit (conversion to Christianity).

The second theme running through the volume is the change in the material conditions of Dalit lives. While the chapters provide ample statistical and survey data demonstrating that Dalits remain the most economically disadvantaged group (with the exception of Muslims)—43 percent of Hill Dalits and 38 percent of Madhesi Dalits live below the poverty line as compared to the national average of 25 percent (p.148)—the volume also explores advances made by Dalits in the last decade due to outmigration abroad (Ch.5), affirmative action policies (Ch.12), refusal to perform *balighare* (services to former high-caste patrons) (Ch.5) and increased representation in the public sphere (Ch.13). However, as shown by P. Nepali in Ch.7, land ownership, or, rather, Dalit landlessness, remains a key impediment to Dalit social and political empowerment. Although they comprise 12.9 percent of the population, Dalits own only 1 percent of the land (p.146)—which demonstrates the material basis of the symbolic domination that Dalits endure.

The volume also reveals that discrimination against Dalits goes well beyond the economic domain. By taking a phenomenological approach to the process of *being*, *belonging*, and *becoming* a Dalit, the chapter by Folmar (Ch.3) poignantly shows the psychological burden borne by those inhabiting the Dalit category and the totalizing effects of living at the bottom of the hierarchy. Folmar explores what it means "psychologically to *be* a Dalit person" (p.37), demonstrating the symbolic violence exerted by the ascribed low status, which

people do not choose yet must inhabit and embody. The chapter develops a carefully researched and nuanced argument about the association between belonging to the Dalit category and mental health vulnerabilities. The psychological weight of the Dalit category is such that many parents, according to Folmar, do not tell their children about caste. Contrary to the common assumption that one is born a Dalit, Folmar persuasively demonstrates that becoming one is a "daunting psychological and social process" (p.58) that happens over time during encounters with neighbors, joining a school, or other social interactions.

The tenacity of caste in today's Nepal, especially in the private domain, is powerfully illustrated by Biswakarma (Ch.12). Based on the analysis of twelve inter-caste marriages in the Dhanusa district in the Tarai, Biswakarma demonstrates that caste is rooted in power relations based on birth and kinship. The harrowing cases of physical, psychological, and mental torture inflicted on young people who marry outside their caste and transgress the hierarchical order (ibid.) demonstrate that caste remains a lived reality, despite changes in the public domain. Biswakarma demonstrates that in the Tarai, unlike in the Hills, all cases of inter-caste marriage must go through Mainjan ("caste head" or literally honourable person), who can upgrade caste and excommunicate "upgraded" Dalits from their families. Thus, in cases of hypergamous marriages (non-Dalit males and Dalit girls), the girls must go through a ceremony of caste upgrade to become a non-Dalit.

According to Biswakarma, the double standards inherent in this ceremony—upgrading someone from the status of untouchable to a higher caste while forcing them to treat their own family as untouchable and, more importantly, upgrading only those Dalits whose status would imperil the purity of higher castes—is a clear example that the "caste system is a traditional ploy to retain power" and maintain caste hegemony (p.198). It is also a striking example of how inter-caste marriages, envisioned as the only way to break down boundaries between Dalits and non-Dalits (p.297), might, under certain conditions, reinforce and strengthen the separation.

While the range of themes covered in the volume is impressive, none of the chapters except Ch.11—which takes a gendered perspective on the Dalit social movement—and the chapter by Biswakarma, with its focus on kinship, explore the intersection of gender and caste. This is surprising, given the centrality of gender for understanding caste, as shown by Cameron (Mary Cameron, 1998. *On the Edge of the Auspicious. Gender and Caste in Nepal*. University of Illinois Press).

Having said this, *Nepal's Dalits in Transition* makes an important and much-needed contribution to scholarship on Nepal's Dalit population, with much of the previous scholarship on Nepal having predominantly focused on *janajati* groups. It will be of interest to researchers working on Nepal and on caste in Nepal and South Asia, with individual chapters speaking to scholars working on social mobility and social stratification, social justice and inequalities, structural/symbolic violence, and social movements/activism.

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