

**THE DIALECTICS OF IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE AMONG DALITS IN NEPAL**

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# **THE DIALECTICS OF IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE OF DALITS IN NEPAL**

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University of Pittsburgh, 2010

Based on two broad constituent samples, this dissertation investigates the dialectics -- content, modalities and processes -- of identity across and between two sites of Dalit life in Kathmandu, Nepal: everyday community and organized political advocacy. These samples comprised, respectively, (1) householders from three occupationally segregated Dalit neighborhoods, encompassing discrete communities of sweepers, metalworkers and tailors/musicians; (2) individual Dalit activists in the political sphere. Through 43 interviews with community members and 41 interviews with activists, the research investigated the modalities of identity across everyday and civil-society space and across class, caste, gender and generation. Research questions specifically sought to uncover constraints and possibilities of everyday identities and organized/activist political identities and further differences of gender, class and generation.

The study revealed strong evidence of the continuing embeddedness of caste in Kathmandu. Their everyday experiences of discrimination force both community and political actors to strategically reveal or conceal their Dalit status depending on the situation. Evidence of resistance ranged from everyday individual acts to collective organized forms. The community ethnography revealed important differences across the sweeper, metal-worker and tailor-musician communities. The gender neutrality of the sweeper occupation allows sweeper women relatively more autonomy than that found in the two other occupational caste groups. The tailor/musician group showed all indicators of social mobility into the middle class and had

adopted a caste-denying discourse that allowed them to embrace their musical traditions as an ethnic asset that was parlayed into commercial success.

The political site revealed two important contradictions. First, Dalit activists based in political parties tend to privilege the nation-state and its bounded sovereignty as the strategic and ultimate terrain upon which the struggle for full Dalit inclusion is fought, while Dalit advocates based in non-governmental organizations appeal primarily to international human rights and the claims to universal human dignity. Second, there is a tension between the private lives of Dalit activists in which they negotiate everyday oppression and their public lives as proactive and empowered political actors. Finally, the important political moment of the People's Movement of April 2006 united Dalit activists to fight locally for full citizenship rights.

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## **PREFACE**

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## 1.0 STATEMENT OF RESEARCH

### 1.1.1 Brief Description of Research

During the last quarter-century, there has been a growing Dalit resistance against ongoing caste discrimination and exclusion in Nepali society (Dahal *et al* 2002; Jha 2004). Within this process, a significant number of Dalits are both assertively deploying *and* redefining their “traditional” identities. For my research project, I set out to study the complex and changing dynamics of Dalit identity in Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal, the research site for my study. More specifically, the study seeks to understand differentiation and variation in the reproduction of Dalit identities across (i) socio-spatial boundaries marking the divide between everyday life and organized political life, (ii) intersections of caste, gender, and (rudimentary) class, and (iii) levels of social consciousness and response/agency.

As fate would have it, the timing of my fieldwork coincided with the rapid onset of a history-making political upsurge which took place on a national scale and ushered in fundamental regime change, affording a rare opportunity to study these questions of identity and consciousness within a context of acute political crisis. At the same time, fears that the political insurgency would severely compromise conditions for investigating everyday dynamics were laid to rest with clear and mounting evidence of the enduring social neglect that enveloped most

urban Dalit communities and kept them isolated. Below, I provide further details about the various ways in which I both accounted for and took account of the ongoing political situation.

Given assumptions (a) that politics properly belongs to, and is by definition contained within, public civil-society space, while being conducted “on behalf of” everyday constituents or ordinary folks, and (b) conversely, that ordinary people, particularly oppressed subalterns, operate in the everyday world where identities tend to be tradition-bound and rendered passive by compulsive accommodation to powerful hegemonic norms, my research aimed to study the dialectics of Dalit identities and identity flux within everyday-world frames and against the backdrop of a gathering groundswell of political mobilization against caste discrimination and centuries-old indignities. As such, it gave critical consideration to the “connect” and “disconnect” between civil-society political space and everyday space, and the implications for identity formation. I used an ethnographic approach of in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, participant observation and field notes from two samples of respondents within their respective socio-spatial contexts or sites of operation: (1) householders from three low- to lower-middle income and occupationally (though not all residentially) segregated Dalit neighborhoods, comprising discrete communities of sweepers, metalworkers and tailors/musicians, and (2) individual Dalit political leaders spanning a diverse range of advocates, spokespersons, and activists in the civil sphere, most notably within political parties and non-profit, non-governmental advocacy organizations and groups. The objectives of the research were to address the three following questions (and sub-questions): (a) What are the possibilities and constraints of everyday lifeworlds with regard to the construction and articulation of identities of the oppressed (as victims and/or agents)? Also, what is the evidence of interaction and mutual influence between everyday identities and civil society-mediated political identities? How is

everyday space also its own political space? (b) What are the dialectics (mutually interacting forms and processes) of social response to everyday situations within a range encompassing accommodation and resistance? (c) How do situated and variable Dalit identities and political consciousness differ even further across gender and emerging class differences? In this study I considered civil-society organizational space as a (somewhat exclusive) cultural space, much as I considered everyday space as a form of political space.

### **1.1.2 Relevance of the Study**

My study draws upon theories of space and spatiality as salient dimensions of identity formation, postcolonial feminist theories of the intersectionality of caste, class and gender, and theories of identity formation, resistance and development of consciousness and agency. My research will contribute to a number of specific areas: to both the sociological and the anthropological literature on modern-day caste systems, the processes and socio-spatial modalities of identity formation and political consciousness, the intersectionality of caste, class and gender (and, to a lesser extent, generation), and emerging social movements among long-oppressed and excluded groups.

The broader impacts of my study are expected to include the generation and deployment of new knowledge about the dynamics of social identity and social change in an under-studied, socially excluded, and politically under-served caste-defined grouping in Nepal, a South Asian country with a growing strategic global profile. This research is expected to add significantly to the knowledge base of Dalit organizations and other advocacy groups and programs for the poor and women, government policy-makers, and local and international academic and social researchers. As the first of its kind for Nepal, my study will be critical in providing the tools and



resources for understanding how identity plays a part in the immobilization and mobilization of Dalits and other oppressed groups. It will also provide empirical data that reflects the multiple and contradictory voices of Dalits at a “lived,” everyday, community level and at an organized political level. More specifically, it will facilitate an understanding of key differences between Dalit men and women in their experiences and perceptions of caste discrimination, and of the impact of socio-economic modernization and differentiation on caste identities.

### **1.1.3 Research Rationale**

This study seeks to understand the different levels and sites of identity formation, how they interface or interact dialectically with each other, and how they are marked and differentiated by the intersections of caste, class and gender. I am interested in finding out what happens to Dalit identity and resistance in periods of accelerated change and how identities get politicized and mobilized. I ask: How do identities move, travel or get translated from one context to another and whose voices get heard and represented? Are there distances between leaders and their assumed constituents or between socio-spatial sectors which are unbreachable?

My multi-method research design, which will be explained in detail in the methodology section, provides a unique opportunity to explore the parameters of social identity, especially given the concern to understand social identity as multi-sited and multidimensional. Moreover, in order to capture the meaningful nuances of social interactions, social relations, attitudes and resistance, multiple methods are essential. My research design is intended to investigate intersectionality, spatiality and temporality, in addition to discourse mobility, process and change.

My study is not one about social movements *per se*. I am not looking at whether the Dalit resistance in Nepal is fulfilling certain criteria to fit into the category of a New Social Movement as defined by the literature emanating from Western academic circles. Part of the problem of NSM theory is that it has developed within the specific context of Western Europe and the developed North in general (Gorringe 2005; Gillette 2004). The profound differences between the industrialized nations of the north and the poorer nations of the south are both historical and complex (Gillette 2004). By investigating the dialectics of identity and resistance in Nepal in the context of an *emerging* social movement, I hope to fill the explanatory gaps and add to a productive critique of new social movement theory as flirting with the risk of being conceptually presumptuous and pre-emptive in non-Western contexts. In looking at the politicization and mobilization of Dalit identities, I want to avoid the danger of *reification*. Fraser (2003) notes that conceptual reification of social movements is a major cause for concern. Reification here means detaching social movements from their foundation in historical and lived social relations. In other words, it means the transformation of social relations into a static, pre-determined objective existence (<http://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/r/e.htm#reification>). Moreover, social movement actors are neither homogenous nor necessarily united, and emerging coalitions may be tenuous and fraught with external and internal contingencies that require historically specific explanations (Gorringe 2005). In particular, the social category of Dalits in Nepal is cross-cut by divisions of religion, caste (within caste), region, class position and situation, gender, age and language (Dahal *et al* 2002). One major division that became apparent through my research is the rural-urban or village/metropolitan center divide.

Space is very significant to my project because conflicts and claims making related to space are central to the movement and production of identity in general (Gorringe 2005).

Recently theorists have argued that space is as much a social construct as it is a physical entity, and this construction is significant to processes of inclusion and exclusion.<sup>1</sup> Social space, in other words, is enmeshed in relations of power. In my study the concepts of everyday space and organizational space are important demarcations in charting the multidimensionality, contradictions and slippages of identity formation. The everyday space is one where society is embedded in a web of affective and routine relations. This space denotes the everyday worlds of the Dalits and the shifts between modernity and tradition, where the traditional variables of caste as an occupational, social and symbolic category encounter fragments from the distant discourse of nation-state-based legal rights. The political space in which organizations operate and which provides them with a discourse of legitimacy denotes the market place of citizenship and rights. It is here that subjects are invested with rights and freedoms, which mediate their claims-making (Green 1993; Chandhoke 2002).

As far as physical space is concerned (as stated in the quote below), poor Dalits in Nepal (as in India) are also located in peri-urban spaces on the outskirts of the city because of historical residential segregation justified by the Hindu moral code (P. Sainath in Devi 2000: 50, cited in Gorringe 2005). The voices and agency of actors within this space are very important for my study. “Emphasizing the participants’ own perceptions of Dalit mobilization ensures that we do not neglect the agency and consciousness of the actors themselves” (Gorringe 2005: 39). To overemphasize the institutional influences on, or determinants of, movement organization is to underplay the radicalism and creativity of Dalit movement actors (Gorringe 2005). In the case of Nepal, Rankin (2004) notes that there is a social context in which subordinate subjects have the capacity for critical reflections on inequality and domination that can become a foundation for

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<sup>1</sup> See D. Massey 1994, Hetherington 1998, and Escobar 2001 for a more theoretical account of this relationship between social movements and social space.

more progressive notions of development should planners know how to recognize these cultural resources. While social change certainly requires material redistribution it also necessitates the mobilization of political consciousness through which subordinate groups recognize the established order as an arbitrary human creation, and can be emboldened to fashion alternative moralities. She further points out that there are remarkably few accounts in the field of how large-scale political-economic progress is experienced and interpreted by people in common or how local experiences are differentially constituted. In the cultural domain, local experiences and interpretations play a crucial role in sustaining or challenging large-scale political and economic processes. Potential for critical consciousness therefore lies in the everyday experience of the subaltern actors (Rankin 2004: 162).

The significance of Kathmandu (modernizing urban space) as this study's field-site must be pointed out. Given that Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world and its heavy reliance on foreign aid for "development," the common assumption is that development should be delivered to the villages (Pigg 1992; Tasuro 2001). Therefore, most poverty alleviation and development programs focus on areas outside Kathmandu. In the process of delivering development to the villages (a project which is undeniably critical), the urban poor tend not to fall under the "target groups" of donors or programs. For example, poor urban Dalits are neglected, since donors and development practitioners assume that city Dalits are far better off than their rural counterparts, and, by virtue of their location, may not face problems of poverty, exclusion and caste discrimination. As this study will demonstrate, the Dalit communities selected for this research referred to this exclusion as "*Battimuni adhyaro*," meaning that their situation is one of "darkness underneath the light" (of the city of Kathmandu). In other words, even though Kathmandu is the capital city, and well electrified in contrast to the many rural areas

in Nepal, the situation of Dalit communities right within its boundaries is one of darkness, neglect and exclusion. The significance of urban Dalits as a distinct caste category, therefore, needs to be emphasized along with the more dynamic intersection of class and market economy in a modernizing urban context. The selection of three urban Dalit communities of metalworkers, sweepers and tailors/musicians living in discrete neighborhoods will help to explain the urban dimension of Dalit oppression. Moreover, as an urban center, Kathmandu is a laboratory for the emergence of market-driven class structures and for the growth of new types of economic and political consciousness which make this study even more compelling.

## **1.2 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The caste system in general terms is understood as a hierarchical, ranking system rooted in the Hindu religion. Although the concept of caste is mostly associated with India and Hinduism, this system also exists in other parts of the world, mainly in South Asia (Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal), Japan and Africa. It is estimated that 260 million people worldwide suffer from caste discrimination (<http://www.idsn.org/>). Sociologists have found it difficult to arrive at a definition of caste because it involves the subjective identification of caste via data that varies from group to group and from time to time (Shah 2004: 4). According to the Indian sociologist, Ghurye (2004), any attempt at definition (of caste) is bound to fail because of its complexity.

The word Caste is not indigenous to India or South Asia but derives from a Portuguese word, “casta.” The sixteenth and seventeenth century usage by colonial traders in India denoted a rather broad definition -- “species” or “breeds” of animals or plants and “tribes,” “races,”

“clans,” or “lineages” among men (Cambridge Encyclopedia; Cameron 1998). It also meant “pure” or “chaste,” as well as inherited class, in their own European society. The British used caste as a basis for classifying the Hindu Indian population in the population censuses of the late 19th Century during British rule. As Shah (2004) notes, even within a country like India, caste is not restricted to Hindus, but pervades all strata of Indian society so that there are castes among Muslims, Jains, Sikhs, and Christians. The same can be said for Nepal.

The word “caste” does not adequately comprehend the caste system and its complexities. The Sanskrit words *varna* and *jati* need to be spelled out to explain the caste system. These two words denoting two dimensions of caste are commonly translated as “caste” but this is misleading and obscures important differences between them. Caste, therefore, is best understood as having two different aspects – one oriented toward the systematic classifying and ranking of people (*varna*) and the other constituting everyday transactions and relations and the cultural and interactional system (*jati* or *jat* in Nepali). These two dimensions of caste are commonly conflated in the general use of the word (Cameron 1998; Shah 2004).

*Varna* literally refers to the form and color of something and, as a ranking system, this refers to the four principal *Varnas*, or large caste categories. Hindu religious scriptures, like *Dharma Sutras* and *Dharma Sastras*, the *Gita* and the *Manusmriti*, confirm a system of socio-religious stratification based on the four-tiered ideal, *catu-varna*, the four caste-orders. There are four *Varnas*. At the highest tier are the *Brahmins* (priests and teachers), then come the *Ksatriyas* (rulers and warriors), the *Vaisyas* (merchants, traders, commoners, and yeomen farmers), and the *Shudras* (servants, laborers and artisans). The *brahmans*, *ksatriyas*, and *vaisyas* men are *dvija*, twice-born, because they have a second, spiritual birth when they are invested with the sacred thread. They had the right to read the religious scriptures of the Vedas whereby

they acquired a second spiritual birth (Encyclopedia of Religion; Olivelle 2004b). The patriarchal rules of the ancient religious law, *Manusmriti*, gave the twice born status only to men. Even though women were born into a higher caste, they acquired their spiritual and ritual caste status only through their husbands, i.e., through marriage. For example, the marriage ceremony was equivalent to women being vested with the sacred thread (Olivelle 2004b). A fifth category that was outside the *varna* social order system were also known as *Ati-Sudras* or *Avarnas* and consisted of those known as "untouchables" and more recently as Dalits. They were often assigned tasks too ritually polluting to merit inclusion within the traditional *varna* system.

In the real world, however, several castes do not fit exclusively into any of these categories, nor are all individuals aware of *varna* categories. For example, in Nepal the *Shudras* are sometimes called untouchables. Cameron (1998:12) points out that the "convention is now to use untouchable and low caste interchangeably." What matters then is their *jati*, which defines social interaction and social status (Shah 2004:5). The word *Jati* comes from the root *jan*, meaning "to beget" or "to produce" and is used to denote origin and the group or class to which something belongs. Scholars in Nepal have used the word *Jat* in different ways; it means in essence "species" or "kind" and has been variously rendered by English writers as "tribe," "caste," "ethnic group," and "nation." Hofer (1979:10) notes that the terminology of the Nepali Legal Code of 1854 does not distinguish between caste and ethnic group (tribe). The term *jat* is used for both. *Jat* is also used by ethnographers who have studied ethnic groups in Nepal. These terms, however, are not static. The rendering of ethnic group in Nepal has evolved from *janjati* (tribes) to, more recently, *adivasi* (indigenous groups). *Jat* in Nepal is also used to mean gender. In other words *Jat* usage might cover any significant social difference, e.g., sometimes respondents in this research talked about only two *jat* (groups/species), women (*aimaijat*,

*aimaikojat*) and men (*lognayjat, lognayko jat*). However, in other contexts *jat* may be used to denote hierarchy of castes.

Viewed within the framework of caste, *jati* is the social stratum into which one is born. One is fixed in a *jati* by birth and there are sets of rules governing acceptable occupations, foods, marriage, and association with other *jatis*. Though there are only four *varnas*, there are thousands of *jatis*. The *jatis* could be seen as the contemporary expression of “caste” as a residual historical category. For example, all Indians including non-Hindus have *jati* (that is, caste) by birth, as an identity for social interaction. But the meaning of *jati* is not the same among Hindus and non-Hindus; caste does not have a religious sanction among the latter, it is merely a social stratum of which they are a part. Among Hindus it is believed that one’s *jati* is a reward or punishment for one’s *karma* in one’s previous life (Shah 2004: 4). The relationship between the *varnas* and *jatis* is complex.

The discussion on caste among sociologists is centered on *jati*. Notwithstanding different perceptions of caste and the difficulties of definition, there is a consensus among scholars regarding the central ideological thrust which underlies the caste social order. The definition below summarizes the definition of the caste system:

Broadly speaking the caste system has been governed by the concept of purity and pollution; by interpersonal relationship among individuals being dictated in terms of blood, food and occupation; and by rituals related to them being divided into pure and impure. It is obligatory for each Hindu to confine her/his relationship and interaction within the restricted circle called *jati* so as to maintain purity in marriage relationships; in exchanges of food and in the pursuit of occupations. (Shah 2004: 6)

“At the empirical level, caste hierarchy has never been static. Like all social systems it has been shaped and re-shaped in local milieus” (Shah 2004:8), a dynamic which this dissertation hopes to



show. The history of Nepal's caste hierarchy provided in the following section will help explain the local caste context in Nepal.

### **1.2.1 A Brief History of the Caste System in Nepal**

Given a basic background of the caste system in general, I would like to move to Nepal's historically specific features. Nepal's caste system in relation to Dalit identity, consciousness and resistance has received little attention (Dahal *et al* 2002). This has led to an assumption that the prolific literature on caste in India can simply be applied to the case of Nepal, with minor adjustments related to scale. This tends to overshadow and undermine Nepal's unique features as a separate country and society. Despite huge differentials of scale, there are indeed deep similarities between the two social structures that frequently warrant the application to Nepali society of concepts generated in the context of India. However, it is important to begin by highlighting some of Nepal's historically specific features in the context of the caste system and Hinduism.

The genesis of the caste system can be traced more precisely to the reign of King Jayasthiti Malla in the context of Kathmandu Valley and to the introduction of the Old Legal Code of 1854 in the context of Nepal as a whole (Dahal *et.al* 2002). In other words, the caste system was instituted in Nepal as a result of Hinduization only in the second half of the eighteenth century. It is an offshoot of the Hindu Indian model that came to Nepal through other caste Hindus with their traditional caste occupations. Prior to this, Nepal had independent but fluid political units, chiefdoms and principalities characterized by diverse communities each with its own religion, language and culture (Pradhan 2004). The unification of Nepal under Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1768 and its consolidation during the Rana regime from 1846 to 1951 was

based on the organizing ideology of the Hindu caste system as uniquely expressed in Nepal. It was referred to as “The Empire Model” of national integration based on forcible unification of diverse groups. As a unifying framework, the caste system was very *inclusive* in the sense that it encompassed all of the diverse social groups living in the territory that became Nepal – with their varied languages, customary laws and religious, social and cultural traditions – into one overarching framework. But it was also *exclusionary* in that it classified all these groups as distinct castes within the broad framework of the traditional Hindu system of the four *varnas* based on concepts of ritual purity and pollution (Dahal et al 2002; Gellner et al 1997).

In general, this legal code organized Nepali society into five main categories, the *tagadhari* (the twice born sacred thread wearing high castes), the *namasine matwali* (unenslavable liquor drinkers), *masine matwali*, (the enslavable liquor drinkers), the impure but touchable castes (including Muslims and Europeans), and the *achuts* (untouchable castes), known today as Dalits (Hofer 1979). Differential privileges and obligations were accorded to each caste and sub-caste within the system, prescribing certain hereditary occupations for some and either allowing or disallowing ownership of land for others. Different punishments for similar crimes were prescribed based on the respective caste ranks of the perpetrator and the victim – with high caste perpetrators getting lighter punishments for crimes against those beneath them in the system and *vice versa*. This system remained until the proclamation of the New Legal Code of 1964 (Dahal et al 2002; Hofer 1979; Gellner et al 1997). Although there was never (and still is not) a simple one-to-one correspondence between caste rank and wealth, over time the caste hierarchy became more and more closely correlated with wealth, as the Shah rulers, and later the Rana Prime Ministers, promoted the transfer of land rights to those of high

caste (Hofer 1979; Dahal *et al* 2002; Gellner *et al* 1997). Table 1 depicts the integrated caste hierarchy of 1854.

**Table 1:** Caste/Ethnic Groups with their Hierarchical Structure, Legal Code of Nepal, 1854

Caste/Ethnic Groups	Classification
I. <i>Tagadhari</i> (Twice born castes-wearers of sacred thread)	
Upadhaya Brahmin (Bahun)	P
Thakuri (the royal caste/warrior)	P
Chhetri (Ksatriya)	P
Rajopadhyaya Brahmin (Deva Bhaju)	N
Indian Brahman	Other
Sanyasi (ascetics)	P
Lower Jaisi Brahmin	P
Certain high Shresta groups (e.g. Joshi)	N
II. <i>Matwali</i> (liquor consuming castes)	E
II.1 <i>Na Masine Matwali</i> (non-enslavable alcohol drinkers)	
Non-thread wearing Srestha	N
Vajracarya/Sakya/Uray-	N
Maharjan	N
Various Newar service castes	N
Hill Tribes (e.g. Magar, Gurung, Sunuwar)	E
II.2 <i>Masine Matwali</i> (enslavable alcohol drinkers)	
Tibetans (including Tamangs); some Hill tribes; Tharu	E
III. <i>Pani Nacalne choi chito halnu naparne</i> (water unacceptable/impure but touchable castes)	
Khadgi (butchers, milk sellers)	N
Kapali (death specialists, musicians)	N
Rajaka (washermen)	N
Carmakar (drum makers)	N
Muslims (bangle sellers)	Other
Westerners/Europeans (Mlecha)	Other
IV <i>Pani nacalne choi chito halnu parne</i> (untouchable castes: water unacceptable/impure)	
Hill Dalits – Kami (metal workers), Sarki (leather workers), Damai (tailor/musician), other Hill Dalits	P
Dyahla (sweepers)	N
Cyamkhalah (sweepers, scavengers)	N
Halahulu (scavengers)	N

Source: Dahal et. al 2002; Hofer (2004 ); p.9 & 10. Note: P=Parbatiya or Hill Group; N=Newar, the original inhabitants of the Kathmandu valley, E=Ethnic group. Ethnic groups are now known as indigenous nationalities.

The Parbatiya or hill groups/hindu highlanders were the favored groups as the rulers themselves came from this group. All groups have been acculturated to varying degrees to the Parbatiya castes. Manifestations of this acculturation include their agrarian techniques, their dress, as well as the partial “hinduisation” of their pantheon. Among several groups, a linguistic assimilation by Nepali is also to be observed. In spite of their linguistic homogeneity, the Parbatiya are of ethnically heterogeneous origin (Hofer 1979: 6-7). “Enslavables” are castes whose members, in the case of certain offences, can be punished by enslavement. Impure castes are also enslavable, although not explicitly so termed. The caste categories I and II depicted in Table 1 may accept water from each other. These groups are also termed *pani chalne jat* or “water acceptable castes.” However, caste categories I and II may not accept water from caste category III, who were called water unacceptable but touchable castes. For example, water and cooked food are not accepted whereas milk is accepted.<sup>2</sup> The caste categories IV are at the lowest strata. The lowest stratum of society comprises “those from whom water is not acceptable” and their touch (either direct or indirect through things they have handled) requires purification by water (Macdonald 1975; 281-95). For example, purification is achieved through

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<sup>2</sup> Cameron (1998:7) provides a good summary of the concepts of purity, pollution and auspiciousness that are central to Hinduism. Purity (*suddha, choko*) and impurity (*asuddha*) or pollution are concepts found in Hindu culture that refer to states of people, objects, and actions. Pollution (sometimes called “ritual pollution” to distinguish it from the Western idea of secular dirt and waste) is of three broad types: that incurred by death, birth, and miscarriage (*asauca*); contact with various objects (metals, cooking utensils, soiled garments, places, animals) (*artha*); and parts of the body (feet, sex organs) and bodily substances (saliva, phlegm, semen, blood) (*sharir*). Water is a potent transmitter of both purity and impurity because it is used to purify through bathing (and an abbreviated form of bathing, sprinkling), but foods impure people cook in water cannot be eaten by the pure (for example, uncooked rice, *chamal*, is “neutral,” but cooked rice, *bhat*, is not). It is in the “nature” of certain classes of people to possess impurity in varying degrees, such as women who have bodily impurity and what is called “occupational impurity” (cited from Glucklich 1984:26). Occupational impurity is associated with lower castes because they handle materials (metals, leather) and perform acts (ploughing and eating beef) considered impure, and they pass this impure state to the next generation: Bahun (high caste Brahmins) pass their pure state to their offspring. Finally, impurity is temporally bound: some occupational impurity is temporary, such as ploughing, while other occupational impurity is permanent such as sewing leather, the work of the low-caste *Sarki*.

sprinkling with plain water or water first touched by gold (such as an earring), as gold is considered a pure metal (Cameron 1998).

In addition to the difference between the caste system in India and that in Nepal, which until recently was the “world’s only Hindu Kingdom,” Hinduism also differs between the two countries. The type of Hinduism that prevails today at the level of the common people tends to be different on several counts from that encountered in India. A majority of people in Nepal are “Hindu” only within a broad understanding of the term, with the type of Hinduism in large measure being closer to the folk religion or shamanism/animism than to the form of Hinduism that has been dominant in present-day north India. Not dominated by classical and conservative Hinduism, Nepal also does not have modern reformist sects and groups, as is the case in India. Similarly, while life-cycle rites tend to be more orthodox and archaic where they are practiced, caste identities and caste behavior such as commensality tend to be less entrenched compared to India. Another significant aspect of Hinduism in Nepal relates to it not having been used so far for political mobilization, while mass movements based on religion or religiously inspired ideas played a crucial role in India’s freedom struggle. Unlike India, Nepal has remained independent through the eras of British imperialism, two world wars and the Cold War, which is a source of national pride. The People’s Movement of 1990, which overthrew the Panchayat regime and curbed the powers of the absolute monarch, was a non-religious movement. Ironically, with the dissolution of the Panchayat regime and placement of an interim government Nepal soon witnessed attempted mass mobilizations in the name of religion. The new constitution (1990) defined Nepal as a Hindu and constitutional monarchical kingdom. Ultimately, Nepali Hinduism is more symbolic than religious (Sharma 2004: 22-26). However, we cannot dismiss this

symbolic power. The enduring influence of higher-caste Hindus is evident in their strong representation in positions of power, access and authority in Nepal (BK 2004).

In the aftermath of the April 2006 people's movement, the current interim constitution has declared Nepal a secular country. Today Nepal is undergoing a deep structural shift: away from predetermined and largely unchanging caste/ethnic identity as the primary basis for social status and economic and political power, towards a more open, class-structured society where status is based on attributes like education, wealth and political influence which (at least theoretically) can be attained through individual effort. Kathmandu is awash in a tidal wave of transnational political, economic, and cultural currents that have brought new ideas, new technologies, and ultimately, new ways of being. In Kathmandu the past and present stand in extraordinarily stark contrast in almost every aspect of daily experience. As the offspring of urban-based modernization, Kathmandu's young middle-class labors to produce itself out of the seemingly contradictory resources of "tradition" and "modernity" (Liechty 2003).

But this shift to new social dynamics is still far from complete in Nepal. While some Dalits have been upwardly mobile and have taken advantage of the limited opportunities that exist, the majority of Dalits, as historically disadvantaged groups, lag behind in their income and asset levels, in their education and other human development indicators. Dalits comprise between 13 percent (around three million) to 20 percent (around 4.5 million) of Nepal's total population. Their life expectancy stands at 50.8 years against the national average of 59 years. Their per capita income is US \$39.60, which is almost the lowest in the world. Of the thirty-eight percent Nepali population living below the poverty line, the majority are Dalits. Twenty-three percent of Dalits are landless whereas 48.7 percent have less than 0.1 hectares of land. For those who have land, cultivable land is less than 1 percent. Dalit women are ranked at the lowest rung in the

Nepali social structure with a high illiteracy rate (92 percent), poor health conditions and very low wages. Dalit women engage, for the most part, in agricultural operations and constitute the major workforce doing hard manual labor. They experience most acutely the interlocking oppressions of class, caste and gender (Bishwakarma 2004; CBS 2001; Jha 2004).

Today Dalits continue to suffer from discrimination and human rights abuses by reason of their caste. Bhattachan et al. (2002) listed 205 existing forms of caste-based discrimination in the Hindu-dominated Nepali society. Legal protections for Dalits have been poorly implemented, and discrimination against Dalits is still very much a part of everyday life in Nepal. Despite the Civil Code of 1964, along with its eighth amendment and the constitution of Nepal ensuring equal rights for Dalits, caste-based discrimination and the practice of untouchability have been enduring. For example, Dalits have been prohibited from entering upper-caste Hindu temples. Moreover, they live in segregated neighborhoods, are often forced to perform menial tasks, such as removing dead animals or disposing of human excreta, and are subject to punishment if they refuse to do so (Dahal et al 2002). Dalits face a powerful combination of social discrimination and violence that force them to endure second-class status. Government inaction helps preserve this second-class citizenship (Human Rights Watch 2004). At the same time, the number of civil society groups dedicated to welfare, advocacy and political action on behalf of the disadvantaged has grown exponentially. Indeed, Dalit organizations are now a part of the international network against racism (Vishwakarma 2002 see Appendix A for history of organized Dalit activism in Nepal).



### 1.2.2 Context of Dalits in Nepal

As noted earlier, Dalits are officially outside the *varna* system of classification and are called untouchables. In this sense, Dalits fall under a separate and “macro” caste category which includes various Dalit sub-castes that tend to bear a hierarchical relationship to each other.

Although today “Dalit” is commonly understood as the category of people who were previously called untouchables, it is useful to point out the etymology of this term since its meaning has evolved and groups respond differently to it. The word “dalit” comes from the Sanskrit root *dal*, and means “held under check,” “suppressed,” or “crushed,” or, in a looser sense, “oppressed.”

This refers to both the people and their deprivation/dehumanization. Jotiba Phule, the founder of the *Satyashodhak Samaj*, a non-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra, India, a social reformer and revolutionary, used this term to describe the outcastes and untouchables as the oppressed and downtrodden victims of the Indian caste-ridden society. The term was used in the 1930s as a Hindi and Marathi translation of “depressed classes,” a term the British used for what are now called the scheduled castes. The word was also used by the famous Dalit Indian leader Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in his Marathi speeches (<http://wapedia.mobi/en/Dalit?t=1.#1>).

In Nepal, the word started being used more frequently after the 1990 democracy movement, although the definition of Dalit is contested. This contestation is important in seeing how Dalits identify themselves. The meaning of this term has evolved over time. Initially, the term was taken to mean the oppressed or crushed, which could refer generally to excluded groups who were economically poor, discriminated against and socially marginalized (Koirala 1996). This meant putting Dalits and some of the indigenous groups of Nepal that were similar in terms of social and economic indicators under one category. What complicated this definition was that the majority of Nepali population is poor, including high caste groups.

The term came to be more specifically used to identify a vulnerable and impoverished group of people, who are discriminated against on the basis of their caste. Dalit activists like Vishwakarma (2001) preferred to use the term Dalit exclusively for the untouchables of Nepal, those groups as defined in the Hindu *Varna* model and in the Old Legal Code of Nepal (1854). But some members within this Dalit group showed their strong resentment for the term, as it has negative social connotations. Because of this, Gurung (n.d.) prefers to use “Occupational Castes” to indicate all the Dalits or untouchables in Nepal. Today, there are still differences as to what the term Dalit means among Dalits themselves, and the debate as to whether they should keep this term to represent former untouchable groups is ongoing. But the term Dalit has been generally accepted as a separate social category and has entered the vocabulary of official documents.

Despite this macro-caste status, Dalits do not constitute a homogenous group. Like other ethnic/caste groups in Nepal, their population is fragmented and their heterogeneity extends to region, language, religion and culture. Moreover, there is a clear caste hierarchy within their ranks. Among Dalits, one group claims to be superior to another in terms of life-cycle rituals and many aspects of their day-to-day life. It can be said that Dalits themselves perpetuate the caste hierarchy despite opposing the practices of higher castes. More specifically their heterogeneity and hierarchy can be better explained in the following three broad regional groups identified by Dahal et al (2002).

(1) Dalits in the hill community: Broadly speaking this group comprises three major Hill Dalit groups in the Eastern and Central Regions: *Kami* (blacksmith or

ironworkers<sup>3</sup>), *Sarki* (cobblers or leather workers) and *Damai* (Tailors and Musicians). In the Western, Mid-Western and Far-Western Development Regions, there are many groups within them such as *Gaine* (singers and musicians) and *Badi* (entertainers and dancers), and many subgroups within the broad cultural groups of *Kami*, *Damai*, and *Sarki*. Linguistically, the mother tongue of this Dalit community is the Nepali language and they follow the Hindu religion.<sup>4</sup>

2) Dalits in the Tarai community: The Tarai Dalit community as a whole can be grouped into three broad linguistic groups: *Maithili*, *Bhojpuri* and *Awadhi*. The Dalits of the Eastern and Central regions speak Maithili as their mother tongue whereas the Dalit part of the Central and Western regions speak Bhojpuri and the Dalits of the Western and Far-Western regions speak Awadhi as their mother tongue. By tradition, they are Hindus and employ their own priests to perform rituals. The Dalits or untouchable groups in the Tarai community are as follows: *Tatma*, *Khatwe (Mandal)*, *Paswan (Dushad)*, *Mushahar*, *Batar*, *Dhobi (Baitha)*, *Chamar (Ram, Mochi)*, *Dom*, and *Halkhor*<sup>5</sup> (Dahal et. al. 2002).

3) Dalits in the *Newari* community: *Newars* are considered to be the original inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley. The complexity within the *Newar* social structure is already highlighted in the Old Legal Code of 1854 (see Table 1). The Dalit Development Committee identified the following *Newar* groups as Dalits – *Kusule* (death specialists, musicians and tailors), *Khadgi* (butchers and milk sellers), *Pode* (public sweepers), *Chyame or Chyamkhala* (sweepers, scavengers) and *Halahalu* (scavengers).

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<sup>3</sup> Although *Kami* is commonly translated as blacksmith or ironworkers, I prefer to use the term metal workers as this group also includes castes involved in working with gold and other metal such as copper and bronze.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed listing of the low caste Hindu groups or untouchables recorded in the Far-Western Hill region see Dahal et al., 2002: 9-13.

<sup>5</sup> Most *Tarai* untouchable castes are landless castes who work for higher castes as agricultural laborers.

The issue of whether groups belonging to the *Newari* community should be called Dalits has been under controversy with the momentum of the *Newari* indigenous (*Adivasi*) movement. A brief contextualization of the *Newari* indigenous movement will help elucidate the situation of the complexity of the intersectionality of caste and ethnicity in Nepal in the case of *Newars*. The *Newars* of Kathmandu Valley represent a particular case. They have their own intra-ethnic caste ranking from Brahmins down to untouchables and are the heirs of a centuries-old high culture shaped by Buddhism and Hinduism (Hofer 1979:7). Ethnographic studies that have been done on *Newars* highlight the complex caste hierarchy and caste-based practices among *Newars* in the Kathmandu Valley (Gellner & Quigley 1999; Parish 1996, Quigley 1993; Rankin 2004).

One of the more remarkable developments in Nepal after 1990 was the rapid growth of ethnic-based organizations (Gellner 2008). The National Foundation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) was formed in 1991 as an autonomous and politically non-partisan, national-level umbrella organization of indigenous peoples/nationalities. NEFIN currently consists of 50 indigenous member organizations widely distributed across Nepal. NEFIN is a member of the United Nation's Working Group on Indigenous Populations.

The definition of an indigenous group provided by NEFIN is a community that has its own mother tongue and traditional culture, distinct social structure and written or unwritten history and yet does not fall under the conventional fourfold *Varna* of the Hindu *Varna* system or the Hindu hierarchical caste structure. The vision of NEFIN is:

The establishment of multicultural democratic state where diverse ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious and territorial groups are treated equally; Indigenous people's rights are recognized and respected; and Indigenous Nationalities enjoy ethnic autonomy on the basis of the principle of right to self-determination. (<http://www.nefin.org.np/component/content/article/115-information/347-indigenous-nationalities-of-nepal>).

The leaders of the *Newari* adivasi movement have now been successful in categorizing *Newars* as an indigenous nationality of Nepal. Their main contention is that the *Newars* are the original inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley who speak a Tibeto-Burmese language (*Newari*) and have their own culture and customs, but who were forced into the four-fold Hindu *Varna* system by Rana rulers. Hence they have been denied their cultural and linguistic rights and do not have adequate representation in government (Sundar 2008).

While other ethnic groups without a caste hierarchy were clear about being called Indigenous groups or nationalities, whether *Newars* should be called indigenous or not became controversial. Some *Newars* and many non-*Newars* opposed their inclusion in the first official list, on the grounds that they were neither backward nor a homogeneous cultural group. Moreover, *Newars* as a whole have the highest developmental indicators, even higher than those of upper-caste Bahuns and Chettris. The Nepal Human Development Report 1998 shows that *Newars* are economically better off than any other Nepali community. Therefore, there was an economic argument for the de-listing of *Newars*. Despite the controversy, *Newars* are now on the list of Indigenous nationalities of Nepal (Gellner 2008).

What complicates the situation for a group like the sweeper caste (*Deulas*) who were listed as an untouchable caste under the old legal code and were considered Dalits is the question of where this group fits in the *Newari* indigenous movement, since, clearly, they are still stigmatized and excluded because of their caste-based occupation. Originally, the Ministry of Local Development had included the names of *Newar* Dalit castes like Khadgi (Kasai), Kapali (Kusule), Kuche, and Dhobi. However, *Newar* activists and some *Newar* Dalit groups made a petition to the National Dalit Commission in 2003 to exclude their names from the Dalit category, asserting that *Newars* were an indigenous group. They also argued that castes like

*Khadgis* or *Kasai* and *Kusules* were categorized under “impure but touchable castes” and could not be put under the Dalit category. The National Dalit Commission excluded their names from the Dalit category. Subsequently, they did not register themselves as Dalits in the 2001 census. The sweeper caste group petitioned to be kept within this category. At the time of this research, they were listed under the Dalit category in the list compiled by the Dalit NGO Federation and were also registered as Dalits in the 2001 census. Despite this, the issue of whether a *Newar* group like the *Deulas* belongs to the category of Dalits remains ambiguous. As the chapter on community ethnography will demonstrate, the controversy of wanting or not wanting to be labeled as Dalits still continues to swirl. Recently, the Deula Society carried out a demonstration saying that they will resort to violence if the government does not include them among the Dalit group. During my field work, some respondents from the sweeper community had also used Dalit scholarships for their children. An activist from the sweeper community raised concerns about the issue of representation of low caste *Newars*, pointing to the fact that the *Newar* Indigenous movement is led by affluent and high-caste *Newars*. He was concerned that the advocates of this movement were trying to integrate all *Newar* groups into the *Newar* Indigenous movement without addressing the caste issue. Some pertinent questions he raised were: What are the long-term implications of not being called Dalits even though one might still face caste-based discriminatory practices, for example, in the case of sweepers, because of one’s stigmatized occupational caste status? Who has the right to speak on behalf of lower castes *Newars* like *Deulas*? What benefits will they get from being called indigenous (*adivasi*) as opposed to being called Dalit? How will a distinction be made between affluent *Newars* and non-affluent *Newars*? Can non-Dalit *Newars* speak on behalf of the historically oppressed lower caste *Newar* groups?

Where does a group like sweepers (*Deulas*) fit within this movement? In this regard the current leaders have not been able to effectively address the heterogeneity of the *Newar* communities.

The case of the sweeper caste is an example of how a formerly untouchable group is caught between classifications as an indigenous group and as a caste group, although they fit in both groups. This complex intersectionality has not been addressed by the leaders. It remains to be seen whether this community will be successful in getting their names included as Dalits because such categorization has far reaching implications. NEFIN has tried to justify the diversity by saying they will give priority to economically oppressed groups, although they do not say how. For example, the NEFIN website's categorization of Indigenous nationalities of Nepal includes the following: endangered group, highly marginalized group, marginalized group, disadvantaged group and advanced group. *Newars* are categorized under "advanced group." There is no sub-categorization under the advanced group even though *Newars* are a heterogeneous group. What is unclear is how they will make a distinction between different classes without alluding to occupational and hence caste statuses of groups like sweepers and those below them. In other words, will the fight for cultural and linguistic rights trump the caste status of communities like *Deulas*? The latter speak *Newari* and suffer language discrimination, are deprived of their cultural rights but are at the same time discriminated against because of their caste status. What happens if Dalits are granted more representative rights and if *Deulas* are disallowed under the category of Dalits and instead categorized under indigenous group? Some of my respondents in the field were concerned that they would have to face long-term consequences if they lost their Dalit status, especially if the new constitution has a more favorable proportional representation/affirmative action policy for Dalits. The case of the

sweeper community then speaks directly to the complexities of questions of identity and resistance.

Given this basic historical contextualization of the research problem, the following section provides a brief explanation of the empirical parameters used for this research.

### **1.3 EMPIRICAL PARAMETERS: SUBJECTS, SETTINGS, AND TIMING**

#### **1.3.1 Intersecting Identities (caste, class, gender, political organization)**

##### **1.3.1.1 Caste group**

The three research caste groups listed below used to be (and sometimes still are) known by their occupational caste names. More recently, they have been identifying themselves with their surnames because of the stigma attached to the occupational bases of their caste, as they handle materials and perform services considered impure. It is believed that they pass on this impure state to the next generation, just as high-caste Brahmins are assumed to pass on their pure state to their offspring (Cameroon 1998).

1. Metal worker caste group is occupationally known as *Kami* but prefers to be called *Biswakarma*, a general surname of the metal worker caste.
2. Sweeper caste group is occupationally known as *Podae* but prefers to be called by the surname *Deula*, which is not considered derogatory. It refers to the priestly identity of the sweeper as some also work as temple priests.
3. Tailor/Musician caste group is occupationally known as *Damais* but prefers to be called *Pariyars*.



The details of how these community members relate to their caste identity and their choice in adapting surnames will be explained in the chapter on community ethnography.

### **1.3.1.2 Ethnic/Indigenous group**

While the Metal worker caste and Tailor/Musician caste have a distinct caste status and speak Nepali, the sweeper caste is also considered an ethnic/indigenous *Newar* group which has its own intra-caste hierarchy as mentioned earlier.

### **1.3.1.3 Class**

The three caste groups present differences with regard to their class status, although in Nepal, caste and class are sometimes used interchangeably. I consider the metal worker community to be of the lowest class, followed by the sweeper community which I consider to be low in socio-economic status even though they seem better off than the metal worker community in terms of material living conditions. I consider the tailor community to be middle-class or upwardly mobile in class terms.

The terms caste and class are not binary opposites as is commonly asserted in western academic explanations (mostly in college-level text books for “Introduction to Sociology” classes) of social stratification systems. Such explanations typically rely on a distinction between open systems (e.g. class) and closed systems (e.g. caste). Eschewing this simplistic bifurcation, chapter three addresses the theoretical component of the interaction of caste, class and social mobility. The rendering of the term “class” in Nepali is “*barga*”. Although the 1955 edition of the Legal Code still recognized the caste hierarchy, Nepal’s first Constitution of 1959 proclaimed all citizens to be equal before the law. The term “*jat*” or caste was used to imply cultural diversity of groups and the right to follow their own customs. Hofer further notes that

newspapers and official publications also avoided the use of the term “*jat*” and “caste” and mostly circumvented them by employing “*barg*” or social class (Hofer 1979:16).

The same can be said for the usage of caste today. “*Jat*” is mostly used in informal conversations, for example in the context of marriage, as in “marrying within one’s *jat*” (caste endogamy). The politically correct term used to refer to lower castes is often conflated with low social class. These groups are commonly referred to as marginalized or oppressed social class(es) within the larger framework of poverty and development. This is also evident in terminologies of NGOs or official government reports that refer to groups like Dalits as “*pichadiyko barga*” or classes that have been left behind. Many of my respondents also used these terms instead of using the caste term (*jat*) that carried the connotation of Dalits or untouchables. More recently, the term has been accepted officially and “marginalized classes” is a general term used to refer to impoverished groups, which, in most cases, comprise low caste groups. The general convention now, with growing political awareness and political consciousness, is to include the groups of Dalits, indigenous groups, women, madhesi (those from the Tarai region of Nepal) and disabled people in the category of marginalized classes. For instance, during my fieldwork, I observed how public figures were familiar with this practice and did not fail to mention these groups under the category of marginalized classes in organization meetings, workshops, discussions and political rallies. One Dalit activist noted that this was indeed a major achievement for the Dalit movement. He felt that even though public figures may not be successful in bringing about large-scale changes, and are criticized for tokenism, they are aware of the marginalized status of Dalits and recognize that Dalits have a separate political identity.

Kisan (2005) notes that class categorizations are highly relative in Nepal and are based on self-reporting. He provides the following distinctions: Those who are seen as upper class are

those who own property and can provide for others (i.e. big business people, industrialists and landlords); middle-class is understood as those who are self-reliant in the sense that they generally would not take loans (urban and rural middle-class are significantly different in terms of material wealth); lower middle-class is generally understood to be those who have taken loans; lower class comprises those who cannot survive solely on the returns from their own property, but must depend on wage labor for survival; the working class are those who can be seen as a proletariat in Marxist terms, those who live hand to mouth every day, those who are landless and chronically jobless.

These categorizations do not seem complete nor do the three communities in this study fit neatly within these categories. Although I administered a brief background survey to respondents to assess their class situation, it was difficult to get information on property and education. I did not force my respondents to divulge such information. A very important indicator of educational status for the lower class communities of sweepers and metal workers was that I had to fill most of the background survey forms myself (based on what they told me), as many were illiterate and could not read and write. To add to my difficulties, no formal, separate surveys of these localities have been done. As far as national statistics are concerned, Nepal's census bureau started collecting caste-segregated data only in 2001 and even then there have been many data gaps.

I used my own judgment to determine material class status through observation of surroundings and (where I could) assessment of objective socio-economic markers like level of education, types of jobs, modes of income generation, consumption patterns and behavior (seen through objects and their use in their homes), as well as through subjective indicators of class-consciousness (see Appendix B for Observation Protocol). Occupational specialization is a

critical component of caste because a person is born into it unlike the modern day version of class where a person enters, and exercises variable degrees of choice in, an open labor market. For this research, it was important to find out to what extent Dalits experience this difference. The objective criteria centered on questions about how community respondents were employed and whether they were dependent on the vagaries of the labor market or self-employed, whether they were waged workers and whether they were restricted to their caste-based occupations. It was also crucial to know whether they participated in an open labor market.

Caste-based occupational status and identity still holds strongly in a more stigmatized form for both the sweeper community and metal worker community. The tailor or musician community has been able to move from a caste-based occupational status to an increasingly market-based class position (or SES), by being absorbed into the modern music industry. Their occupation has been “neutralized” or commercialized and has a modern-day entertainment function in contrast to the other two communities. All the men in the tailor/musician community were well known in the music market of Kathmandu. Moreover, they had also been employed by the Nepali army for its music band. All households in the community had their own homes and were renting rooms to clients. The women in this community were typically not involved in paid employment, although some were.

In the sweeper community, the majority of the respondents (both men and women) were employed as public sweepers in government as well as in private institutions and a few were working as subcontracted workers who received monthly salaries. Because of their erstwhile monopoly position in the business of “sweeping” and the regularity of their employment, their living conditions are relatively better off than those of many other low caste groups in the

Kathmandu valley (Dahal et. al 2002). In addition, some households had used one of their rooms at home to open little shops (similar to convenience stores).

In the metalworker community, some of the older generation males were still active in the caste-based patronage system and were providing services to higher castes. However, as Kathmandu moves toward a service-oriented economy and an open market, their old profession of making agricultural tools is on the verge of becoming obsolete. Moreover, modern tools are available at cheap prices. In this context the older generation is losing out. The new male generation who are willing to take on the modern version of metal making, for example making silver ornaments, are doing relatively well if they find good employers and they get good orders. The women are not involved in making agricultural tools. They work in the fields when they can find seasonal work where they may be paid in cash or kind. In short, women tend to take up any little daily wage jobs that are available, for example, some women had taken up making glass bead necklaces, where they brought the material home and returned the finished product to the shopkeeper.

#### **1.3.1.4 Gender**

The respondents in this research include both men and women in the communities as well as in the organizational space. The interaction of caste, class and region has important implications for gender. In this research, gendered relations were observed in multiple contexts, i.e., as relations among women and between women and men, within and across caste and class.

While the overall situation affects both men and women from these disadvantaged groups, gender, caste and class statuses intersect to marginalize Dalit women the most. Indeed, Dalit women are frequently referred to as the “oppressed of the oppressed.” The majority of respondents in this research commonly referred to Dalit women as being triply oppressed –

oppressed as women, oppressed as poor persons and oppressed as Dalits – unlike Dalit men, who may be oppressed as poor persons and as Dalits but who have male privilege when they enter the domestic sphere.

I discuss the importance of intersectionality of these variables in the theoretical section in chapter three. Ethnographic work in Nepal and India has shown that ideologies of caste and ideologies of gender shape opportunities unevenly for people in different social locations. Gender relations are shaped by a multitude of factors, not by one key variable. Moreover, caste and gender are mutually reinforcing (Cameron 1998; Rankin 2006).

This research also shows how gender interacts with occupational status and how this makes a big difference in the status and autonomy of women within a household (which will be discussed in detail in chapter four). For example, an important difference between the sweeper community on the one hand, and the metal worker community and upwardly mobile tailor/musician community on the other, is that the caste identities of the latter groups (who are considered Hill Dalits) are tied to male occupations (metal worker and musician/tailors) whereas the occupational identity of sweepers (also considered an ethnic group) is gender neutral. The images of metal worker caste (*Kamis*) and tailor/musician caste (*Damais*) that come to mind are those of men working in their metal workshops, men sitting comfortably with their sewing machine and men playing the traditional Nepali instrument *panchae baja* during weddings. By contrast, it is common to visualize sweeper women in their traditional *Newari* wrap, sweeping the Kathmandu streets, even though men are also employed as sweepers and cleaners.

### **1.3.1.5 Political Group**

The political leadership or “activist” sample in this study, i.e., individual Dalit leaders spanning a diverse range of advocates, activists and spokespersons in the civil sphere, represents a

consciously politically active group. Although I used snowball sampling for the activists, this sample turned out to be fairly representative of caste, class, gender, region and organizations.

I consider the activist sample in this study as an upwardly mobile group in terms of SES criteria, with perhaps a greater emphasis on cultural and political capital. In this sense, this sample may be considered as part of a political middle-class by virtue of their education, sites of employment and engagement, and their articulated political consciousness. The activists did not necessarily own property in terms of land and houses in Kathmandu (important indicators of wealth) since most have come to Kathmandu from their home villages, and all of the activists I interviewed had very modest family backgrounds in terms of material wealth. Like respondents in the Dalit communities, activists were sometimes hesitant to fill out information on some objective indicators of socio-economic status, i.e., income, education and property, in their background surveys. I did not force respondents to provide information they were not comfortable in disclosing. This might have to do with Nepal having an honor based culture and a society characterized by acute inequalities. For example, a few activists put the word “general” in the category of education. They might have been embarrassed by their own educational status if it was not high. These factors make it difficult to collect self-reported data on class in Nepal.

From the perspective of gender representation, I interviewed both male and female activists. One-third of my sample comprised female Dalit activists in contrast to two-thirds male Dalit activists. This was not premeditated. I found fewer female activists in comparison to male activists. Both male and female activists noted that this (number of female Dalit activists in contrast to male activists) was reflective of the status of Dalit women in general, and reiterated that the triple oppression was reflected within the orbit of civil-society organizations.

## **1.3.2 Selected Sites/Spaces**

### **1.3.2.1 Kathmandu**

As noted in the research rationale, Kathmandu, an urban/metropolitan space, is significant for this research. Kathmandu is home to several Dalit communities and the headquarters of all major Dalit advocacy organizations. The urbanity of my research site and the impact of urbanization are crucial variables to consider here. Urbanization has an impact on caste and has led to the creation of new intersections with class. The urban setting of the study provided an opportunity to investigate whether (and how) urbanity and urbanization subvert communal bases of caste and facilitate the growth of market-based individual class identities. The circumstances of the musician/tailor caste offer the clearest example of how urbanization has led to the creation of new intersections with class, which will be discussed in the chapter on community ethnography.

### **1.3.2.2 Community/neighborhood space**

Since I was looking for relatively discrete and coherent communities, the location of segregated neighborhoods was my main selection criterion. It is important to note that not all caste groups live in segregated communities in Kathmandu due to increasing urbanization and expansion of the city. The sweeper and the tailor communities lived in the heart of Kathmandu. The metalworker neighborhood, although within the boundaries of Kathmandu, was located on its outskirts or suburbs and thus had a semi-rural character. I was unable to find a segregated community of metalworkers in the heart of Kathmandu. While the residential boundaries of the sweeper and metal worker communities were clearly caste-defined, this was less so for the tailor/musician group, who lived in an area of the city that could be more strongly identified as



middle class, albeit encompassing otherwise diverse neighborhoods. The details of the settings of each neighborhood will be laid out in the chapter on community ethnography, while a deeper engagement with notions of space and spatiality as combining symbolic, discursive, institutional and physical markers will form part of the theoretical framework.

### **1.3.2.3 Organizational space**

The organizational space in this research implies civil-society political space, primarily the operational sphere of non-profit organizations and organizations associated with political parties. The actors within these two kinds of organizations articulate the distinct political networks and repertoires associated with these two different locales within the overall sphere of organized civil society.

#### ***Civil-Society Political Space: Brief Overview of National Dalit Organizations***

Foreign aid plays a vital role in development in Nepal, as Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world. Nepal ranked 142nd out of 177 countries in the United Nation's 2007 Human Development Index (HDI), which measures achievements in terms of life expectancy, educational status and standard of living. Nepal ranked 84th among 108 developing countries in the Human Poverty Index (HPI) measure, with 17.4 percent of the population having the probability of not surviving past the age of 40, an adult literacy rate of merely 51.4 percent, 10 percent without access to safe water, and 48 percent of children being underweight. The gender inequality is high as denoted by the gender-related development index (GDI) -- Nepal ranks 134th in the world. Similarly, Nepal's HDI of 0.534 is well below the regional average of South Asia and substantially below the average HDI for all developing countries (UNDP 2007).

A major source of revenue is through development aid. Since 1970, foreign aid has increased substantially and Nepal has received more financial aid per capita than any other country in the world (Macfarlane 1993, cited in Alexandra Geiser, September 2005). Since the implementation of the five-year plans in Nepal, poverty reduction and poverty alleviation have always been the focal objectives of the government and continue to be so. Additionally, there is a proliferation of non-governmental, governmental, and community-based organizations involved in poverty alleviation and development programs.

The Social Welfare Council oversees the service and development sectors while monitoring and coordinating the activities of local and international NGOs in the country. Although indigenous social institutions and organizations have existed from the very beginning in Nepali society, NGOs addressing issues related to socio-economic development and community mobilization became active only after the restoration of democracy in 1990. The growth of NGOs in Nepal, particularly of the international variety (INGOs), is fundamentally linked to the proliferation of development discourse and agendas. While only a few NGOs began to contribute to “development” in the 1980s, their growth in the 1990s and 2000s was phenomenal. Over the years INGOs have played a crucial role as key stakeholders and partners in the development of Nepal. The Association of INGOs in Nepal (AIN), representing about 70 INGOs working in Nepal, shares the common goal of poverty reduction and sustainable development (<http://www.ain.org.np/index.html>).

There are two kinds of organization that voice the concern of Dalits: one kind calls for gradual inclusion of Dalits into the mainstream through advocacy and development programs. Its target groups are drawn not only from Dalit communities but also include people from other disadvantaged groups. This category of organizations includes the majority of the development

organizations in Nepal that target the poor and marginalized among whom Dalits feature prominently. The other kind of organization calls for the strengthening of Dalit identity and empowerment of Dalits as a self-conscious group; the abolition of caste and casteism, including the power and privilege of the upper-castes; the abolition of “untouchability,” and affirmative action for representation of Dalits in educational institutions, government institutions and parliamentary seats. The latter category, which is more relevant for my study, may be further divided into two kinds of Dalit NGOs in Nepal. The first are large national NGOs, including the Dalit Welfare Organization (DWO), the Feminist Dalit Organization (FEDO), Nepal National Dalit Social Welfare Organization (NNDSWO), Jana Utthan Pratisthan (JUP) and the Jagaran Media Center (JMC). These large NGOs have partnerships with international non-governmental organizations and also receive donor funding. The second are the many small Dalit organizations working at the community level who use local money or may receive support indirectly from the large Dalit organizations like Dalit NGO Federation (DNF). All Dalit NGOs perform advocacy/activist functions alongside traditional development activities. The DNF is an umbrella organization of Dalit NGOs, with a membership of over 500 Dalit organizations.<sup>6</sup> The DNF aims to eradicate caste-based discrimination through the process of empowerment, networking and alliance building among Dalit and pro-Dalit institutions ([www.dfnepal.org](http://www.dfnepal.org)). It is emerging as a powerful converging point for the movement (World Bank and DFID 2006). The Dalit NGO Federation envisions a discrimination-free society in which all people including Dalits can live with respect and dignity. It hopes to promote pro-Dalit policy to ensure Dalit rights and representation in the mainstream socio-political processes, to facilitate and provide legal aid to Dalit organizations and community, to focus on Dalit women, Madhesi Dalits and the most

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<sup>6</sup> The Dalit NGO sector is now divided into two umbrella organizations, Dalit NGO Federation (DNF) and Dalit NGO Federation – Nepal (DNF-NEPAL).

marginalized ones within the Dalit communities, to build national and international solidarity, to strengthen the Nepali Dalit rights movement, to improve good governance of DNF and its Member Organizations, and to focus on DNF's institutional sustainability and human resource development (<http://www.dfnepal.org/aboutus/stategic.php>). Many donor organizations have supported the Dalit cause, and the development assistance that Dalits receive falls within these thematic areas (Bishwakarma 2006).

1. Advocacy programs: workshops, interaction programs, mass meetings, face-to-face public hearings, lobbying and mobilization.
2. Capacity building: training for staff members, board members and frontline workers.
3. Legal Aid: free legal support, paralegal development, legal awareness training and case investigation.
4. Need based: income generation support (training, saving & credit, seed money, and income oriented programs), health and education (scholarships, awareness raising and empowerment).

### ***Political Parties: Major Political Parties of Nepal***

Nepal lacks national Dalit parties as in India. Instead the national parties of Nepal (see table 2) have their own Dalit units, commonly called Dalit “sister wings.” Political parties try to reach the Dalit vote base of their constituencies through their Dalit wings. Activists note that they do not want independent Dalit political parties as in the case of India because Dalits are scattered all over Nepal. It is felt that due to the diversity of Nepal Dalits, forming a single Dalit party will not necessarily address all Dalit problems. Regional differences matter more than caste differences. In Nepal, the Dalit party-affiliated organizations are generally established according to the organizational structure of the parties to which they are affiliated and they are tightly

bound within that particular political party's ideological framework and practical strategies and programs for Dalit liberation. There seems to be a general consensus within the Nepali Dalit Social Movement in favor of carrying out peaceful and legal struggles. Almost all organizations envision an "egalitarian society" where there would be no casteism and untouchability. But what particular social systems and structures would forge this egalitarian society are matters of vast difference of opinion (Kisan 2005). Dalit wings of political parties have leaflets or books documenting their ideological agendas. Many use the media to transmit their ideological messages and to raise awareness of caste issues, mostly in the form of local folk songs. All wings have their separate offices.

**Table 2:** Major National Political Parties of Nepal

1.	Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)
2.	Communist Party of Nepal (Unity Centre-Masal)
3.	Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist)
4.	Madhesi People's Right Forum ( <i>Madhesi Janadhikar Forum</i> )
5.	National Democratic Party ( <i>Rashtriya Prajatantra Party</i> )
6.	Nepali Congress
7.	Nepal Goodwill Party-Anand Devi ( <i>Nepal Sadbhavana Party</i> )
8.	Nepal Workers and Peasants Party

The list above refers to the number of major political parties that had Dalit wings during my fieldwork. Activists interviewed included members of Dalit wings of the above political parties. Soon after I arrived in Nepal, there was an eruption of major political insurgency that resulted in the negotiated ouster of the monarchy, peace talks with the Maoists, and the installation of a new interim constitution and parliament, which included the Maoists and other previously excluded actors. This movement is now referred to as the People's Movement of April 2006. After I returned from the field, a significant number of parties registered for the Constituent Assembly

Election. There were altogether 74 registered parties. The names of the parties with their election symbols are listed on the website of Nepal Election Portal. Two Dalit parties were registered for the Constituent Assembly elections, i.e. Nepal Dalit Shramik Morcha and Dalit Janajati Party.<sup>7</sup>

### **1.3.3 Levels of Consciousness and Agency**

In this study, I look at the levels of consciousness and agency at the community level and at the organizational level which are both influenced by space. Everyday space (i.e. the community lifeworlds of the sweeper, metal worker and tailor-musician communities) and organizational or civil-society political space (i.e. the operational sphere of non-governmental organizations and organizations associated with political parties) generate different levels of consciousness of wider social relations, and comprehend different levels of identity formation. The political spaces in which organizations operate play a key role in mobilizing their group members and the larger society, as well as in the process of destabilizing, deconstructing and transforming identities. However, identities are first formed at the “everyday” level. As such, everyday space constitutes the primordial site of “spontaneous” identity formation, in which the subject is enmeshed in a web of affective and both bodily and inner life-sustaining relationships. At the same time, the importance of the everyday as “raw material” for wider civil-society political mobilization, and as itself an autonomous site of more muted political negotiation, cannot be underestimated. Dorothy Smith (1987) embraces the everyday world as a key site of inquiry about women’s subjectivity, and questions the seemingly “normal” or “routine” events and relationships of our daily lives and the power relations that structure them.

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<sup>7</sup> See “Political parties of Nepal” (<http://www.nepalelectionportal.org/EN/political-parties/>).

Scholars have addressed everyday consciousness, agency and resistance of marginalized groups in different ways. One view points out that hegemony plays a big role in sustaining the social superiority and domination of the powerful group. For example, in a Hindu society, consent is elicited through the hegemonic ideology of Brahmanism and not by instrumental coercion (Charlsey and Karnath 1998). The other view, however, rejects notions of “hegemony” and “false consciousness” commonly attributed to the oppressed group (Cameron 1998; Kapadia 1995; Scott 1985). Scholars with this view contend that there has always been much more resistance on the part of the weak than official accounts allowed, as evident in “everyday forms of protest.”

With regard to the everyday space of the communities in this study, I have pursued an approach that rejects an either/or assessment of the consciousness of the oppressed. The interview questions for the community sample pertained to domestic and extra-domestic arrangements around everyday lives and livelihoods, and provided cues regarding caste/class/gender distinctions as well as modalities of consciousness and agency conceptualized in a four-dimensional dialectical matrix of social agency and change developed by Green (1993; 2006). In order to examine how subjects internalize and adapt to hegemonic values in everyday life and how they ignore or sidestep, resist, and act against the prevailing hegemony, Green considers the multiple following dimensions: (a) “because of” or “as a result of” – the dimension of submission, accommodation, adaptation and compromise in relation to the dominant order, (b) “in spite of” – the dimension of autonomy, where the oppressed have or make a space of their own, outside of the terms of hegemonic referentiality, (c) “against” or “in opposition to,” the dimension of outright and self-conscious resistance and refusal, and finally (d) “beyond” and “towards” (a new social order) – the dimension of transformative consciousness, in-process,

potential, latent, and not-yet-achieved. This developing matrix allows us to undertake a mapping of identity and consciousness as multidimensional, dialectical, interactive, and processual.

In the case of activists, I engage a different type of consciousness – more formally and intentionally strategic consciousness, relating to (a) assimilation or abolition and (b) national citizenship vs. international human rights (or global citizenship). This is addressed in the interviews with Dalit activists spanning a diverse range of advocates, leaders and spokespersons in the civil sphere. I also explored their own political formation and biographies, their relationship and attitudes to their constituencies, and the methods, discourses and aims of political mobilization engaged in by their organizations. In this way, I took advantage of the opportunity to understand how activists themselves traverse the distance between their private everyday lives and their public political lives. Interview questions elicited information regarding whether the political objectives are aimed at the gradual inclusion of Dalits into the mainstream through advocacy and development programs or at the strengthening and empowerment of Dalits as a self-conscious group with the ultimate aim of abolishing caste and casteism. Questions regarding political identities also attempted to discern consciousness influenced by the type of organizations advocates are affiliated to and the discourses they appeal to. For example, organizations were primarily connected to either global space (i.e., global civil society denoted by internationally connected NGOs and human rights discourse) or local space (i.e., local political parties and national citizenship discourse). The issue of national citizenship ((Isin 2004) and human rights discourses (Chandhoke 2005; Jacobson 1996) will be discussed in detail in the theoretical chapter. In Nepal, Dalit struggles for equity and freedom appeal to both regimes of rights as strategy and/or goal, as the chapter on institutional ethnography will show. While these regimes might be seen as complementary, they have become competitive foci or tools based on



the different institutional locations of the advocates who deploy them. Dalit activists based in political parties tend to privilege the nation-state and its bounded sovereignty as the strategic and ultimate terrain upon which the struggle for full Dalit inclusion is fought, while Dalit advocates based in non-governmental organizations appeal primarily to international human rights and the claims to universal human dignity and entitlements embedded therein. This also highlights the tension between national citizenship discourse and the international human rights discourse. Finally, it will be seen how the People's Movement of April 2006 brought these two groups together to fight locally for full citizenship rights.

## **2.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 TIMING OF RESEARCH & IMPACT ON FIELDWORK**

#### **Context for fieldwork: Unexpected Delays and Changes due to the Political Situation**

The political situation in Nepal during the period of fieldwork played a key role in the final outcome of the dissertation project. My initial research proposal was to target the everyday space of caste-bound communities as my primary site of inquiry, but to include “secondary” interviews with Dalit advocates, leaders and activists in the civil sphere for the critical purpose of cross-referentiality. However, the political crisis in Nepal led me to make changes and give the community and activist samples “equal billing.” This became critical in order to gain a better understanding of how identities were sustained, forged, destabilized, contradicted, reinforced, reinvented and transformed along the pathways of the complex social and spatial circuitry connecting – and, for that matter, disconnecting – the two sites of inquiry, one informal, communal and private, the other formal, civic and public. The original proposed timeline for the fieldwork had been from January 2006 to December 2006 but the actual time spent in the field extended from January 2006 to July 2007, due to unexpected delays.

Soon after I arrived in Nepal, there was an eruption of a major political insurgency that resulted in the negotiated ouster of the monarchy, peace talks with the Maoists who had been waging a “people’s war” for the past 10 years, and the installation of a new interim constitution

and parliament, which included the Maoists and other previously excluded actors. These history-altering events forced me to revise my fieldwork schedule and format, mainly to stay longer in the field and to interview a larger number of activists than originally proposed.

The unprecedented political changes created unexpected problems in the field. More than half of the time spent in the field was not conducive to carrying out fieldwork. My fieldwork was delayed and interrupted due to the events and atmosphere surrounding the popular insurgency, the buoyant success of the movement, the transition phase characterized by a breakdown of law and order, strikes, the peace talks, the process of forming the interim constitution, the establishment of an interim parliament that included the Maoist party, and preparations for Constituent Assembly Elections. In Nepal, this moment was seen as one in which the excluded, particularly Dalits, ethnic minorities and impoverished working classes, could voice their demands, and do whatever was required for their voices to be registered in the agenda of the new government. Every day there were protests, demonstrations, strikes, and various forms of sabotage. Despite the recent positive political developments, Nepal still witnesses strikes, severe traffic jams due to Kathmandu's booming population, lack of roads in proportion to vehicles, and spontaneous protests, some of which are violent.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Countries of the developing world, also known as Less Motorized Countries (LMC), are characterized by rapid urbanization, high growth rates in traffic and congestion and decreasing regulation of public transport services. Worldwide, there are estimated to be some half a million road accident fatalities each year. Almost 70 percent of these occur in the developing world. Whilst there is a general decline in the number of fatalities in industrialized countries the opposite is true elsewhere. If account is taken of levels of motorization by expressing accident statistics as rate per registered vehicle, then less developed countries (LDC) have rates at least 10 to 20 times higher than the best industrialized countries. The worst countries in these terms have fatality rates 100 times higher (Ghee et al. 1997). With an increasing rate of migration to Kathmandu due to the Maoist insurgency, limited opportunities in other regions, lack of security in rural areas and a booming population, the streets of the unplanned city of Kathmandu are crowded with ever increasing vehicles and pedestrians. Public vehicles, mainly buses, are overcrowded as evident in people riding on the roofs of buses that do not follow safety regulations. Outdated vehicles still operate on Kathmandu roads, for example, the government has taken a decision (twice) to ban operating vehicles more than 20 years old but this decision has not been implemented (Nepal Traffic Police 2005; Maunder and Pearce 1999). A few government attempts to implement this decision have been thwarted by protests and strikes from the unionized transport workers in Nepal.

The breakdown of law and order hindered the smooth execution of fieldwork. I woke up each day not knowing whether the day would turn out to be favorable for going into the field. The situation threw me off my schedule. Plans had to be abandoned, and it became evident that I had to change my approach, broaden my perspective, and embrace flexibility. This took some doing. It was emotionally difficult to be on a stand-by mode and not know whether one would be able to collect the precise data upon which one's research questions hinged. Even on the days I was able to go, my time in the field was limited. Thankfully, while the uncertainty and unpredictability delayed the fieldwork, my prolonged stay in Nepal ultimately made up for the lost time.

Despite the unexpected problems, I made an effort to stick with my proposal and do my fieldwork on days when safe mobility was possible. I decided to visit the field whenever there were periods of relative normalcy and calm. I contacted my respondents and special informants/insiders<sup>9</sup> who helped me get access into the communities and went in right away. I developed and maintained good rapport and communication with my subjects. This helped me gain and maintain access even after significant gaps. Having insiders from the communities as my main contacts made it easy for me to schedule and reschedule appointments. The easy availability of cell phones also made communication convenient. This "quick response" strategy worked for me. My respondents also understood the situation. During periods that were not conducive to field visits, I was busy typing field notes and insights, reading and transcribing. Below I describe some details of the problems and how I dealt them.

Mundane, taken-for-granted facilities like electricity and transport seemed like luxuries. Strikes, lack of fuel for transport and heavy scheduled electricity power cuts, sometimes for 5-8

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<sup>9</sup> I talk about the role of insiders in detail later on.

hours per day, forced me to make the most of every opportune moment. I had to use the computer when there was electricity as the battery capacity for the computer was an hour and a half and there was no regular power supply to recharge the battery. I had to go into the field when there was fuel (to fill the gas tank) on a strike-free day. Such episodic reprieves made me value each day free of strikes, and I made the most of them, knowing what it was like to have one day of turmoil following upon another.

My personal journal is replete with expressions of frustration as well as words of encouragement to myself. Strikes were so common that the statement “*Aaja Nepal bandha ho*” (translation: “Today Nepal is closed”) was a phrase one heard almost every day – much as in an everyday greeting like “How are you.” If you heard “*Aja Nepal bandha chaina*” (“Today Nepal is not closed”), you were relieved. Still you had to ask “Will the cars move?” because a strike-free day did not mean that cars would move freely.

There were times when I embarked upon a visit to the field and had to turn around when I saw demonstrations ahead of me. Sometimes the police turned the vehicle away. Nobody knew when demonstrations would be initiated and when vehicles would be smashed. After observing such a pattern, I decided to go to the field only when it was confirmed that there was no strike. I cross-checked with the police and sometimes I called respondents’ homes or close-by contacts to ask if the situation was safe. Of course this did not guarantee a day free of strikes or turmoil because anything was likely to spark a protest – a burglary, kidnapping, murders or a road accident – matters that, in normal circumstances, would be considered to be criminal cases for the police department. These experiences made me wonder how I would complete fieldwork. Being inspired by my own respondents at a subjective level and being cognizant of the importance of the study within a broader framework helped me deal with the trying times.

Despite the sense of impasse, I also realized that these situations would provide opportunities. Moreover, my dissertation committee's support and advice through email correspondence were very encouraging. They asked me to lie low and wait until the situation calmed down, and suggested that I prolong my stay to capture the breadth and depth of data required.

In summary, I decided to adjust my dissertation research to reflect the changing situation on the ground, a strategy consistent with qualitative sociology methods (Blee and Taylor 2002). I modified my research design to account for the mass democracy movement that targeted some of the very elements of the social structure I proposed to study. I maintained continuity with my dissertation research by exploring more deeply what the particular implications of this larger-scale political movement and historic moment were for Dalits and Dalit status/identity. In the interviews, I solicited their feelings "in their own words." This was an important opportunity to capture the sentiments of a long-oppressed, marginalized sub-national group regarding their own political desires and possibilities at an extraordinary moment of "national" history.

## **2.2 DETAILS OF RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In order to examine the dialectics of identity and resistance of Dalits in Kathmandu, I used an approach of qualitative inquiry, "to suggest a broad range of scholarly activity that encompasses creative dimensions beyond a preoccupation with data per se" (Wolcott 1994:4). I applied a multi-method ethnographic approach which included in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, participant observation, field notes and documentary evidence. The multi-method strategy calls for an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the subject matter that describes routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives (Denzin and Lincoln 1994; 1998).

## 2.2.1 Description of Sample

My study is based on two broad constituent samples drawn from the capital city, Kathmandu: a community/household sample and an activist sample. These samples comprised, respectively, (1) householders from three low- to lower-middle-income and occupationally segregated Dalit neighborhoods, encompassing discrete communities of sweepers, metalworkers and tailors/musicians; (2) individual Dalit activists spanning a diverse range of advocates, leaders and spokespersons in the civil sphere.

### 2.2.1.1 Community Sample

I interviewed participants from 15 households (43 interviews) making up a purposive stratified sample with sample size determined by availability of subjects.<sup>10</sup> Sample diversity and stratification were sought on the basis of caste-defined, segregated occupational communities, gender, (emergent) class or socio-economic status, and, somewhat less critically, generation. The sample households were spread across three occupationally clustered Dalit neighborhoods of sweeper caste (*Deulas*), metal worker caste (*Biswakarmas*) and tailor/musician caste (*Pariyars*) communities in which emerging “modern” class or SES distinctions could also be discerned. The first two groups might be considered lower income, while the tailors tended to be an upwardly mobile group. The neighborhood I chose for the latter group was also integrated into a broader residential area that might be more generally identified as middle class.

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<sup>10</sup> This sample is not representative, which is a commonplace occurrence in qualitative research. Creswell (2000:185) notes, “The idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites (or documents or visual material) that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question. This does not necessarily suggest random sampling or selection of a large number of participants and sites, as typically found in quantitative research.”

The interviewees included, wherever possible, male and female conjugal partners or parents and children over 18, ensuring gender and generational representation. The interviews were conducted in Nepali, the official language of Nepal and my native language. I did 15 interviews in the sweeper community, 15 interviews in the metal worker community and 13 interviews in the tailor/musician community. Since the family size differed for each household, the number of respondents was not consistent across communities. I did not always do a one-on-one interview. Sometimes women and men agreed to do the interviews in twos or threes. However, I interviewed the male and female members separately and at different times in order to maximize the likelihood of obtaining richly nuanced and candid responses to questions implicating gender. The questions for the community sample addressed domestic and extra-domestic arrangements around everyday lives and livelihoods, as well as levels of engagement or consciousness beyond the community. They provided cues regarding caste/class/gender distinctions as well as modalities of consciousness (See Appendix D for Interview schedule).

Although not a part of my original research plan or a part of my formal sample, I talked to non-Dalits in and around the Dalit neighborhoods whenever they asked me about my research and why I was there. I realized during my research that their anecdotes were also important, and I make reference to some of them in later chapters to help elucidate important points. For example, I talked to the owner of a shop near the metal worker community where I stopped to have tea. When a conversation ensued about castes, the shopkeeper offered his perspective on the caste system and how he related to it. This helped me gauge Dalit and non-Dalit relations. Older non-Dalits in the shops, probably suspecting me to be a reformer of some sort, also obliquely pointed out that for them tradition mattered more than the constitution. Through such encounters, I gained insight into non-Dalit narratives of the caste system. In addition, participant observation



enabled me to observe Dalit and non-Dalit day-to-day interaction within the circuits and sites of everyday space, such as water taps, roads, grocery shops and tea shops. As Denzin and Lincoln (1998:10) note, “qualitative researchers examine the constraints of everyday life; they confront the constraints of the everyday social world. They see this world in action and embed their findings in it.”

### **2.2.1.2 Activist/Leader Sample**

I interviewed a total of forty-one activists/leaders. As noted earlier, this figure exceeds the number indicated in my original proposal. The political insurgency at the time not only required that I capture the “politicized” voices of Dalit leadership, but also that I record for posterity this unique moment in Nepal history. The activists included a diverse range of individuals: Dalit advocates, leaders and activists in the civil sphere. They were representatives from government commissions, non-government organizations, and political parties, as well as independent intellectuals and activists. Given the insurgency and involvement of political activists, names which cropped up frequently could not be ignored. These figures played a critical role in the articulation of Dalit identity in a politically charged context, fraught with new meanings. Despite the fact that the original research plan was to make them secondary informants, their utterances took on an added significance in the circumstances. They were articulating Dalit demands in public discourses that, for better or for worse, might be expected to form a critical part of any conscious engagement with questions of identity. Dalits’ profiles were being enhanced in the public domain as Nepal was and continues to be involved in a process of conflict resolution and nation building. Passing up the opportunities to interview them at such a historic moment for the status of Dalits would have been literally disastrous. Moreover, the groundswell provided a

perfect occasion to study the possible disjunctures between the “sub-national” leadership and urban or peri-urban Dalit communities.

## **2.2.2 Strategies of Inquiry**

### **2.2.2.1 Participant Observation**

For this research, I have used the term “Participant Observation” as an overarching framework for my fieldwork. Wolcott (2001) illuminates this point when he envisions qualitative research strategies as a tree with many branches. He notes: “the central structure from which various branches emanate supports the core activity in qualitative research: participation observation” (2001:88). Similarly Lichterman (2001:91) writes, “participant observation is the heart, and the heartwood, of all qualitative inquiry, its substantial core.” Participant Observation required gaining access to the everyday worlds of communities where I could observe their daily life-sustaining activities that interviewing alone could not capture. Each time I returned from the field I documented my impressions and reflections in the form of detailed field notes (See Appendix B for Observation Protocol). “The participant observer’s prime source of evidence about a site is *field notes*. Field notes are detailed accounts of people, places, interactions, and events that the researcher experiences as a participant-observer” (Lichterman 2001:121).

Although I planned on attending various social, political and religious community events there were far fewer than expected organized events in the everyday space of the communities. I found ordinary days to be in themselves rich for participant observation and interviews, but select specific events provided me opportunities to observe different dynamics. To point to specific examples: in the metalworker community, I observed women and men being involved in seasonal wage labor during the rice-harvesting season. I also observed a talk on income-

generation provided by a women's group. In the sweeper community, I observed a community meeting on keeping the neighborhood clean and a big chariot festival that is highly valued by the sweeper community. In the tailor/musician community, I observed a big Hindu ritual in which family members of three sample households – comprising three brothers and their families who lived side by side – participated. They had also invited other relatives.

In the organizational space, I attended workshops, seminars, rallies and protests of the organizations and the advocacy groups, depending on feasibility and context. Participant observation allows researchers to observe the group dynamics and interactions of members that they would not otherwise see if they only used interviews (Lichterman 1998). I visited all the national Dalit organizations located in Kathmandu. I visited international organizations that support Dalit NGOS. I also visited the offices of Dalit “sister wings” of political parties (as they are called). I accessed and photocopied organizational records pertinent to this research, and observed a few meetings, activities, and events that were relevant to my research. In addition to reviewing public documents of organizations, I attended some workshops, seminars and rallies of the organizations and advocacy groups when these were conducted in conjunction with other organizations and in a common public venue. Some examples are the programs in commemoration of the International Day against Racism; participation in South Asia People's Assembly; the Dalit Citizen Assembly; workshops conducted for discussion on the constituent assembly; workshops on the issue of proportional representation of Dalits organized by both Dalit-based political organizations and non government organizations. This entire period was indeed a vibrant one for discussions, debates and knowledge production, as well as for exposure to Dalit perspectives.

### **2.2.2.2 Interviews**

I relied on a semi-structured interview guide that included “a consistent set of questions or topics which allowed more flexibility during the interview” (Blee and Taylor 2002: 92). Blee and Taylor (2002:93-96) point out the advantages of semi-structured interviewing when studying social movements, some of which I found applicable for this research. They note that through methods such as semi-structured interviewing, scholars can gain access to the motivations and perspectives of a broader and more diverse group of social movement participants than would be represented in most documentary sources. Semi-structured interviewing strategies make it possible to scrutinize the semantic context of statements by social movement participants and leaders, to understand activists’ talk in the context of wider social understandings and discourses, how activists regard their participation and how they understand their social world. Semi-structured interviews bring human agency to the center of the movement analysis and semi-structured interviewing allows scholars to scrutinize the ways in which messages of social movements are received by member targeted recruits, intended audiences and others.

The interviews were tape recorded using a mini-cassette tape recorder that was unobtrusive. This helped me to be more attentive to the respondents. The one-on-one interviews usually lasted between 60 minutes and two hours depending on the situation and context. In the communities, I could not follow a strict one-on-one interview format because of the common space that was shared by family members.

I recorded the interviews only after gaining consent from the interviewees. I explained to the householders (where the setting was informal) that tape-recording ensured accurate capturing of their words and efficient transcription. I urged them to ignore the tape-recorder and keep talking. Since they were not used to technological devices, I did not want to make them nervous.

Once the interviews began, respondents seemed comfortable, and after the interview, some were excited to hear their own voices as I played back the recorded interviews. I decided against note-taking in the lower-income communities to avoid intimidation as most respondents were not able to read and write. During the data collection for my Master's thesis (Kharel 2003), for which I interviewed poor women, an informal and a rather open atmosphere suddenly changed when I took out my pen and paper to jot down some notes. Some vocal women suddenly seemed quiet and were worried that they would say the wrong thing.

All of the respondents except for two Dalit activists agreed to be tape-recorded. On such occasions, I took notes with their permission, although I avoided verbatim note-taking so that it would not interfere with the interview. Verbatim note-taking is counterproductive to the interactive nature of interviewing. I found the period immediately after the interview to be a critical time of reflection and elaboration. It is a time of quality control, to ensure that the data obtained is useful, reliable and authentic (Patton 2002). I tried to schedule my interviews so that there was sufficient time afterwards for clarification, reflection and elaboration. My extensive field notes turned out to be very valuable for the purposes of analysis.

### **2.2.2.3 Documentary Evidence**

I attempted to supplement the strategies of inquiry through interviewing and participant observation with documentary evidence. This evidence was hard to obtain for the community sample because of the lack of previous research in these communities and lack of formal and governmental documentation. I used what I could find. In the sweeper community, a health report done by an INGO provided a basic layout of the community and highlighted basic demographics and health problems (Iris Nepal 2005). For the metal worker community, I used the municipality surveys and looked at some student theses to gauge a general sense of the

community. I also did an informal survey of the area myself. For the tailor/musician community, I could not find any written reference. The Nepal 2001 census proved of little use in shedding light on these neighborhoods.

In the organizational space, I found the brochures and websites of organizations particularly useful. I used websites, political party literature, newspaper clippings that documented acts of resistance, for example, as well as other topics that were relevant, and also papers presented in workshops and presentations.

## 2.3 DATA ANALYSIS

I chose a multi-method approach and multiple levels of analysis in order to gain insight into the dialectics of identity and resistance of Dalits. The research process from the beginning of the fieldwork to the process of writing has been a dynamic one. “The three major dimensions of a qualitative study – description, analysis and interpretation” (Wolcott 1994: 6) “comprise a dialectical process, not linear” (Wolcott 1994: 11). I was engaged in a simultaneous process of data collection and data analysis throughout the research process. These processes were not neat and discrete. In semi-structured interviewing, analysis and interpretation are ongoing processes.

In analyzing semi-structured interviews, researchers make an effort to clarify concepts and categories through successful *alternating waves of data collection and interpretation*. During the course of these interviews, the researcher seeks to develop a sense of important themes and directions (Blee and Taylor 2002:110).

I situated my study in a mode of both deductive and inductive inquiry. In relation to managing data and analysis, I did not apply an either/or oppositional approach with regard to inductive and deductive methodology; rather, I combined these approaches. The inductive method of inquiry

begins with observations and then seeks to discover patterns based on these observations. A deductive approach is inherent in my setting up of the research framework which informed my research questions and, ultimately, the triangulated research methods/processes and research instruments. I used crude “manual” tabulations/coding (based on my analytical framework) while I was in the field and I was able to preliminarily categorize, arrange and organize some of the data. Although I had planned to use the NVivo 8 (qualitative research analysis software) as a data processing aid (for coding), especially to test, supplement and validate my own “gross” tabulations, I was unable to use the program because of structural limitations.<sup>11</sup> Not using Nvivo 8 did not detract from the analysis, however.

I used an interpretive analysis based on a combination of deductive and inductive thinking. For this study I went through a two-stage process of transcription then translation of the Nepali interviews into English. Partly because of the extra time involved, I used my translation time to do some simultaneous categorizing of the data. Translation provided opportunities for further familiarization with the data. This process, although time consuming, was beneficial in that it helped me to be intimately involved with my data. Moreover, translation required a sharp eye for context and intended meaning. I was aware of preserving the integrity of the text while translating. I consulted Nepali-English dictionaries and English-Nepali dictionaries to control for mis-translation, although one cannot deny that the researcher’s interpretation will influence the data. Moreover, no matter how proficient one may be in both the languages (in my case Nepali and English), something is lost in translation. Some examples of English words, among others,

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<sup>11</sup> The University of Pittsburgh computer labs did not have Nepali font installed in their foreign language fonts and it took me around six months of frequent requests before a staff person got back to me with the permission from the technology department for the font to be installed. The technology staff informed me that university policies forbade the installation of new fonts. They had to go through a protocol of requests and they agreed to install the fonts when the university revamped their system during the summer session. However, due to the oversight of a staff member, it was removed again at the end of that summer session. By the time my request for reinstallation made it again to the concerned authorities, it took a few more months for me to be able to view my data.

that were difficult in translating into Nepali were “contradiction” and “disconnect” which do not have one direct word in Nepali. I had to explain these words in terms of processes.

In summary, my research relied more comprehensively on (a) triangulation (combining interviews, participant observation and documentary evidence) and (b) close interpretation (interpretive analysis) with the research questions as my reference base. The triangulation system of data collection helped deal with the limitations of the interviewing method. “Interviews are highly situational conversations, respondents can engage in retrospective interpretation, the interviewer can fail to establish the level of rapport necessary to obtain accurate data, and interviewees can conceal or distort information” (Blee and Taylor 2002:111).

I categorized my data into recurrent themes, patterns and categories which will be highlighted in the following chapters on community and institutional ethnography. I kept a personal journal apart from the field journal for self-reflection in order to provide an open and honest narrative, and identify and clarify my biases. I also documented negative or discrepant information that runs counter to the themes during the data analysis. Because real life is composed of different perspectives that do not always coalesce, discussing contrary information adds to the credibility of an account for a reader (Creswell 2003).

Finally, there remains in both quantitative and qualitative work the possibility of human bias (Narayan 2000). While the researcher who is conscious of her bias can reduce it, its absence can never be proven. There are other limitations that relate to the nature of fieldwork, understanding what is unspoken, the dangers of generalization, and problems of raised expectations and ethics.



## **2.4 DETAILS OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

### **2.4.1 Pre-dissertation field trip**

My pre-dissertation field trip helped me lay the groundwork for more extended fieldwork.

During my summer trips to Nepal in 2004 and 2005 I established relevant contacts. I met with community leaders who helped identify and list segregated Dalit neighborhoods in and around Kathmandu keeping in mind sub-caste and class differences. They noted that some Dalit communities are increasingly socially mobile as they become integrated into the formal labor and commercial markets. For example, tailor/musician castes have been able to use their musical talents to tap into the commercial music industry and gain upward social mobility. Also, some members of the sweeper caste have been absorbed by the tourism sector and have found maintenance jobs in airports or hotels.

These visits also enabled me to identify Dalit organizations based on policies, programs and political manifestos, as gleaned from their literature, knowledgeable informants, and office visits. For instance, the Dalit NGO Federation provided a general overview of the Dalit social movement and provided information about the Dalit non-profit organizations and sister wings of Dalit political parties. The staff was very supportive of my research interests and provided letters of support granting permission for access to resources necessary for the research.

### **2.4.2 Pretest/Pilot Study**

When I arrived in Kathmandu for the formal field research, I did some preliminary work before going into the field. I translated the interview schedules for both community and activist samples

into Nepali, got the schedules checked by a professional translator well versed in both Nepali and English and made changes based on the translator's suggestions. I did a small pilot study to pretest my research instruments. Initially, I thought that I would do a small pretest and continue with the larger formal research in the same community after making adjustments. However, the community that I chose initially on the recommendation of a community leader did not turn out to be a good sample. This community was residing on government land, where squatter settlements had developed. The community people were able to claim the land through political pressure by the leaders of the constituency. The residents of the community were poor and disproportionately Dalits. After a month or so, it got increasingly difficult for me to get interviews for reasons which I think are important to point out. First, there was a general apathy and antagonism toward people from the outside coming and collecting data. The community residents had a hostile "why bother?" or "what's the point?" attitude. In fact, one lady specifically told me that she gave me time only because I came all the way from the U.S., convinced that having taken all this trouble to come to them, I must truly be interested. Second, this neighborhood did not have sewage facilities and they had to collect water from the local tap, which had scheduled times for operation. Kathmandu faces an acute water shortage due to the booming urban population,<sup>12</sup> a general lack of capacity to keep up with the population's growing

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<sup>12</sup> Kathmandu Valley has five of the 58 municipalities in the country and is home to about 30% of the total urban population. The city of Kathmandu is by far the largest city in the country, with more than 20% of the total urban population. The population of the three districts of Kathmandu Valley increased from 1,107,370 in 1991 to 1,647,092 in 2001. The annual population growth rate in Kathmandu district was 4.71%. The population of Kathmandu district was 1,081,845 in 2001 (4.7% of Nepal's population). The urban population density of Kathmandu Valley is 10,265 (the population is 995,966 and the area 97 sq.km). On the other hand, the rural population is also increasing slowly in the valley. The average annual growth of the rural population is comparatively higher than for Nepal as a whole. If present growth continues, the population of the valley in 2020 will reach 2.5 million (<http://new.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?DocumentID=498&ArticleID=5500&l=en>).

needs, and decreasing rainfall and other climatic changes. Due to their household responsibilities, respondents were not able to show up at their scheduled times. For example, acute water shortages forced them to wait for hours until the water became available from the community tap. They told me that sometimes they waited until 2 AM. This of course delayed women's cooking and cleaning activities. The men were often not available, as some were employed by garment factories, and because of acute scheduled power cuts they had to go to work whenever there was electricity. Sometimes they had to make up the lost time during the holidays too. So their availability started getting very erratic. In light of all these difficulties, I decided to withdraw after completing five interviews. Later I was able to find segregated neighborhoods with more favorable conditions for the research.

The community leaders were surprised at the difficulties I encountered in obtaining data, although they had warned me that it would not be easy. They admitted that they might have underestimated the demands of day-to-day survival for the residents of this community. This experience challenges notions that poor groups can be subjects of research because of their easy availability, based on the assumption that they are likely to be unemployed and have a lot of time on their hands. "They do nothing" was a common expression used to refer to this assumption. The "doing nothing" time, in my observation, was filled with struggles for basic survival – for water, cooking, cleaning, looking for employment and worrying about their children's schooling. Viewed from another perspective, it also denotes their agency in refusing to participate in research if they see no material reward for themselves or the community. Here I felt rather powerless.

Although the researcher almost always gets the last word as author of the research findings, during the course of fieldwork, power flows between researcher and her informants sometimes putting the researcher in a position of relative powerlessness (Adams 1999: 332)

This experience was very humbling and also challenged my own assumptions that doing research in communities might be relatively easy just because I was a Nepali. I had not anticipated the difficulties involved in collecting data and going into the everyday space and lives of people in neighborhoods where there are no neat temporal and spatial markers, in contrast to studying organizations with relatively clear structures and timetables. However, this very problem of the discontinuity between everyday space and organizational space had guided my research questions and design, and the experience proved illustrative. I wanted to meet the communities in their own space and within their own schedule.

Listening to people talking in their own settings, on their own time, participant observers have the opportunity to glean the everyday meanings, tacit assumptions, ordinary customs, practical rules that organize people's everyday lives (Lichterman 2002:138)

### **2.4.3 Selection of new communities and beginning of formal fieldwork**

The pilot study was very valuable. It allowed me to restructure some questions and adjust my approach according to the local mores. For instance, I found an informal way to start the conversation which worked as an ice-breaker. When the insider/informant (who accompanied me to the site) asked a 60 year-old Dalit woman whether she would be willing to talk to us, the woman said that she did not understand what we came for. The insider informally said that we wanted to know about her life experiences. Then the lady asked us in Nepali "*dukkha, sukhako kura*"? This phrase, which means "to talk about your troubles/sorrows and joy/happiness," was a nice way to open a conversation. This way of putting it made sense to her. Nepalis also use this phrase to express life in totality – with both its ups and its downs. Their experiences of their

everyday life may be summed up in this short phrase. Here, giving a very formal introduction (with a pen and paper in my hand) about my research right away would not have helped.

I started my formal research after selecting the three communities of sweepers, metal workers and tailors. I contacted insiders from all the communities through references provided to me by Dalit leaders. The three communities had many markers of separation/distinction in contrast to the pretest site and there were enough households to provide a robust sample. Gaining entry and building rapport took more time in the two lower class communities of sweepers and metal workers in contrast to the middle-class tailor community. The differences in location and layout of communities also influenced my observation and the interviewing process. The informal nature of the setting (spatial layout, extended families and household activities which will be explained in the chapter on community ethnography) of the sweeper and metal worker communities influenced the timing of the interviews. There were times when I had to wait because respondents were busy or forgot about the appointment. However, I adjusted my own schedule to theirs. Space was a crucial factor as the sweepers and metal workers did not have big living quarters and had visitors on and off. They did not have a special room to show me into and do the interviews comfortably. Sometimes I talked to them while they were doing chores; sometimes we sat on mats on the porticos. In contrast, the middle-class tailor castes were very polite and more formal in their interviews. They were punctual. I sat in their living rooms and did relatively formal interviews; they offered me tea, snacks and other social niceties.

#### **2.4.4 Key role of insiders**

The key role of insiders warrants special attention. All insiders were male and were easily accessible by phone. Despite being a native of Nepal, I would have found access difficult

without the help of insiders, due to the diversity of communities and the difference in status between the respondents and myself. Entering the field site with insiders was extremely helpful to me, even though, as a native, I speak Nepali and understand Nepali culture enough to negotiate my way into communities.

The researcher must find an insider, a member of the group studied willing to be an informant and to act as a guide and a translator of cultural mores and at, times jargon or language. Although interviews can be conducted without an informant, a researcher can save much time and avoid many mistakes if a good informant becomes available (Fontana and Frey 1998: 59).

I selected insiders through reference provided by intellectuals and community leaders. For each community, I was referred to different individuals. Although this process took me around a month or so, the effort was not wasted as I was able to gather a lot of knowledge about the communities before entering the field. By the time I selected insiders for each community, I had done prior research and met or talked to at least three or four people. In the metal worker community, a known and elderly literary laureate and musician from a Dalit community pointed me to the area which had the highest segregated Dalit population in Kathmandu. He introduced me to his relatives who in turn provided me the reference for the insider, who was from an upper-caste community but who lived close to the metal worker community and interacted with them frequently. He was familiar with the whole locality and known in the area. In the sweeper community, a former political representative from the area, whom I met through another intellectual accompanied me to the area and introduced me to the insider. Although all of the respondents from the sweeper community could speak Nepali, since *Newari* is their mother tongue, a *Newari* insider helped build trust as I was an outsider from another background. In the tailor/musician community, an individual in the music industry took me into the homes of the community members.

I went with insiders initially in all the three communities, familiarized myself with the surroundings, explained the context of my research and only then started my interviews. In other words, this was a rather gradual process. Insiders would also let me know when the time was right to interview. They provided tips for the local context – the way I should dress, what time would be right to visit the communities and what events could be observed.

After getting to know some of my respondents and building up enough confidence in my relations with them, I began to go into the communities on my own. I did not want the insider's presence to influence the interviewees' responses as all the insiders were figures of respect and even authority in the respective communities. I also wanted to avoid male bias since all the insiders were male. I would ask some respondents what time would be best for them and if they thought I could attend something in addition to what insiders suggested. I listened to my respondents. For example, I attended one of their big cultural festivals (chariot festival) in the sweeper community, and although the insider suggested I stay till late, eat with them and drink home-brewed alcohol, the women folk in their protective mode warned me that men would drink a lot that day and I should be cautious. They hinted that I should leave early, which I did. Some of my young female respondents accompanied me to observe the huge chariot festival.

In doing the research, I also saw how insiders related to their communities. As research progressed, my respondents themselves seemed confident and sometimes even challenged the insiders, using the opportunity to raise pertinent questions about community problems and talk about their grievances, an unintended consequence of this research. For instance, in the metal worker community, the "insider" was a respected upper-caste man. So when the issue of caste discrimination came up, they pointed out that he too did not enter their homes even though he called himself their well wisher. They noted that their water pipes were cut off by communities

living below them to brew local alcohol; they complained that a tap supposedly built for their community had no running water and the village district committee had paid no heed. In the sweeper community, respondents took the opportunity to point to some promises made by their elected representatives and why those were not fulfilled; they also raised concerns about caste discrimination their children faced in schools. Fortunately, these situations did not cause any conflict or unpleasantness. At the end of the research, I noticed the insiders being more reflective, perhaps surmising that the questions from the research had raised some caste consciousness.

#### **2.4.5 Gaining entry and presentation of self**

Throughout the study, I presented myself as a graduate student writing a dissertation on Dalit identity and resistance. There were no circumstances where I engaged in covert research tactics to mislead anyone about my intention as a researcher. I did not take special steps to hide the fact that I am opposed to caste discrimination and an advocate for social justice. I am cognizant of my identity as an upper-caste and middle-class woman and the privileges that come along with it. At the same time, I myself have experienced a version of the disconnect between caste status and socio-economic status. More importantly, I occupy a somewhat flat status as a student. To some extent, this trumped my middle-class and upper-caste status.

Initially, respondents from the sweeper and metal worker communities put me under the same category of “data collectors” who come with note books, take some cursory information, make promises saying that the information would help the community and leave, never to return. Although they were partly correct and justified in judging me in the same light, since I too was a data collector, I had to make it clear that my motives were different. I emphasized that I had



nothing to give them but, instead, wanted to learn from them and document their stories so that others might learn of their situation. I stated that the interviews were voluntary and I did not interview respondents who seemed hesitant and suspect. Some respondents asked me what they would get in return. I had to reiterate that I had nothing tangible or immediate to give them in return. I said that I would finish the research and share it in the form of presentations in the university and professional settings in the U.S., as well as with various Dalit organizations and advocates. They seemed fascinated and honored by the fact that I would be talking about their lives in a country like the United States and, as the research progressed, they occasionally asked me about life there. I shared my knowledge with them. They asked whether a caste system existed in the United States. Many of them had a romanticized vision of the United States as being the epitome of material and human development, where perfect equality existed.

This of course, raises pertinent questions on the ethical dilemmas of qualitative research. I am sure each researcher who embarks on in-depth field research asks, "How do I give back?" How do I justify what I am doing? How do I explain the significance of the larger study, which might appear to have value for my work and eventually my career but little or none for my respondents? Is simply saying "I want to undertake research in your community and your cooperation is voluntary" enough? Will saying that the study in question may influence policy make sense? How will such statements be meaningful for historically poor and oppressed groups who have been repeatedly subjects of studies but who have yet to see any meaningful outcomes, who feel apathetic and skeptical of data collectors or of political party candidates who promise "development" in return for votes? How do you show your written work directly (so that subjects can read for themselves) to communities who have not had the opportunity for formal education?

A common justification for conducting research and basis for giving back is the work's potential to influence policy. Unfortunately, in Nepal, sociologists have not been able to exert much influence on policy-making. During a conference titled *Social Sciences in a Multicultural World* organized by the Sociological and Anthropological Society of Nepal in December 2006, the organizer of the conference, a Sociology professor, made a direct plea to the chief guest of the conference, the Speaker of the Nepali parliament. He stated that the time had come in Nepal for government officials and policy makers to start paying serious attention to sociologists for their help in tackling social problems. I personally cannot predict what difference this dissertation might make in the lives of my community respondents. However, it is important to note that activists were very supportive of the research, and they have been assured full disclosure of its findings. An influential Dalit intellectual told me that this dissertation would be important precisely because of my location in the western academy. He mentioned that their own writings were not given much credibility and were not accepted for publication in international journals. The Nepali Dalit movement would benefit from a study that had the potential to reach out to a global audience.

In a paper titled, "Poor people and expanding scholarship: dilemma of anthropological research in Nepal," presented at the conference organized by the Sociological and Anthropological Society of Nepal, Shrestha (2006) stated that most of the anthropological research done in Nepal had been done by foreign researchers. For example, by 2004, 571 foreign researchers from 26 countries had conducted research in Nepal under the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS)<sup>13</sup> alone. He contended that poor people have little to hide, are generally

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<sup>13</sup> Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS) is a statutory multidisciplinary research centre under Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Nepal for conducting independent research and deliberation on issues and studies in social sciences. For detailed objectives see <http://www.cnastu.org.np/>

more open and entertain a lurking hope for material largesse from the apparently well-heeled external researcher. He commented that the often-repeated justification by researchers is that a published ethnography of the communities could constitute a useful basis for planning various development activities. Even though reciprocity may be claimed as an underlying commitment and may even constitute sincere intent, it is rarely followed through. Even final progress reports to CNAS are not submitted. He pointed out the paradox of expanding scholarship on the one hand and worsening and entrenched poverty on the other.

#### **2.4.6 Gaining trust and establishing rapport**

Gaining trust and establishing rapport progressed slowly throughout the fieldwork.

Gaining trust is essential to an interviewer's success, and even once it is gained trust can be very fragile indeed; any faux pas by the researcher may destroy days, weeks or months of painstakingly gained trust (Fontana and Frey 1998: 60).

I was confident that I had gained trust when my respondents started asking me (with smiles) when I would come next. Sometimes they were upset that I did not stay till late to join them in some of their festivals. I also accepted food and water<sup>14</sup> whenever I was offered. The respondents from the sweeper and metal worker communities complained that many upper-caste people (from the same locality or sometimes people wanting information for administrative purposes) visit the area but hesitate to enter their homes and even if they come in, refuse to accept food and

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<sup>14</sup> I accepted food and water not to blend in or as a symbolic gesture (although researchers could use this as a strategy to gain trust) but because I am personally opposed to caste based practices myself. I accepted food out of sincerity and I did not mind having a meal when invited. Many Dalit activists have criticized the symbolic aspect of this kind of gesture – when politicians/persons in high public offices go into Dalit homes to eat for a photo-op or to show that they oppose caste discrimination as if they are doing Dalits a favor. In many activists' view, such acts appear to be a farce and the political correctness of such acts do not herald true change.

water from them. This was a way of testing upper-caste people's stated ideals of equality and opposition to caste discrimination. So while I was researching them, my respondents were also researching and testing me. They wanted to see whether I walked my talk.

#### **2.4.7 Access to organizational space**

Gaining access to advocates and activists was much more straightforward than was the case with the communities, which lacked formal – or, at least, readily legible – structures. I did not have to worry about gaining trust as most activists were happy that I had taken up the issue of Dalits as a research subject and were eager to know more. My first access point was the Dalit NGO Federation and National Dalit Commission. I visited organizations and compiled a list of activists based on snowball sampling and also based on the frequency of times to which a person was referred. I interviewed activists from these organizations as well as independent activists and activists representing the seven Dalit sister wings of national political parties. This diverse sample of activists is emblematic of the diversity of Dalit castes, Dalit organizations and Dalit advocacy in Nepal. I conducted most of the activist interviews in formal office settings. One disadvantage with formal settings was constant phone call and visitor interruptions.

In addition to being the researcher, I also served as a resource person. There were occasions when I volunteered for some organizations when they requested that I help them with editing newsletters, doing online research, providing youth training and giving guidelines to write research proposals. With this also came some expectations that I could not fulfill – to find funding and link them to donors. A common assumption was that getting funding in the U.S would be easy if one prepared good proposals and if one had contacts abroad.

#### **2.4.8 Researcher Identity**

The complexity of my own identity affected the research in various ways. While I was attempting to understand Dalit identities and resistance, I also had to understand the shifting nature of my own identity in different contexts throughout the research process, as I moved between the everyday space of Dalit communities and the organizational or civic space of activists.

My identity is a complex composite forged through the articulating processes of intersectionality. I am an upper-caste, middle-class, urban Nepali woman who is studying in the United States. In this sense, even though I am a Nepali citizen, I was viewed as representing the United States and with this came both expectations and prestige. I felt that my U.S education might have been an important factor in persuading the respondents to be co-operative. They seemed surprised that I had come from so far away to talk to them and engage in an ongoing and deeply involved dialogue over a sustained period. “The researcher-informant relationship brings into play dynamics of race, gender, class, nation, and age” (Adams 1999: 323).

I felt that my gender identity was an advantage, especially in the everyday space of communities. Women talked to me openly. I doubt that a male researcher would have been able to elicit as candid responses as I did on gender, because of the cultural gender norms of hierarchy and segregation. I observed that female space was very important for women in the communities. Such space also provided them a haven of solidarity where they could vent their frustrations and share their experiences. This space in my view is an important source of mutual support and comfort, especially in poor communities. Everyday activities of cooking, cleaning, collecting water and fuel, looking after children also provided moments when I could talk to the women and interview them in a way that did not interrupt their schedules. Ahmed (1982) talks

about gender-segregated space in a positive light even though western perception of this space emphasizes lack of freedom(s). She writes that the strict segregation of Islamic societies has provided in fact certain freedoms for women and opportunities to engage in activities that their Western sisters do not have. In their space, women can be and often are freely together, freely exchanging information, ideas, including about men, without danger of being overheard by them. I am certain that it would have been difficult, perhaps impossible, for male researchers to access this space. As Adam (1999: 345) notes, “Although women often feel constrained by traditional gender roles in the field, this can allow greater access to sensitive topics than men would be allowed if gatekeepers see women as harmless.”

At the same time, male respondents in the communities seemed to downplay some aspects of the gender dimension of caste discrimination and this gave me some insight into their male privilege. They would either dismiss questions on gender division of labor by saying “what to do, this is tradition ” or downplay caste-based discrimination by saying that discrimination had waned and things were getting better in the locality, not taking into account the everyday experiences of women and children. For example, one afternoon, after I stepped away from a portico where I had been interviewing two men (from the metal worker community), a woman hurriedly followed me and stopped me as I reached out of the sight of the men. She protested to me that the men had not given an accurate picture of the situation of Dalits in the locality. She seemed rather upset and said, “How do they (men) know about discrimination – they do not go to collect water, they do not shop nor do they go to temples.” She also suggested that women in the area were disappointed in their husbands/brothers and fathers for not speaking up against caste discrimination.

Male western researchers have noted that they selected mostly male respondents during their research in Nepal. For instance, Parish (1996) has not addressed the problem of meanings that caste and gender hierarchies pose for women in his study on the *Newar* Community in Nepal. He admits that he gained easy access into the male world as a male researcher. He did not want to transgress local gender norms and worried that contact with a male researcher would stigmatize female informants. Liechty (2003), who studied the making of middle-class culture in Kathmandu, states that the majority of his informants were male.

I did not think my gender identity mattered (in a positive way) within the organizational context to the same extent as it did in the communities. Activists were open in their interviews although I am sure their responses were mediated by gender. For instance, female activists were more vocal and open about gender oppression, speaking from direct experience, and probably felt comfortable sharing their views with a female researcher. This is not to imply that male activists did not raise issues regarding gender oppression. In fact all researchers took care to point out the “triple oppression” of caste, class and gender suffered by Dalit women. They seemed very familiar with this term. Many accepted their male privilege as well. For instance, one lawyer told me that even though he aspired to equality, his wife continued to address him with deference (common to Nepali gender norms), thus reproducing the traditional gender hierarchy and inequality in their relationship. So even as a politically conscious professional he had not been able to resist or challenge this cultural double standard. On a few occasions when I went to activists’ homes to conduct interviews, the gender division of labor was apparent, with women preparing, offering, and serving food, while husbands commonly watched TV or read newspapers.

I also noticed during my visits to Dalit organizations and in reading the organization brochures and websites, that they had relatively few female staff. The Feminist Dalit organization, which had a predominantly female staff, was an exception. Moreover, I did not see female representatives in many of the meetings and workshops that I attended during the research process. To point to a more specific example, I attended a meeting (at the invitation of a Dalit non-governmental organization) conducted by a United Nations office to assess the problems of Dalits, to which representatives of all major Dalit organizations had been invited. The UN staff person explicitly noted that the women's representation was very low and that, according to UN rules, it was mandatory to have at least 10 percent female attendance for a proper working meeting. There were only two women (including me) in the room and I was counted as one of the female representatives of the organization that had invited me. Although the meeting went ahead that day (the UN official conceded that the rule in question might not have been clear), Dalit organizations were put on notice regarding gender equity requirements. Later some of the men in attendance explained to me that many female Dalit activists had been invited but had not shown up for the meeting.

As far as my caste, class and educational identities were concerned, communities and activists related to these identities rather differently, despite my efforts, throughout the research process, to emphasize my relatively flat student status. In the lower class communities of sweepers and metal workers, respondents were more curious about my life in the United States. Some even asked me what it would take to go to the U.S. for an education. They were less concerned about my caste, as my urban/class status might have seemed more relevant for them. However, there *were* times when they asked me about caste and upon such occasions I revealed my caste status. In the middle-class tailor community, respondents talked to me about their



relatives and friends living in the U.S. and asked me which state in the U.S. I was from. They also talked about the aspirations of their children to higher education in the U.S. I gave them detailed information about the procedures to gain entry into the U.S. After interviews, many would ask me about colleges and which states were the best for work and education.

When I interviewed activists, there were a few incidents or exchanges that revealed how caste is woven into the very fabric of Nepali society. Some activists would directly point to my caste and class privilege and my current education in the United States to make their points on historical exclusion, oppression, and its present-day consequences. In other words, they would emphasize that there was no level playing field: while persons like myself had enjoyed caste privilege, Dalits had been deprived of opportunities because of their caste status. Using terms such as human dignity and equality of opportunity, they would often force me to reflect on my privileges on the spot. To offer two direct quotes:

“Dalits too want to live like Sambriddhi Kharel [referring to the interviewer, i.e. me]. They want their basic dignity. They want to be able to walk and talk with dignity.”

“A Dalit woman educated in the rural areas with unequal opportunities and inadequate standards of education would never be able to compete with you [referring to the interviewer] and go to the U.S. Can she? You tell me!”

Overall, activists were very open and supportive in relation to my research. The majority of activists had a very positive attitude and were pleased that a non-Dalit was taking responsibility and asking important questions about caste discrimination, especially since Dalits blame the state and the upper castes for their situation today. However, there were a few times when I was charged with encroaching upon Dalits’ employment opportunities, as my dissertation research was viewed as an attempt to build a career upon expert knowledge of Dalits. A Dalit journalist

told me that non-Dalits who have become “Dalit experts” do nothing for Dalits, yet make money out of them. For example, they do not employ Dalits in their offices, nor include Dalits as part of their research team.

During such times I acknowledged my privilege and said that, as an upper-caste woman, it was also my responsibility to understand caste issues, hence my decision to embark on this research. I kept a personal journal in addition to the field journal for introspection and to maintain an open and honest dialogue with myself, including identifying and scrutinizing my biases. The qualitative researcher systematically reflects on who she or he is in the inquiry and is sensitive to his or her personal biography and how it shapes the study. There were times when I had many questions and experienced ambiguities and ambivalent emotions. The role of emotion in the qualitative research process and the effects of emotional experiences on the researcher have been addressed by researchers. According to Hubbard *et al* (2001: 119), “emotions are important for understanding the research process and unless emotion in research is acknowledged, not only will researchers be left vulnerable, but also our understanding of the social world will remain impoverished.” Observing others’ reactions as well as one’s own emotions in response to pushing the boundaries of personal accountability is a good psychological outlet as well as a valuable source of data (Adams 1999: 359).

It was not very easy at times as I struggled with many questions. My experiences also made me empathetic towards non-minority researchers who study minority issues in the U.S. The questions of researcher legitimacy kept invading my mind. My reflexive notes from my personal journal articulate this point:

How do upper-castes that work on Dalit/minority issues manage their identity and deal with the complexities that come along with the selection of the research project? Can a non-Dalit advocate on behalf of Dalits? Will it hurt or support the Dalit movement? Does being a Dalit have a greater impact? What

about the role of privileged castes then? I think non-Dalits walk a tight rope when researching such issues. Basically if you do not experience caste-based discrimination, you are seen to participate in social exclusion and perpetuation of the caste-system. If you are conscious, if you personally oppose such practices and strive to do something, you may be accused of using the cause for your own ends. I think it is crucial to learn to differentiate between people who are involved genuinely for those causes and those who are not. Overall, I suppose the important point is being responsible for what you do and sincerely addressing these issues.

### **3.0 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM: THEORETICAL CONTEXT**

The theoretical context of this study engages the overarching framework of social inequality posed by feminist theories of the intersectionality of race, class, gender, caste and region, as well as the wider literature on transnational processes taking place at various intersections of the local and the global. This chapter presents the building blocks—the major theoretical concepts—that are brought together to provide the theoretical framework for this study. They fall under the following headings: Intersectionality & Matrix of Domination, Place and Spatiality (everyday space and civil-society political space), Caste and Social Mobility, and Dialectics of Identity and Resistance.

#### **3.1 INTERSECTIONALITY AND MATRIX OF DOMINATION**

Feminist scholars have used the concept of "intersectionality" to illuminate the interlocking hierarchies of identity that characterize individual experiences and the production of social life (Chow, Wilkinson, and Zinn 1996; Collins 1990 & 1999; Crenshaw 1997; Fereer, Lorber and Hess 1999; McCall 2005). According to McCall (2005: 1771), intersectionality, "the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations," is perhaps the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far. Collins' book, *Black Feminist Thought* (1990),

was seminal in countering white middle class western feminism's bias in failing to address African American and working class women's experiences. Collins argues that Black women's voices were suppressed due to their oppression related to a colonial and slave past. This oppression was characterized by exploitation of Black women's labor and denial of African American women the rights and privileges extended to white male citizens. Further, controlling images of Black women that originated during the slave era attest to the ideological dimension of Black women's oppression. The key conceptual components of Black feminist thought are: (i) Black women's standpoint, (ii) African feminist epistemology, and (iii) matrix of domination. A Black women's standpoint is constituted by those experiences and ideas shared by African American women (for example, legacy of struggle, black women's vulnerability to assaults in the workplace, home and street that has stimulated black women's independence and self-reliance) that provide a unique angle of vision on self, community and society as well as the situated theories that interpret these experiences. Thus Black feminist thought consists of specialized knowledge produced by African American women which articulates a standpoint of and for Black women. The particular dimensions of an Afrocentric epistemology identified by Collins (1990) are concrete experience as a criterion of meaning, the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, the ethic of caring (value placed on individual expressiveness, the appropriateness of emotions and the capacity for empathy that pervade African-American culture), and the ethic of personal accountability where people are expected to be accountable to their knowledge claims. She maintains that theory and intellectual creativity are not the province of a select few but instead emanate from a range of people (p.xiii).

Collins (1990:222-227) argues that "matrix of domination" is a framework for reconceptualizing oppression that sees gender, class, race, global location, sexual preference and

age as interlocking systems of oppression . This fosters a fundamental paradigmatic that rejects Eurocentric, dichotomous, masculinist and additive models of oppression (see also Crenshaw 1991). In addition to being structured along interlocking axes, the matrix of domination is structured on multiple levels. Collins states that people experience and resist oppression on three levels: “the level of personal biography; the group or community level of cultural context created by race, class and gender; and the systemic levels of social institutions. Black feminist thought emphasizes all three levels as sites of domination and as potential sites of resistance” (p.227).

Lendermann and Brantly (2000) call these interlocking systems “intersecting vectors of oppression and privilege.” The privilege exercised by some men and women turns on the oppression of other women and men. While vectors of oppression and privilege intersect in all people’s lives, the way these vectors intersect markedly affects the degree to which a common standpoint is affirmed. Among factors facilitating this affirmation is the group’s existence over time, its sense of its own history as a group, its location in relatively segregated, identifiable spaces and its development of an intra-group system of social organizations and knowledge for coping with oppression. But a group’s standpoint is never monolithic or impermeable. The group members can pivot between varying senses of self, and group members frequently move out from the home group into the larger society. As Crenshaw (1997:180) notes, “we must recognize the organized identity in which we find ourselves as in fact not monolithic but made up of members with different and perhaps competing identities as well. Rather than viewing this as a threat to solidarity, we should view it as an opportunity for bridge building and coalition politics.” In short, this theory is useful because “in developing an agenda for change, intersectionality theory turns to the knowledge of oppressed people” (Lendermann and Brantly 2000: 340).

Postcolonial feminist scholars have built upon this paradigm and have added caste to the matrix (Cameron 1998; 2009; Deshpande 2002; Kapadia 1995; Rao 2003; Sob 2006). For instance, Nepali Dalit feminists stress the triple oppression faced by Dalit women. They use this as an underlying framework within the historical and socio-political context for framing Dalit issues and understanding problems faced by Dalits. Nepali and Indian Dalit feminists have also criticized feminism in India and Nepal for being middle class and reflecting upper-caste values (Rao 2003; Sob 2006). They emphasize the dynamic relationship of class, caste and gender. It is crucial to examine how the three axes of identity—caste, class and gender—interact. Besides, gender hierarchies and caste hierarchies are in a state of flux because of changes in the class status of women and men as a result of social mobility. In other words, the status of women and men within the same group are not necessarily identical on the non-gender axes. For instance, in a study done in South India, Kapadia (1995) finds that family groups that are upwardly mobile are ascending the class ladder because the educated male members of these families have succeeded in getting salaried jobs. But though most economists automatically assume that all members of an upwardly mobile family are of the same social class, feminist research has shown how mistaken such a view can be, since it ignores the blatant economic inequality and unequal access to resources that often exist within families.

Moreover, Deshpande (2002) argues that there is an overlap of caste and gender inequality. Under Brahminical Hinduism, women and shudras (lower castes including Dalits) are treated identically – the caste system places similar restrictions on the two in terms of denial of religious privileges or denial of access to education. The caste-religion nexus is strongest among upper castes, as they view themselves as custodians of the established tradition. On the other hand, Dalit castes have historically been relatively more egalitarian for women. However,

Deshpande challenges the debates that suggest a trade-off between improvements in the material conditions of living (for higher caste women) and greater autonomy (for Dalit Women). This situation is changing quickly, so that the relative freedom of Dalit women may now be more illusory than real. It is possible that the trade-off may not exist at all. While actual material improvements are not substantial among the Dalit castes, there is evidence to suggest that the phenomenon of *Sanskritization* (a practice by which the lower caste emulates upper caste practices as symbolic of betterment of their position) may be spreading widely. To the extent that *Sanskritization* occurs, the distinction between the two rungs of women, based on relative freedom quotients, becomes largely irrelevant.

In addition to its theoretical contribution, intersectionality is used as a method of analysis as the examples above point out. In her 2005 article, “The Complexity of Intersectionality” (p. 1771-1778), McCall recognizes that the challenge for the researcher is how to manage the complexity of an intersectional analysis. She delineates three approaches although she notes that not all research on intersectionality can be classified into one of the three approaches -- the anticategorical complexity, the intracategorical complexity and the intercategory complexity. Moreover, some researchers cross over the boundaries of the continuum, belonging primarily to one approach and partly to others.

The approach of anticategorical complexity is linked to feminist post-structuralism and deconstruction of the analytical categories. Social life is considered too irreducibly complex or overflowing with multiple and fluid determinations of both subjects and structures. Methodologies for the study of anticategorical complexity crosscut the disciplinary divide between the social sciences and the humanities. This approach has been very effective in challenging or “troubling” the singularity, separateness, and wholeness of a wide range of social



categories. Two examples McCall provides among others are: (1) bisexual, transgendered, queer, and questioning individuals have been added to the original divide between gay and straight sexuality groups, and (2) the social groups that constitute the category of race are widely believed to be fundamentally indefinable because of multiracialism.

Authors working in the vein of intracategorical complexity tend to focus on particular social groups at neglected points of intersection in order to reveal the complexity of lived experiences of such groups. For example, in studies done by feminists of color (Collins' work above is an example), the potential for both multiple and conflicting experiences of subordination and power required a more wide-ranging and complex terrain of analysis. This approach is also used in case studies – in-depth studies of a single group or culture or site that generally employ more qualitative research methods and have generally been distinguished by their ability to reveal diversity, variation, and heterogeneity where quantitative researchers see singularity, sameness, and homogeneity. The study of Dalits in Nepal, the focus of this dissertation, falls within this category.

The approach of intercategorical complexity, also known as the categorical approach, begins with the observation that there are relationships of inequality among already constituted social groups and takes those relationships as the center of analysis. This requires the provisional use of categories. The categorical approach is different because relationships of inequality among social groups do not enter as background or contextual or discursive or ideological factors, as they often do in the other two approaches, but constitute the focus of the analysis itself. The approach focuses on the complexity of relationships among multiple social groups within and across analytical categories and not on complexities within single social groups, single categories, or both. For example, it is not the intersection of race, class and gender in a

single social group that is of interest but the relationships among the social groups defined by the entire set of groups constituting each category. The categorical approach formally compares—say, in terms of income or education—each of the groups constituting a category: men and women, blacks and whites, working and middle classes, and so on. This approach is generally associated with quantitative methodology.

### **3.2 PLACE AND SPATIALITY (EVERYDAY SPACE AND CIVIL-SOCIETY POLITICAL SPACE)**

Identities and consciousness are influenced by place, space and boundaries (McDowell 1993; Massey and Jess 1995; Paul 1992; Rose 1998; Rodman 1992; Spain 1993). The shifting nature of identity and consciousness has to be seen in two ways – first, in terms of levels and modalities of agency (see below), and second, in terms of spatial boundaries, particularly those distinguishing everyday space and organizational space. Before discussing these concepts, it is useful to make a distinction between place and space although there are similarities in that they are both socially constructed and both key to the subject's identity (as well as closely related to each other and needing to be considered together).

Reviewing sociological literature and research that are linked to “place,” Gieryn (2000: 463-466) lists three necessary and sufficient features of place: (1) geographic location, (2) material form, in that place has physicality and material culture in social life is significant (i.e. social processes—difference, power, inequality, collective action—happen *through* the material forms that we design, build, use, and protest), and (3) investment with meaning and value: Places are also interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood, and imagined. In spite of its

relatively enduring and imposing materiality, the meaning or value of the same place is flexible in the hands of different people or cultures, malleable over time, and inevitably contested. Rose (1998) points out that the meanings given to a place may be so powerful that they become a central part of the identity of the people experiencing them – identity being the accumulated impact of lived experiences and all the subjective feelings of everyday consciousness, but these feelings being understood to be embedded in and in negotiation with wider sets of social relations.

Place mediates social life. In other words, place is not just a backdrop for something else that becomes the focus of sociological attention, nor is it a proxy for demographic, structural, economic, or behavior variables. Everything we study therefore is *emplaced*; it happens somewhere and involves material stuff. Gieryn notes that a sociology informed by place will be most effective when it is neither reductionist nor determinist. This is possible where the three defining features of place—location, material form, and meaningfulness—remain bundled, not ranked into greater or lesser significance (p. 466).

Place is not the same as space, or necessarily coterminous with it. In particular, Gieryn cautions that place should not be confused with abstract geometries (distance, direction, size, shape, volume) detached from material form and cultural interpretation (referring to Hillier & Hanson 1984) and the use of geographic or cartographic metaphors (boundaries, territories) that define conceptual or analytical spaces, or even more materially referenced social, cultural or institutional boundaries. Neither is place to be found in cyberspace: websites on the internet are not places in the same way that the room, building, campus, and city that house and locate a certain server are places. Put positively, place is space filled up by people, practices, objects, and representations (p. 465). Whilst places used to be seen as static, coherent, settled and bounded,

they are now being reconceptualised as particular sets of intersections of social relations, where “space is socially constructed and can be imagined as being formed out of stretched out social relations” (Massey and Jess 1995: 220).

Although there is the common view that with increasing globalization place has been transcended, place matters and persists as a constituent element of social life and historical change (Gireyn 2000; Harcourt & Escobar 2005 and Massey 1994; 2007). Places are experienced locally in that no matter how transnationalised and shaped by larger forces, they are deeply historical and particular. Today, rather than speaking about a seemingly homogenous “global village,” it is useful to talk about a global sense of place that recognizes both global influences and local determinations and hence the fundamental diversity of places (Harcourt & Escobar 2005:7).

### **3.2.1 Everyday Space**

Feminist geographer Doreen Massey (2007) is sensitive to uneven geographies of the world. Massey is critical of views that diminish space. Today it is hard to escape grand statements like the world is shrinking; we live in a global village; speeded up travel has conquered distance, and that time has finally annihilated space. Such statements may be true for some in the worlds of business and virtual communication and those who have access to high speed travel but cannot be applied universally. Further, the associated rhetoric of level playing fields and flat earth as well as its shrinking eradicates the historical depth of any cultures or histories that are not those of the authors of this rhetoric. She emphasizes that space in fact counts because it is more than distance. If time is the dimension of change and succession then space is the dimension of contemporaneous co-existence. Space, then is the dimension of the social; it presents us with the

existence of others. In other words space is social distance, cultural distance. It is time (travel time, communication time) that is being reduced, not space. It is important to recognize inequalities and exclusion. A majority of the population lives in the global south. People living in big cities live in forgetfulness of the “geographies of difference.” The local spaces of communities in distant lands are equally important where people have their own stories to tell. Spaces have their own peculiar temporality. Massey is thus critical of a single mode of growth, development and progress.

Where place has a particular geographical anchor, the idea of space refers more to specific social, cultural, and institutional demarcations. The two need to be understood as a dynamic relationship. Dalit neighborhoods are therefore both places and the most salient locus of everyday space, while Dalit organizations are both headquartered or “placed” in Kathmandu and an intentional political space.

Everyday space and organizational space generate different levels of consciousness of those wider social relations, and comprehend different levels of identity formation. The significance of everyday space is addressed by Dorothy Smith (1987: 88-98) in whose work the everyday world is taken to be constituted through various and differentiated matrices of experience. Smith notes that normally we take the everyday world for granted even though significant events are occurring around us all the time. She calls upon sociologists to make the everyday world the locus of a sociological problematic. Smith is critical of sociological discourse that has maintained its hegemony over the activities of the everyday experience of the world. The problematic, manifests equally in the everyday lives of research subject and researcher, for the everyday world is neither transparent nor obvious. Fundamental to this organization is that its inner determinations are not discoverable within it. There are events creating changes in or

intruding on people's lives but the logic of transformation is elsewhere. The everyday world is not an abstracted formal "setting" transposed by the sociologist's conceptual work to an abstracted formal existence. It is an actual material setting, an actual local and particular place in the world (p. 97). The sociological subjects are located as actual individuals located in an everyday world. This means a sociology that does not transform people into objects, but preserves their presence as subjects.

From this perspective then, everyday mind-frames and the everyday world should not be underestimated as "passive." Feminists, she notes, should ask questions that are generated by women's everyday lives and that address their concerns; or in other words, feminists need to view themselves and society from the lived perspective of women. In explaining the standpoint of women in the everyday world she writes:

In the research context this means that so far as their everyday worlds are concerned, we rely entirely on what women tell us, what people tell us, about what they do and what happens. But we cannot rely upon them for an understanding of the relations that shape and determine the everyday. Here then lies our work as social scientists, for the investigation of these relations and the exploration of the ways they are present in the everyday are and must be a specialized enterprise ... (1987:110).

Smith's account can be applied to Dalit men and women in the context of everyday spaces in Nepal. While appearing ordinary and unremarkable, the space Dalit communities occupy have "special" or unique symbolic and physical markers. Therefore, a spatial perspective is critical in understanding Dalit communities. Historically, Dalits were forced to live in segregated neighborhoods, as in the Jim Crow era of segregation in the United States. Segregated Dalit neighborhoods still persist in Nepal and India despite the outlawing of untouchability and caste discrimination. This segregation symbolized Dalits' inferior status and exclusion, not only in the

sense of physical place/space, as in their neighborhoods, but also in the occupations they were required to take up to serve the upper castes. Dalits embodied a polluted space within their own bodies and without. Even their shadows were considered to be polluting to the upper castes.

### **3.2.2 Civil-Society Political Space**

Political consciousness can be decisively influenced by urban space. Kathmandu, for example, as the urban setting of the study, has particular potency as the site of concentration of the coordinating agencies of all the major social movement organizations of Dalits in Nepal, and also as the center of modernist capitalist re-structuring. Place/space therefore matters as a locus of action, “time” (differential temporality), consciousness and identity (Ayers *et al* 1996; Gieryn 2000). Organizations that provide a discursive and intentional space play a key role in mobilizing their group members and the larger society, and in the process of destabilizing, deconstructing and transforming identities. The organizational space in this research implies civil-society political space, primarily the operational sphere of non-profit organizations and organizations associated with, or units of, political parties.

The term civil society carries multiple meanings and diverse interpretations. More recently, with globalization, the term has broadened beyond national territorial boundaries to include the sphere demarcated as “Global Civil Society” (Anheier *et al* 2001 & 2004; Bebbington *et al* 2005; Chandhoke 2003; O’ Brien *et al* 2000). The London School of Economics Center for Civil society (CCS) has adopted an initial working definition that is meant to guide research activities and teaching. This definition takes into account the nuanced range of the concept of civil society:

Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organizations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trades unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy group

([http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what\\_is\\_civil\\_society.htm](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htm)).

Multiple meanings of civil society can provide a space for dialogue (Anheier *et al* 2001). At the same time, scholars also recognize the problematic nature of this term. As Bebbington *et al* (2005: 6) note, perhaps the simplest way to see civil society is as a “third sector,” distinct from government and business, and which encompasses the so-called “intermediary institutions,” such as professional associations, religious groups, labor unions, citizen advocacy organizations, that give voice to various sectors of society and enrich public participation in democracies.

Despite these broad definitions, civil society continues to be identified with Non-Governmental Organizations (Bhattachan 2000; Chandhoke 2003). NGOs play multiple roles depending upon the social, cultural, political and economic context, but, generally speaking, NGOs in developing countries are associated with “development” through intervention programs. They may be also viewed as a space for development alternatives. NGOs are typically viewed as project implementers, critical knowledge generators, or political actors. They intervene in social relations as relatively autonomous “third parties,” but they are also part of the societies and political economies in which they operate. NGOs today have increasingly become a transnational community, itself overlapping with other transnational communities. They share significant linkages and networks with organizations in multiple other countries. These linkages



and networks disperse new forms of development discourse, ethics, and modes of governance, as well as resources, throughout the global South (Bebbington *et al* 2005). Such processes have transnationalised advocacy work. These transnationalising trends have brought into relevance terms like Global Social Movements, Global Civil Society and Transnational Activism (Mohanty 2003; Naples & Desai 2000; Brien *et al* 2000; Twine & Blee 2001).

Global Civil Society is loosely defined as the realm of non-coercive collective action around shared interests and values that operates beyond the boundaries of nation states (Anheier *et al* 2001). Just as NGOs are considered as one of the components of civil society, INGOS are only one component of global civil society, since individuals, grassroots groups, loose coalitions and networks all play a part in a global public debate. The growth of Global Civil Society is also viewed through parallel summits. These are gatherings of INGOS, other groups, and individuals that generally, but not always, take place in tandem with important inter-governmental meetings (e.g. world social forum occurs parallel to world economic forum). The growth of global civil society has been facilitated mainly through resources such as technology and money that have become available to civil society groups. For example, increases in internet usage and both mobile phones and land lines have greatly facilitated the construction of networks and have allowed greater access for groups outside the main centers of international power (Anheier *et al* 2004).

Civil society is not without its limits, however. The concept has been over-theorized and come to mean many things for many people. Chandhoke (2003:45) states that current trends have de-politicized the very concept of civil society. While NGOs and INGOS are important parts of civil society, they do not comprehend the totality of civil society and therefore viewing civil society as mainly NGOs and INGOS is problematic. It is a common understanding that NGOs

shape policy by exerting pressure on governments and by furnishing technical expertise to policy makers. They foster citizen participation and civic education. They provide leadership training for young people who want to engage in civic life but are uninterested in working through political parties. However, it is important to treat with a fair amount of caution the assumptions that global civil society is autonomous of other institutions of international politics, that it can provide us with an alternative to these institutions and that it can give us a deep-rooted and structural critique of the world order. In sum, GCS organizations have emerged as a powerful and influential force on the world stage, affecting as they do both domestic and international policies, but they do not necessarily have the force, the participatory base or the inclusive reach sometimes accorded them in the literature.

In the case of Latin America, for example, civil society is not one homogenous happy family of a global village; it is also a terrain of political struggle and power relations. Alvarez *et al* (1998:18) caution against uncritically applauding the virtues of civil society in its local, regional or global manifestations. Moreover, the boundary between civil society and the state often becomes blurred in the practices of contemporary Latin American social movements. Bebbington *et al* (2006: pp. 2-3) state that what is uniquely NGO is now harder to identify. Democratization and avowedly pro-poor governments have blurred distinctions between NGOs and the state in a number of countries. This has been further reinforced as ex-NGO personnel have shifted to take up positions within the state. Increased state involvement in activities which subscribe to core NGO values of participation and empowerment have raised real issues of identity (distinctiveness) for NGOs, followed by (often critical) questions of effectiveness for state and NGOs alike. The case of Nepal, the country-site of this study is a case in point. Governmental organizations, organizations associated with political parties, as well as NGOS

and INGOS, are involved in poverty alleviation and development programs. Recently, the work of peace and coalition building (as a new constitution is being written) is the focus of most organizations. All organizations are involved in multiple activities, i.e., social movement activities, alongside development and advocacy work. More specifically, organizations are primarily connected to either global political space (i.e., global civil society denoted by internationally connected NGOs and international human rights or “global citizenship” discourse) or local political space (i.e., local political parties and national citizenship discourse).

According to Isin (2000:4), “Modern citizenship rights that draw from the nation-state typically include civil rights (free speech and movement, equality, rule of law), political rights (voting, seeking electoral office) and social rights (welfare, unemployment insurance and health care).” Even though a modern democratic state is expected to uphold a combination of citizenship rights and obligations, the exact combination and depth of such rights vary from one state to another. Today, a process like globalization has opened up the way in which citizenship is understood and debated. Rather than simply focusing on citizenship as legal rights, there is now agreement that citizenship must also be defined as a *social process* through which individuals and social groups engage in claiming, expanding or losing rights. This may be considered as the sociological definition of citizenship, where there is less emphasis on legal rules and more emphasis on norms, practices, meanings and identities. The issues of citizenship raised in this study lie within this sociological definition. It is important to point out that citizenship rights are not natural. “What determines the composition of rights and obligations (citizenship) that pertains to a given nation-state depends on its historical trajectory” (Isin 2000: 2).

Besides national citizenship, the concept of global citizenship has also received a lot of attention. Associated with this concept are terms like international human rights, global civil society and transnational activism which have an influence on national issues. For example, human rights activism has important implications for concepts of state sovereignty. Chandhoke (2005: 359) points out:

Traditionally states, holding aloft the banner of sovereignty and state security, have resisted any intervention by outside agencies and the banner of state sovereignty has been used or misused to hide state-sponsored violence or lawlessness from the censorious global public gaze. Today human rights INGOs, which emphasize solidarity with victims, have brought human rights issues into the global public sphere. International human rights organizations embody the conviction embedded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that national borders or sovereignty are simply irrelevant when it comes to human rights. In these and other ways, global human rights organizations have formally declared and mandated an ethical and a morally authoritative structure for national and international communities.

Jacobson (1996) suggests that the more expansive sovereignty regime based on international human rights is challenging the more restricted one based on national citizenship rights:

More importantly, whereas civic (national) rights can only be realized by “a People,” one does not have to be part of a territorially defined people or nation to enjoy human rights. Human rights are not predicated on nationality. Human rights are not based on the distinction between “national” and “foreigner” or alien (although international law does not prohibit such a distinction). Political, civil, and social rights within the state, however, are based on such a distinction (1996:2).

He goes on to note that international human rights codes are transforming the nation-state system, despite having been established through the instrumentality of the latter. International human rights derive their authority from “universal humanity” rather than from national citizenship or state membership, and they empower or confer political agency on individuals and nonstate entities, who are thereby “becoming international, indeed transnational, actors in their own right” (pp. 2-3). Jacobson’s primary concern is with immigrants and immigration and the

ways in which these disrupt and transform the regime of national citizenship as the final authoritative source of rights and rights claims for all residents within the boundaries of the nation-state. However, there are other categories of persons whose claims also occupy the unsettled zone between citizenship based on the nation-state and the universal entitlements of international human rights. Examples include refugees, stateless persons, sexual and racial minorities, women as victims of gender oppression, and other oppressed sub-national groupings or communities based on ethnicity, religion, caste, and region. A specific example is the case of Dalits in Nepal, the subjects of this study.

### **3.3 CASTE AND SOCIAL MOBILITY**

Caste and class are closely related categories though they are commonly portrayed by Western scholars as binary opposites. In classical structural-functionalist frameworks, caste is a hereditary status group, rooted in ascriptive-particularistic criteria, and a function of closed societies. Class is a fluid socio-economic ranking based on the achievement-universalistic criteria of open, competitive, market systems and principles of meritocracy. However, Weber (1967) has shown long ago the close association between class and informally hereditary status groups. In Weberian and culturalist paradigms, class cultures have always accreted around particularistic variables, symbols and lifestyles (often associated with select bloodlines), so that elite groups might be solidified out of a convergence of class *and* caste features. Marxist interpretations might more straightforwardly see caste as one modality of class, based on historically specific precapitalist modes of production of long duration, and as superstructures which linger on and are both displaced and reconfigured by new capitalist modes of production (see Cox 1948). In a

situation of co-existing modes of production, caste and class would both converge and diverge, but one (capitalist class formation) would be primary and more fundamentally determinant of new social dynamics. Typically, the emergence of new middle classes based on the labor, consumer and capital markets of capitalism might seem to herald an ascendancy of the class principle over the caste principle, but the total picture, incorporating views of the top and the bottom of the social hierarchy, is a much more complicated one.

The view that caste and class are ideological and structural opposites is an erroneous assumption, as is the concomitant assumption that caste and class are only unilinearly related and that the elimination of caste is a necessary condition for the full emergence of class. Caste and class have been inseparable parts of India's social formation for several decades and the study of their nexus, continuity and change has been seen as an essential analytical undertaking (Chakaborty 2001: 63). This study is closely aligned with the perspective that the historical specificity of the social formations of India and Nepal reside in the modes of coexistence and interactions of class and caste, rather than in the simple preeminence of one or the other.

Among Dalits, class differences emerge from both preexisting caste variables and non-traditional market variables. Despite the commonality of their status as former "untouchables," occupational groupings among them are hierarchically ranked, presenting different life chances and opportunities for social mobility. At the same time, access to education, income and consumer goods present the possibility of some transcendence of caste status.

The literature on the interaction of caste and class often looks at the transition from caste-based to class-based societies. To repeat, it is not a unilinear transition, with one neatly displacing the other. Researchers note that high castes continue to have disproportionate access to wealth and status, but the world of consumer goods offers lower castes a new, secular route of

ascent in the social hierarchy. Class is thus emerging as a mode of social organization, an idiom of social life that competes with the logic of caste by structuring hierarchy around competition instead of initial endowments of karma and ritual purity (Kapadia 2002; Liechty 2003; Rankin 2004).

With economic growth, economic class is becoming increasingly salient for overall social status: indeed, caste-based status and ritual purity are slowly declining in importance as independent variables. Caste is being transformed; caste identity is losing importance in old ways and gaining importance in new ways. It is becoming more important as a cohesive factor in new political groupings and political parties. Conversely, in South India significant change in caste consciousness has occurred among rural lower castes mainly due to the paradoxical influence of mass media. Through the latter's unabashed encouragement of a consumerist culture and its propagation of the sovereign right to consume, it has communicated a powerful message of legitimate claim to rights for subordinated groups everywhere. This is because the subordinated classes throughout the South Asian region were historically prohibited from consuming or using the same products as the higher castes/classes. For instance, Dalits were not allowed to wear sandals, jewelry or watches. Thus the consumer imperatives of capitalism are playing a remarkable (though double-edged) role in the reinvention and new aspirations of subordinated groups. Mass media-led consumerism is being identified in subordinated imaginaries in entirely positive ways with social emancipation. Thus, the aspiration for class mobility of the urban middle classes as well as low caste aspirations for emancipation from the restrictions of the caste order are being expressed in terms of an efflorescent consumerist culture (Kapadia 2002:150-154).

*Implications for gender:* New labor market opportunities and purchasing power meanwhile have not challenged gender ideologies restricting women's mobility in the same manner that they have begun to erode the status prescriptions of caste hierarchy (Rankin 2004; Kapadia 1995, 2002; Banerjee 2002). Among low caste butchers, for instance, when men migrate to Kathmandu, women take over the family enterprises (e.g. butchering), which directly challenges the ideology of the male household head. When male migrants return to Sankhu for ritual and festival occasions, however, patriarchal principles are quickly reestablished and continuity of gender ideology assured. In general women face a lot of ideological constraints that restricts their mobility as well as employment opportunities (Rankin 2004).

### **3.4 DIALECTICS OF IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE**

Identity can only be understood as a process – one's social identity (or identities) is never a final matter. Identities are constructed and shifting, not fixed, entities, which can be negotiated, contested and reformulated as categories of representation. Identities evolve and become re-articulated (if not entirely reconfigured) with new social and political languages and discourses. Identity is also highly contextual and individuals can choose appropriate aspects of identity in different contexts. While identities may be created, negotiated and transformed as a self-conscious process of members of a group, identities may also be forced and imposed as a result of wider inequalities of power. As a result, identities also can be surprisingly sturdy, enduring and resistant to certain types of change. A study of identity becomes above all a study of the process of politics of social relations (Chakrabarty 2003; Fernandez 1996; Goddard 2000; Jenkins 2003; Mendelsohn and Baxi 1994; Omvedt 1993; Unnithan-Kumar 1997).



Resistance is tied to the individual or group identities of actors that are constantly contested, negotiated and renegotiated in the process of struggle. Unnithan-Kumar (1997:3) contends that it is worthwhile to explore how the identities of a marginalized group have been invested with meaning and used in the social, political, and economic strategies of the individual and communities concerned. Resistance usually occurs against political, economic, ideological and symbolic domination and exploitation of the subordinate groups. There are different kinds of resistance—overt or covert, organized or unorganized. Resistance does not occur in a vacuum but depends on specific historical, material and social factors. For example, many women's movements in the third world have been tied to nationalist and anti-colonial projects. In the third world especially, feminism cannot escape state intervention.

Resistance to oppressive conditions may be formal, taking such forms as strikes against bad working conditions or low pay. These methods are most likely in a unionized environment. Equally, resistance may comprise informal or everyday acts, taking such forms as sabotage, theft, pilfering and delaying work. Resistance also operates at different sites which may be interconnected or separate and it may also occur under conditions of ideological and material constraints. The struggles of working women, for instance, intersect with those in the local community and the household (Hart 1990).

Work on women's resistance calls attention to the theoretical issue of women's interests and identities and around which they mobilize. Molyneux (1983: 283) identifies three types of 'women's interests' that is common in feminist literature: (1) women's interests (a highly contentious one because of women's different positions in society, depending on class, ethnicity and sexual affiliation), (2) strategic gender interests, and (3) practical gender interests. Gender interests are those that women (or men) may develop by virtue of their social positioning through

gender attributes. Gender interests can be either strategic or practical. Strategic interests are derived in the first instance deductively. i.e., from the analysis of women's subordination and from the formulation of an alternative, more satisfactory set of arrangements—such as the abolition of the sexual division of labor and childcare, the removal of institutionalized forms of discrimination, the establishment of political equality, freedom of choice over child bearing, and the adoption of adequate measures against male violence and control over women. These constitute what might be called strategic gender interests and are the ones frequently considered by feminists as women's real interests. Practical interests do not in themselves challenge the prevailing forms of gender subordination, even though they arise directly out of them.

Molyneux's research in Nicaragua shows that the state was successful in mobilizing women and in bringing about legal reform which represented both strategic and practical interests. Once the Sandinistas were in power, they had the slogan "No revolution without women's emancipation, no emancipation without revolution." After the first years, the political woman's association reduced its public identification with "feminism" and spoke increasingly of the need to promote women's interests within the wider struggle (p. 288).

Despite its undoubted analytical usefulness, Molyneux's separation of these interests is criticized because "it tends to echo assumptions about the divide between middle class and non-middle class women as well as women of the first and third world where only strategic interests are seen to be legitimate feminist interests" (Ray and Kortweg 1999:51). Rather Ray and Kortweg argue that we must look at women's identities as shaping their interests, where these interests in turn inform mobilization. Women are mobilized not only as women but also as mothers, workers, peasants, and citizens. These identities are not self-evident and do not emerge automatically from a structural position but rather are created in the process of struggle. For

example, where Islamic movements are on the rise, women find themselves torn between their identities as women and their cultural identities as Muslims. Some women resolve this dilemma by adopting the veil where the veil can suggest both conformist and feminist meanings.

Related to the concept of the everyday world as a problematic and as an active space structured by power relations—the ‘inner’ organization generating its ordinary features, its orders and disorders, its contingencies and conditions (Smith 1987: 99)—are the concepts of everyday consciousness and everyday resistance of marginalized groups which scholars have addressed in multiple ways. Some scholars use the Gramscian concept of “hegemony” to explain why lower castes and untouchables accept the domination of the upper castes. Hegemony is a process of ideological domination. The central idea behind it is the claim that the ruling class dominates not only the means of physical production but the means of symbolic production as well. Its control over the material forces of production is replicated at the levels of ideas in its control over the ideological sections of society—culture, religion, education and the media—in a manner that allows it to disseminate its position (Scott 1985). For example, in a Hindu-caste society, acceptance by the majority of the exclusion of the lower caste according to principles of ritual pollution is elicited not by instrumental coercion but by a process of hegemony in which consent is manufactured through the ideology of Brahmanism. Hegemony is an active and continuing process, not a static condition. A ruling group sustains its dominance not just by organization of force but through moral and intellectual leadership (Charsley and Karnath 1998; Hall 1996). Opponents of this view (Cameron 1998; Kapadia 1995; Scott 1985) reject the notion of “hegemony” and “false consciousness” commonly attributed to the oppressed group. They contend that there has always been much more resistance on the part of the weak than official accounts allowed, as evident in “everyday forms of protest.”

One of the most popular works on everyday resistance is James Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* (Scott 1985). Drawing on detailed ethnographic work in a village in the Muda region of Malaysia, he examines the unequal class relations between the rich and poor in Sedaka and everyday forms of peasant resistance. The mechanization of agriculture and green revolution benefited rich farmers and displaced poorer tenants who worked for wage labor in the fields. The poor farmers moved from exploitation (due to low pay while working) to marginalization (due to loss of jobs) resulting in increase in poverty. Due to the introduction of combine harvesters, there was a move from labor-intensive to capital-intensive work. Scott refutes the idea that poor rural people are the victims of hegemony and false consciousness. He argues that they are perfectly capable not only of penetrating the self-serving claims of the rich but also of manipulating and subverting elements of the dominant ideology by using everyday forms of resistance—the prosaic but constant struggles between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labor, food, taxes, rents and interests from them. The ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups are foot dragging, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, character assassination, gossip and so forth. To Scott, the notion of hegemony has been blind to the unwritten history of resistance that is necessarily covert and that typically avoids any direct symbolic confrontation with authority and elite norms. The concept of hegemony ignores the extent to which most subordinate classes are able on the basis of their daily material experience to penetrate and demystify the prevailing ideology. He notes that subordinate classes, especially the peasantry, are likely to be more radical at the level of ideology than at the level of behavior as they are more effectively constrained by the daily exercise of the power. Notwithstanding the usefulness of this critique, it is not always clear that Scott has adequately represented the

nuanced, contingent and somewhat open-ended character of the original Gramscian formulations on hegemony.

Empirical accounts in India and Nepal show that there are many strategies, on the rise in recent years, for rejecting or eroding ascription of low status, for example the Dalits in India refusing to abide by the law of slaughtering buffalos and constructing their own temples (Sharma 1998). There are also examples of Dalits in Nepal who have refused to collect the dead carcass of animals. Kapadia's (1995) study of low caste groups in south India and Cameron's (1998) study of low caste women in Nepal also show that women resist the ideological and material basis of domination. Kapadia finds that subordinate groups, especially the so-called untouchables who are at the bottom of India's caste hierarchy, resist and reject upper-caste representations of themselves. She argues that untouchables Pallars in Aruloor village do not share the Brahminical values of elite groups. Instead through distinctive cultural representations, oppressed groups create for themselves a normative world in which they have dignity, self-respect and power. The elites who hold economic power do not necessarily dominate the symbolic means of production. For example, she finds that there are differences in the representation of menarche for Brahmins and non-Brahmins. On the one hand, the Brahmin pubertal girl is represented as very impure, inauspicious and dirty even though there is actually some delight that she has come of age. The girl's ritual impurity is foremost in the cultural construction because Brahmins regard impurity as linked to sin and inauspiciousness. On the other hand, the non-Brahmin girl is represented as extremely auspicious, even though ritually impure, and as very beautiful and imbued with sacred generative powers. Her impurity is of entirely secondary importance; it is her auspiciousness that is central (p. 119). The literature on Nepal also shows how women resist and contest and negotiate dominant ideologies and their position in the public and the private sphere. Cameron

(1998) notes that low castes adhere to the practice of bride price in contrast to the high caste practice of *kanyadan* (giving away the daughter as a gift), which involves dowry. The lower castes also mock the rituals of the upper caste. Moreover, with the relaxation of caste rules, lower caste women sometime refuse to do the demeaning job of carrying manure, and may even refuse to help higher caste women in the fields.

However, there are also accounts that resistance on the part of the oppressed is not necessarily revolutionary in nature. Thus, while there are examples of refusal to accept humiliating obligations there are still many occasions when expressions of defiance or refusal do not indicate fundamental challenge to the system. For instance, Dalits have not challenged spatial boundaries by attempting to enter temples or teashops or to demand the services of barbers (Charsley and Karnath 1998). The most common strategy for rejecting the low status ascribed to them is tacitly withdrawing from day-to-day situations of humiliation. For example, even when specifically invited to eat a meal in an upper-caste home or other setting, the tendency is to refuse politely.

The approach of looking at everyday consciousness and resistance as either hegemonic or counter-hegemonic once again betrays binary thinking and does not cover the nuances—indeed, the “dialectics”—of resistance. The subordinate groups may not always resist outright but may be persistently critical (even as a key element of the sub-culture) and may be in variable positions to negotiate their status depending on the reach of the dominant political economy and the existence of spaces of autonomy. This approach is addressed by Green (2006) in her study of the dialectic of subaltern Afro-Caribbean womanhood. Her work on subaltern Afro-Caribbean women’s labor experiences inquires generally into how Afro-Caribbean women negotiated the race, class and gender-stratified terrain of occupational hierarchy and economic livelihood,

within a context of severe structural and ideological constraints. Her 2006 article explores the tensions between the requisites of Euro-Creole and middle-class feminine respectability imposed by Europeans and the determined counter-assertions of subaltern Afro-Creole traditions of self-respect. According to Green (2006: 2), Afro-Caribbean women negotiated their lives and livelihoods between and around “the slippery and sometimes elusive boundaries of hegemony and autonomy, accommodation and resistance, constraint and possibility, imposed respectability and asserted self-respect” during the slave era and modern times. The potential for autonomy depended on historically specific and materially delimited conditions:

During the formation of Caribbean society, the efficacy of Afro-Caribbean women’s manipulation of the raw material of their lives depended on three concrete factors. First was the relative presence or absence of the model of the White Madonna or the Preserver of High Culture. Second was the existence of autonomous spaces of social and economic life, reinforced by the *relative* freedom from domestic patriarchy. Third was the availability of African cultural memories (Green 2006: 7).

Green asserts in this article and elsewhere that the identity of subordinate groups is constituted through a variety of dialectically related pathways: “because of,” “in opposition to,” but also “in spite of” the hegemonic relation, the first denoting accommodation and adaptation, the second, opposition and resistance, and the third, autonomy and self-referentiality. She has identified a fourth—potential, emerging and transformative—dimension or stage as going “beyond” the hegemonic relation (Green 2006; n.d.). All of these dimensions/stages are sustained by both specifically configured systems of material “re/production” (combination of goods-and-services production and family-based human reproduction) and systems of signification or representation (Green 2001; 2006). They are further considered in terms of “the ways political economic *location*, institutional and discursive *mediation*, and subjective *negotiation* change across history and across different Caribbean plantation colonies and postcolonial societies” (Green 2006: 2-3).

These various ways of approaching the dialectics of structure/agency, spatiality, and dimensions of consciousness have proved critical for my own examination of the modalities of urban Dalit lives, livelihoods and identities, through both ordinary and extraordinary moments in the structures of their being and in the historical processes impacting those structures. In the next chapter, I provide an ethnographically inflected account of the everyday life worlds of sweepers, metal-workers and tailor/musician caste groups, the respondents in the community sample of the study.



#### 4.0 COMMUNITY ETHNOGRAPHY: EVERYDAY LIVES AND AGENCIES

The quotes below give voice to some of the community respondents interviewed for this study:

##### **Voice 1**

Sometimes I wish I was born into a higher caste. When people call us *Podae, gu swarnae* (literally people who clean shit), ridiculing us, I feel hurt and sad. That is why I did not like to go to school.

- A 19-year-old woman from the sweeper community

##### **Voice 2**

They (upper castes) do not let us collect water from the public well. They pour the water for us and we are forced to stand apart. We have to wait till they finish. Even when I told her (a brahmin lady) that the water we touched could be offered to her gods because we are not impure, she stopped talking to me. She has studied till grade ten, but education has not changed her.

- A 35 year-old metal worker woman

##### **Voice 3**

At least we had work and some protection in the contractual labor system. We did metal work for the higher castes. They gave us food to eat and a place to stay in exchange. The conditions were not good but we had work. Now, my son does not want to continue in this contractual system. But he does not have the education or the skill to do something else. So he is neither here nor there. What is happening to the new generation?

- A 74 year old metal worker

This chapter provides an ethnographic account of the everyday life-worlds of sweepers (*Deulas*), metal-workers (*Biswakarmas*), and tailors/musicians (*Pariyars*). Although using local caste terms might be cumbersome for an unfamiliar western audience, these terms are very important in Nepal, as last names are caste qualifiers and have embedded connotations. In the spirit of ethnography, I use last names and the occupational caste identity -- such as *Deulas* and sweepers, *Biswakarmas* and metal workers, and *Pariyars* and tailors/musicians interchangeably.

The ordinary everyday voices are critical for understanding the dialectics of identity and resistance among Dalits, in conjunction with and as a counterpoint to the voices of civil-society political actors. Blee and Taylor (2002:94) point out that interviewing formally excluded groups is one means of countering the biased availability of documentary materials about social movements whose activities and understandings would otherwise be lost or filtered through the voices of others. An example would be interviewing ordinary or rank-and-file African American women during the civil rights movement to counter the bias of relying exclusively on the voices of top male leaders. Usually the writings and statements of those who are prominent, wealthy or influential in society are more likely to be recorded or preserved over time, disproportionately favoring men over women, higher class participants over those from lower classes, leaders or spokespersons over rank-and-file participants.

#### **4.1 BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF NEIGHBORHOOD SETTINGS**

In this research, the neighborhoods of the sweepers and metal workers were segregated. The spatial boundaries may be considered caste-defined. Viewed from the perspective of cultural space, this spatial segregation also denotes caste segregation and untouchability. The

musician/tailor neighborhood was a more integrated one and hence class-defined in terms of spatiality.

#### **4.1.1 *Deula* Neighborhood**

The *Deula* neighborhood was located close to the Kathmandu airport, a little below the main highway. There were narrow cobbled alleys and rows of houses (mostly two-storied) built of factory-bricks and concrete. In Nepal, these houses are called *pakka*, meaning solid and reliable. Some houses were still under construction but people used the rooms that were completed. There was also a small temple that served as the community sacred space and a small community room where people could gather to sing devotional songs, prepare for festivals and discuss community events. There was a public hospital right behind the neighborhood. A government school was located close by. Most of the *Deula* children attended this school as it was specifically built for the locality initially. It had eventually become a public school which admitted students from surrounding areas. There was also a free health clinic, opened by an INGO that served the *Deula* locality specifically. This was seen as a breakthrough for the neighborhood. Respondents noted that the health and hygiene of the locality had significantly improved due to the health services provided by the clinic since its opening five years earlier. The involvement of their local political representative had brought in money to pave the alleys and brought water pipelines to the community. Respondents felt it was a big accomplishment that they could build their bathrooms at home, have running tap water and not have to make trips to the river close by or to public taps to get water. The land on which this neighborhood developed had been occupied by sweepers over many generations. It was land given by the government more than a hundred years ago. The untouchable sweepers were required to live away from one of the major temples nearby. They

were sent across the river due to their untouchable status. Older respondents told me that if I had visited their locality decades earlier, I would have seen huts, animal sheds, muddy alleys and very dismal living conditions. They were happy to observe this progress in their lifetime. If they had to buy land on their own, it would be impossible because of high land prices in the capital. Today there were no vestiges of the past and it looked like a modern neighborhood.

The sweeper neighborhood was known as *Podae tole* and sometimes even called *Harijan*<sup>15</sup> *tole*, but due to its derogatory connotation with untouchables, respondents referred to their area by the name of the Hospital, i.e., using the caste-neutral name of the hospital located in the same area. One 38 year-old *Deula* male respondent told me that when he took the public bus back home, the driver would sometimes call out loud “*Podae tole*” or “*Harijan tole*” when his stop arrived. People would laugh and sneer as he got off. He said such experiences were very humiliating and he started getting off a little further back in front of the hospital.

The homes I entered for the interviews all had symbols of a modern consumerist culture, for example, furniture (sofas, tables and chairs), TV, radio and cupboards. Many respondents had cell phones and some homes had cable TV. All the homes I went into had extended family members living together. I also noticed posters of western pop singers such as Eminem, Britney Spears, Kanye West and other African American hip hop stars in some of the young respondents’ rooms. Some rooms had collections of Hip Hop CDS on racks. Youngsters, both male and female, told me that they liked watching the Black entertainment channel, BET, listening to hip hop music, and dressing up like Beyonce or Eminem, even though they spoke little English. In other words, they seemed to be influenced by the African American pop culture in terms of dress

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<sup>15</sup> The name *Harijan* is attributed to Mahatma Gandhi. In his fight against caste discrimination and quest for equality, he called untouchables, “children of God” (*Harijan*). Although intended positively, this term still has a caste connotation. In India, many Dalits oppose this term. The sweepers in the community did not want any reference to their caste identity and did not feel that *Harijan* was a positive term.

styles and choice of music, which I found interesting and fascinating. This raised the question of the role of media-filtered and commercial African American culture as a kind of global iconic culture that is particularly attractive to historically marginal urbanized groups.

When I passed down the alleys, for my interviews, it was common to see groups of boys dressed in hip hop style, sitting or chatting on the streets. Later, parents complained to me that most of their sons had dropped out of school, were unemployed and loitering around in the streets. They thought that I, as an educated woman, could talk sense into them about the value of education. I maintained my role as a researcher and avoided the counselor role. The consumer symbols denote a consumer class to a certain extent. But in Nepal, cheap products from China have enabled even the poor to enter the secular marketplace of consumerism, as noted by Kapadia (1995) in the case of low castes of South India. Within this context, then, low castes can be said to share a common consumer culture with upper castes.

In short, if one looked at the sweeper community from the outside, one might assume that they are relatively well off in material terms, but, as this research shows, their caste identity still profoundly influences their lives. The material aspect has not translated into valuable human capital like access to and continuity of education or access to employment. Moreover, the material development should probably be attributed to their own painstaking savings over generations and a local system of rotating savings and credit associations<sup>16</sup> of which most of the residents of the community were members. Locally, this rotating savings and credit association was called *Dhukuti*. For instance, many respondents noted that they were able to finish building their houses and buy motorcycles and television sets because of the *Dhukuti*.

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<sup>16</sup> For a detailed understanding of Rotating and Credit Associations, see Low (1995), "A Bibliographical Survey of Rotating and Credit Associations."

In terms of employment, both men and women worked as sweepers and maintenance workers. Some were employed by the municipality of Kathmandu; some were employed in private firms; and others worked as cab drivers. Both women and men went outside their homes for paid employment, as noted in Chapter one.

#### **4.1.2 *Biswakarma* Neighborhood**

The metalworker community was located in a neighborhood situated on the eastern side of the Kathmandu district, around 12 kilometers away from the main city center. Despite its proximity to the city it had a semi-urban character, unlike the other two communities. This area was sometimes referred to as a conglomeration of villages. This rural/urban dynamic is important for the nature of discrimination that metal workers face. Moreover, this community had more interactions with upper castes than the other two communities. The area is bordered by rivers and so is regarded to have fertile land both for cash crops and food crops. The locality includes upper castes that own land and depend on agriculture. They also rely on wage labor during times of planting and harvesting and employ Dalits. There were a few temples around the area. There was a small public health center and a district office. There were also small grocery shops and tea shops. There were a few government institutions – five public schools, i.e., three primary schools, a lower secondary school, a secondary school, and a campus. There were a few NGOs like the Reproductive Health Center, a Health Post and Youth information center although I did not see the offices open for most of the time I was in the field.

The metal worker neighborhood was located on a hill, away from the main road, making the segregation very visible. One had to climb up narrow muddy roads and pass through fields. The neighborhood could not be reached by motorized vehicles. The roads were slippery and

slushy during the rainy season. Although this locality had a secular name, i.e., the name of the town, informally it was known as “*kami*” village by the upper castes. *Kami* is a term that was used previously for metal workers but it is considered derogatory in today’s terminology. In the course of my interviews, my respondents expressed anger at upper castes calling the area by caste qualifiers. All houses in the *Biswakarma* neighborhood were *kaccha*<sup>17</sup> houses (made from local materials like clay, bamboo, and bricks, sourced from the land nearby in contrast to factory bricks). The roofs were thatched. The houses had simple rooms – bedroom, a kitchen space, and an attic. The kitchen had mud stoves and the residents used firewood for fuel. They lacked inside toilet facilities and relied on outhouses. The staircases were very narrow and ceilings were low. Some houses had small animal sheds where they kept pigs and chicken, although not all households owned livestock. Most did not own profitable livestock like cows and goats. I did most interviews outside, on the porticos. I went into two homes for meals and that is how I observed their simple living quarters. They seemed conscious of their low class status (one lady asked me if I lived in a mansion). The houses had very basic surroundings – simple beds, small TV, radio, and racks for clothes. Nobody in the locality had cable TV, so they viewed only local Nepali channels. Some houses had small adjoining rooms that were used as metal workshops – basic mud huts comprising a furnace to smelt and mould iron and a big slab of stone or even tree trunk on which to beat the iron. With modernization and factory production, they hardly receive any orders to make agricultural tools like sickles, axes, hoes and traditional knives. The old men lamented how easily one could buy agricultural equipment at cheap prices in the market, so that

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<sup>17</sup> Houses in urban villages can be either *Kacchas* or *Pakkas*. The first refers to the (old) temporary structures built of tin metal sheets or crude brickwork and/or other improvised materials. The roof is often leaking; these homes lack natural lighting and ventilation; the interior atmosphere gets very hot during the day; rats get inside during the night; there is no toilet or water. A typical *Kaccha* house is around 12 sq. m (130 sq ft) with 4-10 people in the household. The second refers to the reinforced concrete and brick houses with a more permanent condition. The *Pakkas* normally have a shower and occasionally toilet and kitchen (<http://www.urbanouveau.com/index.php?/ihs/project-description/>).

the old workshops did not have much activity. The metal workers felt displaced in terms of occupation. One family had converted their old workshop into a metal welding workshop using modern equipment. They made metal frames and rods for modern windows and doors. There was little separation between work and home (spatially) in this community.

### **4.1.3 *Pariyar* Neighborhood**

The middle class tailors/musicians<sup>18</sup> lived in one of the central urban areas of Kathmandu city. They all lived in an integrated neighborhood. All the houses were *pakka*, multi-storied. The lower levels of the homes provided rental accommodations to shops/businesses and residential tenants. This served as an important source of income, as the locality brought good rent. The locality had many schools, temples, shops, hotels, movie theatres and department stores due to its central urban location. The houses were big, well furnished and had a special room for guests. I observed musical instruments such as guitars, pianos, drums, and computer equipment to mix music. A unique feature of this group is that they have lived in Kathmandu for three or four generations and hence have been able to acquire their own land and build their houses. They themselves noted their own lack of connection to Dalit communities in the rural areas and they emphasized their class status frequently in the interviews. All the husbands worked in the music industry. Some were retired from the army music band. Some women stayed at home and some women taught vocals in music schools. Spatially, there was a separation of home and work in this community.

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<sup>18</sup> This middle class sample is not representative of *Pariyars* in Nepal. From a national perspective, the vast majority of Dalits in Nepal have poor development indicators. Most *Damais* (tailor and musician castes) in Nepal are poor and not as successful as this group.



## 4.2 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

From the description of the settings, I now turn to the following themes that emerged from the interviews, participant observation and field notes regarding Dalit identity and resistance: the negotiated meanings of Dalit identity, experiences of discrimination, everyday acts of accommodation and resistance, relationship with leaders, knowledge of institutional processes, relationship with non-Dalits, and the gender dimension of these themes.

### 4.2.1 Meanings of Dalit Identity

Overall, all three communities (of sweepers, metalworkers and tailor/musicians) are hesitant to call themselves Dalits because of the stigma attached to castes that were historically considered untouchables. So, unlike the strong political consciousness seen among political activists who have started identifying openly as Dalits, none of these communities was open in declaring or embracing a Dalit identity. Despite this general hesitancy, there were important differences in the way people in the three communities understood their identity as Dalits – what the term Dalit meant and their own identity as low-caste people. Most groups do not perceive their identity as a political one necessitating a fight for their rights. A small group had a more political and arms-length understanding of the term “Dalit” as one denoting historically suppressed, oppressed, deprived and excluded people (i.e., its intended meaning). The majority understood the term more subjectively in its stigmatized everyday connotation -- as low-caste people or untouchables. In the *Deula* community, those who had a more political understanding of “Dalit” expressed anger at the fact that *Newar* castes had been withdrawn from the Dalit category by the National Dalit Commission. For them, this move was an attempt to deny the caste-based discriminatory

practices prevalent in the *Newar* community, a stance which served the interests of upper caste and elite *Newars*. The respondents felt that this strategy failed to address the deep-rooted social problems of lower-caste *Newars* who include *Podes* (*Deulas*). One 42 year-old male respondent exclaimed angrily, “What about the low caste *Newars*? They have tried to remove us forcibly from the category of Dalits. There is a question mark on our Dalit identity despite the fact that our conditions have not improved. We are where we were before—excluded, deprived, poor and oppressed.” This group of politically conscious individuals has used Dalit scholarships for their children’s education despite the ambiguity of their caste categorization. For them, not identifying as Dalit is harmful as they will be deprived of special affirmative action benefits; moreover, the economic problems of the community will not improve if their problems are not identified. They also feel that the usage of the term “Dalit” will go away once untouchability is removed. A 65 year-old woman pointed out that other *Newar* lower castes face discrimination but they refuse to identify as Dalits. She pointed out that, for example, the *Kapali* castes (formerly musicians and death specialists) were still not allowed to participate in some *Newari* religious festivals. She reasoned that if their low caste and Dalit status was irrelevant, then why were they still being discriminated against? *Kapalis* persist in denying their low caste status and regrettably do not want to fight for their rights.

Despite the political understanding of term “Dalit,” many respondents seemed upset with the label because of the stigma attached to it. They note that “Dalit” sounds degrading and they do not view themselves any less than other castes. The sweeper caste, commonly known as *Podaes* (which is considered derogatory, literally denoting sweepers and toilet cleaners), would prefer to call themselves “*Deula*.” *Deula* means to take turns in temples as god’s gatekeepers (*deutalai palo dinu*). They proudly note that even the king used to receive *prashad* (holy

offerings) from their hands when he came to the temple. They want to conceal their *Podae* (caste) identity by writing *Deula* as their surnames, which sounds more respectable. They write *Podae* (caste) in their citizenship cards.<sup>19</sup> They would rather emphasize their “god’s gatekeeper” role, although not everyone is active in that role. The *Deula* status conceals the stigmatized status of the sweeper or *Podae*. A 19-year-old respondent said in a sad tone that when her friends ask her what *Deula* means she simply says, “*Newar*,” wanting to emphasize only her ethnic identity, and her non-*Newar* friends do not probe further. Many people in Kathmandu do not know that the surname *Deula* is that of the *Podae* caste since this mode of identification is a fairly recent practice. The *Podae* (caste) identity is not concealed for lack of reason. Many adolescents have lost friends once they have revealed their Dalit identity. They have been mistreated and humiliated in school and have refused to go back for fear of being called “*Podaes*.” A 10<sup>th</sup> grader told me that she and her friends were not allowed to participate in cooking classes in her old school; they had to sit apart and watch the others. Similarly, they faced many humiliating moments during school picnics. She transferred to another school, where she did not face such discrimination.

Among the *Biswakarmas* (metal worker caste), there is a more open admission of being a Dalit, and it is understood as being of the low castes. This is also because of the lack of confusion in categorization as in the case of sweepers who fall under the *Newar* ethnic group. Most respondents very matter-of-factly said they knew their place in the caste hierarchy that

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<sup>19</sup> Dalits were not allowed to write their surnames (*thar*) in their citizenship certificate that serves as identification. They had to write their caste (*jat*) prior to 1966. The ratified covenant on Civil and Political Rights 8, 1966 has obliged State Parties to be liable to protect and promote the right regarding self-determination. With the objective of providing citizenship certificates entitling *thar*, the Government made a written declaration, which is considered important. However, Dalits are still blocked from receiving certificates with their *thar* due to discrimination; for example, Central District Officers may decide what to write on the citizenship certificate of Dalits instead of asking them what they want.

existed since their grandparents' time. They understand their lowly and outside position when they are still excluded from upper caste spaces like temples, grocery stores and teashops. Many have used surnames that are similar to upper caste names<sup>20</sup> like *Rijal* and *Poudel* but use “*Biswakarma*” in their citizenship cards. They admit that the surnames similar to *Bahun* and *Chettri* (upper caste) surnames work to their advantage because people treat them nicely until they find out that they are Dalits. Despite identifying themselves as “Dalits,” they are still hesitant to bring up caste issues and avoid revealing their caste in a bid for assimilation into the society. Moreover, being a Dalit has a cost, what Bennet (2006) aptly calls “the caste penalty.” Being a Dalit has resulted in discrimination and exclusion. Many Dalits in Kathmandu are denied rental accommodations and services once they reveal their caste and Dalit children are still treated badly in school (Parajuli 2006). Caste and ethnic identity are clearly socio-cultural and structural barriers to ending discrimination, poverty reduction and economic growth (Bennet 2006).

The upwardly mobile *Pariyar* community of the tailor/musician caste does not identify as Dalits. They do not agree with the way the term Dalit is used. They perceive “Dalit” as a condition of the poor and oppressed because in the words of one respondent, “we are neither poor nor oppressed.” So they should not be called Dalits. A respondent's question to me

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<sup>20</sup> Dalit castes and sub castes have emerged in many ways. One is through loss of castes that happened for various historical reasons, like kings elevating or demoting certain caste groups if they pleased the royalty or when they committed crimes. The other reason is through contemporary inter-caste marriage between Dalits and non-Dalits. Some Dalit surnames are similar to Brahmin and Chettri surnames. The non-Dalit person who marries the Dalit person retains his surname but the person's children would be considered untouchable. So even though the surname remains, they would be relegated to the Dalit caste status. A third means by which certain surnames came into being is in reference to location. In some cases, individuals, regardless of their caste, may have come to be known by a surname that reflects their place of origin (Kisan 2005). The trend of emphasizing one's surname instead of one's caste has become more common. One can no longer identify one's caste through surnames. Upper castes actually ask whether someone is of a high caste or a Dalit when one mentions common surnames. In my research, I encountered a lot of upper caste people who complained that these days surnames meant nothing and that Dalits were trying to be like upper caste people.

captures the concerns of all the respondents from the *Pariyar* community, “Now, who would you call a Dalit -- a poor, dirty, drunken Brahmin in a rural area or us?” They also feel that “Dalit” is a self-imposed negative term that provides others an opportunity to look down upon low castes regardless of their economic status. This term reinforces the negative stereotypes and negative self-images of low-caste people. They also view this relic of the past as a temporary condition, which will go away eventually. The members of this group view themselves as middle class and prefer to hold on to their current class status rather than their past caste status. They insist that caste-based discriminatory practices are irrelevant for them because of their relative class privilege. A mother noted, “We live in the city, we are economically self-sufficient and our children go to good schools. In fact we have tenants that are of higher castes.”

On the one hand, middle class *Pariyars* reject the stigmatizing part of their caste identity that condemns them as low-caste or untouchable, i.e., their identity as a tailor caste or *Damai*. On the other hand, they have a positive identification with their caste identity as musicians, artists and performers. By referring to themselves as members of the *Pariyar* community, they emphasize their cultural identity. At the same time, they do not want to talk about the historical conditions that relegated them to the role of musicians. Instead, they attribute their ability to play music to their inherent talent, aptly expressed as “it being in the blood.” While they want to give up the tailor part of their historically relegated caste identity, they want to hold on to the music part.<sup>21</sup> With the boom in the music industry, their status is now elevated and they feel that their

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<sup>21</sup> The interesting aspect about Dalit professions is that tailors are considered auspicious and metal workers inauspicious. Metal workers are considered dirty, with sullied hands due to the nature of their work. The Tailor /musician caste on the other hand, sang songs and played instruments during weddings. This has translated into the modern musical band for weddings in the capital. They also played their music in temple premises although they were not allowed inside. This has enabled talented tailor/musician castes to tap into the cultural domain of the music market. The same advantage is lacking for other Dalit castes. There is an old Nepali saying that your day is made if you see an auspicious *Damai* (tailor/musician caste) and your day is ruined if you spot an inauspicious *Kami* (metal worker) on the road. Higher castes used to sprinkle water dipped in gold to purify themselves.

talents are respected and have a place in the market. They also have access to cosmopolitan networks in Kathmandu. A 60 year-old grandfather respondent proudly stated:

People from our community are artists who are interested in the contribution of music to their country and we are so proud of that. This has been a family tradition since the times of our fathers and grandfathers. We were brought up in an environment where there was music all around and now our children are also inclined toward music and may continue making music their careers. We also have many links with artists from other castes.

Viewing their own positive situation, they are optimistic that things will change for the better for the less privileged of their caste group. The youth also have very positive self-images. They had friends across caste groups. The identity of middle class *Pariyars* may be viewed as related to a process of ethnicization of caste identity. Arun (2007) who looked at low caste *Paraiyars*, one of the Dalit groups in Tamil Nadu, South India, demonstrates how *Paraiyars* construct their Dalit identity by reversing the symbols of pollution that defined them as low and polluted, into symbols of their culture and positive identity, for instance from drumming as servitude to drumming as a *Paraiyar* art form; from beef eating as a symbol of pollution to beef eating as a social custom, and in the case of land, from landlessness as a symbol of marginalization to reclaiming land as a symbol of empowerment. He further contends that they reconstruct and ethnicize their identity by reconstructing histories and demythologizing the drum; by having counter discourses on myths of beef eating and communal celebrations of beef eating. They change the image of landlessness as powerlessness by reclaiming land as their empowerment.

#### 4.2.2 Narratives of Equality and Intra-caste Hierarchy

Findings from this research also reveal contradictions in the communities' narratives of the caste system. Dalits reject their stigmatized status and provide a critique of the caste system. At the same time, they buy into the caste hierarchy when they refer to other Dalit castes. In his research on *Newar* Dalits, Parish (1996) documents similar findings. He argues that the symbolic forms and values of caste hierarchy are created, recreated, and contested, in minds and lives which he refers to as the politics of consciousness. I found that respondents use every nuance of their place in the labyrinth of caste hierarchy to feel superior to each other. *Deulas* note that *Damais* (tailors) and *Kamis* (metal workers) are lower than them and *Biswakarmas* (metal workers) note that *Podeas* (sweepers) are lower than them in the caste hierarchy. But they also reject the caste system and support equality through expressions such as, "If your hand is cut, it bleeds, if mine is cut, it bleeds, so how are you and I different?" and "We are all human beings. We are all flesh, blood, skin and bones." "There are only two *jats* (castes), men (*lognae manchae*) and women (*aimai*)" is another common saying that was also identified in Cameron's study (1998) on low castes in Nepal. Parish (1996) notes the interplay of the concepts of hierarchy and inequality in the thought of some *Newars* in Nepal. He found that some of them recognize equality as an ethical principle making use of it in ironic and utopian counterpoint to the practice and legitimation of hierarchy.

It is not surprising that caste ideology and practices are reproduced among Dalit groups. Dalits are a part of the Hindu social structure and have an internal caste hierarchy among themselves, although which caste is higher or lower is contested. Ironically, they reproduce the very structure they critique. They feel that this hierarchy, even though imposed on them, is a tradition that started very long ago, and they find it hard to break away from the system of which

they are a part. One afternoon, as I was interviewing some women on a portico in the metal worker community, I noticed a young woman looking withdrawn, forlorn and sitting apart in a corner outside a neighboring house. After a while, a man came out and the couple left. Later, the women I was interviewing in the nearby portico who had also observed the woman told me that she was of a tailor caste who had married the man from the metal worker caste and she was not accepted in her husband's household. They were living somewhere else and her husband had come to visit the family but she was not allowed inside. His family did not want to interact with her. The respondents said that the community is still not open to inter-caste marriages.

According to a 32-year old female respondent from the *Pariyar* community, "the internal hierarchy and division is there because of tradition. And today I should not be thinking that I am small and weak and have an inferiority complex. We should think of ourselves as equal. I think people are big or small by what they do, through their actions." The respondents from all three communities support inter-caste marriage (among Dalit castes and Dalit sub-castes) if it happens, but they feel that it is better to marry within one's own caste because of similar backgrounds, especially given the rigid heterogeneity of Dalit castes. Moreover, marrying within one's caste limits the discrimination to which one is exposed.

According to Dalit activists and scholars, the complexity of caste issues (for example, intra-caste hierarchy and discrimination) has resulted in non-Dalits washing their hands of the responsibility for dealing with caste-based discriminatory practices. As one activist noted, "The so-called higher castes tell us that unless our own (Dalits') problems are solved and unless we end caste discrimination amongst ourselves, we have no right to talk about them. This attitude preserves their caste privilege and hinders positive change by justifying the status quo." Some activists attribute the caste hierarchy among Dalit groups to a system that was imposed upon



them with a “divide and rule” objective. They feel that the argument of Dalits having to unite first before talking about discrimination is one that upper castes use to undermine Dalits, to suppress the Dalit movement, and to make Dalits feel responsible for caste-based discriminatory practices without constructing a structural critique of the caste system. Many community respondents also raised the point that if sub-castes exist among higher castes, why is intra-caste hierarchy (meaning different occupational castes within the larger grade-caste of Dalits) a problem for Dalits then, especially when it comes to choice of marriage partners? Many felt that even though people accuse Dalits of intra-caste discrimination, the real gap is between Dalits and non-Dalits.

#### **4.2.3 Experiences of Discrimination**

Despite living in Kathmandu (“modern” urban space), Dalits still face discrimination, although the nature of the discrimination may differ from community to community. In this research, all respondents acknowledged that discrimination has declined since historical times, and that their children will not have to go through what they and their ancestors went through. This was an achievement in itself. Most respondents feel that caste-based discrimination has more to do with age or generational differences.

Unlike the lower class *Deulas* and *Biswakarmas*, the middle-class *Pariyars* claimed that they did not face discrimination and that caste issues were almost irrelevant for them in this “modern age.” The majority were born and brought up in the city. They did not have to depend on anybody because they had their own property and lived in their own houses. Moreover, they did not eat out much, nor did they have to frequent tea shops, and city temples allowed anonymity. In other words, they did not find themselves in situations which exposed them to

discrimination. As artists, they do not feel discrimination in the workplace. Many of them were well-established in the music market and had acquired respected status. They tend to overlook cases of discrimination, viewing certain situations as temporary. A *Pariyar* man had this to say: “I have not faced discrimination in the city. I must admit that I have not traveled to villages so I do not know the plight of Dalits [there]. But, once, when we went to our relatives’ place in a remote area for a wedding, we were not allowed to enter hotels. I felt bad but I overlooked it. I do not live there.” He held the simplistic conviction that “once people get an education, their ignorance will wear off.”

The class privilege and success of the *Pariyar* community allowed them to attribute discrimination to the behavior of Dalits. *Pariyars* stressed how religious and good they were and that they did not drink alcohol in public places or use foul language; also, they did not want to have fun all the time (all stereotypes of Dalits). They stress that they are hardworking. They feel that Dalits are treated badly because they give the rest of the society a chance to point fingers at them by drinking and not behaving properly. They are also critical of non-Dalits drinking and behaving badly but not getting labeled as such. In a way, *Pariyars’* claim of modernity and morality supports findings of Liechty’s (2003) study of middle classes in Kathmandu who claim the moral middle and feel that they are appropriately modern. According to Liechty, the local middle class comprises those people carving out a new cultural space which they explicitly locate in language and material practice, between their class ‘others’ above and below. Middle class *Pariyars* proudly note that they have interactions with people from high castes and classes. They eagerly embrace a caste-neutral middle-class status and discourse because it represents the most solid hope for the undoing of any lingering caste residues. In a way, they might be seen as being in the vanguard of the invention of a caste-denying middle class modernity.

In contrast, poor Dalits admit their drinking habits with humor and irony, and remark that without drinking a little after a tiring day, life gets difficult. I observed alcoholism among men in both the metal worker and sweeper communities. Some women too drank their home-brewed alcohol. Because *Pariyars* have more individualistic ways of explaining their own situation, they do not criticize structural inequalities as much as the lower class communities of *Deulas* and *Biswakarmas*.

In the case of *Deulas* (sweepers), respondents felt that discrimination has slowly declined in the city, especially in places of work, due to modernization and their employers' open attitudes. Older respondents said they were treated well by their employers because they were judged by their work rather than their caste. They had actually observed changes in attitudes over the years—for example, previously they were not allowed entry into some office spaces and did only cleaning work; now, office administrators did not hesitate to ask them to buy and serve food and drinks during meetings. Untouchability practices were less common in the offices.

The most pressing problem for the community was that of employment. Their caste identity no longer guarantees them their traditional jobs as sweepers and cleaners in the city. Previously the Kathmandu municipality and other government offices had guaranteed jobs for sweepers but now this practice has ended and the opportunities are supposedly open for all. The quota system which protected them before had been discontinued. The jobs used to provide benefits and pensions.

The unemployed respondents narrated the difficulty of finding jobs because of employment opportunities favoring high caste *Bahunas and Chettris*, some of whom knew people

in high places and used networks to get jobs.<sup>22</sup> Respondents seemed upset that upper caste persons accept the job of sweeping and cleaning but still practice untouchability. While the upper castes are willing to do lower caste jobs because it benefits them economically, they still want to maintain their higher caste status socially. This contradiction seemed untenable and intolerable because *Deulas* see their occupational rights being taken away by other castes and they do not have the education or skills to opt for other professions.

Moreover, the new generation is losing out badly. Even though they may manage to study up to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade (because of high dropout rates and the recent trend of regular schooling, even 10<sup>th</sup> grade is a big deal), they are unable to compete with other castes in the open labor market and they no longer have special access to their traditional jobs. Many are underpaid in the private and semi-private sector due to subcontracting of their occupations. Their Dalit status, their poverty and their inability to negotiate for fear of losing the job have resulted in super-exploitation of their labor. A sweeper working in the airport told me that she earns only Rs.1900 (around \$28)<sup>23</sup> a month because the middle-man (*thekdar*) takes a large cut. A 38 year-old man working in a private organization earns around Rs.2,500 (around \$35) with no benefits. He has received no raise in salary despite working for 19 years. He and the other workers are scared to organize for fear of being fired.

The youth express different dreams than their parents. They are not interested in cleaning jobs. A 20 year-old young woman told me that she does not want to follow the traditional occupation of her parents. She was taking computer classes to add to her skills and waiting for her 10<sup>th</sup> grade results. Even though she failed once, she tried again. She imagined herself being

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<sup>22</sup> Nepal's acute poverty and high unemployment rate has made all jobs, including sweeping/cleaning very competitive. This has mitigated the occupational stigma for poor high caste people.

<sup>23</sup> According to current exchange rate, 1 U.S. Dollar=Rs.72.42 Nepali Rupees

well-dressed and employed as a receptionist in a clean environment. She said she preferred an office environment and a desk job over holding a broom. A 19 year-old Deula male told me he was interested in doing hotel management.

In the case of *Biswakarma* workers, the older male generation is losing out. Their old profession of making agricultural tools is rendered obsolete as Kathmandu moves toward a service-oriented economy and an open market. Some are still active in the contractual system and are paid very little. Members of the new male generation who are willing to take on the modern version of metalwork, for example, making silver ornaments, are doing relatively well if they find good employers and get good orders. However, some are severely cheated and exploited. Many respondents talked about how boys (some as young as five) are kept in conditions similar to bonded labor under the pretext of training in workshops owned by Dalits (*Biswakarma*) themselves. They are paid nothing for three years and are not allowed to go home. Once their training is over, they are paid only around Rs. 500 a month. The respondents in this community felt that this exploitative apprenticeship might benefit their children by guaranteeing them employment later. This finding contradicts earlier studies that suggested that modernization has in fact provided good employment opportunities to Dalits (Rankin 2004).

*Biswakarma* women are not involved in making agricultural tools. They worked in the fields and looked after their homes. When there was seasonal labor, they worked for upper castes, close to their homes. Some of them also worked in or looked after other people's fields (mostly owned by upper castes). They sometimes operated on a system of sharecropping, splitting the crop fifty-fifty with the owners. During the rice planting and harvesting season, I found out that the wage rate for men was around Rs.150-Rs.200 per day and Rs.100-Rs.120 for women. When I asked why the rates were discriminatory, the rationale given was that men have

a heavier work-load, including thrashing the grain, operating machinery, and heavy lifting, and that women have a lighter work-load. However, I observed women do heavy labor as well, carrying heavy loads and thrashing the grains. The insider that accompanied me to the community told me that even though discrimination was against the law, this was how the rate was calculated in the area.

#### **4.2.4 Everyday Acts of Accommodation and Resistance**

The issue of resistance could hardly be applied to the *Pariyar* community because of their class privilege, and the fact that they explicitly reiterated time and again that they were not discriminated against. In the case of *Deulas* and *Biswakarmas*, the respondents from both communities internalize, adapt to, and resist hegemonic values in everyday life, in keeping with the framework laid out by Green (2006; n.d.). This is not so say that they are unaware of discrimination, exclusion and injustices inflicted upon them. They are *aware* that untouchability is against the law, that they have the right to register complaints and file cases against discrimination. They are not passive victims, a common stereotype of long oppressed groups. Rather they use the strategy of identity-negotiation on a day-to-day basis.

The majority of the respondents (except for three respondents) did not believe in the notion that fate (*bhagya*) and bad deeds in past lives (*karma*) had relegated them to the status of Dalits as a way of paying for their sins. The general response was that those in power made the caste system and it has served the upper castes.<sup>24</sup> They were labeled as “low castes” only later

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<sup>24</sup> The term “upper castes” (*mathillio jat*)” and “lower castes” (*tallo jat*) are terms used by respondents themselves and a common way to refer to caste hierarchy in Nepal even today. A Dalit activist/lawyer seemed upset that such terminology was still in use suggesting that nobody is higher or lower yet educated people like me (the researcher)

(after the fact) due to their occupation and the stigma that went with it. This is an important perspective. It shows that, contrary to the notion that the lower castes have no awareness and agency, respondents in this study have not bought into the high caste ideological mythology that their actions in their past lives have made them Dalits in this life.

Their agency is registered in individual acts of defiance and, more generally, in everyday acts of resistance or everyday forms of protest (Scott 1985) – fighting in water taps/wells, criticizing and mocking upper caste ways of life and practices, boycotting public religious functions and tea shops, and refusing food from upper castes when they go to do wage labor. A 22 year-old woman boldly stated, “I will not tolerate discrimination. I would rather stay at home with dignity rather than be humiliated. We are asked to stay apart during *saptaha* (public religious function) to avoid polluting others. The priest does not accept our offerings.” These examples are also in line with Scott’s analysis that subordinate classes, especially the peasantry, are likely to be more radical at the level of ideology than at the level of behavior since they are more effectively constrained by the daily exercise of power.

Another form of resistance that may be considered transformative but still within a broadly accommodative framework (Green 2006; n.d.) is in cases whereby Dalits ignore or sidestep, resist, and act against the prevailing hegemony--in instances of inter-caste marriages and the conversion to Christianity in both the *Deula* and the *Biswakarma* communities. (I did not find converts in the *Pariyar* community. The upwardly mobile *Pariyars* were proud of upholding their Hindu religious tradition).

Inter-caste marriages between Dalits and non-Dalits and among different Dalit occupational castes are instances of breaking away from tradition; these instances constitute a

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still use such language. I clarified that I used these terms for the purpose of the research, only after respondents started using the terms. Moreover, these terms were common in everyday settings.

challenge to the caste system because of the heavy emphasis on caste endogamy. There are almost daily news items of such couples being ex-communicated and mistreated. The conversion to Christianity is another challenge to Hinduism. In a search for equality and human dignity, Dalits have joined religions that preach equality (Gorringer 2005). The Dalits (two respondents from the *Deula* community and four respondents from the *Biswakarma* community) who had converted to Christianity seemed more vocal and confident in their responses. Christianity has provided a legitimate platform upon which to frame a critique of Hindu caste norms. It also exempted them from costly social investments that Hinduism incurs through costly rituals and festivals, which are economic burdens on the poor. A 24 year-old woman from the metal worker community who converted to Christianity three years ago stated that she celebrates only Christmas and it relieves her of all financial stress. Besides, when someone dies, her church makes all the arrangements for the funeral. She does not have to worry about asking for help from other people in the community. She does not have to worry about who will touch their untouchable dead bodies. The church also provides health facilities. However, this personal empowerment and freedom does not prevent other caste groups from calling her a Dalit and treating her badly. She is still a Dalit in the eyes of society despite her conversion to a religion that has no caste system. Her sister had enrolled herself in a free bible-study school, which enabled her to stay in a Christian hostel. She was studying to be a missionary. This was another way to get an education since they could not afford a secular program. These examples point out that resistance is as much a response to economic hardship<sup>25</sup> as it is opposition to the cultural aspects of caste discrimination.

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<sup>25</sup> In Nepal, the majority of Christians are from Janjati groups (indigenous groups) who had Buddhism and animism as their ancestral religions. These groups were not a part of the caste system. In other words, Christian missionaries have been successful in getting converts from among those not favored by the caste system of Hinduism.



A 20 year-old youth stated boldly that he became a Christian because it had no caste system. It preached that people's hearts are one. His father and sisters are still Hindus even though he tried to convince them to convert. He was proud to say that he had a multi-religious family. Another 23 year-old man told me that Dalits are true caretakers of many temples. They play musical instruments for the gods and many clean the temple premises. The bells and the decorative metalwork that adorn the temples, including some of the metal statues, are made by Dalits. Despite their wide-ranging contribution, they are not allowed to enter the temples. They are denied access to the very gods over which they watch. Moreover, he had heard that in the old days, hot oil was poured into the ears of Dalits if they listened to the religious texts. So why should he follow such a religion?

Despite the consciousness, the respondents have tolerated acts of discrimination and humiliation. The *Biswakarmas*, for example, are denied entry into teashops and have to wash cups. By and large, they have not challenged such practices. Similarly, the headmaster of the school in the sweeper locality had mistreated *Deula* students but neither the parents nor the students had challenged his authority. Instead, they transferred to other schools. In other words, the knowledge and consciousness of discrimination have not been translated into collective action. Nobody had registered a complaint nor filed a caste discrimination suit. They were skeptical of getting police officers to listen to them. Another interesting observation was that none of the community respondents in any of the three communities had participated in the demonstrations and protests of the monumental and historic people's movement. Most said that they did not feel safe. In sum, resistance in this research was observed at multiple levels, resistance at an individual and spontaneous level, at an intermediate level (in between

spontaneous and collective resistance) and at an organized or collective level. In the everyday community space, I mostly found individual acts of resistance.

The middle class *Pariyars* (both old and young generation) called themselves non-political but cultural people. They admitted that they were not involved in the Dalit movement. They were skeptical about politics in general, a skepticism common across all the community groups in this study. *Pariyars* were actively involved in their Pariyar Society, where Pariyars get together to discuss what they can do to contribute to the art and music sector in Nepal.

There seemed to be a generational difference in perspectives and attitudes towards discrimination and resistance; as demonstrated earlier, the religious converts were all young respondents. The responses from the older group reveal a more accommodating attitude to the prevailing hegemony. Below are some examples:

We are used to it. It is hard to break tradition because it is deep in our psyche.

--50 year old male from the metal worker caste

If I enter the temple and touch the gods, I will lose all my good deeds and religious merit. We have never done it before so why should we do it now?

--74 year old male from the metal worker caste

This was what our ancestors taught us. They say we are sinners and we will pay for our sins if we speak up or break tradition.

--38 year old female from the metal worker caste

The older respondents say they do not want to fight because they have to live close to other caste groups. They emphasized harmony as long as they were respected, treated with dignity. A 40 year-old *Biswakarma* woman noted, “We let them collect water first. There is no harm in waiting. Why should we pick a quarrel over little things? We all have to live together. You (the researcher) will go away but we have to stay here.” The older generation felt that time,

law and the recent people's movement would solve everything. When asked what the government or the movement had done for them so far, they had no answer.

The younger generation felt that it was their right to be able to live freely and to exercise their rights. In her attempt to resist, a 20 year-old *Biswakarma* girl noted, "We do not wait to collect water. Even though the upper castes ask us to wait or to stand aside, we do not listen. ... In fact I deliberately touched her water and ran away." An 18 year-old *Deula* girl stated: "Guys tease us on the street calling us *Podenis* [sweepers]. ... I almost beat him up. My friends stopped me." They feel that the older generation is not open to new ways. Therefore, they have not been able to organize and resist. They feel trapped. This is aptly expressed by a 12<sup>th</sup> grade male student respondent, "How can we go to file a complaint or pick a fight when the wise people we look up to – our parents and grandparents – do not support us? They tell us to let it be because this is tradition." Pointing to his temple, he further noted, "I tell them it is inside their heads."

#### **4.2.5 Non-Dalit Narratives of Caste Practices**

In the course of my research, I also talked to non-Dalits in the metalworker locality.<sup>26</sup> Most non-Dalits in the locality, some of whom were educated, tended to trivialize untouchability. Many casually remarked that the main problem faced by Dalits was attitudinal untouchability (*chuwa chut*) which would go away eventually. Few non-Dalits went in-depth into the repercussions and implications of the practice of untouchability. Although, upper castes are aware that their practice of caste discrimination is wrong, there is a tendency to dismiss the importance of such

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<sup>26</sup> Many of the respondents asked me also to talk to non-Dalits. According to them, non-Dalit views were important as they practice untouchability. They said that the responsibility of change has been placed on Dalits, the victims, when in fact the perpetrators are non-Dalits. They wanted me to see what non-Dalits have to say to get the whole picture

matters. This shows how normalized such practices are. They have their own narratives about the caste system and a justification of their behavior towards discriminatory practices.

Some common perceptions were as follows:

Tradition is stronger than the constitution so those untouchability laws do not matter in this locality. We have to live with all other upper castes who are religious and good people.

-- A 65 year old Brahmin woman

Let them (Dalits) settle their caste issues first, and then come to us. They are not united amongst themselves. They practice untouchability too. How can they complain about Brahmans and Chettris then?

-- A 33 year old Chettri government official

We are not against them. If they are clean and religious, if they stop their drinking behavior and foul language, we will have no problems with them.

-- A 45 year old Brahmin male

If I allow Dalits entry into my tea shop, then I will lose my business because other castes from the locality will stop coming to my shop. Otherwise Dalits give me good business.

-- A 40 year old male shopkeeper

Non-Dalits basically place the responsibility for change on Dalits refusing to see their own role in perpetuating caste discrimination. They also use the convenient idea of “time” as resolution in achieving gradual and ultimate change. Dalits, on the other hand, are very aware that non-Dalits prefer the status quo. They also know that the non-Dalits are not making serious efforts towards changing such practices. One 35 year-old male stressed the inhuman aspects of caste discrimination in this way, “Our Dogs are allowed in the homes of upper castes but we [humans] are not allowed because we are untouchables.” They complained about the upper-caste double standard, for example, upper castes do not hesitate to enter their homes when they want to drink their home-brewed alcohol but would not allow them in their homes or grocery stores.

Respondents frequently emphasized the importance of having to be a Dalit to really experience discrimination. This was aptly expressed by a Dalit woman who used a Nepali proverb to explain her sentiments, “*achanoko peer khukuri lae jandaina,*” implying that only those who undergo discrimination can truly understand. She further noted how crucial firsthand experience was:

They (upper castes) have never been asked to sit outside and drink tea even though we pay an equal amount of money. They have never had to wash utensils. They have never been banned from entering temples. Their children have not had to go thirsty in school. Their children do not have to worry about their surnames and mistreatment in school. So why should they care?

Dalits’ emphasis on their experiences and narratives resonates with the claim of Collins (1990) of the importance of concrete experience as a criterion of meaning as one dimension of Afrocentric epistemology.

#### **4.2.6 Relationship with Dalit Leaders**

The younger generation, in this research, showed eagerness in taking initiatives and organizing but they stressed that they did not know the appropriate procedures for addressing the injustices. In all three communities, the majority of respondents failed to identify Dalit organizations that advocate on their behalf. Neither were they aware of the Dalit wings of political parties. In addition, they were unable to identify national-level Dalit leaders, Dalit activists and other Dalit notables. Two men had heard about the National Dalit Commission and could name the Dalit wing of the Maoist party. Two 11<sup>th</sup> graders of the metal worker community were able to name the Dalit wing of the Maoist party, although Maoists had never visited their area. Two men in the *Deula* community were able to name the Dalit wing of the Marxist-Leninist party. Most of the

respondents named national-level political leaders who had been re-elected; those they see in the news daily. Some of the leaders identified were no longer in office.

Some respondents attributed their lack of awareness of critical information and organized resistance to a few factors. First, they pointed out that their poverty and low income level do not free up time to organize. Most of their time is spent in meeting their basic needs. Second, lack of education, poor education (of the few who had gone to school), and a dearth of local community leaders deprive them of the knowledge required to go about the process of addressing their problems. Third, Dalit communities are afraid to organize because of their economic dependency on high castes, especially in the case of metal workers in this study. Fourth, there is a lack of presence of Dalit organizations, parties, leaders and advocates (and hence programs) in their communities. No organizations had reached out systematically to these communities. Given that in Nepal many cases of resistance of marginalized groups have occurred through intervention programs that focus on awareness raising, legal literacy, education, empowerment, income-generation and mobilization of marginalized groups, the respondents in this study were removed from such factors. Most of the main Dalit government and non-governmental organizations have their headquarters in Kathmandu but provide services to areas outside of Kathmandu. Dalit activists admitted that most NGOs and INGOs are donor-driven and the donors mostly support projects in remote areas. Funding is erratic when programs do not fall within thematic areas of donors, which change frequently. Moreover, programs are prioritized for areas where there is a substantial geographic concentration of Dalits. Therefore, the Dalits in the Kathmandu valley are not considered significant numerically and remain neglected. I noticed that activists employed in NGOs, INGOS and those in political parties had taken programs into

their home villages while being employed in Kathmandu. None of the activists I interviewed were originally from Kathmandu.

A female respondent, confident that Dalits would be able to stand up for themselves if they had general awareness training and education on caste discrimination issues, stated in bewilderment that she could not understand why organizations did not bring such programs into her area. She was aware that there was money coming in for poor people and Dalits; for example, she had heard of such projects through the radio. She asked me “What do organizations do? Where do they take programs? Aren’t the Dalits of Kathmandu valley on their list?” Another female respondent told me that she was unable to go to a Dalit organization for help because of her illiterate status. She could not read the signboard of the organization even if she knew where it was.

Although these concerns were raised by some respondents, this is not to imply that no organizations had ever gone into the communities. Respondents in both the sweeper and metal worker community said that some general poverty alleviation groups had come into their area but no programs were brought in specifically for Dalits through Dalit organizations. In the metal worker community, a small women’s group focusing on a saving and credit scheme was operating erratically. They did not have any meeting while I was in the field. Community members recollected how women’s groups had come years ago but the programs fizzled out. The women provided a critique of some of the programs. They said that training programs that are provided are located far away and they are not able to juggle child care and training requirements. Sometimes they do not have the money for transport. Sometimes they lose money for an hour’s work or they have to choose between child care, doing household chores or going for training. Even when they are provided training to make little handicraft products, they do not

have the knowledge or the skills to find a market to sell the products. While I was doing field work, a women's group became interested in the community and came for a visit. The ultimate goal was to make women economically self-reliant. The trainers said that the women had to make an initial investment for the training, around Rs.300, since nothing comes free in life. They would be taught how to make incense, using local products like dried leaves, herbs and dried flowers and sticks, which could be found in the locality itself, but which they would have to collect. They would also be given training to make glass bead necklaces.

During a follow-up, I found out that the women had lost interest in the training. Some women told me that they could not afford the fee. Other women told me that they did not know where to sell the incense since upper castes would not buy incense to offer to their gods from Dalits, who were considered impure. Respondents said that programs of economic empowerment are emphasized but who would buy things from a Dalit grocery store, or come to a tea shop opened by Dalits? In short, untouchability practice really limits them in regard to other economic opportunities even if they wanted to break away from their historical occupations. Many respondents said that they did not have the money to invest in or modernize their occupations. In the *Deula* community, many women said that they were interested in opening beauty parlors but that they lacked the necessary start-up capital. They asked me if I knew organizations that might bring such training to their area.



#### 4.2.7 Skepticism of Youth

The youth express a great deal of skepticism about the possibility of positive change for Dalit communities.<sup>27</sup> They feel they are used as tokens and vote banks. These were the voices of a group of metal worker youth from a group interview:

Organizations sometimes come to collect information. Political leaders come to ask for votes. They promise us drinking water and paved roads and we get nothing in the end. They are all the same. Can you imagine such a situation in the Kathmandu valley? Things might be better in other parts of Nepal.

A common expression to refer to their situation of urban neglect in both the metal worker and sweeper community was “*Battimuni adhyaro*” (darkness beneath the light of the city).

Respondents asserted that there are no institutional mechanisms to improve their condition and unless their material conditions of employment, health, housing and education are addressed, fighting for their rights will be hard. Even though they dare to organize, they are afraid of losing their jobs, of being ridiculed and of being boycotted. The cost of being revolutionary outweighs the benefits that may show only after many years. Many are threatened by upper castes. The case of Nani Maiya Nepali, which received national attention while I was in the field, is illustrative of the consequences of bold resistance.

Thirty-three year old Nani Maya Nepali, a mother of two, who was denied access to a local well, broke the social taboo of drawing water from an urban village well in Bungamati (an area close to Kathmandu). The high-caste locals abused Nani Maiya and beat four Dalits who were with her. She lodged a complaint at a local NGO, about which she found out from her sister who lived in the city. After this case became public, media persons, rights activists and a former

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<sup>27</sup> This skepticism and anger also posed difficulty for me in getting initial access into the communities. I gained their trust and hence access through a slow involvement over a long period.

parliamentarian went to conduct an on-the-spot probe. They too were verbally abused. Through the intervention of activists, Nani Maiya registered a complaint at the police station and got compensation. Two agreements were signed in the presence of the deputy superintendent of police to allow Dalits to use the local well.

I interviewed Nani Maiya. She said that with the intervention of Dalit rights activists, the case was settled with the police and she was compensated, but in her day-to-day life the price she was paying for her bold act was heavy. She was being boycotted not only by upper castes but also by the Dalits in the area as other Dalits were threatened with expulsion and sabotage by other castes. Nani Maiya lost her tailoring business. There has been a tacit agreement among the villagers of fining Rs.1,000 to those who go to Nani Maya with their clothes order. The women in her locality had decided to resume the women's saving group only after Nani Maiya withdrew her membership. Nani Maiya told me that even though she lost her livelihood and they threatened to expel her from the area, she had a husband who earned and that she would not starve to death. She had extended family support to help her. She would not give up her fight against caste discrimination. Examples of courage like that of Nani Maiya are rare. Nani Maiya acknowledged that not all Dalits have this kind of safety net and family support to break rigid social norms. She told me that a journalist who covered her story compared her to Rosa Parks, the African American civil rights activist who refused to give up her bus seat for a white passenger in Montgomery, Alabama on December 1, 1955. She wanted to know more about Rosa Parks and asked me about her.

#### **4.2.8 Dalit Women and Implications for Gender**

The preceding sections discussed Dalit identity, discrimination and resistance in general terms. However, I found more instances of women expressing discontent about discrimination and manifesting resistance within their everyday space. As mentioned earlier, there is a gender dimension to caste discrimination since women are those involved in the day-to-day activities that entail the most routinely performed rituals of discrimination—getting water, buying groceries, going to temples and performing religious duties, and taking their children to school. This is not to understate the discrimination Dalit men face. They are also victims of discrimination in their workplaces and the community, and are marginalized by the state in several areas of civic and political life. In the household, however, they have male privilege. Moreover, feminists and others have pointed out that the sectors of consumption (of goods and services) and reproduction—typically women’s spheres—have been historically devalued relative to the sector of production. I found women to be more vocal about issues of discrimination. Perhaps this is a result of the constant re-enactment of humiliating rituals of difference and subservience marking, frustrating, and limiting women’s daily access to subsistence goods and services in the reproductive and consumer spheres. Also, my gender identity as a female may have accounted for women feeling free to talk, although men were not hesitant to express themselves. More palpably apparent was the fact that women feel the oppression on a day-to-day basis more acutely than men because of the gendered division of labor, general gender ideologies and gender role expectations. The “community” for Dalit women is considered a site of disempowerment (DFID and World Bank 2006) where they have to interact with upper castes in “informal” circumstances that provide more room for arbitrariness.

#### **4.2.8.1 Gender and Autonomy**

It is often suggested that low caste women enjoy more freedom of movement and autonomy than high caste women. In this study, I found differences in range of autonomy and inequalities among the three groups. Despite the differences, there were some commonalities. My observations suggest that Dalit households are patriarchal in nature, characterized by gender hierarchy and male domination. This is not surprising given the patriarchal nature of Nepali society in general (Bhattachan 2001; Acharya 2003). Although patriarchal domination is prevalent in different degrees among the three Dalit communities, it is important to note that patriarchy is not monolithic and studies have indeed found that lower caste women have more autonomy than high caste women (Bennet 1983; Cameron 1998 Kapadia 1995; Watkins 1996). According to Kapadia (1995), the inferiority of women to men is accepted in all castes but there are differences in the degree to which this is the case. Differences in region, caste and class significantly affect the status of women, and these need to be considered. Cameron (1998), in her study of low caste women in Bhalara, Nepal, looked at the interaction of caste and gender by examining how the experience of gender is altered in the context of caste and vice versa. She notes that patriarchal ideology associated with high-caste families in Nepal does not apply to women of lower caste. Gender and caste are seen as mutually constituting domains of social life as well as autonomous practices in certain contexts. She argues that gender relations ultimately serve to reproduce caste hierarchy because the upper castes draw on aspects of both caste and gender to differentiate themselves from lower castes. Also, gender is directed toward reproduction (where both high caste and low caste women are involved in domestic chores and child care) and hence it is vital to the system's production of hierarchical differences.

#### 4.2.8.2 Commonalities and Differences in Women's Status

Dalit women of all the three communities, the *Deula* and *Biswakarma* and *Pariyar*, have to bear the burden of household work, child rearing, and income-generating work. Women in all three groups were heavily involved in reproductive labor with help from spouses and other male relatives in some cases. However, the status of women in terms of participation in the economy, gender ideologies, gender roles and expectations, autonomy and restrictions on mobility differed for the three groups.

Gender domination and traditional gender ideologies which affect women's mobility and hence opportunities are more prevalent in the lower class metal worker (*Biswakarma*) community and the upwardly mobile *Pariyar* community. There is in turn a difference in degree to which restrictive gender ideologies are applied in both these groups. For example, upwardly mobile *Pariyars* were more concerned about modesty, etiquette, culture and good behavior in comparison to lower class sweepers and metal workers. In contrast, metal workers and sweeper women were not concerned about how they talked and behaved. They were less concerned about modesty. Women in the low class communities talked openly about domestic violence and acute alcoholism amongst Dalit men. They also laughingly admitted that they drink sometimes but they do not misbehave. In talking about gender relations, they seemed more open about the male double standard, for example, their husbands' behavior in not helping them in household work or men having no restrictions on mobility. Middle class families were more sophisticated in their answers and wives seemed protective about their husbands and always spoke lovingly.

An important difference between the *Deula* community on the one hand and the *Biswakarma* and upwardly mobile *Pariyars*, on the other is that the caste identity of the latter

groups were historically tied to male occupations (metal worker and musician/tailor<sup>28</sup>) whereas the occupational identity of sweepers is gender neutral. This leads to difference in the status and autonomy of women within a household.

In the case of *Biswokarmas*, the women were not employed formally. Unlike *Deulas* and *Pariyar* women in this study, they were involved in wage labor occasionally, whenever work was available. While they did have autonomy in terms of moving around, it was a limited form of mobility. Scholars (Banerjee 2002; Sen 1984) note that even though low caste women in India might have autonomy in going out to work, they are still expected to stay close by or are under the surveillance of men. *Biswakarma* women in this research frequently told me that they would go for wage labor only in the surrounding areas, otherwise husbands had them under suspicion. They were mostly at home doing household chores and looking after their children. The gendered division of labor within the household means that women suffer more as a result of the lack of piped water, fuel stocks and sanitation facilities. Fetching water, gathering kindling and cooking on a wood stove are all labor intensive. Dalit men rarely assist women in such household tasks, though attitudes are gradually changing (Gorringe 2005; Kharel 2006). A mother-in-law's comment illustrates the gendered division of labor, "Who will do the chores and feed my sons if the daughters-in-law go to work?"

Men's controlling conservative attitudes (which men justify as protection and care) restrict women and greatly reduce the scope of female autonomy, particularly in areas where women are confined to the domestic sphere. A 22 year-old married woman noted that when she wanted to undertake tailor training, her husband and her in-laws would not allow her to go, saying a married woman's place was at home. She convinced them otherwise, saved some

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<sup>28</sup> In the modern economy, it is common for women of all castes to open small tailoring shops and even boutiques.

money and joined the training for three months, but later she quit because her family members became very suspicious and would not support her financially. *Biswakarma* women also talked about their husbands not wanting their wives to go to visit their natal home. A 40-year-old woman said in tears that during *Teej* (an important Hindu festival) her husband did not give her money and told her that it was not necessary to go to visit her female relatives. She said that she had only Rs.150 and she went anyway (defying her husband and later bearing the consequences), but could not buy bangles for her relatives.

The relationship between kinship systems, residential patterns and gender status has been addressed by Dube (2001). She contends that women's lives and destinies are inevitably and inextricably embedded in the spheres of marriage and family. South Asia is predominantly patrilineal. Women leave their natal homes to join their husbands' families. This situation is disempowering for women who may be under strict control of male members and mothers-in-law. Women lose the support of their natal kin, especially if they are married in faraway villages (as in the case of *Biswakarma* women in this study who seemed nostalgic about their natal families). In contrast, women have higher status where there are bi-lateral residential patterns (matrilocal and/or patrilocal), which are common in Southeast Asia, for example, in the Philippines and Thailand.

Women also shared their experiences of discrimination coming from high caste women that pertained to water issues, as the community has no taps and has to get water from a common well. Since men are exempt from this tedious task, they enjoy a distance from this everyday inter-caste interaction and do not have to deal with the resulting frustrations. So men tended to downplay discrimination. From their perspective, caste discrimination has waned and things would change with time. Women spoke of the difficulties and the daily insults they faced from

both their husbands and high caste men and women. Women also seemed disappointed with their husbands' passivity. Husbands were sometimes more concerned with the sexual/gender comportment of their wives (as an apparent reflection of their own manhood and power of control) than with the latter's experiences of caste discrimination. One 45-year old woman noted: "The head of the household does not speak up and that makes it uncomfortable for women. We are accused of loitering around and talking to other men."

In the case of *Pariyars*, women talked lovingly of their husbands, brothers, and fathers-in-law employed in the music industry. Since the caste identity of metal workers and tailors/musicians are tied to male occupations, women have historically been excluded from playing musical instruments/making clothes. One probable explanation might have to do with women being considered inherently impure in Hinduism. Since tailors made clothes for the upper castes and played music during festive occasions, women might have been deemed unfit for such personal-service jobs. Control over women's sexuality and mobility were also factors in not allowing women to travel. This has changed in the modern economy with some women opting for music careers as well as opening their own tailor shops. For example, two female respondents in their 20s were teaching vocals in private schools and music schools in Kathmandu.

When I asked women whether they were interested in music or why they were not allowed to play instruments, women gave general reasons, attributing it to gender hierarchy and subordination of women and restriction on mobility, especially since one had to go to upper caste homes to play the musical instruments. According to a 30 year-old *Pariyar* woman, "They used to say that women should not touch the musical instrument (*panche baja*) that they use during weddings. Tradition had it that women could not dance to the tunes of *Panche Baja*."



However, respondents were quick to note that now there are no taboos on playing the instrument (although I did not find girls learning to play the *Panche Baja*). The young women I interviewed were tracked into vocals and not instruments. One father told me his daughter had a wonderful voice and she was better suited in that regard, so he encouraged her. He said that, in the old days, there had been no opportunities for women because they were busy with household chores. He did not want to encourage his daughters into music as the profession has no set schedule and you have to be ready to go anywhere at short notice. He also felt that music and women together might not be seen as a respectable combination. Women in entertainment even today are met with disapproval or suspicion. His daughter feels that the young generation is fortunate, as they do not face too many restrictions. She regretted that her father did not provide more encouragement for her education or for her career.

In terms of household decisions and power in the family, *Pariyar* women claimed that they have family influence and do not perceive themselves as less powerful than men. They note proudly that they run the household -- they decide what to buy for the home and for their children, and they decide what to cook. Husbands listen to them. For example, one 25-year old wife and mother told me: "Men move forward in anything through the support of women. When we talk about power it is not about suppression. It is of different kinds. It depends on the situation of wives. In many cases, husbands listen to their wives." Women admitted that their husbands did not help them with housework, as they were busy with work. Interestingly, husbands provided very sensitive answers in relation to gender ideologies and had liberal attitudes when talking. They seemed well versed in educated discourses and terminologies about gender. They know women's work is considered invisible and that they do a double or triple shift. They seemed empathetic, but very few helped their wives with household work.

In the *Deula* community, I observed gender relations to be less hierarchical and gender ideologies to be relatively liberal. One major factor for this is *Deula* women's income-earning ability that accords them a higher status and a better bargaining position within the household. The working women seemed relatively empowered and supported their families with or without men's help. A 60 year-old grandmother told me that that everyone was supportive of women working because it contributed to the household income. Moreover, women did not have to ask their husbands or children for money. She proudly stated that the house in which she lived with her extended family had been built as a result of her hard work. She was even supporting her grandchildren. A few women were working in two or three places while their sons and husbands were without employment. Hence, mothers, wives, and grandmothers serve as good role models for family members. I noticed men helping in cooking and cleaning. There was less restriction on women's mobility and less emphasis on modesty. I also found out that arranged marriages were uncommon in this community. Since most marry within the same community (mostly by eloping) and in the same locality, women enjoy the support system of their natal families. Hence, they are not domestically confined or isolated as in the case of the metalworker community. The fact that elopement is normalized also shows the lack of a strong marriage gate-keeping culture. A 21-year-old *Deula* woman (one of my interviewees) eloped during my field work. Her parents and grandmother seemed upset for a few days but she returned to visit them in two days or so with her boyfriend (now considered her husband). Her parents seemed accepting of them and things seemed normal. She did not face any punitive measures.

*Deula* women, like *Biswakarma* women, complained about the problem of male alcoholism which sometimes leads to violence. Women frequently criticize their husbands' and men's drinking habits, but Gorringer (2005) found that it can be counter-productive to do so,

since obedient wives can hope for lifelong economic support from their husbands, as well as avoid abuse. A disturbing finding was the relatively low life expectancy of *Deula* men. A report done by a health clinic for the community noted that men have a life expectancy of less than 64 years due to acute alcoholism, drugs and their insanitary working conditions. The husbands of two women had died in their 40s due to alcohol and drug abuse. These kinds of situations have required *Deula* women to step up to shoulder many responsibilities and have also elevated their status and power in the homes.

Another unique aspect of the sweeper community was the customary institution of *dhukuti*, a type of local rotating savings and credit association. Men had their own *dhukuti*, women had their own *dhukuti*, and their children had their own *dhukuti*. This practice provided autonomous spaces where gender- and generation-specific networks could be built within communities. It provided the different community segments a medium through which to learn about, build, and deploy credit and savings. The *dhukuti* functioned as a kind of bank where collective contributions rotate among members. Each month members invest equal amounts. Each individual can use the money to invest in or buy whatever they want. Unlike a bank, there are no fluctuating interest rates. People need not have a formal account and they are able to get money in times of need. Moreover, the money stays in the community. Sometimes, if it is your turn to get the money and there is no pressing need for it, someone else (with more urgent need) can buy the turn from you for a price.

Low (1995) notes that diverse forms of rotating and credit associations have existed in various cultures. She points out that such associations are important for the mobilization of savings and also play a role in building social capital. Participants are referred to as players and throwers. Mutual trust is an essential characteristic; reputation holds the place that collateral does

in the formal sector. Locals do not have to travel out of their comfort zones to formal banking locations. Such associations are also helpful for women since poor women have a poor record of obtaining credit from the formal sector, including access to government loans. However, these associations are also sometimes considered illegal and the money is referred to as black money. The *Biswakarma* women in this research did not have access to such local efforts. Women had shown interest in wanting to learn financial skills and strategies but were limited due to poverty.

A positive aspect I observed in all communities in relation to gender was the awareness of the importance of education, the key to the future. All parents emphasized that they wanted to see their daughters (as much as sons) receive a good education, pursue good careers and become role models in their communities. I observed parents making painstaking efforts to send their children of both genders to school. In both the sweeper and metal worker communities, most questions directed towards me by respondents outside the formal interviews concerned their children's future, particularly in regard to education and career. However, many students from both these communities drop out before taking the School Leaving Certificate Exams (10<sup>th</sup> grade national-level examination), for reasons such as lack of funds, lack of counseling and parental guidance, and discrimination in school.

Although the Nepal government has a policy of free<sup>29</sup> and compulsory education, as well as special scholarship provisions for Dalits, I found that the policies are not fully implemented. A Dalit family still needs extra money for admission fees, school uniforms, and stationery. The admission fee is higher for upper-level classes. Because a family has to have an extra amount of at least Rs.2,000 rupees( US \$27 approximately) at the beginning of a new year for lower-level

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<sup>29</sup> Although government policies state free education, I found out that this is not so in practice. The school official I talked to told me that the school does not have sufficient funds to sustain itself. It does not receive adequate funds from the government. Students are therefore charged fees.

classes and at least Rs.4,000 (\$55 approximately) for classes after grade 10, many parents stop sending their children to school due to lack of money. The lower-class Dalit families in this research did not have the extra income required on an incremental basis. Often, students who seemed promising and eager to study were deprived of an education. Moreover, even though the government had a scholarship provision for Dalit students, not all students could take advantage of this scholarship (of Rs. 250 or \$3.5 approximately). Mostly girls were entitled to this merit-based scholarship.<sup>30</sup> Typically, the money was only enough for lunch and stationery. Through my inquiries with a school official in the metal worker community, I found out that the school does not receive enough money to support all Dalit students. As a result many Dalit children cannot afford to continue schooling.<sup>31</sup>

Family factors, in addition to poverty, also hinder further education. Both *Deula* and *Biswakarma* respondents pointed out that it was common for young girls to drop out to look after their siblings and do household chores. Other girls discontinue education upon marriage. Young boys are tempted to look for jobs, as they sometimes see little point in investing their time in education when their families need financial support. Most parents reiterated that they were not educated and as a result lacked the skills and knowledge to impart educational values to their children. Parents complained that their children do not listen to them. Another major problem they pointed out was that the communities lacked after-school counseling and favorable environments for children to study in—for example, a library where children could do their homework or volunteer tutors who could help them with their homework. In contrast, the

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<sup>30</sup> The school official told me that girls are given priority for government scholarships that are available to Dalit students, as a policy of the government.

<sup>31</sup> It is crucial to point out that the locality included many poor upper caste families, who also had financial difficulties in sending their children to school. From their perspective, Dalits who received scholarships were lucky.

economic affluence of the middle class *Pariyars* have enabled them to provide excellent educational opportunities for their children.

In summary, this chapter has demonstrated that class, gender and generation are crucial mediating factors in Dalit identities in Kathmandu. The findings in this research are clearly differentiated by class, generation and gender, as well as by traditional sub-caste occupational structures. These differences mediate the possibility for change in gender and caste identities. Within an inter-caste context, the most profound difference may be between the upwardly mobile, residentially integrated *Pariyar* community and the enduringly caste-defined, segregated sweeper and metal worker communities. It is up for debate as to whether the former represents the transcendence of class over caste or a peculiar intersection between/combination of the two. It is important to note that social mobility has, if anything strengthened rather than lessened adherence to Hindu values and traditions, despite repeated denials of the significance of caste in community destinies. In the case of gender-specific inter-caste experiences, particularly within the lower-class segregated caste communities of *Deulas* and *Biswakarmas*, the differences between men and women are also significant. Finally, young people in the communities see things differently and along more individualistic lines. They do not fully accept or relate to historical caste identities.

The next chapter looks at the world of Dalit activists; how they negotiate their own identities and employ political strategies in their struggles against caste discrimination and exclusion. In the final chapter, I will focus more closely on subjective and objective aspects of the relationship between the two spatial and institutional contexts and the implications for emerging Dalit identities.

## **5.0 THE WORLD OF DALIT ACTIVISTS: SUBJECTIVE NEGOTIATIONS AND POLITICAL STRATEGIES**

### **Case 1**

Below is an informal conversation I had with a Dalit activist associated with a political party on a roadside, a little away from her rented two-bedroom apartment, which she and her husband shared with her son's family. The complex had several apartments in a central area in Kathmandu. Looking a little perturbed, she hushed me to the side and this conversation ensued:

Interviewer: Is everything alright?

Respondent: There are visitors at my place and I do not want to talk today. Can you come another day for the interview?

Interviewer: Yes, I can. When would be a good time?

Respondent: You see my landlord does not know that I am a Dalit. My last name sounds like a Chettri (upper caste) surname. It may not be safe to talk when people are around. I might lose the apartment. Can you avoid the term Dalit when asking me questions and speak in a low tone when you come to visit next time?

I conducted the interview on a different day, when she had no visitors and it was quiet. As requested, I avoided the term Dalit as we already had an understanding about the nature of my interview.

## Case 2

Below is a direct quote from an interview with a field worker of a Dalit non-governmental organization that provides country-wide awareness-raising workshops about caste-based discrimination. Field workers sometimes have difficulty finding places to stay in remote areas where there are no hotels. They have to stay with families as paying guests. In some cases, if villagers find out the Dalit identity of staff, they are asked to eat outside the house and sometimes even to accept accommodations in animal sheds. Field workers are therefore encouraged to give different names.

I was asked to change my last name in one village by our field officer. He reassured me that they would not find out my true name since it was unlikely that they would ask for my citizenship card for identification. He told me that I do not look like a Dalit. I could pass for *Chand-Thakuri*.<sup>32</sup> I got frightened that if they found out my true name, they might beat me and who knows even kill me. Then we came across a *Biswakarma* (metal worker) village. I knew they were my own people. I felt so awkward hiding my own name. I decided to ask for shelter in this village and stayed with them openly as a Dalit, which was a relief.

These two illustrations (of an activist associated with a political party and an activist associated with a Dalit NGO) show a split between the everyday life and political life of Dalit activists. As they inhabit both these spaces (everyday space and political space), they are forced to negotiate multiple and sometimes conflicting levels of identity. Typically, they experience a disconnect between their everyday/private space of home, community and family, where they are discriminated against on a personal level, and the public space of political consciousness, activism and leadership, where they may attain a certain level of public respect. Dalit activists note that they have to live with this contradiction every day. This makes fighting for change

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<sup>32</sup> Although it is difficult to distinguish Dalits and non-Dalits through phenotype (physical characteristics), Nepal represents a diverse population. In this context, one can roughly distinguish different groups based on physical markers, for example, skin color and shape of noses and eyes. *Chand-thakuris* were formerly considered to be a light skinned aristocratic group.



difficult. “We need to find a place to stay to be able to fight for our freedom. Yet, we cannot reveal our true identity when we come home.” Many Dalit leaders in Nepal are fearful of being found out and being evicted from their rented homes because of their caste identity. They are severely hampered in their public struggle against caste discrimination by their private experiences of such discrimination. In terms of their everyday identity, they have to negotiate at the level of so-called non-political actors. As their identities travel in these two spaces, Dalit activists too are coping, negotiating, strategizing, and resisting on different levels along the everyday-civil society spectrum. This chapter attempts to demonstrate how Dalit activists relate to their own identities. In doing so, it also discusses the factors of motivation that propelled them to be actively involved in the movement. Finally, I present an in-depth examination of the dynamics of activism within political space.

## **5.1 IDENTITY**

### **5.1.1 Importance of a Collective Political Identity as Dalits**

All Dalit activists, advocates and leaders emphasized the importance of identifying as a Dalit publicly. The term Dalit denotes a collective identity and potential collective power. They regard it as extremely crucial as conscious political actors to collectively advocate for the common cause of Dalit freedom. Although they view the status of Dalit as a lived condition and as a state of oppression, they are insistent that this category should include those groups who were considered untouchable and low caste in the historical legal code of Nepal. Therefore the “Dalit” category or label might more easily be seen as a temporary condition which can be removed once

Dalits attain parity with the rest of the society. For the time being, Dalit leaders acknowledge that they have a long journey ahead. Dalits never had a level-playing field to begin with and are suffering cumulative effects of historical and present-day exclusion. It makes the task of “recognizing” this as a problem and working towards a solution an urgent one. In other words, while being a Dalit has a class dimension, its caste basis is extremely important. Otherwise, Dalit activists note, there would be little distinction between upper caste poor (for example, very poor Bahuns and Chettris living in impoverished western regions in Nepal, who might be worse off than city Dalits) and poor Dalits.

Dalit activists point out that because the problems faced by Dalits overlap with problems faced by the poor in general, it is difficult for the larger Nepali society to be sympathetic towards Dalits in particular. However, what is pertinent here is that Dalits face added disadvantages because of the caste dimension (low caste) and it is precisely because of the caste dimension that they continue in poverty. Historically (and even today) their professions were stigmatized and they never received their labor’s worth of remuneration. The difference between a poor Dalit and a poor upper caste man is that, unlike a poor undignified Dalit, a poor *Bahun/chettri* will not be barred from entering a tea shop to enjoy a cup of tea on a cold day. He will not have to wash his cup. He gets what he paid for. He still has his upper-caste pride, dignity, privilege and status even though he may be stigmatized because of poverty. Moreover, even if one looked at an educated Dalit and an educated upper-caste individual, as this research shows, the upwardly mobile Dalit is discriminated against precisely because his or her caste status is known. Here, upward mobility in terms of class (education, income, occupation, political consciousness and activism) does not neutralize or cancel his or her caste status, although these factors may mitigate or reduce the level of discrimination to a certain extent. In short, despite class mobility, the

stigma of being a Dalit may persist for well-to-do Dalits. The struggle of Dalits has therefore to be undertaken publicly and politically with their heads held high. They have to pressurize the government under a common political identity as “Dalits.”

### **5.1.2 Negotiating the Boundaries of Identity**

At a personal level, there were varied perspectives about what being a Dalit meant as a lived everyday experience and how activists viewed their own identity. Despite a common acknowledgment of the need to publicly politicize Dalit identity, many activists balked at self-identification in their private lives. Those activists selected different identities from a repertoire of possibilities appropriate to different contexts. Activists can be divided into two broad groups in that regard. The “pragmatic accommodationists” comprised those activists who had a more pragmatic approach in how they related to and manipulated those options on a situational basis. For instance, they left their identity ambivalent when revelation was not necessary or changed surnames when it mattered. The “militant non-accommodationists” comprised activists who were unsympathetic about concealing their Dalit identity or leaving it ambiguous. This group saw the accommodationist approach as unacceptable because, in their view, it went against the spirit of being a conscious advocate and a true representative of the Dalit population in Nepal. Some even called this betrayal.

Green’s (2006) paradigm that looks at how the identity of subordinate groups is constituted through a variety of dialectically related pathways, as discussed in chapter three, can be applied to the nuances and dynamics of Dalit identity and resistance in the case of Dalit activists as well. For example, the pragmatists concealed their identity as a practical coping strategy “because of” discrimination and exclusion, to which they responded by accommodation

and adaptation. Another example of accommodation and adaptation is choosing to be explicit about their Dalit identity when applying for jobs that encouraged minorities to apply. Over a period of years, activists themselves often sustained pennames which rendered their caste identity indiscernible, and then shifted into being more explicit about their caste identity when the environment seemed more open, like the current political moment. Within this group, there were those who claimed this as part of their right to self-identification and self-determination. They changed their identities as it suited the objectives at hand. For instance, a male Dalit lawyer told me that he carries two official cards that have different last names and he chooses which card to use depending on the context. For him, this was a defensible assertion of individual autonomy. Here, it can be said that added to his pragmatic approach was an element of defiance and even resistance (“in opposition to”). One Dalit leader sums up the complexity and ambivalence of Dalit identity:

Dalit identification may be viewed negatively and positively – sometimes they use Dalit identity to challenge caste based discrimination and to assert their identity in a positive way. Other times, they do not want to be dominated, so why should they reveal their Dalit identity? They have been victims of a Brahmanical Hindu feudalistic tradition and culture. They face humiliation and mistreatment when they reveal their caste. They undergo psychological torture. That is why they hide their names.

Activists were also worried about their children being discriminated against in school because of their Dalit identity. Some activists pointed out that their children had surnames that were different from theirs, surnames that did not reveal caste identity. This helped their children to assimilate in school. Parents want to protect their children from psychological assault and do not want them to internalize a negative self-image.

The “militant non-accommodationists” were willing to be open about their Dalit identity, both in public and in private. This comprised open resistance or opposition to caste

discrimination. They insist on proclaiming their identities as Dalits no matter what the consequences or sacrifices entailed. Co-optation and negotiation will not lead to full emancipation for Dalits, they say. For example, even if Dalits did not find a place to stay, they somehow had to find a way around the problem. Activists in this group were willing to be Dalits, to assert pride in their identities in spite of discrimination. They challenged the hegemonic order very openly and in doing so called it into question. Their revolutionary ideals fit in with the fourth—potential, emerging and transformative—dimension or stage as going “beyond” the hegemonic relation in Green’s schema. An activist summed up their revolutionary ideals in the following manner:

If we want to liberate the whole group from this hellish existence, we have to be proud of our names. We were born into oppression. We were stamped on with the label of “untouchable.” We must give ourselves a strong positive self-identity.

Activists who embrace a Dalit identity feel that those who conceal their identity focus only on individual advantages and hence personal freedom. They seek individual responses to a collective Dalit problem. This is summed up in the following quote:

You see, some well-to-do Dalits, like, who were born and brought up in the capital, who have ancestral wealth, Dalits living abroad and some educated Dalits, tend to deny structural inequities and then focus on individual favorable factors that helped them move up. They tend to forget the struggle the majority of Dalits have to endure. For example, some Dalits living abroad easily say they are not discriminated against. Who is going to discriminate in the U.S. and Europe, where caste does not have relevance? One cannot distinguish caste by one’s looks! These people feel that problems have been solved just because they have left the country.

Many activists are also critical of so-called “educated” Dalits who hide their names. To them, this depicts a lack of true understanding of Dalit issues as well as enduring social and political

ignorance. In other words, higher education and professional qualifications do not necessarily translate into a commitment to fight for a common cause and give back to the community.

To sum up, most Dalit activists emphasize the importance of keeping a Dalit identity. In the words of a Dalit political leader, “We should not hide our identity. Hiding the illness will never cure a sick person. Unless you identify a problem, you cannot redress it. We can let go of our Dalit identity once we achieve total freedom and equality for all Dalits in Nepal.” Activists believe that identification as Dalits will increase because of the possibility of proportional representation and special rights for marginalized groups with the recent discussions on inclusive democracy.

Findings on Dalit identity in this study bear some similarities to writings on racial identity and consciousness in the United States. Comparable concepts are Du Bois’ notion of “double consciousness” (Du Bois 1903) and that of “racial passing” (Kennedy 2001). Just as Du Bois talked about his two-ness—“an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body”—many Dalit activists struggle with the twoness of being a Nepali and a Dalit. For Du Bois, he simply “wishe[d] to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.” Some Dalits in Nepal want to be able to reconcile the identities of being a Nepali and a Dalit without being mistreated. They too want to access opportunities that have been open to other castes. For them, being a Nepali citizen confers upon them a respected cultural status whereas being a Dalit does not seem to have a dignified place in Nepali society.

In examining “racial passing,” situations where light-skinned blacks—those individuals whose physical appearance allows them to present themselves as white but who have black

lineages—“passed” as white, Kennedy (2001) shows how such passing can be a means of struggle, mode of accommodation or adaptation, and even a mode of resistance. Just like Dalit activists in this study, racial passers have ambivalence about their identity and passing has its benefits as well as its costs. They suffer a loss of support from the larger Black community, members of which might go as far as to view them as traitors.

## **5.2 MOTIVATION**

Dalit activists, advocates and leaders talked passionately about factors that motivated them to be involved in the Dalit movement. They were very explicit in stating how a cluster of fortuitous circumstances (personal, social, political and material) had to emerge for them to be able to participate in the Dalit movement.

### **5.2.1 Experiences of Discrimination**

The most common motivating factor was humiliating personal experiences of discrimination that led to a turning point in their caste consciousness. This spurred activists to consciously take up the Dalit cause. For many, humiliating experiences in their school or village, such as having to eat separately, not being allowed to drink water from the common tap, not being allowed to participate in vocational courses such as cooking, being denied temple entry had a profound impact on them. Non-Dalit activists too had a similar awakening in political consciousness when they saw discrimination against Dalits in their home villages or other settings. They spoke up against atrocities and consciously decided to advocate for the cause.

Many activists noted how the impact of societal caste norms, caste-based socialization, and discrimination since childhood had led them to internalize negative self images. Some still felt the lingering psychological effects with which they continued to battle. However, the positive aspect was that these effects prompted them toward critical inquiry and reflexivity and hence heightened consciousness. The quotes listed below illustrate some of these effects:

- Despite my awareness of caste issues, I still feel awkward in certain situations, for example, the other day, I was invited to an upper caste lawyer's home. After eating, I was wondering whether to leave the plate and cup in the sink or whether I should wash them, like I have been used to doing since childhood.

-- An NGO Dalit advocate

- I had a Sanskrit teacher who used to tell the class that if I, the son of a *Damain* (tailor caste), read Sanskrit so well then why others (upper castes) could not do the same. He used me as a negative example. I felt dominated and humiliated. Even though it was a kind of discrimination, I was even more motivated to excel. I could speak fluently in Sanskrit by the time I passed 10th grade.

-- A Dalit intellectual

- The Central District Officer makes the citizenship certificate for Dalits and non-Dalits. Even though the same person signs it, the Dalit citizen certificate does not have the same value as a non-Dalit's citizen certificate. He, a Dalit, is treated like a second class citizen when he eats, when he sits down and when he stands up—people look at him in different ways.

-- A political party Dalit activist

Attitudinal discrimination seemed prevalent at the professional level as well. Activists talked about how caste prejudice and negative stereotypes of Dalits are deep-rooted and persistent.

Although professional Dalits may be educated, clean<sup>33</sup> and of middle class status they are still seen as polluted because of their birth. Their capabilities are also questioned. Activists spoke of

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<sup>33</sup> This is in reference to the negative stereotype of Dalits considered to be uncultured, dirty and living in unhygienic conditions, which has a historical basis. As noted in chapter one, Dalits were delegated to jobs considered polluting and menial (e.g. cleaning toilets, collecting dead carcasses of animals, working with metal tools etc).



good friends to whose houses they were never invited, and the difficulties they experience in finding a place to rent, one of the most common problems faced by Dalit activists. An activist associated with a political party complained about the double standards of his upper caste co-workers and party members, “there are comrades who will tell us to enter their homes only at night but to stay outside during the day. They are scared of offending their elders at home. You see, they play their own politics in the name of tradition *and* with the support of tradition.”

### **5.2.2 Favorable conditions enabling activism**

Activists acknowledged that it was really crucial to have resources and supporting factors that would enable advocacy—for example, access to city amenities, finding a place to stay, having a job, having the opportunity of education, and being able to educate their children. A Dalit intellectual with a PhD degree (which is a rarity for Dalits in Nepal) emphasized how he was able to pursue his education abroad because of his family’s relative wealth. He said that it took at least three generations for this wealth accumulation so that he could reap the benefits.

Dalit leaders were also sympathetic towards poor Dalits. In the words of one political activist from the Tarai region of Nepal:

Dalits are so poor that they cannot come for an hour-long program that we take to their village. Their need to earn is more important than political issues. Their issue is about the stomach. Even today, Madhesi Dalits live in segregated settlements. They live on the river banks. They are so vulnerable economically that their children can’t go to school. They ask, “If we send our children to school, who will graze the goats?”

Exposure to a political atmosphere was also important in motivating activists. Many activists came from areas where there already was a heightened political atmosphere either in the village or in the family, for example, traditions of organized resistance, which informed their political

consciousness. For some, employment in Dalit-based organizations raised their awareness of caste issues. A few of the activists had been able to go to India for study; some had contact with people who shared their knowledge about the freedom movement in India and the Dalit movement led by the charismatic leader, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who was also one of the writers of the Indian constitution.

Jaffrelot (2005) notes that although it is easy to overlook the enabling conditions under which individuals become leaders, we must consider the geographical, historical and social context from which a leader such as Ambedkar emerged, in order to understand this outstanding personality. Ambedkar's family background and environment—the associations with the army and Western education under princely patronage—helped him in emerging as a great leader. He came from a region in western Maharashtra where there were anti-Brahmin movements. His father was employed as a soldier in the British Indian army and was headmaster of a school. Since education was compulsory for the children of the military, not only Ambedkar's father but also the women of the family were literate. Ambedkar's education in the U.S. supported by Maratha Maharajahs was a decisive factor in his career. Ambedkar, who was brought up in relatively normal circumstances, suffered a life-defining humiliation that he was never to forget. One day he set off by train with his brother and sister to meet his father at his place of work. On reaching their destination, the three children were questioned by the station master who, learning their caste, took five steps back. As for the *tonga* (a horse-drawn cart) drivers, none of them would take them to their father's village. One of them agreed, provided that they drove the cart themselves. Later the *tongawala* stopped for a snack in a *dhaba* (traveller's inn), during which time the children had to stay outside and were reduced to drinking muddy water from a stream.

This experience became a turning point in his life and motivated him to fight against caste discrimination later on.

### **5.2.3 Personal satisfaction**

Despite frustrations that activists expressed, they all seemed to find deep personal satisfaction and fulfillment in their work. It provided them a larger sense of purpose, a sense of community and kept them going. Most activists avoided words like “difficulties” or “problems” and instead talked about “challenges” they faced. Their advocacy work also provided them status within their own communities. For instance, a female journalist said with pride that when she went back to her home village, even upper castes deferred to her. They had come to know her through her work. She had also become a role model and example to others. In a way her professional identity and fame had trumped her caste identity in terms of how people treated her. That is why she feels that there is hope for positive change.

## **5.3 GENDER ISSUES**

In addition to the general themes, some gendered themes emerged during the interviews which will be re-visited in the concluding chapter. The biggest issue raised by female activists was the restriction on mobility of women, which holds even for female activists. A big problem for women is that they cannot even leave their homes freely. Although restrictions may be sometimes due to well intentioned concerns—justified as necessary for protection, safety, love and care—they really limit employment opportunities for women and increase dependency on

men. Female activists noted how both Dalit and non-Dalit female activists are limited when they are denied permission for overnight or weekend out-of-town workshops and training. Men learn a lot from these workshops and benefit immensely.

Women activists talk about the difficulty in making it in male-dominated organizations. They complained about the paternalistic attitudes of male colleagues and not being taken seriously. Studies of gender and organizations note the gendered structures of organizations, the practices and policies that perpetuate unequal power, rewards and opportunities, the interpersonal interactions that confirm and recreate gendered patterns, and ideologies that support these processes (Acker 1998). During the research, when the issue of low representation of female staff in organizations came up, most male activists claimed that they were eager to hire women but there weren't enough qualified and educated Dalit women. Some said that Dalit women simply were not interested. Countering this statement, a Dalit female activist asserted:

I do not agree that there aren't enough educated and qualified women among Dalits when it comes to position appointments. The men do not bother to look out for qualified Dalit women. Why can't they communicate with us, take the initiative to find out about capable women? If they ask me, I can show them and bring the women to them. This is a common excuse to not hire women.

At the same time female activists note that it is important for Dalit women to raise their own voices, stand up for themselves and take a more proactive approach to address their own problems. They understand the entrenched patriarchal nature of Nepali society that includes organizational structures. In the face of a lack of assertiveness and self-representation, no-one will come to the rescue of Dalit women. In the words of a Dalit female lawyer, "When I am hungry, I am not going to feel full if you (pointing to the interviewer) eat. I have to eat myself." To sum up, Dalit female activists are fighting both caste and gender discrimination.

## 5.4 ACTIVISM

### 5.4.1 Strategies and Tactics of Dalit Activists

From an organized political and long term view, the tactics and strategies employed by Dalit activists are evident from examining the programs, slogans and strategies of the different organizations. I will first discuss organizations in general and then focus on the historic people's movement of April 2006. The people's movement provides an example of how activists associated with political parties and those associated with non-governmental organizations operated locally to put aside differences for a larger cause. At the same time, this process was not without tensions and contradictions.

The table below compiled from organization brochures and websites of national-level Dalit NGOs in Nepal demonstrates that they want to ultimately eradicate caste-based discrimination and untouchability. The organizations place emphasis on equal rights and living with dignity and freedom. The table depicts the efforts of these organizations to integrate development objectives and the pursuit of a caste discrimination-free society. Dalit organizations also act as pressure and lobbying groups. The organizations organize advocacy interventions like rallies, demonstrations, mobilizations. In addition, Dalit organizations are now a part of the international network against racism (Bishwakarma 2005). The website [www.nepaldalitinfo.net](http://www.nepaldalitinfo.net) serves as an international clearinghouse of Dalit information. This dynamic portal, with information in both Nepali and English, allows discussions, debates and dialogue on Dalit issues. It is becoming a significant, proactive space in developing and generating Nepali Dalit discourse and perspectives and in bringing together Nepali Dalits from all over the world under a common platform.

All the organizations listed below are supported by donors that change over time. However, by and large, the major donors and partners are the World Bank, USAID, Action Aid, Care Nepal, Lutheran World Federation, Plan International, Care International, German Development Service, The Advocacy Project, United Nations Development Program, Swiss Development Cooperation, Department for International Development, European Commission, Danish International Development Agency/Human Rights and Good Governance, Save the Children US, Volunteer Support Overseas, Enabling State Program/Dalit Empowerment and Inclusion Project, and United Nations National Commission on Human Rights.

**Table 3** : National Level Dalit Non-Governmental Organizations in Nepal  
(Source: Information compiled from organization websites)

<b>Name of Organization</b>	<b>Slogan /Vision</b>	<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Programs</b>
DHRO (Dalit Human Rights Organization) (www.dhro.org.np)	Establishing an egalitarian society with full enjoyment of human rights	-creating public awareness against the improper social practices including superstition, caste discrimination and environmental degradation  -bringing the Dalit Community into the socio-political mainstream of the national development.	-producing and broadcasting materials relating to the protection and promotion of human rights of the Dalit Community  -undertaking research to monitor human rights falling under the purview of national, international laws, treaties and protocols, enhancing economic, social, political capacity by conducting various informal education and income generating programs
Dalit Welfare Organization (DWO) (www.dwo.org.np)	A movement for social justice Envision a society where people respect each other with justice and live with dignity regardless of caste, race, status, profession, and ethnic groups they belong to.	-To support and advocate for the eradication of the caste-based discrimination system. -To provide a holistic program for the development of Dalits. -To unify as a people in attaining Dalits' emancipation. -To gain equal rights and dignity among Dalits and non-Dalits alike.	Awareness for capacity building: --Radio, TV, Tele film, street drama , training, seminar, interaction, discussion and co-picnics; Cultural programs, Legal literacy Networking, and mobilization; Advocacy Educational Support Programs - Early Child Development Center --Child and adult literacy class and parents and social awareness literacy; Scholarship and educational support; Skill development training; Textbook and amendment of curriculum Self-help and income generation

**Table 3 Continued:** National Level Dalit Non-Governmental Organizations in Nepal  
(Source: Information compiled from organization websites)

Name of Organization	Slogan /Vision	Strategies	Programs
Feminist Dalit Organization (FEDO) (www.fedonepal.org.np)	For a just and equitable society -Emphasizes the role of Dalit women & children in the upliftment and liberation of Dalit society.	- Awareness building among Dalit women, -Advocacy for Dalit rights and against caste discrimination. -Caste and gender mainstreaming to promote human rights and social justice - Implementing development programs focusing on Dalit women and children based on their needs.	Participatory approach to developments with programs focusing on: - Education: increasing Dalit women literacy rate, inspiring girls to join school -Economic Empowerment-promoting self-sustaining and economically profitable micro enterprises; mobilizing Dalit women groups in income generating and skill development activities for their economic empowerment; modernizing occupational skills of Dalits - Health and Sanitation programs;Advocacy , awareness campaigns and research
Jagaran Media Center (JMC) (www.jagaranmedia.org.np)	Media Alliance against Caste Discrimination -To build a cohesive national and international Dalit Human rights movement through advocacy, social mobilization, media mobilization, and alliance building. -To run media and advocacy programs for social inclusion and mainstreaming of the Dalit community.	-Various awareness campaigns highlighting the realities of caste exploitation that are targeted toward both Dalits and non-Dalits - Documents and follows cases of Dalit rights violations around the country to make these cases public.	- Resource Center for Dalit information in Nepal. - Radio Programs, TV Programs  -Journalism workshops and discussion forums on Dalit human rights and democracy and good governance.
Lawyers' National Campaign Against Untouchability (LANCAU Nepal) (www.lancaunepal.org.np)	Elimination of the crime of Untouchability and all forms of Untouchability based discrimination	-Advocacy and sensitization programs for the elimination of Untouchability and caste based discrimination. -Innovative campaigns against caste-based discrimination. -Promotion of human rights and social inclusion of Dalits	-Consultations and workshops in District networks -Awareness campaigns -Mass Media Research and Publications



**Table 3 Continued:** National Level Dalit Non-Governmental Organizations in Nepal  
(Source: Information compiled from organization websites)

<b>Name of Organization</b>	<b>Slogan /Vision</b>	<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Programs</b>
Jana Utthan Pratisthan (JUP) Academy for Public Upliftment (www.jup-nepal.org)	Nobody is born impure, all humans are created equal	-Raising awareness about human rights, socio-economic development, environmental deterioration, and prevailing superstitious social customs, such as caste discrimination.	-Empowerment and advocacy strategy -Training programs to enable self-reliance, decentralization, good governance and community mobilization -Lobbying at the international meetings in accordance with the laws of the UN, European Union and international organizations, international treaties and conventions, international Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN). -Coordinating its activities with other Dalit movements.
Nepal National Dalit Social Welfare Organisation (NNDSWO) (www.nndsw.org.np)	Envisioning an equitable society	-Uplifting the living standard of the Dalits communities and mainstreaming this isolated sphere of the society into the national nation building campaign.	-Advocacy for Basic Human Rights of Dalits -Promoting Dalits Rights and Political Participation and Livelihood -Education -Policy research and publication -Mass Media Campaign

## **Political Parties in Nepal**

The major political parties in Nepal (see Chapter one, Table 2) have their own Dalit units commonly called Dalit “sister wings.” One of the most organized wings I observed was the *Dalit Mukti Morcha* (Dalit Liberation Front) of the Maoist party. For example, the members were ready to answer questions and were very articulate in their responses. Although the organization did not have a separate text devoted to Dalit issues *per se*, a special book was prepared using the ideology of Prachanda, the leader of the Maoist party, which criticizes the feudal caste system that has dominated Nepal for centuries. It explains how Maoist ideology was interested in a fundamental restructuring of Nepali society through the eradication of the caste system. There was also a general declaration of support for proportional representation of Dalits in all sectors of society. Kisan (2005) notes that a common critique by leftist organizations adhering to dialectical and historical materialist ideologies is that Nepali society is feudalistic and class divided. Other Dalit organizations, adhering to liberal democratic ideologies or to ideologies that maintain the status quo, do not appear to have made parallel analyses of Nepali society. Beyond the broad Maoist critique of Nepali society, there is no specific identification of the social structures or systems that maintain Dalit oppression. This limits the capacity of Dalit organizations to have a clear target to oppose.

### **5.4.2 Major Differences between NGO-based and Political Party-based Advocates**

A general theme of my findings was the differences in perspectives distinguishing activists employed by NGOs and INGOS and those in political parties. These differences reflect a long-term distinction between these two groups, and partly explain the related tensions I found in the

field. They also demonstrate the diversity and heterogeneity within the larger movement itself. It is important to point out that although I highlight differences between these groups, as these were the recurring differences I found, they (the groups) are not necessarily discrete entities. By juxtaposing the perspective of the two groups, I do not mean to imply that they are two completely separate strands of the Dalit movement. As pointed out in chapter three, civil-society political space includes both NGOs and political parties. In other words, civil society is not a benign third sector. It is a common understanding in Nepal that NGOs and INGOS are not free from political influences. Indeed, many NGOs are known to be ideologically close to and financially supportive of the political parties. Activists who are a part of NGOs and INGOS also have their political leanings about which they are sometimes explicit, but in public they mostly speak a moderate language as their programs are guided by donors. For example, I observed that most of the programs and functions of Dalit NGOs (for example, presentations of year-end annual reports) had elected politicians as chief guests or as invited speakers. Sometimes the political officials had little knowledge about Dalit issues and Dalit organizations and their presence was merely symbolic. When I raised the question as to why this was a common trend (since they could easily invite non-politicians who might be more relevant to the work of Dalit organizations), Dalit activists noted that this is how their organizations receive nationwide publicity since the media will highlight functions attended by political leaders. Sometimes elected officials bring their own entourage. Generally speaking, inviting politicians as chief guests is common for public functions in most sectors in Nepal.

#### **5.4.2.1 NGO-Political Party Differences:**

The most striking difference between these two types of organization is that while political parties are fighting for sovereign rights and full inclusion in the national body politic, NGOs

have widened their referential domain and have also adapted to a form of global citizenship through deployment of the human rights discourse. Activists associated with non-governmental organizations feel that the Dalit movement in Nepal was uncoordinated and fragmented because of the tendency of the Dalit wings of political parties to stick to ideological differences rather than to rally around a collective movement for Dalit rights. They feel that the parties' main objectives are to muster Dalit votes around promises that they invariably fail to deliver. According to them, the Dalit executive members of political parties do not address deep-rooted problems peculiar to Dalits and the caste system. Moreover, in their view, Dalit political leaders are simply used as tokens within the parties with little say and little power.

Activists associated with non-governmental organizations claim that the success stories of the Dalit movement are a result of their work, some going so far as to call the movement an NGO movement. For instance, it was through their pressure that the government ratified many international conventions. This group appears skeptical of political processes and state programs. However, they admit that political party wings are necessary for a successful Dalit movement because of the importance of political power. They also feel that "civil society," characterized by the rights to voluntary association through the formation of NGOs and INGOs, can address Dalits problem and challenge the status quo outside of a political culture fraught with a feudalistic mindset, nepotism, corruption, and lack of accountability. They enjoy more space and autonomy (although this space may not necessarily be more powerful) to fight for a common Dalit cause. This allows them to function as effective and less corruptible pressure groups.

The political activists representing Dalit wings of the political parties admit that they are limited within political ideologies and it is difficult for them to grapple with the gaps or contradictions between the political ideologies and the fight for Dalit rights. They lack the

autonomy and the focus for a full-fledged Dalit movement. Sometimes they are subject to stringent controls from their party leadership, which is dominated by high castes. Yet, for them, true freedom for Dalits can be achieved only through the full exercise of their sovereign rights (power of the people) played out through local and national politics. This is reminiscent of the dilemmas faced by women's movements in developing nations that are a part of national movements.

Political activists do not feel that the differences in ideologies detract from or undermine the cause of Dalit liberation, since the constitution addresses the caste system and, in any event, Dalits should exercise freedom of political association. Moreover, Dalits are a heterogeneous group. They feel that the success of the Dalit movement to date could be credited to those martyrs who were selfless in resisting the oppressive state throughout Nepal's history, and who challenged the system through their own sacrifice and through political organizations. They reject the notion of an NGO movement. What NGOs do, in their view, is "activities, programs and awareness raising campaigns," using agendas decided by outsiders and funded through foreign aid. For example, an activist affiliated with a political party notes: "We are not those types of advocates who will simply hand in chicken and goats to villagers. We will make them aware of their political rights and strive for total freedom. We want to bring about a fundamental change. We (political parties) do not have money to hold talks in five star hotels and distribute food. We go through a lot of struggle to raise our own local money."

Political activists also challenge the notion of an uncoordinated movement and emphasize the heterogeneity of Dalits. As Gorringer (2005) notes, social movement actors are neither homogenous nor necessarily united. One activist stated that the issue of an uncoordinated movement is not a serious one. "In fact, there can be many Dalit movements: Why should one

expect harmony and co-ordination among Dalits? Dalits are a diverse group. Do all upper castes get along?”

### **5.4.3 Internationalization of the Dalit Cause and Human Rights Discourse**

The criticism attributed to NGOs in Nepal by political parties as stated above is commonly shared by the public and independent Dalit activists. Nevertheless, non-governmental organizations and international non-governmental organizations, also seen as involved in the “development industry,” occupy visible positions in Nepal, a country heavily reliant on foreign aid. This visibility denotes a certain amount of power and upward social mobility. This is seen in the posh office buildings in which the big NGOs and INGOs are located, the luxury cars that they use, and the attractive salaries and benefits that their employees receive. This visibility unfortunately stereotypes all local NGOs, including those who may be working at the grassroots level, doing commendable work and struggling to get funds, and those NGOs who use local money. Because of these perceptions, skepticism towards NGOs has taken deep root in Nepal, in contrast to the projected principles of non-profit organizations. It is common to refer to organizations supported by western donors as “dollar harvesting organizations”—making money without doing the real work. One intellectual noted that the development industry and those employed in such NGOs or INGOs create a different class category of a privileged group when they do not reach the masses. This perpetuates inequalities, resentment and skepticism.

Acknowledging criticisms, activists associated with NGOs and INGOs admit that the development scene in Nepal is not pristine -- neither are the political leaders. According to them, it is crucial to be aware of the complexities and to keep working. Activists associated with Dalit NGOs and INGOs emphasized that the Nepali Dalit Social Movement has been supported by

United Nations organizations, and other international organizations and associations. There has been considerable influence from the Indian Dalit and anti-caste movements. Dr. B. R Ambedkar is a source of inspiration for Nepali Dalit leaders. They celebrate International Day against Racism and draw upon the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King. They also draw upon the history of apartheid in South Africa. In general, these Dalit activists appear very focused on international advocacy.

Most NGOs and INGOs have adopted the human rights discourse. A consciousness of human rights has percolated through to Dalit movements and shaped their rhetoric and strategies (Gorringer 2005). The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) was established on May 26, 2000, with the objective of effective protection and promotion of Human Rights of the people of Nepal. The Maoist conflict and the gross violation of human rights along with pressure from international organizations led to the formation of the NHRC. This move also helped Dalits to frame their demands within the purview of human rights violations. Recently, the National Human Rights Commission named caste-based discrimination among the key human rights issues in Nepal. In its summary report on the Status of Human Rights under the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the NHRC of Nepal highlighted the continuation of discrimination against Dalits as one of the most pertinent human rights issues of the country, stating that the Dalit Community was still facing obstructions in enjoying the right to life with dignity (NHRC 2007).

The adoption of human rights discourse has also led to the internationalization of the Nepali Dalit movement. Dalit activists in Nepal use human rights discourse to make the case for the importance of human dignity and to expose the inhumane aspects of caste discrimination. This human rights approach seems to have a universal appeal (Tamrakar 2007). It has enabled Dalit NGOs to form alliances with organizations all over the world. There has been a significant

involvement of international development agencies, human rights institutions and solidarity groups/forums that have highlighted the efforts of Dalit organizations and internationalized their issues.

It is important to point out that Dalits started using the human rights discourse after the United Nations accepted that caste discrimination was a form of discrimination based on descent. No international conventions specifically covered problems of untouchability; human rights treaty bodies did not recognize caste-based discrimination as a human rights violation; major human rights NGOs had not taken up the issue until recently. Up until the late 1990s, the daily violence, exclusion, and humiliation suffered by millions of people in low caste groups had not been treated as human rights issues by United Nations organs or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Bob (2007) shows how it has taken a lot of effort by India's Dalits to transform centuries-old caste-based discrimination into an international human rights issue. Most importantly, the formation of a unified Dalit network within India and the subsequent creation of a transnational solidarity network played a major role in these successes. The rhetorical changes played a key role, as Dalits moved from their long-standing focus on caste-based discrimination to a broader framing within the more internationally acceptable terminology of discrimination based on "work and descent." This move greatly benefited the Nepali Dalit movement. It was only in 2001 that the Dalit issue was globalized at the World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) held in Durban. The WCAR brought the issue of caste- and untouchability-based discrimination to wide public audiences internationally and highlighted caste-based issues at the national level. "The WCAR became, in effect, an important means of creating a public space by reflecting the controversy over caste-based discrimination back to the countries where caste was practiced and igniting a huge internal public debate on local terrain" (Smith 2005:17). Today



there is an alliance called International Dalit Solidarity Network based in Copenhagen, Denmark, of which Nepal is a member. Its slogan is “working globally against discrimination based on work and descent.” The purposes of IDSN are:

1. To work for the global recognition of Dalit human rights and contribute to the fight against caste discrimination, and other forms of discrimination based on work and descent around the world, by raising awareness and building solidarity.
2. To advocate Dalit rights - seeking to influence policies of governments and international bodies and institutions; and to monitor enforcement and implementation of anti caste discrimination measures.
3. To facilitate Dalit rights interventions at various levels internationally, including at the Commission of the European Union and European Parliament, United Nations (UN), the International Labor Organization (ILO) and related forums.
4. To create and maintain a resource base and forum that facilitates and strengthens solidarity and representative functions especially at the United Nations, the ILO and other related multilateral bodies, financial institutions like the IMF, WTO, the World Bank (WB), Asian Development Bank (ADB) and bilateral bodies ([www.idsn.org](http://www.idsn.org)).

Dalit Platforms in caste-affected countries, solidarity networks in Europe and USA, and international human rights and development organizations have joined forces in the International Dalit Solidarity Network to work globally for the elimination of caste-based discrimination and similar forms of discrimination based on work and descent.

Participation of Nepali Dalits in international spaces like the World Conference Against Racism (WCAR), other UN conferences, and World Social Forums, allows them to bypass their own governments and appeal to the global community. This is a tactic commonly used by human rights advocacy networks to place their issues on the international agenda.

My findings from interviewing Dalit activists working in NGOs suggest that Dalits feel that forming international alliances and making their presence felt in venues like WCAR, UN

conferences and the World Social Forum (WSF) helps them to move beyond the nation-state with regard to which they have deep frustrations and skepticism. Moreover, they feel that in a globalized world, it is important to form alliances and expand their network with oppressed people all over the world. Supporters of the human rights approach note that governments with bad records can be shamed through international pressure (Coomaraswamy 2002).

Taking the Dalit case beyond the Nepali state shows the desire and need of Dalits to create public spaces in which to highlight their cause and to give voice to the voiceless. Smith (2005) points out that Dalits have been adept at moving across the entire spectrum of local to global politics. Such networks can serve as catalysts of empowerment and agency from below for marginalized groups and social movements.

In contrast to Indian Dalits, the Nepali Dalit Diaspora is only slowly developing. There are a few Dalit societies operating from abroad. It has only been recently that Dalits have had the opportunity to go abroad for study, travel or as immigrants. The Nepali-American Society for Oppressed (NASO) Community, and Empower Dalit Women of Nepal are both based in the U.S.

NASO's objectives are to preserve, promote and encourage positive socio-cultural attributes of traditional occupational caste people of Nepal and to enhance intercultural diffusion between other nationalities and people of Nepali occupational caste roots living in the United States. In order to fulfill these objectives, the NASO Community is involved in mobilizing political workers, government officials, NGO workers and human rights activists, and any other institutions/organizations working towards similar goals.

Empower Dalit Women of Nepal (EDWON) describes itself as a human rights organization for "untouchable" women. EDWON empowers women socially and economically through education and micro-finance programs. The organization's slogan is "Women act

together to end domestic violence, caste and gender discrimination, and poverty; women act together to promote income-generating activities, solidarity, education and community development” (<http://www.edwon.org/>). The UK-based Srijanshil Nepali Society (SNS) is a local community organization founded by Nepali Srijanshil (Dalit) Diaspora with a vision of creating a better society through reformative and innovative work (<http://nepaldalitinfo.net>).

#### **5.4.4 Criticism of the Human Rights Approach**

The human rights approach is not without its detractors. My findings suggest that independent Dalit advocates and activists affiliated to political parties are skeptical of such tactics. Human rights organizations and values are linked to western powers. Many activists feel that authorities from the west have no right to talk about the human rights situation in Nepal. Dissenters (mostly Dalit activists affiliated to political parties and independent advocates) note that adapting to a human rights discourse might not lead to full citizenship status for Dalits, and might not highlight the true problems of minorities. They feel that key strategic issues will be determined by western donor countries. How effective this discourse has been in Nepal is yet to be seen, according to them. Activists also seem displeased when international human rights officials give directives to the Nepali government as to what the government should do while chiding it for its poor human rights record. For example, when a high level human rights representative came to Nepal for a few days and spoke on how Dalits should be included and on the importance of timely Constituent Assembly elections, one activist noted firmly, “Whatever our system says, it is our issue. Nepal public can say something. She has no right to say that. So now the U.S. and other western countries are saying we *should* have elections.”

The Dalit movement, then, is riven by internal divisions. Chandhoke (2005:370) raises very relevant questions of accountability and representativeness in the context of INGOs that operate transnationally. She asks the question who talks for whom and whether the people are truly represented in these contexts: for the practices of representation may well be *constituting* the needs, interests, and the problems of people rather than *representing* them. “Considering that the most influential INGOs are based in the West, it is time to ask how adequately or how competently the problems of the people are being represented and in which direction.”

#### **5.4.5 Views on Donor Dependency**

Many independent Dalit intellectuals and Dalit activists share Chandhoke’s view. Dalit activists note that most NGOs and INGOs are donor-driven and the donors mostly support projects in remote areas. Funding is erratic when programs do not fall within thematic areas of donors, which change frequently. Dalit intellectuals and independent activists are wary of this process of dependency on donors. According to one activist, this dependency does not give Dalit organizations a bargaining position and it compromises Dalit concerns and interests due to donors’ decisions regarding what causes they will fund. During my research, I observed NGOs and government agencies struggling to find funds, and trying to shift their focus depending on the call for proposals in order to accommodate donor interests. As money started coming in for conflict and peace building, organizations were busy preparing proposals and trying to fit their programs into what the donor seemed to want, although they had no experience in the area. This kind of pattern in my view limits true change because it does not allow organizations to provide continuity to the work they do nor does it allow enough time to assess change in the areas of activity. This dependency on donors and emphasis on report writing and grant applications have

also led to negative stereotypical images of NGOs and INGOs as running a “report-writing industry.” I encountered such criticism mostly from independent Dalit activists and those affiliated with political parties.

According to Tvedt (2002), this type of development politics occurs in many developing countries. Tvedt emphasizes that now we can talk of a worldwide system, disbursing billions of dollars every year, engaging tens of thousands of NGOs, and assisting hundreds of millions of people. The boundaries of this money flow have produced a rather closed system (and, in so doing, reproduced its systemness), in the sense that the partners or members have to formally apply to be included in it or to be allowed to cross the boundaries. If you get the money, you are inside. If not, you are on the outside. My research suggests that this, indeed, is also how Nepali NGOs operate, how some are included and others excluded. You are included if you have good English speaking and writing skills. Ironically, since few Dalits have gone to private schools (where they can learn English), many Dalit NGOs have non-Dalit staff. Dalit NGOs may be excluded from access to funds because they lack good English and are not able to write proposals that would satisfy western donors. Critics complain that because there is a heavy emphasis on good written English skills, many non-Dalits are employed in this sector, and Dalits are not able to compete equally. Some feel that it would be advantageous to hire Dalits for Dalit causes because of the critical experience of being a Dalit. My interviewees also expressed frustration that they were limited because of poor English language skills. This trend then has also created a certain class bias, where only well-educated Dalits, along with well-educated non-Dalits, get opportunities in the field of advocacy work. The class bias is also prevalent between Dalit NGOs. Interviewees representing Dalit NGOs in rural areas of Nepal said that the big and powerful Dalit NGOs were “Kathmandu-centric” (located in the capital) and received all the

attention. They complained how the employees lacked humility and started being haughty when they reached the top. They tend look down upon small NGOs. To make his point, an activist evoked the analogy of a bamboo saying, “the taller the bamboo grows the more it can bend.” Similarly, Dalit activists who move up the organizational ladder should be willing to bend.

Dalit advocates from political parties feel that NGOs are spoiling their constituents by seducing them with free things, conducting meetings in posh hotels and providing attractive venues for employment. They feel that once Dalits are well educated and have the potential for fighting for true freedom, they are co-opted by the NGO sector where they are no longer free. Political parties feel that true freedom and true change cannot happen with the help of donors.

Being critical of donor dependency does not mean that political parties are doing a better job in addressing Dalit issues. Activists are also critical of the politics of Nepal and feel that the political culture will have to be changed before Dalits can be liberated. While the answer may lie in true sovereign, substantive rights for Dalits, the political culture of impunity, tokenism, corruption and nepotism will have to end. Genuine change will come about only after Dalits are properly represented in positions of power and decision-making. The pressure employed by Dalit activists for proportional representation will be discussed under the context of the recent People’s Movement in the following section.

#### **5.4.6 People’s Movement (*Jana Andolan II*): Bringing all Dalit Activists Together**

In April 2006, the major political parties, in cooperation with the Maoists, organized massive countrywide demonstrations for the restoration of democracy, forcing King Gyanendra to relinquish power. The nineteen-day protest, considered peaceful and organized, caught the world’s attention. On April 24, 2006, the king reinstated the Parliament. Former Prime Minister

Girija Prasad Koirala of the Nepali Congress Party was selected by the Seven-Party Alliance (SPA) of political parties to lead the government. The Maoists declared a unilateral cease-fire on April 26, and the new Koirala government announced its own unilateral cease-fire and plans for peace talks with the Maoist insurgents. The SPA and the Maoists have since signed a number of agreements, including, in November 2006, a comprehensive peace agreement that ended the 12-year conflict. Both sides also agreed to an arms management process and elections for a Constituent Assembly. On January 15, 2007, a 329-member interim Parliament, including 83 Maoist representatives and other party representatives, was constituted. The first sitting of the Parliament unanimously endorsed an interim constitution, which replaced the constitution of 1990. On April 1, 2007, the ruling eight-party government formed an interim Council of Ministers through political consensus, including five Maoist ministers. The main agenda of the SPA and the Maoists was to hold a Constituent Assembly (CA) election. The Constituent Assembly is the body of representatives authorized by the Interim Constitution to draft a new Constitution for Nepal that would undo the concentration of political, social and economic power in a few hands and make the society inclusive and democratic in the widest sense (Murthy 2007). This Constituent Assembly is to be directly elected by the people of Nepal in order to make it representative of Nepali society and ensure that all groups in Nepal can participate in this historical process (<http://www.election.gov.np/EN/electionresult/>). The Interim Constitution legislates for the creation of a 601 member Constituent Assembly, with 575 of these members being directly elected (335 through Proportional Representation and 240 through First-Past-the-Post) and 26 being appointed by the Cabinet after the election.

The interim constitution guaranteed the basic rights of Nepali citizens to formulate a constitution for themselves and to participate in the Constituent Assembly in an environment free

from fear. The interim constitution transferred all powers of the King as head of state to the prime minister and stripped the King of any ceremonial constitutional role. Under the interim constitution, the fate of the monarchy will be decided by the first meeting of the Constituent Assembly. There has been pervasive pressure from all political parties and civil society to make Nepal a federal democratic republic. The CA elections were successfully conducted on April 10, 2008, after being postponed twice. Ongoing violence in the country and lack of a compromise between parties and the government had led to skepticism of the possibility of successful elections (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5283.htm#gov>).

The democracy movement unleashed three important developments in Nepal: first, the abolition of the monarchy and the declaration that Nepal was a secular country, completely changing its status as the only Hindu kingdom in the world; second, the successful process of bringing the Maoists into the political mainstream; and third and the most unexpected, the assertion of their rights by the marginalized sections in a call for an inclusive society (Murthy 2007).

Discontented with the Government, many marginalized groups are demanding their wider participation in governance, bringing the Government under intense pressure. Their major demands include a federal restructuring of the state based on ethnic lines, the right to self-determination and a proportional representation-based electoral system. For example, all the major groups representing the indigenous communities have united for a common struggle based on these demands. Groups like the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) joined hands to pressurize the Government, resorting to nationwide strikes and agitations. All groups discontinued their strikes only when government agreed to a dialogue with them. There has been



the emergence of armed groups in the volatile Terai<sup>34</sup> region with sporadic violence and armed activity continuing throughout the year. On December 7, 2007, four parties in the Terai region, Madhesi Janadhikar Forum (MJF) led by Bhagyanath Gupta, Dalit Janajati Party, Madhesi Loktantrik Morcha (Madheshi Democratic Party) and Loktantrik Madheshi Morcha (Democratic Madheshi Party), came together to float the Broader Madheshi National Front (BMNF). In a joint statement they said that they all believe in the liberation of the Madheshi people through a federal democratic republic, proportional representation and autonomous Madhesh region equipped with the right to self determination

(<http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/nepal/index.html>).

#### **5.4.6.1 Involvement of Dalit Civil Society in the People's Movement**

Dalits were actively involved in the People's Movement of April 2006. Activists reiterated several times that the Dalit community had contributed significantly to the people's movement. They noted that many Dalits had sacrificed their lives (in historical and recent times) in protesting against autocratic and oppressive regimes. Thousands of them from all over the country took part in the people's movement protesting the authoritarian rule of the King. They participated in the larger movement and also organized separate demonstrations and staged agitations separately. Of the 19 people killed during the protests, three were Dalits. Setu Bishwakarma, Deepak Bishwakarma and Chandra Bayalkoti were killed in the demonstrations

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<sup>34</sup> Half of Nepal's population lives in the Tarai (fertile plain region) where the majority of people are Madhesis or people of recent Indian origin. Madhesis are under-represented in all areas of life. The Tarai region contributes over two-third of the nation's GDP. It has 60 per cent of agricultural land. Though it is the backbone of the national economy, commensurate investments are not made in the Tarai to serve the local population. Madhesis have lower education and health indicators than the hill communities. The agitations in the Tarai in January and February following the adoption of the interim Constitution saw unprecedented violence. Tarai Dalits are also a part of this movement.

and declared martyrs of the peoples' movement. Many Dalits were seriously injured during the agitation. Apart from this, more than a hundred Dalits were arrested in different parts of the country. Likewise, Dalit organizations supported the people injured by being volunteers and contributing to the treatment fund initiated during the movement. The Dalit NGO Federation appealed to the leaders of the seven-party alliance and the revived parliament to bring lasting peace, good governance and sustainable development to the country. They urged the leaders of SPA and the parliament to include the Dalit community in the process of re-construction of the state and address key Dalit-related issues immediately (Dalit NGO Federation 2008).

Dalit activists and leaders played an important role in the articulation of Dalit identity at a historic political moment for the disenfranchised. They were articulating Dalit demands in public discourses. The timing of my research enabled me to observe Dalit organizations and Dalit activists move towards a common political agenda of educating the public about the Constituent Assembly elections and fighting for proportional representation. I observed platforms where political and non-political organizations were framing and discussing the common agenda of Dalits in very opportune conditions. Dalits' profiles are being enhanced in the public domain as Nepal is involved in a process of peace and nation building. This provided an excellent opportunity to observe the actors in the Dalit social movement. Because there was money for the peace building process through the UN, bilateral and multilateral donors, members of Nepali civil society, including Dalit NGOs and INGOs, were focusing their efforts on educating their constituents about the Constituent Assembly (CA) elections and participatory democracy. There were many rallies, demonstrations and workshops, on issues of social inclusion, affirmative action and inclusion of minorities in the Constituent Assembly elections. Political leaders, legal experts and political experts were also invited to participate in the discussions. I observed

discussions and debates on what should be included in the interim constitution. Dalit civil society actors played an important role in pressurizing the government to have an inclusive process in forging the interim constitution and in preparing for the CA elections. For example, it was through their pressure that they later included a Dalit member, Mr. Min Bishwakarma, in the interim constitution framing committee. Dalit advocates from the Nepali diaspora in the United States also criticized Nepal's draft interim constitution and sent an open letter to the Committee demanding that Dalits be guaranteed 20 percent of the positions in the government and in all state bodies, proportionate to the Dalit population in Nepal.

Many large-scale events, gatherings and conferences were organized. For example, a National Citizens' Assembly of Dalits was organized in Kathmandu, where more than 2,000 Dalit activists and supporters voted to demand one-fifth of the Assembly seats for Dalits, and to mount a concerted campaign to pressure the government to agree. Similarly, they rejected the proposed 6 percent reservation in the CA elections and called for a new constitutional amendment to ensure that Dalits receive 20 percent of the seats. The conference also called for the monarchy to be abolished. One big criticism by the conference participants was that the restoration of democracy had not improved the status of Dalits, and that the time had come to exert some political pressure. Despite such calls, an interesting observation was that the Dalit groups did not declare frequent nation-wide strikes like indigenous groups and Tarai groups (other marginalized groups discussed briefly above). Activists noted that they believed in peaceful protests and they supported the plans for CA elections. They felt that the purpose of the democracy movement would be defeated if they resorted to violence, although there were a few dissenters who argued that only violence would make the government listen to them. Dalit groups had not been successful in forming a negotiating team to have a dialogue with the

government in the early stages of the movement. This was seen by some as an indication of weakness in the Dalit movement. In fact, a joke went around suggesting that everyone was waiting for Dalits to shut Nepal down with a nation-wide strike and was wondering when it was coming. However, the majority of my informants emphasized that this was precisely how the Dalit movement was different from the indigenous and the Tarai movements. It is also important to note another way in which the Dalit movement differs from the indigenous and Tarai movements. While the former movements are bent on a federal republic and right to self-determination, the Dalit agenda is wider. Since Dalits are scattered all over the country, their framing of demands is not within federalism, although they support a federal republic. Their concern is where Dalits would be placed within a federal republic system. What sorts of rights would Dalits have? How would Dalits be represented in such a system? Another difference is that while the indigenous movement is a separatist one, Dalits want to be integrated within the larger society, but with equal rights and opportunities, and with arrangements in place for the government's redress of historical discrimination through affirmative action. Dalit activists from all sectors emphasized this aspect very clearly. They are aware of the heterogeneity and diversity of Dalits living all over Nepal, and they see integration, therefore, as necessary. Here, analysis of the difference between national sovereignty and the right to self-determination is pertinent. Although the right to self-determination of nations is a presumptive part of national sovereignty, it is also something to which prospective or de facto "nations" can appeal (Dusche 2000). This is the crux of the difference between the Dalits and the ethnic minorities. Dalits want to be included or integrated on equal terms into the national community based on citizenship and its attendant rights, as well as into the global community of universal humanity based on the dignity and

rights of personhood. They are not "natural" nations, either in terms of ethnicity or in terms of region or territory.

In sum, the Dalits were calling for the fulfillment of their demands, which include 20 percent reservation for their representatives in the Constituent Assembly as well as scholarships and free education for Dalit students. A conference organized by the association of Dalit women, entitled Dalit Women for Ensuring Proportional Participation of Dalit Women in Constituent Assembly and New State Structure, issued a 15-point charter of “Nepali Dalit Women in Building New Nepal-2007” and, among other things, called for reserving 13 per cent of the seats for Dalit women in the Constituent Assembly election, providing 20 per cent reservation to Dalit women in the overall women’s reservation at every level of the state and 50 per cent of the reservations made for the Dalit community, and ensuring proportional representation in the political parties from the decision-making level down to the grassroots level. The President of the Association, Durga Sob, warned that the Dalit women would launch a strong movement if the state did not take their demands seriously.

My interviews with Dalit activists indicated that they felt that the Maoist Party had been the most active and pro-Dalit in their policies and practices. For example, a significant achievement was having the largest number of Members of Parliament (MPs) from Dalit communities ever in the democratic history of Nepal. The CPN (Maoists), while entering the interim Legislature-Parliament as a part of the peace process based on its agreement with the seven parliamentary parties, fielded 12 MPs from Dalit communities, making up 15 percent of their members in the interim Legislature-Parliament. Among the pre-existing parliamentary parties, CPN (UML), Nepali Congress, and United Left Front nominated, respectively, two, one, and one (of MPs) from the Dalit community. Two ministers in the Government representing the

Dalit community were also a record for Dalit representation in the history of governance in Nepal (Nepal 2007).

However, Dalits were very disappointed, frustrated and skeptical with political parties in that they did not have adequate representation of candidates for the CA elections. They insist that the political parties did not listen to them despite all the pressure placed upon them. In fact, only the Maoist party has heeded their demands with a fair representation of Dalit candidates. This kind of frustration has also led the larger civil society to look for international spaces where their voices might be better heard.

The Constituent Assembly Election<sup>35</sup> was held on April 10, 2008, and was considered largely peaceful and successful by international observers. The CPN-Maoist party won a stunning victory of 120 out of 240 Constituent Assembly (CA) seats in the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP). Seven Dalit candidates, all from CPN-Maoist party were elected under the FPTP electoral process in the CA election. The eligible political parties submitted their lists to the Election Commission for Constituent Assembly members under Proportional Representation (PR) system. A total of 43 Dalits were nominated for CA under the PR system, making a total of 50 Dalit CA members including seven members elected directly under First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) system earlier. This total is a little less than 10% of the total members, which is only half

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<sup>35</sup> Two kinds of electoral systems were adopted for the Constituent Assembly election: Each voter cast two votes:

i) First Past the Post System( FPTP) in which the one leading in the vote count is elected One Member, One constituency principle is followed in the First Past the Post System (FPTP). There could be a number of candidates but a voter is allowed to cast vote in favor of only one candidate.

ii) Proportional Representation electoral process in which voting takes place for political parties, considering the entire nation a single election constituency. The winning candidate is determined on the basis of the maximum number of votes received by the parties. For this system, the political parties must submit a closed list of their election candidates to the Election Commission. The listed candidates are declared winners, according to the number of votes earned by political parties in the election. This system is an attempt for inclusion where each party is required to represent marginalized groups (<http://www.election.gov.np/EN/electoralsystem.php>)

of the 20% seats that Dalits have been demanding to represent them in the CA based on the estimated proportion of 20% for their population (<http://nepaldalitinfor.net/2008/05/03/439/>). The results were viewed very hopefully by Dalits.

In summary, this chapter has shown that Dalit activists and leaders relate to, negotiate and deploy their identities in multiple ways -- in their private lives (as a lived everyday experience) and in their public lives, as activists, where they politicize Dalit identity. The “pragmatic accommodationists” are open in adapting to different identities depending on the situation. The “militant on-accommodationists” are unequivocal about their Dalit identity in all circumstances. Also, this chapter demonstrates that, for sustained motivation and activism to be possible and successful, many favorable conditions are necessary. Factors such as experiences of discrimination, suitable material, political and economic conditions and personal satisfaction with their work enabled Dalit activists to be involved in the Dalit movement. This chapter also reveals the dynamics of the Dalit Social Movement in Nepal at a historic political moment, a moment that brought together Dalit activists associated with non-governmental organizations and those associated with political parties, to fight locally for full citizenship rights. The contributions of the movement are noteworthy. With the recent changes in power in the political structure and victory for Dalits as shown by the elected and selected Dalit candidates, Dalit activists seem cautiously optimistic. Those advocating for Dalit rights and freedoms are eagerly waiting to see whether the new interim government will fulfill its promises of the following: inclusion and fair representation of marginalized groups, tackling discrimination head-on and curtailing corruption in the process of building a new Nepal and fundamentally restructuring a caste-based feudalistic society. Or will they simply use Dalits as *tokens*? Where will Dalits be placed within a federal republic? Will the newly elected Dalit leaders fight for Dalit rights or will

they have to subordinate their fight for Dalit freedoms to party ideology and politics? Will this historic change provide favorable conditions to bring together Dalit activists associated with NGOs and those associated with political parties? In an atmosphere filled with new-found hope, expectations and yearning for “true social change,” the answers to these questions remain to be seen in the years to come.



## **6.0 AT THE INTERSECTION OF EVERDAY AND CIVIL-SOCIETY SPACES: EMERGING DALIT IDENTITIES**

This study examined the complex and changing dynamics of Dalit identities in Kathmandu, Nepal, within a context of growing resistance against caste discrimination and exclusion. As this study has shown, the institution of caste is diverse and complex. The caste problem is a vast one, with several ramifications, both theoretically and practically (Ambedkar 1979). Dalits themselves are a macro caste group but they encompass castes and sub castes amongst themselves. In a way, the intra-caste hierarchy amongst Dalits is a reproduction of the larger structure of the institutionalized caste system in Nepal. This has added up to caste discrimination occurring between Dalits and non-Dalits and among Dalits themselves. This apparent paradox has given rise to the common notion that, to the extent that low castes and ex-untouchables support the ideology and practice of caste hierarchy among themselves, they accept their lowly position on the social ladder. Intra-Dalit hierarchy is indeed recognized as one of the problems inhibiting the mobilization of the Dalit masses. This accusation is often rebutted by many Dalits through the counter argument that the hierarchy was put in place by lawmakers and rulers as a ploy of “divide and rule” so that upper castes could maintain their power and their superordinate position over all. To this day, Dalits have had to live with the consequences of this system.

## 6.1 SUMMARY AND SOCIOLOGICAL INSIGHTS

In revisiting the questions that guided this study, the following sociological insights have emerged. This study showed that, overall, all three communities (of sweepers, metalworkers and musicians) are uncomfortable in revealing their Dalit identity. They are hesitant to call themselves Dalits because of the stigma attached to castes that were historically considered untouchable. So in contrast to the strong political consciousness seen among political activists who have started identifying openly as Dalits, none of these communities was fully embracing of a Dalit identity. Activists insist on the importance of a collective and politicized Dalit (caste) identity, as they are more concerned with challenging structural inequalities and attaining total freedom for Dalits as a whole than with gaining individual relief or advancement. However, even among this group, there are contradictions between behavior in private life and publicly declared principles of collective Dalit political identity.

Overall, Dalits conceal their identity (except for middle class *Pariyars*, who deny being Dalits in the first place, and radical activists who are proud of their identity in the fight for Dalit liberation), leave their caste identity ambiguous or use newer surnames as a coping strategy for better treatment from others. In addition, urban location has certain strategic implications: living in the city makes anonymity possible. It is only by concealing their origins that Dalits are able to move, work and live freely.

Everyday life-worlds present both constraints and possibilities in the construction and articulation of identities of the oppressed, constituting them as both victims and agents. The lower caste/class communities of metal workers (*Biswakarmas*) and sweepers (*Deulas*) face many hurdles. From a structural perspective, they are victimized because of discrimination from upper castes, poverty, lack of education, unemployment, and lack of socio-economic and

political intervention programs. Basically, their low caste status interacts with their low economic status to exacerbate their victimization.

The middle class sample of upwardly mobile *Pariyars* (tailor/musician caste) presents a unique example of social mobility and the dynamic intersection of caste and class. Their middle class status has made their low caste identity almost irrelevant, transmuting it into an “ethnic” asset. They have been able to find pride in and capitalize on their cultural identity, as musicians, artists and performers. Making music has become an ethnic art, parlayed into commercial success, rather than a predetermined occupational destiny. They have been able to secure a niche in the music and entertainment industry of Nepal and attain high status through that venue. At the same time, they reject their low caste tailor identity. They also had advantage of wealth accumulation over many generations, which allowed them to see Dalit identity as a temporary condition that they have transcended.

The identities of the oppressed as victims has not been confined to respondents whose lives rarely go beyond the circuits of everyday space, however. Many activists who do not own homes in the capital are victims of caste discrimination and low economic class. They have great difficulty in finding a place to rent if they are open about their caste identity. While being politically conscious actors and even being upwardly mobile (in terms of a political class and the status it accords them in the civil society space) they still experience discrimination. They live with the contradiction and disconnect between their private lives and public lives on a daily basis. Publicly, they are political agents in their organizational space. Through advocacy and through their participation in the organized social movement, they have been successful in legitimizing the demand for equal rights and in bringing about many legislative changes.

This research has also shown that the communities I studied were largely disconnected from the historic people's movement of April 2006 (*Jana Andolan II*) and the Dalit activism that was occurring in Kathmandu. (This is not to imply that other ordinary Dalits from Kathmandu were not involved in the movement. The nineteen day mass protests included people from many districts in Nepal, and, from all walks of life. There were also nationwide protests. Three martyrs of the movement were from Dalit communities).

Respondents selected for this research were unable to identify national-level Dalit leaders and Dalit activists. None of the Dalit organizations or political parties had taken intervention programs into the metal worker and sweeper communities. Respondents recalled vaguely that government officials and, occasionally, representatives of organizations (which they could not name) had come now and then to collect information. They were surprised to find out that many Dalit organizations existed in the city. I shared information with them when they asked me (e.g., names of organizations and venues and processes for registering a complaint). Some young respondents seemed very excited and told me that they would visit some of the organizations. Some individuals seemed eager to seek assistance. For instance, one of the poorest families (of six) in the metal worker neighborhood and their friends asked me if I had links with organizations whose assistance they might seek. They would notify them of their living conditions, so that leaking roofs and dilapidated, unlivable houses might be repaired or a new room built with their assistance.

The disconnect between everyday space and civil-society space suggested a lack of interaction and mutual influence between communal identities and civil-society-mediated political identities. What explains this acute disconnect in an urban setting? Surely, the assumption is that Dalits living in and around the city are at least better off than their rural

counterparts (read *as villagers and undeveloped and therefore needing development intervention*) and so the “urbans” should be empowered political subjects enjoying some benefits of living in a city. By virtue of their physical location, the Dalit communities I observed are not *considered* isolated. They are urban communities, but my findings show that they have been bypassed by both kinds of leadership that are operating in the civil-society or political arena. In other words, the local seems to have been bypassed by both the national and the global. From this perspective then, the Dalit communities in this research could be called *hidden* or *bypassed* locals. This also explains the skepticism community respondents had towards leaders in general, as documented in the chapter on community ethnography.

The civil society and organizational space in which the social movement actors operate and the discourses they use are not unproblematic. The everyday experiences of community respondents in this study, who seemed far removed from the organizational spaces and political discourses, actually called into question both the discourse on national citizenship and that on human rights as documented in the chapter on Dalit activists. For instance, for *Biswakarmas*, who are denied entry into tea shops, and for *Deula* students, who are discriminated against in school by being denied participation in cooking classes, the contention between a human-rights approach and a citizenship rights approach seemed a non-starter. The criticisms that the political party based advocates and NGO based advocates have about each other are the very criticisms that the communities have about the “supposed leadership” representing them. For these subjects then, the differences between political parties and non-governmental organizations have little significance or relevance.

During presentations of the findings of this research in appropriate venues in Kathmandu, and during my interviews with activists, many Dalit leaders and activists were themselves

surprised to learn that such conditions existed in the Kathmandu valley. My presentations were received very positively and became an eye opener for Dalit and non-Dalit activists as well as other members of the public who were unaware that Dalit communities in Kathmandu were so severely neglected. Some activists representing Dalit organizations specified that donors provide support to areas outside of Kathmandu. Programs operating in Kathmandu were targeted toward the poor in general and Dalits fall under that overall category anyway. Many people could not believe that, for example, people in the metal worker community were denied entry into tea shops and were being forced to wash their cups right in the city.

Activists were sympathetic to the situation in Kathmandu and pledged to look into these problems in the future. Many were of the view that organized resistance and fundamental changes had occurred and were occurring at a fast pace in regions outside Kathmandu. Practices such as denial of entry into public places were rare occurrences in the areas where various programs of Dalit organizations were in operation. Activists were eager to take me to visit their areas where their programs were operating, all outside Kathmandu. Although I was interested, I could not accompany them as the political environment was not stable and I wanted to focus on collecting data for my own study during rare periods of calm.

One of the respondents in the metal worker community who had come to visit her relatives from the western region of Nepal said that she found it odd that they were not allowed entry into tea shops since those issues had already been resolved in her village. She said she could not believe that Kathmandu was so “backward.” For her, it was like living in another era. She resented having to sit outside and to wash her cup despite being a paying customer. However, she kept quiet as she was a visitor and did not want to disrupt the status quo of the community or jeopardize her relatives’ lives. She also recounted how she and her friends had

broken one of the temple taboos on a visit to another area outside Kathmandu. They entered the temple and paid homage to the statue and gave the priest their offerings. By doing this they tested the superstition that Dalits would die by vomiting blood if they entered the temple. She pointed out that nothing disastrous had befallen any of them. She told me that that act of challenging temple boundaries had been very empowering. She and her friends also felt deceived, reflecting on how they had bought into the religious superstition.

Despite their metropolitan location, Dalit communities are neglected and excluded from the discourse that is occurring on their behalf. Civil-society organizations are relatively impervious to the messy realities of communities that fall outside the political profile of oppressed groups that they normally work with. As pointed out before, the leaders and organizations do not go to the communities in Kathmandu; the latter are expected to go to them. The responsibility for organizing and mobilizing and approaching organizations and state agencies is placed on Dalit communities who have little knowledge, means, and time. However, the distance between everyday space and civil-society political space does not mean that people living in poor communities do not think politically.

The chapter on community ethnography demonstrated the everyday world as a problematic (Smith 1987). The communities' daily lives are rich, even though seemingly ordinary; they are full of meaning and struggle. Here, as Massey (2007) and Harcourt and Escobar (2005) argue, their local spaces were significant ones where they had their own stories to tell. Places here were experienced locally, no matter how globally connected Kathmandu and the Dalit movement were to other regions of the world.

Dalits demonstrate a clear understanding of their situation and they are important agents on their own behalf as evident in their everyday acts of resistance. Their everyday space is filled

with informal but sustained political discourses and worldviews, and although those are voiced only among themselves, the potential for mobilization is clearly there. These are not muted subjects. The youth show the most eagerness for social change. Respondents stood up to injustices meted out during the contentious routine encounters of their everyday lives. Everyday forms of protest (Scott 1985), like refusing to wait in line for water, retorting back to higher castes and boycotting functions are everyday political acts (disproportionately involving and executed by women), that cannot be overlooked in areas where organizations have not introduced or established aggressive intervention and social mobilization programs. These are political acts in their own right.

The dialectics (mutually interacting forms and processes) of social response to everyday situations in this research was considered within a range encompassing accommodation, autonomy, opposition and resistance, using Green's matrix (1993, 2006). The instances of accommodation and adaptation, regarding various strategies of revelation and concealment of Dalit identity, have been discussed at length. The cases of inter-caste marriages and conversion to Christianity are examples of outright defiance and subversion of the social order, although, as individual acts, they fall short of organized or collective forms of resistance. While examples of autonomy, given high levels of incorporation into the hegemonic Hindu order, might be seen as few and far between, the different systems of morality by which community respondents judged such things as women drinking, marriage by elopement, consumption of BET or televised Afro-global culture deserve closer examination. Kapadia's (1995) study on low caste *Pallars* of India showed how they were able to create a normative world where they sustained positive cultural representations of themselves, beliefs that did not refer back to the dominant system and where they acquired symbolic power. A more



straightforward and tangible example of cultural and economic autonomy might be the rotating savings and credit associations—or the institution of *dhukuti*—that have been traditionally sustained in the sweeper community among men, women, and youth. These associations have been an important means to self-upliftment in and of the community.

Examples of direct action against caste discrimination, although not evident in this study, are commonly reported in other parts of Nepal; to name a few examples – cases of temple entries, tea-shop entries and Dalit men and women who presided as priests in temples from which they were formally excluded. Other examples are provided in the history of organized Dalit activism in Nepal (see Appendix A). Similarly, public interest litigation (considered to be an effective tool of human rights protection and provision of socio-economic and political justice to a large number of people who are poor, lacking in knowledge of law, and historically oppressed in the society) has been filed under the right to equality in some Supreme Court cases involving Dalit rights. Some examples are public litigation cases filed for reservation for Dalits in medical studies in universities, discrimination in public water sources, denial of citizenship certificate with surname of Dalits (instead of their occupational caste name), and denial of entry to Dalits in Sanskrit University hostel. The public interest litigation filed for discrimination against *Chamars* (a Dalit caste of the Terai region) is a notable case. *Chamars* were discriminated against in connection with access to food, medicine, public water sources and other public facilities on grounds that they had failed to dispose of carcasses of dead cattle in villages, which was seen as their main job (UNDP 2008).

During cases when public interest litigation is filed, the Supreme Court notifies and directs local authorities to enforce rights of Dalits and to address the situation in preventing discrimination. However, the Dalit activists interviewed for this study did not seem optimistic or

hopeful regarding the role of the implementing authorities. Since there is a lack of Dalit representation in implementing agencies, those charged with implementation are not far removed from discriminatory and prejudicial mind-sets. Police officials (mostly non-Dalits) and court officials discourage victims from filing complaints. Victims have to deal with a lot of bureaucratic hassles if they want to file a case.

The brightest possibilities for self-assertion and expression of agency in the research communities seemed to lie with the younger generation. Findings reveal a generation gap and a difference in perspectives and attitudes towards caste-based practices by age. There are examples and signs of positive changes. Caste discrimination has surely declined from the historical era when Dalits were entirely excluded and denied basic rights. The degree of untouchability has also waned. Many parents proudly claimed that their children do not face discrimination from their friends from other castes and that their children go to their friends' houses. A father in the metal worker community told me with a smile that his daughter goes up to her friend's room while he waits outside when he goes to take work orders from the upper-caste family with whom he still has contractual ties. All the adult respondents in this study who go to school and college have friends in all castes, although a few have lost friends when they revealed their caste. The young generations have less internalized negative self-image than their parents and grandparents. Parents note that, unlike them, their children have the opportunity to go to school and mix with others, to see a different world, and to learn how to stand up for themselves. However, the youth say that they still know their place in the caste hierarchy because their elders and upper castes in the community have not changed at the same pace.

This study also denotes intersectionality and the heterogeneity of Dalit subjects at multiple levels. From a methodological standpoint, this study is an example of what McCall

(2005) calls intracategorical complexity, as discussed in the theoretical chapter. The findings have revealed the complexities of the lived experiences of Dalits at neglected points of intersection, i.e., across caste, class, gender, region and space. Class differences are evident among the three communities of *Pariyars*, *Biswakarmas* and *Deulas*. Differences in the way respondents gave meaning to and related to their identities are evident in and across all three groups and between community respondents on the one hand and activists on the other. Similarly, socio-spatial differences are highlighted by the distance between civil-society space and everyday space. The geographies of difference (Massey 2007) or uneven geographies can be applied within Kathmandu itself, where Dalit organizations are headquartered and yet have not been able to reach the Dalit communities also located within the city.

From a gender perspective, the research examined the differences in women's status and meanings of gender across occupational (sweeper, metalworker, and tailor/musician) and ethnic (*Newar* and other) communities. In the metal worker community and tailor/musician community, where ownership and occupation are male-dominated, women are more dependent, enjoy less autonomy and suffer more inequality.

The case of sweeper women (*Deulas*) presents a unique case. Their caste occupation being gender neutral, women have been important contributors to the household; they make important decisions at home and enjoy more autonomy. Many serve as household heads. Gender ideologies also seemed relatively liberal in this compared to the other two Dalit communities. However, overall women in all the three communities were disproportionately involved in reproductive labor (i.e., household work and child care). In the organizational arena, Dalit feminists complained about male domination in the Dalit organizations and the fact that even female leaders were subject to mobility restrictions from their family.

## 6.2 NEW POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR DALIT IDENTITY

There have been many political developments since the *Jana Anadolan II* (People's movement of April 2006). The monarchy was abolished; a ceasefire was declared by the Maoists after 10 years of declared people's war; a comprehensive peace treaty was signed by the Maoists and the seven-party alliance (SPA). The Maoists gained entry into mainstream politics. The interim constitution came into effect on January 15 2007; the interim cabinet was formed on April 2007; and the Constituent Assembly elections were conducted successfully on April 10, 2008. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) bagged the majority of seats. They led the first coalition-led government after the Constituent Assembly elections. On December 15, 2008, the Constituent Assembly formed 14 committees to write a new constitution. The interim government changed from Maoist leadership to United Marxist Leninist leadership headed by Madhan Kumar Nepal, who is the current prime Minister. The first Republic Day was observed on May 29, 2009. On September 9, 2009, the Constituent Assembly moved the constitution writing timeline for the sixth time, having failed to complete writing a constitution within the timeline set earlier.

The discussion and debates on the new Nepali constitution are still going on. The interim parliament has not been able to reach a consensus. The biggest debate is on how to change the political regional contours of the map of Nepal, should Nepal choose to become a federal republic. Given the diversity of Nepali populations in terms of ethnicity, language, region and caste, the writers of the new constitution are faced with many challenges. Will they be able to remap/restructure old Nepal to form a new Nepal with fair representation and inclusion of all its diverse groups? Protests, strikes, rallies and boycotts by minority groups (when their voices are not being represented in the parliament proceedings) are commonplace today. The case of

Dalit representation is still tenuous as their concern is how the new constitution will fairly represent Dalit rights within a federal republic. Many are fearful that they might be marginalized again since Dalits are scattered all over the country. Dalits are diverse in language, culture, religion and region, but their fight is not a territorial one.

Dalit leaders and activists are pushing hard to present their demands in parliament proceedings. The Dalit movement has no doubt gained momentum since the fieldwork for this study was concluded in July 2007. This is evident through the increasing number of workshops and discussions on the issue of Dalit rights and representation in the new constitution. The discussion is still around affirmative action, positive discrimination, proportional representation and special rights (some feel the debate is only about semantics while Dalit rights are in urgent need of representation). They still feel marginalized in parliamentary proceedings and feel that political parties are not foregrounding Dalit voices enough.

In this time of crucial political transition then, it is hard to predict what kind of Dalit identities will emerge in the future and how low caste groups will give meaning and relate to their identities. This will depend largely on how the new constitution will represent Dalits and how Dalit organizations will reach out to the Dalit masses. Unlike India, Nepal lacks Dalit leaders in powerful positions to represent their voices in the Nepali parliament (although there is better representation of Dalits than before). They lack a leader as powerful as Dr. B. R. Ambedkar who was one of the writers of the Indian constitution. His role was invaluable for securing the provision of special rights for the marginalized groups of India.

In the case of Nepal, this research raises further questions. Will Dalits of Nepal get a good deal in the new constitution? Will the ongoing Dalit movement percolate to and reach Dalit masses so that everyday space becomes as well an organized political space? Will poor Dalits in

marginalized communities be able to reap the benefits of special provisions? Will the new political developments lift them out of “the darkness beneath the lights of Kathmandu”? Will the new constitution be able to hold non-Dalits accountable (for caste-based crimes), given that laws are already in place but implementation has been extremely weak?

The case of *Newar* Dalits like the *Deulas* (sweeper caste) in this study remains a contentious and difficult one. As the *Newar* indigenous leaders are pushing for their language and cultural rights, the movement is gaining momentum and becoming powerful. What will happen if *Deulas* are not included in the category of Dalits? How will caste discrimination be addressed then? Will they still be able to use Dalit scholarships for their children? If Dalits get special provisions for employment, for example, how will the *Newar* indigenous movement justify the caste identity of low caste *Newars* like the *Deulas*? Can lower caste *Newars* negotiate their own autonomous space within the indigenous movement? Will sweepers have political representatives who will stand up for them or will they be left in the lurch to fend for themselves?

The latest political developments have far-reaching implications. Scholars feel that if the new constitution has special provisions for Dalits, the identification as Dalit might increase as in the case of India’s quota system. In fact, some upper castes could also exploit this provision. However, the lack of a clear-cut definition of Dalits in Nepal could also make it difficult to accord them a special legal status (UNDP 2008), unlike *Janjatis* (indigenous nationalities) who have been successful in securing unambiguous definitions. It remains to be seen what kind of identities will emerge for Dalits of Nepal – Dalit as a temporary condition, Dalit as dignified, Dalits as political actors, Dalits as low castes, Dalits as still untouchables, or a combination of all these meanings?

In summary, this study has shown that that caste identity is still a crucial social marker for Dalits. Despite the caste neutralizing forces, living in Kathmandu has not necessarily improved the social and economic conditions of the majority of Dalits in this study. They still experience all existing practices of caste-based discrimination identified by an Action Aid study (2003) – denial of entry, denial of services, denial of access to common resources, denial of kinship and/or social relationships, social boycotts of inter-caste marriage and attitudinal untouchability. Modernization has not provided Dalits better employment opportunities. Their traditional occupations are threatened and challenged as all caste groups compete for jobs that used to be done by Dalits. Dalits in poor communities are not in a position to compete in the open labor market because of their lack of education and skills that such a market demands. Living in Kathmandu has not subverted communal bases of caste. For the majority of Dalit communities, it has exacerbated caste status through modern forms of oppression and inequality. This shows the urgent need to take intervention programs into Dalit communities in the Kathmandu valley.

Although the Dalit movement has achieved a great deal in terms of legal amendments, anti-discrimination campaigns, seminars, workshops, discussions, allocation of budget, mustering votes for political parties and its internationalization, it is still limited within the context of organizations and political parties. It has yet to reach out and include the poor urban Dalit communities. The Dalit population in Kathmandu cannot be considered insignificant.

It must be noted, however, that the presence of organizations and interventions is necessary but not sufficient in bringing about change. Non-Dalits must play a proactive role in the Dalit movement. The most important change must come in the values and behavior of the average Nepali citizen. Anti-caste discrimination programs have to be targeted towards non-

Dalits as well. Simply empowering Dalits without taking into consideration other communities in a locality will not solve the problem (Bennet 2006; World Bank & DFID 2006).

Finally, this research provides empirical data that can bolster the affirmative action policy efforts of Dalit advocates who call for inclusive democratic processes and structures to improve the access of Dalits and women to state resources and to whittle down the disparity between them and the dominant groups in access to the power structure (Gurung 2006; Shah 2006; Tamrakar 2006). The dissertation also provides a particularly rich terrain for exploring questions and historic transformations that emerge at both the intersections of the local and the global and of caste, class and gender in relation to social identities and social movements in poor, non-Western countries.



## APPENDIX A

### HISTORY OF ORGANIZED DALIT ACTIVISM IN NEPAL

The Dalit movement in Nepal is tied to different political periods and national movements in Nepal. Although there were individual acts opposing caste discrimination in different political periods, the organized movement emerged in the late 1940s. Many Nepali Dalits were inspired by the Indian independence movement led by Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian Dalit liberation movement led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.<sup>36</sup> Dalit activists such as Sarbajit Biswakarma and Saharshanath Kapali both returned to Nepal from India with such inspiration. The mid to late-1940s were a tumultuous time for politics on the Indian sub-continent, as the Indian movements came into full swing and the anti-Rana movement was also starting in Nepal.<sup>37</sup>

During the Rana regime, which lasted for 104 years in Nepal, Dalits were compelled to live an inferior life as they were denied the opportunity of education. Education was banned for the general public including the upper castes but men from the Brahmin community had access

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<sup>36</sup> For writings on the issue of “caste” in relation to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi, see Ambedkar 1979 & 1987; Gandhi 1933; Jaffrelot 2005; and Zelliott 1998.

<sup>37</sup> The Rana Period (1846-1950 AD) began after Jung Bahadur Rana came into power after he usurped all political power through the Kot massacre of 1846. Under Rana’s authority, the first set of codified legal documents - Legal Code (*Muluki Ain*) of 1854 pertaining to the nation state of Nepal -- was issued. The code pertained to issues related to the four *Varna* divisions, to inter-caste marriages, to rules governing food, to the decisions of the king that were promulgated at regular intervals, and to deeds, grants, warrants, and injunctions. This Code categorized people on the basis of their castes (see Table 1 in Chapter 1) and ensured maximum benefits for the ruling class, thus creating a superior category of people. It contained highly detailed provisions systematizing caste discrimination.

to Sanskrit and religious books.<sup>38</sup> In other words, religious education was allowed to Brahmins to perform their priestly duties since this was sanctioned by the ancient religious texts. Many Brahmins went to Banaras (a holy northern Indian city now known as Varanasi) for their education which indeed helped initiate the movement against the Rana regime (Viswakarma 2002). In short, during the Rana regime, there was widespread discontent about the political and economic exploitation meted out on people by different office holders and landowners. As a result there was a public uprising against the Rana regime in 1950 (Kisan 2005).

*Viswa Sarvajan Sangh* (Association for the Peoples of the World) was the first Dalit organization in Nepal. It emerged in 1947 in Baglung district (western Nepal) and was founded by Bhagat Sarvajeet Bishwakarma and Bhagat Laxmi Narayan Bishwakarma. The explicit objective was to promote the self-respect of oppressed Dalits. Sarvajeet Bishwakarma challenged the orthodox Hindu rule by wearing the sacred thread called *Janai* which is only worn by upper caste Brahmins and Chettris. He was jailed in Palpa for this act. In Dharan (Eastern region of Nepal), Jaduveer Bishwakarma, Uma lal Bishwakarma and T.R. Bishwakarma founded an organization called *Nepal Samaj Sudhar Sangh* (Association for Social Reform in Nepal) during the period 1946-1947 to oppose the caste system. T.R. Biwakarma led a movement against barbers refusing to cut the hair of Dalits. His movement compelled barbers to provide barber services to Dalits as they would to other castes. It was from this movement that

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<sup>38</sup> Nepal opened to the outside world only after the overthrow of the Rana regime (1950-51). In order to maintain their power and control, the Rana rulers did not want any outside influence in Nepal. In the context of education, the first school that opened in Nepal was Durbar high school in 1853. It was opened only for the Rana families ruling the country at that time. It is important to keep this historical context in mind because Nepal is a relatively young country when viewed from the standpoint of a western education system. Because Nepal shares its borders with India and the two countries have cultural affinities, comparisons between them are common. However, many of India's modern educational institutions were set up during the British rule in India and as a result the Indian Education System has a fairly long history compared to that of Nepal. Moreover, the sheer size of India is not comparable to Nepal. Nepal's first public college was opened in 1918 and in 1959, the Tribhuvan University, the first public university was founded.

the late Hira Lal Vishwarkarma launched his bid for politics and became the only Minister of state from the Dalit community during the Panchayat regime. In the capital city of Kathmandu, *Kapalis* (*Newar* dalit caste) were organizing and founded the Tailor Union in 1947. Saharshanath Kapali, whose father was the private tailor to the Rana generals, was generally influenced by the Indian independence movement that he had witnessed during his training period in Calcutta. He returned to Nepal with both tailoring skills and a spirit of independence. He sought to enhance the skills and status of the tailoring profession. Although the objective of this organization was to promote professional unity and modernization among the *Damai/Kapali* castes, Sharahsa nath Kapali also used the forum to teach about caste discrimination.

During the Rana period, there were a few Dalit organizations registered but they were focused on individual freedom, so the movement itself was not very effective. The anti-Rana revolts became stronger through the 1950s and the Dalit organizations played a major part. In fact, in a 1951 anti-Rana rally in Bandipur, Tanahu, the government forces shot and killed Chandra Bahadur Sarki and Mani Ram Damai. Unfortunately, the radical change attendant on the toppling of the Rana regime did not have much of an impact on Nepal's Dalits. The autocratic Rana regime was replaced by the monarchy headed by King Tribhuwan and a Brahmanist culture. There was no state-level announcement to abolish the untouchability system. King Tribhuwan postponed this essential move by saying that there would be an end to caste discrimination after the establishment of a constitution council, which never took place (Aahuti 2006; Kisan 2005; Vishwakarma 2002).

### **First Democratic Period (1950-1960)**

In the ten-year democratic period between 1950 and 1960, three major events of historical significance took place: (i) the establishment of Constituent Assembly Interim government; (ii) the promulgation of the 1959 Constitution of Nepal, and (iii) the formation of a government headed by Nepali Congress Party (Nepal's oldest and largest political party) through a two-thirds majority general election victory. In terms of eradicating caste discrimination, however, when the proposal for reform was raised in parliament, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, dismissed the proposal saying that it was untimely (Kisan 2005: 186). However, in terms of the Nepali Dalit movement itself, there were some very successful campaigns undertaken during this ten-year period. In 1954, the “*Pashupatinath* temple entry” movement, which remains a source of inspiration to Dalits today, was organized. Dalits were denied entry into temples even though the majority of Dalits are Hindus. Around 1100 Dalits participated in this organized movement. The government arrested 750 protestors, of whom 400 were women. This movement is considered significant for the prominence of women's participation. In 1955, Mithai Devi Bishwakarma organized Dalit women under *Pariganit Nari Sangh* (Association for Scheduled Caste Women) which was the first Dalit women's organization of Nepal. Mithai Devi Bishwakarma was one of the foremost women leaders and played a crucial role in the Nepal women's movement.. There were many Dalit organizations that were formed during this democratic period.

### **Partyless Panchayat Period (1961-1990)**

On December 15, 1960, a royal proclamation ended this period of democracy and the autocratic Partyless Panchayat period began in Nepali politics. In 1962, King Mahendra Bikram Shah,

promulgated a new constitution, and in 1963, a new (revised) National Legal Code (*Naya Muluki Ain*) legally declared the end of caste discrimination and untouchability. Given that it did not declare these practices as crimes and did not make provisions for punishment, caste discrimination and untouchability continued to be practiced. From 1960 to 1990, the rulers launched a campaign of “One King, One Country; One Language, One Dress.” Any organized effort to preserve and promote indigenous nationalities' language, religion and culture was charged as “anti-King,” “anti-constitution,” “anti-national,” and “communal” (Bhattachan n.d., : 24). In other words, the State did not recognize cultural difference and instead envisioned a society where caste discrimination was supposedly outlawed, and all citizens were equal and assimilated into a single homogenous, national culture.

After the declaration of the legal end of caste discrimination, the Nepali Dalit Movement was divided into two distinct streams. There were Dalit organizations which supported the *Panchayat* form of government and therefore the status quo and those which supported a more radical approach to Dalit liberation. During the *Panchayat* period, Dalit organizations were just emerging and were, on the whole, unclear and unorganized. Establishing Dalit organizations at that time meant reaping the individual benefits of government appointments to important political positions. As a result, many Dalit organizations focused on pro-*panchayat* power politics and were self-serving (Kisan 2005: 186). Although these streams did not lead to an independent Dalit movement at this time, the increased political activity led to significant involvement by Dalit students and the Dalit working class in the subsequent anti-*panchayat* movement where many Dalits became martyrs. The emergence of the *Utpidit Jatiya Utthan Manch* (Forum for the Upliftment of the Downtrodden Castes) and the *Jatiya Samata Samaj* (Society for Caste Equity) in 1988-1989 marked a significant change in the caliber of Dalit

organizations. These organizations explicitly identified Hindu feudalism and Brahmanism as the root causes of Dalit problems and the Panchayat system as the patrons upholding these systems. From there, the organized Nepali Dalit Movement could take revolutionary steps in terms of ideology, policy, organizing and implementing programs for the Dalit cause. These organizations focused on revolting against the *Panchayat* system by declaring that the tyrannical system had been responsible for perpetuating caste discrimination and inequality. With this clarity, the Nepali Dalit Social Movement made qualitative leaps forward (Kisan 2005).

### **Multi Party Democratic Period**

The People's Movement<sup>39</sup> of 1990 (*Jana Andolan I*), following the pro-democracy wave in the Soviet Union, eastern European countries, and other parts of the world, jointly organized by the Nepali Congress Party and the United Left Front, including the Nepal Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist), overthrew the autocratic party-less Panchayat political system and restored democracy in Nepal. It raised hopes and expectations for reducing socio-cultural and political inequalities. This period also provided a favorable political environment for the formation of many Dalit organizations----political and non-governmental.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> In writing about social movements in India, Mohanty (1998:17-18) notes that the term “people’s movement” is better than social movement or democracy movement because it is politically a more potent concept. Social movement as a term has become extremely vague, suggesting any trend of mass mobilization on a specific issue. On the other hand, people’s movement (and its translation in many languages as ‘*Jan Andolan*’, and even more meaningfully as *Janwadi Andolan*’) excites people’s imagination to strive for greater freedom and equality. Moreover, this concept is not meant to replace class movements of workers and peasants, as a section of Marxists might view it. It includes class movements within its scope and at the same time covers the many movements for people’s rights—the movement of dalits, *adivasis* (tribal people), and women and so on. In Nepal the term “*jana andolan*” has been used for two important national movements-- the first people’s movement in 1990 and the second people’s movement in 2006. This term in Nepal, as in India, denotes inclusiveness of many diverse rights-based movements.

<sup>40</sup> To see the chronology of different leaders and organizations that emerged during different political periods of Nepal, see Bishwakarma (2006); Kisan (2005) and Vishwakarma (2002).

The 1990 constitution of Nepal declared untouchability illegal and a punishable offence. Although untouchability had been declared illegal in 1964, Dalits had to wait for 27 years for untouchability to be made a punishable crime. Finally, the Maoist “People's War” that started in February 1996 and ended in April 2006 brought the issues of indigenous nationalities, Dalits, women and other minority groups to the forefront. The Maoist movement had a favorable effect on the Dalit movement. Dalits viewed the Maoist movement positively as the Maoist ideology and agenda entailed tackling social evils such as caste discrimination head on. Moreover, Maoists recruited many Dalits into their army. More recently, the Maoist Movement has helped reduce caste-based untouchability in certain areas.

After 1990, Dalit issues have become issues of national importance and the Dalit movement has become a movement of national interest. Dalits have been engaging in the movement in peaceful and democratic ways. The techniques of protest and dissent used are: calling for strikes; engaging in hunger strikes; marching in opposition; rallying; giving ultimatums; organizing; issuing press releases; issuing pronouncements; making demands; conducting seminars and conferences, and publishing Dalit literature (Kisan 2005; Sundas 2006 and Viswakarma 2002).

There were many incidents of protest and everyday acts of resistance after 1990. On many occasions, Dalit activists and organizations intervened in cases of discrimination and filed cases with the police and also claimed compensation. A few notable incidents<sup>41</sup> have been highlighted by Vishwakarma (2002). In 1993, incidents related to milk selling received wide attention. Milk touched by Dalits is considered impure. The milk collection depots for selling

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<sup>41</sup> Listing many incidents of protests is beyond the scope of this study. I point to some incidents that received attention right after Nepal became a multi-party democracy for the purpose of illustration. The democratic period provided avenues for organizations to address these causes of caste-discrimination openly. Today incidents related to Dalit atrocities and resistance by Dalit are common. They appear almost daily in newspapers.

milk were known to discriminate against the milk brought by Dalits. In Chitwan, the collection depot agreed to accept the milk collected by Dalits due to Dalit protests, whereas in Sindhupalchowk many Dalits gave up livestock rearing for milk production as there were no protests in the area. In Syangjha, a huge demonstration of about 1000 people was organized with the involvement of other human rights organizations. As a result, the Chief District Officer's (CDO) office and Milk Scheme Office of Pokhara settled the issue by agreeing to buy the milk from all without discrimination. There have also been many temple entering incidents, mostly organized by Dalit NGOs. The majority of Dalits in Nepal are Hindus and are as devoted as upper caste people, but their entrance to temples is forbidden in many places. Other common incidents of discrimination and resistance are those related to water scuffles (in taps and wells), and Dalits in the Terai region refusing to dispose of carcasses of dead animals.

### **People's Movement of April 2006 (*Jana Andolan II*)**

The April 2006 people's movement that challenged the centralized power of the Monarchy is an important watershed in the history of the Dalit movement. This moment brought all minority movements (e.g., indigenous people's movements, the women's movement, the Tarai movement, and the Dalit movement) into mainstream politics and together on a common platform with great force and confidence. It not only broke the historical and traditional structure of kingship by abolishing the 240-year-old Hindu institution of monarchy but it also led the country into a different time and direction. This has opened a challenging path towards establishing a new society, a new Nepal. Right now, the nation's most common protests are those of the previously excluded groups whose demands and slogans are related to restructuring and re-establishing Nepal as an inclusive democracy. For the first time in Nepali history, excluded minority groups



are allowed to participate in the crucial process of writing a new constitution. In other words, they have seized the opportunity to speak for themselves.

### **Pursuing Equality: the Role of the State**

Presently, Nepal is governed by the Interim Constitution of Nepal, promulgated on January 14, 2007. The state declared untouchability illegal in 1964. However, the Constitution promulgated before 1990 had no meaningful provisions for elimination of caste-based discrimination. The sub-article 4 ruled that no one should be discriminated against on the basis of caste and creed in public, and in the use of public properties; indeed, according to the sub-article, violators were punishable by law. However, Article 19 prohibited change of religion, implying forced participation by Dalits in Hinduism.

The 1990 Constitution mentioned protective discrimination in its Article 11(3). Prohibiting caste as well as gender discrimination, the constitution pledged to initiate special programs and welfare laws for the socially and educationally disadvantaged groups. Following this constitutional provision, the government enacted various acts, policies and programs, for example, free legal aid, free primary education, provisions for political participation at the local level, policies for cultural enhancement and specific programs for economic enhancement.

The Government formed the Nepal Excluded, Oppressed and Dalit Class Development Committee in 1997 under the Ministry of Local Development. The Committee was entrusted with the responsibility of implementing some of the Dalit-specific government-funded activities. This committee implements scholarship programs for secondary and higher education. Funds are also provided to Dalits for income generation activities. The Committee also runs a radio program and other sensitization programs to increase public awareness on caste discrimination. It

has established a library with resources on Dalit-related reference materials. Activities pertaining to education, income generation and advocacy are limited in their coverage largely due to budgetary constraints as well as the low capacity of the Committee to plan and implement activities. The Committee is unstable; frequent changes occur among the Board and Staff members, which in effect is due to frequent changes in the government setup. The National Dalit Commission (NDC) was established in March 2002. It was formed by a Cabinet decision and works as a section under the Ministry of Local Development. The Dalit Movement of Nepal has been demanding a constitutional, independent, resourceful Commission with semi-judicial roles (Bhattachan et. al 2009).

There are some Acts which directly and indirectly address Dalit causes. The Legal Aid Act provides legal representation to the marginalized communities; Local Self-government Act has mandated several welfare policies to be carried out for the upliftment and promotion of Dalits at the local level; Scholarship Rule is supposed to provide for the reservation of 10 percent of scholarships for Dalit students, Education Act is supposed to provide free education to Dalit students at the secondary level; the Bonded Labor Welfare, Child Labor, and Social Welfare Acts are other important laws that are supposed to help Dalits (Tamrakar 2004).

The Ninth Plan (1997-2002) and Tenth-Plan (2003-2007) contained a Dalit targeted plan outlining the objectives, policies, strategies and programs for Dalits and other disadvantaged groups. However, these were confined to paper work only as most of the plans were never implemented. The current Tenth plan of the government has provisions for pro-Dalit programs on aspects such as foreign employment, sensitization programs against untouchability at the local level; encouragement to Dalit women to become school teachers, scholarships to Dalit students, jobs in governmental as well as non-governmental organizations. The Poverty Alleviation Fund

(PAF) was established in 2004 of which the Dalit community has been one of the target groups. During the Tenth-Plan period, Dalit upliftment activities received about INR. 500 million from the PAF. As opposed to the traditional modality of implementation, the Fund intends to implement activities through community based organizations (Bhattachan et. al 2009).

There have also been attempts by Dalit activists to draft important bills but their efforts have not been successful. Some of the efforts related to legislation on Dalit issues include “Dalit Upliftment and Protection Bill” (2002) prepared by the Nepal Dalit Association, “National Dalit Commission Act” (2003) prepared by the National Dalit Commission (NDC) on behalf of Dalit civil society, “Constitution of Kingdom of Nepal 1990 First Amendment Act Bill” and “Reservation Act Bill” (2005) prepared by the Dalit NGO Federation (DNF), and “Caste based Untouchability Crime Act” (2006) prepared by the Lawyers National Campaign Against Untouchability (LANCAU). After adopting a parliamentary form of government in 1990, the Parliament with the House of Representatives and the National Assembly was responsible for making laws. No Dalit was elected as a member of the House of Representative but a few Dalits were nominated as members of the National Assembly by the political parties.

Another pro-Dalit move on the part of the government was the ratification of several international conventions. The Government ratified a number of international human rights instruments, including the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Convention against Torture (CAT) and Anti Slavery Convention whose compliance is monitored by a group of human rights organizations and NGOs, including Dalit NGOs.

The historic People's Movement of April 2006 gave several mandates including Sovereignty and State Power to the Nepali people and the task of restructuring of the State in an inclusive way through the Constituent Assembly. The Interim Constitution will continue until a new Constitution is formed by the Constituent Assembly. Article 14 has positive provisions addressing the issues and concerns of the Dalits.

Nepal is going through a peace-building process and democratic transition. The election for 575 members of the Constituent Assembly was successfully held on April 10, 2008, and nomination of 26 members of the Constituent Assembly was complete. The Nepal Communist Party –Maoist became the largest party followed by the Nepali Congress, Nepal Communist Party-UML and Madhesi Jana Adhikar Forum (Bhattachan *et al* 2009; Tamrakar 2004; Department for International Development and World Bank 2006).

### **Dalit Women's Movement**

It is important to dwell briefly on the Nepali Dalit women's movement in a separate light although the Dalit movement discussed above includes the participation of Dalit women. As all developmental indicators show, Dalit women are the worst-off sections of the Nepali population. As a result, they are also the most vulnerable to exclusion, discrimination, violence and exploitation. Dalit women face the triple exploitation of gender (as women), caste (as Dalit), and class (as poor). Other common expressions to denote the status of Dalit women in Nepal and in India are "triplely oppressed," "triplely subjugated," "thrice-alienated," and "thrice dominated."

Advocates of Dalit women's rights have raised pertinent issues about Dalit women's exclusion, voicelessness and invisibility. They contend that Dalit women are invisible in the histories of the Dalit movement. Dalit women have taken part in the women's movement since

1951 and the Dalit liberation movement since 1952. Yet, there is no celebration of Dalit women's contribution. Further, many Dalit male leaders did not include Dalit women in their organizations as they too were operating within the feudalistic structure of a male-dominated society and viewed women from a gender-based perspective. Dalit feminists therefore want to historicize the participation and contributions of Dalit women and rewrite their history.

Biswakarma (2006) provides a critique of the absence of documentation of Dalit women and their contribution in Nepal's historical freedom struggle. For instance, there are names of Dalit men such as Bise Nagarchi, Maniram Gaine, Kale Sarki, Jashure Kami who were employed in King Prithvi Narayan Shah's palace during Nepal's unification process but there are no descriptions of Nepali women. Deuki, wife of Bise Nagarchi gave ideas to the king for fundraising. The king was pleased and apparently presented her with a gift. Hira Gaineni got the position of a singer in the palace during Mathar Singh Thapa's reign and used the medium of her songs to raise awareness and political consciousness. The role of Ram Maya Chyameni, employed in the palace as sweeper (maintenance worker), is also noteworthy. When the Rana regime had imprisoned patriotic freedom fighters Dasahanath Chand, Dhanu Bhakta Mathema and Ganesh Man Singh, Ram Maya Chyameni played the role of a secret messenger between the prisoners and their families. Gothi Bassel opposed caste discrimination inflicted by upper castes in Tehrathun. In Chitwan, Nepalni, Lal Bahadur Pariyar's wife, helped her husband in the Dalit rights movement. In Palpa, the wife of Gangabhadur Pariyar, opened a women's organization and worked alongside her husband in the struggle against caste-based discrimination.

More recently, Dalit women are involved at many levels in all sectors of Nepali society.<sup>42</sup> One limitation of the Dalit women's movement is that while there are many Dalit NGOs that

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<sup>42</sup> For contributions of Nepali Dalit women after the 1990 democracy movement see Bishwakarma 2006.

address general Dalit women's issues, only one national-level organization, the Feminist Dalit Organization (FEDO), which addresses specific issues of Dalit women, exists in Nepal. Even though political parties have Dalit wings, these do not have separate units that address specific issues of Dalit women.

The main contention of the Nepali Dalit women's movement is that the women's movement and the Dalit movement in Nepal do not address Dalit women's issues. They criticize the Nepali Dalit movement for being male-dominated and male-centered and the Nepali women's movement for being led by upper caste and middle class women, thereby excluding Dalit women, Madhesis, Janjatis and poor women. This prevents both movements from becoming fully-fledged movements. The Nepali women's movement has also been accused of failing to take into account the complex heterogeneity, diversity and differences among women's experiences in Nepal (Sob 2006; Sunar 2006; Viswakarma 2006). Tamang (2004) calls this 'homogenizing sisterhood'—homogenizing Nepali women as if they were all upper caste *Bahun-Chettri* and middle class women.

The exclusion of Dalit women by the government, by the women's movement and the Dalit movement led to the formation of Feminist Dalit Organization (FEDO). There was an urgent need to establish an organization dedicated to the rights and emancipation of Dalit women. This exclusion was evident by the lack of Dalit women in positions of power and lack of representation of Dalit women at every organizational level. Therefore FEDO works at representing the issues of Dalit women in Nepal (Sob 2006).

Dalit feminists also address the issues of intersectionality of caste, class, gender and religion. They provide a critique of the patriarchal and feudal structures of Nepali society, i.e., male dominated institutions like the state, family and kinship system, the Hindu religion and its

caste system. For instance, they emphasize the link between caste and gender exploitation<sup>43</sup> which the Nepali women's movement and the Dalit movement have failed to address. Dalit women face a great deal of discrimination because of the gender dimension of caste discrimination. Areas such as water sources, shops, and temples are frequented mostly by women, and Dalit women face daily insults from upper caste women as well. Nepali Dalit feminists also raise the important aspect of intra-Dalit caste hierarchy and discrimination among Dalits themselves. For example, Tarai Dalit women have the worst human development indicators when compared to Dalit women in other regions of Nepal. Deep rooted traditional and cultural practices such as child marriage, veiling of women, witch hunt and *Badi* (culturally institutionalized prostitution) practices are still prevalent (Paswan 2003; Swarnakar 2003).

Nepali Dalit feminists critically evaluate the link between caste, gender and religion from a gendered lens. *Dharmashastras* like *ManuSmriti*, the sacred Hindu legal text, covering moral, ethical and social laws is a text that is considered anti-dalit and anti-women. The Hindu law as codified by Manu is based on the principle of inequality. Women are not considered fit for being free and independent. They are to be protected in their childhood by father, in youth by husband and in old age by son. They should never be allowed by their guardians to act independently. A woman must never do anything even inside her home without the consent of her father, husband and son respectively. She must remain in the control of her father in childhood, her husband in youth and her son after the death of her husband (Biswakarma 2006; Olivelle 2004b). For lower castes and Dalit women the situation is worse. From birth, Dalit women are the targets of oppression and suppression in daily life. Because they are born female, they are humiliated at home; because they are born into an untouchable caste they are humiliated in society; because of

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<sup>43</sup> For Indian Dalit feminist movement that draws the link between caste relations and gender exploitation see Rao 2005.

being a Dalit woman they are exploited and excluded in all spheres – religious, social, economic, political and educational. Typically, they live a life of poverty (Biswakarma 2006).

Manu's laws also shows the inequality when it comes to sexual relations between men and women. If a person has sexual intercourse with a consenting woman of his own *Varna*, he is not to be punished. But if a person of lower *Varna* has sexual intercourse with a woman of higher *Varna*, with or without her consent, he is to be killed. Women, Shudras and slaves were declared base, vile and lowly. Women were assumed to naturally have impure thoughts and desires and to be untrustworthy. According to Manu's rule, upper caste men could have sexual relations with lower caste women if they were overcome by passion and they could be purified through a mantra.

Since the Old Legal Code of Nepal had the influence of Manusmriti, its values that took root in society centuries ago are still prevalent despite legal measures against caste discrimination. More than one third of the Old Legal Code of 1854 deals with inter-caste and intra-caste sexual relations. Hofer (1979: 35) states:

The scrupulous accuracy of the legislator amply confirms the importance these relations have for the maintenance of the hierarchy. The consequences of incest, adultery, rape, perversion, premarital intercourse and the like not only affect the persons immediately involved, but also their offspring and eventually their fellow caste members.

Dalit feminists expose the upper-caste male double standard when it comes to sexual exploitation of lower caste and Dalit women. The issue of "untouchability" does not seem to hold when upper caste men want sexual relationships with lower caste women but it becomes relevant at all other times. Many Dalit women are sexually exploited by upper caste men but are boycotted and abandoned when it comes to marriage. Many inter-caste marriages between non-Dalits and



Dalits have resulted in non-acceptance, excommunication, and threats by families and friends and the larger society.

At the level of advocacy, Dalit feminists call for implementing a rights-based approach in empowering Dalit women (Gajmer 2003; Silwal 2003; Sob 2006). They put emphasis on the importance of the “voices” and “experiences” of Dalit women. They try to empower women as agents and not simply as passive victims, as Dalit women are commonly portrayed by the media (Sunar 2006).

The new political environment after the April 2006 movement has provided a platform for Dalit women. They are strongly placing their demands in the new agenda of the government. They want to include Dalit women (suffering from caste and gender exploitation) in the Constitution. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed after the 10-year Maoist people’s war and the 19-day April 2006 movement with its policy of inclusion have played a key role in allowing Dalit women into the parliament. The Maoist role in including ordinary women, especially Dalit women, in their People’s War and helping Dalit women enter the parliament is noteworthy. Although the Dalits won limited political rights through the advisory assembly of 1954, Dalit women had to wait another 56 years to join the parliament. Following the restoration of the parliament and formation of the interim parliament, eighteen Dalits became lawmakers, including seven Dalit women.

Of the 49 Dalit members of the Constituent Assembly, 22 are women. Of the seven Dalit CA members elected through first-past-the-post system of elections, two are Dalit women. When the state has guaranteed 33 per cent reservations for women in the Constituent Assembly, the fact that 44 percent of the women members in it are Dalit women is indicative of an impressive commitment to inclusion within the Dalit community. However, despite such presence of Dalit

women in the CA, whether or not Dalit women's issues get space in the new constitution remains uncertain (Bhattachan et.al 2009; Dalit Watch 2009; Hemchuri and Sunar 2009; Nepali 2009).

## APPENDIX B

### OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Date:	Time:
Venue:	

#### **Descriptive Notes**

#### **Reflexive Notes/ Personal Thoughts\***

Portraits of the Participants	Speculation
Interaction of Participants	Feelings
Reconstruction of Dialogue	Problems
Description of Physical Setting	Ideas
Accounts of Particular Events or Activities	Hunches
	Impressions
	Biases

\* Please note that the columns for Descriptive notes and Reflexive notes are not meant to correspond to each other. They are separate categories for observation field notes although presented side by side.

Source: Bogdan & Biken 1992:121 cited in Creswell 2003

## APPENDIX C

### INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR DALIT ADVOCATES AND LEADERS

Date of Interview:
Length of Interview:
Place of Interview:

**Interview script:** *I am Sambriddhi Kharel and I am a Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh, United States of America. I am conducting a study on Dalit identity and resistance in Kathmandu. The interview will take approximately 90 minutes. Dr. Cecilia Green, Professor of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, United States of America, is supervising my progress on this project. I would like to thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. All information that will discuss throughout the interview will be confidential. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions. What I am truly interested in is hearing about your experiences, opinions, ideas and feelings. Before we begin the interview please answer this short questionnaire regarding your background information.*

#### Personal Information: Background Questions for Activists

1. Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: \_\_\_\_\_
2. What part of Nepal (or country of origin) did you come from?
3. Are you single/married/ divorced/widowed?
4. What is your educational background?
5. What is your occupation?
6. What is your approximate income?
7. Are you a part of any organization that advocates on behalf of Dalits?
8. Are you a member of any other religious / cultural community or political organizations?  
\_\_\_\_\_If yes, please specify. Why?

## Interview Questions

### General information on Organization/Advocacy

1. Tell me a little about yourself. When did you join\_\_\_\_\_?
2. Were you a member of any organizations before this?
3. What do you think are the key issues facing Dalits in KTM and Nepal today?
4. What about the difference in the issues of men and women?
5. What do you think the causes are for these problems?
6. Do you think there is a Dalit Movement in Nepal?
7. What would you say are the goals of\_\_\_\_\_? Can you give me a brief history of your organization? What are its agenda and focus? (PROBE)
8. Could you describe the organization's membership in terms of class (rough income level) and gender?
9. What audiences/target groups is your organization trying to reach? Has your organization tried to reach Dalits of different regions and ethnic groups. PROBE, if yes, why certain groups and certain regions?
10. How do people come to learn about your organization? How often are you in touch with poorer Dalits, Dalits or Dalit communities who are not part of organizations?
11. What are your strategies in bringing about higher levels of political consciousness among Dalits?
12. What strategies does your organization find to be the most effective?
13. Are you part of any international network of similar organizations? Did your organization participate in the World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa? Does it participate in the World Social Forum? Are there any challenges in building transnational relationships?
14. What strategies does your organization use to build solidarity in their transnational networks against caste discrimination?
15. What are some of the sources of funding for your organization?
16. How would you describe your organization's relationship with the government, political parties?

### Self-Identity, Motivation and Activism

1. Did you experience or notice caste discrimination as you were growing up? PROBE
2. What motivated you to publicly advocate for the cause of Dalits?
3. What have been your frustrations in your advocacy and protest work?
4. What have been your accomplishments?
5. What personal satisfactions have you got out of your work with\_\_\_\_\_? Would you ever think of joining other organizations?
6. Have you participated in rallies, demonstrations and protests, national and international conferences?

7. Where do you think the biggest threat/support to the Dalit's movement for more equality in Nepal comes from?
8. How much influence do Brahminical ideas or ideology have in Nepal, among Dalit groups? PROBE.
9. Do you think that there is an emerging identity among Dalits in Nepal of "Dalit as Dignified," like India's self-respect movement?
10. Do you think that people are starting to challenge these older ideas and customs and are you seeing a transformation of attitudes?
11. Do you think modernization, urbanization and development have weakened or strengthened discriminatory caste practices and given opportunities, if any, to Dalits? Probe, Can you elaborate?
12. Do you think ordinary Dalits are aware of the *Mukuli Ain* (Civil Code-1964) that has outlawed untouchability? Do people still practice untouchability? What are your experiences? Do you think there are differences by regions and ethnic groups? PROBE
13. Why do you think Nepal has not been successful in passing the Affirmative Action bill unlike India?
14. What do you think is the biggest problem that the Dalit movement is facing today?
15. Are there any issues you feel that the Dalit community is divided over? Why? United around? Why?

### **Dalits and *Loktantric Jana Andolan* (Democratic People's Movement)**

1. Do you see the Dalit movement and the *loktantric jana andolan* as one with each other? Or do you think of them as connected but different (or separate, independent) movements? In other words, do you see the Dalit movement as part of the wider movement or do you see it as a separate or independent movement, with its own goals? Are they connected? How do you think they are connected?
2. Did the Dalit parties or leaders take part in the *loktantric jana andolan*?
  - a. Were they part of the Seven Party Alliance?
  - b. What about the Maoists? Are many Dalits active in the Maoist movement?
  - c. Do the Maoists defend Dalit rights? Do they represent the interests of Dalits?
  - d. Which of the political groups do you trust the most to defend the rights of Dalits?
  - e. Is there any political group that you do not trust? Why?
3. What do you think of the *loktantric jana andolan* and the challenge to the monarchy?
  - a. Do you think it is a good thing for Dalits?
  - b. Should Dalits support it?
  - c. Will this movement help Dalits to gain their rights?
  - d. Were you involved in the protests?
  - e. What sorts of demands were you making? Give me some examples of the slogans that the protestors were shouting?
  - f. Did you think of yourself mostly as a Dalit or as a Nepali?

- g. Did you think it was a good time to bring up the idea of rights for Dalits or was it better to keep quiet about that for the time being and focus on the *loktantric jana andolan*?
  - h. How do you think Dalits should participate in this movement?
  - i. Should they emphasize the fact that they are Dalits or should they put themselves forward as Nepali, just like everyone else?
  - j. Do you think Dalits have different goals?
4. What kind of government do you think would be best for Dalits?
- a. Do you think the monarchy was bad for Dalits and that a democratic government would be better?
  - b. Now that the country is moving in the direction of a democracy, what should Dalits do?
  - c. Should they form strong associations to ask for their rights or should they join one of the main political parties?
5. What should the goals of the new government be?
- a. What do you hope to see happen?
  - b. What would you wish for yourself and your family and for the Dalit people in general from this new government?
  - c. Do you agree when some people say, It's time for us to all pull together as Nepali, we should not think of ourselves in separate groups? What do you say?
  - d. What do you expect the future to bring for Dalits? Are you hopeful that this is a new beginning?
  - e. Is this a good time for Dalits to put their demands for equal opportunity and social justice before the government?
6. Will you participate more in the politics of the country now?
- a. Do you think Dalits will get a fair shake -- or a chance to better themselves -- now?
  - b. Tell me what your dreams for the future are.
  - c. How should Dalits try to ensure that their desire for equality become a reality? Which group should they trust? Should they form stronger groups of their own? etc.
7. Is there anything I have not asked that is pertinent in understanding Dalit identity and Resistance? Do you have any questions for me?

**End of Interview:** Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in this interview.

**Observations:**

- 1. Did any questions make the interviewee uncomfortable?
- 2. What were the most interesting things that came out in the interview?
- 3. In general, what was the respondent's attitude toward the interview?

## APPENDIX D

### INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR HOUSEHOLD/COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Date of Interview:

Length of Interview:

Place of Interview:

Interviewees — Husband — Wife Both Other adults in the family\_\_\_\_\_

**Interview script:** *I am Sambriddhi Kharel and I am a Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh, United States of America. I am conducting a study on Dalit identity and resistance in Kathmandu. The interview will take approximately 90 minutes. Dr. Cecilia Green, Professor of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, United States of America, is supervising my progress on this project. First, I would like to thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. All information that will discuss throughout the interview will be treated with utmost confidence. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions. What I am truly interested in is hearing about your experiences, opinions, ideas and feelings. Before we begin the interview please answer this short questionnaire regarding your background information. Thank you*

#### Personal Information:

1. Date of Birth:\_\_\_\_\_ Gender\_\_\_\_\_
2. What part of Nepal (or country of origin) did you come from?
3. Are you single/married/divorced/widowed?
4. How many people live in your household?
5. If you have children, how many children do you have?
6. How old were you when you had your first child\_\_\_\_\_last?
7. What is your approximate household income?



8. What is your educational background?
9. Do you contribute to the income of your household? About what percent?
10. Are you currently working?\_\_\_\_\_ Are you self-employed?
11. If yes, what is your occupation?\_\_\_\_\_ Where is your worksite?\_\_\_\_\_
12. Have you or other members of your family ever been active in organizations fighting for Dalit rights?
13. Are you a member of any religious/cultural community or political organizations? \_\_\_\_If yes, please specify?
14. What is your role in the organization?
15. Do you know \_\_\_\_\_( names of Dalit advocates/ intellectuals)?
16. Have you heard of \_\_\_\_\_( names of Dalit organizations)?
17. What newspapers do you read?
18. Who do you consider leaders in the community?
19. Can you give me the names of political leaders in the community?

### **Interview Questions**

#### **Self Identity**

1. Tell me a little about your self.
2. People identify themselves in different ways, for example, as a Nepali, as a worker, as a Dalit, as a man, as a woman. How would you identify yourself first?
3. Did you identify the same way when you were growing up? What did that mean to you when you were growing up? What about now? Does it still mean the same thing? (PROBE: if yes, why did you change the way you identify.).
4. What do you think it means to be a Dalit?
5. What are some of the happy memories/frustrations growing up?
6. What did you want to be when you were growing up?
7. Do you participate in any community/women's groups?
8. Please tell me a little about why or why not you are involved in these groups? What is your role in the group(s)?

#### **Occupation**

1. Do you work for yourself or for others?
2. Can you describe a typical working day for me.
3. Do you like your job? PROBE. What are the working conditions like?
4. Do you like your employer (if working for someone else)?
5. How does your employer treat you? PROBE
6. Would you do something else if you got the chance?

## **Family Interactions/Gender Relations/Aspirations for Children**

1. Who makes the decisions in the household? Is there one person who makes decisions in your family? Who? What kinds of decisions do the husband and the wife make?
2. If you disagree with a decision your wife/husband makes, how likely are you to express your disagreement. And how do you go about expressing that disagreement? Can you think of an example? Would you mind elaborating? Who does the household work at home?
3. Who handles the money in your house? That is, who makes decisions about expenditures? Who made these decisions in your family as you were growing up?
4. From your experience and in your opinion, what issue(s) causes the most conflict with your spouse/children/extended family members?
5. Do you want your children to get an education? What do you want them to be when they grow up? Do you want them to follow occupation that you have?
6. What are your aspirations for your children in terms of their education and careers?
7. Do you think your children have a better future than your generation?
8. Do you have any fears about “modern” influences on your children? Do you see your children moving away from the old ways? Your sons? Your daughters? Can you give examples etc? What possibilities do you see for daughters these days?

## **Dalits and *Loktantric Jana Andolan* (Democratic People’s Movement, April 2006)**

1. Do you see the Dalit movement and the *lokatantric jana andolan* as one with each other? Or do you think of them as connected but different (or separate, independent) movements? In other words, do you see the Dalit movement as part of the wider movement or do you see it as a separate or independent movement, with its own goals? Are they connected? How do you think they are connected?
2. Did the Dalit parties or leaders take part in the *lokatantric jana andolan*?
  - i. Were they part of the Seven Party Alliance?
  - ii. What about the Maoists? Are many Dalits active in the Maoist movement?
  - iii. Do the Maoists defend Dalit rights? Do they represent the interests of Dalits?
3. Which of the political groups do you trust the most to defend the rights of Dalits?
4. Is there any political group that you do not trust? Why?
5. What do you think of the *lokatantric jana andolan* and the challenge to the monarchy?
  - i. Do you think it is a good thing for Dalits?
  - ii. Should Dalits support it?
  - iii. Will this movement help Dalits to gain their rights?
6. Were you involved in the protests?
  - i. What sorts of demands were you making?
  - ii. Give me some examples of the slogans that the protestors were shouting

- iii. Did you think of yourself mostly as a Dalit or as a Nepali?
  - iv. Did you think it was a good time to bring up the idea of rights for Dalits or was it better to keep quiet about that for the time being and focus on the *loktantric jana andolan*?
  - v. How do you think Dalits should participate in this movement?
  - vi. Should they emphasize the fact that they are Dalits or should they put themselves forward as Nepali, just like everyone else?
  - vii. Do you think Dalits have different goals?
7. What kind of government do you think would be best for Dalits?
  8. Do you think the monarchy was bad for Dalits and that a democratic government would be better?
  9. Now that the country is moving in the direction of a democracy, what should Dalits do?
  10. Should they form strong associations to ask for their rights or should they join one of the main political parties?
  11. What should the goals of the new government be?
    - i. What do you hope to see happen?
    - ii. What would you wish for yourself and your family and for the Dalit people in general from this new government?
  12. Do you agree when some people say, It's time for us to all pull together as Nepali, we should not think of ourselves in separate groups? What do you say?
  13. What do you expect the future to bring for Dalits? Are you hopeful that this is a new beginning?
  14. Is this a good time for Dalits to put their demands for equal opportunity and social justice before the government?
  15. Will you participate more in the politics of the country now?
    - i. Do you think Dalits will get a fair shake -- or a chance to better themselves now?
    - ii. Tell me what your dreams for the future are.
  9. How should Dalits try to ensure that their desire for equality become a reality? Which group should they trust?
  10. Should they form stronger groups of their own?

## **Discrimination**

1. What do you think of the caste system?
2. What do you think of the karmic notion that actions in past lives have relegated some people to the status of Dalits in this life?
3. Do you believe in inter-caste marriages? PROBE—why or why not?
4. Have you ever felt discriminated against? Have people mistreated you because of your caste? PROBE. If so, how have you dealt with your frustrations?
5. Do you know about the *Mukuli Ain* (Civil Code of 1964) that has outlawed untouchability?

6. What do you think of sweepers who refuse to do their work and Dalits who forcefully enter temples, as we sometimes hear about in the news?
7. Do you know people personally who have done that?
8. Have you ever been involved in protests and rallies?
9. Do you think modernization, urbanization, development (find/use local linguistic markers for these phenomena) have weakened or strengthened discriminatory caste practices and given opportunities to Dalits? PROBE.
10. Do you think people still practice untouchability? What are your experiences? PROBE

### **General Dalit Issues**

1. What do you think are the key issues facing Dalits in KTM and Nepal today?
2. Are there any issues you feel that the Dalit community is divided over? Why? United around? Why?
3. What about differences in concerns of men and women? Why do you think there are such differences?
4. Do you think Nepal should have a quota system for Dalits like India?
5. What changes do you want to see in contemporary Nepali society? What do you think the government and political leaders should do to address Dalit concerns? Why?
6. Do you have any questions for me?

**End of Interview:** Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in this interview.

### **Observations:**

1. Did any questions make the interviewee uncomfortable?
2. What were the most interesting things that came out in the interview?
3. In general, what was the respondent's attitude toward the interview?

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