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CONSIDERING DALITS AND POLITICAL IDENTITY IN IMAGINING A NEW NEPAL

In this article I examine the articulation between contexts of agency within two kinds of discursive projects involving Dalit identity and caste relations in Nepal, so as to illuminate competing and complimentary forms of self and group identity that emerge from demarcating social perimeters with political and economic consequences. The first involves a provocative border created around groups of people called Dalit by activists negotiating the symbols of identity politics in the country's post-revolution democracy. Here subjective agency is expressed as political identity with attendant desires for social equality and power-sharing. The second context of Dalit agency emerges between people and groups as they engage in inter caste economic exchanges called *riti maagnay* in mixed caste communities that subsist on interdependent farming and artisan activities. Here caste distinctions are evoked through performed communicative agency that both resists domination and affirms status difference. Through this examination we find the rural terrain that is home to landless and poor rural Dalits only partially mirrors that evoked by Dalit activists as they struggle to craft modern identities. The sources of data analyzed include ethnographic field research conducted during various periods from 1988-2005, and discussions that transpired throughout 2007 among Dalit activist members of an internet discussion group called nepaldalitinfo.

WAITING

In the last week of November in 2006, forty-one years after the United Nation's General Assembly adopted for ratification the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD 1965), thirty-five years after His Majesty's Government of Nepal ratified it, six years after the National Human Rights Commission was established by mandate of the 1997 Nepal Human Rights Commission Act, four years after the Nepali government established the National Dalit Commission, and one week after the landmark peace agreement between home-grown Maoist rebels and the Nepali government, a Dalit woman sat alone on the familiar steps outside a Thakuri home in far western Bajhang district of Nepal.¹ Through the clear night air Durga could hear from the third floor kitchen above her the slapping sound of fresh wheat dough and the clinking of heavy silver bracelets, as the Thakuri family's eldest daughter-in-law prepared the evening meal of *roti* and vegetable curry. It was a cold evening, and a late autumn wind blew down from Khaptad Lekh. The figure on the steps hugged her bony legs closer to her chest and tightened the threadbare shawl around her thin frame. Her meal that evening would not begin until she returned

home with the salt and spices she was now awaiting from the landlady. "Ama" I called to her. "Aren't you cold? Why is she taking so long?" As she had for so many years, through four children and nine grandchildren, the now elderly widow beseeched her Thakuri patrons inside the house to "have pity on me, I have so little at home to eat and I want to cook my potatoes with some salt and turmeric. Please give me only a small handful of salt and a piece of turmeric root." Decades of sewing clothing and repairing shawls for the landowning family, first alongside her husband and then with the elder two of her three sons, had earned her the right – she hardly considered it a privilege – to ask the wealthy Thakuri landowners for help in times of need such as she experienced this night. But the obligatory waiting that was the customary sign of subservience for so-called lower castes seemed only to get longer, in spite of government proclamations that caste discrimination must end and that those who violated Dalit rights would be brought to justice. In spite of national laws, Durga herself witnessed recent incidents when Dalit students were barred from the local high school activities involving the worship of Saraswati, the goddess of learning. Durga wondered how those people – the young and defiant Maoist

followers with their bright red scarves and flapping banners who until recently had assembled in the once-active school yard near her Dalit community - were ever going to help her. She could not dream of seeing changes so great in her lifetime that she would be free from being a lower status person, a *juto manche* (impure person), a *nachhune manche* (not touchable person).

Two months later in the new year of 2007, in the capital city of Kathmandu and in small and large cities around the world, a related discussion was underway, a debate among Dalits about who they are, what they should be called, and whether to relinquish or to retain those symbols attached to their Dalit status. Durga, of course, did not participate, and indeed, was only partially a subject of their discussions, focusing as they did primarily on men's concerns. Yet she lived in the kind of place the discussants often evoked when referring to the persistence of caste discrimination in Nepal, namely, the rural farming communities to which urban Nepalis often point as reservoirs of conservative, non literate and backward conditions. I will suggest in this article that activists' struggle over Dalit identity politics in Nepal's new democracy might be challenged to include other agencies of resistance found in the lived experiences of rural Dalits like Durga, specifically in the context of economic transactions that daily frame their lives. My point is not to refute the legitimacy of Dalit activists' claims as they craft modern political identities. Rather, I wish to show how these claims only partially mirror the complexities of rural Dalits' agency of resistance within a socioeconomic context that must be considered in finding paths to social justice in the new Nepal.

LOCATING BORDERS

In this article I use an analytic trope of boundary to draw out the relationship between two kinds of discursive domains involving Dalit identity and caste relations in Nepal, so as to illuminate potentially complimentary forms of agency that emerge from demarcating social perimeters with political consequences. Although the social worlds discussed are in reality more fluid than is suggested by the heuristic tool of framing and bounding, the political activists engaged in social transformation and the rural farmers engaged in trade strategically channel semi-fixed social distinctions into culturally relevant categories offered by the participants themselves, only to then contest them. Thus framing is both a tool of constructing and of dismantling, by Dalits and by the anthropologist.

The first is a provocative border created around groups of people called Dalit by activists dynamically negotiating the symbols of identity politics in the country's post-revolution democracy. Here subjective agency is expressed as political identity with attendant desires for social change and for power. The second framing, also a fluid social one, emerges between people (like Durga) and groups as they engage in inter caste exchanges called *riti magné* in mixed caste communities that

subsist on interdependent farming and artisan activities. Here caste distinctions are evoked through communicative agency that both resists domination and affirms status difference.

Recent debates among Dalit activists focus on the merits of assigning the label "Dalit" to a heterogeneous group of people that shares a history of being discriminated against socially, politically, economically, and religiously by those who are unlike them in social status. The discussions I will draw from took place primarily among Dalit members of a Yahoo internet group called nepaldalitinfo that is, according to its description, "run by a group of Dalit intellectuals and friends of Dalits of Nepal" (<http://www.nepaldalitinfo.net>). Non Dalits are also members of the discussion group, but they did not significantly participate in this particular discussion. All those quoted in this article are Nepali Dalit activists in the caste reform movement either inside or outside of Nepal, and have asked that their real names be used.

It is not surprising that consensus on the merits of strategically promoting the term Dalit would be difficult for the community to reach, for there is variation in the lives of so-called untouchables. Dalits, who comprise anywhere from 12- 25% of Nepal's population, are geographically spread throughout the country with a large majority living in rural communities.² Their diverse artisan skills on which the agrarian economy depends have separate and unique histories, with differing potentiality in the contemporary world; for example, village demand for handmade leather shoes made by Sarkis has dropped precipitously with the availability of mass-produced footwear from China, Nepal and India, while artisan products made by basket weavers (storage granaries) and ironsmiths (agricultural tools) have not yet been replaced by market products. Dalits themselves engage in relative degrees of ranking based on ritual purity (Cameron 1998; Parish 1996), a small minority has become highly educated in national and foreign institutions, and there is uneven sharing of knowledge about what other Dalits are experiencing, particularly for people living in rural areas.³ Finally, and for our purposes here, those involved in the debate over political identity agree on who the oppressors are, but they disagree on what the basis of that oppression is (Religious? Political? Economic?). Therefore they find it difficult to agree on the means by which to eliminate the conditions of oppression, particularly in relation to powerful symbols like Dalit, as this case shows. Using the label "Dalit" keeps alive the meanings associated with caste discrimination, and is politically efficient, but it is nonetheless a denotation that is unacceptable for some activists. They seek an alternative language that more accurately reflects who "Dalits" in fact are.

The second set of boundaries I examine involves the social perimeter of mutual obligations negotiated around and between people as they initiate and engage in inter caste exchanges called *riti magné* in rural mixed caste communities that subsist on interdependent farming and artisan activities. Using ethnographic data culled from field research in Bajhang

over the past nearly twenty years, I will discuss forms of power that Dalits have developed in their interactions with Brahman-Chhetris. Here the demarcations are less predetermined than they are the contingent outcome of morally-informed human interaction that is strategic, informative, intimate, deceptive, degrading, empowering, and enduring -- in other words, complexly communicative. In examining *riti magné* interactions and exchanges, we find the rural terrain that is home to landless and poor Dalits only partially mirrors the rural sites evoked by Dalit activists as they struggle to craft modern identities. Instead, an “ethnography of the particular” (Abu-Lughod 1991) that I present here finds that mixed caste relations are more complex than is suggested by the dichotomy of a modern, caste-free urban site versus a caste-dominated rural one. The modern world may impinge poignantly on urban people and result in new struggles for negotiating and framing the moral self in Nepal (Liechty 2002; McHugh 2004). However, negotiating the moral terms of Dalit political identity in post-revolutionary Nepal involves a different set of inclusive values that seeks liberation for all Dalits and that therefore should include forms of rural agency. The challenge for activists is how to incorporate what Lauren Leve (2007) has identified for Nepali rural women activists as ‘mutual obligations’ that help to define the self, and in the case of Dalits, I suggest, that encompass obligations and expectations that serve as anchors of agency and sites of political transformation.

THE FUTURE IN CONTEMPORARY NEPAL

Events of late in Nepal suggest that there is no period like the present when Dalits, who have been dehumanized by the words in religious books, who are oppressed by people in their communities, and who remain virtually unprotected against discrimination by the state’s ineffective criminal justice system, might imagine a better world than the one they have known for perhaps centuries. The current period is one of hope and potential. As lawmakers in Kathmandu for the past year have calculated community representational proportions, group prerogatives, legislative seats for urban and “backward” regions, and the proportion of representation by Dalit and janajati leaders, the exchange of ideas has become invigorating. Turning to one arena of such exchanges, this essay considers how closely the now globally circulating discourse on Dalit identity in the new democracy fits with the lived experience of Dalits in rural agrarian Nepal, particularly their economic dependence on non Dalits of higher caste status. In crafting modern identities, the slippage between these two sites – the reified world of global discourse among activists and educated elites, and the everyday life of subsistence farmers – results, I suggest, from the modern requisite that identity be bounded, exclusive and stable in a form unfamiliar to the culture of Nepal. Moreover, Dalit political identity must arise from a moral ground that includes all Dalits, rural and urban, and this is difficult to achieve within the

environment of powerful ideologies such as modernity and development that are widely circulating in the country, that influence activists’ agendas, and that tend to devalue rural life as somehow removed from progress. As we will see, Dalit activists struggle over what their identity is, at this time and place in Nepal’s history, when new directions are being forged that finally address centuries of social injustice. Dalit struggle is not, however, a new phenomena; what I hope to show is how oppressed castes in rural communities, too, have evolved moral calculations and communicative strategies that allow them to challenge domination and cultivate self-respect in culturally acceptable ways. What should be acknowledged, therefore, is how the modern struggle for a casteless society that is the Dalit political agenda circulating in one internet debate, finds a well-used adaptive strategy of resistance to domination that nonetheless remains a ‘hidden transcript’ (Scott, 1990).

Rural village inter caste exchanges I consider are typically initiated by Dalits who request material goods from Brahman-Chhetri providers. Such requests are a common form of patterned interaction between people whose families and lineages have been connected for several generations. The practice locally is called *riti magné*, which translates as asking, begging, requesting, or soliciting from a landowning and so-called high-caste person according to “tradition” (*riti*).⁴ With little exception, the solicitor is poor (landless or nearly so) and visits the wealthier landholding family’s home – to whom the term *riti* is extended as a name – to request food necessities such as rice, wheat, and corn, spices such as chili, turmeric and salt, nonessential goods such as cigarettes, tobacco, tea leaves, and sugar, or a cash loan. What I find is that such inter caste transactions suggest manifold cultural ideas at work in cultivating the needs and desires of givers and receivers. What transpires in *riti magné* is a communicative strategy with contours similar to those described by James Scott on maneuvers of resistance by lower status persons to gain advantage in achieving a goal while preserving self dignity (Scott 1985; 1990). Thus, defining Dalit as either an essential set of characteristics or as a *condition* involving an on-going process of discrimination, as we will find happens in negotiating modern Dalit political identity, both fall short of acknowledging forms of Dalit resistance such as demonstrating equal to superior moral understanding of community obligations, thus justifying forms of shaming and work delays, all of which challenge caste stratification and weaken the hierarchical structure in rural communities.

CONTESTING “DALIT”

The anti-monarchy Maoist insurgency in Nepal created a coalition of groups around an ideology that promised, through armed revolution, to deliver social justice by eliminating the power of internal (mainly royalists and Brahman-Chhetri) and external (mainly Indian) “imperialists.” The role Dalits have played in the Maoist insurgency is unclear, but there is an

unverified assumption that because the movement espouses eliminating caste and other forms of discrimination, Dalits comprised many of the cadres. Bajhang friends tell me that Dalits are involved in the Maoist movement there, but not in sizable numbers and that in fact Thakuri and other elite castes represent the majority of Maoists.

I turn here to the discourse of Dalit identity politics as the activists attempt to craft their relationship to symbols and as those symbols are debated, negotiated, and contested by an internet community called nepaldalitinfo. The list was founded by Dr. Drona Rasali four years ago and has approximately 330 members, mostly educated Nepali women and men from predominantly Dalit groups, though not exclusively (there are several non Nepalis as well as non Dalits who are active members). Though the debate over the use of the term Dalit is not new to nepaldalitinfo and to NGOs working to eradicate caste discrimination in Nepal (some discussants on both sides say they have debated this term “over a hundred times”), the discussion over the past year was stirred by the hard-fought and real possibility that the term “Dalit” would appear in Nepal’s new Constitution. Indeed, the interim and yet to be ratified Constitution mentions Dalits in item 6 of Part 3 under “Fundamental Rights and Duties”:

vi. All types of exploitation-oppression including untouchability of the Dalits shall end, and special rights shall be ensured for the Dalits in all sectors.

And Part 11, item 3 under the “Constituent Assembly” states:

3. Women, oppressed nationalities, Dalits, the disabled etc. shall be included in the Constituent Assembly in proportion to their population. (Interim Constitution of Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal, 2063)

As the internet discussion deepened, several key understandings of Dalit members about their community’s history emerged. Some discussants argued that the global circulation of the term Dalit and its political acceptance in South Asia are particularly powerful reasons to retain its use. It should be noted that however globally recognized the term Dalit may now be, it is relatively new to Nepal, having achieved wide circulation only in the past decade, even though it was first introduced to Nepal by India’s most famous untouchable, Dr. B.R. (Babasaheb) Ambedkar, one of the chief architects of the Constitution of India (Zelliot 1992) and founder of the Republican Party of India (later to become the Bahujan Samaj Party), when he visited Nepal in early 1956. A decade later in 1967 it was used in the name of the first organization in Nepal to address Dalit issues, Rastriya Nepal Dalit Jana Vikash Parishad. Still, the term Dalit is unfamiliar to people in many rural communities in Nepal, though as communication about caste issues spreads through the country people are being introduced not only to the word but to its meaning and connotations. I met numerous members of so-called lower castes in Bajhang and Dailekh who even in the year 2000 were unfamiliar with the term Dalit. Nonetheless, use of the term Dalit to refer to a group of people with a stigmatized

social status is common among many social welfare and government organizations, for the label facilitates efficient political organizing and certain actions to be taken on Dalits’ behalf, including numerous social justice programs. Indeed, one list member was concerned that donor agencies would cease contributing to their cause if there was no identifying and unifying symbol associated with the oppressed group. And without doubt the recent historical appointment of two Dalit leaders from the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) to the 13-member Council of Ministers is evidence of a national leadership consensus on the special circumstances of Dalits and the need for their group to be more integrated into the political structure. The latter decision by Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala was met with enormous enthusiasm and relief by the members of nepaldalitinfo, and demonstrated to them the political power of unity under one symbol. These should be seen as welcome signs of albeit cautious progress, for the process of Dalit representation on the Constituent Assembly, in sharp contrast to the ministerial appointments, is currently drawing criticism on nepaldalitinfo, as is discussed briefly later.

Advocates for retaining the label Dalit argue several points. First, the term is regarded as a symbol of pride of heritage rather than of scorn (or at least should be adopted in that spirit), which efficiently unifies under one label different groups of people with similar histories of oppression. The legacy it captures is vividly rendered in the literal meaning of Dalit, to be broken or downtrodden. Use of the word Dalit as part of one’s identity is a bold statement of the unique oppression groups of people have experienced (and in fact four Newar *jaat* have, through a spokesperson, publicly rejected the application of the term to them), thus making their identity unlike other minorities in Nepal. And finally, the term Dalit is beginning to be nationally and globally recognized. Although not all advocates agree with all these points, they all fully support the inclusion of the term Dalit in the Interim Constitution as they consider their group to be unlike other minorities such as *janajati*.⁵ In defense of the term, one long-term Dalit activist provides a history of the adoption of the term in Nepal.

In this regard we have had so many discussions with Indian Dalit intellectuals and leaders including Babu Jagjivan Ram. From all these discussions what we came to know is that the word Dalit is the only word which can address in one word to all the victims of caste discrimination for centuries. Some of our intellectuals have said it has been imported from India. It is right, many things are imported from India including foods and culture, because we are an open border. Truly when Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar came in Nepal on 1956 and had important discussions with the Dalit leaders of Nepal, since then the word Dalit was used to address this community.

- Om Prakash VK Gahatraj (aka Om Prakash VK), February 23, 2007

National and international non government organizations (INGOs and NGOs) in Nepal, of which there are perhaps thousands, have been relatively slow in identifying Dalits as a group that should be assisted in reversing the many negative effects of centuries of discrimination. The history and politics of this significant oversight, while a worthy topic of research and analysis, is not addressed here. However, following the restoration of democracy in 1990, many such organizations have been founded, so many in fact that at least two federations of Dalit NGOs (DNGOs) have been formed to aid in organizing, communicating, fund raising, and facilitating the development of projects among the various NGOs addressing Dalit issues. Leaders of these two federations estimate there to be between 700-1000 registered Dalit NGOs in the country of Nepal, as well as one government Commission (established in 2002).⁶ In addition to these are a hundred more NGOs that, while not specifically mentioning Dalits as their mission, nonetheless develop on an ad hoc basis projects and programs specifically targeting Dalit communities. The international donor agencies that financially support the work of DNGOs include Danida/HUGOU (Denmark), DFID/ESP (England), USAID, SNV (Netherlands), Norad (Norway), CCO Canada (Canadian Embassy), Finnish Government, GTZ (Germany) and UNDP. The role of international aid is identified by some activist discussants as an important consideration in crafting a politically relevant identity. In response to those who feel it is important to pay attention to what might appeal to donor organizations, Mr. Om Prakash VK, Chairman of the Centre for Dalit and Rural Development in Kathmandu, offers a different perspective. He strongly urges that Dalits not feel dependent on donors for social change, and to understand that the term Dalit will not be in place forever. Mr. Om Prakash VK, though, does argue for using the term Dalit and to seeing its value particularly in the present time:

We are not thinking donors will support here for [a] long time. They are not our main components. They are very, very temporary. It is [the] nation whom we are targeting and dealing with permanently. The nation has cheated us for hundreds of years. It has to give us compensation to overcome the condition of Dalit. Dalit word is not a caste, it is a condition ...we are facing due to caste discrimination for hundreds of years. The word minority can not address this community. In one side we are not in minority in comparison to other groups of castes, in other side there are other minority groups in non Dalits who have also good access in national resources. Again I want to inform to our intellectuals that we have no hobby to write the word Dalit forever. We have no personal interest in this word. But this word has now taken a strong position inside and outside especially through communication which is helping us to make our path easier for struggle for human rights. If the condition Dalit is no more we will no more write Dalit. Presently a bright signal is seen after People's Movement-II to overcome this problem, so please do not disturb to this line of possible achievement in this crucial time, because hundreds of Dalit leaders have worked for decades in Dalit movement. It is now time we are expecting to get remarkable result for the sake of Dalits.

- Om Prakash VK, February 23, 2007

Retaining the word Dalit thus points to the condition of discrimination, and does not signify one's family identity or one's subjectivity. Rather it is a corrupt social condition that the term in fact points to, not to a shameful state of selfhood. As the discussion proceeds, participants list many causes and sources of the condition of discrimination. Several key factors of discrimination are enumerated by Ramu Bishwokarma, a doctoral student in sociology at the University of Maryland, College Park:

The underpinning causes, as it appears to me are -- lack of education, lack of income, lack of good health, lack of political and social empowerment, just to name few. Until and unless we are completely able to treat these causes, the disease of castism which have named as "Dalit" will still be there in our society, no matter whether we like it or not.

- Ramu Bishwokarma, February 23, 2007

Opponents of using the term Dalit, while not disagreeing with the shared history of oppression or with the results of united political activism, believe that the term is a shameful one that perpetuates and reinforces the boundaries of exclusion, rather than ultimately eradicating them. For them, the term Dalit is a modern political version of a centuries-old practice in which boundaries have become ever more rigid. The impurity associated with a learned artisan skill came to be more concretely denoted in the allegedly forced use of occupation as the last name for groups who were primarily artisans and small owner cultivators, thus obscuring birth names associated with one's clan and lineage to the point where they are often unknown to women, and recalled by men for marriage matchmaking purposes only. Two on-line discussants express strong objections to the use of the term Dalit, due to its association with a history of oppression and to how that oppression was shaped from the very religion they and others practice

When someone calls DALIT [emphasis in original], I feel humiliated no matter how qualified I am. This humiliation will be there for forever for our generations to come if we do not eliminate this word now. A doctor, an engineer, a scientist, a teacher, no matter who we are, we are tagged as DALIT. I think everyone, from their heart, should now think at this time not to make any mistakes at this critical time which will make our generation shameful forever.

- Prakash Nepal, May 9, 2006

I do dislike the term "Dalit." It comes across like a *gali* [insult] to me. No one is born Dalit. We are made to be Dalit by so-called upper class and they did so by using the very religion we practice. They cheated us. We have a responsibility to educate our people, [the] upper-class, and the world that they oppressed us by using the religion we practice. In my opinion, by describing yourself "Dalit" you are propagating the belief the other side forced upon us and accepting your position in the society.

- Dr. Ramesh Sunar, February 21, 2007

Dr. Sunar goes on to point out that international recognition of the term Dalit does not necessarily justify its use, and like others on the list, he notes that the word *harijan*, adopted by Gandhi to refer to India's untouchables, today has produced little positive outcome for the lower castes in India (a disputable observation for some; what is not disputable, though, is that Indian Dalits dislike the term *harijan*, which translates as "children of god" and which for many implies a bastard birth). The long term goal of equality for future generations is only possible by eliminating the word, as stated by one discussant who points out the problem of creating a false and misleading dichotomy:

Dalit title/word is contradictory to our goal to create an equal, free, honored and dignified society. Because it will divide the society into two groups forever – non-Dalits and Dalits, which is not our vision.

- Krishna Sob, March 1, 2007

As the symbol disappears, so goes the stigma. And the symbol will disappear only by abandoning its use and embarking on a unified effort to fight for one's rights, and not by fighting to establish a false dignity around the term Dalit, or any other terms such as oppressed, untouchable, or *harijan*. Thus, a modern idea of rights must replace an ancient idea of stratified *jat*. Dr. Sunar suggests alternative names for the political action group, such as Samanta Sena or Samaj Sena, as he says "some other name that you find appropriate for our struggle that has no association with intolerable words [like Dalit] that are mentioned above." (Dr. Ramesh Sunar, February 22, 2007)

In one very interesting post, the suggestion is made that stigmatized occupational names – called "dead bodies" – be replaced by *thar* (clan) names that denote important kinship meanings with no stigma.

We are fighting a long cultural and social war. It's not easy to get rid of everything right now. If we keep improving in the way we are thinking (out of the box), things will improve, too. For example, all of us still remember that [the surname] Bishwakarma was not there thirty years ago. Once Hira Lal Bishwakarma became Minister, everyone from that community started writing Bishwakarma. ... Eventually, we are all human beings and we should have the freedom to write what we want. There is no harm in writing different names. Why should we stick to «Sunar» or «Pariyar» or «Bishwakarma» which are not even our Thars? We have our own Thars. We should have a free mentality to write as our last name, for example, Baral, Paudyal, Gautam, and so on.

- Prakash Nepal February 22, 2007

Thar or clan names may be similar to or the same as Brahman-Chhetri *thar* names, groups that in fact sometimes use them as surnames. The extent to which Dalits in the past used *thar* names is unknown, though the forced replacement of *thar* names with occupational names in the past may be assumed to result from their uncomfortable identity to

Brahman-Chhetri *thar* names. Still others have adopted the non stigmatized surnames Nepal, Nepali, and Biswakarma (alternatively Bishwakarma or Bishwokarma, translated as "workers and skilled artisans" and the "God of workers and skilled artisans")⁷, and some nepaldalitinfo discussants strongly advocate using these surnames.

Intended to symbolize a history of discrimination, the term Dalit conjures for many an essentialized identity in opposition to a dominant other, elite caste groups. Those who support retaining the term Dalit advocate for this distinction as it reflects an historical reality. However, added to the dangers already noted by its dissenters is the term's monolithic and homogenizing tendency. As Abu-Lughod (1991) discusses about the culture concept's hierarchical tendencies, the term Dalit likewise may obscure other forms of difference within the social environment (such as gender and class), and may overlook the connections between individuals and groups on either side of the divide (such as values of amity and cooperation, as will be discussed below). The discourse and practice of economic transactions between different caste groups to which we now turn illustrates well the complex relations between people of different castes. Dalits have evolved forms of resistance suitable to social circumstances that draw on values other than rank, including community-based mutual obligations

RITI MAGNÉ: INTERDEPENDENCE, RANK AND DALIT RESISTANCE IN A SUBSISTENCE AGRARIAN ECONOMY

The interactive dynamics of *riti maagnay* results in part from social ranking in Bajhang that allocates differential status to people based on gender, age, and caste, and that expects the fulfillment of responsibilities and behaviors that follow therewith. This ranking practice was recently admonished by the founder of nepaldalitinfo, Dr. Drona Rasali, when he identified the significance to Dalits of a customary Nepali practice that permits and even encourages inquiry of one's social position in a variety of ways, finding in the practice the roots of domination:

We must revolt ... against those people in Nepal who at the first instance of meeting will not initiate conversation without asking anything other than "Kasma?" "Ke Thar?" "Ke Ma?" [literally Which? What clan? On what? These are general questions that ask for a reply about one's status situation]. One tends to ask the other person "Kasma?" with the corrupted mind to explore if he could somehow dominate the person he is meeting for the first time. This happens even among Baahuns, or Chhetris. This mindset is imbedded deep in every Nepali. Because he is brought up that way. He or she is brought up to see 'high' and 'low' in every thing around him or her. We all know but may not realize how serious is the Nepali problem of finding 'low' in others.

- Dr. Drona Rasali, May 15, 2007

Dr. Rasali links the behavior of determining rank to the desire to dominate, rather than as an expression of the need for respect from others. While neither an essential quality of being Nepali or Hindu, nor a totalizing social phenomenon (ala Dumont; see Appadurai 1988), Dr. Rasali nonetheless observes a practice that contributes to social injustice and lost opportunities, effecting large numbers of people. The result is layers of power and purity abounding in Nepali human and deific life, compelling people to try to know the relative value of individuals, families, and gods. Following Dr. Rasali's point of how inequality is maintained in Nepali society, the *riti maagnay* interactions described here are a common economically-based arena in which Dalit agency expands the discourse of social value beyond simple caste distinctions of high and low, to include community-based moral responsibility, respect for the appropriate timing of actions, and ethical generosity.

Landless Dalit artisan families in Bajhang are connected to landowning Brahman-Chhetri families through economic interdependence in which artisans provide products and labor to landowners. Brahman-Chhetri lineages over the generations have amassed wealth in land through historical processes that have excluded Dalits, a process intensified in the modern period with the human and natural erosion of arable land (Cameron 1998). Today Dalits exchange their artisan products and services with owner cultivators who regularly provide harvest shares and are expected to meet many other material and consumption needs of their Dalit dependents. Harvest payments from landholding families to landless Dalit families serve as the economic and moral backbone of the inter caste relationship as these flow from the established right of each family to ask for services, food, or cash loans from the other in time of need.⁸

In this section I focus on two kinds of non-ritual requests: the semiannual solicitation of *khala* (harvest shares), and everyday requests described in the opening paragraphs. What is evident is that both ranking and reciprocity are present throughout the interaction; *riti magné* is not a pure form of power and subservience, nor is it solely a conventional reciprocal exchange between status equals common to agricultural economies elsewhere. Certainly it is the case that *riti magné* is partially structured by codes of caste-based conduct; but in practice, *magné* is an encounter in which the community values of mutual reciprocity, friendship, cooperation, and dharma (religion, religious duty) are strategically and persuasively manipulated by both parties in achieving their respective goals. In such seasonal and everyday requests, the complex social boundaries separating Dalits and Brahman-Chhetris are infused with potential for future exchange and with ambiguity as to relative status. Although economic inequality brings the two parties together in mutual interdependence, it is the Dalit's cultural adroitness at engaging an ethos of cooperation that intermittently undermines a caste-based hierarchy of difference.⁹ Thus, *riti magné* transactions expose the special relational dilemmas encountered by Dalits in rural

settings.

In the kinds of everyday and seasonal interactions that are the focus here, Dalits deploy strategies that resist the domination explicit in being excluded from temples, water taps, and the interior of elite castes' homes. Brahman-Chhetri, on the other hand, seek to retain their position of dominance during the transactions by forcing subservient behavior from Dalits, making them wait for long periods for the requested items, criticizing their behavior, and insisting on labor in return. *Riti magné* incorporates the commonly-held beliefs about caste differences that include relative service to others (Dalits give more), relative wealth (Dalits have less), and relative social status.

Of the many scholars writing on caste in India, Gloria Raheja's work takes the practice of inter caste material transactions most seriously (Raheja 1990). Her work, while exhaustive and scholarly, contains two omissions that I have addressed more fully elsewhere (Cameron 1998). Briefly, she analyzes the ideology of upper-caste Gujar landowners thoroughly but neglects to discuss and analyze lower caste beliefs about what transpires in a transaction, in spite of the fact that lower castes dyadically figure into her models of centrality and mutuality. Nor does her analysis address non-ritual transactions, focusing instead on transactions between Gujar and others in ritual contexts alone. In one of her final chapters of *The Poison in the Gift* Raheja develops a model of mutuality based on data from harvest payments, wherein a kind of fictive kinship relationship supports the ethos of mutual transactional relations. However, this fictive kinship is never confirmed by Dalits, about whom we might wonder if they accept fictive family ties with status unequals. In Bajhang, similar transactions do not create a model of fictive kinship. Rather, the ethos supporting agricultural and artisan interdependence, as described below, includes inherited rights and responsibilities to non kin families, religious values of meritorious behavior, and community values of cooperation and generosity.

Drawing from the insights of Pierre Bourdieu on practice theory, customary material exchanges between castes—and in particular the language by which they transpire—are analyzed here as speech acts in which Nepali artisans and farmers actively deploy cultural models, normative rules, social disposition, and linguistic strategies, to build a 'sense of the exchange game' between status unequals (1977; 1990). The patterned regularity of word, gesture, voice, and outcome indicate shared cultural models, while the dynamic, constitutive quality of the exchanges points us past structure to the strategic, agentive subjectivity of creative linguistic performance. Thus, when we look perfunctorily at *riti magné* encounters, we find that domination is explicit, and results from Dalit economic deprivation and community Hindu beliefs about the relative purity of persons. If we look closer at the cultural context of *magné*, however, we find that Dalits resist domination by those of upper caste.¹⁰ Social boundaries are erected and contested on a daily basis, the meanings of

which are “co-constructed by participants, emergent from particular social interactions” (Ahearn 2001, 111). The dialogic and performative dynamics of the *magné* context are strategically manipulated and controlled by its interlocutors - the landowner and the landless, the non Dalit and the Dalit – ultimately to achieve pragmatic outcomes that meet subsistence needs for the one and guarantee a labor source and the merit of giving for the other.

Khare describes the refutation of domination as «subtle, discrete, and even partially masked by subservience» (1984), a theme taken up by James Scott in his well-known comparative studies of discourses and techniques of resistance to social domination (1985; 1990). Dalits of eastern Nepal are described by Folmar as often following a path of masking their identity in what he calls the “politics of anonymity” where the identity of Dalit is what is hidden for fear of injury or insult, and replaced with a different clan name or a different jaat altogether (Folmar this issue, p. 17). Folmar and I are both describing what to Scott and Khare are refutations of domination that are enacted in forms «suitable to social circumstances», suitable because they are created from a shared cultural model yet performed in such a way that may go unacknowledged by those in power.

The Dalits I have spoken with in Bajhang, Dailekh, and Kathmandu Valley about their experiences of being subordinated explain that while they abhor the treatment they receive, nonetheless they feel they can assert (albeit temporary) power to regulate their relations with elite castes, in traditional contexts such as *riti maagnay*, in modern development projects, and in the rare but increasingly acceptable professional contexts of inter caste interactions (Cameron 2008, forthcoming; Cameron and Rai 2000). What Dalits control in the *riti maagnay* relationship is in the broadest sense the relationship itself, as it sustains a particularly poignant appearance of necessity born of economic interdependence – Dalits as laborers for Brahman-Chhetri.

What distinguishes *riti magné* from other types of social interaction in Bajhang? First, it is not simply *gaf*, informal and spontaneous conversation or gossip. Instead, *riti magné* is one part of the agricultural cycle in Bajhang in which most community members participate as receivers and givers of products produced locally and used for subsistence. It is enacted on the stage of decades-long social and economic relationships, and keeps in motion on-going expectations of labor and material exchange rooted in a non capitalist economy. An economic transaction at its base, it is also a social arena of consequence to Dalit well-being in which social knowledge, artisan competence, and family productive reliability all factor into the negotiation of present boundaries and future expectations. Second, *riti magné* is not random, though it may appear so, as it is initiated by one party with little prior notice to the other. Indeed, *riti magné* is obligatory due to the economic dependency of landless Dalits on landholding Brahman-Chhetris.

Finally, *riti magné* involves communicative strategies deployed by Dalits to realize their goals while minimizing the subservient position high caste owner cultivators confer on them. These include selecting auspicious days to make requests; using gestures and symbols of subservience and dominance; engaging in mutually enjoyable conversation about family, crops, politics, and village events; mixing pleading and indignant tones; minimizing the amount requested; and shaming the *riti* if generosity is not forthcoming. These strategies convey shifting messages of denial, acceptance, resistance, compromise, friendship, and finally, satisfaction.

Dharma, Karma and Dukha

Commonly translated simply as religion, the local meaning in Bajhang of *dharma* or *dhamma* is dutiful action that produces religious merit. Implicit in the concept of *dharma* as duty is the idea of relation, particularly in the form of duty to others. The specifics of one's birth, such as gender and caste, are reflected in an individual's understanding of their and others' *dharma*. A common linguistic contraction is *jatidharma*, the “duty of one's caste” or “the duty of one's gender.” The concept of *jatidharma* presumes that individuals and groups have different duties and responsibilities, and fulfilling those responsibilities brings honor to oneself and the family. Thus, *dharma* is understood as “duty according to one's social place.” It is important to note that *jatidharma* distinctions are not inherently stratifying or hierarchical; they only become so through people's claims to power and authority through repetitious and everyday practices of dominance, subordination and resistance. During *riti maagnay* Dalits claim that it is a *riti*'s *dharma* to give them what they are asking for. Such moral expectations are further reinforced by Dalits' descriptions of their poverty-driven suffering.

The *dukha* (suffering) of being Dalit in Bajhang is linked to the concept of *dharma*; there is inevitable suffering associated with certain positions and situations in life. Individuals experiencing social and economic hardship may feel it is the unfolding of their *karma* to be experiencing pain, and that the fate of being from a stigmatized social group vastly exacerbates that situation. Experiences of situational *dukha* arising from one's *karma* can be alleviated by looking to external sources to help alleviate the suffering, be it healers for illness, shamans for emotional distress, or landowning *riti* for economic need. The community strongly values listening to another person's experiences of suffering; referencing one's *dukha* in the *riti maagnay* context expands the interaction between people to areas of emotional intensity involving compassion. When a *bhagya* confronts a reluctant *riti* he reminds her of the religious merit, *dharma*, gained through giving.¹¹ The *bhagya* tries to appeal to the sympathy of the *riti* by describing his current situation of *dukha* - a spouse is gone, a child is ill, an adult family member is unable to work, the cows are not giving milk, or there is insufficient money for a marriage. By expressing his *dukha*, the Dalit artisan gives the *riti* an opportunity to make life temporarily easier

for him by giving generously. In turn, the *riti* reaps the merit and power from giving.

The Right to Work

Fundamentally, the work that Dalits reliably perform for *riti* families supports their rightful claim to *khalo* and other things. The inter caste agreements between families entitle and obligate both sides to be the preferred employer and employee to each other. The moral obligation to work and to employ is quite strong in Bajhang, and has kept families in production relationships with one another over several generations. In the agricultural economy, landowning *riti* should ask for artisan products and labor first from their *bhagya* families. Indeed, landholding families are very reluctant to purchase tools, baskets, pottery and other artisan and farming services directly from a non-*bhagya*, much preferring to draw on the relationship they have with *bhagya* families, even if it may cost more in regular large and frequent small “payments.” The *riti* can rely on *bhagya* to deliver goods regularly and timely, and they can ask *bhagya* family members to work at any time. Third, from the *riti*’s perspective, an important social relationship is maintained that they believe ensures their continued economic, social, and political dominance.

The Right to Receive: Harvest Shares and Everyday Needs

Community members believe it is the right of Dalits to request food and other necessities from Brahman-Chhetri *ritis*; doing so sustains them through lean periods and temporarily soothes the hardships of their poverty. As a group, the Dalits of Bajhang expect fair payment in exchange for services rendered, and they make it known widely if they suspect they have been cheated by their *ritis*. Dalit artisans and laborers will delay or refuse to complete important farming or other work until the payment matter is resolved, a situation they raise as an issue during *riti maagnay* discussions. They therefore characterize their relationship with landowning *riti* primarily as one of asymmetrical economic reciprocity, rather than in kinship terms, as Raheja (1990) has suggested.

The largest request made in the agricultural cycle is for *khalo*, the semi-annual harvest shares of rice and wheat that may also include other grains such as corn, millet, lentils and soybeans.¹² *Khalo* is considered payment for work completed and a down-payment on relationship continuity. *Khalo* payments in Bajhang are mainly based on the value of the commodity produced or service rendered, though other considerations such as number of dependents, the sex of the laborers (men’s work is paid more than women’s work), imminent and costly weddings, and illness are also factored into *khalo* shares.¹³ A *bhagya* with many *riti* can amass substantially more *khalo* in a season than a *bhagya* with no *riti*. Indeed, the poorest Dalit households are those with few to no *riti*, and the relatively wealthier ones have many. The communal obligation to pay *bhagya* may produce a surplus from *khalo* for Dalit *bhagya* families with many

workers, extensive *riti* networks, and highly valued products. Although *khalo* is considered a payment for services rendered, the *bhagya* must walk to the threshing floor or the *riti*’s house to obtain it. In addition to *khalo* shares, all Dalit families with *riti bhagya* ties request food and other material goods from their patrons throughout the year, as Durga is described as doing in the introduction.¹⁴

ASKING

The strategies employed by Dalits to achieve their desired exchange goals include selecting auspicious days and times to make requests; using gestures and symbols of subservience and dominance; engaging in mutually enjoyable conversation about family, crops, politics, and village events; mixing pleading and indignant tones; shaming the *riti* into giving more than a meager amount; explicitly asserting one’s rightful claim to desired objects; using linguistic minimizers to convey openness and vagueness; appealing to values of religious merit and duty to those who suffer; and disputing *riti*’s assertions that they are undeserving.

Cultural Time: Auspiciousness and Dosh Maanay

Like many consequential actions in Hindu communities, the practice of *riti maagnay* is believed by the people of Bajhang to be most fruitful if undertaken during auspicious time, or *shubha bela*, and avoided during inauspicious time, or *ashubha* or *dosh bela*. By auspicious is meant the appropriate connection of time and temporal events in relation to particular categories of places, objects, and persons (Madan 1985:12-13).³ Auspicious times are determined astrologically, according to the phases of the moon, days of the week, and the time of day based on planetary alignment. They also may be determined by ritual events surrounding life passages such as births and deaths, as well as phases of the agricultural cycle. Auspiciousness involves space, time, people, and objects which, if connected in proper and appropriate ways, bear well-being, happiness, health, and balance. Dalits often evaluate the auspiciousness of plans to *riti magné*, connecting their moral right to ask for objects with their cultural knowledge of appropriate timing.

The practice of avoiding inauspicious times to undertake action is called *dosh manay*, to “observe the inauspiciousness” of certain times and actions, and to avoid activities during those times. The effect of *dosh* would be to render attempts to receive objects fruitless; many Dalits will not approach *riti* to ask for things if they consider the time to be inauspicious to either themselves or to their *riti*. There is not strict conformity to *dosh mane* among all Dalit families and groups. The women I know in a Damai family observe *dosh* based on the *riti*’s situation and not based on their own family situation, while others will consider the auspiciousness of both families. Finally, the Baadi apply the most complex grid of *dosh mane* to their *magné* practices. They do not *magnu* on days in which the moon is in an inauspicious phase, for example *punrma* (full moon), *aunsi* (no moon), *sankranti* (first day of the month),

masanti (last day of month), and *ekadashi* (eleventh day after *aunsi*). Also, if the *riti* is inside the house eating they will not *magné* because the patron will not give. If the *bar* (day) is good but the *riti* is placing a fresh coat of mud-plaster on the walls of the house - a practice called *lipnay* that is associated with the auspiciousness of a religious or lunar event - they will not *magné* because the *riti* will not give on such days, either. Other days deemed inauspicious by the Baadi are Maagh tihar, *utraini* and *shatraini* (inauspicious planetary alignments), and *sraddha* (death anniversary of both the *riti* and the *bhagya*'s ancestors).

The most important times to request one's *khalo* share are the rice and wheat harvest months of *Kartik* (mid-October through mid-November 15) and *Jeth* (mid-May through mid-June 15), especially while the crop is being harvested in the field. If the month progresses without the *bhagya* initiating requests, she or he may not receive *khalo* until months later; once the harvest is stored the *bhagya* must wait until the *riti* themselves have eaten from the new grain stores. *Riti maagnay*, then, is not a series of spontaneous events initiated at will by *bhagya*. Rather, the practice incorporates a rightful claim to ask high caste owner cultivators for subsistence needs, and they are framed by moral ideas about appropriate action taken at auspicious times.

LINGUISTIC STRATEGIES

Dalits who initiate requests for food and non food items convey their right and/or their need to receive the desired object, while landowners want to at least initially avoid giving to Dalits by either ignoring the request, giving as little as possible, and/or demanding they receive something (or the promise of something) in return. Competing objectives therefore engage both parties in a dialogue that co-constructs what it means to be a Dalit who seeks and to be a non Dalit who gives.

Minimizing and Shaming

A linguistic strategy effectively used by Dalit *bhagya* in *riti* *maagnay* is minimizing, a form of conventional indirectness that serves to make the request appear modest yet necessary. Minimizing some feature of the request - the amount, the item, and/or the person himself - facilitates negotiation and compromise between the parties, thus giving Dalits a modicum of temporary control over the situation. The vagueness of minimizers follows norms of interaction that discourage lower status persons (Dalits and women, for example) from making direct demands on higher status persons. The expectation of future reciprocity and the real belief that Dalits have in the rightness of their claims, both support the request as a demand. Habermas notes this function of language when he observes the following: "... when certain social roles prescribe that commands be uttered in the form of requests, the pragmatic meaning of the utterance (as a command) in no way alters the linguistic meaning of the sentence (as a

request)" (1979: 45). Such linguistic strategies are common in asymmetric speech acts. For Dalits, demonstrating linguistic agency can counter positions of dominance by persons of so-called higher caste. Once the request for an object is established through this initial contact the exchange proceeds with the mutual understanding that the desired object is negotiable. Dalit and Brahman-Chhetri alike should then demonstrate a willingness to negotiate in a friendly and fair way.

Agentic Dalit strategy in *riti magné* is found also in shaming the *riti*. Though a Dalit may minimize her request, she anticipates that the donor will provide more than a small amount. If that does not happen, Dalits will ridicule or reject a small offering and demand more. Numerous times I have observed Dalits either reluctantly accept the item-donation, complaining that it is insufficient, or the donation is outright rejected and the supplicant begins to walk away in disgust. One late afternoon in January, 1989, for example, the wife of an ironsmith (Luharni) stopped by the house of a Thakuri family I was visiting in Bajhang, taking a break from fieldwork to discuss their daughter's education. Luharni politely asked her female *riti* for some salt and spices to cook her family's evening meal. The Thakuri *riti* gave her a couple of dried red peppers but no salt. The ironsmith's wife refused to take the small dried plants that had been set on the ground, exclaiming loud enough for others to hear, "How *lobhi* [selfish] you are! This amount is not worth anything for cooking. And you don't have a small amount of salt?" She began to walk away as the Thakuri woman told her "Wait, sister, I'll get a bit more for you. You don't have to be angry." Such responses to a *riti* who is being less than generous are very effective, for people in this cooperative farming community do not want to earn reputations of being greedy and selfish. The use of shame by accusing the rich Thakuri landowner accusations of selfishness was effective in persuading the *riti* to be more generous.

Or take the case of Paru Damai, a tailor who came to a Brahman family's house one morning in December, 1994, as I finished eating a rice meal as their guest. He needed rice for his own meal that morning, as the women in the family were either ill (his elderly wife), menstruating and therefore ritually impure to cook food (his older daughter-in-law), or in a distant field working for another *riti* (his youngest daughter-in-law). Paru's family had sewn and repaired clothing for the extended Brahman family for four generations and his right to make food requests outside the harvest season was indisputable. Still, as the head of a poor family, Paru was vulnerable to *riti* caprice. That morning he asked: "Hajur, may I have a handful of *chamal* [husked rice] for our breakfast this morning?" "How much do you need?" the Brahmani replied. "Oh, just a small amount" and he gestured with a cupped hand to indicate the meager amount. He was eventually given a small amount, to which he replied it was not enough, asking rhetorically how that could ever feed a family of seven. After about an hour of negotiation, Paru left with the equivalent of about two pounds (two *maana*) of husked rice, far more than

the small handful he had originally requested.

Chitta bujnay: To be satisfied

Both parties understand that satisfied desires, *chita bhujnay*, are the goal of *riti maagnay*. Dalits do not expect to get exactly what they came for, but they will not leave until a modicum of satisfaction is realized. Landowners, in turn, typically begin the negotiation with an immediate refusal of the request, but will eventually find it in their interest to capitulate. They are persuaded to act meritoriously (or appear to be acting so), they value a future work commitment, and they want the solicitation to end.

CONCLUSIONS: COMPREHENSIVE SOCIAL JUSTICE

The contribution of Dalit artisans and workers to the village economy is indisputable. Yet they participate in economic formations not always of their own choosing, as evident in their attempts to seek economic independence by acquiring land on the local market, and their on-going material demands from Brahman-Chhetri landowners. The above 'ethnography of the particular' hoped to convey also a sense of Dalit agency in challenging caste discrimination in a form distinct from the challenge to caste oppression offered by Dalit political activists. The communicative agency of *riti magné* incorporates linguistic schemas and strategies in which the merits of an initial request are debated using persuasion and influence, shaming and supplication, and where power differences between the castes are challenged. To participate in *riti maagnay* is to perpetuate Brahman-Chhetri domination in a fundamental way, but also to resist, deny, and render ambiguous and contestable such domination by applying discursive techniques embodying alternative community values of mutual obligation, cooperation, friendliness and generosity. Rural Dalit agency brings to the fore and contests the forms of discrimination and oppression importantly evoked in the debate over the term "Dalit" by political activists, a debate that nonetheless fails to acknowledge the economic dependency of Dalits on non Dalits and the former's evolved ability to adjust to and live with respect under those conditions.

I believe it is the nuances of inter caste relationships that will bear significantly on the forms social justice in Nepal will take. Broad gestures of reform will be ineffective if urban legislators fail to consider sources of Dalit power and sources of their dependence on Brahman-Chhetri landowners. If those legislators do not actively address rural economic interdependence (and there is growing concern by nepaldalitinfo.com participants that the Constituent Assembly representatives may be less activist and more pawns of political parties), there may be unintended consequences of severing traditional ties in ways that could negatively impact rural Dalits, as one close observer on the ground notes.¹⁵

An example of the consequences of ignoring rural Dalit

realities in the wake of social reforms in Nepal can be found in the case of family property inheritance reform. Until recently, Dalit women inherited property in the same way as non Dalit women, that is, through males and primarily through husbands after marriage. Most Dalit families own little to no land, and what women inherit, then, are economic relationships associated with *riti-bhagya* ties, like the right to work for landowners in exchange for harvest shares and other material goods described above. Under new family property inheritance laws, however, women have the right to inherit land and other property equal to brothers. Consequently, Dalit women's main source of economic stability – landowners' land on which they labor as a right they inherit through their husband's family – is potentially destabilized as land becomes divided among daughters and sons equally. As the problem of landowning daughters' property inheritance after marriage (when daughters typically move away from the natal home) has been widely discussed as a potential barrier to women claiming their new property rights, problems associated with Dalit women's inheritance (such as the unlikelihood she could inherit rights to work from her father's *riti*, or that the land of her husband's *riti* might be reduced by landowner daughters' inheritance) have been ignored, most likely due to a lack of understanding by legislators and party leaders about rural Dalit women's situation.

The social dimensions of rural economic exchange like *riti maagnay* must be considered as the people and the government of Nepal move forward with eliminating caste-based inequality. My argument here has been that such complexities remain unintentionally unacknowledged in the quest for an emergent Dalit identity that tends to focus on historical trajectories of injustice and abstract ideas of political representation, and less on local economic realities and community values. An important question that flows from recognition of rural agricultural realities in mixed caste communities would be how best to replace the in-kind and moral economy in artisan and farming relations with forms of fair payment to artisans. As we have seen, negotiation is a central theme in *riti maagnay*, suggesting that Dalits feel they are not fairly compensated, and that they therefore must measure compensation beyond a simple employment calculation. It is difficult to verify if, indeed, there is an equal exchange of pay for work. Furthermore, the moral dimension of exchange – that those with more should give to those with less – suggests that the communities involved regard entitlement claims as valid. Will the government of Nepal be able to replace the agency informed by moral judgment and community standards with legalistic fair employment practices that can be enforced? Will Dalits be provided sufficient incentives to opt out of the inherited system and to participate in a free market labor economy, risking the loss of a safety net during times of *dukkha*? Could Dalits become landowners and subsistence farmers, in numbers equivalent to their non Dalit counterparts? Land reform has not always helped Dalits, due to corruption and fraud by non Dalits

and due to Dalit unwillingness to settle on land far from the reliable, though potentially exploitative, *riti bhagya* system. Can the government of Nepal provide to Dalits an economic safety-net now provided by landowners? Such questions must be considered in achieving economic justice for Dalit families.

Finally, the question of social justice remains. The efficacy of a modern political identity, while partially realized in the work of donor agencies and abstract Constitutional representation, belies the criminal justice system's abysmal record of protecting Dalits from caste-based crimes. It is widely recognized, and a source of continuous frustration for those working on behalf of Dalits, that the laws against caste-based discrimination are not enforced. Weekly reports of abuse and violence against Dalits are inevitably accompanied by reports of a weak police investigation, or of no investigation at all. Indeed, the staff at FEDO (Feminist Dalit Organization) and other Dalit NGOs spend enormous time and effort publicly protesting noncompliance to Nepal's laws, and resorting to legal action themselves. Responding to this need, many Dalit development projects involve educational programs specifically geared toward informing Dalits of their civil and legal rights.

What we should conclude is that as Nepal progresses from a period of violence to a state of hard-fought political equality, only a comprehensive approach toward social justice involving economic, civil, and educational rights will be acceptable to Dalit communities.

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Interim Constitution of Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal, 2007 Pp. 2063

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ENDNOTES

1. A scene composed from field observations in Bajhang recorded during the years 1978-2001.

2. The figures for Nepal's Dalit population vary widely and are a source of controversy. The government itself uses different figures in the same year from its own census reports, depending on the context, and they are widely regarded as too low. Dalit NGO Federation conducted its own census in 2003 and found the population to be around 23%. I thank D.B. Bishwakarma for this information (email communication March 5, 2008).

3. I would like to credit this last point to discussions with Dr. Drona Rasali.

4. In Bajhang the practice relates to what is locally called *riti bhagya* or *rithi bhage* (depending on local dialects), translated as the "tradition of receiving harvest shares," a term that over time has also come to refer to the people involved, such that *rithi* refers to landowners who are usually of elite caste and others (ethnic minorities and other dalits, for example) for whom Dalit artisans, referred to as *bhagya*, work. As described later, these are inherited economic relationships. *Riti bhagya* or *rithi bhage* is a term used primarily in Seti and Mahakali Zones. In other regions of Nepal the relationship goes by different names such as *balighare pratha*. In this article I retain the term *riti bhagya* commonly used in Bajhang when referring to both the custom of economic interdependence and to the people themselves.

5. See Hangen 2005 on the political identity of ethnic minority groups in Nepal.

6. I thank Mr. Motilal Nepali, Chair of Dalit NGO Federation - Nepal and Dalit Welfare Association, and Mr. DB Sagar Bishwakarma, President, International Commission for Dalit Rights (ICDR), for assisting me with information on Dalit NGOs in Nepal.

7. The most famous Nepali to use the surname Bishwokarma was former Minister Hira Lal Bishwokarma. Before him, though, many Nepali Dalits had registered their surnames as Bishwokarma (and other versions) (email correspondence Om Prakash VK, 7-28-07).

8. The enormously important contribution that Dalit artisans make to the local economy can be seen in Table 4 of Cameron (1998, pp. 33-34), that lists the functional and aesthetic products produced by Bajhang Dalit artisans.

9. Evidence from Palpa District in western Nepal suggests that this ethos may be absent and that Dalits routinely feel exploited by landholding families for whom they work and from whom they receive less than adequate payment (email correspondence, DB Bishwakarma, 7-8-2007).

10. Relations of domination between non Dalits over Dalits are the focus of early studies on South Asian culture, including Berreman 1979, Borgstrom 1980, Briggs 1975, Freeman 1979, Galanter 1972, Hofer 1979, Khare 1984, Lynch 1969, Mencher 1974, and Miller 1966, 1969.

11. The concept of *dharma*, defined as religion and religious or meritorious duty based on one's relative social position, is central to Hindu ideology and popular Hindu culture (Allen 1982; Daniel 1984; Fruzzetti 1982; Khare 1976; Inden and Nicholas 1977; Kolenda 1982; Madan 1982).

12. Due to the scarcity of grain among Dalit families, their pay-

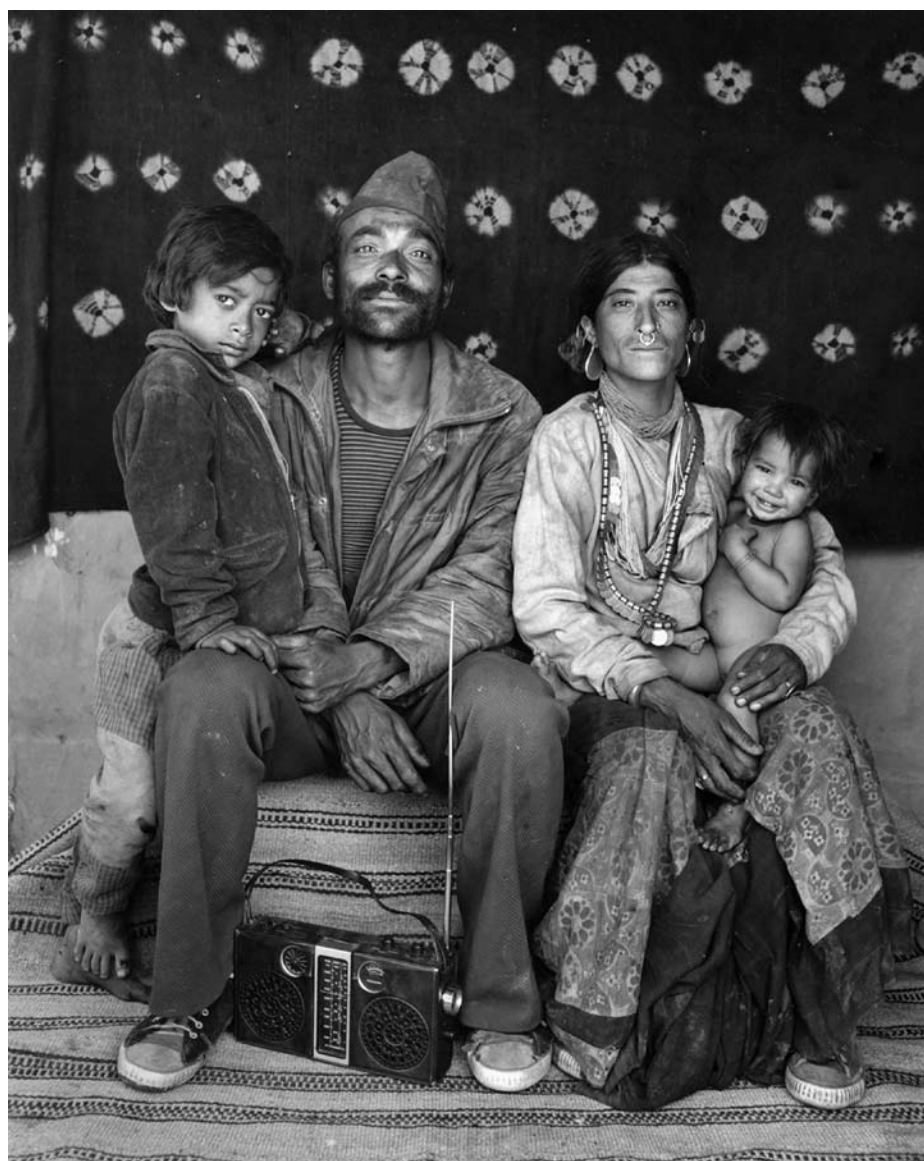
ments to other Dalit *riti* are in the form of exchanges of services or commodities, rather than grains.

13. Lohar ironsmiths (Kami) receive the largest *khalo* per family because their tool-making work is vital to the agricultural economy and is considered physically demanding. Sarki, Parki, and Oudh receive smaller *khalo* and have fewer *riti* families. The value of the Sarki's leatherworking has greatly diminished in the past few decades because of local preferences for imported plastic goods such as sandals from other parts of Nepal or India. Parki and Oudh receive smaller *khalo* shares because the Parki's bamboo products and the Oudh's masonry skills are not in regular demand. In my research I found that the greatest total amount of *khalo* was given to the Badi because all Brahman-Chhetri families feel obliged to give to them. The Badi do no farming for themselves or for anyone else and are

completely dependent on the generosity of the Brahman-Chhetri.

14. Of the different artisan groups in Bajhang, the Badi most broadly interpret their *riti* duty to them, and constantly request grains, lentils, spices, salt, money, cigarettes, and even alcohol, in exchange for what many perceive to be minimal services rendered as entertainers and potters.

15. Peter Burleigh (former Ambassador and Deputy Representative to the United Nations, Ambassador to Sri Lanka and the Republic of Maldives, official in the U.S. embassies in Nepal, Bahrain, India, and Sri Lanka, and former Peace Corps volunteer in Nepal) recently informed me of this possible development, in his current role as Nepal election observer for the Carter Center (email communication March 4, 2008).



Blacksmith family from Syara,
Humla district, Nepal

PHOTO: KEVIN BUBRISKI