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IDENTITY POLITICS AMONG DALITS IN NEPAL

In challenging, “the popular belief that castes that are considered impure according to the Brahmanical hierarchy, nevertheless participate willingly in their own degradation,” (Gupta 2004, 410, see also Moffat 1979) Gupta suggests that the social action in which Dalits engage is poorly understood. Similarly, in Nepal, Dalit issues remain in the nearly invisible undercurrent of contemporary identity politics. This paper examines micro-level identity politics as they relate to the Dalit jats, Kami, Sarki and Damai in Central and Western Nepal. The paper attempts to fill in some of the uncharted area of local political action by depicting various strategies employed by Dalits to negotiate local political landscapes. Several dimensions of Dalit identity strategies are examined including inter- and intra-jat processes, the politics of inclusion and exclusion and the politics of anonymity. Manipulation of caste identity includes strategies making use of origin stories and manipulating inter-caste boundaries. Specific techniques involve alternately asserting and obscuring identity via collective actions of political organization and openly challenging caste structures to shifting use of last-name identification, assuming higher jat status, and using powerful social positions (e.g. faith healer) to override inter-jat restrictions and to lay claim to resources normally withheld from Dalits.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the little-understood question of Dalit¹ identity politics in Nepal. A major controversy is whether Dalits have internalized their low status so much that they reinforce it through their behavior. A brief review of recent literature on Dalit status suggests that in India this issue is still unresolved and in Nepal it is barely of interest to scholars. In an attempt to illuminate questions of Dalit social action at the local level, I flesh out dimensions of identity politics, including a set of actions I call the politics of anonymity (and related strategies), to attempt to further comprehend Dalit resistance to their social oppression. Three still-open issues are salient:

- The degree to which Dalits are still subject to social and political oppression.
- The degree to which Dalits “participate willingly in their own degradation.”
- The social and political strategies Dalits employ to deal with degradation.

SCHOLARLY LITERATURE ON DALITS²

The earliest ethnographies to include details of Dalit life in Nepal did not appear until more than two decades after Nepal was opened to the west and

the ethnography of Nepal was flourishing. Caplan (1972) and Borgstrom (1980) examined the effects of local politics on inter-caste relations with high castes and Hofer (1976) published an account of smithy among Kamis. Not until the 1990s was there an expansion in ethnography specifically focused on Dalits. Much of this focused on specific ritual roles, such as shaman (Maskerinek 1995), Damai musicians (Tingey 1994) and Gaine minstrels (Weisethaunet 1998). Cameron’s (1998) examination of the status of women of several low-castes in far western Nepal is remarkable for its focus on daily routine. I have recently contributed to literature on hill Dalits, examining how they are marginalized by higher status caste and ethnic groups in the processes of development and tourism (Folmar 2004, 2005, 2008). Parish (1996) examined caste structure and resistance to it among the Newars of Kathmandu Valley. More recent interest comes from Nepali scholars whose foci are on the application of research to development concerns by Bhattachan, et al. (2002), Dahal, et al. (2002) and Kisan (2005), himself a Dalit. This list of publications is quite short when compared to similar reviews for the high castes or for ethnic groups in Nepal.

The challenge of working with Dalits

Research on Nepal's Dalits has been sparse, partly because of the personal challenge of working among them. A similar difficulty is found in India, where scholars have demonstrated a very real, personal aversion to "the method," as Moffat (1979) calls living among Dalits. He noted that the prospect was so daunting that, after having set up residence in a Dalit village, he nearly forsook his research:

I was not at the time...prepared for the psychological stress of the method, and after about three months of intermittent residence in the Parangudi Harijan hamlet, I left the village and the region with the intention of abandoning my fieldwork in India (Moffat 1979: xxiv).

Moffat eventually decided to live outside the Parangudi Harijan hamlet. Even from a distance, he encountered problems of social stigma that interfered with his work. The very idea that he wanted to understand the culture of Dalits was considered "outlandish," by locals (xxviii). The major obstacle was that contact with "untouchables" impeded access to people of clean castes. Two and a half decades later Clark-Deces (2005) would encounter similar difficulties in Tamil Nadu and in order to manage considerations of purity and impurity chose not to reside with the Dalits she studied.

Cameron, confronted by the same difficulty in her study of low caste women in far western Nepal, lived with a high caste family, reporting, "I had to make many concessions to continue with my research" (36). She "had to obtain permission from [her] landlady before the low caste interviewee would be allowed inside [her] quarters," (36). Tingey (1994) too decided to forego the option of living in the home of a Damai musician, the group with whom she was working, in favor of staying with Newars, who were higher in status. So unusual is it for ethnographers to live among Dalits that when my students and I stayed in Jharuwarasi, a low caste village in Kathmandu Valley, a television station found it worthy of doing a story on us for that very reason.

Each ethnographer must consider the payoff when making such a choice. As Dalits do live in a caste system, studies of their social standing must be conducted with reference to the other, higher status groups. For Tingey (1994) and Cameron (1998) living among high castes restricted their access to the Dalits who were the central focus of the work. This was also a concern for me in Sirubari in 2002, when I attempted to understand the intricacies of Damai involvement in the local Gurung-run Village Tourism Project. In an odd living arrangement of rotating among Gurung households every other day, I had to reach out to the Damai musicians by making twice daily trips to Damai Tol, a pattern that then restricted my access to important, high status Gurungs. Actually living among Dalits makes access to higher status individuals even trickier. Living in Jharuwarasi among Dalits conferred automatic Dalit-like status to me and created situational ambiguities difficult to negotiate with elites, such as gaining entry to areas forbidden to Dalits, in particular tea

shops. As a consequence of having this status conferred on me (although in no way as onerous as actually being Dalit), I gained some insight into the social and psychological challenges their status entails.

Dalits as non-issues in scholarship on Nepal

The study of Dalits of Nepal has also been secondary to other scholarly concerns. One approach, which will be mentioned only briefly here, is to consider Dalit issues in Nepal as contributing little to what we can learn through the robust interest in Dalits of India³. Another is to view Dalits' concerns as secondary to current issues of global interest to the academic community or to emergent socio-political events in modern Nepal; in contrast, Dalit issues are seen as chronic and perhaps uninteresting.

As political and social events of the last decade of the 20th century unfolded, Dalit social issues remained mired in an ethnographic no-man's land. This was true even though the social problems that suddenly gripped scholarly attention had characterized Dalits for ages. An upsurge of interest in women's issues mirrored a global urgency to address feminist issues. During the same timeframe, another global concern was to quell the spread of HIV/AIDS, leading to plentiful funding and scholarly activity. The Maoist uprising provided a compelling, local, social phenomenon for academic attention. There is no argument about how important these and other issues are and, ironically, Dalit status was related to all of these. In gender issues, Dalit women are recognized as doubly disadvantaged both by low caste and gender status. Dalits are suggested targets of HIV intervention because of their high risk profile. Maoist rhetoric referred to issues of poverty, powerlessness and marginalization, all concerns for Dalits, who were said to have swelled the Maoists ranks, although there is no firm evidence to confirm that. Even so, Dalit issues continued to be swept aside by these more current affairs – they had the one thing that Dalit issues lacked, the appeal that comes with the new discovery. Dalit issues are just the opposite; they are age-old, rooted, some argue, in the very genesis of the caste system, and identified as a concern of Indian, rather than Nepali scholarship.

Dalits and caste: Resistance or acquiescence?

Scholars agree that castes are hierarchical, but dispute whether ranking is based in the symbolic separation of clean from unclean (Dumont 1970) or in the exertion of economic, political or materially-based power (Hocart 1950, Quigley 1993). Gupta (2005) recently raised the question of whether caste is more about identity than system. He asserts that the caste system has remained fundamentally the same but that avenues for resisting and challenging it have opened up, making it more an issue of identity. Beteille (1965) cautions us not to overlook other hierarchies, such as class, that operate alongside caste and can either work in tandem with

caste or cut across it, thus weakening it. A focus on Dalits begs yet another question about whether caste is a unified system or is composed of several micro-systems of ideology and social practice (Moffat 1979). No one definition suffices for caste, since it describes a wide range of cultural situations across time and space. The caste system has such social potency and ability to resist change (though change does occur) because it is all these things, symbolic and material, one system and several, overlapping other hierarchies such as class, race (Hangen 2005), gender (Cameron 1998) and even modernization (Bista 1990). Beteille notes that until recently caste was a system of cumulative inequalities: in “the traditional structure the cleavages of caste, class, and power tended much more than today to run along the same grooves” (1965: 4). In reinforcing each other, they were far more difficult to resist.

This view of “traditional” systems of caste has led scholars to accept the marginalization of Dalits uncritically. According to Karanth, by stressing “institutional similarities among the Untouchable castes and the so-called ‘higher’ castes scholars like Dumont and Moffat attribute a passive acceptance of low status by the former” (2004: 138). The view that Dalits thus reinforce their low status is consistent with self-identity theory, which posits that in any hierarchical social system, “low ranking people often feel they have a stake in the hierarchy...a lowly position and a strong sense of duty are neither incompatible nor contradictory” (Hatch 1989: 351). But the pivotal moment in Dalit history in Nepal was the imposition of untouchability, *pani nachalne*, onto low castes, as defined by the Rana rulers in the Muluki Ain of 1854 (Hofer 1979). According to Kisan (2005), an organized Dalit social movement began at least 60 years ago, in 1947, to oppose their degradation.

Gupta has recently reviewed this issue for Indian Dalits (2005) and edited a volume exploring how they relate to people of higher caste (2004). In these pieces, he and his colleagues challenge Moffat’s (1979) thesis that untouchables accept their low status and act in ways to reinforce it. A process that is said to exemplify internalization of self-degrading behavior is Sanskritization, wherein low castes replicate practices of higher castes. But this is a matter of interpretation. It could also be argued that copying the behavior of elites is a way to elevate status. The biography of Dr. Ambedkar, whose emulation of high caste behavior initiated the entire Dalit social movement in South Asia would attest to that (see Jaffrelot 2004). By the same token, the meaning of other so-called self-degrading acts can cut both ways. For instance, one can construe passive resistance of the kind described by Parish (1996) as self-debasing or as a subtle exercise of subversive power.

In a recent study of low-caste musicians in Tamil Nadu, Clark-Deces (2005) shows how behavior both accepts and resists low status. Dalits in Tamil Nadu tell the story of Virajampuhan, the first Paraiyar, at the cremation grounds. The telling “is neither cathartic nor elevating, as is the case

(at least partly) in dirges and death songs, but restrictive and downgrading” (Clark-Deces 2005; 131). She goes on:

To the question of how they felt about their lowly condition... men replied that they were not angry, because the great god Siva had fated them to be Paraiyars. As one petitioner told me, ‘God created me in this caste. I have no resentment (kurai) about that. Who I am today is god’s creation and design (Clarke-Deces 2005; 132).

The dirges, however, are densely multivocal; they praise patrons (104), “secure esteem” for the singer (105), provide an arena for competition among singers (106-107) and teach lessons (115). They are tragic and comic (115) and, in fact, are so irreverent that by singing them, men strive to, “tip the hierarchical world of the Tamil day-to-day life in their favor, even if their caste is low” (121).

This theme, of the subversive masked by subservience, continues one established by Freeman in the landmark personal history of the untouchable, Muli (Freeman 1979). Muli frequently contributed to his own misery, not because he willed it, but because of structural barriers to his advancement. Following on Berreman’s assertion that, “no group of people is content to be low in a caste hierarchy” (1973, 405), Freeman explains: “Mulmi and other Bauris have failed, not because they embody expectations of failure or accept their lot, but rather because the Bauris face social and economic disabilities that they are presently powerless to change” (1979: 397).

The same is true of Viramma (2002), a Dalit woman who describes how she and other Dalits silently accept restrictions on their singing by high caste patrons: “When we work for the Reddiar, there’s no question of us singing. We keep our mouths shut out of respect for the Reddiar” (2002: 191). But:

Towards midday, as soon as the Reddiar goes home to eat, I start up with the first song. After our husbands, the Reddiar are the people we respect and fear the most. We are their serfs. It’s different with other landowners, we sing as much as we want and anyway, they like it. Sometimes when we work for the Naicker, we joke with him. We can even make fun of him (2002, 191).

The relationship between structural control and latitude for open resistance becomes clearer in her remarks that, “We make fun of Brahmins as well” because “Brahmins own nothing...apart from Temple land. We never go work for them, they employ only Kundiyandar. That’s why we can make fun of them” (2002: 192).

Social and political strategies

The social and political strategies Dalits employ in everyday life to bow to, quietly accept, dissent to or resist high caste domination are numerous. At times a single action embodies several goals, even polar opposites, behaviors that seemingly accept the system but subtly challenge it.

A primary form of dissent, according to Karanth (2004) is replication, which has been viewed by others, including Ambedkar (Jaffelot 2004), as acquiescing to low status. However, Karanth argues that it is the economic system of patronage in village Karnataka that maintains economic and ritual hierarchy, not the act of replication. Empirically, this point is played out at the town well, the use of which is a point of contention between untouchable Holeyas and landowning Okkaligas. One Holeyas says, "After all, my people live here and I do not want to antagonize the members of other castes. But I am hopeful that the Okkaligas will realize that the old order is changing and will stop treating us the way they are doing now" (Karanth 2004: 156). But Karanth comments that the dominant prevail: "if [the Holeyas] oppose the ideas of segregation as prescribed by the dominant and ruling faction, they are not likely to get what they want," (2004, 158).

Moffat (1979) sees replication quite in the opposite way of reinforcing low status. By thoroughly copying the institutions that Brahmins bar them from, Dalits further marginalize themselves from the system in which they seek membership. This view depends heavily on Moffat's assumption that Dalits and Brahmins share one cultural system (Gellner 2001). Karanth (2004) disagrees; replication is not a form of acquiescence to a low status position in a seamless social ethic, but is a strategy of dissent. People who perform service can disagree with the system, but may have little power to resist it. Regardless of caste, village headmen and elders vigorously uphold a social system that serves their own needs. Cameron (1995) concludes similarly, showing how Dalits select Bahuns to perform their rituals – through married women's natal male relatives. Although this might appear to be replication, it is in fact only so in that Dalits get the ritual work done; otherwise, they sidestep caste Bahun authority.

In my experience, Dalit views of self depart significantly from how high castes view them. Although the Bahun may recoil at the mere thought of taking food from a Dalit's hand, the Dalit is not reluctant to make such an offer, for he does not think he is dirty or *achut*, but recognizes that others see him this way. The offer is not one merely of food but as a chance to negate notions of impurity.

Because of acts like this, Dalits are often described as anti-establishment, in that they resist Hindu hegemony by turning to deities that reign beyond the central moral order, and drawing power from sources that defile the high castes (Kinsley 1993). One particularly powerful and potentially subversive Goddess is Kali. The subversive elements "of Kali worship have long been at the core of the religious practices and world views of aboriginal, Tantric, low caste, and village traditions," (Caldwell 2003). Devotion to Kali is widespread among low castes, precisely because of her subversive nature, her destructive capabilities and her potential to transform society. Kathmandu Valley contains the holy shrine of Dakshinkali, where the masses sacrifice to her and which validate certain local forms of shamanism and faith-healing, ritual positions of power open to Dalits. Shamanism and

faith-healing are conducted as such and are examples of Dalit attempts to wrest power for themselves though innovative practices of resistance to an unmerciful social order (see, e.g. Maskerinec 1995).

Another way to resist caste hierarchy is to reconfigure Vedic-based origin stories into *jati puranas* (Gupta 2005), which posit an origin of caste equality. The latter openly question Brahmanical claims to high status and challenge the validity of hierarchy. Alternate origin stories are not uncommon. Badri (2004) recounts, for example, how Dalits create stories that realign present day claims to status through valorizing the past. A case in point, the story of Uman Devi honors Dalits' place in history and legitimizes their present. Even Moffat (1979) records the story of Aadi Draavida, the primordial Dravidian, claiming the position of the first born of caste ancestors. In a similar vein, Dalits, reject Hinduism outright in favor of other religions favoring equality, such as Buddhism, sometimes believed to be the original religion of Dalits (Jaffelot 2004).

In another cultural domain, Agrawal (2004) describes how caste can be reordered through the manipulation of kinship rules. These rules are designed for central moral codes, not codes of prostitution, the caste-based occupation of Bedia women. Through artful twists of caste logic, Bedia claim high *jat* status for their offspring sired by high caste men. In quite a different manner, Quigley (1993) and Gray (1995) touch briefly on how naming and manipulation of kinship identity are employed both as a means of assigning and resisting caste identity in Nepal, a topic that is explored below.

Another area of resistance is physical space, made exclusive by constructing symbolic and physical boundaries to exclude low-status individuals from high status areas. Beteille (1965) shows how the physical structure of the village in South India mirrors its power structure: "the *agraham* ... is not only a cluster of habitations, but also the centre of social life for the Brahmins," whereas, "the Pallacheri...is not just another quarter of the village; it is a place which no Brahmin should enter." I have also observed how higher status groups manipulate geography to exclude Dalits (Folmar 2008) and by so doing, create spaces that Dalits control because of their potential to pollute the pure. Low castes control their space by a sort of proxy power relinquished to them by people who want to avoid its capacity to pollute. Ironically, that which defines Dalits as low and powerless imbues them with the subversive power of untouchability. A Brahmin who enters Pallacheri risks becoming defiled and hence barred entry to Brahmin-only spaces.

Three features of cultural geography, tea shops, water taps and temples are the focus of changing inter-caste relations in Nepal today (see Kisan 2005) and figure significantly in current identity politics.

Dalit oppression

There is no simple answer to the question of whether Dalits are achieving social equality in Nepal today. The current legal code prohibits caste discrimination, but, as Kisan (2005) points out, they are not enforced and have loopholes that allow for continued oppression on numerous grounds. Often the conversation centers on whether a specific change signals deeper, more fundamental shifts in the social fabric of Nepal. Speculation falls into three categories: that material improvement is possible despite caste affiliation, that Dalits now have access to occupations they once did not, and that restrictions on specific prohibitions are easing. All these are true; I have seen examples of each, but it is just as easy to conclude that very little is changing and to employ the same examples as evidence.

These discussions point to the complexity of what constitutes real change. Toppling the caste hierarchy into a set of distinct but socially equal identity groups is not expected by anyone. Nearly three decades ago, Kolenda concluded that for Dalits of India hierarchy was not vanishing; “untouchables are not advancing as rapidly as the legislated quotas originally forecasted” (1978: 132). If anything, in Nepal, change for Dalits lags behind India. Nepal’s Dalits lack the political force to instigate meaningful change and for many Nepalis, the goals are less grand, formulated as a desire to loosen the system up for individual- and group-level social mobility. Ideas that have traction focus on tangibles, like educational and occupational opportunities. Key symbolic changes in oppression, such as access to once-forbidden cultural spaces, in particular temples, tea shops and wells, working in jobs once unattainable and side by side with non-Dalit colleagues without fear of discrimination are debated. They are argued over both as evidence for positive social change and as examples of superficial changes that obscure the fact that things are changing very little. This theme, that evidence is ambiguous, pervades my observations from working among Dalits in Nepal.

DALIT IDENTITY IN NEPAL: DISCRIMINATION AND EQUALITY⁴

I now summarize ethnographic observations I have made on issues of Dalit agency, or their culturally constrained ability to act (Ahearn 2001). For Dalits, agency is referenced specifically in relation to people of higher and dominant status, including castes and ethnic groups. It also refers to a particular kind of socio-political action that is akin to identity politics, within which sphere I will discuss the multiple ways identity is illuminated and claimed as well as how it is altered and even masked, and how each action is employed as a strategy to regulate relations with others. I call the altering and masking of identity, the politics of anonymity. Its overt, tactical structure is opposite to identity politics, and the two can work at cross-purposes, that is, masking identity can be viewed as thwarting the goal of asserting rights through

identity. I specifically address two interrelated topics. One is how Dalits conceptualize their status as Dalit and the other is how they manage their behavior toward other jats, especially those higher in the social order. First though, I set the stage by briefly assessing the broader socio-political climate in which Dalits struggle to acquire an “equal” standing among other groups in the caste system.

Caste and equality in Nepal

Eliminating social and political barriers to low castes (and others, such as women, janajati, etc.), is one of the salient issues of the day. In today’s activist social climate attaining equality is frequently discussed. Nepal has been highly politicized for as long as I have worked there, beginning in 1979. Even then, in urbanizing Pokhara, Dalits of Damai Tol voiced an intense dissatisfaction with their low standing at the time of the Referendum of 1980 on the multiparty status of the government. One interview I had with a Damai man in his 30s particularly stands out. Although my project only dealt peripherally with inter-caste relations, it was prominent in his mind. His comments centered on the injustice in the many restrictions heaped upon low caste people. He peppered his remarks with reference to the equality (*barabar*) he felt was inherent in all people, essentialized by the sharing of one blood. “*Mero ragat chha. Bahunko ragat pani chha. Mero haat khatera ragat auncha. Bahunko haat khatera, ragat pani auncha.*” (I have blood. A Brahmin also has blood. When my arm is cut, I bleed. When a Brahmin’s arm is cut, he also bleeds).

In the nearly three intervening decades, the Dalit cause has been taken up on official and informal fronts. The Government of Nepal includes the improvement of Dalit social, economic, educational and political status in its Tenth Five-Year Plan, in which social justice for Dalits is officially designated as a goal deserving of an entire chapter:

All around development is possible only if multi-ethnic groups, multi-lingual and various groups and communities within the country develop in proportionate manner. Such type of development will help to utilize their inherent skill, ability and knowledge in the national development process on the one hand, and on the other, assist to uplift the living standard of the Dalits, neglected, downtrodden and oppressed classes by creating employment opportunities through the mobilization of local resources (Government of Nepal 2002, 28:1).

Although the plan does not precisely define Dalit, the government has established a National Dalit Commission to protect Dalit rights that were granted legally in 1963. The plan advocates a joint effort to offer social justice to Dalits via a strategic goal urging, “the government, NGOs, and private sector, to put an end to caste discrimination by identifying discriminator situation against *dalit* community (sic)” (Government of Nepal 2002, 28:3). Efforts to identify the specifics of discrimination against Dalits have been made, notably by Dahal, et al. (2002) and Bhattachan et al. (2003) who show that it remains pronounced and includes over 200 specific ways of discriminating against Dalits.

Changes in Status

Although this paper is about social and political status it is important to comment briefly on economic status. Dalits are among the poorest groups in Nepal. The Dalits with whom I have worked mostly fall into that category and their poverty is quite visible. Many rural and semi-urban Dalits are either landless or have too little land to support themselves. Houses tend to be small and of one storey, constructed from earth and stone even in areas where higher castes are quickly modifying or building houses with modern materials. In Sirubari, where many Damai are unemployed, households piece together a family economy from numerous jobs. The same can be said of Damai and Sarki living in Jharuwarasi. Although in these locations some people prospered more than others, I have visited other areas in which entire neighborhoods are quite poor.

Economic change is visible for Dalits, though it is not simple to assess; it entails a plethora of variables among which both economic improvement in some cases and decline in others can be seen. One of the most poverty-stricken places I know is the tiny neighborhood of mixed low caste in Ghandruk, called Naichitol. In 2003, the people I met lacked jobs, food, adequate housing and health, and kept children home from school because they lacked the paltry amount of cash needed for supplies. Although I only glimpsed it in 2007, the neighborhood was visibly improved. The dirt courtyards had been paved with slate and the staircase up to the main thoroughfare had been improved. Unfortunately, however, visible improvement often hides the cases in which people have been driven further into poverty as I discovered in Sirubari in 2002 (Folmar 2005). The unpaved road to the village was extended there at the expense of a number of Dalits for the meager landholdings of several families lay entirely in the path of the road. In the absence of their husbands, wives were pressured to sign land away without understanding what they were doing. In the same village, however, electricity was extended to the Dalit houses that could afford it. One man acquired a television while I lived there.

Changes in economics similarly have mixed effects on social status, as illustrated by Ravi, a Dalit man who drove a car in a government car pool, a job he would have been denied until recently. He asserted that he was treated as equal to all the other drivers even though he was the only Dalit in the pool. It later became clear, however, that he obscured his identity from the other Nepali drivers by maintaining social distance from them. That he masked his identity, rather than asserting it, calls for a different interpretation of how caste relations have changed and to what degree Ravi's situation is evidence of change. The question that puzzles us is whether Ravi improved his status by using the tactic of anonymity or did he compromise the quest for equal status by failing to identify himself as Dalit.

Ravi's tactic also raises the issue of how ready high castes are to extend to Dalits access to once-privileged positions

and places. Hari, a high caste associate, has debated this point with me, positing that it is Dalits' reticence that bars their entry to shrines now legally accessible to them. This reticence is something in the minds of Dalits, an internalization of their low status. Hari admits that there is the "one side" of whether the high caste person will allow Dalits access, but more relevant is this "other side:" whether the Dalit can overcome the embodied low status and exert his right to enter. Many high caste people and janajatis claim that they do not discriminate, but when confronted with the opportunity to grant equal treatment to Dalits, they do not transgress established boundaries and opt rather to maintain them. Hari affords us two further instances of this reluctance. When in Ghandruk in West Nepal, Hari had spoken several times of his desire to move beyond inter-caste restrictions, which he felt were wrong on moral grounds. However, when a Dalit offered him cooked potatoes, he visibly balked. After some hesitation, to his credit, he acted in concert with his principles and took the food. He later confessed to me that this was a psychological hurdle, but that he was motivated to overcome it because of his association with me.

A parallel example is offered from the village of Jharuwarasi from 2007, among Sarkis, who talk often of strategies to improve their caste positioning. People readily pointed out that the situation had improved since my first stay there in 2005. One Bahun was singled out as exemplary of how high caste people now accept Dalits and interact with them as equals. This man, Acharya, had a janajati wife and lived near Sarkigaon. Sarkis claimed that they and Acharya freely entered each others' houses and during holidays could share meat, showing that sanctions on food sharing were easing. These changes are important, but in this case, they did not signal an abandonment of restrictions in caste regulations. In Acharya's presence, Sarkis took the passive role in communication, except for one man, KB, whose story will be outlined later. Moreover, all the Sarkis present, even KB, addressed Acharya with the English honorific, "Sir." On several occasions, KB also confided that he did not agree that Acharya fully accepted Sarkis as equal. Nor did he completely trust Acharya. Later, KB admonished me not to stay long when I visited Acharya's house, not saying why, but conveying distrust in his whisper.

Another case of the disjunction between public discourse of equality and asymmetrical social relations was visible in the words and actions of politically active young Dalits of Jharuwarasi. One such person is Arjun a strapping young man who works in the Middle East most of each year. He noted that social oppression was easing as Dalits improved their economic status, became Christian and obtained education. All these changes weakened the power of caste and diminished the need to identify oneself as Dalit. The logic that followed was that if one was not Dalit, then one could behave as non-Dalit in tea shops where the low status of Dalits was indexed by Dalits being barred entry and by their being requested to wash the glass from which they drank.

With some bravado, Arjun and other assertive Dalits claimed that they can now enter tea shops and refuse to wash their glasses. In order to verify their claims, my colleague tested the issue by asking people to visit tea shops with him, but even the most vocal often refused to do so (Perry 2008).

In Jharuwarasi in 2007, women could attend classes in social mobility offered six nights per week by the Federation for Dalit Women, which is funded by the Communist Party. At one such meeting a leader recommended that rather than wash glasses they had used Dalits should break, then pay for them. Attendees have, again, not translated this strategy into action. Reluctance to do so is tied up in the uncertainty of the outcomes as told of in stories of Dalits being punished severely for opposing caste restrictions.

DALIT MODELS OF IDENTITY AND IDENTITY POLITICS

Local Model

Every new venture – and especially one that challenges age-old social norms – has risk attached to it. Twice Rajiv pointed out to me that “everything is experiment.” The first time was when we spoke about his experiences with starting a business in the city. Just before I left the field in 2005, he had sold his tea shop to his uncle, KB, using the profit to open a lunch counter at a school in Patan, where he was assured that the hundreds of children would eat daily. By 2007, the business failed. There were far fewer students than had been estimated and most of them carried lunches. Rajiv chuckled, shrugged his shoulders and told me, “Everything is experiment.” His current business experiment, a small gift store in Patan, is faring much better.

He proffered the same assessment of the NGO he and other civic-minded Dalits established during our stay in 2007. The ad hoc organizing committee and I had lunch the day we filed the papers to set up Animation Nepal and spoke of our hopes that it would become a conduit to economic and educational development for the Dalits of Jharuwarasi and elsewhere. Referring to a book we were planning, I spoke of the several small markets I thought might be available to us but cautioned that we could fail as easily as succeed. Rajiv intoned, “Everything is experiment.” A simple and basic philosophy is summed up in that short phrase. Upliftment is practical, empirical and based on trying out uncertain ventures. When they fail, another attempt follows. Plain but elegant, this approach is the central theme of the pursuit of development by this community, the right to which, as the next section shows, is intrinsic.

Origins: *Vedas* or *Jati Purana*?

The Sarkis of Jharuwarasi have their own version of the origin of their caste and of the caste system, retold by KB as he located his jat in the caste system and described the Sarkis’ fight to attain social equality. The tale goes like this:

A mother, in the beginning, had three sons. *Kaancha Bhote thyo; Maila Sarki thyo; Jetho Bahun thyo.* (The youngest was a Tibetan; the second was a Sarki; the eldest was a Brahmin). The Bhote was a lama (priest), and the Sarki was a cook. One day, a cow died and Maila and Kancha conspired to cook the cow and to feed it to their Brahmin brother. Once the food was prepared, the two of them put it out for all to eat, which Maila and Kaancha did. Jetho, however, did not eat, as he was fasting that day. When Maila discovered that his elder brother did not eat, he became furious. He took the intestines from the cow and beat his elder brother with them. The intestines wrapped over Jetho’s left shoulder and under his right arm and became *janai* (the sacred thread now worn by Bramins).

This, KB claims, shows that Bahuns came upon their high status illegitimately. The story reconfigures sacred time, the original nature of the castes, the active role of Sarkis in creating the caste system and the substantiation of subversive methods in challenging it. The story is a dynamic between Bahuns, the elite of society, and others low in the caste system represented by the Sarki and those outside the system, represented by the Bhote. At first, all are equal, different jats living together as brothers in the primordial family, ranked only by birth order (the Bahun is eldest). The younger brothers employ trickery to attempt to get the eldest to break the implied taboo against eating beef. The subversion fails, but only serendipitously, through the passivity of the Bahun, not through his intellect or effort for he was not even aware of his situation. His intellect is trumped by that of the Sarki, whose subversion is validated as the original method of resistance. It is through covert action, not open challenge, that his righteous attempt is channeled. The ultimate result is partial, but not total failure, for the Bahun wears a symbol of purity composed of material he cannot come into contact with, thus invalidating his claim to his lofty and pure position.

In addition, KB asserts that Brahmins “stole the Vedas from the Sarkis,” the original keepers, in which symbolic implements are intrinsically linked to the shoemaker’s tools of today. This account provides the foundation for modern day caste relations, in which Brahmins dominate by forcing others into undesirable occupations and by refusing to eat the beef prescribed for Sarkis. Keeping Dalits uneducated and poor, Brahmins intentionally work to oppress them and to thwart their efforts to uplift themselves.

KB does not embrace the viewpoint that Dalits help to oppress themselves, but claims that they lack any vehicle by which to change their position. Here is where KB rightly detects a difference between his older generation and the younger generation to which Rajiv belongs. Where Rajiv is more inclined to organize, lobby and advocate through group action, KB takes individual, subversive action to reverse the injustice of caste.

Jharphuk

KB's personal history is one actively confronting the unfairness of the caste system, but it is an individual story for the most part. In it, KB recounts numerous incidents in which he and his family were abused by people of high castes and his actions to redress those wrongs. The list of indignities began early in life, when after his father died, KB's mother worked hard for a Bahun family pounding rice and receiving little in return. She died sewing clothes for someone else's family, not her own. Later in life, KB himself worked for a Bahun family, earning very little. When his infant daughter became ill, he asked the Bahun for a loan for a cab ride to see a doctor, but was refused. "He would not lend me even 16 rupees." Even when she was so ill that she was "put on a haystack," that Bahun was unwilling to lend him money. "Maybe, if we could have bought medicine or taken her to a hospital, she would not have died." KB quit working for this man, telling him, "I will not work for you, not even for one *lakh* [100,000] rupees per day!"

At age 26, KB apprenticed himself to a well-known *jharphuk*, a type of faith healer, from Lele, several hours walk away. Deeply intelligent and socially minded, KB built fame and influence as a healer. His clientele comes from near and far and includes people of all statuses. Bahuns are more likely to consult KB than they are the Bahun *jharphuk* who lives close by. From this position, KB wields ominous spiritual power and is free to tread on caste prohibitions. When offering his services KB calculates how deeply caste values are embodied in his high caste clients and pushes them past their comfort zones. If, for example, when visiting a Bahun's home to diagnose or treat an illness, KB demands entry into the house and if the Bahun displays too much discomfort, KB insists that he visit every room. This forces the Bahun to purify every room rather than just one. Similarly, KB often gives people water to drink in the course of a ritual treatment. Again, if the Bahun is loath to take a drink from a Sarki's hand, KB admonishes him to drink the entire cup, rather than just a sip. Such measures provide KB avenues to exert his own equality, or even superiority among groups that would otherwise degrade him.

Like KB, Bika has struggled against the indignities of his low status to uplift his family. He lives in West Nepal, in the Annapurna Conservation Area, where ethnic Gurungs dominate development and tourism. He did the unheard of by opening a hotel, owned by a Kami and not by a Gurung, on a major trekking route. Although not prohibited from such an endeavor by traditional caste sanctions, Bika has endured violence several times as a result, not from Brahmins but from Gurungs. The most brutal attack was in the middle of the night, when perhaps a dozen masked men stabbed him repeatedly and wrecked the hotel's restaurant. He survived, however, rebuilding his dining hall and continuing to defy the oppression that others would subject him to.

Bika's case contrasts with KB's, whose awesome spiritual

power protects him from assault. Bika's bold business venture was risky because of his identity as a Dalit and because he lacked allies to support and protect him. Not many have the courage to embark on an action that challenges the domain of a more powerful group, especially without supporters. His hotel is distant from any Dalit community and his actions are similarly distant from normal Dalit actions, embarked upon alone.

More common is the subtler strategy of passive resistance. It is key to coping with the burden of oppression, such as when a tailor in Sirubari seizes a moment of control by purposefully making a Brahmin patron wait a day longer than expected for new clothing or tacitly agrees with the Gurung leader who admonishes him to urge his fellow musicians to save the money earned from musical performances for tourists but later confides that he doesn't care if tourism dries up because there is no benefit from it (*phaida chaina*). Through the constant application of subtle subversive pressure, Dalits thread together a tapestry of resistance that can appear as acceptance.

The younger generation increasingly opts for open challenge to the system, often emulating heroes that directly confront caste authority. This is exemplified in Ram's account of how he followed the alleged actions of a highly placed Dalit politician, who, to get his point across about rejecting the food sharing prohibitions, touched all the food at a banquet so that high caste attendees either had to go hungry or eat food touched by an untouchable. Ram employed this strategy in an Army dining hall, where he, one of the few Dalits at the mess table, did the same, forcing his fellow clean-caste soldiers to eat defiled food.

Ram and a small group of young people in Jharuwarasi employ a proactive, committee-based model of civic action borrowed from other groups seeking political capital, such as the *janajatis*. Political, economic and social committees abound in Jharuwarasi. They include micro-credit groups, groups that teach social advancement strategies, groups that educate older women and groups that come together to organize, fund and conduct community-wide projects, including the formation of the aforementioned Animation Nepal. There are at least half a dozen organized committees and groups intended to address issues of development and social upliftment among the Sarkis and Damais of Jharuwarasi. These include a "Father's Group," "Mother's Group," a chapter of the Federation for Dalit Women, several micro-credit groups, and Animation Nepal. Except for the formal link to the Federation for Dalit Women, the connection between local level Dalit associations and ones organized at the national level is difficult to assess. There is a great deal of awareness of national organizations and it is common to hear informal discussions of the same issues engaged in at the national level.

Locally-based Dalit organizations are common in some villages and among some Dalits and tend to be focused on local concerns. For example, community-based musicians groups are a necessary aspect of many rural Damai communities that

provide traditional music for weddings. Damai musicians in Sirubari are plentiful enough to have two musicians groups there that work on a cooperative basis. They also have a “Father’s Group” as well as a “Mother’s Group,” each of which addresses more general community concerns, such as how income from tourism will be doled out. Their neighbors, the Kamis, are less organized; according to Gurung contacts, there is no Mother’s Group among them. Whether there are many organizations or not, most group action is over local concerns and appears not to be formally connected to national Dalit associations. However, local groups do share the goal of advocating for Dalit rights through collective actions akin to classic definitions of identity politics.

Identity Politics

Identity politics can be defined as:

...demand for recognition on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition has previously been denied: it is *qua* women, *qua* blacks, *qua* lesbians that groups demand recognition. The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of “universal humankind” on the basis of shared human attributes; nor is it for respect “in spite of” one’s differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself as different (Kruks 2001, 85).

For Dalits, identity politics is complex and involves the establishment of various levels of identity, as a specific caste, such as Sarki, Kami or Damai, or as the shared identity of Dalit. Dalit is an ambiguous identity to which not all low caste people aspire. Negotiation over Dalit identity is an ongoing process. In Jharuwarasi, there are frequent debates about whether it is good to be called “oppressed,” and there are those that reject being Dalit on that premise. Counter to that stance is the desirability of being Dalit as it condenses several groups’ power into a unified identity that can bring much force to bear on social improvement. At the political level, the meaning of Dalit for some people refers to anyone who is oppressed, whether by caste status, gender, economic status, age, disability or any other attribute that brings discrimination. For Dalits who are Dalit by caste there is sometimes a sense of entitlement to that status and a desire to bar others from using the designation. KB claimed that “janajatis lobbied with us to be included as Dalit, but we refused them,” because, in his view, Dalit is connected to caste. But, whether it is better to be identified as Sarki or Dalit, Damai or Dalit, or to find a new identity are questions that are still to be resolved.

At the heart of the issue of Dalit identity is the entanglement of oppositions, i.e., the self-definition of Dalit as essentially equal coupled with others’ identification of Dalit as inferior. Some people distance themselves from the label Dalit because of this entanglement. The multiple meanings of Dalit, including who counts as Dalit, leads to choices about pursuing social equality through asserting a Dalit identity with its claims of essentialized equality or obscuring one’s Dalit identity in

order to access equality as a non-Dalit. Inclusion as different is a tricky issue among Dalits as the utility of identity politics is contingent on individual and collective goals and which identity best serves those goals. I now present a variety of uses of identity politics, actions in which Dalits engage while claiming caste or Dalit identity.

Organizing for protest

Organizing committees and groups is a central, collective strategy for fostering a better life among Dalits. Local organizations consist of *afno manche*, an inner circle of associates (Bista 1990), who share common goals and familiarity with one another. Such committees are organized for various reasons, some related to material or financial development and others focused more on social advancement. Local chapters of organizations like the Federation for Dalit Women (FDW) employ the Dalit label publicly and strategize on methods that can be used to demand recognition, in ways entirely consistent with Kruks’ definition of identity politics. Other organizations are less overt, such as Animation Nepal, organized by and for Dalits, but not marked as Dalit in its name. Though it differs in tone and tactics from FDW, the intent is quite consistent as it seeks resources to improve the material living standards of its people. Less focused on overt protest, Animation Nepal nonetheless is aimed directly at securing the rights that political rhetoric is meant to make accessible. In a sense, the efforts of Animation Nepal pursue the outcome that the process of FDW is meant to produce. Thus, they work in concert to address different aspects of discrimination.

A similar observation pertains to the existence of other organized groups that have deeper historical roots and less overtly political names, such as Fathers and Mothers Groups or Musicians Groups in Dalit communities. In each of these cases, the groups are organized internally by Dalits and composed entirely of them. Their mission is to see to various administrative and operation procedures that regulate internal relations and relations with people from other groups of higher status. The ones I have witnessed are comprised solely of one jat, such as Damais, and therefore do not pursue a Dalit agenda per se, but one that advocates specifically for their own caste. They are generally less explicit about contesting hierarchy. Their mission and actions appear to be less about identity politics of the same variety that the FDW exemplifies, but not entirely distinct from it, suggesting that identity politics exists in a graded fashion.

Identity and religion

An assumed attribute of Dalits, particularly when they were thought of as “untouchable,” was their adherence to Hinduism, the religion that defined their status as low. As a way to separate Dalits from their justification for low status, Dr. Ambedkar employed the strategy of renouncing Hinduism

in favor of Buddhism (Jaffrelot 2004), which advocates social equality. In Jharuwarasi, nine Sarki households made a similar shift to Christianity in an effort to distance themselves from the oppression of Hinduism, which sparked debate over the power of the different religions to advance development. Converted Christians claimed that Christianity was an avenue to success, but people who remained Hindu claimed that Christianity offered no such benefit. Members of each religion continued to respect each other and their practices, sometimes grudgingly. Here the political maneuver of religious conversion was not to gain equality within the system as it exists but to ally oneself with an alternate ethic that competes with the prevailing moral order. This form of resistance is one of circumvention, rejecting the system while attempting to operate outside a rule structure one considers intolerable.

Identity and hierarchy within Dalit castes

I asked KB one day what he predicted for the future of equality within the Sarki caste, an issue raised by practices such as religious conversion and others described below. His view was subtle and complex. KB felt that it was the duty of Dalits to treat each other as equals, and to change the status differences that stemmed from the past. KB did not see that Christianity either elevated or decreased rank among Sarkis – they all remained Sarkis. At the same time, KB feared that even within the Sarki community, mainly because of economic differences, Sarkis might eventually split along clan lines with the more affluent asserting status superiority. He also noted that a number of status-based prohibitions exist between Sarkis and Damais in Jharuwarasi, but he felt strongly that these should be discontinued. He recalled that, in the past, Damais were forbidden to enter Sarki houses. But when he opened the first Dalit tea shop in Jharuwarasi more than two decades ago, after considering the issue carefully, decided to allow Damais into it and advocated for social equality ever since.

Status differences are visible between Dalit castes and conflict happens at times. In Sirubari there was an ongoing argument about whether Kamis could refuse to remove Damai corpses to the funeral grounds, an indication that inter-Dalit caste relations were in flux there. And these conflicts, the ones that pit the interests of one caste against another, influence some people to conclude that Dalit is not the identity they prefer. The debate over identity involves internal conflicts over the meaning and membership of the group as well as advocating for rights with social superiors.

Sanskritization

As discussed above, the act of emulating the behaviors of the high caste, or sanskritization, can be viewed either as compliance with the system or as resistance to it. Several examples of emulation are visible in Jharuwarasi, for example,

the Dalit community is in the process of constructing two temples, one to Siva and the other to Ganesh. One could also count the opening of tea shops about 20 years ago as an act of replication of a caste-based socioeconomic strategy employed by Bahuns and Chetris, which also provided Dalits the opportunity to avoid high caste tea shops and the discrimination to which they were subject. The most vivid example of this process in Jharuwarasi, though, was when Sarkis decided that they would no longer eat beef, in emulation of other Hindu castes. Only Sarkis ate beef according to tradition. But KB and others recognize this act as one that is used to justify their untouchability; discontinuing beef consumption would remove one source of their stigmatization. Anyone caught eating beef was to be subject to a significant fine.

Anonymity

Resistance need not always consist of collective action. Individuals, like Bika, the hotelier who defied the system in the Annapurna Conservation Area, sometimes exert their Dalit identity as individuals, without reference to a committee or group that will back them up. This is rare. Without a collective behind them, individuals put their personal safety at far greater risk and so find other, more subtle ways to subvert their status. Through masking their identity, individuals are freer to act against the current of the system, but only in spaces where their Dalit or untouchable identity is not known.

This type of action, the politics of anonymity, is an adjunct to identity politics. It entails cloaking one's identity so that it is either ambiguous or appropriates a higher status by suggesting membership in a caste to which one does not, in fact, belong. Identity politics operates most effectively at the group level, where the force of numbers makes it possible to contest one's low status. Individually, however, it is difficult to confront the social force behind discrimination successfully and the more effective strategy is often to deny or obscure one's identity in favor of adopting another.

Anonymity, familiarity and place

Buddhanilkantha, the famous shrine of the "Sleeping Vishnu," draws large crowds of worshipers regularly. Like many other Hindu temples that prevent Dalits from entry (Kisan 1999), only "clean" caste Hindus are permitted to descend the steps to where Vishnu lies sleeping in a pond on a bed of snakes. Barring non-Hindus and Dalits is a practice taken for granted even in the socially progressive climate of Kathmandu Valley today. However, denying entry depends on either recognizing the person seeking entry or on undependable visual cues like skin color, hair type, stature, posture, or dress, all of which have become less reliable over time. So, personal acquaintance has become essential knowledge for determining Dalit status. An interview with a young Damai man, Keshav, who lives near Buddhanilkantha, clarified the simple but effective strategy

of circumnavigating this prohibition. Dalits avoid having Brahmins deny them entry to sacred Hindu places, preferring to visit temples where the priests do not know them. When Keshav's relatives visit, the Brahmin priest is unaware of their Dalit identity and they enter the temple freely. Likewise, Keshav visits distant temples where his identity is not known, thus skirting the prohibition. He asserts that this strategy is in fact common.

Naming

Establishing group identity, advocating its rights and maintaining its borders are central to the efforts of Dalit empowerment. As seen above, the identity of Dalits is elevated via the *jati purana* they put forth as their origin and for why the struggle for equality is so intractable. A similar story, at least partially grounded in fact, explicates how membership in each *paani na chalne* caste become concrete by high castes assigning caste name as surname. As the discussion here will show, the manipulation of surnames is employed as a strategy, at times to assert identity and at other times to cloak it as part of the politics of anonymity, when an *individual* attempts to access social and economic resources. A young Damai man in Jharuwarasi gave me this version of how Dalits came to have surnames associated with their particular jats, Sarki, Kami and Damai.

Before we needed to register ourselves or to fill out governmental forms, none were called Sarki or Kami or Damai. A man was simply referred to as Mohan Bahadur or Ram Bahadur. It was like this for my grandfather. When he and others went to a government office where a name was needed, the employee would ask, "What is your name?" And he would reply, "Ram Bahadur." When asked, "What is your last name," he would not know what it was and would respond again, simply with his name, "Ram Bahadur." But this would not satisfy regulations, so the Brahmin would ask, "What do you do?" And he would say, "I sew clothing," so the Brahmin would write his name down as "Damai." In this way, we came to have these names.

This was the predominant naming mechanism used among Dalits in Ghachok and Pokhara when I first conducted fieldwork in 1979-80 and essentially what Gray (1995) reports for Kathmandu Valley. Dalit was not in current usage at the time and only a smattering of people used the surname "Nepali," which was an attempt to mask caste affiliation. In the ensuing years, the use of Sarki, Kami and Damai diminished in favor of Nepali as a cover, but Nepali quickly became associated with Dalits (it was distinct from the surname, Nepal, which came to be used by some higher caste people). Even though one might not know which caste it referred to, it was certain that the bearer of it was *paani na chalne*. Over roughly the same time frame, *thar* (clan) names emerged as another, more potent option than either Nepali or caste name for most people. People once called Kami employed an updated version of their caste name - Biswokarma; Damai switched to the *thar* names of Pariyar or

Das and Sarkis became identified with a variety of *thars*, six in the 42 Sarki households of Jharuwarasi alone.

For now, this strategy successfully masks the association of Achami or Bogati with being Sarki. Such masking offers an avenue of access that might otherwise be closed. This is illustrated indirectly by my encounter with a yogi and his young high caste followers at Sri Santaniswor Mandir, which rests atop a hill adjacent to Jharuwarasi. One day I was invited into the temple where the yogi was hosting about a dozen men, mostly young and high caste. They drank tea, ate snacks, smoked marijuana and chatted. As they prepared a new kettle of tea they invited me to enter. They inquired about my identity and with whom I lived, as my identity would be related to (but not completely defined by) my hosts. I told them I lived in the house of a family very near the temple named Bishunkhe, which none of them recognized. They quizzed me on its affiliation, "Is that Bahun? Is it Chhetri?" I denied specific knowledge; they conferred among themselves but failed to identify its caste association. They settled on the likelihood that it was Chhetri, probably because they could not imagine that a Westerner would live with a Dalit family.

Using a *thar* name is thus a strategy that facilitates delinking of personal status from caste or Dalit identity, but not totally or permanently. Like the adoption of the surname Nepali, the use of *thar* names quickly enough becomes associated with Dalit status. Bishwokarma is Kami and this association is well known. The name Pariyar no longer obscures one's identity as Damai. Das is somewhat more effective since it is also used by Brahmins, but as Kisan (1999) points out, when a Dalit shares the *thar* name of a higher caste person, the Dalit is coerced into using his or her *jat* name (Sarki, Kami, Damai) to distinguish him or her from the latter. In time, as the *thar* system becomes more transparent, *thar* names too will cease to distance Dalits from their caste status and other strategies will come to the fore.

Co-opting identity

An alternative strategy is to appropriate names from other castes, and thus their caste identity, at least for specific purposes. One such case of this is found in the tourist village of Sirubari, from which a young Damai girl has gained national notoriety as a pop singer. Because her caste might compromise her success, she has taken a surname widely recognized as Chhetri. A key to this strategy is that the audience has no prior knowledge of her true caste. Essentially the same method is employed by some Dalits who desire access to prohibited ritual spaces but who shy away from claiming it through assertion of their identities.

CONCLUSIONS

We have arrived at a critical stage in the Dalit social movement of Nepal. It has gathered momentum and employs new techniques to challenge discrimination. It seeks inclusion

in national and local political processes, opening economic and educational opportunities and equalizing social status. The process is likely to be slow and painful since the existing structure of the caste system is fastened together by a dizzying number of beliefs and practices that cannot be addressed all at once and everywhere. New generations of Dalits have now entered the process of advocating greater freedom, access and respect in public discourse. At times their actions are well-organized and effective, at others they are fragmented and their effectiveness less certain. This paper has attempted to outline some of the strategies employed by Dalits to challenge, subvert, bend or skirt the caste system to individual and group ends. In particular, it has illuminated previously overlooked tactics of the politics of anonymity.

More academic attention to Dalits is needed in order to clarify the micro-level politics of identity and anonymity now being deployed by them. Incisive research into the conditions of Dalit life and their efforts to improve their well-being will speak to important academic issues such as whether Dalits act to denigrate themselves. This paper suggests that, while self-deprecation might occur, the greater weight of social action is in challenging high caste hegemony overtly and covertly. Other related issues that need greater attention are the social and political relations between *pani nachalne* castes, paying particular attention to hierarchical relations between them and efforts to equalize them. Attention to Dalit issues offers us the chance to understand better the caste system and the place of the people at the bottom of it. It will clarify social and political processes of marginalized people. More focus on Dalits will help to enlighten people about the conditions of the Dalits and bring their struggle into the light. When we sort this out better, Dalits will stand to benefit by the efforts of academics and their chances to take a seat at the table set with equality, fairness and opportunity will improve immeasurably.

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ENDNOTES

1. There are many definitions of Dalit in the literature and its utility as an identity label is hotly contested, as Mary Cameron (personal communication) observes. Here I use it to identify a group of castes from the hills of Nepal, where I have conducted fieldwork, mainly Sarki, Kami and Damai, most, but not all of whom have accepted or embraced this term. Other castes commonly included in this group include Gaines, Badis and others with whom I have not worked.
2. This review of Dalit literature is necessarily brief, but illustrates the general lack of attention to Dalit issues. Vasily (2007) offers a more thorough listing of Dalit publications up to 2005.
3. This opinion is shared with Susan Hangen (personal communication), to whom I owe this observation.
4. The following sections are based on ethnographic observations made conducting research in Ghachok, Pokhara and Sirubari as well as during study abroad trips (including research projects) to Pokhara, Ghandruk and Jharwarasi.
5. Kisan (2005) provides a comprehensive list of the known surnames used by various castes.