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## Book review of 'The Dalit Nepali Social Movement' by Yam Bahadur Kisan

Rama Lohani-Chase  
*The College of New Jersey*

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# THE DALIT NEPALI SOCIAL MOVEMENT

YAM BAHADUR KISAN,  
TRANS. LAURIE A. VASILY

Lalitpur, Nepal: Legal Rights Protection Society, 2005. Pp. xii-200.

## REVIEWED BY RAMA LOHANI-CHASE

*The Dalit Social Movement* by Yam Bahadur Kisan is a timely publication in part because no previous book-length study of the Dalit movement in Nepal exists.<sup>1</sup> Organized into seven chapters and an appendix, the book offers a brief but more or less comprehensive analysis of the organized caste system in Nepal and political organizing by the Dalit community against it. Kisan draws from diverse sources—ranging from Hindu moral and religious scriptures, such as *The Manusmirti*, to Marxism and other modern social theories—to investigate why and how the caste system originated and persists in Nepal. In addition, Kisan critically analyzes past Dalit activism in Nepal and offers his own recommendations to bring forward a more robust Dalit movement.

In the first few chapters, Kisan leads us through the historical background of the caste system. Although he acknowledges that it is difficult to say when and how the caste system started, Kisan speculates the Aryan invasion of the Indus Valley brought the Varna system—a system based on color and cultural, religious, and behavioral difference. Brahminic notions of purity and pollution played an important part in the construction of untouchability. These disciplinary techniques governed all aspects of everyday life—food, work, clothing, and settlement—and, Kisan argues, veiled a system of governance in which a class of people became a “service-class” for the rest of society. Most importantly, the caste system barred Dalits from access to education and from having economic independence.

But Kisan does not blame only the religious system. He looks at how since medieval times different political and ideological systems produced networks of power and domination. According to Kisan, historical research indicates the caste system did not exist in Nepal until the late Licchavi period (200-879 CE), which followed the Kirati age. As Kisan argues, caste-based people migrated to the hills of Nepal to flee religious and political persecution during the Mughal conquest of India, and brought their own prejudiced belief systems. Yet it seems that Kisan’s history could be more subtle. The practice of Sati—the immolation of widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands—among the upper castes

during the Licchavi period suggests that caste practices were present in Nepal well before the late Licchavi period.<sup>2</sup> Kisan, however, rightly points out that after the Licchavi period, rulers like Jaya Sthithi Malla in the Malla period (879-1768 CE) institutionalized the caste hierarchy further (50-52).

Kisan stresses that it was the Gorkhali Empire that truly cemented the caste system in Nepal with its call for unification and Nepalization. After the unification of Nepal, Shah (1606-1846 CE) and Rana (1846-1950 CE) rulers entrenched the caste system further through codification. The “detailed provisions” of the Muluki Ain of 1854 CE promulgated by Jung Bahadur Rana further entrenched caste hierarchy (57). Over time, these provisions became naturalized laws governing the everyday life of many Nepalis. Using the method of divide and rule, the new laws included sub-castes and hierarchy systems even within lower caste groups. The code also included Christians, Buddhists, and people of non-Nepali origin.

In chapter 3, Kisan charts the history of Dalit activism from Gautam Buddha (500 BC) and Katayanan (400 AD) to Gandhi and Ambedkar, champions of the Dalit cause in India in the twentieth century, to modern Nepal. Kisan makes connections between revolutionary groups like the Naxalites and the Dalit Panthers of the 1960s in India to show the entrance of radical politics in the hitherto non-violent Dalit movement forwarded by Gandhi and Ambedkar. Kisan also traces Dalit activism to the time of the underground movement against Rana autocracy in Nepal. From the Josmani faith and Buddhism, both of which opposed the caste system, to organized movements like *Vishwa Sarvajan Sangh* (1947) and numerous organizations in the latter half of the twentieth century in Nepal, the Dalit struggle for social justice has become stronger. Kisan makes it clear that people from all caste groups have supported the movement, documenting numerous individual leaders not from the untouchable caste who opposed caste related discrimination (88). Despite this activism, Kisan stresses, transformation has been very slow to come to Dalit people’s lives, and untouchability is as severe today as in the past. Whether it is getting citizenship cards, using public facilities, visiting a temple, attending school, using water taps, or patronizing tea-shops, Nepal’s Dalits face discrimination in many places. Most of all, falling in love with someone from an upper caste can even cost one’s life. Kisan provides vivid documentation of these facts.

The problems Kisan sees lie not only in an orthodox Hindu society that is slow to change but also in the lack of a unified Dalit movement in Nepal. According to Kisan, Dalit leaders and their organizations have been too fractured to deliver change. Over thirty Dalit organizations and hundreds of Dalit NGOs have come into existence since 1947. They divide among different interest groups, and some result from the cynical attempts by mainstream political parties to include the Dalit constituency mostly for electoral gains. Economic inequalities and sub-caste hierarchies contribute to the power imbalance within Dalit organizations, which

Kisan points out in his analysis in chapter 3 of the representational politics and organizational leadership of the movement. Kisan criticizes Dalit organizations for excluding other lower caste groups, “a phenomenon [that] has brought a 53% Biswakarma majority in the present leadership of the Dalit Social Movement” (131).

Although Kisan tries to be objective in his overview of Dalit organizations and their approaches to liberation, he advocates a revolutionary socialist vision for the Dalits. Following a Leninist philosophy, Kisan calls for effective leadership with “broad political outlooks [and] revolutionary spirits” (117). The Nepal Dalit Mukti Morcha of the CPN (Maoist) seems to provide such a vision for Kisan, who argues that “the change needed to bring Dalit social justice is radical,” and that only radical struggle, either violent or non-violent, can change the status-quo (192).

Kisan’s analysis of the caste system in Nepal comes when the Nepali state is on the verge of failing, if it has not already failed. His look at the Dalit political and cultural movement provides important insights into the armed conflict in Nepal and the political complexity within the Dalit liberation movement. As Kisan sees things, the psychological, economic, cultural, and political toll suffered by Dalit people calls for radical methods of transformation. And Kisan rightly calls for recommendations that the government and the society must fully implement. However, strategies that operate through violent means may not bring positive changes, as violence usually begets more violence. The violence suffered by the Dalits and the powerless in society during the People’s War was grave, and thus one ought to question strategies that employ violence as a method of bringing about a caste-less, egalitarian society. The champions of peace and non-discrimination, Buddha, Jesus, Ambedaker, and Gandhi, did not espouse violence, yet they were able to change societies and bring about revolutions.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Another publication devoted to the Dalits is *The Dalits of Nepal: Issues and Challenges*, edited by Prabodh Devkota (Kathmandu: Feminist Dalit Organization Nepal, 2002), a short collection of essays written by Dalit activists, academicians, and civil society members.

2. As John Whelpton mentions in *A History of Modern Nepal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005: 19), an inscription about Manadeva at the Chagunarayan temple in Nepal dated 465 CE is “probably the first reference to sati (widow-burning) in any South Asian inscription” (19).

*Rama Lohani-Chase defended her dissertation entitled “Women and Gender in the Maoist People’s War in Nepal: Dislocation and Militarization” from Rutgers University in January of 2008, and is currently teaching at The College of New Jersey.*

# THE ORIGINS OF HIMALAYAN STUDIES: BRIAN HOUGHTON HODGSON IN NEPAL AND DARJEELING, 1820–1858

EDITED BY DAVID M. WATERHOUSE

London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004. xxiv, 280 pp.

## REVIEWED BY ARJUN GUNERATNE

Brian Houghton Hodgson (1801–1894), the polymath who served as British Resident in Kathmandu during the first half of the nineteenth century and became a major contributor to scholarship in three different areas—the natural history of the Himalaya, Buddhism, and the description of the Tibeto-Burman languages—is one of the great figures of Orientalist scholarship in India. He resigned the Company’s service in 1843 and settled in Darjeeling, where he lived until 1857. While his researches in Kathmandu focused on the study of Buddhism and zoology, he concentrated in Darjeeling on ethnography and languages of the various ethnic groups in the eastern Himalaya, as well as the physical geography of the region. Well-known and respected in his day, and of seminal importance in the development of the study of the Himalaya, he is not as well known today as he deserves to be, even by Himalayanists, who know of him mainly by repute. This book makes a significant contribution to rectifying this situation by bringing together in one volume a wide-ranging assessment of his life and work. That such an assessment required the collaborative perspective of scholars in half a dozen fields, ranging from history to Buddhist studies to ornithology, zoology, anthropology, and art, is in itself indicative of the breadth of Hodgson’s interests and his scholarship.

What emerges from the various perspectives brought to bear on Hodgson’s work is that he was first and foremost a collector of data, and an excellent ethnographer and naturalist. He was a master at the collection of facts but an untrained amateur in their interpretation. His forays into theory, for example, with respect to the Tibeto-Burman languages, were obsolete in his own lifetime. His enduring legacy lies in the data he amassed: the Buddhist manuscripts he sent back to Europe, the animal skins he collected, the description of bird behavior he recorded when ornithological science of his