

The London School of Economics and Political Science

The Resilience of Caste

Dalits, Psychological Essentialism, and Intercaste Marriage in the
Himalayan Foothills of Eastern Nepal

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Economics for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

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Abstract

This thesis discusses caste-based discrimination in the Himalayan foothills of East Nepal. It is based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork among the Bishwakarma (previously known as Kāmi), a Dalit caste whose traditional occupation is blacksmithing. While social practices that denote the Bishwakarma as 'untouchable' have largely disappeared from the public sphere, they endure in domestic contexts. In the face of this ongoing discrimination, the Bishwakarma deploy a number of strategies to improve how they are perceived by others. The first part of the thesis discusses these strategies as well as their limitations. The second part argues that a cognitive bias known as 'psychological essentialism' plays a significant role in the ongoing stigmatisation of the Bishwakarma and Dalits more generally. The extent to which this is the case has been overlooked in previous anthropological studies, and this has been detrimental to academic understandings of the phenomenon and to efforts to improve Dalits' social status. Conversely, caste has largely been overlooked in existing studies of psychological essentialism, which have focused on gender, race and ethnicity. The recognition of the role that psychological essentialism plays in the social construction of caste leads to a different interpretation of two types of action that have been used to alleviate caste-based discrimination. One is based on identity politics; the other tries to reduce the essentialisation of Dalits by promoting mixing with non-Dalits. Promoting intercaste marriage between Dalits and others, a fringe phenomenon in Nepal, is an example of the latter; an analysis of the promotion of such marriages is offered in the last part of the thesis. Finally, a suggestion is made that recognising the role of psychological essentialism can lead to a more informed comparative study of discriminatory social systems across different cultural contexts.

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Fieldsite

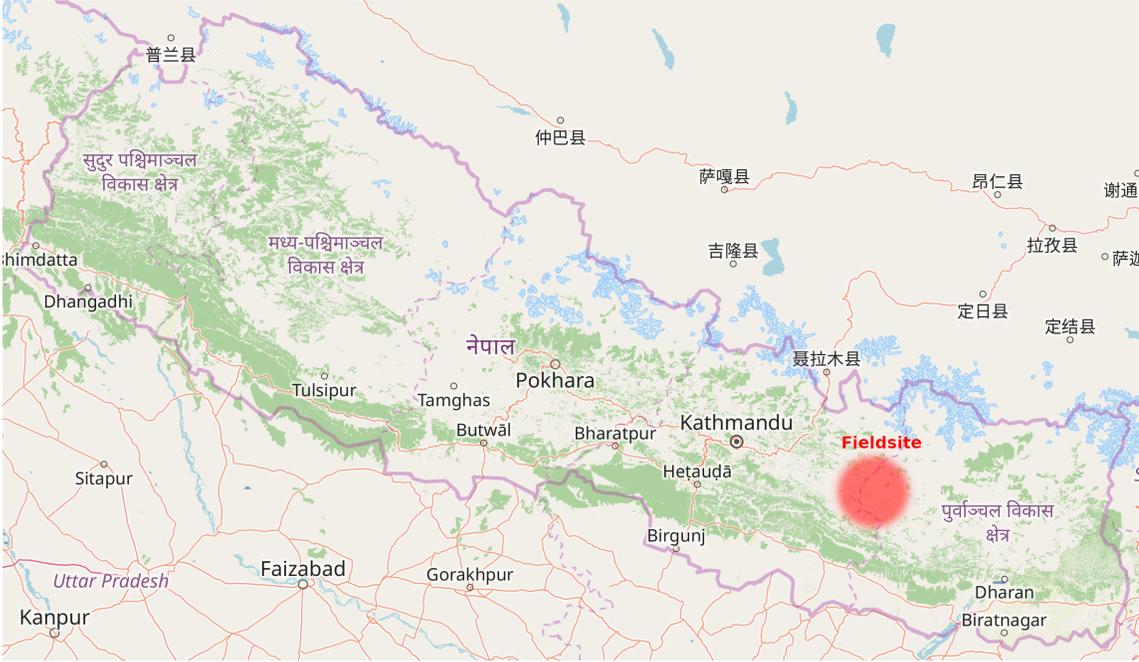


Figure 1: Map of Nepal, with the fieldwork area marked in red.

Own work based on raw data from OpenStreetMaps, licensed under ODbL.

Places named in this thesis

Note: A VDC ('Village Development Committee') is part of the official geography of Nepal; it is an administrative area further divided into 9 'wards'. Each VDC comprises multiple smaller locations that are part of the informal geography, used by locals to refer to places, but not contiguous with wards.¹

- **Bensitaun:** A locality at the bottom of the large hill on which Sammagaon is located. Bensitaun is part of the VDC called Puranogaon.
- **Bishwakarma / Dehegli tol:** A *tol* is a group of houses whose inhabitants, with some exceptions, belong to one or a small number of patriline. The Bishwakarma / Dehegli *tol* in Sammagaon is where I spent most of my time in the field.
- **Dhungagaon:** A VDC neighbouring Sammagaon and Puranogaon.
- **Kathmandu:** Capital city of Nepal, some 150km away from Sammagaon.
- **Parvat:** A VDC neighbouring Sammagaon and Puranogaon.
- **Puranogaon:** A VDC next to Sammagaon in which I lived for six months in 2010.
- **Sahu bajār:** A VDC neighbouring Sammagaon.
- **Sammagaon:** The VDC which I consider my **main fieldsite**. Sammagaon's lowest elevation is approximately 800 metres; it's highest approximately 2800 metres.
- **'Sammagaon-5' or 'Ward 5':** One of the nine official 'wards' into which Sammagaon is divided. Sammagaon-5 is where the de facto administrative centre of Sammagaon is; it includes the VDC's official building, the health post, and the police station. Tindu is in ward 5 but is not perfectly contiguous with it.
- **Tindu:** A locality within of Sammagaon whose borders are not precisely defined; it contains the Biswhakarma tol.

1. The terminology used here reflects that which was used during my fieldwork; there has since been a restructuring of the administrative geography of Nepal.

Introduction

'I can't walk. I can't walk any further.'

Chini Maya, the 67-year-old woman whom I had become used to calling 'mother' (*āmā*) over the past few months, was displaying clear signs of exhaustion. Her heavy breathing was interspersed with whispered complaints, exclamations of pain, and calls to the gods. None of it seemed to help.

The light was developing a soft, golden quality. In normal circumstances, this might have put us in a contemplative mood. Now, the beauty of the mountains and forests surrounding us was hard to take in, as we grew increasingly concerned about Chini Maya. We had been walking since morning, and over the past few hours, her pace had dwindled to something slow and sluggish, devoid of all energy. It had been a hot day. On an earlier stretch, Chini Maya had almost fainted. I had caught her in my arms and asked Ganga, her husband and the person whom I call 'father' in Nepal, what we should do.

'We'll get there before night,' had been his only answer.

By now, it was clear that he had been mistaken. The sun would set well before we reached home. In fact, we were starting to wonder whether we'd make it all the way.

We were walking back to Sammagaon, the village where Ganga and Chini Maya live and the heart of my fieldsite, after attending a relative's wedding in a distant location. The celebration had lasted two full days. Many of the guests had stayed up throughout the second night. There had been music and dancing, ceremonial offerings, quietly enunciated readings by the priests (*purohit*), and old men sitting around the fire, chanting verses into the night. The hosts had ensured that there was no shortage of food or millet beer. *Rakshi*,

a strong, home-made spirit had been served directly out of five-litre jerry cans; nobody had held back. It was no wonder that Chini Maya was having trouble on the long walk home.

Eventually, we reached a village and stopped at the house of some of Ganga's friends, a couple belonging to the Sherpa ethnic group. I expected that they would bring us tea, as is customary on such occasions. We would sit in front of their house, talk for a while, then head off again. To my surprise, the Sherpa couple did a lot more. They brought us indoors, fed us potatoes in spicy soup, and insisted that we stay for the night. The three of us naturally felt relieved, but I also experienced a sense of puzzlement. Ganga and Chini Maya belong to the Bishwakarma caste, which makes them Dalits, people who would earlier have been called 'untouchable' (*achhut*). Despite caste-based discrimination having receded in recent decades in Sarmagaon, it is still standard for Dalits not to enter non-Dalit houses, to avoid ritually 'polluting' these houses. At this point, I had spent almost three months in the area and until then, not once had I seen this norm violated. The Sherpa couple, however, did not seem to care about it at all.

Later that evening, as the conversation turned to the topic of the foreigner—me—accompanying Ganga and Chini Maya, Ganga said something which added to my confusion. He explained that I was a student from Switzerland who had come to live with him and his family to write a book about Dalits in Nepal. He then unexpectedly added, 'He wants to understand why Dalits used to be untouchable, but are not any more.'

This caught me off-guard. Seemingly out of the blue, on an evening during which Ganga and Chini Maya's caste was, as far as I could tell, a non-issue, Ganga described untouchability as a phenomenon belonging to the past. This was contrary to what I had observed so far, and I was not sure what to make of it.

This dissertation is about caste, the ongoing stigmatisation of Dalits, and the efforts put into trying to overcome this stigmatisation. In the broadest sense, the dissertation is an examination of the contemporary conditions of life of the Bishwakarma, a Dalit caste encompassing the one previously known as 'Kāmi', in the Himalayan foothills of East Nepal.²

2. The term 'Bishwakarma' has various transcriptions, including 'Bishwokarma', 'Vish-

The traditional ‘caste occupation’ of these people is blacksmithing, though only very few practise the craft today, let alone depend on it for their livelihood. In Sarmagaon and the surrounding area, most are subsistence farmers, though several have access to various sources of monetary income.

As is well known, Dalits fall at the very bottom of the social hierarchy in India and other South Asian countries.³ Throughout the sub-continent and in some diasporic and transnational communities originating from this part of the world (e.g. Svensson 2014; Adur and Narayan 2017), Dalits have been subjected to striking forms of marginalisation and injustice. The types of discrimination, violence, and exclusion which they face exist in myriad domains, including the social, political, and cultural. Recent studies have made it clear that Dalits continue to face economic inequality, poverty, and exploitation. In the context of contemporary, neoliberal India, this phenomenon not only endures; in several ways it is on the rise (Shah et al. 2018). Macroeconomic indicators confirm that Dalits in Nepal also face dire poverty (CBS 2005, 2011; WB-DFID 2006; Bennett, Sijapati, and Thapa 2013). The ongoing poverty of Dalits is often tied to landlessness, which is itself a vestige of the patronage system called *jajmani* in India and *bali-ghare* or *riti-bhagya* in Nepal.⁴ In this system, described extensively in classical anthropological literature, Dalits used to work as artisans and service providers for upper-caste land-owners. They were placed in relations of subjugation to their upper-caste patrons, depending on them for their livelihood.⁵

In Sarmagaon, on a purely economic level, the Bishwakarma are *not* distinguishably better- or worse-off than non-Dalits. I do not have precise quantitative data that demonstrates this, but my evidence for this statement will follow in chapter 1. Briefly, the central point is that there is considerable economic disparity *within* the Bishwakarma caste, which makes any assessment of their situation *as a group* problematic, and therefore,

wakarma’, and other similar variations. It can be abbreviated ‘BK’, which is usually pronounced ‘bi-ka’, in accordance with the corresponding abbreviation in the devanāgarī script. It derives from ‘Viśhwākarma’, the Hindu God who is the architect or engineer of the Universe. The Bishwakarma group technically includes all earlier metalworker castes, but Nepalis primarily associate it with the ‘Kāmi’. ‘Kāmi’ is still used on occasion, but it is considered derogatory.

3. Note that despite my use of the term ‘hierarchy’, the notion of caste as an overarching and organised ‘system’, presented most famously by Dumont (1980[1966]), does not reflect the current reality in Nepal and South Asia (Gupta 2005; Das 2015).

4. For a detailed discussion of the role of Dalits in the *riti-bhagya* system of West Nepal, see (Cameron 1995, 1998)

5. For a Nepali example, see Prindle (1977)

any overall comparison to other castes or ethnic groups in the area fallacious. Some of the Bishwakarma live in poverty, struggling to feed themselves, but others possess considerable wealth. Some own land, including occasionally in Kathmandu, Nepal's capital city, where even a small plot has extremely high value. Several routinely employ non-Dalits to work in their fields in exchange for money or grain, in a striking inversion of the traditional patronage system. Several factors have contributed to the relative economic success of (some of) the Bishwakarma in Sammagaon. Labour migration, in particular to the Arabian peninsula, is important. A number of households regularly receive remittance from a relative, usually a son or husband working in Qatar, Saudi Arabia or another Gulf country. This is in line with the patterns of labour migration that have become common in Nepal more generally, and that are profoundly affecting the country's economy (Seddon, Adhikari, and Gurung 2002).

Some literature suggests that, in situations where poverty and caste do not obviously map onto each other, anthropologists should favour a class-based analysis. For example, in a study of cardamom cultivation in the easternmost part of Nepal, a few hundred kilometres away from Sammagaon,⁶ Fitzpatrick suggests that

...[a] transition from inter-ethnic or inter-caste economic differentiation to class-based differentiation is illustrated by the fact that the poorest households ... are no longer solely the Dalit groups (2011:118).

Consequently, he contends that

...while an ethnic or caste-based analysis is sufficient for understanding historical processes of economic and social change, *a class-based analysis is much more useful for examining contemporary economic and social differentiation* (2011:117, emphasis added).

Similar remarks could be made about Sammagaon: the Bishwakarma, while Dalits, are no longer the poorest people in the area. A study of emerging class-based differentiation among them as well as across other groups might therefore be fruitful. If one were to adopt a purely economic lens, Gardner's description of her fieldsite in Bangladesh would seem to carry over to Sammagaon. There too, there exists

6. There are no cardamom plantations in Sammagaon.

...a 'worldview' in which another form of movement, to foreign places, is seen as the only way to get ahead. In this context, migration and social status are inextricably interlinked. (2008:479)

And yet a class-based analysis is not what I undertake in this dissertation. What struck me in Sammagaon was the *resilience* of caste *despite* the Bishwakarma's relatively comfortable economic situation. I was struck by the fact that even the wealthiest of the Bishwakarma do not escape—at least never fully—the negative ascriptions that come with being Dalit. Classic literature on South Asia documents the historical possibility of 'caste mobility': entire castes have, on occasion, successfully claimed a higher status than the one which they were previously ascribed (Srinivas 1956:491ff; 2007[1968]; Das 2015:223). It is, however, usually recognised that such mobility does not occur for Dalits, and in this regard, the situation in Sammagaon is no exception. The Bishwakarma have not achieved a higher status as a group, and additionally, no Bishwakarma individual successfully escapes all of the ascriptions of lowliness associated with being Dalit.

It is this resilience of the Dalit condition to which I attend in this thesis. I do not focus on any history of economic subjugation—nor emancipation therefrom—because doing so would not allow me to explain this resilience. Instead, my focus is on the non-economic way in which Dalits have historically been ostracised, namely, the ascription of a defiling, ritually impure status. I attend centrally to the question of untouchability, asking what has become of this phenomenon in the present day. What interests me is the extent to which the Bishwakarma continue to be ascribed a lowly status despite their relative economic success, and—as will become obvious—despite living in a context of rapid and progressive political change.

However, the fact that the Bishwakarma continue to be seen as lowly is not the whole story. Recall the events described in the opening of this introduction, the evening during which Ganga, Chini Maya and I were unexpectedly hosted by a Sherpa couple. This evening presented the first strong, explicit challenge I encountered to the ethnographic picture which I had been forming until then. I filed it as an exceptional event in my fieldnotes and, for a long time, I pondered on how to interpret the Sherpas' unusual hospitality to Dalits, and how to make sense of Ganga's puzzling words: 'he wants to understand why Dalits

used to be untouchable but are not any more'. Had I missed something obvious until then? Had untouchability actually disappeared, and were all my observations of discrimination against the Bishwakarma documenting an altogether different phenomenon? Or, on the contrary, was this just an exception, an event best disregarded, as one sometimes deals with outliers in statistics? Why had Ganga said that untouchability had disappeared, an affirmation that ran contrary—it seemed to me—to his usual insistence that Dalits are still 'shamed' by non-Dalits? Had this just been a polite thing to say to hosts who had welcomed him into their home? Or was this a subtle message to me, a way of telling me to pay more attention to the fact that there are at least *some* people who do not treat the Bishwakarma as lowly or defiling?

I never obtained a truly satisfying answer to all of these questions. A few days later, when I talked about the event with Ganga and his family, they waved my question away, saying simply that the Sherpa community, unlike most, does not care about caste and untouchability, but that caste-based discrimination did continue to occur. Their casual tone led me to believe that this had indeed been a case of over-attentiveness on my part. I had built up a sense of deep significance that the event simply did not hold for my hosts.

Be this as it may, the event did shift my own perspective, making me attentive to the complexity of the issue of caste-based discrimination today. That the Sherpa in Sammagaon are less stringent about caste rules than other communities was new to me, but it made sense that I would not have noticed this until then, since there were no Sherpa people living close to Ganga and Chini Maya's home, where I was based. That Ganga had explicitly said that Dalits were *no longer untouchable*, however, was something which I could not fully shake off. In the weeks and months that followed, I gradually became aware of a phenomenon which I had not been paying sufficient attention to until then, but which I came to realise is central to the way in which caste is talked about in Sammagaon. This is a tendency to place caste and caste-based discrimination in the past, against the fairly obvious evidence that they nevertheless continue to matter a great deal in everyday life. Ganga's assertion that 'Dalits used to be untouchable but are not any more' was unusually explicit, but I would later encounter multiple people insisting that, regardless of what I was observing, caste-based discrimination somehow belonged to 'the past'.

As I paid increasing attention to such assertions, I began to form a new impression. In Sammagaon, the ongoing discrimination against Dalits is real, but it is talked about almost as a historical accident, a fluke, an outdated way of thinking and behaving. As I took notice of this, a number of new questions emerged. Why were people, Dalits and non-Dalits alike, saying such things even though discrimination against Dalits was still observable in countless details of everyday life? Why would upper-caste people regularly tell me that there is 'only one kind of human' but, in the same breath, admit that they would never eat food cooked by a Dalit or let a Dalit into their house?

That people do not behave in line with what they say, and that they regularly say things which do not fully reflect their deeper mental representations, is a well-known fact. For example—in an admittedly entirely different context—Leach suggested that 'dogmatic assertions' say 'absolutely nothing of the inner psychological state' (1966:40) of the people who make them. In the upcoming chapters, I will consider the possibility that the denial of caste-based discrimination operates as a 'dogma' in Sammagaon, that it is a proposition to which people adhere not because it is accurate or descriptive, but for extraneous reasons. I will suggest that while this is occasionally the case, such an explanation is too simplistic. In Sammagaon, people do not only *say* that caste belongs to the past; they make efforts to effectively place it there. It is therefore important not to do away too quickly with the tension that exists between, on the one hand, people making conscious efforts to get rid of caste-based discrimination and, on the other, the persistence of this phenomenon. Many of the upcoming chapters deal with this tension in one way or another.

Thesis outline

The first chapter offers ethnographic and anthropological contextualisation. It opens with a general description of the fieldsite in which I conducted my research and describes how I built rapport with my hosts. The caste 'structure' and the relation between caste and ethnicity in East Nepal are discussed here, and reflections on my overall theoretical orientation are offered.

The rest of the thesis, chapters 2 and following, is divided into three parts. The first part documents various strategies used by the Bishwakarma and others in an attempt to do

away with caste-based discrimination in Sammagaon. These strategies focus on changing the public image of the Bishwakarma, shifting it away from an image of 'lowliness' towards one of prestige. The second part offers an explanation of why, despite these strategies being deployed, the Bishwakarma and Dalits more generally continue to be perceived as a distinct, different kind of people. The explanation I offer is uncommon in anthropology; it is based on research conducted primarily in the disciplines of social and developmental psychology. I argue that the ongoing stigmatisation of Dalits is, in part, attributable to a cognitive bias known as 'psychological essentialism'. This argument, in turn, leads me to re-evaluate the strategies presented in part I and to discuss an altogether different strategy in part III. This final strategy, which I call 'mixing', does not attempt to change the image of the Bishwakarma and Dalits more generally. Instead, it tries to do away with these social categories altogether by blurring or otherwise re-negotiating the boundary which separates Dalits from others.

Chapter 1

Background

This chapter has several goals. First, it introduces the reader to the general setting in which the fieldwork was conducted and describes how I established rapport with my hosts. Second, it describes the caste ‘structure’ and relation between caste and ethnicity in Sammagaon. Third, it discusses my overarching theoretical orientation.

Ethnographic setting and methodological considerations

Sammagaon

In the introduction, I described Sammagaon as a ‘village’. This is a somewhat misleading appellation. Sammagaon covers a much larger area than the word ‘village’ typically evokes. It is what was known at the time of my fieldwork as a VDC (Village Development Committee), which is a unit in Nepal’s official geography.¹

A VDC is primarily an administrative and economic entity. It figures on people’s citizenship documents, determines where a person can vote, and receives a yearly budget from district authorities which is spent on infrastructural development. Thus, in certain contexts, VDCs matter a great deal. However, they are too large to capture the informal geographies which are used to navigate and describe places on an everyday basis. These

1. The 2015 Constitution of Nepal, which was promulgated a few months after I returned from the country and marked the final step in the country’s transition to federalism, reorganised Nepal’s geographical and administrative divisions. The information included here reflects the administrative organisation of Nepal during my fieldwork.

informal geographies comprise elements such as the '*gaun*' ('village'), the '*tol*' (which is usually a group of houses whose inhabitants are from the same caste, ethnic group or lineage), '*jangal*' (forests, which can spread over vast areas between separate *gaun* or *tol*), '*nadi*' (rivers), and many more features of physical and human-shaped geography.

According to the 2011 national census (CBS 2012, 2014), the VDC of Sammagaon boasts a total population slightly over 3,500 individuals, who live in almost 750 households. Among these, 6.2 per cent declare themselves to belong to one of the three Dalit castes present in the area.

Sammagaon covers a large stretch of steep terrain spread between two valleys. It is essentially one very large hill whose base lies at an elevation of about 800 metres and whose highest point is 2000 metres higher. To climb from the lowest point to the highest takes at least five hours, and this must be done on foot. There is a treacherous dirt track that goes part of the way, but it is so badly maintained that no vehicle can use it, apart from Sammagaon's single tractor, owned by a family of the Sunuwar ethnic group and used to provision shops with merchandise.

Sammagaon, like all VDCs, is divided into nine numbered wards, smaller and mostly insignificant administrative units whose sole purpose is to add granularity to the official geography. Ward 1 is at the very bottom of the hill; ward 9 at the very top. Ganga's house, which is where I lived for the entire duration of my fieldwork, is in ward 5, almost exactly half-way to the top of Sammagaon, at an elevation just shy of 1800 metres. It is also in a place which the inhabitants of Sammagaon call '*Tindu*', the informal denomination of an area slightly smaller than ward 5.

Elevation affects which crops can be grown. The two main concepts which people use to describe elevation are '*bensi*' and '*lek*'. The former describes the bottom of valleys, places where the climate is almost tropical, the staple grain is rice, and fruit and vegetables such as tomatoes, mangos, jackfruit, and pineapples grow. Rivers in the *bensi* provide ample irrigation; the terrain is flat and easy to cultivate, the earth fertile. The term '*lek*', in contrast, describes places higher up in the hills, where corn and millet are staples, and common fruit and vegetables include the chayote, spinach, pears, mulberries, etc. Here, the terrain is steeper and irrigation takes more work. *Tindu* is in the *lek*, but it is not far from the

bensi. On occasion, when I would walk to higher places, where the air felt significantly colder and dryer and the vegetation became sparse, I would be told that this was the *lek* proper. Yet even in the highest part of Sammagaon, snow is rare. The whole VDC is part of the *pahād*, the Himalayan foothills, sometimes also referred to as ‘mid-hills’. None of this counts as *himal* (Himalayan mountains). The latter term is reserved for the snowy peaks that can be seen to the north of Sammagaon, only a few dozen kilometres away, but an altogether much harsher environment.

Until roughly half-way through my fieldwork, the best way to get to Sammagaon from Kathmandu was by bus. The journey was intense. The buses themselves were colourful, hand-painted in bright designs with a number of auspicious signs. They would leave the capital at dawn. A few minutes after departure, the driver would turn up the volume on the sound system. He would usually play *naya lok git*, a modern take on traditional music, whose long and repetitive songs celebrate rural life and speak, more often than not, of romance and marriage. The driver was always accompanied by one or two conductors, teenage boys who would check passenger tickets and charge people who hopped on and off along the way. As the bus drove further from Kathmandu, the road would get progressively worse, and narrower; the tarmac gave way to sections paved in roughly cut stone, which in turn deteriorated into sinuous, mountainous dirt track. Once the last police checkpoint was passed, the bus would take on more passengers than it was built to accommodate. With no space left inside, the new passengers would climb onto the roof, where they would sit and cling to the metal luggage bars. Young boys are often particularly eager to experience this thrill.

A slightly more expensive alternative to the bus service was the ‘Sumo’, a transportation service which was introduced half-way through my fieldwork. Its name is eponymous with the car model used for this transport, a ten-seater jeep produced by the Indian corporation TATA. Neither buses nor Sumos reach Sammagaon itself. During the dry season, both stop in Bensitaun, a large *gaun* which is part of the VDC of Puranogaon, and close to Sammagaon’s ward number 1. When I started my fieldwork, under good conditions, the trip from Kathmandu to Bensitaun lasted some ten or eleven hours. Later, a new road was opened which shaved five hours off this travel time. During the wet season, the trip was considerably slower and could not always be completed in one day. Passengers regu-

larly had to get off when the bus or car got stuck in mud, to help dig and push the vehicle. Moreover, during the wet season, the bus stops several hours' walk away from Bensitaun, as the track is destroyed each year by landslides and deep torrents which form spontaneously during the monsoon.



Figure 1.1: Young child on the path between Bensitaun and Tindu (photograph by Christian Deschenaux, reproduced with permission.)

The temperature range in Tindu, the part of Sammagaon I lived in, varies from slightly higher than freezing in the winter to over 25°C in the summer. The most comfortable season is in October and November, when it is sunny and the land is at its most fertile. This is a period of '*sukha*', a term which is hard to translate, but which evokes a sense of contentedness, sweetness and fulfilment. It is a time to lie back, relax, and enjoy the fruits of the land. As the year moves forward, winter brings cold, but not hardship per se. May and June are marked with blazing heat. The land dries up and vegetables are harder to grow; instead, one eats *gundruk*, spinach which has been fermented and dried in the sun earlier in the year. More than any other event, however, it is the yearly monsoon, which usually starts in July, that marks the cycle of seasons. With its torrential rains begins a

period of *dukha*, of toil and backbreaking work, a frantic rush to plant millet (or rice, lower in the valley). All the inhabitants of Sammagon buy cheap, translucent sheets of blue plastic which they tie up in one corner and throw over their clothes as they head out to the fields. This impractical and ineffective gear provides little protection from the deluge, but people distract themselves from the rain through the intensity of collective work and by bantering about their superior planting abilities. Toiling and hardship is part of the rhythm of life; they are greeted philosophically. When somebody complains too loudly about how painful the work is, they are reminded by someone else that all this is just part of *dhukha-sukha*, the alternation of adversity and happiness which give life a rhythm.

Sammagaon's ward 5, where I conducted the bulk of my fieldwork, is made of sixty-eight households. This includes the Bishwakarma *tol*, which comprises eight households, the male members of which all descend from one man, Ganga's great-grandfather. All the Bishwakarma here share a *thar* name: Dehegli.² There is one more Bishwakarma household in ward 5, but it is not in the same *tol*, and its members are not related to the Dehegli, although they maintain friendly relations with them. I spent a fair amount of time in this house, in part because its owner, Kishor, ran the largest smithy in Sammagaon. As chapter 4 will discuss in more detail, the Bishwakarma are still heavily associated with blacksmithing, their so-called 'caste occupation', despite the fact that very few of them actually practise it. As for the other houses in ward 5, an important number of them belong to upper-caste *Chhetri* people, a few to the even higher-caste *Bahun*, and a few more to Newars and other *janajāti* groups (ethnic groups, middle-caste).³ The other Dalits of Sammagaon, the Darji and the Sārki, live in other wards. I spent some time with the Darji, who live in a *tol* some thirty minutes away from the Bishwakarma, but almost none with the Sārki, whose *tol* is further away.

Ward 5 is, for all intents and purposes, the administrative centre of Sammagaon. It includes a small police building, architecturally indistinguishable from people's residences, in which three to four officers live and work throughout the year. There is also a never-used, decrepit official administrative building whose purpose was never made clear to me. There are a few small shops in the ward, all of which are integrated with their owners'

2. See next section for a description of the *thar*.

3. See section below on the social structure of Sammagaon.

homes. One sells thirty-kilo sacks of grain and large blocks of salt; the others are convenience stores selling soap, pencils and instant noodles. Kishor, the owner of the smithy, also runs a shop-cum-drinking spot.

These shops sell goods at a slightly higher price than those in Bensitaun. Ganga and his family, who could have afforded to buy goods in ward 5, often preferred to make the trip all the way down to Bensitaun and carry whatever they needed back up. My large backpack was often recruited for this purpose, as were my legs. At first, carrying fifteen kilos of goods up to Tindu, a steep, three to four hour walk, was difficult for me. Over time, I came to enjoy doing so. I would regularly offer to make the trip, as I found the walk a good way to spend a few hours alone, something that would not happen often otherwise. I also made it a point to buy lentils and other basic goods for the poorer households in the Bishwakarma *tol*, in particular for a woman I called ‘*thuli āmā*’ (lit. ‘big mother’, father’s elder wife)⁴, who lived with an adopted child in a tiny house, and who had no land to sustain herself.

There are two more buildings in ward 5 which are noteworthy. One is a small primary school on the edge of a small forest, teaching grades 1 to 5. When I first arrived in Sammagaon, the building was so old that it was not in use most of the year, teachers preferring to give classes in a clearing above the school. When I left, the building was being reconstructed by an NGO. The other building is a health post; it is quite large, made of dry stone and cement rather than the usual stone and mud. The staff are often absent and there seem to be regular shortages of medicine, but the building is used for village meetings. Public events are held in front of it; NGO meetings are held in one of its larger rooms.

The course of a usual day in Sammagaon depends on the season. The vast majority of the population lives by subsistence agriculture. I have already mentioned the frantic month or two that the arrival of wet season announces. At this time, men, women and children quite literally work from dawn to dusk, with little to no respite. Each seedling has to be planted by hand, and failure to do this at the right time and in the right way can lead to a bad harvest.

4. This woman was the elder of Ganga’s paternal uncle’s two wives; kinship terms can be used quite liberally to mark respect in Nepal.



Figure 1.2: Digging mud in preparation for planting rice.



Figure 1.3: Flattening the ground in preparation for planting rice.



Figure 1.4: Planting rice.

In calmer months, there is still plenty to do in the fields and around the house, but the sense of urgency fades away. People wake up between 5 and 6 am. Some households, especially but not exclusively upper-caste ones, might start the day with some soft chanting or *pujā* (ceremonial worship). Women light fires at the hearth and prepare tea. Buffaloes are brought out from sheds and tied to the poles where they spend the whole day. Other livestock—goats, chickens, pigs—are tended to. People cut grass or bamboo leaves that they bring back for the cattle in a large *dhoko* (a woven basket carried with a strap around the head).

The first of the day's two meals is taken around 9 or 10 am. It usually includes *bhāt* (boiled rice), though on occasion this can be replaced with *chekhla* (crushed corn) or *dhido* (a fried mix of millet flour and water). One of these three staples must be served if the food is to be considered an actual meal and not only *khājā* (snack). *Dāl* (lentil soup) is common, as is whatever vegetable is in season, though neither of these are seen as necessary in the same way as rice or one of the other staples. Meat is rarer, and when available, it is relished. Food is generally prepared by women, with two exceptions. First, unmarried men whose families do not live in Sammagaon, such as school teachers, might cook for themselves. Second, men might cook when their wives or daughters are menstruating, as menstruation is viewed as polluting. This second case is more commonly seen in upper-caste households, though it also occurs in some Bishwakarma households. Once the meal is over, for most adults the bulk of the day is dedicated to work in the fields or around the house. Some specific tasks are reserved for men or women. For example, only men will guide the oxen used to pull ploughs, and only women will add a new layer to the floor and porch of a house, a task which requires dipping one's hands in dung. Most tasks can however be accomplished by either men or women. Some activities include the preparation of foods to be stored for longer periods (drying spinach, grinding turmeric, etc.), preparing *rakshi* (millet alcohol), making various household items (mats, ladders, etc.) out of bamboo, and many other everyday tasks.

Children spend relatively little time in the fields, as they are generally sent to school during the day. Their attendance rates are low, however, and when needed, they will stay at home to help with work instead. While I was in the field, the prize for *best* attendance in a school in Puranogaon was awarded to a student who had been present on barely over

seventy per cent of school days. In addition to children, there are some adults who spend significantly less time than others working in fields. This category includes school teachers, government employees posted in the area (police officers and staff at the health post),⁵ the few inhabitants who have found employment with one of the locally active NGOs, and a small but significant group of better-off villagers who engage extensively in local politics and take an unusually active part in the numerous meetings that are called by NGOs, micro-credit associations, and other development-focused organisations. Together, these people form something of an 'elite' rural class. Also less vested in manual labour are the mostly upper-caste priests who provide ritual services to their patrons, the pastor in Sammagaon's only church, and the more active among the *jhakri* (shamans).

The day ends soon after the second meal, which is identical to the first and consumed in the evening, between 6 and 8 pm. The recent arrival of televisions and satellite antennas means that some villagers stay up for a few hours after eating, and a few others might go drinking, but most go to bed early.

Choice of fieldsite

Citing Pratt, Ahearn notes that ethnographies often open with a narrative of the ethnographer's arrival in their fieldsite (2001:10). I do not believe that my experience of arrival and gradually becoming accustomed to life in Sammagaon differs significantly from that of most anthropologists, so I will keep my remarks on this topic brief. However, it is worth explaining how I came to conduct research in Sammagaon rather than elsewhere. Sammagaon may seem like an unlikely choice for research on Dalits, since it is located in eastern Nepal, where caste-based discrimination is not as pronounced as in the western and southern parts of the country.

On the 21st of November 2013, one month after arriving in Nepal, I made my way to Puranogaon, where I had spent six months in 2010. Despite my familiarity with this place and its people, I had decided not to conduct fieldwork there. In 2010, my primary role had been that of an English language teacher at a local primary school, a position which I had been assigned to by a Swiss NGO. The inhabitants of Puranogaon had come to as-

5. There is also an official secretary for the VDC, but he has not lived in Sammagaon for years, preferring to stay in the distant district headquarters.

sociate me with this role, and I felt that it would be impossible for me to shed the image of an NGO worker and explain my new purpose as an ethnographer. Returning to Purnanogaon in 2013, my main goal was to meet some of the friends I had made there and ask them about places close to Purnanogaon that might be suitable for the work which I now intended to conduct, but where people did not already know me. My aim for this brief trip was to start establishing a list of candidate locations for fieldwork, but I was adamant not to make a final decision before I had also been to other parts of the country.

Ram Prasad and his wife Rasika were some of the people to whom I had grown the closest in Purnanogaon in 2010. After I explained my project to them, Ram Prasad walked me to Sammagaon, some four hours away from Purnanogaon. I stayed there for a few days with Rasika's brother, Narayan. Like Ram Prasad and Rasika, Narayan was an upper-caste man, but he in turn introduced me to Ganga Dehegli, a retired school teacher and a Dalit. Shortly after we met, Ganga offered to host me and help with my work. I thanked him, told him I still intended to check a few other possible locations, and promised I would be in touch.

An unforeseeable accident led me to conduct fieldwork in Sammagaon without exploring other possible fieldsites. This happened a few days later, when I was returning from this brief expedition. I was sitting with five other people on the back seat of the battered old bus that goes to Kathmandu. The bus ceiling was low and the road bumpy, so I held onto the seat to avoid repeatedly hitting my head. We drove into a particularly large pothole; this sent the bus seat upwards, detaching it from the metal frame to which it was only loosely attached. When the seat came back down, it caught the tip of my finger, breaking the bone, ripping the nail off, and cutting me deeply. I stayed in Kathmandu for the surgery and healing process, taking lessons in Nepali language and working towards obtaining a research visa. By the time the healing was complete and I had solved the various administrative issues that arose with the visa, nine weeks had passed. I felt that it was time for me to start my fieldwork in earnest, and Sammagaon was the only entry on my list of possible fieldsites.

Throughout the duration of my fieldwork, I harboured a sense of unease—*anxiety even, at times*—at the reasons for which I had come to conduct fieldwork in Sammagaon. I was haunted by the sense that there was, somewhere out there, a more suitable location.

In my mind, there were three main issues with Sammagaon. The first was, as already mentioned, that it was located in a part of the country where caste-based discrimination is comparatively low. The second was that it had comparatively few Dalit households, and more problematically, that these houses were grouped into three separate agglomerations located quite far away from each other. The third was that no children lived in Ganga's household, and that there were only a few children in the neighbouring houses. The latter was an issue because the project which I originally intended to carry out was focused on childhood.

I worked around these limitations in ways which will become apparent in the upcoming material. The lower-than-average caste-based discrimination, in many ways, turned out to be an interesting context to work in. It led me to study how Dalits try to *change* the way in which they are treated in everyday life and made it possible to study phenomena presumably rarer in other parts of Nepal, such as Dalit–non-Dalit marriage. The separation of Dalit households into three clusters is what led me to work principally with the Bishwakarma. Somewhat paradoxically, focusing on the Bishwakarma later led me to expand my research beyond the borders of Sammagaon, as I started to spend time with their relatives who lived in other villages and in Kathmandu. The low number of children in the Bishwakarma part of Sammagaon is what led to the most drastic change in my interests; I shifted to working with adults and young adults instead.

In retrospect, it is clear that the research I conducted diverged considerably from my original intent, in no small part because of the accident I was involved in. Some anthropologists relish the vagaries and unpredictability of ethnographic work. I do not share this enthusiasm, but I no longer feel the sense of unease which haunted me in Sammagaon. This is mostly thanks to Ganga and his relatives, who not only made me feel welcome, but persuaded me that there was great value in relating their experiences and what they had to say.

Becoming like a son

My first encounter with Ganga and Chini Maya must have been more surprising for them than it was for me. Narayan, who had introduced us, had told them only that he was bringing a foreigner interested in working with Dalits. For our very first meeting, Ganga

had set out two plastic chairs (unusual furniture in the area) on the front porch of their house. He sat in one and ceremoniously invited me to sit in the other. Chini Maya brought tea and a freshly cut cucumber. She initially stood in the background but gradually moved in to take part in the conversation. I made an effort to explain what I had come for, in my then teetering Nepali. Once the basic idea had somehow been communicated—that I was a student, that I wanted to live with them and write about Dalits in Nepal—we immediately discussed practical arrangements: which room I would stay in, how much I would pay for food and lodging, whether I wished to share food with them, etc. In retrospect, I find it remarkable that Ganga and Chini Maya were so welcoming. They were immediately sympathetic and willing to take me in.

Much later, when we had grown close, Ganga and Chini Maya would laugh as they recalled this initial meeting. They had shown none of their surprise on that day, but they later explained that they had both expected someone a lot older. Chini Maya in particular quickly took to calling me '*babu*' (young child), a term used in endearment. For the whole period that I stayed in her house, she never stopped worrying about me, insisting that I call regularly when I was away, reminding me to watch my step whenever we walked together, making sure that I was constantly fed more than I actually wanted, and telling me never to go drinking at the local hangout. I was expected, from the start, to call her '*āmā*' (mother). Kinship terms are widely used in Nepal to address even people whom one is meeting for the first time, but it is undeniable that Chini Maya's attitude toward me rapidly became that of a slightly overbearing motherly figure. On the whole, she would generally have been a lot happier had I stayed at home each day, all day long. In her eyes, I was something of a helpless child—a representation which she explicitly vocalised once, when I was explaining how difficult it was for me to find my way around the many paths of Sammagaon. She would often chuckle sympathetically at my incompetence with farm work, and at how quickly physical labour became too hard for me. But above all, Chini Maya would regularly warn me not to trust strangers, who upon meeting a rich foreigner like me would certainly be intent on getting me drunk and stealing my money.

Ganga was even more explicit about the kinship-like nature of our relationship. He initially suggested that I call him 'uncle' (in English), but this term was rapidly and seamlessly replaced with '*bua*' (father). He often described our relationship as '*bua-chhora*' (father and

son). Unlike his wife, for all his initial surprise at how young I was, Ganga always treated me like an *adult* son. He took a strong interest in my relationship with a *Nepaliki chhori* (daughter of a Nepali), offering advice on how to behave with my future father-in-law and ultimately giving a long and moving speech at the end of my wedding.⁶ Throughout my fieldwork, I saw him shed tears twice. The first was when he spoke of the conversion of his (actual) eldest son to Christianity. This was a major blow for him because it meant that his son would not conduct the appropriate Hindu mortuary rites after Ganga's death. The second was when I left Sammagaon at the end of my fieldsite. I am certain that I had not become equivalent to an actual son, but I was nonetheless moved.

Ganga and Chini Maya have two sons and three daughters. Only the youngest daughter, Sirjanna, is unmarried and still lives with them. I only met her after the initial arrangements to live in the house. I call her '*bahini*' (younger sister), though I use the same respectful pronoun to address her as she has always insisted on using with me, despite the fact that this pronoun is unusually honorific for siblings. Sirjanna, in some ways, is the person in Sammagaon to whom I found it easiest to relate. Our similar age certainly helped, and I always felt sympathetic to the plight she experienced while searching for formal employment. Sirjanna had completed a considerably higher level of formal education than most of her peers, especially in comparison to other young Dalit women. She had lived in Kathmandu for over a year to attend a course for people aiming to work in development. The whole time I was in Sammagaon, her goal was to find employment, marry, and leave this rural area. She sometimes asked me for help; we used my laptop to prepare her CV and would use the unreliable internet connection on my phone to check for new opportunities. A dutiful daughter, she took excellent care of her parents, but it was clear that she was dissatisfied with the current situation.

A fieldsite bounded by kinship

The kinship system of the Bishwakarma is identical to that of the upper-caste *Bahun* (Brahman), described extensively by Bennett (1983:especially 16–22) and Stone (2010:93–110). A few words on this system are necessary here because kinship is the way in which I came,

6. My wife, whom I met before fieldwork, is Nepali. While I was in Sammagaon, she lived with her father in Kathmandu. We were not married yet, but we celebrated our wedding towards the end of my fieldwork, in 2015. Ganga and his family were, of course, invited.

quite unconsciously at first, to ‘bound’ my fieldsite.

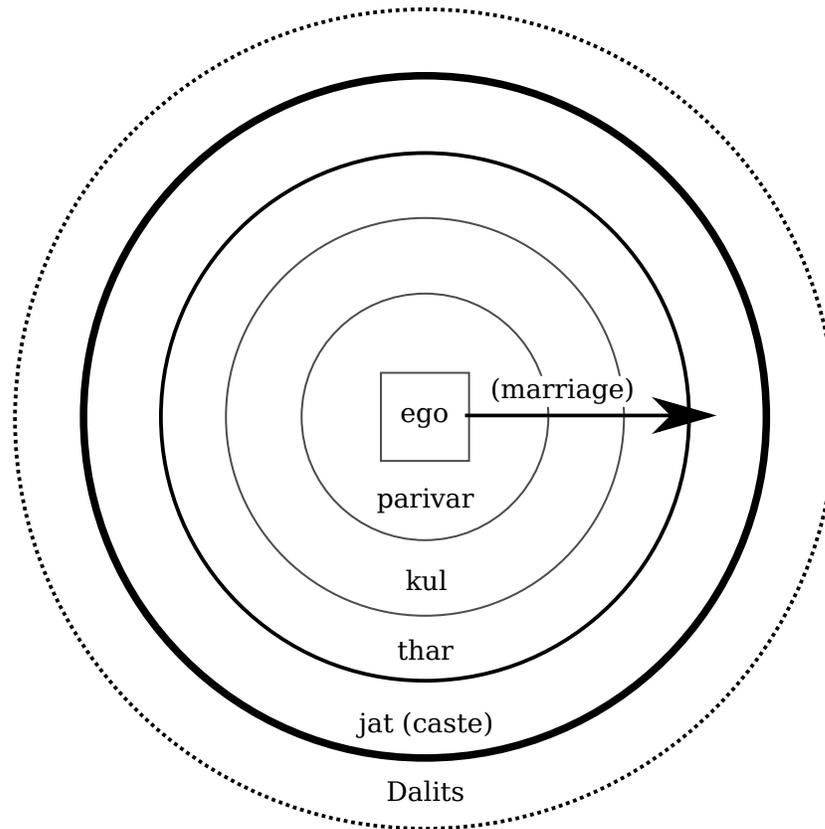


Figure 1.5: A simplified model of different kinship groups

Together, Chini Maya, Ganga and Sirjanna form a *parivār*, a term which can loosely be translated as ‘family’ or ‘household’. The *parivār* is the smallest unit that ego is part of. A larger unit is the *kul*, which is described both as a patriline tracing back to a common ancestor and, more often, as a group that worships the same *kul devtā* (lineage gods). As noted by Bennett (1983:18–21), the size of the *kul* can vary widely, as a *parivār* can choose to begin a new *kul* at any given time and for a number of reasons. Usually larger than the *kul*, but not necessarily so, are the *thar* and *gotra*. Both of these are agnatic descent groups. The *gotra*, which is sometimes translated as ‘clan’, is not a category which is paid close attention to in everyday life; it is mainly important when selecting a spouse because it is exogamous. Many of the people whom I worked with could not tell me what their own *gotra* was. The *thar*, on the other hand, is a commonly used category. In part this is because it can operate, for legal purposes, as a surname. Ganga, Chini Maya and all the other Bishwakarma of Sammagaon belong to the *thar* called ‘Dehegli’, and this is the name which figures on their

identity documents, at least if they own them. The *thar* is also strictly exogamous.

There are categories larger than the *thar*, though these can hardly be thought of as ‘kinship’ terms. Mainly, there is the *jāt*, the term usually translated as caste, though it also has the more general meaning ‘sort’, ‘kind of’, and even ‘species’; thus there are *jāts* not only of people, but also of spinach, leeches, buffaloes, etc. When talking about caste, the media and legal documents favour the term ‘*jāti*’ (‘community’), as this is considered more modern and can apply to the ethnic groups of Nepal as well as castes.⁷ The term is used by some of the more educated and politically active people in Sammagaon, but in practice, its extension is identical to that of ‘*jāt*’, and many people use the two interchangeably, without much concern for their different connotations.

Ganga and his relatives belong to the ‘Bishwakarma’ *jāt*.⁸ The *jāt* is very strictly endogamous. Thus, a Dehegli must marry someone who is a Bishwakarma, but not another Dehegli. In the second part of this thesis, where I address violations of this rule, I use the term ‘intercaste marriage’; this is equivalent to ‘*jāt* exogamy’.

Still larger than the *jāt* is the category ‘Dalit’, which is recognised universally in Nepali politics and the Nepali administration. The term is generally known in Sammagaon, though some people without formal education have never heard it. The category ‘Dalit’ comprises a number of *jāt* or castes. The other two which are present in Sammagaon and the surrounding area are the Darji and the Sārki; together with the Bishwakarma, these groups are sometimes referred to as ‘Hill Dalits’ to distinguish them from the different Dalit castes that live in the Southern plains.

The Bishwakarma are, like other Dalits and the upper-caste Bahun and Chhetri, patrilineal and virilocal. Thus, Ganga and Chini Maya’s sons, having married and moved out, have each started a *parivār* of their own, though they still belong to the same *kul* as their parents.⁹ Of these two sons, I never met the eldest, who was working in Saudi Arabia throughout the duration of my fieldwork. I did however regularly meet his wife and their two sons, who live in Jorpathi, Kathmandu. I met Ganga’s younger son and his own family on several

7. See section below on social structure.

8. See introduction on the difference between ‘Kāmi’, the older caste name, and ‘Bishwakarma’

9. Although in this regard, the status of the eldest son, who has converted to Christianity, is not quite clear.

occasions; they also live in Jorpathi.

Ganga and Chini Maya's two eldest daughters are married. They not only have their own *parivār* now, but have also been ritually 'transferred' to the *kul*, *thar*, and *gotra* of their husbands, during the wedding ritual of *khanyādān* ('gift of a virgin'). Consequently, they refer to their parents' home as their *māiti* (married woman's natal home and consanguineous relatives) rather than *parivār*. Ganga and Chini Maya's eldest daughter lives in Parvat, not far from Sammagaon, where she is married to one of the most talented blacksmiths in the area. She visits her parents regularly. The younger daughter lives in Kathmandu, though in a different location from her two brothers; her husband also works in the Gulf and sends her remittance.¹⁰

I mentioned above that I bounded my fieldsite along kinship lines. A more precise statement would be that, by and large, the proximity which I developed to various people in Sammagaon and elsewhere followed what could be expected if I had been an actual member of Ganga's *parivār*. The people whom I came to know the most intimately were the members of this household. Beyond this, I maintained close relations with all but one Dehegli household in Sammagaon, and particularly that of Ganga's younger brother, who lived in the house immediately next to ours. Later in my fieldwork, I took increasingly frequent trips to other villages, where I was usually introduced either to Dehegli relatives of my main hosts, or to Bishwakarma people belonging to a different *thar*, often affines of the Dehegli. As mentioned, I also maintained close relations with some of Ganga's relatives living in Kathmandu.

I did not spend time exclusively with the Dehegli and other Bishwakarma people. Sammagaon is a location in which a number of castes and ethnic groups live in tight proximity. The relations which I developed with others in the village were, however, often construed as friendship rather than kin-like. At some point, I did feel a need to spend more time with non-Dalits in order to broaden my perspective. When I decided to do this, I was confronted with the problem of choosing which people to approach, and why. I chose the path of least resistance and started taking regular trips to Bensitaun, the home of Ram Prasad and Basika, the upper-caste people I had known since my 2010 trip to Nepal; they were

10. All the marriages mentioned so far are caste-endogamous. Of all the Dehegli in Sammagaon, only one woman married a non-Dalit.

always extremely welcoming. There I developed a secondary set of connections, similar in structure to the one which I had with Ganga's kin, but this time among Ram's upper-caste, Bahun relatives. This second set of relations never reached the same level of proximity as I had among the Dehegli, but it was nonetheless significant.

Beyond allowing me to develop deeper connections with non-Dalits, the regular stints of work which I did in Bensitaun had a second advantage. Bensitaun and Sammagaon had very different experiences of the 1996–2006 'People's War'. The presence of Maoist insurgents in the former was much stronger. Maoists did pass through and stay in Sammagaon, and people there share memories of how they set fire to the police station and enrolled a few young people in their ranks, but the Maoists did not implant themselves as firmly as in Bensitaun. Working in Bensitaun enabled me to understand much better the effect of the War and Maoist insurgency for Dalits, a topic which I address in chapter 5.

In addition to working with the Bishwakarma in Sammagaon, in the surrounding villages and in Kathmandu, and with Ram Prasad and his kin in Bensitaun, towards the end of my fieldwork, I conducted formal interviews with a broader set of people both in the area of Sammagaon and in Kathmandu, many of whom I had not met beforehand. Most of these interviews were with Dalit–non-Dalit couples; the results are discussed in the second part of the dissertation. In Kathmandu, I benefited from the help of an excellent research assistant, Ratna BK.¹¹

The method of following kinship ties to increase my social circle in the field was not so much a deliberate decision as the result of letting my relations grow organically. It was only after a prolonged period and only in retrospect that I came to think of this as a way of—loosely—bounding my fieldsite. Some might find this controversial. In a well-cited article, Candea (2007) defends bounding one's fieldsite arbitrarily rather than following the existing boundaries which separate places and groups (tribes, ethnic groups, castes, and villages, districts, etc.). His recommendation is to choose one or several locations which are restricted spatially or otherwise, but which do not form a coherent social 'entity' or 'whole'. The aim is to observe how the complexities of social life play out in an 'arbitrary

11. As per a previous footnote, BK is an abbreviation often used for 'Bishwakarma'. In addition to helping me in Kathmandu, Ratna was supposed to join me in Sammagaon for one to two months at the end of my fieldwork. The very day he made the trip, a major earthquake hit Nepal. Ratna reached Puranogaon but returned to his home, which was destroyed, as soon as possible.

location', and to avoid painting too homogeneous an overall picture of 'the field'. By now, it should be clear that I did not follow this advice: the choice of working with the Bishwakarma was arbitrary in a sense, but once this initial choice was made, I followed ties of kinship that made sense to the people with whom I worked.

In defence of my choice, while I agree that there is value in observing how complex social systems play out in specific locations, my experience in Nepal is that it is perfectly possible to do so while still bounding one's fieldsite, roughly, in a way that makes sense to the people with whom one is working. Following kinship lines introduced me to a breadth of topics. One does not need many hops on the Dehegli kinship diagram, for example, to shift from a Dalit activist living in Kathmandu to an old woman in Sammagaon who has never heard the term 'Dalit' before, or from a self-proclaimed communist school teacher to a fervent Christian convert. In fact, my experience was far from the type of homogeneity that Candea's method intends to prevent. I often found myself overwhelmed by the diversity that I was observing even among individuals who recognise themselves as closely related to each other, to the extent that during fieldwork, I often wondered how I would manage to produce any valid generalisation. Still, I do attempt to generalise here, and to the extent that I succeed, it is appropriate to describe this dissertation as an ethnography addressing caste and Dalit issues in Nepal, with a specific focus on the Bishwakarma, but which also comes replete with the idiosyncrasies and particularities of the Dehegli of Sammagaon and their relatives.

What this dissertation is not, in contrast, is a classic 'village study' in the tradition, for example, of Caplan's (1972) *Priests and Cobblers*. The latter, one of the early studies of caste and Dalits in West Nepal, reads like small-scale economic sociology. The bulk of the book concerns village economy, studying which sources of income are available to members of which caste groups and how this affects caste relations. The result, while convincing, lacks a sense of the flow of life, an account of the daily experiences of the people whom the author was working with. In my own work, I privileged the latter.

Caste in Sarmagaon

Here I present two different ways of viewing the social organisation of Sarmagaon and of the hilly areas of Nepal more generally. These two views will play an important role in chapter 4, where I will discuss attempts by some Bishwakarma to ‘ethnicise’ their identity. One of these is based on caste and is strongly hierarchical. The other is based on ethnicity. While not egalitarian, it does not imply the same hierarchy as caste.

The hierarchical view

During my first weeks in Sarmagaon, I was struck by two simple yet remarkable facts. The first is that virtually everybody was in complete agreement on how the different castes and ethnic groups in the area are ranked relatively to each other. This is not to say that caste in Nepal has remained—or possibly even ever was—the type of overarching, total social system famously described by Dumont (1980[1966]), in which hierarchy is a ‘paramount value’ that everybody subscribes to unquestioningly and that governs all aspects of life. In many ways, caste in Nepal is closer, like in India, to an ‘identity’ marker (Gupta 2005; Das 2015). These remarks notwithstanding, it is also incontestable that the different castes and ethnic groups of Nepal are not equal in status.

In Sarmagaon, it is still common to hear the terms ‘*thulo jāt*’ (big caste), ‘*māthlo jāt*’ (upper caste), ‘*sāno jāt*’ (small caste) and ‘*tallo jāt*’ (lower caste). These terms are not used to indicate absolute position, but rather to express the relation of another group relative to ego or ego’s own group. For example, the Bishwakarma talk—without pause or unease—of the Sunuwar or the Bahun as ‘*hāmi bhandā thulo*’ (bigger than us), but of the Darji as ‘*hāmi bhandā sāno*’ (smaller than us). Because such terms are commonly used, it was easy for me to position the various groups present in Sarmagaon relatively to each other. In doing so, I found that virtually everybody agreed on an overarching ranking.

The second striking fact is that the ranking elicited in this way is in perfect accordance with the one described in the 1854 *Muluki Ain* (henceforth *MA*), the first civil code of Nepal. In his detailed study of this legal text, Höfer (2004[1979]) shows how nineteenth-century legislators from Kathmandu attempted to create a unique, national caste hierarchy sanctioned by the state. Thus, Nepal’s first civil code was filled with never-ending rules

on how people of different caste should and could interact with each other, and on the punishments to be administered to transgressors.

Upper-caste groups

'Thagadari' in Muluki Ain
'Bahun-Chhetri' in vernacular use
'Khas-Arya' in current official terminology

Janajati-Adivasi

'Matwali' in Muluki Ain
'Tribal' in older academic literature
includes many distinct groups:
Rai, Tamang, Magar, Sunuwar, etc.

Dalit

'Pani nachalne' in Muluki Ain
'Untouchables' in earlier vernacular
Includes three castes in Sammagaon:
Bishwakarma, Darji, Sarki

Figure 1.6: Caste hierarchy

At the broadest level, the social hierarchy in Sammagaon is tripartite (see figure 1.6). This is not to say that there are only three castes; rather, there are three overarching groups into which the multiple castes and ethnic groups of Sammagaon are placed.

At the top are the Bahun and the Chhetri. They are the only people whose men wear a sacred thread, called '*janae*', around their torso. The thread is in principle worn for the first time by a boy around the age of seven, during a formal ceremony called *bratabandha*. In all the *brahabandha* ceremonies which I attended, the boy was in fact much older, between twelve and fifteen. The thread is said to mark the 'second birth' of the child, which nobody else experiences. The thread is often viewed as a symbol of the superiority of the *Bahun-Chhetri*. It is still the norm for most Bahun people to wear it, although the younger generations are progressively abandoning the practice. The Bahun-Chhetri were collectively called the 'Tagadhari' in the 1854 MA, a term referring to their unique 'twice-born' status. Today, the official terminology used in Nepal, both by the media and the government, calls the upper-castes 'Khas-Ārya', a term which refers to linguistic and racial

features.¹² This is a very recent change, which postdates my return from fieldwork. The term ‘Bahun-Chhetri’, which was used previously, is still common, and it is the one I will use in this thesis. For readers familiar with the Indian context, it is worth noting that the term ‘Bahun’ is the Nepali equivalent to ‘Brahman’, and ‘Chhetri’ to ‘Kshatriya’.

Below the Bahun-Chhetri are a host of groups collectively referred to as the *janajāti* or sometimes *janajāti-adivasi*. These groups correspond to those which the 1854 Civil code referred to as *mātwali*, a term denoting the fact that it was acceptable for them, unlike for the Bahun and Chhetri, to consume alcohol. Earlier academic literature referred to these groups as ‘tribes’, following the terminology used in the Indian context. Today, it is more common to see it rendered as ‘ethnic group’, and this is the terminology which I will use here. There are a large number of different ethnic groups in Sarmagaon that belong to this category, e.g. the Rai, Tamang, Magar, Sunuwar, etc. The 1854 MA further split the *mātwali* into ‘enslavable’ and ‘non-enslavable’ groups. This distinction is entirely absent today, but some older upper-caste people speak of a time when wealthy families in the area used to ‘own’ Bhujel servants. More generally, people in Sarmagaon loosely agree on the fact that some ethnic groups are more *thulo* (big) than others; the Magar in particular are seen as ‘high’ and worthy of respect, in no small part because they continue to be associated with the military.¹³

Below the *janajāti* still are the Dalit, the category which includes the Bishwakarma. They are the people who used to be referred to as ‘untouchable’ (*achhut*), and whom the 1854 code designated as those from whom water was not to be accepted. This later appellation is still used in Sarmagaon occasionally, in a shortened form (*pāni nachalne*). On figure 1.6, the Dalit are separated from other groups by a thicker and darker line, to represent the much deeper divide that exists between them and the rest of society. As in the Indian context, ‘the singular division between Dalits and non-Dalits ... is qualitatively distinct from, and irreducible to, the multiple divisions between individual castes’ (Roberts 2016:3). This is the line which, in the traditional understanding, separates ‘pure’ and ‘polluting’ groups, and across which water and cooked foods may only flow downwards, not upwards. Additionally, this line is one across which marriage was and continues to be

12. See chapter 4 for a discussion of the ‘ethnicisation’ of caste. See also Reddy (2005).

13. For a complete monograph on the Magar in recent history, see Hangen (2009)

seen as particularly abhorrent or reprehensible. As part III of the thesis will discuss, any person from the Bahun-Chhetri or janajāti-Adivasi group who marries a Dalit is said to therefore *become* a Dalit themselves, a status which they will then keep for the rest of their lives. In contrast, while the various upper-caste and ethnic groups are mostly endogamous, exogamy among these groups was always permissible to a much greater extent. In fact, hypergamous marriages between a Bahun man and a janajāti woman were one of the practices through which Hinduism was spread in the nascent Nepali state (Gellner 2007:1823). Such marriages would lead to no loss of status for the upper-caste man, and the children of such a couple would become ‘Khattri’, a sub-group of the Chhetri, only marginally ‘lower’ than the Bahun and still considered ‘twice-born’.

This portrayal of the Nepali social hierarchy is standard, and reproduced in many places. What it does not show is a fact that all Nepalis and most researchers focusing on Nepal are aware of. This is the fact that the division between Dalits and non-Dalits is reproduced among the Dalit themselves. Thus, for example, the Bishwakarma in Sammagaon consider the Darji ‘polluting’ to them in the same way as non-Dalits consider all Dalits polluting. Figure 1.7 shows this by adding a second line separating the Bishwakarma and Sārki from the Darji. The Bishwakarma consider that the Darji are polluting to them in the same way as Dalits as a whole are considered polluting to upper castes and the janajāti-Adivasi. The relationship between the Bishwakarma and the Sārki is not always clear. While these groups do not intermarry, the Bishwakarma tend to say that the Sārki are ‘neither higher nor lower’ than themselves.

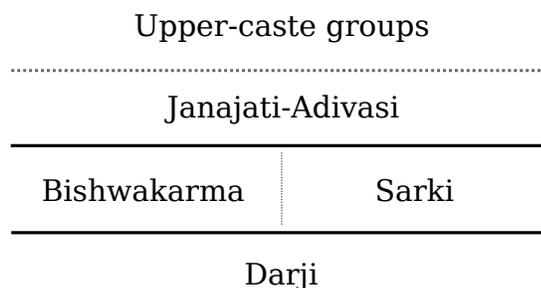


Figure 1.7: Caste hierarchy, showing the phenomenon of ‘replication’

The existence of this hierarchy among Dalits is well-known. Some forty years ago, Moffatt (1979), observing the same phenomenon in a South Indian context, described it as

‘replication’; the replication, that is, of a macroscopic caste structure at a smaller scale, among Dalits themselves. Moffatt considered that the existence of replication indicates that Dalits ‘consent’ and ‘participate willingly’ in their own oppression, a controversial proposition which generated much discussion. One particularly significant intervention was made by Deliège (1992), who convincingly argued that replication does not, in and of itself, imply consensus. Dalits, he pointed out, may well treat other Dalits in stigmatising ways without this necessarily implying that they accept the way in which they themselves are treated. One author offering an alternative explanation is Parish (1996:115–116), who conducted research in the Nepali city of Bhakatapur. He argued that the phenomenon is best understood as a way for the various Dalit castes to deny that they are at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Such a denial, he suggested, requires finding somebody—anybody—‘lower’ than oneself. As evidence for this interpretation, Parish pointed to the existence, in his fieldsite, of an ‘imagined’ lowest caste to which nobody actually belongs. The sole purpose of this imagined caste, he argued, was to allow those Dalits who are *actually* in the ‘lowest’ position to state that there was a caste lower than themselves .

I will not offer an alternative explanation for replication here. I note the phenomenon to make two points which I think are significant. Firstly, working with the Bishwakarma means working with people who find themselves both on the ‘receiving’ and on the ‘giving’ end of caste-based discrimination. As such, they offer insights on caste that one could not glean while working, e.g. with upper castes or with the Darji, who are always on the same ‘side’ of the giving-receiving relation. Secondly, the Bishwakarma are well aware that they are Dalits and that the rest of society sees them as ‘lowly’. They generally acknowledge this fact, yet they also maintain a subdued view according to which they actually are not that low. They sometimes portray themselves as ‘the Brahmans of the Dalit’. Though these terms are misleading in a number of ways, the subtle sense that they are ‘high among the low’ matters in ways which will become evident in chapter 3.

The ethnic / racial view

There is another way of portraying the social organisation of the eastern Hills of Nepal. This is based on a different set of categories than the caste-based view, but these categories are nevertheless commonly used by the people of Sammagaon to classify each other. Chap-

ter 4 will discuss the implications of this view for Dalits in much more detail, so here I will only give a brief overview.

The second way of viewing the social organisation in Nepal is broadly bipartite. It divides people into two overarching categories, which might be thought of as ethnicities or, more closely to the way in which people talk about this, as two ‘racial groups’. One of these groups is referred to in Nepali as the ‘*Ārya*’, a term usually translated as ‘Aryan’. The other is colloquially referred to as ‘*Bhote*’, which translates as ‘Tibetan’, and which in academic literature is sometimes referred to as ‘Tibeto-Burmese’.

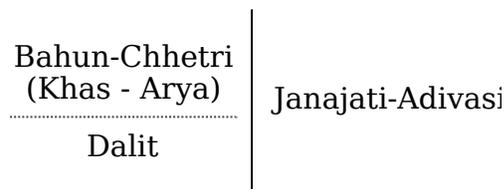


Figure 1.8: Ethnic / racial division.

This division *is* a racial one in the sense that the two groups are said to have different physical features. The former are believed to have darker skin, longer noses and more angular facial features, whereas the latter are thought to have lighter skin, epicanthic folds, and generally ‘Mongolian’ features, a term which is used as a synonym for ‘Bhote’.

In this bipartite division, both upper castes *and* Dalits are said to belong to the same, Aryan group. The various *janajāti*, on the other hand, are all said to belong to the latter. In the current political climate in Nepal, this way of understanding society is gaining prominence, even if the caste-based one is still present. This raises the question of whether this new view has any advantage to offer to Dalits, since it appears less hierarchical by lumping together Dalits and upper castes in the same category, rather than putting them at polar opposites. I return to this topic in chapter 4.

Theoretical orientation

As alluded to in the introduction, this thesis does not follow an approach rooted in political economy. Rather than an analysis focusing on the material inequalities that caste generates, sustains or otherwise enables, I focus instead on the way in which Nepalis *think* about

Dalits. I focus, in other terms, on representations—on what is inside of people’s heads, to borrow Strauss and Quinn’s aphorism (1997). On the whole, therefore, I am sympathetic to Ambedkar’s claim that

[c]aste is a notion; it is a state of mind. The destruction of caste does not therefore mean the destruction of a physical barrier. It means a notional change (2014[1936]:286).

And similarly, to Berreman’s statement according to which

[c]aste is people, and especially people interacting in characteristic ways and thinking in characteristic ways. Thus, in addition to being a structure, a caste system is a set of human relationships and it is a state of mind (1967:58).

Some readers will take issue with this theoretical framing. In particular, those favouring Marxist or more generally materialist approaches might object to it. They might say that, to understand the ongoing oppression of Dalits in Nepal and contemporary South Asia, one should investigate the processes which keep Dalits in a state of *economic* exploitation and marginalisation. This is the strategy followed, for example, by the authors of a recent wide-scale collaborative study focusing on India (Shah et al. 2018). In this country, economic growth has been considerable, but its effects have not trickled down to the people at the bottom of the hierarchy. The authors conclude that

The spread of capitalism has used social division to its own end, in processes we have explored here as ‘conjugated oppression’ which, crucially, involve the *inseparability of class relations from caste, tribe, gender and region* (2018:203, emphasis added)

As these researchers’ work shows, the new, and in many ways more pronounced, inequalities that emerge in neoliberal India not only follow existing caste- and identity-based divisions, they exacerbate them. Hence the claim that caste and class are inseparably bound to each other.

I am sympathetic to one part of this argument, but the study leaves one important question unanswered. It shows that one specific, commonly held hypothesis is false: economic

liberalisation does not act as a social levelling mechanism; it does not enable social mobility where caste divisions previously made it impossible. What the study says less about, however, is caste divisions themselves. That capitalism does not get rid of them is one thing, but beyond this, what makes them endure? A materialist might suggest that a radically different, more egalitarian form of economic organisation would indeed get rid of caste-based discrimination. This is entirely possible. Note, however, that to defend this view, one must make fairly strong assumptions. Namely, one must posit strong causal connections between 'economy' and social ontology, between, as it were, base and superstructure. My view is more humble: I propose simply that economic inequality is not *the only factor* maintaining caste-based discrimination, and therefore, not the only thing which needs to change for caste divisions to be eliminated.

As mentioned in the introduction, the Bishwakarma in Sammagaon are not in a noticeably worse economic situation than other castes and ethnic groups. Given that they primarily live off subsistence agriculture, it is noteworthy that there is no obvious difference between them and non-Dalits with regards to land ownership. This surprised me, at first. Cameron's (1998) monograph on Dalits in West Nepal describes an altogether different situation, in which a complex patronage system called *riti-bhagya*, similar to the Indian *jajmani* system, regulates labour and exchange between Dalits and non-Dalits. In this system, landless Dalits work for upper-caste landowners in exchange for grain. Another classic ethnography (Caplan 1972), also based on fieldwork conducted in the western part of the country, concurs with a portrayal of Dalits as landless, bonded labourers. Höfer (1976) gives a similar description of the Bishwakarma (then Kāmi) in East Nepal.

I did not collect precise data on land ownership in Sammagaon—my attempts at doing so were fruitless, as many people could not or would not quote the precise number of *ropani* (a local unit of land) they owned. I attempted several times to ask people about their income and livelihoods, and found most very reticent to give figures or even estimates. I did consider going to the District headquarters to try to obtain data on how much land people owned, but felt—mistakenly perhaps, in retrospect—that the cost in time and effort outweighed the benefits to my research project. Nevertheless, it was obvious that the Bishwakarma were no worse off than others. Ganga's family, for example, could generally feed themselves off their own fields and would complete any lack by buying food with

the money from Ganga's state pension. Similar arrangements were to be found in the majority of Bishwakarma households in Sammagaon and in the neighbouring VDC of Sahu Bajār, where the produce from a household's own fields was complemented with monetary income from a separate economic activity, often a family member sending remittance from the Gulf. The only household in Sammagaon with a situation somewhat similar to Cameron's description was that of a young man named Niraj. Niraj has a very small forge next to his house and had at least one upper-caste patron who would bring him tools to repair and pay him on a regular basis, but even he does not rely on this for subsistence.

The origins of the Bishwakarma's (relative) wealth in Sammagaon were also a topic which I found difficult to obtain precise answers to. When it comes to monetary income, Ganga's employment as a school teacher explains the situation of his own household; more on this topic figures in chapter 3. A number of other households had one member working abroad and sending remittance. I was never told how much each family received, but I was told that a decent income in the Gulf for a migrant labourer is roughly NPR 50,000 per month, i.e. multiple times more than a school teacher in Nepal. As for the land which the Bishwakarma own in Sammagaon, I was told that an earlier member of the Dehegli patriline had gained ownership over it through a process that could be described as 'pawning'. A Sunuwar man in need of money had offered this land as collateral when he borrowed money from one of Ganga's ancestors, and when he failed to pay back, the land was transferred to this ancestor. It was later divided among his descendents. How this ancestor had obtained the money that he lent the Sunuwar man in the first place, however, nobody could tell me.

More striking even than the fact that many Bishwakarma own land in Sammagaon and have access to monetary income is the fact that, in several households, it is the Bishwakarma who employ other, higher caste but poorer people to work in their own fields. There are four systems in place for the exchange of labour in Sammagaon:

- *parma*: A person from household A works for one day in the fields of household B. In exchange, a person of household B will work for one day in the fields of household A.
- *sajha*: The fields of household A are cultivated exclusively by household B. House-

hold A and B each receive half of the harvest. Household A must provide the land and seeds, but labour and tools are provided by household B. In addition, household A may be required to provide a mid-afternoon meal to the members of household B on the days they work in the fields.

- *thekkā*: Similar to *sajha*, but the amount of grain that goes to household A is fixed rather than a proportion of the harvest. Household B cultivates the fields of household A. After harvest, household B will have to give household A a fixed amount of grain. If the harvest is higher, they will make a profit, if it is lower, they will make a loss.
- *khetalā*: Work for daily wages. People are called to work in a landowner's field on a daily basis. Each day of labour is paid for. For standard work in fields, the daily wage is NRs 150 for a woman and NRs 200 for a man. This salary can change for more specialised labour, e.g. ploughing with bulls.

Ganga's household had some fields that were cultivated by members of the Newar *janajāti* under the *sajha* system. In the fields which Ganga's family cultivated themselves, they would also regularly pay others to help them under the *khetalā* arrangement. Two families, on Newar and the other Bhujel, would regularly come to work in Ganga's fields under this system.

I should note that not *all* the Bishwakarma of Sammagaon and neighbouring VDCs are in a comfortable situation. I have already alluded to the tiny house of the woman I called *thuli āmā*, and to Niraj's small forge. Niraj's family more generally struggled, as they had no access to monetary income, little land, and many children to feed. As noted in the introduction, discrepancies such as this mean that an overall evaluation of the Bishwakarma's economic situation would be fallacious. Nevertheless, as will become clear in the upcoming chapters, even those Bishwakarma households who are relatively well-off do *not* escape the stigma which affect Dalits in Nepal: hence my non-economistic theoretical orientation.

Part I

Strategies

Chapter 2

Ongoing stigmatisation

In this descriptive, ethnographic chapter, I show that untouchability has disappeared from the public sphere in Sammagaon, but that it endures in what I call the ‘domestic’ sphere. I also argue that even if the notion that Dalits are ‘polluting’ or ‘defiling’ is on the decline, there nonetheless exists a cluster of negative representations regularly associated with Dalits. This chapter functions as a backdrop to the next three, which will discuss the strategies used by Dalits to do away with these negative representations.

Recalling a more discriminatory past

Older Bishwakarma people in Sammagaon remember a time when discrimination against them was common and, to a much greater extent than today, public. They recall various forms of social ostracising that were usual in the past, practices that singled them out as people from whom ‘water’ was ‘unacceptable’ (*pāni nachalne*), and who themselves were ‘untouchable’ (*achhut*). They remember being perceived and treated as such by members of both the *Khas-Ārya* upper castes and the various *janajāti* living in the area, the latter being Nepal’s ‘ethnic’ or ‘indigenous’ people.¹

1. There is a considerable body of literature examining the extent to which the *janajāti* adopted Hindu practices, including discrimination against Dalits, as a result of state-led Hinduisation. Recent *janajāti* politics have endeavoured to form indigenous identities that distance themselves from past Hindu influence (see e.g. Gellner 2007; Hangen 2009; Lecomte-Tilouine 2009a:122–156; Ismail and Shah 2015:113–114). This recent history notwithstanding, when it comes to the question of untouchability, Dalits in the area where I conducted research say that the *janajāti* used to, and continue to, treat them in the same way that upper-castes do.

According to the accounts of the older Bishwakarma in Sammagaon—especially those aged sixty and above—some four to five decades ago, the stigmatising image according to which they were ‘polluting’ or ‘defiling’ was made publicly visible in several ways, many of which are well-documented in classic and contemporary literature on caste. Rules and prohibitions concerning food and space are those which my interlocutors mentioned most often. They explained that commensality between Dalits and non-Dalits was avoided, with a strict emphasis on preventing the consumption by a non-Dalit of specific types of food cooked by a Dalit.² A number of public spaces were off-limits for Dalits, especially tea shops. Those shops in which Dalits could consume food often had a policy of making them wash their own dishes, so that the shop owners would not have to come in contact with a soiled plate or glass. Temples, which are another space that Dalits have been prevented from entering in many parts of South Asia were not, in living memory, off-limits for Dalits in Sammagaon itself. However, people mentioned that temples in nearby villages used to be closed off to them. Untouchability in the narrowest sense—the avoidance of physical contact—is not something that was practised universally in the area, but some recounted being told by non-Dalits not to sit next to them or being threatened in case they accidentally came into physical contact.

In addition, a number of embodied and linguistic practices reinforced the image of Dalits as lowly or defiling. Some older Bishwakarma recounted being expected to give non-Dalits a wide berth when crossing their path. They recall sitting separately in school or during other public events, and they recall an old greeting which Dalits were supposed to use when encountering a non-Dalit. This consisted in bringing one hand to one’s forehead, bowing slightly, and pronouncing the word ‘*jadau*’, a term whose etymology is either ‘give victory’ or—the more likely origin here—‘hail divine one’ (Turner 1931). They also mentioned that non-Dalits would address them using the disrespectful pronoun ‘*ta*’ and corresponding verbal forms.

The Bishwakarma who recall such practices unequivocally state that the prejudice against them has diminished. This is not to say that they understand the present as a unilaterally ‘better’ time. There are new hardships today, many of which stem from the absence of the

2. The precise rules followed a variant of the well-known distinction between raw foods, those cooked in ghee or oil (*pakka*), and those boiled in water (*kachha*); these details bear little relevance to the material presented here.

young, in particular young men, which in turn is due to Nepal's extreme rates of outmigration. But as far as the question of caste-based discrimination is concerned, all of my older interlocutors agreed that the situation has improved. They explained that untouchability was either subsiding or had disappeared entirely from public contexts, a claim with which my ethnographic observations accord. Dalit students now sit with others in school. On the bus between Kathmandu and Sammagaon, Dalits sit together with others, and eat in the same restaurants when the bus stops. When they make trips to distant VDCs that are further than a day's walk, Dalits sleep in the same hotels. When a meeting is called by the local forestry association or another NGO, Dalit participants sit among non-Dalits and eat together the customary *khājā* (snack) served on such occasions. Dalits enter the health-post and are treated there in the same way as others. Over eighteen months of fieldwork, I found only one tea shop in whose kitchen Dalits were not allowed. Elsewhere, Dalits enter freely, sit among the other patrons, eat or drink as they please. In sum, segregation has disappeared from the vast majority of public spaces. As for language, terms of address are gradually evening out. The word '*jadau*' is all but forgotten, and pronouns used by non-Dalits to address Dalits are gradually becoming more respectful, although there is noticeable variation here.

This situation might suggest a fairly uncomplicated history of social change in which, over the course of roughly one human lifetime, the situation for Dalits in the hills of East Nepal has improved dramatically and stigmas of the past are dying off rapidly. Yet, as I will now endeavour to show, this is far too simple a picture. I will focus on two facts that challenge this description. The first is that, even without strict rules of untouchability, Dalits continue to be perceived as a 'different kind' of people, a kind with which a cluster of negative representations is regularly associated. The second is that although untouchability is mostly a non-issue in public, it continues to exist, more privately and discreetly, in what I call the domestic realm.

A cluster of negative representations

Dalits are routinely and readily ascribed multiple negative properties which do not, strictly speaking, pertain to ritual impurity. Below, I list the more frequent ones.

Ignorance, ineptitude

Dalits in Sammagaon are commonly assumed by non-Dalits to be ignorant, lacking in knowledge or uneducated. They are also assumed to have weaker intellectual abilities. The space where this is most obvious is in school. Teachers in the schools of Sammagaon and neighbouring villages belong to the upper castes or the *janaajāti*; they are almost never Dalit.³ Several among these teachers expect different levels of intelligence from their students, depending on the student's caste. In 2010, when I was working as an English language teacher in Puranogaon, I was regularly told that I was wasting my time by trying to teach Dalit students who, I was told, 'had no intelligence' (*dimāg nahunne*). This is not a simple attribution of 'lack of knowledge', but rather an assessment of an individual's innate mental capacities. In chapter 7, I will argue that the category 'Dalit' has high inferential power: upon learning that an individual is a Dalit, a non-Dalit makes numerous inferences about this individual. The case of intellectual abilities is a good example.

Additionally, the upper-caste Bahun told me that one of the discerning features of Dalits is that they do not use a polite register or vocabulary, but are loud and boisterous in their speech. This representation is tied to the notion that Dalits are ignorant; it contributes to creating a general picture of Dalits as lacking in refinement or, perhaps, in a local version of what Bourdieu (1984) would have called 'distinction'. It is in stark contrast with the stereotypical view of the upper-caste *Bahun*, who are described as reserved, quiet, poised, and learned people.

Alcoholism

The consumption of alcohol carries multiple connotations in Nepal. On the one hand, it is a substance that carries warmth and helps to create conviviality. To enjoy *rakshi* or *jandh*, locally prepared millet drinks, is a sign that one is sociable and not the type to look down on local products. In this sense, alcohol consumption can be positively connoted. However, the consumption of alcohol carries two other connotations. First, alcohol is traditionally off-limits for the upper-caste Bahun, in line with the idea that the Bahun should be careful to maintain bodily 'purity'. While this prohibition is often overlooked by individual Bahuns, there remains a general, latent view that being upper-caste means not consuming

3. Ganga, my host, is an exception. See chapter 3.

alcohol. The second negative association made with alcohol is that of irresponsibility and immorality. He or she—but mostly he—who consumes alcohol in excess is depicted as an immoral individual, an alcoholic incapable of taking care of his own family and prone to public violence. This representation is commonly propagated in schools, where children are taught the dangers of alcohol to an extent which they internalise and repeat with remarkable verve. The immorality of alcohol was further reinforced during the 1996–2006 People’s War by the Maoists, who were severely opposed to its consumption, which they saw as an obstacle to the ‘new consciousness’ they set out to create (see e.g. Shneiderman et al. 2016:2062).

In this context, it becomes significant that Dalits are often portrayed as drunks. One of the reactions non-Dalits regularly had, when learning that I was living with Bishwakarma hosts, was to tell me to avoid drinking. As it turned out, such advice was entirely unnecessary, as the members of the household which I lived in were opposed to alcohol consumption.

Filthiness

This is perhaps the most common stereotype about Dalits in Sarmagaon. Although few non-Dalits describe Dalits with terms directly associated with *ritual* impurity, Dalits are nevertheless commonly described as *physically* ‘dirty’ (*mailo*) or ‘filthy’ (*phohor*). Thus, non-Dalits variously suggested to me that Dalits wear old and ‘dirty’ clothes, have ‘dirty’ bodies (and ‘dirty’ children) which they do not wash, ‘dirty’ houses in which they allow ‘dirty’ animals, that they drink ‘dirty’ drinks, etc.

In reality, my Bishwakarma hosts were *highly* attentive to their external appearance. They maintained an impeccable house and would regularly admonish me for the dust that would accumulate on my clothes and backpack if I did not brush it off regularly. They carefully kept separate sets of clothes for working and for occasions when they would meet others. I often felt that it was because of the propensity of non-Dalits to call Dalits ‘dirty’ that my hosts were careful not to give non-Dalits an opportunity to validate their biases.

Gopal Guru suggests that ‘in western societies ... it is the corporeal body that carries phys-

ical dirt and hence can become an object of humiliation', whereas 'the idea of dirt in India is unique and deeply structural in nature' (2009:14). He adds:

In the Indian social cultural context one might hold the Brahmanical social order responsible for producing and reproducing the idea of dirt and squalor [...] Within the Brahmanical mode of conceptual construction the untouchable represents the combination of multiple stigmatized images which make him/her untouchable, unseeable, unapproachable. It is in this sense that the untouchable's body is perceived and treated as a 'sociological danger' (2009:14).

Where this description resonates with my experience in Sannagaon is in its use of the phrase 'combination of multiple stigmatized images' to describe how Dalits are perceived by others.

What is less clear, in my mind, is the extent to which the South Asian conception of 'dirt' is distinct from that which prevails elsewhere. The purported distinction is not the 'corporeal' character of dirt. Guru holds that 'dirt' in South Asia is, as in the West, tied to the body—in fact, he agrees that it is so to the extreme. What he seems to imply, however, is that dirt in South Asia is corporeal in a *different*, singularly structural way. The singular South Asian aspect is that dirt—more precisely, the dirty body of a Dalit—constitutes a 'sociological danger'. What Guru is referring to here is the potential for a Dalit's body to 'pollute' and 'defile' that of someone else.

The extent to which the idea of pollution through contact with a Dalit is still present in Sannagaon is the topic of chapter 9. To pre-empt the argument I will make in that chapter, pollution is no longer feared to the same degree as it was in the past. The only case in which a Dalit can *actually* defile a non-Dalit is through intermarriage.

It seems to me that, as the idea of pollution is being slowly eroded in Sannagaon, a transformation is taking place in the kind of 'dirt' which is attributed to Dalits. Dalits are still said to be dirty, but the dirt is not as 'dangerous' as in the past; it is more banal, material, tangible. Indeed, the way in which non-Dalits talk about Dalits reminded me, at times, of the stereotypical way in which my own grandmother used to complain of the 'stinky' foods that Portuguese migrants living close to her would prepare, or of the supposed 'stench'

that students and some teachers in my secondary school in rural Switzerland attributed to black people. The stigma remains, but its distinctly South Asian character is, perhaps, fading away.

Blackness of skin

In some ways, the attribution of 'dirt' goes further still. Indeed, Dalits are regularly said to have 'black' skin than others, and this blackness is loosely associated with a state of uncleanliness.

Early in my fieldwork, I became interested in the question of whether the inhabitants of Sarmagaon could tell Dalits and non-Dalits apart from each other by sight. To distinguish the *janajāti* from other groups is not hard, as they have obvious phenotypical differences. However, I personally found myself incapable of telling Dalits and Bahun-Chhetri apart on the basis of appearance alone. Many Dalits told me this was because there *is* no difference, whereas many Bahuns told me that this was just because I didn't know what to look for. The Bahun first told me to look for a number of superficial properties, as per the stereotypes listed above: ways of talking, poor and dirty clothes, etc. When I asked them whether one would be able to tell the difference without such indicators, on the basis of physiognomy alone, they insisted that this is possible. They said that the Bahun have sharper features, and in particular a sharper nose. More often still, they said that Dalits have 'darker' or 'black' skin.

The attribution of blackness is significant in a part of the world where being 'fair' is a sign of beauty. Blackness is also associated with being 'dirty'. In the case of the Bishwakarma, the link between a black skin and a 'dirty' state is sometimes made through their traditional caste activity, blacksmithing. On one occasion, I was told by a local school teacher that the reason my Bishwakarma hosts were 'black' was that they worked at the forge. In doing so, soot accumulated on their skin, and it was this (dirty) soot that gave them a darker tone. I pointed out that this could not be correct since almost none of the Bishwakarma in Sarmagaon are actual blacksmiths. The teacher replied that while this was true, it must have been a recent change. Their ancestors had worked at the forge for many generations, he argued, and the blackness of the soot had seeped into them. Using a single English word in his explanation, he suggested that it had become part of their 'genes'.

One night, Ganga was hosting relatives. It was the night before a wedding, and there had been plenty to drink. A middle-aged relative of Ganga, whom I had never met before, engaged me in drunken conversation. He spoke some basic English, which he told me he had picked up while working as a taxi driver in Saudi Arabia. He told me that it was very important for me not to refer to the Bishwakarma as ‘blacksmiths’ in English. ‘We are smiths, only smiths! We are not blacksmiths,’ he repeated time and again, with increasing anger in his voice. Everybody around us was laughing, so I initially mistook this for a joke that I did not understand, perhaps a word-play on the common English name ‘Smith’. It was only much later, re-reading this anecdote from my fieldnotes, that I realised my mistake. The man was almost certainly protesting the attribution of ‘blackness’ that he saw in the term ‘black-smith’.

Verbal attribution of ‘smallness’

The term ‘*achhut*’, whose literal translation is ‘untouchable’, is rarely heard in Sammagaon. There are however, other terms that are still in use and that explicitly refer to the lowly or defiling character of Dalits. Prominent among them are ‘*sāno jāt*’ (small or inferior caste), *tallo jāt* (low-caste), and the old term ‘*pāni nachalne*’ (literally ‘water-does-not-circulate’). Moreover, as noted in the background chapter, people regularly speak of other caste groups as ‘lower than us’ (*hāmi bhandā tallo*), another indication that the view of Dalits as ‘lowly’ endures to an extent.

Each of the three Dalit castes present in Sammagaon has two distinct caste names. The older of these two names is now seen as derogatory. When I first arrived in Sammagaon, I was not aware of how insulting the older terms, which I had encountered in academic literature, were. One of the very first things which my hosts taught me was never to refer to them with the older name. In the case of the Bishwakarma, this was ‘*Kāmi*’. The Darji used to be referred to as ‘*Damāi*’. ‘*Sārki*’ is the older name for the third group, which, in Sammagaon, does not have an accepted, less derogatory alternative (although some of the Sārki in the area are pushing for the use of the term ‘*Mijar*’). Generally, non-Dalits know that the older names are considered offensive or diminishing, but continue to use them colloquially. In the worst of cases, combined with specific pronouns and verbal forms, they can function as outright insults (‘*Ta Kāmi (chhas)*!’—You Kāmi! / You’re Kāmi!). Early in

my fieldwork, when my hosts began telling me about the ostracism which they continue to endure, they said that others made them feel 'shame'. The most common illustration they offered was being called '*Kāmi*' or '*Kamini*' (the feminine form).

Pronouns are a significant way in which respect or denigration can be communicated linguistically. Nepali has four commonly used second person singular pronouns, each of which marks a different level of respect or deference to one's interlocutor.⁴ A Dalit's social status is important in determining whether they will in fact be addressed with one of the more respectful pronouns. As one person put it to me, a Dalit who is educated is likely to be addressed with the honorific '*tapai*', whereas a Dalit who has not acquired similar levels of respectability is still likely to be addressed with the diminishing '*ta*' because of his caste. Lest this remark appear dry and scholarly, I should note that the use of different forms of address is in fact very significant in Nepal. To address someone owed respect as *ta* is quite unthinkable, and conversely, the deliberate use of this pronoun in the wrong context can be highly insulting.⁵

Untouchability in the domestic sphere

In a study of intercaste and interethnic relations among Nepali migrant labourers, Adhikari and Gellner (2017) note that caste is a non-issue for Nepalis working in the Gulf. Dalits and non-Dalits share rooms indiscriminately, they cook and eat together, and only very few of them report occurrences of caste-based discrimination. Unlike what is observed in certain other studies of South Asian diasporas (e.g. Svensson 2014; Adur and Narayan 2017), Nepali Dalits working in the Gulf do not face significant caste-based discrimination. One question which the authors ask their research participants concerns what will happen after returning to Nepal. Will the participants be able to maintain relations unfettered by caste after returning home? The answers are clear. Both Dalits and non-Dalits report that while it is fine to share kitchens, food and living spaces abroad, it will be impossible to continue doing so when they return home. To explain this, Gellner and Adikhari suggest that while abroad, a sense of Nepali unity might prevail over one of caste

4. From least to most respectful: *ta*, *timi*, *tapai*, *hajur*. There is a fifth pronoun that has fallen into disuse, which was exclusively reserved for royalty.

5. '*Ta*' is used 'appropriately' in relation to one's younger sibling, for example, or by a husband for his wife. For anybody less intimate, it is wholly unsuitable.

antagonism.

Not entirely dissimilar was the situation reported by Parry (1999) two decades ago, in his ethnography of the Bhilai Steel Plant. Among the permanent workers in this factory, of whom a significant proportion are Satnami (Dalits), Parry observed no form of caste-based discrimination while they were in the workplace.⁶ On the shop floor, Satnamis and others ate together, shared food, and seemed generally unconcerned with caste rules. Yet away from the steel plant, in the residential areas which surround it, the situation was very different. Multiple forms of caste-based avoidances and untouchability were still firmly in place: the Satnami still lived in separate quarters, food and liquid did not circulate as easily, etc.

Both Nepali Dalits in the Gulf and the Satnamis in the Bhilai Steel Plant are brought into close proximity with non-Dalits *at work*. One might suggest, in an argument reminiscent of what social psychologists call the ‘contact hypothesis’ (Allport 1979[1954]; Amir 1969; Hewstone and Swart 2011), that it is propinquity that leads to the relaxation of caste rules. Yet both of these studies also suggest that the context in which this occurs is bounded in space and time. In one case, the relaxation is limited to time spent abroad, far away from home. In the other, it is limited to time on the shop floor, away from home in a more local sense and for shorter bursts of time, but away nonetheless. These further observations mitigate the ‘contact’ explanation.

The context of the two studies just mentioned is very different to that of Sammagaon. Both are based on settings in which industrial labour is prevalent. In my fieldsite, small-scale agriculture is the norm. Nevertheless, one of my own observations falls strikingly in line with the two studies. In Sammagaon too, caste-based discrimination continues to exist in people’s private homes despite having been mostly eliminated from the public sphere.

In Sammagaon, there are different kinds of spaces. Everybody recognises that some places are ‘public’ (*sāmājīk*), whereas others are not. For reasons that will soon become clear, I call the non-public spaces of Sammagaon ‘domestic’ rather than ‘private’. In the vernacular, it is common to refer to these domestic spaces as ‘own houses’ (*āphno ghar*). In such spaces,

6. The situation is somewhat different for non-permanent workers, but this is not relevant to the topic at hand. I should add that I am skipping over Parry’s central argument here, which concerns reservation policies.

two avoidances are particularly common: non-Dalits avoid eating with Dalits, and Dalits strictly avoid entering non-Dalits' houses.

Thus, when non-Dalits come to Ganga's house, they are sometimes offered tea or a snack. Some non-Dalits who are particularly close to Ganga—for example, members of his political party or former colleagues—will accept, but these are a small minority. More often, non-Dalits turn down the offer. The second avoidance always takes place at a non-Dalit's house, which Dalits *never* enter. When a Dalit visits a non-Dalit, the former does not attempt to enter the house and the latter simply does not invite them in. This generally happens spontaneously; the non-Dalit does not need to tell the Dalit to stay outside. The fact that Dalits must not enter non-Dalit houses becomes a lot more evident—and embarrassing—when Dalits and non-Dalits are invited together to a non-Dalit's house. I found myself in this situation a number of times. Accompanied by a Bishwakarma person, I would be invited into non-Dalits' houses, but the person accompanying me was expected to stay outside. Often, in order to avoid a difficult situation, I would say that I was happy to stay outside myself. Occasionally, people would insist on my going in. When this happened, the Bishwakarma person accompanying me would either stay outside alone, or more often sit at the very threshold, from where they could take part in conversations without actually setting foot in the house.

There are some other forms of discrimination which are occasionally observable in the domestic sphere, but the two which have just been mentioned are the most common. Actual, full-blown avoidance of physical contact does exist, but only in small traces. On one occasion, I was accompanying Ganga through Sammagaon when he signalled we should make a detour as he wanted to introduce me to a friend of his, a member of his political party. The friend in question was Chhetri. When we reached his house, we sat on the porch, outside. Ganga's friend greeted us cheerfully and sent his wife to prepare tea. She came back carrying two glasses. She handed one to me and was handing the other to Ganga when she froze for an instant, pulled her hand back and placed the drink on the floor, within Ganga's reach. Only after she had retreated by one or two steps did Ganga pick it up. I asked Ganga about this later, as we were walking away. He initially became angry: the woman's behaviour had clearly been humiliating, and the fact that I had noticed only made things worse. Only several days later, when the offence was not so fresh, did he

explain to me that the woman wanted to make sure she avoided all physical contact with him because of his caste.

Why does untouchability endure in domestic settings even when it has been mostly eliminated from the public sphere? I suggest that this is part of a more general set of contradictory attitudes towards caste and caste-based discrimination which I examine in detail in chapters 6 and 7. Here, I will offer only precursory remarks and an initial explanation, according to which untouchability prevails in domestic settings because this is *where kinship is made*. To make the case for this explanation, I must first describe how people relate to their houses in Sammagaon.

Though each house has a *parivār*, i.e. a precise set of people who are its inhabitants proper, more distant relatives come and go somewhat freely from one house to another. They can turn up with no other purpose than to socialise, to chat (*gāf garnu*). They might want to exchange the latest gossip, watch TV, taste a fresh batch of alcohol, borrow a missing ingredient, or something similar. In contrast, people who are not relatives are far less likely to appear without a more definitive purpose. Similarly to what Bennett noted in her study of upper-caste households, ‘villagers are reluctant to go uninvited or without specific purpose into the courtyard of a nonkinsman’ (Bennett 1983:2).

There are, however, a number of ‘specific purposes’ for which a non-relative might show up. This is particularly true for houses whose inhabitants participate more extensively than others in public life—by taking part, for example, in meetings organised by local NGOs or one of the numerous ‘mother’s associations’, by participating in local politics, teaching or being otherwise involved in the schooling system, providing ritual services or (for the very few Christian households) attending church, etc. Because Ganga and his family are involved in multiple organisations, unannounced guests do regularly show up at their house with business of one kind or another.

When this happens, the unannounced guest is almost never rejected. Instead, they sit in the courtyard or, if they are close to the family, they are invited into the house. They are then offered tea, millet beer (*jandh*) or liquor (*raksi*), and possibly a snack (*khājā*), depending

on the time of day and on Ganga and Chini Maya's inclination. Occasionally, and generally only after spending a significant amount of time with the guest, Ganga and his family will explain that they have to tend to their crops or attend some event outside of the house. This hint usually suffices for the guest to leave of their own accord.

Thus, houses are not places which offer *shelter* from public life. Similarly, they afford virtually no privacy to the household's individual members. When I moved into Ganga's house, I was given my own room, whose only door conveniently led immediately outside. Yet despite the relative physical separation of this room from the main house, it quickly became clear that the space was not really mine, but was quite open to other family members.

Furthermore, it is not primarily the fact that houses are private property which distinguishes them from 'public' spaces. A number of places, shops or restaurants for example, are private property in the same legal sense as familial houses, but are nevertheless described by the local population as 'public'. This is because they are the kind of place in which anyone can come and go freely. The fact that shops and restaurants belong to a specific person does not prevent them from being 'public' in the same way as, say, the VDC headquarters or the village's health-post, both of which are owned by the government.

What does set houses apart from public spaces is the fact that they are heavily and uniquely associated with the people who inhabit them. The following statement rings true of Sammagaon: 'The house and the body are intimately linked. The house is an extension of the person' (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:2). In other terms, houses are *intimate*; they are distinct from public spaces not so much because they belong to someone specific as because someone specific belongs in them. Hence my use of the term 'domestic' to describe them, rather than 'private'.

The association between houses and the specific people who inhabit them manifests itself in various ways. Sammagaon is a place in which a great diversity of ethnic groups and castes live. These different groups hold different cultural understandings of houses. Nevertheless, all seem to recognise a basic separation between the inside parts of the house, which are more intimate, and the outside parts, which are less so. The courtyard, the outside part, is a zone of contact between the house and the non-house, and thus between the family and the rest of society. It is a zone which anybody can enter freely but which

is nonetheless unquestionably part of the house. Entering somebody else's courtyard is a call to attention; it is an act which demands some kind of reaction, however small, by the owner of the house. A word of greeting is the bare minimum. Going further into the house, passing the door and reaching the inside is altogether more significant and more regulated. Only one's relatives and close friends will enter a house without being invited; others will wait to be asked. Some houses, like Ganga's, may be formed of more than one physical building. The main building is the one in which food is prepared, and those people who would not enter the main building uninvited might enter the auxiliary one, if they have previously been told this is acceptable. Following a pattern which I observed in several places, Ganga had strategically placed his television in the auxiliary building rather than the main one, which maximised the number of people who could come in and watch.

In the case of Dalit and upper-caste houses, which I am most familiar with, the inside of the house is often further divided into increasingly intimate areas. Thus, inside the house, it is not uncommon to see two fire-places. External guests will sit around one of these. The other, which can be replaced by an earthen or, occasionally, metal stove, is usually located in a corner. Around it, a large part of the floor is raised by one to two inches; this is known as the '*chulo*' (hearth, stove, cooking place). This area is in principle off-limits to anybody who does not belong to the household's patriline, and guests who are not relatives stay clear of it. A newly-wed daughter-in-law, upon arriving at her new house, has to undergo several rituals before she can pass into the *chulo* and cook for the new family. It took months before I was—quite unexpectedly—invited into this part of Ganga's house. This happened in an utterly unceremonious way, as if I had been mistaken to think that the *chulo* was ever off-limits to me, but nevertheless, when I was allowed in, I felt a new sense of proximity to my hosts. Some houses have another intimate section, often upstairs, where the *kul devtā*, the god of the lineage, resides. In Ganga's house, such a god had its quarters on the upper floor.

This description does not apply everywhere. There are a number of houses, often owned by younger people, which have only one fireplace and no raised '*chulo*' at all. When asked about this, the owners of such houses sometimes state that they do not want to cut off one part of the house. It is hard to assess exactly how significant this is. Such houses certainly

make one feel at ease, since one does not have to worry about offending the inhabitants simply by seating oneself in the wrong place. Nevertheless, even houses without a *chulo* keep the fundamental division between the inside and the outside, and even in these, non-relatives do not enter freely.

That houses are intimate and familial spaces is not only reflected in rules concerning who can enter which of their parts; it also transpires in their material, outward appearance. As intimate spaces, houses require constant care. Their appearance is a reflection of the social prestige (*'ijjat'*) of the families who inhabit them. Everybody in Ganga's house was extremely conscious of the house's appearance. In addition to planting flowers all around it, keeping the porch swept clean, and hurriedly hiding any laundered underwear I had left to dry in plain sight, Chini Maya or Sirjana would regularly clean the house more thoroughly. In a procedure called *'ghar lipnu'*, carried out at least once a month and usually on days with particular ritual significance, they would quite literally re-make the floor. After sweeping away any dust or dirt, Chini Maya or Sirjana mixed earth, buffalo dung and water in a bucket and used a rag to lay down a small layer of the resulting mud all over the floor, inside as well as in the courtyard. As this layer dried out, it formed a homogeneous crust which gave the house a fresh appearance. In a not entirely dissimilar fashion, once a year, the walls of a house are white-washed with lime.

The division between the 'inside' and the 'outside' of the house is also made materially salient. Families often hang photographs and other documents above the main door of their house, at the precise boundary between the porch and the inside. Photographs hung in this way highlight the domestic character of the house; they show family members at various ages, with a prominent place for wedding pictures. Next to these photographs are documents which evoke the public lives of the household members. These include school leaving certificates and other diplomas. Ganga's official certificate of qualification as a primary teacher has been on display for almost four decades just above his front door. Finally, a number of families hang large calendars outside their houses. These calendars, printed and distributed by various political or other organisations, give some indication of a family's public engagements: the choice to display a calendar with Hindu or Christian imagery or, as is more often the case, reference to a specific political party serves as a discreet but noticeable disclosure of a household's external affiliations.

If one is invited into a house, the intimacy of the space takes on a new phenomenological sense. Most houses are made of stone and mud.⁷ The walls of traditional houses are thick, doors are low, windows small and far apart. Because of this, the inside of houses always contrasts strongly with the outside world. On bright and hot days, the inside is cool and shady, and it takes several seconds for the eyes to adapt to the darkness. In the evening; the exact opposite happens. As night falls outside, people turn on the CFL bulbs installed by a local NGO. These cast a flickering, wavering light whose electric blue tones seem almost surreal in a space where everything is usually orange and earthy.

To sum up, houses are heavily associated with the people who inhabit them and who form the most basic kinship unit, the *parivār*. The association between kinship and houses is emphasised in two ways. First, houses are the places in which the lineage gods reside. Second, as one moves through a house's sub-divisions, from the courtyard to the hearth, one enters areas reserved to progressively closer relatives.

In addition, houses are the place in which family members eat together and, as noted by many anthropologists, commensality is a major way in which people develop and maintain 'relatedness' (Bloch 1999), especially in South Asia (e.g. Lambert 2000). The food which is prepared in houses by the female members of a family has this relation-building potential to a much greater extent than the food which is served in tea shops and public spaces. To eat together inside someone's house means, far more than in public, to be or become 'alike'. Thus, the reason untouchability and caste-based avoidances remain stronger in homes than in public is that the same interactions have a much stronger potential to create 'proximity' or 'similarity' when they happen in the domestic sphere.

One piece of evidence supporting this explanation can be observed during weddings, generally large events to which a great number of guests are invited, often several hundred. In this sense, one might mistake them for 'public' events. In fact, they are quintessentially 'domestic' because they are one of the moments during which the *making* of kinship is most salient. The central ritual in a Nepali wedding is *khanyādān*, the 'gift of a virgin'. It involves a woman being passed from one *kul* (patriline, note that the same word is used for this as for the god associated with the patriline) to another. It is also the event which will,

7. Houses made of cement are seen as more prestigious and are becoming increasingly common, but they are still a minority.

ultimately, lead to the creation of a new household, when the bride and groom build their own house. If one were to think of weddings as 'public' events, one might expect them to be a context in which there is no manifestation of caste or untouchability. In reality, the exact opposite obtains. A Dalit wedding almost always requires two separate kitchens, one manned by relatives of the people getting married, the other by hired, non-Dalit cooks. The former kitchen prepares the food for all of the relatives of the bride and groom, i.e. for Dalits, whereas the latter prepares the food for the non-Dalit guest attending the wedding. Thus, weddings are a wide-scale and open, but not public event; they are also the context in which the segregation of Dalits and others is most visible today.⁸

The case of weddings supports the notion that it is when and where kinship is made and manipulated that caste and untouchability endure.

Conclusion

This chapter has set the background for the upcoming three. I have made two main observations. One is that, while untouchability has mostly disappeared from the public sphere, it continues to be practised, in somewhat subdued ways, in domestic contexts. I provided an initial suggestion for why this is the case, which is that domestic contexts are spaces in which kinship is made, and therefore, where the risk of 'pollution' is more serious. A much more elaborate discussion will follow in chapters 6 and 7. The other observation which I made in this chapter is that even if untouchability is receding in Sannagaon, this has not left Dalits with a status that is *equal* to others. There is, in particular, a cluster of negative representations that is commonly and readily associated with them, chief among which is the idea that Dalits are inherently and *physically* 'dirty'.

The three upcoming chapters will examine some of the strategies deployed by Dalits and by people who sympathise with them to combat their stereotyping and to eliminate untouchability altogether, including in domestic contexts.

8. Parry (1999) notes the exact opposite in Bhilai, namely that weddings are the 'most public' of all events, and that they are the ones in which caste is the *least* visible.

Chapter 3

Ganga: dispelling ignorance

Ganga is an old man now. He jokes about it sometimes, putting on an air of wisdom. ‘I have become *budho*,’ he says, using a colloquial term for old age, remarkable in that it says very little about the actual number of years one has lived. It can refer to a truly ancient person but also, and almost more commonly, to one barely past the age of marriage. Thus, people in the field would taunt me: ‘Oh Ivan-*dāi* (older brother), you have become a *budho* now! Where is your wife? Don’t you know you should have children by now?’

As we shall see, the equivocal character of the term ‘*budho*’ is well-suited for Ganga, who, despite his years, seems inhabited by an almost youthful energy.

Aged 69, Ganga is a grandfather of four. He receives a pension from the government, having taught in primary schools for decades. Despite this source of income, like almost everyone in the area, he is also a farmer, and it is in his capacity for hard work that his energy is most visible. He and his family work the terraced fields which they own, a few *ropani*¹ around the house for corn and millet, and a few more lower in the valley, where they grow rice. In the past, Ganga and his family would tend to the crops themselves in both of these locations. Today, only his wife and one of his daughters, Sirjana, live in the same house so, as mentioned in chapter 1, the distant rice fields are worked by others under the *sajha* system. As is common in the area, Ganga and his family do not keep much livestock: one pig, a couple of buffaloes, one or two goats, and a few chickens at most.

1. 1 *ropani* = 508.72 m²

Ganga's inner energy also transpires in his appearance. Time has not taken as sharp a toll on his body as it has on those of his contemporaries. Some of its effects, naturally, are inevitable. The years have dug wrinkles into his forehead, left a few scars here and there—traces of the inevitable accidents that occur when one manipulates the *khukuri* (a large, curved knife with innumerable uses) every day. Time has also turned Ganga's hair a less vivid black—not the whitish grey towards which parts of his beard are veering, just a shade duller than its former, saturated tint. A large bulge has appeared on the right side of his neck, but the doctors in Kathmandu say that it is benign, so he has not had it removed. These lingering marks of age, however, are not what is most striking about Ganga's appearance, at least not in my mind's eye, nor in my favourite photograph of him. In both of these images, what shines through is an overall sense of 'sharpness', for want of a better word. Ganga's body is lean and energetic. He can travel longer distances on foot than his own children and grandchildren, who live in the city and have become, as he deplors, dependent on their motorbikes. Ganga carries himself with dignity at all times; he stands straight and moves carefully, precisely, but never hastily. Above all, it is his face which is truly remarkable, almost a perfect rectangle, delineated by a wide forehead and a chiselled jawline. His eyes sit recessed, but they convey a calm awareness at all times. Ganga's voice, too, is unique. Many of his relatives pronounce Nepali with loud, nasal inflexions, but Ganga himself, perhaps as an effect of having taught the language in school for so many years, has a more deliberate, articulated diction and a deeper, poised timbre.

If Ganga presents himself with such controlled dignity, it is in no small part because he is acutely aware of the prejudice and stereotypes which are common in the area about people like him, a Dalit. In part, Ganga's dignified presentation is a way for him to project an image that goes against the grain, against these stereotypes, in the hope of bringing them into question or, at the very least, escaping them personally.

Not one to sing his own praises, Ganga did not usually describe his own life as a project to 'uplift' himself and his relatives. Yet such an interpretation is compelling, as I will show. I should note that if, in the process, I pay something of a (fragmentary and wholly unsuitable) homage to the person who took me under his wing while I was in the field, for whom I have great admiration and to whom I owe much of what I know now, I consider this an advantage rather than a problem.

I have multiple goals in this chapter. First, I wish to highlight the way in which Ganga personally overcame some of the stigma afflicting Dalits, becoming a charismatic and respected individual despite his caste. I do this by presenting his life-story, which I collected over the entire time that I spent in Nepal, and in particular during extended interviews with a total duration slightly in excess of 10.5 hours, recorded with him at the end of my fieldwork. Elements of this life-story will confirm the overall historical trajectory of discrimination described in chapter 2, according to which full-blown untouchability has receded to domestic contexts, although a more latent stigmatisation of Dalits endures.

I should note at the outset that Ganga's account will contain one glaring hole: it will say nothing of the effect of the 1996–2006 People's War on caste-based discrimination. Ganga did not comment extensively on this topic for a number of reasons. In part, this was because he himself is an active member of the CPN-UML (Communist Party of Nepal–United Marxist Leninist), a party which has not always been on the best of terms with the Maoists who led the insurgency.² In part, it was because Ganga and his relatives were 'non-aligned' citizens during the war, i.e. people who sided neither with the Maoists nor the Nepali Army and who, as a result, reacted to the conflict primarily with fear, similarly to the people whom Pettigrew writes about (2004, 2013). In part still, it was because the Maoists' methods were far more violent than what Ganga, who describes himself as an admirer of *ahimsā* (non-violence), would advocate. I gleaned a much more in-depth account of this period by interviewing an ex-Maoist leader in Bensitaun. That account is presented in chapter 5.

My second general goal in this chapter is to account for Ganga's own theory of caste-based discrimination. This is a topic which Ganga has thought about extensively and to which he has dedicated much energy. I will show that Ganga equates the discrimination with *ignorance*. His remedy is therefore *education*, writ large. My third goal is to engage critically with Ganga's own view, to ask to what extent his strategy has been effective.

2. In 2018, the CPN-UML and the largest Maoist party of Nepal merged, but this happened after my return from the field, and well after the People's War.

From untouchable to guru

A significant part of Sammagaon's population addresses Ganga as '*guru*'. I noticed this early in my fieldwork. Initially, I took note of it but was not sure what, if anything, to make of it. Upon meeting me for the first time, people would ask where I lived. When I told them that I was renting a room inside of Ganga's house, after expressing surprise at the fact that I was more than a tourist or passer-by, many people, especially men, would add a remark about Ganga. They would say something along the lines of 'he is our *guru*, don't you know?' Most people who made this kind of remark were in their thirties or forties and, as I later understood, all had been students of Ganga in primary school.

The term '*guru*' came as a surprise. The only other person to whom it was applied in Sammagaon was an old Sunuwar man, a friend and ex-colleague of Ganga's. They had gone through professional training together and had taught in many of the same schools. The term '*guru*' is sometimes translated as 'teacher', but it was clear that in applying it to Ganga and to his Sunuwar colleague, the people of Sammagaon were doing more than merely recalling these men's prior employment as school teachers. Had they intended to do only this, they would have used one of the usual terms for 'school teacher', '*shikshak*', or the English word '*sir*'. '*Guru*' was far more respectful. This was visible in the demeanor of ex-students who used the term to address Ganga in person. On occasion, one of them would walk up to him, displaying a combination of friendliness and deference, a wide smile on their face but their hands joined and head slightly tilted. '*Oho! Guru-ji namaskār*,³ they would interject loudly and demonstratively. Ganga would respond by wrapping his arm around their shoulders, smiling at the esteem which he had just been shown.

The word '*guru*' is, of course, not entirely foreign to English speakers. One usually encounters it as a name for cult leaders. Generally speaking, in the South Asian context, a *guru* is indeed the leader of a spiritual movement, although the term (arguably) does not carry the same negative connotations as in the Western context. On the Indian subcontinent, the *guru* was initially a Brahmanical teacher of the *Vedas*, ancient religious texts, but a shift away from this exclusively upper-caste realm took place with the emergence of the *Bhakti*

3. '*Namaskār*' is a more polite and deferential greeting than 'Namaste', which equals address to each other. The suffix -ji is a mark of respect which can be added at the end of a name or formula of address.

tradition (Mlecko 1982). The *guru* came to be seen as a worldly subject of worship and, importantly, as a personal guide. The term itself derives from Sanskrit; its literal meaning is ‘dispeller of ignorance’, but of ignorance writ large:

The guru is a dispeller of ignorance, all kinds of ignorance; thus, there are gurus not only for specifically spiritual development but also for dancing, music, wrestling, and other skills (1982:33).

At least some people are aware of this meaning in my fieldsite. An upper-caste *pandit* from Puranogaon explained to me that the *guru* is a person who ‘makes the darkness disappear’ (*andiaro hataune*). Others did not give precise definitions, but older, upper-caste men in particular stated that *gurus* were more common in the past. They spoke of the ‘*gurukul*’ as a system which pre-dated the construction of schools in the area, under which a *guru* would take boys under his wing in order to teach them and guide them towards adulthood. Regardless of whether people knew the etymology of the term, there was certainly a diffuse sense that the *guru* is more than a simple school teacher, that he is the kind of person who contributes to one’s personal growth and development. The institution of the ‘*gurukul*’, it is noteworthy, was evoked mostly by upper-caste men, and they agreed that the system as a whole was, traditionally, an upper-caste (and male) affair. This only adds to how remarkable it is that Ganga is regularly referred to using this term.

Ganga is *not* a spiritual leader. He is, however, a ‘mentor’—the type of person who dispels the darkness in other people’s minds. In what follows, I will show that one of his goals has been to dispel the ignorance that others demonstrate, in his view, when they treat Dalits as inferiors. To do so, an account of his life story is in order.

Ganga was born in 1948. His date of birth was auspicious, coinciding with *Shree Panchami*, an important festival dedicated to Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge. This was a befitting birthday for a man who would become the first Dalit teacher in his district. Ganga was his father and mother’s first child. His mother died when he was eighteen months old, before she could give birth to any other children, and Ganga laments the fact that he ‘does not even know what her face looked like’. He knows none of his maternal relatives and was raised mostly by his paternal grandmother.

When Ganga was a child, his father taught him that he belonged to a '*sāno jāt*', a 'small caste'. He explained to Ganga that upon meeting an upper-caste person, the proper thing to do, in principle, was to greet them by bringing his hand to his forehead and saying '*Jadau! jadau!*'.⁴ While Ganga's father did teach his son about the word, he himself was already opposed to it. He did not like its demeaning character, and he did not want his children to pick up the habit. Ganga says that his father was already conscious of the fact that one should not think of oneself as 'lowly', regardless of one's caste.

A school opened in the vicinity of Ganga's house when he was twelve years old, in 1960. He joined and studied up to grade eight. Ganga and Chini Maya were married before Ganga had completed his schooling; both were eighteen years old at the time. In 1968, leaving his wife with her in-laws, Ganga went to what was then called the 'Normal School', in Kathmandu, to train as a teacher. One of his own teachers had told him about the training programme and recommended he try to join it. This teacher, who was particularly fond of Ganga, wrote a recommendation letter and told him to bring it to the head of the District Education Office. He also gave Ganga a tip, which was to bring some home-made *ghee* (clarified butter) along with the letter, as the officer was particularly fond of this.⁵ When Ganga followed the advice, the officer was so pleased that he gave Ganga a book in exchange, telling him to study it hard since all the questions for the entrance exam would be selected from it.

Ganga returned to Sammagaon in 1970 after successfully completing the training programme and receiving the highest mark. He started working as a government-employed Nepali language teacher, an occupation which he would exercise for 38 years in Sammagaon's various primary schools. This had several important consequences. One was to offer him a fairly stable and desirable economic situation. He had received a scholarship at the Normal School, and then a full-fledged salary. He started saving, with a view to building his own house, which he achieved in 1980. Until then, he and his wife had lived with a large number of relatives—sixteen to eighteen by his reckoning—in the house which

4. A self-diminishing term. See chapter 2.

5. Given the prejudice that existed against Dalits when Ganga was young, one might find the extent to which the (non-Dalit) teacher helped him surprising. Ganga offered two explanations. The first was that the teacher was from Darjeeling where, he believed, caste-based discrimination is weaker. The second is that the teacher particularly enjoyed Ganga's performances in after-school plays (*natak*).

is still known by the Bishwakarma as the *mul ghar* (main house; today, only two people live there permanently).

Ganga's employment drastically improved his and his family's economic standing. They have no trouble feeding themselves; they own land in the area. Ganga receives a pension of NPR 12,000 a month (approx USD 120; a day's work in someone else's fields is paid NPR 200, i.e. USD 2) and his son sometimes sends remittance from abroad. Ganga and his wife have maintained a rural lifestyle, with little luxury other than a satellite TV, something which is increasingly common in the area. Their youngest daughter, Sirjana, spent a year and a half in a private 'training centre' in Kathmandu, which has enabled her to find sporadic employment in various NGOs. Ganga and Chini Maya's grandsons in Kathmandu are showing signs that they aspire to the emergent 'middle class' lifestyle described by Liechty (2003). While I was in the field, one of them left for Indonesia and another for Japan, migratory destinations less usual but more desirable than the Gulf, because they allow for better working conditions and higher income. Perhaps one of Ganga's most fortunate economic decisions was to buy a plot of land on the outskirts of Kathmandu some years ago, using money paid to him by a development project that acquired land which he owned in Sammagaon. Prices in the capital are soaring today. Thus, on the whole, it is clear that Ganga's employment led to upward *class* mobility for him and his immediate relatives.

This relatively comfortable economic situation is one of the reasons Ganga gained in status and reputation. People in Sammagaon never reveal how much they own or make, but they often speculate about the wealth of others. It is not unusual for people to guess that others have large, hidden amounts of money. Any sign of wealth is gossiped about, from the acquisition of a new saree or TV set to the building of a cement house or the departure of a kinsman abroad. Ganga and his family are thought to be fairly wealthy, and my presence in their house only helped to fuel this representation. One person once speculated that I was a 'cow that gave never-ending milk', when in reality I was paying a very modest amount to my hosts. Being perceived as wealthy can be a difficult situation to manage in rural Nepal, as it will inevitably attract people looking to borrow money. One of the positive effects which the image of wealth had for Ganga and his family, however, was to break the stereotype that Dalits are miserable or poor (*garib*). In an anecdote which I develop

below, an upper-caste man told me that Ganga and his relatives were not representative of Dalits in their 'natural' state. One difference which he pointed to was the fact that they had enough money to dress better and look cleaner than he would otherwise expect of Dalits.

It was not only Ganga's income that helped him gain prestige. To become a teacher when Ganga did was, in and of itself, status-conferring. It allowed him to build up considerable *ijjat* (honour, social prestige), as many people pointed out to me. The occupation, at the time when Ganga entered it, was seen as highly enviable—and indeed today's teachers long for the prior prestige of their profession, supplanted as it has been by aspirations to become engineers, airline pilots, and medical doctors. Moreover, if becoming a teacher was an achievement for anybody in Nepal a few decades ago, it was all the more so for a Dalit. The first time that I was told about Ganga—before I first met him—was when an upper-caste man explained, with an audible note of admiration in his voice, that Ganga had been the first Dalit teacher in the whole district. Ganga later confirmed that this was true and added that, of the roughly 400–500 people who had taken part in the teacher training programme with him, only one other was a Dalit.

The process of becoming a teacher was, unsurprisingly, an uphill battle for Ganga. While training in Kathmandu, he had to hide his caste identity, lest landlords refuse to rent him a room and lest he face too much discrimination by his peers. He did so by telling people that he was a Chhetri. Hiding one's caste is still common today in urban environments (BK 2013; Folmar 2007), but it is impossible in a rural setting such as Sammagaon, where people know each other too well. Ganga hated hiding the fact that he is a Dalit. He explained that lying about one's caste means living in fear that others will one day discover the lie, start asking questions, make accusations, and become physically violent. Still, he explained, despite such fears, it was nevertheless preferable to hide one's caste if one could, in the past, since the prejudice against Dalits was much stronger than today. As it turned out, Ganga's fears were not without base: one of his landlords in Kathmandu did in fact discover his caste and kick him out.⁶

6. This problem has not disappeared. In fact, Ganga's son's family faced it. They too rented a room and lied about their caste, and when the landlord found out, they were evicted. In principle, they could have opened a legal case against the landlord, but they chose not to do so because they feared that having lied about their caste would play against them.

Moreover, not everybody in Sammagaon welcomed Ganga's achievement when he returned. His colleagues in school, for example, would avoid sitting on the same bench as him during meals, which he would have to eat outside of the school building. Similarly, in the early days, many upper-caste and *janajāti* pupils would refuse to greet him as they entered the classroom. They refused to do so, Ganga explained, because they had been taught at home that one should not show deference to small castes (*sāno jāt lāi doghnu hundaina*). While he was not very vocal about how he had conducted day-to-day teaching, Ganga did hint that he had put effort into teaching his students *not* to discriminate against Dalits. For instance, he simply did not tolerate the behaviour of those who would not greet him. He would tell them that they were to say 'Namaskār' to him, and if they still refused, he would punish them. More generally, in the early days of his teaching, he did not talk about caste openly in school, as this was forbidden, but later, as the political climate changed, he started to do so. Then, he said, he would seize multiple opportunities to teach his students that Dalits are no different from other people, and that it is not acceptable to treat them as inferiors.

Thus, the reaction to Ganga becoming a teacher was mixed. Still, even if not everybody *approved* of Ganga's achievement, what seems clear is that everybody had, at the very least, to *take notice* of it. So unusual was it for a Dalit to acquire a prestigious position that it was impossible for others to ignore the fact. Ganga broke the stereotype of Dalits as poor, stupid, uneducated and incapable, and he did so very evidently. In his own words:

Ivan Deschenaux: And here, in the village—after you came back, after you had become a teacher, after you passed the final exam and got a job—what did others say?

Ganga Dehegli: After this, others said, 'it seems that we should study. By studying, even a Kāmi has become a teacher.' This is how they spoke. Some said, 'after this, we... after studying and coming back I... He is not a Kāmi; he is a teacher'. Some said that one should study, that after studying there is no meaning to 'Kāmi' and 'Damāi', to upper- and lower-caste. [They said that] people are the same. One should study, and by studying anybody can become [like me].

There is much more to say about Ganga's life, but for want of space, I will not go into detail here. For example, Ganga's political engagement would form another long narrative. To mention but some highlights of this, Ganga joined a number of communist and anti-monarchical organisations at a time when these were illegal, during what is known as the *Panchayat* period in Nepal. He explicitly stated that his main motive for doing so was a desire to fight untouchability (*chuvachhut*) and caste-based discrimination (*jatiya vedbav*). He was also an early member of the CPN-UML and acquired a reputation as something of a dissident in Sammagaon.⁷ Prior to the popular uprising of 1990, he was denounced on several occasions by people who, in his terms, were 'angry that a Kāmi had become a teacher'. After one such denunciation, he very narrowly escaped losing his employment and being jailed. During the 1996–2006 People's War, Ganga's politics once again put him at risk. Although in reality he felt little affinity with the Maoist insurgents, the Nepali Army came to his house five times to search for him. Ganga said they wanted to kill him because of his affiliation to communist organisations—but he managed to hide from them each time.

When he was younger, Ganga occasionally engaged in what could be described as 'direct action', that is, he acted in ways which violated the precepts of untouchability directly, in hope of dislodging them. One example was when he entered a tea shop in a neighbouring VDC and refused to leave until he was eventually dragged out and beaten. On the whole, however, such episodes occupied only a small part of his narrative about political activity. He mostly talked about his engagement as a matter of propagating ideas, a way of teaching others about a better way of thinking about society and organising it. He was particularly proud of the book collection which he had assembled when he was younger and of the way in which he had circulated pamphlets in order to convince others to join him in the party.

Ganga's focus on propagating better ways of thinking about society is not surprising. It fits—like his career as a teacher—with his own theory of caste-based discrimination. The latter sees *ignorance* as the fundamental explanation for untouchability. The following ex-

7. Today, the majority of the population in Sammagaon votes for NC (Nepali Congress, conservatives).

cerpt from one of our interviews is particularly explicit:

GD: Because of people who have old opinions (*purāno bicār*), there is still a kind of disease in society here, today. It is a disease of the mind; it is a serious disease. As long as there remain people with old opinions, as long as we do not have an educated (*shikshit*) society, people will primarily need consciousness (*chetanā*). After they have consciousness, after [society] becomes educated, they will have the wisdom (*gyān*) to see that this [caste] is nothing at all. With regards to caste-based discrimination and untouchability, a revolution will not be successful. A fight cannot be the solution. What is the solution? To make this thing called caste-based discrimination and untouchability disappear, what needs to be done is this: the most important thing is the need for education, the need for consciousness. For example, now, the person called Ratna BK [my research assistant in Kathmandu, whom I had told Ganga about, but who never made it to Sammagaon], this man is doing a PhD. Who is going to keep *him* outside? [Referring to Dalits being kept out of non-Dalit houses.]

In Ganga's view, education is the way out of caste-based discrimination. There are two ways in which he believes this to be the case. First, Ganga sees education as a remedy to the ignorance displayed by those currently 'diseased' with the belief that caste *matters*, that it picks out something deep, that Dalits are fundamentally different from others. Ganga mostly attributes this ignorance to non-Dalits, though on occasion, he did deplore that some Dalits themselves believe that they are 'inferior'.

Second, education matters because it can confer *status* to Dalits, as it did to him. Ganga would sometimes tell me of his frustration at the fact that his own relatives do not put additional effort into educating themselves. He complained that they did not see the value of formal education, which could considerably improve their social status. He lamented seeing some Bishwakarma children in Sammagaon flunk school or obtain low grades. Ganga said, in the final interviews I conducted with him, that he wished that his own example would motivate more of his relatives to follow in his path. On this point, his remarks about Ratna BK are clear. Dalits who achieve a high status through education, he believes, will not be kept 'outside' by anybody.⁸

8. In reality, despite his educational achievements, Ratna does face multiple difficulties because

How effective is Ganga's strategy?

The two facets of Ganga's strategy, it is worth noting, are highly consistent. At its heart, Ganga's understanding of discrimination and untouchability attributes these phenomena to a common, but false, representation of Dalits. This is what he calls 'old opinions' (*purāno bicār*) in the excerpt above. Ganga is aware that non-Dalits think in stereotypical ways, that they perceive Dalits as 'dirty', 'stupid', 'poor', etc. It makes sense that his remedy would be two-fold. On the one hand, non-Dalits should be taught that these stereotypes are wrong; on the other, Dalits themselves should strive to disprove the stereotypes by becoming prestigious, educated individuals.

This raises the question of how effective Ganga's strategy has been. It is hard to evaluate the impact of his direct teaching, in school and in political contexts, that the stereotypes are wrong. Here, I will focus instead on whether his rise to a respectable, *guru*-like status has actually changed the way in which people think about Dalits in Sammagaon. This is, in a sense, a question about the extent to which individual *charisma* can effect social change. I refrain from asking this question in relation to Weber's famous discussion of the topic (1922:212–299), however, because this discussion focuses on political power to a much greater extent than I wish to do.

In what follows, I will argue that Ganga's life story has had an impact on the way in which others think about caste, but that this impact is both *restricted* and *limited*. Before making this argument, however, I should address an objection which some readers are likely to formulate at this point. One might disagree with my overall interpretation of Ganga's life story as a project to dismantle caste-based discrimination by shaping himself into an exemplar. After all, personal gain and the desire to *escape* caste-based discrimination (rather than the bolder enterprise of *dismantling* it) would be a sufficient motivation to explain much of what he has done. One might even wonder—as I have myself several times—whether my personal admiration and sympathy for Ganga have led to excessive generosity on my part. I do not deny the importance of self-interested factors in Ganga's life story, but remain convinced that my interpretation is adequate. Rather than try to convince the sceptical reader, however, I prefer to point out that the question about charisma is valid of his caste, including in his university.

irrespective of Ganga's personal motivations. It is undeniable that Ganga is a Dalit with an unusually prestigious occupation and life-story in Sammagaon, and that he commands unusual respect from non-Dalits. Even if this situation had obtained purely out of self-interest, it would be worth asking whether Ganga has, through his exceptional life story, changed the way in which others think about Dalits. Call this, if you will, the weaker version of the question. Below, I will continue to assume that Ganga was legitimately aiming for more than personal gain, but what I say would remain valid, *mutatis mutandis*, if one only asked the weaker question.

The result of Ganga's efforts, sadly, is not a shift in the way that people think about Dalits in general. Instead, it is a perception that Ganga and his closest relatives are exceptions to a stereotype which otherwise remains valid.

The moment at which this appeared to me most clearly was during a conversation which I had with the Chhetri headmaster of the largest school in Sammagaon. I told him that I kept hearing descriptions of Dalits as poor, filthy, and uneducated. This confused me, I said, since none of these properties seemed to apply to my host family and their relatives. The headmaster immediately answered that I was right, but that this was because the Bishwakarma of Sammagaon are an exception. He explained that my hosts were not in the *natural* state of Dalits, using the term 'natural' in English. 'If you want to see real Dalits,' he added, pointing to a part of Sammagaon that I had not yet visited, 'go to the Darji hamlet up there'.

When I followed his advice, I discovered that the Darji of Sammagaon live in strikingly different conditions from my Bishwokarma hosts. I took several trips to the Darji part of the village after this, and each time, I was struck by their visible poverty.⁹ The fieldnotes I took after such trips show how disturbed this part of the VDC left me. The Darji were obviously in need. In my notes, I wrote of children covered in muck, dressed in rags, and seemingly malnourished. Even Niraj's family, the poorest among the Bishwakarma, did not compare.

I visited several houses in the Darji *tol* and spoke to various people there, though I did not

9. In the background chapter, I claimed that the Bishwakarma of Sammagaon are not economically worse-off than non-Dalits; this claim does not extend to other Dalits in the area.

develop the same proximity as I had with the Bishwakarma. The story of one Darji household was particularly distressing. The father of this household had died some twenty-two years earlier. He had married twice. The first wife had given birth to four daughters. The second wife had given birth to two daughters and three sons, but all three boys had died early—two within weeks of birth, one at the age of eight months. The second wife, who was the person who explained this story to me, could not remember the names of her sons. ‘Why would I remember?’, she asked, ‘they all died so quickly.’ As a result, the household was left with two mothers and five daughters. Once the daughters had married and left, as per the patrilocal norm, the two ageing mothers found themselves alone, facing dire poverty. As I was being told all this, one of the older mother’s daughters—who happened to be visiting—was sitting next to us. When her mother came to the part about the death of her three sons, she intervened to tell me how she too had lost a three year-old son lately; he had died during the heavy rains that had hit the country a month earlier.

Undoubtedly, this house was struck with extraordinary misfortune. And yet, poverty and death seemed to strike the Darji part of Sammagaon with uncanny regularity. Only a few months earlier, I had been invited to another house in the area where mortuary rituals were being conducted for a young mother who had died. Her husband, who had been working abroad in the Gulf, came back to Sammagaon to take part in the rituals. He was distressed by the death itself, but also by what this would imply for the household’s future. He explained that there was no woman left in his house to take care of his young children, so he would have to stay home to take care of them. But if he could not go back to work abroad, his family would lose its only source of income and be reduced to a very difficult life. Several months later, when I visited again, he had not found any solution and was starting to despair. In a similar vein, at the very end of my fieldwork, when a major earthquake struck Nepal in April 2015, more than two thirds of the houses in Sammagaon were judged damaged beyond repair. No more than ten human lives were claimed, but, in a cruel twist of fate, two of these were from the Darji hamlet.

It is of course possible that the inordinate number of deaths in the Darji *tol* during my fieldwork was due to chance alone. Nevertheless, in combination with the visible poverty, the contrast between this part of Sammagaon and the Bishwakarma *tol* was impossible not to notice. This contrast helps to put the headmaster’s remarks about Dalits in context.

Classic literature on cognitive dissonance suggests that, when one encounters evidence running contrary to one's beliefs, this creates unease (Cooper 2007: 1–14). In turn, some mental adjustment is likely to occur. This can be, for example, a change in beliefs or a denial of the evidence. When prejudiced non-Dalits encounter individuals like Ganga, who do not fit their stereotypes, how do they adjust their beliefs? The answer is that they do not outright reject the stereotype, but rather, they allow for *exceptions*. It is in this sense that I suggested that Ganga's strategy is only effective in a *restricted* sense. He has successfully shaken the way in which non-Dalits view him and his close kin, but this has not sufficed to get rid of stereotypes about Dalits altogether. As evidence, consider the words of Ganga's own daughter, Sijrana, on the different way in which she and other Dalit children were treated in school:

Ivan Deschenaux: Please tell me—in school, was it this way for you too? Did other children insult you?

Sirjana Dehegli:¹⁰ They could not insult us, because my father taught all the friends who studied with me in class. They were scared because they knew that this was the daughter of a specific person, that this was the daughter of Ganga sir. It was like this; it was, *really*.

ID: So please make a comparison. At that time, other students of your age, other students who were the children of Dalits but who were not the children of Ganga sir...

SD: ...those who were not; they insulted them a lot.

ID: Who insulted them?

SD: Other *jātis*. They insulted them a lot. What they said was this. When it was not the daughter of Ganga sir, but the daughter of another, they said 'Kāmi, Kāmi, Kāmi! Kamini, Kamini, Kamini!'¹¹ Like this, really. For some people, it can be very different. He who is from a somewhat connected family, he in whose house, in whose *family background*, even just one person is formally

10. In all interview transcriptions, unless signalled other wise, italics indicate terms originally spoken in English.

11. 'Kamini' is the feminine form.

employed, his family is drastically changed. You know? It's like this. For this reason, I studied in school; I studied from grade 1 to 12, but nobody could insult me, insult us. Nobody insulted me. But this was [only] us. The Chhetri and Bahun higher than us, they could not insult us. Rather than a low level, we got a somewhat better level because of the employment [of my father].

Furthermore, while Ganga has indeed managed to acquire a high status and social prestige through his employment, this is not to say that he has become identical to a non-Dalit. It is in this sense that I called his strategy *limited*. His 'escape' from the stereotype is incomplete. It is still the case that most people will not eat food prepared by his kin—Ganga himself only cooks extremely rarely—and he must stay outside of non-Dalit houses for fear of 'polluting' them. Despite all of his personal achievements, and despite being respectfully addressed as 'guru', Ganga continues to be subjected to some of the most common ways in which Dalits are singled out as 'defiling'.

This might seem puzzling. How can Ganga simultaneously be a high-prestige, well-off individual and yet continue to be resolutely *low-caste*? Is such a statement not ambivalent or somehow self-contradictory? As far as I can tell, from the point of view of the people in Sarmagaon, it simply is not. A clear confirmation of this was given to me, unintentionally, by a leader of the CPN-UML to whom Ganga introduced me on a trip we took to the district capital. This man explained to me that there are 'two kinds of untouchability'. 'One,' he said, 'is for poor people, and the other is for rich people'. When I asked him to explain, he told me to pay attention to the way in which non-Dalits talk to Dalits. I would then notice that 'rich' Dalits like Ganga are addressed politely. A non-Dalit wanting to make sure that a rich Dalit does not enter their house might say something like, 'Brother, why don't you sit here, in the sun?' Similarly, a non-Dalit might make up a polite excuse to turn down food prepared by a rich Dalit. (This immediately rang true. I had regularly noticed non-Dalits turning down tea at Ganga's house by stating that they had just had some or that they had an upset stomach). The same person, he continued, will talk very differently to a 'poor' Dalit. He might shout, 'Hey, you [*ta*, very low-grade pronoun], don't sit there' or 'Yuk! Don't bring that food near me'.

The UML leader wanted to attract my attention to the *difference* between these two cases.

He wanted to make sure that I understood that status and class do in fact matter in Nepal, that everything does not reduce to caste. I am grateful for his remarks, and agree that the difference which he pointed out is real and important. Nevertheless, it is striking that the UML leader's suggestion was not that 'untouchability *only* affects the poor'. That 'rich' Dalits are addressed more politely in no way indicates that they are *not* or *no longer* untouchable. It is just that this status is made somewhat less salient.

Conclusion: a Dalit after all

In this chapter, I have presented Ganga's life story as an attempt to dislodge some of the stereotypes commonly applied to Dalits. I have shown that Ganga has his own theory of untouchability, which attributes caste-based discrimination to *ignorance*. The remedy, in his view, is therefore *education*. The latter can give other people the 'wisdom' to stop seeing Dalits as inferior, and it can raise Dalits to high-status positions. I have shown how, through his employment as a government teacher, Ganga achieved such status.

In the final part of the chapter, I asked how effective Ganga's achievements have been. I asked whether his becoming a Dalit who so saliently violates people's expectations has had the effect of dislodging the stereotype. My answer was that it has done so only marginally. Ganga's life story has had a *restricted* effect insofar as it has made people think differently only of him and his closest relatives, but not of Dalits more generally. It has had a *limited* effect insofar as it has not made Ganga equal to non-Dalits, as is most evident in the fact that he is still prevented from entering other people's houses.

In conclusion, despite Ganga's impressive efforts, he has remained a Dalit after all. Though people may be polite when they point out that there are prohibitions which he must respect, the prohibitions nevertheless remain. Caste is an identity ascribed at birth, and it is immutable. In the case of Dalits, this immutability means that no matter how much effort one puts into achieving a high-status, one remains 'lowly' in at least some regards.

I will analyse this 'immutability' of caste in more detail in chapter 7, where I will suggest that it is best understood as a consequence of a cognitive bias known as 'psychological essentialism'. Before I do so, I want to give additional ethnographic evidence for this immutability, by analysing two further 'strategies' to get rid of caste-based discrimination,

both of which are also unsuccessful. This is the topic of the two following chapters.

Chapter 4

‘No culture of our own’

In this chapter, I consider a strategy for the alleviation of caste-based discrimination in which Dalits strive to acquire a ‘culture’ that is distinctly their own. The culture in question is one intending to maximise the difference between Dalits and upper castes and thereby reject the hierarchical overtones of caste.

To discuss this strategy, I open with an assertion made by several Bishwakarma, according to which they have ‘no culture of their own’. I discuss what notion of ‘culture’ is at play in this statement, why the Bishwakarma feel that they do not have one, and what the broader implications of this are in the context of Nepal’s current political climate.

The first few times I encountered it, the claim that the Bishwakarma have no culture of their own surprised me. Indeed, the Bishwakarma do many things which are ostensibly ‘cultural’, at least under any reasonable definition of this term. They organise complex, intricate Hindu rituals, or, for the few who have converted to Christianity, they go to church on Saturdays instead. When they fall ill, they sometimes hire the services of a local *jhakri*, a shaman who will know how to appease and chase the ghost causing the illness. They organise long, two- or three-day weddings which require elaborate match-making, visits to astrologers, feasting and readings of the appropriate sacred texts. They work the land, plant rice, corn, and millet, which they harvest and cook in various ways or use to prepare potent alcohols. A few spend their days working at the forge, where they make and repair tools and objects that are essential to life in this part of the world: sickles, knives, fire stoves,

etc.

Why would people who engage in such complex behaviour, which is imbued with symbolic value, state that they have 'no culture of their own'? In answering this question, it will become clear that a specific, reified and instrumentalised notion of 'culture' has become central in the current political climate of Nepal, and that this notion has enabled some groups to distance themselves from upper-caste domination, but that Dalits are not part of these groups.

Besides discussing a second strategy for the alleviation of caste-based discrimination, this chapter has two secondary goals. One is to bring some elements of an answer to the question of whether there exists a distinct Dalit culture in Nepal. This is a question sometimes asked by regional specialists, but to which there is no commonly accepted answer. My own contribution will not be a definitive answer, but I hope to bring some fragmentary insights to the discussion. Second, this chapter will contribute to the ongoing study of ethnic and identity politics in Nepal. Considerable literature has been published on this topic, but only very little of it considers the implications of such politics for Dalits.

Ilesh's puzzle

Let me open with an account of the most explicit statement I encountered about the Bishwakarma's supposed lack of 'culture'.

It is the month of *māgh* (February), an auspicious time to get married. Ganga and I have been invited to a relative's wedding in Sahu Bajar, a few hours' walk from Sammagaon. We arrive one day before the main ceremony so that we can rest and enjoy the proceedings fully. Other guests arrive early, in the afternoon and early evening. Food and home-made millet alcohol are served by the hosts, and guests start to relax and talk. Relatives who live far apart catch up with each other.

I am introduced to a young man named Ilesh and told that he and I are 'similar' (*eutai*). This unusual suggestion makes me curious. It quickly becomes clear that our similarity extends to more than our common age. I am told that Ilesh is an 'educated' person and that,

like me, he is studying the Bishwakarma. Eager to know more, I sit with Ilesh and we begin to talk. Older men gather round us and listen attentively, intervening only rarely. This is unusual. Ilesh is paid uncommon respect by his older relatives; he is seen as considerably more *thulo* (lit. 'big', often 'important' or 'high-status') than is the norm for his age. It soon becomes clear that this is the case because Ilesh is involved in Dalit activism in Kathmandu. He has been a member of several well-known organisations, including the Jagaran Media Center and the Samata Foundation.

It seems that Ilesh is as eager to ask me questions as I him. He almost immediately enquires about my ethnographic work, and seems particularly keen to know what I think Bishwakarma 'culture' is, using—significantly—the term 'culture' in English. Having barely met him, I already feel that I am letting him down when I answer that, despite having worked in the area for a considerable while, I do not really know. On some level, my answer does seem to disappoint him, but on another, it seems to reassure him too. It is as if I have confirmed something that he already suspected. He starts to talk candidly and openly, explaining that he also does not know what Bishwakarma 'culture' is, or even if they really have one. 'We have,' he says, repeating a sentence that I had heard a few times from Ganga and others, 'no culture of our own'.

Ilesh explains that to fill this void, he has recently created, with a few relatives, the first organisation aiming to promote Bishwakarma culture in Nepal. 'The Bishwakarma are the largest Dalit group in this country!' he says, with animation. 'They have so much *talent!* And yet, they have no organised society to promote their *culture*.'¹ He begins to draw a comparison to the Sunuwar, the small but fairly well-known ethnic group whose homeland we are currently in the heart of. 'Just look at the Sunuwar,' he says, 'There's what, a total of five thousand of them, maybe? And yet they have a society to promote their culture in Kathmandu.'²

He goes on to explain what Sunuwar 'culture' is: the Sunuwar have their own festival—a special way of celebrating *Chandi* every year, which attracts many spectators. But that is

1. 'Talent' and 'culture' in English.

2. Official census figures are closer to 56,000 Sunuwar (CBS 2012), but the comparison remains striking. The Bishwakarma represent 4.8% of Nepal's population. The Sunuwar, at 0.21%, are more than twenty times fewer. However, the Bishwakarma are spread throughout the country, whereas the Sunuwar all live in this area. As a result, there are more Sunuwar than Bishwakarma in Sammagaon and the surrounding VDCs.

not all. They have their own traditional dress and a mother tongue of their own. They even have a 'Miss Sunuwar' contest, Ilesh exclaims! 'How come the Bishwakarma, who are a much larger group, have none of these things?' he asks. There is one major yearly festival dedicated to the Hindu god called Vishvakarman, from whom the Bishwakarma people derive their name. For a while, Ilesh thought that this might count as 'their' culture, but upon reflection, he realised that this idea does not make sense because *everybody* celebrates this festival in Nepal. Therefore, it cannot truly be theirs.

It is precisely to fill this cultural void, Ilesh further explains, that he has set up the new organisation in Kathmandu. He hopes that this association will gather prominent Bishwakarma intellectuals in order to solve this problem.

A 'culture of one's own'

What counts as a 'culture of one's own' in Nepal? We can extract some key elements from Ilesh's account. These include

1. a distinctive mother tongue, such as that of the Sunuwar
2. distinctive religious rituals
3. a distinctive material culture (especially a traditional dress)

This conception of 'a culture of one's own', I should note, is not idiosyncratic to Ilesh. The idea that these three elements are key constituents of 'culture' is one which, as the next section will show, is quite generalised in Nepal's Eastern hills and, to an extent, in the country as a whole. It is also, arguably, little more than one specific version of the highly reified, instrumentalised and essentialised notions of 'culture' which anthropologists are used to encountering, in particular in contexts where discourses of 'indigeneity' are prominent (Kuper 2003:especially 395), as is the case in Nepal.

An important question concerns the sense in which language, rituals, and dress must be 'distinctive' to count as a 'culture of one's own'. Ilesh uses the example of the Sunuwar. In his explanations, what seems key is that cultural markers must be heavily or even exclusively associated with one specific group. What matters is that the mother tongue, ritual,

and dress are exclusively Sunuwar. What Ilesh's account does not reveal, but which one rapidly comes to understand while living in the area, is that there is a further sense in which the markers of a 'culture of one's own' must be distinctive. Indeed, perhaps even more important than exclusivity is the fact that these markers should be *different* to those of the upper-caste Bahun-Chhetri people.

Thus, a 'culture of one's own' in East Nepal might as well be described as

1. a non-Nepali mother tongue
2. non- or not-quite-Hindu religious rituals (the qualification 'not-quite', here, is to account for the fact that syncretic religious practices mixing elements of popular Hinduism with other practices can and often do count as 'distinctive' in the sense discussed here.)
3. any traditional garment other than the *daura-suruwal* (moreover, while clothes are central here, it would be appropriate to generalise this point and say that what is needed is a *material culture* different to that of the Bahun-Chhetri.)

Why and how this conception of 'culture' emerged is tied to Nepal's broad political history. This is the topic to which I now turn.

Who has a 'culture of their own'?

In 1951, Nepal's autocratic Rana regime fell and was followed by a brief period of political liberalisation, sometimes referred to as the 'democratic experiment'. In 1960, King Mahendra re-seized full power, banning political parties and establishing Nepal's *Panchayat* political system. Much has been written about this period, but for the purpose of this chapter, what matters is the form of unitary nationalism that marked this political regime. The following quotation, from a contemporary history of Nepal authored by a prominent South Asian journalist, summarises it well:³

...Mahendra was shrewd—perhaps the shrewdest leader Nepal has seen in modern times.

3. I found this passage well after returning from fieldwork. The mention of language, religion and dress resembles Ilesh's narrative in a way that I still find almost uncanny.

He constructed a narrative in which the monarchy was the symbol of the unity of the nation. And faith in the 'glorious' history of the Shah dynasty, a common language (Nepali), a common religion (Hinduism), and a common dress (daura-saluwar) tied the country together. This definition of a 'true Nepali' immediately privileged a certain group of people—the hill Bahuns and Chhetris—who fulfilled the above criteria (Jha 2014:171).

This unitary nationalism and its definition of a 'true Nepali' lasted thirty years. Absolute monarchy and the Panchayat system were brought to an end in 1990 by what is known as the 'People's Movement I'. Since then, Nepal has been undergoing a period of rapid and intense political transformation. This has included a ten-year insurgency and civil war led by Maoists, the complete downfall of the monarchy, and a drawn-out process of constitution writing. As a result, the country is now officially a democratic, federal republic. While nationalist sentiment is still strong in Nepal, the conception of the nation has changed. The unitary understanding of Nepal which silenced differences in favour of a unique Nepali identity has given way to pluralism. The opening lines of the new national anthem attest to this view, using as a metaphor for Nepal and its inhabitants the image of a single garland made of a hundred different flowers. The Constitution which was promulgated in 2015, despite taking a step back from the 2007 interim Constitution on the question of inclusiveness, nevertheless attests to this idea of a *diverse* nation. The following article is a good example:

Art. 32.3: Every Nepalese community residing in Nepal shall have the right to preserve and promote its language, script, culture, cultural civilization and heritage. (Nepal Law Commission 2015)

Again, much ink has been spilled over this recent political history,⁴ but the aspect which is of interest to me here is the tremendous rise in identity and ethnic politics which has marked it.

To cite but a few characteristics of the present political climate, numerous ethnic and caste-based political parties have emerged, religious revivalisms and 'returns' to purportedly non- or pre-Hindu religions have thrived, the Maoists themselves attempted to create an

4. For two good accounts, see Jha (2014); Adhikari (2014).

'ethnic federalism' whereby different regions would be administered by different ethnic groups, and in the period that followed the end of the war, the Madeshi movement—*Madesh* is the name of the low-altitude plains in the South of Nepal—became extremely important. In this climate, already existing discourses of 'indigeneity' gained further credence, thanks in part to the influence of various national and international organisations (Onta 2006; Gellner 2007; Lawoti 2013; Ismail and Shah 2015:esp. 113–115). Unsurprisingly, the different movements and political parties in Nepal today make a great diversity of claims. Cataloguing all of these would be a tremendous enterprise. Nonetheless, if one were to extract a single overarching feature that has marked recent political history, this would be a general opposition to the historical dominance, political and cultural, of upper-caste hill Hindus, more often than not, through ethnic or indigenous politics (Adhikari and Gellner 2016).

Despite Sammagaon's remoteness, its inhabitants are well aware of the rise of identity and ethnic politics in the country.

The media played a significant role in propagating identity politics in Sammagaon. The arrival of televisions, phones, and mobile internet access is still recent in the area, but these technologies are spreading extremely fast. Testifying to the speed at which technology is developing in the area is the fact that, only four years before my fieldwork, when I lived in the neighbouring village of Puranogaon, access to electricity was a fresh memory. Micro power-plants had been installed by a Swiss NGO in 2008. In 2010, only half of the households had light bulbs. When I returned to Puranogaon in 2014, I was astonished to see satellite dishes installed on several houses and noticed that many teenagers had their own cellphone, whereas only a few households had one in 2010. Sammagaon, from what people told me, had seen a similar technological explosion with the arrival of electricity, along roughly the same timeline.

While I was conducting my fieldwork, *the* main object of news reports and bulletins was the writing of the new Constitution. Discussions about this topic were literally a daily affair on TV and the radio, and with them came constant debates about the reservation systems that were being considered, which caste and ethnic groups would be named explicitly in the new document, whether ethnic federalism would be promulgated, whether

schools should (and could) provide mother tongue education for various *janaajāti*, and a host of other topics pertaining to the rights of the different groups living in Nepal and the valuation of non-upper-caste cultures. Popular comedy and soap operas also touched upon issues of ethnicity and identity, so that even the people who did not watch political shows or news reports were exposed to content relating to 'ethnic identity'.

I should add that this identity-related content was not limited to the question of ethnicity, though this did figure prominently. Dalit issues were also mentioned regularly, but in this case, little was said about any 'culture' associated with them. The content here focused instead on reservations and, sometimes, on the question of untouchability. Thus, on several occasions, my adoptive family would call me to watch a report concerning some atrocity that had been perpetrated against Dalits elsewhere in the country. At other times, there were spots on the radio reminding people that untouchability is now criminal in Nepal and punishable by imprisonment.

As a result, it often felt impossible to go anywhere in Sammagaon without being exposed, mainly through radio and television reports, to the importance of caste and ethnic identity.

In addition, identity politics were also visible in everyday life in Sammagaon. In the meetings called by the various organisations present in the area, the issue of ethnic and caste identity arose regularly. This was particularly true of the meetings that were held to decide how to spend the yearly budget sent to the VDC by the district headquarters. This budget is specifically divided into quotas, with considerable sums of money reserved for women (*mahilā*), children, the *janaajāti*, Dalits, and people with disabilities. Representatives of all these groups had to meet to agree on how to spend the money.

Just as visible were various forms of ethnic activism and cultural politics. Sammagaon itself is home to a diversity of ethnic groups. These include, to cite but a few, the Rai, Limbu, Tamang, Magar, Sherpa, etc. Members of all these groups live in close proximity to each other and to the Bahun-Chhetri and Dalits. The wider area encompassing Sammagaon is nevertheless recognised by all as the original territory of the Sunuwar. The Sunuwar's political and cultural mobilisation is not a topic which I can address at length, but as noted by Ilesh, they do in fact have their own cultural *sangh* (organisation) in the nation's capital, and are quite active in the conduct of cultural programmes. They organise events at which

they perform their own rituals, dances, and generally celebrate Sunuwar 'tradition'. A festival called 'Chandi' is the most important event of this kind. The Chandi celebrations in a village neighbouring Sammagaon attract thousands of people, and videos of these celebrations are filmed by locals and uploaded to Youtube, on channels which sometimes include other films promoting Sunuwar culture.

During my fieldwork, on several occasions, I was approached by Sunuwar men, in particular school teachers, who urged me to write about them rather than the Bishwakarma. They told me about the importance of 'conserving' and 'promoting' Sunuwar culture. As an anthropologist working in Sunuwar land, they felt that this was the task that I should really be undertaking. I explained, as politely as I could, that I really wished to work specifically with Dalits. The simple fact that I received such requests is an indication of how important 'culture', as a reified concept, has become in Nepal. It is a kind of political, symbolic capital that one must develop and validate through research, and which lends political legitimacy.

There are other groups in the area that have their own cultural organisations, among which the Sherpa are particularly noticeable. Giving details on the activities of each of these groups would not add much to the argument here. Suffice it to say, in summary, that the hills of the East of Nepal are a place where *janajāti* people are numerous, and where what Hangen refers to as the 'cultural politics' of Nepal thrive:

Cultural politics includes activities through which indigenous nationalities define and promote the cultural practices of their own communities. Guiding these cultural activities is the belief that the indigenous nationalities should reject the culture of high-caste Hindus, which was imposed on them, and revive their own distinct histories, languages, religions and other cultural practices, including clothing, dances, and festivals. (Hangen 2009:37)

In the quotation reproduced earlier, Jha remarked that it is through clothing, language and religious practices that a unitary, upper-caste understanding of the nation was imposed on the whole of Nepal's population during the Panchayat period. It is not surprising that, in the current climate, it is through these same markers that ethnic activists are seeking to establish a different, pluralist understanding of the nation. It is also not surprising that

these very markers are those which Ilesh had picked up on.

What is still unaccounted for, however, is the fact that Ilesh found it *difficult* to identify the cultural markers which could be deemed the Bishwakarma's 'own'. To explain this, I must spend some time explaining what the Bishwakarma do in fact consider to be *their* culture.⁵

Bishwakarma culture

When I first arrived in Sammagaon, I told people that I was a student and that I had come to study the Bishwakarma, their culture, and how they live today. One of the things which many Bishwakarma people told me early on was that, with regards to culture at least, the Bishwakarma—and the Dalit more generally—are identical to the upper-caste Bahun. Ganga was particularly eager to point this out: 'Ours and the Bahun's culture,' he would say, 'is exactly the same' (*Hāmro ra Bahunko sanskār-sanskriti thyakai milchha.*). On occasion, Ganga would tell me about the similarities in more detail. He would point to the fact that the Bishwakarma and the Bahun speak the same language, are Hindu, perform the same rituals, worship the same gods, celebrate the same festivals, etc. He was not the only person to point this out, but he was particularly enthusiastic about these similarities.

It is worth noting that when people explained the similarity between the Bahun and the Dalit, they generally used the Nepali terms '*sanskār-sanskriti*' (life-cycle rituals, culture, traditions) or occasionally '*riti-thiti*' (practices, customs). They generally did not use the term 'culture' in English in the same way as Ilesh, so it would be wrong to assume that they had the same, highly reified and politicised concept in mind. Nevertheless, they were still bringing my attention to the fact that the Bishwakarma and the Bahun partake in the same religion, rituals, and life-cycle events, and that they speak the same language. Even if the *connotations* of the Nepali and English terms for 'culture' are different, the concepts have considerable overlap in their extensions.

As far as I could tell, the cultural similarity between the Bishwakarma and Bahun is factual. Nepali is indeed the Bishwakarma's mother tongue and, usually, the only language which they speak fluently. Like the Bahun, the Bishwakarma practice popular Hinduism, save

5. It goes without saying that the Bishwakarma do not think they have no culture *at all*; they simply say that they do not have a culture 'of their own'.

for a few households who have converted to Christianity (one in Sammagaon, and a few in neighbouring VDCs). Their year is marked by the same major festivals (Dasain, Tihar, Teej, Shree Panchami, etc.), which they celebrate in the same way, and they conduct *pujā* (worship) in similar ways, mostly to the same pantheon.⁶

One similarity that I did not expect concerned ritual specialists, or more precisely, Hindu priests (*purohit*). Prior to fieldwork, my reading of the literature had led me to believe that Hindu priests exclusively belong to the Bahun caste. In reality, while there is a very strong association between Bahuns and this function, it is not absolute. All Hindus in Sammagaon commission the services of Bahun priests *except* for Dalits. The latter have their own full-blown priests, who belong to the same caste as themselves, who read sacred texts just like the Bahun, and who are not simply relatives 'acting a part', as suggested by Bista (2013[1967]:67).⁷

The priest whose services the Bishwakarma in Sammagaon would hire was a relative of Ganga's who lived in a VDC nearby, a man whom Ganga addressed respectfully as 'brother-in-law', although this was not their actual relation. The reason for which the Bishwakarma have their own, separate priests is simply, as everybody will readily admit, that Bahun priests refuse to provide their services to Dalits. The Bishwakarma, however, see having their own priests not as a difference, but rather as a further indication of the similarity between the Bahun and themselves. Like the Bahun, the Bishwakarma *are* their own priests. Ganga further insisted that Bishwakarma and Bahun priests serve the same function, conduct the same rituals, and read the same sacred texts when doing so. There was therefore, according to him, no reason to suggest that having separate priests meant a difference in 'culture'.

All of this is not to say that the Bishwakarma are *identical* to the Bahun. One difference which upper castes will quickly point out is the fact that the Bishwakarma consume alco-

6. I should note that the goddess Durga / Kali is particularly popular among the Bishwakarma and I do not know whether this is the case among the Bahun.

7. In a passage concerning funerary rites, a book written by the first indigenous anthropologist of Nepal states: 'The occupational and artisan caste people [i.e., Dalits] cannot employ a Brahman priest for their funeral ceremonies but use instead the sister's son or daughter's husband to act the part. This person does not read from a text, but merely guides the funeral process' (Bista 2013[1967]:67). I do not know whether this was true some sixty years ago, but in Sammagaon and surrounding area today it is not.



Figure 4.1: A Bishwakarma *purohit* performing *pujā*.

hol and meats which are said to be unacceptable for a Bahun. Such interdictions are not always observed in reality, but they are brought up regularly when one asks about differences. Still, even the Bahun will admit that this difference does not suffice to constitute a difference in 'culture', as per the Nepali terms 'sanskār-sanskriti'. Such a difference would require, for example, a separate form of *pujā* (worship), different festivals, or perhaps, a different set of sacred texts.

Do such differences in 'sanskār-sanskriti' exist between the Bahun and the Bishwakarma? The answer is perhaps not a straightforward 'no', as the Biswhakarma would have it. This is because there are rituals and practices which the Bahun engage in but the Bishwakarma do not. The most noticeable example here is the *saptāha*, a multiple-day reading of sacred texts which concludes in a symbolic cremation. Another example is the fact that the Bahun have their own dance, which the Bishwakarma do not. Yet another example is a form of singing in *khas bhāsā* (a language from which modern Nepali emerged), which constitutes a form of worship to tutelary gods, those said to reside in rivers, forests, *thulassi* (small, temple-like structures found in front of houses), etc. And another difference still is the

fact that a small number of Bahun people in Sammagaon and the surrounding area go to study in Hindu colleges in India and become what locals refer to as *pandits*.

The Bishwakarma, who do not engage in these practices and do not have their own equivalents, cannot therefore be described as having an entirely identical *sanskriti* to the Bahun. A more accurate description would be that those rituals and practices which they do engage in are not different from those of the Bahun. In other terms, the Bishwakarma's culture is perhaps best described as a subset of the Bahun's.

I must state one point clearly here, lest I be misinterpreted. Under no circumstance would I describe the Bishwakarma's 'culture', in any analytical sense, as *lesser* than that of the Bahun's. In the final section of this chapter, I will argue that blacksmithing is a practice exclusive to the Bishwakarma which could, under the right circumstances, be seen as highly prestigious and constitute a 'culture of their own'. The fact that it does not, I will argue, is testament to the exclusionary dynamics of identity politics in Nepal. Before moving to this argument, however, I should point out that, *in Nepal*, there *is* a diffuse representation that the Bishwakarma's culture is lesser because their *sanskār-sanskriti* is only a subset of that of the Bahun. This is something which several Bahun people hinted at when I told them about the Bishwakarma priests, for example, which they would describe as not genuine.

In response to this representation, some Bishwakarma are putting considerable effort into trying to reduce the gap between them and the Bahun. Ganga, the priest who provided services to the Bishwakarma in Sammagaon, and another one of their relatives from Sahu Bajar are key examples. These three men had given up consuming any locally produced alcohol and stopped smoking, in an effort to appear closer to the Bahun in demeanour. The man from Sahu Bajar, his relatives said, had taken to spending long hours alone in one room, where he would read Hindu texts. Moreover, Ganga was far more of a 'practising' Hindu than any of the other Bishwakarma in Sammagaon. He tried to conduct a full-day *pujā* in his house every month or every other month at least and observed *shraddha*, a ritual to one's ancestors, every year.

But, more explicit than any of these indications was the fact that Ganga would tell me, on occasion, that the Bishwakarma are the *real* upper-castes. He supported this claim with a myth of origin according to which, in times immemorial, the *Veda* had originally



Figure 4.2: Ganga observing Shradha

belonged to the Bishwakarma, but had later been 'stolen' by the Bahun. Subaltern myths of origin of this type have been noted among Indian Dalits. Deliège (1993) has provided an extensive catalogue and analysis of them, in which he argues that myths similar to the one Ganga told me are typical of castes attempting to move upwards in the hierarchy: 'When a low caste wants to improve its position, it usually begins by adopting a new myth of origin consistent with its ambition.' (Deliège 1993:541). He further suggests that they are incipient signs of a process known as *sanskritisation*, a concept famously introduced by Srinivas, whereby one caste or ethnic group adopts upper-caste practices and aesthetics in order to improve its status (Srinivas 1956; for a review of the concept's role in anthropology, see also Charsley 1998).⁸

Though I am wary of pushing this line of analysis too far, the concept of 'sanskritisation' does provide a compelling contrast between Ganga's striving to be *more* similar to the Bahun and Ilesh's attempts to build a distinct Biswhakarma 'culture'. These two goals could be viewed, respectively, as desires to *sanskritise* and to *de-sanskritise* the Biswhakarma. One reason I am wary of this line of analysis is simply that Ganga did also, on occasion, suggest that the Bishwakarma should create a 'culture of their own'. Conversely, Ilesh did at times tell me about the importance for the Bishwakarma of stopping drinking and starting to behave more like the Bahun. Stripped away from the association with specific individuals, however, the contrast between striving to be *like* the Bahun and creating a 'culture of one's own' remains valid. I will return to this topic in the conclusion of this chapter.

To summarise the argument so far: the importance of acquiring a 'culture of one's own' in Nepal is consistent with the country's overall political trajectory. It is a way to mark oneself as *different* from the upper-caste Bahun, who have historically been dominant both politically and culturally. This strategy is effective for the *janajāti*, who can 'revive' their mother tongues, languages, and material culture. The Bishwakarma, however, find themselves incapable of following suit, since in most of these regards, they are similar to the Bahun, the very people from which cultural politics are meant to mark distance.

8. Note that in Nepal, the term 'sanskritisation' has also been used alongside 'hinduisation' to refer to the historical, long-term process whereby the *janajāti* were historically inserted into the national caste hierarchy and adopted Hindu practices as a consequence (e.g. Jones 1976; Sharma 1978; Allen 1997; Whelpton 2005:35–60).

There is, however, one activity that is distinctly Biswhakarma. This is blacksmithing. The Bishwakarma are very heavily associated with this activity in Nepal, so it would seem reasonable to expect them to claim it as 'their own culture'. In the following section, I explain why this does not happen.

Why can't blacksmithing become the Bishwakarma's culture?

Everybody in Nepal recognises that the Bishwakarma's 'traditional' occupation is blacksmithing. So strong is this association that people sometimes euphemistically refer to the Bishwakarma using the expression 'those who work with iron'. In Sammagaon, this association has endured despite the fact that, in reality, only one Bishwakarma man actually practices smithing on a daily basis. Additionally, similar observations are true of the two other Dalit castes present in the area. The Mijar or Sārki are still said to be leather workers, despite the influx of cheap, factory-produced plastic sandals meaning that virtually none of them work as actual cobblers today. The Darji are still associated with tailoring and playing music at weddings. They too are losing work due to the availability of factory produced clothes, although they do have more opportunities to exercise their traditional craft than the Mijar.

The association between the Bishwakarma and blacksmithing raises the question of why the Bishwakarma do not claim metalwork as 'their own culture'. To explain this, let me turn back to the exchange which I had with Ilesh when I first met him. In that conversation, he told me something which I had already heard several times during fieldwork, and which is key to answering the question.

Ilesh explained that while the Bishwakarma do in fact make things at the forge, what they make does not count as Bishwakarma 'culture'. He offered the following explanation: 'If a Bishwakarma makes a sickle, that sickle is part of the culture of the person he made it for. It's not part of Bishwakarma culture.' He drew a parallel with the Darji. 'Think of it. If a Darji makes clothes for a Sunuwar, following the Sunuwar design, he's made something which is part of Sunuwar culture, not Darji culture. It's the same for the Bishwakarama.'

These remarks pose an interesting problem. To the outsider, being artisans or craftspeople might seem, intuitively, a solid basis to claim that one has a 'culture of one's own', particu-

larly in the domain of material culture. Yet Ilesh's words suggests that a phenomenon akin to cultural dispossession, or perhaps *alienation*, prevents the Bishwakarma from making such claims. Without going into detail, Marx famously used the notion of alienation to denote, among other phenomena, the separation which capitalism creates between a worker and the product of their labour (Elster 1986). This type of alienation is primarily economic; it refers to the fact that the products of a worker's labour do not belong to the worker themselves, but instead, to the person who employs the worker. What is happening in the case I am addressing here is not exactly the same. Still, despite the difference, Ilesh's words suggest an alienation between Dalits and the 'cultural value' of the object which they produce, or, to use a more economic analogy, an alienation from the 'symbolic capital' contained in the objects made by Dalits.

In the case of the Bishwakarma, this alienation becomes particularly striking when one thinks about the *khukuri*, one of the various tools which the Bishwakarma smith forges. This knife, with its wooden handle and inward curving blade, is an essential tool for everyday life in rural Nepal. It is amazingly versatile, allowing those who use it well to cut through bamboo or even tree trunks in only a few swings. It is also used to prepare food. To chop ingredients, it can be turned upside down and held securely against the ground with one foot, thus presenting the blade upwards, against which vegetables can be pushed and sliced efficiently. The *khukuri* has multiple other uses in everyday life, including sacrificing and butchering animals, gathering leaves and fodder for buffaloes, stripping bamboo into long, thin slices used to make mats, and many more.

At some level, the Bishwakarma derive pride from the fact that they are the makers of these tools. When I left the field, as a parting gift, Ganga had his son-in-law, a blacksmith living in a village a few hours away, make me the finest *khukuri* I have seen. Unlike the large, rough tools used in everyday life to cut down trees and butcher animals, this *khukuri* is an ornate piece of craftsmanship: its curved blade is partly engraved; carved pieces of two different metals are cast into the wooden handle; intricate motifs are carved into its wooden sheath. Ganga presented me this gift ceremoniously on the day of my wedding in Kathmandu, a few weeks before I left the country. Despite the fact that only a few Bishwakarma actually work in forges, Ganga clearly felt pride in offering me such a beautiful object, and he made a short speech to explain why this gift was befitting for a student of

the Bishwakarma. Similarly, when my (actual) father came to visit me in the field, he too was offered a well-crafted *khukuri*.

Nevertheless, I am forced to acknowledge that Ilesh is right about the fact that what Dalits make gets appropriated. Virtually nobody inside or outside of Nepal thinks of the *khukuri* as a product of Bishwakarma work. Instead, almost everybody will explain that the *khukuri* is a typically *Nepali* knife, talking about it as an object of distinct *national* character but failing to attribute it to any specific caste or ethnic group. Moreover, while the *khukuri* is in most cases a utility knife, its international claim to fame is as a weapon. As such, it is always associated with the Nepali military and the Gorkha regiments hired by various other armies and police forces (British, Indian, Singaporean, etc). It appears on Gorkha flags and in numerous other symbolic representations of military bravery, but the association with the metalworkers who produce it is totally absent. Thus, the Bishwakarma are never given any space in the rich symbolism associated with the *khukuri*. As Ilesh's account makes all too clear, none of the prestige of the *khukuri* 'flows back', so to speak, to them.⁹

Why this is the case is difficult to assess. At the very least, I suggest, a convincing answer would have to take into account what it is like to be a blacksmith, the material conditions in which one conducts such work. Working at the forge is hard labour. In Sammagaon, I would sometimes pay visits to Kishor, the Bishwakarma person who owned the large forge in the village. I usually had no other pretext than to watch him work. I marvelled at how he actioned the large bellows made of goat hide to bring the charcoal to a white-hot glow. Then, he would place in this furnace some of the metal scraps that lay all around him, the best of which, he explained, were obtained from the suspensions of old buses. This was the strongest metal available.

Kishor was a quick and dexterous person, the generous amounts of millet beer he drank doing nothing to reduce his ability to twist and shape high-quality, sharp tools. But where I saw dexterity, I suspect that many saw something entirely different. As discussed in chapter 2, working at the forge, non-Dalits will tell you, is 'dirty' work. It makes the skin

9. I discuss the case of the *khukuri* here because it is the object which most readily shows the alienation between Dalits and what they make. A good Bishwakarma smith, however, can and does make a large number of other objects. For a comprehensive catalogue, see Höfer (1976)



Figure 4.3: Butchering a buffalo with a *khukuri*.



Figure 4.4: Making a *mala* (flower garland) with a *khukuri*.



Figure 4.5: Kishor, the blacksmith of Samagon.

'black', in a part of the world where being 'fair' is universally considered a criterion of beauty, and where blackness quickly recalls old ideas of 'impurity'. I would not suggest that blacksmithing being seen as 'dirty work' suffices to explain why none of the *khukuri*'s prestige flows back to the Bishwakarma. I would argue, however, that this must be part of a wider explanation.

The exclusionary character of ethnic politics

Having shown why the Bishwakarma claim that they do not have a 'culture of their own', I now turn to some more general remarks on the ethnic and identity politics of Nepal. Anthropological critiques of ethnic politics abound, especially when such politics are built around the notion of 'indigeneity' (e.g. Béteille 1998; Kuper 2003), as is the case in Nepal. I have little to add to the theoretical and analytical components of these critiques, which I generally agree with. I do however wish to focus specifically on the ethnic politics of Nepal, insofar as these politics affect Dalits. In doing so, I will make a similar argument to that put forth by Folmar (2013).

To make this argument, I will briefly address two studies of ethnic politics in Nepal, Hangen (2009) and Lecomte-Tilouine (2009a). I consider two distinct yet similar arguments made in these books. The first is that the traditions that are being 'revived' in the context of Nepali ethnic politics are 'invented'. The second is that 'ethnic identity' is a fluid concept. While these observations are broadly correct, over-emphasising them runs the risk of painting ethnic politics as more inclusive than they actually are in Nepal.

The 'invented traditions' argument

Lecomte-Tilouine (2009a) has written a detailed study of how the *Magar* ethnic group was historically sanskritised, developing very close ties to Hinduism and the Nepali state, only to become one of the groups which most strongly demarcated and distanced itself from the upper-caste, ruling elite during the upheavals of 1990 and onwards. The movement she describes is in quest of a Magar identity, trying to distinguish itself from Hinduism and upper-caste elitism through various forms of ethnic revivalism and, in particular, through a re-writing of history which emphasises how the upper-castes eliminated original Magar culture. Magar ethnic activists, she tells us, describe the 1854 civil code as a 'sudden

imposition of Hindu order' (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009a:132) leading to the loss of Magar identity. In response, today, 'ethnic organisations, particularly the historical research they undertake, are entrusted with the task of filling this existential vacuum' (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009a:143).

Lecomte-Tilouine notes the following about the Magar efforts to re-create their original culture:

...the Magars form one of the most interesting groups because of their very deep and old acculturation to the Hill Hindus' culture. This acculturation is so old, going back as it does to at least the fifteenth century, that their rejection of Hinduism and return to an authentic and original culture ... is *necessarily close to a pure and simple invention*. (2009a:126)

Here, Lecomte-Tilouine is clearly referring to 'invented traditions' in the sense put forth by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983). Her point is that while the culture which Magar revivalism promotes is presented by ethnic activists as 'authentic and original', it is not truly so. This is the case because the Magar adopted many upper-caste Hindu cultural markers historically, to the extent that these superseded any 'original' culture which they might have had.

The distinction between 'authentic' and 'invented' traditions drawn by Hobsbawm and Ranger, which Lecomte-Tilouine uses in this passage, is one which has come under considerable anthropological criticism. Sahlins (1999), for instance, has argued that all traditions are, ultimately, 'invented' and that the distinction therefore does not carry much analytical weight.

What this misses, however, is that not everybody is equal in their *capacity* to invent tradition. The traditions invented by one group may be perceived by others as more legitimate than those invented by another, simply because of the wider political context in which such inventions take place. As Lecomte-Tilouine also notes, Magar revivalism happens in a context where the

...opposition to the state is obviously translated as a conflict between castes and tribes, a conflict that is itself reduced to racial opposition between the Aryas and Mongols (2009a:125).

As I showed in chapter 1, there are two ways in which people commonly divide society in the Hills of East Nepal.¹⁰ One division follows a 'caste'-based logic. It is tripartite, distinguishing the upper-castes, the *janajāti* / ethnic groups, and Dalits. The second division follows racial or ethnic lines; it is bipartite, and to follow Lecomte-Tilouine's terminology, uses the categories 'Ārya' and 'Mongol', the latter mapping almost perfectly with the '*janajāti* / ethnic' category in the tripartite division. The important point which I wish to note here is that only those belonging to the 'Mongol' side of the dichotomy will be taken seriously if they claim to have a 'culture of their own'. Only they can 'invent' a tradition that others will recognise.

The issue which the Bishwakarma, and Dalits more generally, face is that they fall on the 'wrong' side of the dichotomy. Although 'untouchable' and 'low-caste' according to the tripartite view, they are Ārya in the bipartite one. As such they are assimilated, on the 'cultural' front, to the upper-caste Bahun-Chhetri.

A person vested in the ethnic politics of Nepal might argue that the Dalit *truly* do not have a culture of their own, unlike the various *janajāti*, and that it therefore does not make sense for them to try to promote their own culture. Ilesh, in such a person's view, would be misguided in seeking to find Bishwakarma culture, since there would be nothing there to find in the first place. Showing that traditions are invented mitigates this view. It shows that, on the analytical front, cultural politics are no more legitimate when conducted by the *janajāti* than by, as Ilesh is attempting, Dalits. What this line of argument misses is the fact that any attempt by the Dalit to create a 'culture of their own', while analytically no more problematic than ethnic revivalism, will not be received well in Nepal.

The 'fluid identities' argument

Hangen's book entitled *The Rise of Ethnic politics in Nepal* (2009) is an ethnographic study of a political organisation called the 'Mongol National Organization' (MNO). The book is thoroughly researched and insightful, but there is one argument it makes that I take issue with.

Hangen's study shows how the rise of ethnic politics in Nepal operated at all levels of

10. Naturally, these emic models of society are also, ultimately, 'invented', but this has little to no *practical* importance since they are recognised by everybody.

society, including in remote villages similar to Sammagaon. Organisations such as the MNO, she demonstrates, 'introduced a new discourse of ethnic equality to village Nepal, and led people to transform their identities' (2009:83). Similarly, Hangen states that

many people who supported the MNO ... came to think of themselves in a new way, as Mongols, and reinterpreted, questioned or changed their religion and other cultural practices. (2009:5–6)

Overall, Hangen argues that ethnic politics have been strongly transformative for members of various *janajāti*, shifting their self-representation to one which is delineated in 'ethnic' terms. Hangen's overall appraisal of this phenomenon is positive; she suggests that ethnic politics can be unexpectedly favourable for democracy and that they lead to new forms of positive self-valuation for the *janajāti*.

In making this argument, Hangen engages with political scientist Donald Horowitz (1985). Horowitz's view, as per Hangen's summary, is that for democracy to function well, people should be able to move fluidly between interest groups and shift their political allegiances at will. Horowitz argues that ethnic politics present an obstacle to this kind of movement because the very identities such politics are based on are ascribed at birth.

Arguing against this view and in defence of ethnic politics, Hangen states that

As anthropologists and other social scientists have argued for several decades, ethnic identities are not primordial or fixed but, rather, are constructed in particular social contexts. *Ethnic identification is a highly fluid process.* Power relations structure the formation and definition of ethnic identities, including relationships between different groups, and the relationships between ethnic groups and the state. New political contexts in which power relations are altered often bring about efforts to redefine ethnic identities. From this perspective, *the identities that ethnic parties mobilize may be framed as primordial but they are in fact no more stable than identities that are mobilized through other political parties.* Identities that are marked by primordial symbols may change and thus do not create the static cleavages and deadlocked political systems that theorists like Horowitz supposed would emerge from ethnic politics (2009:15–16, emphasis

added).

I am not competent to engage with the question of what is required for democracy to function well. Nevertheless, I am struck by Hangen's description of ethnic identification as 'fluid'. I agree with her reminder that the identities mobilised by ethnic organisations are not *actually* primordial—this is the same argument as Lecomte-Tilouine makes in the quotation above. This observation alone, however, does not justify the broader claim that 'ethnic identification is a highly fluid process'. The fact that ethnic identities are, as Hangen herself suggests, 'framed as primordial' is sufficient for these identities to be *rigid* in at least two senses.

First, ethnic identities are rigid in the sense that *individuals* cannot freely choose to self-ascribe to one group over the other (this is, in my understanding, the type of fluidity that Horowitz sees as necessary for democracy). No Bishwakarma can suddenly declare themselves to be, for instance, Sunuwar and expect others to recognise this. A Bishwakarma is born and remains a Bishwakarma no matter what they do.¹¹ Second, and perhaps more importantly, ethnic identities in Nepal are rigid because they set specific conditions for which groups do and do not count as 'ethnic'. A key condition, I have argued, is to have a 'culture of one's own' in the sense explained earlier.

Nepal's ethnic politics are, therefore, exclusionary. The more positive self-understandings that ethnic politics afforded the *janajāti* do not carry over to Dalits. There is no possibility for people such as the Bishwakarma to develop positive self-evaluations through ethnic politics because, quite simply, nobody will agree that the Bishwakarma are 'ethnic'. As I have now repeated enough times, the Bishwakarma are seen by others as *Aryan* and *Hindu*, and in this regard they are seen as 'identical' to the upper-caste Bahun-Chhetri, very much the opposite of being 'ethnic' or 'indigenous'.

Conclusion

I had one main goal and two secondary ones in this chapter. The secondary goals were to address the broad question of Bishwakarma culture and whether this differs from that of the upper-caste Bahun, and to comment on the effect of ethnic politics for Dalits in

11. See chapter 9 for a case of Dalit people claiming that they are no longer Dalit.

Nepal. By now, I hope to have fulfilled these two goals. My main goal was inscribed in the broader argument of this thesis; it was to discuss one strategy which some Bishwakarma are contemplating to 'escape' the stigma of lowliness and untouchability. I now wish to return to this point.

In the previous chapter, I showed how Ganga, my host and adoptive father, dedicated his life to acquiring a high social status through his employment as a school teacher. The further remarks about Ganga in this chapter help to understand his strategy in more detail. Beyond a quest for dignity, Ganga is arguably attempting to *sanskritise* the Bishwakarma. His view is that the Bishwakarma are not truly Dalits, but that they are instead 'fallen' Bahuns, as attested by the myth of origin which he related to me.

It is tempting to read Ilesh's strategy, which is to build a 'culture of their own' for the Bishwakarma, as an alternative to Ganga's. Though Ganga may say that he despises caste and untouchability, there is nevertheless a sense in which his strategy, so to speak, 'plays by the rules' of caste. In his attempt to change the way in which people think about him and his relatives, he is trying to promulgate, arguably, a more Brahmanical image of the Bishwakarma. Ilesh too is trying to change the public representation of the Bishwakarma, but he is doing this according to very different criteria. His strategy, so to speak, 'plays by the rules of ethnicity'. By searching for 'Bishwakarma culture', he is trying to give a *less* Brahmanical image of the Bishwakarma, in favour of a more 'ethnic' one.

In one conversation which I had with Ilesh much later in my fieldwork, he explicitly told me that the problem which Nepal is facing today is 'Brahmanism' (*bahunbād*). He explained that the *janajāti* and the Dalit should face this problem together, that they should join forces in fighting it. The fact that both the Dalit and the *janajāti* drink alcohol was, in his mind, a strong indication of the similarity between the two, and of the possibility for them to come together in opposing the Bahun. When I discussed this idea with Ganga, he dismissed it immediately. He stated that simply drinking alcohol does not mean much. 'How does drinking make us similar,' he asked, 'when the *janajāti*, just like the Bahun-Chhetri, continue to keep us outside of their houses?'

To fully understand why both Ganga's and Ilesh's strategies fail, we must return one last time to the two lenses through which Nepalis view society, that is, the tripartite caste lens

and the bipartite cultural / ethnic / racial lens. I reproduce here the figures from chapter 1 in which these two lenses were discussed.

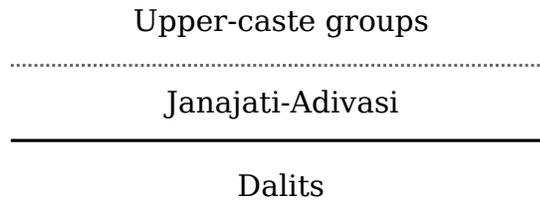


Figure 4.6: The 'caste' lens

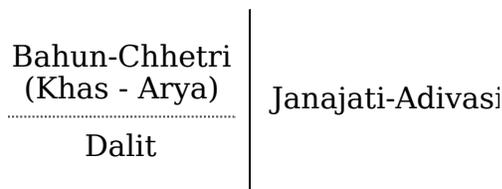


Figure 4.7: The 'cultural' lens.

These two lenses, I argue, create a vicious double-bind for the Bishwakarma and for Dalits more generally. Ganga tries to emphasise the 'cultural similarity' that exists between the Bahun and the Bishwakarma (figure 4.7). Non-Dalits generally recognise this similarity, but it does not have the practical, liberating effect which Ganga might aspire to, since the same people continue to see the Bishwakarma's difference in terms of caste (figure 4.6). Ilesh, on the other hand, wants to emphasise the *difference* that exists between the Bahun-Chhetri and the rest of society. He wants to emphasise the upper line in figure 4.6 and feels that the Bishwakarma should join forces with the *janajāti*. This however is no more successful than Ganga's strategy, because of the cultural similarity between the Bishwakarma and the Bahun (figure 4.7). The one feature which could distinguish them, blacksmithing, is rendered moot through a process in which the Bishwakarma are alienated from the symbolic prestige of the objects they make.

Ilesh's strategy, in conclusion, is no more successful than Ganga's. The emergence of ethnic politics in Nepal has certainly allowed many marginalised groups to contest the political dominance of upper-caste hill Hindus. In this regard, Hangen's positive appraisal of the phenomenon is understandable. But, I would argue, this form of politics has contributed

to *further* marginalising a group that was *even more marginalised to begin with*, namely the Dalits, who were once 'just' low-caste, are now as low-caste as ever, but additionally *culture-less*, at least in the sense of culture currently in vogue in Nepal.

Chapter 5

Force

The two previous chapters discussed strategies by which the Bishwakarma try to *change* their public image. The present chapter addresses a different strategy, which consists in opposing caste-based discrimination through direct, forceful methods.

Between 1996 and 2006, Nepal underwent a civil war, often referred to as the ‘People’s War’, whose conflicting parties were the Nepali government and Maoist insurgents. The war entered its most violent phase in 2001, when the government declared a state of emergency and used full military power against the insurgents. Some 14,000 people were killed during the conflict, the majority by government forces (Lecomte-Tilouine 2013a:10). Human Rights violations were numerous (Lawoti and Pahari 2009:309–311; OHCHR 2012) and accountability for these violations generally low (Rawsy and Sharma 2012). Following the signing of a peace agreement in 2006, the Maoists joined mainstream party politics and proceeded to lead three governments. On the whole, the war was transformational for the country. It was a pivotal episode in the nation’s transition from Hindu monarchy to a secular, democratic and federal republic.

In addition to the study of these macroscopic political transformations, a substantial body of research has taken an ethnographic or anthropological approach to the war. The literature is too vast to review exhaustively here, but I should highlight some important elements. Lecomte-Tilouine (2013c) has edited a fairly recent collection of anthropological essays on the topic; I cite several of them in this chapter. Hutt (2004) contains a number

of chapters by anthropologists. A special issue of *Dialectical Anthropology* (Shah and Pettigrew 2009) is also relevant; it compares the Nepali Maoists and the Indian Naxalites. Pettigrew (2013) has produced a full monograph on life in rural Nepal during the conflict. Her analysis focuses mainly on the fear which villagers experienced during the war, a topic which others have also commented on (Pettigrew and Adhikari 2009; Lecomte-Tilouine 2009b; Zharkevich 2015:372–373). Anthropologists conducting work in Nepal during the war itself have commented on the methodological challenges which this posed (Pettigrew, Shneiderman, and Harper 2004). Some have analysed the symbols used by members of the PLA (People’s Liberation Army, the Maoists’ armed wing) during the conflict (Lecomte-Tilouine 2006); others have tried to account for the emergence of political consciousness in rural Nepal (Shneiderman 2009), in one case through biographical methods (Sales 2010). Somewhat relatedly, Fujikura (2003) made an early call to address new forms of ‘collective imagination’ that were emerging from Maoist activity; an interesting answer is by Zharkevich (2009), who suggests that Nepali Maoism created a ‘new way of being young’ in Nepal. Finally, a number of contributions, including some of those already cited, have emerged from fieldwork conducted specifically in the ‘model villages’ which the Maoists established in West Nepal during the war (in addition to those already mentioned, Lecomte-Tilouine 2013b; Sales 2013; Zharkevich 2015, 2017).

There is, in sum, no dearth of anthropological literature on the topic. My intention here is not to contribute to the general discussion of Maoist ideology and the war, but rather, to address one specific topic, namely, the effect which the insurgency had on untouchability. More precisely, I wish to ask whether the forceful, violent methods which the Maoists used during the conflict to prevent and eliminate everyday caste-based discrimination were effective.

There is good reason to address this topic. The ideology of the Maoist insurgents was complex and multi-faceted, but one of its central strands was egalitarian, anti-hierarchical, and infused with ideals of social justice. The Maoists have always professed their commitment to addressing the difficulties which Dalits face in Nepal, on both economic and social fronts. This explicit commitment was visible even in the very initial stages of the war; one of the forty demands which the Maoists addressed to the government in their 1996 ultimatum being that

[d]iscrimination against downtrodden and backward people should be stopped. The system of untouchability should be eliminated (forty-point demand, reproduced in Riaz and Basu 2007:185–189).

Everything I heard in Nepal suggested that no caste-based discrimination was practised among members of the PLA itself. The extent to which the PLA attempted to ban untouchability *outside* of its own ranks, however, is not as certain. At the very least, what is clear is that the intensity of this attempt differed from one part of the country to the next. The Maoists had varying levels of presence and influence in different parts of Nepal during the war. Their stronghold was in the western districts of Rolpa in Rukum. In this area, they established a number of ‘model villages’, and some recent work (Zharkevich 2017) suggests that there, they effectively put an end to untouchability. In what follows, I will show that the situation in Sammagaon and the surrounding area was different, and then proceed to draw a comparison with Zharkevich’s fieldsite.

I should note at the outset that, in this chapter, the ethnography will not primarily concern Sammagaon itself. A significant amount of the material will concern Bensitaun, a settlement that borders the lower wards of Sammagaon. The reason for this is simple. During the war, the Maoists were not strongly implanted in Sammagaon, primarily because of the relative proximity of an army camp. The situation in Bensitaun was very different. That area was under full Maoist control during the war and the Maoist party was still very popular there during my fieldwork.

Fear

I arrived in my fieldsite seven years after the end of the war. The conflict, then, was still relatively fresh in the memories of the inhabitants of Sammagaon and Bensitaun. Many of the people whom I came to know recounted episodes that happened during the hostilities. While it was not my primary concern to collect such accounts during fieldwork, they were frequent enough that I would be remiss not to give them any space in this dissertation. A caveat, however, is in order. I will not produce a detailed, chronological account of how the conflict unfolded in the area. While in the field, I did not try to cross-check the stories which I was told. Doing so would not only have consumed large swaths of time,

it would have forced me to behave unethically, as it would have required me to recount some villagers' personal narratives to others. In any case, what was most interesting in the narratives I heard, in view of the focus of my research, was the proposal that Dalits were indeed treated differently during the war, but that untouchability had 'come back' later. The explanation for this revolved around *fear*.

In general, the inhabitants of Sarmagaon and its surrounding area remember the civil war as a period during which they experienced sporadic but intense bouts of fear and a more constant, if less salient, sense of uncertainty. This was the case especially for non-aligned citizens, people who were neither part of the Maoist People's Liberation Army (PLA) nor soldiers in the Nepali Army. The majority of people were part of this category.

In her monograph on life conditions during the conflict, Pettigrew (2013) describes the war as a time which saw a 'deepening of structural violence' (2013:3), during which

[p]eople experienced increased uncertainty in social relations and deterioration in the sense of trust. Constant vigilance led to persistent unease. Social tensions were realized in unpredictable ways, and at times, people both supported and betrayed each other. This uncertainty heightened fear as villagers tried to work out who was an 'insider' and who an 'outsider' (2013:3).

Episodes of intense fear similar to those described by Pettigrew were experienced by the inhabitants of Sarmagaon and the surrounding area. A wartime event which many recounted, for example, was the PLA attacking the local police station, dousing it in petrol and setting it on fire.¹ Additionally, several families lost a member, generally a son or daughter, during the conflict. The consequences of such losses were sometimes still visible while I was in Nepal; for example, I was once invited to a week-long *saptaaha*, a reading of sacred texts, performed for a son who had died during the conflict and for whom the appropriate funerary rites had not been held at the time. Yet despite such episodes of open violence, what was recounted to me most often was the way in which the PLA would, when it passed through the area, demand to be fed and lodged. Hosting Maoists, whether by choice or coercion, came with the risk of being labelled a collaborator. The Nepali army did not take well to those thus labelled, and the fear of execution was real. As Ghimire

1. The new police station was only rebuilt after the war.

explains in his account of the war in the neighbouring district of Khotang, ‘the army—not the insurgents—were the first to introduce violence and bloodshed’ (2013:125).

The most detailed narrative of this kind of anxiety was given to me by Abinash, a Bahun man from Dhungagaon, in whose house I spent a little over a week in 2014. I relate Abinash’s story in some detail here, as it communicates not only the anxiety that non-aligned citizens experienced during the war, but also the dangers which they were exposed to.

Abinash tells me about his own experience of the war. We sit upstairs, directly under the roof of his house. In a hushed tone of voice, he explains that the war was made particularly difficult for him and his family because he had relatives on both sides of the conflict. His brother was part of the Nepali Army, but another relative of his—the commander who figures later in this chapter—was a leader in the PLA. Because of this kinship tie, the Maoists regularly came to stay in Abinash’s house. He estimates that they spent at least 200 nights there. When they came, they would demand food, which was often hard to provide, and they would ask to be lodged in a hidden place, out of view.

During the War, Abinash says, anybody who provided shelter to the Maoist insurgents was at risk. Abinash himself never joined the Maoist ranks, but he was forced to help them because they threatened him and his family. Against the will of all of its inhabitants, his house became something similar to local headquarters for the Maoists. This did not go unnoticed by a local ‘informant’ to the government, whose identity Abinash either does not know or chooses not to reveal to me. Unbeknownst to him, this informant reported Abinash. As a result, Abinash’s name was added to the list of people wanted by the district authorities, and he was called to the District headquarters by the DSP (Deputy Superintendent of Police). Fearing that the situation would be worse if he disobeyed, Abinash reported to this person, who in turn delivered him to a nearby Army Camp. After spending a few nights locked up and fearing that he would be executed, Abinash managed to contact his brother, the soldier in the Nepali Army. His brother was a driver for some high-placed officers and he managed to save Abinash by making a plea to his superiors.

The whole experience had been a major source of fear. Staying composed as he told me

this story, Abinash nonetheless emphasized how terrified he had been. The sense of being trapped between the two camps, either of which could potentially blame him for collaborating with the other because of his kinship ties, had made him feel helpless.

Abinash narrated the Maoists' visits to his house, his arrest, and his fear of execution with extreme precision. While few others gave me accounts with the same level of detail, many did tell me of episodes not dissimilar to Abinash's story. Having to host Maoists against one's will and fearing repercussions from the Army was a widely recurring theme.

At this point, I feel that I should address a question that the reader might raise. Abinash is an upper-caste person. The Maoists were dedicated to ending caste-based discrimination, which in turn they sometimes assimilated to 'brahmanism' (*bahunbad*). It is therefore plausible that Abinash's fear, although caused in no small part by the army, was rendered particularly intense by his upper-caste status. Conversely, it is plausible that Dalits welcomed the Maoists much more openly than Abinash, without experiencing fear, because the Maoists were dedicated to improving their situation. Was this the case?

Pettigrew's work focuses on non-Dalits, but it nevertheless contains the occasional suggestion that Dalits perceived the Maoists differently to her Tamu informants. She recognises that the Maoists reached out to Dalits in particular (2013:14) and that their behaviour subverted 'accepted notions of social relationships' (2013:57)—among others, caste. In one rare instance, she reports the words of a Dalit woman who, because of her caste, told her that she had 'nothing to lose and so nothing to fear' (Pettigrew 2013:83). Did Dalits, therefore, welcome the insurgents with open arms?

While such an argument rests on seemingly sound inferences, it simply does not resonate with my own observations. Many of the Bishwakarma in Sarmagaon had a lot of negative points to make about the Maoists. For example, the first time I asked Ganga about this topic, his answer was direct and dry. He explained that by waging war, the insurgents had created a major loss for the country, chasing away foreign development agencies and NGOs. He added that, despite all their promises, the Maoists had done nothing for Dalits in the area. Undoubtedly, this answer was a politically motivated one, as Ganga was a

member of the CPN-UML (Communist Party of Nepal - United Marxist Leninist), a party that has had rivalries with the Maoists.² Later in my fieldwork, once we knew each other better, Ganga made some concessions, admitting that the Maoists had in fact got some things right. While he did not support them wholeheartedly, he did at the very least admire their dedication to doing away with untouchability. Still, first and foremost, Ganga expressed fear and anger at having had to host the insurgents.

The other Bishwakarma in Sammagaon, none of whom were as deeply engaged in politics as Ganga, had mixed views. Many did admire the Maoists' disregard for caste and caste-based hierarchies, a point which I will return to below, but nevertheless recalled experiencing episodes of strong anxiety during the war. In fact, anxiety and fear were usually the first topic they would mention when I asked them about the conflict. They mentioned the guns, the violence, army helicopters and people being shot at from the sky, the Nepali army interrogating them, and a nagging sense that they or their relatives might die. In view of such recollections, it seems safe to state that the notion of Dalits welcoming the insurgents with open arms is an exaggeration. It is true that the Maoist combatants sought to bring about a form of social organisation which, had it been realised, would have represented an extremely positive change for Dalits. Indeed, many of the Bishwakarma recognise this, often stating that the Maoists had a '*rāmro bicār*' (good view / opinion). This admiration, however, was not sufficient to dispel fear.

My argument here, insofar as it mitigates a narrative according to which Dalits welcomed the Maoist insurgents wholeheartedly, is in a similar vein to that of Zharkevich (2015), who conducted extensive fieldwork in Thabang, the Maoist 'capital' during the war and a place which is often portrayed as the archetypal 'village of resistance'. She has produced an insightful critique of the idea that insurgents in the area received unfettered, spontaneous and ideologically informed support from non-aligned peasants. Her argument is that this is a version of history which is, in essence, told by local elites rather than by 'ordinary' villagers. This is particularly problematic given that it is precisely about 'ordinary' villagers that the history is being told. A number of social scientists, she argues, have fallen into the trap of uncritically reproducing narratives of enthusiastic support for the

2. The current alliance between the CPN-UML and the main Maoist party was established after I had left the field.

Maoists. Their research method is the problem, as it is one which unduly 'privileges the view of subaltern elites as a prime source of historical knowledge, and which does not give sufficient attention to the difference between the narratives and perceptions of subaltern elites and 'ordinary' people within the so-called dominated groups' (2015:355). As a result, 'we, as social science researchers, might at times contribute to the creation and perpetuation of historical narratives which are partial but which become the history of the place' (2015:355).

Chini Maya, my adoptive mother in Sammagaon, gave accounts of the war that are particularly telling of the perspective of 'ordinary' people, in the sense used by Zharkevich. I recorded a conversation which we had one morning, when she spontaneously started talking about the People's War. Large chunks of this recording consist in her recalling how scared she felt. Below are the main themes which she mentioned.³

Disruption of space and loss of resources. Cini Maya explains that the Maoist insurgents came to her house many times, in groups of roughly twenty people, to ask for food. The Maoists would come into the house and enter the hearth without asking questions. She explains that if someone who is not a member of one's *thar*⁴ does this, the inhabitants of a house will fall sick. The Maoists' arrival, she adds, put a lot of pressure on her household's resources. There was already a shortage of grain at the time. Rice was hard to obtain; the family was eating maize and millet flour (*dhido*) instead.⁵ On one occasion, the Maoists even organised a *bhoj* (feast, large communal meal) on her porch and front yard.

Rules and restrictions, being forced to obey, and fear of violent punishment. There is one passage in the recorded conversation in which Chini Maya lists the punishments she believes the Maoists inflicted on people who behaved in ways which they did not approve of. Here, her tone and words convey a sense of helplessness. She explains that one had to follow orders without asking questions. The Maoists would beat those who did not follow their instructions. Chini Maya specifically remembers that they forbade everybody from preparing *jandh* and *rakshi* (millet alcohol). Violating such rules could lead to various punishments,

3. In the conversation, Chini Maya moves back and forth between topics rapidly, pauses to cook, uses onomatopoeia, etc. It is easier to present her words in a condensed form than verbatim.

4. One's patriline, see chapter 1.

5. Rice is perceived as the best, or most luxurious grain. Millet, which can be ground into flour and cooked as a paste, is seen as a food for poorer people. There are, however, exceptions to this pattern. Enjoying the taste of millet is also a positive sign; it shows that one is well and truly 'local'.

which included cutting off someone's tongue or ear, breaking a leg, or putting out someone's eyes.

Surprised at the violence of such actions, which Chini Maya seemed to imply were common, I interrupted her to ask if any of these punishments had been used locally. She answered that they had not, but that she had heard of them being administered in other VDCs not too distant. Whether this is true or not is perhaps less important than what this indicates about the role of word-of-mouth and rumours in building up a collective representation of the Maoists as *fearsome*, even in a locality like Sammagaon, where the Maoists were only present sporadically.

Fear of being seen as a collaborator. Chini Maya talks in some detail about an episode in which the army came to her house. While she had hoped that the army would provide her 'security' (*surakshā*), she quickly began to feel intimidated as the soldiers began questioning her about her husband and his political activities, his and her sons' and daughters' whereabouts, their employment, etc. She felt particularly scared when asked these questions because, as explained earlier, her husband had indeed started the local branch of the Communist Party, even if he was not sympathetic to the Maoists.

Fear for one's kin. When re-listening to the recording, I am struck by the fact that it is peppered with moments where Chini Maya pauses to catch her breath and calm down, using onomatopoeia to describe her increasing heartbeat. There are moments when her voice starts to tremble, and once, she explicitly says that recalling this period is making her relive some of the fear. She becomes particularly emotional when she talks about her sons and daughters—most of whom lived with her at the time. She says that she was terrified that one of them might join the Maoists, by force or of their own accord.

On the whole, Chini Maya's fear helps to show that for non-aligned Dalits, the war was not a matter of simply welcoming the insurgents. Nevertheless, it is true that in what the Bishwakarma told me about the war, there was also a discernible note of admiration. I turn to this topic now.

Admiration

Even Cini Maya, who was shocked to see her house and hearth entered by non-kin, said the following about the Maoists and the way in which they tried to actively oppose caste-based discrimination:

Chini Maya Dehegli: The houses of the Damāi... and the houses of the Sārki... Since a long time ago, we Bishwakarma have entered the houses of the Sārki. The Sārki and the Bishwakarma are similar. And the Damāi... In our culture, since a long time ago, we have entered the houses of the Damāi, [but] we used not to eat [there]. It had been like that since a long time ago.

But now, what happened is that a group had a meeting (*samuhā bhāsyō*). After gathering in a meeting point (*baithak aera*), they had a meeting, and by having this meeting... What did they do? They made food and brought it. And we sat around the table and ate, in the same place. [So] now, we could not go elsewhere to eat. Although until now, the Chettri and the Bahun do not let us into their houses. We also do not let the Damāi in [our own houses].

And it has been like this since the Maoists came. Those *Upadhaya* Bahun (the 'highest' type of Bahun, traditionally), those who were astrologers, those who did not eat [food prepared by Dalits]—they [the Maoists] went into the houses of *those* Bahun, cooked at their hearths—cooked at their hearths and gave them food. If [the Bahun] refused to eat, [the Maoists] would beat them. After giving the Bahuns food cooked by us the Bishwakarma, by the Damāi, the Sārki, and after the Bahuns ate [this food], untouchability went away. It disappeared like that... Although now, they still do not let us in [their houses].

In this excerpt, Cini Maya starts by explaining what the 'old' culture is: the Sārki and the Bishwakarma are 'similar'; they can enter each other's houses. The Damāi (Darji) are lower than both, a status marked by the fact that they cannot enter Sārki or Bishwakarma houses. None of these groups, who are all Dalits, can enter the upper-caste Bahun's houses. The same hierarchy is visible in the circulation of cooked food, which can flow 'downwards' between these groups, but not upwards. What Cini Maya is describing here is simply the

traditional caste hierarchy of Nepal, with its multiple lines of untouchability—between Dalits and all others as well as between various Dalit groups, in this case, between the Damāi (Darji) on the one hand and the Sārki and Bishwakarma on the other.⁶

In line with the ‘gastro-politics’ so important in South Asia (Appadurai 1981), but in what we might choose to call ‘revolutionary gastro-politics’, the Maoists attempted to disrupt this hierarchy by forcing people to violate the precepts and rules which sustain it. The insurgents made people behave in ways antithetic to the avoidances which make caste and untouchability tangible in the first place. The organisation of public *bhoj* (feasts, meals) such as the one which Chini Maya evokes, in which Dalits and non-Dalits, Damāi and Sārki/Bishwakarma had to share food was a method they deployed quite commonly to combat caste-based discrimination (Adhikari 2014:138).⁷

To understand the significance of collective feasts, one must know a little more about the theories of purity and defilement which underlie the traditional conception of untouchability in Nepal.

In brief, there is an expression which is still heard quite commonly in the area of Sammagaon, ‘*jāt janča*’. The literal translation of this is ‘caste goes away’. This is an expression used to describe what can happen when a non-Dalit interacts with a Dalit in ‘inappropriate’ ways, for example, by eating cooked food which the Dalit person had come in contact with. The expression describes, in colloquial terms, the well-documented idea of ‘ritual pollution’, i.e. the notion that an upper-caste individual can become polluted through contact with a Dalit, and that the result of this pollution is to lose their upper-caste status, either temporarily (until the appropriate cleansing ritual is conducted), or permanently. Despite this belief being described as an ‘old’ and ‘wrong’ belief by many in Sammagaon, it still has some hold.⁸

The collective meals organised by the Maoists were an attempt to forcefully counter the logic of purity and pollution. Such meals are a way of forcing people who ‘rank’ differ-

6. See section ‘Caste in Sammagaon’ in chapter 1.

7. Similar *bhoj* (feasts) are now held regularly by Dalit activists in Kathmandu, though as far as I know, participation is always on a voluntary basis.

8. I will return to the question of ‘pollution’ in more detail in chapter 9. There, I will argue that while the risk of pollution is no longer taken very seriously by most non-Dalits, this is not because Dalits are no longer seen as inherently impure. Instead, it is because non-Dalits are seen as less prone to accruing impurity from Dalits.

ently in the caste hierarchy to mix with each other, with the aim to reduce the difference between these people. As noted earlier in this thesis, in many parts of the world commensality is a prime way in which people create and maintain links with each other at a deep, 'relational' level (e.g. Carsten 1995; Bloch 1999). This is particularly true in South Asia (Lambert 2000). In Nepal, to share food is to become alike in a deep and meaningful level. I experienced this personally; my own sharing food with Dalits was something which both surprised many non-Dalits and helped me build a proximity with the Bishwakarma which would otherwise have been impossible. Furthermore, to feed someone (*khuaunu*) in Nepal is an intimate act, and conversely, to refuse food is much more than a simple lack of manners. It is a way to deny another person's attempt to connect, a way to emphasize one's difference and separateness. In Parry's terms:

The refusal to eat is a repudiation of kinship-outcasting being expressed above all in a withdrawal from commensality (Parry 1985:614).

Forcing intercaste commensality was one of the main acts for which the Maoists were remembered in Sannagaon. The other violation which was systematically recounted to me is the one which Chini Maya mentions in the last part of the quotation above. It concerns space. The Bishwakarma and other Dalits told me, often with a note of admiration in their voice, about the way in which the Maoists would enter anybody's house, without paying any attention to rules.

Space is a common battleground for Dalit activists. Often, this materialises as forced temple-entry movements, which have a long history in India as well as in Nepal (Lawoti 2007; Aahuti 2014:94ff.). There had been no such initiative in Sannagaon, where no temple was off-limits for Dalits. Still, the Maoist insurgency did come with what we may call a 'politics of space'. Adhikari reports in his history of the Maoist revolution in Nepal that

[t]he Maoists actively included Dalits in their campaign to upend traditional social norms and punish those who clung to them. Egged on by party cadres, groups of Dalits would forcibly enter the homes of their upper-caste neighbours and touch their sacred objects and cooking utensils (Adhikari 2014: 137–138).

I was never told of organised, collective entries of this kind in Sammagaon. Still, what was mentioned to me time and again was members of the PLA, among whom were Dalits, entering upper-caste houses in the village. Seeing the insurgents behave the way they did, and hearing the stories of how they disregarded caste rules both locally and in other parts of Nepal had a strong impact on the Bishwakarma.

As noted by others (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009b:396; Adhikari 2014:137–140), deliberately transgressing rules regulating food and space was one of the many ways in which the Maoists sought to re-educate the Nepali population, as part of their ‘cultural revolution’. Food and space are key battlegrounds in the fight against untouchability in Nepal, I have argued, in part because they are closely tied to the intimate domain of kinship. But perhaps just as importantly, I would also suggest, it is because they are a battleground whose rules are understood by everybody. One does not need to know revolutionary ideology or formal politics, nor does one need formal education to understand the significance of violating caste rules in this way. Regardless of what different people may think about such violations, what is certain is that they do not go *unnoticed*; they are highly salient, and their meaning is highly accessible.

So much cannot be said of current political events in Sammagaon. While in the field, I went to a large number of meetings organised by NGOs, local authorities, and other organisations. In such events, it is typical for local *neta* (leaders) and other *thulo manchhe* (big / important people) to address a crowd of villagers who, more often than not, look and act bored. Speeches are long, usually contain promises of ‘development’ (*bikās*) that people are disillusioned about, and their highlight is often the customary free *khājā* (snack). Only some events generate substantial excitement, such as the singing contest that one NGO organised and the women marching through the village on International Women’s Day. But even these cannot compete with the Maoists’ explicit and public breaches of caste rules.

My sister in the field, Sirjanna, once explained that she and others looked up to the way in which the Maoists behaved, that they admired their disdain for untouchability, but that they nevertheless did not try to behave similarly themselves. Perhaps, therefore, what was most remarkable about the Maoists from the point of view of non-aligned, ‘ordinary’ Dalits in Sammagaon was that they provided a glimpse of what society *might* look like without

untouchability and caste-based discrimination. This is broadly consistent, as we shall see in the next section, with the account that was given to me by a PLA commander. This man stated that while the Maoists had not succeeded in eliminating untouchability, they had at least given Dalits a ‘consciousness’ (*chetanā*) of their oppression and of its unacceptability.

A Maoist perspective

During the war, the situation in Bensitaun, three hours’ walk away from where I lived in the field, was very different to the one in Sammagaon itself. Bensitaun did see a sustained presence of Maoists during the conflict, and a large number of households in the area were still aligned with the main Maoist party (UCPN-M) when I was in the field.

Bensitaun is the place where I met Binod Ghimire, a thirty-five-year-old Bahun man and ex-commander in the PLA, who had some 130 men under his orders during the war. Binod had left the cantonment which he, like many ex-fighters, had been assigned to at the end of the war. His subsequent search for employment had not, however, proved fruitful. Binod had joined the *Maobadi* (Maoists) at the age of fifteen, when he was still a student. After the war, he returned to school and completed his +2 degree,⁹ but his hopes of being integrated into the Nepali Army or of finding a job in the country were dwindling. Binod compared himself to me, explaining that while I might know how to use computers, his ‘specialisation’ was the *khukuri* (long knife, in this case, used as a weapon). Finding no employment in Nepal now, Binod was reluctantly considering moving to Macau, where he had heard that there were opportunities for security agents and bodyguards.

Binod explained that the Maoists had been engaged in a battle for the improvement of the country and its society. Theirs had been a just cause: ‘we [the Maoists] were driven by *bicār* (thought / ideology / opinion); they [the army’s soldiers] were driven only by money’, he told me. Yet Binod bemoaned the lack of tangible change after the Maoists had joined mainstream politics. He wondered whether the fight had been worth it. In this regard, his words echoed a more general sense of disillusionment and frustration that had spread after the 2008 Constituent Assembly failed to complete its mission.¹⁰ I found it remarkable that

9. A degree obtained after studying two years more than the minimum requirement.

10. This sense of disappointment seems to mirror that which was felt after the 1990 popular uprisings and which was, according to Pfaff-Czarnecka (2004), one of the reasons the Maoists emerged

many of the comments which Binod made about the current state of Nepali Maoism were similar to reflections which I had heard from non-Maoists. In particular, Binod shared the sense that Nepali leaders, including some of those at the head of the Maoist parties, had become untrustworthy and self-interested, that they had lost their dedication to the betterment of society. The only exception he saw to this pattern was Baburam Bhattarai,¹¹ who he believed was still genuinely trying to improve Nepal's situation, but was being prevented from doing so by other politicians.

Binod proved an excellent source of information on the Maoists' relation to Dalits during the war. In a one-and-a-half-hour interview, I asked him how the Maoists had dealt with the question of untouchability and caste-based discrimination. I wanted to know whether the Maoists had tried to get rid of these phenomena and if so, whether Binod thought that they had been successful. He first made his own views on untouchability perfectly clear:

The entire world shifted, in this country, during the People's Movement. We [Maoists] understood. [...] Ultimately, if I cut myself, blood will come out. If [a Dalit] cuts himself, blood will also come out. So in the end, why should I avoid eating food touched by a Dalit?

Commonality of blood is often used as an argument against caste and caste-based discrimination in Nepal. The fact that everybody bleeds and that everybody's blood is the same colour are regularly used to bring attention to a single, shared humanity.

In the same breath, Binod added:

Dogs enter [houses]. Bahuns raise dogs inside their houses, inside their rooms. Oh! The very rich even give the dog a mat or a bed. They raise a dog which is let inside. And after this, chickens and other animals enter the house. Chickens eat shit; they eat human shit, don't they? Chickens eat excrement and enter the hearth. Don't they enter? Chickens enter, don't they? Now pigs too have started to go into Bahun houses—the Bahun have started doing business [raising pigs] for money. Since a long time now the Bahun have been raising pigs

in the first place.

11. One of the major figures of the Maoist movement and the Prime Minister of Nepal in 2011 and 2013.

inside their houses. [...*specific examples of Bahuns raising chickens and pigs in the area...*] And now, it is like this everywhere. But ultimately, a man who cuts himself and bleeds [like other humans], why would you not let that man in? This is what we [the Maoists] had understood.

Here, the inclusion of pigs and chickens is particularly significant. Both of these animals are commonly said to be 'dirty' (*phohor*) in Nepal, a point which Binod alludes to vividly by mentioning chickens consuming human excrement. Also significant is the fact that Bahuns adhering to strict, traditional rules of purity are supposed to avoid consuming chicken and pork, both 'polluting' meats. The relaxation of these rules, Binod suggests, had not extended to Dalits when the Maoists took arms.

Earlier, I alluded to the importance of space as a battleground for Dalits. In chapter 2, I mentioned that Dalits have unfettered access to *public* spaces in Sammagaon. What Binod's words show so well is why, despite this seeming equality in the public sphere, restricting access to private space matters. There is much more than just an abstract standard of 'equal treatment' at stake here. As long as Dalits are not let into other people's houses and hearths, Binod suggests, the message which is being sent to them is that they are lower and more polluting than excrement-bearing animals.

Binod says that the Maoists had understood the predicament of Dalits. What, then, did they do about it?

Binod Ghimire: Before the Maoists became weak [*Binod has just explained that the Maoists became weak in the years that followed the end of the war*], this village had become totally Maoist. There was nobody else. One person per house became a Maoist *whole-timer*, in this place.

Ivan Deschenaux: In Bensitaun?

BG: In Bensitaun and [a neighbouring locality]. In this area, more than nine people died (*moreko*) during the People's War. They met their deaths (*mrityu bhaeko*). More than nine people from this area became martyrs. People from the higher area [the higher localities in the VDC] did not become Maoists; only from the lower area, here. There were no Maoists in the higher area. And after

this blood was shed, this village became Maoist, just like in the West.

Here, untouchability ended at that time... but only out of fear. It was out of compulsion (*kar*) and fear (*dar*). It was not through understanding, in fact.

‘Now the Maoists will come and feed us grass, beat us so that we eat it. So that we eat it, or rather, so that [Dalits] enter the house. Now the Maoists will come and beat us if [a Dalit] is outside.’ This was the way that people talked, before... But now, Dalits sit outside out of their own accord [again]; they sit at the door and they do not come in.

ID: Right. Please explain this a little to me. At that time, at the time of Maoists and the war, untouchability had disappeared somewhat because of fear. This is what you said, right?

BG: Yes. Because of fear of the Maoists, in fact.

ID: But this fear—why were people afraid? Explain this to me a little a little. When untouchability happened, what did the Maoists do?

BG: If someone did untouchability, this person would get what we called ‘*bhāte kārbāhī*’. They were beaten with a stick. They were tied up and fed grass. Like an animal. [We would tell him,] ‘in the end, that man [the Dalit] is the same. You are also a man. Why are you forcing him to stay outside? You are also an animal.’ We would tie him here [around the neck] with a *dāmlo* [a rope for animals]. And then grass was fed to him. We would tell him to chew it and make him do so by force.

ID: What is the meaning of that? Why would one feed grass?

BG: Why feed grass? So that [they understand that], in the end, [all] blood is the same and [all] men are the same. ‘A dog has entered your house! Why are you dominating the Dalit and chasing him out? You treated him like a Dalit. You let the dog inside and raise it, [so] why don’t you let the Dalit inside? In fact, he is also a man, he is also the same. From now onwards, let him inside!’ In any case, nobody will enter another person’s house without a purpose. If a

person comes with a purpose, then they must be let inside.

This untouchability... this should not be visible from the outside. When we saw it—when the Maoists saw it—we wanted to eliminate it. Wherever we went, we Maoists used to say that if somebody does untouchability, we would punish this person, right? So it is like I said before. Even if it was only to show [us], they would not practice untouchability, out of fear.

We continued to talk about this topic for a while. Binod listed a number of other punishments which could be inflicted by Maoists upon those who treated Dalits as untouchable. He confirmed that these punishments were not only hypothetical; they were actually administered on occasion, though he could not recall cases of them being used in Bensitaun.¹² His overall evaluation is that, during the war, the Maoists were quite successful at eliminating untouchability. However this did not happen because the Maoists successfully changed people's opinions about caste. Rather, it was only the fear of punishment which compelled non-Dalits.

After the war

The war, thus, was an exceptional period. It was marked by two distinct fears. One was the fear of being associated with Maoists and arrested or persecuted by the Nepali army. This fear affected everyone, including non-Maoist Dalits. The second fear affected mostly non-Dalits: when and where the Maoists were present in sufficient numbers, such as in Bensitaun, they threatened to violently punish non-Dalits who practised untouchability. By Binod's account, this threat was sufficient to 'eliminate' untouchability, even if only temporarily.

Chini Maya succinctly described what happened after the war.

Ivan Deschenaux: This means that while the Maoists used to come, these 'small castes', these Dalits, they used to enter the houses of Bahuns, didn't they?

Chini Maya Dehegli: They entered. They entered.

12. Binod added that he had been to 35 districts during the war, and that none had quite as strong a level of caste-based discrimination as Bensitaun. I am not sure what to make of this remark.

ID: But now, once again, they do not enter.

CMD: Now? They do not enter in the houses that the Maoists had entered [any more]

Binod, similarly, stated that once the war ended and the Maoists could no longer use force to impose their norms, many of the practices related to untouchability re-surfaced in Bensitaun. And indeed, today, commensality between Dalits and non-Dalits is avoided and Dalits never enter non-Dalit houses.

This raises an important question. Why were the Maoists in Bensitaun unable to eliminate untouchability in the long run? Part of an answer can be elicited through a comparison with the situation in Thabang, described in a recent paper by Zharkevich (2017). Thabang was the so-called ‘crucible’ of the insurgency and ‘Maoist war capital’ in West Nepal. Zharkevich’s ethnography shows that, in this location, the war *did* have the effect of eliminating untouchability permanently. Even well after the conflict ended, there is no commensality avoidance and Dalits are let into other peoples’ houses unproblematically.

Given that Thabang was a Maoist model village, Zharkevich considers the possibility that it was the Maoists’ ideological teaching which effected the change:

The idea of transforming the consciousness of people was key to Maoist wartime policies. The path to change was envisioned through an uninterrupted process of uprooting ‘bad traditions’, achieved through a process of conscientization: that is, summoning villagers to attend ideological sessions and implementing distinct policies, most often imposing outright bans. During the war, most areas of social life were regulated by these omnipresent bans: whether on alcohol-brewing and gambling, on polygamy and early marriages, on communal religious festivals and lavish celebrations, or on death rites and shamanic gatherings. Eradicating inter-caste discrimination and encouraging the consumption of the ‘holy cow’ featured high on the Maoist agenda of the Cultural Revolution (2017:785).

However, Zharkevich rejects the notion that it was these bans and ideological sessions alone that explain the elimination of caste-based discrimination. Instead, she argues, the

exceptional conditions that the war created were key.

In the situation of war, life took precedence over particularities of social divisions [...] Thus, the move towards laxer norms of inter-caste commensality did not come as a result of people's deliberate actions or the Maoist project of social change alone, but rather as a result of the highly constraining environment of war, which left people with little choice about what and where to eat (2017:795).

The war in Thabang led to serious and, on occasion, extreme food scarcity. This problem was made all the more intense given the requirement to feed Maoist contingents on a regular basis. At least three important consequences emerged from this situation. First, Zharkevich tells us, in line with the Hindu notion of *apaddharma* (rules that apply in times of crisis), it became permissible for non-Dalits to consume beef. This is significant because the consumption of beef is usually a strong taboo for upper-caste Hindus and is associated with ritual pollution. Moreover, the consumption of carrion, including beef carrion, is associated with some of the lowest Dalit castes. Second, food scarcity led to regular commensality between Dalits and non-Dalits. Third, the dangers of the war meant that people were regularly forced to hide in each other's houses—with little regard for caste rules. Dalits would hide in non-Dalit houses and vice-versa.

The key point in Zharkevich's argument is that behaviours originally seen as provisional, as ways of coping with an exceptional time of 'crisis', eventually became routinised and embodied. In Thabang, intercaste commensality and beef consumption were more than performative or symbolic, more than actions carried out under duress, under Maoist orders. They were common behaviour, 'practices' in the sense implied by Bourdieu (1977), whom Zharkevich cites to support her argument. Carried out through necessity and with sufficient regularity, intercaste commensality and beef eating eventually led to an actual transformation of Thabangi habitus.

The Bishwakarma in Sammagaon remembered, first and foremost, the ways in which the Maoists *behaved* with regards to food and space. None of them discussed Maoist ideology with me in much detail—they tended only to recall that the Maoists said 'everybody is the same' and 'untouchability should be eliminated'. This provides evidence in support

for Zharkevich's suggestion that practice, rather than ideology, is what was salient for non-aligned, 'ordinary' citizens in rural Nepal. In Sammagaon, as my sister Sirjanna suggested, the Maoists were admired for their bold entry into upper-caste houses, but their presence was too weak for any local Dalit to follow suit. In Bensitaun, where the Maoists were far more present, the disappearance of caste-based discrimination was conditioned by *fear* rather than by a change in people's deeply ingrained habits. Following this line of argument, what was missing in Bensitaun was more banal, or perhaps more spontaneous, violations of the precepts of untouchability.

In summary, I agree with Zharkevich's suggestion that

[a]rguably, when people were not compelled to break taboos on a routine basis, the relaxed rules of inter-caste commensality rested simply on the power of the Maoist gun. New social practices were not internalized to the level of routinized acts which people performed habitually. In contrast, in Thabang, people had to practise some of the Maoist dictums in their daily lives. Even if by doing so they initially followed the imperative of 'rules that apply in times of crisis', in the end their practice has led to a profound process of norm-remaking and social change (Zharkevich 2017:796).

What cemented change in Thabang is practice in the anthropological sense of 'theories of practice'. In Bensitaun, the threat of violence alone got non-Dalits to fall in line, but it was only effective as long as the threat remained credible. If Binod is right about the fact that untouchability actually *disappeared* during the war, this was a disappearance conditioned by the Maoists' watchful eyes. What is needed to generate lasting changes such as those which became cemented in Thabang is repeated, systematic action.

Conclusion

The overall argument in this chapter has been that the war was not successful in getting rid of caste-based discrimination in Sammagaon and Bensitaun. I have shown that, to the extent that the Maoists did in fact manage to impose a period during which untouchability was *effectively* eliminated in Bensitaun, this was only thanks to the threats which they made, not because of a more deeply rooted change in habits.

Is this to say that the Maoists made no long-term change for Dalits at all, in the area? Here, I would like to mitigate such a pessimistic conclusion by returning to the *admiration* which Dalits had for the Maoists' disregard for caste rules. Even if the Maoists did not do away with untouchability, they provided a powerful and salient example of what a society without caste-based discrimination might look like.

Binod recognises this, in a way. At the end of our interview, he said that even if the Maoists' vision for society had not been realised, they had at least managed to make one long-lasting change. They had, he said, given Dalits a better *chetanā*—a better consciousness or understanding of the injustices which they face.¹³ Before the Maoists' intervention, he suggested, Dalits would not react to discriminatory practices. Although Binod bemoaned the fact that Dalits were still reluctant to enter other people's houses, he saw an increasing number of cases in which Dalits understood that the way in which they are treated is not acceptable. He named a few such cases, explaining that the present-day Maoists were helping local Dalits in reporting cases to the police.

Discussing the Indian Prevention of Atrocities act, a piece of legislation that criminalises extreme forms of violence against Dalits, Shah and Lerche (2018) suggest that

[u]se of the Prevention of Atrocities Act is fraught with problems of implementation but, in some places, it has helped nurture a climate in which Dalits have at least something with which to fight back against the caste violence they face (2018:206).

An (admittedly somewhat unlikely) comparison is possible, here. Like the Indian Prevention of Atrocities Act, the Maoists' anti-untouchability activities were, arguably, 'fraught with problems of implementation'. Still, the 'something to fight back' that they have left is not a piece of legislation, but rather a less defined, albeit not necessarily insignificant, sense of ethical possibility. They showed that radical change is not necessarily a pipe dream.

Ghimire notes that, in eastern Nepal, the Maoists 'were never strong enough to establish an order consistent with their ideology or to turn the district into a showcase for their pro-

13. It is noteworthy that *chetanā* is the term which Ganga used to describe what people perpetrating untouchability *lack*. It is also noteworthy that transforming people's 'consciousness' was one of the prime aims of the Maoists (Zharkevich 2017:785).

gramme' (2013:131), unlike in the west of the country. Instead, in the east, 'the Maobadi [Maoist] order was primarily a moral order' (2013:132). Exactly what Ghimire means by 'moral order' is not clear. The quotation is followed by a list of the rules which the Maoists imposed (prohibiting alcohol consumption, banning gambling, forbidding sexual intercourse outside of wedlock, etc.), and a little later, by the claim that 'Maoists proved to be revolutionaries by imposing the equal treatment of Dalits on a village society that was totally unprepared for it' (Ghimire 2013:132-133). Regardless of the exact sense of 'moral order' which Ghimire had in mind, the notion that the Maoists served as an ethical exemplar for a society without caste-based discrimination is one which is worth considering. By showing that it was at least *possible* to ignore caste rules, to enter houses which one should not, to get everybody to eat together, the Maoists made an impact and provoked admiration in most Dalits. They pushed the message that Dalits are like other humans and gave an example of what acting in line with this proposition could look like. The Maoists, it seems to me, have helped to expand the space of ethical possibilities in Nepal. Although untouchability against Dalits has indeed returned, many people, including non-Dalits, are now at the very least *somewhat* uncomfortable with it. Dalits and non-Dalits in Sannagaon often state, in one way or another, that there *ought* not to be any discrimination, even if they themselves discriminate. They say that humans are all 'identical', that there is no such thing as caste 'in reality'.

Hearing similar sentences outside of Thabang, Zharkevich reduces such statements to a 'theoretical and legal maxim about the equality of people' which is 'removed from lived reality' (2017:795). This is where I depart from her analysis. In my view, the maxim is not without significance. It is important not to dismiss the possibility that people who proclaim it may fail to adhere to it, not because they do not truly believe it, but rather because they find it *difficult* to behave accordingly. Why they might find it difficult is the topic which I will address in the upcoming chapters.

Part II

Resilient representations

Chapter 6

Contradictions

I have made several observations so far. First, untouchability has mostly disappeared from the public sphere in Sammagon, but it endures in private. Second, Dalits are regularly ascribed a cluster of negative properties, chief among which are ignorance and being physically dirty. Third, the Bishwakarma try to improve their public image through various strategies, and the Maoist insurgents tried to eliminate untouchability altogether during the war, but none of these attempts have, ultimately, been fully successful.

This chapter and the next discuss reasons for this lack of success. Here, I bring one major complication to the ethnographic picture painted so far, namely, the stark difference which exists between *implicit* and *explicit* attitudes towards Dalits in my fieldsite.

A discrepancy

There is a discrepancy between how people in Sammagaon say that one *ought* to behave and how people do, in fact, behave. To give a sense of this, let me open with a conversation which I had with Chini Maya and Sirjana.

This took place, like many conversations, while sipping tea on the porch in front of our house. It was the month of May; the blazing heat would soon give way to the torrential rains of the monsoon, when the hard work of planting millet would begin, but for the time being, it was okay to relax and chat away idly. The three of us—Chini Maya, Sirjana, and

I—had been talking, as we often did, about the way in which the Bishwakarma are treated by non-Dalits.

Chini Maya told us the story of how she once angrily left a wedding which she had been invited to. After being served a customary dish of rice and meat, she had been told by the hosts that she should wash her plate herself. Hearing this, Chini Maya became angry, threw a fit, and told everybody how indignant she was. She categorically refused to wash her plate and left immediately. Chini Maya did not need to explain to us why she had been so indignant. Both her daughter and I immediately understood that this had happened because the hosts of the wedding had wanted to avoid all contact with her *jutho*—the traces of saliva that she would have inevitably left on the plate while eating.

By this time in my fieldwork, I had grown accustomed to Chini Maya recounting episodes such as this. Conceding that there had been considerable positive change in the past decades when it came to the question of untouchability and the treatment of Dalits in everyday life, she nevertheless regularly told me that non-Dalits mistreated her and her kin. She was strongly opposed to this: that she, of all people, had to face such forms of discrimination *despite* her husband's prior employment as a school teacher, a position that, she felt, warranted high social prestige, only made things worse. To behave in this way, to treat her as 'untouchable', she would tell me, is not something that people should do.

At this point, I decided to ask a provocative question. I gestured towards Sirjana and asked Chini Maya how she would react if her own daughter were to marry a *Darji* man. As explained in chapter 1, the *Darji* are another Dalit caste, but one which, according to the traditional model of Nepali society, is 'lower' than the Bishwakarma. In fact, not only are the *Darji* lower; in the traditional model, the *Darji* stand in the same relation to the Bishwakarma as Dalits stand to non-Dalits more generally. Hence, the provocation.

'Oh no!' said Chini Maya with nervous laughter, 'I've told her this many times: do not bring back a *Sārki* or a *Dāmai*, whatever you do!'—*Dāmai* is a derogatory but still commonly used term for the *Darji*, and the *Sārki* are the third Dalit caste present in the area.

'But if she did anyway,' I asked, 'would you accept your new son-in-law? Would you let him into the house?'

'No.'

'What about your grandchildren?'

'No. I couldn't accept them either.'

Sirjana, the daughter, had been listening silently so far. She chose this moment to chime in.

'That's *it!*' she said, excitedly and looking at me. 'If this were *my* house', she added, 'I would let Darji people in'.

Before the conversation turned to another topic, Chini Maya explained, with a touch of embarrassment in her voice, that the reason why she would not let the Darji into her house is that this practice is an 'old habit'.

What I have just described appears to be a textbook case of what the classic literature on caste calls 'replication', a topic already addressed in chapter 1. But there is more to say about Chini Maya's reaction.

One way to frame the conversation related above would be to say that Chini Maya perceives caste and untouchability differently depending on whether she is looking 'upwards' (in which case she is critical) or 'downwards' (in which case she is accepting). Yet while Chini Maya is indeed clearly critical of caste-based discrimination when she is on its 'receiving' end, it would be a mistake to say that she accepts it when she is on the 'giving end'. The reason is that Chini Maya is in fact well aware that her reaction to the idea that her daughter might marry a Darji is out of line with what she had just said, less than a minute earlier.

One clue to this is the nervous laughter which she could not stifle when I asked my question. Another, more explicit example, is what she said after her daughter had exclaimed that *she* would let a Darji into her own house: Chini Maya said that her opposition to a Darji son-in-law was 'an old habit'. Yet another indication of Chini Maya's awareness of the contradiction in her attitude towards the Darji is something which she had explained to me earlier that morning (we had been talking about this on and off that day): that while

she did not like the idea of a Darji coming into her house, what *really* bothered her was not so much the Darji person, but rather the fact that ‘others’—and this was a fairly non-descript ‘other’—would gossip about it. To this she had added that she would let a Darji into her house *if everybody else did too*.

I am therefore suggesting that a fruitful way of analysing Chini Maya’s stance on caste and caste-based discrimination is by separating the ‘normative’ from the ‘actual’. That is, Chini Maya genuinely feels that caste-based discrimination ought to be eliminated, but she finds it difficult to bring her own behaviour and reactions to the Darji in line with this ideal. This is at the heart of the discrepancy which I wish to address in this chapter: why is it that people who believe caste-based discrimination should be eliminated may nevertheless find it difficult to behave accordingly?

Before trying to answer this question, I need to make another crucial point. The discrepancy I have just mentioned is not limited to the case of ‘higher’ Dalits discriminating against ‘lower’ Dalits, but generalises to the case of non-Dalits discriminating against Dalits. This is because, in Sammagaon, a large number of non-Dalits also say, often spontaneously, that they are opposed to caste-based discrimination. And yet, like Chini Maya, they do not behave in ways that are consistent with their assertion.

An ‘ethic of castelessness’

Recall the very opening of this thesis, the episode in which Ganga said that ‘Dalits used to be untouchable but are not any more.’ This is but one example of a wider phenomenon whereby Dalits *and* non-Dalits regularly affirm that caste does not or should not exist, that it is not *real*, and that Dalits should not be treated differently to other people.

Consider for example the following excerpts from an interview that I conducted in Bensi-taun with an ageing upper-caste Bahun woman called Dana Ghimire. We had been talking about the differences between the way Dalits were treated in the past and today. More specifically, the passage quoted below is about whether coming in contact with a Dalit can lead to an upper-caste person like her losing her caste status by becoming ritually polluted. As mentioned earlier, the possibility of such a loss is expressed colloquially as ‘*jāt janča*’ (‘caste goes away’).

Ivan Deschenaux: I still haven't quite understood this old custom. I still haven't quite understood this thing about caste going away. What is the meaning of this?

Dana Ghimire: The thing about caste going away?

ID: Yes, what is the meaning of this? Please give an example.

DG: An example? Caste goes away... One couldn't do things in certain ways. If you touched this or that person, there was this custom, this old custom according to which 'my caste goes away'. Now... In today's... A long time ago there was this practice—[one used to say to Dalits:] 'Hey! You can't touch [me]. Hey! Sit over there.' Through touch, it was said that untouchability (*chuvachhut*)' [occured]. 'There, go far away, go over there!' One also used to put one's own children far away. One used to say: 'It's not okay to stay here, close to the fire. You can't touch this. Don't touch the rice!' This was a custom in the old tradition. But now, caste, rice—I see none of this myself. In today's customs, there is no such thing. And this is the example I [want to] give. Before, there was this old custom. Now, in the new custom, there is no caste, nothing.

Admittedly, this passage is not the clearest explanation of *jāt janča*. Others explained to me the fundamental idea behind this expression, which is that inappropriate contact with a Dalit could lead to one becoming 'like a Dalit' oneself. I will return to this in chapter 9. The reason I reproduce Dana's explanation here is her insistence that caste and ritual pollution belong in the past. Most striking is the final sentence, 'Now, in the new custom, there is no caste, nothing'.

An ageing widow, Dana proclaimed that she had had a very difficult life. Her husband had died thirty-five years earlier. In line with Hindu prescriptions, she had never remarried. Having given birth to no son, after her daughters married and left the house, she had to make do on her own. I had naively suspected that this woman—who had lived by traditional Hindu prescriptions at a significant personal cost—would also endorse traditional notions of ritual pollution. I was entirely wrong.

DG: What I now say is this: Where [inside of a person] is this thing called caste

situated? [Try to] show it to me! To eat or not to eat [at a Dalit's house], this is a matter of personal preference, is it not?

ID: Yes.

DG: If you wish to do so, then eat there. If you do not wish to, then don't. No one will take any notice. Where is caste? Is it tied by the thread [the sacred thread upper-castes wear under their clothes]? Where does it hang? I also say this. This is how it is... Where is it? What caste? There is no such thing! We are just [physical] things. If you cut us we bleed.

Dana's words are clear. Far from endorsing the 'old custom' in which contact with Dalits was seen as defiling and could lead to loss of caste status, she explains that there simply *is no such thing as caste* to begin with, that caste is not *real*. This suggestion is one which I encountered time and again in the field. It is central to what I call the 'ethic of castelessness' which has emerged in Sammagaon and Nepal more generally, in which a notion of shared humanity takes precedence over divisions by caste. This ethic is commonly expressed in at least three ways.

1. *Blood*. Similarly to what some Newar interlocutors told Parish (1996:54ff.), many of the people whom I talked to attributed great significance to the fact that all humans have the same kind of blood. There are two ways in which this is usually expressed. One is by stating that regardless of caste or ethnicity, if a person's skin is cut, they will bleed. The other is by attracting attention to the fact that everybody's blood is the same colour, red.
2. *Non-divine nature of caste*. People regularly explained to me that caste is something that was made by humans (*mānavle banaeko*) rather than the gods. Although not always stated explicitly, the implication is that caste is not a 'cosmological' or 'deep' reality. Some added that caste was created by humans to create divisions where none exist in reality. This statement, it is worth noting, goes explicitly against a widely known myth of origin in which the origin of caste is divine. In the latter, the four *varna* (wide, encompassing caste groups) emerged from four different body parts of the god Brahma: Brahmans with the head, Kshatriyas with the arms, Vaishyas with

the thighs, and Shudras with the feet.¹ This supposed divine origin of caste was known to many of my interlocutors in Sammagaon; those who mentioned it usually dismissed it, occasionally adding that the myth itself had been written by humans.

3. *Only two castes.* Finally, the ethic of castelessness is expressed through a statement which many people, including many non-Dalits, make repeatedly: 'There are only two castes—men and women'. (The term '*jāt*' is used for 'caste' here, so the statement could equally be rendered as 'there are only two kinds of people: men and women.')
- Some people say that they learnt this statement in school, while others say that it was the Maoist insurgents who taught it to them during the 1996–2006 People's War. One of the rare mentions of this statement in existing literature is in an article on healing in Hyderabad (Flueckiger 1997). There, the author interprets the sentence as an expression of women's unity across Hinduism and Islam.² In Sammagaon, the gendered aspects of the statement go unquestioned. That men and women are different kinds of humans is taken for granted. My occasional attempts to suggest that this might be false, that men and women are the same because they are both 'human', was met either with amusement or mild curiosity, but nobody seemed convinced. Thus, proclaiming that 'there are only two castes' in Sammagaon is a way to oppose the idea that there are *more than two* castes; it says that humans are divided only by sex, not by caste.

Explaining the discrepancy

The remaining sections of this chapter are an attempt to come to terms with the discrepancy between the ethic of castelessness and the ongoing stigmatisation of Dalits. I propose a number of explanations.³ These are plausible explanations that I contemplated during fieldwork and in the process of writing this thesis; I do not attribute them to anyone in particular.

1. Here I use the Indian terms for the varnas, as these are commonly used when relating the myth. For Nepali equivalents and differences, see chapter 1.

2. Roberts (2016:82) also mentions an interlocutor, in a slum in Chennai, stating that there are only two castes, men and women. The author does not dwell on the statement at length.

3. To avoid cumbersome formulations, I will speak of discrimination exercised by non-Dalits upon Dalits here. All of what I say applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the case of 'higher' Dalits discriminating against 'lower' ones.

Berliner has recently made the following call:

For anthropologists, I believe, it is time to bring back ambivalent statements, contradictory attitudes, incompatible values, and emotional internal clashes as research objects. It is also essential to outline a typology of different contradictions as well as to explore the cognitive, emotional, and social processes through which they are rendered possible in human lives. In particular, it is worth investigating how actors themselves live with and justify their contradictory thoughts and behaviour. (Berliner in Berliner et al. 2016:5–6)

The rest of this chapter can be read as one attempt to respond to this call and, in the process, develop a better understanding of why caste-based discrimination endures.

Self-interested restraint

The first explanation suggests that the ethic of castelessness is a façade, an idea which non-Dalits pay lip service to but do not truly believe. When non-Dalits refrain from treating Dalits as untouchable in public, the explanation suggests, they are exercising deliberate and conscious control over their actions. They do so either because they are pressured to or out of self-interest, in order to secure a positive public image. Conversely the reason untouchability continues to prevail in homes and in the domestic sphere is that, in such environments, non-Dalits can relax the control that they exercise on their self-presentation; they can, provocatively speaking, show their ‘true colours’.

An ageing but useful piece of sociological theory comes to mind. In his *The Presentation of the Everyday Life*, Goffman (1971[1959]) develops what has come to be known as ‘dramaturgy’ or ‘dramaturgical analysis’. He suggests that people act differently according to the social setting in which they find themselves at any given time. When people face ‘audiences’—which is to say when people interact with others—and especially when they do so in public settings, they put up a ‘front’. That is, they exercise deliberate control over their behaviour, suppressing inclinations which they might otherwise have, in order to project positive images of themselves.

A different but also relevant theoretical framing can be found in Swidler’s ‘tool kit’ approach to culture (1986). This approach was constructed as an intervention in a debate on

the *causal* power of ‘culture’. Here, however, I am only interested in one specific aspect of the approach, namely, the proposition that culture provides a ‘repertoire’ which individuals can draw upon strategically and with flexibility. Particularly relevant is her suggestion that

[c]ulture provides the materials from which individuals and groups construct strategies of action. Such cultural resources are diverse, however, and normally groups and individuals call upon these resources selectively, bringing to bear different styles and habits of action in different situations (1986:280).

The ethic of castelessness might operate as one element in a wider cultural repertoire, which non-Dalits only call upon in public, for strategic reasons.

Why would paying lip service to castelessness and refraining from practising untouchability in public amount to projecting a positive image of oneself? The answer lies in the specific ideology of modernity that is prevalent in Nepal. As other researchers have noted, ‘it is taken for granted by almost everyone in Nepal that Nepal wants to be modern, whatever that means and whatever it might imply’ (Gellner, Hausner, and Letizia 2016:25). The point to underline here is that modernity is always imagined as *devoid of caste-based discrimination*.

Nepali imaginations of modernity have been the topic of a number of studies (see e.g. Liechty 2003). One of the clearest points to come out of these studies is that modernity is always tied to ‘development’. For example, Stacey Pigg (1992, 1996) argues that the most important effects of international development in Nepal are not what its practitioners want when they start their projects. Instead, they are the way in which development is interpreted by ordinary Nepali citizens, as *‘bikās’*, the Nepali term for development. *Bikās* itself is tied to material things: irrigation systems, access to electricity, roads, bridges, schools, health posts, specific varieties of crops, etc. Because it is tied to things and because such things are not present equally in different locations, a strong opposition emerges between places which have *bikās* and those which do not. At a macroscopic level, Nepal itself is seen as a country with low *bikās*, in comparison with others. At a smaller scale, within Nepal itself, urban centres and chiefly Kathmandu have *bikās*, but rural areas such as Sammagaon do not.

There are two more points explored by Pigg. One is that, inherent in the ideology of *bikās* is a normative project of modernization: *bikās* should be brought to the places and people who do not have it. The other is that *bikās* itself is tied to a form of unitary nationalism. This nationalism has a normative effect on personhood: the things which make Nepalis different from each other—for example caste or ethnicity—are to be silenced or muted in favour of an ideology in which people are *Nepali* before they are anything else. However, even as it creates a unitary *nationalist* identity, the idea of *bikās* simultaneously propagates new social divisions between people. This is because the separation between places which have *bikās* and places which do not is mapped onto the inhabitants of these places, and this creates a powerful social dichotomy between people who are ‘developed’ and people who are not. City-dwelling citizens who go through higher education and get paid jobs are *bikāsi* people; illiterate, village-dwelling subsistence farmers are not.

Despite major political changes in Nepal, this last point, the division between ‘developed’ and ‘not-developed’ citizens remains strikingly relevant today. As Pigg explains in her 1996 paper, others have noted subsequently (Skinner and Holland 1996; Skinner, Valsiner, and Holland 2001; Caddell 2005), and as I observed countless times myself, this distinction continues to be used to categorise people, in particular in relation to their level of formal education.

This has implications for caste and caste-based discrimination because one aspect of being ‘developed’, according to how development is imagined in Nepal, is precisely to profess one’s opposition to caste-based discrimination. Pigg linked this to the unitary, and therefore casteless, nationalism of the *Panchayat* political period. While nationalist sentiment is still strong in the country today, the nation is no longer conceived of in the same way. The national ideal in Nepal is now resolutely pluralist, as evident, for example, in the fact that the 2015 Constitution promotes one ‘official’ national language but recognises all mother tongues as ‘languages of the nation’ (Nepal Law Commission 2015:art. 6). The new pluralism is also visible, for example, in the first line of the national anthem, which, as mentioned earlier, states that Nepal is a *single* garland made of *hundreds* of different flowers. Yet this new nationalism, if anything, portrays caste-based discrimination as even more unacceptable than it was during its unitary predecessor, whose single model of the Nepali citizen was in fact modelled on the upper-caste hill population. The new, plural conception of the

nation places a strong emphasis on inclusivity, and the equal treatment of all the different groups which compose the Nepali population. Consequently, today more than ever, to treat Dalits as untouchable or otherwise defiling is seen as distinctly retrograde, and antithetic to modernity.

Coming back to my original point, one reason non-Dalits might say that they oppose caste-based discrimination even if they do not really mean it is to appear 'modern' and 'developed', to avoid falling on the wrong side of the social dichotomy created by the Nepali ideology of development. What happens at home, however, reflects people's 'truer', 'deeper' beliefs. In the same line, practising untouchability in public is not only distinctly unmodern, but officially reprehensible. Though its implementation is still lacklustre, a legal framework is progressively being set in place by the Nepali government to punish those who treat Dalits as untouchable in public, and this framework has been made known to the Nepali population through a number of campaigns (see figure 6.1).

Is adhering to the ethic of castelessness merely a strategic mode of self-presentation? While this explanation has its strengths, I do not think that, on its own, it is adequate.

Its main shortcoming is that it underestimates how powerful and pervasive the modernist ideology actually is. Nepalis encounter it almost daily in the media, at school, in NGOs and in countless other ways. So pervasive is the ideology that it seems unlikely that Nepalis would just use it strategically—simply to appear modern—while maintaining a critical distance from it in their hearts. It is far more plausible that they do, in fact, take its ideals on board, to an extent at least. And indeed, it is not unusual to get the sense that people are being sincere and they genuinely disapprove of caste-based discrimination despite contributing to it.

In sum, while one can point to strategic reasons why people might state that they are opposed to caste-based discrimination without really meaning it, this way of proceeding does not do justice to the complexity of the phenomenon. An alternative approach, to which I now turn, is to stop doubting the sincerity of the people who state that Dalits should be treated like everyone else. From this perspective, what needs to be explained is no longer why people say things they do not really mean, but rather, why they fail to act in accordance with what they say.



Figure 6.1: A poster hanging in the centre of Sahu Bajar referring to the “Caste-based Discrimination and Untouchability (Offence and Punishment) Act” which became part of Nepali law in 2011. Next to the photograph of a pair of hands in handcuffs, messages state that caste-based discrimination and untouchability are now a crime punishable by imprisonment, and that anybody witnessing such behaviour should report it to the police or to district authorities.

Coordination problems

Consider the following examples:

First, from the conversation related at the beginning of this chapter, Chini Maya says that the reason why she will not let a Darji man into her house is that it is ‘an old habit’. Earlier that day, she had explained that she would let in a Darji man *if others did the same*.

Second, my adoptive sister, on another occasion, explains to me that it is in one’s home village that one faces the strongest level of caste-based discrimination. She says that when she goes to other villages, she can enter other people’s houses and eat there without too much difficulty. Her explanation is that what people are really afraid of is not that they will be contaminated by the presence of a Dalit in their house or by eating food cooked by a Dalit. What they fear is that *if they are seen doing such things, their own kin and friends will start gossiping about them*. When non-Dalits host a Dalit who comes from far away, the kin and friends will not know that the person is a Dalit, so it is not a problem.

Third, an anecdote from when I was conducting a small household survey, accompanied by a non-Dalit man who converted to Christianity many years ago. In the survey, I ask various questions, some of which concern intercaste marriage. The non-Dalit man spontaneously tells me that he would let his daughter marry a Dalit only ‘*if Christianity were to win in this place first*’. He explains that it is only under such conditions that his daughter would not face severe ostracism for such a marriage.

Fourth, I regularly ask young non-Dalits whether they would ever consider marrying a Dalit. While the answers vary, several say that doing so *would not be a problem for them, but that it would for their parents*. Others say that they would avoid such a marriage because of the ostracism which their parents and kin would submit them to.

Fifth, an excerpt from an interview with Ganga. We had been discussing the fact that even the very few upper castes who will secretly eat food at Ganga’s house, such as a Chhetri school teacher called Umesh, will nevertheless not let Ganga into their own houses.

Ivan Deschenaux: For example, right, Umesh-*sir*⁴ comes here and eats...

4. It is common to add this as a suffix to school teachers’ names.

Ganga Dehegli: ...but he does not let us enter his house.

ID: Yes, this. Do you know why this happens?

GD: This is because, if he lets us in, society (*samāj*, the meaning here could also be 'his caste' rather than 'society' at large) will mock him [by saying] 'He let a small caste in!' This is why it's fine for him to come to my house and eat, but it is not okay for me to enter his.

What is common in all these examples is a *deflection of responsibility*. People who effectively reproduce caste-based discrimination do so because of others, not out of their own volition. It is what 'others' might think or do which is the problem. These examples are not exceptional; this deflection of responsibility for one's own discriminatory behaviour against Dalits is very common.

When I first encountered this kind of reasoning, my initial reaction was to assume that this was just a case of denying one's responsibility in the maintenance of an undesirable social phenomenon. I came to think of the issue differently towards the end of my fieldwork, when I conducted extensive interviews with Dalit-non-Dalit married couples in Kathmandu. Such marriages, in many ways, represent the ultimate violation of traditional caste rules. In these interviews, spouses often explained that they had to break off completely or almost completely with the kin of the non-Dalit spouse. The non-Dalit spouse would often be disowned by their relatives. They would lose the support, financial and otherwise, of their own kin. Thus, the social consequences of marrying a Dalit, for a non-Dalit, can be high. On hearing such stories, I realised that there may be some truth to the idea that non-Dalits, in some cases, 'fall in line' with caste rules even if they disagree with them, out of fear of the repercussions which they might face otherwise. Intercaste marriage is undoubtedly an extreme case, but a similar mechanism might be at play in others. The fear of one's kin 'gossiping' if one were to eat with a Dalit or let a Dalit into one's house may initially seem inconsequential, but it is not so. This is because *ijjat*, 'social prestige' or 'honour', is something which matters to people. The loss of *ijjat* is feared, and one of the quickest ways of losing it is precisely gossip and backbiting by one's own kin.

How might we understand this more formally? It so happens that philosophers have a

term for situations such as the one which I am describing. They call them ‘coordination problems’ (for an overview see Chwe 2001). Formally defined, a coordination problem is a situation in which individuals will behave in a certain way *if and only if* they have the assurance that others will behave in the same way.

With this in mind, think back to Chini Maya when she says that she will let in the Darji if others also do so. Think back also to the Christian non-Dalit who says that he will let his daughter marry a Dalit only if everybody else becomes Christian in the area. Such situations fit well under the formal definition of a coordination problem.

Coordination problems are interesting because they offer insights into what might prevent ethical change. They show why, in some cases, a behaviour that many people individually believe to be unethical may nevertheless persist. What is missing in a coordination problem for the behaviour judged unethical to stop occurring is—as the name suggests—coordination. If a large number of people judge a common behaviour to be unethical, but will only stop behaving in that way if everybody else does, then what is needed for the behaviour to be eliminated is a mechanism which ensures that everybody will cease to behave in that way *at the same time*.

There is a body of literature which suggests that some historical shifts in ethical norms are best understood as solutions to coordination problems. For example, one highly-cited study by Mackie (1996), a political scientist, discusses the end of footbinding in China. This practice, as Mackie puts it, ‘lasted a thousand years but ended in a single generation’. This rapid end to the practice leads Mackie to reject the so-called ‘modernization view’, according to which a shift towards modernist ideology led to the abandonment of footbinding. Omitting the details of his argument, his central claim is that, regardless of its origins, once footbinding was perceived as a requisite for a good marriage, it became a self-enforcing practice. While both men and women might have preferred a social convention in which footbinding was *not* required for marriage, individual women were still submitted to the practice because of the fact that, if any individual woman did not undergo footbinding, she would not be married to a ‘good’ husband. It is thus entirely possible to live in a world where footbinding is the norm, to disagree with this norm, and yet feel compelled to bind girls’ feet because of the costs in terms of marital opportunities if one

does not.

What is required to ‘switch’, so to speak, from a situation in which footbinding is the norm to one in which it is not is coordinated action by many individuals. In his analysis, Mackie suggests that one key factor in ending footbinding was the creation of associations in which people pledged not to bind the feet of their daughters and not to allow their sons to marry a woman with bound feet. Such associations created alternative marriage markets in which not binding the feet of one’s daughter did not amount to ruining her marital prospects. The success of such associations was key to the subsequent rapid abandonment of footbinding by the rest of society.

I have suggested that enduring caste-based discrimination in Nepal might be understood as a coordination problem. To see why, one must take very seriously the claim that non-Dalits continue to ostracise Dalits because of what others would think about them otherwise. We would face a genuine coordination problem—and consequently, untouchability would be no more than a self-enforcing convention—if the majority of non-Dalits only prevent Dalits from entering their house (for example) because others would reprimand them for doing so. And we would face a genuine coordination problem if the majority of non-Dalits actually wanted to stop treating Dalits as untouchable, but none of them wanted to do so alone.

What is compelling about this interpretation is that it provides an explanation of how it is possible to get ‘stuck’ in a situation where people do something which they otherwise judge unethical. Beyond this, however, reducing the ongoing stigmatisation of Dalits in Nepal to a simple matter of coordination is unsatisfactory. It is unsatisfactory because, in the recent history of Nepal, there have been multiple attempts at coordinating an end to the mistreatment of Dalits, yet none of these have had the effect of rapidly eliminating the problem in the way that they should have, were we actually just facing a coordination problem.

The most remarkable and sustained attempt at coordinating an end to caste-based discrimination came with the ‘cultural revolution’ that the Nepali Maoist insurgents attempted to conduct in Nepal during the 1996–2006 people’s War, and which I have addressed in chapter 5. During the War, the Maoists organised various events in which they made people

explicitly violate caste-based avoidances and rules of untouchability. In addition, they threatened to severely punish people who practised untouchability. The effect of all this was that untouchability was indeed drastically reduced. Once the war was over, however, many of the practices which had subsided during the conflict returned. This indicates that these practices were not merely self-enforcing, but rather, had an external cause.

Here, we have a remarkable difference between the case of footbinding in China and that of caste-based discrimination in Nepal. According to Mackie, the Chinese anti-footbinding associations provided an example of a different way of doing things. Once others saw that this was in fact a better way, they quickly adopted it. The same is not true of untouchability in Nepal: while the Maoists *did* provide an example of a different way of doing things, rapid adoption did not follow. We must therefore rule out the ‘coordination problem’ explanation for ongoing discrimination.

Implicit and explicit social ontologies

I have now offered two candidate explanations for the discrepancy between what people in Sarmagaon say about caste-based discrimination—that it should stop—and what they do—continue to practise it. These two explanations differ in a fundamental way. The first gives primacy to what people do. It suggests that what really matters is that non-Dalits continue to discriminate against Dalits; in contrast what non-Dalits say can be dismissed as a matter of inconsequential lip service paid to an idea of modernity. The second interpretation does the opposite. It considers that what non-Dalits say is what really matters. Non-Dalits saying they should give up discrimination is the important point, and the fact that they do not can be explained as a simple lack of coordinated action. Each explanation also gives primacy to a specific social ontology. If we focus on what people do, we come to the conclusion that what Nepalis ‘really believe’ is that Dalits are indeed fundamentally different from other humans (dirty, lowly, etc.). If we focus on what people say, we come to the conclusion that what Nepalis ‘really believe’ is that Dalits are the same as everybody else.

Given that neither of these explanations is satisfactory, what is needed is a non-eliminative account. That is, we need an account which accepts that non-Dalits can be sincere about their opposition to caste-based discrimination and *simultaneously* fail to live up to this op-

position. This must also be an account in which which Nepalis can ‘really believe’ two contradictory social ontologies simultaneously.

The fact that people hold contradictory beliefs is well-established in anthropology. In fact, in the article quoted earlier, Berliner argues that contradiction is a quintessential aspect of the human condition (Berliner et al. 2016). Beyond such general observations, however, there is much to be learned by analysing how humans hold contradictory beliefs. In the case of caste-based discrimination in Sammagaon, I will argue the contradictory beliefs are best understood as resulting from a difference in implicit and explicit mental representations. Although non-Dalits subscribe to an ‘explicit’ theory of society in which everybody is equal, they nevertheless maintain an ‘implicit’ view—upon which they exercise less conscious control—according to which this is not the case. To make this point, a comparison to racial prejudice is useful.

In the sub-field of psychology concerned with social cognition, a large number of studies have focused on the topic of race and racial prejudice in the USA. A common claim in this literature is that, in the American context, racial prejudice has not so much been eliminated as ‘driven underground’ (Dovidio and Gaertner 1986). This transformation of prejudice was, in no small measure, effected by historical transformations in the second half of twentieth century:

The world was still reeling from the events of the Second World War in which unspeakable atrocities were perpetrated against Jews because they were Jews. The Holocaust, largely viewed as a crime against humanity, led many Americans to seriously question the morality of group-based prejudice. How could the nation fight against such crimes against humanity while, on its own soil, entire groups of people were denied rights and opportunities because of their skin color? Quite simply, the American Creed, although revered in the abstract, was being violated in practice. (Devine 2005:328)

This general context and the nascent Civil Rights Movement gave rise to a cultural and political climate in which it became increasingly unacceptable for white Americans to show open prejudice against black Americans and other minorities. The word ‘open’ in the previous sentence, is key. Allport’s seminal study of prejudice (1979[1954]) argued that

norms of equality—the ‘American Creed’—did not suffice to eliminate prejudice. Such norms could, under the right circumstances, make people *aware* of their own prejudice, but this awareness alone was not sufficient for them to rid themselves of prejudice altogether. ‘Defeated intellectually’, Allport concluded, ‘prejudice lingers emotionally’ (Allport 1979[1954]:328).

Allport’s separation of the ‘intellectual’ and ‘emotional’ components of prejudice suggests an early version of what contemporary cognitive science calls a ‘dual-process’ model of social cognition. The basic tenet of dual-process models is that human cognition comprises two distinct and somewhat independent types of information processing, which are generally referred to as ‘type-1’ and ‘type-2’. Type-1 processes are more automatic, rapid, affective, and unconscious, whereas type-2 processes tend to be more controlled, slow, deliberate, reflective, and conscious. It is often assumed that the two types of information processing operate in different parts of the brain, and there is some neuroscientific evidence for this proposition (Lieberman 2007). A common hypothesis, albeit empirically hard to verify, is that type-1 processes are evolutionarily prior to type-2 processes. Allport’s description of ongoing ‘emotional’ prejudice in the face of its ‘intellectual’ rejection fits the dual-process model. Type-1 processes can continue to sustain prejudice in an individual even when that individual adopts the explicit, reasoned (type-2) belief that prejudice is undesirable. In Allport’s own terms, ‘self-insight [the conscious realisation that one is prejudiced] ... does not automatically cure prejudice’ (Allport 1979[1954]:328).

Thanks in part to the publication of a widely popular book by psychologist and behavioural economist Daniel Kahneman (2011), dual-process models have become very popular in a range of disciplines, especially in the study of social cognition.⁵ These models are widely believed to depict human cognitive activity more accurately than those which do not admit of two distinct types of information processing. This is the case, in no small measure, because they provide an elegant and somewhat unifying explanation for a vast array of empirical observations that would be hard to explain otherwise. Their consequences for anthropology, however, are still sorely under-examined. This

5. In fact, they have become so common and all-encompassing in social psychology that some of their early proponents have called for caution and increased precision in their application (Evans and Stanovich 2013). While this call for prudence is important, anthropology arguably needs *more* attention to dual-process models, not less.

is unfortunate. As Lizardo et al (2016:287) argue, traditional social sciences such as sociology—and, I add, anthropology—have much to gain from attending to dual-process models of the mind. A case in point is a well-cited article by Vaisey (2009), a sociologist who convincingly argues that dual-process theories of human cognition provide a credible foundation for the ‘theory of practice’ famously put forth by Bourdieu (1977). In my view, another advantage of attending to dual-process models is that they provide an empirically grounded, cognitively sound explanation for the difference between what people say and what they do. They can therefore account for the discrepancy between the ethic of castelessness and ongoing discrimination in Sannagaon.

Allport’s description of racial and other forms of prejudice in mid-twentieth century America is one according to which prejudice subsided in many people’s consciously articulated, ethical views, but lingered on at a lower, less conscious, affective level. I believe this description carries over to Sannagaon. Allport did suggest that some individuals could successfully rid themselves of prejudice altogether; he also recognised that others remain fully and openly prejudiced. Most, however, fell somewhere between these two poles. Thus, white Americans developed what Allport called ‘prejudice with compunction’. They experienced ‘inner conflict’—a mismatch between the values they explicitly subscribed to and their more automatic and prejudiced inclinations.⁶

Allport’s notion of ‘prejudice with compunction’ captures an important aspect of everyday caste-based discrimination in Sannagaon. Indeed, the situation which I have described in this chapter is one in which caste-based discrimination is now recognised by a large number of people, Dalits and non-Dalits, as unethical. People nevertheless continue to behave in discriminatory ways, even if they know and openly state that they should not. Chini Maya’s nervous laughter and excuses after saying that she would not tolerate a Darji son-in-law are a perfect example of prejudice with compunction.

It goes without saying that the historical and political trajectories of the USA and of Nepal are very different, so we must be wary of pushing too far any comparison between the two. Nevertheless, with regards specifically to the increasing unacceptability of prejudice

6. The notion of ‘prejudice with compunction’, which Allport had advanced on the basis of only anecdotal evidence, was later submitted to more rigorous experimental analysis by a number of researchers (e.g. Devine et al. 1991).

towards minorities, some parallels can be drawn. Devine, in the passage quoted earlier, suggests that it is the 'American Creed' combined with macroscopic geopolitical changes that made prejudice unacceptable in the USA in the 1950s. Nepal has undergone rapid historical transformations in the past decades, which cumulatively have transformed the 'appropriate' way of thinking about caste. The 1950s marked the end of the autocratic Rana regime and a prolonged period of political isolationism. Caste-based discrimination went from an institution sanctioned by the state to a practice first illegal and, much more recently, criminalised. The social movements of the 1990s set the stage for the pluralistic understanding of the nation state which is currently predominant. The 1996–2006 'People's War' put an end to the Hindu monarchy. The result of all these macroscopic transformations was a change in national ideology and a concurrent shift in cultural and ethical norms. Untouchability and discrimination against Dalits is now quite generally recognised as unethical and immoral.

Yet this shift in public ethical norms has not led to the end of discrimination. Untouchability has not been eliminated, but merely retreated to specific, more private settings. Here again, a striking parallel can be drawn with Allport's observations on racial prejudice in the USA:

One may feel quite free to damn a minority group within his family, club, or neighborhood gathering, but will inhibit the tendency when a member of that group is present. (Allport 1979[1954]:332–333)

Allport cites the following passage from a student essay on the topic 'My Experience With, and Attitudes Toward, Minority Groups in America':

Although prejudice is unethical, I know I shall always have prejudices. I believe in goodwill toward the Negro, but I shall never invite him to my house for dinner. Yes, I know I'm a hypocrite. (Allport 1979[1954]:327)

The same tension, between proclaiming that prejudice is immoral but nevertheless *refusing to let a member of the discriminated group in one's house* is evident in Sannagaon now. Dana, the upper-caste woman who so explicitly told me that untouchability was a phenomenon of the past, later admitted that she had never eaten with a Dalit nor let one into her house.

Neither she nor others, however, explicitly called themselves ‘hypocrites’.

The similar way in which prejudice operates in two very different historical and cultural contexts, for two different minorities (black Americans and Nepali Dalits) is noteworthy. I have suggested that there are some high-level, overarching similarities in the historical trajectories of the two countries. These similarities partly explain why explicit, public ethical norms shunning discrimination eventually emerged in both contexts after prolonged histories of systemic oppression, but what explains ongoing discriminatory behaviour *after* these norms emerge? What high-level historical convergence might cause similarity at this microscopic, interpersonal level? One explanation, I suggest, invokes a more obvious commonality of the USA and Nepal than overarching historical trajectories, namely, the fact both countries are inhabited by humans, and that all humans share the same cognitive properties. Implicit cognitive biases are one among other factors which make ethical standards hard to live up to.⁷

I propose that the ongoing discrimination against Dalits in Nepal is, in no small part, due to ongoing *implicit* representations of Dalits. In the next chapter, I will argue that it is psychological essentialism, a well-documented aspect of human cognition, which makes people maintain an implicit representation of Dalits specifically as a ‘different kind of human’. In the meantime, let me offer a different, more general theoretical framing of implicit representations which encompasses what I have in mind.

I find such a framing in the notion of *alief*, a concept put forth by philosopher Tamar Gendler (see esp. 2008a, 2008b). The word ‘alief’ is a neologism; it refers to a mental state which is analogous to belief, but which is ‘associative, automatic and arational’ and ‘typically also affect-laden and action generating’ (Gendler 2008a:641).

A paradigmatic *alief* is a mental state with associatively linked content that is representational, affective and behavioral, and that is activated—consciously or nonconsciously—by features of the subject’s internal or ambient environment. Aliefs may be either occurrent or dispositional. (Gendler 2008a:642)

The concept is purposefully wide-ranging, Gendler’s aim being to provide an overarching concept for all the mental states which are not, or not-quite beliefs, but which neverthe-

7. Note that I say ‘hard’ to live up to, not impossible. Biases can and should be alleviated.

less cause behaviour. Some of the examples of aliefs which Gendler discusses are quite different from the implicit social representation which I discuss here. Thus, her basic examples include a hypothetical movie-goer who screams during a scary scene or a sports fan shouting at the TV to encourage the players (Gendler 2008b:552–553). Gendler notes that in such cases, it would be unreasonable to suggest that the movie-goer *believes* that they are in danger or that the sports fan *believes* that shouting at the TV can truly influence the match. Instead, the representation which pushes them to behave in this way is an *alief*. It is a mental state to whose content they would not, upon reflection, ascribe truth-value, but which they nevertheless have, and they behave *as if* its content were true. Results from empirical psychology, in particular experiments conducted by Paul Rozin, form another class of examples which Gendler suggests can only be accounted for with a notion of alief. Importantly, uncontrolled biases against social groups are a third category which Gendler also classes as ‘aliefs’ (2008b:553).

To think of the widespread negative representation of Dalits in Sammagaon as a matter of alief is useful because of Gendler’s discussion of *norm-discordant* alief. Gendler suggests that ‘introducing the notion of alief into our descriptive repertoire provides a useful alternative way of answering “why?” questions when confronted with a behavior or tendency that we seek to explain’ (2008b:555). Both belief and alief can have motivational power. In many cases, belief and alief are concordant, which is to say they might motivate one and the same behaviour. When this is the case, no issue arises. However, there are also many cases in which belief and alief are discordant. When this is the case, the behaviour of an individual becomes difficult or impossible to explain by referring only to that individual’s beliefs; instead, one must also refer to that individual’s aliefs.

Gendler notes that the concept of alief is not meant to describe a precise set of neural states. Its purpose is mainly heuristic:

I am not claiming that alief has a localized substrate, or that it is associated with distinctive neural firing patterns, or that it can be selectively inhibited, or whatever other criterion you think is required for something to be included in our ‘mature science’ of the mind. Rather, I am claiming that it is of explanatory utility: it helps us make sense of things. (2008b:557)

This heuristic character makes the concept particularly appropriate for use in anthropological interpretation. The alief is specific enough that it allows us to re-think how we describe the causes of certain behaviour (as I am doing here with caste-based discrimination in Nepal), but not so precise that it necessarily requires methods going beyond traditional ethnography and participant observation. In this regard, it is not unlike the oft-used notion of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977), but a main advantage which it provides over this is that it admits, as Gendler notes, both acquired and innate origins, and it is not tied to a specific theory of enculturation.

My ethnographic observations in Nepal become easy to account for using the notion of alief. The ethic of castelessness is part of people's consciously held beliefs. From it emerge certain norms, in particular that according to which one *ought* not to treat Dalits as untouchable. The reason that people do not behave in line with this is a norm-discordant alief, a less conscious, less controlled mental state analogous to belief which stands in contradiction with the ethic of castelessness, and according to which Dalits are fundamentally different.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that there has been an important shift in beliefs about Dalits in Sammagaon. Dalits and non-Dalits recognise that there is only one kind of human, and they state that Dalits should not be treated differently from other people. As noted in chapter 2, this shift in beliefs *has* been accompanied by a shift in behaviour. Untouchability and open forms of discrimination against Dalits can no longer be observed in public, whereas—according to the memory of older people in Sammagaon—they used to be extremely common some three to four decades ago. The simple narrative of change which this suggests is however complicated by ethnographic observations. First, while almost nobody in Sammagaon now explicitly agrees with the view that Dalits are 'impure' or 'polluting', there is nonetheless a cluster of negative assumptions which are readily made about Dalits, among which a chief representation is that Dalits are 'dirty' in the physical sense. Second, the behaviours associated with untouchability continue to exist in what I call the 'domestic sphere', that is, in people's private homes.

I offered a number of explanations for the discrepancy between stated views according to which Dalits are 'the same' as everybody else, and behaviours suggesting the opposite. A first explanation was that non-Dalits are lying or being hypocritical when they affirm that Dalits are the same as everybody else. A second explanation was that non-Dalits continuing to discriminate against Dalits is a self-enforcing convention, in the sense implied by coordination problems. Neither of these explanations is satisfactory. In the third and final section of this chapter, I suggested that non-Dalits *simultaneously* hold a representation according to which Dalits are 'like everybody else' and another according to which they are in fact 'different'. Turning to literature in cognitive and social psychology, I suggested that a dual-process model of the human mind and Gendler's notion of 'alief' provide a compelling account of how it is possible for such contradictory representations to be held by the same individual. This model, in my view, gives a satisfying account of how non-Dalits can simultaneously *believe* that Dalits are like everybody else, yet *alieve* that they are not.

I will return to the question of the implicit / type-1 / alief-level representation of Dalits in the next chapter, where I will discuss these less-than-conscious representations in relation to another body of literature, on a phenomenon known as 'psychological essentialism'.

Chapter 7

Essentialism

This chapter presents a core argument of the thesis, which is that the enduring character of caste-based discrimination in Nepal is, in part, attributable to a universal cognitive bias known as ‘psychological essentialism’. To illustrate, I open with an incident that took place a mere two days after I had landed in Nepal for fieldwork.

‘Like a dog’s tail’

Krishna works at the reception of the guest house in which I stayed, in Kathmandu, when I initially arrived in Nepal for fieldwork. In his thirties, he is a convivial and engaging person. He has big aspirations, hoping to open his own guest house and stop depending on his current employer. Krishna and I had already established a friendly rapport a few years earlier, during my first trip to Nepal. Upon learning that I wanted to work with Dalits this time around, Krishna made several comments. ‘Dalits are human, and I am a human too,’ he first said, spontaneously. ‘Look,’ he added, ‘I hired many Dalits to build my new guest house. I even share cigarettes with them!’

Liechty has noted that *class* is increasingly shaping people’s self-understandings in Nepal, particularly in urban settings, and that as a result caste is being relegated to the background (Liechty 2003:63–64). Krishna, himself a Bahun, is a good example of a middle-class Nepali in Kathmandu who states that he does not care about caste and views Dalits as normal humans, as people like everybody else.

With his remark about cigarettes, Krishna aimed to *prove* that this is his actual view. It is a well-documented fact that Hindus consider bodily fluids dangerous and polluting. Most Nepalis strictly avoid coming in contact with someone else's saliva and especially abhor the idea of touching it with their own lips or mouth. In this regard, they display a striking example of Mary Douglas' observation that 'we should expect the orifices of the body to symbolize its specially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind' (Douglas 1966:150). In fact, Nepalis avoid even indirect contact with the saliva of other people. For example, cutlery which has been touched by somebody's lips is considered *jutho* (soiled, impure) and must be washed before it can be used by anybody else. I accidentally violated this rule on one occasion, in Sannagaon, during a moment of inattention. During a meal, I was given a second serving that I could not finish. I seized the large lump of rice which had just been placed on my plate and put it back into the cooking pot. The person serving me food was left speechless for an instant, before I realised my mistake—a highly insulting one—and apologised profusely. I had used the hand which I had been eating with to do this. My hand had previously come in contact with my mouth, and the rice had therefore become *jutho* the moment that I touched it. By placing it back into the common pot, I had inadvertently made all of the pot's contents *jutho*. A new batch of rice had to be cooked, and the soiled rice was given to a buffalo.

In order to avoid spreading *jutho*, when drinking from a shared receptacle, one lifts it an inch above the lips, tilting one's head backwards, and pouring the contents from above. Similar precautions are taken when cigarettes are shared between smokers. One forms a makeshift pipe with one's fist to ensure that one's lips do not touch the cigarette itself. Krishna never used this technique, so when smoking with a Dalit, his lips would come into contact with the Dalit's *jutho*. Like many younger urban Nepalis, Krishna found the idea of ritual pollution obsolete. This is what he was communicating to me when saying that he *even* shared cigarettes with Dalits.

Given this disregard for ritual pollution, what Krishna said next came as a surprise. 'You know, though, Dalits are like a dog's tail.' Seeing my confusion, he offered a clarification: 'Even if you tie a dog's tail to a stick in order to keep it straight, as soon as you remove the stick, the tail will curl up again'. Dalits are like this, he explained, because no matter how much you try to help them, they never change. When Krishna had a new guest house

built in his own village, he employed local Dalits rather than hiring professional builders from the city. He described this as an act of generosity and said that he had offered alcohol to the builders, given them advances on salaries, and fulfilled most of their requests. But despite all of this, he explained, several workers did not complete the tasks which they had been paid for; they had left the building unfinished.

In this analogy, the stick is either Krishna himself or the good working conditions he offered. Dalits, despite being 'tied' to this stick, could not stay 'straight'. They reverted to their normal state of dishonesty, leaving the job unfinished. While the conversation I had with Krishna was mostly in English, he used the Nepali term *sidhā*, which means 'straight' but can also be translated as 'straightforward' and 'honest'. Thus, Krishna was suggesting that Dalits are naturally 'crooked'—with the same double meaning this term has in English—and that nothing could be done about it.

Immediately after explaining that everybody is a human and that caste means nothing, Krishna made what can only be described as a highly essentialising remark—all Dalits are a certain way, and they remain thus no matter what. This conversation took place on my second day in Nepal. I did not realise it at the time, but it captured a central tension of the way in which non-Dalits talk about Dalits. Explicit theories and desires for a society in which caste is irrelevant co-exist with deeply rooted, if not always openly expressed representations according to which Dalits are inherently different and lesser.

One might object that there is a significant difference between 'ritual impurity' and 'dishonesty'. Krishna was not, strictly speaking, contradicting himself when he said that Dalits are not impure but nevertheless dishonest. This is a valid objection. However, it is the more general tension in Krishna's words which I want to pick up here, namely, the tension between his statements that all humans are fundamentally the same and that there is nevertheless something *inherent* about Dalits which sets them apart. If I may appropriate Krishna's analogy and change its meaning, I would suggest that the real dog's tail is the way in which people think about Dalits in Nepal. They say that there is only one kind of human, they try to keep their views 'straight'—in line with this statement—but it is all too common for them to fall back to the view that, after all, there is actually something inherently negative about Dalits.

Caste, I argue, is an inherently resilient way of thinking about society. It is this resilience, in part, which prevents non-Dalits from behaving in line with the professed ideal that there is only one kind of human. It is also this resilience which becomes a stumbling block for the strategies described in part I. Naturally, if these statements are to be explanatory, if they are to do more than simply invoke the generic term ‘resilience’ to re-describe the ethnographic data presented so far, an external explanation for the resilience itself is required. This is what the current chapter offers. What I suggest here is that we should view the resilience of caste as just one specific instance of a more general tendency, observed by many anthropologists in many different contexts, towards *social essentialism*. Moreover, I argue that social essentialism itself has root causes not only in specific histories and forms of social organisation, but also in the very nature of the human mind. It is in no small part attributable to a cognitive bias known as *psychological essentialism*.

Two kinds of essentialism

One can distinguish at least two major types of essentialism. Central to both is the notion that entities (objects, artefacts, plants, animals, humans, etc.) have ‘essences’, which is to say, they have invisible and potentially unknown properties or ‘cores’ which determine what they are and without which they would be something different. The way in which the two kinds of essentialism differ is in their relation to this central notion.

Metaphysical essentialism

Metaphysical essentialism is beyond the scope of this thesis. I include a very brief discussion here in order to show the type of claims which I am *not* concerned with.

Metaphysical essentialism, fundamentally, is the theory that the world is *actually* made of entities which have essences. This is a view which a number of philosophers have adhered to, most famously Aristotle and Leibniz. Present-day analytic philosophers defending metaphysical essentialism generally adopt a ‘modal’ approach (Robertson and Atkins 2018). This is to say, they draw a distinction between ‘essential’ and ‘accidental’ properties, the former being those without which—and here the reason for calling this approach ‘modal’ becomes clear—an entity would not be what it is. These philosophers fall into different camps depending on which properties they consider ‘essential’. For exam-

ple, proponents of ‘sortal’ essentialism suggest that the world is made of mutually exclusive ‘sorts’ and that a given entity cannot simultaneously belong to multiple sorts (Mackie 2006:118ff.). Another common brand of metaphysical essentialism is ‘origin essentialism’, which stipulates that the essential properties of an entity are those pertaining to its origins (Mackie 2006: 93ff.).

My personal take on metaphysical essentialism—and metaphysics more generally—is neo-Carnapian (Bennett 2009:38): I think that the questions which are raised in this branch of philosophy are terminological at worst, substantial but unanswerable at best. In other words, either debates on metaphysical essentialism are about how best to use language, or they concern states of affairs which we do not have the epistemological tools to answer. Therefore, none of what is said in this thesis should be taken as a defence of, or attack on metaphysical essentialism.

My concern is instead with the tendency which humans have to *think* in essentialist terms. As it turns out, for certain categories, humans have a strong tendency to act and talk *as if* metaphysical essentialism were correct, independently of whether this is actually the case.¹

Social essentialism

As anthropologists working in a number of contexts have noted, humans typically think that the members of certain social groups share a common, inner ‘substance’ that makes them what they are. In other words, humans are typically essentialist about certain social groups. This is particularly true of race, ethnicity, sex, caste, lineages and other corporate kin groups. The nature of the shared substance might be explicitly identified—in the case of ethnicity, clans, descent groups, for example, it is often ‘blood’—but it may also remain unnamed.

A hallmark of this way of thinking is that groups are given a particularly ‘deep’ ontological status: races, ethnicities, etc. are thought to be more than coincidental collections of individuals. Members of one such group are thought to be similar in profound ways, and con-

1. A recent proposition is that the study of *psychological* essentialism can provide some insight into the truth-value of *metaphysical* essentialism (Gelman 2019). This is an unusual claim upon which no consensus has yet been reached.

versely, to differ from the members of other groups in equally profound ways. One classic statement of the tendency for humans to think in this way is found in Clifford Geertz's description of 'primordial attachments':

By a primordial attachment is meant one that stems from the 'givens'—or, more precisely, as culture is inevitably involved in such matters, the assumed 'givens'—of social existence: immediate contiguity and kin connection mainly, but beyond them the givenness that stems from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language, or even a dialect of a language, and following particular social practices. *These congruities of blood, speech, custom, and so on, are seen to have an ineffable, and at times overpowering, coerciveness in and of themselves.* One is bound to one's kinsman, one's neighbor, one's fellow believer, ipso facto; as the result not merely of personal affection, practical necessity, common interest, or incurred obligation, but at least in great part by virtue of some *unaccountable absolute import attributed to the very tie itself.* The general strength of such primordial bonds, and the types of them that are important, differ from person to person, from society to society, and from time to time. *But for virtually every person, in every society, at almost all times, some attachments seem to flow more from a sense of natural—some would say spiritual—affinity than from social interaction.* (Geertz 1973a:259–260, emphasis added)

In the pages following this excerpt, Geertz identifies a wide range of 'primordial attachments', namely, 'assumed blood ties', 'race', 'language', 'region', 'religion', and 'custom' (Geertz 1973a:261–263).

Geertz's essay concerns the formation of new nation states in post-colonial contexts. Consequently, he focuses on the extent to which these attachments may represent an obstacle to the emergence of civil society, but this aspect of his argument is not relevant here. What is relevant is his suggestion that people who share primordial attachments—people who belong to the same corporate kin group, race or religion, who speak the same language or practise the same customs, etc.—are believed to form an irreducible group, a group whose existence is not merely due to temporary association but is instead *sui generis*. As per the

passages emphasised in the quotation above, the argument is that primordial attachments give rise to social groups which are perceived, by their own members and by others, as *natural*.

Social essentialism such as I am concerned with here is a refinement of Geertz's observation. Geertz casts a wide net, addressing a large number of 'attachments' (race, language, region, custom, etc.) This makes sense in the context of his argument on state formation, but a disadvantage is that he tells us nothing as to why these specific attachments are represented as primordial, nor what it is which they may have in common. Some conceptual refinement is therefore warranted. When I use the term 'social essentialism' here, I am not concerned with language, region, religion or custom. I apply the term only to those categories that fall under the umbrella of what Berreman (1972) called 'birth-ascribed stratification'. That is, I apply the term only to identity categories which are attributed to an individual at birth, and thought to remain unchanged throughout the course of his life. It is these categories, more than any other, which are regularly perceived as *natural* and having 'ineffable, at times overpowering coerciveness'.

Belonging to any given caste in Nepal is a consequence of birth alone, and caste certainly has 'overpowering coerciveness' as described by Geertz. Despite the explicit adherence of many to an 'ethic of castelessness' described in the previous chapter, there remains a latent perception that castes are literal 'kinds of humans'. The term '*jāt*' itself, which I have been translating as 'caste' so far, conveys a deeper sense of 'kindness' and even of 'species'. But more than this linguistic connotation, the naturalised character of caste is seen in the fact that it is impossible for any given individual to *change* which caste he or she belongs to. There is no fluidity or possibility of movement across the groups picked out by caste. One's caste, like one's ethnicity, is acquired from one's parents at birth and is a deep and fundamentally immutable aspect of oneself.

Social essentialism is an overarching term for social ontologies in which there exist different kinds of humans and these kinds are thought to be natural or quasi-natural. Analytically, social essentialism does not necessarily imply that the different kinds of humans are ranked relatively to each other, nor even that the kinds have different valences. It only implies that the kinds are *different*. And yet, where social essentialism is prevalent, such

valences tend to emerge. Anthropologists have long noted the almost universal character of ethnocentrism—the tendency to attribute higher value to one’s own (essentially construed) group over others. In classic Dumontian analysis, what distinguishes *hierarchy* as a principle of social organisation is that—unlike what ethnocentrism would suggest—there is collective consensus over the ranking of, and valences attributed to distinct groups. The low recognise themselves as such.

Critiques of the Dumontian approach are well-known (Appadurai 1986), and indeed, the strategies analysed in the first part of this thesis show that Dalits are far from accepting the ascription of lowliness. In Nepal like elsewhere, they are trying hard to *change* their public image. The ‘ethic of castelessness’ discussed in the previous chapter, however, is premised on a different type of change. Instead of a modification to the *image* of Dalits, it is based on negating the idea that Dalits are a distinct kind of humans to start with. As such, the ethic of castelessness challenges social essentialism itself.

I will presently argue that it is because essentialist construals of birth-ascribed social categories come readily to the human mind that the notion that Dalits are a different kind of human is *difficult to un-think*. In other words, the essentialisation of Dalits in Nepal endures not only because of specificities in Nepali history—though these certainly play an important role—but also because it is one specific case of a much more general way in which humans typically think of group identity, driven by the cognitive bias known as *psychological essentialism*.² Before I can make this argument, however, two caveats are in order.

The first is as follows: to note the occurrence of social essentialism in a multiplicity of contexts, and to point to its ongoing character in Nepal, is not equivalent to adopting essentialist *analytical* categories. I do not propose that the categories of ethnicity, race, and caste are analytically sound. Similarly, my point is not that Dalits are *actually* different from others in any primordial way. All of this should go without saying, but it seems worth making this point explicitly in light of the common misunderstanding of Geertz’s primordialism. Eriksen (2001:44) for example, comes close to suggesting that Geertz himself viewed ethnicity as ‘primordial’, when it is in fact clear that, in Geertz’s view, it is

2. In this sense, psychological essentialism operates similarly to what Sperber (2001; see also 2002) calls a ‘mind-internal’ factor, helping to stabilise one or the other cultural representation.

people ‘out there’ who are primordialist. On the analytical front, I am fully in accordance with Brubaker when he notes that studying essentialised social categories should not lead to adopting them (Brubaker 2002:166). The alternative he proposes, which I follow here, is to treat essentialised social categories not as ‘things in the world, but perspectives on the world—not ontological but epistemological realities’ (Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov 2004:45).

The second caveat comes with one criticism that has been addressed against primordialist approaches to ethnicity by the ‘instrumentalist’ school. This states that social actors do not, as a matter of fact, think of ethnic groups as static, unchanging, ontologically deep entities. Instead, the objection goes, ethnicity is subject to a number of strategic and conscious manipulations, in line with political interests. Given such malleability, instrumentalists argue, the suggestion that humans are primordialist about ethnicity is simply false. A recent theory of ethnicity emphasising strategic manipulation is Wimmer’s analysis of ‘ethnic boundary making’ (2008, 2013). In Nepal, Hangen (2009) has defended a similar view in her study of ethnic politics.

Does this objection carry over to caste, in particular as regards Dalits? Some malleability must indeed be acknowledged. An example is the old, derogatory word *Kāmi* being replaced, in many spheres, by ‘Bishwakarma’. Another example is the emergence of the term ‘Dalit’ itself, which replaces and changes the connotations of the prior ‘*pāni nachalne*’. Nevertheless, we should be weary of over-emphasising this malleability; doing so may be driven more by wishful thinking than by actual, empirical evidence. Chapter 3 argued that the Bishwakarma cannot truly adopt ‘sanskritisation’ as a strategy because they are inescapably perceived as Dalit, no matter how fervently they defend their similarity to the upper-caste Bahun. Chapter 4 showed that when the Bishwakarma attempt to redefine their image by building a ‘culture of their own’, imitating the strategic ethnic politics of the *janajāti*, they once again find themselves incapable of doing so. Thus, for all the strategic manipulations which ethnic politics may be imbued with in certain contexts, the instrumentalist criticism does not, ultimately, carry over to the case of caste, at least not for Dalits in Nepal.

Psychological essentialism

In most anthropological accounts, social essentialism is explained first and foremost in social constructionist terms (Hirschfeld 1998; Mahalingam 2007b). Thus, social essentialism is generally viewed as emerging from specific histories, cultural aspects, power configurations, etc. For example, Stoler (1992; 1995) has discussed the extent to which essentialist understandings of race were linked to European colonialism and the threat which *métissage* posed to these understandings. In the Indian context, various authors have noted the significant role which colonialism played in reinforcing essentialist construals of caste, by imposing a 'racial' reading of it (Cohn 1987; Dirks 1992, 2001). The emergence of essentialist understandings of caste in Nepal, which has never been a European colony, follows a slightly different trajectory. It is generally accepted that the initial origins of caste in Nepal are linked to invasions by various Hindu Aryan kings, as early as 600CE (Aahuti 2014:esp. 81–83). A full-blown, extremely essentialist model of caste was later imposed with the promulgation of the 1854 Muluki Ain (civil code). As Höfer (1976) shows, and as I have already alluded to, this code was relentless in its systematisation of caste and imposition of a logic wherein humans are divided into different kinds. Its political purpose was to spread the power and authority of the then ruling Rana dynasty.

Social essentialism, thus, is intricately tied to power. It is not, however, exclusively so. It is also tied to *psychological* essentialism.

A minimal definition of psychological essentialism is: a psychological or cognitive disposition to perceive and think of entities (objects, artefacts, animals, people, etc.) as having an internal, invisible *core* which determines the nature of the entity and at least some of its observable properties.³ The claim that all humans have such a disposition has its roots in what is known as the 'prototype theory' of concepts (Rosch et al. 1976), but it was first explicitly formulated by Medin: 'People act as if things (e.g. objects) have essences or underlying natures that make them the thing that they are' (1989:1476).

This, he suggested, happens because, while essentialism is 'bad metaphysics' (as I have discussed above), it may be 'good epistemology' (1989:1477). In other words, even if an essentialist description of the world is ultimately (metaphysically) incorrect, it is 'efficient'

3. For a more detailed, but nevertheless succinct definition, see Gelman (2004: box 1, p405)

in the sense of ‘efficiency’ implied by the principle of cognitive economy—‘the tendency for cognitive processes to minimize processing effort and resources’ (entry for ‘Cognitive Economy’ in Colman 2008). This argument, clearly, is evolutionary: it is because an essentialist epistemology is, broadly speaking, advantageous and adaptive that essentialism became an inherent property of the human cognitive system.

Barrett (2001) offers some detail as to why essentialism is advantageous in the sense just discussed. The key lies in its potential for ‘inductive inference’. Essentialism ‘allows one to exploit the causal structure of the world (of natural kinds, in particular), without necessarily knowing anything about the causes themselves’ (2001:7). There are two parts to this claim. The first is that the world does, in fact, have a rich ‘causal structure’ and that this structure explains observable regularities. So, to use an example that is frequent in the literature on essentialism, the world is such that all tigers share a great number of properties: they have similar colours, walk and hunt in the same way, are fierce predators, roar in a particular way, etc. The actual reason that all tigers share such properties is down to many complex causal relations and chains that make up the world, including, for example, ‘the executive control of DNA and cellular regulatory machinery’ (2001:13). The second part of the claim is that these actual causes are hard to know. However, even if they are hard to know, it is advantageous to be able to rapidly and inductively infer, upon meeting a *new* tiger, that this one is likely to display the *same* properties as other tigers. The key evolutionary claim is that an essentialist mental representation of tigers allows for precisely this kind of inference. If one construes tigers essentially—if one holds a representation according to which tigers are the way that they are because of some invisible, inner tiger-essence which they share—this is sufficient for inductive inference to take place.⁴

The proposition that humans have evolved an innate essentialist disposition generated considerable amounts of research in the disciplines of cognitive and developmental psychology. Gelman’s *The Essential Child* (2003) is the authoritative volume on this topic. This is an extensive and astonishingly meticulous presentation of the multiple experiments conducted by developmental psychologists to determine whether young children think in essentialist terms. The motivation for studying children is the assumption, common in

4. Tigers are just one example. There is an ongoing debate concerning which kinds the evolutionary argument may hold true of. It is generally admitted that it holds true of biological kinds, and many suggest it applies for natural kinds too.

developmental psychology, that the younger the age at which a given psychological property (in this case, essentialism) can be detected, the more likely it is that this property is innate rather than acquired. A description of the experimental protocols used by Gelman and others is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but a good summary of their results is available in Gelman (2004).⁵ These results show that

- Young children make category-based inferences consistent with the suggestion that they hold essentialist representations of natural, biological, and social kinds, in so far as they are not swayed by an entity's superficial properties. For example, upon learning that an object which resembles a leaf is in fact an insect, young children will ascribe insect-like properties to the object despite its leaf-like appearance (Gelman and Markman 1986, 1987). Similar effects can be detected in children as young as one and two years old.
- Children believe that membership in certain categories is fixed at birth and immutable. They believe this to be the case for animals, plants and (importantly for the subject of this dissertation) social categories. Thus 'children as young as four years of age appreciate that the identity of animal and other natural kinds can persist in the face of massive transformations' (Gelman 2003:64). This is fully in line with the suggestion that such categories are construed essentially: the attribution of an essence is what explains unchanging identity—a tiger is a tiger is a tiger—in the face of individual transformation (e.g. a tamed tiger, an albino tiger).
- When they are as young as three years old, children are attentive to 'underlying structures'. That is, they offer consistent explanations for the properties that members of a category share, and in doing so they privilege internal, invisible properties.

In the face of such results, Gelman asks whether the essentialism which she and her associates observe in very young children is simply learnt through interaction with parents, or whether it is the result of an innate human disposition. An entire chapter of *The Essential Child* is dedicated to this topic. The findings are summarised as follows:

5. I report these results in an extremely condensed form here, and do not cite the multiple studies (by multiple authors) that provide evidence for these results. Gelman's paper includes an extensive list of references.

We found a mismatch between maternal speech documented in this project and children's knowledge as revealed in prior experimental tasks. Although children have a rich set of beliefs about insides, teleology, and animal origins ... mothers provided almost no corresponding input about these topics. *We found no evidence that mothers teach essentialism to their children* (Gelman 2003:175, emphasis added).

On this basis, Gelman concludes that 'children are not passive recipients of essentializing: they construct essentialism largely on their own' (Gelman 2003: 297).

Although there is now a fairly widespread consensus that humans have an innate disposition to essentialise, a number of questions are still unresolved. One, for example, concerns the *extent* to which humans think along essentialist lines. Some researchers suggest that essentialism is a domain-general bias, which is to say that it affects *all* the categories which humans use. Proponents of this hypothesis often suggest that essentialism is a by-product of the human capacity for language (Gelman 2003:14–15; Carey 1996). Recently, it has been suggested that psychological essentialism is even more general, not a feature limited to categorisation but rather a much deeper property of human cognition, involved in a much larger class of cognitive abilities (Quillien 2018). At the other end of the spectrum, some researchers suggest that psychological essentialism is limited to, or at least only strongly present in, the way in which humans think about specific categories (e.g. Atran 1998; Atran, Medin, and Ross 2002). Those who defend such views generally adopt a 'modular' model of the mind, according to which the mind is divided into sub-systems specialising in the treatment of different types of information. They then attribute essentialism to the way in which one or more of these subsystems function.

The details of these debates, although fascinating, need not concern us here. What matters is only that much of the research agrees on the fact that humans have an innate disposition to essentialise not only tigers and natural kinds, but also (at least some) *social groups*. Some researchers (e.g. Hirschfeld 1998, 2007; Hirschfeld et al. 2007) suggest that this is due to a 'folksociological' module, a cognitive subsystem dedicated solely to the treatment of social groups. Others defend that essentialism about social groups is, to simplify, a 'carry-over' from modules dedicated to processing other categories, e.g. 'species' (Gil-White 2001).

Others still view it as just one manifestation of a much broader tendency towards essentialism (Newman and Knobe 2019). But again, which of these propositions is correct is immaterial to the argument I am making here. What matters is only the recognition that psychological essentialism is an innate disposition that affects the way in which humans think about groups, irrespective of the exact cognitive ‘implementation’ of essentialism.

Many anthropologists are likely to treat the proposition that humans have an innate disposition to essentialise social groups with scepticism. They will point to the ethnographic record to show that humans often have *non-essentialist* understandings of social categories. Indeed, there are a number of ethnographically documented places where people do not essentialise group identity. The Malay fishers studied by Carsten (1995, 1999) are an example. These people, who think of kinship and relatedness as processual and malleable, do not conceive of identity as caused by an immutable ‘blood’ transmitted at birth and unchangeable over the life course. The Vezo of Madagascar, studied by Astuti (1995b, 1995a) are another example. They have a non-essentialist view of group identity, holding that one can become and cease to be Vezo depending on one’s *behaviour*. The Peruvians studied by Hale (2014, 2015) are yet another example, holding what Hale refers to as a ‘non-essentialist theory of race’.

There are two problems with this objection. First, these ethnographers do not tell us whether the people whom they study are non-essentialist with regards to other categories than human group identity. Do Malay fishermen have non-essentialist understanding of plants, animals, gods, etc.? The observation that some people are non-essentialist when it comes to group identity does not imply that these people are non-essentialist in general. Far more serious, however, is the second problem. These ethnographies only show that it is possible for *adults* to develop and maintain non-essentialist theories of identity; in other words, they can be used as evidence to reject the hypothesis that humans are *irreversibly* essentialist about group identity. But this is a hypothesis that no reasonable cognitive scientist would formulate in the first place: psychological essentialism is a disposition, not a rigid constraint.

The Vezo are a case in point. In later work, Astuti, Solomon, and Carey (2004) took the experimental protocols used to detect essentialism in Euro-American contexts and, after

adapting them to a new cultural environment, used them with Vezo adults *and* children. The results are remarkable: even here, children manifest essentialist understandings of identity, which they later have to ‘unlearn’ in order to adhere to the ‘adult’, non-essentialist theory. Because of the setting in which it was conducted, this research provides some of the most compelling evidence for the innate character of essentialism. This is because, given that Vezo adults have explicit *anti-essentialist* theories of human identity, their children cannot learn from adults the *essentialist* understandings which they manifest. The best available explanation is that the children’s essentialism is caused by an innate bias.

There is further evidence for essentialism about social categories among young children in a variety of contexts. For example, Río and Strasser (2010) find essentialist thinking about poverty and class among Chilean children. Diesendruck et al. (2013) find it among American and Israeli children for gender. Most recently, a study by Davoodi et al. (2019) compares the degree to which five different social categories are essentialised by children in the USA and Turkey; it finds that in both contexts, gender is the most essentialised, followed by nationality, then socio-economic status, then religion; finally, the *least* essentialised category is sports teams. The results in both cultural contexts are strikingly similar.

The essentialism of caste

The vast majority of the research on how psychological essentialism influences the perception of social groups concerns race, ethnicity, and gender. There is precious little on caste. The main exception here is the work of Mahalingam (Mahalingam 1998, 2007a; Mahalingam and Rodriguez 2006). This research, conducted in Tamil Nadu, suggests that caste is indeed construed in essentialist terms and that upper castes hold *more* essentialist understandings than Dalits. This is an interesting if not entirely surprising result because it shows that the essentialist bias is *not* insulated from the social context.

In this section, I want to explain in what sense psychological essentialism underpins the way the category ‘Dalit’ is construed in Nepal. The easiest way to do this is by showing how well the way people think and talk about Dalits maps onto key properties of psychological essentialism. These are concisely summarised by Gelman (2003:23), who lists six properties essentialised concepts, using the concept BIRD as her example.

- **sharp boundaries:** Essentialised concepts are not fuzzy. A thing either is a bird or not; there is no such thing as almost-birds or part-birds.
- **stability over transformation:** A bird remains a bird throughout its existence; nothing which happens to a bird can transform it into something else. (This is because the essence of the bird is not subject to transformation.)
- **nonobvious properties:** Birds share many nonobvious properties with other birds, including some which are yet to be discovered.
- **causal features:** It is assumed that the essence of a bird is causally linked to its external features, and that the essence is shared by all birds.
- **inductive potential:** This follows from the previous point. From the observation of one bird, one can infer properties which are assumed to be true of all birds. This is because all birds are thought to share the same essence, and that this essence is causally linked to the induced properties.
- **nature vs nurture:** Birds are thought to be a natural, 'real' category which was discovered, not invented by scientists out of convenience.

Similarly, the category 'Dalit' in Nepal has

- **sharp boundaries:** A person either is or is not a Dalit. In Nepal, there is no such thing as a person who is of 'mixed caste'. I asked many people, many times, whether there were individuals who are of mixed caste or who belong to more than one caste, and I was systematically met with a negative response. To an extent, this was true even in the case of people in intercaste marriages, which the upcoming chapters will address in detail.
- **stability over transformation:** A Dalit remains a Dalit no matter what he or she does. Chapters 3 and 4 have amply demonstrated this.

There is a legitimate question as to whether a non-Dalit can 'become' a Dalit. Non-Dalits talk colloquially of the possibility of their caste 'going away' (*jāt jancha*) and of becoming a Dalit if they interact in the wrong ways with Dalits. This idea, which

is declining, will be addressed in more detail in chapter 9.

- **nonobvious properties:** Dalits were, historically, thought to be ‘polluting’. As shown in chapter 2 and the anecdote about Krishna with which I opened this chapter, untouchability does appear to be disappearing from the public sphere. However, this should not be interpreted as evidence that people have stopped thinking that there is an underlying, nonobvious property which makes Dalits lower and inferior. In the past, the notion that Dalits are polluting, dangerous, and contaminating was constantly asserted publicly, through various practices and avoidances. Now that these practices are fading away, Dalits are still thought to be inherently ‘dirty’ and ‘lowly’, but the exact nature of their ‘dirtiness’ and ‘lowliness’ is less specific, less identifiable than in the past. Thus, the invisible property or essence which make a Dalit what he or she is is in fact becoming *increasingly* nonobvious.
- **causal features and inductive potential:** While there is no explicit discourse about how the ‘Dalitness’ of a Dalit is connected to the external properties of Dalits—in fact, there is no such term as ‘Dalit-ness’ in Nepali—what is clear is that the category ‘Dalit’ *is* invested with very high inductive potential. Upon learning that an individual is a Dalit, people make a number of assumptions, almost all negative, about that individual.
- **nature vs nurture:** The extent to which Dalits are thought to be a ‘natural’ rather than a human-made category is unclear. The explicit theory today is that there is no such thing as caste, that ‘there are only two kinds of people: men and women’, and that caste was made by humans rather than the gods. On the other hand, the word for ‘caste’ in Nepali is *jāt*, which literally translates as ‘species’ or ‘kind’. Moreover, in the ‘traditional’ view, according to which caste does have a divine origin, caste was seen as something ontologically deep and awaiting discovery, rather than something manufactured.

Conclusion

Why should anthropologists take an interest in psychological essentialism? What is lacking in the more habitual social, historical and political explanations for social essentialism? In my view, one perfectly valid answer to this question is, quite simply, that anthropologists ought to be interested in the question of the human mind and how it functions, because they ought to be interested in human universals. Questions pertaining to human universals were foundational for the discipline (Bloch 2005) and it is arguably on such questions that anthropology has made its most insightful and important contributions. There is a concerted effort by a small number anthropologists to push the discipline back towards the study of universals by inscribing it within the broader field of cognitive science (see e.g. Bloch 2013; Astuti and Bloch 2012; Keen 2014; Regnier and Astuti 2015; Beller and Bender 2015; Crivelli, Jarillo, and Fridlund 2016; Bloch 2017).

Beyond such general considerations, the current dichotomy between, on the one hand, historical and political explanations for social essentialism, and on the other, psychological ones, is fundamentally limiting. Psychologists run the risk of studying social essentialism in something of a cultural and historical 'void', and therefore of not questioning the social and political conditions which encourage it. (Indeed, this is the impression one often gets while reading psychology papers on the topic.) Anthropologists, conversely, run the risk of interpreting the social essentialism which they regularly observe as solely a matter of power, inequality, and social organisation. The lack of an integrated approach has important practical consequences. Social essentialism drives many undesirable phenomena: racism, ethnic conflict, gender inequality, and, the one which I am concerned with here, caste-based discrimination. If we make the mistake of thinking that essentialism is purely cognitive in origin, we run the risk of overlooking the political contexts in which it thrives. If we make the mistake of thinking that essentialism is purely social in origin, we are likely to assume that it can be done away with simply by eliminating the social conditions under which it emerged. Hirschfeld (2012) gives an example of how the latter can happen, denouncing 'myths' on how to reduce racial bias that are common among educators in the USA. One example of research that does successfully address both the psychological and social origins of social essentialism is that conducted by Denis Regnier (2012, 2015) in Madagascar, which shows that the ongoing essentialisation of slave descendants is best

understood as a combination of psychological essentialism and the specific way in which abolition was carried out in that country.

Psychological essentialism provides a compelling explanation for the ethnographic phenomena presented in this thesis so far. Hitherto, the narrative has been double. First, I have argued that the strategies deployed in order to improve the social standing of Dalits and to eliminate untouchability ultimately fail because non-Dalits continue to perceive Dalits as an unchangeable kind of people. This is what I referred to, in the opening section of this chapter, as the 'resilience' of caste. Second, I have argued that this perception stands in contradiction with an explicit social ontology according to which there is only one kind of human. In the previous chapter, I argued that this explicit social ontology could not simply be ignored, that a good interpretation could not reduce it to hypocrisy. Psychological essentialism can help explain the resilience of social essentialism in the presence of an explicitly anti-essentialist social ontology. Specifically, it can help explain why, despite what people sincerely say about the unity of humankind, Dalits are still represented as a different kind of people. This is because psychological essentialism delivers the implicit theory that the world is made up of essentially different people, among which are Dalits.

If I am correct, we must ask what strategies, beyond those discussed in the first part of this thesis, could effectively reduce the impact of psychological essentialism in Nepal. The notion of 'mixing', we will see, is key. This is the topic to which I turn in the following chapters.

Part III

Mixing

Chapter 8

Mixing

This chapter and the next two ask whether ‘mixing’ is a viable strategy for Dalits to reduce caste-based discrimination, and if so, according to which understanding of ‘mixing’ such a strategy might operate.

Background: is Nepal a ‘mixed’ society?

Early in my fieldwork, during my first break away from Sarmagaon, in Kathmandu, I met with Kanak Dixit, a well-known journalist and public intellectual in Nepal. We sat together in the pleasant, impeccably maintained interior court of Dhokaima, an upmarket café in the old Patan. I was struck by how foreign this environment would appear to my friends in Sarmagaon. We spoke about many topics. One remark that stayed with me was Dixit’s description of Nepali society, especially in the Eastern hills where I was conducting fieldwork, as ‘mixed’. ‘In the hills,’ he said, ‘ethnicities are mixed to the ground level’.

In what sense is this the case?

The people of Sarmagaon are certainly not mixed in the *mestizo* sense, common in Latin America. That is to say, single individuals do not declare themselves to be of bilaterally reckoned, mixed descent and, as a result, to be of ‘mixed caste’ or ‘mixed ethnicity’. They do not think of caste and ethnicity in the way that the people of Northern Peru think of race. The latter have what Hale (2015) calls a ‘non-essentialist theory of race’. They do

not separate humans into racial kinds, distinguishing who is ‘black’ and who is ‘white’, because of the history of interracial mixing which they are the product of. In Sammagaon and in Nepal more generally, the opposite obtains. Because of caste endogamy, people always declare themselves to belong to a single *jāt* or *jāti*, and have no problem identifying which one. A Tamang is a Tamang, a Sunuwar a Sunuwar, a Bahun a Bahun. The mixing which Dixit was alluding to, I believe, is therefore mostly geographical: people of different castes and ethnicities live in close proximity to each other and interact on a daily basis.

There are some caveats to acknowledge here. Some people in Sammagaon are ‘Khatri’, which means that they or one of their ancestors are the child of an upper-caste man and a *janajāti* woman. As noted earlier in this thesis, one way in which Hinduism was originally spread to the remote areas of Nepal was through deliberate hypergamous intermarriage between the Hindu upper-castes and the (originally) non-Hindu *janajāti*. The child of such a couple was assigned the caste of ‘Khatri’.¹ Nevertheless, to be Khatri is not to be of ambiguous descent. If anything, the category works to *resolve* any ambiguity which the parent’s union could have otherwise created, since ‘Khatri’ is said to be equivalent in all ways to ‘Chhetri’.

Second, there are documented cases of individuals and groups of individuals changing which caste or ethnic group they belong to, of entirely new ethnic identities being created, and of certain identities disappearing. There is therefore some sense in which group identity in Nepal could be called ‘fluid’. Gellner (2012:93–94) lists a number of historical examples, referring in particular to Levine (1987), whose work is one of the pioneering contributions on this topic. However, even in these cases, the changes that occur are not shifts towards an identity understood as ‘mixed’. Any one individual still belongs to one group and one group only. Additionally, the scope of such changes is quite limited. As Gellner himself notes, ‘ethnic identities are indeed fluid, when seen over the very long term; but from the individual’s point of view they are often very far from easily changeable’ (2012:99). What is more, as far as I know, no such fluidity has ever existed for Dalits. The closest documented phenomenon I am aware of is that discussed by Folmar (2007) and BK (2013), whereby Dalits hide their caste when they move to urban environments.

1. The 1854 MA suggests that ‘Khatri’ was historically the child of a Bahun and a Chhetri or a Chhetri and *janajāti*, but not of a Bahun and a *janajāti* (Höfer 2004[1979]:51–55). The remarks here reflect what I was told in Nepal. This minor discrepancy is not relevant to the topic at hand.

They tell their landlords, employers and neighbours that they belong to a non-Dalit caste. However, these ‘politics of anonymity’ (Folmar’s term) are always understood as a matter of dissimulating one’s true caste identity, never as a claim that one is actually no longer Dalit.² The Bishwakarma’s claim to be ‘fallen’ Bahun, as per Ganga’s explanations in chapter 3, could also be interpreted as an attempt to change the caste status of the Bishwakarma, to make them upper-caste rather than Dalit. This however has not been successful so far, and it remains to be seen whether any such attempt could be fruitful in the future.

Thus, despite the documented ‘fluidity’ of identity in Nepal, and despite the geographical sense in which ethnicities are ‘mixed to the ground level’ in Sammagaon, there simply is no such thing as a ‘mixed caste’ model which individuals can claim to belong to, and any possibility of long-term caste change has so far been restricted to non-Dalits.

All this is in line with the conclusions reached in the previous chapter. Dalits are construed in essentialist terms to a greater degree than any other group. The boundary which separates them from others is one which allows no transformation. It is not strictly impermeable since, as we shall see, it is possible for a non-Dalit to become a Dalit, but any movement in the other direction is impossible.

For the most part, the strategies deployed by the Bishwakarma to improve their social status, examined in the first part of this thesis, are attempts to change their public image. They are attempts to do away with the negative representations associated with the Bishwakarma, but not to question whether the category ‘Bishwakarma’ or the category ‘Dalit’ pick out a precise set of people. These strategies, in other terms, do not challenge the essentialist representations of the Bishwakarma as a distinct ‘kind’ of people, they simply try to change what ‘kind of kind’ they are seen as.

One exception is the collective feasts organised by the Maoists, in which Dalits and non-Dalits were made to eat together. This type of action is distinctive because it seems to be based on mixing Dalits and non-Dalits, in an attempt to make people separated by caste more similar to each other. In this chapter and the next, I further address ‘mixing’ as a strategy aiming not to change the public image of Dalits, but instead to re-negotiate the

² Chapter 9 will discuss one attempt by Dalits in Puranogaon to *actually* transform themselves into Magars.

boundary between Dalits and others. I will show that there are two ways in which this can happen. One is by *blurring* the boundary, making it difficult to know who falls on which side. The other is by bringing as many people as possible to the same side of the boundary, so that its practical relevance becomes reduced.

In discussing this topic, I will pay particular attention to marriage between Dalits and non-Dalits. I open, however, with a different type of mixing.

Mixing blood

Ilesh Dehegli is the twenty-seven-year-old man who appeared in chapter 4, where I described his desire to create a culture which the Bishwakarma could call 'their own'. In the later stages of my fieldwork, I occasionally met with him in Kathmandu. On one such occasion, he invited me to a blood donation programme that he had organised. Ilesh had spent several weeks preparing the event. He had made arrangements with the Red Cross, who provided the necessary medical equipment and sent two volunteer nurses. He had found a private school in Jorpati, a neighbourhood in the north-eastern outskirts of Kathmandu, which would host the event. He had personally invited over a hundred people, called the press and media, told politicians about his programme, and done as much promotion as possible.

His efforts paid off. On the day of the event, everything went smoothly. When I arrived, I was greeted by a number of people, all curious about my presence. I shook a few hands and was instructed to sit and make myself comfortable. I took a quick look around and registered to take part in the programme. After eating a couple of bananas on the advice of one of the nurses, I gave blood. Once done, the bag containing my blood was placed, with all the others, in a large medical container with the inscription 'Blood Transport'. I declined an invitation to be fed somewhere away from the school grounds, so that I could stay on site and observe, had another banana to convince the person inviting me that I really did not need more food, and settled down to take in what was happening.

It was a sunny, pleasant day, so it worked well to be outside, in front of the school building. A steady flow of people was coming in, donating their blood, chatting with others for a while and leaving with one of the colourful certificates Ilesh and other members of the

organising committee were signing and distributing. I claimed my own (figure 8.1). It read, in English,

Letter of Appreciation

With the slogan 'Campaign of Blood Donation for Social Collaboration' on the occasion of the international day for the elimination of racial discriminations 21st March the BACSD Center has organised Blood Donation Program. We would like to provide certificate of applause You Mr/Miss [Ivan Deschenaux, filled in by hand] to participate the program volunteering donated blood.

[signatures of the Chairman, Program Director, Program Coordinator, and one 'Guest']

If you need blood contact us with this certificate.

In the upper left corner was the logo of the BACSDC, a globe centred on the African continent, on which Nepal barely figured and from which the Americas were missing, drowned under a vast Atlantic *cum* Pacific ocean. The globe was encircled in the arms of a green-brown silhouette, at the bottom of which white, cut-out buildings symbolised Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. I was not quite sure what any of this had to do with the Bishwakarma, but it certainly had the flair of Nepal's development-driven sense of modernity.

Altogether, more than 100 people must have taken part in the event. Ilesh was satisfied with the attendance. I was surprised that no presentation, speech, or explanation was given during the programme, since it is customary to do so at this type of event. Ilesh explained that he had decided against it because people might feel too weak to listen after giving blood. I was aware that the programme had deep meaning for Ilesh and worried about this lack of communication, but Ilesh said he was confident that he had successfully communicated his message. He had given an official statement to the press as well as to several politicians, one of whom had made a quick appearance at the programme.

I interviewed Ilesh on the day of the event, asking him to explain what the blood donation meant. The account which follows is compiled from my notes and this interview.



Figure 8.1: Blood donation certificate



Figure 8.2: Ilesh's blood donation programme

The programme was organised to coincide with the United Nations' International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which translates to Nepali as 'International Day [for] the Eradication of Colour Discrimination' (*antarrashtriya ranga ved unamulan divas*). Ilesh explained that though other countries suffer from racism, the equivalent in Nepal is caste-based discrimination (*jātiya bhedbhav*). Hence many Dalit organisations hold a programme on this day.

Other organisations had put together various activities. Many had organised feasts in which people of all castes ate together. Ilesh said that these are too common. He wanted to demarcate himself by doing something different. He wanted to take things one step further. One organisation had prepared debates at the Hotel Himalaya, a well-known luxury establishment, to discuss the government's declaration that the country was now officially 'free from untouchability' (*cuvvachhut ko mukta*). Ilesh's tone and body language indicated that he did not think much of this option.

The first explanation he offered me for choosing blood donation was as follows:

Ilesh Dehegli:³ This is a *revolution*. It is a *revolution*. Because after taking out my blood, it is put into somebody else. It is put there. After it has been put there, I have been mixed with that person, haven't I? *We want to make our relationship too much mutual [very mutual],⁴ through blood*. That's the purpose.

Ivan Deschenaux: So, if I have understood correctly, the meaning of this programme is that the blood of Dalits and non-Dalits should be mixed?

Ilesh Dehegli: Yes. We must take it out. One can take out Dalit blood and give it to a non-Dalit; one can take out non-Dalit blood and give it to a Dalit. This means we must all have cordial relations. And this, this is a *movement*. It is a *protest*. After extracting our blood and giving it to others, liberation from untouchability will ensue. Our *first priority* is to make this *elimination* [of untouchability] happen.

Ilesh's primary purpose, therefore, is to blur the boundary that exists between Dalits and

3. *Italics* originally spoken in English, in this and following excerpts

4. This is a common use of the superlative in Nepali English.

non-Dalits by mixing with them in a deep, physiological way. The mixing of blood is done in the same spirit as the mixing that is achieved through commensality, but as Ilesh noted, it goes one step further because blood is much more obviously linked to the body than food:

Ivan Deschenaux: What is the main message today?

Ilesh Dehegli: The main message is this. On the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, we performed a blood donation (*raktadān*). Through this blood donation, by giving blood, we seek to free the country from untouchability—to do so *practically*. We have tried to do this *practically*. What others do is try to prevent it tomorrow, prevent it legally, on paper only. But today, we do this *practically*. ‘Let’s give them food, let’s enter their houses.’—This is only entering, only eating. We tried to add a *relation* of the body.

Beyond the desire to eliminate untouchability through tangible, ‘practical’ action, a secondary aim of the blood donation programme was to show that the difference between Dalits and non-Dalits is not *real* in the first place.

Ivan Deschenaux: With regard to untouchability, why is blood important?

Ilesh Dehegli: [...] Can a man survive without blood? Without blood, can he survive? He can’t.

Ivan Deschenaux: He can’t.

Ilesh Dehegli: If he cannot, that means that this is the most important thing to save. If this life-saving matter is made acceptable, we can all be one in the world. This is our main idea. Let’s imagine we take out all the blood from my body. Do I survive? I don’t, do I? Nobody can survive [without blood]. But even more important than this is the fact that we are all one. People in Nepal, they say that no matter who gets cut, the same blood will come out. They say that humans are all the same. By extracting blood, we want to show that we are indeed the same. It is not only something we say, it is something that we do and show.

Blood, as others have noted, is a particularly potent semiotic device (Carsten 2013). In Ilesh's programme, it fills several roles. First, through transfusion, it has the potential to foster physiological, bodily mixing between Dalits and non-Dalits. It can create a shared substance where there was none earlier, in a way that food alone is too weak to effect. Second, it reinforces the view that all humans are one. In the medical context of the programme, blood has a third role, not stated explicitly by Ilesh, but present nevertheless. It turns on its head the usual assumption made about bodily fluids and pollution in Nepal. Blood, as Ilesh describes it, is a vital, life-sustaining substance. It is a necessity, diametrically opposed to *jutho*, the polluting bodily excretions that one should avoid at all cost. It is also worth noting that this conception is diametrically opposed to the usual view of menstrual blood, also traditionally seen as a highly polluting substance.

Ilesh's programme was one of my most explicit encounters with 'mixing' as a strategy to reduce untouchability. Nevertheless, as he was explaining the significance of his programme, at the back of my mind were the remarks which he had made when I first met him, about creating an association aiming specifically to promote *Bishwakarma* culture. I wondered how the goal of mixing everybody's blood and demonstrating the unity of humankind might square with the identity-focused politics which Ilesh had told me about when I first met him. We talked about this in the second half of the interview. Ilesh was first extremely clear about the fact that, while his association only admitted Bishwakarma people on its board, it was fully opposed to intra-Dalit untouchability, of the sort which exists between, for example, the Bishwakarma and the Darji. This phenomenon, he explained in clear terms, needs to be eliminated just as much as the untouchability that exists between non-Dalits and Dalits. Ilesh presented the decision to start a Bishwakarma association rather than one focusing on Dalits in general as a matter of practicality. The Bishwakarma, he said, 'know each other'. They are 'close' to each other. It is easier, he explained, to work with people who are of the same caste as oneself.

Ilesh Dehegli: To do any work well, the better one knows each other, the closer one is to another, the easier it is. Isn't that the case? It's easy. For example, if we have to work together, if I was a fully new person [to you], *you can't take me this time*. There is no time for this and that, for whatever may happen. If we know each other, then it's fine. Then it's easy to work. That's it. For example, if

you are my brother-in-law, or this person or that one—if we belong to the same *jāti*, then it's fine (*milchha*). It will be easier to work, and our rise will be easier.

Ivan Deschenaux: In your opinion, is it not possible to work with friends from other Dalit *jāti*?

Ilesh Dehgli: It is a little difficult. Caste conflict happens. In the Jagaran [Jagaran Media Centre, a Dalit association which Ilesh was previously involved with], this is what happened.

Ivan Deschenaux: Please explain this to me. This is new to me.

Ilesh Dehgli: This happens because casteism (*jātibad*) between *jāti* takes place. [It's a matter of] *brotherhood relation*. *Blood is thicker than water*. *Blood is thicker than water*.

At this point, I expressed my surprise. I pointed out that, in twenty-five minutes of interview, we had gone from the importance of mixing bloods and showing that everybody is fundamentally *the same* to the statement that 'blood is thicker than water'. I asked Ilesh why he had just used this expression at a programme which he had himself organised and in which the unity of human blood was being made salient. To this, Ilesh replied that my understanding of the idiom 'blood is thicker than water' was wrong, repeating that it is important to mix the bloods but that it also is easier to fight caste-based discrimination with members of one's own *jāti* than with others.

My intent here is not to pick on Ilesh for using the somewhat unfortunate expression 'blood is thicker than water'. Having interacted with him on several occasions, I have no doubt about his sincere desire to get rid of all forms of caste-based discrimination. And while I am not able to assess his suggestion that inter-Dalit conflict causes problems in other associations, this is certainly possible. Nevertheless, there remains a noticeable contrast between his intent to promote a *Bishwakarma* culture modelled on the ethnic politics of Nepal (as reported in chapter 4), his creating an association whose board only admits *Bishwakarma* members, and his desire to foster 'mixing' until the boundaries between castes are no longer identifiable.

My take on this is that Dalit activists such as Ilesh are trapped in a series of difficult conundrums. Should they deny the importance or even the very existence of caste by stating that all humans are the same? Or should they create and promote a positive image of the group which they belong to, following the *janajāti* model of ethnic politics? If they choose the latter, should they attempt to forge a pan-Dalit identity despite existing divisions and relations of untouchability between the different Dalit castes? Or should they promote their own, specific caste, at the risk of ignoring or even reproducing the problem of inter-Dalit discrimination? The problem for Dalit activists is the sheer complexity of the situation which they wish to change. In the face of such complexity, it is perhaps unsurprising that Ilesh's attitude is a composite of all these possibilities.

And given such complexity, it would be too easy to blame Dalit activists in Nepal for inconsistency. My view is that the history of Dalit oppression alone warrants attempting every strategy, at the risk of inconsistencies. In any case, it is not my aim to produce a formal critique of Ilesh's activism here. What I wish to do instead is to highlight 'mixing' as a counter-current to identity politics, one which works against the impact of psychological essentialism and might therefore effectively combat the representation of Dalits as a 'different kind' of human. Instead of doing away with the stigma attached to Dalits, the ultimate goal of mixing is, according to Ilesh's description, to do away with the very social category 'Dalit' and to insist on the unity of humans. There is, in this sense, a trace of the *mestizo* way of thinking about race in Ilesh's attempt to make relations between castes 'too much mutual'.

Intercaste marriage

I am convinced that the real remedy is intermarriage. Fusion of blood can alone create the feeling of being kith and kin, and unless this feeling of kinship, of being kindred, becomes paramount, the separatist feeling—the feeling of being aliens—created by caste will not vanish. [...] The real remedy for breaking caste is intermarriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent of caste.

— B.R. Ambedkar, '*Annihilation of Caste*'

This quote from Ambedkar's (2014[1936]:285) famous undelivered speech is followed by a

caveat: if intercaste marriage were the method through which caste might, in principle, be eliminated once and for all, a major problem was that such marriages were extremely rare in India in his time. What was required to make intermarriage more frequent? Ambedkar's views are well-known. He argued that it is Hinduism itself which makes intermarriage repulsive to Hindus, and therefore that the only way for caste to be well and truly 'annihilated' was to move away from Hinduism.

What struck me when I first encountered the quotation reproduced above is how akin it is to certain statements which I heard in Nepal, some eighty years after it was written. Although intermarriage, particularly between Dalits and others, is a fringe phenomenon in the country, there are nevertheless people who think that such marriages have the potential to reduce caste-based discrimination. It was only after returning from fieldwork that I realised that this suggestion is but the latest incarnation of an older, if radical, idea. In addition to Ambedkar's quotation above, one could mention the Self-Respect Movement, which was started in South India by Periyar E. V. Ramasamy in 1925 and which championed, among others, the slogan 'caste will be destroyed through intermarriage' (Hodges 2005:261).

In certain spheres in Nepal, the idea of marriage between Dalits and non-Dalits carries remarkably positive connotations; it is viewed either as a sign that society is advancing 'out of' caste and untouchability, or as a phenomenon that carries the potential to effect such an advancement.

A particularly striking example of this way of thinking is apparent in the so-called 'incentive' or 'grant' of NPR 100,000 (roughly USD 1,000) offered by the Ministry of Finance to newly-wed Dalit–non-Dalit couples. The grant was first introduced in 2009, and according to the most reliable sources I could find, is still available today, although the procedures to claim it have changed somewhat since its introduction. Couple's eligibility rests on a few criteria, in addition to the obvious requirement that one of the spouses be Dalit and the other not. Such criteria include specifications concerning the ages of the newly-weds, the requirement that a family member from both the husband's and the wife's family testify to the authenticity of the marriage, due registration of the marriage with the civil authorities, and depositing the claim to the incentive within thirty days of this registration.

What this amount represents for Nepali citizens depends on their social class, income status, and place of residence. NPR 100,000 represents between three and five monthly salaries of a teacher in a governmental primary school. It is about double what a labour migrant might earn in the Gulf on a monthly basis. For people who do not have formal employment, however, this amount is even more considerable. In Sammagaon, daily wages for non-specialised agricultural work in another person's fields are NPR 200 for men and NPR 150 for women and children.

It is difficult to obtain reliable data on how many couples have successfully claimed this money since the introduction of the provision. Part of the difficulty rests in the fact that, initially, district-level authorities were responsible for the distribution of the incentive. Some people told me that the only way to obtain accurate statistics would be to contact the authorities of each of the 75 districts independently. This suggestion might not be accurate, however, since under the updated process, district authorities have to report to the Ministry of Finance exactly how many eligible couples have claimed the money on a year-by-year basis. Setting aside the difficulty of obtaining accurate information, it seems safe to assume that the proportion of eligible couples who successfully claimed the incentive is low. One study found that, in the districts of Banke, Parbat and Danusha, only 18.7 per cent of 123 interviewed Dalit–non-Dalit couples had been awarded the money (Biswakarma 2013). Most of the Dalit–non-Dalit couples whom I met in rural and even urban parts of Nepal were either unaware of the provision or, more often, had heard of it but suspected that applying was a waste of time. They feared that there were too many administrative hoops to jump through, too many bribes to pay, too many trips to take to distant government offices, too many conditions to fulfil, and little hope of actually receiving the money in the end.

Setting problems of implementation to one side, the mere existence of a national financial incentive for marriage between Dalits and non-Dalits is significant. It constitutes a striking illustration of the way in which 'official', state-sanctioned discourses frame caste and untouchability in Nepal, namely as backward and undesirable. In this regard, the incentive is but one among several legal measures deployed in an attempt to curb caste-based discrimination, a better-known example being the 2011 'Caste-based Discrimination and Untouchability (Offence and Punishment) Act', which made practices of untouchability

an offence punishable by imprisonment.

Nevertheless, there is something which sets the incentive for intercaste marriage apart from other policies. By *promoting* the mixing of caste groups, the incentive seems to aim for something more than the simple prevention or punishment of caste-based discrimination. In this regard, it is different from the 2011 Act. The latter does contain a clause stating that no one may prevent another person from entering an intercaste marriage (article 4.11, National Dalit Commission 2011), yet the formulation only concerns people's individual liberties, rather than encouraging intercaste marriage. There is no suggestion that bringing about intercaste marriages is a *goal* of the Act. The incentive, on the other hand, seems closer to Ilesh's desire to foster 'practical' mixing.

Could the Ministry of Finance's incentive really be seen as a provision aimed at increasing the number of intercaste marriages in Nepal? Ratna BK, my (excellent) research assistant in Kathmandu, secured me an interview with Abeer BK, a highly-positioned politician who had been involved in the creation of this policy. Abeer explained that there were several factors which had motivated the establishment of the policy. One was that Dalit-non-Dalit couples are typically shunned by their relatives and have to flee to the city and live without any support from their families. Because of this, they need financial help. Another, more strategic motivation was to give the CPN-UML party, under whose government the policy was initiated, a better public image. But it was the third motivation, by far the one we spent the most time discussing, which struck me most:

Abeer BK: Now, we are Dalits, and we are convinced that lower castes and upper castes are the same, right? Now, how to support this? If a couple marries intercaste, something must be done to abolish the caste system, right? [...] In the case of intercaste marriage, by giving support to Dalits, Dalits' and non-Dalits' *socialisation* takes place. *Inclusion* takes place. Because of this, by giving this money, we provide support.

In this description, the incentive is framed as a means of 'abolishing the caste system' (*jāt-pat hataunu*), as an instrument which can create 'inclusion' and 'socialisation'.⁵ How might

5. It is noteworthy that 'inclusion' here is being used very differently from the 'inclusion' which was central to the writing of the country's 2015 constitution. The former is about making people closer and more similar to each other, while the latter was more about giving legal recognition to

intercaste marriage effect such changes?

Ivan Deschenaux: My question is, why do you think that intercaste marriage is a way to fight caste-based discrimination?

A BK: Right. How can this be? I explained it before, didn't I? To sit together and drink tea, to sit together and eat food, these things are only a matter of mentality (*bhavana*). They are a matter of mentality, inconsequential things (*kehi hundaina bhanne kura*). But after getting married? Well, marriage is a *day-to-day* matter. [...] I said it before: it is a matter of *blood*, right? Suppose a child is born. Now *society* changes quite wholly, right? As a consequence, this thing called untouchability does not happen. When people agree, when they agree with each other, when their heart is satisfied, it is possible to marry. This cannot be stopped by caste.

In the first part of this answer, Abeer makes remarks which are strikingly similar to what Ilesh said about commensality. Like him, he suggests that the sharing of food and drink between Dalits and non-Dalits is insignificant. Such acts are inconsequential; they have no tangible effect. I should note that, after living in Sammagon for over a year, I found these remarks perplexing, since the fact that Dalits and others can share food and drink is not a given there. I suspect that one reason Dalit activists and politicians say this is that they have grown accustomed to social spheres in which commensality is common.⁶ Still, as I will show in the next chapter, even in Sammagaon, where commensality is rare, there is a sense in which Abeer and Ilesh are right that commensality has no consequence. In the meantime, suffice it to note that sharing food is, at the very least, inconsequential *in comparison* to intercaste marriage.

Clues as to why intercaste marriage is so significant come in the second part of Abeer's answer. As in Ambedkar's quotation above, and in a way that recalls Ilesh's programme, marriage is a matter of 'blood'. It involves a biological kind of mixing much more remarkable than the multiplicity of ethnic and caste groups who live in Nepal.

6. Cameron (2010) offers a different take on what separates Dalit activists and Dalits living in rural Nepal. In her view, when the former focus on identity politics, they overlook the exploitative, traditional system of economic exchange which the latter live in *and* the forms of resistance and agency which rural Dalits develop within this system. This suggestion does not ring true of Sammagaon where, as I have stated earlier, the Bishwakarma do not take part in any traditional exchange system.

able than what occurs through simple acts of commensality. It involves the mixing—or ‘fusion’ to use Ambedkar’s term—which takes place through sex and procreation. It can change the partners engaging in sex themselves, and further holds the potential, when these partners are of different castes, to create new *kinds* of humans that are not quite as rigidly Dalit or non-Dalit as their parents. A suggestion made by Bloch comes to mind:

In fact, in all cases, kinship created through birth is believed to be less negotiable and therefore less potentially innovative than the unification coming from food and sex. These are therefore often seen as tools in the hands of actors by which they can affect change, or tune the unnegotiable aspect of parenthood and siblinghood (Bloch 1999:139).

Abeer BK’s understanding of mixing, however, was different to Ilesh’s in one significant regard. His view was not infused with the same notion that everybody’s blood is ‘equal’ and that caste therefore does not in fact exist. His was not a view aimed simply at creating a ‘feeling of being kith and kin’. Instead, he thought of intercaste marriage as a method through which Dalit-ness could be *spread* to non-Dalits. Later in the interview, he explained that according to ‘social practice’, any non-Dalit marrying a Dalit automatically becomes a Dalit themselves (this idea is indeed common, and will be described in more detail in the next chapter). Accordingly, Abeer BK stated that intercaste marriage between Dalits and non-Dalits is important because, with a sufficient number of intercaste marriages, *everybody would eventually become Dalit*. He offered some evidence that this would eventually happen by citing population statistics. The total population of upper-castes in Nepal had supposedly significantly diminished over the past decades, and this, according to him, had been caused by intermarriage.

Abeer BK’s view of mixing through intermarriage is therefore one in which Dalits can use their defiling character strategically. It is close, in this regard, to a view defended by the social theorist Ashis Nandy, who argues that the potential to pollute can be weaponised:

[Nandy] further argues that [...] Dalits have traditionally controlled the *savarnas* through their power to pollute. The Dalits, as untouchables, can thus act as poisoned weapons to produce a crisis for the twice-born in the Indian context (Guru 2009:8).

Whether or not Abeer BK's explanations are an accurate description of the motivations behind the policy—it is likely that the various people involved in the creation of the policy had a variety of goals in mind—Abeer BK's significant position in Nepal's national politics when the policy came out and his role in its creation makes his account worth taking seriously.

Another time intercaste marriage was promoted in Nepal was during the People's War, in the ranks of the People's Liberation Army. I found it difficult to gather precise information on this topic, as the ex-Maoist combatants to whom I had access in Puranogaon did not say much on the topic. The best direct source of information I had was a Bishwakarma woman whom I met in Kathmandu, Mukta BK, who had herself been part of the cultural wing of the PLA and who had married a Magar (*jana jāti*) man who had been a platoon commander in the PLA. Details of this woman's experience of intercaste marriage are reported in the next section, but here is how she described the political intent of the Maoists when promoting intercaste marriage:

Mukta BK: What it was—at the time, this is how it was. Intercaste marriages—there was a kind of [policy] among Maoists that such marriages should be encouraged. It was said that [caste-based discrimination] must be erased, that encouragement must be given to intercaste marriages. It was said that discrimination must be made to disappear by doing this.

There are few academic sources on the topic of intercaste marriage among Maoists during the war, and my own data is insufficient to re-construct the reasoning behind the Maoists' promotion of such marriages. It is possible that this reasoning was analogous to either Ilesh's or Abeer's, but it is also possible that other understandings of the effects of intercaste marriage were at play that I am simply unaware of. What can be asserted with confidence, however, is that regardless of the exact reasoning behind it, the promotion of intercaste marriage *was* a strategy that opposed identity politics. Gayer (2013, 2014), who has studied the management of sexual relations among members of the PLA, notes the following.

The Maoist leadership has been encouraging party workers and PLA fighters to contract love marriages—and, in particular, intercaste love marriages—within the movement's ranks. For some women cadres of PLA, this policy is one of the

major achievements of the Maobadis [Maoists] and one sign—among others—of their greater maturity than their Naxalite ‘cousins’ (2013:347–348).

Gayer’s own focus is on the Maoists’ ‘scientific management’ of sexual desire in the PLA, which was constructed in opposition to Nepal’s hitherto ‘feudal’ marital practices. Gayer critically examines whether this scientific management was as feminist as its proponents claimed. Because intercaste marriage is not his primary concern, he does not explain the Maoists’ own justification for promoting it, at least not beyond a general association of endogamy with the feudal practices which the Maoists were seeking to eliminate. He does, however, show that ethnic activists, engaged in identity politics, were very critical of the Maoists’ promotion of intercaste marriage.

Where these [Maoist policies] faced more resistance was in their attempt to challenge rules of endogamy through the promotion of intercaste/interethnic marriage. The policy did not go down well with all party cadres and faced overt opposition from some ethnic leaders who rallied the Maoists during the course of the war. This is the case, in particular, of Gopal Khambu, a Rai ethnic leader who saw in the promotion of intercaste marriage a conspiracy to deprive the Dalits and the *janajāti*s of their most promising women (2013:355).

This passage is followed by a long quotation from Gopal Khambu himself, in which he describes intercaste marriage as ‘an inter-caste relationship that is emerging as a serious threat to the identity, existence, and nature of Asian Mongolian tribes’ (Khambu, cited in Gayer 2013:355). It is thus safe to say that the Maoists’ promotion of intercaste marriage was predicated on an opposition to identity politics, or at the very least, that it was perceived as such. For *janajāti* activists, it came as a threat, because it risked diluting ethnicity. How it was perceived by Dalits and Dalit activists I cannot say, but insofar as diluting the Dalit identity carries the potential to blur the boundary between Dalits and others, my guess is that it might have been welcomed, at the very least, with an ambivalence similar to that of Ilesh.

So far, we have seen the hope that mixing and intercaste marriage can reduce caste-based discrimination being formulated by prominent Indian political figures (Ambedkar, Parivar), by a Nepali politician (Abeer BK), by a present-day activist in Nepal (Ilesh), and by

Maoists during the People's War. Lest this evidence be over-interpreted, I should acknowledge here that mixing remains a *fringe* strategy. By and large, identity-based activism is more common in Nepal, including for Dalits. A more exhaustive typology of the strategies followed by Dalits in Nepal figures in a conference paper recently delivered by Adhikari and Gellner (2018), which shows that the focus on identity does in fact predominate. Here, I focus on mixing, despite it being fringe, for two reasons. First because it is at risk of being overlooked, and second, because the strategy is predicated on a social ontology that is *opposed* to the one which psychological essentialism implicitly delivers, and this makes it quite unique.

Interviews with Dalit–non-Dalit intercaste couples

The discussion so far has revolved entirely around what activists and political figures imagine *might* happen if intermarriage between Dalits and non-Dalits became more frequent. What can be said about couples who are actually in this type of marriage?

Towards the end of my fieldwork, I began interviewing mixed-caste couples. My initial plan was to interview forty couples, twenty Dalit–non-Dalit and twenty non-Dalit–non-Dalit (but intercaste nevertheless). My plans were cut short by the earthquake which hit Nepal in April 2015, such that I only managed to interview fifteen Dalit–non-Dalit couples and five non-Dalit–non-Dalit couples. Because I interviewed most spouses separately, this represents thirty-three separate interviews, most of which are one to two hours in length.

The interviews comprised a fairly structured section in which I asked spouses how they met, how they came to the decision to marry intercaste, how their marriage had been received by their kin and society more generally, whether they thought that they or their spouse had changed caste or ethnicity as a result of the marriage, and what caste or ethnicity they believed their children belonged to or would belong to. The interviews also included a second section dedicated to a more free-flowing discussion.

These interviews do not allow me to describe intercaste marriage in generic terms, or to present an underlying 'script' for intercaste marriage in the way that, for example, Quinn (2005) does for marriage in the USA. There are two reasons for this. First, the total number of interviews is too low to allow for methodologically sound generalisation. Second, the

couples I interviewed are extremely diverse. Even among Dalit–non-Dalit couples, the spouses belong to a number of different Dalit castes and non-Dalit castes. Some of the couples live in rural areas; others in Kathmandu. Some couples are hypergamous, others hypogamous.⁷ Some are poor and struggle to get by, while others are part of a middle-class, urban, political elite. Some have registered their marriage with civil authorities, others have not. Some are old and have lived together for decades; others are young, and so on. In the free-flowing part of the interviews, it became clear that all of these factors played a role in determining the way in which the spouses perceived their own marriage, the reasons why they married intercaste, whether this marriage was ‘accepted’ or ‘rejected’ by the spouses’ relatives and friends, etc.

Nevertheless, in conjunction with the frequent conversations I had with other people about intercaste marriage, these interviews helped me gain a clearer understanding of whether intercaste marriage is indeed believed to ‘mix’ castes, whether it can change the caste of one spouse, and whether it can lead to the birth of ‘mixed’ babies. I discuss these questions more formally in the next chapter. In the final sections of this chapter, I give short summaries of a few interviews to showcase the diversity just mentioned. Space does not permit a more exhaustive account.

Chitra Darji and Chandni Maya Shrestha

Chitra Darji (Dalit) and his wife Chandni Maya Shrestha (Newar, janajāti) live in the VDC of Puranogaon. Both of them are teachers in a local school. On my first trip to their house with Ram Prasad, we only found Chandni Maya at home; her husband was out for a political programme. Chandni Maya agreed to talk with us about her marriage, but during the interview, she stayed mostly silent. While I was disappointed that she had not said much, her reaction was understandable. After all, I had come from nowhere and started asking personal questions about her marriage.

Several weeks later, I met Chitra, who answered my questions enthusiastically and in great detail. He explained that he and Chandni had been classmates since grade 2. Chitra said that they married at the age of seventeen, when they were both in grade 9. They had gradually fallen in love, first treating each other ‘like siblings’, an expression used in Nepal

7. Though the majority are hypogamous, see next chapter for an explanation

to indicate a non-romantic, non-sexual relation between a man and woman. Eventually, however, the relation took on a romantic character, after Chitra had written love letters to Chandni and persuaded her.⁸

Chitra spoke of his marriage to a non-Dalit in a markedly political way. While he is now a member of the Nepali Congress, the political party which is the most distant from the Maoists, during the war, he explained, he had been in perfect agreement with the Maoists' opinions. It was thanks to the Maoists, he added, that he and his wife had not faced public recriminations when they had married each other. Their marriage had taken place during the People's War. Had the Maoists not been present in the area, Chitra said, he and Chandni would have had to hide or leave the area altogether. Society would not have tolerated their marriage.⁹

Chitra said that he had decided by the age of thirteen or fourteen that he would not worry about marrying a woman of his own caste, but rather try to marry for love (*prem*), regardless of this person's caste. More generally, he believed that intercaste marriages such as his own had the potential to change society.

Ivan Deschenaux: What you said about this is very helpful for me. You said that, in your opinion, society must be mixed through intercaste marriage, didn't you?

Chitra Darji: Yes, yes.

ID: Explain this a little, please.

CD: After having an intercaste marriage, after there is mixing, what happens is this. First, the old culture is destroyed. Right? The second thing is that, after an intercaste marriage, you see, after an intercaste marriage there is a *cross*. And children born from this *cross* are very talented. They are of a better breed (*unnat jāt*).

He explained that he had tried to convince as many of his friends as possible to marry

8. On the importance of love letters in fostering love marriage in Nepal, see Ahearn (2001)

9. Because Chitra and Chandni live close to Bensitaun, this remark confirmed the observation reported in chapter 5, according to which the Maoists had created an environment in which discrimination against Dalits was indeed greatly reduced.

intercaste, but that many of them were reluctant because of what their parents would think. Chitra himself had not experienced difficulties with his own parents, who had accepted their new daughter-in-law from the start. Relations with his in-laws, however, had not been quite so easy. For the first four or five years after his marriage, he and his wife did not have contact with her family, but eventually they came to accept that their daughter had married a Dalit, and even invited him to their house. This is extremely rare, and when I asked Chitra about it, he speculated that it was because there were only women left in his wife's immediate family, her father having died and she having no brother. Why women would be more accepting of intercaste marriage than men is a topic which he did not comment on, and I do not have a speculative answer to offer.

Of all the people in Dalit–non-Dalit marriages whom I talked to, Chitra made the most enthusiastic comments about the mixed character of his marriage. He explained this through the following comparison:

ID: And this, right, this mixing of castes—you said this can lead to children with *talent* didn't you? Please explain this to me too. I did not know this.

CD: It's about children's mind (*dimāg*), you see. How to put it? We raise animals here, don't we? Now, it is said that if only the same old male goat and female goat are put together, then [the offspring] will spoil, won't it?

ID: Yes.

CD: Yes. Now, in this way, after an intercaste marriage, I hope that children with fine minds (*pātalo dimāg*) and superior thoughts (*ucca bicār*) will be born.

In sum, the way in which Chitra speaks of his own marriage seems in perfect accordance with the idealised 'mixing' imagined by Ilesh. His marriage was concluded after he and his wife had been in a long relationship and grown to love each other; it was accepted immediately by his own family and eventually even by his in-laws, and from this marriage, he hopes, *mixed* and *better* babies will be born and the old culture destroyed.

A Maoist marriage

Mukta BK (Dalit) is the woman quoted earlier, in the passage describing the Maoists' promotion of intercaste marriage. I interviewed her in Kathmandu with my assistant Ratna.

Aged 32, Mukta had married eleven years earlier and was now studying for a Bachelor's degree. She explained that she grew up in a VDC in West Nepal where caste-based discrimination was very strong. When she was in grade 10, she joined the Maoist insurgency, as a member of the PLA's 'cultural wing', where she took part in programmes aimed at disseminating the Maoist ideology among Nepal's population. This is when she met her future husband, a Magar (non-Dalit) man called Uttam, who was a platoon commander in the PLA.

The marriage itself was encouraged by leaders in the Maoist movement. Indeed, the first step towards it happened when a PLA combatant with a much higher rank met Uttam and Mukta separately and asked them whether they felt any attraction for each other. At the time, Mukta answered that she had not given much consideration to Uttam. The senior combatant, however, encouraged Uttam to pursue Mukta. He did, and they eventually fell in love. Mukta was not sure why their senior colleague had done this, but she speculated that it was because of the Maoists' policy of promoting intercaste marriage.

Although Mukta developed an attraction for Uttam, she was initially apprehensive about the idea of marrying him. She was not worried about his personal reaction, because she felt that caste did not matter at all to comrades in the PLA. Rather, what made her apprehensive was the potential reaction of Uttam's relatives. She explained that she was, at first, scared that they would mistreat her because of her caste, were she ever to live with or close to them. After a while, she and Uttam were stationed in different parts of the country. This being the time during which the Maoists were underground, she and Uttam could not meet regularly, but they exchanged love letters. Eventually, Mukta agreed to marry Uttam. Her apprehensions about her future in-laws were put to rest when they themselves wrote her a letter telling her that she had nothing to fear. Eventually, the marriage itself was celebrated following the wartime marriage rituals which the Maoists had created. It was officiated by a commander of the PLA, in the presence of several fighters and the inhabitants of some sixty Magar houses, approximately one year after she and Uttam had

initially met.

Did this woman feel that marriages such as hers could have an effect on caste and caste-based discrimination, as the Maoist leaders suggested? During the interview, Ratna asked her whether she had married intercaste *because* she felt that this could combat caste discrimination. Himself a fervent supporter of the Maoists, Ratna added that he had wanted such a marriage, but that he 'had not been successful in the end'. Mukta answered that, despite the explanations given by the Maoist leaders, her main motivation had been quite apolitical: she had married her husband because, quite simply, she had fallen in love with him.

Mukta was, however, one of the very few people in an intercaste marriage I met who said that her (future) children would be of 'mixed-caste'. They would be, she said, 'part Magar and part Bishwakarma'. Like Chitra, she also said that children born to intercaste couples, in particular those between a janajāti person and a Dalit or between a janajāti and an upper-caste person, have higher 'talent' than others.

In the two examples just described, Dalits marry a non-Dalit after falling in love with them. They think carefully about the marriage and choose to enter it only after careful, reflective evaluation. In both of these cases, too, the marriage is thought of as a union that can produce 'mixed' babies, as a result of which caste-based discrimination can be diminished.

These two cases, however, were exceptions. The next case which I describe is much more representative of what I encountered in the rural area of Sammagaon.

Varun Bahadur Sārki and Bina Basnet

In extreme cases, non-Dalits who marry a Dalit view their matrimony as a case of extreme misfortune. I found such cases mostly in rural areas, among women born to non-Dalit parents who eloped with Dalit men. The most striking discovery for me was that several non-Dalit women entered such marriages *without knowing* that their husband was Dalit. Prior to getting married, the husband had either lied about his identity or 'omitted' to mention that he was a Dalit. Women in such situations sometimes explained that they came from

poor families, and that it was because of the pressure which their family placed on them to marry someone they did not like that they had chosen to elope, without realising that the person they were eloping with was a Dalit.

Varun Bahadur Sārki (Dalit), a man in his early sixties, would come to Ganga's house every now and then to work and drink *jandh*. Early in my fieldwork, I helped him rebuild part of a wall supporting a terraced field which had collapsed during the previous monsoon, but this and a few other sporadic conversations—he is a quiet character—formed the extent of our interaction. It was only in the last months of my fieldwork that Sirjana, my 'sister' in Sarmagaon, alerted me to the fact that he was in an intercaste marriage, having married a Chhetri woman called Bina.

When I interviewed Varun Bahadur about his marriage, he did not say anything remarkable. He simply stated that his intercaste marriage had created no issue for him at all. His relatives had accepted the fact that his wife was Chhetri. The impression he left me with was that this was really nothing worth talking about.

The interview with his wife, Bina, was quite different. Following my invitation, she came to the interview looking tired and dejected, dressed in muddy work clothes. At least twenty years my senior, this woman was clearly uncomfortable when I interviewed her. We sat in my room with the door closed in order to ensure that we had complete privacy. Most of her answers were limited to a few words. She struggled with my foreign accent and I struggled with her colloquial Nepali. As I trudged through my questions, I tried to encourage her to talk about her marriage, but she gave me little information, certainly no extensive description or narrative. Bina kept scratching herself nervously. A few minutes into the interview, she scratched so hard that she drew blood; a few drops trickled down her arm. I offered to interrupt the interview several times, but she insisted on continuing.

After the interview, I felt frustrated. It took me a while to realise that, in fact, Bina's reluctance to answer my questions was in itself revealing. It was only when I re-listened to the recording that I noticed how central the topic of 'shame' had been in most of her answers, and that the main thing she said about her marriage was how much shame it made her feel.

Bina explained that, at the time when she got married, she had not known that her husband was a Dalit. Discovering the caste of her husband after the fact had clearly been traumatic. The following excerpt describes how, after the marriage, she only met her mother *once*.

Bina Basnet: With my mother too, one year later... or... how much later... My mother and I met in the month of *phus* [December–January] or the month of *magh* [January–February]. Since then we have not met. I didn't go to meet her out of shame (*lāj*), you know?

Ivan Deschenaux: Out of shame?

BB: Yes.

[...]

BB: And mother and father, [incomprehensible] when I was small—it was difficult, you know? My mother was still alive; my mother was still alive... To meet her was really difficult for me. Just looking at my mother's face, I felt ashamed.

ID: Why?

BB: I, a daughter of a Chhetri, unknowingly eloped with a Sārki. After this, how could I meet my mother again?

ID: Oh? This is the reason?

BB: Yes. I felt shame. What's to be done?

For a long time, before I started actually searching for and interviewing people in intercaste marriages, I had assumed that all intercaste marriages would follow a basic script in which romantic love diverts couples away from endogamy. My assumption had been that when people violate the rules of endogamy in Nepal, they do so knowingly and deliberately. I was, in a sense, operating with a simplistic, dichotomous model in which endogamy is 'traditional' and exogamy is 'modern'. Bina's case is a striking illustration of how wrong my assumption was.

Many of the other non-Dalit women married to a Dalit men whom I talked with expressed varying levels of difficulty with their natal relatives, although Bina Basnet struck me as the most resigned of them all. She told me that everybody in Sammagaon treated her like a Dalit now because of her marriage, but unlike some of the other people I spoke with, she offered no suggestion that this situation was abnormal or unacceptable. In fact, when I asked her why she thought all of this had happened to her, she answered

BB: Who knows? I didn't do anything.... To die.

Chapter 9

Two models of caste transmission

In the previous chapter, I presented data collected through interviews with people in Dalit–non-Dalit marriages. I showed that spouses in such marriages have no single way of thinking about their union, and that it is consequently hard to produce valid generalisations.

In this chapter, I offer instead a formalisation of what is at stake in ‘mixing’. The aim is to gain a clearer view of whether mixing might in fact constitute an effective strategy for the alleviation of caste-based discrimination, and of the hurdles which those employing this strategy might face.

Malleable persons and rigid castes: a classic anthropological debate

Thirty years ago, in an essay on how Brahmins in Benares understand birth, death, and the human body, Parry (1989) outlined his views on one of the classic debates in the study of caste. Broadly speaking, the debate concerned the extent to which persons in what was then referred to as ‘caste society’ are thought to be entities subject to change. The question at the core of this debate was whether South Asians think that humans are made of a malleable and changing substance or whether they are thought to have immutable, permanent cores.

One school emphasised the rigidity of the caste system and the unchanging nature of people born into castes. As is well known, Dumont (1980[1966]) in particular emphasised hierarchy as a single, overarching principle in South Asia. According to this principle, people are born into a certain rank in a hierarchy based on purity and pollution. In this view, 'castes are regarded as units of equivalence composed of *people of the same general kind*' (Parry 1989: 494, emphasis mine). In other words, the rank at which one is born determines one's nature, once and for all, and those who are born at the same rank belong to the same kind.

On the other hand, works such as those of Mariott (1976) and the Chicago Indianists emphasised the importance of a 'protean' conception of the person in Hindu South Asia. The term 'protean' refers to a person who is inherently malleable, in whom nothing is permanent. These studies focused on the monist character of what they called 'Hindu thought'. Monist conceptions are opposed to dualist ones; they hold that there is no separation between mind and body. Any change in the body *is* a change in the mind and, consequently, a change in the self. According to this view, in South Asia, 'persons are seen as having a transformable bio-moral substance which is continually modified by the transactions in which they engage' (Parry 1989:494). To simplify, South Asians view humans as constantly *changing*, as they alternately accrue and rid themselves of ritual impurity.

An unformulated question which lay at the heart of this debate is the extent to which South Asians hold essentialist construals of human identity. The first camp implicitly argued that South Asians are highly essentialist because they view humans as fixed, rigid things that are determined by their caste and by an inherent degree of purity or impurity. The second camp argued that South Asians are radically non-essentialist because they view persons as made of eminently malleable and transformable stuff.

Parry himself argued that both notions are simultaneously present, and called upon at various times; they function as ideologies that are used strategically and contextually. He further claimed that the understanding of humans as *changing* not only coexists with a rigid understanding of caste, but in fact helps sustain it. Change, for those who are at the top of the hierarchy, is dangerous. It contains an inherent potential for 'disintegration', 'degeneration' and 'chaos' (Parry 1989:513–514), and it is to avoid the actualisation of this

potential that strict caste-based rules emerge and are enforced. Thanks to these rules, the 'rigid' view of caste becomes prevalent. To simplify, it is because of the *risk* of pollution that caste is so rigid.

The debate just mentioned takes on new significance in light of the previous chapter's discussion of mixing as a strategy for the alleviation of caste-based discrimination. As we saw, in one conception mixing is seen as a way to blur the boundary that separates Dalits from everybody else, a way to create a sense of 'kith and kin' between individuals, and perhaps even a way to produce mixed kinds of persons that are of neither one caste nor the other. The other conception of mixing *exploits* the fact that non-Dalits are vulnerable to pollution. The aim in this case is to bring everybody into the same, Dalit caste, thereby making caste distinctions irrelevant.

A protean understanding of persons—according to which humans are subject to change—seems to be a pre-condition for both of these strategies. It is only if mixing does indeed have the power to *change* what caste people belong to that it makes sense as a strategy to fight discrimination. In one case, people change and become 'less determinate'; in the other, people change and become Dalit. In addition, there is the case of intercaste marriage and the further question of whether people of different castes could give birth to babies who are 'mixed'.

It is with the aim to address these topics that I ask, in what follows, whether the people of Sannagaon think that people can change which caste they belong to, and whether they can give birth to babies who are not of the same caste as themselves.

Models of caste transmission

In this section, I describe two models of how caste can be 'transmitted' from one individual to another. Before doing so, I should note that these models were not described to me explicitly. Instead, they are the result of my asking numerous questions and applying inferential reasoning to the answers I was given. Thus, these models are abstractions from the ways in which people in Sannagaon think and talk about caste.

I wish to make this clear because readers might take issue with my use of the term 'trans-

mission' to describe how caste can, in specific circumstances, be passed on from one individual to another. People in Sammagaon do not use a Nepali equivalent to 'transmission', i.e. this is not an emic category. People in Sammagaon do however speak as if, under certain circumstances, the caste of one individual can determine or even change that of another, although they do not give detailed explanations of how this transformation occurs. 'Transmission' is the term I use to describe this possibility.

There is a strand of cognitive anthropology that addresses mental 'models' (alternatively, 'scripts' or 'schema') (e.g. D'Andrade 1995; Strauss and Quinn 1997: esp. chapter 3; Bloch 2013: esp. chapter 7). These are forms of knowledge or mental states which are, to various degrees, implicit, non-linguistic, action-oriented and which dispose individuals to process new information in specific ways. The 'models' of caste transmission discussed here are a type of cultural knowledge which is not usually verbalised, but nevertheless not quite the implicit and unconscious dispositions which the literature on scripts and schemas describes. Rather, they are part of very basic cultural knowledge, which is taken as self-evident and not worth expressing but nevertheless informs fundamental aspects of life.

The vertical model: descent

There are two ways in which one can become a member of a particular caste or ethnic group in Nepal.

The first is through descent. I call this the 'vertical' model of caste transmission because this term describes how it looks on a kinship diagram. To the people of Sammagaon, vertical transmission is the most obvious way in which caste can be transmitted from one individual to another. It concerns the caste of parents and that of their newborn babies, and is a fact of life so obvious that most people found it very strange, absurd even, that I asked about it.

In this model, when two parents of the same caste have children, these children inherit their parents' caste. Later, when the children grow up, they will marry a partner of the same caste, and when they in turn have children, the cycle will repeat. This is endogamy and descent at their most basic. Vertical descent is also the key principle sustaining a

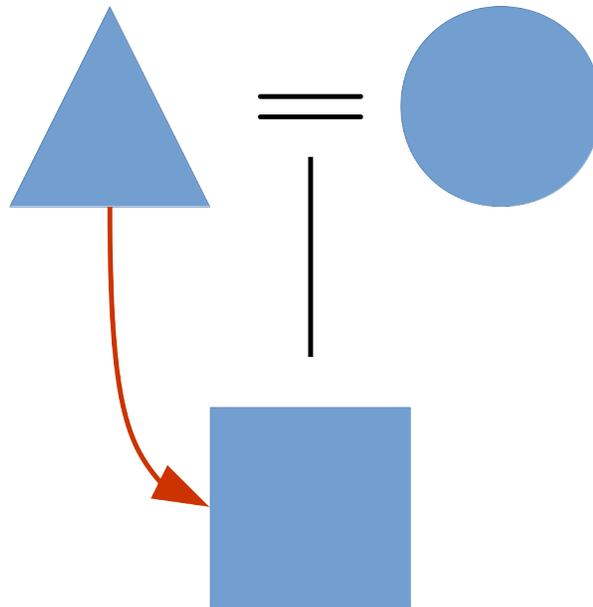


Figure 9.1: Vertical transmission of caste

static and essentialist view of personhood, as opposed to a protean one. The caste of any individual is determined at birth, and if the vertical model applies, people's caste status will never change.

Being the norm, vertical transmission is the ethnographic baseline against which all deviating cases must be compared.

The horizontal model: defilement

The other major way in which caste can be transmitted from one individual to another in Nepal is through defilement. To stay in line with the question of how this spreads on a kinship diagram, I call this 'horizontal transmission'.

There is an idiom in Nepali which readily captures the horizontal model of caste transmission. It is the short phrase '*jāt janča*'. The literal translation of this sentence is 'caste goes (away)', but it could equally be rendered as 'caste is lost'. What the idiom refers to is the loss of a person's *high-caste* status and their demotion to a lower caste. The central idea of '*jāt janča*' is that, given the wrong type of behaviour, an upper-caste person may *become* a person of lower caste. The behaviour which can trigger this is precisely that which is prohibited by traditional rules of untouchability, e.g. commensality.

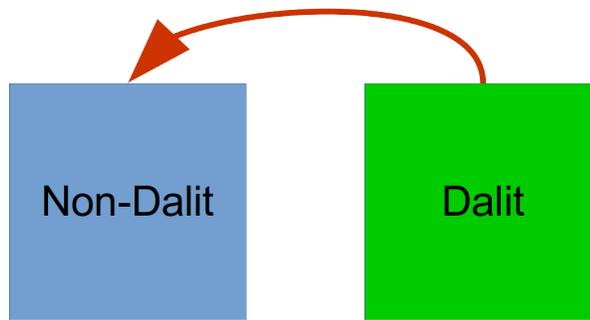


Figure 9.2: Horizontal transmission of caste

Defilement or horizontal transmission is the key principle behind the protean conception of personhood. It is only because of the possibility of defilement that upper-caste persons can, potentially, change which caste they belong to.

Disappearing horizontal transmission

In chapter 2, we encountered older Dalits saying that untouchability has diminished over recent decades. Older upper-caste people make assertions which are consistent with this suggestion. According to them, in the past, caste was much more *fragile* for those at the top.

Towards the end of my fieldwork, I set off to interview older Bahun people in Puranogaon, the village next to Sammagaon. I was struck by the fact that most of them described being high-caste in the past as something which required a lot more effort than today. They told me about rules they were taught as children which their younger relatives were not even aware of but which, until some thirty to thirty-five years ago, were observed quite strictly. These rules were, for the most part, tied to the preservation of purity and cleanliness. They included prescriptions on the number of times one had to wash, the necessity of changing clothes before a meal, the number of times one was to conduct *pujā*, etc. They also included, consistent with what the Bishwakarma had told me, much more rigid rules regarding interactions with Dalits. Just how much such rules were in fact applied a few decades ago is, of course, something which cannot be verified empirically, but the consensus was that they were observed to a much greater extent. Furthermore, those who did violate those rules could *effectively* lose their caste.

The clearest description of this possibility came from Narendra and Sabita Ghimire, the

parents of Ram Prasad, a Bahun man from Puranogaon whom I have known since my first trip to Nepal in 2010 and at whose house I would stay for a few nights every time I made the trip between Sammagaon and Kathmandu. In an interview with Narendra and Sabita, we had been talking about the fact that Bahuns should not eat food cooked by a Sārki when the topic of losing one's caste came up.¹

Ivan Deschenaux: Explain this to me a little. I know that there is this practice. But its meaning—why it is not okay to eat [food cooked by a Sārki]—I have not quite understood the meaning of this yet. If you were to eat something touched by a Dalit, what would happen to you?

Narendra Ghimire (husband): [laughs heartily at the provocative nature of my question]

Sabita Ghimire (wife): In earlier times, everybody would shame you: 'He ate something touched by such and such! His caste has gone away!' It was like this. Yes. 'His caste has gone away! He ate something touched by that one. We must separate his water now. We cannot eat what he touches.' Society (*samāḥ*) would say these things.

ID: Explain this practice of 'caste going away' a little, please. Is this an old practice? Is it still practised today? What is this practice?

SG: 'Caste goes away', this means, from now on, to sit separately from others, not to take part in society, to sit and eat alone, to be told 'We won't touch you!' and 'You are a person whose caste has gone away.' This is the meaning of 'caste goes away'. Not to be allowed to sit with one's brothers.

NG: Right. If I ate food touched by a Dalit, right, now all my brothers would say, 'You ate [food] touched by a Dalit. Don't come here with us! We won't drink water touched by you.'

At this point in the interview, I tried to ask whether the loss of caste one could incur in this

1. In this transcription, I have translated Narendra and Sabita's words in the past tense, because I believe this most closely reflects their intent. In reality, they shifted inconsistently between the present tense and the past as they spoke.

way was permanent. Until then, my impression had been that a specific purification ritual could be undertaken, which consisted in cleansing oneself with water that had come into contact with gold. Narendra and Subita did not immediately understand my question, but their son, Ram Prasad, came to my help.

Ram Prasad Ghimire (son): If one only ate [with a Dalit] once, would [losing one's caste] happen for one's entire life?

SG: It would go for one's whole life.

ID: It would go for life?

SG: Yes. It would be gone.

RPG: One would not be able to become a Bahun [again]?

NG: After eating once, caste would indeed have gone for life.

ID: Really?

NG: Really.

[...]

ID: Until now, what I had heard is that there is such a thing as the *sun pāni* (gold water) ritual. Please explain this. What is this ritual?

NG: *Sun pāni* means, this is a little...

SG: ...it's to purify a place.

NG: Very good things can purify, can't they? After touching things [with this water], they would become good again.

SG: But such a person could not be purified with *sun pāni*. He who eats what a Sārki has touched, *sun pāni* does not purify him. He is gone. Gone. If I ate what had been touched by a Sārki, I'd be gone. From this point, no matter how much gold water or salt water I used, I'd be gone.²

2. This is a word play. 'Gold' (*sun*) and 'salt' (*nun*) only differ by one letter in Nepali. The

I was quite taken aback by the insistence that commensality alone could lead to permanent and irreversible defilement. None of what I had seen suggested that this was remotely possible today. The glances Ram Prasad was giving made me think that he too was surprised. I encouraged him to express his views.

RPG: But my impression, right, is that earlier practices are changing in all things. In very early times, maybe caste used to go forever. But after this, in an intermediate time, Brahmins could call a priest. They could call a priest, right, and the priest would read [sacred texts], the Brahmin would give [the priest] some money, he would receive *tika*, and after this, he could re-gain his own caste.

ID: Is there such a possibility?

SG: No, no, there is not [laughing].

NG: Now—now, if a Sārki came and entered our house then what our custom is, is to do what we call *Rudri*.

ID: Right. *Rudri pujā*, right?

NG: Yes. We would do *Rudri pujā*. And then do the work with the water [Rudri *pujā* requires water, but this is not *sun pāni*] and make [the house] pure again, with this water, make it auspicious.

ID: Right. If a Dalit comes in, your caste does not go away, but you must purify the house.

NG: Yes. This is the way that one purifies it.

Permanent defilement of the type described by Sabita and Narendra no longer happens. Much the opposite, members of the upper castes can act almost however they wish without their high-caste status being at risk. The behaviour of Ram Prasad and his wife Rasika themselves is testament to this fact. Like many Nepalis, they talk of their disapproval of caste-based discrimination, but unlike others, they seem not to be ambivalent about it.

sentence could be stylised as ‘gold water is no more useful than salt water’.

Their actions in daily life are, as far as I could tell, quite consistent with this disapproval. They let Dalits into their house, proudly point out that they share meals with them, and otherwise violate the traditional rules of untouchability. They teach their eleven-year-old son that they will let him choose any wife, including a Dalit, as long as she is an 'educated' person. Their two daughters, they say, will be taught the same thing once they are old enough to understand.

Both Ram and Rasika attribute their liberal attitude towards caste to their 'education' (*shikshā*) and Ram in particular likes to say that his role as a teacher is to give a good example to students. In openly violating caste rules, they are fairly exceptional. Most of their relatives will say that they do not care about caste, but only very few will behave consistently with the assertion. For example, Ram's father never lets Dalits into his own house. For a week following the earthquake on 24 April 2015, I was stuck in Bensitaun with Ratna BK, my research assistant from Kathmandu, a Dalit. Many of the buildings had collapsed or become uninhabitable, so villagers were sleeping and eating together in the school building which had remained standing, nearby. Ram's father, even during this time of crisis, discreetly avoided eating with me and Ratna because of Ratna's caste, as Ram later pointed out to me.

Yet, despite Ram and Rasika's exceptional behaviour, they do not feel that they are putting themselves *at risk* by violating traditional caste rules. As Ram explained to me one afternoon, before the People's War, if a Bahun ate with a Dalit or let a Dalit into his house, this Bahun's reputation and status would immediately be at stake. The relatives of the Bahun, Ram added, would start treating them as if they were a Dalit. This is consistent with what his mother and father had said in the interview. Ram explained that before the war, he never used to eat with Dalits in his own village for fear of such reprisals; he would only do so occasionally, in other places, when he was far away from home. But now, he said, he can eat with Dalits openly. His older kin still disapprove of his doing so, but he says that they cannot stop him any more. And despite this, he has never been treated like a Dalit.

A later passage of the interview with Ram's parents confirms these claims.

NG: For example we—now, in this age—what do Bahuns do? Bahuns also eat food touched by a Sārki, don't they? The Sārki also eat. They eat as equals,

right? But of a Dalit only a Dalit can come (*Dalit ko Dalit hunchha*), of a Bahun only a Bahun, of a Chhetri only a Chhetri. Right? A Kāmi can only be a Kāmi or Kamini [feminine form]. Nobody's caste can change (*Kunai pani usko jāt ta pharak pardaina*).

ID: Right. I want to ask this question. Your sons, do they eat things touched by Dalit?

NG: Now.... Now, in this age, they eat [such food].

SG: But my sons *are* Bahun!

ID: They are Bahun. But do they eat or not?

NG: They eat.

SG: They eat, but they *are* Bahun.

NG: They are Bahun despite eating [brief laugh].

ID: Right. Please explain this to me

SG: [laughs]

ID: What did you tell me earlier? Only ten minutes earlier, what you told me, what you explained to me—in my understanding—is that if a Bahun eats something touched by a Sārki, his caste goes away for life.

NG: Yes, it goes.

SG: Yes! It goes.

ID: But now, what did you just say? It's not like this. [You said that] your sons, although they eat, their caste does not go away. Explain this to me, please.

NG: Yes. It has not gone.

SG: Yes.

NG: Right. In the present age, it is not like this.

ID: Right.

NG: It was like that only before. That was in an earlier age. In the present age, now, it is like this.

SG: Now, my son, he goes wherever [he wants]. Even if the son of a Sārki goes there too. I eat what I have seen my son cook. My son has not become a Sārki, in today's age.

ID: But, in an earlier age...

SG: ...he would have. Yes. That was in the past.

NG: Our relatives would have said, 'your son has eaten what a Sārki touched!' They would have shamed us. Right? But now nobody says this. 'Your son has eaten something touched by a Sārki and come back here, look!'—Nobody says this to me.

SG: It is not only my son! Nowadays everybody does this!

NG: It is not only my son! Other people's sons also eat [food with Dalits]!

ID: I only mentioned your son as an example.

NG and SG: [Both laugh.]

ID: But now, anybody can eat food cooked by anybody else, and their caste will stay?

NG: Yes. It stays.

What this passage confirms is that defilement, the horizontal transmission of caste, is disappearing. Ram's status as a Bahun is not threatened by his actions. He is without any question Bahun and will stay Bahun no matter what he eats, no matter with whom.

Recall the dismissive remarks which both Abeer BK and Ilesh made about using commensality as a strategy for Dalit activism. Abeer said that eating together was 'just a matter of mentality'. Ilesh found that organising feasts between Dalits and non-Dalits was 'too

common' and explained that his blood donation programme, in contrast, was radical because it made people mix their bodies rather than just their food. The material presented in this chapter allows us to better understand these remarks. Even though many upper-caste people still avoid sharing food with Dalits, doing so is no longer seen as a strong form of mixing, or at least no longer as the type of mixing that can affect people's caste status. In Bensitaun, the few Bahuns who do share food with Dalits no longer become polluted; their caste does not 'go away' in any significant, practical sense.

What are the implications of this for mixing as a strategy to alleviate caste-based discrimination?

On the one hand, that defilement is disappearing is to be celebrated. That ideas of pollution are dwindling away among the upper castes confirms, as argued in chapter 2, that fully-fledged untouchability is mostly a phenomenon of the past. Insofar as caste-based avoidances *are* a form of discrimination, the fact that people regard them as no longer necessary represents a reduction of discrimination.

On the other hand, we must not lose sight of what replaces defilement and pollution. If people such as Ram no longer fear interacting with Dalits, this is not because caste as a whole has disappeared. It is not because, as in the *mestizo* case studied by Hale (2015), everybody is now so completely 'mixed up' that it is impossible to divide people into different kinds. It is rather that the protean, malleable understanding of persons is being abandoned. The vertical transmission of caste, however, remains unaffected: 'Of a Dalit only a Dalit can come. Of a Bahun, only a Bahun. Of a Chhetri, only a Chhetri.' A fully enthusiastic evaluation would be warranted if ritual pollution had been the *only* way in which Dalits are stigmatised, but as chapter 2 argued, this is not the case. That a Bahun such as Ram can now feel confident that he will remain a Bahun no matter what might indeed mean that untouchability is disappearing, but it means precious little with regards to all the other stigmas that afflict Dalits. The protean understanding of persons is not necessary for other stigmas to persist. Vertical transmission is enough to keep caste quite 'rigid'.

Unlike commensality, intercaste marriage does have the potential to disrupt the *vertical* model of caste transmission, and it must therefore be addressed separately.

Mixing in intercaste marriage

I now turn to the case of intercaste marriage between Dalits and non-Dalits (or between Dalit castes separated by untouchability, but I apply the usual terminological simplification here). Intercaste marriages that cross traditional lines of untouchability are interesting for two reasons. First, they bring the vertical and horizontal models of caste transmission into direct and fairly explicit conflict with each other. Second, they are the only instances I am aware of in which people risk *actually* losing their caste permanently. Non-Dalits who marry Dalits are still regularly, although not systematically, repudiated by and excluded from their family, forced to live with their Dalit spouse and to become a Dalit themselves.

At least three hypothetical outcomes can obtain for spouses in a Dalit–non-Dalit marriage.

Outcome 1: status quo (figure 9.3). Neither spouse changes caste as the result of the marriage. In this case, only vertical transmission takes place, and both of the spouses continue to belong to different castes after the marriage .

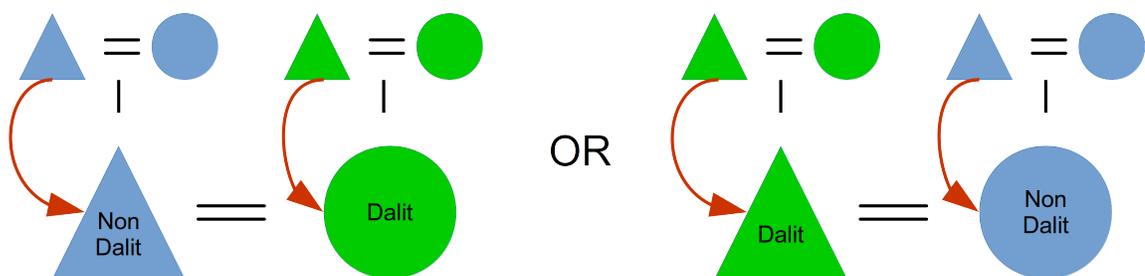


Figure 9.3: Status Quo.

Outcome 2: horizontal transmission of the Dalit caste through defilement (figure 9.4). In this case the non-Dalit spouse, whether it is the man or the woman, becomes a Dalit because of the marriage.

Outcome 3: horizontal transmission of caste consistent with the *thar* name (figure 9.5). In this case, the wife takes the caste of her husband. In a hypogamous marriage, a non-Dalit wife would become a Dalit when marrying a Dalit husband. In a hypergamous marriage, a Dalit wife would cease to be a Dalit when marrying a non-Dalit husband. This last possibility has not been mentioned so far, but there are two reasons I introduce it here. First, this possibility is consistent with what happens with *thar* names. The *thar*, as explained in

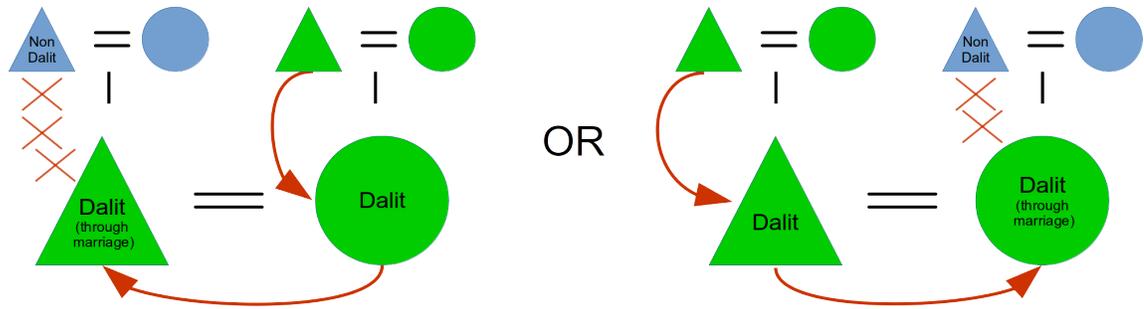


Figure 9.4: Defilement.

chapter 1, functions like a surname. It is strictly exogamous and, for the woman, changes at marriage. For example, when a Bishwakarma woman of the Dehegli *thar* marries a Bishwakarma man of another *thar*, she is quite literally ‘given’ to her in-laws during the wedding’s central ritual of *khanyādān* (gift of a virgin). She is then included into their *kul* (lineage) and becomes a member of their *thar*. Full wedding rituals are almost never carried out for Dalit–non-Dalit marriages. Nevertheless, when a Dalit woman marries a non-Dalit man, according to social practice, she should take on a non-Dalit *thar*. Given the association between *thar* and caste, this should imply taking on his caste too.

The second reason I introduce this possibility here is that it is consistent with Nepali law, especially as regards the names which figure on identity documents. There is no single rule in Nepal as to which ‘surname’ is inscribed on one’s documents. In some cases, this might be one’s *thar*, but in others, it might be one’s caste name. In the case of an intercaste marriage, a wife is legally eligible to change her name to her husband’s, if she chooses to do so. A Dalit woman marrying a non-Dalit is therefore eligible to change her name to a non-Dalit one.

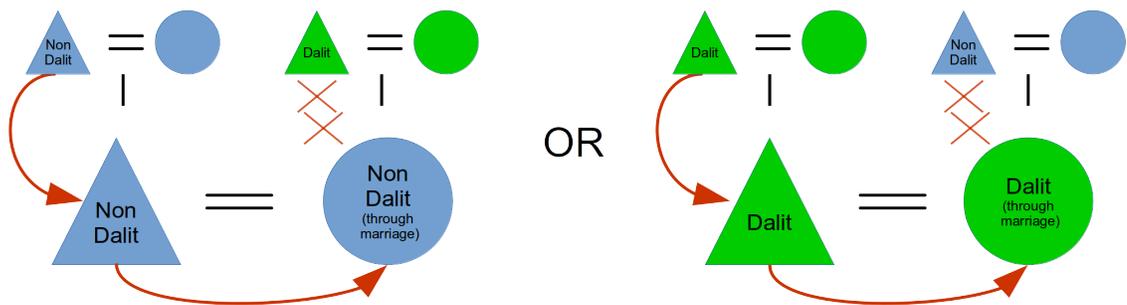


Figure 9.5: *Thar*-like transmission.

When it comes to the caste of the children born from intercaste marriages, only outcome 1 may potentially lead to the birth of ‘mixed’ children. Indeed, in outcomes 2 and 3, after one spouse has changed caste, the marriage ‘collapses’ to the more usual type of vertical transmission shown in figure 9.1. But even in outcome 1, the birth of a ‘mixed’ child is not guaranteed. A condition for it to occur is for kinship to be reckoned, to some extent, bilaterally (figure 9.6). A purely patrilineal understanding of caste transmission can lead, even in the case of intercaste marriage, to a child who is not mixed (figure 9.7).

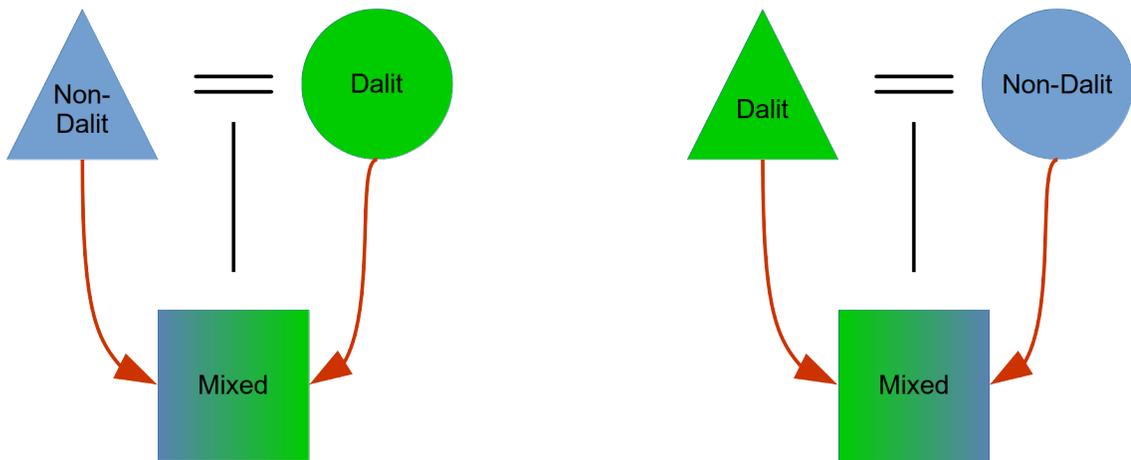


Figure 9.6: Bilateral transmission.

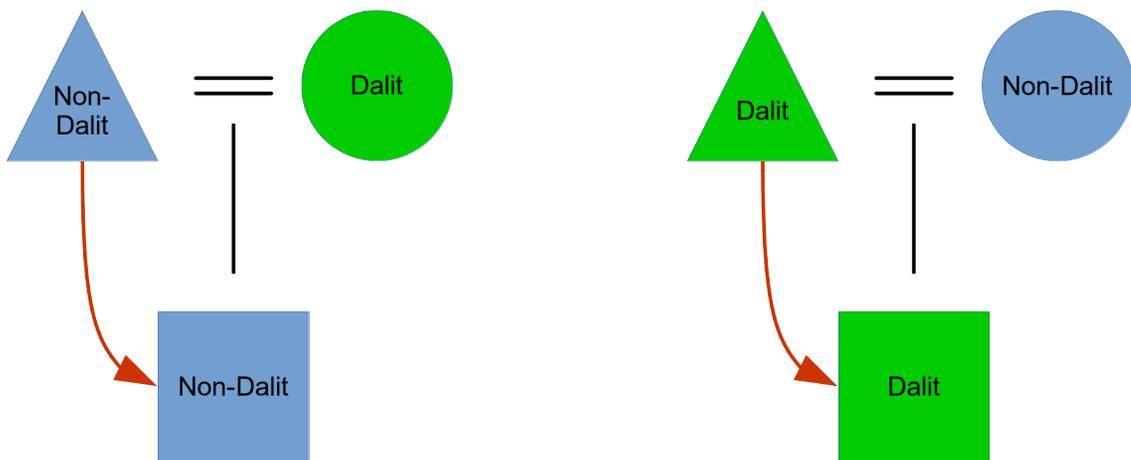


Figure 9.7: Patrilineal transmission.

While in the field, I asked many people about these various possibilities. People would often be hesitant and explain that such marriages are rare, but I would then tell them that I only wanted to know what they *thought* would happen.

Outcome 1, according to which intercaste marriage does *not* lead to a change of caste, is the least frequent answer I received. Only a few stated that people in such marriages could retain their caste affiliation. An exception is women in hypogamous Dalit–non-Dalit marriages. When interviewing women in such marriages, I always asked, ‘In your opinion, what is your caste now?’ In many cases, the woman would initially, spontaneously tell me that she belongs to the caste of her parents. However, when I would further ask, ‘So you have stayed [pre-marital caste] despite having married [caste of husband]?’ some interviewees changed their mind, stating that no, after all, they had probably become Dalit, like their husbands.

Moreover, even people who agreed that outcome 1 was possible would disagree that such marriages would lead to the birth of a mixed child (figure 9.6). They said that the caste of a child comes from his father, no matter what (figure 9.7), and would regularly refer to the names that would be written on the child’s identity documents as evidence for this fact.

It was more frequent for people to say that one spouse *does* change caste in Dalit–non-Dalit intercaste marriages. Whether this happens through defilement (outcome 2) or through change of name (outcome 3) is not, however, clear. Indeed, in the case of a hypogamous marriage, these two possibilities lead to the same result. When a non-Dalit woman marries a Dalit man and becomes a Dalit, this could be the result of her husband’s lower caste ‘defiling’ her, or it could be because she is adopting her husband’s *thar* name and caste. While the underlying justification might seem very different in these two cases, this matters very little in practice: after marrying a Dalit man, a woman becomes a Dalit.

Thus, to adequately distinguish between outcomes 2 and 3, one should ideally study hypergamous Dalit–non-Dalit marriage. This however presents a major methodological challenge, as such marriages are extremely rare. The only hypergamous Dalit–non-Dalit couples I could find lived in Kathmandu: none had remained in their villages of origin.

This rarity can be attributed to patrilocality. In a hypogamous marriage, a Dalit man ‘brings back’ a non-Dalit woman to his house. The relatives of the Dalit husband might disapprove of his choice because, as the next chapter will show, it makes it impossible to have a wedding which respects the customs of ‘arranged marriage’ (*magi vivāha*). Addi-

tionally, there may be some minor ways in which the wife will remain an outsider. For example, according to tradition, she should not take part in *shraddha* rituals, a form of ancestor worship.³ On the whole, however, people say that such marriages do not pose a fundamental challenge.

The wife is usually the person who suffers the most in a hypogamous Dalit–non-Dalit marriage, as she becomes a Dalit in the process. It will become extremely hard, if not outright impossible, for her to return to her *maiti*, her birth relatives, even for simple visits. Like her in-laws, her *maiti* will consider that she has become a Dalit as a result of the marriage. If they do not fully disown her, they will generally refuse to let her back into their house and break off most ties with her. Several women in hypogamous marriages with Dalits broke into tears when I asked them about their relationships with their *maiti*. The fact that the wife faces such difficulties, however, is something that many people either would not point out to me or dismiss as secondary. Most agreed that Dalit–non-Dalit hypogamous marriages are ‘easier’ than their hypergamous counterpart. Kinship is almost always thought of ‘from the point of view of the man’ in Nepal.⁴

It is much more difficult, if not outright impossible, for the family of the husband to accept the new bride in a hypergamous marriage. Indeed, in such marriages, a non-Dalit husband is effectively trying to introduce a Dalit woman into a non-Dalit house, to get her to cook for non-Dalits, and to introduce her into a non-Dalit *kul*. In other terms, hypergamous Dalit–non-Dalit marriages implicitly contain an attempt to violate the rules of untouchability in every significant way (space, food, kinship). Everybody says that such marriages are much more difficult to ‘accept’. For this to occur would require the wife to be ‘promoted’ to a non-Dalit caste (outcome 3). In the southern plains of Nepal, there are some documented cases of such ‘promotion’ taking place (Biswakarma 2018), but I did not encounter anything analogous in the area of Sammagaon. What the majority of people say would happen in a hypergamous Dalit–non-Dalit marriage is that the husband will be considered to have become a Dalit through defilement (outcome 2) and will be disowned by his family.

3. This is the case in *all* intercaste marriages, including those between two non-Dalits.

4. An exception is a study of intercaste marriage by Kansakar and Ghimire (2008). While the authors do mention that hypogamous marriages will be more readily ‘accepted’ than hypergamous ones, they include some passages discussing the experience of the wife.

On the whole, people seem less certain about what happens in Dalit–non-Dalit intercaste marriages than they are about other forms of interaction between Dalits and non-Dalits. This is not surprising, as such marriages remain far rarer than other kinds of contact between Dalits and non-Dalits. The general consensus, however, is that such marriages effect actual, life-long loss of caste of the kind which commensality, for example, can no longer generate. These marriages contain the potential for defilement which food no longer carries. Outcome 1, in which both spouses *keep* their caste despite marriage is the one which most closely resembles what happens with commensality today—but almost nobody agrees with it. Outcome 3, in which the transformation is due not to defilement but more simply to a change of name, can hardly ever be said to take place with certitude. In fact, the *rarity* of hypergamous Dalit–non-Dalit marriages is not coincidental. It is, in and of itself, an indication of ongoing defilement. It is precisely because it is not easily feasible for the wife to become non-Dalit in such a marriage, and because it is possible for the husband to become one, that they are avoided.

I will return to the implications of ongoing defilement in intercaste marriage in the conclusion of this chapter. Before doing so, I will present a particularly striking case which I encountered in Puranogaon, which further complicates the picture. This case was an attempt to re-negotiate the consequences of a hypergamous Dalit–non-Dalit marriage that happened five generations ago.

Re-negotiating a five-generation-old intercaste marriage

I am sitting in Puranogaon with Ram and two men called Govinda and Ishat, who are related to each other. Ram has been telling me about these two people for a long time, insisting that I should meet them and that their story will interest me. Govinda and Ishat agreed to be interviewed several months ago, but they simply did not show up the first two times we were supposed to meet. They are known as the best house builders in the area and have been working hard on the construction of a new school. I am relieved that they are finally present today.

After introducing ourselves, one of them hands me a couple of battered, folded sheets of paper. On these are various kinship diagrams showing nine generations of Govinda and Ihsat's patriline. These diagrams, they say, show that they are not really Dalits, despite

what everybody says.

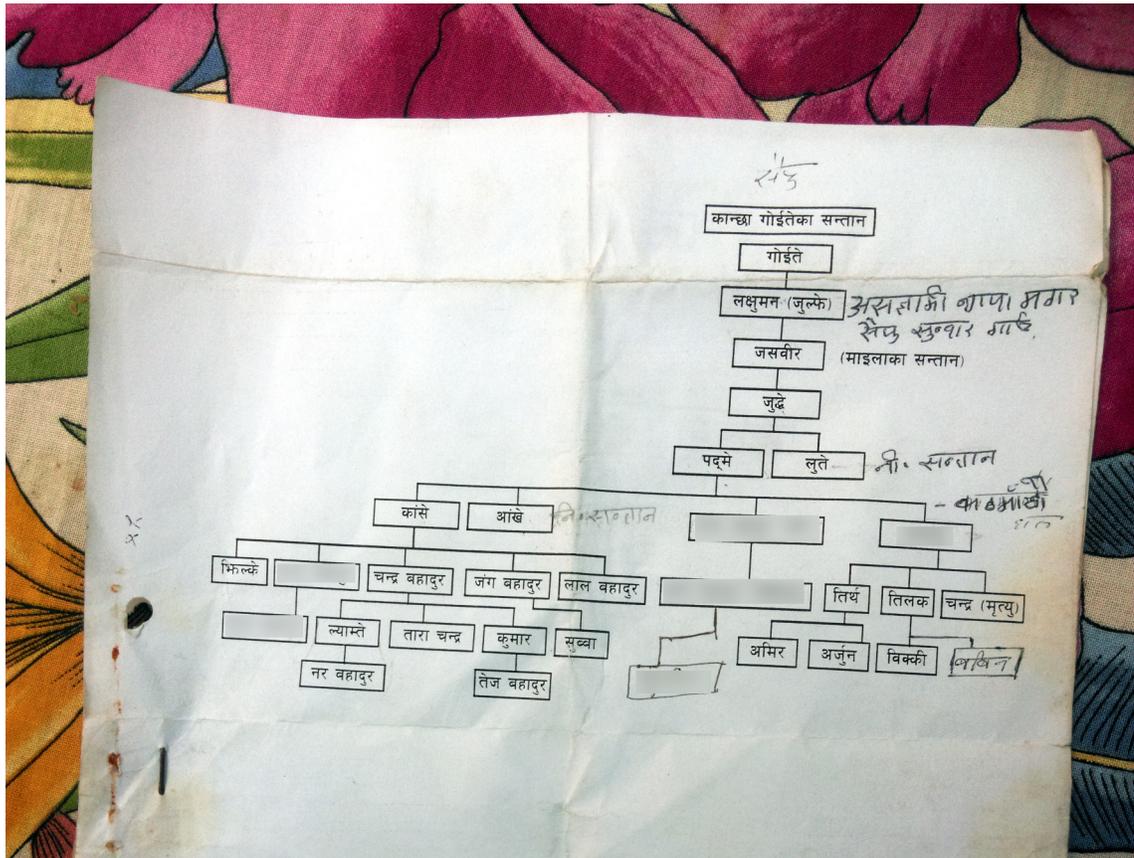
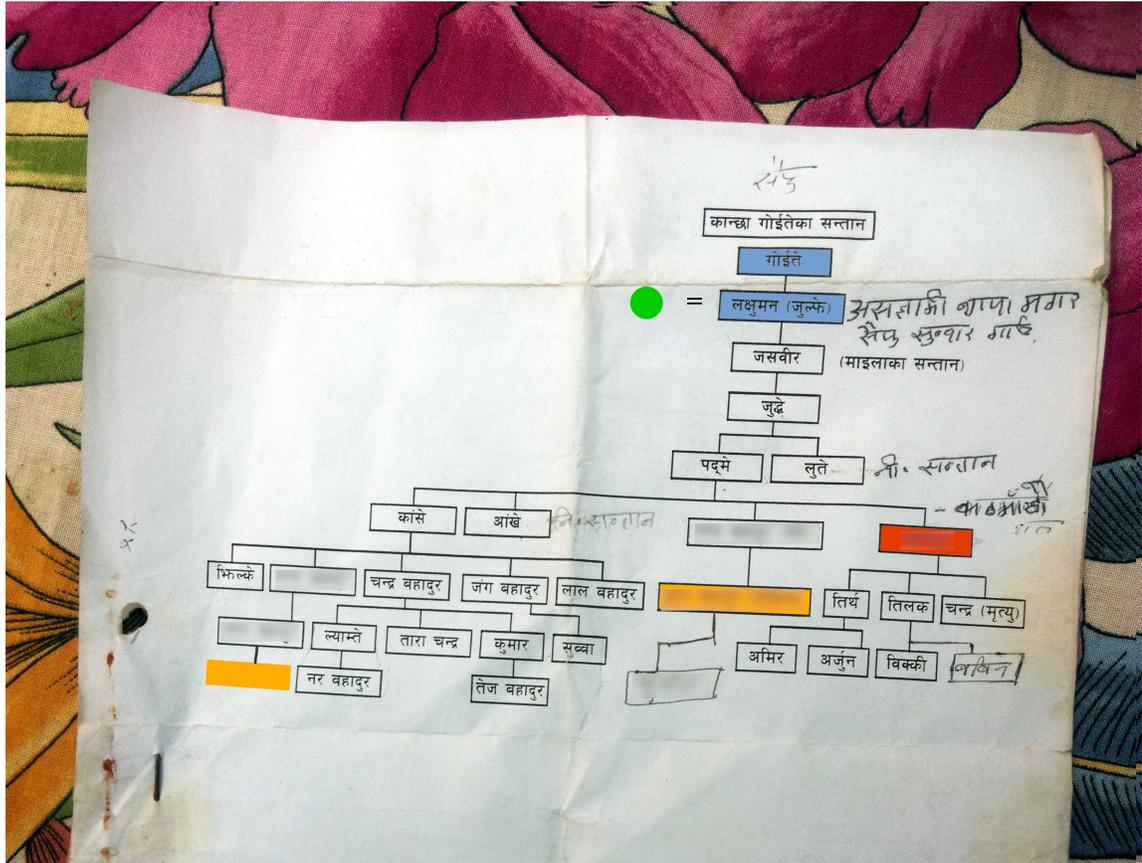


Figure 9.8: Govinda and Ishat’s patriline

By everybody’s reckoning in Puranogaon, Govinda and Ishat are, and always have been Sārki. They and their relatives live in the VDC’s Sārki *tol*. They have always been treated as Dalits. They are not let into upper-caste houses; others avoid the food which they or their wives prepare. But in reality, Govinda and Ishat explain, they are Magar (a *janajāti* group). A piece of family history, passed down from one generation to the next, proves this. Five generations before Govinda’s—seven before Ishat’s—one of their direct patrilineal ancestors was in a hypergamous intercaste marriage. It is because of this marriage that the patriline became Dalit, and this piece of information has never been forgotten by the family members.

The ancestor in question, Lakshman, was not born a Sārki. He was, like his father Goite, a Magar. Goite lived in a different village, in the same district but quite far away from Puranogaon. Govinda and Ishat explained that a Sārki woman from this village ‘became



- Magar (Non-Dalit) ancestors
- Dalit
- Interviewees
- Uncle who conducted the research

Figure 9.9: Interviewee's lineage, annotated

pregnant' with Lakshman's child. Consequently, Lakshman was stripped of his Magar status and demoted to Sārki. He left his village in shame and came to live with his Sārki wife in Puranogaon. From this time onward, Lakshman's descendants, which include some twelve households in Puranogaon, were all considered Sārki; they all lived as Sārki and married other Sārki people. Govinda's father belonged to the generation for which identity documents became common; his identity card had 'Sārki' as a surname, as does Govinda's.

What happened to Lakshman, in other terms, was a textbook case of '*jāt jancha*', of defilement because of his sexual contact with, and subsequent marriage to a Dalit woman.

While the fact that Lakshman and his descendants had become Sārki seemed irrevocable, the story of their Magar origins was passed down from one generation to the next. For a long time, they could not do anything with this knowledge, but then Govinda's uncle, Anarudra, moved to Kathmandu. He did well for himself, became richer than his relatives in Puranogaon and, Govinda implied, became quite a resourceful man. He started to conduct research into his family's origins to ascertain its Magar origins. Govinda and Ishat did not know the details of how Anarudra had conducted this research, and I could not meet Anarudra personally, but it mainly consisted in establishing their ancestry as far back as possible. The result was the genealogy on the paper which they had handed me earlier. Eventually, Anarudra and Govinda secured a meeting with the descendants of Goite's other sons, i.e. with the descendants of Lakshman's brothers. Since none of these brothers had married Dalit women, they and their descendants had remained Magar. They lived in the same village as Lakshman had before coming to Puranogaon, and the fact that they were Magar was completely uncontested.

At the meeting, the descendants of Lakshman's brothers fully acknowledged the family's history. Govinda and Anarudra said that they had been welcomed back as long-lost relatives. To confirm their full re-integration in the Magar clan which their ancestor had been demoted from, they were invited to take part in Magar festivals and celebrations. Their re-integration, according to Govinda, was complete and indisputable. Ishat and Govinda, when I asked them what caste they belonged to, asserted very confidently that they were '*purā Magar*' (completely, fully Magar).

I met Govinda and Ishat only after all these events had taken place, so I could not observe them myself. The next step for them, which they had begun to conduct procedures for, was to phase out the name 'Sārki' from their identity documents. They were, however, meeting considerable resistance in their attempt. Govinda felt that it would be impossible for him to have the name removed from his own documents, but hoped that his younger relatives who did not have identity cards yet might be successful.

I find this case remarkable because of what it says about vertical and horizontal transmission of caste. Here, we have people pushing for a retroactive cancellation of defilement, in favour of a descent-only, purely patrilineal understanding of caste and caste identity. This is best shown from the point of view of Govinda himself (an analogous argument could be made for Ishat, with two added generations in the diagrams below).

Figure 9.10 illustrates the way in which Govinda's patriline has looked to most people, for many generations. Through intercaste marriage with a Sārki woman, Govinda's ancestor lost his Magar caste and became Dalit. All of his descendants, ipso facto, were also Dalit, including Govinda. In contrast, figure 9.11 illustrates the claims that Govinda and his relatives are making now, which is that they have remained Magar despite their ancestors intercaste marriage. An additional observation is that, in order to argue this, Govinda must also implicitly accept that all his male ancestors, who married Sārki women, must also have remained Magar despite these marriages. Thus, in figure 9.10, we have one intercaste marriage whose consequence is to change the caste of all descendants. In contrast, in figure 9.11, we have intercaste marriages at each generation, none of which have any effect on the transmission of caste from father to son.

How have people reacted to Govinda and Ishat's striking claim? Most of the inhabitants of Puranogaon are simply unaware of Govinda's family history, and even those who are, for the most part, continue to view them as they always have, that is, as Dalits. There are however some significant consequences to the claims which Govinda and Ishat are making. One of these concerns their own children, who attend the school in which Ram Prasad teaches. On the school register, these children's second name is the Magar *thar* which Govinda and his relatives claim they belong to. On the evening after I had finished interviewing Govinda and Ishat, Ram explained to me that some scholarship money

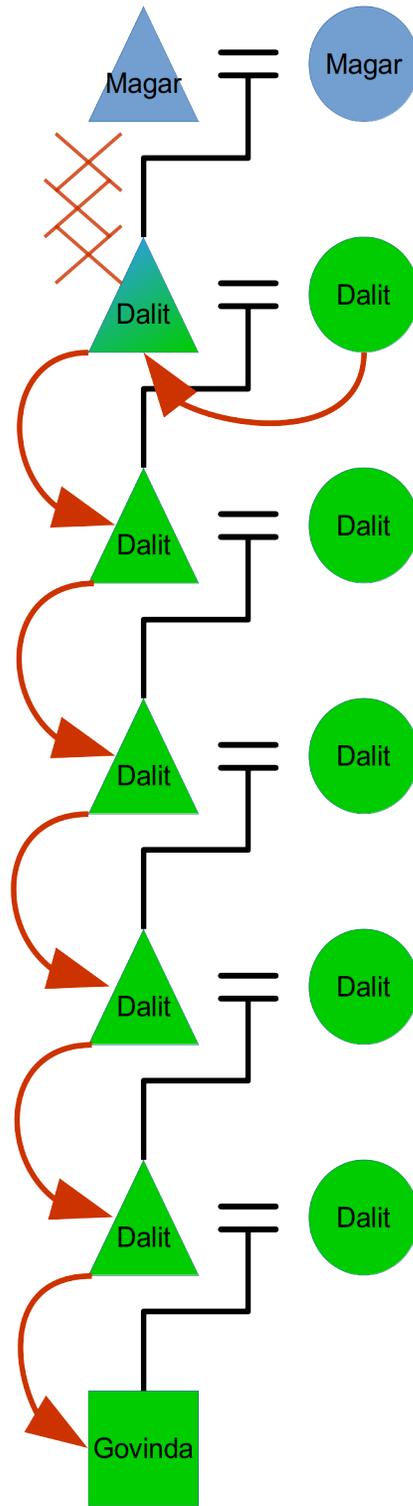


Figure 9.10: Govinda's patriline if horizontal transmission applies

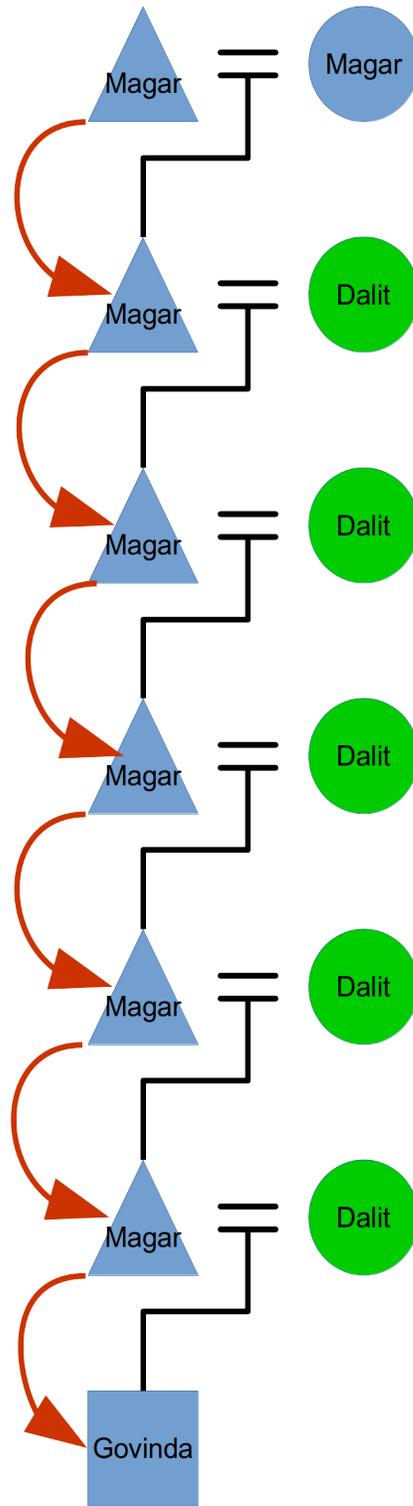


Figure 9.11: Govinda's patriline if only vertical transmission applies

had recently been given to the school, with the explicit instructions to distribute it among Dalit families only. The school committee faced a dilemma when this happened. Should Govinda and his relatives' children receive any of the scholarship money? A teachers' meeting was called to debate the question, and in the end it was decided that money should be given to them because, despite their new name, they had lived and faced the kinds of discrimination that were common for Dalits. The teachers felt that it was therefore unjust to deprive them of this help. Govinda and Ishat agreed with this decision, arguing that while they were truly and fully Magar, they were treated by others like Dalits, so they might as well benefit from one of the very few positive things that comes with the status.

Conclusion

I opened this chapter with a classic debate. One camp defended that South Asians have a *rigid* understanding of personhood, according to which people are born into one caste and remain affiliated to it no matter what, while the other camp suggested that persons in Hindu South Asia are thought to be *protean*, eminently changing and malleable. Parry offered a rejoinder, suggesting that the protean conception sustains the rigidity of caste.

In this chapter, I started by showing that the protean conception of persons is rapidly losing ground in Nepal today. Ram Prasad's parents and other older Bahuns describe the past as a time when this conception was common, and commensality alone could lead to losing one's caste for life. Today, upper-caste people such as Ram Prasad no longer fear that this could happen. The implications of this for mixing as a strategy are not self-evident.

Parry argues that the 'static ideology' of caste serves to protect against the *risk* of defilement. I add that it is only *if* non-Dalits risk losing their caste that the static ideology of caste can be threatened through mixing. In one sense, these two propositions are consistent. They are both based on the notion that change in caste affiliation is threatening for those at the top. On the other hand, their implications differ, given the disappearance of the protean understanding of persons. If, as Parry suggests, the protean conception of personhood is a factor maintaining the 'static ideology' of caste, the disappearance of this conception should lead to this ideology becoming *less* static. There is one sense in which this is true, namely, that upper-caste people such as Ram Prasad no longer think that they

need to maintain as rigid a separation from Dalits as they used to. However, there is also a sense in which the 'static ideology' of caste is becoming stronger. There is no evidence that upper castes and Dalits are thought to be 'the same kind of people' merely because they interact more. Thus, the fact that interaction with Dalits is now possible *without* the upper castes being affected and transformed is a sign of caste becoming, in a different sense, *more* static and *more* essentialised.

One interpretation of the protean conception being abandoned is that mixing has already begun, and that with it, caste-based discrimination is dwindling. While there is some, limited validity to this assessment, I caution against its enthusiastic overtones. A different but equally valid way of interpreting the data presented in the first part of this chapter is that the inherent threat that mixing represents for upper castes is being 'dealt with' or 'countered' by denying the notion that mixing has any effect to start with. The denial that there is a risk in commensality may not be the result of successful mixing so much as a way of protecting the status of those at the top of the social hierarchy. In this sense, Ilesh and Abeer BK are quite right to say that commensality is insignificant, 'just a matter of mentality'.

Intercaste marriage is different to commensality because it can potentially threaten the rigidity of descent itself. One way in which it might do this is by producing children of mixed caste. This, however, requires two things: that spouses in intercaste marriages *remain* members of different castes after they have married, and that descent, to some extent at least, be traced bilaterally. This chapter has argued that, in the way in which most people reflect about caste, neither of these conditions is met. Instead, one of the spouses in Dalit-non-Dalit marriages is usually thought to *change* the caste to which they belong. As a result, parents who were of different castes to begin with are in fact thought to belong to the same caste by the time they have children, and so there is no ambiguity around the child's caste.

Most people in Sammagaon say that the spouse who changes caste in an intercaste marriage is the non-Dalit, that this spouse *becomes* Dalit. This is consistent with Abeer BK's view of mixing, in which intercaste marriage can *transform* non-Dalits into Dalits through defilement. Is, therefore, the most promising understanding of mixing the one which

‘weaponises’ the defiling character of Dalits? While I do not feel that it is my role to answer this question, I note that even in the case of intercaste marriage, an incipient denial of the possibility of defilement is observable. The case of the people recognised as Sārki but claiming to be Magar presented in the last part of this chapter is a striking example of such a denial being made retroactively.

In the last instance, however, I shy away from concluding that mixing is simply unsuccessful. Dalit–non-Dalit intercaste marriages are still extremely rare in Nepal, and the material presented in this chapter is based, mostly, on the way in which people *currently* say that such marriages would play out. Insofar as intercaste marriage might be seen as a strategy for the alleviation of caste-based discrimination, it has not had—so to speak—a fair chance yet. The material presented in this chapter does not suggest that mixing is inevitably ineffective. What it does reveal, however, are some of the ‘hurdles’ which mixing would face if it became a more prominent strategy.

Chapter 10

Love marriage and endogamy

Having described some issues concerning intercaste marriage in the previous chapter, I now turn my attention to the marital aspirations of young people. As existing literature has noted (Ahearn 2001; Levine 2007), love marriages are progressively superseding arranged marriages in Nepal. This leads me to formulate a question about endogamy. Caste endogamy is a rigid condition for an arranged marriage. There is, however, no *a priori* reason to assume that this is also true of love marriages. In Sammagaon, multiple castes and ethnic groups live in close proximity; their children go to school, play sports, and hang out together. Young people, as I have shown previously, say that they ‘do not care’ about caste. In this situation, one might expect that mixed-caste and mixed-ethnicity couples would form regularly. This would certainly obtain if partners chose each other at random, without any regard for each other’s caste. And yet the opposite happens. Love marriages are almost always caste endogamous. Why is this the case? Why do people not fall in love ‘randomly’? In other terms, what drives endogamy in a context where love marriages are the new ideal?

I present the cases of three young women who share a number of similarities. All three are Bishwakarma. All three have done well in school, continuing to study after passing their School Leaving Certificate (SLC). All three share aspirations reaching beyond the rural lifestyle of Sammagaon and, most importantly for this chapter, all three want a love marriage.¹ Yet each of these young women is also a respectful daughter who wishes to

1. I should say ‘want or wanted a love marriage’, since one of them married while I was in the

please her parents. As such, each of them has, at some point and to some degree, felt torn between the desire to choose her own spouse and the duty to defer to her parents' authority by settling for an arranged marriage. This chapter is an examination of how these three women solve this dilemma, and how endogamy emerges from this solution.

In one sense, it would be possible to reduce this entire chapter to one or two sentences. At its core, the argument is simply that, despite love marriages gaining popularity in Nepal, the social norm of endogamy remains strong and exerts itself upon those who marry for love. Yet to only state this would be unsatisfactory, because the simple invocation of norms is, arguably, not explanatory (Sznycer 2019:5 (box 1)). Without invoking norms, there is still a simple explanation for why, among the Biswhakarma and Dalits more generally, young women do not aspire to marry non-Dalits. This is because they fear that, were they to do so, they would face recriminations from their in-laws.

What I want to do in what follows is to describe another, unanticipated reason caste endogamy endures in a context where love marriage is becoming prominent. My argument is not that the process which I identify is the most important, but that it is worth addressing anyway.

Courtship and thinking about getting married

I focus on women here because the way in which they negotiate these aspirations is more complex and subtle than men's. After presenting the data on women, I will give a brief account of a young man's love marriage to illustrate this point.

Preeti – courtship and choice

Preeti Dehegli, the daughter of my immediate neighbour, was nineteen years old when I arrived in Sammagaon. While her lifestyle does not differ substantially from that of other young women in the village, her character makes her stand out. Preeti is outspoken. She rarely displays the shy, discreet attitude which is expected from unmarried young women. She enjoys talking about love and relationships, and the stories she tells reveal the complex nexus of values and desires which young Nepalis experience as they approach the age of field. This chapter will show how she did marry the man she chose.

marriage.

Most of the time, Preeti can be found working in or around the house. She cooks for her mother and two younger brothers. Her father left to work in the Gulf many years ago; he sends money regularly but only comes home once every two years for the festivals of Dasain and Tihar.² Preeti is an assiduous worker. She cultivates the family fields, collects firewood, cuts down and carries vast loads of leaves to feed the family's two buffaloes. When there are no tasks that require her immediate attention, she relaxes, hangs out with friends, or watches TV. Yet even as Preeti participates in the rural, agricultural lifestyle of Sarmagaon, her aspirations lie far beyond this world.

As a child, Preeti attended the local schools. She performed relatively well in her studies, especially in comparison to her fifteen-year-old brother Kundan who, their relatives agree, is better suited to manual labour. This observation comes with a mix of disappointment and pride. Nobody expects Kundan, who most likely will not pass his final exams, to obtain a paid job (*jāgir*). But on the flip side, unlike Preeti, he seems to genuinely enjoy the daily tasks which he performs. His hatred for homework is compensated by his enthusiasm for digging the earth, butchering animals, building buffalo shelters, mats, and ladders out of bamboo, and so on. Preeti, in contrast, diligent though she may be about her chores, takes little enjoyment in them. After passing her SLC, she completed the '+2' degree in education offered at the largest school in Sarmagaon. While I was in the field, Preeti applied to study at the nursing school in the district headquarters and was extremely disappointed when she was turned down. She complained that her life was now reduced to 'caring for cattle' (*bastu palne*), a common Nepali metonym for agriculture. But the school's refusal only strengthened her resolve to resume studying as soon as possible. She felt that she had been lazy, and the severe boredom which afflicted her now was a good lesson, she said; it taught her that she needed to study harder before attempting other entrance exams. A few months before I left Nepal, Preeti was one of the handful of students who enrolled in a Bachelor's programme that was tentatively being offered in one of Sarmagaon's schools. Preeti was happy that she was making progress again, but was also aware that the degree she might obtain from the programme, the first of its kind in the area, would not hold as much value as one from an urban school. She had already spent a lot of time studying in

2. The two major festivals celebrated by most Nepalis.

Sammagaon, she said, and would have preferred to live in a new place.

Preeti's anxieties about the Bachelor's programme were understandable. It was being offered in a new annex to the largest school in Sammagaon, which seemed to be suffering from the same problems as so many of the 'grand vision' development projects in the area. There was in fact a new, three-story cement edifice standing next to the existing school, dwarfing the older mud and stone buildings. But this building had never been finished. Open sacks of cement lay everywhere; the building had no doors, no window panes, no roof. It was in fact a deserted building site, abandoned during the late stages of construction.³ More importantly, also missing were the actual teachers who were supposed to teach the new programme, and as if that was not enough, the president of the new school committee had resigned and nobody had taken his place. It is not surprising that Preeti, with her educational aspirations, was sceptical that this programme would lead her anywhere.

The sense that Preeti aspires to a different lifestyle further transpires in her physical appearance. Although not universal, there is an aesthetic preference among middle-aged and older people in the area for women who are *moti* ('plump'). I once asked Preeti for her opinion on the topic. She shuddered, telling me that her own tastes are very different, that she wants to stay thin. On another occasion, I remarked that only older women seem to wear large gold ornaments such as the *mundri* (a large golden nose-piece). Preeti explained that such ornaments are reserved for married women, but hastily added that she would never wear one herself. She further stated that she would not wear red as a married woman, despite this being the norm. In saying this, she was demarcating herself from the 'traditional' outfit, ornaments and appearance associated with married women in rural Nepal.

It is of course possible that Preeti will not maintain her distaste for the traditional aesthetic markers of a married woman. It is also possible that Preeti's own mother, when she was young, used to make similar statements. Still, these possibilities do not undermine the point I am making here, which is that, as she approaches the age at which she is expected

3. The story of this failure is too long to tell here; it involves the Indian Embassy, Maoists, and a dishonest contractor. The result of the failure is that the entire district was put on the blacklist of the Indian Embassy, who would not donate funds for any other project in the area until this one was completed.

to marry, Preeti has both aspirations to an urban and professional lifestyle very different from what she might expect if she married locally, and a marked disdain for those external markers traditionally associated with marriage.

One day early in my fieldwork, I took a trip to Bensitaun with Preeti. We were going to stock up on various items (lentils, sugar, dried noodles, etc.) for our respective households. I quickly found out that Preeti had additional, secret plans. A few weeks earlier her cellphone had broken and she had sent it to Kathmandu for repair. The phone was being brought back that day by a male friend of hers. As chance would have it, the bus was especially late that day, so Preeti and I spent several hours waiting for the friend and the phone at one of the local tea shops in Bensitaun. After many hours had passed and the bus still had not arrived, I decided we should walk back.

Climbing back home was hard work. We took a break after an hour and decided to give Preeti's friend one last chance to join us. A while later, two panting young men caught up with us, one of whom handed Preeti her phone. After this, Preeti and this young man walked together, several metres behind me and the other young man, deep in a conversation that was clearly private. From afar, none of this would have seemed suspicious. So far as I could tell, we looked like a group of people walking back to the village, two members hanging somewhat lazily behind. Yet, as some of the conversation which I overheard indicated, and as Preeti later confirmed to me, the young man was trying to convince her to elope with him.

Preeti turned down this suitor, as she had others. Prior to this, her parents had already received three formal requests to marry her, but she had declined them all. She wanted to choose her husband herself, and she had a clear vision of what a suitable spouse would be like. Yet, despite this insistence on choosing her husband herself, Preeti also felt pulled by the cultural appropriateness of arranged marriage. Consider the following excerpt from an interview that I recorded with her at the end of my fieldwork:

Preeti Dehegli: Usually in our society, only arranged marriages (*māgera vivāha*) happen, right? Parents don't accept things which have to do with love and affection (*maya, premko kuraharu*). That's why [only arranged marriages happen].

ID: Is this true? Is it also like this in our generation?

PD: Yes, it is.

ID: It is?

PD: It is. Parents... From what kind of house the boy is... For a girl to like a boy isn't enough. All the [boy's] behaviours must be understood. [This is what] parents say, isn't it? This is why [it is still true in our generation].

ID: Right. So take you, for example. Your marriage hasn't happened yet. Later, when you get married, in what way will you do it?

PD: Hmmm. Who knows? I don't know. It'll be an arranged marriage (*māgi vivāha*), maybe.

ID: An arranged marriage? But how would you personally like to do it?

PD: I would personally prefer a *love marriage*.

In this passage, Preeti seems torn between her own preferences and those of her parents. What she said next, however, reveals that the dilemma is in fact a false one.

ID: So you want a love marriage. Right. But can it be an arranged one anyway [at the same time]?

PD: That can be done.

ID: Explain this to me.

PD: This—this is how it is done. At home, you tell your mother and father, 'There is this person. He has shown me a lot of affection [*maya gareko*}'. And after this, you call people from this boy's house—from this person who has shown you affection—to your own house, to introduce [the boy] to your mother and father. After that, if your mother and father say that it's okay—well, then it's done, isn't it?

ID: And if this...

PD: If this doesn't happen, then it's time to elope (*bhāgne*, lit. 'disappear').

It seems, then, that it is possible to have a marriage which satisfies both young people's desire to choose their spouse and the formal requirements for an arranged marriage, but that this possibility is contingent on one's parents' cooperation.

At this point, some linguistic clarification is in order. The usual translation for '*māgi vivāha*' is 'arranged marriage'. Perhaps naively, I initially assumed that this category was mutually exclusive with that of *maya prithi vivāha* or 'love marriage' (the Nepali and English terms are used interchangeably). But talking with Preeti as well as others, I slowly came to understand that the literal translation of *māgi vivāha*, 'marriage by asking', better captures what is central to the concept, namely the requirement that the groom's family obtain formal consent from the bride's parents. Additionally, emically, to have a 'love marriage' primarily means choosing one's spouse. Such choices are regularly motivated by romantic love (*piar* or *prem*), but this is not, strictly speaking, necessary. People who enter companionate alliances, as is increasingly the case in Kathmandu (taking into account each other's social status, income, aspirations, etc.), will be said to be in a 'love marriage' as long as they were the ones to choose whom they married rather than their parents and elder relatives. Thus, *māgi vivāha*, whether one chooses to translate this term as 'arranged marriage' or not, is in fact opposed to elopement, to *bhāgnu* (lit. 'running away'). It is not necessarily incompatible with 'love marriage', as it is possible to choose one's spouse *and* obtain parental consent. When I asked, a friend from Kathmandu who speaks fluent English confirmed that this is the correct understanding. He explained that in the case where two people fall in love and then make the necessary arrangements for the woman's parents to consent to the marriage, as his own brother had done, one can say that the marriage was 'first love, then arranged', or even more simply 'both'. Additionally, Whelpton makes a brief note of this possibility in his history of Nepal:

Especially from the 1980s onwards, however, the line between the two [arranged and love marriage] began to blur as parents might formally 'arrange' a marriage between a couple who had in fact selected each other (2005: 158).

Here is also a good place to note that the categories which I am discussing are vernacular. They differ from those presented in classic Hindu scripture, which lists eight separate

forms of marriage (Pandey 1969:159–170). Among these is *Gāndharva vivāha*, which appears similar to ‘love marriage’ as the term is used in Nepal:

In this form, it were not the parents of the girl who settled the marriage, but the bride and the bridegroom arranged it among themselves out of sensual inclination. (1969:162)

Hindu texts take various stances on *Gāndharva vivāha*. Some portray it as a deliberate, contractual union, whereas others view it as an illegitimate form of marriage resulting from sexual union alone. Be this as it may, I never heard the concept being used in Sammagaon. The categories in common use are, to recapitulate, *māgi vivāha* (marriage by asking / arranged marriage), *maya prithi vivāha* (love marriage) and *bhāgnu / poila janu* (elopement).

Sirjana – a good daughter with a plan

Sirjana Dehegli was my sister in the field, Ganga and Chini Maya’s daughter. Aged twenty-four, Sirjana is taller and stronger than Preeti. She has inherited the sharp angular features and broad smile of her father, and her muscular build reveals how hard-working she is. Often, coming home late in the afternoon, covered in earth, Sirjana dropped the leaves or corn she was carrying, took an instant to rinse the dirt off herself, and immediately proceeded to domestic tasks—chopping firewood, rekindling the fire, cooking, etc.

Sirjana is well within the age for getting married; many in Sammagaon would say that she should do so soon, before it is too late and men lose interest. But if she were to marry, her parents would be left on their own, and they would find themselves incapable of running the house without her. As Chini Maya, her mother, regularly complains, her daughters-in-law should be around to help. If they were, she says, Sirjana could leave the household: but both of her daughters-in-law live in the city, far away. Ganga, Sirjana’s father, is well aware that he and his wife would not be able to perform all the necessary work without the help of their daughter. When I asked him what was going to happen in the future, once Sirjana left the house, he answered that he would have to sell everything he owns in Sammagaon, house and land, and go to live in Kathmandu. There, if he could afford it, he would build a big house for himself and his relatives. There was a clear twinge of sadness in Ganga’s voice as he said this, which is unsurprising given how deeply embedded in

Sammagaon are he and his wife.

As the person preventing, or at least delaying, this rupture, Sirjana is proving a good and virtuous daughter who almost never complains. Only once in the whole year and a half that I spent living in her house did I hear her do so demonstratively. This happened when she had been planning a trip to Kathmandu to see her new-born nephew, but the day before she was supposed to leave her parents told her that she could not go because there was too much work at home.

On the other hand, Sirjana also regularly told me how desperate she was to find paid employment with an NGO, especially given that this is what she had trained for in Kathmandu. After completing her +2 degree in Sammagaon, Sirjana spent a year and half in the capital, where she attended a career development school known as the 'Kathmandu Training Centre'. The centre advertised itself as a good choice for students who had finished their schooling but were unsure how to find employment. It trained people to become social mobilisers. When I helped Sirjana compose her CV, she was adamant about listing all the competences which she had acquired at the centre. These were very much up-to-date with current trends in development jargon, and included 'conflict management', 'food security', 'trafficking and violence against women', 'problems and needs analysis', 'PRA', etc. Thus, like Preeti, Sirjana aspired to a life beyond Sammagaon.

Again like Preeti, Sirjana is caught in a dilemma. Just after finishing the programme at the Kathmandu Training Centre, she held a short-term position as a social mobiliser in a district half-way between Kathmandu and her home. There, she met a man with whom she has been in a relationship ever since. Like her, he is Bishwakarma, and, in line with her aspirations, he has been a development worker for several years. Sirjana plans to marry him as soon as she finds employment herself. She talks with him on the phone at night, texts him and, when she can get internet access on her cellphone, exchanges photographs on Facebook. The relationship is a secret of which her father is unaware, and which I had to be careful not to reveal.

At first, it may seem that Sirjana's situation is quite different from that of Preeti. She faces a dilemma between taking care of her parents at home or finding a job and marrying. Nonetheless, the question of arranged and love marriage arises for Sirjana too. Despite

knowing that Sirjana's marriage would mean losing the most able worker in the household, Chini Maya would regularly tell me that she really wants her daughter to marry, and that she is worried that she will become too old for men to be interested in her. Eventually, Sirjana too will face the question of whether to have a love marriage or one arranged by her parents. Thinking about this issue, she intends to solve it in the same way as Preeti by having an 'arranged marriage' with the person of her choice:

ID:- Who will decide who you marry?

Sirjana Dehegli: - *Thulo manche* [lit. 'big man', her father in this case] will decide that, right?

ID: - And will you be able to choose too?

SD: Yes.

In addition to confirming the possibility of having an arranged love marriage, Sirjana is however aware that this possibility is constrained by one important factor. She knows that her and her future husband's families will only agree to perform the rituals for a *māgi vivāha*, and more generally only recognise the marriage, if the groom and bride are of the same caste.

ID: So the question is this. If one does not have an arranged marriage, there are some boys of one's own caste, but there are more boys of other castes. There are more Sunuwar, and Tamang boys than Bishwakarma boys...

SD: ...and Bahun-Chhetri.

ID: ..and Bahun Chhetri. There are many more. But you fell in love with a Bishwakarma.

SD: I did.

ID: How did this happen? Did you pay attention to his caste before falling in love? Or how did it happen?

SD: No, to pay attention to caste... It's not exactly this. But I did want to marry a

person of my own caste, because if one marries another caste... [brief description of a local case of intercaste marriage]. If you marry another caste what happens is this: by marrying someone higher than our caste, his family will not accept [me], right? They will take him out of his *family background* [i.e. disown him]. And then, if one marries somebody from a lower caste, so for example if I married a Damāi, well, my mother and father would not accept this Damāi.

With Preeti and Sirjana's case, I have tried to show that young women in rural Nepal have clear marital aspirations. They engage in moments of courtship, refuse proposals which are made to them, choose spouses who will suit their professional aspirations.⁴ That young women have some liberty in making these choices is perhaps unsurprising. Two decades ago, Ahearn (2001) had already noted an increased freedom in spouse choice among young Gurungs in Nepal. She argued that with the spread of literacy, the emergence of love letters fostered new forms of courtship that place romantic love at centre stage. In Sammagaon, younger people have stopped writing each other love letters. They told me that this had been popular in earlier times, but that the letters have now been replaced by the more convenient and more discreet use of SMS or, when possible, Facebook.

A central claim which I am making here is that even if romance does indeed play an increasingly important role in how young people choose their future spouses, these young people nevertheless exercise careful control over whom they choose to marry. In particular, as Sirjana's words suggest, they ensure that it is somebody of the same caste as themselves. For the Bishwakarma and Dalits more generally, this is in no small part due to fear of mistreatment by hypothetical non-Dalit in-laws. But beyond this, I argue that another motivation for choosing a spouse of one's own caste is the ability to 'pass off' one's love marriage as an arranged one. We have seen that both both Preeti and Sirjana intend to do precisely this, to have a marriage that is 'first love, then arranged'. In the next section I present the story of a third young woman, Basanti, who got married in precisely this way while I was in the field.

4. This is not true of *all* young women in Nepal, of course, and I did observe cases of marriages in which, as far as I knew, parents had been in full control. People generally agreed that these were increasingly rare.

Basanti – arranged love marriage

Basanti Kalikote is in her mid-twenties. She and her family are Bishwakarma, but belong to a different *thar* than the Dehegli (i.e. they are not part of the same patriline as the other Bishwakarma of Sammagaon). She is the daughter of a blacksmith, shop owner, joker and convivial drinker whom everybody calls by his nickname 'Kishor'. Basanti herself is constantly smiling and friendly. She seamlessly switches between two sets of behaviours expected from her in different contexts. At home, she behaves like a well-raised daughter, bringing food to her father and other men at meal times, waiting patiently for them to finish eating and serving generous second helpings before she starts her own meal. But in public, Basanti assumes her NGO-worker role, speaking authoritatively to crowds of villagers, including men senior to her. As noted in chapter 6, to have formal employment, especially in the development sector, confers status and generates envy in rural Nepal. Basanti spends most of her days outside, taking part in meetings in multiple VDCs in the area, discussing development, explaining credit policies and goals to villagers, taking trips to the district headquarters for more meetings, writing reports, organising training programmes, etc. As a result, she is strongly involved in public life. In several ways, she has achieved some of Sirjana's aspirations.

Basanti, I assumed, would want to choose her own husband. She was steeped in Nepal's distinctive representation of 'modernity', which sees arranged marriage as a phenomenon of the past, a practice that is distinctly un-modern. Moreover, a love marriage would mean Basanti could choose a spouse who would not take issue with her work and independence. I was therefore taken aback when two young men arrived from a distant VDC to ask for Basanti in marriage. One of them was called Kumar; he was here to ask Kishor to give Basanti in marriage to his younger brother. What I found so striking was that everything about the demand rigorously followed the traditions required for *māgi vivāha*, as the following account, a shortened version of my fieldnotes, shows.

Ganga acts as the *lāmi*, the person who knows the families of both parties and facilitates meetings and discussions. In the afternoon after the arrival of the two young men, he phones Kishor and tells him to prepare to welcome guests. In the evening, the two young

men, Ganga, and I walked to Kishor's house. The walk is an unusually silent affair, almost ceremonious. Ganga enters Kishor's house first and we follow a few instants later. We sit in one of the rooms; there is some idle talk, and then the conversation quickly turns to the topic of weddings. Not Basanti's possible wedding, just weddings which the various people present have attended lately.

Mid-way through the conversation, Kishor's wife arrives. She discreetly asks me to follow her outside and asks about the purpose of our visit. I tell her what I know, that we are here to 'request a girl' (*kheti māgne*), the terms which everybody else has been using so far. We go back in. After an hour of small talk, Kishor's wife calls everybody up for the evening meal. Ganga announces, using a common Nepali idiom, that there is one 'small, sweet' (*chotho-mitho*) matter to discuss before the meal, and asks for Basanti to be brought into the room. By now, Kishor has understood what is happening. He asks the young men two simple questions: 'So, it's your younger brother we're talking about?' and 'What work does he do?' The answers are brief: 'Yes', and 'Social work'.

The meal is eaten in silence. Basanti is in the room; she serves us food without saying a word. She is more solemn than usual, perhaps nervous. Once we have finished eating, the conversation starts again. Ganga formally announces that the purpose of the visit is to ask Basanti in marriage. Later, he adds that both Basanti and Kishor's potential son-in-law want the marriage to happen, stating that 'it is their desire' (*uniharuko ichha chha*).

The conversation goes on for about twenty minutes. Kishor wants to make sure that the potential son-in-law is a good match for his daughter. He worries most centrally about the young man's employment. His interlocutors reassure him, stating that he works in the development sector, like Basanti. Kishor asks Basanti to comment on the possible marriage, but she stays resolutely silent. Ganga makes a few passing comments on the fact that marriage traditions are changing. He reminds everybody how in the past one would sometimes go through hours of conversation only to face a refusal in the end. I think he is trying to encourage Kishor, who still looks uncertain. In the end, Kishor announces that he wants to meet his potential son-in-law before giving his final decision.

A few weeks later the potential son-in-law arrives in Sammagaon, and the decision to proceed with the marriage is finalised. All the requirements for a *māgi vivāha* are followed. A

formal request is made to Kishor, with appropriate small gifts. Kishor gives his consent. We go to consult an astrologer, who finds an auspicious time for the wedding. We discuss how many guests the groom's party should bring to Sammagaon, briefly talk about what kind of gifts both sides should exchange.⁵ Finally, there is talk of what vehicles the groom's party should use to bring the bride back to her new village. Kishor is annoyed that the groom's relatives want to come on motorbikes and insists that a more prestigious vehicle, perhaps a 4x4, be rented for the occasion.

On the first visit to Kishor's house, I almost missed Ganga's fleeting mention that Basanti and the groom had a 'desire' for the wedding to happen. But when I did hear it, I was puzzled. Only later did I learn that Basanti and the groom had been in a relationship for a prolonged period before these events, and that they had carefully planned the marriage request together. Kishor himself did not know about his daughter's intentions until the first visit by his son-in-law's relatives. From his point of view, almost everything proceeded as if this was a regular *māgi vivāha*: people came to ask for his daughter's hand, he asked about the groom's suitability, thought it through, and finally gave consent. If anything, by demanding to *meet* the groom in person before approving, it would appear that Kishor was *asserting* the importance of his approval.

And yet, in reality, Kishor's approval—which is supposedly critical—is perhaps not quite so. Consider the following excerpt from my fieldnotes, taken after the first visit, but before the second and Kishor's final consent:

I ask Ganga if Kishor has the right (*adikhār*) to see the potential son-in-law before giving his daughter away. Ganga says that he does, but that before, people would often marry their daughters without seeing the potential son-in-law. I ask if Kishor has the right to refuse to give his daughter, and Ganga tells me that he does; the ultimate decision lies in his hands. So what will happen if he does refuse? The answer here is really interesting: Ganga says that in this case Basanti will have the *right* (*adikhār*) to run away (*baghnu*), i.e. to elope with

5. While it is common for the relatives of the bride to give more than those of the groom to newly-weds, there is no formal dowry in this part of Nepal, and no dowry negotiation.

the boy without her father’s consent.

By the rules of *māgi vivāha*, the father is the person who can ultimately decide whether or not the daughter will marry the man. But the possibility of the daughter eloping, an act that could potentially bring shame to her family, *including* to the father, places pressure on the father to accept. This is especially the case in a marriage like Basanti’s, which others approve of. It is significant that, were Kishor to refuse the marriage, Ganga says Basanti would have the *right* to run away. Kishor may technically have the power to refuse the wedding, but if he does, the result will be an elopement that others consider legitimate and that is likely to reflect poorly on him as much or even more than on his daughter. This is why Ganga encourages Kishor to say yes from the very first visit.

Arranged and love marriage as a cooperation game

It is illuminating to think of Basanti’s marriage and the marriages which Preeti and Sirjana aspire to as cases of cooperation between fathers and daughters. Basanti shows respect to her father by seeking his consent—sending her future husband to ask for her own hand formally—and in return, her father consents to her marrying the man of her choice. The result is a situation which it is optimal for both Basanti *and* her father.⁶

		Father	
		agree	refuse
Daughter	seek consent	A	B
	do not seek consent	C	D

Table 10.1: Arranged and love marriage as a cooperation game between father and daughter.

This situation can be formalised as per table 10.1. Here, a daughter who is considering marriage in Nepal has two options. She may either *seek consent* from her father, the cooperative option, or she may *not seek consent*, the non-cooperative option. The father also has two options. He may *accept* a daughter’s chosen husband or *refuse* him. Again, these

6. It would be more ethnographically appropriate to use the terms ‘father or elder male relative’ here, since in a father’s absence it is traditional for an uncle, for example, to have authority over a daughter’s wedding. I use the term ‘father’ here for simplicity, but one should bear this qualification in mind.

are, respectively, cooperative and non-cooperative options. This formalisation is a simplification of reality. It is the very opposite of a 'thick' description (Geertz 1973b), and as such, it might raise suspicion in the anthropologically minded reader. The 'thinness', however, is by design: this formalisation is useful because it shows very clearly why marriages that are simultaneously 'love marriages' and 'arranged' are optimal for both fathers and daughters.

Let us consider the possible outcomes. If the daughter seeks her father's consent and the father agrees to let her marry her chosen spouse, what obtains is a case similar to Basanti's (cell A). The marriage is a 'love marriage' and an 'arranged marriage' at the same time, or, to give this a more succinct name, an 'arranged love marriage'. If a daughter seeks her father's consent but the father does not accept the spouse she has chosen, two things may happen. The daughter might marry another man, chosen by her father (cell B). In this case, what obtains is a 'simple' arranged marriage. The other possibility is that the daughter will ignore her father's refusal, stop seeking his consent, and elope (cell D).

This model clearly shows that young women are not powerless in the face of fathers who refuse to let them marry who they want. As a father, to pronounce such a refusal is to expose oneself to the risk of one's daughter eloping. This is not merely a hypothetical possibility; elopement is quite a common phenomenon and, to an extent, seen as a legitimate option. Recall both Gita and Sirjana speaking of elopement as a viable alternative if their parents will not let them choose who they marry, and recall Ganga saying that Basanti would have had the *right* to elope if Kishor had refused the marriage.

Nevertheless, even if elopement is seen as somewhat legitimate, it is undeniably an outcome far less preferable than an arranged *cum* love marriage, for all parties. There are negative connotations to elopement which will lead to a loss in social prestige both for those who elope and those whose daughters elope. It is highly unlikely that a wedding ceremony—a highly significant life cycle ritual—will be organised. A mother might become resentful towards her husband if he forces his daughter to elope. A daughter who elopes will find her relations with her *maiti* (her father's household) spoiled. In extreme cases, it can lead to disownment. In sum, there are a host of reasons why daughters as well as fathers may want to avoid this.

The threat of seeing his daughter elope is therefore an important motivation for a father to agree to arrange a marriage with the husband of her choice.

A question remains as to cell C. According to the model, this is when a father is willing to let his daughter choose her own spouse, but the daughter nevertheless does not seek consent from her father. The motivation for a daughter to act this way seems unclear, but if this were to happen, it would count as elopement by Nepali standards. This possibility only occurred to me as I was formulating the model; I did not discuss it with people in Nepal. It would stand to reason that this type of elopement is seen as less *legitimate* than the one which can take place after a father's refusal, but this is speculation on my part; I have no data to back this up.

Sandeep – an accomplished fact

So far, I have presented the 'arranged love marriage' as a phenomenon that emerges through cooperation between fathers and daughters. What of sons? I have much less data on the marital aspirations of young men in Nepal because there were far fewer of them in Sannagaon. This is mostly down to labour migration. Many Nepali men of marriageable age work in the Arabian peninsula or elsewhere abroad;⁷ they typically only come back to Nepal once every two years, sometimes less frequently still.

The effect of migration on young men's marital prospects is unclear. A pattern I encountered several times is for a young man to return to Nepal solely to get married and then to leave again only months after his wedding.⁸ Though I do not have sufficient data to fully substantiate the following claim, it is possible that one of the long-term effects of outmigration will be a mitigation of virilocality. I met a number of recently-married women in their twenties and thirties whose husbands were working abroad, and who had continued to live with their own parents. In some cases, these women have children whom they raise with the help of their own mothers, in a fairly drastic break from what is seen as normal in the area. Another way in which outmigration may be shaking the foundations of Nepali kinship is by providing those women whose husbands work abroad with

7. Labour migration to India is common in other parts of Nepal, but not in the Eastern hills.

8. Such wedding are sometimes *only* arranged, and sometime arranged *and* love marriages. In the latter case, the spouses will have maintained a relationship over Facebook and other communication technologies.

substantial monetary resources, through remittance. Muna, our neighbour, was a good example. Her husband, Ganga's younger brother, had been working abroad for almost ten years when I arrived in Sammagaon. On one occasion, Muna explained to me that, while she had initially felt sad about his absence, by now she had gotten used to it and enjoyed the fact that she could run her household as she saw fit, without having to defer to a man, but while still being able to count on his financial assistance.

Setting aside these considerations on migration, there are some young men who do not leave. I was able to follow in some detail the marriage of one young Bishwakarma man named Sandeep, and the way in which this played out is relevant to the argument made in this chapter.

Sandeep lives with his father, mother and paternal uncle in Sahu Bajar. I paid them a chance visit in May 2014 when I was attending an important festival in the vicinity, with Muna's daughter and two sons, and they decided we should drop by. We sat in front of the house, were offered some tea, and started chatting idly with other relatives who happened to be there. After a while, I noticed that there was an unusual amount of scuffling around and a palpable tension in the air. The reason quickly became clear. I was told that Sandeep, who was not there at the time, was 'bringing back a girl'. This left me quite puzzled. It turned out that the night before, Sandeep had phoned his uncle and told him that he would be returning home the next day with the woman he wished to marry. Some of his cousins were already in the know, but his parents and uncle had not heard anything about it until then.

There was some confusion. The parents were not sure what to do about the new arrival. Sandeep's uncle took charge. He instructed his brother to place two *amkara* (brass vessels) containing flowers on either side of the front door. Someone was sent to buy *sindur* (vermillion), which was then mixed with rice and yoghurt, making the substance used to give *tika* (a blessing given by placing a mark on the forehead) during weddings and other important rituals. A third *amkara* was filled with water and a small, leafy branch placed in it.

Sandeep arrived in the afternoon, a woman following close behind him. Everybody fell silent. At this stage, I was not sure what would happen and I began to feel uneasy. I feared that Sandeep's parents and uncle would be angry at him. Sandeep stood, motionless and awkward, on the porch for a few seconds. His uncle was the first to speak: 'So, how long are you going to keep carrying your bag like that?' At this, Sandeep snapped back to life and put down his backpack. The tension receded. The uncle approached Sandeep, a child following him with the water-filled *amkara*. The child was instructed to sprinkle Sandeep and the woman who had arrived with him while the uncle recited a few lines from a chant.

From then on and for the rest of the day, Sandeep and the woman were referred to as *beula* (groom) and *beuli* (bride). Everybody present, including myself, gave *tika* to them. The bride was asked to greet everybody formally, then she and the groom were fed yoghurt from metal glasses held up to their lips. Sandeep's uncle led the couple up to the front door and told the bride to pronounce some words, including 'from now on, this is my house'. She remained silent, but her attitude was not defiant. As she later told to me, she was simply too nervous to talk. Sandeep's uncle and everyone else seemed to understand this; they did not insist, and shortly thereafter, the bride entered the house.

Later that day, Sandeep's uncle came up to me and said, 'We must be satisfied with whomever the times bring (*Samaya le jo dinchha, tyo hāmilāi santushti hunnu parchha*).'

It was only later, talking with people who had been there, that I understood what I had witnessed. What had happened was a wedding, but one condensed to a few of its key components. The rituals performed that day—the *tika*, the yoghurt feeding, the sentences which the bride was too nervous to pronounce—had taken no more than an hour. But still, from this day onwards, there was no question that Sandeep and the woman whom he had 'brought home' were husband and wife. On every visit I made to the house after these events, the woman was there; she was referred to as 'daughter-in-law' by Sandeep's parents and she did all the cooking, cleaning, and work that was expected of her. I tried on several occasions to get her perspective on the wedding, but she never seemed keen to tell me about it.

Several months later, a more formal wedding was organised for Sandeep and his wife. This was a two-day ceremony, with more priests and rituals than I had seen at most weddings. Darji musicians came to play, and Darji tailors made clothes for the bride and groom. Had it not been for the absence of guests from the bride's side, this would have been a regular ceremony. The reason for organising it, I was told, was that the previous wedding—the condensed version which took place on the bride's first arrival at the house—had not been appropriate. The reason for the absence of guests from the bride's side was that, in the eyes of the bride's family, this was an elopement. No one had asked the bride's family for consent, and so they did not want to come to the wedding.

In summary, Sandeep's wedding shows that it is easier for young men than for young women to marry the spouse they choose without facing negative consequences from their parents. Unlike Basanti, Sandeep did not need to carefully plan to get his family to accept his marriage. He simply announced, less than twenty-four hours before doing so, that he was 'bringing back a girl'. Once he did so, his marriage to this woman was an accomplished fact. Nobody challenged it. As his uncle said, Sandeep's relatives had to be 'satisfied with the person that the times had brought'. The stark contrast between Sandeep's relatives' immediate acceptance of the marriage and his wife's relatives' refusal to attend the second, large ceremony only reinforces the point. Both men and women can have a marriage with the person they choose *and* get their parents and elder relatives to acknowledge it, but doing so is much harder for a woman. This being said, even the accomplished fact of Sandeep's wedding was recognised by his family only because the woman he 'brought back' belonged to the same caste. Had he attempted to do the same with a Darji woman, his family would not have been as welcoming.

Endogamy

What can we conclude from the ethnography presented in this chapter? A number of obvious points could be made about gender inequality. On the one hand, men have it much easier than women when it comes to choosing their spouse. On the other hand, I hope to have also shown that young women are far from *powerless* in the matter. They are not simply the passive 'gift' made during a wedding's central ritual of *khanyādān*. If they plan wisely, as Basanti did and Preeti and Sirjana intended, they can 'arrange' the love

marriage of their choice. The fact that a woman can elope puts pressure on her father to accept the marriage which she desires, and in doing so, he has the capacity to transform his daughter's 'love' marriage into an arranged one.

There are, however, limits to the choices which women *and* men can make, and this is the critical point with which I wish to conclude this chapter. The whole edifice of the arranged love marriage, such as I have presented it here, is *entirely dependent on caste endogamy*. Arranged love marriages are, so to speak, a clever 'trick'. They enable spouses and their parents, under the right circumstances, to have their cake and eat it too. When such a marriage works out, the formalities of an arranged marriage are respected but spouses are still given (some degree of) freedom to choose each other. The undesirable negative connotations of elopement are avoided, but the desirable freedom to choose one's partner, central to the Nepali imagination of modernity, is maintained. *None of this is possible in the case of intercaste marriage*. In the institution of *māgi vivāha*, marriage by asking or 'arranged marriage', it is only possible to ask to marry someone who belongs to one's own caste. All cases of intercaste marriage are, therefore, cases of elopement.

With this observation, we have the answer to the question asked in the opening section of this chapter. One reason young Nepalis do not fall in love 'randomly', a reason they seem to want to marry people of their own caste even in a context where romantic love is increasingly being emphasised and where ideologies of modernity are becoming prevalent, is that doing so represents an optimal compromise between giving in to the traditional form of *māgi vivāha* and choosing one's spouse with complete freedom. By restricting their choices to people of the same caste as themselves, young people and young women in particular can please their parents, avoid the negative associations that come with elopement, and yet nevertheless experience relative freedom in their choice.

To conclude this chapter and the third part of this thesis, although 'mixing' is seen by some as a strategy to do away with caste as a whole, a number of obstacles remain. The previous chapter showed how (upper-)caste status is being increasingly 'guarded', so to speak, against the risk of dilution through mixing. This chapter addressed an altogether different obstacle. It showed that caste endogamy (which is antithetical to mixing through intercaste marriage) does not depend solely on the 'imposition' of a spouse that takes place

in traditional 'arranged marriages'. It is therefore not likely to 'die off' as love marriage becomes more prominent. Young Nepalis who aspire to a 'modern' lifestyle and a love marriage are nevertheless careful to choose a spouse who belongs to the same caste as themselves. Dalits do so in part because they fear the discrimination which their in-laws would subject them to, were they to marry a non-Dalit, but, as this chapter has shown, there is another, more complex process which explains why caste endogamy endures. What kind of incentive Dalit–non-Dalit marriage would need to make it as desirable as the endogamous 'arranged love marriage', beyond the financial reward offered by the Ministry of finance, is a question which remains open.

Conclusion

Norms and actuality

This thesis opened with an incident during my fieldwork which puzzled me. After a long walk Ganga, Chini Maya and I were unexpectedly hosted by a Sherpa couple, contrary to the rule according to which Dalits should not be let into non-Dalit houses. On the very same night, Ganga said that I had come to Nepal to study ‘why Dalits used to be untouchable but are not any more.’

I opened with this episode because it made me attentive to the complexity of the attitudes displayed by people in Sammagaon towards caste and caste-based discrimination.

Ganga’s statement, taken literally, is quite simply incorrect: there are still many behaviours that can legitimately be described as forms of untouchability in Sammagaon. And yet, after spending a year and a half in the field, I do not believe that Ganga’s statement was a complete misrepresentation of the way things are. This is so for the following two reasons.

The first is that the statement is *partly* true. One might say that it accurately assesses the *direction of travel* of caste-based discrimination, but that it is mistaken in suggesting that the end point—its eventual elimination—has already been reached. Chapter 2 showed that there *has* been significant change in the way in which the Bishwakarma and Dalits more generally are treated. In Sammagaon, full-blown untouchability has all but disappeared from public spaces and, generally speaking, Dalits are treated with more dignity than in the past. Gone are the times when entering a tea-shop would lead to a beating, when special terms of address had to be used, when Dalits gave a wide berth to non-Dalits whose paths they crossed. Remarks made by Bahuns and quoted in chapter 9 confirm that this

change has occurred. Indeed, upper castes are no longer worried that they will be defiled by Dalits, and therefore they no longer 'bother' to enforce strong avoidances. But none of this means that caste-based discrimination and untouchability have disappeared altogether. First, there is a host of ways in which the Bishwakarma and other Dalits continue to be singled out as 'lowly', 'dirty', 'ignorant', and as having a number of other stigmatising properties. Second, in spaces and contexts where kinship is a prominent mode of relation—in what I have called the 'domestic sphere'—untouchability still prevails. Therefore, it might have been more judicious for Ganga to say that 'Dalits used to be untouchable but are not *fully so* any more'.

The second reason is that the intent of Ganga's statement was arguably *normative* rather than *descriptive*. Ganga was perhaps not so much describing Sammagaon factually as he was making a statement about what *ought* to be. Indeed, there is today an explicit norm according to which untouchability and caste-based discrimination should not exist, and this norm is known to all. It is communicated by NGOs, by the media, and in school. It was inculcated by Maoist insurgents during the 'People's War' and it is part of the law. More generally, this norm is part and parcel of the modernist ideologies which prevail in Nepal. As chapter 6 noted, this norm has affected the way in which ordinary Nepalis imagine society. The explicit social ontology to which most adhere is one in which humans are not divided into multiple castes, but instead are all fundamentally *the same*. Caste is portrayed as man-made rather than god-made, as a historical and 'accidental' phenomenon that society must 'get over' rather than an ontologically deep and timeless reality. In this sense, Ganga might more judiciously have said, 'Dalits used to be untouchable but *ought not* to be any more'.

The gap between norms and actuality, between what ought to be and what is, has been an undercurrent in much of this thesis. Some chapters addressed the topic explicitly, others only implicitly. In the first part of this conclusion, I wish to return to this topic. I will start by summarising how the various chapters addressed it.

In part I, I described various strategies used in an attempt to bring about a world in which caste-based discrimination and untouchability are not only said no longer to exist, but in which their practical relevance is effectively eliminated. In other terms, part I was ded-

icated to attempts to *actualise* the norm according to which Dalits should not be treated differently from others.

The first strategy which I addressed, in chapter 3 was that of Ganga himself. By and large, it consists in trying to make the Bishwakarma similar to the upper castes. It is, in this sense, a version of sanskritisation. Ganga became the first Dalit teacher in his district, acquired considerable personal prestige (eventually achieving a *guru*-like status), and tells alternative myths of origin according to which his caste is, in fact, a brahmanical one. He has given up on some of the habits which others say make Dalits 'dirty', in particular, the consumption of alcohol. He favours *education* and hopes that the Bishwakarma will become a 'learned' people, thereby shifting their public image to one which resembles that of the Bahun. Put simply, Ganga's strategy is to accumulate brahmanical cultural capital. I argued that this strategy is effective, but that its effect is restricted and limited. It is restricted to Ganga and his household, and it is limited insofar as even Ganga himself continues to be seen as a Dalit, and is thus prevented from entering non-Dalit houses, and so forth. Ganga has unquestionably improved his own social status, but he nevertheless remains resolutely Dalit.

Of the strategies I addressed, Ganga's is the least confrontational. Ganga sees the discrimination which he and other Dalits are subjected to and agrees that this discrimination should cease. His response, largely, consists in trying to change not those who display prejudiced behaviour, but instead those who are subjected to it. In some parts of India, the imitation by subaltern people of the upper castes (in particular by giving up alcohol) has been analysed as a way of *co-opting* or *undermining* the power inherent in upper-caste purity practices (Hardiman 1987:157ff; Shah 2011:1101). Ganga's adoption of brahmanical practices, in contrast, is more in line with the standard explanation of sanskritisation; it is conformist rather than subversive. To be sure, Ganga criticises those who dispense discrimination, but here too his reaction is 'gentle'; it consists in patiently educating such people until they realise that they are *wrong* about Dalits.

The second strategy I described, in chapter 4, also consists in acquiring cultural capital, but of another kind. I described how Ilesh, a young activist, is in the incipient stages of creating a 'culture of their own' for the Bishwakarma, modelled after the success of

indigenous and ethnic politics in Nepal. The culture which he wants to create is one which would *distinguish* the Bishwakarma from the Bahun. In this sense, his aim is diametrically opposed to Ganga's.

Though this enterprise had barely begun when I met him, Ilesh was already facing significant difficulties. Most critically, he was butting against the reified, rigid understanding of 'culture' that has emerged in Nepal with the rise of ethnic and indigenous politics. What the Bishwakarma would need to be able to claim that they have a 'culture of their own' is a distinct mother tongue, distinct religious practices, and a distinct material culture. Ilesh had no hope of finding or creating the first two. The third, a distinct material culture, could in principle be found in the Bishwakarma's traditional 'caste occupation', blacksmithing. However, the cultural capital contained in the objects which the Bishwakarma make—most significantly the *khukuri*—is associated with the Nepali nation as a whole rather than with the Bishwakarma. The *khukuri* comes to stand for Nepali military bravery, but none of the prestige inherent in this symbol flows back to the Bishwakarma, who find themselves alienated from the symbolic capital contained in what they make. In Ilesh's words, what they make is 'somebody else's culture'.

Ilesh's strategy is less conformist than Ganga's in one central regard: it is not based on negotiating one's place within the traditional, caste-based understanding of Nepali social hierarchy. Rather, it is based on rejecting this hierarchy altogether in favour of identity politics. The reason it fails is that identity politics—at least in their current guise in Nepal, which is based on 'ethnicity' and 'indigeneity'—do not put everybody on equal grounds. Such politics are based on a rejection of the hierarchy of caste, but they create new divisions between those who do and those who do not have the 'right' kind of culture. The Bishwakarma find themselves on the wrong side of this divide. This kind of identity politics, therefore, does not represent a promising avenue for Dalits trying to bring about a world in which all people are fundamentally 'the same'.

The third strategy is based on force. In chapter 5, I described how Maoist insurgents, during the 1996–2006 'People's War', attempted to eliminate untouchability by threatening to violently punish anybody exercising it. Of the three strategies, this is the one which is most explicitly and directly confrontational. It was also the most effective, but its effect was

temporary. As the ex-Maoist commander interviewed in that chapter stated, and as many others agreed, with regards to the elimination of caste-based discrimination, the Maoists' success was only temporary and only due to the fear they inspired. In other words, the Maoists succeeded in actualising the norm according to which Dalits should not be treated as a distinct kind of human, but they did so by forcefully *imposing* this norm rather than by eliciting free and spontaneous adherence to it. Consequently, once the Maoists were no longer in control, many of the old discriminatory practices returned.

Part I, on the whole, showed how difficult it is for Dalits to be perceived and treated as equal to others. Ganga's strategy operates *within* dominant cultural forms; Ilesh's tries to move *around* them; and the Maoists' clashed *against* them. None of these have, so far, been fully successful. The stigma which affect Dalits is, as the title of this thesis suggests, highly resilient. Part II of the dissertation is where I engaged more explicitly with this resilience.

Chapter 6 explicitly asked why people who profess that there is only one kind of human do not behave consistently with this assertion. It opened by showing how deep this contradiction runs. It is not just non-Dalits who do not behave in line with their assertions about the unity of humankind: Dalits themselves do the same. The Bishwakarma, who are regular recipients of caste-based discrimination, are also dispensers of it when they interact with the Darji.

I offered several potential explanations for why an 'ethic of castelessness', while easily proclaimed, may be hard to adhere to in practice. First, I explored the possibility that the ethic is merely performative, one which people pay lip service to because doing so makes them appear 'modern', a highly desirable feature in Nepal. Second, I explored whether the mismatch between people's professed ethical standards and their behaviour could be down to a lack of coordination. According to this explanation, it is only if everybody gave up on caste-based discrimination *simultaneously* that the phenomenon would disappear. I found both of these explanations unsatisfactory, and instead suggested that we must ascribe contradictory mental states to the people of Sammagaon. We must admit that they simultaneously and quite genuinely believe that all humans are fundamentally the same, and yet at another level, believe that Dalits are somehow different. A useful theoretical framing for this, I suggested, is Gendler's (2008a, 2008b) concept of *alief*, propositional

attitudes which individuals can hold unconsciously but which nevertheless motivate behaviour. Gendler herself argues that aliefs have been vastly overlooked in philosophy. This might be the case in anthropology as well, and what is certain is that *aliefs* are hard to study ethnographically. I will return to this point below.

Re-phrasing the conclusion of chapter 6, the *norm* that Dalits should not be treated differently is one which people explicitly agree with. What makes the norm hard to *actualise* is a more deeply embedded, more implicit representation according to which Dalits are a deeply different kind of human.

Chapter 7 offered one explanation for why such an implicit representation may endure, based on the cognitive bias known as ‘psychological essentialism’. The main manifestation of this bias is to dispose humans towards thinking in ‘kinds’. In the case of social categories, psychological essentialism makes it easy for humans to acquire the type of conception of social groups which Geertz (1973a) called ‘primordialist’. It makes it easy to come to believe that the members of a given social group—Dalits being the one which concern us here—share an invisible ‘essence’ which makes them what they are. Conversely, it makes it difficult for humans to reject such understandings. The ethic of castelessness being fundamentally premised on a rejection of a primordialist social ontology, psychological essentialism represents an obstacle to its adoption. The bias shows why, despite the ethic being adhered to at an explicit level, implicit representations diverge.

It is important to be very specific about the role of psychological essentialism. Alone, this bias does not explain the full-blown, culturally specific, historically formed notions of caste and untouchability. Nor, for that matter, does psychological essentialism suffice to explain the cultural intricacies of other essentialised social categories such as race, ethnicity, or gender. What psychological essentialism does, however, is provide a cognitive ‘advantage’ to essentialised construals. The history of the emergence of the conception of Dalits not only as a distinct kind of people, but as a ‘lowly’, ‘impure’, and ‘defiling’ kind is complex and deeply intertwined with issues of political power and economic exploitation. Once the concept was in place, however, it was sustained not only by power and exploitation, but also by psychological essentialism itself. The latter—in addition to, not rather than, political and economic factors—helps explain why such a concept has reproduced

so reliably. Macroscopic historical trajectories and microscopic cognitive processes come together in creating caste and untouchability. The removal of these categories must therefore be concerned both with the macroscopic historical level *and* the microscopic cognitive one.

Part III discussed a strategy for alleviating caste-based discrimination that was only tangentially touched upon in part I, but which does have the potential to mitigate the effect of psychological essentialism. This strategy consists in ‘mixing’ Dalits and non-Dalits. Unlike the strategies discussed in part I, mixing is not an attempt to change how others view and treat Dalits. Instead, mixing is couched in a desire to change the social ontology or social composition of Nepal so that the distinction between Dalits and others either ceases to exist, or becomes irrelevant. In this sense, this strategy does not aim to *actualise* norms specifying how Dalits ought to be treated. Instead, it seeks to remove the very conditions under which there is a need for such norms.

Chapter 8 described two different understandings of the efficacy of mixing. I encountered the first at a blood donation programme organised by Ilesh, whose goal was to blur the boundary separating Dalits and others by establishing what he called a ‘relation of the body’. Ilesh’s commitment to mixing seems motivated by the hope that sufficient blurring of the boundary between Dalits and others could, ultimately, lead to the abandonment of the very idea that Dalits form a distinct group. This is in tension with the identity politics which he simultaneously engages in, but his lack of consistency, I suggested, can hardly be held against him. The second understanding of mixing described in chapter 8 was explained to me by Abeer BK, a politician involved in promoting marriage between Dalits and non-Dalits. Abeer stated that such marriages have the potential to transform non-Dalits into Dalits because of traditional beliefs about permanent defilement. This understanding of mixing aims to bring people into the same social category rather than blur the distinctions between categories.

The rest of part III confronted Ilesh’s and Abeer’s hopes with the conceptions of ‘ordinary’—by which I mean, politically non-engaged—Nepalis. Chapter 8 concluded with excerpts from interviews with actual Dalit–non-Dalit couples. My overall evaluation was that the extent to which such couples perceive their marriage as an instance of socially

transformational mixing depends on a host of external factors, including class, education, political awareness, etc.

Chapters 9 and 10 analysed some of the obstacles which mitigate the success of mixing as a strategy for the alleviation of caste-based discrimination. Chapter 9 focused on the *possibility of mixing* itself. A classic debate in the anthropology of South Asia concerns whether persons are conceived of as ‘static’ or ‘malleable’ entities. Mixing is only possible if the latter holds true, and only makes sense if it is believed to *change* people. I showed that such change—which is thought to occur through permanent defilement—is no longer feared by upper-caste people, so that the only way in which such defilement can happen nowadays is through marriage. Moreover, I presented some early signs that, in the future, even marrying a Dalit may no longer be considered to transform a non-Dalit into a Dalit.

The obstacle discussed in chapter 10 is caste endogamy. Mixing through intercaste marriage can only start blurring social categories if it becomes a lot more common than it is today. One might expect that the well-documented shift towards love marriage in Nepal would suffice to put a dent in caste endogamy, but by and large, this is not the case. One reason Dalits do not marry non-Dalits is for fear of the discrimination which they would be subjected to by their hypothetical in-laws. I showed, however, that there is a more general process which sustains endogamy in a context where love marriage is increasingly popular. Namely, unlike exogamous *elopement*, a *love marriage* that respects the rule of endogamy can be ‘passed off’ as an arranged one, and by doing so, the newly-weds and their parents reap the social prestige associated with the latter.

There are, therefore, major obstacles standing in the way of mixing and the bringing about of a situation in which there is no longer a need for anti-discriminatory norms.

Avenues for future research

Cognitive constraints on the actualisation of ethical norms

As of late, a number of anthropologists have been pushing for a more deliberate and systematic study of ethics. The label ‘ordinary ethics’ is used by some (e.g. Lambek 2010; Das 2012; Stafford 2013) to emphasise two points. First, that ethical deliberation and decision

making are ‘banal’, that is, that they are embedded in everyday life rather than the exclusive purview of philosophical consideration or an otherwise detached, intellectual pursuit. Second, the label emphasises the all-encompassing character of ethics, which means that the ‘ethical’ is present in all domains of life, including those that anthropologists have tended to compartmentalise into distinct sub-fields (religion, politics, economy, etc.)

In this thesis, I did not engage explicitly with the ‘ethical turn’ which some are pushing for in anthropology, nor with the theoretical discussions which this push has fostered. However, I do believe that the issues which I have addressed are, by and large, ‘ethical’ in the broad sense defended by proponents of the turn. Indeed, I have been centrally concerned with how Nepalis—Dalits and non-Dalits—say and imagine that one *ought* to behave, and with what they think a ‘good’ social organisation would be like (namely, one in which caste is irrelevant and untouchability no longer exists). I have discussed attempts to bring about such behaviours and, perhaps most centrally, the shortcomings of these attempts.

A topic which I have barely touched upon, and which is in need of further consideration, concerns the way in which Nepalis relate to anti-casteist norms. What does it *mean* when Nepalis say that Dalits ought not to be mistreated? Is this an assessment of what it takes to be a *good*, virtuous person? Is this norm inscribed in wider projects of self-cultivation, perhaps as ‘modern’ individuals? If so, are the shortcomings in applying this norm experienced as personal failure? Or perhaps, is the norm not about the *self*, or about cultivating personal virtue, but instead, simply an (almost utilitarian) recognition that what is ethical is what is beneficial to others and to society at large? In this case, do shortcomings in applying the norm have phenomenological valence at all? Or again still, is the norm just perceived as a rule, part of a wider, deontological understanding of ‘the good’? My existing ethnographic data does not allow me to answer such questions satisfactorily. Future research may do so.

I can, however, offer some thoughts on what a judicious approach to ethical shortcomings might look like. Laidlaw, in *The Subject of Virtue* (2014) makes the following claim:

The reason then that an anthropology of ethics must be more than merely a new sub-discipline is that for it to succeed requires the development of a notion of

explanatory adequacy—of what an effective social explanation might be—that does not re-describe the conduct of responsible agents as the effects of causal ‘forces’ or the mechanical self-reproduction of ‘objective structures’. This, obviously, requires making ‘freedom’ a part of our conceptual vocabulary: not just a ‘discourse’ that is an object of ideology-critique, but a concept we think about and also think with. Unless we can develop conceptual resources to enable us to do this, ethics will remain necessarily outside our purview, and an anthropology of ethics is a contradiction in terms. (2014:10)

On the whole, anthropology has, according to Laidlaw, displayed too great a tendency to explain away, overlook or even negate deliberate, responsible, agentic behaviour. With a few exceptions, it has not, until recently, considered seriously the possibility that agents are free—in a fairly strong sense of the term—and that their behaviour may *not* be best explained in terms of forces external to the agent, but rather as the result of a process of ethical deliberation and decision-making. Anthropology has mistakenly concentrated on various supra-agentic forces that exert themselves upon agents: structures, culture, ideology, etc. In emphasising how powerful such forces are, the discipline has lost sight of the fact that agents do not simply obey these forces blindly, but engage with them evaluatively.

The suggestion is relevant to the question of ethical shortcomings. When, for example, Chini Maya does not permit a Darji to enter her house, she is acting contrary to a norm which she otherwise endorses. Following Laidlaw’s recommendation, we should not ‘re-describe’ her conduct in terms of macroscopic structures or forces that exert themselves upon her. Instead, we must consider it the ‘conduct of a responsible agent’ and, presumably, the result of a process of ethical deliberation that she has engaged in.

Much of Laidlaw’s book is dedicated to discussing which understanding of ‘freedom’ anthropologists should adopt to account for ethical engagements in this way. Another key question which he discusses concerns the nature of ‘agents’, and whether these must necessarily be individuals. These are important questions, but do not concern me here.

I am broadly sympathetic to Laidlaw’s warning against excessively mechanistic and deterministic approaches. More generally, I am sympathetic to his critique of top-down explanations of agentic behaviour. I generally agree with the precept of methodological

individualism (Weber 1922). So, in explaining the reproduction of, say, caste-based discrimination, we must account for the way in which individual agents *encounter* the wider social environment in which they are born and in which they deliberate, eventually coming to behave in ways that reproduce this environment. We must explain the reflective process through which Chini Maya decides not let the Darji in. In explaining the *erosion* of discrimination, we must do the same, except we will have to explain why certain individuals choose *not* to behave in discriminatory ways.

What is less clear in my mind, however, is what Laidlaw's defence of agentic freedom implies when it comes to an entirely separate set of constraints—if not 'forces'—that apply to ethical deliberation. I am referring here to *cognitive* and *psychological* constraints. That anthropology should treat ethical deliberation and decision-making as irreducible to social forces is, in my view, an unproblematic claim. What is not clear, however, is what anthropology should do with the fact that humans, as they come to the task of thinking ethically, do so with a psychological make-up that is, arguably, far from 'free'.

In this thesis, I have suggested that psychological essentialism, an inherent disposition of the human mind, plays an important role in making it *difficult* for Nepalis to behave in ways that they otherwise judge ethical. This does not re-describe Chini Maya's behaviour as the effect of systemic forces.⁹ It does, however, raise the question of how 'free' her actions are, and of how to evaluate her ethical shortcomings.

Moreover, this is but one example of how cognitive constraints may weigh into ethical deliberation; there are sure to be many more. Thus it seems to me that an anthropology that treats ethical engagements seriously must confront the question of whether its own central objects of investigation—ethical deliberation and freedom—may in fact be re-descriptions of more microscopic cognitive processes, similarly to how 'structures' are re-descriptions of agentic conduct. The ultimate question that such an anthropology faces may be no less than that of free will itself, but before we get to that point, there are many less intractable psychological constraints on ethical deliberation which need to be addressed. To do so, anthropology will necessarily have to cross academic boundaries and engage with disciplines who *have* for decades been concerned with individual ethical deliberation and

9. Though of course, Chini Maya's behaviour would not make sense outside of the cultural environment that she lives in.

decision-making. Philosophy is one. Others, more empirically-inclined, include cognitive and social psychology, behavioural science, and perhaps even micro-economics.

A cognitively informed comparison of caste and race

The comparison of caste and race emerges sporadically in the history of anthropology; a good summary of the topic can be found in Fuller (2011), who paints an overarching picture in which an earlier generation of researchers used the term ‘caste’ to describe the black-white divide in the American South in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Later, once the term ‘race’ was stripped—in scholarly circles—of its biological connotations, anthropologists became less reticent in using it and adopted it for the United States. Actual *comparisons* between race in the USA and caste in South Asia came, for the most part, later. Fuller points to 1960 as a key year, in which ‘Berreman and Dumont independently published articles comparing caste in India and the United States that expressed diametrically opposed views’ (2011:616). Dumont, who famously viewed caste as distinctly Indian, argued against any such comparison. Berreman, on the other hand, contended that caste and race were fundamentally similar phenomena. Little was done to solve this debate, though Fuller points to Harper (2007[1968]) and Béteille (1991[1971], 1991) as interventions that tried to steer a middle course. Fuller’s own view is that the overall tendency of Indianists to overlook the literature on race led to certain questions being unnecessarily asked and answered twice. For example, the question of the extent to which Dalits accept or reject their lowly position could have been answered much more quickly, Fuller suggests, had Indianists paid attention to research studying the same issue among blacks in the USA.

The comparison between race and caste re-surfaced for a while in the wake of the United Nations’ World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR) in Durban, 2001 (Thorat and Umakant 2004). In addition, there are a few later attempts to compare caste and race in anthropology (Reddy 2005; Pandey 2013; see also a review of Pandey 2013 in Still 2015; Roberts 2017), but these are, on the whole, rare. I sometimes wonder whether we are today in an analogous situation to that described by Fuller. Indeed, there is an extensive body of research—outside of anthropology this time—on race and racial prejudice, and more specifically, on its cognitive and psychological foundations. As far as I can tell, very little of this research is being consid-

ered in contemporary studies of caste and caste-based discrimination. This, in my view, is a problem not only because those of us interested in caste today risk, once again, lagging behind the research on race; it is also a problem because the research conducted in these other disciplines is concerned, in part, with the *reduction of prejudice*. We should at the very least ask whether any practical recommendation made by those who study racial discrimination could carry over to the South Asian context and help to alleviate the prejudice faced by Dalits.

While I would not be so bold as to suggest that caste and race are cognitively *identical*, there are at the very least reasons to believe that they are processed similarly by the human mind. Almost fifty years ago, in a paper entitled *Race, Caste, and other Invidious Distinctions in Social Stratification*, Berreman (1972) outlined a comparison of social systems in which status is ascribed at birth (rather than 'acquired'). Drawing on ethnographic literature on a wide variety of contexts—caste in India and in Swat, race in the U.S.A. and in South Africa, ethnicity in Rwanda and the Buraku system in Japan—he offered the following summary:

In sum, 'race', as commonly used by social scientists, emphasizes common physical characteristics (as does 'sex'); 'caste' emphasizes common rank, occupational specialization, endogamy, and corporate organization; 'ethnic stratification' emphasizes cultural distinctiveness. These are real differences in meaning, but *the degree of empirical overlap in systems so described, and the commonalities in the existential worlds of those who live within them are so great as to render the distinctions among them largely arbitrary, and irrelevant, for many purposes*. Individual cases differ, but as types of social stratification, they are similar. With equal facility and comparable effect, they utilize as evidence of social identity anything which is passed on within the group: skin colour, hair form, stature, physiognomy, language, dress, occupation, place of residence, genealogy, behaviour patterns, religion (1972:393, emphasis added).

Later in the article, he more succinctly states that

[i]n short, the further one probes into the nature and dynamics of race and caste, and into the experience of those who live them, the more it becomes

apparent that they are similar, comparable phenomena (1972:393).

Berreman bases this claim on a number of commonalities. Both caste and race are intimately tied to colonial histories (1972:397–398),¹⁰ both lead to class distinctions that map onto ascribed status (1972:398–400), and both imply systems of ‘ranked pluralism’ (1972:400–401). Beyond these historical and structural similarities, however, two aspects of Berreman’s work make it stand out.

The first is his proposal that having one’s status *ascribed at birth* is the key common denominator of caste, race, and other similar categories. One reason this claim is significant is that it falls broadly in line with some of the observations made by researchers focusing on psychological essentialism. Indeed, one of the manifestations of psychological essentialism is what is known as ‘birth bias’ (Gelman 2003:94–107). This is a tendency, observed cross-culturally and in children as young as five years of age, to attribute properties to individuals on the basis of birth rather than rearing.

A method commonly used to test for this bias is known as the ‘switched-at-birth’ task. In this, a subject is told a story in which two children are born to two different sets of parents. The story will say that child A is born to parents belonging to social category 1, and child B to social category 2. In the story, the children are switched immediately after birth, such that child A is raised by parents of social category 2, and child B by parents of social category 1. Subjects are then asked questions about the traits that the children in the story will develop. For example, will child A resemble its birth parents or its adoptive ones? Will child A belong to category 1—that is of the birth parents—or to category 2—that of the rearing parents? This inferential task makes it possible to tap into how subjects reason about the transmission of properties, including group affiliation. Answering that a child will develop the same property as its birth parents implies reasoning that the property is *innate* and transmitted biologically. Conversely, answering that a child will develop the same property as its adoptive parents means reasoning that the trait is *acquired*, transmitted through rearing. The ‘birth bias’ observed by Gelman and others is a tendency to favour the first answer. Children (and, to an extent, adults) have a tendency to attribute many properties, including psychological ones (for instance, intelligence) and social ones (for instance, group affiliation), to birth rather than to rearing.

10. Berreman does not limit the concept to European colonialism

Astuti (n.d.) has recently suggested that the universality of psychological essentialism provides a good ‘anchoring’ for cross-cultural comparison. In this vein, I would suggest that birth bias is likely to play an important part in explaining the commonalities Berreman notes in social systems where birth-ascribed categories occupy the front stage. The exact connection between the bias and its wider social implications is a topic for future research. If such a connection can be established, however, this would provide some justification for a cognitively informed comparative study of caste and race.

The second aspect of Berreman’s work which makes it stand out is his insistence on the fact that birth-ascription leads to similar *lived experiences*. In a sub-section of the paper entitled *Psychological Consequences*, Berreman states:

Oppression does not befall everyone in a system of birth-ascribed inequality. Most notably, it does not befall those with power. What does befall all is the imposition by birth of unalterable membership in ranked, socially isolated, but interacting groups with rigidly defined and conspicuously different experiences, opportunities, public esteem and, inevitably, self-esteem. The black in America and in South Africa, the Burakumin of Japan, the Harijan [Dalit] of India, the barber or washerman of Swat, the Hutu or Twa of Ruanda, *have all faced similar conditions as individuals and they have responded to them in similar ways*. The same can be said for the privileged and dominant groups in each of these societies, for while painful consequences of subordination are readily apparent, the consequences of superordination are equally real and important. Thus, ethnic stratification leaves its characteristic and indelible imprint on all who experience it. (1972:405, emphasis added)

In Berreman’s terminology, ‘subordination’ and ‘superordination’ are lived experiences of ascribed inferiority and superiority, respectively. In the quotation reproduced above, Berreman states that these experiences are psychologically similar in caste- and race-based systems. To what extent this is the case is a topic of enquiry which deserves renewed attention, not least because, since Berreman’s article was published, there have been tremendous advances in psychological research. These advances concern not only what is known about social prejudice but also, and perhaps more importantly, the methods used to study

it. It is high time, I believe, that the methods used routinely in psychology and cognitively informed disciplines to study prejudice might be carefully adapted and applied by anthropologists and cultural psychologists in other parts of the world. Existing research on psychological essentialism, which has been cross-cultural almost from the start, can serve as a model of how to do so.

It is hard to say what the results of such an endeavour would look like. I will offer one tentative example.

In social psychology, vast amounts of energy have been dedicated to the study of 'stereotype threat', which is formally defined as 'being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group' (Steele and Aronson 1995:797). Research has shown time and again that individuals who feel at risk of confirming a stereotype about a social group to which they belong do in fact tend to under-perform at certain tasks in precisely the ways in which the stereotype suggests they would. A well-cited study (Stone et al. 1999) provides a clear illustration: the performance of White and Black American students on the *exact same task* varied significantly depending on the way in which the task was described to research participants. If the task was described as a diagnostic of 'sports intelligence', Black participants performed significantly worse than without such a description. If, however, the task was described as a diagnostic of 'natural athletic ability', it was White participants who performed worse than without such a description.

Despite the existence of literally hundreds of studies confirming this effect for a multiplicity of stereotypes (gender, race, ethnicity, etc.), my searches only revealed *one* study which addresses stereotype threat and caste (Hoff and Pandey 2006). The study, based in Uttar Pradesh, tested the performance of upper-caste and Dalit students in a maze-solving problem.¹¹ When three upper-caste and three Dalit students were asked to perform the task simultaneously and in the same classroom, their performances varied significantly depending on whether or not their individual caste had previously been revealed to the other participants. If the students' castes had been revealed prior to the test, Dalits performed significantly worse than upper castes. The effect went away when the students' identity was not revealed; then, there was no significant difference in the performances of upper

11. There was a second component to the study, but its details are too complex to report and not relevant to the discussion at hand.

castes and Dalits. This is in line with the broader literature on stereotype threat: it suggests that it was the fear of conforming to stereotypes that led to Dalits under-performing when their identity was revealed.

My intent is not to discuss one study in detail, nor even to focus on stereotype threat. Rather, the argument I want to make here is that there would be much to learn about the commonalities of caste and race (and differences between them) if anthropologists were to adopt some of the experimental designs used in the rich literature on social prejudice.

Doing this would achieve two further goals. One would be to put to the test some of the results reached in social and cognitive psychology on the basis of experiments conducted mainly in Western contexts. In doing so, we might contribute in new ways to psychology's ongoing 'replication crisis'. Many psychologists are currently coming to the realisation that their existing results do not withstand the test of thorough quantitative methods, more rigorous than those which have been in use until recently. An anthropological intervention could be to question the extent to which results hold true if tested in different cultural environments.

Another goal would be to encourage a *comparative stance* in anthropology. As I come to the end of a six-year PhD in the discipline, I am left with the strong impression that current trends in social anthropology favour particularism. Ethnographies produce deep and detailed descriptions of specific places, but cross-cultural comparisons are set somewhat to the side. Though attention to local detail is commendable, I believe anthropology should not give up on questions that concern human nature as a whole (Bloch 2005). Attention to human cognition is a promising way forward.

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