

Book review

David N. Gellner and Krishna P. Adhikari. (2025). *Nepal's Dalits in Transition*. Vajra Publications.

The edited volume, *Nepal's Dalits in Transition*, edited by anthropologists David N. Gellner and Krishna P. Adhikari, comprises thirteen chapters that discuss the various dimensions of Dalit voices, subjectivities, identity and disparity, with a focus on their agency and structural marginalisation.

The Introduction by the co-editors, Gellner and Adhikari, elucidates the long-standing academic neglect of Dalit experiences and scholarship in Nepal. It states that the absence of “written sources” (perhaps genealogies, text records, and other archives) (p. 1) has limited the formation of a strong Dalit historical narrative. They clarified that the limited documentation and archive-building among Dalits is due to their marginalisation, prevalent illiteracy, as well as their lack of institutional access and agency. They further emphasise that researchers were hesitant to embrace a “subaltern” viewpoint which prioritises lived experiences, oral histories, rhetorical expressions and transcends textual dominations (p. 1). In light of limited Dalit scholarship available, the editors evaluate the research produced on Nepali Dalits, discussing Dalithood across different periods, while acknowledging the changes instigated by legal reforms; nonetheless, disparity remains.

The concluding part of the Introduction affirms that Dalits as a mirror of the Nepali nation state, highlighting their mobility throughout the country and their willingness and openness to marrying from outside their communities, which requires deep scrutiny. The question arises: Does the openness within the Dalit community reflect the Nepali nation-state? If so, does the Nepali nation embody the inclusiveness of the Dalit community? The answer is inconclusive as the claim, Dalits represent the national microcosm appears more ambitious or idealistic than accurate (p. 13).

The Second Chapter, “Nepal's Dalits in Search of Inclusion: Comparing Nepal with India,” co-authored by David Gellner, Krishna Adhikari, and Arjun Bahadur BK, undertakes a comparative approach to Dalit movements in Nepal and India. The authors note that Nepal is often ignored because it is seen as having slight differences from India, a condition they refer to as “asymmetry of knowledge” (p. 15). The author makes a comparative distinction between Nepal and India, claiming that Nepal was not colonised, and maintained a centralised political system under a Hindu monarchy, with the Civil Code of 1854 regulating the caste system. In contrast, India addressed caste discrimination

constitutionally following its independence, while Nepal experienced delays and limited social mobility.

The migration trends observed among Nepali Dalits exceed those of Indian Dalits, which is interesting. However, the author's investigation falls short and lacks the depth necessary to substantiate this claim. Similarly, the authors claim that legal reform against caste-based discrimination is heavily influenced by India's Constitution and Ambedkarism, emphasising that Ambedkarism is not widely used as a political tool in the Dalit movement of Nepal. The explanation given suggests that Dalit leaders in Nepal chose not to embrace Ambedkarism because they were worried about being seen as nationalists and possible complications attached with being associated with an Indian icon like Ambedkar, a topic that requires deeper examination. Furthermore, this argument suggests an anti-India nationalism among Dalit leaders, a claim that is extreme and inadequately supported. For example, Aahuti, a notable Dalit thinker and communist leader, has publicly mentioned ideological disagreements rather than Ambedkar's nationality as a reason for distancing himself from his political approach.

The Third Chapter, "Being, Becoming, Belonging: Revisiting the Effects of Caste and Disaster on the Mental Health of Dalits in Nepal, by Steve Folmar, focuses on a socio-psychological analysis of caste-based exclusion and Dalit identity. Before sharing his research findings, Folmar presents the ambivalence present in the Dalit identity. Folmar writes, "the primary duality of being Dalit calls forth the contradiction once to be Dalit culturally, as a Nepali citizen, but not to be Dalit socio-politically as the most marginalized..." (pp. 39-40). This contradiction "is echoed by internal mental struggles to understand and cope with them" (p. 44), albeit the identity aspires for liberation.

Folmar illustrates the effects of caste trauma on Dalits, stressing the stigma, low self-esteem, and psychological suffering due to the paradoxical nature of their identity. To back this up, he provides several cases. One example involves health institutions that say they are inaccessible to all, yet they frequently fail to understand the influence of caste on individual lives. Even though Dalits face ongoing humiliation, they show incredible strength and resilience.

The Fourth Chapter, "Dalit Leaders in Search of a Dignified Life," examines the caste system that exists in the everyday lives of rural regions in Nepal. The Chapter's author, Arjun Bahadur BK, explores the subjugation of casts in rural areas, which leads to physical separation, exploitation, and symbolic deprivation. BK illustrates a situation where Dalits are forced to work in agriculture, often entering into unfair deals like the *balighare* system, which required them to work for little grain. As one respondent shared the painful experience, "We would bring a large load of fodder to their cowshed... return home on an empty stomach" (p. 67).

Nevertheless, BK also emphasises the diverse expressions exhibited by Dalits across various contexts and occasions. Furthermore, the Chapter points up the resentment felt by the upper-caste towards affirmative action. As one Chhetri woman remarked, “If you feel offended by “Dalit,” you should not take the allowances” (p. 67).

The Fifth Chapter, written by the editors, “International Labour Migration from Nepal and Changes in Intercaste Relations,” looks into the migration to Malaysia and the Gulf to a certain degree, breaking down caste hierarchies and discriminations. The authors note that caste lines tend to get less clear when people move abroad. For example, almost 70% of migrants said they lived and ate with people from different castes. But when they return to Nepal, these changes in social behaviour never last. The authors state that up to 60 per cent of these same respondents say that they would not be able to continue the same level of relations with Dalits in the private domain once they are back in Nepal. This underscores that caste discrimination persists regardless of the migration.

The Chapter Six, “Entering the Academic World: Educated Dalits' Quandaries in Contemporary Nepal”, by Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, explores how Dalit students gain entry to prestigious universities. She argues that education can help individuals improve their social position, but it also comes with hidden costs. Dalit students frequently face discrimination in various forms, such as when their peers refuse to eat the food they prepare or when landlords refuse to rent to them. This discrimination can manifest as exclusion, symbolic inclusion, or tokenism. The persistence of untouchability was revealed by one respondent, Parvati, who is currently a social activist. She explained how “if they [teachers] want to check our copy [exercise book] then they ask is to put our copy...on the table” (p. 122) at school. Affirmative action policies help Dalit students get an education, but they also make people think they are less meritorious. Because of this, these students are humiliated in small ways and have to constantly explain why they belong in academic settings that do not include them.

Purna Bahadur Nepali critically examines caste-based land dispossession in Chapter Seven, “Dalits and Landlessness in Nepal.” Dalits own less than 1% of arable land, despite making up 13% of the population. He argues that they were either left without land or given hazardous, unproductive plots as a result of feudal land policies that favoured dominant castes. He points out flaws in earlier land reform efforts by the state, like the 1964 Land Reform Act, and the 1959 Birta Abolition Act, calling them caste-unmarked and ineffectual. To support his argument, Nepali uses Sen’s theory of “capability deprivation” and Ambedkar’s belief that the caste system was not only a division of labour but also labourers to address land dispossession. He suggests digital records, caste-sensitive redistribution, and post-reform assistance. Nepali cautions that

without implementation, constitutional promises, legal measures such as the land provision in Article 40 are meaningless. He argues that prosperity will continue to exclude those historically dispossessed.

Ram Prasad Mainali's "The Double Discrimination Faced by Dalits: An Analysis of the Nepalese Labour Market," in Chapter Eight, employs a statistical method known as "Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition" to uncover wage discrimination. Through this method, Mainali effectively indicates the idea of "double discrimination," detailing both market-level exclusion (discriminatory hiring) and pre-market disadvantages (such as poor health, education). He further elaborates that in 2003, Dalits were 5.5 years less educated than members of the upper caste, and by 2010, they had made little headway. Dalits held only 3–6% of white-collar jobs, despite their qualifications. Mainali points the finger at elite favouritism and employer discrimination that stems from *chakari* culture. He makes the case for measures that go beyond public-sector quotas, including anti-discrimination legislation, private employment regulation, and scholarships. He claims that wage equity can only be attained by tackling pre- and post-market barriers.

Inquiring into the phenomenon of intercaste marriages involving Dalits and non-Dalits, Tilak Biswakarma, in Chapter Nine, "Changing Caste through Intercaste Marriages in the Tarai-Madhesh," examines the nature of these unions and their subsequent implications. Focusing on how Dalit brides in such intercaste unions are "purified" (p. 194) by caste councils known as *Mainjan*. Biswakarma states that these councils preserve hierarchy under the guise of tradition. While untouchability endures, Dalit women are assimilated through practices like the *Satyanarayan puja*. As demonstrated by Biswakarma, caste is flexible and can maintain its power under different guises. Similarly, the subsequent Chapter addresses the multi-layered exclusion of Madheshi Dalits in Nepal's Tarai-Madhesh. The issue of untouchability and occupational segregation in Nepal's Tarai-Madhesh remains largely ignored. Despite their significant numbers, the Tarai Dalits find themselves marginalised from both Madheshi politics and state activities. Only dominant Dalit groups, such as Paswans, have benefited from affirmative action, which has had little effect. Musahars and Doms, two marginalised subcastes, still endure hardship.

In Chapter Eleven, "The Dalit Social Movement in Nepal: A Gendered Perspective," Sambriddhi Kharel and Manoj Suji critically unpack the gender related issues surrounding the marginalisation of Dalit women, particularly Dalit movements that are predominantly led by male members. This has been a common trend in every social and political movement in Nepal, and the Dalit movement is no exception. The authors emphasise, Dalit women are often invisible in the histories of the Dalit movement because upper-caste feminists overlook caste oppression. Intercaste marriages are still frowned upon, and

Dalit women experience sexual exploitation, internal patriarchy, and caste discrimination. A prime example is Uma Devi Badi's 2007 protest, which led to the state acknowledging Badi's citizenship claims. The authors contend that while intercaste marriages are stigmatised, upper-caste men's sexual exploitation of Dalit women goes unchecked.

The Second-to-Last Chapter, "Failing the Most Excluded: A Critical Analysis of Nepal's Affirmative Action Policy," written by Ramesh Sunam and Krishna Shrestha, critiques the issue surrounding Nepal's reservation system. The authors contend that poverty is an unfair qualifying factor and that over-inclusive categories dilute benefits, arguing that Dalits have faced discrimination due to their caste identity rather than their poverty. They caution that class-based quotas would conceal long-standing caste inequalities. Giving the most marginalised groups priority is necessary for effective inclusion.

To classify Dalit tactics of defiance and adaptation, the Last Chapter, "Way Forward for Dalits in Nepal", by the editors presents the ARERE framework, which stands for Affirmation, Rejection, Resistance, Emulation, and Engagement. It highlights Dalits' tenacious attempts to fight exclusion, despite the limited effects of legal reforms. Dalits use every means at their disposal to oppose caste hierarchies, constantly balancing demands for equality with assertions of difference.

Nepal's Dalits in Transition is a valuable resource for students, scholars and activists in understanding the challenges faced by Nepali Dalits. However, the editor duo has not provided a reasonable justification for the use of the term "transition" within the context of Dalits, and Nepali Dalits has not been justified as well. The editors could have plausibly reinforced their title within the text by incorporating more lived experiences and the diverse Dalit movements throughout Nepali history. Most importantly, the book fails to include Dalit scholarship from the Newar community. Caste groups like Pote, Chyame, Khadgi and others recognised within the Newar community are overlooked. David Gellner, who has previously written about the Newari caste system (Gellner, 1986), finds the omission in this volume to be both unexpected and surprising. It is well recognised that Dalit Newars are being absorbed into a homogenised ethnic Newar identity that minimises or eradicates caste (Maharjan, 2012), and this omission suggests political neglect. The omission not only erases Dalit livelihood in the Newa community but also misses out the complex intra-ethnic dynamic essential to comprehend caste in both urban and ethnic contexts. Overall, the book is a good source of knowledge for those who are interested in Dalit scholarship despite its shortcomings.