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Cast(e) in Bone: The Perpetuation of Social Hierarchy among Nepalis in Britain

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Abstract:

A successful Gurkha campaign – not least the Parliament vote of April 2009 that allowed all ex-Gurkhas, and their families, to settle in Britain – prompted the migration of thousands of Nepalis into Britain. One of the central features of their adaptation to the new socio-cultural environment has been an active revival of caste, which is evident in the treatment of Dalits or lower castes (a tiny minority within Nepali groups). By comparing my research findings with the previous studies of diasporic caste, particularly in the Caribbean, I demonstrate a parallel, not least in terms of the history of recruitment policy: those who moved out of the Indian sub-continent to work as indented labourers – where employee's caste was not important – struggled to revive caste, whereas free migrants were more successful in this effort. This pattern is clearly evident among Gurkha migrants. Backed up by the long-term practice of a highly caste-sensitive recruitment policy of the Brigade of Gurkhas, and the benefit of being allowed to move in en masse, the Gurkha migrants in Britain are rapidly reconstructing their caste. As most of the Gurkhas come from a selection of middle-ranking castes, in Nepalese hills, they are using the newfound opportunity to undermine the traditional authority of the high castes, whilst trying, where they can, to continue to marginalise the lower castes. The article alludes to the need to problematize internal racism – even if not defined as such – like caste discrimination, found within migrant groups.

Keywords:

caste, caste system, caste discrimination, Gurkha migration, Gurkha service, transnationalism.

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Introduction

Caste is indigenous to South Asian society. Although rooted in the Hindu philosophy of social hierarchy expressed in ritual purity and pollution (Dumont 1980), the belief and practice of caste is prevalent not only among Hindus, but also among Sikhs, Muslims, Christians, and others. What happens to caste when South Asians come out of the caste-ridden society of the Indian subcontinent? This is a legitimate question for all those concerned with the South Asian, not least Hindu, diaspora.

While recognising the difficulty of generalising about the status of caste in the Hindu diaspora across the globe, Vertovec (2000: 41) maintains that caste has largely disappeared in the Caribbean – amongst the descendants of indentured labourers – whereas caste-based traditions have thrived in the Western world, including the USA and the UK. Various studies have shown that caste has also survived – to varying degrees – in Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and East Africa, but has become "moribund" in South Africa, Fiji, Guyana, Mauritius, Surinam, and Trinidad since the 1960s (Jayaram 2006: 144).

Some scholars do not accept the assertion that caste has died out in the Caribbean, and other places, insisting that it is the caste system, not caste *per se*, that has actually lost its steam. For instance, Jayawardena claims that caste is no longer significant as a ritual and occupational hierarchy in Guayana and Fiji; nonetheless, it persists as a "constraint on free inter-marriage and as a source of esteem" (1980: 436). Burghart explains the situation of caste among the Indians in Britain as follows:

> Castes have survived, but not the 'system'. In the perpetuation of the identity of such systemless castes a reputation for religious piety and charitable activities has become important. Such activities are organized by regional or national caste associations (1987: 12).

The aim of this article is to explore the situation of caste among newly-expanding Nepalese communities in the UK. It scrutinizes, *inter alia,* intercaste relationships – not least between Dalits or low castes and other castes – as one of the important indicators of the existence of caste among Nepalis in Britain. In the light of the distinction between indentured labourers and free, individual migrants in terms of their ability to recreate caste in the diaspora, I analyse the factors that are responsible for a speedy reconstruction of culture – with caste at its heart – among the former Gurkha communities, who form the major chunk of the Nepalese population in Britain. In conclusion, I attempt to challenge the concept of "systemless caste".

This study draws upon more than two years of personal observation of, and participation in, the Nepali community in Oxford and major Nepali settlements in southern England, such as Farnborough, Aldershot, and Folkestone. In addition to my earlier research on Oxford ex-Gurkhas for my MPhil thesis (ISCA, Oxford University, 2010), I interviewed 15 Dalit Gurkha families and talked to many others in Aldershot and Farnborough. I also interviewed 10 recently arrived college

students, males and females, mostly from lower castes, resident in suburbs of London. I took part in several gatherings of Nepalis in Oxford, Farnborough and London. I also interacted with some informants through Facebook and by email.

It is perhaps appropriate to clarify the position on the use of modern terminology associated with certain groups in Nepal. It is well known that, with rising ethnic politics over the recent decades, often targeted against the Hindu high castes, many groups like the Gurung, Magar, Rai, and Limbu have been keen to identify themselves not as 'castes' – as historically categorised by the state – but as 'ethnic groups' or 'nationalities' (Gellner et al. 1997). Despite the new terms being increasingly recognised and legitimated by the state, not least since the democratisation in 1990, the terminology is still fluid and contested (Ishii et al. 2007). However, for my purposes here I refer to all Nepali groups as castes, rather than ethnic groups or nationalities. I use this terminology also because the concept of caste (*jat* in Nepali) is still very popular in public discourses of the Gurkhas and other Nepalis.

Given the rise of ethnic politics centred on disentangling themselves from Brahman-centric Hindu traditions by means of reviving their own shamanistic practices and beliefs, or alternatively seeking to define themselves as Buddhists, at least some of these groups want to be identified as non-Hindu. Nonetheless, I describe all Nepali groups in the UK broadly as Hindus in line with a theoretical distinction between the Little Tradition (of those who mainly worship local, smaller deities, often for pragmatic ends), and the Great Tradition (more Brahmin-centred and Sanskritic beliefs and practices) used to describe the diversity of Hindu phenomena found among a very diverse Hindu population of the Indian subcontinent (Vertovec 2000; Weightman 1978). Nearly all Nepalis identify with the Great Tradition of Hinduism to some degree, even if they also follow some other tradition or traditions as well, particularly for pragmatic purposes.

The Nepalis in Britain: A Brief Overview

Despite a long history of Nepalese citizens serving in the British army – for over 200 years – the number of Nepalis in Britain, as compared to Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and others, was, until recently, very small. Part of the reason for this is that the retired soldiers were discharged in Nepal, and not allowed to live and work in the UK (although other nationals employed by the British army have always been entitled to settle in the country after the minimum of four years' service). However, an effective movement against the exclusivist policy, initiated in the early 1990s by Gurkha veterans and, later, championed by actress Joanna Lumley and Liberal Democratic Party leader Nick Clegg, forced the British government to amend the policy in favour of the Gurkhas. In 2004, responding to growing pressure, the Blair government permitted post-1997 retirees – after Hong Kong was handed back to China and all Gurkha units transferred permanently to the UK – to live in Britain. Gurkha campaigners, whilst supporting the change of policy, maintained that it was not

enough as older veterans were left out. The struggle – protest rallies, court cases and media campaigns by some influential papers (e.g. *The Sun*, *The Daily Express*) – culminated in a popular parliament vote led by the Lib Dems in April 2009, which defeated the government policy and paved the way for all ex-servicemen, their spouses and dependent children to migrate to Britain. This resulted in the influx of thousands of Gurkha families to Britain; the flow has not yet stopped.[1]

This is a unique case of migration in many ways. It is neither a government-sponsored initiative – such as the indentured labourers recruited to work in colonial plantations – nor is it the independent, individual pursuit of a better life. The Gurkhas are not refugees, nor are they straightforward economic migrants. Although they did move to Britain in search of better prospects, not least for their children, they came, backed by their organised movement, partly to claim their "right" to live and work in a country that they and their forefathers have served with sweat and blood over two centuries. They perceive that they were always entitled to this right and should have been granted it without a struggle. They are different from many other migrants also in the sense that they arrived not on temporary visas but with Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR), as British denizens. Although the British media gave wholesale credit to Joanna Lumley for the success of the Gurkha campaign, perhaps what has not been given due importance is the fact that Gurkha activists were able to mobilise so much support in the UK and have unfavourable government policies scrapped, despite tough UK immigration rules that made it extremely difficult for them even to visit the country. This is undoubtedly a successful example of what some scholars would call "transnationalism from below" (Smith & Guarnizo 1998).

It is important to note that the Gurkha population in Britain does not reflect the ethnic mix of Nepal. The British have always recruited mainly from selected castes or ethnic groups – the Tibeto-Burman speakers, indigenous to the hills, recognised by the state as middle-ranking castes, also called "martial races" – primarily the Gurung, Magar, Rai, and Limbu (Des Chene 1991: 68; Caplan 1995: 12). Consequently, they have become the dominant groups among Nepalese migrants in the UK. Although there is a small population of non-Gurkha Nepalis – including some high-caste Brahmans and Chhetris – they have now been greatly outnumbered by ex-servicemen and their families. Dalits were effectively barred from joining the British Gurkhas until recently, except for a few places reserved for work related to their traditional occupations: Pariyars or Damais as tailors, Bishwakarmas or Kamis as ironsmiths, and Sarkis as leatherworkers. Indeed, there are many other Dalit castes in Nepal, but they had no access to Gurkha service. Though the British government no longer discriminates against any caste, at least officially, there has been virtually no change in practice. According to a 2008 survey by the Centre for Nepal Studies UK, the population of Nepalis in Britain was at that time over 75,000. Today its actual size, including those without documents, is

[1] The issue became controversial in January 2011 when the MP for Aldershot and Minister for International Security Strategy, Gerald Howarth, wrote to the Prime Minister asking him to do something about the 'influx' of Nepalis to his constituency where, he claimed, local services were finding it hard to cope.

estimated to be close to 100,000. The adult population of Nepalese Dalits across the UK is estimated to be around 900. The Bishwakarma or Kami is the dominant group among the Dalits, followed by the Pariyar or Damai; the Sarkis are the fewest of all – about 20 households.

Caste-Based Division

The caste system, still widely practised across the Indian sub-continent, is fundamental to social life in Nepal (Cameron 2007, 1998; Folmar 2008). Caste is abundantly found in public discourses. Many caste names are often used synonymously with certain traits and behaviour of people. Lower caste names charged with stigma, such as the Kami, Damai, Sarki, are used to deride the low castes and sometimes others. There is stereotypic usage of terms referring to other castes too, though they are much less offensive. For instance, 'Bahun' – the local term for the high-caste Brahman – is associated with people who are extremely clever, educated, selfish and cunning. The Gurungs and Magars are seen as having much physical strength but not being very clever. Often the Gurkhas are portrayed in the popular discourse as someone with a thick purse and thick brains.

Jayaram, amongst others, shows that caste-related stereotypes are still widely used among Indian Hindus in Trinidad, although the caste system in its original form has already lost its force. This is most prominent in stereotypes of the "pure and arrogant Brahman" and the "lax and dirty Chamar" (2006: 158). Public discourses discriminate a lot between the Brahmans and Chamars in the Indian Hindu community of Fiji (Grieco 1998: 719), and possibly in many other Indian diaspora communities as well. Similarly, the use of caste stereotypes is popular in public discourses of Nepalis in Britain, as in Nepal, and this has become one of the ways of sustaining caste consciousness in an alien land with secular institutions. At the same time, it is true that in many instances this could also be explained as a result of their unconscious reflex, something derived from the force of habitus, rather than a conscious strategy. Whatever the process, the use of such terms not only helps create community boundaries but also gives the lower castes a sense of being discriminated against even in a foreign land.

The division of Nepalis in Britain on the basis of caste is found not just in idioms and memories, but also in their everyday practice. This can be seen most clearly, *inter alia,* in three important areas: organised and informal unity of people along caste lines; the conduct of untouchability; and caste endogamy. The lower castes have been specially considered here not only because they have not been studied well even in Nepal, despite a widespread problem of caste discrimination (Cameron 2007, 1998; Folmar 2008), but also because Gurkha communities in Britain have increasingly used untouchability as a means of delineating caste boundaries and preserving their caste identities in the UK. Now Indian Dalits in Britain are beginning to make their voice heard; however, "till recently there was hardly any attempt to focus the analysis on the study of the marginalised groups among the Indians abroad" (Judge 2002: 3244).

Like the Punjabis (Judge 2002; Ballard 1994), the Sikhs (Helweg 1986), and most other Indians in Britain (Burghart 1987), the Nepalis are increasingly getting organised through caste associations, including some clan – exogamous groups within a caste – associations. Thanks to the influx of thousands of Gurkhas in recent years, the newly established caste associations – obviously those of the Gurung, Magar, Rai and Limbu – are becoming more powerful and influential than the older ones not dedicated to any particular caste or community. Whereas in Nepal political parties are the most influential players, caste associations are becoming increasingly powerful in the UK. The Yeti Association UK, founded by a few Nepalis from aristocratic families in 1960 with the objective of promoting "goodwill and co-operation amongst [all] Nepalese"[2], now lags behind the Tamu Dhin UK (TDUK), a recently established association of the Gurungs. The TDUK, with its thousands of members and several branch offices, is the only Nepalese organisation that owns an office building (in Farnborough). The associations of the Magar, Rai and Limbu are not as big and powerful as the TDUK, but they are also quite active. YouTube is full of their annual events and cultural programmes. One of the well-known pan-Nepali associations, the Non-Resident Nepalese UK (NRNUK), a branch of the world-wide NRN, has already felt the pressure of powerful caste associations, as evidenced by the fact that the current leader of the NRNUK is a Gurung man who used to be the chair of his caste association before. There are three elected Nepali councillors in the UK representing Britain's three major political parties, none of whom is a high caste. Although it would be wrong to state that the Bahuns and Chhetris have been completely marginalised in Britain, the rise of middle-ranking castes is a significant development, as opposed to Nepal's situation where high castes are still the dominant players.

Partly propelled by a strong sense, particularly after the democratisation of 1990 in Nepal, that it is a good thing to be recognised by one's caste in public and private practices, most Nepalis in the UK now have their own caste associations; the low castes are also catching up. In 2006, when their population was much smaller, Dalit Gurkhas opened an organisation, the Srijanshil Samaj (SS), with the aim of accommodating all the Nepalese lower castes in the UK; it still has members from across Dalit groups. Its leader and activists stress the need for maintaining the unity between all the Dalits in Britain. Over recent years, however, some members of the SS defected and opened rival groups, ostensibly because of feuding among the key players, but really separating the specific castes within the low-caste community. The new Dalit associations, the Bishwakarma Samaj (BS) and Sangam Nepali Samaj (SNS), represent the Bishwakarma or Kami and the Pariyar or Damai, respectively. Whereas an increase of population has strengthened other caste organisations, the Dalit association has split up. But this is not surprising given the fact that Dalits, or low castes, are not, despite a shared category and status, one caste with one culture.

[2] See www.yeti.org.uk/frontpage/about/about.htm#History

A striking fact about these low-caste associations is that they are fiercely opposed to one another; the activists are very territorial. For instance, most of the important festivals and annual events – celebrated according to the Nepali calendar – are held by the SS and BS separately but on the same day and at the same time, apparently to ensure that a single person or family does not get involved in both groups. The SNS, like the SS, does not want to be explicitly named after the caste it represents; indeed, its activists are not keen – unlike the members of other groups – to discuss caste-related issues. But it is common knowledge that they represent a single caste within the lower-caste community. Despite being an exclusive club of the Pariyars, the SNS will not take in those Pariyars who are also the members of the SS, and vice versa. The only Dalit caste resident in Britain that does not (yet) have its own dedicated association is the Sarki, traditional leatherworkers, probably because their number is still tiny, as mentioned above.

Despite the different sizes and power of Nepalese caste associations, they operate under the same basic principles and objectives. Their key function is to promote a sense of community, distinct from other Nepalis, with a view to providing a platform for finding suitable marriage partners, preserving caste-specific cultural and religious beliefs and practices, and helping members in need. This is also a way of teaching the second generation about their distinct cultural identities and of ensuring their loyalty to caste and community. Interestingly, none of the Dalit associations has programmes or plans aimed at targeting the existing problem of untouchability, although the shared problem is also responsible for bringing them together in the first place. At least privately, they strongly resent caste discrimination, but want to retain their caste identities in Britain, just like the Punjabi low castes, the Ad-dharmis (Judge 2002: 3249). This may look contradictory to outsiders, but most of my informants did not see any problem with this strategy. I met a Dalit Gurkha who is working to start a social movement for the annihilation of caste by hiding the caste identities often represented by family names. He wants low castes to stop using their traditional family names and replace them with something unrecognisable by fellow Nepalis. He hoped that this strategy would expose Dalits less, thereby providing a buffer against caste discrimination. On one occasion he spent more than two hours in a Nepali restaurant in Aldershot trying to convince a group of Dalits, most of them from his own caste and family circle, to take up his proposal. Although many attendees shared their caste-related worries, few were interested in his mission as they did not wish to shed their caste identities.

Caste-based division among the Nepalis in the UK is apparent not just at the organisational or communal level, but also – perhaps more importantly – at the personal and familial level. Caste is so ingrained in their subconscious, as hinted before, that the identification of caste is the first priority when Nepalis meet each other; often the respect for and acceptance of a person is contingent on his caste and clan. Even strangers could be treated with more respect if they turned out to be from the same caste, and all the more so in the case of the same clan, as it is the basis for calculating kinship

terminologies. On the other hand, even those who have been together over many years may not be considered true friends if the difference in caste status is too big. Of course, individual interests and habits will have some bearing, but quite often a person's category is more important than individual qualities.

Like fictive kin "boat brothers" among some Indians in Fiji (Grieco 1998) – between people, across caste, who have a history of travelling to the colonial plantations together – there is a form of fictive kinship unique to the Gurkhas, called *numberi,* which transcends caste boundaries. This special kinship occurs between families of Gurkhas who share a history of serving in the same unit of the British army together. It offers some space for them to enjoy greater ties across caste boundaries, including between Dalits and others, although intermarriage continues to be confined within the caste and between appropriate clans. People also tend to support each other with less regard to caste if they originally come from the same village in Nepal. Apart from these instances, much social intercourse takes place between individuals and families within the circle of their own caste. Even more important is clan – the group believed to be born from the same parents. Of course, a slight variation is seen among the second generation; there is a relatively greater mingling between the second generation across castes. Gender also makes a difference: men tend to interact with other castes more than women. At a festive gathering of Nepalis originally from one district (Gorkha) in Farnborough, I observed that two separate tents were full of women, one with Magars, the other with Gurungs, although men were meeting people from other castes. Geographical and cultural differences also play a part. There is a lot of contact between the Rais and Limbus, groups from eastern Nepal who tend to inter-marry, and between the Gurungs and Magars, from the western hills. However, the actual contact between, for instance, the Limbus and Gurungs, or the Rais and Magars, is so far quite low. The same applies, by and large, within Dalit groups as well: the Bishwakarmas generally stick with other Bishwakarmas, the Pariyars with Pariyars. If anything, the establishment of independent caste associations has fuelled this practice.

Caste preference is manifest in residential patterns as well. As far as possible, people from the same caste – even more priority for clan – tend to cluster together. The Rais and Limbus are dominant in Ashford and Oxford, whereas the Gurungs and Magars dominate the Aldershot and Farnborough area. Some small clusters of Bishwakarma families have found their havens – quite aloof from other Nepalese settlements – in smaller towns such as Andover, Bicester and Brize Norton. They openly express that they would be happy if no other castes, particularly the upper castes, came to live close to them. The idea is to escape possible discrimination by fellow Nepalis from other castes. Given the history of discrimination back home, even those who have had no caste-related problems in the UK are eager to remain well away from other Nepalis. In fact, in Britain this has been one of the ways of tackling the problem of untouchability at an individual and family level, without resorting to formal, politicised campaigns. This reflects the situation in Nepal, where the

Dalit movement against caste discrimination is not effective. However, at the grass roots lower-caste individuals and families are devising idiosyncratic ways of challenging their debased position in society. Folmar (2008) found a number of such personal efforts aimed at indirectly challenging the order of caste in Nepalese villages; for instance a tailor told him that he often delayed sewing the clothes ordered by high-caste Bahuns.

As indicated above, another visible form of caste distinction among the Nepalis in the UK (besides the emphasis on caste associations and caste endogamy) is the perpetuation of untouchability. This is not something as obvious as caste-based organisation or resident patterns. Most Nepalis I talked to – both the Dalits and the dominant castes – accepted that, to a certain extent, untouchability has crept into their lives in British society as well. Despite awareness of the problem, there is no serious effort, on either side, to try and tackle the problem in a new environment. From this perspective, it can be argued that untouchability has been preserved consciously too, apart from an unconscious reflex, as in Nepal. Some members of the low caste, apparently so unhappy about facing the same stereotypes and prejudices in Britain, refused to talk to me about it. An ex-Gurkha who plays music in a Nepalese restaurant in Aldershot explained: "I know it is not good to discriminate against the lower castes, but they expose their lowliness one way or the other. The problem lies with them, not with us." The leader of the NRNUK accepted the prevalence of caste discrimination, and suggested that it would stop once the older generation was gone and everyone in the Nepali community became educated. In other words, he did not think that there was anything that could be done proactively in order to discourage the re-emergence of untouchability among Nepalis in Britain.

The following cases and incidents may give an idea of some of the ways in which untouchability is practised by Nepalis in the UK:

1. A Magar woman, married to a Bishwakarma, came to Britain from Hong Kong and hired a room in a house of a Magar Gurkha in Reading. The husband arrived several months later. Because his physical appearance did not match that of the Tibeto-Burman speakers, the landlord grew suspicious of his caste. In an attempt to avoid any potential problems, he had been told that the husband was a Kshatriya, one of the higher castes. However, he learnt the man's true caste when he saw his full name printed on a letter addressed to him and delivered to the house. The Magar landlord immediately asked the couple to vacate his room, effective from the following day, on the pretext that one of his relatives had to move in urgently. Despite their pleas and the legal requirement to offer the tenants some time to make alternative arrangements, he refused to allow them in any longer. They moved out immediately, as instructed, but did not fail to note that the room actually remained vacant for many months after their forced eviction.

2. A Damai or Pariyar student living with his wife and child in Aldershot asked a local Gurung Gurkha to rent out one of the vacant rooms in his house. Initially the landlord agreed because the landlord could not make out his caste identity from his surname. However, despite the previous agreement, the man refused to offer the room to him after he found out from other Nepalis that the student was a Damai, an untouchable. Although the stated reason for his decision was that someone else close to his family had to take the room, the student noticed that it was not occupied for several more months. The landlord apparently preferred to keep the room vacant rather than allowing a Dalit to take it.

3. A Damai man from Pokhara, Nepal, working as head chef in a seaside restaurant in Cornwall, in a relationship with a local English woman, had a bad taste of his caste one evening in mid-2010. A Nepali acquaintance had invited him and his girlfriend to dinner at his house with a group of other Nepalis. He reached the house earlier, and as an experienced cook, he was naturally drawn to helping the family prepare food for the guests, which the hosts did not mind. A high-caste Bahun woman, upon learning his caste, openly declared that she would not take any food as it had been touched by a low caste; it was her dharma to follow the order even outside the homeland. Her declaration not only offended him but also ashamed the other diners.

4. A Pariyar college student from Kathmandu encountered the problem the day she landed at Heathrow airport. Her college did not collect her as previously agreed, so she called someone she knew to pick her up. He was her neighbour in Kathmandu and she was to stay with his family in a London suburb until she found college accommodation. Despite the short notice, he came to collect her in his car and took her to his house. However, she was irritated on the way to the house as he kept asking her to conceal her family name so that his sister-in-law would not be able to recognise her true caste. She was not prepared to hide her identity, particularly not in London, as if she were some kind of a criminal. In fact she found it quite offensive being asked to hide her caste.

   The first few days went very well; the lady in the house was exceptionally kind and generous to her. She taught her many things about living in the UK, took her around London and so on. However, she changed completely upon finding out that she was actually a Damai. She became rude to her; she even told her not to enter the kitchen. The student found it so difficult to stay with the family that she had to move out. With the help of two of her caste fellows she found a room in a house owned by an Indian. The men who helped her out

wanted to take revenge for her and asked her to reveal the woman's name and address, but she did not wish to create any more problems.

Now the student lives in Southall, a different part of London, with a group of students from many castes. She is the only low-caste person in the group, but she has not experienced anything bad in their company. On the contrary, she has fallen in love with a fellow student, a boy from a high-caste Bahun family. It is highly unlikely that his parents would accept her as their daughter-in-law, but they are determined to get married ultimately.

5. The teenage daughter of a Gurkha from a Bishwakarma or Kami family in Farnborough has Nepali friends from across castes. Although she has good relationships with them, a recent experience hurt her deeply. One day she was invited to a birthday party in a friend's house. It was quite a big gathering. She was having fun until the father of the house, a Gurung, approached her and warned her not to touch everything in the house as she was a low caste. This experience, her first one of its kind in the UK, made her cry. She felt insulted and ashamed in front of her friends. She left the party immediately and informed her parents about the humiliating behaviour of the man. Of course, her parents were hurt; they had always tried to ensure that their daughter did not suffer the pain they had endured in Nepal. They were angry but did not know what to do about it. They were not sure if there was any law in Britain against caste discrimination. They were not keen to pursue the case anyway, in part because it would be too much of a risk to challenge a member of the strong and dominant Gurung community. After all, they would need the Nepali community, even if they didn't have to work for the Gurungs, unlike in Nepal. Of course, one way would be to seek support from the Srijanshil Samaj, but they feared they also would not be able to do anything for fear of alienating the Gurungs. So the family swallowed the indignity quietly and moved on, but the incident has seriously altered the girl's perceptions of her friends, of her caste, and of the wider Nepali community.

6. A Bishwakarma woman, the wife of a student in Swindon, works as a cleaner with other Nepali women from different castes. At the beginning of this year, following a quarrel she was told by some of her workmates that she was a lowly, loathsome woman with no prestige or honour. She was obviously deeply hurt by such unkind, degrading remarks. She told her husband about the incident and asked him to do something about it. He then rang the husband of one of the women and asked him to warn his wife not to behave like that again, lest she be taken to court. He told him that they should inform him and his wife about anything that might have bothered them up front, instead of resorting to the use of caste-

related allegations and remarks. He too did not know if the British laws against racism actually accommodated the case of the caste discrimination; nonetheless, he said he had threatened the man with persecution if his wife acted in the same manner again. Since then they have stopped openly abusing her on the basis of her caste.

Another form of caste division among Nepalis in Britain is apparent in many parents' worries about maintaining caste endogamy. They are wary of future generations diluting their caste identities through assimilation into British society, particularly through inter-racial or inter-caste marriages. Interestingly, most low-caste families share the same worries. They want to ensure that, despite the inevitable influence of individual freedom in British society, their children are married within their own castes and outside their clans, as dictated by their traditional laws. This concern is all the more pronounced among the Gurungs, Magars, Rais and Limbus because unlike the Hindu high castes, there is relatively less control of female sexuality and sex before marriage is not always frowned upon. However, their apparently free romantic love and what looks like free choice of marriage partners is not entirely without constraints. Ideally, love and marriage should happen within their own caste; if not, they should try and find somebody from the desirable castes, i.e. those socially and culturally closer to their own. I have evidence of some Limbu girls dating Rai boys in Oxford, for instance. There are similar instances of relationships between Magars and Gurungs. There are many fewer cases of Rais or Limbus having an affair with or marrying Gurungs or Magars.

A young Gurung woman from Didcot is in a serious relationship with a Rai man in Oxford. Although they meet each other quite often, they are not sure if they can actually get married because the woman's parents are not happy with the intercaste relationship. She complains of being frequently beaten by her parents for continuing to see him. They are adamant that she find a Gurung man instead. If the man were low caste, however, her parents' reaction would have been much worse. Although I have not found any evidence of marriage between Dalits and non-Dalits in the UK, I know that, according to Nepali customs, the penalties for this are severe, including threats of violence, intimidation and the eventual excommunication of the peccant from his caste and community. One can imagine the possibility of violence against Dalits, as in Nepal, if Dalit and non-Dalit youths start relationships. There are many such examples of violence when youths among other South Asian populations in Britain attempt to cross caste boundaries, as reported by the BBC and other UK media. Indian Dalits have borne the brunt of caste-related violence and intimidation in the UK; some Dalit organisations such as the Dalit Solidarity Network UK, Caste Watch UK, Federation of Ambedkarite Organisations UK, Association of Community Cohesion, Voice of Dalit International, and Shri Guru Ravidas Sabha UK have been campaigning to expose these problems and to get the British government to adopt legislative and executive measures to address the issue.

It must be noted that the level of separation of caste described above is found mainly among established households, most of which are Gurkha families. Those who arrive in the UK individually and are not settled with their families, such as college students, as pointed out in one of the case studies earlier, are found to be living in harmony across castes. They share houses together, eat together, work together. Some Dalit and high-caste students have started relationships without being ridiculed or threatened by anybody. None of the Dalit students I interviewed had any serious complaint of being discriminated against by fellow students. Perhaps this would not have been possible if they were in their own families and communities. This conclusion is further supported by the fact that most students are beyond the radar of caste associations and their politics. Many Bishwakarma and Pariyar students I interviewed are not even aware that 'their' caste associations exist in Britain. The fact that caste discrimination is absent among students also tends to suggest that instances of such discrimination are not always a result of the force of habitus; rather they result from a conscious choice at both group and individual levels.

The Perpetuation of Caste: Favourable Factors

Ballard notes that South Asian migrant groups are known for their "vigorous and varied" processes of cultural reconstruction (1994: 44). In many cases this also means the revival of caste, as it is an important part of their culture (Clarke et al. 1990). This is certainly true of the Nepalis in Britain, including ex-Gurkhas. Although the migration process itself is very new, and very much still in progress – with many Gurkha families awaiting their turn to fly to Britain – the reconstitution of culture based on caste in Britain is taking place fairly rapidly, as shown above. It is therefore legitimate to ask: What are the factors that have contributed to such a speedy revival of caste among the Nepalis in British society, given its secular institutions? I propose that this can be understood by analysing the history of Gurkha service, the history of Gurkha migration, the aspiration of migrants generally, the socio-cultural background of the Gurkhas, the cultural politics in the original country and the attitude of the host society. This can be best explained in light of the contrast between indentured labourers and those who emigrated from India of their own will, as indicated earlier.

Kuper (1960, 1967) discovered that the descendants of the indentured labourers to Natal, South Africa had failed to maintain caste, whilst free individual migrants had, over time, successfully replicated it. She contends that the revival of caste is contingent on the economic success of migrants in the host society. In her research on the Indians in Fiji, Grieco (1998) she discovered a parallel discrepancy between indentured and non-indentured migrants in their ability to recreate caste. However, she rejects Kuper's assertion that economic success is the key to the revival of caste. Instead, analysing a fairly successful replication of caste by the non-labour 20th-century Gujarati migrants in Fiji, she argues that "it is the auspices of migration – specifically the ability to establish

and maintain migrational chains – that ultimately determines the level of caste-related characteristics re-established overseas" (Grieco 1998: 729-730).

A more elaborate explanation of this framework is advanced by Jayaram (2006) on the basis of his study of the Indian Hindus in Trinidad. He argues that caste has not flourished there because of the recruitment process of indentured labourers and the conditions in which they were employed on the colonial plantations. The workers, aged between 20 and 30, were selected at random without any consideration of caste. They were all treated on a par: everyone had the same status – coolie – and their work was not in any way associated with their traditional occupations. Moreover, the working conditions meant that it was not easy for discerning individuals and groups to observe caste-based behaviour. The workforce had a huge gender imbalance; there were very few women around to be able to maintain caste endogamy. The absence of older people meant that there was nobody to teach them the traditional ways of living, including the maintenance of caste divisions. All these factors made it a struggle to recreate castes, even after being freed from indentured work. Similarly, Hindus were exposed to a powerful proselytising campaign of Christian missionaries who not only converted many Hindus but also did their best to dismantle caste (Jayaram 1980). Furthermore, the Trinidadians became influenced by the Hindu reformist movements such as the Arya Samaj, Sanatana Dharma Mahashabha, Sai Baba, and others which encouraged intercaste solidarity. Later on, political Hinduism – the BJP and Shiva Sena – also discouraged caste divisions for political purposes.

The recruitment process of the Brigade of Gurkhas is opposite to that of the colonial plantations, in the sense that the former has been highly caste-sensitive. Owing to their reified views of different castes, the British recruited mostly from selected castes – the Gurungs, Magars, Rais, and Limbus (and Chhetris, most of whom went to the Indian army in 1947) – and then placed them in caste-specific regiments. Of course, a few other castes were also involved, especially when the number of recruits was massively increased for the First and Second World Wars. The Tamangs, Sherpas, Newars, Thakali were the other castes used during these wars. At most other times, however, only those considered 'martial races' have been employed in Gurkha regiments.

Moreover, the occupational and ritual hierarchy unique to Nepali society has also been maintained in Gurkha regiments. Although the high-caste Bahuns normally do not have an access to Gurkha service, a few of them have always been hired to perform Hindu rituals on behalf of the soldiers. They are also given a prominent role in decision making, akin to senior Gurkhas. Although there are some Gurkhas from Buddhist backgrounds, no lamas were hired for their rituals until recently. More importantly, most Gurkhas have their own caste-specific, largely shamanistic traditions; they have their own priests from their own castes: the Limbus have Phedangma and the Gurungs have Khlibri, for instance. Although these castes use their own priests more than Bahun priests, the former have never found a place in Gurkha regiments. The emphasis on traditional

Hindu order is also apparent in the treatment of Dalits. Although the work of the low castes as blacksmiths, tailors and leatherworkers, are vital to the rural economy in Nepal, these occupations carry a strong social stigma. Their occupations, whilst important for survival, marginalise them economically and socially in traditional communities. The British showed a strong willingness to respect this rule of traditional Hindu society in Nepal by hiring Dalits only for tasks specific to their traditional roles.

The traditional Hindu order, together with its caste structure, has been emphasized by the British in other ways too. For instance, the Brigade of Gurkhas officially celebrates the annual Hindu/national festival of Dashain, together with the associated rituals and animal sacrifice (except those units based in the UK where animals cannot be killed outside licensed butcheries). The Brigade of Gurkhas does not officially celebrate prominent caste-specific festivals, such as Lhosar of the Gurung and Chasok Tangnam of the Limbu. It is clear that the British have been complicit with the high-caste interpretation of Hinduism as the national religion of Nepal, with its links to sustaining and promoting caste hierarchy (Uesugi 2007; Caplan 1995). Things have, however, changed quite dramatically in Nepal over recent years. In 2008 Nepal become a secular republic. Marginalised groups, such as the Gurungs, Magars, Rais and Limbus, have heightened their political campaigns for better inclusion in the state and against domination by the high castes. They have gone as far as demanding autonomy for their homelands as a part of the new federal structure of the state. Despite these radical changes, the British Ministry of Defence has shown little inclination so far to alter its traditional policies and programmes in Gurkha service. A recent change of recruitment policy has seen the end of the quotas allocated for Dalits to do the work related to their traditional occupations. Whereas some Dalits see this as a step in the right direction, others are not happy because the number of Dalit recruits has actually fallen since the quotas were scrapped.

The second important area to consider, when explaining the maintenance of the old caste order, is the unique pattern of Gurkha migration. Unlike the case of indentured labourers, it is mostly people from the four specific ethnic groups – who enjoy privileged access to Gurkha service – who have come to live in Britain; at least some of them are directly related to each other. More importantly, thousands of them are allowed in together with their families; there is no need for them to wait for the success of chain migration to establish their caste- and clan-related communities. Therefore, although the Cameron government has now made it much harder for people from outside the EU to come to Britain, the tightening of immigration is unlikely to hamper the community-building project of the Gurkhas. Unlike indentured labourers, the Gurkhas have no serious problem of gender imbalance in their groups as they are allowed to bring their spouses and dependent children; from this perspective at least the future of caste endogamy does indeed look likely. Even if appropriate marriage partners are not available locally, it is no longer difficult, unlike in the case of the colonial plantations, to fly back to Nepal in order to locate a suitable match. Indeed

some Gurkha and also non-Gurkha families have started doing this already. A Chhetri man who runs a Nepalese restaurant in Oxford recently got married to a woman from his caste, and outside his clan, living and working in Japan. Moreover, there is no shortage of older people to guide the process of the revival of customary practices because, following the parliamentary vote of April 2009, former soldiers of all ages are allowed to move to the UK.

The next important factor for a speedy revival of caste among the Gurkhas in Britain is the general perception that migration is a liberating process, a route for escape from the trap of the original society. Referring to the motivation of many Indian Dalits, for example, Sooryamoorthy observes:

> Migration from their native villages to cities, towns and even the Gulf States and Asian countries where their original identity as a Dalit is no more a burden or a stigma, offers them the freedom to choose the life and occupation of their choice (Sooryamoorthy 2008: 290).

Many Gurkhas have found British society full of challenges and opportunities, too. This is so particularly because they see Britain as a progressive society, free from traditional structures and ideologies. On the one hand, the new-found environment of social freedom is worrisome, not least because there is fear that the next generation will take up the values of British society and distance itself from traditional values. On the other hand, migration has offered opportunities for breaking up social and economic and other barriers obstructing them back home – a real opportunity for liberation. Different groups have used the latter concept in their own ways.

Whereas Dalits are attempting to ensure that caste discrimination is a thing of the past, the dominant Gurkha castes are working hard to shed the traditional domination of the high-caste Bahuns and Chhetris. To a certain degree, this is also true of rival groups within a single caste, e.g. the Sorah Jats (a sub-caste of the Gurungs) are working hard to shed the traditional domination of the Char Jats. A quick move towards setting up their caste associations is based on this psychology. As we saw before, the Gurungs, Magars, Rais, and Limbus have been increasingly successful, with their greater size and caste-based unity, in curtailing the influences of the higher castes, whilst at the same time trying to revive their traditional attitude to the lower castes. This is also aided by increasingly powerful ethnic politics back home in Nepal, not least those spearheaded by their caste associations. For instance, there has been a growing call by ethnic activists in Nepal to stop celebrating Dashain, which although a national festival, is considered to be a Hindu legacy and an effective tool of control historically used by high-caste rulers to contain others (Hangen 2005). As a result, it is very unlikely that the high-caste Bahuns and Chhetris will be able to continue their traditional authority over other castes in British society. This is a trend opposite to the one in the

Caribbean where the high-caste Brahmans had, at least at the beginning, maintained total dominance in religious belief and practice in the Caribbean (Vertovec 2000). Today, despite the caste system being largely dysfunctional, the Brahmins are still quite influential compared to other groups there.

As indicated before, Dalits have also used this opportunity in a new land to release themselves from caste discrimination. Indeed, one of the good things has been that they are, unlike most Dalits in Nepal, economically free: they are no longer bonded to high castes, no longer dependent on them for survival, no longer forced into stigmatizing roles. Because Dalits are not economically dependent on them, the upper castes have fewer opportunities to dominate them. But the problem still persists in other forms, mainly in the form of distinctions on the basis of caste hierarchy determined by ritual purity and pollution. The dominant groups – i.e. the middle-ranking castes, mainly Gurkhas – have been keen to undermine the high castes' claim to ritual purity and resultant superiority, whilst at the same time interested to preserve the ritual pollution associated with the lower castes. While they wish to reduce the status gap between themselves and the higher castes, they also wish to maintain the status differences between themselves and the lower castes.

Conclusions

What this shows is that even at this very early stage of settlement dominant Nepali caste groups are active in challenging certain aspects of caste hierarchy, i.e. the status difference between themselves and the higher castes, and preserving other aspects of the caste system, i.e. the status difference between them and the lower castes. Their greater population size, relative economic success, the impact of growing ethnic movement back home and many other factors have contributed to this. If the current trend continues, it can be argued that untouchability will remain for a long time in Britain as one of the hallmarks of Nepalese caste. Contrary to the claims of the NRNUK President (cited above), the treatment of the lower castes – though they are no longer economically dependent in a new socio-economic environment – is likely to get worse over time. This would be consistent with the experience of Indian Dalits who complain of the rampant problem of caste discrimination – including violence and intimidation – by fellow Indians in Britain, even though they have been in the country for well over half a century.

As with other diasporas, what we see among the Nepalis in the UK in terms of the prevalence of caste is both continuity and change. Changes are understandable, but one might wonder what motivates people to adhere to their some of their old ways, not least caste discrimination? The answer lies in the fact that cultural traits of honour and shame continue to have considerable force not only among Hindus but also for Pakistani Muslims (Shaw 2000), Bangladeshis (Gardner 1995), Sikhs (Helweg 1986), Punjabi Ad-Dharmis (former untouchables) (Judge 2002) and other South Asians. The eagerness to revive caste-based structures and idioms in a society where caste is an alien concept can be understood in terms of their societal obligation to defend their

prestige and honour across borders. A recent advance in communication and transport technologies and the consequent strengthening of transnational ties have increased the possibility of, as well as the need for, preserving one's honour and prestige across national boundaries. As Basch, Glick Schiller, Szanton Blanc (1994) and others have shown, a transnational community is essentially an extension of the original community; people have their feet in two or more boats. Gurkha migrants are a part of two-nation transnational communities; despite everything, they need to take care to maintain their loyalty to caste norms in front of the prying eyes of their kin and caste fellows in the UK and Nepal.

As we saw here, in contrast to the case of indentured labourers there are many favourable factors for Gurkhas migrants: in particular, to preserve their sense of caste and to challenge the political, social, economic and other domination by high castes within the Nepali context. This has been a unique migration, riding on the back of a unique recruitment process – which has always been highly caste-sensitive – so that it has been relatively easier for the Gurkhas to revive their caste-specific traditions in Britain fairly rapidly. Indeed, Nepalis have been in the UK for some time even before the Gurkha influx began, but the rise of caste associations gained momentum only after the Gurkha migration of recent years. This suggests a clear link between the history of Gurkha service and migration, and the ability to recreate caste in the diaspora. Judging by current trends, it is likely that the influence of major caste organisations will flourish in Britain over the coming years. In addition, it will be easier to maintain the boundaries between groups – not least the high castes and lower castes – because British society is still not knowledgeable and sensitive enough to the issues of caste. Indian Dalit activists have been doing their best to get the British government to outlaw caste discrimination through legislation, but have not yet been successful. Their struggle has at least forced the government to see caste discrimination as one of the areas of concern in the Equality Bill amended in March 2010.[3] This amendment in legislation is likely if Dalits can prove their case; it will require government ministers to formulate specific laws targeted at issues of caste discrimination – against Dalits, and any other groups – at least in public places. Indeed, Nepal, like India, has a constitutional provision that outlaws caste discrimination. Whereas in Nepal caste discrimination has continued in the absence of proper implementation of the law, so far it has found an opportunity to continue in the UK in the absence of a proper law.

Due to changes in socio-cultural, political, economic and demographic situations, caste has been forced to operate differently in the UK. But what has really changed is the operational or functional mode – which we might call a 'system' in its own right – of caste; the underlying beliefs and values are, by and large, consistent with ancient law of Hindu society. For instance, despite the growing power and authority of the Gurungs in the UK, as opposed to that of the Bahuns and

[3] See http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/india/7541598/India-clashes-with-Britain-over-Equality-Bill-racism-law.html

Chhetris back home, they are not calling for dismantling the caste system, neither do they see themselves completely out of the system (which fortifies the concept of transnationalism: a life lived across national borders). However, they are trying to subvert it to their own advantage by attempting to undermine the traditional superiority of the Bahuns and Chhetris, not least in the economic and political arenas, whilst trying to reassert the concept of ritual pollution of the lower castes. The Dumontian dichotomy of purity and pollution as the bedrock of caste system is mainly at play here. Thus, the dominant castes in Britain – the Gurungs, Magars, Rais and Limbus – acquire a sense of liberation by undermining high castes economically, politically, and religiously, whilst marginalising lower castes socially. Their desire to contest high-caste dominance in politics, religion and the cultural sphere is open and explicit, but their marginalisation of lower castes is implicit and – they would claim – an unintended consequence of their own self-assertion. The rise of middle castes in Britain is somewhat parallel to that of the OBCs in some parts of India, such as the Yadavs in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

As we saw, the trend in Nepalese communities in Britain is, in many ways, different from that of the Indian Hindus in the Caribbean. Whereas in the Caribbean the traditional domination of high castes – in ritual and political and economic spheres – has been sustained to a degree (Jayaram 2006: 153; Vertovec 2000: 17), low castes have been freed from the clutches of untouchability (Jayaram 2006: 151). Among the Nepalis in Britain, however, middle-ranking castes have the upper hand and discrimination against low castes, based on their ritual pollution, has been perpetuated to an extent and is likely to get worse over time. Whereas the role of the Pundits, or high-caste priests, is still a central feature of caste in the Caribbean, the continued practice of untouchability, amongst others, has been an important marker of caste in the Nepalese community in the UK.

Despite the different modes of reconstructing caste in the Caribbean and Britain, the manoeuvring of dominant players in both instances is not outside the basic principle of caste hierarchy. Understandably, however, "the caste system....could never migrate in its entirety" (Grieco 1998: 712). However, caste is functional abroad not in a vacuum, nor in a completely wayward manner. In many ways, Nepalis in Britain live a Nepali life rather than a British one. Despite the popular assumption that migration leads to liberation, migrants, including those who move from rural to urban areas within a single country and those who cross national boundaries, are never really free from original moral and social environment (Hoy 2007). This is very true in the case of the Gurkhas in Britain. Therefore, perhaps it is not appropriate to argue that what is going on in diaspora can be characterised as "systemless caste" (Grieco 1998: 709; Burghart 1987: 12; Jayawardena 1980), or a casteless system. Instead, I suggest, it should be understood as caste with a different system.

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